

COMMENTARY

Public and Hidden Transcripts in the East African Highlands: A Comment on Smith (1998)

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Smith (1998) uses the relationship between Maasai pastoralists and so-called Dorobo hunter-gatherers in East Africa as part of a framework for understanding archaeological finds on the Vredenberg Peninsula in South Africa. We argue that this relationship may be less marked by subservience, hierarchy, marginalization, and dependence than Smith's sources indicate, and we explore the implications of a fuller understanding of Maasai–“Dorobo” relations for the interpretation of African pastoralist and hunter-gatherer archaeological sites. © 2001 Academic Press

INTRODUCTION

In a recent issue of this Journal, Andrew B. Smith offered historical and ethnographic sketches from seven different locations in Africa and Arabia on relationships between hunter-gatherers and pastoralists as a framework for understanding archaeological finds on the Vredenberg Peninsula in South Africa (Smith 1998). Smith argues that it is the “almost universal condition” of hunter-gatherers to be marginalized on the peripheries of herding societies and that it follows “that the same conditions would have been manifest in the prehistoric period” (Smith 1998:201). In this comment, we provide a

different perspective on one of Smith's ethnographic cases, the relationship between “Dorobo” hunter-gatherers and Maasai pastoralists in East Africa. Although this relationship is only one of the examples Smith gives of how pastoralists and hunter-gatherers interact, it is clearly the most important case both in terms of his understanding such relationships in general and for his reconstruction of relations between pastoralists and hunter-gatherers in prehistory on the Vredenberg Peninsula in particular. We argue that “Dorobo” may be markedly less subservient to Maasai than Smith's sources indicate, and we explore the implications of a fuller understanding of Maasai–“Dorobo”

relations for the interpretation of African pastoralist and hunter-gatherer archaeological sites.

SMITH ON MAASAI-"DOROBO" RELATIONS

Smith presents the relationship between Maasai and "Dorobo" in the context of a broad "master and bondsman" metaphor borrowed from Hegel (Baillie 1949). In this view, many hunter-gatherers, including the various "Dorobo" groups, are best understood not as independent entities but rather as marginalized, low status members of a broader pastoralist system. He argues that when hunter-gatherers become clients of pastoralists, they accept pastoralist values, including their low, subservient, dependent position in the pastoralist system.

Smith's sources on "Dorobo" confirm his expectations. His sources include Joseph Thompson (1885), a 19th century explorer, John Galaty (1986), a leading ethnographer of Maasai, and Michael Kenny (1981), the author of one article on Maasai-"Dorobo" relations based on library research, not fieldwork. The picture created by these limited and one-sided sources is, not surprisingly, limited and one-sided. Despite Thomson's very superficial knowledge of "Dorobo" groups, Smith depends especially heavily upon his descriptions of them as having "nothing like tribal life among them" and as "a species of serf" who are "treated accordingly." Smith does cite two sources based on fieldwork among actual "Dorobo" groups (Cronk [1989b] on the Mukogodo transition from hunting and gathering to pastoralism and Ten Raa [1986] on the Sandawe acquisition of livestock) but only to support his broader point about the difficulty such groups face in obtaining livestock or in keeping it once they have it.

MAASAI-"DOROBO" RELATIONS: AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW

