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978-0-521-02600-0 - Cultural Diversity among Twentieth-Century Foragers: An African Perspective

Edited by Susan Kent

Excerpt

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1 Cultural diversity among African foragers: causes and implications

Susan Kent

While understanding diversity has been a hallmark of anthropological inquiries since the inception of the discipline, hunter-gatherer (or forager) studies tend to stress similarities. Some cross-cultural studies focus on a single aspect which all foragers by definition share: subsistence strategies that emphasize wild plants and animals. Thus, cultural differences in the areas of language, religion, social organization, hunting, politics, mobility, and history tend to be ignored. An example of how diversity can be masked by a fallacious uniformity is the common practice of grouping Northwest Coast hunter-gatherer-fisher Indians in the same category as hunter-gatherer Basarwa (Bushman or San; e.g., Cosmides and Tooby 1992:217). Though they have similar food procurement strategies (an emphasis on the use of wild plants and animals), these two groups differ in almost every other way possible – from the environment they occupy to their stratification, hierarchies, and gender relations, as well as the organization of their economics.

Several seminal books have unintentionally supported the mistaken view that all hunter-gatherer societies are quite similar. Both *Man the hunter* (Lee and DeVore 1968) and *Woman the gatherer* (Dahlberg 1981) represented state-of-the-art thinking on foragers at the time of their publication. However, both these books and those that followed implied a more or less intrinsic similarity between hunter-gatherers because of their reliance on wild plants and animals. In a later book on hunter-gatherers, Leacock and Lee (1982:6; emphasis added) wrote, “The contributors to this volume share an interest in discovering the *commonalities* among gatherer-hunters . . .” Today “commonalities” of hunter-gatherers have been stressed by researchers to the point of being misleading; they actually mask the very diversity anthropology seeks to discover and understand.

After a long period of recognizing broad economic similarities (i.e., hunting and gathering as a major orientation), researchers such as Binford (1980, 1987) began to explore gross categories of hunter-gatherers. Binford labeled two types based on different mobility

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[More information](#)

patterns: collectors and foragers (1980). The former primarily occupy a base camp and gather locally available wild resources to bring back to camp (examples are Northwest Coast Indians, some Okiek groups, and Inuit). Foragers are defined as groups who move their camps to the resources (examples include the Basarwa, Pygmies, and Hadza). Many societies practice both strategies, although usually one or the other dominates. Binford (1982) also distinguished semi-sedentary and sedentary hunter-gatherers from nomadic hunter-gatherers. He attributed differences to variations in their environments in terms of the abundance and distribution of wild plants and animals. Other anthropologists grappling with extinct groups with no modern analog have separated hunter-gatherers by sociopolitical organization, differentiating between complex and non-complex societies (Price and Brown 1985). Woodburn (1982) proposed classifying hunter-gatherer societies by their economic system: those with immediate-return economies and demand sharing (also usually highly, strongly, or assertively egalitarian), and those with delay-returned economies, surpluses, and storage (usually more strongly or completely *non-egalitarian*). Other anthropologists have proposed additional classification schemes for types of hunter-gatherers, with varying degrees of success (see Testart 1982, 1987).

Only by first acknowledging and clarifying diversity in the culture and behavior of foragers can we identify similarities, which may then become valuable for formulating models of modern and past hunter-gatherers. However, if diversity is ignored, researchers may indiscriminately attribute group-specific cultural traits to all foragers. Such inaccurate generalizations would invalidate any resultant conclusions. *Cultural diversity among twentieth-century foragers: an African perspective* is devoted to elucidating and understanding the many differences between and within hunter-gatherer societies. Some of its authors examine differences between particular foraging societies, such as various groups of Basarwa (Silberbauer, Guenther, Barnard and Widlok, Vierich and Hitchcock), Pygmies (Hewlett, Joiris, Ichikawa and Terashima), and Okiek (Blackburn). Other authors, such as Blurton Jones *et al.*, focus on differences between ethnically unrelated foragers – the Hadza of East Africa and the Ju/'hoansi Basarwa of Ngamiland.

