Hunting and gathering

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Hunting and gathering constitute the oldest human mode of making a living, and the only one for which there is an uninterrupted record from human origins to the present. Correspondingly, there has been a lot of anthropological attention devoted to hunting and gathering with an initial confidence that one could directly observe human nature by studying hunter-gatherers. More recently, however, anthropologists have grown cautious not to draw analogies between present-day hunter-gatherers and those of the distant past too quickly. They also do not focus on hunting and gathering as isolated activities, but rather on the socio-cultural formations that have been found to be associated with them. Despite considerable regional diversity, there are recurrent themes in hunter-gatherer ethnography that show shared patterns beyond the ecology of foraging. Prominent is the notion of hunter-gatherers being 'originally affluent' with a relatively low workload. Hunter-gatherers have also been associated with a high incidence of gender and age equality, due to levelling practices such as sharing. Most hunter-gatherers live in very small groups, characterised by multirelational kinship ties. They often have distinct forms of environmental perception, and it has been suggested that they display a high degree of playfulness in ritual affairs. They therefore provide comparative insights in a wide-range of domains far beyond the activities of hunting and gathering.

Introduction: Not everyone who hunts or gathers is a hunter-gatherer

Hunting and gathering as activities have been with humans for all of human evolution up to today. For more than 99% of their time on earth, humans have gained their sustenance through animal and plant food that they hunted and gathered (Lee & DeVore 1968: 3). Even so-called 'herders' and 'farmers' (or 'pastoralists' and 'agriculturalists' as they are often called) have historically tended to spend some of their time hunting and gathering. Especially in harsh times, for instance when drought threatens domesticated animals or harvests, herders and farmers include hunted game and undomesticated plant foods in their diet.

At the same time, many herders and farmers all over the world tend to look down on people who live almost exclusively on hunting and gathering, because this way of life often differs not only in how food is gained, but in many other ways, too. The rituals and beliefs of people who specialise in hunting and gathering are often distinct from those of herders and farmers, as are their social rules and norms. They frequently have their own views about leadership, about whom one should marry, how one should bring up children, what a settlement should look like, which rules one should follow with regard to holding and inheriting property, with regard to sharing and pooling resources, and so forth. Therefore, despite the fact that hunting and gathering activities are often combined with other economic pursuits, anthropologists refer collectively to people who rely exclusively (or largely) on hunted game and on gathered plant food as 'hunter-gatherers'

to acknowledge that there is 'a distinct hunter-gatherer way of life' that distinguishes them from their neighbours (see Kelly 2013). Often that way of life is not recognised, and hunter-gatherers are stigmatised because of it. This entry outlines some of the social practices that constitute this way of life and some of the cultural variety to be found across continents. It does not cover all instances of hunting and gathering activities at all times and places around the world, but it will focus on key case studies with only some comparative reference to more outlying examples such as the hunting practiced amongst the European nobility or the collecting of food amongst urban dumpster-divers. In short, this entry is not so much about 'hunter-gatherers' as a category of people than about 'hunter-gatherer situations' (Widlok 2016) that we find repeatedly across space and time.

The ecology of foraging and the history of hunting and gathering

The term 'foraging' is occasionally also used when referring to people who hunt and gather (Lee 1979). It directly, or at least implicitly, emphasises the continuity between human hunter-gatherers and foraging as it is practiced by [animals](#) or was practiced by humans other than *Homo sapiens* (for instance by the Neanderthals). For this reason, the term is rejected by some scholars and explicitly embraced by others. As activities, hunting and gathering pre-date modern humans because all their predecessors have exclusively lived on various types of hunting, gathering, and fishing. How similar or dissimilar these predecessors were from the human hunter-gatherers that live today is a major point of [scientific](#) debate. For those studying the remote past, any human living by hunting and gathering today (or in the recent, scientifically-documented past) provides a chance to learn more about what life might have been like in a deep past. Conversely, hunter-gatherer studies can help to construct models that attempt to understand the links between various natural environments and the spectrum of human lifeways. This can, in turn, help us understand current or recent hunter-gatherer situations.

