



# WALKING WITH THE HADZA

*a cultural exchange in  
the Tanzanian bush*

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"Wake up quickly brother, they are leaving."

Expedition member Allen Mollel shook me awake as the Hadza hunters started to file out of camp and into the bush. Each man grabbed his hunting kit consisting of a bow and roughly a dozen arrows. Within a minute all ten hunters had exited the village, which was perched atop an island of boulders, and had glided across the salt flats. There were minor conversations as each hunter filed through his collection of arrows and tugged his bowstrings. One of the men, dissatisfied with his arrows, sent the youngest in the group sprinting back to get another set. I was entrusted with the honey axe, a short rugged maul used to hack open trees and extract honeycombs. My sense was that the honey axe holder is the Hadza equivalent of a water boy.

Although low in the sky, the full moon still cast its pale lapis veil over the striding hunters. The group held a steady, brisk gait as we stepped off the sandy flat and onto the dry grasslands of the savannah.

The atmosphere changed and I felt as if we had just entered a church. Suddenly the Hadza men were transformed. Not only did their conversations quieten, but also their very presence. The loud gregarious spirits smoking pipes full of cannabis around the previous night's fire were gone. Not only were their footsteps completely silent, but also their very souls somehow seemed muted. They were now phantom stalkers, spiritually synchronized with their surroundings. They stared into trees, sniffed down burrows, and listened to the air with profound intensity. They investigated, looking for any clue or whisper of life. For it was life that provided what they set out to find every single dawn and dusk. Food.

The Hadza (or Hadzabe) are a nomadic people living on the land surrounding Lake Eyasi, a shallow saltwater lake just south of Serengeti National Park in Tanzania. The Hadza are thought to be one of the

last true hunter-gather societies left on the planet. Traditionally, they do not farm. They gain all of their sustenance from honey, tubers, berries, birds, and essentially any mammals they can kill.

Living less than 60 kilometers from Olduvai Gorge, an archeological site that holds some of the oldest known human hand tools, it can be argued that the Hadza are the last living connection we have to our ancient selves. It is believed that the modern-day Hadza have been hunting at Lake Eyasi for 10,000 years and estimated that their ancestors were in the region for more than 50,000 years.

With roughly 1,500 Hadza remaining, only about 300 are still living a true hunter-gatherer existence. Governmental resettlement programs, Christian missionaries, neighboring pastoral communities, and a growing tourism industry have all had impacts on the Hadza's ability to practice their traditional lifestyle.

In a 2011 milestone decision, the Tanzanian government awarded the indigenous group a CCRO (Certificate of Customary Right of Occupancy), granting them permanent usage of 57,000 acres of land for hunting and gathering. Although most experts agree that CCROs are a great step in stabilizing the Hadza's existence, others contend that profound cultural damage has already been done and the group's numbers will continue to diminish until they are gone. Sadly, when the last band of Hadza finally walks away from their land, they will take with them a part of the human experience they can never again regain.

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OPENING SPREAD: A BABOON SKULL AND A PILE OF HORNS MARK THE ENTRANCE TO THE HADZA CAMP. PREVIOUS SPREAD: A HADZA HUNTER WALKS TOWARD THE BUSH WITH HIS BOWS AND ARROWS. FACING PAGE: EVERY NIGHT THE FIRE IS THE CENTER OF ACTIVITY AND STORYTELLING.







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*“I looked up again and saw three baboons, then ten, then twenty. I heard Allen whisper, ‘There are too many.’”*

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I was visiting the Hadza as part of a three-country expedition through Tanzania, Rwanda, and Uganda with plans to document the traditions of several East African ethnic groups. We planned to meet with Chagga, Maasai, Datoga, Abahutu, Abatutsi, and Baganda peoples.

