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Author(s): Anne Foner and David Kertzer
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Transitions over the Life Course: Lessons from Age-Set Societies[1]

Anne Foner
Rutgers University

David Kertzer
Bowdoin College

This study examines processes of life-course transitions in 21 African age-set societies, a group of preliterate societies where age is a major organizing principle, and compares processes of transition there with those in the United States today. The analysis challenges some long-held views about the putative smooth course of passage through the life course in "simple" societies and troubled transitions in the United States. Despite the contrasting societal contexts, in both types of society transitions constitute immanent sources of tension: for the individual, conflicts between old and new roles and for the society, competition for rewarding roles. But in both contexts mechanisms emerge that serve to mitigate some transition difficulties. Even the processes of transition themselves are subject to change as a result of individual and societal adaptations to transitional problems and to social and environmental change. Some theoretical implications of these findings are explored.

The life course of individuals everywhere is punctuated by transition points—the relinquishment of familiar roles and the assumption of new ones. Much sociological analysis of these life-course transitions has emphasized consequences for the individual, especially the difficulties of moving from one set of roles to another within the context of contemporary Western societies (e.g., Benedict 1938; Brim 1976; Rossi 1968). Yet life-course transitions are more than an individual matter; they involve an interplay between the individual and what he or she confronts as society or the social structure. The historical and cross-cultural variability of transitions supplies ample evidence that they are not a simple result of developmental processes but, instead, reflect specific kinds of

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institutional structures. In this paper, we seek to develop this broader approach to life-course transitions as a framework for reexamining some of the familiar notions about transition processes. Our analysis utilizes the conceptual framework of age stratification. Within this perspective, age and aging have significance not only as properties of the individual but also as essential components of social structure and change.

We consider three questions: How do life-course transitions affect the society as well as the individual? What adaptations are made to meet the societal and individual problems generated by transitions? What are the sources and nature of changes in transition processes? These questions have already been raised by age-stratification theorists with respect to Western industrial societies (e.g., Riley 1976; Riley et al. 1969; Riley, Johnson, and Foner 1972; Foner 1975; Riley and Waring 1976). We seek to elaborate the general understanding of life-course transitions suggested by these writings through systematic analysis of contrasting societal settings. In these pages, then, we explore the questions raised above by focusing on a sample of preliterate African age-set societies and by comparing transitions there with those of contemporary American society.

We have chosen a sample of African age-set societies because, in a number of key aspects, they present a striking contrast with contemporary society in the United States. They are relatively small scale, technologically undeveloped, and preliterate. Because they utilize age as a major element in their social organization, their age-grade systems are particularly explicit. Just because age norms are so definitely institutionalized and stand out clearly in these societies, their age-stratification systems are better documented than those found in most other preliterate populations. Thus they provide us with some of the most complete data on life-course transitions available for preliterate societies.

Our findings both extend previous analyses and challenge some long-held views: Life-course transitions are neither as simple in age-set societies nor as intractable in our own society as stereotypes suggest. At the societal level, transitions represent an inherent source of tension and conflict in both complex industrial and "simple," age-set societies. And in both types of societies, individuals face problems in making transitions. Finally, both individual and societal responses to the problems of life-course transitions tend to change the very nature of the transitions.

SAMPLE AND DATA

Our criteria for designating an age-set society as such include the following: named groupings of males[2] based on age or generation; publicly rec-

[2] In most societies the organized age system involves only males; formal age systems spanning the entire adult lives of females are rare. The implications of distinct systems

ognized membership in these sets; duration of these groups, once they are formed, for the bulk of the life course; membership entailing the allocation of significant social roles; joint movement of age-set members from one age grade to the next; and differential social rewards accorded to the various age sets, based on age grade occupied.

Formal age-set systems that meet these criteria are relatively rare in human societies. Of the 547 cultures surveyed in the *World Ethnographic Sample,* only 23 were found to contain age-set systems, most of them in Africa (Coult and Habenstein 1965, p. 27). Our analysis is based on 21 African societies having age-set systems, 14 of which are based entirely on age and seven of which have an important generational[3] element in the determinaton of set membership.[4] These were selected as the societies in Africa having adequate documentation of their age-set systems. The existence of age-set systems in a number of other African societies has been noted in the ethnographic literature. None of these reports, however, provides sufficiently detailed data for our analysis.

Our analysis of age-set societies is based on the original ethnographic reports.[5] In most instances we have had to rely on the description of an age-set system provided by a single ethnographer. In the majority of these cases, however, reports by others have provided useful background

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of transitions for females and the way the male and female age systems mesh are discussed in an unpublished paper by one of the authors (Kertzer).

[3] A person may be assigned to set membership by virtue of his age (whether based on some social, physical, or chronological criterion), or on the basis of genealogical factors. In the latter case, a common rule is that a boy should belong to the set following that of his father. Few societies follow such generational principles strictly. Most societies having generational components to their age-stratification systems compromise the generation principle to a greater or lesser extent in order to achieve some age homogeneity of sets. It is for this reason that generation-set systems are included in our analysis.

[4] The ethnographic present is used throughout. Many of the age-set systems referred to have, in recent years, been severely modified in response to political and economic pressures.

