

## GRANDPARENTS AND GRANDCHILDREN IN KWAHU, GHANA: THE PERFORMANCE OF RESPECT

*Sjaak van der Geest*

'Unlucky the house that does not have an old person living in it.'

### INTRODUCTION

This description of relations between grandparents and grandchildren in a Ghanaian community argues that the quality of these relations varies according to age and gender. Literature on African kinship has almost entirely focused on very young grandchildren. This article draws attention to changes that occur when those children grow into adolescents and adults. The second argument is about performance: kinship and relatedness need to be demonstrated in public even when their 'content' has dwindled.

Several young people quoted the proverb used as an epigraph for this article, when I asked them about their views on older people. Their answer confirmed an established truth that an old person is wise and can guide the relatives in the house. I raised the question during research on social and cultural aspects of growing old in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town in southern Ghana.

#### *Fieldwork*

The fieldwork mainly consisted of conversations with about thirty-five older people and their relatives or household members. Some of these conversations were lengthy, others short and casual. I met frequently with some older people, with others only a few times. All conversations, except the very casual ones, were taped, transcribed and translated into English. Only a few were conducted in English. Additional insights were acquired through participant observation, short visits and discussions with young people about the old. Finally, I conducted some research in various schools in Kwahu-Tafo and its surrounding towns involving questionnaires, incomplete sentence tests and drawings of an older person.

#### *The town of Kwahu-Tafo*

Kwahu-Tafo is situated in the Eastern Region and has over 5,000 inhabitants. It is a town like many others in the area, though slightly

---

SJAAK VAN DER GEEST is Professor of Medical Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. He has done fieldwork in Ghana and Cameroon on a variety of subjects including the use and distribution of medicines. His other interests include highlife song texts, the meanings of growing old, and concepts of dirt and defecation.

more impoverished and dilapidated. Its inhabitants as in all Kwahu towns are mobile. They love trading, that is, buying things in one place and retailing them in another, and can be found over the whole country. For people of the older generation, men as well as women, the 'normal' life cycle consisted of growing up in Kwahu-Tafo, then travelling and trading in one of the commercial centres of the country and finally returning to their hometown to settle as a farmer (cf. Bartle 1977). That life cycle is less common nowadays as most people of the younger generation aspire to careers other than trading and farming, but the mobility still prevails.

*Old and young in Kwahu-Tafo*

For young people in Kwahu-Tafo having an old person in the house almost necessarily implies living with a grandparent. A survey among school pupils aged between twelve and eighteen showed that more than two-thirds of them had in fact an older person living in the same house. The percentage may seem high but was lower than I had expected, taking into account that three—if not four—generations constitute the 'natural' composition of a household. There is indeed something unnatural about a house accommodating only two generations.

Children are most likely to live in the same house as their maternal grandmother. Kwahu people, who belong to the matrilineal Akan, prefer to stay on in their maternal home after their marriage, if that is possible. Clearly, that is difficult if the marital partners are from different towns, but it is possible when they are both from Kwahu-Tafo. In that case the woman is most likely to continue staying with her mother and conduct her marital duties from there. It mainly boils down to cooking food for her husband in her mother's house and bringing it—or sending a child to bring it—to her husband in *his* family house. In the night she may go to her husband's room to sleep with him. When a man is able to build his own house or rent a decent apartment, his wife will probably join him, but she dislikes the idea of living with her in-laws. Conversely, for a man it is even more difficult to stay with his wife's relatives in one house. Others will laugh at him and consider him a failure.

The concept of grandparent (*Nana*) is classificatory and children make little or no distinction between their biological and other 'grandparents'. They may even not be aware of the fact that the *Nana* in the house is not their 'real' grandmother but their grandmother's sister or cousin or a more distant relative. For the purpose of this essay I assume that the interactions between first and third generations that I observed and discussed in the households I visited were in fact grandparent-grandchild interactions in the broad sense of the word.

NANA KWAKU AGYEI

Nana Kwaku Agyei was one of the first older people I contacted when I started my fieldwork on old age in 1994. I was walking with a friend when we met him. We greeted him respectfully and he replied with

a request: could we give him some money to buy food? We told him we would come and visit him later in the day to have a conversation. He promised to wait for us and so he did. It was the beginning of a friendship that lasted only one year, till his death in 1995.

