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Performing *Dônga*
The restorative benefits of ritual stick duelling in Mursi (Mun)

Shauna LaTosky
shauna.latosky@unbc.ca
University of Northern British Columbia
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4312-8891

Olisarali Olibui
olisaraliolibui1@gmail.com
South Omo Theatre Company

Abstract

Dônga, an ancient form of stick duelling practiced by the Mursi (Mun) [1] of southwest Ethiopia is both a competitive martial art and ritual performance through which the tensions, predicaments and conflicts of society are confronted and resolved. As articulated in the anthropological literature, *dônga* constitutes a socio-political mechanism that promotes societal stability and prevents the disintegration of social relations (Turton 1973; 2002). In this paper we offer a view that expands on explanations of *dônga* in socio-political terms by looking also at its ritual, gendered and aesthetic aspects, and how it is that *dônga* has recently come into direct dialogue with the contemporary political events unfolding in South Omo through the first-ever Mursi-authored performance about *dônga*. Set against the dramatic backdrop of the arrival of Ethiopian military in Mursiland in November 2019, the original script, written by Olisarali Olibui and Tesfahun Haddis, illustrates the preoccupations of every Mursi at this time: the brutalities during the government's forced disarmament campaign, and their uncertain future as pole-wielding pastoralists. We consider *dônga* as one of the central metaphors for the predicaments of Mursi today, as both the performative practice of *dônga* and the principles it stands for – the protection of rights and restoration of societal unity – have come under threat. The suppression of *dônga* through the use of political rhetoric since 2012 has been ramped up at the same time as state military forces have disarmed the Mursi. This conjuncture has spurred some members of the group to express their political agency and customary forms of reconciliation in new ways.

Keywords: Mursi; stick duelling; martial art; indigenous theatre; Ethiopia

Introduction

> Dônga leads to dangerous (አደገኛ) behaviour. Sometimes you even kill each other stick fighting. It is not good. By breaking another man's hand, how can he work? How can he be a productive citizen? How is this good? It is better to stop this [fighting], since it only brings [bodily] harm. The Mursi should learn to live peacefully.
>
> *Ato* Moloka, former South Omo Zone Chief Administrator (South Omo Research Center, Jinka, Southern Ethiopia, 20 November 2012)

[1] Mursi and Mun are used interchangeably throughout. As Olisarali insists, «It was our pastoralist neighbours, the Kara and other pastoralists, who first called us "Murzu", not the *habesha* (highland Ethiopians). When I speak *English* I use both».

> I invite you to my place so you will see dônga (…). We don't kill our brothers! This is our sport – like boxing in some cultures. It is how we solve problems and prevent the killing of another. Without dônga young men would turn to violence. For us, it is like preparing for the Olympics. Young men are too busy training to get into trouble, as they only think about dônga. Without dônga, they'd lose their way. The land would be bad.
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> Olisarali Olibui, Mursi educator and retired *dônga* fighter (South Omo Research Center, Jinka, Southern Ethiopia, 20 November 2012)

What Olisarali explains above to the former Chief Administrator of the South Omo Zone, during a meeting in 2012 at the South Omo Research Center (hereafter SORC), reflects both the misunderstood and meaningful aspects of *dônga* (stick duelling)[2]. Although there is a general awareness of *dônga* in Ethiopia – and globally – there is a spectrum of positions on its meaning. Thrust to the forefront of political rhetoric by a campaign to ban "traditional harmful practices" (THPs) nearly two decades ago[3], *dônga* is frequently depicted as a "dangerous" activity that leads to bodily "harm" and "even death"[4]. Stereotypes about *dônga* are perpetuated not only in political representations, but in the media, especially through the use of raciolinguistic markers that similarly describe *dônga* as "the most dangerous", "brutal" and "violent tradition"[5]. Since the "objectives" of ceremonial duelling are generally unknowable, if not unintelligible, for most outsiders, popular depictions of this fighting art tend to be oversimplified in catchall phrases, such as, "*dônga* is only finished when the last man is standing", or "*dônga* is a violent tradition of fierce combat between young men who fight with 2 metres (*sic*) long sticks"[6]. In the political discourse and popular media coverage that render *dônga* "a violent tradition", Mursi voices are non-existent. The only opportunity to elevate Mursi perspectives on *dônga* has so far been through the work of anthropologists.

David Turton, the first scholar to undertake a comprehensive study of Mursi socio-political organization, shows that society and politics are beholden to ritual duelling.[7] His long-term empirical research since the 1960s includes several fundamental ways in which *dônga* helps to cultivate public virtues. First, as Turton explains, *dônga* is a way to ritually assert «the right to difference» between local Mursi groups (*bhuranyoga*) and, at the same time, to acknowledge their commonalities and

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[2] In Mursi it is synonymously referred to as "*dônga*", "*sagine*", "*thagine*", and translated in the literature as "ceremonial duelling", "ritual duelling", "stick fighting", "pole duelling", "pole fighting", "jousting", "martial arts", "fighting arts", "fighting sport", many of which are used interchangeably throughout the text.

[3] The first official list on "traditional harmful practices" came out in 2009 and, although it did not explicitly include *dônga*, it is referred to by government officials as a "harmful custom".

[4] One exception is national cultural tourism rhetoric, which promotes *dônga* as a commercial activity. The *Ethiopia Travel and Tourism* Facebook page includes, for example, a video of young men as they carry out so-called "practice fights", with tourists visible in the background taking photographs: https://www.facebook.com/ethiopiatravelandtourism/videos/354824905141358/). Such fights are reluctantly being staged for tourists (see also Abbink 2012; Olikibo 2021on Suri), as an increasing number of tour guides push the communities that they visit to perform *dônga* for them. As Olisarali explained: «There are certain times when *dônga* is forbidden. If the Mursi say that "now there is no *dônga*", the tour operators should not push the community to start this for tourists» (personal communication with Olisarali Olibui, March 14, 2022).

[5] Here "raciolinguistic markers" refer to language that enacts or reproduces racialized stereotypes and ideologies (Rosa 2019). Countless films, videos and photographs can be found on the internet that mark *dônga* as "the most dangerous African ritual" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjNBC71L15g). See also Abbink's (2009) article, which includes an extensive critique of exoticizing use of images and language by the media in relation to stick duelling in Suri and, to some extent, Mursi.

[6] Most of the international media attention today still focuses on stick duelling in Suri for reasons explained by Abbink (2009). A recent media story in *The Sun* exemplifies the kind of exotic and racialized language that continues to be used to describe Mursi and Suri duelling. In this case, the article describes *dônga* in Suri as a "violent and bloody display", to "train young men for violence" and that "severe injury or death could be the result of the traditional ceremony", "with the winner accumulating a bride at the end" (Hussain, 8 Jan., 2021).

[7] See also Jon Abbink's (1999) comprehensive study of *sagine* (ceremonial duelling) in Suri.

«"pan-Mursi" values to do with clanship and affinity» (Turton 2002: 173, 181; 1979). Second, *dônga* is central to «the achievement of adulthood», which in the Mursi age-grade system, places value on «various tests of endurance, fortitude, obedience and self-control». Third, *dônga* is a valued form of reconciliation that, like war, is complementary to peace-making (Turton 2002: 179, 190). While the meaningfulness associated with *dônga* in Mursi has also been attempted in visual representations, such as, the documentary *The Mursi Tribe: The Day of the Donga* by the late Australian journalist Michael Willisee and Ben Ulm (2000), Tamas Régi's photo essays on men's *dônga* (Régi 2018) and the first author's research on the gendered and visual rhetoric of "girl's *dônga*" (LaTosky 2013; 2018), there is still much to understand about its continued relevance today. While influenced and motivated by Turton's important contributions to the field, the present study expands on his analysis of *dônga* in socio-political terms by weaving together first-person narratives by Olisarali Olibui, an educator, retired martial artist, ritual specialist and advocate of *dônga*. Our aim is twofold: to draw attention to the continued relevance of *dônga* today*,* and to interrogate common misconceptions about Mursi martial arts heritage through the lens of ritual, gender and aesthetic.

Dônga contest(ed)

The Mursi are a group of approximately 10.000 agro-pastroalists whose livelihoods depend on cattle herding, but also rain-fed agriculture and flood-retreat cultivation along the Omo River and its tributaries. *Dônga* is one of the pillars of Mursi society. However, at this particular moment in Mursi history, some seem to be losing confidence in the constructive role that it plays in reconciling differences and restoring peaceful relations. This has to do with government attempts to restrict *dônga* in South Omo since 2012, which have been ramped up at the same time as state military forces have begun to disarm the Mursi, depriving them of access to firearms. This conjuncture has spurred some members of the Mursi community, in particular Olisarali Olibui, to express their political agency in new ways. One way has been to try and bring *dônga* into direct dialogue with the contemporary events unfolding in South Omo through the first-ever Mursi-authored indigenous theater performance featuring *dônga*[8]. The original script, written by Olisarali Olibui and Tesfahun Haddis (2021), is based on a true love story and set against the dramatic backdrop of the arrival of Ethiopian military in northern Mursiland in November 2019, illustrating the preoccupations of every Mursi at this time: the brutalities during the government's disarmament campaign, and their uncertain future as pole-wielding pastoralists.[9] While the script acknowledges the realities of and frustrations with political injustices, it also holds out hope for the kind of rights, social unity and public reconciliation that *dônga* stands for.

