THE SAMBURU

First published in 1965, this classic ethnography examines the society of the Samburu, a nomadic Kenyan people clinging to a traditional way of life. Paul Spencer spent more than two years amongst the Samburu, during which time he became adopted as a member of the clan and observed the workings of their age organization.

Samburu society is a gerontocracy in which power rests with the older men. Men under thirty may not marry or otherwise assert their personal independence, and in The Samburu Paul Spencer reveals how young men are trapped in the vacuum created by this gerontocratic regime. This delayed development leads initially to resentment that is expressed in delinquent tendencies, but as the young men mature and acquire a greater stake in the system, they learn to support it.

In his new preface to this important work, Paul Spencer describes how he came to profile the Samburu at a time when they were relatively unknown, and explains the relevance of the study of age organization in anthropology.

Paul Spencer is Honorary Director of the International African Institute and Emeritus Professor of African Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the UK. He is a world authority on the peoples of East Africa and author of The Maasai of Matapato (1988, 2004) and Time, Space and the Unknown (2004).

ROUTLEDGE CLASSIC ETHNOGRAPHIES bring together key anthropology texts which have proved formative in the development of the discipline. Originally published between the 1930s and the 1980s, these titles have had a major impact on the way in which anthropology, and most particularly ethnography, is conducted, taught, and studied.

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A study of gerontocracy

Paul Spencer

LONDON AND NEW YORK
TO MY PARENTS  BROTHERS AND SISTERS
CONTENTS

PREFACE TO NEW EDITION xi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS xvi
INTRODUCTION xx

1. THE PASTORAL ECONOMY 1
2. CLANSHIP AND EXOGAMY 19
3. THE FAMILY AND THE HERD 39
4. THE STRUCTURE OF SAMBURU SOCIETY 52
5. THE MORAN 72
6. THE MORAN AND THE TOTAL SOCIETY 93
7. ELDERHOOD AND THE CURSE 121
8. THE STATUS OF WOMEN 148
9. SOCIAL ATTITUDES AND CEREMONY 162
10. THE SAMBURU AND SOME NEIGHBOURING TRIBES: A COMPARISON 191
11. CONCLUSION: THE GERONTOCRATIC SOCIETY 210

APPENDIX: Census Techniques and Data 217
BIBLIOGRAPHY 224
INDEX 227
# ILLUSTRATIONS

## MAPS AND CHARTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Map of the Samburu District, with Neighbouring Tribes Referred to in the Text</td>
<td>xviii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Map and Kinship Diagram of Lekiso’s Settlement</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution of Settlements in the Upper Seiya Area</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Samburu Segmentary Descent System</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Development of Age-sets through the Age Grade System</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modes of Behaviour Associated with Age</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan and Genealogy of Two Ceremonial Settlements</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Distribution of Age Grades by Age and Sex</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinship Diagram: the Seduction of Kipepial’s Mistress</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Comparison between Two Reverse Processes: the Evolution of a Dance and the Social Development of the Individual</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinship Diagram: Darapul’s Second Marriage</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## PLATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plate Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>A moran sings of the exploits of his Club at a dance</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Moran kill an ox at an <em>illmugit</em> ceremony</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>A group of moran at a meeting</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IV. Elders give their blessing at a wedding  

TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Homestead Related to Size</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of Homestead Related to Age of Stock Owner</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numbers of Wives Associated with Age of Stock Owner</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closest Degrees of Kinship between Families of a Settlement</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical Distribution of a Mother’s Allotted Herd among Her Four Sons</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of Polygamists Associated with Age</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical Development of a Total Herd</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dates of Initiation of Living Age-sets</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistical Similarities between Alternate Age-sets</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison between Polygamy Rates of Samburu and Dorobo</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison between Polygamy Rates of Certain Samburu Phratries</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Gerontocratic Index for Several Tribes</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative Degree of Differentiation and Scarcity in Four Societies</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix

Marriage Statistics (Settlement Census)  219
Marriage Statistics (Clan Census)  219
Marriage Statistics (Tax-book Census)  219
Distribution of Population in Different Age Grades (Comparison between Censuses)  220
Polygamy Rates (Comparison between Censuses)  220
Distribution of Population by Age and Sex (Clan Census)  220
Comparison between Ages of Husbands and Their Wives (Clan Census)  221
The Samburu was first published in 1965 and this new edition is linked to a reprint of The Maasai of Matapato (1988) by Routledge and the publication of a further volume on the Maasai entitled Time, Space, and the Unknown (2004). These follow in a logical sequence to form a set of three works that span my involvement in this area.