Kwaku Agyei was not a successful and highly respected elder. He was poor, to start with. He did not even have a proper place to stay and had begged some people if he could live in an empty room in their house until his nephew had finished the house he was building for him and his sisters. It was a small room in an old and rickety mud house with some of its walls collapsed. Agyei's room contained only a bed and a chair. Some clothes were hanging on big nails in the walls. The blankets on the bed were threadbare and dirty. These blankets, his trousers and long-sleeved shirt were gifts from the Polish Catholic parish priest.

After his death people blamed him for his poverty. They said he had lived carelessly and never become a proper farmer. He had been lazy and had done little for his children. During his active years he had been the town's gong-gong beater, a messenger of the chief whose task was to make announcements, for example on communal labour or special events. For the rest he had been hanging around in the chief's palace hoping to get some money from people visiting the chief for judicial matters. His wife had left him after thirty-two years of marriage because, as she explained to me, he always quarrelled with her. According to him the real reason was that he was poor and unable to support her.

Kwaku Agyei was a witty person, in spite of his misery. His experiences in the chief's court had filled him with wisdom and an impressive knowledge of traditional customs. He was particularly fond of proverbs and when he found out that I enjoyed listening to them he cleverly exploited that knowledge to impress me and my friends. When I asked him for the meaning of a proverb that I had heard or read about, he never was at a loss. I noticed that he readily produced explanations even for proverbs that he had never heard before. One of his (and my) favourite ones was: 'If the old person has nothing, he has elbow' (*Opanyin nni biribi a, owo abatwe*), meaning even if the old person has nothing, he has wisdom. The proverb suited his condition and became some kind of personal motto.<sup>1</sup>

Every night a young girl of about five came to the old man's room and kept him company during the night. She was his granddaughter, his favourite daughter's child, who lived about 500 metres away. The girl also did small errands for her grandfather and emptied his chamber pot in the morning. Agyei affectionately called her *me yere* ('my wife').

My reason for introducing Kwaku Agyei at this stage is that his life in old age and his position as elder and grandparent epitomise several features of grandparents and their relationship with grandchildren that will be discussed further on. His accommodation was unusual but in many other respects he was 'typical' in keeping up the appearance of

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on the various interpretations of this proverb, see Van der Geest (1996).

being an elder who is respected by his grandchildren and admired for his wisdom and knowledge of tradition.

The little girl, 'his wife', was sent by her mother and was not particularly close to the old man. She was just respectful and obedient. I observed Agyei's behaviour towards other grandchildren and found him often peevish and mean to them. One incident I remember particularly well. A small girl was attending him while he was eating. He gave her brusque instructions. The girl politely did everything he told her. When he finished eating he gave her the tiny last bit of the soup. She drank it and then brought him water to drink and wash his hands.

When she put the small piece of soap on the balustrade, he grumbled that she should put it elsewhere. She moved it 30 cm. She dried the floor with a rag and swept it. Kwaku Agyei and his two sisters simultaneously shouted at her: *To wo boase* ('Do calmly'). Apparently she caused too much dust. It suddenly occurred to me that Kwaku Agyei was not the cheerful, gentle and humorous old man he always was to me. I found him rather unkind to others, particularly to children.

I visited Kwaku Agyei about thirty times in the last year of his life, sometimes for a long conversation, which we recorded (and transcribed later on), sometimes just to say hello and have a chat. I never saw any grandchild engaged in a conversation with him. The only person who was interested in his wisdom was I, the anthropologist. I recall one day that we were discussing certain proverbs about old age when a young woman staying in the house came closer to listen to our conversation. We asked her if she had learned any proverbs from the old man and she answered in the negative. Agyei confirmed her answer and added: 'She will not learn proverbs because the proverbs will not earn her any money.' It was an indirect conclusion that young people were no longer interested in the wisdom of their grandparents, because it did not contain anything 'useful' for them.

Kwaku Agyei is the main character in an essay I wrote about the concept of *panyin* ('elder') in Kwahu society (Van der Geest 1998). There I argued that his love for proverbs which extolled the virtues of the old person was a way of keeping up his faith in the beauty of old age, while knowing that it had already lost most of its charm, certainly in the eyes of the third generation.

