

Informal Social Control by *Sungusungu* in Southwestern Tanzania: Regional and International Comparisons

Abstract

Sungusungu “vigilante” organizations emerged quickly at the village level in northwestern Tanzania to protect property and enforce customary rules. With increased cattle theft following the war with Uganda in 1979, the ethnic Sukuma designed *Sungusungu* as a law-and-order institution to protect cattle and other property; the Tanzanian state was seen as too corrupt to rely upon. Using charismatic leadership, one or two villages organized villagers into a rank-and-file hierarchy. Within a year, the organizations had spread from the Sukuma populations in northwestern Tanzania to distant migrant Sukuma populations in southwestern Tanzania where this research was conducted. With concrete definitions of institutions of social control, this paper describes different types of rules controlling *Sungusungu*, and how these influence the behavior of the organizations in two villages. Considering variation in traditionalism between Tanzanian regions, general patterns of *Sungusungu* behavior are compared with *Sungusungu* behavior in other parts of Tanzania. Finally, with attention to the rules of *Sungusungu* and Sukuma custom, *Sungusungu* is compared with social control institutions in the nineteenth century American West.

INTRODUCTION

This article describes institutional rules of *Sungusungu* “vigilante” organizations in southwestern Tanzania, and draws from literature describing *Sungusungu* organizations from other parts of the country. First, I review why the *Sungusungu* organizations emerged and spread across Tanzania, and how the organizations are structured to control crime and deviance. *Sungusungu* emerged as grass-roots organizations among rural villagers from the Sukuma tribe, with subsequent attempts by other tribes, and even the Tanzanian state, to adopt and diffuse the organizations. Second, I define institutions of social control, and use a typology of institutional rule types to elucidate the complex set of rules that influence *Sungusungu* organizations in the Rukwa region of Tanzania. Finally, I compare *Sungusungu* organizations in the study area with the *Sungusungu* described in northern Tanzania, and conclude with overall comparisons of *Sungusungu* with law and order institutions in the American West.

SUNGUSUNGU: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Sungusungu emerged among the Sukuma tribe as grass-roots law and order organizations in 1982. Organizations were formed with the goal of controlling the increasing number of cattle rustlers because of the Ugandan war in 1979 that produced a surplus of guns and young jobless males. Soon the organizations began to punish adulterers, run-away wives, debtors, and witches. Mesaki (1995) discusses how state officials have documented 3,072 witch killings (approximately eighty percent of the

victims were elderly women) by the Sukuma from 1970–88. The *Sungusungu* revived traditional aggressive behavior towards women and became heavily involved in the killings. Further, thieves, whether they were guilty or innocent, were beaten and sometimes killed after failing to confess their crime immediately. Although often violent, *Sungusungu* are peacemakers—council members arbitrate disputes involving debts or adultery with fines and sometimes ostracism.

Starting in one or two villages, elders used charismatic leadership to organize villagers into a rank-and-file hierarchy to combat crime and protect cattle. Within a year, the organizations had spread from the Sukuma populations in northwestern Tanzania to distant emigrant Sukuma populations in areas such as Rukwa, where this research was conducted. Bukurura (1994) and Abrahams (1989; 1998) discuss how the *Sungusungu* institution involves independent village chapters whose activities are coordinated by higher-level leadership. Although village *Sungusungu* organizations have autonomy to choose their own leaders and make decisions, the institution is set up to link all *Sungusungu* chapters under one cooperating body. Leaders govern at the village, ward, division, district and regional political levels following the Tanzanian modern political system introduced by the British.¹ Each of the political levels has *Sungusungu* officials including a chief (*ntemi*), chairman (*mwenyekiti*) and a secretary (*katibu*). *Sungusungu*, as the Sukuma did in pre-colonial times, depend on the *ntemi* as a religious diviner. The chairman of the meeting holds a customary role similar to Western institutions. He provides order within meetings, and is the most likely person to be contacted by individuals requesting assistance from the *Sungusungu*. The secretary uses the national

Swahili language to write the details of all the cases discussed at meetings, and lists the names of every council member attending court sessions.

Under the leadership positions, a few dozen or more council members (*wajumbe*) have the duty of hearing cases and discussing *Sungusungu* matters in secrecy. Each member is expected to attend meetings and participate in court sessions. Further, if the secret committee fails to reach consensus on a difficult case, a public meeting occurs where all *Sungusungu* members are expected to attend. The *Sungusungu* soldiers are composed of all young male Sukuma (between the ages of approximately fourteen and thirty) who are led by a few commanders. Each commander controls the young males in approximately ten nearby households. The commanders and soldiers are expected to obey the orders of the council and apprehend thieves or other offenders immediately upon knowledge of a crime being committed. Further, the soldiers may be asked by the council to travel to distant areas to apprehend suspected offenders or gather witnesses needed to resolve cases.

***SUNGUSUNGU* OF MPIMBWE DISTRICT: STUDY AREA AND METHODS**

The study area is in southwestern Tanzania's Rukwa region, specifically in Mpanda district and Mpimbwe division. The village of Mirumba and Kibaoni are the main villages of ethnographic study, and both are located a few kilometers south of Katavi National Park and west of Lake Rukwa (Figure one). The wet season runs from early December through April, and receives an average of 600–900 mm of rain. The area is an important food-producing region for Tanzania (World Bank, 2000). Sukuma and some individuals

from local tribes are very successful in cultivating rice in the fertile wetlands near Lake Rukwa and surrounding areas. Rukwa is an isolated region in Tanzania receiving few state funds for road and bridge repairs, and unlike other regions especially in the north, receives few tourists—Rukwa is a frontier region of Tanzania.

The *Sungusungu* quickly reached the study area in 1982, when as described by Bukurua (1994), elders traveled to different regions to initiate villagers into the *Sungusungu* movement. In the study area, informants reported that elders traveled by truck from the northern Sukuma territories to train and initiate new leaders into the *Sungusungu* institution. The Sukuma in Mpimbwe division were taught the institutional rules and structure of *Sungusungu*, and immediately implemented the organizations starting in the village of Mirumba, and subsequently spreading to other nearby villages. These newly elected and trained leaders then had large meetings to train other *Sungusungu* in the nearby villages. The *Sungusungu* organizations I studied in Rukwa are strikingly similar structurally to the *Sungusungu* described by Bukurua (1994) and Abrahams (1998).

