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Hunter-Gatherer Cooperation and the Emergence of Proto-Agriculture

{Cooperative Hunter-Gatherer Life}

Humans are innately social, and until about 12,000 years ago our ancestors lived in balance with the bounty of nature in small nomadic family based hunter-gatherer groups.[1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7] [8] [9] [10] [11]

{The Hunter-Gatherer Lifestyle Was Cognitively Demanding}

Foraging is a cognitively demanding lifestyle dependent on collective knowledge and cooperative actions to avoid threats and take advantage of opportunities. It required an extensive knowledge of plants, game animals, the impact of seasons and soils, as well as methods of gathering, preparing, and preserving food.[12] [13] [14] [15] [16]

One community was found to exploit nearly 30 species of game animals, more than 60 plants, and a variety of other resources,[17] while another utilized more than 170 plants.[18] Foraging also required knowledge of methods to gather, preserve, and preserve food.[19] [20] Learning and using this knowledge would have been difficult, if not impossible, without the ability to share and recall complex information.[21] [22] [23]

{Spoken Language}

Spoken language was called the first human technology by Marshal McLuhan. It was the first in our evolutionary chain of languages that included written and mathematical languages, and remains an essential tool for sharing, preserving, and teaching information.[24] [25] [26]

It is generally presumed that our most distant ancestors were initially limited to using mimetic communication to create messages consisting of unavoidably ambiguous combinations of vocal and physical gestures (such as pointing). Each holophrastic multimodal sign constituted a complete holistic unitary utterance in which the multiple components of these signs lack discrete meanings.[27]

Although not clear when it evolved, it is possible that our ancestors had enhanced their limited communication repertoire with at least a rudimentary spoken proto-language before learning the foundational skills of controlling fire[28] [29] and manufacturing stone tools.[30] [31][32] [33] [34] [35] [36]

It is clear that language is the foundational technology of symbolic communication that enabled our most distant ancestors to start moving along the path of improvements that we now benefit from. [37] [38] It allowed our ancestors to coordinate complex tasks through efficient exchange of information, coordinate divisions of labor,[39] [40] and create literature.[41] [42] [43]

{Fire}

{Fire - Cooking}

Switching from raw to cooked food significantly increased the range of resources that could be utilized for nutrition, and vastly improved the "bioavailability" of calories and nutrition. Heat breaks down proteins allowing enzymes to digest them, burst cell walls in plants to release nutrients, and converts starch into sugars that are easier to absorb.[44] [45] [46] [47] [48] [49] [50] [51] [52] [53] [54]

Cooking had the additional advantage of preserving food[55] [56] and of warding off nocturnal scavengers like hyenas.[57] [58]

{Fire - Protection From Predators}

Light from fire also reduced the threat from nocturnal predators including cave lions and saber-toothed cats. The archeological record suggests that when humans were not at the top of the food chain up to ten percent of our ancestors were prey to more fearsome predators.[59] [60] [61] [62] [63] [64] [65]

{Fire - Literature}

Firelight extended their days into night when the lack of sunlight prevented productive work. One study of a hunter-gatherer community found that conversations during daylight hours primarily consisted of discussion of forager activities and gossip. In contrast, when gathered around a fire at night after the sun went down their conversations turn to stories and singing,[66] [67] [68] along with spiritual and cultural myths establishing the identity and culture of their community.

The stories have been referred to as tribal encyclopedias used to preserve and teach cultural memory. They were set into poems to ease memorization, preservation, and recall.[69] [70] [71] [72] [73] [74] [75] [76] [77] [78]

The wisdom of using poetry to preserve memory is proven by the fact that some of those ancient stories, including Gilgamesh and the Homeric epics, have survived in memory for many thousands of years.

{Increasing Knowledge - The Ratchet Effect}

Spoken language also allowed their stories to be modified as each generation added to the storehouse of knowledge and improved the advice they contained. This "ratchet effect" required accurate transmission through imitation, language and teaching to pass along the cumulative totality of community knowledge.[79] [80] [81] [82] [83] [84]

{Language - Feedback Loop}

{Teaching - The Scaffold Effect}

Simple stories could be used to teach children complex knowledge, such as toolmaking. These could be taught through instructional scaffold effect by starting with the foundational skills and then other skills required in a complex multi-step process.[85] [86] [87] [88] [89] [90] Some have referred to community memory as libraries before written language.[91] [92]

{Teaching - Ratchet Effect}

This accumulated fluid exchange, preservation, and use of information resulted in a “ratchet effect” of passing the accumulate knowledge, skills, and adaptive strategies to future generations.[93] [94]

The ability to exchange information allowed each group to become distinct information environments - a network of cultural memory that could be increased as new knowledge was gained though experience.[95] [96] [97]

{Hunter-Gatherer Pedagogy}

Language also turned the burden of raising children into an investment by using their extended period of juvenility for teach them the accumulated knowledge of their community.[98] [99] [100] In hunter-gatherer communities these stories, combined with observation and imitation, provided the stone age equivalent of our contemporary vocational training and trade schools.[101] [102] [103]

{Neolithic Revolution}

Moving to exploit seasonally available food locations is expensive,[104] and archaeological studies show that it may have been common for some prehistoric hunter-gatherers to travel more than 600 miles in a year. [105] [106] [107] [108]

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