When I first started along this track, there had been an upsurge of interest in the age-based pastoral societies of East Africa. Anthropological studies on this topic were few, and each newcomer was expected to seek out an unclaimed group—a tribe—as uncharted territory. In 1957, I was at the tail-end of this trend and had at first proposed to study the Maasai, only to find that there were already two other social anthropologists in the area: Alan Jacobs among the Maasai proper and Philip Gulliver among the Arusha, both in Tanzania. This led me to turn my attention to the Samburu of Kenya, where the field was quite empty.

The Samburu were the most northern group of nomadic pastoralists within the Maas-speaking cluster. In effect, they could be regarded as upcountry cousins of the Maasai proper, sharing traditions of joint ancestry and just managing to survive into colonial times over a period when the Maasai dominated the plains further south. The Samburu were an idyllic society for an anthropological novice and this switch in focus from the political centre of this group to the periphery was a stroke of good fortune. The literature on this area was fragmentary compared with the Maasai, presenting an open pasture for research, and, as it turned out, an altogether less elaborate and confusing set of practices.

The present volume focuses on the Samburu age system as a gerontocracy. A number of people—including some well-seasoned colleagues—have suggested that it is a book about old men; and I have been tempted to congratulate them for getting as far as the subtitle. Some reviews even substituted the term ‘gerontology’ in the title. The point to stress is that this work is not primarily about old or middle-aged men, but about young men who are trapped in the vacuum created by a gerontocratic regime, where their alternative lifestyle has a mesmerizing quality. It concerns the social construction of adolescence. Age systems structure the politics of ageing, and the Samburu provided a particularly well-defined version. The Maasai system had some gerontocratic aspects, as I later found, but the power of the moran (or warriors) in carving their own independent arena and the problems of senior age-sets declining into old age suggested that ‘gerontocracy’ was not quite the right label to summarize my later volumes on the Maasai.

I wrote this study when I was still fresh from an extended period among the Samburu, aware that they had given me every opportunity I could wish for and an unrepeatable experience. The text went through numerous drafts before I was rescued by a structure that seemed to do justice to my material (a habit that persists). Apart from correcting some obvious errors, I have left this text as it stands. I was enchanted by the Samburu, like so many others who have had dealings with them. There was a charm in their manner that seemed to stem from the warmth of their community life. But this involvement also
raised some awkward contradictions. Readers of this work may note the odd contrast between the initial pages, where I expressed my affection for the Samburu, and later chapters where I exposed my ambivalence over the brutality of arranged marriages between older men and barely mature girls. On the one hand, this practice was a fundamental premise from the outset of a study that aimed to convey a total way of life, and no self-evident part of this could be ignored or expunged. On the other hand, my attachment to the Samburu as a people managed to gloss over this issue. The resolution was to aim at a morally neutral account that sought to learn from the Samburu experience rather than defend it. But the deeper my involvement with them, the more uncomfortable the moral dilemmas. My case study of one of these marriages, where I had been drawn to play a symbolic role, was a critical experience. It added so much to my understanding of family and gender relations for the sake of my study, but at the cost of colluding with a practice that I abhorred for its gross unfairness. Again, there was a discrepancy between my assertion at the end of this work, that the Samburu could contemplate no alternative to their way of life, and my sense that everything would change when Kenya achieved its independence in 1963, adding to the urgency of this study and the need to break the spell it held over me. The tortuous process of writing this volume raised these contradictory aspects and much more besides. It was time to place the Samburu as I had experienced them on record for posterity. The moran of my age-set were at last moving on in a society to which they belonged, and I needed to do the same in order to give my career the chance of a new start.

