I suspect that using archaeological data from these cultures to test her hypothesis as she recommends [p. 589] will prove even more complicated and less conclusive.

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On Emergency Decisions, Egalitarianism, and Group Selection

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Boehm (CA 37:763–93) puts forward an important thesis—that with the evolution of egalitarian societies, privileged routes to reproductive advantage are blocked and the power of individual selection severely compromised. With competition so constrained, altruistic behavior can more readily spread in a population. This has implications at two levels. For individual selection it means that egalitarian relations could have facilitated the evolution of “altruistic” behavior and accompanying cooperative norms and control mechanisms. For groups it implies that the relative power of group selection could have been enhanced with the reduction of individual selection. From this premise, Boehm goes on to argue that emergency decision making, by binding groups in collective action, may have permitted group selection to reinforce cooperative behavior in a population. Though his detailed examples are drawn largely from nonegalitarian societies, he suggests that the model can be projected back to prehistoric foragers.

Compelling though Boehm’s model is, it does not consider the costs of strictly enforced egalitarianism. With demands for relatively equal distribution of economic returns and social rewards, incentive to produce is dampened in hunter-gatherer and agricultural societies; in fact, individuals may periodically cease production simply to avoid exploitation [Lee 1979, Wiessner 1982]. [Though the effect on pastoral production, where work effort and returns are less closely tied, will be less, costs of egalitarianism may appear in other areas, for instance, ineffective communal resource management.] Given the effects of egalitarianism on production and resource management, it is questionable how long egalitarian structures can survive in the face of group selection. Where they do persist today is in societies that are isolated, subordinates embedded in the economies of dominant nonegalitarian societies, or required by precarious environment and limited technology to maintain broad networks of reciprocity outside the group. In the latter case, problems are more often solved by dispersal than by group action.

Nonetheless, the idea that egalitarianism may have evolved to facilitate altruism is an important one. As foragers like the Kalahari San realize, one factor that reduces the risk of relations involving delayed reciprocal altruism is the social rules that prevent the giver from indebting others or the receiver from turning assistance gained into significant reproductive or economic advantage. To speculate, it may have been only with the evo-
The evolution of egalitarianism that the cost of reciprocity was reduced sufficiently to permit the extension of kinship relations and accompanying obligations of reciprocity from immediate family or a small circle of co-residents to affinal kin and more distant relatives outside the group. The result was the formation of broad networks of kinship based on both biologically and socially stipulated ties that so structure human societies today and ensure economic security (Wiessner 1982). Hand in hand with these networks may have evolved the human ability to become indoctrinated (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1982), that is, to be induced to place the interest of others or the interest of a group over one’s own through such means as the manipulation of rhetoric, song, dance, and symbols (Salter and Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1998, Wiessner 1998). Certainly the willingness to act against immediate self-interest in favor of distant kin with anticipation of future returns does not come easily but is the result of extensive socialization during childhood, indoctrination through initiation, and periodic rituals of reinforcement.

Turning to emergency decisions, those made in response to meteorological events are often relatively unstressful and involve little altruistic behavior. Guidance is sought from individuals who are experienced and knowledgeable, less experienced group members benefit from their advice. Moreover, they are often easily reversible—people disband and reassemble fluidly in response to resource distribution. However, with the evolution of socially defined kinship networks, a new dilemma was introduced to emergency decision making, namely, the conflict of interest between loyalty to the group and loyalty to supportive kin outside the group. If such conflict of interest can be mediated so that members can draw on outside ties to bring wealth into the group, then the group flourishes, and selection may operate at the group level. The Enga of Papua New Guinea describe this situation in a metaphor of birds that roost in the same tree at night. In the daytime each flies its own way, seemingly pursuing its own interests, but in the evening it returns, bringing the harvest back to the same “nest.”

However, the coalescence of individual interests in decisive and beneficial group action in the face of complex social interests is not as easy as this metaphor suggests. First of all, because individuals do not share a single configuration of external ties, group decisions usually favor the interests of some group members at the expense of others. For instance, when an Enga clan goes to war, members with affinal and maternal kin in the enemy groups must suspend ties which normally bring them wealth, support, and affection. Second, emergency decisions that involve relations of people are not easily reversible. While a family which has split off from a band in response to hardship imposed by natural events may rejoin it at any time, wounded men, wounded trust, and wounded pride take long to heal. Third, such emergency decisions usually do not resolve a problem in a single meeting but set off a series of decisions as the events unfold. They must be backed, reinforced, reevaluated, and reshaped with sustained effort until the matter is laid to rest.

