

## AESTHETICS

EMEKA ANIAGO

Department of Theatre & Film Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka (Nigeria)  
emekaaaniago@gmail.com; emeka.aniago@unn.edu.ng  
ORCID id 0000-0003-3194-1463

# Thick Description of Social Functions of Selected African Flogging-Bouts as Theatrical Entertainment and Self-Defence Martial Arts

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### Abstract

**Background and Aim.** This study critically examines the culture specific social functions and performance realities of some flogging-meets that existed or exists in regions of Africa. Thus, this study applies Aniago's Theory of Vicious Performance and Geertz's Thick Description of culture and interpretive contextualization as the preferred conceptual and analytical approaches. More so, this study examines some of the descriptions which authors variously apply in referring to flogging-meets, in a bid to rationalize on the sociological imagination attributable to such classifications. Furthermore, this study discusses the similarities and dissimilarities in social functions, performance and production processes, participants' compositions, paraphernalia of performance and rules of engagement of the flogging-meets.

**Method.** This study applies a mixed methods research technique, which in line with Johnson R. B., et al, is the research approach whereby a researcher or team of researchers combine elements of qualitative and quantitative research techniques in the areas of data collection and analyses, for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding.

**Result and Conclusion.** In many ways, the data gathered through several interactions with practitioners, critical observers, relevant published scholarly accounts and the findings from the author's ethnographic research has enhanced the validation or disputation of existing information on flogging-meets in Africa. Thus, the application of interpretive analyses of the collected data has facilitated the pursuance of plausible categorization of forms of African flogging-contests. Lastly, through the application of Thick Description of culture and interpretive attribution, the study observes that flogging-meets in Africa are perceived variously as community approved utilitarian traditional social practice, which provide various social functions such as rite-of-passage, social entertainment and means of acquisition of self-defence skills.

Every serious cultural analysis starts from a sheer beginning and ends where it manages to get before exhausting its intellectual impulse. [Clifford Geertz 1973: 25]

### Introduction

To very many individuals, particularly those that fall within the 'outsider' category, the imagination they claim that promptly emanate when the expression flogging-meet is mentioned is that of anguish and harrowing pain in relation to the concerned participants. However there is more to the expression 'flogging-meet' than the supposed outsiders' suppositions. To clearly set the perspective as well as the inclination of our analysis, we begin

by defining the expression 'flogging' as an aggressive hitting of a recipient or oneself with a handheld instrument such as a stick or a whip. Noteworthy, flogging can be voluntary or an involuntary audience-orientated or non-audience-orientated action. It can also be categorized as a ceremonial or a non-ceremonial activity. In this study, we are focusing primarily on the context of 'flogging' as a ceremonial audience-orientated practice within African culture specific perspectives. The word 'flogging' is chosen to avoid the inadequacies of a word such as 'fighting' which inadvertently some scholars usually adopt to refer to some flogging-meets such as *soro*, *sagine* and *ipia-agba*. In line with the culture specific attributions of the Fulani and the Igbo who practice *soro* and *ipia-agba* respectively, stick-fighting denotes a

non-refereed, non-rule-bound hostility between individuals. Therefore, to the Igbo and the Fulani, stick-fighting is neither a ceremonial practice nor a form of theatre. Furthermore, in line with the Igbo and the Fulani perspectives, a flogging-meet is a community cultural theatre, whereby people gather at a performance site, as observers or as contestants to partake in rule-bound flogging-bouts. In the described scenario, flogging is deemed a voluntary, an audience-orientated and rule-bound ceremonial practice.

For the purposes of clarity, there is need to explain a couple of expressions which will feature prominently in the course of this analysis. The expression flogging-duel is interpreted and applied in this study in two ways. A flogging-duel may be a 'ceremonial flogging-duel' which represents flogging contests carried out in flogging-meets such as *soro*, *sagine* and *ipia-agba* whereas a non-ceremonial flogging-duel is to the Fulani and the Igbo a fight between individuals where flogging is carried out without formal rules of engagement.

The term 'ceremonial flogging-duel' represents a voluntary communally organized audience-oriented flogging contest which takes place in flogging-meets such as *soro*, *ipia-agba*, and *sagine*. Ceremonial flogging-duels are regulated by codified strict rules of engagement, even though each of the mentioned flogging-meets is typified by a particular pattern of performance practice and process. Again, ceremonial flogging-duel is a generic term which represents forms of communally-organized, audience-orientated flogging-duels in which flogging is carried out either with sticks or animal-hide whips of varied kinds and sizes.

To explain the classification of ceremonial flogging contest as a communal theatre, game and sport, we turn to Aniago's Theory of Vicious Performance, where he explains that the: "Concept of vicious performance defines a certain sub-category of extreme performances, of which *soro* is the case-study, as those forms of audience-orientated events in which a performer voluntarily self-inflicts or allows another individual to inflict a physically damaging force on his or her body (which he or she may similarly reciprocate or may not) in a contest with another, which is aimed at publicly exhibiting his ability to contain, suppress and disguise pain" [2009: 95]. In the above citation, we learn from Aniago's contribution that flogging-bouts are within the scope of vicious performances and that they are viewed as cultural theatre by the concerned.

Furthermore, he observes that: "The term 'vicious performance' portrays *soro* as an event that involves voluntary participation by individuals in the reciprocal infliction of physical damaging force to the bare chest or back with sticks, in order to test their various degrees of endurance to physically induced pain. The physical damaging force relates to the strikes with *soro* sticks that often cause visible bodily injuries to the *fiyetedo*.

