

# Seasonality and schismogenesis

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## Doing seasons and doing difference after 'dawn'

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**Abstract:** For a socio-cultural anthropology of contemporary hunter-gatherers, *The Dawn of Everything* (Graeber & Wengrow 2021) provides both good and bad news. It is good news in that it underlines the relevance of hunter-gatherer research for the here and now – beyond early humans and questions of origins. It is bad news insofar as the book proposes that the study of 'hunter-gatherer societies' is not a useful way to carve out a field of research and that we should be asking different questions. This contribution proposes that hunter-gatherer research continues to be a useful point of departure for engaging in a conversation about long-term social change.

The article emulates one of the strategies in *The Dawn of Everything*, namely using the 'indigenous critique' to generate and enhance enlightenment thinking. Based on extended conversations with ≠Noa//oab and !Gamekhas, two ≠Akhoe Hai//om from northern Namibia, I comment critically on the notions of seasonality and schismogenesis that are important threads of *The Dawn of Everything*. Going back to these conversations allows us to go beyond 'dawning' (searching for original states) but also beyond 'dooming' (searching for the point when we got 'stuck'). Practices of doing seasons and doing difference, I suggest, are ways of dealing with the socio-cultural system, if in a piecemeal manner; practices that are underrated by Graeber and Wengrow who therefore fail to see important continuities beyond changes and flexibility in hunter-gatherer lifeways, and beyond.

**Keywords:** seasons, schismogenesis, Namibia, San, system, change

## Introduction: the moment is now

Even after reading 692 pages of *The Dawn of Everything* (DoE) we still do not quite know where the obsession for origins comes from. Although non-anthropologists often assume that this longing to know origins was a human universal, there is evidence to suggest otherwise. In *Lilies of the Field: Marginal People Who Live for the Moment*, the authors underline that there are people who 'share the effort to live in the present, with little thought for the future and

little interest in the past' (Day et al 1998:2). These are (sub)cultures such as 'London prostitutes, Hungarian Gypsies, and Aegean Greek peasants' that are committed to the present moment and not engaged in nostalgia of a previous golden age or the utopia of millenarianism (Day et al 1998:1–2). And these groups show many parallels with hunter-gatherers, especially those who we call 'immediate-return systems' (Woodburn 1998). It is somewhat paradoxical that amongst the scholars who are particularly interested in hunter-gatherers there have been many who were nevertheless very much concerned with questions of evolutionary origins, even though many hunter-gatherers themselves put little emphasis on reconstructing the distant past. But it is not coincidental that a focus on the present moment goes together with a concern for 'freedom and autonomy' that stands in opposition to many of the social institutions that 'organize long-term social reproduction and, simultaneously, produce hierarchical relationships' (Day et al 1998:2). The question is how social reproduction may be achieved without allowing the past to be abused as a basis for domination and hierarchy. Asking for origins is, after all, not an innocent affair (if it ever was one). It is increasingly tied up with institutions that are predicated on hierarchy, descent and power. In Europe, and that includes prominently European scholarship, being able to trace one's own roots (and those of one's ideas) as far back as possible is an expression of distinction and of cultural capital (see Bourdieu 1979).

Claiming a long and distinguished social or academic pedigree continues to be a key feature of 'doing class' (see Gamper & Kupfer 2023:14), ie of creating class differences by excluding or marginalising newcomers, in this case first-generation academics, or those with degrees from academic institutions of lower reputation or with publications outside the Anglo publishing bubble. While scholarship may no longer be dominated by individual gentlemen who can claim 'Victorian' origins, the principle of descent is today returning with force in identity politics (see Neiman 2023), when the quality of an idea and how it may change our thinking can be trumped by where it originates from and by who utters it.

Against this background, attacking theories of origin to me has the appeal of a levelling mechanism. The idea is not altogether new, but it deserves more support. Wittgenstein (1994:131) laid the philosophical ground by insisting that an explanation based on origins was not inherently better than any other explanation. Pattern-detection based on family resemblances, Wittgenstein insisted, is at least as valuable and successful as trying to trace origins as an explanation for social facts (see also Wittgenstein 1993:32–34). Knowing origins does not necessarily mean that we would know the essence of things.

