

The Origin of Hunter-Gatherers' Foods

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ABSTRACT The concept of contemporary hunter-gathering societies is of unclear definition and their so-called “distinctive” characteristics of doubtful temporal sustainability. In terms of subsistence, there are few studies which have objectively compared the foods consumed by neighboring forager and by peasant populations. The present paper aims at doing this through the semi-quantitative statistical analyses of foodstuffs consumed by Agta and Filipino peasants (Lowlanders). Through interviews, data was collected on the provenience of 1734 dishes consumed in 112 Agta households and on 603 dishes consumed in 86 peasant households. Results show heterogeneity in the way these groups obtain most of their food, although not in the contribution of agriculture to their diet. The main differences concern the use of money which is substituted by foraging, sharing, and exchanging among the Agta, apart from their exclusive practice of working for food. With deforestation, the consumption of game is becoming rare but it is still a good example of differences in subsistence. While Agtas eat red meat mostly of wild animals, Lowlanders usually buy domestic meat from local shops. Nonetheless, exchange between the two populations follows the traditional “carbohydrates for proteins” format, involving mainly rice and fish. In the increasingly common inter-ethnic households (N=38), the origin of foods is more similar to the Agta than to the Lowlander pattern. Access to alternatives sources of food might be one stimulus for inter-ethnic marriages. The conclusion is that the Agta’s socio-economic marginalization is partially responsible for maintaining foraging activities but that, coupled with deforestation, might threaten their survivorship.