

# anthro notes

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## IN TO AFRICA

There I sat, squeezed into the back seat of the Land Rover with my knees pressed up against my chest, sandwiched between two prominent paleoanthropologists, each looking rather pale from the not-so-fine cuisine of the night before. We had been on the "road" (if one could call it a road) for over 12 hours. We were now in the mountains, and, naturally, it was raining. Water drizzled through the cracks, thick and sweet, and began to stick to our hair as the 50 lb. bag of sugar strapped to the roof slowly turned to syrup.

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Again the Land Rover coughed in protest and then refused to move forward. Those who had the energy piled out while the technician attempted another make-shift repair. Another graduate student still lay in the far back of the Rover, almost buried under pack sacks, potatoes, plastic bags, and pineapples. He was asleep, and so we left him undisturbed since he, too, had fallen prey to the flora and fauna in yesterday's salad.

This was not quite how I imagined the legendary Louis Leakey had travelled to Olduvai Gorge! But here I



was, at last, on my way into Africa, to spend the summer in eastern Zaire as a member of the Semliki Research Expedition. The expedition's work would include a survey of the banks of the upper Semliki River and Lake Amin (ex-Edward) for fossil- and artifact-bearing deposits of Pliocene through Holocene age (last five million years). Additionally, we would conduct preliminary excavations once we located significant exposures. Our team included several specialists: geologists, paleontologists, and archaeologists--all of whom were seasoned Africanists. I was a graduate student and assistant to one of the archaeologists. It was my first trip to Africa; I felt a little green.

Life in the field is never what one expects. For me it was more difficult, more intense, and more wonderful than I ever could have imagined from a living room sofa flipping through the National Geographic Magazines' glossy photos of African expeditions. Though the Semliki expedition's discoveries were both significant and exciting, I would like here to share the joys and the pitfalls of being a new field worker in Africa's hinterland.

At Ishango, the point where the Semliki River flows north out of Lake Amin, we established a permanent field station. A place of remarkable beauty and still largely unspoiled by man, Ishango, during the Colonial days, served the king of Belgium as the royal summer resort in what was then the Belgian Congo. Ishango is in the midst of a national park, where high up on a bluff one can look down on hippos, waterbuck, cape buffalo, cormorants, and pelicans. From here one can also watch the sun rise over the snow-capped Ruwenzoris and set over the mountains of the western rift, while one listens to the piercing cries of fish eagles. For me this was paradise.

Three dilapidated, bat-ridden, and flea-infested guest houses stand as a reminder of the bygone days of Belgian colonialism. We preferred to live in tents. Although no running water or electricity existed, a lake free of parasites (and crocodiles) did serve our bathing needs--a real luxury on this sort of expedition.

Of course, we had to share our beach with other bathers: more than 100 hippopotami live in this small stretch of the river. They spend all day "in the cool of the pool" and were often curious about the pink, two-legged swimmers. Hippos may be cute, but two tons of curiosity should not be left unchecked. When one of the inquisitive sort would pop up from underwater, less than 20 feet from where one was soaping up, and reveal his six inch canines in a leisurely yawn, there was no doubt whatsoever as to who was king of this watering site.

Apart from being our beach buddies, the hippos were also our camp mates. Although these amphibious herbivores spend all day in the river, they don't eat much from their bath water. Instead, they emerge from the deep after dark and climb up the river banks to eat grass on the savannahs until close to dawn when they again retreat to relax in the jacuzzi current of the Semliki.

Many a night after I had bedded down in my rather flimsy canvas tent, I would be awakened by the grinding, squeaking, crunching, and munching of hippos mowing the grass around my tent. At times they were so close that I could hear the water in their stomachs sloshing as they moved, and gurgling as they swallowed. It was distressing to realize that less than five feet from my head was an animal that could squash me flat with one false move. But I slowly learned to relax, assuring myself that no sensible animal would purposely step on a large, immovable object.

We had other midnight visitors, too. Hyenas, the garbage men of Africa, were naturally attracted to our camp and their whoops and cackles were a familiar lullaby. Hyenas can be very dangerous, but they were usually just a nuisance to us. Their indiscriminating culinary tastes meant that just about anything left unattended was potential prey. Sneakers, if left outside the tent, made a satisfactory hyena entree, especially when followed by a dirty T-shirt or a bar of soap to cleanse the palate.

For several nights in a row, a number of us were awakened by very loud snoring. Vicious accusations punctuated breakfast conversation. It was not until the culprit was exposed that the snide remarks subsided. The snorer was the resident leopard, grumbling while making his evening rounds.

