Towards a Broader View of Hunter-Gatherer Sharing

Edited by Noa Lavi & David E. Friesem
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With contributions by
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Noa Lavi & David E. Friesem,
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Chapter 16

The pure hunter is the poor hunter?¹

Olga Yu. Artemova

Over the last decade, I have had several opportunities to visit the Aborigines of Australia in the places where certain features of pre-colonial culture have survived, and I have been privileged to conduct field studies among them. In economic terms, in the pre-colonial period most Aboriginal groups conformed to Woodburn’s model of immediate-return systems (1988). There was no institutionalized inequality in either material possessions or material wealth and all followed the norms of ‘minimization of efforts’ in their economic behaviour (Peterson 1993). Each individual acted according to the ‘satisficing principle’ whereby, as Sivizzero & Tisdell put it, ‘he/she does not try to maximize his/her utility, but he/she tries to reach a pre-determined level of satisfaction. Once this threshold is reached, any additional work becomes useless’ (2015, 18). These behavioural patterns tend to be quite persistent (see Peterson 2013), and I have often observed them in Aboriginal settlements such as Aurukun, Formpuraaw and Milingimbi in Cape York and Arnhem Land, where people do not try to obtain more food – be it from the forest, river, department stores or ‘takeaways’ – than they need at any given moment. Nor do they take care of personal belongings, or accumulate them, or show interest in them. The same applies, to a large extent, to their attitudes towards money.

These features of Australian Aboriginal behaviour are deeply connected with the persistence of the ‘demand sharing’ system (Peterson 1993, 2013). Despite having almost abandoned hunting and gathering (though they fish a lot), and despite also having lost many ritual and sociopolitical traditions, contemporary indigenous Australians still retain the ideology and practice of sharing, according to which ‘donation is obligatory and is disconnected from the right to receive’ (Woodburn 1998, 50); people share most of the things for which they have no immediate need, and those who receive things or money from their relatives do not seek money or anything else with which to reciprocate. A number of cases observed in modern Aboriginal settlements illustrate this. The field data discussed below is framed by several theoretical underpinnings, outlined under the ‘Preliminary notes’ subheading below, as well as by some theoretical assumptions (with historical and evolutionary connotations), covered in the final section.

The aspects of sharing I am mostly concerned with are everlasting or permanently repeated transactions (as Widlok puts it, ‘there is no end to the transfers’; this volume, 27) that represent real (actual) mutual help, very often asymmetrical and unbalanced, among the people involved in a particular social network, and also everlasting, permanently repeated transactions that predominantly or exclusively serve as symbolic manifestations of people’s readiness to give and receive help.

Preliminary notes

The fundamental notion that ethnographically studied hunter-gatherer societies – such as those of the Hadza in Eastern Africa, the Paliyan in South India or the Batek in Indonesia, as well as many traditional societies of Aboriginal Australia – could have survived almost to the present day only because the people in those societies used to share hunting prey and other important food with each other, with predominantly men sharing meat with their kin, and because there were complicated rules that determined distribution, became common place in social anthropology long ago. But no less important ethnographic observations and academic generalizations which are not so often stressed by anthropologists do exist. Dr James Woodburn summarized them in his concluding remarks at the conference this paper stems from; previously, he had covered those observations and generalizations in more detail in his paper ‘Sharing is not a form of
exchange: an analysis of property-sharing in immediate return hunter-gatherer societies’ (1998), which although published two decades ago still remains relevant, and, it seems to me, has not yet received enough attention.

Woodburn argued (among other points) that in immediate return hunter-gatherer societies:

1. People had to share not only meat, but ‘most other things for which they had no immediate need’;
2. The donator had ‘very limited control over who’ eventually received a donation or a part of it;
3. Generosity was ‘not stressed’ (in contrast with Spikins’ assertion); ‘shares were asked for, even demanded’ (reference to Peterson 1993); ‘the whole emphasis was on donor obligation and recipient entitlement’; ‘typically, the donor is not thanked’; ‘this is consistent with the notion that’ the donor was doing ‘no more than he should do’;
4. Receiving meat or some other food, items or services did not ‘bind the recipient to reciprocate’; donors tended to be ‘on balance donors over long periods’, recipients tended to be ‘on balance recipients over long periods’;
5. Donation was obligatory and was ‘disconnected from the right to receive’; donation established no ‘significantly greater claims on future yields that would be the case without donation’ (1998, 48–50).

That is why, as Woodburn developed his considerations, ‘the obligation to share cannot to be said to enhance significantly the access of successful hunters to meat and to other resources’. The individual in such a society had almost no control over the results of his (or her) work, which prevented them from maximizing their labour efforts. The obligation to share was ‘a product of system of values’, ‘a political ideology, backed by sanctions positive and negative’. And then the elegant conclusion follows: ‘Equality is what matters and the threat of inequality is of more concern than the threat of hunger’ (1998, 50).

A system in which economy, ideology and morality were indivisibly intertwined was capable of creating strong, solid and durable relations between individuals within the framework of extended social networks. An individual in such a network depended on many others and many others depended on them, but at the same time, we can assume, not being in debt to any particular person or group and not being obliged to work in order to reciprocate for goods and services received, should have meant real personal freedom. Perhaps an individual in such a society normally could not find themselves in onerous and one-sided relations with other individuals or groups, which should have provided them with a high degree of spiritual comfort, though they were doomed to reject many attractive endeavours as well as attempts to obtain more material wealth and comfort.

