Bringing Ageing to Life: A Comparative Study of Age Categories

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Abstract

This article offers a comparative ethnographic study of ageing as both category and experience. Drawing on simultaneous 16-month ethnographies conducted as part of the ASSA project, we focus on how ageing is being re-defined in eight contexts around the world, with particular focus on the authors' field sites: rural and urban settings in both Japan and Uganda. Despite being among the world's oldest and youngest populations, respectively, there are various affinities in both ethnographies of age and technology use related to the reconfiguration of family-care norms across distances. This shared finding informs the articulation of age categories, which we found to be negotiated in line with established intergenerational expectations and family roles. This paper is illustrated with ethnographic examples of how people redefine ageing in context and in turn bring 'age' to life, demonstrating the social significance of age categories.

Keywords: Ageing; Technology; Life course; Japan; Uganda; Comparative; Migration

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Introduction

This paper offers a comparative perspective on how ageing is defined in eight contexts around the world: Cameroon, Ireland, Chile, Brazil, Uganda, Japan, China, and East Jerusalem, drawing from simultaneous 16-month ethnographies conducted as part of the Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing (ASSA) project. This multi-sited project, based at University College London, initially set out to understand experiences of ageing for people at 'mid-life' or 'middle age', loosely defined as 45-70 years. Through comparative ethnographic analysis on health and phone use, we sought to reveal the often-overlooked perspective of this generation who are neither young nor in advanced later life. As a team, we quickly realised that this category of middle age did not translate neatly in many of our research settings. For example, in Ireland, Brazil, Chile, and China, many participants refuted associations with middle age. We recognised that age categories can be socially significant, yet we found that they do not necessarily acquire meaning in line with the chronological concept of age with which we had set out. Instead, our comparative discussion suggests that age categories are socially negotiable, which means that they are dynamic, experiential, and continually evolving, but also often articulated in line with established intergenerational norms and family roles. In this articulation, what values are brought to life, re-established, and experienced as part of processes of ageing? How does age categorisation relate to contemporary contexts informed by global marketisation, migration, urbanisation, and digitalisation – particularly the global impact of smartphones and social media? In this discussion, we offer a comparative anthropology of ageing, as both category and experience, in a global context, with particular comparative focus on our field sites: rural and urban settings in both Japan and Uganda.

In this contribution, we first introduce key aspects of the global context in which this comparison is situated from the perspective of anthropological literature, followed by comparative ethnographic examples of how age is redefined by our research participants in diverse settings. These redefinitions tend to disrupt chronologies; for example, in resistance to the meanings typically attributed to 'middle age' or 'elderly,' and in the more relational and experiential definitions of age, 'bringing ageing to life.' We consider the role of work and retirement in contributing to official and unofficial age categories.

Methods

Whilst we draw upon insights from our colleagues' research in other ASSA field sites, the bulk of our ethnographic comparison is based on the work of Hawkins in Kampala, the capital of Uganda, and Haapio-Kirk in Kyoto city and rural Kōchi prefecture, Japan; these settings offer comparative insights from both the youngest and oldest populations in the world, respectively. Haapio-Kirk's rural site represents the face of 'super-ageing Japan'; in the town of Tosa-chō in which the majority of the rural research was conducted, 45% of the population are over age 65[1] compared with the national average of 28%.[2] The national population of Japan is predicted to reach similar levels of agedness by 2065.[3] Conversely, in Uganda, 76% of the population are below age 30,[4] and only 3% of the population are over age 65.[5]

Despite the demographic differences between our field sites, we found extensive common ground: in the emphasis on *respect* in defining and portraying authority, often along gendered lines; in the relationship between urban-rural migration and age categories; in the role of intergenerational relationships in redefining age and older personhood; and in the re-establishment of ageing ideals, often adapted to contemporary life through the medium of the mobile phone. These themes form the focus of integrated comparison between our two ethnographies in very different settings. The table below gives an overview of the demographic context for both Japan and Uganda. The most striking differences, other than the life expectancy, are the birth and death rates which reflect Japan's 'super ageing' and shrinking population and, conversely, Uganda's comparatively rapid population growth, including among older adults (Golaz, Wandera, and Rutaremwa 2017).

	Japan[6]	**Uganda**[7]
Population	124,830,000 (2022)	46,205,893 (2022)
Growth rate	0.7% (2020)	3.27% (2022)
Birth rate	6.4 births/1,000 population (2022)	40.94 births/1,000 population (2022)
Death rate	12.6 deaths/1,000 population (2022)	5.02 deaths/1,000 population (2022)
Life expectancy	84.83 years	68.96 years
• **male**	81.92 years	66.71 years
• **female**	87.9 years	71.27 years
Fertility rate	1.30 children (2021)	5.36 children born/woman (2022 est.)
Infant mortality rate	1.9 deaths/1,000 live births	30.45 deaths/1,000 live births

Figure 1: Table providing a demographic comparison between Japan and Uganda.