Comparative hunter-gatherer studies have invested heavily in pattern-detection based on family resemblance. Woodburn's distinction between 'immediate return' and 'delayed return' systems, mentioned above, is a case in point. My own depiction of 'hunter-gatherer situations' (Widlök 2016a; 2016b) tries to turn ethnographic attention to family resemblances into a more general approach. Not surprisingly, therefore, many scholars of hunter-gatherer studies, in particular those who are not into origin stories, may feel that the mix between mild disregard and harsh treatment that they receive in *DoE* is unfounded and the critique misdirected. Graeber and Wengrow – at least implicitly – claim that hunter-gatherer studies are a non-starter since in their view hunting and gathering could be associated with basically any socio-political order, anything from very egalitarian to very hierarchical, from high personal autonomy to very repressive systems (2021:111). In my contribution I shall be responding to this claim by underlining that the main task of hunter-gatherer studies has always been that of trying to investigate the variation amongst forager systems and to better understand how transformations occur within the foraging spectrum.

My contribution shares the critique towards origins as the master narrative of scholarly explanation. At the same time, it seeks to redirect some of this critique. It even emulates *DoE* in that it re-affirms 'the indigenous critique' as an important feature of scholarly thinking. One of the main achievements of *DoE* is that it traces in great detail the extent to which enlightened ideas are typically dialogical, if not already in their origins then in the way they evolve and mature. The book focuses on the case of the Wendat and of Kandiaronk as their prominent representative whose ideas made their way into the books of enlightenment thinkers. They see Kandiaronk, a 'Wendat philosopher statesman' (2021:48) – and his fellow representatives of North American First Nations – as commentators of Europe whose critique, captured in the writings of Jesuits and others, they eventually led to the enlightenment values so fundamental for Europe's self-image. Graeber and Wengrow focus in particular on the three great freedoms that they see at the core of the indigenous critique directed against seventeenth-century Europe: the freedom to move away, the freedom to ignore or disobey commands, and the freedom 'to shape entirely new social realities, or shift back and forth between different ones' (2021:503). Their evidence on how exactly these ideas came to constitute the enlightenment is far from being watertight, but it is certainly suggestive and thought-provoking. The authors do their best to convince us that Wendat people such as Kandiaronk had learned their lesson experiencing oppressive regimes in pre-Columbian North America and consequently voiced their critique about the Absolutist social order of Europe at the time. The more general proposition behind this

is that great cultural achievements are typically the result of culture-contact. In my contribution I take a lead from this, listening to the indigenous critique by returning to my field notes featuring long conversations that I had over the years with hunter-gatherers at my field sites in northern Namibia. Apart from my exchanges with !Gamekhas (a senior woman and my main interlocutor in the field), I shall give room to dialogues I had with ≠Noa//oab, a senior man from the same settlement, whose life history I recorded in detail but which has remained unpublished so far. Both !Gamekhas and ≠Noa//oab were key persons at the settlement of /Gomais. They are now deceased but have been my interlocutors for almost three decades. Their remarks, paired with my ethnographic observations, in particular on seasonality and on schismogenesis, are the basis for my critique of *DoE* in this article (see also Widlok 2022a).

### Seasonality: doing seasons

Talking to ≠Akhoe Hai//om like ≠Noa//oab I realised early in my field research that the Hai//om seasonal cycle has three named seasons (see Widlok 1999:78) instead of the four European or the two Arctic seasons: There is *saub* (the cold/dry season) and then *sores* (the hot/dry season, same lexical root as ‘sun’) and //haob (the hot/wet season, same root as ‘cloud’). Each season has something good and something bad to it, hence there is no seasonal dualism. *Saub* (roughly from May to August) is when many fruits ripen and when there are fewer annoying insects around but when it takes more efforts to keep warm during nights, to have sufficient firewood, etc. *Sores* (roughly from September to December) is good for spotting game animals and for hunting but at the same time makes walking on sandy footpaths during the day rather arduous. //Haob (roughly January to April) starts with a plenty of termite and mushroom food but keeping things dry in the rain can be difficult, and occasional floods and active snakes can limit mobility. Hence, there is no sense here of oscillating between better and worse, an easier and a more difficult season, or between hierarchy and equality. Moreover, there is gradual change from cold and dry to hot and dry, to hot and wet, and again to cold and dry, with some aspects continuing while other aspects change.

