Forms of social organization based on age have been reported in many regions of the world, ranging from classical Greece to the Plains Indians of North America. However, this type of system only survives in any number and variety among the nomadic pastoralists of East Africa where they provide insights into aspects of age and ageing. Ageing as a topic concerns a dimension that has been largely taken for granted by social anthropologists, although clearly it has relevance for all societies. Here, I would stress that my concern is not with any specific age category as such, but with viewing the concept of age in the context of a total profile of maturation and ageing. Rather as the issue of gender has to be treated in terms of the relations between men and women, so age from an anthropological point of view is concerned with relations between people of different ages; and this has relevance for understanding social systems based on age. In East Africa, these are male age systems, but they involve relations with and through women. By extension, any contrast between the patterns of ageing for men and for women has to be seen in terms of their bearing on one another. The argument here, however, begins with the topic of the ageing process in quite another setting.

2.1 Primate Behaviour and the Male Arena

One approach to the biological basis of society argues that any behaviour pattern shared by all species of non-human primate may well have relevance for humans, for we belong to the same genetic family. The counter-argument is that this approach trivializes the massive jump in the transition to humanity with the development of language and social institutions, which place humans in a very different category. Nevertheless, it remains that if there are distinctive parallels between primate and human social behaviour, then these could provide clues of some very fundamental characteristics embedded in our being from which the earliest hominids and human society more recently developed. Thus, a general pattern observed among primates indicates that aggressiveness and hierarchies of dominance increase in confined situations, whereas mating patterns are more specific to each species, although with a certain latitude for variation with circumstance. The inference is that human mating patterns are more open to cultural influences, whereas competitiveness and

1 A previous version of this chapter has been published in Sauvain-Dagerdil, C. et al. (eds.), 2006, *Human Clocks: the bio-cultural meanings of age*, Peter Lang, Bern. (pp. 225-244). I am grateful to Peter Lang AG for permission to reproduce it here.
inequality are inherent characteristics that are intensified by population pressure: a feature of human society that is sometimes referred to as circumscription.2

A similar argument has been put forward concerning parallels in the stages of behaviour associated with the life course among non-human primates, with distinctive differences between male and female profiles. The duration and characteristics of each stage may vary between species, but the sequence is widely shared. Among males, following a period of infant dependency, juveniles have considerable freedom to indulge in rough play and to test one another and the tolerance of older males as they cultivate social and physical skills. Once they are too large to play with more dependent juveniles (‘immatures’) but still too weak to compete with adults, they become peripheral to the group and enter a phase of ‘adolescence’. This may lead to a more solitary existence, or they may group together as peers, and even fulfil a pioneering role in testing out areas that are marginal to the parental group. They remain in this limbo until they are physically strong enough to contest with mature males as they work their way back into the group, or they may leave it altogether. Females, on the other hand, are less peripheral to the group as they develop. While still juveniles, they tend to display an increasing interest in immatures and in such activities as grooming; and then they become sexually receptive several years before physical maturity, assuming the status of adults in the adult world after only a brief adolescence.3

A feature that characterizes studies of adult primate society is the unremitting assertiveness of males in their contests for dominance over females and over any rival male when their position is challenged. More uncertain is the evidence of matrifocal networks of support, building up to shallow and ranked matrilineal, and underpinning the competition for status among both sexes. This appears to be common among most species of monkeys where adolescent males tend to disperse to other groups while the females tend to remain, and this has also been observed among captive chimpanzees. More generally among apes, however, and especially in the natural state, it is the females who tend disperse to join other groups following their adolescence, and to the extent that the males remain with their natal group, it is the male bonds of kinship that are more significant, notably among non-captive chimpanzees. Thus the evidence of underlying matrifocal bonds in the general competition for status is ambiguous and diverse, like the variety of mating patterns. Chimpanzees happen to be altogether more closely related to humans than to any other primate, and the contrast between those in the wild and those in captivity suggests that matrilineages arising out of the

community network are incipient, depending on the situation, which may suppress matrifocal bonds in the wild or encourage them in captivity.\textsuperscript{4}

As they age, primates are protected up to a point by group membership, especially when there are close bonds of kinship, but less so among those species that are by nature solitary. However, natural selection takes a heavy toll in the wild, with few surviving long beyond their physical prime. Females normally continue to breed until overtaken by death; while ageing males tend to slip once again towards the periphery where they are at risk. Once they can no longer keep up with the group as it moves around to forage, whether because of accident or natural ageing, they become easy victims for predators.\textsuperscript{5}

The parallel between this broad model and human development is evident. It is close enough to human experience to project our own concepts of maturation and ageing in describing successive stages among non-human primates, endowing them with human social characteristics. This is also to assume natural characteristics in human ageing where mature adulthood is similarly bounded on its margins by the anomalies of adolescence and old age, especially among males: those that have difficulty in entering the central arena and those that are edged out. The gender distinctions of this model have also drawn attention to the natural and ascribed aspects of womanhood whereby girls are absorbed into the activities of child-care from an early age, preparing them for the continuous role of motherhood. This has been contrasted with the male emphasis on achievement within the assertive milieu of their peers, first as peripheral adolescents and then again when they contend as adults.\textsuperscript{6}