Genesis of the book

My interest in compiling a book on hunter-gatherer diversity developed out of other anthropologists' reactions to my work with G/wi, G//ana, and Kūa Basarwa from Kutse, a recently sedentary community located in the Kalahari Desert of Botswana. Kutse residents tend to follow

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

social patterns dissimilar from those of the Ju/'hoansi (or !Kung) Basarwa studied by Lee (1979) or Marshall (1976). Descriptions of customs or behavior which differ from the Ju/'hoansi often evoke criticism since they are generally considered the archetypical Bushmen or Basarwa. These criticisms arise from the mistaken belief that *all* Basarwa practice *hxaro*, rely on mongongo nuts, have namesakes, are degraded agro-pastoralists, speak similar languages, share a common history of contact and interaction with non-Basarwa groups, or exhibit other similar features (e.g., see Wilmsen 1983, 1989; Wilmsen and Denbow 1990).

The following chapters attest to the cultural and behavioral diversity among Basarwa groups. For instance, Barnard and Widlok point out in chapter 4 that minimally 22 percent of adult male Nharo Basarwa hunt at least once a year or more. This figure contrasts with the G/wi, G//ana, and Kūa Basarwa described in chapters 2 and 6. At Kutse (chapter 6), 100 percent of the adult males hunt at least once a year and most hunt much more, as often as every day or two. The same is not the case for those Kūa living in the Eastern Kweneng District discussed in chapter 5 by Vierich and Hitchcock.

In many cases, outsiders, including anthropologists, are generally unaware of the differences between groups. Consequently, researchers lump them together as “Bushman” or Basarwa, as if there were one typical group that such a designation appropriately describes. If this assumption of a “typical” group were valid, how should it be defined? Are the Nharo or the Ju/'hoansi (!Kung) in the 1990s, who are not full-time foragers, the “typical” group (Draper and Kranichfeld 1990; Lee 1992b; Barnard and Widlok, chapter 4, this volume)? Or are the full-time hunter-gatherers at Kutse in the 1990s, or the full-time Ju/'hoansi hunter-gatherers of the 1950s and 1960s “typical” (chapter 6, this volume; Lee 1979)? Or should we consider part-time Kūa foragers of the Eastern Kalahari during the 1970s and 1980s as the “typical” Basarwa (Vierich and Hitchcock, chapter 5, this volume)? While it may be simpler to over-generalize and portray all Basarwa as a single entity, it is neither accurate nor helpful in understanding foragers.

Several years ago, discussions with scholars such as Barry Hewlett, who works with very different African hunter-gatherers than the Basarwa (see chapter 9), indicated that misconceptions of a homogeneous hunter-gatherer society extended far beyond the Basarwa. As Hewlett predicted, researchers later generalized from one group of Pygmies not only to all Pygmy groups, but to all tropical-forest foragers (e.g., Bailey *et al.* 1989; Headland and Bailey 1991; however, see

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

rebuttals by Bahuchet, McKey, and de Garine 1991; Brosius 1991; Dwyer and Minnegal 1991; Endicott and Bellwood 1991; Laden 1992; Stearman 1991). Through such examples, it becomes apparent that researchers who work with foragers either are themselves uninformed of the diversity among Basarwa, Pygmies, and other hunter-gatherers, or have unintentionally conveyed a picture of homogeneity within and between specific groups. How many heated arguments and disagreements in forager studies are fueled by ignorance of the diversity among and between specific groups? How much important information is missed because of the assumption that each group must be the same?

I hope this volume will accomplish several aims: (1) that it will demonstrate that there is an enormous amount of diversity among forager groups often thought to be more or less homogeneous (e.g., among the Basarwa, Pygmies, Okiek, or between general hunter-gatherer groups, such as the Hadza and Basarwa); (2) that it will demonstrate that one learns much more about similarities between groups by first studying differences than by concentrating primarily on similarities; and (3) that it will confirm that it is more productive to view hunter-gatherers from a variety of perspectives, instead of a single personal theoretical orientation.

