

TIME, SPACE, AND THE UNKNOWN

Maasai configurations of
power and providence

Paul Spencer

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TIME, SPACE, AND THE UNKNOWN

Uncertainty is an aspect of existence among the Maasai in East Africa. They take ritual precautions against mystical misfortune, especially at their ceremonial gatherings, which exude displays of confidence, and generate a sense of time, space, community, and being. Yet their performances are undermined by a concern for clandestine psychopaths who are thought to create havoc through sorcery. Normally elders seek moral explanations for erratic encounters with misfortune, viewing God as the Supreme and unknowable figure of Providence. However, sorcery lies beyond their collective wisdom, and they look for guidance from their Prophet, as a more powerful sorcerer to whom they are bound for protection. This work examines the variation of this pattern, associated with different profiles of social life and tension across the Maasai federation.

Paul Spencer is Emeritus Professor of African Anthropology at SOAS and Honorary Director of the International African Institute. He has published extensively on age systems and pastoralism in East Africa; and the present work follows from his earlier books on *The Samburu* (1965) and *The Maasai of Matapato* (1988) both now reissued by Routledge.

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TO BENET AND RUTH

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PREFACE

This book is based on research that was conducted at the same time as my work among the Matapato Maasai in 1976–7, extending to other Maasai *tribal sections*. It was originally conceived as Part II of a single volume on the Maasai, exploring the degree of variation beyond the Matapato model that had been developed as Part I. Earlier drafts of the present work (Chapters 3, 5–8, and 11) were prepared with this in mind. But it became increasingly clear that the whole conception was overloaded and needed to be broken down into separate, more manageable publications. My research interests and teaching responsibilities were expanding, and I decided to publish the first part as *The Maasai of Matapato*, which was already clearly a volume in its own right (1988). The second part was more comparative and could usefully wait until forthcoming work on the Maasai by other authors had been published. Meanwhile, my attention was drawn to the urgency of broader aspects of pastoralism in East Africa and the transition to the modern economy; and it was these aspects that were published next. This was in part to clarify my understanding of change among the Maasai-speaking peoples, but I also needed to collate the strands that underpinned my teaching before my retirement in 1997, while my grasp of the growing mass of published material by other authors was still fresh. The present volume could then have my undivided attention. Elsewhere, I have referred to earlier drafts of this work as ‘Models of the Maasai’, before it acquired its present shape with a more comprehensive title. Extracts from ‘Models’ have been borrowed for incorporation into various articles over the years, responding to the opportunity or the occasion, but always with this volume in mind (Chapter 2: Spencer 1985b, 1993; Chapter 5: 1991, 1992; Chapter 11: 1989). Chapter 10 has been adapted from sections III, IV, and parts of V of an earlier article (1976) and I wish to thank the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland for permission to reproduce this amended piece here. In its original form, this volume contained an extended appendix, collated in 1981 and entitled ‘A Survey of Variation among the Maasai, 1977’. This was derived from material collected in ten communities across the Maasai area. While this survey was a necessary step towards the present volume, the concentration on detail made it essentially archival material for the specialist on Maasai practices. I would invite any readers who are interested in a copy of this survey to contact me, whether it is for

their personal collection or to delve into the wider pattern for themselves and perhaps suggest alternative ways of analyzing it, especially if they have further material of their own on the Maasai.

I must again express my gratitude to all those individuals and bodies who have made this extended enquiry possible. They are listed in the prefaces to earlier volumes. To these I would add colleagues and students in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at SOAS, where I have valued the critical climate of support as I have worked over these problems. I would also express my debt to other authors whose findings among the Maasai are cited in these pages. Their writings have contributed to my understanding, probably more than I realize. At Cambridge, Dr Jack Trevor first set me along the road leading to the Maasai with the rare gift of a first edition copy of M. Merker's *Die Masai* (1904). It is fitting therefore that this classic study inspired a whole chapter towards the end of this volume – just three Maasai age-sets later.

In addition to the Maasai of Matapato, whom I have previously thanked, I would like to express my gratitude to those whom I met among the Purko, Loitokitok, Loonkidongi, Loita, Kisonko, Siria and Uasinkishu, for their hospitality and unremitting enthusiasm concerning their social system and worldview. While I toyed with the idea of extending my work to the Maasai of Tanzania, it became increasingly apparent that there was altogether enough variation on the Kenya side of the border, with the Loitokitok representing a northern branch of the Kisonko of Tanzania. The Kenya Maasai provided me with as much data as I could handle. My lasting memory is of writing up my notes between bouts of conversation with Maasai on the topics discussed here. Meanwhile, my companions would elaborate on these among themselves, debating the point, recalling further aspects, and leaving me struggling to catch up when I was ready to rejoin their gossip, reassured that these were live issues of concern. As exhaustion set in, I sometimes wished they would lose interest, setting a limit to the amount that they had to offer. But it was not to be, and I was constantly guided into new channels, leading to further questions on the next occasion we met. It was the differences throughout the Maasai region that arose out of this discourse and seemed to hold the key to so many lines of enquiry. This led me to pay further visits to the Purko and Loitokitok, and to seek out a second Loonkidongi community, because these emerged as high points in this search. In short, this publication has to thank the Maasai for their willing collaboration in the one way in which they excel: open and generous conversation.

