Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 12

Making a living: foraging
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– Subsistence
  – "How people get their groceries"
  – fundamental to understanding everything else about a culture
  – subsistence is inextricably linked to everything else (remember "culture is integrated")
    – as a result, anthropologists can rarely, if ever, discuss subsistence without bringing in
      other aspects of culture
    – such as gender roles and relations
    – marriage rules
    – ideals and practices about status and wealth
    – systems of trade or other kinds of exchange, etc.
  – the three readings all illustrate this
  – Anthropologists describe subsistence strategies for various reasons
    – as context or background to explain how a particular group lives, as part of an
      ethnography, so that other aspects of the culture will make sense
      – as in the reading by Lee 1984 (The Dobe !Kung) for today, and Pospisil (on the
        Kapauku Papuans of Papua New Guinea), Chapter 4 of Fratkin (on the Ariaal of Kenya)
        for next time
    – to explain the logic behind general types of subsistence systems and what factors affect
      them
      – as in Lee 1994 (Scarce Resources) for today, or the introductory section of the reading
        by Fratkin (Ariaal) for next time
    – to evaluate theories or generalizations about cultures, cultural evolution, and so on
      – as in Lee 1994 (Scarce Resources)

– General types of subsistence strategies
  – **Foraging = Hunting and gathering**
    – living off the land without intentionally altering it
  – **Agriculture = farming**
    – Activities to artificially increase plant food yields (sowing seeds, clearing forest, weeding,
      diverting water, fertilizing, etc.)
  – **Pastoralism**
    – depending primarily on herds of domesticated animals
    – pastoralists travel with their herds to pasture areas, rather than bringing food to them
  – **Agropastoralism**
    – depending on a mix of agriculture and pastoralism
      – typically with one or more fixed settlements
      – often plus pastures to which the animals are sent with some group members seasonally
    – our subsistence base is really none of the above
  – **Wage labor system**
    – people work for pay, rather than producing their own subsistence goods
    – then exchange that income for subsistence goods produced by others for exchange
– These types oversimplify reality
  – real people mix and vary these strategies
  – most real societies don’t fit perfectly into these clear, well-defined types
  – but these types do give us a shorthand for the general ways people live

– Each subsistence system affects the rest of the culture
  – and tends to be loosely associated with certain kinds of social organization

– Foraging is the way that people lived for the vast majority of the time that humans have existed
  – we have been foragers since the first members of our genus Homo
    – roughly two million years ago
  – farming only appeared about 11,000 years ago
  – 99.5% of our time on Earth, we have been foragers
  – Yet very few foragers remain today

– Example of a foraging society: The !Kung, in extracts from two books by Richard Lee
  – Two readings on the same group, with two different purposes
    – Lee 1984 extracts from “The Dobe !Kung”
      – background for an ethnography
      – describing the subsistence strategy provide context for the rest of the ethnography
      – gives you a sense of what the group is like
      – and what Lee’s experience with them as an anthropologist was like
    – Lee 1994 “The Hunters: Scarce Resources in the Kalahari”
      – directed at making some specific theoretical points, supported by ethnographic evidence

– Intro to the !Kung
  – They live in the Kalahari desert of Botswana, Namibia, Angola, South Africa
  – The group of !Kung that Lee studied live in Botswana, and call themselves the Ju’hoansi
    – They often serve as an example, to help us visualize what a foraging lifestyle is like
  – !Kung = San = Bushmen: Terms for the general ethnic and language group of the people in the film
    – Ju’hoansi (pronounced "jhu-wahnsi") and variants spelled slightly differently: a subgroup of the !Kung that speaks one of the three major language variants
      – studied by Richard Lee and others
      – and filmed by John Marshall, starting in the 1950s
  – Many !Kung names and words are written with odd punctuation marks and other symbols that represent various different clicks.
    – If you don’t speak the !Kung language, it is customary to just ignore these sounds.
  – We are reading about the recent past here. Since Lee’s fieldwork, virtually all of the !Kung have been settled in permanent camps
  – These are modern people, not fossils
    – They know about the industrialized world, but it is remote
    – They know farmers and pastoral people who live around them, trade with them, intermarry, etc.
    – In fact, as a separate group, they may be a modern creation, originally just the members of a society that included some herders and some foragers, with people shifting from
one lifestyle to another as their fortunes and desires led. The !Kung with herds became recognized as a distinct group (Khoi), treated differently by colonial governments.

