

The Linguistic and Discursive Construction of Age Grades Among Maasai Women

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Abstract

This article explores the socio-temporal dimensions of Kisongo Maasai women's age grades and their entanglement with the male age-set system. Although Maasai women lack an institutionalized age-set system, their age grades are linguistically and culturally constituted to serve as socio-temporal frames of reference (s-tFoRs) that allow people to position women as they traverse the life course. These age grades - endito, esyangiki, endasat, and engoko - anchor women's social positions and responsibilities relative to the age-set system. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Tanzania, this article analyses the narratives and experiences of a woman named Ninalenyo to illuminate how seniority and social status are negotiated among contemporary Maasai women. By situating Ninalenyo's experiences within broader anthropological discourses on gender and age, this paper highlights critical roles in sustaining and shaping the Maasai socio-cultural system. The article concludes by showing that in the life of Maasai women, age grades serve as a crucial, seniority-based organizational element that defines and interrelates different women and is organized by women (not men).

Keywords: Age-set system, age grades, socio-temporal location, Maasai women, s-tFoRs

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1 Introduction

On the vast, dusty, and dry plain at Mbulungu village, a group of Maasai women, *Alamaal*¹, dressed in colourful *shukas*, jump up and down and move together in graceful synchrony, summoning the gods to bring life after the drought that has claimed the lives of a few calves. Among them is Ninalenyo, her gaze steady, her posture tall – not just in height, but in dignity. She walks at the head of the group, along with two other women of her age group, her status earned through years of resilience, ritual, and service. In this article, which stems from long-term fieldwork during my doctoral research, I present a snippet of her life, illustrating her ageing story and showing how seniority and status are earned among Kisongo Maasai women. Her story makes evident the linguistic and discursive age grades among Maasai women that add to the larger narrative of how Maasai women's lives are deeply woven into the well-known age-set system, which serves as a thick sociocultural fabric for the Maasai people. The age-set practice has shaped her life course from *endito* 'girlhood' to *engoko* 'grandmother' or simply *koko* 'grandma'. At her homestead, where I spent some days helping with chores, she is usually surrounded by young women, her daughters-in-law, nurturing them in the ways of motherhood. In her world, time is counted in hours, in events, in seasons and stages. For instance, *Mnada*, 'the weekly market', structures her daily life around calendrical time, since she earns her livelihood there by selling *ugoro* 'tobacco' on *Mnada* days.

In this article, I examine the role of age-sets and age grades in the life trajectories of the Kisongo Maasai women of Tanzania. I lived among Maasai women for over 18 months, conducting individual conversational interviews, group interviews, and participant observation. Normally, I would spend the morning and evening hours with women, while at other times I would go with young men to graze the cows and take them to water.

I was eager to understand how the dynamics of power relations are negotiated between and among Maasai women and men, given the prevailing perception that women in age-set societies are usually marginalized, as noted in various works. While existing research has examined life-course trajectories within age-set systems, this article focuses on how Maasai women navigate the transitions to coming of age and attaining social status and seniority within a sociocultural framework organized prominently around male age-sets.

Specifically, this paper explores three questions: What linguistic and cultural markers indicate women's socio-temporal positions? How do women negotiate their social positions and seniority in relation to other women? To what extent and how are women's age grades embedded within the male age-set system? Drawing on cognitive semantics, this article employs the concept of socio-temporal frames of reference (s-tFoRs) to analyse age grades as linguistic discursive markers of age, identity, social positioning, responsibilities, and seniority among Maasai women.

Frames of reference (FoRs), as understood from the perspective of cognitive semantics, entail socio-cultural and spatial-temporal coordinates 'loaded' into a word. Essentially, FoRs as used in this article refer to linguistic schemas that are used to interpret or make sense of experiences, events, and situations (Fillmore 1985; Levinson 2003) – in this case, possible positions in the life course, or 'age'. Fillmore (1985, 2001) describes how frames are structured by experience, beliefs, or practices that constitute a kind of conceptual prerequisite for understanding the meaning of a given word. In other words, linguistic frames of reference consist of background knowledge and practices on the basis of which meaning is constructed. In recent studies of language and time, FoRs also capture the social, spatial, and temporal dimensions of a word, a concept, or an experience (Evans 2013; Ziem 2014; Jódar-Sánchez 2015). In this article, the terms

¹ Designated ritual participants

used to denote Maasai women's age grades are viewed as socio-temporal frames of reference (s-tFoRs) in a society that has limited use for imported notions of ageing reckoned with birthdays. Age-grade terms, as shown in the empirical data, carry various sociocultural meanings and are essential tools for identifying socio-temporal locations in a woman's life. Because these terms denote spans rather than precise points in time, they also allow for women to deictically indicate 'moving towards' and 'leaving behind' particular stages in life. One can 'leave behind' being a girl and 'move towards' becoming a woman.

When the age-grade terms are deployed, they can also be considered as egocentric FoRs, i.e. self-determined or socio-centric (allocentric) FoRs, or socially determined perspectives on people's life stages (Levinson 2003; Evans 2013; Jódar-Sánchez 2015). Further, this article not only identifies a set of women's life-stage terms and the sociocultural frames they project but also considers how these terms operate in intertextual discourse contexts, showing how their meanings 'bounce off' other temporal frames, such as men's age-set terms.

The following sections summarize studies on the age-set system in general and women's lives in age-set societies, and then provide a brief description of the fieldwork site, including how the data were collected and analysed, followed by the empirical data, including the conversations and observations I had with the Maasai women. Lastly, I conclude by outlining the role of women in sustaining the age-set practice itself.

2 Background

The Maasai of eastern Africa speak Maa, a Nilotic language, although many Maasai also speak Swahili and/or English. One well-known feature of Maasai social organization in the anthropological literature is the age-set system. Individuals in an age-set move through stages of the life cycle as a cohort with

a given identity – a shared age-cohort name (Spencer 2003, 2014; Almagor 1983; Spencer and Waller 2017). The age-set system is not unique or exclusive to the Maasai; other societies such as Latuka (Foner and Kertzer 1978; Kertzer and Madison 1980; Bernardi 1985), Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1936), Jiye, Bari, Gada (Baxter and Almagor 1978; Almagor 1983), Bashada (Epple 2014), Samburu (Spencer 1965), Kikuyu (Kertzer and Madison 1981, 1980) used to or still practise social classification by age in East Africa, each with its own variations (Spencer 2003, 2018).

