

Ritual Life among the Hadza

The Dancing Dead And Animal Kindred Spirits

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This is a talk given to the Radical Anthropology Group at Daryll Forde Seminar Room, Anthropology Building, 14 Taviton Street, London WC1H 0BW on 24 October 2017.

Thea Skanes, Managing Curator of the UNESCO collections at the Moesgaard Museum, Denmark gives an introduction to the role of ritual in Hadza life.

Her field research has helped elucidate the material culture, social life and cosmology of the Hadza hunter-gatherers of Tanzania.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11xZs_i-Z8s

And I have to admit that I'm under a bit of pressure here because I've been presenting twice for many of you and now I have to present some once again but at least some of it will be you'll recognize some of the points that I'll make tonight but As you said, Camilla, this is about the ritual life among the Hadza and the reason you had this wonderful presentation, because exactly that's the reason why I chose this title, was that not many work in this area and we find that the Hadza is a very, very prominent group in the research, in anthropological research and they are so because they are interesting evolutionarily and also linguistically, they speak this language which is an isolate, meaning that it's not in family with any other language and because they have these ancient DNA, people tend to look to the Hadza to open this window into the past of our common ancestry and so those are some of the reasons that people study the Hadza, is to gain an understanding about where we all come from, what is our common human origin.

Many of the questions that has been asked working with the Hadza has been questions about technology, And also, how do they hunt? Which technology do they use? Where do they stand technologically in, for instance, relation to Tasmanians that are very simple technologically speaking? And we have all these scales that people are investigating to see and they come to the Hazza with these kind of questions.

So technology is one of them.

Economy is another one.

How come? Well, they are hunter-gatherers, and they do live this system called Immediate Return, developed by James Woodburn and it's a very unusual way of organizing or living.

because it's only found among hunter-gatherers, but not even all hunter-gatherers have lived by this immediate return system.

Very, very briefly, it's just to say that instead of putting a grain into the soil, first preparing the soil, putting the grain in, having all this labor going on, and then waiting to get the spoils of the labor, immediate return is start with nothing, go and get it right away.

So there's no storage, it's this way of going out and have the produce immediately from the labor.

So any other kinds of wage labor is also delayed, agriculturalists delayed, all these other systems are typically delayed, return systems.

So that's another — oh, yeah, maybe I should say that it was just that Chris asked me also to make an introduction to the Hatze, right? So that's also why I try to — I'm just walking a bit around presenting now how is it that the Hadza have been, what role have they had in research, what questions has been asked through them with their case.

So it's just so that we will find why we end up with ritual life at the end.

So that's what's going on.

So, yes, we came to economy with the immediate return system.

That's one very prominent thing that is also investigated through the Hatzer case, but also sharing economy, known from many other hunter-gatherer systems, both with the equal meat sharing practices, Why do these people share what they value so highly? Why do they share equally the meat that is hunted by the hunter? Why doesn't he keep it to himself? These questions are asked over and over and we have all these, you know, both moral and different kind of answers given to this key question, but it has been going on for decades trying to solve this puzzle and another aspect is also the demand sharing.

How does it work that people actually can ask for other people to share what they have? So if you have relative affluence I'm entitled and I have the moral upper hand to go and ask you share your share your paper you've got enough you know it's it's a way to to uh to claim the right and to have the moral upper hand in asking other people to share which so it's not begging it's not uh We have got all these other ideas about asking for people to share.

That doesn't apply here.

So evolutionary questions are asked to the Hadza, also economical questions, and also lastly I would say the political questions, because the Hadza is one of the groups that display the highest degree of egalitarianism.

So we have a system of people where both men and women are very equal, with equal rights and equal say in questions of society.

They have equal possibilities to influence this and James Woodburne also wrote a wonderful article in in '81 about this and some of these questions are really gaining momentum these years too.