To accomplish its aims, *Cultural diversity among twentieth-century foragers* delineates differences between and within groups that traditionally have been categorized together. To account for the diversity, the following chapters present interpretations based on solid, reliable ethnographic data (also see Harpending 1991; Lee and Guenther 1991, 1993). Thus, most chapters detail the diversity present in whichever facet of culture is under examination, which I suggest is essential to determine the causes and meanings of this diversity. This is *not* a call to return to the Boasian school of providing detailed descriptive information devoid of theory and interpretation. It is instead a call to avoid the current trend in anthropological inquiry where data are ignored if they do not fit one's theoretical predictions (Kent 1992).

On one point the authors are united: anthropologists cannot discuss diversity without also discussing similarity. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories. It is no longer appropriate, and indeed it may be misleading, to concentrate on either the shared similarities *or* the differences between groups. This point is made again and again in each chapter and its recognition demands a methodological change in how we interpret data. The authors demonstrate, in addition, that it is necessary to discuss how behavior – such as settlement or mobility patterns, plant exploitation, sharing, and hunting skill – is tied to culture, be it economic, sociopolitical, religious and or of ethos, or cultural transmission.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Cultural diversity: causes and implications

5

The book's geographical focus is on Africa, where diversity among foraging groups is so extensive as to allow a comprehensive discussion of the topic. In addition, some of the most heated debates concerning classification, comparative studies, and cross-cultural studies of hunter-gatherers center on African foragers.

Diverse approaches to diversity

As editor, I have deliberately invited people with different theoretical perspectives to contribute to the book in order to look at foragers from a variety of angles. Most of the current major theoretical orientations for studying foragers are represented here. Thus, not only is this book about diversity, but it also represents diversity itself, from the societies described to the environments they inhabit, to the theoretical orientations of the authors who describe them. As Barnard and Widlok have noted (chapter 4, this volume), the book, then, is not just about cultural diversity among African foragers, but is a textbook on methodological diversity in anthropological approaches and thought. Such a blending of ideas and theoretical orientations is, I believe, the direction anthropology needs to take if we are to gain greater knowledge and understanding about human culture and behavior.

There is important common ground between the authors in spite of their different perspectives. For example, all have conducted long-term fieldwork with the groups they discuss (from three to twenty years of periodic collection of data). In addition, most authors are conversant, through either fieldwork or familiarization with the literature, with more than one group within the larger categories of Basarwa, Pygmy, or Okiek. It is interesting to note that each author independently questions, if not rejects, strictly ecological interpretations or interpretations based on political economy, even though this was never an explicit part of the project. Their data, extensive personal experience, and interpretations simply fit within more culturally oriented views of these populations. Even those societies most intimately involved with non-foragers are considered to represent autonomous ethnic groups who differ in recognizable ways from their non-foraging neighbors (e.g., Blackburn, chapter 8, and Hewlett, chapter 9).

The Basarwa of Southern Africa and the Pygmies of Central Africa have been more studied by anthropologists than any other African foraging groups; they are therefore better represented here than are the Hadza or Okiek. In each section, complementary facets of cultural diversity are examined. For example, Basarwa hunting variation is discussed in chapter 6, and Pygmy gathering and wild plant diversity are

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Edited by Susan Kent

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Susan Kent

discussed in chapter 11. These two chapters provide interesting contrasts and similarities on the subject of diversity in wild resource acquisition and use, both because the authors have different theoretical orientations and because the two groups themselves vary. Another example is George Silberbauer's description of the world view, ethos, and other symbolic, non-materialist facets of G/wi culture (chapter 2), which complements but contrasts with Daou Joiris' description of the ritual and religious beliefs of Baka and Aka Pygmies (chapter 10).