Thus, in contrast to emergency decisions made in response to natural occurrences, group decisions involving relations between people are so intricate that they cannot rarely be resolved to confer group benefit in the absence of a strong leader who guides and invests in the process. To return to the Enga example, Enga do not convene, discuss, reach a consensus, go to war, take land, and flourish; the process is much more complex. In the initial clan meeting or meetings, the big-man must hear and evaluate all opinions, for the decision to go to war will have very different impacts on the interests of individual members. And it is through individuals that allies, who are so critical to the success of a war, will be recruited. Since it is labor rather than land which is short in Enga, a small parcel of land gained is often not worth the damage to individual ties of finance from outside the clan [if one can assume that Enga wars are indeed about land at all [see Lakau 1994, Young 1995, Wiessner and Tumu 1998]]. A successful big-man does his research well by letting all speak, heeding opinions which he considers valuable, and when possible making each man feel as if his advice has been heard. When a war is under way and the clan is faring badly, he may then call upon a number of ritual means to unite the group and brew spirit. For example, he may convene the clan for a ceremony involving confession and absolution of past wrongdoings and internal antagonisms against fellow warriors or organize the performance of a small ritual to elicit the help of the ancestors. Finally, when losses mount and it is time to call an end to the war, months may be spent in negotiations and orchestration of complex war reparations under the leadership of big-men. Here oratory from a respected leader and the wealth to back words with action are critical. Individual opinions are suppressed in favor of the words of one who can heal wounds with elegant oratory. To quote a prominent Enga big-man, Ambone Mati:

The tongue was the thing that in most cases brought trouble to a clan. Wars started from the tongue. It was the tongue which said things that could provoke somebody who already had ill feelings, and those who did not want to fight had to go and fight all because of the tongue. If you use the tongue to make peace, then you will have peace in the clan. . . . You have come under the influence of the white man through education, but for us and our generation it was the tongue that ruled.

And even when reparations were paid, big-men still had to assuage wounded feelings within the clan at their own personal expense, knowing very well that their careers hung on their ability to hear opinions, pull them together into decisions, and see that the decisions were executed in such a way as to benefit the group. Ambone
Mati went on to describe how big-men had to make personal sacrifices to see that their decisions brought success:

You see, not all people in the victim's clan would be satisfied with the war reparations, and a poor person in the clan was most likely to miss out, receiving no pigs at all for such purposes as paying bride-wealth for his wife. A wise man from his own clan would give a pig to such a person; it required wisdom to do such a thing. The big-man of a clan had to make sure that no dissatisfied person would think of taking revenge, for he did not want to see chaos come to his place and did not want the houses and gardens to be destroyed. For such reasons the big-man had to give a pig, preferably one which he had decided to keep for himself, to the person who was most likely to cause trouble.

In short, complex emergency decisions involving social and political relations require prudent and competent leadership. To be effective, they are often backed by ceremony and ritual to unify group members, disguise social inequalities, and reinforce, alter, redirect, or align group goals and values. Successful manipulation of ritual and timely performance can make or break group strategies; ritual makes group action possible and is usually not a “commit[ment] to a supernatural solution that hamstrings the group,” as Boehm puts it. The continual innovation and selection involved in redesigning ritual to meet changing needs set the pace for culturally guided selection (see Wiessner and Tumu 1998 for examples). When cultural strategies succeed by binding group members into coordinated action, they confer strong group advantage. By contrast, the cumbersome apparatus of egalitarianism is generally insufficient or ineffective for making such complex decisions and following them through to achieve group benefits. In strictly egalitarian societies, the diversity of opinions may either lead each family down its own path, as people vote with their feet, or move them to make rash decisions, for in the end no single individual will be responsible for failure. Examples may be found in the raids of African pastoralists brewed by individuals in pursuit of personal loot or prestige that bring damages from counterraids to be borne by the group (Bollig 1992) and in decisions made during Gebusi séances that sentenced innocent group members to death for witchcraft (Knauff 1987).

Ironically, then, the very egalitarian relations that evolved in the service of the evolution of far-flung networks of kinship and reciprocity may have crumbled again under the dilemma that the latter posed for group action. That is, the conflict of loyalties to group members and those to kin outside the group so complicated the decision-making process that people sought strong leaders to orchestrate and execute this process. And so social hierarchy, repressed during the evolution of cooperative behaviors, may have reemerged to organize more complex structures of cooperation. Nonetheless, in both Boehm’s arguments and mine, the possibility of a relation between emergency decisions and group selection holds; it is the issue of whether this can be projected to forager societies that is in question.

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