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The notion of the 'noble savage' is the fundamental axiom underpinning the concept of 'hunter-gatherers'. Explore the accuracy and purpose of this assertion with reference to ethnographic examples

Human Evolution: Hunter-Gatherers Past and Present Perspectives

The modern myth of the 'Noble Savage' as the romantic glorification of the savage life is commonly attributed to the eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Ellingson (2001: 1-2) states that Rousseau's role in the creation of the term and the criticism of the Noble Savage myth is an enduring tradition in anthropology. However, he notes that this was a misconception as Rousseau, in fact, did not invent this term concluding that 'Rousseau's invention of the Noble Savage myth is itself a myth' (2001: 4). Although he did not invent the term, he used the 'savage' way of life - being free of the complexities of more developed societies and consequently happier - to criticise European civilisations (Dickason, 2002: 1500). Nevertheless, the notion of the 'noble savage' played a key role in shaping ideological foundations in archaeology and anthropology, for instance, in the study of hunter-gatherers.

The study of hunter-gatherer societies itself remains central in archaeology and anthropology, and serve as a 'testing ground for general theories about human evolution' (Jordan and Cummings, 2004: 1). As Barnard states (2014: 43), the concept of hunter-gatherer as we understand today is a product of speculation, debate and theory. It has moved away from nineteenth century social evolutionary thinking which assumed that hunter-gatherer societies represented the life of 'ancient' peoples in the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic (Jordan, 2014: 905), to acknowledging the deep and enduring cultural significance of these societies which exhibits 'enormous diversity flexibility and resilience across time and space' (Jordan and Cummings, 2014: 25). This essay will aim to discuss the developments in hunter-gatherer studies with reference to ethnographic examples.

To understand the developments in hunter-gatherer studies, the foundational concepts on which they are built on should be examined. Barnard (2004: 5) notes six key issues in hunter-gatherer studies: evolutionism, foraging strategies, woman the gatherer, world view perception, hunter-gatherers in prehistory and hunter-gatherer in history. The social evolutionary theory was established during the 19th century, and were built on Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection. Social Darwinism suggests that all groups are subjected to the same levels of natural selection, therefore assuming that all humanity proceeds through the same series of highly generalised and distinct stages (Jordan and Cummings, 2014: 34), eventually coming to a common end. Edward Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture* (1871) supports this notion as he argues that different contemporary societies were at different stages of evolution, thus simpler societies resembled ancient societies. This led to the creation of the 'evolutionary ladder' by Morgan as he creates the three stages of evolution: savagery, barbarism and civilisation. On that account, hunter-gatherers of the archaeological past and the ethnographic present are then allocated to the lower rungs of this evolutionary ladder (Jordan and Cummings, 2014: 34). Therefore, this theory then believes that 'hunter-gatherer primitives were developmentally retarded, wholly at the whim of nature struggling to wrest a living from land, and ultimately doomed to extinction at the hands of more advanced' (Garvey and Bettinger, 2014: 71). It defined hunter-gatherers by their lack of technology with the assumption that the 'relentless demands of the daily food quest which left little time for development of more elaborate technologies' (Jordan and Cummings, 2014: 1096). Barnard (2004: 1) notes the statements made by Sigmund Freud in relation to Australian Aborigines, referring to them as 'the most backward and miserable savages' who did not have permanent houses, could not make pottery, had no chiefs or beliefs or worship in higher beings. Moreover, as Woodburn (1986: 52) states, hunter-gatherer societies are often described as living on the verge of starvation. He discredits this notion by explaining the Hadza, a group of hunter-gatherers living near Tanzania. He explains that although they describe themselves as suffering from hunger (due to not getting as much meat as they would have liked), there is never a shortage of food even in time of drought (1986: 52). Therefore, as Steward (1963: 19) states, the nineteenth century evolutionists were deeply interested in making generalisations.

By the twentieth-century, the unilinear view of evolution took a turn when Franz Boas, the father of American cultural anthropology, argued that hunter-gatherer cultures were just as complex as the civilised societies of the twentieth century (Hayden, 2014: 644). It is evident that the understanding that hunter-gatherer represented 'ancient' peoples and the way of life in the Palaeolithic or Mesolithic past

contributed greatly to the study of hunter-gatherers. However, as Suzman (2004: 202) notes, this was the final hour of 'lost world' anthropology as researchers went in search of 'isolated communities still embedded in the rhythms of hunter-gatherer life'. This is evident from the fieldwork experience of Franz Boas, as he argued that the classic evolutionary model of thinking was 'inherently racist and based largely on armchair speculation rather than direct detailed knowledge gathered first hand through ethnographic field research with specific groups' (Jordan and Cummings, 2014: 3). In his book *Race, language and culture*, Boas (1940: 16) states 'a stratification of society in social groups that are racial in character will always lead to racial discrimination', thus establishing his opposing views against the unilinear view of the social evolutionary theory. This is evident from the views of Sigmund Freud when he refers to the Australian Aborigines as 'backwards and miserable savages' (Barnard, 2004: 1). Boas' newly established views which argued that all cultures are unique and should be understood on their own terms became known as cultural relativism, furthermore, promoting the importance of ethnographic fieldwork in understanding the unique and complex features of different cultures and societies (Jordan and Cummings, 2014: 3).