Besides the public importance of *dônga* in Mursi, and the recent political events in South Omo that have stimulated Olisarali's interest in prioritizing and promoting Mursi martial heritage, my own involvement in this topic has to do with a long-standing interest in gendered rhetoric, bodily aesthetics and debates about "traditional harmful practices" in Southern Ethiopia (LaTosky 2013, 2015, 2018). Similar to the ongoing attempts to suppress the practice of lip-plates worn by Mursi adolescent girls and married women (LaTosky 2015), *dônga* has also become rooted in contestation. Popular stereotypes, especially those that demonize *dônga,* exclude Mursi narratives and complicate the deeply relational (gendered, aesthetic, ritual and socio-political) character and culturally-specific virtues of

[8] After endorsing his plans to make a play about ritual stick duelling, experienced *dônga* fighters, family and clan members, including women and one *komoru* (ritual specialist) agreed to participate as actors in the play.

[9] After the civil unrest in Tigray, the final script was completed in 2022 by Olisarali Olibui, together with members of Wolkite University's theatre department.

dônga[10]. As already mentioned above, at one end of the spectrum, *dônga* is often depicted in political and popular media rhetoric as “violent”, “harmful” and “even causing death”, and, at the other end of the spectrum, it is defined in the anthropological literature as a “martial art” that gives productive meaning to social relations and the political identity and values of Mursi society by containing violence and transforming it in productive ways[11].

It was not until 2019, when Olisarali and I became involved in an interdisciplinary research and arts-based project at SOAS (University of London), together with theater experts, anthropologists and documentary filmmakers to co-create the South Omo Theatre Company (SOT)[12], that we would come to examine the current realities of *dônga*[13]. We also came to find striking parallels between 19th century legal restrictions on stick fighting among the Zulu in colonial South Africa (Carton and Morrell 2012), 20th century attempts to prohibit ceremonial duelling (*sagine*) in Suri[14], and the suppression of *dônga* among the 21st century Mursi. As we embarked on the first stage of the joint SOT-SOAS project (2019-2021), “Theatre as action: imagining peace and stability in South Omo”[15], I wanted to learn more about why *dônga* became the central performative focus of Olisarali’s vision for the script. In March, April, May and December 2021, I interviewed Olisarali during a series of telephone interviews and online conversations[16]. This was around the same time that the bold-lettered headline “BRIDE BRAWL: Inside the Ethiopian tribe who batter each other in brutal stick battle – with last man standing winning a WIFE” (Hussain, 8 Jan., 2021) caught our attention and debate emerged between us about the risk of reinforcing the sensationalized stock image of the “intrepid”, “fierce”, “merciless” Mursi warrior. However, I realized over the course of our many conversations that my concern that a theatre performance about *dônga*, uprooted from its “original” context, could potentially obstruct the audience’s full emotional and contextual understanding of duelling contests was not the same concern for Olisarali, who saw its potential success in a more “agonistic” way. As he explains:

> This will be my biggest *dônga* ever! As I told you, *dônga* is not only about winning or losing, but having the courage to fight. Even if you lose, you will still be respected. It is only if you are afraid to fight and defend yourself that people will make fun of you. I want to try this new *gul*

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[10] Carton and Morrell (2012: 40) describe similar virtues in their study of stick fighting in pre-colonial Zulu society (see also Coetzee 2000).

[11] See especially Turton (2002), but also (Régi 2018; LaTosky 2018). Olekibo (2021: 38) also describes *sagine* in Suri today as «…violence contained and kept under control by the community…» (2021: 38), the translation of which is taken directly from Abbink (1999: 233).

[12] The co-founding members of SOT include: Olisarali Olibui, Alexandra Genova, Shauna LaTosky and Ben Young.

[13] Funding for the research, rehearsals and final performances were made possible through the “Global Research Network on Parliaments and People’s (GRNPP) Deepening Democracy programme (SOAS), the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s follow-on funding for Impact and Engagement” (SOAS) and the UK Research and Innovation Fund (see https://grnpp.org/Olisarali/). The co-founding members of SOT include: Olisarali Olibui, Alexandra Genova, Shauna LaTosky and Ben Young.

[14] See Abbink (2002:168, 172) on attempts to restrict ritual stick duelling (*sagine*) in Suri since 1991. These efforts were ultimately not successful. The Suri also deeply cherish their stick duelling and continue it whenever they can.

[15] This was the project title for the first stage (2019-2021) of the joint SOT-SOAS project within the “Global Research Network on Parliaments for People” (GRNPP). Further funding through the GRNPP (SOAS) was awarded to SOT in late 2021 in order to complete the play, performed July 30, 2022 and film about the performance (in progress). See https://grnpp.org/Olisarali/ for details.

[16] Unfortunately, Covid restrictions prevented us from meeting in person during this time. During two of our interviews, a former Suri politician, Lanjoy Barkari, also joined our discussions. During his time as an MP, and co-opted by the government discourse, he became part of the early campaigns to ban *dônga* in Suri. During our talks he explained how such bans only exacerbated violent conflict in Suri (see also Abbink 2002).

> [duelling arena]! People in Mursi are waiting for me to start. We must try to do it ourselves, not with others [non-Mursi actors]! I know it's a crazy idea, but what pushes me is that *we* can show our culture and something as important as *dônga*. One thing is for sure, it should be educational. This is why we also need the film, the website and the academic work – all are needed! When the Mursi hear about the play, everyone will want to see it. They will come from all over. I will have many, many guests to feed! For me this is like a *bhollisay* [a marking made on a tree to indicate a *dônga* victory]! (Interview with Olisarali Olibui, April 8, 2021).

Given the challenging circumstances under which the script was written[17], Olisarali considered the play to be his «biggest *dônga* ever». He also saw it as a way to challenge some of the most common misconceptions about *dônga* that persist today, including the myth that "stick fighting" is all about winning and "the last man standing"[18]. According to Olisarali, success has as much to do with being recognized for having the courage to fight and to defend oneself in the duelling arena (*gula dôngay*, or *bala dôngay*), as it does with winning. To not fight runs the risk of being labelled a coward or weakling (*loya,* lit. jackal). After receiving permission from Mursi elders in 2019, and after casting various actors (mainly experienced *dônga* fighters) to perform *dônga* at the National Theatre in Addis Ababa, there was an expectation from his community for Olisarali to follow through with this rare opportunity to share their grievances and to represent Mursi culture to a national, but also a regional and local audience[19]. However, by the end of 2019, a violent conflict that erupted in South Omo left him unexpectedly shifting the focus of his script from being only about love, to one about love and war. This was only the beginning of a much longer struggle, since, by 2021, the global Covid-19 pandemic and civil unrest in northern Ethiopia created further delays, but also political and financial uncertainty[20]. In short, it was overcoming such hurdles and appearing on the national stage that would win him the most respect back home[21]. Olisarali's pragmatic approach to predicting whether a simulated *dônga* event would perform its intended purpose of speaking out against social injustices could only be measured by the number of guests that he would have to feed in the future, and the completion of all components of the project to ensure an educational, as opposed to a merely entertaining experience. Olisarali's experience of *dônga* is interpreted here as "agonistic", since it does not seem all that different from ancient Greek *agones* (contests held during public festivals)[22] that were said to be «not merely oriented toward victory or defeat»», but «emphasized the importance of the struggle itself» (Chambers 2001: 4)[23]. In a similar agonistic spirit, Jon Abbink (1999:

[17] As a result of the conflict, Olisarali was forced to flee South Omo for three years.

[18] This statement is made by an Australian narrator in the introduction to the film *The Mursi Tribe: The Day of the Dônga*: «There can only be one winner and he will be the last man standing» (1:45-1:48).
https://films.com/id/1573/The_Mursi_Tribe_The_Day_of_the_donga.htm. See also Abbink's (2009) critique of the BBC series "Tribe", which included an episode on "stick fighting" among the Suri in the series *The last man standing https://www.bbc.co.uk/lastmanstanding/locations/ethiopia.shtml*

[19] Theatre training and practice performances were carried out at Wolkite University in 2021 and 2022. For a promotional clip for the performance see https://www.southomotheatre.com/whats-on by Young and Young (2021), in collaboration with SOT and SOAS.

[20] Fortunately, in May 2021, three follow-on grants were awarded through SOAS to the South Omo Theater Co. (SOT) to continue with outreach for the project, including a website (www.southomotheatre.com), that would garner government support and permission from the National Theater in Addis Ababa to schedule the performance in the summer of 2022.

[21] Performing *dônga* on stage is courageous for two reasons: first, it would be the first attempt by the Mursi to publicly express their grievances on the national stage in Addis Ababa. Second, since the National Theatre in Ethiopia has legitimized and maintained hegemonic orders of social, cultural, political power, entering such elitist spaces is a way to challenge such hegemonic orders.

[22] Some ancient martial arts scholars argue that typical Greek sporting ethic was to win at all costs (Poliakoff 1987: 28).

[23] A similar example of agonistic discourse found in Mursi is when discussing defeat in *dônga*, which is said to bring honour and mutual admiration.

