ROLE FLEXIBILITY AND STATUS CONTINUITY: TIRIKI (KENYA) AGE GROUPS TODAY*

ABSTRACT. Research in Tiriki, Western Province, Kenya, in 1954–56, 1961, and 1982 reveals the continuing practice and importance of initiating young males into a graded system of semi-generational age groups. This paper describes and analyzes how and why members of the two seniormost Tiriki-Terik 'elder' age grades still enjoy the highest tribal social status even though they have largely forsaken their traditional judicial and ritual roles. These elders have assumed many domestic and subsistence supervisory roles left unfilled by junior age grade members who are working for cash in distant urban centers.

Key Words: age grading; senior age groups, social change; Kenya; aging in Africa; aging in developing societies.

This paper is about expectations of changes in norms for social behavior throughout the life span, and their relevance to the modernization process in Tiriki, Western Province, Kenya.

Over two generations ago protracted periods of employment for cash off-tribe (mutugulu), i.e. on farms and in towns beyond the tribal boundaries, became the accepted Tiriki substitute for young men's traditional cattle herding, raiding, and warrior activities. Ramifications of this off-tribe employment soon became an integral part of the tribal modernization process, and in recent years, due to the explosive population growth and resultant severe shortage of tribal land, money received from employment off-tribe has supplanted farming as the basic subsistence activity for many families. Through all these changes Tiriki elders have continued to enjoy high status even though their social roles have changed greatly. Thus the Tiriki case is of relevance to those interested in the status and roles of the elderly in Third World societies, particularly in societies with established patterns of labor migration. The Tiriki example should also be of interest to anyone concerned or theorizing about the process of aging and related role changes because in Tiriki the expectations of age graded shifts in social roles are much more fundamental to their world view than are the content or particularities of the role shifts expected of people as they progress through their life span.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH ON THE TIRIKI

In 1966 I published a monograph on the Tiriki (Sangree 1966) which was based on 19 months of fieldwork Ludinda Sangree and I conducted in Tiriki in 1954–56, and a brief return visit to Tiriki in July, 1961. In this monograph I argued in some detail that the traditional age-graded age
group system of the tribe supplied a social structural basis for explicit successive social status and role changes throughout the individual's life span (Sangree 1966: 283–5). I asserted that the age group organization aided Tiriki men in their early and middle adulthood to accept the innovations of colonial-introduced western primary schooling, Christianity, and wage-labor off-tribe employment, in a manner that did not erode, indeed maintained, their traditional standing in the tribe. I argued, furthermore, that this age group organization which includes the rituals that initiate youths into it, affirmed and reinforced the relatively high status and the traditional social roles of the elderly men as those who were responsible for overseeing and mystically validating the initiation procedures. The high status of the elders was assured, I maintained, so long as the tribal initiation and age group organization continued to be highly valued and generally regarded as the primary focus of Tiriki tribal identity (Sangree, 1966: 286).

Although I made no predictions about the future of the Tiriki age group system in this 1966 publication, at that time I thought it was very unlikely that the traditional Tiriki age group structure would remain essentially intact and a continuing basis for tribal social and cultural continuity into the 1980s (Sangree 1966: 287). Trends in the early and mid-1960s suggested an exponentially accelerating integration of the Tiriki and other Kenya tribal peoples into an emerging national proletariat, with a relatively educated lucky few emerging as members of the new national middle and elite classes. This process was already under way in the early 1960s in Nairobi, Mombasa, and other Kenyan towns, and was beginning to involve directly or indirectly an increasing number of Tiriki. I felt in 1966 that these economically and politically based national trends would soon adumbrate and quickly erode the saliency of traditional Tiriki tribal values, including the special status of Tiriki tribal elders. Indeed I envisioned, but was too disheartened to predict in writing, that the Tiriki young adults I had come to know about, and in many cases befriend, in the 1950s and early 1960s would find themselves condemned to a rather bleak elderhood. I had seen how these young adults had been greatly aided by the traditional age group system in maintaining their tribal status while at the same time embracing western educational, religious, economic and political innovations. It seemed probable to me, however, that when they became elders in the late 1970s and the 1980s, they would experience only vestiges of the traditionally high tribal elders' status, vestiges principally confined to their reminiscing at beer drinks with their age peers about how things once were and still ought to be. It appeared likely that they would have to subsist principally on intermittent meager handouts from their children and grandchildren who in many cases would be making precarious livings from wage labor or from growing cash crops in the increasing overpopulated tribal areas. Thus I envisioned that the elders