In the study of African political systems, there is no consensus on the significance of age-set organization. This is true despite the fact that such organization is quite widespread (particularly in East Africa) and numerous descriptions of the military, judicial and executive elements of age-set roles have been published.

There has been one noteworthy attempt to establish age-set organization as a major type of African political system, but it has received little attention in recent years. This is the thesis of Bernardi (1952) that age-set organization provides «the basic structure of the political system of the Nilo-Hamites» (1952: 331). He concludes:

The Nilo-Hamitic societies have no place in the classification proposed by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard in the Introduction to African Political Systems. They have no chief, or any other centralized machinery of state control. Kinship, lineage, and clan have practically no political importance. It is the age-system that provides the framework of the political structure. Not that the age-system is to be identified with the political system, but in societies such as the Nilo-Hamitic every corporate activity, of which political activity is the form par excellence, is organized on the structural basis of the age-system.
This is quite a weighty claim. If well founded, our understanding of African political systems would be altered and enriched, yet it is a claim which, a quarter century later, remains insufficiently analyzed.

This is not to suggest that Bernardi's thesis has gone without critical reaction. In a sharp attack, Gulliver (1958: 11) referred to Bernardi's thesis as « uninformed » and based on an overly broad definition of politics, confusing politics with what Gulliver takes to be a different concept, namely, social integration. Only the Masai, according to Gulliver, could be said to have a political system based on age-set organization. Among such peoples as the Jie, Turkana, Kipsigis, Nandi, pastoral Suk, Kikuyu and Meru, the political system is not « fundamentally based » on the age-set system.

Baxter and Almagor (1978) similarly argue that whatever political tasks happen to be carried out through the age-set system are of secondary importance. It is the penchant of westerners for finding some recognizable institutional framework of political action, Baxter and Almagor argue, that leads them to ascribe important political functions to age-set systems in societies lacking alternative structures such as corporate descent groups. At most, they argue, age sets assume political importance to the extent that they become the vehicle for a distinct principle of governance: gerontocracy. As Baxter and Almagor put it, « Sets give open expression, cognitive order and ritual respectability to the velvet-gloved hand of the aged with which they wield their control of productive resources ». They conclude: « ...the over-attribution of political tasks to age-systems, as the primary institutions on which the maintenance of social order depends, has been a barrier to our understanding of them » (1978: 19).

As a contribution to an examination of these issues, this article addresses the political aspects of the age-set systems of a Nilo-Hamitic society which has never been the subject of sustained systematic anthropological study, the Latuka of Southern Sudan. What ethnographic evidence has been published on the Latuka is based on missionary and travellers' reports and on brief survey expeditions, research done primarily through interpreters. Such is the case of the most well known anthropological study of the Latuka, conducted by the Seligmans in the winter of 1921-22 (Seligman and Seligman 1926, 1932; Seligman 1925). They, in turn, based many of their observations on the limited fieldwork
of Lord Raglan in the early part of this century (Somerset 1918; Raglan 1921-1923). Also worthy of mention is the study of Latuka religion done by the missionary Father Molinaro (1940-41), which contains quite a bit of data on ritual, but is of limited utility due to the author's missionary perspective. The field work on which this study is based was carried out in May through August of 1975 by the junior author, who is himself a Latuka, a native Latuka speaker who has spent most of his life living among the Latuka. He, in turn, employed several local research assistants who aided in conducting a census. Their work was not completed until December of 1975. Labalwa and Torit, the villages which were the focus of fieldwork, were studied by a combination of methods, primarily participant observation and interviewing.

In the following pages we will first provide an overview of Latuka ecology and society, followed by an analysis of the Latuka age-set system. The political aspects of this system are then examined; we conclude with a discussion of the implications of this case for the issue of the political significance of African age-set systems.

Physical and social setting

The Latuka are the main inhabitants of Torit District, eastern Equatoria, some sixty miles east of Juba. They live in a plain bounded by mountains on all sides: the Imotong range running in an East-West axis to the east of the river Nile, Dongotona mountains to the east and the mountains of Omia to the northeast running in a North-South axis. The area the Latuka inhabit is like an open sided coliseum with the pitch representing the plain and the walls the mountains that bound it. The plain extends northwards from Lundo and Oronyo to the Okoro area and the marshland of east-central Equatoria Province.

The Latuka belong to the Nilo-Hamitic linguistic group, the peoples most closely related to them being the Bari of the western bank of the Nile and the Iteso of Eastern Uganda. The Latuka-speaking peoples are the predominant inhabitants of Torit District which also includes the Acholi and Madi who live to the west of the Imotong mountains. Of the Latuka-speaking group, the Latuka of the plain are more numerous than their counterparts
who inhabit the mountain areas. This latter group speaks different varieties of Latuka dialects and includes people like the Lokoya (of Lowoi), Longairo, the people of Ido, Ifwotu and Imotong (collectively known as Horyok), Dongotona, Lomia, and beyond the Omia mountains the Lopit. Neighboring these peripheral groups are non-Latuka-speaking peoples, among them the Lokoya of Lirya, Okoro (linguistically close to Acholi and Shilluk of Upper Nile), Acholi, Karamojong and their cousins the Buya and Didinga. Unlike the Latuka of the plain, the Latuka of the peripheral areas are usually bilingual and in some cases adopt the customs of their non-Latuka neighbors. This is basically savannah country with open woodland and grassy plain. Rain is seasonal and wildlife abound, providing the main protein source for the people.

