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Status of Older People: Tribal Societies

Encyclopedia of Aging | 2002 | Sokolovsky, Jay | 700+ words | [Copyright](#)

STATUS OF OLDER PEOPLE: TRIBAL SOCIETIES

To anthropologists, a tribal society is an uncentralized grouping of autonomous local communities linked by common cultural features and associations. These social entities are connected by kin-based organizations such as clan, or associations based on age grading or special activities such as ritual, which cross-cut kinship and territorial boundaries (Haviland). Households tend to be egalitarian, having relatively equal access to available material and social resources, although there can be significant differences based on gender and age. Community size tends to be small, ranging from one hundred to one thousand, but it varies over the annual cycle as the separate communities might come together to initiate a new age grouping or carry out some vital economic activity. Tribal communities typically have an economic base in horticulture or animal herding, although foraging and hunting in rich environments sometimes supports this kind of sociopolitical organization.

In such small scale, kin-focused societies, passage through the life span allows the accumulation of social debt and cultural knowledge that forms the basis of respect and support of older adults. In such cultural settings, the wide embrace of family frequently provides what Andrei Simic calls a *life-term arena* —a stable setting for the engagement of an entire life. The lack of economic specialization through a division of labor tends to enable people of all ages to link their changing abilities and knowledge to the varied tasks over the annual work cycle. There are two important effects from this that are common in tribal societies. First, work groups are often age heterogeneous, and second, these arrangements facilitate the learning of new work skills as one passes through the life cycle (Halperin).

There is now a large body of literature on the status of older people in tribal societies. Much of this material was written before the 1970s, and has had to be mined from disparate ethnographic reports, which in some cases gave tantalizingly short and often enigmatic information about the situation of elders in tribal communities. The first major effort to make sense out of this literature was the seminal book by Leo Simmons, *The Role of the Aged in Primitive Society* (1945). His study examined the interrelation of 109 sociocultural traits, grouped under habitat and economy, political and social organization, and religious beliefs and ritual.

Despite some serious methodological flaws, Simmons's book remains a vital resource of anthropological knowledge on the elderly in tribal societies.

It was not until the publication of *Aging and Modernization*, edited by George Cowgill and Lowell Holmes, in 1972, that knowledge from modern ethnographic studies was employed to test gerontological theory. Here, detailed studies of fourteen different societies were compared to examine the impact of industrialization, urbanization, and Westernization on the status of the aged. The theoretical propositions developed by Cowgill and Holmes in this and later works have served as a most controversial stimulus to subsequent work on aging done around the world. Access to this rapidly expanding literature can be found in several edited compilations and texts: *The Politics of Age and Gerontocracy in Africa* (Aguilar); *The Cultural Context of Aging*, 2nd edition (Sokolovsky); *Other Cultures, Elder Years*, 2nd edition (Holmes and Rhodes); *Old Age in Global Perspective* (Albert and Cattell); *The Aging Experience* (Keith and Associates); *Aging Around the World* (Cowgill); and *Aging and Its Transformations* (Counts and Counts); *Other Ways of Growing Old* (Amoss and Harrel). Information about new and ongoing ethnographic aging research and related publications can be followed through the Cultural Context of Aging Web site at www.stpt.usf.edu/~jsokolov.

Longevity

There is a lack of good longevity data from tribal societies, especially prior to the drastic dislocations of these societies during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries caused by the colonial expansion of European nations. What data exists indicates that only about 10 percent of those born will survive beyond age sixty, compared to well over 80 percent in the United States. Average life expectancy within tribal settings tends to be low, typically less than thirty years of age, primarily due to high levels of infant and child mortality. As a result, only about 3 percent of a village population contain persons over age sixty-five (Weiss). However, those who survive until their fifth and sixth decades of life are often exceptionally fit by Western standards. People in such societies do in fact sometimes survive the full human life span, into their ninth or tenth decades. It is also important to note that reports of extraordinary life spans of over 120 years reported during the 1970s for tribal peoples of the Korakoram mountains of Pakistan or among Abkhasian peasants in the Caucasus region of the former Soviet Union have been completely discredited (Cowgill). Such erroneous reports were based on systematic age exaggeration, confusing and fraudulent written documentation and small sample sizes.

