

4

Studying Children in "Hunter-Gatherer" Societies

Reflections from a Nayaka Perspective

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When at the beginning of the century, the common wisdom was that animistic people think like children, the young Margaret Mead asked very logically, How then do children in these societies think (Mead 1932)? Mead was exceptional in giving children a central place in her ethnographic and theoretical work. With few exceptions, notably within the school of Culture and Personality of which she was a proponent, "children" have not been studied much as a social group, not to mention as a variable cultural concept. "[I]t would be fair to say," wrote Tim Ingold in the *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (1994), "that in the majority of anthropological accounts, children are conspicuous by their absence" (Ingold 1994:745). What research does exist "has been fitful rather than systematic," posited Christina Toren, in an encyclopedic essay on children (1996:92). While children have been studied more often than such programmatic generalizations suggest (largely, from an adult-skewed "socialization" perspective, on which see more below), it is fair to say that child-focused research has remained marginal and undertheorized. It is rarely represented in major anthropological publications, in undergraduate textbooks, or in overviews of state-of-the-art trends in anthropology. As Hirschfeld has recently summed it up, "A substantial, coherent, and—most critically—theoretically influential program of child-focused research did not emerge" (2002:625).

The "hunter-gatherers" field of study has been no exception, as is evident for example in the 1999 *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers* (Lee and Daly 1999). Photographs of children abound in this authoritative reference book, but scholarly references to them are scarce. Children are rarely mentioned in the ethnographic profiles, let alone in the topical es-

says. Students working within the ecological-evolutionary tradition, the work of many of whom is represented in this volume, have to date given the most systematic attention to children. Their attention has largely been directed—narrowly in terms of cultural anthropology—to questions of mortality, child rearing, and work. *The Foraging Spectrum* (Kelly 1995), for example, in reviewing this body of literature, indexes only “child mortality” and “child rearing.” While generalizations necessarily smooth over important exceptions, it is fair to say here, too, that children are surprisingly understudied in hunter-gatherer research.

The neglect of children is enigmatic. Why have so few studies focused on children, when, given even a conservative estimate of two children per family, children constitute a significant part of any studied population? Why are children so invisible when, in fact, in the field, ethnographers commonly spend a great deal of time with them? Children are often more accessible than the adults. Curious about the ethnographer's ways of doing things, they often accompany her. They are good interlocutors when she takes the first steps in studying their native language. Often, she is regarded as a child herself because, initially at least, she is incompetent in the local ways of living. On various occasions and during certain tasks she may be assigned a place with the children and may sleep with them as a solution to her irregular lone existence within the studied community. Why, moreover, have theoretical developments in the field not stimulated child-focused research? Hirschfeld (2002) raises the point that given the contemporary sense that culture is learned, serious attention should have been given to children. A great deal of learning, after all, occurs during childhood; children are experts at learning (Hirschfeld 2002). Interest in subaltern cultures and minority groups has largely bypassed children, who clearly are one of the more consequential groups (Hirschfeld 2002).

The neglect of children is even more enigmatic in hunter-gatherer studies. Ethnographers have rarely addressed them, even when “children” is a key notion in these peoples' own cultures. For example, both adult and child tropical-forest hunter-gatherers see themselves as “children” of the forest. The South Indian Nayaka, with whom I worked, use the word *makalo* (children) to describe themselves vis-à-vis the forest and vis-à-vis all invisible and previous dwellers in their area, whom they call respectively “big parents,” or in some cases “grandparents.” “Children” is a concept that is central to their sense of themselves, their place in the world, and their relations with their surroundings; it recurs in their moral and ritual discourse. The concept of “children” appears to enjoy a wide currency in the cultures of other hunter-gatherers, of course, with the expected variations that we need to explore.

The object of this chapter is to reflect on, first, *why* have children been so understudied in hunter-gatherer research, and second, *how* this lacuna can

be addressed. Even if we simply maintain that “hunter-gatherers” developed their own cultural ideas and worldviews over a very long period of time, without entering into the tenuous area of whether, what, and how we can learn from them about human evolution, the study of children in these societies holds a very rich potential. One obvious direction to explore is how do children become adults who master these long-developed worldviews? Vishvajit Pandya’s chapter in this book touches on this question from a historical perspective, as he looks at Andamanese schooling. An equally important direction to pursue is, How do the children themselves view what happens around them? Bonnie Hewlett addresses this aspect in this book, as she examines Aka adolescents’ responses to loss and bereavement. Since “children” appears to be a cardinal concept in hunter-gatherers’ cultures, yet a third question to ask is, How is this concept constructed and understood in these cultures? What are its symbolic uses and meanings? This last question is given more attention in this chapter than the first two, drawing on Nayaka ethnography with which I am personally familiar.

