

# 1 Historicizing adaptation, adapting to history: forager-traders in South and Southeast Asia

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In South and Southeast Asia today, as in many other parts of the world, there exist people who subsist, in part, by the gathering of wild plants and the hunting of wild animals. Many of these people are also engaged in larger-scale national and international political, social, and economic relationships. They may speak the same languages as others who plant, trade, herd, and rule; they may trade with them, marry them, work with and for them. Archaeological, historical, and biological data lead us to believe that this is not a new situation but instead one of long duration, perhaps nearly as long as the Holocene itself. In this volume we consider the long-term histories of some of these people who gather and hunt and their relationships to agriculturalists and states, in the process grappling with issues of the complex nature of these interactions. In moving beyond polemics to consider the substantive cultural and biological histories of South and Southeast Asian forager-traders, we aim both to focus on the historical specificity of our cases and to forge broader comparisons within and across regions. While close reading of individual cases reminds us to resist the urge to reify such fluid and often partial categories as “farmer,” “forager,” and even specific ethnic/cultural labels, the exercise of comparison reminds us that such categories can have an *analytical* utility, and that the similarities and differences between the complex histories of interaction in these two regions may help us to forge better understandings of the cultural, biological, and historical processes that shaped them.

## **Hunter-gatherers, history, and the revisionist debate**

It has become fashionable to assert that contemporary hunter-gatherers have histories and that hunting and gathering lifeways constitute historically, politically, and ecologically specific responses to circumstances in which people find (and found) themselves. The so-called revisionist debate in hunter-gatherer studies centered around a much-trumpeted recognition of the long-term historical entanglements of hunter-gatherers with

differently organized others (e.g. Denbow 1984; Schrire 1980, 1984; Wilmsen 1983, 1989, 1993; Wilmsen and Denbow 1990). In particular, the debate concentrated on particular foraging groups of southern Africa and on the degree to which they can be seen as having been (until recently) isolated from others, or at least self-sufficient. Although the debate played out largely in terms of ethnographic and especially historical specifics, the intellectual stakes are much larger. The revisionists point out, in contradistinction to those whom they accuse of an ahistorical scientism that imposes temporally evacuated behavioral models on to the past, that neither contemporary foragers nor strategies of gathering and hunting in themselves reflect timeless throwbacks to an earlier "stage" of human cultural evolution. This is an important point. Simply because we may agree, for example, that humans hunted and gathered during the Palaeolithic, and that some humans hunt and gather now, there is no reason to see these contemporary people as necessarily either (enduring) representatives or appropriate models for the Palaeolithic.<sup>1</sup>

This revisionist formulation highlights the work of archaeologists and historians, for whom issues of long-term change have always been central. It is difficult to find fault with this position, if not with its rather messianic tone. While revisionist observations are not entirely novel, the message is still an important one for those who have looked to contemporary hunter-gatherers to find invariant or universal features of this "mode of production" (cf. Sahlins 1972; Johnson and Earle 1987) that can be used to characterize prehistoric societies. Such features have included, among others, qualities such as flexibility, sharing, small group size, mobility, and egalitarian social organization (Conkey 1984; Leacock and Lee 1982; Lee 1979; Wiessner 1982; and see Gardener 1991). In the archaeological record, where one finds a greater range of behavioral variation in hunting and gathering than is recorded ethnographically, these characteristics, rather than being seen as typical of all foragers, have been supplemented by the addition of new foraging forms such as "complex hunter-gatherers" (e.g. Price and Brown 1985) and by more sophisticated approaches to, most notably, the diversity of hunter-gatherer mobility strategies (Binford 1983, 2001). While recognition of this broader range of organization has been productive, such new labels have sometimes simply been absorbed as new types or modes of categorization (cf. Gunther 1995); trait bundles rather than complex outcomes of contingent social and ecological parameters and processes. The revisionist debate, despite or perhaps because of the acrimony it has engendered, forces us to re-examine the shorthand economic labels (hunter-gatherer, horticulturalist, specialist, farmer) we often use

to describe particular peoples, labels whose associated cultural-historical baggage implies much more than simply a way of making a living and which can veer toward essentialism.<sup>2</sup>