#### TERMS AND CLICHÉS

*Nana* (plural: *nananom*) is the term for grandparent, whether grandmother or grandfather, whether maternal or paternal. The term, as I have already indicated, is used for any other relative of the same generation as the grandparents. The term is reciprocal: grandparents call their grandchildren *nana* as well (but pronounced slightly differently). Ancestors are also addressed by the term *nana*, for example when pouring libation.<sup>2</sup> Finally, *nana* is an honorific term, a title of respect one

<sup>2</sup> For a description of the Akan libation ritual, see Adjaye (2001).

could use for any older or important person, particularly for the chief and the members of his council.

When one asks anyone how grandparents and grandchildren relate to each other, one is likely to get the answer that their relationship is extremely warm and positive. In the classic functionalist collection *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (Radcliffe-Browne and Forde 1950), Fortes wrote a contribution about kinship and marriage in Asante society, which is very close—geographically and culturally—to Kwahu. His remarks of half a century ago could still count as today's stereotype:

The grandparents ... on both sides are the most honoured of all one's kinfolk. Their position and status are of very great importance in the social system... The maternal grandmother ... is the guardian of morals and of harmony in the household... It is from the grandparents of both sexes that children learn family history, folklore, proverbs and other traditional lore... The grandparents ... are looked up to with reverence, not only as the repositories of ancient wisdom but also as symbols of the continuity of descent. [Fortes 1950: 276]

My friend and co-researcher Obeng Boamah also stressed the close relationship between grandchildren and grandparents:

Some children like staying with their grandparents because they are more sympathetic, patient and caring. They may give them more food than they would enjoy from the cooking pot of their mother. They are freer when they stay with their grandparents.

There are also disadvantages, however, as Boamah remarked: 'The children may be less well trained [as they will be spoiled]. They may not perform household duties as well [as children staying with their parents].' And finally the old stereotype: 'Children learn culture and tradition from their grandparents. Grandparents show them the boundary of the farm.<sup>3</sup> Some may give their grandchildren money of gold dust and tell them stories and proverbs.'

My fieldwork in Kwahu-Tafo enabled me to look critically at the rosy accounts of the close relationship between grandparents and grandchildren. I will do so by examining both the attitudes and actions of the grandparents and those of the grandchildren, but first we shall sketch how older people see themselves vis-à-vis the young and how members of the young generation look upon their grandparents.

#### HOW DO GRANDPARENTS SEE THEMSELVES?

My conversations with older people were of two kinds. One kind focused on the pains and worries of growing old: poor health, poverty,

<sup>3</sup> This remark is derived from a proverb that indicates that only the old people know the boundaries of the farm. So, if one does not accompany the old people to the farm, one may later on be cheated by neighbours who will take some of the family land away.

loneliness, boredom, lack of care, lack of respect, loss of friends. The other type emphasised the pleasure and beauty of old age: being old was in itself a positive achievement; it entailed an accumulation of life experience and good manners which engendered respect and affection in children and grandchildren. The first type can largely be interpreted as an indirect critique of others who made them suffer, the second as self-praise. For a self-portrait of older people we should therefore focus on the second type of conversations.

There are four terms in Twi which are commonly used for people of old age. In the case of a man these terms are: *panyin*, *akokora*, *akokora pɔsɔpɔsɔ* and *nana*. For a woman these are: *ɔbaa pinyin*, *aberewa*, *aberewa pɔsɔpɔsɔ* and *nana*. The old people themselves prefer the first term. An *panyin*—or for that matter *ɔbaa panyin*—is an older person who is still vital in mind and, to a certain extent, body. The term can best be translated as 'elder', which implies seniority and has the connotation of wisdom and social importance. *Akokora* or *aberewa* is more associated with bodily—and mental—weakness as a result of advanced age and this association is even more explicit if the adjective *pɔsɔpɔsɔ* ('shaky', 'infirm') is added. *Nana*, as we have seen, is again a very positive word, mostly used as a term of address, expressing respect. When I asked an old man what shows that someone is *panyin*, he replied:

You can see it in the wisdom he passes on to the young and in the way he respects himself. If you respect yourself, the young will also respect you and give you everything you need. . . An *panyin* does not drink, behaves well and shows respect to the young.