According to Fosbrooke (1956), 'age set' is an English concept equivalent to *olporor* in the Maasai language or *rika* in Kiswahili. Radcliffe-Brown (1929) and Evans-Pritchard (1936) describe an age-set as a social group that clusters people as being of similar biological and chronological age. However, the Maasai notion of age-set precludes this biological interpretation, as *olporor* in Maasai means a group of youths who attain warrior status after being initiated through circumcision and ritualistic ceremonies. The initiation of a new age-set cohort occurs over a cycle of approximately fifteen years (Bernardi 1985; Muller 1989; Spencer 1993, 2003, 2014), usually at seven-year intervals, followed by another seven years of enjoying the privileges of youth and serving the community as warriors or labourers (Fosbrooke 1956; Spencer 1976), regardless of their actual biological age (Spencer 1993, 1976, 2003; Bernardi 1985; Evans-Pritchard 1936; Foner and Kertzer 1978). This group of youths includes boys from as young as eleven years to 23 years old as a single cohort with a proper given name as their identity throughout the Maasai land (Fosbrooke 1956; Hollis 1905). All Maasai men belong to an age-set following their initiation (Spencer 1993, 140). For instance, the current age-set cohort is called *Iltwati*, or more commonly *Nyangulo*.² These

²These age-set cohort names may have slight variations in different Maasai sections given the dispersed nature of Maa speakers in Tanzania and Kenya. *Nyangulo* are

men were initiated between mid-2011 and 2018. In 2018 the circumcision was closed, and it is expected to be reopened in 2025 for a new age-set to be initiated. Before the *Nyangulo*, there were the *Korianga*, now junior elders; before them, there were *Ilkidotu/Ilantiis*, the current elders.

2.1 Age-sets vs. age grades

At this point, it is necessary to explain the use of the terms 'age-set' and 'age grade' as they are employed in this article. While *olporor* 'age-set' is described as a whole cohort of men initiated together and passing together as a body from one age grade to the next, *olaji/ilajjik* 'age grades' are defined as the successive statuses to which individuals are ascribed over the course of their lives (Spencer 1993, 140, 2003). Evans-Pritchard (1936) and many other scholars, such as Fosbrooke, Morton (1979), Bernardi (1985), Muller (1989), Waller (1999), and Baxter and Almagor (1978) use the terms 'age-set' and 'age grade' in this way. Age grades are like staircases in an age-set. A member moves from a lower age grade to another until he reaches the top one. In the case of the Maasai age-set system, a member moves from the *Ilaiyon* 'boyhood' grade to *Morani* 'warriorhood', to *Arapaiya* 'junior elderhood' and finally to the *Ngakuya* 'elderhood' grade (Spencer 1993, 2003). As for the age-set, once a member is initiated into an age-set, he stays a member for his whole lifetime (Morton 1979; Bernardi 1985; Spencer and Waller 2017). There is no change or moving to a different age-set. Crucially, as mentioned, the age-set cohort is given a specific name that serves as the identity of all cohort members in their lifetime (Evans-Pritchard 1936; Fosbrooke 1956; Berntsen 1979; Kipuri 1989; Spencer 1993). For instance, the current age-set cohort called *Nyangulo* will be referred to and identified as *Nyangulo* for as long as they live. These *Nyangulo* will change their age grade, however, moving to different

socio-temporal locations marked linguistically from initiation to old age.

2.2 Maasai women in the ethnographic literature

Scholars such as Evans-Pritchard (1936), Fosbrooke (1956), Bernstein (1979), Spencer and Waller (2017) have established that Maasai women have no apparent age-set organization and that the system is exclusive to Maasai men. Spencer has described Maasai women's relationship to the age-set system as follows:

In this political interplay among elders, women are treated as pawns. A woman does not belong to any age-set, although in quite different ways she may be identified successively with the age-set of her morani lover as a girl; of her father as a bride; of her husband as a wife, and then of her morani sons as a 'manyata mother' (2003, 35).

This is the position of most anthropological accounts on Maasai women. I agree with this observation to some extent from the perspective that women identify themselves with the age-sets of their husbands, fathers, and sons, not as pawns to the system but as a way to tell their age and social positions, i.e., senior/junior.

Apart from general accounts of the age-set system, a series of ethnographic works has exclusively focused on explaining the lives of Maasai women, especially their purported lack of privileges and their ageing process in the age-set system. For instance, Llewelyn-Davies (1974, 1981, 1984) produced films portraying Maasai women's rites of passage and marital relations as oppressive and subjugative. She also classified Maasai women's age and life cycle into 'girlhood' and 'womanhood' (Llewelyn-Davies 1981, 335). Talle (1987, 1988, 1998) discussed Maasai women as heads of houses, writing about their ageing rituals and fertility. In her account, where she described Maasai women as property and possessions owned by men, she itemized three stages of ageing

commonly known among the Kisongo Maasai found in Tanzania.

in what she calls female stages: *entito*³ (young girl up to clitoridectomy), *esiankiki* (married woman with young children), and *entasat* (older woman with circumcised children). This paper adopts the usage of the terms *entito*, *esyakingi*, and *entasat* to explain the ageing of Maasai women, but it adds more nuances, as I propose to regard these terms as age grades, i.e., socio-temporal locations, because women of seemingly the same age could be in a different temporal location due to fertility and for other social reasons. This is because even when girls are circumcised together they do not get married or have children at the same time or age.

A close account of the subject of this article is the work by Knowles (1993) wherein she describes power, influence, and the political process among Iloitai Maasai.⁴ In her work, she put forward five categories of Maasai women's life cycles: *enkerai*, *entito*, *esiankiki*, *entomononi*, and *entasat*. Knowles's study included the children, *enkerai*, and ignored the *engoko* 'grandmothers', who hold the senior-most position in Maasai *enkan*g 'homestead'.⁵ The *enkan*g is a key term where all the age-set labels and women's age grades are negotiated at a micro level.