It is also possible, however, to see something in the other side of the recent debate over the status and history of hunter-gatherers in the contemporary world. What I mean by this is not the ongoing arguments about whether particular peoples enjoyed periods of isolation (Lee and Guenther 1991, 1993, 1995; Wilmsen 1993), but instead the presumed goals of the less fashionable side in the revisionist debate. The recognition of history, while long overdue, does not negate the considerable interest in and importance of understanding how past and present people employed hunting, gathering, trading, agriculture, and wage labor in complex and varied ways to cope with the real challenges of subsisting in the world. In this sense, then, post-Neolithic and contemporary hunters and gatherers are certainly not "spurious" (cf. Solway and Lee 1990). They really hunt and they really gather, and the fact that they may employ strategies more diverse than previously imagined, may have changed their strategies, and even their cultural identities through time does not imply that our interest in understanding their lives is misplaced. Gathering and hunting, in themselves, as strategies, are worth studying, and the observation of contemporary peoples who hunt and gather is one way to go about doing this.

The charge of essentialism, furthermore – and hunter-gatherers are often seen as having something like the purest of essences, the oldest, or the most primitive and as such are the quintessential foils for discussion of the "civilized"<sup>3</sup> – is not to be wielded solely by the revisionist camp against those who employ general models of hunter-gatherer behavior. In fact, the most rabid revisionists also partake in this search for essential identity, in particular through their insistent denial of the value of ethnographic work and of its utility for coming to understandings of the past. If pre-revisionist anthropologists are to be chided for ignoring the complex, entangled pasts of certain groups once seen as iconic of the hunting and gathering "mode of production" or way(s) of life that, we are endlessly reminded, has been typical of 99 percent of human existence,<sup>4</sup> the revisionists have established their own (absent and seemingly unattainable) archetype of the primeval human. The way out of this conundrum, it seems, is to shed typological/essential thinking so that the fact that foragers have histories of interaction and interdependence can no longer be seen as challenging our understandings of them. If our understandings are processual rather than essential, then we can step out of the parameters of the revisionist debate altogether.

This volume addresses the substantive histories of some people in South and Southeast Asia who, among other things, hunt and gather, paying particular attention to histories of interaction and exchange between people organized in different ways. We aim to move beyond the rather narrow, partisan confines of the revisionist debate. I suggest that, at its worst, this debate revolves around a kind of shared essentialism in which both sides seek an archetypal hunter-gatherer form, one side finding it (or locating it as having just disappeared) and the other finding only sullied, impure, and thus unworthy examples of it. In this volume, I hope we can move beyond this argument to examine actual long-term histories and to come to terms with at least some of the complexity of the biological, cultural, political, and social processes of change in these regions. In focusing on history, I am making the argument, consonant with points raised by revisionists, that we can often (but not always) expect significant long-term change rather than deep stability. In fact, the chapters in this volume suggest that South and Southeast Asian histories are inflected *both* by periods of large-scale change and by significant long-term commitments to particular ways of life.

In stressing the historical, I do not mean to suggest that synchronic ecological and other relationships are unimportant. On the contrary, synchronic relationships do have something to say about ways in which strategies of subsistence, mobility, and so on can be structured and maintained in non- or minimally food-producing societies. However, such relationships in no way constitute explanations for, or total accounts of, the situations of particular people at particular points in time. Synchronic ecological and functional analysis is, by definition, ahistorical, and runs the risk of reifying contingent historical moments into cultural-historical or other normative categories. This does not, in itself, indicate that such momentary studies are somehow wrong; it simply points to their inherent limitations. Although I would argue that an integration between historical and presentist modes of analysis in the study of gathering and hunting – including what has aptly been termed “wage hunting and gathering” (Breman 1994) – is urgently needed, it is also clear that we are not yet at the point where such integration is the norm. In trying to challenge intellectual practice, we also confront its history. That is, just as contemporary hunting and gathering strategies may be best seen as the contingent outcomes of long-term interactions, historical creations made from generations of dynamic human and environmental action, so too must we build on existing scholarly traditions. The relative abundance of environmental and recent ethnographic information on Southeast Asian foragers, for example, contrasts markedly with the relative scarcity of such information for South Asia. In South Asia,

much of the ethnographic work on groups who gather and hunt was carried out early on in a tradition that stressed social organization rather than adaptation, and which in a sense also operated in the shadows of South Asia's large agrarian population, factors that have certainly shaped approaches taken by later scholars. If environmental contexts and ecological relations of Southeast Asian groups are more fully studied, then it must also be said that in the South Asian context, hunter-gatherer studies, as a separate field, has never fully developed and as a consequence, foraging groups are less ethnographic objects than pieces of a larger social puzzle worked on by historians (e.g. Guha 1999; Hardiman 1987a; Skaria 1999) and others as well as anthropologists and archaeologists. It may be, then, that issues of power relations and interactions with differently organized others are further along in South Asian studies, while a developed understanding of the critical environmental and ecological contexts of South Asian foragers is still largely undeveloped.

