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## **Sanitizing Human Folly and Iniquity: An Interpretation of *Essisie* – Bullfighting Festival in Western Kenya.**

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### **Abstract**

*Bullfighting among the Luhya of Western Kenya can be a big event pitting a village, or a collection of friendly villages against a competing village or collection of villages that are related, either as communities, or as a geographical region. At a smaller scale, the duel could be between “my” bull and “your” bull. Unlike la fiesta (the festival) in Spain which involves a fight between a bull and a matador (a human fighter), the Kenyan bullfighting festival is a meeting between bulls. Human beings in this context only play to catalyze the bulls, to cheer and to celebrate the winning animal(s). Characteristic of the often well publicized festival is that before, during and after the actual bullfight, there is extensive singing and verbal exchanges between the “bull drivers” from the opposing sides. The very fanfare that accompanies this fete leaves one wondering what is really in it.*

*The thesis of this paper is that the bullfighting engagement is a social projection leading to a psychological achievement. The paper adopts a qualitative approach that involved attending several fights and conducting intensive interviews with those viewed as ardent patrons of the festival. Meanwhile, the paper also relies on the sociological and psychoanalytic paradigms, as it attempts to go to the core of the festival by analyzing the oral exchanges and other related dynamics of the activity – observable and implied – so as to unearth the social and psychological cause-effects underlying this never dying “recreation”.*

**Key words:** bullfighting, festival, inflated egos, deflated egos, inferiority, superiority, projection, psychological achievement.

## Introduction

Every time I have had the opportunity to watch bullfighting as an activity among the Luhya of Western Kenya (indeed a very serious engagement among the Isukha and Idakho sub-groups of the Luhya nation), many questions have come to my mind in relation to the practice. I have, for example, asked myself what the whole thing is all about; what is at stake; who benefits and why such hullabaloo? It was not until I keenly listened to an exchange between two “bull drivers”, one whose bull had won and the other whose bull had lost that it started to occur to me why perhaps this activity is practiced in the first place. It was the one whose bull had won that started the conversation:

**1<sup>st</sup> Bull driver:** Today my bull has shown yours dust, *(he laughs)*.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Bull driver:** *(Dejectedly)*. It wasn't my day.

**1<sup>st</sup> Bull driver:** It's now clear who between you and me the real man is.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Bull driver:** You cannot be confirmed to be the man simply because of one win. How many fights have you won before?

**1<sup>st</sup> Bull driver:** This may be my first win, but it already puts me in the league of men. This is just the beginning.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Bull driver:** We wait to see. *(He quietly walks away anger and disappointment clearly written on his face. His beaten bull is standing alone at a distance looking towards the direction of its opponent, now enthusiastically mobbed by its admirers)*.

The conversation above brings out one notable observation. Apart from the disappointment of losing and the elation of winning, the conversation which starts in reference to the fighting bulls, goes on and begins to personalize the win and loss to the owners of the bulls, further eliciting a contest of manhood. The man whose bull has won begins to see himself as more of a real man than his colleague whose bull lost. I was then able to tie this conversation to the other messages that had been coming through the singing and heated arguments. Indeed, from the messages of the songs and other verbal exchanges, one realizes that in fact the bulls in the fight have no stake in the affair. Instead the actual stakeholders are the people as they apparently try to reconcile their inflated or deflated egos; in fact a kind of psychological profiling of social superiority or inferiority. Often, the bullfight is an opportunity to settle long standing scores between clans, villages or regions and perhaps to fulfill deeper human desires. This paper attempts to pursue the subject of bullfighting in relation to this social role: fulfillment of deeper human desires.

Although this paper draws a good number of the observations from “*Essisie*” as bullfighting in Bukhayo (another sub-region of the Luhya) is called, comparisons are also made with the activity among other Luhya groups, particularly Isukha and Idakho where the activity is more regular, more highly structured, and done on a comparatively larger scale.