[5] The 14 age-set systems and the primary sources relied on for their documentation are: Afikpo Ibo (Ottenberg 1971); Arusha (Gulliver 1963); Kikuyu (Kenyatta 1938; Lambert 1956; Middleton 1953; Prins [1953] 1970); Kipsigis (Peristiany 1939; Prins [1953] 1970); Latuka (Seligman and Seligman 1925; Seligman 1932; and unpublished field notes by Oker B. B. Madison); Masai (Jacobs 1958; Bernardi 1955; Fosbrooke 1948); Meru (Holding 1942; Lambert 1947); Nandi (Huntingford 1953); Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1936, 1940); Nyakyusa (Wilson [1941] 1963, 1949); Rendille (Spencer 1973); Samburu (Spencer 1965, 1973); Tiriki (Sangree 1965, 1966); and Turkana (Gulliver 1958). The seven generation-set systems are: Borana Galla (Legesse 1973; Prins [1953] 1970); Jie (Gulliver 1953); Karimojong (Dyson-Hudson 1963, 1966); Konso (Hallpike 1972); Kuria (Ruel 1958); So (Laughlin and Laughlin 1974); and Zanaki (Bischofberger 1972). All but one of the 21 societies are found in East Africa: nine in Kenya, four in Tanzania, three in Uganda, two in Sudan, and one in Nigeria. Half (11) are pastoral, primarily engaged in cattle herding, while eight have a primarily agricultural economy and two have mixed agricultural herding economies.

material on the society in question. It is also of interest that studies of about half the societies in our sample have been published since the last major sociological analysis of age-set societies was undertaken (Eisenstadt 1956).[6]

THE AGE SYSTEMS OF AGE-SET SOCIETIES

All societies have some form of age stratification: that is, age is one basis for allocating social roles and for drawing important social divisions. Age-set societies are distinctive in the extent to which their age-stratification systems are formalized and the degree to which age provides a major basis for role allocation in the society.

The Structure of Age Systems in Age-Set Societies

When we speak of a system of age stratification as a general phenomenon, we are referring to a societal structure of socially recognized divisions based on age—that is, age strata. Members of each age stratum are alike in chronological age or life stage and have roles in the society that are in some sense age specific. What from a dynamic point of view are the major transition points over the individual's life course, are from a structural perspective the boundaries that distinguish one age stratum in the society from another. In our society we tend to recognize several strata: childhood, youth, middle age, and old age;[7] in age-set societies the number of socially defined age grades (age strata) varies from as few as two to as many as eleven. For example, the Latuka of Sudan demarcate five age grades: children, youths, rulers of the village, retired elders, and the extremely aged. Whereas in our society the occupants of an age grade do not have a well-defined organization, in age-set societies individuals occupying the major age grades tend to act jointly, often as corporate groups. It is important to distinguish here between "age set" and "age grade." The latter term refers to socially recognized life stages (e.g., youth, warrior, elder), each associated with a variety of appropriate roles. It is a term we shall reserve for describing age-set societies rather than the more general term "age strata." The term "age sets" refers to named groups of people who are assigned joint group membership as a result of their similarity in age and who proceed together at culturally prescribed intervals of transition from one age grade to another. As we

[6] Since the present article was written, a comparative study of age-set systems has been published (Stewart 1977).

[7] Of course, the age-stratification system in the contemporary United States is a good deal more complex than is suggested here. For a more detailed discussion, see Riley et al. (1972, esp. chap. 10).

shall note below, age sets constitute a special case of the more general term "cohort."

The term age "stratification" refers to the fact that age is a basis of structured social inequality. The age strata are differentially rewarded. In our society, for example, most old and young do not have access to the most highly rewarded economic roles, and the middle aged have more political power than the young. Age-based inequalities seem more apparent in age-set societies. In many age-set societies greater rewards are bestowed on members of each successively older age grade. But not all age-set societies accord the members of the older age grades higher prestige (or power); in some, it is relatively young men who receive the highest social rewards. Among the Kipsigis of Kenya, for instance, of their three age grades, boyhood, warriorhood, and elderhood, the warriors have the greatest prestige and personal freedom (Peristiany 1939, pp. 31–36).

In modern Western societies a person's chronological age is but a partial clue to his social location—the roles she/he is likely to fill and the rewards she/he receives. For example, class and ethnic stratification cross-cut lines of age stratification; they are a source of variations in age norms and provide other important sources of identity for the individual. In age-set societies, although bases of social inequality other than age are operative, the age system is more definitive. Individuals become part of the formal age-stratification system as members of an age set. Thus to know which age grade an individual occupies (together with the other members of his age set) is to have a fairly clear idea of his socially defined roles and tasks, his rights and responsibilities, his relations with age peers and age dissimilars.

Dynamic Elements in Age-Set Systems

Individual aging from birth to death involves physiological, psychological, and social changes to which the individual must adapt. Life-course transitions are but key points in the aging process, entailing marked changes for the individual. They are the socially defined stages (although often distinguished also by physiological changes) at which individuals move from one age stratum to another, give up one set of roles and take on a new one.[8] In age-set societies the dramatic changes individuals undergo are more obvious than in our society because transitions are generally marked by formalized procedures and accompanied by considerable public

[8] For a classic account of the rituals associated with this process, see van Gennep (1960). For a fuller discussion of life-course transitions and some evidence on specific transitions in the United States, see, for example, Riley and Waring (1976, pp. 379–96), Riley et al. (1969), and Uhlenberg (1969).

ceremony. Individuals typically make these transitions as members of a named group. That is, there is a collective shifting of people from one age grade to another.[9]

An important aspect of transitions everywhere is that they constitute a form of social mobility. Because members of the various age strata have differential access to valued roles, transitions represent a movement within a social hierachy. In effect, as individuals proceed from one age stratum to the next, they are upwardly or downwardly mobile. Thus in all societies life-course transitions involve individual adjustments not only to new roles, and everything these may entail, but also to new positions in the social hierarchy. Reactions to transitions in age-set societies are clearly influenced by the fact that transitions there involve changes in social rewards. In most of the age-set societies examined here, prestige and power generally increase with the passage through to the most senior age grade. Thus most people in age-set societies look forward with eagerness to transition to the next age grade, at least up to the final age grade. In 10 of the 21 age-set societies under study, some loss of prerogatives accompanies transition to the final age grade, something analogous to retirement in our society. In some, political power may be lost, yet economic well-being and religious authority are increased. In five of the societies (Arusha, Karimojong, Konso, Latuka, and Nyakyusa), loss in status on passage to the final age grade is more marked.

