

MARRYING INTO AN AGE-SET  
The redefinition of social relations and extension  
of women's social networks in Bashada

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*ABSTRACT.* The study of age-systems in East Africa has generally excluded the role of women, who in most cases do not have their own, but are rather associated to their husbands' age-sets through marriage. Commonly, such societies are male-dominated and patrilineal. As age-sets typically cut across kinship lines, they permit both men and women to enter into additional relationships to widen their social networks. While many authors have described the different functions of age-systems, including the relationships among age-mates and between members of senior and junior age-sets, the question of how women's lives are influenced or changed through age-set networks has remained open. This article examines to what extent age-set affiliation brings about new chances and additional agency or alternatively restricts women even more to their traditionally defined roles as wives and mothers.

*INTRODUCTION*

Most East African pastoralist societies are known to have a rather male-dominated social organisation, and many of these groups are also known for their age-systems. The study of age-systems has mostly focused on their political and ritual functions and on how the lives of men are structured through the progressive movement of age-sets through age-grades. Girls and women have mostly only been mentioned in the context of marriage rules, but few have looked at their daily lives. As age- and generation-sets by definition cut across kinship lines, the question remains whether these might offer additional opportunities or further restraints for the females.

This article explores how, among the Bashada people of southern Ethiopia, females' statuses and their relationships with other females and males are shaped through the existing age-system. A focus is laid on the question whether the extension of a woman's social network through affiliation to her husband's age-set at the time of marriage adds to female power, freedom or autonomy, or whether it rather contributes to the dominance of males. Relationships between the wife and her husband's age-mates, his seniors and juniors and the wives of these men will be of special interest here.

*AGE-SYSTEMS AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN*

Variations in structural age-organisation exist in most parts of the world, but North-East Africa is famous for its number and variety of age- and generation-set societies

(Bernardi 1985:11). There are only a few comparative studies of age-systems,<sup>1</sup> since most other publications concentrate on the description and analysis of just one group. The study of age-systems was popular especially in the 1970s and 1980s, concentrating on their influence on male life-cycles. Some argued that age-systems can be compared to military organisations in which age-sets are used to recruit warriors and age-grades regulate the hierarchy of command (Simonse 1998:1). Others emphasized their integrative function in providing orientation and regulating interaction among male equals, seniors and juniors who are not related through kinship ties.<sup>2</sup> Uri Almagor (1978) coined the concept of the 'ethos of equality', referring to the feeling of brotherhood and mutual obligation between age-mates that should help to reduce rivalry and avoid conflicts between them. The rituals related to age- and generation-sets and age-grading have been described as contributing to peace-keeping and integration.<sup>3</sup> Other aspects of age-organisations mentioned in the literature are their effects on the 'harmonizing and structuring of time' (Spencer 1998:95) and the distribution of property (Tadesse 2000), and their diffusion.<sup>4</sup>

Only a few authors took the daily interactions between young and old, or male and female in age-set societies into account.<sup>5</sup> The position and roles of women were not yet considered an issue of much value by many authors, when in the 1980s Bernardo Bernardi demanded that studies of age-systems should take the position of women into account if they wanted to be considered 'systematic and objective' (1985:132). In recent decades many publications have appeared on women in East Africa, but only a few have examined how girls' and women's lives are influenced by the age-system, mostly only by describing how the age-set affiliations of men (by initiation) and women (by marriage) regulate sexual and marital relationships (Spencer 1991, Talle 1998).

Ulrike von Mitzlaff (1988) studied the daily lives of girls and women among the Parakuyo Massai in Tanzania. She observed that the affiliation of women to their husbands' age-sets does not have a great influence on their lives, as women affiliated to the same set 'come from different clans, different generations and different regions', so that they do not have interests in common, nor do they communicate with each other (1988:153). Instead, she argued, informal women's groups, for example in the neighbourhood, have a much greater impact on women's daily lives (1988:159–160). Kaori Kawai (1998) claimed that, among the Chamus of Kenya, women are influenced by both men's age-sets and informal women's groups in neighbourhoods. Kuwee Kumsa (1997) explored the mobilisation of collective female agency among the Ethiopian Oromo, and Marit Østebø (2009) described women's traditional rights among the Arsi-Oromo, without referring to the generation system.

