

southern Tswana peoples, he illustrates how Christian missionaries have contributed to the formation and progress of the *politique du ventre*. As he puts it, 'one must remember that colonialism has been an experience of *subjectivation* for Europeans themselves', missionaries included. Such an analysis of missionary activity, Bayart claims, offers a 'royal road' to deepen our understanding of the development of politics or the state in Africa. With the help of the Comaroffs, he develops this analysis by emphasising the role of material culture, and he extends it to include the work of the NGOs in contemporary privatisation strategies. In this article Bayart virtually ignores, however, African appropriations of Christianity. If one is principally interested in examining the nature and modes of colonialism, such single minded attention to the role of foreign missionaries is perhaps justifiable. If, however, one wishes to understand contemporary Africa, then one must concentrate rather more fully on the distinguishing features of the lives and motivations of modern Africans, on their moral economy, always remembering the ambiguous relationship between any religion and any morality. One needs therefore to enquire whether Christian concepts and organisational practices (be they lay democracy or universal hierarchy) have at times powerfully offset the damage which colonialism has caused to social cohesion and collective responsibility in Africa.

In their *magnum opus* the Comaroffs argue persuasively for greater attention to be paid to the study of missionary influences on the thinking and policies of their metropolitan, imperial home bases. In a well researched and highly original article, Patrick Harries here turns his attention from the activities of the Swiss Romande mission in southern Africa to link the work of these missionaries with the growth in the nineteenth century of Swiss national consciousness. He even goes so far as to suggest that missionary influences were powerfully responsible for generating some parts of the specific international role which has distinguished Switzerland throughout much of the twentieth century. In a final article Professor Blaser, the editor of *Le Fait missionnaire*, reviews some theological approaches since the Second World War to the autonomy of local Churches in the context of missionary activities. This usefully places the debate within Africa concerning a moratorium on such activities in its wider Protestant context.

Regional specialists will always find it valuable to have their studies set in a wider context. Yet some Africanists may hope that the intellectual energy and resources exemplified and deployed in this publishing initiative may increasingly examine the extent to which Christian missions have introduced a radically new set of ideas and practices into local contexts, where they have often been developed with remarkable rapidity and with profound social and political consequences.

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EISEI KURIMOTO and SIMON SIMONSE (eds), *Conflict, Age and Power in North East Africa: age systems in transition*. Oxford: James Currey; Nairobi: East African Educational Publishing; Kampala: Fountain; Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 1998, 270 pp., £40.00, ISBN 0 85255 252 1, hard covers, £14.95, ISBN 0 85255 251 3, paperback.

*Conflict, Age and Power in North East Africa* is a book that emanated from a 1995 symposium, conceived by Kurimoto and Simonse and sponsored by the Japanese Taniguchi Foundation, in which Japanese and European and

American scholars participated to discuss age group organisation, a classic topic in Africanist anthropology. The subject is approached through the prism of contemporary problems in Africa: conflict, violence and the radical transformation of rural societies. The discussions tie in with wider processes of political conflict (the Sudanese civil war), growth of regional market economies and state expansion but have a solid foundation in the anthropological approach of detailed field research and regional comparison without which it would be very difficult to make sense of what is happening in these societies.

The empirical studies of the 'age systems' (the term preferred by the editors to group together the various types) themselves are very detailed, and are perhaps primarily accessible for advanced students, like regional specialists on the ethnology of North East Africa and anthropologists interested in the comparative and theoretical study of this type of socio-political organisation. The fascinating case studies presented in the work suggest how complex and intricate these African age system societies are, and perhaps also how the common discourse of the mass media, political analysts and also of NGO or government agents—owing to unfamiliarity with the relevant background and 'lack of time' to acquire it—routinely misses essential points about the meaning, causes and ramifications of violent conflict and cultural complexity in some parts of Africa.

The societies under discussion are predominantly located in southern Sudan and northern Kenya. The cases are the southern Sudanese *monyomiji* age systems (treated in the chapters by Simonse and Kurimoto), the Nyangatom (Tornay), the *Gada* systems of the Boran, Gabbra and Garre in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya (Schlee) and some groups in Kenya, like the Chamus, Rendille, and Kipsigis (by the Japanese researchers K. Kawai, T. Komma and S. Sato). One interesting contribution is on the extinct age systems of the Iteso in the Kenyan-Ugandan border area (N. Nagashima). These chapters offer excellent descriptions and revealing observations on age systems. In the chapters by the historian J. Lamphear and the anthropologist P. Spencer historical aspects of the transformation of age groups into more military forms of combat (among Jie, Turkana and Maasai) and modes of 'predatory expansion' of age system societies are analysed.

Obviously, not all age system societies are covered in this book. Forms in southern Ethiopia (Chai, Tirma, Balethi, Mursi) are implicitly subsumed under one of the six types outlined in the introduction (the *monyomiji* type) or simply not referred to (Guji, Konso, Gedeo). Others (Narim, Didinga, Murle) are only briefly mentioned once or twice. The book is necessarily a selection of cases, following the list of invited contributors to the symposium. Nevertheless, the comparative study of the missing types, on the basis of available work done by other anthropologists or ethno-historians, must further refine the empirical record and, more important, some of the interpretations and explanatory and theoretical arguments. There is no doubt that there are great structural similarities, but to observe this does not, for instance, explain the divergences that occurred while or after the system was 'imported'. If one is discussing the trans-ethnic and wider regional connections between groups in the Ethio-Sudan-Kenya border area it is a bit puzzling that, for example, the well described case (by D. Turton) of the Surmic-speaking Mursi (in southern Ethiopia) was not included. In general, therefore, Surmic groups are perhaps too easily classified here under the *monyomiji* systems. While it is true that they have many similarities, divergences are also important.

