Notes on Hadza cosmology

Epeme, objects and rituals

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Abstract: This article concerns Hadza cosmology examined through objects, rituals and the Hadza concept of epeme. A brief background to the Hadza and the fieldwork that informs this study is followed by a close analysis of three key objects that are central to the argument presented. The objects are intimately linked to women and to aspects of the social and cosmological identity of the individual makers. One object is a materialisation of the woman’s name and it leads to an examination by interview of naming practices more generally. Naming a child gives it a spirit and places the child in a strong family matrix, and since it receives two names the child has two spirits and two families. Calling a person’s name is thus calling out to one of the spirits within the person. This practice of calling a name occurs during the epeme night dance ritual. Dancers call a name of a relative and turn into the spirit-beings of the named. In this ritual we find that dancers when calling names of women do so through the mediating power objects. The article concludes by considering death, the dead body and the role of the objects in death. The approach taken is not intended to be holistic, but rather a presentation of ethnographic research indicating the potential and need for further examination of the power and role of objects in Hadza society.

Keywords: Hadza, epeme, ritual, cosmology, power objects

1. Introduction

The CHAGS 10 conference held in Liverpool in June 2013 demonstrated the continuing interest in the Hadza among researchers with a number of papers presented across a range of session topics. The doyen of Hadza anthropology, Professor Emeritus James Woodburn drew on his more than six decades of work with the Hadza to encourage researchers to look elsewhere implying that not much is left to be said about these over-studied people. There is, however, a relatively neglected area of Hadza life that is the focus of this paper: ritual and cosmology. Many studies have given the impression that Hadza are lacking in ritual and cosmological complexity (cf Woodburn 1982a, 1982b; Marlowe
2010), while other groups of hunter-gatherers in East and South Africa are studied with an emphasis on their depth of cosmological expression (Guenther 1999) as seen in healing dances (Katz 1982; Keeney & Keeney 2013; Low 2011), rock art (Lewis-Williams & Biesele 1978), folktales and mythology (Biesele 1993; Guenther 1999, Keeney & Keeney 2013; Lewis-Williams & Biesele 1978).

Woodburn’s finding that the Hadza have no belief in an afterlife (Woodburn 1982b) has had the impact of limiting research on Hadza ritual and cosmology. This is an indirect reflection of the assumption that not much is (left) to be discovered and that the field of cosmology and ritual is peripheral and insignificant at best to understanding the Hadza, or simply that in the case of the Hadza it so fragmented and inconsistent that it defies rigorous study. During my fieldwork among the Hadza I realised that although this aspect of their lives did indeed come across as fragmented and partial, what I encountered bore witness to deep cosmological complexity, ritual rigour and a vivid belief in an afterlife.

As a curator, my initial focus on the Hadza was to study three kinds of power objects (Apter & Pietz 1993: x) recorded in Woodburn’s Hunters and gatherers. The material culture of the nomadic Hadza (1970). Researching these objects prompted stories that exposed fragments of a complex cosmology. Over the last 30 years, the ethnography of Hadza material culture has focused on the mundane utilitarian value of objects while largely ignoring the ritual potency of special objects and their cosmological context. This article is a first attempt to rectify this oversight and to stimulate others to investigate the subject more deeply and thoroughly.

A brief introduction to the Hadza and the context of my fieldwork is followed by the close examination of three objects used by women; the stick, the gourd and the doll. The stick is a materialisation of the owner’s name and this observation leads to a more general examination of the significance of names and some Hadza naming practices. The investigation is based on excerpts from interviews undertaken in the field. Calling a name is also found in the epeme night dance ritual where dancers call the name of a relative. Dancers then turn into the spirit-beings of the named. When dancers call the names of women they do so through mediating power objects. The paper concludes by briefly regarding death, the dead body and the role of the objects in death. The overall result is a first step towards exploring the links between Hadza cosmology, power objects and ritual.
2. The Hazda

The people known as Hadza are semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers living in the Rift Valley in northern Tanzania. The Hadza population is relatively small with a census conducted in spring 2012 revealing just 1200–1300 individuals (Brian Wood, pers. comm. 2012). Despite the small size of the population, the Hadza display remarkable linguistic resilience, still speaking Hadsane, a linguistic isolate, as their primary language.

Although some Hadza have taken up paid labour, and a few are studying at secondary school or attending formal education in urban settings, there are still some who live primarily in the bush areas south and west of Lake Eyasi. The Hadza living in Kideru and Domanga, where the fieldwork was largely conducted, retain a livelihood based primarily on hunting and gathering. Although they consume some externally sourced foods they rely mainly on wild resources from the bush (Woodburn 1968, Bird-David 1990). The material belongings an individual possesses is kept to a minimum by strong social conventions that prevent individuals from accumulating goods and promote sharing on demand (Woodburn 1970, 1982a).

