

THE DANCES OF THE ILMURRAN AND THEIR GIRLS

Preliminaries

Introducing his article entitled 'The Dances of the Moran and Their Girls' Spencer asserts that it is the dances of the *ilmurran* that are principal among the Samburu¹ by universal acclaim (Spencer, 1975).² [see p. 111] It is true that the dances of the *ilmurran* are the principal dances among the Sampurr, but Spencer goes no further to say why this is so. The *ilmurran* constitute a very crucial sector of the social organization of the Sampurr community that they cannot do without. From time immemorial they have had full responsibility of defending the community against external attack by both animal and human enemies. They have therefore been free from any domestic responsibilities except herding the cattle in the dry seasons away from the settlements where there are pastures and water.

It is this lack of much domestic responsibility that provides ample time for the *ilmurran* to dance almost every afternoon through the evening right to late in the night, thus making their dances very popular. The *ilmurran* are a charming lot with well organized dances accompanied by songs which are descriptive of their responsibilities. It is because of the songs that they are able to attract a wide range of spectators: boys, girls, women and elders. Compared to these, other dances of other sectors (e.g. dances of the women and of the elders), have few spectators.

The appreciation of the dances of the *ilmurran*, Spencer says, is only "by reference to the anomalous position of the moran in the wider society." In that connection, he further says,

In the distant past they would have been warriors in a very real and prestigious sense, shouldering the responsibility for defending their land. However since then they have been given no general purposes to their existence other than to wait for elderhood and marriage. They relish their position but it is a vacuous situation in which the ideals of warriorhood are given no ready outlet. It is in this context that the incipient rivalry between Samburu clans erupts in a form of sporadic gang warfare and tends to centre on their possession of the girls within each clan as sexual playthings (1975:144).

Spencer misconstrues the whole notion of the position of the *ilmurran* among the Sampurr. He sees them as a group which long ago lost its responsibility as defenders of their land, and who have no general purpose of

existence. Among all the Sampurr, the general purpose of existence of the *ilmurran* is well-known and defined. As boys, they only tended the cattle, and as warriors, they purposely exist to ensure the security of the whole community of the Sampurr and to tend the cattle when conditions are too tough for the boys. It is through carrying out their responsibilities successfully that their ideals of warriorhood find ready outlets. Spencer's assertion of "vacuity" is far-fetched (not to say wrong), from a Sampurr point of view.

As Spencer points out, the elders of the Sampurr suspect the *ilmurran* of adultery with their wives. It is because of this that the *ilmurran* are given freedom to choose *ntoyie e osaen* -- literally, "girls of beads" from among the girls of their respective clans with whom they can have sexual relationships. He explains these matters well, but he should not view the girls as if they were used as "sexual playthings." The *ilmurran* choose their *ntoyie e osaen* officially by giving them beads which they wind around their necks. The elders are aware of those relationships and refer to them as *enkijeman dorropu* meaning "short marriages". It is in this context that the *ilmurran* are expected to treat the girls as lovers, not as "sexual playthings." Also, Spencer refers to the dances of the *ilmurran* and their girls as "wedding dances." I wish to make it clear from this point onwards that the dances Spencer describes in his article are dances performed almost daily by the *ilmurran* and their girls. They would not be classified as "wedding dances" by the Sampurr. The dances are equally performed on other occasions, e.g. circumcision, where the *ilmurran* are involved, or sometimes in weddings.

The Dance Itself

Having prepared for the dance by cleaning and decorating their bodies, and having ensured that their appearances are charming, the *ilmurran* march to the arena (*ilkurroto*) in procession where the dances begin. They begin in the afternoon when the heat of the sun has subsided. As Spencer rightly explains, the dances are composed of "phases" which succeed each other. Within each phase are different dances with different movement patterns and musical forms. The first phase consists of (i) *mparinkoi* (misspelled *nbarinkoi*, in Spencer, p. 145); (ii) *nkukorri* (misspelled *nkokerri* p. 146), and (iii) *Maasani*.

Phase One: (A) Mparinkoi (no literal translation; a name only).

Mparinkoi which is the keynote for the whole session of afternoon dances is invariably the first dance in this phase. In his discussion of *Mparinkoi*, Spencer has missed out the first section of that dance which is both crucial and inevitable. *Mparinkoi* begins with *nkusuyata* (name only), the section I refer to. *Nkusuyata* also introduces each of the *nkukorri*, but in *mparinkoi* it is exceptionally long and significant. To get to know its significance, it is necessary to know what takes place in it. Some of the *ilmurran* from the now compact group in the centre of the arena 'leap-hop' away from the group in a springing style and they either come back (walking majestically and seriously) to their original positions or take positions elsewhere in the group.

