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“The knife or the haft”: realizing equality of outcomes in hunting practices (preliminary field report)

Received 01.03.2020, accepted 31.03.2020

Abstract. The paper describes the practice of equal sharing among Northern Russian villagers, providing a rare example of equality of outcomes. After fishing expeditions to remote lakes and rivers the members of the fishing team receive equal parts of the catch. In this form the equal sharing appeared in the XX century, but numerous omens and prohibitions show that this kind of sharing has deep pre-Christian roots. In my case, the equal sharing was not about the creation of a society of equals but an instrument that can mask a gift, help or even bribe. Equal sharing does not mean creation of equity.

Keywords: fishing, sharing, equality of outcomes, Russian peasantry, Russian North.

Туторский А. В. «Нож или рукоять»: реализация принципа равенства при дележе добычи (предварительные результаты).

В статье описана практика деления улова поровну среди деревенских жителей Русского Севера, являющая редкий пример равенства результатов. После поездок на удалённые озера и реки члены рыбачьей группы получают равную с остальными часть улова. В таком виде деление поровну появилось в XX веке, хотя множество примет и запретов указывают на дохристианские корни элементов этой обычае. В описываемом случае деление поровну не создавало общество равенства, но было инструментом, который мог маскировать подарок, помощь и даже взятку. Деление поровну не означает создания справедливости.

Ключевые слова: рыболовство, деление, равенство результатов, русское крестьянство, Русский Север.

Introduction

My case-study in this section entitled “invention of equality” is definitely the most distant from when farming first appeared (*cf.* Finlayson, this volume; Hayden, Villeneuve, this volume), or the different aspects of culture and social structures of modern hunter-gatherers (Artemova; Peterson, this volume). My data was collected in a contemporary agriculturalist society of Arkhangelskaya oblast (one of the most

Northern regions of the Russian Federation) in 2006–2019. From January till August 2016 I conducted an extensive period of field research in Vozchiki village, while in other seasons I spent between one to two months there. I participated three times in a fishing expedition, as I will describe below. The catch was divided into equal parts after two expeditions, there was no need for division in the third case because it was rather small and we ate it together over the next three or four days.

The region was not only always under state control, but has even survived 74 years of socialist experiment and was deeply influenced by soviet ideology through the standard school education system. However, it is in accord with at least two of Olga Artemova's ideas. Primarily, that practices of equality have a more clear relationship with hunting and gathering than with agriculturalist economies, even though the hunter-gatherer economy may "build up effective mechanisms of social differentiation" (Artemova, this volume). Secondly, that equality is not 'natural' or the result of environmental impact. Equality can be achieved "as an outcome of the persistent, long-term efforts of ... of people" (*Ibid.*). And I will try to showcase these issues.

I perceive the local culture as a heterogenous complex of "local modernity" (Robbins 2001), composed of several practices, projects and traditions (Ssorin-Chaikov 2016). Some of the practices and relations emerged after the 1990s during the Perestroika period, others were created or recombined during the Soviet period. There are also some practices and traditions which are rooted in the pre-Christian history of the region (Petrov 2013).

The practice of 'kukanie' (literally 'kukat' means to shout, and 'kukanie' shouting) is one of the rare practices of 'equality of outcomes'. Bryan Turner outlines four types of equality in contemporary 'Western' discourse: ontological equality, equality of opportunity, equality of condition and finally equality of outcome (Turner 1986: 34). While the first two equalities are fundamental to contemporary Euro-American law systems, and are accepted by the majority of 'western' people, the attitude towards the second two are very controversial, especially the equality of outcomes. The idea of enforced uniformity is known as the 'Procrustean bed', or Shigalyevism (Rus.: shigalyevshchina — the ideas of a character in Dostoevsky's "The Devils" called Ivan Shigalyev, describing socialism with total control) (Wiener 1994) and the terrifying image of future society in Vonnegut's story, "Harrison Bergeron" (Rothbard 2000: 7).

In the following article I will try to illustrate how the practice of equality of outcomes can be realized in fact. The only example in which we can see the practice of equality of outcomes is in Kenneth Read's discussion of Gahuku-Gama soccer matches: In these matches "[g]ames usually go on for days until the scores are considered to be equal" (Read 1959: 429). My purpose here is to describe the practice of 'kukanie' in detail, although it only makes a little step towards the "enlargement of the concept of equality" (Robbins 1994: 22). I will argue that vozchiki people do not use the concept of equality, but understand 'kukanie' as the way a group of people behave.

