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Never Eat Alone: The Meaning of Food Sharing in a Sumatran Fishing Village

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The distribution of food is a central focus of a wide range of behaviors and values in Dusun Baguk, a Sumatran fishing village. Abundant food must be shared with others, and individuals who demonstrate a reticence to share face negative sanctions. At the same time, generosity with food can constitute an avenue for prestige acquisition, yet status-striving is constrained by an egalitarian ethos. Issues of generosity, status, and reciprocity inform food distribution and consumption in both public and private domains, and across both religious and secular contexts. Throughout, commensalism is the hallmark of group membership. Dusun Baguk food norms and values are examined in light of behavioral ecological concepts of risk management, tolerated theft, and show-off distribution of resources.

Keywords: food sharing; fishing; reciprocity; Bengkulu; Indonesia

As the sun sinks below the tall trees in the village, the air is filled with the sound of water splashing around backyard wells; the fishermen are washing off the sheen of another sticky equatorial day. The splashing is a counterpoint to the rhythmic scraping of coconuts being shredded by women straddling small wooden stools, the sound mixing with the smoke that trickles between the planks of the rickety kitchens leaning against the back wall of each house. Evening has come to Dusun Baguk[1)], a village of ninety households scattered along a rocky road next to a river in southwestern Sumatra. Walking past a neighbor's kitchen, a lone fisherman calls out *Apo gulai* ?, 'What's for supper ?' Later, as people gather along the road or in the one-room shops, they greet one another by asking 'Have you eaten? What did you have?'. Should a visitor drop by while a family is dining, she will be entreated to join them, and the invitations will only cease after the third refusal. However, should she happen upon a single individual eating alone, her host will struggle to maintain composure and appear hospitable, but will be unable to meet her gaze. In Dusun Baguk, food is a focal point of social relations, at once a tangle of tensions stemming from questions of distribution and a ray of

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warmth stemming from the joys of sharing. This paper is an attempt to explore the meanings of food sharing in one richly nuanced cultural context.

For a total of 32 months between 1990 and 1993 I conducted fieldwork in Dusun Baguk. Housed in the center of the village and fully immersed in the villagers' daily lives, my primary methods consisted of intensive participant observation and extended nondirective interviews. Although I had broad access to all levels of village society, the collection of data from women and children was enhanced by the involvement of my wife, Jennifer Fessler, and my preadolescent daughter, Erin Fessler. All discussions were conducted in the Bengkulu dialect of Malay.

Dusun Baguk, population approximately 400, is located on the outskirts of the capital of the province of Bengkulu. During the period of fieldwork the village was in the early stages of a transition from a highly traditional lifestyle to a more modern one: the first generation had recently graduated from high school, literacy was becoming widespread, and a number of small factories had opened nearby. For the first time, a significant fraction of men (and even a few women) were earning a wage, working behind desks or machines instead of in canoes or at smoking racks. However, fishing with hand lines and small nets was still the principal means of production, and even the few villagers who worked as civil servants were wont to shed their uniforms in the late afternoon and paddle out to catch dinner. Fishing, I will argue, lies at the core of Dusun Baguk social values, shaping a set of orientations which both stem from and are made manifest in the distribution and consumption of food.

By Indonesian standards, households in Dusun Baguk ranged from impoverished to modestly well-off; the poorest families lived in small shacks, lacking even a simple well for water, while the wealthiest occupied multi-room brick homes with electricity, overstuffed sofas, and televisions. However, despite these inequalities, rich mingled relatively easily with poor, sharing snacks and cigarettes at the local shops. In everyday life, this overt egalitarianism was rigorously enforced through barbed accusations and ridicule directed at anyone who appeared to be putting on airs. The publicly agreed-upon ideal was that all should be equal, and that any surplus on hand, particularly of consumables, should be divided among those present. While integration into a modernizing nation-state and increasing reliance on cash often disrupted these goals, leading to competitive consumerism rather than egalitarian sharing (Fessler, 1995), the underlying values continued to dictate many aspects of behavior, particularly those concerning food.