The primary research method for all members of the ASSA research team was participant observation, which allowed us to examine lived experiences of ageing and the interplay of offline and online practices in people's daily lives. Each of us also conducted at least 25 smartphone elicitation interviews in which we asked local residents to show us the apps on their phone one by one and discuss their usage. Haapio-Kirk's urban and rural participants were just starting to adopt the smartphone, often after previously owning internet-enabled feature phones (*garakei*), and they sometimes maintained both simultaneously. In Uganda, a growing minority of around 30% of Hawkins' participants in Kampala owned smartphones, reflecting the national average. All participants' names in this article are pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

Context

This article contributes to a growing area of anthropological research that seeks to find a middle ground among wider discourses that frame ageing within the tropes of either decline or 'successful ageing' (e.g., Danely 2019; Fujiwara 2012; Gangopadhyay 2021; Kavedžija 2019; Lamb 2017). Independence and autonomy are often presented as cornerstones of successful ageing, a concept which is itself critiqued as a product of global neoliberal processes (Chapman 2005; Portacolone 2011; Rubinstein and de Medeiros 2015; Clotworthy 2020). Successful ageing narratives often align with industrialised age categories, which assign certain activities of economic production to particular life stages (Honwana 2012, 12): i.e., education and childhood: a time of dependence; work and adulthood: a time of independence; and retirement and rest in old age: increasingly characterised as a time of interdependent independence (Kavedžija 2019), as evident in both the Japan and Uganda ethnographies discussed here.

In the 1960s, many demographers, sociologists, and psychologists adopted the emerging life course approach as a way to understand how people's lives follow certain patterns and progressions; in a normative sense, a life course can be defined as "a sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time" (Giele and Elder 1998, 22). The study of the life course has been taken up, critiqued, and expanded by anthropologists (e.g., Danely and Lynch 2013) who have moved from a gerontological to an intergenerational focus, revealing the complexity of ageing across generations and showing how "transitions of aging are a matter of entangled horizons of transformation" (e.g. Danely and Lynch 2013, 4). This "entangled horizon of transformation" has also been usefully conceptualised as a "vital conjecture" and a "nexus of potential social futures" (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 871), reflecting an indeterminate life course of ever-evolving, future-oriented processes informed by "socially structured possibilities" (2002, 871). An earlier cross-cultural study of ageing also emphasises the complexity of the life course as an "unfolding trajectory" informed by temporal, individual, socio-cultural, and complex phenomena of biological-psychological-social interactions (Fry 2018, 269).

Ethnographic insights outlined in this comparative paper build upon these anthropological concepts, which complicate the normative life course and depict the processual complexity of understanding and managing bio-social age. In the ASSA study, fluidity in the life course –and thereby in categorisations of age – was frequently emphasised by older participants themselves. Across the ASSA field sites, many people's life course did not match normative models, such as for those remaining in work, staying single, getting divorced, starting new careers, or entering new relationships later in life. In Ireland and China, for example, activities long associated with 'old age' are being redefined with reduced family obligations and increased longevity enhancing people's capacity to take up independent hobbies in later life (Garvey and Miller 2021). Categories and expectations of age can be socially negotiated in contextually specific ways; for example, the majority of Hawkins' research participants living in a diverse neighbourhood in Kampala, referred to in this article by the pseudonym 'Lusozi,' are from the Acholi sub-region in northern Uganda. Acholi society is gerontocratic, with elders holding leadership positions within their family, clan, and community (Finnstrom 2001). As such, elders have the authority to allocate land (Whyte and Acio 2017) and mediate disputes (Parkin 1969, 144). Only respectable older people with appropriate experience can be nominated as an elder. Some of Hawkins' Acholi research participants in Kampala explained that even someone as young as age 40 could be considered an elder, depending on their social status and life experience.

As well as situated negotiations of the categories of age, our research indicates that wider economic shifts and instability are also disrupting the linearity of the life course. For example, in Japan, the economic stagnation of the 1990s led to a decline of previously secure life-course structures, such as life-long employment with the same company. Furthermore, many of the ASSA researchers observed how global and urban migration is "scattering" families (Coe 2014), who then increasingly rely on smartphones to remain connected (see Otaegui 2023 in Chile; Walton 2021 in Italy; Haapio-Kirk forthcoming, in Japan). The concept of home is thereby reconfigured, and existing moral economies and family norms become adapted in new locations (Sigona et al. 2015). This phenomenon is described in anthropological work on "complex global care chains" (Buch 2015, 286) or "transnational constellations of care" (Nguyen, Zavoretti, and Tronto 2017, 199), such as migrant care workers travelling to Western Europe and North America, leaving their own children at home with grandparents and sending remittances to them (e.g., Ahlin 2018; Baldassar et al. 2017; Horn and Schweppe 2016; Madianou and Miller 2012). Across the various ASSA field sites, contextually-appropriate practices were employed to support the care of older people at a distance, such as by sending remittances via mobile for healthcare in Uganda, or the use of visual communication via smartphones to provide affective support for older people in Japan and China, in line with existing social norms of expression and etiquette (Haapio-Kirk, forthcoming; Wang and Haapio-Kirk 2021).

