FIFTY YEARS IN KWAHU-TAFO
MEMORIES AND REFLECTIONS OF AN ANTHROPOLOGIST

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Introduction

Near my village in The Netherlands is a house with a Latin inscription, a famous line from the African philosopher St Augustine: *Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis* (Time changes and we change with it). I sometimes pass by on my bicycle and the words keep turning in my head while my feet continue turning the pedals: What were the most prominent changes of my time and how was I drawn into them?

One event that deeply affected my life was my visit to the rural town of Kwahu-Tafo in Ghana forty years ago and the many visits that followed, up to today. In contrast with most of my colleagues, I have largely stuck to one place for fieldwork throughout my anthropological career. How did life in Kwahu-Tafo change over all those years? And how did I change with it as an anthropologist, or for that matter, as a person?

Much has been written about subjectivity as a requisite for (not an obstacle to) anthropological fieldwork. The importance of related personal experience for raising questions, observing people and understanding words and actions is now a standard topic in methodological instructions for anthropologists. Without subject-ivity, there is no intersubjectivity and—therefore—no commun-ication. Introspection or reflection, searching oneself to understand the other, is commonly discussed in those instructions and is widely practised in anthropological publications.

Much less has been written about how the fieldwork experience affects the personal life of the researcher. Paraphrasing Geertz, Eriksen (2004: 11) writes that

> all humans are born with the potential to live thousands of different lives, yet we end up having lived only one. One

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> of the central tasks of anthropology consists of giving accounts of some of the other lives we could have led.

Writing about people's lives in Kwahu-Tafo, I have always been aware that their life could have been mine. That awareness created closeness and distance at the same time. What changed in Kwahu-Tafo over the last fifty years immediately raises the question of what changed in me during that period.

Déjà Vu

I arrived in Kwahu-Tafo around Easter time in 1969, twelve years after Ghana's independence, and three years after the coup that ended Nkrumah's hopeful beginning. The purpose of my stay was to learn *Twi*. I was given accommodation in the Catholic mission house with an American priest. The first night I hardly slept. There was an enormous noise on the other side of the road, with people shouting for hours. The next morning I learned that a man had died and that the man's family had decided to expel the widow and her children from the house, because she belonged to another family. "This is a matrilineal society," the priest commented, "it happens all the time."

Twenty-five years later I met Anthony Obeng Boamah, a man about my own age, who was an amateur writer and an interesting person. We became friends and worked together in doing research. He told me about the books and stories he had written. His first novel, he said, was in Twi, and was based on some personal experiences in his family, 25 years ago around Easter. It told the story of what happened to a mother and her children after her husband had died. I asked if I could read the book. It was not possible because he did not have a copy. He had brought the manuscript to the Bureau of Ghana Languages that occupied itself with the publication of literature in local languages. They had read the book and promised to edit and publish it. It was never published. Staff members at the Bureau changed over the years, some died, and every time Boamah went to look for his manuscript, he met another person with another story and the same

promises. “Maybe, I should have given them money,” he told me, “but I really had nothing.” In 2005 he finally managed to get the manuscript back.

He wrote three more books, short novels, about the good and bad things in life as he knew it. I encouraged him, but the writing did not help him much. Publishers cheated him and readers did not turn up. He toured schools and markets to sell his books without much success. Most people in Ghana only read books about Jesus. In the mean time, I wrote books and articles about Kwahu-Tafo with his assistance, which helped me to make a career in anthropology.

Coming and Going

A few weeks after my arrival, I moved out of the Catholic mission and found a room in the house of one of the teachers. I shared the room with teacher’s son, a boy of about twelve. His little son of five years became one of my main Twi teachers. He took me around while holding my hand and, as a little God, gave everything its Twi name: *efie*, *opon*, *mukase*, *asikyere*, *aponkye* . . . house, door, kitchen, sugar, goat. I spent about five months with the teacher and his family, and left for Accra with some—still limited—competence in Twi.

After some time I entered the University of Ghana for a master’s degree in Sociology. The second year of the programme was devoted to field research and the writing of a thesis. I decided to return to Kwahu-Tafo and to explore the tensions and conflicts in an average Kwahu extended family. A friend and fellow student at the university, Kwasi Nimrod Asante-Darko, accompanied me.