That said, over the last decades there have been growing doubts as to whether what is known about hunter-gatherers through [ethnography](#) – that is, through reports by those who have gone to live with them – is a reliable model for reconstructing the ecology of foraging in the remote past, and the other way round. There is growing consensus that the lives of hunter-gatherers are not strictly determined by ecology or by factors detached from human cultural [agency](#) while ecological [dependencies](#) continue to be underrated with regard to non-hunter-gatherers. In any case, anthropologists have grown much more cautious when claiming analogies with the remote past or with animal behaviour, not least because such analogies have often been used in efforts of [colonial](#) domination (Gordon 1992). Moreover, considerable variation and flexibility exist in hunter-gatherer lifeways not only across environments but even within the same type of environment (see Kent 2002, Lee & Daly 1999). Despite striking similarities, life in the Australian deserts is not the same as life in deserts in Africa and elsewhere. The same holds for hunter-gatherers living in savannas, tropical forests, or tundras. An elaborate mythical and ritual attachment to land, for instance,

has its very specific history in Australia, not matched in Africa but with regional continuities beyond indigenous Australia (see Swain 1993). At the same time, a high degree of mobility and small but flexible group size is found across the forager spectrum (Kelly 1995). It is important to point out that every ethnographic case documents a collective cultural achievement that has grown historically across many generations. Moreover, every environment inhabited by humans (foraging or not) has been altered by human impact so that hunter-gatherers, too, live in a cultural environment as much as in a natural one. The use of fire by hunter-gatherers, for example, is likely to have been a major transformative power in many natural environments (see Jones 1969).

Reducing hunter-gatherer life to ecology is as problematic as excluding ecology as irrelevant from other modes of life. Take mobility as an example: hunter-gatherers often move regularly within a certain territory. This mobility is a major strategy for dealing effectively with changes in the environment and with seasonal shortages of resources. However, mobility patterns are not only governed by ecological reasons alone. In many instances, they are also social. People resolve or avoid conflicts and social tension by splitting up and moving away from one another. Conversely, they create and maintain social bonds by visiting one another and by staying together. Moreover, hunter-gatherers often move before resources are depleted, in the search for food variety but also because they long to revisit places they have not been to for a while (see Widlok 2015). The movement is different – in its ecological impact and in terms of social relevance – from those of [farmers](#) and herders who may constantly be on the lookout for new pastures in unknown territory (see Brody 2000). Among hunter-gatherers, one can typically observe a fission and fusion pattern as people aggregate into larger groups and split up again periodically or seasonally. This pattern is often influenced by fluctuations in the availability of resources (migrating herds, fruit seasons, rainfall variability) but also by social needs, such as visiting known places. It is different from the pattern of outmigration in expanding farming or industrial societies. Mobility practices are therefore not only governed by ecology but they are also a matter of longing for others, of teaming up for rituals, but also for enjoying the personal autonomy of deciding whether one wants to stay or to leave. Much of the contemporary literature in social anthropology therefore concentrates on the social practices of living hunter-gatherers, while in archaeology and evolutionary studies the emphasis is on long-term ecological pressures and adaptations. It is important to note, however, that what is shared among hunter-gatherer groups in comparison with non-foragers and what is locally specific to them has both an ecological and a cultural dimension.

The original affluent society?

Early ideas about hunter-gatherers were hampered by the fact that, by the time that [professional](#) ethnographers arrived on the scene in the twentieth century, most hunter-gatherers had been decimated and relegated to remote places. Moreover, many early accounts by European explorers were not based on

first-hand observation but on second-hand information provided by dominant farmers and herders that was strongly coloured by their negative attitudes towards foragers, whom they considered to lead a harsh and undesirable life. When ethnographers were able to show that this was not the case (see Altman 1987), this realization – that hunter-gatherers often did not lead the miserable life of desperate poverty that farmers and herders (and early scholars) imagined – became one of the first major insights and intriguing findings of hunter-gatherer studies that continues to inform social thought. The discussion became widely known under the notion of 'the original affluent society', coined by Marshall Sahlins (1988). Sahlins relied on time-allocation studies suggesting that hunter-gatherers spend less time on work than people practicing agriculture. This made modern working-hours look less like a unique achievement of Western civilization than a return to what we had before the so-called Neolithic revolution. These findings flagged the drudgery and labour-intensive economic regimes that industrialization had introduced into (most) people's lives. A rich discussion followed (see Gowdy 1998), highlighting that the affluence of hunter-gatherers is in most cases not to be confused with abundance. Instead of continuously increasing production and maximising output, the main strategy of hunter-gatherers is to accept low production goals and optimise the distribution and use of resources. Instead of seeking to maximise individual material gains, many hunter-gatherers seemed to focus on allowing for plenty of time for leisure, ritual, social relations, and entertainment. Social practices such as sharing (discussed below) and mobility allowed greater access to resources than amongst sedentary people with exclusive property regimes. Not surprisingly, many alternative and post-materialist circles today are attracted to such a way of life.