## **How the Bullfighting event is organized**

The first bullfighting events that I watched were the *Essisie* bullfights in the Bukhayo area of the larger Luhyialand. The fights were regular contests organized particularly by young herders who often betted on the strength of their bulls and who watched the bulls fight, partly as entertainment and partly as sheer contest of superiority. I would then ask myself where fun came in, in an event where the animals sometimes badly injured one another. As my interest in exploring the rationale of bullfighting grew, I decided to visit the bullfighting festivals among the other Luhya groups, and in particular the Isukha and Idakho of Kakamega, where today the activity has become a predictable occurrence and very popular, drawing the interest of prominent people in society including tourists.

In Kakamega, a stadium committed to bullfighting has been constructed. Malinya stadium in Ikolomani constituency was built supported by the government of Kenya which contributed 12.5 million Kenya shillings, as recognition of the bullfighting activity. Of course other smaller arenas for smaller fights exist in many different locations that host bullfights on weekly or monthly basis awaiting the annual festival that is a really big event. Indeed, Khayega town also often serves to host the activity which is now taken as a sport.

A bull to fight is identified early and is then continually prepared through special feeding, that has sometimes seen a bull for the fighting weigh up to eight hundred kilogrammes, a massive animal indeed. It will also have its horns sharpened using a hot object. Many prominent homes that rear cattle will most probably keep a prized bull for this purpose. A bull could represent an individual, a home, or the entire village. Indeed when the animals fight the real situation depicted is like the owners are also fighting. Ideally, the bull for this purpose may be isolated from the rest of the cattle, as a way of training it to be hostile towards other animals. Meanwhile the bull is denied any opportunity to mate as this is believed to diminish its power to fight. Indeed, a day before the fight, even the owner of the bull and its fans are prohibited from sexual activities for this may lead to their favorite bull being defeated. The bull is given dangerously sounding names such as Thunderbolt, Simba (Kiswahili for lion), or internationally dreaded names of individuals such as Osama (of the infamous Al Qaeda). Of course other names may be chosen of well known soccer players, or film actors, or famed leaders, all to attract the support of the spectators. The fight itself could be dubbed a match between Arsenal and Manchester United soccer teams in the English League, or Barcelona versus Real Madrid in the Spanish La Liga.

Hours before the fight, the ‘candidates for the fight’ (as the animals identified for the match are referred to), are sometimes fed on traditional liquor, or made to smell blood, or exposed to a whiff or two of marijuana (referred to as ‘weed’), all in the effort to make it more brave and more savage. The trainer at this point begins to fret in pre-bout rituals, spraying it with different concoctions. He speaks to the animal as if it were a human being, heaping all the clan praises on

it while the clan's ancestral spirits are invoked to protect it, not necessarily from harm but from defeat. And, as if the animal is really able to comprehend, it in fact gets excited. Soon the animal begins to pace and snort as the fans who have gathered to assist in the preparations cheer. The bull now bellows as it paces up and down mulling the ground as though possessed.

Deemed ready, the march to the arena begins, often to the accompaniment of drums (particularly *Isukuti* drums). People dance after the bull singing war and circumcision songs. By then the bull has been mulling every inch of the ground and is really looking ferocious and scary. Those accompanying it may be dressed in military attire and at times in soccer uniform spotting popular soccer players. They are also seen carrying twigs, perhaps to enhance the fanfare but apparently the twigs also serve to conceal their warrior bull so that it may not be sighted beforehand. It is believed that if the bull is sighted before it enters the arena of the match, one with an evil eye (perhaps working for the opposing side) could cast a spell on the animal thereby diminishing its power and bravery. Of course stories abound of ferocious bulls which turn to run away at the mere sight of the opponent without even as much as waiting to 'lock the first horns'. This could be really disappointing for the trainer who will have invested heavily in the bull, both financially and emotionally. It would also be a terrible anticlimax for the organizers and spectators to a well publicized match. Of course the opponents the other side have also been psyching up their bull and are ready to retreat as soon as they are within the range of combat, so as to leave the bulls to face each other. The fight begins with a sharp command from the referee. The bulls charge amidst a cloud of dust and loud cheer and jeer. The bulls lock horns and the battle has started. The spectators, some of who will have placed bets on the animals are now beside themselves with anxiety and expectation.