The system under consideration (associated in hunter-gatherer studies with the concept of ‘moral economy’ – e.g. Peterson 2002; Peterson & Taylor 2003; Peterson 2005) should preclude any cardinal breakthrough in the economic activities of hunter-gatherer societies – preventing not only the transition to an agricultural mode of subsistence and corresponding lifestyles, but also the so-called intensification4 of foraging. As a typical example of specialized and intensified foraging, scholars frequently refer to the traditional indigenous societies of the Northwest Coast of North America. In those societies, the economy was definitely ‘immoral’, having considerably moved towards so-called social complexity,5 and possibly even towards state and civilization. Archaeology provides numerous analogies.

All this is, of course, only a schematic representation of a far more complex reality (see, for example, Tucker, this volume). Even immediate return hunter-gatherer societies with non-specialized economies (the Hadza, the Paliyan, the Batek, the Chenchu and others) considerably differed from each other in their cultures as a whole and at least partially in their systems of sharing. Many of them have interacted for hundreds of years with agriculturalists or herders (e.g. the Pygmies, the Bushmen, the hunters of India) in quite different historical and geographical contexts. Australian Aborigines, isolated on their huge continent for tens of thousands of years, have nevertheless created a vast diversity of economic strategies and styles of social relations. Ethnographic accounts also describe some hunter-gatherer societies that did not develop economic intensification and social complexity, but which obviously lacked several of the characteristic features of sharing systems outlined above. They demonstrate clear signs of inequality in wealth between individuals (for instance, the Ngana-sans, the Evens, the Evenks, the Nivkhs and some other hunter-gatherer peoples of Siberia) and do not conform to Woodburn’s model of immediate-return systems (e.g. Бахрушин 1925, 90; Попов 1984, Chapter 1; Линденау 1983, 68, 72; Туголуков 1970, 230–1; Штернберг 1905, 116, 119, 122).

Notwithstanding all this diversity, African, South Asian and Southeast Asian as well as Australian hunter-gatherer societies, which did conform to Woodburn’s model, developed – judging by numerous published ethnographies and some personal obser-
vations by the author of this paper – quite specific types of sharing systems. Perhaps, for want of a better word, we could call them ‘totalitarian’ sharing systems. This word has a negative connotation, especially for those of us who were brought up in the Soviet Union. However, here I use it in an axiologically neutral sense meaning only a special pattern of behaviour and moral attitudes obligatory for everybody who is included in a particular social network.

For clarity, it is worth summarizing the main features that ‘totalitarian’ sharing systems had in common:

• They developed the mechanisms of permanent circulation of material and spiritual values as well as services in more or less wide circles of people;
• They tended to deprive individuals or families of control over the products of their work and their possessions which were not in immediate need or were not consumed or used at once;
• They tended to level the economic status of all community members;
• They protected the receivers of goods or services from becoming debtors to the donors;
• They considerably reduced or even nullified the motivation for the accumulation of wealth by individuals, families or groups;
• They developed the mechanisms of permanent circulation of material and spiritual values as well as services in more or less wide circles of people;
• They tended to reduce or lower – in social and psychological contexts – the costs of material assets or material things (‘easy come, easy go’).

All these peculiarities of ‘totalitarian’ sharing systems contributed to the creation of a type of personality and – dare I say – an ethos which proved to be highly resilient even when faced with the dramatic advance of European colonization and/or (e.g. in the case of India or Indonesia) forced modernization. In many cases, foraging ways of living were rapidly destroyed, and hunters and gatherers stopped hunting and gathering and started losing their ritual traditions, political structures and systems of leadership as well as many other components of their cultures; but at the same time they managed to retain (in some cases up to the present day) the behavioural stereotypes, attitudes and spiritual values determined by traditional obligatory ‘totalitarian’ sharing. Moreover, traditional forms of sharing in many communities of former hunter-gatherers promptly transformed and restructured themselves to accommodate the introduction of money and new forms of subsistence as well as other aspects of civilization (see, for example, Peterson 2013). Paradoxically, obligatory ‘totalitarian’ sharing has even acquired exaggerated or hypertrophic scope – compared to the traditional context – in some acculturated communities of former foragers: people have started to share and to demand shares much more intensively than they did in traditional conditions (Peterson 2013).

While staying in Australian Aboriginal settlements the author of this paper has had a number of opportunities to observe various examples of these new facets of ‘totalitarian’ sharing, which sometimes seemed to be quite bizarre or even preposterous.

**Twists of fate**

Sometimes we realize that the books we read many years ago have acquired a sort of mystical power over our life. As a university student, I found in one of the Moscow libraries a book by Ursula McConnell, *Myths of the Munkan* (1958), and was enchanted. I translated the book into Russian and published it in Moscow (1981). I quoted *Myths of the Munkan* and McConnell’s other works many times in my early publications. Several years later, I was impressed by Ann Well’s memoirs, *Milingimbi: Ten Years in the Crocodile Islands of Arnhem Land* (1963).

In 2004, after 30 years of studying Australian Aboriginal ethnographies in Russian libraries, I had the chance to visit Australia; there I learned that a permit from the local Aboriginal Council is required for entry into many Aboriginal settlements and that such a permit would not be easy for a Russian scholar to obtain. But in Canberra I was lucky to meet anthropologist David Martin, an Australian who had worked for many years in the same area of Cape York Peninsula as McConnell had in the 1920s and 1930s. For eight months, David helped me to obtain a permit to Aurukun, one of the main Aboriginal settlements of that area. Eventually the permit arrived, and I was able to spend two months in Aurukun at the end of 2005; I visited again in 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2015.

