

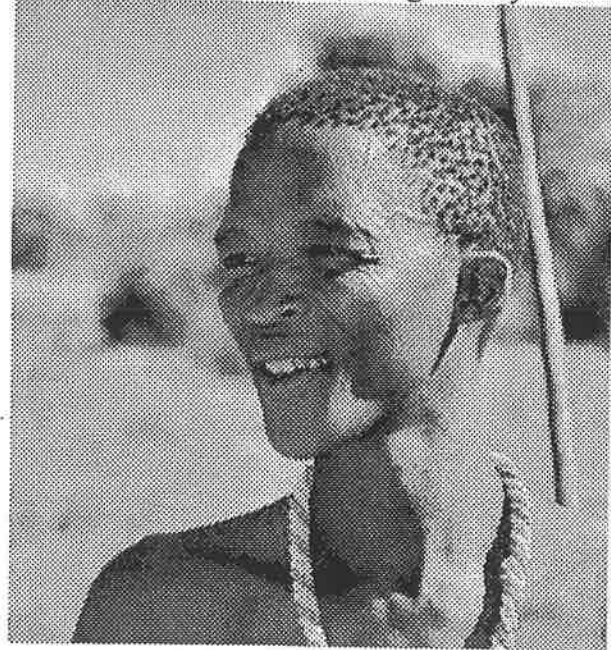
Hunter-Gatherer Societies

From Raw-Food-Health.net

From the time of the first humans (about 2 million years ago) until the start of large agriculture and cities (only 5,000 years ago), humans lived as hunter-gatherers. That means, for 90% of human history, we lived as hunter-gatherers. Now, when I say hunter gatherers, you think nasty, brutish and short, and that's a misconception that's continued forever. They're actually generally well fed, have more time off, and better sex lives than most of us today. Hunter gatherers today still live largely-to the extent that we allow them -as they have since the dawn of man.

When we think of hunter-gatherers, we think of cold, hungry, malnourished, and generally deprived people living in squalid dwelling in remote wastelands. We pity them, and certainly don't want to be like them. Perhaps we throw money in the collection basket in the hope of someone brightening their lives. After all, our civilization provides us with modern health care and plenty of food. We've landed men on the moon and harvested the power of the atom. We communicate across the globe in the blink of an eye and our buildings stretch up impossibly high into the sky. These are impressive feats indeed.

But is this idea accurate? There are many things hunter gatherers have never done that we have, but in some ways their privileged lives put us to shame. Besides rarely going hungry and easily meeting their limited wants, they outclass us in a number of ways.



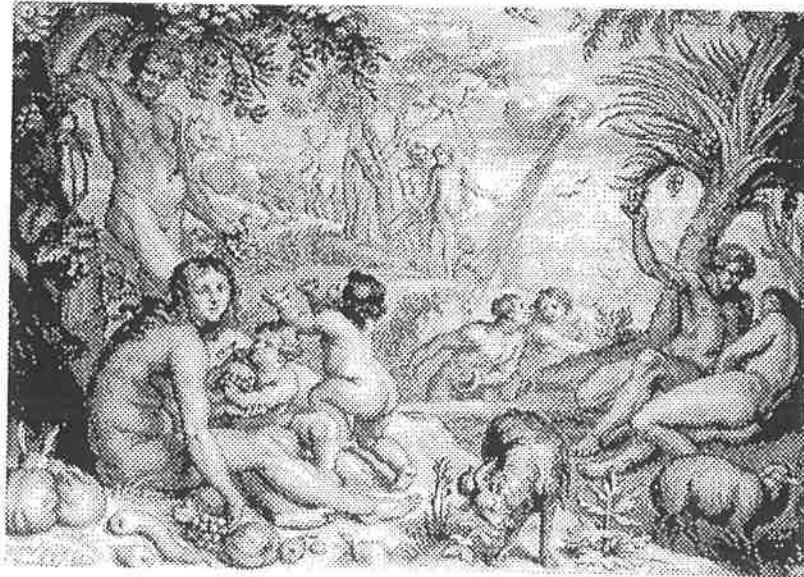
Imagine being part of a society with no taxes, politics, leaders, bosses, 9 to 5 jobs, little crime, and no rich or poor people. In their world, everything is shared, and happiness seems to not include the accumulation of more goods. It's important not to idealize these societies because they certainly have flaws. You also can't lump all hunter gatherers together as if they shared the same culture, because there are considerable differences between them. Most do share these benefits to some extent, however:

- **Their work week is short enough to make us drool in envy.**
- **They enjoy almost unbelievable egalitarianism**
- **The religious gasp at their high levels of sexual freedom, experimentation, and enjoyment.**
- **They're very happy people, laughing freely way more than we do.**
- **Outside a division of labor, women have total social equality with men.**
- **They rarely resort to violence or war**

- Strong social safety nets in most of their societies support the disabled, old, and in many cases, even the lazy.
- They usually live to be at least as old as we do
- Their health is more robust than ours, and they're frequently immune to diseases ravaging their sedentary neighbors.
- Their social lives are rich, and they have the free time to indulge themselves.
- With a few exceptions, their lifestyle lets them live in harmony with the earth, relying mostly on renewable resources, and keeping their numbers at a sustainable level.
- Their senses appear many times sharper than their own, and many seem curiously immune to extremes of temperature.
- Their strength often seems unbelievable.
- They intelligently use their time to create more productive environments that needs little care.

We cannot go back and become hunter gatherers, nor would we likely want to, but these people have some important lessons we could integrate into our civilization for its betterment.

The Golden Age of Man: When We Were Better



"... before the Cretan king, Dictaeon Jove, held sway and an impious age of men began to feast on slaughtered oxen, this life was led on earth by golden Saturn, when none had ever heard the trumpet blown or heard the sword-blade clanking on the anvil." (Virgil, Georgics).

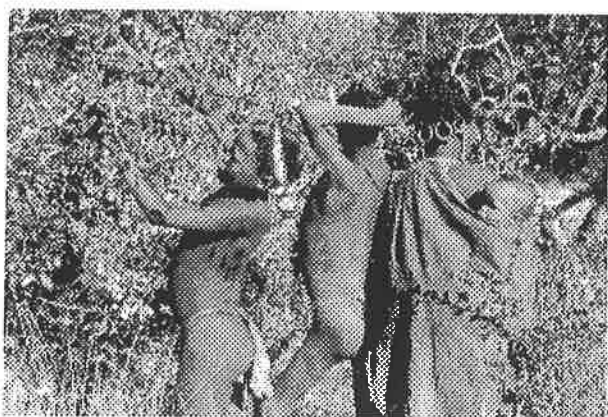
Almost universal in many Western religions is the story of the fall. In the bible, man was cast out of the Garden of Eden, where he lived a life of ease, harvesting the fruit of the earth and living in peace with other creatures. After his fall from grace, he was damned to live in toil, trying to eek out an existence from the earth. The ancient Greeks believed their people were pale shadows of ancient exemplars. At some unstated time before the Trojan War, the Greeks believed their

ancestors had no need to farm during a golden age of the world, but had all their needs provided for them by the earth. They believed these men were much stronger and free of disease.

Regardless of the culture, almost every society and religion has a story of decay. Almost universal is that idea that there was a time when things were better, easier, simpler and more peaceful. Though many of these stories are mere fancy, they're likely not entirely legend either. They may well have been based on an actual fall from a better mode of living to one of surplus farming.

Man started making the change from a hunter gatherer and light agricultural society to one of intensive surplus farming only about 10,000 years ago, and the shift seems to have sunk into our culture. As you read about the traits expressed by the few extant hunter gatherer civilizations, ask yourself if it sounds like they're still living a bit in the golden age the Greeks talked of.

Vigor, Age and the Senses



Hunter Gatherers enjoy great health as well as a level of physical strength, resilience, and range of awareness that makes us look like weaklings. The Greeks pined for their vanished age of heroes, and their inspiration may have come from these people.

