

# Hadza gender rituals – *epeme* and *maitoko* – considered as counterparts

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Camilla Power

Anthropology Programme, School of Social Sciences, University of East London, London E16 2RD, UK  
c.c.power@uel.ac.uk

**Abstract:** Relative to the large amount of behavioural ecology literature, little has been documented on Hadza ritual activity. Nor has it been placed in context of myth and narrative. This is a serious lack given the agreement of both social anthropology (Durkheim, Turner, Rappaport) and more recent evolutionary approaches, eg Sosis and Bulbulia, on the central importance of ritual as the medium for establishing symbols and showing commitment to the group. This paper examines the relationship of the two gender rituals, the more regular monthly *epeme*, and the less frequently performed female initiation, *maitoko*. Both sexes are participants in each ritual, but *epeme* is governed by male-held 'secrets', while *maitoko* is governed by female ones. Drawing on a case study where the two rituals ran concurrently, one by night, one by day, I will link them as counterparts in a gender contest. The key myth on origins of *epeme* – a male 'secret' – is also the source for dramatic ritual enactment by women and girls in *maitoko*. While *epeme* rules of respect underpin Hadza ritual and economic life, the importance of *maitoko* for women's solidarity is indicated by its greater costliness. The relationship of these contesting but counterpart rituals fits a model of a 'pendulum of power' swinging between men and women (cf Lewis, Finnegan), implying that hunter-gatherer gender relations should be considered as dynamic.

**Keywords:** gender egalitarianism, ritual, *maitoko*, Hadza women, costly signal theory

## 1. Introduction

Relative to the large amount of behavioural ecology literature, Hadza ritual has been sparsely documented, and with little context in relation to myth and narrative. This is a serious lack, which could become a grave loss, for a number of reasons.

For any comparative project investigating African hunter-gatherer religion in terms of archaic underlying structures, the Hadza, alongside Khoisan peoples and Central African forest peoples, must make a major contribution (Barnard

1988, 2012; Biesele 1993; Guenther 1999; Keeney & Keeney 2013; Lewis 2002, 2008; Lewis-Williams 1981; Power & Watts 1997, 1999; Turnbull 1993; Woodburn 1964).

Attention to Hadza ritual structures also counteracts a tendency that has arisen to see Hadza society as a mere collection of individuals pursuing economic rationalist strategies (eg, Marlowe 2009). This view sees no more complex mechanisms for cooperation required than on a one-to-one dyadic basis, which might exist among non-human primates. Apicella et al (2012) apply social network analysis to reveal patterns of friendship, exchange and cooperative behaviour, both at dyad and at network levels. Crittenden & Marlowe (2013) draw on Hrdy's 'cooperative breeding' hypothesis (2009) in analysing collective patterns of Hadza childcare. But published Hadza research has emphasised individual more than collective and shared experience, a perspective that may lead us to overlook Hadza religious concepts. Woodburn's (1982a) use of 'immediate-return' – valuable as that has been as an analytic category – can leave little distinction between human and animal economies. The well-known egalitarianism of Hadza hunter-gatherers and the inability of any individual to coerce another does not imply a lack of rule-governed behaviour, especially between the sexes (cf Lewis 2008).

The ancestors of ritual theory in social anthropology – Durkheim (1912), Turner (1967, 1974) and Rappaport (1979, 1999) – all remind us that ritual acts as foundation of institutional reality and symbolic culture itself. Ritual activity surely constitutes Hadza society and we can scarcely understand Hadza culture without clearer understanding of their ritual practices. Each of these theorists can be applied to the Hadza case in relation to the core concept of *epeme*.

The word *epeme* in Hadza ritual is polysemic (cf Turner 1967), and is comparable in its multivocalic range of referents to the BaYaka *ekila* (Lewis 2008), governing relations of men, women and animals. Most materially, it refers to certain cuts of sacred, fatty meat from large game animals (Marlowe 2010:7; Woodburn 1964:29, and see Skaanes 2015). This meat can only be eaten by initiated *epeme* men – fundamentally those who have killed *epeme* animals – and never by one individual alone. Women and uninitiated youths cannot even see or know of the consumption of this meat, let alone eat it (Marlowe 2010:57; Woodburn 1964:304), on pain of illness or punishment sanctioned by powerful *epeme* beings (Kaare 1989:70–73). *Epeme* also refers to the communal – but gender-segregated – dance performed on moonless nights. The collective body of women in camp provides the necessary accompaniment of *epeme* songs, while the initiated men dance, one by one, in the guise of *epeme* (Woodburn 1982b:190).

The effect of *epeme* on all these occasions is to separate men and women categorically, but in the dark moon *epeme* dance, although the layout creates physical separation, the performance aims for reconciliation between the sexes, healing and successful hunting. Rappaport understands ritual as the ‘basic social act’ (1999:31), and foundation of all conventional agreement; in the Hadza context, it is through the *epeme* dance that men and women collude in *epeme* rules of distribution. Durkheim’s collective effervescence as generator of moral solidarity characterises the joyful and emotional shared experience of *epeme* singing and dancing. Especially relevant to the dramatic expression of conflict in Hadza gender ritual is Turner’s ritual process where ‘the ritual symbol becomes a factor in social action, a positive force in an activity field’ (1967:20).

Ironically, today, evolutionary theorists – methodological individualists – have been paying most attention to these classic social anthropology theorists (eg, Deacon 1997:402–403; Maynard Smith & Szathmáry 1995:271–273; Sosis & Alcorta 2003). Partly, this is because within an individualist paradigm ritual and religion present a real puzzle. What motivates such behaviours? Durkheim, Turner and Rappaport, after all, were concerned with the interface between individual and collective consciousness, prefiguring concerns of behavioural ecology on the evolutionary origin of moral cooperation.