While staying in Australia, I happened to meet Sigrid Jacob, whose close relative Stuart Porteus worked as a teacher at Milingimbi, the main island of the Crocodile archipelago. Sigrid asked Stuart to invite me as his guest to Milingimbi, and finally I was able to visit the Aboriginal settlement there in April 2010. It is hard to describe how I felt looking at the remains of the ruined Anglican Church where the missionary Rev. Wells, Ann Well’s husband, served in 1950s and 1960s. In 2010, it was still possible to make out his name on a partially destroyed plate in the corner of the former building. This was the location of a decade of dramatic events vividly depicted in Well’s book.

Apart from Aurukun and Milingimbi, I visited Pormpuraaw, Maningrida, Yarrabah (Fig. 16.1) and a number of other communities, but most of my time in
Welfare payments and other social benefits make up a basic part of inhabitants’ livelihood. Irregular wages are available, with men working in mining, roads and house construction, and women working in shops, as Guest House cleaners, in school or in day care. Overall employment opportunities are insufficient for the settlement, and the Aborigines themselves (for the most part) do not express special interest in permanent paid jobs.

Hunting and especially fishing still remain attractive endeavours for Aurukun citizens, and people – primarily of mature age – use every opportunity to fish (Figs. 16.2 & 16.3). However, it is not productive to fish near the settlement and fishing in remote locations requires modern transport facilities (four-wheel drives and motor boats), which few of the indigenous people have the opportunity to use (and those who possess such facilities often have no money for fuel). Hunting could be a reasonably reliable food source as the forests round Aurukun abound in not only endemic game, but also in feral cattle, horses and pigs. But hunting with spears ceased long ago, and the use of firearms demands a special license and some money too. In addition, hunting is fruitless in the outskirts of the settlement and, as with fishing, travelling further afield requires modern vehicles.
The pure hunter is the poor hunter?

One of the most popular daily hangouts involves card gambling. Here and there, under the foliage of the huge century-old mango trees planted in ‘mission time’, one may find dozens of players. Many of them spend days away in the ‘gamble circles’.

Formally, the settlement is governed by the elected Council of the indigenous residents, headed by a Mayor and two Deputy Mayors. But in practice, decisive influence over all important community affairs belongs to the Anglo-Australians, who do almost all the bureaucratic work for the Council: chief among them is the General Executive Officer (GEO), who is the one to approach when any problem occurs.

Aurukun is notorious throughout Australia for its numerous disadvantages. Poor health, chronic malnutrition, poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, domestic violence, child abuse, street fights, carjacking, attacks on white teachers and shop managers – these are regularly discussed in Australian media publications. Aurukun is a ‘ghetto’, ‘a cell, fenced by rivers and forest’, a ‘nightmare’, ‘hell’ – that is what white Australians write about Aurukun. However, I never felt in danger, nor was I confronted by any hostility from Aurukun inhabitants. I had heard about the fights between local warring factions and even witnessed a couple of street commotions. The

Figure 16.2. Phillis Yankaporta throws the cast net. Photo by A. Zakurdaev, 2008.

Figure 16.3. Lucky family. Photo by V. Klyaus, 2015.
saddened aspect of the settlement was the number of suicides among young people; in traditional Aboriginal cultures, according to the Berndts (in *The World of the First Australians, 1977*: Chapter 11, Death and the Afterlife), suicide was unknown. I also witnessed depressing boredom and feelings of longing, desperation and hopelessness among the inhabitants.

‘Absolutely tribal people’

When I first came to Aurukun, in October 2005, local people totally ignored me, as if I did not exist. The children would make fun of my Russian accent. The days went on and no fieldwork was being done. But once Roger Cribb, a well-known Australian archaeologist (who has now sadly passed away) appeared in the settlement, things began to improve. Roger, being already included in wide networks of Wik kin relations, introduced me to several people as his sister, and they readily accepted me as their relative, and then others followed them. In this way I obtained numerous ‘sisters’ and ‘brothers’, ‘daughters’ and ‘sons’, ‘granddaughters’ and ‘grandsons’. With some of them I developed – quite quickly – warm, cordial relations, the others at least started to greet me kindly when meeting in the street, and the pitiless young boys stopped teasing me. It later turned out that the adults had told them ‘Olga is good’.

Looking at these people wearing jeans, shorts, shirts, skirts and dresses, living in modern houses, buying food and clothes at the General Store, using computers, TVs and mobile phones, riding bicycles and cars, using prams and nappies for their babies, speaking English which was often better than mine, at first I forgot all or almost all of what I had previously learned about their culture through reading – for years and years – anthropological literature. Only gradually did I realize the truth of Roger Cribb’s words which I heard from him the day we met: ‘these are absolutely tribal people’.

How could I forget about kinship (cf. Bird-David, this volume) and that for the Australian Aborigines there are no human relations except those which are in the framework of their classificatory kinship terminology? How could I think, with a sort of disappointment: ‘Why is this woman, a descendant of hunter-gatherers for whom walking 30 km a day was not such a great distance, now ready to wait for hours until some driver passing by in his car gives her a 1.5 km lift!’ Why did I not understand at once that such readiness to wait expresses much more of the hunter-gatherer ethos than a long walk? Minimization of effort! (e.g. Peterson 1993, 2002 et al.; Svizzero & Tisdell 2015).