233) explains how fighting in Suri is not about winning at all costs, since «displaying courage in fighting is said to be more important than winning». This point is further substantiated in the documentary *More than a Game* (Rodríguez 2012) by the Suri protagonist, Bargango, who claims that «it doesn't matter if you win or lose; the important thing is to fight». While popular portrayals of *dônga* tend to condense its meaning to "the last man standing" (cf. Abbink 2009), in fact, «most bouts do not end in a clear out victory but have to be brought to an end by the intervention of referees» (Rodríguez 2012, 2:47-2:51). A duelling contest is however not competition for its own sake; it's about acquiring skills and having the strength and courage to fight in a public arena (see also Turton 1973; 2002). While Olisarali's reasons for wanting to defend the martial arts heritage of the Mursi echo the views of many Mursi, they are also influenced by his experiences working with and/or assisting government administrators, journalists, filmmakers, missionaries, tourist operators, NGOs and anthropologists over the last three decades. Over the course of our many conversations, it became obvious that to bring any audience or reader closer to understanding the centrality of *dônga* in Mursi society, a "rediscovery" of David Turton's research would also be a necessary starting point.

Dônga: ritually-sanctioned reconciliation

In Mursi, reconciliation processes include everything from blessing and cursing, to seeking restitution through cattle payments and other forms of compensation. *Dônga* offers a space for disputes and contestation and remains one of the most important forms of conflict resolution in Mursi today.[24] Although there are many customary ways of rectifying wrongs and healing relationships, depending on the severity of the crime and its specific historical context, according to Olisarali «only some big conflicts cannot be solved using the *dônga*». This includes homicide and other major crimes (e.g. rape, bodily harm, cattle theft, etc.) that involve retributive forms of justice in which the wrongdoer is held accountable with a proportional punishment[25]. When it comes to resolving a whole litany of other problems mentioned below that do not require retributive justice, *dônga* is one of the most beneficial forms of reconciliation.[26] However, it is the potency of the *komoru's* blessings that are important for ensuring the restoration of order and peaceful relations. As Olisarali discusses below, *dônga* must first be sanctioned by the *komoru*, his ritual assistants and the elders for the outcome to be reconciliatory.

> When David [Turton] came to document the *dônga* fight in Mara in 1996, I was the *têrrojone* (lit. *têrro* of the mothers, ritual assistant for the *têrro*), the one to perform the rituals with the *komoru* (ritual figurehead, priest, pl. *komorenna*). This [rite] is done after a *komoru* has announced that there will be no quarrels – no fighting, no *dônga*, no *ula*. (…) He will call for peace for 6 months to 12 months. During this time there can be no blood (shed). Only the *komoru* can allow for *dônga* to resume, with the *têrrojone* – he big one [the senior ritual assistant of the *têrro*] – o bless the cattle (*lam bio*), which takes place over four days. The blessings are done with white clay, though it is all much more complex than this. On the next day, *dônga* will be allowed. They can fight only with his [the *komoru's*] blessings (see Figure 1 below).
>
> If someone disobeys the *komoru's* call for one year of no fighting, those people will have to kill an ox and sheep to "purify" the place (*oinya ba*). Whenever there is fighting or "blood"

[24] This is in stark contrast with the «policies of forgetting in the name of reconciliation» (Radzik and Murphy 2015: 11) that are being pursued by Ethiopian authorities to "resolve" certain development-induced conflicts, from vehicular deaths to forced disarmament campaigns.

[25] Here I draw on the differentiation made by Radzik and Murphy (2015) between retributive justice and reconciliation.

[26] Personal communication with Lugolinybanna Biobisenno, April 30, 2023.

(*nyowa*), those people will be kept separate from the *komoru's* area. *Wowu*, the contents of the intestines will be smeared and sprinkled around [to cleanse] the area since there was fighting without permission. During this period there should be no random fighting. By [also] taking the ula from all girls and women, everyone is protected well. We say, "*komoru keng nyowa*" (*komoru's* protection from blood (shed), or "*nyowa kenga*" (blood protection). Fighting [*dônga*] is therefore very controlled, planned and only possible with permission from the elders. The *komoru* has his own "cabinet" around him and "the cabinet" of elders cannot do anything without the go ahead of the *komoru*. He is like the head of state in a way. He keeps everything very organized and he tries to always keep the peace. If there is fighting in the bush, the *komoru* will be the one to decide on how to proceed.

Figure 1. Olisarali Olibui (right) as the *têrrojone* in 1996 during *Nga Ngone's Dônga* (Photo: Mursi.org with permission from David Turton)[27]

While ritually-sanctioned *dônga* events commonly take place during harvest time, when there is an abundance of food, it is not a given that *dônga* will always occur during the harvest periods (Turton 1973: 52). *Dônga* events can happen at any time, but in order for the outcome to be reconciliatory, they require advance preparation, training and must be authorized by the elders. To disregard the rites of the *komoru*, especially during a ban on all forms of fighting, is believed to bring misfortune, violence and disorder. Past conflicts that lead to *dônga* can therefore only make sense if they are understood within a broader historical and relational context, much like the contemporary context,

[27] Only the *têrrojone* can wear leopard and cheetah skin, not the young boys; they are not allowed to wear it (personal communication with Olisarali Olibui, March 6, 2021).

as there are often many different disputes unfolding (e.g. a rivalry between two or more *bhuranyoga* (local groups, sing. *bhuran*), a conflict between girls and boys, a dispute over a watering hole, the insulting treatment of an elder, beating someone's dog, etc.)[28]. Some of these conflicts might have a long and storied past, whereas others might be brand new. To understand them requires that such conflicts and behaviour can be located in their broader context, as those presiding over *dônga* are able to do[29]. Turton's detailed description of *Nga Ngone's Dônga*, discussed later on, provides a good example of the kind of insight needed to understand the reconciliatory nature of *dônga*, which is seldom what outsiders understand its intentions to be. The same can be said about the context in which *dônga* has come into direct dialogue today with the contemporary political events unfolding in South Omo through the first-ever Mursi-authored theatre performance about stick duelling.

Olisarali's *Dônga*

At the time of writing his script, *Tirainy ko Koisani* (Playing the Mediator), together with Tesfahun Haddis, the Ethiopian military had summoned Mursi men and elders to hand over all "unregistered" firearms, while at the same time stripping several *komorenna* of their beads (the ritual insignia of priests), torturing and beating young men and forcing over one hundred incarcerated men, including elders, to sit in the direct sun for many days[30]. To insult any elder like this, let alone a *komoru*, is reason enough to call for a big *dônga.*

> Were a young man to ever insult an elderly person, man or woman, they will go to fight. To insult an elder might mean pushing him to the ground, yelling at him. Insulting an elder is totally forbidden and there will be a big fight, otherwise, you would be shot dead immediately. They will also want to kill you during the *dônga* fight, but the *koisani* (referee, mediator) will stop them as you cannot kill another Mursi. You come together to fight instead (…). *Dônga* is a reminder of respect towards the elders (Interview with Olisarali Olibui April 8, 2021).

The brutality towards the Mursi (and Me'en), including elders, during the forced disarmament campaign in the Sala-Mago *woreda* in 2019, is what prompted Olisarali to continue to push for his "biggest *dônga* ever". During our conversations, Olisarali always insisted that the *komorenna,* from their constituent *bhuranyoga* (local groups), elders and Ethiopian government officials should attend the performance at the National Theatre in Addis Ababa.[31] This idea was inspired by Mursi customary ways of reconciliation*,* and to some extent by Augusto Boal's concept of "Theatre of the Oppressed", which Olisarali was introduced to when we first began to discuss the aims of his play. He especially liked Boal's idea of spectators being active participants in the performance, since this closely resembles the constant flow of communication between the performers and the audience in a *dônga* performance (cf. Coetzee 2000: 107). Giving the audience an opportunity to partake in the ritual event and to recognize and react to their grievances was considered to be one step towards achieving redress[32]. While the main aims of *Tirainya ko Koisani* were to generate peaceful public dialogue and to help restore Mursi-government relations, the play was also intended as an innovative and culturally-sensitive way to convey

[28] It is a grave insult to beat or kill someone's dog (interview with Olisarali Olibui, April 8, 2021).

[29] See also Eczet (2021: 248) on the role that elders play in presiding over *dônga*.

[30] The campaign first began in Me'en (Bodi) in September 2019, and led to the death of 38 Me'en individuals (Gebresenbet 2021: 7). For details about the disarmament campaign see also Concerned Scholars Ethiopia (2019).

[31] In the promotional video for the play, Olisarali was even hopeful that the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, would attend the performance (Young and Young 2020).

[32] The play was never considered to be a substitute for more substantive forms of redress, but as a rhetorical and culturally appropriate way to initiate dialogue (cf. Radzik and Murphy 2015:14).

the urgency of understanding *dônga*'s continued relevance as a central pillar of Mursi society (for girls and boys, men and women). In what follows, we attempt to further illustrate why *dônga* still matters to the Mursi, although clearly neither us of have the final word on the subject.[33]

Why *dônga* matters

Between March and December 2021, when Olisarali and I sat down to discuss the current realities of *dônga*, three main topics emerged: how *dônga* has changed since his early days as a young stick fighter, how *dônga* is represented by various outsiders, and why Olisarali chose *dônga* as the central performative focus of his play *Tirainya ko Koisani*[34]. In order to situate the current discourse on *dônga* in Southern Ethiopia, we began our first conversation by recalling a workshop at the SORC that we had organized together in 2012, along with South Omo zonal officials, members of the Mursi and Me'en (Bodi) communities, academics and student volunteers. This meeting was the fourth in a series of workshops (from 2011-2012) on improving community tourism in the Salamago *woreda* (district)[35]. During the first day of the final workshop, *dônga* became the central topic of discussion, since not only had stick fighting become a relatively new tourist attraction in Mursi, but a contentious one. Like the Suri on the western side of the Omo River who had already faced such restrictions three decades earlier (Abbink 2002: 168), pressure to suppress *dônga* had shifted from the Bench Maji Zone to the South Omo Zone, where local authorities and NGOs included it in their discourse on traditional harmful practices. This was followed by threats to sanction tour operators and guides who accompanied tourists to attend *dônga* events in Mursi, since «taking tourists is thought to encourage the Mursi to continue [stick fighting]»[36]. Surveillance was made possible, in part, by a rule enforced at the zonal level that made it mandatory for each tourist car visiting Mursiland to be accompanied by an armed (and typically non-Mursi) Mago National Park scout. Among their northerly pastoral neighbours, the Me'en, there was similar pressure to discourage cultural practices that allegedly caused bodily harm, from women's lip-plugs, to *zel*, a form of stick duelling practiced in Me'en (and Kwegu) in which short combat sticks are used[37]. At that time, Olisarali had prepared video footage of *dônga* to present to zonal officials who had implored the Mursi (and Me'en) participants to refrain from stick fighting.

