

SECLUSION, PROTECTION AND AVOIDANCE: EXPLORING THE *METIDA* COMPLEX AMONG THE DATOGA OF NORTHERN TANZANIA

Astrid Blystad
Ole Bjørn Rekdal
Herman Malleyeck

This article deals with *metida* avoidance practices as they exist in daily and ritual practice among the Southern Nilotic, agro-pastoral Datoga-speaking peoples of the Mbulu/Hanang districts of northern Tanzania.¹ The avoidance practices are particularly elaborate in connection with death or death-like events and birth or birth-like events, but are also set in motion by many other events that are experienced as abnormal or threatening. *Metida* implies the seclusion of people, animals and parts of land perceived to be temporarily highly 'infertile' in order to contain and control their inherently 'dirty' and 'contagious' elements and prevent them from affecting fecund elements or segments. Through diverse forms of seclusion, *metida* also aims to protect the potential of particularly fertile people, animals and parts of land from 'dirt' (*ririnyeanda*) or from unlucky events perceived to be contagious and dangerous.

All Datoga who believe in and practise *metida* may be liable to protection or seclusion at particular times in their lives, but women of procreative age are regarded as particularly susceptible to the threats and consequences caused by death and misfortune, and thus commonly experience the most severe restrictions. We are talking about a set of avoidance practices where in some instances women may spend years of their lives with severe restrictions on their conduct in terms of movement and socialization. In this article we shall explore the *metida* complex as a domain of meaning, experience and power that affects large spheres of Datoga lives, and guides and guards Datoga conduct in particular ways. Increasing numbers of educated or Christian Datoga in Mbulu no longer believe in and in principle no longer practise *metida*. We shall suggest substantial variations in how different groups or individuals perceive and relate to *metida* prescriptions.

ASTRID BLYSTAD is an Associate Professor, Department of Public Health and Primary Health Care/Centre for International Health, University of Bergen, Norway.

OLE BJØRN REKDAL is an Associate Professor, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, Bergen University College, Norway.

HERMAN MALLEYECK is a Research Collaborator and Nursing Officer, Getanyamba/Haydom, Tanzania.

The three authors all have extensive field experience in the Manyara Region of Tanzania and have collaborated closely since 1989.

¹ The Datoga comprise some 13 sub-sections, spread out in smaller and larger enclaves over large parts of the Tanzanian mainland. In this article we use 'Datoga' to refer to the population in Hanang and Mbulu in Manyara Region.

The *metida* complex has not yet been explored in Datoga sources. In this first attempt at making sense of the phenomenon we will draw on ethnographic material gathered during three years of fieldwork conducted over the course of some 15 years by the first two authors, and on lifelong experience of the practices in the case of the third author, a Datoga of the Gisamjanga sub-section.² As the origins of the *metida* practices among the Nilotic-speaking Datoga appear partly to lie within the *meeta* complex found among the neighbouring Cushitic-speaking Iraqw, we shall also draw upon central ethnographic contributions on Iraqw *meeta* practices. Before we explore the *metida* complex, we shall place the phenomenon within some of the ongoing debates on the Iraqw *meeta* complex, as well as within debates on analytical concepts that may assist us in making sense of avoidance phenomena such as *metida* and *meeta*.

ON THE RELATED IRAQW *MEETA* PRACTICES

Datoga informants readily claim they took over *metida* practices from the neighbouring Iraqw, a theory partly substantiated by the fact that the Datoga peoples that live in closest proximity to the Iraqw – Gisamjanga and Barabaig – observe by far the most elaborate *metida* practices.³ The comment of Christian Datoga informants on the increasing significance of *metida* practices among Datoga, and the decreasing significance of Iraqw *meeta* practices, is that ‘we are stealing their ignorance/stupidity’. Moreover, several of the key concepts linked to *metida* have Iraqw roots. For example, many of the Datoga terms appear to originate from Iraqw counterparts: *metida* from *meeta*, *ghawiida* from *xawi*, *darawaida* from *doroway*, *marwiida* from *marwi*, *suruhuuda* from *sorohh*, *dirang’da* from *dirangw*, and so on. Iraqw *meeta* concepts and practices have not been taken over, however, but appear to have merged with, and been modelled and modified in, encounters with the Datoga preoccupation with birth and death, or rather with the processes of birthing and dying. A less recognized aspect of this cultural border dynamic is the Iraqw inclusion of various aspects of Datoga seclusion practices, such as the positive seclusion linked to birth-giving indicated by the Datoga term *ghereega*. Indeed, an exploration of the *meeta/metida* concepts and practices demonstrates well how cultural domains often represented as located at the heart of local culture are actually in substantial flux in time and space (Rekdal 1999).

Most authors on the topic agree that the Iraqw *meeta* are practices that concern the powers of the water spirits *Netlaame* (pl.) (Bura 1984:

² Blystad and Rekdal carried out long-term ethnographic fieldwork in 1989–90, 1993–4, and 1995 among the Datoga of Hanang District and the Iraqw of Mbulu District respectively. Both have returned for short-term visits to the field area on numerous occasions between 1995 and 2005.

³ The present article focuses on peoples from the Gisamjanga and Barabaig sub-sections of the Datoga, who have lived with the Iraqw in the Hanang and Mbulu highlands for several centuries.

15–16; Lawi 1999a: 294; Rekdal 1999: 38; Selvik 1998; Snyder 1993: 176; Winter 1966: 164–5). Lawi (1999a: 293) writes that *Neetlaang'w* (sing.) is described by the Iraqw as 'a masculine supernatural power, appearing as an easily provoked and vengeful patriarch', known merely through disease and natural irregularities believed to originate from him. The fear of the Datoga ancestral spirits (*meanga*) is not foregrounded in this way in Datoga accounts of *metida*. Some informants mention the fear of the water spirits (*meangenyenda enda*) and their reaction if human beings do not address failed procreation in proper ways.

