THE DIFFUSION OF AGE-GROUP ORGANIZATION IN EAST AFRICA
A CONTROLLED COMPARISON
ROBERT A. LEVINE and WALTER H. SANGREE

The ethnography of Kenya and Tanganyika presents a problem of great significance to the study of culture history and social organization: why have some Bantu-speaking peoples adopted age-group organization and associated rituals from their non-Bantu neighbours, while other Bantu peoples in the same region have not? That this borrowing has occurred in some cases is suggested by the extant ethnographic literature. Wagner states that the age-group organization of the Vugusu of Nyanza 'corresponds closely to the age-group organization of the Nilo-Hamitic tribes with which it is obviously historically connected.' In discussing the pairing of Vugusu circumcision groups, he says: 'We have here a case of a formal feature borrowed from a group of neighboring but structurally quite different tribes which has not been functionally integrated into the structure of the recipient society.' The Kikuyu, whose age groups are of great importance in their social structure and may antedate their contact with the Nilo-Hamitic Masai, recognize a division among themselves between members of the 'Kikuyu guild', who practise one set of age-grade ceremonies, and members of the 'Masai guild', most of whom live in south-west Kikuyuland near Masailand and conduct different ceremonies. Lambert states that the Kikuyu age-regiments alternate between those of the right hand (tatane) and those of the left hand (gitiere). The elders say it is an imitation of the Masai system, and the terms are certainly those the Masai use for their right-hand and left-hand circumcision groups (tatane and okedanye). Although the published literature is scanty, it appears that the Kuria of the Kenya-Tanganyika border, and

---

2 Ibid., p. 378.
the Gogo and Chagga of Tanganyika, among others, adopted age-group organization or features of it from the Masai. Other Bantu-speaking groups of southern Kenya and northern Tanganyika apparently did not borrow age groups from the Masai or other Nilo-Hamitic peoples with whom they came into contact.

The diffusion of Nilo-Hamitic age-group organization among the Bantu tribes was facilitated by three factors: (1) Age groups as found among the Masai and Nandi-speaking peoples are more universalistic in recruitment than descent groups. Age and willingness to undergo initiation are emphasized more than consanguinity as criteria for membership. This open quality makes age-group organization more easily diffused than some other forms of social organization, notably descent groups. (2) Age groups can exist in a social system alongside corporate descent groups; thus a society with the latter can adopt the former without having to change its kinship organization, at least at the outset. (3) The Nilo-Hamitic peoples presumably attacked the Bantu and apparently defeated them on many occasions. Without attempting to win converts to their own form of social organization, they may have become models for emulation by the Bantu, who perceived a connexion between age-group organization (which has military functions) and success in warfare.

None the less, some Bantu borrowed the Nilo-Hamitic age groups and some did not. An explanation of this difference in terms of simple proximity to the Nilo-Hamites can be ruled out immediately on the grounds that the latter came into contact with all the inland Bantu groups of this area, interacting quite intensively with some of the non-borrowing groups. This seems to suggest that borrowing and non-borrowing Bantu groups might have interacted differently with their Nilo-Hamitic neighbours. To discover what factors are involved in the distribution of Nilo-Hamitic age groups among Kenya and Tanganyika Bantu, specific instances of Bantu–Nilo-Hamite relations must be examined. A definitive solution to the problem awaits the comprehensive comparative analysis that future ethnographic publications will make possible. In this article we are limiting our comparison to the Bantu-speaking Tiriki and Gusii of Kenya, among whom we have done fieldwork. The Tiriki, an Abaluyia group, adopted the age-set system of the Nandi-speaking Terik and made it their own; it remains a central feature of their social system. The Gusii, a South Nyanza Bantu people, had intensive contact with the Nandi-speaking Kipsigis but did not borrow their age-group organization. By examining these two contrasting cases we hope to uncover factors which account for the specific differences between them and to generate suggestions for explaining the differential diffusion of age-group organization among East African Bantu peoples generally.

Comparability of Tiriki and Gusii

A comparison between the Tiriki and the Gusii with regard to acceptance of age-group systems is particularly instructive because the two tribes are otherwise so similar in culture and ecology. Also, they have been exposed to virtually identical Nilo-Hamitic age-group systems, namely those of the Nandi, the Terik, and the Kipsigis.

