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## SUNGUSUNGU: STATE-SPONSORED VILLAGE VIGILANTE GROUPS AMONG THE KURIA OF TANZANIA

*Michael L. Fleisher*

This article describes the organisation and operation of *sungusungu* vigilantism in its state-sponsored incarnation as it unfolded in a village of the agro-pastoral Kuria people in Tarime District, in northern Tanzania, in the mid-1990s. In doing so, it endeavours to extend our understanding of *sungusungu*, which first arose among the Sukuma and Nyamwezi peoples of west central Tanzania in the early 1980s (Abrahams, 1987, 1989, 1998; Bukurura, 1994a, b, 1996) as well as to contribute to the effort to comprehend vigilantism, in its manifold forms, more generally. State-sponsored vigilantism as practised in Tanzanian Kuria country has provided certain benefits both to the state and to local people, although it suffers from some of the same weaknesses that plague the official law enforcement and justice system. What is less often remarked upon, and what this article seeks to elucidate, are the various ways in which local communities have been able to manipulate *sungusungu* in order to garner certain advantages which may not have been anticipated by the state.

### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Although the word 'vigilantism' is widely invoked to refer to actions taken to control behaviour deemed to be 'deviant', outside the purview of the official justice system, there is as yet no scholarly consensus on what exactly vigilantism is—especially as regards the nature of its relationship with the state.

For Johnston a key feature of vigilantism consists in its being 'a voluntary activity engaged in by "active citizens" (private voluntary agents) without the state's authority or support' (1996: 226), while for Rosenbaum and Sederberg, whose definitions have been widely adopted (e.g. Kowalewski, 1982, 1991; Little and Sheffield, 1983), vigilantism is 'establishment violence', perpetrated in furtherance of 'conservative' ends, and 'designed to create, maintain, or recreate an established socio-political order' (1976: 4).

According to this latter, much more inclusive definition, vigilantes can be state officials or private citizens. Huggins holds that they can include on-duty policemen engaging in extra-legal violence (1991: 8–9), members of 'quasi-official death squads and paramilitary/parapolice groups' (1991: 9), and perpetrators of 'communal lynchings'

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that are ‘informally encouraged by state officials who . . . do not punish citizens who resort to lynch “justice”’ (1991: 8–10). Abrahams (1998) compares and analyses a wide range of vigilantist phenomena, from the San Francisco Vigilance Committee and the Montana vigilantes of the nineteenth-century American West to the death squads of Latin America and the Philippines of the twentieth century, taking the form and degree of official involvement as major variables and demonstrating, in the process, that

Both vigilantism and the law, like community and state themselves, vary from time to time and from place to place in accordance with such factors as political ideology, social and cultural homogeneity, internal sanctions and controls, and commitment to duty. [1998: 170]

The nature of alternative law enforcement and justice systems thus exhibits wide variation, both geographically and over time, particularly with respect to the form and extent of its engagement with the official apparatuses of the state. Here the state actively opposes a group in an effort to maintain its monopoly on the administration of justice, while there it looks the other way, or gives its informal ‘competition’ a condoning wink and a nod, or seeks to infiltrate and influence it, or actively takes it over or reinvents it.

One key advantage for the state in lending its tacit or overt approval to vigilante efforts is cost. State-condoned or -sponsored law enforcement is a cost-saving measure (Huggins, 1991: 12). The ratio of police officers to population is said to be 1:10,000 in Tanzania (*Daily News*, 30 May 1989; Nyalali, 1990: 16, both cited in Bukurura, 1996: 263). Like sheriffs forming posses of citizens to chase down outlaws in America’s old West (Kowalewski 1982: 83), the government in effect ‘deputises’ local people and sets them to work fighting ‘crime’ at little or no cost. It harnesses the energy of local people in this struggle, bypassing the lethargic, corrupt ‘formal’ law enforcement system.

#### THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING

The field research on which this article is based was carried out over a nineteen-month period, from August 1994 to March 1996, in Nyaheiya (not its real name), a Kuria village of the Nyamongo clan located in the Tarime District lowlands of northern Tanzania, about 90 km from Tarime town, which is about 15 km from the Kenya border. Situated within a five-village administrative unit known as Kemambo ward (*kata*)<sup>1</sup>, Nyaheiya village occupies an area of roughly 110 sq. km and has an estimated population of 2,232 people residing in 350 separate homesteads (Kuria, *imigi*; sing., *umugi*), each presided over by a male homestead head (Kuria, *omogaaka* or *umueene umugi*; pl., *abagaaka* or *amiene imigi*). A typical homestead consists of a male homestead head,

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<sup>1</sup> All foreign words appearing in this article are Swahili unless otherwise noted.