Broadly speaking, both the Iraqw and the Datoga in their dealings with *metida/meeta* are preoccupied in one way or another with the protection of what they consider to be vulnerable features and forces located within the procreative domain; and this focus is intended to enhance the fertility of people, animals and land. Writing about fertility-related avoidance practices and concepts has often brought authors to concepts such as 'pollution', 'contagion', 'bodily boundary making', and the moral implications of the breaking of boundaries manifested in rules, regulations and prohibitions. In more recent writings the more dynamic 'flow' concept has been introduced to make sense of the commonly found preoccupation with the exchange of bodily substances. These debates are reflected in the writings on *meeta*. Thornton (1980: 140) writes that *meeta* means 'pollution' or 'ritual impurity', while Snyder (1993: 176–7) states that *meeta* is the 'quarantine' created to contain the pollution brought about by misfortune. Lawi (1999b: 147) and Selvik (1998) introduce a somewhat broader *meeta* concept in writing about a set of avoidance practices. *Meeta* in these more recent writings refers not so much to the type of bad state a person is in, but rather to the fact that he/she is in a state of avoiding others because of pollution. The linguists Mous, Qorro and Kiessling (2002) similarly write that *meeta* is a state of not wanting to mix with other people out of fear of contamination. Its verbal form *meetim* is to avoid other people out of fear of contamination. The 'misfortune' that causes 'pollution' varies somewhat in the accounts, but the afflictions to which attention is commonly drawn are incidents of miscarriage, the death of a nursing child, the death of a fertile married adult, pregnancies out of wedlock, and the shedding of blood caused by human beings or attacks by wild animals (Snyder 1993: 176). Thornton (1980: 140–1) adds breech births, being born with teeth, and other disorders connected to the growth of teeth. Being struck by lightning, suicide or homicide have also been mentioned (Lawi 1999a: 294).

ON 'DIRT', 'POLLUTION' AND 'FLOWS'

Several of these works have drawn upon the classic works of Mary Douglas, not least her *Purity and Danger* (1966) and *Natural Symbols* (1970). Douglas writes in a well-known formulation:

Culture ... provides some basic categories, a positive pattern in which ideas and values are tidily ordered... Any given system of classification must give

rise to anomalies, and any given culture must confront events that seem to defy its assumptions. It cannot ignore the anomalies that its scheme produces, except at risk of forfeiting confidence. This is why, I suggest, we find in any given culture . . . various provisions for dealing with ambiguous or anomalous events. . . To conclude, if uncleanness is matter out of place, we must approach it through order. Uncleanness of dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained. To recognize this is the first step towards insights into pollution. (Douglas 1966: 39–40)

In particular, Douglas has linked her pollution concept to the precarious boundaries between bodies. She asserts that: ‘The body is a model that can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious’ (Douglas 1970: 59).

While the tremendous contribution of Douglas’s writings is well recognized, her work has also been criticized. A central critique has been that Douglas has built her arguments upon a foundation of Western notions, and she is criticized for proposing a generalizing framework that prevents the subtleties of native categories from appearing. For example, Herbert (1993: 85) argues that ‘words such as pollution and purity are loaded with ethnocentric baggage’, and asks that such ‘gate-keeping concepts’ should be avoided. Douglas’s focus on boundaries and pollution has also been faulted for understating the fact that, although bounded by the skin, bodies also have openings or passages through which external substances may enter and through which internal substances may leave.

Marilyn Strathern (1988), with reference to Douglas and to the actor–network analysis, invites us to rethink the kinds of ‘flows’ of persons and things that anthropologists describe in their studies. She argues that some societies tend to emphasize the healthy and unhealthy processes related to such bodily ‘passages’, and the substances moving in and out of them, rather than the body boundaries. Moreover, they focus on processes that chain human and non-human phenomena together. When applied analytically, this perception provides an alternative to boundary-oriented theories that assume a universal order or pure categories. Strathern applies this framework in her analysis of the Hagen communities of the New Guinea Highlands, focusing on the bodily and social ‘flows’ continuously taking place between people. Moving closer to Datoga cultural contexts, the works of Broch-Due (1990) and Hutchinson (1992) apply this more dynamic framework in their respective writings on the pastoral Turkana of Kenya and the pastoral Nuer of Sudan. Selvik (1998), who has produced the most substantial account on *meeta*, has in her analysis similarly focused on Iraqw preoccupation with flows and exchanges in bodily interaction.

These writings are of considerable interest with regard to the understanding and analysis of the Datoga *metida* complex. We shall suggest that although *meeta* and *metida* are not exactly the same, the two phenomena appear to be sufficiently related to suspect that the links created between ‘dirt’, ‘pollution’ and the Iraqw ‘quarantine’ or ‘seclusion’ practices have caused some confusion. We find it reasonable to suggest that the strong focus on ‘dirt’ and ‘pollution’ has hindered

an understanding of the fact that the *meeta* and *metida* seclusion not only isolates people and substances perceived to be dangerously contaminating, but in similar ways may seclude the fertile element in order to protect it. The transition to a focus on bodies as open and dynamic systems that mingle with other bodies in social interaction and in intimate exchanges of bodily fluids in this sense appears to be fruitful. We shall suggest, however, that substituting a focus on 'pollution' with a focus on 'flows' in an attempt to increase our understanding of *metida* may lead to challenges that are not entirely dissimilar to the obstacles that have confronted Douglas's concepts. If not employed with great caution, the focus on flows may prevent us from grasping how the phenomenon is variously understood and acted upon in varying social contexts.

