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The Hyena: Witch's Auxiliary or Nature's Fool? Witchcraft and Animal Lore Among the Valangi of Tanzania

Introduction

This article concerns the symbolic representation of the hyena among the Valangi¹. The Valangi live mostly in the Kondoia region, which is situated roughly half way between Arusha and Dodoma, in central Tanzania.

According to the *The Ethnologue* (2005), the Valangi number 350,000 people. They are primarily farmers, and as such have no special link with any one animal. However, animals are an integral part of the culture and symbolism, as is manifested in their oral literature. One animal in particular seems to hold a special place for the Valangi, being remarkable both for its frequent presence in the oral literature, and its striking absence from ordinary conversation: the hyena.

¹ The term “Valangi” is the name of the people in their own language, kilangi. However, whenever one is not speaking in kilangi, the Swahili terms are used (Swahili is the national language of Tanzania): Warangi and kirangi respectively.

My observations stem from numerous field trips² to Valangi land, in the Kondoia region in Central Tanzania, as well as to other parts of Tanzania, namely Singida, between 1996 and the present.

Although John Kesby (1986) states that the Valangi have completely lost their oral literature and traditions, to the point that they no longer remember any stories, in July 1996 I had the good fortune to meet an accomplished story teller, Pascali Daudi, who lives in the small village of Piriri, near Pahi. I was able to record several of his stories, as well as those of a few other people in the same village who were willing to be interviewed³.

In this paper, I will analyze the two stories where the hyena appears (given in full at the end of the text) and will attempt to explain why the hyena is systematically portrayed as a fool, in stark contrast to the fear in which they are held by all the Tanzanians, and Kenyans, whom I have had a chance to interview.

In the first text, *The Hyena and the Hare*, the two animals are friends. The Hare loves to eat beans, and one day the Hyena copies him. The Hyena is caught by the owner of the bean plot, but cowardly betrays his friend, shifting the blame onto the Hare, saying the Hare is the one who usually eats beans, and moreover is very accomplished at it. This leads to the Hare being caught. But, contrary to the Hyena, the Hare is very clever and thinks up a stratagem. He tells the farmer that if he is beaten with a stick, it will toughen up his

² I thank the members of the LACITO-CNRS for their generosity in providing the funds for these trips.

³ The recordings of five texts, accompanied by their translations (English and French) and morphological analysis can be listened to on the LACITO Archive Project website: http://lacito.vjf.cnrs.fr/archivage/contents_fr.htm

meat. The best way to make Hare meat tender is to beat it on the sand. So the farmer throws the Hare on the ground, thus allowing him to make his escape. In the second story, the Hyena is friends with a Lion. The Lion goes out hunting, and brings back food for both of them. The Lion eats the meat, and the Hyena eats the bones. Their neighbor, the Hare, comes to beg for food, but the Hyena sends him away, growling at him. The Hare gets his revenge however; he is called in to treat the Lion for a broken paw, and insists that the only possible treatment is the backbone of a hyena. Thus the Hyena ends up being skinned by his friend the Lion.

The question that arises is: how can one explain that the hyena is portrayed in these two stories as a rather lowly creature, cowardly, selfish and foolish, and yet be so feared that people shudder at the mention of it?

I believe the answer lies in a particular area of the Valangi's culture, tied to witchcraft.

To understand the pervasiveness of witchcraft in the Valangi society today, one must go back to the era preceding the arrival of Islam and Christianity.

Robert Gray (1963) in his article on witchcraft among the Wambugwe⁴, states that before the arrival of Islam and Christianity in the beginning of the 19th century, witchcraft was used by chiefs in an annual rain ritual, for the purpose of bringing rain to the land belonging to the chiefdom, but also to prevent the other chiefdoms from getting rain. The purpose of this was to annex the other chiefs' subjects. The more people in a chiefdom, the richer the chief: subjects had to pay tribute to their chief, as well as court fees.

⁴ The Wambugwe are a tribe historically very close to the Valangi, to the extent that the two consider themselves one single tribe, half of which migrated farther than the other half.

