
ɔpanyin: The Ideal of Elder in the Akan Culture of Ghana

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Résumé

Les proverbes ont été utilisés comme des catalyseurs pour permettre de sonder le concept ɔpanyin (les anciens) dans la culture Akan du Ghana. L'ɔpanyin apparaît comme une personne idéale "parfaitement adulte," un gentleman/une dame honorables, d'un âge certain, pleins de sagesse qui offrent leurs conseils aux autres, bien élevés, pleins de tact, patients et généreux et qui consacrent les dernières années de leurs vies au bien-être de la abusua (famille). Cet article interprète la glorification des anciens, pratiquée essentiellement par les anciens eux-mêmes: c'est là une stratégie pour faire face à leur tragique perte de prestige et de pouvoir à notre époque. Rares sont les anciens, exception faite pour ceux dont les vies ont été un succès sur les plans social et matériel, qui sont dignes des idéaux des ɔpanyin. Pour les autres, l'idée reste un rêve, une sorte de refuge pour se protéger d'une vie difficile et douloureuse. La recherche anthropologique de terrain pour cet article a consisté en conversations avec trente-cinq anciens et des membres de leurs familles dans une ville rurale Kwahu dans le Ghana du sud-est. Les nombreuses citations tirées de ces conversations révèlent l'ambiguïté des gens vis-à-vis de la vieillesse; elles montrent la vitalité et la souffrance associées à la vieillesse dans une communauté ghanéenne moyenne.

The research was carried out with the help of many people. Most prominent was the assistance given by my Ghanaian friends and co-researchers Kwame Fosu, Samuel Sarkodie, Patrick Atuobi, Anthony Obeng Boamah, and Michael Buabeng. Benjamin Boadu and Yaw Darko Ansah typed most of the research material. I am also deeply indebted to Monica Amoako, Martin Asamoah, Abena Gloria Ansah, Abena Josephine Anson, Isaac Oppong, and Abusua Panyin Daniel Osei Yeboah for the help, support, and care they offered to me during the research. Last, but not least, I should thank the old people who are both the "objects" and the authors of this article. I have dedicated this essay to the memory of one of them, ɔpanyin Kwaku Agyei (?-1995). His friendliness and wisdom, as well as his poverty and loneliness, have made me write this essay. He died when I was away in my own country. *Nana, nanteyiye!*

Introduction

In 1994, when I was doing anthropological fieldwork on the meaning of old age in a rural Akan community of Ghana, I visited *panyin* Edward Yaw Addo, an elder in the town of Abetifi. I was introduced to him by Kwame Fosu, a teacher with a special interest in Akan tradition, who was helping me with research. When we arrived, the *panyin* was talking with three friends in front of his house. He invited us inside, where we had a long discussion on various aspects of old age. Apart from *panyin* Addo (A), two of his friends, Okyeame¹ Safo (S) and Yaw Pepra (P), also took part in the conversation.

I asked them their views on the different stages in a person's life and which stage, they thought, gave the most satisfaction and happiness. Fosu (F) repeated my question for them:

F: Kwaku (referring to me) means to say that when a person comes to this world first, he is a baby *akwadaa*. Then he becomes a young boy, an *abarimawaa*. Then he becomes a young man. He later becomes a middle-aged man, an *abasiriwa*,² and finally he becomes an old man, an *akwakora*. Which of these periods in a person's life has the most happiness? Is there much happiness in the period when one is a baby, a child, a young man, or an elderly person or old man?

S: What I know is that an *akwakora* has much wisdom. He knows much of the culture and tradition. Whatever he says is the truth, *Kann* (plain truth).

F: We are asking which of these periods has the most happiness.

S: When you become an *akwakora* or *aberewa* (old woman), you don't go anywhere. It is at this period that you have to be happy. They take care of you. That is it.

A: Yes, we have an *akwadaa*, a baby or child; we have an *abari-mawaa*, a young boy; then we have a young man. The *aberanteɛ* has not reached the time to live a life (*onnya nnuruu sɛdɛɛ ɔbo bra no*). His life has not yet been reduced.³ *Ne bra so ntee*. That is why he is referred to as *aberanteɛ*. Whatever you say to him, he does not hear it. He does not pay heed to advice. He has not reached the period of life when he takes advice seriously. It is when he grows a little bit more that he begins to realise the pieces of advice he was given. He has been told, often, "*Tena ho na wobehunu*" ("Sit there and you will see"). Wait and see. It is then that he begins to taste

life in the following states: *yea* (pain); *ɔdɛ* (sweetness); *amanehunū* (suffering). When he experiences these three states, he becomes an adult. We have *ɔpanyin*. And we have *aberanteɛ* and we have *akwakora* (old man). We [the three of them] are *mmeranteɛ*, in the eyes of the ancients. The *mpanyimfo* *ankasa ankasa wɔ hɔ*. The real old people are there. We are behind them and they are behind the old men. There are two stages of the old. The *aberanteɛ* is always a happy-go-lucky person. *Ne tirim yɛ no dɛ*. *Ɔyɛ huuhuu ɔwɔ ahooɔn*. He is strong. If you offend him, he will beat you. *Woka no a ɔbɛhwe wo*.

F: So is he happy?

A: *N'ani gye ne ho fɛfɛɛfɛ*. He is very happy because he is *aberanteɛ*. You see? He has furnished his room neatly.

F: Please, we asked which of the stages or periods has the most happiness. Is it when he is a young person that there is happiness or is it when he is an old person that there is happiness? That is what we want to know.

A: The happiness is in three parts. At this time, *aberanteɛ*, he will be happy; then you advise him thus: *Ei Kwabena anaa Kwaku, hwe yie*. Kwabena or Kwaku, take care. He may not understand because he is a youth. He will not change. He will go on (*ɔbɛkɔ so*). A stage will arrive when he will realise what you told him during his youthful days. From there he will begin to change. Human beings have three periods of growth (*Nnipa nyini mpreɛnsa*). It is from here that he begins to change. He will be given some work to do. At this stage he will change for the better. *Huuhuu no a ɔyɛɛ no na wagyae*. He will stop his rascal life. *Afei ansa na ɔde n'ani ato fam*. It is then that he begins to live a sober life and realises that he should take care of his father and mother.

F: Does he feel happy at this time?

A: He is happy at this time. He has grasped something. *Wanya biribi mu akita*.

F: When he was a young person, not listening to advice, he was happy.

A: Yes he was just happy.

F: And at this time too he is happy. When is he happy again?

A: There will be a time that because he enjoyed too much for the sake of everything, he will lose what he held. When he was a young person, he was taking care of a child. It is this child who is going to make him happy. Because he took care of him now that he is old,

he will make him happy. He will then comment thus: *Enye me ba yi adaworoma a anka nne merennya baabi minsi*. Had it not been for my son I would not have been in this happy state.

F: You have spoken about three kinds of happiness. When he is young man, he can be happy; when he is middle-aged, he is happy because he is working. And because he took care of his child, he is happy now that he is old. Which of these forms of happiness is the greatest?

A: The old person who lies down cannot go anywhere and has his son taking good care of him. He is happy; he is enjoying until his death (*ɔredi awu*).

Most of the research took place at Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town of about five thousand inhabitants, mainly Kwahu. The Kwahu belong to the larger group of Akan⁴ who inhabit most of Southern Ghana. The language spoken by them is Twi. The Akan have a matrilineal kinship system.

Ancestors, who are remembered in the mother's line, are addressed in prayers and through libation during ceremonial drinking parties of schnapps and palm wine. Elderly people are ancestors *in spe*. They hope to be remembered as honorable ancestors after their death and attempt to behave accordingly during their old age. Nowadays, the majority of the Akan belong to a Christian church, but the concept of ancestor has retained its importance.

The Kwahu are known as smart traders, and their shops can be found everywhere in Ghana. Trading has contributed to a keen awareness of being "successful" in life. Those who have been successful show this by building impressive houses in their home towns and are admired and respected because of their achievements. Until recently, the average life cycle of a Kwahu man — and, to some extent, that of a woman as well — consisted of trading in the first phase of his (or her) active life and farming in the second. The first phase could also consist of practising a skill such as sandal-making or tailoring. Nowadays, many young Kwahu men become taxi drivers in the big towns.

The research involved interviews — conversations may be a more appropriate term — with about thirty elderly people and their relatives. All conversations were taped and transcribed. Some people were interviewed only once, others twice or more often. One old man, Nana Kwaku Agyei, was interviewed about ten times

and visited daily. Apart from the interviews, I often went to greet the old people informally and had brief conversations with them. These more casual visits enabled me to make observations about the daily lives of elderly people and the attitudes of other people in the same house. Most of these observations were recorded in an elaborate diary which I kept during the six and a half months of my fieldwork.

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

In the first phase of the research, I was particularly interested in people's definition and appreciation of "old." In my own culture, that of The Netherlands, "old" is a mainly negative concept. When the adjective is used for people, it expresses loss of physical strength and social importance, but it is believed that in other cultures a more positive appreciation of "old" exists. That somewhat romantic contrast prompted me to carry out research on old age in Ghana. The town of Kwahu-Tafo was familiar ground. I had stayed there before in 1969, 1971, and 1973, when I carried out anthropological fieldwork on various aspects of the culture, mainly related to family life.

The conversation with the three men in the nearby town of Abetifi suggests that people have distinct ideas about the different life stages and about what those stages mean to those who live them. At the same time, the various contributions to the conversation show that it is very much a question of who is speaking — whether someone is called young, middle-aged, or old. The conversation also makes clear that it would be naïve to expect a clear cut and unambiguous judgement about the quality of those stages. Each period has its own charm, but the positive appreciation of old age is remarkable from a Western point of view. That is not the reason, however, that I have quoted this part of the conversation. My reason for doing so is that it introduces the concept of *ɔpanyin* in the context of growing old.

