

Doing Being Senior/Junior: Reconsidering Naming and Kinship Relationships Among the !Xun of North-Central Namibia

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Abstract

In this article, I will reconsider the naming and kinship relationships of the !Xun San in north-central Namibia from the perspective of child socialization. I will thereby deconstruct the naturalized view in which ‘relative age’ (a concept to indicate the age sequence between two persons, positioned relatively from older to younger) and ‘generational distance’ (a concept to indicate the character of the relational space between relatives, positioned relatively from senior to junior) are conceptualized based on ‘absolute age’ (years objectively measured in terms of the time that has passed since one’s birth). I will then demonstrate a view in which relative age and even absolute age become socially explicit, although not always in the context of social relations ordered by generational distance. !Xun children are considered to be socialized as they participate in social relations associated with generational distance and become proficient in the appropriate conduct therein.

Keywords: San; generational distance; relative age; absolute age; Africa

About the author

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Becoming (un)equal in age

The !Xun of north-central Namibia form a group of San known as (post) hunter-gatherers and ‘indigenous people’ in southern Africa. The San are comprised of several clusters of people (e.g. Ju|’hoan, !Xun, †Akhoe/Hai|om, G|ui, G|ana) (Barnard 1992; Takada 2020). The San society has often been characterized as a representative example of ‘egalitarian societies’ (Lee 1979; Tanaka 1980). However, this does not mean that seniority and juniority are not important in San society. Rather, seniority and juniority play a very important role in their naming and kinship relationships, which have been recognized as the centre of San sociocultural organization (Marshall 1976; Lee 1986; Barnard 1992; Takada 2022). This article focuses on how seniority and juniority in the naming and kinship relationships among the !Xun relate to the features of their childcare and socialization, a subject on which the author has carried out extensive research (Takada 2020), and thereby aims to contribute to a more general and theoretical discussion of seniority and juniority in social relations.

First, I introduce the key concepts of ‘absolute age’, ‘relative age’, and ‘generational distance’. These concepts allow us to discuss becoming (un)equal in age. In this paper, I define them as follows, following Takada (2008, 2022). ‘Absolute age’ indicates years absolutely measured in terms of the time that has passed since the birth of an individual. ‘Relative age’ indicates the age sequence between two persons, positioned relatively from older to younger. ‘Generational distance’ is a concept that indicates the character of the relational space between relatives. The relationship between ‘Ego’ and a relative who is conceptually in the same generation as Ego (e.g. a sibling or spouse) is defined as a relationship with no generational distance. The generational

distance between Ego and the first ascending (e.g. father or mother) or descending (e.g. son or daughter) generation is defined as ‘one’, and so on. In generational distance, individuals are positioned relatively in terms of junior and senior.¹ In most westernized and industrialized societies today, the naturalized view, in which relative age and then generational distance are conceptually based on absolute age, has been globalized. Those who take this view assume that objectively measurable time derives relative age and generational distance.

However, research on childcare and socialization among the !Xun in north-central Namibia (e.g. Takada 2020) suggests a different perspective on time. It is during childhood that a !Xun person encounters the majority of relatives. For example, infants receive various forms of embodied care, including gymnastic exercises (a series of behaviours in which caregivers hold infants upright or move them up and down on their laps, from very early on) and early vocal communication, from variety of relatives (Takada 2020, 104–107, 130–135). Although the social relations among the !Xun are generally based on mutual respect for each other’s autonomy (Takada 2022), asymmetry is obvious in early caregiver-child interactions, both physically and mentally. As described below, this is reflected in their naming and kinship terminology. Children soon become able to understand and use such terms. In this paper, by reconsidering the naming and kinship relationships of the !Xun, I will deconstruct the above view and demonstrate an alternative view in which relative age and even absolute age become socially explicit only when the context of social relations ordered by generational distance requires. Before that, the next section gives a brief overview of the !Xun ethnographic background (for details, see Takada 2022).

¹Note that not only generational distance but also relative age is a matter of social relations, and thus I have used senior-junior to distinguish generational distance and younger-older to distinguish relative age.