As we continued to discuss this meeting, I asked Olisarali to reflect on the main points that he had raised (see i-v), the changes that he had observed a decade later (see vi-viii), and his views on the continued relevance of *dônga* today (see ix-x). His responses are quoted at length below.

> i) *Dônga*, or *sagine,* as we also call it, is our national sport and an important part of our history and culture. The Mursi see the Suri [here: Chai and Tirmaga], also the Baale and Suri in South Sudan – the Kachipo – as the real experts. They are very strong, but they have lost part of their [*dônga*] culture: Suri don't cover up [wear protection] as we still do in Mursi. They fight without full gear.
> ii) *Dônga* is a central pillar of our education that teaches young people – boys and girls – to listen and respect their elders and to solve conflicts in a good way. It teaches them to train and fatten their bodies, to become clever and strong – a "*bansanay*" or mature person; someone

[33] By providing Olisarali, a retired *donga* fighter, with some say over its meaningfulness and its future, the intention is not to establish a single authoritative interpretation of *dônga*, but to invite further inter- and cross-cultural dialogue about the importance of ritual duelling in Mursi and across ethnic boundaries.

[34] An alternative spelling is *kwêsani* (pl. *kwêsana*) (Turton *et al.* 2018: 12).

[35] The workshops were funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development's Civil Peace Service (GIZ-CPS) and the SORC (Jinka, Ethiopia).

[36] Personal communication with Olisarali Olibui, May 17, 2021.

[37] For more on *zel* in Me'en see Buffavand (2019).

who has grown up. A strong fighter is also called an *ole* [bull], a hero! Such an *ole* can take the *dônga* song of another.

iii) This is the biggest form of entertainment and enjoyment for all Mursi. The big *dônga* events happen around harvest time when there is plenty of sorghum, but a quarrel can break out at any time, like if two boys are fighting over a girl. If they start to fight, a *koisani* (mediator, referee) will talk to them to calm everyone down. They will talk, talk and then later go [to fight]. Both will begin to train and will meet again some months later to fight.

iv) For us *dônga* is a beautiful sport – *very* powerful! But for others it looks like something strange, especially those who don't have such a [combat] sport where they come from, like in Ari and Maale, where the [former] Chief Administrator was from. Also for foreigners – *ferenji* – for Westerners supporting the NGOs it is a traditional harmful practice. Don't they have similar sports in their countries?

v) Without *dônga*, Mun culture will no longer exist. The youth of today will lose control. *Dônga* is the way to solve conflict among us. If someone fights over a girl, or another conflict comes up, like insulting someone, or a quarrel over a watering hole between boys from different *bhuranyoga*, they will wait and solve their problems with the *dônga*.
There are only some big conflicts that cannot be solved using the *dônga*. (…) In Mursi thefighting stick (*dônga*) controls the [inter-group] conflicts. We fight first and when we grow tired, we come together and "play" (*tirainy*). *Tirainy* is a big word in Mursi that means many things: to sing, play, joke, dance, meet. We also call *dônga* "*tirainy*".
Translating a comment made by his Suri friend sitting next to him, Lanjoy Barkari, also a retired stick fighter: "Without the *dônga*, people will get the machete!" *Dônga* calms everyone down. There are also other important ways we educate the boys and girls to solve conflicts, like *koma kodha* [kneeling before the elders] (…).

vi) *Dônga* has started to attract tourists, also in Suri. But we do not do this only for tourists, as some people say. This is not true! *Dônga* is an important part of our [Mursi and Suri] history; it is something we were doing long before tourists ever came to Ethiopia. *Dônga* is number one. It is something powerful that brings people from different local groups (*bhuranyoga*) together to solve problems.

vii) What people still do not understand is that *dônga* is our way of making peace, living together and loving each other. If people look on *mursi.org*, they can learn what David Turton has written about *dônga*. This is the truth. Other sites give the wrong information. They say that we kill each other. While an accident can happen, like in different [combat] sports around the world, this is not the purpose of *dônga*. Stick fighting teaches boys to become clever, to make a wise decision, to control themselves.

viii) *Dônga* matters the most today [*repeating the question*]. Why? Because for many years, ten, twelve, or maybe eleven – I can't remember exactly – the government and NGOs began to talk about the "lazy" Mursi. Christianity [raised] issues [that] said "your culture is bad". Every meeting they [government officials, NGOs, Christian groups] come to tell us "your culture is harmful", like *dônga* and *dhebinya* (lip-plates). (…) They do it, to bring down the community. Eventually [some] Mursi began to lose interest in stick fighting and have no respect. (…) Now nobody is listening to elders, insulting them, even hitting them. Now some boys are stealing cars, using gun violence instead of *dônga* to solve their problems. Now the government puts all the blame on the Mursi, sending military enforcements to the Mursi to pick anyone they want to blame. The Mursi cannot do anything. The same happened in Suri. Alcohol too is a big problem. These destructive outside influences degrade our culture. Today, instead of drinking milk [to fatten their bodies], they drink *arake* and use violence. If they prepare for *dônga,* this takes many months. It's the only thing on their minds, like training for the Olympics! (…) The [unmarried] girls practice too when they prepare for girl's *dônga* – that's what we call it when they fight with the *ula* (iron bracelet)[38].

[38] Bracelet fights between girls using an *ula* (iron bracelet) is also referred to as "*dônga a dholuiny"* (girl's *dônga*). For more on the cultural significance of the *ula*, see LaTosky (2013, 2018).

> ix) Why is *dônga* worth fighting for? [*repeating the question*]. If it is stopped, what will replace it? What education will the government bring in its place? By threatening this, all [customary] ways of Mursi education, law and order are also threatened. Already there is a lack of respect for the elders and the rituals of the *komoru* (priest, ritual figurehead). Without the rituals, the age-grades will disappear, and the young people will do what they want. But we should learn from the Suri. Now the elders, Suri politicians and missionaries that were once there [in Tulgit] are trying to convince the Suri *woreda* (district) to allow *dônga*.
>
> x) If it continues like this – banning our traditional practices – we must find ways to educate others about our culture. This is why I want to bring *dônga* to Addis. It is a crazy idea, but I want other Ethiopians – and the world – to see our culture. I chose *dônga* because this is our way of making peace (Interviews with Olisarali Olibui April 3, 2021; May 17, 2021; December 12, 2021).

Having experienced the ramifications of a decade-long campaign by EPRDF officials and NGOs to eradicate "traditional harmful practices" in the South Omo Zone, Olisarali is thoroughly familiar with contemporary portrayals of *dônga*, with their rhetorical emphasis on "harm", "violence" and "death". During many government-organised meetings that he has attended, and translated for, the Mursi have been told to «stop stick fighting and behave like "normal" city people»[39]. While *dônga* has come to be regarded with contempt for some, or as something decidedly "strange" for others, for the Mursi, as Olisarali insists, *dônga* constitutes something educational and "beautiful". Aesthetic beauty is not used here in a deliberately provocative way to romanticize *dônga*, but to see it as part of a socio-political good, since competitive duelling – like war (*kaman*) – is considered to be complementary to peace-making and community well-being. The paradoxical nature of violence in Mursi is best described by David Turton when he writes that «war-making and peace-making is part of the same ritual process» (2002: 191). It is perhaps for this reason that when Olisarali was asked about the aesthetic value of *dônga*, he expressed doubt that others would appreciate it in the same way.

> Even if I call *dônga* "beautiful", it would be impossible to convince the world of this. Nobody will believe me. I have lived in both worlds and know how politicians and most Ethiopian people see the Mursi; they will never see *dônga* in this way. Even if anthropologists try to show [in writing] what it means, or we show *dônga* [visually] in a theatre [in Addis Ababa], they [non-Mursi] will never understand *dônga* like a Mursi. You must know about our history, age-grades, *nitha*, the rituals of the *komoru*: *bio lama* and so on. *Dônga* is very complicated! It's like me trying to understand boxing. I don't know anything about it, only that people get paid money to fight. In Mursi it is not about money, but educating the young people to defend themselves, their community and their cattle. It teaches one to be brave, not a *loya* (lit. jackal, weakling, coward). How will you marry and inherit cattle if you are not strong? How will you solve problems? An uneducated boy will not learn to control himself; his stomach will not be cool. He'll just react quickly and, later, he will reach for a gun when he is angry. This is not the Mun way (Interview with Olisarali Olibui April 8, 2021).

