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The Structure of East African Age-Set Systems:

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the structural features of four East African age-set systems. The four groups have been selected because their age-set systems are examined in anthropological literature and because their varied political, social and economic elements suggest many ways in which an analysis of age-set systems may be attempted. The four groups are the Masai, Arusha, Nandi and Kikuyu.

The pastoral Masai (Ilmaasai, as opposed to Iloikop, or semi-pastoral Masai) of Southern Kenya and Northern Tanzania belong to the linguistic group of Plains Nilotes.¹ They are typical pastoralists in that they undergo seasonal transhumance, own large numbers of cattle, sheep and goats and live in small, widely dispersed settlements within the tribal area for much of the year. They are untypical in their attempt at total reliance on their stock for food and in their corresponding contempt for those who have incorporated agricultural produce into their diet. The Masai consist of seven autonomous tribes, each with its own age-sets (olaji, pl. ilajijik). Because of the close organizational similarities among age-sets in the seven tribes, however, it is

possible to speak of the pastoral Masai age-set system. The system, which is the basis for political organization in each tribe, is still functioning.

The Arusha of Northern Tanzania, are classified as agricultural, or semi-pastoral, Masai and belong to the Plains Nilote group.² Like the pastoral Masai, the Arusha are divided into autonomous units, dubbed 'parishes', each with its own age-sets, or age-groups. The political role of age-sets in each Arusha parish, unlike that of each pastoral Masai tribe, is important but not tantamount. Age-sets form part of a political structure in which a lineage and clan system are involved. Age-sets in each Arusha parish are kept in line with those of other Arusha parishes, and the entire Arusha age-set system is ritually dependent, for the formation and 'handing over' of its age-sets, on the ritual expert of the Kisongo tribe of the pastoral Masai. As of 1960 the Arusha age-set system 'continued to flourish'.

The Nandi of western Kenya belong to the Highland Nilote linguistic group.³ Though classified as pastoralists, it would perhaps be more accurate to describe them as semi-pastoralists, or even as sedentary agriculturists who keep a lot of cattle.⁴ The Nandi rely heavily on agricultural produce to supplement their diet, settle in permanent households and the cattle-to-human ratio is low in comparison with pastoral groups. Though the number of cattle exceeded Nandi population by almost five to one in 1945, present estimates show that while the human population is on the increase, that of cattle is declining slowly.⁵ In Nandi there are three levels of territorial organization, and one of these, the pororiet (pl. pororosiek) corresponds to the area in which an age-set (ipinda, pl. ipinuek) is formed. There are twenty-four pororosiek in Nandi and, therefore, twenty-four age-set systems. Again, correspondence is high in terms of age-set organization among Nandi pororosiek, and they can be referred to as belonging to the same age-set system. Nandi ipinuek are involved with political matters insofar as pororosiek are involved,

which may be termed as marginal. The basic territorial political unit is the koret, or 'parish' (not to be confused with the Arusha parish), which is composed of approximately twenty to one hundred homesteads, and with other korotinwek goes to make up a pororiet. Certain features of the Nandi age-set system were declared illegal in the early stages of colonial rule, but the system was functioning as late as the 1940s.

The Kikuyu proper (i.e., Metume, Karura, and Gaki), as separate from Embu, Meru, and Chuka, belong to the Highland Bantu linguistic group.⁶ As sedentary agriculturists the Kikuyu occupy the highlands to the south of Mount Kenya. Age-sets (riika, pl. mariika) in Kikuyu are not linked to any territorial political unit, nor do corporate age-sets assume political power. Territorial definitions of Kikuyu age-sets are relevant only insofar as they explain from where individual members of age-sets are recruited. This unit, appearing in the literature as 'district', also defines certain judicial powers of elders in pre-colonial times and may have been of ritual importance. Kikuyu political and social organization is based on clan, lineage and ritual affiliations, societal moieties known as generation-sets and different forms of land ownership, all of which account for extensive fragmentation of power within Kikuyu society. These factors, in conjunction with the incomplete literature on the Kikuyu, make it difficult to define adequately the Kikuyu age-set system or to relate it to Kikuyu society, as a whole. Certain functions of the Kikuyu age-set system, however, have been described in detail, and comparisons with the other three groups can be attempted. Owing to the sizeable disruption of Kikuyu society by European settlement and colonial labour and land policies, the Kikuyu age-set system, like many other of their traditional institutions, no longer exists.