<sup>1</sup> See Prins (1953), Eisenstadt (1956), Stewart (1977) and Bernardi (1985).

<sup>2</sup> See Evans-Pritchard (1947), Baxter (1979) and Tornay (1987).

<sup>3</sup> See Zitelmann (1994), Baxter, Hultin and Triulzi (1996) and Schlee (1998).

<sup>4</sup> See Kurimoto (1998), Spencer (1998) and Tornay (2001).

<sup>5</sup> See Spencer (1965), Llewellyn-Davies (1978) and Tornay (1981).

In only a very few ethnic groups do girls and women have their own independent age-sets.<sup>6</sup> Eisei Kurimoto and Simon Simonse claim that in these societies female age-sets 'have the same origin and obey the same mechanisms as their male counterparts' (1998:19). While the men's sets are 'enemy-focussed' and serve as defenders of their own group, the women's sets 'unite in opposition to the men' (Kurimoto and Simonse 1998:19).

In Ethiopia, age- or generation-sets are found among a large number of societies, many of which belong to the agro-pastoral groups of south-western Ethiopia. In South Omo, the Karo, Nyangatom, Mursi, Dassanech, Arbore and Tsamako are reported to have an age-system. While the Kwegu of the lower Omo valley are said to have recently adopted age-sets from their neighbours, the Nyangatom (Kurimoto 1998:46–47), and the Hamar claim to have given up theirs in the late nineteenth century (Strecker 1976:78). Remarkably, the Bashada, who are officially considered as part of the Hamar, still have a simple but functioning age-system today.

#### BASHADA AGE-SETS AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN

The Bashada live in close proximity to other ethnic groups in the South Omo Administrative Zone, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Regional State, Ethiopia. In 2003, their population was estimated at about 2,500.<sup>7</sup> Officially they are classified as a subgroup of the neighbouring Hamar, with whom they and the Banna share a common language, as well as most rituals and institutions.<sup>8</sup> Seniority plays a central role in all three groups, but only the Bashada have named age-sets, into which they group men through an initiation rite and women through marriage.

The principles of Bashada age-organisation are rather simple when compared to those of other groups such as the Borana and other Oromo-speaking groups, who are famous for their elaborate generation-set system (*gaada*) (Asmarom 1973), or the Samburu (Spencer 1965). The Bashada word for age-set is 'anamo', a term that is also used for age-mates (e.g. members of the same age-set and their wives) and in a wider sense also for age-peers from childhood on (e.g. males or females of similar biological age). Bashada males form local peer groups already as adolescents. When their members are in their early or mid-twenties, the peer groups of all localities are merged into one age-set, which is ritually named by the senior age-sets. While membership in adolescents'

<sup>6</sup> Bernardi (1985:19), Simonse (1998:3). See also the contribution by Echi Christina Gabbert in this collection.

<sup>7</sup> Official census carried out by local administration in Dimeka (oral information from Sintayu Garshu, a local official).

<sup>8</sup> Besides, the ritual leaders of the Bashada, Hamar and Banna are believed to have been relatives. Members of the three groups are allowed to intermarry, and warfare between them is prohibited (Lydall 1976:393).

peer groups is flexible, the naming marks the establishment of an official age-set and the end of the recruitment of new members. The age-sets are hierarchically ordered by seniority, so that every individual man stands in a clear relationship to all other males in Bashada: members of the same age-set are his equals, while all others are either junior or senior to him.

While it is known to be typical for many age-systems that the members of the same age- or generation-set move together through a series of age-grades, this is not the case in Bashada. Here, status change and movement from one age-grade to the next (such as initiation into adulthood and marriage) are all achieved individually, and age-sets are therefore never linked to any political or ritual office. The central purposes of Bashada age-sets are to regulate social relationships and provide orientation in everyday interaction between boys and men of the same or adjacent age-sets, to assign responsibilities to members of different age-sets in specific situations, and generally to enlarge the social networks of individuals.<sup>9</sup> Members of the same age-set are supposed to display loyalty to and solidarity with each other, and to avoid conflict. At the same time, they are expected to educate and discipline any wrongdoers among them. Juniors must obey and accept the orders of their seniors, while seniors carry responsibility for the juniors' proper behaviour (Epple 2010:84, 145–154). The ritual formation of age-sets does not follow any calendar, but seems to take place every five to ten years, depending on the availability of resources (for example, a good harvest).