The first step toward an understanding of the complex relationship between Maasai and "Dorobo" is an examination of the origins of the word itself, which comes from the Maa language. Maa-speaking peoples are distributed in a more or less continuous swath across East Africa from Kenya's Ndoto Mountains and Lake Turkana in the north, where they are represented by such groups as Ariaal (Fratkin 1998) and Samburu (Spencer 1965, 1973) down through the Great Rift Valley, where they are represented by Ilchamus (Little 1998), various groups of pastoral Maasai and agricultural Arusha Maasai, and into eastern Tanzania, where they are represented by Parakuyo (Rigby 1992). Maa-speakers refer to all hunter-gatherers as *il-torrobo* (singular: *ol-torrobani*). *Il-torrobo* has been anglicized as Dorobo, also spelled Ndorobo, Nderobo, Wandorobo, Wanderobo, and Torrobo. The precise origins of the term *il-torrobo* are obscure. It has been suggested that it comes from the Maa word for "short," *dorop* (Huntingford 1929:335), the Maa word for tsetse fly (Galaty 1986:116); a combination of the Maa words for bees, *lotorok*, with the word for cattle pen, *bo*, referring to people who keep bees rather than livestock; and the Dadoga (Southern Nilotic) word *darabe:da*, meaning "forest" (DiStefano 1990:55). Maa-speakers use the term *il-torrobo* not as a tribal label so much as an economic designation, using it to refer to a wide variety of groups who have nothing in common but a way of making a living and a proximity to Maa-speakers. This includes Elmolo or Gura pawa (Heine 1977; Brenzinger 1992), who formerly spoke an Eastern Cushitic language; Kalenjin-speaking Okiek (see Blackburn 1982, 1996; Huntingford 1928, 1929, 1931, 1942, 1951, 1954, 1955; Klumpp and Kratz 1993; Kratz 1994, 1999) and Akie (Kaare

1996, 1997, 1999); Mukogodo, who formerly spoke an Eastern Cushitic language (Cronk 1989a, 1989b; Heine 1974/75; Brenzinger et al. 1994); Digirri, some of whom formerly spoke Kalenjin (Cronk 1989a; Herren 1990, 1991); Ilng'wesi, some of whom formerly spoke Meru (Cronk 1989a; Herren 1990, 1991); and Maa-speaking Suiei (Ichikawa 1978), LeUaso, and Mumonyot (Cronk 1989a; Herren 1990, 1991). Some of these groups (e.g., Mumonyot) are descendants of Maa-speaking pastoralists who turned to foraging after losing their livestock, but most have deep roots in East Africa, where their ancestors appear to have been hunters and beekeepers for millenia (Ambrose 1986; Ehret 1974; Gang 1997; Kuehn and Dickson 1999; Mutundu 1999).

The second and very crucial step toward a more complete understanding of Maasai—"Dorobo" relations is to develop an appreciation of how situations in which there is a power differential can foster the development of contrasting visions of the relationship, not all of which are equally likely to be expressed by all parties in front of all audiences. James C. Scott (1990) has developed this insight into a useful tool for social analysis by contrasting what he calls the "public transcript" with the "hidden transcript." The public transcript, as the name implies, is the version of reality that is acknowledged openly where dominants and subordinates interact. It typically describes the social order and provides reasons why people, including subordinates, should think that it is good for all and certainly unavoidable and unchangeable. But, as Scott points out, the public transcript, "where it is not positively misleading, is unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations" (1990; 2). The hidden transcript, in contrast, is the version of reality shared among the subordinates when no representatives of the dominant group are there to hear it. Because it is

hidden, it is inherently difficult to study. It often takes disguised and anonymized forms, such as jokes and graffiti.¹

Smith's sources on Maasai—"Dorobo" relations have given him access only to one side of this equation, the public transcript promulgated by the dominant Maasai pastoralists. As a reflection of the public transcript, Smith's account is brief but fairly accurate: the meaning of *il-torobo* to Maa-speakers is essentially derogatory, being used to refer to poor people who must live like wild animals, i.e., by hunting and gathering, rather than from domesticated plants and animals. The label has a way of sticking with people through the generations so that even groups that have not hunted for decades may be labeled *il-torobo* (Waller 1985:128). In the minds of Maa-speakers *il-torobo* are associated with a variety of negative concepts, including offensiveness, meanness, poverty, cowardice, womanhood, degradation, imperfection, degeneration, and contamination (Galaty 1979, 1981, 1982, 1993). *Il-torobo* are associated in a Maasai myth with an original fall from grace, in which *ol-toroboni* is said to have shot an arrow to sever the cord connecting heaven and earth, down which God had been sending cattle (Hollis 1905:271; Jacobs 1965:26–27; Kipury 1983:30–31). Other Maasai stories use *il-torobo* as negative models to teach

