

The Importance of Flux in Two Hunting Societies

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the flexibility of social organization characteristic of two East African small-scale societies, the Mbuti Pygmies of the tropical rain forest of the northeast Congo and the Ik of the dry, open mountains near the borders of Uganda, Kenya, and Sudan. Both the Ik and Mbuti, as hunters and gatherers, work within their respective environments rather than attempting to alter them. Because neither is under the rigid control a truly marginal economy might impose, each is able to maintain a fluid band composition, a loose form of social structure, and to utilize flux as a highly effective social mechanism.

By flux I mean the constant changeover of personnel between local groups and the frequent shifts of campsites through the seasons. This apparent instability is, in fact, the very mechanism that gives these societies their cohesion. Both the Mbuti and the Ik are composed of many constantly shifting elements forming established patterns. Flux is expressed as recurrent fission and fusion which affects the composition of local bands. A similar state of flux is found in a number of hunting and gathering societies, such as the Hadza and Bushmen, and may be characteristic of the majority of peoples described at the sym-

posium. Before undertaking a comparison of flux in Mbuti and Ik society, a brief ethnographic sketch of each will be given.

MBUTI

The Mbuti Pygmies have been previously described by Schebesta (1938-50), Putnam (1948), and Turnbull (1961, 1965a, 1965b, 1965c). They live by hunting and gathering in the interior of the Ituri forest. There are two economic divisions: the net-hunters who live in large camps of seven to thirty families, based on communal or cooperative hunting, and the archers, who live in much smaller groups, and who hunt individually with bow and arrow. The residential units of both net-hunters and archers constantly change in composition as individuals and families circulate between the territorially based bands.

The total population of Mbuti appears to stand at about 40,000 and all of these are more or less closely associated with their Sudanic and Bantu neighbors, the Lese, Mangbetu, and Bira. This association has existed for at least several hundred years and as a consequence all pygmies speak only the languages of the village cultivators adjacent to them. What makes the continuation of their hunting life

possible is the existence of the forest itself, which their neighbors fear to penetrate and to which the pygmies have become closely adapted. Their adaptation to the forest is conspicuously expressed in their technology and subsistence but is also deeply rooted in their ideology.

The Mbuti of the Epulu area, with whom I did field work in 1954 and 1957-58, practiced no agriculture, although they did engage in trade with the villagers, and spent brief periods living with these neighbors and eating their foods.

The villagers regard the Pygmies as their vassals, but, as I have argued elsewhere, the Pygmies manipulate this relationship to their advantage and maintain their primary orientation to the forest.

Ik

Very little is known about the Ik (Gullivers, 1953; Wayland, 1931), and to all outward appearances, they are predominantly cultivators. Yet, because one year out of every four or five brings a drought which destroys all crops, the Ik periodically abandon cultivation and revert to hunting. Thus, although they are cultivators for 75 per cent of the time, for the remaining 25 per cent they are 100 per cent hunters and gatherers.

The Ik, who number somewhat over 1,500, have previously been known as Teuso or Teuth, a name they reject as being applied to them only by the Dodos. They distinguish themselves from all pastoral tribes, such as Dodos, Turkana, and Karimojong, and they associate themselves with nearby hunting tribes, such as the Niangea and Napore, and even the more distant Tepes. They do so, despite a mutual unintelligibility of languages, by describing themselves and their fellow hunters as *kwarikik*, meaning "mountain people"; but they claim no closer connection with the other "kwarikik" than the common mountain environment. There is no thought of common origin. Nevertheless, though separated by hundreds of miles, the environmental factor seems important enough to all kwarikik for them to recognize and feel a unity, against all others who are not mountain people.

The Ik live during the agricultural cycle in small, isolated, heavily stockaded villages that are almost as discrete as their hunting bands. Even within each village there are numerous divisions that prevent any solidification into effective corporate units much larger than the nuclear family. The divisions and subdivisions do not necessarily follow any lines of kinship, nor are they permanent. The groups may not even last the maximum duration of any one village site, namely, two years. Clan membership is only significant as a convenience for a rough reckoning of whether or not a proposed marriage is allowable. Marriage within the clan, however, does occasionally take place, and then the clan is said to have divided. One side of the dividing line is called "big," and the other "small." These features are all directly comparable to the Mbuti band, and when the Ik village converts itself into a hunting and gathering band, the same principles of organization operate with equal effectiveness, and equal fluidity.

