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A golden jackal scavenging on the floor of Ngorongoro Crater.

Disturbed ancestors: Datoga history in the Ngorongoro Crater

by Monique Borgerhoff Mulder, Daniela Sieff and Momoya Merus

A pilgrimage to a grave in Ngorongoro Crater throws some light on the relationship between pastoralists and wildlife during the last century.

The village chairman shook my hand in agreement over our plan to make a pilgrimage with three Datoga elders to the Ngorongoro Crater. Our purpose was to visit the grave of Gitangda, the revered ancestor and spiritual leader of the Daremejeg clan, who died over 100 years ago defending his Ngorongoro homeland from the Maasai. This little known tomb is a site of great historical importance for the nomadic Datoga of northern Tanzania, and we hoped that out pilgrimage would throw some light on the relationships between pastoralists and Ngorongoro wildlife in the last century.

The Datoga, Tanzanian pastoralists who herd their cattle on the dry plains (see map) between Ngorongoro and Singida (and recently even beyond), honour their dead in an elaborate and unique fashion. At an esteemed elder's death (usually a man but sometimes a woman), the body is placed in a shallow grave, generally in a corner of his or her homestead. Over a period of about nine months a burial mound of stones, poles and earth is built to a height of four metres; during this time the deceased is fed with milk and beer through holes left open in the sides of the mound. This structure, and the ceremony that follows, is called a *bung'ed*. When the

funeral monument is ready, several hundreds of relatives, clan members and neighbours come to dance and feast for a month or so, slaughtering large numbers of cattle and brewing enormous quantities of honey beer. The climax of the ceremony involves the eldest son of each of the deceased's wives climbing on the *bung'ed* and placing grass, honey beer and tobacco on its cone, as well as the deceased's stick and sandals. After the visitors have left, the deceased's family abandons the old boma. With time, the boma fence and flat roofed huts fall to the ravage of termites. Soon only a weather-beaten *bung'ed* stands as a beacon to the old man and his ancestory. The *bung'ed,* however, is not forgotten. For many years to come sons and their descendants, clan members and even Datoga of different clans come to visit the funeral monument and tend the grave.

Unknown to visitors and indeed many Tanzanians, one of the two most sacred Datoga *bung'edinga* (plural of *bung'ed)* lies on the floor of the Ngorongoro Crater, attesting to a long history of human habitation in an area now renowned primarily for its wildlife. To extend the extensive ethnographic research carried out by Morimichi Tomikawa and his Japanese colleagues and to learn more about the Datoga occupation of the Ngorongoro Crater, their relationship with wildlife and the rituals involved in the honouring of an ancestor, we decided to organise a motorised pilgrimage to the Ngorongoro grave. We started from the eastern shore of Lake Eyasi where we conduct long-term research funded by the National Geographic Society on Datoga pastoralism and family life, under the auspices of the Tanzanian National Scientific Research Council.

Visiting a *bung'ed* in Ngorongoro

Our guide was carefully chosen. Hirba is from the Daremejeg clan, and a great-great grandson of Magena, whose grandfather was Gitangda. Hirba had visited the grave of Gitangda twice before, and assured us that the Ngorongoro Conservation Authority officials would not object to our plans. We were to be accompanied by his uncle Girgis and his younger brother Simon, the village chairman.

On arriving at Hirba's house an hour before dawn, a small ram was suffocated in the customary way; small strips of its skin, called *loghamajeg,* were cut and then fitted over the second finger of the right hand of each of us. Honey beer that had been brewed the previous day, gourds of sour milk, tobacco and meat were put in the Land-Rover and, to the singing of women and the rhythmic clashing of their brass bangles, we set off for *Fuweid,* the Datoga name for the Ngorongoro Crater.

We were full of trepidation as we descended the crater wall in the company of people for whose great-grandfathers this had been home. Hirba took his bearings from the scars of old cattle paths on the crater wall and, rather to our dismay, directed us straight to fig trees north west of the Lerai Forest, a place designated for tourist camping by the NCA and packed full with tents. Hirba was a little confused by the changes since his last visit in the 1950s to these figs – the tents, showers and toilets – but eventually identified a low cairn, just to the north of the northern fig, as Gitangda's *bung'ed.* Here we all took off our sandals and drank milk and honey beer, pouring more over the stones; then meat, tobacco and *loghamajeg* skins were offered. With no delay Hirba headed off to the large southern fig, where exactly the same procedure was followed, evoking the intense curiosity of the tourist campers! Before leaving the next morning, the Datoga repeated these offerings and, in addition, collected a little soil from the foot of both the *bung'ed* and the fig tree to take home.