The duel may take a few minutes in the case of unbalanced matching of bulls. But it could go on for a long time where the bulls are well matched. Sometimes the referee may provide time for a break when the animals are momentarily stopped for recuperation before locking horns again. Anticipation and apprehension are at their peak. This is then replaced by cheer, jeer, laughter, lament and celebration as the less resilient bull 'breaks the horns' and turns to run away followed by its mulling opponent. This is known to be a dangerous moment as the retreating animal flees for dear life. The desperate beast could trample on anyone who stands on its way. Perhaps to avoid being driven back into the fight, the retreating animal could run with its eyes closed. Sometimes the animal will run towards its trainer, presumably for protection, but the latter who may not want to risk at that moments will run away, or patch on a nearby tree. What then follows is celebrating the winner through song and dance as the losers trade blame for the loss. The loss may be blamed on poor, or biased officiating, foul play resulting from witchcraft, poor training of the bull, or that perhaps some of the fans could have indulged in sex despite the prohibition.

## **Why Bullfighting?**

Interpretations on the essence of bullfighting are varied. Egara Kabaji's 2009 study looks at bullfighting from the point of view of relations of power and masculine dominance. Writing on bullfighting in Western Kenya, Kabaji treats the bulls used in the sport as symbolic male proxies who the owners watch in self-fulfilling sexual gratification. Contenting that bullfighting is a celebration of heroism – which of course is not in doubt – Kabaji asserts that this celebration of heroism is particularly masculine. This has all to do with not only the wish to emasculate others but to further turn them into feminine objects for penetration. The argument is, therefore, that of masculine dominance over the female for purposes of penetration. The penetration is symbolized by the action of mulling the feminized bull by the dominant bull. The surrender of the defeated bull is, thus, equated to the female who gives in to the male. Kabaji's postulation on bullfighting appears to be in tandem with Alan Dundes' (2007) observations about both cockfighting and bullfighting, that both the fighting cock or bull are surrogate men, presumably detached from the source, on a marauding sexual mission.

While Kabaji and Dundes' association of bullfighting with sexual pursuits appear to sound plausible in its own right, my contention is that their arguments seem to place the entire world of bullfighting at the doorstep of sexuality. This, in my view, appears to trivialize the activity, thereby diminishing its significance to the societies that practice it. Among the Luhyia of Western Kenya, for example, bullfighting is a socio-cultural sport that spans many decades – perhaps one of the few sports that have outlived the influences of foreign cultures in Luhyialand. I would argue that the resilience of this socio-cultural event cannot only have depended on its perceived role of expressing sexuality. This is because a people's culture encompasses more than just their sexual life. Indeed, when you put into consideration the very dynamics of this sport among the Luhyia: the audiences involved; the messages put across during the event and the moral fibre of the community, you realize that sexuality can only be a peripheral reason for the activity.

Notably, Kabaji (ibid), in the attempt to profile bullfighting among the Luhyia as the expression of virility and sexual dominance, meanwhile admits that sexual indulgence is seen as bad omen for those taking part in the fight. To start with, the trainers of the bulls and their fans are required to abstain from sexual intercourse during the fighting season. On the other hand, the bull that is specifically reared for bullfighting is never allowed to mate; besides being isolated from the rest of the cattle, thus, denied a social life. It appears ironical how bullfighting as an activity which is for all intents and purposes meant to represent sexual power, is so distanced from sexual indulgence. One would expect that the bull as a 'symbolic male proxy', or the 'surrogate man' out to express 'virility and sexual dominance'; the bull, whose owner watches in 'self-fulfilling sexual gratification', would be extravagantly allowed to display its surrogate maleness, expressible through the sexual activity. Instead, sexual vocabulary is apparently not admissible

as part of this, so to say, ‘sexual game’, in which women are even discouraged from taking part, thus, raising questions about its sexual representational role.

