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The Magicality of the Hyena

Beliefs and Practices in West and South Asia

Abstract

As an animal to which magical properties are attributed, the hyena has moved the imagination of people not only in Africa, where it plays a prominent role in myth and ritual, but also in western and southern Asia. The striped hyena, a nocturnal scavenger, is sometimes caught alive in Asia and employed in animal fights. In this essay it is shown how all parts of a newly dead hyena are used in love magic and to ward off evil.

Key words: hyena—hunting—androgyny—love magic

AMONG CARNIVOROUS MAMMALS, hyenas belong to a family (*Hyaenidae*) comprising four species: the spotted hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*), the striped hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*), the brown hyena (*Hyaena brunnea*), and the aardwolf (*Proteles cristatus*) (MILLS and HOFER n.d.). Whereas the distribution of the spotted hyena, the brown hyena, and the aardwolf is confined to Africa south of the Sahara, the striped hyena (comprising five subspecies) is found in northern and eastern Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, as well as in western and southern Asia. This middle-sized predator has a big, sturdy head, pointed ears, and front legs longer than its hind legs. It has long hair and a mane that can be erected as a threat; the tail is bushy and longer than that of the spotted hyena. The striped hyena scavenges carrion and the remains of animals killed by other predators. It also hunts and consumes a wide variety of vertebrates, invertebrates, vegetables and fruits, and human associated organic material. The massive upper teeth and supporting musculature easily permit the gnawing and breaking of bones and carapaces. Further characteristic traits are weak eyesight, an exceptional ability for distinguishing sounds and smells, and a strong odor emitted from its anal glands. Whereas the striped hyena is, so to speak, a “silent species,” the African spotted hyena’s eerie cry has often reminded people of a howling and giggling laughter. The striped hyena moves alone or in small groups over a large territory and sleeps in natural caves or enlarged burrows dug by porcupines or wart hogs.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF HYENAS IN AFRICAN MYTH AND RITUAL

Before dealing with the scarcely known folklore of the striped hyena in western and southern Asia, it seems appropriate to briefly review the much better known beliefs on “hyenas” and related practices in western and central Africa. Serious source criticism concerns the fact that most anthropologists do not differentiate between the spotted and the striped species of the hyena which often coexist in the same area. Similarly, in many local western African languages both of these species have identical names (MILLS and



FIGURE 1. African hyena

HOFER n.d., Box 10.1). Therefore, in the following section, a differentiation can only be undertaken with considerable reservations in such cases where anatomical peculiarities, or their respective distributions, speak for themselves and consequently allow an identification of the species.

The “hyena” is depicted in African folklore as an

abnormal and ambivalent animal: considered to be sly, brutish, necrophagous, dangerous, and the vilest of beasts, it further embodies physical power, excessivity, ugliness, stupidity,¹ as well as sacredness. Mythic (spotted) hyenas show even more contrasting facets. In western African tales the animal is sometimes depicted as a Muslim, albeit not a good one, who challenges the local animism that exists among the Beng in Côte d’Ivoire (GOTTLIEB 1989, 490). In the mythology of the Tabwa, an ethnic group living in eastern central Africa, the spotted hyena is a solar animal that brought the sun to warm the cold earth, but in West Africa it generally symbolizes immorality, dirty habits, the reversal of normal activities, and other negative traits (GOTTLIEB 1989, 488; ROBERTS 1995, 75).

J. David SAPIR reports that the Kujamaat Diola from Southern Senegal believe that witches ride on hyenas (1981, 531–33). Unfortunately, this author also does not differentiate between the spotted and the striped hyena species. At least in Tanzania people believe that witches ride only on the back of a spotted hyena (personal communication from Heribert Hofer, letter dated 21 March 1998). Witches use this wild animal “of the night,” as the Kujamaat call it, as a symbolic vehicle for metamorphosis.

