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- 1 Paul Spencer, emeritus professor of African anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and honorary director of the International African Institute, is among the first anthropologists who have extensively studied the Maa-speaking populations of East Africa, among them the Samburu and the Maasai. The re-issue of his two major works on these populations is linked to the recent publication by Routledge of a volume entitled *Time, Space and the Unknown. Maasai Configurations of Power and*

Providence, which considers more extensively the perception of space and time among Maa-speaking societies as well as the meaning of the category of destiny.

- 2 The volume called *The Samburu. A Study of Gerontocracy*, first published in 1965, followed the ethnologist's fieldwork in Kenya at the end of the 1950s among the most northern group of nomadic pastoralists within the Maa-speaking cluster. The author focused on the Samburu age-system (Chapters 4-7) to stress its impact on social relations between the members of this society, especially between young unmarried men called *morán* and old men. Political power rests in the hand of old men who also practice polygamy on a wide scale. This form of gerontocracy gives rise to a tendency for delinquent behaviour among the young men, deprived of political responsibility and prevented from marrying until the age of 30 (Chapter 6). The author emphasizes the fact that Samburu gerontocracy is supported by appropriate social values, the first of them being that of *nkanyit* or "sense of respect". Such a value contributes to the reproduction of the gerontocratic system over the years. What is interesting to note is that the author exposes his ambivalent feelings over the brutality of arranged marriages between old men and young girls. Male domination of the Samburu society was such an obvious and revolting phenomenon that Spencer dedicated one chapter to the question of women's status in a chauvinistic and gerontocratic society (Chapter 8). The author also admits that the existence of dissymmetrical relations of power between men and women had the effect of altering the idyllic and enchanting image he had of the Samburu.
- 3 First published in 1988, *The Maasai of Matapato* rests on the same lines as the study of the Samburu. The author focused on one of the main groups that compose Maa-speaking populations, that of the Matapato Maasai. The purpose of the work was to present an extensive study of Matapato Maasai age organisation and religious values that departs from general studies that tend to see the "Maasai" as an homogeneous ethnic group instead of noting variations of organisations between the numerous sub-groups (called "tribal sections" by Spencer). The ethnologist chose the Matapato Maasai as a fieldwork on the grounds that it was a population living in a remote area with few contacts with state administration and tourism. The volume covers various aspects of Maasai society, such as the economy of pastoralism (Chapter 1), marriage (Chapter 2), family (Chapters 3 and 4), age system (Chapter 5), relations between members of different age grades (Chapters 6, 8, 12-14), organisation of warrior villages called *manyata* (Chapter 7) and the status of women (Chapters 10 and 11). The author puts the accent on the dynamics of the age-system in Matapato, considered as the central institution that can account for all aspects of life. He also presents first-hand data on Maasai rituals, such as the eunoto festival (Chapter 9), celebrated five years after the first initiation of *morán* and regarded as the climax of "moranhoo". The author's conclusion on the Maasai of Matapato is not as clear-cut as for the Samburu population, but Spencer is bent to show that Maasai age organisation has the same effect as in the Samburu populations, i.e. to give rise to elder's domination and to create a perpetual state of rebellion among the young warriors category of *morán*. Spencer deals with different interpretative models that can account for such "rituals of rebellion" as Max Gluckman coined it ¹.
- 4 These two volumes have become classics of ethnography for their detailed description of the social and political life of Maa-speaking populations of East Africa. In the new preface of each volume, Paul Spencer looks back at how he came to turn his attention to the Samburu. He explains that the presence of two other social anthropologists in

the area, Alan Jacob among the Maasai ² and Philip Gulliver among the Arusha ³, made him choose an “unclaimed tribe”, a choice he realized was beneficial to a novice in anthropology because the Samburu is a “rudimentary” and “clear-cut” society that can be described more easily than other Maa-speaking populations. His shift to the Matapato Maasai took its roots in the development of his interests in comparative anthropology. The author presents it clearly that the development of ethnological interests in societies characterized by a social stratification based on distinction of age was a major step towards the recognition of the plurality of political systems in Africa. Indeed, although many studies had been published about Maasai age systems, this type of organization does not even appear in the classification of African political systems published in 1940 by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard ⁴. His work fills the gap of a discipline that has long been more concerned with models and classification than with the reality of multiple social and political organizations. Eventually, the author makes it clear that his work follows the path of functionalism in anthropology (“it was an unshamefully functionalist study”) but argues that it is the persistence of Maasai social structures through history, especially the maintenance of the age grade of moran, combined with the absence of general models of age organization, that made him choose the functionalist approach.