ɔpanyin Addo remarked that we could divide the period after

adolescence into three stages: *aberantee* (young and approaching middle-age), *panyin* (getting old), and *akwakora* (old man). The female equivalents, *ababaawa*, *baa-panyin*, and *aberewa* are not mentioned, but they were in other conversations.

I asked Anthony Boamah, middle-aged and one of my key informants, to describe the life stages of women and men. He took special delight in analysing the terminology. His etymological explanations may be apocryphal; they are certainly ingenious and enlightening:

We have *abayewa*, a small *baa*. I think it is derived from *aba* (seed), because it is the seed that grows to bear fruit. The suffix *-wa* means either "small" or "female." ... So *abaawa* means small seed or small woman. She grows to become *baabun*, which is derived from *aba-bun*, unripe seed. We call the Blessed Virgin Mary *Baabun Maria*. She continues to grow and bears fruit when she is ripe. *Abere* means: it has become ripe. When the fruit is ripe, it will fall and get rotten, just like the mango fruit. So we call an old woman *aberewa*. She has ripened and will soon fall, that is die.

Abarima-wa is a small man. He grows to become *aberantee*, young man. *Wobra a onte* ("when you stop him, he won't listen"). It is the age when men feel that what they are doing is right and therefore refuse to take the advice of elders. The young man grows to become an old man, *akwakora*. It is the time he is near his grave. He can be buried at any moment. To bury someone is *kora* or *sie*, which means "to hide." *Okokora* means: he is going to hide. So after the *akwakora* stage in life follows the burial.

It is not possible to establish fixed age categories, as may be done in other cultures. This is illustrated by *Panyin Addo's* earlier remark that the three of them would be called *mmerantee* (plural of *aberantee*) by the very old people. In our eyes, however, they were elderly people, so we addressed them as *mpanyinfoo* (plural of *panyin*). The fluidity of the transition between the various ages has to do with the absence of ritual celebrations marking such transitions. Some events may to some extent function as such, but they may not be publicly recognised, as they were in the past. Especially with regard to men, the transitions may be hardly perceptible. The following quotation, taken from my (S) conversation with Nana Yaa Amponsaa (A), a ninety-year-old lady, illustrates this:

S: Nana can you tell us what really happens in a person's life to show that she is moving from one stage of her development to another?

A: The body grows as time goes on and you change. As I said, I was 18 years old when I passed menstruation (*mekyimaayɛ*) and was baptised but look: I am now old.

S: Is there anything which is done to show that a person is changing from a girl *abayewa* to a young woman *ababaawa*?

A: In the olden days, when a girl menstruated for the first time (*sɛ ɔkɔ ɛmaamu a*), a lot of drumming and dancing were performed to honour her in public. That was called *bragoro* (puberty rites). It was an official way of announcing that the girl was moving from childhood to womanhood. After the performance of those customary rites, the girl was free to marry and have children. The custom lasted for seven days so after the seventh day the girl was regarded as a woman.

S: Is there a particular time when a woman becomes an *ɔpanyin*?

A: Yes. When a woman stops menstruating she moves from *ababaawa* to become *ɔpanyin*.

S: When does a boy change to become a man? We know that a male does not menstruate, so how do we determine the change in him?

A: In a man you see that his dressing and his activities change. He works more seriously and if you observe his movements, you realise that there is a change in whatever he does. His speech and actions become more responsible.

The fluidity of the boundary between *ɔpanyin* and *akwakora/aberewa* showed itself prominently in the research. The only exception is when someone is given a stool in the chief's palace. Such a person will be called *ɔpanyin*, even when he is still very young. Anthony Boamah told me that a relative of his was installed as *ɔkyame* (chief's linguist) at the age of nine. He was given the title of *ɔpanyin*, and from that day onwards he was supposed to behave as an elder and not fight or quarrel. Boamah: "He had left his youthful behaviour."

During further discussions with people, I tried to arrive at a better understanding of the difference between *ɔpanyin* and *akwakora/aberewa*. Gradually I came to the — provisional — conclusion that *ɔpanyin* and *akwakora/aberewa* do not so much

represent a chronological order — but a moral one, a difference in appreciation of old age.

Definitions

On one of the first days of the research, I was walking with Kwame Fosu through Kwahu-Tafo, when we met an old man, Nana Kwaku Agyei. We greeted him. He replied and asked us for money to buy food. We did not give him money but told him that we would visit him later in the day and have some conversation. He promised to wait for us. Two hours later we went to him. He was staying in a small room of an old and rickety mud house. The room did not look tidy and was almost empty. It contained only a bed and two small chairs. The old man was sitting on the bed, which had some dirty, threadbare blankets spread on it. Later he told us the blankets were a gift from the local Catholic priest. The old man explained to us that this was only a temporary abode because his *wofase* (nephew or sister's son) was building a house for him. He was dressed in a pair of trousers and a long-sleeved shirt, also a donation from the priest. He proved to be a gifted talker and had an enormous command of proverbs and other forms of traditional knowledge. After he had told us a few things from his life history, Fosu (F) and Agyei (A) started talking about old age.

F: Why is it that when you grow old we call you *akwakora*?

A: Your joints become weak. You cannot do anything. The second thing is that you are waiting for death. This is what we mean by *akwakora*.

F: What about *aberewa*?

A: It is the same with *aberewa*. Her joints have weakened. The *aberewa* cannot go anywhere.

F: What are the signs that tell us that such a person is *akwakora* or *aberewa*?

A: He is not strong. He cannot weed (work on the farm).

F: Is it because he is sick?

A: Yes, when you grow old, your veins get weak.

F: When you grow old?

A: When you grow old, the veins get weaker. Then you are *akwakora*. It means that you are not strong enough to work.

F: Does it mean that anyone who is sick is *akwakora*?

A: No. If you are young and you get sick, it is different. You go to

the hospital and you feel well again. But when you grow old and go to the hospital, you do not get well again till you die.

F: So, if the joints get weaker, you become an *akwakora*?

A: Yes.

F: Any other signs?

A: When your joints become weaker in the first instance, you cannot work. If you are not lucky, you become partially blind. If you are not lucky, your penis dies.

F: You become impotent?

A: Because there is no strength, and so... (pause).

F: Yes?

A: We call such a person *akwakora*.

F: So your hair [touching hair] and other things don't show signs of old age?

A: As for grey hair, even if you are young you can have it. Therefore, grey hair is not a sign of old age.

F: Your joints are weak, you cannot work. Sometimes your sight becomes blurred and your man becomes weak (impotency). All these are signs of old age?

A: Then you are alone in a room. You don't go anywhere.

The first condition for being old is, of course, that one has lived for a very long time. Those who are able to link their old age to some historical fact in the distant past will be most convincing in their claim. Agya Suo (S), a blind and quite miserable old man, proved his old age thus:

S: At my age I am *akwakora*.

Q: What shows that you are an old man?

S: I am old because it was six months after I had gone to Somanya that the locomotive engine arrived at Koforidua. So I have grown old.

Q: When we say that (*obi anyin a*) somebody has grown, what does it mean?

S: *Na ɛ te sɛ woanyin akyɛre*. It means that you have lived for a very long period.

A few days later, I (S) visited an old lady, Nana Abena Ntiriwaa (N) and asked her the meaning of *aberewa* (old woman) and *akwakora* (old man):

N: When you grow old, you are called *aberewa* or *akwakora*. Such a person cannot work.

S: Why is it that such a person cannot work?

N: Where is strength? The strength has finished.

S: Where has the strength gone?

N: [laughter] Now that I am sitting here, I cannot go to farm. I cannot do anything. The strength has finished and so I am *aberewa*.

S: Is it only the fact that one has lost one's strength that one is called *aberewa*?

N: Yes.

S: What else tells that one is *akwakora* or *aberewa*?

N: For instance, since my husband's death, I have not married. It means that I am *aberewa*.

S: Is there anything else that tells that someone is *akwakora* or *aberewa*?

N: I know you cannot trade. This means you are *aberewa*. If you can trade, you can eat. If someone does not help you, you will sleep (go hungry and get poor). Without these children, I would have found it difficult to eat.

S: So, if you are *aberewa*, you cannot farm and you cannot trade? Are these the only types of work *aberewa* or *akwakora* cannot do?

N: Yes. I have no money to trade with. It means I am *aberewa*.

S: If one is *aberewa*, what shows that there is happiness or no happiness in that situation?

N: There is no happiness in being *aberewa* because you cannot work to get food. You cannot work to gain money to buy anything.

S: Does this mean that there is no happiness in being *aberewa*?

N: Yes.

S: Do you think that all old men and women have no happiness?

N: Where is happiness? There is no strength to work!

Most of her definition seemed to dovetail with the one Nana Agyei provided, but she added one curious element to it: the *aberewa* or *akwakora* is not happy because she/he cannot work to earn money to eat. Nana Kwaku Nyame added a similar element to the definition: poverty.

With money you can always put on fine things which will make it difficult for people to realise that you are an old man. But when you are poor, you can't even get a cloth to put on and it will make you look very old.

The *akwakora*, according to Nana Nyame, also suffers from sickness, not ordinary sickness, but *onyin yareɛ* (old age sickness). That sickness is also related to lack of money.

If I were to have enough money, I would have gone to the hospital so that I could get rid of all these pains and get stronger. At first I could go to the farm and weed but now I can't.

Finally, old age implies dependence. "Dependence" does not have the unambiguously negative meaning which it has in the West. Where children and other relatives are attending to the needs of the old, dependence may even have its beauty. It shows that there is love and peace and proves that the old person is now being rewarded for his hard work and the care he gave to his family. That "beauty," however, is scarcer than people are sometimes willing to admit. Dependence, therefore, is a rather hazardous aspect of old age. Ɔpanyin Kwame Frimpong described his feelings as follows: "When you are old, you will not get your desires. You cannot do what you want to do, so you have to depend on others for help." But the desires themselves also change, as he continued his comments:

Sɛ wobɔ akwakora a, w'ani nnye ɛnɛɛma bi ho (At old age, your desire for certain things in life disappears. You don't enjoy things in life anymore.)