I wish again to thank the Samburu from whom I first acquired a sufficient fluency in the Maasai language and culture to pursue these studies. Indeed, I sometimes feel that I had more training in research methodology in their hands than anywhere else. The present work begins appropriately with a model of the Samburu age system as they saw it, and this is further elaborated in Part II. The Samburu also have a significant role in Chapter 4, which draws on my first (unpublished) conference paper concerning aspects of their religion (1959a). I revisited the Samburu in 1973 and 1976, and this suggested no substantial change in their

PREFACE

practices or beliefs since 1960. For present purposes, my references to the Samburu and the Maasai proper may therefore be regarded as essentially contemporaneous.

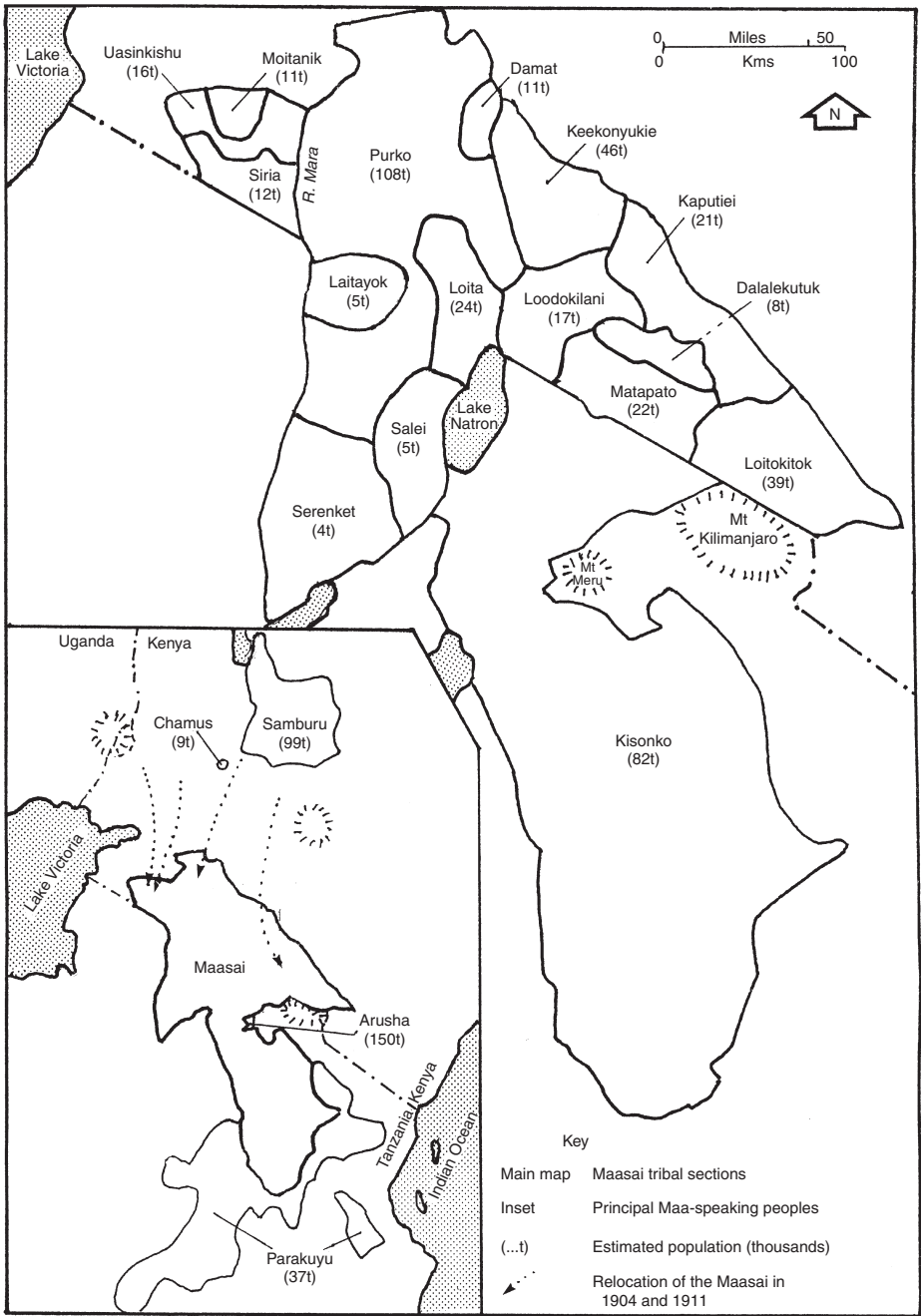
This work, then, arose out of my earlier volumes on *The Samburu*, and then on *The Maasai of Matapato*. The re-issue of these two books as paperbacks by Routledge to coincide with the publication of the present volume provides two detailed case studies that complement the broader view that I attempt here. This joint production of all three works was quite beyond my more limited aim when I approached Routledge with the present volume in mind, and I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Julene Knox, as Commissioning Editor, for proposing that they should be linked in this way to form a trilogy.