At their first two leaps away from the group, they make highly pitched shrieking sounds. As some *ilmurran* leap away and others come back, the group left behind chants a wordless 'chorus' very loudly. This is repeated four times and may take as long as twenty minutes time. The shrieking sounds and the wordless chorus are meant to warn those *ilmurran* and girls who might not be aware that the dance is taking place that it will soon begin. All the time spent on this section is the time given to absent *ilmurran* to get there, and for their girls to prepare, because they usually come when the dance has begun.

It is immediately after chanting the wordless chorus for the fourth time that the *ilmurran* leap forwards in a compact group with their spears raised, pointing skywards. One of the soloists bursts out singing while the rest of the group dances, exhaling audibly at each beat, and appropriately joining in the chorus. It is at this stage that the girls come close and dance beside the *ilmurran* as a compact group too. Spencer says, "One of the more assertive moran takes the role of soloist, boasting in narrative form of his own or his group's prowess and achievements in stock-thieving" (1975:145).

For a start, the soloist does not boast of his own prowess and achievements, but of his group's prowess and achievements, not only in cattle-raiding³ but in defence of their stock and the community. For the purpose of making the point about "boasting" clear, it is appropriate to record a verse of the song that accompanies *mparinkoi*:

Sikar ai rukoki namanya kutuk
Sikar ai mapuru namanya kutuk

My group back me and I don't lie
 My group, I don't boast and I
 don't lie

It is in *mparinkoi* but not *nkukorri*, as Spencer put it, that young boys and even elders dance on the periphery. *Mparinkoi* comes to its climax when the dancers make a compact circle with a few of them dancing within it. It ends, and the circle dissolves with the dancers dancing while they retreat to the spot from which they started dancing forwards.

Phase One: (B) Nkukorri (a name only)

Nkukorri, which follows immediately, has four stages, each introduced by a short *nkusuyata* unlike the long one in *mparinkoi*. The different stages of *nkukorri* have different musical forms, but the same structured movements (action signs) with different beats in each phase. The actions entail some *ilmurran* stepping out to the front of the group of singers and with their backs towards them, they jump up and down as high as they can to the rhythm of the singing. This jumping is called *ng'oro*. All through the four stages of *nkukorri*, the girls are principal spectators. In connection with *nkukorri* Spencer asserts that,

While it is hard to pin down any jealousies aroused by the boasting and counter-boasting, the moran [*sic*] claim that it is at this point that their rivalry and anger come to a head (1975:146).

It is true that anger can and does mount in this dance, as it does also in *mparinkoi*, but this anger is not from one *ilmurrani* to another, or from the *Ilmurran* wanting to fight among themselves as Spencer says. The anger stems from wanting to fight the forces which are against cattle-raiding. These forces include the present-day state government of Kenya and the elders who work in conjunction with the state. I will illustrate by recording another verse of the songs which accompany *nkukorri*:

*Lpayiani le KANU*⁴
Ketusote
Sikar ang eibaitie
lototo nalo
Kaiba nkishu nikiaru
*neya serkali*⁵

The elders of KANU
 have become concerned
 It is our group that they have hated
 the way it goes
 I hate [it that] the cattle we raid
 the government takes

Spencer talks of the boasting and counter-boasting of the soloists, from which he infers they are competing for the solo part to boast about the prowess of their group and themselves. This is very far from being right. The soloists take turns with solo parts. Turn-taking in solo parts is well organized and very orderly. This verse shows that turn-taking is done:

<i>Tigirai nkiteng' ai</i>	Keep quiet 'my cow' ⁶
<i>Materetere</i>	let me help
<i>Nchuneti itilimua</i>	You've talked of achievements
<i>naa ninche alimu</i>	and I will talk of them
<i>Namajo linono</i>	And I will not say yours
<i>lainen ajo</i>	mine will I say

Spencer sees the "boasting and counter-boasting" (his words) as likely to cause a fight in the dance. A fight may erupt within a dance, but it should be clear that the cause of the fight is only a grudge held by some *ilmurrani* towards another, but not what Spencer calls "boasting and counter-boasting". The possibility of a fight erupting in a dance is extremely thin, really -- it is an unusual, not a usual occurrence -- because any *ilmurrani* who holds a grudge against another is strongly advised to avoid meeting that person in public places if he is unable to control his temper or his emotions.

