



56. Age-Grading of the Plains Indians

Author(s): William Foote Whyte

Source: *Man*, Vol. 44 (May - Jun., 1944), pp. 68-72

Published by: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2792101>

Accessed: 29/08/2009 16:06

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=rai>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Man*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The males of 17 and over have head lengths mostly ranging from 181 to 199 mm., while among the youths of 14-16 the main range is 173-186. The head-breadths in the older group have a main range 147-156 mm., the youths showing a corresponding range 142-154. This indicates, so far as it goes, that, as usual, the later stages of head growth are more particular of growth in length. Of the fifteen women of 17 years and above twelve have head-lengths ranging from 176-188 while breadths range from 143-152, the resemblance of these main ranges to those of the youths being thus close, as usual.

As regards the cephalic index, there was no appreciable difference in the main range among males of over 17 and those of 14-16, though one can argue from the head-lengths that the indices of youths would tend to decrease when they grew beyond the age of 17. The main range here was from 78.2 to 85.2 with thirty-seven of the forty-nine within these limits and four youths and one adult man having relatively broader heads and seven having values ranging down to 74 while one is far off at 70.8. The nasal index in the men of 17 and above has its main range between 76.1 and 89.6, while that of the youths has the corresponding figures 92.3 and 102.8. The nose, like the skull, grows more in length than in

breadth during the later stages. It may be noted in passing that among the men of 17 and over, the nasal index tends to higher values among those who live at 450 metres altitude than in those who live at 900 or higher, the averages being respectively 86.7 and 83.9, but numbers are insufficient for further comments. The interorbital breadth is generally considerable. Stature in the males of 17 and above ranges mainly between 1,498 and 1,586 mm., while that of females of similar ages ranges mainly between 1,468 and 1,518 mm., the range as well as the stature being less, especially on the high side. While, therefore, these people are Mongoloid by cephalic index, their platyopic condition differentiates them from their presumed congeners and seems to represent an adaptation to the warm valleys. The shortness of stature is notable. Like all the other Mongoloid peoples they have straight black hair. Their irises are chestnut-tinted more like those of northern Chinese and Mongols than like those of S. China. The lips are thick and everted as one would expect in such a hot wet climate. Occiputs are quite prominent and seen in many cases. Like the other Mongoloids, the Shans are xanthodermi, but much lighter in pigmentation than their cousins in Indo-China. This is again due to the moderation of fog and clouds.

NOTES.

¹ This article was written for the Science Reports of National Tsing Hua University, Series C. Geology, Geography, and Meteorology, in Commemoration of the Thirtieth Anniversary of the University, April, 1941. But on account of the war, publication of this kind has been made impossible in China.

² The Shans are divided into Han or Land, and Shui or Water Shans, according to the location of their dwellings and some other custom, they are called Shan-Da-You and Bu-Ma-San respectively by themselves. This has probably something to do with the nomenclature of the 'Shans.'

The Shans are called Po Yi or Bai Yi in Chinese and written in various forms. Ref. Yunnan Tung Chih.

³ Major H. R. Davies has classified the peoples of Southwest China into four main families, namely the Mon-Khmer, the Tibetan-Burman, the Shan, and the Chinese. *Yunnan, The Link between India and the Yangtze*, Cambridge, 1909.

Dr. V. K. Ting has considered the Shans as one of the three main aboriginal groups of Yunnan, *i.e.* the Shans, the Mon-Khmer and the Tibetan-Burman. *China Year Book*, 1925.

⁴ The Shans call themselves *Dai* meaning 'ourselves,' equivalent to the 'We' group in meaning of Dr. Li Chi's classification of peoples. Li Chi, *The Formation of the Chinese Peoples*.

⁵ A. Davies, 'Some advanced modifications on the relationship between Nasal Index and Climate,' *MAN*, 1929, 4.

⁶ Beatrix Metford, *Where China meets Burma*, 1935, in the chapter 'Meng Mao and its Rulers.'

⁷ The irises of the Cantonese are pitch black.

⁸ W. J. Gregory, *To the Alps of the Chinese Tibet*. 'Where they came is uncertain, but there is close similarity to the 'Cantonese' . . . 'they are supposed to have emigrated 'from Kwangtung and Fukien.'

AGE-GRADING OF THE PLAINS INDIANS. By William Foote Whyte, Peabody Museum, Cambridge Massachusetts.