COMPARISONS

Environment

The environments of the Mbuti and Ik contrast sharply. The forest of the Mbuti, for the most part, is flat with occasional hilly regions. Its climate varies scarcely at all throughout the year. The maximum annual temperature range is 20°, and the normal daily variation is usually far less, perhaps 5° (between 75° and 80°F.). Rain falls evenly over the entire area, and is evenly spread throughout the year. Game and vegetable supplies are similarly uniform in distribution, and are abundant throughout the area. There is nothing that makes one part of the forest more or less desirable than any other part at any time of the year.

On the other hand, the mountain territory of the Ik is for the most part arid, though studded with richly wooded valleys and gorges. Some areas are much more wooded while others may verge on desert. Far from the absence of seasons characteristic of the Ituri forest, the Ik habitat is one of violent climatic extremes. During the summer, the sun

scorches the ground dry with its fierce intensity, while in the winter, the clouds obscure the sun, making the air cold and damp. Violent gales blow up and down the valleys, sweeping the torrential rains with them. Dry gorges become swollen rivers in minutes and, as quickly, become dry again. Small, tightly localized areas can become devastated by wind and flood, while all around these areas, it may be calm and dry. A region that fares well one year may fare badly the next. The game population is seasonally nomadic and edible vegetable supplies are tightly localized rather than evenly distributed.

In light of this contrast between the Mbuti and the Ik environments, a curious feature emerges. The Mbuti treat their stable environment as though it were unstable, creating imaginary seasons of plenty and scarcity, while the Ik treat their highly unstable environment as though it were stable, and consequently bring upon themselves alternating periods of real plenty and scarcity.

However, it should be stressed that the usual notion that hunters live a marginal existence does not apply in either case. The economies, at first glance, may give the impression of being precarious, but in fact this is not the case. Famine or anything approaching it is utterly unknown to the Mbuti who have an axiom that "the only hungry Mbuti is a lazy Mbuti."

The same axiom would have applied to the Ik, up to the drastic encroachments of both the central administration and the neighboring pastoral tribes in recent years which have hemmed them in, confined them, and hampered their traditional economy in every possible way. Yet even now it would be true to say that the only hungry Ik is one who is unable or unwilling to run the gauntlet of the various armed forces that forbid them access to major portions of their former subsistence range.

Land Use and Group Size

Naturally, the methods of exploitation of the resources vary according to the environment, as does the hunting organization and the gathering pattern. Both Mbuti and Ik hunting bands fluctuate in size from seven to thirty

nuclear families, but whereas an Mbuti band is territorially circumscribed, and is so defined, it is much less so with the Ik. An Mbuti band can comfortably confine its movements from one year to the next within 100 square miles, due to the uniform distribution of the game in the forest. An Ik band is forced by climatic fluctuations to undertake seasonal movements over large areas, up to about 10,000 square miles.

Differences due to migration patterns of game and to seasonal differences in the availability of vegetable foods have social consequences as well. The Mbuti band, as a territorial unit, retains independence for most of the year and rarely needs to share its territory with another band, while the Ik bands often come together in larger concentrations in order to exploit the localized resources.

Subsistence Techniques

What is more remarkable than the differences between these two areas is the range of subsistence organization *within* each area. Among both the Mbuti and the Ik, two styles of hunting organization are in use. The Mbuti are divided into net-hunters and archers, and the Ik into net-hunters and spear-hunters.

Regarding the Mbuti, there is no environmental reason why half of them should be net-hunters and the other half archers, although there may be some historical explanation. Nonetheless, the forest is so divided and each division regards the other as somewhat quaint and wonders how the other can survive. Yet on investigation it became clear that each half is well versed in the other's hunting technique; visitors from one division to the other have no difficulty at all in adapting to the different hunting methods. And it is strange indeed that in the same environment and with equally adequate technologies, the net-hunters regard the brief honey season as a time of plenty, while the archers see it as a time of scarcity. Each group takes appropriate measures to meet the perceived situation, the net-hunters splitting into small units, and the archers congregating into larger ones!

