



Respect and reciprocity: Care of elderly people in rural Ghana

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Abstract. This article deals with ideas and practices of care of elderly people in a rural Kwahu community of Ghana. It is part of a larger project on social and cultural meanings of growing old. Four questions are addressed: What kind of care do old people receive? Who provides that care? On what basis do people care for the old or do they feel obliged to do so? And finally, what are the changes taking place in the field of care for old people? Concepts of respect and reciprocity take a central position in accounts of care and lack of care. The article is based on anthropological fieldwork, mainly conversations with 35 elderly people and observations in their daily lives.

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This essay is based on fieldwork which I carried out intermittently between 1994 and 2000 in a rural town of southern Ghana called Kwahu-Tafo. The mainly Kwahu inhabitants of the town belong to the approximately seven million, matrilineal Akan living in the south of the country. The aim of the research was to describe and understand the position of elderly people in this rapidly changing society.

The research involved conversations with 35 elderly people. All conversations were taped and transcribed. Some people I conversed with only once or twice, others more often, up to ten times. Apart from these long conversations, I often went to greet the old people informally and had brief 'chats' with them. These more casual visits enabled me to make observations about their daily life and the attitudes of other people in the same house. Some local friends became co-researchers and accompanied me on many visits. Most of my observations were recorded in an elaborate diary which I kept throughout the various periods 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 and with other key informants. Focus group discussions were held with young people and groups of middle-aged men and women. In three schools of the area students answered 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.

My research was interpretive; I tried to make sense out of what people, the elderly and the others, were saying and doing. My attempt – to use Geertz' pictorial expression – was to read over their shoulders what they were reading about themselves.

There are no clear-cut rules for this type of research. The anthropologist moves around in a hermeneutic circle, which he shares with the people who are the subjects of his study (cf. Neugarten 1985: 292). The 'knowledge' he produces is, to quote Geertz (1973: 23) again, "intrinsically incomplete" and "essentially contestable".

Introspection (or reflection) was an indispensable tool in my interpretive research. Subjectivity is unavoidable in anthropological research, but it is also an asset. The implicit comparison between 'my' and 'their' experience is a prerequisite for understanding 'them'. If we do not recognize anything from ourselves in them, our data will remain stale and meaningless. It will be like reading a novel on people and events which do not touch us in any way. If there is nothing we share with the characters of the story, not even their desires or anxieties, we take no interest in them and do not understand them. We will never finish the book anyway.

Instead of suppressing his personal views and feelings the researcher should carefully examine them and use them in his conversation, observation and participation. By exposing himself to his informant he may reach a deeper level of mutual understanding and appreciation. When Desjarlais (1991: 394) asked an old man in Nepal what happens if one's heart is filled with grief, the man smiled and gave the best possible answer: "You ask yourself."

When evaluating possible interpretations of dialogues I sometimes closed my eyes and asked myself: Does it apply to me? What would I do? Would I think or feel the same thing? I underscore Atwood's and Tomkins' observation: "No theorist puts forward definitive statements on the meaning of being human unless he feels those statements constitute a framework within which he can comprehend his own experiences (cited in Wengle 1987: 368). The underlying assumption is that there is a similarity in the human experience all over the world (cf. Jackson 1989). Of course that assumption sounds crude and simplistic in this way and borders on ethnocentrism, but it will bring us further in the attempt to understand others than will an approach that involves distance and objectivity.

Introspection always alternated with discussions with Ghanaian co-researchers. Most conversations with the elderly involved two of us, myself and a co-researcher. During and after the conversation we exchanged our views on what had been said and what had remained unsaid. Sometimes the elderly person took part in that reflection. After reading the transcription we again discussed how to interpret the various statements and what new

questions arose from this conversation. Our next meeting with an elderly person often followed ‘naturally’ from the previous one. ‘Collecting’ information and ‘analyzing’ it were one and the same act. Moving from myself, to the elderly (and/or his relatives), to my co-researchers, back to myself, and again to the elderly I slowly deepened and broadened my understanding of what growing old meant to them – and, in a sense, increasingly also to me. Reflecting on this continuous movement between informants in- and outside me, I would characterize the research approach not as a circle but as a ‘hermeneutic shuttle’, which is unlikely to stop in the near future.

Two brief remarks on the concept of ‘old’ will be useful here. Firstly, however strange this may sound, in the Twi language spoken in Kwahu-Tafo there is no equivalent to the English adjective ‘old’, at least not with regard to human beings. People use the verb *nyin* (‘to grow’) for the state of being old. They will say about an elderly person: ‘*wanyin*’ (“he/she has grown”). The verb *nyin* suggests a linear process. Life, certainly in their language, is not imagined as a cycle but as an ever-continuing development. To be ‘more grown’ than someone else, therefore, implies having more life experience, indeed being more human.

Secondly, ‘old’ is not merely reckoned in terms of number of years, but, ideally, is also based on one’s situation and status: having children and grandchildren, having returned home to stay with the family (*abusua*),¹ behaving like an elder (*ɔpanyin*)² which implies self-control, giving advice to younger people and showing kindness and patience to others. That these ideas are not always achieved – as will also be shown in this article – is another matter.

My ethnographic interpretation of the life and well-being of elderly people resulted in an extremely diverse picture. Some of the elderly clearly enjoyed their old age. They lived comfortably, in their own house, surrounded by children and grandchildren. They were well-fed and had company throughout the day. Others were miserable, lonely, poor and hungry. Reading through my field notes and the conversation transcriptions, I tried to discover some common underlying themes in these diverse experiences of old age. In this essay, which is mainly descriptive, I discuss one extremely important aspect of elderly people’s lives: care. Four questions will be addressed: What kind of care do old people receive? Who provides that care? On what basis do people care for the old or do they feel obliged to do so? And finally, what are the changes taking place in the field of care for old people?

A daughter takes care of her old father

Agya Mensah is around one hundred years old. About sixty years ago he came to Kwahu-Tafo as a wood splitter. He married a local woman and had

nine children with her. Agya Mensah is blind. The blindness started 16 years ago. Veronica, his daughter who looks after him, says: "When he wakes up in the morning, he opens his door. Then I come in to check his condition. I take his urine and throw it away. In case he has eased himself in the chamber pot, I carry it away from the room." When we ask her what the old man is doing during the day, she answers: "He eats, sleeps, wakes up and eats." She cooks food for him, washes his clothes, and brings him water to bathe. He is able to bathe himself in the bathroom. A long rope extending from his room to the toilet enables him to find his own way.

