
Warfare, Vulnerability and Survival: A Case from Southwestern Ethiopia

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The Mursi are a small group of herders and cultivators living in the Lower Omo Valley of southwestern Ethiopia. Over the past 20 years they have suffered a disaster of classic proportions, involving drought, famine, migration and war. Measures taken to ensure the physical survival of people, and especially cattle, in the face of regular and expected attacks by their neighbours have made the economy of the Mursi more vulnerable to climatic uncertainty. A crude materialist explanation of warfare is not, therefore, supported by this case but it is clear also that warfare has played a key part in Mursi expansion northwards, over the past century, into the territory of the Bodi. Warfare, in this context, is a means of establishing and maintaining the separate political identities of neighbouring groups. The problem of survival does not present itself to the Mursi and their neighbours as a choice between political and physical survival: the only way they know of saving lives is to save their way of life.

Although warfare has been one of the main causes of increased rural poverty in Africa during the 1970s and 80s, one would have to search hard through the enormous literature on poverty and famine to find anything dealing specifically with the impact of warfare on the subsistence strategies of a particular population. This is partly, no doubt, because outside observers have seldom been in a position to study people who are actively engaged in warfare and/or under direct physical attack. Another possible reason is that warfare has too often been seen as a fairly straightforward, if tragic, phenomenon over which poor people have little control and to which they can only respond as passive victims. This picture certainly has truth in it for some populations but, for others, the threat of armed violence is a constant, often seasonal, factor in their subsistence calculations and

one to which they must therefore be presumed to have achieved some degree of adaptation. When the groups who are affected by it are, furthermore, permanently organised both to make war and to meet the threat of attack from their similarly organised neighbours, it has to be asked whether warfare is not itself a product of adaptation to a particular physical and social environment. The relationship between warfare and vulnerability, therefore, is not as simple as it might at first appear and the purpose of this article is to explore some of the complexities of this relationship through a case study of the Mursi, a group of around 5000 subsistence herders and cultivators living in the Lower Omo Valley of southwestern Ethiopia.

Since the beginning of this century the Mursi have become, for reasons to be outlined later, increasingly dependent on their

least reliable means of subsistence, shifting cultivation. The consequent need to find new areas of untouched woodland that could be cleared for cultivation led them to push northwards into an unoccupied buffer zone, separating them from their northern neighbours, the Bodi. By the late 1930s they had reached their present northern boundary, the River Mara, and were "face to face" with the Bodi. Thirty years later, with crop yields falling rapidly and further expansion northwards blocked by the Bodi, the stage was being set for a disaster of classic proportions, involving drought, famine, war and migration.

Between 1971 and 1973, immediately after my first period of fieldwork amongst them (1968–70), the Mursi experienced a famine of such severity that, for the first time in living memory, people were acknowledged to have died of starvation (Turton, 1977). Its precipitating cause was a failure of the main rains for three years in succession but it was greatly exacerbated by an intensification of armed conflict which affected all the herding peoples of the Lower Omo during these years (Fukui and Turton, 1978), disrupting both subsistence activities and economic exchange. For the Mursi, the most serious conflict was with the Bodi, with whom they had been on terms of peaceful cooperation for the previous 20 years. This conflict subsided into an uneasy peace in 1975 and, at the end of the decade, after further years of poor rainfall, members of the northernmost Mursi section began a drought-induced migration to an area in the Mago Valley, about 50 miles to the east, which had last been occupied, by the Bodi, about seventy years earlier. There was plenty of virtually untouched forest here for shifting cultivation and a highland market centre only four hours' walk away. By 1983, despite the high tsetse challenge, which made the area quite unsuitable for cattle herding, there were around a thousand Mursi (or 20 per cent of the total population) living an essen-

tially agricultural, sedentary existence in the Mago Valley (Turton and Turton, 1984).

