IV
Territorial Organisation and Age among the Mursi

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The purpose of this essay is to investigate the wider social significance of some of the data I have collected under the heading 'age organisation' during the course of fieldwork among the Mursi of southwestern Ethiopia.[1] I say 'wider' social significance because I am not concerned to establish connections between different parts of a self-contained age 'system'. I say 'some' of the data because which particular facts are relevant will depend upon which particular aspect (kinship, economic or political, for example) of the wider society is being considered. I am especially interested in Mursi politics and I have therefore chosen to concentrate on this aspect of their society here. Much of what has been written on 'age systems' in East Africa has, of course, been concerned with their so-called political functions, so this choice should allow the reader to judge whether my conclusions are any more satisfactory, and the assumptions upon which they are based any more sound, than those of other writers.

The Mursi, who live in the lower Omo valley, about 60 miles north of Lake Turkana, number 4-5,000 and are transhumant pastoralists and cultivators. Although they maintain the values and outlook of a predominantly pastoral people, they have only about one head of cattle per head of human population, and depend for about 75 per cent of their subsistence needs on the cultivation of sorghum. They are extremely isolated, in relation to the local administration of the Ethiopian Government, being hemmed in on two sides by the River Omo, and on a third by a mountain range[2] which forms the watershed between the Omo and its tributary the Mago (see Figure IV.1). Administration in the whole lower Omo region is minimal and is virtually non-existent among the Mursi. Their decentralised political organisation can be considered from at least two points of view: (*a*) the definition of and relations between more or less autonomous and self-sufficient territorial sections, and (*b*) the exercise of influence and the use of authority in public decision making.

Whichever of these two points of view is adopted, facts normally considered under the heading 'age organisation' are extremely relevant, but they are not the same facts in each case. Roughly stated, the first point of view involves an emphasis on groups of men of the same age but of different territorial sections, while the second involves an emphasis on men of different ages but of the same territorial section.

In other words, and according to the terminology which has become standard for writers on age organisation, the first involves an emphasis on age-sets, and the second an emphasis on age-grades. I originally intended to take both these points of view in turn, but gave up this plan for two reasons. Firstly, it would have resulted in a book rather than in an essay, and secondly, it was based upon the tacit but false assumption that the main purpose of an article on age organisation is to trace the connections between various parts of a putative 'age system', thereby showing how it 'works'. Once I had realised that the only connections worth looking for were between certain phenomena to do with age and certain other phenomena in the wider society, I also realised that there was no good reason why I should attempt to cover all the data I had collected, either on age or on politics, in one essay. I consider here then, only the territorial aspect of Mursi political organisation, and seek to show that certain facts to do with age are essential to a proper understanding of it. I begin by arguing, in the next section, that the present territorial organisation of the Mursi presupposes a continuing northward movement of Mursi-speaking people into territory already occupied, or claimed, by their northern neighbours the Bodi, and that this movement is achieved by the creation of new territorial sections, lying 'across the grain of natural resources' (Sahlins 1968:22). I consider first the external relations of the Mursi, and then show how these external relations are linked to their internal territorial organisation.[3]

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Because they are hemmed in by very clear geographical boundaries, the Mursi are a conveniently self-contained and manageable unit from the point of view of the fieldworker. But this makes it easy to ignore the fact that they have very definite linguistic and cultural affinities with groups lying mainly to the west of them, towards and beyond the border between Ethiopia and the Sudan. With two of these groups, the Tirmaga and Chai, they share a common language and, especially with the Chai, intermarry. Their language is closely related to, but not mutually intelligible with, those of a number of groups lying further to the west, such as (in Ethiopia) the Suri and Bale[4] and (in the Sudan) the Didinga and Murle.

In this essay I am especially concerned with the relationship between the Mursi and their orthern neighbours, the Bodi, who number between three and four thousand and who belong to the same language group[5] as the Mursi and all the other groups mentioned so far. The Mursi and Bodi share an almost identical environment and economy, and although their languages are not mutually intelligible, many people on each side can speak the other side's language. They do not intermarry and their relations alternate between fairly long

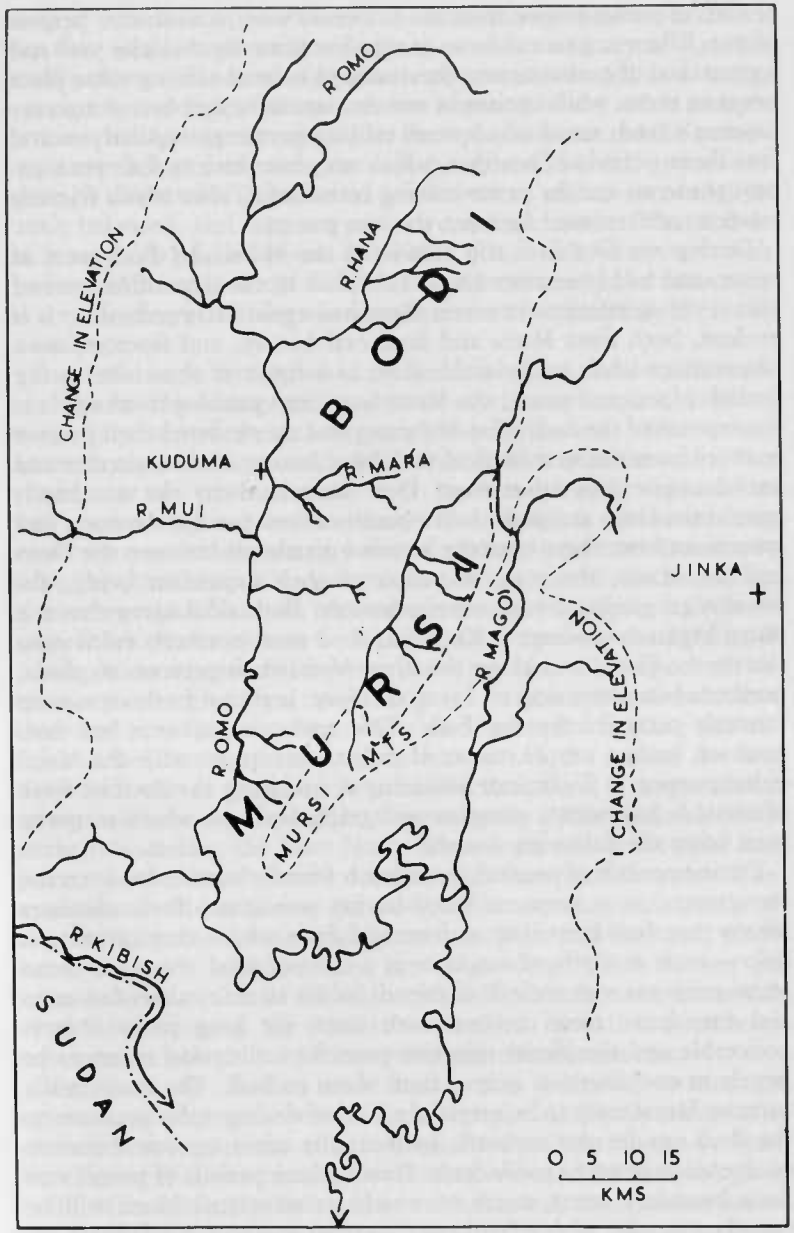

Figure IV.1. Map of Mursi and Bodi country

periods of peace, lasting from ten to twenty years, and shorter periods of war. When at peace the two groups live virtually cheek by jowl and a great deal of economic co-operation and mutual visiting takes place between them, while in time of war they are separated by a temporary no-man's land, across which small raiding parties go regularly to and fro. These periods of hostility, which may last three to four years are brought to an end by peace-making ceremonies, after which friendly relations are resumed between the two groups.

During my first field trip (1969-70) the Mursi and Bodi were at peace, and had been since about 1954, but by the time of my second visit (1973-4) relations between them had again become hostile. It is evident, both from Mursi and Bodi oral history, and from my own observations while in the field, that, as a result of these alternating periods of war and peace, the Mursi have been pushing northwards at the expense of the Bodi. The Mursi say that they entered their present territory from the west bank of the Omo, having made a circular and anti-clockwise migration from their homeland in the southeast, crossed the Omo at a point in the south of their present territory, and spread out from there onto the wooded grasslands between the Omo and the Mago; the main direction of their expansion being, for obvious geographical reasons, northwards. Both sides agree that the Mursi began to cultivate at Kuduma, their most northerly cultivation site on the Omo, and along the River Mara, their present, *de facto*, northern boundary, only in living memory, and that both areas were formerly occupied by the Bodi. This territorial advance has not, however, been a simple matter of military conquest, with the Mursi either putting to flight, exterminating or enslaving the Bodi by force of arms. It has been a complex and gradual process which seems to have taken the following course.

During periods of peace there is much friendly contact between the two groups, most northern Mursi having one or two Bodi associates whom they visit from time to time and from whom they can expect help — such as a gift of sorghum at a time of food shortage. Some Mursi cultivate with their Bodi friends in the latter's cultivation areas and may leave their children with them for long periods. It is noticeable and significant that this peaceful infiltration seems to be largely in one direction only — from Mursi to Bodi. The numerically superior Mursi seem to be exerting a kind of demographic pressure on the Bodi, under the umbrella of mutually advantageous economic co-operation between individuals. During these periods of peace, a *de facto* boundary exists, north of which an occasional Mursi will be found cultivating with a Bodi associate, but south of which there are no Bodi. Then comes a period of war, sparked off by a succession of apparently adventitious incidents, during which there is no friendly contact between individual Mursi and Bodi, and each side aims to get the better of, or at least to even the score with, the other by killing as

many of their men as possible. But hostilities are prosecuted in such a way that simple numerical superiority is of no military advantage. Small parties, well armed with rifles and ammunition,[6] and having a perfect knowledge (from peace-time contact) of the other group's territory, will hide beside a bath, for example, and wait to kill a passer-by, or attack a settlement in the early hours, and be well on the way home by daybreak. This kind of 'tit for tat' is almost certain to be evenly balanced, and does not produce a definite result. What it does do, however, is gradually wear down each side, until, weary both with the loss of life and with the difficulties which the need to be constantly on a war footing put in the way of subsistence activities, they are ready to make peace.