Sometimes people come to greet him but very few stay for some conversation. There is little he can talk about except the past, since most events in the town pass by without him noticing them. His daughter and grandson say they do converse with him but that conversation is probably very limited. Veronica says that he used to tell her about his life in the past, how he moved to the Afram Plains and to Kwahu and how he lived with her mother, "but nowadays, because of the state in which he is, I don't really bother him too much. I just ask him his condition every morning."

Veronica was staying with her husband in Kumasi when she realised that her old parents needed someone to help them. She asked her husband permission to go and look after them. He agreed. This happened eleven years ago. Her mother died four years ago at the age of 95 and now she continues to look after her old father. Every two weeks, she says, she goes to Kumasi to visit her husband and spends some days with him. During those days one of her sisters looks after the father. We ask her why she, out of all the children, is the one looking after the father. In addition, we ask if she is happy about her situation, living away from her husband. "It is not happiness, but it has just happened that I should come and stay here. The rest of my sisters claim they can't leave their husband, their children and their work. So I have to sacrifice myself and come. When I first came, some of my children were staying with my mother who looked after them. When I remembered the sort of help she gave me and how she looked after my children throughout their school time, I knew I also had to do something for her when she became old. And when she died, I could not leave my father alone." Does it mean that she loves her parents more than her brothers and sisters? "I cannot tell. When you are born, not all children are the same. The fingers are not of the same length. Some children may be more helpful than others."

What would she have done, if the husband had not agreed? "I don't have any power. The Bible says the husband is the head of the woman and the man's head is Christ, and the head of Christ is God, so I begged him. I said my parents were very old. If I had not gone to help them and they had died,

people would have insulted me for not looking after my parents, so there was no need for me to come to their funeral.”

Care

At first I expected that care activities would represent the easiest part of the research. Old age is a complex concept and gives rise to philosophical and psychological ruminations, full of euphemisms and symbolic references. Care, on the other hand, seemed a rather unambiguous affair, an observable fact. When the research began to take shape, however, it soon became clear that care, both as a concept and as a practice, was highly ambiguous.

The evasiveness of care as a research topic stems from the fact that people are likely to say very different things about the care they give or receive, depending on the context in which the conversation takes place and the mood of the person involved. Embarrassment over the little care they receive from their children may induce elderly people to conceal that painful truth and to praise their children for their love and good help. One does not wash one's dirty linen in the street, as the proverb goes in many languages including Twi: *Yensi yen ntamago wɔ abɔnten*. Yet the opposite may also occur. When an old person is in a bitter mood, he may be rather inclined to make his plight known and publicly accuse his relatives of negligence. The likelihood of such a reaction will increase further if the old person expects help from the one he is talking to (a foreign anthropologist, for example).

The relatives and those who are supposed to provide care are also likely to produce contradictory accounts. They too may prefer to hide their shame of failing to provide proper care for the elderly. They may otherwise opt to show openly their poverty and lack of means and their inability to provide care, hoping to get help from the listener. It is even likely to hear contradictory claims and complaints within one and the same interview. And finally, frustrations about the limited care given by fellow relatives may incite some to accuse their family members unduly of negligence.

The English term 'care' has various shades of meaning. Its two basic constituents are emotional and technical/practical. The latter refers to carrying out concrete activities for others who may not be able to do them alone. Parents take care of their children by feeding them, providing shelter, educating and training them, and so forth. Healthy people take care of sick ones and young people of old ones. Technically, care has a complementary character, one person completes another one. 'Care' also has an emotional meaning, it expresses concern, dedication, and attachment. To do something with care or carefully implies that one acts with special devotion. Depending on its context, one aspect may dominate, indeed overrule, the other. In 'health

care' the term has assumed an almost entirely technical meaning (although this may now change with the increase of chronically ill people). In personal relationships the emotional meaning prevails ("I care for you"; "I don't care").

The Twi term closest to 'care' is *hwε so* which literally means 'to look upon' or, more freely, 'to look after'. The visual connotation of *hwε so* is not unknown in English, as is shown by the term 'looking after', but it is remarkable that *hwε so* is the only term available in Twi. With some speculation I want to suggest that it heralds the strong association between care and respect, which is very much a matter of the eye, as I will argue towards the end of this article.

The philosopher Heidegger chose the concept of 'care' (*Sorge*) to characterise the structure of being. In his *Sein und Zeit* he argues that 'caring' (*sorgen*) captures the two basic movements of human existence: towards the other and towards the future. To *be*, for a human person, means to *be with others*, to be oriented towards the presence of other people. Dealing with others implies some measure of care, some degree of practical and emotional involvement. Being with others in the world, according to Heidegger, necessarily includes caring for and being cared for.

Sorge, in its more practical meaning, also implies an orientation towards the future. Being human is moving forward, projecting oneself, being ahead of oneself, *sich vorweg schon sein*. If I understand him correctly, he argues that the act of caring for oneself and for others and the attitude of 'carefulness' typifies being a 'human being'; to 'care' is the essence, the structure of being.

Tronto, a political scientist, also regards care as one of the central activities of human life (Tronto 1993). She distinguishes four, interconnected phases of care: caring about, taking care, care-giving and care-receiving, moving from awareness and intention to actual practice and response. The four phases parallel four ethical elements involved in care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness. Care is the process that sustains life. Care, according to Tronto, represents the moral quality of life, but that moral quality needs to be transformed into a political reality.

To be a morally good person requires, among other things, that a person strives to meet the demands of caring that present themselves in his or her life. For a society to be judged as a morally admirable society, it must, among other things, adequately provide for care of its members and its territory (Tronto 1993: 126).

The American philosopher Mayerhoff (1971), in his long essay *On caring*, contrasts 'care' with 'power': "In the sense in which a man can ever be said to be at home in the world, he is at home not through dominating or

explaining, but through caring and being cared for . . .” In his view, people actualise themselves by caring for others, one could say, but that self-interest is not its goal. Mayerhoff (1971: 1), “To care for another person, in the most significant sense, is to help him grow and actualise himself Caring is the antithesis of simply using the other person to satisfy one’s own needs.” In true caring, writes Mayerhoff, the other person is experienced as both an extension of myself and as separate from me, someone to be respected in his own rights. In that idealistic picture of caring is devotion to the other. The obligation to care, which derives from that devotion is not experienced as forced upon me. What I *want* to do and what I am *supposed* to do converge. He provides the following example: “The father who goes for the doctor in the middle of the night for his sick child does not experience this as a burden; he is simply caring for the child” (p. 9). It illustrates what he means by “the other as an extension of myself.”