In the late eighties a new threat loomed for the Mursi, the origins of which lay in national, international and even super-power politics: the acquisition by their southwestern neighbours, the Nyangatom (often known, in Ethiopia, as Bume and, in Kenya, as Dongiro), of modern, automatic rifles. In February 1987 a large force of Nyangatom, armed both with automatic rifles and with the Mannlicher long rifles and carbines which have been common amongst all the peoples of the lower Omo since the Second World War, killed between 500 and 1000 Mursi in a single attack at the Omo. Since most men were at that time with their cattle, in the dry season pastures, the majority of the victims were women, girls and infants. Immediately after the attack the Mursi evacuated the entire southern part of their territory. When I last visited them, in December 1987, they had not yet reoccupied this area and were uncertain whether they would ever be able to do so. This, together with the obviously drastic demographic consequences of the loss of so many women and children and the threat of another, equally devastating, Nyangatom attack, meant that their future as a distinct politico-territorial group was now in question.

I shall first show how measures taken to ensure the physical survival of people and cattle in the face of regular and expected external attacks help to make the Mursi economy more vulnerable to climatic uncertainty, illustrating this with an account of the ways in which the war with the Bodi exacerbated the effects of drought in the early 1970s. I shall then ask why, given the obviously negative consequences of warfare, for both individuals and groups, it is such a pervasive feature of relations between the Mursi and their neighbours. Taking a materialist tack first, I shall examine the part played by warfare in Mursi territorial expansion against the Bodi. It

emerges that, while this expansion has certainly been caused by land shortage amongst the Mursi and while warfare has certainly been an integral part of it, the Mursi fought their last two wars with the Bodi to acquire territory in a *de jure*, rather than *de facto*, sense. Focussing next on the relation between warfare and political identity, it emerges that Mursi warfare is not so much a means by which an already constituted political group seeks to extend and/or defend its territory, as a means by which the very notion of its separate political identity is created and kept alive: warfare is not so much a consequence of political identity as a cause of it. This point is illustrated well enough by the recent history of Mursi-Bodi warfare, but I shall concentrate on the repercussions of the Nyangatom attack of February 1987, since this exposed, as crises often do, the "inner workings" (Waller, 1987, p. 74) of a system brought close to collapse.

WARFARE AND VULNERABILITY

The cultural values and ethnic identity of the Mursi are firmly centred around cattle herding but, with only about one head of cattle per head of human population, they depend for well over half of their subsistence needs on the cultivation of sorghum. Two harvests are obtained, or at least attempted, each year, one by flood retreat cultivation along the banks of the Omo (January–December) and the other by shifting cultivation in cleared woodland along the Omo's westward-flowing tributaries (June–July). Flood retreat cultivation is relatively reliable, since it depends on the heavy "summer" rains which fall over the highland catchment area of the Omo, but the cultivable area is small, being limited to land actually inundated by the flood. Shifting cultivation is highly unreliable, because of the low and erratic local rainfall.

Although cattle provide directly no

more than 20 per cent of daily subsistence, they are a vital means of insurance against crop failure, when they can be exchanged for grain with neighbouring groups or in highland markets. Because the riverain forest and bushbelt of the Omo is infested with tsetse flies, cattle have to be confined, for most of the year, to the wooded grassland which rises eastward to the Omo-Mago watershed. During the dry season (October–February) they are to be found furthest to the east, the herders (mainly men and boys) then living in rough and temporary camps in the Elma Valley and subsisting on milk, blood and meat. The remainder of the population, meanwhile, is at the Omo, where flood retreat cultivation is in progress. With the onset of the main rains (March–April) the cattle are moved westwards to more permanent settlements no more than an hour's walk from the wet season cultivation areas. The population as a whole can then benefit from the increased milk supply that is brought on by the rains and the herders can enjoy a mixed diet of milk and sorghum porridge.

The Mursi have fundamentally hostile relations with all their herding neighbours save the Chai, who live west of the Omo and south of Maji and with whom they intermarry and share a common language. Enemy groups may be divided into two categories: those with whom the Mursi are periodically at war but with whom they otherwise have relations of peaceful co-operation and economic exchange and those with whom they have no peaceful contacts. The Bodi and Nyangatom belong to the first category and the Hamar, Banna and Bashada (Lydall, 1976) who live further away to the southeast and to whom the Mursi refer (as I shall) by the collective term "Hamari", belong to the second. It is with enemies of the first category that warfare, when it occurs, is likely to be most violent, most disruptive of economic life and most threatening to group survival. Attacks by enemies of the second category, normally

in the form of cattle raids, are expected every year and are therefore simply another source of uncertainty, in a highly uncertain environment, which must be taken account of by individuals and groups in their subsistence calculations.