A celebrated attempt to bridge the gulf between primate and human behaviour may have missed the mark by focusing on just one of a variety of mating patterns, but it does have a particular relevance here. This was Charles Darwin’s vision of the lifestyle of our hominid ancestor, taking a cue from the observed behaviour of gorillas. In this evolutionary model, Darwin (1871: 590) suggested that this primal ancestor was a polygynist who jealously guarded his hoard of wives and expelled younger males from the band until they were mature enough to challenge him in the contest for partners. This scenario may well have been influenced by patriarchal fantasies in Victorian England, and it certainly caught the imagination of intellectual circles of Darwin’s time. However, it also has an apt relevance for a common pattern in traditional Africa, where the rate of polygyny is higher than in any other continent. This is achieved by depressing the age of marriage of girls compared with men. The wider the relative age


\textsuperscript{5} Dolhinow 1984: 72-4.

difference at marriage, the greater the scope for polygyny; and this in turn depends on the means available for older men to prevent their younger rivals from entering the market for younger women. Figure 2.1 illustrates the demographic profile of this type of array with reference to the Maasai of East Africa, comparing them with a similar profile among certain primates. The aptness of this parallel raises some more general points.

Figure 2.1: Comparison of demographic age structures

2.2 Maasai Polygyny and the Social Construction of Adolescence

As the Maasai see it, their nomadic lifestyle is essential for obtaining the best grazing for their herds in an unpredictable environment with erratic seasons. This encourages widespread polygyny, since a monogamous family is normally too small to be viable as an independent nomadic unit. Polygyny on any scale inevitably creates a shortage of marriageable women and a surplus of unmarried men. This is a widespread problem throughout rural Africa and is resolved most often by delaying the age of marriage for men substantially as compared with women, creating tensions within the family. However, among the Maa, it is their age system that controls the age of marriage of young men rather than their fathers or older brothers, and this protects the family by diverting competition for wives. While this may be seen as a functionalist argument, the persistence of this institution over a period of radical change leads one to search for some kind of stabilizing mechanism such as this. Functionalism ignores the possibility of change, but it does provide an insight into resistance to change, and the Maasai are renowned for the tenacity of tradition.

While grazing his cattle, a Samburu elder once drew my attention to two herds of gazelle nearby. He pointed out that one of these was the herd of the ‘elder’ and his ‘wives’, while the other, in which several gazelle frisked with one another, was the herd of the young ‘warriors’ (moran) who were not allowed to mix with the females by
the gazelle elder, because he was stronger than they were. The elder was, of course, describing the rudimentary organization of his own society, endowing the animals with Samburu characteristics and a familiar array of roles, although clearly, the parallel with the gazelle model has to be treated as an analogy, which switches the focus from the notion of a single dominant male and his harem to the elders and their wives at large.

This model would be equally familiar to the Maasai, who have a similar age organization to the Samburu. Maasai *moran* were notorious for various deviant activities, such as sporadic raiding and fighting, stock-theft, surreptitious adultery with the wives of elders, and a general lack of respect that placed them in a class apart and absorbed them in a subversive subculture of their own. With the curtailment of intertribal warfare, they were no longer ‘warriors’ in any strict sense, and a considerable number of elders argued that the institution of *moranhood* should be scrapped. Yet at the same time the elders at large were reluctant to upset the balance of gerontocratic power, and half-hearted attempts to curtail the period of *moranhood* foundered under popular resistance (and the occasional flare-up of intertribal raiding).

Real power lay with the elders, notably through their ultimate control over all women, and it was in their interests to maintain sole rights over marriage through a regime that peripheralized the *moran*, as implied in Figure 2.1. In due course, the elders had to bow to the increasing maturity of the *moran*, but in playing for time – denying younger men a share in the marriage market for as long as they could – the older men were also playing for wives and maximizing the scale of polygyny. *Table 2.1* shows the profile of polygyny with age among the Samburu, grouping men according to their age-set.7 The table excludes widows from earlier marriages, since these were not allowed to remarry.

When my informant was observing the habits of gazelle, he was herding his cattle, and he could have extended the parallel to similarities among his own stock, and especially to the periodic change-over in which the reigning bull is outfought by a more powerful rival who acquires supremacy over the females. This corresponds among the Maasai to the point in the age cycle when elders are obliged to allow mature *moran* into the competition for wives, typically around the age of 30. However, there is a crucial difference between the state of raw nature and polygynous societies in Africa. The gazelle elder, like Darwin’s primal ancestor, retained his females and held younger males at bay by brute strength; whereas his human counterpart in societies such as the Maasai is an ageing polygynist, and it is the cast-out younger males that are physically in their prime. With enhanced chances of survival into

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7 Tables 2.1 and 2.2 are based on a census of Samburu (Pardopa clan) in 1958, four years before the initiation of a new age-set. In 1973 (just one age-set later), 485 males of the original 566 were still alive. In descending order of age-set, these survivors were 0/2, 0/13, 24/41, 87/114, 92/102, and 282/294. No comparable figures are available for Maasai.
middle age among humans, there is a shift from the physical supremacy of mature adults – an ability to contest in direct encounters – to the moral supremacy of older men. The Maasai elders maintain their position by asserting their authority, based on the mystical protection that they claim over younger men, underpinned by a belief in their power to curse. Their regime is maintained by a ritualized display of hidden power that substitutes for the more open animal display in the primate model. The elders’ power depends on their ability to maintain this mystique, to persuade the moran that they are little more than dependent children in the process of socializing them. It is this moral dimension, whatever values it perpetuates and however these are expressed, that raises (male) society above brute physical strength and the jungle of perpetual war as perceived by Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (1651).

