



Nalari and Nasarisarau on their spectacular morning commute

MAASAI HONEY

by PETER KEILTY

Most beekeepers are familiar with the sinking feeling that a bee or three have somehow made it inside their suit's defenses. If you're lucky, the bees might only get in around your ankles, but my ninja-like intruders have run the gamut over the years: most memorably, a hole in the armpit of my smock which went undiscovered for several weeks and gave them unfettered access to my torso, face and even scalp, where they managed to get stuck in my hair gel and inflict prolonged and excruciating pain!

Needless to say, I have curtailed my personal grooming on days I know I'll be at the apiary. I've also come up with other ways of frustrating would-

be invaders: taped ankles, Wellington boots, painter's overalls, or shelling out on the latest and greatest bee suit technology. But never have I sought a solution to this recurring problem by discarding the bee suit altogether. Or the rest of my clothing, for that matter.

Yet, for millennia, this is how the honey hunters of the Maasai harvested liquid gold on the plains of Africa. Their loose-fitting "shuka" garment, traditionally made from buffalo hide and, more recently, the iconic, vibrantly-colored cotton most of us are familiar with, has ever been a hindrance when it comes to dealing with bees. And not just any bee of course: the formidable East African lowland honey bee, *Apis mellifera scutellata*. So

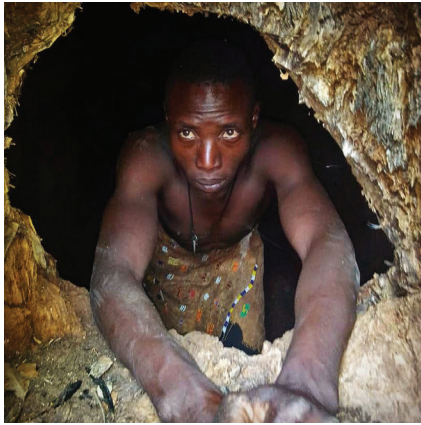
you can imagine how I winced when Maasai Honey's Molly Hagan first told me how the Maasai would wait until nightfall, when they deem the bees to be more docile, and, armed with only some smoke and the skin they were born in, harvested honey in thorny acacia trees from some of the world's most formidable bees. The technique, however odd it might sound to us, holds up to scrutiny: The honey hunters get stung whether they are clothed or not, the only difference being that the bees can inflict greater damage when trapped under the folds of the shuka garment.

Thankfully the modern beekeepers of Maasai Honey, in addition to having all the protective gear they can muster, don't do anything as brave as attempting to keep these formidable native honey bees in their apiaries. I mean, no one chooses to keep *scutellata*, right? I was to learn that the beekeepers at Maasai Honey do in fact embrace the extra risk associated with the East African lowland honey bee in order to stay true to the ecology of their ancestral land. They hang bait hives in the surrounding forest to catch wild swarms, which they then transfer to their apiaries. This not only protects and conserves the native species, but saves money, too. Other apiaries import European strains for an easier life, and slightly higher yields, but the ladies of Maasai Honey do it the harder and, I believe, the better way.

Beekeeping and honey hunting have long been a part of Maasai culture and formed the bedrock of their agriculture before they became predominantly cattle herders. Beehives



Beekeeper Nalari in her traditional shuka garment



A fearless Hadzabe man harvests honey from a wild colony of *Apis mellifera scutellata*.

were even used as bridewealth in marriage contracts, which shows how important they were as a source of wealth and prestige in Maasai society. Women, however, were not included in this tradition of bee husbandry — their role was confined to household tasks and child rearing. But today, these Maasai women are as fearless in going against long-standing cultural norms as they are in handling angry colonies of *scutellata*. Operating within a supportive framework provided by Maasai Honey’s Krysten Ericson and Molly Hagan, the women have been provided opportunities for work and education, and in turn use their earnings to educate their children and improve their families’ standard of living.