1 The fieldwork by Sangree on the Tiriki was conducted during 1955–7 on a Ford Foundation Fellowship Program; the field study of the Gusii by LeVine was
Huntingford and Peristiany both attest the virtual cultural identity and close social ties of the Nandi and the Kipsigs. The two tribes recognize the similarities and assert the identity of their historical origins, of their initiation rites and age-group organizations. They freely intermarry and intermigrate. The close ties of the Terik and the Nandi are not so fully documented in the literature; but inquiries made in the field in 1934–36 indicate that the linguistic and other cultural affinities of the Terik and the Nandi are of the same order as those between the Kipsigs and the Nandi, and are possibly even closer. The Nandi and the Kipsigs purportedly never raided each other. The Terik, however, squeezed between the Nandi to the east and Bantu tribes to the west, evidently quite frequently raided the Nandi for cattle and grazing land.

The Tiriki, Gusii, Terik, Nandi, and Kipsigs all live in what is essentially a single physical environment, viz. the well-watered, partially forested highlands rising north and south-east of the Kano plain, which is just east of the Kavirondo Gulf of Lake Victoria. The Tiriki, Terik, and Nandi live to the north of the plain, while the Gusii and the Kipsigs live to the south (see map). The Tiriki are adjacent to and north of the Terik, the Gusii are south-west of the bordering Kipsigs, and the Nandi lie adjacent to both the Terik and the Tiriki on the east. All these tribes are bordered by the alien, Nilotic Luo, who live in the Kano plain and partially up the slopes to the north and the south of the plain. The presence of the Luo prevents the tribes in the highlands to the north and south from having much direct contact, and effectively stops them from migrating into the substantially lower and warmer, but less well-watered, plain.

Both the Tiriki and the Gusii practise mixed agriculture and herding. The bulk of their subsistence needs is supplied by the agriculture, most of which is done by the women. Eleusine, sorghum and, more recently, maize, are the principal crops, and short-handled hoes are used in planting and cultivation. The cattle, traditionally tended by the men, are prestige items which figure largely in various ritual and social functions.

The Tiriki and Gusii speak languages of adjacent groups (30 and 40) within Zone E of the Bantu languages. Group 40 contains, along with Gusii, the language of the Logoli, who live adjacent to the Tiriki. Although no systematic comparison of the two dialects has been made to ascertain the probable date of divergence from a common stock and the nature of subsequent borrowing, the general similarities in syntax and grammar are striking; and the cases of clear-cut cognates are myriad. In addition to this linguistic evidence, many other facets of their cultures suggest a common heritage, or considerable social interaction in the not too distant past. The two tribes, for example, exhibit many similarities of belief and ritual pertaining to matters of witchcraft, sorcery, divining, and ancestor worship. A number of other striking similarities occur in their social organizations. Both tribes have patrilineal, exogamous clan systems, with patri locality being the preferred residential pattern. The kinship

---

3 Huntingford, op. cit., pp. 1-2; Wagner, op. cit., p. 16.
Sketch Map of Tribal Distributions in Western Kenya
systems of both tribes stress generational distinctions and employ several cognate kinship terms.

The above list of similarities, although it by no means exhausts the inventory of common elements, adequately demonstrates the close cultural affinities between the two tribes and makes it possible, we believe, to detect the principal organizational and historical factors which determined the contrasting ways in which the two tribes responded to and borrowed from the age-group organization of their Nilotic Hamitic neighbours.

The Origin of Turki Age Groups

Turki age groups are essentially the same as the age groups of the Nilotic Hamitic Terik, Nandi, and Kipsigis. Around 1730 there first developed a ritual and military partnership between the Turki, a group of Abaluyia (or 'North Kavirondo') Bantu, and the Terik, a small Nandi group.

Before that, probably, some Abaluyia groups had borrowed aspects of Nilotic Hamitic circumcision rites and age-set organization, but there is no evidence of any Abaluyia group prior to the Turki having accepted Nandi-type age groups in toto while still remaining distinctively Abaluyia in language and culture. The origins and development of age groups among the Nandi-speaking peoples need not concern us in this paper. It is sufficient to note that by the time those Abaluyia lineage segments later to be known as the Turki (Badi'iri) accepted Nandi-type Turki age groups, this age-group system would seem to have achieved most of its present-day characteristics. The Turki elders today assert that the crucial difference between them and other Abaluyia peoples is that they alone among the Luhyia are members of the Nandi-type Turki age groups. Indeed the Turki measure their existence as a distinctive people or tribal group from the time when their Abaluyia forefathers first started to ally themselves with the Terik and were initiated into Turki age groups.