In the transformative rituals of secret societies, such as the Korè cult of the Bamana (Mali), people “become” hyenas by using zoomorphic helmet masks and playing dramatic roles, both of which refer to the dirty habits, trickiness, and nastiness of the animal mentioned above; they may also be used to invoke fear among the participants (STRAUBE 1955, 2; ROBERTS 1995, 75–76). The initiates in these societies are thereby urged to avoid such habits and character traits in their own life. In the Gelede cult of the Yoruba (Benin, Southwest Nigeria) the mask of the (spotted) hyena (Kòrikò),

which appears at dawn to signal the end of a previous ceremony (called *èfè*), points to other aspects:

One is that the hyena is a scavenger that eats up everything... It always shows up to clear the remnants of what a big killer like the leopard has left behind. That is why the animal is associated with the last part of anything. The other explanation is that the appearance of the hyena is symbolic of a successful *èfè* concert: the jokes cracked by the *èfè* mask have been such that even the laughing hyena has come out of the forest to join the audience! (LAWAL 1996, 250)

If a Kujamaat hunter kills a “hyena,” he has to carry the carcass “with respect,” as if it were a human elder, in order to take precautions against a malevolent hyena spirit acting on behalf of the dead animal (SAPIR 1981, 527, 532).

In the oral literature of western Sudanic peoples (where the spotted as well as the striped hyena coexist!) a “half-man, half-hyena” creature is depicted as a monstrous and destructive man-eater who transmutes, usually in the middle of the night, and terrorizes people, especially lovers (CALAME-GRIAULE and LIGERS 1961). It is supposed that in its human form this being would often be a magically powerful healer, blacksmith, or woodcutter recognizable through different signs (a hairy body, red and gleaming eyes, a nasal voice, etc.) that resemble the appearance and habits of the hyena.

The female of the spotted hyena has an elongated clitoris that in relaxed as well as erect condition is similar in shape to the male penis. In addition, it has a pseudo-scrotum that looks similar to the male scrotum. As a result, it is difficult (even for a zoologist) to differentiate between the sexes. As a result of this apparent lack of sexual dimorphism, people think that one and the same spotted hyena can alternately father as a male and give birth as a female (GRZIMEK 1970, 192).² The alternating androgyne consequently appears as an ideal in-between in the ritual domain. During initiation the role of the (spotted) hyena mask is often to transform the neophyte into a complete moral being, integrating his male principles with femaleness, as among the Korè cult of the Bamana in Mali (ROBERTS 1995, 75–76).

According to Alma GOTTLIEB, the western African Beng are mainly interested in the behavioral peculiarities of the spotted hyena: someone who happens to find a freshly dead animal with its rectum still moving in and out has to immediately plug and quieten the anus, otherwise he is liable to be struck by perpetual laughter, a clear sign of one’s own death (GOTTLIEB 1989, 493). However, the spotted hyena threatens not only the individual, but also, as other stories among the Beng demonstrate, the entire social

group. Alma GOTTLIEB was told that, “one day, perhaps about a century ago, a [spotted] hyena had come in from the forest and defecated on the ground, causing the entire village to be *wi*, “broken”: had the village not been evacuated... it would soon have been the locus of innumerable deaths. Thus, the villagers immediately abandoned the old village and chose the present site” (1989, 493). Apparently, the white, nearly completely mineral, feces are believed to be contaminating.