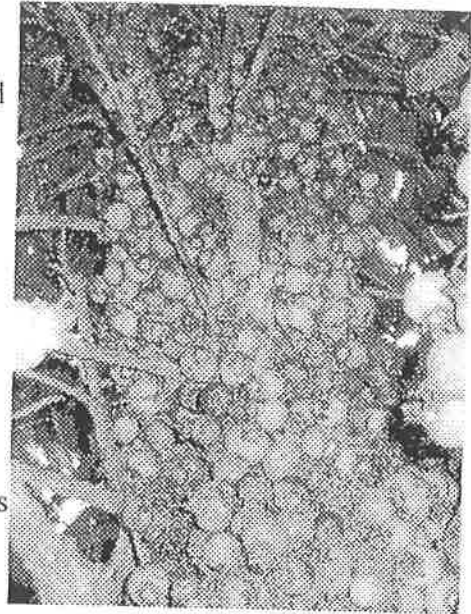
Perhaps the best example I can give is a man of the San tribe of South Africa who survived an unarmed fight with a leopard. Anthropologists studying the tribe noted that while he was wounded by the encounter, he killed the animal with his bare hands (3). Although it's believed their society and health have declined since contact with the west beginning in the mid 19th century, The Andaman Islanders west of Thailand are noted for their remarkable health. They don't seem to suffer from disease, their wounds heal quickly, and their senses are acute. They seem immune to the Malaria that periodically ravages their settled neighbors, their skin is of sufficient elasticity to rule out the post-childbirth stretch marks and wrinkling we associate with ageing. Their teeth are so strong that children between the ages of 10 and 15 can crush nails with them (18).

Watching them wade through a swarm of bees unstung, anthropologist Lido Ciprini said, "Watching them one felt in the presence of some age-old mystery, lost by the civilized world." The superior health of hunter gatherers can be measured in a number of areas, including the absence of degenerative diseases and mental disabilities, and childbirth without difficulty or pain (19), but Devries points out these advantages begin to erode soon after regular contact with civilization is established.

Most people assume hunter gatherers die young, but they live about as long as we do. Out of 466 !Kung involved in one study, 46 (17 men and 29 women) were over the age 60, a percentage that compares favorably to that of elderly populations in industrialized societies (16).

They also don't seem as bothered by climate as we are. During his voyage on the Beagle, Darwin noted a people at the southernmost tip of South America that went about naked in frigid conditions (4), while others have noticed the aborigines of Australia don't seem overly bothered by cold desert nights with little clothing (3).

Hunter Gatherers also possess sight that's astounding by our standards. One South American tribe was capable of seeing the planet Venus in full daylight (20). Several tribes of African bushmen are noted for their ability to see the four moons of Jupiter with their naked eyes (21). The North African Dogon consider Sirius B the most important star (3), but how can they possibly be aware of it with their naked eyes when only powerful telescopes are capable of showing it to our astronomers?



Taking It Easy

Busy with our rat race, it seems hard to believe people can keep their stomachs full and a roof over your head with drastically less time spent at work. When we think of hunter gatherers, we imagine people one step ahead of starvation, but years of research shows us otherwise.

Food is abundant enough that there's little urgency in the food gathering activities of the Batek of Malaysia. They don't view the work as a burden, but actually approach it with enthusiasm (10), walking through the forest in social groups at a leisurely pace to pick nuts, fruits, and roots. They frequently stop to chat, flirt, share fruit, and even play with babies. In camp, the Batek often remark that they're tired of sitting around, and so head off to go walk the jungle or go fishing. (10) It's often been noted that hunter gatherers act as if they have it made. They don't work hard to gather extra food for a rainy day, but only enough for their immediate needs. Rarely does anyone doubt their ability to find food tomorrow(11).

In "The Original Affluent Society," author Marshall Sahlins's uses data to show several hunter gatherer groups seem to average only a mean of three to five hours of work a day. This includes time spent gathering food and other needed items as well as time producing things, but not time spent cooking or doing personal tasks. This totals about 20 hours of work a week.

Happiness

Almost universally, anthropologists remark on how ridiculously happy hunter gatherers seem to be. Laughter is far more common in their societies. Of the !Kung: "Bursts of laughter accompany the conversations. Sometimes the !Kung laugh mildly with what we would call a sense of humor about people and events; often they shriek and howl as though laughter were an outlet for tension. They laugh at mishaps that happen to other people, like the lions eating up someone else's meat, and shriek over particularly telling and insulting sexual sallies...(15)". Laurens van der Post expressed wonder at the exuberant San laugh, which rises "sheer from the stomach, a

laugh you never hear among civilized people. (17). "There's little wonder why. With no stressful work and plenty of time to socialize with friends and family, or engage in other pursuits they enjoy, what's not to be happy about?"