Raids by the Hamari are most likely during the dry season, when the Mursi cattle are taken eastwards to the Elma Valley and the Mago is low enough to be easily fordable. Because of the shortage of water and grazing, cattle camps are dotted widely across the countryside, which makes them an inviting target for small parties of raiders who hope to be well on their way home before the alarm has been raised and a pursuit party mobilised. A raid on one camp which took place on December 25th 1969 may be considered typical. In the early hours of the morning a rifle shot was heard by people living nearby but it was assumed that the stock of this camp were being worried by hyenas. Later in the day it was discovered that the camp had been raided and three people killed — the herd owner, who had been shot and his two sons, aged about seven and thirteen, who were lying where they had been sleeping with their throats cut. All the cattle had been taken and their tracks led in the direction of the Mago Valley. The tracks of the raiders indicated that there were no more than four of them.

Although disastrous for individuals and families, such raids do not, in themselves, necessarily reduce per capita stockwealth, since cattle losses sustained in raids can, in the long run, be made up by counter raids. Other things being equal, the give and take of mutual raiding on this scale should, over time, leave neither group with net gains. Paradoxically, it is not actual raids but measures taken to cope with threatened raids which have a long term negative impact on the community's stockwealth. These are, principally, the withdrawal of cattle from the best, tsetse-free grazing areas and their concentration into large com-

munal settlements near or within the tsetse-infested Omo bushbelt.

The advantage of concentration is that it makes more men and weapons available for the protection of the herds. It is clearly a more difficult task for a small group of raiders to approach undetected and steal cattle from a well populated and securely built settlement than from an isolated cattle camp occupied, perhaps, by three or four men and boys. Even if they succeed in getting away with cattle, the alarm can be given with such speed that they are unlikely to get far before they are overtaken by a superior force of pursuers. The disadvantage of concentration is that it makes demands on grazing and, especially, water which cannot easily be met in the eastern pastures at the height of the dry season when the threat from raiders is greatest. A regular strategy at this time, therefore, is to take all the cattle to the Omo, the only permanent and plentiful source of water in the country, but where the risk from tsetse flies is particularly high and the limited grazing is quickly exhausted. In some years it is considered necessary for the concentration of people and stock to continue into the wet season, large settlements then being built along the eastern margins of the Omo bushbelt where, once again, the cattle are in constant danger from tsetse flies.

The threat of external attack also helps to reduce the productivity of Mursi agriculture. In some years the "small rains" in October–November would be sufficient to allow flood retreat cultivation along streams and rivers in the dry season pastures. But planting is normally not attempted because of the expectation that the plots would have to be abandoned, because of raids, before they could be harvested in December–January. When raiders are active in the wet season, furthermore, people do not feel safe sleeping in their rainfed cultivation areas, preferring the security of the nearby cattle settlements. This increases the likelihood that crops will be trampled by buffaloes and

other game animals and eaten by baboons. It is clear, then, that measures taken to increase the physical security of people and cattle, in the face of regular and expected external attack, reduce the effectiveness of both pastoral and agricultural production and increase the long term vulnerability of the economy to climatic uncertainty.

The short term impact of warfare on vulnerability is well illustrated by the Mursi-Bodi war which accompanied the famine of the early 1970s. Relations between the two groups had been consistently peaceful since the conclusion of an earlier war in the early 1950s and, during my first period of field-work, several Mursi were cultivating, on a regular basis, with Bodi associates north of the Mara. The first signs of trouble came in January 1970, after Mursi cattle had been taken well into Bodi territory to protect them from Hamari raiders. Although this was a strategy which the Mursi had adopted before with the cooperation of the Bodi (most recently in 1966), on this occasion their presence was not welcomed and relations between the two groups began to deteriorate. By May the Mursi were taking cattle up to the highlands to exchange for ammunition, in preparation for an all out war with the Bodi which was expected to begin in a month or two's time, when both sides would have taken in their wet season harvests. The first fatality came in June, when a Mursi youth was shot dead north of the River Mara, where he and his father were living and cultivating with Bodi friends.