The initial move to incorporate Abaluyia lineage members into Turki age groups came (according to tradition) from the Terik, and was motivated by the desperate need of the Terik for military allies. The dynamics of tribal fission among the Nandi-speaking peoples are not known to us; but for one reason or another the Turki broke off from the main body of the Nandi people 200 or more years ago and became a small enclave intermittently feuding with the Nandi to the east, and more or less continually at war with the Nilotic Luo to the south and the Abaluyia groups to the west and north. The rough, partially forested terrain occupied by the Terik, while less than ideal for cattle herding, undoubtedly did much to facilitate Terik defence against warriors from the hostile groups that surrounded them on all sides. Nevertheless, this geographical advantage failed to offset sufficiently the heavy numerical handicap of the Terik. Probably the Nandi alone always outnumbered the Terik several-fold. Traditional history recounts several occasions when the Terik were virtually wiped out in disastrous battles with the Nandi and the Luo.

According to tradition, about eight generations ago need for numerical reinforcements led the Terik to offer asylum to wandering or refugee segments of Abaluyia lineages, on condition that the menfolk would become incorporated into the Terik warrior groups; that is, become initiated into Terik age groups. Members of several
Abaluyia lineages or clans were involved in this initial acceptance into the Terik age groups, and their offspring today pride themselves on being members of the earliest Tiriki clans. Each of these charter Tiriki lineages or clans (zimbamba) has its own traditional history which names the larger Abaluyia lineage and tribe it is derived from, and tells of how its members left their former homeland and joined the Terik. A favourite reason cited for flight to Terik territory is a dispute between brothers over cattle. Regardless of the immediate incident triggering off the separation, the migration and subsequent alliance of Abaluyia segments with the Terik was just another variation on the continuing process of Abaluyia lineage segmentation. The one departure from the usual pattern is that in the case of the Tiriki the migrating lineage segments found it both possible and auspicious for reasons of safety and expediency to ally themselves with a Nilo-Hamitic tribe, instead of following the more usual pattern of either setting themselves up independently in an unoccupied area or putting themselves under the protection of another lineage in a different Abaluyia community.

The age groups provided the organizational structure for Terik military regiments; thus every Abaluyia male immigrant was obliged to undergo initiation into an age group if of military age and, in any event, accept the Terik post-puberty circumcision and age-group initiation for his sons. Initiation converted the Abaluyia immigrants into full-fledged members of the Terik tribe; thus these Abaluyia immigrants became known as Tiriki (Badiji), the Luluyia linguistic rendering of 'Terik'. Differences of opinion and belief concerning female initiation have proved to be an effective deterrent to intermarriage between Terik and Tiriki, and probably in large measure have been responsible for the Terik and Tiriki maintaining discrete linguistic and cultural identities through the generations in spite of their intense military, political, and ritual interaction.

In the years that followed the Tiriki themselves initiated new groups of Abaluyia immigrants into the Terik-Tiriki age groups in sufficient numbers so that the Abaluyia Tiriki came to outnumber the Nilo-Hamitic Terik. Today the total of 40,000 Abaluyia Tiriki outnumber the Terik by perhaps ten to one. Mixed Terik-Tiriki communities, however, are still found along the eastern and southern borders of present-day Tiriki tribal Location, and the Tiriki continue to recognize and respect the Terik as the people who first permitted straggling remnants of Abaluyia lineages to settle in the region, and first initiated Abaluyia men into the Terik age groups.

