

FROM WISDOM TO WITCHCRAFT: AMBIVALENCE TOWARDS OLD AGE IN RURAL GHANA

Sjaak van der Geest

To *Okyeame* Kwame Opoku
who explained the difference between wisdom and witchcraft¹

When I met *ɔpanyin*² Kwaku Agyei in 1994 he was old and poor, living rent-free in someone else's house. During his active life he had been a farmer, a hunter and a palm wine tapper. In addition, he had practised herbalism and had been an attendant at the chief's court. He used to beat the 'gong gong' in town to announce the chief's messages. Kwaku Agyei was an eloquent and entertaining informant on traditional wisdom and had an enormous knowledge of proverbs. He died in January 1995, less than a year after our meeting.

I had more than ten long conversations with him, mostly together with my co-researcher Kwame Fosu. In addition, I paid him a short visit almost daily, as he was staying just opposite 'my house'.³ At our third meeting we asked him to explain what people mean by *bayie* (witchcraft). His answer was long and confusing.

First he said that *bayie* does not exist, then he went on to explain what it is. First he stated that *bayie* spoils things and then he used the term to praise people for their intelligence. At the start he pointed out that old people are respected and loved, then he suggested that people dislike them and resent their age. The conversation contained many of the ambiguities we met in people's perception and appreciation of old age. This article is an attempt to bring these contradictions to the fore and make them intelligible by analysing the basic ambivalence in Akan culture with regard to growing old.

SJAAK VAN DER GEEST is Professor of Medical Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. He has done fieldwork in Ghana and Cameroon on a variety of subjects, including the use and distribution of medicines, 'highlife' song texts and the meanings of growing old. E-mail vandergeest@pscw.uva.nl.

¹ *Okyeame* (usually translated as 'linguist') is the chief's spokesman. Yankah (1995: 3) describes the function of the *okyeame* 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 chief's words. Without an *okyeame*'s editorial arts the royal speech act is considered functionally and artistically incomplete.

² *ɔpanyin* (pl. *mpanyimfo*) is an honorific used of people beyond the age of about 50. Besides indicating age it implies positive appreciation of the person's wisdom, kindness, refined manners and political importance. See further Stucki (1995), Apt (1996) and Van der Geest (1998a).

³ The ideas of Kwaku Agyei about elderhood and his own life as an *ɔpanyin* are the focus of another publication (Van der Geest, 1998a).

THE RESEARCH

In 1994, 1995, 1996 and 2000 I carried out seven months of anthropological fieldwork among elderly people in Kwahu Tafo, a rural town in the Eastern Region of Ghana. The general aim of the research was to acquire an understanding of the meaning of old age in this community.

The research was partly sparked by reflections on the perception and assessment of old age in my own society in the Netherlands. 'Ageism', a culture-embedded way of looking disparagingly at old age, is increasingly being criticised in the Netherlands and other 'Western' countries. In popular discourse and academic discussion alike it is sometimes suggested that old age in various African and other 'non-Western' societies does not carry the negative connotations of 'decrepit', 'decaying', 'worn out' and 'senile'. The term 'old', it is claimed, engenders positive feelings. Old age is regarded as a stage of life in which people reach their full potential, since they have acquired wisdom and experience and are able to guide the young to success in life. The old are therefore respected and honoured, and enjoy considerable social and political power. The research was set up to examine these somewhat stereotypical and romantic assertions.

Earlier research and my acquaintance with the Akan culture and language motivated the choice of Ghana. More than twenty years ago I had spent three periods of six months in the same town, once to study the local language, Twi, another time to carry out research into the dynamics of family life in one *abusua* (matrilineage),⁴ and finally to study sexual relations and birth control. My return visit to the town after so many years implied a reunion with my own past. I was welcomed back by 'my' *abusua*. People who had been young and middle-aged during my earlier research were now *mpanyimfo* (elders) who were easily approachable. They remembered me and in most cases were eager to express their views on the position of elderly people.

Visiting the elderly and conversing with them proved to be a thoroughly enjoyable experience. In the first place, conversing is their 'way of life' at that age, their *raison d'être*, as it were. They are no longer occupied by the hard work of farming or trading; they can rest and philosophise. They are there to dispense their knowledge and wisdom to others, especially the young. The interviews suited their social status and confirmed it. It soon became clear, moreover, that my visits were particularly appreciated because the elderly were far less often approached for their advice and traditional knowledge than they used to be. Many of them complained that the present generation was not interested in their advice and clearly resented this development. Some experienced long periods of relative loneliness and boredom every day.

⁴ The term *abusua* can refer to a very large group of related people (a 'clan'), or to a more restricted group of matrilin three to five generations deep.

They were happy to have a visitor who was more than willing to 'tap' their wisdom. Small gifts of money 'to buy salt', which ended most conversations, also contributed to the cordial atmosphere.

The research involved conversations with thirty-five elderly people and some of their relatives. Apart from these conversations, I often went to greet the old people informally and chat to them. These more casual visits enabled me to make observations about the daily life of elderly people and the attitudes of other people in the same house. Most of these observations were recorded in a diary. In addition, I discussed old age with other people and with some friends who became 'key informants'. Focus group discussions were held with young people and groups of middle-aged men and women. In three area schools pupils completed a questionnaire expressing their views on old people or completed sentences on the same issue.

During the research, which was almost entirely qualitative, I tried to gain an understanding of what it meant to be old and dependent. That understanding was gradually acquired by the method of participant observation. I sat and conversed with elderly people, their relatives and friends. I went to the farm, to church or to funerals with some of them. What emerged was an extremely diverse picture. Some of the elderly 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 interview transcriptions, I tried to discover some common logic in this wide variety of cases (see, e.g., Van der Geest 1997a, b, 1998a, b, 2002). In this article I sketch one aspect: how the young perceive the old and clothe their ambivalent views in assertions about old people's spiritual powers. Their views were then discussed with the elderly themselves, who willingly produced their own ideas about the positive and negative forces connected with old age. Incidentally, it was mainly elderly men who expressed their views about wisdom and witchcraft. I have no reason to believe that women would have felt otherwise. The main difference would probably have been in their examples: elderly women would have spoken more about children and less about money.

THE TOWN, THE KWAHU, THE AKAN

Kwahu Tafo is a rural town of about 5,000 inhabitants. Most of them are Kwahu, a sub-group of the about 8 million matrilineal Akan who live in the south of the country. 'Akan' is a collective name for a number of ethnic groups that share important linguistic and cultural traits.⁵ Twi, the language of the Akan, has various sub-languages or dialects,

⁵ The main ethnographers of Akan culture are Rattray (1923, 1927, 1929), who produced several volumes on the Akan, Danquah (1928), Busia (1951), Field (1960), Fortes (1969), Oppong (1982), Warren (1974) and Arhin (1979). Studies focusing on the Kwahu are Bleek (1975, 1976a), Bartle (1977) and Miescher (1997). Stucki (1995) and Apt (1996) wrote about the position of elderly people in Akan society.

including Asante, Fante, Akuapem, Akyem, Kwahu, Sefwi and Bono. The Akan have a matrilineal inheritance system, which is undergoing a process of modernisation and individuation, although it is as yet impossible to say where the process will lead. Decisions regarding filiation, kinship adherence, family support and inheritance, which are the result of heated arguments and intense social bargaining, are often unpredictable. Much depends on the social weight of the different parties. 'Automatic' decisions, based on the application of unambiguous cultural rules—if they ever existed—are out of the question.

Kwahu Tafo has a tradition of trading plus farming. The average male's life cycle used to consist of trading in the first part of his active life and farming in the second. The first phase could also include a handicraft. Many Kwahu became sandal makers or tailors and later on taxi drivers. Kwahu people are known as astute and industrious traders. They have set up stores everywhere in Ghana and some have become very successful at that. Many well-to-do Kwahu have built impressive houses in their home towns.

