

Power and Age: The Case of the Pastoral Maasai Age Class System

Sam Maghimbi
Department of Sociology and Anthropology,
University of Dar Es Salaam
snakora@yahoo.com

Abstract

Spencer (1965, 1988, 1993, 2003) theorizes two distinct strands in the life course of a Maasai male. The first strand is the building of a cattle herd and a family, and the second is developing involvement in the age class system. The second strand is overemphasized in Spencer's analysis of Maasai society. The age class system attracts nearly euphoric attention from Spencer and other authors on the Maasai. This stance has led to a point where the materiality of Maasai life (cattle) is discussed but is hidden behind a discussion of the age system. This article argues that more weight should be given to the first strand of Maasai life mentioned by Spencer. Maasai society may still be largely organized along gerontocratic lines, but nevertheless the power of Maasai men is derived from the cattle herd and from their control of their families.

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About the author

Sam Maghimbi is a professor in the Department of Sociology on Anthropology, College of Social Sciences, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

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Introduction

Paul Spencer is by far the leading author on the age system of the Maasai. The Maasai have been a focus of much anthropological research due to their nomadic pastoral lifestyle. Today few societies contain many pure nomadic pastoralists, but the Maasai model of age organization still attracts many researchers, such as Bodley (2019).

Human beings started abandoning nomadic pastoralism during the Neolithic revolution when food production by means of horticulture or animal husbandry was widely implemented (Ferraro 2006, 7–8). Nomadic pastoralism thus declined in the savanna regions of Africa. The few cultures speaking Nilotic languages who still practise pastoral nomadism include the Nuer, the Turkana, the Ariaal, the Karamojong, and the Maasai. The Maasai have attracted more attention because demographically they are more numerous than the other nomadic pastoralist groups. They have been a distinct cultural group in what is now Kenya and Tanzania for at least four hundred years (Bodley 2019, 125–126). The age model of social organization is common among all the pastoral people in the savanna regions of Africa. Nevertheless, the Maasai age organization system is the most elaborate, and this is also the reason why it continues to attract many anthropologists and other researchers.

According to Bodley (2019), age-based social organization is an age class system in which individuals of similar age are placed in a named group and move as a unit through culturally defined stages of life. Change in age status is clearly marked with specific rituals (Bodley 2019, 125–127).

The Maasai economy is based mainly on cattle. Other animals like goats, sheep, and donkeys are also important. However, the wealth proper in the Maasai culture is cattle. In the family, a few donkeys may be kept as beasts of burden. Goats and sheep (shoats) are kept with the intention of converting them to

cattle when their numbers increase. The focus on cattle in the culture has its explanation in subsistence. Cattle provide milk, which is the staple food, and meat. Cattle have another key function in the sense that they can be converted to wives, which means that they are also directly converted to children and labour power, as it is wives and children who provide labour power in a Maasai family. With the expansion of commercial relations, we see some Maasai men hiring labour to grow crops. This is mostly white corn, which is called maize in Maasailand.

Paul Spencer (1965, 1988, 1993, 2003) and other scholars have spent much effort on describing models of the Maasai age system. While these accounts of the Maasai age system cannot be described as inaccurate, there is one basic problem, and this is the weight given to the age class system. This weight appears to be inflated, because of the assumption of total participation, and exaggerated, its social impact being overrated. It is inflated and exaggerated at the cost of attention to the materiality of Maasai life. In Spencer's discourse, nearly every aspect of Maasai life is attributed to the age system. The deep attention to the age class system hides the materiality of Maasai life, by which we mean the cattle economy behind the age system.

This article does not dispute the organization of Maasai society along gerontocratic lines. However, the line of argument is that the power of Maasai men is derived from their cattle herds and their control of their families, which generate gerontocracy in practice. This power is vividly observed and mentioned by anthropologists like Spencer (1988, 1993), but they fail to situate it in terms of the cattle economy and the domestic economy of the family. This article advances the hypothesis that the interaction between cattle ownership and tight control of the Maasai family is the primary source of Maasai men's power and authority. The gerontocratic line of organization is important in Maasai life, but is in itself

not the source of this power and authority, but rather its organizational form.

The age system and organization in Maasai society

Maasai society is an extreme case of patriarchy. Men rule their families and their rule over women is aided by their formal ownership of cattle and tight control of the cattle economy. It is a well-known phenomenon that extreme patriarchy is generally found among the cattle owning groups of East Africa. This trend extends to nomadic pastoralists like the Maasai and Turkana, and also to agro-pastoralists like the Sukuma and Kuria. The rule of men is not so absolute in groups that are organized matrilineally. In south-eastern Tanzania this includes the Yao, the Makonde, the Zaramo, the Kwere, the Kaguru, the Ngulu, the Makua, the Mwera, the Ngindo, the Matumbi, the Rufiji, the Machinga, the Zigua, the Ndengereko, the Kutu, the Vidunda, the Sagara, the Luguru, the Doe, and the Shirazi (Vuorela 1987). In the matrilineal groups of south-eastern Tanzania, patriarchal structures also exist, since matrilinearity does not directly translate into power in the hands of women (but rather in the hands of men connected to one another through maternal links) (Vuorela 1987, 97–122). What mitigates patriarchy here is the presence of many matrilineal institutions. Divorce is not stigmatized and women can own land and pass it to other women for inheritance. In communities like the Maasai and the Sukuma we see a more oppressive version of patriarchy (Maghimbi 1999, 119). Spencer has described Maasai society in detail, focusing on the Maasai age system. He argues that:

