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 ilmuran that are principal among the Samburu by universal acclaim (Spencer, 1975). It is true that the dances of the ilmuran are the principal dances among the Sampurr, but Spencer goes no further to say why this is so. The ilmuran 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 ilmuran to dance almost every afternoon through the evening right to late in the night, thus making their dances very popular. The ilmuran 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 ilmuran, 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 ilmuran 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 ntoye 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 ntoye 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 enkitjeman 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) mparkinioi (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-raiding 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 al rukoki namanya kutuk  
My group back me and I don't lie  
Sikar al mapuru namanya kutuk  
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 ilmurran 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
Ketusote
Sikar ang elbaitie
lototo nalo
Kaiba nkishu nikiaru
neya serkali  
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:

```
Tigirai nkiteng' ai
Materetere
Nchuneti itilimua
naa ninche alimu
Namajo linono
lainen ajo
```

Keep quiet 'my cow'
let me help
You've talked of achievements
and I will talk of them
And I will not say yours
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 *ilmurrani* 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 movement 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: Ilkeek 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 oipiri 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 oipiri comprises several songs and accompanying dances.

Some ilkeek oipiri 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 ilmurrans 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 nkop*” (“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 *enkino-yata*.

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

Following the phase of *ilkeek aipirii* 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. 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.

Sesiai follows ntemerr immediately and it is more prolonged than the shorter section performed in the afternoon. Sesiai is followed by ilkeek oipiri 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/ndojicoto*) 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 "moran" dance (1975:154), that he has twisted the sequence of the dances to fit his conception of the social development of the individual.

Lmakiya Lesarge
ENDNOTES:

1. In Maa, 'a warrior' is correctly rendered olmurran, not moran. In Sampurr, 'a warrior and more than one warrior' is not morans, but ilmurrani. More than one warrior in Maa is also ilmurrani. Ilmurran (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 ilmurran 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 Ntawuo 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 OPIRII

(i)

Phase Three:
ILKEEK DORROPU

Phase Four:
SESIAI