

## SES no.53; Introduction : Social Economy of Modern Hunter Gatherers : Traditional Subsistence, New Resources

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journal or publication title	Senri Ethnological Studies
volume	53
page range	1-6
year	2000-09-08
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10502/905">http://hdl.handle.net/10502/905</a>

**Introduction:  
Social Economy of Modern Hunter-Gatherers:  
Traditional Subsistence, New Resources**

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**THE PRESENT FOCUS**

This volume, with its focus on the economies and economic practices of modern hunter-gatherers, has its genesis in the papers presented in several symposia at the 8th International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies. The theme of CHAGS 8, “Foraging and Post-Foraging Societies: History, Politics, and Future”, offered an appropriate venue for examining the ways hunter-gatherers have met the challenges of maintaining their subsistence cultures in the face of what are by any description enormous biophysical and sociocultural changes to their local environments.

Another, if less immediate, impetus for looking at modern subsistence as social economy is that a critical issue in anthropology is whether the term “subsistence”, whether as a form of economy or of culture, retains any utility beyond the rhetorical [WILMSEN 1989; HEADLAND and REID 1989; HOVELSRUD-BRODA 1997], and, if so, what does subsistence actually mean. While this volume does not address this debate or the meaning of subsistence directly, a concern for what structurally and materially constitutes modern hunter-gatherer subsistence is central to each paper.

The study of hunter-gatherer subsistence has long moved beyond the basic study of the how, the where and the how much questions of wild resource extraction that developed from the first two procedures of Steward’s [1955: 40–41] cultural ecological method. Anthropology, following the deep influence of Sahlins’s [1968, 1972] articulation of “primitive economies” and the “original affluent society”, and more indirectly by Polanyi’s [1975] conceptualization of the importance of “changes of hands” as a fulfillment of “changes of place”, gradually shifted analytical focus toward how the means and methods by which resource allocation and appropriation are organized. It thus became clear that among hunter-gatherer

societies economic relations affecting harvested resources follow complex rules based in kinship and other social relationships, as well as being affected by temporal and spatial aspects of production. In other terms, those kinds of activities that Steward [1955: 42] assigned to his third procedure, and which Lonner [1980: 5] (see also Ellen [1982]) usefully restated as including not only the physical production and distribution of goods and services, but also the reproduction of the “social forms” that structure these material flows.

The foremost concern of the authors in this volume regarding the distribution-allocation aspects of subsistence stems from one primary assumption. This is that the central problem shared by most contemporary foragers is not one of actual scarcity of traditional resources, or the money and technologies needed to exploit these, but rather the asymmetric way that resources critical to contemporary subsistence efforts (inter alia money and imported technology) initially enter these societies. This is problematic because just a few members of the community generally obtain these kinds of resources. This challenges the overall system and in particular the structures that previously have allowed a measure of “balanced” access.

It is also the case, however, that detailed investigation of the “change of hands” component of subsistence appears to have stalled, as the focus of the research conducted from within new theoretical perspectives has shifted toward the social condition of contemporary hunter-gatherers. This in part may be related to the assumption that the commoditisation of resources and the irreversible importance of money in modern hunting and foraging activities has eroded the structures that give social context to subsistence (see Murphy and Steward [1956/1968]), and this also has given impetus to this volume. Thus, a common thread throughout this volume is how the traditional structures that typically organize forager relations of exchange, sharing, and reciprocity have been retained, or been modified, as material inputs from agricultural or industrial societies are incorporated into the subsistence cultures presented here.

The economics of present-day hunter-gatherers is not a new theme for anthropologists (see, for instance, Langdon [1983]; Altman [1987]; Peterson and Matsuyama [1991]), any more than is the study of the maintenance of other components of foragers’ other cultural practices and institutions in the face of modernity. However, neither of these is the explicit focus of this volume. Rather, the concern in each contribution is the conceptual and contextual meaning of subsistence when the commoditization of local resources, reliance on imported technologies, and monetization are established aspects of daily life in the societies discussed. Each of these societies practices a mixed economy adaptation that includes cash, earned through wages, received as social transfers or derived from the sale of locally produced (hunted or gathered) goods. What is evident is that the economic reality of each case, the organization of societal and human-nature material exchanges, clearly reflects the customary social relations of a subsistence-oriented system. In other words, the core of each society has remained intact under

numerous and constant external influences. The use and circulation of imported technology, of imported food products, and money, as well as traditional production activities, together march to a subsistence “beat”.