56 The tribes of the Great Plains area were remarkably similar in their culture patterns, but there was one basic distinction. While age differences were important in all the tribes, it was only among the Arapaho, Gros Ventre, Blackfoot, Mandan and Hidatsa that the ceremonial societies were organized upon the age-grading principle. Any theory of age-grading that would be useful in explaining Plains Indian culture would therefore have to account for this distinction.

The first requirement in approaching such a prob-

lem is to set up a theory which appears to account for elaborate age grading systems. The attempt to apply such a theory to the Plains data may then reveal the factor or factors that have led to the difference in social organization.

Age-grading, as discussed here, is a system of differential distribution of rights and obligations, of prohibited, permissible, and required activities, according to different (socially recognized) periods of life and according to the social distinctions established between the sexes.

It is clear that age-grading, defined in this manner, is present in every society of the world. However, in some societies it is of relatively minor importance, whereas in others a formal system of age-graded associations has become accentuated at the expense of other social structures. What are the conditions that lead to this formalization of the age-grading system?

I should expect to find a highly organized and formalized system of age-grades in societies which

- (1) emphasize activities requiring strength and dexterity,
- (2) require large-scale co-operation,
- (3) have little division of labour,
- (4) have little economic inequality, and
- (5) pursue a nomadic or semi-nomadic existence.

If a society accentuates certain activities which require great physical vigour and dexterity, we should expect age distinctions to become very important. If such activities are not limited to men at the peak of their physical powers, from the late teens through the late twenties, such men are nevertheless best able to bear the brunt of the performance for their society.

A complex division of labour among the participating men militates against the predominance of the age-grading system. Where a number of occupations are practised, they tend to work out so that specialists in one line customarily originate action for those in another line, thus assuming higher status. This accentuates status distinctions at the expense of age distinctions. The division of labour gives rise to trading relations, which tend to promote the organization of society in terms of economic relations. The trade requires regulation, and this favours the development of political organization. The rise of economic inequalities, on the basis of a complex division of labour, militates against the importance of age-grades, for the acquisition of wealth enables certain individuals to control others without regard to age distinctions.

Where property is owned by the family group and is passed down from father to son, the individual's social and economic existence depends upon his place in the family system. Under these conditions, age-grading is naturally subordinated to family relationships. Where the family does not have a fixed relationship to the soil and where therefore the child is not so dependent upon his parents for inheritance, we should expect age-grading to assume more prominence. Hence a nomadic or semi-nomadic existence favours this development.

These conditions are clearly interrelated. Nomads cannot practice a highly developed division of labour, and in such a society economic inequalities cannot remain fixed through the inheritance of land

and the construction of improvements upon it. Nomads of necessity pursue a way of life which puts continual demands upon their strength and dexterity.

The Masai¹ of East Africa, who are noted for the elaboration of their age-grading system, conform in every respect to the criteria given above. The Zulus² and the Dinka³ also appear to fit the criteria. There were in Africa a number of tribes having age-grading systems that were fairly highly developed. Unfortunately it is difficult to apply the theory to most of these cases because we have insufficient data upon actual behaviour of the tribesmen. For example, field studies report that age classes are 'important' or 'unimportant,' that they are 'prominent' or else play a minor role. When we compare one society with another, such general statements are of dubious value. In order to estimate the importance of age-grading in a given society, we should have to work out for the entire society the pattern of interactions⁴ of individuals in age classes, families, and other institutions. A study of the frequency of interaction of individuals in age sets, compared with the frequency in other sets, would provide an objective criterion for estimating the importance of the age-grading system.

Lacking data of this nature for most of Africa, we must turn elsewhere for a test of the theory. Data on behaviour among the Plains Indians are also inadequate for a conclusive test, but the distinction between tribes with or without age-graded ceremonial societies is sufficiently clear cut as to permit a useful investigation of the problem.

On the Plains the ceremonial societies functioned only at one period of the year. In winter, when buffalo herds were scattered, the tribesmen clustered in small bands. There was also a clan organization which varied somewhat in form from tribe to tribe. When the buffalo ran in great herds in the summer, the whole tribe came together. This was the period for the great tribal ceremonies, for large-scale war parties, and for the organization of the great annual buffalo hunt. In this period, the men organized themselves into societies for warfare, policing, and the hunt.

¹ See L. S. B. Leakey, 'Some Notes on the Masai of Kenya Colony' and D. Storrs Fox, 'Further Notes on the Masai of Kenya Colony,' both in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, LX, pp. 185-209, 447-465.