In Dusun Baguk, anyone who obtains a large, divisible good (a big fish being the prototype) is beset by requests for a portion. Because the explicit cultural values stress distribution of surplus, the resource owner often has no choice but to acquiesce to their demands—the

cost of refusing is high, for he will likely be excluded from future distributions by his neighbors (cf. Shostak, 1981). However, in the event that the resource owner can conceal his good fortune, his family can monopolize the take without incurring sanctions. People in Dusun Baguk are tirelessly curious about the content of their neighbors' kitchens and stomachs. Though phrased in friendly or humorous terms, inquiries about what others consume are not idle chit-chat, but rather stem from a pervasive concern that one is not getting one's fair share, that others are not being as generous as they should be, and that one's own generosity may not be adequately repaid (cf. Shostak, 1981). At the same time, these inquiries serve to constantly remind each actor that others are watching him, and the costs of not sharing may be high.

Food Distribution and Prestige

Generous magnanimity is the opposite of grudging acquiescence to others' demands. The fundamentally egalitarian understanding that surplus must be shared ironically creates an opportunity for the acquisition of prestige through the provisioning of others. Practicing a mildly syncretic form of Islam, the people of Dusun Baguk celebrate numerous religious occasions upon which the sacrifice of an animal is considered appropriate. The wealthier members of the community periodically fulfill these obligations, sacrificing a goat, cow, or even a water buffalo. Meat is a rare luxury and, in Dusun Baguk, the more valued the good, the greater the pressure to share it (cf. Hames, 1990; Kaplan *et al.*, 1984). Similarly, compared to fish, sacrificial animals are very large resource packets, and the logic of distribution dictates that, the greater the surplus, the more that it must be shared. However, rather then being a focus of tension, with neighbors descending to demand a share, animal sacrifices are joyous occasions, anticipated eagerly by both the wealthy and the poor.

The butchering itself is a communal enterprise undertaken by the men of the village—the donor merely supervises. Boys are enlisted as runners, carrying bundles of meat wrapped in banana leaves and plastic bags to each household. Great care is taken to ensure that everyone gets a share; the poorest households may receive two shares. Because meat is highly valued, and because all members of the community benefit from the sacrifice, the donor is widely praised for his generosity and good citizenship. Such praise serves to both elevate the donor's standing in the community and mitigate any resentment which may surround his greater wealth. Above all, the butchering and distribution is accompanied by a festive air, for the combination of communal activity and the prospect of luxurious food puts people in a good mood. Indeed, months or even years afterwards, people can still be heard discussing

the merits of various past sacrifices, recalling with relish the manner in which they prepared the meat, and applauding donors who provided particularly large portions of delectable food.

Informal Visiting

The Calibration of Sharing

The potential for food sharing to constitute both a source of tension and a source of esteem is manifest on a daily basis in the context of informal visiting. The visitor who drops by unannounced during a meal is instantly invited to join in the repast. However, the adamancy of the host is directly proportional to the abundance of food present. Should the family be sitting around a full rice bowl and hearty servings of fish and vegetables, the visitor will be entreated to join in, and a plate may be prepared even as she attempts refusal. In contrast, should the offerings be more meager, the invitation will be distinctly half-hearted. It is likely that multiple factors contribute to this pattern. First, abundant food must be shared—to fail to demonstrate that one ardently wished to share would lead to accusations of stinginess and suspicions that one was likely to hide surplus from others. Second, abundant food offers the opportunity for generosity, attended by both emotional and social rewards. Third, it is feasible to share abundant food without suffering much oneself. In contrast, when the fare is more spartan, these considerations are less applicable; in particular, there is less expectation that food will be shared—it is surplus, not core subsistence, that must be distributed. Lastly, the above considerations in part explain why people generally eat in a back room of their homes—eating in a location visible to passers-by would mean inviting a steady stream of neighbors to consume one's dinner[2)].

