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Characteristics of age class systems

The relativity of the age concept

To examine age class systems, we must evaluate a concept of age that is alien to our Western social tradition. In Western societies, we do not find such groupings of age mates, designed to govern the participation of individuals in social and political life. Age is employed conceptually to define certain categories of persons, but it is not used as a basis for constructing the societal structure. Groups of conscripts may, perhaps, exhibit some similarity, but here we are dealing with voluntary associations that are more or less temporary and are, in any case, used almost exclusively for recreational purposes.

In both current usage and in historical tradition, the Western concept of age seems ambiguous and fluid. At one time, for example, medieval medicine distinguished the physiological development of human beings into “climacterics,” or seven periods of seven years each. Today, no one views the life course in these terms. We celebrate birthdays, with happiness in childhood and with sadness in old age, but there are those who prefer to ignore them, or, indeed, to conceal their date of birth. We speak very broadly of a first, second, and third age, and we distinguish a series of grades that signal the passage from the one to the other, but without giving them too much weight. As a matter of necessity, we endorse the legal establishment of the “age of majority,” as we think it just that all adults are guaranteed certain inalienable rights of individual autonomy. We also approve of a law that fixes the obligation of school attendance on the basis of age and, similarly, an age-based selection for military service. Yet once these milestones have been passed, transitions that anthropologists list as being aspects of enculturation and socialization, we do not give much weight to age. Rather than age, we now uphold the principle of “merit” as we put up with the ambiguities of fortune. The retirement system, signaling the passage from the second to the third age, is more closely linked to the number of years in the work force than to age of physiological development, and the results are therefore extremely varied and even contradictory. Nor are we greatly interested in the kinds of age groupings of the population found in censuses, other than for their

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statistical value. In fact, our social and political system runs largely on other principles, not on that of age.

The variety of conceptual interpretations of age for social purposes, as shown by anthropological research, is very large indeed: Age class systems, the subject of our analysis, are one conspicuous example. This polysemic pliability of the concept of age may be a cause, however, of conceptual ambiguity and confusion. As it is, we look for the age of everything and of everybody: of the cosmos and the earth, of things and beings. We try to discover their origin and calculate their end. These two terms, origin and end, birth and death, serve as the two poles for measuring age. The criteria of measurement, however, may change according to the different nature of the subject under measurement.

We normally distinguish between physiological and cultural criteria, taking the first to be more objective because we base them on natural indices. However, it is only through our cultural consciousness that we are able to evaluate them. In other words, the very idea of age, as we use it, is a cultural product. It is just because age is a cultural concept that it is apt to be assigned a relative value and used for social purposes.

Age class systems afford a very special instance of relative age. Within such systems, age assumes a preeminent role as a principle of social structure. Members of society come to be classified into special groupings by being assigned a common age and, thus, by forming a collective body of age mates with special prerogatives and specific tasks. It is for this reason that age classes have acquired, in the anthropological literature, the precise reference to institutionalized groupings. Thus, age classes, where they exist, are not informal groupings; rather, they are essential parts of the social structure.

Age grades within age class systems

Age class systems are distinguished from any other age system by the special relationship between age classes and age grades. Such a relationship is the basis for the special structure of age class systems. The two concepts, classes and grades, may not be disconnected within the context of age class systems, though, however intimately connected, they must be distinguished to clarify their significance. To this end, it is also useful to distinguish between formal and informal grades. It is only formal grades that are institutionalized in relationship with age classes, thus becoming one of the determining factors of the age class systems. In ordinary language, we don't normally make such a distinction, and we are inclined to describe any grouping of coevals in terms of age grades or age classes indifferently. It is a way of speaking that needs rectification if we wish to clarify the specific character of age class systems.

Informal grades possess only an approximate and indicative value: childhood, adolescence, youth, etc. Normally, no precise term is used to signal the passage from one informal grade to another. The indications may vary from culture to

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culture, and they may change according to new situations. In Italy, for example, the English word *teenagers* has recently become part of current usage to indicate a certain attitude in the behavior of adolescents. Only a few cases of informal grades are fixed by law in all Western systems: Examples are the age of majority and the age of pension, when the law makes the attainment of such a grade somehow compulsory. It happens thus that informal grades are superimposed by institutionalized grades.