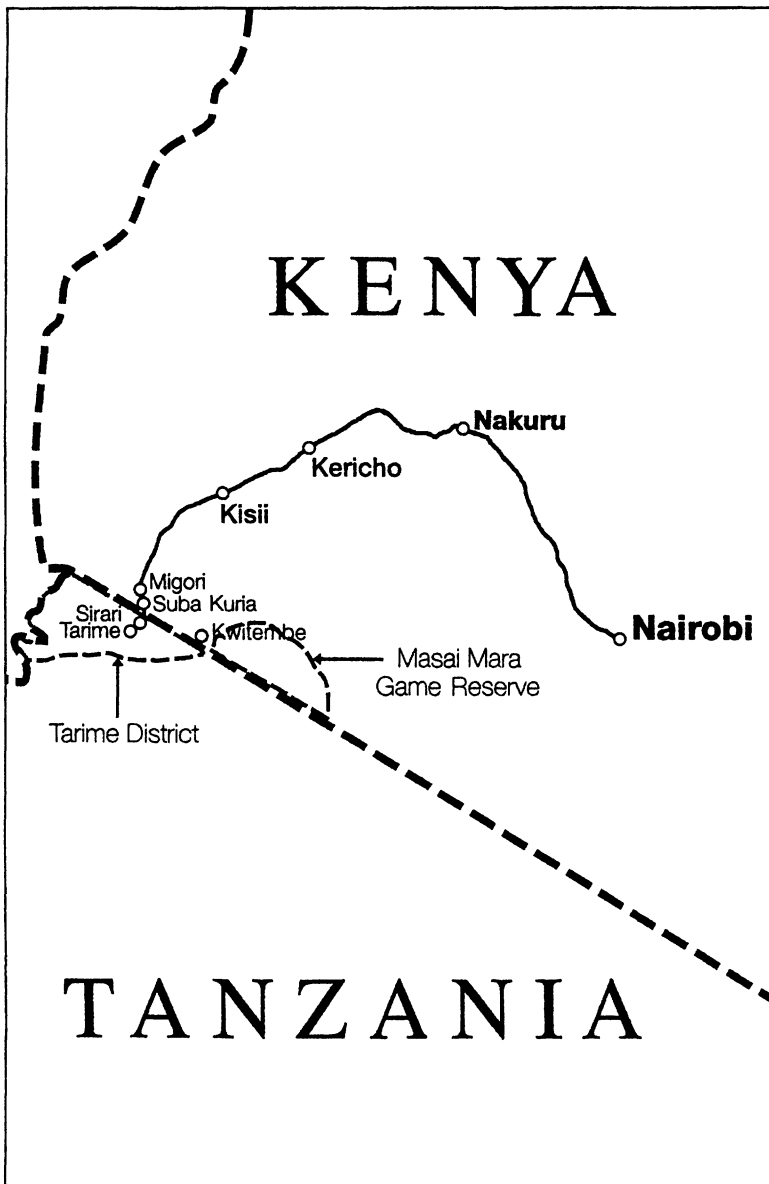


FIGURE 1 Tarime District, north-western Tanzania. (Map preparation by courtesy of Ernest R. Carley)

his wife or wives and all their unmarried children, and all their married sons, their wives, and their children. The widowed mother of the homestead head, and sometimes other guests and relatives, may also make their home within the homestead. In 1995 there were about 5,800 cattle in Nyaheiya and an uncounted number of sheep and goats.

Nyaheiya is governed by a twenty-six-member village council, including a village chairman and a village secretary, all of whom stand for election every five years. In addition, each of Nyaheiya's 'neighbourhoods' (*vitongoji*; sing., *kitongoji*) is represented by a 'neighbourhood head' (*mkuu wa kitongoji*; pl., *wakuu wa vitongoji*), who is elected by all the adult members of the *kitongoji*, and a 'ten-cell leader' (*balози*; pl., *mabalози*)—called that because, at one time, his job was to serve as representative of only ten homesteads—who is a political representative of CCM (Chama cha Mapinduzi, or Revolutionary Party), Tanzania's ruling political party, and who is elected by all the adult residents of the *kitongoji* who are registered party members.

Although the village's proximity to the river Mara ensures it year-round water and plentiful, nutritious pastureland for its livestock, agriculture is precarious there, owing to erratic rainfall patterns and recurrent drought. In the face of sporadically inadequate harvests, villagers are compelled to buy a substantial portion of their food from farmers in neighbouring Serengeti District, relying on cattle raiding and on gold prospecting in the indigenous low-technology mining areas that pockmark the Nyamongo area to fulfil their cash needs. About 20 per cent of Nyaheiya's men between the ages of 20 and 39 are actively engaged in raiding cattle, mainly from other Kuria but from neighbouring peoples as well (Fleisher, 1999).

#### METHOD

An ensemble of strategies was employed in the research, including participant observation; a homestead survey; lengthy personal interviews, primarily with active or recently active cattle raiders and their kin; and shorter, generally informal interviews, with local officials, policemen, livestock officers, victims of cattle raids, and others relevant parties. Numerous documentary sources were also utilised, including, but by no means limited to, cattle censuses, police reports, agricultural and rainfall statistics, and archival materials in the Tanzania National Archives, in Dar es Salaam.

Of Nyaheiya's 350 homesteads, 190 were randomly surveyed, this number having been selected for the purpose of ensuring a confidence interval of 5 per cent (Bernard, 1988: 105). In accordance with the sampling procedure outlined by Bernard (1988: 107–9), a map of the village was drawn and divided into 'random chunks of different sizes' with the aid of a random-number table, which was then used to select out ten of those random chunks for interviewing (Bernard, 1988: 107). When every homestead in each of those ten chunks had been identified and assigned a number, a random sample of homesteads to be surveyed was drawn, with an identical number of them drawn from each chunk.

A certain number of minor mistakes were unavoidable, owing to the frequent absence of distinguishing landmarks in the grassy village terrain and the crudeness of the hand-drawn map, which sometimes made it a judgement call as to which of two adjoining 'wildly uneven

spaces' (Bernard, 1988: 107) on the map represented the proper location of a particular homestead.

At every homestead randomly selected for surveying, a conscientious effort was made to interview the homestead head. Where it was not possible—because the homestead head was deceased, in jail, or simply unavailable after three unsuccessful attempts to contact him—another resident of the homestead was asked to stand in for him—i.e. a wife, a widow, a son, or a daughter. Out of the 190 respondents who contributed their time and knowledge to the survey, fifty-eight—or 31 per cent—of them were stand-ins. Of these fifty-eight stand-ins, thirty-two—or 55 per cent—were females and twenty-six—or 45 per cent—were males.

#### CATTLE RAIDING AND *SUNGUSUNGU*

Cattle raiding was a persistent feature of Kuria life even in pre-colonial times (Ruel, 1991: 343), but, by the mid to late 1920s, Kuria cattle raiding had undergone a profound transformation—from its pre-colonial roles of demonstrating the mettle of new warriors and enlarging the community cattle herd to an illicit, oftentimes quite violent, cash-market-oriented enterprise—in response to the pressures exerted by capitalist penetration, the colonial economy, and the response by the Kuria to the implementation of colonial policies designed to facilitate the imposition and growth of that economy (Fleisher, in press; cf. Anderson, 1986, who describes an analogous historical process for the Kalenjin peoples of Kenya). Indeed, by the 1930s this new form of cattle raiding had mushroomed to become 'the major administrative problem' of the British colonial administration (Ruel, 1959: 152; see also Sillery 1936; Kjerland, 1995: 298–9).

