

Kill to Engender

Agencies of Lifelong Constructed Masculinities (East Africa)

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For Michel Izard,
in homage to his perspicacity and generosity

There is nothing surprising about a warrior intent on killing his enemy; indeed such an imperative is the very foundation of the military institution. However, the suggestion that the murder of the enemy might increase the reproductive capacity of the killer does merit further analysis. This article is therefore devoted to this connection between the death of an enemy and the development of the killer's fertility, and to this singular theory about the construction of masculinity that was previously widespread in age- and generation-based societies in East Africa.

Information on these customs can be found throughout ethnographical studies; however, it is rarely used, most probably for fear of reinforcing a clichéd view of these societies, which are sometimes seen as aggressively warlike and sometimes aestheticized in the way that the Maasai warriors have been. It is also perhaps because of a lack of consideration given to information that is thought to be trivial or anecdotal, or even conversely, a lack of conceptual tools available with which to analyze them. It is no coincidence that in the numerous works on the subject of war and warriors in East Africa, the authors mention these customs, but do so without further investigation; for example, A.A. Mazrui (1977:69–81) in the field of political science, or J.A. Fadiman (1982) and J. Lamphear (1992,1998) in history. As for ethnology, the major work coedited by K. Fukui and D. Turton *Warfare among East African Herders* (1977) does offer this sort of information, notably the article by S. Tornay (1977:97–118) from which the exceptional photography was used again by another author in his research on warrior rage (Massenzio 2002). However, because it lacks an appropriate level of enquiry, their analysis remains in the embryonic stages. The fact that these publications are now relatively old provides an initial explanation. Since the 1970s, the growing interest in the social context of sexual relationships has led to the appearance of the largely constructed area of gender categories.

It is precisely this approach through the construction of masculinity (Hazel 1999; Hodgson 1999, 2000; Lindsay & Miescher 2003; Ouzgane & Morell 2005; Uchendu 2008) that allows this information to be appraised in a new light, and for a review of the universally established connection between masculine identity and warrior activity.

There remains, however, a double obstacle, ethical and empirical in nature, resulting from temporalities and the manipulation of the present. These murders that initially may be defined as “rituals” are still perpetrated today by peoples settled in the border areas adjoining Kenya, Ethiopia, South Sudan and Uganda. These peripheral areas, beyond the reach of state authority, are poorly controlled. Although not isolated, they have remained cut off from the process of modernization and scholarization, so that these practices that are etched into the codes of restricted warfare coexist today with the excesses of violence and the massacres concomitant with the chaos of contemporary unrest in overarmed populations.

The media sometimes get wind of these events, putting the ethnographer in the center of the battlefield. On May 5 2011, there was an article and video on the web site of a major Kenyan newspaper, *The Daily Nation*, claiming that massacres of the Turkana people had been carried out on the border of Ethiopia and Kenya by the Dassenetch (Marile) people. In the context of border disputes and worsening drought, the murder of twenty or perhaps thirty women and children on their way back from market was reported in various ways, until John Munyes, the local Member of Parliament, of Turkana origin, let slip the uncomfortable explanation; “The Marile have the right of killing a Turkana. It is their tradition. After circumcision you must look for a Turkana to prove your manhood.” This was followed by comments from Kenyans who were outraged by the barbarity of customs unthinkable in the twenty-first century, and condemning once again the lack of decisive action on the part of the government, and the helplessness of the army in protecting its citizens from this “medieval nonsense.”

The video, which was quickly withdrawn from the newspaper’s website, remains available to watch on *YouTube*.¹ This is not the place to elaborate on the new online resources for ethnography; certainly, the anthropology of ritual murder has to navigate the tortuous route between alarmist accounts of human barbarity and sacrificial violence, or the pitfalls of exoticism and voyeurism.

In order to try to analyze this ontological imperative, I will base this study on the ethnography of the Meru in Kenya, amongst whom I have previously conducted research (Peatrik 1999, 2004, 2009) and who provide a slightly unusual view of these customs. They are a people who, having become part of Kenya under strict colonial administration since 1908, experienced something of a forced march towards modernization. The generations-sets known as

1. Video NTV Kenya May 42011. “Turkana Killing Fields,” accessed September 6 2011 on YouTube file://localhost/< http://www.youtube.com/watch%3Fv=-iR33qEhQz8>

Ithalie and Michubu, who were recruited and initiated around the time of the First World War, and up until the Second World War, both witnessed and participated in this accelerated process: their fathers and mothers who had grown up in the precolonial era had taught them about the traditional customs, and had themselves suffered numerous upheavals when they lost their independence. Their witness accounts, combined with the colonial archives and written accounts by early travelers, mean that it is possible to piece together an idea of the long gone practices of raids, which in any case the ethnographer would never have been able to observe directly, unless by accident, and also to read the information distributed amongst the various monographs on the subject.

An Account of the Meru Tigania Igembe (Kenya): Elements of the Ethnography

Taking advantage of the mountain ecosystems through a combination of agriculture and herding, the Meru Tigania Igembe were firmly settled in the north-east of Mount Kenya, in the Nyambene hills and the surrounding plains. Like the majority of East African peoples, the Meru Tigania Igembe were organized by age and generation sets, which took turns to hold power and thus constituted a type of democratic polity. Both men and women, providing that they lived long enough, progressed through the various age-grades together with their age-or generation-set, fulfilling the corresponding roles. For the men, this meant war, then procreation, political responsibility, and finally, a religious role. Except for the warrior stage, the women progressed along the same lines as the men: the maternal stage was followed by the political, and then the religious stage. In all then, four grades for the men and three for the women (the number seven refers explicitly to the concept of the whole and the androgynous) were duly identified, as well as the generation sets or initiation sub-sets according to names and a shared onomastic that indicated the external limits of the polity. A new stock of names for both sets and grades signified the appearance of a new political entity.

Such a succinct description might lead to an erroneous impression of social harmony. The formation of sets and the transmission of power was accompanied by recurrent tensions and crises, with secessions that often resulted in new rules of recruitment, hence the extraordinary variety of set systems that have been recorded by ethnographers (Peatrik 1995). Nevertheless, these generational systems were so successful that they represented the predominant political formula across East Africa, and remained hegemonic up until the colonial conquests.

The Warriors' Initiation Cycle

Initiation, much looked forward to by the young men, was carried out well after puberty. It required the consent of the parents (mother and father), the

maternal uncles, the Fathers of the Country (the title of the generation-set in charge of political affairs), and their wives, the *kaaria*² Mothers, and then that of the Warriors, who must agree to hold a new initiation session on public ground every four years or so.