In order to understand how age-sets function, it is appropriate to begin with definitions of age-sets and age-set systems. According to Radcliffe-Brown, an age-set is:

...a recognised and sometimes organised group consisting of persons (often male persons only) who are of the same age ... In Africa, at any rate in East and South Africa, an age-set is normally formed of all those males who are initiated at one time... Once a person enters a given age-set, whether at birth or by initiation, he remains a member of the same age-set for the remainder of his life... In East Africa, where the age-organization is highly elaborated, each age-set normally passes from one grade to another as a whole.⁷

A. H. J. Prins has attempted to modify this definition in order to make room for certain components of age-sets which he calls 'age-classes'.⁸ Alan Jacobs' study of Masai political organization makes a distinction between an age-set (a corporate age-group recruited on the basis of biological age) and a generation-set (recruited on the basis of a 'man's father's group membership and, hence, on criteria of genealogical generation'.)⁹ Among the Masai one may enter an age-set at birth, as Radcliffe-Brown has suggested, but only at the time of circumcision. This distinction is largely immaterial to the following discussion, however, because the four groups selected possess age-sets for which recruitment is based on biological age. Among the Kikuyu an age-set system functions alongside a generation-set system, but the latter will not figure into considerations here. According to Huntingford Nandi males are born into a set, and the eldest son enters the set second from and below the one to which his father belongs, while younger sons enter the set third from and below.¹⁰ According to Jacobs' definition, the Nandi would have a generation-set system, rather than an age-set system. Huntingford mentions, however, the case of an eldest son being too young (he was 10 at the time) to be initiated with members of the set second from and below that of his father, and who was consequently initiated along with the members of the set third from and below.¹¹ This occurrence calls into question Huntingford's assertion of genealogical determination of set membership. Since, also, Nandi sets do not act as'

corporate groups until initiation of their members by circumcision is undertaken, it is perhaps more correct to call them 'age-sets' as Jacobs has defined them, having members recruited at the time of their eligibility to be circumcised and which in turn is determined by biological age.

An 'age-set system', which applies to all age-sets in a society at any one time, and which is the main concern of this paper, is undefined in anthropological literature. A number of excellent studies of these 'systems' have been made in larger studies of East African peoples, and the relevant chapters are usually titled 'age organizations', 'age-grades', 'age-sets', or something similar. Normally, the similarity of what is meant by these terms emerges in the course of reading, and the following definition relies mainly on deductions made therefrom:

An age-set system is composed of structural and social elements. Structurally, an age-set system is the particular means by which an age-set is brought into being, is advanced from one grade to another and is held responsible for performing certain tasks as a corporate group in a particular age-grade. Socially, an age-set system is the means by which is defined conduct between members of different age-sets, between members of the same age-sets and between the individual member of an age-set and his society at large.

An age-set system, therefore, incorporates males of approximately the same biological age for the purpose of advancing them up a series of distinct societal levels, each of which require them to perform certain duties and to follow certain behavioural norms. Ideally, no two age-sets should occupy the same age-grade, as each senior age-set vacates its age-grade prior to its occupation by the junior. Movement upwards by age-sets in the age-grade scale takes place at about the same time and is ceremonially marked by the conclusion of the formation of the youngest age-set (the close of the circumcision period), or by the entrance into the lowest grade of

elder by the senior 'military' age-set, or both. Prior to their formal advancement up the scale, however, it is not unusual for older members of an age-set to behave like members of the age-set immediately senior to their own and to usurp some of the duties and privileges associated with membership in the senior age-set.

As a rule, age-sets are incorporated as territorial units and are expected to carry out their duties in relation to the needs and external policies of the territorial unit. In the case of the Masai, who are composed of several tribes, each tribe corresponds to a territorial unit in this respect. The operation of the age-set system in a given territorial unit, however, is often dependent on extra-territorial considerations, thus the age-set system of each Masai tribe consciously brings into line the promoting of its age-sets with the promoting of age-sets in the other Masai tribes, to give just one example.

In examining the four age-set systems of the Masai, Arusha, Nandi and Kikuyu, various similarities among them emerge. In terms of structure, the highest level of correspondence can be observed in the manner in which age-sets are recruited, the role of ritual figures in certain age-set activities, the chronological regularity of the maturation cycle, and the role and organization of the military age-set(s). Though social similarities of age-set systems are not under review here, it is worth noting that the highest correspondence exists in the manner in which egalitarian behaviour among age-set coevals is encouraged, in the definitions of behaviour for age-sets standing in junior and senior positions to one another, and the way in which the behaviour of age-set members is regulated with regard to society members not enrolled in age-sets (especially females) and to the society as a whole.

In all four systems, members of a newly-formed age-set are recruited from among young males of approximately the same biological age, during an 'open' recruitment period, and by circumcision. The age at

which a male is circumcised during an open period and thereby recruited into an age-set varies among the four systems and may vary from time to time within a single system depending upon a number of factors. As a rule, age in the age-set most recently recruited falls between 14 and 22 for the Masai,¹² about 14 to 20 among the Arusha,¹³ and between 12 and 22 among the Nandi.¹⁴ No figures are given for Kikuyu initiate sets, but Kenyatta says the customary age to be circumcised was '18 or 20'.¹⁵ 'Approximately the same age' may, therefore, be seen as a term of casual meaning, but in regard to recruitment, it may be generally applied to those males standing between puberty and physical maturity.