Their livelihood is sustained through daily trips up into the hills and into the bush. A division of labour sharply divide the sexes. Men hunt with bows and arrows, some tipped with poison, and hunting is mostly done by lone tracking of game but also in groups hiding in ambush at water holes. Women provide the main staple foods of the camp. They dig for tubers and roots with a wooden digging stick, the *ts’apale*. Digging is hard and requires removal of large rocks from the soil in order to reach the edible roots, and it demands skill to be successful. Berries and fruits are eaten instantly, and only in some cases is a surplus of tubers, meat, honey, and fruit carried back to camp. The remarkable immediate-return system of labour, thoroughly described by Woodburn (1980, 1982a, 1998), permeates the practices around distribution and consumption.

As the Hadza are semi-nomadic, settlements are dynamic and people move in and out of the core camps. The types of dwellings are very diverse ranging from rocky caves, fully grass-thatched huts, elaborate assemblages of twigs and tree branches into see-through framework structures to subtle markings of homes, eg just the setting of a fireplace or the clearance of the ground by sweeping it and laying down cloths, hides or straw mats as beds. Sometimes they just lie down under the open sky. The caves are mostly used during the rainy season when the fully thatched huts fail to provide shelter from the heavy rainfall, while the more subtly structured ones are use during the dry season and as short-term dwellings.
I borrow Woodburn’s words to sum up some of the key social factors when addressing Hadza social dynamics, bringing to the fore egalitarianism, mobility, and the sharing of meat:

But I think I have said enough to show that we have here the application of a rigorously systematic principle: in these societies the ability of individuals to attach and to detach themselves at will from groupings and from relationships, to resist imposition of authority by force, to use resources freely without reference to other people, to share as equals in game meat brought into camp, to obtain personal possessions without entering into dependent relationships – all these bring about one central aspect of this specific form of egalitarianism. What it above all does is to disengage people from property, from the potentiality in property rights for creating dependency. (Woodburn 1998: 445, emphasis in original)

Woodburn concludes by linking these core social traits to the way Hadza relate to property including their relation to things as belongings. I make this the starting point for the rest of this article.

3. Power objects

Woodburn’s observations above reveal a view on property that emphasises the risk of possessions as possible generators of inequality and dependence. There are aspects here that transcend the view of belongings as practical-economic props, but a utilitarian view has predominated in recent studies that attribute a resource value to these transactions and assume implicitly an economic rationale on the part of the actors administering these things (cf Apicella et al 2012; Hawkes et al 1997).

As curator at Moesgaard Museum, I focused also on material belongings but with specific attention to cosmology, taboos and rituals. I have examined these matters through three objects used by women, the naricanda-stick, a’untenakwete-gourd and olanakwete-doll. These objects are material objects that have proven excellent portals for Hadza, as well as for my research, to enter the realms of forefathers, night dance and cosmology. My asking questions about these objects facilitated discussions which illuminate the cosmological constituents of being human.

The stick, gourd and doll and the way they are related to, are not representative of the way Hadza relate to things or possessions as such. These are ritual objects and they are considered to be objects of power by the Hadza. In anthropological theory, ‘power objects’ have come to be the cover term for artefacts that carry
spirit, are magical, mystical or particularly ritualistic, and the term has saved analysts from the discomfort or even embarrassment of the related concept ‘fetish’ (see Pietz 1985).

A caption at the British Museum’s Africa exhibition accompanying a large display case with anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic mostly wooden sculptures refers to this concept and defines it in the following way:

Objects of power: Wooden sculpture commonly offers a way of fixing and controlling powers that are of natural or supernatural origin or can even be part of an individual’s own body. (British Museum, transcript from exhibition text, December 2013).

In the Hadza context, objects of power are not only things of wood or sculptures, but they are explicitly related to powers — both natural and supernatural — and they are indeed part of the women’s bodies. Importantly they stand in contrast from ordinary things among the Hadza, which are passed on, discarded or broken through inventive bricolage or misuse with lightness and ease. The social conventions that disparage accumulation of goods and promote sharing accord with this low attachment to ordinary material objects (Woodburn 1982a, 1998).