In Mayerhoff’s view of ‘care’ the concept of reciprocity becomes superfluous. If the other I care for is experienced as an extension of myself, I do not need any ‘payback’. Caring, in that sense, is indirect self-fulfilment. That view fits the care given by parents to their children but much less the care of children for their parents. Looking at my experiences – observations and conversations – in Kwahu-Tafo, I am convinced of the crucial importance of reciprocity in allotting – or denying – care to elderly people. And I am equally convinced that the eyes of the beholders – people involved in caring as well as onlookers – also contribute to caring and not-caring.

Western notions of care should be handled with caution in a radically different social, cultural and economic environment as in Kwahu-Tafo. Tronto (1993: 103) warns that “the activity of caring is largely defined culturally, and will vary among different cultures.” There is only one way to figure out what care is in a particular cultural setting: by listening to those who are directly involved in it and by observing their actions. I shall first describe the various activities of care, which are carried out for the elderly in Kwahu-Tafo and then discuss their social and cultural grounds through my conversations with both the elderly and those who care – or are supposed to care.

Activities of care

Some of the most common activities for which elderly people need the help of others include: getting food, taking a bath, washing clothes, and going to the toilet. Helping them financially and providing company are tokens of care, which are also indispensable. Finally and, in they eyes of many, the most important type of ‘care’ is the organisation of a fitting funeral when the elder dies.

Food

When we asked the elderly about the type of care they received, food was by far the most frequently discussed topic. Getting something to eat is the most concrete aspect of daily survival for them. For those who provide care it is the most regularly returning type of care that is expected from them. What to eat, when, who will bring it, etc. filled a great deal of our conversations with the elderly. It especially occupies the minds of those for whom the arrangements for food are haphazard. They often have no fixed plan about which food is being provided. What food is brought, by whom, at what time, depends often on coincidence. The old person may have an abundance of food on one day and very little on another. People who live near him often improvise; they bring food when they see he is without and don't when others have brought some.

Some fend for themselves and manage to prepare their own meals or go and buy their food at the market or in a 'chop bar'. Pages could be filled with the story of one old man, nearly blind, who stubbornly went to buy his food at the market, although the family was willing to prepare meals for him. The man seemed obsessed by fear that someone would poison him and, for that reason, did not even send a child to buy food for him. Fortunately, for many, obtaining food is less hazardous. They get their meals at more or less regular times, from – again, more or less – the same person. Maame Adofoa, for example, a mentally disturbed old lady gets her morning and afternoon meals from a granddaughter who stays with her in the same house: "I give her something from what I eat" ("*Nea medi no na mema no bi di.*") Her evening meals come from her son's wife who lives about ten minutes walking distance away. On Mondays and Thursdays the woman does not prepare meals because she is then out of town to trade.

Many old people, who are sure to have their evening meals, may have to do some improvisation in the afternoon when the relatives have left the house. Some eat leftovers from the day before or the morning meal, some send for food or buy from a passing hawkker and some skip their meals. One elder, *ɔpanyin* Kwame Frempong, told us, for example, that his daughter often brought him food, but that he never knew beforehand what day she would come.

A boy brought some food while we were conversing. We realised that the food came from the wife of his son. *ɔpanyin* Frempong later told us that he received supper from his son's wife everyday, whether the husband was in town or not. He said that his son had instructed his wife to send food to him everyday and moreover, he said, it was the tradition that daughters-in-law send supper to their father-in-law everyday. When my co-researcher entered

another room of the house, he caught the boy eating from the food which his mother had sent to his grandfather.

Although it is not possible to draw a general picture of the way old people get their meals, one may venture that a completely fixed pattern is somewhat exceptional. Everyday is likely to have its variations, surprises and disappointments as far as food is concerned. The people in the house are often mobile and may not be around because of 'business' elsewhere such as farming, trading, visiting relatives, and attending funerals. Failing to cook due to sickness is also not uncommon. As a matter of fact, for the non-elderly too, eating patterns may be 'whimsical'. Children, for example, may eat at different times and in different places depending on the occasion. The difference, however, is that the elderly cannot go out to find something to eat.

Some of the elderly were not at all clear about their eating 'programme'. *Opanyin* Frempong, as we have just seen, first said that he only received food about twice a week from his daughter. When, by accident, we discovered another source of food, he revealed that his son's daughter cooked for him daily. Finally, the food situation and financial problems may cause unpleasant surprises. During part of my stay there was little else in the farms and in the market than corn and cassava. Food arrangements present a kaleidoscope of variations in terms of quality, quantity and regularity.

Bathing

Another important aspect of care concerns bathing. Someone has to collect the water and carry it to the bathroom. Preferably the water should be warm, so someone should heat it, but another common method is to put the bucket in the sun and leave it there so that the water turns warm. Some elderly may not be able to get to the bathroom. In this case, they either take baths in their room or may be bathed by someone, most likely a female relative. Most 'ordinary' people take their bath once a day, usually in the morning. Some take it twice. The old person may at times feel too tired or cold to take his bath and skip it. Carrying someone's water to the bathroom is a characteristic gesture of respect. A woman may do it for her husband, young people for the aged. It is not nice (*enyɛ fɛ*) if an old person has to carry his own water to the bathroom. It is seen as either a sign of disrespect on the part of those who stay with him/her in the same house or an indication of loneliness. Here are some quotations from the elderly that describe how they started the day:

I had my bath before taking my breakfast. It was my daughter who put the hot water in the bathroom for me.

I have not taken my bath because I am feeling cold.

I myself collected some water from a tank in the house and put it in the sun to warm.

The granddaughter gave her some hot water to take her bath. No one helped her to bath. She did the bathing in her bedroom. The granddaughter later on swept the water out of the room.

The daughter of a woman who has been bedridden since she had a stroke told me that she bathed her mother about twice a week on the veranda in her house.

The following observation from my diary helps to visualise the old people's bath.