WISDOM AND EXPERIENCE

Knowledge is acquired by listening to wise people and through experience. Kwaku Agyei: *Aburo a ahon, wonto ani*, 'When the leaves of the corn cob are brown you don't need to open them to see if it's ripe.' Everyone knows from experience when the maize is ready for harvesting. It is everyday knowledge. The older you become, the more knowledge you collect. Wisdom, knowledge, life experience and the ability to foresee what will happen and offer advice are indeed the qualities of the elderly. The fact that one has lived a long time means that one has seen a lot of things and begun to understand how they are connected. Experience of life, in other words, teaches how one thing follows another. On the strength of that understanding the *panyin* (elder) may be able to predict the future and advise people how to avoid trouble. *Panyin* Kwame Frempong was one of the first inhabitants of Kwahu Tafo to attend school. In his active life he had been a cocoa buyer and a Jehovah's Witness. At the end of his life he became a Presbyterian. Frempong, a self-styled philosopher, said one day, 'If you are old, you can always see ahead, because you have experience.' When we asked him to define an *panyin* he said:

Frempong. An *panyin* is someone who, through his experience in life, has gained a lot of wisdom and can know what is good and what is not good.

Us. What are some of the qualities of an *panyin* which may not be present in a young person?

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

The wisdom and experience of the elder become valuable when they are used for the benefit of others: the *panyin* advises. The style of advising

was beautifully depicted by Kwaku Agyei when he explained to us the proverb *panyin nni biribi a, wɔ abatwe*, 'If the elder has nothing, he has elbow.'

Agyei. If you go to the *panyin* and he has nothing to give you, he can warn you, *Hwe yie* [Be careful]. He can curse you. He can choose not to curse you but say, 'If you don't listen to what I'm saying, I won't help you if you get into trouble.' *Asem a mereka yi se woantie no yie na wode wo reko a, minni hwee de rebegye wo.*

Us. Why did the elders use *batwe* [elbow] in the proverb? Children and adults have elbows but . . .

Agyei. When you're in the chief's palace and you start saying something you shouldn't, an *panyin* sitting in front will nudge you with his elbow to stop you from getting into trouble. . . . He gives you a dig in the ribs and whispers to you to stop. If he spoke out loud, or made a gesture with his hand, everybody would know he was warning you. If he does it with his elbow, and you're wise, you'll understand and stop.

The proverb means that if the *panyin* has nothing else, he has wisdom; he can give good advice. The wisdom of the *panyin* implies power and prestige. That is why they say, *panyin ano sen suman*, 'The *panyin*'s mouth is more powerful than an amulet.' It means that the words of an elderly person tell you what is going to happen. You should listen, or you will get into trouble. The old, therefore, tend to regard advanced age as the most gratifying period of their life. *Okyeame* Opoku:

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

Another elder, *panyin* Frempong, was of a similar opinion:

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

A young man may have physical strength, but he is inferior to an *panyin*, who has knowledge and foresight. If he thinks he surpasses the elder because of his youthful strength, he is mistaken and will be in trouble. That is why the elders cite the following proverb: *Se wohuru tra panyin a wusa ne nkon mu*, 'If you try to jump over the elder you land on his shoulders.'

The proverbial wisdom of old people is also expressed in the saying *Yenko bisa aberewa*, 'We're going to ask the old lady,' which the elders use when they withdraw to deliberate upon a difficult question. When I

asked my co-researcher Kwame Fosu to explain what it meant, he wrote this down:

This expression is used when the elders pronounce judgement over a case. The *ɔkyeame*, and a few important personalities who are trying the case, retire after the expression has been pronounced. They go to a secret, quiet place and decide what the judgement should be. After the decision, they come back and the group's spokesman pronounces the judgement thus: *Wie mpanyin, yesɔree se yerekobisa aberewa. Yekɔee no na aberewa te awia mu reto awia*. 'Well, elders, we retired to consult the old lady. When we went, the old lady was sunning herself.' If it is evening, they will say, *Yekɔee no na aberewa renom n'abua, bo, bo, bo*. 'When we went, the old lady was smoking her pipe—bo, bo, bo [the sound of her smoking]. When we related the case to her she said we did well to come and seek her advice. She listened and explained to us that if we hadn't consulted her we would have passed a wrong judgement.' Why should the old lady, *aberewa*, be considered wise?

Fosu then produced a story which is well known in Akan folklore:

Here is a story that proves the wisdom of *aberewa*. In the olden days there was a powerful chief who was so cruel that his people feared him very much. Whenever he gave orders his elders did not dare to challenge him. One day this chief ordered that the residents of every house should kill the old ladies living there because they were witches. All the old ladies in the town were killed but one man loved his mother so dearly that he decided not to kill her. He sent her to a cave and fed her daily. No one knew that he was keeping an old lady alive. He was a hunter, and whenever he went out into the bush he would enter the cave to visit his mother and prepare food for her.

After some time the cruel chief ordered his men to clothe him in the skin of a tiger to make him more fearsome. Hunters managed to get the skin of a tiger and draped it around the chief. Thus the chief became even more frightening than before. The chief was given so much to eat that he put on a lot of weight. No longer comfortable in the tiger skin, he ordered his men to remove it and find a bigger one. When his men attempted to remove the skin, the chief cried out with pain. The tiger skin had become stuck to him so tightly that when they attempted to remove it, the chief's own skin was torn.

No one was able to suggest a way of removing the tiger skin. The chief promised a reward and said that anyone who could suggest a way of removing the skin would be honoured. The chief was very worried and thought he was dying.

The hunter who had hidden his old mother away in the cave went to discuss the matter with her. Could she think of a way of removing the tiger skin? No one in the town could offer a solution. The old lady told her son that he should go and pour plenty of water over the chief. When fresh the skin had been full of blood, and it had stuck to him as the blood dried. If plenty of water were poured on the chief the skin would soften and could be removed without causing pain. When it was done the chief was put out of his misery. The tiger skin became moist and soft as the old lady had said. It was removed and the chief lived.

The chief asked the hunter where such a wonderful idea had come from. He was told that the hunter's mother, an old lady, had given it to him. The hunter had retired to the bush, thinking the chief would kill him for disobeying him to save his mother. But instead the hunter was honoured. His

mother was honoured too. A nice house was built for her, and whenever the elders found it hard to judge a case they would go and ask her advice. Thus the expression *Yenkobisa aberewa* came into use.

Having lived for a long time is tantamount to being wise. The old person has seen much; he has gained an understanding of how things happen and has learned how to prevent misfortune. Such knowledge, as we have seen, is more effective than physical strength. Old people take pleasure in stressing the point. Young people need them—because of their wisdom—more than they need the young. Respect for the elderly is based on that principle first and foremost. The old were there first. As the proverb goes, *Abodwese beto anintɔn*, 'The beard came to meet the eyebrow.' The one who came first knows more and deserves respect.⁶ The old know the place [the world] better than the young.

When they argue along these lines, old people seem to forget that the young seldom come to them for advice, are not interested in their knowledge and therefore do not need them. Conversely, the young too seem to 'forget' this. They never stop telling us that they respect and fear the old people because of their experience of life and the spiritual power derived from that experience. One young man said:

The old are more advanced in years than we are, so when you get closer to them and respect them they will reveal to you how they got to the age they have, and they will also tell you traditions and customs that will enable you to reach that age too.

In a discussion with six women whose ages ranged from 30 to 60 similar views were expressed:

Fosu. Why should young people fear and respect an elderly person?

Women. Because of his age. Once you are older, your children should fear and respect you. They should respect not only their parents but every old person.

Fosu. Why do they fear?

Women. Because you are older you know what is wrong and what is right. You came into the world before them [*Wo baa wiase gyaa wɔn*]. We know a lot more than they do, and our advice can help them to be successful. So if you don't fear and respect them they won't show you the right way. If they see that something is going wrong in your way, they won't tell you.

Okyeame Opoku also gave his opinion:

The old have the power to predict the outcome of certain actions. The old can do so because of their vast experience. Most of the things young people do are things that old people once did, so they know what will happen. If the

⁶ Culpit (1998) suggests that there is an almost 'natural' tendency to respect older people because of the fact that they have lived longer. He links this idea with the intuitive awe of things and people that are taller (in space or in time).

young take the warnings and advice of the old with good grace it will be as well for them.

