

Sapient Instinctuality
The Body's Knowing Precisioned
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To tease out what it means to live instinctually, it might be helpful to make some distinctions between instinctual living and other ways of life which can easily be conflated with it and with each other. I'd especially like to look at aspects of *hunter-gatherer*, *indigenous*, and *traditional* ways of life.

It's been said that the hunter-gatherer 'evolutionary stage' accounts for 99% of our history and for our fundamental genetic attributes.¹ But what this may mean in practice is by no means clear. There are many different kinds of lives which are seen as present-day examples of a hunter-gatherer life. The more one looks at these different examples, the harder it gets to pin down exactly what a hunter-gatherer *is*. Rather than being a single way of life it is a complex mesh of possibilities. But roughly, we could say that a hunter-gatherer is someone who, for a

¹Robert L. Kelly, *The Foraging Spectrum: Diversity in Hunter-Gatherer Lifeways* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 1.

significant part of his or her diet, is dependent upon wild food which s/he directly procurs from the land.

Hunter-gatherer cultures take many many forms depending on their environment. Inevitably, part of any hunter-gatherer environment is the other human beings who live close by but who are ‘others’: not part of the same people. These others may also be hunter-gatherers, or they may be agriculturalists or modern people.

For untold years, hunter-gatherers worldwide have accomodated themselves to these other groups; at times their relations with them have included food exchange. For instance, on the Melanesian island of Viti Levu an inland group of hunter-gatherers who have access to choice plant foods trade some of it for fish:

My guide told me that it had always been essential, as it is today, for the people of the interior to obtain some food from the sea, and that even during the times of most bitter warfare between the inland or hill tribes and the coast tribes, those of the interior would bring down during the night choice plant foods from the mountain areas and place them in caches and return the followin night and obtain the sea foods that had been placed in those depositories by the shore tribes. The individuals who carried these foods were never molested, not even during active warfare.²

In the Amazon, the Efe who are hunters, trade meat for carbohydrates which the Lese village agriculturalists grow:

²Weston A. Price, *Nutrition and Physical Degeneration; a Comparison of Primitive and Modern Diets and Their Effects*, foreword by Earnest Albert Hooton (New York: London, P.B. Hoeber, inc., 1939), 109.

Tropical hunter-gatherers often have an excess of protein, and are more often deficient in carbohydrates (Hill et al. 1987; Milton 1985; Sponsel 1986). The Efe, for example, trade meat for Lese agricultural produce containing two to five times the meat's caloric content (Bailey and Peacock 1988; Hart 1978). Tropical horticulturalists, however, may display the opposite pattern. Keegan found that the manioc and maize gardens of the Machiguenga of southeastern Peru provide sufficient amounts of calories at return rates above those of forest carbohydrate sources but fall short of meeting protein needs (1986)... It appears that, though energy is the limiting factor for hunter-gatherers in tropical forests, protein (or fat) may be the limiting factor for horticulturalists.³

Hunter-gatherers themselves sometimes engage in a certain amount of agriculture, which may be pastoral or horticultural. Hunter-gatherers also make goods for sale, work for wages, or receive welfare. They may forage commercially (for instance, trapping animals for furs which they sell).⁴ Part of this money may be used to buy food.

It should be clear by now that hunter-gatherer culture is not static but is constantly being influenced by changes in the world and exposure to others--and *this is not simply a modern phenomenon* but is a natural and inevitable part of the life of hunter-gatherer peoples stretching far back in time.

A group of hunter-gatherers *forage*, in a range which *may* be their traditional homeland but does not have to be. They may well have a fixed base that they operate from, or a semi-fixed base that moves with them along a regular seasonal migration

³Kelly, *The Foraging Spectrum*, 106–7.

⁴Kelly, *The Foraging Spectrum*, 24–25.

route. As long as the group continues to forage for a significant proportion of their food, they can be called hunter-gatherers--but if they cease to forage, even though they may be living in the same place and may be doing many of the other things they have always done, they are no longer hunter-gatherers.