I only returned to social anthropology in 1971 after a break of nine years, when I decided that the academic world seemed more promising than anything I could achieve elsewhere. The next six years were the most productive period of my career. Much of the substance of what I have been writing since then stems from this period. As a lecturer at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, I had an opportunity to work among the Maasai, where the field by now was wide open. It was my double fortune to have cut my teeth among the Samburu, where I had been drawn into a community from whom I learned the rudiments of the Maasai language and culture—and of fieldwork—and then to find a niche among Maasai studies—which was an altogether more crowded field. In this sense, my subsequent book on the Matapato Maasai followed directly from *The Samburu*.

The clearer structure of the Samburu age system provided a stepping stone towards a greater awareness of the more dominant Maasai edifice in Matapato. At the time of my fieldwork, age-set restrictions on initiation and marriage were rather more rigorous among the Samburu. The Maasai, by contrast, laid more stress on loyalty between age mates, and their moran were encouraged to display an excessive regard for accountability towards one another and to develop their debating skills. This led them towards the finesse of elderhood, which was characterized by these loyalties, provoking striking tensions between age-sets. By comparison, the Samburu moran in this volume are cast into a limbo for up to fourteen years, facilitating polygyny among the elders but also slipping too readily out of control. Once out of this limbo, their lifestyle as married elders appears more tranquil and mellow than in Matapato. These differences were matters of degree up to a point, but generally there was a greater elaboration and variety in the Maasai age system, and I would have found this too complex as an initial study.
The Samburu also have a place in the most recent book of this series, which addresses the Maasai perception of their universe and the wider pattern of variation. In the first place, aspects of Samburu cosmology are less opaque than among the Maasai; this requires some explanation and it also throws light on the Maasai system of beliefs. While the Samburu are generally less eloquent than the Maasai over a wide range of topics and their ritual behaviour is less elaborate, they are at least more explicit on metaphysical explanations associated with guardian spirits and the operation of the elders’ curse. Second, the Samburu are characterized by strong clan loyalties and interclan rivalries. Gossip infects their conversation within each dispersed clan community, constantly updating news over a network stretching up to one hundred miles or more from end to end. Correspondingly, there is a general ignorance of and lack of interest in the affairs of neighbours of another clan. This contrasts with the Maasai, where local community relations cut across the bonds of clanship. However, there is evidence that the Maasai may have had stronger clan loyalties in the mid-nineteenth century, before they developed a more formidable warrior system. Partisan feeling among clansmen appears to have been undermined by adopting an overarching loyalty within each age-set as a basis for unity and military aggression. Transferring my attention to the Maasai gave an impression that the Samburu were closer to an ancestral prototype of Maa social organization, when clans had been stronger and age-set loyalties weaker. This lay beyond the scope of my research, but the evidence was striking, especially taken alongside oral traditions and some of the earliest writings on the Maasai. From this point of view, the Masula of Mt Ngiro may be regarded as a sector of Samburu society that is closer to Maasai in various ways. In the present volume, I refer to them as ‘Samburu-Dorobo’ and describe how they conform less to ‘Samburu’ ideals: there is less concern for local clan unity and an easing of age-set restrictions on early initiation and marriage. It was only later that I realized that these are also Maasai characteristics. Revisits to the Samburu area in 1973 and 1976 indicated some exceptions to these age-based restrictions in areas affected by change, but the integrity of clanship remained strong. Since then, there has been substantial change in the growing townships and on the Leroghi plateau. But in the vast barrenness of the low country, nomadic Samburu have continued to display the strong traditional features that are described here.

The third volume also explores another telling feature, which concerns an ox that a Samburu boy should slaughter for a feast after his initiation to become a moran. This ox is known as loolbaa, and I refer to the ceremony in the present work as the ilmugit of the arrows. This corresponds to the ox-feast that is mounted for each Samburu girl as the most critical part of her bridewealth when she is married; and regardless of sex, these feasts should be mounted for brothers and sisters in strict order of birth (pp. 87, 239). Turning to the Maasai, a highly prestigious ox-feast bearing the same name—loolbaa—is performed much later in a man’s career (and only after his older brothers). Similarly, the formal bridewealth is paid for a Maasai wife and a fine ox is slaughtered for a feast many years after her marriage (and again only after her older sisters). Historical evidence suggests that each of these ox-feasts may have previously been held at an earlier stage in the careers of Maasai men and women; and these practices now appear in the process of slipping into disuse, beyond the point of recovery with a mounting backlog of delay and unperformed ceremonies by older siblings (and parents). The Maasai do not suggest that they once staged these ox-feasts as early as the Samburu, where they follow initiation, but
extrapolating the evidence backwards makes this a logical inference. The extended process of slippage suggests a cumulative decay in the ideals of family propriety and reputation among the Maasai, again linked to the erosion of bonds of clanship. In other words, this slippage could be one more side-effect of the uncompromising constraints that were imposed on the Maasai age system during the nineteenth century. It is the Samburu evidence above all that suggests a historical dimension to these trends.

