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Introduction: Hunting Culture and Mining Knowledge

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A central purpose of the Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies has been to direct international attention to the history and dilemmas of people often thought to live at the margins of nation states. Since 1966, the conferences have been successful in creating a large corpus of literature documenting and analysing a range of peoples whose historical modes of subsistence have included hunting and gathering. However, since this time, the people “from the margins” have become increasingly adept at fighting their own battles by projecting their identity as hunters and/or ‘indigenous peoples’ through negotiations with the broader societies encapsulating them. From the circumpolar Arctic to remote areas of Australia, many aboriginal groups have asserted their “nationhood”, their traditional “ownership” of land and a distinctive “culture”. This paper, as well as others in this volume, propose to examine the manner in which belonging to a “hunter/gatherer” tradition can be effectively wielded to achieve economic, political and cultural aspirations.

In negotiations with nation states or with international organisations, indigenous peoples successfully wield ritual and traditional practice to distinguish their group from the predominant urban and industrial interests around them. Today, most scholars and environmentalists agree that hunting is an important ‘subsistence activity’. However, since the beginning of the Cold War, portraying subsistence activity as an exclusive or primordial right has become an important technique for portraying authority over land. One might say that ‘hunting’ one’s tradition has become an even more important part of diplomacy.

The process of ‘hunting culture’ is a contradictory one. On the one hand, representations before land claims tribunals serve as an opportunity for cultural revival; as an opportunity for participants to take pride in their achievements and their differences [Bird-David 1983; Cruikshank 1998]. On the other hand, the knowledge that is presented tends to be performed in a different way that it had been in the past such that there might be pressure to speak publicly of special or secret rituals or in some cases spend an inordinate amount of time just talking about culture, rather than living it. The contradictions implicit in the process of

representing or defending traditions pose a difficult problem for anthropologists. In order to represent culture clearly, we are trained to reify culture to a certain degree in order that it can be read as being consistent and understandable. Those of us who are asked to interpret culture in court settings are under additional pressure to establish the consistency of traditions [Hiatt 1998; Cassidy 1992; Taylor Chap. 10 in this volume]. However we all *tacitly* understand that any account of culture is rarely in the singular. Cultural tradition in our own conversations and field notes is usually represented differently depending on the generation of those with whom we speak but also on the context in which the conversation occurs. An account of culture will be different around the campfire, in the courtroom, and over a shop-counter.

The literature on this question tends to offer rather stark alternatives. The classic view, stemming from the Marxist tradition, is that once societies come in contact with commodities and with urban legal systems the 'Chinese walls' which protect their autonomy crumble, making these societies defenseless before the 'world-system'. One might call this the 'impact' hypothesis. The revisionist view is that through ritual, tacit understandings, or the 'weapons of the weak' local groups can continue to project an unbroken identity even in situations where their health and economy are threatened by poverty and their language may be lost or creolised. This is the school of 'resilience'. Although anthropology gives us a concept of culture that is entrepreneurial and flexible, there have been few attempts to try capture the subtlety by which people attempt to engage with surrounding forces so as to change its political environment in its own terms. The papers in this volume are accounts of the creative way that choice is used in wielding hunting culture in various settings from Southeast Asia, to Africa, to Siberia.

Needless to say these papers are not the first attempts at exploring this issue. One early example from the CHAGS literature is the 1983 Nurit Bird idea of 'wage-gathering' as an attempt to describe how it was that a South Indian Naiken community took advantage of some of the opportunities of a plantation economy while continuing to maintain aspects of their division of labour and sense of individual autonomy. In her view, the Naikans 'gather' wages rather than earn them. She argued that paper money was able to be integrated into their households without importing ideas of value and worth external to this forest community. The idea of wage gathering tends to the 'resilience' strain but speaks of change in an active mode.

Studies of cultural syncretism are another rich area which approaches the way that cultures might enter into dialogue with themselves and with colonial agents. Rose [1984] analyses one popular aborigine saga, the Saga of Captain Cook, as a thought-lesson in comparative morality. A more radical example presented by Jeremy Beckett [1993] reexamines the syncretic story of Walter Newton combining Dreamtime themes and biblical themes for an example of how different stories of civilisation might be made to co-exist. In this case, he concludes rather darkly that in the heat of the land-rights struggle neither anthropology nor aborigines

particularly welcomed a story which offered the prospect of co-existence. Here Walter Newton's story is one of private resilience which falls upon deaf ears in a stark political economic scenario of zero-sum impacts.