Among the Ik, it is equally difficult to discern why some should hold to the net-hunt (of the Acholi type) while others say that hunting

with spears is more effective. Again, there appears to be no discernible differences in habitat which would explain the different styles of hunting.

Part of the explanation may lie in the fact that in both cases, the environment is generous enough to allow alternative hunting techniques. In common with other tropical hunter-gatherers discussed at the symposium, gathering of vegetable foods is fully as important a factor in diet as is hunting. Although hunting is a more prestigious activity, gathering strategies play a large part in determining the band's daily and seasonal movements. Even in the direction of their all-male spear hunt, the Ik take the distribution of vegetable foods into consideration and women are called on for advice. Thus a common basis of abundant vegetable food sources may make possible alternate and equally felicitous styles of hunting.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FLUX

Among the Mbuti, the constant process of fission and fusion that characterizes every band, is more predictable than among the Ik. The flux appears as a systematic pattern which I have analyzed elsewhere (1965a, 1965b, 1965c). The focal point of the process is the honey season, during which the net-hunters spread out into fragmented subbands, sometimes uniting siblings, sometimes dividing them; but always separating antagonistic elements. At the end of the honey season, the band begins to re-form, carefully avoiding any lines of fracture that remain unhealed. The net-hunters normally form bands larger than those of the archers, for a net-hunt demands cooperation between a minimum of six or seven nuclear families, and allows a maximum of thirty. The honey season, they say, is a time of such plenty that the game can easily be caught by hand, and so there is no need for the large cooperative net-hunt. During the previous ten months, the necessity of constant cooperation, and the proximity and intimacy in which all band members must live with one another, invariably gives rise to numerous latent antagonisms and even a few open hostilities. If hostilities were to go unchecked, it would destroy the essential unity of the band

and consequently ruin the success of the hunt. Thus the honey season is an important safety-valve, allowing for the radical reconstitution of face-to-face groups.

The archers, in exactly the same environment, do precisely the reverse. They hunt in maximal bands *only* during the honey season, and for the rest of the year split up into minor and ultimately minimal segments. Their stated rationale is that the honey season is a time of poor hunting, and thus, maximum cooperation is demanded. The reality is that whereas the net-hunting band is of necessity united throughout the bulk of the year, the archer band is splintered into tiny segments, sometimes only two or three families, each independent of others. The ideal number of archers for either tracking or ambushing game is three; five would already be felt as unwieldy. The composition of these small-segments does not remain constant throughout the year, anymore than does the composition of the net-hunting band; but the net-hunters must endure close association with much greater numbers of people than do the archers.

When hostilities come into the open, the solution is for one or the other disputant to pack up and leave. But the very size of the minimal archer segments means that the healing of internal disputes is of much less concern to them during the honey season than it is to the net-hunters. The problem for the archers is how to maintain any semblance of band unity under such conditions, and band unity must be expressed, for territory is defined by bands, just as bands are defined by territory. It is essential that territorial boundaries should be known so as to avoid any conflicts that might arise due to allegations of trespass or poaching. The need, then, is for each band to draw together all its scattered segments and to act as a band, within its territory, for at least some part of the annual cycle. On the excuse that hunting is poor at the honey season (I could find no justification for the excuse, though I prefer to leave it an open issue), the archers of each band gather together and participate in the *begbe*, or communal beat, which in technique is similar to the net-hunt.

The Ik band is similarly in a constant state of flux, and again, its composition is determined primarily by non-economic factors.

The process, though less predictable than that of the Mbuti, clearly does not follow any unilinear descent pattern in fission. Age and territoriality are prime factors in the regulation and definition of the band, and the conflict-resolving aspects of its shifting composition are predominant. The Ik also have a honey season, which comes at a time of general abundance. Communal activity breaks down, even during the agricultural cycle, and major changes in band composition are likely to take place in adjustment to political factors by separating antagonistic segments. The honey season is followed by a termite season which breaks the band into its minimal segments and takes these far afield—during the hunting year. At the end of this season, the bands gradually re-form into agricultural units, if rain promises well, and cooperate in the building of new villages and the hoeing of new fields. However, each village retains the internal divisions of the hunting bands, though, as with the Mbuti, the Ik seldom revert to previous groupings.

