

# Regeneration of self and of community: the Hadzabe (Seminar)

Thea Skaanes

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Is creating relations and relationships an increasingly lost skill? How can we create a future not only for ourselves but a future of belonging, connection, and togetherness? Who creates the future? A programmer or a potter? For the Hadza, the future is made by women in an earthen child: a clay-born baby that rebirths society and connects generations of women through spiritual relations. Regenerating the future is not a task for women alone.

Thea Skaanes trace the honey love letters and the sharing practices in a hunting and gathering society that, contrary to impressions given in academic accounts, is more dealing in life than in death.

Thea Skaanes, PhD, is a museum curator with special focus on African cultural heritage at the National Museums of World Culture, Sweden.

She is head of content for the upcoming permanent exhibition, *Existens*, and she engages in difficult questions such as meaningful reparations and how to move forward with ethical forms for active museum collection practices.

Thea is a trained ethnographer and social anthropologist researching fields such as cosmology, rituals, power objects, and human-animal relations among the hunter-gathering Hadza of Northern Tanzania.

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<https://vimeo.com/1176361932>

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## Introduction

**Camilla:** Welcome, everybody. It's an absolutely wonderful special occasion tonight.

So, Tia Skornes has come all the way from Sweden to come and talk to us about her research with the Hadza.

She's really the kind of leading curator of, well, so many things, but Hadza Women's Ritual culture and material culture and you're going to be saying something about some of the ritual power objects tonight.

Absolutely and Tia's social anthropologist.

She's also been setting up exhibitions in the Swedish World Culture Museum and it's a noted museum curator.

She's done long field work with the Hadza, including in camps where I've been myself, including with some of the folk up here and Most of all, I'd like to draw attention to the fact that her co-author in this talk is Petro Erik Tulangi, and he's a real Hadza scholar who's been very committed to gathering cultural knowledge and Tej has been telling me about how he is setting up a like a counter school for Hadza

children with a little kind of shed of all kinds of collected artefacts, which he's been involved with and he is teaching and making sure that this knowledge gets transmitted. He's incredibly committed to that.

So I'm going to hand over to Thea now.

## Seminar

**Thea:** Thank you and thank you for inviting and well, there's much to be said on the Hadza.

It's really a topic of people. It's not a topic. These are people that are very close to my heart. I've been working with the Hadza since 2011. They remember me often as Mama Suniva, because I brought my one-year-old girl with me.

Recently, I've been working, as Camilla said, working on a permanent exhibition in the World Culture Museum in Sweden that has been taking up much of my time and focus and I might just want to take this talk in that direction as well, because I think that some of the thoughts that came out from the production process of an exhibition has been also giving some good insights to how is it that the way that the Hadza are in the world is relevant even to us now.

But I always like to start with this picture, to be grounded, to have an overview.

This is a picture I've anonymized, so I will call them different names, but Mitzi and Pa Aqua and Mitzi's son.

We've just been out digging for roofs and you see carrying, we also, I also had my digging stick and this was just on our way back.

We just wanted to have a break, a nice view, enjoying this, the breeze.

Also, the rock is hot from the sun.

So it just, we spent some time just overlooking the valley, talking about, oh, do you remember? Oh, Can you see those giraffes, not giraffes, but those kudus down there? Or do you have any, small, just small memories that were passed overlooking this place? Yeah.

So, but let me just take you, asked where is this? Let me see if I can manage all these screens and everything.

Oh, welcome and so I put this pin in Lake Eyasi.

This is in the northern part of Tanzania.

So we are here very close to the equator and this is actually just around here, just to the south, central part of the lake and just moving in a bit closer, yes.

So this, it would be like, let's have a look, around here.

So we have these two mountain ranges and also, oh, no, down here is the mountain range and we have the swamp in between.

So This is an area that is very, it's the Great Rift Valley, very volatile.

You have sometimes earthquakes, small earthquakes.

You have, there's been historic place of volcanic eruptions.

It's an environment that is not docile in any way.

So, and this environment is also a site for, as I told you before, of memory, of memory sharing.

As you move through this landscape, you would revisit memories, you would revisit knowledge, knowledge that is discussed.

