

3500 BCE



1.1 !Kung hut

INTRODUCTION

For a million years, humans lived off hunting, food gathering, and fishing. From the perspective of our advanced world today we tend to look back at this and wonder how we could even have survived given all the difficulties. We once labeled these people savages or barbarians, and then we called them primitives. More recently we call them hunter-gatherers, as if all they do is obsess about food acquisition. But the !Kung, who have lived in the Kalahari Desert in Botswana for hundreds of thousands of years, spend only about 40 percent of their time hunting and gathering. The rest of the time, they do what most of us might do: they socialize, dance, cook, and rest.

In the Kalahari, mongongo trees, which produce tasty and nutritious nuts by the thousands, proliferate in mile-long groves. Tubers can be dug from the ground, and animal herds migrate through the territory, easy prey for a canny hunter and his poison-tipped arrows. The !Kung live in camps that are rebuilt every year near seasonal water holes. Women make the huts around a common campfire, usually under the shade of a large tree. The huts are not really to live in, since people tend to live mainly outdoors, but serve as storage areas for tools and as shade on a hot day. The modern world has little respect for its venerable ancestors. Because of forced relocations, mining on their territory, and fences cutting across their land, the !Kung people's survival into the next decades is much in doubt. It is not the natural world that endangers them, but our civilized world.

As populations expanded, groups would bud off to form new communities in the next valley or further along the shores. In this way, the first groups of people left Africa some 1.5 million years ago with a second group, our human ancestors, following around 60,000 BCE to slowly yet persistently colonize the globe, reaching the southern tip of South America around 13,000 BCE. First Society people, however, were not nomads as is so mistakenly assumed. Instead they tended to live within prescribed and familiar territories, moving seasonally between winter camps near rivers and upland summer camps for hunting and fishing. The ancient people of Australia, for example, moved in predictable cycles: in some parts of the year they lived in relative isolation, and in other parts they would get together for large annual ceremonial and social events.

During the Ice Age (ca. 25,000 BCE–ca. 15,000 BCE), humans faced a global phenomenon the likes of which we have never seen since. The extreme cold, which sent massive, mile-deep ice sheets far to the south of the polar regions, impacted Europe in particular. But the people there did not leave. This was not because they were trapped. It was because those areas had become a hunter's paradise, with bears, lions, and, above all, huge herds of horses, reindeer, and mammoth moving across the grassy landscape. The Gravettian Culture was the first to master the cold. They developed leather-making and the needle to create fur-lined clothing, boots, and jackets. In great festivals, they congregated near caves where artists had painted brilliant images of animals on the walls and ceilings. What form of magic these places produced is still unknown, but the quality of the art staggers the imagination even today. The animals were painted not as carcasses but as living creatures moving and breathing, and were made by artists who had practiced their skills over a lifetime. As the weather warmed, the hunters moved to the east, crossed Siberia, and around 13,000 BCE crossed Alaska to enter the open plains of North America. Called the Clovis People, they hunted mammoth and then, when the mammoth were all hunted out, they switched to bison. Their sacred landscapes include Seminole Canyon in Texas, with its ancient rock art depicting shamans and sacred animal spirits.



1.2 Haida settlement, Canada

The warming of the weather raised the levels of the oceans, separating Japan from China, and England from mainland Europe. It created vast rivers, swamps, and forests teeming with animals and plants, drawing humans to the river shores. It was, one might say, an age of affluence. At Lepenski Vir along the Danube River, a settlement of triangular huts emerged. The people there caught sturgeon, a fish that averaged some 3 meters long. Why go hunting when catching one fish would feed an entire community? The nearby forests provided a wide assortment of berries, mushrooms, and nuts to complement the diet. Nor was this village a solitary community. Similar villages lined the shores, and their inhabitants traveled by boat to connect with each other for ceremonial events.