The Shame of Eating Alone

The range of behaviors evinced by a family in response to a visitor during meal times stands in contrast to the behavior of single individuals encountered eating in private. Regardless of the amount of food present, an individual eating alone typically shows enormous discomfort at the presence of a visitor. The behavior is identified by informants as *malu*, 'shame,' (see Fessler, 1999), and it is not difficult to fathom the cause: The Bengkulu dialect of Malay contains a highly specific and quite pejorative term, *(meN)unggun (seorang)*, 'to eat in hiding, without sharing with others.' The implication of being encountered eating alone is that, regardless of the amount or nature of the food, one has been caught in an act of selfishness, attempting to keep for oneself what ought rightly to be shared with others[3)].

Public Commensalism

Feasting

The antithesis of eating in private is the feast. Feasts encompassing the entire village are held to mark all major rites of passage, including births, Koranic matriculations, weddings, and funerals. In addition, smaller neighborhood- or kin-based feasts are held on a wide variety of religious occasions. The number of occasions appropriate for feasting is thus quite large, and an average of 3-12 feasts are held each month, depending on the season. Although there is some variation as a function of scale, most feasts follow a similar plan. Guests, segregated by gender, are seated in two rows facing one another, with a line of serving dishes spread out between them. At a signal from the host, each guest motions to those around him or her, inviting them to eat—to do otherwise would suggest that one was more interested in obtaining food for oneself than in sharing the contents of the serving bowls with those seated nearby.

Remarkably, although feasts may range from 5 to 65 guests, and may include everyone from strapping young men with hearty appetites to toothless old graybeards who eat like birds, nevertheless, all of the guests finish eating, leaving an empty plate, at nearly the same time. In a sample of 10 feasts, the average elapsed time from the moment that the first person finished to the point that the last person finished was 1.2 minutes. This coordination, achieved without any overt organizational process, is the result of constant subtle changes made by each guest in the rapidity of consumption—guests watch one another out of the corners of their eyes and calibrate their eating such that they are consistently aligned with neighboring guests as they move through the meal. Moreover, guests coordinate their eating spontaneously—I could not find a single informant who could recall ever having been instructed as to the need for coordination at feasts. Rather, informants explained, coordination is the inevitable result of acceptance of fundamental understandings regarding the meaning of food and its distribution: To finish eating before others would indicate that one does not appreciate the host's generosity, and hence, implicitly, that one does not plan on reciprocating in the future. Conversely, to continue eating after others have finished would indicate that one wishes to acquire more food than others, and hence that one does not adhere to the values of equitable sharing (compare with Richards, 1939; Volkman, 1985).

Roadside Vendors

Even if they include guests from afar (or anthropologists!), feasts involve a known community of individuals—guests recognize one another and are likely to engage in relations far

into the future. Reinforcing the importance of sharing food, and demonstrating one's commitment to that ideal, thus serves to maintain one's position in a community of reciprocators. The urban roadside food vendor creates the antithesis of this context. Although itinerant vendors pushing carts sometimes pass through the village selling soup or popsicles, like the American ice cream truck, their goods are aimed primarily at children. In contrast, in the nearby capital city, vendors crowd the curbs selling a variety of delicacies that are greatly enjoyed by adults. City folk often eat standing or squatting next to the carts. However, most adults from Dusun Baguk either avoid the vendors or else purchase their food 'to go,' carrying it home in a plastic sack even though the journey diminishes the appeal of the item. When asked to explain this pattern, many informants at first claimed that they avoid the vendors because it is a sin to eat standing up. When I pointed out that customers often hunker next to the cart to consume their purchases, informants generally acknowledged that this was religiously acceptable, but said that they felt uncomfortable, or even *malu* ('ashamed') eating by the side of the road. Although their feelings are complex and probably overdetermined, it appears that one factor contributing to this orientation is the presence of many people with whom one does not share food. People from Dusun Baguk experience discomfort at the prospect of eating in the presence of people who are not members of a reciprocating community—they do not want to share, yet worry that they should, even as they know that they need not. The few men from Dusun Baguk who eat in the city are only able to do so by appearing to completely ignore all passers-by, while at the same time keeping an eye out for fellow villagers—should anyone familiar come along, they are hailed by the eater and invited to join him. Village women, being less bold, virtually never eat in such public settings. While riding on a minibus with me, a man from Dusun Baguk gasped at the sight of prostitute across the aisle from us—as he recounted later, "She wore pants rather than a skirt ('Shocking!' said his audience), sat with her legs akimbo ('Wanton!') and, worst of all, *ate on the bus* ('Utterly depraved!' they remarked)."