In the Japanese and Ugandan field sites specifically, there is an age-based migration that often occurs between rural and urban areas. In Uganda, rural areas come to be associated with elders and the "idealised past" (Livingston 2003; Porter 2019), whilst urban areas are associated with younger people and work (Nyanzi 2009). For the majority of research participants, Kampala is not considered a home but as a place to work and for children to receive an education, whilst the village is a place for retiring, to spend time with family, and to live off the land. Through these lived experiences and aspirations in Lusozi today, certain geographies are assigned to certain temporalities, informing movement from the village to the city and back again. In Japan, definitions of age are similarly spatialised in association with rural areas. Indeed, since the early 2000s, rural areas were no longer considered to be "life-course spaces"; rather they are "life-phase spaces" because of the massive exodus of working-age people to cities who, in their retirement, often return to their rural roots (so-called U-turners) (Traphagan and Knight 2003). The new "mobilities paradigm" (Sheller and Urry 2006) in the social sciences has produced significant literature on migration, including research in Japan on the experiences of retiree migrants (Ono 2008) and the phenomenon of "lifestyle migration" (e.g., Klien 2019). This is a growing movement of people, often below middle-age, who are not returning to their countryside hometowns but who are moving in a one-way direction from cities to rural sites (so-called I-turners) (Klien 2016). Haapio-Kirk found that digital technologies are emerging as key sites for the management of visibility, especially in her rural site where migrants and locals alike contend with a context of intense social scrutiny (Haapio-Kirk forthcoming). Despite the tensions that can arise in a small town where "gossip travels faster than the internet," as expressed by one local woman (age 50), older resident generations (both locals who have never left and U-turners) seem to find both fulfilment and meaning from interacting with and helping younger migrants. These migrants are often of a similar age to their own children or grandchildren, many of whom have left for life in the city. In this way, urban-to-rural migrants play an important role within normative intergenerational practices that are significantly challenged by depopulation.

Likewise in Uganda, rather than being fixed or reified, as in the colonial framing of rural/urban segregation and inequities (e.g., Finnström 2008, 82; Mamdani 1996; Nyanzi 2013; p'Bitek 1986; Tamale 2020), values of respect and relatedness are actively adapted for contemporary relevance. As Hawkins saw in her ethnography, these values are circulated and enacted to "keep them alive in town," (re)generating meanings for both younger and older people (Finnström 2008; Pype 2017). Furthermore, digital practices play a key role in these processes of reconfiguring expectations of age, for example, with mobile remittances accommodating ideals of intergenerational home-based care in a context of migration between the city and the village.

Both of these examples of smartphone adoption can be understood through anthropologist Cati Coe and ethnologist Erdmute Alber's concept of "age inscription" (Coe and Alber 2018), a useful terminology and perspective for thinking through the re-configuration of established ageing norms in patterned ways and in line with socio-historical-economic circumstances. This builds on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theories of "habitus" and "social reproduction" (1977), whereby existing power structures are inhabited and reproduced through embodied practices. Coe and Alber's 'age inscriptions' offers a more applicable, processual conception of social trajectories, which allows for the possibility of indeterminacy and change over time. The term was further developed in relation to how age inscriptions "calibrate care obligations with the circumstances of the contemporary period, instead of insisting on compliance with time-honored arrangements" (Häberlein 2018, 35).

Through our ethnographies, we also hope to expand these processual notions of the life course in more relational ways; in particular, through intergenerational notions of age categorisations, which is the focus of the latter half of this article. Our research indicates the limits of an individualistic life course approach that focuses only on the trajectory of one person's life. In Japan, people in their 60s and 70s are sandwiched by the diverse life courses of both their parents' generation and their children's

generation, especially as the latter are increasingly challenging norms of what is expected as one ages, such as by delaying entry into full-time work and marriage, and thus entry into societal notions of adulthood, sometimes indefinitely (Cook 2013). A more realistic picture should include the resultant dialogue between the generations, sometimes taking inspiration from each other, but also sometimes acting in deliberate contrast to each other.

This public generational dialogue is evident in both of the ASSA project's African field sites, Yaoundé (Walton and Awondo 2023) and Kampala, where tensions between younger and older generations play out in both political and domestic spheres, with age categories publicly invoking an "imagination of power" and familial relationships (Durham 2000). Similarly in Japan, generational stereotyping has been part of popular discourse since at least the Meiji era (a period of time named after Emperor Meiji's reign, between 1868-1912), gaining momentum after the Second World War, and initially corresponding with the reigns of various emperors (Kelly 1993). For example, during the post-war period, generational discourse focused on responsibility for the war, with people born in the first decade of the Showa era (named after Emperor Showa's rein from 1926 to 1989) emerging in the popular consciousness as the bedrock of post-war recovery (Kelly 1993). Anthropologist William Kelly argues that this generation became a standard against which later generations were judged, such as the baby boomers, also known as "new family types" (*nyu famiri gata)*. This generation gained a reputation for being concerned with personal lifestyle advancements during the high economic growth decades and thus lacked experience of the hardships experience by previous generations (Kelly 1993). Popular discourse around the Baby Boomer generation was amplified in 1976 with the publication of Sakaiya Taichi's novel "*Dankai no sedai*" ("The Baby Boom Generation") about the cohort born between 1947 and 1949. Gaining prominence in the 1990s, the terms *dankai no sedai* or *dankai* are broadly used in Japan to indicate the post-war generation (Ishikawa 2020).

