
Feeding Nayaka Children and English Readers: A Bifocal Ethnography of Parental Feeding in “The Giving Environment”

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Abstract

In this article I examine relational child feeding in the Nayaka forest-world and problematize the concept of “nurturing” which interferes with understanding it. Several essentialist and individualist antecedents of “nurturing,” I suggest, conflate child feeding with a one-way, top-down transfer of food; with training, controlling and loving the children; and with rearing them to grow up and separate from their parents. This conflation obscures the Nayaka relational senses which are embedded in an ontology of “living together” and in which child feeding is framed as an instance of sharing between coevals who remain closely related throughout their lives. As well as offering a corrective to “The Giving Environment” (Bird-David 1990), this article contributes a relational perspective to the study of children among forest-dweller hunter-gatherers. Methodologically, a case is made in the article for “bifocal ethnography” that pays attention not only to the subjects of the study but also—and ethnographically, as well—to selected key notions in the language in which the ethnography is written as a means of limiting readers’ own inherent ontological biases and “fine-tuning” the ethnography. [Keywords: Child feeding, relational ontology, nurturing, sharing, Nayaka, hunter-gatherers, bifocal ethnography]

Introduction

This article developed out of my surprise at how “The Giving Environment” (Bird-David 1990) had been read by English-speaking students and a nagging curiosity to understand why. “The Giving Environment,” which over the years has received a fair share of attention within and outside anthropology, offered a cultural perspective on the economies of hunter-gatherers, serving as a counterpoint to the then prevailing ecological approach in this field. In a nutshell, the article suggested that it is worthwhile to distinguish hunter-gatherers by their perception of their environment, more than by the actual subsistence activities which they do (or do not) carry out, arguing that this perception influences their economic conduct. It analyzed ethnographic material from the food-gathering Nayaka of South India, and their shifting cultivator neighbors, the Betta Kurumba, highlighting parallels between the



Photo 1: Foraging for honey (1970s).

Nayaka and other tropical forest dwellers (Batek and Mbuti) and contrasting them with the cultivators. The gist of the argument was that, compared to the cultivators’ sense of an environment that yields its bounty *in return* for appropriate conduct and labor, the “hunter-gatherer” view can be summed up as the “forest is a parent” who unconditionally “provides food to its children” (Bird-David 1990:190). Puzzlingly, some Anglo-American students read into this idea a far more transcendent, benign, nurturing and loving (forest as) “parent” than I had envisaged.¹ Their reading surprised me even more because based on the same argument some of my

Israeli students visualized a “Jewish parent” of sorts—someone you trust to give you food. Now, the Nayaka words “*appa*,” “*awa*” and “*makalo*” readily translate into the English “*father*,” “*mother*” and “*children*,” and as readily

into the Hebrew “*abba*,” “*imma*” and “*yeladim*.” The translation of these basic, everyday words is incontestable.² However, while the translation itself is not problematic, that very fact may obscure divergent cultural perspectives and ontologies.³ It produces a sense of obviousness which allows the readers to insert their own native intuitions and understandings.

My sense of puzzlement developed into a series of nested concerns. In part as a corrective to “The Giving Environment,” the core of these concerns was a study of Nayaka relational child feeding, which sought to shed more light on the local *own* senses of a parental provisioning forest. Within the Nayaka relational view of a forest world that is constitutive of coeval agents of all sorts who are enmeshed in sharing relations, I clarify in this article a core Nayaka relational view of children as active agents, who both give and take food. As part of my analysis, I shall probe the English language concept of “*nurturing*” as a way of preempting reading into the Nayaka ethnography antecedents of this notion that can eclipse local experiences. My analysis continues a series of recent articles exploring the Nayaka particular rendition of a relational ontology.⁴ I demonstrated in these articles their concerns with immediate relations, and with first-hand knowledge that is gained within immediate relations and is desired for maintaining these relations. I argued for the prominence and authority in Nayaka forest-life of an ontology of “living together” with diverse yet immediate others, human and other-than-humans, focusing on the process of being with them, more than on the essence of their respective beings. In this article, I build on these previous articles but also contribute to them since parent-child notions generally provide a particularly revealing perspective on ontology.⁵

More generally, I shall engage with studies of children in societies commonly grouped as “hunter-gatherers,” with special regard to forest dwellers, who provide a relevant comparative context for my Nayaka study. This, without belittling their diversity and the complex changes which they undergo, nor the fact that there are problems attached to categorizing them as “hunter-gatherers.”⁶ To date, children and child-rearing in these communities have received considerable attention, largely from evolutionary and developmental psychology perspectives. These perspectives, which were dominant during the first spate of research in the 1970s,⁷ and are still influential today,⁸ have yielded invaluable empirical findings over the years, including on the relation between views of the environment as “giving” and child-rearing practices (Hewlett et al. 2000).

Although the Nayaka among whom I worked will remain my main focus, I hope that my relational perspective will throw a complementary light on these findings. This study also responds to the growing call for an anthropology of children, portrayed at times by strategically persuasive descriptions of children as an overlooked "population," "minority group" or "subaltern culture" (Hirschfeld 2002). From the vantage point of their marginality, the Nayaka study will alert attention to the fact that this seductive call traps anthropologists within essentialistic ontological terms and tensions. The Nayaka study, I hope, will draw attention to social contexts (not restricted to "hunter-gatherers") where "children" and "parents" are inseparable as subjects of study and constructs.

My last and broadest concern in this article is methodological: it has to do with the problem of writing ethnography in English (or any of the other main international languages which anthropologists use for publishing their ethnographic work). In other words, it has to do with the fact that there is no God's language, just as there is no God's point of view. I have previously addressed the obstructive cultural baggage of several key English terms used in "hunter-gatherer" analysis (e.g., "*sharing*," on which I shall elaborate below, "*past*,"⁹ "*labor*," "*egalitarianism*" and "*property*"¹⁰). But the surprising misreading of "The Giving Environment" pressed home to me the fact that even basic everyday words such as father, mother, and children—perhaps *especially* such words—embody ontological intuitions and ways of seeing the social world that have to be addressed for ethnographic performance to be effective.