Over the past decade, behavioural ecologists have been developing an interest in ritual, drawing especially on costly signal theory – the main theory of signal evolution in animal communication (Maynard-Smith & Harper 2003; Zahavi & Zahavi 1997). Costs included here might be trauma, ordeal, large amounts of time and energy expended, renunciation of desired resources etc. Richard Sosis (2003), Alcorta & Sosis (2005), Bliege Bird & Smith (2005) and others have theorised and empirically tested these ideas, to consider ritual as signalling of costly commitment to a participating group. This is carefully considered as an *individual* strategy productive of *group-level* cooperation through strictly Darwinian processes (Bulbulia 2007; Bulbulia & Sosis 2011).

From an evolutionary game theory perspective, the advantage of this model of cooperation is that it operates via the carrot of prestige rather than the stick of punishment (ie, in line with Zahavi models of showing quality, see Gintis et al 2001). Attempting to enforce prosocial behaviours by punishing defectors is a costly strategy, and those who freeload on the policing efforts of others may gain most. It is not characteristic of most human societies, and certainly not immediate-return foragers, that people cooperate through fear of punishment. As Wiessner (2005) and Marlowe (2009) both remark and demonstrate, African foragers are not inclined to administer costly punishment for perceived defection, nor do they give particular status to anyone who tries to do so.

By contrast, going through costly ritual experience together may secure positive emotional commitment to groups or coalitions. Durkheim's theory that homogenized movement and rhythmic sound-making engenders 'moral unity' finds support in recent empirical work specifically on music-making, whether song or dance. Kirschner & Tomasello (2010) show that joint music-making among 4-year-olds leads to increased spontaneous helpful and cooperative behaviour. Reddish et al (2013) find more cooperative tendencies resulting from synchrony – in forms of chanting or rhythmic movements – produced as a shared goal. As Durkheim's century-old discussion indicates, it is not humanly possible to participate in the synchronised movement, sound and rhythms of ritual without sharing the representation or idea of 'we' that it generates.

## 2. Women's ritual costs

When it comes to Hadza women's experience, all these considerations apply even more strongly. The work by behavioural ecologists on women's foraging and life history strategies has been invaluable, teaching us so much of real importance from an evolutionary standpoint. But we know too little about Hadza women's culture. I focus on Hadza women's ritual particularly in the light of costly signal theory, since there are strong grounds for arguing Hadza women incur significantly higher ritual costs than men. Because Hadza women in their own ceremonies are making strategic decisions quite freely – with no imposition by men – we need to ask why.

If we compare costly ritual practice and observance by each sex (Table 1), there is considerable equivalence. Woodburn (1964:303, 308) reported very similar practice for a girl at first menstruation and a boy at his ceremony of sexual maturity (after his first emission) involving the individual's seclusion and decoration with beads, followed by reintroduction to different types of food. Marlowe does not report this ceremony for boys. Adults of both sexes expend similar time and energy engaged in monthly *epeme* rituals, though singing is done by women. Taboos observed in respect of women's reproductive cycles, menstruation and pregnancy, similarly affect foraging for both sexes, including men's hunting. These ritual observances can be seen as equally costly for each sex.

Table 1 Hadza costly ritual requirements

<b>Costs equivalent between the sexes</b>
• Girl's first menstruation and boy's ceremony of sexual maturity
• Reproductive/menstrual taboos equate to hunting taboos
• Performing at monthly <i>epeme</i> dance
<b>Female costs exceed male costs</b>
• <i>Maitoko</i> more costly than <i>Maito</i> ( <i>epeme</i> initiation)
• Loss of <i>epeme</i> meat

Women bear two aspects of significant extra cost. Firstly, there is a nutritional cost in their enforced renunciation of *epeme* meat. Secondly, relative to a hunter's initiation into *epeme* (*maito*, Marlowe 2010:57), the costs of female initiation in recent tradition appear greater. *Maitoko* can involve practice of circumcision in relatively harsh forms, although there may be variability. Clitoridectomy and excision have been reported (Marlowe 2010:56 records clitoridectomy; Power & Watts 1997 cite Woodburn 1964 on excision of labia as well). By contrast, no type of genital cutting is reported for males (Marlowe 2010:57; Peterson 2013:148).

Genital cutting appears anomalous compared to other African foragers. In general for African initiation (Power 2001), it is rare that girls only are subject to genital cutting when there is none in corresponding male initiation. If we consider African hunter-gatherers, genital cutting is not found in female ritual contexts among Bushman groups or Central African groups. One example occurs in Kenya among the Okiek, traditionally forest hunter-gatherers, whose female initiation has been carefully documented by Kratz (1994). But this case does not closely compare to the Hadza context. Among the Okiek, there is a clear pathway bringing circumcision from the Kipsigis and relevant in Okiek-Kipsigis interrelations, which can account for its centrality. No such link to an outside population exists in the case of the Hadza that explains why it matters to Hadza women today.

Interestingly, there is persistence of female circumcision practice among the Sandawe (Bingi 2007), click-language speakers of Central Tanzania with forest hunting traditions and possible ancient linguistic and genetic links to Hadza populations (Pickrell et al 2012; Tishkoff et al 2007). The Sandawe and Okiek share certain features as forest-based honey gatherers, who keep livestock, and are organised through patrilineages. By contrast the Hadza in bush camps continue to hunt big game, stay aloof from livestock-owning neighbours and,

while showing flexibility and multilocality (Wood & Marlowe 2011; Woodburn 1968), retain a strong tendency for daughters to stay in the same camp as their mothers, certainly early in a marriage (Wood & Marlowe 2011; Woodburn 1968:108 and see Blurton-Jones et al 2005:229–231). Among Hadza neighbours, the Iraqw have female circumcision, but their ritual practice is very distinct from that of the Hadza (Snyder 1999). So too do the Datoga, also known as Barbaig, but the Hadza have just as aloof relations with this group as with the Iraqw. The Bantu-speaking Isanzu may intermarry to some extent with Hadza women, but they have no current tradition of female circumcision.