Extending the argument from the elders at large to the family in particular, the Maasai father towers as a patriarch above his children in status, demanding total obedience. His sons of any age should ‘run away’ from his anger rather than face him and risk his curse. Yet there is a softer side to this relationship, revealing unquestioned loyalty to the father and protection for his children. This is expressed in terms of faith that he will arrange the best possible marriages for his daughters. A mature woman must avoid her father especially, but she will remain devoted to the idealization of his judgment, even in an unhappy marriage. Similarly, a father will protect his sons from intimidation by his ‘brothers’, who have a potent curse over them and covet his herds. Even a mature elder is said to dread his father’s death, which will leave him exposed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age range of successive age-sets of men (years)</th>
<th>Total living men</th>
<th>Total living wives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17-30 moran (warriors)</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-41 ex-moran (novice elders)</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42-56 patrons of moran</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57-69 patrons of ex-moran</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-86</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total men</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total wives</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polygyny rate</td>
<td>&lt; 0.01</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>1.66</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2.41</td>
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<td>1.77</td>
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<td>1.50</td>
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to coercive threats from within the extended family. There is no parallel to this notion of family loyalty in the Darwinian model of primitive patriarchy.

The model of primate ageing (and Darwin’s variant) provides a metaphor rather than a biological template for Maasai society. This is well illustrated by contrasting adolescence in the West, popularly associated with teenage pubescence, with the age of Maasai moran, who are typically in their twenties. Again, these moran are required to submit to the discipline of their warrior villages (manyat), espousing past traditions of warriorhood on the one hand, but in a culture that encourages individualistic bravado and vainglory on the other. By the time they marry and settle down, they are already passing their physical prime (Table 2.1). If one accepts that moranhood among the Maasai has features of adolescence – they are more than children but not yet accepted as adults – then this draws attention to the social construction of their position. The moran are held in a state of social suspension for up to fifteen years beyond pubescence. They are confined to a prolonged adolescence, and their moods and eccentricities have to be viewed against this background. From once being warriors, they are now angry young men. They are recognized to be under a certain stress: there is high expectation of them from all parts of the society, yet to no purpose except that they should continue to be moran and no more. Adolescent defiance is not simply an urban phenomenon as has been sometimes suggested by sociologists, nor is it a genetically programmed stage as the behaviour of primates might at first suggest. In such societies as the Maasai, it shares some characteristics with adolescence elsewhere, but the form that it takes is distinctively moulded by the Maasai social context.

This offers an explanation for the persistence of anachronistic warrior ideals in times of relative peace that followed the colonial conquest. The fact that these young men have continued to adorn themselves and behave as moran has to be seen in the wider context of the interests of older men, who can retain their monopoly in polygyny only by delaying the marriages of these young men. In maximizing their advantage in this respect, a certain loss of control over the activities of their juniors is the price that the elders have to pay. In terms of the distribution of power with age, control over women, cattle and marriage is concentrated towards the upper end of the age pyramid (Figure 2.1), and this creates a power vacuum lower down the scale, within which moran have their own lifestyle and ideals. These are associated with warrior virtues, close identity with their peers as a society apart, and concern for notions of honour and prestige.

The parallel with the primate model can be approached at another level by shifting the focus and considering the arena of moranhood as the centre of competition. In this context, immature Maasai boys emerge as the peripheral males. In other words, this is to compare competition and maturation among adult primates with the sub-culture of the Maasai moran, who are also in their physical prime, drawing a step closer to a more strictly biological interpretation.
The *moran* besport themselves in their distinctive regalia, always aware that they are the focal topic of interest and concern. They are thrust into the foreground as the most spectacular and controversial sector of the society, an army in reserve who retain at least some of the glamour of their traditional role, colourfully adorned, keeping their own company, braving the dangers of the bush, freed from their fathers’ control, unpredictable in their behaviour, and (with good cause) suspected by the elders of adultery with their wives and filching their small stock. The widespread bemusement in their status as *moran* extends to the total array of their activities. The arena of *moranhood* provides a widely admired display of masculine assertiveness, ranging from spectacular dances to the right to associate with unmarried girls and become their lovers and protectors, although they are not allowed to marry and pregnancies must be avoided.

Uninitiated boys covet the flamboyant arena of *moranhood*. However, as boys, they are systematically refused access to girls or to the affairs of the *moran*. They are obliged to herd during the day and to keep their own company at night. From the point of view of younger people, it is the boys who are peripheralized from the arena and sub-culture of *moranhood*. During their physical prime, the *moran* are without peer. However, this is ultimately a passing phase, and meanwhile there is a growing body of physically mature herdboys who cannot be bullied into submission indefinitely. They aspire to be initiated to become *moran* in their turn, and they will then displace their older brothers and form their own arena and attachments to those younger girls who are still unmarried.

The strength of the position of the *moran* is expressed by the Maasai with reference to certain warrior privileges (*enkisulata*) that they alone display as symbols of their physical prime, proclaiming their right to ‘rule’ (*a-itore*) in a physical sense. Only they may wear their characteristic adornments and hairstyles, place certain patterns on their shields, put dark-wood in the hafts of their spears, make assertive grunts before entering a hut, yelp at night in the bush, perform certain dances, go on lion hunts, wear thigh bells associated with raiding, assume the right to treat unmarried girls as play-things, and above all abscond with their mothers to form separate warrior villages without regard to any protests from their fathers.

