

Intergenerational relations among the Samia of Kenya: culture and experience

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Abstract

Culture in the sense of beliefs or norms for behaviour may be at variance with the actual experience of individuals, as is the case with intergenerational relationships among the Samia of rural Western Kenya. Samia has undergone enormous changes in the 20th century; these changes have created differences in the knowledge and experiences of older and younger generations. While there is consensus across generations about behavioural norms based on principles of seniority, respect and reciprocity, views diverge regarding how well ideals are lived up to in actual behaviour. Young people say that elders often do not understand modern life and they prefer being with other young people; many older people say that the young do not respect their elders, nor do they want to walk or sit and talk with elders. However data reported here indicate that contacts between generations are frequent, providing opportunities for social interaction, skill acquisition, emotional support and reciprocal exchanges. Examples given include patterns of association in daily activities, the nature of intergenerational discourse, and family decision making involving two or more generations. Though not always smooth, relationships between generations are important sources of social interaction and mutual assistance, and frequent contacts provide a sense of generational continuity in a fast-changing world.

Introduction

Intergenerational relationships among the Samia of rural Western Kenya are critical to the wellbeing of all family members. Such relationships are not always smooth, as is true in all societies (Foner, 1984). Nevertheless, they are important sources of social interaction and mutual assistance. They also give individuals a sense of generational continuity, a sense of belonging in a particular social world.

This social world has undergone enormous changes in the 20th century – indeed, in the lifetimes of Samia who are now elderly (Cattell, 1989b, 1994a). The Samia of the 1880s lived in small walled villages; they had a self-sufficient agropastoral economy, and a social system and culture virtually untouched by European influences. By the 1980s incorporation into the world political economy had brought to Samia money, cash cropping, labour migration, new technologies, Christianity, literacy, medicine and hospitals, and a centralized bureaucratic political system. While there are no towns or cities in Samia today, there are small trading centres and markets, public transportation, schools, churches, government clinics and a small hospital, telephones, a postal

service and electricity lines. Nevertheless, contemporary Samia is decidedly rural. Most Samia are peasant farmers growing both subsistence and cash crops by labour-intensive hoe agriculture; girls and women carry water and firewood from sometimes distant sources to their homes and cook over open fires; most transportation is by foot.

While younger Samia grow up in this rural environment, they encounter knowledge and have experiences which their elders commonly lack. About a third of older men have had some formal schooling, while only a handful of older women went to school; most older men but only a third of older women have worked or lived in a city. Today most younger people, female as well as male, attend school and spend at least some time, sometimes years, in urban employment and/or residence – in cities which have grown larger and more cosmopolitan than they were when their fathers and grandfathers knew them. When these younger generations return to Samia – as many do, during weekends and holidays, for funerals, and upon retirement – they bring with them knowledge of modern urban life which many elders do not share. However when in Samia, the younger people resume the rural life-style and daily participation in family relationships.

Intergenerational social contracts are currently being widely discussed, defended or denied, and, in short, renegotiated in Samia – and elsewhere in Kenya (Cattell, in press). This debate concerns ideas which cluster into beliefs and values relating to lifeways rooted in the agrarian traditions of the Samia on the one hand and European-influenced patterns which have developed during the 20th century. These different life-styles involve conflicting ideologies and differences of opinion, often along generational lines, though there is also much sharing of beliefs and daily activities. For example, Samia of all ages consider education to be the foundation for success in the modern world. The youngest generation is eager to attend school, while parents and grandparents struggle to pay school fees (a substantial proportion of most families' budgets). At the same time, older people often blame schools and modern education (*okhusoma*, a loan word from Swahili literally meaning "to read") for creating a gap between the generations (Cattell, n.d.). Elders make remarks such as "Young people go to books for knowledge" and "Young people only want to speak English." Their observations are accurate in that schools remove young people from parental and grandparental influence and instruction in terms of space, time and the nature of knowledge, including the language of instruction, English, which only a few men and almost no women over the age of 50 know (Cattell, 1989a).

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The purpose of this paper is to suggest the nature and extent of intergenerational contacts in daily life, which occur in spite of experiential and cognitive distances between generations. Such contacts give the generations opportunities for working and talking together. They constitute a sharing of interests and experiences which helps to build a sense of generational continuity and the will to continue cultural patterns of familial reciprocity and interdependence.