The proverbs that we discussed in our conversations implied many positive qualities of older people. The most important one was their wisdom and life experience, which enabled them to predict the future and advise younger people. The fact that one has lived for a long time implies that one has seen a lot of things and understands how they are related, why one event follows another. This wisdom enables the old person to foresee misfortune and tell people how they can prevent it from happening. When I asked one of the older people what marked the difference between them and young people, he answered: 'Wisdom, the capacity to think before acting. Young people just begin to act without thinking.' That wisdom and capacity to look ahead endows the old person also with power. That is why a proverb says *ɔpanyin ano sen ɔbosom* ('The mouth of an elder is stronger than god').

The *panyin* also has good manners that are rooted in self-restraint. He is in control of his emotions, he does not become angry and does not shout at people. His self-discipline also shows in his attitude to food, drink, sex and other physical pleasures. Gluttony and greediness do no benefit an older person. One elder said: 'If there is not enough food in the house, the *panyin* gives his portion to the children.' Another added:

We have a proverb, *ɔpanyin yam adwansae aduasa* ['There are thirty sheep in the stomach of the *panyin*']. You know it is your food but that child has nothing to eat. You tell him he can eat it. I can chew kola and get satisfied.

The *panyin* has lived his life, he has eaten so much in this world. All he needs to do now is to look after his people in the house.

Wisdom, caution, discipline and altruism are the main virtues of the older people (in their own eyes). These virtues are kept together by their dedication to the family (*abusua*). The *panyin* is concerned about only one thing: the well-being of the *abusua*. His life is drawing to an end and soon he will join the ancestors. There is no reason to worry about material things. Only his children and grandchildren count. One old man explained:

An *panyin* should not travel or go and live somewhere else. He should stay at home and offer advice to the young. If there is a conflict in the house, he will reconcile the two parties. If an *panyin* goes to travel and live somewhere else, people will criticise him and call him a bad *panyin* [*panyin bofoɔ*]. It is the duty of an *panyin* to stay at home, advise relatives and re-establish peace.

The well-being of the *abusua* is the touchstone of everything the *panyin* undertakes. Whatever he does, if it benefits the family, it is good. If it does not, he will be criticised. His wisdom is meant for the *abusua*. His refusal to entertain gossip holds the family together. His unselfishness and patience are an example for others in the house.

Of course, the older people know this is an idealistic picture, but they believe in the ideal. They *have* lived long and dispose of a considerable amount of experience, so they are entitled to the respect and attention of their children and grandchildren.

#### HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE VIEW THEIR GRANDPARENTS?

Interestingly, young people confirmed the positive view of the older people about their own qualities. One of the most remarkable 'proofs' of that positive view I experienced during a few discussions with young men aged around eighteen. I asked them what they meant when they said—as they had been doing—that they respected older people. One of them answered:

The meaning of the respect we have for the old is that the old are far more advanced in years than we. So, when you get nearer to them and respect them, they will reveal to you how they got to that age and they will tell you traditions and customs that will enable you also to reach that age.

Another young informant remarked:

The meaning of respect is getting nearer to the old and giving them the necessary honour. Moreover, we think that the aged have a certain blessing because of their mere age, and so when you respect and honour them and

they bless you, it will be forever on your life. In much the same way, when they curse you, it will also be forever.

I asked them how they showed their respect and invited them to give concrete examples of respectful behaviour in their own house. One of them said:

It is something that we the Akan have done over the years and which has come to stay. White men have a different lifestyle. I have some relatives who were born and bred in Canada and came back home recently. When they are engaged in a work and you call them, they will not mind you because they want to use their time according to their personal plans without interruption. But Akan are not like this. Even when you are asleep and an old person calls you, you cannot ignore him. Whether you like it or not, you have to wake up and attend to his call. Respect is our tradition. If you are not obeying that tradition, they will call you a bad child. Every child should show respect, especially to the old people in the house. In my own house, I have two old persons. One of them called us today, and asked us whether we know we are his grandchildren and so every morning, when we wake up from bed, the first thing we have to do is to come to his room, greet him, ask his condition of life. In case something is worrying him, we will be the first to know this. If we didn't do all these things, it would not be good.