One feature missing in many ecologically oriented analyses of prehistoric and recent foragers is specific consideration of social and political contexts, and specifically power relations. If we agree that foragers (including those who farm, trade, keep animals, and labor for a wage) must engage a real, material world, then it seems analytically indefensible to study hunting and gathering behavior as if all choices could be freely made and as if there were never external constraints to action in past or present forager worlds. Such worlds may be best conceived as total landscapes, largely dependent on environmental parameters beyond human control but which may also have been modified, to a greater or lesser extent, by human action. These landscapes are also social landscapes in which differential relations of power exist and which are differentially perceived and acted on by humans. Such socionatural landscapes reflect, one suspects, a widespread Holocene condition rather than simply a colonial and postcolonial phenomenon. By power, I mean not only coercive and restrictive forces, something imposed on foraging groups by outside polities or peoples, but also issues of internal social and political power, the ability of foraging groups to define themselves, to move freely, to give meaning to their own actions. Skaria (1999), for example, discusses the meanings given by Bhils and other forest groups in western India to their own "wildness," a highly gendered notion whose valorization by the Bhils inverted the negative connotations of that same "wildness" when seen through colonial eyes.

The solution, then, at least as I see it, rejects the terms of the revisionist debate altogether, at least in its more typological manifestations, and

highlights the need for, on the one hand, *both* history and process. A fuller understanding of past and present forager-traders, as well as the larger worlds in which they lived and continue to live, must take into account both the contingent outcomes of particular contexts (and hence accept that human trajectories, even those involving foragers, are never fully predictable) while still working toward understandings of general historical and ecological processes. That South and Southeast Asian forager-traders followed, in many cases, roughly parallel lines of development (while still, of course, maintaining important cultural and other differences) and can be so fruitfully compared itself accentuates the critical role of such general understanding. Furthermore, this comparison also highlights the need for greater analytical integration of both organization and structure – foundational synchronic analytical forms – as well as change through time or trajectory. As noted, few studies achieve this kind of integration, though perhaps Junker's analyses (1996, chapter 10 this volume) come the closest. As noted, the differential research traditions of South and Southeast Asia might be held to account, in part, for this disjunction.

The solution, then, to the impasse of the revisionist debate will not be to ignore environmental and ecological relations in favor of interpersonal relations, nor will it be the reverse. It will not be to try and pluck hunter-gatherers from their current position as creatures uniquely linked to the natural environment, nor will it be to force other groups into that ethological mode. Instead, these dichotomies must themselves be overcome. To step outside the terms of the existing debate we must develop a balanced – and thus necessarily multidisciplinary – political ecology which both keeps humans in (and of) the natural environment while at the same time does not elide the critical cultural dimension of human experience. Furthermore, this new human ecology, as suggested above, needs above all to be a historical political ecology (cf. Biersack 1999; Peet and Watts 1996), where long-term histories matter. It is one thing, of course, to prescribe and quite another to practice. As noted, few single studies, especially those that can be outlined in an article, incorporate all aspects of this approach. It is our intention that the diversity of approaches, data sources, and emphases taken by the authors in this volume should go some way toward building this more balanced account of forager-trader (and other) lives past and present; no one scholar or discipline will be able to construct this edifice alone. Further, our focus on both comparison and long-term histories, on both process and trajectory, is meant to suggest a way into this historical political ecology. To set the stage for this comparison, we turn now to the region itself.

### South and Southeast Asia in the hunter-gatherer scene

South and Southeast Asian hunter-gatherers have often played supporting roles in hunter-gatherer studies. Unlike African, Australian, or North American foragers who have become textbook exemplars of this way of life,<sup>5</sup> South and Southeast Asian gatherers and hunters have long been recognized as less “pure,” more sullied by external forces, and as poor representatives of the type, at least in more popular treatments. This is not to say that there has not been a rich and productive tradition of anthropological and historical scholarship on Asian hunter-gatherers, as the chapters in this volume make clear. However, it is certainly the case that both ethnographic (from patrimonial bands [Steward 1938] to optimal foragers [Smith and Winterhalder 1992; Winterhalder and Smith 1981]) and archaeological (focal vs. diffuse foraging strategies, for example [Cleland 1966]) models of hunter-gatherers are overwhelmingly constructed on the basis of research outside Asia. Archaeological research on gathering and hunting peoples in South and Southeast Asia has lagged somewhat behind ethnographic work, hampered both by specific contextual difficulties in regional archaeological records (preservation problems in the humid tropics, depositional integrity of Palaeolithic sites, to name only two examples), as well as by a tendency to de-emphasize studies of hunter-gatherers in time periods after the initial emergence of agriculture (but see Junker 1996).