Indeed, anyone who watches *dônga* may wonder what is happening as the two contestants square off to swiftly strike each other in order to apparently inflict the most harm in just under a minute (Turton 2002: 180). In the case of *dônga*, even when the rules are known by outsiders, the setting is often unintelligible and frequently leads to narrow understandings of *dônga* as "brutal" and "deadly". In fact, the stock figure in media representations of *dônga* fighters today continues to be that of fierce, bloodthirsty warriors[40], which is not all that different from 19th century colonial portrayals of Zulu warriors as

[39] Personal communication with Olisarali Olibui, May 17, 2021.

[40] Hussain's (8 Jan., 2021) photo essay in *The Sun* is a good example. For a critical treatment of the appropriation of the exoticized "tribal other" and "intrepid warrior" in relation to media portrayals of *sagine* in Suri, see Abbink (2009).

merciless «stick-wielding tribesmen in combat» (Carton and Morrell 2012: 34). What is concealed by such stereotypical images of the "mortally wounded warrior" is that duelling contests are principled in their own way, just as the greatest martial heroes usually are (cf. Parks 1990). By moving beyond such jaundiced views, there is much to learn from the "heroic ethos" of the Mursi (and Suri), where bravery, self-control and honor play a crucial role in the education of Mursi boys and girls[41].

Dônga contests are the most impressive events in Mursi to capture a mixed gendered audience, and to create a public stage and meaningful experience for the martial socialization of boys and girls. Both play an active role as spectators and contestants in their own martial contests, where participation, victories (*bhollisay*), but also ties (*olinye karri*) are used to stress masculine and feminine ideals. There are also multiple aesthetic elements used in Mursi that intensify the affective force of such performative and "heroic" contests that are not only to entertain themselves, but provide a kind of safety valve for channeling aggression and competitiveness in ways that generate change, not harm (Turton 2002). Such aesthetic expressions are found in everything from the symbolically significant protective "kit" (*tumoga*) worn by male fighters[42], and the different clays and medicinal plants used for the purpose of healing and protecting fighting sticks and fighters[43], to the visual links between *dônga* fighters and their reproductive strength[44]. Here below we emphasise several aesthetic elements highlighted by Olisarali (e.g. gendered displays of martial socialisation, skill and technique, the "combative" exchange of songs, and the performance of rituals) that enhance the virtuous qualities of *dônga* and, at the same time, help to reframe popular misconceptions about this customary combat sport.

The virtues of *dônga*

"Attaining adulthood" through the art of "striking"

Drawing inspiration from his own martial socialization, where Olisarali learned the educational importance of *dônga* for teaching young boys to become men, and to respect Mursi values of strength, courage and the ability to defend oneself, he also reflects on the work of David Turton, who was the first to document *dônga* and identify it as vital to the attainment of adulthood (Turton 1973, 2002). While sharing his experiences as a young *dônga* fighter – during the same time that David was doing fieldwork in Mursi – Olisarali would frequently refer to the heroic ethic of a *dônga* fighter as someone with "the strength of a bull" (*hiriya ole*) and a 'cool stomach' (*hiriya lalini*), or someone who shows restraint, all of which are metaphors of manhood[45].

> We don't have a lot of words to describe *dônga*, other than *dônga daga* (to strike with a fighting stick), which teaches us everything we need to know about *dônga etey* (how to protect yourself). *Dônga* teaches you to become smart. When you fight well and you become a strong man,

[41] The skills and techniques required for *dônga* are not passed on to those attending boarding schools outside of Mursiland, where sport in general is often divorced from the school curriculum.

[42] The various protective items comprising the *tumoga* (see Turton 2002: 180; LaTosky 2013: 163,165; Salazar 2018: 82) are also elements that give *dônga* a decidedly performative and theatrical affect. Aniago (2019: 17) also describes *saro* and *ipia-agba* ("ceremonial flogging meets") among the Fulbe and Igbo of northern Nigeria and their associated costumes, make-up, props, etc. as indigenous forms of African performance and theatre.

[43] Ritual preparations using traditional medicines, herbalists and healers are found in many stick fighting cultures in East Africa (see Coetzee 2000: 100).

[44] Aside from the verbal and non-verbal references to "bulls", one of the most evocative symbols of virility that performs an ongoing unconscious dialogue about reproductive potential is the phallic fighting stick (see also Turton 1973; Abbink 1999: 228 and LaTosky 2013: 119). Eczet (2021: 258) also mentions a likely link between *dônga*-related cattle aesthetics and "the group's reproductive potential".

[45] This criterion of bull-like strength is found in almost all East African herding societies.

> everyone will sing your *dônga* song. You will become very famous. You are described as a hero, an *ole* (bull), *a gurguri* (clever), *a bansanay* (mature, strong). Some famous fighters that come to mind are Tiyosameya Olibui from Belle. Kokolum, and also my father Olibui Dhokdhok. When you are a good fighter, people respect you. You are called *oleya dôngay* (lit. the bull/hero of *dônga*; strong like a bull).

The attainment of heroic status and of someday becoming a *rori* (junior elder), and respected member of the Mursi community, carries with it the customary obligation of participating in *dônga*[46]. What constitutes aesthetic approval to participate in *dônga* involves training, in particular the fattening of one's body by drinking copious amounts of milk sometimes for several months[47], and mastering the techniques required to defend oneself (e.g. holding the fighting stick in a high guard position, protecting one's head and neck), and displaying courage and self-control (Turton 2002: 179)[48]. All unmarried men and unmarried girls are expected to participate in *dônga* at some point in their lives. Girls are also taught from an early age how to defend themselves and, later, as women, they will continue to use the *ula* (iron bracelet) to defend their family, their personal property, and their reputations as "strong women" (LaTosky 2018).[49] Girls create their own public stage on which they can distinguish themselves early on as "strong girls" (*bansanna*) (LaTosky 2013)[50]. Here we focus mainly on the active participation of boys and girls in *dônga* contests in terms of how they reinforce ideal gender expectations, and especially masculinity[51].

Even though both the *dônga* and the *ula* are taken up at an early age and skillfully mastered and individually crafted as symbols of masculinity and femininity, *dônga* contests are more commonly depicted as a ubiquitous and hyperbolic symbol of manhood, not womanhood (LaTosky 2013)[52]. Even in the literature today, bracelet duels (*ujene ula*), also referred to as "girls' *dônga*", continue to be sidelined as having less significance. During the writing of the script and when discussing *dônga* with Olisarali, it was the fighting stick and the stick fighter, not the bracelets and bracelet fighters, that were the central focus of our conversations. Whenever I would ask about girl's contests, Olisarali would insist that girl's *dônga* is not second to men's *dônga*, but that men's *dônga* is more dominant since martial resolution in Mursi society devolves mainly on men.[53] Through rigorous lifelong training boys and young men can later distinguish themselves as proficient junior elders (*rora)*, earning them respect in their community[54].

[46] See also Olekibo (2021: 38) on becoming a respected member of the community through *dônga* contests.

[47] There is an aesthetic appreciation for fattening in Mursi for cattle and people alike. Such intensive training/fattening by older boys and men, but also girls in preparation for *dônga* contests also matches their potential capacity to maintain the health of their cattle and children in the future in unspoken, aesthetic ways.

[48] As Ryall (2018: 59) reminds us, attributing beauty to a display of courage in aesthetic terms is not at all unusual. Mursi displays of sportsmanship are no different and signal both ethical and aesthetic approval (e.g. being likened to a strong bull (to indicate strength and bravery), or a jackal (to indicate weakness and cowardice).

[49] Bracelet duelling is a uniquely Mursi gendered practice (LaTosky 2013). In Suri, for example, girls fight with the *dônga*, not with iron bracelets (personal communication with Olisarali Olibui, April 28, 2023).

[50] Our attempt to revise the dominant narrative about *dônga* as only legitimizing manhood, is not to say that masculinity does not still dominate Mursi rhetoric about *dônga.*

[51] The duelling ground is called both *bala dôngay* and *gula dôngay.* When stick duelling takes place in an open plain or savannah area, that is, if there is space to spread out, the girls will not fight on the same duelling ground. Only if the terrain is rocky or with dense bush will the girls and boys fight in the same place (*bal* or *gul*) (personal communication with Olisarali Olibui, April 29, 2023). For more on the *ula* fights of women beyond the ceremonial duelling ground, see LaTosky (2018).

[52] A more comparable symbol of womanhood is the pottery lip-plate worn by pubescent girls and married women (LaTosky 2013).

[53] Prompted by Tesfahun Haddis' reading of the anthropological literature on the *ula,* the script eventually came to include girl's *ula* contests (personal communication with Tesfahun Haddis and Olisarali Olbiui, May 11, 2021).

[54] This is similar to descriptions of pre-colonial Zulu stick fighting (e.g. Coetzee 2000).

> From the time you begin to walk, your mother, your father, your brothers will teach you. The young boys will take leaves when playing in the bush and make them like a *dônga*, or they will use their cloth to practice. The herding boys will practice in the bush. Girls will also practice *ula* [bracelet contests]. Once you feel you are skilled enough, you will go and fight. A *donghay* is about the age – around 16, 17, 18 – that you will start [to fight in public]. It is very dangerous if you do not know how to protect yourself. Young boys will fight other young boys, but if you feel you are ready to take on someone stronger, you can. A *têrri* (senior warrior, pl. *terro*) will fight a *têrri*, but can also fight a *rori* (junior elder, pl. *rora*). I used to fight against *têrro* and *rora*, anyone older and stronger. You can [fight someone from another age-grade] if you are a skilled fighter[55]. Only a strong fighter can later defend his cattle from enemies (Olisarali Olibui April 21, 2021).

