Review of the Samburu: A study of gerontocracy, written by Paul Spencer in 1965

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The justification for this research review is to investigate the societal structure of Samburu, focusing on their gerontocracy (age-set) administration system in northern Kenya, as studied by Paul Spencer, a British anthropologist who was immersed himself in the society structure during the 1960s. This review aims at conducting an ethnographic analysis of the document or book authored by Spencer. To address this issue, Spencer employed a methodology that combines living within the society, practicing interviews, observations, and theoretical analysis. He utilized both primary and secondary data collection instruments, including interviews, field observations, and focus group discussions. Spencer’s theoretical framework primarily draws from structural-functionalism. Furthermore, he extensively engaged with members of the Samburu society, ultimately becoming an adopted member himself.

Key words: The Samburu, the gerontocracy, the age set administration system, northern Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

The biography of author Paul Spencer

Anthropologist Paul Spencer, born in Acton, London in 1932, attended Woodhouse Grove School in Yorkshire before graduating with a degree in Engineering from Christ's College, University in 1955. Despite his engineering background, he transitioned to sociology and anthropology, joining the Tavistock Institute in London where he conducted research unrelated to his initial profession. In 1962, Spencer ventured to Kenya for sociological research, marking the beginning of his deep engagement with African anthropology. By 1964, Spencer was a post-lecturer at the School of Anthropology, specializing in Eastern and African studies in London. He later ascended to the position of Professor of African Anthropology at the School of Eastern and African Studies in the United Kingdom. Concurrently, he served as an unpaid worker Director of the African Institute.

Throughout his career, Spencer distinguished himself as a meticulous researcher, mastering the Maa language spoken by the Samburu and Maasai peoples. His interest gradually shifted from industrial organization to anthropology, prompting a two-year fieldwork stint in Kenya.

Spencer's legacy primarily rests on his six ethnographic books, which extensively document the cultures and societies of the Maa-speaking Samburu and Maasai, as well as the Rendille people residing in the central Rift Valley.

He became a professor at Society of Oriental African Studies in 1993 and continued there until his departure in 1997. He was died at age 83, in 21 July 2015.

Samburu society

The Samburu society shares a similar culture and language named Maa, with the Maasai people. They are considered a northern subgroup of the Maa-speaking people, a division commonly recognized by scholars as part of the Maasai individuals (Rhodia, 2013). The Samburu's cosmological beliefs are rooted in their mythology, which holds that they originated from the planet Venus and were given a "ladder" by God to descend to Earth, which they consider their "new world." This belief shapes their identity as "Loikop," meaning "the owners of the earth" (Rhodia, 2013).

Traditionally, the Samburu were nomadic pastoralists, mainly inhabiting northern Kenya. They adhere to a gerontocratic social structure, where elder men hold significant authority, and men under 30 are not allowed to marry until elders grant them independence. This gerontocracy creates a power dynamic that the researcher illustrates as trapping young men in a societal vacuum.

Geographically, the Samburu inhabit an area of approximately 11,000 square miles between Lake Turkana and the Uaso Ngiro River in Northern Kenya. Their territory features were open savannas and Leroghi highlands, previously occupied by the Maasai before European colonization. The modern administrative center for the Samburu District, formerly known as Marsabit, is Maralal, situated on the Leroghi highland.

The Samburu live in dispersed settlements, often alongside their traditional neighbors, the Rendille, under the same administrative government in Marsabit. Their environment is characterized by uneven terrain, scarcity of water, and volcanic rock formations. Despite these challenges, the Samburu society, comprising approximately 30,000 people within the Samburu District, does not practice agriculture due to low rainfall and poor soil conditions. Land ownership is communal within the society (Spencer, 1965).

