‘Beach-Boy Elders’ and ‘Young Big-Men’: Subverting the Temporalities of Ageing in Kenya’s Ethno-Erotic Economies

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ABSTRACT *In the 1980s, Samburu men from northern Kenya began migrating to coastal tourist resorts to sell souvenirs and perform traditional dances for European tourists. Many of them engaged in transactional sex or marriages with European women attracted to the image of the exotic African young male warrior. Through relationships with European women, some Samburu men managed to rapidly accumulate wealth, becoming so-called ‘young big-men’. As a way to transform their wealth into more durable forms of respectability, these men used their money to marry local women and speed up their ritual initiation into elderhood. Meanwhile, there also emerged the figure of ‘beach-boy elders’, men who aged before accumulating sufficient wealth. They returned to coastal tourist resorts, dressed as young warriors, and waited to find European partners. In the article, I argue that beach-boy elders and young big-men produce queer moments in the temporalities of ageing, in that they subvert normative expectations of ageing at the very same time that they seek to produce them.*

KEYWORDS *Age, temporality, sexuality, Samburu, Kenyan tourism*

Bamburi is one of the most popular tourist beaches on the north coast of Mombasa. Luxurious tourist hotels and expensive Italian restaurants, swimming pools, and disco bars line the beach front, facing onto the Indian Ocean. Tourists – mainly from Western Europe – sunbathe on the white sands. Kenyan men from all over the country sell souvenirs or offer tourists picturesque boat trips and scuba diving sessions, camel rides, or guided tours

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of the coast. Kenyan women sell traditional fabrics, embroidered sandals, and jewellery to foreigners, or sell fruit, doughnuts, and hot tea to the traders. For many tourists, however, the most striking presence in this diverse beach landscape is that of the *morans*, or young male warriors of the Samburu ethnic group of northern Kenya. Dressed in traditional attire of red cloth and colourful beads, with long braided hair and occasional face painting, these men embody for many tourists the 'rich', 'primitive' culture of the Maa-speaking pastoralists of East Africa, among whom the Maasai are the best known. At the beach, Samburu morans pose for photographs and sell souvenirs. Many of them hope to find European female partners for transactional sex, long-term relationships, or marriage.

One day in April 2011, I was visiting with traders at the beach, when my friend Saruni, a young Samburu man, invited me to sit at his souvenir stand and chat. 'Do you see that elder selling beads over there?' he asked. Then, he went on:

> His name is Patrick. He used to be a very rich man. He had many white ladies from Germany, Switzerland, and England. He even had several of them at the same time. He had lots of money from them. He used to hire police escorts just to go to the ATM to get cash so he would not be mugged. Everyone knew he was rich. He even had four Nissan mini-vans and a big house back home, in Maralal [Samburu District]. Heee! This guy had been a big-man when he was still a young boy.

Saruni explained that Patrick had graduated from the age grade of the morans six years earlier. By the age standards of the Samburu, he was an 'elder'. But Patrick continued to dress in full moran regalia, trying to fulfil tourists' stereotypes of the Samburu 'warrior' and hoping to find another 'white' girlfriend. Saruni continued:

> When he became rich, he started drinking. He lost everything. He even sold his cars and his house, and drank all the money. And now, he is back in Mombasa trying to make some business. Now, he is a beach-boy again. He hopes to get another white mama. But luck like the one he had only comes once in a lifetime.

Patrick's story had become something of a legend not only among the Samburu, but also among traders at the beach and among Europeans vacationing regularly in Kenya. A woman from England, for example, described Patrick to me as a 'famous beach-boy' who had once been a 'millionaire', only to waste his fortunes on casinos, alcohol, and prostitutes, and return to the beach as a poor

man. Saruni was much younger than Patrick and more attractive to female tourists. He perceived Patrick less as a competition than as a sad reminder of the fact that, as a man aged, his chances to have intimate relationships with female tourists quickly diminished. Saruni sighed and concluded: 'I'd rather die poor at home than age at the beach.'

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, more and more Samburu men obtained wealth rapidly through relationships with foreign women. Some of these men sought to transform their wealth into locally recognized forms of respectability and social worth, by marrying, fathering children, and building houses. In this way, they tried to become elders long before other members of their age sets. Relatives and neighbours called them 'young big-men' (S: *vijana wakubwa*).[1] Other men, however, never managed to acquire any wealth, or they 'lost' their wealth through excessive consumption. Some persistently returned to the beach in hope for further life-transforming encounters with foreigners. Often, they grew older at the beach, still waiting for such encounters. Saruni and others sarcastically called these men 'beach-boy elders' (M: *lpayeni loobishboi*), an idiom that questioned their entitlement to the respect normally given to members of the elders' age grade.

'Beach-boy elders' and 'young big-men' illustrate contradictory ways of producing age and inhabiting social time. While young big-men desired to skip ahead of their age mates and turn quickly into respectable elders, beach-boy elders wished to return to being young morans to produce forms of wealth associated with an age grade status that they had come to inhabit prematurely. In this article, I argue that subversive practices of age – that is, accelerations and inversions of the normative life course – reveal how, in Samburu, the temporalities of ageing are shaped in relation to the tourist commodification of ethnic sexuality. As various social actors negotiated ageing in relation to age grades, wealth accumulation, bodily transformations, and touristic brands, they produced what I will call 'queer moments' – moments of contradiction and subversion – through which new forms of age and time emerged.

Age, Temporality, and Ethno-Erotic Capital

Subversive practices of age, I will argue, offer important insights into the links between age, temporality, and sexuality in the new global economy. Anthropologists have long been interested in how age and ageing constituted central mechanisms of producing social value, that is, socially recognized forms of moral worth. Structural-functionalist anthropologists made age categories central to understanding social reproduction and political organization (e.g.