The economy of the Latuka is mainly subsistence agriculture, the staples being dura (i.e., sorghum), millet, groundnuts (peanuts), and maize. Cattle, goats and sheep are also kept.

The division of labor among the Latuka is largely based on sex and age. Among traditionally masculine activities are the clearing of virgin lands for cultivation, the building of houses, and other odd but heavy chores around the house. On the other hand, the female takes on the lighter activities and, above all, cooking and housekeeping. Both sexes, however, cultivate crops together although it is generally the responsibility of the female to weed the field and harvest the crops, while the male must clear sufficient acreage for cultivation. There are usually several part-time blacksmiths in a village, all men, whose job it is to make for sale to the villagers hoes, axes, spears, and other metallic handicrafts.

There is not much disparity of wealth among the inhabitants of a Latuka village. A money economy does not exist; wealth is embodied in livestock. Usually there is a handful of people in any given village who may be termed rich by Latuka standards simply because they own ten or more head of cattle and/or many goats and sheep. The majority of the inhabitants have either a few head of cattle, some goats and sheep, or none at all. Yet the social system is basically egalitarian; the possession of wealth by certain individuals does not confer any political power on them. Since wealth is embodied in livestock, it is precarious, for a calamity such as a cattle epidemic can reduce the wealthiest to poverty in a relatively short period of time.
The Latuka number between 150,000 and 200,000 people scattered in twenty-four villages in the plain and tens of other villages in the mountains. Latuka villages are not based on clan or kinship ties but rather consist of people from several clans. Furthermore, Latuka villages vary in size but share one notable characteristic: they are divided into wards. These wards (aman-gat) have considerable social salience in bounding social activity and as a basis for local identification.

With the exception of the hereditary chief (hobu) and village headman (aboloni), both of whose roles primarily involve ritual prerogatives and powers, traditional offices of political authority are non-existent. Latuka society is structured by an age-set system which allocates social and political roles, dividing the male population into well-defined strata. Women have a separate age-set system which, rather than remaining important throughout the life of an individual, is of limited significance after marriage. The position of each individual is defined for him by these age groupings, a person owing deference to those in more senior strata.

Also of considerable social importance is the kinship system, which is patrilineal. There are several clans. Normally a person is physically and socially closer to his/her father's clansmen than to his/her mother's and loyalty is held accordingly. Marriage is clan exogamous and polygynous.

The Latuka religious system revolves around the belief in a supernatural force called Ajyok (God). The witchdoctor forms the link between man and the supernatural and is a medicine-man par excellence. He commands tremendous respect since witch-doctoring is regarded as a difficult profession. Besides the witch-doctor are the chief and the village headman, their responsibility being to ward off diseases and other calamities, these normally revealed to them in sleep rather than by diagnosis, the technique used by the witchdoctor.

Culturally the Latuka have changed relatively little in recent decades. Although missionaries appeared in Latuka country in the late 1920's and early 1930's, the Latuka resisted the changes urged on them by the missionaries and the government. The majority clung to traditional religious practices; the few Christians among them turned to syncretism. Although both the missionaries and the government introduced schools in Latuka country, there was resistance by most parents to formal education until the early 1950's. The underlying reason for such resistance was
the fear by fathers that their sons would be lost to them and that nobody would take care of their livestock. This attitude toward education only changed, particularly among the eastern Latuka, in the mid 1960’s, mainly a result of the demonstration effect of the western Latuka and the experiences of the Sudanese Civil War which brought them into contact with ‘progressive’ elements, especially in Uganda where most of them took refuge. The illiteracy rate among the Latuka, however, remains close to 100%.

Latuka age grades and age sets

The Latuka have four primary male age grades: Aduri (« Children »), Aduri-horwong (« Youths » fifteen to twenty years old), Monyemiji (« Owners of the village »), and Amarwak (« Elders »). Aduri has no corporate existence. The boys are charged with various errands and other menial chores by their parents, but they are not organized to perform any chores at the behest of Aduri-horwong or Monyemiji. Aduri-horwong is formally organized into an age grade that is responsible to Monyemiji. Recruitment to the age grade is carried out by Aduri-horwong themselves but they must report to Monyemiji. Members of Aduri-horwong are in a transitional status, spending no more than seven or eight years in the age grade on their way to membership in Monyemiji and hence recognition as adults. They perform various tasks on the ward and village levels and their activities come directly under the purview of Monyemiji. Violation of any social codes either individually or collectively invokes a collective punishment or the levy of heavy fines designed to discourage future transgressions. Furthermore, Aduri-horwong provide provisions for festivities like ebworo (thanksgiving during and at the end of harvest season), and are organized for elulung (communal labor) to work for the Chief and other villagers. Organized communal labor on behalf of a villager does not come under the purview of Monyemiji although it is customary to invite them to partake in the consumption of food, beer usually being provided by the individual being aided. Aduri-horwong also have a small public meeting ground, its amangat ⁷ (pieces of logs laid down in a rectangular manner and made as comfortable as possible for seating purposes. Monyemiji’s amangat is always positioned close to the entrance to the drum house or adufa).
Every Latuka village ward must have *amangat*. The symbolic embodiment of Monyemiji age grade, *amangat* is a wide open space in the middle of the ward where most of the formal activities of Monyemiji take place. It is regarded as sacrosanct because of the sanctified objects that are found within it: drums, a drum-house, the headman’s shrine, *amangat*, and *alore* (bundles of ebony wood erected in the middle of *amangat*). Monyemiji are the central political and social force of the village. It is their responsibility to safeguard the security and welfare of the villagers and to make and implement political decisions. Monyemiji acts as a unit for the common defense of the village against outside danger; they negotiate with the rainmaker Chief and mollify him in times of hardship; and they discuss any village developments and problems, trying to find means of dealing with them. Indeed Monyemiji constitute the village government with a traditionally bestowed mandate to guarantee the peaceful advancement of the villagers’ welfare. Their term of office runs for nearly two dozen years (22) whereupon they are replaced by a new generation of leadership formalized at Efira, a ceremony which brings together people of many villages.