The First Social Safety Net

The first social safety net was developed by hunter gatherers. It requires no taxes, but merely sharing. The idea of not sharing what they have is shocking to the !Kung of the Kalahari Desert. It makes them laugh uneasily to hear the idea. Lions would do that, they say, not men (13). Keeping more than a fair portion for yourself and your family would bring great disdain from the tribe, which expects the fruit of any hunt to be distributed equitably.

The old, senile, crippled, and young are especially well cared for, and respected for their expertise. Senicide is extremely rare (14). The responsibility of working and gathering food is not picked up by the young. Children are not expected to provide food for themselves or others until they get married, which happens around age 20 to 25 for men and from age 15 to 20 for girls. So, it's not unusual to see healthy teenagers visiting from camp to camp while their older relatives provide food for them (14). The people of age 20 through 60, or around 60 percent of the adult population in !Kung camps, supports the other 40, which allows for a carefree childhood and untroubled old age (14).

Equality Of The Sexes

Equality is another area where we've made huge gains in the last 50 years. Women are increasingly free to live their lives as they wish without social stigma. But again, the hunter gatherers beat us to the punch by countless millennia, and still outclass us.

During his famous voyage on the HMS Beagle, Charles Darwin noted that in remote tribes, women had more power to choose, reject, or change husbands, and pick lovers than he would have ever imagined (4). The reason they have so much power is because the men need them as much as the women needed the men. Half or more of calories consumed are actually plant foods gathered by women in most of these societies, though men also gather and hunt.

A Jesuit missionary wrote of the 17th century Montagnais-Naskapi of Quebec, saying that disputes and quarrels among spouses were virtually nonexistent, since each sex carried out its own activities without meddling in those of the



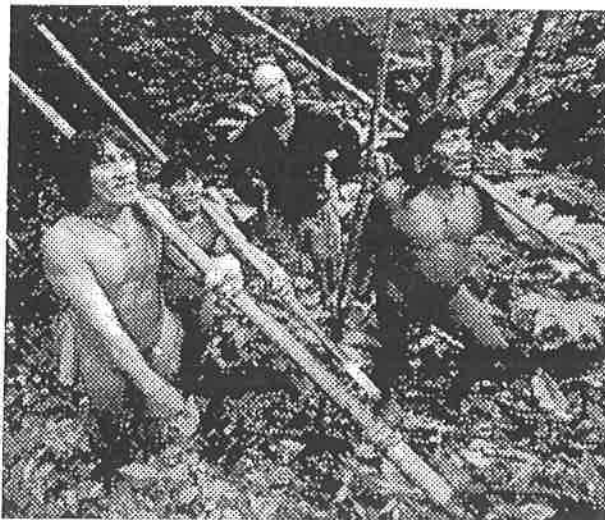
other. The tribe thought, "they ought by right of birth to enjoy the liberty of wild ass colts, rendering no homage to any one whomsoever," he said. He disapproved of this, and instructed the men that they should make their wives obey them and force sexual fidelity upon them, apparently without much success, because the men had no leverage (6).

Hunt Little, Gather Much

Hunter gatherer is a bit of a misnomer, as gathered plant materials have always provided considerably more calories than hunting, except in far northern and southern climates where plant material is scarce. Gatherer scavenger would probably be a better term to describe the lifestyle. Scientific consensus has shifted in the last few decades from the assumption that hunting provides the main source of food for hunter gatherers to today's view of hunting as supplementary (22). There's actually no indication of the use of animal products until the relatively recent appearance of anatomically modern humans (23).

Adrienne Zihlman concludes that that "hunting arose relatively late in evolution," and "may not extend beyond the last one hundred thousand years" (24). Lewis Binford doubts there was any significant hunting activity before 200,000 years ago (25).

Archaeology backs this up. Fossil teeth belonging to our ancestors found in east Africa suggest a



fruit-based diet, and stone tools found at a 1.5 million-year-old site a Koobi Fora Kenya were used to process plant materials (3). The diet of early man was made up largely of high-fiber vegetables and fruit, as opposed to the modern high fat and animal protein diet with its attendant chronic disorders (24).

