
MAN AND ELEPHANT IN THE TSAVO AREA OF KENYA: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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For thousands of years, man and elephant have shared the vast Tsavo plain in Kenya, which is generally too arid for farming and of little use for pastoralism. Up to the middle of this century, part of this area (which is now Tsavo East National Park) belonged to the Waata, an Oromo-speaking group of hunters who were experts at elephant and other big game hunting, as well as honey gathering. Three hill ranges which rise from the middle of the plain comprise the home of the Taita who have settled there as permanent agropastoralists. For centuries, they hunted on the nearby plains in the area that now form part of the Tsavo West National Park. However, these two neighbouring peoples, the Waata and the Taita, did not hunt in the same way. The Taita, unlike the Waata, were not predominantly hunters. The Waata specialised in elephant hunting, partly to provide ivory for the coastal trade, while the Taita practised their hunting skills on a wide variety of game which did not normally include the elephant.

This article, based on a research study, examines the co-existence of the Waata and the Taita people with the elephant from an anthropological perspective, revealing an interesting age-old complicity between the two species.

THE TAITA CASE: ELEPHANTS AS PEOPLE

Hunting was quite important to the traditional subsistence way of life of the Taita. In the 19th century, several Europeans mentioned the existence of numerous game-pits at the foot of the hills and some thought that they were being used to trap elephants for ivory (Guillain, 1856; Krapf, 1860; New, 1873). Today, however, the Taita dispute this assumption, asserting that elephants are too clever and will always “nose out” the pit with their trunk.

During the great famine of 1884, when many Taita tried to survive by hunting, other witnesses refer to rhino and buffalo hunts, but not elephant. The missionary A. Wray wondered why the Saghala people were not killing the elephants which were often seen at the foothills (Johnston, 1886; Wray, 1928; Tyrell, 1985).

There were some Taita, the Wasi, who did spend most of their time hunting elephants, though they rarely took part in the ivory trade even though it was flourishing in the second half of the 19th century. A famous Taita hunter at that time was nicknamed Mundwachovu or “Man of the elephants”. His grandson, who inherited his skill, remembers having killed several elephants to defend his crops and to sell ivory. However, as he explained, he was ceremoniously cleansed by a traditional doctor after his first kill; and after subsequent kills, he always cleansed himself with the stomach contents of the dead elephant. In fact every hunter who had killed an elephant had to undergo a cleansing ceremony (*kuombochua*) before going back home or sleeping with a woman, just as was the case for a warrior who had killed an enemy or another Taita in a feud. The killing of an elephant was thought of as “murder” and the elephant was seen as a man. For this reason, its flesh was never eaten.

The Taita explain this human identity by referring to the elephant’s naked skin and to its mammary gland which resembles a woman’s breast. They give a female character to the elephant in contrast to a male character to the rhino. They say that an elephant will never attack unless it is endangered, or if its young are endangered, but rhinos will charge without any reason. Thus with these two animals they express the opposing images of tranquil strength and blind fierceness.

However, the Taita people have always known that the elephant’s tranquil strength can be dangerous. In a blessing to a departing missionary called Rebmman in 1849 they said, “May this friend continue on his way unimpeded, may the bush not hold him back, may this friend not meet with elephants, rhinos or enemies...” (Krapf, 1860).

The inhabitants of the Taita hills are no strangers to the hunger and anger of elephants. The crop depredations and deaths of several people in the early 1980s, and from 1990 to 1993 (Ngure, 1995) were almost a repetition of events in 1916, when the District Commissioner of Voi asked permission for natives to shoot elephants which were damaging crops, and again in the 1950s (Anonymous, Kenya National Archives, 1913-1925; 1951-1962).

Being good hunters, the Taita could have traditionally killed elephants for at least two reasons: to protect their crops from damage and to trade ivory to the caravans, to which they were already supplying food and water. But to the Taita this would have amounted to murder. Instead, they used the strength of the elephant for their own benefit. For example, they sprinkled elephant dung around their fields to protect them from robbers and sorcerers, or they burned the dung to cure a sick person through fumigation. The old *kufighika* ritual, which aimed at guarding the land against enemies or wild animals, made use of elephant dung and the earth from elephant footprints. Even today, Taita shepherds burn pieces of dung, or wild sisal (*Sansevieria spp.*) chewed by elephants, to keep elephants at bay. The Taita explain that because elephants eat a wide range of plants found on the plain, their dung contains many useful constituents which act as efficient medicines or repellents to chase away intruders, including elephants themselves.

Interestingly, the Taita ascribed a similar effectiveness to the medicines and arrow poison of their neighbours, the Waata. They thought about the plain as a powerful and potentially dangerous place and bestowed these same characteristics on the plain dwellers. Following the principle that evil can be treated by evil, the Taita tried to control this danger by using the power it contained. The Waata hunter and the elephant were classed in the same category, and since the Waata were often called “animals” it is no surprise that in turn, elephants were regarded as “men”.