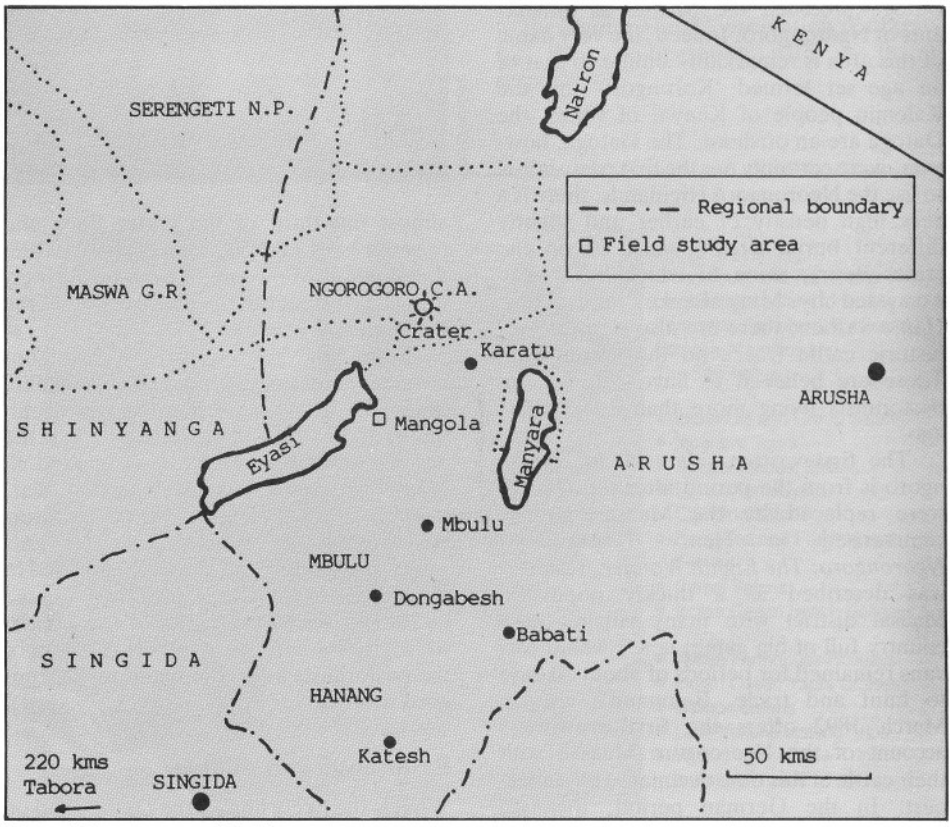
The battle for Fuweid

What was life like for the Datoga in Ngorongoro, when were they there and why did they leave? More specifically, who was Gitangda, and what is the significance of the fig tree? Interviews with old men and women of the Daremejeg and other clans have shed some light on these questions.

Datoga pastoralists were living all over the Ngorongoro Highlands and in the Serengeti *(Shilinget)* in the early 19th century and, according to their accounts, for many generations previously. Gitangda himself, a leader of great spiritual and magical power, seems to have lived at what is now Fig Tree Campsite. Whereas Datoga clans are currently widely dispersed, at that time they settled as localised units. Up to 100 or more distinct families of the same clan lived inside a vast thorn enclosure *(musesoda),* each using a separate gate *(dosht)* through which the family cattle left in the morning and returned at night. The purpose of these fortified camps was the protection of cattle and people from enemies, both other tribes and wild animals. We have no idea how many of these bomas existed in the Ngorongoro Highlands, but two subtribes of the Datoga were certainly represented.

The stories that surround the Ngorongoro *bung'ed* decribed the circumstances under which the Datoga left Fuweid. The Maasai entered the crater from the north east, attacking Datoga bomas. Datoga say that until that time they had been friends with Maasai, but play-fighting among young herdsboys began to get out of control, eventually developing into a tribal war over the Ngorongoro Highlands that lasted four years or more. During that war, Gitangda and one of his five sons, Ngalalng'en, were speared by Maasai. Gitangda's *bung'ed* is at Fig Tree, Ngalalng'en's to the north of the Lerai Forest, near Lake Magadi.

Gitangda's eldest son, Magusachand, met a more curious fate. He was wounded by a Maasai spear in his leg and attempted to crawl back to his boma, calling to his wife to bring him milk. Hearing his call, she took a gourd and ventured away from the safety of the boma to find her husband. After drinking her milk he said goodbye. He never returned home and his body was never found. In the place where he drank his last milk a large fig has grown. This tree, the massive southerly tree at Fig Tree Campsite, is revered as a *bung'ed* because Magusachand was the father of the famous Magena, who led the Datoga out of the crater on their six-year flight from the Maasai to Dongabesh and finally Tabora. Magena died at Tabora, where his *bung'ed*



Map of the area used by the Datoga

... Datoga

at Mashongod still stands and is honoured as the grave of the leader who saved the Datoga from total decimation at the hands of the Maasai.