This realization leads me to ask whether ethnographers can do anything to check on the English bias that is inherent to writing ethnography in English. This is a question that is as old as anthropology itself, but one that I maintain we need to revisit time and again. As one strategy among others for tackling this problem, I propose to problematize key English notions that are used in the ethnographic analysis *as an inseparable part* of that analysis. In principle, of course, each English word is a candidate but since an ethnographer is unlikely at any given time to be engaged with more than a handful of such key words I shall pay particular attention here to the notion of "*nurturing*" (which Tim Ingold's critique of "The Giving Environment" brings into focus, see below) and, to a lesser extent deal with the notion of "*sharing*" (which is a key concept in hunter-gatherer ethnographies, see more below). Furthermore, I propose to problematize these English language notions by drawing on the growing ethnography of English

speakers to the best extent that a non-expert is able to in a study whose main objective remains a better ethnographic sense of the studied other. My concern is to highlight antecedents of these notions that can interfere seriously with the Nayaka senses which I want to convey in English. Or, put in other words, my aim is heuristic scaffolding in service of my subsequent inquiry into the Nayaka life-world. At best, the result can be read as useful ethnographic reflections through a Nayaka prism on these English concepts, but not their ethnography as such. My rationale for this proposition is this: it behooves anthropologists not to be the proverbial cobbler who walks barefoot, even if only by wearing coarse shoes.

Before moving to the analysis, a few notational clarifications are called for. “Nayaka” in this study refers to a very small tribal (*adivasi*) population in South India, numbering a few thousand people. More specifically, “Nayaka” refers to generalizations based on my study in a particular space-time (Pandalur area, 1978-9, 1989, 2001), and on the follow up study by Daniel Naveh (2003-4). I shall focus on Nayaka notions and practices of child feeding that are dominant especially in forest-related contexts, and which exert some influence on the Nayaka’s growing engagement with the State and NGOs. I shall not deal in this article with the changes which Nayaka are currently undergoing.¹¹ I use “child feeding” instead of “parental feeding” in order to circumvent the latter’s *ipso-facto* allusion to *feeding* parents and *fed* children, contra to my intended argument. (I stop short of using “parent-child-feeding,” which would have been even better had it not been so awkward!) Lastly, I shall sometimes italicize not only Nayaka but also English words, when focusing on [English] native notions. I shall prefix some translations into English by “~” to denote the need to further “tune” these translations in future work. The analysis begins by broadly describing the ontological distance that Nayaka concepts have to travel on the way to their English readership.

Child Feeding as Nurturing: Or, Feeding the Nurturing Mind

The English anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000:45-6) offered a useful critique of “The Giving Environment.” What concerns me here is not the critique as such but rather the terms in which it was framed. (The critique rested largely on misreading the article’s heuristic statement “forest as parent” for Nayaka own key metaphor, and then key metaphor—as a relation of analogy). Ingold maintained that parenting is not projected *on* but

subsists *in* such acts "as the *nurture* and *affection* bestowed by *adults* on their *offspring*" (2000:45, emphasis added).¹² This statement indicates how readily parenting can be indexed by "nurture" and "affection"; furthermore, it shows how readily one can assume that parenting is about adults who nurture their young, i.e., their non-adult children. I want to destabilize both of these presumptions.

A complex notion such as "nurturing" can be examined in diverse ways. I focus principally only on some of its antecedents, especially contemporary hierarchical, regulatory and individualistic ones, which constrain the description of Nayaka senses of child feeding. My principal objective, this simply cannot be overemphasized, is only a partial survey that can help to anticipate some of the readers' own possible native readings of the text and thereby direct the writer beforehand as to what ethnographic details to include in the ethnography in order to curtail its subsequent (mis)readings. I turn to English-English dictionaries as a starting point for the discussion, using them as an ethnographic source not just a writer's tool. "Nurture" is one of a set of verbs listed as synonyms for "feed," along with "nourish," "sustain," "support," "encourage" and "bolster." "Nurture" is defined as "feed and protect [for example 'to nurture one's offspring]"; "support and encourage, as during period of training or development," "bring up; train; educate." The verb "nurture," in other words, entangles giving children food with rearing them, fostering them, cherishing them, bringing them up, supporting them, encouraging them, training them, educating them and disciplining them; in certain contexts, nurturing means also tenderness and solicitude in training mind and manners.¹³ "Nourishing" similarly means more than simply feeding; it denotes promoting and sustaining life, growth or strength; giving the body what is necessary for health and development. And, "nursing," which means feeding babies, also means tending the sick or infirm. "Nurse," and in an earlier form "nursh," is derived from "nourish." In 20th century usage, nurturing, nourishing and nursing can be used almost interchangeably when referring to bringing up the young. This bundle of synonyms brings to the fore a relatively recent historical image of innocent and vulnerable children. By the end of the 19th century, this image appeared natural but it had evolved historically, arguably along with the pedagogical role of parents and teachers since the 18th century. Recent studies now open up this image (e.g., see Shehan 1999).

One aspect of "nurturing" that concerns me here as ethnographer of the Nayaka, who writes their ethnography in English, is the underlying

assumption that nurturing involves a profoundly unequal relation. This notion presupposes a fundamental asymmetry between adults (who take care of children) and children (who are taken care of by the adults); and more specifically, in the present context: adults who feed children and children who are fed by adults. "Nurturing," in other words, casts the feeding of children *a priori* as a one-way, up-down, non-reciprocal provision of food. Breast-feeding appears to be the most powerful reflection of this notion be it whether the mother feeds her baby on schedule, according to what she believes the baby needs, or whether the feeding is in response to the infant's demands. However, this is the case only when it is *seen* as the mothers who are feeding their babies rather than as the *babies* who feed themselves on their mothers' breasts, which, as will be shown below, frequently is the case for Nayaka.