The book is organized according to broad cultural categories, beginning with the Basarwa and moving north to the Hadza and Okiek, then west to the Pygmies. Chapters are linked through the authors' commitment to documenting and explaining diversity. This is accomplished by references to the authors' previous research from a retrospective, philosophical perspective (e.g., Silberbauer, chapter 2), or by presenting new, unpublished data (e.g., Guenther, chapter 3; Barnard and Widlok, chapter 4; Kent, chapter 6; Blurton Jones, Hawkes, and O'Connell, chapter 7; Blackburn, chapter 8; Joiris, chapter 10; Ichikawa and Terashima, chapter 11). It is also accomplished through examinations of diversity from specific theoretical perspectives (e.g., Blurton Jones *et al.*, chapter 7), through reinterpretations or new views of previously collected data (e.g., Barnard and Widlok, chapter 4; Vierich and Hitchcock, chapter 5; Hewlett, chapter 9), or through descriptive analyses embedded in particular theoretical orientations (e.g., Kent, chapter 6; Blackburn, chapter 8; Ichikawa and Terashima, chapter 11). Scholars with ecological, environmental, and evolutionary perspectives emphasize certain aspects of culture and society, while symbolic and structuralist anthropologists emphasize others. Diversity as both subject and method is a strength of this book.

Causes of intra-cultural diversity

Foragers as a group may not be any more diverse than farmers or other broad economic categories, since the degree of diversity displayed between different farming communities can equal or surpass that between forager groups (e.g., the differences between Pande farmers and Yangere farmers in the Central African Republic are no less than the differences between Aka and Baka Pygmies; Barry Hewlett 1993: personal communication). However, diversity, as noted by the authors, exists on an intra-cultural level as well.

What causes this level of cultural diversity? It is not coincidental that a constant in all chapters concerns the fluid (Joiris, chapter 11), shifting (Vierich and Hitchcock, chapter 5), opportunistic (Silberbauer, chapter

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2; Barnard and Widlok, chapter 4), and flexible (Guenther, chapter 3; Ichikawa and Terashima, chapter 11) social and political organization and general lifestyle of modern foragers. This constant supersedes uniformity or diversity in the environments inhabited by each group. As noted by Bird-David (chapter 12), some anthropologists claim that within-group diversity is the most distinctive characteristic hunter-gatherer societies have in common! This section attempts to address, from one theoretical perspective, the question of why so much diversity exists within specific forager societies in order to raise some interesting points that readers can keep in mind while studying the chapters that follow.

I have suggested elsewhere that cognitive flexibility may be one of the most important traits that emerged in anatomically modern humans during the Upper Paleolithic (Kent 1989b). It is based on an emphasis on learned behavior in contrast to instinctual behavior, and on cultural transmission in contrast to genetic transmission. The consequence of dependence on learned behavior and cultural transmission is a freedom from the constraints of rigid behavior forced by instinctual thinking and acting. Such flexibility may account for the initial success of hominids in general and of *Homo sapiens sapiens* in particular (see Tooby and Cosmides 1992:112). The ability to innovate and change their behavior allowed hominids to thrive in radically different habitats and to defend themselves from a variety of stronger predators (i.e., natural selection was positive for learned behavior at the expense of instinctual behavior). Foley (1988:212–13, 215) is correct when he states that earlier hominids appear to have been more habitat-specific and possessed a less flexible pattern of behavior. Only with the appearance of anatomically modern humans was there technological variability, innovation, and flexibility (Foley 1988:213, 215).¹

Cognitive flexibility increased in non-human primates, through hominids, as the genus and later the species evolved, and is most highly developed in modern humans.² Nonetheless, the existence of this pan-

¹ However, the archaeological record with which I am familiar does not support Foley's contention that forager culture and behavior as we know it (and as described in the following chapters) developed only in tandem with the emergence of farming. While Upper Paleolithic complex hunter-gatherers may have been quite different from the band-level highly egalitarian societies discussed in this book, with the exception of the Okiek analyzed in chapter 8, the band-level forager model is applicable to, for example, prehistoric Paleo-Indians and early Archaic populations, who occupied North America long before the appearance of the first farmers.

