NJAS
NORDIC JOURNAL OF AFRICAN STUDIES

Differences of Age Without Distinctions of Authority: Marking Juniority and Seniority in a Khoisan Language

Thomas Widlok
Institute of African Studies
University of Cologne
50923 Köln, Germany
thomas.widlok@uni-koeln.de
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4427-413X

Abstract

This contribution begins with the puzzle as to why there are kinship and naming systems that distinguish junior from senior, elaborately and systematically, even though these practices are embedded in substantially egalitarian societies. The case under investigation is that of Hai‖om, a Khoisan (Khoekhoe)-speaking group in southern Africa that shows such a combination of the elaborate encoding of age difference while at the same time providing elders with very little authority over juniors. The article briefly discusses explanations such as the possible effects of cultural domination by neighbouring groups in recent history, which could play a role, but I argue that there is little evidence for such explanations in this case. The alternative argument put forward here aims to show how birth sequence functions as a general means of social orientation. Moreover, what prevents age awareness from being turned into status distinctions are social hedging mechanisms that are enmeshed with the junior/senior distinction, particularly in practices such as cross-sex naming, but also in linguistic features such as the common use of reciprocals beyond dyads to express kin 'belonging together'. The article concludes by outlining some general lessons derived from the Hai‖om case study in terms of decoupling seniority from superiority and gerontocracy.

Keywords: superiority; egalitarianism; San; kin; Namibia

About the author

Thomas Widlok is professor of anthropology at the Institute of African Studies and Egyptology at the University of Cologne.

DOI: 10.53228/njas.v33i4.1144

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the ǂAkhoe Hai||om and many other Namibians who have facilitated my field research in the country over the last four decades. This chapter has also benefitted from the feedback I have received from two anonymous reviewers and from fellow participants in the thematic workshop we held in Arusha, Tanzania, in 2023 with generous funding from the German Research Council through the University of Cologne's Collaborative Research Center 228 "Future Rural Africa". All shortcomings remain my own. I dedicate this publication to my late parents who managed to refrain from turning seniority into superiority in a cultural setting that tended to nudge seniors to dominate their juniors.

Introduction

This contribution begins with a puzzle. The Hai‖om, like many San groups, are expressly egalitarian in many ways, both in terms of the relationships between men and women and with regard to those between juniors and seniors (Widlok 1999). Still, when talking about kin relations, they routinely apply age differentials to determine their relationships, since these differentials are built into their kinship terminology. When asked "How are you related to this person?", the answer with regard to a classificatory brother would either be *abudib* ('senior') or *!gãb* ('junior'), or, with regard to a sister, *ausis* ('senior') or *!gãs* ('junior') (see Table 1). Why would age difference be so frequently invoked by people for whom age seems not to matter as a marker of status and authority?

While the San may be exceptional in their egalitarianism, the prominence of age differences in their kin talk is not. In fact, when 'African values' are being discussed in African media, or in scholarly discourse – for instance when explaining *ubuntu* (Broodrijk 2005; see also Cattell 1997) – sooner or later 'respect for elders' is usually mentioned. In Broodrijk's words:

> Respect is […] generally regarded as the most central theme of the Ubuntu worldview, and one that […] stipulates the authority of the elders over younger people, parents over their children, leaders over their followers, and, traditionally, men over women. (2005, 183)

However, there are at least two reasons to be critical of this generalization: first, variability across the continent; and second, the specific 'cultural baggage' that comes with terms such as 'elder' and 'respect'.

As for variability, I have spent many years of my life in the company of African people who do not have a pronounced reverence towards elders – but who are surrounded by other groups that do. My experiences with ǂAkhoe Hai‖om are mirrored by those of others working with other San groups (Marshall 1976; Biesele 1993). There are many everyday cases of children acting seemingly 'disrespectfully' towards elders, even though this is locally glossed in terms of children being autonomous beings from an early age ('having their own mind'). I have encountered many San parents who – when being visited by non-San teachers demanding that they should discipline their children for not attending school more regularly – typically shrug their shoulders, exclaiming that there is not much they can do against the child's will. And sure enough, the children practice social distancing in the same way as adults do in this society: If they are uncomfortable or feel molested, they simply move away. Walking off, away from their parental home, to stay for a while with grandparents, is a preferred option when tensions arise. Depending on the circumstances, staying with other relatives is also possible. As adults, Hai‖om tend to ignore elderly people, who occasionally try to make themselves heard and to make others do what they think should be done. In this society, everyone has the right to speak, but no one – including older people – has the right to make others listen to them. In other words, there are minority groups in Africa that have quite clearly found a modus vivendi between generations that is at odds with what is claimed by those who presume to speak for a pan-African culture of *ubuntu*. It is the latter group who also routinely discriminate against San and other hunter-gatherer groups, since they consider the forager way of life as defective and inferior to their own. One goal of this contribution is therefore to show that African cultural heritage is more diverse than is often claimed, and moreover that there are good reasons to value the mode of relation between generations that we find in these

minority groups, possibly even above that of the dominant mainstream cultures.