Girls are associated with the age-sets through marriage. As Bashada is a patrilineal and virilocal society, when a girl marries, she will not only move and live with her husband's family and belong to her husband's lineage and clan, she also adopts most of his other relationships. In the context of the age-system, this means that her husband's age-mates and their wives also become her age-mates. The members of the senior age-sets are called 'ishim' (lit.: senior brother) and their wives 'misha' (senior sister), while those of junior age-sets are 'kana' (junior brother), their wives 'kano' (junior sister). The relationships a man has with them are likewise transferred to his wife.

#### *Ritual welcoming of a bride by her husbands' age-mates*

After moving to her husband's place, a bride has to undergo a three-month period of seclusion during which she becomes accustomed to the new environment, her new role and her new relatives.<sup>10</sup> It is also during this time that her affiliation to the age-set of her husband is ritually confirmed through a visit of her husband's age-mates and junior

<sup>9</sup> (Epple 2010:14). The Nuer as described by Evans-Pritchard (1947) seem to be similar. Nuer age-sets have no corporate activities, and an individual progresses through the age-grades as such.

<sup>10</sup> As many girls are quite young at the time of marriage-sealing, Bashada girls move to their husbands several years later. In the meantime, they live at home as 'married girls' until they have reached the appropriate age to live with their husband. The time of moving in is either determined by the parents of the girl, or by the husband who, if his demands to be given his wife are not met, may decide to

brothers. During these three months a bride does not do any work besides sweeping the compound and serving coffee and tobacco to her husband and guests. This is conceived as a time during which the young woman has to learn everything anew from her mother-in-law. It is also a time during which the bride practices submissive behaviour towards her husband, with whom she does not communicate directly for several weeks and who displays a rather dominant behaviour towards her, often continuing until she has given birth to her first child. At the end of the period of seclusion, the bride has to invite her husband's age-mates and junior brothers, that is, members of the junior adjacent age-set, to her house.<sup>11</sup> The aim of this rather ritualized visit is to define the relationship between the bride and her husband's age-mates and junior brothers, who from now on should know and respect each other. Belaini, a young married man, described a typical visit to a new bride as follows:

When the age-mates arrive, the bride takes off their sandals and their things. She has no child of her own, yet she carries someone else's child on her back. That is because of the whipping wands that will whip her. When she takes off the sandals, the men will make it difficult for her by putting pressure on their feet on purpose. She holds each foot soothingly and then takes the sandal off. While she is taking the things, the men slap her repeatedly. The bride will have brought along an old woman. When the old woman says, 'Ay!', they stop (recorded interview, 13 March 2001, Jinka).

Once in the house, the bride serves coffee and hands a bowl to each of the age-mates in order of seniority. Here, the culturally expected intimidation of the bride continues:

There is one who looks at her angrily. If she looks back at him, he will start to slap her, maybe with his sandals, maybe with his hand.

After a while, she starts to protect herself. She stays quiet. The old woman stops him. Only then will he accept the coffee from her. Then she gives the coffee to the ones sitting over there, the ones there and the ones there. To some of them she gives tobacco in the tobacco pouch. To others she gives tobacco into their hands. She serves coffee again.

Then sticks for cleaning teeth (*rigima*) are handed out. She has brought these sticks, and now she gives them to everyone. They chew the sticks. 'These are the ones of our elder brother's wife!', they say. Later she will take them out of their mouths. Some are timid – they take the sticks and stay quiet. Some are different; some of the junior brothers whip her: 'She shall know us, she shall know her junior brothers!' they say. 'Otherwise, if we come here tomorrow, she will not prepare coffee for us!' That is why this tradition exists (recorded interview, 13 March 2001, Jinka).

