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15. | Holocene Foragers and Interethnic Trade: A Critique of the Myth of Isolated Independent Hunter-Gatherers

Thomas N. Headland and Lawrence A. Reid

Abstract: It is popularly thought that today's existing hunter-gatherers lived until recently in isolation, independent of food-producing peoples. The present thesis takes a different view, proposing that middle-to-late Holocene foragers followed an economy based heavily on trade relationships with neighboring food producers. It is argued here that the symbiosis observed today among such groups as Southeast Asian Negritos, the !Kung Bushmen, and the African Pygmies is neither recent nor anomalous but reflects a subsistence strategy that has been followed by most hunter-gatherers for millennia.

Introduction

There is a widely held myth among Westerners today that tribal peoples in general, and hunter-gatherer societies in particular, are rather primitive and isolated peoples—remnants from the Paleolithic who have just emerged through recent contact into the twentieth century. Until recently, hunter-gatherers were popularly thought to be neither dependent upon human-produced foods nor involved in trade with outsiders. This viewpoint is assumed by most lay people and has been continually supported throughout this century by the writings of explorers, adventurers, missionaries, government agents, journalists, and even anthropologists. This model is referred to as the *isolate model* hypothesis.

In this paper we review recent arguments that present a very different model of mid-to-late Holocene hunter-gatherer economy. We argue that, well before the eve of European expansion, most such foraging groups practiced a

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subsistence strategy that was mainly dependent on symbiotic trade with food-producing populations, as well as part-time cultivation or pastoralism. We refer to this hypothesis as our ~~independent~~ *interdependent model*. We propose that the symbiosis and small-scale food production observed among these groups today is neither recent nor anomalous; rather, it represents an economy that has been widely practiced by most hunter-gatherers for many hundreds, if not thousands, of years. We illustrate this proposition by looking at the Philippine Negritos.

Philippine Negritos—A People without History?

Living in several areas of Southeast Asia today are a number of small foraging groups of hunter-gatherers generally referred to as Negritos. In the Philippines, there are approximately 25 ethnolinguistically different Negrito groups, numbering in total about 15,000 people. All of these groups are today involved in minor cultivation and in heavy symbiotic trade of forest products with non-Negrito farmers. The question we raise in this paper is, how long have these (and other) hunter-gatherers been involved in food production and in interethnic exchange relationships with outsiders?

The Isolate Model

Two models of Negrito prehistory may be proposed. The older and more generally accepted isolationist model assumes that the first human inhabitants of the Philippines were some type of Pleistocene *Homo sapiens* that evolved some 20,000 years ago into the phenotypic Negrito found in the archipelago today. Our argument does not disagree with this part of the isolate model, which assumes that Negritos were the aboriginal inhabitants of the Philippines, that their original languages were not Austronesian, and that they lived a so-called pure hunter-gatherer life-style into the early Holocene. We do not, however, agree with the assumption that this isolated foraging way of life was still going on by the late Holocene and into the Spanish colonial period. Nor do we agree with the isolate model's notions that Negritos had almost no contact with the Austronesian speakers who began migrating into the Philippines around 3000 B.C. (5000 B.P.) and that they lived off of wild foods until recently.¹

We therefore disagree with the views of those anthropologists who have most recently been studying Negritos, for example, Eder who says that "in the closing decades of the nineteenth century [the Batak Negritos in Palawan were still] isolated . . . from all but sporadic contact" with outsiders (1987:ix), that they "began cultivating rice only during the latter part of the 19th century" (1987:58), and that their trade of commercial forest products with outsiders "may also have begun at this time [i.e., around 1880]" (1987:58); and Rai who, in his dissertation, sees the Agta Negritos as "relatively isolated," with formal trade with outsiders beginning only in this century (1990:79, 85, 86, 92); and the Griffins who argue that the Agta began only three generations ago to make

the shift from hunting to horticulture (Estioko-Griffin and Griffin 1981:61; Griffin 1985).