The village of Vozchiki

My field research took place in a village situated in the Eastern part of Arkhangel'skaya oblast which I call Zapinezhie. The settlement is rather big in comparison to other settlements of the area: it has more than 500 dwellers, though the average population is less than 100. The whole area is situated north of 60th degree north latitude, like Greenland, Norway, Finland and Alaska. The lowest temperature in the month of January is -53 °C. According to the traditions of dialect, the name "Vozchiki" is used both

as a name of the settlement and at the same time as the name of its dwellers. I will use this name in both senses, writing the former with the first letter capitalized, and the latter in lower-case.

Before proceeding directly to the subject, I would like to stress two features of vozchiki society that are important for this discussion: the multi-vector character of household activities, and the presence of several types of hierarchies, rooted in the five hundred year history of the society.

As with the majority of the Russian village dwellers, vozchiki think of themselves as peasants and farmers. This point of view is ubiquitous throughout the country. However, I will give just one example from my field observations that very clearly illustrates the importance of fishing and hunting. It concerns the way agriculture is placed among different types of household activities in the contemporary village. The most important plant for vozchiki is the potato. This is typical for many Russian villages and dacha settlements all over the country in the 20th century (Ries 2009). Despite this, the potato is treated not very carefully. Many people plant it as soon as it is possible to dig the earth with a shovel. Usually, after that time the cold weather comes back for a week or two, so the potato, although it does not rot, stays dormant for a month or more. Those people who plant potatoes one or two weeks later see them sprout a week earlier than the impatient ones. The more patient and slower gardeners ultimately receive a better harvest.

So why do people hurry? What benefits do they receive? One friend of mine called Andrei told that “the early potato planting makes people free to go fishing”. When the first warm days come the middle part of the river usually melts, while the upper parts of the river stay frozen. When the cold returns in the next one or two weeks, the temperature is still not low enough to stop ice floating and the upper parts of the river also become free of ice. The next two or three weeks are the most convenient time for fishing: the level of water is high enough to flood the rapids, and the fish come there for spawning. So, everyone has the choice — to get more potato or more fish — and a lot of men choose fish.

The second feature is the presence of different types of hierarchies among villagers. Although several contemporary researchers have highlighted the presence on social stratification and inequality in the Russian village (Rogers 2005: 71), or the presence of individualism in community everyday life before 1917 (Tutorskiy 2012), there are still many obscure traits of egalitarian behaviour: for example an egalitarian language of offering help and assistance (Humphrey 1998: 466), or an egalitarian liminality created by vodka drinking (Tutorskiy 2016). Nevertheless, for the purposes of the current discussion, it is important to stress at least three different hierarchies. The first one is the economic stratification based on the level of income. The lowest level is a group of unemployed people who do not receive salary at all. The next is a kind of rural middle class — people who have an income of between 10,000 to 35,000 rubles. These are typically employees of state enterprises and institutions (such as the school, kindergarten, or post office). The highest level consists of one local businessman and two or three highly paid employees who have a salary of more than 60,000 rubles. This stratification emerged after Perestroika and the 1990s, when the collective farm had collapsed and many unemployed people appeared in the village.

The second type of hierarchy has been present since the 1930s. It is based on the ability to use a special resource, which has limited access for other people. In soviet times, the most influent occupation in kolkhoz [‘collective farm’] was a tractor-driver or truck-driver. These people had preferential rights to use their vehicles after working

hours, so they could do, and help others do, things that were impossible without mechanical assistance.

The last, but not least, was the hierarchy linked with the longevity of a family in the village. There were the oldest groups of families, their ancestors came to Vozchiki long ago in the 16th–17th centuries. These groups of families had special patronymic nicknames. For example one of the most original 'clans' had the name 'Fyodorovtsy' ('descendants of Theodor'). They were so highly ranked that before 1990s only a member of Fyodorovtsy could be the chairman of kolkhoz. The middle level were the longtime dwellers of the village. And the last one was made up of families that have lived for less than three or four generations in the village. They are called scornfully 'rolling stone' or 'tumbleweed'.

These hierarchies are deeply rooted in the history and the culture of vozchiki society. We cannot affirm that these stratifications are results of Soviet modernization or the transition to the free market society on the edge of the 20th–21st centuries. These hierarchies and the motivation to confirm them are in constant struggle with the motivation to establish equality. The most tangible egalitarian practice is the equal division of game after the fishing expeditions.

