VIOLENCE, RITUAL, AND REPRODUCTION: CULTURE AND CONTEXT IN SURMA DUELING[1]

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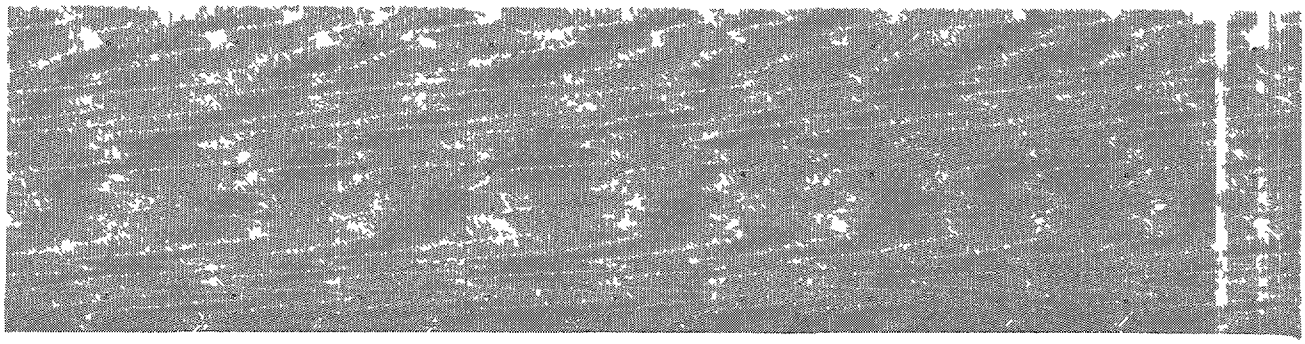
Through a study of the ceremonial stick-dueling of the Surma people of southern Ethiopia, this article explores the sociocultural context of ritual violence in a small-scale agropastoralist society and its relation to social reproductive concerns. Surma male stick-dueling (*sagine*), contained by strict rules of procedure, is a form of ritualized violence among Surma themselves, and contrasts sharply with violence against members of non-Surma neighboring groups. Sagine can be interpreted not only as the management of relations between competing territorial sections within Surma society, but also in terms of the connection between sociality and sexuality in Surma life. However, contrary to sociobiological predictions, combat success is neither valued for its own sake nor shows itself to be reproductively advantageous in a statistical sense. (Ritual violence, reproduction, male combat, Surma, gender relations)

Male ritual combat is a widespread cultural phenomenon and is often organized on the basis of territorial and/or age-group competition. Examples are known from Africa, Asia, and the West (see Otterbein 1994; Chagnon 1992:214f.; Dundes 1994; Lewis 1972:93-94; Spencer 1965:107, 111, 118). In this article, the institution of ritualized male stick-dueling (*sagine*) among the agropastoral Surma (or Suri) people of Ethiopia is considered for its connections to violent performance in general, its cultural meaning, and its social effects. The institution of dueling has a central place in Surma community life, often seemingly quite violent, and shows the interplay of psychological notions of aggression with cultural rules and gender roles in a small-scale, nonliterate society. A consideration of this institution can offer insights into understanding male combat and peer-group competition for status and prestige as an apparent cultural universal (Brown 1991).

A psychological or a symbolic analysis could point to the function of dueling in constructing the Surma (male) social person and in expressing core elements of the cultural order in Surma society, both in a political and in a gender sense. Specific cultural ideals are actualized during the dueling; namely, those concerning the role and scope of assertive display for young men, the nature of male and female roles, some religious-cosmological beliefs, and political authority. A neo-Darwinian view (see Betzig 1986; Betzig et al. 1988; Barkow et al. 1992; Wright 1994), on the other hand, would assert a connection between public male combat and aggression with the reproductive advantage of those successfully engaged in it: the winning young males, being more prestigious and popular, would allegedly have more choice of female partners (and wives), which would result in having more children.[2] This article assesses the merits of both theoretical orientations and thereby aims to clarify what is at stake in Surma male dueling

Whether one can speak of violence in the dueling contests obviously depends in part upon the definition of violence, which, with regard to Surma society, has been

ETHNOLOGY vol 38 no 3, Summer 1999, pp 227-42
ETHNOLOGY, c/o Department of Anthropology, The University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh PA 15260 USA



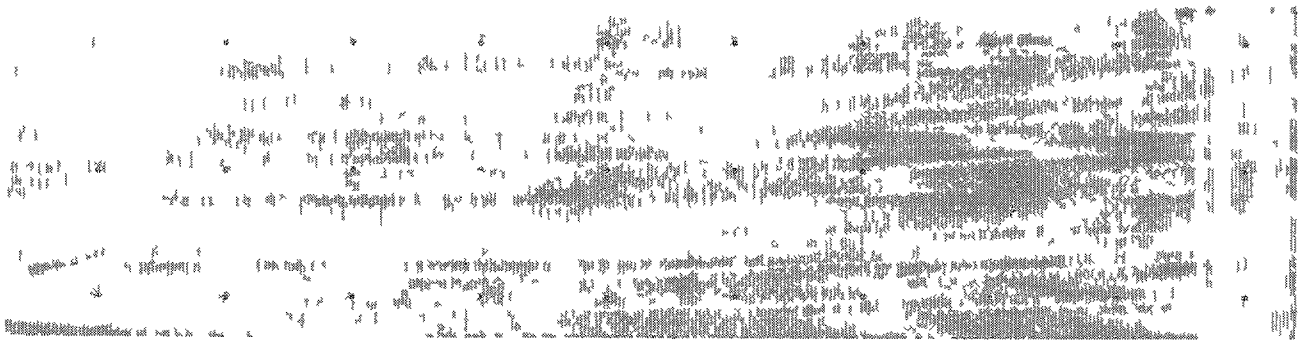
explored elsewhere (Abbink 1998). Using Riches's (1991:295; see also Riches 1986:11-12) definition of violence as "contestably rendering physical hurt," sagine is not full-blown violence as the Surma understand it; it does not seek to shed blood or kill. But its violent action, aimed at intimidation and gaining dominance over others, can cause physical harm. It is thus not seen as contestable; i.e., yielding different and conflicting evaluations by perpetrators and victims about the legality of the physical harm done. Nonetheless, as the boundaries between perceptions are fuzzy and in flux, dueling may turn into more assertive and disputable events, especially when political relations between local communities undergo change.

