Chapter

FIVE

Warfare in the Lower Omo Valley, Southwestern Ethiopia: Reconciling Materialist and Political Explanations

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Turton analyzes a post-colonial eruption of “traditional” warfare among the Mursi in Ethiopia. This outbreak in certain ways resembled that described by Rosman and Rubel, because in both instances an isolated “primitive” folk suddenly started massacring itself—Rosman and Rubel accounted for this fighting in terms of nineteenth-century, capitalist growth. Turton’s article equally implicates capitalist developments, but in his case these developments...
are those involving capitalist states’ policies to defeat their opponents politically. Capitalist states throughout most of the twentieth century were opposed by communist states. This confrontation after World War II was called the Cold War. During it, throughout the world, capitalists armed their allies while communists did the same with theirs, so that even the Mursi — in the far southwest of Ethiopia — acquired automatic weapons with which to intensify enormously their “traditional” violences. Cold war provoked hot war.

To consider the anthropological literature on warfare is to be confronted with a paradox. Here are scholarly comparative surveys, meticulous descriptions, and ingenious arguments leading to conclusions that are amongst the most obvious (such as that most wars result in one group gaining access to resources claimed by another) and even banal (such as that wars occur in the absence of institutions capable of preventing them) to be found in the whole anthropological corpus. Such conclusions are unsatisfactory as explanations of warfare (rather than of particular wars) because they confirm our taken for granted cultural assumption that violence in the pursuit of individual self interest is a fact of human nature which it is the purpose of social institutions to keep in check. They confirm, in other words, what we knew, or thought we knew, already, rather than give us the shock of surprise that is the source of any new understanding.

My aim in this chapter is to reach, or at least point toward, such a new understanding of warfare by considering the case of the Mursi, a small group of agro-pastoralists living in the Lower Omo valley of southwestern Ethiopia. I shall attempt to bring together, in a single explanation, two ‘theories’ that have come to represent entrenched positions in an extended anthropological slogging match about the ‘causes’ of ‘traditional’ or ‘primitive’ warfare: the materialist and the political. My contention will be not simply that both types of explanation apply to warfare between the Mursi and their neighbors, but also that the validity of each depends upon it’s being seen as the complement of the other. They are, or should be considered, two sides of the same coin.

I shall first show how measures taken to ensure the physical survival of people and cattle in the face of external attack help to make the Mursi economy more vulnerable to climatic uncertainty. 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 neighbors. Taking a materialist

Figure 5.1. The Mursi and their neighbors.
In the third and final part of the chapter, I shall focus on the relation between warfare and political identity. The argument will be that 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 in the first place (Harrison 1993; Turton 1978 and 1993): warfare becomes, in this light, a cause rather than a consequence of political identity. This point could be illustrated well enough by the recent history of Mursi-Bodi warfare. I shall concentrate instead on a new and devastating expansion in the scale of local warfare in the Lower Omo Valley brought about by the introduction, in the mid-1980s, of automatic weapons and by their increasingly easy availability. One group, the Nyangatom, who are southern neighbors of the Mursi, have been particularly well placed to acquire these weapons (from their friends and allies in Sudan, the Toposa) and have become, since the late 1980s, the most powerful military force in the area.

WARFARE AND VULNERABILITY
The cultural values and ethnic identity of the Mursi are firmly centered around cattle and herding, but with only about three 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 30 per cent of daily subsistence, they are a vital means of insurance against crop failure, when they can be exchanged for grain with the neighboring groups or in highland markets. Because the riverain forest and bushbelt of the Omo are infested with tsetse flies, cattle have to be confined, for most of the year, to the wooded grassland that rises eastward to the Omo-Mago watershed (Figure 5.2). During the dry season (October–February) they are to be found furthest to the east, the herdsmen (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 westward 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 herdsmen can enjoy a mixed diet of milk and sorghum porridge.

Figure 5.2. Marsilând drainage and physical features.
The Mursi have fundamentally hostile relations with all their herding neighbors save the Chai (or Surma), 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 have no peaceful contacts at all and those with whom they are periodically at war but with whom they otherwise have relations of peaceful cooperation and economic exchange. The Hammar, Banna, and Bashada (Lydall 1976), to whom the Mursi refer (as I shall) by the collective term "Hamari," belong to the first category, and the Bodi and Nyangatom to the second. There is a paradox here, since warfare with those who are out-and-out enemies (i.e., the Hamari) is less disruptive of economic life, less destructive of human life, and less threatening to group survival than with those who are, for long periods, friends and allies. Attacks by the Hamari normally take the form of cattle raids. They are expected every year and are simply one more source of uncertainty in a highly uncertain environment that must be taken into account by individuals and groups in their subsistence calculations. Conflict with the Bodi, on the other hand, and especially in recent years, the Nyangatom, is seen by the Mursi as conflict over the occupation of territory and therefore as potentially threatening to their continued existence as an autonomous group.