Peace-making is accomplished by means of two successive ceremonies, one held by each group, at each of which a stock animal is killed in the presence of the other group's representatives. What really matters is not whether one side has lost more men than the other, but where these two ceremonies are held, since each side is supposed to hold its ceremony in its own territory. Thus, holding a peace-making ceremony at a certain spot is a way of making (and having acknowledged by the other side's representatives) a claim to *de jure* ownership of territory which formerly may have been owned only in a *de facto* sense. In which case, it may be said that the purpose of the fighting is to bring about a peace making ceremony, and that the purpose of this ceremony is to give legal ratification to a territorial encroachment which had already taken place, peacefully, before the fighting started. This can be illustrated from recent history. At the end of the last Mursi-Bodi war, in 1954, the Mursi killed their beast at a spot about twenty miles south of what had become, by 1970, their *de facto* northern boundary, the River Mara. When I was last in the field and spoke to both sides about the conditions under which they would be prepared to end hostilities, the Bodi, rather optimistically, insisted that the Mursi would have to withdraw from Mara and Kuduma, while the Mursi were adamant that any beast they killed by way of peace-making would be killed at Mara.[7] I now turn from the external relations of the Mursi to consider how this northward movement is linked to their internal territorial organisation.

The Mursi are divided into five named territorial sections or segments, which may be represented diagrammatically by means of a series of horizontal lines, at right angles to the Omo. It can be seen from Figure IV.2 that this east-west axis is dictated by the ecological 'grain' of the country, which is from north to south. Each section has to span the full range of natural resources in order to be, theoretically at least, self-contained and self-supporting. These natural resources consist of river bank land for flood cultivation at the Omo, bushland thicket[8] for rain cultivation several miles east of the Omo, and wooded grassland for cattle herding yet further to the east. Although

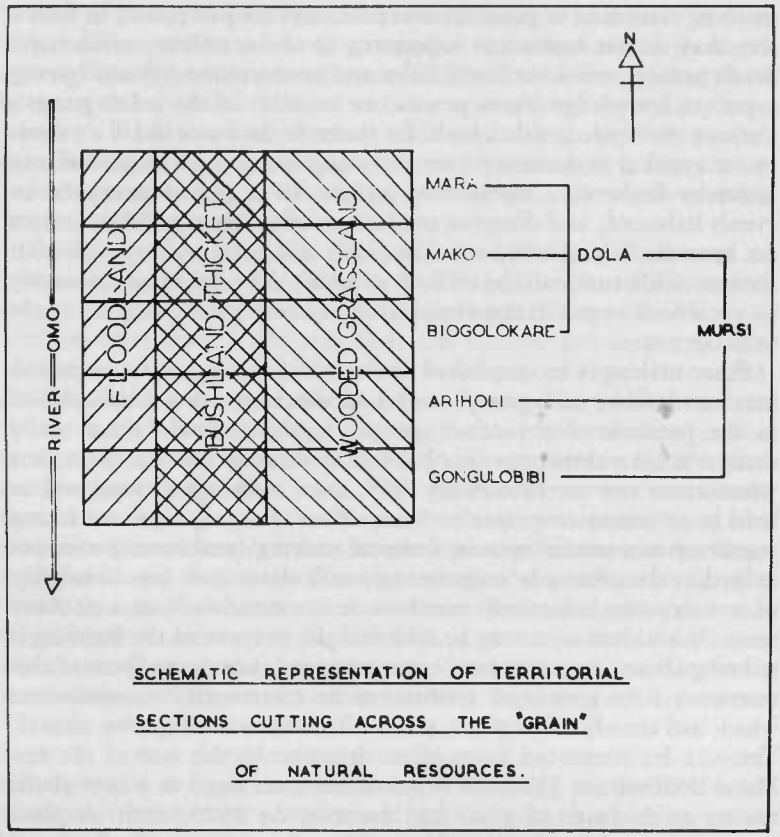

Figure IV.2

the transhumance movements by means of which the Mursi exploit these natural resources result in a high degree of individual mobility (there are no permanent settlements for example), this mobility takes place almost entirely along an east-west axis, at right angles, in other words, to the Omo, and parallel with the division into sections. For any one individual, then, the actual area covered during the annual cycle of subsistence activities is relatively limited, and indeed it is not unusual to come across people living, for example, in the north of the country, who have never visited the south, a mere fifty miles away.

Figure IV.2 also shows that three of the sections, Mara, Mako and Biogolokare, combine to form a unit of a higher order, called Dola, and that the other two sections do not form a similar unit, structurally equivalent to Dola. This grouping together of the three northern sections, each one of which, taken singly, is structurally equivalent to each of the two southern sections, seems, at first sight, anomalous. It

does not correspond to any geographical or ecological division of the country, and the settlements of members of the three northern sections do not form a single, discrete grouping. Indeed, on this latter basis, Biogolokare would be more likely to form a single unit with the two sections to the south of it than with those to the north of it, since, as far as physical proximity and day to day contacts are concerned, its members are much closer to those of Ariholi and Gongulobibi than they are to those of Mara and probably also to those of Mako. Many members of Mara, on the other hand, have closer links with the Bodi (during period of peace) than they do with their fellow Dola-members from Biogolokare. Thus it seems that the unit called Dola must be seen as resulting, not from the convergence of three previously independent sections, but from the formation of new sections by means of a process which Dyson-Hudson has called 'replication' (1966:259).

This fits in well with the hypothesis of a long term and continuing northward movement of population, as a result of which new territorial sections, structurally equivalent to the existing ones, and cutting across the same three bands of natural resources, have been formed. It also fits in with the Mursi view of their recent history, except that they think of the three northern sections as having sprung from a single parent-section, called Dola. What is proposed here, on the other hand, is that there has been a general northward migration, the direction of which has been dictated by geographical features and by the availability of natural resources, and which has been exclusively fed, neither by the members of a single 'proto-section', nor even by the descendants of those Mursi who were the first to cross to the east bank of the Omo. Rather, one must envisage a continuing movement, not only from present day Mursi country, northwards, but also into it, from the west. Mursi/Chai intermarriage seems to play a vital part in this process, since one comes across many Chai in Mursi country who have married Mursi girls and who have come to live with their wives' people. Thus, just as one finds Mursi living among the Bodi, so one finds Chai living among the Mursi, but whereas intermarriage enables the Chai to infiltrate Mursi country peacefully, Mursi infiltration of Bodi country cannot, in the end, be peaceful. I have never visited the Chai, but I would expect that, just as there is virtually no southward movement of Bodi into Mursi country, so there is virtually no westward movement of Mursi into Chai country. The numerical superiority of the Mursi over the Bodi results, then, from the fact that the former have behind them a source of new immigrants, who speak the same language as themselves and with whom they intermarry, while the latter have before them the foothills of the Ethiopian Plateau, into which they can move only by displacing the sedentary agriculturists who already live there.

Each new Mursi section, then, has maintained with those immediately

behind it ideologically closer links than it has with those further to the south, and the Mursi explain this by reference to the common parentage of the sections in question. In view of the above argument, however, it seems wiser to view this idea of common parentage as the main ideological justification of a link which has a more pragmatic and contemporary basis. This basis, I suggest, consists in the need to hold onto territorial gains and, if possible, to make further ones, in the face of rival claims by the Bodi. Since the territory into which the Mursi have been moving has been either occupied or contested, it has been necessary to bring maximum pressure to bear at the frontier.[9] It is evident, however, from the description given above of the tactics employed in Mursi/Bodi hostilities, that this pressure cannot be a matter of military strength. Rather, the maintenance of particularly close ideological links between the sections immediately behind the frontier facilitates the northward drift of population and therefore the gradual, peace-time, encroachment on Bodi territory, which has been shown to be the main mechanism of Mursi expansion. Thus it is no accident of demography that Mara, the youngest section, is also by far the largest in the size of its population.[10] A subtle, demographic pressure is brought to bear on the frontier by these arrangements, then, not a crude military one.

A second advantage of the special status of the three northern sections is, however, indirectly military, and has to do with the fact that the most highly valued material asset of the Mursi, the cow, is mobile. During periods of hostility cattle have to be kept as far back from the frontier as possible. The extent of Mursi and Bodi country together is no more than two thousand square miles and neither side can keep its cattle completely out of the reach of the other's raiding parties. But the further these raiders have to go into enemy territory, the greater the chances of their being overtaken on the way home, and of any cattle they may have stolen being retrieved. Thus, it is the cattle of the Mara section which, on the Mursi side, are most at risk during Mursi-Bodi wars, and at such times these cattle are sent thirty to forty miles south, to be looked after if not by, then at least in the territory of, members of the Biogolokare section. It is useful, therefore, for members of Mara and Biogolokare to think of themselves as having more in common with each other than either of them have with their fellow Mursi of the two southern sections, and therefore as having more binding obligations to each other. (It is interesting to note that the territorial organisations of the Bodi mirrors that of the Mursi. There are three Bodi territorial sections, named, from south to north, Gura, Hana and Chirim. Gura and Hana are linked, through the name Mela, in exactly the same way as the three northern Mursi sections are linked through the name Dola. Members of Mela think of themselves as a unit in opposition to Chirim.)[11]

What we seem to have in Dola, then, is an incipient 'society', the

territorial span of which is related to the amount of opposition being experienced at the frontier, (other things, such as access to weapons, being equal, this opposition is probably mainly a matter of populaton size) and to the 'fall-back' distance necessary to protect cattle from raiders during periods of hostility. There will be no need for a greater span than is necessary to maintain ground already won, and to make further expansion possible — there is no value in unity for its own sake. As the front line advances, links with units now being left behind become more and more tenuous until they amount to no more than a vague memory of common origin. Indeed, it is not inconceivable that these units, when they have been left far enough behind, in time and space, should start expanding on their own account, in the same general direction as, and thus at the expense of, their former allies. At some time in the future, then, a 'society' which originated in the unit now known as Dola might find itself being encroached on from behind, rather as the Bodi are now being encroached on by the Mursi. Indeed, as will be seen, the members of Dola already protect themselves, symbolically, against such an encroachment from the south, using duelling poles rather than rifles. A useful image to represent all this would be a series of waves, seen in elevation, the crest of each wave representing a different 'society'. Although over a time span running into hundreds of years, these waves, or societies, are constantly on the move, merging into and out of each other, they appear stationary when observed over a single generation or so. The Bodi would thus represent a wave which is just about to break against the beaches of the Ethiopian Plateau, with another representing the Mursi (or rather Dola) coming in close behind it.