Evans-Pritchard 1940; Wilson 1963; Fortes 1984). In East Africa, for example, the study of so-called age set systems – that is, organized cohorts of people moving together through a number of 'age grades' or categories of age – resulted in extensive comparative debate (e.g. Spencer 1965; 1997: Chapter 3; Prins 1970; Baxter & Almagor 1978; Almagor 1983; Bernardi 1985; Kurimoto & Simonse 1993; Aguilar 1998). Age set systems, scholars argued, sustained social cohesion by tying together disparate groups of kin in the face of conflict and maintained hierarchies of seniority by allowing elders to control their juniors.

More recently, anthropologists and historians of Africa pointed out that notions of age, in fact, mediate and are shaped by global economic processes (Bledsoe 2002; Honwana & de Boeck 2005; Argenti 2007; Cole & Durham 2007; Burton & Charton-Bigot 2010). Age, for example, has become a central lens through which to examine the effects of increasingly volatile and unpredictable economic circumstances, following market liberalization. New constraints to social maturation and emerging ways of imagining the life course also generate novel configurations of age (Johnson-Hanks 2006; Cole 2010). Informed by these bodies of work, in this article, I take 'age' to refer to sets of practices and representations through which people negotiate life trajectories in order to create social value. Age may be defined in relation to bodily transformations, chronological measurements of time, wealth accumulation, ritual initiation, age grades, claims to generational belonging, membership in age cohorts, or commodity consumption. With the growing circulation of people, goods, and ideas across the globe, it is important to examine also how divergent notions of age intersect in social practice.

Age is also one of the many ways through which people produce and inhabit social time. For early anthropologists, time was a function of structural organization, categorized as respectively linear or cyclical and mediated by systems of kinship and political organization (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1940: 94ff, 249ff; Leach 1961: Chapter 6). By contrast, recent studies use 'temporality' to capture more dynamic ways of being in time. Temporality is not merely a product of structural circumstances, but rather inheres in the concrete practices through which people produce and embody time (Bourdieu 1977; Munn 1992). For purposes of this study, I define temporality as an embodied symbolic process unfolding in practice, through which people imagine themselves to inhabit a present in relation to various kinds of pasts and futures (Munn 1992: 115–116). I use temporality to understand how large-scale structural and historical processes inform – often in unexpected ways – the everyday life of social actors (cf. Gell 1992; James & Mills 2005; Hodges 2008). Henri Hubert (1905)

pointed out long ago that, because the rhythms of time are always experienced as plural, humans everywhere struggle to reconcile the tensions between different, competing 'calendars' (see James & Mills 2005: 7–9). Drawing on Hubert's insight, I will examine what kind of temporalities emerge when people try to reconcile the divergent rhythms of competing notions of age and ageing.

The intersection of primitivist tourism with markets of sex and intimacy presents a particularly challenging context in which to rethink age and temporality in the new global economy. Following the effects of market liberalization in Africa and elsewhere, since the 1980s, many people with scarce material resources have capitalized on their ethnic difference and cultural identity (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009). Primitivist tourism became part of growing global markets of 'tribal' or 'ethnic' culture – artefacts, performances, and experiences – which drew Western consumers in search of potentially transformative, authentic Otherness (Stasch, Introduction, 2014; for Africa, see Ebron 2002; Bruner 2005; Kasfir 2007). The same economic circumstances also led to the spectacular growth of transnational markets of sex and intimacy. In many of these contexts, Euro-American tourists and travellers drew on imaginaries of racial, ethnic, and cultural difference in their quest for sex (see Ebron 2002: Chapter 6; Jacobs 2010). I offer the framework of 'ethno-erotic economies' to map networks of monetary and intimate exchanges based on the commodification of ethnic sexuality in tourism and beyond. Here, ethno-erotic capital, or a subject's potential to embody marketable ethnic sexuality, is based not only on one's ability to look 'primitive' or culturally different, but also on one's likelihood to match Western standards of bodily beauty and sexual desirability (for the concept of 'ethno-capital' on which I build the related notion of 'ethno-erotic capital', see Comaroff & Comaroff 2009). Therefore, ethno-erotic capital is often the privilege of those with youthful bodies. How does the commodification of young bodies in ethno-erotic economies shape how people experience ageing and time? How can subjects produce value *in time*, if ethno-erotic capital irreversibly depletes itself in the ageing process? And what do 'beach-boy elders' and 'young big-men' reveal about how Samburu men and women craft age and temporality in contemporary Kenya?

In order to describe how the commodification of the moran's sexuality generated new contradictions in the temporalities of ageing among the Samburu, I will first show how, since the mid-twentieth century, Samburu notions of elderhood intersected with national representations of 'big-men' and 'boys' to produce new ideals of masculine authority and respectability.

Making Elders in Samburu

Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, the Samburu of northern Kenya subsisted primarily by raising cattle, goats, sheep, and, to a lesser extent, camels and donkeys. Living in a semi-arid savannah environment, families migrated seasonally with their livestock in search of pastures. According to my elderly informants and early anthropologists, during this time, ageing was based primarily on the age set system and the accumulation of wealth.

First, age sets and age grades offered important ritual and symbolic means for producing respectability throughout the life course. Every 14 years or so, all boys aged approximately 12–25 were ritually initiated, through circumcision, as a named 'age set' (M: *ntowuo* or *laji*). Circumcision marked their transition from the age grade of 'childhood' (M: *keraisho*) to that of 'moranhood' (M: *lamorano*). Morans (M: *lmurran*, sg. *lmurrani*) had to spend several years herding their father's livestock and participating in cattle raids, without relying too much on the resources of their family and without getting married. About 14 years after its initiation, elders promoted the age set of morans into the age grade of 'elderhood' (M: *lpayiano*), allowing its members to begin their own families. At any given time, there were four or five living age sets of elders, each with different degrees of authority and different ritual and political roles. Although women were not initiated into age sets *per se*, as girls (M: *ntoyie*), they adopted the name of the age set of the current morans, and, once married women (M: *ntomonok*), they became part of the age set of their husbands (Straight 2007: 31–32, 74–75). While women enabled – and could sometimes undermine – the age formations of men by acting individually or collectively as daughters or wives of a certain clan or region, they also gained authority as their husbands and sons progressed through the age grade ladder.