As for Amarwak (the elders), they lack any formal political leadership role; they do not act as a corporate unit; yet they command respect and deference from others. They are also eligible for *ebiro* (a form of social security) and usually they are few in number, death having exacted its toll (see Table 1). Furthermore, their wisdom in the customs of the people is highly respected and their advice is sought by both political novices and veterans who aspire to further their knowledge and influence. Amarwak’s participation in the economic and social affairs of the village is limited. Although most of them are strong enough to carry out important economic activities on an individual basis, they are never organized formally for collective activities on the village or ward level as are their political successors in Monyemiji. On political matters (as distinguished from dispute arbitration - see below) their role is solely advisory; it is the prerogative of Monyemiji to heed or to ignore their counsel.

*Age Sets*

Each person can be located in the age stratification system by reference to his age grade status. Whereas age grades are the strata of the system, which themselves do not change over time,
people pass during their lifetime from one stratum (age grade) to another. Moreover, their social status within a stratum is determined by the cohort with whom they first passed into adult (Monyemiji) status. These organized and named cohorts are what is referred to as age-sets, the members of which, once initiated into the age-set, make all subsequent transitions through the system as a corporate unit.

Age-set formation occurs at the transition point between youth (Aduri-horwong) and adult (Monyemiji) status. Children (Aduri) and youths have no age-set organization. One becomes an Aduri simply through birth. Transition to Aduri-horwong status is an individual affair, governed largely by the members of Aduri-horwong of the ward themselves, who decide whom to induct. However, a younger uterine brother cannot be inducted into Aduri-horwong before the older brother has passed out of that age grade into Monyemiji. Recruitment consists of the ward’s Aduri-horwong going to the recruit’s parental home at nightfall, tapping at the gate while pronouncing a ritualized message which tells the parents of their son’s recruitment. The youths then report the identity of their new recruits to Monyemiji. The ritual notification of the parents relates to the fact that members of Aduri-horwong are responsible for providing provisions for ebworo (thanksgiving), provisions which the youths’ parents in part must produce.

Age-set membership is acquired at the next life course transition, to Monyemiji status. Induction is left to the initiative of the potential inductee, though he must secure the concurrence of Monyemiji before being initiated. Such permission is rarely refused, the initiate being in a position to determine the community’s judgement of his maturity before making the request. The solemn ritual of induction involves the sacrifice of an animal, the entrails of which are smeared over Amangat. This ceremony is presided over by the ward headman. At any one time only one age set is open for recruitment, a new age set being formed on the average every seven years. The only exception to this pattern is that every 22 years, at the time of the societal-wide transition ceremony of Efira, elder members of Aduri-horwong may become members of Monyemiji directly through participation in the Efira ritual. These individuals are recognized as constituting a distinct age set of their own, one which is immediately closed to recruitment as soon as it is formed.

Age sets are based in village wards. However, a village head-
man designates the name of one of the concurrent age sets to serve as a common age set name for all members of the contemporaneous age sets in the village. Similarly, contiguous villages (especially those tracing a common village origin such as the unit Hatia, consisting of the villages of Labalwa, Torit and Mura) acquire common names for their age sets, thus providing an equi-
valency structure. On a more informal basis this process is extend-
ed further to other Latuka villages.

During the 22 years between Efira ceremonies four new age sets are formed. These age sets are given a generational name. Upon the completion of Efira, the four age-sets formed after the last Efira constitute Monyemiji. Over the course of the next gene-
ration, until the time of the next Efira ceremony, three additional age sets will be formed. Members of these age sets, belonging to a younger named generation, are considered members of Mo-
yemiji, yet they are clearly junior members, not wielding the influence exercised by the members of the senior generation. At the time of the next Efira, these three junior age sets, together with a fourth age set formed at Efira (as noted above), become the senior generation of Monyemiji. All those who had undergone the Efira rite before (i. e., members of the senior generation of Monyemiji) must retire to elder (Amarwak) status.