The notion of "nurturing" invests adults with the responsibility for, and control of, how much, when and what food the children eat, generally, not just at the nursing phase. The reason for this is not only the ontological axiom that the children (as "~vulnerable," "~needy" and "~immature" beings) cannot be trusted to know what is good for them. The nutritional *substance* of the food they consume is believed to be crucial for their development and well-being. These are far from being merely abstract ideas. They are manifested in various everyday child feeding practices that are generated by and regenerate these notions, and which require attention for anticipating and then preempting their obstructive unconscious projection onto the [English-read] Nayaka ethnography.

The feeding of children with solid food is a relatively under-studied area within the prolific field of child development (Dettwyler 1989, see also review by Van Esterik 2002, and the rare mention of child feeding in recent anthologies like LeVine and New 2008). Katherine Dettwyler (1989) drew on folklorists' work describing the playful techniques which English parents were using in order to feed their children what the parents thought their children should be eating. These techniques included: praising or rewarding the children; pretending that the caregivers themselves were also eating; designating each spoonful as "one" for this or that relative; or "playing airplanes" with the caregiver treating each spoonful as a plane seeking permission to land in the child's mouth. Dettwyler characterized England, the USA, Newfoundland and Sweden by "high control" approach to children's consumption of solid food. This characterization can be further fleshed out by drawing on familiar contemporary bourgeois scenes.

Control is inherent to the very way in which some parents spoon feed their toddlers, first seating them on high chairs, at a level convenient for the parents, and then securing them to the chairs by safety straps or a locking gate, lest the children fall from this height onto the hard floor. When time presses, these parents sometimes try to speed up the feeding, nudging the children to open their mouths. At other times, the children may have to wait open-mouthed for the spoonful to arrive. The *need* of toddlers, and even older children, to *be given food* is created in some cases by certain kitchen designs and food storage and hygiene conventions. Clearly, children do indeed *need* the caregivers to give them food when it is stored beyond their reach, whether having been done to prevent children from getting at it or for the convenience of adults. Similarly, when food is stored in vacuum-tight or other secured bags and containers, an adult's help is required. In a market economy, a child would commonly also depend on the caregiver for both money and the permission to spend it for access to food outside the child's own and relatives' and friends' households. The extent of parental control over food in this situation is quite unlike the position among Nayaka children who can easily access food within the household, and can also forage for it in the forest (see below).

The passive role of children in getting food is consolidated by diverse discursive practices, some examples of which I can draw from my own experience of raising my son in early 1980s Cambridge (UK). Young mothers I knew, including myself, commonly took a photo of their young toddlers showing the infants after they had been allowed to eat by themselves, with splotches of food smeared on their little faces, on the trays of the high-chairs, on the floor... These photos lovingly recorded the children's endearing dependence on their parents and their *need to be fed*. Parents I knew implored their four to seven year old kids to behave "like good little children" and wait until the food is doled out to them in conformity to the then accepted eating decorum. Doling out the food was viewed as a parent's role to such an extent that as a peculiarly humorous spillover, one could ask at exclusively adult tea or dinner parties in 1980s academic Cambridge: "who will play mother?" (or "who's going to be mother?" or "shall I be mother?" etc.), as a way of asking who was going to pour the tea or serve the food to the other guests.

Alongside discipline and control, feeding children can also evoke, in some contexts, a sense of transcendent love and security. Barbara Reid and Jann Vaisner (1986), for example, show how discipline, security and

love are all conjoined in the child rearing philosophy of some American parents. In another American study, DeVault (1991) showed how providing food for the family is construed as expressing care and love. Kolodny (1975) traced how for several centuries a “nurturing mother” has been a common metaphor in American literature for the land and the landscape alluding to well-being in an Eden of Childhood that has been lost and was now being re-sought. In Janet Carsten’s memories of her London childhood home (2004:31-33), a “large kitchen table” looms large as the focus of not only eating but, inseparably, affectionate family life.

Apart from the connotations of control/love and one-way up-down relations, a further aspect of “nurturing” which concerns me as writer of Nayaka ethnography in English, is the attention this English concept directs to the essentialist end-points of the process: i.e., the *individual*-parent and the *individual*-child, more than to their mutual engagement as a form of “being-together.” The changing terms of debates on breast-feeding provide a convincing if fleeting glimpse of this. In the mid-twentieth century, debates focused on whether breast-feeding is innate (i.e., *within the mother’s body*); whether it fulfills the *mother’s* emotional need; whether it is crucial for the *baby’s* health; and, even whether breastfeeding is important for bonding mother and baby, a concern arising from seeing them as two separate individuals to start with, whose bonding then becomes an issue.¹⁴ More recently, attention focused on whether breast-feeding is an intense *embodied* experience for the nursing *mother*, connected with *her senses of self, sexuality and femininity*, with her *self* identity as mother and, furthermore, with whether and in what way the mother-child relation is itself embodied *within the mother*.¹⁵

In her study of late 20th century English kinship, Marilyn Strathern (1992:12) pushed the point further and observed that under late-twentieth century individualism and consumerism, “having children” has itself become a matter of satisfying an *individual’s* preconceived emotional needs. The individual’s need for having children and becoming a parent, suggests Strathern (1992), arises *before* having the children and leads to the children being conceived. To put it in simpler terms, a woman may want to become a mother and go on to have a child rather than first have a child and through engagement with the child turns into a mother. Motherhood in this particular perspective, which no doubt is articulated with other perspectives in the lived reality of particular women, becomes a matter of individual consumer choice with the child figuring as an



Photo 2: Relaxing at home (1970s).

object of care that provides emotional satisfaction. In his historical study of English society, Alan Macfarlane (1986:55) similarly showed how in previous centuries the English viewed pets as substitute children and children as “superior pets” (Strathern 1992:12), i.e., as objects of care and emotional satisfaction. These tangential antecedents of child feeding can too easily obscure the senses of sharing and coevalness which, I shall argue below, Nayaka associate with child feeding.