It is such superimposition that has been a cause of great confusion in ethnographic writings, hindering the understanding of age class systems. We find a typical example of this in the first ethnographies of the Masai. Though those early writers perceived the importance of age grades, they did not realize the differences between formal and informal characteristics. A comparison of their reports provides sufficient evidence. Johnston (1902:827) distinguished three grades: young boys, warriors, and old men. Merker (1910:66) listed five:

1. *ol aijioni* pl. *ol aijiok* – up to circumcision;
2. *os siboli* pl. *es sibolo* – up to the time of the healing of the circumcision;
3. *ol barnoti* pl. *el barnot* – during the time of induction into the life of a warrior;
4. *ol morani* pl. *el moran* – fully organized warriors;
5. *ol moruo* pl. *el moruak* – married men until death.

Hollis (1905:28), in the glossary of his work, entered four grades:

1. *engeru* pl. *in-gera* – child
2. *o-sipolioi* pl. *i-sipolio* – the recluse;
3. *ol-barnoti* pl. *il-barnot* – the saved ones;
4. *ol-murani* pl. *il-muran* – the warriors.

These series have almost nothing in common with the age class system of the Masai (see Chapter 4).

The formation of class and promotion in terms of grades are two aspects of the same phenomenon of formal institutionalization: The recruitment of candidates to a class implies, in fact, their promotion to an initial age grade. Thus the relationship that is set in motion by recruitment and promotion not only brings about the structure of a special grouping; it also implies the chronological succession of classes in the grades, so that the emerging structure is rightly called an “age class system.”

Every grade corresponds to a social position, that is, a status with special prerogatives acquired by a class as a right, which, in any case, is only a temporary right. In fact, after a definite period a class is expected to abandon the grade and leave it for the following class. The series of grades is thus conceived as a potential acquisition of rights by all the classes, and its very conception serves as a propeller to the succession of classes in the grades.

Class formation and grade promotion imply a differentiation between succeeding classes, and such a differentiation is brought to bear on continuous classes in terms of antagonism aimed at catalyzing the normal succession from the younger to the senior grade. Thus, the interrelationship between classes and

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grades is what we call an age class system. In every such system, there is found: (1) the formal institution of classes; (2) the configuration of promotional grades; and (3) the succession of the classes in the grades. It is thus evident that, when we refer to grades as one of the fundamental factors of age class systems, the reference is to institutionalized age grades and not to informal ones.

Where age class systems are at work, the attainment of a grade and its relative status confer the juridical right that regulates participation in social life. Promotion to a grade, therefore, is not simply a nominal passage; it also implies the legitimation to take certain social actions. Even where grades are only informal, there may exist some relationship between grades and social rights. But in such cases, except where a special law is applied (as in the case of majority age or pensionable age), the relationship is not compulsory but a very loose one. Besides, social recognition of the status that accrues to one by informal grades is normally attained individually, whereas, in the case of institutionalized grades the attainment is formal, ritual, and corporate: It is the class as such that is promoted to the grade and, consequently, all its members obtain the rights connected with its relative status.

The corporate promotion of a class does not mean that the transition involves the physical presence of all members of that class. A gathering of all members of a class is not only a rare event; often enough, it is not even possible, especially among sparsely settled pastoral populations living among their far-flung herds, covering a vast territory. In any case, the ritual celebration of promotional passages takes up a symbolic value and involves all members in a corporate way even if they are not physically present.

Rites of promotion and principles of recruitment

The formal institutionalization of age classes takes place through the celebration of rites of passage of the candidates on the basis of two principles: either the public recognition of the candidates' physiological maturation with the celebration of postpubertal initiation, or the determination of the generational distance between each candidate and his father. These are the two principal rules of recruitment into age classes. It is important to note that recruitment into a class also represents a social promotion because it is connected to the assignment of an age grade and, with it, of a certain status with accompanying rights. In this way, the succession of age classes through the grades, the age class system itself, becomes the mechanism of social promotion.