Going for fishing

There are no special words used nowadays to designate the collective of fishers who go for an extended expedition to the lakes up the river, or through the taiga to remote places in Timan mountains. People just say: "They have left for Pinzero [a lake. — A. T.]". But almost everyone knows exactly who has gone there, and how far and hard to get to is this or that place. It is even possible to propose that the scale of remoteness builds another kind of hierarchy amongst hunters and fishermen. Yarzuga (the most remote place up the river on which Vozchiki is situated) and Pinozero (a lake in the Nenetskiy district to the North-East from Zapinezhie) are hard to reach. There are also remote, but more easily reached, lakes about 120–100 kilometers from the village. And the area of 'remote places' itself begins from the abandoned village of Losevo about 70 kilometers from Vozchiki. This type of hierarchy is not very important, but from time to time one can find it in jokes and boast talks.

The persons who go together for fishing expeditions usually have different specialties. There are several people in the village who have large boats, which can carry many plastic barrels with salted fish, while others have many nets. Some people can tinker special devices for winter fishing, for example, weld a longer guide bar for a chain saw to cut one meter thick ice. Some people are welcome to the fishing team because they possess or have the right to use a hunting hut near the destination. Another category which is very important is 'lucky people', these are people who possess special luck in fishing. Once I heard from my friend Alexey that if a group of fishermen doesn't get any catch for two or three times, they ask a lucky person to come with them. If the group is going to fish not far from the village and they will return home in the evening, it is possible to ask a lucky person "just to come with them and to touch the net from time to time". And finally there are also such types as a "person from the district" or a "person from the city" — men who go to the fishing expedition as a kind of tourist, but can help other members of the group when they are in the cities of Mezen or Arkhangelsk. Whoever is a member of the team will receive an equal part of the catch.

Once the group is adjusted and the date of departure is set, the members of the team perform some rituals. These rituals are very secular, but very important. First of all, the members gather in one garage, or subsequently in the garages of all the members, to examine the amount of oil, food and vodka necessary for the trip, and the number of nets and set of equipment needed. These preparations may be completed by drinking some vodka, although this is not obligatory. However, on the day the team departs, it is required to drink on the shore and then every place where acquaintances meet. When I was part of such an expedition we moored more than five times near all the small hunting huts to drink a shot or several shots of vodka. Those who go fishing provide those who have already reached their destination or are returning home with the alcohol, although it is not forbidden for the second bottle of vodka to be provided by the opposite side.

There is also a set of omens that the team members must react to. I can mention two situations that I have seen repeated several times. When we saw a hare on the shore, we had to turn our hats backwards. Once, we saw two hares, we had to turn our hats two times. We have seen about 10 hares during the three days we were travelling to our fishing place. When we were returning home and I saw a hare I asked the person steering the boat if it was necessary to turn our hats backwards. He replied that it was optional, but then he himself turned his hat backwards. The other situation is when speaking with a person who is not known (though almost everybody knows everyone along the river). The stranger may cause bad luck during fishing. That is why my partner constantly held his hand in his pocket making a fig sign when speaking to stranger. That gesture is believed to ward off misfortune and jinx. These are just two examples that were repeated several times, but they are not all of the omens related to fishing practices intrinsic to Russian fishermen (Arkhipova 2018; Nazarova 2009).

When the team reaches its destination, fishermen set the nets in the evening and harvest the fish during the next day without pulling the nets out in the morning. All the catch is thrown to the bottom of the boat. When all the nets are free of fish the boats come to the bank near the hunting hut. The men put the catch on a big sheet of tarpaulin near the river, then disembowel the fish and finally divide it into several bunches, all of which are put on a separate sheet of tarpaulin or into a plastic sack, according to the number of members, and right at this moment the process of 'kukanie' starts.

I know at least three way of doing 'kukanie'. The first is the ritualized and long. The men carry the bunches into the hunting hut, arrange them in the form of a circle. One of the team members puts an axe in the centre of this circle and spins it. One of the team member stands in the corner of the room, turns away from the fish: he will choose to whom the next bunch will belong. When the axe is stopped the person asks: "The knife or the haft?" and that means — which bunch will be allocated: the one at which the axe blade points or the haft of it. The man in the corner answers. The next question is: "to whom [will this bunch belong]?" The named person takes his bunch. Then the procedure is repeated until all the bunches are given out.

The second way is a little bit easier. The catch is divided into bunches but they are not carried anywhere. The person who will choose turns away from the fish. One of the others points a knife or a small branch of the tree to one of the bunches and asks: "To whom?" The procedure is again repeated several times until every bunch is allocated.

The third way does not include the procedure of choosing the bunch. The catch is divided according to the desires of people. This way of choosing is the most simple and quick, however it may cause resentments. This way of dividing the catch usually

takes place when all the members of the team know each other very well, or there are only two members of the team and the one proposes to the other to choose.