By contrast, reading *DoE* we are given a sense that seasonality is a structuralist dualist switching between two seasons and between two states of affairs, egalitarian and hierarchical (read: good and bad), decentralised and centralised, etc. San groups, too, have a fission and fusion mobility pattern (see Widlok & Henn 2022) but as Barnard (1992) has observed, depending on where you

are in the Kalahari basin either fission or fusion may be associated with 'the wet season'. There are good reasons for moving, and good reasons for staying, throughout the year (see Widlok 2015). Graeber and Wengrow do say at some point that it would not matter if there were three or four or five seasons instead of two, but I am afraid they are misled by the binary seasonality of the circumpolar regions, since it suggests that social relations and social systems can and do (firstly) 'oscillate' between two state of affairs, (secondly) shift in a flash from very egalitarian to very hierarchical and (thirdly) that this oscillation necessarily overshadows the continuities between these state of affairs.

Among Hai//om San the hot wet season usually does not start suddenly when the first rain falls. In fact, it takes experience and patience to tell when the rains may start in earnest and the termites will start to swarm (see Widlok 1999). After weeks or even months of mostly blue skies during *sores*, finally some substantial clouds appear which soften the heat somewhat as they provide some shade but which initially only may lead to rainfall here and there. When rains finally set in at full force (if you are lucky) in *//haob*, it may still be very hot at times and only slowly does the sun gets less scorching. Eventually then, moving into the dry and cool season of *saub* could be said to begin by it by becoming drier (without immediately getting cooler) or by becoming cooler (without, in years of drought, there being a major decline in rainfall). In turn, when in *saub*, the aridness stays into *sores* but more hot days are added, which will eventually make people say something like 'Oh, *sores* has really come now.' In other words, in ecological reality and in cultural perception, the seasons shade into one another, and they may do slightly differently in different years. In fact, people may disagree as to whether one season has 'really' started yet or not. There are rarely sudden shifts, there are always continuities and certainly no sense of oscillation between two states of affairs. Hot and cold, dry and wet, do come in various combinations, and each season is really a loose and polythetic bundle of features. Neither in mind nor out there in the environment do they form clearly demarcated sets.

Maybe even more importantly, seasons are neither just happening, nor are they all-consuming states of affairs. Quite to the contrary, the other seasons always continue to be present. When talking about seasons and when dealing with the desirable or undesirable aspects of a particular season (eg the presence or absence of non-human species that are important in life), the other seasons are frequently invoked and can be made present. In a sense, seasons are even actively created. Seasons (or features associated with them) may be longed for, they are welcomed, they are seen off, they are something to look out for and something to get tired off. For instance, there used to be a first-fruit

ritualisation for the new harvest of Mangetti/Mongongo nuts and people today occasionally are still arguing about when it is right to start eating the first fruits of the new season. After all, many areas have so many Mangetti trees that the old nuts from the previous season may still be available (with some extra effort of walking) when the new ones ripen. Getting the Mangetti off the tree at the beginning of the season means that the outer flesh is still unripe and has to be discarded to rot while the nut inside is already good to eat. In the main harvest season, which is both in late *//haob* and in early *saub*, Mangetti is at its best, with rich fruit flesh and the nut inside. After that, collecting Mangetti later in the season means that the outer flesh is often already rotten while the nut inside is still good, the harvest becomes a pale (or rather brown) shadow of what it was before. Hence, deciding when Mangetti is ‘in season’ can be subject to debate. And with such a major resource not falling into one season only, the whole idea of two utterly distinct states of affairs associated with seasonality becomes dubious. Although the state and occurrence of Mangetti differs across the year, there are almost always *some* Mangetti to be found *somewhere* and in some edible state. The same, I would hold, is also true for many hunted animals.

However, I don’t think that this is just a matter of San ecology being different – or maybe exceptional – and therefore dualistic seasonality not being applicable in this case. More generally, I think, San ethnography suggests that the change of seasons is not so much structurally given, as Graeber and Wengrow suggest. Rather, it is performatively achieved. Or, to put it differently, San are not just subject to seasonality, they can also be said to be the subjects ‘doing seasons’. At least the first-fruit ceremonies of the old days (see Widlok 1999:214–215) made the start of the season publicly known and accepted. Like many rituals, it digitised what is in fact a protracted analogue shift over time (see Rappaport 1999). Apparently, Hai//om are not alone in this. In *Nagori* (2020), Ryoko Sekiguchi explicates how the Japanese seasons are similarly actively fostered, remembered, invoked and so forth. Reading her account shows considerable family resemblances with the way in which my Hai//om informants deal with seasonality. In *DoE*, by contrast, it seems that two biases are mutually reinforcing, namely the bias of the strongly seasonal setting in circumpolar regions and the bias of structuralist thinking (in Mauss and his disciples) that conceives of all differences and variation in terms of dualistic oppositions.

