

ON THE TRAIL OF A HUNTER

The chill of early morning was rapidly dissipating as the sun rose to illuminate with fiery colours the heavy dust haze of a glorious new African day. An emerald-spotted dove cooed its soft lament while red-faced mousebirds warily clambered and chatted in the acacias around us.

In anticipation of the unknown, Margie and I stood beside our vehicle with Raymond our driver, in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by dry and brittle thornbush. Beside us, overshadowing our insignificance, was a huge baobab tree.

Gaga, our black guide and interpreter and no resemblance to the white 'Lady', bade us wait. For the last half hour he had guided us through the dense thornbush over desolate stony ground covered in inches of fine powdered dust and animal tracks to locate a small family group of Hadzabe bushmen living around the now dry Lake Eyasi on the edge of the vast Serengeti. It seems that we were now close to them and he left us to disappear into the harsh, enveloping landscape to make a formal greeting and to politely advise them of our presence.

In a short while he returned to lead us through the wicked and beckoning thorns of 'wait-a-while' bushes to a small clearing. Huddled for warmth in small groups around two flickering campfires was a family of Hadzabe bushmen. There were half a dozen men in one group and as many women with two small children in another.

Our first impression of this surreal and ancient scene was startling to say the least. Around them were simple and crude shelters of bowed sticks, covered with a few animal skins, leaves and branches. The tramped floor of one was covered with a kudu skin on which a small sleeping child had been placed. They afforded shade from the relentless sun but hardly protection from a downpour. When the rainy season comes the bushmen will move with pitiful few possessions to caves and rock overhangs of a nearby kopje.

We were formally introduced by handshake to each of the men and then to the separated group of womenfolk as they ate a meagre meal of the dry seeds and vitamin A rich cream-of-tartar pulp from the large pods of the baobab tree. The people were of brown to yellow skin, small and wiry in stature, skimpily clad in skins and tattered cloth. Steatopygia, a genetic characteristic of this race was prevalent in the women and to a lesser degree in the men. They had the distinctive roundish faces and almond eyes of the Khoisan race, the first people to inhabit much of southern Africa many hundreds of thousands years ago. Later in time they would be hunted down, killed and dispersed by the migrating and more dominant Bantu tribes. In order to survive they had to adapt to the more inhospitable regions of the central and southern parts of the continent. Sadly, to a lesser degree this persecution still goes on.

Through Gaga our interpreter we asked them questions and their simple replies came in a language punctuated with the distinctive 'clicks' of the bushmen. The absence of many children was most noticeable. The harsh nature of their lifestyle has a profound effect on their fecundity but a vital factor for their survival in this forbidding environment. Adventurers like Dick Smith who get out into the world of reality and are more aware and attune to our planet's problems than the average person or politician, wisely warn us that the greatest danger facing our quality of life and the continued survival of the human race is overpopulation. These so called primitive people before us

here today are a poignant example as are the Amazonian Indians who have instead practised birth control for aeons in order to live within their limits.

At first we felt a little uncomfortable being here with cameras hungrily clicking, – almost like voyeurs intruding into their private and simple way of life. However, as time went by and with the assurance of our guide, we became more relaxed about it. The little men and women took scant notice of us as they went about their daily chores, willingly making contact with the foreign world of commercialism for their own advantage.

The men demonstrated how quickly they make fire by friction from hand-twirled fire-sticks. This was a man's task and I was asked to try my hand at it. When smoke and hot coals miraculously appeared and placed in one of the men's pipe for smoking, it was jubilation and handshakes all round.

Soon after, the squatting men rose, gathered their short giraffe sinewed-strung bows and lethal steel poisoned-tipped arrows and set off with their silent, sandy coloured hunting dogs at heel. They barter for the beautifully hand-forged steel tips from the blacksmiths of the nearby Datoga tribe who we will have the privilege to visit later.

We followed at quickening pace, through the thornbush and stunted commiphora trees, sometimes carelessly delayed with a curse by an unseen, bloodletting 'wait-a-while' thorn tendril across our path. The bush suddenly opened up to reveal a hundred metre wide dry, sandy riverbed which will feed Lake Eyasi when the life giving rains come, hopefully in three months time. We crossed the deep sand with some effort. It was then along a dry narrow dusty trail through a hostile sunburnt landscape studded with giant baobabs.

The pace was quickening as the five tireless, loping hunters in front of us split up, occasionally disappearing from view. Jennies and Lee's crucial training for the Hay Travelscene six-day Fish River Canyon walk was narrowing the gap just a little. In an instant they silently vanished into thick bush.

So here we were in the middle of nowhere, leaderless! Who were they to worry about a handful of pussy-footed tourists. This was their world of 'survival of the fittest', a phrase today that sits uncomfortably with many unworldly city dwellers. Our guide and interpreter was finding the going tough and lagging well in the rear. Margie was not far behind keeping the leopards off my back!

Suddenly excited shouts from the hunters relieved our apprehension a little. We struggled through the clinging thornbush towards the hidden chatter, following narrow animal paths, this way and that.

Contact! A grinning and diminutive bowman broke cover, then another. One clutched a black-face vervet monkey, mortally pierced through the chest by a steel-tipped arrow. A troop of vervets had been located in an umbrella thorn-tree and the hunters were quick to surround them and secure one of its hapless members. It was a big male in the prime of life sporting a vivid blue scrotum, its intensity of colour once having a stimulating affect on the females of the species.

The hunters were jubilant and non-stop chatter, clicks and gestures told the story of a successful hunt and its valuable prize. This was food on the table for their family. They would live well for

another day. Such a stark contrast to our way of life with the assurance of a nearby supermarket; choice and plenty with little effort.

They found a small clearing in the bush in the shade of an acacia and began deftly skinning the monkey on a bed of green leaves gathered from a bush, one of few that were remarkably lush on this thirsty soil. His testicles were unceremoniously lopped off without a whimper. The now tailless, and disturbingly human-like carcass, was placed on an already blazing fire and toasted rather than roasted. Half-cooked offal, joints and testicles were shared amongst the five hunters who ate with relish. A slice of raw heart was offered to us but we politely declined on humanitarian grounds – we had brought a packed lunch with us! The grinning head was sliced off, split open and the brains scooped out, shared and eaten raw – a delicacy, eaten like a child would an ice cream. A constant chatter accompanied the frenzied eating and little notice of us was taken as we sat with them and shared this stone age experience.

Eventually with hunger temporarily satiated, they quartered the main carcass, throwing unwanted offal to their hunting dogs, and set off at a brisk pace back to their camp. On the way the hunters harvested a dozen or so baobab seedpods by expertly knocking them off the high branches with well aimed throwing sticks. Again, a fluky throw brought down several more and the little men rushed to my side to shake my hand!

On arrival back at the camp the meat was distributed equally amongst the women. Following a celebration of singing and dancing led by some older folk who appeared later, we prepared to return to the twenty-first century, bidding farewell to a race of people whose culture and lifestyle has perhaps changed little in a million years. Our monetary payment to our guide will be negotiated and substituted for tobacco or hashish - the exchange not our concern. They want none of our material goods.

When the last president of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere tried to introduce his forcible settlement policies, the small population of Hadzabe bushmen resisted. Nowadays most of their children still have never seen a doctor or a school, the environment around them provides all their modest basic needs. This is their classroom. When it fails to provide the essentials of life they simply gather up their few belongings and move elsewhere.

How fortunate are we and our children here in Australia.

THE END

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