Chieni and Spencer (1993) explored Chieni's account of becoming a Maasai woman, which is close to what Talle (1988) has described. Kipuri (1989) described the Maasai women as being in transition, especially with regard to the question of class and gender in the age-set system. She viewed accounts that described Maasai women as property and as subjugated to men as "reductive" and containing "major flaws" (1989, 67). Kipuri, a Maasai

woman herself, summarizes the Maasai social organization as operating on the basis of "mutual dependence" and "mutual obligations" (1989, 97) between men and women (Coast 2000). I draw on her position and argue that both the men's age-set system and women's age grades are – and always have been – interrelated. It is essential to recognize that this fact has frequently been overlooked and insufficiently documented by many researchers, particularly white males.

In the same vein, Hodgson (1999) stated that although Maasai women were not formally divided by age grades, their succession from young girls (*endito/intoyie*) to old grandmothers (*koko*) was marked linguistically and often ritually enacted. Hodgson (1999) explored the changing of gender relations among Maasai women, revealing somewhat equal power relations between Maasai men and women based on *enkanyit* 'mutual respect' and relative autonomy. She further asserts that, historically, colonialism and state instruments contributed significantly to changes in power relations between Maasai men and women. She posits that the commodification of livestock and monetization of the Maasai economy led to the shift of property relations and enforced the patriarchy. This situation led to the strict imposition of a hierarchical, gendered domain, both domestically and publicly/politically, thereby fostering the perception of Maasai women as property owned and controlled by men. I found Hodgson's account useful since it made space to examine the Maasai women's age grades now that the dynamics of the Maasai economy have changed and placed women at the centre of earning and growing the family economy. My empirical findings illustrate Maasai women's age grades, their degree of autonomy, and their roles in the age-set system.

Elsewhere, Epple (2014) describes Ethiopian Bashada women's social relations and networking within their age-set system. She argues that women are only initiated into womanhood and acquire their social status

³ Variation in orthography is due to different pronunciation from one Maasai section to another.

⁴ The Iloitai Maasai section is found mostly in Kenya and some parts of Tanzania. My study focused on the Kisongo Maasai, who are found only in Tanzania.

⁵ The *enkan*g is the household, which includes several families in one big compound. For instance, my host family had an *engoko* who served as the head of the entire household.

through marriage. According to her, a woman attains a senior position by marrying a man from a senior age-set, regardless of her biological age, and the reverse is also true. Therefore, a young woman can command respect from an apparently older woman if her husband belongs to a senior age-set. While Maasai women do identify with their husbands' age-sets, a newly married young woman cannot, in practice, reach a senior position to perform age-related rituals simply because her husband belongs to the senior age-set. Other factors influence this process. In contrast to Bashada society, it should be noted that Maasai women are initiated into adulthood through circumcision, except for girls who are still in school (Switzer 2009, 2018).⁶ After marriage, motherhood provides avenues for attaining seniority, as demonstrated in the empirical section of this paper.

3 Fieldsite and methods

3.1 The field

The ethnographic study on which this article is based was conducted in Manyara, Tanzania, rural Babati district, Nkaiti ward, in Minjingu Village, which includes Olasiti, Oltukai, Kakoyi, Almasi, Makao Mapya, and Mbulungu subvillages. Minjingu has a total of 796 households according to village records⁷ submitted to the 2022 Tanzania population census. During fieldwork I resided in the Mbulungu sub-village in a host family; thus, most of the data is from there, although I frequently visited families in other sub-villages as part of community activities such as ceremonies

and rituals. Mbulungu has 166 households of Maasai proper.⁸ Minjingu is located in the Kisongo Maasai section.

During my stay in the Maasai community, I was engaged in daily activities and ceremonies. I had three research assistants who were local villagers in the community. One of them was my undergraduate student from the University of Dodoma. He spoke particularly good Kiswahili, English, and his first language, Maasai. He was my main transcriber.

The data used in this article were gathered from informal conversations, observations, and semi-structured interviews. The data were documented and recorded in fieldnotes, voice records, and videos. I was privileged to get transcriptions while in the field, therefore I had an opportunity to analyse most of the data with my key informants in situ.

The main female informants, whose experiences are presented in this article, were related to the host family. This gave me ample time to visit them often when I needed more clarification. The data and photographs used in this article were collected between October 2022 and July 2023. The participants agreed for their information and experiences to be published for academic purposes. For instance, the parents of the girl in Figure 1 agreed for their daughter's picture to be used, since her face is somewhat covered. Likewise, Ninanlenyo (65–72 years)⁹, the main consultant in this article, wanted her story to be written and her picture kept so that she would be remembered. However, no real names were used in this article, to maintain a certain level of privacy.

⁶The circumcision practice is still prevalent in the Maasai community, I observed. However, nowadays they circumcise girls at a very young age, and the ritual is celebrated later, at the onset of menstruation. This is done to avoid disrupting girls' education and to avoid government intervention.

⁷These records were obtained during an interview with the village executive officer on December 13, 2022.

⁸Spencer (2003) noted that there are Maasai proper (the ones strictly following age-set practices and mainly depending on cattle keeping – pure pastoralists) and the Arusha (Maasai who have assimilated to Swahili and who are engaged in agriculture and other business). This distinction has relevance for understandings of personhood and social position, particularly in terms of access to/participation in formal schooling. But that is not the subject of this article.

⁹I deduced her age based on her explanations, in which she related her age to the *Makaa* age-set.

3.2 Reflexivity and positionality

My background as an academic and a woman from a different ethnic and religious background than the Maasai imposed some limitations on my understanding of 'deep' Maasai conversations, but it also provided access to spaces where a local Maasai woman is not usually allowed. The language barrier was not a major obstacle since most Maasai speak fluent Kiswahili, so some interviews were conducted in Kiswahili. Additionally, being accompanied by native Maasai research assistants who speak Kiswahili and English facilitated my integration. Eventually, I learned the language at an intermediate level, and collaborative analysis with local informants helped reduce misinterpretations and deepen the data. While my limited fluency in Maa still presents some challenges, working with bilingual assistants ensured the reliability of the linguistic analyses. Regarding religion, most Maasai still practise their traditional faith, although Christianity has spread widely into rural areas. Most Maasai have little knowledge of Muslims, and they showed no interest in asking about my religion; therefore, I faced no challenges from the local people, but rather from the environment, which I adapted too well.

