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MAN AND WILDLIFE IN NGORONGORO CRATER

by

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In an informative article in SWARA, Vol.12 No.2 of March-April 1989, Ms Monique Mulder and her co-authors presented a striking story of the Tatog pastoralists in Ngorongoro Crater, their past history and present ceremonial practices. Unfortunately, the article was sadly lacking in illustrations, so here an attempt is made to rectify that deficiency and at the same time place the Tatog presence in the perspective of two thousand years of pastoral man/wildlife relationship in the Crater.

Those who recall my earlier article in SWARA entitled Fire! Master or Servant? (Vol.9 No.2 March/April 1986) will remember that the first known pastoralists were the Stone Bowl people, who inhabited the area more than 2000 years ago. There is however, no direct evidence to be found in the Crater that these folk were pastoralists. The association of the Stone Bowl culture with cattle comes from other sources, further to the North, where these terminal neolithic people are found to have lived four thousand years ago. In spite of 60 or more Stone Bowl grave sites in the Crater, the excavation of several of these sites has failed to reveal any bones of domestic animals. This however, is not surprising, as other excavated graves reveal no such bones although they are doubtless burials of cattle owning Tatog. Their ethnic origin is revealed by the fact that the skeletons are found in a sitting position with the head between the knees and facing East. This is the accepted posture for a Tatog burial (Momoya Menu, personal communication). There is no record of customary burial of domestic animals in the grave, though the Maasai are known to wrap the corpse in ox hide in the exceptional cases of actually burying important elders.

Thus there is no way of knowing the size of herds these people possessed, to enable an assessment of their impact on the environment to be ascertained. An indication might be gained if living sites were to be found and excavated, revealing perhaps cattle, sheep or goat bones, though prolonged research has failed to reveal any such living site in the Crater. The nearest approach to such is found on the Serengeti, where adjacent to certain granitic extrusions (Kopjes) circles and lines of stones are to be found, see SWARA Vol.9 as above. An archaeologist,

John Bower records that as a result of his excavations at the low stone enclosures at the north end of the Gol Kopjes, he is strongly persuaded that the structures in question were constructed by the Pastoral Neolithic folk. A grave cairn adjacent to one such site might if excavated confirm that these stone structures are in fact Stone Bowl.

Just when the Stone Bowl people disappeared and who replaced them in the Crater is uncertain, but doubtless other inhabitants came and went before the arrival of the Tatog possibly a few centuries ago. There is much evidence of the moves of cattle people who swept through northern Kenya, starting around 500 B.C. One of these early cultures left massive cairns of stone, and sometimes circles, to mark their graves. There may be significance that one such cairn, similar to but not so large as the Kenya occurrences, is to be found in the Crater. This was pictured in my earlier SWARA article, but was wrongly described as a Stone Bowl grave. These latter are in fact very inconspicuous, the stone work barely protruding above ground level, making them hard to find.

The later grave cairns are more obvious, as for instance the grave of a Tatog ancestor to be seen adjacent to a sacred grove near to Fig Tree Camp at the southern side of the Crater. This is the site described in the Mulder article as marking the grave of a Tatog named Gitangda who died some seven generations ago. It is here that religious ceremonies still take place.

The adjacent grove of trees is not directly associated with the grave cairn - in fact some Tatog deny that it is anything to do with them. But others suggest that it may indicate the site of a bung'ed, the high standing pyramid wood-and-mud structures erected over the graves of important elders. This practice is still performed by the Barabaig the sub-largest tribe of the Tatog now concentrated round Mount Hanang, a 12000' extinct volcano just visible on a clear day from Ngorongoro, 120 miles to the South.

Why they are clumps and not single trees is explained by the fact that some Tatog prolonged the ceremony of the burial and erection of a bung'ed by returning every month for the next 9 months and planting a stake each month to form a circle round the grave site. If a number of these stakes were to strike and grow they would form a clump such as

the one near Ngalalng'en's grave cairn. It is difficult to consider these clumps of which there are several, as anything but man-made as the type of tree, largely ficus species, are water loving, and unlikely to have established themselves on the open steppe where they are found. They are standing up well against their contact with wildlife, but in the absence of regeneration are doomed to extinction in a matter of decades.

One very conspicuous fig tree, the centre of the Fig Tree camp site is said to have grown on at a spot where a mortally wounded warrior drank his last gourd of milk before his disappearance and death. This tree, together with the stone cairn, is the site of present day worship, as fully described in the Mulder article. When I was the Conservator of Ngorongoro in the early 1960's, before I appreciated the cultural significance of this conspicuous fig tree, I permitted one safari firm to camp under the tree. Unfortunately, when more recently wholesale camping was permitted in the Crater, this sacred tree has become a camp centre, complete with cooking-camping and toilet facilities. The tree itself has suffered, (see photo) whilst sacrificial items hung on the tree, were filched by tourists or camp employees. Some years ago a large branch fell onto a tent pitched under the tree and killed the Canadian woman sleeping there. However, since June 1992 all camping in the Crater has been prohibited by the Authority, a most welcome step to preserve the integrity of this unspoilt attraction.