When circumcision is opened, males of this 'age' are eligible for recruiting into the forming age-sets. In all four systems, recruitment by circumcision is carried on at relatively fixed periods of time, which are separated by 'closed' periods. Among the Masai, the 'open' period was from 7 to 8 years, while the 'closed' period ranged from 2 to 6 years;¹⁶ among the Arusha, 6 years for both the 'open' and closed' periods;¹⁷ and for the Nandi, 4 years 'open', 11 years 'closed'.¹⁸ Among the Kikuyu a number of variations exist, but 'open' and 'closed' periods are usually formulated on combinations of the figures 4 1/2 and 9 (in years and/or seasons), and the total number of years for 'open' and 'closed' periods for recruitment of an age-set is 13.¹⁹

It would appear that 'open' and 'closed' periods are almost always ceremonially marked, and that ritual figures play a prominent role at these times, at least for the Masai, Arusha, and Nandi. Among the Masai the closed period is initiated when the ritual expert (oloiboni) places a curse on the circumcision knife, and the open period begins only when he removes it.²⁰ Among the Arusha, circumcision is closed when the 'black stone' is formally deposited by the ceremonial leader (olaunoni) who, at a later date, must ritually treat the stone to allow circumcision to begin again.²¹ Among the Nandi, no mention is made of how the closed period is begun, but the

chief ritual expert (orkoiyot) must give his approval to the resumption of circumcision, which begins in each pororiet soon thereafter with the kikule kwet ('we bleed the goat'). For the Kikuyu, the closed period (muhingo, lit. 'prohibition') was begun in various ways, but generally dances and sacrifices were held and oaths were administered by selected elders. Prohibition was removed and circumcision reopened by the 'unswearing of the oath'.²² At the inception of circumcision, the mundu mugo (ceremonial doctor) set up the circumcision alter and performed rituals for the protection of the proceedings and participants from witchcraft and evil. At the conclusion of the ceremonies, mundu mugo purified the initiation area.²³

The presence of ritual figures not only at times of circumcision, but on other occasions when all the members of an age-set are corporately affected, is characteristic of the four systems. Among the Masai, there are four types of ritual figures,²⁴ three of whom bear relevance to a discussion of tribal age-set systems. Only two need concern us here. The first is the olaunoni (sometimes, olotono), who is the elected ritual leader of the senior military age-set in each tribal area. The second is the oloiboni kitok the 'ritual expert', who must come from the engidoji sub-clan of the Laiser clan and attains his influence within a tribe and sometimes outside it on the strength of his personal reputation. The Arusha make use of two types of ritual figures, one the olaunoni, of which there are two in Arusha society and who serve as ritual leaders of their respective age-set 'streams',²⁵ and the other being the oloiboni of the Masai living outside the ritual area and having an Arusha-wide influence. In Nandi two orkoiik (singular orkoiyot) shared their influence among the various pororosiek up to the end of the nineteenth century, after which there was but one orkoiyot. The title, orkoiyot, was hereditary, its holders being adult male members of the Kamwauka clan.²⁶ Among the Kikuyu a number of ceremonial doctors, known as mundu mugo (plural andu ago) were involved in age-set

affairs, but it is not known on what basis they were selected or how and to what extent their influence was constituted.

Apart from their respective roles in circumcision ceremonies to which partial reference has been made, ritual figures performed other roles common to the four age-set systems. First, they sanctioned plans of war or raiding proposed by the military age-set. With the exception of the Arusha, the responsibility of the ritual expert lay in prophesying the success or failure of the pending campaign and advising the military set accordingly. Second, they approved, and, in some cases, presided over the promotion of the senior military into the grade of elder. This probably did not apply to the Kikuyu, whose soldiers were supposed to have entered elder status individually and upon the payment of fixed fees. Thirdly, the Masai oloiboni and Kisongo oloiboni for the Arusha directed the Eunoto ceremony, which promoted the junior military age-set to the status of senior soldiers.²⁷

With the exception of the Masai olaunoni of the Arusha, who are members of age-sets and perform leadership roles in conducting their constituent sets in ritual matters, the ritual figures of the Masai, Arusha, Nandi and Kikuyu are not part of the age-set system per se. Indeed they appear to function largely outside the secular affairs of the society. This is most obvious for the Arusha, whose oloiboni belongs to the Kisongo tribe of the Masai. Among the Masai themselves, however, the oloiboni constitute an isolated group. They are all members of the same sub-clan, are avoided by the members of the other sub-clans (out of fear of their supernatural powers), do not belong to age-sets, and are felt to owe allegiance to no particular tribe. Furthermore, their sub-clan (engidoji) is distinguished from other sub-clans by its segmentary lineage system and long genealogical traditions, and was supposedly founded by a boy of unspecified origin (though non-Masai), whose ability to find water led to his adoption by the Masai. This mythical explanation of oloiboni origins is symbolically related to the

position of the oloiboni in Masai society. According to
Jacobs,²⁸

Masai commonly compare their (oloiboni) status to that of an adopted orphan boy although the latter are treated kindly and generously by a family because of the services they perform as herd boys, they are seldom permitted to take part in their age-set's affairs and possess no authority within the family.