² New ideas are often merely the reshuffling of old ideas. After a period of embracing the concept of cultural evolution and borrowing terminology from biology (the hey-day of Sahlins, Service, Steward, and hunter-gatherer studies), anti-evolutionary thought in all subdisciplines of anthropology became popular (e.g., as noted by Binford 1983 and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

hominid, if not general pan-hominoid, trait does not mean that modern human foragers are an appropriate analog for pre-modern, pre-*sapiens* hominids, as Foley (1988) convincingly demonstrates.³

The term “cognitive flexibility” (i.e., freedom from instincts) applies to the physical design of the brain and its thought processes (see Tooby and Cosmides 1992 for a contrasting view of this concept). *Cognitive flexibility* enables, but does not produce, within-group *cultural flexibility*. Cultural flexibility itself varies according to cultural context.⁴ Cognitive flexibility can also result in cultural rigidity, which is common in most complex societies (as in the presence of ranking or gender inequality). Cultural rigidity, however, in no way implies that the culture itself is static, but only that there is a rigidity or conformity in thought and behavior. This rigidity or conformity is institutionalized through stratification and hierarchies, and other types of institutionalized segmentation, which reduces the cultural and behavioral options open to the majority of individuals in a society, e.g., strictly prescribed gender roles and rigid divisions of labor by sex, age, or status. Cultural flexibility, on the other hand, can be found in many of the forager societies discussed in the following chapters, as in the fluidity between men’s and women’s activities (also see Kent 1993a, 1995a).

I have discussed elsewhere the presence of underlying universal principles which structure culture (Kent 1984, 1987, 1990a, 1991a). These principles are a product of the anatomically modern human brain and its internal design, though their manifestations are different in different societies and the result is visible in cross-cultural variability.

Without this frame or structure which emanates from a brain that has the same species-wide internal configuration, however, “social and mental life in every culture would be so different as to be unrecognizable as *human life*” (Cosmides and Tooby 1992:207; original emphasis). It

Hallpike 1986, among others). Discounting accusations of functionalism (used as a derogatory term to imply theories that are tautological and non-explanations or, at best, “just so” stories), there recently has been a resurgence of evolutionary biological perspectives in anthropology (as one example, see Blurton Jones *et al.*, chapter 7, this volume).

³ If nothing else, the substantial increase in cranial capacity from the various australopithecines to anatomically modern humans precludes the use of modern human behavioral analogs for pre-modern human behavior, particularly since much of the brain’s expansion occurred in the frontal lobe. For example, Middle Paleolithic foragers appear to have been quite different from Upper Paleolithic and later foragers (Gamble 1992).

⁴ This view allows us to dismiss criticisms that label cultural explanations of phenomena as “non-explanations” and underlying cognitive principles that structure culture as “mentalist non-explanations.” Both are legitimate explanations; they are simply at different levels. Both are necessary for a complete understanding of any one phenomenon. To focus on one or the other is valid as long as either explanation is viewed as partial without the other.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

thus makes all types of cultures known today recognizable as culture, but it does not generate the specifics of culture, such as social exchange or, more relevant to this discussion, cultural flexibility.

Thus, cognitive flexibility, a basic property defining anatomically modern humans, encourages diversity, which has enabled humans to cope with changing environments and social, political, and other cultural situations. From cognitive flexibility as the basic blueprint of the mind emerged cultural flexibility. This cultural flexibility, a feature of highly egalitarian hunter-gatherer culture, allowed foraging to persist as a subsistence strategy into the late twentieth century. This fact makes foraging one of the most successful endeavors ever adopted by humans, if longevity is a criterion of success (the popular figure is that an estimated 99 percent of all of human existence has been spent as hunter-gatherers; Lee and DeVore 1968:3; also see Barkow *et al.* 1992:5). So, although all modern humans have *cognitive* flexibility, which is genetically transmitted, only highly egalitarian foragers also have *cultural* flexibility, which is socially transmitted.