With this brief review in mind, let us move to the Datoga preoccupation with *metida*. In an attempt to show how *metida* emerges in Datoga lives, we shall offer glimpses of how the phenomenon is talked about, handled, experienced and opposed in daily and ritual contexts.

METIDA CONCEPTS AND PRACTICES

Cooling down danger

Most Datoga of Hanang and Mbulu perceive the death of babies and procreative individuals, or other highly abnormal or threatening events, as certain to anger the spirits profoundly. If these occurrences are not attended to properly, the spirits may cause illness, death and dying that reach far beyond the individuals immediately affected by the misfortune. Such events have to be dealt with through avoidance conduct or seclusion, commonly combined with some sort of 'cooling' activity (*gimista*) to appease the spirits. Exactly how a particular event is 'cooled' depends upon the incident in question. Common ways to confront such disturbing events include the brewing, consuming and sometimes 'blowing' of honey mead (*ghamunga*) on affected people or places, combined with prayers (*moshta ghawooda*); and the making and spreading of medicine (*meajooda*) at the affected locations. Sometimes this takes the form of a ritual such as the *ghadoweeda* ('blessing seeking') which commonly consists of a healer or ritual expert, supported by a large group of women, singing, praying and spreading out medicine to 'cool' the misfortune and illness of people, cattle or land. It may also take the form of a *lughmajega nyangida* ('the hide of earth'), a ritual that cools environmental threats through the slaughter of a goat, sheep or bull and the spreading of the chyme from the animal's stomach on the affected places.

Most cooling activity will lead, upon completion, to some form of avoidance conduct and/or seclusion of people, animals or sections of land for a certain period of time. The 'seclusion of land' (*metida nyangida*) will commonly be linked to particular parts of the natural environment such as lakes, rivers, mountains or any other fairly bounded area. Among the Iraqw, whole villages or even entire wards can be

quarantined for set periods of time (Lawi 1999a: 293; Thornton 1982). If people quarrel or fight, use an axe or a knife, eat salt or in other ways show disrespect during the time of the *metida*, the 'medicine is destroyed' and the treatment will have to be repeated. It is not the cooling activity as such but the linked avoidance conduct that we shall concentrate on in the coming pages.

During our fieldwork on an almost daily basis we experienced encounters with people with whom we could not relate freely: individuals to whom we could talk only with a high thorn fence between us and them, for example, and sometimes with our heads turned away while talking. Every social gathering consisted of a number of people who would approach the location slowly and remain at a distance, sometimes eventually coming close to the compound fence to talk to friends and relatives. During such occasions it was also common to see a woman eating by herself or a man seated apart from his male companions while drinking honey mead. During long walks to visit people and sites, it also became a common experience to take detours around abandoned homesteads, or homesteads where we had a glimpse of large poles barring the compound gate, or observed at a distance people walking on their own and carefully watching the path to preserve their isolation. People we asked explained such sights by reference to *metida*. Similarly, questions about apparently unrelated observations – pieces of animal skin hanging from the branches of a tree, lumps of cow dung and butter smeared on the ground, men and dogs eating together, men sweeping the dusty path in front of a crowd of young men, pregnant young girls living on their own or married women living alone behind high thorn fences for months on end – would all receive the same reply: 'it is *metida*'.

'Secluding the dirt of death' (ghawiida)

According to Datoga informants, some deaths (*miyeeda*) or death-like conditions produce 'dirt' (*ririnyeanda*) that is both harmful and contagious, and hence necessitates some form of restrictive action or seclusion of those affected to prevent it from spreading to others. It was said to be dangerous to approach such individuals or animals 'with dirt' (*buneed ag ririnyeanda*, literally 'people with dirt') or rather, as the Datoga usually put it, 'people eating death' (*fuuga aki miyeeda*). The dirt (*ririnyeanda*) produced by the death refers to substances left on the skin (easily observed when dead skin peels off the body after long baths). What is feared is this 'dirty' skin, as well as personal belongings such as clothing and eating and drinking vessels that have been in direct contact with the affected skin/body. It is important to note that it is not the death *per se* that instigates seclusion or other avoidance practices, but rather that '*ghawiida* is made', as the Datoga say – by which they mean that the type of seclusion, the persons to be secluded, and the extent of the seclusion are decided upon in each individual case. Indeed, *ghawiida* may in some instances be skipped altogether if the practical circumstances work strongly against its being practised.

The deaths that are perceived as producing the most dangerous kinds of 'dirt' and are experienced as the most threatening are deaths of women in labour, miscarriages (of a foetus with a 'human-like shape', as in pregnancies from the fourth or fifth month onwards), stillbirths, deaths of suckling infants, deaths of women of childbearing age and deaths of men with wives of childbearing age. Deaths perceived as less threatening to outsiders are deaths of children who have been weaned, and deaths of youths, adults who have not yet given birth or adults past childbearing age.

Ghamata Gidasang tells the following story about her experience of seclusion due to the 'dirt of death of the child' (*ghawiida jeapta*):

I lost my first child just after he had ceased nursing, so there was no *ghawiida*. My second pregnancy ended in a late abortion, and even though I was the last wife, still young, and my husband liked me, I knew I had to 'eat' the *ghawiida* alone, as he had other wives and children to take care of.

The body of the child was left inside while an 'outsider' – an Iramba we have never seen since – came and cleaned out the hearth, shaved my head, turned the leather skirt inside out, removed my jewellery and threw out the cooking stone of the child. We never mentioned the baby again.

A fenced-in grass house was constructed some distance away from the housing compound. The isolation was strict in the first months. You know, people were so afraid of the milk that was dripping from my breasts. In the beginning I could not fetch water or firewood; I placed my calabashes outside the fence where the first wife of my husband poured water into them. The other young wives of my husband were so afraid of being affected by my dirt and kept far away from my calabashes. I was not given milk or butter, for fear of exposing the cattle and their calves to the dirt. I did not eat with anyone. Nor did I attend women's meetings or celebrations.

