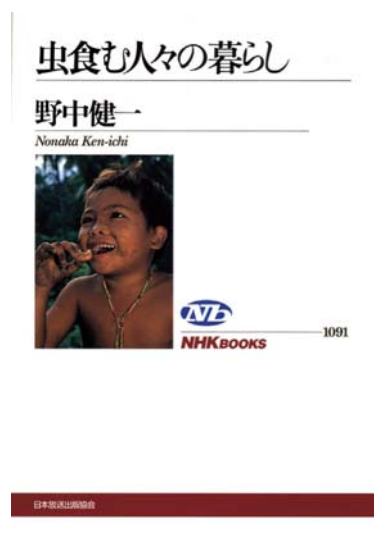


Excerpts from 'Living on Insects'

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'Those cricket's legs look delicious!' (P.23)

Stopping off at a bookstore on the way home from work one day, I happened to overhear a couple of young ladies in the travel section talking about their plans for a forthcoming trip to Thailand. The topic of their conversation had turned to their impressions of a TV programme they had seen on the subject of eating insects. It seemed that they were quite keen to go to Thailand and try some insects. "The crickets look tasty. I wouldn't mind trying the legs", one of them said. The time had finally come when insects, which were once the epitome of bizarre foods, were now the deciding factor for two young women in choosing a holiday destination. Excited by this prospect, I had an overwhelming urge to tell them that "They used to eat crickets in Shinshu too, you know. They would eat the body, and then grind up the legs to mix with soya-bean paste." I couldn't just blurt out that kind of thing to a couple of complete strangers, though. I just had to suppress the urge!



Pride of the hunter-gatherers (P.71)



In the Kalahari Desert, in the southern hemisphere, the end of November marks the beginning of summer, when the rains of the wet season begin to fall. It was still the end of the dry season when I arrived, and the rainless landscape remained arid and barren for some time afterwards. All the trees and grasses were thoroughly parched. Even the hunter-gatherers were just wandering aimlessly around their settlements. From time to time, strong winds would bring sandstorms, leaving everyone holed up in their houses waiting patiently for the storms to pass. With not even the slightest hint of anyone heading out to gather natural resources, there was clearly little chance of anyone eating insects. During the daytime, it was so hot that temperatures were off the scale, even on thermometers in the shade of the house. It was just impossible to walk barefoot on any ground directly exposed to the sun's rays. "Nothing happens until the rains come", I'm told. My head was full of questions. I wanted to know how these hunter-gatherers make use of the natural environment to survive in such harsh desert conditions.

What do they use for food, and how do they get hold of it? What kind of tools and methods are used in doing so? How is the food prepared and eaten? I had decided to observe them, although I can honestly say that I was almost entirely clueless as to how to go about it. Not even sure where I should start, I decided to follow their movements whenever and wherever I could.

Just 'following along', however, is by no means as easy as it sounds. To the hunter-gatherers, going out to work means going out in search of living essentials such as food or firewood. This means they must go to different places depending on the conditions surrounding whichever plants and animals they intend to use at the time. Exactly where they were going, and what they were looking for, was beyond anyone just trying to follow along with them. To begin with, they don't even necessarily go out every day. Such unpredictable behaviour meant that I was constantly unsure of what I should be doing at any one time, leaving me totally unprepared. At first, I was hopelessly frantic, but I soon gave up on trying to work out what they were going to do. I decided it would be best to just go along and observe, taking notes on everything they did during their whole day instead of trying to predict their movements. I devotedly followed them around, from the time they got up in the morning to the time they went to bed, recording whatever they were doing at the time. I would follow along with primarily one member from each family, recording a week in the lives of three families in turn. Subsequently, I continued to tag along whenever anyone happened to leave the house.

