Introduction

The Maa peoples of East Africa share the same language and are predominately nomadic pastoralists. The Maasai have a dominant position at the centre of this area, with 60% of the Maa population dispersed among 16 independent tribal sections. This volume stems primarily from anthropological fieldwork among the Maasai of Matapato and among the Maa-speaking Samburu, who live in the northern reaches where conditions are harsher. It is convenient although a matter of speculation to regard the Samburu as close to some proto-Maasai ancestral group before the Maasai expanded southwards against other Maa-speakers, spurred by their legendary Prophet Supeet during the first half of the nineteenth century. Conditions were more arid in the north, families were more nomadic and warfare seems to have consisted of lightly armed skirmishes and mobile tactics. The easier conditions of the south permitted the Maasai to mount more heavily armed and organized companies and the development of more stable territories defended by strategic warrior villages (*manyat, s. manyata*). A third Maa-speaking group are the Chamus, who have had close links with the Samburu, borrowed the idea of *manyat* from the Maasai at one point, and provide an independent insight into the history of the area.

A significant feature of inland pastoralist societies in East Africa is the variety of age-based organizations that group men into cohorts according to age from initiation in youth until the cohort – or age-set – dies out. Historically, this type of society has been described in every continent, displaying a similar range of ramifications. This suggests some basic principles of age-based existence, parallel to those of kinship elsewhere, but raising questions in some quarters of whether this type of society could possibly have worked. East Africa provides the principal surviving cluster of age-based societies, among whom the Maasai are the best known.

A likely cause of the demise of age systems generally is the emphasis on equality within each age-set that cuts across family interests, whereas the spread of world trade and hence capitalism has created inequalities that tend to be perpetuated within families. The strong commercial streak in Islamic societies in East Africa, for instance, has led to cumulative inequalities that are inherited down the generations. Differences of wealth between families also occur among age-based pastoralists, compromising their ideals of equality within each age-set. However, these tend to be temporary rather than cumulative: their herds can multiply quite rapidly over a period of years and then be wiped out through drought, epidemic or raiding, giving the impression of a saw-tooth profile of growth and collapse. In these conditions, the ideal of age-set equality applies to long-term prospects and opportunities rather than current wealth. In the short term there is an emphasis on sharing products of the family herd rather than

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1 Merker 1904: 90-9. This can be compared with Lamphear (1992: 18-26) whose description of the Turkana raiding tactics gives a useful indication of the ecological constraints on intertribal raiding in the north.
Map: The Maasai and Maa-speaking Peoples in 1977
sharing the living herds which are treated as a reserve capital. With no trade routes through the area, Islamic and other traders were unable to penetrate the Maasai in their traditional setting, and the Maasai were unable to build up capital in the long-term. In contemporary society, the Maa are an anachronism, but they can provide useful insights into aspects of ageing from childhood onwards that have a more general relevance.

The present work arose indirectly from an invitation by Oxford University Press to submit an annotated bibliography on 'The Maasai and Maa-speaking Peoples of East Africa' for their *Oxford Bibliographies Online* programme in African Studies. The strict format that they proposed appealed to me and the labour involved stretched my understanding of the Maa-speaking region. This led to the notion of resurrecting some earlier dispersed articles and bringing them together as a collection that complemented my published ethnographies. These articles reflect opportunities to pursue particular models of Maa society, responding to conference themes and seminar series. They lay bare some fundamental aspects of structure that tend to be obscured in comprehensive ethnographic accounts.

Two approaches to models of age systems are possible. The first is to strip them of their social context and discern some basic rules that govern the process of ageing and the succession of generations. This provides a series of ideal types – constructs – that pose and resolve some basic problems of how they work. It is this approach that Frank Stewart (1977) has adopted in his outstanding analysis of recorded age systems throughout the world, stripping them down to the bare bones of rules and principles, simplifying them in order to arrive at a basic understanding of complexity. Maa age systems are at the simplest end of Stewart’s spectrum with no generational complications (Maasai) or just one unproblematic restriction (Samburu). In this sense, the Maasai provide an ideal type at the level of rules and procedures.

An alternative approach towards models is adopted here with reference to selected topics that arose from the study of Maa society and especially their age systems. These models were the product of perspectives offered by my Maa informants on the one hand and insights borrowed from a variety of disciplines and parallel fields on the other. Each chapter in this volume views the Maa through a different lens that throws light on their system in order to clarify some aspect of a more complex whole. As Max Weber pointed out, models are abstractions that simplify and distort reality, but they also throw further light on it, and ultimately we can only perceive reality through models. There are cross-threads and a logical sequence between the chapters, but there is no overarching model other than an attempt to expand an understanding of Maa society by viewing it from a variety of angles and comparing the Maasai, Samburu and Chamus as a means towards this diffuse end.