The account of the appearance of the orkoiyot in Nandi society contains much the same theme of a young lad coming from the outside and in possession of magical powers. The first orkoiyot was the child of a python, who gave it to a barren Nandi woman to suckle, whereupon the child manifested the power to bring water from the ground during a famine and to kill people and animals with his eyes. In Nandi the orkoiyot belongs to the Kwamwauke clan (all clansmen are referred to by other Nandi as orkoiyot, plural orkoiik), and the orkoiyot of the Nandi may come only from this clan. The orkoiyot of the Nandi is feared by all non-Kamwauke clan members for his magical powers, and he lives by himself with his wives. Non-Kamwauke provide the labour necessary to till his land, call upon him to mediate between the people and the Nandi diety, and to practice rainmaking when 'local practitioners' have failed. He may also use his powers against the people, when he so chooses, and he may not be harmed or killed without disastrous results to the people.²⁹

Among the Kikuyu the mundu mugo is a person selected by the diety to perform the services of a doctor, ritual expert, diviner, prophet and specialist in magical protection. Unlike the select group of ritual specialists among the Arusha, Masai and Nandi, the andu ago were numerous and scattered throught Kikuyu territory. Power and knowledge of ugo was often passed from father to son, but non-relatives could be found deserving of initiation. What set the andu ago apart from other Kikuyu was their

special powers (ugo) and exclusive claims over lion and leopard skins. No mundo mugo acted as member of any age-set council in the military or elder age-grade.³⁰

The position of the ritual figure within the age-set system is seen most clearly perhaps as one that validates the machinery of the system. When the ritual figure opens circumcision, a new set is brought into existence thereby obligating the other sets to make room for the new set by advancing up the age-grade scale. By closing circumcision, the ritual figure prevents the size of the newly-formed age-set from exceeding that of the others and thereby preserving the balance of power and authority between sets and the established means of organizing individual sets themselves. By promoting sets, he insures that the various levels of power and authority shall be shared by all the age-sets in the course of the maturation cycle, that no one corporate group shall retain and consolidate its power, but shall relinquish it to the set taking over. By his sanction of action on the part of the military set, the ritual figure acts to insure their success as a corporate group, which in turn acts to insure the well-being of the society as a whole. In no way does the ritual figure act on his own in these instances, but instead he responds to the requests of age-set representatives and the society at large. His role, in effect, is to formalize and validate processes which are underway or have already taken place. But this in no sense means his role is extraneous. By virtue of his magical and ritual authority and by his exclusion from participating in the secular systems of his society, the ritual expert is a figure beyond which there is no appeal. His ritual acts are free from the interference and intrigues of others, and are therefore seen as the acts of himself. Because he alone of the male members of society functions outside age-sets, the ritual figure is above suspicion in administering ritually the development of any one age-set in the maturation cycle.

Because age-sets are recruited and promoted on the basis of biological age, their corporate ascent up

the various levels of age-grades is kept in line by a relatively fixed cycle of age-set ceremonies, and the important age-set ceremonies are validated by ritual figures whose authority originates from outside the age-set system itself, the age-set system may be characterized as a self-perpetuating system that is highly regularized and difficult to alter in its operation. As long as the young male population resides within the age-set area and their biological age advances, sufficient pressure within the society is created for the formation of a new set and the promotion of the sets in existence.

That the age-set system is capable of functioning over a long period of time without noticeable changes in its structure is born out by Jacobs' study of the Masai. In his chapter on Masai history in the nineteenth century, Jacobs points out that the Masai recall past events and activities of renowned personalities in relation to the name of the contemporary age-set occupying the grade of soldier. By constructing a hypothetical chronological table for Masai age-sets in the nineteenth century based on the age-set system as observed in the 1950s, it was possible to ascribe general time periods to the events and personalities mentioned. In order to test the reliability of these, which had been postulated on the assumption that the Masai age-set system has operated in much the same way for the past 150 years, it was necessary to examine European travel accounts, dictionaries, and other forms of written documentation for references to the events and personalities mentioned in Masai oral traditions. In all instances where corroboration between written and oral evidence was possible, agreement in time proved extremely close.³¹

For anthropological purposes, the age-set system of the pastoral Masai may therefore be studied with a mind to examining the historical forces that gave birth to or reinforced present-day social structures and relations. For the historian, the Masai age-set system is a reminder that age-set systems in other societies may

provide potentially reliable means with which problems of chronology and the provision of narrative detail may be approached.

Were the historical methods of Jacobs applied to the age-set systems of the Arusha, Nandi and Kikuyu, perhaps more could be said about the capacity of age-set systems to exist in essentially unaltered form for long periods of time.³² Despite the difficulties attending such proofs, it is fairly clear that, at least for the Arusha and Nandi, age-sets belong to an old and well-established system, perhaps, if one accepts the testimonies of elders, as old as the society itself.

These age-set systems are old because they are durable. In the histories of the four groups examined here, three retained the system in the face of a number of socially disruptive factors that for other forms of social organization would probably have led to substantial change. Over many years, famine, disease and rapid declines in human and stock population all afflicted the Masai, but their system continued to operate as usual. The Nandi and their age-set system successfully endured some of the same calamitous experiences, and the banning of the saket ap eito ceremony by the colonial administration did not lead to any serious disruptions in the maturation of its age-sets. Relatively mild interference by the colonial administration and the fertile, well-watered and defensible nature of their land made the Arusha and their social institutions relatively immune to the sort of strains placed on the Masai and the Nandi. On the other hand, portions of Arusha society were transformed in the nineteenth century in the wake of large-scale absorption of Bantu-speaking settlers in Arusha area, most coming from the Meru and Chagga. The present lineage system of the Arusha along with their forms of ancestor worship and political leadership are results of this immigration.³³ It is therefore significant that the age-set system of the Arusha, whose society originally stemmed from the Iloikop Masai on the plains below,

continued to operate in the midst of internal changes precipitated by a large influx of socially alien peoples.³⁴

