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PERSISTING CULTURES AND CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS AMONG AFRICAN HUNTER-GATHERERS

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THE VIII TH CONFERENCE ON HUNTING AND GATHERING SOCIETIES

The papers collected in this volume were originally presented at the VIIIth International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies (CHAGS8), held at the National Museum of Ethnology (NME) in Osaka. During the five-day conference from 26th to 30th October 1998, more than 200 papers were presented in a total of 20 sessions. In addition, pre- and post-conferences were held in Aomori and Sapporo, respectively. The conference was a great success with a large number of participants and presented papers. The remaining task for us in the organizing committee is publication, i.e., how to circulate the outcome of this successful conference to a broader academic world.

We think it better that the NME and the Center for African Area Studies (CAAS), Kyoto University, share the work of publication, since the two institutions have collaborated since the initial stage of preparation for the conference. The CAAS has an English (and in part French) journal, *African Study Monographs* (ASM), dedicated to publishing works on Africa. We therefore agreed with the NME members of the organizing committee that the CAAS will publish the papers mainly on Africa in a supplementary issue of ASM, possibly including a few other papers which may give us a general view of hunting and gathering societies.

The papers included in this volume were originally presented in different sessions of the conference, mixed with the papers on similar topics from other areas. The collection of such papers in one volume will, therefore, present a myriad of theoretical interests and comparative perspectives. We have tried, however, to classify the papers into several groups to be reflected in the organization of this volume, which is comprised of the sections of History, Culture, Ecology, Contemporary Problems, and Prospects. Here is a brief overview of the papers included in each section.

HUNTER-GATHERER SOCIETIES IN HISTORY

The first group of papers deals with history, either placing hunter-gatherer societies in an evolutionary history of mankind, or reconstructing their recent history which conditions their present-day situation.

Nishida tries to re-evaluate a hunting and gathering life in an evolutionary perspective. In some parts of the world, a transition from a nomadic life to a sedentary life became inevitable around 10,000 BC, owing to the population increase, and it eventually marked a turning point in human history. According to Nishida, this transition was accomplished by adopting as new staples, the starchy seeds which had been the food of the secondary choice in the preceding nomadic life. Once adopting a sedentary life, however, humans began to modify the surrounding environment, enriching the soil around the campsite and altering the vegetation more favorable for the growth of their food resources, which almost automatically led to the beginning of agriculture. The unique point in this hypothesis is that humans adopted a sedentary life as a second choice, and that agriculture was almost a natural outcome of this new lifestyle of sedentism.

All the contemporary hunter-gatherer societies have, to some extent, contacts with agricultural, pastoral or industrial societies, and are influenced more or less by these societies, and larger (national and international) systems behind them. Wilmsen (1989) and others emphasized that contemporary hunter-gatherer societies are the product of the modern society, and by no means represent a primordial state of human life. This is true in that they had not been totally isolated even before the "discovery" by the Western Society. However, it is necessary to analyze historical and ethnographic evidences carefully in order to understand to what extent a particular hunting and gathering society has changed, or marginalized, through such a contact with a wider society. On this issue, there are two opposing views. As Smith explains in his chapter, "while the works of Richard Lee and the Harvard Kalahari Group say the Ju/'hoansi, studied between 1950 and 1965, give an idea of independent and relatively affluent hunter/gatherers, Ed Wilmsen and others regard the Bushmen in general, and the Ju/'hoansi in particular, as a dispossessed proletariat marginalized by outside economic interests."

Smith tackles this problem in his attempt at a reconstruction of the recent past of the Cho/ana area in Namibia. Based on the archaeological findings at the Cho/ana site and oral traditions collected from Ju/'hoansi elders who had once lived in the area, he concludes that the contact of the Ju/'hoansi in this area with external societies was limited to acquiring trade items used for *hxaro* exchanges.

Osaki carried out a similar study on the recent history of the G/ui and G//ana in Kade area, Botswana, based on the archival materials obtained in Gaborone and interviews with elders in Kade. After discussing about the reliability of the oral traditions for a historical analysis, he also points out the limited nature of their contact with other people, although they have obviously had some contacts with the Tswana since the 19th century.

We need detailed analyses of a similar kind of the relationship between hunter-gatherers and neighboring groups, in order to make the revisionists' view more productive, i.e., to make it something more than just another way of looking at the world.