This is not only a matter of such dual oppositions being more clearly visible in one cultural system (eg among Inuit) than in another (eg among San or in Japan). It is also a matter of practitioners and researchers being able to keep track of continuities beyond different ways of doing seasons. This awareness of continuities despite ongoing change features large in the life histories I have



collected among Hai//om. They always emphasise continuity. Repeatedly in his life history ≠Noa//oab expresses continuity in this way:

tsike ke //nâba ke ûi, //nâba ke ûi, //nâba ke ûi, //nâba ke ûi

[and we lived there like this, lived there like this, lived there like this, lived there like this]

(≠Noa//oab life history, unpublished ms, p 22)

habe ke //nati ke hâ, //nâti ke hâ, //nâti ke hâ, //nâti ke hâ

[but we stayed like this, stayed like this, stayed like this, stayed like this]

(≠Noa//oab life history, unpublished ms, p 14)

The repetition of verbs here express continuity, as it does in the following statement:

ao da ke //nâba ra ≠û-e, ≠û-e, ≠û-e ≠û-e, ≠û-e, o da ke sida //nâba sida di /gomaisi ≠û-e

[and then we ate there, ate, ate, ate, ate, and we ate there at our Mangetti place]

(≠Noa//oab life history, unpublished ms, p 85)

I am confident to say that in the perspective and practice of my Hai//om interlocutors, stability is considered to be of value. Even though Hai//om may also talk of the joys of coming seasons or places to be visited, etc, they certainly do not experience the change of seasons as an unruly switching between worlds (neither two nor three or more). I would argue that if one is generally happy with what is (which is true for many hunter-gatherers), stability does have a value. To see stability as a burden, as being 'locked in', presupposes a sense that things would have to change for things to get better, which is part and parcel of progressive narratives that we find in Europe and in many other agriculturalist settings (see Brody 2000).

At the same time, the Hai//om life stories also show an awareness that things also regularly get worse so that change is not a value in itself. In their recent history they experienced colonial wars and liberation wars and many displacements. However, things for very long stretches are kept as stable as possible and that stability – it seems – can be appreciated while at the same time there is also a positive longing for what is to come (eg the fruits of the next season). People appreciate variety, not only in foodstuffs but also in other matters, but this is a far cry from desperately seeking change. Hai//om stories and their everyday narratives show that they are regularly impatient for things to start. In many ways they are always ahead of time in their thoughts.

We could say that not only cities but also seasons ‘begin in the mind’ (see Graeber & Wengrow 2021:276), but that is true for all seasons. Transposed to European seasonality we could say that they look forward to carnival as much as they expect Lent. Again, there is family resemblance to be found in other ethnographic cases: Spittler (1999) provides a non-forager example from West Africa in which the alternation between everyday and feasting periods are culturally valued and are mutually constitutive so that the meagre season is not necessarily considered a bad season.

When transposing seasonality to the political domain one could argue that, firstly, there is always underlying continuity even when things change, since different states of affairs are not necessarily inversions of one another, they are different and similar at the same time. Secondly, there is an expectation of returning to what one has seen before (places, seasons, foodstuffs) without remorse. Latency, what was and what will be, is always present and therefore underlines continuity. Thirdly, despite the known cycles, there is a sense that the changes are made and undergone at the same time, they are neither entirely determined by outside conditions nor constructed exclusively by human expectations and endeavours. One is stuck, to some degree, not only with the current season but also with the season as it unfolds in any particular year. Being able to think about alternatives (past or future) is not necessarily liberating, since its valence could be a daunting loss or a promising gain. It is only insofar as humans, in all situations, know about the effects of both – presence and absence – that they are never entirely stuck but can put their stuckness into perspective. In sum, the indigenous voice reported on here could be said to critique a view of seasons underlying the whole argument of *DoE* that is too structuralist, and too much coloured by agricultural folks in the high latitude zones who have one hard and one sweet season, a good one and a bad one, so to speak. The case material that I have presented here does not fit into the oscillation narrative, and without there being an oscillation, the notion of having reached a stage where humans are stuck (ie of no longer being able to oscillate between states) is also undermined. I do not contest that in the face of our current zeitgeist of being constantly in the process of transforming ourselves and the world around us, a sense of being stuck may arise as a worry of not being able to move fast enough and of lagging behind. However, I consider this to be more of an emic expression of impatience than an analytical category that holds comparatively. It seems that hunter-gatherers who may appear to be on the move all the time live with more continuities and a higher degree of stability than meets the eye – a transgenerational and trans-seasonal continuity that we find to higher or lesser degrees in many, if not all, societies.