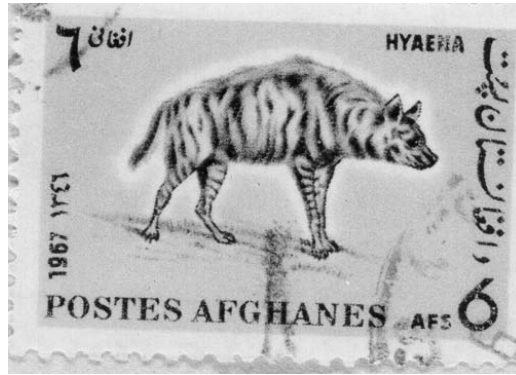


FIGURE 2. Asian hyena

THE STRIPED HYENA IN WESTERN AND SOUTHERN ASIA

This timid, little-known carnivore nowadays lives between the Near East, western Asia, the southern parts of central Asia and southern Asia (as far as the Nilgiri Hills and Nepal); in some parts it has virtually become extinct (POCOCK 1941, 65–67; HARRISON 1968, 274, 279; HEPTNER and SLUDSKIJ 1980, 27–29; MILLS and HOFER n.d.).³ In Iran, for example, the striped hyena was quite common throughout the nineteenth century and was reported as late as 1933 by Alfons Gabriel (POLAK 1865, 187; GABRIEL 1935, 125). It was found near big cities like Teheran, but apparently was not greatly feared, as it does not attack human beings (POLAK 1865, 187). Today, the striped hyena roams the steppes and semideserts of the Arabian Negev (BONEH 1987), southern Iraq, and in the southern, western, and northern regions of Afghanistan (NAUROZ n.d., 39; HASSINGER 1973, 144–46), Baluchistan, and Lower Sind, especially west of the river Indus (AITKEN 1907, 49; ROBERTS 1977, 135–37). East of the Indus, in Punjab and western and northern India, it is nowadays scarcely to be found, a situation which is apparently different from what it was at least until the end of the nineteenth century in such areas as the Salt Range and Hazara District (ANONYMOUS 1883–84, 15; ROBERTS 1977, 137; ANONYMOUS 1915, 13). T. J. ROBERTS mentions that “[Striped] Hyaenas used to be plentiful in Dera Ismail Khan, where it was the practice to hunt them with dogs, but they are reported to be rare even in these areas” (1977, 136). As I came to know, the animal still continues to live south and east of Agra in northern India, but is extremely rare in Rajasthan. Most of the people I talked to had never seen a hyena.

In Persian the striped hyena is called *kaftar*; in Baluchi *aptar*; and in Pashto *kog*. Other vernacular names are *taras* in Sindhi, and *targh* or *charkh* as well as *lagar bagar* (*bhagga*) in Urdu, Hindi, and Punjabi.

METHODS OF HUNTING STRIPED HYENAS IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

In the areas where striped hyenas are still found today, in the border zones between Afghanistan and Pakistan, inhabited by Pakhtun and Baluch, as well as in the southern Punjab and the desert of Cholistan, hunters either catch the animal or kill it. Villagers tend to shoot it because it is said to kill donkeys, to eat human carcasses, and to bite off the limbs of small children who sleep in the open. The supposed killing or kidnapping of children by striped hyenas is also reported from the Caucasus, Azerbaijan, and India (MILLS and HOFER n.d.).

As I heard from informants in Sistan, Kohat, Bannu, and Cholistan, striped hyena meat is considered *halal* (ritually pure) and is therefore consumed. This follows the rules of the Shafiite school of Muslim religious law, laid down, for example, in ash-Shirazi's (d. 1083) *Kitab at-tanbih fi l-fiqh* (EISENSTEIN 1991, 16), even though this represents an exception, as it is generally forbidden to eat the meat of wild animals that use their carnassial teeth to kill their prey.⁴ Obviously, the uncertainty in classification that one often comes across in discussing this question with people who are not religious scholars, stems from the fact that the hyena is an omnivore, eating both meat and fruits and vegetables. Among the Bedouin of Arabia the striped hyena is permitted for human consumption but, as reported by SMITH (1903, 232), more as a medicine than as food. Throughout Africa, however, eating its meat is mostly considered taboo and often the carcass is burnt (CALAME-GRIAULE and LIGERS 1961, 106; GOTTLIEB 1989, 497, note 9).

If specialized hunters, for instance in Kandahar, Quetta, or Cholistan, kill a striped hyena, they do it mostly to sell parts of its body to a magician (see below). Hunters belonging to marginal occupational groups, such as the Thori⁵ of southern Punjab, the peripatetic Qalandar entertainers, and the Payloch of Kandahar and Quetta, catch striped hyenas to use them in animal fights. They let them fight against strong, specially trained dogs. During the fight, their owners restrain them with ropes so they are able to pull them back from the dogs if necessary (NAUMANN and NOGGE 1973, 83).