2

If one were setting out to describe the 'age-system', of the Mursi, one might be tempted to begin by observing that they 'have' age-sets, which are 'formed' in a certain way, which 'succeed' each other at certain intervals and which 'cut across' the territorial divisions of the population, thereby promoting 'integration'. For the Mursi do have a word, *teny*, which corresponds to what has usually been called an 'age-set'. The distinction between age-sets and age-grades has recently been succinctly stated by Paul Spencer: 'The term *age-set* is used here to refer to all those men who are initiated in youth during a definite span of time, and as a group share certain constraints and expectations for the remainder of their lives; and *age-grade* is used to refer to a status through which each person passes at some period of his life unless he dies first' (1976:153). An age-set, then, is a group, while an age-grade is a status. It is clear, however, from many accounts of East African age organisations (e.g. Dyson-Hudson 1966:174) that what is usually referred to, in these accounts, by the term age-set is not

a group, but a category of men (and this, as will be explained below, is certainly true of the Mursi word *teny*). Gulliver has suggested that we use the word 'age-group' to mean a number of age-mates who 'engage in particular activities . . . and function as a group in relation to outsiders' (1968:159). Such an age-group is specifically not 'society-wide', while an age-set is; only another conceptual entity could be co-extensive with a society. From this point of view it would be pointless to describe 'society-wide' age-sets (or, for that matter, clans)[12] as helping to promote the integration of separate territorial sections, since the fact that the men of these sections acknowledge, for example, common age-set names is simply evidence of that integration. Such is the sort of conclusion, however, which is bound to follow if one sets out by treating conceptual entities (such as age-sets and clans) as though they belonged to the empirical rather than to the mental world. If, on the other hand, one acknowledges that they are conceptual entities but, nevertheless, makes a discussion of them the basis of one's analysis of actual behaviour, then one's method is at odds with one's theory. In this account, therefore, instead of beginning at the level of the 'tribal' institution and working down, to the particular, I begin at the level of the individual and his local group of age-mates and work up, to the general.

Most men, in any society, spend most of their lives as members of two kinds of family group, in one of which, their natal family, they are dependent, and in the other of which, their conjugal family, they are depended upon. The individual's transition from one kind of family to the other, however, is not necessarily instantaneous — there is liable to be an interval during which he is neither considered to be dependent on his natal family nor yet has dependants of his own. This interval will be relatively long in a society such as that of the Mursi, in which polygyny is the norm[13] and in which, consequently, there are, at any one time, more married women than married men. Given an equal sex-ratio, the easiest way for such a state of affairs to be brought about is for men to marry at a considerably later age than women (cf. Spencer 1965:96). While most women seem to marry between the ages of seventeen and twenty, most men do not appear to marry for the first time until their late twenties or early thirties. From the age of about fifteen (when he is old enough to look after cattle without being under the constant supervision of the parental generation) until the time of his marriage, a Mursi man is expected to live the year round in a cattle camp with his local age-mates, apart from the settlements of married men.

The Mursi word which I translate as 'territorial section' is *buran*, and this can also be applied to the local group formed by a single settlement of, say, half a dozen families. The five territorial sections I have described above are thus thought of in the image of separate residential groups. But the only residential groups which are co-extensive with sections are those formed by unmarried men, whose cattle camps consist, theoretically at least, of all the men of a certain

age in a section. These camps are therefore identified with and represent the territorial exclusiveness of sections, this being particularly apparent in the practice, to be described below, of ceremonial duelling between unmarried men from different sections. The settlements of married men do not show the same exclusiveness, either where age or territory is concerned, because they do not consist of all the married men of a certain age in a section. Thus, it is during the approximately fifteen-year period of his life when he is more or less physically mature but unmarried that a man is most closely identified both with men of his own age group and with his own territorial section.

Fifteen years is a long time in a man's life, especially these particular fifteen years, between his mid-teens and early thirties. During this period he goes through a dramatic change, in terms of his physical maturity, the social expectations to which he is subject and the personal aspirations to which these expectations give rise. It is a period which covers the transition between the two basic age grades of jural minority, or boyhood, and jural majority or adulthood. I say 'basic' age grades because all males can be categorised by means of them. In Mursi, the two grades in question are those of *lusa* (boys) and *zuo* (adults), and each of these is further sub-divided into four grades of boys and three of adults. Here I am concerned only with the two which fall on either side of the basic boy/adult divide, since it is into them that the men found living together in cattle camps with their unmarried age-mates fall.

The junior of these two grades — the senior grade of boys — is that of *teru* and it corresponds to the period in a man's life falling roughly between his mid-teens and early twenties.[14] A *teri* (the singular form) is expected to be interested in his cattle, in dancing, in ceremonial duelling contests and in flirting and sexual escapades with unmarried girls (there is no ban on sexual intercourse before marriage). Although not formally prohibited from marrying, a *teri* is very unlikely to admit any short term interest in obtaining a wife. The most obvious public recognition of his jural minority is the fact that he is not allowed to speak at public meetings, unless specifically called upon to do so by an older man. Ideally he will live, more or less permanently, in a cattle camp together with all the other *teru* of his section, the cattle then under his care consisting of some that will form the nucleus of his own herd and others which he is looking after for his father, married brothers and/or uncles, and which are not needed at the family settlements. His ability to meet this ideal will depend, among other things, on the availability of a younger brother or cousin or take his place as a herd-boy in his natal family, and upon his family's cattle wealth.

The senior of the two grades under discussion — the junior grade of adults — is that of *rora*, or 'junior elders'. It corresponds to the period

in a man's life between, roughly, his early twenties and late thirties. It is while occupying this grade, therefore, that a man is expected to marry for the first time. Until he does so, however, he continues to live, as before, in a cattle camp with his unmarried section age mates, attending dances and duelling contests and 'calling the girls'. But he is now openly intent on building up his herd in order to provide bridewealth for his prospective in-laws. As an adult he has a right to speak in public meetings, but as an unmarried one he is unlikely to do so, except perhaps to report on the state of the outlying pastures, or on a recent expedition to the border areas of the country, looking for the tracks of enemy scouts and raiding parties. Unmarried *rora*, being physically mature and yet not having the domestic and agricultural commitments of married men, are looked upon as a source of military manpower, providing the community with a sort of early warning system, or first line of defence, against attack from outside.

When he marries, a man ceases to live with his section age mates, and, indeed, his whole life style changes drastically. Firstly, he is no longer a member of a tightly knit group, exclusive both in terms of age and territorial affiliation. He forms links of co-residence and economic co-operation with men who may not only differ from him widely in age, but who may not even be members of his own territorial section. This latter situation is most likely to arise as a result of his marrying a girl from a different section. If such a girl continues to cultivate in her natal section, her husband may spend a large part of his time with her people. Conversely he may form economic and residential links with a sister's husband who has migrated from another section, to his own. Secondly, a newly married man is unlikely, after having provided his affines with bridewealth,[15] to have sufficient cattle to constitute a viable herd, and will therefore have to satisfy his subsistence needs, at least in the short run, primarily through cultivation. In marrying, therefore, he will have exchanged cattle, and a diet consisting predominantly of milk and blood, not only for the sexual services and procreative capacity of his wife, but also for her agricultural services, and for a diet consisting predominantly of sorghum porridge. Thirdly, he will no longer be a contestant in inter-section duelling contests (he may referee such contests) but he is now free to seek public acclaim in a physically less violent way, through his contribution to public meetings.

The physiological transition, to which the terms *teru* and *rora* give social recognition, is, of course, made gradually and imperceptibly by each individual. But the social transition is made suddenly, publicly and collectively by means of an initiation ceremony held, for all the *teru* of a section, on average, every fifteen years,[16] this being also, therefore, the average age span of the initiands. I describe the initiation ceremony and discuss its bearing on territorial organisation later. Here I wish to mention two implications which this fifteen year

age span of initiands has for the facts I have been presenting above. Firstly, it is evident that for some individuals the transition from the *teru* to the *rora* grade, or, in other words, their initiation into jural adulthood, will accord more or less imperfectly with the particular stage of physical maturity they happen to have reached. In describing the fifteen years of a man's life between the ages of fifteen and thirty as falling, more or less equally, into two age-grades, therefore, I was ignoring discrepancies of this kind and considering only those individuals whose biographies typify the norm. It should be noted, then, that some individuals spend most, and others all, of this period of their lives either as *teru* or as *rora*.

