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Like fathers, like sons: Age-staging and generational stumbling blocks.

The Boran Gadaa-experience.

A principle question underlying the discussion about ageing and the existence or non-existence of familial, generational, societal or other “cycles” addresses the issue of the existing degree of institutionalization and “chronologization” of individual life-paths and biographies. While some analysts emphasize the standardization of biographies and underline the existence of similarities, “deadlines” or even “timetables” for transitions along the life-course, others mainly examine processes of “heterogenization” and the “fragmentation” of biographical life-courses. This question can, in fact, be equally well applied to Western societies as to any other society. In the following article, an ethnographic case study of the Boran of North-east Africa will serve as a paradigmatic example to discuss some of the main issues connected to the “life-course” or “cycle” approach more generally.

The Boran are cattle-herding nomads living in Southern Ethiopia and Northern Kenya. In their practice of an elaborated age and generation system, called *Gadaa*, individuals (ideally) pass as a group of age-mates through a defined sequence of grades. These cohorts are clearly differentiated and employ distinctive boundary markers, both physical, in the form of distinctive dress and hair-style, and in terms of the transitions undergone throughout the life-course, both of these taking the shape of individual and collective rituals. The age-staging is combined with a generational mode of recruitment in that a son gets introduced to a specific set correlated to the set of his father and subsequently changes his status every eight years as a member of his cohort. Intergenerational references are, thus, being clearly made. There are, furthermore, timetables: a calendar (based on moon-months and correlations with the stars) prescribes the timing of the change marked every eight years by means of ritual performance thereby simultaneously setting the individual sets or cohorts into a clearly identifiable historical frame. History is perceived to be structured, or “sub-divided”, in terms of durations of generation sets. Sets are named after their leaders, who act as “historical personalities” during their life-times and who, over time, merge (as “name-givers” and heads of concrete organizational units) into the larger group’s collective memories and social structure. A strong tendency of the different

versions of cohort and generation phenomena analytically distinguished above is the merging that can be observed within the very same framework of Gadaa age and generation organization. In the case of the Boran we are dealing not only with individual familial cycles, or generalized generation sets, but with a whole administrative or governmental system (as will be discussed in this paper) based on age-grading and a deep regard for the generational cycle.

While the age-grading aspect in Gadaa is mainly present in the (ideal) age-mates' cohort-bound climbing up of the "ladder" (Spencer 1976) of seniority, the generational aspect comes in at the moment of initiation, when a male, along with all his brothers (who belong to the same set as he himself), gets introduced to the system in chronological accordance with the life-course timing and set membership of his own father. The son's set then always remains at an equal distance to his father's set, which synchronically "moves", some distance ahead, through the same life cycle (and thus always remains senior in rank with regard to the son's set). This type of filial "bond", embedded in the group's socio-political organisation, can have affective values but it can also become a "fetter" on personal decisions and even cause individual life crises. For instance, a son who is born late to an elder may, by the time he finally reaches adult age, already be "too late" for his own (generation set defined) time of marriage. Indeed, the moment a member of the family does not stick to the rules for the timing of legitimate procreation, which according to Boran rules is confined to the stage of "fatherhood" (called *raaba doorii*), the whole generational chain is brought out of step. Demographic surveys suggest that large numbers of people no longer match the ideal correlation of age and generation set membership (Legesse 1973) and should therefore, nominally at least, fall out of the system thus becoming deprived of their participatory rights in social and political life. This has led some analysts to regard the system as "dysfunctional" or as something "fading away" over the course of time (even though the Boran themselves do not seem to be too bothered about the "[mal]functioning" of their system). In ways mirroring the related discussions of scientists about European societies (where it is assumed that there once existed an age-structured and institutionalized social order, "swept away" or at least profoundly transformed by the coming of modernity) for the Boran it was assumed that age and generation systems that had once functioned perfectly had over time come to be "out of step". But the question of whether there ever was such an ideal state in history when the system existed in its "pure" form and the institutional norm was still "in order" seems valid for both the Western "historical modernist" and the Boran-related statistical approaches.