Moreover, larger groups made for more successful cattle raids on the Maasai – a share of the plunder was given to the chief – and also made for better protection against cattle raids by the Maasai.

With the advent of Islam and Christianity, the Valangi were made to give up the rainmaking ceremonies. Witchcraft however remains part of their daily life, and fear of it prompts people to be very careful not to excite the envy or jealousy of others. For example, one informant, now living in England but who returns regularly to the Kondoa area, will never eat twice in the same restaurant for fear of poison in his food.

Concerning the Sukuma, a tribe living, like the Valangi, in Central Tanzania, Mesaki (1994:48, quoted in Golooba-Mutebi 2003:5) states that “a sickness which fails to respond to normal treatment will be held to have its base in the enmity, envy or jealousy of those with whom the victim interacts. [...] witchcraft in Sukumaland may be held responsible for almost any calamity or misfortune such as sudden storms on the lake, the sudden death of a healthy person, miscarriages and infertility, the failure of rain, death from snake bite, losing one’s way, and various diseases.”

The hyena plays a major part in the imagination of the Valangi because it is closely associated with witches, and belief in witchcraft is all pervasive among the Valangi, and indeed among all Tanzanians and Kenyans I have met. Kesby (1986: 230-231) states: “The spotted hyena is the most significant mammal, apart from people themselves, in Rangi experience. Associated with witches (vasave) and thieves (viivi), hyenas are at the furthest conceivable point from everything which is wholesome and decent. It is true that hyenas sometimes break into houses during the hours of darkness in order to capture the goats which are impounded there for the

night, but this depredation in (sic) inadequate to account for the fascinated hatred with which Rangi regard them. Hyenas also antagonize the Rangi by spoiling stored “millet”, even when they are not hungry and do not eat any of it. Their inauspicious character parallels that of owls: they are animals of ill omen. If one comes near a house at night, most Rangi feel that someone in the house, or a relative elsewhere, will fall ill or die.”

According to my informants, witchcraft is not hereditary among the Valangi.

When the witches see a child who shows promise in the domain, they demand that the parents allow them to train him. In the case of refusal, the witches take revenge by turning the defaulter into a zombie or by killing someone he loves. This is done by making the person ill, by having him devoured by lions or by striking him down by lightening. Some areas in Tanzania are known for the type of punishment they inflict, for example the witches of Sumbawanga have the reputation of being able to control lightening.

Apprentices are taught the arts of witchcraft at nocturnal gatherings in the forest. Once their training is complete, they are given a “kit”, containing potions, but also snakes and hyenas. They must vow never to reveal the identity of other witches.

Witches are said to act mostly for their own purposes, but one may buy the services of a witch, to obtain the favors of a loved one, to become wealthy, to take revenge on someone, etc. These services are paid for in cash or in cattle, although having recourse to a witch can be dangerous, as they sometimes make heavy demands, such as that one give up one’s eldest child to be trained as a witch.

There are two main types of witchcraft, depending on whether it is carried out during the day or at night. The first type mostly consists in poisoning or casting an evil eye on a person's food. According to Robert Gray, the result depends on the kind of food bewitched:

« The character and seriousness of the sickness depends on the kind of food involved in the bewitching. For example, bewitched sweet potatoes are believed to cause simple swelling of the abdomen – a relatively mild affliction of short duration; meat causes a more serious pathological condition affecting either the throat or rectum; while bewitched water causes severe insanity. To be bewitched through butter is the most dreaded misfortune, for this is believed to result in leprosy. Butter can be affected by a witch not only while it is being eaten but also if lumps of it appear on the skin. Therefore, people take care when applying butter as an ointment not to leave any unmelted lumps which could be seen on the skin. Snuff, if it is bewitched, causes a mild form of insanity in old men, making them act clownish. The staple daily foods – porridge of ground sorghum, clotted milk and green vegetables – are not regarded as very suitable agents of witchcraft, and can be eaten in relative security. »

It is even said that the Wambugwe build their houses well spaced-out so that the neighbours cannot cast an evil eye on their food.

