



“They don’t come to listen”: The experience of loneliness among older people in Kwahu, Ghana

(In memory of ɔpanyin¹ Kwadwo Gyima)

SJAAK VAN DER GEEST

Medical Anthropology Unit, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract. This article describes life conditions of elderly people in a rural community of Ghana. It deals with the paradoxical situation of elderly people who are still engaged in social activities and yet experience loneliness. It is argued that in spite of the respect given to them, elderly people are denied what they regard as the most valuable proof of respect and companionship: listening to their wisdom and advice. Their loss of that ultimate respect constitutes an experience of loneliness. The article is part of broader anthropological study on social and cultural meanings of growing old in a rural Ghanaian community.

Keywords: loneliness, companionship, respect, wisdom, elderly, Kwahu, Ghana.

Popular beliefs in the industrialised societies of Europe and North America have it that elderly people in the “developing” world are better off than their “Western” contemporaries. That positive image of life at old age refers in particular to the idea that people in those countries retain—even increase—their social importance when they grow old. It is significant that this romanticisation points to an aspect of old age which in the European context is felt as painfully lacking: social integration, the ability to keep in touch with others. The belief appears to be a projection of unfulfilled wishes in European society.

Interestingly, African and Asian visitors to my own country, the Netherlands, tend to confirm that idealised picture of their own elders by expressing shock and disdain at the social isolation of the elderly in my society. The implication of their reaction is that the condition of elderly people in their own society is very different (and for the better).

In an interdisciplinary research on successful ageing among very old people (85 and above) in the city of Leiden in the Netherlands, loss of social contacts was regarded as the clearest indication of unsuccessful aging. Of course, increasing physical and mental impairments caused practical problems and psychological suffering, but were not experienced as real “failures.” Loss of contact with children, other relatives, friends and neighbours, however, was

felt as a personal defeat. The inability to attract others was often—explicitly or implicitly—regarded as the “desserts” for a less than successful life (cf. Von Faber et al. 2001).

This paper is a critical interrogation of the popular romanticisation of old age in other more “humane,” *Gemeinschaft*-like, societies. I will present data from anthropological research in a rural town in Kwahu, Ghana and examine the extent to which it can be said that elderly people in that community continue to enjoy the company, attention and respect of others.

At the same time I will explore what social and cultural conditions can be considered as “equivalent” to what in Western literature is called “loneliness”: “the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person’s network of social relationships is deficient in some important way, either qualitatively or quantitatively” (Perlman 1988: 190). By doing so I will briefly touch upon a loneliness scale which is commonly used among older people in Dutch society.

Discussions in the literature tend to distinguish between “objective” and “subjective” features of loneliness (e.g. Weiss 1973). Objective features, sometimes called “social isolation” can be measured and counted. Subjective features, “emotional isolation,” are more difficult to observe. That living alone does not necessarily imply loneliness is generally accepted. In this paper I am particularly interested in loneliness as an emotional phenomenon, an *experience* of deficiency and emptiness. The question I want to address is: What “deficiency” in the social network of elderly people in Kwahu is felt as particularly painful? In other words, my search is for a Kwahu definition of loneliness at old age.

In the Twi language, a lonely person is indicated by terms such as *ankonam* (“he/she walks alone”), *onnibie* (“he/she has no one”) and *ɔbaakofo* (“one person”). Not having anyone in life to help you is regarded as one of the most miserable things that may befall a human being. Several Highlife songs bemoan the plight of a lonely person. Orphans in particular are often portrayed as pitiful because they have no helper. In their song from many years ago, *Aka me nkoa* (I am left alone), the African Brothers Band sang: “Disaster has fallen on me, because loneliness is very painful. I am an orphan, there is no helper.” Another song, *Ankoa anoma* (“Lonely bird”) compares the fate of the lonely person to that of a traveller in a foreign country who runs into all kinds of problems and will finally be buried far from home. Loneliness is indeed a terrible lot in a society which claims sociability and hospitality as its main virtues. In the case of elderly people, however, the pain of loneliness does not so much lie in being literally alone and having no helper. I will argue that it is rather the fact of not being able to *help others* that gives elderly people an acute sense of loneliness.

Research and context

The paper is part of a larger research project on the social and cultural meaning of growing old, which I carried out intermittently between 1994 and 2000 in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town of about six thousand inhabitants on the Kwahu Plateau in the Eastern Province of Ghana. The local population calls itself Kwahu, which is a subgroup of the Akan who constitute almost half of Ghana's 18 million people. The Akan, who speak Twi, have a matrilineal kinship system, which in spite of various inroads, still stands, both in the rural and urban context.²

The research is based mainly on conversations with 35 elderly people (18 women, 17 men) and some of their relatives. I used no randomised sampling to find this group, but asked my friends about elderly people in their neighbourhood and continued from there. The concept "old" was not clearly defined before I began the research. This group is composed of people who were described by others as "old." In fact, "old" proved to be more of a term of respect than of calendar age per se. My only concern in selecting respondents was to guarantee some variation in my "sample" in terms of gender, economic and social status, marital situation, religious affiliation and number of children.