Originally, these chapters were developed from ten articles. The dates when they were produced merely reflected the opportunities that arose at the time rather than stages in my own thinking or fashions in social theory that seemed to switch with
uncomfortable regularity as they engaged new generations of anthropologists. While these articles were unconnected, there was considerable repetition in matters of detail between them, and these had to be edited in the first instance. From that point, it was not clear where to stop editing to improve the flow and structure of the argument, even borrowing whole sections from one chapter to another where they seemed more appropriate, reducing the ten articles to nine chapters, and ultimately revising and expanding chunks of the text while preserving the original thrust of each chapter. My thanks to the copyright holders for permission to reproduce the articles – or what remains of the original articles – are included as a footnote for each chapter.

My research among the Maa deliberately sought to understand their indigenous institutions as they appeared at the time of fieldwork. This provided a full agenda without delving into history or attempting to follow new trends in regional development. The use of the ethnographic present throughout my writings was deliberate. At the same time, the Maa were clearly affected by the changing interface with economic and political trends in Kenya. Moreover, Chapters 7 and 8 address radical changes in their indigenous beliefs and systems over the years. Regardless of such changes, this work retains the ethnographic present tense in order to establish the various chapters at a particular point in time rather than blur the boundary between (what was then) present and past by resorting to an inclusive ethnographic past tense. Whatever changes have occurred since my material was collected, these chapters remain an attempt to contribute to the Maa and Kenyan heritage and to our own understanding of the diminishing number of societies based on age organization and ultimately the process of ageing itself.

These researches were not strictly contemporaneous: they concerned the Samburu around 1960 and the Maasai and Chamus around 1977. The gap of seventeen years between these studies raises problems of comparison between the Samburu as a restricted colonial enclave and the Maasai and Chamus as postcolonial outposts that were more directly affected by global trends, notably the Chamus. However, in approaching my study of the Maasai, I deliberately chose to work primarily among the Matapato because they were remote enough to appear to have been less affected by change and tourism than other Maasai tribal sections at that time, and it was their view of tradition that focused my attention. I also visited the Maasai of Purko and of Loitokitok-Kisonko to assess the degree of variation among Maasai, and they confirmed my broad impressions despite the greater evidence of change in these areas. The Maasai as a whole were regarded as unrepentant traditionalists and the stability of their system in times of change was directly relevant to my work. At the level of my enquiry, it seems justified to regard my studies of the Samburu in 1960 and the Matapato in 1977 as broadly of the same period, whereas the Chamus in 1977 clearly represented a society in transition.

3 For fuller details of my research among the Samburu, and among the Matapato, Purko and Loitokitok Maasai, see Spencer 1965, 1988 and 2003 ( Chapters 7 and 8). For a synopsis of these volumes, see Spencer 2010.
Of more relevance here are the changing conditions of my research. I learned the Maa language among the Samburu and spent more time there collecting data as an apprentice social anthropologist. In approaching the Maasai years later, I was in effect standing on my Samburu shoulders and trying to see further in a shorter time. This meant relying more on gathering data through conversation among the Maasai than through direct observation and participation as among the Samburu. The balance between these is significant in this work. Whereas the chapters on the Maasai focus on their age-set system, which was altogether more elaborate than the Samburu and needed a lot of explaining, while the chapters on the Samburu focus on aspects of ritual which relied more on community involvement. Fortunately, the Maasai excel in talking about the intricacies of their system. Work among the Chamus relied substantially on their history, again because this was a major topic in their self-presentation and delved more deeply into this topic than either the Samburu or the Maasai.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter 1 of this work focuses on the problem of reminiscence and tricks of the memory and self-presentation. My heavy reliance on conversations with older Maasai especially raised this issue. This was not just a problem of relying on the accuracy of what I was told, especially as there was often a strong element of personal involvement in their recollections, but also of discerning the relevance of inconsistencies and exaggerations, and whether there were deeper levels of insight underlying any distortions. As Malcolm Johnson has put it, autobiographies by older people have to be kept in good repair.4 Then, when writing up my material over the period that followed fieldwork, there was the problem of the reliability of my own memory, which implicitly shifted each time I recalled incidents or pieces of information that were not necessarily fully recorded in my field notebooks. To the extent that there were hidden distortions, these could be seen as the essence of model building – of compiling an incomplete range of data and converting it into a meaningful whole for presentation to a notional readership. The present work is essentially about models of Maa society that have to be taken for what they are worth, and seek to provide insights into selected aspects. In a rather similar way, my Maa informants were presenting models of their society and of their own roles and experiences, and these too were relevant to an understanding if one could pursue the points with a variety of respondents in an attempt to unravel the contradictions. The dilemma haunts the integrity of ethnographic enquiry generally, and in the final analysis an anthropologist can only rely on the consistency of the various strands of argument to arrive at a reliable shot at understanding.

