

# Graceful and Successful Ageing: Observations from Ghana and the Netherlands

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What it is that makes old age a beautiful experience? Sjaak van der Geest compares older people in Ghana, among whom he did extensive anthropological research and older people in The Netherlands, his own culture. There are huge differences: for many in Ghana old age is something to look forward to while the opposite appears to be the case in The Netherlands. More striking, however, is the discovery that at a deeper level of understanding older people in these two societies appear to be going through very similar experiences.

Ageing gracefully seems to be foremost a matter of bodily health and beauty. In their article on growing old, Bytheway and Johnson (1998: 243) reflect upon the role of mirrors in the lives of British people. The mirror is a life-long companion that shows us who we are and how we appear in the eyes of others, and mercilessly tracks the gradual decomposition of our bodies (see also Fairhurst 1998; Biggs 1997). While trees become more graceful as they age and deepen in their wrinkles and disfigurements, human beings seem to lose their beauty although their bodies experience the same changes. It is not this type of graceful aging, however, that I want to address in this essay. Beauty will be treated as a metaphor. The question I want to discuss is rather what it is that makes old age a 'beautiful' experience. I will be mostly referring to older people in Ghana, among whom I did anthropological research over a period of more than fifteen years, and to old age in The Netherlands that I know as my own culture. I am struck by the huge differences: for many people in Ghana old age is something to look forward to while the opposite appears to be the case in The Netherlands. I am even more impressed, however, by the discovery at the end of this essay, that at a deeper level of understanding these two societies reappear to be very similar. But let us first look at the appearances that mirrors and other forms of media show us about age.

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## Age's disgrace

The overwhelmingly negative associations with old age in my own Dutch – and more generally in the Euro-American – societies are well known. I am not ignoring the fact that people above the age of 65 have never lived so well and comfortably as today. The point, however, is that being-old itself is not valued in their lives. Their enjoyment of life is rather *in spite* of their old age. Their style of living is in fact a denial of their age. Countless quips express the idea that old age is concealed and denied and that people try to regard themselves as being relatively young for as long as possible. ‘Relatively’, in the sense that they regard only those older than them as ‘old’. For them the dividing line between ‘young’ and ‘old’ moves every year with the climbing of their own years. The prolific production of euphemisms for ‘old’ is another indication that being old is not viewed as possessing an intrinsic positive value.

This largely disparaging attitude towards old age is not a new phenomenon. Reading through literary works from the Greek-Roman time and the past five centuries in Europe and North America, one generally finds that descriptions of old age are filled with feelings of loss and loneliness and anxiety about physical and mental decay. The following lines are from the Roman satirist Juvenal:

But old men are all alike; all share the same old bald pate,  
 Their noses all drip like an infant's, their voices tremble  
 As much as their limbs, they mumble their bread with toothless  
 Gums. It's a wretched life for them, they become a burden  
 To their wives, their children, themselves, so loathsome a sight  
 That it turns the stomach of even the toughest legacy-hunter.  
 Their taste-buds are just about useless, they get little pleasure  
 From food or wine, it's years since they had any sex –  
 Or if they try, it's hopeless: though they labour all night long  
 At that limp and shrivelled object, limp it remains.<sup>2</sup>

The dominant ‘philosophy’ of growing old in our past and present culture is indeed a cyclical one: the dependence and helplessness of newborn babies and small children returns to many people at the end of their life. Illustrations depicting the rise and decline of the human being have been popular to represent the *condition humaine* of older people in the European imagery. The contribution of Brigitte Röder to this volume contains two beautiful examples of the life stages of women and men.

<sup>2</sup> From Juvenal, Satire 10, lines 196–2005. Thanks to Tim Parkin who collected this quote for the Mainz conference.

Cole (1992: 30), who included several such illustrations in his study of the cultural history of ageing, quotes the English epigrammatist Thomas Bancroft, to elucidate the sobering symbolism of this type of illustrations:

We climbe the slippery stairs of Infancy,  
Of Childhood, Youth, of middle age, and then  
Decline, grow old, decrepit, bed-rid lye,  
Bending to infant-weakness once again,  
And to our Cophines (as to Cradles) goe,  
That are the staire-foot stand, and stint our woe.

The imagery of life as a cycle is not a merely 17<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon, however. Present-day cartoonists still find inspiration in the idea that we eventually arrive at the place where we started.