Food as the Focus of Delinquency

The roadside vendor presents a quandary to people in Dusun Baguk because food must be shared, but sharing only makes sense within a reciprocating community. Food sharing and commensalism thus define the boundaries of alliances and, more broadly, the meaningful social world. As is true in many societies, young men in Dusun Baguk occupy a marginal status. While their female age-mates may already be wives and mothers, young men dally on the edge of adulthood, hesitating for a number of years before taking the plunge into a life

of responsibility. With time on their hands and a certain disdain for the seriousness of the men's social world, they occupy themselves with a variety of diversions. Long after respectable folk have gone to bed, piles of young men can be found on the village benches, smoking cigarettes, playing the guitar, and, sometimes, thinking up mischief. Although creative young men devise a remarkable variety of ways to get into trouble, many of their escapades revolve around food. Prototypical of these is chicken theft. Young men get quite excited discussing the prospect, and will spend many hours debating how best to prepare a chicken, which parts are tastiest, and so on.

Never having witnessed an actual foray, I cannot comment on the details of chicken theft, although I know that it is not infrequent: Villagers occasionally awaken in the morning to find a favorite hen missing and, off in the bushes, a pile of feathers, a fire pit, and some bones. They sigh and explain that the hen was a victim of a 'black-headed civet cat,' an oblique reference to young rascals. It is clear from the young men's late-night discussions that they view chicken theft as an extraordinarily enjoyable activity, seemingly out of proportion with the amount of meat obtained from a single scrawny village hen. Their remarks strongly suggest that some of the joy derives from the affirmation of solidarity among the young men, as sharing their elicit meal confirms for the participants that they are allies, a unified body standing, if not in outright opposition, at least in contrast to the staid world of chicken ownership and other forms of adult responsibility.

Gender and Food Sharing

Inclusion in, or exclusion from, food-sharing defines social divisions in Dusun Baguk, marking ostensibly egalitarian groups within which relations are reciprocal. Although the household is the basic economic unit, gender differences transect the household. This is most evident at public food events, for husbands and wives assume individuated roles that are largely independent of their common household identity. While funding comes principally from the host, feasts are a communal enterprise. As is true of most aspects of life in Dusun Baguk, the division of labor at feasts is highly gendered, with men engaging in heavy work, and women focusing on meal preparation. Although they sample and snack throughout the preparations, women workers only eat the principal meal of the feast after most of the men have eaten. This is because the serving dishes from which the women stock their plates are the same ones used by the men: The men share food, then the women quite literally share the men's leftovers; it is only in the home, where they form a single social unit, that men and women share food, and that some of the disparity in power is muted.

