6 Anxiety and the Interpretation of Ritual among Samburu

‘... the antique religions had for the most part no creed; they consisted entirely of institutions and practices. [The worshipper] was often offered a choice of several accounts of the same thing, and, provided he fulfilled the ritual with accuracy, no one cared what he believed about its origin – the rules of society was sufficient reason why precedent once set should continue to be followed,’

[W. Robertson Smith, 1888-9, Lectures on the Religion of the Semites]

Various accounts of the Maasai have suggested a link with ancient Israel, noting the common feature of nomadic pastoralism and suggesting other parallels. The most concerted attempt was by Moriz Merker in his outstanding book on Die Masai (1904), suggesting that perhaps they were a lost tribe of Israel. This section of his book has long been discredited as a historical curiosity, and given the sheer span of time, no link between ancient Israel and the Maa today can be seriously considered. In one respect, however, a more general point can be made in relation to the above quotation. Robertson Smith was drawing on similar material to Merker, relating to the earlier books of the Bible, and his stress on the importance of ritual conformity over belief applies very aptly to Maa religion. Samburu elders discuss and argue about precedent rather than explanation when preparing for any ceremony. When they consult a diviner on some vexed issue, they are given magical substances coupled with ritual advice and some personal help, but only a vague explanation. Even powerful Maasai Prophets would diagnose any situation in oblique terms before giving crisp ritual instructions without claiming insight into some other sacred world. Smith’s generalization on the irrelevance of creed can be challenged in one respect among the Samburu and Maasai. They insist that any departure from established ritual practice could be punished by God (Enkai), and this is reason enough for strict compliance. One may argue that this is a creed of sorts at a very fundamental level: a vague belief in the mystical causes of misfortune.

Compared with the Maasai, the Samburu have a relatively straightforward and transparent political framework, with no powerful Prophets or major concerns over sorcery. Their age-set system and associated ceremonies are clear-cut and less elaborate than the Maasai. It is against this background that one may note the profusion of ritual detail. The core details are broadly acknowledged, but the

1 An earlier version of this chapter was published under the title 'The Function of Ritual in the Socialization of the Samburu Moran', in Mayer, P. (ed.), 1970, Socialization: the approach from social anthropology, ASA Monographs 8, Tavistock, London. (pp. 127-56). I am grateful to the Association of Social Anthropologists for their permission to draw on this article here.
Perpetuating Gerontocracy

Profusion is assumed to be a matter that only senior elders understand. Older men with more experience are held to have a profound depth of practical ritual knowledge, and this is an aspect of the mystique associated with the charisma of ageing. However, the proverbial wisdom of old men goes no further than the length of their memories, and if there is disagreement when elders mull over the ritual preparations for each performance, there is a broad concern to strike a formula that will minimize the risk of unexpected misfortune. Sometimes disagreements over protocol can spark off dramatic confrontations at their assemblies with unseemly shouting between the age-set of firestick patrons, who are responsible for the moran, and elders of more senior age-sets who feel that tradition is being violated, courting mystical misfortune and discrediting the authority of their experience. Robertson Smith’s ‘choice of several accounts’ raises rather than resolves the concern for ‘accuracy’.

6.1 Perpetuating Gerontocracy

It is through their ability to control marriages that power chiefly resides in the hands of the elders, and they have every reason for seeking to maintain the status quo. At the beginning of their adult careers, moran have no overriding incentive for accepting a higher authority, and their firestick patrons have to focus their attention in order to retain the initiative. They have to ensure that younger moran accept the gerontocratic structure of their society in its pseudo-traditional form, and accept especially their marginal role within it. The system relies on moran accepting this situation and the attractiveness of remaining moran and regarding elderhood as an essentially colourless set of responsibilities. This provides the backdrop to the anomalous position of the moran. They are a sector of the society without a precise role. They are no longer warriors in the most literal sense, yet no alternative role has been assigned to them. The traditional imbalance of power in terms of wives, independent stock ownership, and participating in local decision-making, depends on the moran being kept apart from the elders.

A critical period in the age-set cycle is therefore the transition from boyhood to moranhood. The older moran already have a stake in the total system, and therefore an incentive to settle down sooner or later to a peaceful elderhood, whereas boys have to learn. By the time that they are initiated – at ages varying from perhaps thirteen to twenty years or more – many of them are quite old enough to assume a warrior role, having identified themselves with this for a number of years. They have had both opportunity and incentive to acquire the notions and values of warriorhood, and have responded to the general expectation that they will in their turn become moran and the general focus of interest and attention. As boys, however, they have not cultivated a deep sense of responsibility towards their society in times of quasi-peace or of subservience to the will of the elders. In regarding themselves primarily as potential warriors, sensitive to notions of honour and prestige, they may be
dangerously near the brink of anarchy. The years of waiting culminate with their initiation into moranhood, and this could potentially lead to sudden and widespread disorder. This is the point when their firestick patrons need to assert their control and bring the initiates to heel. They do not wish to destroy the boys’ incentive to become moran, but they do need to quell any desire to become complete rebels. The vital quality that the initiates are seen still to lack is ‘a sense of respect’. It is this above all that the patrons wish to inculcate into the younger moran. It is not simply that as warriors they may sometimes become involved in inter-clan affrays, but also that they may show their disrespect for society at large as self-centred adolescents, stock thieves and adulterers. Among moran, there is an element of prestige quite apart from personal satisfaction in such exploits, with boastful allusions to these in their songs. Potentially, the firestick patrons have a problem of delinquency on their hands.