Usually a conversation with an elderly person circled around one topic, for example, his/her life history, the concept of "old," the power of elderly people to bless and to curse, the care they received (and gave), their ideas about a successful and unsuccessful life, respect and reciprocity, wisdom and witchcraft, love, sex at old age, death and—the topic of this paper—experiences of loneliness.³

These various topics were not planned beforehand but grew "naturally" out of earlier conversations. It often meant that one topic was discussed with one person and another topic with another one. With some of the elderly people, I only had one or two conversations, with others, many more. The eloquence of some of the elderly people was striking. Their ways of expressing themselves were both effective and persuasive, and offered an extra reason to quote some of our conversations.

In addition to the longer conversations, there were frequent casual meetings with the elderly, e.g. short visits to greet or to deliver a message. Observations during these visits constituted a crucial element of the research, as they added depth and context to verbal accounts.

All of the longer conversations were taped, translated and transcribed. During most conversations a co-researcher who ensured my understanding of the language, Twi, accompanied me. Towards the end of the research period my co-researchers sometimes held their own conversations with elderly

members of the community while I was writing my ethnographic notes. They discussed the contents of those conversations with me afterwards, adding their own views. The sharing of research activities is expressed by the term “we” throughout the article.

I also had conversations with younger people; sometimes I had formal ones (“focus group discussions”), but usually they were more casual. My selection of these conversation partners was “at random” (in the colloquial sense of the term). They ranged in age from young people to middle-aged men and women. Additionally, in three local schools I asked students to answer a questionnaire expressing their views on old people or to complete sentences on the same issue.

As the research has extended over a period of seven years (and still continues), the conversations date from various periods. In most cases I quote from them as they were related to me at that particular point in time. The article thus applies a kind of “ethnographic present” and does not show all the complexities of change in the lives of the elderly. Indeed, most of those speaking in this essay have died by now.

“Loneliness”: definitions and models

In an overview of the literature, Wenger et al. (1996) emphasise the difference between “social isolation” and “loneliness.” As I mentioned before, the “fact” of being alone and having few social contacts does not necessarily mean that a person *feels* this as “an unpleasant or unacceptable discrepancy between the amount and quality of their actual social relationships compared with their desired ones”(definition from Perlman & Peplau, cited in Van Tilburg et al. 1998: 741). “Those who love reading are never lonely,” writes the Dutch poet Ida Gerhardt.⁴

Social scientists have struggled with the concept of “loneliness” and its operationalisation. There are at least two reasons why this struggle was—and still is—difficult. First of all, loneliness is an emotion, and emotions tend to resist the research techniques applied by social scientists. Loneliness cannot always be observed; questionnaire techniques are likely to be deficient as well. Anthropologists may claim that their approach of open-ended conversation is more suitable for fathoming emotions, but “loneliness” is virtually non-existent as a topic in their libraries.

Secondly, and closely related to the first reason, “loneliness” is a bone of contention between the various disciplines; they all claim it as their own. As an emotional state it is, of course, claimed by psychologists and social psychologists who mainly evaluate it with quantitative measures such as questionnaires and scales. As a social phenomenon and a policy problem, loneliness

has been widely studied by sociologists. In my own country sociologists have been particularly active in studying loneliness and have developed their own “loneliness scale,” which has resulted in an enormous production of projects and publications, mostly concerning Dutch society. This scale is based on a cognitive definition of loneliness, which emphasises “the discrepancy between what one wants in terms of interpersonal affection and intimacy, and what one has; the greater the discrepancy, the greater the loneliness” (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg 1999: 3). The scale itself consists of eleven statements, six negative, five positive to which respondents could react in five degrees of agreement/disagreement. The statements have been derived from a content analysis of accounts written by 114 lonely people about their experiences.

The Dutch scale is reputed to have a satisfactory level of reliability and validity and can therefore serve as convenient tool to report on the prevalence of a various degrees of loneliness in selected populations. Obviously, the scale is bound to Dutch culture and cannot be applied indiscriminately to other cultures. Another of its limitations, in terms of my purposes, is that the scale is not designed to inform us about the social and psychic “mechanics” of loneliness. For the study of loneliness (and its “mechanics”) in a West-African community, therefore, we need another approach to explore what loneliness is, how it feels, and how it is brought about. In my conclusion I will briefly return to this scale and discuss its possible application in the context of Kwahu society.

For a first attempt to “map out” the contextual factors of loneliness I turn to the model of Van Bergen and Staarink (1994). These authors have developed a model to study social isolation and loneliness among elderly people which is sufficiently broad to serve as a starting point for a description of the conditions of elderly people in Kwahu-Tafo. The authors have been inspired by a stress explanatory model that discusses determinants of psychic well-being. Without agreeing with the deterministic character of the original model, I find it a suitable “Notes and Queries” for my exploration.

Van Bergen & Staarink distinguish three levels of stressors: micro, meso and macro. The micro-level stressors include physical limitations which inhibit social contacts: deterioration of health, invalidity and loss of mobility. There are also psycho-social factors at the micro-level, such as lack of meaningful activities, boredom, loss of people (partner, friends, children) or work, anxiety about sickness and death, and the absence of a future-oriented perspective. Third, there are material factors, including financial problems and type of accommodation, which lead to isolation.