The !Xun of Ekoka

The !Xun have had close associations with the neighbouring Aawambo agro-pastoral people and have adopted a sedentary lifestyle in which considerable numbers of members cultivate crops and work for the Aawambo for cash or in kind (Takada 2022). The transformation of their society can be outlined as follows. The San, possibly predecessors of the present-day !Xun, are generally believed to have been the first inhabitants of north-central Namibia. A group of Bantu-speaking people, who are considered to be the ancestors of the present-day Aawambo, are generally believed to have moved in from the north at the beginning of the first millennium A.D. and to have encountered the San near the Zambezi River (Williams 1994, 32, 51–53, 73). Over time, mutual dependence developed between the !Xun and Aawambo. In the early twentieth century, South Africa started to dominate what is now north-central Namibia through so-called indirect rule, exploiting the people of the area as a cheap labour source. The need for cash pushed both the Aawambo and the !Xun into the more southerly part of the colony. Missionaries won the confidence of local people in northern Namibia after many years of working towards this end. Most of the !Xun, who had previously lived in small-scale camps, started to become concentrated in mission-controlled villages in the 1950s (Widlok 1999). Ekoka, in which the author has conducted research, is one of these villages. These villages developed flourishing agriculture systems. In the 1970s to 1980s, however, the ‘liberation movement’ against the illegal occupation of Namibia by South Africa became active, and an intense war interrupted missionary work in north-central Namibia. During this period, the !Xun who had remained in this area had to rely increasingly on foraging again. After Namibian independence in 1990, fighters and refugees, including some !Xun, returned to north-central Namibia. Several so-called development programmes (e.g. programmes

to promote the resettlement of returnees, the rehabilitation of residents, and local agriculture) were begun with high hopes of success. However, as a result of the government taking the lead in regional development instead of the missionary organizations, the !Xun are not given full consideration as a minority, neither in the country nor in the region, and consequently do not benefit much in the development process. Ironically, the status and situation of the !Xun has improved little, if at all, with Namibia’s independence. The !Xun and other San groups are struggling for cultural recognition (Dieckmann et al. 2014; Takada 2022; Widlok 2000).

The Ju|’hoan and !Xun

The naming and kinship terminology of the !Xun exhibit several similarities to that of the Ju|’hoan, which is the best known group of the San (Barnard 1992). The two groups share moderately related languages. According to Güldemann’s (2014) classification, in which San languages are classified into five lineages, both the !Xun and the Ju|’hoan belong to the Kx’a lineage. The Kx’a lineage can be subdivided into several groups, in which the !Xun belongs to the W2 lect, while the Ju|’hoan belongs to the E1 lect (König and Heine 2001, 2). The orthography used in this paper to describe the !Xun language largely follows that proposed by König and Heine (2008) (tonal information is omitted).

Although several cognate kinship terms are recognized between the !Xun and Ju|’hoan, their naming and kinship terminologies are also characterized by considerable differences. For example, !Xun kinship terms are classified as the ‘Hawaiian’ type, in which both cross and parallel cousins are categorized as classificatory siblings, while Ju|’hoan kinship terms are classified as the ‘Eskimo’ type, in which sibling terms are different from cousin terms. The !Xun terminology is also classified as ‘bifurcate collateral’, in which kinship terms for a father’s

siblings differ from those for a mother's siblings, and the same terms are not applied to parents and their siblings. In contrast, the Ju|'hoan have a 'lineal-type' terminology in which one term is employed for both father's brothers and mother's brothers, another term is employed for both father's sisters and mother's sisters, and the siblings of parents are distinguished from the parents themselves. In addition, the !Xun have a surname system called !'honi, which is passed on by cross-descent: from father to daughter(s) and from mother to son(s). A similar surname system is also found among the †Akhoe/Hailom (Widlok 2000), neighbouring people of the !Xun. On the other hand, the Ju|'hoan do not have a surname system such as !'honi. In the next section, I will re-analyse the naming and kinship terminologies of the !Xun described in Takada (2008, 2022) using the key concepts of 'absolute age', 'relative age', and 'generational distance'.