Why the Kikuyu age-set system should not have endured, at least in some form, in the face of disruptive European administration and land policies, is uncertain. Most likely the age-set system did not operate dynamically in the nineteenth century, when the Kikuyu constantly separated and regrouped as they colonised new lands southward from Mt. Kenya. The Kikuyu proper, no matter how determined to preserve any level of their social unity, would have been hard put to operate a system involving a cross-section of its male members on the basis of age, when Kikuyu families preferred to settle on ridges, among which communication was necessarily difficult and proportionately limited as distances increased. However weak the age-set system may have been among the Kikuyu at the time of European settlement, the crucial factor in its demise was probably related to large numbers of males travelling out of the Kikuyu Reserve to live as squatters on European farms or to work as urban or farm labourers. For a system that corporately organized its male members on the basis of age and within a territorial unit, this would have been a crippling blow even to age-set systems more firmly established than among the Kikuyu.

If an established age-set system proved durable in the face of depopulation by widespread calamity, colonial disruptions and the intrusions of alien forms of social institutions, it also provided its parent society the means with which certain threats to the society could be dealt with and with which the welfare of the society could be served.

In each of the four groups, the age-set system represents the principal means for organizing manpower for the purpose of protecting the group against forcible intrusions from the outside and conducting offensive warfare against neighbouring groups, often in the form of stock raids. In some cases, services to the community in the form of policing, carrying of messages, herding and building were also provided. The age-set

system also increased the likelihood that only males of optimum age and experience and with minimum domestic obligations be called upon to perform these tasks.

The means by which this was accomplished was by the recruitment of males, generally between fourteen and twenty years of age, into an age-set occupying the military or junior military grade.³⁵ Roughly speaking, a man was a soldier for approximately fifteen years, though many variations occurred, depending on the group in question, the point in the 'open' recruitment period a male was circumcised and the length of time his age-set occupied the grade(s) of the military. Whether or not both junior and senior military divisions existed within an age-set system, systems in each of the four groups divided their fighting men into two groups with separate functions, privileges and uniforms. As military men, however, both groups were often required to assist one another in the interests of society. In times of war or raiding, for example, the junior murran of the Masai were required to act as suppliers and carriers for their seniors, who did the fighting. The seniors, on the other hand, were responsible for the proper military training of their juniors.³⁶

By and large, however, the junior group of soldiers were given few responsibilities, either in connection with the military organization or the society at large. Their activities tended to focus on participating with their age-set coevals in dances and games, both of which often had military overtones. Normally the juniors acted as a group, occupied communal quarters and travelled about the tribal area displaying their costumes, voices and camaraderie. In the case of the Kikuyu and Masai, the juniors were allowed to participate in a minor way in the planning and execution of raids. But here, as in all other instances, the juniors were expected to play very much a subordinate role. All powers and decisions rested ultimately with the senior group and their age-set leaders in conjunction with certain elders renowned for their military experience and the advice and endorsements of the ritual expert. To the junior soldiers,

anticipation of advancing into the position of the senior soldiers was high, and their time was spent preparing for the eventual takeover.

To the senior soldiers went the responsibility for the defence of the group, the increase of the group's wealth in stock through raiding, and all the honours and privileges that came with it. As an age-set, the senior soldiers had their own military organization, composed of fighting units with their leaders and a senior command. In military activity, the senior army was made up from the territorial unit from which age-sets were recruited. In the case of the Masai, each tribe had its own fighting force, which could, and usually did, act independently of the others. Among the Arusha, the senior muran of one or more parishes might join together for purposes of raiding or defending, but the parish closely corresponded to the tribe of the Masai in terms of its fighting autonomy. Among the Nandi, each of its pororosiek was responsible for its own defence, also for the recruitment of its own age-sets. Like the Masai tribe and Arusha parish, Nandi pororosiek could join together for fighting, but pororosiek were not known for fighting against one another, as sometimes happened among Masai tribes and Arusha parishes.

Aside from the honours attained through military prowess, a senior military age-set was normally entitled to privileges exclusive to the grade. Generally, senior fighting men were permitted sexual access to unmarried girls, could demand food from any household in the territorial unit and, with the exception of the Masai, could marry. Marriage for the senior soldier, however, was not synonymous with the establishment of a homestead, and other obligations that restricted the soldier's ability to participate in the activities of his age-set were discouraged. Senior soldiers were also forbidden to take beer and, at certain times, meat. These items were reserved for the elders and, in the case of beer, were thought to reduce one's ability to carry out military duties.