It is about eleven o'clock when I enter *ɔpanyin* Kwaku Nyame's house to greet him. He is about to take his bath. One of his grandchildren takes the water, which has been warming in the sun, to the bathroom. The old man moves very carefully across the compound to the bathroom. In his right hand, his stick, in his left, a small wooden stool to support himself. He pushes the stool slowly ahead. It takes several minutes before he reaches the other side. Halfway he meets a heap of chicken dung, which forces him to slightly change his route. He sits down on a piece of cement in the bathroom. The grandchild, who has been playing with two other children, comes to him, takes the towel from his neck and hangs it over the low wall, which separates the bathroom from the bucket latrine. He starts to wash himself. He does not need anyone's help, not yet. When I return half an hour later, he is just arriving back at his room and trying to lift his foot over the threshold.

Cleanliness is an important value in Akan culture. If old people become negligent in taking their bath and their relatives do not interfere, the old person loses dignity. Uncleanliness and a bad smell are unmistakable signs of neglect and loss of respect.

Clothes

The same applies to the way old people are dressed. Torn and dirty clothes seriously affect the esteem which should be awarded to them. Going about shabbily dressed, old people not only present their own degradation but are – in a literal sense – also the proverbial 'dirty linen' of the *abusua* which can be seen by everyone in the street. When we asked *ɔpanyin* Yaw Donkor to give his opinion about an *ɔpanyin* who goes about in shabby clothes, he answered: Relatives are therefore seen as the ones that should take care of the washing of the old person's clothes, and also provide him/her with new clothes. Most of the elderly are also conscious of their status as elder, which includes proper dress.

*Toilet*³

People in Kwahu-Tafo are concerned about constipation, which they regard as the cause of a whole range of health problems (cf. Van der Geest 1998c). They are scrupulous about daily visits to the toilet. For most of them this is the first activity of the day, after which they take their bath and have breakfast. Old people usually try to stick to this practice as long as possible, but as they gradually become more dependent on others that habit may change as most people do not have a toilet in their own house.

About seventy percent of the population of Kwahu-Tafo depends on one of the two public toilets in town. Since most people go there early – some very early – in the morning, it is not uncommon to see people queuing in front of it around 7:00 a.m. Two public toilets is, of course, too few for a town of approximately 5,000 people. Obviously, a visit to the toilet is cumbersome for everyone but especially for the old. For some of them the distance to the toilet is too great. Moreover, for the respected elder a visit to a public toilet is particularly difficult, both for reasons of social esteem and physical discomfort. It is not surprising that some of them try to avoid this painful road by making an arrangement with the owner of a nearby private toilet.

Agya Mensah, who is blind, has his own bucket latrine near his house. As mentioned before, a long rope leads from his room to the toilet so that he can find it without anyone's help. This was his son's idea. Two other elderly people use the same toilet. They had 'begged' the old man's daughter who gave them permission to use it.

Some old people need help going to the toilet. One old man, whose eyesight is poor, is helped by his wife and sometimes by a tenant. "They are my left hand to the toilet," he says. Some old people ease themselves in their room and call someone in the house to remove the chamber pot and empty it. One elder cited this service to old people as a typical example of respect and kindness.

Other chores

Another sometimes burdensome activity is keeping an eye on an old person who needs constant surveillance. One old lady was confused and could suddenly leave the house and get lost. The granddaughter who looked after her sometimes became desperate because of this constant pressure on her.

Other chores and activities of care include sweeping the old person's room or compound and doing all kinds of errands when the old person calls. Some blind, old people complained that they do not know who is around. When they hear someone they may call that person without knowing who it is. In that case the one they call to – supposedly a child – may sneak away. *ɔpanyin*

Kwasi Menu upset a lot of people when he ostentatiously started to sweep the surroundings of the house, which was typically an activity which did not befit an *panyin*, at least not a male *panyin*.

However, the old person in the house may continue to do odd jobs to be useful to the others. A good, elderly person is willing to perform petty tasks in the house. Nana Akua Mansah was about 75. She lived with her daughter and her daughter's children in one house. When we visited her she told us that she rose at 4:00 a.m. Around 6:00 a.m. she ground pepper for the *kenkey*⁴ which was sold at the house. If her daughter and the grandchildren were not at home, she sold the *kenkey* to the clients who came to the house. Many of them were school children. Around 10:30 she swept the compound and her room. At 3:30 p.m. she again swept the compound and at 4 p.m. she ground new pepper for her daughter's *kenkey*. About 15 minutes later she started to prepare some food for herself and the other people in the house. One of her grandchildren pounded the *fufu*⁵ while she turned it.

One old man was staying in a room of a big house being constructed by his son, who lived in Japan. The old man made himself useful by serving as a caretaker at the site. There were many building materials lying around which he watched over together with one of his grandchildren.

Remittance

The mobility of people and the growing importance of money for survival have changed the pattern of care considerably. Few children of the elderly person may be around and those who are away are expected to contribute their share by sending money and items such as food, clothes and soap. By doing so, they take part in the care from a distance. It is rather difficult to get a clear picture of the quality of remitting being practised. The most contradictory claims were made about money that was being sent to help in the upkeep of old people.

I had the following conversation with a man taking care of his old mother, who was blind and could not walk:

- I. Your mother now has six children alive, do you receive any help from them to look after your mother?
- M. Well, the rest of my brothers and sisters were helping sometime ago, but now they are not here, so most of the help for my mother comes from me.
- I. Do you receive money from them?
- M. Occasionally, when they pass by.

Mr. Mensah (M), a retired head teacher, assured me that his children looked after him very well:

- I. Are they all contributing to your care?
 M. They are all doing it . . . All the clothes are bought by them. They buy them for me.
 I. So, they don't so much give you money but rather buy things for you?
 M. No, they give me money too, to buy food and so on.

The accounts of remittance varied enormously. Some elderly people seemed to receive considerable help from their children, while others received practically nothing. Another observation was that nearly always the elderly person, or the one who was responsible for his/her upkeep, found that the (other) children did not do enough in terms of financial help. This was likely to cause some ill will and a feeling of betrayal within the one who volunteered to actually take care of the old person.

Company

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

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

- F. Agya, you know a lot of history and tradition. We have come to listen to you today. Do people come to you as we have come today to listen to traditional history?
 S. No.

- F. People don't come to you?
 S. No.
 F. Do visitors come to converse with you?
 S. Sometimes, when somebody is walking past he branches (comes to me) and greets me.
 F. When such a person comes to greet you, does he converse with you?
 S. After greeting me, he asks: *Wo ho te sen?* (How are you?) And I respond: *Me ho ye* (I am fine).
 F. It means people don't especially come to sit and talk with you but rather they casually enter to greet you and go?
 S. Yes.
 F. Why doesn't anybody come to listen to your talk?
 S. It is only when you come that I shall tell you. If you don't come but stay in your house I cannot call you to come and listen to traditional stories.