It is a process that went on throughout a whole year and involved all the novices/candidates in a particular polity. The initiation began by a circumcision carried out by a practitioner on a group of candidates, who henceforth became “brothers in circumcision” or coiniciates. Each novice would then remain for about nine months in the “workshop of the one who has been operated on” (*kiaanda kia ntaane*), a basic hut for the newly circumcised, built as an extension of the paternal hut, and situated just outside the family compound, which the novice could only leave at night in order to relax and join his friends. The specific exception to this was the raid, carried out by the coiniciates as soon as they had recovered from their operation: for the first time in their lives, and led by experienced warriors, they had to go out to the margins of the territory and kill someone, a man, or woman, it mattered little, except that the victim had to belong to the category of those known as *maitha*, “enemies” in terms of the polity’s external relations.

During their seclusion, which clearly equates to a new gestation period, the novices were fed and educated in various subjects by elders specially selected to look after the novices and encourage them. Finally the day would arrive when they could leave the hut. Together with the other novices, all as chubby and white as newborn babies, and having been shaved by their respective mothers, the coiniciates would solemnly enter the warriors’ house, a large collective dormitory strategically situated in the central public ground; the warriors would welcome the novices one by one calling them by their new names, the third that they had assumed since birth (and not the last!), which identified them as “son” of a particular “man.” By entering the warriors’ house they also became members of a generation-set and would remain so for the rest of their days.

To summarize it in a few words, this particularly intense ritual sequence conceals a subtle realignment of the bonds of filiation and a rearrangement of the person and the self. When the act of circumcision removes that part of the prepuce, the umbilical link with the mother’s brother, and then mimics a new act of procreation, the gestation period in the seclusion hut and admission into the warriors’ house both then reinforce the filiation between the newly-begotten son and his father (henceforth the rightful *pater* of the son who has just been born), but this time explicitly and deliberately without the presence of the women (apart from the process of “neo-natal” shaving).

2. Named after the white clay, which only the women from this grade had the right to use, and which is thought mortally dangerous for anyone else.

During the initiation, by the intervention of the circumciser and other ritual devices, a man engenders a boy, his son.³ The links with the maternal parents do not, as such, disappear, but are realigned with the newly established patri-filiation. However, it does not end there. The first murder of an enemy by the novice, carried out with the right hand, reinforces the killer's patrilateral right side, a concept of the person whereby the body is divided into two vertical halves, the left side being associated with the maternal side. As the individual progresses through life, the patrilateral half is meant to become stronger than the maternal side, which was more dominant at birth, and which nevertheless remains a guarantee of healthy growth: the Meru like to hedge their bets. This initial murder marks the beginning of a period in which other similar murders would follow.

Destined to remain as warriors for several years, the young men lived a life punctuated by raids (more of which later), but it was also a life marked by idleness and pleasure. These young men, affiliated to their fathers by their presence in the warriors' house, fed by the community, banned from the agricultural duties by various taboos, and exempt from herding the flocks—the uninitiated boys and fathers would see to these tasks—the warriors formed a sort of leisure class, in the sense used by Veblen (1970), which presupposes that the society had the means to support them. On the same note, the warriors represented an ideal of masculine beauty, which this age group alone was thought to personify. The young warriors, fed with meat and other "rich" and nourishing fare, were then in excellent health and particularly well built—even according to the first colonial administrators ever to search for robust and sturdy porters. They would spend most of their time adorning and preparing themselves, arranging their hair and smearing themselves with ochre and fat. They would then lead lively and very popular dances in which they stripped bare and disported themselves for hours on end, and they would have been the pride of their group,⁴ admired by all.

Handsome they may have been, but they were also disreputable. The two went hand in hand; the elders said that the warriors had nothing, by which they meant that they had no family and were irresponsible. Fathers were irritated by the success that the warriors had with the women, young and not so young, particularly in their wives' age set, the *kaaria* mothers, who held a special bond with the warriors, and then with the girls from the "grown but not yet initiated" group, courted by the warriors as potential wives. Sexual relations were tolerated to some extent, but any uninitiated girl who became pregnant would have to have an abortion or abandon the newborn baby in the bush. Known as *kitheega*, these offspring inspired fear, and were thought to be malformed and evil.

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3. Although initiations are performed in many different ways, they are often based on this kind of arrangement. Examples of this outside Africa include the Baruya people in New Guinea (Godelier 1996).
 4. Evocative of the Maasai or Samburu *morán*. However, these adornments have been modified considerably since the advent of colonial power!

Here, then, is a hint of the enigmatic aspect of the warrior. It was believed that the warriors, like the uninitiated girls, did not have the ability to reproduce, in the sense of successful procreation—which is the meaning conveyed by the word *muthaka* (pl. *nthaka*): “being from the bush”, “bushman”, uncouth, with a lot of growing up to do. The young man has been masculinized and affiliated by circumcision, but he is not yet capable of real procreation. His reproductive powers are still developing, and this is where, to the detriment of the enemy, the raid (*njûûri*) takes on its full importance. This singular equation then comes into play whereby the death of an enemy or, failing that, a wild animal,⁵ increases the reproductive potential, the *inya*,⁶ of the killer, both as an individual and as a member of his generation-set whose collective capacity to reproduce would be called on at a later date; this generally happened when the Fathers would authorize the set to leave its warrior status behind and acquire a wife.

Preparation for the raid and, in particular, the choice of target, fell to the *lamalle*, the council of experienced warriors who would meet amongst themselves away from public gaze, and under the rather notional authority of the Fathers of the Country who feared raids that might be organized without their knowing. Multiple attacks might provoke the enemy into increased aggression, and in return destabilize the Fathers’ own authority. In this decision-making process, the *mugaa* (pl. *agaa*) or diviner-healers, with their status as practitioners, were consulted by the *lamalle* on the tactical advisability of the raid and the decisions concerning the event. In this they were acting as go-betweens, relaying the authority of the Fathers of the Country.⁷

The departure for a raid was always preceded by sessions of dancing and singing. The warriors, smeared on this occasion with black charcoal instead of gleaming red clay, would work themselves into a state of heated excitement, both in body and mind: the repetition of certain movements, particular types of song and breathing rhythms would put the warriors into an altered state known as *waangi*, in which they felt seized by “the desire to kill an enemy,” to the extent that sometimes it would be necessary to restrain dancers who had become dangerous.⁸ The women with their wooden weapons also incited the men to raid, urging them into battle. In this case, it was usually the *kaaria*

5. This substitution came into force in strictly controlled areas under colonial rule; all the more relevant since an increased number of predators such as lions made certain areas unsafe.
6. *Inya* is primarily a term for the energy of the supreme Power; *Ngai* by extension means any energy, positive and beneficial force.
7. Unlike the Maasai and Samburu (Fratkin 1977) or the Nandi (Anderson 1995) and Turkana (Lamphear 1992), the Meru diviner-healers were not independent of the authority of the Fathers of the Country.
8. The memory of these altered states, which are neither trances nor possessions, has been preserved/ maintained because these dance sessions were not banned or controlled until a much later date than the raids, subsequently becoming the subject of folkloric entertainment (Hann 1977). For the Tigania-Igembe, these long evenings of song and dance before the circumcision sessions, organized more or less officially by

mothers, but also the uninitiated girls, who would provoke the warriors, challenging their bravery and their virility. It is probable that the state of *waangi* is etymologically related to the term for the women's dances, *kwaanga*, which is named after the *ngaa*, the small wooden shield held by the women. The desire to kill the enemy could, according to old women, be provoked by a fit of jealousy at the sight of an uninitiated youth courting an uninitiated girl from the category of potential warrior wives, thus establishing an explicit link between the impulse to kill an enemy and the desire felt towards a woman. Once some of the warriors had reached a state of amok-like fury, it was time to leave for the raid.