Yet another and the last transparent antecedent of “nurturing” which concerns me here is its anticipated temporal restriction to the period during which a parent cares for a young child. The English term “*children*” refers both to an age category (being young) and to a kinship category (sons and daughters). However, in English language references to child feeding it is the former that generally prevails. The idea of nurturing—like the idea of *socialization*, another key paradigm in 20th century thought about children which I am unable to deal with here—inherently applies to a circumscribed phase in the life cycle, i.e., until the child matures into adulthood. Continuing to feed the children after they have become adults is not usually part of parental expectation. The counterpart to this is the expectation that, ideally, as children grow up they will separate from their parents and begin living

their own individual lives. This is articulated, for example, by parents who express the hope that their children will grow up to “*stand on their own feet,*” “*make their own decisions,*” “*look after themselves,*” and “*live their own lives.*” But there is more to this separation than just the children’s physical departure. Strathern (1992:13) maintained that the departure of children assumes a further and critical importance for the English because they imagine this separation as distance, and distance as crucial for making and defining individual boundaries. The distance, in this English view, is an analogue of social and innate states of maturity. Lived experience, of course, can endlessly complicate and collapse this idea, but in its crudest abstraction it amounts to a two stage parent-child relation: i.e., firstly, parent-[young] child intense one-way nurturing, controlling and loving, then, parent-[mature]child mutual autonomy and independence. This split makes it hard to describe, and indeed hard to understand, the Nayaka framing of parent-child relation as a variant of sharing and as part of an ongoing coevalness throughout the life cycle.

A fuller exploration of other senses of “nurturing” must be left to future work. For now the above is sufficient to enable us to turn to the Nayaka ethnography and to do so with a better appreciation of the ontological gap that Nayaka notions have to cross on their way to the reader of English. Or, rather, the ontological *return journey* that English-language concepts have to make to and from the Nayaka world, with some gains to show for the effort. If nothing else, one can gauge from the above discussion the need, as it were, to “feed” English readers with a sense of the relational ontology that underscores Nayaka practices and ideas of child feeding. It alerts me as ethnographer of Nayaka who writes their ethnography in English, what ethnographic details should not be neglected in the ethnography: for example, seemingly banal details on how, when, and where children access and consume solid food which as Dettwyler (1989) noted are not often given sufficient attention in ethnographies.

Before I turn to the Nayaka case it is crucial to stress that this involves a radical shift of scale that too often is concealed by using the same problematic but commonly used English terms: “society” and “culture” for both “Nayaka” and “English” (or even “Anglophone West”). The total Nayaka population at large is estimated at about 3,000 people (hypothetically, they can all be accommodated in a few high-rise buildings in the center of London). Notwithstanding, as an ethnographer of a small-scale society, I am still faced with the problem of making generalizations, just

as ethnographers of large-scale societies. What I gain by my direct contact with a relatively large proportion of the studied society, I lose because their idiosyncrasies are not neutralized by the strength of large numbers, commonly not even in their own imagination. My Nayaka friends rarely made generalizations about the Nayaka as a whole, and resisted my own attempts by always pointing to exceptions and saying only the equivalent of "many Nayaka." I follow their usage when I refer below to "many Nayaka," though it may seem a regression to old-fashioned rhetoric. But it should be remembered that, given the size of the community, "many" may refer to only a very small number of people, and most of these "many" are personally known and engaged with in immediate ways. Let me turn then to the Nayaka life-world, and occasionally to other forest dwellers as a relevant comparative context for my Nayaka study.

Crossing Ontological Domains: Or, From "Nurturing" to "Sharing" Perspectives

Once during my original 1979 fieldwork I was startled by an incident that my Nayaka companions did not pay much attention to. An abandoned mongoose cub was found in the forest and was brought back to the hamlet. A nursing Nayaka mother expressed breast-milk and fed the cub. The incident gripped my attention but my Nayaka companions did not indulge my attempt to make it an issue: as far as they were concerned, the cub simply needed and was given food. Unsure about what to make of this gripping observation, I have been on the alert ever since for any mention of such incidents in other hunter-gatherer ethnographies and found quite a number of instances, all mentioned either in passing or in brief footnotes (e.g., see Chen 1990:41, Cormier 2003:114, Rival 2002:98, Seitz 2007:185, Smole 1976:185). I suspect it happens even more widely among hunter-gatherers whose ethnographers simply left it out of their analysis, as I myself did. What is it that is so gripping yet analytically elusive about this observation? If we do not see it, as do Nayaka, as simply expressing and giving white-yellowish milk to a hungry animal but rather view it from a "*nurturing*" perspective as expressing—note the co-usage of this term—love, care, attachment and co-substantiality between the nursing woman and the fed cub, it unsettles the Cartesian binary division between human/animal and subject/object. From the Nayaka perspective on feeding, this incident is unworthy of special attention. I explore this perspective next, referring to it as "*sharing*."

The concept of “sharing” has received a great deal of attention in hunter-gatherer ethnographies. In the words of James Woodburn (1998:48), an authority on hunter-gatherer societies, “sharing” is “unquestionably...of central importance in the operation of these societies.” It is

a much-stressed characteristic of many hunter-gatherer societies. The hunter-gatherers themselves stress it and so do anthropologists. They and we are right to do so (Woodburn 1998:48).

Yet, “sharing” is rarely, if at all, a literal translation of an indigenous vernacular. Rather, it is an English word and concept that is used for generalizing and glossing over a range of indigenous notions: for example, in the Nayaka case, *kodu* (~to give), *e:su* (~to receive), *ba:gama:du* (~to distribute), and *eri* (~to beg).¹⁶ Woodburn himself already warned that:

A particular difficulty in dealing with this topic [sharing] is that our preconceptions badly obstruct our understanding of it (Woodburn 1998:61).

And, he added in an endnote that:

Certainly, the Hadza or !Kung sharing does not map neatly on to English sharing (Woodburn 1998:234, fn 5).