Meanwhile, one wonders whether the bullfight as an escort event for an important dead man, as practiced among the Luhya, does carry sexual representations. It would perhaps be rather improbable to hypothesize so. Later, the bull (considered the surrogate of the dead man) is slaughtered. Asking why a bull should be slaughtered at such a funeral, the elders responded saying that the deceased was an important person for whom a bull should shed blood. Among the Luhya, the blood of an animal is shed for purposes of cleansing, reconciling and atonement of the deceased with the living, or the living dead, as the spirits of the dead are referred to. It could also be a celebration of a life well lived. Of course a bull reared for bullfighting would be preferred over any other for such a serious purpose, I guess, because it is pure since it was never used to mate. Apparently, slaughtering a ‘virgin’ animal (special and rare) for the deceased man confers his supremacy among the living and a triumph over the spirits of the living dead. I would, therefore, want to treat the bullfighting that is held to escort the deceased, as more of a mockery of death, than a display of virility. This is as demonstrated by the songs performed during the fight. One song, for example, says: “*Lifwa lino, nobutukhu butswa*” (This death, is simply a dawn), perhaps hinged on the fact that dawn signals a new day. This could mean that death is just the beginning of fresh life (a prominent man among the Luhya is not surrendered to death; he is only deemed to change their form to become a living dead).

Kabaji (ibid) has pointed out that Luhya men are promiscuous. Indeed this is a trend that seems to obtain in many Africa communities, perhaps due to the fact that polygamy is officially practiced in majority of these communities. What is not accurate is the claim that adultery is tolerated, perhaps encouraged to prove one’s manhood. On the contrary, one who commits adultery is seen to be blemished, thus, carries bad luck to the battle arena, as the following song suggests:

<i>Mbere khubolere</i>	I have told you
<i>Niwaliakho sindu siomundu</i>	If you have ever tasted somebody’s thing (wife)
<i>Ngawo akhwenyeranga, ngawo</i>	This is the proof we have been waiting for
<i>Khulakhulola mushikuri.</i>	It will reveal itself in the battle arena.

Indeed, as we observed earlier, sex is believed to blemish one, making him unable to win a competition. It is apparently worse if the case is adultery or incest. Of course this stand places further sanctions on sexual indulgence for competitors in fights, while helping to diminish the initial overwhelming association of bull fighting to sexual intercourse. In fact, the fact that sometimes bullfights are made to happen between bulls within the same clan, in what is considered ‘friendly’ fights, this confirms that bullfighting cannot be strictly interpreted only in terms of sexual dominance. My argument here is that, if bullfighting were strictly interpreted in a sexual conversation, a fight between related bulls would perhaps be seen as incest, something

that the Luhya abhor and which they would not have allowed to symbolically happen by allowing animals that are related to 'penetrate' one another. Further distance is created between bullfighting and sexuality when one considers arguments that have tried to interpret the fight between two bulls as a kind of homosexuality, i.e. sex between two males. From interviews with members of the Luhya community, homosexuality cannot in normal cases even be imagined. It would, therefore, be improbable that the community would intend to indulge in homosexuality by making their bulls to engage in the act, which to them is abhorrent.

It is notable, however, that different scholars seem to offer interpretations to animal fighting activities, which are not necessarily sex oriented. Though originally commenting on cockfighting, the following observations have been easily accepted to represent bullfighting as well, because of the similar nature of the two events. Del Sesto (1975) sees both cockfighting as bullfighting as a symbolic representation of man's continual struggle for survival, and display of courage and bravado in the face of adversity. Del Sesto's observation seems to acknowledge the inevitable need for aggressiveness in life, perhaps in recognition of the principle of 'survival of the fittest'. Bullfighting would in this case then perhaps be seen as a demonstration of the obstacles that sometimes stand in the way of man's attempt and desire to reach some point of recognition in society. Besides, it may serve to always remind man that there are other people who may be coveting that position you occupy, so for you to retain it you have to be ready to sweat it out.

Parker (1986), perhaps walking the same path as Del Sesto above, comments on the related activity of cockfighting, posing that the fight can be seen as a contest that is totally concerned with violence, competition and aggression. Indeed competition and aggression are the hallmark of 'survival of the fittest', and as acknowledged in the preceding paragraph, justified in the effort to survive in the ever harsh, hostile and adverse world. While violence is not acceptable in life, it may be easily called upon where 'competition and aggression' have the element of conquest at stake. Incidentally, the Luhya are often referred to as 'mulembe' people, meaning the people of peace. Why would they then engage in a seemingly violent enterprise as bullfighting? Perhaps the answer to this question may be found in the reason why people watch games such as rugby, wrestling, boxing and other games that from the very onset appear violent, but let me revisit this later.