The description of the topic under discussion

In the discussion part, the author attempts to interpret an aspect of the gerontocracy (age-set system) prevalent among the Samburu people, which confer authority upon the elders to govern the society—a crucial element ingrained in their culture. The elders exerted overarching authority over the Moran (warrior group), essentially influencing every aspect of societal functioning. Thus, the term gerontocracy signifies an age-set system wherein elder men hold sway, consolidating power in their hands. Gerontocracy leaves no room for power dynamics, particularly for the Moran, who is socially marginalized by the elders for up to 30 years, leaving them with little choice but to resort to criminal activities. Another facet of gerontocracy involves elders employing a mechanism of suspension and delaying of young individuals from marriage by controlling their interactions with women, thereby depriving them of autonomy at a young age. The Moran, although contributing to the perpetuation of this elder-dominated system by acquiescing to their prolonged subjugation, are cognizant of the collective mistake in perpetuating a system that robs the younger generation of rightful authority. Women, throughout their lives, remain beholden to the whims of the elders. The gerontocracy system creates a conducive environment for elders to assert significant influence over society. The Samburu society places great emphasis on the importance of this regime in their customs. The gerontocracy (age-set) system relies on the Moran (warrior group) for survival and continuity among the Samburu, particularly in territorial raiding and maintaining peace. This reinforces the age-set system or gerontocracy, serving to alleviate potential tensions within the community by deferring marriage ceremonies for the Moran under the auspices of the elders.

The central theme of the book

The pastoral economy of Samburu

The Samburu societies reside in the arid and semi-arid regions of Northern Kenya, relying heavily on their livestock—cattle, sheep, and goats—for sustenance. Donkeys are primarily utilized as pack animals. During periods when milk production from livestock is insufficient, sheep and goats become crucial for meat, especially during the dry season. Occasionally, they supplement their diet with roots and tree bark for soups, and they may also engage in the sale of livestock. Milk serves as the primary source of nourishment for the Samburu society (Stenning, 1955).

Livestock grazing occurs in proximity to water sources,
which are exhaustively utilized before moving to other areas due to the uneven and unpredictable rainfall patterns in their region. The erratic rainfall patterns often necessitate the movement of significant portions of the population in sporadic and unpredictable ways. Samburu families reside in small, temporary settlements, with mobility being a constant aspect of their lifestyle. Settlements are relatively less mobile, but periodic relocation is inevitable, typically occurring every month and week. Women are responsible for dismantling and rebuilding their shelters during these moves.

Children play an active role in the daily activities of the settlement from a young age, around six years old, assisting with herding and tending to small livestock and calves. Women are primarily responsible for milking the cattle in the early morning and evening, as well as fetching water for their families using pack animals (Spencer, 1965).

**Clanship and exogamy marriage in Samburu**

The Samburu society is characterized by strong clan loyalties and inter-clan rivalries, with rumors having the potential to rapidly spread and isolate a clan community within minutes. These clans form extensive networks stretching across vast distances, sometimes spanning up to one hundred miles or more. Clan identity is deeply ingrained in Samburu culture, with communal principles underpinning their rural economy. Exogamy, the practice of marrying outside one's clan, serves to maintain the unity of each clan (Spencer, 1965).

Within the Samburu social structure, there is a general reluctance among members of different clans to engage in cooperative endeavors, often accompanied by suspicion and occasional hostility. Clan ties and differences are largely influenced by marriage patterns, with elders exerting control over marital arrangements, contributing to tensions and aggressive behavior among younger men. Inter-clan marriages serve to strengthen social bonds while also revealing conflicting interests and underlying competition for wives.

Polygamy is common among the Samburu, with significant competition among elders for desirable brides. Bride wealth, typically consisting of 6-8 livestock initially, is paid to the bride's family, followed by additional gifts negotiated during marital discussions. The number and nature of these gifts are subject to negotiation, with no fixed tradition dictating their quantity, leaving room for extensive bargaining between the families involved (Spencer, 1965).

