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“No strength”: sex and old age in a rural town in Ghana

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Abstract

This article is part of a larger project on social and cultural meanings of growing old in a rural community of Ghana, the fieldwork for which was carried out between 1994 and 2000. It deals with ideas and practices concerning sex among the elderly. Informal conversations were held with individual elders and with groups of people that were, middle-aged and young. Sex was generally regarded as a matter of “strength”, which was diminishing at old age. For men the concept of strength specifically referred to sexual potency, whereas for women “strength” was part of a more general feeling of physical power and the ability to perform the many activities expected from being a man’s sexual partner. Sex at old age is looked at with a considerable amount of ambivalence. On the one hand, it is something that the elderly should have left behind them. On the other hand, sex confirms the vitality and status of the elder. If sex is practised at old age, it should be orderly and restrained, “respectful”. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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“Your mind gets away from it.” (Kwahu man)

“I want strength to get food to eat.” (Kwahu woman)

Introduction

Sex and sexuality are universally regarded as the prerogative of young people. Elderly people are viewed as sexually unattractive and not interested in sex. If they *are* interested, there must be something wrong with them. Sexual intercourse between elderly people is typically “considered embarrassing or aesthetically unappealing”, writes Levy (1994, p. 291). She continues: “Images in the media and other forms of popular culture, such as cartoons and greeting cards, tend to portray older adults’ interest or attempts to be sexual as humorous, ludicrous, scornful or repugnant”, even as perverse (see Butler & Lewis, 1986; Gibson, 1993, p. 111). A “normal” elderly person is not or should not be interested in sex.

Recently, however, that view of the sexually disinterested elderly is being challenged by a stream of publications. These should be viewed against the backdrop of growing criticism of ageism. Levy (1994) points at the contradictory evidence. On the one hand, decline of sexual interest is indeed reported. Quoting a number of authors, she mentions: “mental or physical fatigue, preoccupation with business interests, over indulgence in food or drink, physical illness, fear of sexual failure, etc. Monotony in sexual relationships, related to over-familiarity and the predictability of sex with the same partner” (Levy, 1994, p. 291).

On the other hand, several authors emphasise that sexual desires continue to be felt throughout the life span, although there remains disagreement as to whether this applies solely to men or to men and women alike (Weg, 1983; Nadelson, 1984; Crose & Drake, 1993; Hodson & Skeen, 1994; Minichiello, Plummer, & Seal, 1996). Kellet (1991) concludes that reduction of sexual activity at old age is more cultural than biological in origin. Traupmann (1984) points at the discomfort of children thinking of their parents’ sexuality. According to Freud (1918), witnessing one’s parents making love could be traumatic for a child. Freud’s assumption was tested in a study by Hoyt (1977), which showed that parental

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sex was the most anxiety-provoking fantasy for young people, men as well as women.

The literature on sex and old age is slowly expanding, showing both consistency and contradiction. Consistent are conclusions about the widespread social and cultural production of the asexual elderly and the recognition that underneath the abnegation of sex, sexual desires may continue to exist until a very advanced age. Contradictory evidence is reported with regard to what extent this applies to what percentage of the elderly and whether there are significant differences between men and women. Virtually, nothing is known about cultural variations in both the acceptability and the actual existence of prolonged sexual interest and activity among elderly people. The studies quoted thus far refer exclusively to North American and Western European populations.

Anthropological studies of sexual behaviour in Africa, for example, are extremely rare if we exclude the avalanche of research on sexual behaviour as risk in the era of HIV/AIDS (Standing, 1991; Standing & Kisekka, 1989; Ahlberg, 1994; Savage & Tchombe, 1994). It is not surprising, therefore, that studies on *sex at old age* in Africa are practically non-existent. Apt's (1996) study of elderly Ghanaians does not contain any reference to the topic of sex, for example. This paper is one of the first attempts to explore the field of sexual desires and practices among elderly people in an African community. The main objective was to record people's views on the topic and to analyse their statements in light of their culture, with a particular focus on gender differences. The result of this attempt is mainly descriptive, which may seem disappointing to some, but it provides a promising start to gaining insight into a topic still surrounded by taboo and embarrassment both among the elderly and younger generations.

Research strategy

The article is based on anthropological fieldwork in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town on the Kwahu Plateau in the southeastern part of Ghana. The aim of the research was to describe and understand the position of elderly people in a rapidly changing society.

The field research involved open-ended conversations with 35 elderly people, which were taped and later transcribed and translated. Some people were interviewed only once, others twice or more often. Apart from these more formal conversations, this author often went to greet the old people informally and chat with them. These more casual visits enabled me to observe the daily life of elderly people and the attitudes of other people in the same house. Most of these observations were recorded in my diary. In addition, old age was discussed with many other people in the town including opinion leaders such as teachers and church members as

well as with other key informants. Focus group discussions were held with young people and groups of middle-aged men and women. In three schools, students completed a questionnaire expressing their views on old people or completed sentences on the same issue. Some students wrote essays about the old or made drawings of them. The research was almost entirely qualitative, in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of what it means to be old and dependent. That understanding was gradually acquired by the method of participant observation. I joined some of the elderly at their farm, in church and at funerals.

The elderly people in this study form a diverse group. A few of them were well off—socially, psychologically, financially, and in terms of health. They were surrounded by caring relatives and received attention and respect. Others were quite miserable because of poverty and loneliness. The extremes of happiness and misery occurred particularly among men. Those whose lives had been a success enjoyed the fruits of their work and did not have any worries. Those who had been less successful in their active days had often been deserted by the ones they had failed to care for. A strictly applied measure of reciprocity accounted for this difference in well-being at old age. As a result, women usually found themselves more in the middle than in the extremes. Even if they had not been successful in giving their children what they needed to progress in life, the children recognised that their mothers had tried their utmost and now returned their love.