Finally, I would again like to express my warm gratitude to Rosalind and our sons, Aidan and Benet, who tolerated my restless search for data and yet more data, charming our hosts as they entered into the spirit of the exercise. As we uprooted ourselves from our Matapato base and travelled to other tribal sections, constantly pursuing what must have seemed an endless trawl for odd ends, they were my constant companions, and I still treasure this memory.

Paul Spencer
SOAS

NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

In this work, I have followed the style previously outlined in *The Maasai of Matapato* (p. xii). The spelling *ch* should be pronounced as in *change*; *nk* represents a sound between NK as in *thinker* and NG as in *finger*; *ng* is used for the velar nasal sound as in *thing*, and not as in *finger*. Thus the term *Loonkidongi* pronounces the K implosively and does not pronounce the G at all. In other respects, I have tried to follow Tucker and Mpaayei (1955) to indicate Maasai usage, ignoring dialectical variation between different parts of the Maasai area. Frans Mol's extensive dictionaries (1978, 1996) have been especially useful for re-assessing Maasai terms in my fieldnotes.



Map 1.1 The Maasai and Maa-speaking region.

INTRODUCTION¹

Interest in the Maasai as nomadic pastoralists has generated an extensive literature since the mid-nineteenth century, when they dominated the hinterland in the emerging map of East Africa. This cumulative search for understanding a particularly resilient society poses a number of questions that the present volume seeks to address. The study is based on material that was collected in remoter parts, before commercial tourism and media attention raised the additional question concerning the authenticity of Maasai ritual performances in a global setting, where they are patently out of place.

There are two principal areas of concern. The first relates to the sheer variety of different accounts, reflecting changing traditions over a period of transition, and also a considerable diversity among the Maasai themselves. The need is not so much to establish some pristine and authentic version, as to discern patterns that underlie the variety in space and time. The second area of concern is the general absence of Maasai views and perceptions in this literature to match the wealth of description of their ceremonial activities. Generally, the religious beliefs of nomadic pastoralists below the Horn of Africa have aroused little interest among social anthropologists, and the Maasai are no exception. This reflects the way they present themselves in visual terms. They discuss their ritual practices avidly and in detail, but they are diffident about their myths and they do not respond easily to questions searching for explanation. Nevertheless, when pressed, they are adamant regarding the relevance of these practices for their survival as a people.

The point to stress here is not the tenacity of particular traditions or their consistency across the Maasai area. The details of ritual performance are matters for debate, and also reinterpretation as times change. The crux of the argument does not concern the details as such, but rather the human relations that are highlighted by the debates and the ritual event. These are grounded in social institutions and bear on the dynamics of community life and the involvement of different roles and points of view. Their ritual behaviour gives substance to the premise of their existence as Maasai; and any account of their ceremonies that overlooks the accompanying perceptions and beliefs misses a vital component and reduces the essence of tradition. There is a need to portray a Maasai world view and cosmology in terms that relate to their daily lives and community experience.

There have been two direct influences on my research in this area. The first was my earlier study of the Maa-speaking Samburu (1957–62). The Samburu warrior organization still persisted despite the general absence of intertribal warfare at that time. This led me to examine links between their age system – a form of stratification by age – and other aspects of their society. Polygyny was extensive among older men, and this led to a shortage of marriageable women and a prolonged bachelorhood up to the age of about thirty years for ‘warriors’ (*moran*, s. *morani*). In these times of peace, the age system could be viewed as a gerontocracy that placed *moran* in an extended state of social suspension; and in response to the tensions of this regime they displayed delinquent tendencies. By the time ageing youths were eventually admitted to the responsibilities of elderhood and marriage, they had acquired a stake in perpetuating the system, when they too would aspire to further wives (Spencer 1965, *Samburu*).

The second influence on my work was Philip Gulliver’s analysis of the Arusha (1963). The Arusha were settled agriculturalists with a distinctive pattern of land ownership vested in patrilineages that was not shared by the nomadic Maasai. However, they followed the Maasai age system, and Gulliver provided the first coherent account of this cyclical system in which men over a span of some fifteen years are grouped together to form an *age-set*, and are promoted together through a series of stages – *age grades* – rather as a class of children progress in a school. Whereas my understanding of the Samburu had focused on tensions between elders and *moran* as the two principal *age grades*, Gulliver drew attention to the dynamics of relations between successive *age-sets* of elders, leaving the *moran* politically on the sidelines. This provided a radically different type of explanation that did not appear relevant for the Samburu. Did our contrasting viewpoints perhaps reflect different phases of the cyclical age system? Or had Gulliver delved further into a model of the age system as perceived by elders, whereas my own analysis as a younger colleague had identified more closely with the *moran*? Or were the Arusha and Samburu simply quite different?