Nor has cash-market-oriented cattle raiding abated in the post-independence era, during which the general pattern has been one of intensification of cattle raiding in Kuria country, followed by a forceful government-ordered police or paramilitary crackdown accompanied by the seizing of weaponry and numerous arrests, followed by a brief lull in raiding, followed by a resumption of cattle raiding as usual once government forces have withdrawn from the area. Between 1978, the year of Tanzania's first nationwide livestock census, and 1995 the size of the Nyaheiya village cattle herd plummeted by at least 50 per cent, owing mainly to losses due to cattle raiding and related cultural and ecological factors (Fleisher, 1998), despite three separate crackdowns—in 1981, 1984, and 1986—by the Field Force Unit, the military wing of the Tanzanian police. In the year 1994 alone, the number of incidents of cattle theft reported to the police by the people of Nyaheiya rose by 47 per cent over the previous year, from seventeen reported incidents in 1993 to twenty-five in 1994. In that year the Nyaheiya village cattle herd declined by an estimated 23 per cent (Fleisher, 1998).

This time, however, there was no Field Force crackdown. Instead, government officials chose to respond to local 'crime' concern by implementing, under government sponsorship, a form of village

vigilantism known as *sungusungu*,<sup>2</sup> which had first arisen in the early 1980s (Abrahams, 1987: 181–3; Mesaki, 1994: 58; Bukurura, 1996: 260), among the Sukuma and Nyamwezi peoples of west central Tanzania, as an indigenous response to cattle raiding and robbery and, in some communities, although not in others, to the perceived problems of witch finding and witch eradication (Abrahams, 1987: 187; Mesaki, 1994: 58; Bukurura, 1994a: 20, 1996: 260). This embracing of the anti-crime functions of *sungusungu* by Tanzanian officialdom in Tarime District represented a marked turnaround from the 1980s, when police and judges arrested, tried, and sentenced some members of *sungusungu* groups—although the popularity and spread of *sungusungu* groups, as well as personal sympathy with the groups, ultimately led Tanzania’s president, Julius K. Nyerere, and his successor, Ali Hassan Mwinyi, to grant amnesties to some of those convicted (Abrahams, 1987: 189–90; Bukurura, 1996: 263–4, 265 n. 10).

By late 1994 the institutional framework of this new, state-sponsored incarnation of *sungusungu* in Tarime District was already in place, the consequence of a series of meetings of area elders and local officials that had been organised by local officials. A district (*wilaya*) *sungusungu* ‘commander’ (*kamanda*) was elected to preside over all *sungusungu* operations throughout Tarime District, and, under him, a divisional (*tarafa*) commander was appointed for each of Tarime District’s eight divisions, including Ingwe Division, of which both Nyaheiya and the nearby village of Ekeng’ooro (not its real name), a village of another Kuria clan, the Irege, are a part. Each village, in turn, elected its own village commander, responsible for the leadership of the *sungusungu* contingent within his respective village, and a *sungusungu* clerk (*katibu*), and ten other men were selected to assist the village commander in carrying out his work.

Village commanders were required to report to ward (*kata*) commanders, who reported to the divisional commanders, who in turn reported to their Division Officer, a district government official, who in turn reported direct to the District Commissioner, the district’s highest-ranking government official. All villages pledged themselves to co-operate in apprehending the cattle raiders in their midst and in returning cattle stolen from other villages. Many Nyaheiya residents equated *sungusungu* with the old People’s Militia, or Mugambo, led by CCM, which had lain dormant in the area, if not defunct, since the end of the 1980s.

The broad vigilantist implications of the government’s sponsorship of *sungusungu* in the area were unambiguously enunciated by Gisieri Chambiri, the Member of Parliament for Tarime District’s Kuria divisions, in remarks he made during a visit to Nyaheiya on 11 January

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<sup>2</sup> *Sungusungu* is the Swahili word for a species of large black biting ant, and throughout Tanzania Kurialand this is the etymology that is offered. Among the Sukuma and Nyamwezi, however, people relate the name to the Sukuma word for poison (*busungu*), a reference to the poison-tipped arrows employed by *sungusungu* members there (Bukurura, 1996: 265 n. 3).

1995. Proclaiming that ‘the solution to this problem [of cattle raiding] is in our hands’, and reminding his listeners that Tanzanian law empowers *all* citizens to arrest wrongdoers—‘You are all policemen!’ he told his listeners—Chambiri went on to recommend a number of ways of combating the area’s cattle-theft problem. These included:

1. Public condemnation of the cattle raiders, ‘so that they become unfortunate in life’.
2. Turning captured cattle thieves over to their victims to deal with as they saw fit. ‘Then, when the thief is brought to you, you will decide yourselves what to do with him,’ Chambiri said. (This was widely interpreted in Nyaheiya as a government licence to kill captured cattle thieves.)
3. The use of a method being employed elsewhere in Tarime District, according to the MP, by which cattle thieves residing in a village were taken into custody and their fathers compelled to administer a severe public beating on pain of being beaten themselves if they refused.
4. A method of punishment being applied, according to the MP, in Bukoba, the capital of the Kagera Region, whereby the mucous secretions of slugs—or house snails—were smeared on the eyes of captured cattle thieves so as to render them permanently blind and make them a living example to others.

While none of these suggestions, excepting perhaps the first one, was ever specifically implemented in Nyaheiya, the broader idea of rough justice for cattle thieves was already well established, both in principle and in practice, long before the MP’s visit. Indeed, killing cattle thieves, either in the course of the raid or while pursuing them to recover the cattle, is the preferred means of dealing with cattle thieves—provided they are village outsiders.