The raids would be led by the *lamalle*, recognizable from a distance by what they wore—a sort of decorated tabard. The way in which the enemy (or the wild animal) had been killed provided the meaning for the name gained by the warrior during the raid. These acquired names can almost be seen as trophies: they are proof that the warrior has taken the life of his enemy.⁹ The name would be taken back and borne as a badge of glory, and would later be passed on to a son, nephew or godson. Unlike the Borana warriors, who would return from a raid with the male pudenda of their enemies as trophies that were proof of their bravery, the Meru thought that handling a corpse was repugnant, and so took nothing from the bodies of the dead. If the opportunity arose, however, they would retrieve weapons. Their objective was to accumulate names by committing more and more murders. Sometimes, if there were not sufficient numbers of enemies or wild animals, a group of them would set about killing their victim as a group, which did not stop them from acquiring their own name.¹⁰ Known as “generation names,” these trophy-names refer to the fact that the generation-set that began with the initiations increased its fame and strength with each name produced when one of its members made a kill on a raid. The more exploits a generation-set could accomplish, the more names it accumulated, the greater the reproductive potential of the men in the set. This collective gain also served to compensate for the occasional losses that were suffered on these raids. Warriors killed in combat were left in the bush to be disposed of by predators. If possible, the body would be laid on the ground, turned on the right side, but none of the possessions would be brought back, not even the weapons or decorative adornments. A “Bushman,” killed in the bush—the dead warrior represents the unaccomplished man *par excellence* (Peatrik 1991).

Apart from their weapons, warriors returning from a raid would keep nothing for themselves, giving any spoils to the Fathers. The raids were not

the neo-*lamalle* up until the end of the 1980s, were the means by which these traditions were recreated and passed on.

9. Example: Baibere—“he who has killed an enemy and returned with a spear”; Kaileba—“he who gave great thought to how he would kill the enemy”; Kirimania—“he who has killed many enemies,” etc.
10. Example: Kîrua—“he who was the first to kill”; Baibuto—“he who killed third”; Munye—“he who killed a rhinoceros,” etc.

always motivated by the quest for plunder, even if they resorted to it at times of tension, but this nevertheless threatened to lead to the same impasse if the cycle of reprisals were to intensify. Any captured livestock were distributed by the Fathers of the Country according to a set of variable rules; as for prisoners, children and young women, they were adopted by initiating them into families, which would thereby increase their chances in entering the bride-wealth exchanges. Human trafficking was nonexistent in these societies, and so adopted captives would be useful additions to swell the often small numbers of able workers in Meru families. In the case of the warriors being taken prisoner, a ransom would be quickly obtained—a large goat per captive, for example—before the warriors could escape or make excessive inroads in the food supplies.

There are two more rituals to mention before the end of this cycle: the reinsertion of the warrior-killers, the closure of a set. Following an ontogenetic ritual device most common among the Meru, the reinsertion of the warrior-killers or *ubacugia*, resembles a sort of renaissance of beings metamorphosed by the death of the enemy. This ritual celebrated under the auspices of the *kaaria* mothers is another portrayal of the ties that bound this class of menopausal women with the warrior class whose reproductive powers were still developing.¹¹ To an accompanying atmosphere of dancing and praise singing, the *kaaria* mothers would shave the head of the killer and smear his body with a mixture of ochre and fat, so that he was as slick as a newborn baby. In some cases, the diviner-healer would perform various scarifications on the warrior's body, intended to release the excess energy remaining after the battle, to refresh a body too inclined to overheating, and return the warrior to his daily life.¹²

Approximately every four years when one subset closed, and every fifteen to twenty years for a generation-set, the young men, having accomplished their function as warriors and on the point of being allowed to get married, would gather at a public ground on one of the territorial boundaries. In the presence of the *mûgwe* (a kind of androgynous dignitary, mentioned in more detail later on), the warriors would prepare themselves in great pomp for one final raid, during which they intended to kill as many enemies as possible, especially those warriors who had not been particularly keen on this exploit, or who had not really had the opportunity to prove themselves. This information, brought to light by old men long past the warrior stage, adds another dimension to the one-sided accounts of the military prowess of the warrior-sets, and emphasizes the fact that not all the “bushmen” were inclined to kill an enemy. The act of killing

11. This difference in the reproductive capacity of some in relation to others is crucial in that members of generations sets that were active, in terms of fertility, were not allowed to interact with each other on pain of illness or even death.

12. This reinsertion ritual is quite different from the purification rituals regarding murders committed within the society, where the murderers had to be cleansed of a sort of pollution. The reintegration of warrior/killers is never a small matter. This calls to mind the magnificent work on the fate of murderer by M. Carty and M. Détienne (1996).

appears to be a rite implemented to ensure that no member of that generation will lack a particular quality, or the name that goes with it. The comments also account for the notion of individual variability that is understood in a different way here: while the raid allows the warrior to develop the reproductive capacity that will be consolidated in the marriage phase, while the brave warrior by killing numerous enemies has increased his own reproductive energy tenfold, as well that of his peers, his attributes as a murderer do not qualify him to become a great politician, in the Osense of an orator respected and listened to in the councils of the Fathers of the Country. From the outset, brave warriors in these societies were not intended to become important figures, or great men involved in the public arena. The reverse was even implicit in that the political *savoir-faire* characteristic of a great man—the ability to be a peacemaker—is completely the opposite of the qualities required to be a great warrior. This disparity provides an insight into the various components of the person that, over the course of time, constitute masculinity and the individual, and that are more complex than thought *a priori* in societies where the emphasis was on warfare and its formative aspects: warrior societies they may be, but they are certainly not militaristic.¹³

In any event, this final raid can be seen to echo the first raid that took place after the circumcision, and therefore brings to a close the phase in which the young man is “a bushman,” called on to defend the territory and develop his reproductive capacity by killing an enemy.

Variants and Variations

The Meru methods for managing the masculine condition and constructing masculinity are representative of age-grade societies across East Africa, although variants in a particular sequence, and variations as to the presence of certain sequences do exist here and there.