Linguistic evidence (Miller 2013) is strong that the name *maidoko*, used for a girl candidate or referring to the girls' ritual, has an old Cushitic source.<sup>1</sup> This suggests the historic route of transmission of the custom, over a long time period from the Iraqw. Marlowe (2010:57) proposes a mechanism for Hadza people borrowing from Iraqw custom centuries ago. Yet Hadza practice today is apparently independent of the initial cause of adoption of this custom.

The costly signal argument is that high costs paid by the individual in the process of ritual demonstrate commitment. Whitehouse & Lanman (2014:680) discuss the cognitive and emotional mechanisms involved in painful or frightening experiences remembered as 'life-changing episodes'. Those undergoing such ritual ordeal will engage in reflection, creating rich representations of the episode's significance, reinforcing 'the impression that only those who have experienced the same thing can possibly understand how it feels and what it means' (2014:680). This, they maintain, produces a 'robust and enduring state of psychological kinship among coparticipants' (2014:680).

Potentially such ritual practice, which appears to be voluntary among the Hadza, is important to women's cooperative networks, especially between generations, reinforcing their solidarity in confronting men. Woodburn (1964:260) recorded that if a husband tried to beat his wife, her main support and defence would be her mother who could threaten to take her daughter away. In bad cases, a mother and her daughters would gang together to attack an offender with digging sticks. But a woman could not rely on male kin for protection. Peterson (2013:152) also notes the importance of female solidarity for dealing with 'domineering husbands'. If ritual had a significant role in maintaining women's solidarity, this raises the question of what would happen in the gender balance of power should women's ritual traditions be lost,

1. Miller (pers. comm. 2014) suspects the Cushitic source is cognate with Iraqw /maxiito'oo/'(fem.) candidate for initiation'. A Cushitic etymology, cognate with Iraqw /maxa/ 'seclusion period for girls', is traced back to proto-West Rift Cushitic \*maax 'to anoint' (as in daubing w clay), and a nominal suffix /-itoo/.

suppressed or removed under modern conditions. While cooperative childcare and alloparenting practice may originate through kin selection mechanisms (Crittenden & Marlowe 2013:74), it is also possible that ritual practice enables establishment of a wider, generalised network of cooperative allocare.

This paper examines the symbolic and political relationship of the two gendered spheres of ritual, comparing the more regular monthly *epeme* dance with the less frequently performed female initiation, *maitoko*. Both sexes are participants in each ritual, but *epeme* is governed by male-held ‘secrets’, while *maitoko* is governed by female ones. Drawing on a case study where the two rituals ran concurrently, one by night, one by day, I will link them as counterparts in a gender contest. The key myth on origins of *epeme* – a male ‘secret’ – is also the source for dramatic ritual enactment by women and girls in *maitoko*.

Aspects of playful or dramatic performance in these gender rituals may explore, defuse or test the limits of tensions between the sexes. This recalls the danced gender contests in secret society contexts of the BaMbuti (Turnbull 1993:138–140), the negotiation of power during performance of BaAka women’s dances (Kisliuk 1998:134) or the ‘unfinished dialogue’ among the BaMbendjele, producing a pendulum swing of power from one sex to the other (Finnegan 2008:141, 2009:36–37). In this view, hunter-gatherer gender relations cannot be seen as static; bodies in motion never allow that ‘hierarchy floods the interpersonal field’.

Fieldwork took place over a short period, a few months comprising two summer (dry) seasons (2003–2004), in bush camps surrounding Yaeda valley as well as a visit to Endamaghay on the Lake Eyasi side in Ngorongoro Conservation Area. I worked in Swahili not Hadza, which makes me indebted to James Woodburn’s original ethnography (1964) and to a number of conversations with him.

The Hadza comprise a genetically and linguistically distinct group of roughly 1000; they appear to have been indigenous to the Lake Eyasi basin since long before herders or farmers were in the area. Some 300–400 Hadza maintain a foraging lifestyle (Marlowe 2010:38), despite serious land loss and environmental degradation. Considerable changes have occurred in Hadza country over the past 50 years, including the growing influence of outside groups, the impact of environmental degradation and critically a reduction in availability of large game. In the camps where I worked, a significant part of the diet was still being obtained from the bush, but kills of *epeme* animals were decreasing. I intend to draw on the account of James Woodburn from 40 years prior to my own fieldwork to assess the historic continuity of ritual practices against this changing backdrop. Woodburn offers significant insight into gender relations for this famously egalitarian group, an aspect of his research of great value

### 3. *Epeme* rules

The fundamental institutional divide of Hadza society is expressed through the respect rules around *epeme* meat. As noted, these are certain joints of meat from large animals held as sacred – supposedly reserved for *epeme* (powerful sacred beings) – but actually consumed by men in secret *epeme* feasts. Women and the uninitiated must never come close on these occasions. In this context alone, there is serious threat of rape and violence; *epeme* or *alungube* ancestors sternly govern such violations (Kaare 1989:70–73; Woodburn 1964:301, 304). Women will usually deny knowledge about *epeme*, saying ‘ask the men’. I had to be discreet about any enquiry on *epeme* to senior men. They preferred to wait until my partner visited so they could speak to him.