However, it is important to note that the degree of affluence and its socio-cultural repercussions vary considerably. In drier climates, occasional hardships and food shortages occur more often than in rainforests. In lower latitudes, there is a strong seasonal element, resulting in shifts between more concentrated (and arguably more hierarchical) settlements in the summer months and more dispersed (and arguably more precarious) living during the winter (Mauss 2004 [1904-5]). More importantly, in some places like America's northwest coast, economies based on hunting, gathering, and fishing provided enough sustenance to allow for permanent settlements. As Brian Hayden (1984) argues, in some places enough surplus food could be converted into more hierarchical social structures through exchange and redistribution feasts to eventually lead to ranks, leaders, and clans, which were effectively avoided by most hunter-gatherers elsewhere. While sharing is a main strategy to facilitate resource access and enable equality, large-scale exchange networks and ceremonial, competitive exchange systems (like the *potlatch* feasts among northwest coast Indians) enabled hierarchy. In other words, major transformations in socio-political life, including the introduction of inequality and strong leadership positions, of inheritance and succession via descent, etc., may not have taken place as a consequence of the introduction of agriculture. They may have been already taking place within the hunter-gatherer spectrum.

This observation has led to a number of attempts to create sub-categories within the hunter-gatherer

spectrum and to emphasise the diversity among foraging groups. Amongst the various attempts to distinguish 'simple' from 'complex' hunter-gatherers, the distinction between 'immediate-return' and 'delayed-return' foragers (Woodburn 1998) has been most productive. While 'immediate-return' groups tend to consume the fruits of their labour more or less right away, 'delayed-return' groups may invest in land, infrastructure, and people that provide returns at a later stage. The point of departure of this distinction is that hunter-gatherer societies are integrated systems, so that an economic transformation may involve a number of socio-political transformations. Transitioning from immediate-return to delayed-return thus involves creating a strong sense of personal property and of social institutions (corporate groups and leadership positions) that protect property between the moment of investment and the moment of return. More recently, other aspects of this integrated system have been studied in greater detail, above all the ideational (or ontological) confidence that immediate-return hunter-gatherers have in their 'giving environment' (Bird-David 1990), and the corresponding notions of distributed creativity and performative sociality (see Lewis 2015). Immediate-return systems, it is argued, do not just allow for confidence in being able to make a living tomorrow, but they also free up time and energy that is then spent on art, music, and on engaging intimately with children and with one another. All of these studies underline that the seemingly 'simple' systems are in fact, in many ways, rather complex and intrinsically subject to historical and geographical variation. The following paragraphs will briefly outline key aspects of this complexity by dealing with equality, kinship, and ritual.

Hunter-gatherers and (in)equality

Biased views towards hunter-gatherers typically point out that they 'lack' several features that dominate the lives of observers, e.g. strong leaders, religious specialists, large edifices, codified laws, written literature, and formal institutions. The counter-movement has been to emphasise what hunter-gatherers have *preserved* (and which got lost in other contexts), for instance: equality, personal autonomy, freedom of movement, ecological harmony - with a danger of romanticising forager society as the inverse image of conditions found elsewhere. Much of the task of the anthropology of hunter-gatherers has been to debunk false assumptions leading into either of these directions. With regard to the question of equality, ethnographers have pointed out that it is not a given state of affairs amongst hunter-gatherers (and anyone else). The primate heritage seems to be characterised by widespread hierarchy (see Boehm 1993) from which human foragers managed to break away. Having few material possessions or moving places frequently is not a guarantee for equality. Whatever the material conditions, particular cultural lifeways have to develop for egalitarianism to be transmitted across generations. In other words, equality among humans is not a default that does not require any historically grown socio-cultural practices (see Widlok & Tadesse 2005).

Quite to the contrary, any successful form of equality is typically achieved by a host of practices that are

