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FOOD SHARING AND DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES AMONG HUNTER-GATHERERS: A CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Introduction

'Food sharing' commonly shortened to 'sharing' or 'distribution' of resources of various kinds (including gift exchanges), is a common topic of discussion in anthropological literature on hunter-gatherers (see, for example, Adhikari 1999; Alekseenko 1999; Bahuchet 1999; Bhanu 1989; 1992; Binford 1966, 1978; Bird-David 1999; Bird and Bird David 1977; Cashdan 1983; 1985; Damas 1975; Eder 1999; Endicott 1979, 1999; Eggan 1968; Feit 1999; Golovner 1999; Gould 1989; Hill and Hurtado 1999; Kaare and Woodburn 1999; Keen 1999; Kent 1993; Landes 1981; Lee 1968; 1976; Love 1936; Marshall 1976; Mailhot 1999; Marlow 2004; Morris 1999; Myers 1999; Nemysova 1999; Pandya 1999; Peterson 1993; Rival 1999; Sahlins 1972; Smith 1999; Song and Shen 1999; Testart 1977; 1987; Woodburn 1968; Yellen 1976).

This paper evaluates the two basic terms 'distribution' and 'sharing' used by ethnographers when describing the life-style of hunter-gatherers. Close examination of usage of these terms in diverse situations reveals that they are not only valuable but useful too. Ethnographic reconstruction or ethno-historical reconstruction of the life of hunter-gatherers would never be complete without their use. But, surprisingly, some anthropologists have been using them without examining their applications in diverse situations. This paper critically evaluates ethnographic descriptions of various experts on hunter-gatherers, particularly in interactive situations in which 'food sharing' and 'distribution' of resources become the focus of description. However, I limit my comparison and explanation to 'adult-adult food sharing' (Kaplan and Hill 1985: 228) and distribution of resources across households living in a 'camp' (Adhikari 1999: 250; Arcand 1991: 98; Balee 1999: 107; Bhanu 1992: 32; Binford 1968; Gardner 1999: 262; Guenther 1999: 131; Lee 1968: 31; Morris 1999: 267;Rose 1968: 202; van der Sluys 1999: 308; Woodburn 1968: 103; 1982: 435; Yellen 1976: 48) or 'campsite' (Kaplan and Hill 1985: 228; Pandya 1999: 245; Turnbull 1968: 132; Yellen 1976: 67). Although 'food sharing within a family

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or household – nuclear or extended – has anthropological significance' (Marlow 2004: 72), I exclude it from discussion here, since the focus of this paper is food sharing and distribution of resources at the inter-household level. The paper also presents a brief ethnography of the Cholanaickan, contemporary 'gatherer-hunters' popularly called the cave-men of Kerala (Bhanu 1992: 32, 2003: 248; Bird David 1990: 194; Tanaka 1976: 117) who have no knowledge of agriculture. The two terms have been used to describe their life-style. The paper argues the necessity of using these terms as independent of one another, because they refer to two dissimilar socio-economic transactions. Since the hunting and gathering life is disappearing rapidly and 'ethnographic reconstructions have their own limitations' (Binford 1968), it is hoped that data on the Cholanaickan will motivate further research and theory building, or modify existing theories on the subsistence economies, eco-cultural adaptations and territorial mechanisms of hunter-gatherers.

Distribution and food sharing

While explaining the economic functions of the chief in his book *Primitive Polynesian Economy* Firth writes:

> In relation to his (chief's) clan he stands at the focal point of distribution in addition to being the prime mover in production . . .The chief's role in distribution and consumption is equally prominent. He is the recipient from his people of periodic gifts of food and raw material . . . The chief himself cannot of course consume personally all that he receives and so distributes it among members of his family, his neighbours and his close kin (Firth 1967: 213-4).

The above sentence, without any confusion, confirms the fact that Firth is so fond of using the term 'distribution' that this has led to a situation in which the meaning of the term became distorted. For example, instead of the term 'division', Firth used 'distribution' in the following remark:

> The distribution of the fish of the canoe is made equally because the crew toiled at the paddling of the canoe at sea . . .. The principle of equal distribution is simple to follow when the catch is of flying fish which are all roughly equivalent in size. A difficulty arises when a single large fish is caught as well (Firth 1967: 280).