A second type of daytime magic is intimidation: if a witch considers that someone is getting above themselves, doing too well out of a shop for example, the witch sends a snake to the shop to frighten the owner. The fact that shops are usually situated far from any grass or wooded areas, is claimed as proof that the snake is indeed sent by a witch.

The second type of witchcraft is carried out at night, and this is where the hyenas come in. As mentioned above, hyenas and snakes are part of the "kit" witches receive upon completion of their studies. Snakes are used for intimidation; hyenas can be used to prevent someone from sleeping, by prowling around the house making strange noises. But their greatest usefulness is for travel. Many night time spells make use of the hair, nail clippings, clothing, or even footprints of the victim. They may also visit a victim's house to make mischief. One informant told me that he had great trouble getting his house built because witches would come at night to disperse the sand pile (for making cement) with their naked bottoms.

To travel to the victims' houses, witches use hyenas. According to Gray's informants, learning to ride the hyena is one of a witch's most difficult tasks. Valangi witches ride hyenas naked, and sit backwards, facing over the tail. They cover their bodies with oil so that if ever they are caught they can slip out of the captor's grasp. The hyenas are said to be so swift that a witch can travel to the farthest part of the country yet be back before morning. The witches make themselves invisible, but not the hyena. If a person encounters a hyena at night, chances are it is carrying a witch. To inform the witch that the encounter was unintentional, the person must pick up a fistful of sand, and throw it over his shoulder, then spit a little to the right, then a little to the left.

The hyenas are said to live in the witches' house, in a special area called *kisuri chaa mpici*, at the very back of the house where it is darkest. This led to trouble during the 1970s when the President Julius Nyerere undertook to group people into villages. Officials were sent out to move the people and their cattle. Some animals, such as goats and chickens, are kept in the house

at night. When someone happened upon a hyena, they knew the owner was a witch. The official therefore had to be suppressed. I've been told that there were many deaths at that period.

It is said that witches use hyenas as their auxiliaries because hyenas can be tamed, trained, because they are faithful, because people stay away from them, and because they are swift.

It therefore seems rather strange that the hyena should be portrayed as such a weak and cowardly character in the oral literature: he lets his friends do all the hard work, betrays them at the drop of a hat, and is quite incapable of getting himself out of trouble. It is interesting to note that although the Valangi seem quite knowledgeable on the subject of the hyena - it is indeed true, for example, that hyenas eat bones, their especially strong jaws and teeth serve as bone crushers, and their excrement is often white and chalky due to such a diet - they seem to downplay the more frightening side of the hyenas. The hyena is portrayed more as a housewife, who stays home and does the cooking while the mighty lion goes out to hunt, whereas they are actually talented hunters.

The answer perhaps lies in the special relationship between hyenas and witches. As witches are greatly feared, and there is no way of telling who is a witch and who isn't, one must constantly be on guard. In fact, witches are just like everyone else, and share the same feelings, except that they have the means to act on their feelings, of jealousy, covetousness, envy, malice, etc.

The hyena could be considered the animal counterpart to witches, and as such represents the darker side of humanity. On many points, popular beliefs surrounding hyenas and witches are identical: they are believed to be mostly active at night, to eat corpses, to commit incest, to be homosexual, and in

general, to give free reign to their baser impulses. Thus, belittling hyenas in the oral literature is a way of assuaging the people's fear of witches without risking retribution. Therefore, although the hyena cannot be considered a keystone animal in the sense that the culture would continue to exist without it, it is, through the fear children have of it, for natural reasons, namely that of being eaten, and that adults continue to have of it, through its associations with witches, the hyena is a central character in Valangi culture.

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Abstract

This paper presents the relations between hyenas and witches on one hand, and between witches and the other Valangi on the other hand. It aims to show how the lowly representation of the hyena in the oral literature, in contradiction with reality, is a means of assuaging people's fear of witchcraft.

Key words

Langi, witchcraft, oral traditions, Tanzania, hyenas