For a Maasai male, there are two quite distinct strands in the life course. The first is as a pastoralist with a very direct involvement in the chequered process of building

up a herd, surviving periods of drought, and establishing a family with striking differences of achievements and wealth. The second strand is a developing involvement with his age-set. The confidence that Maasai display in their culture and their sense of identity as a distinct people is bound up with the second strand which emphasizes the equality of peers and the irrelevance of family and differences in wealth. (Spencer 1993, 149)

Spencer focuses on how the Maasai men are socialized to accommodate direct involvement in the cattle economy. He attempts to show how the Maasai family and the cattle herd provide the economic base upon which the ideology of Maasaihood is built. Nevertheless, throughout his work (1965, 1984, 1988, 1993, 2003), more weight is given to the second strand and there is almost an obsession with age organization. The undue weight given to age organization leads Spencer to spend more time describing the age system than the cattle economy and the family. Nevertheless, he gives a very detailed and original picture of the Maasai age organization and here he must be credited.

Spencer's description of Maasai age organization does not differ from those of other authors, notably Ndagala (1991) and Rigby (1992). Every Maasai man goes through three age classes and their subdivisions or age sets. The system is highly patriarchal; women do not belong to age classes and are excluded from participating in the age class system. There are three distinct classes of age for men, i.e., boys, warriors, and elders. Before the introduction of the colonial state, the *murrain* (warriors) were the protectors of cattle and society and they sometimes conducted expeditions to steal cattle from neighbouring groups. Age classes are named and members of each class carry a distinct style of hand-forged iron spear and

form a fraternity (Larick 1986, cited in Bodley 2019, 128).

Every male first goes through boyhood. During this stage he is too young to herd animals; the stage ends when he is grown up enough to start herding. The shepherding boys aspire to move to the next age stage, which is the warrior class or *murrain*hood; finally, they move on from *murrain*hood to eldership.

Stratification within the age classes and between them is sharp. Opposition between boys and *murrain* (warriors) and between *murrain* and elders can be observed. The social structure of moving up the age classes is not like a conveyor belt where every (similar) object passes through the same process and ends up in the same position. Some boys rebel against the age organization system and they never become successful *murrain* before becoming young elders and finally elders. Boys are expected to become *murrain* after circumcision. Becoming *murrain* also means becoming a man and aspiring to pastoral ideals. Becoming a *murrain* cannot be separated from aspiring to pastoral ideals. Maasai society is organized on regimental lines, but not all boys settle down to become herders. Some boys react to the exhortation and beatings of *murrain* brothers, and fathers, by withdrawing from pastoral life (Spencer 1993, 155; Maghimbi 1988, 129).

In his analysis of age organization, Spencer observed this type of deviance, which is not tied to age. Nevertheless, his age system is described as being so tight that he did not pursue the observation in detail. Those boys who deviate from the regimental discipline of pastoral life disregard the age system and run away from the age divisions of society. Maasai society considers them as wastrels and quite often they run away from cattle herding. Others become wastrels after successfully going through boyhood and *murrain*hood. Given the importance of cattle, wastrels are very unpopular in Maasai society as they appear to threaten the ideal livelihood. The

whole society depends on cattle for a living and wastrels are seen as deviants in the sociological sense (Giddens 1993, 116–117; Spencer 1993, 155).

The way wastrels are treated is one indication that Spencer's first strand has more weight in Maasai men's life than he himself is prepared to accept. Building a herd means sending animals to pastures and this is done by men. When men become wastrels at any of the three age stages, it means a threat to everybody's livelihood. Thus, wastrels are viewed in a harsh way by both men and women. Both Maasai men and women give much weight to the herd within family arrangements; concern with age stratification comes second or even third, as we have no verified reason to list involvement in the age organization as the second priority of Maasai men. Below I shall consider women's participation in subsistence, examining power relations at family level.

A further indication that age organization is given an inflated weight in Maasai life in Spencer's analysis is that a significant minority of young men do not even become *murrain*. These are not only the wastrels mentioned above; there is also a number of Maasai men who arrive at elderhood by some other route than the idealized route of going through all the age groups. For example, *murrain* who are needed by their fathers for herding cattle may skip living in the *manyatta* (see below) and stay at home to look after the father's herd. This may be the case when the father has no younger sons to herd animals, or when the father is too rich in cattle, or both. *Manyatta* are semi-permanent homes in lowland areas which are camps for those who have just been initiated into *murrain*hood. The boy who does not join the *manyatta* thus may become a *murrain* in name only. Some boys may not be spared from camp life but may now and then go home to attend to duties given to them by their father (Spencer 1988, 94).