The Social Significance of Tiriki Age Groups

There are seven named Tiriki age groups parallel to those of the Nandi-speaking peoples. Each group embraces an age span of approximately fifteen years. The system is cyclical, a span of about 105 years being covered from the time a named group starts through the cycle to the time when that name appears again at the cycle bottom. Initiation occurs every four or five years, thereby forming three or four subdivisions within each age group. Youths are not initiated until after they have reached puberty, and initiation entails both circumcision and a period of seclusion of about six months' duration. Before the abolition of tribal warfare by the British, the age group immediately senior to the initiate age group carried out the offensive raiding. At fifteen-year intervals ceremonies were held which handed over the functions of an age group
THE DIFFUSION OF AGE-GROUP ORGANIZATION IN EAST AFRICA

to the group immediately junior to it. Following such a ceremony the warriors gave up cattle-raiding and confined their military activities primarily to defensive action and advisory roles. The former retired warriors in turn moved into the succeeding role of judicial elders, while the former judges became ritual elders. Thus there were

Tiriki Age Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1939 Age graded duties (traditional)</th>
<th>Age groups</th>
<th>Membership age span (approx.)</th>
<th>Modern age graded social roles</th>
<th>Membership age span (approx.)</th>
<th>Age groups</th>
<th>Age graded duties (traditional)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elders (deceased or senile)</td>
<td>KABALACH</td>
<td>91-105</td>
<td>Senile or Deceased</td>
<td>91-105</td>
<td>GOLONGOLO</td>
<td>Elders (deceased or senile)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual elders</td>
<td>GOLONGOLO</td>
<td>71-90</td>
<td>Ritual elders</td>
<td>70-90</td>
<td>JIMINIGATI</td>
<td>Ritual elders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judicial elders</td>
<td>JIMINIGATI</td>
<td>56-70</td>
<td>Judicial elders</td>
<td>56-70</td>
<td>NTONJE</td>
<td>Judicial elders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elder warriors</td>
<td>NTONJE</td>
<td>41-55</td>
<td>Administrators or away at work</td>
<td>41-55</td>
<td>MATINA</td>
<td>Elder warriors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warriors</td>
<td>MATINA</td>
<td>26-40</td>
<td>Away at work</td>
<td>26-40</td>
<td>JUMA</td>
<td>Warriors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiated</td>
<td>JUMA</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>In school and work</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Initiated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uninitiated</td>
<td>SAWE</td>
<td>0-10</td>
<td>Away at work</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Uninitiated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

four distinct age-graded roles (in addition to that of the new groups in the course of formation), each fulfilled in turn by succeeding age groups. To recapitulate, these roles were: warriors, retired or elder warriors, judicial elders, and ritual elders.

The Tiriki continued to accept and utilize—indeed to cherish and venerate—the Terik-type initiation and age-group organization even after they had grown to outnumber the Terik several-fold. There are primarily two reasons for this. First, the Abaluyia in general stood in awe of Nilo-Hamitic bravery and prowess in battle.
Traditional history of the Abaluyia tribes is replete with accounts of their having been pillaged and slaughtered not only by Nandi-speaking groups, but also by the fierce, far-ranging Masai. Membership in any organization which proved both to grant permanent alliance with a Nilo-Hamitic tribe and also to supply effective Nilo-Hamitic military knowledge could hardly have failed to retain the allegiance of people with such a background.

Second, the Abaluyia recruits to the Terik age groups came initially as individuals, families, and lineage segments, but not on a lineage or clan basis. Consequently, the traditional Abaluyia practice of organizing their communities primarily on the basis of lineage and clan affiliation was not able to operate effectively. The Tiriki successfully retained the typical Abaluyia lineage- and clan-centred social organization in most areas of life. Lineage and clan ties, for example, remained the primary organizational framework for their major religious activities (the ancestor cult), the ownership and inheritance of land and livestock, and the regulation of marriage. In the military and political realms, however, the Terik age-group derived loyalties came to prevail. When the British administration was first established in Tiriki around 1900, military regiments and nearly all community (lukiya) activities were organized on a multi-clan basis, in which all clans were regarded as intrinsically equal. Age-group membership, which cross-cut clan affiliations, served as the principal basis of military and community corporate action.

The Tiriki age groups continue to function to this day as discrete, graded social entities, but the social functions of the age grades have, of course, changed somewhat. The general nature of these changes is indicated in the accompanying chart. The succession of the age groups from one grade to the next is no longer marked by a special ceremony and simply occurs automatically every fifteen years or so whenever a new age group is opened to initiation.