Second, ageing was also about a gradual process of wealth accumulation, wherein the temporalities of ageing were symbiotically mediated and magnified through the rhythms of growth of individual cattle herds and families (Spencer 1973). Elders acquired respectability, prestige, and authority by gradually obtaining livestock, paying bridewealth for several wives, fathering many children, and building vast networks of exchange partners and clients. Cattle allowed male elders to control the labour of wives, offspring, and clients, while access to labour facilitated the growth of their cattle herds. Women produced respectability by marrying, giving birth, raising children, and thus growing the lineages of their husbands. Women's work tending cattle and trading livestock products generated the political resources necessary for male power and also conferred prestige and authority onto women as they aged.

Tensions and contradictions permeated age relations. For example, generational inequalities sustained conflicts between senior and junior men. Men relied on the herds of their fathers to pay bridewealth for their first wives. But, because fathers themselves still wanted to marry additional wives, elders had high stakes in keeping young men in the age grade of moranhood and delaying the age of their marriage (Spencer 1965: 96). Although elders expected young men to wait patiently for the herds of their fathers to generate a surplus of cattle in order to marry and become elders, their relation was fraught with conflict (Spencer 1965: Chapter 6). In addition, wealth inequalities shaped the extent to which particular senior men and women could exert authority. Although age grade status conferred nominal authority on all elders, in practice, men and women with material resources had more influence in political and ritual matters.

The intensification of British colonial reforms towards the mid-twentieth century played an important role in the reconfiguration of age in Samburu. As more and more young men earned money by enrolling in the colonial army as soldiers or by working as policemen in towns, they came to erode generational inequalities. Using their wages to buy livestock and pay bridewealth, some of these men gained partial autonomy from the elders of their clans (see Sperling 1987: 181–182; Holtzman 2003: 235ff), even if they still depended on these elders to be promoted into elderhood. Samburu elders, who had begun losing control over the means of economic production, sought new sources of power and authority in state politics and local ritual practice. Some elders collaborated with British administrators and gained positions of relative power as chiefs of their respective clans or members of the Local Native Council. Other elders sought to monopolize the means of ritual reproduction as a way to claim gerontocratic authority (cf. Parkin 1972: 100ff). As the money of wage labourers began eroding the ability of local elders to control the time of young men and women, elders now more insistently claimed ritual knowledge and the occult power of the curse (M: *ldeket*) as privileges of elderhood. In this context, age sets and age grades gained renewed importance. Colonial administrators tried to reform the age set system, by reducing the number of years of moranhood in order to foreclose raids and violence by morans (Simpson 1998). Although relatively unsuccessful, these colonial policies contributed to making the age set system a key element of Samburu identity and consciousness. Being Samburu became, among other things, a way of 'being in time' (Spencer 1993) through age sets and age grades (cf. Straight 2005).

'Big-Men' and 'Boys' in Post-Independence Kenya

Following Kenya's independence from Britain in 1963, new notions of seniority and gerontocratic authority emerged in the discourses of the state. As African elites took over the positions of white colonial administrators, they reorganized the state bureaucracy, in part, around hierarchies of wealth and ethnicity. 'Big-men' and eternal 'boys' represented key figures in the vocabulary of power of the new regime.

Benefiting from access to the social and economic resources of the state, politicians-*cum*-businessmen depicted themselves as 'big-men' (Berman 1998: 330; see also Bayart 1993). Kenya's big-men claimed authority by amassing wealth and generating vast networks of patron–client relations that were crucial to their economic and political standing. Addressed primarily as 'big-men' (S: *wakubwa*) or 'respectable men' (S: *waheshimiwa*) and spoken of, at various times, as 'the ones of Mercedes Benz' (S: *wabenzi* [in the 1980s]) or 'bosses' (S: *wadoss* [in the present]), these men owned large houses in cities and in rural homelands and drove expensive cars. At political rallies (S: *baraza*) across the country, they distributed large sums of money to local spectators, and at various community fundraisers (S: *harambee*) they tried to outdo each other through large gifts of cash. Big bellies revealed through unbuttoned expensive suits, upright bodily postures topped by 'godfather hats' (cowboy hats), or flamboyant speeches delivered on a loud, confident voice became quintessential indices of the big-men. To these, one must add an excessive desire for sexual consumption reflected in multiple wives and mistresses, all of whom were showered with expensive gifts. Previously, African servants and clients had addressed their white male patrons as 'big-men' and villagers used similar phrases to speak of wealthy land owners. But, unlike their predecessors, postcolonial big-men also displayed their largess through self-aggrandizing practices of conspicuous consumption (Blunt 2010: 3ff).

While big-manhood indexed the *spatial* dimensions of power (largess, wealth, and connections) and elderhood its *temporal* dimensions (old age, acquired wisdom, and ritual expertise), the two forms of masculine authority converged, if only partially, in the practices of postcolonial subjects. Big-men sought to portray themselves as 'elders' in order to enhance their power and authority. Jomo Kenyatta, the country's first president, for example, fashioned himself as *the* 'elder' (S: *Mzee*) of the nation. In response, elders of various ethnic groups soon offered to bestow 'tribal elder' titles upon different politicians and businessmen as a way of becoming their clients and protégées (cf. McIntosh 2009).

