

# ***GSC NOTES AND QUERIES***

## **ELDERLY PEOPLE IN GHANA: ONGOING ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH**

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There is a growing interest in the social and cultural meaning of growing old across the world. In rich industrialised countries such as Japan, the USA, Australia and Sweden the upsurge of research is linked to the fact that elderly people represent an ever-growing proportion of the population causing entirely new social, demographic and economic situations.

The recent interest of social scientists in the life of elderly people in less industrialised countries results from the awareness that those changes in the rich countries will soon affect the poor countries as well. Kinship based security and intergenerational reciprocity are disappearing and are rarely replaced by publicly or privately organised systems of care for the elderly. An additional motive for doing research among elderly people in "non-western" societies lies in the popular belief that care for the elderly is more humane and integrated in the daily life of the community than in "western" societies. Foreign social scientists hope to draw lessons from their research for old people's care in their own society.

In Ghana the position of elderly people has long been neglected by social scientists. Anthropologists often focused on elderly people as informants of their culture, but did not take old age itself as a topic for research. The first substantial study of elderly people in Ghana was by the sociologist Nana Apt (1971) who pointed at the imminent collapse of the traditional system of family care. Apt has remained the most productive writer on the elderly in Ghana. She has published a flow of articles on the issue, culminating in her recent book, *Coping with Old Age in a Changing Africa* (Apt, 1996).

A similar concern about the worsening position of elderly people was expressed in a report based on a survey in the Greater Accra Region (Brown, 1984). More than ten years later the same author (Brown, 1995) wrote a report in which he examines the care relationships between the elderly and their families. This time, the study covers all ten regions of the country. The trend which he observed in 1984 now applies nation wide: many families are no longer able to provide the necessary care to dependent elderly relatives. He calls upon the government to assist families financially to carry out their task of caring and to provide care services and social security for the old generation.

In a recent PhD thesis the American anthropologist Stucki (1995) describes the position of elderly people in a rural Asante community. She focuses on how elders manipulate social relationships and cultural ideals to attract followers and gain political influence and support in old age.

My own research was carried out in 1994 (four and a half months), 1995 (one month) and 1996 (one month) in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town of little over 5000 inhabitants on the Kwahu Plateau in the southeastern part of Ghana. The research consisted mainly of long conversations with elderly people and their relatives.

I started in 1994 with 27 elderly people, 13 women and 14 men. Two years later, ten of them had died, although at the time most of them did not give me the impression that their life would soon come to an end. It made me realise how fragile old age is in a community where there is a lack of good health care (both preventative and curative) and, more importantly, a lack of money to pay for the care which *is* available. The frequent death cases also confronted me with the rapid disappearance of a wealth of local wisdom and wit for which the new generation has hardly paid any attention. This "handicap" of a continuously dwindling "sample" increased my motivation and haste to "tap" my informants' ideas about life, past and present.

Apart from the conversations, which were all taped and transcribed, the research consisted of a kaleidoscope of methods. I often went to greet the old people informally and had brief conversations with them. These more casual visits enabled me to make important observations about the daily life of elderly people and the attitudes of other people in the same house. Most of these observations were recorded in an elaborate diary.

In addition, I discussed old age with many other people in the town including opinion leaders such as teachers and church members and with other key informants. Focus group discussions were held with young people and groups of middle-aged men and women. In three schools of the area, students filled a questionnaire expressing their views on old people or completed sentences on the same issue. Some students wrote essays about the old or made drawings of them.

The research focused on a number of issues including: the social and cultural bases of care, the concept of elder (*opanyin*), the role of money and respect in the life of the elderly, the meaning of building a house, old people's wisdom and witchcraft, sex at old age, and the meaning of death and funeral. First drafts of papers on all these topics have been written and the author is willing to share them with interested colleagues. Two articles have so far been published (Van der Geest 1995, 1996). A selection of conversations with the elderly (Atuobi & Van der Geest, n.d.) is in process.

Most articles present a number of literal transcripts of conversations. People's ideas on old age and various related issues are ambivalent and often contradictory. By making the elders speak directly to the readers, I tried to convey this ambivalence in its most vivid form. A second, not less important motive for presenting these texts is the beauty of the words. Summarizing their accounts and referring to them in an indirect sense would do injustice to them. My own terms seemed bleak compared to theirs. The transcripts demonstrate who the real authors of my articles are. I am only the interpreter.

The overall conclusion of the research is that the position of the elderly in this "average" Akan community is extremely varied and ambiguous. Some elderly people are well off, socially, psychologically, economically, and in terms of health; others are simply miserable. These differences can partly be explained by the concept of reciprocity: people who took good care of their children are sure to receive good care from their children in return. Those who did not, face serious problems in their old age. The two most outspoken signs of a fruitful life are: 1) having given one's children proper education and training in order to enable them to get a good job and 2) having built a house for the family. There are, however, instances where these solid guarantees fail to work.

Proverbs and traditional wit extoll the virtues and wisdom of the elder (*opanyin*) and obviously elderly people enjoy citing them. But in the grey reality of everyday, these sayings often turn into ideological rhetoric against the forces of a changing society, which no longer needs the old. One thing is certain: the popular belief that people are respected and cared for *because* they are old, does not hold in actual life. It is doubtful it ever did.

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