The 'classic' elderly person, respected and sought out for his/her wisdom, is portrayed by Apt (1996: 24):

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

Stereotypical statements about elderly people, positive as well as negative, were also put forward by pupils in local schools who completed the sentence 'Most young people think that old people . . .'. Out of the seventy-five respondents who completed the sentence, twenty-five referred to the wisdom and advice of the elderly and their knowledge of stories and history. In total, sixteen mentioned their witchcraft. Others alluded to their physical weakness, their inability to work and their resemblance to children, among other things.

BLESSING AND CURSING

Blessing (*nhyira*) and cursing (*nnome*) were busily discussed in many of our conversations. The terms were first mentioned during a discussion with eight young men around the age of 20. One of them said:

We think the old have a certain blessing because of their sheer age, so when you respect and honour them, and they bless you, it will be for ever on your life. In much the same way, when they curse you it will be for ever too. We all like blessings, so if you respect, honour and get closer to them, they develop a certain kind of love for you which leads them to reveal to you some of their hidden treasures. They will show you their possessions and tell you you'll inherit them when they pass away.

For this particular person—and his friends agreed with him—the ability to bless or to curse was directly related to the length of a person's life. We put the two concepts on the agenda of several meetings we had with elderly people. We first asked Kwaku Agyei to explain blessing and cursing to us.

Us. Nana,⁷ you've explained so many things concerning old people to us. We'd like to know something about *nhyira* [blessing] and ancestral spirits.

⁷ *Nana* (lit. 'grandparent') is an honorific for an elderly person, male or female.

People claim that an *akwakora* or an *aberewa* can bless or curse his or her offspring for their behaviour. What do you know about that?

Agyei. An old woman takes good care of you; you grow. You tell her, 'I'll beat you.' She says, 'You're going to beat me? OK. Go on. You'll see.' *Tena ho na wubehu* [Stay there and you'll see]. She has cursed you. It is not good. If an *akwakora* or *aberewa* takes good care of his or her grandchildren no one does the other wrong. They all live peacefully like the fingers of one hand. When you respect the old, they will love you.

Us. Will they bless you?

Agyei. Yes.

Us. Nana, what things done to the old result in cursing and which give us blessing?

Agyei. If you do good to the old you are blessed. If you give them money or food, for instance: 'Nana I'm going, but I'll be back soon. Here are five pesewas.' Or you may ask, 'Nana, have you had anything to eat today?' He may say, 'No.' Then you might say, 'Get something ready for Nana.' His comment will be 'God bless this grandchild of mine. May he live long so that when I die he will bury me.'

Us. What about the one who curses?

Agyei. If you are disrespectful, if you insult or abuse an old person, he will say, 'You're abusing me? OK. *Tena ho na wubehununu* [Stay there, you'll see]. *Wadome wo* [He has put a curse on you].'⁸ . . .

Us. If an *akwakora* or an *aberewa* blesses a young person, what shows that the youngster has been blessed or cursed?

Agyei. When such a person is blessed, no misfortune will befall him. *Asiane biara nsiane no. Afei adwuma biara a beye no ekɔ so.* He prospers in every endeavour. Then he will say to himself, 'This old lady is a good person. She has wished a good wish. What she said was beneficial. If you go to take an old woman's cloth who worked hard to buy it . . . It may be the cloth that was to drape her dead body one day. And you've come to steal it. . . . *Wobeye ahuhuahu.* Your life will be a failure. *Woye biribiara a enye yie.* Whatever you do will be in vain.

His view that blessing and cursing were ways of rewarding and punishing the young for what they did to the old was echoed by several of the elderly. *Ɔpanyin* Frempong said:

Frempong. It's true that old people can bless and, at the same time, curse. As you grow you are getting nearer to God, and so whatever you say will be the truth. It is a spirit from God that comes into you. Whatever you will tell a young person, whether it is a blessing or a curse, it will affect that particular person. [*Adee biara wobeka no, se eye nnomee a ebenya no, enna se eye nhyira nso a ɔbe nya nhyira no.*]

Us. Do you believe the power to curse and bless is from God?

Frempong. I believe that the power is from God, because when someone is old he knows what is evil and what is good. When he follows what is good, that power is from God. It implies that, whatever he says, it is a blessing and will affect you. If it's a curse it will also affect you.

⁸ One of the folk tales collected by Rattray (1930: 150-3) deals with the same curse: *Ɔbiara kakyerɛ obi sɛ, 'Tena h, na wobehu' a, na wabɔ no dua'* ('If someone says, "Wait there and you'll see," he has uttered a curse upon that person').

Nana Frempong emphasised that the power to bless and to curse comes from God. He did not mention the idea that it derives from experience, an explanation some of the others offered. Let us look at two other statements about blessing and cursing. We asked Mr Asare, a devout Presbyterian, what would happen if a child did not respect his elders.

Asare. It will be a curse.

Us. What does that mean?

Asare. The child is cursing himself, because the Bible says, 'Thou shalt respect thy father and mother for long life,' so if you go against that, you're cursing yourself.

Us. Is it the old person who curses the young one or is the curse from God?

Asare. The curse is from God, because He has laid down the rules in the Bible for us to follow. If you don't follow them, and anything happens to you, we take it as the punishment for being disrespectful to elders . . .

Us. Why do old people have more power than young people?

Asare. They have more experience of life.

Asare combined the two explanations we mentioned before: the power to bless and to curse emanates from God *and* is based on long experience. At first he seemed to suggest that blessing and cursing were more or less the automatic effect of good and bad behaviour and came directly from God. The elderly had little to do with it. Moments later he contradicted himself: the mere words of an elderly person can be a blessing or a curse.

During a conversation with Nana Wiredu, a traditionalist, blessing and cursing were again firmly linked with the experience and wisdom of the elderly person.

Me. If a young man wants to bless, will it work?

Wiredu. It is the blessing of the elderly person that will have effect.

Me. Why is it that when an elderly person says something it is more likely to be effective than when a young man says it?

Wiredu. It is because the elderly person has grown in the house (*eno ye onyin a wanyin wo ofie no nti*). It is also because of how he speaks [to people]. *Afei wo kasa a wokasa no. . . .*

Me. Does the blessing of an old person affect only his clansmen or does it also affect people outside? Is it more powerful within the family or does it affect strangers?

Wiredu. If he is not your clansman or relative, your curse will not affect him (*erentum' no*).

Me. So it affects only your clansmen?

Wiredu. Yes.

Me. Your relatives, your children and grandchildren?

Wiredu. Yes. The elders say, *Wo ni na eku wo. Wo fieni na eku wo.* 'It is your clansman who kills you. It is someone from your house who kills you.'

An interesting aspect brought up by Wiredu was that cursing is effective only within the *abusua*, i.e. between close relatives. Fosu ended this discussion with a proverb which is commonly applied to witchcraft:

Aboa bi beka wo nso a efiri wo ntama mu, 'If an insects bites you, it is from your own cloth.'

The various views expressed in the quotations above reveal both agreement and disagreement. Some claim that the ability to bless and curse results from the wisdom and experience which old people have accumulated during their lives. Others seem to suggest that it is not so much the old people who bless or curse but rather that it is God who punishes or rewards people.

Another question which remains unclear is whether a blessing or a curse really can bring something about thanks to a special power the elderly possess or whether it is merely their ability to foresee what is going to happen anyway. That foresight, some explain, is precisely the result of old age.

Who can be affected by blessings or curses was the third matter on which not everyone agreed. Some held the view that these things could affect only members of the same *abusua*, while others stressed the opposite. No good person would ever put a curse on his own child or relative. A curse is only ever put on people outside the family.

Another disagreement was that some people insisted that blessing and cursing could not be done by the same person. You can't have the power to bless, which comes from God, as well as the power to curse, which is evil and comes from *ɔbonsam* (Satan).

A fifth question on which people differed widely was how the ability to bless and to curse was related to *bayie* (witchcraft).

