Omo-Turkana Research Network
Briefing Note 11

# Human-Wildlife Relationships among the Mursi, Bodi and Bacha

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## About this Research

The recently formed Tama Community Conservation Area (CCA) in Ethiopia's Lower Omo Valley includes the territory of multiple groups, with various practices and customs related to wildlife (Clack and Brittain, 2018). In recent years these groups have faced environmental shocks that have negatively impacted food security, including unpredictable and extreme weather in 2022-2024 (Slinkman et al., 2021; O'Mahony et al., 2025; Brooke et al., 2025). In addition, the upstream Gibe III dam has disrupted traditional flood-retreat farming (Brooke et al., 2025), while the Kuraz Sugar Development Project has limited access to farmland and pasture (Stevenson and Buffavand, 2018; Tebbs et al., 2019; Hodbod et al., 2019). Hunting and trapping of wild animals remain vital for local food security and cultural practices, potentially creating tension with the CCA's goal of conserving biodiversity while also ensuring sustainable access to ecosystem services (University of Leeds, 2022).

To ascertain which species of animals are present in the CCA, camera traps were deployed in August and September 2023 to document medium- to large-sized mammals (Tebbs et al., forthcoming). In April 2024 a set of 25 images out of 26 species captured by these camera traps was presented to a group of CCA scouts and elders from the Mursi and Bodi communities (exonyms for people who call themselves Mun and Me'en [Clack and Brittain, 2018]). The local names for each animal were recorded, along with community perceptions of the animals (categorised as good, bad or neutral) and associated uses, beliefs, and practices (e.g. taboos, dietary prohibitions). Additional insight was drawn from focus group discussions conducted with members of local communities – also including the Bacha (exonym for Kwegu) – between 2023 and 2025. This briefing note summarises findings from these interviews and focus group discussions.

## Key Findings

### Wildlife names

Table 1 displays the Mursi and Bodi names for each animal presented in the focus groups.

*Table 1: Animals spotted on camera traps in the Tama CCA, in English, Mursi, and Bodi languages*

| ***English common name (Latin name)*** | ***Mursi name*** | ***Bodi name*** |
|---|---|---|
| African buffalo (*Syncerus caffer)* | Nebi | Nebise |
| Olive baboon (*Papio anubis)* | Kangai | Kangach |
| Crested bushbuck (*Tragelaphus scriptus)* | Abo | Modoro |
| White-tailed mongoose (*Ichneumia albicauda)* | Gushura baruine | Ange baruny |
| Bushpig (*Potamochoerus larvatus)* | Choywai | Chobach |
| DeBrazza's monkey (*Cercopithecus neglectus)* | Gusheny | Sokot |
| Common warthog (*Phacochoerus africanus)* | Hoi | Gashu |
| Crested porcupine (*Hystrix cristata)* | Charadini | Yaiyoch |
| Guereza Colobus (*Colobus guereza)* | Karam | Wuach |
| Patas monkey (*Erythrocebus patas)* | Tala moi | Elkumit |
| Lelwel hartebeest (*Alcelaphus buselaphus lelwel)* | Shigin | Shigin |

*Table 1… continued*

| *English common name* | *Mursi name* | *Bodi name* |
|---|---|---|
| Common slender mongoose (*Herpestes sangeuineus)* | Kuro koroi | Serech |
| Genet (*Genetta genetta)* | Munyetui | Dokol |
| Serval cat (*Leptailurus serval)* | Char a keshogn | Kereng a keshu |
| Honey badger (*Viverra capensis)* | Larengai | Rubun |
| Reticulated giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis reticulata)* | Kirin | Kirin |
| Plain zebra (*Equus quagga)* | Duwun | Dobun |
| Leopard (*Panthera pardus)* | Char | Kereng |
| Defassa waterbuck (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus defassa)* | Holi | Dun |
| Duiker (*Cephalophus* spp.) | Gumi | Gumdi |
| Lesser kudu (*Tragelaphus imberbis)* | Marchan | Marshan |
| Caracal (*Felis caracal)* | Gorbi | Gorbuch |
| Hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius)* | Aru | Aro |
| Spotted hyena (*Crocuta crocuta)* | Gushura bola | Gu |

In many cases, the Bodi and Mursi names for animals are similar. For example, lesser kudu, Lelwel hartebeest, and zebra all have names which are phonetically alike in Mursi and Bodi [Table 1]. Sometimes the literal translations of animal names are also similar. The Mursi and Bodi names for white-tailed mongoose – *gushura baruine / ange baruny* (literally "night hyena" / "night animal") – accords with their perception of the mongoose as a pest that eats chickens.