As for cultural connotations, there is a specific cultural bias that comes with the notion of 'elders' and with that of 'respect'. Both terms are common ways of discursively disguising claims for power and for implicitly or explicitly establishing domination and status differences. This is not a phenomenon that is more marked in Africa than elsewhere. In European youth culture, influenced by international rap and hip-hop subculture, demanding 'respect' is tantamount to a low-level threat of violence and a push towards acts of submission. The demand for 'respect' is not simply to safeguard non-interference, but creates an expectation of submission when uttered by domineering individuals or groups. I attribute the fact that the 'respect discourse' is emulated more widely to a confusion between 'respect' and 'dignity'. While all humans can and should expect their dignity to be protected, that does not hold for submissive respect. The San, too, recognize the importance of distance in social relationships (see Widlok 2022b), but they categorize these into "joking" versus "avoidance" relationships (see Barnard 1992). Typical avoidance partners are in-laws; sometimes the behaviour of these individuals towards each other may appear to be similar to relations of 'respect', but importantly these are mutual and not asymmetrical. A second aim of this contribution is therefore to provide more clarity when describing and understanding different modes of behaviour that may all deal with social distance but that still deserve to be distinguished.

So here is the paradox to be tackled: If these San societies are as egalitarian as I have sketched them (see Widlok 1999), and as others have described them in more detail (see Barnard 1992; Biesele 1993), why do we still find that distinctions between junior and senior kinsmen are routinely employed? The article proceeds in three steps: I start by outlining the way in which the notions of junior and senior are distinguished in Hai‖om kinship terms. I ask whether a possible explanation could be one of 'structural inertia', i.e., of formal terminology lagging behind or being imported from neighbouring groups. To clarify (and defy) this possible explanation, I turn to an older ǂAkhoe Hai‖om layer of kinship terminology which shows exactly the same sensitivity towards juniority and seniority. Step two is an attempt to show how a distinction between junior and senior can be maintained without allowing it to become a tool for domination. I shall discuss hedging devices that allow Hai‖om to 'take the sting of domination out of seniority', as I shall describe it. In step three I formulate more general lessons to be drawn from this case study with regard to the possibilities of decoupling seniority from superiority.

Kinspersons are always junior or senior

Hai‖om, in their kin terminology, distinguish not only elder from younger sisters and brothers but also elder and younger parallel uncles (FBs) and aunts (MZs) and their children (i.e., parallel cousins). At sibling level there are entirely different terms employed for younger and older siblings: *!gãb* and *abudib* for male referents, *!gãs* and *ausis* for female referents (see Table 1). With regard to father's brothers and mother's sisters, Hai‖om employ morphemes that distinguish small (*ro*) from big (*gai*). These forms are used in all kinds of contexts and with regard to all kinds of objects (living or non-living). The diminutives are routinely inserted into personal names, so that a young man called *Seib* becomes *Sei-ro-b*. *Gai* (big) is inserted when talking about forebears: *gai-a-khoen*. Designators indicating junior and senior are therefore almost as ubiquitous in Hai‖om as grammatical designators indicating male or female gender. The latter provide ready orientation, as the male ending *-b* is added not only to obviously male entities but to anything that is longish, tall, or big (e.g. *hai-b* for 'tree')

Table 1: Hai‖om kin terms with junior (j) versus senior (s) distinction

Brother / Mother's Sister's Son / Father's Brother's Son	*abudib* (s), *!gãb* (j)
Sister / Mother's Sister's Daughter / Father's Brother's D.	*ausis* (s), *!gãs* (j)
Mother's Sister	*magais* (s), *maros* (j)
Father's Brother	*bagaib* (s), *barob* (j)
Hai‖om kin terms without junior/senior distinction: Child, Grandchild, Father's Sister's Children, Mother's Brother's Children	

while the female ending *-s* is added to anything round or smallish (e.g. *hai-s* for 'bush').