Nobody came inside my fence during the early months. After some four or five months, however, the brothers of my husband secretly visited me, and also my husband would now and then sneak into the hut at night. The only thing I could think of now was to become pregnant again. My husband slept with me too early, though, and got severe sores on his head that he failed to treat for a long time. He was also affected by the *ghawiida* in other ways; he was not invited to the social gatherings of the neighbourhood men, and if he was together with others he had to eat apart from them from a separate bowl. As the months went by I could gradually start to go outside the fence, although I avoided getting too close to people. Slowly I also started to seek out the women's gatherings to greet my friends and to receive news. In the beginning I remained outside people's compound fences, and when I finally joined them I was served apart from the others for several more months. Throughout the months of *ghawiida* people would talk to me over my own fence; people don't fear words but the milk that can affect them so badly. More than a year later I joined the others, as I was by then visibly pregnant. Nobody, except maybe a lover, fears a woman who is pregnant, so I was fine then.

This is just the beginning of Ghamata Gidasang's story. The woman became pregnant at least 13 times but had only four children that survived. Most of the deaths instigated *ghawiida* and the restrictions on

her life became gradually worse, keeping her more or less continuously isolated. Even the healers and ritual experts eventually feared contact with her.

The fear of *ghawiida jeapta* is so profound not least because a woman risks becoming *neaboda*, feared for her 'unclean breasts' until her death. Datoga women say that it is the fear of never being able to freely share food and sleep with their family and friends that is the most painful aspect of *ghawiida*. Ghamata Gidasang concluded her account by saying: 'I was so lonely that I ended up running away from my husband. I am *neaboda*' (pointing to her breasts that had not nursed a child since her last infant died). 'People will continue to fear me and my food until I die.'⁴

The fear of miscarriages, stillbirths or the death of suckling babies extends into the animal world. Cows, sheep, goats and donkeys – and their products – are in diverse ways avoided if they have lost their offspring. People who practise *metida* will strictly avoid the milk and meat of cows and goats that have lost their offspring, and such animals will never be used for ritual purposes. Nor will people touch the salt brought by a donkey who is *neaboda*. Many such examples could be cited.

The death of a husband with wives of childbearing age, or the death of a wife of reproductive age, will commonly lead to *ghawiida* of the widow (*ghawiida dirangwa*, 'the dirt of the lion death') or widower (referred to by the same term). The *ghawiida* of a widower is commonly less strict and less elaborate, however, than that of a widow. A widow will be secluded in her own house where she will eat, drink and sleep alone or together with her co-wives or 'assistants'. Both widows and widowers will 'eat the mourning' (*ghayaji barakta*), made physically visible through the wearing of a filthy dress, the shaving of the head and the removal of jewellery except for a dark-blue glass-bead necklace (*gelenga barakta*). Although the deaths of husbands and wives commonly lead to some sort of avoidance conduct, such avoidance is talked of less in terms of 'dirt' than as a sign of mourning and respect for the deceased spouse.

Avoidance and protection caused by abnormal/frightening events

Many events, sights or sounds are perceived as abnormal, frightening, infertile or threatening to the extent that they have to be 'cooled' (*gimista*) and prescriptions instigated on conduct so as not to harm or bring misfortune to more people, animals, land or plants. Most commonly, precautions are set in motion by what is perceived as unacceptable or failed birthing (*jeata*), the most elaborate avoidance

⁴ The fear of the social exclusion implied by *ghawiida*, and even more the chronic condition *neaboda*, causes many Datoga women to consider weaning weak babies a little earlier than they would otherwise have chosen to do. Health personnel also complain that Datoga women 'who have *meeta*' will be more reluctant to follow proposed family planning as a new pregnancy is what can clean or 'cool' their unfortunate condition.

practices being prompted by pregnancies out of wedlock. Premarital sexual intercourse leading to pregnancy is morally highly unacceptable among the patrilineal Datoga, as a child born out of wedlock will be regarded as nameless or clanless, and will lack the paternal kin on whom he/she is to depend for social, economic and political support. The unacceptable conception, moreover, is said to produce 'dirt' (*rivinyeanda*) in a manner that resembles that of miscarriage and infant death. In such cases it is no longer the mother's milk that is the focus of fear, but rather the 'birth water' (*buweadega*) that will pour out in a home where it does not belong. The only place 'birth water' can flow acceptably is in a woman's private room located in the compound of the husband or his father. If the girl is unmarried the available options are giving birth in the hospital, or in the house of a Christian or another 'outsider' who fears neither the 'unclean' birth water, a girl 'with a closed womb' (*hudanirachi*) or a child who results from a premarital pregnancy (*darawayenda*). Tellingly, the term 'birth water' also means 'kin' or 'relative', drawing attention to the social bonding the birth water symbolizes.

Until a couple of generations ago the Datoga appear not to have feared the unwed mother. Such girls were certainly despised, but the unacceptable pregnancy was, and indeed still is, somewhat downplayed by quickly marrying the girl off to any fairly suitable partner. The Iraqw, however, have customarily feared these girls and their babies to the extent that they have been completely secluded or expelled from Iraqw communities. Recent history has shown a stark decrease in the practice among the Iraqw, while the Datoga have picked up certain aspects of it. Despite Christianity and official schooling working against the practice, it is still very common to find some sort of avoidance of unwed mothers and their babies. Indeed, unwed mothers and their children were believed, according to our informants, to suffer from a more serious contamination than that produced by death. While *ghawiida* will usually come to an end, for example through a new pregnancy and the birth of a live child, the uncleanness of the mother who remains unmarried will continue, if not 'cooled' extensively, to pose a threat to vulnerable villagers.