The major ritual celebration of the Hadza is the *epeme* dance, held in pitch darkness for two or three nights every month at the time of dark moon. Traditionally, most camps hold an *epeme*, the period of dry-season aggregation being most favourable for the ceremony. But even in the wet season, according to Woodburn, there would be an *epeme* danced each dark moon somewhere in Hadza country. The ritual requires the presence of a good number of adult women who provide the accompaniment of special polyphonic *epeme* songs. Woodburn considers that at least three women with good singing voices are needed, though a proper ceremony would involve a dozen or so. I have been in *epeme* ceremonies ranging from three to four women singers, up to 15 or more. The key feature is segregation with women and older girls comprising one group, sitting apart from and out of sight of the group of initiated *epeme* men. The separation can be done by building thorn bush barriers, but in some camps, the women singers would sit in the lee of a large hut wall while the *epeme* men were on the further side. The lunar phase of darkness is emphasised by the extinguishing of fires; everybody complies.

Initiated men dance, embodying the sacred being *epeme* or as the ‘shadow’ of *epeme* in the guise of the man, wearing a costume of ostrich-feather head-dresses (*kembako*. Miller has *kembaku*), leg-bells (*!ingiribe*, Miller has *!ingili-bi'i*) and a gourd rattle (*sengeno*, Miller has *ts'engeno*). As the singing grows strong, moved by joy and emotion, women get up to dance around the shadowy figure who stamps down with a special step on his right foot, the bells jingling in time with his rattle. The atmosphere under the spread of the Milky Way above is very ethereal and uplifting. Failure to hold the dance, says Woodburn ‘is believed to be dangerous’ (1982b:190). *Epeme* promotes and maintains ‘general well-being, above all good health and successful hunting’. Peterson (2013:162) describes the aspect of community harmony, uniting men as a group with women as a group,

and that ‘harmony-breaking illness can be cured at the *epeme* dance’. This refers especially to illness arising from *epeme* violations.

The *epeme* dance, according to Woodburn, ‘stresses kinship and joint parentage, and seeks to reconcile the opposed interests of men and women which are so manifest in other contexts’ (1982b:190). A man may dance in the guise of *epeme* two or three times, each dance being for someone. First, he may dance for himself; then, most commonly for one of his children – either an actual child or an object owned by his wife that stands for a child. This may be a decorated gourd in which fat is kept, or a stone or clay decorated ‘doll’. A man may also dance for other close kin or affines. After each dance, a dialogue is held between the *epeme* dancer and the women. The dancer uses a ritual ‘whistling’ language special to the context, the women answering with greetings, using the kinship term applicable to the person for whom that dance has been held (1982b:190).

#### 4. The lunar template

An *epeme* performance therefore promotes hunting success in the upcoming period of waxing moon as it grows brighter. Knight (2013) outlines the significance of the lunar cycle for hunting success in relation to the threat of lions, which can see well during dark moon periods. Further taboo structures suggest an ideal template of the relationship of hunting, menstruation and the moon, with *epeme* ritual framed within that.

All adults will consistently state that a wife’s menstruation prevents her husband from hunting – because arrow poison is destroyed (see also Peterson 2013:148, cf Biesele 1993:93, 196 for Ju/’hoansi). In addition, she cannot have sex with her husband, and she should not gather berries (*undoshihi* or *tafabe*, Miller has *thafa-be’e*), lest they all fall down and spoil, or gather honey (or it would dry).

Does menstruation relate to the moon? All adults will agree or assert women have a relationship to the moon. But there are variable answers to ‘when do women menstruate in the moon?’ Two senior knowledgeable people – a man and a woman – separately told me that women would menstruate together, and named the dark of the moon. Most women who are having menstrual cycles dispute that – reflecting their own variable experience, no doubt. But they may reconcile these different views by agreeing ‘it used to be like that in the old days’. Both Dorothea Bleek (1930:700) and James Woodburn (pers. comm. 1993) heard this belief in women’s synchronisation of menstruation at this phase of the moon.

A senior *epeme* man also spelled out in digital on/off terms how the moon itself affected arrow poison (cf Bleek & Lloyd 1911:67, 77, *The Moon must not be looked at when game has been shot*, for the /Xam; Power & Watts 1999:112).

