

# Predicaments of war and peace

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Initially, I wanted to deal in this paper mainly with the ethnography of war and peace in southern Ethiopia, and I intended to keep theoretical debate to a minimum. But, as armed conflict remains a contemporary reality I find it necessary to tackle some more general questions, shifting the focus on theory and method in the anthropological study of warfare. In so doing I will critically examine some of the work done previously in this field.

My point of departure is that engaging in armed conflict and writing about it are not separable activities because theory and practice influence each other and constitute a causal whole. Because it is so basic, let me repeat the point: fighting and writing are not separable because knowledge influences action and vice versa. This is why we must work towards a critical theory of warfare. A critical theory helps to undermine the practice of armed conflict instead of legitimating and thus perpetuating it like many of the existing theories of warfare tend to do.

I want to expand on this point by examining Katseyoshu Fukui's essay "Cattle colour symbolism and inter-tribal homicide among the Bodi".<sup>1</sup>

The use of 'and' in the title makes one wonder what kind of relationship may exist between the unlikely pair of cattle colour and homicide, and at close inspection it turns out that Fukui says nothing about the primary function of perceiving, knowing, caring for and speaking about individual cattle by means of their colour patterns, but, following Berlin and Kay, he gives a nice outline of Bodi colour classification and the way in which colours are used to name favourite cattle. He also shows how the Bodi, like so many other pastoralists in East Africa, ritually link people to particular animals and name them after them.

Fukui sees in this linkage an act of identification and mentions that persons identify themselves with their favourite animals by receiving their names after them, by wearing necklaces signifying the animals, by singing about them and so on.<sup>2</sup> He sums up this identification with the statement that "It is no exaggeration to say that a man regards life without his morare (favourite animal) as hardly worth living".<sup>3</sup> As Bodi men identify themselves with their favourite animals, they are distressed when these animals get sick.

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<sup>1</sup> Katsuyoshi Fukui, "Cattle colour symbolism and inter-tribal homicide among the Bodi", *Senri Ethnological Studies* 3 (1979).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 163, 170.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 170.

Therefore they perform an animal sacrifice or go and kill a member of a neighbouring group in order to help their favourite animal to recover. They go also to commit homicide when the morare has grown old and has died a natural death or has been ritually slaughtered and eaten by the age-mates of the owner. As Fukui says, "Sometime after this ceremony, the man who has lost his morare will take a few age-mates with him on an expedition to kill a member of a neighbouring group".<sup>4</sup> When he returns, the killer is ritually cleansed, and later receives scarifications on one of his arms, which signify that he has slain an enemy.

Fukui gives four cases of such homicide and then ends his paper with a short paragraph entitled "Continuing inter-tribal homicide". Here he says:

It has now been established that the death (or sometimes illness) of a man's favourite animal (mostly an ox) is a primary factor in the killing of members of neighbouring groups. As the Bodi put it... "When a morare dies, I become resentful and go to kill a Mursi or highlander". For the Bodi, cattle do not belong to the animal world... but to that of mankind... The morare institution is the most striking illustration of this belief. If his morare is ill a man will sacrifice another animal to aid its recovery, as though he wished himself to recover from an illness.<sup>5</sup>

I will return to this passage presently, but before I do this let me quote Fukui's final statements:

Thus, while cattle continue to die, there will, of course, be no lack of occasions [*sic*] for men to go on lufa [raiding] expeditions against neighbouring peoples... When I asked the Bodi, "Will there be an end to killing and warfare if you get many cattle and abundant pasture?", they replied "No; they will go on forever".<sup>6</sup>

Now, there are a number of points in Fukui's paper, which ask for criticism. I go through them one by one: the most general is that Fukui suggests that the Bodi will go on killing others forever. They will never stop killing because they hold certain beliefs about the identity of man and beast and think that they can only rescue their beasts and themselves by killing innocent others.

This sounds mad and exotic and may be what people expect to hear from anthropologists, but to me it is an expression of the alienated stance of the anthropologist, and I dare say that if Fukui had asked the Bodi a more sensible question and had discussed with them the reasons for warfare more

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 170.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 175-176.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 176.

deeply, the Bodi would have given him quite a different answer.

