

HYENAS AND HUMANS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA*

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ABSTRACT. The spotted hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*), the most common large carnivore in the highlands and lowlands of Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia, has occupied both a scavenging niche and a predatory position at the top of the food chain. My own field explorations on this animal and the observations of travelers document its long and ambivalent association with people in the Horn of Africa. Spotted hyenas in this region have mostly lived in anthropogenic contexts rather than, as in East Africa, on wildlife. Tolerated as efficient sanitation units, hyenas have removed garbage and carrion from towns. They have also destroyed livestock, killed people, and eaten corpses. Famine, epidemics, and armed conflict have provided opportunities for unbridled anthropophagy. The past and present coming together of human and hyena in this multiethnic region can be viewed as a vestige of a primeval African ecological relationship that dates far back in prehistory. Biological processes offer a deeper framework than culture with which to grasp the inherent contradiction of the hyena/human relationship past and present. *Keywords:* anthropophagy, *Crocuta crocuta*, Ethiopia, Horn of Africa, spotted hyena.

Cultural-historical geography provides a distinctive perspective on the human/animal interface by connecting the present with the past and the particulars of the biophysical with the cultural. Scholars who have explored animals in other disciplines have rarely predicated their studies on convergence of the two dimensions through time. Examined here is a relationship, broadly symbiotic yet also conflictive,¹ between the spotted hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*) and the culturally diverse peoples in the Horn of Africa.² If the roots of this connection originated in the distant past, only the last half-millennium is knowable, and but a fraction of that is retrievable. Integrating time, space, culture, and ecology with the many recorded observations of an animal species in one broad region offers more than the demonstration of a time-honored geographical approach. Reconstructing an interrelationship reaching back into time raises issues about the normative place of *Homo sapiens* at the top of the food chain and the need for a common groundwork of explanation that links humans to the same biological processes as the rest of life on earth. The geographical imagination, adept at converging natural history and culture history, can contribute to this project by identifying, collating, and analyzing inchoate topics into an intelligible process and pattern. Debates surrounding land and life can often be clarified when place and temporality frame the connectiveness of phenomena.

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