So it's very speaking in a way, this landscape and I just want to bring your attention to also that it's very, I think that the that the length of the leg is about seventy-five kilometres, kilometres work, right? Yeah, and so it's being up here, it would be far off from the nearest.

No, this is the tarmac Rd.

this is a dirt Rd.

so it's just a very peripheral in many ways.

It was also described as an area that was not fit for human settlement due to the supply infected and nobody really, even the colonial governments, neither the German nor the British, really wanted to engage out there.

So people were pretty much left alone, having But it also means that there is no service of electricity, water supplies, anything like that and it is a semi-arid area.

Let me take, let's move from these abstractions and into actually seeing people.

Because here we see Mitzia again, where we had just been out on this digging trip, digging for roots and immediately we would roast these tubers in the fire and eat, enjoy telling stories.

So, and this is, this is a division of labour between men and women, but it is considered one of the most egalitarian societies that we have as human beings.

So you would see men are very engaged with their hunting.

Women are doing collectively these work with getting the roots, collecting firework.

There are all these different aspects that you would do as a man and as a woman.

But let me just, oh, And maybe also, I actually expect, I think that many of you have heard about the Hudson before, right? So I don't know how much introduction that is needed.

Just very briefly, it's a very small population of somewhere between 800 and 1200 people and they speak in isolate.

It's been very difficult to make a census that is reliable due to the fact that there is this, it's a semi-nomadic society and people have multiple identities.

So they would have a whole social being, not just one, but two at least, social beings in their body, you could say.

So, which makes it very difficult for census workers to provide a reliable census.

But I just also added these two quotes by Frank Marlow.

He had written this very influential book on the Hausa where he He's been doing some work on looking at complexity scales and he said, it doesn't surprise me that the huts are ranked at the bottom of the complexity scale.

We would be hard-pressed to find a less complex society and this is a story that has been perpetuated by researchers and in academia.

since people would like to go to work with the Hadza to approach or to get to know an origin story about us as Homo sapiens.

But I think that in that eagerness, something went missing as well.

This story about simplicity or they were actually ranked in this same, yes, they got a zero in complexity along with the Mbuti.

So it's quite detrimental, I think, to even have that idea about a people that they should be ranking with a zero of complexity.

So, but what these, the thing is that a lot of, the hats do present an alternative in so many ways that it has been difficult to get a grasp of what are we dealing with.

So, for instance, James Woodburn developed this the system of immediate return system and delayed return system to categorize hunting and gathering societies, looking at how they operate in the world and there are very few, I don't want to go into this, the distinctions, but it's just to say that the Hats are one of the few immediate return systems and a lot of it's been a puzzle.

So, for instance, if they go on a hunt, everything would be eaten up, if possible.

You would eat everything, not keep rations to next day to the week.

Why not? That would be our way in a delayed return system thinking, we would rationalize.

We do this without salaries, without supplies in any way.

We rationalize.

We put them into sections.

We make them last and all this is not part of the system, really, of the Hadza and there are so many things that this does in order to change how you are in touch with the world and the limitations that you put around yourself.

So, and behold, this is just to move into this quote from this was from a very this man, the Hunter Conference that has been very psyched very famous, and there was there was a discussion that was also put into this book from the Member Hunter Conference and in the discussion, James Woodburn was also giving this.

The Hadza are strikingly uncommitted to each other.

What happens to other individual Hadza, even close relatives, does not really matter very much and he got a lot of things right and I'm very impressed with his work.

But this at least I would say that this was inaccurate.

So this is and this is what I would exactly this question about what are we to one another? was one of the things that I wanted to work on and now I'm just taking, I think, I can't see the next slide.

Yes.

Well, that's something completely different, right? Sorry about that.

But it's when we worked with this exhibition that I've been working with, we were trying to figure out we were giving a task to work with, to create an exhibition for young adults in Sweden and we had this ambition to be of service because that group of young adults from 13 to 25 are not really the ones who go to the museums most, not voluntarily in any case.