There is an aspect of social class and not age for the Maasai who are able to bypass the

age organization and become elders and even *loibon* (religious leaders). My own observation is that these are rich Maasai and quite often they come from the Laizer clan. The same observation was made by a Maasai anthropologist/sociologist from Ngorongoro (Saruni Kisiaya), who added that a poor Maasai cannot be elected *loibon* or *laigwenak* (age group spokesman). The rule is that the *laigwenak* and the *loibon* must be rich in cattle. On top of that they are given more cattle gifts by members of the age set they represent. Saruni Kisiaya (who is now a senior *murrain* waiting to become a junior elder) is of the opinion that, in Maasai life, it is cattle which is more important than age organization (Kisiaya, pers. comm.).

In 1993 I observed Maasai kraals near the old Engassumet Wells in Simanjiro district in the heartland of the Maasai community. I was able to interview 67 Maasai men. There was a feeling among these Maasai men that the rich *murrains* are more favoured among their peers. This may contradict some anthropologists' portrayals of the *manyatta* as a republic and the belief that there is equality among the peers in an age group (Spencer 1988, 13). There are many ceremonies which symbolize the various age stages which the Maasai men go through. The Maasai are very clear on who contributes animals for slaughtering in the feasts which accompany those rituals. There is a tendency to respect the richest *murrain* more than others; this custom extends to the elders' age group and even to older men who have been pushed beyond the age organization system because of old age or because all or nearly all of their age group mates are deceased.

The regimental system based on a group of *murrain* was key in olden times, when tribal war, cattle raiding, and counter raiding were common. Cattle raiding was important for poor *murrain* who did not have cattle to pay bride-wealth. Having no cattle can make a Maasai man a career *murrain*, as he would appear to be in no hurry to marry. The camp of *murrain* (*manyatta*) of old times could

have been the inspiration for anthropologists to portray the Maasai social organization as a republic and a democracy (Spencer 1988, 103). However, Maasai society is also experiencing modernization, as was observed by Rigby (1992). The *murrain* may not feel equal amongst one another. The *murrain* from a cattle rich background is more likely to be elected as an age group spokesman in later life. This leader may acquire more political power in eldership and be elected as an arch-spokesman (*laigwenak kitok*). It is the group of middle-aged elders who dominate politically in Maasailand (Spencer 2003, 36).

Spencer is perhaps the most prolific anthropological author on the Maasai. All his works refer to the age organization of the Maasai (see, e.g., Spencer 1965, 1988, 1993, 2003). A detailed examination of Spencer's work would suggest that he is advancing the view that Maasai society rests upon age or gerontocracy (Rigby 1992, 8–9). By putting too much emphasis on age organization Spencer appears to be describing old Maasai society before modernization. There could have been a time when Maasai society was egalitarian (amongst initiated men), but even this is only an assumption. The cattle rich man has always been respected and powerful in Maasai society. The problem of having a speculative view of an old society is not new. It is a trap which scholars fall into when they rely on informants describing in hindsight (and often in an idealized fashion) what their society was like in bygone eras. Informants who are members of current society could be referring to an ideal old society which is constructed out of the old – and possibly as an ideal advocated for the future. As a consequence, scholars may entertain a kind of idealization of the simplicity of society at an earlier stage, which may be imagined to be egalitarian and democratic. Isaiah Berlin examined this kind of thinking and saw that sometimes scholars crave for simplicity and fraternity, a tendency that ultimately goes back as far as Rousseau (Berlin 1978, 223).

Spencer may have been theorizing about age organization as it was in late nineteenth and early twentieth century, since this is the idealized time that his informants were referring to. Consequently, Rigby attacked Spencer's analysis as being ahistorical. While he acknowledges that Spencer is a major authority on the Maasai, he accuses him of ignoring almost entirely the history of their social formation for three hundred or more years (Rigby 1992, 8–9, 31).

Any careful reader of Spencer will conclude that he explains Maasai social organization almost entirely on the basis of their age set system. For him the age system does govern all aspects of society. It is inflexible and determines a personal biography in Maasai society (Spencer 1988, 20, 23; Rigby 1992, 31). Spencer's obsession with the age system also leads him to make incongruous statements on the Maasai. For example, he implies that there is little capitalist development among the Maasai because the market economy is incompatible with the age system. His formulations are also sometimes vague. This is the case when he argues that the economy of the Maasai is one of rudimentary capitalism and that their pastoral economy is essentially a family enterprise. Spencer's model of family enterprise provides an economic backcloth against which he assesses the dynamics of what has proven to be a highly resilient alternative to the market economy (Spencer 1988, 19–20, 33; Rigby 1992, 31–32). It is not quite clear how rudimentary capitalism can also be highly resilient in the market economy and how the age system is incompatible with a "truly" capitalist system. The answer here is again found in Spencer's emphasis on idealized age organization in Maasai society, as if it had been immune to change. Rigby was particularly irritated by Spencer's assertion that the Ilmatapato Maasai:

...share a pride in their past, but have no developed sense of their

own history or of the changing opportunities of the contemporary scene. (Spencer, cited in Rigby 1992, 179–180)

Maasai society has undergone tremendous change since German and British colonization at the end of the nineteenth century. As Rigby claims, it appears that Spencer ignores much of this change and this could be due to his obsession with an age system which for him was fixed in time and space (Rigby 1992, 31).