This pattern is not found in all Khoisan languages, but is common in the Khoe branch to which Hai‖om belongs. Hai‖om, in this regard, is no different from the Khoekhoe or the neighbouring Nama and Damara, who pre-colonially lived mainly on pastoralism and who are distinctly more hierarchical in their social systems than the Hai‖om and other San groups. Hai‖om may in fact be considered a variant of Khoekhoe and in the last century there were theories of Hai‖om having taken on Khoekhoe from their Nama neighbours in a process of acculturation (see Widlok 1999, 29–30). New evidence suggests that, instead, Hai‖om and Nama should be considered the opposite ends of a Khoekhoe continuum, both in terms of spatial distribution and of being different from one another. However, given this relative linguistic closeness between an egalitarian group of San and a group with more hierarchical features, it is reasonable to discuss whether the prominence of the junior/senior distinction is possibly a cultural import from powerful neighbours. In other words, one would assume that the kin nomenclature was either imposed on Hai‖om by their neighbours with a more hierarchical social system, or that it was part of a linguistic import from those neighbouring variants that lost its original function (see Widlok 2005, 461). The 'mismatch' between a ubiquitous terminology of seniority and a lack of seniority privilege in practice would then be due to cultural baggage connected to a linguistic import from dominant groups such as the Nama in some earlier historical strata about which – unfortunately – we can only speculate. This is a type of explanation that has been put forward in the early stages of anthropological theory, but it has also earned considerable scorn from structural functionalists, most prominently by Radcliffe-Brown in his discussion of the "mother's brother in southern Africa" (Radcliffe-Brown 1924). Given the paucity of historical evidence we cannot entirely rule out any 'survival theory', but there is also no evidence to substantiate it. There are a number of reasons, however, why it is rather unlikely: For one, there is evidence of an older layer of kinship terminology that operates structurally the same way but which is not used in any other Khoekhoe variant, i.e., which has probably been in use among Hai‖om since before intensive contact with Nama pastoralists. In other words, even if Hai‖om took over other aspects of the Khoekhoe lexicon (and grammar) in recent times, the differentiation between junior and senior seems not to have been part of the package, since it had already been with Hai‖om for much longer. Second, there is complementary evidence that practices of hierarchical kinship differentiation by age and generation are a rather recent addition to the Hai‖om cultural repertoire, as a discourse of elderhood has been promoted by

colonial and post-colonial regimes. Thus, the categories seem to be old but the practices that should match it are rather recent. And third, there is a simpler theory for explaining the phenomenon without recourse to speculation about survivals. I shall discuss these points in turn.

In long-term field research with ǂAkhoe (the most northerly of the Haiǁom in Namibia), a separate set of kinship terms emerged (see Table 2) that is distinct from Nama or Damara nomenclature and that ǂAkhoe themselves also identify as the kin-terms they used 'in the old days' before they had intensified contact with other Khoekhoe-speaking groups in more southerly parts of Namibia and when they were still subsisting fully on hunting and gathering. While the lexemes are distinct, it is noteworthy that, structurally, the two systems show no difference. Most importantly for our discussion, the older ǂAkhoe system does distinguish junior from senior status as elaborately as the current Haiǁom system does. In fact, at the level of what in English would be nieces and nephews, the ǂAkhoe system is more elaborate. Note that the historically 'younger' system is shared with other groups in the country and that it includes loan roots (*abudi* and *ausis*, probably derived from Afrikaans *broer* and *sus* or from their cognates in other European languages). While it is intriguing to note that the loanwords are only those for elder siblings – and thus arguably add a recent marking to elderhood, the main point that I want to emphasize is that there is a junior/senior distinction in the 'older' system, too. In other words, it is unlikely to have been imported by contact with Nama or other Khoekhoe-speaking people. There is evidence for lexical shifts in the kinship terminology, but there is nothing in these historical shifts to support the idea that the junior/senior distinction in kinship terms has been imposed or that it came as unwanted cultural baggage along with linguistic imports. Quite on the contrary, there is some evidence that the discourse of 'elderhood' is a fairly recent arrival, as I shall discuss in the next section.

In the early 1990s I assisted Haiǁom in putting their land claims down on paper on the occasion of the first national land conference held in Windhoek. In these documents there is no mention of ancestors or elders. Rather, people were making claims to places that they themselves had been living at before the war and from which they felt displaced, since the land had been given to the neighbouring Aawambo agropastoralists. The latter began to move into the region in large numbers at that stage, since the land was no longer occupied by the South African army. The 1990s and 2000s saw a mushrooming of NGOs in Namibia and what I have elsewhere called the 'corporatization' of San communities across

Table 2: ǂAkhoe kin terms with junior (j) versus senior (s) distinction

Brother / Mother's Sister's Son / Father's Brother's Son	*aib* (s), *annob* (j)
Sister / Mother's Sister's Daughter / Father's Brother's D.	*ais* (s), *annos* (j)
Mother's Sister	*aigais* (s), *ai!õas* (j)
Father's Brother	*abogaib* (s), *abo!õab* (j)
Brother's Son	*aibõab* (s), *annobõab* (j)
Sister's Son	*aisõab* (s), *annosõab* (j)
Brother's Daughter	*aibõas* (s), *annobõas* (j)
Sister's Daughter	*aisõas* (s), *annosõas* (j)
ǂAkhoe kin terms without junior/senior distinction: Child, Grandchild, Father's Sister's Children, Mother's Brother's Children	