We have been able to date the expulsion of the Datoga from Ngorongoro with the help of Henry Fosbrooke. The path by which the Maasai remember first entering the crater bears the name of an age set, the *Dawati,* who were circumcised in approximately 1836. A new age set is likely to have been created within 15 years, suggesting that the great Maasai-Datoga battle for Ngorongoro occured betwen 1836 and 1851.

The relationship between fig trees and *bung'edinga* at first puzzled us. Datoga never settle under figs *(sebid),* which they consider as sacred trees (as do the Maasai), and hence *bung'edinga* will never be built near figs; they also never use this kind of wood in the construction of a *bung'ed.* A number of *bung'edinga,* however, including Magena's and Gitangda's, are now found in close association with fig trees, which must have grown subsequently. In fact, most fig species grow very fast and Magusachand's tree could well be less than 100 years old. Furthermore, ecologists maintain that human disturbance favours the successful seeding of figs, and this may therefore account for these associations. For the Datoga, it is more simple: the fig grows to offer the revered elder shade.

Peter Davey ARPS

M. Borgerhoff Mulder

Clockwise from top left: young men delight in constructing ingenious traps for hyenas; Momoya drinking at the fig tree which has grown at Magusachand's bunged; *and with the rhinos poached out of existence, young Datoga men have to kill elephants to demonstrate their bravery.*

Arthur Christiansen

History of human habitation in Ngorongoro

These graves and their accompanying stories provide strong evidence that the Datoga preceded the Maasai as inhabitants of Ngorongoro. Indeed, the very name of this area is remarkably similar to that of an age set termed 'Korongoro' by the Kalenjin people of Kenya, of whom the Datoga are an offshoot. The Datoga, however, were certainly not the first pastoralists to use the Ngorongoro Highlands: there is a very high density of earlier and slightly different burial sites (almost 60 on the crater floor), some of which have been excavated by Mary Leakey and, later, Hamo Sasoon; there are also signs of prehistoric cattle tracks on the crater wall. These are believed to have belonged to pastoralists living more than 2,000 years ago.

The first written reference to Ngorongoro is from the period after the Datoga were replaced by the Maasai, and is summarised in Henry Fostbrooke's *Ngorongoro: The Eighth Wonder.* The area was described as a thickly populated Maasai district with many villages in a country full of big game; here Swahili carvans remained for periods of about 20 days to hunt and trade. Baumann's visit in March 1892 offers the first eyewitness account of the Ngorongoro Maasai, with their cattle at this time decimated by rinderpest. In the German period, the two Siedentopf brothers set up farms covering almost one-third of the crater floor and raised a herd of 1,500 mixed breed cattle; they built at Munge and Lerai, unwittingly using cairn stones in the construction of the farmhouse at Munge.

From this time onwards, Ngorongoro became increasingly protected as a wildlife sanctuary. In 1928 all hunting was prohibited, and in 1951 it was made part of the Serengeti National Park; this excluded all Maasai not resident as of June that year, banned cultivation and restricted pastoralist activities such as burning. These events sowed the seeds of the dissension that led to the establishment of the Conservation Area in 1961 in which the rights of the Maasai were given greater recognition. The era of the pastoralists as predominant in Ngorongoro was over.

Pastoralism and wildlife

What is the likely impact the Datoga had on wildlife during their use of the Serengeti plains and Ngorongoro? Three distinct types of hunting are recognised. The first is *shageta,* opportunistic spear and bow hunting for mammals ranging in size from dikdik to eland, as well as many birds, simply for food. The second type of hunting falls under the category of *lilicta,* comprising buffalo, rhino and, more recently, elephants. *Lilicta* entails competition: men who have killed animals of this category with either a spear or a bow, are allowed to have sexual relationships with young girls; men who have not are scorned. Some men who we have interviewed had killed up to four rhinos (northern shores of Lake Eyasi in 1960) for this purpose. The meat is of course eaten, but the importance of *lilicta* killing lies in its demonstration of a man's bravery.

The third category, *ragnod,* is of great cultural significance. Lions and men of other tribes are termed 'enemies of the people' (because they steal cows), and any man who is the first to spear such an

'enemy' is honoured in extraordinary ways. He is bedecked in jewellery given by young girls and then, singing outside the homesteads of his clansmen and friends, he can demand cattle. According to our interviews, the minimum number of cows awarded a 'killer of the enemy' is five, but men belonging to large clans with many friends and who can afford to extend their *ragnod* over the period of a year, can get up to 60 cows for one killing. Some men kill four or five times in their lifetime. Lions are still killed in the Eyasi area and in Hanang District in this way.

