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Bernardo Bernardi
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AGE CLASS SYSTEMS
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Age class systems
Social institutions and polities based on age

BERNARDO BERNARDI

Translated from the Italian by David I. Kertzer
For Lilly,
another flower
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Translator’s preface

Bernardo Bernardi is one of the pioneers of the anthropological study of formal age group systems. His dissertation work, under Isaac Schapera, in the early 1950s and his article “The age systems of the Nilo-Hamitic peoples,” appearing in the journal Africa in 1952, helped catalyze research on this fascinating topic. This book represents a culmination of a lifetime of work, including many years spent among the peoples of southern and eastern Africa.

Although the nature of age group systems has become one of the classic issues in modern social anthropology, it has proved to be a complex and often elusive topic. There are a large number of individual case studies of African societies with formalized age groupings, but surprisingly few full-scale comparative analyses of such systems. The result is that substantial confusion is evident in discussion of these systems, as reflected in the treatment anthropologists give the subject in introductory textbooks (Kertzer 1978). Yet, paradoxically, despite the lack of suitable comparative and general materials on age group systems, an increasingly wide range of social scientists are citing such systems in connection with the expansion of scholarly interest in the process of aging. The fact that sociologists, for example, so often refer to Eisenstadt’s (1956) secondary analysis of age group systems, although a tribute to the enduring value of that work, bespeaks the dearth of more up-to-date and accessible materials on the subject, despite the outpouring of individual ethnographic accounts of age group systems over the past three decades.

In this book, Bernardi helps us to make sense of the diversity of formal age group systems, to better appreciate their common features and the pattern of their differences. In so doing, he goes beyond the other recent overview of such systems, Stewart’s (1977) Fundamentals of Age-Group Systems, which concentrates largely on the formal, structural properties of these systems. Bernardi is above all concerned with the role age groups play in different societies. In this, he takes issue with the major recent statement of African age group systems offered by Baxter and Almagor (1978). According to these prominent anthropologists, age group systems serve primarily ritual purposes and have but limited significance for people’s social, political, and economic lives. Bernardi, devel-
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Opening the thesis he has been identified with since the early 1950s, and making use of the ethnographic evidence that has accumulated since then, rejects this argument and shows just how socially far-reaching age group systems are.

Bernardi currently heads the new department of anthropology at the University of Rome and is one of Italy's most prominent anthropologists. In addition to the international reputation achieved by his scholarly work, he has done a great deal to build bridges between Italian anthropology and the rest of the international scholarly community. The breadth of sources used in writing this book reflects in a small way the internationalization of anthropology toward which he has long worked.

Bernardi wrote this book in Italian (an Italian edition was published in 1984 by Loescher) and asked me if I would be interested in translating it. I suppose the combination of my interest in African age group systems and my knowledge of Italian made me a logical candidate, though I hardly consider myself expert enough in the Italian language to qualify as a professional translator. If this text is clear and the prose cogent, it is largely due to the help I received from Bernardi in the translation. He carefully read through all parts of the translation, answered my queries, and suggested revisions. It was a pleasure to collaborate with him in this process.

I worked on the translation during 1982–3, a year I spent as a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Stanford, California. I would like to thank the staff at the center for its support of this project and especially note the assistance of Rosemary Martin in typing the manuscript. I would also like to thank the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for helping support my year at the center.

Since the translation of this book was a project I reserved for evenings and weekends, I owe a special thanks to my family for the time taken away from them. Without the support and understanding provided by Susan, Molly, and Seth, this translation could not have been undertaken or completed.

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David I. Kertzer
Preface

My goal in these pages is to clarify the nature of age class systems and to identify their basic characteristics. The social and political organization set in motion by such systems is of a peculiar type: Through the classification of coevals into formal social groupings – that is, into age classes – it provides for the promotion of all members of a society along a scale of social gradation. Classes and grades within such systems have an institutional character. Those who become members of the same class are not necessarily coevals in the sense of their physiological age; rather, their grouping is based on the structural value attached to the idea of age, so that the recruits of the same period of time who form a single class are conceived of as if they were of the same age. Clearly, structural age is a species of relative and social age. (A glossary of terminology related to age class systems is found at the end of this book.)