In contrast to the big-men, men in subordinate positions, who lacked wealth and authority, were subject to practices of infantilization. Regardless of their age, they were addressed as 'boys' and denied both the privileges of social maturation and the prerogatives of elderhood. Infantilization through the relational use of the noun 'boy' had first emerged during the colonial era, when Europeans referred to African workers as 'house-boys' (domestic servants), 'corner-boys' (tribal patrols), or 'cow-boys' (herders). Unemployed men who worked in the informal sector were also 'boys', such as in the expressions 'beach-boys' or 'shoe-shine-boys'. Following independence, the noun continued to refer to relatively poor men, at the same time that it also more fixedly described men of politically and economically marginalized ethnic groups. For example, urban Kenyans saw the Maasai and the Samburu as ignorant 'primitives' whose lifestyles undermined national development. When they encountered a Maasai or Samburu man, they condescendingly called him *ero* (hey, boy!), the Maa appellative for a male social junior. Moreover, in urban contexts, as many school-educated men who lacked the means of adulthood turned to youth organizations as a way to make a living or mobilize politically (see Charton-Bigot 2010), the English noun 'boy' became partly synonymous with the Swahili *kijana* (pl. *vijana*) – literally 'youth' – so that those who identified with the generational category of 'youth' were oftentimes those classified as 'boys'.

National images of the big-men and boys circulated widely throughout the country via political rallies, print media, and labour migrants, thus setting the tone for new ways of embodying age and status in villages and towns (see also Blunt 2010). Samburu men who were employed by the government as councillors, chiefs, or chief's messengers, or those who worked as soldiers, watchmen, and policemen across Kenya used their wages and their social relations in government administration to gain authority among their neighbours, kin, and age mates, regardless of their particular positions in the age grade ladder. For them, different aspects of the state's image of the big-man became appealing. They adopted 'godfather hats', blazers, and shirts in combination with traditional items of clothing, such as the loincloth (M: *shuka*), to produce local versions of the Kenyan big-man (see Figure 1). By recombining clothing items, these men expressed their desire to embody both Kenyan ideals of powerful masculinity and local ideals of elderhood (cf. Lonsdale 1992: 360). In relation to these men, impoverished elders became infantilized clients of sorts, dependents with less power to claim authority in the political affairs of their district. Even if not all of these men were addressed as 'boys', their clientage to big-men often rendered them socially junior to the latter.

Figure 1. *Chief (junior elder), chief's messenger (senior elder), and moran, Samburu District, 1960.* Source: Photo by Paul Spencer. Reproduced with permission.

Since the 1980s, the effects of market liberalization and structural adjustment programmes combined with the aftermath of devastating droughts, land privatization schemes, and rapid population growth to strain people's access to resources (Fratkin 1994). With the declines of cattle economies and the national labour market, Samburu men found it difficult to access the material means for achieving respectability as elders. For many, the spectacular riches of big-men – cars, large houses, and expensive clothes – remained largely out of reach.

'Mombasa Morans' in Kenya's Ethno-Erotic Economies

In this context, more and more Samburu men sought alternative avenues to wealth in the tourist resorts of the coast. Drawing on Western stereotypes of their 'primitive' culture, beginning in 1979 and 1980, some young men began migrating seasonally to work in tourism. They boarded public minivans and buses and travelled almost 1000 kilometres from the Samburu District in the Kenyan north to the coastal towns of Mombasa, Mtwapa, Diani, and Watamu, on the Indian Ocean. There, they sold souvenirs at the beach, danced for tourists in hotels, and initiated various forms of transactional sex with female tourists and travellers. Selling beads, spears, and shields allowed many of them to send money regularly to their families at home and also purchase livestock. But it was ultimately through relationships with foreign women that some built houses, bought cars, started large businesses, and married local women (Figure 2). By 2010, an estimate of 1000 Samburu men traveled to the coast every year.

Figure 2. *Samburu men selling souvenirs to tourists at the beach, Mombasa, 2011.*
Source: Photo by the author.

Tourists were fascinated with the figure of the exotic Maa-speaking 'warrior'. Through the visual and textual representations of travellers and journalists, photographers, and filmmakers, the image of the tall, slim, light-skinned warrior, walking half-naked, dressed only with a red cloth and with colourful beads, and holding a spear and a club soon became an emblem of Maasai and Samburu ethnicity and a major element of Kenya's brand identity as a tourist destination (Bruner 2005; Kasfir 2007). Some foreign tourists and travellers desired to authenticate their sojourns in Kenya through intimate relationships with morans. For many of them, the presumed cultural and sexual difference embodied by morans carried the potential of a transformed subjectivity (Kasfir 2004: 324; Meiu 2011: 102ff). Within growing sexual economies in tourist resorts (Kibicho 2009), women from Germany, Switzerland, England, France, Holland, Italy, and also, to a lesser extent, the USA, Australia, and Japan found in morans the possibility of experiencing intimately an authentic, 'primitive' Africa. They thus performed what Fabian (1983) called a denial of the temporal 'coevalness' of the Western subject with the Other. In addition, foreign women I interviewed explained that, as they aged, they found it difficult to have relationships at home. Anna, a German, said:

> In Europe, as you know, men look for young, thin women, even when they themselves are old. So for a woman, it is more difficult to date at a certain point in her life. [. . .] Also, if I were to have a younger partner in Germany, everybody would

point the finger at me and judge me. But, Kenya is different. In Kenya, it is okay. Nobody cares about age differences.

What Anna wished to consume in Kenya was not only racialized and ethnicized sexuality, but also an image of herself as attractive and desirable. For her, travelling to Kenya was a way to escape dominant ideologies of biological ageing as bodily degradation. She wished to turn back the clock of ageing in a place where 'nobody cares about age differences'.