But even here there is not a clear-cut line in actuality: for instance, the Saami traditionally stocked the streams along their migration paths with char so that the fish would be there waiting for them, much as farmers and ranchers stock a pond or tank with fish.⁵ And reindeer herding itself is a bit hard to classify. It is somewhat analogous to the management of free-ranging longhorn cattle in the old West, or to the taking of cows and goats to the high summer pastures by the indigenous Swiss of the high Alps.⁶

...Which brings us to indigenous peoples. At first blush it would seem much easier to define what makes a person indigenous: surely it is that they are one of the original inhabitants of a place, and grow up bonded to this ancestral home.

But what, then, of the many forced relocations that have happened over the course of the centuries, throughout the world? When the the Cherokee were forced o follow the Trail of Tears, did they lose thier indigenous status along with their homes? What about the Saami who were forced further north by later settlers in the Scandinavian countries? And what of those groups of Saami who have recently been forced by the government to move again, into lands already occupied by other Saami groups?⁷

⁵http://www.thearctic.is/articles/overviews/ecosystem/enska/kafli_0501.htm accessed Oct 29, 2007.

⁶Price, *Nutrition and Physical Degeneration; a Comparison of Primitive and Modern Diets and Their Effects*, 23–26.

⁷Hugh Beach, *A Year in Lapland: Guest of the Reindeer Herders* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1993), 23–26.

Where, in fact, *does* one draw the line which allows *this* group to be called indigenous, and *that* group not?

In northern Scandinavia, the indigenous Saami have lived in the area for many thousands of years--including during the last ice age when they were cut off from other peoples by the ice. When the ice began to melt, others began to move north and ultimately conquered the land--easily done because the Saami had no warriors or weapons of war.

At present, the Scandinavian governments define a person as Saami only if s/he herds reindeer--yet the herding of reindeer is a relatively recent (last 1000 years) phenomenon. The herding itself appears to have been taken up in the 8th or 9th century so as to make it possible to pay the considerable tribute exacted at that time by the Danes.⁸

Before that time, the Saami were a hunter-gatherer people who followed the reindeer in their seasonal migration, as well as hunting moose and other game, and fishing. The Saami are only allowed by the government to have hunting and fishing rights if they are reindeer herders as well. The right to hunt and fish is important to the people--so even at the present time reindeer herding is a way of life that though central to the Sami people themselves, is also imposed from without.

There was a period in which reindeer herding was mostly *intensive*: the people stayed close to the reindeer they owned and had a close relationship with them, using

⁸<http://www.utexas.edu/courses/sami/dieda/hist/early.htm> accessed November 11, 2007

them as work animals, and sources of milk as well as sources of meat, clothing, bedding, and so on. As the northern landscape has been changed by hydroelectric dams and timber farms, the government has begun to closely regulate *how* reindeer herding is practiced. It is now a primarily *extensive* practice in which people mostly stay in one place and work at other jobs while the reindeer are left to their own devices.

Most Saami no longer have a close daily relationship with the reindeer, and herding is now done a couple times a year by helicopter and ‘snow machine.’ The more intimate and intricate texture of the old traditional reindeer herding life is mostly lost now, even though some aspects of that life do live on.

...Which brings us to traditional ways of life. Again, at first glance it seems this should be easy to define: is it not someone who is living the way that his or her ancestors lived? But if we look again at the Saami we can see that here, too, it’s not so simple. In fact, the traditional way of life for the Saami has been one of continual slight *changes* for generation after generation.

Traditional, it would seem, does not necessarily mean that there is *no* change. In some cultures at least, it means that *as* things change certain core things which make the culture *this* culture, maintain a recognizable presence even if in a different form.

Take the example of coffee-drinking among the Saami. For sure this is not something that was done by prehistoric Saami hunter-gatherer ancestors! But embedded within the coffee-drinking tradition is a knowledge that likely goes back before coffee arrived: that it is not healthful to drink cold water in a cold climate. One needs to heat it up first.

It may be that some other beverage had this function before coffee arrived. Assuming that this was the case, it's apparent that a key function of this 'original' beverage--to avoid drinking cold water--has been preserved in the drinking of coffee. *In terms of its function*, that 'same' tradition can be said to continue.