The pattern which developed in Tiriki of allegiance to both clan and age group occasionally leads to conflict of loyalties. Tiriki is divided at the local level into territorially discrete multi-clan communities. Each community is presided over judicially and ritually by elders who hold their positions solely on the basis of age and suitable personal attributes. In contrast to the situation among the other Abaluyia tribes of North Nyanza, clan affiliation is not the basis for local authority in Tiriki. If, however, one clan is more numerous in a Tiriki community, members of that clan usually support each other, everything else being equal, and, by virtue of their numbers, tend to dominate local affairs. No formalized rule of community exogamy exists in Tiriki; indeed it is considered auspicious for an immigrant male to take a wife from the community into which he has moved. Most headmen, however, are of lineage segments which have been resident in the same community for a generation or more; and in such cases, the difficulties of endogamous marriages seem generally to outweigh the advantages. Marriage establishes a highly formalized, reserved, and typically, rather hostile relationship between the parents of the bride and groom, which is abrogated only after the bridewealth has been fully paid, the bride has borne her husband at least three children, and her family has finally presented the husband's family with the hind quarter of a bull or cow. Thus intra-community marriage, though permitted, establishes a situation which puts a strain on co-operation and easy relationship between the elders, and this probably underlies, in part at least, its infrequency.
THE DIFFUSION OF AGE-GROUP ORGANIZATION IN EAST AFRICA 105

Circumcision rites and the traditional auguries and sacrifices at the sacred groves (gabagaratye) are organized and conducted both on a multi-clan and on a multi-community sub-tribal (lusomo) basis. Thus, they serve not only to provide the traditional basis for social solidarity which cross-cuts clan loyalties, but also subordinate the community to a larger social collectivity.

Only people who have been initiated may be included in age-group activities; group members may be cursed and expelled for various well-defined crimes, witchcraft being probably the most common. The age-group structure, which extends to all Titiki, is the basis of Titiki tribal identity; every age-group member feels that loyalty to this organization comes before everything else; and whenever a choice must be made between the age groups and other affiliations, either indigenous or introduced, the age-group loyalties almost always prevail.

The Titiki, in spite of their completely alien language and culture, have apparently always been regarded as comrades and equals by their Terik hosts and tutors. Since the Titiki have become the numerically dominant group, they have retained with pride a strong feeling of comradeship with the Terik and continue to honour them as their traditional military partners and former mentors. The Titiki-Terik alliance is a case of a bi-cultural society where both groups have over a considerable period of time continued to interact with and view each other on a basis of social equality.

The Persistence of Gusii Social Organization

The Gusii are a larger group than the Titiki. Their population was estimated at 75,000 by the first British administrators in 1907, and at present it is rapidly approaching 300,000. They constitute a Bantu island in a sea of Nilotic and Nilo-Hamitic groups: Luo to the north, west, and south, Masai to the south-east, and Kipsigis to the east and north-east. This isolation from peoples of similar language and culture seems to have given them a somewhat greater unity than other stateless Bantu societies of the area; unlike the Abaluyia, they did unite in common defence efforts against unrelated groups. Such alliances were neither permanent nor frequent, however, and internecine warfare was common.

According to their traditional history, the Gusii came from the north, near Mount Elgon, and wandered through the Kano plain along Lake Victoria to their present location in the South Nyanza highlands. Some of the most common names given to girls nowadays are said to be taken from the names of plants seen by the ancient Gusii on the dry lake plain. The middle of the eighteenth century is the most likely period for Gusii entry into the highlands they now inhabit. This area appears to have been previously unoccupied, but the Gusii soon found limits to their penetration. At the south-western corner, where the highlands drop off into hot savannahs, they encountered the Masai, who succeeded in isolating one group of Gusii and forcing them into Kipsigisland, where they were incorporated and assimilated into the group. At some point after that, the Gusii left uninhabited a sizeable strip of highland at the border of Masai country, and the two tribes seem to have had little subsequent contact.

In their early encounters with the Kipsigis too, the main body of Gusii suffered some setbacks, losing the land which is now called Litein in Kipsigisland. They still retained a large and fertile area to call their own, however, and on this they apparently thrived. Although cattle were important in their economy, the Gusii were known as
prosperous agriculturalists to whom the Luo and Kipsigis turned for food supplies in time of famine. The Kipsigis are said to have traded children and women to the Gusii when famine struck; the Luo exchanged pots and salt for Gusii grain.