When I met him again a year later and asked him about his feelings, he became almost philosophical. He (F) had the following conversation with my co-researcher Patrick Atuobi (P):

P: Ɔpanyin Frimpong, please, how do you feel as an old man?

F: When you grow old, you lose interest in a lot of things which are of interest to the young.

P: At this age, do the activities of the young remind you of your own youth?

F: Yes, but they also 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 older 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.

P: Wouldn't you like it if you were a young man again?

F: No, because when you are young, you make a lot of mistakes. Now that I have grown old, I have realised this, and I don't like to become young again.

P: Don't you have any regrets being an old man?

F: The only regret I have is my inability to go out and work. When I see the young every morning walking briskly and going up and down, busily on their daily work, I feel I once could do the same but now I have to sit down here, all the time doing nothing. This gives a lot of worries to the old person. *Eye ateetee ma obi a woanyin*.

P: Is it only your inability to work which makes you regret being old?

F: I don't really regret being an old man nor do I want to be young again. My only worry is my inability to work.

P: Suppose it were possible to become young again, would you not take the opportunity?

F: I would take it because I have now seen a lot of important things I did not when I was young, so I would accept that possibility to go back and do them. That is the only reason I would love to be young again.

P: There is a popular saying *Onyin ye nhyira* (Old age is a blessing). Please do you share that view?

F: Yes I share that view because 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.

Several more people added their views on old age, and if we were to deduct a general definition out of all these comments, the emphasis would, without doubt, lie in physical weakness and the various forms of discomfort which result from it. Wisdom, life experience, the ability to give advice, and the knowledge of culture and tradition were also mentioned, but much less than I expected. These positive features of old age emerged far more prominently when the term *panyin* appeared in our conversations. *Obiara pe se anka ye panyin* (Everybody would like to be an *panyin*), according to *Panyin Dade*. As we went along with the research, we noticed that some people would use the term *panyin* when we expected *akwakora* or *aberewa*. We decided to include that term in our interviews. The first person we asked about the meaning of *panyin* was Kwaku Agyei. Kwame Fosu (F) asked him:

F: When we say *panyin*, what does it mean?

A: Somebody who has grown is *panyin*. He has lived in the house much longer than you. You came to meet him. *Panyin* is a big

expression (important). He is a person who knows what is going on. He must receive respect and obedience.

F: Please, what is the difference between *ɔpanyin* and *akwakora*?

A: It is *ɔpanyin* who grows to become *akwakora*. If you haven't grown, you will not be called *ɔpanyin*. When you grow and finish growing, you are called *akwakora*.

F: Will somebody who is about forty years old, with strong limbs, be referred to as *ɔpanyin*?

A: No, he is a youth.

F: Why?

A: He hasn't grown....

F: There is somebody who is not yet *akwakora*, he hasn't attained many years, he is almost *abasiriwa*, but he can say great things. He can offer good advice. He can give good examples. He is a model. Can we call such a person *ɔpanyin*?

A: We call him *ɔbadwemma*, a wise person. He is wise and so he can say wise things. If you hear him talk, you will say this person is an *ɔpanyin*.

F: Please, what do we call a young man who has some status in the chief's palace or occupies a blackened stool?

A: He is also referred to as *ɔpanyin* in the same way as an elderly person. This is because he has sworn that great oath of allegiance, *Efise waka ntankeseɛ asuae*. Because of that, you cannot argue with him. You cannot challenge him. *Worentumi mfa w'afe nhye no*. You cannot compare yourself to him.

F: So if he is not even forty years old...?

A: And he occupies a stool, he is *ɔpanyin* because he has sworn the great oath.

F: So, it means there are two kinds of *ɔpanyin*?

A: Yes.

F: The one who has grown and has attained many years and is nearing *akwakora*, who speaks wisely to people and gives good advice and the one who occupies a stool in the chief's palace.

A: Yes, he is also *ɔpanyin* because of the great oath; we don't count his years. *Waka ntamkeseɛ asuae nti ɔye ɔpanyin; ye mfa ye n afe nhye no*.

When I asked Anthony Boamah for his views, he stressed the binary opposition *abofra/ɔpanyin* and ended — again — with an etymological explanation:

First we have *abofra* and *ɔpanyin*. They are general names for “younger” and “older.” When twins are born, the first one will be called *ɔpanyin* and the second *abofra* or *akuma*. But the terms are also used in a general meaning. Each child (*abofra*) will grow to become an *ɔpanyin*. When he has reached his height and his brains are fully developed he has become *ɔpanyin*: *Wapa onyin ho* (he has passed the age of growing).⁵

“Can you tell us the difference between *ɔpanyin* and *akwakora*?” I asked *ɔpanyin* Pusuo. *ɔpanyin* Pusuo (P) is about seventy-five years old. He worked as a mason in Accra and Kwahu-Tafo. About ten years ago, he stopped working because of his worsening eyesight. If it were not for his eyes, he says, he could still work. The strength is still there.

P: Yes *ɔpanyin* is an *abasiriwa*, but *akwakora* can’t walk without the help of a stick and shakes when he is walking. Someone like myself is *ɔpanyin* or *abasiriwa*. I am not yet an *akwakora*. You [Patrick] are an *aberantee*.

S: What shows that someone is an *ɔpanyin*?

P: When you grow older and you are no more an *aberantee*.

S: Nana, what qualities or activities show that someone is an *ɔpanyin*?

P: An *ɔpanyin* is not allowed to travel and settle in someone’s town. He always stays at home and gives advice to young people. When there is any palaver at home, he will settle it peacefully. When an *ɔpanyin* travels and goes to live in someone’s town, people insult him and regard him as an *ɔpanyin bofoɔ*, an irresponsible old man.⁶ So the duty of an *ɔpanyin* is to be always at home, to give advice and to restore peace in the *abusua*.

S: Can we call someone who did not have a successful life an *ɔpanyin*? For example someone who did not look well after his children, who did not send them to school and did not acquire his own place to stay but lives in someone’s house, for example with his wife’s relatives? Is it correct to regard such a person as an *ɔpanyin*?

A: Such a person is an *ɔpanyin bofoɔ* (an irresponsible *ɔpanyin*). Such people at times do not even marry, or if they do, they fail to look after their children. They did not work hard in their youth so they may not even have a cloth to put on when they are old. They are always in worn-out clothes which most of the time have been

given to them by kind relatives. They also don't have any property. Such a person is *ɔpanyin bofoɔ*, and at their death the *abusua* doesn't spend money on their funeral.

A day before Patrick (P) had put the same question to Nana Kwaku Nyame (N):

P: What shows that a person is an *ɔpanyin*?

N: It is mostly the wisdom you give to the young and also how you respect yourself (*wo bu wo ho*). When you respect yourself, the young will also respect you and fulfill your needs. I remember I met a young man recently who willingly dashed me some money because he explained he liked me. Many young people do that to me as you did just now. [Patrick had given him some money for *kenkey* (food).] I think all that depends on how I respect myself.

P: What are some of the things an *ɔpanyin* does which show that he respects himself?

N: An *ɔpanyin* does not drink and misbehave, and he shows a lot of respect to the young.

Q: Is there any difference between an *akwakora* and an *ɔpanyin*?

A: Yes, an *akwakora* is so old that he can't do anything by himself. He can't even get out of bed by himself. Someone has to help him to do everything, but an *ɔpanyin* can walk, travel, and pay visits too.

Q: So is it when you can't get up from bed that you are an *akwakora*?

A: Yes, now I am old but if not because of sickness I could travel to Koforidua and even to Accra, so I am not an *akwakora*. An *akwakora* can't do that.

His last remark is revealing. By his own definition he is an old man (*akwakora*). He walks with difficulty, with the help of a stick, he is not able to travel, and his sickness is not an ordinary sickness, but "old age sickness." Nevertheless, he refuses to be caught in his own definition of *akwakora*. It reveals the aversion he has towards that status. It was at that moment that I began to see the difference between *akwakora* and *ɔpanyin* in qualitative rather than chronological terms. To arrive at a "definition" of *ɔpanyin*, I decided to follow another strategy.

Proverbs

Proverbs, Yankah (1989, 37) quotes Burke, are:

... strategies for dealing with situations. Insofar as situations are typical and recurrent in a given social structure, people develop names for them and strategies for handling them.

Proverbs are devices for "change as well as reaffirmation." Proverbs are also the domain of the old (Yankah 1989, 71-82). It is believed that they were made by ancestors, the eldest of the old. When a proverb is formally recited, it is thus introduced: *Mpanyimfoɔ bu be se* ("The elders have a proverb saying that...").

Citing proverbs, moreover, is a favourite activity of elderly people. In knowledge of proverbs and ability to use them, they distinguish themselves from the young, who lack this art. In reciting proverbs and other forms of traditional culture, the elderly demonstrate the "added value" of old age. Thanks to their long life, old people have gathered a deeper understanding of life and possess knowledge of their tradition. Proverbs, in particular, are an apt way to express that status because they both reveal and conceal. They show the young superior knowledge but do not show everything. If the young want to understand, they have to ask the elder, which, according to *ɔpanyin* Frimpong, is the greatest pleasure of an old man. Proverbs, in their claire-obscure quality, are not unlike the Ethiopian poetry ("wax and gold"), described by Levine (1967): the outside beauty is "wax," understanding its deeper meaning is "gold." The gold will be enjoyed only by those who have patience and are prepared to sit and listen to the old.