Upon discovery of her pregnant condition, Udabarasa was expelled from school. The family was poor, and sending their daughter to distant Christian kin for a fee was out of the question. The girl therefore remained at home until the fear of the birth water falling in her father's home drove them to action. It was decided that she should give birth at Haydom Lutheran Hospital, and a small room was rented for her in the hospital vicinity. The girl was expelled from her new dwelling twice, however, due to her neighbours' fear of having a 'girl with a closed womb' in their proximity. Upon giving birth her life was filled with restrictions. She remained on her own, and she strongly felt the silence, unease and fear with which people dealt with her and her newborn son. As it is only a husband who can slaughter the goat and spread the chyme necessary for 'cooling' her condition, and she knew the likelihood of finding a marital partner was low as she had a child out of

wedlock,⁵ Udabarasa soon moved to distant relatives in Arusha town where she gave birth to three more children, all outside of marriage.

Other events perceived as ‘failed birthing’ that commonly cause fear and restrictive action, albeit a regime far less elaborate than that for the unwed mother and her child, are breech births (*suruhuuda*), births of twins (*saleahooga*) and children born with teeth.

There are also a great many unfortunate or accidental occurrences that cause uncertainty and fear due to their perceived contagious potential, and that therefore require action. Common events that instigate ‘cooling’ action and avoidance behaviour are particularly frightening *illness episodes* (such as many people falling ill simultaneously or the occurrence of types of illness perceived as frightening – such as blisters, burning or diarrhoea); *accidents* (such as being bitten by a wild animal or injured in a car accident); *sights* (such as seeing awkward, ugly or incompletely formed people, animals or natural features);⁶ *sounds* (such as those that may at times be heard from Mt Hanang); *environmental phenomena* (such as lightning, hail, fire, serious drought or serious flooding) or particularly *disrespectful events* (such as harm done to sacred Datoga trees, lakes or graves).

Avoidance and protection upon giving birth (ghereega)

Avoidance practices are not only triggered by negative or threatening events perceived as contagious to the fertile segment of the population. *Metida* is similarly initiated to contain and protect the fertile element or fertile condition produced by the birth of a child, or in connection with a number of birth-like conditions. A mother and her child, for example, commonly spend four months – or three months in the case of a newborn girl – in more or less complete seclusion inside the dark, private room of the wife’s house. No one will enter the room except for the midwife and a close relative who assists with cooking and cleaning. Post-natal convalescent women said they experienced themselves as in a sacred state produced by the occasion of a successful birth (*ghereega*). *Ghereega* is said to follow from the ‘near death’ condition of birth-giving (*ghoghomnyeanda*), a condition characterized by extreme danger where the outcome is highly uncertain. Birthing may lead to the birth of new life (*jeata*), but it may also lead to death (*miyeeda*) and dying. While perceived as a most vulnerable state, *ghereega* is simultaneously experienced as a most desired and enhancing one – a sacred or elevated condition that has to be vigilantly protected from harm. A post-natal convalescent woman is commonly referred to as ‘*Udaghereeg*’. The

⁵ The eagerness with which unwed mothers search for marital partners is implied when people jokingly tell unwed male friends to enter the hospital maternity wards ‘where they will be picked up by the *hudaniwagani*’.

⁶ Great fear may be induced by a person who has lost a finger or toe, or even a finger- or toe-nail (*gunyooda*), or an arm or a leg (*ghanyeta*), or by other forms of bodily malformation. One of the most-feared ‘incomplete’ features is the cleft lip. Seeing snakes or other animals or things with odd shapes or features induces similar fear.

women's conduct during *ghereega* is circumscribed by quite extensive avoidances, not least in terms of eating, drinking and sexual contact.

A most important extension of the avoidance conduct instigated by birth-giving is the manner in which a number of animals such as cows, sheep, goats, donkeys, dogs and cats, as well as certain wild animals such as leopards and lions, are said to have *ghereega*, again talked of as a near-sacred and elevated period following birth-giving. *Ghereega* in animals is manifested in terms of protection from harm during pregnancy, labour and while nursing their offspring, as the case below indicates.

A neighbour's dog had a litter, and a couple of days after the puppies were born the household head returned home uncommonly drunk. When the dog reacted to its owner's awkward demeanour by rushing towards him, barking fiercely, the man lost control and beat the dog furiously with his stick. The dog died the following day, and her puppies a few days later. Upon hearing how the man had caused the death of the dog and her puppies, the married neighbourhood women mobilized and convened meetings where they heard every aspect of the case, and sang and prayed. The meeting's decision was to fine the man a black bull. A few days later, the man's favourite black ox was suffocated and cooked, and honey mead was brewed. The men and women shared the meat with the remaining dog in the compound, and an eight-day seclusion of the compound was instigated upon completion of the meal. According to our informants, had immediate action not been taken the beating of a dog in *ghereeg* would have threatened the birthing (*jeata*) of all Datoga.

Limited seclusions or avoidances also follow diverse *rites of passage* to facilitate the transition from one state or status to another. The transformation process is made manifest through performances of birthing (*jeata*), where the initiate passes through near-death conditions (*ghoghomnyeanda*) only to reach his/her new status and experience *ghereega*. The most overt examples of such shifts of identity/status and consequent seclusion/avoidance are found in connection with the circumcision of boys (*lughmajega dibiga* or *giyillida dibiga*), the circumcision of girls (*bannoda hawing* or *giinnoda haweega*, literally 'making girls nice'), and the youth hunts (*lilichta/lugooda*).⁷ The eventual celebration of *ghereega* may attend the time of marriage (the seclusion of the bride, *sibeeda*), the initiation of men to the honey-mead-consuming community of elders (*ginealda ghamunga*), and the burial of esteemed elders (*bunged*) – an event talked of as the 'birth of the spirit' (*jeata meangenyanda*), where particular chosen elders are more or less completely secluded for months.