¹ The existence of a hidden transcript by itself does not imply that the social situation in question is one of heavy oppression. All it suggests is that there is a power differential between two groups and that it is made manifest in a contrast between the public and hidden transcripts when the two groups interact. One strategy of subordinate groups for dealing with their status is precisely to avoid such interactions as much as possible, i.e., to remain as independent and autonomous as possible so that their lives are dominated as little as possible by their relationship with their oppressors. Another strategy is to maintain a hidden transcript that helps them recast their social situation in terms that they find more acceptable and that more accurately reflect how they experience them. Both strategies can be and often are used simultaneously.

lessons about envy and selfishness (Hollis 1905:297; Spencer 1973:86) and hold *il-torobo* up as objects of ridicule (e.g., Kipury 1983:200–201). The idea of *il-torobo* is so antithetical to the Maasai image of themselves that Galaty (1979) has suggested that it acts as a kind of symbolic “anti-praxis,” helping Maasai to define themselves more clearly (see also Kenny 1981). One of Galaty’s informants even went so far as to list these three key differences between *il-torobo* and Maasai: *il-torobo* smell like urine and feces, they were reared without cattle and eat wild animals, and they speak Maa imperfectly (Galaty 1993:185).

Smith’s focus on the Maasai view of the relationship fits well with his emphasis on the marginalization of African hunter-gatherers vis-à-vis pastoralists, but it misses entirely a thriving hidden transcript among “Dorobo” groups themselves. Such groups are well aware of the Maasai view of them, and they neither accept it nor appreciate it. Rather, they reject the “Dorobo” label and offer a variety of reasons why it does not apply to them. Some Mukogodo, for example, insist that because they always had beehives, they were never really *il-torobo*, their bees being the equivalent of livestock. One Mukogodo man, who had just answered “I don’t have any” to a series of livestock census questions, pointed somewhat defensively at a beehive and explained, “Those are my herds” (see also Blackburn 1996:192). In this view, only those people who once had neither livestock nor bees can really be considered *il-torobo*, effectively excluding not only Mukogodo but also some groups known to them, such as LeUaso, as well as some other groups that Mukogodo do not know, such as Okiek. Interestingly, this redefined *il-torobo* does include groups founded by failed pastoralists, such as Mumonyot, who typically do not become beekeepers and return to pastoralism as

quickly they can. Other Mukogodo insist that in order to be *il-torobo*, a people must have eaten zebras. Eating zebras is seen as a sort of hunter-gatherer analog of eating donkeys, which Maa-speakers consider a disgusting famine food, at best (see also Blackburn 1982:300). By that light, Mukogodo and their ancestors were never *il-torobo*, but perhaps other groups, less choosy about their prey, would qualify. Rejection of the “Dorobo” label has even been made official government policy in the Mukogodo area thanks to a coalition of leaders from the Mukogodo Division ethnic groups (Mukogodo, Mumonyot, Ilng’wesi, Digirri, and LeUaso), who have successfully lobbied the Kenyan government to refer to them not as Mukogodo Dorobo but as Mukogodo Maasai.

Similar hidden transcripts can be found among other “Dorobo” groups, as well. While Kenyan Okiek and Tanzanian Akie are well aware of how Maasai see them, they reject the notion that they are merely appendages of Maasai society and prefer instead to see themselves as distinct groups with their own origins, histories, and cultures. They are the centers of their own worlds, worlds in which they were the first inhabitants, worlds in which Maasai are just the latest in a long series of powerful but ephemeral groups to pass through (Kratz 1981:367). While Maasai see the forest as peripheral to their own way of life, the forest and what it produces, such as game meat and honey, are absolutely central to the self-identification of the hunter-gatherers (Blackburn 1971, 1982; Kratz 1981:360). To the hunter-gatherers, the forest is not a refuge; it is home. From the hunter-gatherer point of view, their residence in the forest and lack of livestock result not from forced marginalization by Maasai, but from their own free choice, and they actively maintain both a physical and a cultural distance from Maasai through their choice of residence, language, and personal adornment (e.g.,