The study of age systems has had a chequered career in social anthropology. It has appealed to those who have encountered it—mostly in East Africa—but has barely touched the subject as a theoretical topic. A secondary theme that I consider in this volume concerns the exploitation of women, which I noted above. Audrey Richards’s *Chisungu* (1956) could be read as a pioneering study of the dignity and confidence that the ordeal of initiation bestows on a girl around the time of her marriage. However, this did not prepare me for the stark experience of Samburu girls facing arranged marriages to men who were up to four times their age. Since that time, gender and concern over the status of women, ranging from their exploitation to their inviolability, has grown into a major topic in the anthropological literature. Whereas ageing, as a further dimension of universal experience, remains in the doldrums, and the structuring of this experience through age systems arouses even less interest: it is widely regarded as esoteric and quaint rather than challenging. If bringing these three volumes together raises awareness of the topic of age organization, then it will have served a useful purpose.

‘The Survey’ that is cited in these pages was subsequently published in an abridged form as *Nomads in Alliance* (1973). My fascination with the dancing of moran (pp. 120–7) led me to elaborate on this theme and to edit a volume entitled *Society and the Dance* (1985). There are also several unpublished pieces that I would willingly offer to any reader on request. Foremost among these is a census that I compiled for Pardopa clan, involving over 600 adult males and their wives (pp. 318–19). The structuring of this genealogy by age has enabled me to use it for further exercises, extrapolating to the Maasai (*The Maasai of Matapato*: 178) and further afield (1998, *The Pastoral Continuum*: 105). Clearly, this material could have relevance for other researchers who require raw demographic data to feed into simulations for societies of this kind, where adequate material is sparse, polygyny is high, and age is a crucial variable. I can also offer copies of earlier papers on the ‘Dynamics of Samburu Religion’ (p. 185), and on ‘Samburu Notions of Health and Disease and their Relationship to Inner Cleanliness’ (pp. 269–70).

In addition to all those to whom I have expressed my thanks in these pages, I should add Edmund Leach, who first suggested that I might consider the topic of age systems in East Africa for my research; Jack Trevor, who then steered me towards the Maasai and gave me a priceless first-edition copy of Merker’s *Die Masai*; and Alan Jacobs, who encouraged me to turn to the Samburu instead. Since then, my career has led me to consider each of these subjects, though in reverse order. For this new edition of *The Samburu*, I am grateful to Benet Spencer for the new cover design and to Julene Knox, who was the commissioning editor for anthropology and religion at Routledge when I first submitted my latest typescript for publication. It was Julene’s suggestion that these
three works should be published as a trilogy, bringing the various strands together to form a coherent series. This was wholly unexpected and a long way beyond the horizon of my ambitions, and I owe a special debt of gratitude to her for this idea.

Paul Spencer
2003

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Throughout my stay among the Samburu, members of the Administration and of other Government Departments showed a great willingness to help me in every conceivable way. Mr. C.P. Chenevix Trench, as District Commissioner for Maralal District during the greater part of my stay, gave me every assistance and suggested certain lines of research which proved both interesting and invaluable for my study. During the early days of my field work, in particular, I owed much to the help and hospitality of Mr. David Lambert, and Mr. and Mrs. Tom Powell at Wamba, and of Mr. and Mrs. Gerard Prior at Isiolo. While staying among the Samburu I had no permanent base, and my greatest personal debt is to Mr. Robert Chambers who offered me unlimited hospitality at Maralal, and whose immense enthusiasm for the Samburu gave an increased stimulus for my work. Many of the points treated in this study were first discussed in embryonic form with him. I must also thank Mr. A.M. da Cruz, Mr. Leonard Waithaka and Mr. David Adams for their help in many small ways.