Let us take a closer look at the power objects singled out here:

1. The bead decorated calabash gourds – a’untenakwete (m.sg.), a’untenakwiko (f. sg.):

The gourds are made of decoratively incised calabashes with a wooden bung. Ashes are rubbed onto the incisions to make them conspicuous with a darker tone or by burning marks. A beaded string or band is attached to the gourds to provide a handle. The a’untenakwete is ceremonial and is only used to store clarified animal fat. In ceremonies the naricanda stick (below) is used as a tool to extract the animal fat inside. Animal fat is a valued everyday ingredient used in cooking, however, the fat stored in the gourd is only used in ritual contexts. The fat is used by smearing it onto both female and male neophytes during

1. I am grateful for the inspiring discussion during the international conference, ‘The power of objects. materiality, forms, ritual action’, in Toulouse, May 2013. Apter & Pietz were the first to use the term in their remarks on fetishes: ‘delineating the rational forms of cognitive subjectivity and objectified value required in market societies to interrogating the breakdown in social theory’s dialectic of subject and object when ... [the institution] is recognised as itself a sexual fetish and magical power-object, alternately conceivable as a thing or a god’ (1993: x).
initiation rites and as a medicine to relieve joint pains for elderly people, but is otherwise not used. The gourd itself is feminine (a’untenakwiko) or masculine (a’untenakwete) following its shape (round or oblong respectively). In order to become invested with ritual power the gourd should contain clarified animal fat. A woman might be buried with her a’untenakwete gourd or it might be destroyed on her grave (Woodburn 1982b).

2. Simple mud dolls – olanakwete (m. sg), olanakwiko (f. sg.)

When a young woman starts to live with a man and the time for having a child is nearing, a close relative like her mother or an older sister will make her an anthropomorphic doll from riverside mud or from clay taken from the centre of termite mounds, hun’to. The mud or clay is carried back to camp where it is kneaded and ash from the cooking fire is worked into the clay as a substance that gives power to the doll. Ashes along with blood and soil as power substances are readily available for women and are used in many occasions. The anthropomorphic doll is carefully modelled with a relatively small head and extremities compared to the volume of the body. A mouth will be pressed into the clay and there might be inserted beads for eyes. The olanakwiko (feminine) could have markers of breasts and be decorated with braided hair by straight lines drawn on the still wet surface.

The feeling of a newly ‘born’ doll is remarkably like handling a newborn child. It has the same weight, the dampness of the clay makes it transpire, and the structure and temperature of the surface is a notable emulation of the feeling of a human being’s skin.

There are other types of dolls in use among the Hadza. First, there are toy dolls, made by little girls out of edible roots, pieces of wood or other ready at hand materials, and made into dolls by wrapping pieces of cloth around them and carrying them around. The girls will hold these dolls and breastfeed and sing to them. These are not used in ritual contexts, and there are no raised eyebrows when children for instance bite off the head of the edible root-doll. Second, there are dolls made out of gourd-like roots of certain plants. They are gendered and treated the same way as the mud dolls. Third, there are ha’alanakwete/ha’alanakwiko-dolls (litt. meaning small precious stone) that are kept very secretive (Woodburn pers. comm. 2013). The stone dolls are made of

2. James Woodburn writes han’alanakwete and han’alanakwiko in his work (Woodburn 1970), however, I was corrected to ha’alanakwete.
Figure 1 The a’ntenakwete gourd is part of the Hadza collection collected by the author for Moesgaard Museum

Figure 2 A woman carries the newborn olanakwiko (feminine) doll back from the riverside where it was modelled. She handed it over to me with the words: ‘Now, we have given birth to this olanakwiko’ (newborn child, feminine).

Figure 3 Young women left a naricanda stick and beads at the site for the ceremony while bathing in preparation for the initiation rite, the maitoko, just before the cutting ceremony.

Source: All photos by author
cylindrical stones and they are dressed with pieces of cloth and strings of beads placed in ways on the ‘body’ that indicate their gender and retaining only the cylindrical form of the body to ensure the anthropomorphic resemblance. The size is significantly smaller and they do not share physical similitude to infants. Woodburn collected one *ha!anakwete*-doll (masculine) and two *ha!anakwiko*-dolls (feminine) that were handed to the British Museum in 1970. In addition, Ludwig Kohl-Larsen, a German medical doctor, photographed a man posing with *ha!anakwete* that Kohl-Larsen links to *epeme* dance (Kohl-Larsen 1958: Photo 105).³ He also documents egg-shaped dolls of clay with and without decorative cuts (Kohl-Larsen 1958: objects 51-54).

Dolls are used as tools for maternity education and are named after close kin, typically a parent or sibling. According to Hadza cosmology, the naming after kin is a process of spirit-sharing, and it is that which establishes the person, here in the form of a doll, as a significant, spirit-sharing, kinship-placed being. We will return to name- and spirit-sharing below.