Yet, Woodburn conceded that this bias is no worse than is common and acceptable in anthropology (Woodburn 1998:234, fn 5). I endeavor below to pursue his insight further, and depart from the concession both in specific reference to “sharing” and, more generally, as a case for not accepting such “biases” in anthropology.

I maintain that, transparent as it has been left in English language anthropology, the English word and concept of “*sharing*” has its own antecedents, embedded in an ontology, of which it is necessary to briefly sift through and tune, prior to its application. The word comes from the Old English “*scearu*,” meaning “cutting” or “division.” Whatever it may have meant then, in contemporary usage it commonly means either the division of an item between individuals or individuals who use this item jointly, whether at the same time or sequentially.¹⁷ (The latter sense extends to the sharing of experiences, secretes, feelings, and so on). Notwithstanding these almost diametri-

cally opposite meanings, the concept of "*sharing*" either way premises and creates separate individuals: in the first case, individuals who remain separate by dividing the item between them and in the second, individuals who join in what they experience as involving an inner sense of unison that transcends and overcomes their pre-given separation and/or competition over individual access to the shared item. This underlying premise is in tension with the Nayaka authoritative ontology of "living-together."

I previously examined this particular Nayaka rendition of a relational ontology from diverse other perspectives (using, however, "joined lives" or "joint selves" which, I now think, are not as succinct an expression as the simpler "living together").¹⁸ This ontology presupposes a pre-given plurality. But it is not a plurality of separate individuals; i.e., an assembly of the same and separate beings, that the mind can see and count one by one and determine how many beings altogether there are of one kind or another. Rather, this Nayaka ontology premises a plurality of diverse but connected beings who are in immediate engagement with one another, if not constantly, then, at least frequently enough to sustain a lingering sense of ongoing personal face-to-face familiarity. This plurality *ipso facto* is underscored by immediacy (see Bird-David and Naveh In Press), and would be affected by what Fred Myers described so eloquently as the "tyranny of distance" (1986). It is local by its very nature. It is diverse in its deep logic: what counts first and foremost is not "what" or "who" one is, but whether one "lives with" the others, irrespective of type. Classifications are subsidiary in this Nayaka ontology. Furthermore, in this ontology, the act of living together defines the personhood of all those concerned. That "personhood" is an overarching construct, within which distinctions by kind may or may not be further drawn and are, in any case, of secondary importance.¹⁹

The English language concept "sharing," in this context, should not be understood as connoting the divisiveness associated with the word in English, but rather as alluding to using or doing something *together*. Moreover, attention should dwell on the process of being-together in the course of using something jointly rather than on the object of usage. A good example is the sharing of large game, a central and commonplace event for many hunter-gatherers. Here, the focus for Nayaka is on its joint usage and consumption, as acts in which living-together subsists. Cutting the meat and distributing its parts is, to a large extent, merely the practical concomitant of sharing and eating the game together. The sharing here is not about the division of a things between individuals but rather

its flow between and co-use by people who live together. Sharing in this case can be usefully imagined in terms drawn from “the law of connected vessels,” i.e., as a leveling of the flow between connected people, affirming and maintaining their connectedness.

An important aspect of sharing in this sense needs to be amplified. It involves a flow between the current “haves” to the current “*have nots*,” *the difference between whom is viewed as situational and changeable, not inherent*. The givers and the receivers figure here as coevals; they are connected subjects who jointly live together. Indeed, in the form of sharing which is the most commonly practiced among hunter-gatherers, and which has been called “demand-sharing” (Peterson 1993), the “have nots” *demand* that the “haves” share with them. That is to say, the “have nots” are not passive recipients; on the contrary, they initiate the giving and, in a sense, orchestrate it. They are an active, agential side in the transaction. Critical to their ability to command, however, is living-together. Immediacy, visibility and accessibility of things sustain the conditions in which the “have nots” can make *actual concrete* demands (i.e., “give me this,” “give me that”), not just vague, abstract demands.

Next I want to show ethnographically that within the Nayaka ontology of living together, feeding children figures as sharing with them in the above explained sense of that word. The children figure here as coevals with the parents and as active recipients who can also feed others now or in the future. But once again, prior to making this argument, the notion of children that I use as a translation for the Nayaka *makalo*, itself requires tuning. *Makalo* is rarely employed for nursed babies, who are mostly referred to as *kusu*. *Makalo* is commonly used when children are already able to walk, talk, and independently engage with others in the community. Notwithstanding this, the word *makalo* alludes in many contexts more to kinship than to age, unlike its English translation “children,” although in their respective languages each carries with it the meaning both of an age status and a kinship relation. For expositional convenience, I focus in the next section first on feeding babies and then on feeding children.

Living Together, Nursing and Weaning

In Nayaka forest-related contexts, suckling babies play a far greater agential role than may appear to observers culturally disposed to see *mothers* feeding their young. It is vital to recognize the extent of immediacy

between mothers and babies—and between children and their caregivers generally—in order to gauge the agential roles of the suckling babies. To an outside observer the extent of parent-child closeness, starting from the very moment of birth, was remarkable. I witnessed how on the onset of labor, especially in the case of a woman's first-born, relatives gathered and then stayed for the duration so that the baby was born right in the midst of a gathered community of relatives. Babies grew up in close proximity to relatives, who themselves lived very near to one another. The Nayaka I studied lived in small hamlets comprising each of a few huts, which in the late 1970s, were bunched closely together, their walls made of porous, flattened bamboo strips and grass. These hamlets were populated by a few dozen people at most; other hamlets, especially in recent years, have grown in size, some of them doubling or even tripling it (Naveh 2007). Babies commonly were carried by adults or older children, but mostly by the mothers. The mothers carried them seated on the side of their waists, from where the babies had immediate and easy access to the mother's bare, or lightly covered, breast. Babies suckled from the mother's breast more or less at will, while the mother continued on with whatever she was doing, be it cooking, talking with others, engaging in foraging or in casual wage work on the plantation. Babies rarely cried in hunger or for attention; they commonly fed themselves *before* crying. They could actively suckle their mother's breast *because of* their constant bodily closeness to her. Babies and mothers, in this respect, lived together, while doing their own separate things.