The Sukuma in the study area began arriving in 1964, and many continue to arrive in Mpimbwe searching for new grazing pastures or areas to cultivate rice. The migration is part of the overall Sukuma expansion described by Galaty (1988). Today, there are nearly as many Sukuma as there are members of the local Pimbwe tribe living in the study area. As in other areas, the Sukuma continue their traditional agro-pastoral strategy, although great variation exists in size of family cattle herds and amount of wealth obtained each year from cash crops such as rice and sunflower. Some families have large herds of cattle reaching into the thousands, and sell hundreds of sacks of

rice each year, whereas others have few cattle and grow only enough food for subsistence.

The migrant Sukuma have moved into the traditional area of the Pimbwe² tribe. Traditionally the Pimbwe were hunter-horticulturalists who hunted a variety of large and small game, and grew mainly maize in small plots to supplement their diet. The introduction of Katavi Game Reserve in the 1950s, and subsequently a national park in the 1970s, has substantially inhibited Pimbwe from hunting.

Historically, the Pimbwe hunted game, grew maize, and herded goats. They lived in small un-centralized settlements near the forests. Willis (1966) describes how their political structure involved loosely linked clans controlled by a chief in a centrally located village. Political integration between clans existed, as exemplified by the chief mediating difficult disputes such as homicide, but overall there was little need for large-scale cooperation between settlements. The Germans and British replaced the tribal system with the state political system, reducing the chief's powers to a symbolic role. After state re-settlement schemes in the 1970s, the Pimbwe were forced to leave their isolated households within the forest areas and centrally locate in villages that now each contain a few thousand people. Traditionally, the Sukuma lived in a multiple chiefdom system where local chiefs controlled large areas but also cooperated with distant chiefs. The Sukuma also had powerful organizations and clubs at the village level (Abrahams, 1967a, 1967b), and recent studies discuss sophisticated cooperation among agricultural cooperatives (Lang 1978).

In the study area, Pimbwe and Sukuma differ markedly. In general, Sukuma are much wealthier than the Pimbwe and retain their traditional customs to a greater extent.

Pimbwe have few remaining customs, high rates of alcohol abuse, and an inability to adequately feed their families. As a result, many Pimbwe envy the Sukuma. Pimbwe live in small one-room households within dense village settlements while Sukuma live in larger extended households surrounding the village, but often at considerable distance (1–2 miles) from the village and from other Sukuma households. Pimbwe lack the capital to rent or purchase cattle and face labor constraints. Thus, they are often unable to cultivate enough food to see them through the wet season. Pimbwe households facing food shortages often work for Sukuma by weeding their large fields.

Concerning institutions, the Pimbwe are rarely involved in any large-scale events involving individuals from outside the extended family or friendship networks. Moreover, there are few tribal markers defining Pimbwe ingroup loyalties. In stark contrast, Sukuma individuals share a common ornate pattern of dress, and young boys adorn themselves with jewelry, spears, and large capes. Women wear distinct dress patterns and use specific types of material to make their own clothes for their children. The Sukuma community also organizes annual dance competitions that take place after the harvest—almost all the Sukuma come from neighboring villages to compete and socialize. The Sukuma are known to have rules specifying that all people in need should be aided, and strangers are taken in for lodging and food (Varkevisser, 1973). In contrast, Pimbwe share with their families and friends, but rarely to people of more distant relation.

Methods

Fieldwork was conducted over three trips in the dry season, specifically in the villages of Mirumba and Kibaoni. I became a member of the *Sungusungu* during my first trip to the field site and was invited to attend all meetings and events. Because I was invited to be a councilman in the committee, I had the opportunity to attend secret meetings open only to committee members. Through participant observation techniques, I was able to gather information about the meetings and activities of the *Sungusungu*. In my final trip to the study site, I continued participant observation and attended meetings, but also conducted a survey with both Pimbwe and Sukuma informants.³

I surveyed members of *Sungusungu* in the village of Mirumba, and included only males past the age of approximately thirteen because younger males are not expected to participate in *Sungusungu*. Random sampling techniques were unfeasible because men were often tending to their rice fields or cattle herds, and thus were difficult to locate. Overall, biases may exist in the sample because of non-random sampling methods; males who often travel or spend little time in the village may be underrepresented. I also conducted a survey of non-members in two villages. In the village of Mirumba, my research assistant and I interviewed males when we saw them in the village. Once again, this sample was non-random and may men who often travel may be underrepresented. In Kibaoni, nearly every Pimbwe male household head or his son was interviewed in two representative sub-sections of the village. Thus, this sample is less likely to be biased because nearly all of the individuals living in these areas were eventually found and interviewed by my research assistant.

INSTITUTIONAL RULES AND THE MAINTENANCE OF *SUNGUSUNGU* IN MPIMBWE

In this section, I define institutions of social control, and then use the typology of different institutional rule types to describe the *Sungusungu* institution in the study area of Mpimbwe.

Institutions of Social Control Defined

Institutions of social control comprise of all the mechanisms of social control that limit deviance and disputes in a society. There are number of possible social control actors present in a population including *informal* controllers (e.g., community gossip networks, *Sungusungu*), and *formal* controllers (e.g., state police organizations and court systems). The relative strength of different controller types influences the strength of others. For example, when formal state controllers are weak, there is a need for the emergence of other controllers such as those exemplified by *Sungusungu* and other vigilante-type groups (Abrahams, 1998; Bukurua, 1994, Fleisher, 2000).

Each controller type has three components. Actors, or hierarchies of actors, by administering sanctions defined by rules, are able to control both social deviants and enforcers themselves who fail to contribute to the enforcement effort. To illustrate, *Sungusungu* leaders and the rank-and-file administer sanctions through a tripartite system of material or symbolic incentives. Rewards go to individuals who excel in upholding rules, punishments go to those who violate rules, and no incentives are provided when individuals conform to rules. Rules, or prescriptions of behaviors that

should be followed, can be categorized into primary and secondary rules. Primary rules (substantive rules) specify socially unacceptable behavior such as stealing or adultery. Secondary rules (procedural, remedial, constitutive, and controller-selecting rules) are higher-order rules that specify the sanctions to be given to social control actors for not punishing or rewarding individuals breaking primary rules. For example, an individual failing to uphold a secondary rule by spreading negative gossip about a deviant could be sanctioned herself from higher-order rules.

By considering actors, rules, and sanctions separately, I am careful to distinguish between organizations (and the individual actors that comprise them) and the institutional rules that result in sanctions capable of influencing the behavior of actors. Thus, throughout the paper, the term institution refers to sets of rules that allow social controllers to effectively punish deviants and arbitrate disputants within a society.