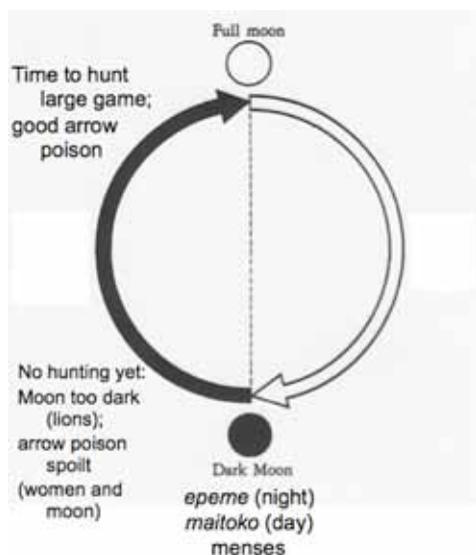


Figure 1 Ideal lunar template framing *epeme*, hunting and menses

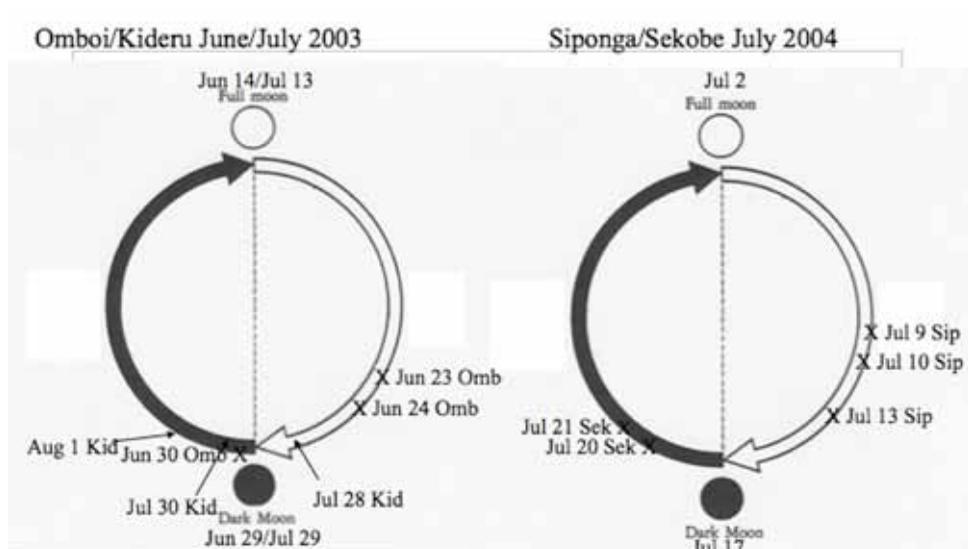


Figure 2 *Epeme* performances related to the lunar cycle

He related this to the topography of Kideru camp that has a rock wall horizon behind which the young new moon sets. He calibrated the efficacy of arrow poison in terms of the hour at which the moon set: very early in the evening, when the moon was small, the poison would not work; later, as the moon waxed and set after nine o'clock, it would be fine.

If women really did synchronise their cycles, this would give a template (Figure 1) with three different idioms ruling out effective hunting in the early new moon: because women themselves affect arrow poison; because the moon does; or because of the danger of lions. A man who did go hunting when his wife was menstrual would likely be eaten by those lions who can see so well. This leaves the opposite pole, waxing to full moon, when good moonlight favours hunting, in particular the successful waterhole ambush technique of late dry season (Bunn et al 1988:424; Hawkes et al 1991:Table 2; Marlowe 2010:118–119; Peterson 2013:35; Woodburn 1964:49).

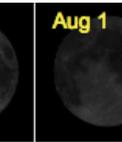
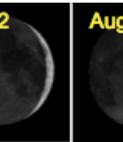
The logical implication, given the spread of performances of *epeme* in the dry season (Figure 2), is that *epeme* and menses coincide symbolically. But people are reluctant to make such a direct allusion.

## 5. *Epeme* and *maitoko*

The reason for outlining this ideal template is that it fitted very closely the case study of the interrelated performances of *epeme* at night and daytime *maitoko*, the female initiation that happened at Kideru in August 2003. Table 2 overleaf shows the diary of events that week, with dark moon in fact 29 July. The top row gives lunar visibility; each column showing one day from dawn to dark.

During the days of dark moon, preparations were being made, with the ritual expert or operator arriving from nearby Kibunula, and women from both Kideru and Omboi – neighbouring camps which supplied the girl candidates – working very hard (a significant costly time expenditure) on creating bead decorations. On the last day's preparation, tall, straight whipping sticks were found and cut; and several girls took advantage of a water trip by car to go and bathe at the river. That evening, with the moon invisible, a very spirited, good-humoured *epeme* ritual was held at Kideru. The next morning, early, the cutting took place in the bush out of sight of the camp and any men. The girls were then arrayed with lavish bead decorations, and anointed with any available fats. For the following three days, the women and girls of *maitoko* were 'running', chasing boys with big, flexible whipping sticks, starting even before dawn with flashlights on the second and third days.

Table 2 Diary of events at Kideru, Jul 28–Aug 3 2003

Jul 28	Jul 29	Jul 30	Jul 31	Aug 1	Aug 2	Aug 3
						
	Late AM: Operator arrives from Kibunula	AM: whipping sticks cut	AM: <i>Maitoko</i> decorated and cut	Run with torches before dawn		AM: Men with arrows
			Midday: Porridge for girls			
Working beads	Working beads	Working beads		MAITOKO GIRLS RUNNING – no arrows in camp		
	(Men hunting)	Late PM: Girls go to wash			Late PM: Girls fight boys over honey	
<i>EPEME</i>		<i>EPEME</i>		<i>EPEME</i>	Women sing	

Men had been hunting prior to the start (dark moon), but for the whole time of the girls running, no arrows were seen carried by hunters in the camp. Boys and youths might use their bows in defence to ward off the girls' enthusiastic thrashing. Another *epeme* dance was held on the middle night, while – after a climactic battle between the girls and boys over honey – women themselves reclaimed the last night with some especially powerful final singing. The morning after, the spell of *maitoko* was clearly broken because men were in camp carrying bows and arrows visibly – as normal. Both men and women informants gave consistent testimony that the simple reason for no arrows during the initiation was that arrow poison would be spoiled. In other words, the bloodshed from cutting of the girls was accorded the same valency as menstruation. This was expressed as: on the first day, boys run from the girls because of the blood – which would spoil arrow poison and hunting; on the other days, they run from the sticks.

To clarify, female initiation is not at first menstruation – which takes place as an individual's ceremony, involving bead decoration and seclusion. Nearly all the women and girls taking part on this occasion – six out of seven – would have gone through that, and be sexually mature and marriageable (if

not in fact married). Most of them were adolescents (*tlakwenakweko*, Miller *tl'akwe-nakwi-ko*); one mature woman also 'ran' with the girls, and was cut. The youngest here was ten.

The cutting on this occasion appeared relatively severe, closer to Woodburn's account than to more recent observations by Marlowe of a milder cutting of the tip of the clitoris (based on male informants). A senior woman does the ritual operation, and is paid by parents to 'wash the girl' with a special medicine. Marlowe (2010:56) notes that this person is one of the only specialists among the Hadza. It seems that continuity of this tradition depends on there being an available operator; I heard at Endamaghay that *maitoko* did not happen anymore because of the lack of a skilled woman in the Mang'ola area. It is likely there has been variability of forms of cutting depending on regions of Hadza country and specific practice of operators.