On the morning of 13 January 1972, the day I ended my first fieldwork and was about to return to the university in Accra to write up my data, the radio behaved strangely; it repeatedly played the same Highlife song, *To wo bo ase* (Calm down/Be careful). The song was occasionally interrupted by an announcement that the army had overthrown the Busia government. It was the second military coup within five years. Everything was said to be under

control, so I decided to travel anyway, but left my precious cassette recorder with a friend. I could not afford to lose it.

In 1973 I returned to the town for my second research, which eventually led to a PhD dissertation at the University of Amsterdam. The topic was sexual relationships and birth control. Six months later, I left Ghana after a stay of four and half years and did not return for 21 years. That long period had a reason. Both my theses contained delicate and potentially explosive information on secret witchcraft accusations within a close network of family members and on abortion practices in that same family. The studies and related articles had been published using pseudonyms for the participants, the town and the author, in order to protect the anonymity of the participants. I realised that a return to Kwahu-Tafo would mean that I had to hand my work to some of the family members, which would lead to a breach of confidentiality. I thought I had no other choice than to stay away from the town and my new-won friends.

In 1994 I thought that my hiding had lasted long enough. Most of the main "witches" (older people) had died and the young people of 1973 were now middle-age. Most important, however, was my assumption that time heals wounds and erases painful details. I was right. I formally presented the new family head a copy of my dissertation, in which he figured prominently—and not always favourably. He thanked me and said he would read it. The next day he returned to me and smiled; he had found himself in the book and was pleased. But he regretted that his name and the name of the town had not been printed out boldly.

My new research focused on experiences of growing old in Kwahu-Tafo, a topic that had everything to do with my discomfort about growing old in the Netherlands. I hoped that older people in Ghana could show me a more humane and dignified way of reaching old age.

Since 1994 I have visited Kwahu-Tafo every year for additional research on various topics such as sanitation, greeting, sleeping, the night, hospitalisation, funerals, orphanhood, mortuaries and brother-sister relationships. The many visits

enabled me to sketch a personal view on what changed and did not change in the town since I arrived there for the first time. Finally, in 2008, I spent one month in Kwahu-Tafo and talked to a few of my friends about what had changed in the town since Independence in 1957. Their observations will be mingled with those of my own. Let me start with some general remarks about developments in the town by my friends.

Kwahu-Tafo at Independence

The first thing that people think of when they compare Kwahu-Tafo in 1957 to Kwahu-Tafo in 2007 is the size of the town. This will be similar for nearly all towns in the country, certainly in the south. When I walk with them through the outskirts of the town, they remember that the area we are passing was all "bush" (read: farm) fifty years ago. Nowadays, houses have sprung up everywhere. The assumption that the population has accordingly increased is not correct, however. In 1970, Kwahu-Tafo had 5,328 inhabitants according to the census, while the 2000 census counted 5,255 people in the town, a slight decrease.

Another common observation is that the typical institutions set up by the Nkrumah government after Independence have disappeared. In Kwahu-Tafo, there was a Cocoa Service Division of the Ministry of Agriculture to help farmers with their cocoa plantations to prevent the trees from getting swollen shoot, a disease that killed the major part of Ghana's cocoa trees. There are hardly any cocoa trees left today and the Division has disappeared with them. There was a Workers' Brigade, a kind of model state farm that employed labourers, mainly from the Akuapem area, to grow foodstuffs, using advanced agricultural techniques. I witnessed the last days of the Workers' Brigade when I arrived in the town in 1969. There was a small clinic in 1957 run by foreign missionary sisters. The clinic is still there; it has expanded (the staff is now 25) and attracts a lot of patients. In 2006 it treated almost 26,000 out-patients and delivered 576 babies.

There were only two primary schools in 1957, one Catholic and one Presbyterian. I estimate that there are nearly ten today, including several private ones that enjoy increasing popularity due to the decreasing quality of public schools. There is now also a technical school and a senior secondary school. A missionary from Germany, who lived for more than ten years in Kwahu-Tafo, is remembered by many as a "development chief,"[1] *avant la lettre*, who made a major contribution to the development of the town; he built schools, houses, a football stadium, and a Catholic shrine where pilgrims come to pray.

The number of churches must be around twenty. I never counted them. My friends estimate that there were about ten churches in 1957, the "colonial" ones (Presbyterian, Methodist, Roman Catholic) and what were then called "spiritual churches" such as the Musama Disco Christo Church. The town had and still has a *zongo* (Moslem quarter), with a mosque.