The second dynamic feature of age systems, cohort succession, impinges on the whole age system and can have wide ramifications in the society (Riley et al. 1972; Ryder 1965; Waring 1975). It concerns us here because it influences the aging process and life-course transitions. Because the world around us is constantly changing, each cohort (persons born in the same time interval or entering a social system at the same time and aging together) is unique. And because each cohort is exposed to a unique segment of history, the process of aging and therefore the nature of life-course transitions are never quite the same for any two cohorts. The consequences of these different historical and environmental contexts for the careers of successive cohorts are readily perceived in modern, everchanging societies. For example, not only the nature of the transition itself, but the whole life course of cohorts who made the transition to adulthood during the depression were different from these experiences of cohorts who came of age during affluent times. Age-set societies may seem, in contrast, to be relatively unchanging.[10] But even there, suc-

[9] It is true that entry into the younger sets may occur on an individual basis in some societal groups, but even in these groups subsequent transitions are usually made formally and collectively by all members of that age set.

[10] It should be noted, though, that a number of African age-set societies (e.g., Tiriki, So, Sidamo) are known to have adopted the age-set structure within the past century or two. The notion of "simple" societies as unchanging is itself suspect.

cessive age sets (cohorts) differ in life-course patterns. Cohorts can vary in size, in exposure to epidemics, in experience with natural disasters, or in contact with other societal groups, and, as we shall see, such differences can affect when and how transitions are made.

Variations among Age-Set Societies

We have suggested that in some general sense age systems in age-set societies have elements in common with age systems everywhere, but that they are distinctive in the degree to which they elevate age as a major basis of social organization. However, the way they use age as an organizing principle varies among and within societies. Societies differ in the number of age grades that are recognized, the number of years an age grade spans, the degree of internal organization of an age set, the point in the life course at which individuals become members of an age set, the frequency of the formation of new age sets, and whether or not members can be initiated throughout the period of formation (see table 1, which summarizes some of these variations). Even within societies there are variations among age grades in the span of years covered and among age sets in the degree of joint and organized activity. And finally, successive age sets (cohorts) confront different physical and social environments. Underlying the diversity, however, are some common problems that help us to understand the overall nature of the transition process in these societies and begin to suggest analogies to the situation in the United States today.

PROBLEMS OF LIFE-COURSE TRANSITIONS IN AGE-SET SOCIETIES

Despite the fact that life-course transitions in age-set societies are organized and ritualized, these transitions are neither simple nor smooth. We have found three types of problems which seem to be intrinsic to transitions in these societies. Our discussion focuses on the nature of these problems and on some of the ways the societies deal with them.

The Timing of Transitions

While transitions seem structured and formal in age-set societies, not all aspects of the transition process are firmly fixed. One set of transition problems in age-set societies arises from the fact that the timing of transitions is often uncertain, and this can have repercussions throughout the society.

According to an abstract model of the process, transitions in age-set societies occur at fixed points—say, every X years. In few societies, how-

ever, is this actually the case. Typically the timing of transitions is a product of deliberation rather than of simple chronological determination. The decision to initiate a group of young men into an age set is never made by the prospective initiates themselves. Similarly, the transition of the age set from the first grade in the system to the second grade is not decreed by the individuals making the transition. While the precise group formally controlling the decision to hold transition ceremonies differs from society to society, in 19 of the 21 societies this is the prerogative of the elders, however defined; in two societies (Borana Galla, Latuka) it is the prerogative of the younger age set, which occupies the position of greatest political power in the society.

Conflicts over timing of transitions.—The consequences of the prac-

TABLE 1

VARIATIONS IN AGE-SET SYSTEMS

	Age Set Only	Generation Set
Frequency of age-set formation (yr):		
1	Kikuyu, Meru	...
3	Afikpo Ibo	...
5	Latuka, Masai, Nyakyusa (5–8 yr)	...
6	Arusha, Turkana	...
8	...	Borana Galla
10	Nuer	...
14	Rendille, Samburu (12–14 yr)	...
15	Kipsigis, Nandi, Tiriki	...
18	...	Konso
20–30	...	Jie
25–30	...	Karimojong
25	...	Kuria, So, Zanaki
Number of age grades:*		
2	Nuer, Turkana	Karimojong
3	Kipsigis, Nandi, Nyakyusa, Rendille, Samburu	Jie, So
4	Latuka	Kuria, Konso, Zanaki
5	Arusha, Afikpo Ibo, Masai, Meru, Tiriki	...
7	Kikuyu	...
11	...	Borana Galla
Point in life cycle at which individual becomes member of an age set:		
From birth	Nandi	Borana Galla, Konso, Kuria, Zanaki
From birth, but official induction later	...	Jie, So
10–11 yr	Nyakyusa	...
Adolescence	Kikuyu, Meru, Latuka, Masai, Arusha, Turkana, Nuer, Rendille, Samburu, Kipsigis, Tiriki	Karimojong
30–35 yr	Afikpo Ibo†	...

* A statement of the number of age grades which can be distinguished is beset with difficulties, for the exact number of age grades stated in some cases depends on judgment in distinguishing age grades from sub-age grades and on collapsing analytically two or more separate emically recognized age grades into one age grade.