Contrary to Anna's belief, however, age was a central idiom through which people understood the relationships between Samburu men and foreign women. On one hand, men specifically desired relationships with 'old white women' (M: *nkashumpai ntasati*), because they thought that these women had more money. Through these relationships they hoped to enjoy the pleasures of consumption in tourist resorts and also improve the material conditions of their lives at home. On the other hand, in Samburu District, people ridiculed the sexual morality of these men, arguing that they transgressed sexual boundaries of age and reversed gender roles. A woman explained in Swahili:

Look at what these Mombasa morans are doing, just to get white people! *They are lowering their culture* [italicized material spoken in English]. What a shame! You know, sometimes these men even bring the old mamas home to Maralal. When I was working at a restaurant, my friend, Taitas came with an old mama from Mombasa. She was so old, this one. And I could not stop laughing. I called him and told him: 'This is *too much*. How can you like this woman? She can be your grandmother.' And he told me: 'Jacinta, you are always so mean to me. You know I don't like her, but she has a lot of money, and she can help me.' We usually laugh at these morans of Mombasa. We don't say that they 'marry' [S: *wanaoa*, masculine, active verb] white women, but that they 'are married' [S: *wanaolewa*, feminine, passive verb].

People referred to morans in coastal tourism as 'Mombasa morans' (M: *lmurran le Mombasa*). Having sex with women of the 'wrong' age and assenting to be materially dependent on women, these men upset ideal masculine roles. Consequently, neighbours and relatives gossiped about them in emasculating terms. Meanwhile, however, the Mombasa morans imagined themselves as more cosmopolitan and better equipped to navigate economic opportunities than their relatives at home. Being a Mombasa moran became thus a distinct masculine subject position (Meiu 2009). It also became a nexus of multiple potentialities in the life of a man, who, depending on his skills and luck, could rapidly become either a 'young big-man' or, tragically, a 'beach-boy elder'.

'Young Big-Men': Speedy Rituals and Early Elderhoods

Several Mombasa morans accumulated wealth rapidly, became big-men, and gained some of the privileges of elderhood while relatively young. Paying bridewealth and performing wedding rituals ahead of their age mates, they hoped to anchor their wealth and authority in the respect and social recognition associated with elders. Take the example of Sakaine. When I interviewed him in 2008, he was 23 and already the richest man of his village.

When Sakaine was a child, his family was poor. His widowed mother did not own livestock and subsisted on a small income from producing and selling charcoal. Through a local NGO, Sakaine eventually found a foreign sponsor to pay for his school tuition. But, in high school, the headmaster reassigned Sakaine's sponsorship to one of his own children. Because Sakaine could no longer afford tuition, he dropped out of school. He hoped to find a way to earn money quickly to continue his education. Around the same time, in 2005, he was initiated into the age grade of moranhood, as part of a new age set, called the *Lkishami*, or 'We, who love.' True to their name, following their initiation, many Lkishami went off to Mombasa to find foreign women. In Sakaine's village, there were numerous men of the more senior *Lmooli* age set (then, the outgoing morans) who had gone to Mombasa for years, and regularly returned home with money. Motivated by the example of his age mates and neighbours, Sakaine decided to go to Mombasa. After only six months, he met Elise, a German woman in her 50s. Elise and Sakaine began a long-term, long-distance relationship, with Elise visiting Kenya twice a year and occasionally also paying for Sakaine to visit her in Germany.

Sakaine soon became a big-man in his village. Elise sent Sakaine money regularly through Western Union and he used this money to invest in properties in the village. He built a luxurious, five-room stone house with a spacious verandah, an electric generator, a satellite dish, and a grand sheet metal gate. In his village, there was no electricity and most people lived in traditional houses covered with roofs of mud or bark. The otherwise well-off labour migrants built modest houses of wooden poles and rusty iron sheet roofs. In stark contrast, Sakaine's house had an imposing presence. He also owned more than 100 head of cattle and some 300 goats and sheep. A survey I carried out in 2010 among 21 neighbouring households shows that most families did not own cattle (0.38 head per household) and owned only few goats and sheep (8.3 head per household). In addition, Sakaine fenced some four acres of land on which he cultivated maize and beans. He also opened a small shop in the village, supplying locals with sugar, maize flour, soap, detergent, paraffin, and

other commodities. Finally, Sakaine bought a motorcycle and a Land Rover, which he took turns driving when visiting friends in the village or shopping in town. Soon, Sakaine also developed a vast network of clients – mostly impoverished elders of his village – whom he employed occasionally to herd his cattle, weed his farm, clean his compound, or guard his gate.

Sakaine's neighbours and relatives spoke of him ambivalently. They often pointed out to me that 'this young man is a big-man' (S: *huyu kijana ni mkubwa*) or that 'he is a rich moran' (M: *kera ninye lmurrani ltajiri*). Even as they turned to him for material support, villagers pointed out to me that Sakaine's riches were transitory and that he would never fully benefit from his wealth. People believed that the 'money of Mombasa' (M: *shilingini e Mombasa*) originated in coastal sorcery and transactional sex and, therefore, animated dangerous forces that would affect its owners in the long run. The fact that numerous former young big-men had lost their wealth convinced people that this money carried the kernel of its own depletion (for a discussion of the moral contestation of money in primitivist tourism, see MacCarthy 2014).

Aware of people's gossip, young big-men sought to transform their money into forms of social value that they perceived to be more durable. Some invested their money in political campaigns, hoping to be elected as regional councillors. Others sought to bend ritual norms and become elders. A few weeks after I interviewed him, Sakaine came by my house with a friend to invite me to his wedding. His news took me by surprise. I knew that, according to custom, a moran was not allowed to marry for several years. But, he explained that he did not wish to 'waste time being useless' like his age mates and that 'our culture is all about wasting time'. His friend supported his point of view. 'This is why Samburu people will never be modern,' he said, 'because they like to waste time [S: *kupoteza wakati*], waiting around without a purpose'. Echoing state development discourses of being in time, Sakaine and his friend saw the desire to speed things up in life, as part of being 'modern', an ontological position that contrasted with how 'Samburu culture' disposed of time. Sakaine's desire to speed things up was also a product of his anxieties about the possible depletion of his wealth. After all, he was well familiar with former young big-men who had lost their wealth only to return to the beach in search of tourists. With access to the necessary resources, Sakaine decided to pay bridewealth and marry the daughter of a rich regional councillor, another 'big-man', who had been once also a 'beach-boy' in Mombasa. Many people attended the wedding, which combined Samburu ritual and moran

dances, several meals and an open bar, a disco night, and speeches by the big-men of the region.