In all East African societies based on age- and generation-classes, the young man takes on (or did in the past) the status of warrior together with his peers.¹⁴ In all cases the status is prescribed, but with variants in each case governing the length of the warrior stage, the ways of distributing the spoils, the possibility of acquiring a wife, and the differential valence attributed to the warrior and his capacity for becoming a man of some importance. Apart from the need for defense, the motivations for a raid are often equivocal, ranging from ontological

13. There are two mythical/historic accounts of war among the Meru. In the story of Mbugi, Murutu and Mukunga linked to the young men’s preoccupation with finding enemies to fight and young women to marry; the harmful effects of procrastinating over initiation in the myth of Mbwa (Peatrik 1999, 189–208, 381–425).

14. Ethnographical data is distributed across a considerable number of references (Peatrik 1999, 280–289). Here I have provided the mere outline of a comparison, which would require a whole volume in itself to be fully developed.

imperative to economic justification. Moreover, the decision to go out on a raid is a permanent source of conflict between the Fathers inclined towards restraint and the young men who are eager to do battle.¹⁵ Generally, the dances in preparation for the raid trigger a surge of warrior rage in some protagonists, symptomatic of the desire to kill, which his friends must keep under control. Whether carried out alone or in a group, the murder of the enemy, in the established category of “preferential enemy,” (or failing that, a wild animal), is the vector for a transformation of the killer, which is recognized in different ways according to the different societies: a celebration in which the name of the killer’s favorite bull is shouted out repeatedly; accumulating generational names that evoke the method of killing; passing the names of warrior-killers on to children as protective names; accumulating trophies instead of names; for example, a warrior might present the male pudenda, ears or even nose of the enemy to his fiancée. The reinsertion of the warrior-killers is a phase that often involves the older women, whereby the body of the valiant warrior undergoes various practices, such as symbolic birthing gestures, purgative scarification, distinctive scars, and celebratory hairstyles.

These variations in shared practices are indicative of the fact that, although the warriors of different polities are bent on confrontation, they also travel great distances, moving around the interstitial spaces, spying on each other, imitating each other’s hairstyles, dances, and new weapons. Sharing these practices can also result from secession or defeat, with some groups taking refuge with former enemies. The most common example of this is that of the Maasai at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who, having killed each other in a series of internecine wars, took refuge with agro-pastoralists or hunter-gatherers (Spear and Waller 1993).

The only notable difference between these societies relates to circumcision. Some peoples do practice it (speakers of Maa, Bantu, Cushitic languages), while others do not (Ateker speakers—Karimonjong, Turkana, Nyangatom, Jie, Toposa—populations of South Sudan). However, they mark the formation of sets and the coming of age of young men in other ways: scarifications, the *asapan* rituals of the Karimojong cluster. On the other hand, all attributed (and some still do) beneficial effects to the raid and to the murder of an enemy. Apart from the issues of borrowed or diffuse practices (de Wolf 1983), the absence or presence of circumcision refers to two methods of recruitment in the generational systems (Peatrik 1995). Circumcision is related to problems of affiliation to a generation set and a problematic relationship with the father *versus* the mother’s brother. Its over-validation in today’s terms is a result of the ban on raids and the concomitant process of modernization. With scholarization becoming more widespread, the difference between circumcised and uncircumcised youths has been exacerbated in the schools. Circumcision remains the

15. The study by U. Almagor (1977) is a fine illustration of this confrontation among the Dassenetch (Marile) people. See also R. Waller (2010) work on the Maasai.

only operation that is a prescribed form of initiation, amongst, for example, the Nandi (Langley 1979), and Meru (Peatrik 1999), whereas for the Borana, the Maasai and the Samburu (Hazel 1999), circumcision is a stage in a wider ritual system. In order to shed light on the connection between the death of the enemy and the fecundity of the warrior-killer, and more generally, between war and masculinity, two analytical approaches will be used: a sociological and geopolitical approach, examining the relationship between war and society; plus an ontological and symbolic approach looking at the question of the body and the person and the social construction of sexual identities.

War and Society: the Political Ecology of Age and Generational Systems

In order to understand the way in which masculinity is attained through warfare, it is necessary to examine the recurring presence of the warrior class in East Africa in both time and space. They are distinct from other forms of militarization in human societies, such as professional armies, combatant aristocracies, hereditary warrior clans, clandestine networks of soldiers, various forms of brigandry (Andreski 1968; Uzoigwe 1977; Bazin and Terray 1982; Adler 1987; Descola and Izard 1991; Adam 1997; Lamphear 2007), and are the product of a particular kind of society (Baxter & Almagor 1978; Kurimoto & Simonse 1998; Tornay 2001). The principle of their structure is based on the different ages of life; the principle of reproduction hinges on the reproductive age of the men and the begetting of a future generation-set, and their perpetuation depends on the transmission of authority to the following generation-set.

The warmongering direction taken by these societies, most probably in a bygone era and maintained over a long period, relates first and foremost to the simplicity and efficacy of the generational principle, together with the possibility of departure as a way of resolving tensions. By grouping fathers/elders on one side, and on the other, sons/young men at arms, the society marks out a territory and at the same time creates a way of controlling it. This is an easily repeated process that must have existed almost everywhere in human societies, but appears to have found an ideal setting in East Africa. These regions enjoy two rainy seasons and a variety of ecosystems, and are potentially highly productive, as long as it is possible to cope with the vast difference in the amount of rainfall from one year to another. Before modernization brought with it unprecedented change, the response to this consisted in combining economic activities such as herding, agriculture, hunting, gathering, and bartering on various levels, and controlling a territory sufficiently large to encompass a variety of ecosystems, that enabled people to move between them if and when it was necessary.¹⁶

16. Apart from the fact that it is echoed in Johnson's (1991) research in South Sudan, to mention but one example, this detour into political ecology is a deliberate move away

Long-established societies responded to this schema by settling in a large “interior” homeland where they were expected to live peacefully, and by marking out the boundaries with an exterior populated by allied societies or enemies with whom periods of tension and warfare alternated with periods of peace and a return to mutual trade. Neighboring groups would have had to organize themselves in a similar way, or accept integration with such societies. Historical traditions abound with accounts of migrations, departures and arrivals, and not of dynasties founded by heroes but of breakaway groups of warriors or elders. All else being equal, the generational system established itself gradually from one neighboring group to another resulting in a geopolitical dynamic that is still discernible on a regional level in the subcontinent.¹⁷

This metaethnic rationale which brings interconnected polities into play would also indicate that a sort of equilibrium had been reached, a balance of the presiding forces brought about by conventional warfare and the possibility of reprisal, the great fear of the elders, as has already been mentioned. Conflict had the potential to degenerate into total war; the well-known historic example of this is that of the Maasai polities already mentioned, who, after their livestock was decimated, started to kill one another to the extent that many sections of the tribe were wiped out. These were polities that were built around restricted warfare, and likewise had no concept of wars of conquest where one group sought to permanently dominate another. Indeed, those that did venture in that direction lost their original organizational structure, as demonstrated by the expansion of the Oromo (Hultin 1990; Fiquet 2003).