The Boran Gadaa age-grading system

Let us first consider the ideal course of events: born as the first-born son of a *raaba dorii* (which is the first stage of the age-grade that permits a father to raise sons), a male, as a matter of principle, enters the cycle as a *daballe*. This is a stage of ritual “purity” associated partly with somewhat female symbolic ascriptions such as the wearing of leather clothes embroidered with cowry shells. He will be nurtured by his mother, play around the compound with relatives, siblings and friends and, if he is already capable enough, be trusted with his first herding tasks (mostly involving calves in the compound). Eight years later he will proceed to the next stage in the cycle, called *gammee xixiqqoo* (“little *gammee*”), at the same time that his father enters the *gadaa* grade (the politically most important stage of his life career). While his father “rules the country” as a member of his age and generation set, the first-born boy gathers increasing experience as a herder until he enters the grade of *gammee guguddoo* (“big *gammee*”), together with his age-mates, at the time his father leaves the prestigious *gadaa* grade and becomes a *yuuba* elder. At this stage, the son is in an upwards-oriented period of his life cycle: ideally fierce and young, already capable of herding and of competing with his peers, he is, however, still regarded as immature and has to wait a further eight years before he becomes a *kuusaa*. The *kuusaa* stage represents the time when he and his age-mates will first be fully socially recognized as “players” in the Gadaa system: they organize assemblies, live together and elect their own leader, who will be the future *gadaa* leader once their set reaches its political pre-eminence. All this, however, is spatially and socially separated from the age sets of their predecessors who at the same time as this is going on are ruling the country or preparing themselves for the take-over of power and who have their own separate age-set villages. Another eight years later, the man enters the *raaba* grade. The *raaba* live in a joint village under the leadership of the leader they elected during the previous *kuusaa* period.

The *raabaa didiqqoo* is the first grade in which males are allowed to marry. They are, however, still not permitted to raise children at this stage.

After a further eight years the man finally reaches the stage of full political maturity (*gadaa*). Together with his age-mates, he now lives in the nomadic village; his leader has now been officially invested as *abbaa gadaa* (“father of the Gadaa”) and has been entrusted, together

with a number of officers (called *aduula* and *hayyuu*), with the responsibility of ruling the country. This represents the peak of the social and political career of a man.

After eight years of ruling, though, the *gadaa* must retire and becomes a *yuuba* elder. His own father, at this time, undergoes a further transition in a ceremony known as *gadaamojiii* to become a fully retired *jaarsa* elder, a person whose forces are leaving him and who is said to “become a child again”. Our man, as a *yuuba* elder, still has some advisory functions and acts a mediator, ritual expert and peacemaker at this point. Although his set nominally continues passing through the stage ladder (so as to allow their successors to proceed in their life careers), the overall *yuuba* status basically remains the same over the next 3-4 stages. By the time his son acts as *gadaa*, he will be considered a *gadaamojiii* (a “not *gadaa* anymore”), which indicates that he has retired from the Gada cycle. By the time his own son retires from *gadaa* and becomes a *yuuba*, he will finally have had to make room by taking the last step of becoming a fully retired, “really old”, *jaarsa* elder himself, just as his own father had before him.

Fathers and sons: linked lives and generational cycles

Given that the time of entrance into the Gadaa cycle of a man is defined by the grade position of his father, the son’s cycle is always bound to the cycle of his own father. Each of the sets has, at its highest level, a “ruling elite” which generally consists of the (preferably first-born) direct offspring of the rulers of the fathers’ set. The members of a given council responsible for ruling during a specific *gadaa* period thus, by definition, belong to a conjoint generation set. Forty years before, their own fathers had been living together in a communal village (*ya’α*) and had organized public rituals and assemblies, thus jointly going through the waiting periods and finally the peak period of their political lives. Now, forty years later, their sons do the same by founding a joint *ya’α* village and jointly passing through the socially and politically relevant stages still to come.

Early-born, right-born and late-born sons

So far the ideal timing has been described. We have described the case for what Leus has called the “elite children”, the ones who are born at the correct time, during their father’s *raaba doorii* period, as *dabballe*, who are referred to as “sons of bulls” and who are the heirs and future

leaders of the country. But what if a man begets a son other than in his eight-year-long *raaba doorii* period?

While the beginning of the procreative period is clearly marked by entrance into the “fatherhood” grade (*raaba doorii*), its ending is not as clearly demarcated and elders may still beget children in later life. While those sons born “correctly” during their father’s *raaba doorii* period, those entering the cycle as *daballe*, perfectly fit the ideal age scheme of staging, their younger brothers may be “late” and “run behind” their elder brothers in that they are constantly too young for the ceremonies they should pass according to their nominal grade-ascribed “age”.