The age-set systems of the four groups, therefore, made possible a standing army of able-bodied males who were highly organized and trained. And junior soldiers, who were corporately organized and trained for the role of senior soldiers, constituted a ready replacement for the senior military when they advanced on to the grade of elders.³⁷

In conclusion, it should be said that, any discussion of age-set systems such as this, which focusses on structural similarities among several groups, is necessarily limited in its application, not only to other groups possessing age-sets, but also to the groups and systems here examined. In the first place, emphasis on similarities of structure tells us little or nothing about dissimilarities, which hold equal, if not greater, importance to the analysis of societies. Secondly, looking at a structure per se rather than at a structure as related to its parent society, is to disregard factors operating outside the structure that are affected by and affect it, in turn. The single society, in which an age-set system may be observed to function, will ultimately reveal the meaning of its age-set system.

The weakness in the structural approach may be demonstrated in attempting to answer certain questions concerning the four age-set systems just examined. What, for example, is the purpose for these groups having an age-set system? Why is it that among the pastoral Masai, the age-set system is equivalent to the political system, whereas among the closely related Arusha, lineages and, to a lesser extent, clans are important factors involved along with age-sets in the resolution of conflicts between groups and individuals? Among the Nandi, age-sets are only marginally connected with the political system. Here, the function of the age-set system would appear to be purely military, with the largest share of political power vested in the kowet, the elders' council of the parish (koret). The council of the territorial unit of the age-set, the pororiet, has political authority over a group of korotinwek, but only on matters

affecting war, circumcision and planting. Among the Kikuyu the age-set system appears to be mainly restricted to the recruiting of fighting men. The political structure is built around its councils (kiama), into which one enters through the payment of fees, and the generation-set system, which removes approximately half of the male population from positions of political privilege and installs the other half, at about thirty-year intervals.

All four groups have relied historically on the age-set system to further their military interests, and possibly the system came into use for that purpose. Yet, Gulliver asserts that the Arusha were not aggressive until the 1880s, as much as half a century beyond their arrival at Mt. Meru. Furthermore, Jacobs has demonstrated that the stereotype of the pastoral Masai as being 'warlike' is a myth which stems from Masai hostility to colonial intrusion and the reports of nineteenth century European travellers who incorrectly labelled the aggressive and semi-pastoral 'Kwavi' (i.e., Arusha, Baraguyu, et al) as being 'Masai'. Jacobs argues that the so-called 'fierce' pastoral Masai have little in their history to distinguish them in this respect from other East African groups.

Apart from leaving us in the dark as to the function of age-sets, the structural approach proves unsatisfactory elsewhere. How does one explain why the age-set system is more firmly established among the Masai, Arusha, and Nandi, classified as either plains or highland Nilotes, than among the Bantu-speaking Kikuyu? The answer cannot lie in divisions according to livelihood or settlement patterns with the concordant assumption that age-sets fit best into pastoral modes of living. The Arusha and, to a lesser extent, the Nandi, are sedentary agriculturists for whom the age-set system has proved workable. To say that the Kikuyu along with other Bantu-speakers in Kenya and Tanzania, have had the age-set system for a shorter time than the Nilotes, and therefore have had difficulty grafting it on to older and

more firmly established social and political systems, conforms with present historical theory, but it cannot be supported by historical method. There are grounds for believing, for instance, that the Kikuyu are historically related to the Giriama, who claim to have operated a form of age-set system since their settlement on the coast no later than the early seventeenth century. The Kikuyu and Giriama share some age-set terminology and, unlike Nilotic groups, combine fee-paying in the promotion of age-set members. It is possible, therefore, that by the early seventeenth century the Kikuyu had an age-set system operating too.³⁸

Nor can the study of age-set structures explain why it is that age-set systems, despite their comparatively rigid structural features, are often characterized by much flexibility in their implementation. Mention has already been made of members of one set having leave to participate in the affairs of another, and that age-set ceremonies may often be seen as occurring after the movement upwards of age-sets in the age-grade scale, rather than before. Perhaps the explanation here relates not to the structure of age-sets so much as to a society's wishes to make the age-set take into account factors operating outside the system.

Given the limitations of the structural approach, certain conclusions of importance are possible. What it can do with regard to the four systems examined here is to isolate those structural elements that have the widest application. This may in part explain what it is that makes an age-set system attractive to groups who do not possess one, and thereby favours its adoption as a form of social, political and/or military organization.

An age-set system would seem to be most appealing as an effective means of having a military group at all times prepared for both offensive and defensive activity; of controlling this form of manpower in the absence of a central political authority, or chief; of preventing the permanent acquisition of power by an elite group or an individual; of combining magico-

ritual authorities with political and social organization; of encouraging, if not always enforcing, standardized behaviour between males of different ages; and, of rotating positions of authority on a group-wide basis. Though these may explain why a group would be induced to absorb a form of age-set organization, it cannot necessarily explain who absorbed an age-set system from whom. Conversely, it may cast doubts on certain dissemination theories. A comparison of age-set structures, for example, discounts Huntingford's hypothesis that the gada system of the Galla was given in the sixteenth century to the Nilo-Hamites who in turn gave it to the North-Eastern Bantu as some of the Nilo-Hamites migrated southwards into Kenya and Tanzania.³⁹ The gada system is, in effect, a generation-set system, because a son enters the first gada-grade (Daballa) only when his father has left the fifth (Yuba). Further contrast between the gada-set system and the age-set systems examined here may be seen in the time and functions of circumcision. Among the Galla, circumcision is performed on those gada-set members who have just completed their occupation of the fourth gada-grade or Luba, as contrasted to circumcision at the time of recruitment in the first age-set of an age-set system. In Huntingford's words, the Galla '...rite is therefore not the entry into manhood, but signals the departure from the government grade (Luba)'.⁴⁰ It may be added that for the Galla, circumcision is neither the means of recruiting males into age-sets, as it is among the plains and highland Nilotes and highland and coastal Bantu. It is therefore difficult to say that the Galla originated the age-set system among the Nilotic group, because of fundamental differences in the structures of the Galla and Nilotic and Bantu age-set systems.