Substantive Rules: Behaviors Controlled by Sungusungu

Substantive rules specify what types of behaviors are deviant within a society and should be controlled. Upon emergence, *Sungusungu* began to enforce substantive rules other than controlling rustlers and thieves, such as controlling run-away women and killing suspected witches. In the study area, *Sungusungu* enforce these rules along with mediating debt disputes. Debts are common in the area because many individuals, often without clear agreements or contracts about payment, sell or trade goods on credit. Figure two illustrates that out of a sample of forty-seven *Sungusungu* cases from the village of Mirumba, about forty-nine percent are debt related. Other cases involving theft, adultery, and disputes about livestock eating crops occur at lower frequencies. In

addition, I looked through the case records in the village of Kibaoni, and the majority of the cases were related to debt disputes. Although less common, some cases involved theft and adultery. In another nearby village, the secretary informed me that debt cases are now the most common, but ten years ago theft cases were much more frequent. With all the recorded cases since the emergence of *Sungusungu* in his possession, this secretary also informed me that there has been a decline in theft cases heard by *Sungusungu*, and believes that this is a result of the *Sungusungu's* fierce reputation that continues to deter crime effectively.

Sungusungu informants stressed that their main goal is to control thieves. Informants explain that *Sungusungu* handles debt and adultery cases, because these crimes are types of theft. It is difficult to determine how prevalent witchcraft cases are in the study area due to the highly secret nature of these, but there are plentiful reports and evidence of these occurring. Further, I have witnessed Sukuma individuals and relatives being forced to move under the threat of death because of being suspected of witchcraft. There are a few cases in the Mirumba sample where *Sungusungu* resolved disputes between herders and farmers because livestock often enter maize fields to feed.⁴ Often these conflicts occur between Sukuma and Pimbwe, and the problem seems to be more severe in the village of Kibaoni where more Sukuma households have large cattle herds.

Although informants reported that interpersonal violence occurs in the area, there were no *Sungusungu* cases involving male interpersonal violence in Mirumba, although I heard of one case from another village. As discussed below, it seems that informal social controllers other than *Sungusungu* control interpersonal violence among the

Sukuma. Finally, the *Sungusungu* have also agreed to enforce rules mandated by the state such as preventing passage to regions experiencing cholera epidemics.

Membership Rules

In the study area, all Sukuma are members of *Sungusungu*, and thirty-three out thirty-four respondents said they had never met or even heard about a Sukuma that is not a *Sungusungu* member. Although women are not allowed to participate in the political aspects of *Sungusungu*, they are considered members if their husband or father is in good standing with the organizations. The rules specify that family members of *Sungusungu* are also members for life,⁵ unless they violate *Sungusungu* rules and fail to pay their fine. Sukuma were initiated into the organization without having to pay a fee when it first emerged in 1982. In contrast, many Pimbwe and Fipa have joined the organization after it emerged in the study area in 1982, but almost all were forced to pay a membership fee. The fees vary by place, because villages with stronger economies have substantially higher fees. In the village of Mirumba, where most of the research was conducted, for males to join the organizations the fee is 2,000 Tanzanian shillings.⁶ In neighboring village of Kibaoni where the economy is better, a recent meeting placed the fee at 5,000 shillings. In the wealthiest rice cultivation villages in the study region, the fees are nearly 10,000 shillings.

Paying the fee and becoming a member is a form of insurance; members losing cows to a thief are entitled immediate aid from all *Sungusungu* members. Non-members can go to *Sungusungu* with problems, but will be forced to pay five times the regular amount (1,000 shillings in Mirumba) to have their case heard. If the plaintiff wins the

case, however, the defendant is forced to pay this fee. Informants also stress that non-members are not guaranteed to receive immediate service from the organization. Of course, upon becoming a member, an individual is expected to abide by all *Sungusungu* rules, including mandatory participation in events requiring capturing and punishing deviants.

Procedural Rules

Once a thief is identified, procedural rules specify how evidence is to be weighed and justice administered. In the case of thieves, leaders reported that soldiers are commanded to immediately bring the suspects to the committee to determine their punishment. However, soldiers sometimes beat and abuse suspects, and may not be fined for such violence by the *Sungusungu* leaders. Tanzanian newspapers often report events in which *Sungusungu* kill suspects, many whom were later found to be innocent. There are similar cases in the study area of suspected thieves being tracked down and killed on the spot, or beaten and dragged across far distances until they die. The secretary of one nearby organization (a Pimbwe) informed me that the local *Sungusungu* are trying to convince soldiers to beat individuals only in certain parts of the body to prevent dangerous injuries. I heard these reports mainly from Pimbwe members and government officials, and it is probable that the Sukuma members feel that abusing suspected thieves is legitimate.

I have heard a few reports about cases involving death of suspects. In one case, a wrongly accused man of the local Fipa tribe was beaten to death after being suspected of cattle theft. In another case, thieves from a distant village burned the

house of a Sukuma family—the accused were tracked down and killed. It is possible that suspected offenders from non-Sukuma tribes are less likely to be able to confess (whether innocent or guilty), and have the opportunity to pay a fine to avoid being beaten or killed.

After a thief is brought to the committee, violence results when suspects fail to confess their crime. If the suspect refuses to confess to the *Sungusungu* committee that he is guilty, the soldiers take the suspect to a body of water, strip them of their shirt, cover them in mud, and paste straw reeds on their head. They are dunked in the water and the term “to wash” is used when describing the ritual. Finally, the suspect is paraded around the village with mud on his head so that all of the villagers can identify the accused thief. Later, to be allowed to re-integrate into the community, Bukurura (1994) describes how the accused must confess and state how much they are willing to pay until all parties agree. In the study area, *Sungusungu* have explicit rules that each thief must pay two cows: one to be eaten by all the members, and one to be placed in the *Sungusungu* bank for future use. If the person agrees to pay the fine, they are welcomed back into the community and once again considered a *Sungusungu*.

Individuals who refuse to pay, or cannot pay immediately, are socially ostracized by all *Sungusungu* members, and effectively, all Sukuma. Ostracism forbids any member to communicate, greet, or cooperate in any way with deviants and their immediate family. Individuals that cooperate with ostracized individuals become ostracized themselves. Informants stress the effectiveness of this punishment and refer to it as the *Sungusungu* jail. Letters written to inform other *Sungusungu* organizations in distant villages about the ostracized individuals increase the effectiveness of the

ostracisms. Individuals under ostracism cannot move, even to distant villages, to escape punishment. In one case, the *Sungusungu* wrote a letter to all chapters in the division forbidding every *Sungusungu* member from visiting the store of an accused adulterer who violated *Sungusungu* rules by fleeing to the police for help. After the punishment was issued, the accused quickly paid his fine of 30,000 shillings to end the ostracism.