generally known as 'levelling practices', techniques that prevent individuals from becoming dominant; from converting, for instance, hunting success into lasting asymmetric dependencies and more generally from creating and accumulating capital in the hands of particular individuals or groups. Sharing, and specifically 'demand sharing', is a common strategy that regularly diffuses any inequalities between those who happen to have more than others (Peterson 1993, see also Widlok 2017). 'Demand sharing', closely related to 'tolerated scrounging', allows those in need to take initiative in the (re-) distribution of goods. Instead of waiting for an alm that may (or may not) be given according to the discretion of the giver, forms of demand sharing are a morally accepted and socially expected behaviour among many hunter-gatherers. It typically requires the owner to justify why something may be kept. It also makes hoarding difficult and often asking can be done implicitly, via a silent demand of a gesture or simple taking. Another example of levelling practices is gambling, such as the gambling of arrows among the Hadza, a group of a few hundred hunter-gatherers in Tanzania (Wooburn 1988). Here, arrows are the stakes in gambling games, which result in any hunter carrying arrows of other men in his quiver, which in turn has implications for meat distribution. Since the maker of an arrow can make claims on game shot with his arrow, this means that the more successful hunters regularly have to give up meat to others. Gambling is also widespread in Aboriginal Australia and those who gain are expected to play until inequalities even out. Another levelling practice is known as 'insulting the meat' and has been documented for the !Kung, the largest and best-known group of southern African hunter-gatherers (Lee 2003). Here, the meat provided by a hunter is systematically and rigorously talked about in negative terms ('insulted') which prevents hunters from boasting and exploiting their hunting luck for the domination of others, and for creating personal dependencies and obligations to them. A model known as 'reverse dominance hierarchy' (Boehm 1993) suggests that these egalitarian systems are actually not free of attempts to dominate, but that equality is maintained through strategies of the many who are dominating those few who otherwise would rise to positions of domination. There are, therefore, a number of informal social institutions that, when taken together, nudge people towards more equal relations and away from more hierarchical ones: mobility patterns allow people to 'vote with their feet' by avoiding lasting dependencies, as people cannot be forced to stay. Rituals strengthen communal bonds rather than individual specialists. And systems of universal and performative kinship avoid strong lineages emerging. Not all of these strategies are found in all hunter-gatherer societies. However, hunter-gatherers are characterised by bundles of levelling practices, and the resilience and reappearance of hunter-gatherer societies relies to a large extent on these levelling practices being kept in place across generations. Conversely, we are now in a better position to explain why there are (sub)cultures in which some hunting and gathering are practiced, but which on the whole look very different from the majority of what we call hunter-gatherer societies.

Hunting outside the context of hunter-gatherer societies has both continuities and discontinuities with what we find in the hunter-gatherer contexts. Hunting involves the taking of a life; it invokes the unintelligibility of death, of killing, and of having to kill in order to live. Therefore, the relationship to the

animal killed and the hunting practices are universally marked and hedged by ritual acts and special uses of language – including in 'modern' hunting. Nevertheless, two instances of hunting, however similar they may be in outward appearance, can involve rather different political institutions and different spiritual connotations. In the more recent history of Europe and its colonial satellites, hunting is closely associated with privilege and hierarchy. The landholding gentry held hunting rights over its large stretches of land which turned hunting into a symbol for (over-)lordship and domination. It also created the poacher as someone who not only illegally hunts but who also defies the sovereignty of kings, clergy, and lordships and who is consequently threatened with extremely harsh penalties (see Thompson 1975). The connection between hunting and ruling has been intimate across a large spectrum of modern political systems including fascist, communist, and colonial rulers, and it continues to be a strong marker of social distinction and power. In many ex-colonies, the nation-state and its representatives consider themselves to be the owners of wild animals (and sometimes of wild plants, too). This often automatically criminalises indigenous hunter-gatherers and has frequently led to the expulsion of local people from wildlife reserves based on an ideology of categorically separating people from wildlife.

Since hunting in European nation-states and in the colonies is associated with power-holders and domination, it is very different from the socio-political embedding found amongst hunter-gatherers. This is not only true in economic and political terms, but also with regard to the relationship between hunters and environment, particularly their prey. In his study *Grateful prey*, Robert Brightman (1993) gives a detailed account of the religious ideas and hunting strategies of subarctic indigenous hunters, in this case of the Cree Indians of the Hudson Bay. Here, the notion of the game animal as offering itself to the hunter, who in turn has a responsibility for that animal, is widespread. Animals are considered to be, in some respects, like humans, and in other respects seen as unlike humans, as depending on them but also as a potential spiritual threat. The personalization of the prey is deeply ambivalent. Rane Willerslev, in his ethnography of indigenous people of northeastern Siberia (2007) also underlines the point that hunting in these instances is never straightforwardly utilitarian, since there is an important spiritual dimension to it, stemming from the giving and taking of life. As in personal relationships, the exchange between humans and their environment is often conditional. It depends on performative skills and mutual atunement, including a degree of tricking, deception, and retribution, as well as gratefulness and respect (see Breyer & Widlok 2018). These ambivalent tendencies tend to culminate as part of hunting, which elevates this practice for hunter-gatherers to more than just a way of getting meat or of passing their time.

