

THE CROOKED PATHS OF TIME:
THE CONCEPT OF HISTORY AMONG THE TUGEN OF KENYA

I

During my first stay among the Tugen of Kenya in 1978,¹ I became involved in an interesting discussion. Some elders sitting under the shade of a *baraza* tree claimed that the Europeans would invade their land again and establish themselves as rulers, as they had done some time before; colonialism would come back again 'when the men of the age-set Kaplelach had become elders' - that is, in about thirty to forty years' time. I protested and tried to explain the economic and political situation in Europe which had led to colonial expansion but which had now changed completely. But the elders laughed at me and said: 'You wait. You will see. Time will tell.' This is when I started to become interested in their concept of time and history.

II

The Tugen of northwestern Kenya belong to the Kalenjin group

¹ In 1978, I started fieldwork in Karbartonjo, north of Kabarnet, the capital of Baring District. I continued my work in 1980, moving further into the northern region of Kipsaraman, and finally started working in Ngorora Location, Bartabwa, in 1981. I returned to Bartabwa in 1982 and 1983-84. Most of my material relates to Bartabwa.

linguistically,² like the Nandi, Kipsigis, Elgeyo and others. They live in the Tugen Hills of Baringo District, an area of harsh ecological conditions where they grow millet and maize and raise cattle, goats and sheep. When the rains fail and their cattle are raided by their neighbours or diminished by disease or famine, the Tugen leave their scattered homesteads and go hunting and gathering in the bush. The stories the elders tell are stories of hunger and of the need to migrate in order to find a better place to live.

The Tugen are acephalous. There are no central institutions such as kingship, chieftainship or priesthood to maintain and cultivate a general history of all Tugen. Instead, there are many 'histories', each local group maintaining its own distinctive history. However, the Tugen, like other Kalenjin, have a cyclical age-set system which provides them with a general frame of reference to fix past events in the flow of time, and essentially determines their concept of history.

III

Age-sets are social groups, hierarchically arranged, which mark the flow of time by organizing men and women in certain categories based on age and generation. 'The classification of time reproduces the classification of men', as Durkheim and Mauss put it. Age-set systems attempt to 'tame' time, to reconcile age, generation and the flow of time.³

The Tugen distinguish eight age-sets, which exist for men and women:

<i>Men</i>		<i>Women</i>
Kimnyegew		Chelemei/Cheptinap
Nyongi	ritual elders	Chepargamei/Chepingwek
(Maina)		Selengwech
Chumo	political elders	Chepingwek/Chesiran
Sowe		Chesiran/Chemusinya
Korongoro	warriors	Chemusinya/Chesur
Kipkoimet	initiates	Chesur
Kaplelach	children	Kusantya/Chelemei

An elder explained the system as follows:

² Kalenjin is a very recent term; the Tugen belong linguistically to the southern Nilotes.

³ P.T.W. Baxter and Uri Almagor (eds.), *Age, Generation and Time: Some Features of East African Age Organisation*, London: C. Hurst 1978, p.5.

Now Chumo owns the world, until the next age-set grows. Then Sowe will own the world. Chumo will show Sowe the right way to follow. So they stay. Sowe follows behind Chumo. When Sowe knows everything, then Chumo tells them: 'Now the world belongs to you.' Nyongi taught Chumo. Nyongi has finished its work. Nyongi sleeps now. They say to Chumo: 'It's your turn. We sit.' If there is a meeting of elders, then Nyongi sit and watch how Chumo fulfils its duty. If they make a mistake, Nyongi says: 'You failed to take the right path.' Then Chumo feels sorry. When Chumo gives the world to Sowe, Chumo becomes the master of ritual. Kimnyegew sleeps. They will come back again, when Kaplelach is initiated.

As the names of the women's age-sets demonstrate, there was no agreement among the informants about the exact order of these categories. Women's age-sets are of little importance in social, political and ritual life, a fact which reflects women's actual exclusion from politics and the public sphere. Indeed, after marriage, women 'forget' their own age-sets and identify with those of their husbands. Moreover, whereas men's age-sets are clear-cut categories with defined boundaries, women's age-sets are split: Chumo, for example, marries the youngest women of Selengwech and the oldest of Chesiran, while Sowe marries the youngest Chesiran and the oldest Chemusinya. Thus, although according to marriage regulations, men should marry women from the parallel age-set, they are also allowed to marry women from the following age-sets. Therefore, the correspondence of the women's age-sets to those of the men is not an exact one.