During the period of initiation when boys are promoted to moranhood, the main focus of concern is their circumcision. This four-minute ordeal is the supreme test to prove that they have the necessary courage for true warriorhood, and this critical test is anticipated in their lebarta song, vowing to endure the agony of the operation. Any flinch of a muscle or even the bat of an eyelid as primitive razor sears into flesh is interpreted by the Samburu as a desire ‘to run away’. Any flinch will violate the boy’s honour, and this can never be redeemed, and also that of his family, which will be tainted for years to come. The honour of his clan and circumcision settlement will be derided by other Samburu. The prospect of a flinch provokes anxiety, not merely among the initiates but also among their kinsmen and ultimately the whole clan. A timid boy would be made to wait for circumcision, rather than become a morani at the earliest opportunity. The following example illustrates the extent to which a collective circumcision ceremony may bring hidden anxieties to a head.

Among the Masula of Mt Ngiro, events leading up to the initiation of the Kishili age-set had taken their normal course and all the necessary ceremonial preparations had been completed in order to hold the first circumcisions in July 1960. Excitement ran high in the circumcision settlement where I was staying. A new age-set of moran would shortly be brought into being. On the 6th July, the firestick patrons agreed that two of the initiates should be circumcised on the evening of the 7th, observing their family custom, and the remainder on the morning of the 8th.

Throughout the next day a major topic of conversation was whether or not any of the initiates would flinch. More and more elders and also moran of the previous age-set gathered carrying pliant sticks up to ten feet in length. These, they said, were to discourage any initiate who had thoughts of running away to hide himself in the bush before the operation. The initiates themselves stood around in small groups, apparently nervous at the prospect of the operation and aware of the general lack of confidence which the moran and elders had in them. On the previous evening their singing had been pointed out to me as distinctly unsteady, and now they were silent.
They afterwards told me that it was the fear of flinching rather than of pain that had worried them most. The ordeal of the ceremony was not so much one of physical endurance during the operation itself as of maintaining confidence beforehand in the face of unknown pain.

One elder saw them standing around in dejection and shouted at them. “Sing your circumcision song,” he demanded. “Show us that you are not afraid ... Or don’t you want to be circumcised?” One or two of the boys started to sing, and then another elder, the father of one of them, ran towards them and ordered them to stop singing. This, I was told, was because he was quite certain that his own son would flinch and he considered it better for him to be silent than to boast and then flinch afterwards.

This general anxiety came to a head just before the two circumcisions of that evening were to take place. The two initiates had to drive their fathers’ cattle into the settlement, and one of them started to sing: “My light brown bull – roar! For I will not bring dishonour (nyileti).”

This boast caused some consternation and the boy’s eldest brother, an elder, at first raised his whip to strike him and then checked himself. His gesture, coming at a moment when nerves were frayed, sparked off a general release of tension. One moran ran up to strike the initiate and was seized by an elder and thrown to the ground. Other men, both elders and moran, seized any person who showed signs of wanting to strike the initiate or to start an affray, and in some cases were themselves seized on this assumption. At least five moran broke down and had to be held firmly while they shook insensibly. The first two circumcisions were then carried out in a confusion of babbling and shouting, mostly aimed at the initiates undergoing the operation and the circumciser performing it, although the circumciser seemed to be the one man present who had a clear notion of what should be done and completed the operations deftly. Once these two circumcisions had been performed, there was less anxiety, and the other circumcisions were completed the following morning, still in an atmosphere of confusion and shouting, but without any signs of flinching from the initiates or fighting from the adult males.

Especially interesting in this incident was the reaction to the initiate’s boasting. His elder brother nearly struck him and his ageing father seemed on the point of having a stroke. The boast itself was made to the bull of the family herd – the same herd to which previous members of the lineage had boasted when they had been circumcised. If he had flinched then the herd itself would have been driven ignominiously through the thorn fence and so long as the event was remembered no future member of this lineage would dare to make a boast of this sort. This is the one context in Samburu life where there is a recognized way of openly shaming a person and his family, and a specific word for dishonour (nyileti). In retrospect, the elders did not criticize the initiate for showing too much confidence in himself before the operation. This boast was expected of him if he had any spirit, and as he kept his word and did not flinch, he brought credit to his family for his boldness. But they did criticize the father and
the elder brother who had shown too little confidence in him, publicly betraying that they regarded it as quite possible that a member of their family might flinch during circumcision. Other persons in private admitted that they too had felt the same way about the circumcision of their own kinsmen, but would not want to betray this in public. The news that reached other circumcision settlements in the area was not that someone had actually flinched in this particular settlement, but that the elders had expected someone to flinch. The incident was a minor humiliation and it dampened the general elation once the ceremony was over. One of the Moran who had been present told me afterwards that during the whole period of the change-over he had hated that day more than any other, but having now seen the circumcisions he had to accept that a new age-set of Moran would soon replace his own in popular esteem.

After the circumcision ceremony, the initiates spend a month under strict ritual prohibitions governing their behaviour and diet, and encouraging them to keep close company with one another. These prohibitions end with a further ceremony at which the initiates formally become Moran; they start to grow their hair and embellish it with red ochre. This is the first of a series of ceremonies known as ilmugit, which are the principal gatherings that enable the firestick patrons to exert their authority.