The notion of physical aggression evident in *soro* as a vicious performance is a reference to the state of action at that intensity when individuals, especially the spectators, clearly appreciate the immediate capacity of such actions (strokes with a *soro* stick to the bare body of the *fiyetedo*) to inflict bodily injury" [Aniago 2009: 95–96].

In the context of this study, action described as damaging force is categorized as 'physical', 'non-physical', 'audience-orientated' and 'non-audience-orientated'. Actions such as punching, flogging, stoning and kicking are kinds of physically-induced damaging forces. Non-physically-induced damaging forces are produced by actions which do not require the aggressor's physical contact with the recipient, such as character assassination through print or electronic media, race-hate crusades and threats. A vicious performance can be categorized as 'audience-orientated' when it is enacted specifically for the audience, in which case there would be strict rules of engagement. Illuminating further on the conceptualization of a cultural theatre such as *soro* as a form of vicious performance, Aniago observes that: "*Soro*, as a vicious performance, embodies the reality of pain and physical aggression to varying degrees. During a *soro* bout, the *fiyowo* inflicts the strikes with as much strength as possible, so that a *fiyetedo*'s wellbeing may be adversely affected or threatened, which indicates the element of viciousness of the action in the performance" [Aniago 2009: 96]. Furthering, Aniago explaining the reality of damaging force in a culturally accepted contest, opines that: "Due to the viciousness contained in a *soro* bout, the physical aggression may appear to teeter on the edge of disaster, however it will mainly remain 'on the edge, but not over' because the performance actions are contained within *soro*'s performative boundaries" [Aniago 2009: 96].

On the locale culture specific nature of Igbo and Fulani perception of flogging-meet, we turn to Geertz's view on pattern of culture analysis, where he notes that culture analysis must be cast in terms of the interpretations to which a given people or community's worldview define their actions and practices, because that is what they profess to be the descriptions of their ways of life [Geertz 1973: 15]. Therefore, because flogging-meet in some Africa communities is a cultural practice, this study in line with Geertz notes that cultural practice such as flogging-meet is most effectively treated in its own terms: "By isolating its elements, specifying the internal relationships among those elements, and then characterizing the whole system in some general way, according to the core symbols around which it is organized, the underlying structures of which is the surface expression, or the ideological principles upon which it is based" [Geertz 1973: 17].

The above view by Geertz indicates that culture-specific contextualization denotes an analytical perspective whereby analysis of culture and its products are based mainly on culture-specific significations and contexts.

Geertz's Thick Description which subsumes his 'interpretive theory of culture' denotes in line with Max Weber that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" and Geertz in his approach "takes culture to be those webs" and the culture specific analysis as "not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning" [Geertz's 1973: 5]. This point of view places the theoretical essence of this study as that which focuses on culture specific interpretive study. Consequently this study utilises an interpretive approach to provide the platform for examining selected flogging-meets' social functions based on the socio-cultural perspectives of the people whose cultural practice is being studied. Therefore, if a researcher is applying thick description, such a researcher "[...] should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings [...]" but rather at "what the practitioners of such cultures do" [Geertz 1973: 5]. Thus this study is about generating an interpretive analysis of human actions within culture specific contexts.

### Review of Historical and Contemporary Nuances on Flogging-Meets in Africa

Proven scholarly accounts clearly indicate that in parts of Africa, there are or were forms of flogging-meets and that the people concerned recognized flogging-meet as traditional utilitarian event. According to Andrew Leibs [2004: 10] ceremonial flogging-meets were immensely popular "from Egypt to South Africa" in the pre-colonial period and were "second only to wrestling in terms of cultural importance". However, what is known, according to Gerard Taylor [2005: 123] is that "many traditions and varieties of stick-fighting [ceremonial flogging-meets] come from Africa" such as the Donga and Dula Maketa in Ethiopia. It is also widely held that the culture of ceremonial flogging-duel was exported to the Caribbean by Africa slaves during the slave trade era. Thus, forms of ceremonial flogging-meets practiced in Caribbean and Latin American nations such as Trinidad (*Kalenda* or *Kalinda*) and in Brazil, (*jogo de bastes*, *bate-pau*; and *maculelê*) can be traced to sub-Saharan African nations [Aniako 2012]. According to Tony Wolf, in the work *Juego Del Palo*, ceremonial flogging-meets sometimes are usually part of a wedding ceremony as well as the activities in the religious Festival of *Benesmen* on the Canary Islands. Furthering, Wolf observes that 'stick play' is: "Practiced as a folk art, sports and self-defence system, on the Canary Islands; a mountainous island chain off the coast of Morocco. It features a wide variety of *Estilos* (styles), which are usually named after the families which have preserved and perpetuated specific teaching systems, and also many distinct *juegos* (games) featuring different rules, strategies and techniques [...]" [Wolf 2000: 1].

Again, it should be noted that across different cultures, all forms of communally organized audience-orientated flogging contests that employ sticks or whips made of animal hide can accurately be described as 'ceremonial flogging-meets', but not all such forms could fittingly be described as 'stick-fighting'. For instance, in the work *Sports and Games of the Ancients*, David C. Conrad [2001: 48] basing his information on the descriptive narrative of a Malian minstrel specializing in *dan* music observes how Mande youths congregate to engage in a whipping contest with whips made of hippopotamus-hide, "to demonstrate courage before village girls of marriageable age". Meanwhile, in an account that explains the *dan* music, Eric S. Charry [2000: 81] notes that the word *dan* which is also pronounced as *ndan* or *ndang* is a pentatonic stringed instrument with multiple necks; each string is attached to a separate neck, which consists of a flexible stick. Describing the musical instrument *dan* further, Charry adds that the resonator is a large calabash turned upside down so that the strings lie across the curved surface, each raised by a small cylindrical bridge. The other side of the calabash is left open, with no skin covering [Charry 2000: 81–82]. Meanwhile, Conrad's description of this extinct whipping contest interestingly makes an unambiguous reference to *soro* which he refers to as *Sharo*, the common word the Nigerian Hausa people and neighbouring Niger Republic people apply in referring to *soro*, which is a Fulfulde word. Furthering he notes: "As village girls clap their hands to the rhythm of drums and the parents and their desirable daughters look on, the two *Kamalenw* assume prescribed positions and take turns receiving blows of the whip from each other" [Conrad 2001: 48].