Secondly, although the number of more or less physically mature but unmarried men in the society will remain constant from year to year (barring demographic fluctuations and/or a change in the normal age of marriage for men), the distribution of these men between the two grades of *teru* and *rora* will vary according to the time when the observation is made. Immediately after an initiation ceremony, most of them will be *rora* and most *rora* will be unmarried (the most senior may well have already married, as *teru*). Thus, one would expect to find, at such a time, a relatively large cattle camp of unmarried *rora* in each section. These camps will be large, but gradually decreasing in size, as more and more of their members marry. The cattle camps of the *teru*, on the other hand, will be small but increasing in size as every three or four years more boys are admitted to this grade. Immediately before the next initiation ceremony one would expect there to be no more unmarried *rora*, and each section to have a relatively large cattle camp of *teru*. (There may even be smaller cattle camps, made up of the senior occupants of the grade immediately junior to the *teru*.) In 1969/70, which was approximately nine years after the last initiation ceremony, Mara, the section with the largest population, boasted a cattle camp of *teru* and a cattle camp of unmarried *rora*, the latter having been ten and fifteen members. When I returned, about four years later, virtually all these unmarried *rora*, whom I had interviewed at their cattle camp in October 1969, were married and there was no cattle camp of unmarried *rora* in the Mara section.

Unlike any other type of residential group, therefore, the cattle camps of unmarried men, whether of the *teru* or *rora* grades, are co-extensive with territorial sections, of which they are thus a kind of ideal embodiment. But their members are in a state of what might be called social suspension, between childhood and adulthood. The whole essence of their life together as age-mates is that it must come to an end in order for them, individually, to become fully fledged members of society. The residential units they form are, therefore, essentially impermanent and this, in itself, demonstrates that various ideals which these units embody — including the territorial

exclusiveness and autonomy of sections — are, for the society as a whole, nothing but illusions.

Since they cut across the full range of natural resources, each of the sections is, in theory, self-sufficient, both economically and politically. In fact, because of the vicissitudes of climate (especially the very localised rainfall and the variable Omo flood), a great deal of economic interdependence exists between the members of different sections, but individual ties of economic self interest cannot account for the territorial organisation of Mursi society. Members of Biogolo-kare, for example, cannot be described as having more to gain, economically, from co-operation with members of Mara and Mako than they have to gain from co-operation with members of Ariholi and Gongulobibi. And it is evident from the close links which members of the Mara section maintain with individual Bodi, despite periodic warfare and the gradual northward movement of the Mursi, that it is quite possible for economic co-operation to take place between fundamentally hostile and territorially exclusive neighbours. In the light of the argument in the first part of this essay, there is a far more telling reason why the autonomy and exclusiveness of territorial sections must be illusory. I refer to the need for especially close links to be maintained between those sections closest to the expanding frontier (and therefore most recently created), so that the migration of people towards this frontier can be facilitated in time of peace, and that the cattle of the 'front line' sections can be suitably protected in time of war. Mursi territorial sections are not autonomous units, in the sense of static permanent building blocks, at all.

There are two other ideals which the cattle camps of unmarried men, by embodying, show to be illusory. The first is that of the solidarity and self sufficiency of unmarried age-mates or, in other words, of men without women. To pursue this particular point further would take me too far away from my main theme. I merely wish to point out that the cattle camps I have described embody, to an extreme degree, the masculine ideals of Mursi society and yet are, in the long run, unviable social units, because women have no formal place in them. Secondly, unmarried men are the only members of the population who can hope to achieve, for any length of time, the ideal of a purely pastoral existence. The reality, for the population at large, is that, with only about as many cattle as there are people, around 75 per cent of their total subsistence needs must be provided by cultivation. These cattle camps, then, are built upon at least three illusions: the autonomy of territorial sections, the self-sufficiency of a purely male society and the viability of a purely pastoral economy. They seem to hold a message similar to that which Lévi-Strauss has attributed to some myths, and which may be roughly paraphrased as: 'These ideas are all very well in theory, but they will not work in practice. Try them out for yourself, and you will see.'

So far I have been concerned with the individual and his local group of section age-mates. I now want to discuss two kinds of ceremonial peformance which bring to the fore relations between age-mates of different sections and, in a structural sense, the relations between sections. The first of these performances I call 'ceremonial duelling'. It consists of a single combat game, or sport, in which the contestants, who are always unmarried, belong to the same age-grade but to different territorial sections. The second is the ceremony by means of which local groups of *teru* become *rora*, and which I call 'initiation'.

3

The duelling weapon is a pole about six feet long and weighing about 2 lb. In the attacking position it is gripped at its base with both hands, the left above the right. The aim is to land a blow with the shaft, and not with the point, on any part of the opponent's body, and with sufficient force to knock him over. Blows are parried by continuing to grip the base of the pole with the right hand, whilst sliding the left hand up the shaft. Each contestant wears a more or less identical duelling kit which is both protective and decorative. It includes a helmet and a hand guard for the right hand, both made of strong basket work, woven from the leaves of the doum palm, shin guards made of hide, rings of plaited sisal cord to protect the elbows and knees, a leopard skin over the front of the torso, a skirt made of hide cut into strips and a cattle bell tied round the waist. Bouts are fast, furious and short, (they usually last no more than thirty seconds) and are brought to an end, unless one of the contestants has been knocked over first, through the intervention of a referee, who attempts to come between the contestants. It is usually necessary for at least one of the contestants (nearly always the one who has been receiving most of the punishment) to be held back, by several spectators, before the referee is successful in ending a bout.

Contestants are always unmarried men, of either the *teru* or *rora* grades. Separate contests are held by the occupants of each grade, but contestants always come from different territorial sections. What significance should be placed upon the fact that they are chosen not only by age criteria (which may be said simply to ensure even matching) but also by territorial ones? Given that the contestants are unmarried men, and since such men live in residential groups which are co-extensive, in membership, with territorial sections, the answer to this question may seem clear: it is just a convenient, indeed an obvious, way of picking sides.

The trouble with this answer, however, is that there is no obvious reason why 'sides' need to be picked at all, since duelling, from almost every angle, is a highly individualistic sport. Firstly, the actual bout sets one individual in single combat, against another. Secondly, there

Plate IV.1. Mursi ceremonial duelling: a contestant ready for his bout

is no points system, or matching of local champions, which would enable one section to 'beat' another. Indeed, it is very unusual for unambiguous superiority to be demonstrated by one contestant during a single bout. Such superiority can only be demonstrated by knocking over one's opponent which, since bouts usually last less than thirty seconds, is a very rare occurrence. The duelling careers of some individuals are, of course, more illustrious than those of others and very considerable individual reputations may be made in this way. But they are specifically *individual* reputations, the men in question sometimes being remembered for many years after their deaths. Thirdly, the main conscious motive for taking part in duelling is sexual assertiveness: the young men say that they do it to impress the unmarried girls. But from this point of view it is undoubtedly more important to take part than to demonstrate superior skill. Indeed it is at least as honourable to sustain injuries as it is to inflict them. Contestants are proud of their injuries and will often leave the binding on an injured limb long after it has ceased to be strictly necessary.

Thus, if one considers the actual conduct of duelling contests and the conscious motivations of the participants, there would seem to be no reason why these participants should make up two local 'sides': no reason, in other words, why contests should not be staged by the unmarried men of a single territorial section. A second answer to the question posed above might be based upon the social context of duelling, and upon its 'latent' functions. Thus it might be argued that inter-section duelling contests provide a sort of 'safety-valve' for pent up antagonism between sections, this antagonism being the result of an underlying competition for natural resources between these ecologically identical units.

Such an argument, however, would ignore the following facts. Firstly, rights to property and resources are not vested in sections, while individuals can easily gain access, usually through affinal links, to even the most scarce natural resource — flood land at the Omo — in sections other than their own. Secondly, although duelling contests are preceded by a more or less intense build-up of tension and hostility between the young men of different sections, this is very largely manufactured for the occasion. It is not that contestants feel no solidarity with their section age-mates, or that they are not antagonistic towards their age-mates of other sections. It is simply that this solidarity and antagonism is at least as much a result as a cause of the duelling. So far from duelling being a safety valve for inter-section antagonism, it is likely that, without it, there would be less, not more, antagonism between sections. Thirdly, if duelling really were an outlet for antagonism resulting from competition for resources, it would be difficult to explain why only unmarried men take part in it. This latter fact does draw attention to a possible 'cathartic' effect of duelling, but any antagonism it thereby expresses and 'controls' is not so much

Plate IV.2. Mursi ceremonial duelling: a bout in progress

between territorial sections as between the young and the old. Duelling is certainly seen as an activity of immature youth which married men attempt firmly to control, both by acting as referees and, occasionally, by trying to prevent the contests from taking place at all.[17] This aspect of duelling, however, belongs in a discussion of authority relations, and not of territorial organisation.

A third answer to this question might be that it is simply in the interests of social harmony for hostility between individuals, which is presumably latent in duelling, to be directed outside the group of co-resident men. There is no doubt that duelling is an institution through which local loyalties are expressed and periodically

intensified, but this answer fails when we consider the way in which the rule (that contestants should come from different sections) applies to the three constituent sections of Dola. It was noted above (p.101) that Mara, Mako and Biogolokare 'do not form a single, discrete grouping' and that members of Biogolokare are much closer, both geographically and in terms of day to day contacts, to members of the two southern sections, Ariholi and Gongulobibi, than they are, certainly to Mara, and, probably, to Mako. Yet, although members of the three Dola sections do oppose each other in duelling, they do so only when members of the two non-Dola sections are not represented in the contests. Thus, in October 1969, the unmarried *rora* of the Mara section took part in a day of duelling with the unmarried *rora* of the Mako section, at the latter's 'home ground', these being the only two sections represented. In June 1970, however, following a good harvest, there took place, at the Biogolokare 'home ground', eight successive days of duelling which attracted participants from all five Mursi sections. In these contests (which were immediately preceded by an outbreak of what could appropriately be called, in a phrase used by Spencer of the Samburu Moran, 'gang warfare') Dola members did not oppose each other, and neither did those of Ariholi and Gongulobibi. Thus, the division of contestants followed the structural division between Dola and the two southern sections, and was not a simple reflection of the intensity of social ties based on local contiguity. It should be emphasised here that Biogolokare, Ariholi and Gongulobibi settlements are likely, during the wet season, to be dotted about the headstreams of the same Omo tributaries and to be only a few hundred yards apart.