**Their family structure and the herd**

The senior husband typically allocates a small portion of his livestock flock to his new spouse, which she receives with little precision in requesting additional assistance. This allocation serves as the basis for her sons to eventually build their own cattle herds. When negotiating a marriage, the senior husband does not disclose the entirety of his livestock, reserving some for future marriages. However, when the decision is made to allow the elder man to marry, the potential bride is informed of the number of cattle she can expect in her dowry, with warnings about the possibility of her husband concealing additional livestock. Upon marriage, the bride receives her allocated portion of the flock, typically about one month after the wedding, marking a ceremonial moment. Once this allocation is received, she forfeits any entitlement to further livestock from her husband's flock indefinitely (Spencer, 1965).

The husband retains the remaining livestock for future marriages, rapidly increasing the size of his flock in anticipation of subsequent unions. Upon the husband's death, each of his sons may claim a portion of his remaining flock, with larger flocks potentially allowing for some of his brothers to also benefit. The eldest son from the first wife inherits the entirety of the remaining flock as the primary beneficiary. Tradition does not specify how the mother's flock should be divided among brothers, leading to intense competition and potential hostility within the family. Brothers may acquire stock from their mother's flock by requesting cows individually, and under pressure, she must agree on how to divide them. Upon the death of a woman, her youngest son inherits the remainder of her allocated herd not distributed to her other sons.

These dynamics lead to external conflicts, particularly with clan members, at the expense of bitterness within the household. Disputes over matrimonial livestock allocations between clans exacerbate internal tensions and disputes (Spencer, 1965).

**The societal structure in Samburu**

The Samburu society employs a complex clan hierarchy based on age sets, encompassing all mature men. Their age-set system primarily revolves around the *moran*, the youngest age group within their customs. There are two significant ceremonial transitions: the initiation of young boys into circumcision, marking their progression into *moranhood* during their teenage years after the ceremonial defeat of a bull named Loolbää, and the ox-feast ceremony known as ilmugit of the projectiles, where every Samburu girl has the right to participate. The initiation of young boys into *moranhood* through circumcision is typically overseen by their fathers. The second transition occurs when the eldest son advances from manhood to early adulthood, a period crucial for the prosperity of his future wife. Only after this transition ceremony can young men marry, signifying their readiness for adult responsibilities. However, while the elders of the society often encourage young men over 30 to participate
in such ceremonies, girls are not included in this age-set transition, highlighting a disparity in societal expectations.

The gerontocracy system, driven by elder dominance and control over marriage, delays the initiation of manhood ceremonies among the Samburu, as moran prioritize their first marriage while elders seek to maintain their marital dominance. The moran, traditionally associated with guarding flocks in the bushland, are ceremonially distanced from settlements and the young wives of elder men, occupying an intermediate status between childhood and elderhood, posing challenges for less masculine seniors. After these ceremonies, girls are encouraged to marry the moran.

The segmentary nature of the gerontocracy system extends to relationships among boys, categorized as brotherhood by lineage and brotherhood by connection. Clans are linked by the belief that they descend from the same ancestor, prohibiting intermarriage between them. Boys within the same age set are considered brothers and respect each other's desires regarding marriage. Childhood transitions into adolescence within the same age set, followed by moranhood in teenage years to early adulthood, culminating in elderhood until death, marking the age when authority shifts to seniors (Spencer, 1965).

a) The Moran (young and unmarried men): The central argument of this work revolves around the experiences of young men within a gerontocratic society, particularly focusing on the social construction of adolescence, age-set structures, and the politics of aging, as exemplified by the Samburu society. The moran, representing the youth of each clan, form autonomous groups known as Clubs, which dismiss moran from other clans. Unmarried girls are associated with their brothers' Club and are expected to have lovers from this Club, although they cannot marry them due to exogamous restrictions. The high demand for brides from elder men results in competition among moran and elders, creating anxiety regarding each girl's fidelity. Elders often distance themselves from moran activities, considering them mere play, but may intervene when competitions escalate beyond their control, asserting their authority, particularly during moran marriages. Marriage ceremonies serve as significant events that bring moran from different Clubs together, gradually resolving tensions and bridging gaps between peer groups.