In the above sentences, in fact, Firth really talks about equal division of the catch and not distribution. Distribution is possible only after dividing or apportioning the catch or the product. When the catch (of fish) is divided equally, either in terms of number or size or pieces, distribution becomes easy. Therefore, the natives must have divided the catch first before distributing them. The chief or his assistant or agent divides the catch and the distribution of shares is done by others who are present or assigned the task. Nemysova *et al* have rightly used the term 'division' while describing the economy of the Khanti of the West Siberian Plain as:

> All produce appropriated by collecting, hunting and fishing are equally divided among the participants (1999: 162).

Lorna Marshall, an authority on the !Kung of the Nyae Nyae of Namibia (South West Africa), did fieldwork among the !Kung during the 1950s and 1960s resulting in 8 articles and monographs. In her 1961 article in *Africa*, 'Sharing, talking and giving: Relief of social tension among the !Kung', (reprinted in R. B. Lee and I. DeVore 1976), Marshall used 'distribution' as a synonym for 'sharing' but preferred 'distribution' when describing the manner in which uncooked meat was divided by the hunting party and supplied to other members in the camp; 'sharing' she used more often for the supplying of cooked meat.

> It is the meat of these animals that is distributed according to custom and is shared by all present in the encampment . . .. Nothing is wasted; all is distributed. The owner of the animal is the owner of the first arrow to be effectively shot . . .. That person is responsible for the distribution . . .. A man wants sometimes to be the owner of the meat in order to start the distribution off in the direction of his own relatives, but . . . not to have the onus of the main distribution. The first distribution the owner makes is to the hunters and to the giver of the arrow . . .. The meat, always uncooked in the first distribution . . . In a second distribution, the several persons who got meat in the first distribution cut up their shares and distributes them further . . .. The result of the distribution is that everybody gets some meat. In the later waves of sharing, when the primary distribution and primary kinship obligations have been fulfilled, the giving of meat . . . has the quality of gift-giving (Marshall 1976: 359-60).

Marshall classified distribution into various categories such as first distribution, second distribution, main distribution and primary distribution and also explained the nature of distribution of cooked and uncooked meat. Although there are discrepancies in her labels for kinds of distribution, such as main distribution, first distribution, second distribution, and primary distribution, its correlation with uncooked meat seems correct and convincing. But Marshall did not clarify in what way the first distribution is different from primary distribution and how does it differ from the main distribution? Testart while comparing the nature of distribution of game among the Eskimo and !Kung makes the following observations:

> This distribution, which Marshall calls the first, is our third level of distribution, and it redivides the animal between the hunters and the giver of the arrow, if its owner is not the person who made it. This distribution, the first which can be called sharing, involves the sharing of the animal between all the producers . . . while the owner only gets the prestige of having presided over the distribution. The game is again distributed (Marshall's second distribution and our fourth) by those who received a part (Testart 1987: 291).

The comparisons cited above make it clear that the categorization of game distribution into first, second, third, fourth etc., need not be the same from one hunter-gatherer culture to another. Moreover, such classifications are the result of qualitative judgment of the researcher. To cite an example,

distribution and meat-sharing are used in the same sentence by Marshall (1976: 359). According to Testart (1987: 291) the first distribution of Marshall is the third distribution among the Eskimo and argues that the first distribution can be called sharing. Thus, the number of dissimilarities is multiplied when comparison is comprehensive. 'Distribution' is used when the hunter divided the meat and supplied to others. Here the object of description is the hunter, and when meat became the object of description, instead of 'distribution,' sharing' is considered appropriate. So the degree of difference in the use of these terms shifted in accord with the objectification of the subject by the ethnographer.

I have been discussing the term 'distribution' so far, and I need to introduce the term' sharing' at this stage. To start with, I again quote Firth on *Primitive Polynesian Economy* as follows:

> While the chief is a most important stimulator of production and in theory is the owner of the most important sources of raw material and instrument of production, in actual fact he cannot withhold the means of subsistence from his people; and that the ordinary productive routine of households goes on without his motivation or his sharing in the benefit (Firth 1967: 235).