The above account from Conrad is similar to the flogging-meets witnessed by the researcher in parts of northern Nigeria from 1998 to 2006 during his several field studies. Furthermore, Conrad relates that: "In 1965 in a village near Kano in northern Nigeria, I witnessed a Fulani rite of passage called *sharo*, which consisted of very similar activities. Young stalwarts, who in an earlier era would have been warriors and had been initiated the previous year, strutted and posed with whips in their hands, proudly displaying the scars on their chests. As the drum beat and elaborately dressed and rouged girls of barely marriageable age looked on, the new class of initiates held mirrors in front of their own faces to be sure they didn't flinch, and received the lashes" [2001: 48].

Clearly the contribution of Conrad, in many ways accords with the observations and reports of authors such as [Brackenbury 1924; Wilson-Haffenden 1930; Webster 1931; Reed 1932 and Aniako 2012]. Meanwhile, in relation to Conrad's contribution and specifically his application of the word *Kamalenw*, scholarly reports validates that among the Mande and the Bambara tribes of West Africa, the unmarried young men are called *Kamalenw* in the Mande language [Isichei 1997: 82; Con-



rad 2001: 48]. Thus, the performance described above about the Mande by Conrad can hardly be referred to as stick-fighting, not only because it does not involve the use of sticks, but because the participants' performance practice of taking turns to receive flogging from each other in a rule-bound manner, qualifies Conrad's example as a bout that constitutes 'a match and a test' rather than a fight, where opponents engage in an un-refereed, non-rule bound and non-ceremonial exchange of damaging forces at will and at random.

Having observed that ceremonial and non-ceremonial flogging-duels are or were in many ways integral to African cultural realities, this study at this point will attempt to examine closely the social functions of four examples of flogging-meets in Africa. The selected examples are *ipia-agba* which is practiced by the Igbo people of south-east Nigeria, *soro* which is practiced by the Fulbe or Fulani people of some West African countries particularly Nigeria, Cameroon, Benin Republic and Niger Republic, *sagine* which is linked to the Ethiopian Surma tribe in East Africa, the Kenyan *Samburu* linked to a pastoral tribe, identified as a section of the *Maa*-speaking people who reside mainly in the highlands of Northern Kenya, and lastly the south-African stick duels.

### **Ceremonial Flogging-Meets in West Africa: Social Functions of Fulbe Ladde *Soro***

*Soro* as practised by the West African Fulbe or Fulani can be described as a test of manhood as well as a test of a boy's ability to withstand the pain from a *fiyowo*'s (striker or flogger) whip without showing distress as long as he remains the whiplash recipient, which in Fulfulde; the Fulani language is referred to as the *fiyetedo*. Similar definitions can be found in reports of Brackenbury [1924]; Wilson-Haffenden [1930]; Webster [1931]; Reed [1932]; and Aniago [2012]. Based on several ethnography focused reports, *soro* contests fall within two performance modalities. One of the performance modality is the scenario whereby a young man or boy stands still on a spot in the middle of a gathering of observers to receive a stipulated number of strokes of the whip without betraying his inability to contain the pain effectively. Thus, the receiver of the whiplashes having received all the stipulated strokes and at the end of the last strike leaves the arena with applause and cheers from the spectators, mainly his fans, family, friends and admirers. The second performance modality is essentially the same with the first modality; however, the difference is that the striker (the *fiyowo*) usually swaps position with the *fiyetedo* the stroke recipient in line with the formal and pre-bout arrangement and agreement.

In defining *soro* as a flogging-meet the term 'meet' (*mobgal* in Fulfulde) suggests an organized gathering; a public event or performance (*fijirle* in Fulfulde), which

receives its authority from community participation and strict adherence to stipulated rules of engagement. However, it is also important to add the word 'ceremonial', which emphasizes its connotation as a communal and festive event, which, in turn, distinguishes it from other similar performances which may be literally defined as flogging-meets (for example, public whipping as corporal punishment under *sharia* law, which is not a 'ceremonial' flogging-meet but can be classified as an 'audience-orientated performance'). According to Leibs [2004: 10] in his work *Sports and Games of the Renaissance*, ceremonial flogging-meets in sub-Saharan Africa are forms of rites featuring "some of the fiercest competition on the continent". The quality of ferocity involved in some ceremonial flogging-meets may be likened to extreme sports such as bare-knuckle boxing (*dambe*), in which the risk of injury is high. This observation by Leibs regarding the viciousness of ceremonial flogging-meets confirms the views of some other scholars who have contributed research reports on African ceremonial flogging-meet traditions and variously describe ceremonial flogging-meets as events that involve pain and regulated aggression [Ndukwe 1996; Bovin 1998; Abbink 1999; Bocquené 2002; and Aniago 2012]. According to Aniago [2012], among the Jafun Fulbe ladde, *soro* contestants do not use shields nor do they hold two sticks during a bout. In line with *soro* rules of engagement, in the instance, whereby the *fiyetedo* is being tested to ascertain his ability to contain pain, the performance is not referred to as 'fighting' rather it is viewed as a 'sport'. Therefore it is incorrect to refer to *soro* as fighting either literally or metaphorically because there is no scenario of simultaneous or random exchanges of damaging forces (whiplashes) between the performers (the *fiyowo* and the *fiyetedo*) in the course of a bout.