So how come, how did we, why did we come from an egalitarian past and develop this highly hierarchical system later on? What happened? What is the logic? And would we all like to go back to or forward to more egalitarian systems? So these are the things — evolutionary questions, economic questions, political questions that are primarily — and technological questions that are primarily asked with the Hadzer case in mind, but these questions about, OK, but what goes on inside? What's the

imagination? How do they see the world? How do they see themselves in the world? And not just as stereotypical people performing their roles in society.

That's really something that has been left out of many accounts.

I think that at least that was something that I needed to ask.

I didn't go directly to this.

I didn't jump to ritual life from my armchair and just, oh, I'll go and explore this.

Rather, I have, I could say, I'm a curator at a museum in Denmark.

My angle into this research was that I had read James Woodburn's catalogue from the British Museum in 1970.

It was a catalogue around his collection, and it just had this curious mention of three objects that were termed children.

objects that were children, how does this match to all this technological, economical, political, very hard, hard lining descriptions.

So this was the crack that I wanted to explore and through this, through these three kinds of objects, I came to, I landed Splash into ritual life.

So So that's how we got to this point and tonight, we're going to talk about therianthropes and dancing dead, and also having animals as kindred spirits.

How do people see themselves as in relation family relation ties even with animals and what does it mean? Yes, this means that we're going to see therianthropes is this mixture between man and animal.

So these are beings, hybrid beings, that has both and a human side or aspect, as well as an animal aspect within them and the dancing dead, we meet at this Epamer ritual, night dance ritual that we're going to just have a hearing about also and this relationship with animals is the last point, but let's get to the — the card, we always have to have that card, right? Saying where are we in the world? And here we are, just in the northern part of Tanzania, near... Well, I'll go closer.

Or maybe I should just say we have the Rift Valley here going down and we are in the Rift Valley area and And here we've got... did you see it? Did I just jump too quickly? Let me just go back.

Up here we have the lake that we'll find on the next slide.

This is Lake Iyasi and it's even though Tanzania is almost a thousand one million square kilometers large.

This area that the Hata live in is only 4,000 square kilometers.

So it's a very small area in the large land that Tanzania is and here, you probably would recognize the — here's the Ngorongoro crater.

It's just up here and up here we've got Serengeti Plain.

So and this is where I did my fieldwork was around.

Let me just have a look.

Here and that's in the in the Yaida Chini area, which is which is far away from There's also people living here, and that's closer to the tourist track, going from Arusha to Serengeti and also quite a lot of people come as tourists to see the performance by the Hata in this area, but this is definitely more off the track.

There are only three roads going to this area in total, so it's quite it's quite difficult to get near and to get to.

This is one of the roads that leads to the area and this is in the rainy season so we've got an area that can very easily be flooded in the rainy season and it's scorching hot in the dry season with these winds swirling around and just drying you up.

So it's a very rough area to be in and it's considered to be, you know, not fit for human beings to live in.

It's got also, it's a tsetse fly infected area, so it's quite rough and that's also why the Hatse still has this area, even though people are moving there to a larger degree and here we have a picture of the hunters.

Only men hunt and that's a quite it's an important thing that only that men and women have different roles in society even though they are egalitarian they have different chores or different roles that they perform and men have the role of being hunters, and women do not.

Here we've got a picture of a roasting of — only women know how to to dig for the tubers and roots.

So this is, and it's only Hadza women who know this.

No other group, women or men, would know how to do this and it's highly skilled, it's such a powerful thing to do and to be successful in and here we see we've just pulled the roots that we got that afternoon and are eating them straight from the bonfire and men and women do know how to, and do, when they're out, pick fruits on their way and drink whatever they come by.

So it's also a way, you know, when you go out, that's when you feel not hungry, that's when you feel replenished, that's staying home in the camp, that's where the hassle is and that's also quite a different, you know, mindset about being home.

It's not a comforting place.

It's more demanding to stay at home, really and here we also see that This woman, she has a carrying kanga.