Frequent nursing, mother-infant co-sleeping and a high level of physical contact throughout the day, have been found to be characteristic of other hunter-gatherers.²⁰ Quantitative studies of some other forest-dwelling hunter-gatherers show that infants under the age of one "are never set down on the ground or left alone for more than a few seconds." They "are held, touched, or kept near others constantly" (Hewlett and Lamb 2005a:15). Hewlett et al. (2000), who compared the daily experiences of three to four month old infants among Aka foragers and Nagandu farmers in central Africa with those of upper-middle-class urban Americans from the Washington, D.C. area, found out that Aka held infants 94% of the time when the infants slept, and 98% of the time when they were awake. The American infants were held 22% of the time while sleeping and 44% of the time while awake (Hewlett et al. 2000:290). Hewlett recorded whether the *baby* took the breast or the mother offered it, and found that the Aka

infants took the breast 58% of the time, and the Ngandu 2%; this was due in part to holding methods as the Aka infants were carried on the side, and the Ngandu on the back, when the mother was walking, and on the lap when she was sitting (Hewlett, personal communication).

Ayako Hirasawa (2005) showed that the extent of mother-infant physical contact remained high among even sedentarized hunter-gatherer Baka, compared with their neighboring cultivator Bombong. The sedentarized Baka infants initiated more than 70% of the nursing sessions (Hirasawa 2005:374); their mothers often continued with their own affairs while the baby suckled. Likewise, those Nayaka I knew who got involved in casual wage work in plantations—from the late-1950s until the mid-1980s (by which time the plantations had closed)—preferred, unlike their non-Nayaka co-workers, to work in husband-wife teams usually taking their young babies along and, in this sense, continuing to live together whilst working.

Willful agency of infants, far more than their control, is apparent not only in nursing but even in their weaning. I did not record nor recall any observation of coercive weaning among the Nayaka I worked with. The same claim is forcefully made in a recent comparative study of Bofi foragers and farmers of Central Africa (Foutes et al. 2005a) which directly focused on this issue. Bofi foragers and farmers share the same natural ecology, speak the same language and interact with each other on a daily basis. However, among the foragers, infants themselves decide when to stop breast-feeding, without overt parental guidance or coercion, while among the farmers, mothers overtly strive by various means to wean children from the breast. Infant feeding, in these contexts, is far less controlled, contrived, one-sided and unequal than the “nurturing” perspective might lead readers to expect.

The Relational Aspect of Child Feeding

The active involvement of children in food matters becomes more evident beyond the nursing stage that has previously drawn most of the attention in quantitative child focused hunter-gatherer ethnography. With no dining table around which everyone sits, and *to* which food is brought, eating, for Nayaka children as well as for adults, involves going *to* the cooking pot, and taking a share from it. The cooking pot (in all the Nayaka households which I saw in the late 1970s and still in the early 2000s) stands on a low cooking hearth, at a height that a toddler can reach. With



Photo 3: Sharing food with a fledgling (1970s).

no closed cupboard storage space for food, leftovers remain in the pot and children serve themselves from it throughout the day at their leisure when *they* want to. In his comparative study of the hunter-gatherer Aka and the Nagandu farmers, Hewlett observed three to five years old Aka children cooking food for themselves, which the Nagandu children of the same age never did (Hewlett, personal communication).

As the hunter-gatherer literature has emphasized, children in many cases are involved in producing food. Nayaka children accompanied adults in foraging expeditions. Occasionally, they went on their own to fish and pick wild fruits or even hunt small game in the immediate surroundings. However, an important point to emphasize here is that while “*production*” or “*subsistence*” are the common English designators of these activities, for Nayaka these activities are intensely social in effect and sometimes even in design. The economic produce in some cases is just the epiphenomenon of roaming together in the forest, which is one way in which living-together subsists.

The children have active, agentive role not just in producing food but also in receiving and distributing it, though this has received far less

attention in the literature. A good example of the way in which their participation is made apparent comes from the highly formalized and ritualized meat sharing event (an occasion which provides the theatrical opposite to the stereotypical English Sunday roast, when children sit around the family table waiting for the parent to carve the meat and serve it to them). On the occasions which I observed, the Nayaka children were involved in butchering and dividing the meat into family portions, playfully monitoring its proper distribution. They, then, carried the portions to the respective families. The following describes in detail one event that took place in the late 1970s:²¹

It is late evening; already pitch dark. Dogs are barking in the distance, heralding the hunters' return. Children run towards them in excitement, waiting for their arrival at the edge of the hamlet. Indifferent to the commotion, their parents remain at their respective hearths. The hunters lay a dead deer on the ground amid the huts and send the children to bring a metal pot, a plate, or just a large plantain leaf from each hearth. The assorted objects are placed, next to each other around the carcass. The children become increasingly excited as the butchering begins. The meat is cut into small chunks. The children take an active part, here clutching a torch, there a limb to ease the butchering. Chunks of meat slowly pile up: the innards on one side and the mounds of flesh heaped on the deer's skin. To the joyous and unceasing commentary of the children the chunks of meat from both piles are then divided and placed on the various vessels. The young audience keeps making suggestions and directing the hunters to place this bit here, and that bit there. The hunters tease them, pretending to be uncertain, putting a chunk in this pot...but no! at the last moment withdrawing it and placing it in another, and so on; all with playful exaggerated gestures. At last, the job is done, and the children carry the portions to the respective hearths. The meat is cooked and eaten immediately. Everyone eat meat, even those who already had had their evening meal before the hunter arrived. No meat is saved for the next days.

The involvement of the children in producing and circulating food spilled over to food purchasing as those Nayaka who had worked casually in plantation began to make small purchases of tea and snacks in tea

shacks opened by entrepreneurial immigrant co-workers on the edge of the isolated plantations. Children went by themselves to these tea shacks and brought sweetened tea [in old empty bottles] to everybody back at home. Furthermore, while among the non-Nayaka workers it was mostly men who attended the tea shacks as a pastime after work, among the Nayaka the whole family (husband, wife and children) commonly went there together. The individual consumption of the food remained less the issue here than its *joint* consumption.