Instead of giving us detailed documents of Bodi speech and action, Fukui provides us mainly with stereotypes. Take for example the following: “So interested are the Bodi in cattle that their daily conversations seemed to be about nothing else”.<sup>7</sup> Anyone who is familiar with the pastoralists of East Africa knows that here Fukui has grossly distorted the character of their discourse. True, cattle feature prominently in the daily concerns of pastoralist — and how could it be otherwise — but people’s daily conversations are, like in all other societies, an integral part of their social life and revolve around politics, economics, kinship and marriage, rituals and beliefs, song and dance, warfare and the like. It would be the task of the ethnographer to listen closely to these “daily conversations” rather than reduce them to “talk about cattle”.

This leads me to Fukui’s thesis that the death of a man’s favourite animal is a “primary factor in the killing of members of neighbouring groups”. This is a shallow analysis. Are we really meant to agree that certain fancy beliefs can be primary factors for action? From all we know about the production of “fancy beliefs”, we have to expect that they are based on rational practices and have a persuasive and rhetorical character. In other words, beliefs are never “primary factors”, and should not be mistaken as such.

A primary factor among the Bodi (as among so many other pastoralists) is the desire to create in the members of their society a strong commitment to their herds. Herding cattle, goats and sheep is often a lonely and extremely trying activity. It involves hardships of various kinds, including the protection of the herds from dangerous animals and their defence against raiders from neighbouring groups. One way of strengthening the commitment of the herdsmen is the institution of the favourite animal, usually an ox or castrated he-goat.

The institution has a persuasive function and its form is poetic. In the technical language of rhetoric the choice of the favourite animal is that of synecdoche: a significant part is chosen to represent a whole. The favourite animal stands for the whole herd. Thus people focus on a specific and clearly perceptible part (the ox) rather than an unspecific and amorphous whole (the herd).

The exaggerated way in which the favourite animal is decorated, praised in song, ritually slaughtered and psychologically invested with feelings may in turn be described by the rhetorical form of hyperbole.

In order to understand the kind of commitment created by the favourite ox, it may be useful to recall a custom, which Fukui does not mention but which used to be common to most of the pastoral groups of

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 150.

southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. When they were threatened by others, the warriors would drive their favourite oxen towards the enemy, singing the praise of these animals and showing that they were ready to die for them if the enemy would dare to touch them. Nobody knows who invented this custom, but it is certainly a good strategy for committing the individual herdsmen to the herds and even risk death in the defence of them.

Seen in this light, the rituals and beliefs associated with a man's favourite animal are not primary factors for his action but rather secondary or derived ones. In other words, they have no independent grounding but depend on other factors such as the need for commitment and devotion to the herds.

I think that the defensive practice, outlined above, will find approval by everyone, including the Bodi, Mursi, Nyangatom, Hamar, Maasai, and, for that matter, their anthropologists. But I doubt that the treacherous homicide for the favourite ox which, according to Fukui is practised by the Bodi, will ever find general approval, and I am also convinced that the Bodi themselves would condemn the practice if we were to engage in a meaningful conversation with them about this matter.

In fact, I even doubt that the Bodi would agree with Fukui's analysis. They would probably tell us that no Bodi really has to kill anyone because of the illness or death of his favourite ox. Here it would have been extremely important to have accurate data, covering a certain span of time, which would show on the one side how many Bodi committed homicide when their favourite animals got sick or died, and on the other side how many refrained from killing, and the reasons why they did so. But Fukui provides only the very general statement that "the man who has lost his morare will take a few age-mates with him on an expedition to kill a member of a neighbouring group". In this form, the statement is certainly false and misleading and exemplifies the alienated and positivist position of the anthropologist. True, some Bodi will go and kill, but others will not, and this difference is crucial for a critical understanding of what is happening, and of how things could be changed.

I have said above that the beliefs and rituals associated with the favourite animal cannot be primary but only secondary or derived factors for homicide. But, interestingly, the empirical cases of Bodi homicide given by Fukui only partly support such a refined thesis.