The principle of recruitment is thus a good criterion for distinguishing among age class systems. The variety of forms in which that principle is expressed may also be seen in the rites of recruitment. We distinguished between promotional rites and initiation rites, both of which are part of the larger category of rites of passage. Initiation rites normally have an individualistic character, in the sense that each candidate must undergo them. Promotional rites, on the other hand,

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even though they may be carried out by official representatives of the class, alter the status of all class members and, for this reason, can be called corporate rites.

Undergoing the prescribed rites during the same period makes the candidates involved coevals. They become age mates. Evidently, what ties them together is not physiological age, but rather relative age as determined by their having participated in the rites of passage in the same period. Relative age thus becomes social age, based on membership in the same class and expressed in the status proper to the grade acquired by the class.

Celebration of rites of passage connected to age class systems takes place according to established norms of time. The celebration of postpubertal rites, in particular, is scheduled in such a way as to allow all candidates to undergo them, for these must be performed by each and everyone. There are times in which such initiation ceremonies are permissible and periods in which they are not. The successive performance through time of these ceremonies forms the basis of particular groupings of age mates – or initiation units – that are incorporated, in varying degrees of salience and permanence, within each class. What is important to note is that the rites of passage thus constitute the mechanism of recruitment of the members into a class and the factor determining their common social age.

Initiation and generation, as I have just hinted, are the two basic principles of class recruitment. Initiation (and I mean by this here postpubertal initiation) involves the public recognition of a physiological fact that makes an adult out of an adolescent. Generation stresses the relationship that is formed at birth between an individual and his or her parents. Despite their apparent diversity, there are certain similarities between the two concepts, as shown by the fact that both serve to create similar social groupings – age classes – albeit in systems having different characteristics. To better flesh out these similarities, let us examine the two concepts in terms of birth.

As with all rites of passage, postpubertal initiation may be considered a birth: Before the initiation, the individual does not have any social recognition; he is not even considered a full person. Afterward, not only is he recognized as a responsible person, but he becomes a full part of the society and acts autonomously. In those age class systems that use initiation as the basis of recruitment, the social birth of the individual takes place with his entrance into an age class, among his age mates, and his attaining of the first grade that marks his social promotion. Classes formed in this way can appropriately be termed *initiation classes*.

The generational principle establishes a relationship between parents and their children based on genealogical birth. This relationship is normally expressed in terms of descentance. It is not descentance that interests us in age class systems, but rather the structural distance between the father and his children. The distance between mother and children is not considered because, as we shall see, age class systems are largely patrilineal and masculine.

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The recognition of the generational relationship between father and son is a sufficient basis for the social recognition of the son and his entrance into the age class system: It is through this entrance that the son participates in social activities with full rights. The generational relationship between father and son is expressed in the structural distance that separates and distinguishes them. Structural distance implies a chronological distance expressed with reference to the years that separate the father from the son within the system of classes, or simply with reference to the names of the classes involved. For example, among the Oromo of southern Ethiopia, the official distance between father and son is forty years, or five classes, with each class being promoted from one grade to another every eight years (the name of the class coincides with the name of the grade). Thus, the determination of generational distance is not a generic index (or nominal index), but it is ruled by a precise criterion dictated by the series of grades. In fact, the systems based on *generation classes* are always complex, just because of this rigidity.

The succession of the classes in the grades gives rise to the creation of a social stratification, represented by the classes existing at any one time and occupying the various social grades. It could be said, schematically, that the framework of gradations, formed by the totality of grades in each system, represents the ideal model of the social structure; the classes, on the other hand, represent the legitimate though temporary incumbents of each grade.

It is in the dynamic relationship of grades and classes that age class systems provide a framework for social organization. It is this feature that, although demonstrating the institutional value of age class systems, distinguishes them from all other kinds of age systems and from any other type of aggregation occasionally based on age. In addition to their mode of recruitment, age class systems differ among themselves by the way in which they create and maintain the social order. In the most typical cases, it is age class systems themselves that form the principal element of the social structure. In other cases, their value is secondary in the sense that they constitute just a structural element that is complementary and alternative, as happens, for example, among the Nuer, where the most important structural element is the kinship system.