Julie Cruikshank's work [1998] offers yet another productive area for reflection in her exploration of the bridging capacity of narrative. In her recent book, she argues, along with her colleague Mrs. Annie Ned, that meaning and argument can transcend the boundaries of language such that English for Yukon native people is "just another native language".

Gradually I learned how narratives about complex relationships between animals and humans, between young women and stars, between young men and animal helpers could frame not just larger cosmological issues but also the social practices of women engaged with a rapidly globalizing world. Stories connect people in such a world and they unify interrupted memories that are part of any complex life. Rooted in ancient traditions, they can be used in strikingly modern ways [1998: 46].

The important meaning of narrative comes through interpollating a story into one's own life history making multiple productive interpretations possible. In this sense, we as ethnographers of human action could learn a lot from the styles of expert narrators like the women with whom Julie Cruikshank works.

Another pioneer of the complex way in which a hunting people can represent their culture is Ann Fienup-Riordan. Her early work [1983] on the Nelson Island Eskimo spoke of people using kinship and belief in complex ways to pull together their community. In her more recent work she writes of the creative way that tradition is 'invoked' rather than merely invented [1990]. Her most recent contribution [2000], which pulls on some of the ideas presented during the panel session on which this volume is based, Fienup-Riordan identifies a Yupik way of 'hunting tradition' through which Yupiks reinforce their sense of belonging and solidarity through sharing rituals with kin in urban centres.

However, the phenomena of negotiation through narrative and experimentation is often creatively used in another important area of political life within hunting and gathering societies: self-policing. As First Nations the world over achieve forms of self-government, the onus then turns upon them to make hard decisions regarding the opening up of traditional lands to mining and development. In these cases where large sums of capital and prestige are at stake, pressure is put on communities to creatively 'mine' their knowledge of their elders on the one hand to achieve title, but on the other to achieve a flexible form of title which may allow the land to be employed in other than traditional ways.

The paradox implicit in this harsher but necessary side of representing culture has proven to be a more tender one for rural hunting societies. In most fora, in order to achieve unambiguous rights to land, groups of people must build a concept of culture which is strong, internally consistent, and somewhat unrealistic. The

reaction of many actors to these statements is a type of paternalist protection which confines indigenous actors to certain types of traditional subsistence activities. One of the classic examples of this paradox comes in George Wenzel's [1991] examination of the conflict between animal rights activists and Inuit seal hunters wherein the sale of seal skins procured with rifles and snowmobiles make traditional activities illegitimate in the eyes of ecological activists. In this poignant example, hunting peoples often are forced to choose between living a life that holds local meaning for them and guiding or repressing activities in order to preserve an independent economic base. More recently, this contradiction has come to the fore with the creation of natural parks or reserves which strictly protect the landscape but with little scope for local people to re-employ resources in a 'non-traditional' ways.

One small example is the case of Tuktu Nogait National Park on Banks Island in Northern Canada. The local aboriginal group struggled for many years to establish the park before discovering large stocks of Nickel slightly within the boundary. The group requested a small change to allow them the flexibility to develop the Nickel ore. In this case, the Canadian government answered swiftly and authoritatively that it would protect the integrity of "their" parks (no matter what local people think).

In cases where communities have full control over the disposition of their resources, the opportunity is opened for competing agendas with some, typically younger generations, pushing for opportunities for more money income and other, often elderly generations fighting a conservative battle. However this need not always be the case, as Trigger [1995] notes in one land struggle, where elderly statesmen often take advantage of land claim cases in order to achieve greater status or fame rather than to debate what might be the best development options for a community.

The process of 'mining' memories in order to support local agendas has become a mini-industry in many parts of the world with the development of a branch of study entitled 'Traditional Ecological Knowledge'. In these studies, small insights on the environment, taken out of their context of ethical or intrapersonal development often offer lucrative opportunities for pharmaceutical companies or wildlife managers. This enterprise is indeed a new form of the commodification of knowledge for insights can be traded and advertised in urban contexts far away in order to gather funds for an international park or legitimate a particular ecological statute. Although in many cases the 'informants' might be paid a symbolic amount, or in some cases might even be cited by name, the question remains how can knowledgeable people share knowledge with others while keeping control over how that knowledge is used? As with the question on trade commodities, this question is wide open with more options than a simple choice between assimilation to the dominant context or subtle forms of resistance.