Just tagging along like this, without really having a clue what was going on, occasionally led to misunderstandings. Kaogi, with whom I had become quite friendly, was a renowned hunter. He seems to have withdrawn somewhat to the sidelines due to his advanced years, although he would still make regular trips into

the bush. I persistently followed him around, taking notes on the things he did. I once followed him into a dense thicket, convinced that he had found something interesting and had gone in there to investigate. However, he glared at me indignantly and said, “I’m going to take a crap, so don’t follow me”.



There was another occasion when, determined not to be an encumbrance, I just couldn’t bring myself to ask him to wait for me. I followed along, desperately trying to keep up with the relentless Kaogi as he walked here and there. It was a blisteringly hot day, with the sun beating down upon us. When we finally made it back to the house after a whole day of trekking around, I just collapsed. I regained consciousness after having a bucket of water splashed over me by some people who had rushed to my aid. The following day, Kaogi was going around telling all the villagers, “I thought Nonaka was trying to kill me! The guy just wouldn’t give in and say he needed to rest.” Who was he to talk! As far as I was concerned, I had just about put myself in peril trying to keep up with him despite desperately needing to stop for a rest. I found out later that it is considered unseemly for a tribe member to be the first of the men to give in and say they need to take a break. I guess I should be grateful, really, as Kaogi started to include me a lot more after that, perhaps because I had shared that ‘life-threatening’ experience with him.

It’s the ants that accentuate the taste (P.76)

The emergence of caterpillars signifies that, with leaves growing thick on the trees, the rainy season has begun in earnest. The various animals have become more active, and the hunter-gatherers have once again started to make regular hunting and gathering trips. Despite now being settled in one place under domiciliation policies, and even receiving supplies of corn flour, sugar and milk, it has remained important for these hunter-gatherers to collect wild food-stuffs from the bush, even if they have managed to get paid cultivation or pastoral work. These trips into the bush are revitalizing for the hunter-gatherers.





They don't go out especially to find and collect insects; it is more a case of finding them along the way when they happen to be doing something else. Frequently finding ants while walking somewhere, for example, will often result in an impromptu insect-gathering session. A digging stick is used to poke at the roots of any likely-looking bushes they come across while they are walking along. If an ants' nest is found, it is investigated thoroughly. They start slapping the ground in front of the entrance to the nest, which has been opened out a few centimetres. This brings lines of

soldier ants marching out, believing the nest to be under attack. These are swiftly gathered up by the nimble-fingered hunter-gatherers, who then wrap them up in grass bundles and take them home. Watching from the sidelines, this all seems quite simple. However, the attacking soldier ants viciously snap at their fingers with their tenacious jaws. The hunter-gatherers wait until a number of ants have left the nest before attempting to collect them, but speed and precision timing is required to know exactly when to start picking them up. They are truly skilful in the way they manage to do this. Clumps of grass found growing nearby are rolled into balls, with the ants inside, to be stashed away in the bags slung over their shoulders ready to take home.

So, they've got the ants. Now, how do they use them? The women collect wild herbs as part of their gathering activities. These herbs are then thoroughly cleaned and mashed up in a mortar. They then begin to sprinkle in the ants, the *pièce de résistance*. The mixture is mashed up a little more, mixing in the ants. The ants are used to add a vinegary taste to the herbs. I suppose you could say it is a kind of 'wild herb salad' with an ant dressing. When we eat a salad, we often use some kind of



dressing. This is because it helps to bring out the flavour of the vegetables. Similarly, in the world of the hunter-gatherers, the ants are used as a dressing to enhance the flavour of the salad. Mashing up the herbs brings out their juices, making them soft and juicy. The vinegary taste of the mashed-up ants combines with these juices, delicately bringing out the flavour. Taking a mouthful of the salad, one may also find oneself biting into un-mashed ants, which have retained their original form. A vinegary taste immediately spreads in the mouth, further accentuating the flavour. It is not only the women who collect ants; men also bring any ants they find home to their houses in the camps. In observing these people frequently making such dishes I have developed a keen awareness of the hunter-gatherers' abundant food culture.