At their first ilmugit, each initiate vows to his mother not to eat any meat seen by a married woman. This is foremost among the various restrictions associated with the Moran. Meat that has not been seen by married women is regarded as meat of the bush where the Moran belong and where they share one another’s company. In the same vein, a Morani should not drink milk except in the company of other Moran. He should not be allowed to die inside a settlement. He should not take any form of alcohol or other non-traditional form of food. He should avoid all young married women. And he should always acknowledge his obligations towards other Moran of his age-set. To ignore these norms would be sometimes a matter of shame (eg. to eat meat seen by married women – as if he were a child), sometimes a matter of unpropitiousness (eg. to die inside a settlement), or a matter of disrespect for his age-set (eg. to drink milk by himself), or a matter of disrespect for the elders (eg. to be familiar with their wives). All these can be broadly summarized in the general formula that the Moran belong to the bush where they should keep their own company.

At defined stages of their transition to elderhood, the Moran perform an ilmugit ceremony, each of which has certain basic features that bear some similarities to their initial circumcision ceremony. Both circumcision and ilmugit ceremonies are performed separately by each clan; both entail the promotion of essentially the same group of Moran, and both ceremonies are controlled by essentially the same group of firestick patrons. Both ceremonies systematically follow the order of birth of full brothers – the order of circumcision in the first instance and the order of slaughtering ilmugit oxen in the second. In both ceremonies, the huts are systematically laid out in order of genealogical seniority within and between all the lineages of the clan. The emphasis is on a prescribed order of precedence.
Altogether there are six of these *ilmugit* ceremonies associated with stages of transition for the *moran*, from the end of their initiation period to the time when they are on the brink of elderhood some sixteen years later, when a new age-set of younger *moran* will have been initiated for some years. Above all, the *ilmugit* ceremonies are regarded by the firestick patrons as occasions when they can collect the *moran* together, harangue them, and engender in them a sense of respect, thereby maintaining some form of control.

The firestick patrons aim to instil into the *moran* not only a sense of respect, but also a sense of awe stemming from their power to bless or to curse them. A harangue will last for several hours as one patron after another hurls a tirade against the *moran* over their shortcomings and points to misfortunes – perhaps deaths among *moran* – which ‘prove’ the effectiveness of the elders’ power to curse. Actual cursing is comparatively rare, but it is a very apt topic for a harangue. These harangues end with a conditional blessing by the patrons. As an example of such a blessing, consider the following sequence during one of the more important *ilmugit* ceremonies performed by Pardopa clan.

For about ten days before the performance of the *ilmugit* ceremony, the elders and *moran* periodically held separate discussions; and the *moran* were given four or five harangues, each lasting several hours. While elders of all age-sets attended these harangues, it was the firestick patrons of the *moran* who played a leading role in all harangues, discussions and blessings. The main theme of these harangues was that the *moran* did not have a sufficiently developed sense of respect and that this retarded
their progress towards elderhood. To the patrons, this was most apparent from the way in which they stayed close to certain settlements where there were attractive young wives and from the large number of accusations of adultery recently levelled against them. The patrons argued that it was dangerous for the moran to provoke the anger of the elders, tempting them to use their curse. They urged the moran to discuss the matter among themselves so that they could reaffirm their sense of respect. Spokesmen for the moran were nominated by the patrons and these played a major role in acknowledging the essential truth of the accusations levelled against the moran.

At about 9.00 pm. on the evening before killing the first ox in the ceremony, the moran were called over to the elders’ enclosure for a blessing. There were about 25 elders and 40 moran. This was preceded first by separate discussions by the elders and by the moran, and then by a harangue. At each new stage of the evening’s activities a spiral kudu horn was blown by a morani at the instigation of the patrons. Finally, it was time for the blessing. To the sound of the horn an intense fire was built up between the elders and the moran. The elders protected their bodies from the heat by drawing up their blankets, but the moran only had short loin-cloths and were exposed to it.

Two forceful patrons led the blessing invoking the protection of God on the moran. “May Nkai look after you . . . May Nkai give you life . . . May Nkai look after you . . . May Nkai give you peace . . . May Nkai give you good fortune ...” At each pause the other elders waved their up-raised staffs and chanted, “Nkai .... Nkai .... Nkai.” rhythmically, and continued to do so even when the invocations were drowned by the general tumult. A morani was also blowing the horn in time with the rhythmical chanting.

As they began their invocations, the two leading patrons splattered the bodies of the moran with a mixture of milk and water. The unexpected sting of the cool liquid on their bodies exposed to the heat of the fire caused some of the moran to squeal and jump. And immediately three started to shake and perhaps a dozen started to shiver. Relentlessly the blessing continued, and the gasps of the shaking moran and the chant of elders and the sound of the horn practically drowned the words of the invocation. Some shaking moran partially recovered, and others started to shake and had to be held. Eventually the morani blowing the horn fell shaking and had to be held by about five other moran. Another morani picked up the horn and started to blow, but he began to shake immediately, and the horn was taken over by a third morani who had some difficulty in keeping the time and just blew it continuously. After about six minutes, there were five shaking moran who were being forcibly held by both moran and elders, and a dozen other moran who were either shivering or shaking. There was no morani who was not either shivering or shaking or holding a shaking morani. At this point the blessing stopped.