In deliberate confrontations between enemy warrior groups, the exterior/outside is a constituent of the interior/inside, thus establishing the notion of the preferential enemy, reflecting the so-called matrimonial alliances, and even more so since often the females of these preferential enemies are potential wives—hence the practice of abducting some of these girls and initiating them into adoptive families. A good indicator of this is *gichiario*, a link of mutual aid maintained between the Meru Tigania Igembe and some other polities by which specifically both war and intermarriage were forbidden.

With their relations with the external/outside world structured by the warrior set, the inner rhythm of these age- and generation-based societies was (is) marked by the rise of the various sets and the transmission of authority, which

from the pastoral centrism fashionable at one time, and which was an obstacle to any true understanding of real and existing situations (Spear & Waller 1993).

17. Age- and generation-graded societies cease to be predominant when other principles come into play, for example, the chiefdoms of Tanzania, the kingdoms of the Great Lakes, South Sudan and of Ethiopia, the Swahili city-states. Intermediary forms exist, for example, among the Chagga of Kilimanjaro (Raum 1996) or the Nuer of South Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1968). Elsewhere, traces of the warrior ethos of age-grade societies, and sometimes more, can be found, as in the Nyakyusa in Tanzania (Wilson 1963), and in the Comoros (Blanchy 2009)—an indication that these forms of political organization used to be far more widespread.

is not without its crises and tensions. Just like the Fathers who were getting too old for their position of power, the ageing warriors were replaced by newly promoted warrior sets, the whole idea of the system being that whenever a set changed position on the social scale, all the sets followed suit. These political methods are exclusive to strong descent groups; clans and moieties with weak lineage do exist, but there is no system of lineage or the like in the ontological domain, with no tutelary or threatening ancestral figure. In establishing egalitarian societies based on collective power, where generations take it in turn to hold power, this method of distribution based on the passage of time does, however, pose the particular problem of delimitation. Age is based on a continual biological process that has no precise limits, and successive generations tend to overlap and become indistinguishable because the men in one generation-set do not tend to reproduce all at the same time. If nothing is done to prevent this demographic drift of generations, confusion rapidly sets in.

From this point of view, the imperative to assume the military status and kill one's enemies for a certain period of time has the advantage of introducing a clearly defined 'before' and 'after' period, which sets in order the age divisions and the begetting of generations. The distinction between an age-set specifically devoted to warfare and age-sets that are not, or have ceased to be, does not exclude the fact that if the necessity arose, all able-bodied men would go into battle alongside the appointed warriors, armed with bows and poisoned arrows (in the case of the elders) and catapults (for the uninitiated)¹⁸ (Uzoigwe 1977).

In short, in this socio-technical and political context, incompatible with any form of aristocratic domination or chiefdom, the formation of a durable polity or its simple survival was dependent on the balance of power in terms of numbers that the warrior sets were able to maintain. Oscillating between restricted warfare and armed peace, these power relations-based on the ability to incorporate a sufficient number of warriors fuelled the idea that the interior/inside can only be maintained as long as the other/outside is not too strong, or that survival depends on the decline of the enemy/other, which invites further analysis of the ontology and the concept of the person in such societies.

War, the Body, the Person

The information presented above already suggests that, just as the warrior sets have to be considered in relation to the society as a whole, it is also necessary to consider the effect of war on the person of the "bushman" in the light of the temporality that is intrinsic to *all* ages of life, and not just in terms of youth as a category apart. This latter subject has been dealt with in a certain number of publications over recent years (Abbink and van Kessel 2005; Burton and

18. Since the 1970s, AK47s have become the main weapon of preference, but this has not rendered the traditional weapons obsolete.

Charton-Bigot 2010). In this article, I will only deal with certain elements of the life cycle, those pertaining to a particular concept of the person and the body, to an ontology that is primarily an ontogenesis.

The Ages of Life According to the Meru

At birth, the child is (was) considered as a fully-fledged human being, androgynous, combining both masculine and feminine traits. The child is meant to develop and differentiate him/herself as he/she transforms physically and progresses up the age grades. Development is not complete until the last grade, as indicated by the list of successive ages (see the table of ages in the Meru Tigania Igembe).

Typically, weaning would take place quite late, at around the age of five.¹⁹ The child had already been given the birth name of a grandmother or grandfather whose turn it was to pass on the first name; in this sense the baby is already recognized as a gendered being, but in terms of age category, the child is not yet recognized as such. Age categories begin to indicate sexual identity after weaning; once weaned the child becomes in effect a “small uninitiated boy” or a “small uninitiated girl,” and these designations mark the development of the person in the countdown towards initiation. At puberty, the child passes to the next category of “big uninitiated boy/girl.” This stage of “big uninitiated boy” might last for several years however, since initiation was carried out anywhere between the ages of around eighteen and thirty, and as such was a very variable period of minority social status, subsidiary to the set system and the choices made by the parents.

Following initiation and, at the same time, the novice’s recruitment into a generation set, the various terms relating to age indicate a growing differentiation in the definition of sexual identity. The youth goes from being “circumcised” to a “bushman,” the warrior status that prepares him for future paternity. Then in the grade of active reproduction, he becomes *mûrumî*, a young father, the root *ûrumî* meaning specifically the masculine sex in as much as it is capable of procreation; his wife is *muka*, a young mother, a word from the root *uka*, meaning the female sex in that it is specifically intended for motherhood. During this paternal phase, all the reproductive energy accumulated during the warrior phase is now put into effect. If the couple are barren, the wife is invited to test the cause of the infertility through the intermediary of the *bankiro*, an accepted lover, the relationship being permitted between members of the same generation-set. The children born of the *bankiro* would be considered as the legitimate children of the husband, since they were conceived by a coinitiated lover whose reproductive capacity was forged during the communal activity of

19. The calendar age here is just an indication. The old Meru have a different concept of the passage of time (Peatrik 1999, 62–69).

the raid. The inability to reproduce was therefore overcome via membership of a generation-set, which guaranteed that every man could be a father and thus progress to the following grades at the same time as his other peers.²⁰ Although infertility did, of course, occur in some cases, limits were placed on reproductive capacity anyway; a man was not supposed to father a lot of children since numerous siblings were disapproved of, and were the sign of a lack of self-control and bad education.

The stage of generativity corresponded to an age phase that was limited by time itself. The time would inevitably come when procreation was at an end. Just like motherhood and the menopause, fatherhood, more unusually, also had a time limit. When the firstborn (whether son or daughter) was initiated and began, in turn, to enter his or her own fertile period, the parents had to renounce their own reproductive faculties, and for the father this represented a form of andropause. At risk of being punished (see note 11) and in order to contain demographic drift, only one generation was allowed to reproduce at any one time, hence the importance of delaying the initiation of children for as long as possible.