- ¹References to the Masai are almost exclusively drawn from A. H. Jacobs, 'The Traditional Political Organization of the Pastoral Masai', D. Phil. Thesis, Oxford 1965. J. E. G. Sutton argues that a strictly linguistic classification is preferable to previously accepted classifications based on cultural differences and similarities. On the latter basis the Masai, Arusha and Nandi fall under the heading of 'Southern Nilo-Hamites' and the Kikuyu under the 'Central Tribes of the Northern-Eastern Bantu'. 'The Settlement of East Africa', in B. A. Ogot and J. A. Kieran (ed.), Zamani: A Survey of East African History, Nairobi 1968.
- ²References to the Arusha are drawn mainly from P. H. Gulliver, Social Control in an African Society, London 1961
- ³Principle sources for the Nandi are G. W. B. Huntingford, Nandi Work and Culture, London 1950; and The Nandi of Kenya: Tribal Control in a Pastoral Society, London 1953
- ⁴See Sutton, 'Settlement of East Africa', pp. 71-72
- ⁵Based on personal information supplied by J. Davis, Animal Husbandry Officer, Dairy, Kenya Ministry of Agriculture, 14 November 1969
- ⁶Principle sources for the Kikuyu are H. E. Lambert, The Systems of Land Tenure in the Kikuyu Land Unit, Cape Town 1950; J. Kenyatta, Facing Mount Kenya, London 1961; J. Middleton and G. Kershaw, The Kikuyu and Kamba of Kenya, London 1965; G. Muriuki, A History of the Kikuyu, 1500-1900, Nairobi 1974; and L. S. B. Leakey, The Southern Kikuyu before 1900, 3 vols., London 1977
- ⁷Radcliffe-Brown, A. R., 'Age Organization - Terminology', Man, XXIX (1929)
- ⁸Prins, A. H. J., East African Age-Class Systems, Gronigen 1953. p. 10
- ⁹Jacobs, 'Pastoral Masai', p. 241 and footnote
- ¹⁰Huntingford, Nandi of Kenya, pp. 60-62
- ¹¹Ibid

- ¹²Jacobs, 'Pastoral Masai', p. 245
- ¹³No mention is made of what age a boy may be circumcised, but Gulliver states that the 'closed' period lasts for six years and that many youths awaiting circumcision 'are about twenty years old'. Gulliver, Social Control, pp. 27, 42
- ¹⁴Huntingford, Nandi Work and Culture, p. 61
- ¹⁵Kenyatta, Facing Mount Kenya, p. 107 and confirmed by Leakey, Southern Kikuyu, II, pp. 587-588
- ¹⁶Jacobs, 'Pastoral Masai', p. 240
- ¹⁷Gulliver, Social Control, p. 27
- ¹⁸Huntingford, Nandi of Kenya, p. 54, 66 footnote
- ¹⁹Lambert, Systems of Land Tenure, pp. 8, 22.
Leakey argues that a closed period of nine planting seasons (4 1/2 years) followed the recruitment of nine groups initiated in successive years. The open period, however, could be longer than nine years if in any given year eligible males were insufficient in number to warrant initiation. Southern Kikuyu, II, pp. 707-712
- ²⁰Jacobs, 'Pastoral Masai', 258, 267
- ²¹Gulliver, Social Control, p. 27
- ²²Lambert, Systems of Land Tenure, pp. 58-59
- ²³Kenyatta, Facing Mount Kenya, pp. 139, 143;
C. W. Hobley, Bantu Beliefs and Magic, London 1938; pp. 80-81; Leakey, Southern Kikuyu, II p. 608 and III p. 1156
- ²⁴Jacobs, 'Pastoral Masai', pp. 317-328

