

MARIO I. AGUILAR (ed), *The politics of Age and Gerontocracy in Africa*. Trenton / Asmara: Africa World Press, 1998, £ 14.99 (distributed by Turnaround, London, tel. 0181 829 3000 / fax 0181 881 5088).

Long-term processes of change in Africa, which over the years have been dubbed by various names, from Westernisation to globalisation, could also be viewed from a totally different perspective: as a gradual disruption of gerontocracy. If *The Politics of Age and Gerontocracy* has a central theme, it is probably that process of losing influence by the elderly. Elderhood as a social and cultural category, a position in which one receives respect and exercises power because one has lived longer and therefore 'knows', seems universal, certainly in Africa. At the same time, that concept is being contested by the young who resent the overbearing attitude of the old and their refusal to make room for the next generation. This ambivalence, respect and fear on the one hand, frustration and rebellion on the other, takes different forms in different social and historical contexts.

In his introduction, the editor gives a brief overview of the anthropology of age and gerontocracy, discussing age-sets and other age-related social and cultural institutions and contrasting age categories to those based on gender. By doing so, Aguilar tries to set the tone of the book: the dislocation of the age basis of political power.

In the contributions that follow we first read about the colonial period when the political authorities attempted to co-opt the influence of the elders, thus creating conflicts between the generations in traditional society. This is followed by three articles on the post-colonial period, only one of which truly focuses on old age. Pat Caplan provides a beautiful sketch of the experience of growing old on Mafia Island, in front of the Kenyan Coast. She draws the portrait of an elderly woman whom she met at different stages of her life, at middle age, as a grandmother fostering grandchildren, and finally as a somewhat impoverished fragile old woman, still enjoying the company of children and grandchildren. Caplan presents transcriptions of her conversations with Mwanema, some of which contain trenchant lines about the conditions of life for the elderly in Mafia society. The conversations are then analysed in terms of economic, social and cultural capital. She pleads for a perspective of elderly people as active agents who strategise their concerns during their lifetime and continue to do so in old age. At the same time, however, the context in which they are planning their life is changing and part of the capital they have been accumulating has lost its value.

The book ends with four contributions set in the 'post-modern' state, a somewhat 'forced' term to indicate the most recent period. The articles deal with political protest in South Africa, land conflicts in Maasai land, cross-boundary disputes and generational knowledge in Kenya.

When I suggested the gradual shifting away from gerontocracy as a leading theme in this collection, I granted it too much honour. Many contributions only marginally touch upon that theme and some don't refer to it at all. Apparently, the book was designed as a tribute to Paul Spencer whose work has made important contributions to the study of nomadic life, pastoralism, gerontocracy and old age in general. His edited collection of essays *Anthropology and the Riddle of the Sphinx* was a landmark in the anthropology of the life course. All authors make reverential reference to Spencer's work and most articles are located in East Africa where Spencer carried out his research. Turning a *Liber Amicorum* into a coherent thematic collection rarely succeeds, as is also confirmed by this book. Nevertheless, the book

does contain some intriguing perspectives on the generational conflict that for generations has been taking place on the African continent.

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