True, there are cases where men go on expeditions with the sole intention of killing others and bringing home their trophies, but there are also cases where the sickness or death of a favourite animal are not real driving motives but are simply used as convenient excuses for raiding. To illustrate this point I quote Fukui here at some length:

A man's animal had become senile and was slaughtered by his age-

mates in the normal fashion. Ten months later he went on a lufa expedition, accompanied by twenty-five young men... His aim was to kill and not steal cattle but his companions, from the start, were only interested in taking cattle. Not being able to find any, however, they killed four Dime.<sup>8</sup>

A further case shows that Bodi homicide, rather than being motivated by favourite animals may be an undisguised expression of aggression and expansion. A Bodi's favourite animal had died:

Several days after its death, he shot a woman in an area called Fardi in the northern highlands, her death being witnessed by some of his age-mates. In the same month many Bodi raided the northern highlands, together with the Tishana, taking more than one thousand cattle and killing hundreds of people.<sup>9</sup>

What has gone wrong in Fukui's paper is that he has pictured the Bodi as prisoners of some irrational beliefs and concludes that their homicide will go on forever. In this way he has created a hopeless situation, which is worse than the horrific reality itself, for how can there ever be a way out of it?

This leads me to my final criticism. I have already quoted the sentence where Fukui says: "For the Bodi, cattle do not belong to the animal world... but to that of mankind". Here the ethnographer has created mysticism, which is alien to the Bodi and other East African pastoralist.

It is complete nonsense to say that for the Bodi cattle do not belong to the animal world. They certainly belong to the domain of the animal world. This is the ground from where they are then metaphorically likened to human beings. As in the metaphor "George is a lion", the expression "cattle are human" brings two separate domains into focus so that the attention oscillates between two separate domains, the domain of animals and the domain of humans.

This metaphorical likening of man and beast creates lively thoughts and feelings, but there is nothing irrational in it. When we hear "George is a lion", we think about the way in which George may be like a lion, with a tail, a roar, a mane and claws and all, how he may be king of humans like the lion is 'king' of the animals, how he is brave as a lion *etc.* Wouldn't it be hilarious and would we not laugh if one day an anthropologist came from Mars and after much intensive fieldwork would publish his (or her) finding that: "For the English (or Germans, French, Italians *etc.*). George does not belong to mankind but to the animal world?"

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 172.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 175.

We would laugh, but we would also be disturbed, for the misunderstanding would signal how alienated the observer and the observed have been from one another, and we would say to each other, "lets talk to him (or her) and see to it that he gets things right, because as long as he confuses metaphorical with literal meanings he will misrepresent us and make us look silly and irrational".

In other words, the likening of ox and man that underlies the institution of the favourite animal must not be taken literally but should be interpreted as metaphor. If we interpret the likening in terms of the theory of metaphor, the seeming irrationalities vanish and we realise that the Bodi are not imprisoned by immutable beliefs. They themselves have created and are creating the beliefs as part and parcel of their ongoing rhetorical strategies and to the same extent that they make their beliefs they can also modify and change them.

My point in all the criticism which I have voiced so far is that if we turn to the subject of warfare, we do not only face empirical but also theoretical and methodological problems. The difficulties are not easily mastered, but the least we can do is to acknowledge the fact that people make their own history, and that cultural forms are not immutable.

Fukui has pictured the Bodi as prisoners of conventional beliefs, but there is a critical difference between convention and performance. To paraphrase Stephen Tyler, social life is neither anarchic nor determined but a process emerging from the intentional acts of wilful egos constrained by convention.<sup>10</sup> It is this difference between convention and performance on which we have to focus when we want to study warfare. Let me explain this by means of cases from the Hamar who live not far from the Bodi in South Omo.

## Case 1

In March 1973 my friend Bali was staying at the cattle camps in the valley of the Lower Omo. One day he and a number of his Hamar age-mates went scouting because they were at war with the Galeba (Dassanech) and their relationship with the Bume (Nyangatom) was also full of tension.

At noon they reached an area which was rich with certain trees that carried edible fruits. As they were resting in the shade chewing the fruits, a group of hungry Bume turned up who had also come to have a share of the abundant harvest.

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Tyler, *The said and the unsaid: Mind meaning and culture* (New York; San Francisco; London: Academic Press, 1978): 135.

Bali, who told me the story a few days later, heard some of the Hamar talk to each other but did not quite understand what they said. Then, suddenly a Hamar jumped up and killed one of the Bume visitors. The other Hamar followed suit killing the Bume one by one. Only Bali acted differently. He allowed the Bume elder with whom he had been sitting and talking in the shade to hide behind his back, and he held his rifle ready to shoot anyone who would dare to harm his guest. His age-mates respected him and allowed Bali to accompany the Bume elder back to the Omo river and thus lead him into safety.

