

Ethnology of the Kalahari Bushmen

By WILL J. CAMERON, Chicago

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A LITTLE over a year ago, I equipped an expedition for research and exploration in the heart of Africa. My work has had to do with the devising of equipment and electrically lighted instruments for diagnosis and surgery, and so I have always been interested in the health problems of modern man. It was not such a far cry, then, to the study of primitive man—the Kalahari Bushman.

Then, too, my friend, Dr. Dart, of the Witwatersrand University, had recently authenticated the **Taungs Skull**—unearthed in a limestone quarry close to the haunts of the Bushmen. This Taungs Skull Dr. Dart has estimated as being over 50,000 years old, and so it ranks with that of the Java, the Heidelberg and the Piltown men and is of great interest to those anthropologically inclined. Most of us, at one time or another, take more than a passing interest in when and where we are going, and some few of us at least are curious as to where we came from.

So the urge became a reality and we started from **Chicago** on Decoration Day, 1928. Associated with me were C. Ernest Cadle, anthropologist, Richard L. Mannen, geologist, Fred Parrish, cinematographer and Henry Hoder, mechanician.

We shipped a couple of two-ton, Diamond-T trucks to Capetown, with complete camping, hunting and camera equipment for several months' stay in the wilds.

Most of our time was spent in the Kalahari desert—that vast tract of barren country lying between the Orange and Zambesi Rivers in South West Africa. This is the one place where, today, may be found the Stone-Age man, living under Stone-Age conditions with the Stone-Age animals—the elephant, the rhino, the hippo and the dassie.

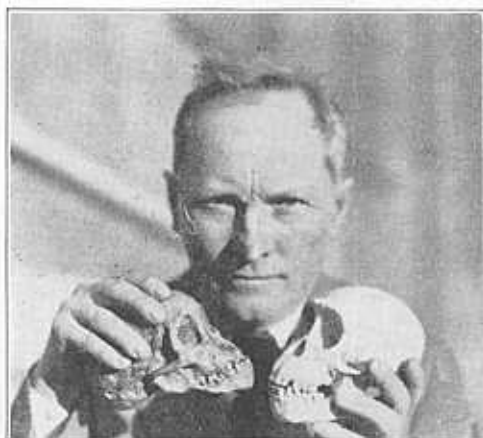


Fig. 1.—Will J. Cameron holding the skull of a baboon and the Taungs Skull (left), the most unusual find of Dr. Dart of the Witwatersrand University, and of real interest and value to the students of prehistoric and ancient man.

Because of the inaccessibility of the desert, due to the shifting sand and the scarcity of water, the Kalahari Bushmen have been able to preserve their entity for centuries by retreating into the desert before the invading Kaffir hordes. Although touching elbows with our civilization, they are separate and apart from it and are living virtually as did our forefathers of the glacial period

in Europe, fifty thousand and more years ago.

The pure-blood bushman is undersized and copper-colored, with facial characteristics more of the Arabic than the Negroid type, and it is not unlikely that these people inhabited this section long before the



Fig. 2.—Dr. Cadie and Masari bushwomen in native costume—an antelope hide for dress and another for carrying the baby, and decorations of ostrich egg shell beads.

Bantu tribes came down from the North and East. Only when the occasional rains fell were the invaders of the desert able to stand the heat and drouth, kill the men, and capture the women and children of the bushmen. Now that the country is administered by the British, warfare is taboo; but peace is more destructive to the Bushman than war has been, and he will soon disappear by negroid admixture.

The Bushman is an individualist. He has no headman or chieftain. One or two families live at an isolated water-hole and follow the wild game in their migrations, for the Bushman is a meat eater and of the pure hunter type. He does not cultivate the ground and has no cattle, so he is an adept at spearing and hunting, for he must get close to his game to wound it with his poisoned arrows. His bow and arrows are crude, with tips of flint and bone, but the poison tip is deadly. They use the venom of the cobra, puff-adder and that from a spider, together with vegetable juices. They keep their formula a secret, and once or twice a year they hold a ritual for the manufacture of their ammunition; each of them contributing his share to the poison potion.