The workings of this system can be illustrated through exami-
nation of the situation in the village of Labalwa in 1975 (see Ta-
ble I). This portrays the age sets and age grades of the village’s three wards shortly before the holding of Efira (in 1977). Two generations of Monyemiji are shown (Ogugu, the junior, and Cho-
bo, the senior). The four age sets constituting the senior genera-
tion of Monyemiji consisted of individuals who had undergone the Efira ceremonies of 1955. The three age sets of the junior generation were formed after 1955. Amarwak, the elders, are at this stage in the cycle quite depleted, consisting of men who had undergone Efira in the 1930’s and who had become elders in 1955. In 1977, the members of the senior generation of Monyemiji would themselves retire to elder status. At the same time the fourth age set of the junior generation would be formed by older boys from Aduri-horwong (the youths), and these four age-sets would constitute the Monyemiji of the village. Among the Latu-
ka of the plain, these methods of transition from one age grade to another are universal, involving the procedures of recruitment, induction, and Efira outlined above. The procedures used by the
Latuka of the periphery of mountain region deviate from these somewhat but the fundamental concept of age grades and sets is unaltered. Such slight deviations may be attributed to the influence of the non-Latuka cultural practices of the neighbors of the mountain or peripheral Latuka, peoples such as the Lokoya, Acholi, and Toposa.

The relationships among different age sets of the Monyemiji age grade are generally amicable. Monyemiji regard themselves as members of the same age grade regardless of the difference in the age spread of the various age sets that make up the grade. Consequently their relationships are governed by the principle of equality as members of the same age grade. Younger members of the age grade do, however, pay deference to their older colleagues. This does not by any means imply an inherent obligation of the junior members to be subservient to members of more senior age sets or to continually mollify the latter for fear of punishment or ostracism. But respect for one’s elders is a leitmotif of Latuka culture. Therefore, exclusive of personal relationships, inter-age-set relations among Monyemiji are characterized by cordiality, warmth and respect, all the more so because the collective leadership needs the support of all the age sets to be effective. Disagreements are usually over procedural matters rather than substantive issues. In the latter instance Monyemiji abandon their inter-age set squabbles in favor of a unified point of view. This sudden shift of opinion by feuding age sets occurs most dramatically when an imminent external danger to the security and welfare of the villagers arises. But Monyemiji seldom confront a situation where age sets are set against one another because the deference mechanism that governs age set relations and indeed social relations on a wider scale, discourages such situations. Thus, personal conflicts notwithstanding, Monyemiji generally present a united front in political and social matters and as custodians of the village; such cooperation is seen by the men as essential to the proper running of the affairs of the village.

Politics and the Latuka age-set system

The village is the basic political unit of Latuka society. A village is headed by a village headman (aboloni) who is a spiritual leader with a patrilineally inherited post. The main components
of a village are the wards which vary from one (in small villages like Ibalany just outside Torit) to as many as five or six (such as in Oronyo about twenty-four miles northeast of Torit). Each village ward in turn is headed by a headman who is junior by position to the village headman. On most spiritual matters concerning the village as a whole, the village headman works closely with the other ward headmen. The village headman acts as a coordinator among ward headmen on the village level. Individually, however, each ward headman takes care of the spiritual needs of people under his jurisdiction. Where there are poor relations between a village headman and any of his ward headmen, or among the ward headmen themselves, the village will be politically affected, leading sometimes to fissioning or severance of contacts on the political level. This is because Monyemiji of a ward tend to support their ward headman on what may concern religious issues but which quickly is transformed into a political squabble. Although in most instances social interaction is affected, personal relationships between Monyemiji and others of the feuding wards are maintained.

Headmanship is inherited patrilineally, but is not limited to any single clan; headmen in different wards and villages come from different clans. Likewise Latuka villages and wards are not organized on a clan basis, though it is not unusual to find one village or ward disproportionately peopled by members of one clan.

The plain Latuka are led by two chiefs, each of whom commands the spiritual allegiance of a group of rival villages. Unlike headmanship, the two chieftaincies must always be occupied by people of the same clan, Hang Igago-Hobu (or the House of Chiefs), and are hereditary. The Chief’s role is defined as spiritual, while the more mundane leadership of the people is left to the collective direction of Monyemiji.

The political influence of the Chief includes the speeding up of consensus on issues which would have taken otherwise a long time to resolve. The very presence of a Chief among the villagers leads the latter to minimize their differences or leads to the mediation by the Chief in the event of such differences arising. At best the Chief acts as a unifying force in village as well as in inter-village affairs; and sometimes his views on a subject may swing the political disposition of Monyemiji on that particular issue.

Latuka villages are divided into various wards depending on the size of the village. Each ward has its own Amangat which is
the seat of Monyemiji. A man may belong to the Amangat of only one ward in a village. However, multiple membership on the inter-village level is permissible because each ward Amangat has its counterparts in other villages of the plain. This is convenient for traveling Monyemiji in that they can join in the social and political activities of the wards they visit. It is not clear how these counterparts originated. According to Latuka belief, they originated from Imatari, the original village of the Latuka before their dispersal to their current villages some two centuries ago. In some contiguous villages such as Labalwa, Torit, and Mura-Hatiha (collectively known as Hatiha), induction into Amangat (Monyemiji) for some families may be conducted twice, once at an inductee’s resident Amangat and a second at his father’s ward’s Amangat. 11. Furthermore, there is in each village a senior ward usually called Fwara where formal village level political and spiritual activities take place. The village headman and (in Oronyo and Tirangore) the Chief reside in this ward. Some of the most visible ritual activities that have to be performed in Amangat of Fwara section are the New Year’s dance (Allam) and Efira. To do these things in any other ward is taboo.