the country (Widlok 2002). Increasingly, the San were also becoming part of the international indigenous peoples' network, with visits and re-visits between groups particularly from other parts of Africa, from Australia, and from the circumpolar region. With these networks and the work of lawyers and activists there was also a certain streamlining of the prevalent discourse. I was told by international NGO staff to look out for Hai‖om graves because putting 'ancestral graves' onto the map would be one way to substantiate claims to land (see my reflection on this in Widlok 1998). Similarly, over the decades I have seen a recent increase in discourse that incorporates terminology relating to seniority, ancestors, and elderhood. In everyday talk I had never heard ǂAkhoe Hai‖om referring to fellow Hai‖om of advanced years as 'elders'. The possibly equivalent term *gaiakhoen* was only used when talking either about members of the community long dead or about people of the almost mythical 'old days' when the land was made as it is. For instance, the term was used in folk stories on how the division of people into different subsistence pursuits (herders, farmers, foragers) came about, in order to refer to the 'first people' (see Widlok 1999). I am therefore confident in saying that much of the 'elders' discourse has recently been imported from the outside. However, Hai‖om are quick learners, as they began to understand that the larger social environment around them was not only hierarchical in nature (including the newly independent Namibian state), but that it in turn expected a hierarchical order from the San if they wanted to make any political claims. Whenever a government delegation (or indeed a non-governmental organization) reached out to them, they were requested to name their 'chiefs', 'elders', or 'representatives' and they were asked where their 'ancestral' land was. As a consequence, many individuals self-declared themselves to be 'headmen' or 'chiefs'. In the 2000s, the San networking NGO WIMSA received many competing claims for 'leadership'. I remember seeing one letter signed by three 'chiefs' whom I had hitherto known as ordinary members of the community. In sum, therefore, instead of assuming that the kinship system is a survival from a past in which there was more hierarchy and seniority in Hai‖om society, there is reason to believe that these trends have been planted and amplified only fairly recently as part of colonial and post-colonial encounters. *San Elders Speak* is, for instance, the title of a recent book by two archaeologists who interviewed San of advanced age about items in a museum collection of San materials (Backwell and D'Errico 2021). The book is very useful and I am sure this title was meant to be a benevolent and strategic recognition of the cultural knowledge and expertise of these interlocutors – but in a sense it is also misleading. The authoritative 'speaking' of elders pronouncing the will of the ancestors, as we find in other cases in Africa and Europe, is not what we find in most San situations. Certainly, the Hai‖om precolonial nomenclature allowed for the distinction between more junior and more senior people. The external discourse of elderhood therefore had a basis to connect to. At the same time, it seems that the mere existence of a system of differentiation between juniors and seniors does not automatically lead to a system of distinction or even of discrimination in terms of behaviours, claims, and a hierarchical order.

If we can therefore consider survival theories to be rather unlikely, what would make a convincing – and ideally simpler – theory that could deal with the phenomenon at hand? For this purpose, the remainder of this article investigates under which conditions the junior/senior distinctions become operationalized into claims of domination and dependency. I also look more closely at the ethnography to understand how this move towards domination is largely prevented in current Hai‖om practice.

Preventing seniority from becoming superiority

In the discourse that dominates, for instance, the NGO world, 'seniority' (being of advanced age) almost always comes with the connotation of 'superiority' (being of elevated status). This was also the case in the discussions during the workshop on which this special issue is based, including my own earlier contributions on the topic. It requires a conscious correction and sensitization *not* to assume that being senior necessarily implies being superior and to realize that this is a tacit but influential cultural bias. When consulting my ethnographic notes on Hai‖om interactions (both linguistic and non-linguistic), I came to realize that Hai‖om communication is characterized by a very different, almost inverse cultural bias. Here, being senior and being junior seem to be commonly interpreted primarily in terms of birth order. When explaining kinship relationships to me, interlocutors regularly and almost inevitably explained who was born first and who followed. This was to explain not only the relations between those who were children today but also the relations between those who were now adults. It was also employed with regard to those relatives (and their birth order differences) that left a structural mark, as it were, in allowing others to determine their kin relations. For example, !Gamekhas, when explaining her relationship to another woman present, would say: "We are siblings […] Her father is older than my father." The hand gesture that was commonly associated with these explanations simulated giving birth, the hand emulating the movement of a baby being born out of the womb. Hence, one could argue that in a society that has very few markers of differentiation between individual status (no material property markers, no dress code, no honorifics, etc.), remembering and operationalizing birth order is one of the few features that can be invoked for social orientation and chronology. It helps to be aware of the birth sequence in order to know who was around at what stage of one's own life and that of others. There is a vague sense of elder children looking after younger ones, not as authority figures that can boss others around, but rather as helping them to find their way around in the camp. Children are cared for (and carried around by) a number of their relatives, not only by their parents. Grandparents play a major role and so do elder siblings. In terms of power relations, however, the designation of birth order, and seniority more generally, is practically 'innocent'. Avoidance (and joking) relationship patterns are important (see Barnard 1992) but these two macro categories involve both junior and senior members of the kin network. Moreover, avoidance is not to be confused with respect in the sense of 'taking orders'. There is no general sense that seniors have to be 'respected' for their advanced accumulated knowledge. Many elderly people live by themselves with very little attention given to them. Some older individuals are known for particular skills (storytelling or playing a traditional instrument) but that does not allow them to draw any authority from this. Young people are also often attributed with particular skills (such as being a good dancer or craftsperson or speaking a particular neighbouring language).