The *ilmurran* often "shake" and "shiver" very vigorously and the product of this physical condition is an inner state which comes to an end when the *ilmurrani* loses consciousness and achieves relaxation. Spencer explains this phenomenon as displaying the urge to fight and manliness. It does display the urge to fight the forces which are against their ancient custom of cattle-raiding, but that is a different thing. Referring to the "shaking," Spencer further explains that it "...is a sign of their assertiveness and of their self-mastery, in other words, a proof of their worthiness as warriors" (1975:148). The worthiness of an *ilmurrani* is not proved by his "shaking," but by his capabilities with reference to carrying out his responsibilities to his people successfully. The shaking only reflects the anger that wells up in him and the urge to release the anger by fighting.

Phase One: (C) *Maasani* (a name only)

The fourth stage of *nkukerri* ends and *maasani*, which is the last dance of phase one, begins. *Maasani* runs its course in three progressive stages. The first stage is characterized by the singers shouting a different wordless chorus from that of *Mparinkoi* and *Nkukorri* and the dancers jumping up and down under the control of that chorus. At this stage also, the *ilmurran* leap away and back to the singers in a springy style in pairs. This move is called *nikoto* (lit. meaning 'leadership').

The next stage follows immediately without a break. Here, a few *ilmurran* are left standing in a group watching the rest who do the same leap-hop step about in the arena in a procession with the girls hand-in-hand. The rhythm here is not made by any singing but the audible exhalation of breath of the *ilmurran*. As they approach the group watching them, the group shouts out the wordless chorus. This stage ends when the procession comes back to join the group.

The last stage of *maasani* starts with the *ilmurran* making a compact circle which they compress and expand now and then as they jump in a thrusting movement⁷ away and towards each other. The girls also dance beside the *ilmurran* in a group. It should be noted that it is in the second stage of *maasani* that the girls join the warriors in dancing and for the remaining phases and dances, they are actively involved.

Phase Two: *Ikeek oipiri* (literally, 'songs of jumping')

At the end of *maasani*, which also marks the end of the first phase of the whole dance, the second phase, which the Sampurr call *ilkeek oipirii* begins. Spencer calls these "boy's dances." He thinks of these as "clan dances" which follow the first phase of the total dance, but in Sampurr reality, this is not only not the case, it will probably never be. The phase of the *ilkeek oipirii* comprises several songs and accompanying dances.

Some *ilkeek oipirii* have no "meaning" in the sense of literal definition at all, but some are meaningful, describing the appearances of the dancers and their styles of dancing. In some of these dances, the *ilmurran* make circles within which they dance in pairs. The girls look on from a distance, while some of them, in turn, come and join the pairs of dancing *ilmurran* within the circles, dancing with them. In some of the other dances of this phase, the

dancers hop about in procession holding each other at the back. This phase of the dancing concludes by the dancers performing *enkino-yata* towards one another in a circle and finally jumping up and down while holding each other's waists in the circle. Spencer comments, "As one of the dancers once said of this phase: when someone beats out the right tune, you find yourself jumping higher and higher and you can't stop" (Spencer 1975:150), but something must be confused here, because the dances of this phase are not characterized by high jumps, but low jumps or simply foot-stamping. One will often hear one of the dancers in this phase shout out "*La-murran maibooki nokop*" ("Hey, warriors, let us press it to the ground"). By these words, he asks the others to make their jumps as low as possible. What is emphasized in the dances of this phase (as in most dances of the Sampurr) is the *enkinoyata*.

Phase Three: *ilkeek dorropu* (literally, 'short songs')

Following the phase of *ilkeek oipirii* is the third phase which Spencer calls "play" and which the Sampurr call "short songs." This does not mean that the songs sung in the dances are short. It means that the dancers dance while bending their knees a lot so that they seem to be short. It also means that the songs include no jumping movements. To the girls, this phase is central. It is almost impossible to perform without the girls, for the dances are done facing the girls, holding their right hands so that two parallel lines are formed.⁸ Sometimes the girls are too few for the *ilmurran*, so it is not uncommon to see two *ilmurran* dancing with one girl, each holding on to one of her hands. The songs of this phase centre on the girls, especially their appearance, but the songs are also about raids and the settlement organization of the *ilmurran*.

Phase Four: *Sesiai*

At the end of the phase of *ilkeek dorropu* the last phase starts. In connection with this, we read,

I refer to the dances of this phase as clan dances; the moran and the girls of each clan build up a repertoire of songs for those dances (*Sesiai*), generally relating to cattle rustling (Spencer 1975:148).