Political organization on the inter-village level is less visible because the political activities of most Latuka are centered around the ward and the village. Relations between villages vary from fraternal to hostile. In some such as Hiyala and Illieu to the east of Torit, they have been violent, taking the form of undeclared inter-village warfare where forays into each other’s territory have been a common occurrence. In others relations have been amicable. Political co-ordination on the village level is almost always the responsibility of Monyemiji, especially when dealing with outsiders such as the government. In the case of important political decisions affecting an entire village, a joint meeting of all Monyemiji from the village is held, decisions being reached by consensus 12. On the higher level Monyemiji may be aided by the Chief who carries some implicit influence on the political level although he is in most cases dealing with manifestly spiritual matters.

Powers of Monyemiji

Political powers in Latuka society reside in Monyemiji who are the constituted authority in the village. Their powers are varied; their exercise is of a collective nature; individual discharge
of authority on behalf of Monyemiji is not permissible. For instance, if a social directive is broken by one or more members of Aduri-horwong, the resultant punishment or requisition of the offending age grouping's property cannot be carried out by individuals among Monyemiji but rather is carried out collectively. Indeed, Monyemiji's political powers become null and void when applied individually by members of that age grade because they lack individually the authority to be either arbiters or enforcers of political disputes or social transgressions.

Among the powers of Monyemiji is the right to block the induction of members of Aduri-horwong to perform communal activities either for the Chief or for any member of the village. They have the power to convene meetings to discuss issues of interest to the village including their relationship with the Chief. In theory they have the right to reject the legitimacy of a Chief or to renounce their allegiance to him. In practice however, the Chief's position and even his personality are held in respect and fear by all members of the community, more so for social and religious than for political reasons. Among the other powers of Monyemiji is their monopoly in dealings with outside powers such as the government or other villages and the mandate to act according to the best interests of the village. Furthermore, they have the power in consultation with the ward or village headman to call for hunting forays, allam (the New Year's dance marking the beginning of the hunting season), and, with the permission of the individuals involved, aburio (funeral dancing). Monyemiji reserve the right to expel from the village (although not from the age-set) anybody who subverts village peace and harmony, and to censure those exhibiting anti-social behavior. In secular matters of village concern Monyemiji and not the village or ward headmen have ultimate decision-making power. The political supremacy of Monyemiji is invulnerable to challenge by any other age-sets, the only qualification being that Monyemiji have to act as a group in order for their decisions and actions to be acceptable to all the villagers.

The powers of Monemiji, although the same all over Latuka region, nevertheless, are limited to individual wards within a village. There are times, however, as when a village confronts an external force threatening its security, that the political powers of Monyemiji transcend ward boundaries. Membership in a ward's Amangat is sacred, renunciation of membership in it bears grave
portent for the welfare of the individual including the successive loss of children either at birth or thereafter. Because each Latuka is born to a particular Amangat (even if one is born and raised in another ward of the village, he must be recruited to Aduri-hor-wong and eventually inducted into Monyemiji of his father’s Amangat), his political activities must be confined to that Amangat. Each ward is thus a self-contained polity with its headman, Monyemiji and Amangat. Non-ward (or non-Amangat) members do not participate fully in the political activities of that ward. Such an individual may, however, take part in political discussions as do other sojourning Monyemiji, but he will not be included in the policy implementation and other related political activities. He is, on the other hand, required to attend any kind of formal social and political activity in his own Amangat; failure to do so can lead to fine or censure. Thus Monyemiji of a ward have a geographical limit beyond which their political involvement leads to charges of interference from the other ward.

The non-interference maxim is also applicable on the inter-village level and is further accentuated by the fact that most Latuka villages are miles apart. The political system is non-centralized; each village like each of its wards is a self-contained political entity.

Coordination of political activities on the village level is usually done by Monyemiji themselves. In this instance some members of Monyemiji of each ward may, after discussing or relaying messages concerning an issue, call for a joint meeting of all Monyemiji in the village. In the case of strictly spiritual matters the village headman together with the ward headmen assumes the responsibility of coordinating village activities, while the more mundane administrative matters are coordinated by the village mukungu (government agent) with the help of his ward lieutenants (anyuparra’).

Dispute arbitration and settlement within the ward is a process involving an informal assembly of members of Monyemiji and Amarwak in the ward’s Amangat. When a dispute erupts between two men of the ward the disputants go, sometimes after considerable heated argument and perhaps a wrestling match, to Amangat. There they present their case to those of Monyemiji and Amarwak who happen to be present, although if there are very few present at the time, the disputants will wait until more arrive. In these deliberations, generally only the elders of Amarwak
and those of the two most senior age sets of Monyemiji take an active role in questioning the disputants and in discussing a proper settlement. It is worth noting that these discussions do not characteristically involve argumentation between numbers of kinsmen on either side of the dispute. Moreover, when the dispute is between men of different age sets, it is considered inappropriate for the elders to be influenced by common age set membership with one of the disputants.