## Schismogenesis: doing (and undoing) difference

Dividing the world into oppositions in the sense of opposite camps is of course also central to the other main thread of *DoE*, namely schismogenesis (2021:57). In this case, the authors are quite clear that they consider this to be one of most destructive underlying dynamics that led to all kinds of recurring problems in the history of humankind (2021:504–505). In schismogenesis gradual differences are amplified and turned into what eventually appear to be unbridgeable gaps between groups, be they conceived of as ethnic or otherwise. Throughout the book we get the impression that the human drive to form opposing groups is the root of pretty much all evil and at the same time the book has little to offer as to how one might convince people otherwise or how to curb this destructive human trait. People just decide, it seems, that they are different and should be different and they start excluding others by putting themselves in opposition to others.

In an earlier debate I received considerable flak for suggesting that among the Hai//om that I have encountered in the field there is comparatively little institutional nudging towards ethnic stereotyping, for instance through proverbs and other forms of ethnic deixis (see Widlok 1999:44). I still maintain, since no better account has been provided, that San are less prone to institutionalise stereotypes and therefore less prone to indulge in ethnogenesis. My earlier suggestion that this has to do with ‘the way in which social categories are established in small groups’ (Widlok 1999:45) is supported by what Bird-David (2022) and others have found (see contributions in Widlok & Cruz 2022). I am not arguing that the Hai//om or any other (former) hunter-gatherers are immune to stereotyping. Rather, I suggest that they have social institutions that not only have levelling effects within their own group but also between groups. The use of proverbs and praise songs is not prevalent among Hai//om, but it is very much so among their agropastoralist neighbours. It is one of the most common tools to give expression to ethnic and other stereotypes. Above, I have replaced class with ‘doing class’ and seasonality with ‘doing seasons’ and it is tempting to do the same here, replacing schismogenesis with ‘doing difference’ and to turn our attention to practices of creating and entrenching differences.

The life histories that I collected when recording senior Hai//om men and women contain quotes which suggest we find the opposite of doing difference, namely undoing difference:

//nâtin ûi ku hâ habe !gâi ûi-e ui ku [...] /gui khoes oase ke //êi //aebe.

[We lived like this but we lived a good life [...], we lived as children of one woman in those days.]

(≠Noa//oab life history, unpublished ms, p 56)

/nâi da ke !Xûn /kha ke /gukuse ke hà i ge, /nâi da ke !Xûn /kha ke /gukuse ke hà i ge, !ama da ke sida ke //ein di !Xûn di gobab tsina ke //nâu, !Xûn tsina sida di namagobab //nâu.

[Then we were living close with the !Xûn, then we were living close with the !Xûn, that is why we can understand the !Xûn language, and the !Xûn can understand our language.]

(≠Noa//oab life history, unpublished ms, p 77)

In the context of the larger life story, ≠Noa//oab describes Hai//om relations with various surrounding groups and the sense we get is that he is very aware that they (and all of us) are born into a world of differences. For a long time, there have been different languages and looks and different subsistence pursuits within walking distance, so to speak, of any Hai//om camp. But in this world of difference, and potentially of group conflicts, there is always the opportunity to live together like ‘children of one woman’. Hai//om lived with the !Xû, another group of hunter-gatherers speaking a very different language, for many generations. More recently they have lived in constant exchange with their farming neighbours, Aawambo and people of European descent. In their life stories, they insist that despite a lot of suppression, persecution and marginalisation, there were also phases and situations in which they lived with those neighbours like children of the same mother.