By their institutional character, age classes and grades are distinguished from informal age grades – which are found in all societies as indicative categories (such as infancy, adolescence, etc.) – and from occasional age groups that, for various reasons, may be formed by coevals on the basis of their physiological age or on any other interpretation of the idea of age. The identifying characteristic of age class systems is the institutional relationship that exists between classes and grades: Once a class is formed, it proceeds through the grades of social promotion as a corporate body. As recruitment into an age class is generally restricted to males, I shall normally use masculine pronouns throughout the text.

My definition of age class systems is the result of a wide comparative analysis of the ethnographic evidence. This book, however, does not intend to be an exhaustive review of the entire literature; rather, it aims to demonstrate the social and political significance of age class systems. I have not attempted to describe the entire range of age class systems. References have been deliberately restricted to those systems deemed most useful in developing a series of models according to which age class systems might be distinguished. This series of models is not exhaustive. There is no doubt that more discussion and comparison will help to develop further the theoretical issues they raise.

In this context, it has been necessary to define better such basic concepts as
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age, class, and grade, concepts normally used in a generic and often contradictory way. In the process of describing and comparing the models, the distribution and rotation of power have emerged as the main social and political characteristics of age class systems. Within these systems, the concept of power cannot be identified with mere political power, as this appears to be just one of the various forms in which power is distributed and exercised; rather, power must be seen as a more general and comprehensive concept. The apparent ethnographic relationship between acephalous societies and age class systems must also be explained. Indeed, this link is not coincidental; the relationship is due to the fact that the distribution and rotation of power, caused by age class systems, may not coexist with any political system where power is personally accumulated and centralized.

This book is organized in three parts. The first, Chapters 1 through 3, deals with preliminary concepts, the geographical distribution of age class systems, and the anthropological approach to their study. The second part, Chapters 4 through 11, describes the ethnographic models of these systems and examines the problem of the position of women. The third part, Chapters 12 and 13, attempts to portray the ethnemic relationship between these systems and the other elements of social structure and, finally, to approach the problem of contacts and transformations through which age class systems have been forced to pass.

My interest in the study of age class systems goes back to the now distant time when, in Cape Town, South Africa, I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the age systems of the Nilo-Hamitic Peoples under the direction of Isaac Schapera. I am delighted to express, once again, my esteem for him, my teacher and friend. Later, in Kenya, from 1953 through 1959 and on occasional return visits, I had the opportunity to observe and study the surviving aspects of age class systems among the Meru, the Embu, the Kikuyu and, on occasion, among the Masai, the Samburu, and the Rendille. I only briefly visited the Oromo Boran of Kenya.

In the past decade, stimulated by the publication of new ethnographic material, I took up once again my study of these systems in both my teaching activities and in various seminar presentations. I am grateful to those friends and colleagues who invited me to discuss this subject at their institutions. I would like to thank in particular Jack Goody, who, through the British Academy, provided me with the opportunity for a study trip to Cambridge in May 1978; Emrys C. Peters, Paul Baxter, and David Turton of the Department of Social Anthropology at Manchester University, where, as Simon Fellow, I conducted two seminars in March 1979; and David I. Kertzer, chairman of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Bowdoin College in Maine, where I spent 1979–80 on leave from the University of Bologna as Tallman Visiting Professor. In May 1980, I gave seminars on the concept of power in age class systems at the Department of Anthropology of the University of Chicago and at the University of California at Santa Barbara. For these two seminars, I would like to thank
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Terence Turner and Valerio Valeri of Chicago and David Brokensha of Santa Barbara. After I had completed the draft of this book, I was invited to conduct a seminar on the "models of age class systems" at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociale in Paris. I would like to thank Isac Chiva, who was responsible for my invitation, as well as all my other French friends and colleagues for their contribution to the discussion, especially Claude Tardits, Marc Augé, and Pierre Bonte. It is difficult to say how much I owe to all these encounters; certainly, through the discussions we had, I was able to form a more "systematic" vision of the entire problem; various parts of this book were originally drafted on these occasions.

A warm thanks to my Italian colleagues and good friends, Italo Signorini, Antonio Colajanni, and Francesco Remotti, with whom I have had frequent occasions to discuss the issue of age class systems through the various phases of writing and revision of this book. Finally, I would like to thank in a very special way my friend David Kertzer, whom I have already mentioned, for the trouble he has so generously taken and so furbishly accomplished in translating into English my original Italian, thus allowing the possibility of a contemporary publication of my book in two languages.

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