Competition, Egalitarianism, and Self-Deprecation in Food Sharing

Feasts

Feasts are an opportunity for competition and social comparison (cf. Barkow *et al.*, 2001). Women are proud of their cooking skills, and reputations built over many years can hinge on the attributes of a single batch of cakes. Similarly, men evaluate the repast at each feast, commenting on the relative quality of the ingredients used, the amount of meat, the size of the fish, and so on. They compare the meal to those at recent feasts, and fondly recall past feasts involving memorable menus. Hosts are acutely aware of such scrutiny, and often stretch their budgets to the breaking point in order to procure the most delectable foods. However, despite open comparisons and the seemingly overt nature of the prestige competitions which surround feasts, status striving is fundamentally incompatible with the egalitarian ideal that underlies Dusun Baguk social relations. The solution lies in self-deprecation. After the feast a representative of the host family makes a speech in which he thanks the guests for coming, and apologizes for the inadequate nature of the food, the lack of attentiveness on the part of the servers, and so on. The message is clear: Guests do not need to worry that the host might seek to aggressively place himself above others, and thereby jeopardize reciprocal relations.

Informal Visiting: The Host

Self-deprecation in the presentation of food extends beyond the feast and into the home. Although neighbors often drop by one another's homes in a relaxed fashion, formal visits are another matter. More socially or geographically distant visitors are always served food; coffee or tea are minimum prerequisites, and often cookies or fruit are presented as well. The more formal the visit, the more elaborate the food served. Yet, the more elaborate the food, the greater the host's apologies at the inadequacy of the offerings. Both guest and host know that issues of prestige are at stake, that the food must show that the host is stretching her resources in proportion to the importance of the visitor, and that this is done both to honor the visitor and to demonstrate the host's social standing. However, these questions must be glossed over with a veneer of simplicity and humility that maintains the illusion of egalitarianism.

Informal Visiting: The Guest

Like the host, the formal visitor must also behave in a fashion that guards her reputation as a member of the food-sharing community: She must not touch the food until, after several minutes, she has been invited to do so, for to do otherwise would suggest gluttony, the im-

plication being that the guest is more concerned with acquiring food than with maintaining social relationships. She must similarly restrain herself in her choices, sampling the delicacies while not emptying the plate in a fashion suggestive of gluttony. However, she must finish her cup of tea or coffee, for to do otherwise would imply that it was not to her liking. Nevertheless, like the guest at a feast, the visitor must not drain her cup too quickly, but rather should coordinate her consumption with that of the others present lest she appear to be demanding seconds too quickly, or to be more concerned with acquiring food than with visiting.

Subtle ridicule guides individuals towards proper patterns of consumption. Visitors who drink up too quickly may be asked if their cup has a leak in it. Similarly, guests who eat and depart too rapidly, implying that food, rather than relationship maintenance, was the goal of the visit, will be referred to as 'middle school' types—SMP, the acronym for middle school, also stands for *sudah makan, pulang*, 'to rush home after eating.'

Religiosity and Commensalism

Fasting as a Product of Food Sharing

Concern with egalitarianism and fear of approbation shape a wide variety of eating behaviors, including abstention. With only a few noteworthy exceptions, all of the adults and most of the youth of Dusun Baguk state that they fast from sunrise to sunset throughout the month of Ramadan. Although it is impossible to estimate the degree to which individuals occasionally violate the fast, from the visible physical changes in the population during Ramadan it appears that most people fast most of the time. There is no question that, for many people, this is a holy period during which extended attention is dedicated to spiritual matters. However, individuals vary widely in religiosity—while some pray five times a day throughout the year, others may visit the mosque only once in twelve months. Given this variation, both the uniformity of the claim to fasting and the apparently widespread dedication to this religious trial are somewhat surprising. One factor that may contribute to this is the high cost of failing to fast.