WHY HAVE CHILDREN BEEN ANALYTICALLY INVISIBLE?

The above is a complex question. Scholars’ own modern perceptions and worldviews provide some answers, and before we turn to the observed ethnographic reality, we must pay due attention to them. Social scientists have tended to project onto all children, everywhere, an idea of childhood that is peculiarly modern (Toren 1993). Modern thought sees the child as in a natural state, a sort of “natural human material” waiting to be shaped by adults into a member of their specific culture. The child is “half-baked,” so to speak, if not outright “raw.” She is a person not yet fully developed; someone in a liminal situation who has not yet reached the human end-product, adulthood (see Hirschfeld 2002). Universalizing this view leads at best to investigating the *process* through which the child is made an adult, namely, “socialization,” turning the naturally given object into a social subject. At worst, such universalizing leads to projecting the “natural” child itself as a human universal, i.e., assuming that the child is the same everywhere. In the second case, there is little impetus for ethnographic comparisons of children and their own cultures. In the first case, the resultant inquiry is heavily adult-centered, “focusing on the adult end-state and adult influence on ‘achieving’ it” (Hirschfeld 2002:615). It is assumed that the child is passive and starts from a position outside or on the margins of society, from whence adults “work” to enculturate him (see Poole 1994).

When it comes to “hunter-gatherers,” other modern perceptions play a critical role as well. In modern scholarship, reflecting *its* concerns, “hunter-

gatherers" have been cast as representatives of *our* past. Early 20th-century students regarded peoples later to be classified as "hunter-gatherers" as "survivors," or even as "living fossils" of a distant human past. Midcentury, this temporal absurdity was tempered by claiming only a logical relation between peoples, past and present, who hunt and gather for subsistence, namely, only a membership in the *same society-type* ("hunter-gatherers"). However, the original sentiment persisted, outlasting fierce controversies in the 1980s and early 1990s. To date the category "hunter-gatherers" still frames continued research into evolutionary questions, as well as an ethnographic context for culturalist research. Within an evolutionary perspective—however sophisticated it is, and however it is compared with a century ago—these peoples are framed en masse as developmentally behind "us," and in a metaphoric sense, at least, as children of a sort. This characterization creates a blind spot for researchers.

For cultural anthropologists, talking about "children" and "hunter-gatherers" in the same breath is sensitive, given the intellectual historical baggage of the field. The founding "fathers" of cultural anthropology, such as Edward Tylor ([1871] 1958) and Lucien Lévi-Strauss (1979), treated "primitive thought" and Western children's thought as if they were alike. The comparison is still sometimes, albeit rarely, made today (see Hallpike 1979), embarrassing anthropologists. Colonial regimes and modern states have been increasingly critiqued for their paternalistic attitudes toward natives as children. An extreme example of this attitude was the appointment of a state bureaucrat as the general guardian of the natives in Australia in the 1930s. This mind-set creates a cloud of uneasiness around the issue of "children," in dealing with "hunter-gatherers."

Finally, we need to bear in mind the politics and economics of academic careers in anthropology. Many ethnographies draw on fieldwork carried out by young ethnographers in the course of doctoral and postdoctoral studies. These researchers are young people, commonly without children of their own, and they are less observant of child-focused practices.

Along with observers' modern conceptions, some reasons for the neglect of children in hunter-gatherer studies are attributable to the subjects of the studies themselves and their daily reality. First, in these societies, children do not constitute a visible separate social group. In these very small communities, they live in close proximity with everybody else. The magic number of the band's size is 25 (Lee 1968:8), fewer than half of whom, perhaps only 10, would be children, and they would be of all ages. Thus, in any given age bracket there are very few children. The children, of course, play with each other or go together to collect fruits or fish in the surrounding areas (see more below). However, they spend equal amounts of time with adults. In my experience, at least, they often share sleeping mats with adults, sit with them around the campfires, go with them on foraging trips, etc. It is more common to see a mixed-age grouping of adults and

children than groups of children and adults each by themselves (but see Bird and Bird 2000).