In at least part of the nineteenth century, the Gusii were apparently quite successful in their military activity against surrounding tribes. They frequently raided the Luo for cattle; in fact it was one such successful raid which brought them under British rule after the turn of the century. The Kipsigis raided Gusii for cattle, but the latter inflicted a momentous defeat on the former when (around 1880) they joined forces with the Luo and Kuria at the battle of Mogori to massacre large numbers of Kipsigis. Contemporary Kipsigis admit this defeat and claim that it caused them to unify their military organization. When the British arrived in Gusiland more than a quarter of a century later, Gusii triumphantly showed them weapons and shields taken from the bodies of slain Kipsigis at Mogori. Thus the Gusii did better than hold their own against their neighbours.

There were peaceful relations as well as warfare between the Gusii and surrounding tribes. The formerly pastoral Kipsigis claim that Gusii introduced the short-handled hoe among them, and there is other evidence that the Kipsigis learned a good deal about agriculture from Gusii. There was some intermarriage, facilitated by the fact that both tribes practised circumcision and clitoridectomy. The Gusii claim that the ‘evil eye’ (okobiriria) was brought to them by Kipsigis women (it is the major form of malevolent magic among the Kipsigis) and they came to use the term muren (from the Kipsigis muren, ‘warrior’) in one of their male initiation songs. Nevertheless, Gusii culture shows few signs of Kipsigis influence. By contrast, Gusii recognize four of their seven tribes as having been culturally influenced by the Luo, and even the speech of the ‘pure’ Gusii contains some Luo loanwords. It was mentioned above that the Gusii took Luo as allies in their major battle against the Kipsigis. In this connexion, it is interesting that the Luo have neither age groups nor initiation ceremonies.

In their insular and prosperous condition, the Gusii were able to keep intact the localized lineage system which has broken down among so many of the eastern Bantu. Their territorially discrete clans were, for the most part, autonomous military units which fought one another as well as outsiders. Each clan (samala) was also exogamous and the widest descent group within which kinship terminology was used. The entire Gusii social system was based on patrilineal descent groups and their interrelations. This has been well described by Mayer, who also notes the existence of chieftainship and non-kin political ties in the important Gusii tribe of Getutu. There, however, immigrants from other Gusii tribes were allowed in as ‘dwellers’ (abameteyi) in return for their military support of the host lineage and its leaders. In no case did functioning age groups exist.

---

1 This is mentioned by Peristiany, op. cit., pp. 162–4, as the battle of Ngoine. Kipsigis informants confirmed this account in 1917.

2 The presence of clitoridectomy among the Gusii, and its absence among the Tiriki—a major cultural difference between the two groups—should have served to tie the Gusii more closely to the Kipsigis and to act as a barrier between the Tiriki and Terik.

That the Tiriki were nevertheless more influenced by their Nilo-Hamitic neighbours than the Gusii indicates that clitoridectomy in particular and intermarriage in general were not significant factors in the aspects of diffusion discussed here.

THE DIFFUSION OF AGE-GROUP ORGANIZATION IN EAST AFRICA

The Gusii did have annual male initiation ceremonies involving circumcision, and in that respect resembled their Nilo-Hamitic neighbours more than they did the Luo. All Gusii boys initiated in one year recognized themselves as being members of a group bearing the name given to that year, but the group never gathered or took collective action of any kind. Its only significance was that two boys or men circumcised in the same year, regardless of clan membership or locality, could establish upon meeting a ‘pal’ (omokiar) relationship with each other, the hallmark of which was abusive joking.¹ Such relationships had no effect on the overall structure of group loyalties as exhibited in warfare and feuding, for this was based on the lineage principle.

Male initiation is a good example of the customs which differentiate the Gusii from the Tiriki and the Nilo-Hamites. First of all, Gusii initiation is annual, for there is no thought of having ‘enough’ boys to form a group before an initiation ceremony can be held. Secondly, it does not bring together large groups of people, for it is organized on a local community basis and sequentially, with communities in the west performing it before those to the east of them, in the manner of a chain reaction. During the post-circumcision seclusion, two or three boys share a hut in the homestead of one of them. Thirdly, the ‘meaning’ of initiation for boys seems to be one of inducing them into full membership in the local agnatic group and instilling in them respect for lineage elders and for the inter-generational taboos cherished by the Gusii. Thus the initiation of Gusii males is local, individual, and connected with the family and lineage system rather than with corporate age groups.