The core of the Maasai age system is the stage of *murrainhood*, which comes after boyhood. Spencer describes this stage and the third stage of eldership. Nevertheless, he (1988, 1993, 2003) overstates the place of the *murrain* age group in the overall social structure. The regimental system of the *murrain* Spencer is describing may have been in place before British and German colonization. A regiment of soldiers is a source of social power. The old *murrain* used this power to raid for cattle. However, this raiding benefited poor *murrain* most, as their fathers had no cattle for their bride-wealth. It is thus possible that poorer *murrain* were more active in the regimental system. The regimental system of the *murrain* declined after British and German colonization. Spencer (2003, 205) is aware of the decline of the *manyatta* institution, but in describing the Maasai age system he never indicates that the meaning of the regimental system has diminished. The colonial and nationalist governments in Kenya and Tanzania have their own armies and no modern state would tolerate a parallel regimental order to its own.

Therefore, in an analysis that is sensitive to historical change, the weight given to age groups must be qualified. The *murrain* is what gave the Maasai age system its attraction to researchers. The idea of young men becoming adults and marrying and having their own family households is common for all the ethnic groups of East Africa, but the

regimental system is not. Nevertheless, many other groups had an age class of young men before marriage. The functions and collective expectations of this age class varied between groups. Some groups had similar or even more elaborate warrior age groups than the Maasai. Among the Gweno and Asu to the east of Maasailand the young men were physically removed from the community and confined to a forest camp where women and other members of the community were not allowed to go. Here, for up to a year, they received military training on how to become responsible men heading their own families. The military training was more thorough and dangerous than the training Maasai *murrain* received in the *manyatta*. Interestingly, this training specifically included learning the Maasai style of war, which was close combat with sword, spear, and shield. The Gweno and Asu usually fought from a distance with poisoned arrows and bows. They discovered that the Maasai were better at close range and therefore they added the sword and sometimes the spear and shield to their arsenal in case close combat became necessary when fighting the Maasai. The Gweno and Asu regimental system almost died with German colonialism. The point here is that there is nothing particularly special or strange about Maasai age organization, since it was a wide-spread pattern. The Kuria Bantu speakers to the north-west of the Maasai used to have a strong age based regimental organization, like the Maasai, before German colonization. Their age organization has weakened with modernization. Nevertheless, Kuria young men (their equivalent to the *murrain*) still today occasionally raid the Maasai for cattle.

After the decline of the militarism of the *manyatta* in the course of colonialism, the importance of the *murrain* or warrior age class also went down, although there are still many rituals and ceremonies associated with their age group. The ideology of the age organization is strong in a culture which changes slowly

compared to the surrounding cultures, like the Kuria, Gweno, and Asu cases mentioned above. Nevertheless, there are no grounds for overstating the role of this age group in the Maasai society and economy. Rich Maasai adult men are the class that matter in Maasai power relations and in their economy. Even the *manyatta* camps and the rituals associated with *murrainhood* depend on the rich married group, who have to supply cattle for the food of *murrain* camped in the *manyatta*.

Spencer portrayed age mates as treating one another as equals. He also argues that beyond this there is a rigid system of stratification based on age differences (Spencer 2003, 29–30). But stratification can also be observed among age mates. As we saw earlier, there is a tendency in the *murrain* class to favour the rich *murrain*. This extends to married Maasai men and older men. This is not a secret in Maasai society but it seems not to have been noticed by Spencer. There was more stratification in Maasai society based on wealth accumulation (not age organization) than Spencer's account would show. Stratification according to wealth is becoming a central reality today and this was obvious from the 1990s onwards when Peter Rigby (1992) wrote his major work on the Iparakayo Maasai. The *murrain* custom of sharing material things (e.g., meat) as equals does not remove class stratification on the basis of wealth. Moreover, beyond the *manyatta*, when the *murrain* starts marrying it is the man who is cattle rich that is more respected.

The many Maasai seen by Rigby in Nairobi and the many Maasai we see working in Dar es Salaam city today are now only marginally involved in the age set organization. They are poor *murrain* trying to work and save money to buy cattle and to be able to marry and become successful adult men. Many Maasai women can also be seen selling beadwork and jewellery in Nairobi, Arusha, and Dar es Salaam. Rigby saw such women in Namanga town on the border between Kenya and Tanzania in the 1980s and 1990s. He went

on to ridicule Spencer, who could not see social change among the Matapato Maasai in the same area (Rigby 1992 178–179; Spencer 1988).

In my interviews carried out in 1997 I witnessed steady, though slow, social change. The power of money was taking its place in Maasai society. Maasai men with many animals were also taking the upper hand in farming. They were able to sell animals and hire what they called ‘Swahili’ tractor drivers to plough maize fields and to do all the farm work for the Maasai men. I was also informed that in Kajiado in Kenya there were big capitalist Maasai farmers who had invested in wheat farming. Many Maasai are now working for the government in Kenya. Some have businesses in Nairobi, like cattle trading and hairdressing (Rigby 1992, 158). Among the Ilparakayo Maasai in districts like Bagamoyo, Rigby saw a considerable transformation of Maasai society. Some Maasai had become so poor that they were selling their labour to richer Maasai. A group of Maasai had also become rich peasants or *kulaks* along the lines of the process that I had witnessed in Engassumet. They were able to invest money from cattle sales in agriculture (Rigby 1992, 149–150). Rigby theorizes on contemporary class formation among the Maasai and takes this as an indication of the decline of the age organization.