As with many other non-literate societies, Hai‖om at my field site do not keep track of birth years, but it was readily known and easy to remember who was born before whom, who was already there when one person was born, and who came later. There is no special status or obligation connected to 'being a firstborn', neither in childhood, nor later in life or in terms of inheritance, unlike in so many other societies across the world. The loss of life of an older person is usually mourned more intensely and longer than that of a baby but this is explained in terms of having shared so many experiences with a person one has lived with for many years, as opposed to the little time one has had with a newborn child. Also

note that seniority here is not something that is 'achieved' ceremoniously or that is 'conveyed' through relations with dead ancestors or with spiritual beings, as we find in ancestor 'cults' elsewhere (see Kopytoff 1997). Rather, seniority is merely the given sequence. Even small children are 'more senior' than other children, but with no sense of the more senior children being able to direct or command their younger relatives. This corresponds to relationships later in life when old people are usually left alone, both positively, in terms of granting them individual autonomy, and negatively, in terms of not providing them with any particular age-based privileges. Throughout one's life, Hai‖om may feel particular obligations to particular people in their kin network. But this is not due to absolute or relative age. Rather, it is due to being in a particular kinship constellation with these individuals and it depends on the history they have shared with one another. A typical case in point would be the parents of a spouse, to whom many feel a sense of obligation. Brideservice has been a widespread custom and one may give particular gifts or portions of meat, etc., to close in-laws (see Widlok 1999, 143). This connects to the underlying logic of classifying kin primarily in terms of 'joking partners' and 'avoidance partners' (see Barnard 1992). These relationships cut across age and generation, since everyone has both joking and avoidance partners amongst their juniors and seniors. Namesake relations again cut across age (and sex) differentiations, at least among Hai‖om. Among other San groups who practise the selection of personal names from a limited set of names (see Marshall 1976), it is part of the logic of that system that one may have namesakes, particularly in generations twice removed from oneself (i.e., in the grandparent/grandchild generation). Thus, it is fair to say that the ubiquity of distinguishing juniors from seniors in the Hai‖om kin system does not translate into domination and power differentials for two reasons: Firstly, the age differences are 'naturalized' by connoting primarily birth order and not much else. There are, for instance, no particular privileges or duties attached to being the firstborn, or the lastborn, for that matter. Unlike the languages of their Aawambo neighbours, Hai‖om do not give lexicalized terms or names to 'firstborn' or 'lastborn' children. Secondly, age differentiation is 'hedged' by other mechanisms that largely level out the possibility of domination, or what I like to call 'taking the sting out of difference', as I shall explain in more detail in the next section.

Hedging the differentiation between junior and senior

The differentiation between junior and senior, as indicated above, seems structurally and logically very similar to the differentiation between male and female. Both are extensively grammaticalized in the Hai‖om language and both are very ordinary in everyday interaction, but neither is ceremonially or otherwise marked. I propose that this is largely due to complementary features in the social system that prevent awareness of sex or age from being turned into status distinctions. I want to highlight two of these hedging devices in this context, namely cross-sex naming and the use of reciprocals beyond dyads.

The Hai‖om kinship system does not privilege descent and linearity. In part this is achieved by having a cross-sex naming system in which boys receive mother's 'surname' and girls receive father's 'surname' (see Widlok 1999, 2000). In effect this leads to a reshuffling at the level of every generation: Those who carry my surname, and to whom I may feel a vague sense of allegiance and mutual support, are related to me both in terms of male and female relatives, e.g., speaking from a female position they include my father and his brothers but not my paternal grandfather, not my brothers, not the sons of my paternal uncles. They also include my own sons and

their daughters. Given the overall small size of the group, the chances are that there will be other, more distant relatives with whom I share a surname, but under no circumstances will they form a corporate group holding any inherited or other assets. They also do not demand allegiance, etc. Rather, together with self-chosen friends, I may more readily approach my namesakes for gifts or support, but there is no sense of clan identity or solidarity like what we find in linear kinship systems. There is also no sense of names being ranked in a way that clans or lineages are frequently considered to be ranked (as, for instance, among the agropastoralist neighbours of the Hai‖om). Similarly, there is no privileging of the male gender as a default, as we frequently find elsewhere (e.g., in German).

