



WIKO VILLAGE  
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Born in 1953 and raised in Lebanon and then Britain, I worked in various professions – teaching, journalism, and archaeology – before turning to academia. I am now Professor of Anthropology at UC Davis. My research encompasses a wide array of topics, but always from an evolutionary-ecological perspective (Conservation: Linking Ecology, Economics and Culture, 2005, with P. Coppolillo), including the evaluation of conservation-development projects in Tanzania with the NGO “Savannas Forever”. My current evolutionary anthropological work addresses issues of health, reproduction, survival, and marriage in Mpimbwe. I aim to bring science to the widest audience possible (*I’ve Been Gone Far Too Long*. 1996, with W. Logsdon) with, for example, our history books for Tanzanian school children (*Historia ya Kabila la WaPimbwe*. 2013, with P. Mgawe, T. Caro, and S.-J. Seel) and ongoing broader comparative work on inequality (“The Intergenerational Transmission of Wealth and the Dynamics of Inequality in Pre-Modern Societies.” *Science* 326, 2009, with S. Bowles et al.). – Address: Department of Anthropology, University of California at Davis, Davis, CA 95616, USA.  
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I write this from a dusty village in Mpimbwe (western Tanzania), contemplating my year as a 2011/12 Wissenschaftskolleg Fellow, and how such an experience intersects with the “real” life of both an academic and the more typical inhabitant of this planet. As I think back over such an immensely pleasurable and intellectually stimulating year, looking out onto a breaking dawn over the now dry Msadye River, and registering the chorus of roosters, the cries of young Sukuma children digging for water, and the pattering feet of

the few practicing Muslims on their way back from a *daku* (it's the holy month of Ramadan) I am struck, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, by the similarities between Wiko and an African village.

Most prominent is the sense of community. As an evolutionary anthropologist I cannot of course buy into the romantic idea of harmonious communities made up of cooperating individuals. Indeed these Bantu villages where I work reveal, like every other community in the world, a complex mosaic of ties, of both close interdependence and bitter rivalry, with the former anchoring the extraordinary evolutionary success of our species and the latter prompting witchcraft accusations among even the closest of kin. But whether ties are warm or cold, a sense of community emerges from the fact that everyone knows everyone, and more significantly from the extensive pool of shared knowledge and experience from which each individual samples (often very selectively). Most events in village life are social, or at least interpreted as social: a birth, the construction of a new road, a theft, a marital scandal, a sickness, even a sudden change in the price of items purchased or sold. Each such event instantiates endless discussion, and everyone has his or her own opinion on the causality, consequence, and morality entailed.

So when Mwendapole's *powatila*, a small diesel-powered tractor marketed as a tiller and Mwendapole's gift from a political patron, spluttered to a halt outside the local bar yesterday afternoon, every drinker of the thick maize brew seated on the verandah had his or her own hypothesis: Mwendapole had slept with one of his patron's wives; Mwendapole's disgruntled neighbor had replaced one of the *powatila* spark plugs with worn ones; Mwendapole had never attended primary school and was therefore an incompetent mechanic; the petrol Mwendapole had stolen from the Chinese road-building contractors was spiked; Mwendapole had broken his Ramadan fast. The wonderful thing about these hypotheses is that they are all based on evidence – everyone in the bar has a pool of considerably accurate knowledge about Mwendapole's life. Furthermore, without a rigorous scientific method (particularly after the beer) for evaluating these hypotheses, there is remarkable tolerance for multiple explanations – the patron's first (and now disregarded) wife was working together with the disgruntled neighbor, for example. The shared knowledge, both personal and professional, provides a rich, engaging, and often intellectually stimulating aspect to village life.

As an anthropologist (even of the evolutionary blend), I of course have to spend time “hanging out” in the bar (we call it “participant observation” methodology). Yesterday I was mainly chasing up “missing values” in my anthropometric database, or in other

words tracking down recalcitrant individuals who had so far failed to climb onto my various scales to reveal their weights and heights. Patience is the key to being an anthropologist, so I sit with friends and wait for my “missing values” by soaking up (together with the beer) discussions such as that over Mwendapole’s *powatila*.

Yesterday, as I noted above, I was struck by the parallels between village life and that of a Wiko Fellow. Spending a year together with a group of like-minded people is, in the evolutionary scale of things, not a particularly unusual feature of human social life – we have after all, for thousands (and most likely hundreds of thousands) of years, lived in small relatively stable communities of kin and unrelated individuals who are all highly familiar with one another. In our modern world, with small, nucleated families, predominantly urban residence, and huge international intellectual networks facilitated by conferences and the Internet, relatively few of us enjoy “village life” in the way that our ancestors did. Wiko in a strange way offers this. The sense of community that develops within the year, the intense familiarity with different peoples’ very distinct ways of thinking, the diversity of viewpoints and hypotheses on offer, and the selectivity with which different people call on different kinds of evidence, all combine to produce a richly stimulating and entertaining village life – a truly unique pleasure that few of us enjoy in our normal academic lives. When do we each have the opportunity just to hang out, so often in the equivalent of the village bar and equally “voll mit Wein”, and explore views on the behavior of our (and other) species with people who share some similar bodies of knowledge and who are infused with similar curiosity?