The third important link between the *ɔpanyin* and proverbs is that so many proverbs are about the *ɔpanyin*. That cannot be a coincidence. If proverbs are the domain of the *mpanyimfoɔ*, it is understandable that the *ɔpanyin* is also the main character in many of them. In the proverb, the *ɔpanyin* provides an ideal picture of himself, how he wants to be seen by others. The proverbs are not so much autobiographical as they are "hagiographical." They are, in the true sense of the word, "strategies for dealing with situations." The strategy is to persuade people of the excellence of the *ɔpanyin*.

Proverbs also prove a useful research tool. Since the elders like to engage in the use of proverbs and especially enjoy it if people come to ask for their explanations, I decided to do precisely that in some of the interviews. I asked old people to explain to me the

meaning of certain proverbs which referred to the elderly.

There is a proverb which says, *Yɛnnae a, yɛnso dae* ("If we don't sleep, we don't dream"). The meaning is that a proverb should be cited only when there is an occasion for it. Citing proverbs out of context is misunderstanding their proper function. In the case of our research, this did not pose a problem, however, and the elders rarely objected to our questions on the grounds of improper use of proverbs. The interview, a situation in which younger people approached older ones to share their wisdom with them, proved an almost natural context for a discussion on proverbs. Moreover, since the conversation was about old age, it was only appropriate that we discussed traditional wisdom on old age.

Citing a proverb, which in most cases had been taken from the old collection by the Presbyterian missionary Christaller (1879), also introduced a playful element into the interview, something like a riddle which the old tried to solve. There was, however, one important difference with the normal riddle: the one who gave the riddle did not know the answer.

Finally, discussing proverbs in the course of the interview made abundantly clear that proverbs are no static depositories of traditional knowledge and wisdom, but instead living things, changing all the time. The old people's interpretations of proverbs diverged extremely. In some cases I realised that they were explaining proverbs to me which they had never heard before. They sometimes even explained proverbs which did not exist.

During one interview, my assistant misread a proverb. He should have said: *Obi nse n'aberewa sɛ sɔre na menhwɛ wo*. ("No one tells his old mother: Get up and let me look at you"); instead of *menhwɛ wo*, he said, *menhwe wo*, which means: "Let me beat you." The man gave a long and plausible explanation of the wrong version of the proverb, and it took some time before I realised the misunderstanding. When we gave him the "right" proverb, he, unperturbed, started anew and provided us with an alternative explanation, equally acceptable.

The proverbs also functioned as catalysts to discussion. They provided the elderly with a starting point to elaborate on their views regarding old age and the relationship between the young and the old. It was not my intention to trace the original or "official" meaning of the proverb — if at all possible — but rather to try to elicit the elders to express their ideas. The function of the proverbs

in the research, therefore, was not much different from that of an association test commonly used in psychological research.

In addition, I was less interested in the proverb *as proverb* than what the mini-story of the proverb meant to the informant. For that reason, I did not always ask the elders in what situation they would use the proverb, since the fitting occasion might have nothing to do with the elder.⁷

If the ɔpanyin Has Nothing, He Has Elbow.

One day, when Kwaku Agyei was explaining a proverb to us, we asked him if people came to learn proverbs from him. He answered that they did not. At that moment a young woman living in the same compound with him came closer to listen to our conversation. Kwame Fosu asked her whether she had learned any proverbs from the old man, and she answered in the negative. Then Kwaku Agyei commented:

She will not learn proverbs because the proverbs will not earn her money, but in the future they will help you. When you are entering a town and you hear the *abɔmmaa* drums: *Nammɔn-tenten reba, nammɔn tenten reba, nammɔn tenten reba*. The drummers are informing the executioners that there is someone to be executed. If you understand the proverb, you will not go to 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.

Wisdom, knowledge, life experience, and the abilities to foresee what is going to happen and to give people advice are the qualities of old men and women. The fact that one has lived for a long time means that one has seen a lot of things and has begun to see how they are connected. Life experience, in other words, teaches how events follow one another. The *ɔpanyin* is, on the basis of that understanding, able to predict the future and advise people on how to act in order to prevent trouble. *ɔpanyin* Frimpong: "If you are old, you can always predict, because you have experience." When I asked him to define an *ɔpanyin*, he said:

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

S: What are some of the qualities of an *ɔpanyin* which may not be

present in a young person?

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

ɔpanyin Kwame Pusuo explained the meaning of the following proverb: *ɔpanyin tirim na wɔhɔn akuma* ("It is in the elder's head that the axe is pulled from the wooden handle"):

P: It is from the inside of the *ɔpanyin*'s head that we extract wisdom. The *akuma* in the proverb symbolises wisdom. Pulling an *akuma*, axe, from the handle in an *ɔpanyin*'s head means pulling wisdom from his head.

S: Why does an *akuma* symbolise wisdom?

P: You see even in the Bible a lot of things are presented in parables and proverbs; it is the same with Akan sayings. A lot of things are used to represent other things. So the *akuma* in the proverb is wisdom, not a real *akuma*.

We were not very satisfied with his answer. When we asked him to explain why the axe and the wooden handle were used to symbolise wisdom, he could not give us a convincing answer. The group of elders we met at Abetifi discussed the same proverb. One of them said:

The reason why they say: "It is from the old man's head that the axe is removed from the handle," is that the old man is there. He knows everything. You get involved in a case. The case comes to him. It is painful. He will blow his nose. You feel bad but you will say to him: "Papa it is painful (serious) but it is only you that I should tell." *Asem yi ye ya nanso wo ara na meka makyere wo*. It is not the axe which you are going to hit his head with. It is because he has experienced it before and it is he who knows how to do it (settle the case). It is he who will deliver you from trouble. He will say *Ah, wo deɛ ɛnye wo a anka...* Ah, if it had not been you, I would not ... you see. *ɔpanyin nni wo fie, a due* ("If there is no old man in your house, I pity you.")

F: Is the axe which is being removed the wisdom with which the old man will settle the case?

A: Ehee (yes).

Neither could he adequately explain the axe as a symbol of wisdom, but both he and Pusuo agreed that the proverb refers to the wisdom in the *panyin*'s head. Several others who commented on the proverb also had that opinion. It is interesting that the elders from Abetifi stressed the painfulness of extracting wisdom. No doubt, the image of an axe being pulled out of a man's head made him digress in that direction. *Panyin* Asare opted for a less difficult interpretation of the proverb:

It should be: *Panyin anim na yehon akuma* and not *Panyin tiri ho na yehon akuma*. That is: "We remove an axe handle in the presence of an elder." Because if you perform any difficult task and an elder is around, he will give you an easy solution.

The wisdom and experience of the elder become valuable when they are used for the good of others: the *panyin* advises. Their style of advice was beautifully depicted by Kwaku Agyei when he explained to us the following proverb: *Panyin nni biribi a, owo abatwe* ("If the elder has nothing, he has elbow").

A: If you go to the *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 wode wo reko a, minni hwee de rebegye wo.*)

F: Why did the elders use *batwe* (elbow) in the proverb? Children and adults have elbows but....

A: When you are in the chief's palace and you are saying something which you should not say, an *panyin* who is sitting in front of you will touch you with his elbow to stop you from speaking which might lead you into trouble.

F: So the proverb means that if the *panyin* has nothing at all, he has a way of advising and talking to people. He can blink the eye or make a simple gesture....

A: Yes and that is why in the chief's palace, if he fears that you may fall 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 you are warning him. If he does it with the elbow and you are wise, you will understand and stop.

F: You are talking, but you are not an *panyin*. You don't know

that you will fall into trouble, but because he is *ɔpanyin*, he knows. Is that the meaning?

A: That is how it is.

This proverb aroused a lively debate among informants as they produced the most divergent explanations for that enigmatic “elbow,” but all agreed that the term stood for wisdom.⁸ The best alternative for Nana Agyei’s version was provided by my own co-researcher Kwame Fosu. He answered that when people get old, parts of the body become more prominent. The elbow bone is an example. If you look at a young child, the bone hardly shows: it is hidden under a thick layer of flesh. Old people, however, are lean, and one often sees the elbow bone protruding. So the elbow becomes a symbol of old age, a *pars pro toto* as it were for the entirety of the old body, while the old body stands for old age and old age for wisdom and experience. So the proverb means that the old person has wisdom.

The wisdom of the *ɔpanyin* implies power. That is why they say *ɔpanyinano sen suman* (“The *ɔpanyin*’s mouth is more powerful than an amulet”). A variant of this proverb goes: *ɔpanyin ano sen ɔbosom* (“The *ɔpanyin*’s mouth is more powerful than a god”). The elders at Abetifi discussed these two proverbs in the following way:

A: You don’t have the experience the old man has (*Nea ɔpanyin ahunu no wo wunhunuu bi*). You intend to do something, and he tells you to stop.

S: He says stop but you don’t stop (*ɔse gyae wose mernnyae*).

A: You go to do it. And this is what we say: *ɔpanyin ano ye ɔbosom*. The old man’s mouth is a god. We told (warned) you, but you did not pay heed.

F: If he goes to do it, what will happen?

S: You are travelling and we warn you that today is *Awukudaeɛ*,⁹ so you should not go. You don’t agree and you go. If you go and the lorry gets into the ditch, we say the old man’s mouth is like a god. If you had paid heed to his advice and stopped going there, you would not have been in this trouble.

F: Does it mean that it was the old man who caused the accident to happen?

S: Yes he caused it.

A: I don't agree. He has seen it before (so he can predict) *wahunu bi pɛn*.

S: You told me.

A: He has the experience, and he tells you how it is. But you say it is not so. It is like this, but you say it is not. If you like, turn around (*Wopɛ deɛ a san*). You did not listen. If something happens, we say the old man's mouth is a god. If you stop going, there will not be any trouble.

S: We say: The old man said it (*ɔpanyin no kaɛɛ*).

F: This is because the old man has experienced it (*ɔpanyin no ahunu bi pɛn*). The youth has not yet experienced it.

S: Yes.