We could say that at its root, tradition is the functional wisdom of a people--especially, knowledge of things that may not be obvious but which are important to know, to thrive in a particular context. This context may be a particular geographic area but a context can be much more than geography.

Though tradition may start out as a means of passing down functional wisdom needed in a particular context, it often happens that a tradition continues to be practiced among a people who no longer live in that same situation. Things change, and people migrate. The cultural tapestry originally woven from many such threads of functional wisdom, becomes its own, self-reinforcing context.

A tradition can maintain a practice whose function is no longer needed. Conversely, a tradition may be easily adopted by those who are new to a context. When Hugh Beach⁹ first arrived in Lapland he was told about the tradition of drinking coffee instead of cold water. It was explained to him what would happen if he drank cold water instead of hot when he was out hiking: he would get thirstier and thirstier the more he drank, and he would also keep getting weaker.

⁹Beach, *A Year in Lapland*, 34.

While hiking through an area full of mountain streams, as he rested Hugh was tempted by the clear cold fresh water. The more he drank the thirstier he became. As he continued on he became weaker and weaker, until he remembered what he'd been told.

This story might seem to lend weight to the idea that one should not listen too closely to the siren song of one's own bodily wants. But actually the problem was in paying attention to just one small *segment* of what the body was saying. As soon as Hugh began to pay attention to *more* of his bodily experience than just that bit of him that craved cold fresh water, he became aware of his thirst as a *growing* thirst, itself part of a larger and more intricate experience which also included a growing weakness.

He recognized what he was experiencing as an instance of what he'd been told about, and thus was able to change his state of being by drinking hot water instead of cold. *His own body verified* the tradition and thenceforth acted automatically from it in what I call a *sapient instinctuality*.

This is similar to what happens when a mother cat teaches her young to catch birds and mice. A cat will sometimes learn to catch, dispatch, and eat wild prey on its own, or sometimes not: hunting is instinctual, but for competent feline hunter the instinct has been activated and precisioned by experience at the mother's side. Cats especially benefit from the example of the mother in learning the final kill, and tend to eat the same kind of prey their mothers brought home when they were kittens..¹⁰

¹⁰James Richards, *ASPCA Complete Guide to Cats* (Chronicle Books, 1999), 211.

There's a triad operating here: first, instinct; second, the mentoring of those who are more experienced; and third, one's own experience. Instinct points in the right general direction--in Hugh's case it was not wrong to drink liquid. Teaching told him what *kind* of liquid was good to drink in that context. And experience *verified* the teaching and made it his own.

It's this bodily verification which marks Hugh's experience as falling within the realm of sapient instinctuality, which begins with the body's knowing of its own nature and needs, precisions that knowing in a particular context via teaching and independent discovery, and circles back around to the body as the only locus which can verify that precisioned¹¹ knowing.

The richly textured knowing implicit in the lifeways of hunter-gatherer, indigenous person, and traditionalist--especially as all three intersect--is a rich source of potential ways to precision the body's self-knowing in a particular context. But these lifeways with their precise fit to context arose out of *bodily experience in context* originally. Since context is continually changing in small and not-so-small ways, unless they are continually re-verified and newly precisioned by each body which takes them on, a sort of 'drift' occurs. A gap opens between body and tradition and over time becomes wider and wider until the tradition no longer serves to join body seamlessly with

¹¹'Precisioned' is from Eugene Gendlin, who speaks of terms which have been precisioned by specific instances. See endnote 15 in Eugene Gendlin, *A Process Model* (1997), 287 also Gendlin in Eugene Francis Kaelin, *American Phenomenology: Origins and Developments* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 1989), 405 (available at http://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2029.html) and http://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2157.html . Since instinctual body-knowing is 'tuneable' via experience much as concepts are, the term works similarly in the present context.

its environment, instead acting as a means of *separation*. Ultimately, it becomes necessary to break with tradition in order to heal the rift which has opened.

In contrast, a *living* tradition is able to continually re-form itself. Since it is able to change, it is able to endure.

Bibliography

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