Sakaine's decision to get married and become an elder ahead of his age mates generated scandal. In particular, his choice to perform the ritual killing of the 'wedding ox' (M: *rikoret*) sparked controversy among the elders of his village. As a member of the moran age grade, Sakaine was normally not allowed to kill the wedding ox until his age set performed a ceremony called the '*lmugit* of the name' (M: *lmugit lenkarna*) and only after the leader of the age set, the so-called *launoni*, himself married. Because the '*lmugit* of the name' was not going to be performed for about five more years (and the *launoni* would not even be chosen until then), the elders thought that Sakaine was bending the normative course of age grade rituals. Ldoroni, a junior elder, told me:

> *L:* This is wrong, my friend. This is not the way our tradition is supposed to be. Now that they have money, they just do as they please.
>
> *GP:* Why don't the elders stop him?
>
> *L:* The elders are also after money. If you have money, you decide how you want it to be. But it's wrong. The whole thing is just to show how big he is.

According to Ldoroni, the desire of elders for money, like Sakaine's desire to become an elder ahead of time, corrupted the temporality of age grade rituals. This case was particularly upsetting to Ldoroni. Like numerous junior elders of his age set, Ldoroni cohabited with his 'wife', while continuously deferring bridewealth payments and the killing of the wedding ox, because he lacked the necessary material resources. By contrast, Sakaine was able to fulfil these expectations long before they were supposed to take place.

Accelerating access to the privileges of elderhood is not a new phenomenon. So-called 'age set climbers' (M: *lailepi*, sg. *lkailepi*) had long existed among the Samburu. They were orphaned morans blessed by the elders 'to climb' (M: *ailep*) an age set in order to marry and take over family responsibilities. In contrast to age set climbers, men like Sakaine took it upon themselves to become elders.[2] Furthermore, these men sought to climb an age grade without climbing an age set. Nevertheless, while age set membership was premised on the collective interference of the age cohort with the life of each one of its members, young big-men were no longer subject to age set control. As a Samburu woman put it, 'a rich moran only listens to himself and that pulls him out of his age set'. Elders called such a man a 'transgressor', using the Maa noun

lperet. In the past, *lperet* referred to a moran who married his girlfriend against the will of her parents. The moran would come to the house of the girl and kill the 'wedding ox' under the cover of the night. This usually occurred after the girl's father promised her in marriage to an elder. Elders of the clan usually cursed 'transgressors' to death during the *lmugit* ceremonies. More recently, elders also used the term *lperet* to speak of morans who fathered children with mistresses and those like Sakaine who performed rituals reserved for elders.

In the years following Sakaine's wedding, several other young big-men followed his lead. In this way, they subverted what others invoked as long-held ideals of ageing. Labour migrants had long aspired to become both big-men and elders. They accumulated wealth gradually as morans and, when initiated into elderhood, they sometimes also acted as big-men. By contrast, men like Sakaine suddenly acquired more wealth than a labour migrant did in a lifetime and, thus, became big-men while still young morans. Then, they used their wealth to skip ahead of their age mates and 'buy' their way across the age grade ladder.[3]

Embodying the contradictions between age grades and wealth accumulation, young big-men engendered what I wish to call 'queer moments' in the temporalities of ageing. Drawing on recent work on 'queer temporality' (e.g. Halberstam 2005; Freeman 2007), I use the adjective 'queer' to refer to ways of being in time that subvert normative temporal expectations. 'Queer' does not refer here to 'ethnographic objects deemed queer' as such, but rather offers an analytic that seeks critical potential in emic historical constructs of non-conformity, disruption, and subversion (see Boellstorff 2010: 229). As they desynchronized competing ways of ageing, young big-men produced queer moments that revealed – if only momentarily – the hegemonic workings of normative expectations of age. Making elderhood into a commodity, they challenged the kinds of time expected to go into its achievement. They showed how elderhood was possible without long periods of waiting or without a *gradual* accumulation of wealth. Becoming elders while in their early 20s, young big-men queered normative temporalities of ageing and life course.

I speak of queer *moments* rather than 'queer temporalities' to underline that the queerness of these practices of age is *momentary*. Rather than sustain an ongoing 'queer time', or 'the potentiality of life unscripted by conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing' (Halberstam 2005: 2), 'queer moments' emerge out of (hetero)normative, reproductive desires and often facilitate argu-

ments for the reiteration of normativity. As young big-men used their money to subvert the ritual time of age grades, poor elders more strongly reiterated the normative time of ritual ageing. By asserting the unpropitious nature of the actions of the young big-men, elders could more tightly control the time of poorer morans. They also benefited financially from instances of 'transgression'. Following Sakaine's wedding, elders capitalized on their ritual power and allowed other young big-men to marry early in exchange for a monetary 'fine' (M: *pain*). In this sense, queer moments in the temporalities of ageing regenerated the importance of elderhood, albeit in a new, commodified form.

'Beach-Boy Elders': Touristic Morans and Reversed Ageing

While young big-men rushed into elderhood, impoverished elders at the beach tried to turn back time, as it were, and return to being morans in order to produce material resources associated with an age grade status that they had come to inhabit too soon. 'Beach-boy elders' were of two kinds. Some were former young big-men, who lost their wealth. Others were Mombasa morans who had never acquired any wealth to begin with. They dressed as morans, hoping to meet foreign women. Consider the example of Ltarsia.