As a man left behind his status of *genitor* for the political status of Father of the Country, he would not engender any more children unless he took another wife, which was not a frequent occurrence. He had “matured” in the sense of “continuing to grow,” indicated by the root *ûrû* of his new title *mûkûrû*; the prefix *mû* relating to the masculine, not in the sense of procreation, but the (masculine) principle of his ability to become the *pater* of his children, the complementary fertility of his words, and on the whole, his power to make decisions in the council of Fathers of the Country and maintain social peace and harmony. To mirror this, the wives of the Fathers of the Country, *mwekûrû*, follow the same model, *ûrû* referring to the advanced degree of maturity, *mwe* indicating the feminine element and the power to hold *kaaria* women’s meetings, a symbol of their ability to control the forces of life and death, for example, by presiding at the reinsertion of the warriors. From then on, the ages would not have any sexual identity.

As an “Accomplished” man or woman, having reached an age of maturity corresponding to the status of grandparent, the individual has the full power to pronounce curses or blessings. Death following this last age phase was not considered as a severance, but rather as the end of a process; having exhausted his/her personal vital energy, the “Accomplished” can draw his/her last breath (Peatrik 1991). The person would be remembered through the transmission of his/her name to the grandchildren. The son, who only enjoyed the full power to give blessing after his father’s death, would then ask his father to help him pronounce blessings when it was his turn. Beyond that, the name of the dead person would be quickly forgotten, the generational onomastic providing a temporal

20. Similar parallel arrangements existed amongst the women, through various forms of adoption.

framework for remembrance. Everything happened during the lifetime of the individual, who had to be born, grow up and then die at the right moment. Those who caused concern were precisely those who upset the proper sequence of age and generations. Those who were conceived or born at the wrong time, died before becoming “Accomplished,” or old people who lived beyond their years, *ntindiri*, created a problem of social categorization and a threat to the socio-cosmic order. The society had to protect itself against such disruptions.

TABLE OF MALE AND FEMALE AGE GRADES FORMERLY
USED BY THE MERU TIGANIA IGENBE (KENYA)

Male ages	
<i>ntindiri</i>	who is waiting, doing nothing
<i>Mwariki (ariki)</i>	“Accomplished”, grandfather
<i>Mûkûrû (akûrû)</i>	Mature man, Elder, Father of the Country
<i>Mûrumî (arumî)</i>	Young father
<i>Muthaka (nthaka)</i>	Bushman, warrior
<i>ntaanî (ntaanî)</i>	cut, circumcised, novice
<i>mwîjî (ijîjî)</i>	uninitiated big boy, adolescent, youth
<i>kajîjî (iwîjî)</i>	uninitiated boy
<i>mwana (aana)</i>	unweaned child
Female ages	
<i>ntindiri</i>	who is waiting, doing nothing
<i>Mwariki(ariki)</i>	Accomplished, grandmother
<i>Mwekûrû (eekûrû)</i>	Mature woman, <i>kaaria</i> Mother
<i>Muka (aka)</i>	Young mother
<i>ngutu (ngutu)</i>	cut, circumcised, novice
<i>mûkenye (nkenye)</i>	uninitiated big girl, adolescent, uninitiated girl
<i>gakenye (tûkenye)</i>	unweaned child
<i>mwana (aana)</i>	

The non-gendered ages are shown in bold. Capital and lower case letters at the beginning of words differentiate the age categories from the age grades (three for the women and four for the men), which were reached by an individual along with his/her peers. These terms indicate successive states that enabled the concepts of masculinization and feminization to be identified, along with personal forenames. Note that there is no word for “man” or “woman,” whatever the age. The term *muntû pl. antû* means human being.

Death of the Enemy and Ontogenesis: the *Mûgwe* as Proof

In the age grade system, masculinity can only be understood in relation to the passage of time, the developing co-relation with the feminine and the growth of concomitant relationships: bonds with age- and generation set, ties of filiation

and affinal alliance. Seen in this context, it becomes much easier to analyze the warrior phase and the ensuing changes in the life of the individual male.

The warrior kills with his right hand, that much has already been established. The weapons used were a spear, a sword or a long knife as well as a wooden club, usually thrown at the enemy from a distance. This act is meant to reinforce the patrilateral right side of his person. The efficiency of this act carried out with the right hand, the palm being marked with the lines of the paternal clan, implies the acknowledged possibility that the build-up of an excess of masculinity through warfare may not materialize. In this respect, it is relevant to mention a dignitary ritual that had its hour of anthropological glory when Bernardi (1959) and then Needham (1960) discovered to their surprise that the *mûgwe* gave out blessings with his left hand. Various interpretations for this have been put forward, but in reality the answer must lie in the Meru's own conception of the body and the person. In the past the blessing (and its counterpart, the curse) was the ultimate method of controlling social relations and conflict and its efficacy increased with the age of the giver. A blessing was given with the right hand, a person's powerful patrilateral side. The Meru were not at all surprised that the *mûgwe* should use his left hand to give a blessing, thereby drawing on the efficiency of the matrilateral left side. On the contrary, they expected it of this dignitary who was committed to cultivating this distinctive act.

The *mûgwe* was from a particular lineage in which this role was passed on from father to son. He lived the same way as all the other Meru. Just like the other youths of his age he would be circumcised and become part of a generation-set. However, he had to renounce communal life with his "brothers in circumcision" and could not go out on raids. It was, in fact, his duty not to reinforce his right side, thereby protecting his left side. In short, for the benefit of others, the *mûgwe* retained the matrilateral principle transmitted by the left side and its feminine component. For all other males, the right side would be reinforced over time and even if the left side had to remain active, the right side still became stronger at the expense of the left. By not becoming a warrior or going into battle, the *mûgwe* embodied a principle that was reduced in others, but which they could not do without, therefore conferring on him the dignitary status of *mûgwe*. The noun has the same root as *mûgwanja* meaning the number seven, and which, as mentioned previously, is the "whole" resulting from the addition of the three female and four male [grades].

Being circumcised but having not developed his patrilateral right side, the reproductive potential of the *mûgwe* was believed to be inferior to that of his peers. He would marry endogamously and have very few children. The *mûgwe* was not supposed to take the initiative in sexual relations; his wife would take the lead in the same way that she tended to run the household. In the same vein, the *mûgwe*'s daughters were not highly courted, and had the reputation for being disobedient and for dying prematurely. In short, the *mûgwe* represented a sort of counter-model, an example not to be followed, and perhaps this was one of his social functions, however the process is altogether more subtle.

Each generation-set, every major territorial division had its own *mûgwe*. The presence of this respected man was thought to be beneficial and his left-handed blessings indispensable at certain crucial times in public life. By cultivating the efficiency of his left hand and remaining intact, androgynous,²¹ and undifferentiated, his blessings were propitious for maintaining peace, for ensuring the continuity of rain cycle, the fertility of the land and abundant crops. The presence of the *mûgwe* provided a counterbalance to the excesses of the other life cycle—that of the sun, associated with war, the growth of the herd, the reproductive energy and the multiplication of the humans that, in the distant past, was the preserve of the blacksmith. The two cycles of the rain and the sun were crucial, but too much rain blocks the sun, and too much sun stops the rain. It was essential to guard against both eventualities, and therefore the Meru polity was based on this socio-cosmic pact. The presence of the *mûgwe* and his blessings at the ritual raid marking the end of a set is related to this pact. The warrior has to kill the enemy in order to enhance his right side, and so that he can procreate, without reducing the importance of the left side which the dignitary, the *mûgwe*, has safeguarded for the good of the polity.