At dawn next morning, before the slaughter of ilmugit oxen started, the firestick patrons mustered the moran for a further blessing (Plate IV), inducing further shivering and some shaking on an altogether smaller scale.
In this incident, the blessing started abruptly and there was a sudden and relentless build-up of invocations and chanting to the climax, which was maintained throughout. At one moment, the 
*moran*
 were standing half-naked before the blazing fire. Then their heated bodies were suddenly stung by the cool mixture of milk and water, invocations were hurled at them, and the horn was blowing almost deafeningly in time with the patrons’ chanting. It had much in common with the circumcision operation where each initiate had first to wash himself quickly with a similar mixture of milk and water, and then he was surrounded by a crowd of shouting elders while he passively submitted to circumcision. The repeated sound of the horn, only used at ceremonies or when enemy raiders are in the vicinity, added to the impressiveness of the occasion. The 
*moran*
 said that the sound of it, especially in the presence of the elders, made them want to shake. In other words, such features as the mixture of milk and water, the horn, the concentrated attention of the firestick patrons have potent associations. It also seems feasible that the extent to which the patrons managed to impress the 
*moran*
 with the weight of their powerful blessing would also engender a greater dread of their curse. Paradoxically, both the curse and the blessing over the 
*moran*
 are oppressive, and not as complementary as they might seem.

At their harangues, the elders emphasized that they wanted to inculcate certain values in the 
*moran*, emphasizing the need for them to gain respect in order to attain full elderhood. But they behaved as though they really wanted to maintain the 
*moran* in their state of prolonged adolescence. It was not simply that they tried to teach
the *moran* respect, but that they constantly accused the *moran* of being incapable of learning respect. Instead of inviting them to keep company more often with the elders, they would tell them to go back into the bush where they belonged and to stay there until they acquired this respect. In private, no-one seriously suggested that the *moran* could learn the true meaning of respect from other *moran* alone. Rather, this unconstructive haranguing could be seen as a way of ensuring a continuation of the status quo.

6.2 Interpretations of Shivering and Shaking

Shivering and fits of shaking among *moran* are popularly ascribed to the roots of certain plants that they stew in their soups. The Samburu claim that these excite their emotions and make them shiver. The Maasai have a similar explanation and this was confirmed by an early administrator who wrote that “I can vouch for the *il kitoloswa* [root], small doses of which do, in fact, produce a fierce and unbalanced state of mind”. In my own experience on the other hand, *moran* soups among the Samburu gave me diarrhoea, but I was not aware of any emotional response. This negative view was confirmed when extracts from four selected roots (including *il kitoloswa*) were routinely tested on laboratory mice, and this seems to tally with the ideal that *moran* should keep their inner bodies pure and expurgated (Chapter 3).²

An alternative explanation is that there is moral pressure on Samburu youths to become *moran* and behave in the ways that *moran* are assumed always to have behaved. In other words, this phenomenon is a form of conditioned reflex. It is expected of them as warriors and they assimilate it as part of their subculture. Among the Maasai, shivering is also associated with *moranhood*, but occasionally it extends to girls, older boys, young elders, and in one observed case to the mother of an initiate during his circumcision. The ‘conditioning’ appears more tightly restricted among the Samburu.

Shivering and shaking were observed in the initial phase of *moran* dances, their *dances of display* (Chapter 5). Although the Samburu do not elaborate on this phase in clear analytical terms, they are aware of acute emotions generated in this climax by two opposed forces: constraint and assertiveness. The element of constraint is symptomatic of their whole *moranhood* and of the regime under which they are placed. This is a society in which loyalty to age-set and clan and conformity to the mores of Samburu society as a whole are supreme virtues. A man is expected to suppress private desires that conflict with public expectations, to show an aloof

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² Fox 1930: 454. For further details of the subsequent tests, see Spencer 1965: 270n. I am grateful to Dr John A. Lock of the Pharmacology Department at Makerere College for undertaking these tests and for permission to quote his findings.
respects, and to stand on his dignity. This self-restraint is a social grace that the *moran* in particular cultivate and carry through to elderhood. In the dance, the *moran* have a uniform appearance, compactness in their grouping, and stereotyped movements that are synchronized with the collectively induced rhythm.

This constraint extends to the expectations that they should comply with the peace of the dance, regardless of its competitive edge, and master any desire to fight. They associate their shivering and fits of shaking with the angry struggle within themselves to overcome the urge to attack some adversary. As their anger is aroused, they shiver and experience a tightness gripping their chests, inducing a sense of breathless suffocation as they sink into unconsciousness and shaking. When *moran* assert themselves aggressively at each rhythmic climax of the dance with boasting and loud exhalations from deep down in their chests, it is as if their anger is induced by the conflict between their own assertiveness and some external force pressing relentlessly inwards. In the grip of this extreme contradiction between assertiveness and constraint, they lose consciousness and achieve relaxation. They have no theory of possession by some spirit, yet at a metaphoric level a somewhat similar explanation suggests itself. In a society such as this, the collectivist slant of Durkheim’s sociology is particularly apt, and at times when *moran* shiver and shake one is led to suggest that this sense of suffocation is none other than their experience of society itself as a constraining force bearing down on them and taking possession as their anger and urge to break free mounts. This is to imply that Samburu society as a moral force is assimilated as a physiological response over the extended period that youths prime themselves for *moranhood*. It is in their dances during the display phase and at other times when they should control their desires to fight that shaking is actually expected of them. Shaking is a sign of their assertiveness and of their self-mastery, in other words a proof of their worthiness as warriors. When they become elders and are no longer expected to assert themselves, then shivering and shaking are inappropriate and are expected to cease.