Another feature that effectively hedges the power of seniority is a widespread use of reciprocals. Reciprocals are a standard feature of many languages, but in Hai‖om they are pragmatically extended far beyond what one might expect. To begin with, reciprocals do not only refer to dyads. Reciprocalization is easy in Hai‖om and all other Khoekhoe variants. The reciprocal morpheme *gu* may be added to any verb, for instance to turn 'give' (*ma*) into 'give one another' (*magu*) and to make things and relations reciprocal more generally. It may also be added to a relationship of multiple partners connected in mutuality ('we all give to one another') and it can be combined with nouns, including kin terms (see Rapold and Widlok 2008). That makes it possible to say we are 'cross cousins to one another' (*/aigu*) or 'we are siblings to one another' (*!gãgu*). This was also the case in the exchange with !Gamekhas referred to above, when she said:

> Khoe !gã gu
> person sibling reciprocal
> 'We are siblings to one another'

The dedicated reciprocal marker *-gu* is also suffixed to pronouns and borrowed nouns, including *familigu* 'to be each other's relatives', from Afrikaans *familie* ('relatives'). The most relevant point here is that the reciprocal is also employed in asymmetrical events (even with just two participants) as long as reciprocation is conventionally expected, e.g. *magu* 'to give', or *mĩ* 'to tell one's news', as in *mĩgure!*, a conventional short greeting, a vocative construction meaning 'Let's tell each other news' (see Rapold and Widlok 2008 for details). In sum, there is a readily available linguistic device that emphasizes reciprocity in numerous ways and contexts and which can be employed to hedge asymmetrical relations.

Lessons learned from Hai‖om

What is there to be learned about the specific case presented here? For one, the case illustrates that awareness of age differences and the prominent linguistic grammaticalization of age differences in the kinship terminology do not necessarily go together with seniority as superiority, or even with gerontocratic tendencies. But why do the Hai‖om succeed in 'taking the sting out' of seniority classification while many, and in fact most, other cases in Africa do not? After all, one could assume that two aspects of seniority, namely being there first (see Agwuele, this special issue) and having more experience than others (see Mitchell, this special issue) would lend themselves to being exploited for domination. And in fact, outside the small pockets of egalitarianism, we find the seniority-as-superiority principle firmly established across Afropea, that is, across Africa and Europe – so much so that there have even been repeated criticisms of the political abuse of this principle. Awami (2023) has recently shown how state politicians in Tanzania use the kinship terminology of (prime) ministers being 'parents', with the citizens of the country being 'children', for creating political dependence. This political abusive scaling up of a very specific notion of parenthood onto the national sphere is widespread.

In Europe there are notions of 'Father of the country' or '*Landesvater*' (lit. 'father of the land' in German, for the prime minister of the state, or, more rarely, '*Landesmutter*', its female equivalent). And in Africa there are frequent expressions of such a quasi- or pseudo-kin relationship between modern rulers and citizens, not only in metaphorical language but also in bodily gestures. In 2017 a public outcry went through Zambian newspapers after a picture was publicized showing government ministers kneeling humbly in front of the prime minister. In Kenya's National Museum we find various photographs of prime ministers handing out land titles to citizens who take on the same posture, kneeling and bowing to the 'senior' prime minister. And this is not only about the parental metaphor, and it is not only a matter of 'the old days'. I was recently told by a tour guide in Arusha, who pointed out the old German court building in his village, that "Do Not Argue With An Elder Brother" continues to be one of the three major rules in his community (the other two were, according to him, "Do Not Wear Indecent Clothes" and "Do Not Fail To Attend The Funeral Of A Close Relative"). Many of these culturally specific expressions of the seniority-as-superiority principle exist across both Africa and Europe. At a more general theoretical level, Graeber and Wengrow (2021, 513–514) have recently pointed out that the practice of leaders extending a quasi-kin relationship of 'care' to those who are marginalized in their own kin networks is the foundation of state domination and ultimately of suppression by office holders. The same argument connecting patriarchal power and 'the old culture concept' has been made for Europe, too (see Därmann 2019). Hence, examples abound of the seniority principle going awry. Are there any lessons one can draw from the inverse, namely the Hai‖om example of how to escape these excessive and suppressive usages of the seniority principle? On the basis of the case study sketched in this contribution we can at least outline three of the design principles that could be employed against such a problematic use of seniority.

Firstly, there is the importance of the hedging levelling mechanisms mentioned above. Neo-Whorfian research suggests that there are effects of language on cognition (Levinson 2006), but that the relationship is rarely one of a single linguistic or cultural feature influencing cognition, and the influence is typically a 'nudging' and not a determination. This is because these traits are not isolated. In spatial cognition, for instance, a Whorfian effect is likely when several traits or features mutually reinforce and amplify one another (see Levinson 2006 for examples). Conversely, and this is the case here, there are features such as cross-sex naming, reciprocals beyond dyads, and so forth which can weaken or counteract an elaborate age classification. Our case is, it seems, not one of 'one hundred words for "senior" in Hai‖om' (in parallel with the popularized Whorfian argument that Inuit living in snowy conditions had "one hundred words for snow"; see Cichocki and Kilarski 2010). Rather, this is a case of the knowledge and classification of seniority being developed in a very specific way, namely highlighting birth order, which helps to orient and anchor the individual in the social network but without erecting boundaries of age categories and without connecting it to a sense of distinction or a social expectation of privilege. After all, even people who are very close in age may use the 'being older/younger' distinction. It is significant that – as we have seen above – Hai‖om develop the elder/younger sibling distinction (a same generation distinction) in their lexicon and in their everyday behaviour more elaborately than the parent/child generational distinction as it is developed in modern gerontocratic politics.