Striped hyenas are sometimes caught in pits, as in southern Afghanistan⁶ or with the help of baits and nets, as reported in the North-West Frontier Province (Pakistan). In the area of Kandahar, courageous and experienced hunters locally called *payloch* (naked foot) use an extraordinary method of hunting.⁷ Günther Nogge was told that the hunter crawls into the den, completely naked, only keeping a rope or noose in his hand (NAUMANN and



FIGURE 3. A hyena-dog fight

NOGGE 1973, 83; HASSINGER 1973, 146). He advances further and further and drives the striped hyena to the rear of the den. Murmuring the magic formula “turn into dust, turn into stone,”⁸ the hunter brings the animal to a state of total submission where he can slip a noose over its forelegs and, finally, drag it out of the cave. Gerd Kühnert adds that the striped hyena hunter touches the animal with a stick while speaking the magic formula. Furthermore, the entrance to the den would be walled up with clay by a helper to prevent any light from entering. Nevertheless, other sources maintain that the hunter uses a torch (SWYNNERTON 1892, 375; ANONYMOUS 1915, 13; HOUGH 1926, 63). As regards these secondhand reports on hunting methods, it should be critically mentioned that, instead of using a rope or noose (?) to catch the animal, it would be more plausible to put a heavy piece of cloth over the hyena’s head. Fortunately, we have a quite accurate firsthand account of this method of capture given by a certain Sayyid Daoud from the area of Pishin (Baluchistan), an experienced hunter himself. He told the following to Arthur CONOLLY, who travelled there in the first half of the nineteenth century:

When you have tracked the beast to his den, you take a rope with two slip knots upon it in your right hand, and with your left holding a felt cloak before you, you go boldly but quietly in. The animal does not

know what is the nature of the danger, and therefore retires to the back of his den; but you may always tell where his head is by the glare of his eyes. You keep moving on gradually towards him on your knees, and when you are within distance, throw the cloak over his head, close with him, and take care that he does not free himself; the beast is so frightened that he cowers back, and, though he may bite the felt, he cannot turn his neck round to hurt you, so you quietly feel for his two forelegs, slip the knots over them, and then with one strong pull draw them tight up to the back of his neck and tie them there. The beast is now your own, and you may do what you like with him. We generally take those which we catch home... and hunt them on the plain with bridles in their mouths, that our dogs may be taught not to fear the brutes when they meet them [in the] wild." (CONOLLY 1838, 134)

VISIONS OF THE STRIPED HYENA'S BODY

As nocturnal animals, both spotted and striped hyenas have inspired the imagination of the people. Among the Baluch and in northern India it is said that magicians or witches ride a striped hyena in the night (JANMAHMAD 1982, 143; CROOKE 1925, 425), and especially in the Near and Middle East striped hyenas are regarded as incarnations of demons (*jinn*) (CANAAN 1927, 244; WELLHAUSEN 1961, 152; EISENSTEIN 1991, 224). It could be aptly called an animal of obscurity. This is highlighted in the many stories in Arabia about dogs who, because a striped hyena's shadow was cast upon them, become deaf and blind until the predator has made off with a sheep or even fallen from a roof (SCHAMI 1992, 122; EISENSTEIN 1991, 53, 97, 100).⁹ Numerous tales of nightly encounters between humans and mystically powerful striped hyenas show the importance of the animal in the symbolic thought of Arabian Bedouins (BONEH 1987). Interestingly, a medical treatise written in Persian around AD 1376 in Delhi gives detailed prescriptions of a magical nature on how to deal with a man who can transform himself into a striped hyena (IVANOW 1926, 195). This demoniacal being, "half-man, half-hyena," is called *kaftar* and has the habit of attacking and killing children.

However, the most characteristic views on the striped hyena relate to the use of its body. Already in antiquity it is well known that Greeks and Romans used the blood, excrements, rectum, genitalia, eyes, tongue, hair, skin, and fat, as well as the ash of different parts of the body, as effective means to ward off evil and to ensure love and fertility (STEMPLINGER 1948, 118–19; see also BAUMANN 1955, 59; EISENSTEIN 1991, 99). Also today, among Western Sudanic peoples the nose serves as a magical means to guarantee a good harvest and the tail to get a desired woman (CALAME-GRIAULE