Research methods

My anthropological fieldwork among the Samia of rural Western Kenya has focussed on ageing and old age, and the lives of elderly Samia under circumstances of rapid socio-economic and cultural change. This research has been guided by several perspectives: the much critiqued but influential modernization theory, initially formulated by Cowgill and Holmes (1972); ideas about the life course (Fry, 1990); and exchange theory, especially Caldwell's (1982) concept of "net lifetime intergenerational exchange." The research extended over two years from November 1983 through November 1985, with visits of four to six weeks in 1982, 1987, 1990, 1992 and 1993. The research was carried out in Western Kenya among two Abaluyia subgroups, primarily the Samia, and among families of my rural informants in the cities of Kisumu and Nairobi.¹

While I have used field-designed formal instruments (including a survey of 416 women and men age 50 years and older), the major data sources are participant observation, including informal and in-depth interviews. I have lived among the Samia and have been incorporated as a member into two Samia families (plus another family in Bunyala); as a family member, I am expected to behave appropriately and to participate in family reciprocity. I have observed and interacted with numerous people in many homes, on roads and footpaths, and in other public places such as markets, churches and schools. I have shared daily activities, serious illness, theft, house fires, the struggle to educate children, marriages, births and deaths. My contacts include females and males of all ages with a range of social and economic characteristics.

The result is a wide-ranging knowledge of Samia society and culture, recorded in extensive and varied fieldnotes and what Ottenberg (1990) calls "headnotes," or data recorded only in one's memory.² In addition to the survey questionnaires, the written fieldnotes include a narrative field journal and topical notes which describe events and conversations. In addition, there are biographical interviews (tapes and transcriptions), a household census in one village, focussed interviews (mini-surveys on a particular topic), essays by seventh and eighth grade schoolgirls, funeral speeches (tapes and transcriptions), maps ranging from a map of Samia (see Cattell, 1994c) to sketches of family compounds and house interiors, photographs and videos, cultural materials (folktales, proverbs, riddles, songs), language materials, genealogies, archival materials from Nangina Hospital, and others.³ Not all these materials relate directly to the topic at hand, though many do; but all taken together (along with others' publications) constitute the sources of my knowledge of Samia culture and the lives of Samia people.

Culture: ideals and attitudes

Everyday behaviour is guided by cultural beliefs and ideals. Among Samia of all ages, ideals of respect and reciprocity are widely shared regarding expectations of behaviour among kin (Cattell, 1989a: 330-59).

"Respect" (*esitiwa*) is a word that is frequently heard in Samia, especially in reference to respecting those older than oneself, or in elders' complaints about not being respected. The principle of seniority is paramount, as it is throughout sub-Saharan Africa (Robertson, 1986; Rosenmayr, 1988). The rule is simple: those senior in age and generation should be listened to, respected and obeyed. In practice, there are many complexities. Age and generation are not always congruent, as when an uncle is younger than his nephew. Expectations for behaviour in certain kin dyads relax the respect rules. For example, grandparents and grandchildren may be free and easy with each other, even to the extent of approved sexual joking (Cattell, 1994c). This contrasts with expected behaviour between parents and children, and especially between in-laws, who are expected to show respect by modesty in speech and behaviour and, in some cases, by avoidance rules such as not shaking hands, eating at the same table, or sitting on the same bench in church. Also, since kinship is widely extended, mistakes can be made unwittingly if one is not careful. As one young woman told me: "I never sit on the same bench with an old man, even if I don't know him, because he might be my father-in-law."

A second principle undergirding family relationships is reciprocity, which governs a moral economy of familial exchange that ideally ensures that in the long run everyone is fairly treated. This expectation underlies implicit contracts concerning appropriate exchanges between kin dyads; the exchanges include material goods, labour, affection, information and advice, and are conceived in a life-time framework (Caldwell, 1982; Fapohunda & Todaro, 1988; LeVine & LeVine, 1985). Samia primary intergenerational contracts are between parents and children, as is the case in all societies (Rubinstein & Johnsen, 1982). Relationships between grandparents and grandchildren are also important in themselves and as extensions of parent-child relationships (Cattell, 1994c). The essence of these intergenerational contracts is that parents and grandparents are responsible for young children; in turn, older and adult children are expected to respect their elders, work for them, assist in other ways (e.g. pay school fees for younger siblings), and ultimately care for elderly parents and grandparents.