Nyaheiya villagers killed three cattle raiders, all of them outsiders, in the course of the fieldwork period, and three Nyaheiya cattle raiders were killed while carrying out raids on other villages. A Canadian volunteer school-teacher, working in Tarime town, unexpectedly became an eye witness to an event of this kind while visiting Buhemba, a Kuria village of the Timbaru clan, in early 1995. (The ‘sticks’ she refers to in her account are actually the ‘cudgels’ or ‘knobkerries’—*marungu*; sing., *rungu*—that are carried by the men of some Kuria clans.)

A cow had been stolen from Buhemba village, and a day or so later a man came and he said, ‘I have a cow for sale. Does anybody want to buy my cow?’ And a few men said, ‘Let us see this cow,’ and when they saw it they said, ‘This is *Juma*’s cow!’ and they started to beat the man.

People came running from everywhere. I never saw a group of people gather so fast. There were a hundred—more than a hundred. They surrounded the man, so that I couldn’t see him, but I could hear the sticks hitting his body. I will never forget the sound of the sticks hitting his body.

I was standing with the women, and I asked them, ‘What are they doing? What is happening?’ And they said, ‘He is a thief. They are going to beat him to death.’

I was new, so I still wasn’t confident with my Swahili, and I would repeat everything anybody said to me. So I said, ‘You are saying he is a thief and they are going to beat him until he is dead?’ And they said, ‘Yes!’



I'll never forget the sound of the sticks hitting his body. They said they beat him so hard his ears fell off. They—fell off. He must have been not right in his head, that man, to have tried to sell a cow in the same village he stole it from. I remember asking, 'You say they are going to beat him until he is dead', and they said, 'Yes!'

Children came. Even children. Everyone was having a wonderful time. I didn't see him being beaten, but I saw his body. They put an arrow in his head and dumped him in front of the police station.

In Nyaheiya, where all men between the ages of 18 and 50 are required to perform *sungusungu* service, thirty men—armed with bows and arrows and short swords (Kuria, *imichonge*; sing., *umuchonge*)—were assigned to patrol the village each night, with instructions to sneak up on invading cattle raiders, fire an arrow at them, and then sound the alarm.

In addition, *sungusungu* members made the rounds of the various homesteads, soliciting accusations against anyone suspected of involvement in cattle raiding and, throughout Tarime District, village lists were compiled of cattle-raiding suspects, where they lived, and the specific crimes of which they had been accused. Inevitably, there were some deliberately false accusations, made by people who owed money or who harboured resentment over adultery or other grudges; efforts were made to substantiate accusations by seeking corroboration from other accusers and by insisting that accusers must persuasively link those whom they named with particular incidents of cattle raiding.

Those who had been accused, and were not already in prison, were taken into custody by the village *sungusungu* commander and his men and hauled before a village *sungusungu baraza* ('council house', from the verb *barizi*, to 'attend a council', but also used to denote any meeting held to discuss a public issue) attended by about fifteen people, including the village commander and his ten immediate subordinates, the village chairman, selected village elders, and the accused. Accusers do not attend these *baraza*, and their identities are not revealed to the accused, who are confronted with the evidence against them, interrogated, and beaten with a hippopotamus-hide whip (*kiboko*; pl., *viboko*) on the legs, back, and buttocks in an effort to extract confessions. Whipping on the chest is not engaged in, as it is said to be potentially lethal. Sometimes the whipping and interrogation of a single suspect or group of suspects continue on and off for several days.

In Nyaheiya, village men who had been caught red-handed with cattle belonging either to their fellow villagers or to residents of other Nyamongo-clan villages, or who had used guns in committing their crimes, were turned over to the police to be incarcerated in the prison at Tarime—sometimes for years—while they awaited official investigation of their cases and possibly criminal trial. Of the resident accused cattle raiders remaining, those who confessed at their *baraza* were required to pay a heavy fine of three or four head of cattle or 20,000–50,000 shillings in cash (500 shillings being equivalent to slightly less than US\$1 during the fieldwork period), which was used to defray the expenses of the

*sungusungu* as well as to support such village institutions as the primary school and the new clinic, then under construction. Then the men were released, with an admonition not to engage in cattle raiding again.

In those cases where those who had confessed were unable to pay the fine, the *sungusungu* was empowered to collect it from their kin, seizing their property—livestock, furniture, cooking utensils—if need be and selling it to raise the money needed to discharge the penalty. In the first sixty days of the *sungusungu* crackdown the Nyaheiya *sungusungu* took into custody and interrogated some two dozen suspected Nyaheiya cattle thieves.

It needs to be emphasised that, in Nyaheiya, these extremely harsh procedures were utilised only against Nyaheiya men who stood accused of either committing or abetting—as accomplices to cattle-theft groups from outside the village—cattle theft within Nyaheiya itself, or against any of the other Nyamongo clan villages, or against other specific groups with which the Nyamongo regarded themselves as being closely allied, e.g. the Ngoreme people of neighbouring Serengeti District. No one in Nyaheiya was ever punished, for example, for taking cattle from a village of the Irege clan, whose relationship with the Nyamongo clan is characterised by a good deal of enmity. That is why, in early 1995, after a Nyaheiya man named Chacha Gatora had been mortally wounded in the course of a raid against the Ngoreme that had gone disastrously awry, Chacha's Nyaheiya comrades tried, albeit unsuccessfully, during the *sungusungu* interrogations that ensued, to hold to the story that they had *not* been guilty of raiding the Ngoreme, but rather that Chacha had been shotgunned to death in the course of their attempt to waylay and rob a band of Irege cattle raiders who, the Nyaheiya men falsely claimed, had themselves taken cattle from the Ngoreme.