Both the Arusha and the Samburu were on the fringe of the Maa-speaking area, and questions raised by our alternative findings prompted me to turn my attention to the Maasai proper. At a time when others were looking beyond the Maasai to problems of development and adaptation to a new order, I set out to fill gaps in the ethnographic map of their institutions and tradition. The prospect of change in the area was of less concern to me than the need to explore contradictory aspects of Maasai society before these were obscured as they merged into a changing world. A variety of evidence suggested that much of Maasai tradition would persist. They still had warrior villages in Kenya despite attempts by successive administrations to abolish these; and the time-span of their age-sets had remained doggedly constant since pre-colonial times, despite repeated predictions of their demise. Again, there was widespread apathy towards education, which undermined attempts to enrol growing numbers of children in schools.² But increasingly, influence was slipping to Maasai who had some education and were developing networks in the wider region, pastureland was being displaced by agriculture, and herds were becoming

confined to grazing schemes. These were signs of change that were creeping inwards from the borders and outwards from the growing townships. Meanwhile, dispersed over an area equivalent to Scotland and Wales combined, most Maasai lived in remoter parts where traditional pastoralism persisted and persists, adapting as necessary to new demands. Because of the resilience of this tradition, the ethnographic present is used in the earlier chapters of this volume. These refer primarily to the 1970s, but draw on material collected over a longer period. It is this sense of persistence that I wish to convey here, avoiding overuse of the past tense, which refers to topics that clearly belong to the past or concern a particular period in time (Chapters 7–10).

The terms *Maa* and *Maasai* have a variable usage throughout the region. Here, I use *Maa* to include peoples, such as the Samburu and Chamus in the north and the Parakuyu in the south, who cannot claim to be pastoral Maasai proper, although they belong to the Maa- (or Maasai-) speaking cluster with traditions of common origin. Besides language, these fringe Maa have similar social institutions to the Maasai proper, but their age systems are quite independent of one another and this corresponds to being separate political and ritual entities. They contrast with the core of this cluster, which consists of sixteen (territorial) tribal sections. These are indisputably Maasai in the sense of a ritually united federation that subscribe to the same age system.³ Historically, some changes of alignment between these tribal sections have taken place with circumstance, but the general notion of a Maasai federation persists. So too does the sense of continuity in a tradition that still holds the clue to the way in which Maasai respond to changing circumstance.

The Maasai recognize common bonds of clanship throughout the federation, but the configuration of clans and sub-clans varies quite strikingly. The Laitayok clan, for instance, are numerous in the south but are absent in the north; the Uasinkishu Maasai have their own quite separate set of clans; and so on. The nub of the Maasai sense of unity is not their clans, but their shared age system. Within this system, peers of the same age-set grow old together and owe one another clear obligations, extending beyond the tribal section to all Maasai proper, binding them uniquely as a people. This vital link is lacking in their relations with outlying Maa-speakers, such as the Samburu or Parakuyu. Table 1.1 summarizes differences between fringe Maa-speakers and the Maasai proper, indicating some of the variables that are discussed later. Three tribal sections that live to the west of the River Mara fit uneasily into this scheme: they are the Uasinkishu, Moitanik, and Siria. These ‘Trans-Mara’ Maasai are fully integrated into the Maasai age system, but they also have their own independent Prophets and separate histories (Waller 1984).

The progression of this volume broadly follows my own research interests from 1976, when I undertook my principal fieldwork among the Matapato, who were more or less at the geographical centre of the Maasai federation and probably as typical as any other tribal section (Spencer 1988, *Matapato*). Aspects of the earlier studies of the Samburu and Arusha seemed relevant to Matapato, but the Maasai age system was altogether more elaborate, and a different explanation seemed necessary to account for its persistence. The patriarchal family emerged as a key

