

1 Historicizing adaptation, adapting to history: forager-traders in South and Southeast Asia

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In South and Southeast Asia today, as in many other parts of the world, there exist people who subsist, in part, by the gathering of wild plants and the hunting of wild animals. Many of these people are also engaged in larger-scale national and international political, social, and economic relationships. They may speak the same languages as others who plant, trade, herd, and rule; they may trade with them, marry them, work with and for them. Archaeological, historical, and biological data lead us to believe that this is not a new situation but instead one of long duration, perhaps nearly as long as the Holocene itself. In this volume we consider the long-term histories of some of these people who gather and hunt and their relationships to agriculturalists and states, in the process grappling with issues of the complex nature of these interactions. In moving beyond polemics to consider the substantive cultural and biological histories of South and Southeast Asian forager-traders, we aim both to focus on the historical specificity of our cases and to forge broader comparisons within and across regions. While close reading of individual cases reminds us to resist the urge to reify such fluid and often partial categories as “farmer,” “forager,” and even specific ethnic/cultural labels, the exercise of comparison reminds us that such categories can have an *analytical* utility, and that the similarities and differences between the complex histories of interaction in these two regions may help us to forge better understandings of the cultural, biological, and historical processes that shaped them.

Hunter-gatherers, history, and the revisionist debate

It has become fashionable to assert that contemporary hunter-gatherers have histories and that hunting and gathering lifeways constitute historically, politically, and ecologically specific responses to circumstances in which people find (and found) themselves. The so-called revisionist debate in hunter-gatherer studies centered around a much-trumpeted recognition of the long-term historical entanglements of hunter-gatherers with

differently organized others (e.g. Denbow 1984; Schrire 1980, 1984; Wilmsen 1983, 1989, 1993; Wilmsen and Denbow 1990). In particular, the debate concentrated on particular foraging groups of southern Africa and on the degree to which they can be seen as having been (until recently) isolated from others, or at least self-sufficient. Although the debate played out largely in terms of ethnographic and especially historical specifics, the intellectual stakes are much larger. The revisionists point out, in contradistinction to those whom they accuse of an ahistorical scientism that imposes temporally evacuated behavioral models on to the past, that neither contemporary foragers nor strategies of gathering and hunting in themselves reflect timeless throwbacks to an earlier “stage” of human cultural evolution. This is an important point. Simply because we may agree, for example, that humans hunted and gathered during the Palaeolithic, and that some humans hunt and gather now, there is no reason to see these contemporary people as necessarily either (enduring) representatives or appropriate models for the Palaeolithic.¹

This revisionist formulation highlights the work of archaeologists and historians, for whom issues of long-term change have always been central. It is difficult to find fault with this position, if not with its rather messianic tone. While revisionist observations are not entirely novel, the message is still an important one for those who have looked to contemporary hunter-gatherers to find invariant or universal features of this “mode of production” (cf. Sahlins 1972; Johnson and Earle 1987) that can be used to characterize prehistoric societies. Such features have included, among others, qualities such as flexibility, sharing, small group size, mobility, and egalitarian social organization (Conkey 1984; Leacock and Lee 1982; Lee 1979; Wiessner 1982; and see Gardener 1991). In the archaeological record, where one finds a greater range of behavioral variation in hunting and gathering than is recorded ethnographically, these characteristics, rather than being seen as typical of all foragers, have been supplemented by the addition of new foraging forms such as “complex hunter-gatherers” (e.g. Price and Brown 1985) and by more sophisticated approaches to, most notably, the diversity of hunter-gatherer mobility strategies (Binford 1983, 2001). While recognition of this broader range of organization has been productive, such new labels have sometimes simply been absorbed as new types or modes of categorization (cf. Gunther 1995); trait bundles rather than complex outcomes of contingent social and ecological parameters and processes. The revisionist debate, despite or perhaps because of the acrimony it has engendered, forces us to re-examine the shorthand economic labels (hunter-gatherer, horticulturalist, specialist, farmer) we often use

to describe particular peoples, labels whose associated cultural-historical baggage implies much more than simply a way of making a living and which can veer toward essentialism.²