Once the catch is divided it is possible to make jokes about a personal portion. After the allocation of the parts people usually salt the fish in the plastic barrels. For example, when I was in such a trip and had received my part of catch, I asked Dmitriy, my companion, how much salt should I put into the fish? Dmitriy who was very serious all the previous days smiled and answered: "Now it is your fish, if you want you can even put no salt at all". After a second he added: "If you put too much salt it will be possible to keep the fish in the water to make it insipid. If you put not enough — the fish will adle. So don't spare the salt".

The last point worth noting here is that on our way back, Dmitriy and I moored in a small village. Dmitriy was asked by an old man to take some small things to Vozchiki. So we moored, went through the village to the old man's house, and returned back to the boat with a bag. All the dwellers asked Dmitriy about how big was the catch. And Dmitriy answered them with at least four different amounts. "Let them decide together which of my answers was true" — he said in the boat when we have set sail (for more about lying see: Tutorskiy 2017).

Is it really equality and equity?

The practice of 'kukat' described above is very specific, but it is difficult to definitively describe its place and meaning in culture of vozchiki people. In this section I would like to stress some of the most important (from my point of view) aspects of this phenomenon.

1. It is very difficult to say whether this practice appeared in the 20th century or is older. The word 'cheren' (eng. the haft) which is used in this context is not widespread in contemporary vozchiki dialect. So I can definitely say that the practice had emerged before 1970s. But it is impossible to say if it already existed before 1917 or the end of 19th century. Fedot — who is about 70 years old — told me that he remembers this practice from when he was at school. He went to one of the lakes up the river with his father. Their companions were also a father and a son. They were dividing fish into two parts among families (not among persons) and used the wording "the knife or the haft" to allocate parts. This story shows the allocation of fish among individuals didn't always exist, and there may have been an earlier distribution between families. What this story also illustrates is that the most appropriate context for the words "the knife or the haft" is in dividing catch into two and into more parts.

It is also important to note that in descriptions of fishing teams made on Pechora river on the edge of the 19–20th centuries, we cannot find descriptions of equal division. The parts of the catch were divided according to the length of nets provided by each person for the team: approximately every five meters of the net was one part. A person who has provided 15 meters would get three parts, a person who has provided 25 meters would get five parts, and so on (Konakov 1983: 154–156; Pecherskiy kraj 1904: 147–157). The person (usually a leader of the team) who provided the boat received an extra quantity of fish from each team member, although very often he refused to take anything for the boat (*Ibid.*: 148).

2. According to André Beteille "equality of condition, or equality in the distribution of material resources", does not always advance "simultaneously with equality as a moral or philosophical value" (Beteille 1994). The practice of 'kukanie' confirms

exactly this idea. My Vozchiki friends have explained to me that people talk about “avoiding deception”, “doing fairly”, “dividing into equal parts is correct, our ancestors have done like that”, as reasons for ‘kukanie’. None of them said that everyone should have the same amount of fish as others or that people should be equal generally. On the contrary, there are many stories about cheating during ‘kukanie’.

One friend of mine — Peter, who went for fishing while still under 16 and at school — told me the story of how he once cheated this practice. He was the person who should turn away. However ‘kukanie’ took place in a small hunting hut situated window to window in front of a bathhouse. The glasses of the two windows had were like a mirror so he could see all the bunches of fish in the room behind him. He did not say anything to anyone and allocated the parts according to his conception. I asked him about the punishment for cheating, and he said that there is no special system of punishment or fines. There is no intention among the members of the team to get really equal parts of the catch, everyone of course wants more.

It is important to note that fishermen all know ways to get more fish for one person. I heard many stories about fishermen who propose to allot more portions of catch than the number of participants in the expedition. For example, it might be argued a portion should be allocated for the motor, or the portion for the nets if they all belong to one person. In another case a member of the team who took his father’s boat proposed to include his father as a virtual team member, and allot a special portion for him. This approach to division of the catch is considered by the vozchiki people not correct nor good, although from the perspective of meritocracy and equity this kind of allotment is good and much more logical, just, and correct.

The last example here is a case when the members of the expedition don’t want to take their portions. Eugen — a person from the ‘Fyodorovtsy’ clan who has relatives living in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg — went on a fishing expedition with his nephew from Moscow and two friends of the latter, also from Moscow. They gained more than 100 kilos of fish and salted it into three barrels. When the team returned to Vozchiki, Eugen proposed dividing the fish equally. The guests refused and left the whole catch to Eugen. He was partly upset talking about this. He said: “They didn’t want to take it. What could I do?” But at the same time he was glad to have a lot of fish at home. He explained: “Hundred kilos of fish is good but I said to them [the guys from Moscow. — A.T.] if they wanted their parts they can always come and take them”. It is important to stress here that even if a person doesn’t cheat and gets all the fish, he does not like to talk about it.