Could it be the philosophy of foragers – with its principal pursuit of minimization of effort and risk – that deters hunting when easier and less labour-intensive and less dangerous ways of procuring a livelihood are available? It sounds a paradox, but it sounds true.

Following the philosophy of foragers and having low incomes, the people of Aurukun have ended up a lot more poorly resourced in terms of food and other necessities than would be the case if they continued to hunt, gather and fish. But the same foraging ideology and behavioural stereotype helps them to steadfastly endure deprivation and make do with what is available. Their natural environment is very rich, and they could have lived ‘from the land’ in conditions of ‘original affluence’. Instead, they became accustomed to ‘fishing for money’ or ‘hunting for money’ in the gambling circles. For it would be unprofessional on our part to see in Aboriginal card gambling a mere entertainment; they perceive gambling as a sort of business, which among other occupations is aimed at procuring money ‘here and now’. I remember what one of my Aurukun brothers said (he, too, unfortunately passed away several years ago): ‘Tomorrow, I will not be able to meet you, I am going to receive my payments and I need to go gambling’. Then something like a sad sigh followed as if he wanted to add: ‘What can I do?’

Usually, people in Aurukun do not bet too much while gambling, but sometimes wins reach thousands of dollars. Lucky gamblers buy in the local store or order on the Internet refrigerators, washing machines, bikes, musical equipment, very rarely even cars or motor boats. But, as a rule, none of those purchases stays for long in the winner’s possession. Money is spent very quickly, things change hands, get broken down quickly and thrown away. Many old home appliances can be found lying around the houses or are hauled to the dumps. In the outskirts of the settlement, you can see impressive cemeteries of crashed automobiles. Those who lose their welfare payments in gambling circles procure what they need from their relatives.

When I first came to Aurukun in 2005, a woman who three days before had ‘won’ $3000 playing cards asked me for some bread and tea because she was terribly hungry and had a ‘splitting’ headache. I offered her some simple treatment and she vividly described what a great amount of money she had been lucky enough to win. She accompanied her story with gestures showing how difficult it was to collect and carry away the piles of cash, how she shoved the bunches of banknotes into her pockets and under her shirt, and everywhere... And there was nothing left! I wondered how she could spend $3000 in three days? Well, she had bought bicycles for her grandchildren; she had ordered from Cairns recordings of her favour-
Lights shine around the nephew’s house, and cheerful lights shine around the houses, even though it is such fun to sit in the yard when they shine!

Gradually, I was diving into the process of ‘recognizing’ the typical traits of hunter-gatherer cultures, frequently described in ethnography, which in unpredictable ways show themselves in the behaviour of groups and individuals having to deal with modern things. I was introduced to the people of Aurukun as a sister and very soon I myself became an element of the ‘giving’ or ‘gifting’ environment (Bird-David 1990).

As soon as I arrived in Aurukun on my return visits, requests for an electricity card would pour down on me. It was impossible to respond to all of them, but sometimes I bought cards for my closest sisters. When on the next day one of the same sisters again (whispering) asked me to buy another card for her, I could not help replying in an indignant voice: ‘Why? I bought you a card just yesterday!’ But there was nothing to be indignant about. She could not reject the demand of her nephew’s wife. And now her own house had plunged into darkness, and multicoloured lights shine around the nephew’s house, and cheerful children’s voices are heard from there. She could not have acted in any other way.

**There is no other way**

All the gifts I presented my sisters and brothers with, as well as various things I shared with them at their request – such as blankets, clothes, CDs and DVDs, etc. – very soon were lost in the course of their circulation among relatives.

I remember a story Roger Cribb told me about a man who gave his bankcard to one relative and its PIN to another – both as acts of sharing. Those two soon decided to withdraw all the man’s money. This is not a joke, nor is it stupidity on the part of the victim – this is just normal life. He could not reject the requests of his relatives.

In 2010, in Milingimbi, I happened to witness the following event. An old nurse who worked in a local medical centre was retiring, and a celebration was planned to mark the event. A new nurse, a white lady who had recently arrived at the settlement, hired an Aboriginal man (for $100) to catch enough fish to feed all the guests. She went fishing together with the man, and 40 big fish were caught. However, as soon as the boat full of fish was ashore, a crowd of the man’s relatives snatched away all the fish except one, which they left for the nurse. She was frustrated and upset. She could not understand that the man could do nothing about it, that when hungry kinsmen, including children and adolescents, surrounded him, he could not shoo them away. The fact that he had been paid $100 for his work did not concern anybody apart from the poor nurse, and nobody was sad that there would be no food at the celebration, which was going to take place two days later.

Many situations where Aboriginal people who have found themselves trapped in conflicting circumstances have preferred to reject a profitable job, or violate their obligations towards white employers, or even risk going to jail for a breach of Australian law, rather than quarrelling with their relatives, have been described in the academic literature as well as in media publications (e.g. Martin 2011, 206; Martin & Martin 2016, 213–14; McRae-Williams & Gerritsen 2010).