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

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

We should not forget, however, that all the elderly people we conversed with live with others in one house. The architecture of the houses (a compound surrounded by rooms) and the style of living (outside, in front of the room) prevents the type of loneliness that is so common in 'Western' houses that provide maximal privacy. A remark by someone in De Witte's study of funerals in Asante hits the mark:

In a compound house, there are always people around. If something happens, you shout and immediately your people or your neighbours will come and help you. They see and they hear what is going on. But in such a modern house, with a high wall all around and a warning at the gate that a ferocious dog is protecting the place, who is coming to help you when something happens to you? Nobody! (De Witte 2001).

Many of the elderly have people around them throughout the day. When they sit in front of their room they can watch what is going on in the compound: mothers bathing their babies, children sweeping, people returning from farming and spreading groundnuts over the yard to be dried in the sun, women washing clothes, others preparing meals, children playing, etc. Their situation cannot be compared to the loneliness of some old people in my own society, for whom a day may pass without them having seen one living person.

*Funerals*⁶

The funeral should be regarded as a kind of care as well. If care can be defined as doing things for people which they can no longer do for themselves, performing a funeral certainly fits this category. It is the *abusua*'s ultimate care for the old person. Ultimately, not only in the sense of last but also, in the view of most, the most decisive, the most elaborate and the most expensive. A funeral is regarded as the culmination of the care the family provided while the deceased was still alive. In the funeral the *abusua* pays tribute to one of its members. It publicly shows its respect and affection for the deceased.

If the previous sections may appear a catalogue of diminishing care for the elderly, this certainly does not apply to funerals. Funerals have proved tremendously resilient in the face of profound social and cultural changes and it is fair to say that their importance has even increased in the present age. An explanation for this remarkable development must be sought in the fact that funerals not only bestow honour on the deceased but also on the family. This is, of course, true for every form of care. Good care for its elderly members will yield praise and admiration for the family. At the same time, those who fail to look properly after their aged will be criticised and insulted. But this double effect of good care is nowhere so prominent as in the care provided through funerals. Caring activities such as feeding, bathing, cleaning, remitting money and visiting are house affairs which will only partly become known to the outside. However, performing a fitting funeral is a public thing. The entire community participates in it and judges its quality. If the family is praised it will be public honour, if it is criticised, it will be public disgrace. Organising a funeral is 'family care' in a double sense: care *by* the family and care *of* the family.

Who cares?

The second question I want to address is: who is supposed to take responsibility for elderly people who have become dependent on care? And who

is actually doing it? Changes in the management of family affairs and in society at large (cf. Apt 1993, 1996: 34–46) have cast uncertainty over the first question. I single out four developments, which have had a particularly strong impact on the organisation of care.

The first is the growing ambiguity around family solidarity. Opong (1974) described a process, which started several decades ago: the shift in loyalty from lineage to conjugal family. Middle-class, urbanised Akan families began to try and keep non-nuclear relatives at bay and to avoid claims by the *abusua* on their income and possessions. At the same time, they wanted to maintain ties to the matrilineage whenever they considered this advantageous to themselves. This manoeuvring between *abusua* and conjugal family has now become a general phenomenon and is no longer restricted to the urbanised middle-class. As a result, family relations are uncertain and loyalties may change depending on what is at stake. Support and actual care during sickness or old age are difficult to find outside the nuclear family whereas funerals still mobilise the entire *abusua*.

A second development affecting care-giving is the increase of migration. Elderly people in rural towns may have few – or no – children in the vicinity. Those who would be the most probable providers of care, may not be available at all. Some may have found employment in the country's cities or larger towns, others have travelled abroad.

The monetisation of life, the third development, enables absent children to provide 'care from a distance'. They promise to send financial support to the person who does the actual caring. But, as we have seen, that person often complains that her brothers and sisters do not keep their promise and fail to send sufficient money.⁷

The fourth development is the shift in the appreciation of knowledge and wisdom as a result of school education and general changes in society. The knowledge of the elderly, based on long life experience, is no longer relevant to the younger generation, which needs other information to succeed in life. This has decreased the young's desire to live close to the elders and has to some extent marginalised the latter.

All these developments take place in a country where formally organised professional care for the elderly does not exist. In the entire country not a single institution for care of elderly people exists. The only facilities available in Accra – and perhaps a few other places – are day care centres where elderly people can meet each other, pass the time with games and other activities and receive a good meal. In Kwahu-Tafo such a facility does not exist.

This brief description of changes affecting care for the elderly seems to suggest that care was better and more guaranteed in the past. I am inclined to accept that suggestion, but there is hardly any reliable data to confirm it.

Some caution must be used when elderly people start praising the past and condemning the present.

Let me now turn to the question of who, according to my informants, should take care of the elderly.

The children before the abusua

The major change in the allocation of responsibility is a shift of emphasis from the *abusua* (matrilineal relatives) to the children. My co-researcher Patrick Atuobi (P) asked *Ɔkyeame*⁸ Opoku (O) the meaning of a proverb: *Ɔpanyin a wɔanyin dan mma* (An elder who has grown old depends on his children).

- O. It means that the young are responsible for the care of their aged. It should not be the parents alone, they should care for all the relatives.
- P. Who is responsible for the upkeep of a person who is so old that he cannot work?
- O. If through the blessing of God he has children, they are responsible for his upkeep. If your relatives take care of you, they won't do it as well as your own children. Moreover, the quality of the attention of your own children depends on how well you looked after them. Children are willing to look after their parents but lack of proper work prevents them from doing so.
- P. Sometime ago it was the practice for each married person to live in his or her own family house (*abusua fie*). Who was, in that case, to look after the man when he became weak because of old age?
- O. If they had not separated, the wife provided him with food and water, but if they had separated, the relatives had to care for him. That care was not satisfactory, however, unless you had some property that the relatives could get after your death, or if you were able to help some of the relatives in their education or in some other way.
- P. Don't you think there is a sort of forced responsibility on sisters, brothers and nephews to look after an old man who is staying in the *abusua fie*?
- O. [Laughter] You are funny. If you did not live a proper life in your youth, they may not even give you food. When you call a nephew he will say don't worry me, you *akwakora bofoɔ* (bad, old man). Sadness usually kills such old people.
- P. So no matter where a man is staying, it is the responsibility of the children to care for him?
- O. Yes, if you took good care of them and they are well off, they will put up a house for you and take you out of the *abusua fie*. For the relatives,

it may be their wish that you die for them to be free from the problem you present. But if you were able to take good care of your children, they will look after you well.