Another performance of respect was presented during a 'test' of uncompleted sentences which school pupils (mainly male) in Kwahu-Tafo and two nearby places filled in for me. One sentence started with: 'My grandfather. . . ' Out of eighty-three entries (some multiple), only two made a (partly) negative remark, six referred to the old man's physical weakness, five mentioned his need of help, the same number made a remark about being in need of help approaching death, and one said he resembled a child. All other entries were either neutral (for example, simply revealing his name) or positive: giving advice (6), telling stories (6), helping others in the house (8), still working hard (10) and references to respect and kindness. A few examples (slightly corrected for English language) illustrate their views:

My grandfather is very good because he taught me how to be a good child in any way. [Male, 17 years, no. 9]

My grandfather is a person who knows things about the past. So anytime my grandfather visits us, it is a great day for me because he tells me stories about the past and advises me on certain behaviours. [Male, 16 years, no. 91]

My grandfather is a very old person in my house and head of the family. He is very popular in the community for the good work he has done for the people living in the community. [Male, 19 years, no. 140]

One respondent was more ambivalent:

My grandfather was . . . [unclear] . . . a hardworking farmer. During his lifetime he worked hard to reach the demands of the whole family and loved everybody. The only thing, which I disliked about him was that he smoked



and drank alcoholic drinks which was against the Bible. He also appreciated material things. [Male, 17 years, no. 60]

The role of adviser and helper was still more strongly expressed in sentences starting with 'My grandmother ...'. Out of 79 entries, 13 mentioned her good advice, 10 her story-telling, 11 her kindness, 6 her help to others in the house and 4 the fact that she was still working very hard. A few examples (English slightly corrected):

My grandmother is good for me because she told me about the past and taught me important things. [Female, 17 years, no. 236]

My grandmother told me not to make friends who will lead me into disaster. But I paid no heed to what she said and my life ended in disaster. [Male, 20 years, no. 172]

My grandmother loves her grandchildren, especially me. She likes telling me stories and sometimes gives me money for food. She likes calling my name because I am her youngest grandchild. [Male, 18 years, no. 116]

My grandmother is the best woman I have ever seen. She is kind and generous. She cares very much for me, especially during my mother's absence. She also advises me and used to tell me old tales. I always love her. [Male, 17 years, no. 85]

The contrast between these professions of affection and communication between young people and their grandparents and my daily observations was remarkable. These young people in their late teens assured me that they benefited from the presence of older persons in the house. They said they enjoyed their stories about the past and their knowledge of traditional lore and listened to their advice on important issues in life. When I asked them about specific meetings and conversations with grandparents, I soon found out that they did not occur. During my frequent visits to older people I had the same experience: I never saw a young person of the age of my informants involved in a conversation with an older person in the house. The older people confirmed this: their grandchildren did not come to them for any kind of advice. It was only small children below the age of ten who could be seen in the company of their grandparents talking to them.

The accounts of the adolescents should not be disregarded as false information, however. They should be taken seriously, not as reliable reports about what actually happens, but as demonstrations of the respect that youngsters owe their grandparents. If they uttered phrases of ideal behaviour—or referred to their behaviour of ten years ago—it was because that was the way they should speak about older people. It was a way of showing respect, courteousness, and politeness. The contrast between publicly expressed respect and privately held indifference or even resentment, led me to examine the mechanics of respect and reciprocity in the context of the family.

## THE MECHANICS OF RESPECT AND RECIPROCITY

In her introduction to a recent collection of essays on kinship Janet Carsten (2000) suggests the concept of relatedness. Taking her inspiration from the work of David Schneider she wants to rekindle the interest in kinship among anthropologists by linking it to discussions on the cultural meaning of 'nature' or 'biology'. Biology, blood relationship, provides the primary mode of expressing connection. Apart from its symbolic efficacy, 'blood' stands for 'first contact', the first sharing of food and body fluids. Kinship is the first social ordering in which people find themselves and is therefore an important determinant of a sense of 'belonging'. But the ordering itself is not enough; it is a space which needs to be filled by tangible signs of relatedness: giving and receiving, mutual dependence, reciprocal exchanges concerning material, cognitive and emotional matters. If practical reciprocity does not enter the domain of kinship, relatedness remains void and shrivels. Kinship needs to be practiced in solidarity, mutual assistance. If this does not happen, relatedness will seek its way outside the circle of blood relations.