Gatherers, gender and comparisons

A broadly parallel picture emerges with regard to gathering and collecting wild foodstuff. There are two aspects to this: firstly, it has been pointed out that in terms of food quantity, nutrition, and food security, gathering undomesticated plant food is much more important to hunter-gatherers than the hunt, even

though ideologically there is commonly an emphasis on game meat. Scholarly preoccupation with the hunting aspect of the hunter-gatherer way of life may therefore be biased, since at least in terms of quantity, gathering is in many settings the main means of survival. Since it is mostly women who concentrate on gathering, the old picture of 'man the hunter' (Lee & DeVore 1986) began to be complemented by that of 'woman the gatherer' (Dahlberg 1981). This is an oversimplification, since even men who go out hunting often return with gathered fruits (rather than meat) while women's gathering may include capturing small animals such as lizards and birds. The line between what constitutes 'hunting', and who is involved in it, thereby becomes more blurred than anticipated (Kästner 2012). Without the keen observations of women reading animal tracks and movements, many hunts would not be successful. Moreover, collective hunts in forest areas often involve the whole camp, regardless of gender. Despite cases in which some of the meat may be reserved for men (or to particular relatives of the hunter), women in many hunter-gatherer societies enjoy equality that compares favourably with most other societies (see Leacock 1998). This includes their access to resources, but also their social standing and status, their autonomy in making decisions (for instance, in cases of infanticide) and their room for agency. Men, on the other hand, often engage in what may be considered 'female' activities, not just gathering but also looking after children (see Hewlett 1991). Despite a frequently observed division of labour, women and men are often equally involved in relevant practices, including economic decisions, politics, healing, and ritual affairs. This point has been particularly intensively debated with regard to the case of Aboriginal Australia where senior initiated men tend to be seen as the guardians of secret-sacred knowledge. Here, more recent studies have shown how women influence rituals from which they are formally excluded, so that kinship relations may override gender in ritual (Dussard 2000). More generally, ritual among hunter-gatherers is considered to be an integral part of making a living off the land (see below).

Although in comparison to hunting, gathering has been somewhat under-theorised in anthropology, the term 'collector' is occasionally also used synonymously with hunter-gatherers (and sometimes is restricted to more sedentary foragers). Yet in most instances, the goal of gathering items is not accumulation – in contrast to the case of art collectors, hobby collectors, or 'hoarders' in industrial societies. Although there is a sense of ownership in what individuals gather, gathered food items are prime objects of sharing (Widlok 2017). Sometimes, items get stored – for instance, fruit may be left to ripen in underground sand borrows – but as soon as they are brought back into the open, they are subject to intense (demand) sharing. Moreover, the attitude that informs the integration of hunter-gatherers into market and labour economies seems to be informed more by their gathering than by their hunting habitus. In my own field research with ≠Akhoe Hai//om in Namibia, I have observed people who basically forage in their small gardens, checking on small quantities of ripe fruit on a daily basis rather than waiting for a day of harvest. Similarly, their taking on day-labour seems to follow very much the logic of gathering: foraging on day-labour opportunities, as it were. Several authors have therefore pointed at similarities between hunter-gatherer ways of life and those occupying niches in large-scale societies, for instance travelling artisans or so-called

peripatetics who live as mobile blacksmiths or other specialists at the margins of sedentary societies (Rao 1987). One may also be inclined to include other 'labour minorities', such as deposit bottle collectors, dumpster-divers, day labourers, prostitutes, and others who in one way or another 'live for the moment' (see Day *et al.* 1999). It has been suggested that what connects these disparate cases is not so much the technique of generating an income, but the 'anarchic solidarity' (Gibson & Sillander 2011) that comes with it. This refers to a strong sense of mutual support and equality that is paired with the ability to share conventions of appropriate behaviour without a centralised authority figure or the codified rules policed by the state.

That said, there continue to be considerable differences between modern subcultures and hunter-gatherers. The former are typically integral (even though marginalised) parts of larger polities, while the latter usually enjoy a much larger degree of autonomy. While many subcultures of urban foragers are forced into their precarious positions (for an example see Rakowski 2016), most hunter-gatherers consider their way of life not to be 'second-best' and a matter of desperation, but rather one of considerable social and personal value that has proven its adaptability and resilience over many generations. While some subcultures may incorporate features that are also found in hunter-gatherer societies, they are in many ways only able to do so as a minority living among a majority that leads a different life. By contrast, within hunter-gatherer societies, their values and practices are practiced by all. They are the mainstream and 'normal', even though the size of these groups is very small indeed as they often only count a few hundred individuals. Thus, it is not only true that not everyone who hunts and gathers is living in a hunter-gatherer society, but also that hunter-gatherers share features with non-hunter-gatherers, in particular with some modern subcultures, without necessarily being as integrated into larger encompassing socio-economic systems.