The most common metaphors applied to the ageing process are the various cycles: the cycle of human life, of the seasons and of the day. In all of these, growing old is portrayed as decline. In art and literature (McLerran and McKee 1991) the 'four ages' of the human person are described as a transition from life to death, from growth to standstill, from warmth to coldness, from gold to iron (Ovid), from spring to winter, from morning to night. Shakespeare wrote in his reputed 74<sup>th</sup> Sonnet:

In me thou see'st the twilight of such day  
As after sunset fadeth in the West,  
Which by and by black night doth take away.

In his poem "Hälfte des Lebens" Hölderlin (1988: 308) describes the bitterness of old age by contrasting the coldness of winter with the fullness and abundance of summer:

Mit gelben Birnen hänget  
Und voll mit wilden Rosen  
Das Land in den See,  
Ihr holden Schwäne,  
Und trunken von Küssen  
Tunkt ihr das Haupt  
Ins heilignüchterne Wasser.

Weh mir, wo nehm ich, wenn  
Es Winter ist, die Blume, und wo  
Den Sonnenschein,  
Und Schatten der Erde?  
Die Mauern stehn  
Sprachlos und kalt, im Winde  
Klirren die Fahnen.

The comparison between the sadness of growing old and the passing of spring and summer is also made in the following four lines:

Das Angenehme dieser Welt hab ich genossen,  
Die Jugendstunden sind, wie lang! wie lang! verflossen,  
April und Mai und Julius sind ferne,  
Ich bin nichts mehr, ich lebe nicht mehr gerne. (p. 376)

The resentment about the loss of physical strength and beauty have rarely been put into words as forcefully as by the aestheticist Oscar Wilde in *The picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde holds the change of seasons against the condition of man; for him there is no new spring.

The common hill-flowers wither, but they blossom again. The laburnum will be as yellow next June as it is now. In a month there will be purple stars on the clematis, and year after year the green night of its leaves will hold its purple stars. But we never get back our youth. The pulse of joy that beats in us at twenty, becomes sluggish. Our limbs fail, our senses rot. We degenerate into hideous puppets, haunted by the memory of the passion of which we were too much afraid, and the exquisite temptations that we had not the courage to yield to. Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth! (Wilde 1948: 45–46).

Wilde wrote a new version of the Faust legend. Dorian Gray sells his soul to the devil, not to acquire knowledge and science, but to keep his youthful beauty.

Anthropologists and other social scientists have added their voice to art and literature to bring into focus the Western deception with old age. If life is seen as movement, then the fear of declining mobility among elderly people is understandable. Thornton (1993), who did participatory research in ‘Mobility and Movements Groups’ in Britain, describes the members’ obsession with health and staying mobile. ‘Healthism’ becomes an escape route away from old age (*and* a new prison, according to the author).

The old body full of wrinkles, scars and defects becomes the almost proverbial symbol of the negatively perceived old age. The scars and wrinkles admired in old trees and ancient furniture and buildings, frighten the members of a society, which has sanctified youthfulness in human beings. Pictures of naked old bodies evoke shock and repulsion. Woodward (1991) describes such reactions during a display of a photo of a naked old man in the USA. Leder (1990) has come up with a new term, the old body not only disappears (to prevent it from hurting aesthetic and moral taste), it also ‘dys-appears’; “its presence is felt as pain, disease and dysfunction” (Hepworth 2000: 46).

The decrepitude of old age is most vividly experienced in the growing number of people suffering from dementia. Dementia, Cohen-Mansfield et al. (2000: 381) write, “... destroys the brain and confuses the mind; it disintegrates the self and degrades one’s dignity and soul. Sufferers of dementia de-

scribe the disease as a frightening shadow which sneaks upon them and steals potions of their memories, dreams and selves.” They then picture the impact of dementia on a person in the following fragment of a diary by a sufferer of the disease:

No theory of medicine can explain what is happening to me. Every few months I sense that another piece of me is missing. My life ... my self ... are falling apart. I can only think half thoughts now. Someday I may wake up and not think at all, not know who I am. Most people expect to die someday, but whoever expected to lose their self first? (Cohen-Mansfield et al. 2000: 382).