Ltarisa was born in a family of blacksmiths (M: *nkunono*) in Mount Nyiro, in the far north of Samburu District. He was initiated into moranhood in 1976 as part of the *Lkuroro* age set and spent the following years herding cattle. Following severe droughts, all the cattle of Ltarsia's family died and they migrated to the southern highlands of the district, where they hoped to benefit from a more affluent market to sell spears and knifes. Upon arrival in the highlands, Ltarsia saw that many of his age mates – at that time, all from lineages of blacksmiths (Kasfir 2007: 273) – had begun travelling to Mombasa, where they had found a better market for their spears in tourist resorts. So, in 1982, Ltarsia joined his age mates in Mombasa. Although he had never gone to school and only spoke the Maa language, at the beach, he quickly learned Swahili and English, a bit of German, and some Italian. Kenya's beach tourism grew spectacularly throughout the 1980s. But Ltarsia only managed to earn enough to live, send money to his parents, and save cash for a bridewealth payment. In 1990, as a new age set was initiated into moranhood, Ltarsia's age set was promoted to elderhood. No longer moran, Ltarsia continued to dress in moran regalia, perform dances for tourists, and go to the beach. None of the relationships he had with foreign women allowed him to accumulate wealth. Ltarsia married a Samburu woman and lived with her and their three children in Mombasa for another 10 years.

With the number of morans at the coast rising dramatically throughout the 1990s (from no more than 100 in 1980s to some 500 in 1997), Ltarsia soon realized that his chances to earn significantly in tourism were quickly diminishing. As he was ageing and was no longer 'in shape', tourists paid comparatively little attention to him relative to the younger, more attractive men. Ltarsia and his age mates had to seek temporary jobs as watchmen to supplement for the small income at the beach. In 2000, Ltarsia decided to return along with his family to their village in Samburu District. In 18 years at the coast, he had only saved sufficient money to build a small wooden house covered with bark and establish a herd of some 50 goats. Having aged before accumulating sufficient wealth, Ltarsia was far from having achieved any form of prestige and respectability. When I first met him in 2008, Ltarsia had already sold off all his livestock and was struggling to make ends meet by producing and selling charcoal. Every evening, he walked through the village drunk. He often stopped me on the main path to chat and to ask me for money. Another elder of the village told me once to ignore Ltarsia, for 'this elder is just a beach-boy' (M: *kera ele payian bichboi ake*).

Like Ltarsia, many elders who aged at the coast were called 'beach-boy elders' (M: *lpayieni loobishboi*) or 'elders of Mombasa' (M: *lpayieni le Mombasa*). When I asked a Samburu woman what she thought of these elders, she told me laughing:

> Nowadays, my child, we have those elders who have gone to Mombasa. There, the *Lkuroro* [age set of elders] believe that they are still morans. They haven't seen that people have left them behind long ago. [Laughing] Are the Lkuroro still morans up to now? Let God hate me, if I am lying. Don't they understand that age sets pass with circumcision? The *Lmooli* [age set] were circumcised, even the *Lkishami* were circumcised, and the *Lkuroro* are still in Mombasa. They are still morans. And they are very old men. They are lost.

Many women I interviewed used similar narratives to ridicule what they perceived as the beach-boy elders' attempt to defy the linear flow of time, by refusing to acknowledge that people have moved on and 'left them behind' (M: *kechomoki ninche*). Such narratives actively undermined the respectability of these men. Also called 'the lost ones' (M: *laaimina*), beach-boy elders reversed the clock of ageing and thus became 'lost' to their forward-moving relatives and age mates. Meanwhile, for tourists and other foreigners, beach-boy elders caricatured the touristic brand of the moran. 'I had pity for these warriors who remained on the coast and advanced in age,' wrote a German woman in her

memoir. 'Many of them seemed to me like lost sheep' (Hachfeld-Tapukai 2009: 263, my translation). Because their bodies no longer corresponded to the brand-image of the young, erotic morans, beach-boy elders seemed to capitalize on a bodily youth they no longer had. In the process, they ridiculed both elderhood and touristic moranhood.

Like the young big-men, beach-boy elders produced queer moments of ageing in that they subverted normative temporal expectations through the very practices by which they hoped to fulfil them. Under current economic circumstances, for the vast majority of men, the respectability and authority associated with the age grade of elders became more difficult to achieve. As few big-men – councillors, chiefs, businessmen, and young big-men – came to dominate economic relations in the district, those with limited material resources, like Ldoroni (see above), had to defer indefinitely some of the rituals associated with elderhood. Despite their inability to fulfil ritual expectations, however, these elders struggled to produce livelihoods through means that others considered more legitimate: they engaged in daily labour or traded charcoal, goats, sheep, or cattle. By contrast, beach-boy elders dressed as morans in order to engage in transactional sex. During elderhood, when male sexuality was supposed to be about the domestic processes of social reproduction, beach-boy elders took their sexuality to the tourist market for economic production. Freeman (2007: 159) pointed out that 'queer time' emerges at the intersection of 'marginalized time schemes' and 'disavowed' erotic practices. In this sense, beach-boy elders embodied queer moments not only because they disrupted the normative flow of the life course but also because they corrupted sexuality. Subversive sexual practices remained for the most part heterosexual and involved relations with more senior women. Although some beach-boys also engaged in same-sex relations for money, these were comparatively rare, involved one-night stands, and remained largely unknown to relatives and age mates at home. Therefore, I suggest that, *pace* Halberstam (2005), queer temporal moments do not have be about a deliberate attempt to oppose reproductive normativity, but may emerge as people articulate normative desires through subversive means.