The climax of *moranhood* occurs when the warrior villages of a tribal section converge to perform their flamboyant *eunoto* ceremony. During this celebration, each *moran* has his long red-ochred hair shaved by his mother and then he leads her back to his father’s home and regime, and the warrior villages disband. This represents a major step towards elderhood, but only in the sense that the *moran* are now held to be more responsible. They retain their ritualized lifestyle and especially the privileges of *moranhood* for a number of years yet, even after older boys are initiated to form a new age-set.
Meanwhile, if boys dared to filch any of these privileges, or just walk into the middle of a village when moran are around, they would be beaten into submission – until they are strong enough to hold their own. According to Maasai tradition, the classic way in which the privileges of moranhood were handed over was when young initiated youths, having unsuccessfully attempted to filch the privileges from time to time as boys, eventually become strong enough and numerous enough to beat the moran. They then would usurp the privileges, and the reigning moran, with or without a decisive fight, would retire humiliated to elderhood, while the youths could claim to be reigning moran, physically supreme, fully able to defend the country, and sporting the privileges of moranhood as a token of their supremacy. In practice, the more usual mode of transition has been for the elders to prevail on the moran to save face by abandoning their privileged position diplomatically before the youths can humiliate them in an open contest; in other words, to climb up to elderhood voluntarily, in order to avoid being forced to climb down from the supreme pinnacle of warrior virtuosity. They can then always claim that they retired as undefeated champions and are still in a position to take up arms again to beat their juniors if they abuse the privileges. Correspondingly, the youths would now be recognised as the new age-set of moran, but they can never truly boast that they actually took over the privileges in a classic coup. Today, there is an element of this competitiveness in the rhetoric of both sides, and it seems likely that there has always been an indeterminate balance between a display of bravado on both sides and resort to violence.

In this way, the primate model of juvenile adolescence, poised to contest mature brute strength, is echoed in the competition over the privileges of moranhood at the formation of a new age-set. To this extent, there is evidence of a certain biological underpinning based on sheer brawn. The contest between moran and boys is clearly a matter of prestige and ultimately of power, but this is limited. Their rivalry over access

**Plate I:** Maasai moran process to the ritual enclosure at their eunoto (1977).
to girls is overshadowed by the higher authority of the elders, who can take away any of these girls for redistribution as brides among themselves at any moment of their own choosing. Boys who battle with their seniors to gain the privilege of being *moran* only enter a peripheral arena. This is their apprenticeship to the real competition over women and polygyny that takes place one age-set later, when they in their turn will be dispossessed of their *moranhood* and poised to become married elders.

In the primate model, there is just one arena, whereas among the Maasai there are two, and these are encountered as successive stages of age organization. Boys are at first denied access to girls by *moran*, while the *moran* in their turn are denied access to marriage. The spectacular contest is among youths for possession of the arena of *moranhood*. So long as this spectacle absorbs the attentions of younger men, and indeed of the community at large, the true arena of power and control over women vested in the elders remains out of focus. In the final analysis, the elders regard rivalry among *moran* over their privileged position and over immature girls as ‘children’s play’. So far as they are concerned, it is their own dealings in the marriage market and the possession of mature women and their fertility that is the essence of power. Sexual play among juvenile members of the community is regarded as a shadow of the real thing. From this point of view, the critical issue in the age cycle is not the act of admitting boys to a new age-set through initiation, but the consequence of this act in freeing *moran* from their pseudo-warrior role in order to enter the marriage market. For the elders at large, the primate (or rather gazelle) analogy is more meaningful at the higher level in the age hierarchy, shifting the focus from the peripheral side-show of *moranhood* to their own more covert dealings.

### 2.3 The Arena of Elderhood and the Social Construction of Old Age

Age systems in East Africa can usefully be regarded as steps up a ladder, leading from one rung (or *age grade*) to the next as individual *age-sets* move up through a series of statuses, defined in terms of their changing relations with older and younger men. Among the Maasai, boys are placed on the bottom rung at initiation, *moran* step up to the next rung, and elders move up still further. This is not an orderly procession as in the annual cycle of school promotions from form to form in the West, but one that responds to demographic pressures. It is the upward movement and pattern of age relations that are certain rather than the exact timing of each transition or the span of this recurrent cycle. There is a certain jostling between age-sets, as between aspiring boys and ageing *moran*, and this may also occur for privileged positions at higher echelons of the ladder. Thus, while peer bonding may inhibit competition within each age-set, relations between age-sets are concerned with patterns of dominance and competition over privilege.

As *moran* become elders, they enter a new domain that contrasts with the panache and physical assertiveness of their former lifestyle. Older men encourage them by pointing out that the privileges over which they have contended are no more
than children’s games that are simply not worth the risk to life and limb. In this way, the physical premise of *moranhood* is trivialized by relegating it to the periphery of a more fundamental truth associated with the knowledge and wisdom that can only come with elderhood. A retiring *moran* has to adapt to this role as a novice elder before he can play an active role among elders politically. After his first marriage, his involvement with the development of his family and herd may take up much of his energy and leave little time to learn from close company with older men in their leisurely gossip and discussions.

The rules of the Maasai age system force the age-set of novice elders to remain on this rung for a complete age cycle of fourteen years or so until yet another age-set of *moran* (two below their own) is initiated. At this point, now in their mid-forties, these elders become ritual patrons of the new age-set with the power to bless or curse them. They are known as ‘firestick patrons’ (*ilpiron*), because they generated the fire that first brought the new age-set of *moran* to life. This endows them with moral and ritual authority as they enter their political prime. Increasingly, with growing sons that can take over the family herding, and often with further wives, these patrons of the *moran* are now in a position to associate more closely with older men and the affairs of elderhood, conducted through debating and the awe-inspiring panache of stage-managing ritual for the *moran*. After their long experience as *moran* and as novice elders, and with ample time to appreciate the skills and qualities of leadership among their peers, they are now principally responsible for maintaining a regime that protects the community at large from the erratic delinquencies of their *moran* protégés. It is the *moran* who are a focus of popular concern, and it is the duty of the age-set of their ‘firestick’ patrons to instil them with respect amounting to fear, overawing them into submission.