Although there *were* occasions when the Nyaheiya *sungusungu* felt compelled to co-operate with the *sungusungu* of other clans' villages, including the Irege, to the extent of recovering and returning cattle that had been taken from them by Nyaheiya cattle raiders, the Nyaheiya *sungusungu* never went so far as to turn one of its own 'sons' over to the *sungusungu* of another village, or to the police, for cattle raids carried out against another Kuria clan, or another people, at least in so far as it was possible to determine.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Given the well known fact that cattle raiders are almost invariably complicit with outsiders in carrying out raids on the village where they themselves live, there can be no question but that the unwillingness of Nyaheiya's people to act more forcefully against these 'insiders' served, at least during the fieldwork period, to greatly diminish the effectiveness of their vigilantist response. This deeply rooted cultural ambivalence toward cattle-raider insiders, which Heald (forthcoming) has cogently analysed with regard to the Kenya Kuria, may go a long way toward explaining just why it is that *sungusungu* arose spontaneously, as a grass-roots phenomenon, in the Sukuma and Nyamwezi area of Tanzania (Abrahams, 1987; Abrahams and Bukurura, 1993) yet had to be imported into the Tarime area under state sponsorship notwithstanding the persistence of high levels of cattle-raiding violence there. Let it be noted, however, that in the Kuria villages of the Tarime highlands, where agriculture, including cash-crop agriculture, and not pastoralism, is the economic mainstay, communities' willingness to take strong punitive action against their resident cattle raiders is markedly more pronounced than in Nyaheiya and the Tarime lowland villages generally (Fleisher, forthcoming).

The stated, and perhaps honestly intended, justification on the part of district government officials for the implementation of *sungusungu* in the villages is that local people are the ones best equipped to identify the cattle thieves in their midst and bring them to justice—far better equipped, many argue, than the police, virtually all of them corrupt, all outsiders frequently contemptuous of local people and indifferent to their concerns. Apart from enhancing village security through beefed-up night-time patrols, however, one of the main functions of *sungusungu*, whether deliberate or incidental, seems to have been to safeguard local people against police arrest and criminal prosecution while at the same time redirecting the illicit economic benefits of law enforcement from the pockets of police officers, wardens, and magistrates back into the local communities where the cattle raiders live.

If a Nyaheiya man's oxen are stolen, for example, he can report the theft to the village *sungusungu* commander and his subordinates, who will agree to take up his case for a fee—but a fee that is lower than the bribe which is invariably demanded by the police. Then the *sungusungu* will set to work, activating a local information network far superior to that of the police, and chastened by the knowledge that their fellow villagers will vote them out of office if they habitually fail to perform their duties adequately—because, unlike the police, who owe their jobs to commanders in the district capital, they are not invulnerable to community sentiment.

If the oxen are recovered, usually through the co-operation of the *sungusungu* in other villages, the Nyaheiya *sungusungu* will extract an additional fee from the owner, both as a reward for their success and because the *sungusungu* men in the co-operating village(s) must be paid for their help. If the culprits are identified and turn out to be, or to include, Nyaheiya men, and if the oxen they stole are no longer recoverable, they or their families will be required to pay compensation to the oxen's owner in addition to the fines that will go to supporting the building of the new clinic and other village projects. In one 1995 case, in which fourteen calves were stolen by a multi-clan gang and sold across the border in Kenya, the families of two Nyaheiya men who confessed to involvement in the incident were required to pay a fine of 80,000 shillings—far less than the actual market value of the calves—5,000 shillings of which went to the *sungusungu*.

Unlike the situation that prevailed in past decades, when 'There was no generalised public opinion against cattle theft' in Kurialand (Tanner, 1966: 41), the people of Nyaheiya and other Kuria villages have come to oppose cattle raiding as the offtake from raiding has passed the point of sustainability and as the widespread use of firearms by raiders has claimed the lives of many innocent people. Asked, on the homestead survey, to register the extent of their approval or disapproval of Nyaheiya residents carrying out cattle raids against the Maasai, the Luo, the Irege clan, or their own Nyaheiya neighbours, overwhelming majorities of Nyaheiya respondents registered vehement disapproval of *all* such cattle-raiding activity (see Table 1), an attitude that was also

TABLE 1. 'If one of your fellow villagers, or a group of your fellow villagers working together, were to steal cattle from the following groups, how would you feel about it?' (%)

Response	Maasai	Luo	Irege	Nyaheiya
Strongly approve	0.5	0.5	0.0	0.0
Approve but with some reservations	0.5	0.0	0.5	9.5
Disapprove	3.0	2.0	1.0	1.0
Strongly disapprove	95.0	97.0	98.0	89.0
No answer	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5

NOTE  $n = 190$ .

expressed at frequent village meetings in Nyaheiya and in innumerable private conversations throughout the fieldwork period. Notwithstanding the heated antagonisms between some Kuria clans—e.g. between the Nyamongo and Irege—'Many people,' as one local official put it, 'want peace.'

Although overwhelming majorities of Nyaheiya respondents registered vehement disapproval of all such cattle-raiding activity, they stated their approval, 'but with some reservations', of Nyaheiya residents stealing cattle from *other* Nyaheiya residents with nineteen times the frequency with which they approved of Nyaheiya residents stealing from the Maasai. And, similarly, although 98 per cent of survey respondents said that they 'strongly disapprove' of Nyaheiya stealing cattle from the Irege, only 89 per cent said that they 'strongly disapprove' of Nyaheiya residents stealing cattle from *other* Nyaheiya residents.

The reason for these seemingly anomalous responses is not that Nyaheiya residents approve of stealing from neighbours as opposed to stealing from outsiders as a *moral* matter. On the contrary, their answers express disapproval of all cattle theft. Rather, as a *practical* matter, they know that if cattle are stolen from them by other Nyaheiya villagers there is at least a chance that the *sungusungu* will succeed in identifying the culprits and compel them to pay compensation, even if the animals themselves have already gone to Kenya, whereas if one's cattle are stolen by outsiders it is far less likely that the thieves will ever be identified or compensation paid. Nyaheiya's residents are also well aware that the mortality rate among cattle raiders is high. Although they oppose cattle theft generally, they would rather that their own young men stole cattle within their home village than from outsiders, because they know that at home their boys will at worst be beaten and reprimanded whereas if they are caught in the act by outsiders there is a strong likelihood of their being killed.