To have something in common forms the basis of relatedness. Sharing and exchanging goods, services, emotions, reproduction and meaning, constitute the 'stuff' out of which kinship relations are made. The family stands as a model of fertile reciprocity. It is often used, therefore, as a metaphor for other groups in which people practice reciprocity in a gratifying manner: associations, religious groups, and even the state.

Carsten quotes Marilyn Strathern who calls kinship 'the social recognition of the actual facts of biological relatedness' (Strathern 1995: 222, quoted in Carsten 2000: 9). I accept that way of putting it, but want to emphasise that biological relatedness only becomes relatedness in the true sense of the word if it develops social and cultural values for sharing. That is why I prefer to see blood relationship as the first and most directly available opportunity for exchange of the things that people need in life. We may call it the first invitation to reciprocity. Kinship is the naturalisation of relatedness. But if the reciprocity leaks away, kinship becomes an atrophy or at best a memory.

It is time I expounded the concept of reciprocity. It is one of those concepts that are so fundamental to social and cultural life that they refract from attempts to define them. Gouldner (1996: 47 f.) presents a list of renowned social scientists (Simmel, Hobhouse, and Becker, to mention a few) who viewed reciprocity as the basis of all forms of social organisation, but failed to define it. The most enlightening and comprehensive discussion of reciprocity is probably *The Gift: an interdisciplinary perspective* (Komter 1996). The contributions are from anthropologists, sociologists, social psychologists and economists.

All authors in Aafke Komter's interdisciplinary collection of readings on reciprocity emphasise that human relations and interactions derive form and substance from the game of giving and receiving. Early anthropologists stressed that this exchange of objects and services brought about a moral community. Others, Bourdieu for example,

pointed out the symbolic meaning of reciprocity: people express who they are in the presents and care they give to each other. Some hold the view that reciprocity entails a careful calculation and should be understood as self-interest, either short or long term. Others stress its unselfish character: people give without calculation; they sacrifice themselves without asking a reward.

Following these different accents Komter distinguishes four types of human actors: *homo moralis*, *homo symbolicus*, *homo economicus*, and *homo generosus*. These distinctions suggest too much difference, however. There is a subtle economy in generosity. The mother who takes care of her sick child, acts spontaneously, without any calculation, but she does get a reward: the child's gratitude. Moreover, she has created a moral fact that will move the child to look after its mother when she needs it. Obviously, symbolic expressions of belonging, affection and family identity work alongside this exchange of care. These different and complementary perspectives show that reciprocity can assume various forms and meanings but remain the basis *and* content of human relations. Every communication and interaction should be understood as a form of reciprocity. The statement is close to tautological; without reciprocity it would not be communication or interaction.

How does this relate to the theme of this paper? My point is that the reciprocity between grandparents and grandchildren in Kwahu-Tafo is slowly 'drying up' and that this process is not well understood by anthropologists. That the crumbling of reciprocity between grandparents and grandchildren has been overlooked in studies of old age in Africa is mainly due to the fact that students only had eyes for very young grandchildren. The relatively few studies of grandparent-grandchild relationships have indeed focused on situations where the degree of reciprocity is very high, that is when grandchildren are small and in need of the things that grandparents have in abundance: attention, love, tenderness. Conversely young grandchildren provide their grandparents with opportunities to redo their past lives and enjoy the pleasures of children for whom they may not have had the time and maturity when they were young parents.

If, however, we focus our attention on the relationship between grown-up grandchildren and their—still older—grandparents, we are likely to view a very different situation. The blood relationship is there, but its reciprocal contents, emotions, life experience, communication, may have leaked away. The wisdom of the grandparents may no longer have relevance to the young generation. Their knowledge regarding farming, medicinal herbs, traditional customs, stories of the past and ancestors has grown obsolete in the eyes of the young. The new generation needs other types of knowledge to survive and become successful in life: school education, knowledge of how to contact the right person to acquire a job or a visa to go abroad. Grandparents have little in common with their grown-up grandchildren and exchange of information decreases. Reciprocity becomes redundant and dwindles to the performance of respect.