The inspiration behind this volume is to establish the way that rural communities worldwide are now engaged in a hunt for special meaning as a way of

bolstering their idea or local view of culture (Figure 1). It is our hope to move the discussion from stark alternatives of resistance and assimilation to a consideration of the means by which mutual understanding might be increased through the use of various forms of bridging narrative and practical action.

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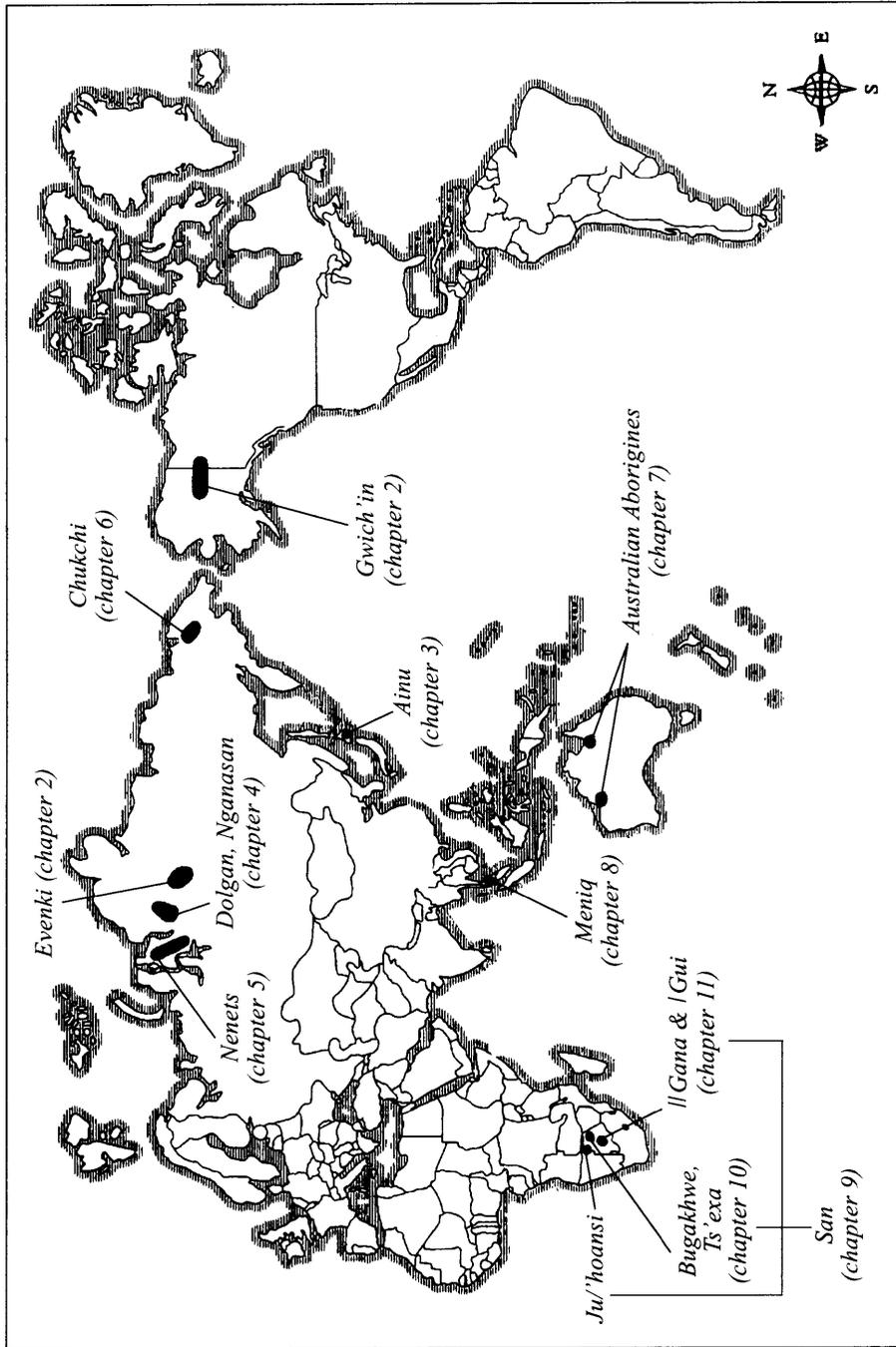


Figure 1. Case studies referred to in this volume