There was no police-station in 1957, no pipe-borne water and no electricity. My friends mentioned these three amenities within one sentence, as if they were of one kind of basic necessities. All three are present now, but only electricity is prominent and visible. Pipe-borne water and the police are scarce and hardly available to "common people."

Electricity

My first and second research took place in the pre-electricity era. When darkness fell around 6 pm, my friend Kwasi and I lighted our lantern and positioned ourselves at the table to transcribe the interviews we had recorded, or to work out the field notes of the day. I have fond memories of those sparsely illuminated evenings, our sitting together and discussing the events of the day, or talking about our own adventures in life, our families and our dreams.

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[1] The *Nkosuohene* ('Development chief') is a new phenomenon in many towns and villages in Ghana. The function is usually given to a well-to-do person from abroad who is ceremonially installed as chief. He (or she) is believed to be able to rally money for the development of the community (see also Steegstra 2008).

Now electricity is available in Kwahu-Tafo, and I find it hard to believe we could do without it 35 years ago. But we could, and I think our efficiency was hardly less than it is today when I am doing the same things in the evening, in the bright glare of an electric bulb.

Yet, the presence of electricity (for those who can pay the bill) should not be under-estimated. Electric light has changed the appearance of the town. Television masts break the horizon of roofs and draw spectators under the roofs. Ghanaian and European football matches and soaps have become part of daily life. And the blasting of music from morning to late at night, has become the town's permanent wallpaper.

It is only a change in size and decibels, however. In 1969, the young people assembled in front of a beer bar that started its generator at 7 pm and played loud Highlife music until 10 or 11 o'clock (depending on the weather and the moon). Women and children settled in or along the gutter with little tables to sell snacks and drinks. The street was practically blocked with people having fun, dancing to the music, conversing and dating for the night. The bar itself was always empty.

Highlife

I took an interest in Highlife and started to transcribe songs when I discovered that the artists were singing about the life I was studying. Many people, including young boys, volunteered to write the Twi texts on paper, listening with one ear pressed against the cassette recorder. They knew most of the songs by heart, anyway. It was the period that Nana Ampadu, from the neighbouring Kwahu town, Obo, reigned as the unrivalled king of Highlife.

People of today are surprised and amused when I remind them of classic songs like *Aware bòne, Kofi Nkrabea, Yaw Berko,* or *Aku Sika*. The songs are now "colo" (colonial, out-dated, typical of the older generation), but not forgotten, and still topical as they describe the worries of life that have hardly changed: marriage

conflicts, money problems, envy and useless travelling.[2] The songs of today are different, more about love and naughtier perhaps, but songs still dominate the streets and funerals in particular. Nothing expresses better the sorrow of the family than a Highlife song like *Nnipa nsè hwee* or *Maame Adwoa,* played at eighty decibels.[3]

Marriage and Divorce

One of the frictions that made family life less peaceful and harmonious than some of the early ethnographers wanted us to believe was the instability of marriage. My research showed that marriage was extremely volatile (Bleek 1975). A too "successful" marriage was looked at askance by the lineage members and was sometimes felt to thwart the interests of the couple's respective families. Interference of the *abusua* (matrilineal family) was a common explanation for divorce, as were mismatch of characters, no children, and "lack of love." It was no exception to meet people who had had five or more different partners in their life.

I asked people around me if they thought the situation had in any way changed since my research in 1971. They thought it had not. One said that he found it difficult to judge as today people marry partners from elsewhere and/or stay outside Kwahu-Tafo, so one does not know anymore what exactly is going on in their marriage.

Farming

Almost everybody in Kwahu-Tafo is—to some extent—a farmer; yet farming is not a popular occupation, certainly not among the younger generation. For many it is just a Saturday-morning obligation to relieve the food budget of the family.

I hardly participated in farming during my many years in the town. The family I stayed with in 1971 was not keen to have me around on the farm. I invited myself a couple of times, but each

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[2] Van der Geest, S. & N.K. Asante-Darko 1982, 1983.

[3] Van der Geest 1980

time they managed to dodge me by leaving very early in the morning. One morning I set my alarm at 4.30 am and waited until I heard them leaving. They could not avoid me this time. Their reluctance to take me along proved right. I caused many problems on the farm, not being able to distinguish between the weeds and the vegetables. On the way back, I tried to carry the calabash with water on my head; it fell and broke. I never joined them again, but did accompany some older people to their farms during my later fieldwork.