The lack of procedural rules in determining guilt, and quick use of violence, is one of the most controversial elements of the institution from the perspective of government officials and many Pimbwe I interviewed. The use of violence in *Sungusungu* may be related to the fact that few Sukuma in the area have attended school, and have little knowledge about how state justice systems are supposed to function. In contrast, most Pimbwe have had four to seven years of primary school education, and are more likely to be familiar with courts and procedures to determine guilt. There are often disputes between the local non-Sukuma and Sukuma within the organization as to how to determine guilt and use violence. In one case, an individual known by all villagers to be crazy, but generally trustworthy, was accused of stealing money from a Sukuma. Many Sukuma in the village wanted to follow the custom of bringing the suspect to the river to be “washed” and then beaten. The *Sungusungu* secretary from Mirumba (an educated Pimbwe man) protested, and prevented the leaders from beating the suspect.

Procedures for civil and domestic cases differ. Committee members seek facts to determine who is at fault in cases such as debt or adultery disputes. Both the plaintiff and defendant are given a chance to speak and bring witnesses to support their case.

Committee members along with leaders ask questions, provide important information if they have it, and sometimes summon additional witnesses. I have attended numerous cases where witnesses were called in to testify, and in one case, the council sent a soldier on a trip to a city seventy miles away to bring a witness to the hearing. Once both parties have spoken, and the council is satisfied, council members express their opinions on how the matter should be settled. Debate continues until everyone—including both plaintiff and defendants—agrees on how to resolve the dispute. Some cases last for hours; meetings continue until everybody is satisfied with an agreement. In most debt cases, the defendant is told to pay the debt by a specified date. Adultery cases usually involve very heavy compensation to be paid to the plaintiff. In all cases, the individual losing the case must pay council fees that vary by village organizations. In the village of Mirumba, all fees are 1,000 shillings for members. In another village, the council fee is 5,000 shillings for members.

Remedial Rules: The Control of Sungusungu Members

Remedial rules are secondary rules that control the enforcers themselves by specifying the type of remedy to be used by other enforcers when punishments (or rewards) are deemed necessary. *Sungusungu* remedial rules encourage attendance and punctuality to all meetings, bringing thieves and witnesses to the *Sungusungu* court, and general compliance to any order from higher-ranked members. There are also rules that prohibit slandering the organization or its leaders, reporting all crimes to appropriate leaders, obeying ostracisms, and never lying or stealing—even the slightest dishonest remark or “borrowing” organizational property are serious infractions. I have witnessed cases

involving infractions and subsequent fines for individuals breaking organizational rules. Large fines were given to individuals who slandered the organization, were late to meetings, told lies about a case to committee members, and stole organization funds or food at parties.

A remedial rule forbids council members from spreading information discussed in secret meetings because leaders are wary of giving information to thieves. *Sungusungu* also have rules specifying that any knowledge of thieves must be brought immediately to the attention of the *Sungusungu* chairman or *ntemi* without spreading the news to other individuals. The organization seeks to prevent thieves, especially those with powers upheld by weapons or even linkages with the state, from getting the news before the committee can determine the best way to proceed. If a member sees a theft in progress, he is required to blow his cattle horn to alarm *Sungusungu* soldiers to cooperate with their commanders to apprehend the deviants. Any knowledge of corruption within the organization must be reported to the committee immediately, or the individuals themselves risk being accused of cooperating with thieves.

In the study area, civil or domestic cases involving disputes or adultery can only be brought to the committee's attention by the disputants. *Sungusungu* soldiers are especially prohibited from getting involved in settling disputes on their own, or seeking payment for various types of services. Allowing individuals to seek cases on their own and receive payment individually can quickly lead to private policing institutions such as Mafias. In a case involving witchcraft accusations of a wealthy Pimbwe family, Pimbwe villagers stoned the family and destroyed some of their property in an attempt to ostracize them from the village. Only police intervention allowed them to remain. When

asked why the *Sungusungu* did not get involved, one high-ranking informant told me that if some party had asked the committee to kill the family, they would have rapidly done so.

Constitutive Rules: Encouraging Sungusungu Compliance

Constitutive rules are other important category of secondary rules that encourage participation and compliance among enforcers and provide the “glue” of the organization. The importance of these rules cannot be understated, especially in large-scale organizations such as *Sungusungu*, because these provide incentives for cooperation and reduce corruption and rent seeking.

Bukurura (1994) discusses how *Sungusungu* has not yet become factionalized. In my study area, interest groups emerge over issues such as how much the government should be allowed to influence the *Sungusungu*, and tension occurs often among men of different opinions, but there is always effort to remedy these before extreme factions materialize. Thus, constitutive rules limit conflict among *Sungusungu* members. I have documented cases of individuals being fined for slandering both the *Sungusungu* organization and its individual members. Members are also punished for speaking harshly to other members in meetings. In one meeting I attended, the chairman was strongly advised to lower his voice in an argument he was having with the *ntemi*, or receive a fine. In many cases, controversial leaders are simply fired, and new leaders are appointed before lasting divisions take hold. Further, I have witnessed *Sungusungu* chapters from other villages and higher-ranking ward leaders discuss the politics of troubled villages such as the village of Mirumba in their meetings and in daily

gossip. These higher-level leaders attend meetings and elections and attempt to minimize intra-organizational conflict.

Controller-Selection Rules: Preferences for Different Controllers

Controller selection rules specify which controllers (e.g., *Sungusungu* or the Tanzanian state) should be chosen upon a breach of substantive rules. The Sukuma rely heavily on informal social control forces such as the *Sungusungu* organizations to resolve disputes and protect their property, rather than state controllers. In the survey, Sukuma respondents were given hypothetical cases of disputes or crimes and were asked which third-party controller they would prefer to use for assistance—*Sungusungu* or the government police/courts (table 2). For situations involving the theft of a cow or bicycle, every member regardless of tribe said they would turn to *Sungusungu* for aid. Similarly, high proportions of respondents stated preferences to use *Sungusungu* for situations involving difficulty get repaid for a debt and having one's wife runaway. A situation where an individual is hit by another may produced a different pattern; a substantial number of Sukuma and almost all non-Sukuma said they would turn to the government⁷ for such a case. This pattern likely reflects the *Sungusungu* mission of controlling thieves (which includes debt and stolen wives). The fact that more than half of the Sukuma said that they would use *Sungusungu* to resolve a case involving violence whereas only a few non-Sukuma reported to do this likely reflects the fact that Sukuma abhor using government institutions altogether.