In his outline of female initiation Woodburn (1964:309–315) noted that women could go through cutting more than once. I also heard a rationale for why women might do it again based on an idea of regrowth. In this case, the mature woman was being cut again. Thea Skaanes, who has recently experienced a *maitoko* ceremony at Kideru, relates that a woman may go through the cutting again following childbirth. On the occasion she took part, during wet season, the cutting involved bloodshed through scarification rather than circumcision (pers. comm. 2014, and Skaanes 2015). What is not clear is whether type of trauma may vary by season, or there has been recent intent to modify initiation in line with Tanzanian law. Peterson (2013:148) reports circumcision to be waning as part of *maitoko*.

## 6. Aspects of gender reversal

The girls had a short rest back in the camp at Kideru, and were given some fortifying porridge before they commenced the chase, launching themselves after the boys with extraordinary vigour only two to three hours after the operation. In his account, Woodburn emphasised the 'masculine dress' accompanying the masculine behaviour (1964:309). He traced the history of men's costume changes through time, which were mimicked by women at circumcision. In the Kideru case, women and girls did not look masculinised – they were not actually wearing trousers but Swahili-style *kangas*. However one or two girls were still bold enough to go topless (which would be normal for men). Undoubtedly, though, in behaviour, the girls acted as 'hunters'. They were hunting boys – who had effectively been disarmed.

Woodburn also stressed the aspect of violence and hostility between the sexual groups. The girls at Kideru were rough and remorseless, wielding their sticks, but this was also a huge game – a sexual game, since they targeted precisely boys who were potential (or actual) sex partners and husbands. These are ‘joking’ relations, as Woodburn emphasised (1964:313), with the boys joining in to tease and provoke.

*Maitoko* initiates carried two types of stick (Figure 3). All of them were armed with fierce whipping sticks to go into battle; some also carried *narichanda*. These are straight, incised sticks, over a metre long, which have been made by an *epeme* man for a girl at birth – usually her father – and kept for such occasions as initiation. Skaanes (2015) relates that the *narichanda*, connected to a baby girl’s naming, is a male object. A boy during *maito* (the initiation into *epeme*) is also said to be accompanied by a *narichanda* during his seclusion. This reinforces an aspect of gender reversal or unification between the girls’ and boys’ ceremonies. Miller (2013) notes *naricenda* as a Datoga loan word referring to a short herding stick. A narrative of *maitoko* collected by Elena Mouriki at Kideru (Mouriki pers. comm. 2015) celebrates the incredibly fierce and fast *maitoko* girls of long ago who chased and speared the young men with their *narichanda*.



Figure 3 *Maitoko* initiates with their weapons. The young woman on the right carries a carved *narichanda*. Photo: Chris Knight.

On two other occasions, one the month earlier at Omboi, the other a year later at Sekobe, I witnessed girls running and chasing, both these times in a kind of dress rehearsal, since I do not believe anyone was cut then. But the young girls were eagerly performing dressed in beads to show themselves ready. Woodburn also mentioned celebrations going on without any cutting happening before they came to an end. The atmosphere of these battles between the girls and boys can only be compared to the famous descriptions of the *elima* among the Mbuti by Turnbull (1993:174), rough but provocative, sexy and teasing, girls determinedly pursuing the boys they fancied. Worth noting, both occasions of ‘mock’ *maitoko* again coincided with *epeme* rituals (sung the night before or that same night).

Adding to the playful mood at Kideru, young girls, only five or six years old perhaps, were equipped with sticks, and beautifully decorated, to chase slightly older, bigger boys.



Figure 4 Young girls armed with sticks for their own *maitoko* chase. The stripey patterns referred to zebra. Photo: Chris Knight.

## 7. Genital cutting

The significant difference in the comparison with *elima* is the cutting. I fully agree with Woodburn that there is no influence by men, these are women's secrets entirely and their decisions. 'Hadza regard women's circumcision as women's business', claims Peterson (2013:148). There is some aspect of hierarchy through seniority in the person of the ritual operator with senior women organising the initiation. But it would be hard to suggest that girls are being controlled or coerced. The girl candidates had a consistent attitude, eager and determined to go through it, with no hanging back. This fits with a costly signal model of prestige in showing commitment to their group.

People were aware of the Tanzanian legal situation, which outlaws female genital cutting. But 'in the bush', they did not worry much about it. The reasons given for performing the operation included: an idea of obstruction of childbirth if a woman had not had it done; or an idea of cutting back growth, a vegetation metaphor, also used to explain repeated operations. Often in the conversation with women, but also in discussion with men, was the idea that a



Figure 5 Women and girls of *maitoko* run together, 'hunting' men. Photo: Chris Knight.

girl who did not do *maitoko* was not a mature adult, her sexual behaviour would be loose. Mature women – some mothers of these girl candidates – reflected with emotion on their own youthful experience of *maitoko*.

We heard the women of Kideru express important aspects of *maitoko* most clearly after I had put my foot in it – a classic case of an anthropologist learning most when making mistakes. This occurred because the youngest of the initiates was cut badly and kept on bleeding. She was given time to recover and wait while the others ran. We tried to help with some basic first aid. By mid-afternoon, though, I negotiated to take her by car to the clinic at Yaeda Chini for treatment. We left her in care of friends at Yaeda, and because we did not return with her, the women of the camp were indignant. This was spelt out to me in no uncertain terms. Above all, they said, she must be with her companions; it was against the law of *maitoko* that she be in another place. Apart like this she would not receive the medicines she needed – this being the first time anyone acknowledged using bush medicines. This led to full and frank discussions where we explored some implications. One was that if the absent girl did the ritual again, she would have to receive more cuts, only then could she run together with the others.