Contemporary Gusii social life is still largely based on particularistic lineage principles rather than on universalistic principles of any kind, including age. In the part of Nyaribari tribe that was investigated, local communities (amasage) are composed of members of a single clan and are thus completely exogamous. Though now bounded by communities of other clans, they have little social contact (outside specific marital and affinal relationships) with their out-clan neighbours. Generational distinctions are stressed, but they serve to stratify the local lineage or local community rather than to establish links across boundaries of these groups. In fact, generational distinctions, involving kinship terminology and avoidance behaviour, are an integral part of the lineage system, not an independent organizational aspect of the social system. When the elders of a community gather for judicial purposes, they think of themselves as lineage elders (abagaaka begesaku), even though a government-appointed official from outside the lineage may be in charge of the proceedings. The segmentary lineage structure thus remains the framework on which Gusii social behaviour is based.

Summary and Conclusions

Although the Tiriki and Gusii have many social and cultural characteristics in common which suggest a high degree of past similarity, they currently exhibit the following specific differences:

1. The Tiriki have a system of organized and corporate age groups; the Gusii do not.

2. Male initiation rites have a ‘national’ significance for the Tiriki; they involve

large groups of boys, some degree of interlocal co-ordination, and represent a point of entry into the national system of age groups. Gusii initiation sites for boys are small-scale, locally organized, and connected with adult performance in kinship and lineage roles.

3. Tiriki local communities have a multi-clan membership and are somewhat endogamous. The Gusii have single-clan, exogamous communities.

4. For the Tiriki, age groups and local communities, which cross-cut descent groups, have prior claims on the loyalty of individuals. For the Gusii, descent groups are the central focus of loyalty, being congruent with local units and free of interference by groups based on universalistic principles.

We attribute these differences to the Tiriki borrowing of Terik age-group organization in the eighteenth century and their retention of age groups during a period in which the Gusii did not take the opportunity to borrow age-group organization from their neighbours. Since both societies were exposed to neighbouring peoples with virtually identical age-group systems, the critical historical question is, Why did the Tiriki borrow age groups while the Gusii did not? A comparison of the data presented above suggests that the problem must be viewed primarily in terms of the requirements for survival and defence in the face of inter-tribal warfare, and that three factors are of the greatest importance:

1. Population size. The Gusii (current population: 275,000–300,000) are not only much larger than the Tiriki (current population: 40,000) but also almost twice as numerous as their Nilo-Hamitic neighbours, the Kipsigis. In the period during which they borrowed age groups from the Terik, the Tiriki were a tiny group, dwarfed by the Nandi and even by the smaller Terik. This gross difference between Gusii and Tiriki has two implications: (a) It means that the Tiriki were in much greater need of allies to survive in a situation of intertribal warfare than the Gusii were. (b) It means that Tiriki interacted with the Terik as individuals who became at least partially assimilated to Terik culture, while the Gusii for the most part interacted with the Kipsigis as large organized groups. In fact, the Gusii constituted a large enough population to be able to lose a sizeable group of individuals, who fled to Kipsigisland (as fugitives from the Masai) and became assimilated to Kipsigis culture, without affecting the main body of Gusii.

2. Adequacy of defence. The Tiriki, apart from simply being a small group, were refugees and were vulnerable to attack from several sides by nearby tribal groups. Even with their alliance with the Terik, their military successes were not notable and defence continued to be a serious problem. The Gusii, on the other hand, managed to inflict serious defeats on neighbouring tribal groups and also established a no-man’s-land frontier with the Masai which gave them a measure of security from attack by that bellicose people. Thus the Gusii were able to combat effectively or keep at a distance their major enemies, while the Tiriki were pressed in upon by military forces which they could not keep entirely at bay.

3. Nature of available allies. In the rather anarchic and desperate situation in which the Tiriki (or their early predecessors) found themselves, the only tribe which initiated an offer of alliance was Terik, which made initiation and age-group formation a condition of that alliance. The Gusii, who had much less need for allies, found them in times of emergency among the numerous Luo, who had neither age groups
not initiation ceremonies. Therefore a military alliance with the Luo was not only
temporary but involved no requirement that the Gusii change their military traditions
or organizations.