The time for initiation into one of the age-sets is determined by the elders. They watch the sky, the movements of stars, moon and sun. Only if the constellation of heavenly bodies is considered beneficial will initiation be allowed. Also, there must be enough food to feed the initiates during the period of seclusion. In times of hunger and war, children will not be initiated.

Not only do celestial and ecological conditions determine the time of initiation, but also, the antagonistic relation between elders and young men influence the times for the opening or closing of an age-set. Elders say that they try to postpone the initiation of young men, because young men and elders compete for women. Sometimes the elders delay the 'coming out' of young men and marry the young women who were initiated into the parallel age-set. Or else they refuse initiation altogether to the young men, who then 'steal' it, going to Pokot, Nandi or Elegeyo instead; then they return to Tugen to marry those women whom the old men had wanted to monopolize for themselves. Elders also say that before the Europeans came to their country all members of an age-set were initiated at the same time. The initiates came from a wide area to *koi*, the 'stone', where circumcision took place. Initiation into an age-set not only fixed a central point in space, but also in time: a point of reference for a large part of a society in which people otherwise lived dispersed and isolated. So

in a sense, initiation provided a framework for social synthesis.

When the initiates emerged from many months' seclusion, the age-set was closed for about ten to fifteen years until the time was ready for initiation into the next age-set. Later this changed: during colonial times, the period of initiation became longer and longer, and today initiation takes place every year - there is no longer any closed period.

The unifying character of initiation is also diminished today, because there is no longer just one stone for the initiates of a wide area; instead, every hillside or neighbourhood has its own stone where local 'children' are circumcised. Moreover, the time-span between succeeding age-sets has become shorter; whereas previously, an age-set was separated from the next one by approximately fifteen years, now the time-span between two age-sets is only eight to ten years. Thus time for Tugen has accelerated and become precious. Parents of modern initiates say that they want to initiate their children as quickly as possible, because 'they don't want to waste time!'

IV

Initiation in one of the age-sets marks the 'birth' of the social person and essentially determines the social identity of an individual. If you ask a Tugen: 'Who is this person?', he will answer, e.g.: 'He is a Nyongi'. If you ask for his age, people will give you the same answer.

There is no rigid division of labour between different age-sets. After initiation, young men are called *muren* or 'warriors', but in time of war every able man goes to fight. The transition from the grade of *muren* to that of a political elder is marked by a ritual called *sohro*, which is performed individually for each man, and not collectively, as at initiation. However, because a man has to do *sohro* before his son can be initiated into an age-set, the time-span allotted to him for this is limited. Thus the rule assures the synchronized transition of sons into *muren* and fathers into *boisiek* or political elders. In addition, the social position of the grandfather is altered. When his son performs *sohro* his grandchild is initiated, and he will retire from political leadership and now 'owns the ritual', becoming a ritual elder.

Elders say that one age-set is the 'teacher' of the following age-set. In rituals that mark the life cycle, there are always *motiren* or teachers who belong to the age-set 'in front' or above the person for whom the ritual is done. Ritual elders are *motiren* of the political elders, and political elders are *motiren* of the *muren*, who during initiation are *motiren* for the young men undergoing circumcision. Thus the hierarchically ordered age-sets correspond to a pyramid of wisdom.

V

The cyclical age-set system also determines the limits of physical life. Elders say that formerly, children who were born to uninitiated girls or fathered by uninitiated boys were strangled before they took their first breath. Only men and women who are circumcised and members of an age-set are full social persons who are allowed to produce children. Members of the oldest age-set, whose name was given to the age-set of new-born children, had to commit suicide. The Tugen of the Highlands say that the elders of this remnant age-set went to a cliff and sang and danced to its edge, from which they fell to their deaths.⁴

Age-sets of fathers and sons must never be adjacent, but must be separated by at least one other age-set. Elders say that very often there is hatred and envy between fathers and sons, even though they should love each other. Members of the age-set that separates fathers and sons act as *motiren* in rituals carried out for the latter, teaching, praising and punishing the sons of fathers who acted as their own *motiren* in rituals. In a way, *motiren* function as go-betweens for the two generations, and also as substitutes for the fathers, whose teaching and punishing roles they assume. However, Tugen age-sets are not generation sets, because not all the sons of one man belong to the same predictable age-set: according to the Tugen, his youngest children are 'stolen' by the following age-set and are thus separated from the set of their father by two age-sets.