Kwaku Agyei said about this proverb:

A: It is the same as *Wusian ɔpanyin ho a woka ne nkɔn mu* ("If you try to jump over the elder, you will get stuck at his shoulder"). Its explanation is that if you don't give respect to elderly people, you will fall into trouble.

F: But the proverb says that the elder's mouth is sharper than an amulet.

A: Yes, when he predicts something, it becomes real. For example, he says: "If you are not careful with this book, something dreadful will happen to you." *Sɛ nwoma yi woanhwɛ no yie a, ɛbɛ bɔ wo tiri so*. It will truly happen. *Ebɛ bɔ nso. N'ano yɛ bosom*. His mouth is a god. That same thing is called *anogya* (mouth of fire). He is like a witch, but he is not a witch. Whenever he says something, it becomes real. This is because he has grown in the world.

F: What should we think about elders?

A: You must always give respect to elders.

F: And listen to them?

A: Yes.

The proverb which Kwaku Agyei first cited was linked to respect in our conversation with the Abetifi elders. A young man may have physical strength, but he is inferior to an *ɔpanyin*, who has knowledge and foresight. Anthony Boamah made an interesting comparison between young and old people:

I once asked my brother, who is in the army, why we have offi-

cers and men in the army. The officers get the chance to stay until their retiring age, but the men are made to retire after they have served for about twenty years. He explained that officers can stay because they just assemble more military knowledge. The young men don't fear death and can fight well, but the older they grow, the more they begin to think of their mothers, wives, and children. So when they are getting older, they are no longer good fighters.

When a young man thinks he can outshine the elder, he is mistaken and will be in trouble. That is why he should respect the *panyin*. *ɔpanyin* Addo, referring to Agyei's proverb:

A: The reason we give this proverb is: [He says] "Do not go." You say, "I will go." "Do not go." You say, "I will go." You have defied him. You have run over him. If you fall down behind there, it is your own fault. He told you not to go.

F: He told you not to jump.

A: Yes. You should not pass there. That is not the way. But because you think that you are strong, you jumped but got entangled.

F: Why did he (the old man) tell him that he should not go?

A: That is not the way.

F: So he knew that if he went....

A: He would get entangled.

F: Ehee. But the young man thought that he would not get entangled.

A: He would not get entangled.

F: OK.

A: He climbed with his might but got stranded.

The child who does not listen to the *ɔpanyin* and acts as if he is an *ɔpanyin* himself will run into trouble. But if you respect the *ɔpanyin* and listen to his advice, you will be OK. The wisdom of the elder and the fear of his power are the basis of respect. That is why the child squats near the *ɔpanyin* (*Abofra koto ɔpanyin nkyɛn*). But this respect is also engendered by the good manners and kindness of the *ɔpanyin*.

Thirty Sheep in the Stomach of an ɔpanyin

The good manners of an *ɔpanyin* are based in self-control. He controls his emotions, he does not get angry (*ɔpanyin bo mfu*), and

he does not shout at people. The ability to check himself shows itself foremost in the way he deals with information that is given to him, but also in his ascetic attitude. His careful dealing with rumours is expressed in many proverbs. Nothing shows so well that one is still a child as when one cannot hold one's tongue. The elders at Abetifi explained to us the meaning of *ɔpanyin due mante mante* (somewhat freely translated as: "The *ɔpanyin* says, excuse me, I haven't heard, I haven't heard"):

A: It means I am a chief. I should not listen to hearsay. Suppose my brother Yaw Pepra comes to tell me that Nana X says this and Nana Y says that. If you listen (and take action), all your subjects will desert you. So make up your mind that if somebody tells you something, you will not take action (immediately).

F: X says this or that. What does it mean?

A: He will tell you that a European has come to the Agonahene's house. He has brought a big case and so if you do not go to stop them, there will be a serious case. But you say: "It does not concern me. I have not heard it."

F: Why have you not heard it?

A: Because: *ɔpanyin mm̃ nsekuo* ("an elder does not gossip"). He does not listen to lies.

F: It means what he is saying is a lie?

A: It is a lie.... Suppose, people report to you that your small child has gone to pick mangoes. You don't ask him (to find out the truth) and you beat him. You see? Maybe it is not true. That's why we say *ɔpanyin due mante*. It is the same as "They say, they say' destroys the town." (*Yɛse, yɛse bɔ kuro*).

Kwaku Martin always tried to involve me in the examples he gave. When he discussed the same proverb with his friend Asare, he remarked:

What about if someone comes to inform you directly that Dr. Sjaak is insulting you? Though this will go against you because you are *ɔpanyin*, you will not say I am going to do this or that to the fellow. You avoid further trouble by pretending you have not heard anything. This is why they say *ɔpanyin due, mante, mante*.

Kaku Agyei explained a similar proverb to us:

ɔpanyin nni abansosɛm akyi ("An elder should not listen to

rumours"). Somebody may come from outside and tell you this and that. He tells you X or Y says this or that. You should not listen. You have to depend on your own judgement.

F: What is the meaning of *abansosɛm*?

A: It means somebody coming from outside your house telling you that X or Y says this or that. That is *abansosɛm* (gossip or rumours).

F: So any person who does not listen to *abansosɛm* is an elder, *ɔpanyin*?

A: Yes.

F: What about an *ɔpanyin* who listens to *abansosɛm*?

A: He is not a good elder. *Onyɛ ɔpanyin pa*. He wants to spoil the home. *Opɛ sɛ sɛ sɛ e fie*.

Not listening to rumours is akin to the ability to keep secrets. Agyei explained this through a proverb which remained rather obscure. We asked him about the meaning of: *Abofra hu nensa hohoro a, ɔne mpanyimfoɔ didi* ("If a child knows how to wash his hands, he eats with the elders"), but he changed the proverb into: *Abofra hu nensa hohoro a, na woyɛ akwadaa a woka w'ano tom* ("If a child knows how to wash his hands, it means he closes his mouth").

F: So, it is not only knowing how to wash your hands well?

A: No. Your mouth. You are told not to say this. And you don't go out to announce that *ɔpanyin* X or Y says this or that.

F: It means that this will qualify you to sit and talk with elders?

A: Yes. You can converse with elders, and no one will hear. This means the person is dumb *ano-mum*. When somebody converses with him, another does not hear.

A few minutes later, when he was about to pronounce an abusive term (*kwasia* or "fool"), he refrained from saying it and then changed tracks. He said, "God had created man with something in his throat [he touched the glottis] which makes him stop mentioning what is forbidden." [The implication was that women do not have such a "warning system."] It is called *kurokurohinko*.

The *ɔpanyin*'s civilised behaviour shows itself particularly towards children. Respect is a mutual virtue. *ɔpanyin fere ne mma*

a, na ne mma suro no ("If the *panyin* respects his children, the children will fear — respect — him"). Kwaku Agyei:

A: Yes. When your children come to you and you shout at them *kɔ, kɔ, kɔ, kɔ*. ("go, go, go, go"), they will not fear you. They will say: "As for this man, he is like that."

F: Papa, if I come to you every time and you shout at me to go, I will fear to come to you.

A: Yes, you will fear him and you will not go to him. But if he speaks kindly to you when you come and advises you and pets you, the child respects you and will not be rude to you. *Eyɛ saa a na akwadaa no bu wo, ɔntweatwea wo*.

F: Is the fear in the proverb respect?

A: Yes.

F: It is not the fear that discourages him from coming to you?

A: Yes.

F: So it means if *panyin* respects his children, his children fear him and the fear is respect? Therefore, *ɔpanyin fere ne mma a na ne mma bu no*.

A: The same proverb has this explanation: *Sɛ obi yɛ wo biribi na wubu nkotodwe pa no kyɛ w a, na abaa atɔ* ("If somebody wants to hurt you and you beg him on your knees, the stick is lowered down"). It does not mean that the stick literally is lowered, but whatever he had to say would not be said. He has seen that you are respectful because you went on your knees.

F: This proverb, *ɔpanyin fere ne mma na ne mma suro no*, is it like: "if you look after your children well in your youthful days, your children look after you well in your old age"?

A: No.

F: Can't that explain the proverb?

A: No, the explanation is this. It is the advice which you will give to the children that makes us give such a proverb. The advice will discourage the children from indulging in cases that will lead to debt. This is what will make the children respect you. It differs from the fact that you looked after this child and when he gets a penny, he gives it to you.

Here, the old man seemed to rationalise his own difficulties in taking good care of his children. Respect and good care depended, he stressed, on the way the old person treated the youth. What his

credits were in this domain, we shall see later on. He quoted yet another proverb which expresses the same thought in the negative: *ɔpanyin se na wanyɛ a, mmofra nsuro no* ("If the *ɔpanyin* says something but does not do it, children don't fear him").

The *ɔpanyin*'s self-restraint reveals itself also in his attitude towards food and other material pleasures. Greediness does not befit him, as the following proverb indicates: *ɔpanyin didi adibone a, oyi n'ansanka* ("If the elder eats greedily, he washes his own dish"). Kwaku Agyei commented thus:

A: The man is not kind and so he will not call a child to eat with him. He will eat it all alone. When he has eaten like that, he cannot call the child to wash or remove the bowl. You will have to remove or wash the bowl yourself. You are a bad elder.

F: But an *ɔpanyin* does not eat from the same bowl with a child, does he?

A: He eats with a child. When he eats with the child, then after the meal, the child takes the bowl away. But if you eat and you remove the bowl yourself, then you have disgraced yourself. *Wo ara wudidina wuyi w'ayowa a, na ɛkyere se w'anim agu ase*. Nobody respects you as a good elder. *Obiara mmu wo se woyɛ ɔpanyin papa*.

F: Somebody said a little bit more in addition to your explanation. He said as an adult, you should not finish all the food given to you in the bowl. You should leave some of the food in the bowl so that whenever you eat, a child likes to remove and wash the bowl. But if you finish everything, next time the child will not rush to remove the bowl and you will be compelled to wash it yourself. How about that?