Second, as shown by other chapters in this volume, caring for children *as* children in our sense of the term, ends at a very young age, around three or four years old. Until this age, the children are with caregivers most of the time, but thereafter they are relatively independent. At a time where in modern societies children begin schooling, say at age six, Nayaka children independently go hunting small game, visiting and staying with other families, free from supervision by their own specific parents, though not necessarily from adults. Descriptions of the independence of children abound in the ethnographic literature.

Teaching, additionally, is done in a very subtle way. No formal instruction and memorizing here, no classes, no exams, no cultural sites in which packages of knowledge, abstracted from their context, are transmitted from one person to another. Knowledge is inseparable from social life. As I have elaborated elsewhere, I believe knowledge in this context has to do with learning how to behave within relations, in order to keep these relations going, rather than with knowing things for their own sake, as a known detached from the knower (Bird-David 1999). Young people learn their skills from direct experience, in the company of other children or other adults, in the course of everyday life. If by "children" we have in mind dependents in need of food and custodial care, here we do not see them as such. Babies and toddlers clearly fall into this category, but not the ages above them.

The analytical invisibility of children in hunter-gatherer studies is all the more striking given, as mentioned, that "children" is a key cultural notion in their own cultural discourse and imagery. Thus, we seem to have here a classic case of ships that pass in the night: hunter-gatherers elaborate on the category "children," while their anthropologists rarely give children any attention. Let me suggest a way in which we can create a connection, even if it is only a starting point, between the scholarly and the indigenous views.

"CHILDREN" IN "HUNTER-GATHERER" ANALYSIS

First of all, we should perhaps disaggregate the category "children" into, on the one hand, babies and toddlers and, on the other hand, all other minors. In our own legal and economic sphere, the distinction is not critical. Certainly, caring parents of babies and toddlers know the difference; they sleep less, are tied down more, they worry more, and so on. However, from the state's point of view—the parents' legal responsibility, the economic burden, statistical surveys of all sorts, welfare benefits, and so on—

a distinction is not made. "Children" covers all persons from birth until they reach their age of legal majority.

The kind of hard data provided in this book, and I think hunter-gatherers' own notions, support the idea of distinguishing between babies and toddlers and other youngsters. By children, Nayaka—and perhaps also other hunter-gatherers—do not mean very young babies. Young babies, they say, do not have names, because they cannot respond to them. Burial procedures are much simpler for babies than for other people. Woodburn, for instance, describes a case of an infant (a two-day-old) who was buried unceremoniously by a man at dawn in the hut of its parents (Woodburn 1982a:198). According to Bonnie Hewlett (Chapter 15 in this volume), the Aka believe that dead young babies come back again reborn as other babies. The death of a very young baby, perhaps, registers with the community as a failed birth, rather than as the death of a person. We see how permeable the boundary is in Western attitudes toward stillborns and infant deaths. Indeed, this ambivalence is reflected in the debates about abortion as to whether the embryo is a person or not. Perhaps hunter-gatherers, who are plagued by high mortality rates, and value social interactions as a key social activity, do not regard young babies as distinguished "selves." Young babies are, to some extent, an extension of the mother's self, until they start to communicate and interact with others, independently.

What age, then, is the lower boundary of childhood? In the modern state, it should be remembered, the end of childhood is variable, often determined by the state in relation to specific domains or purposes (e.g., vis-à-vis schools, parents' legal responsibility, parents' rights regarding their children's welfare, the age for acquiring a driver's license, drinking alcohol, getting married, and so on). If in the modern state only the upper boundary of "childhood" is variable, in the case of hunter-gatherers both the upper and lower boundaries are. Basically, a person becomes a child when he or she starts socially engaging with others, independently, responsively, and responsibly. Other parameters are influential, such as, when he or she is weaned, starts walking, is no longer carried by adults all the time, engages with other persons independently of his or her parents, and so on. Based on these criteria, along with much of the material discussed in this book, childhood seems to begin at three to four years of age.