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abduct her by force. During the seclusion, a bride has to perform a number of bridal rituals before she is allowed to conceive a child.

<sup>11</sup> When I speak of age-mates and junior brothers here, I refer to those who live in the same locality as the husband. This means that maybe ten to twelve men would come to such an invitation, not the whole age-set.

In many conversations with other men and also women it was confirmed what is shown in Belaini's account: the relationship between a woman and the age-mates and junior brothers of her husband is clearly defined during this first ritualised visit as one of dominance and respect. But also as one of mutual care, as at the end of the visit, before the age-mates leave, they extensively bless the young woman, her family, the animals, the children she will bear in the future and the whole homestead. Finally, they give her the so-called age-mate name (*anamo-nabi*) by which only they, her age-mates, will address her in the future.<sup>12</sup> From now on, it is said, a woman knows her age-mates and junior brothers well and will host them whenever they come to her house. The age-mates and junior brothers, in response, will invite her for coffee or honey wine whenever they meet her at the market.<sup>13</sup>

The age-mates' behaviour during this first visit resembles the expected behaviour of a husband towards his newly married wife. To gain their respect and friendship, brides are advised by other women to bear the situation with strength and pride. While a husband may continue to display his dominance publicly for a long time (often until the wife has born one or two children), the relationship between age-mates and bride changes after the first invitation. Whenever they visit her again, individually or in a group, though they are respected guests and must be hosted well, their conversations are marked rather by playful talk and joking.

### *The blessing of the age-mates*

Besides the respectful friendship between a woman and her husband's age-mates, there is also a spiritual relationship between them. As mentioned above, age-mates bless a young wife who has just moved to her husband. If a young woman fails to become pregnant, the age-mates may be summoned again. Their blessings are said to be very strong and supportive of a woman's fertility, as they potentially come from many different places and bring their good fortune (*barjo*) with them.<sup>14</sup> It is even believed that this could make a barren woman fertile. A woman who invites her age-mates to be blessed has to prepare coffee for them. Maldo, a young unmarried man, explained,

She scoops, scoops, scoops and gives coffee to everyone. When it has cooled down a little, they say, 'Lift the bowls!' All men then lift their bowls and pssss! [They spray coffee onto the woman], inside the house. Then they call forth *barjo*: 'Someone to herd the goats shall come down from this house. Someone like a baboon [...]!' Then, the [left-over] coffee is all

<sup>12</sup> This name refers to the region the wife has come from.

<sup>13</sup> While in other contexts there exists a clear hierarchy between members of adjacent age-sets (where juniors have to follow the orders of seniors), in their behaviour to the wives of one age-set they are similar. This probably has to do with the fact that, within the kinship system too, a classificatory junior brother can replace his elder brother in his role as a husband, for example, if the older brother dies. Then a wife can decide to live and have more children with her husband's younger brother.

<sup>14</sup> The Bashada age-sets cut across all settlement areas so that a man has age-mates all over Bashada.

given back to her, and she drinks it all. 'We have given you a human now!', the age-mates say. Then [from that bowl], she drinks the coffee all by herself – the age-mates don't drink. She drinks all the coffee! Completely! Then the age-mates leave. If these people did have *bairo* (here: 'the power to bless'), she will get pregnant soon (recorded interview, 26 September 2002, Jinka).

While sexual intercourse is prohibited between men and the wives of their age-mates,<sup>15</sup> in this context the age-mates symbolically take part in the fathering of the woman's child by spraying their coffee on to her, the rest of which she has to drink.<sup>16</sup> Although there is no biological relationship between age-set members and each other's children, all age-mates of the parents are addressed as 'father' (*imbo*) and 'mother' (*indo*), and the relationship between age-set members and the collective of the age-set children is expected to be affectionate. Belaini explained,

My age-mate's daughter addresses me by saying 'father', and my wife by 'mother'. When you sit in the *rash* (semi-circle in a public meeting) and see an age-mate's son, you will call him and give him some meat. 'That is my age-mate's son! Hey boy, come over here!' I will call him and stroke his head. He will take the meat and go over to his peers to eat it there.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Age-mates as an extension of the husband's role*