† But informal age grouping around wrestling competition begins earlier.

tices described above are not difficult to predict. Given the fact (1) that the exact timing of transitions is often uncertain, (2) that those most concerned often have least to do with determining the time of transition, and (3) that there are inequalities among age grades in power and prestige, "setting the date" frequently leads to tensions and conflicts. Age sets which stand to lose prestige and power through the transition often do what they can to delay the ceremonies; those who stand to gain exert pressure to expedite the rites. Since the ensuing struggles concern all the men in several age sets, these conflicts have a potentially great impact on the whole society. Such conflicts are apparently widespread throughout age-set societies. In our sample there are just 10 societies for which sufficient data on the relevant variable are available. Of these, all societies having indeterminate timing (these include seven age-set societies and two generation-set societies) are reported to have conflicts over the timing of transitions.[11] The only society having determinate timing of transitions, the Nandi, is the only one for which it is specifically claimed that transitions engender no social conflict (Huntingford 1953, p. 68) (see table 2).

To be sure, the battle lines as well as the intensity and openness of the conflict vary from society to society. Among the Kipsigis, for example,

TABLE 2

INDETERMINACY OF TIMING OF TRANSITION AND CONFLICT OVER TIMING IN AFRICAN AGE-SET SOCIETIES

	Timing of Transition		Conflict	
	Determinate	Indeterminate	Yes	No
Age-set societies:				
Afikpo Ibo		x	x	
Kipsigis		x	x	
Arusha		x	x	
Masai		x	x	
Meru		x	x	
Nandi	x			x
Samburu		x	x	
Nyakyusa		x	x	
Generation-set societies:				
Zanaki		x	x	
Karimojong		x	x	

[11] There has had to be some oversimplification in categorizing a society as having indeterminate timing of transitions. The degree of indeterminacy may range from months to years. Further, three of the societies having indeterminate timing and the one having determinate timing have prerite transitions. Some of the others may also have prerite transitions, but they are not reported. These kinds of problems are involved in all attempts at classification and tabulation found in this paper, and are compounded by scanty ethnographic data in many cases.

there is struggle over the timing of initiation, with the current warriors beating up those who would replace them and the aspiring warriors, on their part, mobilizing to the point where they attack the current warriors (Peristiany 1939, pp. 31–32). Among the Samburu the expression of conflict is somewhat different. Here young men during their 20s were traditionally held in an extended period of delayed adolescence and were denied the highly valued marriage role. One response was a series of youthful deviant activities such as theft of stock, disobedience, and affrays (Spencer 1965, pp. 156–65).

Resolution of conflicts over timing of transitions.—It is the nature of the aging process that transitions must eventually be arranged. There are various mechanisms by which the different societies resolve the issues pertaining to the timing of these rites. In some societies conflicts are institutionalized in transition rituals. For example, the Meru stage a mock battle between age sets in which novitiate warriors and novitiate elders are aligned against the incumbent warriors and elders. These latter are defeated and concede to their conquerors, who then come into power (Holding 1942, p. 59). Sometimes, those not directly affected by transitions intervene. Among the Kipsigis, where conflicts were quite intense, the elders who had already retired and who wanted their sons to become social adults with the prerogatives of manhood tried to persuade the warriors to retire (Peristiany 1939). Here, and in the case of the Meru, there is a suggestion that a tacit coalition among the less privileged against those in privileged grades eventually forces resolution of the conflict.

In other societies demographic factors become crucial. Among the Karimojong the decision to hold the transition is in the hands of members of the senior set, who occupy the most prestigious position and who are not eager to relinquish their roles. But as many of them die or become senile, it becomes impossible for them to carry out their social duties. At the same time, the shrinking size of the senior set and the deteriorating faculties of senior-set members embolden the adult uninitiated to make public protests. It is at this point that "succession takes place for it is seen as unopposable by the retiring elders themselves" (Dyson-Hudson 1966, p. 188).

Age Discrepancies—Chronological Age and Age-Set Membership

Another problem associated with the timing of transitions arises because members making transitions together are often at different stages in their respective life courses (or, alternatively, because individuals are at the same stage in their life course but may not make transitions together). Such age discrepancies are mentioned in reports on several of the age-set

and all seven of the generation-set societies under study. These discrepancies, as the figures suggest, are most dramatic in those societies in which age-set membership is based on generation rather than simply on age. For example, among the Galla of Ethiopia (Legesse 1973), many children may "retire" alongside elderly men who also belong to the same generation class.[12] Some men may not marry and have children until they are in their 40s, while others in their generation set will encounter the same role transfer in their 20s. And among the Karimojong, where only two generation sets—one junior and one senior—are recognized as being in existence at any one time, while a boy's father belongs to the junior generation set, the boy himself may not be initiated (Dyson-Hudson 1966, p. 163). Thus young boys may join an age set and enjoy the concomitant privileges while older boys may be excluded.

In age-set societies having no generational component such age discrepancies may occur for different reasons. It is often the case that initiation into an age set depends not so much on chronological age—traditionally, few age-set societies calculated the age of individuals in years—but on such factors as social maturity or family wealth (where initiation requires a substantial offering) (Evans-Pritchard 1936, p. 237). However, once the recruitment of the age set's membership is completed, subsequent role transfers will be made by all members of the age set together at the same point in time. For example, where individual A was one of the oldest recruits to the age set and individual B was one of the youngest, they would both "retire" at the same time, but individual A might be 48 and individual B just 38 at retirement.