These ideals of respect and reciprocity are widely shared among Samia of all ages. From eighth graders to the very oldest, many Samia expressed themes of reciprocity and familial interdependence. When interviewed, some old people said: "I can still take care of my people. I still work. I still feed my family." Younger people, even primary school pupils, combined personal ambition with family responsibility, hoping for a good education in order to get a job and help their family. An eighth-grade girl wrote in an essay that she wanted to help her family, "because I saw the suffering they have had with my school fees." Statements which reveal a clear conception of life-time intergenerational exchange often included the phrase, "After all, my parents fed me and cared for me when I was young," along with remarks concerning the necessity of caring for elderly parents. Feeding is a key metaphor of nurturing and caring for others.

An image of old age frequently invoked by Samia to express proper fulfillment of intergenerational obligations was that of an old person "sitting and eating": basking in the sun, or sitting before a fire and waiting for food to be brought to him/her. Though most old people in my survey (63 %, n=416) saw "no goodness" in old age, some said: "Old age is [or can be] good if you have children to help you; then you can just sit and eat." The image of old age as a time to sit and eat was also used by young people, though they tended to perceive old age as an opportunity to relax from hard work

and meeting responsibilities – an interesting difference in viewpoints which was clearly a consequence of one's position in the life course.

However, though there was intergenerational agreement about the obligations between children and parents, older people frequently voiced opinions that young people today neither respect their elders nor seek their advice. For their part young people, while supporting the ideal of seeking advice from elders and being respectful in their presence generally, often remarked that old people really do not understand modern life, or have the knowledge that is needed to get along in today's world.

During conversations and interviews elders recalled "our days" when children respected their parents, sat with them, and listened to their advice (Cattell, 1989b). Such reminiscences often included a counterpoint, a direct contrast with the situation today: "Young people nowadays don't want to walk [or sit/eat/talk] with old people." As one man in his 80s forcefully said: "Do I give advice? Who comes to me for advice?" In the survey of 416 older Samia, such comments were often made to explain responses to a question asking whether there is a gap today between old and young; 90 % agreed with the statement. Many explanatory comments on this and related questions focussed on schools and generational differences created by education (discussed earlier).

Nearly as many secondary school students (74 % of a survey sample of 69 students) agreed that there is a generation gap; 22 % specified the cause of the gap as education. Other causes included culture change (16 %), and differences in the attitudes and behaviours of young and old (29 %). Three-quarters of these students agreed that education brings problems between young and old. A 17-year old said: "Old people believe that though they aren't educated they still eat. But young people believe that without education you can't survive." This view reflects radically different orientations to work, with the older generation relying on farming and the younger generation hoping for educational success and salaried employment. At the same time, young people recognize the difficulties of achieving success in the modern economy and the value of farming on family land as, at the least, having something to fall back on (Cattell, 1988).

Further, when asked whom they consulted when they had problems and with whom they discussed their hopes and plans, many students named parents. Asked if they thought various persons in senior generations understood their hopes and plans, 59 % thought that their mothers did, 41 % (of the 56 with living grandparents) that their grandparents did, and 23 % that their fathers did. These responses probably reflect the fact that Samia young people are emotionally closer to mothers and grandparents than to fathers, and that fathers are more likely to be absent from the home in outside employment, or socializing with age mates. They also highlight the fact of variation in intergenerational relations.

Experience: work and sociability

Contexts of social interaction

As I learned from observations made while walking along roads and footpaths, visiting homes, and from numerous conversations and interviews, Samia life and work occur in social contexts shaped by the sexual division of labour and pervasive gender and age hierarchies (Cattell, 1989a, b; 1994b). Samia social hierarchy is created from the complex interplay of gender and age and other factors such as kinship. Thus, for example, a middle-aged man who "rules" his wife will defer with great respect to his elderly mother, and older women may have a great deal to say in family decision-mak-

ing processes and in other social arenas in this overtly patriarchal society (cf. Herbert, 1993; Udvardy & Cattell, 1992).