At the meso-level the authors distinguish: insecure or difficult to reach accommodation, unpleasant living area (e.g. lack of shops and other services) and nearness of schools, offices and factories.

At the macro-level are cultural stereotypes and rules, which discriminate against elderly people. Examples here include forced retirement leading to loss of role and status, the absence of transition rituals which guide people into old age, and social-economic developments which victimise elderly people.

The authors also list a sequence of parallel factors at the three levels which help elderly people to cope with the various stressors. At the micro-level they name good health, character features such as sense of humour and autonomy, good memories of the past and positive experiences in the present age (for example grandchildren, a new partner). Sufficient financial means, private transport and a good house also contribute to well-being at old age. At the meso-level they mention good living conditions. At the macro-level, retention of status after retirement and continuation of work are factors which improve well-being at old age.

Living conditions for the elderly in Kwahu

A description of living conditions of elderly people in Kwahu-Tafo, more or less following the model of Van Bergen & Staarink, can only be impressionistic within the limited scope of this paper. It should also be stressed that those living conditions vary considerably between different people. Some general remarks can be made, however.

Health conditions of most elderly people in Kwahu-Tafo are relatively good due to the paradoxical fact that medical facilities are scarce and hard to access. As a consequence most elderly people who are alive are alive because they enjoy a good health. As soon as a person falls sick, it is likely to be the end. Most of the elders I met when I first began this project in Kwahu-Tafo “disappeared” rather suddenly over the course of the years. I began my research in 1994 with 27 elderly people, 13 women and 14 men. Two years later, ten of them had died, although most of them had not given me the impression that their lives would soon come to an end. Every time I received a letter from Ghana, it announced someone’s death, usually accompanied by a description of the funeral. Such letters made me realise how fragile life is in a community which lacks good health care or—more importantly—which does not have the means to pay for the health care which is available.

As I said, health of the elderly was generally good. Only one person suffered from Alzheimer’s disease. One major problem was blindness or extremely poor eyesight. Out of the 35 elderly persons who participated in the research, ten were blind or almost blind. This problem severely limited their mobility and made them very dependent on others. One woman could not walk because

of an amputated leg, some felt too weak to leave the house, but several were still active, visiting friends, taking part in meetings and celebrations and going to their farm.

At the psycho-social level conditions also seemed quite favourable. Elderly people in Kwahu-Tafo do not lose their job at a certain age, but can simply adjust their function to their status as elder. They may stop doing certain things and assume new responsibilities such as advising the younger generation, participating in local politics and doing odd jobs in the home. Anxiety about the approaching death is virtually absent (cf. Van der Geest 2002), but the elderly were rather worried about their funeral. These positive factors are directly linked to the Kwahu perception of old age, as we will see in a moment.

Loss of a partner or other supporting persons mainly affected the men. Divorce and separation are common, even in old age, which fits the general picture of marriage as an uncertain undertaking in the matrilineal Kwahu society. Couples often do not stay together because one of them has travelled or is trading or doing other work somewhere else. It is also possible that the wife prefers to stay in her own family house if the husband has no place of his own; often the wife is not eager to stay with her in-laws. In most cases marriage is a temporary affair and divorce can be initiated by women as well as by men (Bleek 1975, 1977). Very few couples put their money together, which may be the clearest indication that husband and wife do not perceive each other as having one common purpose in life. They are likely to have different interests and they may attach more importance to their (consanguinal) family (*abusua*⁵) ties than to their marriage bond. After all, marriage is only friendship, it is not *abusua*, as the proverb goes (*awadeε ye ɔyonkɔ, εnyeε abusua*). As a result, the relationship that a father has to his children is ambiguous. He bears responsibility for them but strictly speaking, his children belong to his wife's *abusua*. The extent to which he bonds with his children and takes care of them depends very much on the person, his character, but most of all, on his economic position. The well-off man is one who is able to build his own house in which he can have his wife and children gathered together. He will pay for his children's upkeep and education, and help his wife financially to trade or farm. The wife and children, in return, are likely to stay with him. A poor man, however, may find it difficult to keep his wife and children with him. He has little to offer them and they may therefore seek support from the wife's *abusua*. The marriage may break altogether if the wife thinks there is no longer anything in it for her. Financially and sexually she is no longer interested in the marriage and the man may find himself deserted in his old age. Elderly women may thus regard separation as a relief and find new security in their own *abusua*, with continued support of their children, while elderly men may

end up with virtually nothing if they have not invested in social relationships during their active lifetime.