Two or three hunt together, camouflaging themselves in the hides of wild animals, in the skin of the ostrich or in grass disguises, and they rarely risk a shot at more

than twenty or thirty yards. Then they take the trail of the wounded animal, and sometimes have to follow one of the larger antelopes for hours before it drops, for the poison, though deadly, is not immediate in effect.

Though the bushman is a hunter he can scarcely be rated as a sportsman, for he would much rather find his game dead than hunt it himself. So here the lion is his friend as well as his enemy, for if he hears the lions roar at night, announcing a kill, he takes the trail early, for the circling of the vultures will lead him to the remnants of the carcass, and if he can beat the jackals and vultures to it, he may have zebra steak for breakfast.

The bushman builds no hut or house for his family, and at night they lie down under a crude, brush shelter wherever they may be. They use less care in the preparation of their beds than does the gorilla. They do not even carry an extra antelope skin with which to cover themselves at night. Though the temperature ranges from 100° to 130°F. in the daytime, frost will frequently form on the water at night. They make their fire by friction, holding the wood with their feet. They have no dishes and they cook their meat by throwing it into the open fire, tearing it with their hands and teeth. Marrow-bones, which they roast and break on stones, are their great luxury. What they cannot eat they rub on their limbs, and this is their only bath, for they never use water.

The bushwoman, having no housekeeping to do, is Queen of the May. Only when faced by starvation does she search for the occasional edible roots, for there is little fruit in the veldt. The children are usually fed at the breast until they are

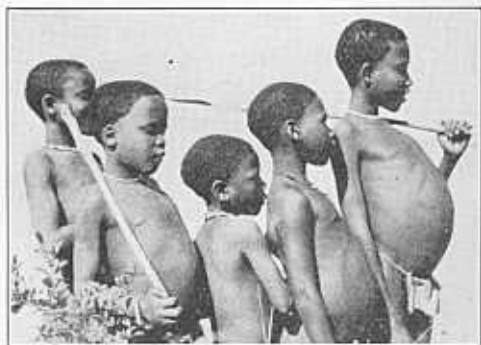


Fig. 3.—The elastic stomachs of the bush boys are something to marvel at. An adult will eat ten pounds of meat at a sitting.

six years of age, for there is no other milk and little food in the desert that they can eat. At certain seasons of the year, the sama or wild melon grows in profusion, and serves as both food and water.

Childbirth is but an incident to these women of the desert, and though they have children with surprising regularity, not many of these reach maturity, because of the scarcity and irregularity of food. The common illness is due to over-feeding, and Nature has given these children, as well as the adults, an unbelievable food capacity, as shown in Figure 3.

Generally speaking, the bush people appear healthy. Eye affections appear to be the most common disorders, but in our camp, where they had an abundance of meat to eat, they were constantly tortured from their gorging. Their greatest enemy is pneumonia, and it is invariably fatal. They avoid the areas of sleeping sickness and seem almost immune to malaria and blackwater fever.

They have little knowledge of drugs, and nothing they will reveal in regard to their cures. Whenever they have made contact, they believe in the white man's magic and prefer it to their native arts of healing.

In one instance a child was brought into camp with a severe burn. This wound was covered over with a clay, mixed with herbs and gum, and was healing nicely under this treatment. The cause of this accident was interesting. The parents had been in a drunken stupor late in the morning, from the excess of meat, and the child had crawled into the fire in search of food and water. I have found no satisfactory explanation of the effect of meat on these people, but they assuredly react as does the average American to his home-brew.

They are remarkably free from the heathenish customs peculiar to most of the African tribes, cicatrication being the only mutilation commonly practiced. They appear to be free from venereal disease, a condition not common to the Kaffirs, for medical officers told me that as high as 70 percent of some of the native tribes had syphilis. This need not be debated when we consider that, for four or five hundred years, from the time of the slave traders, these negroes had been exposed, with no methods of combatting the disease, until the advent of arspenamine, except their social customs, for in some tribes promiscuity was punished by death.