The term 'stick-fighting' is frequently used inaccurately to describe a ceremonial flogging-meet which belongs to the category of performance that we refer to as 'audience-orientated public performance'. The Jafun Fulbe ladde perceive *soro* as a ceremonial flogging-meet, a gathering of both performers and spectators for the purpose of mutual flogging contests. To this end the Jafun Fulbe ladde *soro* is categorized as a *fijirde* (game), likewise the Hausa refer to it as a *wasa* (game) and engaging in *soro* is described by the Fulbe as *fijida* (to play with someone). Abdul Sule [2006] argues that even at the level of figurative representation *soro* can hardly be referred to as fighting because there is no context of attack and defence or simultaneous exchange of strokes. In *soro* bouts a *fiyetedo* stands calmly and receives strokes from a *fiyowo* who will not receive strikes in retaliation. In relation to *soro*, according to Abubakar Harande [2007] unmarried young girls get their answer as they watch the boys during a flogging-meet where they exhibit strength and courage. Harande [2006] observes that girls do not contest in *soro* hence psychologically there is a subtle

but clear assertion of physical strength over them by the triumphant-boy-contestants. Through this public test of manhood a boy becomes a man who is deemed able to provide for and protect his wife, family and occupational interests.

In line with the concept of *pulaaku* in public performances, when a Jafun Fulbe ladde boy presents his bare chest or back for flogging during *soro* it is unambiguously acknowledged by his community, both those present at the meet and those who are not, that he has clearly taken a 'stance'. In this instance, the *fiyetedo*'s 'stance' symbolically indicates that he has matured to the appropriate physical and psychological stage in which he will be able to stand his ground and not tremble when confronted by harsh, difficult or tortuous conditions; rather he will be able to combat the challenges of life as the head of a nomad household accordingly. A *fiyetedo*'s actual quality of endurance will ultimately determine his *daraja* (respect). For instance, my informant Harande observes that when the Jafun Fulbe ladde say in their language: *yeso mako holli suende kulol* (which translates as, 'his face shows a lack of fear') in regard to a *fiyetedo* it is a commendation which suggests that the *fiyetedo* has exhibited the expected and appropriate level of *pulaaku* (positive character in line with Nomadic Fulani worldview).

### Ceremonial Flogging-Meets in South-east Nigeria: Social Functions of *ipia-agba* of the Igbo

The Igbo are mostly in the south-east and south-south regions of Nigeria. The Igbo people practice whip flogging-contests, which they variously refer to as *ipia-agba* or *ipia-osisi* or *ipia-utali*. The flogging-contest is strictly contests for men and boys. Importantly, contests are usually between age-mates, however some contestants do opt for opponents of a higher age bracket, as a way of extending their respect among peers and in the entire community. Usually, flogging-contest can be between a masquerade and another masquerade, or between a masquerade and a boy, or between a boy and a boy. The Igbo people in Anambra state, south-east Nigeria classify *ipia-agba* as *egwulegwu* (play), and this position is captured in the reports of James Amankulor [1989: 45] and Osita Okagbue [2007: 1]. To the Igbo people flogging-contests are not *ogu* (fight), according to Emma Ezenwa, [2007]. Looking at the masquerade (*mmṛnwu*) which among Anambra Igbo partakes in flogging-contests as contestants, Ossie Enekwe notes that among the Anambra Igbo: "Masks in this category dramatize values based on physical prowess, masculine vigour and determination. By performing them, young men assert their manhood. These masks are feared because they rely on feats of strength or of magical skill" [Enekwe 1987: 105].

Writing on the typology of Igbo (masquerade) *mmṛnwu*, Augustine Onyeneke [1987] observes that

two categories, namely *mmṛnwu ọsọ* and *mmṛnwu iga* ('racing masquerades' and 'restive masquerades' respectively) are easily distinguishable. He notes that *mmṛnwu ọsọ* is known for its "athletic actions of racing about and numerous physical endurance tests involved in pursuing young people around with strong canes" while the *mmṛnwu iga* engage in stick-flogging bouts with each other at traditional festivals, and sometimes at burial ceremonies for dead *mmṛnwu* cult members [Onyeneke 1987: 28]. Onyeneke also observes that participants – who could be *mmṛnwu* followers or the *mmṛnwu* themselves – easily get involved in fights [bouts] among themselves [1987: 28]. This idea of easily getting involved in fights [bouts] may be due to the heightened emotions among the performers pre-performance – a direct result of the nature of the charged environment; directly linked to the intoxicating praise songs and music by the *mmṛnwu* followers, Onyeneke elucidates. During *mmṛnwu* festivals in south-east Nigeria, youths – especially young girls and uninitiated boys (*ogbodu*) – although virtually delirious whilst watching the flogging-contests, know full well that they risk being whipped by the *mmṛnwu*. To be flogged by an *mmṛnwu* during such festivals is within the regulation of *mmṛnwu* performance in communities in south-east Nigeria, although the *mmṛnwu* are also aware that they have to apply moderation in flogging their victims in the spirit of *egwulegwu* (playing) [Amankulor 1989: 45]. Usually, as soon as young girls or uninitiated boys spot an *mmṛnwu* they will run to hide from it, only to come out of their hiding after the *mmṛnwu* have moved far away. According to Ikenna Emmanuel Onwuegbuna: "*Mṛnwu okwomma* (*Okwomma Spirit-manifest*), as the main feature in *Egwu Okwomma* (*Okwomma Music*), stands for a physical manifestation of the ancestral spirit of the people" [Onwuegbuna 2012: 145]. The social functions of the masquerades include sacerdotal, enforcement of discipline and morality, entertainment, enforcement of law and order, community policing etc [Middleton 2002; Widjaja 2011; Aniago 2012; Ekegbo 2012; Onwuegbuna, 2012].