Beach-boy elders – as the oxymoronic label itself suggests – were not only infantilized 'boys' with no claim to social maturity, but also – distinctly – boys who, by virtue of their age grade status, should in fact be elders. They embodied the contradictions between Samburu age grade relations and tourist expectations of the youthful bodies of morans, revealing their respective hegemonic workings. Beach-boy elders are products of a historical context in which the

expectations of elderhood have become, for many, economically unviable, and when ethno-erotic capital has become the exclusive privilege of physically young men.

Queer Moments in the Temporalities of Ageing

The social types of young big-men and beach-boy elders are symptomatic of the precarious and volatile contexts of life following market liberalization in Africa and elsewhere. Under these conditions, economic possibilities shift rapidly, while 'wealth appears ever more proximate, but ... remains mostly inaccessible to the vast majority' (Makhulu *et al.* 2010: 18). Life becomes a 'tactical mode of being-in-the-world' (Makhulu *et al.* 2010: 12), a speculative effort to produce some sense of permanence in the face of what Achille Mbembe calls 'the generalization and radicalization of a condition of temporariness' (in Shipley 2010: 659f). Under these circumstances, Samburu men travelled between coastal tourist resorts and their home district, trying to convert ethno-erotic capital into the respectability and social recognition associated with historically produced, local forms of social ageing. Because ethno-erotic capital was the diminishing privilege of physically young men, men had to act fast to transform it into forms of social value that they perceived to be more durable. For them, idioms of elderhood associated with age grade relations offered such a sense of permanence. Yet, the means by which they tried to achieve the prerogatives of elderhood undermined their outcomes.

When boys rapidly turn into elders, and elders regress to boyhood, the workings of age and temporality are turned on their head and caricatured. As these men tried to get the best out of ethno-erotic capital, big-manhood, and age grade relations, they came to embody the contradictions of multiple, competing rhythms of ageing. At once accelerating and inverting the ideal ritual time of age grades through the bodily time of ethno-erotic capital or the time-producing wealth of the big-man, these men *queered* temporalities of ageing. They performed what Freeman (2007: 159ff) describes as embodied sensations of asynchrony or of time being 'out of joint' with normative temporal expectations. Neither fully youth nor fully elders, young big-men and beach-boy elders sustained temporal contradictions rising from the expectation that a gradual wealth accumulation should be simultaneous with a gradual process of social ageing. As these men navigated volatile economic contexts through competing notions of age, time, and the life course, their contradictory practices opened up new future-making potentialities in the material conditions of the present.

However, at the same time that subversive practices of age create the potentiality for alternative futures, they also generate arguments for the reproduction of a hegemonic *status quo*. Beach-boy elders and young big-men came to my attention because both men and women in Samburu District spoke about them at great length, often ridiculing them. Through such 'talk', they actively eroded the respectability of these men and reasserted ideal forms of ageing, even when these were no longer available to everyone. In this sense, it is important to note that what might seem like 'timeless traditions' of age grades and age sets, in fact, must be continuously reiterated against the messiness of lived realities and historical transformations. Furthermore, even if young big-men and beach-boy elders subverted age and time, their desires for particular kinds of social value were by and large normative. In this sense, rather than speak of 'queer temporalities' as embodied practices that are actively *opposed* to a reproductive normativity (Halberstam 2005), I use 'queer moments' to refer to subversive means and outcomes of otherwise normative desires. While anthropologists have already critiqued predetermined models of ageing by showing how age entails perpetually emerging historical phenomena, it is also important to attune our analytic vocabulary to interrogate the production of normativities. An ethnographic exploration of queer moments of ageing facilitates such an interrogation.

And, if 'cultural competence is a matter of timing' (Freeman 2007: 160; see also Bourdieu 1977: 6ff), then new cultural configurations emerge whenever social actors seek to reconcile competing temporalities of ageing. As more young big-men bought their way across the age grade ladder, elders commodified age grade rituals. Furthermore, even as young big-men no longer had high stakes in age set relations, age sets did not fade in importance. To the contrary, age sets now provided poorer men with strong ties of reciprocal support and allowed them to claim what they thought were morally superior forms of elderhood. When I met Ltarsia again in 2009 and 2010 he had acquired some cattle, stopped drinking, and become very invested in the rituals organized by his age set. Thus, he hoped to turn away from his past as a beach-boy elder and become respectable. Baxter and Almagor (1978: 20, 23) argued that 'economic individualism and age-setting are probably incompatible', and that 'East African age-set and generation-set systems . . . seem doomed to extinction or, at best, to be preserved . . . in a reserve for tourists to wonder at uncomprehendingly'. However, as we have seen, with the rise of ethno-erotic economies, age grades and age sets emerge in new ways, their rituals more commodified, and their age cohorts more markedly shaped by rapidly shifting inequalities.

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Notes

1. Throughout this article, I use the abbreviations "M." and "S." to mark words and phrases in Maa and Swahili, respectively. Many young Samburu men and women use both languages alternately or in combination, in various contexts.
2. Similar instances of accelerated ageing existed in other parts of Kenya throughout the twentieth century. Among the Maa-speaking Chamus of Lake Baringo, since the 1900s, age set climbers were young boys who, as a way of claiming rights in property, sought circumcision into moranhood long after the moran age set had been ritually closed (Spencer 1997: 181–189). Similarly, during colonialism, Kikuyu rich men in central Kenya paid an "ox of climbing" to become senior elders and gain political power (Lonsdale 1992: 345).
3. The age practices of young big-men also affected women's ageing and life course. A woman once complained to me that her husband had pulled their daughter out of high school in order to marry her to a young big-man. Despite the mother's protests that her daughter did not finish her education, the suitor had managed to gain the support of the wives of his soon-to-be affinal clan. These women persuaded the mother that this was a unique opportunity for her daughter to live a life of comfort that schooling no longer guaranteed. While some women desired marriages to young big-men, others considered these marriages unstable and undesirable.

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