Proving one's manhood is central to the whole heroic project of stick fighting contests. For example, a contest with someone from a more senior age-grade might impress the audience, especially admiring sweethearts, since displaying courage in Mursi is considered attractive (LaTosky 2013). Indeed, as Ryall also reminds us, «skill often correlates with that which we find beautiful» (2018: 40). While all sports have a certain aesthetic value that is appreciated by both the contestants and the spectators (Kuntz 1974), at the heart of *dônga,* technique is also paramount. For example, double-handed striking with the shaft (and never the tip of the stick), landing a double hit, holding the fighting stick in a high guard position to protect the head and neck, are among just some of the techniques[56]. These require of course special skills, especially speed, strength, coordination, and accuracy since decisions are made within a fraction of a second. The range of one's skills are demonstrated over a period of several days (usually not exceeding four days). When Olisarali began to explain how it is that aesthetic judgements are made with regard to technique, and how such a short fight can demonstrate one's skills, he explains that besides one's ability to move deftly and swiftly in order to accurately hit the opponent on the head, the leg, arm, or hand, with the ultimate aim of knocking one to the ground, the demonstration of self-restraint is crucial. This is enhanced by the constraint of time, since one is obliged to respect the *koisani* (referee, mediator) when he stops the fight. Such self-restraint is also attributed to preventing serious or potentially life-threatening injuries, as Olisarali shares below:

> A fight only lasts for about a minute. I never timed it. You need to be smart in order to prevent yourself from being knocked down. You must be fast and able to protect your arms and your legs. Because if you are knocked down, or someone beats your leg or arm, that man is the loser. The *koisani* will stop the fight if you break your stick so that you can get a new stick. They will throw a *dônga* between them. When a tie (is declared), it could be that a *dônga* broke, a hand shield (an *orgomay*)*,* came out, or they fought for a long time. [If two men tie] we say: "*a olinye karri"* (they are both bulls), or "*yog he dhib"* (they are exactly the same), "*heto"* (the same)! It can happen that the spectators will be angry at the *koisani* if he cannot stop the battle, or someone has grown tired. They will ask: "Why are you pushing him?" It can also be that a young man can be a *koisani* and what he says, the people must respect. Everyone must listen to him. (…) Only sometimes will a *koisani* let the fight go on a bit longer, like a fight over a girl (Interview with Olisarali Olibui, March 6, 2021).

In Mursi, the restriction of time contributes to its performative and emotional force. As Ryall so aptly puts it, «[g]ood sport provides a theatre in which human action, constrained by time and space, is worth watching. It is compelling and absorbing» (2018: 36). What seems to create the highest intensity of drama in *dônga* is when a duel is stalled beyond the one-minute mark. If a *koisani* does

[55] While some claim that *dônga* competitors only fight those within their own age-grade (e.g. Regi 2008), this tends to be the norm, not the rule.

[56] According to one Suri informant, the double hit is said to be a distinguishing feature of Mursi stick fighting (personal communication with Lanjoy Barkaki, April 8, 2021).

not stop the fight immediately, this will create tension in the audience, since the supporters also have a personal connection to the fighter and want to ensure that the play is fair and no serious or life-threatening injuries are inflicted. While it can happen that a fight is delayed for a number of reasons, like the one mentioned above, competitors are expected to play fair by respecting the *koisani*, who ensures that the spars are brief. The principle of self-restraint is thus important for preventing serious or potentially fatal injuries, since not being able to "intelligently defend oneself", as Olisarali explains below, is often brought on by fatigue if one ignores the *koisani*.

> If you did not have this time restriction, they will get tired. This is very dangerous. When the *koisani* stops the fight, you must listen to him. Yes, it can happen that someone dies from that sport, but it is not intentional. If you become an expert fighter and [unintentionally] kill someone, say it was my son Solomon, he would be praised by everyone and called an *ole* (hero). If it was intentional? [*repeating the question*] That person will be punished according to Mursi law. He would be disqualified, and people would choose not to let him fight in the future. To kill another Mursi is a big crime. The man would be punished. He must give his daughter to the family of the man he killed. This debt will carry on until he can give his family a girl. (…) Nobody has the intention to kill another Mursi.[57]

Figure 2. Men's *dônga* contest in northern Mursiland (Photo: S. LaTosky, 2012)

There is no stereotype that demonizes *dônga* more than the claim that it "often leads to death". The vilification of *dônga as* "deadly" is most common in political and media rhetoric[58]. One exception

[57] See also Eczet (2021: 214-219) on the restoration of order in the killing of another Mursi through the slaughtering an ox to cleanse the ground (*zuo onia ba*) (218).

[58] Some references in the anthropological literature, such as, «their use of sharp-ended and often deadly iron bracelets (*ula*)» (Salazar 2018: 84) could also lead to similar unintended conclusions about the combative bracelet contests of girls.

is the short documentary film *More than a Game,* which includes a well-translated story about stick fighting in Suri. Interviews with Suri stick fighters and the American linguist Michael Bryant substantiate the narrator's – and Olisarali's – claim that «it is unusual for it to come to death», since «the offender will be considered a murderer» (Rodríguez 2012, 20:32-20:38). As the Suri protagonist explains:

> No, you never think of killing the other one, only of beating him, of seeing him under your stick, admitting defeat. When you are in the heat of the battle, you don't feel the pain of the blows; those hurt later. What we feel is the strength that we only have at that moment. There isn't anything which gives us the same feeling of strength (*More than a Game*, 20:56-21:10).

In the case of a homicide in Suri: «[i]f the fighter kills an opponent with a blow intended to kill, the offender will be considered a murderer. He will be exiled from the community, his goods confiscated and one of his sister's given in marriage to the family of the dead fighter» (Rodríguez 2012, 20:32-20:38). Similar customary laws are also applied in Mursi. To be clear, while «fatal injuries are sometimes sustained» (Turton 2002: 6) as in any combat (or contact) sport, the skills and techniques required for stick fighting, from the strict time constraint and principle of self-restraint to the harsh punishment for intentionally killing another Mursi, all help to ensure that the risk of severe or fatal injury during a duelling contest is minimised. David Turton's description of the ritual "washing" of the fighting sticks (pl. *dongen*) with white clay and water, and the blunting of the "fifth" one by the *komoru* before sanctioning a *dônga* contest lends further evidence that people want «to ensure that there are no fatal injuries on either side during the duelling» (Turton 2002: 184).
However, just as it would be wholly inaccurate to characterize pole-wielding Mursi as "inciting violence" or "causing death", it would also be inaccurate to characterize all government officials as having the same jaundiced views about *dônga*. While the opening quote by *Ato* Moloka did draw attention to his own misunderstanding of *dônga*, Olisarali also found it important to underline that during his meeting with the former Chief Administrator, *Ato* Moloka did not advocate an outright ban on *dônga*, but suggested that more protective gear should be worn instead to reduce harm[59]. This utterance to "improve" *dônga* was a hopeful one that offered a compromise, rather than restrictions, as Olisarali recalls below:

> *Ato* Moloka was from Maale. He was shocked at first when I showed him the [*dônga*] video [in 2012]. But after I explained everything, he asked me to replay the video and offered some advice. He said that in his own culture the Maale practice a form of bloodletting that can be harmful and that over time they changed this practice by using just a small knife to make a very small cut. In this way, they could keep the practice but just reduce its harm[fulness]. *Ato* Moloka gave similar advice once he understood the importance of *dônga*. He said, "It is better if you wear more protection to prevent injuries, like broken hands and fingers". This is a much better way, rather than telling us our culture is "bad" and "should be stopped" (Interview with Olisarali Olibui, May 21, 2021)

Indeed, many outsiders will have mixed reactions when watching all of the various actions on the duelling ground, many of which are often lost on outsiders as "violent" and "deadly" in the same way that boxing, karate or mixed martial arts might not be appreciated in the same way by all[60]. However, by understanding the skills and techniques that frame the aesthetic experiences of *dônga*, we can begin to dismantle popular stereotypes about this indigenous martial art form. The same is true when it comes to understanding the socio-political and gendered context in which *dônga* contests occur.

[59] Another common misconception is that, like the neighbouring Suri, the Mursi do not use protective gear, which might have to do with the dominant images of Suri *dônga* in the media.

[60] Olisarali was shocked for example to learn about the length of a boxing match, calling it "brutal" and "deadly".

"The right to difference"

During a *dônga* fight there are many dramatic things going on at once that come together to produce a certain experience of pleasure and enjoyment for the contestants and the audience. David Turton reminds us, however, that *dônga* «is not seen merely as entertainment, or as a frivolous pastime of unmarried men» or «one off events»; it is «part of the continuing relationship of antagonism between the groups in question» (2012: 176). Turton's long-term fieldwork is still the most valuable contribution today for understanding Mursi social organization and how fundamental *dônga* is to the political foundations and social dynamics of the community. It is through the performative ritual of *dônga* that local groups are able to constantly assert their differences and, at the same time, acknowledge their commonalities (Turton 2012). Duelling contests are, to borrow James Fernandez's definition of rituals (Fernandez 2006: 648), «social situations of constant contestedness». Because conflict is valued as a political good, including ritualized forms of violence*,* Turton's argument that *dônga* is "a ritual assertion to the right to difference", is especially relevant today as local groups (*bhuranyoga*) have to continually reassert their political identities, especially to the Ethiopian authorities. Ever since government resettlement plans were announced in 2011, concerns have been raised that such plans will disrupt the political structure of the Mursi by imposing new government "localities" on customary ones (LaTosky 2021: 283). As Turton further explains, a "right to difference" is also synonymous with the right of different *bhuran* "to conduct their affairs in relative independence of others". The ideal outcomes of *duelling* contests are then not only to (re)draw symbolic boundaries between different local Mursi groups, as Turton argues, but to give renewed meaning to social unity and peaceful co-existence through «the shared values of 'Mursiness' embodied most notably in the institutions of clanship, marriage, priesthood and the age-organization» (Turton 2002: 187). At a time when Mursi identity and political independence is being challenged by the Ethiopian State, and especially by the onslaught of large-scale agro-development in South Omo since 2011, ritually sanctioned *dônga* contests continue to serve as an important way for the Mursi to publicly (re)affirm their political identities and the social well-being of the community, including gendered social relations[61]. The affective force of such affirmations is only possible however when the context is known and the rituals of the *komorenna* (ritual figureheads, priests) are observed.