Just like the Fulani worldview on *soro*, the Anambra Igbo who mostly engage in fierce flogging-contest view the flogging sites as places where boys show their developing state of courage, dexterity and respect. The Igbo believe that a boy, who will grow to pursue a successful occupation, fend for his family and defend his community's territorial integrity, requires sufficient courage, dexterity and respect. Again, the *ipia-agba* is a sport; hence it provides opportunity for theatrical atmosphere for the community and their neighbourly communities. Also as a community theatre, *ipia-agba* avails the boys of dense and deep performance experience which influences their worldview and prepares them for adulthood. Meanwhile, part of this performance experience is the feeling of triumph over fear, thus the practical knowledge on how to contain pain helps a boy contestant to further

his appreciation of the trajectories of pain containment, both the physical and psychological pain. According to Chigozie Nkwocha [2018] an Igbo youth from Imo State southeast Nigeria, who has witnessed several flogging-contests during a number of *Ibono* festivals over the years, the period of ceremonial flogging-meets create theatrical atmosphere for entertainment as well as provides the boys the opportunity to publicly join the ranks of 'young men' through the show of courage, dexterity, respect, and skills. Similarly, Ikechukwu Ozoeme and Collins Emeka Ikeji [2018] both from Ukehe in Igbo-Etiti in Enugu State southeast Nigeria suggest that the performers in *ipia-agba* meet usually attain temporal transition and transportation of emotional essence whereby they feel ecstatic which is as a result of surge in adrenaline.

### Ceremonial Flogging Meets in East Africa: The Social Functions

In East African sub-continent, ceremonial flogging-meet traditions are linked to the Oromo, Surma and Mursi tribes. The Surma, also called Suri, are a sedentary pastoral Nubian tribe who use Suri as their language. The Surma people are mostly settled in the southern part of the western region of Ethiopia near the border with Sudan [Abbink 1999]. These three tribes, who are all from Ethiopia, engage in forms of flogging-meets that are similar to *soro* in some aspects. Just as in *soro* and *ipia-agba* flogging-contests, Surma flogging-contests are exclusive to young males. The Oromo people, who are the largest single ethnic group in Ethiopia, refer to their flogging-meet performances as *dula meketa*. The flogging-contest is meant to test the level of endurance and bravery among young males, just like *soro* and *ipia-agba*. The other two tribes, Mursi and Surma, refer to their form of flogging-meet as *sagine* which like *ipia-agba* and *soro* is "contained by strict rules of procedures" and is a ceremonial "male stick duelling" contest [Abbink 1999: 227]. *Sagine* contests take place as a sport normally when their community's harvest season is over. Usually, at that time the Surma youth observe a period of courtship, which include spending days by the river applying finger-painting designs on their bodies. Performers paint their bodies in elaborate patterns that tend to make them appear awe-inspiring to their opponents. Metzner explains that: "Once the bodies are painted and men and women have started courting one another, the other side of courtship starts. Once a week the Surma men from different villages come together, sometimes walking thirty miles on very small grass paths to meet one another to perform the most-wild sport we have ever seen on the entire African continent" [Metzner 2000: 1].

Jon Abbink in his study focusing on the social functions of flogging-meets among the Surma identifies three

specific areas. He notes that ceremonial flogging contests are: "Collective forums of competition between Surma villages; secondly, the duelling is a socially framed status contest allowing young men who are eager to start life as independent household heads to show their strength and virility [...] in a socially accepted manner both vis-à-vis older males and potential wives in the audience; thirdly, duels, in a psychological sense, can be seen as a training ground for youths to explore the fascination and energy of violent combat" [Abbink 1999: 232].

These, with the exception of the third point, are also in concordance with the Jafun Fulbe ladde perspective on *soro* (as based on the information I gathered during my field study from 2006-2009). The second aspect of *sagine* as observed by Abbink supports the idea of the Surma people using flogging-meets as a means of furthering the concept of men being stronger and more capable of enduring pain than women, which is a concept that is also projected in *soro*. The awareness of the painful nature of whiplashes on the body and the ability of young man to endure this pain without showing any signs of strain is a picture that non-performers (women and children especially) are left to contemplate. The young unmarried girls, by witnessing young boys going through this pain successfully, tend to either redefine or consolidate their perception of boys as stronger than themselves, which enhances their respect towards them, particularly when they become their husbands. To earn this respect, a boy has to try, as much as he can, to present himself as sufficiently strong, respectable and always in control of both his own emotions and any situation that may arise around himself and his immediate family.

Espousing on the social function of ceremonial flogging-meet among the Mursi, David Turton [1973: 49] observes that flogging-meet "is the principal culturally valued means by which a young man seeks to attract the attention of young girls". The underlying question presented here is why the man, and not the woman, should be viewed as the head of a family? Continuing on the roots of the ceremonial flogging-meet tradition in Africa, Leibs notes that a contemporary form of ceremonial flogging-meet originating in Kenya many centuries ago, has all the attributes of ferocity (as does the Surma *sagine* in neighbouring Ethiopia) whilst remaining strikingly distinct. Furthering he notes: "Warriors would cut forked sticks from the leketwo tree, whose wood marks easily when struck. A modern equivalent might be coating a stick with paint, flour, or chalk so that hits to it are easy to see. No hits to the body are allowed, only to the opponent's stick. A match begins when both players are ready and one says, 'Let us begin.' A match may last for a preset period of time, such as three minutes, until a player's stick has been hit a given number of times, or until both players are tired" [Leibs 2004: 10].