A: They are all the same.

Two other proverbs were mentioned expressing the same idea: An *ɔpanyin* does not complain about hunger (*ɔpanyin mpere kɔm*) and: "An *ɔpanyin* gets 'satisfied' from eating his own intestines" (*ɔpanyin mene nsono*). Asare and Kwaku Martin agreed on the meaning:

A: That is, if there is not enough food in the house, the elder will forego his share so that the children will not stay hungry. That is why we say the elder eats his intestines.

M: For instance, if a father and his son are given a small amount of

food, the father will leave it for the boy to eat to his satisfaction. When an elder is hungry, he does not cry, but a youngster does.

S: If an old person meets me in the street and complains of hunger or asks for money, it means that he is not an elder, even though he has grown old?

A: *ɔpanyin mpere ɔkom*: that means an elder does not beg for food, even if he is hungry.

The Abetifi elders had a particularly picturesque addition to this explanation:

A: The reason that we say this is that we Akan say: *ɔpanyin yam adwansae aduasa* ("Inside the belly of the old person are thirty sheep"). Whenever something evil happens to him, he purifies himself with some of the sheep. He then does not need to go and ask for anything anywhere. You know that you should eat the food brought to you to your fill, but this child of yours has nothing to eat. And so you tell him to eat it. I will chew *kola* and get satisfied (*Bese koraa a me deɛ mɛwe, mɛmee*).

F: It means that you are hungry and there is food, but because there are other people besides you who look more important than you. Therefore you will swallow your intestines. You will not eat the food. You will give it to another person?

A: Yes.

F: OK.

S: Even if he dies, it is OK.

K: Why is it OK, even if he dies?

S: He has lived his life. He has eaten so much in this world. *Wadi wiase yi mu biribiara*. Therefore, there is nothing left for him to do other than guard those people in the house.

Anthony Boamah presented a slightly different interpretation of the proverb although it came down to the same praise of the *ɔpanyin*:

It means that every elder has about thirty castrated sheep in his stomach. Whenever a young person offends the *ɔpanyin* and they are pleading, the young person will be found guilty. He will have to pay a fine to the *ɔpanyin*. They will then tell the *ɔpanyin* that he already has thirty castrated sheep in his stomach so he should be merciful to the culprit. Among the Akan,

castrated sheep and drinks are usually collected when a crime has been committed. The meaning of the proverb is that the *ɔpanyin* should show magnanimity.

I began to be increasingly uncomfortable with the sanctification of the *ɔpanyin*. Was I not almost daily approached by old people who begged me for money or who complained about hunger and poverty? When *ɔpanyin* Kwaku Nyame came to greet me in the morning and sat down, as he always did, I decided to broach the subject. I asked:

S: What about *ɔpanyin mpere ɔkɔm* (The *ɔpanyin* does not complain of hunger)?

N: It is not good for an *ɔpanyin* to complain about hunger as it will make the young disrespect him.

S: Nana, we know you are now old and not healthy, and at times you find life very hard. Would it still be wrong for you to complain?

N: Yes, it is very wrong for an elder to complain much, especially about hunger. If you do that, the young will not respect you. *Eye saa a na woanim ahwee* ("Your face becomes light"). No matter the ordeal you may be passing through, you have to keep it to yourself because you are an *ɔpanyin*. It is only children who complain.

S: But Nana, during our conversation, you were complaining about your health, and you said you wished to be treated if you had the money. What about that?

A: I wouldn't do that in the house in the presence of my grandchildren and nephews. In the house I do not complain. If I have money, I just call the children to buy me food. But if my niece or grandchild sees that I don't send anyone to buy food, they provide me with some. I know they will never let me go hungry so I don't complain.

He had beaten me, but my discomfort remained.

The ɔpanyin Does Not Travel

If gentleness and wisdom are the two main characteristics of the *ɔpanyin*, they are held together by his dedication to the *abusua*. The *ɔpanyin* is not concerned about anything but the well-being of the family. Approaching the end of his life after which he will join the *nananom* (ancestors), there is no need to toil any longer for material gains. His children, *wofasenom* (nephews and nieces), and

grandchildren will take care of food and other daily needs. Kwame Fosu asked the elders at Abetifi for the meaning of: *ɔpanyin to sa a, na ewɔ mmofra deɛ mu* ("If the *ɔpanyin*'s buttocks diminish, they enter into those of his children").

A: The explanation is this: At first I was able to walk to Aframso and back.

S: He was a young man.

A: Today I cannot, I cannot walk. So I have to send a young person who is as strong as I used to be. That is why there is the proverb *ɔpanyin to sa a ekɔ ababuu deɛ mu*.

F: Please, why did they use "buttocks" in the proverb and not another part of the body like leg, food, thigh, etc?

A: Yes. It is a proverb. Anything that you will use can be appropriate. You are a driver. When you are descending a hill, you will use second gear.

The closing remark was meant for Fosu, who drives a taxi. The explanation was clear: the *ɔpanyin* has finished what he came to do. He has worked hard for his children. Now he may rest and devote himself entirely to peace and unity in the *abusua* and assist his younger relatives with his good advice. *ɔpanyin* Agyei:

A proverb is given on this: *Akwakora ntena efie mma asadua mfo*. You are old in the house and beans are being dried. If it starts to rain, you, the old man in the house, have to go and collect them to prevent them from getting wet. If you stay aloof and the beans get wet, it means that you are not a good person. The application is that an old person in the house must gather the grandchildren around him and teach them the tradition. If he does not do that and he dies, then it means you have thrown away the children. It means that you have allowed property belonging to the family to get lost.

Others who cited the proverb replaced *akwakora* with *ɔpanyin*. Remember, also, what *ɔpanyin* Opusuo said:

An *ɔpanyin* is not allowed to travel and go to live in someone's town. He always stays at home and gives advice to young people. When there is any palaver at home, he will settle it peacefully. When an *ɔpanyin* travels and settles in someone's town, people insult him and regard him as an *ɔpanyin bofoɔ*, an irresponsible old man. So the duty of an *ɔpanyin* is to be always at home, to give advice, and to restore peace in the *abusua*.

One evening, I went to say hello to ɔpanyin Kwabena Dadeɛ. Dadeɛ ("made of iron") is his nickname because he looks strong, even at his advanced age. He was sitting behind his house conversing with a friend. He told me he would soon be travelling. Jokingly, I objected to his plan by saying that people had told me that the ɔpanyin does not travel. It was true, he said, that the ɔpanyin should not travel away from his hometown for business or other affairs, but if he travelled to visit his children or relatives, there was nothing wrong with it.

One could say that the well-being of the *abusua* is the test for everything the ɔpanyin undertakes. Whatever he does, if it serves the *abusua*, it is good, but if it does not, it is condemned. His wisdom should benefit the *abusua*. His refusal to listen to rumours also keeps the *abusua* together. As Kwaku Agyei said in an earlier quotation, if the ɔpanyin pays attention to gossip and acts upon it, there will be trouble in the house, but if he does not, no trouble will come.

The ɔpanyin's restraint in expressing hunger should be seen in the same perspective. He foregoes his food for the children to eat well. The central place of the *abusua* in the life of the ɔpanyin was poignantly summarised by one of the elders at Abetifi:

S: He has lived his life. He has eaten so much in this world. *Wadi wiase yi mu biribiara*. Therefore, there is nothing left for him to do except guard those people in the house.

F: Yes.

S: This is what I know. The old man's duty is to organise the *abusua* so that the *abusua* members will be one and combine to bury him (when he dies).

Concrete proof of a person's devotion to the *abusua* is his building a house in his hometown. A house, a place where the members of the *abusua* can stay, shows that the elder is truly concerned about the well-being of his relatives. There is little that yields more respect than putting up a house (van der Geest 1998). When I asked Okyeame Kwame Opoku why people had so much admiration for those who had built a house, he explained:

It is difficult to put up a building so anyone who manages to build is regarded as a special person among his relatives. The fact that you have given your relatives or children a place to sleep is an honour to the person who put up a house. It is a great

honour also if you don't live in someone's house or in the *abusua fie* (family house). Children and a house are the most important things in a person's life.

Stucki, who carried out fieldwork in an Asante community, pays considerable attention to the importance of building a house:

Ownership of a compound house is an important indicator of maturity and prestige, and wealthy migrants still tend to build in the hometown. Those who cannot put up a house at least try to renovate a room in the family compound. Building a house in one's hometown shows commitment to one's village. It is also a way to attract dependents, since close ties are forged between those who live together (Stucki 1995, 94).

Patrick Atuobi asked *ɔpanyin* Nyame why people who build a house in their hometown are held in such high esteem. The old man answered by giving a negative example:

N: I know a certain man from Obo who was very rich. He had a big cocoa farm and was one of the richest people in Obo. This man failed to put up a building in Obo so when he died, he was buried in his village where he had his farm.

P: Did he have a house in the village?

N: Yes. He had a nice building in the village which could be compared to the buildings at Nkawkaw, but because he did not have one in his hometown, people did not regard him. The comments people made after his death were that he did well but failed to put up a building. Without a building, your relatives will never hold you in high esteem even if you have plenty of money.

To conclude one's life successfully as an *ɔpanyin*, one should settle at home and watch that "the beans" do not get wet.

Behind the Image of the ɔpanyin

An *ɔpanyin* is an elect for the status of ancestor (*nana*).¹⁰ He is a gentleman — civilized, kind, patient, and composed — "cool," one could say. All his virtues and qualities can be summarised in one word: honour. J.B. Danquah described the ideal *ɔpanyin* as follows: He had married and been given in marriage with honour; he had bought or sold in open or private market with honour; he had been a member of the Asafo or company of fighting men with honour; he had taken wine and dined with men of honour; he had sowed and

reaped with honour; suffered famine or enjoyed plenty with honour; brought up children with honour; worshiped at shrines with honour; had suffered bereavement with honour; and above all, had joined with others, or acted by himself, to settle family and other disputes, bringing peace and increase to the family, with honour (1944, 122).