Cattle, family, and male power in Maasai society

In my analysis, Maasai society is shaped and managed by a wealthy cattle owning class. This elite is also in the position to reproduce itself. It is structurally better prepared to endure the loss of cattle due to drought and diseases and to continue even when poor Maasai are dying or moving out of Maasailand (Spencer 1993, 292). This ruling class is defined by wealth and not by age. At an ideological level, this class despises those Maasai men with few or no cattle. Within Maasai villages, those who have no

cattle, and who are driven to farming because of cattle poverty, are the most despised class of people. They can only earn back their lost respect if they can return to pastoral life. In older times they could look after other Maasai cattle and expect to build a herd out of the payments received. Normally this payment was in the form of cattle or goats. Currently they have the option to migrate to towns in Maasailand, to Arusha and Nairobi, to look for work. Some migrate to distant areas like the city of Dar es Salaam on the Tanzanian coast. In Dar es Salaam, cattle-less Maasai *murrain* can be seen in large numbers; most of them are employed as day and night security guards. Way back in the 1980s Peter Rigby (1992) observed the same phenomenon in the city of Nairobi. Nairobi (like Arusha) is in Maasailand and naturally the cattle-less Maasai would discover opportunities in Nairobi sooner than in Dar es Salaam.

The age ideology is expressed in a variety of ways in Maasai society. However, this ideology is strongest in the *manyatta*, where those initiated into *murrainhood* camp for some months. In the old society this was the time when they learned combat skills and skills for hunting cattle-threatening animals. The *manyatta* cannot survive without the support of rich Maasai who provide the cattle for subsistence. Thus there is a contradiction here with the *manyatta*, which is sometimes portrayed as a democratic republic, since it also produces an ideology of respecting the rich *murrain* whose father has contributed many cattle. Spencer (1988, 101–119), who viewed the *manyatta* as a platonic ideal where the *murrain* share everything in their self-government, seems not to have seen this contradiction.

Alternatively, we may also view the *manyatta* as a form of ‘mob rule’ – another view of democracy advanced by Plato, especially after the death of his mentor, Socrates (Maghimbi 1988 114–116). There can be an element of chaos in the *manyatta*, as some *murrain* move in and others move out. The ones who move

out are mostly the rich, when they are called home by their fathers to take care of the cattle at home. After *murrain*hood we can speak of real life now beginning for the young Maasai man. He is now faced with the task of building a herd, establishing his own nuclear family, and learning how he and his family can survive periods of drought or animal disease. Spencer considers this to be secondary to involvement in one's age group (Spencer 1993, 149). In contrast, what defines one's Maasai social class position in my analysis takes place outside the age system. Key to this is how the Maasai man is able to manage and multiply his cattle herd. Building up a cattle herd goes hand in hand with marrying multiple wives to provide labour power to look after the cattle. Maasai men are able to tightly control cattle ownership; they also control and use women and child labour, including the labour power of the *murrain*.

The power of Maasai men can also be better understood in the light of the division of labour at the level of individual Maasai families. This family space is highly gendered and it is also not driven by the age class division. As Spencer (1993, 152–154) observed, only men belong to the age organization; women are only bastions of the morality that underpins the age system.

At the *murrain* stage every young Maasai has the ambition of building a cattle herd and managing his own family. This is a process which greatly depends on inheriting some animals from one's father. The clan and age mates are of no use in this process. In Maasai society there are clans, but there are no well-defined strong clan heads. In older times some *murrain* would have been able to steal cattle from other ethnic groups. Nevertheless, even this method was limited because neighbouring ethnic groups had their own defences. Raiding other ethnic groups also encouraged those groups to mount counter cattle raids. Thus, poor *murrain* might favour raiding but the particular Maasai community they came

from might oppose cattle raiding. The poor *murrain* were always late in marrying as they had to struggle with their parents to raise the cattle for bride-wealth. Marrying late meant delaying the chances of raising a cattle herd. It is not easy to raise and maintain a cattle herd in Maasailand without the assistance of wives and children.

The adult men with power in the Maasai society wield their power not because of their age but because of their economic dominance and their ability to rule their families. At the family level, real political power is in the hands of the cattle owning patriarchal head of the family. At the level of society, ritual authority and the dynamics of power are in the hands of the same people. Not many men live long enough to allow the formation of a fourth age group of older men and men tend to leave political affairs in the hands of elders who, in other societies, would still be considered young or middle-aged men. In the 2022 census only 3.8 percent of Tanzanians were older than 64. Generally, men die a little earlier than women and Maasai life expectancy appears to be below national average. Spencer argues that ritual authority and the dynamics of power are in the hands of younger men who are in the elders class between the ages of about 45 to 60 (Spencer 2003, 39–40). Nevertheless, for the rich men, power and influence continues well after their retirement from age classes. They are able to influence community affairs because of their cattle wealth, which they may still control directly or through their sons. These sons are now elders themselves, who by now will have built large herds aided by their inheritance from their rich aging fathers.