Hamari raids occur in the dry season, when the Mursi take their cattle eastward 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 mobilized. A raid on one camp that took place on December 25, 1969, may be considered typical. In the early hours of the morning, a rifle shot was heard by the 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 that 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 communal 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 that cannot be easily obtained in the eastern pastures at the height of the dry season, when the threat from raiders is greatest. A regular strategy of this time, therefore, is to take all the cattle to the Omo, the only permanent and abundant 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 were, 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 in the face 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 bufaloes 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.
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 northward into an unoccupied buffer zone separating them from their northern neighbors, 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 northward 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 that 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.

Relations between the two groups had been consistently peaceful since the conclusion of an earlier war in the early 1950s. The first signs of conflict began in January 1970, after Mursi cattle had been taken well into Bodí territory to protect them from Hamar raiders. Although this was a strategy that 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 that 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 Bodí 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 favorite 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 the Bodí 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 traveling, 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 Kudama, the northernmost Mursi flood cultivation site on the Omo, throughout the war. The biggest single engagement was in late 1971, when a large Bodí 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 centers, Jinka and Berka, was a dangerous undertaking. The path to Jinka took them across the Ababa Valley, where they ran the risk of being attacked and robbed by Hamars, while that to Berka accounted for the largest number of Mursi deaths at the hands of Bodí between 1971 and 1975.

There was no systematic distribution of relief food to the Mursi or, as far as I know, to their immediate neighbors during the 1971–73 famine. Some relief food was obtained by Mursi on an ad hoc basis in Jinka, the awraja (district) capital, and some was distributed to Bodí at Hana, the ‘Mursi-Bodi’ awereda (sub-district) capital, which is in Bodí territory, about forty miles north of 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.

In the late eighties a new threat loomed for the Mursi, the origins of which lay in national, international, and even superpower politics: the acquisition by their southwestern neighbors, the Nyangatom...
(often known, in Ethiopia, as Bume and, in Kenya, as Dongiro), of automatic rifles. In February 1987, a large force of Nyangatom, armed with both automatic rifles and with the Mannlicher long rifles and carbines that have been common amongst all the peoples of the Lower Omo since the Second World War, made a surprise attack on the Mursi at the Omo, south of the Dara range. The slaughter was indiscriminate, most of the casualties being women and children. This was, firstly, because a good proportion of the men were with the cattle north of the Dara range, and secondly, because it was easier for men and boys, unencumbered by infants, to scatter and hide in the bush. The majority of the people were killed with spears and knives, having been wounded in the rifle fire. One particularly respected elder, who was well known to the Nyangatom, was deliberately sought out and speared to death. The hands of women and girls were chopped off with bush knives so that their bracelets could be more easily removed. In order to get some idea of the number of people killed, I was told to imagine a packed market square in the nearby administrative town, Jinka. Two families alone lost 64 people between them, and the total number of Mursi deaths have reached 500.

Immediately after the attack, the Mursi evacuated the entire southern part of their territory, abandoning in the process their recently harvested sorghum crop. Meanwhile, a whole section of Nyangatom now felt strong enough to move northward and occupy land to the west of the Omo, which had been a contested area between the two groups for many years. When I visited the Mursi in December 1987, I found them fearing for their future as a distinct group. A further onslaught by the Nyangatom, they predicted, would cause them to abandon their territory altogether and seek refuge, as individuals and families, amongst neighboring highland cultivators. Their clan names would survive such a dispersal, but the Mursi would have disappeared. Five years later, however, in 1992, there had been no further Nyangatom attack, and the Mursi had started to acquire automatic weapons of their own (from the Chai). They still felt highly exposed, however, to potential attack from the considerably better armed Nyangatom and had still not permanently re-occupied their southern territory.

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 that is organized for war and in which warlike qualities are inculcated in men from an early age. The military organization 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 practise 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 organization 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 that 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 friction that immediately preceded it arose out of the temporary use by Mursi, under pressure from Hamari raids, of Bodi grazing areas. 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 then be asked, then, is how, regardless of the events that 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 Bottego was mapping the course of the Lower Omo (Vannutelli and Citeri 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 that 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 been occupied, about 70 years before, by the Bodi.