Additional evidence for Sukuma reluctance to use government controllers for aid appeared in ward-level court records that I was allowed to study. The ward court system

mediates all types of petty criminal and civil disputes. Out of fifty-one cases heard in the year 2000 by the ward-level court, only one of the plaintiffs and six defendants were Sukuma. The one Sukuma plaintiff took a Pimbwe individual to the court over a farming boundary dispute. The magistrate of the court informed me that Sukuma occasionally do use the courts for this purpose because they need the historic farming boundary records held by government officials. Four of the six Sukuma defendants were brought to court because their cows entered fields and ate the plaintiffs' crops.

The Sukuma preference of avoiding government controllers (e.g., police and state officials) may involve their low level of education and weak understanding of government institutions. However, the *Sungusungu* emerged because of dissatisfaction with the police, and almost all informants said that *Sungusungu* allows individuals to get fast and reliable service to protect property and resolve disputes. Further, informants report that the police specifically target Sukuma for "crimes," because the Sukuma, often owning large cattle herds, are able to pay the police to stay out of jail. Informants also stress that police corruption, in conjunction with the Sukuma belief that spending time in police custody is spiritually damaging, motivates many Sukuma to give police large sums of money or cattle to avoid incarceration.

Because of conflict with the state, the *Sungusungu* have rules that punish individuals from choosing state controllers over *Sungusungu*. I have documented cases in which *Sungusungu* members chastised, and even removed from office, individuals who used government controllers. In one case, the *Sungusungu* aided a man in returning his cattle, but later he went to the police for help. The police in turn stole a large fraction of the herd, and the *Sungusungu* were so furious that one of their

members could allow this to happen, that they subsequently ejected the individual from the organization. In other cases, Sukuma deviants go to the police because they know they can bribe the police but not the *Sungusungu*. In sum, with the belief that the police and courts are corrupt, the Sukuma enforce the rule that the only legitimate way of settling disputes and protecting property is through Sukuma social controls.

REGIONAL COMPARISONS OF *SUNGUSUNGU*

If the *Sungusungu* institutional rule types described above maintain corresponding *Sungusungu* behaviors, variation in the strength of rules should influence patterns of primary and secondary behavior. In this section, I first argue that Sukuma in Rukwa are more traditional than Sukuma in northern regions. As a result, the *Sungusungu* of Rukwa may have stronger institutional rules that leads to different outcomes of substantive behaviors enforced, procedures used to punish deviants, and degree of organizational control of members.

Regional Variation within Tanzania

A highly educated national politician explained to me that in his inter-regional travels he was astounded to observe the difference between the Sukuma in Rukwa region and the Sukuma in northern regions. His comments reflected in general what I observed when traveling within different Tanzanian regions and talking to local Sukuma. The first observation is that Sukuma in Rukwa wear gaudy clothes, traditional bracelets, and distinct black capes that symbolize and display their ethnicity and spiritual beliefs. Ethnographic observations from the institution of *chagulaga* strengthen the hypothesis

that Sukuma are more traditional in the study area. *Chagulaga* occurs after dance competitions and other large gatherings, when a number of young males surround a young woman and chase her until she chooses a young man to discuss a possible romantic meeting in the future. The process continues, and other young men are chosen until finally one male is guaranteed a meeting with the young woman. Traditionally, this has been a formal marriage market for parents searching for husbands for their daughters. Hangaya (1989) discusses *chagulaga* in Sukumaland, the traditional Sukuma region in northwest Tanzania, where young males now break the rules of the institution by using violence and raping women. As a result, the *Sungusungu* in his study area have banned *chagulaga* due to the decay of the institutional rules preventing violence and rape. In contrast, the institution remains legitimate in my study area, and informants suggest that young males generally abide by the rules or face strong punishments by the *Sungusungu*.

There are a number of reasons why the Rukwa Sukuma are more traditional in the study area. First, because many Sukuma invest their wealth in cattle, Sukumaland has become environmentally degraded, thus pushing Sukuma to migrate in search of new pastures (Brandstrom, 1985). The Sukuma that are unwilling to give up their cattle by trading them for other investment opportunities are forced to move. As a result, the migrant Sukuma in Rukwa may be a biased sample of Sukuma holding on to their cattle traditions, and possibly other traditional institutions. Second, Rukwa is a frontier region with few state or non-government organizational activities bringing development schemes or education programs that might erode Sukuma traditions. Finally, the fact that Sukuma in the study area mark themselves with modern gaudy dress patterns

might be an indication of exaggerated ethnic marking due to adaptive processes associated with migrating to new environments and mixing with other tribes (McElreath et al. n.d.).

Outcomes of Traditionalism: Substantive Rules and Behavior

A number of administrators familiar with *Sungusungu* in both regions informed me that the Rukwa *Sungusungu* are mainly administrative—they spend most of their effort mediating small civil cases and fining their members for breaking organizational rules. This is supported by evidence from the cases. Nearly fifty percent of the cases heard by the Mirumba *Sungusungu* were related to debt disputes, whereas only one out of twenty-seven cases in the data reported by Bukurura (1994) was related to a debt dispute. The other cases in Bukurura's sample represent a number of cases involving theft, adultery, ostracism violations, and a few violations of membership duties. Although Bukurura mentions a few cases involving the punishment of *Sungusungu* members breaking organizational rules, his description of *Sungusungu* does not discuss the importance of such cases. In contrast, I witnessed many cases of leaders being thrown out and fined for violations such as borrowing from the organizational bank without permission and giving non-members meat at organizational parties. In addition, organizational leaders at the ward level were constantly concerned about the behavior of their members. The amount of effort used to maintain the organization in the study site is interesting, especially when both case data and informant reports show that severe crime such as cattle theft is relatively uncommon in Rukwa. Unlike northern

regions, there are fewer antagonistic cattle raiding tribes, and the isolation of the region leads to difficulty in both moving stolen cattle and finding safe markets to sell them.

First, one possible explanation for the high effort of *Sungusungu* in Rukwa—despite lower direct payoffs received from punishing cattle raiders and thieves—is that the traditional Sukuma maintain *Sungusungu* for cultural as well as material reasons. In other words, the institution is important to Sukuma because they believe *Sungusungu* is an important part of their lifestyle, regardless of the direct need to punish deviants. Further, because migrant Sukuma face uncertainty, the *Sungusungu* may also function as a support network for Sukuma, and in effect be an important mechanism in the Sukuma ethnic diaspora. Second, institutions may lag when populations experience ecological changes. Thus, although cattle theft and other property crimes are less common in Rukwa, migrant Sukuma may continue to maintain *Sungusungu* because of the complexity of knowing the risks of losing cattle in new environments and because sanctions mandate all Sukuma to participate in *Sungusungu* regardless of the amount of crime in the area (Paciotti, 2002). Finally, although cattle rustling is not a major problem in Rukwa, many Sukuma have cattle in other regions of Tanzania, or may one day move to other regions where cattle rustling is a problem. Thus, Sukuma males must follow the *Sungusungu* rules because they need to be in good standing with the organizations to receive aid in the future.