The ‘firestick’ patrons of the ageing *moran* maintain this position until a new age-set is initiated, precipitating the next movement up the age ladder. Their protégés become novice elders, and they in turn step up a further rung, while their successors (until now the age-set of novice elders) enter their prime and become the ‘firestick’ patrons of the new age-set of *moran*. The retiring ‘firestick’ patrons are typically in their sixties and as their numbers and will to assert themselves decline, so they lose the initiative in public affairs, and this initiative is taken up by the succeeding age-set: the new ‘firestick’ patrons. One age-set later still, as some of their wives predecease them, they are less likely to replace these with new wives. The intensity of their network of mutual support inevitably declines and with it the hub of their political awareness. The anomaly of old age is that while the most senior age-sets are highly respected for their age and experience, they cease to have a clear role in community affairs once they lose credibility as a political force.

Thus, the waning of ageing primates with increasing disability corresponds most closely to the retirement of the *moran* when their physical decline forces them out of their prized arena. While the elders’ regard this as a short-sighted view that overlooks the thrust and responsibilities of the next phase of their careers, there is a further
parallel between the primate model and their ultimate destiny. This parallel concerns the social construction of old age, when elders are ultimately edged out of the arena of public affairs with an uncertain moral authority and no future.

Clearly, this has relevance for the span of each age-set, linked to the age-set cycle of about 14-15 years, for the rules of the Maasai age system interact with the natural process of ageing. Figure 2.2 summarizes the argument indicating the two successive arenas in the course of active adult life among males, each with its own sub-culture. Four successive age-sets span the prime of *moranhood*, novice elderhood, the prime of ‘firestick’ patronage, and declining strength among retired patrons respectively, typically from about 15 years old until about 70. If the natural span of physical and political resilience were longer or shorter among the Maasai, then these rules would increase or reduce the typical span of 14-15 years.

![Figure 2.2: Age and the two male arenas](image)

**2.4 The Maasai, the Samburu, and the Primate Model**

The Maasai proper are closely related to the Samburu, and there are clear parallels in the relationship between *moran* and elders in each case. There is a similar exasperation among elders over the stock thieving by *moran*, amounting to a simmering fury over *moran* adulteries with their wives. There has also been a similar resistance to attempts by administrators to tame the *moran* by curtailing the age-set system. Significantly, the span of successive age-sets among Samburu does not appear to have altered throughout the twentieth century. Again, the average rate of polygyny is very close in both societies, implying a similar delay in the average age of marriage of *moran* when compared with the age of their brides (*Figure 2.1*). On the other hand, the rules of age organization are slightly different, and this is reflected in the data shown in *Tables 2.1* and 2.2, which were collected among the Samburu, where the span of age-sets is slightly lower.
The Samburu refer to the age-set of retired patrons as ‘fathers of moran’, since only from this point can their sons be initiated to become moran, while the sons of ‘firestick’ patrons have to wait a further age-set before being initiated. The Maasai do not have this restriction, whereas among the Samburu it highlights the distinction between ‘firestick’ patrons and their predecessors – the ex-patrons of ex-moran – whose sons may now be initiated. The Samburu ‘firestick’ patrons are expected to be disciplinarians, while the ‘fathers of moran’ are expected to assume the role of defending their ‘sons’ against the overzealous threats of the newly promoted firetick patrons and to use their greater experience to argue for moderating any punishments imposed by the new patrons on the new moran.

Moranhood among the Samburu differs from the Maasai in three other significant ways. First, each Maasai age-set is divided into a senior (right-hand) side and a junior (left-hand), and this corresponds to a staggered process of advancement, with the right-hand taking an intermediate step towards elderhood and beginning to marry, even before the left-hand are initiated. The Samburu do not divide their age-sets between right- and left-hand sides, and there is no intermediate step for older moran, and this extends their ‘adolescence’ into their late twenties. Secondly, while Samburu moran espouse altruistic ideals of warrior integrity, they do not build warrior villages and lack the overshadowing demand of manyata discipline as an overarching virtue during their critical years of development. By contrast, Maasai manyat are dominated by ideals of age-set unity as the supreme virtue, reining in any streak of individualism, and they are encouraged by elders to resolve their differences by cultivating the art of debate. Any Maasai morani must attend all manyata debates and must obtain manyata permission before absenting himself for more than the odd night. Such intense experiences of peer-group discipline and loyalty are moderated among the Samburu, and their path towards elderhood is slower.

Thirdly, clanship plays a major role in Samburu life. Villages and clusters of villages tend to be associated with particular clans, dispersed throughout the region. There is a background of mistrust between elders of different clans, and one of their tasks is to prevent the build up of local feuding among moran over issues of clan honour and prestige. Among the Maasai, on the other hand, moran of different clans share residence in the same manyata villages and are subject to manyata discipline, which precludes such feuding. It is his clan that guarantees each Samburu moran a wife eventually, whereas the marriage market is more competitive for Maasai moran and some never marry. Clan exogamy appears to have weakened among the Maasai.