After American photographer and climber Christopher Beauchamp agreed to join, I reached out to my old friend Allen Mollel, a Maasai living in Arusha. Allen runs safaris around Ngorongoro Crater, escorting tourists and explorers alike to photograph the Serengeti’s Big Five—lions, leopards, Cape buffalo, rhinos, and elephants. Allen was excited to contribute his knowledge of the region to the expedition and meet neighboring tribesmen he had only read about. Convincing his wife to let us borrow the family minivan for the 4,800-kilometer round-trip proved more challenging. Greyson Marealle, a member of the Chagga community from west Kilimanjaro, joined the team as well.

Now several days into the journey, our only challenge was keeping up with the Hadza. We had been speed walking silently through the bush for two hours and the blazing, unfiltered sun had taken its official place in the morning sky. Allen quietly handed me the water bottle. “Drink the dawa, it will keep your energy up.” Allen never traveled without his

own homemade Maasai power drink, a selection of dried medicinal plants; *olekidongo* (*Achyranthes aspera*), *olkiloriti* (*Acacia nilotica*), and *natua-enkongu* (*Pappea capensis*) that had been pulverized and dissolved in water. Although the Hadza speak their own tongue, an isolate click language, a number of the tribesmen were able to communicate with Allen and Greyson in Swahili.

Suddenly the hunting party froze. They cast their gaze upon a towering huddle of boulders almost identical to the one where they had set up their village. One of the youngest hunters tapped me on the shoulder and pointed at a stoic gray dot staring down from the 30-meter summit. *Mbuzi* (baboon)! A lone baboon saw us, watched us. The men grew focused and excited. They broke us up into groups and took off in an attempt to surround the high cliffs. Chasing after two hunters, we crashed through sharp thicket and underbrush, the pricklers ripping deep into my arms. I looked up again and saw three baboons, then ten, then twenty. I heard Allen whisper, “There are too many.” As we sprinted clockwise around the island of boulders, an entire army of angry male primates started to scream and bark from atop the cliff in our general direction. We were drastically outnumbered and the troop of baboons clearly had the higher ground. The sprinting Hadza had the same simple tools they always had, wooden bows and poison-tipped arrows that were only accurate when used at relatively close range. Clutching the honey axe tight in hand, I

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FROM A DISTANCE THE HADZA PEOPLE APPEAR UNCHANGED BY TIME. IT IS EASY TO IMAGINE A SIMILAR SCENARIO UNFOLDING THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO.

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*“The altercation climaxed with a blurring cacophony of running Hadza, screaming baboons, and whizzing arrows.”*

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realized this might very well be a dramatic fight to the death. For the Hadza, this kind of high-stakes face-off was not unusual. This was an everyday activity. The baboons are not enemies to the Hadza. They are not trophies in waiting. The baboons are food, they are medicine, and they are clothing. They are a means to survive another day.

The altercation climaxed with a blurring cacophony of running Hadza, screaming baboons, and whizzing arrows. When the dust settled, it became clear that this time the baboons had escaped. The intense moment left all outsiders adrenaline-surged and chatty. For the unfazed Hadza men it just meant it was time to look for honey.

On the walk back to the camp, a hunter named Shakwa stopped and climbed a tree that had a football sized rock jammed in a hole. He took the honey axe and chopped the rock out. Reaching his entire arm into the hollow trunk he pulled out a massive brick of dripping honeycomb filled with white larva. We passed the comb around. I bit deep into the tender chiffon brick, the small larva popping like honey coated caviar, releasing a taste not unlike boiled ackee fruit. Shakwa had found this superfood arsenal by communicating with a honey guide bird. These birds will exchange whistles with foragers and lead them to bee colonies they cannot access. The bird will attempt to feast on the wax once the forager has finished removing his loot. Shakwa had smoked out the killer bees and taken a bit of honey before sealing

the tree back up for our future use.

Closer to camp, another hunter found a second honey stash inside of a tree. Small nonstinging bees produced this. He used the honey axe to completely split open the small tree, revealing dark amber comb filling the majority of the hollow trunk. While we shared the contents and preserved some for the village, I noticed small pegs that had been hammered into the voluminous trunk of a nearby baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*). Allen asked Shakwa if the pegs were there so they could get access to the fruit. The reply makes him smile.

“They say sometimes they might sleep up there. I think it is the honeymoon suite. You and I are too fat. We will break the ladder.”