That the main beneficiary of induced animal fights (whether cockfighting or bullfighting) are human beings, is quite apparent. Guggenheim (1982), considers this activity as a symbolic system that couples individual self identity and self esteem. One will rightly conclude that self identity and self esteem could only relate to human beings. Perhaps this is why Guggenheim relates the conquest in the animal fights as an affirmation of rank in the social structure, where, apparently the victorious bull represents the powerful and the mighty in society. Nevertheless, whether

representative of social rank as Guggenheim suggests; or struggle for survival as Del Sesto (*ibid*), points out; or simply the intent to display violence, competition and aggression, as Parker (*ibid*) views it, one begins to realize that the essence of bullfighting may not necessarily be solely reduced to sexual interpretations, i.e. virility against the other.

### **The Bigger Picture of Bullfighting**

The overriding purpose of this paper is to draw a bigger picture of the bullfighting festival among the Luhya of Western Kenya, by according it wider meaning contrary to the narrow confines of sexual interpretations assigned to it, as demonstrated by Kabaji's (2009) study of the activity. In my interpretation of the bullfighting activity, I wish to anchor my arguments on Sigmund Freud's (1961) theory of psychological projection. In this theory, Freud postulates that humans defend themselves against their own unconscious impulses or qualities (both positive and negative) by denying their existence in themselves, while attributing them to others. This actually incorporates blame shifting. Freud considers that in projection, thoughts, motivations, desires, and feelings that cannot be accepted as one's own are dealt with by being placed in the outside world and attributed to someone else.

Building on Freud's postulations above, Alan Dundes (1980), revisits what he calls 'projective impulse', explaining it to be the tendency to attribute to another person or to the environment what is actually within oneself, and in particular what is taboo, or painful, or unpleasant, or unacceptable. Dundes further argues that the ascription of feelings and qualities of one's own to an external source is accomplished without the individual being consciously aware of the fact. The individual perceives the external object as possessing the taboo tendencies without recognizing their source in himself. We could demonstrate projective impulse by considering any one taboo among the Luhya. For instance, considering themselves the 'omulembe' people (people of peace), it is taken as taboo to deliberately commit violence against anyone, relative or neighbour. Particularly when an act of violence results in the shedding of blood, this is taken very seriously. Extensive cleansing ceremonies have to be conducted, making one involved really feel the pinch of their actions.

Given the social sanctions placed on the possibility of a person committing violence, people have to demonstrate great restraint, or perhaps act as if they were incapable of violence, yet it is a fact that each one of us is capable of and sometimes desires to be violent as evidenced when we are made angry. The wish and urge to resort to violence when one gets angry may often be strong, thereby, requiring some avenue of expression so as to exorcise the violent instinct. The theory of 'wishful thinking and wish fulfillment' argues that the wish in us, for example, the wish to commit violence; to hurt others when we feel angry, has to be fulfilled in one way or another. Here is where Dundes' (*ibid*), 'projective impulse' comes in. The fighting bulls become the objects of this projection: they are made to commit the taboo of violence on our behalf, thereby, helping us to indulge repressed instincts. Consequently, the wish to commit violence; to hurt is



fulfilled in a disguised manner: the bulls commit the violence and the humans remain blameless. This actually incorporates ‘blame shifting’ that Freud (ibid) talks about. Indeed this perspective comes out in the following song which is sung as the bulls mull one another:

<i>Ing’ombe yandaruka</i>	The bull that I have reared
<i>Ekhwesa, ekhwesa</i>	It pulls, it pulls
<i>Ing’ombe yandaruka</i>	The bull that I have reared
<i>Ikhwesera munyororo yong’ene.</i>	On its own pulls my chains for me.

This song above states that the bull pulls the chains for its owner. Chains here could be associated with sufferings, burdens, or any other endeavour whose weight the human being himself doesn’t want to bear. It actually confirms the role of the bulls as human surrogates tasked to perform those duties that humans abhor, or those for which the human doesn’t want to bear blame.