That's just to, she will eat just standing there for maybe one minute, quickly just taking some berries and eating them right away, but also just tossing in some in this kanga that she will bring back home.

So, but the most is eaten right away, as an immediate returner would do.

All right.

Now we get to the question about ritual life.

Because here I have a picture of these bells.

They're used by so many people in ritual or just in performances and so what would be so special about these? The special thing about these is that they are also part of the rituals.

They're part of the Eppermint night dance ritual and they're part of the maitoko and the maito rituals that are initiation rituals for adolescent people and if we just remember that But the story about the Hatsa has been that they have been projected as our primitive past.

They've been this window into our past.

It's been our most primitive version of ourselves.

I think that this story about the rituals is really putting a question mark to this primitivity.

It's so highly evolved.

it has got all these very delicate structures around it so I think that that's also why it's so important to remember this aspect of human beings that they're not just this these hunters and these gatherers and they perform like that and they've got they They organize by these rules.

No, they also have an inner life.

So yeah and that's a point that is — it's strange to have to make this point, right? We're in 2017, it's — yes, of course we know that.

Why is it — why should it be necessary to say this? But if you read the articles, the books that are presented about the Hadza, you will find that there is this strain, that they tend to oversimplify these people and there are consequences of this.

Because the state, the government, is not really that happy to have this stone-age population living in the midst.

It's just this annoyance.

Why don't they evolve? Why don't they take the hand that the government gives to them, saying, please, have some seeds and start Yeah, start your agriculture.

It's simple.

Just go ahead with it.

We'll help you and they just refuse again and again and this is really an annoyance and the government has this reaction of being more and more — and yes, annoyed and thinking that, well, if they're not going to take our help, we'll stop offering it.

When the research literature also gives this impression that this people is really so primitive, it's also something that substantiates and that would strengthen this attitude from the administrative side.

So it's really, it does have consequences.

Right, now I'm just going to play a short audio clip.

I'm going to present a bit about the Epeme night dance ritual.

I'm going to present just briefly some of the rituals that the Hatsa do have and this first one is taking place in the darkness.

We could... We could... Put the lights off then, please.

The door as well.

Then it's dark moon.

Yes.

It takes place in the really pitch darkness and it's supposed to be like that we have only women on one side and men on the other side, but that's okay, we can stay mixed, but this is a very powerful ritual and it takes time, it takes time maybe twice every month.

So it's something that really goes on a lot of, you know, it's repetitive.

They do it all the time keeping this ritual alive and pulsing.

It has this pulse about it.

follows the moon, which is also this cosmological pulse that is set by the planets.

So we have this night which is completely dark.

All the fires are extinct and nobody carries a torch or anything that gives out light.

It's supposed to be non-visible.

It's supposed to be something where we use the other senses.

You can feel, you feel also the closeness of the people beside you.

You feel it stronger when it's dark and when you're not having the visual to give you all these ordinary impressions and you hear things more clearly when it's dark too.

So this ritual is not a spectacle, but it's a ritual that is supposed to — that communicates through primarily sound and this is also something you should really not accept to see a video of this ritual, because it's completely tabooed to make videos of it, but sound is fine.

So that's the closest we get to this, is through sound.

Whistled and the women respond.

Okay.

So what we had just heard was... We should imagine to be here in this dance clearing and men on the one side, women on the other, and they're divided by this hut or cliff or something that will prevent the two groups to see each other, but they can easily hear each other.

So we hear that the first thing that will happen is that a dance will be initiated by whistles.

From the men's side, there will be these whistles and you hear the women respond and they have to, they will decode, Oh, who is this dance for? And they do convey this through a whistled language that is understandable, not to me, fortunately but but to the women and they so they say they recognize oh this is a dance for this and this person and they will once the women find out oh yes this is for that person they will start to sing and clap and the man who is — he comes from this other side into the dance clearing and he will be wearing a tall headdress of ostrich feathers that he will wave like this and he will have these calabashes, small calabashes, that he can rattle and he will be obscuring his body shape with a cloth so that he shouldn't be recognizable.