Notwithstanding the general opposition to cattle theft in the area, however, three complicating factors make it difficult for the people of Nyaheiya and other Kuria villages to curb the cattle raiders in their

midst. The first is that, in an area all but bereft of economic opportunities, cattle raiding—along with prospecting for gold—underpins the village economy. Many people benefit from it, directly or indirectly, and there is probably no one who is not either related to a cattle raider or a friend or neighbour of someone who is. It is not easy in any close-knit community for a person to take an action that may help send the son of a relative, friend, or neighbour to prison.

A second reason, closely related to the first, is that cattle raiding is a major source—perhaps *the* major source—of scarce and highly valued animal protein for the people of Nyaheiya. When a group of Nyaheiya cattle raiders return home from a raid, particularly against the hated Irege village of Ekeng'ooro, the three dozen or so village women living in homesteads along their path rush out to greet them, ululating joyfully, knowing that the raiders will likely distribute all the sheep and goats they have taken to village women as gifts, retaining only the cattle to sell for cash. When there are not enough animals for every woman to claim one, several women will usually share one, taking it to a nearby homestead to slaughter and dividing the meat. 'We are happy!' exclaimed a Nyaheiya woman on one such occasion. 'We are happy and joyful to have meat!'

Another woman, employing the Swahili word *mtumba*—widely used in East Africa to mean 'second-hand clothing'—as a metaphor for illicitly obtained beef, bluntly stated her view that 'People shouldn't be stopped from getting *mtumba*. We hate the Irege, and we like cows to be taken from them and we eat *mtumba*'.

A third factor militating against effective opposition to cattle raiding by insiders is the fact of recurrent clan warfare, which not only serves to legitimate cattle raiding—as well as functioning as a kind of school, or training ground, for cattle raiders—for so long as the fighting rages, but also nurtures and reinforces a climate of inter-clan enmity that fosters at least tolerance of, if not full-scale support for, cattle raiding, particularly if it is carried out against certain groups.

'When we were going there [to Ekeng'ooro] and taking cows and bringing them here', recalled a young Nyaheiya man who had participated in a recent spate of clan warfare between the Nyamongo and Irege, 'the women at Nyaheiya were very happy'.

'War,' commented a Nyaheiya member of a multi-clan cattle-raiding group, 'is good for thieving.'

#### DISSATISFACTION WITH THE POLICE

The embracing of *sungusungu* by government officials constitutes an admission at the highest levels of the glaring inadequacies of the official law enforcement system.

'We have no police in Tanzania', commented a Moscow-trained Kuria physician living in Musoma town. Citizens exact 'mob justice' from cattle thieves and other criminals, he explained, because they know that if they turn them over to the police the lawbreakers will simply bribe their way to freedom. A policeman earns his livelihood, in

essence, through his ability to impose an illicit 'tax' both on victims of crime and on those who have broken the law.

In the Nyamongo area, of which Nyaheiya is part, the local police demand a bribe before they will consent to investigate any complaint, and, having received it, they proceed to extort bribes from the alleged perpetrators and, having received those, will go on to demand more money from the complainant, and so on, until one or both sides are either broke or tire of the game. Even an arrest, followed by detention in the local lock-up, is only a gambit in the game of wringing further payments from complainants eager to keep the accused locked up and from kinfolk of the alleged perpetrator anxious to see him freed. The real bread and butter of police work consists of arresting people involved in bar fights, or caught cultivating *bangi* ('bhang'), or distilling *gongo*, the local white lightning—minor infractions commonly referred to by local people as 'mistakes'—and extorting bribes from them to let them go.

Of the forty-two respondents to the homestead survey who answered affirmatively to the question 'Has any person in this homestead ever been arrested?' fifteen of them, when asked, in a follow-up question, what the outcome of a cited case had been, volunteered that the arrestee in question had been released after bribing the police.

Police officers are easily found who will hire their rifles out to cattle raiders, or sell their firearms outright, or accompany cattle raiders on night-time raids for a fee. Although there is as yet no established practice of paying the police regular protection money to buy immunity from arrest, as is common in developed countries, cattle-raiding groups and their buyers routinely deliver cash payments to the police to win the freedom of comrades who have been arrested. For cattle raiders who have been shot or otherwise wounded in the course of a raid, local police will readily provide, for a fee, the official form—called a PF3—which any person seriously wounded or injured, whether in a crime or an accident, must present to a doctor or hospital before he or she can legally receive treatment. Policemen also extract a cut of all illicit livestock traffic that moves through their area and shake down known cattle raiders for bribes by threatening them with arrest.

Although the ledger books in which the police record citizens' reports of cattle thefts, along with the progress of the ensuing investigations, almost invariably contain entries stating that police joined together with villagers in the aftermath of a cattle raid to follow the tracks of the stolen cattle, the truth is that the police seldom follow the cattle tracks in daylight, and never at night, when hot pursuit is highly dangerous—but also crucial if there is to be any chance of recovering the animals before they are 'gone to Kenya'. On occasions when cattle are recovered, it is either because local people followed and recovered them, sometimes through the use of force, or because the victim or a family member, wandering the countryside in search of the stolen animals, came upon them in some distant corral and then summoned—and paid—the police to help recover them.

'The police didn't help me at all,' commented an elderly Nyaheiya man recalling the theft of his cattle in 1994.

TABLE 2. 'How would you rate police effectiveness in coping with the cattle-thieving problem in this area?'

<i>Effective?</i>	<i>%</i>
Extremely	2.1
Reasonably	3.0
Not very	0.5
Ineffective	93.0
Don't know	1.0
No answer	1.0

NOTE *n* = 190.

My wife was the one who followed the tracks to Bukira, at a village called Matanka, and she found the cows in a homestead and the wife of the head of the homestead was milking. She saw the cows and she pretended that she was sick so that she wanted the wife of the homestead head to give her medicine. Then [after ascertaining that the cattle were indeed her husband's] she came back and brought the police. The police went and captured the cows back.