From time immemorial, animals have been used to sanitize human folly and iniquity. They are many times made to bear the brunt of human felonies and misdemeanours. Consciously or unconsciously aware of the sanctity of human life, humanity seems to believe that it is justifiable to punish animals for human sins. In many cultural and religious practices, animals are killed to atone for the sins of humankind. Among the Luhya, murder, whether homicide or manslaughter, involves the slaughter of several animals in consequent and subsequent cleansing rituals. The argument here perhaps, is that the animal should die for the human being. This, the argument goes, has been sanctified by God Himself, when as is given in the Bible, He offered a sheep to be sacrificed by Abraham when the latter was about to sacrifice his son, Isaac. By slaughtering a fowl, goat, sheep, or bull, it perhaps gives one to conclude that it is the animal blamed for the wrong that the human being committed, or that the animal should be used to satiate the human intention to please others and to fill up for their human inadequacies.

Still among the Luhya, bulls are made to fight as an act of escorting and mourning a deceased elder. One of the bulls is then slaughtered ‘to die for the elder’ who is considered not to have died, but only changed the form so as to join the ‘living dead’. In this case, the ‘dead’ human being symbolically remains ‘living’ as the bull dies in actual sense.

Humans’ tendency to run away from blame and the tendency to use animals to cushion humankind against direct criticism is to be found abundantly in fables. In Luhya fables, Hyena is always used as the metaphor for human greed, stupidity and shaming lack of decorum, attributes for which he is heavily punished. It is notable that in the fables the greedy and corrupt hyena will be punished while in real life the allegorical corrupt government official goes scot free. On the reverse, the sly Hare trickster who is always defrauding others is never punished.

Instead, Elephant is ridiculed and mocked for falling prey to Hare's fraudulent workings. Apparently Hare is not punished because he seems to represent what humans admire: dishonesty, greed and taking advantage of others. It is, however, notable that where humans see good attributes in animals, they want to take over the attributes so as to be seen to be the ones possessing the said attributes. They will, for instance, create associations with the animals by calling themselves lion, buffalo, tiger, or leopard, perhaps so as to be revered as strong or fearless. This is some kind of 'reverse projection'; the type that Melanie Klein (quoted in Dundes, 2007) explains as where the good parts of the idealized object are projected to the self.

Projection and 'reverse projection' seem to capture the love/hate relationship that exists between humans and animals, so that when escaping humans blame animals, but when convenient they want to partake of the mysterious and esoteric nature of animals. And as if to fulfill the dictum "familiarity breeds contempt", humans appear to despise domesticated animals. They instead tend to admire the attributes of the wild animals such as the fearlessness of the lion, buffalo, tiger; the hugeness of the elephant; the cunningness of the leopard; or the slyness/cleverness of the hare, yet completely detest any association with the domesticated animals. One will, for instance, feel much offended if someone called them Cow, or Pig, or Goat, or Donkey. Interestingly, one would also never accept to be referred to as Dog even as they call the dog 'mans best friend'. Of course there are also some wild animals that humans don't want to associate with since they go in for the best in the animals. Humans, for instance, would detest to be called Snake, or Hyena, perhaps due to the negative attributes associated with these animals. But in spite of their low opinion of domesticated animals, the bull is an exception. The bull appears to be a favorite, I guess because of its strength and perhaps because Bull fights for them in that representational stead that we have already seen. Bull commits for them the violence they themselves would wish to commit, but unable due to social sanctions. Bull too apparently enables them to compensate for their lack of might and social status that Guggenheim (ibid) refers to.

Talking about compensation for lack of might and social status, a story exists among Abakhayo group of the Luhyia, about the indolent, social misfit, Nabarema. The latter was despised in the community because he was poor and lazy and without a family of his own. Whenever people were gathered, Nabarema was not accorded any consideration and he would only normally take meals with the children as he would not join grownups who despised him so much. But with time, the man acquired a bull that grew to become the bull of the entire village. Nabarema's bull was ferocious and came to scare every other bull in the entire region spanning tens of locations, and for a long time the position remained that way. Owing to this turn of events, Nabarema became a celebrity, respected by everyone and admired by every woman in the village. Everyone now wanted to be seen to be close to 'the man of the bull' as he came to be known.