The cultural construction of elders and older adulthood

The construct of a stage of elderhood or of later adulthood appears to exist in all tribal societies and is largely based on combining social and functional definitions of one's place in the life cycle. Often there is a distinction between elderhood as a marker of social maturity in relation to others in the community contrasted to boundaries of old age that can take some of the criteria of elderhood and combine them with how a person's physical being and behavior reflects the biological aging process. Elderhood on the one hand is a relative status marker, accomplished by passing through ritual transitions, and is not necessarily tied to extended chronological years. Persons who do not pass these ritual markers will not be considered elders no matter what their age. Among Australian aboriginal tribes as well as in Africa, persons could enter the beginning ranks of elderhood in their early thirties and proceed over time and through ritual passage into different elder statuses.

Older adulthood on the other hand links changes in the persons physical being (reduction of work capacity, beginning of menopause) with social changes (such as the birth of grandchildren) to create a culturally defined sense of oldness, which like elderhood, can have various gradations that can even extend beyond the point of death. Steve Albert and Maria Cattell make a helpful distinction between old age, ancients, and ancestors. The first notion of *old age* typically begins in tribal societies between the fourth and fifth decades of life, with a change in social/economic role being the most common beginning marker (Glascocock and Feinman).

Factors such as invalid status and senility are quite rare as primary indicators of a general designation of old, since tribal culture begins using such labels before such changes are likely. However, many tribal societies also recognize those truly ancient adults who show sharp

declines in functional skills as a different category of old, which may lead to a dramatic loss of status and even neglect and actions that hasten a person's death (Glascock).

Ancestorhood is another social category very common among tribal cultures. In such societies, whether in the Amazon or Sub-Saharan Africa, ancestral spirits remain part of the family system and have the ability to affect the lives of their descendants, both for good and evil. In some societies, such as the Tiriki of Kenya, ancestral spirits are perceived to be the mystical source of all human life and vitality (Sangree). Very old adults that are close to death are thought to have a special connection to ancestors and may ask them to intercede on behalf of their family, or even call upon them to curse a kinsperson who is acting badly.

Gender and age

Despite the strong male dominance in many tribal societies, some authors have begun to document a pattern of positive changes of role, power, and status by women as they pass into the middle and later adult years. These occur when women enter their postreproductive phase, and culminate when mastery of the domestic sphere is complete—as marked by control of the daughter-in-law and other adult female kin, influence over married sons and their children, greater authority over life-cycle ritual, and the gradual withdrawal of a woman's older spouse out of his public domain and into her hearth-centered life. As P. Silverman notes, “even in male dominated societies, like the Comanche in North America, the Mundurucu of South America and the Ewe of West Africa, women who have reached menopause fill important decision-roles otherwise restricted to men” (Silverman, 1987, p. 335). While some theorists have stressed the cultural turning points linked to procreative and family cycles, others have suggested that universal intrapsychic personality development best explains the frequent reversals observed among older adults (Gutmann). A classic description of this process is provided by Kaberry in an early anthropological study of Australian aboriginal women:

As the women become older they often assume more authority, become more assertive, tender their advice more frequently and interfere where the activities of any of their kindred are likely to run contrary to the tribal law. On the other hand, when anger mounts high and threatens the peace, even safety of others in the camp, they take the initiative in stemming the disputes and temporarily establishing order again. Amidst the shouting, the barking of dogs, the voice of an old woman will make itself heard above the uproar as she harangues men and women impartially (Kaberry, 1937, p. 181).

Old age in myth and folklore

Many tribal peoples use older adults in their mythology to teach morality and warn of dire consequences if ethical behavior is not followed. For example, the Murgin aboriginal peoples of Australia have an important myth of the “Old Woman and the Turtle Flipper.” This story tells of a turtle hunt by men of the Gwiwula clan. After the hunt a good piece of meat is given to all local clan members except an older woman, who gets a flipper. This insulted woman asks, “How can anyone find fat on a flipper?” and states “You men are greedy.” She then precedes, through magical powers, to produce pestilence that kills all individuals except for a man and a woman who eventually repopulate the world (Warner).

In another area of the Pacific, among the Asmat people of southwestern Irian Jaya (Indonesian New Guinea), a mythological personage called “the oldest man” and also “father of the people,” was responsible for creating the ritual system and determining where and how people should live. There is also mythic belief in an old man named “famiripits” who carved wooden figures of humans, placed them in the men's ceremonial house and then proceeded to drum them to life. Peter Van Arsdale, who studied these people, asserts that such beliefs under precolonial conditions led to an equation of age with greater potential for knowledge, influence, and the ability to shape the direction of human development.