It is plausible that the gerontocratic ideology of Maasailand is not just constructed at the level of the family, where the cattle are situated. It is also constructed at the level of the wider society, especially in Maasai religion and the many ritualistic initiations which are also tied to the age organization of the society. Primary socialization in Maasai society, like

in other societies, takes place at family level. There is no dispute on the validity of the two strands constructed by Spencer. The key issue is that Spencer gives more weight in Maasai life to the second strand, age, while it appears that Maasai society is reproduced more at the level of the first strand, family wealth in cattle. The key processes in Maasai society and its reproduction, including the reproduction of the division of labour, takes place at the level of the family. When we investigate the Maasai family we can gauge how the process of building a herd is the most important event in a Maasai man's life. The herd and the family are his sources of power.

Rich Maasai men have power which is derived from cattle ownership at the family level. We can understand their power if we add the idea of authority. Their power and authority allow them to be accepted as leaders at family level and in society at large. The idea of authority has been advanced by social scientists, starting with Max Weber in his classic presentation of types of authority (Ritzer 2000, 30–32). Rich Maasai men have authority over their families which is not enjoyed by poor men. Unfortunately, authors writing on the Maasai have avoided a social class analysis of Maasai society. The authority of rich Maasai men is accepted because of their economic power and this is sanctioned by an old system of beliefs tied to Maasai religion. Weber called this “traditional authority” and the Maasai case is a classic illustration of this.

Theoretically, Maasai culture thus invites us to relate authority to social stratification without simply applying a class-society model. Dahrendorf (1959) advanced the idea of authority in his conflict theory. He was aware of the importance of property relations as a basis for stratification. Nevertheless, he went beyond traditional Marxian theory, which tended to limit itself to the property level as a source of stratification in society. Dahrendorf advanced a conflict theory based exclusively on the relations of authority. For him, authority involves

relations of super-domination and subordination. He argued that in every imperatively coordinated association there is a differential distribution of authority and that this creates a dichotomy of discrimination and subjection. Some people are entrusted with the legitimate right to exercise control over others who are subordinate to them. This distribution of authority leads to the formation of two conflict groups which correspond to two positions of control and subjects. This means the group of those who give orders (rich Maasai men) and the groups of those who take orders (Maasai wives and their children) (Ritzer 2000, 123–126). Maasai men's authority is combined with their political power and their interests are diametrically opposed to the interests of their wives and children; we can interpret this as a conflict between two groups. Without building a cattle herd there would be no source of authority and power to be wielded by Maasai men. Only those who own cattle are able to sustain this conflict and come out in the super-ordinate position. In Maasai culture, women are highly disregarded and men without cattle are highly despised by fellow men and women. It is not a secret that young women are likely to turn down marriage proposals by poor *murrains*.

Drawing attention to the building of a cattle herd means focusing our analysis on the family and not on the age group. This means taking into account the choices of young men and the wealth of old men. Even going through the age system depends on the young man's father, who has to provide animals for the many age system related rituals and ceremonies. Maasai men who own cattle are very powerful and have much authority at family level. They can marry several wives and having more wives and children increases their chances of success in building a large cattle herd. Analysing the gendered division at the family level gives us a better understanding of power and authority in Maasailand than analysing the age organization system. Actually, we can argue that the age

class division of society does not contradict the power and authority of rich men. The age class division could even be in a symmetrical relationship with the gendered division of labour. The ultimate source of control and political rule rich Maasai men have over women is the position of these men in the pastoral economy. Men enforce this control systematically and quite often they display their power and authority by beating their wives. This is an observation I have made among the Maasai living in Kiteto, Kibaya, Morogoro, Mwanga, and Same districts during the many research visits I have made to Maasailand. There is a widespread custom of Maasai men using the same stick to beat both wives and children. This may also reflect their ontology that women are children and can never grow to full adulthood; they cannot have independent legal representation besides that of their father before marriage and of their husband after marriage. As women do not belong to age classes, they are also excluded from whatever privileges are acquired from being members of an age class. A man, for example, can borrow an animal from a rich class member. The woman does not have such a privilege.

In the Maasai family the man rigidly controls animal wealth and all animals in a man's kraal legally belong to him. These animals include the cows allocated to a wife for herself and her children's subsistence after marriage. In the case of the Kisonko Maasai, I was informed that these are eight cows for milk and can include a castrated bull and a seed bull. The young wife can demand to be allocated more cows for milk as her household grows. Older women to whom I talked extensively in the Simanjiro district told me that more cows will be assigned to the woman "if the husband loves the wife" (Maghimbi 1999, 13). It should be added that the rich man is in a better position to provide more cows directly or indirectly by asking for the animals from his father, especially when he is a young man, still looking after his own cattle and those of his father

jointly. Cattle are used to manipulate women and entrench the power of Maasai men at the family level. In the wider society, the rich man uses the same strategy by contributing animals to be slaughtered in the many rituals which are part of Maasai religion and wider culture.

Maasai men with many cattle have power and authority in their families. The whole society may respect the age order but this power and authority cannot be said to have its origin in the age system organization itself. This material source of authority is not widely acknowledged and remains rather concealed by the ideas of republics, gerontologies, equality, and democracy that have been entertained by scholars in the past.