At the meso-level a mixed picture arises. The type of accommodation, including the architecture of the houses and life style of the inhabitants, encourages sociability. Most houses are full of people, especially children, and most activities take place in the open air, in the courtyard or in front of the house. The proverb one elder cited to me to describe loneliness hardly applies to any situation I witnessed during my stay in Kwahu-Tafo: “when someone is alone for a long time without talking, his mouth will smell badly, so the best thing for him to do is to go to bed and sleep” (*Sε ⊃baakofo ⊃ te h ⊃ na woka w’ano to mu a, na w’anum b ⊃ n enti εse sε ⊃da*). An elderly person is surrounded by noise and action during a great deal of the day. The rhetorical question of one elderly lady, when I asked her, if the noise of the children did not disturb her, is significant: “Ah, would you be happy in a house without noise?” She then added an explanation, which succinctly summarised the foundation of happiness at old age: “If there is no noise in the house, (it means that) you are not a good person!” Loneliness or company are the “rewards” of a bad or good life.

Financially, most elderly people did not do very well. Kwahu-Tafo is a poor town, unlike some of the other towns on the Kwahu Plateau. Its inhabitants were not very successful in trading or farming. The farmers had had a lot of difficulties, such as land conflicts and lack of rain. In 1983 and 1984 severe droughts hit a large part of the country, including Kwahu, and many people lost their cocoa farms.

A little while ago I emphasised the importance of material wealth in attracting relatives. The failure, particularly of men, to earn sufficient money to invest in the education of their children—and other relatives—is likely to lead to another failure, at the end of their life: the inability to assemble children and other company around them. The inability to assemble his family will be even greater if the man’s economic failure is not due to bad luck but to lack of initiative and devotion to his family.⁶

Factors at what Van Bergen and Staarink call the meso-level, related to the area of living, are unambiguously favourable to social integration of the elderly. Living conditions are open (people spend a lot of time outside their houses) and a sense of security prevails. Access to shops and other services is easy and elderly people have no problem acquiring daily necessities (provided they have money). Apart from shops and little kiosks spread throughout the town, hawkers pass the houses and offer food and simple commodities for sale.

The most important clues for understanding loneliness or companionship at old age can be found at the “macro-level.” Kwahu culture respects old age. The

common—and probably only adequate—Twi term for “old” when referring 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”). Whereas 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, content and time. A child can say *manyin*, if it has “grown” in comparison to a previous period or 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.”

A common term for an elderly person is \supset *panyin*, which at the same time is an honorific title expressing admiration and affection. The \supset *panyin* is honourable, civilised, kind, composed, and wise. Countless proverbs and local sayings confirm this high appreciation of advanced age. The \supset *panyin* represents the beautiful image of old age. He (or she) receives what is most highly regarded in Akan culture: respect. An \supset *panyin* can be a man or a woman, though most will think of a man when the word is used. A respected older woman is called \supset *baa panyin*. An \supset *panyin* is an ancestor “to be”; people will remember him after his death because of his good deeds and wisdom (Van der Geest 1998a).

One elder said: “The \supset *panyin* has lived in the house much longer than you. You came to meet him. “ \supset *panyin*” 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 \supset *panyin*. 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.” There are mainly three virtues of the \supset *panyin*, which earn him this respect: wisdom, self-restraint and his dedication to the family. I focus here on the first.

Wisdom and respect

The older one becomes, the more knowledge one collects. Wisdom, knowledge, life experience and the ability to foresee what will happen and offer advice are indeed the qualities of the old man and woman. 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 events follow one another. The \supset *panyin* may, on the basis of that understanding, be able to predict the future and advise people about how to act in order to

prevent trouble. We discussed this with \supset *panyin* Kwame Frempong who had been one of the first inhabitants of Kwahu-Tafo to attend school. In his active life he had been a cocoa buyer and a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses. At the end of his life he became a Presbyterian. Frempong, who was a self-styled philosopher said one day: "If you are old, you can always predict, because you have experience." When we asked him to define an \supset *panyin* for us, he said: "An \supset *panyin* is someone who through his experience in life, has gained a lot of wisdom and can know what is good and what is not good." Asked which qualities of an \supset *panyin* are not present in a young person, he answered: "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 and experience of the elder become valuable when they are used for the good of others: the \supset *panyin* advises. The style of advising was beautifully depicted by another elder, Kwaku Agyei when he explained to us the following proverb: \supset *panyin nni biribi a, \supset*w\supset abatawe* (If the elder has nothing, he has elbow): "If you go to the \supset *panyin* and he has nothing to give to you, he can warn you: *Hwe yie* (Be careful). He can curse you. He can choose not to curse you but say to you: "If you don't listen to what I am saying, I will not save you if you fall into trouble." (*Asem a mereka yi se woantie no yie na w\supsetde wo rek\supset a, minni hwee de rebegye wo*). When you are in the chief's palace and you are saying something which you should not say, an \supset *panyin* who is sitting in front of you will touch you with his elbow to stop you from saying that which might lead you into trouble. . . . He touches you with his elbow and whispers to you to stop. If he would speak aloud or make the gesture with the hand, everybody would know that he is warning you. If he does it with the elbow and you are wise, you will understand and stop. That is why we say: The \supset *panyin* has elbow. The proverb means if the \supset *panyin* has nothing at all, he has wisdom; he can give good advice to people.*

The wisdom of the \supset *panyin* implies power and prestige. That is why they say \supset *panyin ano sen suman* (The \supset *panyin*'s mouth is more powerful than an amulet). It means that the words of an elderly person tell you what is going to happen. You should listen, or you will get into trouble. The old, therefore, tend to regard their advanced age as the most gratifying period of their life. \supset *kyeame*⁷ Opoku:

I am content to be old and I am proud of my age. On many occasions, I challenge the people I meet that I am older than they are. . . . Wherever I go, I am given a chair first. I wouldn't like to be young again.