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8 Table 2.1 shows the extent to which Samburu moran were not allowed to marry, whereas most of the unmarried elders were actually widowers who had previously married. Average polygyny rates are quite similar for the two societies, but there is greater variation among the (Matapato) Maasai (Spencer 1997: 88).
during the twentieth century, and there is other evidence that there was a stronger sense of clanship amounting to a pecking order in clan rivalries in the past.9

It follows that Samburu *moran* are less disciplined than their Maasai counterparts. They are divided by clanship rivalries, they are without the finesse of *manyata* discipline, they are more footloose and less accountable to their age-set peers, and they may be compared more directly with outcast juveniles in the primate model. The differences between Maasai and Samburu in this respect are a matter of degree: Maasai *moran* too have brittle notions of honour, and rivalries between *manyat* may occasionally erupt in intense fighting. Again, cattle theft and reprisal raiding may occur across the sensitive borders that separate neighbouring tribal sections.

The rivalries over the privileges of *moranhood* between Maasai *moran* and boys appear more severe than among the Samburu. This rivalry is repeated in elderhood when the novice elders harry their seniors for possession of the dominant ‘firestick’ patrons’ rung. The seniors resist this, for there is no distinct role for them once their *moran* protégés have become elders: there is only old age. Once they are displaced from their rung and lose credibility as a diminishing and ageing age-set, they experience humiliation and a sense of crisis, rather than a more gradual decline, as among Samburu, where they are respected as ‘fathers of *moran*’. Like retiring *moran*, ex-patrons among the Maasai proper feel that the integrity of their age-set has been damaged by confrontations with their immediate juniors, who should respect them. From this point, they are still respected for their age, but they have lost the political initiative to younger men; and as they lose the will to persist, they gradually retire from active political life. This appears to account for the slightly longer age-set cycle among the Maasai where ‘firestick’ patrons resist their impending retirement – as they did thirty years earlier as ageing *moran*. The span of adult activity seems to be similar to the Samburu, but the shift in the Maasai rules retards the changeover and there is a more pronounced sense of crisis as old age approaches. They may try to maintain some influence as assertive individuals, but they are cut off from political

9 Merker (1904: 79-80, 87, 97, 208-9) recorded that in precolonial times a clan that was numerically dominant within a district would assert its power over lesser clans. In settling any grievance or homicide, they would bias the outcome, paying less compensation or demanding more; their *moran* would display a clan emblem on their shields and take a larger share of the plunder after a raid; the principle of ‘Might comes before right’ generally prevailed. Merker also noted that duels between *moran* became more serious if they belong to different clans, leading to an affray between clans. Such affrays could occur among the Samburu in 1960, but they were incompatible with the ethos of *manyata* life among the Maasai in 1977. This raises two possibilities. First, the imposition of indirect colonial rule may have shifted this ethos away from settling local grievances by force. Or prior to that, there was the power of the iconic Prophet and warlord, Mbatian in the latter part of the nineteenth century. When Mbatian reorganized the Maasai into a concerted force to fight their Maa rivals, he may not only have persuaded different Maasai tribal sections to unite, but also he may have effectively curbed the divisiveness of clanship to underpin this unity.
life as an age-set with no clear role once they have lost their formal position and any effective support from the elders at large. The shift in emphasis is from a greater concern among Samburu ‘firestick’ patrons regarding control over delinquent *moran*, to an ambivalent mix of concern offset by an alliance between patrons and *moran* among Maasai proper, which is fanned by the rivalry between adjacent age-sets. This leaves the oldest men marginalized from the arena of community affairs, although still highly respected. The last few survivors of any age-set may reach the point where so many of their age mates have died that they feel that they have outlived their time, and they wholly disengage from public life.

In this way, the firestick relationship develops during each age-set cycle with an emphasis on an alliance between patrons and *moran* during the period leading up to the change-over to a new cycle. This corresponds to rivalry between adjacent age-sets and this becomes particularly intense after the older boys have been initiated into a new age-set of *moran*. A significant cleavage within the age-set system now involves four age-sets: two rival sets of firestick patrons as well as two of *moran*, senior and junior. This lasts until the junior *moran* are able to wrest the privileges from their seniors, who now retire as novice elders. From this point, there is a certain loss of control over *moran* in mid-cycle, when rivalries between adjacent age-sets subside and *moran* delinquencies mount up. Figure 2.3 illustrates the shift in the major line of cleavage during this cycle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age grades:</th>
<th>Ruling firestick alliance</th>
<th>Latent firestick alliance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>AGEING ELDERS</strong></td>
<td>((↑))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RETIRED PATRONS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>(↑)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FIRESTICK PATRONS</strong></td>
<td>↑</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NOVICE ELDERS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MORAN WITH PRIVILEGES</strong></td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>Cleavage in mid-cycle (between age grades)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OLDER BOYS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>(↑)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>YOUNGEST BOYS</strong></td>
<td>((↑))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2.3:** Shifts in the line of cleavage during an age-set cycle
This contrast between the lines of cleavage is a matter of degree and it is echoed in differences in emphasis from north to south. In the north where the Purko Maasai are the dominant tribal section, the firestick alliance prevails at an ideological level, but the manyata system ensures that the moran can assert considerable independence, and they posed an unresolved problem for the colonial administration. In the south where the Kisonko Maasai are dominant, the firestick alliance is stronger and the rivalry with the opposed (latent) firestick alliance is more intense at the time of change-over. The Kisonko model lays more stress on the opposition between age-sets, whereas the Purko model lays more stress on the opposition between age grades (moran vs. elders in general). Among the intervening tribal sections, there appears to be a balance between these themes, shifting from north to south with the oldest men more marginalized in the south. The Samburu in the far north are clearly associated with the northern pattern, although the moran pose a less intractable problem than among the Purko.10

Thus, as between Maasai and Samburu, it is the Samburu moran, with no restraining manyata organisation who appear closer to the primate model in terms of their extrusion from the community of adults. Whereas in terms of the loss of status in the process of ageing, it is the Maasai who correspond more closely to the primate model, especially in the south.