Outcomes of Traditionalism: Procedural Rules

The *Sungusungu* punish suspected thieves harshly, and often without procedures to determine guilt. This behavior, in contrast to the administrative processes associated

with civil cases such as disputes, may result from the desire to implement harsh punishments unimpeded by organizational procedures. Without rules to determine guilt, the *Sungusungu* increase their ability to deter theft by sending a clear message that thieves may be killed or beaten without the chance of providing an alibi or attempting to bribe the organizations. However, not all thieves are punished harshly because *Sungusungu* provide many thieves with a chance to re-integrate into society once they have displayed remorse to the public and have agreed to pay their fines. Cases from nearby villages suggest that individuals from other tribes or distant areas may be more likely to meet quick violence due to their weaker ties with the local Sukuma communities. Although *Sungusungu* use violence in Rukwa, many informants (along with numerous newspaper reports) suggest that the *Sungusungu* in the northern areas are more likely to punish suspected thieves violently. This pattern may reflect a greater perceived need to deter the large number of thieves in the region. However, it may also reflect the decay of traditionalism among the northern Sukuma that results in less desire to re-integrate deviants into society (because the society is already becoming divided by modernization forces), and thus violent punishment is common.

Traditionalism may increase the likelihood that young males respect elders. As a result, organizational procedures for collecting and holding fines may result in fewer disputes between generations. Bukurura (1994) discusses conflict between young and older males in northern Tanzania because older males prefer to use fines to buy beer and food, instead of saving the money in the organizational bank. The *Sungusungu* in Rukwa compromise by allocating one cow to a feast, and one to the bank. Although

disagreements about funds occur, these are usually minor, and many informants explained that little inter-generational conflict occurs.

Outcomes of Traditionalism: Remedial Rules

Sungusungu's attention to civil disputes reflects interests both to reduce risk in market transactions (i.e., debtor problems) and to obtain the adjudication fees. With the ability to profit from dispute resolution, it is important to consider predatory dispute resolution organizations such as Mafias. Gambetta (1993) describes how Mafias provide the service of protection and dispute resolution, but actively seek business by creating distrust between potential clients. Further, they actively extort payments and use violence to show individuals who refuse to pay that bad things happen to those not under the "protection" of the Mafia. In contrast to Mafias, the *Sungusungu* provide public goods across a wide social scope because of tribal and inter-tribal cooperation and trust. However, the decay of traditionalism may result in the emergence of less pro-social *Sungusungu* organizations seeking only profit for their services. Such a change could alter how public goods are distributed, and the modern *Sungusungu* that produce effective public policing could evolve into rent seeking Mafia style organizations. For example, in the study area, informants stress that soldiers are not allowed to resolve disputes themselves—disputants must bring their cases to *Sungusungu*. In addition, the council determines *Sungusungu* fines, with the decisions monitored by the community as a whole, thus reducing the likelihood that a few individuals can exploit the power of *Sungusungu* for their own interests. However, Mwaikusa's (1995) discussion of corrupt *Sungusungu* in some areas in northern Tanzania may reflect the decay of traditional

institutional rules that enables such community control over *Sungusungu*. He argues that the maintenance of *Sungusungu* now requires more remuneration than during its spontaneous emergence. As a result, 'some *Sungusungu* groups have turned their operations into a business. Some impose exorbitantly heavy fines in retribution, part of which they retain' (Mwaikusa, 1995: 175).

SUNGUSUNGU AND INSTITUTIONS OF THE AMERICAN WEST

Abrahams (1998) categorizes *Sungusungu* as vigilantes because the organizations emerged as a result of weak state enforcement and concerns over the protection of property. He compares *Sungusungu* to vigilante social movements in the nineteenth century United States and finds many similarities between them. However, with specific attention to the sophisticated sets of institutional rules comprising *Sungusungu*, the organizations, especially in Rukwa where the institution may receive the most support from Sukuma traditionalism, are distinctly different than vigilante committees of the American West. I argue that *Sungusungu*, although related somewhat to vigilante organizations, are more similar to the legitimate law and order institutions that were present in many western frontier towns.

Legitimate Community Institutions

With their attention to civil cases and high degree of institutionalization, traditional *Sungusungu* in Rukwa are very similar to the legitimate law and order institutions set up in communities in the American West (see discussion in Prassel, 1972). Towns elected

leaders just as *Sungusungu* do, and considered each citizen a deputy to the police and courts. Similar to *Sungusungu*, western towns depended on the citizens themselves to cooperate with their commanders (or sheriff) to monitor, apprehend, and punish deviants. Sheriffs and constables were elected by the citizens based on their ability to conduct such work, and were expected to deal with criminals and civil disputes, as well as administrative duties such as tax collection. With large areas to police and few resources, early legal systems depended on the participation of the public. The juries of the communities were similar to the meetings of the *Sungusungu*—social deviants were judged partially on their reputation and social standing. Although Hollywood movies portray western mining towns as lawless and violent, McGrath (1987) discusses how even instantaneous boomtowns quickly instituted familiar Anglo-American law and order institutions. Violence was an occasional outcome because of the large number of young males (many with honor codes from their Irish, American Southern, or Mediterranean homelands), but in general, self-help justice (violence) did not override the peacemaking institutions of the towns. Thus, similar to migrant Sukuma families moving in search of new pastures, migrant families on the western frontier brought with them the institutional rules to install law and order institutions quickly.

Western Vigilante Organizations

Although similar to the legitimate law and order institutions in western towns, *Sungusungu* are also related to western vigilante organizations (Abrahams, 1998). Both *Sungusungu* and western vigilante committees emerged quickly and in separate communities because of pre-existing knowledge and institutional capital. In the case of

Sungusungu, the institution spread through teaching of the institutional rules by elders and was based on pre-existing Sukuma institutions (Bukurura, 1994; Paciotti, 2002). In the case of the American West, early groups such as the San Francisco vigilante committee became examples, which encouraged other movements to emerge and follow similar customs (Abrahams, 1998: 57). In addition, Abrahams (1998) describes how western committees were often based on pre-existing institutions such as the Freemasons. Finally, both the *Sungusungu* and Western committees had sets of leaders with specific goals of controlling crime because the state institutions were ineffective.