In other words, difference is there ‘from the start’ and it is not known to be going away, but it is possible to take the sting out of it: You can learn each other’s languages, you can marry one another, you can cooperate and above all you can treat one another with dignity, despite known differences. My Hai//om interlocutors were very clear about this: The !Xû are very different in terms of their language, they are even said to often look different, to have different hair for instance – but they are ‘one blood’ with the Hai//om. And even with the agriculturalists with whom one does fight occasionally, it is possible to extend kinship ties, not only individually but systematically by translating the clan naming of the neighbours into Hai//om surnames (see Widlok 2000). These are practices of ‘undoing difference’ if you like. Even with people who come from the same countries that brought the bloodthirsty colonists from Germany or South Africa, it is today possible to achieve some degree of conviviality. If they are not ‘children of the same mother’ it is possible to learn how to live with them as ‘siblings of a different mother’.

True enough, the global ethnographic record is full of cases of ‘doing difference’ but there are also other accounts of ‘undoing difference’. Pálsson (2016) describes the life story of Hans Jonathan, who as a slave was subject to

institutionalised ‘doing difference’ (and intertwined with it, ‘doing class’) but who ended his life being integrated into Islandic society as a free person. Wilson (1979) has many examples on how individuals from outside the society were integrated by undoing differences. Across the board this may not have been the most common strategy, and the motives may not have been so much philanthropic but more strategic ways of creating larger groups and followership. But one does wonder why Graeber and Wengrow are so reluctant to include examples from hunter-gatherer studies in their account. It seems that they wanted to avoid, at all cost, to be grouped with romanticists who maintained that some things were better ‘then’, when we were all hunter-gatherers. It is kind of ironic that the authors of *DoE* here seem to fall into the trap of ‘beginnings’ themselves: As I read the relevant passages on schismogenesis they make it sound as if there was a world in the beginning where everyone was the same and had no need to amplify difference but that we were then set onto the path of schismogenesis that subsequently spoiled it all and that today makes it apparently impossible for us to escape being stuck. The voice of the indigenous critique I report on here suggests a different scenario: Everyone was kind of different all the way long, but it did not (always) matter so much, or at least it continues to be an open story, depending on institutions and practices that do or undo difference, as to whether the difference is made to matter or not: You could make it matter, yes (and thereby aggravate schismogenesis), but you could also always make it NOT matter. In the latter case, it was not a case of wiping out all differences, but rather of taking the sting out of the possible, latent or real schism.

Maybe there is an underlying similarity here between seasonality and schismogenesis: You can long for the next season (and the one after that and so forth) without attempting to get rid of seasons or seasonality as such. It seems you can also work towards living with others ‘like you were of one mother’ without attempting to get rid of the fact that people come from different families (and backgrounds etc). After all, there is much in the everyday life of many hunter-gatherers that proves how useful it can be to keep variation alive. As Liebenberg (1990) and others have pointed out before, hunters often appreciate that different members of a tracking group might keep alternative explanations around for considerable time so that they do not too readily dismiss other views in the interest of streamlining ideas of what the hunted animal may have done, the way it went and so forth. Similarly, when tracking our way through long-term history, it may be beneficial to encounter others who are both the same and different. And ultimately, I suggest that this also applies to our histories of humankind: I appreciate *DoE* as complementing earlier such

global histories, by neither being environmentally deterministic nor reductively evolutionist like most other long-term histories, but rather as sensitive to cultural diversity and to open-ended, contingent political processes. That endeavour would clearly be enhanced by taking full account of the practices of doing and undoing difference.

## Conclusion: we are all tinkers

What matters in the examples I have given in this article is not so much that Hai//om or other hunter-gatherers do not have any bad things to say about their neighbours. After all, most of their neighbours have given them plenty of reason for having misgivings about the way they have been treated. Rather, the point is that their flexibility with regard to embracing or distancing neighbours is part of their socio-cultural system. Much of *DoE* reads as if we need to ‘switch systems’, that other, earlier(!) humans were previously able to do so but that we have lost the skill or chance to do so in recent times. The alternative view is to consider seasonality among Inuit or conviviality among Hai//om as properties of a single system. Why does it matter beyond scholarly concern as to whether we think of this as moving between two systems or as moving between different modes within a single system? For one, it localises the source of change either outside (in the two systems view) or within the boundaries of a system (in the one system view). In Europe we are more familiar with the former which also at least in part explains why we have for long considered subsistence changes in terms of ‘revolutions’. When trying to explain socio-economic shifts, we habitually search for changes in the environment, from ‘outside the system’, as drivers for social change (see Widlok 2022b:14). The palaeoenvironment, conceived of as outside forces impacting human society, seems to be easier to do research on and to consider an independent variable than what goes on in small-scale politics. To be sure there must have been cases where gradual or rapid environmental change produced socio-cultural changes. But things start to look slightly different when this is considered to be an integrated system (see Widlok et al 2012). One aspect of the indigenous hunter-gatherer critique, it seems to me, is to be cautious against ideas of being able, or being better off, by ‘stepping outside the system’.