It is also possible, however, to see something in the other side of the recent debate over the status and history of hunter-gatherers in the contemporary world. What I mean by this is not the ongoing arguments about whether particular peoples enjoyed periods of isolation (Lee and Guenther 1991, 1993, 1995; Wilmsen 1993), but instead the presumed goals of the less fashionable side in the revisionist debate. The recognition of history, while long overdue, does not negate the considerable interest in and importance of understanding how past and present people employed hunting, gathering, trading, agriculture, and wage labor in complex and varied ways to cope with the real challenges of subsisting in the world. In this sense, then, post-Neolithic and contemporary hunters and gatherers are certainly not “spurious” (cf. Solway and Lee 1990). They really hunt and they really gather, and the fact that they may employ strategies more diverse than previously imagined, may have changed their strategies, and even their cultural identities through time does not imply that our interest in understanding their lives is misplaced. Gathering and hunting, in themselves, as strategies, are worth studying, and the observation of contemporary peoples who hunt and gather is one way to go about doing this.

The charge of essentialism, furthermore – and hunter-gatherers are often seen as having something like the purest of essences, the oldest, or the most primitive and as such are the quintessential foils for discussion of the “civilized”³ – is not to be wielded solely by the revisionist camp against those who employ general models of hunter-gatherer behavior. In fact, the most rabid revisionists also partake in this search for essential identity, in particular through their insistent denial of the value of ethnographic work and of its utility for coming to understandings of the past. If pre-revisionist anthropologists are to be chided for ignoring the complex, entangled pasts of certain groups once seen as iconic of the hunting and gathering “mode of production” or way(s) of life that, we are endlessly reminded, has been typical of 99 percent of human existence,⁴ the revisionists have established their own (absent and seemingly unattainable) archetype of the primeval human. The way out of this conundrum, it seems, is to shed typological/essential thinking so that the fact that foragers have histories of interaction and interdependence can no longer be seen as challenging our understandings of them. If our understandings are processual rather than essential, then we can step out of the parameters of the revisionist debate altogether.

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This volume addresses the substantive histories of some people in South and Southeast Asia who, among other things, hunt and gather, paying particular attention to histories of interaction and exchange between people organized in different ways. We aim to move beyond the rather narrow, partisan confines of the revisionist debate. I suggest that, at its worst, this debate revolves around a kind of shared essentialism in which both sides seek an archetypal hunter-gatherer form, one side finding it (or locating it as having just disappeared) and the other finding only sullied, impure, and thus unworthy examples of it. In this volume, I hope we can move beyond this argument to examine actual long-term histories and to come to terms with at least some of the complexity of the biological, cultural, political, and social processes of change in these regions. In focusing on history, I am making the argument, consonant with points raised by revisionists, that we can often (but not always) expect significant long-term change rather than deep stability. In fact, the chapters in this volume suggest that South and Southeast Asian histories are inflected *both* by periods of large-scale change and by significant long-term commitments to particular ways of life.

In stressing the historical, I do not mean to suggest that synchronic ecological and other relationships are unimportant. On the contrary, synchronic relationships do have something to say about ways in which strategies of subsistence, mobility, and so on can be structured and maintained in non- or minimally food-producing societies. However, such relationships in no way constitute explanations for, or total accounts of, the situations of particular people at particular points in time. Synchronic ecological and functional analysis is, by definition, ahistorical, and runs the risk of reifying contingent historical moments into cultural-historical or other normative categories. This does not, in itself, indicate that such momentary studies are somehow wrong; it simply points to their inherent limitations. Although I would argue that an integration between historical and presentist modes of analysis in the study of gathering and hunting – including what has aptly been termed “wage hunting and gathering” (Breman 1994) – is urgently needed, it is also clear that we are not yet at the point where such integration is the norm. In trying to challenge intellectual practice, we also confront its history. That is, just as contemporary hunting and gathering strategies may be best seen as the contingent outcomes of long-term interactions, historical creations made from generations of dynamic human and environmental action, so too must we build on existing scholarly traditions. The relative abundance of environmental and recent ethnographic information on Southeast Asian foragers, for example, contrasts markedly with the relative scarcity of such information for South Asia. In South Asia,

much of the ethnographic work on groups who gather and hunt was carried out early on in a tradition that stressed social organization rather than adaptation, and which in a sense also operated in the shadows of South Asia's large agrarian population, factors that have certainly shaped approaches taken by later scholars. If environmental contexts and ecological relations of Southeast Asian groups are more fully studied, then it must also be said that in the South Asian context, hunter-gatherer studies, as a separate field, has never fully developed and as a consequence, foraging groups are less ethnographic objects than pieces of a larger social puzzle worked on by historians (e.g. Guha 1999; Hardiman 1987a; Skaria 1999) and others as well as anthropologists and archaeologists. It may be, then, that issues of power relations and interactions with differently organized others are further along in South Asian studies, while a developed understanding of the critical environmental and ecological contexts of South Asian foragers is still largely undeveloped.