The importance of extreme small-size of hunter-gatherer groups has recently been emphasised by Nurit Bird-David (2017) and it points, again, to the question of how one might compare instances of hunting and gathering across enormous stretches of scale (as well as across time and place). Interestingly, there are two major opposing positions within anthropology that, at their extreme, both discourage comparison, if for very different reasons. Those who consider hunter-gatherers to be closer to 'human nature' are disinclined to compare them to any other societies, since the latter are said to follow rules that are a product of a complex cultural history which are assumed to be largely absent in the case of hunter-gatherers. Those who consider today's hunter-gatherers to be merely the impoverished product of encapsulation by dominant neighbours dispute their capacity to create and maintain foraging as a cultural system from within, and therefore also do not grant them the status of 'independent' cases for comparison. However, it is likely that at the heart of the matter is not an intrinsic problem of hunter-gatherer societies, but rather difficulties in the discipline of anthropology of determining what counts as 'a case' and of understanding what comparative method(s) entail (see Candea 2019) – and ultimately, what counts as 'a society', 'a

community', or 'an individual'. None of these terms are neutral as they are filled with assumptions – usually generated from non-hunter-gatherer situations. If the subordination of individuals to a ruling authority or structures of domination defines a society, then we may either conclude that hunter-gatherers do not live in societies or that our notion of society is not universal and broad enough to capture human relationships that bind people together across all cases. The ethnography of hunter-gatherers therefore continues to generate critical reassessments of key notions in social theory. Hunting and gathering, as Tim Ingold (2000: 313) pointed out, is not just a 'technological regime' independent of the social relations of those who happen to neither domesticate crops or herds. Consequently, if these groups have more in common than their subsistence techniques, this should also show in domains of life that may at first appear to be less directly connected to hunting and gathering (less, say, than sharing and human-animal interaction), such as the domains of kinship and ritual, for example.

The social relations of hunter-gatherers

Hunter-gatherers across the globe differ in their kinship systems, even though statistically bilateral kinship is encountered most frequently among them (that is, kinship as a broad network that does not strictly follow a 'pedigree', a line of descent). Amongst pastoralists and horticulturalists, patrilineal descent (reckoning kinship through the male line) dominates, but it also occurs among hunter-gatherers (Keesing 1975: 134). The ≠Akhoe Hai//om are a case in point insofar as they practice cross-sex naming, which means that daughters receive their father's family name and sons receive their mother's family name, which effectively prevents the emergence of strong descent groups, lineages, and clans as corporate agents. Moreover, like many other hunter-gatherers, ≠Akhoe Hai//om may be said to have a universal kinship system; that is to say, they readily incorporate everyone with whom they are co-resident into the kinship network so that their family formation is not fully predicated on blood-ties, unlike the American kinship system (see Schneider 1980). They disregard a strong separation between 'matrilines' and 'patrilines', and between linear and non-linear kin, for that matter. Given the overall small number of persons in this group, links between people are 'multirelational' (Bird-David 2017), insofar as everyone is in many overlapping relations to everyone else. The notion of being a 'member' in a single abstract kinship category is not common in hunter-gatherer systems. Rather, kinship may be said to be performance-based, i.e. you achieve a certain kin relation through actions that comply with the expectations for that kin relation. Practices of care can create 'parental' kin; practices of friendship and mutual assistance can performatively bring about 'siblingship'. Thereby, you can become kin to someone who behaves appropriately but who may be distant from you (in terms of genetics or descent). Correspondingly, cases are reported in which those who do not share their lives anymore in a particular way can also lose their status as kin (Bird-David 2017). As mentioned earlier, this does not apply to all hunter-gatherers, but it occurs much more often in hunter-gatherer settings than it does elsewhere. Again, the Australian cases have been critical in many of these debates. This is partly because foundational texts in social thought (e.g.