Cognitive evolution, which allows flexibility, depends on physical evolution predicated upon genetic inheritance, natural selection, and reproductive success. However, the flexibility of a society's culture depends on cultural reproduction, not on physical or sexual reproduction (and this differs from Blurton Jones *et al.*, chapter 7; but also see Hewlett, chapter 9, this volume; Boyd and Richerson 1985:7–10; Hewlett and Cavalli-Sforza 1986; Durham 1991).

Cultural evolution in action

Depending on a number of variables, such as random chance (i.e., history), internal–external transformations (i.e., innovation or diffusion of new traits), and change (environmental or cultural), culture can evolve or, in other words, change through time. Such change can be seen, for example, in the sedentarization of the Basarwa. Cultural evolution here stems from the fact that sedentary lifestyles require cultural unity and within-group conformity in order to be viable, regardless of why a society became sedentary in the first place. Sedentary societies have to discourage individual variability and its consequences, or they cannot remain aggregated or sedentary. Instead they would revert to a nomadic, band-level existence capable of accommodating such cultural flexibility. Sedentary Kutse (G/wi, G//ana, and Kūa) residents occupying a recently established sedentary Kalahari community provide an interesting case study of evolution in action (most residents have been sedentary 15–25 years).

Cambridge University Press

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Edited by Susan Kent

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Susan Kent*

According to my perspective, individuals are born neither aggressive or passive, nor egalitarian or non-egalitarian (i.e., hierarchical or non-hierarchical). These traits are culturally determined and there is a continuum in the importance accorded them in different societies. What is culturally inherent in traditional Basarwa society, but is not physically inherent, therefore, is an emphasis on passivity (at least in thought, if not in behavior) and on egalitarianism. The Okiek place somewhat less emphasis on these traits and other groups place even less or actually promote the opposite. This can be seen cross-culturally as a continuum between highly egalitarian societies and highly *non*-egalitarian societies.

Nomadic Basarwa society has been characterized as acephalous, lacking social or political stratification or hierarchies (Lee 1979; Silberbauer 1981a). As long as Basarwa were nomadic, the lack of formal leadership was viable. The only leaders were not leaders in the usual sense of the term. No one was more important than anyone else: the ideas of skillful individuals were more valued than others only in a situation related to their skill. At most, these leaders can be viewed as situational, transitory, and informal. The term “advisors” is perhaps a more appropriate descriptive one, since the status and power of these individuals are the same as everyone else’s, at least among Central Kalahari Basarwa (though not necessarily among the Ju/’hoansi; Lorna Marshall 1994: personal communication).

When a dispersed nomadic mobility pattern is abandoned, the absence of a formal leader becomes a serious liability, threatening the stability of a newly aggregated sedentary community, such as Kutse. A traditional method of resolving disputes without the presence of an arbitrator – i.e., mobility – is not feasible in a sedentary context. Thus far, resolution of conflict in the sedentary community has not been possible without much physical violence (Kent 1989b). The current flux being experienced by Kutse (resulting in numerous injuries of varying severity and one murder committed by the 30–35-year-old victim’s biological brother) will not continue. Eventually, Kutse will either disband as a community or a leader will emerge who possesses status that gives him/her the political power to implement decisions and to arbitrate disputes.

It is fascinating to observe that among Basarwa who have been sedentary for centuries, in contrast to Kutse where they have been sedentary for only one or two decades, formal political leadership is emerging. The new leader often arises by an ephemeral, situationally specific advisor being elevated in status and influence. The individual’s traditionally temporary status is now maintained on a continual basis in these established sedentary communities. Trance dancers at Ghanzi,