Leibs did not provide the name of this Kenyan ceremonial flogging-meet. In this Kenyan ceremonial



flogging-meet, performers are prohibited from hitting the opponent on the body; rather strokes are aimed at the opponent's stick.

### **Ceremonial Flogging Meets in South-Africa: The Social Functions**

Russell Kaschula [1997: 33] emphasizing on the nature, importance and prominence of ceremonial flogging-meets among the South African Xhosa ethnic group, observes that it "is a national sport among Xhosa men". However, Marié-Heleen Coetzee [2002] asserts that ceremonial flogging-meets used to be a national sport especially during the pre-colonial and colonial periods, but presently, this practice has only a symbolic value as the essence of Xhosa heritage because of the dwindling interest in it. The South African Zulu tribe also employ stick-fighting skills as forms of warrior training drill and sport. What Coetzee suggests is that stick-fighting methods were further developed by King Shaka Zulu as a veritable military skill for warfare and not that Shaka was the originator of stick-fighting among the Zulu tribe. According to Coetzee [2002: 1] "it is generally agreed that during Shaka's reign, stick-fighting was used as a means of training young men for both self-defence and war". Coetzee notes [2002: 1] that Shaka Zulu in Ritter's version of the story in his work *Shaka Zulu: The Rise of the Zulu Empire*, "was already a highly proficient stick-fighter at the age of 11". Consequently, he could not have started the tradition. Coetzee, in her work, *Zulu Stick-Fighting: A Socio-Historical Overview* maintains that, "the recent history of stick-fighting is traced to the legacy of the Zulu king Shaka", who employed stick-fighting skills for tribal warfare and general self-defence [Coetzee 2002: 1]. Alice Werner [1995: 28] in her contribution adds that "the genealogy of the presumed originators of Zulu stick-fighting may be traced to Amalandela, son of Gumede, who inhabited the Umhlatuze valley about 1670". Two points are illuminating in Werner's contribution: firstly, stick-fighting and ceremonial flogging-meets are both long standing African traditions and secondly, that the actual origin of the stick-fighting and ceremonial flogging-meet traditions are both speculative. This same notion of a test of manhood is held by some ethnic groups in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Lesotho who also have a tradition of ceremonial flogging-meets. In South Africa, flogging-meets are popular among the northern Nguni people, including the Zulu, Swazi and Ndebele. Among the Nguni, ceremonial flogging-meets are appreciated as a traditional African way of celebrating masculinity and courage, whose origins are believed to be in time immemorial. The Zulu, like the Jafun Fulbe ladde, the Abagana Igbo in Anambra state southeast Nigeria and the Surma, consider ceremonial flogging-meets to be 'games', despite the fact that they

could result in different degrees of injury as an outcome of the intensity of physical viciousness that the contestants deploy during the bouts. Among the Zulu people ceremonial flogging-meets are called *umdlalo wezin-duku*, meaning 'games of the stick'. Like other forms of ceremonial flogging-meet practiced in various African countries, the South African form involves a contest between two young men, each armed, in this case with two sticks. One of the sticks is used for the purpose of attacking the opponent, and is usually held in the contestant's right hand, whereas the other stick, held in the left hand, is meant for defending. During the bout, the contestants are not allowed to deliver their blows with the stick intended for their defence nor are they allowed to jab with either of the two sticks. As part of the game, strikes may be directed at any part of the opponent's body and, apart from jabbing, the contestants are allowed to use any method to strike their opponent such as downswing, slashing swing, upswing or side-swing; blows to the head and knuckles are generally discouraged. Contestants are allowed to use a small shield or a small, stout defence stick of about three to three and a half feet. This choice and use of either shield or defence stick depends on the practice of different clans and, in some cases, on an agreement between the contestants.

### **Polemics and Perspectives on the Terms Stick-Fight and Stick-Fighting**

In this study, the term 'stick-fighting' is primarily used to describe an actual fight, in which opponents use different types of sticks as weapons to engage in an un-refereed, non-rule-bound hostility against an enemy. 'Stick-fighting' in this context belongs to the category I refer to as 'non-audience-orientated performance', indicating that such actions are not carried out primarily to exhibit one's strength or to impress spectators, hence they are not ceremonial. They are usually prompted by needs such as impromptu self-defence, revenge and an attempt to achieve domination over another individual. *Fada da sanda* (in Hausa a language), which literally translates in English as 'fighting with a stick' is not a ceremonial event. However it is a phrase which describes the notion of inter-personal hostility with sticks that may take place, not because of cultural festivities or for entertainment purposes, but because of an individual's quest to defend himself and his interests against aggression; or to confront another person for any other reason. To the Hausa and the Fulbe alike this is a 'non-audience orientated performance'. In their study of Fulbe ladde culture and cattle domination Dale F. Lott and Benjamin L. Hart observe that most of the men over twenty-five whom they questioned said that they had had at least one serious stick fight. Many blows are directed at the head, and that they were sometimes shown the scars of blows they