Descriptions by sailors and explorers are filled with examples of newly discovered regions where wild mammals and birds originally showed no fear of humans. A few hunter gatherers practiced no hunting at all before exposure to the west, though most did hunt to some extent (3).

Overall, hunter gatherers have a better, more varied diet than their surrounding farming neighbors. Starvation is very rare, their health is generally superior, and there is much less chronic disease (26). Their fruit-based diets keep them in far better shape, despite their lack of medical care.

Unlimited Equality

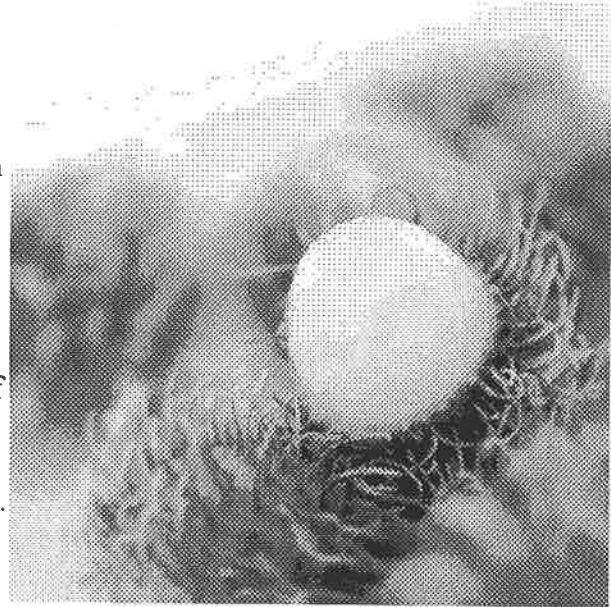
Can you imagine a life without social classes, a boss to slave away under, or politicians to rule over you? These societies exist right now, and they thrive.

Because there is little in the way of property and so much sharing, there's not much to fight over in hunter gatherer societies.

People that try to take control have no leverage to manipulate people with. They can't really threaten to take away land or rights, because these are all equally shared. They can't bribe someone, because they don't have much more than the next person.

They can threaten with physical harm, but the other person can just pack up and leave because they're untied to any particular piece of land or they can fight back. But most of these societies have a built in aversion to authority that stop such attempts in their tracks.

Among the !Kung, for instance, any assumption of authority within a group leads to ridicule or anger (26). Dozens of studies stress communal sharing and egalitarianism as the defining traits of such groups (3). Baer lists "egalitarianism, democracy, personism, individuation, nurturance" as key virtues of the non-civilized (3).



Among the Mbuti of the Congo, researchers describe a complete power vacuum, and say, essentially, peaceful anarchy reigns. They have no rulers, and decisions concerning the band are made by consensus (27). Anthropologist Paul Radin says that: "free scope is allowed for every conceivable kind of personality outlet or expression in primitive society. No moral judgement is passed on any aspect of human personality as such" (28).

Peace

Don't let old tales of bloodthirsty natives fool you; hunter gatherers are peaceful people.

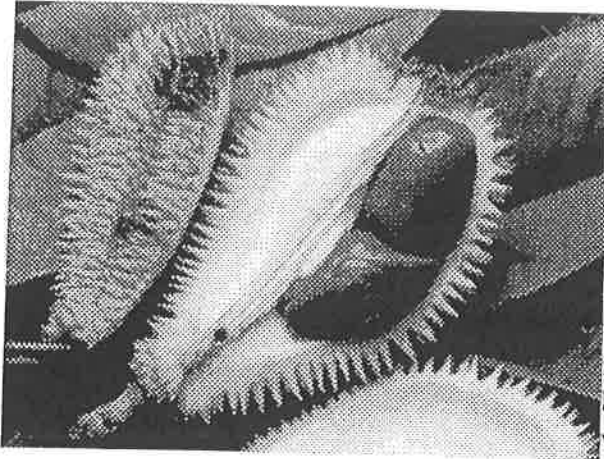
The warlike nature of Native Americans, for instance, was mostly fabricated by Europeans to legitimize conquest. Most didn't start fighting seriously until it became clear the Europeans would not be content until the natives were wiped out and they controlled all the land (30).

Homicides and suicides in hunter gatherer societies are incredibly rare (29).