The doll will be carried on the back in a cloth (*kanga*) just as mothers carry their infants on their backs. It will be breastfed, laid in the shadow covered by a cloth to sleep, and it will be handled and passed on when sitting, talking and preparing food, cooking or making beadworks. The doll is cared for as an infant. If a doll breaks, the doll will need the same burial rituals as other beings with spirits. Beings which have spirits are human beings, as well as the power objects and eland.⁴

3. **Thin, incision decorated sticks – naricanda**

The sticks measure roughly 1–1.5 cm diameter and are about 1.1–1.5 metres long. They are straightened carefully using teeth as clamps and cautiously

³. Kohl-Larsen is a controversial figure in the family tree of anthropologists working with the Hadza. He joined the NSDAP, the Nazi Party in Germany, before engaging in fieldwork. His fieldwork among the Hadza in the 1930s was in search of primitive man and he pursued questions of myths, rituals, blood and race, an interest shared with the Nazi regime. He had remarkable observation skills and he has described, photographed and collected substantial and interesting material. However, due to his political allegiance and the fact that his material is in German, there has been little subsequent in-depth work on his contributions. More research is also required to look into the different dolls and secretive props for fertility used by Hadza.

⁴. This relation to the eland’s spirit is not included in this article, but it will be more elaborated on in my PhD dissertation (forthcoming). Suffice it to say that Hadza have an exclusive spirit-bond with the eland, which is reflected in rituals such as the night dance rituals and in rites connected to killing an eland. There are salient similarities when comparing these rituals with Lewis-Williams & Biesele (1978) that come across as particularly striking.
bending the stick with the hands. They are then decorated throughout with a head and tail end. The father of a newborn baby girl crafts the sticks in connection with the naming ritual, when she will receive a name from the father and a name from her mother. The father, uncle, an older brother, or a brother in-law – the group of initiated epeme men who are ritually able to call the child’s name during the epeme rituals – might jointly decorate it. The sticks are decorated in the same manner as arrows, holding a knife firmly to the stick and twirling the stick while moving the knife up and down in order to produce the desired decorations. Ashes and clarified fat from an a’untenakwete are rubbed into the incisions to enhance the contrast of the decoration and the stick is smeared with the clarified fat all over. Then the naricanda is inserted into the twigs of the hut above the fireplace in order for the stick to obtain a patina from the smoke and so appear old.

Despite its intimate relation to women the naricanda stick is a male object. Even though it is used during the monthly epeme night dances, it is most closely connected to initiation rituals into adulthood. This ritual is called the maito for men and the maitoko for girls. During a maito a stick is chosen by the epeme, the collective of initiated men, to accompany the young neophyte, the maito, during his rite of passage (van Gennep 1960). In the rite’s separation phase the neophyte leaves his friends, the cohort, and ritually dies, which makes him enter the liminal phase friendless. The epeme men choose a stick that spiritually matches the neophyte and it will be the maito’s friend and companion during the weeks of initiation to epeme.

The naricanda stick, however, is most strongly linked to the maitoko, the initiation rite of passage from girl to woman. The neophytes and the young initiated women wear beads as a signal of their initiation and they run as a raiding cohort to visit other camps to spread the knowledge of their transition from girl to woman. When the word is spread that a maitoko is about to take place, young men come to join the ritual. During the initiation the women and young men flirt and a game of teasing and chase is performed with the threat of the women mercilessly using the sticks and whips (snapped off trees) during the rite of passage to whip and beat the young and mature men. When a woman dies she might be buried with her naricanda stick, but it is also one of the few objects that can be passed on as inheritance, when the name of the deceased is passed on to a younger generation family member.

The objects singled out here are materialisations of what we usually leave as abstract aspects of women, namely, name, self and future children. The name (naricanda) connects the woman to her forebears in the past as she is being named after a woman in earlier generations, living or dead; present selves
(a’ntenakwete) and future children (olanakwete). As such the woman extends beyond the boundary of her skin with innate relations to both different times and family within her being and she is ritually referenced through mediating external objects.

However, the way that the objects are externalised and severed from her own body create a dimension of reference, ie, stressing the discreteness between the woman and the object while retaining aspects of equivalence. To navigate this relationship we need to touch upon cosmological organisation, through names and spirit-sharing, the multiplicity constituting a human being and death.

4. Naming practices

Interviews conducted in the field provide support for the claim that the naricanda is a materialisation of a name and for the implications that follow. Naming is a complicated matter and it was a recurrent theme in the interviews; I had noticed that children would be addressed ‘Amama’ (grandmother) or another older kin term, and while I pursued my observation of a toddler being called grandfather in an interview this discussion unfolded:

Interlocutor: Because he has the name from that older man. They gave that child that name. Now they say grandfather to him. It is like the girl, they say Amama, grandmother-

Thea: Yes, grandmother.
I: Because she has the grandmother’s name.
...
T: Like when a grown-up sees Betti, the little girl –
I: He will say grandmother because she is Bernadetta [the grandmother]. They say Betti, but it’s Bernadetta. Now they say grandmother to the little girl.
...
T: Now we return a bit to the question about spirit because of the name. Your son, his name is Kasama, and Kasama is your brother, and your son has –
I: He has spirit. He gets spirit from Kasama, the spirit of Kasama’s father, the spirit of Kasama’s father’s father, and the spirit of Kasama’s grandmother, like that you wrote [a diagram of ego, the parents and paternal and maternal grandparents]. All of that, the spirit stays with the child.
T: It stays with the child?
I: Yeah. And they grow with the child.
...
T: This spirit [of your son] it comes from the name?
When the child is born, maybe he is one week old, and he hasn’t received the name yet, at this time he hasn’t got spirit. Now, when you give the name, the spirit of the child comes.