## 8. Comparisons with *epeme* initiation: the key myth

This assertion that the girls must run together and be together throughout is worth considering in relation to the other occasion of stricture when men must be together: for consumption of *epeme* meat which no man can do alone (Woodburn 1964:294) or he would be afflicted with serious illness (Marlowe 2010:58–59). During the *epeme* initiation – *maito* – when a young hunter is brought to the scene of an *epeme* feast and taught the secrets, Woodburn (1964:304) relates that young hunters with bows and arrows would come running wildly into camp, as if afraid, being chased by a figure in *epeme* costume (ostrich plumes and a dark cloth wrapped around). Sexually active women get up and run away or hide in huts, while older women stay put, but the *epeme* figure seizes and breaks women's property.

In some aspects, the chasing of *maitoko* by the girls who clear men and youths and their weapons out of camp mirrors the form of *epeme* initiation. While the girls are in fact cut and bleeding, the *epeme* initiate colludes in a drama of a pretend beating. The figure dressed as *epeme* thrashes a hide with a stick, and the initiate is meant to cry out as if beaten. But his nose is made to bleed so that he is smeared with blood when women come to rescue him.

This violence, says Woodburn, emphasises the separation and alienation of the initiate from the women's and uninitiated grouping. The fact it is imaginary makes him a sharer in secrets and deception of the women, as part of his new sexual group.

I want to posit a relationship between *epeme* and *maitoko* operating through the key myth of *epeme*, suggesting a dynamic contest is going on between the genders expressed through these rituals. Woodburn has observed the potential for violent attack by *epeme* men on any woman perceived to have infringed *epeme* rules, especially if a woman came too close to the men's secret *epeme* feast. The story of the 'Woman with the zebra's penis' – a classic patriarchy myth – justifies men's possession of the *epeme* meat.

Long ago *epeme* meat used to belong to the women. The owner of the pot in which *epeme* meat was cooked was an old woman called Mambedako. She dressed like a man with a wild catskin in front and with her buttocks naked. Under the wild catskin she had tied the penis of a zebra. She was married to beautiful wives and used to have intercourse with them using the zebra penis. She had a man's bow and used to hunt, but she only hunted male zebra. When she killed one, she cut off its penis and tied it onto herself. She threw away the old dried penis.

When men hunted and killed an animal, the *epeme* was cut off and carried to the hut of Mambedako. She took out her pot and went with the meat to the women's meeting place. There the women ate the meat. The men stayed at home and had no share in the *epeme* meat...' (Woodburn 1964:298–299)

One day, a hunter heard a *sengeno* (the rattle used at *epeme*) and saw a group of male mongeese and wild cats in the bush holding an *epeme* feast. They invited him to eat the meat, which he refused, saying only women eat it. They advised him to return, sleep one night, then go hunting for eland. 'then, we will come', they said.

The hunter succeeded in killing an eland. When the meat was cut up, Mambedako sent women for water and fire. At the *epeme* place, when the meat boiled, big red flies came to sting the women round their genitals. Then the mongeese and wildcats came, tied the women up by the legs to trees, filled their vaginas with sand and beat them with thorny branches. Then they gave *epeme* meat to men. It has belonged to the men ever since. (paraphrase from Woodburn 1964)

This episode of vivid sexual violence warns of the likely fate of any woman who disobeyed *epeme* injunctions.

Out of respect, I never spoke about this story to any man, nor would I have to any woman, but one day about two weeks before the Kideru ritual I heard a remarkable version told to me by elderly women at Endmaghay. I had the opportunity to speak with the late Abeya Siguazi, and asked her about

an enigmatic story on origins of *epeme* told by her father Siguazi (Wagner 2000:24). Unexpectedly, she and her companions came out with an alternative that closely resembled the ‘Woman with the zebra’s penis’. This women’s narrative had all the salient details – the zebra penises, the struggle over *epeme* meat, the sexual violence. There were some notable differences. More was made of the origin of *epeme* songs and dances – not only the meat. Of course, women do the singing at *epeme*. In addition, interpolated between the women’s rule and the encounter of the hunter with the *epeme* people was an episode where the old woman tries to have sex with her husband. She goes on top with her zebra penis, and it doesn’t work – there’s no vagina underneath. They change around, him on top, her beneath, and have sex. But then she starts menstruating. This provides an explicit linkage of menstruation to the myth. I recalled Woodburn’s report (pers. comm. 1993) of an expression used for a girl at first menses: ‘she has shot her first zebra’. Mouriki has recorded that girls at menstruation or during *maitoko* may be called ‘wives of Mambedako’ (Mouriki & Power 2005). She also heard this metaphor of shooting zebra (*//akakwa dongo*) from women at Kideru (Mouriki pers. comm. 2015).

Hadza women would never be likely to offend against *epeme* rules. They would be intimidated by the all too possible threats. It would be unthinkable for them to do so directly. But I contend that during *maitoko*, women and girls are re-enacting aspects of the myth of the origins of *epeme* in a way that is obliquely but fundamentally challenging to the premise of men’s ownership. Older women, who undoubtedly know their versions of the story, send out the *maitoko* initiates – an armed body of women – to re-perform the myth, re-presenting an alternative cosmos ruled by Mambedako.

These girls have all ‘shot zebra’, they are hunters – a notion supported more so by Woodburn’s report of how women dressed as hunters in earlier rituals. In the Kideru ritual, there was a deliberate effort by the older women to produce decorations recalling zebra patterns (seen in black and white bead stockings worn by some girls, and also in the children’s painted designs). The most telling feature is the culminating battle between the girls and the youth which took place in this instance over a pot of honey. The boys had to fight their way to take hold of the pot in the face of the girls’ thrashing. The original contest over Mambedako’s pot was therefore being ritually dramatised, with no definite outcome as to who gained possession in the end.

And in the course of this ritual – in this case interspersed by actual *epeme* ritual performances (as well as a men’s feast) – the tension of threatened sexual violence is transcended through the turning upside down of the girls’ attacking boys, and the whole element of sexual play.