The workings of the age system can in these various ways bring hardship to some members of an age set and create problems for the society. The rules of the age system may disregard the needs of certain individuals; they may violate other societal norms for what is age-appropriate behavior; or they may be at odds with societal requirements for qualified personnel such as warriors of fighting age. (See Prins [1953/70] for a discussion of adverse consequences for society of such rules among the Galla, and Nadel [1952] for a discussion of the relationship between age discrepancies and witchcraft.) In some societies, at least, such contradictions do not go unrecognized. For example, among the Zanaki the discrepancies are alleviated somewhat by modes of transition distinct from the generation system. Males of approximately the same age undergo circumcision as a rite of passage into adulthood and form a group which is independent of generation. The generation-set system still operates,

[12] Because a boy's generation-set membership is specified by a fixed number of sets following that of the father, over time such sets will be composed of individuals of widely different ages, with many members of more senior sets being much younger than members of more junior sets.

however, in that those boys whose fathers belong to the generation class which is still active cannot assume all the roles of adulthood. They are regarded as adults, but are excluded from some specific activities of the generation class.[13]

Role Discontinuities

The problems discussed so far pertain to matters of timing—when whole age sets are to make transitions or when individuals are permitted to or required to make these transitions. Role discontinuities involve the content of roles, the marked contrast between pre- and posttransition role definitions as well as problems of pacing, that is, the abruptness with which these transfers are made.

Nature and extent of role discontinuities in age-set societies.—There is evidence of sharp changes in the individual's roles at the time of transition in many age-set systems. Perhaps the most dramatic transition commonly found is that occurring when boys are initiated into an age set and occupy the first grade of an age-set cycle. (In the 21 societies under study such a dramatic change was reported in nine of the societies.)[14] Here individuals move abruptly from the roles of children to those of adults. The Tiriki are a case in point (Sangree 1966). Uninitiated boys may not engage in sexual intercourse, they must eat with other children and with women, and they are free to play in the women's section of the hut. After initiation, they may engage in sexual intercourse, are expected to eat with other men, and are forbidden from entering the women's section of the huts. They are thus abruptly cut off from the world of women and children and catapulted into the company of adult men. In addition, they undergo a dramatic change in prestige. This suddenness of role transfer and the sharp contrast between pre- and posttransition roles, however, are not duplicated in subsequent transitions among the Tiriki. Similarly, in other societies not all transitions are characterized by sharp and sudden changes. For example, sudden and dramatic role discontinuity at the onset of old age is reported only for two societies (Latuka and Nyakyusa). In a number of societies, "elder" status, the final age grade of the life course, is reached well before old age and thus there is no formal institutionalization in the age-grade system of roles associated with old age.

Moderating mechanisms.—Role discontinuities have long been recog-

[13] Comparable mechanisms for alleviating the stresses inherent in age discrepancies are described for the Karimojong (Dyson-Hudson 1966, p. 202) and the Kuria (Ruel 1958, p. 12).

[14] These nine are the Kipsigis, Latuka, Masai, Nuer, Nyakyusa, Samburu, So, Tiriki, and Turkana. This does not imply that all the other societies lacked such dramatic change, for in nine cases the evidence was not complete on this point.

nized as a source of strain to the individual making the transition. If there are tensions involved in role transfers, a variety of procedures have evolved in many age-set societies which serve to offset or alleviate the difficulties which would otherwise accompany abrupt changes in roles. First, in some societies there is a gradual period of transition which mitigates the abruptness of role changes and allows a period of anticipatory socialization. For example, among the Afikpo Ibo, members of the junior elder age grade are permitted to attend and to take part in the elders' meetings (Ottenberg 1971, p. 86). (It should be emphasized that taking part does not make them "full partners" with the elders.) And among the Karimojong, the senior generation about to retire abandons its prerogatives stage by stage "until at the end it has abdicated its superior status, relinquished its corporate control of public affairs and reduced itself to a collection of separate, aged individuals" (Dyson-Hudson 1966, p. 193).

Further, in many societies, a degree of individual flexibility is allowed in the actual operation of the age-grade system. For example, among the Samburu (Spencer 1965, p. 90), "those who wish to become elders as soon as possible generally try to marry early and start to acquire the dignity of elders; and those who prefer still to remain as moran retain the accoutrements and behavior of moranhood." Such flexibility not only tempers the impact of role discontinuities on the individual but helps to minimize the discrepancies between the formal rules of the age-grade system on the one hand and individual inclinations on the other.

Thus flexibility and informal rules in the age system do seem to blunt some of the potential difficulties individuals face in making transitions in age-set societies and to lessen some of the individual deprivations engendered by the rules of transitions. This does not mean that the disruptive potential involved in conflicts over the timing of transitions is thereby extinguished. There are societies which are reported to have both conflicts over the timing of transitions and a degree of flexibility in the operation of their age systems. What seems to be at stake in these conflict situations is the assignment of full rights and privileges to age-set members and the public recognition of these rights.

Many of these problematic aspects of transitions in age-set societies seem far removed from the issues of transitions in large-scale, modern societies. Yet, as we discuss in the following pages, there are some underlying parallels in the two kinds of societies.

LIFE-COURSE TRANSITIONS: DILEMMAS, ADAPTATIONS, AND CHANGE

Life-course transitions in age-set societies seem complex and paradoxical. While they generate social and individual stress, they are frequently

accompanied by mechanisms which reduce some of these stresses. These elements take on fresh clarity when we juxtapose transition processes in small-scale, age-set societies to those in an urban, industrial society like the United States. A comparison between these two diverse types of societies begins to suggest some generalizations about the impact of life-course transitions on the society and the individual.

Life-Course Transitions and the Society

On the surface, transitions in age-set societies provide an orderly method of role allocation and reallocation. But, as we have seen, the process is often not so orderly; rather, it is frequently the occasion of societal discord. These conflicts are essentially a version of time-honored struggles between the "ins" and the "outs." They tend to arise because there are no clear societal rules mandating a specific point at which transitions are to be made. The conflict of interest is between those who wish to assume age-graded roles of power and prestige and those who are reluctant to be "kicked upstairs."