The distinctiveness of sections, then, is as much a result as a cause of the rule that contestants in duelling should come from different sections and this, I believe, should be seen as the rule's main significance. The Mursi themselves will define a section as a local division of the population, the members of which do not oppose each other in ceremonial duelling. The rules of duelling are therefore functionally similar to those of segmentary lineage organisation, in that they have a 'nesting' or 'massing' effect. This does not, of course explain the particular pattern of nesting which is revealed in the present territorial organisation, but this can, I believe, be accounted for on the assumption that there has been, and still is, a gradual northward migration of Mursi into territory formally claimed by the Bodi.

4

The second ceremonial performance which involves local groups of age-mates and which bears closely on the question of territorial organisation is that which I call 'initiation'. This seems to be the most

appropriate term to use, because it is through this ceremony that the transition is made from the grade of *teru* to that of *rora*, and also, therefore, from the basic grade of *lusa* (boys) to that of *zuo* (adults). Of all the ceremonies which mark the individual's transition from one grade to another, this is by far the most elaborate, and thus of all the 'big moments' which he experiences in his progress through the grades, this is by far the biggest. (It will have become clear by now, of course, that while it confers new jural status on an individual, the transition to the *rora* grade makes virtually no immediate difference to his life-style and activities, a far more significant 'moment', in this sense, being his marriage, which may occur while he is still a *teri*.)

There are two reasons, however, why the term initiation could be misleading here, although I have no better alternative to offer. Firstly, for reasons outlined earlier, there is a very wide variation in the age at which men go through this ceremony. Some may be boys of fifteen, and others may be married men of thirty or thirty-five with children. Secondly, (and this is a point which will be continually emphasised in what follows) the initiands go through the ceremony very much as a group, and not as individuals. It is not just that a local group of *teru* is initiated together, but that no concessions are made, during the ceremony, to their separate individual identities. Nothing is done to them, as individuals (there is, for example, no circumcision) and nothing is done by them as individuals (there is, for example, no killing of a stock animal by each initiand). It will be seen later how the symbolism of the initiation ceremony emphasises both the solidarity of age-mates and their territorial — indeed residential — exclusiveness.

I consider first, however, the circumstances under which ceremonies are held (rather than what happens during them) for this focuses attention on the structural relations between sections. Since these relations are, in the long run and of their very nature, impermanent, and since initiation ceremonies take place at relatively infrequent intervals, it is necessary to emphasise that the following account is based upon information gained at one particular moment in Mursi history (i.e. 1969-74, the period spanning my two field trips). There is no suggestion, therefore, that the particular pattern of relations between sections upon which this account is based always has existed and always will exist — indeed quite the opposite is suggested. This qualification about time is not, as must be evident by now, inserted as a theoretical admission of something from which my analysis prescinds in practice. I am specifically not saying 'Yes, I know Mursi society must be changing, but since the only historical information I have is based upon oral accounts of the very recent past, I must — indeed ought to — ignore this in practice.' I am saying, on the contrary, that what I was able to observe only makes sense if a particular systematic change, which my gleanings from recent oral history sufficiently confirm, even if they do not fully document, is assumed to have

been, and to be, taking place. It must be understood, then, that although I now outline the circumstances under which initiation ceremonies *are* held, this is based upon accounts I was given of the circumstances under which the most recent ceremonies *were* held, in 1961.

There are three points to mention here, one of which is evident from the last sentence: namely, that although different initiation ceremonies are held in different parts of the country for different local groups of *teru*, they are all held in the same year and during the same wet season, though not simultaneously. Secondly, the ceremonies are held in a particular order, beginning in the south of the country. The Mursi explain this priority of the south by observing that it was in the south of their present territory that they first crossed from the west to the east bank of the Omo. It is the Ariholi section which, on these grounds, is considered the most senior, for it is from the territory of this section that the Mursi see themselves as having expanded, after crossing from the west bank of the Omo. Ariholi thus stages its initiation ceremony first, and is followed by Gongulobibi. The constituent sections of Dola hold a third and final ceremony, after Gongulobibi. Thus (and this is the third point), although the unmarried *rora* of the Dola sections form cattle camps which are not co-extensive with Dola but rather with each of its constituent sections, they are moved into the *rora* grade at the same time, in the same place and as a single body.

The special conceptual unity of the sections which make up Dola is revealed then, by this rule, as it is by the rule that members of Dola sections do not oppose each other in duelling contests in which members of the other two sections take part. Although they express a conceptual unity — that of 'Dola-ness' — neither of these rules should be thought of as a survival from a time when Dola was a single section, since the idea that the present three-section Dola has grown from a single parent section simply helps the people represent to themselves a unity which is dictated by their northward migration into contested territory. If this migration continues, and a new Mursi section is formed, north of the Mara, there is no reason to believe that the constituent sections of the present Dola will continue to hold common initiation ceremonies, exclusive to themselves. On the contrary, there would appear, in this event, to be only two alternatives, neither of which would allow the exclusive conceptual unity of the present Dola to remain intact.

One is that the new section will be thought of as a fourth unit of Dola, so that four separate sections will then hold a common initiation ceremony. But there is already some logical tension between the symbolism of the initiation ceremony, which emphasises the solidarity and indeed the residential unity of initiands, and the separate cattle camps in which the unmarried men of each of the three Dola sections

continue to live after they have been initiated. (This tension does not of course, arise where Ariholi and Gongulobibi are concerned, since each of these sections holds it own initiation ceremony.) This is another way of saying that there is a tension between the conceptual unity of 'Dola-ness' and the virtual self-sufficiency of the separate Dola sections in the management of day-to-day affairs — in the reaching of decisions, for example, about transhumance movements between the Omo and the eastern grazing areas. This applies particularly to the two Dola sections which are physically furthest apart, Mara and Biogolokare. There will presumably be a critical point beyond which geographical distance so reduces physical contact between sections that the job of organising a common ceremony with the particular symbolic content of that to be described soon, becomes not so much technically impossible as literally unthinkable. An observation already made in the first part of this essay should be stressed here. Namely, that although individual Mursi families are highly mobile over the course of a single year's transhumance their mobility is almost entirely along an east-west axis.

The second alternative, in the event of a new section being formed north of the Mara, is that the southernmost of the present Dola sections, Biogolokare, would break away from the conceptual unity which had hitherto bound it to Mara and Mako by holding its own initiation ceremony, as Ariholi and Gongulobibi do at the moment. As far as the rules of duelling are concerned one would expect Biogolokare to combine with the sections to the south of it, in opposition to those to the north of it — that the segmentary 'rift', in other words, which now separates Biogolokare and Ariholi would move up one to separate Biogolokare and Mako. Mako, Mara and the new section would then form a conceptual unit exactly analogous to the present Dola, holding initiation ceremonies in common and combining against the rest in ceremonial duelling. On no account, if the argument of this essay is correct, would a new section, north of Mara and thus in the front line of expansion against the Bodi, hold, like Ariholi and Gongulobibi, its own initiation ceremonies, thereby allowing the exclusive conceptual unity of the present three Dola sections to remain intact. If the northward movement of the Mursi continues, Dola, as it exists at the moment, is doomed. Indeed, if this movement were to continue indefinitely, so that the number of Mursi sections south of the 'segmentary rift' continued to increase, it might happen that those to the north of it, becoming proportionately fewer and having literally left behind such territorially anchored names as Mako and Mara, will be overtaken from behind like the present Bodi, and eventually be pushed into the foothills of the Ethiopian Plateau.

It now remains for me to show that there is a logical tension between the symbolic content of an initiation ceremony and the residence in separate cattle camps of those who have been through it together.

Since the most recent initiation ceremonies were held in 1961, eight years before I visited the Mursi, the following account of their form is based upon what I was told, and since I spent the greater part of my fieldwork in the north of the country, the most reliable information I have on this subject refers to the ceremony held by the three Dola sections in that year. I have no doubt, however, that the ceremonies held by the Ariholi and Gongulobibi sections were identical in all essentials — apart of course from their smaller catchment areas for initiands. Nor is it necessary, as it was when discussing the circumstances under which the ceremonies are held, to enter a proviso about the moment in Mursi history to which the information refers. As far as what happens in an initiation ceremony is concerned, the undoubted truth that even ritual activity changes over time can be ignored.

The ceremony lasts two days and I find it useful to divide the performance into four parts, of which I now give a rough outline.

1. *The beating of the initiands.* On the morning of the first day the *teru* (i.e. the initiands) construct around a shade tree an enclosure of branches, having two openings, one opposite the other. They then leave the scene. During the afternoon men of the *rora* and of the next most senior grade (*bara*, or 'senior elders', who are also referred to as the 'fathers of the *teru*') enter the enclosure, each man carrying a withy. Late in the afternoon the *teru* return. They kneel in a compact group outside the enclosure and are severely beaten by the older men, who circle the group, landing occasional but carefully aimed swipes with their withies.[18] The *teru* hold duelling poles with which they attempt to ward off these swipes but, since they are expected to remain kneeling in the same spot, they are easy targets. Meanwhile they have aimed at them not only withies but also words, since some of the more senior *bara* take it in turns to harangue them while the beating is going on, insisting that they are unworthy to become adults.

2. *The killing of the ox.* The next morning the *teru* return to the enclosure, three of them (in the Dola ceremony) driving an ox and a cow each, from their own herds. Two of these represent the junior and senior sub-clans of the Juhai clan and the third represents the Kagisi clan. (In the Ariholi ceremony there is a single pair of animals, belonging to a single representative of the Komorte clan, and in the Gongulobibi ceremony there is also a single pair of animals, belonging to a single representative of the Garakuli clan). The oxen are driven to one opening of the enclosure and killed by their owners, while the cows, their necks weighed down with bells, are allowed to wander off to graze. After this killing of the oxen, from which the whole ceremony takes its name (*nithai*) the *teru* enter the enclosure, within which the next part of the ritual is held.

