

29. Personal Autonomy among Hunter-Gatherers: Egalitarianism, Relationality, and Personhood

15989 - The freedom to stop being free: Negotiating personal autonomy and family relations in a contemporary Nayaka community

Presentation type: Oral presentation

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In this paper I examine the notion of 'personal autonomy' in the contemporary life of the Nayaka hunter gatherers in South India. I focus on how it is acted and manipulated in a time when people are subjected to intensive pressure by welfare institutions to assimilate them in the hierachal dominant society and adopt different values and perceptions of self and society. They are required to accept a stratified social life in which people of authority are listened to and obeyed. They are also encouraged to adapt "western-style" individualist values by accumulating personal wealth and property on the expense of social dependency and relations. I explore how people cope with the dissonance between different sets of values - the one they grew up with and those of the dominant society around them - by examining a diverse cast of actors of different ages and different extent of engagement with outsiders.

The paper will focus on a specific aspect of modern everyday life, children's education and learning. Raising children in the village is a balance between significant personal autonomy and freedom to choose, experience and making mistakes on the one hand, and active guidance regarding social sensibilities and engagements on the other. Today, parents are expected to send children to schools, and in fact limit their freedom of choice by making decisions for them. The schools themselves are very hierarchical institutions and require strict discipline and obedience. I show how parents juggle with the requirement to "tell their children what to do" and thus prevent their personal autonomy. They struggle and manipulate their actions and words so to succeed in fulfilling their new "parental responsibilities" while still acknowledging the values of each being's personal autonomy, including their children. In contrast, once in boarding schools, children are exposed to a different set of values. Children who spend most of their young lives apart from their families bring those new ideas on their return home on vacations. They order siblings around, give instructions to relatives and are keen to follow orders. Such new behaviors are not openly rebuked, as many still value personal autonomy and free choice of conduct, but they are looked at suspiciously and are silently avoided. However, in specific cases this new behavior meets different response by certain members of the community, especially those who are more engaged with mainstream society. Those rare occasions activate new sets of values and introduce new social dynamics into the village setting.

16021 - "It's Up to You": The Way of Personal Autonomy among the Mlabri

Presentation type: Oral presentation

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The aims of this paper are to examine personal autonomy among (post-) hunter-gatherers in Northern Thailand, the Mlabri, especially focusing on the expression which they very frequently use in their social life: "it's up to you" (kalam do méh), and to discuss how it contributes to create and maintain their personal autonomy in interpersonal relationships. In Northern Thailand, there are many ethnic groups, who differ ethnically, culturally, and linguistically from the lowland Thai. Most of them are generally known as farmers, practicing swidden cultivation, but there are the only hunter-gatherers, the Mlabri, who are traditionally called "the spirits of the yellow leaves" (phi tong lueang) by Thai and Laotian because of their traditional lifestyle. During my own fieldwork among them, the expression that I heard most frequently is "it's up to you". When I asked them what I should do according to their ethics, they just answered, "it's up to you". And they also answered like that when I asked that why he took his own life with a deadly poison, even if he is a relative or good friend. For us, the expression seems to be indifferent because it is usually used when we do not concern about the thing. Indeed they also behave as if they are totally indifferent to others in the social life, but I have found that this is not the point. Like other hunter-gatherers in the world, personal autonomy is an important social principle among the Mlabri. In fact, they said, "For us, 'freedom' is to think alone and do alone". They never get too close and too far to each other. It seems that the expression is a manifestation to express this social principle: personal autonomy. This paper, therefore, examines how hunter-gatherers create and maintain personal autonomy through a case study on the Mlabri and considers why and how it contributes to their interpersonal relationships while taking into account the current situation that suffered various socio-cultural changes.

16262 - Communists herded us like animals: individualism and collectivism in Russian Far East

Presentation type: Oral presentation

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The presentation is based on fieldwork in the Russian Far East, in a region north of the Verkhoiansk mountains. This is a remarkable region because contrary to the Soviet nostalgia in hunters-herders' villages of the region, local people express obvious joy about the collapse of the Soviet state and collective farms.

This exceptionally different attitude is caused by value conflicts between local social and religious norms, and Socialist planned agriculture. Local people are engaged in a mixed form of economy from hunting, fishing and reindeer and cattle breeding. On the one hand, such economy supports individual decision-making and responsibility. On a community level, cooperation with neighbours is important for more complicated tasks like hay making or trading. Interestingly, the individualism, egalitarianism and simultaneous collectivism contradicted with the Soviet way of life and organization of work. The collective farm brigade structure and command system was inconsistent with the local notion of individuality and violated many religious norms. Socialist centralization and decision making power of individual administrators disabled the community from controlling its affairs like regulation of land use. Moreover, the Soviet system that provided privileges for high officials conflicted with the local egalitarian way of life.

These communities were quick to restructure their life after the collapse of the Soviet Union and are now actively engaged in formal and informal economy. The norms of individuality foster successful entrepreneurship whereas egalitarian collectivism guarantees that the person remains connected to the community and local economy. In the presentation I explain how the strength of local social norms and traditional beliefs made these communities into passionate anti-Communists and later transformed them to supporters of free entrepreneurship.