Half a world away, another affluent society emerged along the northwest coast of Canada. It was a favorable site for many reasons. It was in a pocket of relatively mild weather, the result of cross-Pacific winds; it was also sited along the migration path of whales, and salmon came in the thousands to swim upstream to spawn. Huge cedar trees, sacred to the Haida, provided material for houses and boats. The tree was not just "wood." Its red color and sweet smell were indicators of its connection to the world of the spirits. Linear settlements sprang up along the shore, composed of large, clan-based community houses facing the water. Each house was a sacred diagram designed in relation to the cosmos, which for the

Haida was divided into three shamanistic zones: the sky world, the earth, and the oceanic underworld. The building's frame system consisted of massive roof beams, often more than half a meter in diameter and spanning the width of the house, which ranged from 7.5 to 15 meters. These beams were supported by posts carved to represent important family ancestors or supernatural beings associated with the family's history. Walls were clad with split-cedar planks tied horizontally between paired upright poles.

It was not just rivers and shores that attracted human habitation to make the first settled communities, but also the emerging great rain forests. The Bambuti in Congo still today pay homage to a forest spirit, Jengi, whose power is thought to emanate through the world. Jengi is seen as a parental figure and guardian. Society is organized around individual households consisting of a husband, a wife, and their children, forming settlements that can number up to about fifty residents. The women build the huts that, in the shape of upside-down baskets, are made out of a frame of saplings and clad with leaves. Other rain forest cultures developed in Brazil, Central America, and Southeast Asia.

Beginning around 10,000 BCE in some places, the great First Society traditions that had sustained human life for so long began to change. Instead of hunting animals, humans began to herd them, and instead of gathering and tending plants, they began to domesticate a few chosen plants and grow them in organized fields. These changes altered



1.3 Village scene

the imaginaries of the spirit world. Cattle in particular were seen as living gods, requiring daily attendance and a culture of respect. They were not killed for food but were sacrificed to mark special events in the life of the community. Among the Dinka in the Sudan, a man knows his cattle by special names, sings songs to them, and sleeps next to them for long periods of time. Cattle are sacrificed only on special occasions, such as at weddings or funerals. Although only a few cattle-centric societies remain today, the impact of this worldview can be felt even in modern religions.

Just as important was the shift from gathering plants to farming. Rice in southern China and eastern India, millet in Africa and northern China, wheat and barley in the Levant, and corn in Guatemala—all rose from being just one of thousands of plants that humans tended to the precious focus of effort and devotion. The combined transformation of our relationship to animals and plants produced a new way of life: agropastoralism. While today we call this period the birth of agriculture, we have to remember that crops like rice and barley were not raised as food. They were gods. We have so secularized food production today that we forget that the birth of what we call agriculture coincided with profound transformations that deified certain foods and thus, it might be said, guaranteed the proper and complex work ethic needed for their production. The impact on women was particularly profound; harvesting, grinding, storing, and cooking were all largely women's work, as was pottery making, basket weaving, and, of course, the raising of children.

The emergence of pastoral and agropastoral cultures produced village societies organized around chiefs with more or less power depending on circumstances. Villages were well calibrated to meet the needs of the animals, to deal with the calendar of planting and harvesting, and to produce the necessary equipment for life, such as the bowls and containers that stored grain and water and that allowed fermentation and cooking to take place. These activities were all governed by ritual practices and unwritten rules of behavior that shaped the destiny of all. But village society could not spread just anywhere. It needed the right combination of good soil for farms, grasslands for cattle, forests for firewood, and upland areas for hunting—and, of course, water and salt.

The Mesopotamian highlands were perfect for such agropastoral societies, and beginning around 9000 BCE compact villages began to spread along the slopes above the great rivers



1.4 Pottery making

in the plains. A similar expansion took place along the Sahel in Africa, where sorghum was the main plant, as well as in the foothills of the Baluchistan Mountains (barley), in northern China (millet), and along the Yangtze River (rice). By 5000 BCE these places had also established themselves as profoundly different from the First Society worlds that neighbored them, even if they maintained some aspects of the older traditions. Whereas the agropastoral tradition in Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, China, and Egypt remained confined by their ecological niches, a remarkable transformation took place in Europe, where between 9000 and 4000 BCE, agropastoral cultures moved slowly along rivers and shores to reach even northern Ireland. There the newcomers thrived and built one of the greatest structures of the time, Newgrange, a vast artificial mound with a sacred chamber in its interior that was designed to mark the first rays of the winter solstice.



1.5 Herding