This article tests the hypothesis that assertive or aggressive display in dueling confers prestige and honor upon the young men who participate, and may enhance their chances of social success, particularly in marriage, later. Indeed, in the ritual combat of the sagine (a central concern of youngsters at an age when they are reaching for social adulthood and starting a household) two aspects can be recognized: first, the construction of symbolic power of persons as well as communities through ritualized dueling in a public arena; second, a public demonstration (aimed especially at the many young female visitors) by young males of their suitability and strength for adulthood, marriage, and reproduction, all of which are deemed necessary for gaining higher social status. More specifically, this essay evaluates in exploratory fashion a central tenet derived from neo-Darwinian social theory: whether the success and prestige of a male in this society as a good dueler has a direct and positive influence on his reproductive career.

SURMA SOCIETY

The Surma, numbering some 28,000 people, are shifting cultivators and cattle herders in the savannah of extreme southwestern Ethiopia (in the present Southern Peoples' Region), near the Sudan border. They speak a southeast Surmic language belonging to the Nilo-Saharan (east Sudanic) group and are 99 per cent nonliterate. Other members of this group are the Kwegu and the Mursi, well described by Turton (1978, 1994a, 1994b). The Surma identify themselves as speakers of the same language and having a similar way of life and ritual complex. They are subdivided into two groups, Tirma and Chai, who have different traditions of origin and diverging dialects. Their subsistence economy shows a low level of technological development, there is little socioeconomic differentiation between adult household heads, and regional market interaction with neighboring groups is slight. (The main products traded are pottery, gold, crops, and some cattle.)

The Surma at present live dispersed in some 45 villages, ranging in size from a hundred to a few thousand people. They have interacted for generations with other cultural and occupational groups on the Sudan-Kenyan-Ethiopian frontier (occasionally absorbing new members from them) and with state authorities of the Ethiopian empire, local Omotic-speaking chiefdom societies (Dizi, Dime), and the British colonial authorities of Kenya and (Anglo-Egyptian) Sudan. But, largely contained



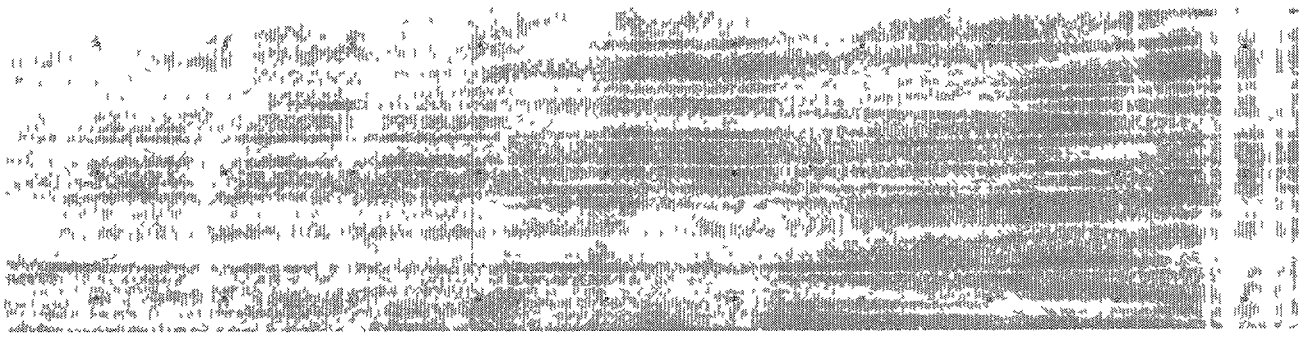
within their region because of an emphasis on transhumant cattle herding, they developed social and economic specializations that marked their political and cultural organization as distinct. Until recently, the Ethiopian state, nominally present in the Surma area since 1898, did not make any serious effort to integrate them into its political and economic structures.

In the last fifteen years, the civil war in southern Sudan has had a significant effect on the Surma, as is evident from increased trading across the border in cattle, beads, and crops, and, for the past decade, from imports of large numbers of semiautomatic rifles (AK47s, M-16s) and ammunition. This has had a notable impact on intergroup relations and violence (Abbink 1993, 1994). The Surma are now well armed and militant, and have in the past eight years been involved in numerous incidents of raiding, theft, and homicide. (Neighboring groups like the Anyuak, the Nyangatom, and the Toposa have a similar record.)

Though the Surma were drawn further into the political and administrative structures of the Ethiopian state after 1991 (Abbink 1996), they still maintain relative autonomy Indicative of their limited contacts with the wider Ethiopian society is that all except a few dozen Surma are monolingual. They are at present also a self-conscious group, having a strong feeling of being a distinct political and moral community. In recent years, the divisions between them and others seem to have hardened. This also holds for their agropastoralist, sedentary-agricultural, and other neighbors (Nyangatom, Dizi, Me'en, and the village settlers in the nearby Ethiopian highland area, most of whom are descendants of northern Ethiopian immigrants since 1898)

Surma social organization includes named clans that determine primary allegiance or individual identity Patrilineal descent is used for purposes of marriage, cattle inheritance, and ritual rights. Villages contain members of different clans (essentially for exogamy). Where a descent group resides in a contiguous area, people herd cattle together and form a named territorial unit (*b'uran*). There is a strong Surma value of balance and reciprocity between individuals and, by implication, families, descent groups, and territorial units. Surma are polygynous and have a bridewealth system (with cattle exchange). Marriages are relatively stable and the rate of divorce is low (about 5 per cent).