Samburu and Maasai associate shivering with an emotional state that they describe as *en-goro*. Dictionary definitions translate this term as ‘anger’, derived from *a-gor*, ‘to strangle’ and hence its reflexive form *a-goro*, which seems to imply a bottling up of emotions, but not necessarily just of anger. Shivering and shaking among Samburu *moran* appear to have wider connotations than just controlled anger. In the first of the above examples, the *moran* who shook at the initiations of a new age-set were confronted with a mixed concern: first, over the implications for family honour if an initiate flinched; and second, over the prospect of the end of their *moranhood* leading to an uncertain elderhood after years of suspended adolescence. This suggests a state of apprehension on various counts as much as anger at the prospect of being displaced from their pedestal as *moran*. In the second example, the *moran* were confronted with a tirade from their firestick patrons followed by their relentless collective blessing, and they shivered and shook. They later described their emotions as one of fear for their patrons and an anxiety over their power to curse.
Interpreting shivering among Moran as a state of apprehensiveness seems supported by the claim that they would shiver before but not during battle, rather as in their dances of display when their shivering is said to stem from controlling their impulse to fight.

Switching to a Maasai context, when young elders express their sadness regarding the prospect of a father’s death, they use the terms a-iputukuny (to be afraid) and a-goro. While the second term suggests an element of ‘anger’ in their grief, they explain this in terms of losing someone who would protect them from the greed of predatory senior kinsmen. In this context, ‘to be apprehensive’ seems again a more fitting translation for a-goro. Clearly, the interpretation of intensely felt emotions and translation into English pose problems, and shaking among Moran appears to be more than just an expression of anger. Here, it is the experience of apprehensiveness that I wish to pursue further.

6.3 Conditioning and Reconditioning through Ritual

When misfortune occurs in unusual circumstances or is unexpectedly severe then Samburu assume that it was caused either by a discourtesy that provoked a valid curse or by some ritual gaffe. Their concern for showing respect where it is due is matched by a concern for ritual correctness in conducting ceremonies. Ceremonies are the highlights of social gatherings and the rich detail of their ceremonial activities is a matter of public display and pride.

Yet, ritual protocol is surrounded by a penumbra of uncertainty and conflicting notions. In the first example above, the element of confusion and shouting during the initiations illustrated this uncertainty. Even on routine occasions, such as weddings which are marked by celebration, the details of ritual correctness are not necessarily routine matters for the central performers. They are the focus of attention, and the principal performers can be embarrassed, confused, and sometimes visibly anxious under public scrutiny. The confusions add colour to the event and may be recalled as local anecdotes for a time. Every performance has its uniqueness, giving it character and distinction. But if some ritual gaffe or novelty can be linked to later misfortune then it is more serious and the penumbra of uncertainty gives rise to a penumbra of anxiety. The repertoire of anecdotes is matched by theories of mystical misfortune that arise from experience and raise questions concerning the popular consensus on tradition. Belief in the sanctity of tradition is fixed, but the details are more fluid and tradition evolves imperceptibly as events and theories unfold.

The impact of elaborate public ceremonies on personal emotions touches on the realm of psychology. This raises the possibility that an understanding of the essence of ritual may stray beyond the pioneering work of Van Gennep (1909) and the established confines of social anthropology, which steer clear of psychological explanation. In Van Gennep’s scheme, changes in status are disruptive in societies.
where status differences are pronounced, and these changes tend to be enveloped in ceremony or rites of transition. He pointed out that these may consist of three stages that can be broadly classified as a process of separation-marginalization-reincorporation. Ceremonies that mark the career of Samburu moran fit neatly into this scheme. Thus, prior to their circumcision the initiates are obliged to keep one another’s company more or less constantly and are thereby separated from younger boys and from their older brothers who are moran of the preceding age-set. After their circumcision they are in a marginal state with defined ritual constraints and in a position when they are more than boys but less than moran in the fullest sense. And at the end of the month, they perform their first ilmugit ceremony and formally become moran: they are now incorporated into the age grade of moranhood. The subsequent ilmugit ceremonies may also be divided along the same lines, although less obviously, and each marks a phase in the promotion of the moran towards elderhood. In pursuing his analysis, Van Gennep considered early material available for the Maasai at length (ibid: 84-87). But unaccountably he failed to note that the whole period of moranhood can be regarded as an extended period of transition. Circumcision is a rite of separation from the initiate’s mother’s home; moranhood, with its prohibitions, association with the bush and ilmugit ceremonies, is a prolonged marginal rite; and the final blessing by the elders when a man is allowed to relax the food restrictions of moranhood is a rite of incorporation into elderhood. Van Gennep’s term ‘marge’ is particularly apt when referring to the separateness of the moran from the remainder of the society: they are marginal, and it is the colourful associations with their marginal position that makes them the focus of popular attention.