While the absence of clear rules of transition can be a source of age-related antagonisms in age-set societies, the operation of formal rules distinctly establishing points of life-course transition can also create problems for the society. We have noted that in these societies strict adherence to formal rules can create age discrepancies which bring hardship to only some individuals of a given age—for example, delaying their marriage or forcing premature "retirement." Because these rules do not affect all individuals of a similar chronological age, the potential for group protest and society-wide discord over the operation of these rules is reduced. Nevertheless, conformity to such rules can have a society-wide impact by subverting societal requirements for a sufficient number of role players of a given chronological age.

Thus in age-set societies, both clearly defined rules on the one hand and indeterminate rules of transition on the other have society-wide repercussions. We suggest that both explicit and indeterminate rules of transition also have far-reaching consequences in American society.

Consider first the indeterminacy of the timing of transitions. In our society, the assumption of full adult status depends a good deal on having full-time work roles, especially for males and increasingly for females. Yet unemployment rates are higher for the young than for older workers, especially at times of economic downturns. When full-time work is not available, the transition of young people to effective adulthood becomes problematic. The uncertainty about when they will assume full adult

status can be a source of youthful deviance and hostility toward their elders.[15]

Alternatively, the operation of explicit rules of transition can also lead to problems in American society because such rules are not necessarily pegged to the individual's readiness either to assume or to leave given roles. Further, because these clearly defined rules do cover a considerable number of individuals in an age stratum, the potential difficulties for the society are magnified. Two examples will illustrate the point. For young people seeking to enter the work force as full-time workers, formal job requirements typically stipulate that the young person have a high school diploma and, in many cases, a college degree. These binding age-related norms about the appropriate number of years of schooling needed to qualify for work roles result in an extended period of adolescence or pre-adulthood for a substantial number of young people. One reaction of many young people to prolonged dependency has been individual and collective action—such as struggles for student power or against parietal rules—in order to claim some of the rights and privileges of adulthood even before adult roles are assumed (see Coleman [1974] on youth-culture pressures for autonomy; see also Matza [1964]). For older people, formal rules mandating retirement frequently operate to hasten their exit from the work force. While older people have not often demonstrated their dissatisfactions with "rolelessness" by collective protests, the enforced role ousters have led to various types of social withdrawal among them, an outcome creating problems for the family and community (Riley et al. 1969).

These examples from two widely different types of societies suggest that there are immanent sources of conflict and tension in the very process of life-course transitions. Because aging is inevitable and continuous, the society must accommodate the perpetual flow of one cohort (or age set) after another to fit into the array of social roles that is available. One possible solution is to allow "natural" forces to operate: younger people assume adult roles when they are ready to do so; older people give up roles when they are ready or when they become ill or die. Another solution is to regulate this continuous flow of people by establishing firm age norms for entering roles and leaving them: that is, by establishing clearly defined points of life-course transition. Both solutions are problematic and can have adverse consequences for the society: the first, because there is no guarantee that the readiness of those who must give up roles fits in with the readiness of those who are waiting in the wings;

[15] The indeterminacy of transition to adulthood in 19th-century America is found to have a similar potential for creating discord in the family (see Foner [1978]).

the second, because the age norms may not be in accord with individual needs or societal requirements.[16]

This statement is an abstraction of what really goes on in various types of societies, of course, but it provides a basis for generalizations about some sources of age conflicts and stresses in age systems. In essence, the problems summarized above parallel several forms of the pathological division of labor which Durkheim (1964) proposed as causes of class conflicts. On the one hand, we find insufficient (in the Durkheimian sense) regulation (e.g., no clear norms for the timing of transitions)—the analogue of the anomic situation. On the other hand, there is a set of rules, but they are not in accord with individual capacities, as in the extrusion of the young and healthy old from the work force in our society, or the long delay in marriage in some age-set societies—a situation corresponding to Durkheim's forced division of labor. But whereas Durkheim saw these pathological forms as temporary aberrations, the examples from vastly different societies suggest to us that, in the case of age stratification, age conflicts and tensions in the society are inherent in the process of life-course transitions. (See Mannheim [1952] for seminal work on another key source of age conflicts, the succession of generations [cohorts].)

Flexibility in Transition Processes

If matters of timing of transitions produce individual frustration and precipitate societal discord, the actual transition subjects the individual to conflicts between the demands of old and new roles—that is, to sharp role discontinuities. Many decades ago, Benedict (1938, pp. 165–66) asserted that in age-graded societies the trauma of role discontinuities is alleviated by peer support as individuals make these transitions as part of a group. We have found that this is only part of the story: as we have discussed previously, there are a variety of practices in these societies which appear to minimize the potential stresses for the individual in life-course transitions. There is frequently a period of role rehearsal which permits individuals to learn new roles before they are official incumbents. Sometimes the role changes are made by stages, thereby easing the abruptness of transfers. Sometimes the actual practices permit individuals to make some role transfers, such as marriage, on an individual basis and others with their age-set peers. Such practices may mitigate the strains of making multiple transfers simultaneously. In general, there is a good deal of individual flexibility in following the rules, a tendency which serves

[16] In addition, in changing times age norms may not mesh with changes in supply of and demand for role players of given ages, a point discussed below (see also Waring [1975]).

not only to alleviate role discontinuities but also to mitigate age discrepancies.

Flexibility in actual practices does not mean that collective transition rituals are of little significance. In some cases the rituals confer the full range of privileges on age-set members, only some of which had been granted informally. In addition, they serve as points around which informal norms can vary (Gulliver 1963). Finally, in some societies the formal transition may be especially significant in compelling individuals to leave highly valued roles associated with a particular age grade.[17] In short, rituals serve to legitimize age-grade status.