In the following section, we discuss how our older research participants grapple with such 'official' and inherited definitions of ageing such as those based on life course chronologies, state retirement ages, and inherited ageing norms of previous generations. We argue that official and unofficial age categories are not natural but are instead constituted by shared meanings; they are therefore embedded in personal and institutional relationships. We begin by summarising a few instances of how age is defined in our various research contexts. Taken together, this suggests a need for the diversification of ageing chronologies and terms, and points towards more experiential and relational definitions of ageing. We build on anthropological work that seeks to find "spaces" of manoeuvrability through the use of technology, changing social norms, and changing biologies that challenge age and ageing (Majumdar 2021, 2).

Defining Age around the World

With age defined by a variety of factors, including personal, social, economic, and political, it can be understood as a dynamic and negotiated state (Livingston 2003) rather than a fixed entity. Often, we found that people seek to re-define established categories of age based on their own lived experience, particularly as it deviates from that of their parents' generation or public discourses around ageing. As Kenji-san (age 68) from Kyoto explained, his experiences of later life vary considerably to those of his parents' generation:

> Probably purpose in life (*ikigai*) has something to do with longevity. We live longer nowadays after retirement. It is necessary to think about ikigai. My parents' generation didn't worry about that. They were only working throughout their lives. If we stop working at 65, there are 15 or 20 years left. So, it is necessary to think about how to spend that time.

In the Japanese research context, many people seemed to both resist and embrace official discourses that encourage "purpose in life" (*ikigai*), which can be understood as a culturally-inflected form of active ageing discourse common to the Global North (Haapio-Kirk, forthcoming).

As in Kenji-san's case, active ageing discourses may shape the responsibility people feel to stay healthy for as long as possible as older adults. The flip-side of this sentiment can result in ageist attitudes that may discriminate against inactivity, poor health, and appearances of age. For example, in her monograph, anthropologist Xinyuan Wang (forthcoming) argues that older people in Shanghai have a new opportunity to "grow young" after retirement, as their youth (their teenage years and twenties) was hijacked by Communist ideology and the radical revolutionary movement of the time (the Cultural Revolution that occurred between 1966-1976). "Keeping up with the era" is regarded as a key sign of remaining young; this means keeping up with younger people's conversations, maintaining health, and using smartphones. In Shanghai, Wang's retired participants often emphasized their so-called "mental age" (*xinli nianling*), which indicates that the way they think and behave can redefine their physical age.

In line with this concept of mental age, many of anthropologists Pauline Garvey and Daniel Miller's (2021, 28-36) participants in Ireland believe that "age is only what you feel" and tend not to "feel their age." People often said they expected to feel different when they reached age 50, 60, 70, 80 but, despite accumulated experiences, that never happened. This reflects a more experiential sense of continuity from youth disrupted only by frailty. There may therefore be a perceived discrepancy between these subjective experiences and official social categories of age. Rather than focusing on age, which is often associated with passivity, these participants consider their activities and interests. Formal provisions for older people, such as active retirement groups, may therefore seem out of step with the realities of their members' lives. The Irish participants would also often reflect on the distinction between this experiential definition of ageing and the one from previous generations. Reflecting radical social change – particularly in terms of women's roles – some women mentioned that their mothers were a lot less active than they are now; their mothers were more housebound and less likely to lead independent lives.

Notably, as a point of contrast to other examples cited here, media and communications scholar Maya de Vries and Islamic scholar Laila Abed Rabho found that most of the older women they worked with in Al-Quds (East Jerusalem) define age in chronological terms. As discussed in the contribution by Miller, Abed Rabho, and de Vries, these women see ageing as part of a person's cycle of life, in line with the holy Quran, with wisdom and respect for older people, and with their roles as women, mothers, grandmothers, wives, and/or colleagues. However, during some longer and deeper conversations, some of the women said that, while their body feels old, they themselves feel young. They wondered if their daughters will be able to fulfil the roles of older women and grandmothers as they do, considering the tendency to have children later and to continue working; will the next generation be active grandmothers as they are?

This example also differs from other ASSA field sites in the sense that intergenerational comparison in defining age is mostly orientated towards the older generation. Alfonso Otaegui's (2023) participants (Peruvian migrants who have lived in Santiago, Chile, for 10 to 30 years), in their late 50s and early 60s describe themselves as feeling much younger than they would have expected at this age. Here, definitions of ageing tend to be vague, as people do not feel 'old.' Their vitality, displayed by their commitment to work and their very active social lives, fit current Global North narratives of active ageing. When explaining how young they feel, these participants tended to compare themselves to their parents at the same age. They remember their parents as being much less active, staying at home, and only going out for family meetings.