had failed to duck or parry [1977: 183]. This observation suggests that the authors are using the term 'stick-fight' to refer to a non-audience-orientated performance, which does not take place for public entertainment or as a rite-of-passage but rather is instigated by (e.g.) verbal insults or disagreements due to an apparent lack of respect; or by the encroachment into another's domain; or by a supremacy struggle among peers. Stick-fighting mainly occurs spontaneously between individuals, and there are no referees or rules of engagement (specifying or limiting where and when an opponent may land his strike). Likewise, there are no designated locations or specific times for fights and it is important to note that all Fulbe ladde clans, even those who do not engage in *soro* (like the *Wodaabe* clan), have a cultural tradition of stick-fighting as a skill necessary for self-defence but not for festival or ceremonial purposes. Leibs [2004: 9] notes that stick-fighting for utility purposes "was once an important skill necessary for warding off both animals and rustlers that might be pursuing one's cattle herd, the source of a family's dietary staple and wealth in many African nations". Leibs' observation conforms to my study findings, which indicate that these stick-fighting skills are fast diminishing among African tribes that are not traditional pastoralists, such as the South African Zulu and Nigerian Igbo [Abbink 1999; Craig 2002; Wail 2003; Sisuly 2006; Aniago 2012].

In support of the notion of stick-fighting as a means of self-defence, Nepangue Ned *et al.* in *Cebuano Eskrima: Beyond the Myth*, attempting to theorize self-defence as the probable origin of stick-fighting traditions in different cultures, observes that: "The stick is one of the oldest weapons used by man, other than the flint stone, rocks, and bones. This is not purely speculation. In fact in 2001 [...] Chinese archaeologists unearthed a wooden club, which they believed was used as a weapon, in Linyi city, Shandong. The stick is about 700,000 years old; it measured 61 cm long with a diameter of 9 cm" [Ned *et al.* 2007: 42].

Sticks are arguably among the earliest hand-held tools/weapons that man carried about for self-defence and other utility purposes. It is plausible to suggest that the warrior-hunter-farmer ancestors of African people found in the stick a multi-purpose and accessible object to hold and keep close by. This is mainly due to the fact that sticks were easily obtainable: the trees from which one could cut a stick were numerous, and found nearly everywhere around people's dwellings at all seasons. Nuno Curvello Russo, in his work, *O Jogo do Pau, Origens e evolucao*, focusing on the origin and evolution of stick-fighting and 'flogging contests' in parts of Western Europe, observes: "In the generic sense, stick-fighting has been practiced throughout the world and was refined as a practical technique in some European countries, such as Portugal, France, England (quarter-staff) and also in the majority of Eastern countries, including India, China,

Japan (bo-justu), Thailand, Vietnam and Afghanistan" [Russo, trans. Tony Wolf and Gonçalo Costa 2003: 1].

Russo goes on to say that in the interior of some European countries, "that still preserve their medieval customs of combat" it is possible to witness "bloody individual combats, including inter-clan rivalries fought with staves" [Russo 2003: 1]. In an attempt to rationalize the origins of stick-fighting he suggests that "human beings have always had to fight to survive and humans have always employed tools" [Russo 2003: 1]. He refers to the stick as "almost certainly among the first tools to be turned to martial purposes" by man, serving as an "instrument of attack and defence against animals" [Russo 2003: 1]. He suggests that: "As societies evolved from the nomadic hunting and food gathering stage, conflicts arose; competition over resources, etc. boiled over into personal combat, and people created a series of specific movements, attacks and defences, with their utilitarian sticks. The specific nature of these actions depends on geographic conditions, as well as cultural and other factors. This new fighting technique varied not only by country but also by the length of stick or staff most commonly employed" [Russo 2003: 1].

In a study which looks at flogging contest in African continent Nigel Crowther observes that there is evidence that supports the practice of ceremonial flogging contests in ancient Egypt. He notes that: "In addition to wrestling, the scenes from Medinet Habu show a ritualised sword fighting with masks, and stick-fighting [ceremonial flogging-contests] before spectators. The tactics of stick-fighting [ceremonial flogging-contests] probably resembled those of fencing matches (saber) today, although the ancient contestants sometimes fought with a weapon in both hands. One could achieve victory through submission or by amassing a greater number of hits, which the officials recorded" [Crowther, 2007: 29].

In this study which not only suggests the spread of a ceremonial flogging contest culture across Africa, there is clear indication that flogging-contest is among the very ancient tradition of African continent, however, Crowther's description of the duel or contest as stick-fighting is again an inaccurate translation. Furthermore, Crowther's claim that the ceremonial flogging-contest culture is "a very old tradition in Africa" is supported by archaeological findings. The discovery by archaeologists of "several ancient staves over three feet long in the tomb of Tutankhamen" [Crowther 2007: 29] and of elaborate 'artworks' showing contestants "using sticks about one meter-long" [Cashmore 2005: 65] strengthens the claims about an ancient Egyptian ceremonial flogging-meet tradition. Again, Ellis Cashmore [2005: 65] inaccurately applies the term stick-fighting instead of the more appropriate expression ceremonial flogging-meet, when he observes that 'even today' [meaning in 2005] that ceremonial flogging-meets "persist in parts of Egypt, though in a more ritualized form".



