YOUTHS AS ELDERS AND INFANTS AS ANCESTORS: THE COMPLEMENTARITY OF ALTERNATE GENERATIONS, BOTH LIVING AND DEAD, IN TIRIKI, KENYA, AND IRIGWE, NIGERIA¹

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A RECENT paper by Igor Kopytoff (Kopytoff, 1971) argues that Africanists have been led by their Western conceptual ethnocentrism into creating a false dichotomy between 'elders' and 'ancestors' in their descriptions and analyses of African societies. He asserts that this has obscured the fact that 'elders' and 'ancestors' are conceptually as well as terminologically united in many African cultural and social traditions. There are flaws in his assertion, perhaps the most serious of which has been ably countered by James Brain in a recent article (Brain, 1973) where he demonstrates that many, if not most, African societies make explicit and clear-cut distinctions both linguistically and conceptually between 'elders' (both living and dead) and 'ancestral spirits'. Nevertheless Kopytoff's article effectively argues that Western scholars have had a tendency to overlook indigenous conceptual continuities between living and dead elders, and this prompted me to re-examine my data on the Tiriki of Kenya and the Irigwe of Nigeria which deal with the traditional relations of the living and the dead (including the not yet born). I found that these relationships, though strikingly different in the two societies, are nevertheless in each case patterned in ways that are congruent with relationships between both adjacent and alternate generations.

I shall start by examining the case of the Tiriki, who number roughly 40,000 people, where published material is already available on both inter-generational and elder-ancestor relationships (Sangree, 1965: 64-5; 1966: 30-5, 45-6). Tiriki is one of the score or so of 'Abaluyia' Bantu-speaking peoples with predominantly grain-based economies located between Mount Elgon and Lake Victoria in western Kenya. Traditionally Tiriki political affairs were regulated principally by a system of semi-generational graded age-groups which they borrowed from the neighbouring 'Nilo-Hamitic' Terik and Nandi. Clan and sub-clan affiliations of a characteristically Abaluyia type, however, served as the basis for a set of crucial authority relationships in the religious and economic realms.

Traditional Tiriki religious beliefs are quite in harmony with the prevailing Abaluyia and general Bantu idea that the spirits of the deceased have a pervasive influence over the fortunes of the living. A crucial aspect of the relationship the Tiriki feel exists between the living and the dead is articulated by the distinction they make between the fairly recently deceased paternal and mother's agnatic ancestors (*baguga*) and the generalized ancestral spirits (*misambwa*). It is this latter

¹ This article is a revision and expansion of a paper read at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting at Toronto, November 1972. The field-work on which it was based was carried out in Tiriki, Kenya, between December 1954 and

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collectivity rather than the recently deceased forebears who are perceived by the Tiriki to be the font of life and well-being. A ritual elder does not expect the ancestral spirits (*misambwa*) to hear his supplications directly; he believes he can effectively reach them only through the intercession of the recently deceased elders who in turn are led to do this by the pleas of the living elders. The relationship between the ancestral spirits, recently deceased forebears, and the living elders is a direct extension of the strongly patterned and formalized set of relationships between three alternate terminologically equated generations, namely the grandchildren, the grandparents, and the deceased great-great-grandparents, all of whom are called *baguga*. I have labelled this the '*baguga* triad' (Sangree, 1966: 45).

The complement of this *baguga* triad of three alternating generations is a second triad consisting of three adjacent generations, the grand-parental, parental, and filial. Here the relations are essentially economic and authoritarian in nature. A child must respect and obey his father; and the father in turn is expected to discipline his children, provide for their economic needs, and arrange for the bridewealth of his sons.

Competition between siblings over cattle and other property is checked and arbitrated by the parental generation, while competition between father and son over cattle is controlled primarily by intervention and arbitration by members of the son's grandparental generation. To be sure, members of this senior-most living generation are often entering their dotage and growing more and more dependent economically on their middle-aged sons. The middle-aged men, however, are dependent upon their ageing fathers for leadership in the ritual sphere. Thus the senior elders retain a potent weapon with which to guard both their own and their grandchildren's rights. The tense, ambiguous grandfather-father-son relationship is represented, the Tiriki say, by the three ancestral stones found at every ancestral shrine. One Tiriki elder told me it was just like Christianity. 'One stone stands for the homestead father, one for his senior son, and one for the Holy Ghost', he said. It seems likely to me that these three 'stones of the ancestors' (*majina gi misambwa*) as the Tiriki call them, derive their principal emotional appeal and effectiveness as religious symbols by covertly representing the harmonious *baguga* triad.