All symptoms of old age’s disgrace described so far can be captured in the cyclical perspective on ageing. Growing old is seen as a return to the point of departure, babyhood, with infantilisation as its result. In that belittling view of old age the older person is reduced to the status of a small child. He is fully dependent on others, his movements are restricted and watched, he has no access to ‘dangerous’ objects such as sharp knives, matches, and the gas tap, he has to be spoon-fed, he needs help going to the toilet and may lose control over his bowels, he is not supposed to take an interest in sex and he is talked to as a child. Hockey and James (1995: 30–31) cite several authors who discuss infantilisation of elderly people. One of them, Gresham (1976: 205), who did research in a nursing home, noted the following ‘children’s talk’ by nurses:

An elderly woman (age 82), who has just finished her breakfast, which was fed to her by a practical nurse, gets a patronising pat on the arm from the nurse, who says: “Good girl, you ate all your breakfast.”

Infantilisation, Hockey and James (1995: 32) remark, is “more disabling than the biological fact of growing old.” Biggs et al. (1995: 84) rate infantilisation as one of the most debilitating forms of age discrimination and so does Kayser-Jones (1981) in her study of aged care in Scotland and the USA. All the tarnishing texts in my own culture drove me to look for a more cheerful view of growing old. Where could I find more positive valuations of old age?

## Graceful ageing

My fieldwork among older people in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town of Southern Ghana, brought me into contact with an entirely different view of old age. To understand that difference, I first need to explain some local conditions and terminologies. People in Kwahu-Tafo call themselves Kwahu, which is a sub-

group of the about ten million Akan living in Ghana. The language of the Akan, which has several dialects or sub-languages, is Twi.

The most common – and probably only adequate – Twi term for ‘old’ when we refer to human beings is the verb *nyin*, which means ‘to grow’. The correct Twi translation of the English ‘I am old’ is *manyin* (‘I have grown’). Where in English, and most (all?) other European languages, we use an adjective to indicate the status of being old, the Akan prefer a verb. This is not just a linguistic particularity; it expresses the quality of the experience of being old. *Nyin* indicates a process and suggests a linear type of development: growing, increasing in size (whatever type of ‘size’ is relevant for that process of development). A child can say *manyin*, if it has ‘grown’ in comparison to a previous period or to another child. It can also be said of an adolescent, a middle-aged person and finally of an elder: *wanyin* (he/she has grown). When my Kwahu friends spoke English to me, they did not refer to anyone as ‘being old’. Their standard English term was indeed: ‘He has grown.’ One of my friends used the term ‘grown-up’ referring to an old person in a transcription. Reluctantly I ‘corrected’ that beautiful idiom into mainstream English to prevent misunderstanding by non-Akan readers.

The verb *nyin* can be used for any being that ‘lives’ and therefore has the potential of ‘growing’: It is applied to humans, animals, trees, plants and fruits. Because ‘growing’ is conceived as a linear process, *nyin* basically is a positive concept. It implies accumulation, getting more of what the person/animal/ tree is supposed to acquire because of its nature. As such the English term ‘to grow’ is a perfect equivalent; it also implies a positive development. Only when the adjective ‘old’ is appended to it does the term ‘growing’ lose some of its positive quality in English.

One day I took part in a discussion with three older men about ageing. I asked them what they regarded as the happiest time of their life. The ‘leader’ of the three pointed at his present situation because, as he said, his joy at old age was the most complete. His reaction was not unique. Many elderly people expressed satisfaction about being old, in spite of possible limitations, poverty and poor health.

The most common term for an older person, *ɔpanyin*, is at the same time an honorific title expressing admiration and affection. The *ɔpanyin* is honourable, civilised, kind, composed, and wise. Countless proverbs and local sayings confirm this high appreciation of advanced age. The *ɔpanyin* represents the beautiful image of old age. He, or she, receives what is most highly regarded in Akan culture: respect. An *ɔpanyin* can be a man or a woman, though most will think of a man when the word is used. An *ɔpanyin* is an ‘ancestor-to-be’; people will

remember him after his death because of his good deeds and wisdom (van der Geest 1998). One elder said:

The *ɔpanyin* has lived in the house much longer than you. You came to meet him. ‘*ɔpanyin*’ is a big word. He is a person who knows what is going on. He must receive respect and obedience. I asked him what shows that a person is an *ɔpanyin*. He answered: “It is mostly the wisdom he gives to the young and also how he respects himself. When you respect yourself, the young will also respect you and fulfil your needs.”