Sesiai is the only dance of this phase. Spencer's description is marvelous. Perhaps his informants were not telling him the truth -- but I only know this phase to be called *sesiai*. Referring to the *ilmurran* and the girls, he says,

“They indulge in a game in which the moran tease the girls for their unworldliness with riddles.” Here, the ethnographer seems to describe *ntemerr*, which is a different dance altogether. He gets the form of the *sesiai* right: the *ilmurran* and the girls each in a compact group perform *enkinoyata* towards one another.

This *sesiai*, unlike the one performed at night, takes only a short time and it normally indicates that the afternoon session of the dancing is over. It is after *sesiai* that the *ilmurran* and the girls disperse each to a part of the *enkang* where his or her family lives to see their animals from grazing and take supper before the next session of the dances commences. This break between the sessions may start from 7.00 p.m. and quit at 10.00 p.m.

It is after supper and after having had enough rest that a few *ilmurrani* will head for the *ilkurroto* and start exhaling audibly and dancing the rhythmic thrusts of the *sesiai* without singing it. They may also sing and dance *sesiai* for a short time, if there aren't enough dancers to sing *ntemerr*. If there are enough, after a short pause, they burst out singing *ntemerr* with the soloist leading.

The Night Dances

Ntemerr is the keynote for all the dances of the session of the night. It is in *ntemerr* that the *ilmurran* tease the girls with riddles. The girls normally arrive at the arena immediately after the warriors, who often advance towards them, flirting their long hair around their faces or simply touching their foreheads and coming back. This action more readily signifies the approval of what the girls have said and more important, the approval of their presence by the *ilmurran*. They sing this way as separate compact groups without any movements except those indicated already.

Sesaii follows *ntemerr* immediately and it is more prolonged than the shorter section performed in the afternoon. *Sesaii* is followed by *ilkeek oipirii* and *ilkeek dorropu*. The whole session is again concluded with a short *sesiai*. The dancing may stop around 1.00 or 2.00 a.m. The dancing progresses through two sessions -- afternoon and night -- and there are a number of phases within each session.

Right from the beginning of the first session, an observer will notice a progression of diminishing seriousness and vigour throughout the sessions.

There is much seriousness and vigour in the dances of the first phase of the first session. However, this decreases from the second phase and continues decreasing to the last phase of the second session. Spencer develops a diagrammatic pattern of evolution of the total performance, which he ties to the social development of the individual. This diagram is based on his view of the dance(s) of the *ilmurran* and their girls. In the Appendix at the end of the article, I have drawn a diagrammatic evolution of the total performance so that I may show my view of the dances and the important elements which are inseparable from them.

Some Important Spatial Orientational Features of Sampurr Dances

From the diagram in the Appendix A (see p. 112), it can be seen that the (geographical) spatial orientation of the singers and dancers is towards the east (*loosaen* or *nkilepunoto*), unless they are in a circle. This is an outstanding element of all the dances of the Sampurr. It is an element that has some implications with reference to how the Sampurr view the world around them.

The Sampurr hold a strong belief that good fortune, blessings and all good things originate from the east, especially because the morning breeze and the rising sun both come from the east. It is very common to hear sick people being told to go out into the morning breeze, because it is cold, fresh and good and therefore believed to be carrying the healing powers of Enkai. The same people are advised (indeed, assured) that they must get out of bed and sit up when the sun is setting because it is sunset and the west (*loontshio/ndojicroto*) that is associated with bad fortune and curses.

In the dances, the girls can face any direction the *ilmurran* do, but they cannot face in other directions. Whenever the dances begin, it is the *ilmurran* who come to the arena first and begin the performance. This is because they are the principal dancers and the girls are not as important. This is tied with the belief of the Sampurr that women are subservient to men.

Finally, it can be inferred from Spencer's diagram of the evolution of the "morán" dance (1975:154), that he has twisted the sequence of the dances to fit his conception of the social development of the individual.