On my first days in the field, everyone addressed me as *endito* 'girl'. Later on, they learned about my social position by asking whether I was a married woman and which age-set would be equivalent to my husband's age. I recalled one of my colleagues, a Maasai who was the same age as my husband. He belonged to the *Korianga* age-set, the elders, so I said my husband was a *Korianga*. From that moment, the atmosphere changed. I was allowed into spaces that were previously restricted. Thus, my social status played a crucial role in understanding the significance of age grades among Maasai women.

4 Coming of age and seniority: Socio-temporal linguistic frames of coming of age

Like other languages, the Maasai language has words that denote stages in the life course, e.g., *engaiyeni* 'little boy' (0–5)¹⁰, *ilaiyoni* 'uncircumcised boy' (7–11), *morani* 'young man' (13–27) *arapaiya* 'junior elder' (30–39), and so on. These words, as I pointed out earlier, denote social and sometimes biological age, status, seniority, and the socio-temporal location of an individual. It should be noted that these names 'come to life', to use Ahearn's (2012) expression, in the context of events such as ceremonies that serve as rites of passage in which a person moves from one age and social grade to another. The terms are also 'packaged' (i.e., carry associations) with ideas about the social roles assigned to a person, in this case, both Maasai men and women. In this section, I am going to introduce these words as social-temporal linguistic frames of reference and describe their loaded inferences in the life of a specific woman, discussing her reflections on the age-set system of Maasai men. I also show how these age-grade terms combine with other socio-temporal markers in discourse to project certain socio-temporal identities.

4.1 Girlhood

1.1.1 *Endito* (pl. *intoiye*) – a girl child

Children, regardless of sex, from birth to approximately five years old, are called *inkera* (pl).¹¹ From around seven years of age until circumcision and marriage, a Maasai girl is referred to as *endito*. Socially, *endito* is perceived as 'ignorant', as she knows nothing about what it is like to be a woman. She can play with

¹⁰ The ages in the brackets are my approximation, from the fieldwork observation and literature, to make the concept easy to understand.

¹¹ I have not considered the period from infancy to five years as a distinct age grade that has significance in the life of Maasai women because there is essentially no behavioural or material differentiation between the sexes at this age.

anybody with almost no limits, that is, she may ‘play’ with young men sexually.¹² From my fieldwork observations, *endito* is a stage in which a girl is free to move around houses and other spaces without causing ‘harm.’¹³ While she has few restrictions on her behaviour and mobility, the word commands no respect at all. From a socio-temporal vantage point, *endito* situates a girl or a young woman in the early years of her life. Older girls, when approaching puberty, do not want to be called *endito*, and they usually push for earlier circumcision so that they become women as early as possible. With respect to FoRs, *endito* specifies a girl’s social position as a child. The term could also be labelled as a sociocentric rather than egocentric term because its meaning is ascertained socially, and the child is just a recipient of the assigned identity.

It is when *endito* is approaching puberty that she starts to associate herself with the age-set



Figure 1: A Maasai girl of about 7–9 years

‘mate’. My conversation with Ninalenyo about *engoko* (the most senior age grade) illuminates her experience as *endito*.

Excerpt 1: Fieldwork interview July 2023

SM: kwa hiyo ukiwa pale nyumbani ukiwa mdogo, ulikuwa unafanya kazi gani, ukiwa *endito*?

NINALENYO: Nacheza na mamorani, iko miti, tunacheza hamuna nguo, morani hana nguo, tunacheza mpaka jioni.

SM: hao walikuwa morani wa makaa?

NINALENYO: ndiyo

SM: hapo ni mtoto?

NINALENYO: morani wameta-hiriwa, ni wakubwa, il-kichangen makaa, wale wakubwa.

[English translation]

SM: So, when you were a child at home, what were you doing, when you were *endito* I mean?

NINALENYO: I play with *morani* in the bush, I take off my clothes, *morani* takes off their clothes, we play until the evening.

SM: Those were *Makaa morani*?

NINALENYO: Yes

SM: At that point, you were a child?

NINALENYO: Yes, but *morani* are already circumcised, they are grown-ups, those were the big [first] *il-kichangen Makaa*.

Excerpt 1 of my conversation with Ninalenyo shows how she frames her social-temporal location relative to *Makaa* age-set cohorts.

¹² Also noted in Talle (2007).

¹³ *Moranis* ‘warriors’ cannot eat meat that has been seen by women, but an *endito* is considered a child, so she does no harm to the meat.

Interestingly, Ninalenyo was describing her childhood existence and experience in relation to the *morani*, the warrior age grade of the *Makaa*. *Makaa* is the name of the male age-set cohort initiated between 1969 and 1976, incorporating men born approximately between 1950 and 1960. Here I came to understand that Ninalenyo was trying to tell me several things. First, she indicates her chronological age and positions herself in historical time - the *Makaa* time. The fact that she was playing in the bush with *Makaa morani* indicates that she was probably 8–12 years old during their initiation. In a sense, she was telling me that she is temporally located with the *Makaa* age cohort, who are the senior old men of the Maasai community now. (There are very few *Seuri*, an age cohort older than *Makaa*, but they are not in a state of being able to attend meetings, due to their old age.) That is to say, Ninalenyo was describing her experience by using the *Makaa* as a st-FoR to pinpoint both her chronological age and her social location, that is, her seniority. Second, in communicating her social position, she stressed that she was playing with *Il-kichangen Makaa*. It should be noted that even within the same age cohort, members command respect differently depending on when, in the seven years of the circumcision cycle, they were circumcised. Members of the age cohort are internally divided into *Ilkichangen* and *Ir-banot*, referring to the senior and the junior warriors, respectively. Ninalenyo was associating herself with *Ilkichangen* to point out that she is a senior woman, even among other women, as we will see later.

4.1.2 'Big girls'

The freedom that *endito* is indulged with diminishes slowly when she becomes a 'big girl'. I could not find a Maasai word to describe this stage, but I learned from my conversations that the stage is linked to the onset of a woman's menses. Depicting this from Ninalenyo's

experience, which is a typical sequence of female life transition in Maasai traditions, when a girl becomes a big girl, she reduces her interactions with grown-up men – *morani*. As our conversation went on, she said:

Excerpt 2: Fieldwork interview July 2023

NINALENYO: ...halafu nakuwa msichana kubwa. Sasa nikishakuwa msichana kubwa, hapana kutoa nguo. Akiwa mto hajui kitu anatoa nguo. Lakini mwingine anatoa nguo na morani anajua huyo msichana amekuwa kubwa.