Nonetheless, the general rule is that fathers and sons are separated by only one age-set. Following this rule, a man belongs to the same age-set as his great-grandfather and his great-grandchildren. Tugen say that in the succession of age-sets there is no beginning and no end, because age-sets 'go round'. This is why, for example, the old Kimnyegew call the young Kipkoimet their fathers, since they are the 'recurrence' of their fathers, who were also Kipkoimet. Age-sets which have the same name are identified with each other, but Tugen do not believe that the members of one age-set are the reincarnation of the previous age-set which bore the same name.⁵

There is a homologous relation between the circulation of age-set names and the circulation of the personal names of individuals who are given the names of deceased ancestors of the patrilineage.⁶

⁴ D.W.W. Kettel, *Passing like Flowers*, University of Illinois dissertation 1975, p.17.

⁵ The Tugen do not believe in reincarnation, as Kettel claims (*What's in a Name: Age-Organisation and Reincarnation Beliefs of the Tugen of Kenya*, University of Nairobi, Institute of African Studies, Paper no. 32, April 1972). An elder explained: 'We give our children the names of ancestors. For example, Bartonjo was a good ancestor, thus many people bear his name. The child which bears the name Bartonjo stands for Bartonjo, but it is not Bartonjo.'

⁶ Kettel, *ibid.*, p. 9.

On the one hand, bearing the name of an ancestor individualizes a child, while on the other, it incorporates it into the chain of ancestors with the same name. The child is not only an independent, self-reliant being, but also the recurrence of one, or rather many, ancestors. Parents who give their child the name of a good ancestor hope that the child's destiny will be influenced by the ancestor in a good way, although the ancestor will never act directly as a protector or guide during the child's lifetime. Likewise, age-sets with the same name have certain characteristics in common. Tugen say that Korongoro is 'hot, troublesome, and warlike', and Tugen expect that every age-set with the name Korongoro will be hot, troublesome and warlike, whereas the age-set Kaplelach is said to be 'cool and peaceful', and Tugen expect all the following age-sets which bear the name Kaplelach to have the same characteristics. Likewise, they expect those events which occur during the time of an age-set when its members are warriors or political elders to occur again in the next cycle. On this level, history is a cycle of events which repeats itself eternally, in which nothing is lost, and in which new events cannot develop.

On another level, the cyclical concept of history is suspended: every age-set is divided into two or three sub-sets, according to the age of the members. Elders explain that these sub-sets are given nicknames, in order that an outstanding event taking place during initiation be remembered. Thus one sub-set was called 'kilo', because initiation took place when the colonial government introduced the kilo as a measure. Another sub-set was called 'rain of cleaning the stones', because such rain fell during initiation. These nicknames are never repeated; though related to a unique event, they are soon forgotten. Likewise, children are given not only the names of ancestors, but also names relating to events which took place during their birth. For example, there are children called *kemei*, 'hunger', because they were born during a famine; or *talam*, 'locust', because locusts came and destroyed the millet; or *chumba*, 'European', because there was a European present at the time of their birth. Thus on the one hand, in relation to age-set names and personal names of ancestors, the Tugen concept of time seems to be cyclical, while on the other hand, sub-set names and personal names are based on unique, non-recurring events which are soon forgotten.

VI

The Tugen are not much interested in the recollection of past events. To fix an event in the flow of time, they correlate it with one of the age-sets. They say, for example, 'when Kaplelach were elders, there was a war'; or, 'when Chumo was initiated, locusts came.' If Tugen are asked which Chumo they are speaking of, the last ones or the ones before, they answer that they neither count nor differentiate between the various cycles. It is of no importance, they say, during which Chumo locusts came, because whenever Chumo are initi-

ated, locusts will come.

In fact, events do repeat themselves, because Tugen interpret them in this special way and act in accordance with their interpretation. Although Tugen know that events will recur, they try to prevent the repetition of some of them. When, in the last century, the warriors of the Maina age-set were badly defeated in war, the elders decided to abolish this age-set;⁷ and their precaution was successful, for in the next cycle, there was no repetition of this defeat. Since then, Tugen no longer have eight but only seven age-sets. The antinomy between destiny and volition may be a problem for philosophers; for the Tugen it is not.

The Tugen play the same trick on destiny by changing the personal names of individuals. When a child receives the name of an ancestor and afterwards falls sick or behaves in a curious or abnormal way, the elders suggest that the wrong ancestor has given his name to the child and that the right one - offended for being forgotten - has sent sickness to attract attention; accordingly, they change the child's name. Ancestors do not want to be forgotten, and if their name is given to a child they 'live', because the living remember them. The well-being of the child is dependent on the identification of the right ancestor with the right name; the manipulation of the name is the manipulation of destiny.