What is distinctive about the foraging lifestyle?

- **Subsistence by foraging**
  - gathering
    - most of the food is plants (70% of calories for !Kung)
  - hunting
    - occasional meat (30% of calories for !Kung)
  - these proportions have probably varied a lot for different groups, places, and times
  - compare to maritime foragers like Inuit (Eskimos), who eat almost exclusively meat for much of the year

- **Small groups**
  - one or a few families, typically 10-50 people
  - group membership changes over time: groups split, merge, individuals shift from group to group
  - groups can’t be big, or food around the camp would get depleted too fast

- **Very mobile**
  - use up the preferred food in one place, then move to another
  - moves may be irregular or in a seasonal round
  - camps are typically set up in a few hours or days

- **Few possessions**
  - nothing you don’t want to carry
  - many things can be made as you need them
  - so no hoarding, long-term storage, or accumulation of wealth
  - so there are few differences in wealth
  - everyone has roughly the same kinds and amount of stuff
  - no one “owns” the land or the water, although people do have recognized rights to certain territories that are associated with their families or bands
  - they can try to control access to it (although in practice access is almost always granted)
  - but they can’t sell or trade it
  - their connection to it is inherent in their family identity: it is "inalienable"

- **Little division of labor or specialization except by age and sex**
  - women handle most child care, since men can't breast feed
  - men do most of the hunting, since women are usually burdened by children
  - little kids and old people gather but don’t hunt
  - some limited specialization: skilled people may make and fix tools, or perform curing ceremonies
  - but only a small part of their time
  - reward is personal satisfaction, some respect or prestige, occasionally gifts, etc.
  - but overall, with minor exceptions, everyone has basically the same roles, determined by sex and age
  - no careers, jobs, positions that strongly differentiate one person from another
− every family includes people who do all the things that are necessary to survive
− families are fairly independent, self-sufficient, and economically equivalent
− yet families do depend on each other to share things, especially meat
  − all families can get meat and other necessities
  − but a good kill is relatively rare and produces a lot of meat that will go bad quickly
  − so sharing reduces the risk of not getting enough meat during a spell of bad luck,
    while not hurting the family of a hunter that temporarily has more than it can use
− Minimal social hierarchy (no powerful leaders)
  − no chiefs or other people with special power (according to Lee)
  − although some are more respected than others
  − and some have special skills (curing, making arrows, etc.)
  − i.e. no significant hierarchy of status or power
  − !Kung society is essentially egalitarian
− "Simple" social organization based on kinship
  − everyone is related to everyone else
    − so you deal with others according to your relationship with them
    − you know how to treat them, what their obligations are to you, and yours to them
    − social dynamics are like going on a trip with your extended family and a few friends
      − except that the !Kung have much more practice at getting along with each other
      − and they really depend on each other much more directly than we do
    − another analogy is to a small town, where everyone knows everyone else
      − everyone knows what everyone else is doing, and talks about it
      − almost nothing is private
  − interactions are on a personal level
    − foragers like the !Kung tend to be very aware of interpersonal matters like jealousy,
      pride, trustworthiness
      − take elaborate steps to prevent social problems
      − “insulting the meat”
      − thus little room for anyone to take advantage
    − conflicts can be defused by someone just leaving to hang out with another band, usually
      with a kin connection
      − as you might move in with your grandparents if you had problems with your parents
    − occasional violence, but only at a personal or family level (no warfare).
      − Very occasionally group violence by general consent
    − although the kinship system is extremely complex (much more complex than ours,
      extending much further out and with some wild variations), this is often called “simple”
      social organization.
      − Because some kind of kinship system exists in all societies
    − “Kinship-only”, then, is a minimal kind of organization, "simple" in the sense of there
      being just one system for categorizing people and relating to them
    − in more "complex" societies, additional layers of organization like classes,
      educational status, family prestige, inherited titles, etc. are added
– complex, in the sense of having many parts, refers to society organized by kinship plus other, more or less independent systems