This comparison of Tiriki and Gusii can be used to generate expectations about
what may be found in a broader comparative analysis of factors determining ac-
ceptance or rejection of Nilo-Hamitic age groups by Bantu tribes of Kenya and
Tanganyika. We expect that the Bantu tribes which did not adopt Nilo-Hamitic age
groups were either larger than those that did or were better able to defend themselves
against the Nilo-Hamites by virtue of military skill or effective physiographic barriers
(e.g. mountains, escarpments), or both. The availability of military allies which did
not have age groups might also be a factor, although we suspect that it was more
important in the Gusii situation than elsewhere. Given the general military prowess
of the Nilo-Hamites and the ease with which age-group organization can be borrowed,
it seems likely that a Bantu group which did not have a clear advantage in terms of
size, defensive capacity, or strong allies lacking age groups, would tend to imitate
the successful Nilo-Hamitic military organization and initiate far-reaching changes in
their social structure. It is to be hoped that future publications on East African age
groups will contain enough historical material to test the validity of this hypothesis.

Résumé

LA DIFFUSION DE L’ORGANISATION PAR CLASSES D’ÂGE EN
AFRIQUE ORIENTALE: ÉTUDE COMPARATIVE

L’ethnographie du Kenya et du Tanganyika présente un problème de grande importance
pour l’étude de l’histoire culturelle et l’organisation sociale: pour quelle raison certains
peuples de langue bantoue ont-ils emprunté à leurs voisins non-bantous, l’organisation par
classes d’âge et les rituels y afférents, tandis que d’autres peuples bantous de la même
région ne l’ont pas fait? On ne peut pas expliquer cette différence simplement en fonction
de la proximité des peuples nilo-chamitiques, car ces derniers sont entrés en contact avec
tous les groupes bantous de l’intérieur de la région: il y a eu réaction réciproque assez
intensive avec certains des groupes qui n’ont pas emprunté cette organisation. Dans le but
de déterminer les facteurs qui interviennent dans la répartition des classes d’âge nilo-
chamitiques chez les Bantous du Kenya et du Tanganyika, des exemples bien déterminés
de rapports bantou-nilo-chamitiques sont étudiés, notamment ceux des Tiriki et Gusii
de langue bantoue du Kenya avec les Terik et Kipsigis de langue nandi. Les Tiriki, un
groupe abaluvia, ont adopté le système de classes d’âge des Terik qui reste une particu-
larité saillante de leur système social. Les Gusii, peuple bantou du Nyanza méridional,
on ont un contact intensif avec les Kipsigis, mais ils n’ont pas emprunté leur organisation
de classes d’âge. Les Tiriki et les Gusii ont plusieurs caractéristiques sociales et culturelles
communes et les différences entre eux peuvent être expliquées par l’emprunt par les Tiriki
de l’organisation par classes d’âge des Terik au cours du dix-huitième siècle. Une com-
paraison des données laisse supposer que le problème des raisons pour lesquelles les Tiriki
ont adopté des classes d’âge et les Gusii ne l’ont pas fait doit être envisagé essentiellement
en fonction des conditions requises pour assurer la survivance et la défense dans les guerres
entre tribus. Les Gusii sont non seulement plus importants que les Tiriki, mais ils sont aussi
presque deux fois plus nombreux que leurs voisins nilo-chamitiques, les Kipsigis. Par
conséquent, ils avaient moins besoin d’alliés que les Tiriki qui étaient plus vulnérables en face des groupes de tribus avoisinantes. La seule tribu qui a pris l’initiative de leur offrir une alliance fut celle des Terik, qui ont imposé l’initiation et l’organisation par classes d’âge comme conditions de cette alliance. Les Gusii, par contre, lorsqu’ils avaient besoin d’alliés, les ont trouvés chez les Luo qui n’avaient ni classes d’âge ni rituels d’initiation. Il paraît donc vraisemblable que les tribus bantoues qui n’ont pas adopté les classes d’âge nilo-chamitiques étaient, soit plus nombreuses que celles qui l’ont fait, soit plus capables de se défendre contre les peuples nilo-chamitiques, en raison de leur force militaire ou des barrières physiographiques effectives, ou des deux à la fois. Un groupe bantou plus faible aurait eu tendance à imiter l’organisation militaire nilo-chamitique qui s’est avérée victorieuse et à instaurer de profondes modifications dans sa structure sociale.