The evident integration of South and Southeast Asian foragers into larger-scale economies and political structures may be a factor in their perennially ambiguous status as “proper” hunter-gatherers. In the now-classic *Man the Hunter* symposium and volume, for example, B.J. Williams (1968:128) seemed both slightly apologetic and defiant about the utility of his data on the Birhor of South Bihar, India:

In some important ways the Birhor do not meet the conditions assumed in the model of hunting-gathering society. They are neither politically autonomous nor are they economically autonomous.

They live in an area that has been inhabited by tribal agriculturalists for a very long period of time. During the past 100-plus years the area has seen a large influx and growth of Hindu and Muslim agriculturalists that now far outnumber the tribal population.

The Birhor trade hunted and collected items to the villagers in exchange for rice . . . The Birhors also spend some time making rope from the inner-bark fiber . . . of certain vines. These they also trade for rice . . . Not only do the Birhor live a form of economic parabiosis with agriculturalists, but also they are in some ways a politically subjugated minority . . . These conditions which are the result of intensive interaction with dominant groups makes [*sic*] the

Birhor less than ideal as a basis for inferences about possible forms of social organization in hunting groups living only among hunters. On the other hand, they have the great advantage of being hunters now.

The apparent problem of "impure" cases (cf. Lee and DeVore 1968b:4) of hunter-gatherers of course presupposes the existence of a "pure" form or archetype. Certainly Pleistocene peoples lived in a world of hunter-gatherers, as did later peoples in some parts of the world, but the existence of a single or even a few archetypes for even these cases may not be realistic. All historically and ethnographically known foragers present problems, however, in the quest for archetypes. Schrire (1980:11) sums up this problem:

The actual study of living hunter-gatherers is fraught with practical problems: very few modern groups fall in this classification; those who do generally live in remote and unattractive areas; and despite their isolation, nearly every known group has some measure of contact with pastoralists, agriculturalists, or landowners today. Contact is regarded as an "impure" overlay on the previously "pure" hunter-gatherer base. If its effects are slight, it is usually treated as a recent intrusion that may be subtracted easily from the pure hunter-gatherer base, whereas if its manifestations are more complex, the whole situation may be regarded as transitional, representing an intermediate stage in the evolutionary scale from hunting to urban dwelling. This stage is usually defined as being analogous to a Neolithic economy – *sensu latu* – which allows the "impure" form of hunter-gatherer behavior to retain its intrinsic importance in the study of human behavior.

Thus, contemporary foragers might be seen, if not as models for the Palaeolithic, then as examples of sedentism, acculturation, or some other early Holocene process.

Schrire does not, however, note the other way in which "impure" hunter-gatherers – those involved with non-foraging others or even having non-foraging pasts – have been studied without abandoning cultural-historical schemes; they can be products of "regression" or "devolution." In fact, the participants in the *Man the Hunter* conference concerned themselves at some length with "devolution" and the problem of "failed" agriculturalists. The Sri Lankan Veddas, studied by Seligman and Seligman (1911), were included in this category as were the Siriono of South America (Lee and DeVore 1968b:4; and see Lathrap 1968; Murdock 1968). That such language can be used to describe this shift points to the pervasiveness of progressivist evolutionary schemes and the persistent belief that gathering and hunting are "primitive" and "simple," and hence "early" in



the usual scheme of things.<sup>6</sup> Lathrap (1968:29), for example, has made much of the fact that the ancestors of some South American foraging groups formerly practiced agriculture, a pattern that follows in part from the colonial experience of the Americas and its catastrophic demographic and social-political effects. Such transitions, although historically specific, should, it would seem, tell us a great deal about foraging strategies in general. Rather than argue about whether such hunter-gatherers are “real” or “devolved,”<sup>7</sup> we might see in such shifts an opportunity to combine both historically specific and general organizational understanding of foraging and its role in larger strategies of survival, resistance, and cultural persistence and change. Both South and Southeast Asian foraging peoples present similar opportunities for scholarly understanding. We know that we face complex and long-term histories of engagement between people organized in very different ways, a situation which was probably more common in the past several millennia than anthropologists have generally acknowledged.