– also called a “band” society, in reference to the size and the nature of the groups in which people live
– but some foragers in particularly good environments may not fit these generalizations
– ex: northwest coast of North America: rich salmon runs allowed for sedentary, complex societies based on foraging
– ex: Central California: reliable, productive acorns allowed for semi-sedentary foragers
– Answering some questions about the !Kung that people have asked in previous semesters
– life expectancy
– since people die at different rates at different ages, this is a harder concept to express that you might think
– figures as of 1968, when Lee did the research in the reading
– life expectancy at birth was 30 years
– but this includes high mortality during childhood
– 20% of babies die in their first year
– 50% of children die before age 15
– those who make it to age 15 survive, on average, to 55
– only about 10% of the population is over 60
– compared to 16% in the US
– this is actually fairly good life expectancy for societies without modern medicine, including our own just a century or two ago
– weapons: poison-tipped arrows, can be deadly
– rates of violence
– Mostly between men, with mostly men killed (unlike many other places where women are the most common victims)
– of three recorded women killed, two were innocent bystanders
– Fights are mostly over women or previous deaths (feuds)
– 22 homicides recorded in 35 years (1920-55) in the Dobe area
– There were 466 Dobe region !Kung individuals in 1965
– i.e. 135 homicides / 100,000 / year
– US in 1990: 9.4 homicides / 100,000 / year
– !Kung homicide rate was 14 times greater than that of the US!
– drugs and alcohol
– !Kung occasionally plant marijuana and tobacco
– Alcohol problems where sugar (to brew) or liquor available
– Lee’s 1994 argument about the economic viability of foraging:
– Main conclusions:
– contrary to earlier belief, foragers do not depend primarily on hunting
– contrary to earlier belief, foragers are not necessarily just barely surviving
– background
– 14 camps, each at a waterhole
– each surrounded by an exploitable hinterland
- minimal storage of food
- lots of sharing within camps
- plant foods are 60-80% of total diet by weight
- women provide 2-3 times more weight of food than do men
  - virtually all of it is plant food
- men gather for themselves while in the bush, but don’t bring home nearly as much food
  - what the men do provide sometimes is meat
  - which is relatively scarce and highly prized
- food is available year-round
  - it just requires more walking in the drier parts of the year
  - they never use up all the available mongongo nuts
    - plentiful, reliable, nutritious
    - 50% of the plant food consumed
    - more dependable than agriculture
  - nor do they use up many of the other plant foods
- the relative richness of food is shown by how selective the !Kung can afford to be about what they choose to eat
  - of all the plants they know to be edible, they eat primarily just 25% of the species
    - they can afford to neglect the rest
  - of all the animals they know to be edible, they regularly hunt only 31% of the species (17/54)
- subsistence can’t be too precarious, because they tend to live to an old age
  - 46 out of 466 (10%) of Dobe !Kung were over 60 years old
  - compare to 16% for US society today
- another indication that subsistence can’t be too difficult: young people don’t regularly provide food until they marry, around age 20 for boys
  - nor do old people over 60
  - so only 40% of the people are providing the food for the whole group
- time allocation study
  - they average only 12-19 hours/week getting food
  - in a more detailed publication, Lee included "chores" like getting water, gathering firewood, making tools, cooking, etc.
    - still only 42.3 hours/week of work, total
    - compare to US, where we work at least 40 hours/week to earn money, then add another 40+ in commuting, buying food, cooking, cleaning, etc.
- diet study
  - they typically eat a bit above what the US recommended daily allowance would be for people of their size and activity level
  - that is, they get enough food
  - and all this data was collected in the third year of a famine!
- Lee’s conclusion: foraging isn’t such a bad subsistence strategy
  - so the fact that humans were foragers for most of our history is not surprising
  - instead, the question is, why did they change? Why adopt agriculture, herding, etc.?
− Recent history update:
  − many of the !Kung in Botswana were forcibly evicted from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve
  − and prohibited from hunting in it
  − in December 2006, the !Kung won a long-running legal case that found that the Botswana government was wrong to do this
  − but did not find that the government owed them any services, like drilling wells for them
  − several hundred to 1000 !Kung have indicated that they plan to move out of the settlements in Botswana and back into the Kalahari preserve to return to their foraging lifestyle
  − it remains to be seen if they really do, and how well they fare