The meaning of the term 'sharing' in the above sentence is simply contribution or joint use. When we examine the writings of other experts on hunter-gatherers, we really wonder how this term has been used in so many ways in describing the ethnography of hunter-gatherers. A casual reading of the publications on hunter-gatherers demonstrates that scholars have used the term 'sharing' in dozens of different ways, such as 'reciprocal sharing' (Adhikari 1999: 250; Kent 1993: 501), 'informal sharing' (Cashdan 1985: 459) 'demand sharing' (Bird-David 1990: 195; Blurton Jones 1987; Kent 1993: 500; Peterson 1993: 860; Rival 1999: 102), 'structured sharing' (Damas 1968: 115), 'considerable sharing' (Eder 1999: 295), 'pattern of sharing' (Balikci 1968: 81; Eggan 1968: 85) 'extensive sharing' (Feit 1999: 42), 'extended food sharing' (Hill and Hurtado 1999: 95), 'meat sharing' (Kaare and Woodburn 1999: 201; Song and Shen 1999: 303), 'collective sharing'(Rival 1999: 103) 'forced sharing' (Kent 1993: 500), 'game sharing' (Testart 1987: 287), and 'food sharing' (Bhanu 1992: 37; Bird-David 1990: 195; Eggan 1968: 85; Endicott 1999: 291; Keen 1999: 368; Love 1986: 93). Similarly, we come across 'sharing strategies' (Bird and Bird 1977), 'sharing networks' (Cashdan 1985: 468; Endicott 1979: 178), 'sharing isolate' (Cashdan 1985: 467; Kent 1993: 483), 'sharing food' (Eder 1999: 295; Feit 1999: 43), 'sharing ethic' (Cashdan 1985: 458; Marlowe 2004: 82), 'sharing pattern' (Kaplan and Hill 1985: 227), 'sharing behavior' (Kent 1993: 495), 'sharing bond' (Kent 1993: 492), 'sharing custom' (Marshall 1976: 357), 'sharing practice' (Peterson 1988: 234; 1993: 865), 'sharing resources' (Myers 1999: 349), and 'sharing system' (Testart 1987).

Surprisingly, no attempt has been made by the ethnographers to give a satisfactory definition or explanation of how the above terms are used, except

in two or three instances, (demand sharing, formal sharing and informal sharing). 'Food sharing' is the term preferred by six ethnographers mentioned above while describing the socio-economic situations where the reciprocal relations centered on sharing of cooked food. Other scholars oscillated between using 'distribution,' 'sharing' and 'food sharing' or they mixed discussion of cooked and uncooked food, game, meat and resources.

Myers (1999: 341) while explaining the traditional economy of the Pintupi of Gibson Desert of Western Australia writes that men hunted alone or in small groups. A hunter distributed large game to all domestic units of the residential group. A similar expression is found in the writings of Keen on the Yolngu of the north coast of Australia's Northern Territory. Keen (1999: 368) argues that larger game is distributed more widely among camp residents and people share food mainly within a household cluster. Likewise, Song and Shen while writing on the Dulong of Southwestern China say:

> Although each "hearth unit" has its own storage pit, food brought in by each such unit from outside is equally shared by all dwelling in the long house. Women are usually in charge of food storage and cooking (Song and Shen 1999: 305).

We know sharing is a concept that is reciprocal involving two kinds of actions – giving and taking, or receiving and returning soon or later. The famous concept and theoretical position taken by Woodburn (1982: 432) to classify the hunter-gatherers based on their reciprocity – 'immediate return and delayed return systems' – is based on reciprocal relations where sharing is an important concept. Returning is an act after the first, i.e. receiving. In the absence of a receiver, giving has no meaning. So the emphasis is on two groups, those who give and others who receive. This is the reason Sahlins said:

> Hunter-gatherer sharing practices generally are a pure example of generalized reciprocity (Sahlins 1972: 193).

Thus the title of Marshall's "Sharing, Talking and Giving: Relief of Social Tension among the !Kung" makes it very clear that the first concept 'sharing' is reciprocal and the word 'giving' means it is one-sided and non-reciprocal. While Marshall used distribution for uncooked meat and sharing for cooked meat Testart used sharing for both cooked and uncooked meat. Similarly, Kent makes a distinction between giving cooked and uncooked meat by calling them formal and informal sharing; she used 'formal sharing' for raw meat and 'informal sharing' for cooked meat (1993: 492).

Eggan's reaction on the concept 'food-sharing' is significant at this stage:

> There is a series of norms or sanctions with regard to the sharing of food. It seems to me that they often differ with the kind of food – meat, fish or vegetables – with the size of the animals involved, and with the latitude of the location. I remember looking at the Siberian central Asian data, and in that area food sharing increases to the north and decreases to the south. I

> wonder whether these patterns of sharing, if we worked them out, might not give us something relevant to the problem of adaptation, even an index to it (Eggan 1968: 85).