Samia kinship is strongly patrilineal. Every child is born into the clan (*oluyia*) and patrilineal descent group (*enyumba*, also meaning "house") of the father and remains a member for life. Because females are peripheral to the descent line, they are depersonalized in genealogies through use of clan rather than personal names and, after one or two generations, are dropped from genealogical recitations. Living females, however, have important lineage duties all their lives. Married daughters/sisters (*abakoko*) are called home by fathers, uncles or brothers to participate in discussions and rituals during family crises such as marriage decision making and funerals.

Clans and partilineages tend to be localized because sons usually bring their wives to live on their father's land.⁴ This patrilocal residence pattern is reinforced by the reality of contemporary land shortages which tie males to land inherited from their fathers (females do not inherit land). Thus brothers and half-brothers⁵ often live on adjacent farms, their sons and grandsons remain on the same land (further subdivided), and male "cousins" live nearby. *Enyumba* are usually three generations deep, breaking up into new *enyumba* with the death of the last brother or half-brother in the senior generation. Thus many family homesteads (*amadaala*) are occupied by groups of brothers and their families, and most older people live with sons, sons' wives and grandchildren. In the survey of old people of Samia, 78 % of the women (n=200) and 70 % of the men (n=216) lived in a three-generation *edaala*, most commonly with daughter(s)-in-law and grandchildren, and often sons (though sons are more likely to be absent in outside employment).

Even in this strongly male-oriented situation, maternal ties are significant. They are institutionalized in a variety of ways, including the special relationships of mother's brother and sister's son, and the ongoing visits and exchanges between mothers and daughters – and daughters' children – even after daughters marry and move away (Cattell, 1994c).

Nearly all Samia work in the *shamba* (field, garden), planting, cultivating and harvesting both food and cash crops; most other work is distinctly women's or men's work. Women carry out a variety of activities relating to food preparation, domestic tasks and child care; men's work involves clearing fields for planting, herding livestock, and house building and repair. Adolescents and adults rarely cross these gender lines, though male grandchildren (including adults) may ignore them if they are doing something for their grandmother, e.g. bringing her water. Many female social activities occur in work contexts, e.g. mothers and daughters fetch water together, or work in the kitchen together. Men more often than women have leisure time apart from daily work for relaxing and socializing. Meals, which are important occasions for conversation, are probably less gendered today than they were a generation or two ago, when men and boys ate around a fire built before the cowshed, and women, girls and small children ate separately in the kitchen. Nowadays women and children may still eat in the kitchen, though in some homes they may join male family members for meals.

Another factor in intergenerational contacts is relative age or seniority. Unlike some Abaluyia groups well known in the literature (Sangree, 1966; Wagner, 1949, 1956), the Samia did not and do not have circumcision age grades or a formal age group system. Hence social maturity is not achieved in a group process marked by ritual but individually and gradually, through marriage and parenthood; one's peers or age mates are *abandu abandebulwa*, "people born together," and *abandu abandesimbukha*, "people growing up together."

Maturity evolves into old age, marked by the end of a person's reproductive career (including, for women, the end of menstruation) and loss of physical strength, the latter associated with the ability to grow food and provide for one's family, i.e. to meet adult responsibilities. Any old person is to be respected, but someone who is merely old (*omukofu*) but still works and leads the family is to be obeyed. Whereas the very old, hence frail elder (*omukofu muno*) should be cared for and perhaps even feared, as being close to the spirits of ancestors (*emisambwa*).

Respect is shown through verbal and behavioural deference, and through obedience to the commands of one's seniors. A senior is anyone older than (born before) oneself, though kinship and other factors also affect definitions of seniority. The obedient child is the exemplar of a respectful junior. Such a child willingly and promptly carries out errands for older siblings and adults. Children also show respect by silence, by listening quietly and agreeing with whatever is said. Samia children in the presence of adults are quiet, whether in church, school or family settings. Most intergenerational relationships are ordered by similar norms of respectful behaviour, though seniority can be less clearcut among adults and obedience more problematic, with the advantages of higher status individuals often contested (Cattell, 1992, 1994c).

Patterns of association in daily activities

In focussed (topical) interviews with an opportunistic sample, 46 men and 51 women ranging in age from their twenties into the nineties were asked to state their previous day's activities and with whom they were done. Most older people (age 50+, $n=41$) reported intergenerational contacts in at least one and often in more than one activity. Only seven elders (5 men, 2 women) reported no intergenerational companions in any work or leisure activity during the day, among them a man who spent the day alone because he was sick and another man who had been on an all-day trip the previous day.