How did the farmers fare over the past decades? When I returned to Kwahu in 1994 to do research among older people and listened to their life histories, I mostly heard pessimistic accounts of their farming. The land did not produce anymore what it used to, the rain was unreliable and most agreed that the Volta Lake was to be blamed. The lake was the scapegoat. The stories covered the disastrous middle 1980s when extreme droughts hit their farms and bushfires did the rest. Those who had cocoa farms lost them and never recovered from that blow.

Farming today is unpopular among the young. The products are few and of low quality, mainly cassava and corn, they complain. Clearly, farming is no more a life ambition for an overwhelming majority of the young generation. He/she who wants to succeed in life must get away from the town and find employment in the city or, preferably, overseas.

Trading

There are two types of traders, the "big" ones who have set up stores in urban centres such as Accra, Koforidua, or Oda, and the petty traders who have remained in Kwahu-Tafo and have a small store in their house or a kiosk on the roadside from where they sell daily necessities to the people in the town. I am here referring to the latter only.

Opening a store to sell things is still seen, by women in particular, as a profitable way to earn a living. I estimate that the town has more than two hundred stores and kiosks of different kinds and sizes that sell items for daily use. The idea of buying

things in one place and selling them for a higher price in another attracts a lot of people in Kwahu-Tafo. It seems such a simple formula for success in life and many succeeded indeed to make a decent living from their trading.

A woman who stays with me in the same house is a good example. She has bought an old shipping container and placed it at the roadside. She uses it as a store from where she sells approximately two hundred different items, foodstuffs, drinks, and daily necessities such as soap, kitchen utensils, candles, batteries, school items, cosmetics, etc. She leaves the house around seven in the morning and returns to sleep around nine or ten at night. The store has become a second home where she does the cooking for her family and where her husband and children spend a lot of time, eating, conversing and taking care of the store when she has to leave for other business.

It is a picture that looks identical to what I observed in 1969: the same obsession then with trading, among women in particular. Many houses had one room reserved for a store where daily necessities could be bought. The only difference is some of the modern items that are now for sale: electric equipment, telephone cards, transistor radios, and a lot more plastic. The pièce de résistance of the trade, however, has remained remarkably similar: the same tins with condensed milk, sardines, tomato paste and corned beef, matches, batteries, sugar and key soap. Seeing those items unchanged after so many years, gives a strange feeling of travelling through time.

Drivers

During all those years of visiting Kwahu-Tafo, I never had my own transport. At first it was a mere necessity, later it was a conscious choice. Travelling in one's own vehicle cuts one off from human company. Travelling with others, and even more so, waiting with others for the transport to leave, unites. The hours I spent at lorry stations outnumber those spent at funerals. Lorry stations are places where one never gets bored. There is so much to be seen, especially in Kwahu where people travel a lot. At a certain moment

I became interested in the inscriptions on the lorries, an interest I shared with Margaret Field in her *Search for Security* and with many visitors of the country. Why should someone write on his vehicle *Suro nea obèn wo* (Fear the one near you), *Nnipa yè bad* (People are bad), *Sea never dry* or Good *father*? And who wrote it? I asked the driver, the mate, and in no time we had a focus group discussion, before the invention of the focus group. Everyone wanted to add his views and when the lorry finally left, the discussion continued in the car.

Travelling in Kwahu over a period of forty years has shown me the gradual social degradation of the driver. During the early years of my Kwahu life, a driver was a local hero who straddled city and rural life. His urbanity showed in his manners and in the commodities at his disposal: clothes, electric goods, drinks, and cigarettes. Young boys once dreamt of becoming a driver. Today drivers no longer have this flashy aura around them. Many are shabbily dressed and face a hard life. The public widely criticizes them for irresponsible behaviour and careless driving (Van der Geest 2009). One older man, who was a driver when I first came to Kwahu-Tafo in 1969, remarked: "In our time, life as a driver was very good. Drivers commanded respect. These days it is different."

Migration

Houses that are now being built with money earned in Europe or America testify that one can make most progress outside the country. Many Ghanaians have managed to find employment abroad, including in my own country, The Netherlands. They contribute to the upkeep of their family by paying school fees for their brothers and sisters and health care expenses for all; they help relatives running a business, they build houses, support their elderly parents and, of course, send money for the organization of funerals.