Klumpp and Kratz 1993). Aspects of hunter-gatherer behavior toward Maasai that may look to Maasai or to an outsider as deference by the hunter-gatherer or domination by Maasai often look quite different from the point of view of the hunter-gatherer. For example, Okiek and Maasai normally use the Maa language when speaking with one another. Kratz (1981: 359) explains that for Okiek, this is merely a convenience because while most Maasai cannot speak Okiek, most Okiek can and happily will speak Maa, a language that they even incorporate into some sacred rituals. Similarly, relationships between Maasai and Okiek individuals that a Maasai might describe in terms of patrons and clients are usually described by Okiek as merely friendships (Kratz 1994:65).

From the hunter-gatherer point of view, their control over knowledge and resources that Maasai need can even give them a certain power over Maasai, despite their numerical and military inferiority. For example, Maasai need forest products, particularly honey, but dare not enter the forest to obtain them themselves, while nothing that Maasai have to offer in exchange is truly indispensable for the hunter-gatherers (Blackburn 1982:301). Okiek recognize that honey wine in particular has a power to create obligations among Maasai, and they are expert at manipulating such obligations and at using the intoxicating effects of honey wine for their own advantage (Blackburn 1971, 1982). Blackburn (1996:194) summarizes the situation this way:

... Okiek, ... Pygmies ... and Basarwa ... have long-standing social relations with dissimilar neighbors characterized in the literature as dependence, submission, serf, subclan, and other pejorative descriptions, usually derived from non-forager informants. It is clear to those of us who have studied these foragers that the relationship is far more complex, subtle, reciprocal, interdependent, and far-reaching than others have described. Foragers often have access to resources non-foragers need and can get no-

where else. The Maasai are dependent on the Okiek for honey for ceremonies and drink, for forest medicines, and (formerly) craft production and ivory. The Maasai need the Okiek more than vice versa, and this may prove to be true with other forager-non-forager relations.

Perhaps nothing expresses the Okiek version of the "Dorobo" hidden transcript better than a story collected by Blackburn (1971:199) involving an Okiot (the singular form of Okiek) and two Maasai warriors. The Okiot was returning from a trip to collect honey when he was stopped by the Maasai, who told him that they were going to kill him. He asked to be allowed to eat his honey so that he could die satisfied. As he began to eat, he asked his captors, "Do you eat honey?" They did, and while their hands were covered with the liquid the Okiot quickly washed his hands with dirt, grabbed one of the Maasai's swords and stabbed him. The other Maasai tried to grab his spear, but could not because his hands were too slippery with honey. The Okiot stabbed him, too, picked up his honey, and left, showing how an Okiot and his honey can outwit even two threatening Maasai.

A HIDDEN TRANSCRIPT ON THE VREDENBERG PENINSULA?

Smith's interpretation of the archaeological record on the Vredenberg Peninsula is heavily dependent upon his ethnographic examples of relations between hunter-gatherers and pastoralists. Our goals in this section are, first, to review briefly the findings at the South African sites and, second, to suggest other ways to interpret them that do not depend upon the idea of hunter-gatherers marginalized and dominated by pastoralists.

Kasteelberg is an open site located four kilometers from the coast, while Witklip is a rockshelter located nine kilometers from the coast. Although both sites are shell middens, they have produced otherwise

contrastive artifacts and faunal remains. Kasteelberg, by far the larger and deeper of the two sites, has been dated to between 1800 and 800 B.P. This site produced large quantities both of seal and sheep bones with the former species being the most common. The remains of various species of antelope were also present. Potsherds were found in great density, at over 700 shards per cubic meter. Flake stone debris was abundant but retouched pieces constituted a scant two percent of the total lithic array. Other materials found at the site included ostrich eggshell beads, ranging from 5 to 11 mm in diameter, grooved stones, bone tool points, awls, pendants, and ivory bracelets (Smith 1998:209).