Grandparents rejoice in the birth of their grandchildren who they say will be the ones to assure that they are remembered when they die. No Tiriki ever receives the family name of a living relative; instead grandparents have the responsibility of finding the name of a deceased family forebear which suits the newborn and does not appear to cause a shower of tears when bestowed on the infant a few days after birth. The grandparents take satisfaction in knowing that the infant they have named may eventually become an elder who will pray to them by name at the ancestral shrines, and in turn bestow their names on newborn children. The traditionalist Tiriki does not believe either in personal reincarnation or immortality of the spirit or body; but active remembrance and prayer by one's grandchildren, and the rebestowal of one's name upon a living person again and again down through the ages, are sought for imitations of immortality. In addition, every Tiriki male, upon the birth of his first son, views himself as the founder of a lineage, and hopes that his name will eventually be exalted as the founder of a clan.

Thus a Tiriki, knowing he himself cannot bridge the chasm of death, sees his grandchildren as his personal link with the eternal and vice versa. His grandchildren

(*baguga*) will remember him after he dies and pass his name on to their grandchildren (*baguga*); and he in return, as one of their deceased grandparents (*baguga*), will serve as their link with the ancestral spirits (*misambwa*), thereby furthering their mortal well-being.

I shall now turn to Irigwe in Nigeria, a people of around 20,000, situated near Jos, roughly 2,000 air miles from Tiriki. Both speak highly divergent and in no way mutually intelligible languages of the Benue-Congo subfamily (Greenberg, 1966: 7-9) and both practise variant forms of hoe agriculture mainly of grain crops. Neither these, however, nor other cultural similarities provide sufficient basis for a 'controlled' comparison anchored either on 'common origins' or the impingement of common external political or ecological forces. Thus the underlying commonality which makes this comparison between two such minimally related groups valid is, I believe, a structural one. I am examining the manner in which a structural universal is socially articulated, and ritually and symbolically reified in the two societies. I am using 'structural universal' in a sense suggested to me by Radcliffe-Brown (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952: 195-6; 1957: 130-1) and by subsequent writings of Fortes and others (Fortes, 1969: 45-50). The structural universal I am examining in this instance is the conflict inherent between adjacent generations.

In Irigwe we find, just as we did in Tiriki, a terminological equating of grandchildren, grandparents, and deceased elders, with the tern *ño* being used in Irigwe both referentially and vocatively in all these contexts. But the nature and tone of the interrelationships between the alternate generations does not contrast so much with those between adjacent generations as in Tiriki, and it is noteworthy that the term for 'father' (*be*) rather than that for 'grandfather' is regularly used in Irigwe to address and refer to ritual elders. Irigwe parents have the principal responsibility for finding their newborn a name within a few days of its birth, although they may extend this privilege to grandparents, other relatives, or friends. The infant may be named for any kinsman or friend, living or dead; those who receive a living person's name, however, have the obligation to 'buy' (*se*) the name for themselves at the person's funeral.

Irigwe grandparents characteristically have a lot to do with their grandchildren from infancy on. It is common practice for a grandparent to 'beg' for his or her offspring's second son or second daughter. Usually the 'begged for' grandchild is 'given' to the grandparent at the age of three or so, takes up residence there, and becomes the grandparent's recognized ward. In such cases the grandparent-grandchild relationship becomes virtually indistinguishable from the usual parent-child relationships. Towards their non-adopted grandchildren, however, grandparents are characteristically more demonstrative than parents, and more apt to express open annoyance; also grandfathers in particular are inclined to play the bogey-man, and to make threatening remarks and overtures of an explicitly sexual nature against their pre-adolescent grandchildren of both sexes.