One feature missing in many ecologically oriented analyses of prehistoric and recent foragers is specific consideration of social and political contexts, and specifically power relations. If we agree that foragers (including those who farm, trade, keep animals, and labor for a wage) must engage a real, material world, then it seems analytically indefensible to study hunting and gathering behavior as if all choices could be freely made and as if there were never external constraints to action in past or present forager worlds. Such worlds may be best conceived as total landscapes, largely dependent on environmental parameters beyond human control but which may also have been modified, to a greater or lesser extent, by human action. These landscapes are also social landscapes in which differential relations of power exist and which are differentially perceived and acted on by humans. Such socionatural landscapes reflect, one suspects, a widespread Holocene condition rather than simply a colonial and postcolonial phenomenon. By power, I mean not only coercive and restrictive forces, something imposed on foraging groups by outside polities or peoples, but also issues of internal social and political power, the ability of foraging groups to define themselves, to move freely, to give meaning to their own actions. Skaria (1999), for example, discusses the meanings given by Bhils and other forest groups in western India to their own "wildness," a highly gendered notion whose valorization by the Bhils inverted the negative connotations of that same "wildness" when seen through colonial eyes.

The solution, then, at least as I see it, rejects the terms of the revisionist debate altogether, at least in its more typological manifestations, and

highlights the need for, on the one hand, *both* history and process. A fuller understanding of past and present forager-traders, as well as the larger worlds in which they lived and continue to live, must take into account both the contingent outcomes of particular contexts (and hence accept that human trajectories, even those involving foragers, are never fully predictable) while still working toward understandings of general historical and ecological processes. That South and Southeast Asian forager-traders followed, in many cases, roughly parallel lines of development (while still, of course, maintaining important cultural and other differences) and can be so fruitfully compared itself accentuates the critical role of such general understanding. Furthermore, this comparison also highlights the need for greater analytical integration of both organization and structure – foundational synchronic analytical forms – as well as change through time or trajectory. As noted, few studies achieve this kind of integration, though perhaps Junker's analyses (1996, chapter 10 this volume) come the closest. As noted, the differential research traditions of South and Southeast Asia might be held to account, in part, for this disjunction.

The solution, then, to the impasse of the revisionist debate will not be to ignore environmental and ecological relations in favor of interpersonal relations, nor will it be the reverse. It will not be to try and pluck hunter-gatherers from their current position as creatures uniquely linked to the natural environment, nor will it be to force other groups into that ethological mode. Instead, these dichotomies must themselves be overcome. To step outside the terms of the existing debate we must develop a balanced – and thus necessarily multidisciplinary – political ecology which both keeps humans in (and of) the natural environment while at the same time does not elide the critical cultural dimension of human experience. Furthermore, this new human ecology, as suggested above, needs above all to be a historical political ecology (cf. Biersack 1999; Peet and Watts 1996), where long-term histories matter. It is one thing, of course, to prescribe and quite another to practice. As noted, few single studies, especially those that can be outlined in an article, incorporate all aspects of this approach. It is our intention that the diversity of approaches, data sources, and emphases taken by the authors in this volume should go some way toward building this more balanced account of forager-trader (and other) lives past and present; no one scholar or discipline will be able to construct this edifice alone. Further, our focus on both comparison and long-term histories, on both process and trajectory, is meant to suggest a way into this historical political ecology. To set the stage for this comparison, we turn now to the region itself.