ENDNOTES:

1. In Maa, 'a warrior' is correctly rendered *olmurrān*, not *morān*. In Sampurr, 'a warrior and more than one warrior' is not *morāns*, but *ilmurrāni*. More than one warrior in Maa is also *ilmurrāni*. *Ilmurrān* (see title) is often anglicized as *elmoran*. It means 'the warriors' in the Maa language and in Sampurr.
2. 'Samburu' is an anglicization. It is correctly spelled *Sampuru* or *Sampurr* in the Maa language.
3. Spencer calls this "thieving", but is an act which admits of other interpretations. The *ilmurrān* call it "raiding".
4. Kenya African National Union [KANU]
5. The word *serkali* is Kiswahili for 'government'.
- 6 A cow to the Sampurr is a very dear animal. It therefore follows that if a man refers to another man as "his cow", he is saying the person is dear to him. Sometimes a woman will refer to her daughter as "my cow". It is also common to hear a man calling another *Ntauuo ai* (lit. 'my heifer') which has the same meaning as the above.
7. This is a movement of the upper body only, especially the neck and head: the move is forward and back on the sagittal plane of the body. The Sampurr have no name for this movement, but the Maasai call it *enkinoyata*, so that name will be used.
8. The hands are held unless the girl is a warrior's close relative, in which case a short stick is used, with the partners holding on to it at opposite ends.

APPENDIX A
 FLOOR PLANS ILLUSTRATING THE PROGRESSION OF THE DANCES

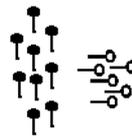
Phase One:

(A) MPARINKOI

(i)



(ii)

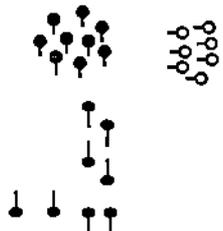


(B) NKUKORRI

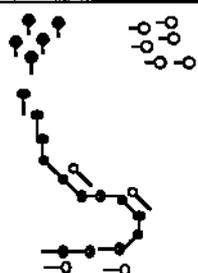


(C) MAASANI

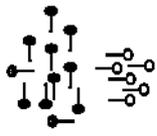
(i)



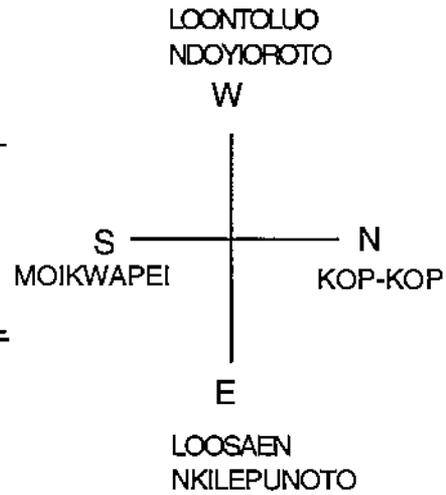
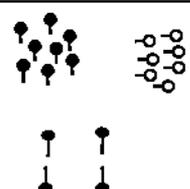
(ii)



(iii)



(iv)



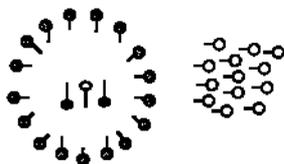
KEY:

- = ilmurran not dancing but singing or watching
- ⌋ = ilmurran dancing
- = girls not dancing
- = girls dancing
- ⌋ = point of pin
- ↗ represents facing of the dancers

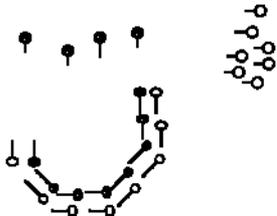
Phase Two:

ILKEEK OIPIRII

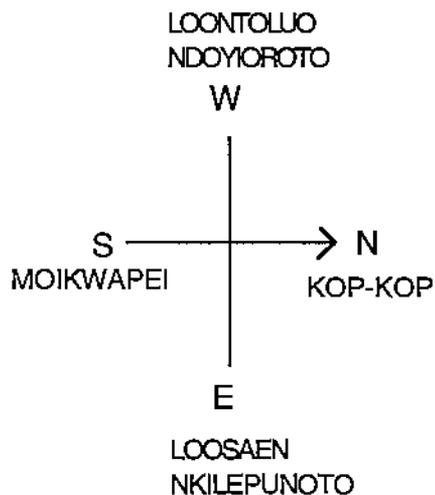
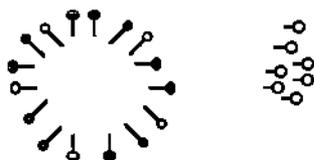
(i)



(ii)

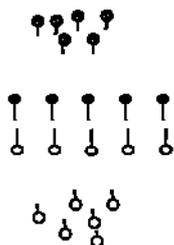


(iii)



Phase Three:

ILKEEK DORROPU



Phase Four:

SESIAI