One woman of "my" family, who migrated to Amsterdam about 25 years ago, married an older Dutch man. The couple built a house for the woman's family in Kwahu-Tafo where now several sisters of the woman live with their children. The Dutch husband

has died, but the house is not yet completed. The woman visits her relatives about every two years and uses that period to continue the building. She complained to me that her sisters expected too much help from her and that she could hardly manage. When she returned to the Netherlands after her last visit she asked me if I could help her to pay the transport to Accra (about 3 euro) because, she said, she had spent all her money.

The high demands that people at home place on their relatives abroad is well known. I have read several letters that I had to carry to the Netherlands (in the pre-cell phone era) for migrated brothers and sisters; all of them contained lists of items they asked them to buy for them and lists of things or sums of money they had received so far. I remember one letter in which a man asked his brother in Amsterdam to buy a car-wash machine for him. He thought that such an innovation in Kwahu-Tafo would generate good money.

A Dutch research project led by Valentina Mazzucato explored the transactions between Ghanaians in the Netherlands with relatives at home. Smith (2007), who focused on people in the city of Accra, singles out two key interests in those transactions: income generating materials, and money and support for the improvement of social security of relatives. Kabki (2007), who did her research in rural Asante, vividly describes how the rural relatives exploit their ties with the migrants to improve their living conditions and thus become local agents of change. Her ethnography demonstrates how migrants through their remittances continue to play a significant role in the development of their home community.

Miescher and Ashbaugh (1999) followed a Kwahu couple who settled in the United States. They emphasised that the migration experience for the couple was much more complex and varied than the economic motives may suggest. For the home front, however, the migration experience is first of all one of economic entrepreneurship, followed by its effect on the family's reputation. They wrote:

> from the Ghanaian perspective in Kwawu, there is the image of the ideal migrant. This notion refers to young, ambitious sons, daughters, nieces, and nephews who will go abroad and further their educational credentials. They will earn enough money to establish themselves back home, or at least help relatives with expenses and investments at their place of origin. (Miescher & Ashbaugh 1999:63)

In her introduction to a special issue on Ghanaian migration, Takyiwaa Manuh wrote: "Through the migrations of people and the contacts that they maintain with those at 'home' and the monies and goods that are sent, the local in Ghana is being remade" (Manuh 1999: 7). This observation certainly counts for Kwahu-Tafo that is being "remade" by its sons and daughters abroad. The migrated sons of a prominent church member in Kwahu-Tafo are now rebuilding the old Presbyterian church into an impressive construction, more than twice its original surface and height. And the sons of a respected elder, who died while I was doing my research on older people, erected a complete new house in the three months between their father's death and funeral. During the funeral the new house served as a memorial—if not a museum—to pay tribute to their deceased father. Both examples of church and memorial house, represent new trends in Kwahu-Tafo today.

Kwahu people have always been mobile (Bartle 1980). They settled as traders in towns and cities all over the country and invested their earnings in the building of impressive houses in their hometowns. Their successful migration to *Aburokyiri* (abroad) and their continued involvement in family affairs from afar constitutes a major change that took place between my first and later visits to the town.

Funerals

My research made me attend a lot of funerals. I was moved by the emotional energy that broke loose during those occasions, the expressions of sorrow, shaving of hair, tears, loud music, noisy exchanges of sadness and anger, drunkenness, fights in the streets

and at the grave yard. And the music! Drumming at the funeral ground, Highlife in the beer bar, the dancing. I loved funerals.

When I returned many years later, the funerals had increased their hold over people. Of course details had changed; highlife had replaced most of the traditional drumming and mortuaries now made it possible to spend more time on the preparation of the funeral. The ceremony could still be bigger. Relatives could restore and embellish the house of the deceased to provide the guests with a place worthy enough to be received in. They could decide to build a proper toilet for the guests. And, most importantly, they would have the body of the deceased right in their midst, all thanks to the "fridge" (Van der Geest 2006). When I arrived in 1969, the body of a deceased person had to be buried one day after the death, but now even after four months, the body can still be the radiant centre of the festivities. And—another significant change with the past—relatives from abroad return to attend the funeral, and to pay most of the expenses. More than before, funerals are manifest-tations through which families compete with other families in self-glorification. The size of the occasion, the money spent, the decibels of the music and the number of visitors determine the success of the funeral and the reputation of the family. No family that respects itself can afford not to take part in that competition (Van der Geest 2000).