South and Southeast Asia in the hunter-gatherer scene

South and Southeast Asian hunter-gatherers have often played supporting roles in hunter-gatherer studies. Unlike African, Australian, or North American foragers who have become textbook exemplars of this way of life,⁵ South and Southeast Asian gatherers and hunters have long been recognized as less “pure,” more sullied by external forces, and as poor representatives of the type, at least in more popular treatments. This is not to say that there has not been a rich and productive tradition of anthropological and historical scholarship on Asian hunter-gatherers, as the chapters in this volume make clear. However, it is certainly the case that both ethnographic (from patrimonial bands [Steward 1938] to optimal foragers [Smith and Winterhalder 1992; Winterhalder and Smith 1981]) and archaeological (focal vs. diffuse foraging strategies, for example [Cleland 1966]) models of hunter-gatherers are overwhelmingly constructed on the basis of research outside Asia. Archaeological research on gathering and hunting peoples in South and Southeast Asia has lagged somewhat behind ethnographic work, hampered both by specific contextual difficulties in regional archaeological records (preservation problems in the humid tropics, depositional integrity of Palaeolithic sites, to name only two examples), as well as by a tendency to de-emphasize studies of hunter-gatherers in time periods after the initial emergence of agriculture (but see Junker 1996).

The evident integration of South and Southeast Asian foragers into larger-scale economies and political structures may be a factor in their perennially ambiguous status as “proper” hunter-gatherers. In the now-classic *Man the Hunter* symposium and volume, for example, B.J. Williams (1968:128) seemed both slightly apologetic and defiant about the utility of his data on the Birhor of South Bihar, India:

In some important ways the Birhor do not meet the conditions assumed in the model of hunting-gathering society. They are neither politically autonomous nor are they economically autonomous.

They live in an area that has been inhabited by tribal agriculturalists for a very long period of time. During the past 100-plus years the area has seen a large influx and growth of Hindu and Muslim agriculturalists that now far outnumber the tribal population.

The Birhor trade hunted and collected items to the villagers in exchange for rice . . . The Bihors also spend some time making rope from the inner-bark fiber of certain vines. These they also trade for rice . . . Not only do the Birhor live a form of economic parabiosis with agriculturalists, but also they are in some ways a politically subjugated minority . . . These conditions which are the result of intensive interaction with dominant groups makes [*sic*] the

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Birhor less than ideal as a basis for inferences about possible forms of social organization in hunting groups living only among hunters. On the other hand, they have the great advantage of being hunters now.

The apparent problem of “impure” cases (cf. Lee and DeVore 1968b:4) of hunter-gatherers of course presupposes the existence of a “pure” form or archetype. Certainly Pleistocene peoples lived in a world of hunter-gatherers, as did later peoples in some parts of the world, but the existence of a single or even a few archetypes for even these cases may not be realistic. All historically and ethnographically known foragers present problems, however, in the quest for archetypes. Schrire (1980:11) sums up this problem:

The actual study of living hunter-gatherers is fraught with practical problems: very few modern groups fall in this classification; those who do generally live in remote and unattractive areas; and despite their isolation, nearly every known group has some measure of contact with pastoralists, agriculturalists, or landowners today. Contact is regarded as an “impure” overlay on the previously “pure” hunter-gatherer base. If its effects are slight, it is usually treated as a recent intrusion that may be subtracted easily from the pure hunter-gatherer base, whereas if its manifestations are more complex, the whole situation may be regarded as transitional, representing an intermediate stage in the evolutionary scale from hunting to urban dwelling. This stage is usually defined as being analogous to a Neolithic economy – *sensu latu* – which allows the “impure” form of hunter-gatherer behavior to retain its intrinsic importance in the study of human behavior.

Thus, contemporary foragers might be seen, if not as models for the Palaeolithic, then as examples of sedentism, acculturation, or some other early Holocene process.

Schrire does not, however, note the other way in which “impure” hunter-gatherers – those involved with non-foraging others or even having non-foraging pasts – have been studied without abandoning cultural-historical schemes; they can be products of “regression” or “devolution.” In fact, the participants in the *Man the Hunter* conference concerned themselves at some length with “devolution” and the problem of “failed” agriculturalists. The Sri Lankan Veddas, studied by Seligman and Seligman (1911), were included in this category as were the Siriono of South America (Lee and DeVore 1968b:4; and see Lathrap 1968; Murdock 1968). That such language can be used to describe this shift points to the pervasiveness of progressivist evolutionary schemes and the persistent belief that gathering and hunting are “primitive” and “simple,” and hence “early” in