⁷ In the *lilichta* hunters who successfully use their spears to kill a lion, elephant or leopard – or in earlier times a human enemy (*reng'moda*) – will upon return be anointed with butter. Together with his girlfriend the hunter will be in a sacred state of *ghereega*, and the two will avoid others (*metida reang'sinda*). During this time the young man is physically transformed in dress and decoration into a 'woman who has given birth'.

Living with metida, ghawiida and ghereega

Although the avoidance/seclusion processes set in motion by death or death-like conditions and those motivated by birth or birth-like conditions are seemingly located at different ends of the scale, the elaborate prescriptions will in the course of normal life interfere with each other – and practical solutions have to be found. The following examples indicate how people cope with the complexities of *ghereega* and *ghawiida*:

A group of men were consuming honey mead (*ghamunga*) at the gathering of the ‘hide cleansing the land’ (*lughmajega nyangida*) at Gidawadin’s home. Two men who were seated apart in separate places were drinking from their own gourds. As the honey mead became scarce during the evening, and there was still plenty of mead in the gourds of the two men who were sitting on their own, inquiry was made about the men’s conditions. One of the men explained the details surrounding the ‘eating the eight-month-old death of his wife’ while the other revealed that he was still in *ghereega* following a lion kill. It was then asked whether there were men in the crowd who did not fear the eight-month *ghawiida*. A group of men came forward and confirmed that they did not fear the man or his belongings. They got up and moved over to him to share whatever was left. The man in *ghereega* now shared what was left in his gourd with the remaining two men who placed their gourds on the ground. The lion-killer carefully poured mead into their calabashes, making sure their gourds did not touch his to prevent his own gourd from becoming contaminated.

Four wives were ‘eating the dirt of death’ (*ghawiida*) after the death of their husband. They had shaved each others’ heads, had removed their leather skirts and jewellery, and had a dirty appearance. Young women in particular carefully kept away from them. The wives stayed together in one house where they ate, drank and slept apart from others. As a decision was made that their late husband was to be honoured by the rare event of a large official Datoga funerary ritual (*bunged*) to ensure the rebirth of his spirit, the *ghawiida* was terminated quickly. The wives then entered a new phase of avoidance, a phase characterized by extreme vulnerability linked to the ‘near-death condition’ (*ghoghomnyeanda*) that at the closing day of the funeral leads to the elevated state following birth-giving (*ghereega*). The wives, who until then had been avoided, now avoided contact with others, and ate, drank and slept apart from other people to prevent outsiders’ dirt from harming their valued but highly vulnerable state.

Transformation of metida practices

There are strong signs of the diminishing impact of *metida* practices in many segments of Datoga communities. With the substantial transitions taking place through schooling, the spread of Christianity and the emphasis on development (*maendeleo*, Swahili), the *metida* practices are losing their foothold. An important distinction is made between Christians and non-Christians, and informants commonly held that Christians have ceased practising *metida*. Although such a tendency is easy to observe in practical lives, this often-reported distinction is upon further investigation not as clear-cut as it may at first appear. Both Christians and non-Christians, schooled and non-schooled individuals,

will often believe in and practise *metida* to varying degrees. What is more, these people live within the same communities and share food and drink and often also houses and beds. Thus people who are differently situated in terms of adherence to the *metida* complex will have to relate to each other in daily life: Christian villagers, for example, will have to accept that people will shun their houses unless they make sure that salt is not brought by a donkey who is *neaboda*, or that a girl who has recently given birth out of wedlock or has lost an infant does not sleep at their house. The *metida* restrictions, not least those following the death of an infant (*ghawwiida jeapta*) or a birth out of wedlock, make it tempting to search for potential escape. Women these days readily flee *metida* through outright rejection of the practice. One consequence is particularly visible: the large numbers of young unmarried women who reside in particular quarters on the outskirts of Mbulu, Dongobesh and Haydom. Many of these women have become Christians and no longer practise *metida*, but in practice they remain secluded to quite some extent, since fear of their condition is still alive in their surroundings.⁸

MAKING SENSE OF THE *METIDA* COMPLEX

The precariousness of procreation

Let us now take a fresh look at what *metida* is about, and how we are to make sense of the phenomenon. What is quite clear is that *metida* is located at the heart of the Datoga compassionate concern with procreation – or rather their concern with the experienced precariousness of procreation and their related attempts to prevent hazards from destroying the fecundity of people, animals and land. A large number of older as well as more recent ethnographic sources explore the substantial preoccupation with fertile features and forces and the articulateness of African folk models of fertility.⁹ These sources have also demonstrated how the perils of reproduction and reproductive imagery dominate African systems of thought. Such broad references to a preoccupation with fertility become meaningless unless they address both the subtleties of local cultural practice and the broader historical and political contexts.

We suggest that the substantial Datoga concern with threats to their fecundity cannot be properly grasped without a reference to the particular historical-political circumstances within which it has developed. The Datoga people of northern Tanzania have become extremely marginalized during the past century (Lane 1996; Rekdal and

⁸ The phenomenon of a large number of unwed mothers living in the vicinity of Haydom Lutheran Hospital is a special case – due this time to the denunciation of premarital pregnancies by Christians. The stigma linked to the condition within Christianity is nevertheless much less pervasive than that experienced within *metida*.

⁹ For example, Jacobson-Widding and van Beek (1990); Sanders (1998: 239); Herbert (1993); Beidelman (1997); Devisch (1993); Kratz (1994); Burton (1991); Broch-Due (1990; 1999); Karp and Bird (1980); Blystad (1996; 1999; 2000; 2005).