4 Redfern 1986.
The next three chapters concern aspects of the Maasai age-set system in which males climb up from youth to old age, fitfully and in cohorts (age-sets). Chapter 2 compares this system with a primate model borrowed from physical anthropology. It considers how far youth and ageing are determined by biological features for each sex, and in what ways these have been elaborated through culture to produce a distinctively Maasai slant that can only override natural ageing up to a point. The Samburu variant with their own age-set system provides an opportunity to take the analysis a step further. Chapter 3 compares the mobility of the Maasai system of age stratification as men climb up towards old age with the wholly immobile Hindu system of stratification by caste with no climbing throughout the lifespan. This is to compare incomparables, but some unobvious parallels at a deeper level are revealed, and these point towards competing systems of classification that lie in the shadow of the dominant hierarchy, reminiscent of the articulation between modes of production. Chapter 4 turns from a model of relations between age-sets in the process of ageing to an examination of internal relations within each age-set. While the Maasai have a reputation for being highly egalitarian, this is only true within each age-set, where the ideal of equality is developed to the point of obsession. This introduces the notion of a ‘group indulgence’ that taken to the extreme endangers the reproduction of society. This is examined here as an extension of alliance theory in societies dominated by kinship rather than by age. This chapter overlaps with my Maasai of Matapato (1988) to a considerable extent, but in drawing together diverse themes from this work, it seeks to stress the dominance of male age-sets and the reactions of women to male hegemony.

The following three chapters consider aspects of Samburu ritual and belief. These have much in common with the Maasai, notably in relation to belief, but my material is heavily weighted towards the Samburu. Chapter 5 is concerned with the nature of dancing as a central aspect of ritual performance and relevant to emotional expression. Ethnographic literature tends to be sparse on the dancing itself, avoiding the complexities of choreographic description, but it does provide the wider social context that gives meaning to each performance and the social relations among the performers and with their audience. In a society that is dominated by the power of the elders, dancing among Samburu provides an inviolable arena that moderates this power. Chapter 6 introduces a psychological dimension into the analysis of rites of transition. It examines the role of anxiety generated by ritual and political pressures in implementing change and examines the role of shivering and shaking among Samburu warriors (moran) in resolving emotional tensions that result from their restricted position. This is an elaboration of a theme that was previously explored in The Samburu (1965, Chapter 9). This approach received encouragement at the time, but it has been largely overlooked in the literature since then. In my more recent research among the Maasai, it is quite clear that the same principles would apply to the drama of their ritual behaviour, and the approach seems worth resurrecting here. Chapter 7 is an extended critique of a recent publication that provides new insight into the nature of close family relations among the Samburu, but also suggests an incredible switch in their system of beliefs over 40 years since I undertook
my fieldwork. Approaching this with a willing suspension of disbelief, I suggest that the new system of beliefs stems from an alternative women’s view of religion and perhaps reveals a gender bias on my part during my fieldwork, which was strongly influenced by male Samburu attitudes at that time.

The final two chapters introduce the Chamus of Lake Baringo, who spoke Maa and displayed strong Samburu and Maasai influences, but had their own oral history that was remarkably rich and introduced new themes. Chapter 8 outlines this history of the Chamus, elaborating the succession of economic transitions from hunter-gathering, to irrigations agriculture, to agro-pastoralism, to exploitation by capitalist opportunists. Karl Popper’s model of the evolution of knowledge appears especially pertinent here, throwing light on the process of indigenous development. This is not to assume that oral traditions provide an accurate record of history. As with autobiographies (Chapter 1), they have to be kept in good repair. But as an interpretation of current knowledge, they may still provide the most reliable evidence of historical processes on offer. Chapter 9 is a critique of a work that is concerned with the eco-system and the need to broaden participation in community development. The chapter examines the nature of the Maa democratic process through formal discourse among elders to the exclusion of *moran*, women, and expert outsiders. The Chamus are particularly relevant to this problem, illustrating the robustness of the institution that underpins community decision-making in the course of recurrent change. This underlines the importance for developers to understand and respect indigenous institutions.

In compiling the present collection, I am grateful for the patience of my Maa informants as I built up my understanding of their systems, responding to their explanations with new questions, and responding to their questions with answers that revealed the inadequacies of Western society in Maa terms, but also suggested new paths of enquiry. The Samburu hold a charm for everyone who has met them, and their friendliness at a time when I had only limited resources to share with them in return was especially important as I learned the rudiments of their language and culture, and the kinds of issues that I could later explore among the Maasai and Chamus. The greatest help of the Maasai was not only their acceptance of our presence, but especially their enthusiasm for talking about their social system, and discussing moot points. In effect, the rudiments of my agenda had been set among the Samburu, and the Maasai built on these as an extension of their daily gossip. The Chamus were not only keen to discuss their earlier system, but it was they who determined the agenda of my research at a time when their society seemed to have been overturned by exposure to new trends in the Kenyan and global economy. Their keen recollections of a dwindling past were clearly important to them and pointed towards a reconstruction of their history to a depth that had not seemed possible among the Samburu or Maasai.

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