The Maasai man is likely to be successful in building his cattle herd by acquiring knowledge about the right pastures, water sources, and animal diseases. As Maasai society is changing, knowledge of the cattle market is also a necessity. This includes the actual cattle auction centres and of the pharmacies in town where cattle drugs are sold. This may even involve crossing the border to another country. Fellow age class mates may help but they also depend on their fathers for such knowledge and for money. The urge to build the herd keeps the son close to the father and minimizes *murrain* rebellion.

The focus on the family is important because the young man faces the impossibility of building a herd without the support of a wife. The division of labour in the cattle economy is extremely gendered (Maghimbi 1999). Women do a lot of work in the cattle economy, besides domestic work. Women wake up before six in the morning to milk cows and count them and report sick animals. They have to repeat the process when the animals return from pastures. In between they have to cook, fetch water, and fetch firewood. They must also clean cowsheds and calf pens and water the calves (Maghimbi 1999, 116–117).

Without much power and authority over women, children, and others seen as 'juniors', a

Maasai man would not be able to build a herd and to move up the social ladder. Age has little role here. The man must be able to exploit the labour power of his wife or wives. A Maasai woman can manage the aforementioned duties when the husband has few cows with calves. The work of milking many cows and herding the calves is very irksome. Some rich Maasai men own hundreds and even thousands of cattle and shoats. When I was near Engassumet Wells I was able to calculate, with the help of some Maasai women, the number of cows which a single wife can manage without drudgery or running out of her work capacity. We arrived at 40 cows, but many Maasai women milk more than 40 cows. The woman must also build the house for her household. She has to cut trees for construction of the building and if there is no water for mud she has to use cow dung for walls and roofs. Men only build the thorn fence surrounding the kraal to protect the cattle and shoats against wild animals like hyenas, jackals, leopards, and lions (Maghimbi 1999, 115–117).

The Maasai man who is able to build a big herd can marry more wives and thus have more labour power and more chances of moving up the ladder of the cattle economy. A man with one wife for a long time is despised because the conclusion in the community is that he is cattle poor. Polygyny is universal and the 67 Maasai men I interviewed near Engassumet Wells had 143 wives between them. In 1989 in Maasai villages near Kilimanjaro International Airport I was told that a man with one, two, or three wives would not be elected as a village secretary or chairman. The implication was that he was not desired because he was thought of as possessing too few cattle.

A man cannot build a large cattle herd when there are no women to be involved in birthing and caring for newborn animals. This is fundamental in the pastoral cattle economy. It is a job which women are specialists in after many years of being involved with cattle. Losing calves ultimately means losing the herd.

The man must be able to use his authority to bind the animals to the labour and expertise of his wife or wives. The tasks of birthing and caring for newborn animals is labour intensive and, in contrast to herding, require a direct and individual relationship between the animal and its caregiver. Maasai women are also active in craft production. They milk and distribute milk and other dairy products (House 2002, 12).

Building the herd for the Maasai men is building Maasai society, which would have long ago been transformed if cattle were removed. It is the gendered division of labour at the family level more than the age system which deprives Maasai women of power and authority. As the herd increases, so too does the blessing for the men, while for the women it is a blessing and a curse. It is a curse for the women because of the increase of very toilsome work. It is a blessing because male children may have more animals that they can inherit. A Maasai young wife must work very hard to take care of the cows assigned to her for milk and to make sure that she has a high survival rate for her calves. By the time there are about 40 fertile cows, the work related to milking cows and tending the calves becomes too much for a single wife. More cows give the husband the ticket to marry more wives. For the man this is a strategy to increase the amount of labour power under his control and to win more respect in the community. The man is less concerned here with the etiquette of the age system. His strategy is to increase his cattle herd and be able to systematically control and exploit the labour power and sexuality of his wives. As the children grow the man extends his control and exploitation to the children, who start looking after animals at a very tender age; when he has no boys, daughters may graze animals near home.

Besides the idea of gerontocracy, Spencer (1965, 1988) also uses the idea of patriarchy to describe Maasai social organization. Von Mitzlaff (1994) puts a lot of emphasis on the

idea of patriarchy in the social organization of Maasai society. She attempts to show how the most important components of Maasai men's social organization are the patrilineal affiliation, and the age class system. We have just seen the importance of organization at the level of the family and the ability of rich married men to reproduce themselves by managing and exploiting the labour power of their wives and children. To understand the importance and dominance of Spencer's first strand in the life course of the Maasai male we have to examine the ways in which Maasai men control the second mode of human life, namely the mode of human reproduction, which tends to be neglected by non-materialist anthropologists and sociologists. Spencer only indirectly implies that this mode exists by mentioning the establishment of the family. Von Mitzlaff discusses elements of the mode of human reproduction, like marriage, without using the concept of the human mode of reproduction.

The mode of human reproduction in Maasailand is intimately linked with the economic division of labour. The over-working of women and the violence directed against wives are all related to the mode of human reproduction in Maasailand. Aspects of the Maasai mode of human reproduction are polygyny and bride-wealth. Sexuality, sexual behaviour, and cultural attitudes toward women are also elements of this mode of human reproduction. At the family level a man seeks to control and manipulate women. One mode of human reproduction is class and gender bound (Vuorela 1987 21–24). In the case of the Maasai it is polygyny which is the dominant element of the mode of reproduction, which regulates relations of reproduction and which breeds violence against women. The class of rich cattle-owning men is able to subdue women, particularly wives, in all aspects of life (Maghimbi 1999, 116–117).