BAYIE: A RETROSPECT

When I did my first fieldwork in Kwahu Tafo, in 1971, *bayie* overshadowed most of my stay. My research studied the daily events of one particular family, and I took a special interest in social tensions and conflict (Bleek, 1975).⁹ It was not long before members of the family began to tell me stories about witchcraft. Usually the tales involved themselves as victim and another, often older, member of the family as witch. Altogether I heard someone accuse a relative of practising *bayie* no fewer than seventy-one times. The whole family (adults, dead and alive) then numbered about 115. When I asked about *bayie* nearly everybody mentioned one or more cases, sometimes the same ones. Only a few people denied all knowledge. Those who did were the ones who had been accused by others. Evidently their denial had to be interpreted as a strong affirmation: they refused to talk about it.

After a few weeks a serious conflict erupted between the *abusua-panyin* (head of the family) and his brother-in-law.¹⁰ The immediate

⁹ The name Bleek was a pseudonym which I used at the time to protect the identity of my informants.

¹⁰ This case has been described and analysed in my thesis (Bleek, 1975) and a subsequent article (Bleek, 1976b).

cause was the death of a woman, a sister of the *abusuapanyin*. The *abusuapanyin* declined to bury her because a few years before she had taken her husband's side in a disagreement with her brother. His refusal developed rapidly into a major row which split the *abusua* and brought half the population of the town to the *abusuapanyin*'s compound to see what would happen and join in the argument. Matters came to a head the next day with compensation being paid and the brother-in-law thoroughly humiliated. In the aftermath I asked seven people for their view of the affair. The result was an array of suspicions and insinuations, some of which accused the *abusuapanyin* of killing his sister through *bayie*.

In this social drama *bayie* took the form of malicious gossip (Bleek, 1976b). Anthropological theorising about gossip (Gluckman, 1963; Paine, 1967; Handelman, 1973) proved helpful in making sense of the secret accusation of *bayie* which circulated in the *abayie*. Like gossip, *bayie* accusations were transmitted between members of one group. They indirectly reinforced norms and normality. They centred around people with whom close relations existed. Those who were the butt of accusations were often socially important people. Finally, the accusations always advanced the personal interests of the accuser/gossiper.

My young age and the situation I was in made it impossible to speak about the matter directly to those (secretly) accused. Many of the crimes they were accused of were too hideous even to allude to in an informal conversation. I tried to exchange a few general ideas about *bayie* but they refused to discuss it. Among the elderly and, more important, the people of the *abusua*, *bayie* was taboo. This confirmed me in my conviction that *bayie* was a very concrete and extremely negative phenomenon.

As 'the evil of all evils' *bayie* has been a topic of interest since missionaries and anthropologists arrived in what was then called the Gold Coast.¹¹ One of the first to discuss the concept was the Presbyterian missionary and linguist J. G. Christaller, who recorded a number of proverbs about *bayie* and gave the following description of *bayifoo* in his dictionary:

The natives describe a wizard or witch as a man or a woman who stands in agreement with the devil [*sic*]. At night, when all are asleep, he (or she) rises or rather leaves his (her) body, as a snake casts its slough, and goes out emitting flames from his eyes, nose, mouth, ears, armpits; he may walk with his head on the ground and his feet up; he catches and eats animals, or kills men either by drinking their blood or by catching their soul, which he boils and eats, whereupon the person dies; or he bites them so that they become

¹¹ The following overview of perspectives on *bayie* draws upon Owusu-Sarpong (1998). The main ethnographic sources on *bayie* in Akan society are Rattray (1927, 1929), Field (1960), Debrunner (1961), Fortes (1969) and Bleek (1975).

full of sores. Some change themselves into leopards, snakes, antelopes; some apply their witchcraft also to trade when selling things. [1933: 11]

Christaller speculates about the etymology of *bayie* as coming from *oba* (child) and *yi* (take away). One of the witches' most frequently reported crimes during my research was indeed the killing of young children, causing abortion and making women and men infertile.

Rattray, a colonial anthropologist, defined *bayie* as anti-social magic, and to kill a person by *bayie* was regarded as 'murder'. He reported the following traditional sanction against *bayie*:

After being found guilty . . . the witch was either driven out with a firebrand in his or her hand, to die eventually of starvation, or was smeared all over with palm oil and cast into a fire, or clubbed, or strangled, or drowned. [1929: 313]

In Rattray's volumes *bayie* is described as an insatiable desire to eat people. He quotes a witch hunter saying:

Witches walk about naked at night, and when they come to a house where someone is lying asleep they will turn round and press their buttocks against the outside of the hut. A *suman* [charm] . . . will then make a connexion between their body and the body of the person who is asleep, and by this connecting the blood is drained. The person, on awakening, will complain of illness and may die before nightfall. [1927: 29]

The above imagery of *bayie* is upheld in a study by Debrunner, another Presbyterian missionary, which appeared in 1959 and saw its second edition in 1961. Debrunner's attention was drawn to witchcraft by a number of incidents at schools, where some female pupils declared themselves to be witches and 'temporarily terrorised the whole school' (p. 3). He asked the students to write essays on witchcraft and complemented their narratives with the accounts of Rattray, Field and others, as well as his own observations. His book contains sixty-one photographs of people and objects connected with *bayie*. Debrunner (1961) remarks that belief in *bayie* seems a recent phenomenon; before 1850 only one author mentions it (p. 62). He associates *bayie* with the profound changes that occurred after missions and colonialism had established themselves permanently in Akan society. He regarded witchcraft as a 'neurotic reaction' to new developments in society, such as education, the economic factors (taxes and the success of cocoa farming), disease and the consequent social inequality.

This pathological view of *bayie* is most explicitly expounded by Field (1960), whose study moved Debrunner to revise the first edition of his own book. Field called her book 'an ethno-psychiatric study'. She did most of her fieldwork at a 'shrine' in Asante, where people came to find protection or a cure for their problems. She lists 2,537 complaints and requests, among which 'not prospering', sickness and reproductive problems are the most frequent (p. 105). In the second half of her study Field classifies the complaints of the 'patients' into thirteen kinds of

mental disturbances. Her psychiatric classification had a remarkable, now obsolete, purpose: it was to prove that mental stress and illness were not the prerogative of the 'civilised' industrialised societies but occurred also in Africa.

Field's main contribution has not been superseded, however. She provides an enormously rich collection of cases. These involved 146 people complaining about their problems. The accounts form a precious inventory of the social, psychological and material worries of Ghanaians in the middle of the twentieth century. The cases also show that *bayie* was the most likely and effective idiom in which to express and explain those worries.

As I have indicated, the enormity of destruction attributed to *bayie* made it extremely hard for me to approach the alleged *bayifo*. In my research *bayie* remained the great unmentioned issue. It was discussed only with 'outsiders', non-witches. The character even of those discussions was *sotto voce*, secretive. They were full of innuendo but never included an open accusation. In fact I never witnessed anyone publicly confront a relative with an accusation of *bayie*. For Kwahu, and probably Akan society in general, I concluded, the published ethnographic material on *bayie* was unduly biased towards witch hunting and formal accusation and confession. The most usual form of *bayie* was to be found in whispers.

Bayie, hideous but hidden, became the most trenchant symptom of the contradictory feelings which close relatives may have for one another. Imputations were secretly levelled at people one could not openly criticise, let alone accuse. I agreed with Kennedy (1967: 273): 'Witchcraft is primarily a manifestation of strongly held negative emotions. Any student describing it inevitably finds himself involved with materials which have been the province of psychoanalysis—hatred, fear, anger, jealousy and frustration.'¹² But a psychological interpretation of *bayie* also falls short of the 'facts'. Several of those who accused someone of *bayie* denied any ill feeling towards that person. They stressed that the 'witch' was not guilty of his/her deeds since he/she was not even conscious of them. Accusing often went hand in hand with excusing. *Bayie* remained elusive, typically a concept not to be caught by one-dimensional reasoning, let alone a dictionary.