Similarly, in communications scholar Marilia Duque's ASSA field site of Bento in São Paolo, Brazil, research participants often said that their chronological age is not accurate as they "feel younger than ever" (Duque 2022, 36). They refuse to see themselves as the ageing body they see in the mirror, and also refuse to identify with their memories of their parents and grandparents, who lived at a time when life expectancy was over 30 years less than today; "being older was being really, really old," as they said (Duque 2022, 36). Physical appearance was also a significant aspect of age definitions among Duque's participants; to say that someone does not look their age is considered the highest praise. In terms of body-schema and body-image, anthropologist Maren Wehrle describes that ageing bodies may feel out of sync with internal experiences: "In the same sense that we are habituated to one body-schema (i.e., a young body that was once very able), we are also habituated to another body-image: namely, a more or less stable image that we have created of ourselves by the middle period of our lives" (Wehrle 2020, 86). In the ASSA field site of Yaoundé, anthropologist Patrick Awondo found that physical appearance plays a significant role in defining who is old.[8] It is not just about aesthetics, skincare, and hair. Ageing is also about an attitude reflected in clothing, consumption, and a person's relationship to family, friends, and society. In Bento, women start to change their hairstyles and create their own fashion trends, some of them becoming social media influencers in later life. This seems to help them craft and disseminate new images for their age group, now presented as an entrepreneurial, empowered, and innovative group.

Official Age Categories

When age-based categories are imposed, they may be simultaneously both resisted and embraced. There is often a tension between how ageing is 'officially' defined by the state, by society, and by older people themselves. This was particularly evident to Haapio-Kirk during her ethnography in Japan's 'super ageing' society, and in Hawkins' ethnography in Uganda's 'youthful' society. In Japan, the focus was on people's experiences amidst public discourse surrounding the super ageing trends. *Kōreisha* means "elderly person" and is used in official discourses. The term has connotations of incapacity; for example, the "*Kōreisha* mark" is a statutory sign in the Road Traffic Law of Japan that indicates "aged person at the wheel." Anyone who is age 70 and over must place the symbol on the front and back of their car if it is deemed by local government that their age could affect their driving when taking a course in order to renew their licence. Drivers age 75 and over have to take a cognitive test in order to renew their licence and must display the mark by law.[9] *Shinia* ("senior") is an English loan-word that is a more neutral term that can refer to anyone over the age of 50, but typically refers to people in their 60s and above. Another English loan word that has become ubiquitous is *siruba* ("silver"), which is often added in front of other words to denote services for silver-haired people. Other words for older adults include *rōjin* ("elderly people"), *chūnen* (directly translated as "middle-age"), and *sōnen* (meaning "prime of life"; Plath 1975), among others.

While such age-based categories may be required for developing policy and services in Japan, Haapio-Kirk found that such categories are of diminished importance for most people in their daily lives. For example, while people may recognise that they are suffering from age-related illnesses or use the category of 'elderly' when struggling with their smartphone ("I can't do it, I'm elderly!"), in their day-to-day lives, they may also enjoy many continuities with their younger selves; some people feel that their interests and personality have become even more pronounced with age. Haruki-san from Kyoto (age 85) sees other people his age around him becoming 'elderly' by staying at home, yet he feels his commitment to socialising with people of all ages enables him to avoid such categorisation: "I am not an elderly person," he said. He does not attend the local club for older people as he feels that attending would, in his words, "suck away my youth!" Alongside many others in Haapio-Kirk's research who continue to engage in some form of business or employment after their official retirement, Haruki-san maintains an active role in the family fabric business aided by his smartphone. His LINE (the most popular messaging platform in Japan) is full of photographs of the fabric that he sells online in partnership with his son who uploads the product photographs to an online marketplace, with Haruki-

san receiving the sale requests on LINE. Through his smartphone, he sends customers photographs of rolls of fabric. Haruki-san's sons set up this system for him, and even though he protests that he does not know how to use his smartphone and prefers to use his old feature phone (*garakei*) to make calls, he actually uses his smartphone very efficiently every day to take photographs and access the internet. For Haruki-san, his continuing participation in social, family, and business life is mediated by his smartphone use; the device helps to facilitate the kind of sociality that he claims will save him from becoming 'elderly.'

However, one of the areas in which people in the Japanese research context did feel a sense of belonging to age-based categories was in terms of employment, particularly when nearing the mandatory retirement age of 65. A proposal in 2017 to shift the official categorisation of 'old age' to 75 and over was intended to stimulate policy reform around the productive economic capacity of the 'pre-old' in order to reduce the socio-economic burden of an ageing society on younger generations (Ouchi et al. 2017). The emergence of 'pre-old' as a proposed policy category in Japan aligns with the wider concept of the "third age" (Gilleard and Higgs 2002; Laslett 1991). Generally, the third age is defined as the period of life between retirement and the "social imaginary" (defined by philosopher Charles Taylor as "that common understanding that makes possible common practices"[Taylor 2004, 23]) of a so-called "fourth age," which signifies the beginning of age-imposed limitations and frailties (Higgs and Gilleard 2015). While the boundary between the two ages remains undefined (Gilleard and Higgs 2010) in affluent post-industrial societies, the fourth age exists more as a post-modern shadowy opposite of the 'active' and 'successful' third age rather than as a distinct set of criteria (Higgs and Gilleard 2015). Understood more from the perspective and experience of Haapio-Kirk's research participants, what mattered was that, even during such a pre-old age or third age, they experienced apprehension towards the physical and mental decline associated with longevity, along with concerns about financial precarity, and a desire to stay away from hospitals where "they will not let you die," as one woman in her 60s expressed it. This imagination of 'real' old age as a period of life somewhere in the future – marked by a loss of agency and decline, in stark contrast to prior modes of being – can be understood as a society-wide form of othering ageing bodies that condenses 'real' old age into a life stage that is always on the horizon (Gilleard and Higgs 2010; Pickard 2019). The theory of othering, originally coined in post-colonial studies (e.g., Spivak 1985; Said 1995), has been used to describe processes of identity formation (Jensen 2011). The theory is also applied to discourses of ageing, revealing the dehumanisation of the oldest old and the "affirmative othering" of midlife (van Dyk 2016, 114).