The more recent inhabitants' of the Crater were the Maasai. They forced out the Tatog about 150 years ago. In the 1880 their presence was recorded by the leaders of the trading caravans which habitually passed through Ngorongoro on their route between Pangani on the Coast and Ukerewe on Lake Victoria. The description read "Ngorongoro, a thickly populated Masai district with many villages. The country is full of big game, harboured in the neighbouring forest. A strong boma is made here and the caravan remains about twenty days to trade and hunt."

Thus the Crater's wildlife maintained itself against both the resident Maasai cattle and the hunting of the transient caravans. Then tragedy struck all the Crater's inhabitants, human, domestic stock and wildlife. The cattle disease, rinderpest crossed the Red Sea c. 1890, and swept through Africa from Cape Gardafui to the Cape of Good Hope. It decimated both cattle and wildlife whilst the Maasai were in most pitiable state.

Baumann, the first European visitor to the Crater records on 20th March 1892 that:-

" A crowd of tattered scare-crows, now typical of the Masai country, gathered outside the thorn fence of our camp. These were women reduced to walking skeletons, out of whose sunken eyes looked the madness of hunger, children resembling deformed frogs rather than human beings, warriors who could hardly crawl on all fours and moronic, enaciated grey beards. These people ate everything available; dead donkeys were a delicacy to them; but they also devoured the skins, bones and even horns of cattle."

But there was still some wildlife around. Baumann records "the plain around us was again populated with numerous rhinoceros" of which Baumann and his followers shot several. He also describes a Wandorobo camp, the surroundings of which were littered with game refuse - which shows there must have been game around for these hunters to kill.

By the early nineteenth hundreds the position must have re-established itself, for the German rancher Seitendoph, who established himself in the Crater, helped maintain himself by shooting wildebeest and travelling to the Bantu country to the West with an ox-cart load of wildebeest tails which he sold to the locals to make fly switches.

Seitendoph built up a herd of cattle of not less than 1500; he endeavoured to protect his pastures from the wildebeest by organized drives, which reveals the extent to which they must have re-established themselves.

Seitendoph and his cattle retreated south before the advancing British. In the early post war period, after an abortive effort of an Englishman Captain Hurst and

numbers from 8500 in 1958 to 17,000 in 1960. A detailed analysis in 1966, calculated "stock units" based on the weight to each species showed that the domestic animals only formed one tenth of the total grazing weight on the Crater's pastures. Since the eviction of the Maasai and their cattle in 1974 there has been a remarkable increase in the number of buffalo. In 1962 it was an event to see 5 buffalo in the Crater: now they number between two and three thousand.

Two catastrophic events have hit the wildlife of Ngorongoro one natural, and reversible, the other man made and irreversible. The first was an unprecedented plague of small biting flies called Stomaxys. These are always present in small numbers, breeding in muddy swamp edges, particularly when fouled by dung. But the bimodal rain system means constant fluctuation of the swamps leading to the alternate flooding and drying out of the Stomaxys breeding grounds. But in 1962-63 the short and the long rains blended into one long rainy season. This led to stability of the swamp edges and permitted continuous breeding of the flies. They increased in such numbers that the wildlife and indeed the Maasai cattle were literally black with flies. If in case of sickness an animal could not whisk off the flies, it was literally bled to death.

The lions were particularly affected by flies. Some died and some migrated, reducing their number from an estimated 50 to about 10. With their bodies covered with lacerated patches, they tried to avoid the flies by climbing trees or hiding in hyaena dens. Luckily the plague of flies ceased and over a very few years the lion numbers were restored and indeed increased to the present one hundred. A most interesting study by Craig Packer, Professor of Biology at the University of Minnesota reveals how the lion population reestablished itself, but severe inbreeding casts doubt on the future health of this Community (see National Geographic, April 1992).

Not so the rhino which were found by scientific count to number over a hundred different animals either resident in or visiting the Crater in 1961-62. But since then poaching has reduced the number to under twenty. By strict anti-poaching measures the number being maintained over the last three years so that the crater is one of the very four places where the tourist can be guaranteed the sight of a rhino.

So in our review of the man-wildlife relationship in Ngorongoro over the last century we have observed several ups and downs, but in general the wildlife has more than held its own against the pastoralists cattle. The big question for the future is whether wildlife can maintain itself against the tourists land rovers.

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