## Conclusion

As a category of indigenous African performance and theatre, flogging-meets in Africa, merits a comparative analysis in a number of aspects based on the evident common pattern of performance practice, performance process, and their possession of similar socio-cultural environments and contexts, albeit with slight dissimilarities. Firstly, my argument explains the choice of the expression ceremonial flogging-meet, secondly; I explain why I view the application of the term 'stick-fighting' to describe *soro* as not only inaccurate but also misleading. This study also categorizes various forms of stick duels as 'ceremonial flogging-meet' or 'stick fight', by looking at their social functions and modalities of performance. Thus, this study applies culture specific definitions of these practices in line with Geertz's thick description in a bid to provide dependable classifications. Clearly, the divergences evident in the above contributions indicate that neither the definition of *soro* as 'a stick-flogging contest' or as 'an animal hide-whip flogging contest' can be considered all embracing. Therefore, this study offers the term 'ceremonial flogging-meet' as a more accurate and an all encompassing description. In order to better appreciate the connotations of the terms 'ceremonial flogging-meet' and 'stick-fighting', as they are applied in this study, we offered a concise definition for both expressions. The link between projecting one's personal identity as a man worthy to be respected according to one's own capabilities and not just by virtue of the name made by one's parents, is a central aspect which can be recognised and appreciated in all the forms of ceremonial flogging-meet that were considered in this study, including *soro*, *ipia-agba*, and *sagine*. This study illuminates on my experience of flogging-contests through years of living among the Fulbe and Igbo people in northern Nigeria and eastern Nigeria respectively, who both practice *soro* and *ipia-agba* flogging-meets, where the images of young contestants clenching their teeth and fists brings back images of pain and defiance to pain. These are images of boy contestants, fighting back the emotions of pain with blank, taunting and indifferent faces, amidst cheers, noise and ululations from the spectators. Obviously, there are variations and differences between the methods, purposes, rules and regulations, costume, make-up, props and general directorial approach in the form of training and preparation applied to performance as seen in the various forms of flogging-meets in each of the different African countries. In some ethnic nationalities the hand-held apparatus for assault could be a cudgel, a fresh malleable long whip, a long pole or a shepherd's staff. For the purposes of defence there is evidence of the use of a shield or a short, thick stick held in the other hand among the Zulu and Suri people. In ethnic groups such as the Igbo, Yoruba, Jukun, Suri and Dogon women admire men who are not easily tormented by fear and not prone to

crying/displaying emotion, especially in public. Among the Jafun Fulbe ladde and the Anambra Igbo women do not engage in flogging-bouts but are allowed to attend as spectators. However, among the Ethiopian Hamar tribe women are allowed to participate in a whipping ritual that is part of an initiation rite for boys. This takes place during the bull-leaping rituals that young Hamar boys go through as an initiation into the cult of warriors known as *maz*. At the time of this initiation, young single girls, (who are relatives of the ritual candidate), present themselves for whipping. Boys who are already members of the *maz* carry out this whipping. Each girl chooses and approaches a member of the *maz* and pleads with him to whip her. The whipping is usually done on the bareback only. This whipping ritual is a possible means of establishing a relationship between the girls and the boys that they approach to whip them. After a girl has received the whiplashes other girls will cheer her for her bravery. Among the Zulu tribe of South Africa young girls are allowed to learn stick-fighting skills, but only for purposes of self-defence. Jafun Fulbe ladde girls are also taught stick handling skills because they are necessary when they are required to look after the family sheep, goats or even cattle. However, Ezenwa observes that Igbo girls are not involved in stick-handling-skill training in any form, neither for ceremonial flogging-contests nor for self-defence [personal communication, July 22, 2007].

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### Gęsty opis funkcji społecznych wybranych afrykańskich pokazów walk z zastosowaniem chłosty jako rodzaju rozrywki teatralnej i sztuk walki samoobrony

**Słowa kluczowe:** chłosta-pojedynek, chłosta-walka, *ipia-agba*, *sagine*, funkcje społeczne, *soro*, walka na kije

#### Abstrakt

Tło i cel. Niniejsze badanie krytycznie analizuje specyficzne kulturowo funkcje społeczne i realia pokazów walk z zastosowaniem chłosty przy użyciu pejcza lub kija, które istniały lub istnieją w regionach Afryki. W związku z tym, w niniejszym studium stosuje się jako preferowane podejścia koncepcyjne i analityczne: Teorię Błędnych Osiągnięć według Aniago oraz opis kultury i kontekstu interpretacyjnego według Gęstego Opisu Geertza. Co więcej, w pracy przeprowadzono analizę niektórych z opisów, które autorzy różnie stosują w odniesieniu do walk z użyciem chłosty, w celu racjonalizacji wyobrażeń socjologicznych przypisywanych takim klasyfikacjom. Ponadto omówiono tu podobieństwa i różnice w funkcjach społecznych, wynikach i procesach tworzenia, grupach uczestników, parafernaliach wykonania i regułach zaangażowania w pojedynek-chłostę.

Metoda. W niniejszym badaniu zastosowano technikę badań mieszanych, która zgodnie z badaniami Johnsona i co-autorów, jest podejściem badawczym, w ramach którego badacz lub zespół naukowców łączy elementy jakościowych i ilościowych technik badawczych w zakresie gromadzenia i analizy danych, dla poszerzenia zakresu badań i głębi zrozumienia. Wynik i wnioski. Pod wieloma względami dane zebrane podczas kilku interakcji z uczestnikami, krytycznymi obserwatorami, odpowiednimi opublikowanymi danymi naukowymi oraz wynikami badań etnograficznych autora potwierdziły walidację lub dyskusję na temat istniejących informacji na temat poje-

dynków z użyciem chłosty spotykanych w Afryce. W związku z tym zastosowanie analiz interpretacyjnych zebranych danych ułatwiło prowadzenie wiarygodnej kategoryzacji form afrykańskich konkursów chłosty. Na koniec, dzięki zastosowaniu Gęstego Opisu kultury i interpretacji atrybucji, w badaniu stwierdza się, że pojedynki z chłostą są różnie w Afryce postrzegane jako społecznie akceptowana utylitarna tradycyjna praktyka społeczna, która zapewnia różne funkcje społeczne, takie jak rytuał przejścia, rozrywka społeczna i sposoby zdobywania umiejętności samoobrony.

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