Politically, the age-grade structure (with four formal grades) is important among the male Surma (Abbink 1994). The ruling age grade of initiated elders (*rora*) functions as the political decision-makers for the community as a whole. As among the neighboring agropastoral Nyangatom (Tornay 1986, 1989), the juniors stand in a subordinate relationship to these elders and to the most senior grade, the retired *bara* Women also have age grades but these are not formally recognized and lack an initiation rite Married women take the grade of their husbands. The Surma, like the Mursi mentioned earlier, have three ritual leaders or mediators (*komoru*). They have moral authority and a ritual mediatory function based on hereditary clanship, but lack executive powers or the right to impose strong sanctions (Abbink 1997)



The Surma area, a savannah at an altitude of some 1,000 to 1,200 meters bordering the southwestern outlier of the Ethiopian highlands, is fertile but vulnerable to drought. Famines or problems of food scarcity do regularly occur, the last one in early 1997. Their economy is based on four kinds of activities: a) the cultivation of sorghum, corn, cassava, beans, and cabbage; b) herding cattle, sheep, and goats; c) trade in gold, panned in the local small rivers; and d) hunting and gathering. In socioeconomic terms, the Surma are a nonstratified society, with few notable differences between household heads in terms of wealth; i.e., access to land, agricultural produce, or livestock.

In the past decade, the Surma have been getting cash income from foreign tourists (Abbink, In press; also Beckwith and Fisher 1990, 1992), who are particularly keen on seeing sagine. A popular image among tourists, but also reflecting non-Surma Ethiopian opinion, is that at these occasions the Surma are fighting over women. This misperception ties in nicely with some popular versions of evolutionary anthropology (cf. Wright 1994:33-34, 39, 100; Chagnon 1992).

DOMESTICATED VIOLENCE

Sagine contests are organized by the Surma two to three times a year, each over a period of three to six weeks. Turton (1973, 1978) first described this institution for the related Mursi people as an expression of political and affinal relations. While his work is essential for understanding the context and dynamics of sagine among both Mursi and Surma, my perspective is different in that it explores the possible links between controlled violent performance in dueling (and by implication in interethnic encounters; see Table) among males and their social success in later years based on their presumed reputation as good fighters.

The Surma duels, in contrast to those described for the Mursi, are large-scale, spectacular occasions. People turn out in large numbers and take care to be visually attractive according to local standards, with body painting, bead dresses, decorations, etc. It is perhaps important to say first what these duels are not. They are not part of any initiation ritual. Neither are they organized for a specific reason (e.g., because of some particular grievance between two individuals or communities), nor are they meant to resolve simmering conflicts between individuals or groups. Dueling is more like an athletic event that is deemed appropriate in a certain season, as when young people are relatively free from labor tasks.

Preparations

The main contestants are young men of the *tegay* (i.e., unmarried) age grade coming from different settlements or village communities (b'uran). Unlike the *moran* among the Maasai or Samburu (Spencer 1965:102), which it resembles, the tegay is not an initiated age set and lacks the *moran*'s degree of corporateness. Surma tegay

do not act together as such. Men act on the basis of their territorial (and partly clan) identity and their b'uran affiliation.

In the Surma sagine, no two members of the same settlement will challenge each other (although people of the same clan, spread over different territories, can). Several matches and return matches are held over a period of a few months every year. The timing is important; the main dueling season is after the sorghum and maize harvest in November, when food is plentiful, labor is no longer needed in the fields, and people can tolerate being injured. Cattle still have enough pasture then to stay in one place for five to six weeks, allowing the young herders to participate. Duels on a smaller scale are held after the planting of the main crops in April and May.

Sagine is done with long, slender poles (*donga*) made of tough wood (*Grewia mollis Juss.*), with a length of about 2.10 to 2.40 meters. (A similar but shorter stick is used in herding) These poles have a phallic-shaped tip. Surma consider it impolite to point to the similarity and ask about its meaning, but the connection with masculinity is obvious. Surma dueling or fighting with anything else (e.g., knives or spears, let alone rifles) is never permitted.

Duelers with a good reputation have the right to wear an elaborate fighting uniform, which consists of protective cotton bands for the neck, legs, and breast, decorative strips of hyena or lion skin, cattle-hide bands, and a very strong woven hat and shield of sisal plant fiber. A cow bell is also attached to the outfit. These items are scarce and usually owned by others (not the best duelers), who lend them for the occasion. The participants enter the dueling ground (*gul*) in a group, chanting their own songs. Spectators bring their own food (mostly sorghum beer, *gesso*) and install themselves in good observation positions at some distance from the dueling ground

Arena and Rules

Dueling takes place in a large open space at the edge of a village. The duels, which draw thousands of people, are supervised by referees (*odda*), who are always older married men. Dueling is governed by strict rules of procedure as to the handling of the pole (e.g., no pointing straight at the opponent, the carved tip should be in the air, never down), the length of the bouts, who fights whom, etc Also, repeat fights of the same contestants are prevented A dueling bout is ended when an opponent is knocked to the ground, or is too tired or injured to continue.

Although deep flesh wounds and bone fractures are common, killing an opponent, either on purpose or accidentally, is prohibited If it occurs, all dueling immediately ceases, and the mechanism of homicide compensation payment is set into motion A homicide breaks the ritual frame of the dueling game, and disrupts the balance of social relations between the family groups of victim and killer, which will remain disturbed until a reconciliation is made