## **Case 2**

Some late evening in June 1973 when the sun had already gone down, my friend Baldambe and I were sitting in the cattle kraal of our homestead in Dambaiti. This is one of the places where men retreat when they want to talk in quiet to one another, for there, among the cattle, no one will disturb them at this hour. Baldambe had been speaking to me for a while when suddenly we heard the song of a man approaching the homestead. The man came singing, praising Baldambe, who was his mother's brother, and telling in his song that he had just killed someone from a neighbouring tribe. According to custom, Baldambe should have risen now and should have received the killer at the gateway of the cattle kraal, welcoming him with elaborate ritual. But Baldambe did not move until eventually the singing stopped somewhere not far from us in the dark of the night. Then he whispered to me:

He comes and calls me with endearing names and thinks I will praise him for the homicide he has committed. But he went and killed an innocent Bume (Nyangatom). We are at peace with the Bume, why does he think he can show his bravery by killing one of them? I will not welcome him, I will keep silent, no matter what he and others may think and say of me.

## **Case 3**

The third case is mentioned almost in passing in my diary on 1 July 1973:

There are many groups of people and herds passing through Dambaiti these days. They are on their way north in search of grass because the pastures are exhausted in the south. The girls carry milk containers, cow hides and water calabashes on their backs, the men

drive the cattle and the goats. The leader of one such group is an age-mate of Baldambe, and Baldambe tells him where the best pastures, the waterholes, ridges to camp on are around here. I join them to listen and learn that this man is Aira Allamba, the man who saved the only surviving Galeba down in southern Hamar recently. Aira seems to be a strong, tough person. Heavy scarification on his chest tell of his past killings and when I ask him why he saved the Galeba, he merely says: "My homestead is not one of liars". Later I discover that in the past he himself had once been saved by his Galeba bond-friend when the peace between the Galeba and the Hamar suddenly came to an end overnight.<sup>11</sup>

I think these cases speak for themselves and prove that not all the Hamar follow conventions of killing. As among the Bodi, so among the Hamar, killers are celebrated. They are given special names, receive scarification on the chest and the like. But thoughtful men like Bali and Aira do not kill in order to be celebrated, and responsible men like Baldambe do not celebrate thoughtless killers. Rather, these men base their actions on general and universally acceptable principles which have little to do with the "quest for honour" or any other such motive. They may get celebrated and respected because they have killed, but their killings will have been motivated only by the defence of themselves or others, and not by the wish to win social esteem, vent their anger about the loss of a favourite animal or the like.

In principle Bali, Baldambe, Aira... are opposed to every form of aggression, and they have a keen eye for the deception which is going on when people try to legitimate their blatant aggression against others (raiding for cattle and other forms of robbery) by insisting that they have to prove their manhood.

Baldambe has often pointed out this perversion to me, and I have often heard him say: "Yes, you should prove your manhood, but you do this by watching the gate of your father's cattle kraal and defending it against anyone who may attack it". In his text "Baldambe explains", Baldambe has given a good outline of how the Hamar and Bume made peace with one another more than half a century ago. On that occasion the Bume came to Hamar country singing:

Let us forget our fighting,  
let our stomach become one,  
let us forget our fighting,  
let our stomach become one,

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<sup>11</sup> Jean Lydall and Ivo Strecker, *The Hamar of Southern Ethiopia. Vol. I: Work Journal* (Hohenschäftlarn: Klaus Renner Verlag, 1979): 149.



let our talk become one,  
let us be brothers,  
let us be in-laws,  
let us be friends....<sup>12</sup>

The will expressed in this song was sincere, and in spite of many problems, which had to be overcome, this peace has lasted until today. There have been occasional killings (see for example cases 1 and 2 above) which were motivated by beliefs and values very similar to those of the Bodi, and I think that it would not be difficult to find some mindless Hamar who would say: "this killing will go on forever" (compare the Bodi statement quoted by Fukui).<sup>13</sup> But in fact there is no good reason why the killing should go on forever.

The reduction of fighting which the peace treaty between the Bume and Hamar brought about is a convincing proof of this.

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Lydall and Ivo Strecker, *The Hamar of Southern Ethiopia. Vol. II: Baldambe explains* (Hohenschäftlarn: Klaus Renner Verlag, 1979): 33.

<sup>13</sup> Fukui, *Senri Ethnological Studies* 3, 176.