Nga Ngone's Dônga

When Olisarali attended a *dônga* fight in 1996, he encountered David Turton there documenting a three-day duelling event between the Mugju and the Mara, which would come to be known as *Nga Ngone's Dônga* (2002: 182-186). What he was not aware of at the time was that David's analysis of this event would someday offer an important window into the world of *dônga* and inspire him to write his own play about *dônga*. Through his own reflections on Turton's detailed analysis of *Nga Ngone's Dônga*, Olisarali also sought to convey in his script the enduring social relations between the various age-grades, kin groups, clans and sub-clans, the different rivalries between *bhuranyoga* (local groups), the personal histories of individuals and a festering dispute that erupted beyond the duelling ground. Like Turton, he discusses the affective bonds between the unmarried girls and unmarried boys who took up the challenge for a *dônga* contest and the explicit ritual symbolism represented by the "unmarried girls of the mother's clan" (*dholê jugê*). Such ritual symbolism is important, as it points to two popular gender stereotypes about *dônga*, first, that the main objective of pole duelling is to "win a bride at the end", as is still popularly depicted in the media today, and second, that *dônga* fights are *only* about the martial glory of men. The first misconception is acknowledged by Turton confirming that men do not have free reign to choose from a pool of

[61] *Dônga* is only possible in the absence of war, hence, the common expression: "If there is no *dônga*, the land is bad" (*Huli dônga ninge ba agersi*).

unmarried girls, and that *dônga* is not only about strengthening relations between potential marriage partners, but affirming integral gender roles between, for example, young men and the unmarried girls of their mother's clan (*dholê jugê*) (see *mursi.org*).

> For a bout to end in the victory of one of the contestants, his opponent must either fall to the ground or retire hurt (commonly because of broken or bruised fingers). In the first case, though not in the second, the victor is carried round the field on the shoulders of his local age mates and then surrounded by unmarried girls of his mother's clan, his "girl mothers" (*dholê jugê*). They lay goat skins on the ground for him to sit on and hold cotton cloth above him, stretched on duelling poles, to provide shade. The explicit symbolism here is that of a mother protecting her baby from the sun: "They are wrapping up their child. Doesn't one wrap up a baby to protect it from the sun?" It is probably this custom which gave rise to the popular misconception that the victor in a duelling contest can take his pick of the available marriageable girls. In fact, there is a strict prohibition on marriage between a man and a woman of his mother's clan (*mursi.org*, adapted from Turton 2012).

That *dônga* contests provide girls with a certain degree of freedom to choose their boyfriends, and to try and influence their family's decision of a potential marriage partner, is also revealed in Olisarali's script for the play *Tirainy ko Koisani*. Based on a love story similar to that of *Nga Ngone's Dônga*, the script reiterates the fact that *dônga* is "frequently provoked by girls". The play also similarly depicts how stick fights can be a way for a girl to test the bravery of young men who are admired as good fighters, or to show off her boyfriend's strength and prowess, which provides her with a certain degree of protection (Olisarali and Haddis 2021). A suitor or boyfriend does not have to be the victor either, since showing bravery by fighting still earns one respect. However, regardless of who provokes the fight, or "calls for a challenge", both young men and unmarried girls will train for many months until they meet again to "make war" (*kaman*), as Olisarali discusses below:

> Ngangone was Komorakorra's daughter, from the komorte clan. Someone from the *ngerreyai* clan, my father's clan, had challenged her and so she challenged the young (*ngerreyai*) men. Girls will do this. They are often the ones to provoke the fight.
> Boys who will go to the girls' (place) to play or joke around with them, or meet them at the river, might ask for water (from a girl). If she is not a *babi* (silly) girl, she will give water; if she is (silly), she will pour water on him. This is very insulting and will create big problems. Clever girls might also do this to test the strength of someone they know is a good fighter. When they meet him, they will challenge him. To not give water is a real insult. If she does not move closely towards him to hand him the water but stands far away and makes him stretch his arm to reach for it is also insulting. He will say: "I am a guest here and you cannot even bring water to me?" A (nice) girl must bring water and put it in the guest's hand. If he has to stretch his arm like that, he will retaliate and take a bracelet or beads from her and "make war" (*kaman*). This happens often (between boys and girls), especially during harvest time, when most *dônga* fights take place (see Figure 3 below).
> If she provoked him, he cannot fight her. If a girl does this, he can challenge her. Her girlfriends will fight that man (and his age-mates), the man that was insulted. She will have to tell her girlfriends where he lives. They will go and declare that they accept to fight. That man who was insulted, he will go (back) to Mugju area, to start fattening for six or seven months. Also girlfriends will start fattening. All will begin to do this (training) and set up a date.
> When preparing for the challenge (*itoge dônga/dônga itog*) they (the men) will drink *girari* [prepared from the mulched bark of the wild olive tree] that helps to strengthen them for the fight. Again, when a girl challenges you, you cannot fight her. She might insult other boys to test her own boyfriend. If he is a good fighter, nobody can touch her. She will be proud and even do crazy things and nobody can stop her. Like Ngangone, when she challenged the *Ngereyai* this was another way to set up a stick fight. In the night the girls they go around to different places to call

> all the boys to fight in Mugju. They will give them (the boys) milk and *shalu* (gruel) and they will resolve the conflict. If that girl insulted someone from another *bhuran* (local group, also cattle camp) – her family or parents will not go to fight with that boy. Her boyfriend's family's clan will go to fight. The parents cannot intervene (Interview with Olisarali Olibui, 04.08.21).

Figure 3. Girls gather during a *dônga* contest in Banko, northern Mursiland (Photo: **S.** LaTosky, 2004**)**

Gendered relations are at the heart of *dônga* contests. As Olibui explains above, girls will fight against other unmarried girls from the respective clans and/or local groups of the boys who they challenge to fight and vice versa. However, as mentioned earlier, the role of girls is still underestimated in the literature and especially in popular accounts of *dônga*. Girls have, in fact, to a large extent, legitimized *dônga*, not only by actively attending *dônga* events, and bestowing attention on their favourite fighters and admirers, but by competing themselves in bracelet spars (*ujene ula*) or "girls' *dônga*". In their analysis of stick fighting during the time of the Zulu kingdom, Carton and Morrell (2012: 42) confirm that young Zulu girls and women also learned martial skills and that «female agency is also shown in martial "play" with the same intentions of attracting the attention of a sweetheart». Similarly, *dônga* provides an exciting arena in which lovers meet and male and female favourites display the ideals of manhood and womanhood through acts of courage, strength, restraint and, in the case of men, the promise of providing future bridewealth cattle[62]. As Olibui explains, martial arts training is highly valued for boys, and also teaches girls self-defense.

> Girls' *dônga* is just as important. When girls challenge boys, they can also create a big *dônga*. The girls who have the *ula*, will go to fight. The young men will follow the girls to fight "with" the girls. If the girls create the *dônga*, the girls will fight in the early morning and many men are

[62] Although men's *dônga* dominates the foreground of activity, it is important to note here that girl's *dônga* contests do not take place "in comparably fewer instances" than men's *dônga*, as I had also once assumed (LaTosky 2018).

> there watching. When the girls finish, they will stop and hand over to the *têrro* (senior warriors) and the *têrro* will start fighting. If the boys create the *dônga*, girls will fight in the evening. The *rora* and *bara* (junior and senior elders) are not allowed to take [over] the *dônga* from the girls. After the girls, the [young] men are going to fight, but *rora* are not allowed. Maybe in the end, only during the last days, the *rora* and *rora* will fight; only then can they take over. The girls will also fight two, three, four days or more if there are no problems. Usually *dônga* lasts four days. *Ula* is just as important (Interview with Olisarali Olibui, May 17, 2021).

Mursi girls also attract attention from admirers by impressing them with their own strength and prowess during *ula* contests in which the female heroines are also referred to as "*olinya*" (bulls) or *bansanaa* (mature girls, strong fighters), as expressed in the songs of praise that are sung during and after *ula* contests (LaTosky 2013: 123). While both young unmarried men and young unmarried girls create a "public stage" on which they can display their strength and bravery, and potentially achieve the status of an *ole* (LaTosky 2013: 119), there is no question that the public stage for men dominates any *dônga* event. This is enhanced by their athletic displays of skill and technique mentioned above, but also other aesthetic expressions, including verbal and non-verbal strategies. While a number of non-verbal strategies are used to impress and persuade the audience, such as, the piercing, shrill sound of antelope-horn trumpets to invite contestants to the duelling arena, the powerful image of cheetah and/or leopard skins worn as a symbol of their prowess, the stomping of *têrro* and *rora* like dangerous bulls, or the sounding of the cowbell tied around their waists that resonate with the audience (see Figure 4 below)[63], here we focus on the affective force of verbal contests during *dônga* events.

