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Myths About Hunter-Gatherers

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With the re-emergence of evolutionist theorizing in the last few decades, anthropologists appear to be interested now in generalizing about the features of societies at different levels of complexity. Particular interest in the hunter-gatherer way of life appears to be associated with the belief that the typical characteristics of recent hunter-gatherers were typical also in the Paleolithic. Although I take issue with this belief below, it is particularly disturbing that statements about typical hunter-gatherers are made and apparently accepted in the absence of systematic surveys of hunter-gatherers to assess what characteristics are actually typical. (Although Lee's [1968] survey is an apparent exception, there are serious problems with the sampling procedure he employed, as I shall discuss below.) Systematic surveys are relatively easy to make, now that we have a number of pre-coded data banks (e.g., the *Ethnographic Atlas*). Although these data banks are not random samples of the universe of described societies, they are large collections of data which are not likely to be severely biased, because they have not been constructed with a particular hypothesis in mind. Many anthropologists have an unfortunate habit of tending to generalize from their fieldwork experience to the rest of the world, or from the ethnographies they have on their own bookshelves. Such samples, however, are notoriously biased by interest, and may lead to faulty generalizations.

The main purpose of this paper is to show, on the basis of a worldwide survey, that three current conceptions of what hunter-gatherers are typically like appear to be erroneous. These conceptions are that hunter-gatherers are typically bilocal, that gathering is the most important subsistence activity in hunter-gatherer economies (and the related idea that women contribute more than men to the economy), and that hunter-gatherers are typically peaceful.

Over the years the view of the typical residence pattern of hunter-gatherers appears to have changed. The earlier view was that hunter-gatherers were typically patrilocal (Radcliffe-Brown 1930; Service 1962, 1966; Williams 1968). But now hunter-gatherers seem to be viewed as typically bilocal. This change in view may have occurred because a number of fieldworkers (Damas 1969; Hiatt 1968; Leacock 1969; Meggitt 1962) have challenged the earlier view, or because descriptions of the !Kung Bushmen and the Mbuti (both of which have bilocal residence) have been widely cited, or because some anthropologists (Eggan 1968; Lee 1976; Lee and DeVore 1968) have explicitly suggested that hunter-gatherers are typically bilocal.

TABLE I
Residence Among Hunter-Gatherers

Residence	(1) Total Hunter- Gatherer Sample	(2) Omitting Equestrians	(3) Omitting Equestrians and High Fishers
Patrilocal (P or V)	112 (62%)	95 (64%)	51 (56%)
Bilocal (B, C, D)	28 (16%)	24 (16%)	20 (22%)
Matrilocal (M or U)	29 (16%)	19 (13%)	18 (20%)
Avunculocal (A)	6 (3%)	6 (4%)	1 (1%)
Neolocal (N)	4 (2%)	4 (3%)	1 (1%)
TOTALS	179	148	91

However, the data in the *Ethnographic Atlas* do not support the current view of residence among hunter-gatherers. Column 1 of Table 1 shows the residence patterns (from column 16 of the *Atlas*) of all those societies in the *Atlas* summary (Murdock 1967) that depend almost entirely on gathering, hunting, and fishing (a zero in column 10 [herding] and in column 11 [agriculture] of the *Atlas*). By far, the predominant form of residence among this sample of hunter-gatherers is patrilocality (62 per cent). Bilocality shares a distant second place with matrilocality (16 per cent each).

To those who might object that the *Atlas* sample of hunter-gatherers includes some societies that might not be "typical" of the past (because they had horses or because they had an unusually large dependence on fishing and aquatic resources), I retabulated the frequency distribution for residence omitting the equestrian hunters (as indicated by an E in column 39 of the *Atlas*—see column 2 of Table 1) and also omitting the cases that had approximately 50 per cent or more dependence on marine resources (5 or more in column 9 of the *Atlas*—see column 3 of Table 1). But even with these omissions, the results do not change substantially. Patrilocality is still much more typical than bilocality among hunter-gatherers.