Fig. 4.—Bushwomen at the water hole; but they never go in swimming!

Though the Bushmen are unable to compute time or distance, they appear to reach at least an average age, judging by the wrinkles on their stomachs, as shown in Figure 4.

That these Masaris are primitive in the extreme is shown in Figure 6. This woman, about twenty-five years of age, came into camp with her husband, carrying her baby and two young pups. After a few days I noted that the baby, though young, was quite "strong," so I made inquiry as to when it had had its last bath. Neither the father nor mother could remember and finally admitted that the child, five months old, had never been washed; and it may safely be assumed that it is only when the seasonal rains fall that the bushmen are exposed to this element.



Fig. 5.—A group of Masari bushmen and a brush shelter, their usual habitation. Note how they seat themselves and try to do it.



Fig. 6.—Bushwoman feeding her baby and her pup, one at each breast. The dog will eventually help provide the meat, their only staple article of diet.

The two young pups intrigued me also, for though they had no mother dog to feed them, they always wore a contented smile and the reason is easily seen (Fig. 6). There is an economic as well as a humanitarian reason for the care of these pups, for later on they will aid her husband in tracking the wounded game through the rocky areas where he could not otherwise follow them. In the final analysis, the bushman's efforts center around the securing of meat.

Lovemaking in the desert does not appear to present any peculiar difficulties, so the primitive emotions of man—food and love, according to psychologists—are about all the worries the Bushman has.

He has a vocabulary of about 200 words, most of which are clicks and clucks, imitative of the wild life, and no white man has learned the intricacies of these as yet. He can count to but five and these only in digits; one, one and one, one and one and one, etc. Those who have studied them carefully place them on a numerical parity with the baboon. They illustrate this by stating that, if six hunters go after baboons and one hides himself in a likely place, the baboons will return; but if one drops out of a party of five, they will not come back. This appears to be conclusive. It is certain that they are not so well organized, socially, as are the baboons, who always have their

leader who keeps his outposts on constant watch to guard against the common danger of attack from the lion, leopard and wild dogs.

It was a constant cause of wonderment to me to see how a kind Providence took care of these naked bush babies and protected them from the poisonous snakes and preying animals. These youngsters are stoical in the extreme, and they wander around in the thorny bush with no word of complaint. The twenty-odd children we had around our camp did not create so much fuss or friction as would four average American youngsters, and instinctively these bush babies fared and shared alike with their mates. The parents were kind to their children and never scolded or abused them.

Despite the fact that the Bushmen are exclusively meat eaters, they do not seem to exhibit any evidence of an unbalanced diet. They appear as healthy as the Kaffir tribes in adjacent territory, who have a mixed diet of meal, meat and milk.

I paid particular attention to their teeth, and found conditions much as among our own people. Some had good teeth and some had carious teeth; some had pyorrhea and others were free from it; and I could see no difference in dental conditions between those living on meat or mixed diet.

The Bushman's two diversions are "throwing the bones" and dancing. Their "bones" are about the size of dominoes. They believe absolutely in what the "bones" tell them, and if they are going lion hunting, they want to know if they are going to get the lion or the lion is going to get them. If the "bones" do not fall right, they will find no lions for you that day.

The Bushman's dance is imitative of the jungle animals. They have the gemsbok dance, the eland dance, the jackal dance, the vulture dance. They have no musical instruments and the women furnish the accompaniment by chanting and clapping their hands. The men do the dance, which frequently lasts for hours—and they dance till they are "all in". They lie where they fall, until they are able to join in again, and they do not take time for either food or water. The music is rhythmic, but not melodious.

They worship the praying mantis—an insect about four or five inches long and resembling what we call the darning needle.

No doubt there is an economic reason for their choice for, so far as I could learn, it was the only living thing in the desert that they did not eat.