THE WAATA CASE: THE HUNTER AS AN ELEPHANT-MAN

For several centuries, the Waata hunters have roamed the arid bush and woodland which stretch from the Tana River to Mount Kilibasi and the Taita hills. In contrast to the Taita farmers, the Waata specialised in elephant hunting, supplying the coastal traders with tonnes of ivory. Their archery technology - an extraordinarily powerful long bow and a very potent arrow poison - possibly had no counterpart in East Africa. Their traditional way of life revolved around the elephant. Camps were built next to the animal which had been killed and were moved according to the kills. In good times, elephant meat was their only food, aside from honey. The Waata also used the elephant fat to smear on themselves.

The tremendous importance of the elephant is shown in a myth which associates the creation of elephants with the emergence of the Waata as real hunters.

Famine was in the country because the (first?) Waata hunter always came home empty-handed. So his wife and children started eating grass and leaves and anointed themselves with red earth. They did so everyday until they became a mother elephant and her calves. Thus, elephants were born and Waata never experienced famine again.

To become an adult, the young Waata male had to kill a dangerous beast, for example a buffalo or a rhino, but especially an elephant from which the tusks were required for marriage. As explained by an old hunter, the first hunting success was greatly celebrated. As soon as an elephant had been killed, the young hero was dressed up as an elephant with pieces of its skin, a part of its trunk for a hat, the tail pulled on as a sleeve, and the ears slung over the shoulders to act as an apron. Once in the village, the hero remained secluded for seven days, wearing a necklace rubbed in elephant fat every day. On the last day of seclusion, beer was poured over his head which was shaved by an old, skilled hunter, in the hope that the new hunter would become another good marksman. A different version of the same story describes how the ears of the elephant were cut off by the women and placed as a shelter “hut” for the young hero. The women then performed a dance in front of the shelter, hurling taunts at the dead animal and praising the slayer, who received the elephant’s tail as a bracelet. Then, having sat in his “hut”, the hero’s head was shaved and anointed with the fat of his victim. When all the meat had been removed from the carcass, the ears were placed under the animal’s skull to ensure its peaceful sleep (Sharpe, unknown date; Parker & Amin, 1983).

The hunter also had to make use of “animal skills” when stalking his prey: by moving quietly, making good use of all his senses and being able to read every sign left by elephants - in other words, trying to understand the elephants’ language. To the Waata people, the hunter and his game are one and the same thing.

The Waata people remained almost unknown until Tsavo National Park was created in 1948. By that time, most of them lived in permanent settlements and had taken up farming. But ivory trafficking was by then well organised, and the Waata men who had not given up hunting turned to full-time poaching, killing elephants only for their tusks, and rhinos for their horn, and leaving the flesh to rot. Together with other tribes, namely the Kamba and the Giriama, the Waata were a

real threat to the Tsavo elephant population. The Park's authorities reacted sharply and by 1958 had totally dismantled the bush underworld of these poachers.

For centuries before they became poachers, the Waata had been well integrated into the lowland, semi-arid, savanna ecosystem of Tsavo. Their lives were so dependent on elephants that the destruction of herds would have meant death to themselves. The antiquity of the ivory trade on the north coast of East Africa suggests that the hunting habits of the Waata people had never endangered the elephant population even though their hunting was focused on the elephant.

It is arguable that the Waata in fact contributed to the ecological balance by reducing pressure on woodland through elephant hunting. By killing elephants, the Waata were actually preserving another important resource, wild honey, which they mostly found in trees. The honey is produced either by the honey bee, *Apis mellifica*, or by several species of social bees belonging to the genus *Trigona*. These small, stingless bees usually build their hives in the hollows of trees such as *Commiphora* spp. (*hammess*, *hagarsu*) or *Bowswellia* spp. (*d'akar*) from which the resinous sap is sold at the coast as incense, and - less commonly - *Cordia sinensis* (*mad'era*). The Waata also made use of other plant species, such as *Adansonia digitata* for food and beer fermentation, in which the honey bee is frequently found; *Sterculia africana* for making carrying straps, snuff, and natural water storage; and *Grewia* spp. for food and for making bows and arrows. Most of these species constitute a portion of the elephants' diet. With the increase in the elephant population during the 1960s, coupled with the effects of fire and the cessation of poaching by the Waata, many *Commiphora* spp., *Sterculia* spp. and *Adansonia digitata* were destroyed, thus depriving the Waata of essential resources, especially honey (Bax & Sheldrick, 1963; Agnew, 1968; Leuthold, 1977).

CONCLUSIONS

Although elephants were more important to the general livelihood of the Waata than the Taita, and although the two groups have traditionally approached hunting from different angles, they have the same respect for the elephant. They believe that it is a powerful and intelligent animal, which is on an equal footing with man, especially to a hunter. The elephant's equality and power were regarded as useful, not harmful, because elephants secured the Waata's existence and provided the Taita with protection.

Modern research confirms the appropriateness of the traditional approach. The elephant is called a "keystone" species which, with man, shares the capacity to shape its environment. Man and elephant also compete for the same resources in the same habitat (Western, 1989; Shoshani, 1993; Parker & Graham, 1989). Both species have a long life-span, follow a similar reproductive cycle, rear their young for several years, have no serious predators except man, react to death... and so on.

The complicity between the two species existed in some societies long before the development of science. Man and elephant have not always been enemies. Traditionally, man had respect for the elephant and recognised its worth and usefulness. The dramatic reduction of elephant populations can be linked not only to habitat reduction and human population growth, but to the advent of modernisation and the breakdown of traditional societies.

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