The foot pegs disappear high atop the smooth trunk, a thick limb about the size and shape of a living room couch branches out over the warm savannah. The higher branches conceal the limb, creating a natural tree house. To be young, in love, and semiarboreal.

When we got back to camp, the men wasted no time making new poisonous arrows for the next hunt. Shakwa lit a fire using a bow drill in a matter of seconds. Handfuls of panju shrub (*Adenium obesum*) were plucked from a nearby bush and stripped of their leaves, the stems crushed with stones

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SHAKWA APPLIES POISONOUS PANJU SHRUB PUTTY TO THE BASE OF AN ARROW. THESE ARROWS WILL BE WRAPPED IN STRIPS OF HIDE TO PREVENT ACCIDENTAL CONTACT.





and put into small iron cauldrons with water, which was then boiled down. The result is a highly toxic putty that is worked between two stones until malleable. It is wrapped around the base of the iron arrowheads and carefully pushed up the shaft to the point with a stick. Once the putty has hardened, the entire top of the arrows is coated in ash and wrapped in thin strands of animal hide to prevent any accidental contact.

These will be used for any large animals, including the baboons. Should the hunters kill something massive such as a giraffe, the entire camp of roughly 40 people will descend upon the carcass until it is completely consumed. Wooden arrows are made for birds and small mammals. Some are adorned with a piece of corn-cob to prevent them from exiting the prey. Arrows with a large iron spear tip are used for the final kill.

We wandered through the camp, eager to speak with the women to find out if anyone would be foraging for tubers, and if we could join. I saw Esta Dofu, a woman I had spoken with the night before who had been sitting by the fire smoking a pipe. It was a genuine Hadza *tl'omasako*, a cylindrical smoking instrument carved from sedimentary rock and wrapped in animal hide. With their brown tubular body and black tips, *tl'omasakos* curiously resemble cigars. It is far different from the clay and wooden makeshift tubes the men were using to smoke hemp the night before.

For a pipe collector such as myself, a true *tl'omasako* is a thing of rare beauty. I removed my finest tobacco pipe from my own pack and lit it up. It was a Nording straight grain made from aged Corsican briar with an amber inlay. We eyed each other's pipes. I

asked Allen if she might be willing to trade her *tl'omasako* for my Nording. She grabbed my pipe and studied it, then took a long drag. After a minute she handed it back and flew into a brief rant before sucking on her own pipe once again. All the surrounding women laughed. Allen translated.

"She says your tobacco is too weak and your pipe does not give enough smoke."

Once my public shaming had ceased to amuse everyone, we started to talk about medicinal plants. As a common practice, I always bring some of my own foraged ethnobotanical gifts to get conversations going. I presented a massive chaga mushroom (*Inonotus obliquus*) to Nyamakala, the oldest woman in the village. After explaining how to use it to make a healthy tea, her family gave me in return a beaded necklace adorned with porcupine quills.

As we discuss traditional medicines, I am surprised that the conversation quickly changes from plants back to meat. Everyone listening seems to agree that baboon meat is the Hadza equivalent of chicken soup, in particular the brains and tongue. Cobra oil will do wonders when poured into a sore ear, and porcupine quills are good to press against the skin. I try to clarify whether they are utilized much like acupuncture needles, but my query seems to get lost in translation.

When we packed up to leave, it became clear that it would take much more than a few days in the bush to see the Earth as the Hadza see it. To tap into their profound connection to the Earth requires time enough to cleanse one's system of the noise and responsibilities that prevent us from truly living in the moment.

As we said our good-byes, Esta Dofu approached me and handed me her *tl'omasako*. She stated that, since I would be returning, it was okay if I borrowed it. I told her I was honored by the gesture and that I promised to return, bringing with me much stronger tobacco. ▲ ▢

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ESTA DOFU PUFFS SOME STRONG TOBACCO FROM HER *TL'OMASAKO*, A CYLINDRICAL PIPE MADE FROM ROCK AND WRAPPED IN ANIMAL HIDE.