Nabarema’s case above is a perfect example of how humans could redeem themselves through animals. This perhaps serves to confirm why bullfighting is such a fervent activity in which the owner of the losing bull feels totally crushed while the winner feels to be on top of the world. Indeed, this is where Guggenheim’s assertion that bullfighting and cockfighting is all about self-identity, self-esteem and social status. Meanwhile, the question of power and dominance begins to emerge from Nabarema’s case above. Nabarema’s bull dominates the rest of the bulls around and by extension the human owner suddenly becomes powerful and respected. He also begins to dominate as his stature grows more and more. Now everyone wants to be seen and associated with him. The man becomes the focal point and he becomes the personality most sought after. His indomitable bull has accorded him power and dominance, and surely social status.

It may not be far-fetched to argue that power and dominance are the obsession of every normal human being. The human self always wants something to dominate, of course the prospect of dominating other human beings perhaps offering the greatest contentment. Besides, it also sounds logical to posit that where one cannot dominate fellow human beings for one reason or another, they seek for alternative objects of dominance. Here, animals come in handy for the person so seeking to dominate. Incapable of dominating other human beings, one may find psychological contentment in displaying dominance over that dog or cat he/she keeps, or the cow or bull, or rabbits, and so on. This perhaps goes to explain why one will spend money and time keeping pets that don’t play any other role in the keeper’s life other than just being pets. Such pets become objects of domination and contentment as the owner exercises control over them. Indeed the owner of the pet makes every decision for the reared pet, which is wholly dependent on its owner. Needless to say, dominating such a powerful object as a ferocious, indomitable bull, must indeed be an enviable achievement.

Even without exhausting all the discussion on the relationship between human beings and animals, the foregoing observations begin to reveal that there is much more in the relationship, away from sexual representation. The action of bullfighting cannot, therefore, be seen only from the perspective of symbolizing virility and male dominance over the female. For the Luhyia, the bull nearly means the people’s entire life, as expressed in the following song, sang during the bullfight.

Ing’ombe	Cow/Bull
Ing’ombe namabere	A cow is milk
Ing’ombe mama	A cow, oh, my mother
Ing’ombe neinyama	A cow is meat

Ing’ombe	Cow/Bull
Ing’ombe namasingo kobweru	A cow is, cow dung for smoothing the floor
Ing’ombe mama	A cow, oh, my mother

Ing'ombe nobweya	A cow is dowry
Ing'ombe	Cow /Bull
Ing'ombe neingabo	A cow is a shield
Ing'ombe mama	A cow, oh, my mother
Ing'ombe neliye	A cow for the fight.

The stanzas of the song above reveal the relationship between the animal keepers and the animals they keep. When one keeps a cow, or bull (ing'ombe is a general term), one has milk, meat, cow dung for the beauty of the house, dowry for a wife, and more relevantly for this paper, a cow/bull,' is a kind of shield that protects the owner and as the last verse suggests, fights for him/her.

It is perhaps worthy noting that apart from the psycho-social and cultural value attached to bullfighting among the Luhya, the activity is quickly taking on an economic value as people win the bets they placed on the bulls going to fight. Meanwhile, as the activity begins to attract tourists, both local and foreign, those who take the trouble to train their bulls are beginning to get some payment from well wishers and event organizers. Besides, the bullfighting events have also become vote hunting grounds for politicians given the crowds that congregate there, and actually big monies change hands. This further widens the value and intentions of the endeavour, thereby liberating it from the initial narrow confines to sexual associations.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has tried to underscore the essence of bullfighting among the Luhya people of Western Kenya, beyond the sexual confines that earlier studies of the activity had given it. Adopting a psycho-social and cultural approach, the paper concludes that while the psychological sexual associations may not be dismissed altogether, the event needs to be considered beyond this, recognizing it as something that accords human beings social status in addition to serving as an avenue to indulging repressed instincts. The fighting bulls – discussed in this paper as human surrogates – are seen as being used to perform taboo acts such as violence against others (prohibited to humans but apparently allowed to the bulls). This, we conclude, enables humans to indulge violence but in a disguised manner. This means that the bulls kind of cushion humans in the case of social sanctions, while at the same time liberating some of the spaces for expression that were otherwise reduced by the said social sanctions that come in form of prohibitions that breed fear and guilt. The events, however, also come with monetary gain and political supremacy displays.

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