and LIGERS 1961, 107). Unfortunately, the authors do not mention if parts of the spotted hyena's body are used or those of the striped hyena's body. Similarly in West and South Asia, parts of the body of striped hyenas play an important role in love magic and in the making of amulets. From Iran, for example, it is mentioned that a kind of stone found in the body serves as a general means of protection for the one who wears it on his upper arm (MASSÉ 1938, 326). Muslims in the Pakistani province of Sind hang the tooth of a striped hyena over the churn in order not to lose the *baraka* (blessing) of the milk (ABBOTT 1932, 415). Although he does not go into great detail, William CROOKE reports from northern India that "from ancient times the blood of the [striped] hyena was held in repute in folk medicine" (1925, 371). Furthermore, it is believed in India that eating the tongue helps fight tumors (GRZIMEK 1970, 194; MILLS and HOFER n.d., Table 5.3). A dried striped hyena skin is considered a potent charm in Iran that forces all to succumb to the attraction of its possessor (SYKES 1910, 239). Similarly, in Afghanistan and Pakistan striped hyena hair is used either in love magic or as a charm in sickness (SWYNNERTON 1892, 375; also see CANAAN 1914, 129). This may derive from the fact that the hair of the thick mane and tail of striped hyenas is especially long and elastic, an aspect usually attributed to female beauty. In the Khyber area, the fat produced by burning the skin is applied to the male organ of humans or is sometimes taken orally to ensure virility. It is said that in India the fat serves as a cure for rheumatism (GRZIMEK 1970, 194; MILLS and HOFER n.d., Table 5.3).

The parts of the body of the striped hyena that have fascinated people most are no doubt the female genitalia and the anus, symbolizing vitality and sexuality. Already among the Greeks and Romans there was the widespread belief that the genitalia "would hold a couple peaceably together" and that an anus worn as an amulet on the upper arm would make its male possessor irresistible to women (STEMPLINGER 1948, 119; KNUF and KNUF 1984, 149–50). Until recently, the sexual organs and rectum of female spotted and striped hyenas were used in eastern Africa, Iran, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan for love magic (POLAK 1865, 222; MILLS and HOFER n.d., Table 5.3).

In Afghanistan the ocular-shaped vulva (*kus*) is first wrapped with seven pieces of different colored silk (*haft rang*) and then worn by a Mulla for seven days under his armpit to make it effective (Clas Naumann, personal communication). It is said that if a man looks through the vulva, which is made into spectacles of a sort,¹⁰ he will definitely get hold of the one he is longing for. A particular aspect of this belief and custom is the alleged inevitability of its successful use. This has led to the proverbial expression in Dari (Afghan Persian) of *kus-e kaftar bay*, as well as in Pashto of *kus-e kaftar*

ware, both invoking the “vulva of the hyena” and roughly meaning “it’s going like clockwork” (i.e., it happens as smoothly as if you would look through the vulva of a female striped hyena).

Among the Pakhtun of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan, the vulva is kept in red *sandur* powder (vermilion), itself having the connotation of marriage, sexuality, and fertility. To attract young men, homosexuals and bisexuals likewise use the rectum of a striped hyena, if possible cut out of a freshly dead animal while the sphincter of the anus is still moving. The expression “to possess the anus of a [striped] hyena” therefore denotes somebody who is attractive and has many friends (lovers). For the same reason a striped hyena’s penis can be kept in a small box filled with *sandur*:

The use of the striped hyena’s genitalia and rectum emphasizes the extraordinary aura of magicality that surrounds this animal. However, the striped hyena is an ordinary mammal without any peculiar anatomy or behavioral traits from which magical beliefs and practices could be derived. Thus, the key question remains: Can these magical qualities attributed to the striped hyena be connected to any cultural or historical dimension?

It is tempting to refer to the African spotted hyena with its peculiar androgynous anatomy to explain the magicality of the hyena, but this would only lead to speculative explanations. In African folk belief the spotted hyena is regarded as simultaneously male and female in physical form. Thus in sub-Saharan African “parazoological” thinking, the spotted hyena symbolizes the androgyne, who has a distinct sexuality. According to mythological beliefs, the hyena also has relations with the bisexual moon (BAUMANN 1955, 244–47). Whereas the spotted hyena is loaded with such symbolic meanings against the background of biological facts, the same does not hold true for the striped hyena, whose anatomy has no androgynous characteristics at all.