More serious are disputes between men of different wards of the village. These often lead to physical clashes when resolution is not quickly achieved. Such violence involves groups of Monyemiji facing one another by wrestling or, if the fighting escalates, club fighting. Such a flare-up occurred in Torit in the summer of 1975 during fieldwork. Even when violence does erupt, moderating voices of members of Monyemiji on both sides are heard. Arrangements may be made for an assembly to be held in one of the wards, attended by the Monyemiji of the two wards. Even if the dispute involves just one age set in each ward, the whole of Monyemiji come together. Discussion of the issues at such an assembly may or may not lead to rapprochement. However, today there is added pressure to reach a settlement, for continued hostility may lead to government intervention.

The government enters into this process in another way as well, for a disputant who is unsatisfied with the resolution of his problem by the local elders may now take his case to the government court in Torit. This court, headed by a Latuka chief, will only hear the case after the complainant has exhausted traditional channels. The court may become immediately involved in the case, however, if a serious crime (e.g., homicide) is involved. In the past, such crimes too were dealt with through the gathering of elders. The traditional resolution of murder cases involved the payment of a girl in marriage or sufficient bridewealth for the acquisition of a bride to the family of the victim.

The village remains the highest Latuka corporate political unit. Supravillage political organization is, at best, rudimentary. Because the social and economic life is centered around the village, it also follows that the political life of the people is village-centered. Individuals from different villages rarely come together for political reasons except at such ceremonies as Efira and allām (New Year dance). Individual Monyemiji who are travelling do, however, participate in the economic and political activities in the
villages they visit through the auspices of their ward counterpart (as discussed above).

Since political organization at the higher level is weak, what role do the recognized two Chiefs of the plains Latuka play? With the exception of presiding over Efira ceremonies, the chiefs have no official political duties. Yet the chiefs form a political and religious link between all villages through the people’s belief in their spiritual powers. The ward and village headmen are subordinate to the Chief and are eclipsed by the Chief in some of the latter’s rare visits to the village. Yet politically and spiritually the headman is closer to the people and identifies with them more than the Chief does because he lives among them. He is more involved in the economic, social and political affairs of the village although he does not have greater political powers than other members of Monyemiji. His role is confined to the spiritual realm and his status as a headman does not entitle him to anything but social deference. As for other people with spiritual powers, people such as the ward headmen and the diviners and medicine men, they are no different from other people of the village in political matters. Although they possess greater spiritual powers than the average villager, this does not put them a political notch above others in the ward or village.

The Exercise of Influence

In order to understand the way in which influence is exercised among the Latuka, the native concept of etamiosso must be mentioned. Etamiosso refers to calling upon one’s junior to carry out a task at one’s behest. Members of more senior age sets delegate chores to the member of more junior age sets. Nor are the elders (Amarwak) excluded from this line of influence, despite the fact that the responsibility for ward and village governance lies with their juniors, Monyemiji. Indeed, the threatened curse of the elders provides a quick impetus to action among their juniors. In the case of the elders, etamiosso is largely used for personal need satisfaction (e.g., bringing food, carrying out menial chores) rather than for activities pertaining to the ward or village as a whole.

The principle of seniority is also reflected within Monyemiji, where members of the senior generation are considered the real «bosses» of the village. It is considered their regime until the holding of Efira. Although the age sets of the junior generation have some rights in the running of the village, in disagreements
between the age sets of the senior and junior generations concerning substantive political issues, the older generation normally prevails. Although relations between the generations have generally been harmonious, accounts are told of club fights which took place in the past between the junior and senior age sets of Monyemiji.

The various age sets of Monyemiji of a ward are quick to band together when confronted with a challenge from another ward. One such example is provided in Labala in the continuing struggle between the wards of Imira and Fwara over the use of a flag and the ringing of a gong, both ritual symbols which residents of Imira consider a traditional prerogative of their ward alone. These are occasions on which behavior of no intrinsic political or economic significance is seized upon as a vehicle for the demonstration of political strength.

In the formulation of public policy and in the adjudication of disputes within a ward or village, certain individuals have more influence than others. As has been described for other egalitarian polities, decision is made by consensus, in this case by Monyemiji. As in these other societies, there are a few people in each Latuka ward who are often key speakers during political discussions and around whom consensus is built. These are generally individuals reputed for their rhetorical abilities and for their sober wisdom. They occupy no formal political office and exercise powers of persuasion only.

Discussion

Bernardi’s analysis of the age-set basis of Nilo-Hamitic political systems provides a model which fits the Latuka case quite well. Among the elements of the model to which the Latuka system conforms are:

a. An uncentralized polity lacking a powerful political officeholder either at the local or the tribal level.

b. A clan system which is separated from much of the political decision-making and executive process.

c. A territorial system in which strong allegiance to one’s locality threatens the harmony of social relations among localities.
d. The age-set system provides a pan-tribal structure which promotes social integration through inter-village solidarity.

e. Differentiation of authority in « practical matters » is largely based on age-set membership.

f. The judicial system is tied to the age-set system.

g. Political authority is vested in age-sets, distributed to different age sets in different degrees and for different activities.