Male age-mates are expected to eat, drink and stay together before marriage, as well as afterwards, which implies that they should invite each other and continue to help each other out, though daily contact will decrease as they get older. As already mentioned, initiation and marriage are performed individually in Bashada, which leads to the fact that males marry at very different ages, ranging from their late teens to their early thirties. This creates a feeling of inequality among supposed equals, some of whom may already established their own households and produced offspring, while others still depend on their parents, herd their father's cattle and eat their mother's food. This also means that married men can invite and host their age-mates at their homes, while unmarried ones cannot. As to be a good host is an opportunity for men to gain in reputation, men strive

<sup>15</sup> It is known that in other societies – for example, among the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania – such sexual intercourse is not only allowed, but is even a sign of respect and friendship among the men (Talle 2007).

<sup>16</sup> When a child is conceived and born after the blessing of the age-mates, it will be known as a 'saliva child' (*patsi-nas*) in the community. Then the age-mates should be rewarded by the parents of the child through an invitation to honey beer and a slaughtered goat. If this invitation is delayed for whatever reason, it can still be extended by the child itself once he or she has grown up. Women know that the reason for their barrenness may be that their husband is sterile, and some decide to sleep secretly with other men. Such secret partners could be one of the husband's age-mates, but not necessarily.

<sup>17</sup> In former times the children of the members of one age-set would form their own group on certain occasions, such as public meetings.

to marry early. Maldo, a young unmarried man, some of whose age-mates were already married, explained,

Without a wife you have no age-mates and no relatives. No one will come to your house. A woman prepares coffee; she cooks food. Then guests will come to your house. If you have no wife, you have no name. No one will say about you, 'So-and-so one has hosted me well!' (Epple 2000; translation from the German original S.E.)

This shows that having a wife means to mature and join those males who can host and impress others. Moreover, to some extent it is in the wife's hands, that is, it depends on her ability and willingness to be a good host whether a man will have a good name in the community. To make sure that a young wife performs well and does not spoil her husband's name, males say that they need to whip their new wives. Wurre, an unmarried youth of about sixteen, commented: 'If you don't whip your bride, she will not cook and work properly. When your age-mates come for coffee, she will quarrel with you. Then your age-mates will think, "What is wrong? Why does she quarrel?" And they will stop coming to your house'.<sup>18</sup>

Not only men, but also the women contribute to this kind of 'serious game' between the sexes among newlywed couples,<sup>19</sup> which, as Jean Lydall (1994) describes it, is meant to establish that a husband is in control of his wife and that the wife is not being controlled by a weakling, but rather by a strong man to whom she does not give in without demonstrating her own strength and courage.<sup>20</sup>

In rare cases, when a husband is too weak to control his wife, his age-mates may be called upon to actively support him. Belaini explained,

Some women are of the kind that makes their husband weak, aren't they? In olden times the age-mates and the junior brothers would come to visit and say: 'That wife has made her husband light [weak]!' Then the younger brothers whip her! One of the age-mates comes and whips her severely. 'This wife has turned my age-mate into a woman!', he says and whips [her]. From then on she will be afraid of the people from the community and will work properly for her husband (recorded interview, March 2001, Jinka).

The age-mates, as Belaini depicts them, here take on the role the husband is unable to exert. They therefore make sure that he, who is considered to belong closely to them, is respected and leads the life he is supposed to lead, that of a strong, dominant man.

<sup>18</sup> Epple (1998; translation from the German original S.E.). For a detailed discussion of the husband-wife relationship and the role of dominance display and whipping in Bashada and Hamar, see Epple (2010, 2012) and Lydall (1994).

<sup>19</sup> I am using the term 'serious game' following Aud Talle (2007:351), who applied it to describe the sexual interactions among the Maasai, which express clear rules and power relations and at the same time follow the local concepts of 'social aesthetics'.

<sup>20</sup> On the similarity with Arbore gender relations, see the contribution by Echi Christina Gabbert in this collection.