Shame is the principal mechanism of social control in Dusun Baguk, and violators of *any* social norm are subject to a wide variety of shaming tactics (see Fessler, 1995, 1999, n.d.). However, failing to fast occupies a privileged place in the hierarchy of violations: While uncouth individuals may occasionally flaunt any of a number of conventions, and a few sinners even engage somewhat openly in frankly immoral behavior, from what I could judge, during the daylight hours of Ramadan children are the only ones to eat in a place where they might possibly be seen by others. If adults break the fast during the day, they do so in utmost se-

crecy. Informants readily acknowledge that they would be ashamed to be seen eating during the fast. When asked why, some remark that it was a sin, but many simply explain "They'd be fasting while I was eating—I'd feel shame!" Attempts to explore this answer inevitably result in numerous rephrasings of the basic contrast between one who is eating and one who is not. This leads me to believe that a factor contributing to the motivation to fast is the basic concern with food distribution. To eat in front of others who are not eating runs counter to the fundamental understanding that food is something to be shared. Moreover, the fast-breaker cannot absolve himself of responsibility by offering to share his meal with the faster, and hence he is stuck in the role of one who does not share. The only alternative, then, is to eat alone, in secrecy. However, this action carries the baggage of the previously mentioned concept, *(meN) unggun (seorang)*: To eat alone in the back room of one's house is to assume the role of a highly antisocial being, one who is despised by others. It therefore appears that even relatively irreligious individuals fast much of the time during Ramadan because the potential social and emotional costs of doing otherwise are simply too high.

Charity and the Mandatory Distribution of Surplus

Ramadan is also the period during which those who can afford to do so pay the tithe, sharing their wealth with the less fortunate. Being near the capital, Dusun Baguk offers an attractive source of needy recipients to city dwellers looking to make a donation. Large sacks of rice are dropped off at the village mosque and, at the end of Ramadan, village and religious officials gather to divide up the charity. The sacks are emptied onto the mosque porch, forming a large pile. The rice is carefully measured, then a distribution proportionate to need is calculated. Boys are sent to notify selected households, and soon villagers arrive carrying empty sacks and plastic bags. Although some appear to be uncomfortable having their poverty marked and publicly announced, most of the recipients appear very pleased, and the term *rezeki*, 'windfall,' is used repeatedly (see Fessler, 2002). The overall atmosphere is quite jovial, with few religious trappings; indeed, the closest parallel event is the butchering of sacrificial animals and the distribution of the meat. In each case, while recipients are happy to acknowledge the prestige of donors, it is clear that they also feel a degree of entitlement—good people share their surplus, but this in no way diminishes others' right to expect them to do so.

Food and Ancestor Propitiation

Once or twice a month, a small group of adults and children can be seen walking north along the road in Dusun Baguk, toting pots and plates, kettles and woven mats, heading for the cemetery. Once there, the mats are spread out, the plates are arranged, and a feast is served. The guests seat themselves around the mats. The host walks off into the weeds. He cracks a coconut over the grave of a parent or ancestor, and then sprinkles perfumed water over this and several other graves. Then he returns to the mats and drops clumps of fragrant sap onto some hot coals held in a metal plate. As the sweet smoke rises, he formally requests that the guests pray on behalf of one or two specified deceased relatives, as well as on behalf of all of the ancestors combined.

To all appearances, feasts held in the cemetery are not that different from other religious feasts held in the village. However, informants point out that the reason the feast must be held in the cemetery itself is that the deceased actually partake of the repast. Although they clearly cannot consume the material food, they are able to enjoy the meal through its scent—the various preliminary rituals serve to draw the ghosts' attention to the feast, so that they too will enjoy it. In other words, the deceased are being benefited in two ways—the prayers add to their total religious 'merit,' and the food gives them pleasure. In return, two things are expected of them. First, they are not to feel envious of the living, or cause them harm because of such feelings. Second, they are to assist the living by forwarding various requests to God. In short, the dead, no longer having surpluses of their own to share, are expected to reciprocate the sharing of food in other ways.

Explaining Dusun Baguk Attitudes toward Food, Sharing, and Status

In Dusun Baguk, food and eating constitute a hypercognized domain (Levy, 1973), a facet of life to which an enormous amount of cultural and personal attention is dedicated. Central themes in this domain revolve around mandatory sharing and the tension between egalitarianism and a desire for prestige. Although it is difficult to conclusively identify the factors responsible for any given psychocultural constellation, the field of behavioral ecology offers a number of potential accounts of the functional roots of attitudes toward food, sharing, and commensalism in Dusun Baguk[4)].