In a sense, then, we can see that the concerns raised by the revisionists, including their attacks on the myth of the primitive isolate (Headland and Reid 1991; Kuper 1988), are partially prefigured in earlier scholarship (and cf. R.G. Fox 1969; Steward and Murphy 1977). What this debate did accomplish, however, besides promoting a vitriolic public exchange over the history of southern African San peoples and the history of scholarship relating to them, was to highlight the ways in which isolationist models are *used*, particularly in archaeological reconstructions (Shott 1992). This is an important contribution, especially given the tendency in archaeology to rely on ideal types or categories that can be used to flesh out difficult reconstructions (cf. Morrison 1996).

While we can probably agree that naive attempts to create analogues for Palaeolithic lifeways based on heavy-handed applications of San ethnography, for example, are to be avoided, the question remains as to what the recognition of complex historical interaction implies for constructive research. In this, we hope that the experiences of South and Southeast Asian forager-traders will have something to contribute. Extreme revisionist views, that studies of contemporary and historically known hunting and gathering peoples have little or nothing to tell us about prehistoric hunting and gathering, are not only incorrect, in my view, but they also reveal, as noted above, an underlying essentialist bias sometimes shared by its fiercest opponents. This is the idea that “hunter-gatherer” or “forager” is to be constituted as an ideal type, so that “corrupted” or “devolved” contemporary examples have nothing to contribute to examination of presumably

purer past examples of the type. To return to the concept of “base” as raised by Schrire (1980), one might ask whether or not hunting and gathering constitutes some kind of a base or foundation (cultural, if not economic, cf. Bird-David 1992a, 1992b) on which later (or different) strategies are simply built. Or, should the metaphor perhaps invoke concentricity, as in the layers of an onion? Perhaps we should abandon the notion of the forager archetype, of bases and foundations, altogether. In South and Southeast Asia, it is clear that contemporary foraging peoples are not isomorphic in their lifeways with, for example, Palaeolithic or Mesolithic hunter-gatherers. In some cases, like those described by Lathrap, they are clearly not remnant populations of people with an unbroken history of hunting and gathering but are instead people who, in the face of both opportunity and restraint, rearranged their subsistence activities to become specialized forager-traders. Both these people *as well as* those who can claim an unbroken ancestry involving gathering and hunting are no less “modern” than agriculturalists or craftspeople, no less contemporary, no less enmeshed in complex political, cultural, and economic worlds. In some cases, we can view hunting, gathering, and trading as related to oppression and domination, but it is also apparent that many people have worked hard to retain their ability to practice various foraging lifeways, suggesting a kind of resilience and strength on the part of foragers that views of their disappearance or imminent demise tend to deny them.

As noted, the solution to the apparent deadlock of the extremes of the revisionist debate – a relentless historicism and anti-comparativist bent on the one hand, an ahistorical scientism on the other – may be for both sides (and those on the sidelines) to abandon the worn-out typological constructs that have been the source of such acrimony. Rather than imagine that contemporary “bands” (*sensu* Service 1971) can tell us all about “bands” in the past, we may instead consider strategies and processes, which although historically variable and contingent (inasmuch as strategies and processes are always realized in specific contexts) have utility as general analytical categories that iconic depictions of societal types do not.

### **Building comparisons: South and Southeast Asia**

South and Southeast Asia, beyond their potential to contribute to broader debates in anthropology and hunter-gatherer studies, also present us with an interesting historical comparison. In both places, upland peoples are known to survive by gathering forest products<sup>8</sup> and trading with lowland

agriculturalists for essential goods such as rice (or other crops), cloth, and metal (Dunn 1975; Eder 1988; R.G. Fox 1969; Headland and Reid 1989, 1991; Hockings 1985; Hoffman 1984; Hooja 1988; Junker 1996; Morris 1982b; Spielmann and Eder 1994). Although both South and Southeast Asia incorporate a great deal of environmental variability, in both places upland/lowland trading relationships took place (and still do) in the context of tropical and semitropical environments and involve a similar range of products. In both areas, topographic and associated environmental variation is a salient dimension of residence and social-economic organization, with vegetation distributions and transport considerations playing important roles in the ability of lowland polities to penetrate and successfully navigate the uplands. In both places agriculture was developed relatively early, but was adopted rather selectively so that diversity in economic strategies has been the norm throughout the latter part of the Holocene (and perhaps before). Thus, upland agriculturalists may practice swidden farming at the same time as nearby groups forage and trade, while lowland farmers may engage in swidden agriculture, trade, and intensive rice agriculture – and, significantly, the same people may vary their practices through time (e.g. Griffin 1984).<sup>9</sup>