Good. And his spirit is like power from Kasama, and Kasama’s father

Grandmother, Grandfather of Kasama... All of them, like this.

You see? And this, when all of them have died, all the spirit stays. It is living with the child, with that name. They enter the child. Like when they have all died, necessarily the spirit will watch the child closely all the child’s life.

They watch or they stay?

They go inside. Through the head and into his body. Because the name Kasama is ready. Because now Kasama and me, the spirit of uncle, of grandmother, and this and this [spirit-giving forbearer], all! We watch. OK?

When I give the name to the child, the grandfather’s name, [I ask myself:]’what is grandfather’s name?’. It is this. And I give it, ‘You, child, stop crying! I give you this name of your grandfather’. Done! ‘Your name is Peha’, and the child keeps quiet, it doesn’t cry. There! The child is finished/ready (tayari). Grandfather’s spirit enters the child. Yah, now it cannot cry.

Very nice.’

The naming of a new born child is of great importance. The spirit of the name chosen will have to agree with the child chosen. When the match is not obtained, ie, if the child cries unhappily, great care is mobilised in trying to find the right name for the child.

Furthermore, a neonate receives not only one but two names. He or she receives a name from both the family of the father and of the mother. These two names evoke separate spirits, which renders the child doubly spirited, and by using one of the names you evoke the spiritual capacity corresponding to the name. Reflecting the bilateral decent structure the paternal family members call the child by the paternal name, while the maternal family members call the child by its maternal name. Therefore, the family relation is always one of the first things to sort out when meeting other Hadza.
Settling a person with name, kinship and spirit ties establishes the structure for ritual action, ie, who is to dance in the name of the person, what the map of allegiances is, and which forbear can be invoked through the name. The three artefacts, the stick, the gourd and the doll are mediating between the man and the woman during the ritual dances where men dance in the name of their family members.

Being a prerequisite for the ability to dance in a woman’s name, the objects are ritually crucial. Yet when they are invoked these objects are not materially present in the ritual; they remain hidden away inside the hut, and they are not materially handled in the ritual context; as I was told: ‘They are not to walk about’ (interview excerpt).

5. Epeme

There is a disparity between this seclusion of the material artefacts, and the recurring celebration and frequent performance at the night dances that invoke the power objects. The ritual night dances, called epeme are performed for up to three days twice a month in utter darkness under a moonless sky, with all fires extinguished, and with even the light from cigarettes considered to be too bright, the only light source left being the stars’ milky light. The exclusive group of initiated men, like the ritual called epeme, perform dances for and as their family members. During this ritual when dancing for female family members, the dancers call the names through mediation of these objects, invoking them and the women to whom they belong in the dance. The material objects of power, though, are not brought to the dance clearing, but are left inside the hut.

The epeme ritual dance is considered a dance for the unity, balance and restoration of the significant family ties of the people within the camp. The dances are marked by clear rule-bound gender segregation, with men and women parted by a space divider such as a large hut, a cliff, or some other dividing feature that prevent people from seeing from one side to the other, but at the same time enables a degree of proximity so that people are still able to hear each other. The epeme men place themselves on one side and the women and small children on the other side of the divider. Notice that there is a significant residue of people not ‘placed’ here, namely all the uninitiated men, young men and older boys who are not allowed to attend the dance, and
hence they have to avoid the dance. They may even flee into the bush when dances are performed.

The *epeme* men perform serial solo-dances while the women sing, clap and dance with understated movements. As a collective, the women support the dancer as he enters the dance clearing, the *hakato*. The solo dancer is masked by a dark cape covering the upper body, obliterating the contours of the body, wearing ostrich feathers as a tall and sensuous headdress, and tying bells around the right ankle in order to mimic the clicking sound of the eland.

Sometimes the *epeme* dancer encounters a person seeking healing hiding under a rug as he enters the dance clearing. This person can be anyone among the participants, eg, a young woman or an older man. However, crouching down under the rug, the person is divested of any gender identity and remains simply a person seeking the assistance of the *epeme* and the spirit-beings they carry forward in the dance. He will aid the person by blowing *kelaguko*, the healing, harmonising, and benefactor *epeme* medicine onto the person.