Proceedings

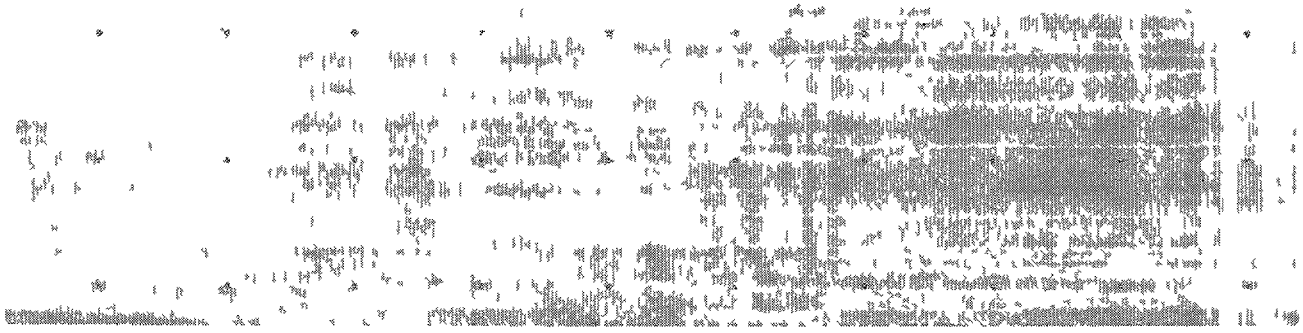
Each day of dueling features dozens of bouts, each lasting only a few minutes. In addition to the main candidates, who do not fight early in the day, many secondary duels take place. However, only the results of the fights between the serious candidates count. There can be up to four parties (of different b'urans) participating, and by a process of elimination their candidates are removed until two remain for the decisive fight. During all the duels, the unmarried and young women keep close track of the results and monitor the participants and their supporters. After the winner of the day is known, his supporters carry him in triumph on a wooden rack to girls from other b'urans, specifically from the one that organized the duel, who evaluate the merits and attractiveness of the victor and his party.

Background

Several aspects of these sagines are important. First, they are collective forums of competition between Surma villages. With a few exceptions, non-Surma contestants are not involved.[3] Surma communities are actually reaffirmed on these occasions, in contrast to the Samburu, whose whipping contests (with pliant sticks) are usually meant to settle disputes and questions of honor between members of the same age set (Spencer 1965:111, 119), challenging and facing each other as persons and not as members of a corporate group.

Second, sagine is a competition between individuals, peers in the younger age grade of tegay. All Surma men in their twenties must participate in the dueling at least a few times. Youths also wish to become renowned stick-fighters. The dueling is a socially framed status contest allowing young men who are eager to start life as independent household heads to show their strength and virility (i.e., a male display of forceful aggressive action) in a socially accepted manner both vis-à-vis older males and potential wives in the audience.[4] This latter aspect is explicitly recognized by nubile Surma girls, who are always present. Indeed there is no dueling worthy of the name if the girls are not there. As Turton (1973:49) says of Mursi dueling, "it is the principal culturally valued means by which a young man seeks to attract the attention of young girls."

A third feature is that the duels, in a psychological sense, can be seen as a training ground for youths to explore the fascination and energy of violent combat. Violence in this form is not a problem among the Surma and not seen as something which should be overcome. They would not even equate it with violence in Riches's (1986, 1991) sense. For most participants the sagine is their first experience with physical fighting, and all participants have been encouraged by elders and women to prepare themselves for it and the bloody wounds they are sure to receive. The duels are also seen as a training ground for the real armed conflicts with neighboring groups (in self-defense, ambushes, and cattle raids).



Sagine duels are the highlights of the year and young participants are emotionally very involved in these encounters. This can be seen in their trembling with excitement just before the actual fight. They then seem to work themselves up to a state of near trance. All three aspects clearly indicate that sagine dueling is a ritual of belonging performed to teach uninitiated junior males to conform to what is expected of them by the reigning senior age set. Sagine constructs ideals of Surma male behavior to impress elders and young females. Two aspects are noteworthy. First, the dueling defines the participants as Surma; i.e., those who are able to keep violence under control and discern when killing force is really needed. Second, the dueling establishes a subtle, implicit connection between sexuality and long-term claims to reproduction. Ideals of masculinity are undeniably involved, as is evident from details like the phallic-tipped poles used in the duel, with the aim of "bringing down" the stick of the opponent. In both respects, the Surma males enact a controlled violent performance to make a claim to power (for the present and future) by showing age mates their defiance and courage (preferably with lasting scars) and symbolically showing their bravery to the females and their relatives among the onlookers.

Despite their vehemence, Surma do not see duels as violent in the sense of inflicting "contestable" physical harm. With strict rules governing the timing, location, and execution of these contests, the duels are an example of domesticated violence, so to speak; i.e., violence contained and kept under control by the community and the culture of the participants. The death of a contestant is unacceptable; it is out of place, it shows a break in the Surma peace. With such a misfortune, the dueling arena becomes a lethal battle ground, which should be reserved for real enemies only. Surma dueling is meant to be ceremonial, as much for showing off as for winning. While there are some overall successful fighters, not all contests are won by the same people, and displaying courage in fighting is said to be more important than winning Wounds and scars are shown with pride. The duels are thus structurally and symbolically different from fights with Surma enemy groups because they have no reward except prestige and enhancing status. But such prestige and status do not translate into marital and material advantages.

THE REPRODUCTIVE CONNECTION

In order to explore the connection between dueling well and having reproductive and social success, data on the lives of eight Surma men of the Chai subgroup with good dueling reputations (and one man who was not an exceptional dueler) were compared to assess their parental and social accomplishments The hypothesis tested was whether there was a significant positive correlation between being or having been a good fighter and being or having been socially successful; i.e., being the head of a larger than average family (with three or more wives and twenty or more children),

Table: Male Surma, Their Status Attributes, and Number of Wives, Children, and Cattle

Respondent	Elder status	Age (estimated)	No wives	No living children	No cattle (estimated)	Has killed a non-Surma
1	no	55	7	26	250	yes (Nyangatom)
2	yes	60	2	9	70	yes (2 Nyangatom)
3	yes	50	3	10	75	yes (Nyangatom)
4	yes	45	3	11	60-70	yes (Toposa)
5	no	40	3	9	60-70	no
6	no	45	4	8	80	yes (Nyangatom)
7	no	24	-	-	40	no
8	no	28	-	-	30	Yes (Dizi)
9	no	22	-	-	35	no

possessing a higher than average number of cattle, and being a respected and powerful elder. The individuals in the Table can be seen as a representative choice from the population of Surma males.

When people were asked why dueling was done and what its importance was, some answers were: "This [dueling] is what makes us Chai. We have to do it. Su, Tumura, Golach [other ethnic groups] do not; it is only we who do it." "Sagine is what makes us strong." "We should prepare for battles and develop our strength." The point of b'uran rivalry was also frequently mentioned: "We have to show the people from Disshui or Jargush [two b'urans] that we can handle them, that we are better " Notably they said nothing explicit about fighting for women or even about impressing the girls, which certainly is a very important underlying motive, judging from the actual proceedings of the duels and the rendezvous between girls and fighters later.