Along with changing attitudes about the "typical" residence pattern of hunter-gatherers, there has also been an apparent shift toward thinking of hunter-gatherers not so much as hunters, but rather more as gatherers. Earlier writers seemed to emphasize the importance of hunting; perhaps because it was viewed as giving rise at least partly to patrilocality (Steward 1955; Service 1962).¹ But perhaps because gathering is more important among the !Kung and Mbuti, and perhaps because Lee's (1968) survey suggested it, gathering seems to be viewed now as the most important subsistence activity among hunter-gatherers. A related idea (because women generally do the gathering) is that women typically contribute substantially more calories than men do to subsistence (DeVore and Konner 1974: 120-122).

The results of the present survey do not support the view that gathering is

generally the most important or even the more important subsistence activity, nor does the survey support the related view that women contribute substantially more to subsistence than men. The *Atlas* has information on the caloric importance of gathering, hunting, and fishing (columns 7-9, respectively). As Table 2 shows, most societies in the sample (77 per cent) have gathering contributing less than half the calories. (These proportions remain essentially unchanged if equestrian hunters are omitted—see the second column of the table.) And, as Table 3 shows, the somewhat weaker assertion that gathering is more important than any other activity (i.e., has a higher number than either hunting or fishing) is also not supported. If anything, fishing typically seems to be the more important activity. (This pattern still obtains if equestrian hunters are omitted.) Finally, when *Atlas* data are used to calculate a sexual division of labor score (following the procedure employed in an earlier study [C. R. Ember 1975: 202]),² it is clearly men, not women, that typically contribute substantially more to primary subsistence (see Table 4). Men predominate in subsistence in 83 per cent of the sample cases, while in only 8 per cent do women contribute more than the men.³ (Men still typically predominate when equestrians and high fishers are omitted—see columns 2 and 3 of Table 4).

One puzzling issue remains. Why do the present results differ from Lee's (1968) survey? His survey suggested that gathering was typically more important than any other activity; the present survey suggests that fishing is. I suggest that the discrepancy may lie in his sampling procedure and his alteration of the classification of "gathering." Although Lee also used the *Ethnographic Atlas*, he substantially reduced the proportion of North American cases (but not the proportions of cases from other areas of the world). Since 80 per cent of the hunter-gatherers in the *Atlas* are in North America, and since the North American cases generally have hunting and fishing more important than gathering, Lee's reduction of the proportion of North American cases inflates the apparent importance of gathering. Lee also reclassified shellfishing from "fishing" to "gathering," which also inflates the relative subsistence importance of gathering (versus fishing). Thus, the way he selected his sample and the way he classifies shellfishing make for a distorted view of hunter-gatherers, in my opinion. If we wish to assess what is typical of hunter-gatherers, I do not see any

TABLE 2
Importance of Gathering Among Hunter-Gatherers

Importance of Gathering	(1)	(2)
	Total Hunter-Gatherer Sample	Omitting Equestrians
Contributes more than half the calories (6 or more)	18 (10%)	15 (10%)
Contributes approximately half the calories (5)	24 (13%)	24 (16%)
Contributes less than half the calories (0 - 4)	138 (77%)	109 (74%)
TOTALS	180	148

TABLE 3
The Relative Importance of Gathering, Hunting, and Fishing
Among Hunter-Gatherers

Relative Importance of Subsistence Activities	(1) Total Hunter-Gatherer Sample	(2) Omitting Equestrians
Gathering more important than hunting or fishing	54 (30%)	51 (34%)
Hunting more important than gathering or fishing	45 (25%)	21 (14%)
Fishing more important than gathering or hunting	69 (38%)	64 (43%)
Gathering and hunting co-dominant	4 (2%)	4 (3%)
Gathering and fishing co-dominant	4 (2%)	4 (3%)
Hunting and fishing co-dominant	4 (2%)	4 (3%)
Totals	180	148

TABLE 4
Division of Labor Among Hunter-Gatherers

Division of Labor in Primary Subsistence	(1) Total Hunter-Gatherer Sample	(2) Omitting Equestrians	(3) Omitting Equestrians and High Fishers
Women contribute more than men (0-17)	13 (8%)	10 (8%)	10 (13%)
Women contribute about the same as men (18-22)	14 (9%)	14 (11%)	13 (17%)
Men contribute more than women (23-40)	134 (83%)	107 (82%)	54 (70%)
TOTALS	161	131	77

justification for an *a priori* downward weighting of one area of the world. If most hunter-gatherers that have been described are in North America, why should they be underrepresented? I do not think it would even be fair to say that the environment of the North American cases is probably less representative of the past, because, if anything, the "marginality" of the environments of many recent hunter-gatherers in the Old World may make them less instructive about Paleolithic conditions than the North American cases are.