The plan is that they shouldn't know which man is performing this.

He has turned into something else.

He's turned into this therianthrope.

He's turned into this being that is both human and animal.

and he stands on the threshold between the living and the dead and between women and men.

He can turn into a person carrying forward women's spirits.

So that's a very powerful figure, this epimer that is called and he... it's a uniting... feeling being present in this ritual.

They have such care that they perform this ritual every month that is to ensure that they have this connectivity, that they feel each other strongly in the families.

So it's a very powerful ritual and And it definitely drives on this, you know, on transgressing the divides that are otherwise in place and now when we have this darkness where we are here, it's also something to consider that, well, wouldn't it be nice sometimes to have a ritual where we can actually face and confront the things that we are supposed to avoid at all costs, that we should never be in touch with.

We've got all these stories like Eve and the apple.

Whenever there's something that you're told, you cannot do that.

It's an urge.

You find this urge inside of you to go do it and that's also part of the ritual life.

That's exactly to have this space, this time, this technology, to actually have the possibility to get in touch, to face what you're not supposed to face, to engage with what you consider the most potent or dangerous or anything that transgresses the norms that you otherwise live by.

So I think that's also something that we can see through the Hadza case, is that maybe we do need these rituals.

Maybe we do need to have an institution that allows us to work with this urge that we have to to get in touch with all these taboos that we set up around us.

Because I don't think that there has ever been a taboo or something that is described as illegal, or you cannot do that.

You shouldn't get in touch with that without there also being transgressions of that rule.

So there's some kind of need to mediate these these things Right, thanks This is bright Matthias Gunther still has been doing some wonderful stuff in the Kalahari And he wrote about the kung that they seem untroubled mentally and emotionally by such cosmological and logical incongruities as humans merging identities with the animals of myth and wealth and that's also what we see in this Epimid night dance.

There's this fluent, and it's unproblematic, There's nobody saying, but that can't be.

It's not right.

How can you be both human and animal or neither? Explain this to me, but this is something that has got some really wonderful descriptions about also meat and these wonderful rituals that really correspond nicely with so many of the Hatsa cases too and what we are seeing here is one of those animals that they merge with.

The Hatsa would merge in a particular way, in a special way, in a kindred kind of way with The eland.

I have a picture here.

This is an eland.

It's a huge animal.

It's bigger than a buffalo.

It can be quite... This is just from the internet, though.

I don't have permission to do this, but this is... Sorry, but this is the materiality that we are dealing with.

These animals are huge and actually Lewis Williams and Biesle have a quite wonderful description of Eland too and they write on this.

The kung wax eloquent on the subject of the fat of an Eland bull.

There's so much fat around the heart, they say, that two or three people are required to carry it.

When it is melted down, it is necessary to make a large receptacle of the eland skin to contain it all.

The heart, together with the surrounding fat, may be of such a size that it's impossible for a man to put his arms around it.

So this is really what we're dealing with.

This is the myth of the strength and of the fat and of the meat of the eland.

back to this interview with these two Etemen men.

I would ask them about when they go on hunt with the on Elands what is going on and they would say, if I would go on hunt and I had shot an Eland, I could not come back to camp and say that I shot an Eland.

I would say I had shot a lion, sesame, or bells in gripite, because when the eland walks, it makes the sound of the bells.

The bells that we also heard in the dance before, these are the mimic of the eland sound.

To say the eland's name Komat is really bad and I, me, I'm Tia.

The eland is very special, very, very, very special.

Oh, oh, oh, I cannot even say its name.

and just I just cut out some bits of the interview but we would talk about the hunt and the special rules applying to the hunt and how they would need to seek help of other Epame people to trace the dead island but now we are back to having traced the eland as it lies there in in the bush so even we're just we come to the place now they find the eland and they say even though they're very excited they uh the the old men do not talk if they talk the fat will disappear and they cannot pass the head and To pass around the eland's head when it lies like it's sleeping like that, it's absolutely bad.