Further, specific historical experiences tie the two regions together. Most importantly, these include a common participation in regional exchange networks, beginning by at least the last few centuries BC. This broad network of commerce and culture stretched ultimately from the Mediterranean to China via many intermediate links (Junker 1990b; Morrison 1997). The scale and intensity of interaction waxed and waned through time, but we can point to particular periods of high connectivity (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1989; Arasaratnam 1986; Liu 1988; Meilink Roelofsz 1962; Ray 1994; A. Reid 1993b; Risso 1995). The nature of this connectivity is multifaceted, including not only commercial relationships, but also religious exchanges (the expansion of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, for example) and political domination (common experiences of colonization by the Portuguese and English, as well as by other powers [Bouchon 1988; Stoler 1985; Subrahmanyam 1993]). Both South and Southeast Asia played key roles in the expanding spice trade of the sixteenth century and later, with particular regions supplying raw materials (many of them forest products) and others serving as redistribution or food supply centers. Separate introductory sections (Morrison, chapter 2, Junker, chapter 7, this volume) lay out the particular histories of South and Southeast Asia and of forager-traders within them, but it is worth stressing here the comparative as well as historical enterprise of this volume.

### **Problems of naming: when is a hunter-gatherer?**

Throughout this volume we grapple with problems of terminology. People who gather wild plants and hunt wild animals are generally called hunter-gatherers unless they also engage in agriculture. In that case, they become agriculturalists, with agriculture enjoying a priority in naming. If people who hunt and gather also engage in trade or craft production, then again these latter activities are often accorded priority and they become known as specialists (who also hunt and gather). The difficulties with these easy labels have been widely discussed, for example in the context of hunting and gathering by agriculturalists (Kent 1989). The term forager presents similar difficulties,<sup>10</sup> even if we eschew any necessary association of adjectives such as "optimal" (cf. Winterhalder and Smith 1981).

We thus experience some difficulty in discussing South and Southeast Asian peoples differentially involved in gathering, hunting, trading, agriculture, and wage labor because the shorthand categories we employ are based on economic labels for modal (or most important,<sup>11</sup> or most "advanced" in some evolutionary scheme) forms of food getting and the peoples we are considering here employ a wide variety of food-getting strategies.<sup>12</sup> The use of shorthand modal labels flies in the face of empirical evidence for considerable economic diversity and flux apparent in the archaeological, historical, and ethnographic records. This diversity and flux is both synchronic, with spatial and social variability in gathering, hunting, and trading strategies, and diachronic, changing through time. Such staggering diversity encourages the construction of such awkward monikers as "hunter-gatherer-farmer-trader." In the end, we have opted, first of all, not to restrict the terminology of individual authors, but to let them use whatever constructions seemed most relevant. Second, we have emphasized both foraging (used here as a synonym for hunting and gathering) and trading in the volume title because these are two important dimensions behind the selection of cases and in the comparison between South and Southeast Asian histories that we wish to highlight.

If economic labels present certain problems of focus and definition, cultural labels create other difficulties. In this volume we consider a broad range of ethnic, linguistic, biological, and social groups – dimensions of difference that may be either mutually coincident or cross-cutting – some of whom are difficult to distinguish from their non-foraging neighbors on these same grounds (cf. Hoffman 1984; Fix, this volume). Further, archaeological and historical analyses are not always suited to recover self-ascribed cultural classifications. Nevertheless, in some cases it will be possible to follow the history of a single "people," while in other cases

the economic activities that led to, for example, the formation of a certain kind of archaeological deposit will be much more evident than the social or cultural identity of its creators. Thus, the discussions in this volume vary in both scale and specificity, depending on the nature of their information and the scope of their analysis.