2.5 The Life-course of Women and the Quasi-matrifocal Network

Just as Maasai elders dominate age-set and community affairs collectively, so they control their wives and families individually within their own households. Women are treated as chattels for arranged polygynous marriages, where they are expected to produce sons as heirs and daughters for further arranged marriages. Apart from a mother’s continuing dependence on her sons, there is no matrifocal tendency in this practice, and even her unmarried moran sons assume authority when their father is absent, treating their mothers as dependants and referring to them as ‘children’ (inker), a generic term for women in general.

This sharp demarcation between male and female domains corresponds to quite different career profiles. A girl’s close link with her mother ends with her marriage. Neither mother nor daughter are consulted regarding the choice of husband as this

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10 While there may be a historical explanation for this shifting emphasis of the firestick relationship between north and south, it cannot be explained in terms of contrasting colonial policies over the Maasai in Kenya (north) and Tanzania (south). Thus the Loitokitok are a Kenya branch of the Kisonko and their firestick relationship has its roots in Kisonko (south) and not in the northern (Purko) pattern. Similarly, the intermediate patterns refer to tribal sections that are in Kenya and were subject to Kenya colonial administration.
is not regarded as their business, and elders insist that women as ‘children’ simply would not understand. It is elders, they argue, whose knowledge and wisdom extends to arranging ‘good’ marriages. After consultation with other elders, a father can marry off his daughter when it suits him and on any pretext, especially if she causes trouble among *moran*. She may have a *morani* lover, but their relationship should end with her marriage: the freedom enjoyed by girls with their *moran* friends is seen as incompatible with the subservience demanded of a wife. The daughter’s marriage is to an elder who is normally two or more times her own age. She is brought up to accept a marital regime that will offer only a restricted range of opportunities and the prospect of widowhood at some point, with no possibility of divorce before then or of remarriage afterwards. *Table 2.2* draws on the same sample as *Table 2.1*, estimating the ages of women from the age-set of their *moran* lovers before marriage. This indicates that probably more than one half of the women who had survived beyond the age of 40 were already widows, and this rose to 70% by the age of 50.

**Table 2.2**: Distribution of age differences between spouses (Samburu 1958).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age range of living women</th>
<th>Age range of living husbands (years)</th>
<th>Widows</th>
<th>Total women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>79+</td>
<td>17-30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61-78</td>
<td>31-41</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>42-56</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14 3 56 94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-49</td>
<td>57-69</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>32 5 - 43 148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-35</td>
<td>70-86</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>71 21 3 - 14 190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-23</td>
<td>87+</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>53 50 25 - - 2 131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>134 189 99 23 3 150 599</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marriage is a particularly bleak point in a Maasai girl’s life, but it is the first step towards building up her personal network of friendships which accumulates as her family grows and her children marry to produce children of their own. Following her marriage, a woman’s closest associates are typically her husband’s mother and her co-wives, and as she ages these will be replaced by the wives of her sons, none of whom should be her own kin. Not only is she deprived of her earlier maternal links and then her daughters as these are married off, but her ability to build up a network of friendships with women outside the family is disrupted by their nomadic lifestyle in which each migration is determined by the elder of each individual household, changing the configuration of neighbours with each move. It is the men as family heads who make decisions to migrate and may choose to live near friends of their own choosing.
Women must operate within this male dominated regime. To the extent that there are underlying patterns and preferences in her husband's nomadic choices, these provide a framework within which she can build up a more extensive network of her own in the longer-term. There may be sporadic reunions as nomadic paths converge, extending even to past family links with her mother or married daughters as the opportunity arises. The scope for maintaining these friendships is enhanced by periodic festivities that attract women from over a wide area, notably weddings.

An exception to this routine occurs when a woman is co-opted to her Moran son's Manyata village for up to seven years. There, she is under the authority of the body of Manyata Moran until they take a step towards elderhood at their Eunoto ceremony, when she shaves off her son's Moran hair. She then is accompanied back to her husband’s home, and is once again under his authority. However, the Manyata episode is also an opportunity to extend her network to other Manyata mothers-of-Moran, sharing a particularly vivid and proud experience with these for the rest of their lives.

Plate II: A Maasai mother-of-moran shaves off her son’s hair at his eunoto (1977)
A woman’s future hinges on her ability to bear children that survive into adulthood, for once she is a widow, she looks to her married sons for support. As her remaining children grow and especially with widowhood, the restrictions of her reproductive years are eased. She acquires a new freedom to consolidate and expand her network among women and through her married children. In this way, the life career of women displays a certain reversal compared with that of men. While men peak in the prime of youth and again in the prime of middle-age, women start from a depressed point at marriage, when they rely heavily on the support of other women. However, there is a steady rise in their confidence and network as they have increasing scope for giving support to others, notably their sons’ growing families, and this continues into old age, whereas the networks of men tend to tail off after the prime of their middle-age. A man’s ‘peer-group’ is his age-set, which shares the fragility of ageing. For a woman, her ‘peer-group’ is her evolving personal network that spreads across the spectrum of ages and remains resilient as she grows old. Male elders tend to become more passive and docile once their age-set has been edged out of the political arena by younger men. With widowhood especially, women may become more autonomous, confident and even dominant within the community of women, enjoying a freedom that was denied them before middle-age.