[English translation]

NINALENYO: ...during that time, I also become *msichana kubwa* – a big girl. Now when I become a big girl, I do not take off my clothes. But other girls who know nothing still take off their clothes. But other girls know, and they take off their clothes and the *morani* knows she is now a big girl.

For a moment, I could not understand what she meant about being a big girl, so I had to inquire more about the Swahili term *msichana kubwa* 'big girl'.

Excerpt 3: Fieldwork interview July 2023

SM: ...msichana kubwa anakuwa ametahiriwa?

NINALENYO: hapana, msichana kubwa tu.

[English translation]

SM: ...a big girl, you mean they are already circumcised?

NINALENYO: No, they are just big girls.

I still could not understand the message she was conveying here. This is because, from the girls' initiation ceremonies I attended, I did not see a single girl who fit into the frame of what she refers to as a big girl. The girls I saw in the ceremonies were between 9 and 12. With my imported, biased social frames they were still children of not more than 14 years. I had to overcome my biases and think as a woman what could make a girl child *a big girl* before circumcision. Frankly, I was a bit confused. Menstruation came to my mind as I was trying to solve my confusion about being 'a big girl'. I asked her if that is what she meant by a big girl:

Excerpt 4: Fieldwork interview July 2023

SM: ...kuwa mkubwa, kule kupata damu?

NINALENYO: Enhee! ndio msi-chana akishapata damu hatoi nguo porini.

SM: kwani kutahiriwa mpaka msi-chana apate damu ndio anatahiriwa?

NINALENYO: Mmh, mwingine bado mdogo anatahiriwa, mwingine natahiriwa mkubwa.

[English translation]

SM: ...a big girl here is starting to see her blood?

NINALENYO: Enhee! When a girl starts getting her blood, she doesn't take off her clothes in the bush.

SM: So, for a girl to be circumcised she must start seeing her blood?

NINALENYO: Mmh, no, some girls get circumcised when they are still young, and some get circumcised when they are big girls.

At this point, it made sense as to why I saw girls as young as 9 years old in the ceremony. Puberty changes a girl child's status, but she is still considered *endito* until circumcised. This period of being a 'big girl' seems to be rather short, and some girls skip it if they get circumcised before reaching puberty. I needed to understand a few things I saw before, during, and after the girl's circumcision ceremony that had taken place a few days before our conversation in Ninalenyo's kitchen.

4.2 Becoming a woman

4.2.1 *Emurata* – circumcision

This picture (Figure 2) was taken at the girls' circumcision ceremony, *emurata*, that took place in June 2023. When you look closely you will see there are short branches – the height of the child in the picture – and long branches that go above the roof. These planted branches indicate 'mother tree' and 'daughter tree', which communicates that there are five circumcised girls who are being celebrated in this hut. Attending the day of the ceremony and attempting to fully comprehend every event that took place that day was an experience that brought mixed feelings for me. I had the urge to know and understand the meaning of what was taking place throughout the ceremony, combined with a fear of offending



Figure 2: A hut with healed girls after *emurata*

others. Fortunately, I was allowed to take pictures and film the dances outside the huts. There were three huts planted with these trees outside. That means there were fifteen girls to be celebrated.

At times I went inside to talk to and tease the girls. This is because the ceremony was hosted in the household that I lived in for my entire fieldwork. So, I was 'home' in a sense. That is also why I had access to the inside of the huts. The girls inside who were almost healed were seemingly healthy and very happy. I asked two of the girls, whom I had seen going to school in my time in the village, if they would continue to go to school after the ceremony. One of them said yes and one said no. Nonetheless, I did not see any of them go to school afterwards. One of them, Ngilo, 'disappeared'. I did not see her around anymore. She was the one who served me tea the first day I arrived at the village. I came to learn afterwards that she was married to a man as his third wife at Nanja, a village 55 km away from Mbulungu, on the way to Arusha. It was now clear from my observations that *emurata* is still a gateway to womanhood for most Maasai women¹⁴, as has also been explained by previous anthropologists such as Spencer and Chieni (1993), Hodgson (1999), and Epplé (2014). As I kept talking to Ninalenyo about her experiences of becoming a respected senior Maasai woman, whom on different occasions I saw leading rituals, I asked her out of curiosity about Ngilo's marriage, trying to measure the time from being a big girl to being circumcised to being a married woman:

Excerpt 6: Fieldwork interview July 2023

SM: Anhaa, lakini kutahiriwa ni lazima.

¹⁴ However, as I said earlier, state institutions such as schools have changed this practice for girls who continue with education. The practice continues for the majority of girls who normally do not proceed to secondary school education.

NINALENYO: ni lazima, lakini aya yayaya! Siku hizi mambo ya serikali, naacha siku hizi.

SM: Lakini ilikuwa ni kitu kinaleta heshima kwa msichana, jamii ilikuwa inafurahi?

NINALENYO:...kama natahiriwa msichana eee?

SM: mmhnn

NINALENYO: ndio, kimila ya maasai, ni heshima, kama msichana hajatahiriwa, nasema huyu msichana hajui kitu, hajui niniii, anakuwa malaya tu.

SM: Malaya?

NINALENYO: Eeeh! Malaya tu, hajui kukaa, anakuwa hana heshima.

SM: anhaaa! Kwa hiyo heshima yake inatokana na kutahiriwa?

NINALENYO: enheee! Anajua kukaa, anakuwa mwanamke kwa mila ya Maasai

[English translation]

SM: Anhaa, but to be circumcised is a must?

NINALENYO: Yes, it is a must, but *aya yayaya!* Nowadays and these government issues, we have stopped.

SM: But it was something that brings respect to a girl and the society was very happy with it?

NINALENYO: ...if a girl gets circumcised eee?

SM: mmhnn

NINALENYO: Yes, in Maasai culture, it brings respect, if a girl is not

circumcised, we say this girl knows nothing, she knows absolutely nothing, so she is just a prostitute.

SM: A prostitute?

NINALENYO: Eeeh! A prostitute, she doesn't know how to 'sit'. She doesn't have any respect.