*THE AGE-MATES' ANGER*

Age-mates not only ensure that their wives treat their husbands appropriately, they also claim a kind of ownership over each other's wives. This means that, when one of them gets married, invitations are expected and good hosting is ensured not only through the husband, but also through their own interventions. Age-mates are believed to have a very strong power to curse, so that their anger is feared. Generally, in Bashada curses do not necessarily have to be uttered: to feel the anger (whether consciously or sub-consciously) is considered sufficient to cause disease or misfortune among one's junior relatives or among one's age-mates and their wives or children. Kadya, an elderly woman of about sixty, explained that women fear the curse of their husbands' age-mates. If the age-mates are angered by a woman's behaviour, she should try to appease them before they curse her:

If your age-mates are really cross with you, they can kill you! 'My hunting friend, my age-mate, he did not marry a woman! He shall go and marry mine!<sup>21</sup> His wife is a bad woman! She does not know the age-mates!' If they talk like that, it is bad. [...] Then I have to brew sorghum beer, and I call all the age-mates.<sup>22</sup> I make coffee. The beer is sitting over there. They get in, all my age-mates and the junior brothers. I pour the coffee into the bowls; then they spray it on to me, spray, spray, spray, spray, spray. 'Pssss, psssss, psssss!' [...]. When they do like that, I have no sickness. That is good (Epple 1999; translation from the German original S.E.).

The curse of the age-mates, the Bashada say, may not only affect the wife, but also the husband, her children or the family's animals, which may become sick or even die. The feeling of ownership over an age-mate's wife also includes the expectation that age-mates do not move far away after marriage, as this means that the couple would not be available to the age-mates of a given locality anymore.

Belaini had abducted his wife into marriage and then escaped with her to Banna.<sup>23</sup> He was determined not to give her back, and so it was more secure for him to live far away with her until her father accepted the marriage.

After two years, they still had not come back, even though her father had finally accepted the gifts given by Belaini. When Bonna [Belaini's wife] gave birth to her first son, he died soon. The reason for the child's death came out in the sandal oracle: the age-mates were annoyed because Belaini had moved away from their place. If he did not come back, their

<sup>21</sup> Here, this means that he should go and marry another woman who would treat him with respect.

<sup>22</sup> Sorghum is the main cereal crop in Bashada and among most of the neighbouring groups. It is eaten in different forms such as bread or porridge, and consumed as local beer (*parsi*) during special festivities or to host guests.

<sup>23</sup> A neighbouring ethnic group with a similar culture and the same language, where Belaini has many relatives.

curse would hurt his family and homestead again and again. So Belaini decided to return to Bashada (Epple 1999; translation from the German original S.E.).

Locally, the story was commented on as follows:

The age-mates say, 'Yesterday he was dancing together with us. Then he married a wife. How can he move to other people's place? His wife now prepares coffee for strangers, for other people's age-mates! We have something to tell him, he shall come. This leaving will later turn towards his wife!' Talking like this, it turns into a curse (recorded interview with Maldo, September 2002, Jinka).

The local interpretation of the child's death shows that the age-mates are seen as entitled to the respect and services of each other's wives and that no individual should simply ignore this mutual obligation. In a wider sense, this shows that the members of one age-set, that is, all the men together with their wives, form a kind of entity which provides support, friendship and assistance, but also demands commitment and the fulfilment of mutual expectations. The age-mates thus influence men's lives as much as those of women.

*WOMEN'S NEW STATUS AND REDEFINED RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH AGE-SET  
AFFILIATION*

Socially, women get their 'age' from men  
(Talle 1998:139).

What Aud Talle wrote about the Maasai is also true for the Bashada: women's social age is determined by their husbands, or more specifically, by their husbands' age-set. In practice this means that biologically younger and older women who are married to the same man, or to different men who belong to the same age-set, have the same social age. It also means that a very young woman who is married to an old man has a higher social age than an older woman who is married to a man belonging to a junior age-set. As a consequence one can say that, while men's social age and the hierarchy among the different age-sets relates to their biological age, women's social age depends on the age of their husbands and thus changes at marriage. As it is more usual for a woman to marry a man older than herself, in most cases marriage means a status increase in the context of the age-system. This new social age becomes visible in rituals and ritualized situations, where it determines the relationship between age-mates and age-mates' wives.