The ethnographic data from western and southern Asia, presented above, suggest that certain qualities of the striped hyena in the shape of objectified sexual powers (vulva, anus) are transferred to man, thus ensuring fertility. The aspect of fertility is further emphasized in a rather fantastic prescription recommended as a cure for infertility in Punjab:

A woman must entice a [striped] hyena, and mounting it at night naked, with her face to the tail, must ride it in a circle seven times round, after which she dismounts, makes seven salaams to it, and feeds it with bread and ghee from a chatty which is placed on her chuddah, or covering, spread out on the ground. Women are also said to adorn [striped] hyenas with their earrings. (SWYNNERTON 1892, 375)

The question remains why, especially in Afghan and Pakistani folklore, the striped hyena is associated with love magic and fertility. First, it cannot be ruled out altogether that hearsay on the distinct sexuality of the African spotted hyena traveled northwards and eastwards, for example coming from Ethiopia, where spotted hyenas have lived in close association with human settlements for hundreds of years (Hofer, letter dated 21 March 1998), and reached western and southern Asia. Beliefs on the spotted hyena could have been orally transmitted by traders, dervishes, migrants, etc., and subsequently transferred to the local striped hyena. A second hypothesis would be an assumed earlier existence of the spotted hyena in parts of western and southern Asia analogous to the distribution, for example, of the lion, leopard, and cheetah in Iran until the early twentieth century. It is not improbable that traditional beliefs on nowadays extinct spotted hyenas in this region could have been transferred to the related species of the striped hyena. Admittedly, at present, there is no further evidence to support these speculations.

NOTES

I would like to express my gratitude to Rafiullah Orakzai (Hangu, NWFP), Asad Esker (Peshawar, NWFP), and Osman Salimi (Kabul) for providing me with valuable information, and to Dr. Gerd Kühnert (zoologist; Grünberg), and Prof. Clas M. Naumann, Ph.D. (zoologist; Museum Alexander Koenig, Bonn) for kindly reading the manuscript and making helpful suggestions. I would also like to thank Dr. Stefan Eisenhofer for his suggestions on the section concerning Africa. For the photograph of a captured hyena in Kabul, taken on the occasion of the Nauroz festival 1972, I would like to thank Prof. Günther Nogge, Ph.D. (zoologist; zoo of Cologne). My deepest thanks, however, go to Dr. Heribert Hofer (Berlin, IZW), who scrupulously read and commented on the manuscript while working in the field on the Spotted Hyena Project, Serengeti Wildlife Research Centre (Arusha, Tanzania).

1. The alleged stupidity of the striped hyena seems to be a particular trait that has inspired Arabian as well as Punjabi fables (cf. EISENSTEIN 1991, 37, and note 71; SWYNNERTON 1892, 375).

2. For more on these types of sex changes see O'FLAHERTY 1980, 303.

3. On hyenas in Arabia see DRAKE 1871, 324, 327; HARRISON 1968, 274; WRANIK 1993, 14.

4. An obvious exception is in Hebron (Palestine), where the meat of the striped hyena should be eaten in case of an attack of fever (CANAAN 1914, 129).

5. Thori represent a marginal social group whose male members are hunters of jackals, wolves, rabbits, etc. They also sell hides, work seasonally as harvesters in agriculture, and preserve animals for urban clients (for other occupations see ROSE 1911, 466).

6. This method is also reported from Darfur west of Kordofan (Sudan): "The people of the country dig pits for them [the striped hyena], and lying in ambush, when one is entrapped, stun him with clubs, or pierce him with their spears" (BROWNE 1799, 260).

7. *Payloch* is a general derogative term for poor people of low social ranking. In Kandahar the *payloch* are also known to perform walking on glowing coals and other sensational dervish-like practices such as holding red-hot instruments in their hands. Moreover, they

have a reputation as bandits and criminals (Osman Salimi, personal communication).

8. Gerd Kühnert (letter dated 4 December 1990).

9. See STEPLINGER 1948, 118. The Greeks and Romans in antiquity also believed that a dog would suddenly stop barking if touched by the shadow of a (striped?) hyena.

10. Memorandum by Clas M. Naumann (dated 17 Nov. 1971, Kabul, Afghanistan) on the cutting out of a female striped hyena's genitalia by a soldier to use them for love magic. The animal was kept in the Kabul Zoo and was apparently poisoned.

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