‘That’s enough for me’

I also had many opportunities to learn for myself that, as evidenced in the ethnographies, those Aboriginal people who get goods or services from others do not feel indebted to the donators. For example, one day I went fishing with my Aurukun sister and her relatives. They borrowed a motorboat from someone, I
paid for the fuel and brought the things needed for a picnic: rice, tea bags, sugar, matches, etc. All these things are normally not available in Aurukun households. They catch plenty of fish, we get ashore, I make a fire, cook rice and boil water for tea, while they gut and roast the fish in the ashes. Then they start to eat; nobody offers a fish to me, but they are very much surprised that I did not catch any fish myself. ‘You do not know how to fish? It is very strange!’ I feel a bit surprised that I did not catch any fish myself. ‘You do not know how to fish? It is very strange!’ I feel a bit hurt but there is nothing to feel hurt about. I simply forgot that I should ask for fish. Eventually, I do this and receive a portion.

On another occasion, my colleague and I rent a boat to visit one of the totemic centres up the Watson River. Two young Aboriginal men accompany us. At the place where we get ashore there are plenty of mud shells, and there is lots of room in our boat. Both men could have collected and brought home many of these mud shells, the flesh of which is greatly valued. But one of our companions is not interested at all, and the other collects not more than nine or ten. ‘Enough for me’, he says. Then we sail back to Aurukun. On the way, the second man throws the fishing rod into the river, gets one fish, and does not attempt to catch any more. We tell him: ‘Catch more, plenty of room in the boat, plenty of fish in the river’. He replies: ‘One fish is quite enough for my supper’. Every man is for himself and he does not care about feeding others. But every man knows that someone will give him food or money when he is hungry.

One afternoon, I meet in the street a woman who calls me sister. She tells me that now it is lunchtime, but she has nothing to eat. So I give her $5. An hour later she meets me again and says that she bought half a fried chicken and a bottle of cola for $3 in the ‘Take Away’, ate the chicken and drank the cola on the go, and then she gives me back the remaining $2.

Once, a white woman who lived in Aurukun at the time I was there showed me the staple skirts that she sewed for the black women. These skirts of very bright colours had only one patch pocket. I wondered why only one pocket? The woman replied: ‘A pack of cigarettes and a pamper for a baby – nothing else is needed, she is happy!’

It is also enlightening to consider an Aboriginal woman or man who is going to visit her or his relatives in Cairns (600 km away from Aurukun). Such a traveller would wait for a plane near the Aurukun airstrip. He is dressed in jeans and shirt, she in skirt and light blouse. Perhaps there is a pack of cigarettes and some money in a pocket. But no handbag, no backpack. Everything that is needed will be provided by their relatives or obtained somehow on the spot and according to circumstances.

‘We cannot be like them’

A true hunter has to be mobile and not weighed down. Today’s Wik people live sedentary lives but retain the habits of nomads. Throughout my stays in Aurukun, I had only two or three opportunities personally to see the interior of the Wik-Munkan houses. A typical Aboriginal house is almost empty: a number of much used mattresses lying on the bare floor, or sometimes taphans or bunks with mattresses; there could be a television set and good musical equipment, with plenty of CDs and DVDs (my information of 2005–2009 might be out of date now, and the Wik people may use more modern devices); and several plastic armchairs. And that is all or almost all. No kitchen utilities, no food supplies. Often various colourful pictures or rugs are glued or hung on the walls (in one Wik house, for instance, there was a ‘Velvet Elvis’ on the central wall – the American idol depicted full-body against a dark background, white-suited, microphone in hand and wearing a Hawaiian garland of scarlet flowers; see Fig. 16.4).

The Aboriginal people of Aurukun do not spend much time in their houses. Mostly, they spend their life in the yards or in the streets, and it is quite understandable why normally people say ‘I sleep in this house’, rather than ‘I live in this house’. Indeed, people often change the houses they sleep in. I happened to find the people I wanted to see one day in one house, and the following day in another house.

When a person I was looking for would come out of a house and greet me, a leisurely talk would start, and some common enterprise would be planned: a fishing expedition, a visit to the cemetery, or a simple tea party in the house I lived. Preparations for a fishing expedition often would take an hour or more. If I did not have matches or a boiler (for a ‘picnic’ on the beach of the river), that would not be a problem. A fire could be started without matches in a number of tricky ways, water for tea could be boiled in one of the old tins which were abundant everywhere. But it is impossible to fish without a fishing gear, and the latter would not be available all the time. ‘Oh! I forgot that N. borrowed my cast net yesterday!’ We would walk (or drive) to N.’s house. If she was not in, we would go to a third or to a fourth house. And having not found N., we would eventually borrow a cast net from someone else. I cannot remember a situation when such a problem was not solved sooner or later in this or that way.

The Wik people have lost many of their ancient skills and customs. They have almost ceased making traditional tools, and many of the most important rites such as initiation of youths or totemic increasing
rituals are no longer performed. But they have retained
the norms that obligate a person to give others what is
requested, and allow him or her to expect that needed
things or services will be procured with the help of
others. This is the key to the continuation of their com-
munal life and the preservation of the personal integrity
of the members of their communities.

I remember what was said to me by one of the
most charming, intelligent and kindest Wik men, who,
alas, has also since died. We talked one day (in 2007)
and he said in a quiet, sad voice: ‘White people want
us to be like them, but we can’t, simply can’t.’

It seems that the social environment (the so-called
constant pressure of demand sharing; Peterson 2013)
does not allow the people living in the Aboriginal
communities to get out of what Anglo-Australians
call poverty, but among the Aboriginal individuals
themselves there is also – as a rule – a lack of moti-
vation to achieve what white people call wealth or
well-being. More than that, even the ‘objective scarcity
of resources (finances, fuel, equipment and so forth)’
(Martin & Martin 2016, 213) is not perceived as pov-
erty by the indigenous people. I have never heard one
of my Aurukun or Milingimbi interlocutors calling
themselves poor.

