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HOW WILD ARE THE GOMBE CHIMPANZEES?

Review Article

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The idea that the Gombe chimpanzees are 'wild' is questioned, in view of the fact that for many years these animals have been artificially fed for purposes of study. Their so-called 'predatory' behaviour is examined in relation to artificial feeding techniques causing high levels of excitement, close proximity to baboons and competition with baboons for bananas. Comparison with other studies of chimpanzees in the wild and in captivity indicates that the incidence of killing of baboons is, or was, artificially high at Gombe during the time of Teleki's study. While there remains good evidence of limited killing and eating of other species by chimpanzees at Gombe and nearby areas, the evidence needs to be kept in perspective especially in view of its possible use in arguments about early man.

How wild are the Gombe chimpanzees? Judging from Geza Teleki's book '*The Predatory behavior of wild chimpanzees*', and writing as one who has studied truly wild chimpanzees, I would say that they do not appear to be very wild at all. This view is, I think, in line with the view of them one forms from reading some of the works of van Lawick-Goodall (1963; 1967; 1971), and from the films made at Gombe. All these show us in intimate detail the day-to-day lives of the Gombe chimpanzees but destroy any notion one may have had that one is looking at wholly wild animals. The Gombe chimpanzees have recently been described as 'feral' (Tutin 1974); perhaps 'free-ranging' would be a better word to use.

Fortunately for Teleki a recent paper by Wrangham (1974a) does put the issue of predatory behaviour into the perspective of feeding behaviour as a whole. The year described by Teleki in this book, 1968-69, seems to have been the year when tension between the chimpanzees and the baboons at Gombe was at or just past its height, owing to a particular form of banana feeding during 1967-68 which brought large numbers of each species to the Goodall camp-site in a highly competitive situation. I have observed a comparable situation, where fruit was given to a group of thirty or more chimpanzees at a couple of dozen food hoppers in a large building at one end of a 30-acre enclosure at the Holloman Air Force Base, New Mexico. Feeding took place early in the mornings and again in the afternoons. As feeding time approached, the number of aggressive interactions rose among this group of otherwise peaceful and friendly animals. Dominant males were especially liable to attack and bite others at this time. During feeding, aggression was less frequent and quite subtle food-sharing interactions between certain males and females, and between adults and youngsters, occurred. After feeding, the animals drifted off in groups or settled down to groom each other and calm returned to the colony.

It is clear from Teleki's detailed account that the attacks of chimpanzees at Gombe on other species, especially baboons, did not always, or even often, occur
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actually at the feeding-place or at feeding time. To this extent one cannot *simply* conclude that chimpanzee 'predation' at Gombe is a direct outcome of the competition and hostility arising from the artificial and highly unnatural situation produced by feeding. Yet Teleki clearly describes, on pp. 62–63, an attack by the adult male chimpanzee Mike on the young female baboon Amber as an outcome of, or accompaniment to, feeding tension.

We can be sure that the cases of predation on certain species other than baboons—red colobus monkey, bush pig and bush buck—were not related to the increased boldness and interspecific aggressiveness engendered by the Gombe feeding situations because they occurred before artificial feeding started. But in at least two earlier studies of truly wild, unprovisioned chimpanzees, that of Nissen (1931) and that of Reynolds and Reynolds (1965), there was no evidence at all of predation by chimpanzees. Nissen's study was made in woodland terrain in Guinea, Reynolds and Reynolds' in rain-forest in Uganda.

Kortlandt (1962; 1967) and his co-workers have made extensive studies of chimpanzees visiting food-rich plantation sites and provisioned areas in west and east Africa. They have been concerned to document chimpanzee reactions to a predator (stuffed leopard) but have reported no predation *by* chimpanzees. We should note that where this research team has used provisioning to tempt the chimpanzees into camera range for the leopard experiment, conditions differ from those at Gombe in two important respects. First, the provisioning was for short periods only. Second, no other non-chimpanzee species were present to compete for the food. This is clearly a very different situation from the one at Gombe. Albrecht and Dunnet (1971: 101) report no predation by chimpanzees on baboons despite considerable social tension between the two species.

Predation by chimpanzees is thus not a common or frequent event. At Gombe it takes an average of 200 observation hours on males to see predation (Wrangham 1974*b*), and elsewhere, e.g. in rain-forest, it may not be seen, even if it occurs.

Predatory behaviour has, however, been reported at a site to the south of the Gombe National Park by Kawabe (1966). Kawabe's account of the chasing, killing and carrying away of a redbelt monkey by a group of six chimpanzees is thoroughly convincing. There is no mention of feeding, and Kawabe stresses that this incident was an isolated case. Further data on chimpanzee predation are given by Nishida (1974), who reports on seven predatory episodes, involving killing, eating, and carrying away prey species of suni, squirrel, mongoose, bush-baby, redbelt and vervet monkey.

Sugiyama (1968) during a six-month study in the same area of the Budongo Forest as that in which Reynolds and Reynolds worked for eight months in 1962 again found no evidence of meat-eating (p. 228). He did, however, include in his report a personal communication from Suzuki to the effect that the latter had seen chimpanzees eat a blue monkey and a black-and-white colobus monkey in Budongo, and the data were later published by Suzuki (1971). Suzuki describes how he saw chimpanzees eating the flesh of (a) a baby chimpanzee, (b) a young blue monkey and (c) a young black and white colobus monkey. In the latter case, although the kill itself was not seen, there was evidence of a chase and a catch. He also describes in some detail the process of meat-sharing among the individuals involved in a catch. Teleki likewise gives data on meat-sharing.

Teleki himself argues that the Gombe predatory behaviour cannot be ascribed to provisioning because (a) it occurred there prior to the onset of regular feeding and (b) because of the reports of Kawabe and Suzuki already discussed. However, both Wrangham (1974*a*) and I feel that Teleki has seriously under-rated the impact of the Gombe feeding technique, especially during the year 1967–68, on chimpanzee–baboon relations and thus on chimpanzee–baboon predation.

From all this it follows that great caution needs to be exercised in drawing inferences from the meat-eating habits of the Gombe chimpanzees to those of our hominid ancestors. Such a speculative ‘scoop’ is not missed by Teleki, nor by Carpenter in his Foreword to the book. Indeed, everything the Gombe chimpanzees do—their ‘tool-making’ and their use of tools for termite fishing, their use of leaves as ‘sponges’ or as ‘toilet paper’—tends to be seized on rather uncritically by those eager to prove something (what?) about early man.

Teleki’s own treatment of the implications of the Gombe data for man is disappointing. He appears to be unaware of the excellent comparative study of predatory behaviour by Schaller and Lowther (1969) though it is highly relevant to the theme of his discussion (pp. 175–77). Nor are there any references in the text to other work on human/hominid origins, though the bibliography is quite extensive. In a book one does expect a fuller discussion than is presented here, and perhaps we can expect one at some future time?

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