The dancer initially dances in his own name, and following that he will dance in the name of junior family members. When he dances for a male family member, he will refer to the name itself, but when he dances in a female family member’s name, he dances through invoking one of her power objects. The manner he does so is through ritual whistled language (Meyer 2008):

I: Regarding the *a‘untenakwiko* [the female gourd], it is coming for *epeme*, because when we go to dance, my daughter.. or Sunniva’s father can say: ‘I’m’ – no, he’s not saying this through his own mouth, the elderly men sitting there they say: ‘Woos, akweteasa Sunnivako’. The name only, Sunniva. They do not say *a‘untenakwiko* from Sunniva. Don’t say that. You say: ‘Akweteasa Sunnivako’. It is the child of Sunniva who’s dancing, Sunniva’s uncle says, the *epeme* says. ‘I’m the child of Sunniva’ …

T: Good. Because this [naricanda] is male, it is a man, you have to say that it’s the child of Sunniva-

I: YES!! Very good! Very nice, Thea [laughs]

T: The naricanda is still the name-

I: It is still the name. You would say, ‘Naricanda belonging to Sunniva’ because, the naricanda belonging to Sunniva is the child

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5. It should be noted that not all men become *epeme*. Quite a lot are not considered to have the capacities required to enter into *epeme*. Qualifiers are: being able to make good bows and arrows, displaying ability to care for the family, not sitting with the women but staying with the men, and very importantly, to be able to keep a secret. The admission is based on an overall assessment of the skills, maturity and personality of the man.

6. Sunniva is my daughter who joined me on fieldwork. We used her (name) as an example.
of Sunniva. There are two points there: Sunniva’s child is the naricanda, and is calling again, ‘Naricanda belonging to Sunniva’ is this [holds the naricanda up] – Sunniva’s child. Two names there.

T: Good. Then, this naricanda in itself is Sunniva’s name?
I: That’s it. [Affirmative]
T: That’s it. And this naricanda is also- since it is male it isn’t Sunniva -
I: It isn’t Sunniva, Sunniva is this [holds the a’utenakwiko up].
T: The a’utenakwiko is Sunniva herself?
I: It’s Sunniva, that’s it. Sunniva is dancing.’

(Interview transcript, my translation)

A dancer will through ritual whistled language communicate for whom he is going to dance. This makes the spirit of the person he dances for enter the body of the dancer through his head, and the dancer becomes a vessel for the spirit of the one in whose name he dances. Thus, ritually, he shifts into this person’s spirit-being.

When dancing through invoking female objects (ie, objects that are feminine in themselves due to their shape, not to be confused with the wider category of objects mediating women) the dancer becomes feminine as well; he dresses as a woman with a cloth around the waist and he becomes female during the dance. All three objects are conceived of as ‘of the girl or woman’, which categorise them as her children within the ritual. The naricanda stick is inherently masculine and dancing in the naricanda of a woman, eg, named Sunniva, the dancer will whistle: ‘Akwatesa Sunnivako kwaia naricandasa’ (I am Sunniva’s child through the naricanda), and he will dance as the son of Sunniva, while at the same time invoking her in the act.

Epeme is difficult to define and confine into a conceptual category. Epeme is most closely a name for the group of initiated men, but also the night dance rituals performed are referred to as epeme. Epeme additionally denotes the sacred fatty meat from hunted animals sanctioned by powerful taboos and which only epeme initiates are allowed to eat. As a descriptive term it marks the semi-godlike quality of the epeme collective, which is manifested in their ability to eat the sacred meat, ‘supposedly reserved for “god”’ (Power 1994:33), who interpret transient symbolic conversations in the form of dreams and messages from the forbearers. The ability and power to individually and collectively give

7. Transient is here used in the Latin meaning of ‘going across’. 
advice and point out a path forward are skills and practices that the epeme men have the requisite qualities and abilities to undertake.

The multiplicity and fluidity of epeme makes it strong and powerful and to the non-initiated it alludes to something larger than what a person can wholly grasp. Even the initiated men struggle with the implications of epeme, and learning about this is a lifelong undertaking (see Lewis 2008 for comparable views on the Mbendjele concept of ekila). During fieldwork I asked three very senior epeme initiates what epeme was, and a long discussion wavered back and forth gradually narrowing the concept to a one word answer: ‘Manako’. Epeme is meat.

Imagine my surprise: This polysemic word allowed itself to be boiled down to one word. And that word is meat? I had anticipated an answer that pointed towards spirit, spirituality, idea, or epeme as a cosmological organising principle that structures the world. However, epeme was meat. Strings of connections appeared during interviews while trying to work on the meaning of this: Epeme relates to the wild animals, and the fatty meat necessary for the initiation of a young man, that is for the reproduction of epeme-initiates. Epeme designate the rules of taboo concerning eating the fatty meat; it is to be eaten collectively and never alone by epeme, and that the external exclusivity of the act is preserved through harsh repercussions. Epeme involves gender segregation.9 Analytically, then, epeme is the reproduced and re-enacted manifestation of family ties, through celebrations of Hadza, past, present and future. Epeme is the flesh-material of which both people and animals are made.