On the infrequent occasions when the police do apprehend a cattle raider, noted one Nyaheiya cattle holder, 'it's to ask for their share. Instead of stopping this business, they're pruning it'.

It is hardly surprising, then, that when asked, on the homestead survey, to 'rate police effectiveness in coping with the cattle-thieving problem in this area' (see Table 2), an overwhelming majority of respondents—93 per cent of them—gave police the lowest rating available in the survey: 'ineffective'.

Requests, in a follow-up question, to explain these low evaluations unleashed a torrent of criticism:

Like the day when my cows were stolen, a man went to call them [the police] but they said that their boss was not around. This was just a way to demand money and to avoid us. In the morning I went to see them again and they just came to see my place and wrote down their things and that was all.

Many people are robbed here at Nyaheiya. And they make reports to the police but they [the police] don't help them. They are useless here at Nyaheiya.

They [the police] fear them [the cattle raiders] because the thieves have more powerful weapons than the policemen.

They [the police] like bribes and then let the thieves go free and that frightens even the leaders. Therefore the police are contributing to the increase of cattle theft in this area.

The thieves are friends with the police. The police rent their guns to the thieves, so they also fight the people of Nyaheiya, and they do not follow the tracks to help them when they are robbed.

They don't like to follow the tracks. They like to catch people in small mistakes so that they can be paid bribes.

They have guns but they are also afraid of night, so they wait until in the morning to follow the tracks—after the cows have already reached Kenya.

The police are themselves poorly paid men who are ill equipped to cope seriously with the cattle-theft problem. The cattle raiders outnumber and outnumber them. Lacking vehicles, the police are limited to negotiating the treacherous rain-gullied unpaved roads on bicycles. Many police posts, in common with the one that serves Nyaheiya, lack short-wave radios or any other means of communicating either with their superiors in Tarime town or with other police posts. In an effort to discourage complicity between policemen and Kuria lawbreakers, the government has seen to it that no Kuria policemen are posted to Kuria country. The result, as residents of Nyaheiya often noted, is that most of the area's policemen, and their commanders, are indifferent, if not outright hostile, to local people. 'They seem not to care about the situation of this place,' noted one Nyaheiya man. 'They say, "Let Chacha kill Mwita [Chacha and Mwita are common Kuria names] and we don't care"'.

Many policemen in Tarime District frankly fear the Kuria, and exaggerated, or wholly apocryphal, anecdotes of Kuria ferocity are common currency in police circles. One is that Kuria have ceremonies at which they boast about the number of people they have killed and injured. Another is that a Kuria will never confess or betray information, 'even if you cut him into little pieces'. Yet another story, heard often from policemen throughout Kuria country, is that, thanks to their uncanny ability to identify the type and calibre of any weapon by its sound, the Kuria have absolutely no fear of firearms, even when they lack guns themselves. Surprised in the act during a night-time cattle raid, goes the story, they will count the number of rounds a policeman fires and then, when they know he is out of ammunition, they will close in and hack him to death with their short swords.

The upshot of all this is that the people of Nyaheiya as well as the rest of Kurialand have little option but to act as their own policemen, i.e. to rely on mechanisms of self-help much as they did prior to the advent of colonialism.

#### SHORTCOMINGS OF *SUNGUSUNGU*

Inevitably, however, *sungusungu* has proved to be vulnerable to some of the same abuses that have plagued all other efforts to resolve the problem of cattle raiding in this area. Some village *sungusungu* commanders have extorted pay-offs from cattle raiders in exchange for turning a blind eye to their thefts, particularly from outsiders. Others have extracted advance payments from villagers in need of assistance, such as in recovering a stolen goat or radio, but then made no effort to do the requisite work. Others have actively assisted cattle thieves in robbing their own fellow villagers, capitalising on the



TABLE 3. Cattle thefts reported to police by the people of Kemambo *Kata* (including Nyaheiya), 1995

<i>Month</i>	<i>No. reported</i>
January	15
February	6
March	1
April	1
May	2
June	1
July	0
August	3
September	2
October	3
November	2
December	5
Total	41

knowledge of people's sleeping habits and sentry routines acquired in the course of their nightly patrols. In Nyaheiya alone three village *sungusungu* commanders were ousted in the space of less than a year: two for corruption, the other for slashing an elderly woman with a short sword during an altercation over the up-front fee he had demanded before undertaking to recover her stolen hoe. Even when operating with complete integrity, and at their most efficient, the vast majority of *sungusungu* members still have only bows and arrows and short swords to fight with, while many cattle raiders are armed with guns.

Beginning in early 1995, however, and continuing for some months thereafter, the *sungusungu* crackdown did have a dramatic effect on the incidence of cattle raiding in Kemambo ward, which comprises all five villages of the Nyamongo clan, including Nyaheiya. For the entire ward, forty-one cases of livestock theft were reported to the police in 1995, fifteen in January, before the crackdown really began, and six more in February, as it began to take effect. In the remaining ten months of 1995 only twenty additional cases were reported altogether, an average of only two per month (see Table 3).

Nyaheiya residents, who had reported a total of seventeen cattle-theft incidents to the police in 1993 and twenty-five in 1994, reported only seven such incidents in 1995. Net cattle losses (number of cattle taken minus number recovered), as reported to the police by Nyaheiya residents, declined by a dramatic 86 per cent in 1995 as compared with those of the previous year (see Table 4). Although the number of cattle reported stolen may have been exaggerated in the hope of receiving outsize compensation later on from government compensation programmes, the number of thefts reported, and the percentage rise or decline in the number of cattle stolen from month to month and from year to year, are probably accurate.

TABLE 4. Cattle thefts reported to police by the people of Nyaheiya, 1993–95

Year	No. of thefts reported	No. of cattle reported stolen	No. of cattle recovered
1993	17	593	66
1994	25	412	36
1995	7	73	22

Throughout this period, however, both in formal interviews and in casual conversation, Nyaheiya cattle raiders expressed confidence that raiding would resume in force again once the crackdown died down. ‘Cattle thieving has stopped now, but it will start again when the *sungusungu* cools down’, predicted one man. ‘They can’t stop the stealing’, another agreed. By December that same year, in fact, the total number of cattle-theft cases reported to the police by the people of Kemambo ward had all but returned to February’s level, a sign that the intimidatory impact of the crackdown had begun to slacken (see Table 3).