Name relationships

Like the Ju|'hoan (Marshall 1976; Lee 1986), the !Xun use a limited number of names, and thus the names are repeated over and over from generation to generation. Most names are used exclusively for men or for women, but some names, such as *Djam*, *N|ome*, *Tue*, and *N|ame*, can be used by both men and women. Like the Ju|'hoan, the !Xun usually name their children after their relatives (e.g. FF, MF, FB, MB for male children, and FM, MM, FZ, MZ for female children), either consanguineous kin or affines. The namesake relationship is widely known to members of the community, including the namesakes themselves: children usually know their senior namesakes, and vice versa. For both the !Xun and Ju|'hoan, having the same name binds people together

(Marshall 1976). Two people who happen to have the same name can form a close relationship (i.e., name relationship), conceptualized as *m!kon* (lit. 'my name') among the !Xun. For example, they can talk about sexual matters or exchange obscene insults with each other. However, if their kinship tie classifies them in an avoidance relationship, the avoidance relationship is given priority.

In general, the augmentative *n!a* is added to this term (*m!kon*) when addressing the senior or same generation, while the diminutive *ma* is added to address the junior generation. In other words, the use of augmentative and diminutive does not depend on relative age but on membership in a generation. In general, mutual support is expected in name relationships. In particular, one should help *m!kon-ma*, while the latter should respect *m!kon-n!a*. This practice is sometimes applied across ethnic boundaries. For example, when my own first-born son was born, I gave my firstborn son the !Xun name |*Qama* after the name of the third son of a beloved informant *N|ome*. Since *N|ome* belongs to a generation older than mine, *N|ome*'s third son is the *m!kon-n!a* of my first born son, and the latter is the *m!kon-ma* of the former. Therefore, my firstborn son respects *N|ome*'s third son, and *N|ome*'s third son loves my firstborn son in some way, and will welcome him when he visits Ekoka. In other words, seniority and juniority form a close yet asymmetrical relationship between namesakes. The practice of attaching the augmentative *n!a* or the diminutive *ma* to social relations to encourage appropriate actions in accordance with convention is also widespread with the kinship terms shown below.²

²The short forms in the figures and text indicate the following: s senior; j junior; o older; y younger; F father; M mother; S son; D daughter; B brother; Z sister; H husband; W wife; Δ male; ○ female; □ male or female

Terms for affines (1): spouse’s grandparent–grandchild’s spouse

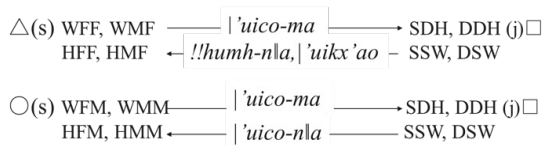


Figure 1: Spouse’s grandparent–grandchild’s spouse

|uico-nla is used to address a spouse’s grandmother, while !!humh-nla or |uikx’ao indicates a spouse’s grandfather. When the senior generation addresses the junior generation, |uico-ma is used regardless of the addressee’s gender. Terms between a spouse’s grandmother and a grandchild’s spouse are symmetrical, with the augmentative nla being assigned to |uico for senior while the diminutive ma is assigned for junior. In the meanwhile, terms between a spouse’s grandfather and a grandchild’s spouse show a somewhat asymmetrical structure but seniority and juniority are still marked in these terms: similar to nla, kx’ao can mean large, or the head or representative of a group. |uico and |uikx’ao may be Khoe-derived terms (Barnard 1992, 51). The etymology of !!humh is still unconfirmed. Note that the junior’s gender is not marked, while the senior’s gender is distinctive in these terms.

