

50. Women's roles in contemporary hunting and gathering societies

16053 - The Yezidi gatherer woman's role in the community and outside of it (Armenia)

Presentation type: Oral presentation

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Although Yezidi men also have corresponding knowledge and often practice plant-gathering, the Yezidi woman is the main holder of plant-gathering traditions. Yezidi women are primarily responsible for the application, enrichment and continuation of gathering culture within the family and the community in general. The Yezidi woman is responsible for practically everything concerning the “internal affairs” of the family, and particularly for the household. Despite this, women’s activity is somehow shadowed in the conservative patriarchal Yezidi community (Yezidi and Yezidi-Kurdish communities of Armenia were the focus of this study). Thus, until recently very little was known about the plant-gathering culture of this community, as women are the main carrier of such culture. Observations show that Yezidi women supply part of the vegetal food stock and material for folk medicine for their families via gathering. Food preparation and feeding of family members and caring for their health, leisure and even beauty are also the responsibility of Yezidi women. Many Yezidi women are so involved and specialized in gathering that some trade wild plants in nearby villages or in markets. Some of them also gather and store plants in the high mountain zone where their families move in the warm seasons in the course of transhumant pastoralism: they then sell from this store of plants in the lowlands or barter with it when they return to the villages in the fall. Being more culturally conservative than Armenians and other nationalities in Armenia, Yezidis often have preserved gathering traditions with less loss and currently people preferring natural and ecologically pure food and folk medicine consult Yezidis for them. Many Yezidi women are skilled folk doctors (hekim) and are famous within and outside of their community, especially for their talent to cure female sterility, various inflammations and injuries using the wild plants they gather.

15984 - Cultural Interaction of Women in Field Encounters

Presentation type: Oral presentation

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Women play a key role with regard to the stability, as well as to the destabilisation of Hunter-Gatherer societies. We can find the same pattern worldwide - the loss of women's dignity and their self-conception is a marker, when the course is set to the disintegration of a Hunter-Gatherer culture. Nevertheless, the role of women within the radical changes is part of cultural-psychological mechanism, into which the phenomena we are witnessing are systemically integrated. Whereas the women's loss of dignity and self-conception is apparent and semiotically manifest at the surface, these are, in one sense, the symptoms of a far-reaching loss of identity. In another sense, the manifest processes at the surface also determine deeper psychological mechanisms, as we know from recent research on social embodiment. And furthermore, the women's identity are of crucial importance to the collective self-conception of the entire Hunter-Gatherer community. The triggering of the destabilising processes can be clearly identified within the external influences bearing on Hunter-Gatherer cultures. These influences, in turn, can be analysed with regard to the transfer of cultural elements and their effects within a different context or, depending on the approach, as socio-cognitive processes. Non-Hunter-Gatherer women from the globalised culture, who come as visitors to the traditional society, are a major source of these external influences. Recognising the interdependencies of external impact, women's role, and cultural identity, we can point out that the community as a whole can benefit from strategies of women's empowerment, as the maintainance of cultural identity leads to cultural resilience, so that destabilisation can be averted. In particular, the strategies of Hunter-Gatherer women's empowerment need to focus on the interaction with external women during encounters in the field, as these are the critical situations, where the processes of destabilisation could be triggered.

15939 - Use of Medicinal Plants and Transmission of the Knowledge by an Elderly Baka woman in Cameroon

Presentation type: Oral presentation

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This study focused on “Pygmy” hunter–gatherers’ knowledge of medicinal plants and previously neglected aspects of the ways in which they use such plants for homecare. I conducted a case study of an elderly Baka hunter–gatherer woman in Southeast Cameroon and examined her role in Baka society, gender differences and characteristic in their therapeutic system. The data used for this study were collected from November 2003 to July 2004. Using the Baka language, I conducted interviews with an elderly woman, ‘M,’ about 653 plant types and their medicinal uses. I also observed her medicinal practice for 131 days.

Of the plants collected, 60% were used for medicine. M used 392 plants for medicinal purposes and 496 uses were recorded. Compared with her knowledge of medicinal plants, M used only 11% of the available medicinal plants and just 6% of her uses which M answered before. I observed 315 medicinal uses over a period of 131 days. The materials for her medicines were 85% wild plants, 5% agricultural products, and 9% modern medicines such as tablets and ointments. She acquired her materials primarily from the village and from the forest, which was less than 3 km from the village.

I chronicled those who had received medicine from M and their relationships to M. She gave medicine to 19 people including 11 blood relatives, four in-laws, three non-relatives in a group, and one relative from outside the village. She mainly gave medicine to herself and to close family members, including grandchildren, a daughter-in-law, a son, and a daughter. The ratio of male to female patients was 11:89. M cared for her pregnant daughter seven times over the course of a week, beginning the day before childbirth. She gave her medicine for physical and mental balance, for promoting labor, and for postpartum pain.

The elderly Baka woman, M, used small parts of medicinal plants that she knew. She collected medicinal plants in the village and the nearby forest and mainly gave medicine to close female family members. She actively cared for her pregnant daughter. In only one case, that of an infant, were healing rituals needed; the other cases were apparently cured by M. She did not engage in any subsistence activities, but took the central role in domestic medical care.

In a previous study, I analyzed the extent to which knowledge of medicinal plants was communicated among mothers, fathers, siblings, and other relations. Although there were individual differences regarding the source of knowledge, the female research subjects obtained most of their knowledge from their mothers, and the male subjects received such information from their fathers. Now, I can propose the hypothesis that there is a tendency for medicinal plant knowledge to be transmitted among women. There are insufficient data in this study to properly test this hypothesis. Further study should be carried out to consider the cases and the medicinal practices of other women.

15838 - Dingo: In the Shadow of Woman

Presentation type: Oral presentation

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Dogs are perhaps the most widespread domesticated animal and the species that forms the closest bonds with humans. Dingoes (*Canis familiaris dingo*) arrived in Australia about 5,000 years ago, presumably as a domesticate, as their travel must have been by watercraft. After their arrival they formed wild populations across the diverse environments of the continent. The ethnohistoric record indicates that some dingoes were tamed and used by Aboriginal people for a variety of purposes including as companions, blankets, protectors and as hunting dogs. There is some controversy about the efficacy of dingoes as men's hunting dogs to capture large game. However dogs commonly accompanied women on foraging expeditions where they were used to help capture small animals, such as goannas. These observations suggest that the arrival of dogs in Australia might have changed subsistence patterns and gender roles associated with subsistence of Aboriginal Australians. Archaeologically, this might be indicated by greater numbers and greater diversity of small animals in post-5,000 year old deposits. Such a pattern is indeed evident in Aboriginal Australia and we argue that this has implications for early human dog relationships elsewhere in the world.