² E. J. Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus*. London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1936. The Zulus had a fairly high development of agriculture, but this was primarily the sphere of the women. Economic activity of the men who formed the age-graded regiments was organized primarily around the herding of cattle.

³ C. G. and B. Z. Seligman, *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan*. London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1932.

⁴ The conceptual scheme used in this article is that of Eliot D. Chapple, Conrad M. Arensberg and Carleton S. Coon. See Chapple and Coon, *Principles of Anthropology*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1941.

Robert H. Lowie has summarized the characteristics of the highly graded systems of the Blackfoot, Gros Ventre, Arapaho, Mandan, and Hidatsa tribes in this way :

The features common to all five systems were these : In each tribe the societies were graded in a series, the difference in grade corresponding to a difference in age. Except for the very young and the very old, practically every male member of the tribe belonged to one of the societies. Age was nowhere the sole condition for joining ; either membership itself or the requisite emblems and instructions had to be bought, and this purchase, even among the Blackfoot, was normally collective rather than individual. As part of the purchase price, the buyer ceremonially surrenders his wife to an older man in some, at least, of the societies of each tribe. In every case the function of a tribal police during the hunt is associated either with the entire system or with one of the societies in the series. Finally, in every one of the five tribes a women's organization connected with the buffalo is associated with the series, while no such society is reported from tribes having ungraded military organizations.⁵

Age distinctions were not rigidly adhered to in these societies. Cases have been reported in which old men had retained membership in younger societies, serving as mentors of the youth, and young men became members of societies of the very old to serve as messenger boys and perform other tasks requiring youthful vigour.⁶ Nevertheless, nearly all members of a given society were roughly of the same age.

There was no special warrior class, as among the Masai. We can assume that the younger societies must have played the major role in the buffalo hunt, though we have no field accounts that record actual participation. The older societies took the lead in organizing the religious ceremonies. The position of the older men was supported not only by their control of the ceremonies but also by the nature of the rite of passage through which a group moved up in the age-grading scale. Throughout this ceremony the younger group remained passive and simply responded to the originations of action on the part of the elders.⁷

These five tribes fit my proposed specifications for age-grading systems quite closely. Warfare and the buffalo hunt were activities that required strength, dexterity, and large-scale organization. There was little division of labour and small development of economic inequality among them. They pursued a nomadic existence—with two exceptions. The Man-

dan and Hidatsa tribes were settled agriculturalists, living in well-constructed permanent dwellings, for a part of the year. However, as the buffalo hunting season approached, they left their villages and organized themselves for that period in terms of their age-societies. Since in no tribe did the age-societies function except in this ceremonial, hunting, and war-making season, it was apparently possible for a tribe to live a sedentary life for a part of the year and still develop age-societies that became activated in this season.

Lowie pointed out that in the tribes with 'ungraded' societies there was found a tendency for rank in the society to correspond with the age of the members. In the societies of the Oglala the correspondence was fairly close. By means of historical study Lowie showed that even in tribes with graded systems the rank of a particular society was subject to great change over a period of years. While the grades in existence at a given time corresponded with the people's conceptions of social prestige, there was no necessarily permanent connexion between a particular society and a particular age-grade.

Lowie undertook to discover the course of the evolution of the age-grading system and explain why it developed in the pattern found among the Plains Indians. By means of an elaborate analysis of the ethnographic evidence, he concluded that the ungraded systems had developed first and that the graded systems of the Hidatsa, Mandan, Arapaho, Gros Ventre, and Blackfoot had arisen out of the ungraded systems.

Lowie's theory may be accepted or rejected without affecting the problem set forth in this paper. It has been established without question that certain societies, with their ceremonies, were 'diffused' from one tribe to another. This, however, provides us with no basis for explaining the direction of diffusion and the differing lines of development of the social organizations of the tribes. Unless we can discover some objective criterion for distinguishing between tribes with and without graded systems, we must assume that the distinctions were simply the products of historical accidents, and abandon all efforts to discover laws of social organization.

It is suggested here that an examination of the distribution of wealth in the various tribes will enable us to establish such a distinction. In all the tribes that participated in the buffalo hunting and warfare culture complex, the horse was the primary form of wealth. Horses were valued not only for utilitarian purposes ; they had great prestige value.

As Wissler has pointed out,⁸ horses reached the

⁵ *Plains Indian Age-Societies : Historical and Comparative Summary*. Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, XI, part XIII.