Another elder, *Ɔpanyin* Frempong, held a similar view:

I have set my mind on the sayings of St. Paul in the Bible: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child and did things like a child.” Because of this age you realise that most of the activities of the young are useless and at times I laugh when I see them indulging in them. . . . When you are young, you make a lot of mistakes. Now that I have grown old, I have realised it, and I don’t want to become young again. . . . When you grow old, you see a lot of things in life, so it is a blessing from God to grow old. When you die young, without experiencing a lot of things in life, it is not a blessing.

A young man may have physical strength, but he is inferior to an *Ɔpanyin* who has knowledge and foresight. If he thinks he surpasses the elder because of his youthful strength, he is mistaken and will be in trouble. That is why the elders give the following proverb: *Se wohuru tra Ɔpanyin a wusa ne kƆn mu* (If you try to jump over the elder, you get stuck at his shoulders).

Having lived for a long time is almost tantamount to being wise. The old person has seen a lot of things; he has gained an understanding of how things happen and has learned how to prevent misfortune. Such knowledge, as we have seen, is more effective than physical strength. Old people take pleasure in stressing that point all the time: The youth depend more on them—because of their wisdom—than they do on the youth. Respect for the elderly is first and foremost based on that principle: The old were there first. As the proverb goes: *Abodwese betoo anintƆn* (The beard came to meet the eyebrow). The one who came first, knows more and deserves respect. The old know the place (the world) better than the young. Culpit (1998) suggests that there is an almost “natural” tendency to respect older people because of the fact that they have lived longer. He links this idea to the intuitive awe for things and people that are taller (in space or in time).

When the old argue in this way, they seem to forget that (as we will soon see) the young rarely come to them for advice, that they are not interested in their knowledge and, therefore, do not depend on them. Conversely, the young too seem to “forget” this. They did not stop telling us that they respect and fear the old people because of their life experience and the spiritual power derived from that experience. During a discussion a young man said:

The old are 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 also tell you traditions and customs that will enable you also to reach that age.

In a discussion with six women between the ages of thirty and sixty similar views were expressed. We asked them why young people should fear and respect an elderly person. They answered:

Because of his age. Once you are older, your children should fear and respect you. They should not only respect their parents but every old person. . . . You are older, you know what is wrong and what is right. You came to the world before them (*Wo baa wiase gyaa wɔn*). You know a lot more than they and your advice can help them to be successful. So if they don't fear and respect you, you won't show them the right direction. If you see that something is going wrong in their way, you won't tell them.

▷*kyeame* Opoku also gave his opinion:

The old have the power to predict the results of certain actions. The old are able to do so because of their vast experience. Most of the actions of the young were once practised by the old, so they are able to predict the results of such actions. If the young receive the warnings and advice of the old in good faith, it will be good for them.

The “classic” elderly person in Akan culture, someone who is respected and sought for his/her wisdom is portrayed by Apt (1996: 24):

The elder plays an important role in social upbringing of the young and thereby becomes the educator and the guiding spirit behind many initiatives, psychologically, a very satisfying role. As one entrusted with family wealth in general, he or she is consulted in administrative matters and always brought into the picture when important decisions concerning the family are to be made. . . . The idea of ancestral worship makes the elderly the cultural link between the living and the dead. In this role, he or she officiates in ceremonies to do with marriages, births and deaths and as an adjudicator ensures that peace and harmony prevails in the greater family.

Similar statements about elderly people were put forward by students in local schools who completed the sentence “Most young people think that old people. . . .” Out of the 75 respondents who completed the sentence, 25 referred to the wisdom and advice of the elders and their knowledge of stories and history.

The most precious company to an elderly person, is, as one elder said, that of a young person who comes to you and asks for advice. That type of visit is a true recognition of the ▷*panyin*'s wisdom and a convincing expression

of respect. There is no greater pleasure for an elderly person than having such company, but there is also no greater bitterness than having none of it. Saying this, I am approaching the most pungent experience of loneliness (and companionship).

Conversations

Providing company to old people, especially to those who are not able to leave the house, constitutes an important aspect of care, which may have a profound effect on the elderly person's well-being. Here too, the picture is diverse and ambiguous. During conversations old people sometimes stressed their loneliness and boredom but on another occasion when I found the same person in another mood, he tried to boast about his social importance by claiming that many people visited him.