Molly described to me how Noorkisaruni and Nashiluni, two female beekeepers from Mairowa, a “sub-village” in Ololosokwan, have improved the lives of their families through their hard work with the bees. Noorkisaruni, a widow, has been able to send her five children to



Keeping *Apis mellifera scutellata* takes nerves of steel.

school, and Nashiluni has provided for her seven children as well as expanding her family’s small herd of livestock.

With over a hundred hives spread over five apiaries, the women regularly sell honey and wax products at the weekly market in Ololosokwan village. Each Sunday residents walk long distances to buy and trade for food, clothing, and livestock. I am told it is quite a spectacle of sound and color: the Maasai congregating in their bright shukas and haggling over prices, happy to reunite with their distant neighbors from the widely dispersed sub-villages.

ABJ readers may remember an article from June 2021 on honey bees and their predators. We featured Maasai Honey’s “apiary cage” — a small building designed to protect their hives from the depredations of ravenous honey badgers and dexterous monkeys. Since then, they have erected a new cage, this time to house their stingless bee colonies. These bees, in the genus *Melipona*, are smaller than honey bees and often pollinate a different suite of floral resources, leading to honeys with distinctive flavors and qualities. Their diminutive size also makes them important pollinators of species with tiny flowers that honey bees cannot access. Harvesting wild stingless honey often leads to the destruction of the colony, and the trees they inhabit will often be cut down to gain access. Keeping stingless bees instead in sustainable structures is a win-win for the people and the environment.

What I found most interesting about these bees, however, is that their honey is stored not in wax cells but in “pots” made of cerumen. This substance is similar to honey bee propolis but contains a mandibular secretion, added during its construction. During storage, the properties of the stingless bee honey are influenced by the infiltration of phytochemicals from the cerumen. The combination of being able to access nectar that is off-limits to honey bees, and the unique form of storage, leads to honey that is unique in both its taste and medicinal properties. In Tanzania, it is used to treat stomach ulcers due to its ability to combat *Helicobacter pylori*, the bacteria responsible for this condition.

In addition to training local women as beekeepers, Maasai Honey also supports local villagers by purchasing honeycomb. Beekeeping and honey production is a home industry



The fragrant blooms, and formidable thorns, of *Acacia nilotica*

for many Maasai, but those in remote villages struggle to access a market for their harvest. Providing these beekeepers with a honey market brings income to families in remote areas, supports native bee populations, and allows Maasai Honey to distribute a diverse range of local honeys.

When I interviewed Molly, two of their beekeepers had just returned from a mission to visit the Hadzabe tribe in Kipamba Village. Maasai Honey provides training to the Hadzabe, so that the tribe can increase honey production and support their village through sustainable beekeeping methods. The Hadzabe are both beekeepers and honey hunters — harvesting wild honey from high in the trees, or even hollow caves inside the baobabs. As hunter-gatherers, the tribe also depends on honey as a food source for their survival.

Using bees and beekeeping to do a little good in the world is a common theme of my writing, and I can’t think of a finer example than Maasai Honey. Beekeeping equipment donations are always much-needed and very welcome, and you can even add



An apiary watchman inspects a bait hive in the evening hours.



Members of the Hadzabe tribe hunt for honey in the hollows of baobab trees.

them to your Amazon Smile account should you wish. Check out their good work at [MaasaiHoney.org](https://www.maasaihoney.org) and stay up to date with their latest projects at [Instagram@maasaihoney](https://www.instagram.com/maasaihoney).

Peter Keilty is a beekeeper and pollinator conservationist living in Austin, Texas. His focus is on beekeeping as a means of educating and spreading awareness regarding the plight of pollinators, and native bees in particular.



Peter's latest initiatives include: creation of the first (of hopefully many) "pollinator neighborhoods," where an entire community comes together, through beekeeping, to protect pollinators by mindful stewardship of their land; and the Hurricane Dorian Pollinator Conservation Initiative, which again uses beekeeping to promote native pollinator recovery, as well as teaching a valuable skill to local residents affected by this disaster. [Beesforall.com/@beesforall](https://www.beesforall.com/@beesforall)