Of course the rub here is “similar bodies of knowledge”. With so many disciplines and topics represented in the Wiko Village, to what degree can we really make a joint exploration of anything? Discussions following our Tuesday Colloquia revealed gaping lacunae among us in our assumptions, hypotheses, and use of evidence. This of course is to be expected, indeed cherished, in a forum where the sciences and the humanities meet. What I learned in the Wiko Village, as I have perceived in bar-room chat about *powatillas*, divorces, or the specific route taken by the new Chinese road that dissects the village, is that everyone is right. This is not simply tolerance of other peoples’ worldviews – surely as academics we should all be well-enough socialized human beings to accept that others can see the world differently. Rather, what I learned in Wiko was how to pursue more deeply such questions as *why* a social scientist views the concept of culture so differently from me, or *why* an evolutionary biologist sees the ontogeny of behavioral diversity somewhat distinctly from me. These differences reduce to differences not in logic, but in values

– deeply held tenets that structure how particular individuals view the world. As you get to know the individuals better on a personal and social level, you begin to appreciate the fundamentally different intellectual landmarks they bring to the analysis of what are, after all, common questions. Just as in Mpimbwe I am intrigued not simply by the different reasons given for why Mwendapole’s *powatila* lies abandoned on the street, but by the personal, social, and idiosyncratic histories that lie behind the different explanatory tools that each individual adopts to make sense of this world. So thanks Wiko for inviting me to your village (and your bar!) for such a wonderful year.

Finally a few more mundane observations about my year at Wiko. On Paul Schmid-Hempel’s invitation I had initially intended to coordinate a group on the evolution of human behavior and conservation; the participants ultimately fell through, but I would strongly encourage another such group in the future. The roots of the current biodiversity crisis obviously lie in human behavior, and there are huge advances to be made from collaborative work in this area; indeed one of my Wiko projects lay in such an analysis, a paper we now have published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*; with regard to conservation I also coauthored several papers during the year on the factors driving illegal bushmeat hunting in Africa. As it turned out, even though the conservation focus group failed to materialize, we ended up with a terrific group of evolutionary anthropologists; although we did not formally collaborate on each other’s projects, I for one can say I learned a huge amount from everyone in the group and really valued their collegiality and friendship. My own work at Wiko lay primarily in untangling the soap opera of a small village in Mpimbwe – seventeen years of marriages, births, divorces, and deaths, interlaced with anthropometric and economic data. With the data now clean and properly coded, I am ready to tackle lots of evolutionary anthropological questions about marriage, parental investment, and economic inequality and to produce papers that will owe a huge debt to the time afforded me at Wiko. In another project, Wiko kindly employed an assistant for me to work on modeling cooperative networks in my Mpimbwe village – this was a fantastic opportunity both for me and for the assistant, and I recommend that this become a more standard procedure insofar as it furthers the training of more junior scholars and scientists in Berlin and brings new ideas and skills to the Fellows. Wiko also supported the visit of one of my Tanzanian collaborators. This was a wonderful experience both for me and for my visitor and will open (I hope) increased outreach to the scholars of the developing world, and particularly Africa. Wiko also gave

me the opportunity to finish two books on the history of Mpimbwe, one in Swahili for school children and one for a broader audience among historians and Tanzanian citizens.

The roosters are now quiet. Excited primary school kids scuttle with their notebooks to their overcrowded, under-furnished classrooms, women head to Msadye to scoop murky water out of shallow wells re-dug each morning in the coarse sand, and teenagers wake to another day of little hope of employment other than the physical labor of hoe agriculture, so typical of rural Africa. I dwell on the unmerited luxury afforded to some of us, particularly my invitation to the Wiko Village, for which I am endlessly grateful and for which I try not to feel guilty.

I finish with a list of the work published or submitted during my year at Wiko.

- Seel, S.-J., P. Mgawe, and M. Borgerhoff Mulder (2013). *The history and traditions of the Pimbwe*. Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers.
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- Mgawe, P., M. Borgerhoff Mulder, T. Caro, A. Martin, and C. Kiffner (2012). "Factors affecting bushmeat consumption in the Katavi-Rukwa ecosystem of Tanzania." *Tropical Conservation Science* 5: 446–462.
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- Towner, M. C., M. N. Grote, J. Venti, and M. Borgerhoff Mulder (2012). "Cultural macroevolution on neighbor graphs: vertical and horizontal transmission among Western North American Indian societies." *Human Nature* 23: 283–305.
- Borgerhoff Mulder, M., L. Msalu, T. Caro and J. Salerno (2012). "Remarkable rates of lightning strike mortality in Malawi." *PLoS One* 7: 1–4.
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- Borgerhoff Mulder, M. and B. A. Beheim (2011). "Understanding the nature of wealth and its effects on human fitness." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 366: 344–356.
- Kasper, C., E. Fitzherbert, and M. Borgerhoff Mulder. "Who helps and why: cooperative networks in Mpimbwe." (submitted).
- Schacht, R. and M. Borgerhoff Mulder. "Explaining sex roles in humans: sex ratio effects on the mating market in southwestern Guyana." (submitted).