Peterson [1991] has succinctly reviewed many of the macro theoretical issues of relevance to contemporary foragers’ material relations vis à vis the natural and socioeconomic environments these peoples currently inhabit. The present emphasis is on key concepts for understanding: 1) subsistence, in its contemporary practice, as a socioeconomic system; and, 2) the structures through which local and exogenous resources are integrated into this type of socioeconomic system.

## THE CONTRIBUTIONS

As with most specialized volumes, the papers presented here seek to provide a relatively broad comparative ethnological perspective while still maintaining overall conceptual coherence. The papers span a broad geographical as well as societal range - from Nepal to Equatorial Africa, from the High Arctic to Australia, and from urban-dwelling Aborigines to Inuit in a small East Greenland *kommune*.

More importantly, nearly all the papers independently address important theoretical points integral to the conceptual and functional delineation of subsistence as a form of economy. This is especially evident in the paper by Hunt, who brings a most useful “non-hunter” perspective to issues of terminological meaning and meaningfulness that is illuminating when it is realized that so much discussion of “subsistence economy” is rooted in ecological, rather than economic, thought. In like manner, Bodenhorn and Hovelsrud-Broda both thoughtfully reassess the theoretical utility of various concepts that have become almost general to the discourse on hunter-gatherer economic relations.

Equally instructive are the ways Macdonald and Wenzel utilize Peterson’s [1993] formulation of “demand sharing”. It is apparent that this concept is of great importance to understanding the structural problems of how traditional institutions adapt to “handling” new resources. And it also appears that it requires as much careful contextualization as the concepts of generosity, gifting or reciprocity, if only because of, as these contributions indicate, the subtlety of the situations in which it occurs.

Not surprisingly, virtually all the ethnographic-specific papers presented explore along one or another dimension the tensions associated with various foragers’ efforts to rationalize new resources and, in some cases, the institutional forms associated with them into traditional forms of socioeconomic organization and behavior. Fortier and Macdonald place particular emphasis on conditions of resistance and identity vis a vis such contact, while Kitanishi provides a micro-study of how the commoditization of resources in one situation and the commoditization of labor in another have had different effects upon the Aka and Baka, respectively.

With less intention, it is also the case that a number of the studies presented here provide something of a unique intra-cultural comparative opportunity. In this

regard, the four Eskimo contributions by Bodenhorn, Hovelsrud-Broda, Kishigami, and Wenzel virtually encompass the West to East sweep of Inupiat-Inuit-speaking societies (see Woodbury [1984]) present across the northern rim of North America. These papers represent different, and unanticipated, perspectives on how a single "people", living in four distinct socio-political situations, are attempting to internally organize and perhaps adapt the use of money to the needs of their respective subsistence systems (albeit not necessarily with complete structural or functional success).

Finally, as we believe this collection demonstrates, the key matter at the heart of this volume, that subsistence must be conceptualized as "social" economy, can be well-served from untraditional theoretical starting points. Thus, more than a few of these papers have had their origins as much in ecological, gender, or identity theory as from the influences of neo-classical, Marxist, or "original affluence" perspectives on economic behavior.

### **THE SHAPE OF THE VOLUME**

There has been no attempt to deliberately organize the papers presented in this collection by either theoretical or ethnographic affinity. In point of fact, there has been a deliberate effort to "distribute the ethnographic wealth", although Hunt provides a logical entry to the volume by virtue of representing the most explicit effort to clarify aspects of economic theory as these have been applied to issues of hunter-gatherer subsistence.

Following after Hunt's contribution, the only decision exercised by the editors regarding the ordering of papers has been to provide what we feel is the richest mix of conceptual and case materials as possible. Where "clustering" might appear to have occurred, it is, if anything, a result of a subliminal predilection shared by the editors for presenting papers that offer counter views as "nearest neighbors" to each other.

In closing, we must first thank in the warmest possible terms the organizers of the 8th CHAGS for providing us with the opportunity to come together and explore a subject of great interest to each of us. We also deeply appreciate all the assistance provided to us by the National Museum of Ethnology, and especially Dr. Shuzo Koyama and Mrs. Hiroe Ikegami, in smoothing the technical problems that arise in the production of such a collection. And, last, we thank the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science without whose support this volume would not have been possible.

Finally, the editors, on behalf of the authors represented here, wish to express our sincerest thanks to the four anonymous international colleagues for their generosity in reviewing and graciously commenting on our often less than polished early drafts. We now realize that they were asked to commit far more time and energy than they ever may have first anticipated.

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