Nevertheless, *Sungusungu* are different than western vigilante committees in many ways. Brown (1994) argues that vigilante movements in the American frontier resulted from class conflicts between rich cattle barons and poorer herders and farmers. Because of class conflict, wealthy elites were often unable to win their disputes in town courts—jurors from the lower classes would not punish individuals from their own class. Without the ability to protect their property and further their interests using the local courts, elites mobilized their rank-and-file organizations, often with names associated with “vigilantes” to seek out and punish troublesome individuals. Although individuals such as Jesse James were considered outlaws to the elites, these men were protected and considered social bandits by the poor (Hobsbawn, 1971). As is often the case in social conflicts without peaceful resolution mechanisms, violence provides a credible deterrent to groups of individuals supporting and acting subversively to the interests of the elites. Thus, similar to the *Sungusungu*, the elites formed committees favoring swift justice, often through the use of violence, to deter and even terrorize the poor classes

threatening their interests. Just as the Sukuma could not depend on the corrupt Tanzanian state to protect their cattle, wealthy cattle barons of the American frontier could not use state justice institutions controlled to enough extent by the poor to make them useless.

In sum, American vigilante committees emerged because of class boundaries, whereas the *Sungusungu* emerged as a tribal institution in opposition to the state. Thus, *Sungusungu* functions across Sukuma communities and to some extent other tribal groups, especially in areas like Rukwa where Sukuma traditionalism inhibits class ideological boundaries. Thus, the Sukuma unlike the American vigilantes are uninhibited by class boundaries, and provide law and order at the tribal scale, rather than in the narrow interests of ruling elites (Abrahams, 1998). In addition, although the *Sungusungu* began because of dissatisfaction with state law enforcement, the *Sungusungu* have obtained legitimate recognition by the state with emerging, albeit weak, cooperation with local and national level offices. All of this has reduced “vigilante” behaviors, such as the use of excessive violence, among the *Sungusungu* (Abrahams, 1998) and has made the institution closer to a legitimate section of the state. Indeed, organized state attempts to spread *Sungusungu* reflect an acknowledgement that *Sungusungu* is an effective law enforcement system that can provide grassroots legitimacy lacking in the state system.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I described *Sungusungu* among villages in the Rukwa region—a frontier area of Tanzania, and that is the home of some of the more traditional Sukuma in Tanzania. Both primary and secondary *Sungusungu* rules specifies what deviant acts should be controlled, by whom justice should be administered, and which social controls individuals should use when requiring aid.

It is useful to consider the types of institutional rules governing *Sungusungu* behavior because the maintenance or decay of these rules through modernization forces can lead to distinct behavioral outcomes. Different behavior between *Sungusungu* in Rukwa and *Sungusungu* in other areas of Tanzania may be the result of institutional differences associated with the decay of rules in the north, and maintenance of them in Rukwa. First, *Sungusungu* in Rukwa are extremely active, yet experience lower cattle rustling rates than *Sungusungu* in other parts of Tanzania with greater problems with rustlers. Second, procedures of administering justice are often violent, but may be mediated to some extent by traditional customs of re-integrating deviants into society. Finally, *Sungusungu* institutional rules in the Rukwa region favor civil dispute resolution that is pro-social rather than predatory, in the style of Mafia organizations that may be emerging among some *Sungusungu* in northern Tanzania.

From an international perspective, the *Sungusungu* of Tanzania are more similar to legitimate law and order institutions of the American frontier, than the vigilante committees connected with wealthy elites. The institutionalization of *Sungusungu*, especially in Rukwa, has created a community law and order system capable of protecting property and resolving disputes among all Sukuma, and even some non-

Sukuma. In the main, the *Sungusungu* have evolved closer to a state system of social control than most other known informal social control organizations.

REFERENCES

- Abrahams, R. G. 1967a. *The political organization of Unyamwezi*. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.
- Abrahams, R. G., & International African Institute. 1967b. *The peoples of Greater Unyamwezi, Tanzania Nyamwezi, Sukuma, Sumbwa, Kimbu, Konongo*. London: International African Institute.
- Abrahams, R. 1989. Law and Order and the State in the Nyamwezi and Sukuma Area of Tanzania. *Africa*, 59(3), 356-370.
- Abrahams, R. G. 1998. *Vigilant citizens: vigilantism and the state*. USA: Polity Press; Blackwell.
- Brandström, P. 1985. *The agro-pastoral dilemma: underutilization or overexploitation of land among the Sukuma of Tanzania*. Uppsala, Sweden: African Studies Programme Dept. of Cultural Anthropology University of Uppsala.
- Brockington, D. n.d. *Communal Property and Degradation Narratives: Debating the Sukuma Immigration into Rukwa Region, Tanzania*.
- Brown, R. M. 1994. Violence. In C. A. Milner & C. A. O'Connor & M. A. Sandweiss (Eds.), *The Oxford history of the American West*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bukurura, S. 1994. *Sungusungu: Vigilantes in West-Central Tanzania*. Cambridge University: Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation.
- Ellickson, R. C. 1991. *Order without law: how neighbors settle disputes*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Fleisher, M. L. 2000. Sungusungu: State-sponsored village vigilante groups among the Kuria of Tanzania. *Africa*, 70(2), 209-228.
- Galaty, J. G. 1988. Pastoral and agro-pastoral migration in Tanzania: Factors of economy and demography in cultural perspective. In J. W. Bennett & J. R. Bowen (Eds.), *Production*

- and autonomy: anthropological studies and critiques of development* (pp. x, 438).
Lanham: University Press of America: Society for Economic Anthropology.
- Gambetta, D. 1993. *The Sicilian Mafia: the business of private protection*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Hangaya, M. 1989. *The state and the peasantry in Tanzania: Lessons from Sungusungu/Basalama of Shinyanga*. University of Dar es Salaam.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. 1971. *Primitive rebels; studies in archaic forms of social movement in the 19th and 20th centuries* ([3rd] ed.). Manchester,: Manchester University Press.
- Lang, G. O. 1978. *Development in Usukuma, Tanzania*. Williamsburg, Va.: Dept. of Anthropology College of William and Mary.
- McElreath, R., Boyd, R., & Richerson, P. J. n.d. Shared norms can lead to the evolution of ethnic markers. *Current Anthropology*.
- McGrath, R. D. 1987. *Gunfighters, highwaymen & vigilantes: violence on the frontier*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mesaki, S. 1995. The preponderance of women as victims in Sukuma witch killings. In P. G. Forster & S. Maghimbi (Eds.), *The Tanzanian peasantry: further studies* (pp. xxxiv, 329). Brookfield, USA: Avebury.
- Mwaikusa, J. T. 1995. Maintaining law and order in Tanzania: The role of Sungusungu defense groups. In J. Semboja & O. Therkildsen (Eds.), *Service provisioning under stress in East Africa*. Copenhagen: Centre for development research.
- Paciotti, B. 2002. Cultural Evolutionary Theory and Informal Social Control Institutions: The *Sungusungu* of Tanzania and Honor in the American South. University of California, Davis. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation.