Ten times the word "honour." ... Having gone through this forest of metaphors and glorifying quotations around the *ɔpanyin*, one cannot help asking: But does such an ideal being really exist? Of course not. I shall illustrate this blunt answer with some observations in the house of my friend Nana Kwaku Agyei. It is not my intention to tarnish his reputation. I merely want to depict him as an ordinary human being who, at the end of his life (I did not know him before), was quite miserable, poor, and lonely. Partly as a result of circumstances, partly as a consequence of his own character. His wit and eloquence were attempts, sometimes desperate, to preserve his pride and honour in those difficult circumstances.

31 March 1994

Kwaku Agyei told us that his wife has left him, after thirty-two years of marriage because he was not able to take proper care of her. His daughter confirms this. When we visit the old lady, she denies she left him because of his poverty. She went away because he always quarreled: *Wosore a wo ne me reko* ("When you get up, you quarrel with me"). "He insulted me for nothing."

10 October 1994

Today I went to greet Kwaku Agyei. He was eating. A small girl (about five years old) was attending him. He gave her instructions in a peevish tone. The girl nicely and 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. 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. Kwakuy 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 *ɔpanyin* he always was to me. I found him a rather nasty and unkind old man.

16 October, 1994

Patrick Atuobi visits Kwaku Agyei. The old man complains about his sister: "She forces me to eat as if I am a small boy."

18 October, 1994.

Michael Buabeng and I visit him. During our conversation he cites a proverb, *Deɛ adeɛ wɔ no na odi, ɛnye deɛ ɛkɔm de no* ("The one who has the food will eat, not the one who is hungry"). We ask him why he cites it. He answers: "Because I am hungry but my sisters have the food. My sisters bought food for themselves and never bothered about me. My hunger does not interest them."

22 October, 1994

A "relative" has brought me a large amount of fufu with groundnut soup and chicken. I send someone with a part of the fufu and three pieces of meat to Kwaku Agyei. I know he has no teeth left and cannot chew the meat, but it is a kind gesture and he can give the meat to his sisters. Then, more fufu arrives from a friend. In the soup are tender pieces of fish. The old man will like that. Michael brings him some of the fish. When he returns, he tells me that Kwaku Agyei had given one piece of the chicken to his sisters. He had kept the two other pieces for himself, desperately trying to chew them with his toothless mouth. I can't help thinking of his eloquent explanations about the unselfish *panyin* and how different his actual life is. Later on in the afternoon, I pay a farewell visit to him as I am going home. I bring him a bottle of schnapps and ask him to pray. He produces a beautiful prayer:

Onyankopon Twiediampon come for some drink.

The youth of today don't want to play with the old,

But Kwaku Omari (my nickname) came from *Aburokyire* (Europe) and made friendship with me.

When he came, I told him a lot of things before he left.

Now he is back and even today he fed me.

May the spirits of the departed come for a drink.

May the spirits of those who departed from the Asona clan come for a drink.

May the spirits of Ayokoo come for a drink.

May the spirits of Aduana come for a drink.

May the spirits of Amonkare, Ada come for a drink.

May the spirits of Agona come for a drink.

Agona is from Bokuruwa.

Aduan is from Denkyira Akorokyere.

May all of you stand firm behind Kwaku Omari.

So that his works may go on well.

So that he will be able to get his food.

So that he will be able to get his clothes.

Oh God, and spirits of Aduana and Asona stand firm behind him.

That anyone who becomes jealous of his achievements cannot kill him or make him sick with juju.

I wish longer life to everyone here.

People should hear of us because of our riches,

People should hear of Kwaku Omari because of his success.

When people hear of him, it should not be in disgrace.

Once more I wish all of us here good health.

Here are drinks for you all ye spirits of the departed,

Guide him home and let him return again safely.

During the prayer, he pours libation but he takes care that not a drop of the schnapps get lost. He holds a little bowl under the bottle, and all the schnapps that is poured out is caught in the bowl. After finishing the prayer, he drinks the schnapps which was meant for the earth and the ancestors. A mean thought crosses my mind and disturbs the beauty of this moment: he not only robs his sisters of their part, but also the ancestors.

23 October 1994

A few minutes before I actually depart, I pay him a last visit to say good bye. He asks me directly where the money is which I am going to leave with him on the occasion of my departure.

Four months later, I received a letter that he had died.

16 August 1995

I returned to Ghana almost a year later. In Kantamanto Accra, I boarded the Kwahu-Tafo lorry, "God First," and found myself sitting next to someone who had known Kwaku Agyei well. We talked about Agyei, and I asked his opinion about the old man. "He had been lazy," was the quick and short reply. During his life, he had failed to provide his children with proper care because of his laziness. But he may have been unfortunate in his life, I objected, trying to defend the defenceless dead. Perhaps his health was poor;

perhaps his cocoa farm had burnt down (in fact, that is what Kwaku Agyei had told me: "After my cocoa farm was destroyed by fire, I have been useless"); perhaps his crops died of some disease. My co-traveller rejected all these apologies. In the past, everybody who worked hard would earn enough to at least send his children to school. Perhaps he could not give them the best of the best, but at least proper care and school education.

17 August 1995

I visit the sisters and the *wɔfase* (nephew) of the late Kwaku Agyei to give them my condolences and to pay a contribution towards the funeral expenses. We converse for some time about Agyei, and then I ask them what kind of man he had been. The sisters and the young man carefully choose their words: Kwaku Agyei was the son of a herbalist and it is well known that herbalists do not like to do hard farm work. Their clients bring them food, so there is no need for them to farm. Kwaku Agyei was like that; he did not like farming.... The judgement of my co-passenger is confirmed in polite terms.

Date unknown

When I discussed Kwaku Agyei's life with some people in the town, one of them made the following clichéd remark about his function as a gong-gong beater (town messenger):

Gong-gong beaters are usually people who are not hard-working. They sit in the chief's palace, hoping that people will be summoned to appear before the chief for an offence. They will then get a fraction of the amount collected from the culprit. They are also drinking all the time in the palace. When they go out to beat the gong-gong, people will give them some money. So, gong-gong beaters are not responsible and hard-working people.

29 August 1995

I visited Kwaku Agyei's favourite daughter and asked her to give her frank opinion about her father. When I said I often found him unkind and impatient towards others, especially to children, she agreed, but at the same time defended him:

D: You are right, but that attitude in him developed during his old age, especially when he became sick. You know that anyone with

pains easily becomes annoyed at the slightest incident that may happen. He was driving my own children away at times which looked strange, because he was not like that formerly. People around here can bear me out. When he was strong and could set traps in the bush, it was common to see him cooking meat and inviting the children from the neighbourhood to enjoy the meat whenever he had a good catch.

S: How did he care for his children?

D: We were three children, all girls, and he sent all of us to school. The eldest is now a chop bar operator in Accra and the last one is a seamstress in Oda. As for me, I was very close to my father, and he was petting me so much that I became spoiled and refused to obey his constant advice to learn a trade. He even bought a sewing machine for me so that I could learn sewing, but I refused to do so and he gave the machine to one of my relatives. By then I never thought he would be poor one day. He cared for us and was very fond of us.

Conclusion

"Successful aging" is a popular concept in the international gerontological literature (Rower and Kahn 1987; Fries 1990; Baltes and Baltes 1990; Garfein and Herzog 1995; Westendorp *et al.* 1996; Van Eijk 1997). That popularity is not surprising: a growing proportion of the world's population is old. Both policy-makers and researchers see the need of safeguarding the well-being of the elderly in a rapidly changing society. A dwindling young generation is no longer able to take care of their elderly co-citizens. "Successful aging," therefore, stresses elderly people's ability to take care of themselves. "Successfully old" are those who are physically fit and socially active and whose cognitive functions are intact. These three qualities determine the elderly person's measure of self-reliance.

The Akan equivalent of "successfully old," the *ōpanyin*, is strikingly different from the gerontological concept. For an Akan elder, being successful is not so much a matter of being self-reliant or independent, but of enjoying dependency. With some slight exaggeration, one could say the successful elderly in Europe or North America are those who do not behave as old people, but still look and behave like young ones. "Successful aging" amounts to being

"young" at an advanced age.

The concept of *panyin* stresses the opposite. An *panyin* is someone who is radically different from a young person: more patient, more careful, wiser, less selfish, more relaxed. Being dependent on others is not a sign of failure; it shows rather that one has been successful. Such a person has people at his disposal who respect and care for him. The care by relatives proves that one has lived a good life and is now being rewarded for it. "Successfully old" in Kwahu-Tafo, therefore, refers first of all to what has passed. One is successfully old if one's life has been a success, that is, if one has managed to feed and educate one's children and to build a proper house for the members of the family. An elderly person who has been successful during his active life can live comfortably during old age. His character and behaviour as an *panyin* follow logically from his successful past: he can afford to relax and to be kind and patient to all members of the community. But how common is this relaxed and comfortable state of *panyin*?

Most of the old at Kwahu-Tafo do not have a pleasant old age. For many, the days are boring. The house where they are staying may be empty during a large part of the day because the children go to school and the others to their farm. Few people pass their house. Those who do pass usually only greet them and continue on their way. The elderly often depend on hawkers for their lunch. The golden rule that children look after their parents, even if they live far away, is not always followed. Many of the old complained privately to me that their children sent too little money to help them to live somewhat comfortably. I believe them, although some may have exaggerated their plight in order to arouse my sympathy for them.