SM: anhaaa! So, her respect comes from and with circumcision.

NINALENYO: enheee! She knows how to sit and become a woman in Maasai culture.

I was moved by a connection between the *emurata* and the state of becoming a knowledgeable woman. In Ninalenyo's words, a Maasai woman who is not circumcised knows nothing and is regarded as *malaya*,¹⁵ a prostitute, and she does not know how to 'sit'.¹⁶ In the context of the Maasai community, a prostitute does not constitute a sex worker but a woman without honour and respect. In Ninalenyo's words, circumcision is not only a physical but a social and cultural upgrade. After circumcision and marriage, a girl enters another age grade.¹⁷ Before healing, she is called *esipolio* and during this time girls are taught things pertaining to becoming women and about how to conduct themselves and behave in relation to men.

From the fieldwork observation, *emurata* is still the main stepping stone and rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood. After *emurata*, a girl is believed to have matured

intellectually and socially and thus may get married, as Hollis (1905) and Spencer (1976) also noted in their in-depth Maasai anthropological studies. In his words, Hollis (1905, 324) said "When Masai girls wish to marry, they are circumcised. [...] When they recover, they are married". Over a hundred years later, the Maasai women's *emurata* still serves as a rite of coming of age and as a gateway to the upper age grades.

4.2.2 Marriage, motherhood, and elderhood

Like in many other societies, including those with age-sets, marriage positions Maasai women differently from a social perspective. In the Maasai language, a married woman is referred to as *esyangiki* and later as *endasat*. These are the main frames of reference and within each, multiple sub-frames are available as a woman starts to have children. After marriage women move from one age grade to another, depending on the number and gender of their children, as I will describe.

Esyangiki (pl. *Isyangiki*) – 'a woman'

Esyangiki is a term that refers to any married woman regardless of any other factor. Within this concept there are categories such as *engitok* 'wife', *indauwa* 'bride; newly married woman with no children'; *indwaan* 'pregnant woman' and *entomononi* 'mother'. These terms reckon and mark social-temporal locations in a Maasai woman's life. From a cognitive semantics perspective, the word *esyangiki* evokes larger frames such as marriage and motherhood. It projects many associations about a woman's social status, domestic environment, activities, and responsibilities. The subcategories I have mentioned also specify women's roles in power relations, especially in defining junior/senior dimensions among women and across the community. For example, a newly married woman will remain *indauwa* 'newly married' and her husband will be perceived as 'young' by his age cohort mates until they

¹⁵ *Malaya* is a Swahili word not a Maasai one. It refers both to sex workers and adulterous individuals.

¹⁶ This is a metonym related to making sure your legs are covered up when you sit in the presence of men. This phenomenon occurs in many cultures.

¹⁷ A circumcised girl who is not yet married will still be called *endito*, but she is placed differently than a girl who is not circumcised. Some girls do not get married immediately following circumcision due to schooling nowadays. Thus, the girl remains *endito* even if she is 25 years of age.

get children, either by birth or by *enkira ekipa* 'to be given a child'. In English, we could say adoption, but this phenomenon is remarkably close to surrogacy. The procedure is performed traditionally, and it is meant to elevate all women and not leave anyone without a child (Talle 2004). When a woman becomes *indwaan* 'pregnant woman', her status changes, along with her husband's.

When women have children, they are called *intomonok* 'mothers'. This is a time when a woman feels prosperous in the household and the community at large. The *boma* 'household' feels blessed. I regard *entomonok* as a social-temporal position when a woman is at the stage of raising children.

Seniority dynamics and social status among women: *Engaputani* 'mother-in-law' and *inkainito* 'co-wives'

The terms *engaputani* and *inkainito* do not denote age grades per se, but another dimension of s-tFoRs that depicts power and seniority dynamics among Maasai women in relation to other women. The s-tFoR *engaputani* 'mother-in-law' portrays the social position and temporal (life stage) location of a woman who has married sons¹⁸ and is therefore an *endasat*. On the other hand, the *inkainito* 'co-wives' s-tFoR not only positions women spatially in the *enkang* but also tells about a man's position in the eyes of age mates and elders. A man with more wives is highly respected.

Engaputani – mother-in-law and seniority

At a certain point during my conversation with Ninalenyo, her daughter-in-law entered, and they spoke, seemingly neither amicably nor disagreeably. However, an unspoken tension could be felt in the air. I understood she was asking Ninalenyo for some food items for the soup. Ninalenyo works at a market selling *ugoro* (tobacco), and she provides for the family. That day, she had not come home with any

vegetables for making soup. After they talked and Ninalenyo instructed her on what to do, the daughter-in-law went out, and Ninalenyo turned to me and said in Swahili:

Excerpt 7: Fieldwork interview July 2023

NINALENYO: She asked for something she did not tell me in the morning, how could I know? She is not ready to be given a house.

I was a bit lost for a moment. I did not know how to react. But I asked:

Excerpt 8: Fieldwork interview July 2023

SM: huyu ni mwanao?

NINALENYO: hapana, ni *syangiki* yangu.

SM: lini atakuwa na nyumba(mji) yake?

[English translation]

SM: Is she your daughter?

NINALENYO: No, she is my daughter-in-law.

SM: When is she going to have her own house (homestead)?

This question occurred to me when she said, "She is not ready to be given a house". I wanted to clarify my confusion, but I was also curious to learn more about the power dynamics within the household. Ninalenyo then responded:

Excerpt 9: Fieldwork interview July 2023

NINALENYO: Anazaa mtoto mmoja, halafu anaenda kwake

SM: Kwake ni wapi?

NINALENYO: Si anatengenezea nyumbani yake

¹⁸ Normally a Maasai man marries after *eunoto* ritual onward.

SM: Anhaa! Lakini mpaka apate mtoto kwanza?

NINALENYO: Enhee, si nafundisha yeye

SM: Unamfundisha kuwa mama?

NINALENYO: si nafundisha yeye mpaka nazaa, nafundisha kulisha mtoto, halafu kama anajua kuten-geneza kitu yoyote, nampa nyum-bani yake.

SM: Mnhuu! Kutengeneza kitu kama nini?