Finally, I wish to address myself to one other view of hunter-gatherers that I have reason to believe is erroneous—namely, the view that hunter-gatherers are relatively peaceful (Lee and DeVore 1968: 9; Service 1966: 60; Steward 1968: 334; Turnbull 1968: 341).⁴ Ratings of frequency of warfare were obtained from a previous study of 50 hunter-gatherer societies (C. R. Ember 1975).⁵ If we tabulate the warfare data from that world-wide sample of hunter-gatherers (excluding those few cases that had a little herding or agriculture), 64 per cent had warfare occurring at least once every two years, 26 per cent had warfare somewhat less often, and only 10 per cent (including the !Kung) were rated as having no or rare warfare (see Table 5). Even if we exclude equestrian hunters (indicated by an "Eq") and those with 50 per cent or more dependence on fishing (indicated by an "F"), warfare is rare for only 12 per cent of the remaining hunter-gatherers. In sum, hunter-gatherers could hardly be described as peaceful.

The discrepancy between Lee's (1968) survey and the present one raises the possibility that what is typical of hunter-gatherers may vary considerably by geographical region. After all, if Lee's exclusion of many of the North American hunter-gatherers enhanced the apparent importance of gathering, then the North American hunter-gatherers may be quite different from those of the other areas. To see if this is the case, I have tabulated the distribution of residence, division of labor, and subsistence for each of the five major geographical areas of the world in which hunter-gatherers are found (see Table 6).

The data in Table 6 show that patrilocality is everywhere more "typical" of hunter-gatherers than bilocality. Patrilocality is found in the majority of the hunter-gatherer societies in sub-Saharan Africa, the insular Pacific, and North America. And even in Eurasia and South America where only 33 per cent of the hunter-gatherers are patrilocal, and matrilocality is equally frequent, bilocality is still less common. Aside from a few cases that are scattered around the world (!Kung, Mbuti, Andamanese, Alacaluf, and Aweikoma), bilocality is found commonly only in a few culture areas: most of the Pomo-Yuki cases in California are bilocal and many (but not most) of the Eskimo and Great Basin cases are bilocal.

If patrilocality is the most typical form of residence among recent hunter-gatherers, we need to explain its prevalence. In a study of residential variation among hunter-gatherers (C. R. Ember 1975), I tested a number of theories about the conditions that might favor patrilocality. The study found no empirical support for the notion that the importance of men in hunting (Steward 1955; Service 1962) or the importance of men in war (Murdock 1949; Service 1962) favor patrilocality. Hunter-gatherer societies with a greater dependence on hunting or with frequent warfare are no more likely to have patrilocality than other hunting and gathering societies. But support was

TABLE 5
Warfare Frequency Among Hunter-Gatherers*

More than once every two years	Andamanese (Eh1)	S. Ute (Nd2) Eq
	Murngin (Id2)	Kutenai (Nd7) Eq
	Tiwi (Id3)	Coeur D'Alene (Nd14) Eq
	Aleut (Na9) F	Yavapai (Nd66)
	Sekani (Na28)	Gros Ventre (Ne1) Eq
	Yurok (Nb4) F	Comanche (Ne3) Eq
	Bellaçoola (Nb9) F	Crow (Ne4) Eq
	Squamish (Nb13) F	Tehuelche (Sg4) Eq
	Klallam (Nb16) F	Bororo (S11)
	Maidu (Nc12)	Aweikoma (Sj3)
Less frequent	Dorobo (Aa2)	E. Pomo (Nc18)
	Semang (Ej3)	Sanpoil (Nd4) F
	Mootka (Nb11) F	White Knife (Nd43)
	Tubatulabal (Nc2)	Shiwits (Nd52)
No or rare warfare	!Kung (Aa1)	Yahgan (Sg1) F
	Pekangekum (Na34)	

*

These data come from C. R. Ember (1975). The few cases of hunter-gatherers with a little herding or agriculture were excluded from this table. Atlas numbers appear in parentheses; the symbol F refers to hunter-gatherers that are highly dependent on fishing (approximately 50 percent or more); the symbol Eq refers to hunter-gatherers than have horses.

found for the theory (M. Ember and C. R. Ember 1971) that internal warfare favors patrilocal residence (since families may want to have their sons nearby for protection), or, in the presence of purely external warfare, a male-dominant division of labor favors patrilocal residence. There was empirical support for the traditional notion (Murdock 1949) that sexual division of labor by itself determines residence. (Why division of labor predicts residence among hunter-gatherers but not in samples of societies at all levels of cultural complexity [see M. Ember and C. R. Ember 1971 and Divale 1974] is something of a puzzle.)