A closer look at the careers and social statuses of the nine people interviewed reveals that there is no clear and direct (i.e , causal) correlation between prestige as a fighter and subsequent social or reproductive success. As details cannot not be presented here, I will only mention some indicative cases (see Table).

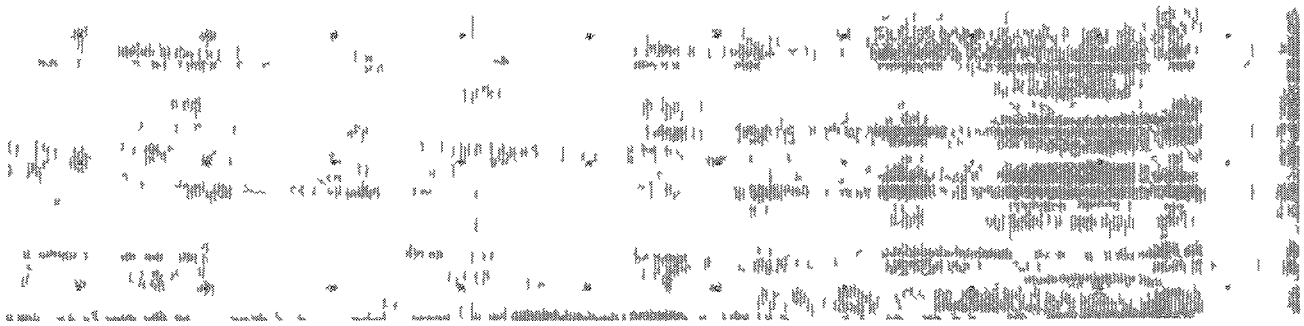
Of the nine men, three were married elders who no longer dueled, two married men were not yet elders (and occasionally joined in dueling but never officially in a

combat uniform), and three were experienced and acclaimed duelers in their twenties. The ninth informant (here no. 1) is an exception, being a ritual leader (komoru), who before his election as komoru was not a particularly famous stick fighter. But he had by age 55 seven wives (a large number among the Surma) and at least 26 surviving children (about twenty others had died). His cattle herd was also one of the largest in the area. His position as a ritual mediator and conciliator was itself the opposite of the behavioral ideal of aggression and virility as displayed in the dueling arena; other factors made him attractive as a husband. By virtue of his function (which is hereditary within a certain clan), the ritual leader is seen as having a charismatic quality: he is what the Surma (and Mursi) call *barari;* i.e., having a powerful aura. His marriages were also concluded with women from various key clan lines in Surma society, perhaps to reinforce his position as a widely acceptable mediator. This case suggests that the way to reproductive success and wealth does not have to be through masculine prestige and success as a fighter. Although a komoru has a certain dominance by virtue of his status (e.g., in public debates and as a mediator), for him it would have been counterproductive to display or even hint at aggressive behavior.

Although his case shows that social and reproductive success is not predicated on criteria of successful dueling and fighting, perhaps the other cases of ordinary men are more important for hypothesis testing. The three junior elders (nos. 2, 3, and 4) who had retired from dueling were average Surma; two currently with three wives, one with two wives. What is more, when roughly comparing their position and social success with other male adults from a sample of 148 Surma men (on the basis of census material), there was no significant divergence in either cattle wealth or number of children between successful and less successful fighters.

In the sample population, most men in the middle-range age group (24-54 years) had two or three wives, from four to eight living children, and about 60 to 70 heads of cattle. Among this group of about 80 men, there were seven or eight who had a reputation for having been a great stick dueler Of these, six men had two wives, one had three, another four, and only two of the eight had six or more living children. (All men were in the higher age category, reflecting advanced age as a significant variable for the acquisition of wives and children.) Also, the size of the cattle herd at the time of the survey did not show any correlation with the owner's reputation as good dueler or fighter.

My initial suggestion to the men depicted in the Table (except for no. 1) that they should have been able to secure more wives and many children because they had been prestigious duelers was met with incomprehension and denial. Such good fortune, they said, was based on other things, e.g., the natural growth of the herds, on timely and strategic exchange of cattle for bridewealth, and on luck. They left out the yield from raiding, perhaps because they also lost cattle in counter-raids Social success was not due to fame as duelers: "Women may like you for your being a good sagine dueler," they suggested, "but this is only in your time, and it is short-lived." This comment is exactly the point· fame as a good dueler is important only at a certain stage in the male career One has to keep in mind that men may contract



marriages over several decades (when they are aged between twenty and 45 years or older) Other achievements (e.g., good public speaking or reliable divination) may be equally or more important in building a man's fame and desirability as a husband.

The men listed in the Table as 5 and 6 had given up dueling in recent years and were, like the previous ones, well-established persons in their communities, with a slightly higher than average number of wives (four and three) and a substantial number of livestock. One man had more daughters than sons, and thus a larger number of bridewealth cattle coming to him. The other man was from a lineage that was not as hard hit by the 1984 drought and cattle epidemics as other families, and had been able to keep more animals alive.