by Emile Durkheim or Marcel Mauss) at the beginning of the twentieth century were informed by early ethnography that came out of Australia, and to some extent North America. Another reason is the extraordinarily complex and varied structure of many Australian kinship systems. Moreover, in a very recent contribution, Doug Bird *et al.* (2019) have analysed Australian forager ethnography to argue that despite small residential groups, the Martu of the Western Desert of Australia are actually part of large social networks that typically involve social relationships beyond kin relatives. This undermines the widespread assumption that human sociality was conditioned exclusively in tight, small groups of 'bands' in human evolution. Rather, even apparently isolated foragers took part in large and complex societies linked through ritual and an expansive social network. These debates illustrate two recurrent challenges in hunter-gatherer studies and in social thought more generally: images of hunter-gatherers (and of humanity more generally) are often wrongly coloured by the assumption that their social relations are simply small-scale versions of present-day modern state societies with clear-cut social roles and individuals occupying these roles (Bird-David 2017). At the same time, images of hunter-gatherers (and of humanity more generally) are also wrongly coloured by the assumption that they are extreme cases of the closely-knit farming communities found in the immediate past of modern state societies with its villages and corporate descent groups, instead of being part of open and expansive networks (Bird *et al.* 2019).

The fact that some of the arrangements that characterise hunter-gatherer relationships (for instance performativity, or integration of distant people as kin) are also found in the patchwork families of modern urban societies is not, it seems, a coincidence. In both instances kinship ties are not 'burdened' with issues of political power, with the control of women by men and of juniors by seniors, with succession to office, or with an indispensable reliance of inherited property for living one's life. And in both cases we find a high premium given to personal autonomy and open networks paired with an intrinsic interest in other people as particular beings rather than as representatives of social categories. Hunter-gatherer ethnography therefore provides important lessons for understanding social and cultural life, not because it is closer to an assumed natural condition but because it departs in many ways from the dominant ways of farmers and herders – while not being exceptional to the extent that a comparison would not be possible.

Rituals of hunter-gatherers

A similar summary can be made with regard to the domain of hunter-gatherer ritual. Again, some patterns emerge, but without there being a single set of religious ideas and practices associated with hunting and gathering. In fact, it has been repeatedly questioned whether the dominant idea of a religion (defined as a sacred sphere separate from the secular) holds for hunter-gatherer contexts at all. Their rituals seem to be conspicuously disconnected from any direct interaction with a distant creator-god. Rituals are typically not considered to be sacrifices or other forms of 'striking a deal' with deities, ancestors, or other spiritual beings. Consequently, many rituals lack the sense of devoutness and dogma. Often rituals are transacted

through intergroup exchange, as in Aboriginal Australia, where a whole category of ritual activities is known as 'travelling business' in which ritual songs, dances, objects, and emblems have been transferred across the whole continent (Widlok 1992). Among hunter-gatherers of the central African forest, rituals are regularly paid for in such transactions. This is not seen as curtailing their power but rather amplifies their playful and emotional value (Lewis 2015). Ethnographers like Mathias Guenther (1999) have long been pointing at the degree of playfulness and flexibility that characterises hunter-gatherer life, and in particular the domains that are usually called 'religious'. At least, this is true for many so-called 'immediate-return systems'. In other contexts, in particular in Aboriginal Australia, transgressing or disclosing what is secret and sacred can have deadly serious consequences. The excitement of new ritual songs, dances, and objects travelling between places is part of this playfulness, but also the fact that ritual activities are often a blend between skilful art performances, entertaining group gatherings, and matters of concern such as healing and caring for the social and natural environment. This is true for ritual actions like the San trance dance, which combines healing with play entertainment and dance performance (Widlok 1999: 249). Dances that may begin as 'just play' can involve sincere healing, and most stories and ritual actions have an open, entertaining 'reading' as well as a serious, at times secluded, and powerful one. Combining serious issues with elements of 'serious play' is also apparent in the 'mythical' trickster figures that are prevalent among hunter-gatherers (and beyond). Tricksters are ambivalent not only as superhuman shape-shifters or messengers of superhuman forces, but also as tricking others and as being tricked - and as being laughed about. Where trickster stories and trance dances occur, we find parallel social and political relations of hunter-gatherer groups predicated along similar lines. Peter Gray (2009: 484) speaks of the prolonged social play in these societies as characterised by 'voluntary participation, autonomy, equality, sharing, and consensual decision making'. At the same time, ritual has been identified as one possible entry-point for emerging inequalities (see Woodburn 2005 and other contributions in Widlok & Tadesse 2005).