TABLE 6
Residence, Subsistence, Division of Labor Among Hunter-Gatherers
by Area of the World*

	Sub-Saharan Africa	East Eurasia	Insular Pacific	North America	So. & Cen. America
Residence					
Patrilocal	3 (60%)	2 (33%)	7 (100%)	98 (65%)	3 (33%)
Bilocal	2 (40%)	1 (17%)	0 (0%)	21 (14%)	2 (22%)
Matrilocal	0 (0%)	2 (33%)	0 (0%)	24 (16%)	3 (33%)
Other	0 (0%)	1 (17%)	0 (0%)	8 (5%)	1 (11%)
Importance of Gathering					
More than half the calories	3 (60%)	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	12 (8%)	1 (20%)
Half the calories	1 (20%)	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	20 (13%)	1 (20%)
Less than half the calories	1 (20%)	6 (100%)	4 (50%)	120 (79%)	8 (80%)
Relative Importance of Subsistence Activities					
Gathering most important	3 (60%)	2 (33%)	4 (50%)	43 (28%)	2 (20%)
Hunting most important	1 (20%)	1 (17%)	1 (12%)	38 (25%)	5 (50%)
Fishing most important	0 (0%)	2 (33%)	1 (12%)	63 (41%)	3 (30%)
Co-dominant combinations	1 (20%)	1 (17%)	2 (25%)	8 (5%)	0 (0%)
Division of Labor in Subsistence					
Women contribute more than men	3 (60%)	0 (0%)	4 (57%)	6 (4%)	0 (0%)
Women and men about equal	1 (20%)	1 (17%)	1 (14%)	9 (7%)	2 (25%)
Men contribute more than women	1 (20%)	5 (83%)	2 (28%)	120 (89%)	6 (75%)

*The first letter of the Atlas identification number provides the basis for the geographical breakdown shown above.

Inasmuch as most hunter-gatherers have warfare (as noted above), which is usually internal warfare, and inasmuch as men usually contribute more to subsistence, the "warfare" theory and the "division of labor" theory may both explain why most ethnographically described hunter-gatherer societies have been patrilocal.

Bilocality may occur only in somewhat unusual circumstances. Service's (1962) notion that severe depopulation transforms a previously unilocal society

into a bilocal or multilocal society seems to be generally supported. Among depopulated agriculturalists (C. R. Ember and M. Ember 1972) as well as among depopulated hunter-gatherers (C. R. Ember 1975), non-unilocal residence is significantly more likely than unilocality. (Among hunter-gatherers, the Andamanese and the Yavapai, for example, were depopulated and had bilocal residence.) It has also been suggested that severe resource fluctuation and sex-ratio fluctuation may favor bilocality among hunter-gatherers, since bilocal residence provides a way of shifting band membership in response to changing conditions (see Forde 1947; Eggan 1966, 1968; Anderson 1968; Steward 1968; Lee 1976; C. R. Ember 1975). There appears to be empirical support for both of these theories (C. R. Ember 1975). Using an index of precipitation variability as a measure of resource fluctuation, the more such variability, the more likely bilocality (e.g., Aweikoma, Kidutokado, Wappo). And using typical band size as a measure of the likelihood of sex-ratio fluctuation (the smaller the band, the more likely there will be chance departures from a sex ratio of 1.00), I found that hunter-gatherers with very small bands (e.g., !Kung, Mbuti) tend also to have bilocal residence. Thus, an earlier study (C. R. Ember 1975) and the present one suggest that bilocal residence may not be that common because the precipitating conditions may not have been so prevalent among recent hunter-gatherers. Indeed, in the Paleolithic and Mesolithic, when many hunter-gatherers inhabited less marginal environments, bilocality may have been even less common.

