



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Age, Generation and Time: Some Features of East African Age Organizations by P. T. W. Baxter; U. Almagor

Sex and Age as Principles of Social Differentiation by J. S. La Fontaine

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relations. Except for a very few overview comments, by Richard Schaedel and Nora Scott Kinzer, no attempt is made to derive conclusions or tie things together.

It may be, as Schaedel and Kinzer state, that the meetings themselves were exciting in that anthropologists, sociologists, historians, architects, and others rubbed shoulders and exchanged ideas; unfortunately, not much of this reputed cross-fertilization is apparent in the papers.

Age, Generation and Time: Some Features of East African Age Organizations. *P. T. W. Baxter and U. Almagor*, eds. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978. viii + 276 pp. \$19.95 (cloth).

Sex and Age as Principles of Social Differentiation. *J. S. La Fontaine*, ed. A.S.A. Monograph, 17. New York: Academic Press, 1978. vi + 188 pp. \$12.75/£6.20 (cloth).

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These two volumes represent a new phase in the examination of principles of social ascription (as J. S. La Fontaine terms them) and their expression in social organization. It is commonplace to encounter assertions that age and sex are universal components of social identities in interaction. These statements raise difficulties when examined in comparative perspective. Evidence of definitions of gender and aging in other cultures indicate not only that they vary from society to society but that the expression of gender, in particular, changes in its manifestations over the life cycle and in relations to processes such as the developmental cycle in domestic groups. If that is so, then what is to be made of the status of sex and age as universal aspects of social ascription? As principles of social differentiation they have the property of operating at the intersection of nature and culture. Nature does not determine the construction of aging and sexing in society. Natural constraints do, however, operate to limit the range of their expression. The other pertinent feature of age and sex is that their social and

cultural aspects are examined more profitably in relation to each other than in isolation, as they are in much of the new literature on women.

Sex, gender, time, and maturation are inextricably linked in social organization. In many societies (our own, for example) behavior expressive of masculinity and femininity changes with respect to time and status position. For women, playing with dolls may be regarded as feminine at age 8 and childish at age 30. Not only the passage of time as duration, but changes in status make behavior patterns appropriate or inappropriate. On the other hand, societies also use gender categories to organize their interpretation of relative age. New Guinea societies provide some striking examples. In the men's houses the uninitiated adopt female sexual roles to initiated men.

Three aspects of the intersection of age and sex are useful to consider when examining them in relation to social ascription. The first is their relationship to the construction of physiological processes of maturation and development. Of considerable interest is the social recognition given to growth and development and the changes in role and conception of the person associated with them. The second aspect is situational. Age and sex have different and varying recognition in social situations. The contexts in which gender- and age-based identities play significant parts in social interaction will provide a good deal of information on their place in a social formation. Finally, there is a symbolic and metaphorical aspect to the intersection of gender- and age-based identities in social organization. The Gada systems of the Oromo-speaking peoples, described in the Baxter and Almagor volume, use gender distinctions as metaphorical equivalents of relative age in rituals of their age systems.

The two collections of essays consider those aspects, although not always systematically. The Baxter and Almagor volume is on a more narrowly defined topic, the age systems of East Africa. The image of those systems that emerges from the essays and the introduction provides a striking contrast to the account given of them in other surveys. They are not primarily or even predominantly forms of political organization. Their relationship to the allocation of authority, warfare, or economic exchanges is contingent and changing. Rather, they are better ex-

amed as ritual systems that mark passages in the lives of men. Underlying them is a theory of the person that equates age with wisdom and the prudent exercise of authority. In his excellent essay Baxter refers to the Boran age system as "social theory." Almagor shows in his contribution that among the Dassanetch the "ethos of equality" among age-mates is contradicted by processes of economic and political individuation. The essays by David Turton and William Torrey examine age systems in relation to processes of ecological adjustment and territorial expansion. Turton's essay is particularly interesting for his demonstration of how an age system can be used to provide a sense of continuity under conditions of expansion. His assertion that the age system among the Mursi is not a system at all has something of the force of overstatement. Certainly he illustrates Baxter's insight about the ideological function of age systems. Again, Hector Blackhurst's examination of continuity and change among the Shoa Galla provides an excellent description of the shrinking political functions of an age system under political change. John Hinnant stresses ritual and ideological elements in his description of the Guji Galla system. He breaks new ground by showing that their age system can be understood only in the context of Guji conceptions of order, balance, and nature—in other words, their cosmology. Paul Spencer's essay on "The Jie Generation Paradox" addresses the demographic contradictions of generation-based age systems and considers the means by which the contradiction created by their age systems are resolved. R. G. Abrahams is the odd man out. His essay on the Labwor attempts a controlled comparison with neighboring societies. Because his approach is static and fails to take account of political changes in the region, the result seems labored at best.

Although women are conspicuous by their absence in the age systems considered by the authors, their gender is not. In Oromo systems described by Hinnant and Torry, for example, the powers of ritual elders are interpreted as feminine in contrast to the powers of political elders. Thus, even male-based systems do not exclude the conception of women from their constitutions, and gender and age are related even where one sexual category is excluded from participation. This volume provides a view of age systems different from the conventional. In the introduction the editors draw many of the

conclusions well and relate age systems to the construction of time in the societies in which they are found.

Time is a crucial aspect not only of age systems but of gender as well. If age systems "create figurative representations of time," as Baxter and Almagor argue, then gender is intimately involved in the representations so created. The second volume, edited by La Fontaine, is on the more general topic of age and sex, but many of the themes found in the first are contained in the second. That is not surprising since there is considerable overlap of authors. Baxter and Almagor reprint a portion of their introduction from *Age, Generation and Time*. There is an additional essay by Almagor, and one by Abrahams as well. Almagor's essay examines the relationship between generations in terms of alliance formations and takes up the theme of the contradiction between ascribed and achieved social differentiation. Abrahams argues that the status of women affects features of some African kinship systems to a greater degree than the presence or absence of rules of descent. Enid Schildkrout treats children among the Hausa in terms of their roles and the ideas concerning them, not as proto-adults. In a fascinating essay, Olivia Harris examines the ideology of sexual complementarity in households among the Andean Laymis and the situations in which it is contradicted. C. Hugh-Jones relates contexts of food production and consumption to sexual differentiation among the Pira-Pirana. Her essay points to an undeveloped aspect of studies of sexual differentiation—its role in social reproduction. Finally, Basil Sansom examines a peri-urban "mob" of Australian Aborigines to show how connubial arrangements are the result of external factors. The volume is opened by an excellent introduction (by the editor) that differentiates among the various aspects of the interrelations of sex and age.

Taken together, the results are inconclusive, as is proper in exploratory volumes. They show that forms of social organization are misread by social anthropologists if they neglect the intersecting aspects of age and sex in their accounts. These two collections of essays and Michael Jackson's splendid *The Kuranko* begin to correct the imbalance created by the neglect of such promordial organizing principles as age and sex.