Jerome Lewis has recently suggested that attraction, enjoyment, excitement, and entertainment are the main driving forces in the economy of 'spirit play rituals' among Mbendjele, central African forest hunter-gatherers (2015: 18). Thus, the playfulness and the role of being attracted to engaging with one another in ritual performance, which was previously considered to be little more than a side-effect, has now entered central analytical stage. Playfulness appears to be a key motivation for engaging in these rituals and for regulating the seemingly 'anarchic' social life of hunter-gatherers. The same pattern of play seems to inform not only what one may want to call the religious sphere but also other aspects of human life, such as sharing and ultimately even hunting itself. There seems to be a fairly close match, at least in some of the cases, between hunting practices and ritual ones: hunter-gatherers can be highly tolerant with regard to alternative opinions and interpretations, for instance when interpreting the tracks of game animals, keeping options open long into the hunt (see Liebenberg 1990). A similar acceptance of heterodoxy and flexibility with regard to contextual, situational factors is also found in the religious domain and in the domain of ethical judgements of some hunter-gatherer groups. However, a strong sense of 'Law' may

prevail in others, above all in Aboriginal Australia and in the case of the northwest coast of America. The argument here is therefore not that there is a causal relation between hunting and religion (or vice versa) but rather that hunter-gatherers in many instances train and cultivate similar ways of going about things across these domains. The playfulness and flexibility of African hunter-gatherers is found across domains, and so are the harshness and rigidity found in both religious and kinship affairs of hunter-gatherers in Australia and the northwest coast.

Conclusions: hunting and gathering in past, present, and future

In the early stages of anthropology, the fact that hunting and gathering predates other human economic practices led to the assumption that they somehow constitute the simplest building blocks of human social life and therefore held the key for understanding humans in general or 'human nature'. This was the view, for instance, put forward in Emile Durkheim's book *The elementary forms of religious life* (Durkheim 2015 [1912]) which relies heavily on what was then known about hunter-gatherers in order to develop a general sociological theory of religion. It also applies to the early work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Many assumptions entertained by Durkheim and other early theorists about hunter-gatherer ethnography turned out to be wrong, even though – arguably – they have been able to draw interesting conclusions from them. Durkheim was wrong, for instance, to think of Australian hunter-gatherers as featuring a particularly simple religion (or society for that matter). Their mythology and their kinship systems are among the most complicated on this planet.

At the same time, studying hunter-gatherers may still lead us towards an improved understanding of religion and other aspects of cultural life. Rather than seeing religion primarily as a system of codified beliefs that lends itself to particular forms of political domination, we may conceive of it more broadly in terms of 'serious play'. What has been pointed out for hunter-gatherer religion is also true for their economic and social practices: they are not entirely exceptional. Hunter-gatherer ways of practicing religion are reminiscent of sub-strands in other religious traditions (see Turner 1999). Hunter-gatherer ways of organising access to shared resources may inspire changes in urban or digital settings (Widlok 2017). What makes the hunter-gatherer ethnography so relevant for anthropological thought is not that it was entirely different from all other ways of life, nor that it often seems particularly attractive to post-industrial urbanites today. Rather, it is the fact that it enriches the spectrum of possible lifeways that humans have been able to bring about – and it enriches our attempts to better understand how humans create any particular socio-cultural environment in the first place.

Contemporary hunter-gatherers and their descendants face enormous difficulties when trying to maintain their way of life in an economic and political environment that is hostile to them. Their number is decreasing as dominating neighbours have forced them to give up their ways of life. Correspondingly, it becomes ever more difficult to live a hunter-gatherer life and to share that life as an ethnographer. Much

anthropological work with hunter-gatherers and their descendants is therefore dealing with issues of land rights, health and education, political mobilization and participation, of maintaining local languages and culture as heritage. Hunter-gatherers themselves are increasingly involved in determining the direction of anthropological research in ways that is relevant and beneficial to them.

At the same time, hunter-gatherer studies continues to be a burgeoning field. Even seemingly abstract and 'old-fashioned' anthropological pursuits, such as the collection of genealogies, mapping hunting sites and trails, documenting stories and everyday language, can gain applied relevance in court cases on land rights, in revitalization programmes, and in political conflicts with states and majority populations. Moreover, existing ethnography proves to be a fertile ground from which innovative anthropological explanations continue to emerge. They may teach us about hunter-gatherer culture and what makes it intrinsically valuable, and they may enable us to look differently at other cultural traditions. Once we learn that some people perceive the cosmos as capricious and populated with whimsical powers, we find this perception not just among foragers but also elsewhere. When hunter-gatherers teach us that for some people indulgence is a value, but achieving status through distinction is not, we may not only notice this stance in the documented past before farming or in the utopias of distant futures. Rather, we may be able to better trace practices and cultural repertoires seen and realised among hunter-gatherers in a variety of contemporary contexts elsewhere. After all, the ethnography of hunting and gathering was never only about a group of strange 'others', it has always been about them and us as fellow humans.

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