Prassel, F. R. 1972. *The Western peace officer: a legacy of law and order*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Varkevisser, C. M., & Centrum voor de Studie van het Onderwijs in Veranderende Maatschappijen. 1973. *Socialization in a changing society: Sukuma childhood in rural and urban Mwanza, Tanzania*. Den Haag Netherlands: Centre for the Study of Education in Changing Societies.

Willis, R. G., & International African Institute. 1966. *The Fipa and related peoples of south-west Tanzania and north-east Zambia*. London: International African Institute.

World Bank. 2000. *Agriculture in Tanzania since 1986: follower or leader of growth?* Washington, D.C.: World Bank: International Food Policy Research Institute.

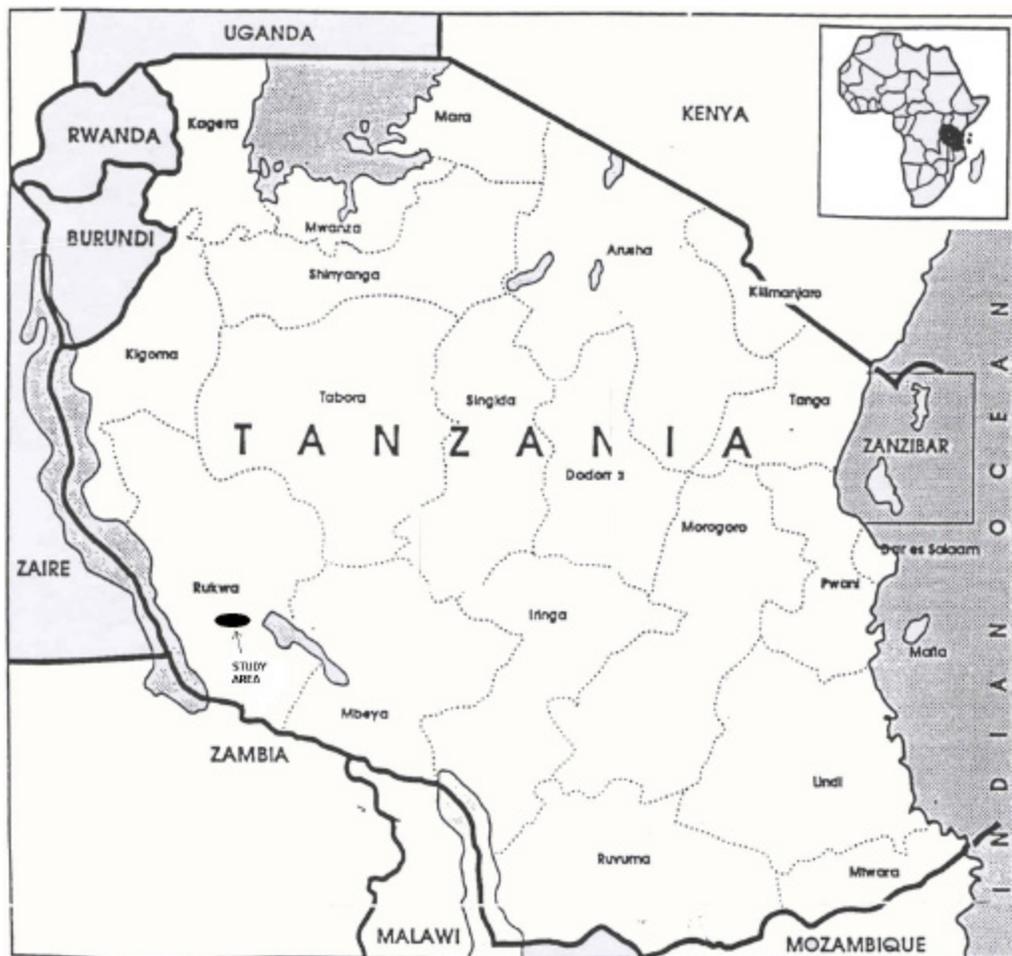


Figure 1. Map of Tanzania and Location of Study Site.

Case Types N = 47	Number (Percent)
Debt Dispute	23 (49%)
Theft	6 (13%)
Farming/Herding Dispute	4 (8.5%)
Adultery	3 (6.4%)
Slander	3
Bridewealth Dispute	3
Boundary Dispute	1 (2.1%)
Lying	1
Resisting Arrest	1
Domestic Dispute	1
Witchcraft Accusation	1

Table 1. Mirumba Cases.

Situation	Sukuma Members		Non-sukuma Members	
	Seek Sungusungu	Seek Government	Seek Sungusungu	Seek Government
Debt dispute	38	0	20	2
Stolen bike	38	0	22	0
Stolen cow	38	0	22	0
Runaway wife	36	3	17	2
Hit by another man **	27	11	3	18

Table 2. Survey questions about preferred social controllers (n= 61).

**** Difference between cells significant with Fisher's exact test (p>.0001)**

Notes

¹ Tanzania is divided into twenty-five regions. Each region is divided into a few districts, and subsequently divisions, followed by wards and village subdivisions. Each of these state political units of the state have both elected political officials as well as administrative assistants.

² The Pimbwe are closely related culturally and linguistically to the Fipa ethnic group living on the plateau to the south. Many Fipa live in the area and are different culturally and economically in important ways.

³ Because conformance to rules provides little evidence that rules are really influencing behavior, the best way to study institutions is through observations and reports of sanctions produced when rules are broken (Ellickson, 1991: 128). Thus, in this paper I use observations and reports of sanctions that I witnessed, and that were discussed by informants. Although less desirable than reports and observations of actual sanctions and behavior, I used a survey to obtain measures of attitudes and responses to hypothetical questions.

⁴ Sukuma herd boys are often young and sometimes they play instead of watching where their cattle are wandering.

⁵ My girlfriend, upon visiting the field area, was made an official *Sungusungu* member through this rule.

⁶ At the time of the research, 900/= Tanzanian shillings equaled one U.S. dollar. For comparison, a full day's wage of general labor such as building bricks earns 1000/= shillings. Craig Hadley (personal communication) shows that Pimbwe generally use 3000-5000 shillings a month to support their families.

⁷ Informants informed me that cases involving violence are often resolved by informal Sukuma institutions other than Sungusungu such as neighborhood elder moots.