16100 - Living autonomously in a Bayaka community: the production of autonomy in daily life

Presentation type: Oral presentation

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A profound emphasis on personal autonomy has been recognized by a range of scholars as a key organizing principle in hunter-gatherer social life. Yet the means by which such autonomy is produced in the daily life of hunter-gatherer communities remains poorly understood. Much of the theorizing about autonomy has focused on material factors -- subsistence practices, resource distribution, etc -- or global-level political factors -- encapsulation in hegemonic cultural systems, integration into wider markets, etc -- while that which has examined local-level social practice has tended to take Western conceptual categories such as "egalitarianism" and "individualism" for granted, rather than examining indigenous categories and understandings. In addition, this latter work has usually employed a "socio-centric," and often functionalist, approach to cultural practices, treating them as "mechanisms" through which a society protects its members from falling prey to the forces that underlie more complex social forms -- power, inequality, accumulation, etc. In this paper I employ a different approach, seeing the preservation of autonomy as a political achievement produced by social actors in the varied contexts of daily life. Using a Bayaka (Pygmy) community in the Central African Republic as a case study, the paper begins by outlining the Bayaka ethos of autonomy, which is intimately associated with the notion of well-being and presupposes a set of rights for all persons: the right to make one's own decisions, the right to health (both physical and "spiritual"), the right to material resources circulating in the community and the right to sustenance from the forest. It then examines the various discursive genres and ritual practices that actors employ to protect these rights and preserve their autonomy. The right to make one's own decisions is safeguarded by a style of decision-making in which those with political authority offer proposals for collective action, but each individual in the community retains the right to decide whether or not to comply with them. Rights of access to resources and health are protected by a set of discursive genres and ritual practices that individuals use to contest actions they perceive as transgressions of their rights, making relations between the relevant parties subject to negotiation in a public forum. By basing the analysis on indigenous cultural categories and examining how actors negotiate interpersonal relations in such a way as to preserve their autonomy, the paper presents a concrete case of how individuals deeply committed to personal autonomy are able to produce an enduring social order based on extensive cooperation and a "dense" sociality.

15985 - Happiness and cooperation in Hadza, egalitarian foragers of Tanzania

Presentation type: Oral presentation

Author(s): Butovskaya, Marina (*Institute of ethnology and anthropology, RAS, Moscow, Russian Fed. / Rus Föd.*); Karelina, Dmitri (*Moscow State University, Moscow, Russian Fed. / Rus Föd.*)

Hadza are known as egalitarian nomadic foragers, with fission-fusion band organization, widely practicing food sharing. But egalitarianism by no means suggests an indiscriminative sharing. According to recent data, even the large game in Hadza camps were shared in ways significantly advantaged to hunters' family (Wood, Marlowe, 2013). The best hunters provided 3–4 times the amount of food to their families than median or poor hunters. In the light of these findings, kin provisioning hypotheses gain obvious support. Same data explain the reason of obvious preferences of good hunters as husbands. Besides, their children survived better (Apicella, 2014). Besides, best hunters are appreciated as friends as well. Thus, according to current data, cooperation network among Hadza has been arranged according to kinship and friendship relations (Apicella et al., 2012). To what extent does the ability to cooperate influence personhood, particularly feelings of happiness and anxiety in this egalitarian society? Data on 146 adult individuals (80 men and 66 women) with age-range from 18 to 70 y. were collected in 11 Hazda camps on the Eastern side of the Lake Eyasi in March-April, 2014. We collected data on self-ratings on Subjective Happiness Scale, Helping Scale, and State-Trait Anxiety. The linear regression analyses with ratings on Subjective Happiness Scale as dependent variable, sex, age, scores on State-Trait Anxiety, Helping Scale as independent variables was conducted. It was found that these variables were responsible for about 24% of variation of ratings on Subjective Happiness Scale. Individuals rating higher on Helping Scale were feeling happier and less anxious. Our data also suggest that those Hadza, who are helping (cooperating) others, are feeling happier in general. Such help may well be associated with aggressive support, not only with food sharing or cooperation in child rearing. Egalitarianism as cultural concept does not appear to preclude from association and integration with close others in the Hadza case: people feel happier and less stressed, when caring for relatives and friends. This study was supported by the RFH, grant 12-01-00032a and approved by the Tanzanian Commission for Science and Technology.

15997 - Baka's 'Ambiguous' Utterance and Their Group Hunting

Presentation type: Oral presentation

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The 'ambiguous utterances' of Baka have been discussed in the context of questions about the organization of group hunting. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the hypothesis that there is a relation between their utterance forms regarding ambiguity and the group hunting practice. Kimura (2001) found the overlap and long silence on Baka's daily conversations, and pointed out that they live in a "high-context" situation. In observation of this paper regarding Baka's ambiguous utterances, a speaker's utterance is frequently repeated and overlapped by other hearers. Therefore the agency of the speaker appears to be canceled, or the clearness of the moment addressee is lost.

This paper targets the Baka hunter-gatherers, who live within the tropical rainforest in the Eastern part of Cameroon. Although the giant rat hunting is treated here, it is different from the individual hunting for large mammals because the giant rat hunting is often carried out by people having a wide range of age groups. Thus, it was a valuable opportunity in which we can observe exchanges among the hunters on the hunting activities. During the group hunting, it is effective that each hunters inform events occurred in which he/she is to others. In addition, they seldom cling to their role, but rather have a tendency to prepare shift in roles. In this regard, ambiguous utterance of Baka is considered to be related to the group hunting activities.

Reference

Kimura, D. 2001. Utterance overlap and long silence among the Baka Pygmies: Comparison with Bantu farmers and Japanese university students. African Study monographs, Suppl. 26: 103-121.