Having pointed to the difficulties of naming (what makes someone a forager-trader? Does such terminology elide other activities such as farming, serving in an army, etc?) and the sometimes-insidious way in which terminology can be employed (farming tends to cancel out gathering, for example), it is worth examining the utility of the analytical category of forager-trader. The unity we see across the cases in this volume is multifaceted. On the one hand, this unity is one of strategy: the exploitation of wild plants and animals (and in some cases, of minerals) is, in the contexts discussed here, a specialized economic and social strategy for surviving in a complex and stratified world. The unity among cases is also one of engagement. The ecological, social, and political relationships between, for example, late precolonial “hill peoples” of the Western Ghats of India and the wider nexus of political power and international exchange were remarkably similar to those of upland forest dwellers in the Malay Peninsula at about the same time (Anderson and Vorster 1983; Morrison, chapter 6 this volume). Considerations of power, marginality, contestation, cooperation, and exploitation figure in almost every discussion in this volume, even if implicitly. Finally, the chapters in this volume contribute to the consideration of an analytical unity of historical process. From the very beginnings of hunter-gatherer engagement with differently organized others, we have to abandon the idea of a “pure” hunting and gathering world and to begin to conceptualize and investigate what turns out to be an ongoing process of engagement. In the agricultural origins literature, this realization has long been present (e.g. Dennell 1985a; Green 1991; Tringham 1971; Zvelebil 1986), but is sometimes cast as the opposition between “types” of peoples or “stages” of society and as an engagement that effectively ended with the triumph of the Neolithic. Holocene hunting and gathering may not be best understood as a persistent strategy of the tattered but tenacious remnant of the losers in the wave of advance (cf. Ammerman and Cavalli-Sforza 1984), but instead as a viable (although sometimes marginally so) strategy for surviving, even prospering, in a complex world. It is this long-term history – or histories – that may allow us to see what regularities there may be in historical process without requiring that we construct our understandings solely out of bounded and rigid categories such as “agriculturalist,” “hunter-gatherer,” “merchant,” or “state.”

### **Long-term histories in South and Southeast Asia**

The contributors to this volume have two immediate goals. First, and more immediately, we wish to consider the long-term histories of several groups of forager-traders and their neighbors in South and Southeast Asia. As noted, many contemporary groups in this part of the world subsist through various combinations of gathering, trading, hunting, wage labor, and agriculture; all of these groups are articulated into national and international markets and polities. The relationships between people and their environments, within and between various groups of forager-traders, and between forager-traders and their agricultural, mercantile, and military neighbors are complex and variable across this region. Further, relations of exchange, of interdependence, of domination, and of inter-group awareness are of long duration in South and Southeast Asia, extending back as far as the initial shift from hunting and gathering. Far from existing in isolation, South and Southeast Asian peoples have a long history of maintaining multiple diverse – sometimes opposing – lifeways. There is merit in focusing on this part of the world, for the histories we see here have much to say about the long-term possibilities for the creation, destruction, and reinvention of strategies of hunting, gathering, and exchange in the contexts of both tropical and subtropical environments and of expanding state power.

The chapters in this volume employ a variety of approaches and information from ethnography, history, biology, linguistics, and archaeology, fields it will ultimately be necessary to bring to closer accord if the vision of a historical political ecology sketched above is to be realized. It should be noted that several authors contributing to this volume do not specialize in hunter-gatherer studies but instead come to their interest in the engagement of forager-traders with agriculturalists, states, and empires from the other side of the equation. In this, I think that we may balance the debate somewhat, moving between studies that focus closely on the foragers themselves but that may view external forces as large and undifferentiated, and studies that lack the rich detail and close reading of foragers' strategies and dilemmas but that work to situate the relationships between hunter-gatherers and others in the context of the larger political economy. This location in larger political economies raises fundamental concerns for those of us who do not consider ourselves specialists in hunter-gatherer studies. If forager-traders are truly part of larger societies, then their activities are of concern not only to hunter-gatherer specialists, but also to those concerned with the operation of states and empires. Sahlins once noted (1972:8), half-humorously, the misconception that "The anthropology of hunters is largely an anachronistic study of ex-savages – an inquest

into the corpse of society . . . presided over by members of another.” The body is, however, alive and, it seems, a real part of the overall body politic. “They,” in this construction, are truly a part of “our” society, and the study of foragers thus moves into the mainstream.