Generally, seniors are served first during public ceremonies or festivities. Social age also determines the division of labour during ceremonies that involve hosting many guests. Generally, the men who belong to the junior-most age-sets are assigned to slaughtering the cattle or goats, roasting the meat and cutting the branches on which the

meat is later served to the guests. Girls and women belonging to junior age-sets prepare sorghum, and serve sorghum beer to the guests. The guests sit in order of age, with the men of the same age-set sitting together. They are served by their wives or by the wives of their age-mates. The ritual dances and songs during initiations are initiated by the women belonging to the senior age-sets, and the younger ones dance together, also according to age-set affiliation.

*THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WIVES OF DIFFERENT AGE-SETS*

As the 'social age' of women depends on the age-set membership of their husbands, the relationship between two women has a dimension which relates to their everyday interaction during which biological age matters more, while the ritual dimension is determined through their social age which they acquire through their husband. This also means that the two dimensions in their relationship can oppose each other, implying that the relationship that two females have with each other before their marriage may change afterwards, as the following example shows.

Watu and Balda were both about fifteen years old and locally regarded as peers when I met them in 1998. Both knew, however, that their relationship would change after moving in with their husbands, as Watu's husband belonged to an age-set senior to that of Balda's husband.

Balda: Once a girl has put on the woman's skirt [after moving in with her husband], we say, 'She is a big person now!'

Watu: Mmmh. You should not refuse anything she asks of you. If you refuse, the dead spirit (*meshi*) will slap you [affect you and make you sick]! [...]

Susanne: What about her [Balda]? Does she refuse things to you?

Watu: She does not. I will simply take things from her by force! If she says 'I do not have much of this', if she says so, refusing, I simply take it and leave! It is so. Heeeyou! [laughs]. We make each other's life hard [...] (recorded interview with Watu and Balda, January 1999, Bashada).

Watu and Balda both expressed the fact that their relationship would have a new aspect after they started living with their husbands. They chose to describe a situation in which Watu would take away things she might need by force from Balda, thus depicting a behaviour that expresses the senior-junior relationship between them. Watu's laughter (in which Balda joined in) accompanying her description seemed to me an expression of critical acceptance of what was expected of her and her friend. I have often observed this kind of laughter when my informants were describing painful experiences they had had or were expecting to have. In this context they seemed to be showing that they were aware of the related difficulties, but at the same time were determined to be strong enough to bear what would come. In my observation, however, it is not usual for former

girl-friends to express their social difference from each other rudely after marriage. Their different statuses will rather mostly only be visible in their seating positions during larger ceremonies, where they will sit together with other wives of their respective husband's age-set and where seniors are served before juniors.

#### *CONCLUSION*

I have shown that through marriage a girl not only assumes the new status of a woman, wife and later of a mother, but also engages in additional non-kin-based relationships linked to her affiliation to her husband's age-set. In contrast to the males, whose relationships with senior and junior boys and men are simply more clearly defined and articulated through the formalised age-sets, the relationships that females assume are partly new (with boys and men) and partly re-defined (with girls and women). The redefinition of relationships with females relates to the new social age that women assume through marriage, which is adapted to the social age of their husbands. For some women, such as those who marry senior men, this means a gain in status through which they earn special respect in society.

Affiliation to the age-system mainly concerns a woman's married life. As age-mates act as a kind of extension of the husband, they are said to contribute to the well-being and fertility of the family through their blessings. They may also add to the proper functioning of the relationship between husband and wife through their control and sanctioning if a woman fails to behave as expected.

In this sense, one can conclude that the function of age-sets as regulators of social relations is also transferred on to women. The affiliation to the age-sets does not offer new opportunities for women to counter the patriarchal structure of Bashada society, but rather supports and reinforces that structure. The age-system can thus be regarded as a conservative element of Bashada culture which emphasizes the social roles of both women and men.

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