the usual scheme of things.⁶ Lathrap (1968:29), for example, has made much of the fact that the ancestors of some South American foraging groups formerly practiced agriculture, a pattern that follows in part from the colonial experience of the Americas and its catastrophic demographic and social-political effects. Such transitions, although historically specific, should, it would seem, tell us a great deal about foraging strategies in general. Rather than argue about whether such hunter-gatherers are “real” or “devolved,”⁷ we might see in such shifts an opportunity to combine both historically specific and general organizational understanding of foraging and its role in larger strategies of survival, resistance, and cultural persistence and change. Both South and Southeast Asian foraging peoples present similar opportunities for scholarly understanding. We know that we face complex and long-term histories of engagement between people organized in very different ways, a situation which was probably more common in the past several millennia than anthropologists have generally acknowledged.

In a sense, then, we can see that the concerns raised by the revisionists, including their attacks on the myth of the primitive isolate (Headland and Reid 1991; Kuper 1988), are partially prefigured in earlier scholarship (and cf. R.G. Fox 1969; Steward and Murphy 1977). What this debate did accomplish, however, besides promoting a vitriolic public exchange over the history of southern African San peoples and the history of scholarship relating to them, was to highlight the ways in which isolationist models are *used*, particularly in archaeological reconstructions (Shott 1992). This is an important contribution, especially given the tendency in archaeology to rely on ideal types or categories that can be used to flesh out difficult reconstructions (cf. Morrison 1996).

While we can probably agree that naive attempts to create analogues for Palaeolithic lifeways based on heavy-handed applications of San ethnography, for example, are to be avoided, the question remains as to what the recognition of complex historical interaction implies for constructive research. In this, we hope that the experiences of South and Southeast Asian forager-traders will have something to contribute. Extreme revisionist views, that studies of contemporary and historically known hunting and gathering peoples have little or nothing to tell us about prehistoric hunting and gathering, are not only incorrect, in my view, but they also reveal, as noted above, an underlying essentialist bias sometimes shared by its fiercest opponents. This is the idea that “hunter-gatherer” or “forager” is to be constituted as an ideal type, so that “corrupted” or “devolved” contemporary examples have nothing to contribute to examination of presumably

purser past examples of the type. To return to the concept of “base” as raised by Schrire (1980), one might ask whether or not hunting and gathering constitutes some kind of a base or foundation (cultural, if not economic, cf. Bird-David 1992a, 1992b) on which later (or different) strategies are simply built. Or, should the metaphor perhaps invoke concentricity, as in the layers of an onion? Perhaps we should abandon the notion of the forager archetype, of bases and foundations, altogether. In South and Southeast Asia, it is clear that contemporary foraging peoples are not isomorphic in their lifeways with, for example, Palaeolithic or Mesolithic hunter-gatherers. In some cases, like those described by Lathrap, they are clearly not remnant populations of people with an unbroken history of hunting and gathering but are instead people who, in the face of both opportunity and restraint, rearranged their subsistence activities to become specialized forager-traders. Both these people *as well as* those who can claim an unbroken ancestry involving gathering and hunting are no less “modern” than agriculturalists or craftspeople, no less contemporary, no less enmeshed in complex political, cultural, and economic worlds. In some cases, we can view hunting, gathering, and trading as related to oppression and domination, but it is also apparent that many people have worked hard to retain their ability to practice various foraging lifeways, suggesting a kind of resilience and strength on the part of foragers that views of their disappearance or imminent demise tend to deny them.

As noted, the solution to the apparent deadlock of the extremes of the revisionist debate – a relentless historicism and anti-comparativist bent on the one hand, an ahistorical scientism on the other – may be for both sides (and those on the sidelines) to abandon the worn-out typological constructs that have been the source of such acrimony. Rather than imagine that contemporary “bands” (*sensu* Service 1971) can tell us all about “bands” in the past, we may instead consider strategies and processes, which although historically variable and contingent (inasmuch as strategies and processes are always realized in specific contexts) have utility as general analytical categories that iconic depictions of societal types do not.

Building comparisons: South and Southeast Asia

South and Southeast Asia, beyond their potential to contribute to broader debates in anthropology and hunter-gatherer studies, also present us with an interesting historical comparison. In both places, upland peoples are known to survive by gathering forest products⁸ and trading with lowland