The present-day !Xun tend to be highly sedentary, with settlements limited to Ekoka and the surrounding villages, originally established by the mission, and still heavily populated with !Xun and †Akhoe. Although relatives often live in close proximity, the pattern of residence is not as clearly defined as patrilocal or matrilineal. Like name relationships, mutual support is expected in the relationship among co-residents. Basically, the senior should help the junior, while the junior should respect the senior. However, if there is a distance of two generations between them, and by the time this relationship is established through a spouse, !!humh-nla or |uikx’ao is often quite

old. When the senior is still alive, the junior may help and respect the senior. In some cases, seniors are already dead at the time of juniors’ marriages and they never actually meet.

Terms for consanguineous kin (1): grandparent–grandchild

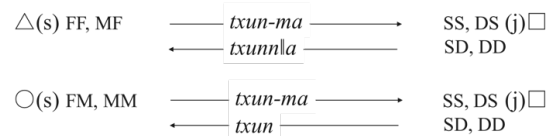


Figure 2: Grandparent–grandchild

Next, let’s look at the grandparent–grandchild relationship, which is also a relationship between individuals who are two generations apart. Similar to the Ju!’hoan, the !Xun use the same terms for FF and MF (txunnla) and for FM and MM (txun). For txun, the augmentative nla is assigned if the senior is male, but not if it is female. On the other hand, if the senior addresses the junior, a diminutive ma is assigned to the txun regardless of the junior’s gender. Thus, the terms for the grandfather–grandchild relationship are symmetrical in that txun is marked with the appropriate morphemes, while the term for grandmother is not marked by the augmentative in the grandmother–grandchild relationship.

These grandparents take part in the care of grandchildren from a very early age, engaging in various caregiving behaviours, such as gymnastic exercises and early vocal communication (Takada 2014; 2020, 104–107, 130). The stem txun is thought to express such a close relationship, but in actual use the diminutive ma and the augmentative nla mark the generational distance and the senior’s gender. Children learn to use these kin terms from an early age. When they are a little older, grandparent and grandchild often exchange frank jokes with each other. These jokes often involve a senior touching a junior’s genitalia

or making a comment that makes fun of it. In this act, no actual sexual activity is implied, and the speaker's or receiver's gender is not the determining factor of the joking relationship between them because of the large generational distance. These behaviours often occur in contexts where seniors, who are relieved of the responsibility of teaching parenting norms, are compassionate towards juniors. Juniors also show deep affection for seniors and may kindly help them with daily activities, when their eyesight or limbs are weakened.

**Terms for consanguineous kin (2):
uncle/aunt–nephew/niece**

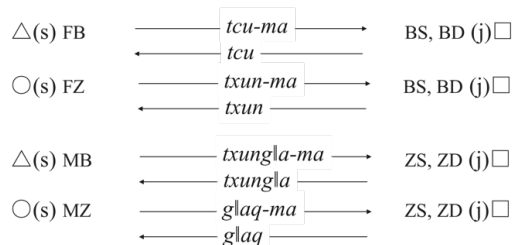


Figure 3: Uncle/aunt–nephew/niece

!Xun have separate terms for FB (*tcu*), FZ (*txun*), MB (*txungla*), and MZ (*glaq*) ('bifurcate collateral'; Lowie 1928). In both relationships, the diminutive *ma* is added when the senior addresses the junior, regardless of the junior's gender. In other words, the senior's patrilineality/matrilineality and gender are terminologically contrastive, while the junior's gender is not marked in these terms.

Although the seniors actively engage in the care of the juniors from an early age (Takada 2020), the kind and extent of care depends on the type of relationship. In this respect, patrilineality/matrilineality and the gender of uncle/aunt seem to create differences not just in the kin terms, but also in attitudes and behaviours towards the nephew/niece. *Txungla* may be the guardian of the family, teaching a junior person the norms and being involved in the junior's important decision making. These customs are more

dominant among the matrilineal agro-pastoralist Aawambo. It is therefore possible that the !Xun have adopted the Aawambo's practices. *Tcu* seems to be a bit more socially distant from junior than *txungla*. *Glaq* is very close to junior, next to his or her mother: juniors are often under the close care of *glaq*, as MZ, from an early age. FZ is called *txun*, as are FM and MM, one generation above. Whether the FZ–BS, BD relationships and the FM, MM–SS, DS, SD, and DD relationships show commonality not only at the level of terminology but also of practice needs to be further investigated.

