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# The Anthropology of Aging, a New Area for Studies of Culture and Personality

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# The Anthropology of Aging, a New Area for Studies of Culture and Personality<sup>1</sup>

Margaret Clark, Ph.D.<sup>2</sup>

**A**NTHROPOLOGISTS are relative newcomers to the field of aging studies and this is somewhat odd for two reasons. First of all, the aged are no strangers to us; ethnographers have traditionally relied heavily on the memories, knowledge, and insights of old informants for a good deal of their cultural data. Much of what we have learned in preliterate societies about the ways of man and the varieties of his culture we owe to the accumulated experiences and recollections of the elderly.

In the second place, anthropologists have long claimed the study of cultural patterning of the human life cycle, with its various phases, transitions, and rites of passage, as one of their special concerns. To be sure, early life has been given careful scrutiny: infancy, childhood, adolescence, the early adult years—all these have received meticulous ethnographic attention. However, if one is to judge from typical anthropological accounts, the span of years between the achievement of adult status and one's funerary rites is either an ethnographic vacuum or a vast monotonous plateau of invariable behavior. Occasional exceptions to this tendency in ethnography are found in reports on societies where age-grading is an inescapable feature of the culture, and where the elderly as a formal group play critical roles in political or economic organization. Perhaps the most classical of such accounts is Warner's ethnography of the Murngin of Australia (Warner, 1958). A recent example of such work is Spencer's

(1965) study of gerontocracy among the Samburu. LeVine (1965) has summarized some of these studies of age-graded societies in Africa, pointing particularly to the fact that, within many extended family units in such cultures, obligations between young and old

... beyond the nuclear family engender antagonisms which may ultimately be registered in homicide, suicide, litigation, and other forms of interpersonal conflict (LeVine, 1965).

Leo Simmons (1945) was the first to introduce a cross-cultural perspective to gerontological studies. In his major work, he posed the following question:

What in old age are the possible adjustments to different environments, both physical and social, and what uniformities or general trends may be observed in . . . cross-cultural analysis? More specifically, what securities for long life may be provided by the various social milieus and what may the aged do as individuals to safeguard their interests? (Simmons, 1945).

Simmons' work was an analysis of the impact of 109 specific cultural traits (such as principal food source, matrilineal versus patrilineal residence, forms of marriage, inheritance and succession, and specific religious beliefs and practices) on the status of the aged. Correlations between these traits and the status and condition of elders were studied among 71 separate primitive people; the material was abstracted from the Yale Human Relations Area Files.

The focus of Simmons' work was on social status of the aged and its relationship to material culture and formal social structure. Thus, he was able to show, for example, that aged women tend to retain property rights more readily than men in simple hunting, fishing, and gathering societies, while it is aged men who preserve the greatest advantage in the control of property in farming and herding societies.

With the growth and development of the field

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