A similar tension between official age categories and experiences of ageing is found in Hawkins' work with people in their 40s, 50s, 60s, and above. In line with the World Health Organization (WHO), various researchers of ageing in East Africa set the boundary for 'old' at 50 and above due to the perceptions of their participants (de Klerk and Moyer 2017; Kuteesa et al. 2012; Velkoff and Kowal 2007). Some ASSA research participants in Kampala would similarly determine 'oldness' as those over age 50, and 'elderly' as those over 60. However, according to many participants (including healthcare workers, researchers of ageing, and age-based advocacy organizations in Kampala[10]), age is more likely to be determined by the experience and health of the individual, as well as their income and 'environment.' Environment has been understood anthropologically as the "local biology" of ageing or as "bio-social" factors, where the body and its socio-cultural environment intersects, re-shaping experience throughout the life course (Lock 1994; Livingston 2003). Various participants in Kampala consider that poverty, manual labour, alcohol use, poor nutrition, and chronic illness can manifest as 'oldness,' regardless of a person's age. As Godfrey (age 43) stated during an interview, "You know you can get somebody who is 25, but when you don't take care of your life, you drink excessively, you do other things wrong, you become old."

The founder of The Aged Family Uganda (TAFU), a non-governmental organisation for older people in Kampala, explained that "middle age doesn't really exist," as some people grow old before age 45 if

their health is bad or their lifestyle "harsh." He gave the example of lower-income older people who have restricted access to food, medicine, and care. As in other ASSA field sites, some people also considered 'oldness' to reflect a personal mindset or an attitude towards life. At an event organised by TAFU for older people, Victor (age 82) refused to describe himself as old. Despite visual impairment, he keeps in contact with his three children living in West Africa after making himself a Braille phone directory. "Age is just a number. I'm not youth, not aged, but mature," he said during an interview. He believes that age is defined by what you want to do, and he wants to dance. He feels that people over 70 are forgotten; they have exceeded their life expectancy so they are "already dead and cannot help you." But he has seen that people younger than he have died, so he knows it is not age that kills people. "Me, I don't believe I'm old – I've still got ideas." He hopes to start a potato farm, and meanwhile keeps active with housework and his young grandchildren.

In this way, age appears to be continually redefined in relation to daily routines and activities, for which work and retirement is a significant component. For Duque's (2022) participants in Brazil, staying in work is a way to age healthily; 'oldness' is often associated with a lack of productivity. To Otaegui's (2023) Peruvian participants, vitality may relate to their long-life identity as workers and providers as well as their work ethic since they came to Chile, which keeps them engaged and very active. Similarly, public retirement ages often present a point at which official age categories become lived through day-to-day life. Again, this can be re-purposed according to people's individual experiences and aspirations for ageing. For example, in Garvey and Miller's (2021) work in Ireland, people often said that they had never been so busy as they are in retirement – this statement was something of a refrain. Retirement can therefore be an opportunity to embark on new activities, to open new possibilities, and to redefine what age looks and feels like. With the significant increase in life expectancy in China, Wang's (forthcoming) research indicates how the current generation of retirees may enjoy a much longer and healthier life after retirement than older cohorts, perhaps developing their personal hobbies and achieving certain personal aspirations. Many of them may finally be able to be 'young' in the sense of embracing a full range of possibilities in life, sometimes facilitated by the use of the smartphone. This redefinition of ageing and later-life activities interacts not only with official age categorisations but also with socio-economic factors. For many participants in Kampala, as around the world, aspirations for rest and retirement are often put on hold, as they continue to provide for their children, grandchildren, and aged parents in later life. Anthropologists Shireen Walton and Patrick Awondo (2023) offer a global perspective on this theme in their article on retirement and grandparenting in this special issue. In the following section, we discuss the intergenerational implications of age categories – or the categorical implications of intergenerational relationships and responsibilities – in more depth.

Intergenerational Definitions of Ageing

Whilst a chronological understanding of 'oldness' may be too fixed in relation to dynamic personal and social determinants of age (Freeman and Coast 2014, 1138; Hoffman and Pype 2016, 4; Kyaddondo 2008, 27), categories of age such as 'elder' and 'youth,' or 'pre-old' and 'third age,' can be socially and politically significant. In Awondo's work, his informants in Yaoundé expressed political and economic tensions between generations. Older people are targeted by the younger generations, who accuse them of monopolising the material and symbolic resources in a country where leadership roles tend to be held by older people and where the majority of the population is young. This tension is also reflected in the symbolic position of seniority in families; older people speak before every other age group, they eat first and, when they speak, everybody has to listen. Similarly, in Kampala, older people (typically older men) occupy positions of authority, both politically and within the family. They often speak first in the family meetings and tend to make decisions on behalf of the collective – decisions that are to be respected or enforced. Typically, these decisions seek to enable productive, cooperative ways of living and working together.