Secondly, the Hai‖om example suggests that we need to read seniority nomenclature not so much, or not primarily, in semantic and lexical terms as with regard to the pragmatics involved. Having a junior/senior distinction

built into the lexicon and grammar is one thing, but how that is then used (or not) in particular pragmatic strategies is another matter. In gerontocratic societies, junior/senior distinctions are often presented as 'principles', for instance in the form of proverbs, praise songs, formalized genealogies, and so forth. Moreover, they appear in normative statements such as "one ought to respect the more senior" (see examples above). By contrast, the pragmatics of employing Hai‖om senior/junior terms is very different. They appear in rather neutral descriptions and interpretations of the personal kin network. Birth order accounts both connect me with others (having the same classificatory parents) and at the same time distinguish me from others (being born before or after them). They also provide a calculus not to 'order people around' but to 'order people who are around' into a well-structured network. As an ordering and orientation device these differentiations have the same function as reliable birth certificates and dates elsewhere. The pragmatics of San birth order talk is to connect people more than to set them apart. And it is a relational tool between any two individuals in an extensive kin network, more than a categorical tool of erecting status boundaries between persons as 'kinds of people'. This tendency is supported by other, general features of Hai‖om discourse that are not limited to the use of kin terms. For instance, Hai‖om pragmatics allow for many questions to be asked that never receive an answer, i.e., giving the respondent the autonomy to respond or not (see Hoymann 2010). More generally, there is a lot of parallel talk and overlap in conversation, for people of both genders and all ages. In other words, it seems that it is not so much the existence of a classification that matters as a question of how much (or rather how little) specific individuals can determine the course of a communicative interaction and commit others to their interpretation of the world.

Thirdly, there is certainly also an effect of number and scale here. As Bird-David (2022) has pointed out, societies of very small scale like those of the San and other hunter-gatherers tend to conceptualize people as pluri-relational. In other words, everyone is connected to everyone else through a multitude of relations that form an individual profile for each of these links. As Bird-David suggests, they live with one another as kin without being like each other (2022, 219); they are not "of the same kind" (2022, 215). We now know that many of these societies are actually much larger than what meets the eye, given their long-distance relationships (see Widlok 2022a), but nevertheless, the notion of personhood that is performatively and pragmatically created seems to have a very distinct colouring to it. This is in contrast to the kinship types and the associated pragmatics in many large-scale societies in which individuals are defined as similar due to being part of a larger whole. It may be a matter of debate how to establish the size of hunter-gatherer societies stretching out further than we think. But upscaling and downscaling are performative actions. In classic gerontocracies that take seniority to mean superiority, this is achieved by actively scaling the seniority principle to reach down all the way to their smallest units, the homestead or house. What distinguishes the San case from these gerontocracies is that hunter-gatherers such as the Hai‖om successfully isolate social strategies of kinning, limiting their ways of 'doing kin' to a particular scale. Among Hai‖om, genealogy may be used among close kin, in namesake-ship or shared classificatory siblinghood in a wider network of friendship and exchange. By contrast, among many of their agropastoralist neighbours in Africa and Europe, the small scale and the large scale are tied to one another in forms of mutual reinforcement. Here the wider nation and the individual house thrive on the same principle of parenthood. The parallel and identity of a relationship across scales, situations, and domains is actively promoted, with the nation

being constructed as 'the house' writ large (see Därmann 2019).

Conclusion

Conversations and also non-linguistic communication and interactions take place with participants whom outside observers may readily classify as being of different age groups or generations. As I have tried to outline, however, it is problematic to label every such exchange as 'the elders speak'. The notion of 'elders' connotes status distinctions that may not be present when age differences are expressed.

In this article I have highlighted the fact that age reference can also be 'matter-of-fact' anchoring in social space without any strategic status differentiation or distinction emerging from it. Either way, a reference to relative age difference can also be structural, i.e., not only referring to the age relations between interlocutors but also to age differences in the parent/grandparent generation affecting the descendants encountering each other today. Whether age differentiation picks up more cultural weight and baggage, particularly privileges, along the way depends on a number of factors that I have sketched in this contribution. Age reference can be combined with many other identifiers (surnames, personal names, etc.), but also with other communicative and practical features that act as levelling devices. An example of the former would be expressions of mutuality that can be extended into a non-dyadic and more diffuse 'belonging together'. An example of the latter would be inheritance rules, not covered in this article but described elsewhere (Widlok 2005). The evidence that I have presented here is not only to alert us to the fact that there are cases such as that of the Hai‖om San that do not match our expectations about a tight fit between recognizing seniority and realizing superiority. Rather, it helps us to understand that such a tight fit is by no means inevitable, nor self-explanatory. Maybe the right question to ask is not why the Hai‖om San routinely differentiate age even though they are egalitarian. After all, birth order information as a means that readily lends itself to social orientation may be good enough as an explanation. Rather, we may ask (as other contributors to this special issue do): Why is age, in so many other cases, often associated with status and seniority, since it need not be? How are age differences instrumentalized to create domination? How is pathos attached to what at face value is not more than the basic information that one person has been born earlier than another? This also invites further comparative studies of other distinctions. Gender distinctions come readily to mind and the reasons why they are instrumental in suppression in some cases, when converted to a basis for power, while measures to successfully 'take the sting out of them' are in principle available to all cultural systems.