They go around to butcher the meat of the eland, and when all has been cut, they will call for the others waiting there to come to get pieces of meat.

They will never go around the head of the eland resting there while cutting, because if they pass around the head, they get huge problems, without doubt.

They will be sick when they return to camp and they will not be able to even consider eating the meat of the eland, not any meat of the eland and it will be like that for a long time, because the eland is from the Hatsa spirits and this description about not going through or passing the head of a dead animal, it just resembles so

much the way that it was described to me that if a person falls You know, if he dies and he lies there on the ground, you cannot pass the head.

You will have to go another way around.

So I said, oh, I'm thinking about a dead person and they said, yes, to go around the head is bad.

Ilan is like that.

It's important because the Ilan is the sound or the voice of the Hatsa spirits.

It's a big story, that one and I keep on going.

So it's like a person? You cannot go around the head? Yes, you cannot.

Because if you go around the head, you'll get dreams of the dead man and the Ilan is like the dead man.

It's very important that animal for the Hatsa.

When the Ilan is shot, we will initiate three boys for Maizo because it's a powerful animal and it's got a lot of fat.

Yes, it's a very big story.

We'll not finish it now, but the other one keeps on going.

The eland spirit from the Hatsa spirits since ancient times.

Ah, the story is much richer than this deer.

I will tell you more later, but the eland is so powerful.

There's no other animal like the eland and he goes on.

The eland is like a man of other people for Hatsa.

It's like another person, oh, I ask.

Yes, it's very important.

It's a Hatze spirit.

Now you know the big story of the Eland.

So this is how an interview would go, up and down, and somebody else would just keep on giving cues and the other one tried to put it to rest, but this is how it goes, but this is really important to have this information, because that's also something that really opens up a whole area of research, of symbolic research, that has not been dealt with and it can inform so many discussions, this one.

So it's quite good.

This is a quote provided by Marshall Starlins, where he quotes another guy, Hoggart.

So it's not really that nice then, but I think that this is key to what we are dealing with here.

Marshall Starlins quote Hoggart when saying — that he says, Men divide themselves into two groups in order that they may impart life to one another.

that they may intermarry, compete with one another, make offerings to one another, and to do to one another whatever is required by their theory of prosperity and I think that this is really a key.

Because why is it that the Hadza operate with these rituals where they invite all these others in kind of — the living merging with the dead, the men merging with the women, the humans merging with the animals.

I think that this quote gives an idea about how we need, as human beings, we need to have some kind of others that we may internalize so we create this other this argument is one that reaches back to with Levi Strauss and the incest taboo we need to have another group we need to have A and B's because A need to to get their spouses from the other group we need not to we should have this exchange and This is a that's the the idea behind this But I think that we can also refine it in another way that maybe we need to have a and B in order to be able to to take the other's point of view by ingesting it by by a by taking it in so that we gain the perspective from outside of ourselves, back to ourselves.

So that was the idea with this quote and let me just give another example of this.

Because now I know that we're just jumping from one ritual with the night dance onto the hunt, now onto something completely different, but this is also part of the — and a very important part of the women's rituals among the Hatsa.

This is an .

This is a calabash gourd that was one of the things, one of the three items that James Woodburn addressed as children in his 1970 report and this, along with a doll, and we see, oh, I just jumped very quickly.

This is a clay doll and this stick.

These three items are considered part of women among the Hatza.

These are aspects of the women.

So that's also a very concrete way of extending human beings to beyond the skin of yourself or inviting other kinds into your idea about self.

We've got the stick and a wooden stick, a clay doll, and a calabash that are all part of women and it's really quite complex how they are so, but it's all the things that they that they indicate or what they draw out as aspects of the women is always quite neat.