The waste of time and money spent on funerals is a recurring issue in public discussions, in Ghana as a whole and also in Kwahu-Tafo. But funerals also generate money and stimulate parts of the local economy, as Arhin (1994) and De Witte (2001) pointed out. De Witte devoted an entire chapter of her book on the growth of the "funeral industry;" the funeral developed from a largely self-help activity into a professional service. The delivery of chairs, the decoration of the deceased's body and the house, and food and drinks are increasingly farmed out to "party services." Relatives and friends organise the printing of special clothes with the image of the deceased to wear during the ceremony. "Jamborees," best described as disc jockeys, are hired to play music and make announcements. They bring with them the technical equipment

needed for a successful funeral such as turn tables, boxes and a generator. They often use the opportunity to sell music cassettes to those attending the celebration. Others film the ceremony, focusing on the decorated body and the visitors who come to pay their respects. After all, the number and reputation of the visitors are an indication of the success of the funeral. The films are distributed within the family and sent to relatives abroad who were unable to attend. Finally, the installation of mortuaries has caused a major boost to the size and the pomp of funerals.

As funerals started to disrupt the normal course of work more and more, the authorities ordained that they should be held on Saturdays only. Now funerals have assumed the character of a weekend entertainment, a mixture of mourning and merry-making.

Latrines

When I settled in the house of a teacher to start my study of Twi, my host was worried about my health and tried to convince me to return to the Catholic Mission. "This place is not good for you," he said. "You cannot live as us, the food, mosquitoes, everything, you will get sick." I was able to convince him that it was important for me to stay with him and his family. I would never learn Twi and understand their culture while staying at the mission house. He thought for a few moments and then became enthusiastic. Okay, he now understood and he would let me experience every detail of his culture, he promised. I slept early and well that night and woke up amidst the noise from the goats and chickens in the compound and a monotonous sound that I couldn't identify at first, but which turned out to be the sweeping of the compound by one of the teacher's daughters.

Then a knock on my door: "We are going to the toilet." My introduction into the culture had started and it proved to be its most difficult part. I followed my host through the twilight of the morning to the public latrine. There was a queue in front of the small building. I became worried. The stench increased with the shortening of the queue. Frightened, I entered the toilet when it was my turn. About ten squatting men stared at me. I walked past

them and left the building. I told my host that I did not feel any urge, which was very true. I gave up the idea of participant observation in the public latrine. As a sinner, almost, I returned to the Catholic priest and asked permission to continue using his one-person water closet (Van der Geest 1998).

Twenty-five years later, when I started my research on the lives of older people, the latrine returned into my life. Little had changed in myself and in the sanitary conditions of the town. My fear of latrines turned into a professional interest. I visited the four public latrines in the town and interviewed the sanitary inspectors and visitors. I also met the night soil collector, a man who in the darkness of the night goes around the houses that have a private bucket latrine. He empties the bucket into his own bucket and carries the "night soil" to the edge of the town and dumps it (Van der Geest 2002). As I said, little has changed in the sanitary situation. Most people still depend on public latrines, as the majority of the houses do not have their own latrine. And if there is one, the number of users may be restricted for good reasons: the night soil collector only comes once a week.

Recently, however, the private VIP (Ventilated Improved Pit latrine) or KVIP (a newer and better version) has become an essential element in the new houses that are now being built in the town. Access to one's own private latrine is increasingly being regarded as a sign of civilization and modernity. And, as I just said, a successful funeral requires a proper latrine.

Teenage Pregnancies

My second research, which eventually resulted in a PhD dissertation, dealt with sexual relationships and birth control. Being young myself, it led me mostly to the young people of the town. Moreover, it was the young generation that was interested in—and to some extent practiced—birth control. My findings were shocking. Those to whom the government and other organizations offered birth control services, married couples, were not interested and those who *were* interested, unmarried school-going youngsters, were excluded from the services. Education led to the

postponement of marriage, but not of sexual relationships. On the contrary, school rather encouraged or at least facilitated early sexual contacts. It created an environment outside family control that enabled young people to meet freely and develop romantic relationships. Moreover, the competitive character of the school also urged pupils to engage in early lover relationships in order to "count" in the company of peers. Numerous school activities were indeed used for secret meetings with lovers: evening studies in the school building, "cramming" in someone's room at night, sport events in nearby towns.