I remember Nicolas Peterson’s story (related to me
orally) about a Warlpiri man; having almost no food or
money, and sitting on a ripped blanket spread over the
ground, he was speaking about his wish to save some
money and to send it to the children of Afghanistan,
because the other day he had watched a TV programme
about their disastrous situation. He was especially con-
cerned by the fact that they lacked blankets.

When generosity is stressed

In 2008, my assistant Alexey Zakurdaev and I found
ourselves in a situation of conflict. The former GEO
of the Council demanded an exorbitant charge for our
accommodation. We did not have the funds to pay, but
without doing so we risked being ‘thrown out’ a week
or so before the end of our expedition. Although we
did not tell anybody about our problem, the people in
the settlement learned about it quite quickly. A woman
who calls me aunt came to our place and said that she
and all the kinsmen would not leave us in trouble, they
would get the money together. ‘I will give $200’, she
said. ‘H. will give $100, A. will give $150, others also
will give money to you.’ ‘But how will you find such
an amount of money if yesterday neither you nor H.
had even $5 for food?’, I asked. ‘It is our business’, was
the answer. Fortunately, everything worked out, and
we did not have to pay more than had been agreed
at the beginning of our stay in Aurukun. Perhaps our

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**Figure 16.4. The interior of an Aurukun house. Photo by V. Klyaus, 2009.**
The strongest example in Aurukun is the death of a relative, which motivates people to save large sums of money and to store food and various things in huge amounts. Any improvidence or the usual tendency to live ‘day to day’ are absolutely out of the question. Funerals, complicated mourning rites, and mourning feasts attended by numerous people are carried out assiduously, which entails big material investments on the part of the families of the deceased people. A relatively new trend is the installation of expensive natural stone monuments or tombs, ornamented with totemic symbols; such monuments require considerable financial means.

The high death rate among the Aurukun people is the most convincing evidence of the profound dysfunction in their social life (see, for example, Sutton 2009; Ford 2013). Perhaps it will be sufficient to say that when I first came to Aurukun there were many men whom I called ‘brother’ (aged 50–55), and now I have only sisters left. Many people much younger than me also have passed away over the last 10 years.

Figure 16.5. The children of Aurukun. Photo by O. Artemova, 2005.
It seems that the two cultures which have clashed here (on Wik land) cannot coexist, and that the stronger is winning. In 2015, during my last stay in Aurukun, I sensed that some families and individuals had made a decision to ‘get out of the vicious circle’. They had reduced sharing, started to accumulate things and money, and send their children to study or work somewhere in town. As a result, those whose sharing demands were being rejected felt frustrated, and those rejecting such demands felt separated from others (cf. Peterson 2013). The danger which these changes in the behaviour of some people might pose to the Wik people’s communal life as a whole cannot be overestimated.

Quite a number of colleagues (and not only Australians) might reproach me for being unrealistic, romantic but outdated, and even inhuman. They claim that for the Aboriginal people to survive and live a decent life, to become self-sustaining, independent members of civil society, they should ‘sell their labour’, ‘free themselves from the shackles of demand sharing’, ‘be built into mainstream society’, etc. But what will remain of their traditional culture? Nothing but public festivals – pseudocorroborees – and the serial production of pseudototemic bark paintings, while the main achievements of their extraordinary culture will be lost forever. That brings to mind the words of Donald Thomson who in early 1930s went on an expedition to northeastern Arnhem Land to carry out a heroic mission – to resolve the severe conflict between the Aborigines and Anglo-Australian authorities: ‘I think that it should always be remembered that in making black white men of these people we do them the greatest of all wrongs, since with our rigid adherence to the “white Australia” policy, we are not prepared to admit them to real social equality, which would obviously be the only possible justification for such action’ (Thomson 2003, 186).

This was said more than 90 years ago (perhaps in 1937). Since then, Australia has changed beyond recognition: the notorious ‘white Australia’ policy has been abandoned while multiculturalism with its humanistic and democratic ideals has prevailed; the government attitude to interaction with the Aborigines has changed for the better as well as the public opinion of ‘white Australians’ towards ‘black Australians’: the latter have been recognized as fully fledged citizens of the country and many of them have been granted the legal right to live traditionally on their lands. And at last the Aborigines’ religious and artistic heritage has become highly valued. The guilt of the colonizers has been repeatedly recognized publicly and legally, and there have been many acts of atonement. However, a yawning gap remains between indigenous and alien cultures, and threats to the autochthonous cultures are not removed completely, but modified, and new ones continue to develop.

Retrospect

It is very important to emphasize that the phenomenon under consideration, namely the system of ‘totalitarian’ sharing, could and very often did exist without any paraphernalia that would be visible in the archaeological record. However, such phenomena are crucial from the evolutionary point of view.

In 1929, Russian ethnologist Aleksandr Maximov published On the Eve of Agriculture, in which he meticulously summarized all the data on Australian Aboriginal gathering practices available at the time in published sources. Having analysed this data he argued that the Australian Aborigines in many parts of the continent used techniques of harvesting of wild crops, tubers, roots and fruits, as well as techniques of processing various kinds of wild plants before consumption, which were quite similar to those used by horticulturalists. He concluded that the Australian Aborigines, in the framework of their foraging economy, developed all the preconditions needed for farming. According to Maximov, ‘the indigenous Australians did not have to commit any “revolution” to shift to cultivation’ (Максимов 1929, 325). Technologically, they were completely ready for farming.