The upper boundary of childhood is variable as well. In the Nayaka case, initiation rites are not elaborate. When they are performed at all, they are performed for girls only, at the onset of their menstruation. Athletic prowess is important for boys, for example, to be able to climb high trees and collect honey and *sikai* (*Sapindus trifoliatus*), because these skills have economic implications. Above all, however, having children of one's own is critical. In English, a "child" means both the counterpart of the parent in a parent-child relation, and a young rather than an old person. In general

use, however, "children" generally denotes the latter sense of the term. "The children go to school," emphasizes not that they have parents, but that they are young persons. A teenage mother, similarly, while a parent herself, is still regarded as a child because she is young. "Children," in other words, is commonly understood in the sense of the dichotomy between child/adult rather than child/parent. Among the Nayaka, too, *makalo* means both offspring and young ones. However, the former sense predominates. "Child" is commonly perceived as a "child of" within a child/parent or a child/caregiver *relation*. Becoming a parent, namely switching one's position from one side of the dichotomy (child) to the other (parent), is therefore a critical index of adulthood among the Nayaka, and I think also, among other immediate-return hunter-gatherers. Roughly estimated (in such very small communities, statistical generalizations are untenable) the Nayaka become parents, and hence adults, at a relatively old age (compared with the stereotypical "traditional society"): over 18 years of age for women, and 22 for men.

The children's society is more visible when analytic attention is restricted to persons between these age limits, excluding the baby/toddler stage. While they spend a great deal of time with adults, children also group occasionally among themselves. They play together (a common Nayaka game, for example, is sliding on a plantain leaf down a muddy slope, one child after another, or in a row embracing each other); fish in a nearby stream; pick fruit in the hamlet's surroundings, and so on. The groupings are age and gender mixed. Additionally, the older they get, the more likely it is that they will share sleeping mats at night with each other, or when the need arises—the Nayaka rarely sleep alone—with single people who are as yet unmarried or may be divorced or widowed (see Bird-David 1983, 1987). Among some hunter-gatherers, an exclusive juvenile foraging takes place, systemically separate from adult foraging, on a regular, daily basis (see, for example, Bird and Bliege Bird 2000, and Chapter 6 in this volume).

More commonly than recognized hitherto, children in hunter-gatherer societies seem to play a role in the sharing of large game. A much-stressed characteristic of many hunter-gatherer societies, the sharing of large game is of central importance in the operation of these societies (Woodburn 1998). That ethnographers who often refer to this central activity do not mention the children is a good illustration in itself of the systemic blindness to them in anthropology in general and in hunter-gatherer studies in particular (see above). When the Nayaka hunters come back to the hamlet with the game, it is the children who run toward them. The parents remain at their respective hearths, seemingly indifferent to the commotion. The children bring a metal pot, a plate, or just a large plantain leaf from each hearth, in which the family's share is placed. Excitedly, they take an active

part in the butchering, holding the torches for light or manipulating the limbs of the animal to ease its cutting and commenting on the equality of the meat's distribution among their families. When the distribution ends, they carry the portions to the respective hearths. Other ethnographers have reported on children's involvement in the sharing of a large game animal, for instance, among the Batek (Lye Tuck-Po, personal communication 2001), and among the Inuit (Barbara Bodernhorn, personal communication 2001). In the case of Cree, the meat itself is handled as if it were a child: the hunters pass the carcass to the women; the carcass is shown great care; nothing is thrown away or wasted; the feast in which the meat is distributed is similar to the feast held after the birth of a baby (Tanner 1979:153, 163). This brings us to the symbolic sense of "children" as a key notion in hunter-gatherers' cultures.

CHILDREN AS A KEY CONCEPT IN HUNTER-GATHERERS' CULTURES

Appreciating the symbolic sense of "children" in these cultures, I think, is only possible if we destabilize some of our own taken-for-granted senses of this term. First, "children" in this context are understood largely as "children of," namely, children of parents (i.e., within a child/parent relation), as opposed to just *young persons*, in and for themselves, as we might intuitively read the term. This is certainly clear in the case of the Nayaka *makalo*, and I would hypothesize that it applies to other hunter-gatherer cases as well, of course with different nuances, all of which are worthy of research. Second, "children (of)" connotes mutual care, sharing, and growing old together, more than reproduction and descent as we might read into the term. Third, "children" do not connote a *separate* autonomous section of society. The Nayaka *makalo*, for instance, cannot be considered a distinct minority group or a subaltern culture, as Hirshfeld, speaking from a Western perspective would have it (2002, see above).