In an elaboration of Van Gennep’s work, Chapple and Coon (1947) follow Radcliffe-Brown’s distinction between the transmission of new social sentiments through ceremony and the maintenance of existing sentiments. They suggest that in rites of transition, individuals are conditioned through dominant symbols to adapt to a new pattern of interaction that follows from a change in social relationships. Thus in the first example of an initiation ceremony, a new age-set is brought to life by patrons kindling a fire, and the firestick that they use can be taken as a symbol of their patronizing power over the initiates. On the other hand, Chapple and Coon label other ceremonies as rites of intensification, where the existing pattern of interaction is periodically reinforced, as in the second example when the firestick patrons’ power over the moran was reinforced through their harangues and blessing. More precisely, the elements of transition and intensification may describe separate features of a single ritual: routine ilmugit ceremonies mark stages in the transition of moran to elderhood, but the opportunity to gather then together and harangue them intensifies the firestick relationship between patrons and moran. In addition to routine ceremonies, the firestick patrons may mount other ilmugit ceremonies at times when the morale or the sense of responsibility and respect among the moran are at low ebb. These can be regarded as rites of intensification pure and simple.
Radcliffe-Brown’s theory of social sentiments was neo-pavlovian, and Chapple and Coon highlight the relevance of Pavlov’s earlier experiments for understanding ritual. These had shown that certain behaviour patterns could be built up in dogs under controlled laboratory conditions as conditioned reflexes. However, Chapple and Coon do not extend this interpretation to Pavlov’s later experiments, which have further relevance for understanding ritual. Pavlov noted that during some floods in Leningrad, a number of his laboratory dogs were nearly drowned and some ceased to respond to their previously conditioned stimuli, but they were highly sensitive to the sound or sight of trickling water. This led to Pavlov’s later experiments that examined ways in which conditioned behaviour patterns could be removed and supplanted by new ones. He found that by submitting the dogs to abnormal mental stress, or by debilitating them in some way (such as by inducing excessive fatigue, fever, intestinal disorders or by castrating them) a breakdown – a transmarginal state – could occur which would interfere with their existing conditioned responses. Pavlov also found that while these dogs were in a transmarginal state, new patterns of behaviour might be induced in them which would remain after recovery, and these tended to be more permanent in dogs of an inherently stable temperament than in other dogs, and not vice versa. Pavlov evidently felt justified in applying his conclusions on animal behaviour to processes of human thought, and William Sargant, a ‘physician in psychological medicine’ who drew on Pavlov’s findings, had no hesitation in doing so from his own observations, equating positive and negative conditioned responses with positive and negative emotional attitudes.

Sargant was primarily concerned with the physiological mechanisms that make it possible for the beliefs and attitudes of individuals to be modified or radically altered. He proposes that suggestibility is increased at times of abnormal mental stress, straining higher nervous systems beyond the limits of normal conditioned responses. When this leads to a transmarginal breakdown, it may accompany either a release of nervous energy (abreaction), or a change or intensification of attitudes among those concerned. These changes may remain when the cause of anxiety is removed. In such circumstances, brainwashing in both religion and politics and in eliciting confessions are quite practicable.

Thus in the first case study above, taking Samburu circumcision as a time of abnormal mental stress for the initiate, this may be regarded as entailing pain and debilitation, but more significant is the prolonged mental ordeal of anticipating the pain and the devastating possibility of flinching. Following Sargant, the initiate is at

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3 Sargant 1957: chapter 1.
4 Sargant 1957: chapter 2.
5 Sargant 1957: 88, 94, 97, 145, 158, & passim. Sargant considers the significance of initiation rites in West Africa and New Guinea. I had two opportunities to discuss my material with him in the 1960s, before and after his visit to the Samburu.
the threshold of his *moranhood* and faced with a wholly new set of expectations. These extend to experiencing the full force of the power of the firestick patrons in managing the ceremony and overseeing the new age-set. The initiate’s increased suggestibility reorients him to a new awareness of the regime that ultimately governs his *moranhood*. From the elders’ point of view this is practical politics, whether or not they are aware of the underlying psychological mechanisms.

During the initiations, the dominant thought present in everyone’s mind was surely whether any initiate would flinch, and this entailed honour. Inasmuch as the anxiety created by the ceremony could induce any new attitude in the initiates, it might well be the association of this notion of honour with their new relationship to family, clan and age-set. Honour would not be an entirely foreign notion to them, but the gravity and intensity of the ceremony could introduce a new significance. Such incidents as this might, I suggest, explain to some extent why honour is of such importance during *moranhood*. By accident if not design, it becomes the crucial issue during circumcision, and the very fact that it is a crucial issue could (following Sargant) have a pronounced effect on the values accepted by the initiates after their circumcision. Family honour for them could have become what the sound of trickling water was for Pavlov’s dogs.

My material does not seem to justify any pseudo-psychoanalytical analysis of circumcision as a symbolic form of castration to prepare the initiates for the years of impotent bachelorhood that lie ahead. But following Sargant, it is worth noting that circumcision is a form of debilitation which could be a further factor that drives them to a transmarginal state of mind where they are exceptionally suggestible to new ideas. The operation itself was instigated by the elders, and another aspect of the ceremony that might have impressed the initiates besides the notion of family honour was that it was under the control of the elders in every detail and at every stage. The elders brandished long pliant whips and a confusion of shouting conflicting instructions surrounded the operation. This could have instilled or reinforced the attitude that they belonged to a society that was controlled by the elders. As we have seen, it preceded a time when the initiates were to be subordinated to the will of the elders and especially of their firestick patrons.

Turning to the second case study, *Chart 6.1* lists some principal points in Sargant’s argument and matches these with selected aspects of the *ilmugit* ceremony.