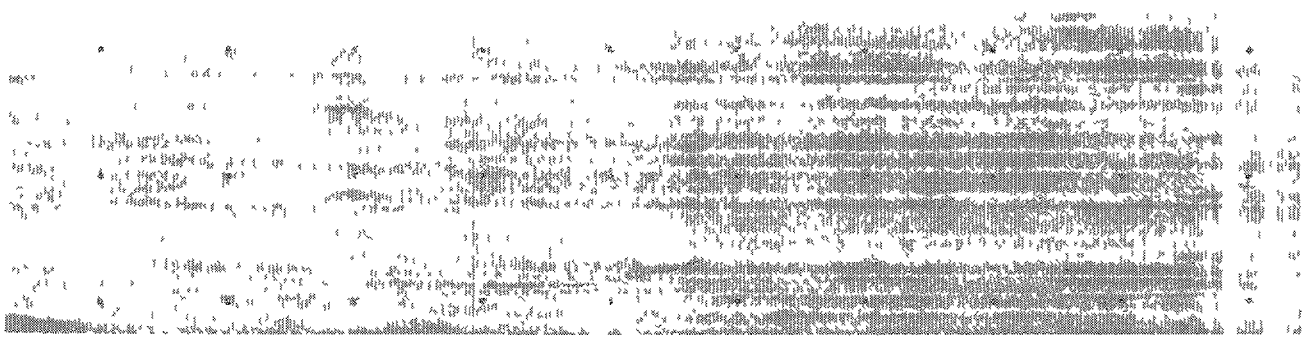
The three youngsters in their mid-twenties (nos. 7, 8, and 9) were at the peak of their dueling career, having won several major contests, and had no lack of interest from girls. But none of this had led to marriage. Furthermore, if the girls had decided among themselves that they would take one of them, they would designate only one girl to do so, not more, again regulating competition. No one's inclusive fitness is impaired if a sagine victor is assigned to a certain girl for either a rendezvous or for a marriage Furthermore, if the two do agree on a marriage, whether they wed also depends on their families, their cattle wealth, and other factors

Thus, while some young men may be more successful than others in their dueling, whether they will be able to convert this prestige into reproductive advantage will depend on other crucial developments in their life-cycle and their kinship and social networks (e.g., ritual bond-friendship). While the achievement of prestige is vital for the young male Surma, it is not geared to winning women. If matched for age, the Table shows that those males manifesting greater dueling and battle prowess did not significantly deviate in reproductive success from the others

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL VIOLENCE

Surma violent performance also takes forms of combat which involve death and maiming, notably with neighboring non-Surma Here the rules and the expected results of violent action are different because the opponents are defined as enemies [5] This external violence has always been less regulated, although until recently rules of combat conduct were observed by the adversaries. Warfare was usually over access to and control of resources such as land, pasture, game areas, wells, and livestock, and there were many fatalities

Herding peoples evidently have a materially determined need for defense against similarly placed competitors for pasture and livestock. The agropastoral neighbors of the Surma with whom problematic relations exist are the Me'en, Toposa, Nyangatom, and in recent years the Anyuak to the north, with whom they now compete for alluvial gold panning The Surma have been losing territory to the Toposa and Nyangatom. Before the introduction of automatic weapons, the extent and intensity of violence was limited, and there was a shared idea of long-term balance



between the groups. But since 1987-1988 the Surma have been pushed into the territory of the sedentary Dizi people. Despite both groups having age-old contacts and customary resource-sharing agreements, this has in turn led to more violent clashes (Abbink 1994).

Surma violence against their agropastoral neighbors (especially Nyangatom and Toposa) is no longer effective (Abbink 1994). The deteriorating external situation shows a correlation with (and may have led to) an increase in the frequency of sagine fights. The duels are now held almost every two to three weeks after the main harvest of sorghum (September-November) and after that as well (in January and in the time of the first rains in April-May). Based on informants' statements, the frequency has at least doubled compared to a generation ago.

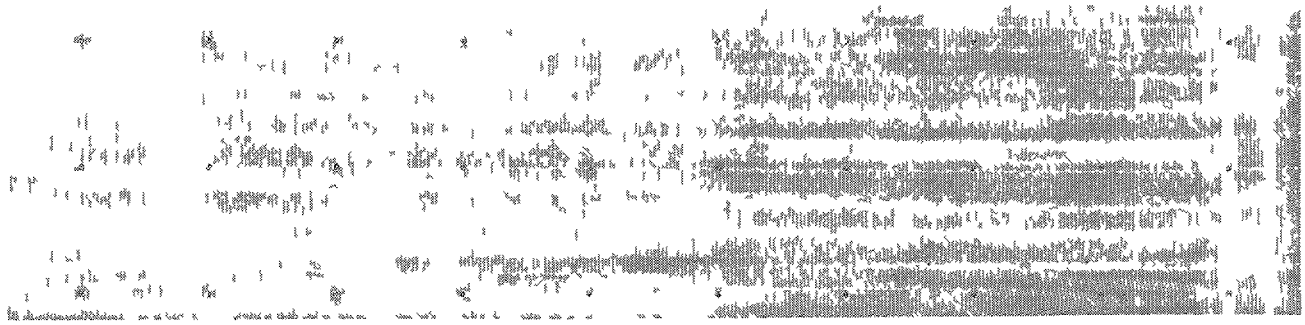
Second, the crisis in external relations and in the extent of violence has caused a change in the character of dueling itself. The influence of elders, ritual leaders, and referees over the contesting parties has diminished: nowadays, the young men and their friends continue as they like, and after one party has lost one contest, they grab their automatic rifles (always brought along) and shoot to show their irritation. Usually they shoot in the air, but not always. This had led to several accidental killings. The Surma elders say that the sagine has lost much of its former attraction and that its meaning is being eroded. It can indeed be noted that the dueling has changed from combat in the form of a sport or game to a more aggressive confrontation. This is another example of controlled violence having lost its accepted meaning. When the ritual threshold is crossed, ceremonial violence becomes real violence. Obviously, the influx of automatic rifles among the Surma in a period of only a few years has notably contributed to this, as is described elsewhere (Abbink 1993, 1994, 1998).

This development also invalidates any neofunctionalist argument which holds that the sagines exist to channel aggression into a socially acceptable form. While this element cannot be completely excluded, the duels themselves generate aggression (perhaps not least due to the fact that semiautomatic weapons are carried by many males).

In the view of local non-Surma Ethiopians in this frontier area, the Surma are now seen as a particularly violent people. The area's security problems of the last eight years and the large number of deaths are blamed on the Surma's "violent, wild character." The evidence cited for this opinion includes the many lethal incidents, and also the stick-dueling. In 1993, the administration tried to prohibit the dueling on the basis of the mistaken view that it is an expression of a violent predisposition. This ban did not work, of course, and is impossible to enforce.