The Maasai mode of human reproduction is controlled and manipulated by the same

people who control the mode of production based on the cattle economy. The key components of this mode of human reproduction are bride-wealth and the Maasai family headed by the husband. Eight to 15 head of cattle have to be paid to the father-in-law in exchange for one daughter. This is a lot and a person with four sons must prepare up to 60 head of cattle to be able to marry off the sons. The actual number of cattle required to settle a *murrain* in marriage is more than 15 because the new bride will have to be allocated eight cows for subsistence, as we saw above. This means that a man with four sons will need nearly 100 head of cattle to settle his sons in marriage. That is why building a cattle herd is a matter of life or death for the Maasai man. The sons also expect more cattle for their inheritance when the father grows old or dies. The Maasai man is afraid that without a big cattle herd he will become poor after marrying off his sons. The rich Maasai is considered blessed as he is able to give many animals to his sons and still remain rich when he is old. He can give animals to sons and still retain some. In this way he does not have to lose his patriarchal powers, as each son builds his own herd and his own power in his own nuclear family.

Conclusion

In sum, it is fair to say that family life extends beyond age organization even for the *murrain*. The herd is built at the level of the family and when there is no animal wealth, even success in *murrainhood* is on shaky grounds. The *murrain* might share meat in the *manyatta* but each *murrain* knows exactly what each father contributed. A *murrain's* ambition is to marry and have full power over his wife, like those ahead of him on the age ladder. At the family level the young man expects his wife to reproduce children and make sure that the cows assigned to her produce many calves. There, the economic mode of production and the human mode of reproduction are in

alignment and are mutually supportive. This works in favour of the man, who feels secure both economically and socially when the new wife is able to look after his cattle and bear him children. The young wife is not likely to spoil the husband's desire to build a cattle herd and a family. She feels the urgency to take care of the cattle because her children's subsistence depends on cow's milk.

In the *manyatta* there may be some equality, which has fascinated anthropologists in the past, but at the end of the day the rich *murrain* is politically more influential. This is because in Maasailand a cattle-poor person has little status and is consequently despised. The *murrain* looks to the family and his homestead because this is what will define his future as a Maasai man with many cattle and many wives. The poor *murrain* can now move to town to look for work to raise money to buy cattle. In older times there was a class of poor *murrain* who moved around between Maasai kraals literally begging for food. They constituted a de facto proletariat and quite often they volunteered to take the cattle of other Maasai to pasture for long durations of time in return of payment in the form of goats. The poor *murrain* would later exchange his accumulated stock of goats for cattle so that he too could marry and build a cattle herd and a family. The arrangement of Maasai families and cattle ownership discourages the *murrain* from disobedience, which may result in the father withholding cattle for starting a herd and marrying. Thus, the organizational form of the Maasai family is likely to exist for a long time to come, as long as cattle ownership at the family level is the basis of both the economy and society.

Maasai society is not static, but we tend to have a view of Maasai society as it used to be or as it was remembered by informants of early ethnographers like Spencer. Maasai male heads of families are very strong when they possess many cattle. Fathers are able to marry several wives, which is an aspect of the mode of reproduction which enhances the

oppression of women. The man with many cattle feels that, for the purposes of reproduction, he cannot depend on one woman. He may also feel that he is not obliged to respect his wives because he has the means to marry new wives who will not challenge him. At the level of the family, rich fathers are able to systematically exploit both the labour power and sexuality of their wives. The ideology of the society also sanctions the authority of fathers. Spencer's first strand appears to carry the day. It has the upper hand in the dynamics and reproduction of Maasai society. The man who matters in terms of age organization is the man from a strong family with many cattle. Rich Maasai men constitute a class of powerful men with considerable wealth and labour power at their disposal.

We can now view the rich Maasai men as consolidating their authority and power at the level of their families and at the level of the whole Maasai society. Peter Rigby saw this process when he was writing in 1992. I have seen the process in many Maasai villages, such as in Kiteto District in 2004 when visiting some villages (Ndedo, Amei, Ndaleta, Songambebe, Matui, and Njiro) in Maasailand.

In the Lugoba area in Bagamoyo District, the farms of the large cattle owners can be seen even from the main road. They have invested in cattle dips and some have invested in farming. I observed this process earlier, in Simanjiro District near Engassumet Wells. Rich Maasai men will try to build herd security by investing in agriculture. Investing in agriculture helps to ensure the security of the cattle herd. Animal diseases may kill many cattle and the head of the family may opt to use agriculture as a cushion. The family will not disintegrate when there are cattle diseases or when there is drought, as long as there are food reserves that can be used. Sales from grain and beans can also help to replenish the cattle herd to ensure the continuity of both the herd and the family. Spencer himself agrees that the pastoral economy is essentially a family enterprise (Spencer

1988, 18–33). Investments in agriculture, for the cattle rich, are intended to make sure that

the Maasai family is not pushed out of the pastoral economy.

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