So we were thinking, we were asking ourselves, how can we actually provide something that is relevant to this group? And I got in contact with a psychology professor and asked him, so what would, in your opinion, what would the main concern for this group be? And without a doubt, he said, connection.

connectivity, the lack, the fear of lack of connectivity, the fear of not fitting in, of this, the fear of loneliness.

You see, you can get all these quite heartbreaking statistics about the degree of people feeling lonely, they're really on the rise exponentially, as well as depression, as well as all these things are really, they're real problems that people are suffering from.

And, but now I just, this, what is this? is the statistics of households in Sweden.

We just passed now in Sweden that there's more than 50% of the households in Sweden that are of one person.

This is the norm and it has come so quickly that it just rose so quickly that nobody really caught up with this.

Really.

So more than 50% is a one-person household in Sweden and the same, you can see here that this was in 2016, we have around 30% in Great Britain.

But this is one of the ways that we live that are really on the rise and I thought this is not a global problem.

There are actually youth, there are societies that do not have this main challenge and the Habsa is one of them and I wanted to find out, so what is it that they do that anchor each person so firmly into the community? that they do not feel a lack of connection, that they do not feel irrelevant, that they feel that they are part of something.

Oh, I think it's a connected human ecology or something.

I don't remember what I said.

But it's the idea is that you're connected in so many ways in the Hadza society as part of this way.

The landscape talks.

If you engage with it, it's a place of memory.

It has special sites.

It's not just, it's very meaningful, these the nooks, the places, the plants, the animals, everything has a story to tell.

But it's also a multi-species community where exactly baboons are telling stories that you can relay on to other people.

You have also, as I said, more than human, that could be like ants and animals, but also there's more than natural, which is the supernatural beings and agents that are also part connecting people to pasts, to futures and you can engage with these.

entities in, and you do so in rituals, in everyday life as well.

So this is a very, it's a vibrant way of being in touch and being, being, you, have, you're being connected into family.

You have, somebody that you will even embody from your family or families, because you have two people within your body and these two social beings are referring to other people.

So at least we're already four people.

You have these relations within yourself as well and what we would also say that I would probably talk about these power objects and this is exactly also a way that you extend your own being onto objects.

These objects, the way also represent you.

So all these anchoring mechanisms are what the Hatza society, this is something that the Hatza society has not left undone.

This is of concern of community, how you feel and how you are part of the of society.

**Audience member #1:** Is that the same rock you saw in the first picture?

**Thea:** It is.

It's just, yeah, this is just to another site, yeah, and then another trip, but yes.

So these are some of the objects that women are connected through that make them connected to past, to the present and to the future.

So for instance, This is a very rare example in material culture that would testament that there is an idea about self, which is it's also way so problematic to try to translate concepts like that to a system that really works in other ways.

But this is actually something that is This is the last object that you get when you're mature as a woman, then you're ready to have an gold, and this is broken on your brain.

Because then you are no more.

So this is a materialization that you are indeed somebody as you, as yourself.

While this is given to a newborn girl when she's born, not immediately, but maybe after five days she will get her names and this is given to the girl by the father's side of the family with the name that she gets from that side of the family.

Of course, there will also be a name from the mother's side of the family.

But this very clearly links her to that, to a position of kin in in the father's side of her family.

But it's also a very strong object.

This is taken in another situation, exactly this rite of passage for my toko that Camilla has worked wonderfully with.

So, and yes, but this is just to say that through these objects, They're made, they're created, they are anchors for a person to be relevant, to be empowered through these instantiations.

Yes.

You haven't said anything about the other object.

Yes.

Okay.

Yeah and this is a...

It's a wonderful object.

I was almost not saying anything because I get very excited about it.

But it's when a young woman has found somebody that could be somebody that she wants to start a family with, then her, this young woman's mother or older sisters would make her this doll and that would be, she would be given it and it's born, you said when it's made it's born as well.

So, and she would receive this doll, she would have to name it, whereby it accepts a spirit, a human spirit when she names it.

so that it is like a person and you would need to really take care of it.

But still, this is also a placeholder.

It makes the space for a child to come into the world.

So it's just, I'm just keeping the space for you.

I'm just making this room so that you fit in, so that you're welcome when you come into the world as a newborn child and still that is also a power object for the young woman herself.