This isolate model view, then, assumes that Negritos probably lived independently of the farming populations until the late 1800s. Not only in Prehispanic times but up to the turn of the twentieth century and perhaps up to the end of World War II, Philippine Negritos, according to this view, may have lived solely by hunting, fishing, and gathering, with wild roots as their main carbohydrate source. This isolationist stance assumes that they had little trade of any kind with non-Negrito farming populations and that they practiced no agriculture.

The Interdependent Model

We propose a second, more complex model that more accurately formulates the history of Southeast Asian Negritos in the late prehistoric period. Our model argues for a much earlier date for the changeover of Negritos from an independent foraging economy to an economy based on interaction with Austronesian-speaking immigrants. It is hard to know when their independent life-style may have ended, but there was probably a gradual move toward interdependent symbiotic relationships with Austronesian-speaking peoples soon after those latter began migrating into Negrito areas. This change would have occurred, then, around 3000 B.C. (5000 B.P.).

The Agta of Northeastern Luzon

The data we review here in support of our thesis focus mostly on the Agta Negrito groups in northeastern Luzon, where we have both done fieldwork.² Several Agta ethnolinguistic groups live in eastern Luzon. They typically reside in small nomadic camps in the rain forests of the Sierra Madre. The most salient activity of Agta men is hunting wild pigs, deer, and monkeys with bows and arrows. In a typical year, about one-quarter of the households cultivate tiny swiddens, which average only one-seventh of a hectare in size. Rice is the main staple of these Agta, with wild starch foods eaten at only 2% of their meals. Almost all of this rice is acquired by trading wild meat and other forest products with neighboring farmers; less than 5% comes from their own small fields.

In attempting to establish just when the ancestors of today's Agta began making swiddens and when they developed their intense interdependent relationships with farming populations, we review four bodies of evidence, including ethnohistorical, archaeological, linguistic, and botanical.

Ethnohistorical Evidence

Early Spanish records substantiate beyond question that the Agta were making swiddens and that symbiotic patron-client relationships with

nearby farming communities were well established when the Spaniards first arrived. Pertinent English translations of those many records are presented elsewhere (Headland 1986). The question remains, how far back into the Prehispanic era do these practices go? This question brings up the second body of data.

Archaeological Evidence

The archaeological record establishes that extensive international trade in forest products has been practiced throughout insular Southeast Asia for at least the last thousand years and that nomadic forest peoples, including Negritos, were the collectors and primary traders. Trade was the major "pull" force attracting these two population types together.

Looking specifically at the Agta areas of northeastern Luzon, archaeological studies indicate that non-Negrito farming populations were living here well before the time of Christ. One such study (Snow et al. 1986) establishes that people were cultivating rice in the Agta area of northeastern Luzon over 3,000 years ago and that ceramic-manufacturing cultures were in the same area 5,000 years ago.

This and other archaeological evidence, then, point to the likelihood of rice farmers and Negrito hunters having lived within less than a day's walk of each other in northeastern Luzon for at least the last 3,000 years. The interdependent model proposes that Agta bands during this period were not only living in the same geographical areas as the non-Negrito food-producing peoples, but also maintaining significant symbiotic trade relationships of one type or another with them.

Linguistic Evidence

As we have argued elsewhere (Headland 1986; Headland and Reid 1989; Reid 1987, 1989), linguistic data provide the most overwhelming independent support for our hypothesis about the long time depth for the beginning of intense interaction between Philippine Negritos and non-Negrito populations. Today's Negritos are descendants of aboriginal peoples who lived in those islands long before the arrival of Austronesian-speaking immigrants some 5,000 years ago. Yet, all these Negrito groups today speak Austronesian languages that are significantly different from the neighboring non-Negrito languages. This can only mean that the ancestors of these Negritos were, at some time in the past, interacting so intensely with Austronesian-speaking non-Negritos that they lost their aboriginal languages and adopted the languages of their new neighbors. Subsequently, after the two groups separated, a process of linguistic differentiation began that slowly evolved until today the decedents of those original protolanguages are no longer mutually intelligible.