3. *The naming of the initiands.* While the oxen lie where they were

killed, the initiands enter the enclosure, but stand one behind the other in a line which may thus stretch out through one of its openings. They hold on their shoulders (I am not sure whether the right or the left) sticks which are tied together, end to end, to form an unbroken line. One of the seniormost members of the *bara* grade present then walks down the line of initiands, banging with a stick the sticks they hold over their shoulders, and addressing them meanwhile with a name which they will keep for the rest of their lives. The oxen are then cut up and roasted for the older men by the new *rora*.

4. *The tying with kalochi.* Proceedings at the enclosure are now over. While the other men sleep off their meal, the new *rora* disperse into the bush and cut strips of bark from the *kalochi* tree (Grewia). Its bark is tough and flexible and is much used as a sort of general purpose string. The *rora* tie *kalochi* round their wrists, arms, knees, necks and waists, leaving long tassels which make a rustling noise when they walk. They then tour the local settlements, singing a song of which the following is one of the versions I collected:

You girls, crawl into a hole;
Make way for the *rora*;
Make way for the lions.
You boy, crawl into a hole;
Leave the country for the *rora*;
Leave the country for the lions.
You woman, look at the *kalochi*;
It says 'liang', 'liang'.
You boy, crawl into a hole;
etc.

Thus, during the three parts of this ceremony which takes place at the enclosure, the initiands are treated as a single body. They form a compact group during the beating and, although certain individuals are singled out for a specially severe haranguing, this is only so that the sins of the individual may be visited upon the group. The alleged misdemeanours of individual *teru* are dwelt on, not in order to correct particularly delinquent individuals, but in order to show that the whole group of *teru* does not deserve to receive, and therefore has no right to be given, adult status.[19] Secondly, the killing of the ox, which is clearly the central act of the ceremony, is not performed by each initiand for himself, but on behalf of them all by one or more representatives. Thirdly, during the name giving, the physical oneness of the initiands is emphasised by the fact they are made to hold an unbroken line of sticks.

The significance of the enclosure which is constructed for the ceremony also needs to be pointed out. It is called a *dir*, and this suggests that it represents a particular type of settlement, of which the cattle camps lived in by unmarried men are an example. The settlements of married men consist of a number of separate but

contiguous brushwood compounds, grouped round a shade tree, with the compound openings facing inwards. The cattle camps of unmarried men, however, are constructed not only more roughly than those of married men, but also according to a different plan. The compounds face outwards from the central shade tree, and back onto an enclosure which is built round the base of this tree and which has two openings, one opposite the other. This enclosure is called the *dir* and, like the area round the central shade tree of a married men's settlement, it is predominantly a male domain. Women enter it only to bring food to the men, and in the case of the *dir*, they should be unmarried girls, at that. I was told that in the days before the Mursi had rifles, the *rora* would hang their shields from the branches of the shade tree in the *dir*, a practice which has been preserved in the imagery of public speaking, in which context one still hears the expression 'to take one's shield from the *dir*', meaning to prepare for military action.

It is only when the central rite of the ceremony, the killing of the ox (or, as in the Dola ceremony, the oxen) has been concluded that the initiands enter the *dir*, which until then had only been occupied by the initiated men. This seems to be a clear representation of their becoming not only adults but also members of a single residential unit. The word for the members of such a unit is *buran*, which can be used of any local group, and is used of that which I call a territorial section. The word for the physical structure lived in by the members of a single residential unit is *or*, and this is used also for the physical site or geographical extent, of a territorial section. Thus, the territory occupied by the southernmost of the three Dola sections, Biogolokare, is referred to by Dola members as 'the stomach' or centre of the 'settlement'. Mara, therefore, is thought of as being on the edge of the Dola 'settlement'. The *dir* which is constructed for an initiation ceremony symbolises therefore, both the residential unity of the initiands and also the physical extent of their territorial section. In the Dola ceremony these two are at odds, since Dola consists of three sections, the unmarried men of which live in physically separate camps with their unmarried section age-mates.

Finally, the giving of a name to the new group of initiates needs to be discussed. From one point of view, the ritual of name-giving emphasises the unity of a distinct local group of age-mates since, while receiving their name, they are made to stand in line and are joined to each other by an unbroken line of sticks. On the other hand, their new name links them to other local groups of age-mates, for the same name is used at each initiation ceremony held in the same year. In 1961 the name used was *benna*, stones, which had last been used about seventy years earlier. All men initiated in the same year, whatever their section, are said by the Mursi to form a *teny*, which word should be translated, according to current anthropological usage,

as 'age-set'. One might say, therefore, that by going through an initiation ceremony an individual becomes not only an adult, but also a member of a named, society-wide age-set, of which he remains a member until he dies. The trouble is, however, that while this statement is logically true, it is very misleading in practice. It is particularly misleading if it is accepted as a basic proposition in attempting to understand the relationship between age phenomena and territorial aspects of political organisation, and this is why I did not want to begin my own account of this relationship with a discussion of age-sets. The essential point is that an age-set (*teny*) exists only as a sex and age specific category of the population. Membership (in the taxonomist's sense) of this category does not, in itself, affect an individual's behaviour. What does affect it, on the other hand, is membership of a local group of age-mates. This is well illustrated if one considers the rule that a man should not marry the daughter of an age-mate.

On the face of it this looks like a rule which governs the behaviour of men of the same age-set throughout the society, making the set a powerful force for integration, 'cutting across' local divisions. In fact, it does help to produce a degree of social integration, but in an entirely indirect way. For, in practice, the rule only applies to the daughters of a man's *local* age-mates. The term for such a girl is *ba*, but the Mursi say that the daughter of a man of one's own age but who lives a long way away is not one's *ba*. In other words there is a spatial element in the definition. The reason for this is clear, on the assumption that the purpose of the rule is to prevent one set of expectations about the free and easy behaviour which is appropriate between age-mates being brought into head-on collision with another set of expectations about the stiff and formal behaviour which is appropriate between son-in-law and father-in-law. If one rarely sees one's father-in-law the problem of such conflicting expectations will hardly arise, even if he is technically one's age-mate. So what looks, on the surface, like a rule about age sets turns out to be a rule about local age-groups. And if it promotes social integration it does so indirectly, through the contribution it makes to the practice of local group exogamy.

On one occasion during my first field trip I was puzzled to learn from a Dola man that he had become a *rori*, together with two or three others of his section, the year before, eight years after the last Dola initiation ceremony. When I enquired further I was told that 'the *buran* [local group] has not been cut.' On asking 'Which *buran*?' I was told 'The *buran* of the *rora*.' It is possible, therefore, for individual *teru* to join their local group of *rora* until a 'cutting' ceremony is held, and I was told that this 'normally' takes place two to three years after the main initiation ceremony. I discuss the apparent abnormality of recent history in the next section. Here I want only to point out that

the Mursi speak of the 'cutting' not of the *teny* of the *rora*, but of their *buran* or local group, and that they therefore think of those individuals who become *rora* in the way just described as joining a local group of age-mates, rather than a society-wide category. As far as Mursi age-sets are concerned, then, we are left merely with the fact of a common name being applied to all men who were initiated at the same time. This does, of course, imply an idea of unity, but it is an idea which is co-extensive with that of being a Mursi. Age-set names have no more significance, for social integration, than any other cultural item which the Mursi think of as distinctively their own — such as the lip plates worn by their women, and the duelling poles carried by their men.

It would be easy to offer reasons why Mursi age-sets are politically redundant. Firstly, the Mursi are few in number, and they inhabit a well defined territory which is only about 1,000 square miles in extent. Secondly, because of the east-west axis of transhumance movements, there is relatively little need for individual families to travel from one section to another in the course of normal subsistence activities, and day-to-day co-operation in subsistence matters is therefore carried on almost entirely between people who are already well known to each other personally. Thirdly, because of the effects of clan and local group exogamy in such a small population, it is difficult to imagine any two Mursi being unable to relate to each other except on the basis of age-set membership.

The trouble with this kind of argument, however, is that it invites the question 'Why then do they have age-sets at all?', which in turn leads to conjectures about the functions which the 'age-set system' performed in the past, under conditions about which we have no knowledge, but which are presumed to have been different from those existing today. Writers on East African age-organisations seem particularly prone to this kind of conjecture, partly perhaps because the societies they have studied have fairly recently come under colonial administration. They are also prone to making theoretical statements of a similar kind, setting out, for example, the conditions under which age-sets will *not* have important political functions.[20] Such conclusions may be logical, but the fact that they are totally unenlightening suggests that they are based on false assumptions, the most important of which is, I suggest, that the phenomena in question form a system, which has a definite set of functions for a particular society. There must surely be something wrong with an approach which leads so frequently to conclusions about why certain kinds of behaviour are *not* socially significant.

5

In this section, by way of conclusion, I want to consider some of the

apparently recent departures from 'normal' practice which are revealed by the investigation of age-organisation among the Mursi, no less than among other African societies. Explanations of such 'recent' departures from the norm fall into two broad categories, the *ad hoc* and the systematic. The first can be divided into two sub-categories, depending upon whether the explanations are offered by the participants or by the observer. An example of an *ad hoc* participant explanation is, 'We should have held ceremony *x* before now, but we have had a succession of poor harvests.' This type of explanation would be convincing (since bad harvests and other disasters, such as epidemics and war, are common enough occurrences in these societies) were it not so common. For it seems too much of a coincidence that so many peoples in East Africa should have had their age ceremonies delayed by adverse conditions just before they were visited by an anthropologist. Equally *ad hoc* is the kind of explanation, this time coming from the outside observer, which attributes recent 'abnormal' behaviour to colonial influences and to the subsequent loss by the 'age-system' of its former significance. The Mursi, at least, are one people who have never come under colonial administration, but who make just the same statements about recent departures from traditional practice as have been recorded for many other East African peoples. Into the same category of *ad hoc* observer explanations come those which attribute the irregularities and anomalies of a particular people's 'age-system' to the fact that they have recently adopted it from one of their neighbours, or that they are in the process of changing it to fit new ecological conditions. Both types of *ad hoc* explanation serve the purpose of protecting the belief, on the one hand of the participant and on the other hand of the observer, that there exists in a particular society an 'age system' which would, under 'normal' circumstances, 'work'. The trouble with both types of explanation is that, even if they are accepted as true (and they are, of course, extremely difficult to verify), they are relatively uninteresting if one is concerned with the wider social significance of the phenomena under study.