In addition to providing essential new empirical information, the book is also

explicitly part of an on-going theoretical debate about age systems that started in the early decades of the twentieth century. The position taken in the editors' introduction is to re-emphasise the *political*, and also the antagonistic and military aspects, of age systems over and above their integrative, ritual and symbolic ones (though they admit the distinction is hard to uphold in practice). The editors want to interpret age systems in particular in their role as 'arenas for political drama' (p. 3), for the play of oppositions and conflicts across but also *within* the societies. It is here that they indeed make advances on earlier approaches to age organisation in Africa. One is the breaking of the 'ethnic group' mould as the unit of analysis. A regional and historical approach reveals that indeed one cannot speak of bounded ethnic groups with 'different systems' that interact as such. The 'cultural boundaries' of age systems go beyond the individual societies. This point of trans-ethnic connections and identifications—which has also repeatedly been made in political-anthropological studies of ethnicity in Africa—is systematically and cogently argued in the various case studies, and its importance cannot be overestimated in times of political manipulation and falsification of local history.

Another point evident in this study is a more sophisticated analysis of power and power struggle within age systems. The editors suggest that the dynamics of the age systems be analysed by looking at, for example, the two mechanisms of 'increasing symmetry' and of 'cumulative asymmetry' (derived from G. Bateson's work *Naven*) that characterise interaction patterns. This is elaborated especially in a good discussion of antagonisms within a society and between segments of the age system.

An additional new aspect treated in the introduction is the role of women's age groups as vehicles of antagonism with the men (p. 19). There are many cases of concerted group action by women in several societies. However ethnographically interesting, the importance of women's age sets is overstated here, because in most societies they are simply not so relevant and still reflect, or refer to, the male age system. They never take precedence in a political or ritual sense.

The introduction and the various chapters also treat elements that undermine age systems: modern education, the spread of market capitalism and state intervention. What is perhaps surprising is that despite the presence of these elements in recent decades the age systems still show resilience and adaptive capacity.

In a review one cannot take up many theoretical arguments, but what is missing in this book, in a predictable swing of the pendulum, is sufficient attention to the ritual and symbolic aspects of age organisation. We do not have to subscribe to a 'cognitive' view of the origin and functions of age systems to note that the cultural implications of taking 'age' as the *metaphor* for social organisation (a point well made by Turton in *After Empire*, ed. G. Ausenda, 1995) is very relevant and should be addressed *in conjunction with* the 'political view' on age organisation in this book.

Another point for debate is that the use of the general term 'age systems' may suggest a somewhat too 'systematic' view of the various types of age organisation, as is also evident in various case studies. On p. 10 the editors talk about the 'shared age system' across groups, but it is not sure that what these groups share is the same, either in a political or an ideological sense. Various 'ethnic groups' that are in contact with each other often also try to get the upper hand *vis-à-vis* others, and do not necessarily have an idea or norm of 'sharedness'. Hence this systematic aspect should perhaps not be over-emphasised, especially in the light of remarks in the introduction, where the

'meta-ethnic', wider regional connections and the variability of 'age' as an organisational principle are given importance. It is too much and too easy to ask for a 'generative model' of age organisation, but one may speak of 'systems' only if ideational coherence as well as the close link with the economic and social organisation of the age system in question are given due attention—in their interaction.

Such points do not, however, detract from the observation that the book is an essential and important advance in the comparative and theoretical study of age organisation in Africa. It also has an excellent bibliography that includes all the relevant works on the subject. A final observation is that one would sometimes like to have had more statements and interpretations by the people themselves about their age organisation. Simonse indeed cites Philip Lomodong, a Lokoya writer who has described his own society's age system in a book, but there are few other verbal quotations and views 'from the field' of participants/informants on these aspects of their society or on the deep impact of civil war and conflict on their lives.

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PAUL SPENCER, *The Pastoral Continuum: the marginalisation of tradition in East Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, 302 pp., £40.00, ISBN 0 19 823375 2. ✓

It is generally assumed, especially by those who have studied them and by the pastoralists themselves, that there is something enduring and distinctive about East African pastoral societies: even though there are, and probably never have been, any 'pure' pastoralists and pastoral societies themselves demonstrate considerable diversity. Most pastoralists, moreover, have been cruelly battered by global forces. This book is essentially concerned 'to understand better the nature of pastoral society in East Africa' through an examination of the 'hidden forces' which sustain 'it' and/or 'them'. The study centres on the Maasai, Rendille, Samburu, Ariaal and Chamus. Spencer demonstrates sensitivity to ethnographic nuances, the passage of time and variable statistical data as well as the detailed knowledge of the extensive literature (especially the work of Gulliver, Lamphear and Little) and intellectual doggedness which his task requires. The book brings together and scrutinises the cultural insights which, during nearly forty years of endeavour, he has been refining and redefining. He cuts through dense thickets of detailed ethnography to make clear the crucial markers or signs which enable us, in the present, to discern the flowing continuum which runs between past and future. Following him is an energetic cross-country safari rather than a potter round the park, but the fresh views make the sweat worth while.

The book consists of three parts. Those readers who are not pastoral enthusiasts will, I think, find the first part, a discussion of the 'dimensions' of pastoral society, of most interest. Spencer starts from observations about subsistence activities. He shows how pastoralists maintain themselves and their flocks and herds from day to day while always keeping one eye on their long-term growth and safety. He argues that 'traditional pastoralism' is made up of a series of interconnected family businesses, each at varying stages of development in its economic and domestic cycle, which can maintain themselves only by actively sustained intra-family solidarity while also maintaining a balance between competition and co-operation with other similar family enterprises. To do this each family head has constantly to reconcile his need to keep control