In 1986, referring to a number of Australian studies, another Russian scholar, Vladimir Kabo, wrote: ‘The latest research has shown that the Aborigines of Australia were even closer to horticulture than it seemed to Maximov.’ Apart from so-called ‘fire-stick farming’, Kabo mentioned simple forms of irrigation – the construction of dams, artificial water reservoirs and irrigating channels – which evidenced ‘conscious and targeted impacts on nature – even more impressive than the experiments involving the cultivation of yams and other plants which are also known in Australia’ (Kabo 1986, 233).

In 2011, Bill Gammage, in his book The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia, attempted to show (based on extensive data and on the conclusions of a number of contemporary researchers – archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, palaeobotanists, etc.) that Aborigines throughout the whole of Australia really farmed their land and, in particular, purposefully grew and harvested many plant species. According to Gammage the Aborigines were farming but did not become farmers; that is, they did not turn cultivation into their main occupation and main source of subsistence, and they did not invest into farming as much time and labour as real farmers do. In other
words, they did not change their way of life for the farming way of life. True farming is sedentary, but the Aborigines were absolutely committed to mobility. Gammage sees precisely this as the reason why foraging remained prime.

It appears that all the traits of Aboriginal culture discussed above are of no less importance: totalitarian sharing as a whole, and in particular the satisficing principle of economic behaviour, minimization of effort and risk, mechanisms that considerably reduced or even nullified the motivation of individuals, families and groups to accumulate wealth, as well as mechanisms that constantly reduced or lowered (in social and psychological contexts) the costs of material assets or material things.

However, the question ‘why did the Australian Aborigines not become real farmers?’, quite frequently posed in the literature, seems to be academically incorrect. Many hunter-gatherer peoples experimented with cultivation of plants, which is richly evidenced ethnographically and archaeologically, but only a few of them independently made farming their main mode of subsistence – and soon after farming rapidly spread, mostly via colonization processes, almost all over the world (see, for example, Bellwood 2011; Özdoğan 2011; Rowley-Conwy 2011; Bar-Yosef 2017). The move to farming was determined by concrete evolutionary choices made by concrete societies in concrete periods of human history; the majority of other societies found themselves in the orbit of those choices. Only some preferred and managed to retreat to environments that were not attractive to farmers or happened to settle in such environments before the spread of the farming economy started.

The Australian Aborigines were lucky to live on land that was suitable for farming but which was not available for an external colonization till relatively recent times. They had good opportunities to choose to farm or not to farm. For it seems to be absolutely obvious that reasonably acting and determined individuals, associated in groups, did make historical choices (cf. Widlok, this volume) and did so deliberately, generation after generation, and that they understood what they were doing, ‘experimenting consciously with different social strategies in different contexts’, ‘being aware of multiple social possibilities’ as well as of possible results and consequences of their ‘social strategies’ (Wengrow & Graeber 2015, 603) and also manipulating ‘their environment while being fully aware, probably not always, of changes caused by their behavior’ (Bar-Yosef 2017, 300).

The indigenous Australians knew how to procure what they needed in the volumes they perceived as sufficient for them. An overwhelming proportion of their time spent outside the sphere of necessity was taken up with their religious cults and other spiritual occupations (e.g. Berndt & Berndt 1977, 519). They invested much into procuring, collecting and accumulating food and other valuables – skins, down, feathers, shells, stones, ochre, honey, plant fibres and many other different things – in quite a large quantities when that was needed for their collective ceremonial activities and aesthetical requests. So we may assume that the Australian Aborigines did not become agriculturalists because of conscious human moderation. ‘Enough is as good as a feast’, the English proverb says; ‘He will always be a slave who does not know how to live upon a little’ (Horace).

Tiger, in his book Manufacture of Evil (1985), no less impressive or provocative than his Men in Groups (1969), claimed that ‘the rot set in with agriculture’ and saw the essence of World Evil in the industrial system. He wrote, ‘it would be foolishly naïve to ignore the obvious role... of simple greed, or complex and thoughtful greed’ in the processes of creation of that system. The crucial issue is that once started, industrial system is ‘implacable!’ ‘But was it inevitable to begin with?’, asks Tiger, and he replies: ‘Of course not’. ‘A carefully litigated near-madness covers over the almost unbelievable financial facts which resulted from the foolish belief in the inevitability of productivity’ (Tiger 1985, 75, 82, 103, 109).

Was the shift to agriculture thus inevitable? Of course not, think some archaeologists. Thus, Rowley-Conwy argues: ‘There is no archaeological evidence that hunter-gatherers display an inherent trend from simple to complex..... Numerous examples reveal complexity coming and going frequently as a result of adaptive necessities.... There was... nothing about the Natufian that made agriculture inevitable.... Most hunter-gatherer historical trajectories would never have resulted in agriculture had that way of life not impinged on them from the outside’ (2001, 53, 62–4).