Many anthropologists working ethnographically with hunter-gatherers have insisted that flexibility was built into the system and not external to it. James Woodburn (1995; 1998) for instance, clearly saw hunter-gatherer flexibility in terms of a single operating system. Whatever the flexibility and dynamics that characterise hunter-gatherer social relations, he insisted that it was a single

system, and a successful one at that. In contrast to Graeber and Wengrow, he would have insisted that we are dealing with *one* social system and not with two that alternate seasonally or otherwise (see Widlok 2023). According to this perspective, the Inuit, for instance, live in a single social system comprising of one adaptation for summer and one for winter. Moreover, it was not their conscious choice to alternate between two systems but their system – like that of Gumsa and Gumlao in Burma (see Leach 1954) – provided room for these changes; it was a systemic effect. Woodburn was also very keen to emphasise the continuity in hunter-gatherer social systems because there is a tendency to mistake their flexibility in many affairs as having no system at all. Consequently, he and others in hunter-gatherer studies that are somewhat side-tracked in *DoE* continued to look out for these continuities at deeper levels. As I have suggested in my own ethnography of the Hai//om of Namibia, I am confident to say that their social relationships, too, show continuity across the year and also across changing seasons. And the same holds for their flexibility in social affairs. There is no ‘exchange of system’ but it is one system that can accommodate changes while keeping some things running constant in the background, which also ensures that the option to return to earlier states is possible. Change, in this view seems to be predicated on piecemeal transformations.

Graeber and Wengrow tend to dismiss the everyday contestation of social practice as merely ‘tinkering’ with the system (2021:493). Instead, they are searching for ‘inversions’ and fundamental questioning of the status quo, the great carnivalesque inversions of structure that they try to find in the evidence. They find it hard to believe that nothing has changed for long periods of human history. I agree that this is so if we put it this way. But there is often change which is based on small changes only, and considerable cultural effort can go into maintaining cultural order, efforts that may not be easily visible in historical hindsight. Keeping an ‘immediate return system’ going, as Woodburn (1998) has portrayed and synthesised in his descriptions, requires considerable everyday work and engagement. As a consequence, those who have done field research with hunter-gatherers are much less dismissive towards the everyday ‘tinkering’ since they know what a cultural feat it is to keep up egalitarian relations and social freedom and autonomy in the absence of centralised institutions. The price to be paid, it seems, is that individuals have to do that work in their everyday lives. After all, keeping up egalitarian relations is constituted by the hard work of the everyday piecemeal transformation and reproduction by the many. To have levelling mechanisms is not an on/off switch but is a continuous doing, confirming the structure and reproducing it, or in a piecemeal way modestly questioning the structure and changing it (see Widlok 2022a). This may be less

spectacular than the Graeber/Wengrow narrative but I think it is backed up by more evidence. For political intellectuals of today, the life of a ‘tinker’ may not seem very attractive. But we need to reflect on what the alternatives are. It may not be coincidental that Graeber (with his US background) and Wengrow (with his UK background) are appalled by a schismogenetic system that, favoured by a centralised state and by non-proportional voting arrangements, brings about stalemates between Democrats/Republicans or Conservatives/Labour. Here a sense of ‘being stuck’ in a particular democratic system may indeed be very strong. At the same time, the popularist voices that promise to break away from this by entirely ‘changing the system’ are probably not the ones that Graeber and Wengrow would like to see taking over political power. The lessons we draw from the history of humanity seem to differ not only in terms of how we judge the role of ideas versus materiality. Rather, we also arrive at different conclusions in terms of seeing the developing system as requiring major disturbances and inversions from outside the system or as relying on moderate but continuous tinkering from inside the system.

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