Age and generation as organization

In some tribal societies where age is used as the most powerful organizing principle, different spans along the life cycle are sharply set apart by highly managed images involving spectacular ritual, distinct dress, specialized tasks, modes of speech, comportment, and deferential gestures. Persons move through the life cycle collectively and form tightly bound groups, or age-sets, performing specific tasks. Societies where age plays such a powerful role in ordering social life have been found in Africa, among certain Native American groups and Australian aborigines, and in Papua, New Guinea (Bernardi). The most elaborate forms of such cultural systems are found among East African nomadic herders, such as the Samburu of Kenya (Spencer). Here, age-sets of males initiated together move through the life cycle collectively. Over time and through elaborate ritual, they progressively enter, as a group, age-bounded roles of herders, warriors, and, finally, three levels of elders who exert control over the lives of younger community members. The middle-level elders, in their fifth and sixth decades, gain substantial power through maintaining large polygynous households, holding wealth in their numerous cattle and having a ritual link to their ancestors, whom they can call upon to curse younger persons who misbehave. As is the case for most such age-based societies, a Samburu woman's social maturation is accomplished through individual life-cycle rituals and her status is much more tied to her place in family units (see Kertzer and Madison for a description of one of the rarer cases of women's age-sets). Societies such as the Samburu are said to be gerontocracies (from *gerontes*, old men), where authority and esteem cumulate in the eldest males. In reality, it is often the middle group of elders in their fifties and early sixties who typically hold the most power in such societies.

All too often such cultures have been held up as exemplars of places where a strong positive image of the elderly reaches its zenith. It is important to note that this is frequently accomplished at the expense of intense intergenerational conflict, of exploiting and repressing the young and preventing women from gaining an equitable place in the community. Among the Samburu, older women in fact do not share the very powerful image associated with old men. When they are widowed, women are not permitted to marry again and suffer both materially and socially.

Status of the aged

In tribal societies, older adults commonly function as a storehouse of knowledge about such things as family lineage, religious rituals, lore and myth that explain tribal origins and identity as well as in-depth knowledge about the environment and how to exploit it for survival. Among many African tribal peoples, older adults are the gatekeepers for the ritual management of life, from the naming of children to the planting songs chanted by West African village women to assure the younger female farmers that the harvest will be good.

Despite the respect that relative age often generates in tribal societies, many anthropologists find that chronological age itself is seldom the basis for respect or authority. Pamela Amoss and Steven Harrell have proposed that there are two key factors that determine how older adults fare in their particular cultural settings. The first is the relative balance between the contributions older persons make and the costs to society that they represent; the second is the control older persons have over resources that are important to younger members of the community. Amoss and Harrell sum this up succinctly by predicting that "the position of the aged in a given society can be expressed in terms of how much old people contribute to the resources of the group, balanced by the cost they exact, and compounded by the degree of control they have over valuable resources" (1981, p. 6).

While this formulation has not been cross-culturally tested through a large sampling of societies, the issue of control of resources has received a great deal of study in relation to status and treatment of older adults.

A series of global statistical studies have corroborated in many respects the association of status and deference with the control of informational and administrative roles, as well as with

valued activities and extended family integration (Silverman). This research shows that, in terms of resource and information control, only certain types of control, particularly administration and consultation, correlate with beneficent treatment of the elderly. Some forms of supernatural information control, especially transformational powers are, in fact, a potential threat to the elderly. This fact is highly relevant to some historically known situations of massive societal change, such as in Europe during the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, where the majority of persons burned at the stake for their transformational knowledge (witchcraft) were middle-aged and older females (Bever).

Some worldwide statistical studies have dealt with the darker side of aging, including various types of nonsupportive, and even harsh, treatment directed toward the elderly. This work makes it clear that being old in a small-scale, traditional, face-to-face community does not necessarily prevent cultural variants of death hastening from occurring. Anthony Glascock found that killing of the aged was found in about one-fifth of his global sample, and that 84 percent of the societies exhibited various forms of nonsupportive treatment. However, few societies enforce a single treatment of their elderly, and it was commonly found that both supportive behavior and death-hastening behavior coexisted in the same social setting. Glascock's study demonstrates that cultural distinctions drawn between intact, fully functioning older adults and decrepit individuals who find it difficult to carry out even the most basic tasks are critical. It is persons placed in this latter category toward which geronticide or death hastening is most frequently applied.

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See also [Age](#); [Age Norms](#); [Gerontocracy](#); [Status of Older People: Preindustrial West](#).

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STEREOTYPES

See Ageism; Images of Aging; Social Cognition

Cite this article

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Sokolovsky, Jay. "[Status of Older People: Tribal Societies.](#)" *Encyclopedia of Aging*. 2002. *Encyclopedia.com*. 4 Apr. 2013<<http://www.encyclopedia.com>>.