A "no-man's land", 20–30 miles deep, now opened up between the two sides, across which raiding parties of two or three individuals went regularly to and fro, a favourite tactic being to lie in wait for potential victims beside a path or near a watering point. For their part, the Mursi behaved as though the bush and long grass were alive with Bodi and avoided using well worn paths as much as possible. Those who wore ivory bracelets took the precaution of

smearing them with cattle dung so that they would be less visible when travelling, as people preferred to do, at night. The cattle were kept for long periods at the Omo and in the far south of the country, although people continued to cultivate along the Mara and at Kuduma, the northernmost Mursi flood cultivation site on the Omo, throughout the war. The biggest single engagement was in late 1971, when a large Bodi force attacked a Mursi settlement at the Omo where several hundred cattle had been concentrated. The attackers, who were better supplied with ammunition than the defenders, succeeded in taking a large number of cattle. They suffered many casualties, however, as they drove them back towards the Mara, under harassment from the Mursi, the narrow path they followed through the bushbelt becoming so littered with corpses that it has since been known as the "rotten" path.

Not only were the pastoral and (to a lesser extent) agricultural activities of the Mursi disrupted by the war but, equally important at a time of famine, so also was their access to external sources of food. In 1974 the Mursi told me that it had been people who were able to exchange cattle for grain in highland markets who had survived the famine best. Those without cattle took less valuable trade goods, such as buffalo hides and honey, while some were forced to part with rifles, agricultural implements and personal ornaments. Getting these goods to the nearest market centres, Jinka and Berka, was a dangerous undertaking. The path to Jinka took them across the Mago Valley where they ran the risk of being attacked and robbed by Hamari, while that to Berka lay through Bodi territory. People travelling to and from Berka accounted for the largest number of Mursi deaths at the hands of Bodi between 1971 and 1975.

There was no systematic distribution of relief food to the Mursi or, as far as I know, to their immediate neighbours, during the

1971–73 famine. (It was only in 1974, after the overthrow of the Emperor Haile Selassie, that the new military government established its unique and highly regarded Relief and Rehabilitation Commission.) Some relief food was obtained by Mursi, on an *ad hoc* basis, in Jinka, the awraja (district) capital, and some was distributed to Bodi at Hana, the “Mursi-Bodi” wareda (sub-district) capital, which is in Bodi territory, about forty miles north of the Mara. At the end of 1973, soon after beginning a second period of fieldwork, I arranged, through Oxfam, Christian Aid and the British Embassy in Addis Ababa for two plane loads of grain to be flown to Hana for the Mursi. The first of these consignments was successfully collected by a party of Mursi but, during the distribution of the second, a month later, a Mursi man was shot dead near the government post, whereupon all the Mursi returned home, leaving the bulk of the grain at Hana.

WARFARE AND EXPANSION

It is clear that the costs of war are counted, for the Mursi, not only in death and injury for individuals, but also in increased economic vulnerability for the community as a whole. And yet this is a society which is organised for war and in which warlike qualities are inculcated in men from an early age. The military organisation of the Mursi is based upon a system of male age sets. Men usually marry in their late twenties or early thirties, while girls are expected to marry in their late teens. This allows older men to practice polygyny and creates a class of physically mature but unmarried men who, since they are without domestic and agricultural responsibilities, are the main source of military manpower. Why, given the obvious negative consequences of warfare for the Mursi, is it such a pervasive feature of their social organisation and external relations? This question can be approached from both an ecological and

political point of view, corresponding to the two principal, very broad and not mutually exclusive explanations of “indigenous” or “tribal” warfare which have been advanced by anthropologists: that it is a means of adjusting the human population to available resources and that it is a means of maintaining rule governed relations between autonomous political units in the absence of an overarching authority.