As a topic *bayie* was avoided in personal encounters, but *in general* it was everywhere to be seen and heard. It was, you could say, 'the talk of the town'. Highlife songs, often litanies of misery, were—and still are—full of complaints that relatives are trying to kill the singer and his loved ones because of their success in life (see Brempong, 1986: 441–90; Van der Geest, 1992). A few lines from the song *Efie abosea* 'House gravel' illustrate the point:

¹² Fortes (1969: 181), who calls *bayie* 'the hidden canker at the heart of solidarity demanded by law and morality', stresses the structural oppositions (generational, sex, birth order, *abusua*) in the Akan kinship system as the root of *bayie*.

When the gravel in the house causes pain,
 It cuts sharper than a knife.
 If an insect bites you,
 It is in your own clothes.
 I am in trouble.
 Everything I do goes wrong.
 I have no peace.
 It is the family who are doing this to me.

Today stories about witches continue to fascinate people, not only in highlife songs but in concert parties (Collins, 1994: 392) and video films (Meyer, 1999b). Pentecostal Churches have taken over most of the role of Field's shrines forty years ago, and the witch has been 'translated' into a devil (Meyer, 1992, 1999a). The Christianisation of the witch, as we have seen, had already been initiated by Christaller in his definition of *bayie*. Field's emphasis on *bayie* as a way of dealing—or rather failing to deal—with envy and material and social success (or the lack of them) is carried on up to the present day, only the terminology has changed (e.g. 'modernity', 'globalisation').

The most remarkable public appearance of *bayie*, however, is on public transport: lorries, mini-buses and taxis. Again, it was Field (1960: 134–45) who drew attention to the meaning of the popular inscriptions which drivers painted on their cars. In them, she wrote, they express their worries about the future, their anxiety that misfortune may strike. Their security lies in the hands of other people, and it is witches in particular who pose a threat. Some inscriptions beseech God for protection, others are aggressive and refer directly to the potential evildoer: *Obi mpe obi yiye*, 'Someone does not like someone's success', *Suro nea oben wo*, 'Fear the one who is close to you', *Abusua do funu*, 'The *abusua* loves a corpse', and *Ɔtan firi fie*, 'Hatred come from the house'.¹³

A lot of innuendo and 'indirect speech', but the *bayifo* themselves remained out of sight, conspicuous by their absence from my research. Some twenty years later—and older—I had the opportunity to meet a few of them and ask them about their reputation as *bayifo*. They both rejected and accepted the qualification, and showed understanding of the fact that young people saw them as witches. In the eyes of the elders *bayie* became a more positive term.

BAYIE ACCORDING TO THE ELDERS

On one of the last days of the research study Patrick Atuobi, one of my co-researchers, and I went to see Kwame Opoku. For some thirty years Opoku had been the *ɔkyeame* ('linguist') at the chief's court in Kwahu

¹³ Drivers, their inscriptions and the links with highlife and *bayie* are discussed elsewhere (Van der Geest, n.d.).

Tafo. He had never been to school. In the past he had been a tailor, a shopkeeper and a farmer. He had married three times and had sixteen children, all of whom he was able to send to school. Retired both from his work as a farmer and from his role as *Okyeame*, Opoku enjoys his old age. He is respected because of his success, wisdom and verbal skill. Patrick asked him to explain the difference between wisdom, the ability to bless and curse, and *bayie*. The following conversation ensued:

Us. We know that the old use the power and the wisdom in them to advise the young ones. Is it the same power they use in cursing and blessing?

Opoku. There are people with evil spirits, (*honhom bone*). They can curse, but a person without evil spirits can never curse. We are all the time praying that our children will become prosperous. How then can we say anything bad against them? Any old person who would do that is not a good person. . . . A person who can curse is with an evil spirit. Someone who is not a bad, old man can't tell his child that he will never succeed in life.

Us. What about blessing?

Opoku. The power in an old person to bless is always derived from God. Before someone gives his blessing he will say, May God help you to succeed in life. So it is through God that an old person gives his blessing.

Us. Why do you attribute the power to bless to good powers and the power to curse to evil? Are both not some kind of foresight which an old person acquires during his life?

Opoku. You can't say that a person who prayed for you to succeed is an evil person and you can't call the person who cursed you a good fellow.

Us. Can the same person curse and bless as well?

Opoku. Yes, one person can bless the people he loves and curse those he hates. Even someone with an evil spirit can use it to help a person he likes to succeed.

Us. Do you mean that the evil power can sometimes be turned to do good things?

Opoku. *Yiw, etumi ye papa na etumi ye bone.* Yes, it can do good and it can do bad.

Us. You told us that the evil powers some old people use in cursing were not acquired through old age. Where do you think they come from?

Opoku (laughing). I can't tell. When the fetish catches some people with *bayie*, they claim that they brought it from their mother's womb. Others acquire it in the way people get juju. So evil spirits are acquired through different ways.

Us. How can we call that kind of evil spirit?

Opoku. We can refer to it as *bayie*.

Us. Can we term the spirit to curse and to bless *bayie*?

Opoku. Yes, anyone who can do that is with *bayie*. If whatever the person may say happens, it is *bayie*. We call some people *anogya* ('mouth of fire'). What such people say always comes true. *Okra biribi a na aye ho.* That is *anogya*. Any person who can spoil something by speaking will be called *bayifo* even if he is not one.

Us. We've been told that *anogya* is not *bayie* but the power some people have to repay the wrongs done to them with the spoken word, but you say it is *bayie*. Which is right?

Opoku. Anyone with the power to destroy something with the words of his mouth will be called *bayifo*. Just imagine someone commanding this

cupboard to break into pieces and it happens right away. Wouldn't he be called a witch?

So far Opoku's explanation was clear: in his view, cursing was the same as *bayie*. Only a witch would curse someone. But how were cursing and *bayie* related to old age?

Us. People always accuse the old of *bayie*, but now you're telling us that *bayie* has nothing to do with old age. Rather, you explain that the power to do evil or good is in some people no matter what age they are. Can you please enlighten us a little on the matter?

Opoku. Why I said so is that I [*ɔkyeame*], for instance, am quite old but I don't have the power to curse and spoil things. All I can do is pray to God for the success of the children under me.

...

Us. Some old women with successful children and relatives are accused of witchcraft. We constantly hear the expression *Ei, saa aberewa yi deɛ ɔye ɔbayifoɔ*. *Hwe senea ne mma nyinaa aye yiye* 'This woman is a witch. Look how successful her children are'. So it seems as if the people in an old woman's house always regard her as a witch. What do you think about that?

Opoku. If old women use witchcraft for the success of their children, it is referred to as good witchcraft, *bayi pa*. People seldom mean it, even when they use the term. It's said as a joke. But the young in the house constantly insult those with bad witchcraft, *bayi bɔne*. Sometimes the young even threaten them.

Us. Whether it's *bayi pa* or *bayi bɔne*, why is it always the old who are accused?

Opoku. They are constantly accused because of their doings.

Us. What do they do?

Opoku. That's what I've been explaining. If you're an *ɔpanyin* and your children are all failures you will be called a witch.

Us. We're a bit confused. Do you think all the accusations levelled against the old on *bayie* are correct, whether they're accused of being good or bad witches?

Opoku. Most of the accusations are not true. The young do it because they're desperate. When they run into difficulties they turn to accuse the old. When I was young and struggling I used to insult my mother whenever I got drunk, and I constantly accused her of witchcraft. My mother used to tell me that she was not a witch, rather, she was praying for me to succeed in life. When I worked harder things got better, and if my mother was alive today I'd happily stay with her. *Se ehia wo a na ɔbiara ye wo bonsam*. 'When you have problems, you regard everyone as a devil.' It's like if you lose something: you see everyone as a thief.

