

Anthropologist in the field: Sjaak van der Geest

Can an old body be beautiful?

Text and Image

Sjaak van der Geest

Memories from my fieldwork in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town in Ghana where I had many discussions with people of all generations about what it meant to be old. I was already becoming older myself at the time and now, twenty years later, I have aged even further. Looking back at fieldwork of long ago fills me with mixed feelings, sometimes of joy, even contentment, sometimes of uneasiness.

"Can an old body be beautiful?" I ask an elderly woman. She shakes her head. Monica, aged about fifty, who is also present at the conversation, agrees with her. "When you get old, you become wrinkled and lose your beauty. Only the rich, who don't have to work on the land and can buy all kinds of ointments and medicines, sometimes succeed in remaining beautiful, without wrinkles."

"I find an old tree more beautiful than a young one," I object. The elderly woman partly agrees with me: "Yes, some old trees are beautiful, but others develop all kinds of bumps and grow crooked. You can't use them anymore for building." Her ideal of beauty also has a practical side.

I'm alone with my idea that an old tree can be beautiful because it is crooked and wrinkled. Appreciating the beauty of an old wrinkled human body is absolutely out of the question for them.

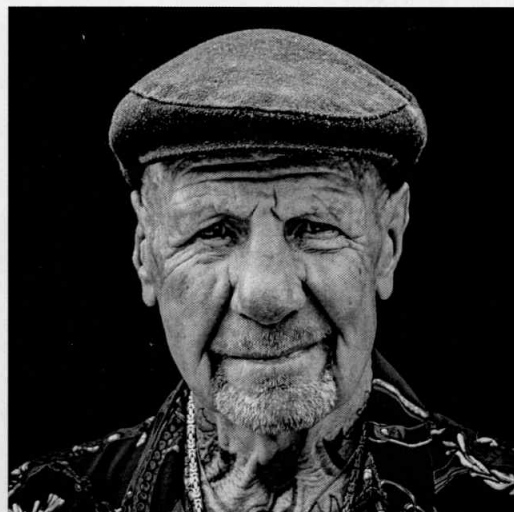
In the evening, during dinner with two friends, I lay the topic on the table. Yaw, aged twenty, doesn't have to think twice. He finds a young tree much more beautiful than an old one. Its branches, he says, are fresh and soft and its trunk is smooth. Patrick, 45, has a more philosophical slant. He hesitates and seems to be wondering why I asked the

question. He has more sympathy for the old tree. But why would the wrinkles, pustules and other deformities of a tree be beautiful while they make a human body ugly? He laughs. That comparison goes too far.

The next morning I leave the house to take a picture of the old tree behind my room. As soon as the children see my camera they run towards me. After all, you take pictures of people so they hope I will take some of them. "Not today," I say. The children follow me and look amazed when I focus on the old tree. Then one of them shouts: "He takes a picture of a tree!" Others repeat the scream. Some adults stick their heads out of the window. They seem as surprised as the children and shake their heads. When I take three steps forward to zoom in on the wrinkles of the bark, the crowd starts to cheer. They have never seen such a strange sight. The tree has a hole and is full of grooves and scars. Beautiful!

When I wrote about this field experience some twenty years ago, I stopped here and left the comparison with the aging human body to the reader. It was a cowardly open end. The love for old trees, furniture and houses may be widespread in my own society; however, our wrinkled bodies remain largely excluded from that admiration. Of course, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but what directs the eye? Is it not our ambivalent feelings towards growing old – a mixture perhaps of fear and disgust? ♦

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Left: an old ash tree behind my house in Oud-Ade (photo: Anneke van Luijken)

Right: Theo Warmenhoven (75) has been chosen by the Leyden Academy on Vitality and Ageing as the figurehead of their website in the year 2022. He has worked in concrete construction for 40 years and (active) boxing is still his favorite sport (photo: Henk Aschman for Leyden Academy on Vitality and Ageing).