A point should be raised with regard to many other observers’ doubts as to whether a system like Gadaa could be maintained, or keep on working as a proper functioning cycle, given that so many people do not adhere to the rules of “rightful” procreation, as can be deduced from the statistics (Legesse 1973). The point to be made is that perhaps the system does not really concern *all* a man’s sons to the same extent, rather being focused on the first-born sons, the “real” heirs, who stand at the “core” of the Gadaa system. We would deal in this case with a kind of “focused attentiveness” that concentrates on the most vital figures and tolerates partial differentiation or even non-compliance for the younger members. Applied to the case at hand, it would not be necessary for *all* male Boran to fit perfectly into the age and generation scheme as long as the first-born ones – who are the main heirs and political successors of their fathers – do fit into the ideal frame (cf. Hazel 1985: 250, Dahl 1998: 313-314).

Generational modes and governmental organization

In light of the above discussion it needs to be asked why such an elaborate way of organizing society is chosen and put into practice by the Boran since, as the previous passages have shown, the Gadaa system requires constant effort to be upheld: there are prescriptions and prohibitions to be declared on a normative level and diverse rituals, ceremonies and calendar calculations necessary in order to keep it ongoing. Consideration of demographic factors furthermore showed that in a “natural” or purely biological-driven setting age-staging and intergenerational succession would not be in step. The question remains, then, of why so much effort is put in to *make* it be in step.

As a matter of fact, the most efficient or convenient form of organization in a context such as the one described here for the Boran would be a system that combined the different factors or components of both biological and cultural age, generation and familial cycles. In a context like the North-east African one, where intergenerational relations between fathers and sons (and, by extension, between grandfathers and grandsons) are the most significant for the organization of family life and economy and where age differentiation plays an important role in most encounters in public life it seems completely natural to make the overall societal structure based on these principles, too. This, however, would only work if a certain degree of synchronization and institutionalization of the many diverse individual familial cycles and those of wider kinship groups could be ensured in some way or another. With the introduction of general marriage and procreation rules binding for all group members, with the sub-division of society into common “generation classes”, into clearly defined “cohorts” or “sets” and with the strict obligation for all members to stick to the rules of timing with regard to life transitions and the handover of power and responsibility on all levels, such synchronization can be brought into existence. Gadaa provides this necessary degree of synchronization and institutionalization. The model comprises, by combining the mobilizing principles of kinship, age and generational succession, different modes of administrative, military, juridical and other tasks to generate a “state-like” order.

Marriage and the production of offspring, in such contexts, are *political issues*. The assumed private nature of family and “kinship issues” and the assumed diametric opposition of these to “public policy matters” such as war and peace-making therefore need to be qualified. Marriage, procreation and the identification of legitimate descendants and heirs can, indeed, be subject to far-reaching social and political decision-making.

It would thus seem worth considering attributing the very notion of “governance” a wider meaning. State-bureaucratic models are simply possible frameworks sometimes chosen to organize politics or “administrate” people’s affairs on a wider societal level. Age and generation systems, such as Gadaa, may organize matters differently in terms of the detail but are not inherently distinct in all their goals and tasks.

At the same time as they combine different factors of age and generation, all formalised age and generation class systems, as is often stressed, seem to have a weakness in common, what Dyson-Hudson calls a “degree of built-in malfunctioning” (1966: 202) and Baxter and Almagor “a continuing dilemma”. This is the problem of the “reconciliation of age, generation, and the

steady flow of time” (1978: 163) since “(p)hysical, mental, sexual and social ages do not necessarily correspond” (ibid.: 163). Counter-measures, or “secondary rules”, which lift the hardships or individual problems presented by this have to evolve in such a context and a certain freedom of interpretation or even manipulation of ideal rules is often found (ibid.: 164-165). The substance or the “core” of the system, however, must be maintained.

The Boran experience does confirm the ambiguous picture of people’s non-conformist behaviour on a larger scale. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to think of Gadaa and other types of age and generation organization as “failed” or “dysfunctional” systems. In fact, a social, administrative or governmental system realised in the form of its ideal blueprint and in full accord with the original intentions of policy-makers does not exist anywhere. Rulers and governors may face different options when dealing with people’s non-compliance to declared rules: they may attempt to regulate and correct them further or to enforce them through sanctions or they may decide to ignore “deviance” as long as it does not threaten to make the foundations collapse. There can often be observed an active interplay between the enactment and maintenance of normative rules, on the one hand, and repeated actual behaviour on the other, this representing a tacit compliance and consideration of what is practicable under the present conditions and what is therefore to be tolerated. This is what we call the daily pragmatism of “government business” and it appears to be particularly relevant in the Boran context.

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