INTRODUCTION

Table 1.1 Variation among Maa-speaking peoples

<i>Maa-speaking group</i>	<i>Traditional economy</i> <i>Maasai proper villages?</i>	<i>Age system compared with</i>	<i>Moran form warrior</i>	<i>Influence of Prophets of Loonkidongi dynasty</i>
<i>North</i>				
Samburu	Pastoral	Similar in form, but not in detail	No	None; have their own diviners
Chamus	Agro-pastoral	Samburu and Maasai features	Recently acquired	None; have their own diviner
Trans-Mara Maasai	Pastoral	Identical (acquired?)	Yes	Remote; rely mostly on their own diviners
Maasai proper	Pastoral	Prototype	Prototype	Divided among tribal sections
----- Kenya–Tanzania boundary -----				
Maasai proper	Pastoral	Prototype	No longer	Kisonko Prophets dominate
Arusha	Agricultural	Overtly identical	No	Kisonko Prophets close by
Parakuyu	Pastoral	Independent but quite similar	No longer	Have a Prophet who claims Loonkidongi ancestry
<i>South</i>				

feature in this. Unlike the Samburu, the development of relations between overbearing fathers and maturing youths could relate to the separation of moran in their own semi-autonomous warrior villages (*manyat*, s. *manyata*) as the liminal phase of an extended rite of transition. Work among the Matapato raised issues that could have a wider bearing on the Maasai as a whole, suggesting the next horizon in my research. It was with this in mind that I set out to explore the degree of variation in other tribal sections with an open-ended checklist of questions – a list that expanded as I pursued my itinerary among the Loitokitok, Purko, Loita, Kisonko, Siria, Uasinkishu, Chamus, and two Loonkidongi communities of diviners (*il-oibonok*).⁴

Regarding the pattern of variation, it should again be stressed that there is not and probably never has been just one code of practice shared by all Maasai proper. Thus the Matapato system, as the principal focus of my study, was only typical in the sense that the Matapato were no more different from any notional norm for all Maasai than any other tribal section at that time. They saw their own version as ‘true’ Maasai, but so did their neighbours. The searching question, therefore, does not concern any normative view of Maasai society, but the extent to which the degree of variation can help us understand the significance of the broader pattern.

Turning from the background of this volume to its content, Part I progresses from the Maasai construction of time and of space in the world they inhabit to a hidden other world that they insist cannot be known. The perception of time is governed by their all-embracing age system (Chapter 2). Relative status associated with age seniority dominates social life among men, and the process of ageing provides their most far-reaching experience of time. Women have a secondary role in this, but the nuances of the age system are characterized by men’s relations with

women and through women, and this binds women to the system at different stages of their lives. The Maasai construction of ageing is relatively straight forward, and certainly, it is easier to grasp than other age systems in East Africa where generational position within the extended family is a complicating factor. But even so, this chapter reveals a measure of complexity that lends itself to a variety of interpretations. These may be regarded as Weberian ideal types that highlight different facets of the process of ageing and career development, varying with context and gender. Here, it is useful to distinguish between the cycle of ceremonies that punctuate the process of time, spanning about fifteen years, and the experience of those passing through this cycle as age mates or peers: members of the same age-set. They perceive it as a 'ceremonial cycle', but they never return to the same point, for meanwhile they have been promoted to the next stage. In effect, they experience it as an 'ageing spiral'. As with the passing of days or seasons, a cyclical process is involved, but time moves on, and the spiral of ageing involves a time-span that is more than merely recurrent. It is unique to each age-set and only recurs a limited number of times over any lifetime, providing a shared experience for its members as individuals. While women have an essentially passive role in this process, they do have their own independent career profiles; and the chapter ends by outlining their gathering experience of the life-course, which consolidates their role. This contrasts with the tailing off among men, who in certain respects become anomalously peripheral to the system as they reach old age, placing them beyond time.

Chapter 3 considers the Maasai construction of space, working outwards from the village as the focus of relations between the sexes. This relationship had been a topic in my earlier volume on the Samburu, which noted the extent to which women were ruthlessly exploited in gerontocratic societies – a theme that was not yet topical in social anthropology. However, I was inevitably trapped on the male side, impelled by my age to tread a delicate tightrope between moranhood and elderhood. This virtually precluded trespassing on the minefield that separated the sexes, which bore on the sensitive issue of women's clandestine affairs with moran and their former lovers. It was hardly different nearly twenty years later among the Matapato Maasai, when my age identified me as an elder. Here too, the relationship between the sexes was dogged by misgivings, and I could not appeal to trust from both suspicious elders and secretive wives. My involvement with women was essentially at the overt level that they chose to present themselves in public, complaining about the elders in general and sometimes even about their own husbands, but giving away no hostages to fortune. This inevitably introduced a gender bias in my work, and I tended to overlook the network of support shared among women.⁵ In this chapter, I have attempted to bridge the gap in my own material by reviewing a vivid case study undertaken by Ulrike von Mitzlaff (1988). This provides a very perceptive view of the women's domain in striking contrast to my own published work. In her model, power in village life shifts between men (when they are present) and women (especially when they act in concert). Once again, these contrasting points of view clarify complementary aspects of a more complex social reality that is not dominated by either sex.