Then, what is it that constitutes a human being? A human being is a composite and complex being with externalised and internalised parts. The human being is made of meat. This is asserted firmly and strongly among the Hadza which led Woodburn to conclude ‘There is no clear belief in an afterlife … [W]hen one dies, one rots and that is that’ (Woodburn 1982b: 193).

However, humans are not flesh-matter alone, they carry spirit, and spirits are seen as transient. Spirits and their constitution with or within the human being is a domain that is opaque, elusive and speculative, and as Guenther (1999) argues working with Bushmen religion:

8. The multifaceted concept of epeme and the connection of epeme as meat strongly suggests that further comparative studies should be made for instance with the Mbendjele of northern Congo and their concept of ekila (cf Lewis 2008).

9. The myth about the matriarchal primordial times with the powerful woman, Mambeta, as key figure reveals a time when women had the power to become/be epeme and how it changed through the interference of ancestral spirits and the hunt of an eland.
The hallmark traits of Bushman religion are fluidity, flexibility, and variability, each manifested to a striking degree. Thus, the knowledge one can gain of so ambiguous a field is indeed uncertain. (Guenther 1999: 4)

It needs to be stressed that there are different versions of accounts of this subject. These matters are only shared after considering the person’s readiness to receive such knowledge, and if it is a man, whether the person is initiated into epeme or not. Thus many variations of accounts are told trying to match cleverly the level of disclosure with the one it is disclosed to. In the accounts I received, there were diverging versions of details, primarily related to whether the spirits were internal or external to the body, whether the way of addressing the spirits would be in the singular or plural.

6. Shadow and spirit at death

The spirits are vigilant and guard the person. When walking in the bush, I often heard the description of one spirit walking in front of the person and the other one walking behind. The same tasks apply when walking with humans; the one in front and the one in the back have to be extra vigilant. The spirits thus guard the person and make him or her choose to go right when walking around a tree and not to the left where a dangerous snake awaits. The task of the two spirits is to protect and help the person. Whether these accompanying spirits are the same as the individual’s inner spirits or additional to them remains uncertain.

Another aspect of the human constellation is the shadow cast by the carnal body. The shadow is the food of the spirit. The shadow itself is not spirit, but the inner spirit gets its power and strength from feeding on the shadow.

T: Right, a person dies in the night, and his spirit leaves. Now it is morning, and his wife sees that her husband has died. So, they go to dig in order to put the dead body inside the hole. The spirit is not there, since it has already left. But it is important to lay the head in direction of Dundubi or Anao or Sansako [mountain deities]. Why is that? Because his spirit has left when he died, but now it is important to put the head here, why?

I: Mm [...consults the epeme elders present in hadsane] Yes, because Thea, you see, the shadow is there. And the shadow – the spirit has left, but later when they have stopped digging, the spirit returns to collect the shadow. That is why. It is imperative to handle the head

10. Ancestral – and forebear spirits, alungubee, are not always this benevolent, and they might also be quite forceful, terrifying and threatening in their encounter with people.
to put it right. So, now the spirit knows and it comes to collect the shadow.

T: And this shadow – a human being’s shadow – what is it?
I: A person’s shadow is the power of the spirit.
T: It’s the power of the spirit?
I: Yes, the shadow of the one who died is the power of the spirit – it has to collect it! Because –
T: Like this [creates a shadow from the arm]? This is shadow?
I: Yes, yes. This shadow the spirit collects it to take it away. The shadow is not the strength of the deceased; it is the strength of the spirit. It has to collect it and take it with him from the one who died. Remember, when we talked about the shadow that hit the child so that the child cried-
T: Yes
I: Because the shadow is the power that comes from the spirit. It’s power that comes from alungubee. All of them. Therefore it is necessary to put a dead person’s head straight.’

(Interview transcript, my translation)

The puzzling paradox was the solicitude for the bodily remains in burial practices since the spirit had already left and all that was left was, like Woodburn described, merely the rotting body ‘and that is that’ (op cit). What transferral or exchange was to take place through this carefully positioned head? The point is that the head is a port for receiving the spirit, like when a name is given to a newborn. Likewise in death, the head is the entrance for receiving the spirit, and not a runway for sending it off. The spirit needs to be able to find its way back to the dead body in order to collect the shadow, its nourishment, power and strength. Hence, there is an intimate interconnectedness and processes of transferral between the carnal body that casts shadow and the spirit empowering the body feeding on the shadow.11

Death, in all sympathy, is an occasion that elicits conceptions of the human being and cosmological maps. The three objects of power are all involved during the procedures following a woman’s death.