Can parallels be drawn between these aspects of transitions in age-set societies and those in American society? In American society there are no collective rituals marking the passage from one age grade to another. (High school and college graduation ceremonies may constitute an exception, though not for all individuals in the cohort.) Moreover, in our society the problems of role transitions for the individual seem more acute than in age-set societies. Discontinuities between pre- and posttransition roles involve not only sharp changes in role definitions but changes in physical settings, in role partners, and role relationships. Yet, just as we have noted a relatively wide range of practices in age-set societies that serve to ease these role passages for the individual, we can identify some of these very same strategies operating in the contemporary United States.

Consider the transition from youth to adulthood. Role rehearsal for major adult roles is widespread. For example, part-time and/or summer jobs are common for school youths 16–19 (Waldman 1969). In 1971 about 25% of 14–16-year-old males in school (97% were in school) were working, mostly part time (Griliches 1974). And studies indicate that child work—defined as working part time for strangers for pay—was more prevalent among fourth- to eighth-grade boys than is generally believed (Engel, as reported in Skolnick 1973, pp. 352–54). And role rehearsal for marriage includes dating, going steady, and, currently, living together. (More than a quarter of a million young men and women under 25 were reported to be sharing bachelor quarters with an unrelated partner of the opposite sex in 1976 [U.S. Bureau of the Census 1977, p. 43]). At least for some people, such role rehearsal represents a self-conscious effort to adjust to prospective roles.

[17] An example of this is found among the Latuka, who have a large-scale transition rite every 22 years. Individuals pass from the youth age grade to the highly valued "village owners" age grade throughout the interrite period, their status being officially validated at the next major transition ceremony. However, exit from this grade to the less powerful grade of elders takes place only through the formal rite. Thus, over time, the population of "village owners" grows as new members are inducted, only to sharply fall when the new rite takes place, forcing the retirement of all "village owners" who had been formally inducted into that age grade at the previous rite.

Measures to ease the shock of retirement seem less prevalent. Gradual retirement is possible for only certain segments of the labor force, primarily those in the independent professions and those having their own farms or businesses. Reports indicate that a substantial minority of retired workers do work, many at part-time jobs, most in the same broad occupational categories as their previous jobs (Riley and Foner 1968, p. 452; Lingg 1975). Most adults do little definite planning for this late stage in their lives (Riley and Foner 1968, p. 446), although there may be a degree of unwitting preparation (Merton 1957; Foner 1969).

Finally, there is some flexibility in the operation of the age system that permits individuals to make transitions at their own pace and in terms of their own needs. Children skip grades in elementary school; bright youths enter college after only three years of high school; there is flexible retirement in some companies and occupations. And college students now do not have to wait until they finish their schooling before they can get married.

Thus in the United States there is evidence that age norms are bent somewhat to make transitions a less difficult process (see Clausen [1972, pp. 504–6] for a discussion of the lessening of some role discontinuities in the United States today). However, this does not resolve all problems associated with role transfers. Young people may be socialized for but not assigned to valued roles (see Riley et al. [1972, p. 571] for a discussion of socialization without role assignment), and on their part older people may be preparing for retirement even though they are reluctant to relinquish their current, more rewarding roles.

In summary, in both small-scale, age-set societies and in large-scale, industrial societies like the United States, individuals are not necessarily at the mercy of the inexorable workings of the age system. In both types of societies there are intrinsic sources of strain in transitions for the individual; but the actual operation of the age system departs from the formal system in many ways, often making transitions less onerous for the individual. Further, flexibility in the system also serves to offset some problems that transitions pose for the society. That is, insofar as flexible transition practices reduce individual frustration which might otherwise be expressed in deviant acts or directed against other age groups in the society, these practices serve to reduce strain in the society.

We would argue, however, that such "give" in the age system can have different consequences for the individual and the society. Consider two sets of major transition issues discussed above: for the individual, to resolve conflicts between the demands of the old and of the new roles; for the society, to resolve the competing demands of different age groups for rewarding roles. The mechanisms we have mentioned can help the person

adjust to and fit into new roles. By alleviating certain individual problems, flexible transition practices can also help deflect tensions in the society. However, with regard to the problems on the societal level noted above, one dilemma remains. These mechanisms are no guarantee that individuals will be assigned to or permitted to keep highly rewarded roles. As long as there are a limited number of these rewarding roles to be allocated among people of different ages, the gains of one age group must be at the expense of other age groups.[18] It is competition among members of different age strata for rewarding roles that leads to recurrent problems for the society. Thus, flexibility in the system may be important in supporting the individual without resolving some fundamental transition problems for the society.

In a broader sense, whether individual or societal problems engendered by transitions are fully resolved or not, such problems do have far-reaching implications for the society. Both the problems and the measures devised to cope with them can be a source of change in the nature of transitions, a point to which we now turn.

The Potential for Change in Transition Processes

Not only do transitions mark individual transformation, but transition processes themselves are subject to change. These changes may be almost imperceptible or dramatic; they may involve only some aspects of transition or many aspects. Among the many features that may be altered are: matters of timing, formality of the transition, the extent of role discontinuities, whether transitions are made on a group or individual basis, and whether they involve more than one role. Our focus here is on two sources of change in transitions which are key aspects of age-stratification systems: the hierarchical nature of age-stratification systems and the succession of cohorts.

Consider first the implications of the age-related hierarchy of roles. We have suggested that life-course transitions represent a form of social mobility as individuals proceed from one set of roles to another, with the new roles providing either greater or fewer rewards than the old ones. It is the desire to gain access to or hold on to these rewards that provides an important motivation for social conflict or individual grievances. (Incidentally, this also helps to account for the fact that there are two transition points which seem most often to be involved: the move to adulthood and the transition to old age. These are frequently the points which entail appreciable changes in the individual's power and prestige.) One outcome of real or threatened conflicts may be a change in the transition process.