- 5 Paul Spencer stresses the fact that *The Maasai of Matapato* was originally conceived to be the first part of a larger volume, the second part being entitled *Models of the Maasai* and dealing with the comparison of different Maa-speaking societies. But as the first part happened to be long enough to form a whole book, it was published separately. It is the second part of the original project of a large volume on the Maasai that constitutes the present book entitled *Time, Space and the Unknown*.
- 6 In this work, the purpose of the author is to examine patterns of variation among Maasai populations. The influence of the comparative approach was perceptible in his previous works but was in a second position after his concern to provide detailed studies of Maa-speaking societies. Thus, in *The Samburu*, one chapter out of ten is dedicated to a comparison between the Samburu and neighbouring tribes (Chapter 10). The task of exploring degrees of variations in age organization and social and religious values constitute the core of a book written at the end of the ethnographer's professional career (he retired in 1997), i.e. at a point when he could assert his deep knowledge of various Maa-speaking societies while invoking his intellectual distance from the concreteness of pure data in order to propose a sort of bird's eye-view on societies constructed as models or ideal types. It is worth noticing that Paul Spencer was diverted from his work on a comparative study of Maasai societies because of his increasing interest in the impact of modern economy on pastoralism, hence the postponing of the publication of *Time, Space and the Unknown* until the year 2003 ⁵. Yet, it is striking to notice that in the two prefaces written for *The Samburu* and *The Maasai*, he asserts that no change has occurred in social practices and religious beliefs among these populations since his first visit in the 1960s ⁶. Such a paradox is not explained but it accounts for the fact that the elaboration of *Time, Space and the Unknown* relies on data collected in the 1960s and 1970s. The “Ethnographic present” that is used in the book to present data and models of societies conceals the importation of information collected in the past into the present ⁷.
- 7 The work is divided into two parts, the first part dealing with Maasai social representations and religious values, the second part considering patterns of variations

between Maasai tribal sections that concern age organization and values. The first part is composed of five chapters (Chapters 2-6). In Chapter 2, the author examines the way in which social and individual perception of time is governed by the age-system. The largest part of the chapter is concerned with the presentation of a general model of age-system based on data collected among the Samburu. It therefore constitutes an appropriate review of the material presented in *The Samburu and the Maasai of Matapato* as well as a starting point for developing the question of its impact on the perception of time. The age-system, characterized by the succession of status associated with age grade, can be seen as a pecking order in which Samburu elders are in a dominant position for they claim to be the custodians of traditional values. *Moran* are in a middle position between young boys, on the lowest level of social hierarchy, and elders. This social organization, that equates ageing with increasing political dominance, generates a very peculiar sense of time in Maasai pastoralist societies. Spencer indicates that such an experience of ageing as times moves on can be represented by an “ageing spiral”, i.e. a cyclical but not repetitive progression through time. Such an experience mostly concerns men, who are completely submitted to age organization, but it also constraints women who entirely depend on men at the different stages of their lives. Chapter 3 deals with perception of space. It first considers the sexual division of space in the layout of every hut and of the village. This description allows Spencer to examine the question of gender hierarchy in Maa-speaking societies, resorting to the work of Ulrike von Mitzlaff concerning women exploitation and women tactics to gain power for certain activities⁸. Then the author presents the perception of space beyond the limits of the village. The bushland is associated with *moran* warriors but it is also a place where sorcery takes place at night. Borders of each tribal territory constitutes the limits in which a sense of common identity is built up in opposition to other Maasai tribal groups.

- 8 Chapters 4-6 consider Maasai religious values and practices. It appears that it is the notion of uncertainty that best characterizes Maasai position towards the divine hidden world, which is both unknowable and unquestionable. There is a strong belief that misfortune is a reality that nobody can escape from, but religious ceremonies and sacrifice take place in order to invoke God and ask for his help. The ability to bless or to curse is associated with elders, increasing their control over society, but is also in the hand of sorcerers, and among them the more skilful and famous ones called Prophets. Chapter 5 is devoted to the dynasty of Prophets belonging to the tribal section of the Loonkidongi. The Loonkidongi Prophets are famous in the entire Maa-speaking area for their extraordinary power and their ability to act as intermediaries with the divine world. Their role is to protect people from misfortune. As they constitute a class that stays apart from ordinary people, they are considered with great fear and respect. Chapter 6 presents in many details techniques of divination. Spencer specifies that the data he got concerning the process of acquiring skills of sorcery and interpreting the number of peddles that are thrown for divination rely on one informant but were compared to the information given by another Lookidongi informant. Overshadowing the differences in information to focus on their congruence, the author gives an account of interpretation of oracles that presents itself as a general model from which only slight local variations depart.
- 9 The second part of the volume is divided into four chapters and a conclusion. It is concerned with patterns of variations in several Maasai tribal sections from the general model (or ideal type) he was bound to draw in the first part. The author underlines the