The second goal of this volume is more general. By approaching the problem of long-term history not as a study in typology – hunter-gatherers behave in such and such a way – but as a study in long-term patterns of adaptation,<sup>13</sup> adaptation *to* environment, to polity, to power, and adaptation *of* these same forces, we hope to transcend the current debate in hunter-gatherer studies. We agree that history matters, but we also aim to move beyond polemics. By accepting that even small-scale societies have histories, we are not reduced to mere biographers. Putting people back into history does not require that we abandon the search for more general understandings of human strategies, including strategies of subsistence, mobility, social organization, resistance, and indeed change itself. A historicized understanding of forager-traders need not imply that they have been mere pawns of history. Instead, a search for the ways in which such peoples, successfully and unsuccessfully, sought to adjust and adapt to changing circumstances can actually strengthen ecological analyses, leading us toward a more historically and humanly informed ecology.

#### NOTES

- 1 Indeed, one might say as models *of* the Palaeolithic (an argument of persistence) or as models *for* the Palaeolithic (grounds for analogy).
- 2 It is interesting to consider the conclusions drawn by participants in the revisionist debate about its implications for future work. Compare, for example, the statements of Burch (1994) and Gunther (1995).
- 3 The use of “primitives” (often pure figments of the imagination) as conceptual foils for understanding “ourselves” has a long history in both scholarly and popular writing. For the former, I note the way in which Adam Smith created just-so origin stories for various economic and social institutions based on his conception of (economically rational) primitive humans. He explains the origins of the division of labor in just this way ([1776] 1976:19):

In a tribe of hunters or shepherds a particular person makes bows and arrows, for example, with more readiness and dexterity than any other. He frequently exchanges them for cattle or venison with his companions; and he finds at last that he can in this manner get more cattle and venison than if he himself went into the field to catch them. From a regard to his own interest, therefore, the making of bows and arrows grows to be his chief business, and he becomes a sort of armourer.

- Di Leonardo (1998) discusses popular use of this trope, including its deployment by popular sociobiology.
- 4 This formulation is a set refrain of textbooks.
  - 5 For example, an examination of indexed references in Bettinger (1991), a general treatment of hunter-gatherers, yields thirty references to African groups, twenty-five to South American, fifteen to North American, seven to Australian, and only three to Asian hunter-gatherers.
  - 6 Johnson and Earle write (1987:27), for example, "Foraging economies have the simplest form of subsistence production, gathering wild plants and hunting wild animals."
  - 7 Or "primary" or "secondary" (Hoffman 1984:144; see also Woodburn 1980).
  - 8 What are usually referred to in both places by the colonial term "minor forest products" meaning gums, resins, honey, dye products, wax, animals, spices, etc. Just about any product of the forest other than bulk wood products may be included in this category. It is also significant to consider that in both cases, forests were originally more extensive than they are today and that the upland forests themselves may be more legitimately considered remnant than the people who live in and use them.
  - 9 Some scholars have argued that the survival of hunter-gatherers in tropical forest environments is simply not possible due to constraints on the productivity of biomass edible to humans (Bailey et al. 1989; Headland 1987), thus suggesting that interaction between agriculturalists and foragers is always essential. For discussion of this issue, see the introduction to Southeast Asia by Junker, this volume (chapter 7). The issue is far from resolved for South Asia, where relatively little work on either human ecology or archaeology (especially of non-agriculturalists) has been conducted in tropical forest environments.
  - 10 Pianka (1974:108, 202) makes it clear how the forager concept, which is derived from ethological studies of animal behavior, is based on explicit metaphors of the market economy (profits, costs) and on assumptions about the optimizing nature of behavior.
  - 11 And, of course, we can ask how importance is to be gauged. For example, the high social visibility of hunting and its cultural importance often eclipse its sometimes modest contribution to caloric intake.
  - 12 In a discussion of "post-pastoral" and "post-agricultural" foragers in Kenya, Cable (1987:11–12) notes, "The adoption of a generalist or mixed economic strategy seems to have been more common for foragers and farmers than traditional archaeological classifications might suggest. The implication is that purely economic criteria may be poor differentiators between groups that see themselves socially and ideologically as practicing quite different subsistence adaptations." He also complains that archaeological work in Kenya has rarely focused on post-pastoral and post-agricultural foragers, suggesting that field



methods and the expectations of archaeologists may be equally to blame for this state of affairs (1987:2–3).

- 13 Here the term adaptation is employed in its most general sense of adjustment, change, and accommodation rather than as a precise ecological concept. Clearly, I do not wish to suggest that forager-traders, or states, empires, or any other group for that matter, somehow lie outside of or do not have to respond to environmental dynamics.