Sharing as a Means of Managing Production Risk

As practiced in the coastal Malay villages of Bengkulu, fishing is an inherently unpre-

dictable activity. Some days a fisherman returns home dragging a plastic bucket heavily laden with fish; other days he might fish in exactly the same location, using the same techniques, and yet come back with an empty bucket. Although today excess fish can be sold at market and the proceeds husbanded for future needs, in the past access to the larger economy was much more limited, and hence the problem of how to survive on an inconsistent source of food was more acute. Traditionally, Dusun Baguk villagers thus confronted the same challenge as that facing hunters in foraging societies: When averaged over a long period, the means of production suffices to meet daily needs, yet, because of considerable daily variance, hunters face a very real risk of shortfalls. Some behavioral ecologists (Cashdan, 1985; Kaplan and Hill, 1985) have argued that the mandatory distribution of meat, particularly large game, that is common in hunter-gatherer societies serves to manage production risk—even if the odds that any one individual will fail to catch game on a given day are fairly high, the multiplicative nature of probability is such that the odds that everyone will fail simultaneously are low, hence sharing makes it possible to rely on what is otherwise an unreliable means of making a living.

Congruent with the risk-management thesis, people in Dusun Baguk are acutely aware that social networks constitute their sole form of insurance in times of need. On several occasions villagers turned down lucrative employment opportunities elsewhere because accepting them would have meant being unable to participate (as worker, guest, or host) in village feasts and other activities, thus removing the individual from the chain of sharing events that justify aiding neighbors in times of need. Villagers were quite frank about their reticence to share with those who had not shared in the past, to the point of allowing the child of a miserly individual to die (by withholding funds for medical care) in order to teach the man a lesson. In mutual risk-management schemes individuals must be attentive to the possibility of cheating, since individuals who consistently withhold some of their resources from the common pool yet expect others to share fully with them constitute a burden on true reciprocators. People in Dusun Baguk are obsessively concerned with the size and nature of the resources held by others, and this is particularly true with regard to food, behavior that suggests that actors are constantly checking to see whether others are sharing properly.

Groups that plausibly rely on sharing as a means of managing production risk are typically egalitarian in nature (cf. Cashdan, 1980; Lee, 1993). It is possible that this is because reciprocal relationships involving mutual dependence are best undertaken on an equal footing – if, having had a successful day, I lord it up over you, I greatly reduce the likelihood that, come tomorrow, you will be willing to share with me should you succeed when I have failed. Anyone who displays a hierarchical orientation thus constitutes a threat to the insurance sys-

tem on which all depend. Again consistent with this account, Dusun Baguk culture contains a long list of pejorative terms used to describe someone who thinks he is better than others, and overt attempts to establish social dominance are met with everything from loud catcalls to organized ostracism.

Tolerated Theft and Showing Off

Although a number of features of Dusun Baguk culture are consistent with a historical focus on managing production risk, this explanation is not a perfect fit. It is unclear, for example, why, if the ethos of sharing derives from risk management concerns, individuals should be compelled to share even with the very young, the old, and the infirm, none of whom are in a position to reciprocate. Observations such as this suggest that risk management is not the only possible explanation for attitudes toward food and status in Dusun Baguk. Indeed, within behavioral ecology there is considerable debate about the factors responsible for meat sharing (Smith, in press), and several alternative perspectives provide equally compelling explanations of this behavior. The concept of *tolerated theft* (Blurton-Jones, 1987) suggests that apparent sharing can often be explained as nothing more than acquiescence. Resource holders should only be willing to defend their resources if the benefits of doing so exceed the costs. Accordingly, if other actors are willing to inflict sufficiently high costs on the resource holder in order to gain access to the resource, defending the resource is no longer worthwhile, and the resource holder should tolerate the appropriation of portions of the resource by others. The strident claims made by people in Dusun Baguk upon anyone who is known to possess a large quantity of food have a tenor that is more consistent with tolerated theft than with risk management. On a number of occasions informants explicitly told me that they had no desire to share food with particular individuals, but did so anyway rather than face the person's incessant demands and interruptions or, worse, risk incurring their long-term wrath. Similarly, despite the greater cost, people routinely buy rice and other staples in small quantities in order to avoid the demands for sharing that inevitably attend bulk purchases.