So in this, it's a hyper-relational object that is a, that works with the future very tangibly by this, we create it, we make mock-ups of the future, inviting the future to become what we wanted it to be.

**Audience member #1:** Yes, you see, you describe what's called a very symbolic, hyper-living entity.

It's a gateway for future generations.

You've invested it with personality.

Do these living objects have dialogues between themselves? I can imagine that happening.

**Thea:** It's a good question, but I think that everything, everyone could have a dialogue, but we might not be privy to it.

So that's also one of the things that sometimes you are able to understand what is going on between other entities, that, entities that are not human, for instance, the baboons.

But Sometimes you're also not able to, you don't have that super, superposition in the world to, yes.

**Audience member #1:** I can imagine having communities of other species which are basically animistic.

The question is whether these communities of living objects infested with life, they themselves can have communities that have.

**Thea:** Yes, this is another.

This is not like the Amazonian perspective.

This is where I just we just talked about the and their ideas about everybody seeing themselves as human, and for instance, in the world of the anaconda.

We're parakeets, all chatting, very social, very noisily.

That's us in their eyes and where they're human.

So, but this is another system.

It's not the same system, even though that the world is animated in so many ways.

Can I just ask if the gourds have any practical purpose and when are they given?  
Yes.

Well, these are actually some of the ancient variations of the gourds, because normally they would be as gourds are having space for being containers and for the, they are different, differently gendered according to form.

So some gods would be like oblong, those would be male and have slightly different usage than the rounded gods that are female and which are only used.

They're much more powerful.

Yes, absolutely and these, the rounded gourds, the female gourds, are only filled with clarified elan fat, which is a very powerful power substance.

So, and those would only be used in ritual, where the others could also be used, like, if you have a rash, or you could use it in more more ways.

Yeah.

Okay, but I've been talking a lot about this, the women's objects.

And, well, I could talk much more about that.

Yes.

I just wanted to point to this, that everything is very intertwined.

They have, the objects also relate to one another in different ways, that all these objects were considered names, for instance, and they're related to kin.

They have all these different intertwined significance to them.

But let me just move to meet.

We shift gender now.

It's because I wrote in this in the abstract for tonight that it would be around regeneration and obviously, women have been traditionally and I think that there's a truth to that.

One of the main contributions to society in a hunting and gathering society would be fertility and this ability to regenerate society by having children.

While men would provide the meat.

But meat is not just caloric intake.

Meat is also like we saw with women and the fertility, the doll is a good example of how things are not just left.

We hope she will have a child.

No, we make it happen through these means.

We work with the future, work with creating it and in the same way, the men That way of producing and procuring or getting meat for society is also, yes, it's food, but it's also an important spiritual thing to come with.

So it's, I think, yeah.

Maybe just to just read it, meat is something of a special treat.

It's Mathias Kemper, who has worked with the Bushman in Kalahari and I would love this.

I think that you put it so well.

People covet and crave meat, and successful hunters returning home shouldering sides of meat.

My illicit soap you call it a seen as rushing, chanting, ululating, and dancing children and women.

Animals are food not only for the stomach, the mind also feasts on beasts.

Indeed, animals are probably the Bushman's prime food for thought and at the aesthetic, symbolic, and ritual level, they are the Bushman's significant others with close mystical association to divinity, healing, potency, regeneration, and sex.

So just to, again, to expand a little bit about, many people would have treated meat like cover intake.

It's about, what are the expenditures of for hunting and what do we gain? And this is so much more and that's also maybe something that has been lost when Marlow wrote that the score is around 0 on the complexity scale.

Kicked Frank in the head too much.

No, I know.

Yes.

No, and I do this respectfully.

Absolutely.

So it's just, well, looking at, if we move from the everyday life and into a very known example of the Epeme dance, night dance ritual, that some might have heard of.

It's one of the only rituals that have actually been described in academic literature from the Hatse, even though they do have quite a number of rituals, this has made it and it's about, it's held in the night.

Only some people not uninitiated men cannot be part or be present at all in the ritual and what is happening is that the men will turn into this hybrid being called Epena and they will take turns to come into this dance clearing and They're not themselves, but they are also not themselves.

