

Generation-Sets and Age-Sets Made Easy

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This short paper aims at bringing some clarity into the often blurred issues of generation-sets, age-sets and the concept of generation.

Generation: What is a generation? This question besets the social sciences since long.¹ „Generation“ is one of those terms we are using constantly, but it is difficult to define what actually a generation is. Or the other way round: Generation is a sheer matter of definition. There are terms like post-war generation, baby-boomer and millennium etc.. All of them are arbitrary terms, and even if people agree on one of these terms it is still unclear where such a generation starts and where it begins - the borders are fluid. We may call these generations socially-constructed or **social generations**.

Generation-set: Some peoples like the Ateker in East Africa have created socio-political systems which are based on **genealogical generations** of the male population.² By definition, every male person is a member of the generation-set immediately following the one of his father. Thus, when there are, say, generation-sets A, B, C ... then B are the sons of A, C are the sons of B i.e. grandsons of A, and so on. As generation-sets are formalised groups, each of them has its own distinctive name.

Generation-sets are plagued with an inherent problem: Adjacent generation-sets overlap in age, an effect which increases over time, and this brings along multiple problems which the respective society has to deal with.

There are living members of a generation-set over a long period of time.³ Thus, each generation-set is sub-divided into consecutive age-sets.

Age-sets are formalised groups of boys/men who all have approximately⁴ the same age. One age-set is followed by the next younger one, and there is a hierarchical order between them according to their age. Each age-set has its own distinctive name.

1 No references are given in this paper.

2 Women have their own system but become part of the male system when they marry.

3 Depending on the society \pm 100 years.

4 5 ... 15 years

Pure age-set systems are composed of consecutive age-sets which are hierarchically ordered - the older, the higher in hierarchy.

Complication #1: Sometimes the term age group is used which is confusing, as an age group can be anything. **Set** as part of the above terms is important as it indicates that this group is formalised.

Complication #2: The distinction between the above categories is of utmost importance. People everywhere, even in the scientific literature, incorrectly use the term age-set as an overarching concept for whatever age or generation grouping.

Complication #3: The term generation is often imprecisely used without further specification. In generation-set systems this is not a problem, as the definition of a generation coincides with a generation-set. Sometimes, however, the term „generation“ also pops up in the description of age-set systems, without further explanation what is meant.

Complication #4: Some ethnic groups ascribe alleged generational aspects to their age-set system. A simplified model may exemplify the problem. There may be 9 age-sets in existence at any one time, each one comprising a time span of 10 years. There are statuses attributed to the age-sets as shown below. For most of the individuals, the status ascription may coincide with their physical condition.

Grandfathers			Fathers			Sons		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

After 10 years, age-set 1 would be dead, a new age-set of youngsters (10) would have come into existence, and the whole system would shift by one step. This shift in status will recur every 10 years.

Grandfathers			Fathers			Sons		
2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Fathers #4 have become Grandfathers, Sons #7 have become Fathers, and #10 has entered the system. All of them have changed their status, not their generation, as one can-

not change his generation. Fluid as the term generation may be - see above - one cannot change from a generation to the next one.

In daily life, people of this ethnic group may call # 1...3 or # 2...4 the „generation of Grandfathers“, but for analytical purposes it is important to know that in this case „Grandfathers“ delineate neither a physical nor a social generation but a status.

Complication #5: Regarding generation-set-systems, it has been mentioned that adjacent generation-sets overlap in age, and this brings along multiple problems which the respective society has to deal with. The solution is always that the main rule of the system - each male person belongs to the generation-set immediately below the one of his father - must be changed or modified. The adopted solutions are quite different and may result in highly complex systems as the Gada system of the Borana where the generational aspect almost disappears in parallel generation-set lines. The Turkana have changed the generational aspect into a moiety system, etc.

Conclusions

1. Generation-set systems are not modifications of age-set systems.
2. Generation-set systems may lose the generational aspect and become age-set systems.
3. Pure age-set systems cannot turn into generation-set systems, and if members of age-set system speak of generations, this is merely an ascribed status of certain people or age-sets, and it will change over time.

Further readings

Legesse, Asmarom

1973	<i>Gada. Three Approaches to the study of African Society.</i> New York: The Free Press
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Baxter, P.T.W. and U. Almagor (eds.)

1978	<i>Age, Generation and Time. Some Features of East African Age Organizations.</i> London: Hurst
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Simonse, Simon

1998	Conflict, age & power in North East Africa - age systems in transition. Oxford et al., Currey et al. (Eastern African Studies)
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Müller-Dempff, Harald

2009	The Ngibokoi Dilemma: generation-sets and social system engineering in times of stress - an example from the Toposa of Southern Sudan. <i>Pp. 189-211 in: Zeitschrift für Ethnologie 134</i>
2017	Ateker Generation-Set Systems Revisited - field facts and findings, and a systematization. <i>Working papers, Max-Planck-Institut for Social Anthropology, vol. 183</i>

The bulk of scientific literature on age-sets and generation-sets has been published in the 1970s and 1980s. More references on request.