Table 1

Selected work and social activities of older Samia women and men (age 50+) carried out with intergenerational companion(s) (1984): frequencies

Work/social activity	Women	Men
Went to the <i>shamba</i>	17	9
Prepared meal(s)	15	N.a.
Carried water	9	N.a.
Ate together	20	12
N	23	18

In Samia, work is labour-intensive and unremitting. Everyone works, young and old; there is no retirement from farming, cooking or child care. The most time-consuming and everyday work tasks are going to the *shamba* and, for women, carrying water and cooking. Water is fetched from small streams, protected springs, wells or public taps (which often do not work). For many, fetching water means walking up to an hour or more a day. Cooking may begin with "going to the *shamba* to look for vegetables," and/or grinding flour. Food is cooked over open wood fires or in small charcoal burners. These three activities, together with eating meals, were often done with intergenerational companions, most commonly

sons, daughters, grandchildren and/or daughters-in-law (see Table 1). Women's work of fetching water and cooking was done only with other females and/or grandchildren (the sex was not specified). Work in the *shamba* was frequently done in mixed sex and generation groups. The majority ate meals with children and/or grandchildren, sometimes with spouses or daughters-in-law.

Swinging a hoe is hard work. In the *shamba* people devote most of their energy to working, though they relax and chat with each other and greet passersby from time to time. Fetching water provides a better opportunity than working in the *shamba*, for chatting with one's companions and people met on the way. (One never walks anywhere in Samia without meeting others who are also on foot.) Women talk with each other and other family members and visitors as they cook. After a meal is served, the women and girls who cooked may eat together in the companionable warmth of the kitchen. These and other work settings, which frequently involve workers of two or three generations, are everyday settings for gossip and discussion, the exchange of information and opinions, the making of plans, and so on. They are also places where members of younger generations learn the local skills necessary for physical and social survival which their elders possess.

Much knowledge of Samia elders is no longer highly valued by younger Samia, having been displaced by European and other non-local knowledge through formal education, books, mass media, government officials such as chiefs and agricultural extension officers, religious institutions, new medical practices, and urban employment and residence (Cattell, 1989a). This new knowledge includes literacy, numeracy, new languages (English and Swahili), Christian and other European beliefs (e.g. the causes of illness and misfortune, and how to deal with them), and cosmopolitan knowledge – the knowledge needed for urban success. However knowledge of farming, wild foods, cooking, local crafts, indigenous rituals, family history, kinship and proper behaviour continues to be regarded as valuable knowledge held by elders which they can pass on, verbally and by example, as they go about their work and during meals.

Associates, helpers and confidants

In a different focussed interview concerning social interactions of older Samia, 30 men and 30 women aged 50+ were asked three sets of questions about regular social contacts, instrumental relationships and confidants.⁶ All these old people (even the oldest, a woman of 84 and a man of 99) reported a variety of social resources and, with few exceptions, frequent daily social contacts. These contacts were with two broad categories of persons: close kin, especially spouses, children, grandchildren, and (for men) brothers; and friends, age mates and colleagues in work groups. Most saw their children frequently (daily or several times a week), also spouses, except for the 15 widowed women; and many men saw their brothers frequently. Grandchildren and daughters-in-law were less frequently mentioned.

The generational lines are clear (see Table 2). Close kin of all generations are daily associates and often helpers, the people with whom one eats and works, who provide daily necessities. Nearly all men (25 of the 30) but only five of the 15 married women mentioned spouses as helpers in all three categories of assistance (work, money, food). Friends and colleagues of one's own generation, spouses, and for men, brothers were named as helpers and overwhelmingly as confidants.

Table 2
Associates, helpers and confidants of older Samia men and women (age 50+) (1984): frequencies

	Associates		Helpers		Confidants	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Close kin						
Spouse	23	11*	25	5*	24	8*
Son and/or daughter**	25	24	19	25	8	10
Grandchild	25	15	7	12	2	4
Daughter-in-law	11	12	5	8	1	4
Friends/age mates						
Friend	4	6	2	8	13	9
Work group	–	–	9	6	–	–
N	30	30	30	30	30	30

* Fifteen of the women were widows.