They still have, they have remembrance of what they're doing in the dance.

But they are also, they can bring in a woman, for instance.

They can change gender in this, and they can also call on beings that are dead.

So it's really a very hybrid person or being, this epime, that enters the dance clearing and what happens is that they start a dance, a solo dance, and they announce for whom this dance is, and they can dance in the names, that is the spirits, of family members and as they do so, for instance, somebody would say, I'm dancing, for Tea, or in one of her, that's a complication, never mind.

They would say, I dance for Tea, and my spirit would enter that dancer.

I will not be spiritually dispossessed at this point, because spirit has, it's a, it is not a zero-sum entity.

You really can let your spirit be shared and what it made me see is that, well, it's not that the spirit is shared, but it's more that the bodies are shared.

These bodies that the spirit enters, it resides there, even for just the duration of the ritual or for this dance, actually.

It's there, it has, it feels this body and this made me think, okay, we have this idea. Again, I think this is a quote from James Woodburn saying that, well, the hats are men.

They're constantly dealing in death, in the death of the game animals they hunt. So killing animals is a real focus for the daily life of men.

That might be true.

But what I saw, again talking about regeneration, in the ritual life of men, they're constantly dealing in life.

They're sharing these, the bodies are being shared in order to regenerate, to create fertile grounds for for society to thrive.

That is the whole point of having these epic night dances is to make cohesion in society.

Again, one of the things that would create connection.

Yeah.

So this is just to...

**Camilla:** You should make clear though, Tia, that this is not just men involved.

No, we're talking about reconciliation or healing.

It is an interaction.

**Thea:** Yes, absolutely true and this is, I just wanted to make that, to provide some information about, so in this society where there is division of labour between the genders, these And there are many more ways of regenerating society and of creating connection and of anchoring people to be both relevant and very much a part of society and I just wanted to talk a bit about what would this look like for a woman and what would this look like for a man? I think that I'll try, and that's I put this as a theatrical illustration because Pedro was re-instructing now.

Now you go.

**Camilla:** Now you do this.

**Thea:** And what we're looking at is an illustration of how to make a, to to, it's, this is honey.

What they are passing on in this goat is a honey gift and honey is a way, it is very, coded as related to relations, to sexual relations, to romantic relations and this is a way of also just sending out the probe.

Oh, I might be interested in you.

Would you be interested in me? And if the woman then, actually, this is not really accurate because most often he would, the young man would pass on the gourd and also in the night, not being this open and he would involve maybe this woman's sister saying, oh, could you take this? And he would be very, like, listening all night, hearing if she would say, oh, this honey is good.

This is excellent.

I really like it.

Because then he knows that, okay, this is, that could be something because she would of course ask who gave you this honey and it's just a code for, but you could also say, it's not sweet.

It's strange.

**Camilla:** What's with this, honey? And you would go, oh, no, okay.

**Thea:** So this is also just a way of creating relations, of creating those relationships that seem to be the problem in Sweden, at least, where people, most people would fear to be alone when they are old or elderly and this is really, but this is the fate for so many, especially elderly, that they live alone.

So this knowledge or this taking care of how we actually do relationship, how we actually do bind us into relations, into community, into other people, those are movements or technologies or ways that seem to be forgotten at it.

Something that we're not very skilled at in the Nordic countries anymore at least having focused since the 70s on independence and how to become strong individuals, but how do we also become strong communities?

So this is just to wrap it up.

Because I think that sometimes we project stories, something that we would like to find to people around us, and especially in working in anthropology, we tend to, we have to make stories as well.

It's not only descriptions, but we're telling stories with the work that we do and just wanted us to have a look at some of the ancient storytelling that we also find in these barriers and to just have a look at what is it that we are projecting.

Are we just looking like a lovesick narcissus? for a reflection of us.

When we look at the Hadza, trying to make them fit the mold of the most simple version of Homo sapiens that we could then learn to how are we as a species hardwired? Is that their function? Is that what they should perform to us? And I, just want to make this, to invite this more broad, complex, living, connected version of the Hadza as well.

So I think that that's it.

Thank you.

The Ted K Archive

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