Studies on the contemporary hunting and gathering societies exhibit diverse interests and methodologies. There are ethnographic studies, studies on social and cultural changes, particularly marginalization by the modern world system, as well as ethno-archaeological studies which compare the ethnographic data with the past.

The hunter-gatherer societies themselves show a great diversity in the extent to which they have been influenced by the external political and economic systems. Taking these complications into consideration, Stiles attempts at classifying the hunter-gatherer societies into several types, or stages of change, based on the degree of contact with a wider society and on the changes which have resulted from this contact. It is indispensable, he argues, to evaluating the validity of the use of a specific hunter-gatherer group for particular paradigmatic purposes, to understand the historical and social context (i.e., the stage) of the group. By employing this classification, he further tries to address some of the pressing issues in the hunter-gatherer studies, such as the problems of the immediate return system and the persistence of a hunting and gathering life.

PERSISTING CULTURES

In spite of the long history of contacts with the outside world, hunting and gathering cultures undoubtedly persist in various parts of the world. Although more or less fragmented, elements of hunting and gathering culture can be found in their subsistence and economic activities, social organizations, inter-individual interactions, as well as in rituals and symbolic systems. This fact clearly demonstrates the resilience of hunting and gathering culture even under the increasing pressure of the contemporary worldwide systems. The papers of the second section analyze the persistence of hunting and gathering cultures from several different angles.

The paper by Biesele and Barclay demonstrates the importance of women's contribution to hunting. This fact has been overlooked in the prevalent male-biased studies, in which hunting is regarded as men's activity and gathering as women's. They also point out the flexibility, or lack of strict rules, in the sexual division of labor, which has often been cited as one of the few rules in hunting and gathering societies. According to them, hunting itself is by no means an exclusively male activity, and women actually participate in the hunt, depending on the situation. In particular, women possess as much knowledge as men of the game animals and tracking methods, which is indispensable to successful hunting. This fact, in combination with the equally rich knowledge of men on the plants, deserves further investigation to understand the nature of knowledge and techniques among hunter-gatherer societies.

Rituals and other non-material aspects of culture are more likely to persist in spite of, or probably because of, the changes in subsistence and economic aspects. Bundo describes the singing and dancing performances (called *be*) of the Baka in the Cameroon forest. The Baka in his study area settled in the 1950's to semi-permanent villages on the roadside, where they stay throughout the year. Hunting is still carried out, but only individually with snares set mostly in the nearby forest, whereas collective net hunting, a former principal hunting method, is no longer practiced at all. Singing and dancing performances in the evening are the only occasion on which a large number of people of different age and sex gather in one place to do something collectively. Thus, in such a performance, Bundo argues, embodied is their sense of belonging to the same community. At the same time,

it provides the Baka with an opportunity to learn, through singing and dancing, about role differentiation and other social rules for cooperative behaviors, whereas such an opportunity was formerly provided by the collective hunt. To extend Bundo's conclusion, it may be said that singing and dancing performances persist, partly because the Baka have abandoned the collective activities in the forest. In other words, their performances are now given a larger social meaning.

The characteristics of hunting and gathering cultures have mostly been argued with regards to their economy and socio-political organization. While Sugawara (1996; 1998) has studied verbal and non-verbal interactions of the San in Botswana, no study of a similar kind has yet been made on other groups of Africa. Kimura's analysis of the conversations among the Baka in Cameroon is therefore important to understanding their unique culture of communication. He analyzes, in particular, the overlapping of silence and utterance in their conversation. In our society, such an overlapping is usually regarded as a failure in turn taking. Otherwise, utterances are deliberately overlapped for some strategic purpose. In the Baka society, however, utterance overlapping is an expression of behavioral synchronization, and silence represents a mode of co-presence, both of which have a rather positive value in their society. He further suggests that such a mode of communication may be related to their flexible social organization.

ECOLOGICAL BASIS

Ecology has been one of the major fields of interests in the studies of hunting and gathering societies since the 1960's, when Richard Lee (1968) carried out now "classic" studies on the subsistence activities of Ju/'hoansi (!Kung). We have today elaborated ecological studies which employ a "strict" methodology to collect quantitative data and analyze them in relation to the theory of optimal foraging strategies. On the other hand, there are increasing influences of revisionism, or related critiques of ethnography. It has become almost a fashion to analyze hunting and gathering activities in relation to a larger economic and political system, which provides a framework for specific hunting and gathering activities to take place in a particular time and space.