The stick is the past, the gourd is the present and the doll is the future and we have these quite neat ideas that fit very nicely together as ideas behind these items and this Naruchanda stick is mostly related to the girls' initiation ritual called the Maitoko.

They would they should always bring their stick to this ritual and it's quite... Camilla, you have also done research on this and it's quite... it's powerful and it has a duration of time but it's It's playful, and it's serious, and it has all these facets that it turns, that it addresses, and that it gives to people — well, to people, to the ones performing this ritual and it involves a cutting, which is quite strange.

having a society which is egalitarian and then has involves cutting in in this initiation ritual but it's I and I really tried to ask quite a lot of women about this and how come or had they been Was it something that they could not refuse to have this cutting? But that would be — they said, no, I choose to do this myself, but I would like to dig further into this ritual.

Yeah.

We also see that it's not only the adolescent girls that partake in this ritual, also the girls not ready yet.

They have rehearsals of this ritual and instead of wearing the beads that we saw, the beads and the naira chanda, they are smeared with — they have these ashes that is mixed with the water, but special ashes, it's ashes from the hearth.

that is then drawn on their bodies, and they ran around with the maitokos and it was quite interesting and this is what's going on.

We really have all these men who are — they are like prey suddenly during this maitoko.

They dance around, being light-footed and the women, you can see, come charging very powerfully with the Naritanda high in the air, ready to punish and to whip if she gets the chance and we've got this heavy flirting going on in the ritual and we can see when the ritual is on, the women will wear the beads across the chest.

So at night, late at night, they can take them off and then the ritual is on pause.

So, but it's a very striking reversal of roles and it's so amusing to be part of, really.

So the women are hunters, but they're hunting men.

Yeah.

Yes, exactly and they should... There's this idea that the women, once they get to the men, they should whip mercilessly.

It's really... I was safe because I was considered old enough to be harmless.

Yes, but then they can... Cut me on the head and then the young men.

Exactly.

Yes, but that's also where... where the floating is up.

I would just end by also introducing that there are gods, actual mountain gods that are part of the Hatza cosmology, that they could go to these these God cliffs and make requests, demand sharings, saying give me a kudu and God will have to give you a kudu.

So it's not like this Christian attitude of please and oh, I'm so... I'm not worthy.

This is really, you know, give me a kudu and you... you have the entitlement and the god should obey you.

So it's quite another idea of a god, but it's also, and it has a shadow side, this obedience, because of course the god is also this powerful being, this powerful mind.

that will have the possibility of crushing you on a whim.

It's just, it's really, it has this double to it that so many things among the Hatsa does.

There's this, there's the face value and then we find the opposite just when you scratch the surface.

So this is just to say that we also have regular gods where the dead, where the spirits of the dead reside in these mountains and the god will send them out to do different chores, to take care of the animals, to give the hungry hyena the prey that the hunter just left and maybe forgot, or maybe he didn't, maybe he did everything right, but hyena just simply needed this meat.

So the spirits will make sure that the hyena finds this prey.

So they have all these tasks that — and the god has all these care.

It's cares for so many, both humans and animals and here we are.
on the god, which was kind of a difficult thing.

I was invited to come to the god just after they had agreed to give me some, give me information on this esoteric knowledge that is not supposed to be shared.

So, and just as they agreed, they say, Oh, by the way, would you like to come to visit the god? I was just, yeah, shh and I didn't see the connection at that point, but being invited to the god was, of course, also to check if it would be OK if they gave me this knowledge and the test was if I survived.

So I'm really happy that I did, but it was quite — it was a really — It was really a test.

It was the only time that I felt sick was the night before and it was such a strange day that we had and I almost didn't make it, but eventually I did and once I climbed the mountain, everything, every hardship that I had had during that day simply disappeared, so it had this very strange or mystic side to it, too.

Well, I just wanted to say this is about communication and telling the stories that matter to people and hoping that somebody will listen, so thank you very much for your time.

The Ted K Archive

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Radical Anthropology. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=11xZs_i-Z8s>

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