When asked about the best or proper time for doing *maitoko*, both women and men referred to the season of *tafabe* berries, October–November late dry/early wet, when game would be plentiful thanks to waterhole nocturnal hunting. This would place *maitoko* towards the full moon pole in the template, rather than fitting it into the menstrual template as had happened in the Kideru rite. In Woodburn's account (1964:301), *tafabe* berries are the only other food than *epeme* meat to which *epeme* men have privileged 'first-fruits' access. This privilege is said to be accorded also to the girls during the ritual.

In a number of ways, the hunter-like *maitoko* girls are linked to senior *epeme* men: besides access to the *tafabe*, they receive paraphernalia from the older men. At Kideru, anklet bells (*lingiribe*), which had been used during the previous night's *epeme* dance were reconfigured to fit to the shins and ankles of the girls. The sounds heard when waking in the camp came from these bells as the girls gave chase – mimicking the stamping of *epeme*. In addition, their 'male' *narichanda* sticks have been carved for them by the senior men.

## 9. Conclusion: Gender balance and bodily counter-power

Woodburn recorded the late dry season among the Hadza as the time when 'formal opposition between the sexes is at its height' (1964:50). Women gather *tafabe* berries, but relinquish the first fruits to the initiated men, who dramatise their privilege by accusing the women of having eaten some first, forcing them to deny it. *Maitoko* typically happened in this season, with its rough battles between the initiated girls and the youth. The number of large kills at waterholes, sustaining *maitoko*, also segregates men and women through *epeme* feasts. These interlinked rituals traditionally framed challenge and counter-challenge between the sexes, within lunar and seasonal cycles.

Woodburn (2005:27) considers Hadza male ritual privilege which is 'defended by the threat of force and, on occasion, by the use of force' to be discordant in a society where men 'have so little authority over women in day-to-day life'. He argues the stark age/gender inequality of ritual contexts – distinct from everyday egalitarian relations – provides a weak point, a 'potential structure for domination by male elders, though not yet a structure for domination'. But Hadza male ritual privilege has apparently co-existed a very long time with little effective male control over women. This surely indicates the weight of *maitoko* as a counter-action by women and girls. An 'ideological rupture between men and women', leading to devaluation of women's labour and reproduction (Woodburn 2005:28), could indeed develop if it were not for the

counterbalance: women-as-a-group contesting and answering men's ritual claims. This could explain why women go to such lengths in their ceremonies. The severity of the measures women need to take to maintain gender solidarity may reflect the degree of threat posed by male ritual power.

To speak only about men's control of *epeme* is to tell just half the story of Hadza gender ritual. The balance of Hadza gender power appears dynamic rather than fixed or static. The ritual dramas of initiation for both sexes propel the swing of a 'pendulum of power' now with one sex, now with the other, as visualised by Finnegan (2009, 2013, 2015; and see Lewis 2002, Lewis 2014:237). As Finnegan argues, only by maintaining this movement can any fixity of hierarchy be resisted. The girls of *maitoko* bleed, run, hunt, hit, fight, dance and sing together to reclaim time and space from the men. Women's endurance of traumatic cutting, whether that is genital or scarification, is the mark of their solidarity, commanding respect from *epeme* hunters, who are disarmed by the potency of blood.

Men's claims over *epeme* meat and secrets place women under threat of serious violence or repercussions, but Hadza women can by no means be seen as cowed or intimidated. At *maitoko*, they emerge as an organised intergenerational force, the younger reproductive generation militant, replaying the story of women's original ownership of *epeme*, which is known to the grandmothers. During the regular *epeme* dances, where sexual conflicts are reconciled, any tendency to cynical trickery among the men is soon overwhelmed by the joyful and passionate performance of special *epeme* songs by the women's group, who get up to dance with the *epeme* spirit in the flesh. Both collective women's performances in their different ways, *maitoko* and *epeme*, are examples of 'bodily counter-power', as Finnegan calls it, in response to the threat of male control or dominance, because 'absence of hierarchy in this moment is no guarantee of its absence in the next' (2008:228). Though referring to Mbendjele situations, Finnegan's remarks apply strongly to the Hadza: 'it is the possibility of concerted male violence in any inter-sexual negotiation that makes women's collective responses so profoundly serious'. (2008:141)

As with the Hadza, among Central African forest hunting groups such performances are elicited in secret society contexts, where there is contest over original ownership. Turnbull described vividly the takeover of Mbuti men's *molimo* as women mustered to sing the sacred *molimo* songs which he had believed only men could sing (1993:136–137). An ancient crone danced herself into deep trance in counter-power to the men who guarded the *molimo* fire, her dramatic performance invoking women's legendary claim to primary ownership of both *molimo* and fire itself (1993:139–141). Lewis (2002:173–197) documents

the *mokondi massana* of the Mbendjele which women claim as originally theirs, including the most powerful forest spirit *Ejengi*. The creation myth of the Mbendjele turns on women performing *Ejengi* and producing babies independently from men (Lewis 2002; Knight & Lewis 2014:306). While men claim they forced women to give them *Ejengi*, women say they gave it to them freely. As men asked for more and more of the *mokondi*, women slowly gave them one by one, but kept the most powerful, *Ngoku* and *Yele*, 'We'll never give them to the men!' (Lewis 2002:191). Exclusively performed by women, *Ngoku* is the main *massana* for women's counter-culture and occupation of space.

When it comes to gender among hunter-gatherers, we need to refine our understanding of the work being done to maintain egalitarianism. Collective bodily ritual performance is that work. As Finnegan describes it in Central African contexts:

Gender is a mutual ongoing construction based on difference but transcending it. A ritual conversation is maintained between the sexes in which one may temporarily and collectively claim supremacy only to relinquish it to the other. It is through this sensual repartee between male and female ritual collectives that the political pendulum at the heart of community life is animated. (2009:37)

In the case of the women and girls at Kideru, those bodies in motion bear costly scars.

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