However, it is important to note that age class systems do not operate in a cultural vacuum, nor are they dissociated from other elements of structural systems. On the contrary, they are bound in various ways, ritually and structurally, to territorial divisions, to kinship systems, and to the cosmological beliefs that almost always underlie associated rites of passage. One of the most important aspects of age as a structural principle is its efficiency in bringing about unity; in situations where other social elements produce division, age can produce unity. When age is employed for structural ends, it does not know territorial boundaries nor divisions based on kinship. Indeed, paradoxically, because its ultimate end is death, age is mystically placed beyond all age, as when it creates a link to the ancestors beyond time.

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The anthropemic value of age

The process by which the elements of nature are transformed into elements of culture is very complex. It is fundamentally brought about by choices from among possible alternatives of cultural evaluation. The same element of nature, such as age, may be used, as we have just said, in formal and informal ways. Such choices are normally made by single individuals or by groups of individuals, but they are always somehow influenced by the natural environment and by the time when they are made. They are also influenced by the reciprocity that relates individuals and groups among themselves. Individuals and groups, however, are the ones responsible for the choices; environment and time are mere points of reference for the choices. To describe such a process with a single word, we use the term *anthropeme*. By anthropemic value, I mean any conceptual evaluation of an element of nature in order to make use of it as a principle of cultural elaboration or of social structure. The bond between anthropemic choices and individuals, who always succeed themselves in time expressing new needs, explains the extraordinary variety by which the same natural elements are valued by all the peoples in the world in the countless forms of social organizations and cultural expressions.

The cultural evaluation of the idea of age characterizes all age systems generally and age class systems in a very special way. The same distinction of generic age systems and special age class systems is based on a cultural interpretation that affects the idea of age in the same way that occurs to any other element of nature when it is culturally evaluated. Age class systems differ among themselves by the way they apply the principles of recruitment and by the forms of their respective structures and functions. In the following pages, I shall distinguish, for such reasons, a series of models of age class systems.

All this is a typical reflex of the cultural complexity of the idea of age. It may be useful now to look deeper into the relationship introduced by the idea of age between “individual beings” and “time succession.” The identification of an individual through time is only possible if we observe all changes and modifications he or she undergoes in maturing. Such an observation makes it possible to locate those points of reference – the before and the after – that afford the necessary poles for defining the chronological boundaries of the idea of age. Age, therefore, while serving to identify an individual as self, may also be used to mark his or her differentiation and the changes that may alter his or her being. It appears, thus, that movement and change are intrinsic to the chronological aspect of the idea of age. Indeed, age implies flowing and changing. As such, it differs from the idea of sex, which normally implies permanence: either male or female.

Age also implies succession: New individuals, by maturing, replace their elders: *Les enfants poussent*. The impulse to individual autonomy, brought about by maturation, is a physical as well as cultural and social necessity. The process

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is not realized without tensions and conflicts. On reaching personal autonomy, individuals dissociate themselves from their parents and elders and tend to associate with their equals. Whenever tensions and conflicts arise, the matter of contention is the attainment of new positions for the youngsters so that they may be assured of their autonomy. It is in such a context that we may better realize the function of age class systems as instruments of social organization. They are devised to control and regulate the entire process by which individuals attain autonomy and take part in communal life, in the same way as kinship systems are devised to regulate the orderly descent of offsprings and matrimonial alliances.

The peculiarity of age class systems consists in using age as a principle of social organization: On that basis, individuals are classified, the relationships between the classes and their particular functions are defined, and the norms for keeping tensions in check and curbing conflicts are passed and applied.

Some definition of time is a basic requirement for any age classification. All age class systems respond to this requirement, although they differ in the way they apply it. By being classified together, class members are equated as coevals, and this chronological equation means they share the same social status. In this way, every age class takes up its own identity as a class and is thus distinguished from any other class that has existed before or will follow it. Identification and succession of classes are normally expressed in terms of age grades, which define their specific functions at a particular time.