⁶ C. Daryll Forde, *Habitat, Economy, and Society*, 'The Blackfoot : Buffalo Hunters of the North American Plains,' pp. 45-68.

⁷ Clark Wissler, *Blackfoot Societies*, Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, XI, pp. 390-1.

⁸ Clark Wissler, *The Influence of the Horse on the Development of Plains Culture*, *American Anthropologist*, XVI, 1, January-March, 1914, pp. 1-25.

Plains area from the south, being introduced by the Spaniards into what is now Mexico. In general, the southern Plains tribes, being close to the original source of supply, acquired the horses early and held great numbers of them. The Blackfoot, Gros Ventre, Arapaho, Mandan, and Hidatsa tribes possessed relatively few horses.

To understand the meaning of this contrast, we may consider three cases. Henry Elkin makes this comment upon the role of the horse among the Arapaho :

The horse . . . under proper circumstances, might have allowed for social stratification on a property basis. Unlike other forms of property, it was the essential means of procuring a livelihood; was differentiated into relative values, and deteriorated slowly. Nevertheless, any development along this line was precluded by constant warfare. The frequency with which whole herds were won or lost, served to prevent property ownership from becoming permanently concentrated. The spoils of a successful raid, moreover, were equally divided among all participants, though those who acted most effectively received first choice.⁹

The situation was quite different for the non-graded Crow and Kiowa. Wissler reports that the Crow had more horses than any other Missouri tribe.¹⁰ In 1833 Maximilian estimated that the tribe possessed nine to ten thousand horses for a population of 1,000 to 1,200 warriors.¹¹ While horses were gained and lost in raids, the Crow more than held their own in competition with other tribes, so that there apparently was never a time when this wealth was wiped out, even for a short period. We have no exact accounts of the distribution of horses within the tribe, but the evidence indicates that great inequalities existed. Lowie reports that Gray Bull, a chief, had seventy to ninety horses.¹² James P. Beckwourth's autobiography¹³ gives abundant evidence of the unequal distribution of horses within the tribe. While Beckwourth was notoriously given to exaggeration, especially in matters involving his own behaviour, his accounts of the Crow culture have proved accurate in the main outlines. Lowie writes :

A large herd had sheer ostentation value; the owner could offer twenty horses for a wife instead of five; and he could give frequent presents to his father's clansfolk if he liked to hear himself eulogized.¹⁴

Beckwourth reported several occasions upon which he was forced to give up all of his horses to com-

pensate a man whose wife he had stolen. Within a short time he would be as wealthy as ever, since all his relatives would make up the loss with gifts from their own herds. Beckwourth smoothed the way for this system by giving away to relatives most of his horses before each wife-stealing episode.

It is clear that unequal distribution of wealth does not, in and of itself, create social stratification. The important question is, how was the wealth utilized? Among all the Plains tribes, prestige and position depended to a large extent upon liberality in the giving of gifts. The gift giver originated action in pair, and set events. He placed the recipients under obligations to him, with the result that, as Lowie has pointed out in the passage above quoted, he could originate action for them in other matters also. When the same individuals were continually able to originate action in this way, positions became fixed and a stratified society developed.

It is also important to observe the channels through which the gifts passed. The accounts of both Beckwourth and Lowie indicate that this activity tended to follow kinship lines to a large extent. This channelling of interactions emphasized kinship ties at the expense of age divisions. It is therefore natural to find that sons among the Crow frequently joined the societies of their fathers and that surrender of one's wife was never a feature of society initiation, as it was in some of the graded systems.

The Kiowa¹⁵ present another clear case of stratification closely related to economic inequalities. This tribe had societies that were roughly related to age distinctions, but other social distinctions prevented the correlation from being very close. The system of societies was, furthermore, overshadowed by a clearly defined class system. Mishkin¹⁶ reports that there were four recognized social classes. Social position depended upon war honours, wealth, and special abilities.

Specialization was more highly developed among the Kiowa than among the age-graded tribes. Medicine men, hunters, artists, craftsmen, horse-breakers, herders, and veterinarians were among the specialties recognized.

The Kiowa were extremely wealthy in horses. All members of the top social class were born to wealth. Therefore, in warfare and raids they could afford to concentrate upon the winning of war honours unconnected with economic acquisition. Members of the second class were in many cases as wealthy as the top people but were not born to wealth and consequently had had to win their position by excelling in horse

⁹ Ralph Linton, ed., *Acculturation in Seven American Indian Tribes*, 'The Northern Arapaho of Wyoming.' New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., Inc., 1940, p. 224.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

¹¹ Robert H. Lowie, *The Crow Indians*. New York: Farrar & Rhinehart, Inc., 1935, p. xiv.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 223.