3. In contemporary fishing teams, there is no formal leader and there is no explicit division of labour, however it is possible to identify a leader. When vozchiki people talk about long distance fishing expeditions they often say “I went to Yarzuga-lake with Theodor” or “Eugen used to go very far up the river”. The persons “with whom” people go fishing are the informal leaders of these teams. These people usually have the following features: a) they go to remote lakes very often, usually one or two times in winter, once with a big boat in spring and several times in summer. Some of them are the only persons who know how to get there; b) these men usually have all the necessary equipment for such expeditions: big boats, long nets, motors (and there are only three or four big boats in Vozchiki). These people are known as potential leaders of the fishing and hunting teams, and those who want to go on such an expedition have to address the leaders.

The leader doesn’t have any formal right to tell a member of the team to do something, but usually, as the most knowledgeable person in fishing affairs, they give the

orders. If a member of the team doesn't want to execute them he can easily refuse. The leader cannot insist or make a person do what he wants. The only thing a leader can do is not to take an intractable person next time. A kind of loyalty check is the request to prepare the food or to return to the hut some time earlier to melt the stove. If a member agrees he will be accepted for the next expedition. As Nikolai, one of these leaders, told me "I asked Ivan to go to prepare some food. He replied that he didn't want. So I will not go with him any more".

The figure of the leader is very important in the process of dividing the catch into bunches. When the fish is divided into two parts it is usually the leader who guts them and puts the fish into one or another bunch. A leader can decide that there will be no 'kukanie'. When I was on an expedition with Nikolai he said that he doesn't like to 'kukat'. "That is what people do who do not trust each other". Thereafter he divided fish into two bunches and my one was always with one more fish, or if there was a fish a bit bigger than others, it went definitely into my bunch.

This peculiarity of Nikolai was well known in the village. It is very important for discussion here to note that people in the village do not talk about 'kukanie' as a practice, but about how different people do it. As above, vozchiki people do not say that 'kukanie' is a "fair way to partition" or "everything should be divided equally", instead they say: "Semen is not good because he proposed to allot more parts than the number of the members. He wanted one more portion for his boat"; or "Nikolai is good because he divides the catch into equal parts for whoever goes with him".

There is another demonstrative story about Vladimir, a person who hosted me during my first visit to Vozchiki in 2006. He was of Ukrainian origin, but since he was 18 he moved to Arkhangelskaya oblast and has stayed there for all his life. In May and June there are several days when the red fish (salmon and dog-salmon) go for spawning up the river. These days all men are in boats on the water. The boats make a queue and every 30 minutes fishermen from the next boat throw the 'plaven' ('floating seine'). There should be at least two men in the boat to throw and collect it. Vladimir started queuing and when his turn came near he asked a person (usually a young guy) from the boat in the queue after him to float with him and help with the net. And as Peter told me "he always gave his companion an equal part. He was really a great man, a rare kind of person". We can see the same idea: not that an equal division in itself is great, but that a man, a leader performing an equal division is great. And once again we see that equality confronts equity.

Conclusion

As I have shown, the practice of 'kukanie' is contemporary or even a modern practice. Dividing catch between individuals rather than between families only emerged in the 20th century. However, the roots of this tradition go deep into pre-Christian times, as confirmed by the multitude of omens and prescriptions surround the tradition. The principle of equal division seems to me to have been partly shaped in Soviet times, when every inequality in division could be claimed as exploitation and cause administrative punishment. But the cases when a team leader refused his extra-part from the catch to make a division equal are also documented in the literature, suggesting the practice was partly shaped long before Soviet times and politics of 'real equality'.

What is also important for current discussion is that the practices of creation of equality in the Russian North are not the result of governmental policies, strict local

rules, or of environmental impact. While all these factors make their contribution to the final form of the custom, the people themselves stress the very important role belongs to the individual who directs the division. In other words it is the leader who makes this equal sharing real and a fact of their everyday lives. I think this role of singular persons (I am reluctant to use the term individuals in regard to hunter-gatherers societies) in creation and invention of equality was really important.

Acknowledgements

The research for this article was made possible by generous funding provided by the Historical Faculty of Moscow State University and its former Dean Ivan Ivanovich Touchkov. Russian Foundation for Basic Research grant No. 19–09–00126, “Personality and Collective in Provincial Russia”, gave me time to finalize a draft. I am grateful to Anna Kruglova, Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov, Dmitry Bondarenko, Olga Artemova and Bill Finlayson for valuable critique. I am also grateful to Bill Finlayson for his help with the English proofreading.

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