Two final idiosyncratic uses of wildlife are reported. First, if cattle show the symptoms of *dagidoutoust* (an unidentified disease of which breathing difficulties and the growth of long red hairs are symptomatic), a zebra is speared, its fat boiled up with water and then administered to the sick animal; recovery is assured. Second, young men take great delight in constructing traps for spotted hyenas, another livestock thief. One is to place meat in a calabash that the hyena can get its head into, but not out of. Another is to place meat inside a specially-designed hut, which has a pit at its entrance in which an upturned spear is staked, concealed by cut grass, such that the hungry hyena impales itself.

Datoga thus have quite extensive use for wildlife and, at least at high densities, could have had a significant effect on wildlife numbers. Certainly nowadays in the Eyasi area, with the rhinos finished through poaching largely by outsiders, there is increasing competition among young Datoga to hunt for elephants as *lilicta*. Elders are appalled by this escalation in the stakes of male competition, complaining that killing elephants is excessively dangerous. But the young men respond that if you have not killed a *lilicta* animal you are like a 'dead' man. To what extent the impact of Datoga on wildlife differs from that of Maasai (see Mol, *Swara* March/April 1981) is unclear, but (as in the case of the Maasai) peaceful coexistance is hardly an apt description. Realistically, however, the densities of pastoralists are usually so low that their impact on healthy breeding populations of ungulates and predators is likely to be small. More importantly, their impact is tiny in comparison with that of the illegal commercial firearm hunting that occurs today on the east and southern sides of Lake Eyasi. It is this new threat that will most probably destroy Eyasi's diversity in wildlife.

It would be a mistake to argue against multiple land-use schemes on the basis of the *traditional* relationships between pastoralists and wildlife. Customs can and do change, often quite rapidly. For example, the Datoga were in the past renowned for their savage and unprovoked murders of members of other tribes. Although this custom has not entirely disappeared, it is now uncommon, in part through fear of official punishment, in part through reduced harassment from their neighbours (this is not true is Hanang). Such flexibility in customary behaviour suggests that there is no reason to believe that modern pastoralists, even those with a history of quite extensive use of wild animals, should not be granted access to wildlife sanctuaries, if specific provisions enable them to pursue their traditional cattle-raising livelihood. In particular, with proper management of grazing rights and adequate maintenance of grain supplies, pastoralists should be able to coexist with wildlife in many of the more arid areas of nothern Tanzania without resorting to cultivation, which so often precipitates erosion, or poaching, which ultimately devalues tourist opportunities.

The dangers of such advocacy should nevertheless be recognised, as pastoralists may also start to use firearms in the pursuit of wildlife, and the numbers of their stock can increase dramatically with devastating ecological consequences. Until the competition between domestic stock and wildlife is better understood, it is difficult to generalise from case to case. The argument here is simply that the interests of wildlife and pastoralists are not necessarily incompatible.

Multiple land-use schemes, where pastoralists are not excluded from wildlife sanctuaries, may become more acceptable to staunch conservationists, and more interesting to romantic tourists, if there is a greater appreciaiton of the human history of areas currently reserved for exclusive wildlife use. One way to enhance such awareness would be to mark the sacred historical sites. We plan to erect a simple plaque explaining the historical significance of Fig Tree Campsite. We hope this will enrich the experience of both local and foreign visitors to Ngorongoro and ensure these sites are treated with respect until perpetuity. We are, in particular, grateful to the Ngorongoro Conservation Authority for their co-operation with us in all respects.

Monique Borgerhoff Mulder spent two years (1982-1983) living in a Kipsigis village in south-western Kericho District, Kenya, where she conducted a study on marriage and fertility. In 1987 she began a study of inheritance with another Kalenjin group, the Datoga. She is a Post Doctoral Fellow at the Evolution and Human Behavior Program at the University of Michigan, USA and has a PhD in anthropology from Northwestern University

Daniela Sieff has a BA in human sciences from Oxford University, UK, and is now a graduate student at the Evolution and Human Behavior Program at the University of Michigan. She is initiating a study of fertility and work patterns among Datoga women.

Momoya Merus is from Gidoskiet, Mbulu District, Arusha Region. He completed primary school in 1986 at Mangola, Mbulu District. He now lives in Ghangadenda, Mangola, with uncle Gidabashgei, where he is a cattle trader.