[A visitor (V) who came in a little while ago wanted to give his views.]

- V. Most of these problems are the result of divorce. It is better for a man and a woman to stay together to the end. Then their children will take good care of them.
- P. So, you think it is the children who should look after both parents in old age?
- O. Yes, because it is the same with a woman: if you were not able to provide assistance to your relatives when you were young, you will be neglected by them when you are old unless you have children. Just now my brother [the visitor] was telling us that divorce is bad. I agree and even the commandments of God say so. But what about if one partner is presenting unbearable problems to the other? If such a thing happens to you and you don't seek a divorce, you will die. So I don't agree with him.

The main conclusion that can be drawn from his remarks is that nowadays it is the children who are held responsible in the first place. Help from the *abusua* may be added if the elderly person has helped members of the *abusua* during his active life. Indeed, if someone takes care of relatives other than his children, those relatives will care for him in old age when his own children are not available. That is why people are still advised to care for both sides if they can afford it. As the proverb goes: *Wusum brodeε a, sum kwadu* (If you support the plantain, support the banana also). If that is not the case, it would be foolish to count on the *abusua*. If you ask your nephew to help you he may just call you a bad, old man. The same idea was vigorously expressed during a discussion with a group of women:

Caring for someone in old age is continuous work, it is not one day's work, so in your old age you need your own children or children you helped to look after when they were young.

The one taking care of an old person does not need to be that person's own child, but a child he has looked after in the past. In most cases, however, that will in fact be the old person's own child. Children have by now become the only solid basis for social security in old age. Children are the only ones from whom one may expect *continuous* care. However, it is not certain that children will take care of their parents. Firstly, because the children may not be around and secondly because the children don't always seem to share that view. For many of them, the willingness to render continuous care depends on the care they received from their parents when they were young.

The children before the wife/husband

What is the role of the husband or wife in the care of an elderly person? In many cases, one partner may still be strong and able to carry out caring activities for the other. As a matter of fact, those people who advocated the ideals of a Christian marriage strongly defended the duty of a married couple to take care of one another in old age sickness. But:

Awaredeε yε yεnkɔ, ennye abusua (Marriage is 'let us go', it is not *abusua*).⁹

Marriage, this proverb suggests, is a temporary affair, like a passing friendship, it does not have the permanent character which the *abusua* has (cf. Bleek 1975, 1977).

Separation and divorce are also common in old age. Kwaku Agyei's wife left him after 32 years of marriage because of his poverty, he said. He was not able to look after her well so she decided to leave him. In a conversation with Kwame Fosu (F), *Nana Agyei* (A) gave the following (male biased) comments about the phenomenon of divorce in old age:

- A. A woman likes to get things cheaply (*obaa pε adefudeε*). If you cannot give her money she will not live with you and handle your filthy clothes. She therefore leaves you. But your family members do not despise you. They will care for you.
- F. Why do wives leave the old man behind whereas children don't leave him?
- A. The elders say: *Dyere nkɔ ma ɔba mmra* (The wife may go but the child will come).
- F. I asked why the wife would leave the old and sick husband and you said it is because the old man might not have money to give to her. Is that all?
- A. The dirty clothes she would be handling.
- F. What more?
- A. He would not be able to sleep with her (*Orentumi ne no nna*). The woman feels that the old man is of no use to her any longer, so she leaves.

Accounts of women who leave their sick, poor and dependent husbands are indeed common. During the first stage of my fieldwork, only three of the old people we interviewed were still married and living with their partner. Five had lost their partner through death. All of the others had divorced or were living apart. One old lady, whose husband had died, said she would not like to have a husband at her old age. When we asked the reason, she answered: "I have finished what I came to accomplish." To women in particular, marriage

at old age seems an anachronism. Opinions why divorce and separation at old age are so common vary, however.

Male informants stressed that women tend to leave their husbands when life becomes too difficult for them, for example because the husband becomes poor or sick and handicapped. But most women held a different view and blamed the men. They said that men often sack their first wife who has given them children and worked with them for many years. Then they marry a second wife who is far less attached to them and who will easily leave them when life becomes difficult.

The competition between the duties of a child and those of a marriage partner shows itself in the decision which the daughter of Agya Mensah took twelve years ago (see the introductory case). She asked her husband's permission to go home and look after her old parents. The case gave rise to a lively discussion during a meeting I (S) had with a group of women:

- S. Is it good for a wife to leave (not divorce) her husband and come and look after her parents when they are old?
- W(1). It may happen that the wife asks permission from the husband to go. When a woman marries, she belongs to the husband and so if her father or mother needs her, she will have to ask permission from the husband. Unless the husband agrees, the wife cannot go.
- W(2). What I have to say about this is that my father felt sick sometime ago, but he is dead now. My father sent a message to my husband that he was sick, so I should come to him. I told my husband about it and begged him to allow me to go. He agreed and even came with me to Tafo to look after my father. After some days, my husband agreed that I should stay behind with my father but he had to go back. So permission has to be sought from the husband to let you go.
- S. What will happen if the husband does not agree?
- W(1). You cannot go without the husband's permission.
- W(2). In this area, the husband cannot refuse the wife to go and look after her parents. A woman can also instruct one of her children to look after her father so she can come home to sleep with her husband. [Whatever the case] the husband cannot refuse, because as you are also a father, in the future you may also face such a situation.
- S. Do all of you agree with what she has said?
- W Yes, we all agree. Whatever will happen, the husband will allow the wife to go.

The high frequency of divorce and separation at old age shows that for many people marriage is indeed a temporary affair which may be terminated

anytime, whereas the relationship between parents and children is forever. It may be quite normal to get 'tired' of marriage, but you can't get tired of being your parents' child. From that cultural perspective, it makes sense that many women leave their husbands and return to their maternal homes. It fits in the general process of growing old, which is viewed as a journey home. One old lady said: "I want to go to my brothers." She wanted to die.

However, men who have been deserted by their wife, usually regret that she has left. In most cases it means that they have lost someone who could take care of them. An old man described the vicious circle of poverty, divorce and loneliness as follows: "The old man cannot work and your children will not give you money to enable you to look after your wife. If you cannot properly look after her, she will not waste her time on you and leave you. At this stage you cannot marry again and you will be left alone."

