

Symposium

Nature and Man: From the Perspective of Food

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Venue : Umeaoka Campus, 34B 302 room

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Today I'd like to talk about hunting, fishing and gathering – the first stage of human food economy.

I spent some time in Arnhem Land on the north coast of Australia, and the Central Desert, which are both home to Aborigines. There are significant seasonal differences in Arnhem Land ; wet in the rainy season and arid dry season. By contrast, the Central Desert is very dry throughout the year. It is not easy to lead the life of a hunter-gatherer in such a challenging environment and a vast expanse of land is needed to accomplish this.

Here let me introduce village life in Arnhem Land. Meat is a favorite food of Aborigines. Young people go to the marshes to shoot birds because they flock there at particular times of year. The youngsters return home triumphantly when they have been successful. Women pluck the birds, build a fire and throw them into the flames. It taste best to cook and eat fresh meat. Another animal that Aborigines often hunt is the kangaroo. But interestingly enough, eating its meat is a taboo for some of them. The Australian natives do not eat anything unless it has been cooked. This may be a reasonable way of eating in a hot and humid environment. They also eat a lot of seafood; oysters, short-neck clams and the like. Hunting for shellfish is women's work because it does not involve hard moving, and takes many hours.

However, starchy foods that satisfy the stomach are more important than foods containing animal protein. I have often seen they collect bulbs of spike rush in the broad.

In Japan during the Jomon Period, people ate acorns and horse chestnuts after first removing their harsh taste. Aborigines also know a way of eating highly poisonous cycad The aboriginal people collect the nuts of cycad and then crush and soak them in water before eating them. It may take two weeks or so before they are ready to eat. However people now use wheat

flour to make dumper(bread), except when somebody (such as anthropologists) make a special request or they have time to enjoy the taste of the old days.

In the past the Aboriginal community had no liquor, but today alcohol has become a social problem. Hunter-gatherer communities generally had no liquor. The reason seems to be that no brewing techniques were developed because there was no custom of preserving foods. One characteristic of hunter-gatherer communities is that people lose no time in eating the game they obtain, and they do not move until they have finished it all.

We tend to think that hunter-gatherer peoples such as Aborigines have no trouble living in forests abundant in nature and surviving in an environment with such natural blessings, but in fact they control the environment using the “tool” we call fire.

Recently, a serious bushfire disaster has been reported in the vicinity of Melbourne. In the old days Aborigines control forests by fire, an approach that is called Fire Stick Farming. Unless Aborigines frequently set fire at forests , there is an accumulation of leaves from the trees and these burn easily. Once the leaves catch fire, the flames travel up to the crowns of the trees just like a bomb blast and the forests are destroyed. On this dry continent, some of the plants, such as eucalyptus, are fire resistant, and some species do not sprout without fire. The Aborigines have developed an environmental technique that takes advantage of this phenomenon.

In Australia, grass land were turned into pastoral ranches and forests were cut down and turned into farms after the colonization by Britain at the end of the 18th century. The new food production techniques created a new environment.

There are almost no indigenous domestic animals or crops domesticated. Australia depends entirely on food made from such non-native species. Aborigines as hunter-gatherers were living an ideal life on wild foodstuffs, however the food supply was insecure. This food problem was resolved when Australia became a colony and lifeline foodstuffs such as flour, canned foods, tea and sugar were guaranteed. It was livestock farming and agriculture that overcame the great disadvantages of living with nature.

Then what happened? The result is that Aborigines have become physically like whites. I have seen very large and fat Aborigines who even make me look slim. Many have lifestyle-related illnesses caused by

overeating, such as heart disease and diabetes. The medical history of Aborigines shows that they initially suffered from classical illnesses such as leprosy and tetanus as well as from a high mortality rate among pregnant women and infants. But a new problem has now arisen due to overeating. When Aborigines were living with nature, they did not like being hungry and wanted to eat to their full. But once their dream came true, this new problem appeared. A full stomach may be the nightmare of modern civilization. I have a potbelly from overeating, but I plan to take up aerobics or do some other fitness exercises, and then meet you again when I look better.