

BINGO!

Mark Moritz August 10, 2017

How to Teach about African Foragers

One of my favorite courses to teach centers around a problematic category: hunter-gatherers. But the problematic nature is also one of the reasons why I enjoy teaching this course—it allows me to integrate scientific and critical perspectives in anthropology to train students to recognize myths about foragers and their impacts. Recently, I found a very effective strategy to overcome the challenge of students not recognizing forager myths: a game of bingo.

One of the greatest challenges for students is to recognize the myths about foragers because they have grown up with National Geographic and the Discovery Channel.

The goal of the course is to train students to scientifically study the diversity of forager societies and write up the results without reproducing harmful myths. I achieve that goal through two interrelated projects: a comparative study of forager societies and an ongoing critical analysis of how foragers are represented in the anthropological literature and the mainstream media. The course is built around Robert Kelly's book, [*Lifeways of Hunter-Gatherers*](#) (2013), and John Marshall's film series, [*A Kalahari Family*](#) (2002). I use Kelly's book to show that a scientific study of the wide range of foraging societies, not just the Hadza or the Ju/'hoansi, helps to avoid the creation of myths or stereotypes about hunter-gatherers, while I use Marshall's films to

show the impact of myths on contemporary foragers.

One of the greatest challenges for students is to recognize the myths about foragers because they have grown up with National Geographic and the Discovery Channel. Unfortunately, anthropologists have also contributed to these myths. They assume that there is something special about foragers and that by studying contemporary foragers, we can learn something about the evolution of our species. And while practically everyone notes that contemporary foragers are modern people who live in a world of Coca Cola, many anthropologists cannot help themselves and argue that there are larger lessons about humanity to be drawn.

Another persistent problem in the study of foragers is that generalizations are made on the basis of a limited sample. Robert Kelly shows how, at different times in the history of anthropology, one society becomes the quintessential model for all other foraging societies, for example the patrilineal band of Australian Aboriginals or the generalized foraging model of the Ju/'hoansi. All other societies are then seen through the lens of that model. Moreover, variation that does not fit the model—be it the patrilineal band or the generalized foraging model—is ignored. While there is always a perfunctory note about the diversity across foraging societies, that diversity is conveniently ignored if it does not fit the theoretical model. The result is that when students learn about foragers, they often learn about one iconic case.



The Hadza
A last glimpse of
Ancient Africa

March 6th 2014

SAVE THE HADZA, A MEMORY FROM THE DARKNESS OF HUMANITY'S ANCIENT PAST

IN THIS ISSUE

The Hadza Fund

Come home to Africa and enjoy the natural rhythm land the Hadza call home. The Hadza are a quintessential link to our past, and are one of the last true Hunter-Gatherer groups in the world today that live in the landscape of our ancient ancestors. Anthropologists have been studying the Hadza homeland for over a hundred years in search of the clues to trace the course of human evolution. The Hadza live a very simple lifestyle much like our human ancestors did for thousands of years, and we are lucky enough that the Hadza are still here today to give us a glimpse through time. These kind and gentle people live in small groups that move every few months and cooperate with each other and call each other family. An egalitarian group, these people have no leaders who can speak for all of them, and unfortunately outsiders are taking advantage of them.

Frank Marlowe is the leading expert in the Anthropological study of the Hadza and proclaims that "Their lives in many ways are much better than the average Tanzanian." Marlowe has been closely studying the Hadza for a few decades now, and states "they are not living fossils...but the amazing thing is how little they have changed." Marlowe and his colleagues are leading the charge to protect the Hadza from the

infiltration of outsiders that include farmers, pastoralists, non-ecofriendly tourists, and oil tycoons that want to make their land a personal hunting area for a few elite. It is up to us to save the Hadza and the ancient landscape from the hands of the disrespectful and uneducated masses.

Marlowe and others warn that "foragers" have been greatly influenced and dominated by their agricultural neighbors. Much Hadza mention that they believe foraging for wild foods is a fulfilling avenue to a better diet than either farming or cattle-raising would enable. They truly enjoy and cherish the personal freedom afforded by living in small, mobile, and intimate camps. Many Hadza overtly reject the noise, crowds, dangers, and discrimination that life in neighboring villages would entail.

The Hadza are not nasty, brutish but peaceful and healthy, for now. The people surrounding the land consider these foragers as pests and stupid lazy people who are a means to make money through extortion. They have killed off much of the buffalo, eliminated the lions, and introduce cattle and goats that consume the resources used by the Hadza. It is truly unacceptable.