** Many mentioned both sons and daughters, but men more often mentioned sons and women more often mentioned daughters.

Confidants are individuals with whom one relaxes during leisure time, and shares feelings, thoughts, worries and secrets, and from whom one seeks advice. The majority of the confidants were persons of the same generation as the respondent, many of whom were not kin but friends and age mates (by far the most common), fellow Christians and neighbours. "My wife" and "my husband" were often mentioned as confidants. Scattered responses in each category included a few sons, daughters and grandchildren, especially among the women. For example, four men and 12 women said that they confided their worries to their children and grandchildren; three men said they shared secrets with a son; seven women shared secrets with sons, daughters and grandchildren. One man said that he shared his secrets "with my last-born son who will inherit my properties." A third kept their secrets truly secret, sharing them with no one.

Advice-seeking was confined entirely to one's own and higher generations (parents, "elders"), except for one woman (a 75-year-old widow) who named her son as the person from whom she sought advice. Advising others who have problems and concerns is considered by all generations to be a pre-eminent responsibility of elders, female and male. For elders to seek advice from juniors would be to contradict strongly-held and widely-shared beliefs, so they either counseled themselves ("I advise myself"), or went to peers for advice. A 65-year-old man stated the principle and the practice succinctly: "I go to anyone who's older than I."

Intergenerational discourse

Another way to consider intergenerational relationships is through daily discourse: who converses with whom and what is discussed. Shared work and a cultural emphasis on sociability encourage conversation throughout the day. Since the majority of family compounds in Samia are multigenerational, as discussed earlier, older persons are usually present in a home and intergenerational discourse is facilitated.

My six research assistants reported on 25 "natural" conversations in their own homes, located in six different areas of Samia. These conversations were natural in that no inquiring anthropologist was present nor in any way participated in

setting an agenda. Most of the conversations involved members of two or three generations. The groups ranged from two to 18 persons; one group had 25 individuals (which probably included several children, who sit quietly in adult gatherings). The median size of the groups was ten. All but five groups included individuals of both sexes.

Only general topics and their time orientation to the present, or to the far or near past or the future were recorded – not the content of an entire discussion. In the fifteen conversations in which three generations were present, most topics were introduced by members of the two older generations, with males slightly more likely to take the lead in initiating a discussion.

Members of the senior generations introduced a variety of topics from the distant past, including marriage, child care, ceremonies, the respect which old people used to get, and the teaching of *ebima* (Samia customs and behaviour) to young people. There were few references to the distant future. The greatest interest of everyone, of every age and either gender, was the present and aspects of life in which persons of all ages share an interest: food, famine, work, pregnancy, health, marriage, other relationships, land, education, employment, money, and various recent events, or events about to take place.

There is nothing unusual about these topics – they are the "stuff" of everyday life which came up over and over in ordinary conversations throughout my research. Of course individuals often have differing opinions. A son who came home from school with a new way of growing maize (the staple crop) was told by his father, "We are growing food in the way my father taught me, and we are still eating;" the son concluded that his father was a man who did not understand today's world. When an unmarried young woman did not bother to learn a new acquaintance's clan, family elders reproved her "because you might marry your cousin" (thus breaking the rules of clan exogamy) and misfortunes would follow from such a marriage. In situations such as these, each generation becomes impatient with the other. But so far as Samia intergenerational relationships are concerned, such conversations are evidence of both a common ground of daily concerns which bind the generations together, and an ongoing discourse which allows the different generations to state their positions and negotiate new understandings.

Family decision making

Another way of looking at intergenerational relationships is through decision-making processes. Family decision making operates through hierarchy and consensus. The opinions of juniors and females may or may not be heard, depending on a situation and the participants; final decisions are usually made by senior males, except decisions regarding women's work. Women make all decisions concerning their own work, including which food to prepare for meals, with senior women taking the lead in the decision making. This can be seen in the following account of a mother and her daughter deciding which grain to grind for the evening meal, a decision made daily as a woman fulfills her responsibility of feeding her family.