Such statements expressed more the norm than the actual practice in young-old interaction. As a matter of fact, most of my conversations with older people resulted in wishful thinking about respect and the beauty of old age. There are mainly three virtues of the *ɔpanyin*, they said, which deserve him respect: wisdom, self-restraint and his dedication to the family. The virtue of wisdom, knowledge, life experience and the ability to foresee what is going to happen and to give people advice are the special qualities of old men and women. The fact that one has lived for a long time means that one has seen a lot of things and has begun to see how they are connected. Life experience, in other words, teaches how the events follow one another. The *ɔpanyin* is, on the basis of that understanding, able to predict the future and advise people on how to act in order to prevent trouble. One of the elders said: “If you are old, you can always predict, because you have experience.” When I (S) asked him to define an *ɔpanyin*, he (F) said:

F. An *ɔpanyin* is someone who through his experience in life, has gained a lot of wisdom and knows what is good and what is not good.

S. What are some of the qualities of an *ɔpanyin* which may not be present in a young person?

F. It is wisdom, especially the ability to think carefully about things before doing them. The young don't have those qualities they just get up and do things.

The wisdom of the elder is referred to in a large number of proverbs, one of them being: *ɔpanyin nni biribi a, ɔwɔ abatwe* (If the elder has nothing, he has elbow). It means that even if an *ɔpanyin* is very poor, he has at least wisdom.<sup>3</sup>

Wisdom, the ability to foresee, implies power. An elderly person can bless (*nhyira*) and curse (*nnome*). That is why they say: *ɔpanyin ano sen ɔbosom* (The mouth of the *ɔpanyin* is stronger than a god). In a discussion with some young men, one of them said:

We think that the old have a certain blessing because of their mere age, so when you respect and honour them they will bless you. It will be forever on your life. In much the

3 Elsewhere (van der Geest 1995) I have discussed how the elbow became a metonym of old age and wisdom.

same way, when they curse you, it will also be forever. We all like blessings, so if you respect and honour them and get closer to them, they develop a love for you and they will reveal to you some of their hidden treasures.

The second virtue refers to the good manners of the *ɔpanyin*, which all boil down to self-restraint. He controls his emotions, he does not get angry (*ɔpanyin bo mfu*) and does not shout at people. The ability to hold himself in check is manifested primarily in the way he deals with information that is given to him and in his ascetic attitude. His careful dealing with rumours is expressed in many proverbs. Nothing will betray that you are still a child so quickly as when you cannot hold your tongue. Indeed, the *ɔpanyin* is the antithesis of a child.

The *ɔpanyin*'s self-restraint also reveals itself in his attitude towards food and other material pleasures. Greediness does not befit him. One proverb says: *ɔpanyin mene nsono* (The elder eats his own intestines), which means that he can go without food. If there is not enough food in the house, the *ɔpanyin* will give his part to the children. He has eaten enough in his life.

The *ɔpanyin*'s third virtue is his love for the family (*abusua*). His gentleness and wisdom are directed first of all to the *abusua*. It is the *abusua*, which benefits from the *ɔpanyin*'s life experience and civilised manners. He may have travelled a lot, but at his old age, when he reaches the stage of *ɔpanyin*, he will come home and spend his days with the members of the family. He will give them good advice on all kinds of problems and promote peace and unity among them. He will mediate in conflicts. "There is nothing left for him to do than guarding the people in the house", according to one elder. Another elder put it in a proverbial way:

A proverb is given on this: *Akwakora ntena efie mma asadua mfo* ('An old man stays at home to prevent the coffee or cocoa beans from becoming wet'). You are old in the house and beans have been spread out in the sun to dry. If it starts raining, you the old man in the house have to go and collect the beans to prevent them from getting wet. If you don't do anything and the beans get wet, it means that you are not a good person. An old person in the house must gather the grandchildren around him and teach them the tradition. If you don't do that and you die, it means you have thrown away the children. It means that you have allowed property belonging to the family to get lost.

To depend on others at that stage of your life is not a disgrace or a sign of failure, but rather a proof of your importance and success in life. It is not something you consider a loss of control over your own life; it shows that you have built up social capital. As Stucki (1995) has pointed out in her study of older people in Asante, neighbours of the Kwahu, an *ɔpanyin* is someone who has accumulated both wealth and followers. The two are not unconnected: rich people attract relatives and friends. Such successful people enjoy their 'dependence'; their followers lavishly pour care on them when they grow old.