¹³ T. D. Bonner, ed., *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 228.

¹⁵ Bernard Mishkin, *Rank and Warfare among the Plains Indians*, monograph of the American Ethnological Society. New York: J. J. Augustin, 1940.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

stealing. This concentration of activity prevented them from performing the honorific acts necessary for attaining the top social positions. The third class was made up of those who were poor in horses. At the bottom was a group possessing no horses at all.

There was considerable fluidity in this Kiowa social system. A young man in the bottom position might borrow horses from well-to-do relatives, engage in successful raids, pay his debts, and acquire the wealth to consolidate his position in the second social class. Beyond this, however, it was exceedingly difficult to rise in one life-time, for the reason already given. Even though there was considerable shifting of social position below the top level, the aristocrats remained in power and those in the second class at any given time were able to build up their power by liberal giving and lending of horses. As among the Crow, the horses tended to pass back and forth along kinship lines, thus emphasizing family ties at the expense of age distinctions.

This theory of age-grading, especially as it applies to the Plains Indians, should be taken as suggestive rather than conclusive. Unfortunately, the existing data upon Plains Indian culture do not provide an adequate basis for giving a final answer to the question. We have a wealth of material upon arts and

crafts, customs and folklore, and considerable work has been done upon the diffusion of traits. In order to explore this problem farther, we should know for each tribe roughly the number of horses possessed in relation to the population, how the horses were distributed as to ownership, and through what channels gifts of horses travelled. All ethnologists have recognized that in the Plains area the horse was the primary form of wealth, but, except for the Mishkin study, we have only fragmentary material on this subject. Most ethnologists were content to report in vague, general terms that the Indians rode, stole, and gave away horses. No attempt was made to determine systematically the role of the horse in the social organization of a given tribe.

This paper will, it is hoped, serve a dual purpose. In the first place, it presents a theory of age-grading, which, with modifications, may prove useful in analysing the social structures of a variety of societies. In the second place, the attempt to apply the theory reveals serious gaps in the existing data. If we are to develop a science of comparative social organization, such gaps must first be pointed out and then, wherever the data may still be available, be filled in by field research pointing toward the solution of particular problems.

THE FRENCH INSTITUTE FOR NEGRO AFRICA (L'INSTITUT FRANÇAIS D'AFRIQUE NOIRE). *By Th. Monod, Director; translated by H. V. Meyerowitz.*

57 In a volume published in 1942 by the High Commissariat of French West Africa, entitled 'French West Africa in 1942,' I wrote at the head of the chapter devoted to the 'Institut d'Afrique': 'The paraphernalia of what is now conveniently called a new country does not consist only of rails, lorries, and factories. It has become clear that the African edifice will have several façades, and the planners are already beginning to take this into account. Politics and economics will have their place, science will have its place, and intellectual and spiritual life will likewise take theirs.

'All these things are interdependent, and it would be fallacious and inauspicious—indeed impossible—to desire discrimination between the true and the useful. To attempt this would be to condemn the one group to confinement within a strictly local utilitarian sphere, and to expose the scientific knowledge of the other to the indifference, suspicion, and indeed the hostility of that type of mind which, while making a ready pretence at being "realistic," too often blunders across all the pit-falls of a short-sighted empiricism.

'Science has a general aim. Although it must collect the small stones separately, it is to use them

'in the erection of the great structure which is its supreme and permanent end.

'Here in contact with the African realities, science seeks a thorough acquaintance with the present in all its aspects. But this picture would be but a snapshot, fleeting and unproductive, if it did not at the same time reveal itself as both a result and a cause, the consummation of a past which it explains, and the preview of a future to which it will owe its very contents.

'The utility of this scientific research has been open to discussion. Only too often people have wanted to see in it nothing but a kind of academic pastime, a pretence at scholarship out of touch with current political, economic, and social affairs. But now this scientific research has gained the day.

'Far from excluding science, and with it the scientist, from her colonial territories, France now wishes to make up for lost time and to do this speedily and well.

'Scientific research in Africa, to be efficient, must be equipped with both research-workers and materials. Of the two problems the first is the more difficult because it cannot be wholly solved by making provision in the budget.