My tentative conclusion about the people we interviewed is that those elderly who are most dependent on others for company get it the least. Elderly people who are mobile and strong are able to go out and visit their friends and converse. But those who cannot leave the house and have to wait until others visit them complain that people have forgotten about them. They hardly have any visitors to receive. The claim that old people are respected because of their knowledge of tradition and wisdom and that they are consulted for advice is hardly supported by my findings. Instead, the interviews and observations suggest that the present generation is not interested in the knowledge of the elderly. That knowledge has become redundant and/or irrelevant to them. What they need to know to succeed in life is not something stored in the old people. The following conversation between Kwame Fosu (K), my co-researcher, and Agya Suo (S), an elderly man who was once a drummer and an expert on traditional knowledge, now blind and miserable, may serve as an example:

F. *Agya* (Father), you know a lot of history and tradition. We have come to listen to you today. Do people come to you as we have come today to listen to traditional history?

S. No.

F. People don't come to you?

S. No.

F. Do visitors come to converse with you?

S. Sometimes, when somebody is walking past he branches (comes to me) and greets me.

F. When such a person comes to greet you, does he converse with you?

S. After greeting me, he asks: *Wo ho te sen?* (How are you?) and I respond: *Me ho ye.* (I am fine).

F. It means people don't especially come to sit and talk with you but rather they casually enter to greet you and go?

S. Yes.

F. Why doesn't anybody come to listen to your talk?

S. It is only when you come that I shall tell you. If you don't come but stay in your house I cannot call you to come and listen to traditional stories.

Becoming dependent is a vicious circle. Those who don't go out gradually lose their social importance and become less and less interesting to visit. Being cut off from the information network that spreads through the community, they experience a gradual process of social death before they die in the physical sense. Those who are less dependent, however, are also confronted with this lack of interest.

In 1994 and 1995 we had several conversations with *ɔpanyin* Kwadwo Gyima who was then about 80 years old. I quote from my field notes: He is a devout Catholic and has outspoken ideas about a lot of issues. His wife died about five years ago. When I carried out my first research in Kwahu-Tafo in 1971, I had a very lively conversation with him in Accra. He told me his life history, about his marriage, his children, his work and especially about his religious ideas. He was then a poor sandal maker in Accra. Many of his relatives considered him somewhat as a failure. He had never "made it" and had remained poor throughout his life. When I met him again, 23 years later, he had reason to boast: one of his sons is living in Japan and sends him money. The son is putting up an impressive house at the edge of the town. The old man has since long stopped the work in Accra and has returned to Kwahu-Tafo to spend the last years of his life "at home." He is still full of energy and is doing almost everything by himself. Nobody takes care of him. He spends most of the day at the building site to watch the materials lying about. Usually he also sleeps there, in one of the rooms that have been completed. When we asked him what "old age" meant to him he answered: "I don't know the meaning, but the old has wisdom in his head."

Several times during our meetings he (G) complained, however, about the disinterest of the youth in his knowledge and wisdom. Two examples:

G. The most painful thing of death is that if an aged person dies there will be no one to tell you some important history. I used to ask my elders when I was young and I am now handing it over to the children. Recently one grandchild asked me something and I was at a loss. In fact I had to tell him that I did not ask my elders when I was young. So I don't know. Even now at this my age, I keep on asking those older than me a lot of things. Yesterday I was complaining to someone that I don't understand why my

grandchildren and the young people in my house don't come and greet me and ask me about a lot of things I know.

I. Why don't they come?

G. I don't know. I want them to come and ask so that I tell them but I don't get them. If you don't come well, I will die and take it along (*Mewu a na medek*).

I. So you will go with it?

G. Yes my head is full of things but I will go with them because they won't come.

One day, one of my friends (B) went to see the old man at the building site and found him conversing with a woman. The following conversation ensued:

G. This woman is just a friend. She often comes to keep me company whenever she visits her farm nearby.

B. What about your relatives, do they pay you visits or do you visit them?

G. I have many relatives but they don't visit me, except on rare occasions, they don't care much about me especially the young ones. You know I am the eldest of all the people living in the family. Thus it is my desire and wish that the young educated ones will come to me so that I will impart my rich knowledge about our clan and my life experiences to them. But they will not come.

B. If they will not come, why not go to them?

G. It is against my principles and also against the tradition to do so. If they will not come, it is they and not I who will lose in the long run.

Another elder, *Nana* (Grandfather) Kwaku Agyei (A), expressed the same complaint in a conversation Kwame Fosu (F) and I had with him.

F. You have many proverbs. Do people come to you to learn proverbs from you as well?

A. They don't come.

[A woman from the house had come closer to listen. When we asked her whether she had learned some proverbs from the old man since she was living with him in the same house, she answered in the negative].

A. She will not learn proverbs, because the proverbs will not earn her money but in future it will help you. When you are entering a town and you hear on the *abmmaa* drums: *Namm* tenten *reba*, *namm* tenten *reba*, *namm* tenten *reba*. The drummers are informing the executors that there is someone to be executed. If you understand the proverb (on the drum) you will not be caught and executed. You will run away to save your life. But if you don't understand the proverb you will be caught and killed.