First, the naricanda. The stick can be buried along with the dead woman. However, it is striking that the naricanda-stick can also be inherited. Very few objects are fit for inheritance, and normally such objects are items not produced by Hadza but which need to be purchased, such as axes (with the precious iron blade) or other wealth such as a radio or the like.

However, close kin, such as a sister or daughter, can keep the naricanda stick

11. For studies of shadows in another hunting and gathering context, also see Willerslev 2007.
and wait for an occasion to pass it on. The stick will be given to a newborn baby girl that will carry the deceased woman’s name. The stick is the materialisation of the name, and the name is in cosmological sense the instantiation or vessel for the spirit.

There is another striking element of continuance related to the naricanda: if a stick breaks the pieces are carefully assembled and a replica is made. Incisions made in the original are copied and the colour is matched by keeping it in the smoke from a fireplace. If somebody else breaks a naricanda, the family members of the two families will meet to settle on an agreed course of action. If a man breaks it he might be asked to kill an eland or a warthog – animals considered the most precious – and to supply the epeme men with the fatty meat, and the clarified fat can be filled into an a’untenakwete-gourd. After the epeme feast an epeme night dance will be performed, whereby the dispute is settled and balance is restored.

The a’untenakwete-gourd is ritually a non-human instance of the woman herself and the oil it contains is powerful and used only in rituals. The gourd and the clarified fat it contains links to power substances available for women: blood, soil and the ashes from the cooking fire are other potent substances used in potions, as rubbings, or as presences of power in rituals.12 During the monthly night-dance rituals, a dancer might dance in the name of a family member’s a’untenakwete-gourd as the potent evocation of the family member herself. Even after her death, the dancers might dance in the name of the gourd to evoke the dead woman’s spirit to the site, while not evicting the spirit to the homes of the forebearer spirits. Dancing in a dead woman’s name without the mediating gourd will evict her spirit from a proximity to the living, and this is a course of action taken if a recently dead person’s spirit is occupying the minds and dreams of relatives. The final sending off of the dead person’s spirit is normally carried out approximately two years after the person died (interview data). The gourd is sometimes buried along with the dead woman to whom it belongs. It is broken on the grave or placed beside her inside the grave (Woodburn 1982b).

The olanakwete-doll is not a toy; it is a way of anticipating motherhood and reproductivity. The woman in young childless couples is encouraged to make an olanakwete or have one made for her. She should name it after a relatively close kin, often somebody who has not died. The doll thereby carries spirit and spiritual force from the kin, and as such it is pertinent to take good care of it. If

12. Considering the limited space available here, the theme of power substances will remain unexamined. I discuss the different power substances in more detail in my PhD dissertation (forthcoming).
it breaks it should be handled like a human being and be buried with the head in the right direction.

If a woman has had an olanakwete-doll and she then gives birth to a child of the same sex, she will give the olanakwete’s name to the child. The doll and the child merge into one being. This merger can be evidenced from the unhappy event of a baby’s death, where the sending off of the baby’s spirit will be conducted through a dance invoking the mother’s olanakwete.

7. Final remarks

This study has shown how material objects form part of the social and cosmological identity of those who are linked to them. There is an intimate aspect to the material objects that provide the women to whom they pertain with a sense of belonging; materially tying their name-spirits to relations to forebears, to the immediate family members and to future generations. Several questions arise from these findings, admittedly probably more than answers, and there are more questions to come.

Studying these power objects created portals for research on cosmology, rituals and their human constituents. The findings indicate the power of names as a medium for spirit-sharing, the multiplicity of elements constituting a human being, and the cosmological maps revealed by the event of death. The ethnographic research described specifies Hadza conceptions of death that comprise ideas of an afterlife, something that previous research has largely denied them (Woodburn 1982b, Marlowe 2010).

This article aims to reintroduce cosmology as a field of study in current Hadza research. The impression conveyed in recent decades of Hadza ethnography has oversimplified the depth and width of ideational imagery, viewing objects and practices as mundane and pertaining to the everyday life leaving out spiritual aspects of the same. The ethnography presented here, though limited in scale, provides clear traces that ritual and cosmological beliefs are significant constituents in Hadza life. The implications of this are that Hadza cosmology is more elaborate than generally assumed and that there is a tighter connection between ritual practices and the evocation of this cosmology. Hadza perceptions of cosmology and ritual transcend the material world just as their sharing practices are not purely economic but also spiritual.

13. Compare with the elaborate examination of findings in other hunting and gathering societies in Knight 1991.
14. This will be elaborated in my PhD thesis (forthcoming).
One of the most routine aspects of Hadza life, the sharing and eating of meat has been centre for scholarly scrutiny and it has been debated from different perspectives; however, the utility of these practices have been the basis for the analysis. Finding that epeme is meat shows that these practices are not simply a question of economics and adaptation, they are tied into a cosmology. Meat is not just meat to be shared, meat is cosmology.

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