Am I too rigid in my reading of reciprocity? Is the relative uninterest of teenagers and older adolescents in their grandparents not a 'normal' phenomenon and, moreover, very widespread? Is it not a temporary phase which will pass when the grandchildren get children themselves and have topics and things (children) to share with their grandparents? And do they, during that period of low tide, not have memories of their childhood in which grandparents played a central role? Should we conclude that there is 'nothing' between grandchildren and grandparents if we do not *observe* communication and shared activities between them?

Elders complained to me that their grandchildren did not come to them. Do I perhaps take that complaint too seriously? Have older people not always been saying that the young do not listen to them? Cattell (1994, 1997) describes the growing gap between grandmothers and granddaughters in Kenya, and Møller and Sotshongaye (2002) write about the loss of respect felt by grandmothers in South Africa. Both articles place their observations in the framework of 'complaint discourse'. That is what older people normally do: complain (see Sagner 2002). Elsewhere in this issue, Benedicte Ingstad's quote from Schapera (1940: 265 f.) shows the same complaint about lack of respect in the 1930s. Young people, for their part, have always been saying that life has changed and that the old do not understand the new facts of life. So, why not treat their words as styles of generational parlance instead of factual information?

These are hard questions I put to myself. Answering them will necessarily contain some speculation. I do indeed think that men in particular are witnessing changes that are far more profound than those reported in the 1930s, 1950s and 1970s. Fewer young men than ever before follow in the footsteps of their fathers, let alone their grandfathers. Practical reciprocity that implies discussing relevant matters of life will continue to decline in their case. In the case of granddaughters, however, there may be more overlap in interests with their mothers and grandmothers. When they move into motherhood and have children of their own, this will bring new 'stuff' to fill the relation with their grandmothers. Moreover, grandmothers usually played a greater role in the childhood years of their grandchildren than grandfathers. Reviving memories and reactivating long-term reciprocity will focus first of all on grandmothers.

Politeness and good manners is what is left over of the warm and busy reciprocity that characterised the relationship between small grandchildren and their grandfathers. This type of respect serves its purpose: it enables the older men to keep faith in their own excellence and protects the young against public criticism and the dangers of cursing and witchcraft which the old may use to hurt them. Indeed, a large part of my fieldwork data were demonstrations of respect which were designed to keep up the ideal picture of the wise and celebrated grandparents who, in Fortes' words, 'are looked up to with reverence ... as the repositories of ancient wisdom' (1950: 276).

Respect, one could say, is a compromise, a strategy to deal with the disappearance of practical reciprocity. It is a strategy because it allows both generations to retain their dignity and—to some extent—their relatedness. Behind that appearance of mutual respect, however, resentment and loneliness may lie, as I have described elsewhere (Van der Geest 2002, 2004). I am not suggesting that reciprocal activities are 'real' while respect is some kind of fake façade. I do not see a split between ideology and actual practice. Performing respect in speaking is as much an activity as practising it in sharing a meal, giving money or asking advice. The point, however, is that the older people make distinctions between the 'doing' of respect and other forms of communication and reciprocity. It is the absence of communication (advice, family history, traditional wisdom) that worries them.

One of the elders in Kwahu-Tafo remarked that there was no greater happiness for him than a young person who would come to him and ask a question. The implication is clear: the fact that young people do not come to listen to their stories and advice constitutes their main doubt about the quality of their relatedness.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research for this paper was carried out with the help of many people. Most prominent was the assistance given by my Ghanaian co-researchers Kwame Fosu, Samuel Sarkodie, Patrick Aduobi and Anthony Obeng Boamah. Benjamin Boadi and Yaw Darko Ansah typed most of the research material. I am also indebted to Kofi Ron Lange, Sera Young, Geertje van der Geest, Erdmute Alber, Wenzel Geissler and Susan Reynolds Whyte for various kinds of support. Last, but not least, I would like to thank the old people who shared their knowledge and concerns with me and the young who expressed to me their respect for their grandparents.