In modern imagery, "parent" and "child" are generalized respectively as separate and autonomous categories: "children" and "parents." This distinction is maintained despite the fact that in reality the child and parent in a child-parent pair are normally with each other more than each is with others of its group. "Children" and "parents" often stand for subsequent generations, following one another. The concept of "generation" is such that, as Ingold put it, "with each new generation, those preceding it regress ever further into the past" (Ingold 2000:136). One generation goes and the other comes, each *replacing* the other. This image, of course, ignores the commonplace concrete situation of parents and children whose lives overlap, and who share life for a significant period of time.

Compared with this modern imagery, in the Nayaka imagery the "parent-child" relatedness as such is generalized. "Children" is used as synonym for a closely shared living, mutual attentiveness and concern, belonging, and a sense of shared identity. "Children" is not conceived separately from "children-parents" relations. "Children" connotes a horizontal section of society that is not separate and autonomous from the "parents" but, to the contrary, is inherently inseparable from and overlapping with it.

This point is clearly evident in the Nayaka ritual discourse, wherein the notion of *makalo* recurs. The celebrants refer to themselves as *makalo* and address the forefathers and animistic beings as *dodappanu* ("big" parents). By doing so, they do not portray themselves as the replacement generation for the parents but, to the contrary, emphasize the interconnections between the "children" and the "big parents," and the expectation for mutual caring and sharing between them. In terms of the local imagery, framing the living Nayaka as "children" evokes a sense of the forefathers as not "dead and gone," but present and available to be engaged with. They are evoked in this way as beings to whom one can turn for help. The notion of "children" carries similar associations in some modern contexts, alongside its use in the sense of "the replacement generation."

Within the local symbolic framing, then, "childhood" is a condition of those living. The child phase ends at death. Although death is generally handled very simply (as it is as well among African hunter-gatherers; see Woodburn 1982a; Hewlett, Chapter 15 in this volume), the ritual of death resembles a rite of initiation. The dead person is removed from the living. He is at a liminal stage where he is dangerous to anybody who may come upon him. Ultimately, he returns as a "big" father and joins all the other "big parents."

What additional meaning does the notion of "children" carry with it? Or, rather, to put it more correctly, what does the pair of categories "children" and "parents" mean, because these terms are often used together, and each gets its meaning from its relation with the other. I speak for the Nayaka, but I think it holds true to one degree or another also for other hunter-gatherers. Children are not first and foremost perceived as persons in need of physical care (note the restriction of the term to those above the baby oddler stage, above). They *can* obtain food for themselves and are relatively independent, as mentioned. The simple conditions of life preempt a great deal of the physical care that we need to provide our children—buying clothes, dressing, getting a reluctant child to sleep in a separate room away from everybody else, taking him or her outside to play, and so on. Instead, children are perceived as persons whose social skills are not developed yet. Nayaka say that a baby has no *budi* (sense), is not aware of others, does not know yet how to respond to them, is socially

clumsy. Fred Myers describes a similar situation for the Pintupi (Myers 1986:197), while Jean Briggs (1998) perceptively portrays how children are helped to learn to deal socially with other persons. In the local view, children require looking after and engaging with, as they lack social skills and must be taught how to care for fellow-beings and share with them. The learning does not end as one grows up; it is an art and a skill that one continues learning and perfecting. Compared to the early people, Nayaka see themselves still as children, in this sense of the term. If illness strikes, they ask the early people whether they have unknowingly done something to offend the big-parents and plead their innocence.

When Nayaka describe themselves as "children of the forest," they do not simply imply that the forest feeds them, as may be inferred by someone with a modern viewpoint who sees children primarily as dependents in need of feeding. The child/parent relation as it is generalized—even cosmologically—connotes an emotional sort of caring. It projects people as belonging to each other, as "of the same family." "Children of the forest" connotes an emotional attachment, a shared living, a shared sense of identity and mutual responsibility.

CONCLUSIONS

We end up with a paradox: a familiar anthropological dissonance between our analytical categories and the local sense of things. The growing trend within anthropology has been to study children as a separate "class," "minority," or "subaltern culture" (e.g., see Toren 1996; Ingold 1994; Hirschfeld 2002). This approach does not consider children as simply initiates or "raw material" in the process of becoming full members of society. In the local sense of things, "children" are not a separate, distinct class. To the contrary, child-parent *relations* are the focus of the Nayaka because the notion of "children" stands for a shared living experience.