It is important to note that the concept of class, as an aggregation of age mates, does not coincide with the concept of generation. The overlapping of the two concepts is apt to occur whenever we speak in terms of "class of the fathers" and "class of the sons." In fact, the very concept of generation is rather fluid, and even in the context of age class systems it may take on different meanings. We have already seen how one of the two main principles of recruitment in those systems is the idea of generation (in the sense of the structural distance between fathers and son). In such systems, it would be logical to expect a perfect coincidence between the concept of class and generation. But that is not exactly what happens, because, as we shall see, the rigidity of generational systems makes recruitment into a class a rather complicated business. In the other systems, the generational relationship between father and son is not structurally applied, and it may only affect indirectly the interested persons through the relationship that binds their respective classes.

Lastly, it is worth stressing one final aspect of the anthropemic value of age, that regarding the possibility of expressing the promotional push, intrinsic to the age concept, in terms of right and of power. A maturing youth wants to affirm himself and his own personality. He aspires to taking on his own social life, whether by getting married and establishing his own home, or owning the means of production necessary to support himself and his family. He is eager, in the same way, to take part in communal decisions and in all social activities.

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Age class systems are unique, for not only do they regulate the attainment of individual maturity or autonomy, but they regulate the distribution and rotation of all forms of power.

Physiological age and structural age

The anthropemic choices regarding age bring up the distinction found, in ethnographic reality, between physiological age and structural age. These two are but aspects of relative age and social age.

Physiological age is responsive to the measurement of the physiological development of an individual, or the calculation of the time passed from his or her birth to the present. In Western systems, this calculation no longer depends on the simple observation of the person's physiological development, but on the application of an autonomous method of measuring time, namely, the calendar, with the years calculated on the basis of the recurrence of a certain day in a certain month. In these cases, the birthday is accompanied by traditional observances. Yet, regardless of how solemn and communal such birthday celebrations may be, their significance is simply personal and individual. It is only in the event that the person in question occupies an institutional position of authority, as in the case of a king, that these celebrations take on greater structural and social significance.

Structural age is characterized by its institutional impact. It is evaluated in relationship to the degree of integration into social life and the grades of successive promotion in society. This concept is analogous to the "structural time" analyzed by Evans-Pritchard. He maintains that the Nuer "think much more easily in terms of activities and of successions of activities and in terms of social structure and of structural differences than in pure units of time" (1940a:104).

A similar phenomenon is found in the concept of structural age. The age of an individual is not measured in relation to the stages of his or her physiological development, but in relation to the social activities that are consigned to the individual. It could be said that structural age measures the juridical capacity of the individual to perform certain social activities.

In every age system, the concept of structural age has its distinguishing connotations. For example, in Western systems, the attainment of the right to vote is an index of the structural age of a person. In age class systems, structural age is reached with the individual's entrance into the class structure and is measured with his progressive advance along the line of social gradation.

In societies having age class systems, it is only structural age that is important; physiological age is ignored. There are age class systems in which the person enters at the moment of birth, but here it is not the physiological aspect that is the determining element, but rather the existing structural situation that allows the immediate assignment to the newborn of a structural position within the age class system. An illustration of this point is provided by the system of the Oromo

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Boran of southern Ethiopia. There the rule is that the son's entry into the age class system, known as *gada*, can take place only at five grades distance from the grade of his father. Because each of the grades has a span of eight years, the rule is that entrance into the system can take place only forty years after that of the father. If this distance already exists at the time of the son's birth, the son can be immediately entered into the system and, from that moment, his age will be calculated on the basis of the activities consigned to him by the position he occupies in the succession of grades.

In age class systems, structural age can also be defined as the relationship existing between class and grade. The person enters the system with his recruitment into a class; he progresses through the system by traveling, together with all fellow members of his class, through the grades of social promotion.

The articulation between class and grade, the dynamic characteristic of age class systems, brings with it something of a semantic equivalence between the two concepts; indeed, they seem to be almost synonymous. To say that someone "belongs to a certain class" can mean that he has the right to take part in certain activities because his class occupies the grade responsible for such activities. To say that the same person "belongs to a certain grade" can mean the same thing because that grade, in that moment, is occupied by the class to which the individual in question belongs. Such equivalence of the two concepts is the cause of a great deal of confusion in the ethnographic literature, which can be avoided by keeping their basic distinction in mind.