Surveying the Semliki was not as simple as walking up and down the riverbank. The vegetation was often dense and impenetrable, and the only paths were those cut by local hippos. Since humans are not shaped quite like hippos (at least not most of us), the use of these trails often necessitated our surveying on hands and knees.

When passage along the water's edge was simply impossible, we took to the water. Usually this meant a survey on soggy feet, but sometimes a survey by boat. Clusters of submerged hippos made a challenging obstacle course for even the most sporting paleoanthropologist, particularly because these animals, previously unseen, delight in moving at the last minute or on popping up directly in front of the boat. The game is made even more challenging by the fact that the "obstacles" are bigger than the boat and can move equally as quickly upstream. Adrenalin and prayers were the most frequently employed strategies for collision-avoidance. However, the first time an over-zealous hippo gave the boat a not-so-gentle bump from underneath and

practically dumped us all overboard, I retreated--permanently--to dry land.

Apart from discovering fossil- and artifact-yielding exposures, we also discovered snake-, wart-hog-, cape buffalo- and lion-yielding localities. One roar from the lioness was sufficient incentive for us to alter our survey transect to bypass her home territory. And when the cape buffalo rose to greet us, we rudely rejected their hospitality with a 90 degree turn in our path. The puff adder never even acknowledged our presence, and we might have been able to quietly slip away except our technician rushed forward and picked up the five foot long viper and excitedly demanded that we take pictures for his family.

Once one of us could stop shaking long enough to click the shutter, the technician nimbly laid the snake down and beheaded it with one easy blow of the machete. He claimed he knew that the snake was ill, but we had other suspicions about where the illness really lay. With great enthusiasm he then examined the one-inch long venomous canines. Back in camp our technician-cum-herpetologist skinned and tanned the "hide" of this beast and the next morning presented us with his special breakfast treat--puff adder on toast. A delicacy not to be missed!

Excavation posed several new problems not encountered in America. It seemed that all of the most promising archaeological sites were either lying on, or directly next to, hippo trails. Of course, hippos are fine excavators. They cut paths quite efficiently, sometimes to a depth of about six feet. However, they had not yet grasped the concept behind two and four inch arbitrary levels nor the importance of piece-plotting. Surprisingly, as dainty as they are, they kept tripping over the unit strings.

How do you keep such enthusiastic amateurs off the site after hours? Acacia trees, with the largest and sharpest thorns we could find, proved effective when seven or eight were piled on each unit. However, hippopotamus bathroom etiquette complicated this protective strategy. Hippos have the rather unpleasant habit of marking territory with their excrement through a rapid swirling and swishing of the tail during defecation. This behavior serves to "spray" fecal matter in all directions, often to a height of several feet. Thus, each morning after we removed the acacia trees from our units, we were faced with the task of scraping off the hippos' contribution to our stratigraphic sequence. It was all in a day's work.

But it was nice to return to camp, have a delicious dinner of fresh fish, and curl up in bed with a good book ...along with the fleas, mosquitos, domestic beetles, and an occasional reptile. Army ants were less welcome tent mates. When they marched in unannounced, it usually meant that one would be forced to "abandon ship," perform a midnight striptease to get them out of one's pants, and spend the rest of the night in the Land Rover.

The field season went so quickly that before we knew it we were again piled into the Land Rover. We had a plane to catch at 6:00 p.m., but to kill time we thought it would be fun to visit the rare mountain gorillas in Rwanda. At 3,000 meters we slipped and slid through the damp forest, huffing and puffing with every step. Vines and branches formed a matting beneath our feet, and we soon realized that we were not walking on the ground but about one meter above it. We were constantly losing our balance and grabbing for the nearest supporting object, which was often a stinging nettle bush.

We searched for over two and a half hours before we encountered the group; evidence of their presence in

the form of their prodigious feces revealed that we were hot on their trail. During one particularly tricky maneuver around a hole and over some vines, I lost my balance and landed on my rear smack in the middle of a fresh pile of gorilla droppings. However, every slip and sting along the way was well worth the effort to see the gorillas in their natural habitat leisurely eating their forest salad.

As the afternoon wore on, we realized that we had better move quickly if we were to catch our evening flight to Paris. Scrambling out of the forest and into the Land Rover, we drove down mountain roads without any brakes or a muffler. We arrived at the airport with little more than enough time to change our dirty clothes. I threw my soiled trousers in the top of my pack and headed for the baggage check. The clerk manually inspected my bags and immediately encountered my trousers, complete with their fresh souvenir of our gorilla expedition. Needless to say, he looked no further, and I knew I was hastily on my way out of Africa.

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