The *ɔkyeame* mainly looked for psychological reasons to explain why young people accuse the old of *bayie*: it is out of frustration. They blame the old for their own failures in life. Why they pick on the elderly is something I will take up shortly. First I want to explore another idea that cropped up: good and evil *bayie*. Apparently, *bayie* does not necessarily imply the destructive actions I encountered more than twenty years ago. The issue was most extensively covered in an (English) discussion I had with two old friends, Mr Asare and *ɔpanyin*

Kwaku Martin. Both men were educated. Asare had been the secretary of the Kwahu Traditional Council and was well respected in town. Martin had done many different things in his life, from teaching and selling to farming and rearing pigs. During our conversation Asare was serious most of the time, while Kwaku Martin often spoke tongue-in-cheek, trying to challenge and tease his friend. The conversation shows that neither really knew how to reply to my questions but slowly managed to come up with some plausible and logical answers.

Me. I want to know the difference between blessing, cursing and witchcraft. I've been told that old people have special powers to bless or curse. This power is sometimes called *bayie*. So witchcraft seems a special power you can use to bless or curse. Some people say it is used not only for bad purposes but for good ones as well. Is it essentially the same, or is it different?

Martin. As for me, I don't know, and neither does my brother. We can only guess, sorry to say, that *bayie* can hurt us. But then, I've never seen a witch.

Me. But you may have some ideas. Is *bayie* always good or is it always bad?

Martin. It's sometimes good and sometimes bad.

Me. Have you an example of good *bayie*?

Martin. Yes. If someone has about ten children and none of them dies it is an example of good *bayie*. An example of bad *bayie* is if she gives birth to ten children and nine die, it is a sign of bad *bayie*.

Me. Can you give another example of good *bayie*?

Martin. Good *bayie* can make one have a successful life. If you make a farm, it will give a high yield. Bad *bayie* will spoil the farm.

Me. Can we say Mr Asare has good *bayie* because all his children are alive and successful?

Martin. Yes, he has *bayie* (both laughing).

Me. He's laughing. Are you serious about it or are you just joking?

Martin. Oh, he's laughing because he admitted it. *Kwabena* [Asare] *ka se wo ye bayifo*, *ka*. Kwabena, say you're a witch. Say it!

Me. Mr Asare, are you a witch?

Asare. No, I'm not. I don't believe in *bayie*, though I believe it a little. I think *bayie* is how you apply your mind. If you think something is good and you focus your mind on it then it will be good. And if you say this thing will not catch me, naturally, whatever you will do, it still will not catch you. . . . *Bayie* to me is a state of mind. What you think so deeply about will become a reality, but what you think of less will never materialise.

Martin. Mr Asare, so you're saying this is *bayie*? Do you mean to tell me that if a lorry is going to Nkawkaw, and you're a witch, it's possible to let the lorry have an accident, just by focusing your mind on that?

Asare. If the driver had wronged you, it will surely happen.

Martin. So if I know the Doctor [van der Geest] is here, why not focus on the Doctor for him to bring me something from Holland? Can you do that?

Me. What about lotto? Can you focus your mind to win?

Martin. It will not work, because I can't focus my mind on something better so that it will happen. But he could do it.

Me. Please, I'm not joking. I want to know if I can focus my mind on lotto numbers and really get the winning numbers.

Asare. The numbers will not come.

Me. Why is it that they will not come?

Asare. Because lotto is being operated by numbers dropping from a machine.

But in the case of the lorry it's a machine being driven by a driver who has done you wrong.

Several times during this conversation I was a listener. The two friends, although conscious of my presence, had their own discussion. It showed in a striking way that *bayie* is a topic about which we cannot expect final statements. The two men were ambivalent about it. First they rejected the idea but in the course of the conversation they retracted. They recognised that there was something about some people which made them more powerful and successful than others. *Bayie* thus assumed a more positive loading. The line between cursing and *bayie*, and between good and destructive *bayie*, proved to be very fine.

Our conversations were interesting not because they provided us with the correct view of blessing, cursing and witchcraft in the Akan or Kwahu traditional world view. I was after sociological insights, not theological ones. I wanted to know the social logic implicit in and expressed by the various statements. What did all these complex theories about mystical power reveal about the way young and old perceived and appreciated one another in this rural community? Before going into it let us nevertheless pause to look briefly at the 'theological' relevance of this wild variety of views and claims.

Some say *bayie* is inherently evil and different from blessing or cursing. For example, 'A witch kills people. A witch spoils things. When he sees someone doing well he'll try to harm him. You don't want good things (*Wompo ade pa*).' Others claim that blessing and cursing are effective only if they are pronounced by a witch: 'If someone puts a curse on you and the curse comes true, he's a witch.'

Several people argued that there is good and evil witchcraft. Some witches use their power for good and others for evil purposes. Someone who has been very successful in life must be a (good) witch. A sociologist colleague assured me that a certain man in Kumasi, whose children had all reached very high positions in life, was widely believed to be a witch. Witchcraft, he said, is a kind of 'talent'. He compared it to the 'supernatural intelligence' of people like Newton or Einstein. Nana Agyei likened good *bayie* to the cleverness of white people, who produced all kinds of machines (pointing at my cassette recorder):

Oburoni tumi ya. The white man can manufacture [such things]. Nobody knows by which intelligence the *Oburoni* can do it. His wisdom is here [tapping his forehead] and we say that person is a witch. You have intelligence. People can't imagine by what wisdom he was able to manufacture that thing, so they know he's intelligent, they say he is a witch.

That same idea is expressed in a once popular highlife song by A. B. Crentsil, who compared European and African witchcraft. The (Fante) title of the song was 'Ayen' (witchcraft):

If you have witchcraft, use it to do something good.
If you have witchcraft, don't use it to litigate.
Obonsam [Satan] is very powerful.

He has given us witchcraft to protect ourselves.
 Some use their witchcraft to cure disease.
 Kwasi Oburoni's [the White man's] witchcraft is good.
 He has used it to build an aeroplane.
 When you sit in it, you are happy.
 It takes you back and forth quickly.
 He has used it to build a train.
 When you sit in it, you are happy.
 It takes you back and forth quickly.
 But the Black man uses his witchcraft for evil.
 When he sees his fellow man prosper
 He will cause his downfall.
 He will make him crippled,
 He will make him blind,
 So that he will never prosper.
 You, devil, go away from me!
 You, devil, go away from me!
 You, devil, go away from me! [translation by K. A. Senah]

Crentsil's idea of good (European) and evil (African) witchcraft cropped up only twice during the research, but the idea that the power of *bayie* could be put to good and evil use was common. Some quotations: 'If you're a witch, you have to guide your children to become prosperous' (Nana Animaah). 'There is a woman who has given birth to fifteen children. They're all living. She is proud to say, "I protect my children with my witchcraft." So if you're a witch and you use it for the protection of your children, there's nothing wrong about it' (Aberifi elders). The idea of good and bad witchcraft also cropped up during a conversation I had with an elderly woman (M.) who cleverly defended herself against the accusation of bad witchcraft:

M. Some people have good witchcraft and others have bad witchcraft.

Me. Can you give an example of good witchcraft?

M. I'm not a witch. But those who have good witchcraft are people whose children never fall ill and never die young. That power they receive from God, and it is good. Bad witchcraft is the opposite. I myself gave birth to thirteen children and I'm left with only four, three sons and a daughter. Even the three sons are scattered, I don't know where they are.

Me. So what does it mean?

M. I don't know, but most people accuse me of witchcraft. My grandchildren in particular always accuse me of witchcraft. But if I were a witch I wouldn't have allowed my children to go away. I even go hungry nowadays, and my children would be sending me money regularly to buy something to eat.

For many Christians *bayie* shades into the work of Satan. I asked *Opanyin* Posuo whether he believed in witchcraft.

Posuo. Yes, there is witchcraft. In Christianity that is what is referred to as demons, *adamoni*. Even Jesus found it difficult to root it out of people. He said a person must give himself up before it can be rooted out. If there are no witches, then what are the balls of light we see on treetops and places deep in the night?

Me. Have you ever seen any?

Posuo. Oh, it's common on this football pitch at night. [There is a Presbyterian school playing field near *Opanyin* Opusuo's house.] You can see them, bright and twinkling, during the night on this football field most of the time. Yes, there is witchcraft.