The !Kung hate fighting, and think anybody who fights is rather stupid (3). The Mbuti, "look on any form of violence between one person and another with great abhorrence and distaste, and never represent it in their dancing or playacting" (27). Even when they do fight, it's more like sporadic skirmishing. Hunter Gatherers simply lack the food reserves to support armies outside

of their territories. This does make them particularly vulnerable to agricultural groups that want their land, however, which is why there are so few hunter gatherer societies left.

Good Sex Starts Young.



Within the last 50 years our culture has adopted a level of sexual freedom unheard of since the dawn of civilization. But even now there is a kind of deep-seated hesitation about the whole idea of sex, and puritanical religious and societal forces still frown on anyone who indulges freely.

If hunter gatherers lived among us, the tabloids would label their women whores and their men...well I suppose they would just say they're being men. Funny how that works. But no one would want their teenagers to go anywhere near the children of the HGs.

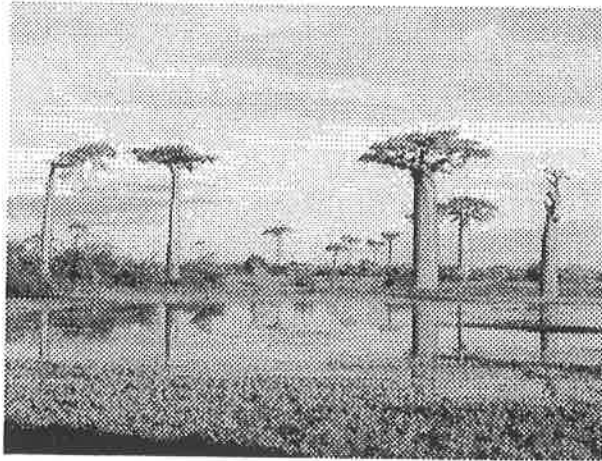
For the Mbuti of the Congo, it's usual for youths to experiment with sex play, and teenagers, "indulge in premarital sex with enthusiasm and delight," according to Colin Turnbull. (1) There is no social stigma attached to this, and it's actually encouraged by society.

Among the Iroquois in the 1800s, young women lived in dormitories, took lovers, and experimented with trial marriages for years before they made a choice and settled down (5).

This sexual freedom and lack of bashfulness about the subject shocked civilized missionaries going back hundreds of years. The ribald conversations shared by men and women were especially galling to them. Even when men and women settle down and marry, these situations are and often not sexually exclusive.

I honestly haven't the slightest idea what to make of one interesting, oft repeated idea seen from researchers studying hunter gatherer societies all over the globe: that their women are able to prevent pregnancy without contraception. One theory is that they're merely more in tune with their physical selves, their senses are not dulled, and their bodies are less mysterious because they are not viewed as foreign objects to be acted upon (3). Perhaps an increased awareness of fertility cycles could explain this.

Low Maintenance Cultivation



The hunter gatherers of North America dwelled in and between in the vast forests that stretched across much of the continent. With the exception of the south west, the only treeless lands, including most of the great plains, were treeless because Indians kept them that way. The Indians consciously expanded the great plains through controlled burning to increase the range of the buffalo (8).

When Europeans arrived they were amazed at the huge trees they found, such as the white pines of New England, which they quickly started using to build ship masts. They thought the new world simply had trees that grew larger and ignored the stewards who had masterfully cultivated those trees. They also couldn't understand why so many forests had large numbers of fruit trees in them. For millennia the Native Americans worked to maximize the species of useful trees and bushes while minimizing the disadvantageous ones, all the while maintaining a natural harmony that kept the woods safe from fire and disease (8).

Their culture was not a stone, bronze, or iron one, as you might classify old world civilizations, but a wood one. The number of things they built with wood was immense. The pines they so favored allowed for huge canoes, palisades, spears, bows, arrows, mortars, pestles, spoons, boxes, bowls, snow goggles, cradles, digging sticks, and a huge number of other tools. The Native Americans wanted food that was easy to get. They didn't want to spend a ton of time working for it, so they cultivated many perennial species that would grow good food year after year without intervention. Paw paws, persimmons, mulberries, blueberries, pecans, and dozens of other fruit and nut-bearing plants were spread to achieve this (8). Similar forest-based agricultural systems can be seen among the Mbuti of the Congo and the Batek of Malaysia. (9)

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