fact that such a model is not the ethnographers' reconstruction but a version that is stressed by every Maasai community. In Chapter 7, Spencer considers a northern dominant tribal section called the Purko Maasai. He gives a review of its characteristics concerning its age system and main religious values and concludes that Purko society constitute a "node" between the northern model of gerontocracy (i.e. domination of the age grade of the elders over that of the *moran* warriors) and the southern model of rivalries between various age-sets. Chapter 8 deals with another dominant group, that of the Kisonko Maasai of Loitokitok, whose territory lies along the Kenyan and Tanzanian border. They constitute a model of southern Maasai societies where unity is jeopardized by struggle for power between successive age-sets. In other words, both the Purko and the Kisonko are considered two opposed ideal types of Maasai social organization, ranging from gerontocracy in the north (Purko) to a balanced state of rivalries in the south (Kisonko). In Chapter 9, the author attempts to operate an historical reconstruction of Maasai age organization at the beginning of the 20th century. He summarizes the work carried out by a German officer, Moritz Merker⁹, centered around the subjects of moranhood, elderhood and sorcerers, and underlines obvious flaws and anomalies in description and analysis. Nevertheless, it seems that Merker's ethnographic observations are reliable enough to constitute a basic document that can be used to draw the broad lines of change that have been going on in Maasai societies. Chapter 10 is an account of Philip Gulliver's work on the Arusha Maasai of Tanzania. It presents the dynamic or transactionalist approach adopted by Gulliver, i.e., a perspective where the whole age-system is perceived as a battleground for prestige and political power, therefore refusing a normative approach of social reality. Spencer questions the relevance of such a model to explain the persistence of institutions over time and the reproduction of social order.

- 10 Eventually, in the last chapter, Spencer reconsiders the transactionalist approach adopted by Gulliver to emphasize its limits. He highlights the fact that such a theoretical perspective tends to ignore the constraints of social rules on the individuals while stressing their capacity to exploit the system. He resorts to the notion of dilemma (especially the cat-and-mouse dilemma, the game of Chicken and the Prisoner's dilemma) to account for what is the room for manoeuvre of the individual. He expresses in the form of matrices models of dilemma that face age-sets, showing that four main scenarios of rivalry are likely to occur. After displaying elaborated systems to explain social action, the author paradoxically ends his work saying that theoretical constructions will never achieve to account for the complexity of social reality.
- 11 The re-issue of Paul Spencer's earlier books, which coincides with the publication of a new volume, is more than a simple means to promote classics of ethnography. *Time, Space and the Unknown* obviously constitutes the final volume that puts an end to the author's comprehensive work on Maa-speaking societies and their age organization. The three books form a trilogy that rests on the same fieldworks among the Samburu and the Maasai and on a comparative as well as functionalist perspective on the cultural phenomenon of age organization.

NOTES

1. M. GLUCKMAN, *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa*, London, Cohen & West, 1963 [1954].
2. A. H. JACOBS, "The Traditional Political Organisation of the Pastoral Masai", unpublished D. Phil. thesis, Oxford, 1965.
3. P. GULLIVER, *Social Control in an African Society: a Study of the Arusha, Agricultural Masai of Northern Tanganyika*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963.
4. M. FORTES & E. E. EVANS-PRITCHARD (eds.). *African Political Systems*, London, Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1940.
5. His interest in social and cultural change in Maasai societies led to the publication of *The Pastoral Continuum: The Marginalization of Tradition in East Africa*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1998.
6. *Time, Space and the Unknown*, op. cit.: "I revisited the Samburu in 1973 and 1976, and this suggested no substantial change in their practices or beliefs since 1960. For present purposes, my references to the Samburu and the Masai proper may therefore be regarded as essentially contemporaneous", preface, p. XIV. It is more than debatable to erase in such a way more than thirty years of change and assert that data collected in the past can be considered as contemporaneous data.
7. But it has to be said that some parts of the book were written at the same time as *The Maasai of Matapato* (Chapters 3, 5-8, and 11), at the end of the 1970s, while new drafts were added later.
8. U. VON MITZLAFF, *Maasai Women: Life in a Patriarchal Society, Field Research among the Parakuyo, Tanzania*, Munich: Trickster Verlag, 1988.
9. M. MERKER, *Die Masai: Ethnographische Monographie eines Ostafrikanischen Semitenvolkes*, Berlin, Dietrich Reimer, 1904.