While it is impossible to reconstruct the circumstances that led to the first permanent crossing by Mursi to the east bank of Omo, it is possible to gain a fairly clear picture of the factors that led to their expansion northward during this century. These can be traced to ecological and political changes that made them increasingly dependent on shifting cultivation: a drastic lowering in the level of Lake Turkana, which fell by 20 m. 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 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 the change, both by cutting down the forest for shifting cultivation and by 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 that 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 taxes 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 northward during this century, then, the Mursi have been taking over land that 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 the 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 peacemaking ritual that was attended by the other side's representatives. The Mursi held theirs on the River Mara and the Bodi held 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 Moillo, 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 the 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 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 (1974, pp. 77-8). This is because it exerts a negative influence on the “nuturance of females.” Harris is thinking principally of female infanticide, which I have no reason to believe is actually practised by the Mursi. Nor do I have evidence that Mursi mothers are relatively more protective 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 the one that 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 this way, then, warfare is not a breaking down 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 that 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 defenseless 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).

Despite the extremity of their situation, the Mursi I spoke to in December 1987 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 that had characterized 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 football) was the best way to maintain the territorial balance that would be seen by both sides as re-establishing the previous balance between them, this being a necessary and sufficient condition of a successful peace. It would not even matter if more Mursi than Nyangatom were killed in the course of ‘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 massacres. 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 that 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 that cannot maintain, over the long term, a balance of gift and counter gift with rival groups loses its political autonomy. A group that 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 that threatened both literally and symbolically the annihilation of the Mursi.

Another way of putting this would be that warfare itself, and not just the public ritual by which it is concluded, is a common ritual language through which groups make themselves significant to each other and to themselves as independent political entities; it is not primarily a means by which an already constituted group seeks to extend or defend its territory, since it is warfare that constitutes the group — or rather the idea of the group — as a separate entity in the first place. The analogy between warfare and dueling, which is clearly relevant for the Mursi themselves, confirms this view of warfare as an essentially ritual activity, the function of which is to create separate political identities.

The dueling weapon is a pole about two meters long and weighing about one kilogram. Bouts take place between individuals and are fast, furious, and short, being brought to an end by the intervention of a referee after about 30 seconds. Such events are sometimes called ‘stick fights’ in the ethnographic literature, but, at least in the Mursi case, this would give a misleading impression. I use the term ‘dueling’ or (in past publications) ‘ceremonial dueling’ to reflect the fact that we are dealing here with a martial art — a highly ritualized and rule-governed activity — rather than with an undisciplined free-for-all.

Contests are held two or three times a year between men of different territorial divisions, or buranyoga (sing. buran), a term that refers to any order of a territorially defined group, from the whole Mursi population (and including, therefore, neighboring populations such as the Bodi and Nyangatom) down to the members of a single settlement. Contestants, who are always unmarried men, are ritually as well as territorially defined in the sense that they always come from one or the other of two age grades and always duel with members of their own grade. The highest order territorial division of the population, below that of the Mursi as a whole, is into three buranyoga, which are named, from south to north, Gongulubibi, Ariholi, and Dola. Although these divisions consist of people who regularly utilize the same cultivation and grazing areas, they are cross-cut by ties of affinity and economic cooperation and exchange that ramify throughout the whole population. Since dueling is the only context in which the lines between one buran and another are regularly and visibly drawn, one might say that dueling actually creates separate political identities (those of individual buranyoga) against a background of close-knit and widely ramifying social ties that work against the drawing of clear-cut and exclusive divisions in everyday life.

If the political subdivisions of the Mursi population are the product of ritualized male violence, it seems reasonable to suggest that Mursi political identity itself will be similarly constructed — that is, through the ritualized male violence that we normally call warfare. Simon Harrison, writing about Avatip in Papua New Guinea, has made an impressive case for viewing warfare in this light:

War, and the ritual ethic of war, were means used purposefully by men to construct a political identity for their community in the first place, not just [emphasis added] as a physical population secure from extermination, but more basically as a conceptual entity free from the normative claims of outsider... They fought and fostered war in their cult, not because they lacked normative ties beyond the village but, quite the opposite, precisely because they had such ties and could only define themselves as a polity by acting collectively to overcome and transcend them (1993, p. 00).

These remarks obviously fit well the case of dueling between members of the territorial political divisions of the Mursi itself. What grounds are there for applying them also to the external relations of the Mursi — that is, to their relations with other buranyoga, and particularly with their principal enemies of recent years, the Bodi and Nyangatom?