Having examined and understood the effect of killing the enemy through the prism of the *mûgwe* and his role, analysis can be now furthered by considering the other elements relating to the body and the person.

The blood shed by the enemy was believed to strengthen the patrilineal blood of the warrior, meaning the qualities passed on by the male blood and the power that it represents or is attributed to it, as opposed, of course, to matrilineal and menstrual blood. When a child cried too much, it was said to be the sign of an excessive amount of paternal blood caused by the fact that the father had killed too many enemies.

In a wider context, the distress of the child's tears and the difficulty of developing its nascent function of speech refers to a local theory about word and breath. Without entering into too many details, the Meru believed that the ability to speak came from the heart, an organ towards which three elements flowed; the flow of blood, the flow of food from the stomach, and the flow of air from the lungs. Excess crying, and later on, an excess of bad language or calamitous utterances were attributed to an unbalance in these elements flowing to the heart. This is evidence once again of this way of thinking in terms of balance or excess in relation to various aspects. Appropriately, as the central organ, the accelerated beating of the heart announced the state of *waangi* that overcame the warrior during the preparation for a raid. The warrior would say "Nkoro nî kuringa," "my heart is beating hard," as the rhythm accelerated, thus announcing the changes taking place within himself.

This theory of word and flow invites consideration of one last element: the person of the enemy, who has just been killed by the warrior. The Meru believed

21. Wood (1999) studied the connection between androgyny and the exercising of religious functions, in particular the *d'abella* stage in the Gabbra people.

that the life breath of this enemy was, as any breath, part of the supreme deity. It is known here as Ngaï, which is close to the word *nkaï*, meaning testicles, a complement to the term *inya*, meaning energy, the supreme principle, including reproductive energy and that of the phallus.²² According to this theory, a person's breath, the air he/she breathes, the breath of animals suffocated during sacrifice, the wind, as well as reproductive energy, all form one continuous flow. The breath taken from the enemy activates the circulation of breath to the benefit of the warrior-killer, thus fortifying his own life breath.

Confronting Death

Of all the effects attributed to the raid, its "agentivity," to use a word that has been very fashionable in recent years, the major effect upon the warrior of killing his enemy results from being confronted with his own death, and with the possibility of losing his own life while attempting to take the life of another.

The risk incurred by exploring the limits of life and death was the very foundation of the Meru initiation cycle, the key moment of which was the raid itself. The deep sense of initiatory metamorphosis does not hang on the experience of pain, or the ordeals the novice has to suffer without flinching; the true test that the warrior had to go through and survive was the confrontation with his own death. This was a planned confrontation with death, in the sense that it is not unexpected or accidental as it is in ordinary life. The process of initiation itself, as a ritual institution, builds on the possibility of this confrontation and stages the methods of mastering the eventuality. This proposition, applicable to numerous human practices, is particularly illuminating here with regard to the notion of death, which was mentioned previously; intrinsically linked to the ages of life, this notion includes an unusual (in the sense that it is little known) conception of the ages of death, of "inauspicious death" (any death before the stage of Accomplished), and the achievements of the individual during his/her lifetime.

This study has dealt primarily with the construction of masculinity, but now attention turns once more to the development of the feminine, this time in relation to the initiation of the "uninitiated big girl." Very similar to that of the young men, the metamorphoses brought about by this ritual performance were parallel and complementary. The initiation of "big girls", carried out some years *after* puberty, was decided to fit in with the matrimonial negotiations following the right to marry that was accorded to the outgoing warrior set. The

22. Although I do not have any specific ethnographical data on this, it is quite acceptable to make a connection between the postmortem erection that often follows a violent death and the conceptions surrounding reproductive energy. In any case, this is certainly the thinking behind the Borana warriors' practice of bringing the severed male pudenda of the enemy back to their fiancées.

circumcision or cutting was organized in the public ground for groups of young female candidates, and followed by a period of prolonged seclusion in a hut set aside for that purpose, but this time within the family compound. During her seclusion a novice could be visited by her fiancé and, if conception took place in the seclusion hut, it was considered to augur well for the future marriage. The seclusion would come to an end on the day that the first part of the bridewealth payment was made.

The warriors were a part of this whole procedure, at least in a role that is of interest to this study. As protectors and guarantors of the public initiation, they would surround the group of girls who were sitting on the ground, awaiting the circumcision knife. To give themselves courage, the girls would have seized and held the warriors' spears; the warriors would chant vigorously, exhorting them to be brave in their own battle, to return victorious from their own personal raid, thus echoing the provocative chanting of the "uninitiated big girl" during the sessions leading up to the raid. What kind of raid was it, in this case? Primarily, of course, what comes to mind is the experience of the pain inflicted by the circumcision practitioner, which the girl is supposed to overcome without batting an eyelid. However, there is clearly more to this question.

When old women were asked about the nature of this war to which the warriors exhorted the women, and from which they must return victorious, and alive, of course, they explained that this did not in fact refer to the risk of death following an infection, but to death as a result of childbirth; in their "raid," the act of giving birth, the women risked their own life and perhaps that of the child, or even both.²³ A girl's initiation was indeed the moment when her genitals were shaped and her mind prepared for reproduction and her future status of *muka*. The initiation also draws profoundly on the act of childbirth as the supreme example of the confrontation between the forces of life and death: childbirth is seen as a battlefield, and mirroring that, or by metonymy, the battlefield is thought to bring about the ability to procreate. The fact that here it is the warriors who evoke this battle and its uncertain outcome says as much about the women as it does about the warriors, and indeed complicates the usual scheme of things whereby it is the warriors who do battle and the women who procreate. In this mirroring of the confrontation between life and death, two reverse transformations are at play; the woman gives life, while overcoming the possibility of her own death, and perhaps that of the child; in the same way, but in reverse, the warrior increases his capacity for engendering life by surmounting the possibility of his own death.