The People

The Hadza are a culturally, linguistically, and genetically distinct population of approximately 1000-1500 individuals, living around Lake Eyasi, in northern Tanzania. Genetic studies confirm that the distinctiveness of the Hadza population stretches back thousands of years.



The Potential Future

Without generous donations to The Hadza Fund, these living relics could be consumed by the greed of encroaching pastoralists and farmers and could lose not only their land, but their way of life.

[Slideshow 2 Photos](#)

Class assignment flyer for the Hadza Development Fund. Jesse Young

I have experimented with different assignments to help students recognize

forager myths. This year, my students played a game of forager myth bingo. (I was inspired by [chronic illness bingo](#) from the blog, *Heart Sisters*, that I came across one day when I entered the rabbit hole of the internet). In preparation for the game, students read Binyavanga Wainaina's satirical piece "[How to Write about Africa](#)" (2005) and identify stereotypes in a [flyer](#) for the Hadza Development Fund that Jesse Young, a former student, purposively incorporated, drawing from Wainaina's piece and Frank Marlowe's book, *The Hadza: Hunter-gatherers of Tanzania* (2010). The flyer assignment was an experiment from an earlier iteration of the course.

As in the flyer assignment, the stereotypes on the bingo card are mostly drawn from Wainaina's "How to write about Africa" and include statements about the film's visuals (e.g., pictures of elephants, wide and empty landscapes with wildlife, the light in Africa), scenes (e.g., Jane Goodall says something about nature, hero carries and teaches children, hero eats what they eat without flinching), and narration (e.g., Hadza have not changed in 50,000 years, overpopulation threatens ancestral lands of the Hadza, Hadza are doomed without your help).

Then in class we watch the film, [Hadza: Last of the First](#) (2015), which—no surprise, considering the title—is full with stereotypes about Africa and foragers. However, rather than simply watching and discussing the film, we play a game of bingo while watching the film. Students check off the stereotypes they caught in the film and marked them on their cards.

Hadza have not changed in 50,000 years	Westerners really care about the Hadza	Nobel Prize winner comments on powerful politicians	Overpopulation threatens ancestral land of the Hadza	Wide and empty landscapes with wildlife
Pictures of elephants	A glimpse of our past	The light in Africa	Link to our ancestors	A unique population
Jane Goodall says something about nature	Monkey brains are food of choice	BINGO	Hadza are doomed without your help	Hero carries and teaches children, saves sick
Original affluent society	Hadza are part of nature	Hadza are endangered like wildlife	They are a timeless people	Eat what they eat without flinching
Hadza are free and without worries	Mention Arab or Chinese land grabbers	We have to save their habitat	Corrupt officials want to take the land	We have to save them before it is too late

Example of card used in BINGO exercise. Mark Moritz

It does not take long for students to start checking off the different boxes on the card. And after about five minutes into the film, the first students shout “Bingo!” when they have checked off an entire row or column. It is really quite impressive how many stereotypes the director was able to pack into the first minutes of the film. To show how effective this strategy was, in the middle of the film, a student raised her hand and asked, “This film is a parody, no?”

Unfortunately, the film was not meant as a parody—and unfortunately, it is similar to many other stereotypical films about African foragers, for example, *The Great Dance: A Hunter’s Story* (2000) by Craig and Damon Foster. And really, after reading Wainaina’s piece it becomes impossible to watch any of these films and not start laughing and crying simultaneously.

We finish the semester watching the fifth part of John Marshall’s series, *A Kalahari Family: Death by Myth* (2002). The film is painful to watch. Not because the film is stereotypical—it shows how myths haunt the Ju’/hoansi as

development organizations create a community conservancy to protect Ju/'hoansi land. Rights. However, the idea of the conservancy is sold to financial donors by—dare I say—pimping the Ju/'hoansi as people who continue to live as foragers in symbiosis with their environment as they have done for thousands of years. In this vision of the Kalahari, there is no room for Ju/'hoansi making a living through herding and farming. Moreover, in the end, lions and elephants are even more important than foragers. The Ju/'hoansi are well aware of the dangers of the myths. Oma Tsamkxao, one of the main protagonists in Marshall's film, expresses it well: “There are two kinds of films. Films that show us in skins are lies. Films that show the truth show us with cattle, with farms, with our own water, making our own plans.”

Why is that a simple game of bingo helps students become aware of forager myths? I think what makes the teaching strategy effective is the same reason why Wainaina's “How to Write about Africa” is such a compelling critique of stereotypes about Africa: satire.

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