Women (and children) before men

The sharp division between the men's and women's domain in Akan society makes itself felt again in the provision of care. Most of the practical activities performed for elderly people are, in fact, female tasks. Men rarely cook or wash clothes. Their main contribution to care is that they provide money and pay visits. The organisation of funerals is also their responsibility.

Of course, there is nothing unique about women carrying the brunt of caring in Kwahu-Tafo. It is a universal phenomenon and will therefore need little cultural comment which is specific for Kwahu. Van den Brink (1999) reports that in The Netherlands twice as many women as men are engaged in tasks of caring, voluntary as well as professional and Tronto (1993) wrote her book to contest the association of care with women.

Simple tasks such as washing clothes, bringing food, running an errand, carrying water to the bathroom, and sweeping the room are commonly done by children, both boys and girls. Once boys reach adolescence they gradually reduce their services to the elderly. This too seems a widespread pattern, with the exception, however, of industrialised societies where children are practically exempted from performing any tasks at all.

But who actually cares?

There may be some rules about who should care for the old, but that does not yet predict unambiguously who will actually do the caring. Looking at a large number of cases, I find it difficult to discern any trends in the way people decided who would be the 'care taker'.

I could collect reliable information with regard to care from 27 elderly people. Six were men who had their wives looking after them, four said they

could manage themselves (two were men), eight received most help from a daughter, one lady was looked after by her son and his wife, and eight people were helped by a more distant relative. It should however be stressed that this quantitative overview is a simplification. The real situation is far more complex. Several people are usually involved in providing care. Who does what is very much a matter of who happens to be around. Care is often managed on a day-to-day basis, with considerable improvisation.

It often happens that one of the children decides to take up the responsibility of caring for an old parent. This may be decided in a family meeting, or the person him/herself may decide to come and stay with the parents. The reasons why this particular person and not another one makes that decision are not always clear. Children living abroad or those who find it very difficult to come are excused. Out of the remaining ones several seem eligible, so why this particular one? It is not unlikely that the person has a special relationship with the parent. One woman said that her mother took care of *her* children, so she should now do something in return. Often, however, this does not seem to be the case. Rather, it seems to be a matter of who has the best arguments to say no. In one case, the older brothers put pressure on the younger one to accept the task. It is understandable that some resentment develops if the others who promise to help do not fulfil their promises.

If no children come home, another common solution is to get the help of another relative. That solution is usually a practical one: the one who happens to stay in the same house is asked to take care of the old person. Sometimes, it seems, no formal decision is made. It is regarded as normal that the one who stays nearby prepares food and helps in other ways. One old lady had a 'granddaughter' (her sister's daughter's daughter) staying with her. Her only son was working in another town and came home during the weekend. He always gave the granddaughter money (too little, she says) to look after the old lady. He also allowed her to live in the house which he had recently built for his mother.

Let us, in conclusion, try to trace some pattern in the kaleidoscope of care situations. When an old couple is still together and the wife is healthy enough she will be the first to look after the old man. If the man is alone, or if the wife is dependent, one of the children is likely to take care of him/her. If there are no children around, another relative may receive that task. That relative can be almost anyone, as the above examples suggest. The decisive factor is not so much the exact relationship but the coincidence of who is staying in the house. It further seems that permission to stay in the house, which usually belongs to the old person or one of his/her children, is part of the tacit deal made to arrange for cooking and surveillance of the old. And finally, there are

some who don't need anybody. But one day they too will become dependent and then the above described processes will be set into action.

Why care?

As we have seen, the social and cultural bases of care are undergoing profound changes. When I asked people why they cared for elderly people, the most likely answer was: because of respect. But what is meant by 'respect'?

Respect

I organised a discussion with seven young men around the age of 18 and asked them what they meant when they said they respected old people.

- A(1). The meaning of the respect we have for the old is that, the old are far more advanced in years than we, and so when you get nearer to them and respect them, it is then that they will reveal to you how they got to that age and they will also tell you traditions and customs that will enable you also to reach that age.
- A(2). The meaning of the respect is getting nearer to the old and giving them the necessary honour (*Ebuo ne se wobebenben won, na wode nidie bema won*). Moreover, we think that the aged have a certain blessing because of their mere chronological age, and so when you respect and honour them and they bless you, it will be forever on your life. In much the same way, when they curse you, it will also be forever.

The young men emphasised that they showed their respect for elderly people by visiting them and doing all kinds of services for them. I could not match their claims about helping the old and listening to them with my observations and conversations. I never saw them conversing with old people and very few of the elderly told me they did. Their accounts about blessing and cursing did not convince me either. They sounded like things they had once learned and were now politely repeating. It was politeness they were demonstrating to me in their stories about how they behaved towards the old. The young men uttered phrases of ideal behaviour. Their definition of respect cannot be deduced from *what* they said about old people but from the *way* they said it. Respect was presented in its superficial sense of *showing* respect, preventing embarrassment or shame, courteousness, politeness. Respect, in this sense, prescribes how people in public settings should behave towards one another: It is etiquette. These rules on proper behaviour were applied here to the home situation.

One remark, however, added significantly to my understanding of this type of ‘respect’: If you don’t show respect, people will insult you. The sanction of disrespectful behaviour is ostracism, disrespect being paid back. If this type of respect leads people to care for the old, it will be a type of care which attempts to forestall social criticism, which may indeed apply to some care being given to old people.

For most of the people we conversed with, however, respect had a much deeper meaning. For them, respect had about the same meaning as love, dedication, and affection. To respect meant: to care, to *do* all kinds of things that the old person cannot perform. An elderly lady said it in a very down-to-earth way:

A lazy person does not respect. *Woye asasafoɔ wummu adeɛ*. This is because if he respects you, you will ask him to do something. *Obu adeɛ a wobesoma no*. But when you send him, he tells you “I won’t go”, just out of laziness. *Wosoma no pɛ a asasaa nti ɔse merenkɔ*.

Respect, both in its superficial and in its deeper meaning, is usually thought to follow hierarchical lines. The young respect the elderly, children respect their parents, the servant respects the master. But respect is mutual. One proverb goes: *ɔpanyin fere ne mma a, na ne mma suro no* (If the elder respects his children, the children will fear (respect) the elder). Several other proverbs confirm this in the negative sense: an elder who does not treat children nicely, will not be respected by them. For example: *ɔpanyin didi adidi bone a, oyi n’asanka* (The elder who eats greedily, washes his own dish). The meaning is that an elder who does not leave some food for the children, will find no child who is willing to wash the plate for him. Or: *Aberewa, w’ano ye den a, gye wo ban* (Old woman, if you are quarrelsome, make your own fence).