From the junior's point of view, the uncle/aunt is a relative who, like their parents, is one generation above them. When the juniors are in their childhood, the uncles/aunts usually have more experience of being included in a web of !Xun social activities and are still socially active in their everyday life. The fact that they (i.e. *Tcu*, *txungla*, *glaq*, and *txun*) show the above-mentioned different propensities in the care of children one generation below them has important implications for discussing the differentiation of these relatives' roles in socialization, as does the relevance of institutional, attitudinal, and behavioural features in socialization (Takada 2020).

**Terms for affine (2):
parent-in-law–child-in-law**

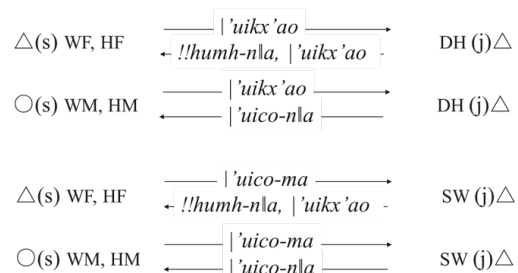


Figure 4: Parent-in-law–child-in-law

The parent-in-law and child-in-law become affines with the marriage of the junior generation. It is important to note that these

relationships begin when juniors are already adults. Similar to the Ju|'hoan (Lee 1986), the !Xun consider these relationships to be the relationships that are most heavily weighted towards avoidance. Both parties are expected to respect each other and to adhere to social norms. It is considered outrageous for these two parties to joke around, especially with regard to sexual jokes. Among these affines, the addressee's generation and gender are relevant in deciding on which terms are being used. An honorific title for man (*!ui*) *kx'ao* is used not only for WF and HF, but also for DH, even though DH belongs to the junior generation. This indicates that DH is in a position to lead the relatives from now on, and that parents-in-law also show respect for this position. The fact that the term (*!ui*) *kx'ao* is used only for males (WF, HF, and DH) indicates that a gender distinction is made for these senior affines, at least at the terminology level, and gender trumps generational symmetry in parent-in-law and child-in-law relationships. Further research is needed on this point.

Terms for consanguineous kin (3): sibling/cousin

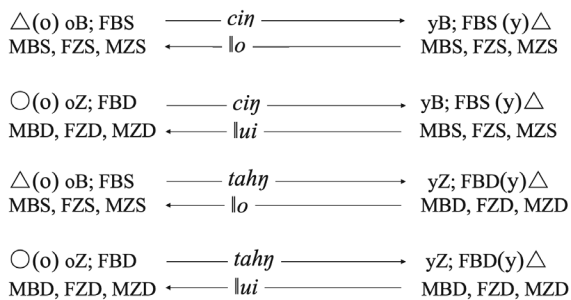


Figure 5: Sibling/cousin

The !Xun have separate terms for oB (*!o*), oZ (*!ui*), yB (*cin*), and yZ (*tahη*). This is different from the Ju|'hoan terminology, in which sibling terms are different from cousin terms, and which applies the same term(s) for parallel and cross cousins (i.e. 'Eskimo'). The !Xun apply the same set of kinship terms to all (i.e., both

patrilineal and matrilineal, as well as cross and parallel) cousins and siblings (i.e. 'Hawaiian') (Boden and Takada 2014). In other words, among these kin, the term used depends only on their relative age and gender. Thus, in these classificatory sibling relationships belonging to the same generation, and *only in these relationships within the same generation*, are kinship terms based on relative age, and therefore relative age is socially explicit. !Xun children who have been weaned move their locus of socialization to the activities of multi-aged child groups. Here, older children provide intimate care and support to younger children. Among these kindred (i.e., *!o*, *!ui*, *cin*, and *tahη*), very intimate communication is routinely observed (Takada 2014; 2020, 156–158, 178–182). This applies to the social situations where relative age is marked. Sexual relationships between these kindred are regarded as incest. In principle, one can joke with the same sex classificatory sibling but not with the different sex classificatory sibling.