- ²⁵The Arusha olaunoni should not be confused with the Masai figure of the same name, as the Arusha olaunoni is an hereditary office and is taken up when one's age set is approaching circumcision and is relinquished when eldership status is achieved. Gulliver, Social Control, 32-34. Gulliver defines 'streams' as '...moieties of the total of initiated men', moiety here being used outside its normal application to descent groups. Thus, a stream would be composed of all alternate age-sets, living and dead. The 'active' sets of one stream would be the junior military set and its linked junior elder set, the latter supporting and guiding the former on its journey through the maturation cycle. Gulliver refers to the latter senior group as the 'patrons' of the senior military set, their 'wards'. Upon the approach of circumcision and the recruitment of a new age-set, the senior military 'wards' would take on the responsibility of being the 'patrons' of the newly-forming age-set, soon to enter the status of junior soldiers. Ibid., 30-31
- ²⁶Huntingford, Nandi of Kenya, 38-39
- ²⁷Both Ilmurran. The Nandi have but one military age-set, and thus no eunoto-type ceremony is possible. The Kikuyu have two military age-sets, and Kenyatta mentions that the junior set is promoted, through the payment of fees, from the njama ya anake a mumo ('national council of junior warriors') to the njama ya ita ('war council'), but he makes no mention of the figures involved in the proclamation ceremony occurring at this time or of how the time for promotion was deemed auspicious, two occasions at which ritual figures might be expected to play important roles. Kenyatta, Facing Mount Kenya, p. 199
- ²⁸Jacobs, 'Pastoral Masai', 320-327
- ²⁹Huntingford, Nandi of Kenya, 38-51
- ³⁰Leakey, Southern Kikuyu, III 1120-1210
- ³¹Jacobs, 'Pastoral Masai', 48-54, as well as the historical introduction to the thesis.

³²Huntingford, Nandi Work and Culture, sections 23-39, in which is constructed a skeletal outline of Nandi for the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries on the assumption that the age-set system he observed had been in existence since the early seventeenth century and that age-sets occupied any one grade or its subdivision for fifteen years, but Huntingford has put this to no historical test. Gulliver uses age-set lists to make assorted references to particular points in the past, especially in the late nineteenth century, and he postulates the arrival of the Arusha on Mt. Meru by the same method. Gulliver has compiled a chronological table of Arusha age-sets extending back to 1811, but he has not attempted to test its reliability. Lambert has made a number of chronological tables based on his observations of age-set systems in Kikuyu and among related groups like Embu and Meru, some of which extend back to the early nineteenth century, but they have neither been tested nor put to historical use. It is unlikely that any satisfactory test could, at the moment, be applied to age-set chronologies derived from the Kikuyu and Nandi, owing to the absence of written corroborative evidence for these groups prior to 1880-1890. It is not unreasonable to expect, however, that the histories of certain groups with whom the Kikuyu and Nandi frequently came into touch (e.g., the Masai) could eventually prove reliable enough to serve as corroborative evidence where written sources are lacking.

³³Gulliver, Social Control, 12

³⁴Probably crucial to the absorption was not so much the presence of an age-set system among the Arusha, but rather the Arusha, Chagga, and Meru were all agriculturists. That an essentially uncentralised Arusha political system, based in part on an age-set system, was capable of absorbing diverse populations along with some of their institutions tends to modify the argument that 'centralised authority and an administrative organization seem to be necessary to accommodate culturally diverse groups within a single political system, especially if they have different modes of livelihood'. M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, African Political Systems, London 1940, 9

³⁵The Nandi have a single military grade; the Kikuyu have two councils for a single military grade, one a council of junior soldiers into which one automatically enters after recruitment by circumcision, the other a council of senior soldiers into which one enters with his age-set coevals after a fixed number of years and upon the payment of fees; the Masai and Arusha both have junior and senior murren grades, which are occupied successively by age-sets. In the case of the Nandi, again, the age-set of recently circumcised youths belongs to the grade of 'initiate' from which it is advanced, eight years after the close of recruitment, into the grade of 'soldier'. Owing to the similarities between functions and activities of the Nandi 'initiate' and the 'junior soldier' among the Masai, Arusha and Kikuyu, the Nandi 'initiate' will be treated in the following discussion as belonging to the 'junior soldier' grade

³⁶It is because the juniors aspired to the position held by the seniors, for reasons for prestige and privilege, and because the seniors were reluctant to see the juniors replace them, that a fundamental tension and resentment was usually present between the two groups. This is one example of the 'dichotomy of men' which Gulliver has so aptly described in his discussion of Arusha age-sets. Jacobs' study of the Masai affords a number of comparisons

³⁷It should be noted that junior and senior military did not necessarily act out the roles associated with the age-grade occupied by their age-set. It would not be uncommon, for example, for older members of the junior age-set to act as if they were members of the senior and move into the lower echelons of the senior military organization, with their seniors' approval. Likewise, one may find older members of a senior set forsaking their military obligations and setting up homesteads, having children and sitting in on the council of junior elders. In order to make adjustments for those individuals who became old enough to advance up the scale of age-grades before their age-set was due for promotion, members of age-sets in senior positions were usually willing to allow the older members of the immediate junior age-set limited participation in their age-set activities. This unofficial opening of doors by the senior set to older members of the junior was indicative of the approaching time for promotion, though the difference in time was as long as several years.

³⁸Lambert, Systems of Land Tenure, reckons that the twelve remembered generation sets, corresponding to roughly thirty years each, would originate the Kikuyu in the fifteenth century

³⁹Beckingham, C. F., and G. W. B. Huntingford, Some
Some Records of Ethiopia, 1593-1646, London 1954
lxxiii

⁴⁰For Huntingford's discussion of the gada-system see
G. W. B. Huntingford, The Galla of Ethiopia, London
1955, 40 ff. See also A. Legesse, Gada : Three
Approaches to the Study of African Society, New York
1973