This was followed by the works of Julian Steward who developed the cultural ecology framework, which required systematic comparisons of groups living in similar environments (Jordan and Cummings, 2014: 36; Garvey and Bettinger, 2014: 73). Steward (1963: 29) states that 'the most fruitful course of investigation would seem to be the search for laws which formulate the interrelationships of particular phenomena which may recur cross-culturally but are not necessarily universal'. He notes that technologies used to adapt to particular environments and the external environments to which they adapt suggest multi-linear patterns of evolution rather than a unilinear process of evolution (Jordan and Cummings, 2014: 37). Moreover, Myers (2004: 184) suggests that Steward's influence transformed the study of hunter-gatherer research as scholars 'quickly adopted and modified cultural ecology and or multilineal evolution'.

Steward (1963: 31) suggests that culture is a 'super-organic' factor which affects and is affected by the total web of life. As culture includes the use and development of tool, the technological tool adaptation to certain environments must be considered. For instance, the Netsilik Eskimos can be taken as an example to analyse groups adapting to extremely harsh environments. Balikci (1986: 82) notes that the long winters that were characterised by intense cold were consciously recognised by the Netsilik as they reacted accordingly by trying alternative strategies. Their technology is adapted in specialised artifacts made from the availability of raw materials, and in relation to specific environmental conditions (Balikci, 1986: 78). Moreover, he observes how the

Netsilik eskimos stand in sharp contrast to the Bushmen of the Kalahari, as in their region, pressure phases are infrequent (1986: 82). From his observation of the two contrasting groups, it is evident that different adaptive forms are found with different qualities of pressures, even in terms of tool use in subsistence methods. Moreover, hunter-gatherers in extreme environmental conditions such as the arctic 'exhibit more complex technologies as the implication of coming back to the camp empty handed are much more severe here'. (Jordan and Cummings, 2014: 1097). Furthermore, it established the modern view of hunter-gatherers as 'largely timeless populations' (Jordan and Cummings, 2014: 13) who had little motivation to change over the millennia as they were content with their respective environments.

The most popular group considered to be the poster group for modern hunter-gatherers are the Bushmen of the Kalahari. The Kalahari San populations like the Ju/'Hoansi continued to be hunters and gatherers well into the twentieth century (Suzman, 2004: 202). The cultural ecology framework sparked the Kalahari Debate which included the arguments from both traditionalists (who believe that modern-hunter gatherers can be taken as examples to understand the past human adaptation) and revisionists (who took the complexities of different regions of societies into account). Although the misconception that the hunter-gatherers were primitive, isolated and survivals of an 'older and relatively unchanged kind of human existence' (Jordan and Cummings, 2014: 14) was corrected, Barnard (2004: 7) criticised it by suggesting that neither side of the debate examine the Bushmen's own perception of the world. It was the *Man the Hunter* conference in 1966 that was truly responsible for discrediting the initial assumptions about hunter-gatherer societies which assumed that these societies were always on the brink of starvation, 'with an inadequate unreliable food supply forcing them to move around frequently to find scarce resources' (Jordan & Cummings, 2014: 7). As mentioned before, Woodburn's example of the Hadza discredits this notion as he states that they never run out of food supplies even in times of drought.

In conclusion, by analysing the timeline of the changing ideas on hunter-gatherers through time, the diversity of views and its development can be identified (Barnard, 2004: 1). As Sterling (2014: 152) states, the diversity of all aspects of hunter-gatherer peoples past and present is lost when we assume under the romantic glorification notions that they behave in ways that are 'natural' or in past terms, 'noble savages'. It is evident that evolutionary thinking in both archaeology and anthropology has changed enormously over the years from Morgan's evolutionary ladder, to the 'noble savage' notion to the now accepted idea that hunter-gatherer groups are as

complex as the 'civilised' societies. In fact, modern hunter-gatherer societies are no longer regarded as exotic 'others' but are members of modern foraging societies who have regained their rightful status as global citizens (Jordan, 2014: 906). From this analysis of the timeline, the changing perspectives are clearly evident, and demonstrates how far the research in hunter-gatherer studies have come to be developed today.

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