Visiting old people is no longer an act with intrinsic social value, a “pleasure.” Rather it has become an act of charity or a moral duty one would rather not do. Ironically, it was only a foreign visitor who came to “tap” their knowledge and wisdom. The growing loneliness of elderly, dependent people seems to me the clearest indication of old people’s marginalisation and loss of social significance. The claim that elderly people are respected because of their wisdom and advanced age is only a figure of speech, wishful thinking on the part of the elderly themselves and lip service on the part of the youth. “Respect” is shown more by the fact that such claims are still made than in young people’s actual behaviour.

Friends explained to me that “natural occasions” at which young and old meet are gradually disappearing. One such instance was the palm wine bar; which was a very common phenomenon when I did my research in 1971 and 1973. The social and financial threshold to the palm wine bar was low, which allowed young and old from all sorts of socio-economic backgrounds to assemble and engage in conversation. There the old would impress the young with their stories and experiences. As one proverb goes: *Tontom te, tontom te yereñum nsa na yerefa adwen* (While drinking we gain wisdom). Today the palm wine bars have decreased in number and fewer people visit those that are remaining. Bars and canteens that sell beers and soft drinks are taking their place, but are too expensive for the majority of the population.

Another occasion for young and old to meet has all but disappeared: the communal eating of meals. Formerly, brothers would join each other for meals and eat together from one dish. The children would sit near them and listen to their conversation. Nowadays meals have become more individualistic. Many mothers give each child its own plate to avoid fighting over food. Both changes have contributed to the growing separation between young and old.

The problem of a lack of company at the end of one’s life was most strongly put by \supset *kyeame* Kwame Opoku (O) in a conversation Patrick Atuobi (P) and I (S) had with him. Opoku, who is 87, has been an \supset *kyeame* all his life. He is still an active, very eloquent and highly respected person who gets many visitors. In that sense he is an exception to what I have been saying about the elderly.

- S. If someone is old or sick in a room and cannot go out, don’t you think the person will still need company of people?
- O. The relatives will be visiting till a certain time but when they see that there is no hope of recovering and they realise that the person will no more be able to leave his room, such frequent visits cease and everyone goes about his own business. Normally, however, the children cannot leave the parents.

- P. What about your sister. Her case is not sickness but old age. Don't you think she needs company?
- O. She needs it and we do it but not frequently. We go there and ask of her health and she may say: I am all right but I couldn't sleep properly last night and so on. We tell her: Oh things will go well. We spend some few minutes with her and leave. It is not good but it has become a tradition among us Akan and there is nothing we can do about it.
- S. You are old but still you are mobile. Do people visit you for conversation and seek your advice and wisdom?
- O. It is someone's behaviour and character which attract people. Some people are not friendly and do not talk nicely to their fellows. A person like this will not get visitors. When such a person becomes immobile, no one will come to visit him. I am not boasting, but because I am sociable and do not talk harshly to people, I have been getting visitors all the time. That is how the world is. If you do not have good intentions towards others and do not talk nicely to them, no one likes your company. The situation becomes worse if you don't have money.
- P. Excuse me *Sebe*, in case you become sick in bed for about four or five years, do you think people will continue to visit you as they do now?
- O. I can't tell but I don't think it will be as it is now. As I said, in such cases people will visit you initially but when they realise that you don't get well, the visits will become more rare.

Another elder, *Ɖpanyin* Asare, made the same point when he concluded a conversation about his poor health at old age with the following adage: "The sick man has no friend" (*Ɖyarefo nni adamfo*).

Conclusion

If we accept the definition, cited earlier, that loneliness is the "unacceptable discrepancy between the amount and quality of actual social relationships compared with desired ones" it is not difficult to determine which discrepancy is felt as the most unacceptable and painful by the elderly people I met in Kwahu-Tafo: respect. As elders they are entitled to respect. Respect is expressed in many ways and, at a first glance, elderly people are accorded a lot of respect: children obey them without the slightest objection, passers-by greet them politely and young people speak about the good advice given by the elders in their houses. In addition, countless proverbs sing the praise of elderly people for their wisdom, gentleness and civilised manners. Respect galore, one would say, but at a closer look, flaws appear in this rosy picture.

As the research continued, elderly people became more candid about their situation in life. The respect they received was criticized as a thin veneer of politeness, while the respect that really counted—listening to their wisdom—was denied to them. Elderly people almost unanimously complained to me that young people were not interested in what they had to say. My own observation concurred with that complaint: I rarely saw a younger person engaged in a proper conversation with an elderly one.

The conceptual overlap of (lack of) respect, (ignored) wisdom and loneliness among elderly Africans has been hinted at by various authors but has not been made as explicit as I noticed it to be in Kwahu, Ghana. Sagner (2002) comes closest in his description of older people's complaints about disrespect among the young in South Africa. Their lack of respect "... denies the maturity and increased status that goes with old age." For the old people it was "a most disturbing experience that challenged their self-image and created *feelings of depersonalisation*" (p. 49, author's emphasis). The underlying reasons for this disrespect (which took form in the denial of the elders' wisdom, for example) are not discussed. The frustrations of the older people are mainly analysed as part of their "complaint discourse." Loneliness is not explicitly mentioned.