VII

As has been said, Tugen do not consider events related to age-sets as unique occurrences, but rather they try to interpret one event as the repetition of another. Thus I was interested in establishing how Tugen interpret colonial history - the arrival of Europeans and the establishment of colonial power - which, I thought, was an abrupt break with the past and could not so easily be interpreted as a repetition of a preceding event.

During my stay in the Tugen Hills between 1978 and 1983, I collected stories and songs in which the Tugen remember colonial history. Although Tugen living in the north of Kipsaraman - which was mainly where I stayed - did not have much contact with Europeans, they nevertheless produced an ethnography of the *chumbek*, as they call them. As in other societies where metaphysical concepts are used to interpret encounters with strangers,⁸ the Tugen thought that an *o'in* or ancestor stood before them when they met a European for the first time. The stranger was white like salt, and they could see the blood flowing in streams through his body. He was so fat that they were convinced that he did not eat millet porridge but people.

⁷ B.E. Kipkorir reports that the Marakwet originally had ten age-sets but erased two from memory, perhaps because of some disaster.

⁸ Fritz Kramer, *Verkehrte Welten*, Frankfurt am Main 1977, p.111.

The Tugen say that the first *chumbek* lived in the mountains wandering from place to place. They ate rice and millet flour, but did not exchange them. They did not hunt and had no women. They were spies who explored the country for their relatives and countrymen, who would follow them later and come into the Tugen Hills.

The first *chumbek* measured and marked out the land and the hills. They counted people, animals, huts, everything. They dug the earth and looked for metals, which they filled into bottles. They put some of the bottles back into the ground as a sign for the age-set of the next *chumbek*, which would return to Tugen in the following cycle.

The first *chumbek* had no power. They had to pay *hongo*, a sort of toll, to be allowed to travel through the hills. Later, more and more *chumbek* arrived. They carried weapons and refused to pay *hongo*, but instead forced the Tugen to pay taxes. The Tugen felt betrayed. They recall that the *chumbek* stole *Ilat*, the god of rain, and took him back to England. Since then, there has been no rain in Baringo, whereas in England there is plenty of rain, the pastures are green, the harvest is good, and the *chumbek* have become rich and fat, while the Tugen go hungry.

The Tugen say that in the old days, before the arrival of the Europeans, the prophecies of the elders came true. When elders recalled past events tradition and prophecy merged, so that what the elders said about the past became the prophecy of future events. The arrival of the Europeans destroyed the stable relationship between tradition and prophecy, and with it the cycle of historical events; they 'stirred' history, the Tugen say - like women, when they cook millet porridge.

In pre-colonial days, there was always war when the age-set *Korongoro* was in the warrior grade. Now this has changed, because the Europeans brought peace. At present, *Korongoro* fight among themselves. Likewise, the Tugen say that the age-set *Sowe* was known to be very greedy. In pre-colonial times they slaughtered many animals for their meat. During colonial times their hunger changed, and now they sell their animals because they are greedy for money. Thus on the one hand, the Tugen recognize that social change has taken place, while on the other hand they deny this, insisting that, although changes have occurred, the warlike *Korongoro* and the greedy *Sowe* are still as before. Ultimately, the Europeans did not really 'stir' the Tugen's cyclical concept of history, because the Tugen were able to integrate the colonial period into their cycle of events: when *Kaplelach* become elders, Europeans will return, and the colonial period will repeat itself.

Not only do the Tugen expect colonialism to come back again, they also interpret the coming of Europeans as the recurrence of the arrival of the *Sirikwa*, a mysterious people which disappeared before the arrival of the Europeans.⁹ The colonial period is

⁹ An elder of *Bartabwa* claimed that even before the arrival of the *Sirikwa*, Europeans had been there, disappearing when the *Sirikwa* arrived.

already the repetition of an encounter with strangers which took place in the past and will take place again in the future, the Europeans being the second Sirikwa. It is not that the Tugen concept of history is simply restricted to the repetition of identical events: they also recognize differences between Sirikwa and Europeans. Thus they say that the Sirikwa, in contrast to the Europeans, owned cattle, did not rule, and did not demand taxes. The Sirikwa taught the Tugen rituals and iron-working. In contrast, the Europeans brought peace, but did not teach them anything. Yet under colonialism, Tugen elders predicted that just as the Sirikwa had disappeared, so too would the Europeans disappear, and on the same day on which their age-set was told to retire. This prophecy has become true. The Tugen have experienced that time can tell.

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