Posuo. *Bayie* is *obonsam*. You can't cast it out from a person unless you dig up the pot containing the things that are the main source of the evil powers.

Me. Have you ever seen such a pot being dug up?

Posuo. Yes, I witnessed the digging of my grandmother Mintaa's pot. It was dug up from the shrine of the Mante god.

Opinions also differ with regard to the question of what *bayie* is. Posuo locates it in a pot which will be buried somewhere. Asare claims it is a spiritual power, a state of mind, and so on. Several times, too, it was made clear that the term *bayifo* was just a way of saying that someone is 'amazing', either in a positive or in a negative sense.

During our conversations we asked many questions which had probably never been put to our informants before. They were, moreover, questions to which it was impossible to get a clear and certain answer, since the topic was not empirically verifiable. It meant that the conversation became a kind of laboratory in which those who took part started to experiment with different ideas and pieces of information that were available to them, often only half aware of what they were doing. In the course of the discussion they tried to make sense of the loose ends of thoughts coursing through their heads and to put them together in a construction which satisfied their (and my) desire for logic and coherence. The conversations were less effective in bringing out the Akan cultural view of old-age wisdom, blessing, cursing and witchcraft, let alone the exact place of all these concepts in the Akan religious system. The ideas that were put forward during these conversations were often produced on the spur of the moment under the pressure of our persistent questioning. Our presence and questions encouraged people to say things they may hardly have thought about before, to create knowledge which made sense to them, which seemed logical, and in accordance with what they already knew.

The conversation was also a social situation which required some kind of social acting. Being visited by a European to ask them about certain things was an invitation to show their intelligence. 'I don't know' would be a disappointing answer. In other words the 'data' collected during those conversations were only partly about theological and psychological concepts. They also reflected the social dynamics of the particular meeting between local informants and a foreign anthropologist. The quotations which opened this section should therefore be seen first and foremost as social statements which (1) were aimed at satisfying all those involved in the discussion and (2) indirectly expressed the ambivalent relationship between the older and younger generation.

I am therefore not concerned about the lack of agreement on such questions as 'What is blessing?', 'What is cursing?', 'What is *bayie*?',

'Where do they come from?', 'How are they related to one another?', etc. I am not worried about the fact that no consistent and coherent Akan world view can be deduced from the various statements. We find utter confusion if we look for theo-logics: nothing like a doctrine can be detected. People contradict each other and themselves continually when they start explaining the mystic powers of wisdom, blessing, cursing and witchcraft. But if we look for socio-logics we will be rewarded by the discovery of a remarkable coherence: ambivalence about old age.

Why is it old people who are believed to have wisdom and experience, who are said to be respected and loved because of their good advice, their patience, their good manners, their kindness? And why, at the same time, is it old people who are accused of being witches and spoiling the lives of their children and kinsmen? The accounts of old people's wisdom and blessing and those of their evil practices like cursing and *bayie* reflect a fundamental ambivalence in Akan society about old age. They are the two sides of the proverbial coin. In a roundabout way people were expressing both love and dislike of old people.

'THEY WON'T GO': WHY THE YOUNG ACCUSE THE OLD

In his classic study of Cewa communities in Zambia, Marwick (1965) emphasised that witchcraft (he preferred the term 'sorcery') provided a way of expressing hatred towards people one should respect and honour. In the functionalist spirit of his time, he presented it as a social strain gauge, which made it possible for communities to survive underlying tensions. Without subscribing to his functionalist perspective, I do agree with his view of witchcraft as a hidden way of airing frustration and dislike.

Generational conflict has been extensively discussed in both the anthropological and the psychological literature. Particularly in gerontocratic societies, such as exist in Africa, tensions between young and old are likely to arise over issues like control of material, social, sexual and religious resources (e.g. Fortes, 1949; Parkin, 1972; Foner, 1984).

In Kwahu Tafo, too, resentment of the elderly by the young was commonly expressed in the idiom of *bayie*, but never in public. As mentioned, accusations usually took the form of malicious gossip behind the suspected witch's back. *Bayie*, to use Scott's terminology, is a weapon of the weak. The younger generation, which is supposed to show the elderly respect, cannot afford to accuse them openly of evil practices. *Bayie* provides them with the opportunity to combine outward respect with hidden resentment.

When I asked young people what made them resent the elderly, the most frequent answer was that they 'did not go'. The fact that some old people lived a very long time, whereas young members of the family died prematurely, was taken as an indication of their evil tactics: they managed to stay alive at the expense of the young.

Elderly people were aware of this accusation. In a somewhat difficult conversation with an old, blind and utterly destitute man, *Agya*¹⁴ Suo, the ambiguity of old age as both a happy and a hateful condition came gradually to the surface. Fosu asked him why old people were so often accused of witchcraft.

Suo. It's because you've grown old, that's why you are being called a witch.

You won't go. *Wonko*.

Fosu. You won't go where?

Suo. *Wunwu*. You won't die. (Laughter.)

Kwaku Agyei, in a conversation with Fosu, also referred to this accusation:

Agyei. The reason why they say that is that they don't like him. He's grown old and has lived in the house for a long time. He won't die, so whenever something goes wrong they say it's the old woman. Maybe it wasn't the old lady's doing. It doesn't look as if it was in her mind. It's they who are accusing her of witchcraft. Do you see? *Bayie* is intelligence. For instance, somebody says this rug/old cloth will get spoilt. If it gets spoilt, then they say you are *ɔbayifo*. In your wisdom you've foreseen that it will get spoilt.

Fosu. Is it true that people more often than not accuse old women of witchcraft?

Agyei. Yes.

Fosu. More than *mmabaaɔwa* [young women]?

Agyei. Yes.

Fosu. More than young men?

Agyei. Yes.

Fosu. Why do they accuse *mmereɔwa* [old women]?

Agyei. *Aberewa ho ye ahi*. An old woman irritates people.

Fosu. Why? Why does an old lady irritate people?

Agyei. The reason is that the old lady doesn't go anywhere. She's always at home. Maybe there are many grandchildren, some of them dying. People would accuse her of causing their deaths. But maybe she wasn't responsible. They'd have accused her for no reason.

The accusation was usually rejected by the elderly themselves. *ɔpanyin* Posuo turned it round:

That some young people die and leave the aged is most of the time due to their sins. Stealing, adultery and other wrongdoing are rampant among the youth of today, and that's the reason for most of their deaths. People they've wronged at some time kill them with juju or fetish. *Wo ye obi bone a na wabɔ wo dua anaase wato wo aduro na w'awu*. The old people in the house reached such age thanks to the good things they did. They're not the cause of young people's deaths.

An elderly lady summarised the dilemma of old age and *bayie*: 'If your

¹⁴ *Agya* (lit. 'father') is an honorific form of address to an elderly man.

child dies you'll be accused. If your child prospers you'll be accused too.'

CONCLUSION: THE AMBIGUITY OF OLD AGE

I have presented and discussed some fragments of conversation with elderly people and younger people in the rural town of Kwahu Tafo. The statements of the various speakers are often contradictory. The borderline between respect and hatred, admiration and envy, affection and fear, proves porous. This article is an attempt to understand the changing sentiments of the young towards the old and vice versa. Elders pronounce both blessings and curses. Their spiritual power is sometimes appreciated as wisdom, the fruit of lifelong experience. At other times that same spiritual power is denounced as witchcraft. Theologically these statements sound confusing and contradictory. From a sociological point of view, however, they make sense and are coherent. They express the basic ambivalence of young people towards the older generation. On the one hand there is respect, a cultural code which is almost 'natural': one regards with mingled awe and admiration what came before. On the other hand, old people engender resentment because of their overbearing attitude and their refusal to 'go'. The fact that young people die while old people remain alive is a reversal of the natural order and reeks of *bayie*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research was carried out with the help of my Ghanaian co-researchers Kwame Fosu, Samuel Sarkodie, Patrick Atuobi, Anthony Obeng Boamah and Michael Buabeng. Benjamin Boadi and Yaw Darko Ansah typed most of the research material. I am also deeply indebted to Monica Amoako, Martin Asamoah, Abena Ansah, Isaac Oppong, Marek Dabrowski, Grzegorz Kubowicz and Abusuapanyin Daniel Osei Yeboah for various kinds of support during the period of the research. Last but not least, I want to thank the old people who shared their knowledge and concerns with me. I have used their real names throughout. Most of the elderly people figuring in my study indicated that they wanted to be mentioned (and remembered) by their true name. I assume that those who did not express themselves explicitly on this point and who are now dead held the same view. I dedicate the article to *Jkyeame* Kwame Opoku in tribute to his wisdom.