References

Awami, Sammy. 2023. "Of Tanzanian Politicians Demanding to Be Treated As Parents." *The Chanzo Online*, 24/11/2023. Accessed November 23, 2024. https://thechanzo.com/2023/07/24/of-tanzanian-politicians-demanding-to-be-treated-as-parents/

Backwell, Lucinda, and Francesco D'Errico. 2021. *San Elders Speak: Ancestral Knowledge of the Kalahari San*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Barnard, Alan. 1992. *Hunters and Herders of Southern Africa: A Comparative Ethnography of the Khoisan Peoples.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Biesele, Megan. 1993. *Women Like Meat: The Folklore and Foraging Ideology of the Kalahari Ju/ʾhoan.* Johannesburg, South Africa: Witwatersrand University Press.

Bird-David, Nurit. 2022. "How Do We Scale Hunter-gatherers' Social Networks? Towards Bridging Interdisciplinary Gaps." In *Scale Matters,* edited by Thomas Widlok and Dores Cruz, 19–37. Bielefeld: transcript.

Broodryk, Johann. 2005. *UBUNTU: Management Philosophy.* Randburg: Knowres Publishing.

Cattell, Maria. 1997. "Ubuntu, African Elderly and the African Family Crisis." *Southern African Journal of Gerontology* 6 (2): 37–39

Cichocki, Piotr, and Marcin Kilarski. 2010. "On 'Eskimo Words for Snow': The Life Cycle of a Linguistic Misconception." *Historiographia Linguistica* 37 (3): 341–377.

Därmann, Iris. 2019. *Kulturtheorien zur Einführung.* Hamburg: Junius Verlag.

Graeber, David, and David Wengrow. 2021. *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity.* London: Allen Lane.

Hoymann, Gertie. 2010. "Questions and Responses in ǂĀkhoe Hai||om." *Journal of Pragmatics* 42 (10): 2726–2740.

Kopytoff, Igor. 1997. "Ancestors as Elders in Africa." In *Perspectives on Africa*, edited by Roy Grinker, Stephen Lubkemann, and Christopher Steiner, 314–322. Oxford: Blackwell.

Levinson, Stephen. 2006. *Space in Language and Cognition: Explorations in Cognitive Diversity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Marshall, Lorna. 1976. *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Radcliffe-Brown, A. R. 1924. "The Mother's Brother in South Africa." *South African Journal of Science* 21 (11): 542–555.

Rapold, Christian J., and Thomas Widlok. 2008. "Dimensions of Variability in Northern Khoekhoe Language and Culture." *Southern African Humanities* 20 (1): 133–161.

Widlok, Thomas. 1998. "Unearthing Culture. Khoisan Funerals and Social Change." *Anthropos* 93: 115–126.

Widlok, Thomas. 1999. *Living on Mangetti: 'Bushman' Autonomy and Namibian Independence.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Widlok, Thomas. 2000. "Names that Escape the State: Hai‖om Naming Practices Versus Domination and Isolation." In *Hunters and Gatherers in the Modern World*, edited by Peter Schweitzer, Megan Biesele, and Robert Hitchcock, 361–379. New York: Berghahn Books.

Widlok, Thomas. 2002. "Corporatism and the Namibian San." In *Challenges for Anthropology in the 'African Renaissance': A Southern African Contribution*, edited by Deborah LeBeau and Robert Gordon, 206–216. Windhoek: University of Namibia Press.

Widlok, Thomas. 2005. "Take it or Leave it: The Post- and Pre-Mortal Inheritance of San People in the Oshikoto Region." In *The Meanings of Inheritance. Perspectives on Namibian inheritance practices*, edited by Robert Gordon, 23–38. Windhoek: Legal Assistance Centre.

Widlok, Thomas. 2013. "Hai‖om Language Contact." In *The Khoesan Languages*, edited by Rainer Voßen, 461–463. New York: Routledge.

Widlok, Thomas. 2022a. "Introduction: Why Scale Matters." In *Scale Matters*, edited by Thomas Widlok and Dores Cruz, 7–18. Bielefeld: transcript.

Widlok, Thomas. 2022b. "Näher dran oder mit genügend Abstand? Ethnologie in die Praxis getrieben." In *Ethnologie als angewandte Wissenschaft. Das Zusammenspiel von Theorie und Praxis*, edited by Roland Hardenberg, Jos Platenkamp, and Thomas Widlok, 45–60. Berlin: Reimer.