That the Mursi-Bodi war of the early 1970s was related to competition for scarce resources seems obvious from the fact that the frictions which immediately preceded it arose out of the temporary use by Mursi, under pressure from Hamari raids, of Bodi grazing areas in early 1970. As I have already explained, however, a permanent northward movement of Mursi had been going on for many years before this as, in their search for new areas of uncleared woodland, they had gradually taken over the buffer zone separating them from the Bodi. The question to be asked, then, is how, regardless of the events which immediately preceded it, was the war related to this long term acquisition of new territory by the Mursi?

It is recounted in Mursi oral history that they entered their present territory from the west, having displaced by force of arms its former occupants, the Bodi, who retreated north of the River Mara (Turton, 1987). It is impossible to say when this occupation took place, but it was probably fairly recent — at least 100 but not more than 200 years ago. The Mursi first took over the southern part of the area that had been vacated by the Bodi and they were still concentrated in the south in 1896, when the Italian explorer Vittorio Böttego was mapping the course of the Lower Omo (Vannutelli and Citerni, 1899). The buffer zone between the two groups was eventually eliminated only in the mid-1930s when the Mursi first began cultivating along the River Mara. This progressive occupation by the Mursi of land which had been occupied many years

earlier by the Bodi continued in 1979 when they made a sideways move to the Mago Valley. For this had also last been occupied, about 70 years before, by the Bodi.

While it is impossible to reconstruct the circumstances which led to the first permanent crossing by Mursi to the east bank of the Omo, it is possible to gain a fairly clear picture of the factors which led to their expansion northwards during this century. These can be traced to ecological and political changes which made them increasingly dependent on shifting cultivation: a drastic lowering in the level of Lake Turkana, which fell by 20m. between 1896 and the mid-1950s (Butzer, 1971), and the incorporation, also dating from the late 1890s, of the Lower Omo Valley into the Ethiopian state.

The fall in the level of Lake Turkana which, according to Butzer, was almost entirely due to reduced rainfall over the Omo Basin, led both to a progressive diminution of land available for flood retreat cultivation and, because of the consequent reduction in ground water level, to the growth of woody vegetation on land adjacent to the River and along its tributary streams. The lower courses of these tributaries pass today through a dense belt of bushland thicket, 10 to 15 km in width, but older Mursi can remember when this was open grassland, used for cattle herding. (The Mursi themselves probably also had a hand in bringing about this change, both by cutting down the forest for shifting cultivation and subjecting the banks of the Omo to heavy dry season grazing. This would have reduced the effectiveness of periodic burning and made it easier for woody plants to establish themselves.) The advance of bushland thicket east of the Omo allowed tsetse, already present no doubt in the Omo forest, to penetrate the eastern grassland, a process which is reported, by people in their 50s and 60s, to have begun in their lifetimes. Thus, not only have flood retreat harvests been deteriorating throughout this

century, but herd growth rates have been held back by the steadily increasing tsetse challenge. Demands for tribute and tax by local administrators of the Emperor Menelik (whose forces occupied the Lower Omo at the turn of the century) and of his successor, Haile Selassie, were also an effective constraint on herd growth (Turton, 1987).

In their movement northwards during this century, then, the Mursi have been taking over land which had been evacuated many years before by the Bodi. To understand the part played by warfare in this expansion we have to see it not simply as a means of expelling Bodi from territory later occupied by Mursi, but also as a means of legally and retrospectively ratifying, in the eyes of both groups, an existing occupation. We have to focus, that is, not so much on armed conflict as on its ritual resolution.

Since making peace with the Bodi in 1975, the Mursi have not extended their northern boundary beyond Mara. On the contrary, those Mursi who had been cultivating, before the war, with Bodi friends and associates, north of the Mara, did not resume these links afterwards. What did change, as a result of the war, was the legal status of the boundary. When the war came to an end, each side "hosted", in turn, a peace making ritual which was attended by the other side's representatives. The Mursi held theirs on the River Mara and the Bodi theirs on the Gura, thirty miles further north. These were, in effect, boundary-marking rituals, the important point to note being that, at the end of the previous Mursi-Bodi war (1952) the Mursi had held their part of the ritual on the River Moizoi, twenty miles south of the Mara, which they had nevertheless been using for cultivation since the 1930s. From the Mursi point of view, the war of the early 1970s was fought to acquire new territory only in a *de jure* sense: to establish their legal right to Mara, of which they had been in *de facto* occupation for about 40 years.