Respect is no longer something which is automatically awarded to people just because they are older. Respect is *earned*. It is given to those who deserve it because of what they have done in their lives. To respect an older person is no longer a ‘natural’ thing to do (cf. Van der Geest 1997b).

Reciprocity

Both elderly and young people confirm that respect and care depend on reciprocity. Those who worked hard for their children can be sure that they will receive respect and care from them. One elder, looking back on a fruitful life, remarked:

I had the foresight when I was very young that I would be old one day and would find it difficult to work. So I worked very hard and laid a sound foundation for my old age. Now I am old but very happy because

I looked after my children and they are now feeding me. They provide me with what I should wear. In fact, they give me whatever will make me happy. When you are old and you get what you will eat and what you wear and also where to lay down your head, nothing worries you. Just imagine, I am able to sit down and have a lively conversation with my children.

We asked another elder why in some houses you see old people who look miserable and neglected. He replied:

It all depends on how you started life. If you laid a good foundation, you will reap the results, but if you failed to look after the people around you, they won't spend their money on you when you are old. Such miserable, old people are those who failed to work hard in their youth.

Most outspoken was a young woman who categorically declared that she would look very well after her old mother who had worked hard for her, but that she would not care at all for her old father since the man had done nothing for her when she was a child.

Migration and children's long-term absence, which has changed so much in the life of the town, will not affect this 'golden rule', as some claim. One woman said:

If the parents looked after the children, no matter what will happen, the children will also care for their parents. Even where the children have travelled outside the town or outside Ghana, they will remit their parents. So all depends on the care the parents give to the children in their early years.

If respect is the basis of care for old people, it is respect, which will be less and less rewarded on the basis of advanced age alone. The care, which is given to the elderly, is increasingly a measure of the care that they gave to their children when they were young. That past determines their present status. Stucki (1995), who did research in another Akan community, describes the status of elderhood as a result of careful management, based on a successful life. One of her informants remarked:

You need money to have people come and greet you – they will want drinks. If you do not have anything to offer, they will not come back. If no one in the family comes to you, you will stay in your room and 'rot'. You will be worried because when you are sick no one will come and you will die and no one will know (p. 120).

Concluding remarks

I started this essay with a brief philosophical excursion on the concept of 'care'. Heidegger and Tronto emphasised the central role of caring in human life. Care realises an orientation both to the future and to others. It reveals a time as well as a social/moral movement. In Mayerhoff's view caring for another even coincides with caring for oneself. By helping others to realise their lives, those who care actualise themselves.

My field research taught me that these 'Western' reflections largely applied also in Kwahu-Tafo but with one important restriction – or should we say: addition – namely reciprocity. In most cases I observed care given to elderly people depended on the 'silent book keeping' of give-and-take that life is in this close-knit community.

Old age in Kwahu-Tafo is not that 'chronic' condition of greater or lesser dependency, which it often is in Western Europe. Out of the twenty elderly people with whom I started this research in 1994, ten died within one and a half years. Most of the others died in the years that followed. Most elderly people in Kwahu-Tafo do not 'last long' once they become frail or fall sick. One bout of sickness may well be the end. But old age *is* a period during which people need more and more help from others.

Whether they actually get that help in good quality and quantity depends very much on how they are regarded by others. I have tried to sketch the conditions for good care in old age. Those who are respected are assured of care. That respect depends very much on what they have achieved during their active life. Those who have worked very hard and have taken good care of others, their children, their partners and other relatives, will receive care, attention and financial help. It is only money that begets money. The guarantee of care at old age is foremost a matter of reciprocity (The same applies to care provided to sick people. People with AIDS who have not contributed to the wealth and well-being of the family before they fell sick, may, therefore, find themselves in an extremely awkward situation; see e.g. Radstake 2000: 51).

The material and monetary character of reciprocity should not be misunderstood, however. Material provisions and money are emotional expressions, proof of loving care. Money is not a means to keep people at a distance and avoid getting involved in their lives as it tends to be in industrialised societies. In Kwahu-Tafo, where state-provided material security for the elderly is not available, material gifts and money are the most convincing proof of respect and affection. Money *is* a gift. It binds people together and creates a future of enduring relationships.

One thing is certain: there is not much reason for romanticising the situation of old people in Kwahu-Tafo. With the hazards of present life and

the inability of many parents to give their children a safe foundation for a successful life, they may face considerable hardship in the last years of their lives. Minimal care based on minimal respect will remain available to all old people, but a comfortable and pleasant old age will probably be reserved for a minority.

It is not unlikely that in a place like Kwahu-Tafo which is moving from a matrilineal to a bilateral society, men will be the main victims of this calculating type of care and respect. Where men, during their active life, have shown to be little concerned about their children, they may expect the same lack of concern from their children in their old age. And where they have done little to support their wives they may reckon with the possibility that their wives will leave them.

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Notes

1. *Abusua* is the matrilineage. The term can refer to a very large group of related people (a 'clan'), or to a more restricted group of matrikin, three to five generations deep.
2. *ɔpanyin* (elder) is a complex term. In a strict sense it refers to an elderly man who has been successful in life and enjoys people's respect but the term is also more loosely used for any elderly man. The concept of *ɔpanyin* is extensively discussed in Van der Geest (1998a).

3. Problems of elderly people visiting the toilet and keeping up their dignity is discussed more extensively in a separate publication (Van der Geest 2002).
4. Kenkey is a somewhat sour food prepared from boiled maize.
5. Fufu is one of the most common and popular dishes in Southern Ghana. It is made of yam, plantain, cocoayam or cassava, which is first, boiled and then pounded into a doughy substance. It is eaten with several types of soup.
6. For more elaborate discussions of the funeral as an expression of family care, see Van der Geest (1995 & 2000).
7. Arhinful (2000) reports on the assistance Ghanaians in Amsterdam send to their relatives at home. Contributing toward the costs of funerals was generally regarded as the least pressing, yet the most difficult to ignore.
8. *Ɔkyeame* (often translated as 'linguist') is an official at the chief's court, whose function is to speak for the chief and enhance the rhetoric of the words the chief has spoken.
9. Some said the proverb should read: *Awadee ye yɔnkɔ, enye abusua* (Marriage is friendship, it is not *abusua*).

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