Although egalitarianism is consistent with a strategy of risk management through sharing, other explanations for this orientation are also possible. Social inequalities translate directly into unequal access to valued resources. Accordingly, while any given actor might do best by being the most dominant, all of the other individuals would do better under an egalitarian arrangement. Unlike nonhuman primates that are incapable of complex cooperation, humans frequently band together to oppose individuals who would establish positions of dominance, with the result that small-scale societies are frequently characterized by a 're-

verse dominance hierarchy' in which the group prevents any single individual from rising to a position of power (Boehm, 1993). In Dusun Baguk, shaming of individuals who are seen as arrogant or harboring aspirations to power acts as an ever-present leveling mechanism, muting attempts to achieve dominance. Consistent with the concept of reverse dominance, such shaming is frequently a collective enterprise, one that is reinforced through a buzzing gossip network.

While they generally despise overt social climbers, people in Dusun Baguk are nevertheless quite ambivalent about social inequality, as they heap praise upon those who are particularly lavish in their distribution of food. This willingness to openly assign prestige to (and, ultimately, act deferentially toward) individuals who are potentially useful because of their ability to provide resources is congruent with another explanation of the pattern of resource distribution often seen in foraging societies. The *show-off hypothesis* holds that hunters share game in order to advertise their superior skills; because these skills are valuable to group members, the latter are willing to provide a variety of perquisites to successful hunters (Gintis *et al.*, 2001; Smith and Bird, 2000). Consistent with this idea, Dusun Baguk villagers are far more tolerant of social striving by generous providers than by more miserly individuals. Indeed, the entire spectacle of animal sacrifice, though clearly designed to generate prestige for the host, nonetheless has a festive air precisely because everyone wins – the host rises in the village hierarchy, and the audience goes to bed sated.

Conclusion

Dusun Baguk villagers' attitudes toward food, food sharing, and social standing are not explicable solely in terms of risk management, tolerated theft, or showing off. This is likely because these three explanations are not mutually exclusive. Villagers maintain close, highly reciprocal exchange relationships with a subset of the population, and it is to these people that individuals turn first in times of need. At the same time, a sort of tyranny of the masses prevails, where anyone who possesses a clearly divisible resource, particularly food, is besieged by demands for sharing regardless of the degree of past reciprocity, and ridicule serves to constrain a great deal of social striving. Ironically, the same gossip network that enforces egalitarianism also enhances the prestige of generous individuals, and those who command substantial resources make a show of translating them into publicly sharable food.

Notes

1) This is a pseudonym.

2) An additional factor contributing to a desire for privacy during meals is the link between eating and shame—see note 3.

3) The shame of eating alone is compounded by shyness and shame which surround eating in general (Fessler, n.d.), reactions that likely stem both from the intimate nature of the act of eating and from a cultural association between eating and sexuality, topics which I will explore in a future paper.

4) Indonesianists will recognize many of the patterns discussed in this essay as present elsewhere in the archipelago, including exclusively agricultural regions. Although my analysis is intended to explicate only patterns evident in one fishing village, I strongly suspect that core Malay social values arose in the context of a dependence on fishing, but were maintained even after fishing was abandoned by some communities. The perpetuation of ecologically functional value systems beyond the duration of relevant subsistence activities offers a plausible explanation for a variety of core ethoses around the globe (cf. Nisbett and Cohen, 1996).

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