Blystad 1999). A systematic employment of political rhetoric against the Datoga by colonial and independent governments alike, in combination with the encouragement of agricultural growth, has caused an expansion of neighbouring cultivators and the initiation of large-scale mechanized cultivation in what was once the heart of Datoga pastureland. This activity has caused a massive loss of land and starkly diminishing herds, to the point where the large majority of Datoga in the area today have merely a few head of cattle, if any at all. The Datoga experience of being surrounded by enemies, which surfaced so strongly during the conflicts with the Maasai at the end of the nineteenth century, has thus been nourished throughout the past century as new enemies-in-chief have appeared. The Datoga preoccupation with threats to procreative processes must be at least partly grounded in the embodied knowledge of marginalization that history has produced (Blystad 2000).

Metida understood as containing 'dirt' or 'pollution'

The Datoga material has revealed that *metida* may be used to seclude what is perceived as dirty, contagious or dangerous. What is perceived to be dangerous can be dirty skin, dirty vessels, dirty mothers' milk or cows' milk, or dangerous birth water. As we have seen, these substances and liquids are perceived to be particularly threatening to human beings and animals capable of procreation. *Metida*, however, may also instigate seclusion of that which is perceived to be utterly productive and fecund, as highlighted by the protection of the sacred state following birth-giving (*ghereega*). Where the first *metida* process contains what is feared and thus prevents the sharing of food, drink and physical closeness with contaminated persons or substances, the second secludes the fertile and fecund to prevent it from becoming affected by 'dirt' that may endanger it.

We argue that the substantial focus on dirt and pollution in literature on the subject may have led to the exclusion of this latter category, namely the huge sphere of seclusion practices that are set in motion not to contain dirt or polluting conditions but rather to contain and protect the fecund element at its procreative peak. We suggest that attempts to grasp the dynamics and meanings of the Datoga *metida*, and indeed also the Iraqw *meeta* complex, depend upon assumptions that move us beyond the fairly narrow and rigid 'pollution' and 'quarantine' concepts.

Metida understood as containing 'flows'

The works of Broch-Due (1990) and Hutchinson (1992) have demonstrated in a scholarly manner how a flow concept can open up a more processual and dynamic analysis of African systems of thought. Selvik (1998) similarly indicates in relation to the Iraqw *meeta* practices how the 'flow' concept may assist us in opening up what has hitherto remained a far too rigid field. An excessive preoccupation with limits and boundaries will prevent us from grasping the ways in which both seclusion and avoidance practices must be understood in the more dynamic context of the exchange and movement of substances between

bodies. The concepts of 'flows', 'unboundedness', and 'intake/outtake systems' add an important and dynamic dimension to concepts such as 'pollution', 'risk' and 'avoidance' in relation to Datoga *metida* practices as in other contexts.

The 'flow' model appears to make it easier to discuss the dynamics of the *metida* practices among the Datoga. A focus on flows and bodily exchanges helps us, for example, to grasp how a Datoga mother-to-be's fear of being affected by harmful states, sensations or substances implies an understanding of permeability, crossings and transitions, since procreative activity necessarily entails complex exchanges with other bodies. Activities such as lovemaking, gestation, childbirth and nursing involve the crossing of boundaries, so that bodily fluids can move in and out of bodies. While inherently fecund, these bodily encounters can also be dangerous, and they become particularly threatening with the loss of an unborn or still-nursing child.

The 'flow' concept, moreover, makes it easier to grasp the pervasiveness of *metida* – for example, how *metida* can contain both highly fertile and highly infertile elements and can cause the seclusion or protection of human beings, animals and parts of the natural environment. We need to move beyond the relatively clear classifications of types of misfortune that bring about 'pollution' in the manner commonly spelled out in accounts of the Iraqw *meeta* practices. The lists and categories of states and incidents that cause *meeta* have also been reassessed critically by Selvik, who writes that *meeta* refers to 'a series of avoidances which most people practise as they go about living their daily lives' (Selvik 1998: 4). *Metida* indeed instigates an enormous domain of restrictions, avoidances or seclusions that may vary with gender, with time, with kinds of severity, with location, and with the decisions of particular people. *Metida* sets in motion a series of restrictions that are made relevant in daily life, restrictions that can be located on a scale which at one end consists of minor and almost unnoticeable avoidances, and at the other consists of the full-fledged quarantine of individuals and households for months or even years on end. Datoga who practise *metida* relate to the complexity of their own and others' avoidances and seclusions throughout their lives.

Datoga informants, however, did not speak of 'flows' as such, and did not readily confirm this way of talking or thinking in our many discussions on *metida* – although they agreed, for example, that the dripping of milk from a woman who has lost a baby or the flowing of birth water in forbidden locations was highly feared. They would talk animatedly, however, about people's fear and avoidance of a woman suffering a miscarriage, or of the death of a nursing child – and their eloquence would dwell on a fear of the 'dirty milk' in the woman's breasts, or on the need to contain 'the dirt' inside a secluded woman's hut. It was the prevention of the concrete touch of a body or of a common vessel, and not the prevention of the exchange of bodily substances and fluids, that emerged as the prime concern. Hence Datoga conceptions appear to indicate that the 'dirt' and 'boundary' concepts of Douglas are still relevant and valid. This does not mean

that we should dismiss the productive, dynamic and open approach to *metida* that the 'flow' concept facilitates, a concept which more easily allows us grasp the workings of live bodies. But it does indicate that a too-strong focus on flows and bodily exchanges may have shortcomings in terms of grasping the fairly definite Datoga preoccupation with the creation of boundaries and borders; boundaries that may contain either dirty and harmful mother's milk or vulnerable new mothers and their babies. We propose that in encounters with Datoga ethnography, Douglas's concepts should be located within an open and dynamic analytic framework, drawing upon the flow concept. Such an approach is necessary to understand the simultaneous fluidity, concreteness and rigidity of *metida*.