Elsewhere (van der Geest 1998) I have argued that this positive image of old age is more an ideal cherished by the elderly than daily reality. The point, however, is that it is their ideal to grow old in this way. Being old, carrying the signs of old age, having the experience and wisdom of an elder person, being respected and admired because of one's age, staying home and being cared for by children and grandchildren, and receiving visitors who come to pay their respect; all these constitute the attractiveness and gracefulness of old age. Old age is a time to look forward to.

If older people in Dutch society are able to live 'gracefully' and enjoy their old age, it usually is thanks to their denial and defiance of old age. Their happiness lies in the 'fact' that they can stop the ageing process. They do not feel the number of years they actually number and they have people around them who keep assuring that they do not look as old as they are. Their *joie de vivre* is possible thanks to their success in keeping old age outside the door, in not receiving it as a welcome guest. Thus, going on pension can be a pleasure; people may even accelerate that moment and go on 'early retirement'. They are going to enjoy life "before they are old."

### 'Gracefulness' reconsidered

Most of what I wrote up to this point took 'gracefulness' in its popular, somewhat superficial meaning. I was drawn to a very different meaning, however, by a study among 21 older Dutch people about 'successful ageing' by Margaret von Faber (2001). The older people she talked to protested against the popular images of 'success' as being healthy and able-bodied, mobile, independent, and capable of taking care of themselves. Success, they said, was rather the art of accepting the limitations and declines of old age without turning spiteful or sour. Graceful and successful ageing, they continued, was the ability to retain social connections in spite of receding health and mobility. The secret of that ability does not lie in remaining youthful, strong or handsome, but in 'remaining interesting' to others I found that both in Ghana and The Netherlands success depends on three strategies, two of which can be described as rewards of reciprocity.

First, both in Ghana and The Netherlands, a successful life is a matter of investment in others: one's partner, children, other relatives and friends. Old age is the time of harvesting what one has put into life the years before. In Ghana, this is mostly material support and care that is paid back in social and material security at old age. Of course, in that material care lie also emotion and affection. Young and old reassured me that no one who had devoted his life to the

well being of others needed to worry about old age. Those he had cared for would take care of him. Such a person could truthfully say that old age was the best time of his life; it is harvest time: he could now enjoy.

The Dutch situation differs, but only on the surface. Material reciprocity may be less crucial since state pensions and bank accounts have taken over from family security, but the emotional reciprocity is not any less crucial. If loneliness is the main worry for older people in Dutch society, it is – as the older people realise – because they have invested insufficient concern in others during their productive years (cf. van der Veen 1995).

Next to this long-term reciprocity, is the short-term exchange of information, conversation and emotion. Older people, however good they may have been to others in the past, may turn into boring beings who are no longer entertaining. Meeting them and having no interesting information to exchange, kills the pleasure of the encounter and discourages visitors from returning. The secret of remaining interesting, as a partner in conversation, is not to tell stories about the past, but to keep an interest in the present. For older people, the short-term reciprocity during conversation and interaction is achieved more in asking and listening than in speaking. For older people in Ghana, this proved particularly difficult. The popular cliché of successful ageing is the wise elder who gives advice to younger people and treats them on old legends. Ironically however, both in Ghana and The Netherlands young people avoid older people who want to impress them with their stories and fail to listen to them. In contrast, those elders who continue to take an interest in the younger generation are most likely to attract company.

Finally, there is the art of what I called ‘not turning sour’ in spite of the physical, mental and social constraints that old age brings. Von Faber (2001) speaks of accepting these limitations, adjusting to the new situation (see also Baltes & Baltes 1990). There is a Dutch saying that expresses this well: moving the beacons (*de bakens verzetten*). It is the opposite of complaining: not complaining as a strategy, as impression management (cf. van der Geest 2007). It is more than a strategy, however, it is the integration of new experiences into one’s life, a continuous production of meaning (cf. Apostel 1993). Vitality at old age does not refer to bodily strength but to the moral and emotional resilience in that permanent renewal of meaning. This is what I call ‘gracefulness.’

After all, life experience, wisdom, patience, caution, gentleness and reflexivity are the true signs of ‘success.’ They shine through most physical and cognitive handicaps. Significantly, Hölderlin, who wrote so melancholically and bitterly about old age (“*Ich lebe nicht mehr gerne*”), also captured its beauty:

In jüngern Tagen war ich des Morgens froh,  
 Des Abends weint ich; jetzt, da ich älter bin,  
 Beginn ich zweifelnd meinen Tag, doch  
 Heilig und heiter ist mir sein Ende. (Hölderlin 1988: 78)

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