Sargant pays particular attention to John Wesley’s techniques of gaining converts to Methodism among his hearers, and certain aspects of his meetings resemble a harangue of Samburu *moran*. Wesley would first agitate his audience with threats of eternal hellfire (just as the patrons warned the *moran* of the unpropitious consequences of their curse) and then he would suggest to them that salvation could be gained through conversion (just as the patrons would persuade the *moran* of their general security from ill-fortune once they acquired a sense of respect). Wesley’s preaching would have a powerful effect on his hearers: ‘Some sunk down, and there remained no strength in them; others exceedingly trembled and quaked; some were torn with
Chart 6.1: Evidence of brainwashing in Samburu ilmugit ceremonies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRINCIPLES OF BRAINWASHING (Sargant)</th>
<th>ASPECTS OF SAMBURU ILMUGIT CEREMONIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjects in preliterate societies may become sensitive to objects associated with their initiation, endowing these symbols with an emotional significance.</td>
<td>The significance of the term ‘firestick’ as a symbol relates back to the initiation fire of each morani when he and his age mates are first subordinated to the will of their over-bearing ‘firestick patrons’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In eliciting confessions, mental stress may be produced by fasting, ordeal, threats, prolonged social isolation, debilitation or torture.</td>
<td>Any morani who is accused of some offence faces the ordeal of a threat of the patron’s curse hanging over him and also being singled out at the next patrons’ harangue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induced change is liable to be more permanent if the subject has a stable personality, and if he tries at first to oppose the change.</td>
<td>The firestick patrons select spokesmen for the moran from among the most astute members to represent their whole age-set.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To elicit a confession, it is only necessary to force a victim to accept that he cannot resolve the ordeal except by accepting his guilt and whatever else is being indoctrinated.</td>
<td>In an ilmugit ceremony, firestick patrons harangue the moran and force their principal spokesman to admit the tacit guilt of all the moran present – and he may then loyally reiterate this allegation to his age mates subsequently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliciting confessions can be effectively achieved by finding a ‘sore spot’ in the victim’s experience and working away at it.</td>
<td>The Samburu term for ‘to harangue’ also translates as ‘to hit someone on a bruise or a sensitive place’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certain rhythms can build up abnormalities in the brain and induce convulsive fits in predisposed subjects.</td>
<td>The firestick patron’s blessing builds up relentlessly and rhythmically, and leads to widespread fits of shivering and shaking among moran.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger and fear can drive subjects into a transmarginal state, and this increases their suggestibility.</td>
<td>Moran suggest that their shaking displays a mixture of anger and apprehensiveness. The anger openly displayed by patrons appears to be in part genuine and in part contrived to overawe the moran.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New doctrines need to be consolidated through periodic re-inculcation, and through re-iterating their basic principles at communal assemblies.</td>
<td>Extra ilmugit ceremonies may be mounted from time to time when relations between moran and their patrons are at low ebb.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
a kind of convulsive motion in every part of their bodies, and that so violently that often four or five persons could not hold one of them.’ This seems very similar to the widespread shaking observed at the imugit blessing.6

In the imugit harangues, firestick patrons focus on the misdeeds of the Moran, publicly exposing known suspects: they are the ‘sore spot’ of the Moran. If a few Moran have been caught stealing stock, seducing wives, or showing less than full respect for the elders, then they are all held to be thieves, adulterers, and hooligans. In their advance towards elderhood, they are allowed to crawl only at the pace of the slowest and most unresponsive members. During the first seven or so years that follow the initiation of a new age-set, there are several minor initiations, and the older Moran are joined by raw recruits to their age-set and are obliged to retrace their steps with them. In addition, they face the constant frustration of losing their girl-lovers as these are married off to elders of other clans. Meanwhile, they have to wait up to fifteen or even twenty years after their own physical maturation before they too can marry and qualify as elders. During this period, any show of disrespect plays into the hands of the patrons.

Sargent’s comments on the greater effectiveness of brainwashing techniques on emotionally stable subjects tally with the Samburu patrons involving selected Moran spokesmen as their predictable agents during a harangue. There are many Samburu elders who were once brave, influential, and irascible as Moran and hence in some ways typical of a popular image of the Moran, and yet they were unable to adapt themselves successfully to elderhood and tried in the debates and at other times to dominate rather than persuade, as though they were still Moran. Such men tend to have signs of inflexibility in their temperaments and seem never to have quite achieved the transition from Moranhood to elderhood, but they remain members of their age-set and as firestick patrons they can be superb at leading the angry harangues against the Moran. It is the more docile patrons who may privately suggest that the Moran are on the whole a decent lot, but that stressing their worst faults in harangues has always been standard practice, and that they in their youth had been terrified of their firestick patrons.

The ordeal that Samburu women face on marriage is particularly telling. Every girl is strictly taught to avoid all elders and is afraid and overawed by them. As a girl-bride, she has to formally separate from her Moran lover to be circumcised in her mother’s hut and meet her husband, who could be two or three times her age, or older. Then in the evening she is harangued by the avoided and highly respected elders of her father’s clan. During the harangue, she is forced to recant her associations with the Moran and made to accept the wisdom of her father’s choice of groom in return for all he has done for her, or risk his curse. Intimidated by the occasion, she is expected to respond dutifully to the elders’ demands, while clearly confused by their verbal

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6 Sargent, 1957: 82. Quoted from Wesley’s The Journal of John Wesley.
bullying. Only when the elders are satisfied that she is prepared to accept that she has no alternative to this marriage would the pressure on her subside. On the following morning, she is docilely led away by her husband with no clear prospect of ever seeing her parents again. Some wives may run away from their husband’s home and their marriages break down. However, for those who remain, the pressure of their wedding appears to achieve its purpose, for most, if not all, mature women insist that they owe everything they have to their fathers’ care and wisdom in choosing their husbands. Elders, they insist, understand these things while women do not.