Other names describe the animal's typical habitat. The Mursi word for serval, *char a keshogn*, and the Bodi word, *kereng a keshu* — literally "leopard of the snake plant" — both refer to a feature of the serval's preferred habitat, the snake plant (genus *Sansevieria*).

## Hunting wildlife for food and other purposes

All communities interviewed reported hunting wild animals for food. The most commonly hunted animals included buffalo and various antelope species, such as kudu and hartebeest.

Hunting wild animals is an important survival mechanism for Mursi, Bodi, and Bacha communities in times of hunger and crop failure:

*"We wouldn't have survived without hunting." (08/2023\\Mursi)*

*"After you sell off all your cattle, you go back to the bush and try to hunt." (03/2023\\Mursi)*

This can even extend to eating species that were previously considered unadvisable to eat:

*"Before we never ate warthog, but during the drought season, some people started eating it... We fear warthog isn't good for the intestines …but some people started eating it anyway." (08/2023\\Bodi)*

Hunting for medical purposes is also common. One common remedy is soup prepared from the meat of a wild animal:

*"Some of them [wild animals] are used for medicine. You go and hunt them, you drink the soup, and you get better. (03/2023\\Mursi)*

*"He was sick one time and he killed this warthog and boiled the soup, drank it, and he got better." (03/2023\\Bodi)*

Responses concerning the use of wild animals for rituals varied more markedly between interviewed communities. Multiple Mursi and Bacha communities stated they did not use wild animal products for ritual or decorative purposes.

*"We shoot and eat. We don't shoot for decoration or for ritual things." (03/2023\\Mursi)*

However, it remains possible that some individuals may have withheld information about hunting activities, which could involve illegal practices, for instance using giraffe tails.

In contrast, Bodi communities (and one Mursi community which used zebra skin for *donga,* a form of stick fighting) more frequently described ritual uses of wild animal products, although these species weren't captured by the camera traps:

*"For the ceremony of the installation of the spiritual leader, they try to find a greater kudu and an elephant. From the greater kudu they use the horn, and from the elephant... they use the tusk. They put milk and blood inside, and mix it." (08/2023\\Bodi)*

However, one Bodi community indicated that such practices ended following the establishment of the Tama CCA — though Buffavand (2025) notes that these practices appeared to have ended as early as 2016, before the park's establishment:

*"For the ritual for the establishment of spiritual leader, they hunt for greater kudus. Beforehand they used to kill elephant and lion... Now no one does this." (03/2023\\Bodi)*

Many communities also held the opinion that hunting for clothing and decoration has declined. This shift was attributed to increased access to manufactured clothing and external influences, including government pressure, as previously noted by LaTosky (2014) among Mursi women living in Mago National Park:

*"We used to use the skin of the hartebeest or the skin of the lesser kudu for women to wear. Nowadays we don't wear them... The government told us we should wear [modern] clothes and be the same as them. Now we have left our culture and wear foreign clothes." (08/2023\\Mursi)*

## Wildlife as pests and partners

Mursi and Bodi communities described antagonistic relationships with wildlife that eat or interfere with their crops or livestock, including baboons, bush chickens, bushpigs, porcupines, warthogs, and genet cats. These species are consistently seen as pests, with communities seeking to control their numbers by shooting and trapping. There appear to be degrees of aversion to different pests – while warthogs may be killed for damaging crops but still used for other purposes such as healing soups, porcupines are sometimes killed and discarded entirely.

*"Warthogs eat the sorghum... We shoot them when they're doing that." (04/2024\\Mursi and Bodi)*

*"If a porcupine is eating our corn, we kill it and then just throw it away, we don't like them." (04/2024\\Bodi)*.