If this is true, then instead of asking why the Australian Aborigines did not move to a new mode of subsistence, it would be much more reasonable to ask why some ancient hunters and gatherers did move to a productive economy? Of course, this question has been asked by archaeologists and anthropologists more than once, and various hypothesis have been suggested (e.g. Boehm & Flack 2010; Boehm 2012; Flannery & Marcus 2012; Hayden 2014, etc.). But no definite answer is forthcoming (for an analytical survey of various approaches to the problem see, for instance, Price & Bar-Yosef 2011 or Bar-Yosef 2017).

Such trivial explanations as overpopulation and lack of natural resources are not supported by recent data (Price & Bar-Yosef 2011). The centres of original
agriculture were localized in the regions which at the beginning of Holocene experienced an unprecedented affluence of wild food (see, for example, Price & Bar-Yosef 2011; Finlayson, Mithen & Smith 2011, 129; Hardy-Smith & Edwards 2004, 258; Byrd 2005). It appears, paradoxically, that some people started systematically to produce food and generate other material values in artificial ways not because they were in shortage, but because they had much and wanted to have more. This means that the reasons for the developments should be searched for in the specific features of social relations and social values which the creators of early agriculture had. Applying such reasoning, we should doubt that all ‘the pure hunters were the poor hunters’ and assume – contrary to Rowley-Conwy – that there was something about the Natufian that helped their descendants to shift to productivity, and that set them apart greatly from those hunters and gatherers who have survived almost till the present day (including the Australian Aborigines and many other foraging peoples).

The traditional culture of the Wik-Munkan people as well as the cultures of other indigenous Australians and some modern hunter-gatherers of Africa, South and Southeast Asia were absolutely unique thanks to their economic egalitarianism. Apparently, the development of such cultures was the result of quite specific trajectories of social evolution. This is why we have to agree with the scholars who posit that these cultures do not provide background for a valid reconstruction of the remote past (e.g. Sassaman 2004), and disagree with those who assume that contemporary or recent ‘simple’ foragers have maintained their egalitarian lifestyles from extreme antiquity to the present and that these societies represent a once universal form of social relations (e.g. Boehm 1993, 1999, 2012; Flannery & Marcus 2012). As Testart put it, referring to ethnographically studied hunter-gatherers, they ‘might not have been such and probably remain such only by reason of restrictive social forms that for them are quite possibly a distant and glorious heritage’ (1988, 13). This, perhaps, applies not only to ethnographically studied hunter-gatherer societies with immediate return systems but also to the so-called complex ones as well. As Finlayson, Mithen & Smith assert, ‘neither the Natufian/Harifian nor the PPNA appear to have good ethnographic analogues, and the use of generalized models of hunter-gatherer complexity and sedentism serves more to mask the specifics of each culture, rather than help us understand it’ (2011, 137).

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Notes

1. An allusion to Owen Lattimore’s famous line ‘it is the poor nomad who is the pure nomad’ (1940, 522). See also Lattimore 1938, 15 (‘The poor nomad is the pure nomad, best able to survive under the strictest conditions of the old life, and at the same time best able to evolve into new ways of life’).
2. That the long-term economic pay-offs of sharing are only possible through ‘…complex emotional relationships of generosity, trust and response to vulnerability…’ (this volume, 58).
3. As Widlock puts it, for example, sharing ‘takes place in a way that downgrades the act of giving (see, for instance, Lee 2003) as part of levelling any potential attempts of the giver to take political advantage from his or her economically advantaged position’ (2013, 21).
4. There are archaeological data that allow some scholars to assume that in separate areas of southeast Australia the processes of the so-called intensification of economic activity took place during certain periods of Aboriginal history (e.g. Lourandos 1997). As Smith (1999, 327) wrote, ‘It seems, Australian hunter-gatherer societies moved toward a different social and economic mode in some parts of the continent in the postglacial period but it was not a unilinear process nor was it continuous or uniformal across the continent.’ Nothing of the kind, as far as I know, was observed among traditionally oriented Aboriginals.
5. The notion of complexity is much debated among social anthropologists and archaeologists (see, for example, Sassaman 2004, 231–6; Boehm & Flack 2010; Hayden 2014). However, these debates are not directly relevant to this discussion.
6. Conscious use of so-called levelling strategies has been described in many ethnographies and discussed in theoretical publications (for example Biesele 1999, 208;
In Russia, scholars usually avoid this term because of its apparent obscurity. In Western publications, including hunter-gatherer studies, it is used without any special reservations (e.g. Bird-David 1992, 38–41; Martin 2011, 203, 206). Perhaps, the expression hunter-gatherer ethos could be regarded as synonymous to Barnard’s construct hunter-gatherer mode of thought (Barnard 2000).

For the 2016 Census in Aurukun, there were 1,144 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people (2016 Census QuickStats).

cf. Woodburn’s words quoted earlier in this chapter: ‘generosity is not stressed’.

I could not find any reliable official statistics on the Aurukun death rate. A high death rate does not mean a decreasing Aurukun population, because the birth rate is also high: ‘In Aurukun (Indigenous Areas), the median age of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people was 27 years. Of the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people 31.2 per cent were children aged 0 to 14 years and 4.5 per cent were people aged 65 years and over’ (2016 Census QuickStats).

cf.: ‘However, there is evidence of an increased desire for a wider range of goods and services in outstations that require cash’ (Peterson 2016, 60).

e.g. Bender 1975; Belfer-Cohen & Goring-Morris 2011; Hayden 2014; Bar-Yosef 2017. Unfortunately, reliable archaeological data on the social systems of those hunters and gatherers who were first to move to farming is still very scarce.

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