Figure 4. A young Mursi man prepares for a *dônga* fight (Photo: S. LaTosky, 2012)

[63] Such visual devices include, for example, the loud chants and tapping of *dônga* sticks by supporters (e.g. age-mates and clan members) to assure that the champion looks braver, more manly, and more popular than his opponents (LaTosky 2018). With the exception of the *donghay* (age-grade of junior warriors), male competitors wear colourful combative regalia called a *tumoga* (kit) that makes them stand out. Female contestants take off all decorative adornment (e.g. ear and lip plates), and use a cloth and/or animal skin to protect their heads (LaTosky 2013: 123).

Figure 5. A young Mursi man prepares for a *dônga* fight (Photo: S. LaTosky, 2012)

"Striking *Dônga* Songs"

Verbal duelling is closely entwined with pleasure and enjoyment for the audience during *dônga* events. Verbal spars are used, for example, as a way to praise a fighter and to show allegiance to age-mates, kinsmen, clansmen. Along with songs of praise, insults are also made to intimidate one's opponent. In Mursi there are different types of "verbal contests", such as those between married women called *ujene zilloi* ("striking songs") (LaTosky 2013: 155-156), an important topic in its own right, or *dagana holowa dôngay* ("striking *dônga* songs"), a genre that is specific to men's *dônga*. The songs of individual men are closely linked to a person's identity, as they pay homage to the favourite ox, and communicate kin and clan allegiances as well as wider social relations.[64] The "combative exchange" of men's songs during *dônga* events are of particular interest, since these songs are part of a man's individuality, producing collective memories

[64] The names of places, people, cattle and colour terms are some of the dominant ways in which allegiances are expressed through songs (see Eczet 2021: 70).

and a certain emotional experience for spectators and competitors alike[65]. During *dônga*, such individual songs are also a way to publicly honor and bring attention to one's bravery, and the collective strength of one's age-mates, clan and *bhuran*. Those who are able to enjoy a monopoly of victory are immortalized as famous fighters through their songs. In other words, just as "wounds are exchanged" ("*moloy kachachana*", or *"chacha moloi"*) during *dônga* (Turton 2002: 181) and worn with pride, men's songs, are passed on from one defeated fighter to the next as a kind of valuable "prize". The winner of a duelling contest wins the right to take another man's song(s), earning him respect.

> Those who are good at singing can sing. Anyone can sing. Each man has his stick-fighting song(s) for his own dance. Your age-mates will give you one song, or you take the song(s) from the man you knocked down. When you go to fight, you will go to take their songs. Others will sing your song(s) when you go to *dônga*. (…). If you have many *bhollisay* (victories), you have many songs. It's like killing an enemy and taking his gun. Later, you will go to dance with his song(s) [that follow *dônga*], called *holowa dôngay* (dance of *dônga*). You can use all of his songs. When you go to dance, they will want to take that song from you. These songs go around and around. (…) If you have never been defeated, nobody can take your song. If you take one [song] that everyone knows without fighting him; if he finds out, he will come and fight with you. This is part of the play (*tirainya*) of *dônga* (Interview with Olisarali Olibui, May 17, 2021).

This kind of "combative dialogue", in which men "steal" each other's songs, is a central aesthetic category in men's *dônga*[66]. It is also what differentiates it from girls' *dônga*.

> For girls, when they come to the *bal* (duelling ground, men's shade) to fight [with bracelets], everyone sings for them. Individually, a girl does not have her own song until she gets married and is given another name. Then she can challenge others in *zilloi* (the verbal singing contests of married women). If she does not sing well, the (stronger) woman can take something from her, like flour or grain (Interview with Olisarali Olibui May 17, 2021).

In the case of an *ula* (iron bracelet) contest, «her supporters sing songs to intimidate and convince others of her strength» (LaTosky 2018: 209). Chants of praise are also sung for a girl who defeats her opponent, for example, with a swift blow to the forehead (LaTosky 2013: 117). While a girl who wins is also declared a "*bansanay*" (here: strong girl, mature person), or "*ole*" (lit. bull; hero), only the men can take the song(s) of a defeated opponent during *dônga* contests. While the demonstration of athletic skills, gendered and verbal contests provide a worthwhile aesthetic and restorative experience, rituals that impose order and stability, as mentioned earlier, are also an important aesthetic category with the forward-looking goals of reconciliation and forgiveness.[67]

[65] For examples of men's songs that pay homage to cattle-human relations see Eczet (2021: 78-83).

[66] To take the song of another – or to even document it for the purpose of research – without the express permission of the owner is akin to theft in Mursi society, not unlike the copyright rules of songwriters.

[67] Forgiveness is a productive part of reconciliation that requires further attention.

Figures 6 and 7. Performing *dônga* at the National Theatre in Addis Ababa (Photos: O. Olibui, 2022)

In defense of *dônga*

The Mursi have long recognised the communal value of ritually-sanctioned and refereed arenas, not only as a form of recreation, but as a way to enable competitors at a nascent stage of their masculine and feminine formation to pursue the heroic feats of *dônga* without abandoning the priorities of self-restraint, courage and honour that sustain and (re)define Mursi social relations and customary forms of reconciliation. These priorities are regulated by the *komorenna*, the ritual figureheads or "agents of reconciliation" (Turton 2002) who uphold domestic age-grade hierarchies, kin and clan relations. They also continue to define and redefine the symbolic boundaries between the various local groups (*bhuranyoga*). Displays of manly and womanly vigour, are also shown in numerous aesthetic ways, from the technical expertise and skill that is honed at an early age, to the combative exchange of songs between men (and verbal spars between women), to the participation in rituals to show communal respect for Mursi values.

From at least 2012 onwards, however, government rhetoric, as well as, popular portrayals of *dônga* in the media have presented a different perspective of stick fighting in Mursi. The most extreme of these positions essentialise *dônga* as "violent" and "often causing death". This has led to talk of legal restrictions, as the authorities tried to enforce in Suri several decades ago, that are not unlike those imposed in other parts of Africa during the colonial era. Nineteenth-century British colonialists, who tried to stamp out stick fighting in Zulu society, for example, not only barred stick fighting, but helped turn it into public spectacle for their own enjoyment. As Carton and Morrell (2012: 51) explain, «proponents of white supremacy who, among other things, channelled the theatrical elements of stick fighting into public entertainment like *ngoma* dance, did more than most to project, deep into the twentieth century, an image of weapon-wielding Zulu men as relentless purveyors of aggression and chaos»[68].

Tirainya ko Koisani, which premiered on July, 24 2023 at Wolkite University and opened at the National Theatre in Addis Ababa on July 31, 2022, was the first attempt to channel the performative elements of *dônga* in a more socially just and educational way (see Figures 6 and 7 above) than 20th century *ngoma*. The success of the play, with Olisarali's call to protect *sagine* and the cultural integrity of Mursi society in general, was made apparent during a recent workshop on Indigenous

[68] Olisarali insisted all along that the play should not be viewed as mere public entertainment, but as a way to help generate constructive dialogue that takes into consideration Mursi views.

Theatre in Canada, Nigeria and Ethiopia held at the University of Northern British Columbia (March 25-27, 2023).[69] Mursi participants, which included three senior elders and one junior elder, discussed the positive role that the play has had in terms of bringing awareness to Mursi concerns and threatened cultural practices such as *dônga*. Two compelling actors in the play, who attended the workshop, explained, for example, how the performance has garnered media attention for the Mursi, including several Ethiopian television documentaries (e.g. Fana Television 2022), and has helped Mursi women and men to see the value in safeguarding their cultural heritage. Their insights also pointed to the continued relevance of *dônga* for restoring peaceful relations, challenging the assumption that *dônga* invariably stokes aggressive and violent behaviour, and reiterating many of the points that Olisarali raises here about the urgent need to promote *dônga* in order to "promote peace", "resolve conflicts" and "show respect towards the elders".[70]
Furthermore, unlike many ancient and modern martial arts that are celebrated today, *dônga* remains largely unacknowledged. The ancient Egyptian fighting art of *taḥṭīb*, for instance, has witnessed a revival in recent years. Led by Adel Boulad's creation of Modern Tahtib, which was enshrined in 2016 in UNESCO's "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage" (Gabry-Thienpont 2019)[71], it has more recently come under consideration as a new Olympic sport (*Global Times* 29 April 2021). Given the many striking similarities between *taḥṭīb* and *dônga,* we are inspired to make the case that *dônga* (or *sagine*), and similar indigenous games deserve national and international recognition and protection across ethnic borders. The creation of, for example, a National Association of Indigenous Sports in Ethiopia could be one way to formally acknowledge the restorative benefits of indigenous martial arts like *dônga* and their potential role in the prevention of future violence and attainment of democracy.

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[69] The two-day workshop entitled "Building Connections between Indigenous Theatre and Theatre for Development in Canada, Nigeria and Ethiopia" was funded by UNBC's SSHRC General Research Fund.

[70] Personal communication with Chanyogolony Torko *Komoru* and Barkaka Olibui, March 26, 2023.

[71] Modern and ancient Egyptians were accomplished in stick fighting, aspects of which were also ceremonial. According to Riddle (2003), stick fighting in ancient Egypt was performed as a tribute to the pharaoh (Gabry-Thienpont 2019). See also Poliakoff (1987) on ancient forms of stick fighting.

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