The exclusion of women from male dominated affairs creates a niche for the separate involvement of women in their own networks in the process of child-rearing and mutual support. These display a quasi-matrifocal slant in which a woman’s mother-in-law substitutes for her own mother, and her daughters-in-law substitute for her daughters, but the similarity with primate behaviour lies more in the female bonds of support within an extended domestic domain, transcending the disruptions caused by the dominance of their men-folk.

The persistence of these women’s networks contrasts with the more dramatic ebb and flow of fortune in the male political arena. For males, active adult life is sandwiched between the anomalies of adolescence and of old age. They are in a stronger position during their active years, but as they grow old they find themselves increasingly marginalized. For females, there are disruptions due first to their marriages arranged by their fathers and then to the unquestioned authority and nomadic whims of their husbands. However, in the longer-term there is continuity, building up with each successive child in a sustained network of support. By the time a married woman emerges as a granny, she will have moved many times, renewed many friendships, and had a good chance of establishing herself as a pillar of the women’s domain wherever she goes. Unlike her husband, from a position of subservience at marriage, she reaches her full potential in old age.
2.6 Conclusion: The Nature and Culture of Ageing

The perception of personal development as a civilizing process, from the uninhibited innocence of childhood through a series of stages of socialization, is widespread. However, to compare this with the life-course of non-human primates and to invoke Darwin’s view of the primeval family, as I have done here, is to imply some evolutionary parallel whereby the childhood experience of growing up replicates the development of human society, rising out of its most primitive biological origins. This was a common theme in nineteenth century theories of social evolution, inspired in part by a moralistic concern over promiscuity, and based on the premise that the transition from primitive savagery, like the upbringing of children, was a process of cognitive development (E. B. Tylor), increasing altruism (Herbert Spencer), and redemption (John McLennan), leading towards the emergence of modern humans (and notably educated males) as the dominant species commanding the moral high-ground.11 Freud followed this line of argument when he embellished Darwin’s model of a primeval hominid ancestor defending his captive horde of wives before he was overthrown by his sons as rivals, whose sense of guilt led to the development of conscience. Freud too used a metaphor of upbringing (the oedipal socialization of the child) to hypothesize the transformation of humanity from nature to culture. In these various models, the Hobbesian dilemma – that personal self-interest undermines collaboration – is averted by a higher moral awareness. The possibility of competition for power based on self-interest remains, but with cognitive and emotional development it is displaced to a more altruistic level, where it is subject to a social discourse instead of endemic violence.

In an attempt to pitch this argument at a deeper level, Lévi-Strauss attributed the superiority of culture over nature in tribal societies to institutions of exogamy that transcend the family as a biological unit and lift it above a natural tendency towards inbreeding.12 Because it is men who almost invariably control the exchange of women in marriage, and it is the women who have a natural capacity to reproduce and nurture their offspring, this approach has been summarized as:

\[
\text{nature : culture :: women : men}
\]

In a neat twist to this formula, Sherry Ortner has pointed out that during the process of childcare, it is the women who transform ‘animal-like infants into cultured beings’. Thus women should not be equated with nature as such, but should be seen as the principal intermediaries between nature and culture. They perform a vital role in perpetuating culture that is more than merely biological.13 This effectively shifts the

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11 Spencer, H. 1850; McLennan 1865; Tylor 1871; Freud 1913.
nature-culture dimension from a matter of gender to one of ageing. It is children who are closest to a state of nature. In other words, this returns us to the earlier theme without the evolutionary speculation:

\[
\text{nature} : \text{culture} :: \text{children} : \text{adults}
\]

The argument in this chapter has followed a similar path, but projecting it beyond the formative years of childhood to successive stages in the adult world. Starting with evidence of the behaviour of non-human primates, this draws attention to a broad distribution of power with age, based on physical strength and according to gender. In human society, however, the social environment is transformed from one that relies on narrow self-interest, physical ability, and internecine competition for survival, as Hobbes perceived it, to one that relies on a consensus. The comparison poses the stark contrast between short-term physical solutions that would favour the strongest in their prime, and collective solutions that hold greater security in the longer-term for everyone. Ultimate power shifts from fully grown young males displaying their natural abilities and towards older men who have to impose a moral authority on each new generation in order to maintain their position. This is to redirect attention from the nineteenth century premise of civilization as an achievement of contemporary society to an ideal that is achieved with age as social skills build up with collective experience, imposing an ethical superstructure on any natural display of youthful energy. It is a premise that is strikingly illustrated by a group of very age-conscious and male-dominated societies in East Africa, among whom the Maasai are broadly typical. The primate model has a physical parallel with the career of an age-set as it passes into and out of ‘warriorhood’. However, this leads on to a second career that echoes the profile of the first but follows a more diplomatic trajectory, maturing later, lasting longer, and generating a climate of ultimate authority. It is those whose physical strength is waning that have most to gain, and the basis of their success is the development of human institutions that they control. The institution of age organisation is at the core of this work. Tradition in the hands of older men is an instrument of power and of vested interest.

The evidence of the primate model suggests closer parallels with the physical peaking in youth and hence a stronger element of nature at that end of the life-course. The wisdom of middle-age is further from nature and hence is particularly subject to cultural variables. Among gerontocracies, such as the Maasai, tradition in general is a powerful tool wielded by older people – notably men – claiming the moral high-ground against the insolent subversions of younger people – notably youths. In the process of ageing, the exuberance of youth and the dilemmas of frailty in old age are very general, and in illuminating these in a particularly striking way, this example raises issues that have a more general relevance in other cultures.