Now let us look into the application of these concepts as we examine the ethnography of the Cholanaickan of Kerala. Cholanaickan are contemporary gatherer-hunters living in caves and generally said to have no knowledge of agriculture (c.f. Thurston and Rangachari 1909, vol. 6: 383, 385-6) or bows and arrows. They are highly mobile and make use of the natural caves (*ale*) and rock shelters spread over in the two forest ranges. The entire area inhabited by them and known in their language as *tsola* (*chola*), stretches across 89,000 acres of rain forest. The entire area is divided into ten exogamous territories known as *tsenmam* (<Malayalam *janmam* = an area recognized as owned by someone), which are distributed across two forest ranges (Karulai and Chungathara) in Nilambur. Each *tsenmam* is further subdivided into *naadu*, a term (*naatu*) which has wide currency in southern India, and denoted in older times 'the locality assembly' (Stein 1983: 27), and later local territorial divisions (Baden Powell 1977: 167, 231). Among the Cholanaickan, *naadu* are territorial divisions, which are also clearly demarcated by rocks, trees, streams and hills. Each *naadu* has a name and its function is to facilitate easy demarcation and identification of the entire area within a *tsenmam*. An individual is known after the territory, since the name of the territory is prefixed with the name of an individual such as Karimpuzha Kungan, Paanapuzha Kungan, Kuppanmala Kethan, Taalipuzha Kungan, Puuchappara Kungan etc. Similarly, women are also known after their territories, which are exogamous, patrilineal and patrilocal. The ecology of these ten territories is more or less same. Members of each of these *tsenmam* have specific rights of access within a well-circumscribed area to resources appropriated through gathering, fishing, hunting and collection of forest products (Bhanu 1982: 148, 1988: 174, 1992: 31; Misra and Bhanu 1982: 58). Each territory is jealously guarded and protected by its inhabitants. Forest products are bartered for consumer goods such as rice, salt, local cigarettes (*biidi*), tobacco (*oyya*), tea and coffee powder, clothes and iron implements. Their stay in a particular cave does not usually exceed a week, and their general pattern of movement is cyclic. The movement becomes more regular, repetitive and prolonged during the honey season, which like the Mbuti of Epulu (Turnbull 1968: 133), is considered the season of abundance. The inhabitants of a *tsenmam* always try to stay together in one cave or 'camp' (Adhikari 1999: 250; Arcand 1991: 98; Balee 1999: 107; Bhanu 1992: 32; Binford 1968; Gardner 1999: 262; Guenther 1999: 131; Lee 1968: 31; 1976: 39; 1979: 54; Morris 1999: 267;Rose 1968: 202; van der Sluys 1999: 308; Woodburn 1968: 103; 1982: 435; Yellen 1976: 48) or 'campsite' (Kaplan and Hill 1985: 228; Pandya 1999: 245; Turnbull 1968: 132; Yellen 1976: 67) for a few days and then, especially when resources are nearing depletion, they move on to other places within their own *tsenmam*. Each member is well aware of the seasonal variation in food availability and of the

resource potential of a given area; on the basis of this knowledge, as among other hunter-gatherers 'seasonal migration is organized around the resources' (Cashdan 1985: 457; Damas 1969: 136; Wiessner 1982a: 173). The Cholanaickan have clearly laid down norms regulating the movements of the members both for the extraction of food resources and the collection of forest produce, whether for their own consumption or for exchange. The seasonal variation in the availability of forest produce makes the members of a territory regulate their movements accordingly within their own territory, or even to other territories and this opens up channels of intensive food-sharing. The entire procurement system of the Cholanaickan can be thought of in terms of two major categories: (a) procurement by individual labour, and (b) procurement by collective labour. Products obtained through individual labour are for (1) consumption, (2) consumption and /or barter, (3) barter alone, and (4) for exchange as gifts. The products procured through collective labour are for consumption alone.