Similarly, in the rural field site of Tosa-chō, Kōchi prefecture, Haapio-Kirk found that older people act as "caretakers of collective wellbeing," such as through the management of religious rituals (Traphagan 2004) and community revitalisation work. Generally, these roles were taken up by men in their 70s who were native to the area and were elected to leadership positions after working in other kinds of employment. As in Uganda, elected elder leadership is determined by gender, social status, and experience, particularly long-term knowledge of life within that particular setting. In the Japanese site, older women tended to run community social groups, such as the club for older people and a club for new parents and older people to mix. Such age and gender profiles of village chiefs and community leaders are common in rural areas of Japan (Traphagan 2004).

While older residents seemed to find value in taking on the roles of community group leaders, there was a sense of concern over who would replace them in the coming years, especially if they begin to exhibit signs of cognitive decline. Haapio-Kirk observed that younger migrants and locals are often involved in non-institutional webs of support and care with older residents; these tend to be outside of the structures of community groups and are based more on locality and friendship. In this way, informal intergenerational relationships of care were emerging as central to maintaining the wellbeing of both older and younger generations in Tosa-chō. Older residents would also teach younger migrants about agricultural processes and methods of food preservation, and relationships based on respect and mutual support emerged.

Intergenerational respect and respectability are also key notions in relation to defining age in Kampala. Many participants and researchers of ageing in Uganda and elsewhere in Africa (Aboderin 2004; Maharaj 2020; Maniragaba et al. 2019; Nankwanga et al. 2013; Nzabona et al. 2016; Oppong 2006; Reynolds Whyte 2017; van der Geest 2011) have noted a decline in elder respect and respectability, believing it to contribute to the "moral decay" of their society and the younger generation growing up within it (Kyaddondo 2008, 43). With declining respect and togetherness often comes worsening experiences of ageing, disrupted hierarchies of age and intergenerational care practices. However, many of the older people Hawkins worked with in Kampala said that they feel increasingly respected as they age. Here, respect means being acknowledged and approached with humility by younger people in the family and community.

In both field sites, elder care is also a significant aspect of intergenerational relationships and seems to play a key role in re-defining ageing itself, with the forms of care being re-defined in relation to wider historical, economic, and digital shifts. Intergenerational interdependency in various forms was experienced among all of Haapio-Kirk's Japanese participants at varying ages. Rather than a clearly defined active 'third age' followed by a 'fourth age' of decline, it was the anticipation of frailty on the horizon that seemed to either motivate people into actions of preparedness or make them shrink back.

Like many of Haapio-Kirk's research participants who were from the post-war Baby Boomer generation (*dankai no sedai*), Hiroshi and Sachiko Suzuki, a couple in their mid-80s living in rural Tosa-chō, experienced the rapid economic growth of the 1960-80s during which a capitalist model of life course was promoted by the state (Kelly 1993, 201). During this time, Hiroshi-san sold his farming equipment, moved to find work in nearby Kōchi city, married Sachiko-san, and bought a house. For most men of his generation, the normative life-course model included clear age-based stages, such as entering the workforce at age 23, marriage and the birth of a first baby by 30, followed by a timeline centred on the development of one's children, and ending with one's own retirement at the age of 60 (Shakuto 2017). As argued by William Kelly (1993) the high-growth Japanese state dictated that one's progress through life should be demarcated by a sequence of socioeconomically 'productive' moments and the accumulation of middle-class goods. However, now in later life, a new life-course stage appears to be emerging with the divestment of these accumulated goods.

The Suzukis are preparing their home to be taken over by the next generation in anticipation of their deaths, rather than foreseeing a time in which they would all live together as had previously been the norm. The Suzukis described these activities as part of their process of "*shukatsu*" (meaning "end of life hunting"). *Shukatsu* has become a buzzword among older people to mean planning for later life and the afterlife (Chan and Thang 2022). During the early 2010s, the term gained popularity in the Japanese media, corresponding to a period in which the first Baby Boomers reached retirement age, and there was growing concern about the ageing society (Kimura 2017). At nearly age 80, Hiroshi-san included a range of activities in *shukatsu*; for example, relocating their ancestors' graves to near their mountain home, reducing their belongings, and writing down important information regarding bank accounts and business details in a book for their children who live an hour away in Kōchi city.