Bernardi has not been alone in stressing the significance of age-set organization as an alternative basis for political organization to kin-based societies and centralized chiefdoms. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940) have been criticized by others along these lines (e.g., Middleton and Tait 1958: 3). Yet the theoretical significance of this observation has not been fully explored. Certainly one of the orienting questions of political anthropological theory has been: What provides the social basis of order in noncentralized political systems? Despite valid criticisms directed toward those who exclusively seek out the harmonious and the functional and ignore sources of conflict and processes of personal aggrandizement, the question remains fundamental. The primary anthropological response to this question has focused on principles of kinship. Although in the case of studies of individual societies, particularly in Africa, the age-set principle has been portrayed as an alternative basis of political order, the age-set type has received little attention in comparative analyses of noncentralized political systems.

In pursuing such theoretical inquiry, one of the major questions which remains to be solved is under what conditions might we expect a society to exhibit an age-set organization as a cornerstone of its political structure. A few efforts have been made to address this question, but none is entirely satisfactory (cf. LeVine and Sangree 1962). Over three decades ago, Whyte (1944: 69) proposed five factors which taken together would result in a society having « a highly organized and formalized system of age-grades ». These are societies which:

1. emphasize activities requiring strength and dexterity
2. require large-scale co-operation
3. have little division of labor
4. have little economic inequality, and
5. pursue a nomadic or semi-nomadic existence.
The case of the Latuka casts some doubt on this schema, for in respects 1. and 2. the Latuka do not appear to be well characterized comparatively; in respects 3. and 4. they are little different from hundreds of other noncentralized societies; and as for 5. they are a sedentary people. Moreover, looking at the other age-set societies in Africa which have been described, many are neither nomadic nor semi-nomadic.

Tis latter point is significant in that the most straightforward explanations of age-set systems have dealt with pastoral societies. Dyson-Hudson’s (1963, 1966) explanation of the Karimojong age-set system is one of the best examples of this approach:

The mobility of small groups is such that no limits of combination, dispersal, and realignment can be predicted for any segment of Karimojong society, however small. In such a situation an organizing principle that is coincident with the limits of society, yet as irreducible as the human condition, is most effective. If a man is a Karimojong and an adult... then he can be grouped and ranked by age no matter what the company or circumstance in which he finds himself. Thus any aggregate of Karimojong in any place at any time can be easily structured to take common action if their general interest requires it (1963: 399).

Here, then, we have described the condition of herders who travel far from their permanent settlements, mixing along the way with various other Karimojong groups with whom they can trace no kin or neighboring relation (1966: 174). In such circumstances age-set organization can be reasonably seen in evolutionary terms as an adaptive environmental response.

The case of the Latuka, and other sedentary horticulturalists, is the sore spot in what otherwise would be a neat ecological explanation of age-set systems. In the case of the Latuka, it might be possible to prove the existence of a more pastoral economy in the distant past, but this leaves us in the unsatisfactory position of accounting for the ongoing age-set system as a vestigial tradition. It could also be claimed that the sedentary Latuka borrowed their age-set system (a process which has been documented for such peoples as the Tiriki [Sangree 1966: XXXIX], So [Hamer 1970: 58] and Sidamo [Laughlin and Laughlin 1974: 266] from neighboring pastoral Nilo-Hamites). This again, even if true, hardly explains the case.
Tab. 1 - Age-sets and age grades in Labalwa, 1975

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age grade</th>
<th>Age set</th>
<th>Imira</th>
<th>Fwara</th>
<th>Angaur</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aduri-horwong</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Youths)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Village Owners - Junior Generation)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 st</td>
<td>(1938-1945) 7</td>
<td>(1936-1945) 10</td>
<td>(1946-1949) 3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monyemiji (Chobo)</td>
<td>4 th</td>
<td>(1938-1940) 1</td>
<td>(1938-1939) 4</td>
<td>(1937-1940) 3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Village Owners - Senior Generation)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 rd</td>
<td>(1927-1937) 23</td>
<td>(1927-1937) 3</td>
<td>(1935-1936) 2</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 nd</td>
<td>(1916-1930) 20</td>
<td>(1918-1925) 6</td>
<td>(1919-1926) 5</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 st</td>
<td></td>
<td>(1913-1919) 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amawak (Nyong)</td>
<td>4 th</td>
<td>(1908-1913) 5</td>
<td>(1912- ) 1</td>
<td>(1910-1915) 3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Elders)</td>
<td>3 rd</td>
<td>(1900-1907) 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>91</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census conducted in the village in 1975. Dates in parentheses refer to years of birth of age-set members.
Age-set systems constitute a distinctive mode of social and political organization. They provide an alternative answer to the problem of maintaining social order in a noncentralized polity. It is time that more systematic attention be given to this system and toward its explanation.

Notes

1. The research on which this article is based was made possible through the sponsorship of the Russell Sage Foundation Program on Age. Thanks are also due to the Surdna Foundation and Bowdoin College for support provided to the junior author.

2. In fact, both Baxter and Almagor recognize significant political aspects of the age-set systems they studied, the Boran and the Dassanetch respectively (Baxter 1979, Almagor 1978a, 1978b), but they reject the view that age-set systems can profitably be viewed as political institutions.