At Makerere College, Kampala, during two breaks in my field work, Professor Aidan Southall generously extended the facilities and accommodation provided by the East African Institute of Social Research. Here we discussed aspects of my work, and it was largely through his help that I was able to extend my field work to cover the Rendille. Dr. Gerry Shaper set up two medical research expeditions to the Samburu where we collaborated together. The second of these was a stroke of good fortune from my own point of view, as it enabled me to return to East Africa during the final phases of my writing up period at Oxford, and make up for the many omissions of my earlier field work which had by then come to light. Dr. John Lock showed an interest in Samburu herbal lore, and I am grateful to be able to quote some of his findings in Chapter Nine of the present study.

Writing a work of this kind, knowing just where to start and what to include is inevitably a formidable task, especially after several years away from a purely academic environment. I was guided during my two final years at Oxford by my supervisor, Professor Evans-Pritchard whose work among the Nuer remains the first and foremost study of pastoral peoples. I also owe much to the many informal discussions I had at this time with members of the staff and students at the Institute of Social Anthropology at
Oxford. In publishing my thesis in its present form, I have taken careful note of the points raised by my examiners, Dr. John Beattie and Dr. E.L.Peters, and by Dr. John Middleton who read the manuscript on behalf of the present publishers.

My work has been influenced by several writers. My debt to Professor A.N.Tucker is only implicit in these pages: he showed an early interest in my work, and armed with the Masai Grammar he had prepared in collaboration with Mr. J.Tombo Ole Mpaayei, it was possible to dispense with interpreters and an initial knowledge of Swahili from the very start; the exact value of this in terms of field-work time that was saved is inestimable. Dr. P.H. Gulliver has not only given me sound advice since my period of field work, his earlier work among the Turkana has also proved a stimulating model of pastoral life in this part of Kenya, and I constantly found myself using it as a comparison and contrast with my own work. During my field work, I was generally intrigued with the emphasis that the Samburu placed on their ceremonies and the anxiety verging at times on chaos and panic that they displayed during such occasions. Dr. W.W. Sargant’s book, Battle for the Mind, provided a vital clue to appreciating these phenomena. Dr. Sargant has since visited the Samburu and has endorsed the general line of argument put forward in Chapter Nine of the present study with some helpful comments.

And finally, my greatest debt is to the Samburu themselves, not only for their co-operation in my work, but also for making what might have been an arduous period of my life into one of the most delightful ones I am ever likely to experience. Choosing a virtually unknown tribe for study is a risk many anthropologists have to take, but few can have been so fortunate in their blind choice as I was. From a purely academic point of view, theirs was a fascinating social system for any anthropologist to study; but my fascination inevitably covered all aspects of their society, and above all the people themselves: they demanded it. I was drawn compulsively into the society so that I became less of an outside observer, and more of a member subject to many of the pressures and frustrations of their daily lives as well as to the warmth and the charm of their community existence in that harsh environment. By adopting me into their numbers, Pardopa clan gave me insights that it may well have been impossible to obtain as an outsider. By accepting me as a member of the Kimaniki age-set at the time of change-over, and hence as a moran on the verge of elderhood, they opened the way for me to gain first-hand impressions of the two distinct worlds of the moran and of the elders. Friends that I made, particularly of my family and clan, appear pseudonymously in the pages of this study, and they were mainly responsible for my education, leaving me only with the problem of trying to convince myself afterwards that there were other ways of life besides the Samburu. While Africa to the south of us was in the throes of an industrial revolution struggling towards a golden age of the future, we were living—foolishly perhaps—in the golden age of the present. Time meant something quite different; and under this spell, three years of my life slipped past unnoticed.

If I am to single out any individuals for special thanks, they are Ledumen Lenaibor and his brother Letapawa who as camp assistants at one time or another during my stay shepherded me from the time that I was hesitatingly trying to find my feet to moments when I was in danger of losing my head. Even if a private retreat was never a really practical proposition when living among the Samburu, a well-organized camp to lean back on was essential, especially when there were guests to be looked after or a move to
be made. In entering fully into the spirit of our rather odd assignment, these two were in many ways my closest friends.

Map of the Samburu District, with Neighbouring Tribes Referred to in the Text.