6.4 Conformity, Suggestibility, and the Assembly of Clan Elders

The optimistic outlook on social life among Samburu is not dogged by excessive concern with misfortune, but it is hedged in by pressures towards conformity with custom and avoiding any suggestion of some ritual lapse. The ultimate authority on these pressures is the ad hoc assembly of local clan elders, acting as the agents of the entire, widely dispersed clan. They are the repositories of tradition, and genuine anxieties within the community are ultimately their concern. Individuals who utter curses or violate ritual protocol are accountable to their peers and ultimately the community of clan elders.

The moral authority of any elder within his own homestead is buttressed by the collective wisdom of his fellow clan elders, and he is answerable to them and may join them in any discussion at a locally convened clan assembly. These assemblies vary in size with the seriousness and immediacy of the problem that needs to be addressed. If, for instance, a wife is suspected of adultery with an unknown morani, she may be saved from her husband’s beating by local elders convening at short notice to restrain him. She will then find herself subjected to a harangue by these elders – this time of her husband’s clan – and they will agree on a suitable punishment, perhaps the confiscation of a cow from her allotted herd. The husband will then be under pressure to accept this decision by the shared concern to resolve an issue that would affect the reputation of his clan if this wife were to run back to her parents’ home.

A more formal assembly of clan elders could take place at a convenient spot beyond earshot of any village and their deliberations are conducted in an aura of privacy. They are the ultimate authority on ritual protocol and they assume powers to bless or to curse, giving a reassuring protection to all their members. Moran are given their first direct experience of these assemblies when they are gathered together by their firestick patrons for a harangue and blessing, and they may be abruptly dismissed or recalled at any point. At other times, moran should avoid these assemblies. During the elders’ debating, serious disagreements may display a mixture of anger and anxiety. However, the pressure to achieve consensus appears to increase the suggestibility of elders as they emerge from heated discussion. Minority views that were expressed before and during the debate can be emphatically denied afterwards. The ultimate
correctness of collective agreement is a guiding principle that shores up the unity of the clan. It is a self-fulfilling premise that underpins conformity and the suggestibility among individual elders.

The pressure for consensus within the clan corresponds to conflicting interests between clans, notably over the ambiguities surrounding marriage. These include indefinitely extended marriage payments, clan responsibility for obtaining wives for even their most handicapped members, and above all a concern for clan reputation and eligibility for marriage. The credibility of the clan lies with their ability to rein in their least suggestible members as moran, and those who do not respond to coercion and suggestion will lose the support of their clansmen as elders.

6.5 Conclusion: Ritual, Anxiety, and Evolving Roles

Malinowski suggested that rituals are performed in situations where there is uncertainty and danger, and they serve to allay anxiety and give confidence. Responding to this, Radcliffe-Brown pointed out that the opposite may also be true: that the rites and associated beliefs may induce anxiety where anxiety is a proper and expected sentiment, as in childbirth (and rather as shivering while bottling up emotions among Samburu moran is both proper and expected). Radcliffe-Brown’s response fitted his general theory of the social function of ceremony: ‘to regulate, maintain and transmit from one generation to another sentiments on which the constitution of society depends’. Drawing on a psychiatrist’s view of religious and political indoctrination, this chapter argues that anxiety is not necessarily allayed or encouraged by ritual performance, but that it may be a response to the stress of changing relationships and expectations. It serves to increase the suggestibility of participants, challenging their existing sentiments so that they come to accept the changes.

Among the Samburu, there is widespread agreement over the correct ritual procedures for each ceremony, but there is also a measure of uncertainty and minor elaborations that give each performance character and add to the wider perception of change. Unscheduled features may be fondly remembered as anecdotes, or give rise to gossip and even the possibility of mystical misfortune. Any of these irregularities may cause anxiety, especially among the key participants. To the extent that the ceremonies mark transitions and hence changing social relationships, it can be argued that the anxious concern for ritual correctness stems most immediately from the fact that the ceremonies are very public and are linked to the inevitability of change. To the extent that the wider public are not just passive onlookers but are related to the performers and affected by the evolving social relations as the ritual unfolds, they share up to

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a point in this apprehensiveness. The real uncertainty that hangs over them is the future of developing relationships. Paradoxically, it is the anxieties aroused by more immediate concerns over performance that seem to be more relevant to the transition than firmly held beliefs in the possibility of mystical misfortune, which articulate these anxieties.

The mixture of celebration with an undercurrent of apprehension is characteristic of Samburu ceremony generally. At times of weddings, women are involved in a ritual domain of their own, with similar concerns that raise and dampen their anxieties. However, where the ceremony concerns relations between male age-sets as participants step up to the next rung on the age ladder, then this involves a major adjustment within the society at large, and the possibility of anxiety increases to this extent. It is not just the initiates, moran, and their firestick patrons that have to adapt to the fact of promotion to a higher status. All Samburu are obliged to accept the changes of relationships that this implies, within the age system and within individual families. It involves everyone in the final resort in a process of adjustment to a new reality. The general sense of apprehensiveness with increased suggestibility is an aspect of accommodating to this fact. Once there is a clear consensus on this, the upgrading has been fully accomplished. The firestick patrons have achieved their purpose, and in this sense so has the ritual performance. The problem of accepting the transition as fact is resolved, and thereby it is legitimized in the unique memories of ritual performance.