The potential to control metida

The extent to which a particular individual observes *metida* avoidance does not solely depend upon the degree to which he/she experiences accidents and events related to death and dying, or birth and birth-giving. The practice of *metida* also varies in the sense that some will observe stricter *metida* than others. The same incident may cause diverse responses, depending upon those affected. The example of the men who were drinking honey mead revealed that some men were not afraid of sharing a vessel with the man still 'eating' the death of his wife, while others chose to refrain from drinking with him. There is therefore an inherent flexibility within the *metida* complex that allows for individual assessment and choice.

There is a limit, however, to this flexibility. It is very likely that those who refused or feared to drink with the man 'eating the dirt of death' themselves had wives of a procreative age, or had wives who had experienced extensive procreative hardships. The people who observe the harshest restrictions on their conduct, however, are not men but women, not least those who have experienced numerous miscarriages or infant deaths. The severe sanctions against unmarried mothers, the isolation that prevents young widows from leaving their deceased husbands' compounds, and the seclusion that prevents a young woman from leaving her husband's house after miscarriage, still-birth or infant death, are all restrictions placed primarily on women. Both male and female informants readily pointed out the political game inherent in *metida*. One male informant put it this way:

We Barabaig have taken over the fear of *ghawiida* and *darawaida* from our [Iraqw] neighbours and we truly like these customs. Our young wives can no longer run away after the death of their husband or after losing a baby as they did in previous times. Now they stay behind and become pregnant again. They remain to bless the clan of their husbands.

If a woman nonetheless chooses to run off, she will have to leave behind any other children she has managed to bring into the world. The hardships experienced by women who go through several periods of *ghawiida* seclusion, or who live with the chronic *neaboda* status, were commented upon by another informant:

A Datoga woman doesn't mind 'eating the death' of her husband, what we fear is 'eating the death' of our children. The loneliness is agonizing and adds to the pain of losing the child. We are terrified that we will remain outsiders until death. But what can we do? Some women run off, but with what benefit when our children remain with their fathers?

CLOSING REMARKS

This article has aimed to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the *metida* avoidance phenomenon among many Datoga of Tanzania. The impact of the restrictions is highly visible, not least in relation to young women's reproductive lives, where the potential for negotiation is limited because Datoga custom is under threat from conversion to Christianity. Indeed, Christianity is the option that increasing numbers of Iraqw and Datoga girls and women choose in order to avoid the long-term isolation instigated by the painful recurrent loss of infants, or by pregnancies out of wedlock. We have argued that the critical employment of a combination of the analytical concepts of 'pollution' and 'boundary making', on the one hand, and 'flow' on the other can enhance our understanding of the meaning and employment of *metida* concepts and practices. We have argued that one should be cautious about uncritically substituting classic 'pollution' and 'boundary' concepts with a new set of potential 'gate-keeping concepts' such as 'flows' and 'unbounded' bodies – concepts which appear to fit equally well in Hagen, Turkana, Nuer and Iraqw communities. Generalizing concepts need to be employed critically lest we lose the subtleties of local phenomena. Ivan Karp (1987: ix) has pointed out that when focusing on a commonly found phenomenon we need to demonstrate how it takes its meaning and 'emotional coloration . . . from custom, society, cosmology and experience' in a way that makes the general and familiar culturally specific. It is the diversity of local meaning and 'emotional coloration' of the Datoga *metida* phenomenon that we have addressed in this article.

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with *metida* avoidance practices as they emerge in daily and ritual practice among the agro-pastoral Datoga-speaking peoples of Tanzania. The elaboration of the avoidance practices varies starkly between and within Datoga segments, but these practices are commonly particularly elaborate in connection with death or death-like events, and with birth or birth-like events. In the study area women may spend years of their lives with severe restrictions on their conduct in terms of movement and socialization. We argue that in making sense of such avoidance phenomena the strong influence of Mary Douglas's 'dirt' and 'pollution' concepts has hindered an understanding of the fact that the *metida* seclusion does not only isolate substances perceived to be dangerously contaminating, but in similar ways secludes fertile and vulnerable elements in order to protect them. A Strathern-inspired transition to a focus on bodies as open and dynamic systems that mingle with other bodies in intimate flows or exchanges of bodily fluids may be fruitful in this context. We indicate, however, that incautious substitution of a 'pollution' concept with the concept of 'flows' may lead to challenges not entirely dissimilar to those that attended the employment of Douglas's concepts.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite des pratiques d'évitement *metida* dans le cadre des pratiques quotidiennes et rituelles des peuples agropastoraux de langue datoga de Tanzanie. L'élaboration des pratiques d'évitement varie considérablement selon les segments Datoga, mais ces pratiques sont souvent particulièrement élaborées en ce qui concerne la mort ou événements assimilables à la mort, et la naissance ou événements assimilables à la naissance. Dans la zone d'étude, il arrive que les femmes passent plusieurs années de leur vie assujetties à de lourdes contraintes de conduite en termes de mouvement et de socialisation. L'article soutient qu'en donnant un sens à ce phénomène d'évitement, la forte influence des notions de "souillure" et de "pollution" de Mary Douglas a empêché de comprendre que l'isolement *metida* ne fait pas qu'isoler les substances perçues comme dangereusement contaminantes, mais de façon similaire isole les éléments fertiles et vulnérables afin de les protéger. Une transition inspirée par Strathern vers une focalisation sur les corps en tant que systèmes ouverts et dynamiques qui se mêlent à d'autres corps, dans des écoulements intimes ou

des échanges de liquides organiques, peut s'avérer féconde dans ce contexte. L'article indique cependant que la substitution imprudente d'une notion de "pollution" par la notion d'"écoulements" peut susciter des contestations peu dissimilaires de celles qui ont accompagné l'emploi des notions de Douglas.