Why Are the Punan 'Complex'?
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The first international symposium on hunter-gatherer studies was held in 1966 (Bender and Morris 1988:4) and led to the publication of an anthology named: *Man the Hunter* (Lee and DeVore [eds.] 1968). In his article entitled "Punan Foragers in the Trading Networks of Southeast Asia" (Published in *Past and Present in Hunter Gatherer Studies* — fruit of the third international conference, held in 1983), Hoffman (1984) notes:

> The publication of *Man the Hunter* was unquestioningly a milestone in the anthropological study of hunters and gatherers. The overall impact of this volume was profound. As a state-of-the-art compendium, *Man the Hunter* rapidly became a staple feature of undergraduate reading lists and an almost inevitable contribution to university training in anthropology. For many anthropologists in the 1970s, this volume has been both a touchstone and fact of life, but, like all comprehensive books, *Man the Hunter* has led to the codification and entrenchment of certain questionable ideas that ought now to be rethought.

One of the ideas discussed at the *Man the Hunter* conference and reiterated ever since, is the notion of cultural 'complexity'. Notions of complexity were novel to hunter-gatherer studies in the 1960s because hunter-gatherers had always been thought of (in Western academic tradition) as culturally 'simple'. Notions of 'simplicity' fitted in with unilinear models of evolution upon which academic disciplines like anthropology were (and still are) built. According to this model, all human societies tend to evolve in one certain direction (unidirectional), toward the acquirement of agriculture and the development of state formations. Notions of complexity crept into hunter-gatherer studies as an evolutionary bridge filling the gap between 'simple' hunter-gatherers and the cultural intensification presumed to predate the development of agriculture and the state (see Suttles 1968:56). Hoffman's study on the Punan foragers of Borneo makes an important contribution to our understanding of hunter-gatherer societies and their evolution because their classification as 'complex' stems not from their movement toward agriculture, but in their movement (quite possibly) away from it.

Traditional Western academic perceptions of the Punan (as simple, wild, savage, fierce, child-like, weird, sun-scared, primitive) were forged around the turn of the twentieth century by the likes of explorer and naturalist Carl Bock and anthropologist Charles Hose (Hoffman 1984:124). The Punan, Bock believed, were the ancient cultural predecessors of the more advanced sedentary Dayak agriculturalists with whom they co-existed (Hoffman 1984:125). Later on in the century a different picture began to emerge from a number of different sources (colonial officials and anthropologists) (Hoffman 1984:125-126). The Punan were racially identical to their neighboring sedentary agricultural peoples, the Dayak (Hoffman 1984:126). Moreover, the various Punan groups scattered across Borneo had less in common (culturally) with one other than each group had with

their Dayak neighbors. In local usage the generic term ‘Punan’ referred not to a distinct culture, but to a distinct way of life (nomadic, hunter-gatherer, forager, forest-dweller) (Hoffman 1984:128-129). Culturally (in terms of language and custom), Punan groups resembled their Dayak neighbors with whom they maintained symbiotic trading relations and considered to be “people of our kind” (Hoffman 1984:129-130). Other Punan were “people of other kinds”. Prior to pacification, tribal warfare was fought against “other kinds of people” — other Punan and other Dayak — not against their Dayak neighbors (“people of our kind’) (Hoffman 1984:131). Anthropologists and linguists found no uniting ideology nor language between various Punan groups, only between symbiotic groups of Dayak and Punan .

The close symbiosis between Dayak and Punan groups was found to be based upon relationships of exchange. Punan groups gathered certain ‘tradables’ from their primary forest habitat (aloes wood, rattan, camphor, resin, gutta percha, beeswax, edible birds’ nest, etc.) exchanging them for items such as salt, tobacco, cloth, iron machetes and wealth tokens like dragon jars and gongs (and nowadays, money) (Hoffman 1984:137-141). Closer cultural-historical analysis revealed that Punan and Dayak peoples were part of a larger trading network that had been running through southeast Asia for centuries. Quite possibly for all of the last millennia Borneo had been a trade crossroads for Eastern civilizations like the Chinese (Hoffman 1984:134). Add to this the ideas proposed by historical linguist Robert Blust in the 1970s and a picture begins to emerge. Blust proposed that prior to their movement into Borneo, Austronesian speakers (including the Punan and Dayak and the indigenous peoples of the Philippines and Sumatra like the Kuba and Tasaday) were already cultivating rice. Therefore, he conjectured, each of these peoples were one-time sedentary agriculturalists who had later become (for some reason) nomadic hunter gatherers (Hoffman 1984:133).

Pulling all of this information together Hoffman formulated the following hypothesis (which also constitutes the argument for complexity). Sometime after Austronesian rice cultivators moved into Borneo a Chinese trading network became established in the area demanding primary forest products. Gathering the primary forest products was too difficult for the sedentary Dayak cultivators who lived in areas of secondary forest. Consequently a section of the Dayak community split from the agricultural way of life to concentrate on collecting primary forest products (becoming Punan — forest dwellers, hunters, gatherers), trading these products back with their Dayak kinsmen whom in turn would trade them into the southeast Asian network (with Malay and Chinese traders). Therefore, Hoffman suggests, the Punan hunting and gathering way of life seen today may not be an archaic remnant from a former age, but rather a creation of the recent past (hence the cultural similarity and trade relations with Dayak peoples) (see Hoffman 1984:142-143).

If Hoffman is correct about all of this, his hypothesis suggests that people do not move toward higher degrees of complexity on their way to developing agriculture and state political formations, but that human history itself is complex. Hoffman’s study, then, discounts unilinear theories of evolution (which have, for a long time, been discounted in the natural sciences — see Gould 1977) in favor of multi-linear (branching) theories.

Cultural evolution, it would seem, doesn't occur in one direction (toward agriculture and civilization), it occurs in whatever direction is deemed appropriate by the prevailing historical-cultural and environmental circumstances. I would suggest, then, that the reason we have traditionally classified certain hunter gatherer groups as being 'complex' rather than simple is not because one is, in fact, more complex than another (since all extant human societies are, in some way, complex), but because we (Western academics) gauge complexity in terms of certain criteria (namely a culture's likeness to our own).

Traditional classifications of hunter-gatherer 'complexity', then, indicate on one hand a degree of similarity to our own way of life and, on the other, imposed models of unilinear human evolution. Classifying the Punan as 'complex', then indicates, first of all, that complexity can be gauged according to criteria other than 'likeness to our own culture', and secondly, that evolution does not occur in any one direction (toward the attainment of agriculture and civilization). Understanding the Punan in this way evaporates notions of 'devolution' (a colloquial expression in the first place, meaning 'evolution running backwards').

References

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