

# Loneliness and distress in old age

A note from Ghana

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There is a type of social exclusion that is little noticed because it is generally regarded as 'normal', an almost biological necessity: the isolation of people when they grow old. Loneliness is probably the most painful experience of advanced age in my own society. Loneliness is like a germ that causes distress at the end of life.

Popular beliefs in the industrialised societies of Europe and North America have it that older 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 romanticization 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 older people in my society. The implication of their reaction is that the condition of older people in their own society is much 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 regarded as the 'dessert' for a less than successful life (cf. Von Faber et al., 2001).

### Loneliness in Kwahu Tafo, Ghana

Some years ago, my research colleague Kwame Fosu (KF) and I discussed the pleasures and pains of old age with an older man in Kwahu Tafo, Ghana. Agya Suo (AS), as the man was called, had once been a drummer and an admired expert on traditional knowledge. When we met him, he was blind, poor and miserable, forgotten by almost everyone. A few lines from our conversation:

KF. *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?

AS. No.

KF. People don't come to you?

AS. No.

KF. Do visitors come to converse with you?

AS. Sometimes, when somebody is walking past he branches [comes to me] and greets me.

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

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

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

AS. Yes.

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

AS. 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.

My research on social and cultural meanings of growing old was carried out intermittently between 1994 and 2004 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.

The research was based mainly on conversations with 35 older people (18 women, 17 men) and some of their relatives. I used no randomised sampling to find this group, but asked my friends about older 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 older person circled around one topic, for example, his/her life history, the concept of 'old', the power of older 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.

I also had conversations with younger people; sometimes formally ('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.

### Wisdom and respect

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 perceived quality 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 rarely referred to anyone as 'being old'. Their standard English term was indeed: 'He has grown'.

A common term for an older person is *ɔpanyin*, which at the same time is an honorific title expressing admiration and affection. The *ɔpanyin* is honourable, civilised, kind, composed, and wise. Countless proverbs and local sayings confirm this positive appreciation of advanced age. The *ɔpanyin* represents the beautiful image of old age. He (or she) receives what is most highly regarded in Akan culture: respect. An *ɔpanyin* can be a man

or a woman, though most will think of a man when the word is used. A respected older woman is called *ɔbaa panyin*. An *ɔpanyin* is an ancestor 'to be'; people will remember him after his death because of his good deeds and wisdom (Van der Geest, 1998).

One elder said: 'The *ɔpanyin* has lived in the house much longer than you. You came to meet him. "*ɔpanyin*" is a big word. He is a person who knows what is going on. He must receive respect and obedience.' I asked him what shows that a person is an *ɔpanyin*. He answered: 'It is mostly the wisdom he gives to the young and also how he respects himself. When you respect yourself, the young will also respect you and fulfil your needs.' There are three main virtues of the *ɔpanyin*, which earn him this respect: wisdom, self-restraint and his dedication to the family. I focus here on the first.

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 *ɔpanyin* 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 *ɔpanyin* 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 *ɔpanyin* for us, he said: 'An *ɔpanyin* is someone who through his experience in life, has gained a lot of wisdom and knows what is good and what is not good.'

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 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.

### Untapped wisdom, loss of respect, loneliness

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 older person's well-being. But the picture is diverse and ambiguous. During conversations older 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 was that older people who are most dependent on others for company get it the least. Older 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 was hardly supported by my findings. Instead, the interviews and observations suggested 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 conversation with Agya Suo cited above, referred to that loss of interest among the young.

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. Confirming what Cicero raised as a question, life seems to be a play with

a sloppily written end (Van der Geest & Von Faber, 2002). 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.

We had several conversations with *Ɔpanyin* Kwadwo Gyima who was then about 80 years old. When we asked him what 'old age' meant to him he answered: 'I don't know the meaning, but the old person 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. One example:

- 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 medekɔ*).
  - 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.

The problem of a lack of company at the end of one's life was most strongly put by *Ɔkyeame* Kwame Opoku (O) in a conversation Patrick Atuobi (P) and I (S) had with him. Opoku, who was 87, had been an *ɔkyeame* [official at the chief's court] all his life. He was still an active, eloquent and highly respected person who received many visitors. In that sense he was 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, 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 rarer.

### **Conclusion: exclusion**

Visiting older people seems 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, the anthropologist, who came to 'tap' their knowledge and wisdom. Their growing loneliness seems to me the clearest indication of old people's marginalisation and loss of social significance. The claim that older people are respected because of their wisdom and advanced age is mainly a figure of speech, wishful thinking and attempted self-assurance on the part of the elderly and lip service on

the part of the youth. 'Respect' is shown more by the fact that such claims are made than in young people's actual behaviour.

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, p. 34).

This observation confirms the crux of my argument that (emotional) loneliness can occur in spite of on-going social contacts. Older 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.

### Acknowledgement and dedication

I am grateful to my many Ghanaian friends who helped me in the research and to the older people who were not only willing but also eager to talk to me about their life. Our meetings worked as subtle attempts of re-inclusion. This brief note draws upon an earlier publication (Van der Geest, 2004). I dedicate this essay to Annemiek Richters for whom social exclusion was a permanent concern in her anthropological career.

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