- **Case 1: Women's work-related decision making.** *This [which grain to grind] was discussed among the four of us, that is, mom, two sisters and I. I suggested that we should grind maize-millet flour and mother opposed, saying since we had so little maize remaining in the granary, we should grind cassava-sorghum flour. The other sister said that instead of all these, we may just grind maize flour because it is good and can be eaten several times even with greens. We discussed over this matter and mother finally agreed to give us maize to grind. (Account by a daughter)*

Decisions about work may be made anywhere and at any time but formal family or lineage meetings are called to discuss larger issues. At such meetings those who are directly affected will usually "advise" (give their opinions). For example, a family which was planning to build a house had a meeting of the parents and children to decide on a site. The parents and sons stated their choices but the daughters, who will leave home when they marry, listened silently. In another family which met to discuss how to reduce the disturbances created by a junior wife who was a problem drinker, the husband, the senior wife, and the adult son and daughter who lived in the home met with the husband's visiting sister, who had been insulted by the drinker – the immediate cause of the meeting. Each had a chance to speak.

Marriage decisions and funerals, which affect persons beyond the immediate family, may require the summoning of lineage members, i.e. a senior male's brothers and sisters. After discussion, a final decision will be made by the senior male and those who have not spoken (the younger generation) are expected to state their agreement, as in this case:

- **Case 2: A lineage group's marriage decision.** *When my sister decided to get married, many people were not agreeing with the man of her choice. Father decided to consult his brothers and sisters. They all came and sat in my mother's house for discussion. My father's brothers decided that my sister should not marry because they were not happy with the boy's family. My aunts [father's sisters] said that my sister can marry the boy so long as the boy is ready to take care of her and live peacefully. My mother told my sister that she should not say that she is suffering in future; if she does, no one is going to sympathize with her. The final decision was made by my father's older brother who told my sister to go and marry the boy. He said that anybody is supposed to stay with a person of their choice. Other people being younger in the family agreed with what he said. (Account by the would-be bride's sister)*

As can be seen in these examples, family decision making, like other aspects of intergenerational discourse, maintains the privileges of seniority while allowing juniors to participate, learn and, at least some of the time, express their opinions.

Conclusion

In contemporary Samia, generation gaps have resulted from extensive socio-economic change and differences in the knowledge and experience of older and younger generations, as well as from the geographic dispersion of families associated with school attendance and labour migration. Much knowledge possessed by elders is not valued by the youngest generation – though there is intergenerational consensus on ideals and norms of family reciprocity and standards of behaviour based on the cultural ideal of respect. Young people say that older people do not understand modern life, while elders complain that young people avoid them.

If one went by talk alone, it would seem that the generations spend little time together. However, as has been shown, intergenerational contacts are frequent, occurring in a variety of situations including everyday work and social settings, and occasional formal family and lineage meetings convened to deal with problems and crises. The current rural life-style in Samia encourages intergenerational mixing in the home, in work and in conversation. Older Samia often take the lead in conversations. Elders attempt to instruct their juniors in Samia customs and remind them of their cultural heritage, but much discussion centres around immediate contemporary

experiences and problems which everyone shares. These ongoing discourses allow the different generations to state their positions and negotiate new understandings.

Frequent intergenerational contacts provide opportunities for social interaction and skill acquisition, emotional support, and reciprocal exchanges of information, food, money and labour. They stimulate and maintain shared interests and intergenerational co-operation over common concerns with land, food, relationships, birth, marriage and death. Indeed, it is the generational continuities, both cultural and experiential, which in the long run sustain Samia society and enable change to occur without complete social disruption. Without this constant reinforcement, it is a question whether the will to continue cultural patterns of familial reciprocity and interdependence, so important to the welfare of both young and old, could be sustained in a fast-changing world.

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Notes

1. The other subgroup is the Banyala, who live south of Samia and who are culturally very similar to the Samia. (Banyala are the people, Bunyala is the place.) Data reported in this article are from Samia.
2. Perhaps the best validation of this knowledge has come from literate Samia who have read my dissertation and articles. Invariably they tell me: "You really know our culture."
3. Many of the forms and questionnaires are reproduced in the appendix to my dissertation (Cattell, 1989b: 604-93).
4. This localization of descent groups was confirmed by a household census in Siwongo village.
5. Polygyny is widespread, with about a third of men being polygynously married (Cattell, 1989b); many men therefore have half-brothers, i.e. sons of the father's co-wife (or wives).
6. All but ten of these people had been previously interviewed in a larger survey of 416 elders (Cattell, 1989b).

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