NINALENYO: Kupikia bwana yake, analisha mtoto mdogo, basii kama anachunga ng'ombe yake vizuri, anajua kukamua, nampa nyumba yake.

SM: ...mnhuu, hapo anakuwa amekuwa...?

NINALENYO: ...sasa amekuwa mama.

Tunacheka

[English translation]

NINALENYO: When she has a child, then she goes to her house.

SM: Where is her (house)?

NINALENYO: It is I who build/make/give her a house.

SM: Anhaa! But until she gets a child first?

NINALENYO: Enhee, it is I who teaches her.

SM: You teach her to be a mother?

NINALENYO: I teach her until she gives birth, I teach her to feed a child, then if she knows how to

do things on her own, I give her a house.

SM: Mnhuu! To do things like what?

NINALENYO: To make food for her husband, to feed a small child, if she knows how to keep her cows, knows how to milk the cows, then I give her a house.

SM: ... mnhuu, there she becomes a grown up...?

NINALENYO: ... now she becomes a mother.

Tunacheka (we laugh...)

This extract says a lot about how senior women influence the social status of other women in Maasai society. Female power relations seem to be automatically determined by who is senior in society, just like their male counterparts. The whole time a married woman stays at her mother-in-law's compound she is referred to as *esyangiki*, in addition to other frames depending on her fertility.

***Enkaini* (pl. *inkainito*) 'co-wives'**

The Maasai people predominantly practise polygyny. Consequently, it is very common for a woman to have at least one co-wife. This tradition situates women within the *enkang* 'homestead' according to their seniority, based on the order of marriage, from the first to the last. The sequence in which women were married is so significant that it is reflected in the spatial arrangement of houses within the *enkang*. Upon entering the *boma*, one learns who is senior and who is junior among the women of that homestead. Typically, a woman should accept and respect the seniority of her senior co-wives and, above all, her mother-in-law (*engaputani*).

A typical Maasai house compound is encircled with thorns and nowadays an iron fence. When you enter the compound, the first house

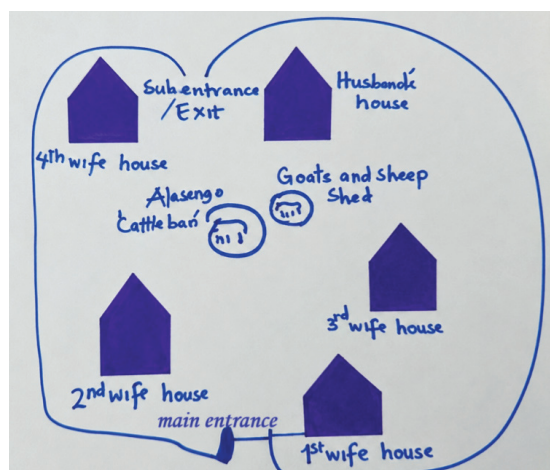


Figure 3: Maasai homestead

found on the right side belongs to the first wife and to the left the second wife; the third wife's house is found on the right side next to the first wife's house and the fourth wife's house is built on the left side next to the second wife's. Hence, one can 'read' seniority off the spatial layout.

Elderhood: *Endasat* (pl. *intasat*) and *engoko*

When a woman is referred to as *endasat* she is regarded as a communal mother or a mother of a whole household. She gains the elders' respect, and she has more influence in the community. A married woman becomes *endasat* when she gets her sons circumcised, i.e., initiated to become *moranis* and perform *eunoto*.¹⁹ Ninalenyo remembers when she was shaving her sons' heads in *eunoto*. She recalls that it was from that time onwards that she could get involved in senior women's meetings and sometimes elders' meetings. Seniority is thus linked to social reproduction and the position of one's children within the age-set system. This implies that her seniority and social position are not only derived from her husband's age-set but also her personality and her intergenerational relations with her children. In Ninalenyo's case, she had eight

children: six sons and two daughters. One of her sons died after he was married. He was in the *Korianga* age cohort. All the living children are married. Two of her sons belong to the *Korianga* age cohort and three of her sons belong to the *Nyangulo* age cohort. The daughters are both married to men in the *Korianga* age cohort, and they have children. As I pointed out earlier, the *Korianga* are the current junior elders. Ninalenyo derives her seniority and high social status from having her sons in two age-set cohorts and her daughters married to junior elders. This implies that her social status is not only derived from and defined by her husband's age-set cohort, but also largely by intergenerational relations with her children, which constitute her social position as a woman and a mother, not just a wife. Her seniority is visible in the community: on one ritual occasion, she was one of the respected women in the village and was entrusted to lead a ritual.

The power, respect, and authority that *indasat* (pl.) hold allow them to speak at women's gatherings. I observed this when I attended a meeting after a ritual to discuss further rituals to be carried out. We sat according to age grades. I sat with a middle-aged women, *entomonok*. Young women who had recently got married sat together a little distant from the meeting. *Indasat* were the only ones talking.

¹⁹ This is the ceremony during which all *moranis* of the same age cohort are 'levelled' to become one generational set ready to enter junior elderhood.

Afterwards, they relayed their decision to the rest of the women at the gathering. *Endasat* continues to gain privileges until she gets much older and becomes *engoko* or *koko*. *Engoko* is an old grandmother. At this point, a woman is normally the most respected person in the household. This is because Maasai women tend to outlive their husbands by decades, so they remain the centre of the *boma*.

5 The entanglement of Maasai women's grades with men

This article aims to highlight the role and socio-temporal position of women alongside the age-set system, examining how seniority is attained among women and its connection to the age-set structure. A close observation of Ninalenyo's life history reveals that Maasai women have linguistically defined age grades, which I have analysed as s-tFoRs. These age

grades not only signify women's socio-temporal positions alongside the age-set but also their responsibilities inherent in the age-set system. Notably, the age grades in Table 1 illustrate the ways in which female age grades are recognised in discussions that intertwine with the male age-set system.²⁰

While studies of age-set societies (Talle 1998; Llewelyn-Davies 1981; Knowles 1993; Eppe 2014; Spencer 2003) have shown that women 'get their age' from men, the socio-temporal positions of women, such as *esyangiki*, *inkainito*, and *endasat*, communicate the social position of husbands and sons within the age-set. This means that a woman's social position symbolises the social position of her husband

²⁰ The table is my own creation, illustrating the individual positionality of Ninalenyo, using her husband's age-set as a historical framing device (as a marker of historical time).