The Witklip site is much smaller than Kasteelberg but occupation there has taken place over a longer period of time. The site has been dated to between 3000 and 300 B.P. The faunal array at Witklip is dominated by remains of small antelopes and tortoises. Few sheep bones and almost no seal bones were recovered there. The density of pottery shards was a scant 10 per cubic meter. Of the stone tool assemblage from the site, retouched stone tools made up four per cent. Ostrich eggshell beads recovered at Witklip were smaller than the Kasteelberg beads, almost all less than 5 mm in size. Neither site produced many bones of domesticated cattle.

Smith interprets these contrasts as conforming to the expectations of his model of a political economy uniting rich, dominant herders and their impoverished hunter-gatherer bondsmen. In his view, the "archaeological signature" at the Kasteelberg sites reflects the presence of "herders with large numbers of sheep . . . expending considerable energy capturing seals," while that of the Witklip site was produced by "hunters of small antelope" (Smith 1998:209–210). Although neither site yielded many cattle bones,

Smith suggests that the patterns in the ostrich shell beads, in particular, may reflect "a more formal structuring of the hierarchy" involving relatively wealthy pastoralists with growing cattle herds and poor and increasingly marginalized hunter-gatherers (Smith 1998:210).

The data presented by Smith provide only weak support for a herder/hunter hierarchy similar to the Maasai "public transcript" view of *il-torrobo* and can easily be reinterpreted as being consistent instead with the "hidden transcript" of the hunter-gatherers of the East African highlands. The scarcity of cattle bones makes the idea of an increasingly structured hierarchy between cattle herders and hunters particularly hard to maintain. Although the large number of sheep bones at Kasteelberg compared to Witklip lends plausibility to the idea that the sites were created by groups with different subsistence practices, one with considerable numbers of sheep and the other without, there is nothing in the archaeological record that points inevitably to a hierarchy between the two groups. Even if we set aside our questions about Smith's ethnographic analogy, we must pronounce the Scots Verdict of "not proven" regarding its applicability to his sites from the Vredenburg Peninsula.

DISCUSSION

Writing about East African highland hunter-gatherers, Woodburn warns that "we should be extremely careful before we believe outsiders' views of stigmatized groups" (1991:41–42). More specifically, he cautions against "a widespread and dangerous tendency among us anthropologists, property-holders all, to deny to low-status groups with little property the relative autonomy and integrity that we are more willing to concede to high-status groups with their, to us, more familiar and intelligible hierarchies and wealth" (1991:64). Woodburn argues that we must resist

the "ethnocentric temptation" to treat the apparent propertylessness of people like those that Maa-speakers call *il-torobo* "as comparable to the propertylessness of low-class groups in our own society—as a product of impoverishment" (1991:64). The contrast between the way Smith describes the relationship between the Maasai and "Dorobo" and the way that relationship is described by the hunter-gatherers and former hunter-gatherers themselves suggests that he may have failed to resist this temptation.

This same temptation must be resisted when writing about prehistory. Evidence that one group is "poor" and that another group is "rich" is not by itself evidence of active impoverishment or marginalization. In his discussion of excavations at Kasteelberg and Witklip, Smith (1998:213) says that "We must ask ourselves why, if there was social contact between these groups over the period 1800–900 B.P. from archaeological observations, and up to 300 years ago from the historic record..., there was no greater merging of the two." Based partly on an analogy with Maasai–"Dorobo" relations, he argues that the "answer probably lies... in the continued marginalization of the hunters on the edge of the more dominant herder society and restricted access by the hunter to the means of pastoral production: breeding stock" (1998: 213–124). The hidden transcript of East Africa's highland hunter-gatherers regarding their relationship with their Maasai neighbors suggests quite a different interpretation. The evidence that the South African sites provide for the maintenance of culturally and economically separate groups over long periods of time could indicate that, like the hunter-gatherers of the East African highlands, those of prehistoric Southern Africa might have been actively maintaining a separate identity and a degree of autonomy for their own benefit, rather than simply because the pastoralists gave them no other choice.

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