Regrettably, I left the field slightly over two months later without having acquired any additional monthly cattle-theft figures. According to friends in Tarime District with whom I correspond, however, cattle raiding resurged with a vengeance in 1996, inciting an even more violent *sungusungu* response the following year. A personal letter written to me by a district government worker in 1998 describes the level of cattle theft in the district in that year as being

Very, very minimal. These rustlers created their own downfall by overdoing their trade, to the extent that all the rest of the society had to rise up in defence. Somewhere in the middle of last year [1997] the *Sungusungu* in conjunction with *Wazee wa Kimila*<sup>4</sup> were given extra powers from above, to arrest, torture and/or kill any punk they suspect and confirm to be a rustler. A good number of them were lynched that way.

The story of efforts—official, unofficial, and semi-official—to put an end to cattle raiding in Tanzanian Kuriland is thus an on-going story whose final chapters remain to be written. While the *sungusungu* crackdowns had an undeniably chilling effect on cattle raiding in the area in 1995 as well as, apparently, in 1997–98, they can have had no effect whatsoever on the root causes of cattle raiding, which are structural and economic (Fleisher, 1999, in press).

‘Thieves use guns to steal cattle and kill people pointlessly’, said one Nyaheiya man plaintively. ‘They don’t care about old people or young

<sup>4</sup> A reference, in Swahili, to what in Kuria are termed the *Abagaaka bikimiira*, the men who constitute the *ikimiira* (also *inchaama*), or secret council of elders.

people. They kill everyone they meet in their houses to take the cows away’.

#### CONCLUSION

*Sungusungu* is a form of village vigilantism that first emerged among the Sukuma and Nyamwezi peoples of west-central Tanzania in response to intense feelings of insecurity with respect to cattle theft and banditry and the failure of either the government or the police to stop these crimes. At first both the police and the courts opposed it, alarmed by the threat they felt it posed to the state’s monopoly of law and order (Abrahams, 1987: 189–90) and arguing that *sungusungu* was ‘attempting to turn the clock back to primitive punitive measures’ (Bukurura, 1996: 264).

As time passed, however, such resistance abated, owing to widespread dissatisfaction with the police and the courts and the widening success and popularity of *sungusungu*. By late 1994 a new form of *sungusungu*, this time state-sponsored and controlled, had emerged in Tarime District, focused mainly, albeit not exclusively, on cattle theft, and with its hierarchy of commanders responsible, ultimately, to government officials.

In its state-sponsored manifestation *sungusungu* offers local people a number of significant advantages and benefits. With regard to their most serious ‘crime’ concern, cattle raiding, it enables them to dispense, to all intents and purposes, with the costly, inefficient, and corrupt services of the police, whom many villagers dismiss as ‘useless’. In their place it provides them with ‘law enforcers’ who are of the community and accountable to it. It dramatically reduces the out-of-pocket costs of law enforcement, because the fees paid to *sungusungu* are lower than the bribes habitually demanded by the police, and because all fees and fines collected by *sungusungu* remain within the community, to finance not only the work of *sungusungu* but also other worthy village projects. And, lastly, it enables local people to punish fellow villagers who have transgressed the law—their friends and neighbours—by administering beatings and levying fines, but without handing them over to the formal justice system, which they see as indifferent, if not hostile, to their needs and over which they have no control.

Unfortunately, however, *sungusungu* is itself not free of corruption. Doing the rounds on night patrol provides a first-rate opportunity for spying out villagers’ cattle corrals and familiarising oneself with their sleeping patterns and security regimes—so that this intelligence may be passed along to one’s comrades in the thieving profession. Over a fifteen-month period during the course of this fieldwork, two Nyaheiya *sungusungu* commanders were dismissed for having solicited bribes in the form of cattle from local thieves who had stolen cattle from other villages.

And then there is the matter of incarcerating suspects, sometimes for days, and beating them with a hippopotamus-hide whip. ‘With the

*kiboko* we will get a confession', I was assured on more than one occasion. Indeed. And when a suspect succeeded in persuading his *sungusungu* interrogators of his innocence he was freed—but the welts still took a long time to heal.

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#### ABSTRACT

In the mid-1990s the village vigilantism known as *sungusungu* emerged, for the first time, in Tarime District, in northern Tanzania, in response to high levels of cattle theft and related violence—not in the form of independently organised but co-operating village vigilante groups, as it had first manifested itself a decade and a half earlier, in west central Tanzania, among the Sukuma and Nyamwezi peoples, but under state sponsorship. This article describes the organisation and operation of this form of state-sponsored vigilantism as it unfolded in a village of the agro-pastoral Kuria people, and argues that, while it offers a number of significant benefits both to the state and to local people, it nonetheless suffers from some of the same weaknesses that plague the official law enforcement system.

#### RÉSUMÉ

Au milieu des années 90, le mouvement villageois d'autodéfense appelé *sungusungu* est apparu pour la première fois dans le District de Tarime, dans le nord de la Tanzanie, en réponse aux nombreux vols de bétail et à la violence qu'ils ont engendrée, non pas sous la forme de groupes indépendants organisés mais agissant en commun, tels qu'ils se sont manifestés pour la première fois quinze ans plus tôt dans la partie centrale occidentale de la Tanzanie au sein des populations Sukuma et Nyamwezi, mais avec le soutien de l'Etat. Cet article décrit l'organisation et le fonctionnement de cette forme d'autodéfense soutenue par l'Etat à travers son développement dans un village de la population agro-pastorale Kuria, et suggère que, bien qu'offrant des avantages certains tant pour l'Etat que pour la population locale, elle souffre néanmoins des mêmes faiblesses dont est en proie le système officiel de maintien de l'ordre.