Systematic explanations attempt to preserve the idea of system by showing that what look to the participants like departures from tradition are in fact manifestations of an underlying, long term, regularity within the 'age system' itself. Subtle and ingeneous arguments have been advanced to this end by various scholars, but they do not overcome the major disadvantage of the *ad hoc* explanations just mentioned. Indeed the social significance of the so-called 'age-system' of a society seems to recede in proportion to the amount of effort which is expended in trying to show how it 'really works'. Another problem with this approach is that it makes us wonder why it should be necessary for the participants to fool themselves with *ad hoc* explanations when there is an underlying regularity within the system

all the time. Why should they need to hide this regularity from themselves? If it is answered that they do not need to, but that they have not discovered it, one would have to ask what data the anthropologist has at his disposal that enable him to succeed where they have failed. As far as knowledge of the past is concerned he is rarely more knowledgeable than the people he is studying. It is more likely, surely, that *ad hoc* explanations are needed precisely because there is no deep seated regularity within the 'age-system' — or, in other words, because there is no such system. But why, then, should it be necessary for the people (and for the observer) to talk as though there were? The answer which is proposed here, for the Mursi, is that the beliefs and practices to do with age, which have been described above, help to sustain the illusion of a permanent and enduring 'Mursi society'. Understanding the true causes of what the Mursi see as recent departures from traditional practice in these matters means understanding that there is no such permanent and enduring entity at all. Thus, it is not the existence of a Mursi 'age-system' which is ultimately at issue, but the existence of Mursi society.[21] My final task, therefore, is to show how recent 'abnormalities' in Mursi age phenomena are related to the analysis made above of their territorial organisation.

The Mursi do not state a fixed interval which should elapse between successive initiation ceremonies, but the interval between the last two — between twenty and twenty-five years — was generally held to have been unusually long. It is extremely difficult to put even an approximate date to earlier initiation ceremonies, but the average interval between the last four seems to have been about fifteen years. The Mursi say that the holding of the last initiation ceremony, in 1961, was delayed by a succession of disasters, including a period of hostile relations with the Bodi, which came to an end in 1954, droughts and an outbreak of rinderpest. Similar reasons are given for the fact that the 'cutting' ceremony referred to at the end of the last section, which 'should' have been held two to three years after the last initiation ceremony, had not been held up to 1974. This ceremony, which took place according to schedule (around 1940) after the last initiation ceremony but one, should be held by the same territorial divisions and in the same order as the initiation ceremonies. That is, Dola holds a single cutting ceremony, which should, furthermore, take place in the 'stomach' of the 'settlement' — namely in the territory of the Biogolokare section from which Dola is seen as having originated. There is no such rule about the appropriate location for the Dola intiation ceremony, the last one having been held in the territory of the Mako section. It should be noted then that, while the special conceptual unity of Dola is expressed by both these ceremonies, the cutting ceremony gives this conceptual unity a territorial focus in its southernmost constituent section.

There is a third ceremony, of which I was not able to obtain an eye witness account since it was last held about seventy years ago. This is called 'the cutting of the cow's neck', from the fact that its central rite consists in completely severing a cow's head from its body. This is the only ceremonial performance, of any kind, for which the appropriate congregation is said to be society-wide. It also has a territorial focus: it should take place at that point on the Omo where it is believed the Mursi first crossed to the west bank. The stated purpose of this ceremony is to mark the transition to the *bara* grade of four successive sets of age-mates, or age-sets, such a series being linked by one of two alternating 'joint names', *gamal* and *kirin*. In practice this means that the ceremony should be held after every fifth initiation ceremony or, in other words, about every sixty years. When the next initiation ceremony is held and the present *rora* move into the *bara* grade, they will, *ipso facto* become the first set of a new *kirin* series. Thus, when they became *rora* in 1961, their immediate seniors, who then moved into the *bara* grade, became the last set of the previous *gamal* series. Immediately after the 1961 ceremony then, the new *bara* should have 'cut the cow's neck', but they have not yet done so, and there is no expectation that they will. Although some informants account for this by the familiar appeal to 'bad years', other give a slightly more subtle interpretation. They point out that, once a new series has been completed, a man whose set falls within it (i.e. men of the *bara* grade and above) should not marry a girl who was below marriageable age (about seventeen years) at the time the ceremony was held. This rule would affect quite seriously those who fell within the last set of a series — the youngest of whom might be about 40 years old — but it would hardly affect those who fell into the first set — many of whom would be dead by the time the series was completed. But, merely to point out that it has not been in the interests of the present *bara* to hold this third ceremony does not account satisfactorily for their success in putting it off. For if they could delay it just because it was against their interests to hold it, one must ask under what conditions such a ceremony would ever be held.

If the argument of this essay is correct it is not surprising that the interval between successive age ceremonies should vary, since these ceremonies must be seen as defining not only a cyclical series of temporal divisions of the population, based on the physiological aging of individuals, but also a linear series of spatial divisions, based on a continuous northward migration. Failure to hold a particular ceremony, therefore, when it is thought that the temporal limit has been reached, may result, partly, from uncertainty as to the appropriate spatial limit which should be set to its 'congregation'. In other words, these periodic age ceremonies play a part in the definition of the internal spatial divisions of the Mursi which is analogous to the part played by periodic Mursi-Bodi peace-making ceremonies in the

definition of their external boundary. With this in mind and using what information can be gleaned from recent oral history, the particular 'abnormalities' just referred to might be explained as follows.

Since the last but one initiation ceremony (c.1938) the Mursi have consolidated their hold on the River Mara and on Kuduma. Indeed this consolidation has probably taken place mainly since 1954, when the last peace-making ceremony was held with the Bodi in the territory of the Mako section. It may be, therefore, that the last initiation ceremony was held up until 1961, by which time it seemed long overdue, because of the change this consolidation brought about in the alignment of the northern sections, Mara having now become by far the largest. Holding a common Dola ceremony at that time was, at the very least, a different matter from what it had been 20 or 25 years earlier, when, if the Mara section existed in any recognisable sense at all, it consisted of relatively few families who cultivated at Kuduma and along the Mara, but who thought of themselves, and who were thought of by others, as a northern outpost, rather as the Mursi who cultivate north of the Mara think of themselves and are thought of today.

But even if it is accepted that such considerations could delay the staging of a common Dola ceremony,[22] why was such a ceremony nevertheless held in 1961? The reason for this lies, I think, in the fact that the 'cutting' (of the *buran*) was last held around 1941, two to three years after the last but one initiation ceremony. As a result of this, firstly, no *teru* had been initiated since about 1941, so that by 1961 several were already married, with children, and secondly, virtually all the existing *rora* of the three northern sections who were alive in 1961 had been initiated together in a single ceremony. Pressure to hold a new initiation ceremony came to a head in 1961, presumably, because of anomalies connected with the first point — such as married men being technically unable to take part in public decision making — while the second may well account for the fact that the three northern sections held a single ceremony in that year. For virtually all the existing initiated men of these sections had been through such a single ceremony themselves, and it may not, therefore, have yet been 'thinkable' for one of these sections to act independently. Under what conditions, then, would such a break in the conceptual unity of Dola become 'thinkable', and how are these conditions linked to delays in the holding of age ceremonies?

This can be answered, I think, by considering again the 'cutting of the *buran*'. This ceremony, it has been noted, should be held according to the same territorial divisions and in the same order as the initiation ceremony. This follows from the fact that it is seen as closing recruitment to a particular local group of age-mates, who were initiated together, and not to a society-wide category, or age-set. It has

also been noted that, unlike the Dola initiation ceremony, the precise location of which is not laid down, the 'cutting' of the Dola *buran* must take place in the territory of the Biogolokare section, which is seen as the 'stomach' of Dola. But this precedence of Biogolokare over the other two Dola sections, like the precedence of Ariholi over all the other Mursi sections, is historical, and does not reflect the present distribution of population. For, on the one hand, most Mursi are now members of Dola, and on the other, most Dola members now belong to the Mara section.[23] On the assumption that this had already become true by the early 1960s, it would have been even more anachronistic to hold a single ceremony at that time to 'cut' the Dola *buran*, a ceremony with its territorial focus in the Biogolokare section, than it was to hold a single Dola initiation ceremony, without such a territorial focus. The 'cutting' of the *buran* could, furthermore, be delayed indefinitely, without risk of creating the sort of anomalies which lead to an increasing pressure to initiate a new group of *rora*. It is true that newly initiated *rora* are still considered to be, in some sense, 'boys' until their local group of age-mates has been 'cut', but the sense in question is extremely technical.[24] In a similar technical sense a man is not considered to be a 'real' adult (*hiri hang*) until he has left the *rora* grade altogether and has become a *bari*, or senior elder. Becoming an adult is a gradual process, but becoming a *rori* is by far the most significant moment in that process.