Most of the young women in the family where I carried out my research became pregnant before they wanted and most of them tried to terminate their first pregnancy. I counted 53 different methods of "causing" abortion, most of them harmless and ineffective, for example the consumption of extremely sweet drinks. Other methods however were very dangerous, for example the insertion of a twig of a certain tree into the uterus or an overdose of anti malaria drugs. The fact that the girls knew the risks and yet tried to have the abortion, showed their desperation (Bleek 1976). I attended several funerals of young women, between the age of 16 and 20, who had died of an attempted abortion.

Now, more than thirty years later, HIV/AIDS has entered the scene. Has it changed the situation or is the disease just an addition to the problems young people already face? Are young people today able to protect themselves against pregnancy *and* HIV/AIDS?

After some unsuccessful attempts to interest a Ghanaian university student to do a re-study on this issue, I met a British volunteer in the town who was about to start her anthropology studies and was interested. She sent me the first draft of her bachelor thesis on "Changing choices and constraints in the making of Ghanaian marriages." She writes, among other things, that contraceptives, particularly condoms, are more easily available now, but the total context in which young men and women have to operate, may still pose formidable obstacles to effective protection.

I am cautiously inclined to believe that the situation has not changed much. Funerals for young women who suddenly die are still being held.

According to friends with whom I discussed this issue, the most prominent change between forty years ago and today is that the shame surrounding pregnancy at school-going age has almost gone. The dangerous abortion practices at the time were forced upon girls because they did not want their pregnancy to become known to others such as parents, school staff and peers. That anxiety has now been greatly reduced. Pregnant schoolgirls are now able to more openly discuss their situation and—if they choose that option—look for a safe way to terminate the pregnancy. Others may take one year off from school and return a year later while their mother looks after the child during the time they are in school. In 1973 very few girls dared return to school after delivery and if they did, they preferred to do so in another town to avoid the shame (Bleek 1981).

Morals

It is unavoidable that older people start to criticise the "morals" of today's youth if you ask them what has changed over the past fifty years. Older people I interviewed in 1971 had the same complaints about the youth of that period, and again, anthropologists around 1940 recorded elders who repeated the same view: today's youth has no respect, unlike us when we were young. Nevertheless, I listened to the complaints of older people in 2008. One woman, of around 65 years, remarked:

> Now it is difficult to control the children. They use drugs and do not listen to advice. They think they are grown up and do what they want.

Her brother, about ten years younger, added:

> At the time of Independence it was very rare to see a young person travelling to the city without proper guidance. Children were placed in the hands of good relatives when they went to

> another place to learn a trade or look for a job. Now, a child may leave Kwahu-Tafo without the parents knowing where they are going, with whom they will be staying and what they are going to do.

The way of dressing was another standard item of complaints. The brother continued:

> The way some young people dress is very bad. Some expose parts of the body that are not supposed to be seen by others.

But the most serious negative development according to him was the so-called "freedom of speech." Radio and television set bad examples of rough language, "saying things that should not be said, telling blatant lies and insulting others." Young people had taken over this bad habit.

Money

All friends I spoke to mentioned money-mindedness as a negative trend in today's society. One said:

> During the time of Independence people were not so money-conscious. Even though they made farms or did other jobs, most people were content with what they had. Today, people are eagerly looking for money without paying much attention to their children. They like radio, TV, computer, mobile telephone, etc. They work very hard, though sometimes in unfair ways. They also want to educate their children and to make them look presentable, wherever they go. This is not possible without money.

Money is a convenient metonym for lamenting the present age, but the critical tone in the above quote is linked to money's positive value. Strictly speaking, the negative description above refers to the absence of money. Money, when it is there, is the "stuff of life" and the source of happiness. I cite a few examples to illustrate this.

During Christian church services, which have become creative celebrations of local culture, the collection is the peak of the liturgy. The faithful come dancing to the front to donate

their contribution, while the singing reaches its climax and women enthusiastically wave their handkerchiefs. In some Pentecostal churches, where the faithful are urged to give "beautiful money" (large bank notes), money has also become the centre of worship.

Similarly, funeral celebrations are unthinkable without the ingredient of money. Giving money is the way of paying respect to the deceased and his/her *abusua*. The name of the giver and the amount of the donation is carefully recorded in a notebook and publicly announced when it is above the average (Van der Geest 1997).

Monetarisation is felt during social events and festivities, but most of all in day-to-day living. It has become more and more difficult to survive if one has no money. Forty years ago, when I lived in the town, people could feed themselves fairly well, even if they had no or little money. They brought a variety of foodstuffs from the farm, which met most of their needs. Nowadays, people complain, their farms cannot feed them anymore. The need for money makes the young generation leave Kwahu-Tafo to find gainful employment in a larger town nearby, in the cities of Accra or Kumasi or, as we have seen, abroad.