Unlike residence, there appears to be some geographical variability with respect to the importance of different subsistence activities and the relative contribution of men and women to subsistence. As the reader can see in Table 6, gathering is generally the most important subsistence activity in sub-Saharan Africa and the insular Pacific; gathering and fishing tie for the most important activity in east Eurasia; fishing is generally the most important activity in North America; and hunting is generally most important in South America. Not surprisingly, since the importance of gathering shows geographical variability, so does the relative contribution of men and women to subsistence. Both in sub-Saharan Africa and the insular Pacific—where gathering is more important than any other activity—women typically contribute more than men to subsistence (see Table 6). But in most areas of the world, men typically contribute more to subsistence. Since most geographical areas have men typically contributing more to subsistence and since there are proportionately very few societies with women contributing more than men (only 13 out of 163), the current notion that women typically contribute more to subsistence than men among hunter-gatherers clearly needs to be revised. Men may generally contribute more to subsistence than women because hunting and fishing generally account for more than half the caloric intake in most hunter-gatherer societies.

Finally, it is clear that the high proportion of North American hunter-gatherers in the *Atlas* does not account for the general finding that most hunter-gatherers have had warfare at least once every two years. As Table 5 shows, 14 of the 21 North American cases (67 per cent) fight at least once every two years, which is not significantly different from the percentage in the rest of the world (six out of ten or 60 per cent).

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The data presented here suggest that some current views about hunter-gatherers may need to be revised. Specifically, the data suggest that, contrary to current opinion, recent hunter-gatherers are typically patrilocal, typically have men contributing relatively more to subsistence than women, and typically have had fairly frequent warfare.

As noted above, much of the interest in the hunter-gatherer way of life appears to be associated with the belief that typical characteristics of recent hunter-gatherers were typical also in the Paleolithic. But even if we quantitatively establish the statistically "normal" cultural patterns of recent hunter-gatherers, I take issue with the belief that we are entitled to infer from this information what cultural patterns must have been typical in the distant past. We know, for example, that there is substantial variation among recent hunter-gatherers in residence, subsistence, division of labor, and warfare. If these variations are the result of different causal conditions, then what has been "typical" in recent times may only be a statistical artifact of the recent prevalence of certain causal conditions. If we wish to make inferences about the Paleolithic, then, I suggest we need to do two things. First, we need to discover what predicts variation among recent hunter-gatherers.⁶ And then, using archeological indicators, we need to discover the past prevalence of those predictors and their presumed effects.⁷ If we are successful in these efforts, we shall be able to draw inferences about Paleolithic hunter-gatherers that are based upon systematic evidence rather than merely plausible conjecture.

NOTES

1. It should be noted that more dependence on hunting does not predict patrilocality among hunter-gatherers, although higher dependence upon gathering does predict a tendency toward matrilocality and higher dependence upon fishing predicts a tendency toward patrilocality (C. R. Ember 1975).
2. The procedure used to calculate division of labor scores is now fairly conventional. Basically, the non-numerical information in the *Atlas* on the degree to which males and females participate in each of the five primary subsistence activities (columns 54, 56, 58, 60, 62) is assigned a numerical score which is then multiplied by the importance of each of the subsistence activities as given in the *Atlas* (0-9 in columns 7-11) and summed across all activities. Numerical scores are assigned as follows to the information on contribution by sex: F=0; G=1; D,E,I,P,O, a dot=2; N=3; M=4. Scores range from 0-40. A score of 40 means that the men do all the subsistence work; 20 means an equal contribution of men and women.
3. Omitted from Table 4 are those societies for which missing division of labor information (arbitrarily assigned a "2" in calculating the score), if known, might have altered their placement in Table 4.
4. Harris (1975), citing data collected by Divale, has noted that hunter-gatherers have fairly frequent warfare.
5. The definition of warfare in this study followed that of M. Ember and C. R. Ember (1971: 577). Warfare is defined as fighting between two or more territorial units (at the community level on up) as long as there is a group of fighters on at least one side. If pacification occurred, frequency of war ratings were made as far back as 50 years prior to the ethnographic present listed in the *Atlas*. If pacification occurred earlier than 50 years back, warfare was coded as rare or absent.
6. For some predictive conditions of residential variation among recent hunter-gatherers, the reader is referred again to C. R. Ember (1975).

7. For example, cross-cultural research has suggested one possible archeological indicator of matrilineal versus patrilineal residence (M. Ember 1973; Divale 1977).

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