Rosenmayr (1988), who studied the relationship between young and old people in a Malian village, describes the eroding wisdom of the elderly but relates it mainly to political strategies the elders use to maintain their seniority. The declining recognition of their knowledge is not discussed in terms of declining respect, let alone in terms of loneliness. Cattell (1994) takes the grandmother-granddaughter relationship as a starting point to sketch the growing cognitive and experiential distance between the generations among Abaluyian people in Kenya. Her emphasis lies on the changing role of grandmothers vis-à-vis their granddaughters; grandmothers find it increasingly difficult to advise the young whose problems in life are radically different from those they experienced in the past. Though declining respect and recognition of wisdom are examined, the loneliness that may result from this gulf between young and old is not discussed. The changing relationship between grandmothers and grandchildren is also the topic of an article by Møller and Sotshongaye (1999), in which they address the situation in South African Zulu society. They do relate the growing gap between the two generations to diminishing respect, but the emotional consequences of this process for the elderly are—once again—not discussed. The same can be said about other studies of the decline of wisdom and respect among elderly Africans (e.g. Campbell 1994, Cattell 2002, Okemwa 2002). Thus, the "myth" of the privileged African elder who enjoys permanent company and who constitutes the heart of the family has thus been perpetuated to some extent.

My Kwahu-Tafo observations belie that romantic picture of old age, however, and the publications I just referred to give reason to believe that similar conditions occur elsewhere as well and that such observations could be generalized more widely.

Finally, a brief comment on the loneliness scale of De Jong Gierveld and colleagues is in order here. I did not carry out a systematic evaluation of the Dutch scale in the Kwahu context. However, open-ended conversations with a number of key informants as well as my own observations made it obvious that statements which in Dutch society would be unambiguous indications of the presence or absence of loneliness are not appropriate signs of loneliness, or lack thereof, in the Kwahu situation. Conversely, the most important measurement of loneliness for a Kwahu elder is missing in the Dutch scale. I am referring to what constitutes the most intensely felt “discrepancy between what one wants in terms of interpersonal affection and intimacy, and what one has” (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg 1999: 3). That discrepancy, as we have seen, is not so much the absence of “someone I can talk to about my day to day problems” (the first statement in the Dutch scale) but rather the absence of someone who comes to me to talk about *his/her* day to day problems.

If wisdom is the epitome of old age and if respect for that wisdom, based on a long life experience, constitutes the essence of all respect, the absence of interest in that wisdom can only be an experience of losing what one believes one is most entitled to. This experience seems to be the Kwahu equivalent of what has been termed “social death” in Western society, “the final event in a sequence of declining social involvement” (Mulkay 1993: 34).

This observation confirms the crux of my argument made at the onset of this article that (emotional) loneliness can occur in spite of ongoing social contacts. Elderly people in Kwahu-Tafo, who are surrounded by the noise and bustle of everyday life and who seem the centre of respectful attention, are denied what they regard as their deepest existential right: the listening ear of a younger person.

Acknowledgments

The research 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 Atuobi and Anthony Obeng Boamah. Benjamin Boadi and Yaw Darko Ansah typed most of the research material. I am also indebted to Kofi Ron Lange, *Abusuapanyin* Daniel Osei Yeboah and Sera Young 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. I dedicate this essay to my

“brother” \supset panyin Kwadwo Gyima, who let me share in his loneliness. He died in January 1996. I have used people’s real names throughout this article. Most of the elderly people figuring in my study indicated that they wanted to be mentioned (and remembered) by their true name. I assume that those who did not express themselves explicitly on this point and who are now dead held the same view.

Notes

1. \supset panyin (pl. *mpanyimfo*) is an honorific term used for people beyond the age of about fifty. More than an indication of age, it carries a positive appreciation of the person: his/her wisdom, kindness, refined manners and political importance. See further Stucki 1995, Apt 1996 and Van der Geest 1998a.
2. Other Akan groups include the Asante, Fante, Akyem, Akuapem, Bono and several other smaller groups. Some of the important studies of Akan culture are those by Rattray (1923, 1927, 1929), Danquah (1944), Field (1960), Fortes (1969), Arhin (1979), and Oppong (1982). Studies dealing with Kwahu society include Bleek (1975, 1976, 1977), Bartle (1977) and Miescher (1997).
3. These various themes have been dealt with in other publications: e.g. Van der Geest (1995, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2000, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c).
4. Literally: “Those who read may be lonely” (*Die lezen mogen eenzaam wezen*) (Gerhardt 1997: 557).
5. *Abusua* is the matrilineage. The term can refer to a very large group of related people (a “clan”), or to a more restricted group of matrikin, three to five generations deep.
6. The role of money in the management of old age is further discussed in Van der Geest 1997.
7. \supset kyeame (often translated as “linguist”) is an official at the chief’s court, whose function is to speak for the chief and enhance the rhetoric of the words the chief has spoken.

Address for correspondence: Sjaak van der Geest, Medical Anthropology Unit, University of Amsterdam, Oudezýds Achterburgwal 185, 1012 DK Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Tel. +31-20-5252621. Fax +31-20-5253010. E-mail: s.vandergeest@uva.nl