Child Feeding and Growing Up

The children's freedom of action—while living-together with their relatives—was manifested in diverse ways other than feeding. For example, the *children* often went to cuddle their parents, far more so than the other way round (cf. Hewlett 1991:102-103). The children chose when to join their parents or other relatives in various kinds of work, far more than the parents enticed them to do so. The children initiated their visits to, and stay with, other relatives, more than the caregivers did. In the forest world, Nayaka children were rarely given formal instructions. Even when this was risky, they were left to learn for themselves by direct experience, by trial and error and by joining the everyday activities of other children and adults. Very young children could, for instance, be seen playing with large, sharp knives, with no one taking notice (except for the anthropologist worried that they would harm themselves!). In his 2003-4 fieldwork, Naveh (2007) observed a four-year-old Nayaka girl playing with a poisonous caterpillar. The father watched the child, barely restraining himself from intervening, but did not say a word. Parents generally admonished children only rarely; and if the parents lost control over a particularly mischievous child, *they*—not the children—were admonished by adult bystanders.

Again in these respects, Nayaka are not an exception when compared with other tropical forest-dwelling hunter-gatherers. Children's use of dangerous tools is reported for other hunter-gatherers (see Hewlett and Lamb's review 2005a, Hewlett 1991; see also Endicott and Endicott 2008:115). Students also noted the restraint exercised by adults in not admonishing the children. Hewlett et al. (2000:289) report that hitting a child is not only rare among Aka but can be a cause for divorce. This behavior is, indeed, striking when looked at from the viewpoint of contemporary bourgeois conventions which emphasize the need for a safe,

adult-controlled child-environment. Yet, such behavior is in tune with an indigenous paradigm that premises children as active subjects, living-together with adults. This paradigm, it should be noted, also accords with such ethnographic descriptions as Briggs' (1998) exquisite analysis of the "dramas" which Inuit parents stage. In these "dramas," one can say, the grown-ups do not teach the child conventions of behavior, but rather create the engagement within which the children actively develop their own social sense and skill of being with others.

These aspects of growing up, which prevailed in forest-related contexts, spilled over to other realms of Nayaka life, where they were often misunderstood. Consider for example the school for migrant workers (up to standard V) which operated in one plantation during 1968-1977. To boost the small number of pupils and justify keeping the school open, Nayaka children were invited to attend it and a few of the Nayaka children I later met had gone there on a casual basis. I was told by non-Nayaka neighbors that these children attended the school when they had wanted to, sometimes coming especially at lunch time when a meal was provided. The teacher and these neighbors criticized the Nayaka children for their "primitive," if not, as a few neighbors put it, their "animal-like" concern for food over education. From the Nayaka perspective, however,

the joint eating of food augmented sharing relations with the teacher and other pupils. *This* had been important for them, while they continued to learn when and what they wanted, shifting freely in and out of the supposedly "secure" school grounds. The Nayaka children broke free not only from the "safe grounds" of the school but also from the paradigm of vulnerable children in need of *being* taught and re-socialized.



Photo 4: Learning through free play (1970s).

Growing up was *not* generally identified by the Nayaka I studied with separation and distance (conceptual or actual) from the parents. Growing up was associated with developing *budi* (~the skills of living-together with relatives, the ability to wisely act with others). The normal Nayaka life trajectory in the late 1970s involved physical departure from the parents at a young age. Children moved freely between families in their hamlet and at an older age took advantage of visits by adults, walking along with them and staying away in other hamlets, for days, or even weeks at a time, until another opportunity presented itself for them to return home. From their late teens, they circulated widely in the area, staying with other families for increasingly longer periods, until during these visits they met spouses with whom they settled down. The "fact" of the departure from their parents, however, did not figure in the Nayaka relational perspective as "separation" from the parents but rather as the concomitant aspect of joining other relatives, i.e., as part of the twofold social process which involves joining and separating relatives so as to maintain immediate relations with all of them. Rather than evidencing the children's *social state* of maturity, by making and defining their individual boundaries, this process facilitates and evidences their growing *budi*, and their ability as mature persons to live with all their relatives.

The sharing of food was an important part of this coming and going and the feeding of children merely represented one aspect of it rather than being viewed as an expression of duty and care for vulnerable, needy children. In fact, I would go as far as to contend, pushing the argument to its logical extreme, that child feeding was the epitome of the general practice of sharing. I would argue that this is so because it takes place between close relatives (parents and their children) who live together—as and because they are living together—at a time of temporary, situational disparity which is bound to change in the future as the children grow up and may themselves be giving food to the parents. The generalization of child feeding into a universal model, or at least its casting as inseparable from other instances of sharing, finds clear expression in the key Nayaka celebration, the trance gathering, which I described from diverse perspectives in earlier work.¹⁸ In the course of this celebration, the celebrant Nayaka referred to themselves and to the other-than-human forest-beings who visited them, respectively, as "children" and "big parents." They framed themselves as "children" at the same time that *they* were offering food to the "big parents" and cooking a meal that would be shared by

everyone. The trance dialogues that went on continuously for two whole days stressed the mutual dependence of parents and children, including the *parents'* dependence on the *children* for cooking the food *provided by the parents*. At the end of the day, the cooked meal was shared equally between everybody present, Nayaka "children" and the "big parents." Strikingly, everybody received an equal share, including even young toddlers (excluding, however, the kusu, the breast-fed babies): young toddlers could be seen seated facing disproportionately large shares that had been doled out for them, and which, in the case of the youngest toddlers, equaled almost a third of their own body mass.