Moranhood, while providing prestige and linking individuals to various social groups, ultimately serves the interests of elder administration at the expense of younger individuals. Seniors have the authority to oversee moran activities, keeping them in a state of adolescence until they are replaced by a new age set. Seniors above 30 years old, without fathers, are assigned to monitor moran activities, maintaining their status as the guardians of tradition. This dynamic often leads to tensions and mistrust between moran and elders (Spencer, 1965).

b) Elders and their curse: Seniors in Samburu society wielded communal knowledge, widespread authority, and wisdom to address various issues within the community. Their discussions and debates were highly regarded and shared through local communication channels. Senior elders played a crucial role in resolving matters related to the moran's transition into adulthood, among other communal concerns. Community matters were deliberated upon extensively during local meetings, with seniors continuing discussions until a resolution was reached. These discussions concluded with mutual blessings exchanged among the seniors and their clan members.

Seniors of the same clan or age set possessed the authority to alleviate tensions and conflicts within their community, often assuming various statuses that granted them the power to bestow blessings or curses upon those who showed them disrespect. Blessings and curses were common in daily interactions, with seniors believing they had the authority to pronounce them. If a senior cursed an individual for their wrongdoing, it was considered unfortunate, and the individual faced severe consequences until they paid compensation and the curse was transformed into a blessing.

However, if a senior cursed someone for disrespect, they were given respect in return as compensation but advised to avoid such actions in the future. In cases of marriage rivalry between seniors and moran, was serious, curses were particularly significant. Moran daughters were subjected to genuine curses in these disputes (Spencer, 1965).

The status of women in Samburu

In Samburu culture, polygamy was prevalent, and women were often viewed as possessions of the elders. Marriage was a daunting experience for Samburu teenagers, as they were often wed to men at least four times their age. Before marriage, girls were expected to obey their fathers' wishes and learn to navigate the expectations of elder respect. Once married, they were taken away to live among members of another clan and were expected to avoid interaction with the moran of their own clan. Their husbands held absolute authority over them and could treat them as they saw fit, instilling fear in them and granting their peers certain privileges over them.

Over time, as women aged and had children of their own, they gained seniority and established relationships within their husband's clan and with other wives. Upon becoming widows after their husband's death, their status did not worsen, but they were not permitted to remarry. Instead, they were expected to endure and bear children in their husband's name, maintaining their relationships with younger wives under the care of their sons. Women often engaged in conversations and jokes at the expense of their husbands, particularly evident in their songs and dances, which openly mocked elders in general (Spencer, 1965).

The process of marriage agreement in Samburu culture involved severing the connection between the bride and her clan's moran lover. After marriage, the bride voluntarily
severed ties with her clan, viewing it as an irreversible decision. Despite any nervousness, confusion, or compromise within the family and clan, the change in status was accepted and recognized by society as a whole. Once the change occurred, it was considered legitimate and irreversible (Spencer, 1965).

**Samburu relation with its neighboring ethnic group**

There were three neighboring societies to the Samburu society: the Turkana, Dorobo, and Rendille (Spencer, 1973). For instance, in Turkana society was communal society where fathers and sons engaged in violent rivalry to divide their family herd to provide livestock for each marriage, with the new affine (in-law) becoming primary among their important friends for future interactions. This contrasted with Samburu practices, where neighboring friends supported each other against external threats, such as raiders attempting to steal their livestock.

The Dorobo ethnic group consisted of dispersed groups of ex-hunters who had adopted some Samburu structures but only to a limited extent. While some of these groups had been incorporated into Samburu clans, they were considered to hold lower status until they met Samburu standards of performance (Spencer, 1973).

The camel-owning Rendille were close partners of the Samburu, but the slow growth of their flocks imposed constraints on each family’s development. Rendille preferred committed marriage arrangements, with emphasis on the first son, and had made numerous adjustments to their age system, which, in some respects, resembled the more straightforward system of the Samburu (Spencer, 1961).