Another crucial issue in the ecological studies is that of the cultural potential of the environments, in particular, of the tropical rain forests. There is a debate on the possibility of hunter-gatherer subsistence in the humid tropical forest. Some people hold a negative view on such a possibility for two reasons; one is the absence of hunter-gatherer groups who live solely by hunting and gathering in the humid tropics, and the other is the insufficient availability of starchy food which would sustain their subsistence throughout the year. They insist, thus, without an exchange relationship with agricultural neighbors, hunter-gatherers could not survive in the tropical rain forest.

There are, however, problems in this view. First, recent archaeological studies (Mercader et al., 2000a and b) in the Ituri Forest suggest the existence of hunter-gatherers dating back many millennia before farming appeared in the region. Secondly, present-day hunter-gatherers may have abandoned some of the

potential food resources which had been used in the past, because of easy access to cultivated food. And thirdly, the availability of wild food resources in the forest has not been quantitatively studied yet. At any rate, we need more detailed studies on the potential food resources and their availability in quantitative terms in order to gain any conclusive view on this matter.

Sato tries to evaluate the availability of wild yams (and yam-like tubers) in the eastern region of the Cameroon forest. Based on the quantitative data obtained from a series of transect surveys, he insists that the Baka could survive in the forest depending mainly on wild yams, even if there were no agricultural food.

Yams comprise the most important wild vegetable food of the Baka in this area, not only in their diet but also in their social and ritual life. Dounias reports on the Baka's surprisingly rich knowledge on the yams and their elaborate manner of utilization of the tubers. The Baka re-bury a part of important yam tubers in the same soil from which they have harvested the tubers, in order to facilitate re-growth. Dounias, in his chapter, calls this practice "paracultivation," which is different from cultivation in that, unlike cultivation, it is not associated with a shift of the growing sites. It is neither a protocultivation, because it would not lead to cultivation, nor is regarded as the preparatory stage of cultivation. Rather, he states that it "imposes an impact on the spatial distribution and seasonal availability of wild yams." Here, we come to an important point; through such paracultivation, they are modifying the environment so that it may become more favorable for their subsistence.

While the Baka are intentionally modifying their environment and food availability through paracultivation, other hunting and gathering groups modify their environment rather unintentionally. Ichikawa points out in his chapter on the Mbuti in the Ituri Forest that their life in the forest camp itself contributes to improving their environment as a human habitat. By clearing the forest for a campsite, they create a sunny, disturbed environment, which is favorable for germination and growth of their important food plants. Moreover, they concentrate at the campsite minerals and organic matters in the forms of food and firewood, which will eventually enrich the soil in the area. Humans are, therefore, not only dependent on the forest resources, but also contributing to their reproduction. In this sense, there is an interdependent system between man and the Ituri Forest.

It deserves further investigation how hunter-gatherers contribute to maintaining the ecosystem through their intentional and unintentional activities. There is at least a hope in such a study that two seemingly opposing goals, conserving the nature and securing human life and culture, may be reconciled.

CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS OF POST-FORAGING SOCIETIES

Contemporary hunter-gatherers, while maintaining their culture in various forms, are experiencing fundamental changes. In addition to the destruction of natural environment which has been sustaining their life, hunter-gatherer societies are now being incorporated into nation-states. Political and economic globalization and

various national and international movements are imposing unprecedented influences on hitherto neglected hunter-gatherer societies. School education exemplifies one of such problems.

In a critical examination of school education of the Basarwa (San) in Botswana, Tshireletso points out the problems in such a government-supported schooling system. He emphasizes in his chapter that the problems lie in the “exclusion of their language, culture, and non-involvement of their parents.” The teacher-children relationship in the classrooms is also characterized by historical relations of hegemony and subordination between the dominant teacher group and subordinate children group. To improve the current practice of pedagogy and to empower the local communities, he proposes a community-based approach to schooling for Basarwa children, which involves a participatory research by community members, including the Basarwa parents.

One of the purposes of education is to provide the means to expand one’s potential in a broader world by increasing the amount of knowledge. Once educated in a modern schooling system, however, most youths of hunter-gatherer cultures show less respect to their indigenous knowledge which have been accumulated and transmitted through many generations. In this case, the amount of total knowledge would rather decrease. We need, therefore, some means to preserve their indigenous knowledge which represents their cultural heritage in a non-material form.