#### REFERENCES

- Adjaye, J. K. 2001. 'The performativity of Akan libations: an ethnopoetic construction of reality', *Ghana Studies* 4: 107–138.
- Apt, N. A. 1996. *Coping with Old Age in a Changing Africa: social change and the elderly Ghanaian*. Aldershot: Avebury.
- Bartle, P. 1977. 'Urban Migration and Rural Identity: an ethnography of a Kwawu community'. Ph.D. thesis. Legon: University of Ghana.
- Carsten, J. 2000. 'Introduction: cultures of relatedness', in J. Carsten (ed.), *Cultures of Relatedness: new approaches to the study of kinship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cattell, M. G. 1994. "'Nowadays it isn't easy to advise the young": grandmothers and granddaughters among Abaluyia of Kenya', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 9 (2): 157–78.
- 1997. 'The discourse of neglect: family support for the elderly in Samia', in T. S. Weisner, C. Bradley, and P. L. Kilbride (eds), *African Families and the Crisis of Social Change*. Westport CT and London: Bergin & Garvey.
- Fortes, M. 1950. 'Kinship and marriage among the Ashanti', in A. R. Radcliffe-Browne and D. Forde (eds), *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*. London: Oxford University Press, for the International African Institute.

- Gouldner, A. W. 1996. 'The norm of reciprocity: a preliminary statement', in A. E. Komter (ed.), *The Gift: an interdisciplinary perspective*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Komter, A. E. 1996. 'Introduction', in A. E. Komter (ed.), *The Gift: an interdisciplinary perspective*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Møller, V., and A. Sotshongaye. 2002. "'They don't listen": contemporary respect relations between Zulu grandmothers and grandchildren', in S. Makoni and K. Stroeken (eds), *Ageing in Africa: sociolinguistic and anthropological approaches*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Radcliffe-Browne, A. R., and D. Forde (eds). 1950. *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*. London: Oxford University Press, for the International African Institute.
- Sagner, A. 2002. 'Identity management and old age construction among Xhosa-speakers in urban South Africa: complaint discourse revisited', in S. Makoni and K. Stroeken (eds), *Ageing in Africa: sociolinguistic and anthropological approaches*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Schapera, I. 1940. *Married Life in an African Tribe*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Strathern, M. 1995. *The Relation: issues in complexity and scale*. Prickly Pear Pamphlet no. 6. Cambridge: Prickly Pear Press.
- Van der Geest, S. 1996. 'The elder and his elbow: twelve interpretations of an Akan proverb', *Research in African Literatures* 27 (3): 110-18.
- 1998. 'Opanyin: the ideal of elder in the Akan culture of Ghana', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 32 (3): 449-93.
- 2002. 'From wisdom to witchcraft: ambivalence towards old age in rural Ghana', *Africa* 72 (3): 437-63.
- 2004. "'They don't come to listen": the experience of loneliness among older people in Kwahu, Ghana', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 19 (2).

#### ABSTRACT

This description of relations between grandparents and grandchildren in a rural Ghanaian community argues that the quality of these relations varies according to age and gender. Literature on African kinship has almost entirely focused on very young grandchildren. This article draws attention to changes that occur when those children grow into adolescents and adults. Grandchildren—both young and old—speak respectfully about their grandparents, but older people regret that their grandchildren do not come to them for advice once they have grown up. Older men seem more 'neglected' by their grandchildren than older women. The second argument is about performance: respect, affection and relatedness between grandparents and grandchildren are demonstrated in public even when their 'contents' have dwindled. The article is based on anthropological fieldwork over a period of almost ten years.

#### RÉSUMÉ

Cette description des relations entre grands-parents et petits-enfants dans une communauté rurale ghanéenne montre que la qualité de ces relations varie selon l'âge et le sexe. La littérature consacrée à la parenté africaine s'est presque exclusivement intéressée aux petits-enfants en bas âge. Cet article attire l'attention sur les changements qui surviennent lorsque ces enfants deviennent adolescents et adultes. Les petits-enfants, jeunes et vieux, parlent respectueusement de leurs grands-parents, mais les personnes âgées regrettent que leurs petits-enfants, une fois adultes, ne viennent plus leur demander

conseil. Les hommes âgés semblent plus «négligés» par leurs petits-enfants que les femmes âgées. Le second argument concerne la conduite : respect, affection et parenté entre grands-parents et petits-enfants se manifestent en public même lorsque leur «contenu» s'est réduit. L'article repose sur des études anthropologiques de terrain qui se sont déroulées sur une période de près de dix ans.

Copyright of Africa is the property of Edinburgh University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.