These pest relationships can also extend to competition for resources between humans and wildlife. Mursi, Bodi, and Bacha community members described confrontations with animals such as honey badgers and bush-dwelling species during the collection of wild foods like honey or edible plants:

*"[Describing honey badgers] It'll go into these beehives and just eat the whole thing; it doesn't care if it's stung. It ruins the honey – even stuff that's left, if somebody tries to eat it, it has this bad taste and they'll get sick from it." (04/2024\\Bodi)*

Bacha communities, by contrast, articulated more positive relationships with predators such as lions, leopards, and hyenas, which help them to find injured wildlife or secure bushmeat leftovers:

*"Hyena and lions attack some wild animals, and they injure them. When we are there, we chase them and we eat." (03/2023\\Bacha)*

*"[We] are very good friends [with lions and leopards] Not only them, but also the vultures. They will show you where that leftovers are... because sometimes they don't finish it all, or maybe they put it somewhere for later and we will steal it." (08/2023\\Bacha)*

The absence of narratives of scavenging among Mursi and Bodi respondents reflects the differing subsistence strategies between these groups; the Bacha's hunting and gathering likely fosters a closer relationship due to a greater reliance on wildlife.

Despite this, Mursi and Bodi communities expressed a sense of stewardship for surrounding wildlife. Two Bodi communities spoke of relationships with wildlife resembling stewardship, particularly in relation to land management practices like controlled burning for grazing purposes:

*"[Wild animals] hide and stay in the bush, because we sometimes leave the bush unburnt.. when we are burning the* lech *[grassland] or the shrubland* [gash]*. We allow them to stay, it is like shade for them. Also, we can put the cattle in the shade in the bush. Then after we burn that, the rain comes, our cattle come out to the green grass. Even the wild animals who hide themselves in the bush, they come out to graze in the same way. We use this land for burning for both, our cattle and our wild animals." (08/2023\\Bodi)*

This suggests an awareness of how human actions shape wildlife habitats and a willingness to accommodate non-human species within shared landscapes.

### Wildlife and cultural taboos

Cultural taboos play a significant role in shaping how communities interact with wildlife, often influencing not only dietary practices but also broader relationships with animals. One example is the Bodi aversion to eating animals with top teeth because they resemble humans, for example, the zebras:

*"They have the teeth up at the top. [We] don't eat these things that have the top teeth." (04/2024\\ Bodi)*

Another example concerns the "bush chicken" (helmeted guineafowl, *Numida melagris, Atalati* in Mursi*, Moroi* in Bodi*)*. While Mursi actively trap and consume bush chickens, Bodi do not eat them for traditional cultural reasons:

*"Our fathers say that if you eat them, you will become a bad person." (04/2024\\Bodi)*

Cultural taboos and beliefs may also vary between clans within each of these groups. For example, among the Mursi, certain clans, such as the *Juha* are averse to consuming "tall animals":

*"If the animals are very tall we are avoid eating those kinds of animals. … Those of us who are members of the Juha clan avoid it." (04/2024\\Mursi)*

Similarly, spiritual leaders, such as the *Komoru* are prohibited from eating giraffe meat due to their responsibilities in the *biolama* ceremony, which aims to bolster the health of the community and cattle, as well as land fertility (Mursi Online, 2025). Such restrictions reflect a broader cosmological logic in which dietary taboos are linked to ritual purity and ecological stewardship.

## Concluding Remarks

The focus group discussions convened to discuss animals captured in the CCA camera traps highlight the importance of hunting for communities experiencing food insecurity, the existence of pest relationships between agro-pastoral communities and wildlife, as well as positive relationships in which communities and wildlife benefit each other.

A limitation of this research was the difficulty in accessing Bacha (Kwegu) communities. Bacha have especially close relationships with wildlife due to their status as specialist hunters, gatherers, and fishers. Partly as a result, of all the groups of the region they have been the most adversely affected by the end of the flood and the annexation of riverside land for plantations (Buffavand 2018). Many are therefore traumatised and reluctant to engage with outsiders.

Nonetheless the wide diversity of relationships, attitudes, and customs related to wildlife represented in this research demonstrates the importance of understanding local cultural and practical contexts when determining conservation goals and methods.

The results also reflect the fact that cultural taboos related to wildlife go beyond simple dietary preferences and are embedded within complex systems of belief, identity, and ecological management. They shape not only what is eaten but also how communities perceive and interact with the animals around them. These cultural beliefs may or may not be compatible with species-targeted conservation efforts. Improved understanding of them is important for a more informed and reflective conservation practice.

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