This is an example of a particularly elaborate process of masculine development, far removed from the clichés about nature *versus* nurture. In focusing on the status of warrior, it was necessary to identify those stages necessary

23. In his work on childbirth mortality in Niger, J-P.Olivier de Sardan (1999) draws attention to this woman's exclamation: "Giving birth is like a battle, like a war. Any woman, who has been pregnant and given birth and who has not gone down on her knees to thank God, can no longer be a believer."

for attaining virility. This was a long countdown process from the moment of weaning onwards, whereby the small boy first became an uninitiated boy, then at puberty, an uninitiated “big boy”. At circumcision came paternal filiation, when, engendered by his father, the novice became a son, but also a “Bushman.” Then followed the period of male generativity in which the men were allowed to procreate; the reproductive capacity taken from the enemy in raids undertaken with others of his age-set, and limited in quantity, was expended during this period; any inability to do so was palliated by one of his peers. Then came the andropause; as a new generation came to the fore, the mature man and those of the same age-set would cease to produce children and develop other skills subsumed by the ability to maintain peace and harmony when he took part in the elders’ council along with his peers. Finally, returning to a form of androgyny with the last age, he had the power to give blessings or curses, expressed by spitting out a mixture of saliva and hydromel.²⁴ This process undertaken through the different stages of life reveals the reductive or erroneous nature of atemporal approaches and, furthermore, the essentialist or naturalistic conceptions of the difference between the sexes. In this case, the ontology is an ontogenesis, and sex is defined, among various forms of androgyny, as a component of the construction of the ages of life.

In this process of formulating the difference between the sexes, the Meru way, as with similar peoples in East Africa, places the emphasis on the ability to create life and the confrontation with death. “Nothing has been more decisive in the organization of sexual distinction than this major divide between the men who risk their lives for the group in battle, and the women who risk their life in childbirth, also for the common good,” says Irène Théry (2007:317 *sq*) in her sociology of sexual distinction, which drew its inspiration from Nicole Loraux’ research into Greek civilization. However, still on the same lines as Théry and Loraux, while the ancient Greeks devaluated the female world of reproduction, and celebrated the warrior in search of immortality on the battlefield, the ancient Meru saw the two worlds in relation to one another, emphasizing the value of the warrior who returns alive from the battlefield.

This dramaturgy, this conception of war and society, not only points to the most obvious difference between the sexes—it is the women who bring children into the world at the risk of losing their own life and that of their children—but also, in reverse, transforms the warrior-killer into a being able to create life, and hence control the creation of new generations and the succession of ages, thus highlighting to some extent the paradox of polities based on the succession of male generations. However, this is not taken for granted. Each generation, as well as the women who confront the possibility of their own death, the warriors must acquire their reproductive capacity by taking it from the enemy. In that

24. In his analysis of the Borana male age grades, comparable to those of the Meru, R. Hazel (1999, 328) offers the following distinctions: “latent virility (*dabale* stage), pastoral virility (controlling the herds in the bush), warrior virility, procreative virility, and finally sacrosanct virility.”

this obligation to kill an enemy in order to increase reproductive potential is the mobilizing factor for establishing sexual distinction, this unusual social imperative opens the way towards wider consideration.



In conclusion, it seems appropriate to reiterate the precautionary observations in the introduction and ask how the area for comparing the ethnography of the Meru Tigania Igembe might be extended. The Meru are certainly representative of East African societies, but it has to be remembered that the ethnography presented here depicts conditions that existed over a century ago. Since that time, as in the rest of Kenya, a country with great agricultural potential, there has been a significant amount of change (Heald 1999; Peatrik 1999: 429–506; Southall 1977; Waller 2006). With the advent of colonial power, the warriors were disarmed and raids were forbidden, which provoked an unprecedented and enduring crisis in the process of the development of masculinity. New stages of initiation, known as “raids of the few,” were gradually introduced as substitutes to enable the men to overcome this breakdown on the road to accomplishment, which had also provoked an acute crisis in the female institutions and the development of femininity. This period (1920–1950) was followed by other noticeable changes in the new demographic dynamics. Since 1950, the Meru population has doubled every twenty years, along with the rest of Kenya. Some aspects of the ancient society still exist, such as the language, although admittedly impoverished, the knowledge of the names of generation categories, and the initiation imperative for men. However, it is impossible to trace a continuous line between the old customs and for example, the confrontations between “warriors” that occur now during every election campaign. This can only be established through historical-ethnographical studies, carried out with full background knowledge of the ancient customs and the context in which they operated. The populations that dwell in border areas, have come late to modernity, and have been affected in different ways. They have been confronted with shrinking of their territories, they are over-armed and caught up in frequent massacres (Abbink 1998; Galaty 2002; Hutchinson & Jok 2002; Simonse 2005; Mkutu 2008). In light of this, there is room for the hypothesis that these exacerbated ontogenetic imperatives are combined with a variety of other motives. The lack of ethnography in this area is all the more evident. Whenever research is possible, the as yet unexploited information on the Meru and other peoples should provide a grid for future comparative research.

Originating in an invitation to rethink masculinities, this article has dared to explore further in order to shed new light on customs from societies that are out of the ordinary, but which nevertheless provide much food for thought in relation to many other societies and cultures.

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ABSTRACT

The customary obligation to kill an enemy in order to engender offspring was widespread among ancient age- and generation-based societies in East Africa, and is still in existence among people in the bordering areas of the nation states. Here this is analyzed in two ways: in the light of the political ecology inherent to such social organizations and their warrior classes; and according to the ontogenetic requirement and gender differentiation across age grades and life cycles. By confronting the possibility of his own death while trying to kill and capture the enemy's vital energy, the warrior increases both his own reproductive capacities and those of his age mates. Death and life are mirrored. The efficiency of this transfer of a reproductive capacity derives from the model of the woman confronting the possibility of losing her own life and that of her baby when giving birth. In addition to their specific characteristics, these societies reveal an unusual way of linking war to manhood, and shed light on the vital issue of life stages in constructing masculinity and gender differentiation.

RÉSUMÉ

Tuer pour engendrer. Les agents d'une masculinité au long cours (Afrique de l'Est) – Attestée dans nombre d'anciennes sociétés est-africaines organisées en classes d'âge et de génération, encore vivace dans les populations des espaces périphériques, l'obligation de tuer un ennemi pour devenir capable de se reproduire est analysée de deux manières : à l'aune de l'écologie politique intrinsèque aux systèmes de classe d'âge et de génération ; en termes d'injonction ontogénétique et de distinction des sexes au fil des âges. Affrontant la possibilité de sa propre mort en cherchant à capter la vie de l'ennemi, le guerrier augmente sa capacité génésique et celle de sa classe. L'efficacité

de ce transfert d'énergie reproductive puise dans le modèle de l'accouchement où la femme produit de la vie en affrontant la possibilité de sa propre mort. Au-delà de leurs particularités, ces sociétés éclairent, sous un jour inédit, le lien entre guerre et virilité et rappellent l'enjeu fondamental que sont les âges de la vie dans la construction des masculinités et de la distinction des sexes.

Keywords/*Mots-clés* : East Africa, Kenya, Meru, androgyny, age classes, life cycle, body, concept of person, war, masculinity, trophy names, ontogenesis, generation systems/*Afrique de l'Est, Kenya, Meru, androgynie, classes d'âge, cycle de vie, guerre, masculinité, nom-trophée, ontogenèse, systèmes générationnels.*