DISCUSSION

While the Surma are increasingly involved in relations of a national and global character (i.e., government administration, tourism, missionary efforts, the effect of the Sudanese civil war, and relief efforts), ceremonial dueling is maintained and



indicates a celebration of their distinct cultural identity. Within Surma society, the sagine duels constitute a domestic arena of controlled physical combat and prestige-building for young males. It is a variation of the universal theme of status competition The duels also have the inevitable effect of socializing Surma males into both gender and socioeconomic roles.

In aiming at an explanation of the role and functions of sagine, elements of both a causal and an interpretive explanation are necessary: the first because of its potential to highlight and connect to universal, comparable traits in the human experience, and the second because of the local cultural details that often decisively modify the bio-psychological base of human behavior.

In neo-Darwinian theory (cf. Betzig 1988:5), three intertwined features are said to be associated with the social and reproductive success of people; dominance, status, and wealth. But being a winner in Surma sagine offers no clear-cut yes-or-no answer to the question of selective advantage. Not all wealthy men with a higher than average number of wives were or had been assertive, aggressive, or dominant in the predicted sense. In a statistically significant number of cases there is neither a direct correlation between being or having been a successful sagine fighter and being a successful herder and family head with several wives and many children The intention of the young male sagine fighters may indeed be to impress and sexually attract girls, who react accordingly. But in the long term the results of being a successful dueler are not inexorably played out in terms of reproductive success. In the course of a man's life cycle, there are many unpredictable intervening factors such as disease and death in a family, cattle disease which can damage one man's herd and not someone else's, famine, and the sex ratio of the sibling group of a fighter (connected to a father's bridewealth obligations and affecting the wealth of the son who wants to marry). The ability to attract additional wives over the years also is related to visibly adequate male parental investment in children; if sons are neglected in terms of the allocation of cattle or the transmission of cultural knowledge by the father, women will not want them as a partner

This makes clear again that to fully assess the alleged evolutionary advantage of aggressive or violent behavior, the entire sociocultural context of Surma male violence, ritual or otherwise, should be considered, including developments in the individual life-cycle of males and the decision-making of nubile girls and women Beyond that it should be noted that some of the crucial cultural ideals of the Surma separate achievements on the domestic battlefield of stick fighting and advantages in the reproductive sphere. The sagine is first and foremost a culturally regulated game, an enactment of Surma sociality in which players can excel and find pleasure, proudly displaying themselves in competitive ceremonial combat Second, the dueling is a social performance through which claims to manhood and prowess are demonstrated toward women, who are always intensely involved as onlookers and who constantly evaluate the duels and the participants. The winners, however, are not the ones always desired in marriage and, viewed in the long term, are not consistently more successful in reproductive terms As noted, this is because social success and

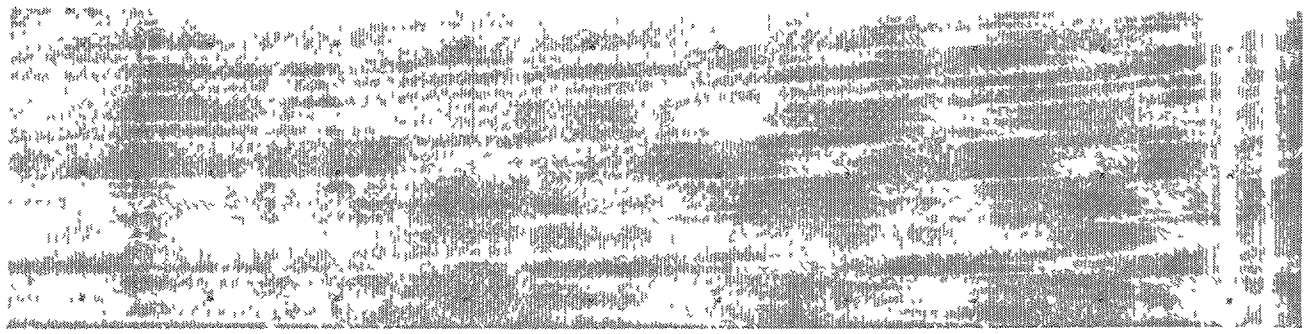
chances to marry more wives and have more children are mediated through various additional factors; e.g., public-speaking ability, herding capacities, cattle wealth of the male's kin and their willingness to help him to pay the (often high) number of cattle as bridewealth.

Hence the evidence suggests that one cannot assume that the demonstration of fighting ability in some direct sense guarantees the achievement of lasting masculine prestige, let alone a sure way to get a marriage partner and hence reproductive success. Contrary to some predictions about sexual and reproductive behavior in nonliterate societies, among the Surma there may also simply be the aim of starting a new affair with a girl; i.e., nonreproductive sex for pleasure. Girls have a big say in this, and their preferences do not always go to the publicly most successful dueler. In addition, while having watched the sagine proceedings, the girls themselves decide who among them will approach a certain male for closer contact. Again here, other considerations (e.g., the candidate's clan and village membership, the socioeconomic position of his family, etc.) play a backstage role.

The above thwarts the often postulated close connection between male assertive display or behavior and priority claims to female partners and, by implication, assured social and reproductive success. Also, although there may be competition, there is no stated fighting over women among the Surma, at least not in the forms known from other comparable societies. Surma men never indicate that they quarrel over women (certainly not over married women), or that these would be a cause for violent encounters. Of course, youngsters might have quarrels over girlfriends, but it is not assured that the winner in dueling gets the girl. In other words, while it may be true that "male competitiveness for gaining access to females" (Brown 1991:80, 103) is a human universal, it is, interestingly, usually based on a high amount of cultural regulation and does not by necessity work through the application of violence or aggressive behavior.

The sagine, as culturally styled contests, can be said to have a dual feature: they are, first, a means of public display of personal quality (through a show of fighting spirit or courage, and of proper self-presentation, body decoration, etc.) with undeniable sexual overtones, and are thus, as one element among many, indirectly related to reproductive issues. Second, the duels are a forum for trying to conform to the tenets of expected Surma age-group behavior, and thus to the "construction of community" among young Surma people from different geographic locations. The dueling defines or confirms their social relations, their identity vis-à-vis all non-Surma, and provides a focus of collective identification in a world that remains ecologically and socially precarious.