The men wear a ghee string. The women gird themselves with an antelope hide and have an extra hide in which to carry the infant on their back. Both men and women adorn themselves with beads, which they make from ostrich egg shells. They break the shells into convenient

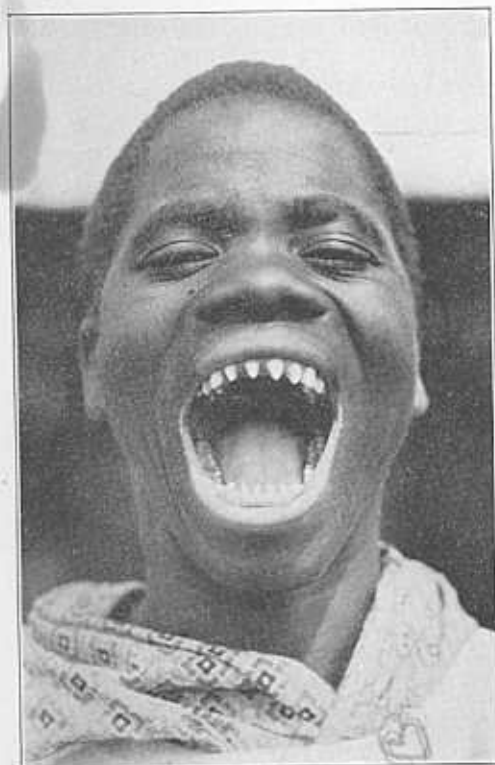


Fig. 7.—Tooth sharpening is still practiced among descendants of the old-time cannibals.

shapes and polish the pieces with sandstone rock, drilling the holes with flint arrow heads.

The complete household equipment of an average Bushman family will not exceed five pounds in weight, and like Goldsmith's villagers "Their needs are simple and their wants are few." When the game leaves their waterhole, the Bushmen store up a little water in ostrich egg shells, to tide them over to a fresh oasis in the desert, and they travel light, fast and far. The Bushman is a product of his environment and, under different conditions, would undoubtedly become a useful member of society. Happy indeed is he and rich, to

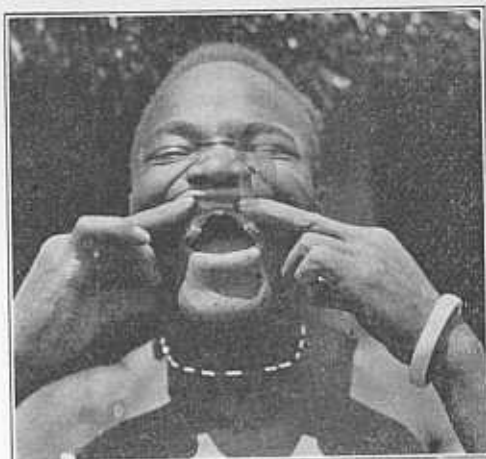


Fig. 3.—The Masakolumbo tribe on the Kafue River in Northern Rhodesia knock out the six upper anterior teeth of their boys and girls when they are ten years of age.

the limit of his conceptions, if he has a bow and arrow, a wife and a dog.

After leaving the Kalahari, we trekked north to the Belgian Congo and came in contact with natives, some of whom had



Fig. 8.—The Ba-Ila tribe bind their heads from childhood and look very grand with this protuberance decorated with the head of a crested crane or with brass upholstering tacks.

unusual and barbarous customs. As shown in Figure 7, the cannibal tribes sharpen the six anterior upper and lower teeth. Undoubtedly this must be to facilitate the practice of their profession. The boy in the picture claimed that he was not in active practice, but one cannot be too sure of anything in Africa, for things are quite different there.

The Masakolumbo tribe on the Kafue River in Northern Rhodesia knock out the six upper teeth of both boys and girls. This is part of their tribal ritual at the age of puberty. They give as the reason for this that they are not animals, like the zebra,

and so they knock out the upper teeth to prove it—all of which we must admit is quite logical.

The Ba-Ila boys have their scalps bound up from childhood, as shown in Figure 9, and when they reach adult age they have outward and upward elongations almost as large as their heads, which are their pride and joy. This may be where the "swelled head" idea got its start.

Anyone with an observant mind will find much to interest and entertain him in Africa, for it is a land grotesque, unusual and bizarre, and much remains to be seen and told.