These, I believe, are the likely reasons why the 'cutting' of the *buran* did not take place after the last initiation ceremony and why, indeed, it is unlikely to take place at all for the present *rora*.[25] Two implications of this failure to 'cut' the *buran* are relevant here. Firstly, it means that serious anomalies of the type mentioned earlier are unlikely to arise, since individuals can continue indefinitely to join their local group of *rora* in the years after it has been formed. Thus, if it is the build up of pressure from these anomalies which is instrumental in causing an initiation ceremony to be held at a particular time, there seems no reason to believe that the interval between the last initiation ceremony and the next will be any shorter than that between the last two, which was regarded as abnormally long. In other words, the reason why the last initiation ceremony was regarded as overdue was not simply because of the length of time (about twenty-three years) which had elapsed since the previous one (it has already been mentioned that there is no rule about how long this interval should be) but because, by 1961, many men who were heads of households were still jural minors. And this came about not because the twenty-three year interval just mentioned was abnormally long but because the 'cutting' of the *buran* took place two to three years after the last initiation ceremony but one. It would be mistaken, therefore, to attempt to assess what is an emically 'normal' or 'abnormal' interval between successive initiation ceremonies by means of the purely

chronological measurement of time to which we in the West are accustomed.

The second implication of failure to 'cut' the *buran* is that, as the years go by, the proportion of Dola members who have been through a common initiation ceremony will steadily decline. For those Dola members who become *rora* in the years following the main initiation ceremony do so as members of a particular section, and not of Dola as a whole. Each section, in other words, acts independently when it comes to admitting individuals to its already constituted local group of *rora*. Thus, when the next initiation ceremony is held (which, because of the factors outlined in the previous paragraph is unlikely to be for some time) by no means all the existing *rora* of the Dola sections will themselves have been through the same initiation ceremony. The longer the delay before the next initiation ceremony, the greater the proportion of these *rora* who will have been initiated as members of a particular constituent section of Dola. Using the next initiation ceremony, therefore, to give public recognition to a new alignment of sections (by, for example, Biogolokare breaking away to hold its own ceremony) will seem less of a break with tradition than it would have seemed in 1961.

It may be objected that, in the above argument, I have concentrated on Dola and left out of account the two southern sections, Ariholi and Gongulobibi. What was to stop Ariholi, for example, holding its initiation and 'cutting' ceremonies 'on time', especially as it is expected to give the lead in these affairs to the other Mursi sections? The answer, I believe, and the reason why the Dola tail may be said to wag the Mursi dog, is that the precedence taken by Ariholi and Gongulobibi in the holding of age ceremonies, which makes it look as though they dictate the timing of these ceremonies to the northern sections, is purely historical and formal. It is just another means by which the Mursi preserve the idea of their own historical permanence. In practice, it is events in the north which, although they take place furthest from the historical 'stomach' of the country, nevertheless dictate the timing of age ceremonies in the south.

Failure to hold the third ceremony, 'the cutting of the cow's neck', is easily attributable to the same fact of northward movement and consequent territorial re-alignment. Not only is this ceremony said to be a 'national' one, requiring the presence of all men of the *bara* grade, from all sections, but it also has to take place at a particular place, associated with the first entry of the Mursi into their present territory. When it was last held, about seventy years ago, it seems likely that the Mursi were occupying only the immediate bank of the Omo (the present bushland thicket having been produced since by a combination of over-grazing and cultivation) and that they had not moved north of the area at present occupied by the Biogolokare section. The Mursi say that the same ceremony cannot be held again

because there is no-one alive who can remember its details but, according to the argument being presented here, the real reason is that they are not the same Mursi.

Although they recognise that they have not always lived in their present territory, the Mursi believe that their society was created by God, at the beginning of time, and along with all the other peoples by whom they now find themselves surrounded. In this essay, however, I have argued that the people I have been calling 'Mursi' are merely a temporary coalescence, brought about largely by ecological and geographical features, in a huge migration of cattle-keeping people from the general direction of the southern Sudan into the Ethiopian highlands, where they are destined to become sedentary agriculturalists. I have tried to show that the definition of, and the structural relations between, Mursi territorial divisions are changing all the time, and that this change is being, so to speak, mediated by various activities and beliefs to do with age. On the assumption that every society has to seem more or less permanent (in the sense of having existed since the beginning of time) to its own members, the most general significance of the activities and beliefs I have been discussing is that they help to shield the Mursi from the realisation that their society is, by its very nature, ephemeral. This may also be the most general significance of segmentary lineage organisation among the Nuer. In which case, it is not so much an 'organisation of predatory expansion' as Sahlins has described it, but a means a camouflaging that expansion from the Nuer themselves. That is, it helps to preserve an illusion of permanence in a society which, like that of the Mursi, is not so much expanding but which, if one may so put it, is expansion.

NOTES

1 Fieldwork was carried out between 1969 and 1970 and between 1973 and 1974. I am grateful to the Social Science Research Council, the Central Research Fund Committee of the University of London, the Tweedie Exploration Fellowship Committee of the University of Edinburgh and the Royal Geographical Society, for their financial assistance. In writing this essay I have been helped by discussions with Dr H.J. Blackhurst and Dr P.T.W. Baxter. I also thank Mr Timothy Baxter for drawing Figure 2.

2 This range is called Ngalabong (from the Turkana name for the Mursi) on existing maps, but I prefer to call it the Mursi Mountains.

3 For a fuller treatment of the argument presented in the next section see Turton (in press).

4 These are the Zilmamu of earlier literature. For a brief account of existing sources for the Mursi and their neighbours, from a linguistic point of view, see Turton and Bender (1976).

5 This is called the 'Didinga-Murle isolated language group' by Tucker and Bryan (1956) and 'Surma' by Bender (1971).

6 The Mursi and Bodi obtain rifles (mostly the 8mm. Austrian Mannlicher, which was carried by the Italian troops who occupied Ethiopia from 1935-40) and ammunition from highland traders, in exchange for cattle, ivory and leopard skins.

7 Peace was eventually made in November 1975, after I had left the field, and the Mursi did indeed kill their animal at Mara, in the presence of Bodi representatives. For this information I am grateful to Dr Katsuyoshi Fukui, who carried out fieldwork among the Bodi in 1974-6.

8 That is 'an extreme form' of bushland 'where the woody plants form a closed stand through which man or the larger ungulates can pass only with extreme difficulty and in which the land has no value for grazing' (Pratt, Greenway and Gwynn 1966).

9 Sahlins (1961) has pointed the way here, with his argument about segmentary lineage organisation and 'predatory expansion' but, as will be seen, my emphasis is different from his.

10 The following table shows the section membership of all married male respondents in a complete census of cattle settlements carried out during July and August 1970.

Mara	*Mako*	*Biogolokare*	*Gongulobibi*	*Ariholi*	*Total*
127	82	72	56	28	365

11 Katsuyoshi Fukui (personal communication).

12 Mursi clans, like their age-sets, are conceptual entities which 'cut across' local divisions of the population.

13 Although most men have only one wife, taking all the married men in my census together, the incidence of polygyny works out at 1.66 wives per man.

14 The name *teru* probably derives from the word for the new green shoots of grass which appear with the first rain in grazing areas that were burnt off during the dry season.

15 Bridewealth amounts, ideally, to thirty-eight head of large stock, but in practice is unlikely to exceed twenty head. The essential point, however, is that, as a result of protracted negotiations, the groom's people are forced to give as much as they can afford.

16 This figure is based on a rough estimate of the dates of the last four initiation ceremonies. The timing of initiation and other ceremonies is discussed in Section 5.

17 The following sentences, which were written about the early history of sport in English public schools, suggets some similarities between it and duelling among the Mursi: 'Sport united the boys in a particular pattern of behaviour but from the point of view of the teachers and governors of the school it was dysfunctional. The boys were in frequent rebellion against their teachers and on at least two occasions the army had to be summoned to supress them. Sport which was organised entirely by the boys was the focus for the opposition of pupils to the established authority.' (McIntosh 1971:5-6).

18 This kneeling and haranguing is frequently seen in smaller, annual age ceremonies.

19 Cf. Spencer (1970:149): 'They [the Moran] are in a powerless position, and they simply cannot win in any circumstances. If a small group of them, or even just one individual, shows any irresponsibility through, say stealing stock, flirting with wives, or showing less than full respect for the elders, they are *all* held to be thieves, adulterers and psychopaths.'

20 Cf. Eisenstadt (1954:102): '... Age-set systems arise and function in those societies in which the basic allocation of roles is not overwhelmingly determined by membership in kinship groups, and where some important integrative functions remain to be fulfilled beyond these groups.' Also Gulliver (1953:166): 'It may be suggested that a deep seated age-organisation cannot exist where there are other important mechanisms of social integration.'

21 There is an analogy here with the *ad hoc* explanations offered by the Azande to account for inconsistencies in their beliefs about witch-craft. For the Azande to understand the true cause of failures of the poison oracle, for example, would mean their understanding not only that the poison works through its chemical properties alone, which is neither here nor there, but also that there is no moral order in the universe.

22 There is what appears to be an alternative explanation of the fact that the interval between the last two initiation ceremonies was relatively long — namely that the present *bara*, when they were occupying the *rora* grade, wanted to delay the 'cutting of the cow's neck', which was due to take place immediately after the next initiation ceremony, and which would have seriously curtailed their future marriage choices. From this latter point of view, therefore, it was against their interests to become *bara* and they would not, consequently, have exerted pressure to displace their immediate seniors. The difficulty with such an 'explanation', however, is that even after the 1961 ceremony had been held, the 'cutting of the cow's neck' still did not take place. Also just as it is insufficient to account for this last fact by appealing to the self interest of the present *bara*, so it is insufficient to use a similar explanation to account for the apparent delay in holding the last initiation ceremony. For even if it was in the interests of the present *bara* to delay this ceremony for as long as possible, this does not explain how the delay was actually brought about.

23 See note 8.

24 At meat-eatings, for example, the present *rora* may be taunted by their seniors, and told that they have no right to the portions of meat which are customarily reserved for 'adults' — but these are empty and jocular threats.

25 While my informants were always ready to speculate about the data of the next initiation ceremony, they had no interest in similar speculations about when the long overdue 'cutting' of the *buran* might take place.

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