Another way in which Mursi-Bodi territorial relations were changed by the war was that it gave rise to a new buffer zone, about ten miles deep, north of the Mara, across which the two sides subsequently maintained a respectful distance. From the point of view of the conservation of renewable resources, the creation of this unoccupied zone can therefore be regarded as ecologically adaptive, whichever group occupies it in the future and even though it must have resulted in some loss of resources for both Mursi and Bodi individuals.

The adjustment of population to resources may be achieved, of course, not only by increasing the latter but also by decreasing the former. How might warfare play a part here? An obvious answer is that people are killed in war but it is a short step from here to the absurd conclusion that the more destructive war is of human life the greater its adaptive "efficiency". The American anthropologist, Marvin Harris, has suggested that it is not "combat *per se*" but the need to produce "combat-ready males" that makes warfare, among people such as the Mursi, an effective means of controlling population growth (1975, pp. 77–8). This is because it exerts a negative influence on the "nurturance of females". Harris is thinking principally of female infanticide, which I have no reason to believe is practised by the Mursi. Nor do I have evidence that Mursi mothers are relatively more neglectful of their female children. What is clear, however, is that unmarried adult males, because of their predominantly pastoral lifestyle, are generally the best fed section of the population and that which is likely to suffer least during times of food shortage. Such men live for most of the year with their local age mates in cattle camps in the eastern grasslands and are the main source of military manpower. If Harris is right that the need to produce and maintain a warrior class does have a negative impact on the survival of females, this could be one of the factors that might

help explain the commonly stated finding that mobile herding groups in East Africa have lower population growth rates than sedentary agriculturalists.

WARFARE AND POLITICAL IDENTITY

The contribution of warfare to the survival of a group may also be considered in a political sense. Here, "survival" means the continuation of the group as a distinct, autonomous, politico-territorial unit, in a system of similar units, and "warfare" is a reciprocal activity by means of which groups assert their independence of each other and enter into orderly (rule-governed) relations. Viewed in this way, then, warfare is not a breakdown in "normal" political relations, but their very underpinning. This is well illustrated by the part played by warfare, and its ritual resolution, in defining the changing territorial relationship between the Mursi and the Bodi over the past 100 years. It is clear that, as distinct political units, they are as much products of their periodically hostile relations with each other as they are of their relations with the physical environment. It is even more revealing to consider the repercussions of the Nyangatom attack of February 1987.

This attack upset the normal pattern of Mursi-Nyangatom warfare, not only because of the enormous number of Mursi casualties and because so many of them were women and children, but also because it proclaimed a drastic technological imbalance between the two groups. Although the Nyangatom may have had access to automatic weapons for some time, they had not previously used them against the Mursi. From the point of view of the Nyangatom, the attack was justified by a particularly provocative incident which had occurred a few weeks earlier. Eight Nyangatom, who were guests at a Mursi village on the Omo, had been shot and then hacked to death with bush knives. This in turn was justified by the Mursi by reference to a yet earlier incident

in which a defenceless Mursi boy had been shot dead by a Nyangatom after crossing to the west bank of the Omo to collect relief food from a group of missionaries (Alvarsson, 1989).

The Mursi I spoke to in December 1987 confidently predicted a second Nyangatom onslaught, in a month or two's time, when the Omo would be low enough to ford. The Nyangatom were now even better armed than before with automatic weapons, while the Mursi, despite repeated pleas to the administrator at Hana, had none. Having already abandoned the southern part of their territory, a second Nyangatom attack, they said, would leave them with no option but to abandon the rest of it. They would then have to find what refuge they could with neighbouring groups in the highlands. Their clan names would thereby survive, but the Mursi would no longer exist as a distinct political group.