Expectations

Edgar Reitz's 17-hour-long film *Heimat,* describes the changes in the daily life of the population of a rural German community between 1918 and 1984. People may not change much, but the circumstances of their life do. In the case of *Heimat,* it is first and foremost technical developments that bring about change in this agricultural community: new media, increased mobility and agricultural machinery. It is also technical and infrastructural innovations that have changed the appearance of Kwahu-Tafo. The road to the town has finally been tarred, electricity and pipe-borne water are—more or less—available, and people communicate through mobile telephones to relatives in Accra and abroad. For

those who have no mobile phones, there is "space-to-space," a small table under an umbrella, a mobile telephone and an operator with a notebook and a stopwatch. However, the "space-to-space" that appeared a lucrative new business three years ago, has almost outlived itself as most of its former clients now have their own mobile phones. The "Development Chief," a retired British television maker, has built an Internet Communication Centre with money from Britain, and the town will soon be connected to the worldwide web. For the time being, those who want to surf the Internet visit nearby towns.

I now receive text messages from friends in Kwahu-Tafo while I am giving a lecture about them in Amsterdam. They report to me about the death of so and so, or ask me to send money for a mobile telephone, a digital camera, a sick relative, or for the school fees of a child.

Ordinary life has not changed much in spite of these changes, but expectations have. The new media that are now available to them show dazzling pictures of what is possible outside Kwahu-Tafo. It is a cliché to say that the world is a global village, but clichés can be true. The world is Kwahu-Tafo. Everything happening anywhere is heard and seen in this small town. This feeds ambitions and makes dreams more daring. But if expectations rise, so also do frustrations. In the same way that shops display what many cannot buy, the media show what is unattainable for the large majority of people. Feelings of deprivation grow with the successes of the few who make it. *Aburokyiri* (Europe/America) seems much closer; yet, for most it is as far as fifty years ago. And in the mean time they pound fufu as they did in 1957.

Affectations

Time is changing and we change with it. Time's serendipity brought me to the town of Kwahu-Tafo, first to learn Twi, then to do anthropological fieldwork about life experiences that concerned me as much as the people of the town. "Anthropology is about taking people seriously," writes MacClancey (2002:4), in the introduction to a book that wants to de-exoticise the reputation of

anthropology. I want to add: "and it is about taking yourself seriously." Studying others, I came to realise over the years, is a roundabout route to studying yourself.

My first four and a half years spent in Ghana (almost two of them in Kwahu-Tafo), "brainwashed" and "heart-washed" me thoroughly. The awareness that I could as well have been one of them "de-naturalised" most of my taken-for-granted ideas and practices. Kwahu-Tafo came to be my "sub-ego," a "voice" that I kept hearing, suggesting that what I and those around me considered normal and natural, was subject to debate and doubt after all. In my intellectual life, that voice has been a tremendous help to escape from ethnocentrism and prejudice and to place so many established 'facts' in a wider, relativist perspective. In my personal life that relativist stance was a mixed blessing; it sometimes caused misunderstanding and irritation in my environment, and the suspicion of defeatism and lack of commitment.

The more mundane changes and developments in Kwahu-Tafo that I listed in the foregoing pages affected the also more mundane experiences in my own life. Electricity, water, Highlife, marriage, pregnancy, funerals, travelling, farming and trading and—last, but not least—toilets, changed the way I used and experienced these amenities and institutions back home. They have not changed me merely into an "unfaithful" or uncommitted citizen in my own society. My inability to take things for granted has had some gratifying effects as well. It has also turned me into a person who keeps being surprised at the efficacy, wisdom and beauty of my own culture.

Author's Note

Over the years many friends and co-researchers helped me during my fieldwork in Kwahu-Tafo. They accompanied me during interviews and conversations, made transcriptions, commented on first drafts of chapters and papers and collected data on their own initiative. Moreover, they were great company. Outstanding were Kwasi Nimrod Asante-Darko, who joined me during my first research in 1971, and Yaw Anthony Boamah, Patrick Atuobi and Benjamin Boadu who helped me from 1994 until today. Others, to whom I owe a lot of thanks include (somewhat in chronological order), Kofi Ron Lange, Kwasi

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