Table 1: Ninalenyo's experience in coming of age and attaining seniority

<i>Historical Time (Husband's age-set)</i>	<i>Events mark ageing and seniority</i>	<i>Socio-temporal FoRs (Women's age grades)</i>	<i>Historical time (Sons' age-sets)</i>
<i>The Makaa age-set cohort</i>	Ninalenyo		<i>Korianga (1997-2004)* Nyangulo (2011-2018)*</i>
<i>Makaa</i> circumcision (1969-1975)*	Early childhood	<i>Enkira</i>	
	Girlhood	<i>Endito</i>	
	<i>Emurata</i> 'Circumcision'	<i>Esipolio</i> 'unhealed circumcised boy or girl'	
<i>Makaa eunoto</i>	<i>Enkiyama</i> 'Marriage' and childbearing	<i>Esyangiki</i> <i>Indauwa</i> <i>Indwaan</i>	
<i>Arapaiya</i>	Sons' initiation/ circumcision	<i>Entomonon</i>	
<i>Ngakuya</i>		<i>Endasat</i>	
		<i>Engoko</i> (koko)	

*Circumcision window

and her sons as well. For instance, when you find an *endasat* in a homestead you will also know that her husband, if she is not widowed, is a senior elder and her sons are *moranis*. This enables the age-set system to serve as the primary socio-temporal framework from which both Maasai men and women derive meaning and perspective on their life stages.

Furthermore, as Maasai women transition from one age grade to another through inter-generational relatedness, that is, by initiation, marriage, motherhood, and widowhood, they play a vital role in sustaining the age-set system. Spencer (2003, 37) noted that, “it is women who assert themselves as the ultimate custodians of a system that holds them in subjection. As brides, they are pawns that are married off and forge the tacit links between age-sets... it is these same women in later life who uphold the fundamental moral premise on which the patriarchal system is based.” Although he associates Maasai women’s custodianship of the age-set system with their subjugation, it is evident that as women progress from girlhood to womanhood and motherhood, they establish and maintain tacit links between age-set cohorts, i.e., between fathers and sons.

Additionally, among the Maasai, known for their cultural rituals, most fertility-related rituals, such as rain-making and prosperity ceremonies, are performed by women, wherein the *olamal*, or ‘ritually designated participants’, are strictly organized according to women’s age grades. Only *engoko* and *endasat* women assume leadership roles; a senior *isyangiki* leads the songs while other *isyangiki* sing along. Those designated as *endito/intoiye* are not allowed to attend any rituals as they have not yet been initiated. I observed Ninalenyo performing core ritual acts, which indicated her seniority among other women, as she is married to a member of the Makaa age-set and, more importantly, is the mother of *Korianga* ‘junior leaders’ and several *morani*.

On the other hand, the dynamics of seniority are not defined only by the symbiotic

relations between Maasai men’s age-set practices and women’s age grades but also among Maasai women themselves. *Engapuatni* ‘mother-in-law’ and senior wives have significantly higher social status, with their seniority granting them authority over daughters-in-law and junior co-wives. *Inkainito* ‘co-wives’, along with other women in the neighbourhood married to men of the same age cohort, attain seniority based on the order of marriage and the number of initiated sons. However, first wives retain their seniority status regardless of their sons’ status.

6 Conclusion

Becoming a Maasai woman is not an inevitable consequence of being born into a Maasai community. Instead, one must undergo rites of passage that allow one to move from one age grade to another. This article highlights the structure of Maasai women’s age grades, which are constructed discursively in daily conversations. The empirical data show how Maasai women have linguistically framed age grades, spanning from childhood to elderhood. The primary age grades identified in this paper are *endito*, *esyangiki*, *endasat*, and *engoko*. These age grades serve as social positions and temporal locations that point to a woman’s life stage. The link between women’s age grades and men’s age-sets is mapped through intergenerational relatedness, whereby a woman climbs a ladder of seniority through her own and her children’s initiations, marriages, motherhood, and widowhood. As shown in Ninalenyo’s experience, she identified herself with the big *Makaa morani*, and was later married into a *Makaa* age-set cohort, facts which anchored her existence in historical time. Her sons belong to the *Korianga* and *Nyangulo* age cohorts. As her sons climb the ladder of elderhood in the age-set system, their mother’s social status also rises, and she is more respected and trusted with ritual obligations. On a different note, other women, such as the mother-in-law and

co-wives, have significant implications for the dynamics of seniority among women within a family.

Substantially, I can discern several conclusions: first, the coming of age of Maasai women is clearly articulated by the linguistic terms for different age grades, which serve as a frame of reference for indicating the socio-temporal locations in the 'mainstream' or hegemonic frame, namely the age-set system; second, Maasai women achieve seniority both in relation to men and to other women (and not in terms of individual achievement); third, Maasai women's age grades could be considered as an 'out of sight age-set-like system' but deeply embedded within male age-set labels, which explains why women 'derive' their respective age and seniority from men's age cohorts – be it their sons', husband's, or father's. For instance, Ninalenyo is connected to each existing age-set; thus, age-sets are like chapters in the long, unwritten book of her life. She describes the age grades she went through to adulthood since the initiation of *Makaa* age-set. Later, she witnessed and facilitated her sons' initiation into the *Korianga* and *Nyangulo* cohorts and the retirement of *Korianga* from *moranis* to elders. As such, the

current functioning male age cohorts - the *Makaa*, *Kidotu*, *Korianga*, and *Nyangulo* – connect and separate both Maasai men and women in terms of their age, status, and responsibilities. On the other hand, considering Ninalenyo's milestones, the discursiveness of Maasai women's age grades, alongside the age-set cohorts, demonstrates the co-dependency between men and women and thus safeguards the sustainability of the system as a whole.

Lastly, the (hi)story of male age-set systems and age groups in Maasai society has been presented as if it were unrelated to other age and gender groups. This article clearly shows that the opposite is the case: just as Maasai women's (hi)story has always been described as dependent on men's lives, one could also argue that both men and women are always interrelated in manifold ways across time (with age) and in intergenerational relations – and that, in the life of a Maasai woman, there is a substantial seniority-based organizational element in society, defining and interrelating different women, organized by women (and not men).

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