Terms for affine (3): husband–wife

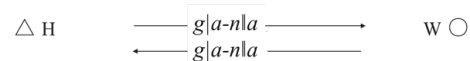


Figure 6: Husband–wife

A husband and wife call each other *g|a-n|a*, regardless of the gender of the addressee. Furthermore, neither relative age nor absolute age is relevant for this designation. In addition, regardless of the degree of relative age, the husband and wife are considered to belong to the same generation and show mutual respect. As far as I know, no cases of polygamous marriage have been found. The pure form of the symmetrical use of kin terms is only observed between spouses. Note that they call each other by the term with the augmentative *n|a*. This may show that *n|a* here indicate respectfulness rather than seniority. Indeed, like in other San

societies (e.g. Marshall 1976; Lee 1979; Tanaka 1980; Barnard 1992; Widlok 1999; Takada 2022), !Xun spouses form mutually respectful and supportive relationships, from an equal standpoint. This relationship is considered to provide the basis for the egalitarian society, where the most fundamental aspect of social relationships is respect for each other's autonomy and reciprocity based on it. In this regard, relative age and even generational distance might be means to this end.³

Concluding remarks

The names and kinship terms in !Xun, as in other people groups, indicate social relations. However, the terminology does not necessarily translate directly into behaviour. Therefore, it is also important to consider how the names and kinship terms are used in everyday interactions and how they (re)generate social relations.

In my view, the key to understanding all of the social relations discussed in this paper is the generational distance. Although the social relations among the !Xun are generally based on mutual respect for each other's autonomy, generational distance brings a structural asymmetry to social relations, in particular to early caregiver-child interactions among the !Xun. The generational distance is often marked by terminology which provides one with the referential framework regarding what is appropriate or inappropriate for others separated by the generational distance (e.g. terms between grandparent and grandchild, terms between uncle/aunt and nephew/niece, terms between parent-in-law and child-in-law). In this respect, generational seniority and juniority are particularly important. In practice, the junior shows respect to the senior while the senior takes care of the junior. This respect and care provides the fundamental structure with !Xun socializations.

Among the !Xun, there are also relationships between senior and junior generations, such as between grandparents and grandchildren, where a joking relationship is observed. And the joking relationship is reciprocal, i.e., if one has a joking relationship with another person, that person also has a joking status with one. Hence, seniority/juniority and joking/avoidance should be understood as (related but) different concepts.

Interestingly, in social relations separated by generational distance (e.g., terms between grandparent and grandchild, terms between uncle/aunt and nephew/niece, terms between parent-in-law and child-in-law), juniority is always marked (i.e. the diminutive *ma* is assigned), except for the term from parent-in-law to DH (i.e. *!ui kx'ao*, an honorific title to show respect to a man). This may indicate that appropriate care for the junior generation is emphasized in these social relations. As time goes by, a person assigned *ma* will one day become a person assigned *n!a* in relation to other individuals in a generation more junior than theirs. In other words, through participating in and accumulating experiences of these types of social relations, the individuals are socialized into the !Xun norms; at the same time, these social relations are reproduced across generations.

The seniority/juniority embedded in these social relations is relevant to (relative and even absolute) age in the West. However, age does not determine social relations; rather, social relations derive age among the !Xun. As indicated in the section on classificatory siblings, the only social relations where relative age differentiates the terms applied are the relationships of classificatory siblings, in which older children provide intimate care and support to younger children. In contrast, neither relative age nor absolute age is relevant for the designations used between spouses. Rather, they are expected to form mutually respectful and supportive relationships from an equal standpoint.

³I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

Thus, from the practitioner's perspective, social relations are primarily ordered by generational distance, and if there is no generational distance (i.e. two people are regarded as belonging to the same generation), the terminology

shows two types, namely one in which respect and support are asymmetrically expected (i.e., terms between classificatory siblings) and one in which mutual respect and support are equally expected (i.e. terms between spouses).

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