REFERENCES

- Apt, N. A. 1996. *Coping with Old Age in a Changing Africa: social change and the elderly Ghanaian*. Aldershot: Avebury.
- Arhin, K. (ed.). 1979. *Brong Kyempim: essays on the society, history and politics of the Brong people*. Accra: Afram Publications.
- Bartle, P. 1977. 'Urban Migration and Rural Identity: an ethnography of a Kwawu community'. Ph.D. thesis, Legon: University of Ghana.
- Bleek, W. 1975. *Marriage, Inheritance and Witchcraft: a case study of a rural Ghanaian family*. Leiden: Africa Studies Centre.
- 1976a. 'Sexual Relationships and Birth control in Ghana: a case study of a rural town'. Ph.D. thesis, Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.
- 1976b. 'Witchcraft, gossip and death: a social drama', *Man* 12, 526–41.

- Brempong, O. 1986. 'Akan Highlife in Ghana: songs of cultural transition', two volumes. Ann Arbor MI: UMI Dissertation Services.
- Busia, K. A. 1951. *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti*. London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute.
- Christaller, J. G. 1933 (1881). *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language*. Basle: Evangelical Missionary Society.
- Collins, J. 1994. 'The Ghanaian Concert Party: African popular entertainment at the crossroads'. Ann Arbor MI: UMI Dissertation Services.
- Culpit, G. 1998. 'Justice, age and veneration', *Ethics* 108, 702-18.
- Danquah, J. B. 1928. *Akan Laws and Customs and the Akim Abuakwa Constitution*. London: Routledge.
- Debrunner, H. 1961. *Witchcraft in Ghana: a study on the belief in destructive witches and its effect on the Akan tribes*. Accra: Presbyterian Book Depot.
- Field, M. J. 1960. *Search for Security: an ethno-psychiatric study of rural Ghana*. London: Faber.
- Foner, N. 1984. *Ages in Conflict: a cross-cultural perspective on inequality between the old and young*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fortes, M. 1949. *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi*. London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute.
- 1969. *Kinship and the Social Order*. London: Routledge.
- Gluckman, M. 1963. 'Gossip as scandal', *Current Anthropology* 4, 307-15.
- Handelman, D. 1973. 'Gossip in encounters: the transmission of information in a bounded social setting', *Man* 8, 210-27.
- Kennedy, J. G. 1967. 'Psychological and sociological explanations of witchcraft', *Man* 2, 216-25.
- Marwick, M. G. 1965. *Sorcery in its Social Setting: a study of the Northern Rhodesia Cewa*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Meyer, B. 1992. '“If you are a devil you are a witch and if you are a witch you are a devil”: the integration of “pagan” ideas into the conceptual universe of Ewe Christians in south-eastern Ghana', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 22 (2), 98-132.
- 1999a. *Translating the Devil: religion and modernity among the Ewe in Ghana*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute.
- 1999b. 'Popular Ghanaian cinema and “African heritage”', *Africa Today* 46 (2), 93-114.
- Miescher, S. F. 1997. 'Becoming a Man in Kwawu: gender, law, personhood and the construction of masculinities in colonial Ghana, 1875-1957'. Ph.D. thesis Evanston IL: Northwestern University.
- Oppong, C. 1982. *Middle Class African Marriage*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Owusu-Sarpong, C. 1998. 'Language and the cryptic reality of witchcraft (bayie) in Asante', *Papers in Ghanaian Linguistics* 11, 89-106.
- Paine, R. 1967. 'What is gossip about? An alternative hypothesis', *Man* 2, 278-85.
- Parkin, D. 1972. *Palms, Wine and Witnesses*. London: Intertext Books.
- Rattray, R. S. 1923. *Ashanti*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 1927. *Religion and Art in Ashanti*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 1929. *Ashanti Law and Constitution*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 1930. *Akan-Ashanti Folk-tales*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Stucki, B. R. 1995. 'Managing the Social Clock: the negotiation of elderhood among rural Asante of Ghana'. Ph.D. thesis, Evanston IL: Northwestern University.

- Van der Geest, S. 1992. '“Tegen haat geen medicijn”: het lied van een melaatse in een Ghanees dorp' ('No medicine against hatred': the song of a leper in a Ghanaian town), *Etnofoor* 5 (1-2), 146-64.
- 1997a. 'Money and respect: the changing value of old age in rural Ghana', *Africa* 67 (4), 534-59.
- 1997b. 'Between respect and reciprocity: managing old age in rural Ghana', *Southern African Journal of Gerontology* 6 (2), 20-5.
- 1998a. 'Opanyin: the ideal of elder in the Akan culture of Ghana', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 32 (3), 449-93.
- 1998b. 'Yebisa wo fie: growing old and building a house in the Akan culture of Ghana', *Journal of Cross-cultural Gerontology* 13 (4), 333-59.
- 2002 '“I want to go!” How elderly people in Ghana look forward to death', *Ageing and Society*, forthcoming.
- n.d. '“Anyway”. Cars and Highlife in Ghana: inscriptions and means of transport'. Unpublished manuscript.
- Warren, D. M. 1974. 'Disease, Medicine and Religion among the Techiman-Bono of Ghana: a study in culture change'. Ann Arbor MI: UMI Dissertation Services.
- Yankah, K. 1995. *Speaking for the Chief. Okyeame and the politics of Akan royal oratory*. Bloomington and Indianapolis IN: Indiana University Press.

ABSTRACT

This article presents fragments of conversation with elderly and younger people in the rural town of Kwahu Tafo. The statements of the various speakers are often contradictory. The borders between respect and hatred, admiration and envy, affection and fear prove porous. The article is an attempt to understand the changing sentiments of the young towards the old, and vice versa. Elders pronounce both blessings and curses. Their spiritual power is sometimes appreciated as wisdom, the fruit of lifelong experience. At other times that spiritual power is denounced as witchcraft. Theologically these statements sound confusing and contradictory. From a sociological point of view, however, they make sense. They express the basic ambivalence of young people towards the old. On one hand there is respect, a cultural code which is almost 'natural': one regards with awe and admiration what came before. On the other, old people engender resentment because of their overbearing attitude and their refusal to 'go'. The fact that young people die while old people remain alive is a reversal of the natural order and reeks of witchcraft.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente des bribes de conversation avec des personnes âgées et des jeunes dans la ville rurale de Kwahu Tafo. Les propos des divers intervenants sont souvent contradictoires. La limite entre respect et haine, admiration et envie, affection et peur s'avère perméable. L'article tente de comprendre l'évolution des sentiments des jeunes à l'égard des vieux, et vice versa. Les anciens prononcent à la fois des bénédictions et des malédictions. Leur force spirituelle est parfois reconnue comme de la sagesse, le fruit de l'expérience de toute une vie. A d'autres moments, cette force spirituelle est dénoncée comme de la sorcellerie. Sur un plan théologique, ces propos semblent déroutants et contradictoires. D'un point de vue sociologique, cependant, ils ont un sens. Ils expriment l'ambivalence fondamentale des jeunes vis-à-vis des vieux. D'un côté, il y a du respect, un code culturel presque "naturel": on considère avec

respect et admiration ce qui nous a précédé. De l'autre côté, les personnes âgées engendrent du ressentiment en raison de leur attitude dominatrice et leur refus de "partir". Le fait que des jeunes meurent alors que des personnes âgées restent en vie est un renversement de l'ordre naturel qui exhale la sorcellerie.