[18] It is recognized that where there is a shortage of role players to fill rewarding roles, as in war time, flexible age norms can operate to ease societal difficulties.

A recent example in the United States is the lowering of the voting age, which, in part at least, can be traced to the youth-adult conflict of the period in which the change was enacted.

Perhaps a more significant source of change in transition processes is related to the succession of cohorts. No matter how unchanging a society may seem to be, no two cohorts are identical nor do they confront exactly the same social and physical environment. Such changes in the context in which transitions occur are likely to force changes in the processes themselves. Recall the case of the Karimojong where the relative sizes of the age set seeking power and the age set (cohort) in power were crucial in setting the time of transition. It seems clear that any exogenous events such as epidemics or natural disasters that affect the size of these successive age sets would influence the timing of the transition and the relations among age sets. Size of successive cohorts has been an important influence on transition points in our society as well. Waring (1975) shows how transition points are pushed up or pushed back to adjust to successive cohorts of different size. For example, the transition of unusually large youth cohorts to adulthood may be delayed because there are not enough jobs for them. Or, the transition of a small middle-aged cohort to retirement may also be delayed in order to maintain the levels of experienced workers in the labor force.

The unique experiences of each cohort may also engender specific adaptive mechanisms that serve to deal with the problems of transitions. This may be a gradual process as successive cohorts learn from the experience of their predecessors. For example, we suggested above that in the transition to retirement in the United States, relatively few adaptations had been institutionalized to deal with the abruptness of this role transition. But retirement as a firmly established norm is a relatively recent phenomenon. In 1920 there were 60% and in 1950 there were 46% of the men 65 and older in the labor force as compared to less than 25% in 1974 (Riley and Foner 1968, p. 42; Bixby 1976, p. 4). Much of the data about adjustments to retirement come from the first cohorts to confront retirement as a mass phenomenon (Riley and Foner 1968). Among more recent cohorts, we can expect more advanced planning and social support to ease the discontinuities involved in the transition. The recent increase in early retirement seems to herald new attitudes about retirement among people in their 50s and early 60s (Bixby 1976, p. 3). Clearly, the mass nature of retirement today provides the basis for peer support to help retirees "manage" this change in their lives. It is this mass market which has facilitated the development of leisure programs and residential havens for the retired. And these, in turn, provide a supportive environment to the retirees. Thus, as experience with retirement and its problems grows, and

measures are developed to meet these problems, the nature of the transition process may be expected to change.[19]

Similar processes are likely to have occurred in age-set societies. Consider some of the events that have "hit" these societies: the borrowing of the age-set system from another group, the banning of warfare by colonial powers, or the contact with more complex political and economic systems. Two examples suggest how such events have affected transition processes in African age-set societies. Among the Nigerian Afikpo Ibo, a new age set was traditionally initiated every three years. It is reported that in a number of villages now, it takes a longer period of time to form a new age set for "many young men are away at work or at school, and it is difficult to organize into an effective group and to collect the necessary funds for an initiation, even under pressure from the elders" (Ottenberg 1971, p. 56). Among the Sidamo, where once the elders had a monopoly on political power, they recently have had to compete with the Ethiopian court system. Youths are thus less deferential toward the elders and also, presumably, less concerned about making the transition to the elder grade (Hamer 1970, p. 68). Here, apparently, the nature of the transition is changing as an age grade once associated with great rewards of power and wealth begins to lose these privileges. It is likely that the adjustments made by early cohorts to confront such social and economic changes will differ from those made by later cohorts. If we are correct, then as these adjustments accumulate, transitions and the age-set system are subject to further changes.

Even if the societal context in which transitions take place does not change perceptibly, successive cohorts may still have unique transition experiences. For the difficulties engendered by transition processes seem to generate the impulse for change. As members of a given cohort find ways to deal with transition problems, the transitions themselves become modified. Later cohorts making these transitions confront a situation on which earlier cohorts have left their mark.

Thus while it is tempting to emphasize the constancy of the ever-recurring cycles of transitions and the continuous flow of cohorts, we see these processes themselves as ever changing. Within the life-course transition processes are the seeds of change as transitions give rise to social conflict and individual adaptations. And the process of cohort flow, as it interweaves with social and environmental change, acts on the age system and transition processes in the society.

[19] Even as some "old" problems associated with retirement are being resolved, new issues (e.g., the elimination of mandatory retirement and the introduction of flexible age criteria for retirement) are facing those on the threshold of retirement.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis of transition processes in two vastly different types of society has challenged some received notions about transitions in these societies:

Whereas many theories of life-course transitions have emphasized the impact of transitions on the individual, we have pointed to their effect on the society as well. In both age-set societies and the United States today there is a disruptive potential in life-course transitions. Whereas there has been a tendency to stress smooth transitions for the individual in preliterate societies and traumatic ones for the individual in Western societies, we suggest that the difficulties encountered in life-course passages can be formidable wherever they occur. At the same time, in both types of societies means are found to mitigate the tyranny of the rules of the system. Finally, transition processes are constantly subject to change as individuals and societies deal with the exigencies of the processes themselves and of social and environmental change.

These findings highlight two important features of age-stratification systems. First, just as Marx looked for inherent sources of conflict in the class system and saw class conflicts as a basis of change in the class structure, we propose that age conflicts and tensions are intrinsic to transition processes and that these conflicts are likely to be a source of change in the age systems (see Foner [1975] for a discussion of this general point). Second, each cohort facing a given transition does so in a unique historical context and deals with the problems of this transition in its own way. Thus generalizations about transitions depend both on cross-cultural study and on the study of these passages among successive cohorts within each society.

We recognize that it is not the same the world over, but we suggest that there may well be underlying similarities in transition processes wherever they occur, just as there are such parallels in the two contrasting types of society we examined.

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