Women and children are the primary foragers for food; men mostly spend their time collecting forest produce for exchange (Bhanu 1982: 175, 1988: 148, 1992: 39), but while returning, they also do some foraging for edibles. Most gathering trips are made by women in the morning or the evening. There are no rigid rules governing the area in which plant food is gathered; all are in principle free to move outside their own territory and gather food. Nevertheless, it was found that while foraging most Cholanaickan confined themselves to their own territories. The area covered will be two to three kilometers in circumference, and fairly close to the camp; areas further away are avoided for fear of wild animals. The foraging group consists of married women, adult females and children of above five years. Children between the ages one to four are left in the charge of the elderly at the cave or camps, while those who are less than one are carried by their mothers.

Trap hunting is undertaken both individually by males and in groups of males, females and children. The group consists mainly of persons who live closely within a *tsenmam*, and varies in size from two persons to ten or more, depending on the nature of the prey and hence the hunting technique employed. In an individual hunt the hunter becomes the owner of the meat. In a group-hunt the hunt-leader becomes the owner. Such a leader is recognized on the basis of an individual's active role in the organization of the hunt; it is he who owns the trap, or net, decides on where to position it, and actually places it. Even in group-hunts, hunting is confined to the territories of the participants, and trespassing into other territories is punished by a fine (*tettana*). If an individual of one *tsenmam* decides to hunt in another *tsenmam*, permission must be sought from the *tsenmakkaran* of the latter *tsenmam*. Irrespective of its nature, game obtained is brought by hunter(s) to the cave of its 'owner'. Meat is distributed to all members of a hunting group. It is usually given to the members camping at one place and also to those who belong to the same *tsenmam*. However, the distributive principles here do not operate with the

same 'equality' as they have been reported to do among the foraging Nayaka of the Nilgiri Hills (Bird-David 1990: 192). Before the meat is distributed, it is singed to remove its hairs or feathers; then it is cut into pieces and distributed by the owner with his wife's assistance. The meat thus distributed among the members of a hunting group and other households residing in the cave is taken by them to their respective homes (*paale*, i.e. the space used by the individual household within a cave or outside) and cooked independently in the respective households. The share of the meat taken by the 'owner' is first cooked and then shared with other households, along with a porridge of rice (*kuulu*) or roasted tubers (*gaatsu*). The act of food sharing clearly demonstrates that all members of a territorial group are considered equal. On the other hand, the territorial chief (*tsenmakkaran*) enjoys a supreme position in this food sharing process, since all cooked food must pass to others through his hands; even that cooked in his own household must pass through his hands. But in terms of neither quantity nor quality does he enjoy any privileges except that of getting the heart; he gets an equal share from other members of his *tsenmam*, just as he similarly gives away shares to others when he happens to be the hunt-leader, or even an ordinary member of a hunting group.

Fishing (*miinu idippatu*) is carried out usually during summer, but in the rainy season it is also undertaken with the help of fishing hooks. The usual methods of fishing are by poisoning, baiting, using hooks, and bailing out. Individual men, families or groups of men, women and children living in one or two caves or camps within a *tsenmam* go fishing; women and children also often fish in small streams and rivulets. Again diverging from the Nayaka pattern (Bird-David 1990: 192) the catch is divided among the participants either at the site if the catch is big, or afterwards at the cave if the catch is small. Each household, after receiving its share, cleans the fish and then prepares a dish by boiling the fish with salt and chilies. The dish is poured over boiled rice and served to other households – again via the *tsenmakkaran*. Thus the total number of shares is equivalent to the number of households that participated in the group fishing, and this generally corresponds to the number of households in a cave, camp, or given area.

As the Cholanaickan of one territory live close to one another, there are numerous occasions for give and take. All foodstuffs that are consumed raw are brought to the cave and distributed immediately among all, children being the first recipients. Consumer goods brought from the Girijan Cooperative Society in exchange of forest products are also distributed similarly; but if several heads of households visit the society together with their products for barter, only rice, which is now the staple food of the Cholanaickan, is distributed thus. If any household runs short of food, other members of their territory help them out with food and food stocks; if no edible items are in reserve, permission is given to collect exchangeable forest products. But provisions received through the exchange of such produce are not

distributed or shared after cooking by the 'collector' with the owner.