The Irigwe believe that every living person has a 'soul' (*ñwú*) as well as a corporeal 'body' (*rē*). When a person dies rites are performed to ensure that the soul has departed from the corpse which is then put to rest in a lineage crypt. The soul is believed normally to rise to the firmament and eventually become reincarnated in a newborn baby after returning to earth as a shooting star and then entering the womb of a pregnant woman.

The mortuary rites of men and women who have reached middle age are normally concluded by four successive evenings of circle dancing and chanting, to the accompaniment of two or three male drummers, performed by girls and women related to the deceased. The chants have cryptic lyrics which characteristically include such phrases as, 'Where have you gone?', 'Why have you left us?', 'When shall we see you again?' And the accompanying dance steps, although simple and repetitive, are done at a lively tempo. On the fourth and final evening the chanting and dancing start before sunset. All the girls of marriageable age join in, their bodies washed and oiled, and soon the older women and small girls drop out to join the throng of men and youths from near and far who have gathered around the edges of the dance ground to watch. As darkness begins to fall, the mortuary chanting and dancing finally stop once and for all, but after a wait of only a minute or two, the drumming starts again at a more lively and urgent tempo, and the assembled youths rush through the disbanding circle of girls and begin a series of intricate and very energetic impromptu dances which the girls then stand back to watch. Usually this goes on until it gets too dark to see, and then quite suddenly the drumming and dancing stop, youths join their current girl friends waiting among the spectators, and the couples scurry down the paths from the dance ground and quickly disappear into the darkness.

It is not only the youths and girls who enjoy these dances. Comments I overheard elderly participants and spectators make such as, 'Won't the deceased be pleased by this', and 'How pleasant to know that our deaths will also be the occasions for young people to get together in this manner', and also simply, 'How beautiful such times are', all attest to the involvement in and identification with the *amours* of the rising generation by the senior generation, and to the appropriateness in their minds that death among one of their generation should be linked to such activity. These mortuary rites are firmly established in Irigwe as prime occasions for trysting between youthful lovers who look forward to them very much. A favourite aphorism among young Irigwe is, 'It's a tough world when none of the old people die'.

The complementary aspect of this association of old people's deaths with courtship is the linking of births with their reincarnation. The appropriate Irigwe aphorism with which to greet the news that a baby has been born is to exclaim, 'The grave is now two!' In other words, every birth is both a bifurcation and a reincarnation of a deceased forebear. In this apparent paradox we have expressed the Irigwe belief that every human being is the reincarnation of the soul of someone who lived before, and at the same time a new and unique person. There is something tenuous about the relationship of a living person to his soul. This soul, since it also has a continuing prior existence, so to speak, has to be encouraged and induced by certain periodic and occasional rituals to stay around or return to the body of its current incarnation; for the person whose soul leaves him (or her) for long loses strength and becomes particularly subject to death brought by disease, witchcraft, or some other agent.

The Irigwe world view is profoundly dyadic; everything of importance has its obverse aspect. Male and female, parents and children, mortal and immortal, body and soul, disease and health, and so forth, are both 'proof' and objectifications of this underlying principle, in Irigwe eyes; but an Irigwe correlate of this principle is that everything contains within itself aspects of its obverse number (Sangree, 1971: 68-70). For example, it seems reasonable and to be expected by the Irigwe that the

ritual, symbolic, and social separation of the sexes at every turn should also contain clear-cut and explicit exceptions to these separations; also every disease, and every poison, is perceived to contain its own cure or antidote within itself. We have already noted that souls do not long remain unincarnate, nor living beings long separated from their souls. Similarly the opposition of parents and children, that is of adjacent generations, is ameliorated by the adoption of junior grandchildren by grandparents, and also by the association of fatherhood rather than grandfatherhood with positions of ritual authority, even though these are, in fact, nearly always held by members of the senior-most grandparental generation. There is no need for the opposition of adjacent generations to be counter-balanced in Irigwe, as it is in Tiriki, by grandparents serving as special guardians of the rights of their grandchildren.

