

Week 1: Hunter Gatherers or Gatherer Hunters Assignment:
Comparing and Contrasting the Mbuti with the San

By Tobias Theodore Olds 21/09/18

Mark. S. Mosko pointed out that much of the analysis of Hunter-Gatherer societies was skewed by the ethnocentric materialist-empiricist perception of the west (Mosko, 1987, p 896-897). He argued for a structuralist-functionalist understanding of the societies (Mosko, 1987, p 897), and this is how I will approach the four main areas that Anthropologists have traditionally studied societies: Politics, Economy, Belief and Family.

Ingold points out that rather than considering themselves mentally separate from the environment they inhabit, both indigenous groups think of nature and themselves synonymously (Ingold, 2000,). They consider themselves not in the world, but of it and in fact the Mbuti regard the whole world they are part of as akin literally to the womb (*ndu*) of a woman (Mosko, 1987, p 899). They believe that life consists of multiple birth and rebirth ceremonies, and that there are separate occasions where they are physically born – and then born into the community for instance (Mosko, 1987, p 900). The Mbuti also consider their world in parental terms and in fact their family structure reflects the relationship with the forest in fact. They also do not distinguish between relatives and non-relatives when referring to kinship, as they fundamentally represent kinship as the forest, and so therefore how it plays out with the individuals around them is fluid and gender-neutral. The San also share a concept of healing through rebirth called N'um, which requires being able to accept the unknown. It is where N'um explodes in you, causing you to die and be reborn.

Both communities appear to aspire to egalitarianism (a commonly occurring belief among many hunter-gatherer societies is that they view life and matter as balanced and all equal). The San people are committed to egalitarianism – hunters who succeed at bringing back meat on hunts will go out of their way to disparage and discredit their achievements to neuter all sense of pride, and they share arrows when hunting, and insist it was the hunter's arrow responsible, to maintain it as random chance. What the Mbuti do differently to preserve egalitarianism is allow for a *Bopi* – a children's governance where kids can hold responsibility for the group's purity (due to children being regarded as purer as adults) if the adults fail to harmony, then the children will threaten to partake in *molimo*, a ritual where they will destroy the village.

Similarly, there is an ethos of sharing and immediate return among the San people, to help dampen the pride. Nurit Bird-David, drawing on accounts of Mbuti, Batek and Nayaka ethnography, links it to the foundational outlook of the San and Mbuti, where the Mbuti view of the forest unconditionally transacts with people to correlate with the similar unconditional transactions that take place among the people of a community (Ingold, 2000, p 43-44). In conclusion, the main contrast to be found with the San and the Mbuti is that the Mbuti have engaged with outside trade with the Bantu people, but otherwise share many core philosophies.

Reference List:

1. Ingold, T. (2000). *The Perception of the Environment: Essay on livelihood, dwelling and skill*. 11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE, 29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001: Routledge
2. Mosko, M. (Dec, 1987). The Symbols of "Forest": A Structural Analysis of Mbuti Culture and Social Organization. *American Anthropologist*, 89(4), pp. 896-913