The frequent visiting observed among various hunter-gatherers groups has been viewed as a mechanism that reinforces social ties (also see Barker 1976: 232-6; Ingold 1980; Kent 1993: 503; Layton 1986; Misra and Misra 1982: 83; Pandya 1999: 245; Strehlow 1964) on the one hand, and maintains diet efficiency and security (Cashdan 1985: 456; Kent 1993: 506; Winterhalder 1983) on the other. Among the Cholanaickan, members of all territory often visit one another, the frequency reaching its maximum between March and May. This is also the season when food is abundant. Diet efficiency in this season is achieved by working for an average of seven hours per day by men, which is slightly more than the usual working hours reported among most hunter- gatherers (Hiatt 1965: 103-4; Lee and De Vore 1968; Mathew 1910: 84; Spencer and Gillen 1899: 34 Woodburn 1968a: 51; 1968b: 54) but less than the time spent by the !Kung (Lee 1968: 37). Visiting guests stay for a day or two, and are fed and given shelter. They are also presented with honey by the local *tsenmakkaran*; if he is too busy he takes the guest to the forest, shows him a honeycomb and asks him to collect the honey himself. If the guest is a distant relative, the *tsenmakkaran* merely tells him how and where to locate the comb. At the time of the guest's return to his natal *tsenmam*, he is once again presented with a gift by the *tsenmakkaran*; depending upon the season, it is dammar, honey, cardamom or pepper. A *tsenmakkaran* also visits other territories and receives gifts, which are always converted into 'gift provisions' (*mothalu*<Malayalam *mutalu* = 'property') at the Girijan Cooperative Society; these are distributed among all the members of the *tsenmakkaran*'s territory. Collection of forest products makes their movement regular and recurring and this widens their contacts with the members of non-tribes who also live in the interior of forest for managing the transactions in the society. This exchange of consumer goods for forest products by Cholanaickan has been going on since 1976. The socio-economic significance of such contact varies from culture to culture (e.g. Bird-David 1982; 1986; Fox 1956: 98; 1967; Garvan 1963: 32; Lee 1972: 140; Maceda 1964: 46; Misra and Misra 1982: 83; Schrire 1984; Vanoverbergh 1929: 130; Warren 1964: 38; Turnbull 1965; Williams 1968: 126) and the social relations between the foragers and their exchange partners are often complex (e.g. Gardner 1972: 141; Peterson 1976; 1978; Tanaka 1976: 114; Warren 1964: 44; Williams 1968: 120). However, the contact has brought about only minor positive and negative changes to the culture of the Cholanaickan.

Although the ethnographic description given above is brief, it makes clear the application and function of both distribution and food sharing. It can be seen that the term 'distribution' cannot be used as a synonym for 'food sharing' amongst Cholanaickan because they refer to quite different processes. Extension of the meaning, function and application of these two terms to other hunter-gatherers becomes relevant and significant, in spite of the fact that 'all hunter-gatherers cannot be treated as functionally equivalent' (Layton

1986: 29), but comparison and generalization are the two essential steps in the scientific method and therefore, to understand human behavior in abstract terms, whether hunter-gatherer or others, the researcher has a responsibility to support the significance of scientific method. This is the reason Murdock (1968: 335) argued that 'the research on the contemporary hunter-gatherers may shed light on the behavior of Pleistocene man'.

Distribution of resources obtained through the exchange of forest products and appropriated through foraging, fishing and hunting and food-sharing between households living in a cave or camp within a territory is repetitive and frequent; this frequency diminishes with the increase in the number of families involved in the reciprocal exchange. As the number of families increases the pattern of food sharing also becomes more complex and recurring. Beyond five households the complexity increases to such an extent that the group breaks up into smaller groups of at the most five families, who live separately so as to maintain faster and frequent reciprocal relations and group activities. Distribution need not be direct, it is a process of division and distribution of meat, fish, and unprocessed vegetable food from the 'owner' to other households living in the same cave or camp or campsite. Return of similar articles is not expected or done immediately but it is always done on the same day or later. Distribution is controlled and guided by the 'owner' or leader, and it is always the unprocessed meat or fish or food materials. Unlike distribution, food sharing is direct, instantaneous and reciprocal where food alone is in exchange. Food sharing and consumption start in the early dusk and continues till midnight when all households finish serving food to the rest of the households regardless of whether food served earlier by other households has been consumed. If the members are satisfied with the food received in the second or third rounds of food-sharing the food served last is kept aside for the next morning. Thus, food sharing becomes an elaborate and continuous course of interaction where all members of the households living in the same cave or camp engage themselves as one unit of joint enterprise. The residence pattern followed by the Cholanaickan (i.e. patrilocal and exogamous territories) encourages distribution of resources and food sharing which ensures that children, orphans and the aged are taken care of, either in the natal territory, or by others in other territories. Their elaborate food sharing ensures that food is shared between producers and non-producers, and in spite of the coexistence of the 'market forces' and subsistence economies, a pattern of generalized reciprocity still exists. This evidently eliminates the risk of food shortage (see for e.g. Burch 1986; Cashdan 1985: 456; Kent 1993: 503; Pandya 1999: 245; Wiessner 1982a; 1982b; Woodburn 1982).