3. Though, it should be noted, it constitutes one of the cases Bernardi relied on in substantiating his thesis. His knowledge of the Latuka was based on the account of the Seligman's in their Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan, an account which, as noted below, is based on very limited fieldwork.

4. As evidenced in the first sentence of the article: «Nota bene e non dimenticare che anche i Lotuko come in generale tutti i Pagani non hanno idee chiare, precise e stabili circa la religione». Another missionary, Father Muratori, has also written articles on Latuka rituals and rainmakers (1949, 1950, 1954).

5. The senior author, involved in the designing of the research, was unable to participate in the fieldwork due to his inability to secure a visa for conducting the research from the Sudanese government.

6. An analysis of the women's age-set system among the Latuka appears in Kertzer and Madison (1980).

7. Amangat, besides being the open space in the center of the ward where activities of Monyemiji take place, also refers to the pieces of logs placed in a square or circular fashion, always near the drum-house, forming settees. It is here that Monyemiji spend the evenings discussing formally or informally issues of interest to the village or ward.

8. Following the communal hunt each year, the game is brought back to the common ground of each ward. There a goodly portion is reserved for the elders of Amarwak. The meat is ceremonially distributed, with the eldest member of Amarwak being given the first portion, then the next to oldest man is given the second, etc. At the end of the distribution, the men take their portion home.
A similar custom, *ebworo*, is followed during the time of the harvest, at which a portion of the yield is given at the beginning of the harvest to members of Amarwak, who take their portion home. This practice is conceived of as a means of thanking the supernatural forces for providing a bountiful harvest.


10. The village headman must come from a specified ward of the village, of which he is the ward headman.

11. This applies to cases in which the inductee lives in a village different from that of his father’s Amangat.

12. Since colonial times, each village has selected a government agent whose job it is to act as intermediary between the central government and the village. He may come from any of the village’s wards and is selected jointly by the Monyemiji of the village.

13. The headman is considered to be a member of Monyemiji. However, he does not retire to elder (Amarwak) status with others of his age set, remaining instead in Monyemiji.

14. This particular source of inter-ward conflict and others like it have been witnessed by the junior author since he was a child (in the 1950s). Their occurrence appears to be increasing. In the past, conflict between villages included warfare, in the form of nocturnal raids conducted by small raiding parties. The object of these forays was to kill a few people and to steal some cattle. Killing was selective in the sense that the raider had to make sure that he did not murder a close clansman. As Latuka District passed into effective government control in the last 1920s and early 1930s, inter-village warfare ceased. However, long-lasting hostilities between some villages continued to simmer and occasionally erupt in violence well into the 1960s (the most notable case involving the villages of Hiyala and Ilieu).

References cited


Summary

The Latuka are one of the largest but least known Nilo-Hamitic groups living on the eastern plains and hills of Equatoria (southern Sudan). Numbering between 150,000 and 200,000 souls, they are organized in patrilineal clans inhabiting several dozen medium and large villages. The present paper is based on direct fieldwork carried out in 1975 by Oker B.B. Madison, a Latuka himself. The subject of the paper is the local system of age sets and grades, and the system’s relationship to the nation’s political life. There is a general survey of social structure, followed by an analysis of the concept of power and the attributes of those who exercise power. The Latuka have village chiefs, an office that is inherited patrilineally. Village chiefs, however, function chiefly as spiritual leaders. Real authority is invested collectively in the monyemiji, the « adults » (literally, « the village owners ») within the age-set system. The « adults » are responsible for military defense and for the safety and well-being of the village inhabitants. It is the « adults » who make specifically political decisions. The authors believe that their findings confirms the thesis advanced by B. Bernardi in 1952, namely, that the age-set organisation is the fundamental structure of the Nilo-Hamitic political system.
Sommario

I Latuka, uno dei maggiori e tuttavia meno conosciuti gruppi nilo-camitici delle pianure e colline orientali dell'Equatoria (Sudan meridionale) vivono in considerevole numero (150.000 - 200.000 anime) organizzati in clan patrilineari e disseminati in alcune dozzine di medi e grossi villaggi. Il presente studio, basato su ricerche dirette condotte in sito nel 1975 dal secondo e più giovane dei due co-autori, egli stesso un Latuka, ha per oggetto il locale sistema di gradi e classi d'età, e la relazione di tale sistema alla vita politica della nazione. Un rapido sguardo alla struttura sociale è seguito da un'analisi del concetto di potere e delle attribuzioni di coloro che lo esercitano. I Latuka hanno capi-villaggio, con carica ereditaria in via patrilineare, ma che hanno soprattutto la funzione di guide spirituali; l'autorità effettiva risiede collettivamente nei monyemiji, gli 'adulti' (letter. 'proprietari del villaggio') entro il sistema dei gradi d'età sui quali incombe la responsabilità per la difesa militare, la sicurezza e il benessere degli abitanti, e ai quali competono le decisioni propriamente politiche. Tale situazione verrebbe a confermare secondo gli Autori la tesi avanzata già nel 1952 da B. Bernardi, che l'ordinamento a classi d'età rappresenta la struttura fondamentale nel sistema politico dei Nilo-Camiti.