The remainder of the chapter extends to Maasai perceptions of space beyond the village. If elders are vulnerable to ridicule within the village, no one questions their higher authority and overbearing shadow in the wider scene. The uncertainties of the bushland are associated especially with moran as the principal defenders of Maasai herds, based on their manyat and conspicuously pursuing their affairs in all directions during the day. However, the bush at night holds unseen dangers; and hidden from view is the bizarre belief in the sorcerer, a secretive misanthropic spectre laying his traps. While the popular image of moranhood expresses an idealized form of masculine virility, the notion of the sorcerer may be regarded as a perverted form, a caricature of the more unscrupulous aspect of elderhood. Beyond the borders of the tribal section, a further ambiguity pervades the concept of the Maasai proper as a confederation. On the one hand, there is the prevailing notion that the sixteen tribal sections are all 'Maasai' in a full sense, united by a single age system. Inter-marriage is unusual but widely approved in principle, and intermigration in times of necessity supports the claim that land inhabited by Maasai belongs to all Maasai. On the other hand, each tribal section independently organizes its own ceremonial cycle that concerns the development of each new age-set; and this involves considerable variation between tribal sections, who turn to different Prophets for advice. It is the territorial tribal section that provides a sense of identity and the context of community action, and local concern rarely extends beyond their borders to neighbouring Maasai. A sense of mistrust and ambiguity attaches to these borders. The stranger who is Maasai and yet unknown as a personality, poses a sinister figure, especially if he is also an age mate. At its most inclusive level, the age system poses a larger more impersonal edifice. Pride in being Maasai is tinged with a sense of awe beyond their immediate comprehension.

Maasai religious concepts are elaborated in the next three chapters and these form the core of this work. The interpretation of misfortune is considered in Chapter 4, with special reference to the general belief in the elders' power to invoke God through their prayers – to bless and to curse. God is perceived as the all-powerful and arbitrary force of Providence, whose intentions can never be known. Only in retrospect can there be even a glimpse of some overarching pattern, linking human lapses to unexpected misfortune. Even Prophets, who are adept at probing the causes of misfortune, have no more than a dim notion of the nature of the cosmos. The flamboyance of Maasai ceremony and self-regard is offset by a sense of resignation to an unknown and unknowable future. They see themselves rather like Plato's prisoners in a cave, ill equipped to delve into ultimate truths. The elaboration of these beliefs touches on the experience of growing up in a regime where children and wives are 'possessions', subordinated to the principle of patriarchal authority. Similarly, elders in their prime – the patriarchs – are no less subordinate to powerful forces that lie beyond their moral comprehension. Their piety is expressed in terms of an ultimate submission to a divine order that lies beyond the world they understand. The humility of this ignorance is linked to the widespread concern over sorcery, disavowing the hidden knowledge that this implies. The Samburu are relevant here, partly because they have a more elaborate

system of beliefs, and also because this seems to correspond to certain differences between the two societies. Notably, Samburu fathers are more constrained within their local communities, engendering less concern over sorcery and a more open attitude towards ritual knowledge. Both societies have a similar attitude towards misfortune, but there is an apparent correlation between family structure and the perception of God.

The Samburu do not share the formidable reputation of the Maasai historically, and their diviners do not compare with the Loonkidongi dynasty of Prophets, who are closely associated with the earlier successes of the Maasai. Chapter 5 elaborates the ritual and quasi-regal nature of Loonkidongi patronage as intermediaries with the unknown. This gives them a shadowy doubled-edged reputation. As diviners, the Loonkidongi see themselves as a class above ordinary Maasai and keep themselves apart. They claim superior knowledge and higher standards of behaviour, and they point to the fees from their clients that bring them greater wealth. Most successful are those diviners who become Prophets. The Maasai of each tribal section have their own Loonkidongi Prophet, who is described in terms of an infallible 'godfather'. However, deep respect for him is edged with fear: he protects his clients from sorcerers through a more potent form of sorcery, and he may withdraw this protection if they do not reward him or try to desert him. The general image of the Loonkidongi at large is of fratricidal sorcerers competing with one another for the spoils of patronage; and the reputations of successful Prophets are dogged by the threat of misfortune, leading to madness and early deaths. The Maasai in their turn prefer to dissociate themselves from Loonkidongi communities, who are felt to live in a dangerous semi-mythical world.

Central to the power of the Loonkidongi is their manipulation of oracles, involving an ability to interpret the number of pebbles thrown during a consultation. The process of acquiring this skill is considered in Chapter 6, leading to an examination of the symbolic structure of the numerology implicit in their technique. This reveals a pattern that echoes Maasai concepts of cyclical time and the spiral of ageing. At a symbolic level, the configuration of Prophets, diviners, and their oracles are fully integrated into the Maasai system of belief.