Conclusions

As anthropology changes and develops, we need to revisit age-old problems that, unfortunately, do not simply disappear with the passage of time. In this article I addressed an old problem in anthropology which arises from its very constitution: the introduction of exotic worldviews—or ontologies—to Western readers, naturally, in the latter's own languages. My broad argument has been that one fresh way in which to meet this old challenge is by problematizing, as an inseparable part of ethnographic work, ontological antecedents of key English language concepts which the ethnographer uses. Furthermore, I suggested drawing on ethnographic studies of English-speakers themselves, which have proliferated in recent years and which can help anticipate some of the ontological biases of English-speaking readers.

Triggered by what for me as a non-native English-speaker were unexpected readings of "The Giving Environment" (Bird-David 1990), my attention was alerted to how basic, easy-to-translate notions like "parent" "child," and "giving the child food" can interfere with effective ethnographic performance; indeed, perhaps, simple notions such as these are especially obstructive. In this article I focused mainly on certain antecedents of "nurturing" and "sharing" that might interfere with how native English speakers read English language ethnographies of Nayaka child feeding notions and practices. My narrow argument has been that some antecedents of the complex notion of "nurturing" may allure readers to presuppose that child feeding is about one-way, up-down giving of food to children; that it is entangled with *rearing*, *training*, *protecting* and *loving* the children, and with the parents' and the children's innate needs;

and that it lasts until the children grow up and can take care of themselves. These senses can obscure the Nayaka own relational senses of child feeding. My second specific argument has been that within the Nayaka ontology of living together, child feeding is framed as an instance of sharing between coevals, perhaps even the epitome thereof, where "sharing" mainly refers to the experience of eating the food together, in which living-together subsists, not to its practical division. This, I argued, is especially so in the forest-world, yet spills over also beyond it. I showed that Nayaka children are active actors in the consumption, production as well as in the circulation of food within their community. They play a part in sustaining a universe conceived of and structured as involving ongoing coevalness and sharing within an intricate web of mutual dependencies.

More broadly, I argued for paying attention to the ontological context of commonly reported hunter-gatherers' child practices (e.g., frequent nursing, parent-infant co-sleeping, a high level of physical contact with infants, child indulgence, acceptance of a child playing with dangerous tools, and so on). Their ontology of living together, I maintain, deserves more attention than is generally paid to it not only in hunter-gatherer literature but also in popular and scientific discourse that draws on hunter-gatherers for naturalizing or legitimizing changing child-care fashions in the West.

My broadest argument has been that ethnographic effectiveness can sometimes be improved by what I suggested calling "bifocal ethnography." Namely, ethnography that pays attention not only to the subjects of study but also—and ethnographically, as well—to selected key notions in the language in which the ethnography is written, as a means of limiting the readers' own inherent ontological biases. The work which this involves can be described as "fine tuning," borrowing the term from music where it means bringing instruments to the same pitch for harmony, generating agreement between tones that are still audible as coming from separate sources, making minor adjustments in order to produce the precise and desired results during a performance. In tribute to Clifford Geertz, the object of bifocal ethnography perhaps can be described as "thick tuning."

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ENDNOTES

¹This reading attracted some criticism; see for example, Ichikawa 1992, see also Ingold 2000:44-45. Grinker (1992) importantly remarked on how anthropologists embraced Colin Turnbull's (1961) romantic characterization of the Mbuti as children who enjoy the forest's "affection" with strikingly uncritical persistence.

²The abstract, gender-neutral term "parent" translates into the Hebrew "horeh," but, to the best of my knowledge has no equivalent in the Nayaka dialect. In 2003-4 some Nayaka used the literal combination "appa-awa" (father-mother) for this purpose (Naveh, personal communication).

³Recent years have seen a growing usage of the term "ontology" in anthropological writings, not necessarily in strict adherence to its uses in philosophy. It lies beyond the scope of this article to try defining the manifold, complex and above all emergent meanings of this concept in anthropology. I should only note that to my understanding, and as I myself deploy it, one of its main attractions is that it does not connote a symbolic representation of the world (as perhaps the orthodox "worldview" does) but instead a world-form. I endorse Viveiros de Castro's position on the possibility of multiple ontologies (2004).

⁴Bird-David 1999, 2004a,b, see also Nave 2007.

⁵Moore 2004, Strathern 1992.

⁶Although the term "hunter-gatherers" originated from early 20th century ecological and evolutionary discourses, it has remained the received term also beyond these discourses as a fruitful category for comparative study.

⁷See useful reviews by Hewlett and Lamb 2005a and Konner 2005.

⁸For some examples see Tronick et al. 1987, Hawkes et al. 1997, Fouts et al. 2005, Hewlett and Lamb eds. 2005.

⁹Bird-David 2004a.

¹⁰Bird-David 2005.

¹¹For studies of these changes see Naveh 2007, Bird-David and Naveh in press. See also Bird-David 1983, 1988, 1992a.

¹²See also Carsten (2004) for an important revisit of kinship, where she argues that nurture forges kinship relations.

¹³"Nurture" sometimes means "establishing *the conditions* for growth and development," in which sense it applies, for example, "to laying manure on one's flower-beds to encourage the growth of plants" (an anonymous reviewer). In this case, the caretaker still has the active role, while the beneficiary may even be further removed ontologically from the caretaker as the term extends to the subject-object relation between gardeners and plants.

¹⁴See review in Scheper-Hughes 1985, Klaus and Kennel 1976.

¹⁵E.g., see Carter 1995, McLean 1990, Shmied and Lupton 2001, Beasley 1998.

¹⁶Orthography follows Natanasabapathi (1986).

¹⁷I thank Francoise Dussart for comments which helped me to refine this point.

¹⁸Bird-David 1999, 2004a, b, Bird-David and Naveh In Press.

¹⁹See Bird-David 1999.

²⁰See Konner 2005 for a recent synthesis of empirical findings from child-focused studies, conducted in the 1970s largely on the !Kung, and later on Hadza, Efe, Aka, Ache and Agta. For Batek see Endicott and Endicott 2008:61, 115.

²¹A similar description appears in Bird-David 2005:201.

²²Bird-David 1999, 2004a, b.

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