The present study cannot claim to have presented exhaustive evidence refuting evolutionary theory regarding selective advantages in human reproduction. But it has shown that for an understanding of the role of aggressive behavior it is useful to work toward an explanatory model that takes into account the subtle ways socio-cultural factors relate to biological and psychological ones. Even if aggression, like altruism, has a genetic basis (cf. De Waal 1996), the specifics of social organization



and the structure of meaning determine how, when, and where aggressive behavior is expressed, and what it is allowed to achieve. This is the most interesting and decisive aspect of the study of violence in society. The presence of universals (including mental capacities) that may define the human condition and which manifest themselves in the realization of social behavior are rightly re-emphasized in recent evolutionary approaches. But they do not explain or account for actual configurations of aggression, competition, and violence. The presumed universals are best studied in conjunction with a society's cultural premises, conflicts of interest, and power relations, because these three elements are in many ways the efficient causes that explain variation in the construction and expression of those universals.

This is obvious in the recent changes of violence among the Surma as a result of external and internal factors. First and foremost is the introduction of semiautomatic weapons and their cultural appropriation as new symbols of manhood. Second is the increased vehemence in the competition between neighboring ethnic groups for certain resources. Finally, there are the emerging (and in some aspects unprecedented) tensions between the Surma generations (specifically between the senior age grade and the uninitiated youngsters) and between families and lineages. These conditions have led to virtually all Surma males having a modern rifle and ammunition, and their unrestrained and unpredictable use of firearms has led in turn to a higher rate of internal homicide. As a consequence, customary claims to status and female attention within Surma society have been undermined. The removal of ritual controls over Surma male violence clearly affects men's chances of long-term social reproduction.

NOTES

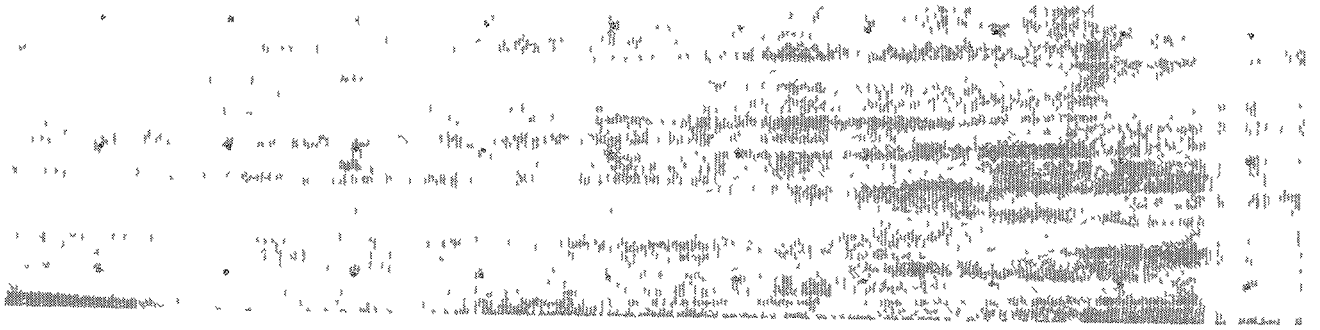
1. For their support of research in southern Ethiopia from 1992 to 1996, I thank the Royal Netherlands Academy of Science (KNAW), the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research in the Tropics (WOTRO, grant W52-610), the African Studies Centre, Leiden, and the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (Addis Ababa University). An earlier and different version of this article appeared in the proceedings of the 13th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Kyoto, Japan (Fukui, Kurimoto, and Shigeta 1997). I am grateful to the editors of these proceedings for the use of material from that paper here.

2. Using sociobiological theory, Chagnon (1988, 1992) found that the most violent Yanomamö Indian warriors had the greatest reproductive success, although he himself was cautious not to turn the evidence of Yanomamö "killers" having greater reproductive success than others into a general claim that being successful in killing is reproductively advantageous (cf. Moore 1990:323).

3. Remarkably, in the northern Surma area, several youths from the Dizi ethnic group, an agricultural people speaking a completely different language and dissimilar culturally, participate in the duels (J. Haspels, pers. comm.). This also seems to be the area where Dizi-Surma intermarriage is strongest.

4. The widespread practice in the Ethiopian countryside of abducting girls for marriage is completely unknown among the Surma.

5. After killing a non-Surma opponent, the killer scarified his upper arm as part of a purification ritual and as a mark of prestige.



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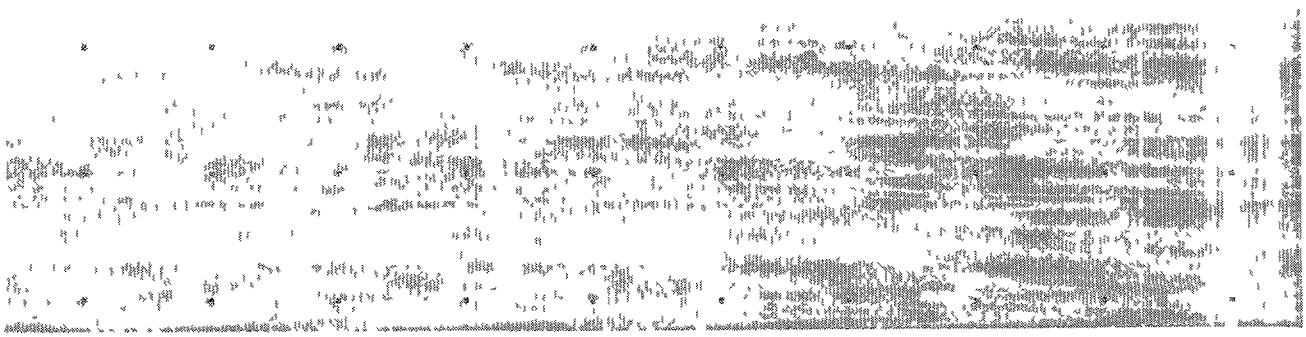

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