The respect they receive is rather superficial. Few of my old informants replied positively to my question of whether or not people come to them to listen to their stories and wisdom and to ask for their advice. I am afraid that those who did say that the young come to them for advice and traditional knowledge were trying to keep up their honour and defend their children rather than telling what actually happened. This absence of interest in the knowledge of the elderly is perhaps the most painful aspect of their old age. Their knowledge has become redundant and is no longer relevant to the present generation. Patrick Atuobi and I had the following conversation with *Okyeame Kwame Opoku*:

S: We know that the old have wisdom which they can give to the young. Do you think that young people are eager to get it? Do the young really approach the old for wisdom?

O: No. What the youth of today is interested in is money. All their attention is geared towards it. Anything you tell them which does not concern money goes past their ears. *Nea wo beka akyerɛ wɔn biara nam wɔn aso akyi.*¹¹

S: Let us have your own experience. We know you have done well in life and people respect you. Do your own nephews, nieces, and the young people in your house approach you for wisdom?

O: They don't come. How to get money is their main concern. At times when I manage to have them for conversation, they complain about lack of time and tell me that they are in a hurry to go and do this or that. We used to consult our elders before we embarked on whatever we did, but now it is not so.

The things one needs to know to become successful in life have changed completely. The history of the family, the boundary of the farm, the use of medicinal herbs, the traditional agricultural techniques, the knowledge of gods and prayers, the ability to solve riddles, the name of ancestors have all become quite useless to them. "My head is full of things, but I will go with them, because they do not come" (Nana Kwadwo Gyima). The things they do need to know to achieve something in life are not to be sought with the elderly.

Several colleagues who read an earlier version of this article found my view of the *ɔpanyin* passive and pessimistic. Stucki (1995), in her study of elders in Asante, presents a more active picture of the *ɔpanyin*. An *ɔpanyin* is an elderly person who has managed to manipulate the ambiguities of life to his own advantage and is now a respected person. An *ɔpanyin* is someone who has proven himself a "master in accumulating wealth and followers." Large financial contributions to the *abusua*, a lavish funeral, or the construction of a multi-story compound house are all important to create a good name in life and to leave a legacy so that the community will regard a person as worthy of ancestorhood (Stucki 1995, 103).

Bringing peace to the house and settling disputes between lineage members are other building stones of the status of *ɔpanyin* (Stucki 1995, 76). The *ɔpanyin*, in short, is self-made. "No one can

by design give birth to an *panyin*.¹² In her view, the *panyin* is not so much the unreal and holy near-ancestor from the proverbs, but the successful elder. He is the person who has been able to amass wealth and — in its wake — followers, clients, sympathisers. He has financed the education of his children and other relatives and helped them in various other ways. He has built one — or more — houses in his hometown. In Ghana, “success in becoming an elder depends on use of personal resources to initiate and maintain relationships among family and friends” (Stucki 1995, 76).

Such successful elders do indeed exist, and I have described one of them elsewhere (van der Geest 1998), but they are rare. Less rare, but harder to find, are those who command deep respect in spite of the fact that their life has not been a commercial success. Patrick Atuobi pointed out that his mother had been a real *panyin* because of her exemplary life. I apologise to all true *mpanimfo* for being so skeptical. To quote a proverb from my own culture, they are the exceptions that confirm the rule which I have tried to sketch in this essay. Danquah’s *panyin* has become a rare specimen, and I doubt it ever was a common one.

That the elderly are losing ground and status to the young is probably nowhere better illustrated than during funerals. Superficially viewed, both young and old seem to be united in one vigorous and emotional ritual, but on closer look, the differences appear. Funerals, which always have been the preeminent occasion for the elders to “shine,” are being taken over by the younger generation. At present, enormous amplifiers spew out the sounds of highlife music, which have drowned the drums and dances of the elders at the funeral ground. The traditional tasks of addressing the mourners and announcing their gifts are now carried out by a “jamboree,” a kind of disc jockey or entertainer, who mourns at funerals and makes jokes at wedding parties if you pay him. During funerals, the elders and their culture are literally blasted away by the technical and commercial advances of the new age. One may find them sitting quietly, watching the eclipse of their world.¹³

What is left to them are the proverbs which extol the virtues of the *panyin*. They constitute the building blocks of the construction of an impressive dream world in which the *panyin* excels in wisdom and civilised manners and takes care of the well-being of the *abusua*. The proverbs turn into a rhetorical weapon to defend their traditional position against the forces of a changing society.

The irony of it all, however, is that only a foreign anthropologist and his Ghanaian co-researchers come to listen to them.¹⁴

The “real” *ɔpanyin* exists mainly in proverbs. The word has become a euphemism to hide the painfulness of old age. *ɔpanyin* is an ideal, a dream, a title — not a person.

Notes

¹ *ɔkyeame* (often translated as “linguist”) is an official at the chief’s court. Yankah (1995, 3) describes the function of the *ɔkyeame* as “speaking for the chief”:

Being a counsellor and intermediary to the chief, he is responsible, among other things, for enhancing the rhetoric of the words the chief has spoken. In the absence of an *okyeame*’s editorial art, the royal speech act is considered functionally and artistically incomplete.

² According to Christaller (1933), an *abasiriwa* is a child from the ages of about six to fourteen. In Kwahu, the term is used for a man of middle age.

³ Bartle (1977) provides the following explanation of the term *mmaranteɛ*: *mara* (laws, customs) and *nɛ* (does not hear/ understand); those who do not yet understand the customs.

⁴ Other Akan groups include the Asante, Fante, Akyem, Akuapem, Bono and many other smaller groups. Some of the important anthropological studies of Akan culture are those by Rattray (1923, 1927, 1929), Busia (1951), Field (1960), Fortes (1969), Arhin (1979), and Oppong (1982). Studies dealing with Kwahu society include Bleek (1975, 1976a, 1976b), Bartle (1977), and Miescher (1997).

⁵ Rattray (1916, 23-24) provided the following etymology: “*nyin*, to grow up (the word used for “to reach puberty”), and *apa*, old, long lived. The word is used in various senses, one who is full of the wisdom of years of experience, and as a term of respect.” In other publications (Rattray 1929), he discussed only the formal functions of the *ɔpanyin*, as member of the chief’s council. Bartle (1977) was told that the term derives from *ɔpa* (polite term for waist) and *anyin* (has matured/grown). Danquah (1944, 122) explains the term as a compound of *pa* (good) and *nyin* (to grow): “One whose goodness has grown.” My co-researcher, Anthony Obeng Boamah, provided yet another etymology: *wapa* (he has passed) *nyin* (growing), meaning: “someone who has stopped growing (taller),” a “full-grown” person.

⁶ Apt (1996, 24), who did fieldwork in a Fante community, mentions two other disapproving references to elders who do not live up to people’s expectations: *ɔpanyin simpa*, which means ineffective elder, someone who is not consulted when decisions are made, and *ɔpanyin toto* (weak-minded elder).

⁷ Using proverbs to grasp the multivocality of the term *ɔpanyin* also has its limitations. The discussions that evolved around proverbial images conjured up a male-dominated and traditional setting at the expense of two important appearances of the *ɔpanyin*: the female *ɔpanyin* and the Christian *ɔpanyin*. In theory, everyone agrees that women, too, can be *ɔpanyin*, but in ordinary language, the term has its hiccups. The old lady, Yaa Amponsaa, said that I could call her *ɔpanyin* Yaa Amponsaa, but when Boadu typed the transcript of the interview, he laughed his head off. "Yerekɔ *ɔpanyin* Yaa Amponsaa" (we are too going to *ɔpanyin* Yaa Amponsaa) sounded "too funny." All the others agreed: no one would ever say such a thing. No one would use *ɔpanyin* as a title for an elderly lady. But an elderly and important lady *could* be called *ɔbaa panyin* (woman *ɔpanyin*).

A new type of *ɔpanyin* emerged with the coming of Christianity. Teachers and catechists (*akrakyefoɔ*) became a new elite who were supposed to set the same example of good manners and wisdom as the "traditional" *ɔpanyin*. The history of the construction of this new style *ɔpanyin* has been studied by Miescher (1997), who did fieldwork in the Kwahu town of Abetifi. Appiah's (1992) philosophical and autobiographical essay contains a homage to his father Joe Appiah (1918-90) as a new version of the *ɔpanyin*. Joe Appiah was a respected politician and Christian.

⁸ Elsewhere (van der Geest 1996), I have discussed this interesting phenomenon in detail. In total, I collected twelve different interpretations of "elbow." That number would certainly have grown, if I had continued asking people about it.

⁹ *Wukudae* is a "holy" Wednesday (once in six weeks) which traditionally was devoted to honouring the ancestors. People were not allowed to go to their farm or do any other work (Rattray 1923, 92-112).

¹⁰ In his ethnography of another community, the Anufo in Northern Ghana, Kirby (1986) gives an impressive account of these people's main concern in life: reaching the status of ancestor. More than among the Kwahu, their ideal "*ɔpanyin*" lives at the other side of death.

¹¹ Opoku's reference to money here is negative, but money is also seen as a positive value, bringing honour and togetherness to the old and their *abusua* (van der Geest 1997).

¹² That one does not automatically become an *ɔpanyin*, just by growing older, is vividly expressed in a pun and proverb which Jon Kirby heard many years ago from an old man: *Wo pa nyin a, ennye se woye ɔpanyin* ("If your genitals are grown, it does not mean you are an *ɔpanyin*").

¹³ Elsewhere, I have discussed the ambivalent attitudes of elderly people towards their own funeral (van der Geest 1995).

¹⁴ The lack of interest of Ghanaians in their own culture and tradition is

alarming, also at the academic level. The number of historians, as well as of social, cultural, and linguistic scientists, who have produced significant work is minimal. (There are excellent exceptions, fortunately.) To give two disconcerting examples: The Twi Dictionary by a Swiss missionary (Christaller 1933) has still not been replaced by a better one, and Christaller's collection of Twi proverbs (1879) was only republished with an English translation in 1990, by an American missionary (Lange 1990).

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