Firstly, these relations certainly do not exclude ‘normative ties,’ as the incident that sparked the Nyangatom attack of February 1987 illustrates. The Nyangatom guests who were hacked to death in a Mursi settlement had come to obtain grain, a frequent item of exchange between the Mursi and Nyangatom in times of hunger. Earthenware cooking and water pots, made by Mursi women, are also in demand among the Nyangatom, from whom the Mursi traditionally obtain goats. Relations between Mursi and Bodi are, if anything, closer. During my first period of fieldwork, just before the last Mursi-Bodi war of the early 1970s, several Mursi were cultivating on a regular basis with Bodi friends north of the River Mara.
Secondly, like duelling, warfare is a specifically male activity that men engage in as part of a ritually defined category of the population—an age set. If age set ritual is the equivalent, in this context, of the men’s cult at Avatip— the institutional focus of Mursi political identity—this would help to explain the timing and the significance of the most recent Mursi age set formation ceremony, or *nitha*, held at Kurum in southern Mursiland in January 1991 (Woodhead 1991a and 1991b). Kurum is the historical center, or ‘stomach’ of Mursiland, it being the place that was first occupied by the ancestors of the present Mursi when they crossed the Omo from the west bank about 200 years ago. It had been evacuated following the 1987 massacre and, in 1991, was still only being utilized during the dry season for flood retreat cultivation.

The 1991 *nitha* was considered long overdue, the last one having been held in 1961. When on previous visits I had asked about this delay, I had been told that social and environmental conditions had simply not been good enough to allow the organization of such an important event. And yet these conditions could hardly have been less propitious in January 1991. Not only were the Mursi, who were still without automatic weapons of their own, in constant fear of further Nyangatom attacks, but food was in short supply because of poor rain and flood harvests in both 1990 and 1991, and only five months earlier, about 200 people had died in a meningitis epidemic that particularly affected the southern Mursi. There are grounds for arguing, however, that the *nitha* was held when and where it was because, rather than despite these difficult and threatening circumstances.

In the first place, it can be seen as a symbolic assertion by the Mursi of their historical right to the territory they had been forced to evacuate four years earlier. The main events of the *nitha* take place around a specially constructed enclosure of branches with a tree at its center and two openings opposite each other. The enclosure at Kurum was built around a young and highly unimpressive looking tree about six feet tall. The choice, however, was deliberate: the tree had a long life ahead of it and would therefore ‘grow-up’ with the members of the new age set who were thus identified, not only with the tree but also with the place where it was rooted. In the future, the fact that the *nitha* had been held at Kurum, a fact concretely symbolized by the tree, could be used to validate Mursi claims to this territory, which was still considered too insecure for permanent occupation.

In the second place, the 1991 *nitha* can be seen as an essential step in preparing the way for a Mursi response to the 1987 massacre and therefore to re-establishing peaceful and yet politically equal relations between the Mursi and the Nyangatom. The point here is that the men whose responsibility it would be to make this response—those between the ages of approximately 20 and 45—had not yet become adult members of an age set because of the period that had elapsed since the last *nitha*. They were, of course, perfectly capable, in a physical and organizational sense, of responding to the Nyangatom attack. What the *nitha* did was transform them ritually into a category of men whose ‘official’ role it was to engage in warfare. It also ensured that those who would die in the process—of whom there would obviously be very many, given the new technology of automatic weapons—would ‘die as adults.’ Indeed it is quite likely that one of the pressures that was brought to bear on the older men, to persuade them to hold the *nitha*, was the unwillingness of the younger men to risk dying as ‘boys’ in a ‘return match’ with the Nyangatom. To say that warfare is an activity of a ritually defined category of the population is to say more, therefore, than that a ritual ‘stamp’ must be given to what is already the case. It is the ritual definition which makes the case: until formed into an age set, these men were not able to make the required military response, not in the sense that they would not otherwise have had the necessary stamina or training, but in the sense that their action would not otherwise have carried the necessary message, whether to themselves or to the Nyangatom.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the direction and rate of Mursi expansion against the Bodi have 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 their neighbors 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 neighboring groups. Wars may be fought, in the Lower Omo Valley as elsewhere, for material ends, but warfare exists to create the entities that pursue those ends: it is a cause rather than a consequence of political identity.
NOTES


REFERENCES


Chapter

SIX

Requiem for the Rational War

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Nordstrom’s article, like that of Turton, asks that readers contemplate the politics of capitalist states against those who resisted them. It concerns civil conflict in post-independence Mozambique where a movement called Renamo fought a very ‘dirty war’ against the Marxist-Leninist government of Mozambique in the 1980s. Renamo, however, was controlled to a considerable extent by the armed forces of Apartheid South Africa, and the fighting in Mozambique was but one theatre in a larger war that South Africa waged at the time throughout southern Africa, to destabilize