How long would it take for this process of differentiation to occur? The linguistic differences between today's Negrito languages and the most closely related non-Negrito languages indicate a period of independent development

that must extend to well over a thousand years for those Negritos in western Luzon, to about 3,000 years for the Agta Negrito languages we studied.

Botanical Evidence

A question may be raised about why prehistoric Negritos attached themselves to non-Negrito farming populations. We suggest that the reason was ecological; specifically, there was an acute nutritional need for cultivated foods. It is not just that Negritos developed a desire for cultivated foods that superseded their taste for traditional wild starches. Rather, as Headland has argued in a separate paper (1987), tropical rain forests are not the food-rich biomes many assume them to be. The evidence is quite strong for the Philippines that there is insufficient wild starch food in those rain forests to sustain human foragers who have no access to at least some agricultural foods. Such forests could not have provided adequate carbohydrates for pure foragers. If the pull factor was trade, the "push" force was the need for cultivated starches.

We propose, then, that the symbiotic relationships that exist today between tropical forest hunter-gatherers and farmers is not a recent event but evolved long ago as an adaptive strategy for successfully exploiting the tropical forest. In other words, Negritos evolved culturally into what they are today as they moved into the forest long ago to collect wild products to trade with agriculturalists and with overseas traders for tools and starch food. We are proposing that prehistoric Negritos probably moved into the neolithic at more or less the same time as did their Asian neighbors.

Do Other Hunter-Gatherer Groups Fit the Interdependent Model?

We do not limit the interdependent model just to Southeast Asian foragers. There is good evidence that we must also discard isolationist views that we may hold for even the most famous of the hunter-gatherer societies--namely, the San Bushmen, the African Pygmies, and the Punan foragers. In spite of the 1980 film, *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (20th Century Fox), we now know that the !Kung San were involved in both food production and outside trade for at least a thousand years before Richard Lee arrived.³ And, we are now learning that the central African rain forest is probably even more devoid of wild food than are the Philippine rain forests (Bailey et al. 1989; Hart and Hart 1986). Any Pygmies who tried to live independently there would probably have starved to death within the year.⁴

As for the "wild" Punan foragers of Borneo, Hoffman's research suggests that none of those many groups has ever been economically self-sufficient (1986). All have long been involved in ongoing trade relationships with sedentary peoples. The evidence indicates that they are former agriculturalists who became specialized collectors of forest products for Chinese traders over a

thousand years ago (Hoffman 1986:32, 102–103; see also Dunn 1975). As Hoffman argues, "it is time for anthropologists to stop thinking of Borneo as though it were New Guinea" (1986:103).

Conclusion

We argue that today's hunter-gatherer societies are as fully modern as any twentieth-century human group, that most hunter-gatherer groups were involved in minor food production for perhaps thousands of years, and that many of these groups were also participating in interethnic and possibly international trade long before the advent of sixteenth-century European expansion.

Westerners have chronically failed to understand such societies. They continue to see them as fossilized hunters of the isolate model variety rather than as "commercial" foragers carrying on a life-style not in spite of but because of their particular economic role in the larger national and international world in which they live. Until this anthropological bias is corrected, our image of hunter-gatherer culture and ecology will remain sadly incomplete and distorted.

Notes

1. For a review of the arguments for the 5000 B.P. date of Austronesian movement into the Philippines, see Bellwood (1985:107–121, 130, 232).
2. For a detailed ethnography on the Agta, see Headland (1986). A detailed bibliography for all Agta ethnographic materials may be found in Griffin and Headland (1985).
3. For recent arguments for the view that the San have been interacting with outsiders for a thousand year or more, see Denbow (1984, 1986); Denbow and Wilmsen (1986); Gordon (1984); Guenther (1986); Hitchcock (1987); Parkinson (1984:172); Schrire (1980); Volkman (1986); and Wilmsen (1983).
4. For recent essays arguing for a long history of interaction between Pygmies and agriculturalists, see Bahuchet and Guillaume (1982); Bailey et al. (1989); Hart and Hart (1986); Morelli et al. (1986); and Vansina (1986).

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