Part II of this volume is concerned with the pattern of variation around these themes. Within each tribal section, the Maasai are aware that variety exists elsewhere, but they tend to regard it as idiosyncratic and discount any deeper significance. There is a general lack of comparative curiosity, and other people's customs do not command the same attention to detail as the nuances of their own practices. It is the unity of the Maasai age system that is stressed, and local differences are trivialized and even denied. Yet there is a striking pattern that extends to all Maa-speaking peoples. My earlier comparison of the pastoral Samburu and agricultural Arusha had noted the existence of contrasting models of age organization (Spencer 1976). The first emphasized gerontocratic rule that led to tensions between elders and moran among Samburu; whereas the second displayed a certain disregard for age seniority in the competition for power between successive age-sets among Arusha. The two models seemed to be quite unconnected and

incompatible, but my subsequent fieldwork revealed a broad trend that was fully consistent with the Samburu model, located at the northern extreme of the Maa-speaking area, and the Arusha model in the deep south, with a broad shift in emphasis from north to south among tribal sections of the Maasai proper. The Matapato were in an intermediate position, leaning towards the south. The existence of this broad north–south trend was wholly unexpected, and only when I encountered it in the field did I realize that it had been a logical possibility in my earlier review. Far from being fringe anomalies, as I had assumed, the Samburu and Arusha were part of a wider pattern. Further south still, the Maa-speaking Parakuyu have an age system that appears very similar to their Kisonko neighbours. Thus, the Samburu in the far north provide a particularly clear-cut and even extreme example of the northern model, and the Parakuyu in the far south seem to fit into an extended north–south pattern. However, a critical feature that defines both societies as ‘Maa-speaking’ rather than ‘Maasai proper’ is the independence of their age systems.

These shifts in emphasis highlight the different approaches towards age organization and the notion of mystical misfortune. The Purko Maasai are the dominant tribal section in the north, and they are taken to represent a node along this continuum in Chapter 7. In the following chapter, the Loitokitok Maasai represent another node, as a branch of the Kisonko who are the dominant tribal section in the south. These two chapters display contrasting aspects of the Maasai age system, and the whole process of ageing takes on different complexions. There is a shift in focus from the contrasting ideologies of opposed *age grades* in the north (youth vs middle-age), to a struggle for power between opposed *age-sets* in the south, where there is a shared ideology regardless of age differences, and a more immediate concern over sorcery. This corresponds to very different types of relationship between the Maasai of each tribal section and their Prophet.

Chapter 9 attempts to reconstruct the pre-colonial system of the Maasai, when the Prophet had more influence over the moran and the Maasai held their destiny in their own hands. The principal source for this is an early study undertaken by Moritz Merker (1904), who served in the military administration of German East Africa (now Tanzania). While the English translation of Merker’s book has never been published, his description of their society, extending over more than 200 pages, deserves to be treated today as a classic in its own right, with an authentic ring, and insights into the Maasai age system that now seem decades ahead of their time. Compared with other early accounts that raise more questions than they answer, there is an exemplary attention to ethnographic detail that inspires confidence. However, there are some inconsistencies and clear differences with more recent accounts that deserve closer attention. This aims towards a historical perspective of the Maasai system, both for its own sake and to understand better the process of change since that time.

Following this reassessment of Merker’s study, Chapter 10 examines Philip Gulliver’s more recent account of ‘social control’ among the Arusha Maasai, which took a similarly pragmatic approach. Gulliver rejected the possibility that institutions

such as the age system or the patrilineal system were constraining, and he presented them as arenas of opportunity, prone to manipulation. This provided a novel and dynamic twist to our understanding of age organization. However, such expediency did not explain the persistence of Arusha institutions or the complexity of the Maasai age system. Without some form of constraint, anarchy rather than order would surely prevail, and any patrilineal or age-based concepts would fall into disarray. This chapter reconsiders Gulliver's rich case material and suggests that the Arusha age system did in fact have a major role in containing the excesses of patrilineal squabbles, and it was itself constrained as well as constraining by the emphasis on consensus. But it remains that Gulliver's transactionalist approach provides a dynamic model of the succession of age-sets, viewing the age system as a perennial battle for power and prestige. It follows on from Merker's study quite neatly, and its aptness for the present volume is clear throughout this text.

Gulliver presented the politics of social control, in other words, as a *constant sum game*, in which the gains made by one age-set at any time balanced the losses among its rivals. This critique of his work leads to the final chapter, which provides an overview of the topics considered in the present work. Here the argument is developed a stage further with reference to a theory of *non-constant sum games*. These are sometimes described as *games with Providence*, or taken together they may be regarded more aptly still as composing a *theory of dilemmas*. This modified approach views social interaction at a more indeterminate level, where the players cannot read each other's minds; and the dilemmas they face have their counterpart in the patterns of belief associated with mystical misfortune and the unknown. Because ageing, family tensions, and misfortune concern ambivalent relations between young and old, between the sexes, and between Maasai and Loonkidongi, any theory that is concerned with dilemmas has potential. The northern and southern models provide parallel opportunities for exploring this neglected theory as a tool for the analysis of choice, risk, and action. This extends beyond the transactions of politics to the uncertainties of developing age relations within the fifteen-year ceremonial cycle. By examining the application of just three basic types of dilemma to different points in this cycle, an attempt is made to bring the northern and southern models together as facets of a recurring age system.