POLITICAL AUTHORITY

There is no form of centralized authority in either society, apart from the nominal authority vested by the European administrations in their appointed headmen. This lack is perhaps at first surprising, considering that both Mbuti and Ik are divided into virtually autonomous bands with no formal system of interrelationship, and that each band is constituted in such a way as to create the minimum of cohesion within itself. Even nuclear families are not the solid social entities we might expect them to be. It is difficult to see what are the threads that hold each society together as such, for despite the apparent lack of cohesion, both the Ik and the Mbuti are strongly united, as peoples, in opposition to their neighbors.

On the contrary, in each case there is a strong hostility felt towards any individual who aspires to a position of authority or leadership. Hostility is even shown towards those who, without any such aspirations, are plainly better fitted to lead than others by virtue of sheer ability.

Part of the answer lies again in the environment, for while it determines certain aspects

of the mode of economic exploitation, within that general framework it leaves a large margin of latitude and always allows the certainty of, at the very least, a sufficiency of food, if not a surplus. This assurance of food is clearly seen in the unpredictability of the daily hunt. Even when game is known to be close, a band (in either society) may well at the last moment decide not to go hunting at all. It may find an excuse, such as a trivial dispute, or it may not bother to find any. The result may even be hunger on that day. Yet when already sated with successive days of good hunting and feasting, a band may decide to set off in the most unlikely direction and return, at the end of a long and arduous day, with nothing to show for it. Sometimes rain will make hunting impractical, and again hunger might ensue since neither society (the Ik considered in their hunting cycle, here) will store or keep anything for the morrow. After two or three consecutive rainy days, which is about the maximum that can be expected, a fine day may dawn and find the band still determined to stay in camp and attend to unimportant chores.

A band may hunt as a single unit, or it can split up and hunt as several independent units. There is no predicting which it will do among the Ik, where seasonal variations are strongly marked, yet among the Mbuti where there are virtually no seasons (except for the two months of the years during which honey is available in addition to all the usual food supplies) the process of fission and fusion is clearly predictable.

It all seems to be a rather topsy-turvy world for both Mbuti and Ik, where the things that happen are those that could least reasonably be expected. I am perhaps somewhat over-emphasizing the lack of organization, but here that seems important, for all too often hunters and gatherers are expected to set a shining example of social organization at its simplest and its clearest, and to illustrate with crystalline lucidity the fundamental principles upon which all respectable social systems are based.

The fact is that both the Mbuti and the Ik work within their permissive environments rather than attempting to control them. They are unencumbered by the rigid imperatives that would be imposed by a truly harsh environment. Thus they are able to maintain a fluid band composition and a loose social

structure; and are able to utilize this flux as a highly effective social mechanism, providing scope for action in all aspects of social life.

CONCLUSIONS

In summing up, I want to stress three points. First it seems clear that it is environmental permissiveness and not environmental rigor that makes possible the system of flux. Second, the major function of flux is not ecological adaptation but what could be called political adaptation. And third, the fission and fusion of individuals and groups does not follow lines of kinship.

The relative abundance of food that obtains in both traditional situation permits the system of flux. It allows for the fluidity of composition that affords a simple means of averting disruption without imposing a legal mechanism that would in itself be even more disruptive to the total society. The predictability of food supplies allows for neighboring bands to plan their movements so as to avoid conflict.

It is plain that in each case the process of fission and fusion follows lines of dissent rather than those of descent, and that the major function is conflict-resolving. At no time during the process can any trace of the concept of unilinear descent or affiliation be found. The band can only be defined as that group of individuals living and hunting within recognized territorial boundaries at a given time. A cross-cutting loyalty is formed by attachment and cooperation between age-mates, age being the vital bond that takes clear precedence over kinship, among both the Mbuti and the Ik.

Another function of flux might be said to be religious, for, by deemphasizing stability in interpersonal relations, the process throws the people into closer recognition of the one constant in their lives, the environment and its life-giving qualities. Under such conditions of flux where band and even family relations are often brittle and fragmentary, the environment, in general, and one's own hunting territory in particular, become for each individual the one reliable and rewarding focus of his attention, his loyalty, and his devotion.

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