Despite the extremity of their situation, however, they showed no interest in making peace, even though the Nyangatom were reportedly ready to do so. My question, "Why do you not make peace?" was met with another: "Who are the Nyangatom to make peace with?" By virtually destroying the southernmost Mursi territorial section, they had destroyed the very group with whom it would have been appropriate for them to hold a peace-making ritual. A peace that was made now would not provide the Mursi with a guarantee against further attack by the Nyangatom, who would be secretly laughing at them as "women", even as they made peace. Such a peace would merely be a temporary convenience for the Nyangatom, enabling them to take in their flood harvest without fear of Mursi snipers. (Less than a month before my visit, two Mursi had crossed the Omo at night and, the next morning, killed two Nyangatom men who were working on a new dugout canoe.)

There was no doubt that the Mursi wanted an end to hostilities but it seemed

that the only way this could be achieved was by re-establishing the state of balanced opposition which had characterised their relations with the Nyangatom before the February attack. This meant that the Mursi would have to make a comparable attack on the Nyangatom — namely, one involving several hundred men, armed with at least some automatic weapons. One man said that the Mursi would feel able to make such an attack even if they had as few as ten automatics. When I objected that this would surely be suicidal, since the Nyangatom would in due course respond with much greater fire power, he said that a "return match" (he used the analogy of home and away duelling contests between different Mursi territorial sections) would be seen by both sides as re-establishing the previous balance between them, this being the necessary and sufficient condition of a successful peace. It would not even matter if more Mursi than Nyangatom were killed in the course of the "return match": the surviving Mursi would still be able to make a secure peace, thus ensuring their survival also in a political sense. The Nyangatom would understand and respect the "rules of the game".

This was not, then a simple matter of the Mursi needing to "take revenge" on the Nyangatom, although the individual men I spoke to certainly explained their determination to take part in a counter-attack by referring to relatives of theirs who had been killed in the February massacre. What was at issue, it seemed, was a symbolic, not an actual equivalence, whether of war casualties or weapons. As with the peace-making/boundary-marking rituals referred to earlier, we are dealing here with a system of meanings which is shared by both groups. This suggests an analogy with systems of ceremonial gift exchange which, in other parts of the world (notably Melanesia) also provide for rule-governed competition between autonomous political groups. A group which cannot maintain,

over the long term, a balance of gift and counter gift with rival groups loses its political autonomy. A group which gains access to items of wealth external to the local subsistence economy — such as cash and motor vehicles — is thereby in a position to “defeat” any of its rivals who do not have such access. If warfare between the Mursi and their neighbours is seen as a system of inter group “reciprocity”, we might say that the use by the Nyangatom of automatic weapons had introduced an element of inflation into the system which threatened, both literally and symbolically, the annihilation of the Mursi.

CONCLUSION

In their extreme forms, the two approaches I have relied upon in order to reach an understanding of Mursi warfare, the materialist and the political, have come to represent, appropriately enough, entrenched positions in an extended anthropological slogging match about the explanation of “primitive” or “traditional” warfare. My contention is not simply that both types of explanation apply to the Mursi case, but that the validity of each depends upon it being seen as the complement of the other. They are, or should be considered, two sides of the same coin.

It is clear that the direction and rate of Mursi expansion has been determined by ecological change and that warfare has played a key role in making that expansion possible. On the other hand, it is also clear that the role of warfare has been as much ritual as military: the Mursi do not fight the Bodi to acquire new territory except in a *de jure* sense. Fighting appears to be a necessary preliminary to the real, ritual business of periodically defining and communicating, to themselves and to each other, their common territorial boundary. Thus the materialist explanation, that warfare is a means of adjusting population to scarce resources, is not complete without the

political explanation, that warfare is a means of establishing and maintaining the separate political identities of neighbouring groups. Warfare is a cause, not a consequence of political identity. A corollary of this, which brings us back to the issue of vulnerability, is that the problem of survival does not present itself to the Mursi as a choice between physical and political survival. The only way they know of saving lives is to save their way of life.

Note

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