We have shown that generational subdivisions are of comparatively little significance in structuring of authority relationships in Irigwe. Instead formal authority is characteristically ascribed in any group simply on the basis of the known or putative agnatic seniority of the men involved; and this leader is then referred to and addressed by the group as 'father' (*be*), or 'father of the compound' (*beri*). The Irigwe make no terminological or conceptual distinction between more recently deceased forebears and ancestral spirits comparable to the Tiriki *guga-misambwa* distinction; indeed there are no ancestral shrines, and no ancestor cult, as such. Instead there is a 'soul' cult which inexorably links the living and the dead through the 'souls' they share in common. It is in Irigwe beliefs about the 'soul' that we find the key to understanding the patterned relationships both between the generations of the living, and also between the living and the dead. Elders regard their juniors as possible incarnations of souls of people who have already died who were important to them; and juniors regard their elders as those whose souls may some day be incarnate in beloved ones junior to them. Souls influence other souls, both incarnate and unincarnate, just as living mortals do. To be indifferent about or angry towards a living person is also to be angry or indifferent towards his soul; and an annoyed or angry soul may call another soul away from its incarnation, spelling trouble or death for that incarnation. Those people you are most dependent on in everyday life are also those who through mystical means may most strongly affect your health. It is believed that anger 'in the heart' of a parent or a formally bestowed guardian may bring ill health to a person, and sometimes also to a person's offspring, through the mystical interaction of their souls. Also souls no longer incarnate or just recently incarnated are seen as potential threats to one's health. Thus Irigwe have a compelling reason for treating social relationships with parents and others on whom they feel dependent, and also for treating elderly people and infants, as though their own health, indeed their life, and the welfare of those they love, were at stake.

The Tiriki world is triadic rather than dyadic; for them dualities are innately troublesome and must be subordinated to or at least counter-balanced by some third force or element.² Intergenerational conflict or opposition is resolved in Tiriki, as we have seen, by the *baguga* triad. The grandparental *baguga* are the balance point of the triad; they serve as the ritual elders and mediators between their grandchildren (*baguga*) whom they perceive as those who will be sure to remember them when they

² In this context it is noteworthy that in Tiriki the pubescent or pre-initiation grandchildren are regarded as sexually neuter.

die, and their own grandparents (*baguga*) now dead, but still remembered and regularly besought by them at the homestead ancestral shrines (*lusambwa*). The Irigwe world in contrast to Tiriki is profoundly dyadic. Conflict between adjacent generations is structured in terms of the dependency of the child on the parent. A complementary dichotomy, that between the mortal body and the immortal soul, binds together not only senior and junior generations, but also links the still unborn and the deceased with the living.

Kopytoff does us a service by stressing the structural and cultural continuities between elders and ancestors which are so important in many African societies; but it would do violence to the ethnography of Tiriki, Irigwe, and probably every other African society, to lose sight of the indigenous distinctions between the living and the dead which for the Tiriki and Irigwe, at least, clearly both reflect and reinforce their respective structurings and resolutions of inter-generational conflict.

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Résumé

LES JEUNES GENS EN TANT QU'AÎNÉS ET LES NOUVEAUX-NÉS EN TANT QU'ANCÊTRES

KOPYTOFF (Kopytoff 1971) souligne l'unité des 'ancêtres' et des aînés dans le système des croyances africaines; mais il néglige de noter une unité comparable entre les 'aînés' et les jeunes gens d'une part et les 'morts' et les nouveaux-nés d'autre part, qui caractérise certaines sociétés africaines. En outre, Kopytoff méconnaît l'importance des distinctions que font les indigènes entre les vivants et les morts dans leur manière de structurer et de résoudre les conflits entre générations.

Pour les Tiriki du Kenya le monde constitue une véritable triade par nature et les conflits entre générations sont résolus par une mise en correspondance conceptuelle et structurale entre les grands-parents, les petits-enfants et les arrière-grands-parents.

Le monde, pour les Irigwe du Nigéria révèle, par contraste, un complexe de réalités couplées et les conflits entre les générations sont résolus en mettant l'accent sur l'interdépendance des enfants et des parents d'une part et, d'autre part, sur une interdépendance corps-âme entre les vivants et les morts.

Dans ces deux sociétés, les distinctions que font les indigènes entre les vivants et les morts reflètent et renforcent leurs manières respectives de résoudre les conflits entre générations.

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