Compared to the Samburu, young men among the Rendille were more bound by the firm obligations of camel herding and limited traditional rights than by the age system. There was a distinct shift in character, with Rendille elders gaining a notorious reputation for resorting to powerful curses (Spencer, 1965).

**METHODOLOGY**

Based on information collected from the book, it was found that the author wrote the ethnography of Samburu society during a 2-year field study. The following methods were used by Spencer, which are:

1) Participant observation
2) Interview (extensive interview with the society members was used)
3) Learned Maa language (the language of Samburu and Massai) within 5 months
4) Spent more than two years within the society and became an adopted member of the Samburu society.

**RESULTS OF THE STUDY**

The Samburu gerontocracy (age-set) system was integral to the structure of Samburu society, with authority largely monopolized by the elders. In this culture, senior members held sway over all aspects of life, including marriage, ownership of women, supervision of young men (morans), and control of livestock and herds. The elders played a crucial role in maintaining peace within Samburu society and fostering peaceful relations with neighboring societies such as the Turkana, Dorobo, and Rendille.

**DISCUSSION**

**The theoretical orientation that the author used**

The author of the book utilized structural functionalism theory to craft an insightful analysis of the Samburu society’s age set system, presenting a comprehensive description within its contextual framework. Ethnography served as the methodological approach, scrutinizing the behaviors and performances within specific communal environments, influenced by the societal conditions in which the described society resides. Ethnography, in this context, transcends mere description, serving as a philosophy of storytelling that stimulates an informed and engaged understanding of a particular society. The author’s ethnographic process was both diverse and innovative, guided by both established and evolving methodologies. Therefore, Paul Spencer employed the explanatory descriptive method of ethnography, supplemented by structural functionalism theory, to provide a nuanced understanding of the Samburu culture.

**The organizational format of the book**

The book written by author Paul Spencer is organized into eleven chapters. Chapter one delves into the Countrified Economy, while chapter two explores Fraternityship and Exogamy. Chapter three focuses on the Household and the Flock, and chapter four deals with the arrangement of Samburu Society. Chapter five is dedicated to the Moran, while chapter six expands on the Moran’s role within the entire society. Chapter seven discusses Elderhood and the Swear Word, followed by chapter eight, which deals with the Status of Women. Chapter nine explores Social Approaches and Ceremony, while chapter ten evaluates the relationship between the Samburu and neighboring “Tribes.” Finally, the eleventh and last chapter presents the Conclusion: the Gerontocratic Regime of Society.

**The author’s style of writing**

The author embarked on his first journey to East Africa and conducted ethnographic fieldwork among the Samburu society. Despite initial concerns about the risks involved, he succeeded in documenting the culture of the society. His ethnographic work is characterized by understandable language, descriptive elaboration, and logical progression.
of ideas and arguments. Although occasional use of engineering terminology, stemming from his engineering background, may have been confusing, overall, the author adeptly presents the culture of the Samburu in a readable and intelligent manner, especially considering his status as a beginner author.

The perspective the author used to write the book

The author employed both etic and emic viewpoints of anthropology to study the ethnography of the Samburu gerontocracy (age-set) system. Initially, upon arrival from Britain without prior knowledge of the Samburu society, he adopted an etic perspective (outsider view). However, after spending five months, he was immersed in the society, learning their Maa language, and integrating himself as a member, he transitioned to an emic view of the society's perspective. During this phase, he aimed to present the society's viewpoint without imposition of his own background or biases, refraining from translation. The author strived to maintain a perspective free of ethnocentric views.

Conclusion

Like many indigenous African ethnic groups, the Samburu lack customary laws that regulate the actions of elders towards Moran, individual relations within the group, or the balance between nature and nurture would be balanced the situation. This absence of legal framework allows elders to exercise this excessive power under the gerontocracy regime, controlling the initiation and transition from boyhood to manhood, as well as monopolizing the practice of marriage within the society. Customary norms do not specify how many cattle from the mother's flock should be divided among brothers or sons, leading to intense competition within the immediate family that can escalate to active hostility among family members.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declared that there is no conflict of interest.

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