The sheer scope of this work has precluded an examination of the contradictions between tradition and development. This is not to deny an articulation with the forces of modernization elsewhere in East Africa, typified by sporadic attempts at imposing grazing schemes and an ambivalence towards money as a growing medium of exchange. Rather, it is to be drawn into the enclosed world of Maasai society that works as it is felt always to have worked, with little sense of historical change. Cattle and women are treated as commodities, but time and space are perceived as representations of a traditional order, opposed to any suggestion that they too are commodities stemming from the creep of global capitalism.

Yet, the need to perceive the Maasai in a wider setting is clearly a pressing issue, and this led me to put an early draft of the present volume to one side, while I turned my attention to the broader aspect. This was published as *The Pastoral*

Table 1.2 The sequence of publications relevant to this volume

Topic		Publication
<i>Maa-speaking cluster</i>		
Samburu (Maa-speaking pastoralists)		<i>The Samburu</i> (1965) <i>Nomads in Alliance</i> (1973) <i>The Maasai of Matapato</i> (1988)
Matapato Maasai		
Maasai world view and cosmology	Chapters 2–4	present volume
Loonkidongi Prophets	Chapters 5–6	
Purko Maasai	Chapter 7	
Loitokitok Maasai	Chapter 8	
Maasai c.1900*	Chapter 9	
Arusha (agricultural Maasai)*	Chapter 10	
Chamus (Maa-speaking agro-pastoralists)		<i>The Pastoral Continuum</i> (1998)
Other African pastoralists besides Maa-speakers		

Note

* Critiques of earlier work.

Continuum (1998), collating studies of pastoralism and development in East Africa with historical material that I had gathered among the Maa-speaking Chamus of Lake Baringo. The Chamus provided a useful microcosm of the problems of resilience and change throughout the region, but this involved a separate line of enquiry from the aspect considered here. The present volume, then, is the most inclusive of my writings on the Maa-speaking area. Logically it leads on to *The Pastoral Continuum*, which is more inclusive still, historically and geographically. Table 1.2 summarizes the logical progression of these various publications, and provides a setting for the pages that follow.

Notes

- 1 The population estimates in Map 1.1 have been extrapolated from a variety of sources, ranging from some earlier more detailed surveys to more recent censuses that have provided broad indications of growth, without identifying separate ethnic or sub-ethnic groups. The sources for this map are: Tucker and Mpaayei 1955: xii; Tanganyika 1958; Beidelman 1962: 10; Jacobs 1963: 52a; Kenya 1965 vol. 2: 98–102, 131–173, 192–205; 1966: 36; 1980: 13–14; Tanzania 1969: 267–8; 1991.
- 2 Eg. Johnston 1886: 407; Merker 1904: 339; Kenya 1934–5: 4–5 (citing earlier reports), cf. Saitoti in Beckwith and Saitoti 1980: 269; Holland 1996: 38, 66, 287–8.
- 3 Among these sixteen tribal sections, ten claim ‘pure’ Maasai descent and customs, uninfluenced by any non-Maasai neighbours. These are the Damat, Kaputiei, Keekonuykie, Kisonko, Loita, Loitokitok, Loodokilani, Matapato, Purko, and Salei. Six others diverge from the notion of purity in various ways, including clanship. They are the Dalalekutuk (who had links with the Kikuyu), Laitayok and Serenket (who had links with Dorobo foragers), and Trans-Mara Maasai of whom Moitanik had links with Luhya, Siria with Luo, and Uasinkishu with Kalenjin (Waller 1984). On the fringe, the Arusha and Chamus have agricultural traditions; and the Paraguyu are interspersed among agriculturalists, such

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as the Gogo, Hehe, Irangi, Kaguru, Nguu, and Pare (Beidelman 1960: 251). It is not clear from available material how far the closeness of Uasinkishu and Moitanik to the Maasai proper, as compared to the separateness of the Parakuyu, stems from a more inclusive approach towards the Maasai problem by the British administration during in the early years of colonial rule in Kenya, in contrast to a more divisive approach by the German administration further south.

- 4 For fuller details of this itinerary, see Spencer 1978, and *Matapato*: 4–5. A systematic outline of my findings with comments on the literature is recorded in ‘A Survey of Variation among the Maasai, 1977’ (Spencer nd.). This was originally intended as an appendix to the present volume, and it is available for anyone who wishes to rearrange this jigsaw with perhaps further pieces to add.
- 5 Cf. Llewelyn-Davies 1978: 222–36. My attempt to record an old women’s autobiography (Chieni and Spencer 1993), for instance, emphasizes the mutual loyalty between the sexes and provides some rather bland reading when compared with von Mitzlaff’s more dynamic account or my own chauvinistic impressions among Maasai men.

Part I

THE BOUNDARIES OF TIME, SPACE, AND CERTAINTY