Discussion

The terms 'distribution' and 'sharing' used by ethnographers when describing the life-style of hunter-gatherers have been re-examined in the

light of the ethnographic data on the Cholanaickan of South India. The possibility of using one term as a synonym for the other has been examined critically and it has been found that treating them as two independent concepts is necessary when describing the way of life of the hunting-gathering Cholanaickan. The two processes are different and they have distinctly different meanings and functions. Distribution is controlled and discontinuous, unlike food sharing in which all participants are treated as equal before food. Food sharing is direct, constant, continuous and instantaneous among the Cholanaickan. Edible plant resources and the forest products collected for exchange by the Cholanaickan are the same throughout their habitat, but there is regional variation in their appropriation as some territories are blessed with more streams and rivers resulting abundant vegetation and animal population. Distribution of meat, sharing of honey and food sharing across households within a territory, irrespective of seasonal variation, encourages reciprocal exchange and discourages storing of food and resources. Cholanaickan, like most hunter-gatherers who are still leading a nomadic life (Rao and Casimir 2003; Misra and Malhotra 1982) will find that storing imposes hurdles on their movement. The best way to solve this problem is to accumulate minimum possible provisions, food and material artifacts of instant use. Thus distribution of resources and food sharing between households living together in one cave or camp or campsite is preferred and promoted. When people discourage storing, food sharing between close kin is the best alternative; it ensures reciprocal exchange of food and resources and reduces the risk of food shortage such as has been reported among other hunter-gatherers (Burch 1986; Cashdan 1985: 456; Kent 1993: 503; Pandya 1999: 245; Wiessner 1982a; 1982b; Woodburn 1982). The hunter-gatherers have evolved similar adaptations in the course of their interaction with their ecosystems. It is argued that hunting and gathering way of life has been considered as one of the most successful adaptations human beings have ever achieved (Lee and De Vore 1968; Misra and Misra 1982: 391) and therefore research on the contemporary hunter-gatherers needs to be strengthened so as to find answers to some of the unresolved questions on cultural evolution, eco-cultural adaptations and techno-economic change (Damas 1968: 113; Kaplan and Hill 1985: 227; Lee and De Vore 1968; Murdock 1968: 335; Sahlins 1972; Turnbull 1968: 133). The degree or intensity of distribution of resources and food-sharing is not uniform among hunter-gatherers; it varies from group to group depending upon the availability of resources, ecological niches and means of production. Problematic use of the concept 'food sharing' as a synonym for 'distribution' is due to shifting of emphasis between the distributor and the distributed. Ethnographers often do this unintentionally for narrative convenience. Objectification of the focus by the ethnographer is a style of description and to make the narration systematic the focus of the object should not be shifted till the narration is complete. This is a methodological issue that needs to be addressed separately.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Research on the Cholanaickan was supported by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, through a Senior Fellowship instituted at the Tribal Research and Training Centre (present KIRTADS), Kozhikode for a period of one year and four months from December 1974 to March 1976. Research on the Cholanaickan was continued nearly for four years when I joined the Anthropological Survey of India, Southern Regional Centre, Mysore, as an employee in 1977. I would like to thank these two organizations and the two heads of these institutions (Dr. P. R. G. Mathur, and Dr. P. K. Misra) for their enormous help and encouragement. Dr. P. K. Misra guided my research on the Cholanaickan leading to a Ph.D. degree in Anthropology of the University of Mysore in 1985. During my fieldwork among the Cholanaickan for nearly 17 months from 1978 to 1982 the officials of the Divisional Forest Office, Nilambur, and the district officials helped me by providing necessary documents and assistance. I thank all of them. I am extremely thankful to my Cholanaickan friends with whom I had constant contact and interaction while in the forest and for making my research encouraging and thought provoking.

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