As in Kampala with mobile phones accommodating "care at a distance" (Pols 2012), in Tosa-chō, digital technologies play an important role in redefining ageing and reconfiguring elder care, with smartphones acting as a mediator to facilitate closeness without the burden of intergenerational living. The Suzukis communicate with their children and grandchildren daily through a family chat group on the digital application LINE. Sharing frequent messages and photos help to enable the kind of informal sociality that would have previously emerged through living together. Using technology to mediate family relationships is not new or even limited to those living apart, but is part of a longer trajectory towards increasing autonomy among multiple generations. One reason behind this desire for connected independence was identified by anthropologist John Traphagan (1998) in his study of how older adults contest their progression to 'elderly' status. Traphagan found that older adults resist the term through practices that reduce the trouble they might cause to others (*meiwaku*) by relying on them for care. This finding also relates to a familiar refrain encountered throughout the ASSA project, with many older participants stating a preference to remain economically and physically independent to "avoid becoming a burden" on the younger generation. The *shukatsu* activities of the Suzukis were intended to make their eventual passing less burdensome for their children. Similarly, their smartphone usage enabled them to be connected to their family while maintaining independence, reflecting a sense of intergenerational obligation. In the Japanese and Ugandan examples, this relational independence is often facilitated through the digital as people age with smartphones.

Conclusion

The cases outlined here, which draw upon research in multiple field sites around the world, indicate how people live in between and against categories of age, including those that have arisen in popular discourse or through government policy – or indeed through academic engagement, such as the "third" and "fourth age" (Gilleard and Higgs 2010) and the concept of the life course (Giele and Elder 1998). Rather than a simple opposition between categories and experience, we argue for a more fluid approach to understanding how people appropriate, negotiate, and resist categorisations of the life course. Our ethnographic evidence points towards people adopting age-based categories for some purposes but largely rejecting them for more broad self-definitions. From both the Japanese and Ugandan ethnographies, we found that it is not individual action but intergenerational relationships of care, responsibility, and respect that make ageing 'successful' or not. The concept of 'successful ageing' also provokes the binary of 'unsuccessful ageing' through its polarising language and focus on the individual (Rubinstein and de Medeiros 2015). Yet in the cases presented here, we see how intergenerational webs of support may be interwoven between offline and online, enabling people to maintain autonomy even when they may need increased care. Such evidence suggests that, throughout their lives, people are situated in webs of interdependency; as anthropologist Iza Kavedžija (2019) argues, this may be how they achieve independence.

With a rapidly expanded life expectancy emerging around the world within just one generation, new opportunities have arisen for many of the people who participated in the ASSA research compared with previous generations, demonstrating the multiple ways that people live with and against

categories of ageing. This observation aligns with concepts of a socially situated, ever-evolving life course in the anthropology of age, such as "age inscriptions" (Coe and Alber 2018). In the cases of Japan and Uganda, with the world's oldest and youngest populations, respectively, we have found that people are innovating their own forms of categorisation. Emic understandings of 'active' ageing are defined in Japan as *shūkatsu* (end-of-life-hunting) and, in Uganda, elder authority and respect is being adapted to life in the city against a pervasive sense of the declining social status and experience of older people. The Ugandan and Japanese cases also highlight that maintaining a sense of respect as one ages is important, often mediated through intergenerational relationships of learning and care. Age categorisation in both sites is informed by processes of migration and urbanisation, and digital technologies are emerging as central to how people define themselves as ageing people in relation to others.

Older members of "scattered families" (Coe 2014; Sigona et al. 2015) in Lusozi actively work to uphold elder roles and respectability. Despite socioeconomic insecurities, many of the older people we worked with sought to educate the 'dotcom' generation to mobilise support for their elderly relatives in the village, and to heed their advice. Rather than being fixed in an "idealised past" (Livingston 2003; Porter 2019), values of respect and relatedness that underpin age categories are actively adapted for contemporary relevance and circulated to "keep them alive in town," (re)generating meanings for both younger and older people (Finnström 2008; Pype 2017). In Japan, the rapid extension of later life during recent decades has affected deeply rooted traditions of filial obligation involving intergenerational co-residence (Long, Campbell, and Nishimura 2009). Demographic shifts, changing attitudes towards co-residence, and the increasing participation of women in the labour force have meant that in recent years the responsibility of caring for elders has become fraught with contradictory sentiments as people try to balance their continuing loyalties to family with a more individualistic desire for privacy and autonomy. This autonomy is not only desired by middle-aged people but also those who are older and in need of increasing care, who may have a strong desire to avoid becoming a burden on those around them (Danely 2019; Kavedžija 2019; Traphagan 1998).

More broadly, the ASSA ethnographies discussed here nuance the linear trajectories of decline associated with ageing, disrupting expectations of how age is defined. Duque's participants in Bento strategically take-up official categories of age, whilst rejecting the associations of passivity and the 'old age' of previous generations. Otaegui's participants in Santiago also feel much younger than their parents seemed, and Abed Rabho and de Vries' participants admitted feeling younger than their bodies. Garvey and Miller's participants in Dublin and Wang's participants in Shanghai similarly reject official categories and associations with 'middle age' or 'later life,' and have newfound freedoms and opportunities in retirement. Taken together, all of these ethnographies point towards a socially significant, experiential understanding of age, which seems to be continually re-defined and grounded in intergenerational relationships and responsibilities.

Acknowledgements

Notes

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7. *World Population Prospects—Population Division—United Nations*. (n.d.). Accessed April 29, 2023. https://population.un.org/wpp/
8. Patrick Awondo, personal communication, 2022.
9. The mark is in the shape of a four-leaf clover, and was originally in orange and yellow hues, denoting an autumn leaf, yet now the symbol also includes two tones of green in a nod towards elderly vitality (Davies 2019).
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