While there is a lack of concern with the indigenous language and culture in the San education system in Botswana, missionary school teachers in Cameroon use Baka’s own language for education. The textbooks used in their schools are full of materials relating to the forest life. In spite of such a missionary’s endeavor which did not exist in the former Cameroon national education system, it is still difficult, according to Kamei, to harness the interests of Baka children. When adults moved to the forest hunting camp in the dry season, children followed their parents and the school was closed in the absence of pupils. Kamei pointed out the difficulty of making the school education compatible with forest life, but the education of Baka children would not be successful without solving this problem.

Most state governments in Africa are trying to settle the nomadic hunter-gatherers in their countries to permanent villages for administrative and other reasons. In the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, the G/ui and G//ana began to settle in the Kade area from the end of 1970’s, in accordance with the policy of Botswana Government. In 1997, however, they were suddenly relocated to New Kade, about 70 km west of the old Kade, where Botswana government planned to establish a national park. While there are various problems involved in this relocation plan, Akiyama tries to investigate its influences on children’s playmate associations. Relocation provided the children with an opportunity to become acquainted with non- kin playmates. He shows different tendencies in the effect of the relocation: younger children returned to their kin playmates after the relocation was completed, whereas older children maintained the relationship with non-kin playmates. While we think a forced relocation is suppressive to the people concerned, we should also note the case in which the children utilized even such a situation to create a new form of social relationship.

Large-scale commercial exploitations of the environment also cause a problem for hunter-gatherer societies. In central Africa, logging industries are imposing serious influences on the forest dwelling peoples. After describing the hunter-farmer relationships and their variations in southern Cameroon, Ngima points out the forest has served as a basis for the interdependent relationship between the Bakola hunters and Bantu farmers. The forest is, however, disappearing by the heavy logging pressures. Increasing influences of commodity economy are also bringing about changes in this relationship. As Ngima describes, the Bakola in this areas have long kept an interdependent relationship with farming people; it is therefore necessary to take both groups into consideration, when making a forest conservation plan which is compatible with the life of the forest peoples.

In a sense, present-day hunter-gatherers may more appropriately be called post-foragers, in that they have contacts with other societies and have altered their hunting and gathering lifestyle. Some of them are even forced into a state of "vagabondage," excluded from their land and employed as the lowest paid wage laborers. Otherwise, as Frankland describes in his chapter on the Twa (or Sua) in Uganda, they are expected to play a role of "the last hunter-gatherers" for a tourist attraction. Ironically, the "purest" form of hunting and gathering culture is often found in such a tourist spot, though it is by no means their real life. It should be noted, however, that in such a situation, they "deliberately provide a reflection of what others (tourists, in this case) want them to be, in order to make of a rare opportunity," thus "making an active choice on their own behalf," as Frankland points out. Although they are marginalized by the dominant system, they are not just victims of such a system.

PROSPECTS: RE-EVALUATION OF THE HISTORY AND CULUTRE

As has been seen above, contemporary hunting and gathering societies face various variagated problems. These include the disputes over the land with neighboring groups, destruction of natural environments which have sustained life, exclusion from their own land for nature conservation, infiltration of capitalist economy, and assimilation to the dominant society and eventual loss of their culture. The core issue here is that they have had little power for coping with these problems for their own sake.

While the revisionists insist hunting and gathering societies have been marginalized by the more powerful systems of a broader world, it should also be noted that not all the hunting and gathering societies have been the victims of the local power politics to the same extent. In spite of suppressive and difficult situations, there have been groups which maintained "independence," however relative. As Lee pointed out in his chapter, some even showed organized resistance against such external powers. It is necessary, therefore, to examine individual cases carefully, in order to understand the nature of external pressures and local responses. Without such procedures, the solution to the current problems of hunter-gatherer societies could not be properly addressed, since "hunter-gatherer pasts are woven into contemporary political consciousness."

In South Africa, there is a movement for “Khoisan Renaissance,” which tries to re-evaluate the Khoisan history and culture. As Lee pointed out, “encapsulated and marginalized peoples can turn their attention to the re-establishment of their historical roots. Recovering history is now a world-wide social movement among encapsulated peoples...” The study on hunting and gathering societies should preferably be carried out by the people who still maintain much of their heritage. We conclude this introduction with the hope that such a time has become a reality.

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