Most of the elderly people were able to walk, only one of the 35 spent the whole day in bed. Five of them were blind, which restricted their movements considerably. Two more were almost blind. Only one old lady suffered from dementia and had to be “watched” throughout the day. The care they received from people in the house or children nearby included cooking food, helping them bathe, washing their clothes, assisting them in visiting the toilet, and doing all kinds of chores such as running errands, buying food, and sweeping the room. Remittance of money becomes increasingly important as a form of indirect care, since many children are earning their living elsewhere. The people who were actually taking care of the elderly varied from wives, daughters, and daughters-in-law to more distant relatives or anyone who happened to live in the same house.

Their condition of life did not remain the same over the period of my research. Some people who had been vigorous when the fieldwork began, fell sick a short time later and died. Others lost their partner or caregiver or became more handicapped and lonely. In 1995, the marital status of 29 elderly was as follows: seven still had their partner (more or less), 11 were divorced or had separated, and 11 were widowed. Of the 35 elderly people who had been involved in this research, only six were still alive in April, 2001.

In this article, six of the elderly play a role: Kwame Opoku who used to be a farmer and a trader and functioned as an *okyeamie*¹ in the Chief's court; Yaa Amponsaa, formerly a farmer and a trader who is living with her three daughters; Kwaku Nyame, a former cocoa farmer; Kwame Frempong, who used to be a cocoa marketing agent; George Adu Asara, in his active life, secretary to the Paramount Chief; and his friend, Kwaku Martin, a man of many different trades: teacher, trader, pig farmer. The last three men had attended school in their youth.²

Reading through field notes and interview transcriptions, the aim was to discover some common underlying theme in the diverse experiences of old age. This essay focuses on one aspect: what people, old as well as young, think about love and sex in old age. It was only after some time and much hesitation that the topic was broached. Initially, this author thought it would not be possible to include questions surrounding sexuality in the research, having been made to understand that sexual desires and sexual practices are secret. *Okyeame* Opoku: "How somebody makes love to his wife or girlfriend, he will never tell you unless you are his friend." Why is it bad to talk about it? The answer completed the circle: because it is secret. If people hear about your sexual habits or desires, they will talk about them and may laugh at you. It is shameful. It is a breach of intimacy. Instructions to young people about correct or enjoyable sex were not given in the past or at present. It is "not done."

Taking these warnings into account, there was some pessimism about the possibility of discussing sex with the elderly. Among the young, sex has become a more open thing to do and talk about without "shame", but not among the older generation. I was therefore rather surprised to find many of them open to the subject and willing to share some of their "secrets" with me. I say "some" because I am convinced that the most intimate details were not disclosed. Extensive quotations taken from these conversations reveal people's ambivalence and uncertainty about the topic of sex. What they declined to say was often as significant as what they spoke about.

¹*Okyeame* (often translated as "linguist") is an official at the chief's court. Yankah (1995, p. 3) describes the function of the *okyeamie* as "speaking for the chief": "Being a counselor and intermediary to the chief, he is responsible, among other things, for enhancing the rhetoric of the words the chief has spoken. In the absence of an *okyeamie*'s editorial art, the royal speech act is considered functionally and artistically incomplete".

²The names of people mentioned or quoted in this article have not been changed. When I asked the elderly people I conversed with if I should give them a fictitious name to protect their identity, they indicated that they wanted their names to be "boldly" written in my publications (they wished to be remembered).

(The quotations may also enable the reader to interpret for him- or herself the meaning of their statements.)

It cannot be denied that a certain culture of "prudishness" may have affected the conversations. Among women, for instance, it seemed more proper to deny than to admit an interest in sex. It took some time before I realised this. In my own culture, most women would probably be more embarrassed to admit having no interest in sex. That bias towards denying sex was particularly strong when one day we had a discussion with 15 Christian mothers aged between 30 and 65. I was initially doubtful that a *group* discussion of *Christian* women would produce the kind of information I was interested in, but a friend, a woman of 55 helping me with my research, was more optimistic. My scepticism grew when it was made clear that the women wanted to have the meeting in the back of the church.

The discussion that took place under the eyes of Our Lady of Good Counsel was much more fruitful than expected, however. A lively debate occurred during which I realised that some of the women were talking a lot while others were completely quiet. All those who had spoken emphasised that they were no longer interested in sex. Some boasted about this. They applauded one woman who said she had not slept with a man in 30 years. It appears that those who spoke did speak their mind and express their feelings and that their remarks were reliable and useful. However, no access to the views of those women who were still interested in sex and practising it was made. My suspicion was that they were the ones during the meeting who were silent and possibly keeping those views hidden.

If sex is such a delicate and uncomfortable topic for conversation, it is no surprise that one encounters extremely contradictory statements. In answer to the question "Is it good for old people to have sex?" an elderly woman (AM) said:

AM: No. It is not good, you have led this sort of life, so you have to stop (*Yeabu Ōbra no bi ara*).³

S: Why?

AM: Because I have already finished giving birth. I have given birth to 10 children. One has given birth to seven children, another to eight, another to six. The youngest has given birth to four children. So I don't have to marry again.

S: Is it not good to have sex after you have ceased giving birth to children?

AM: You see, I married my husband and had ten children with him, and he died.

S: If he were still alive, would you continue to have sex with him?

AM: Yes, if he were alive, I couldn't have denied him anything.

³All texts preceding a Twi phrase is its English translation.

S: If your husband is dead, is it not good to marry again and have sex with your new husband?

AM: If an elderly fellow is willing to marry me, I will agree.

S: At your present age, do you sometimes have the desire to have sex?

AM: Yes, if I get an old man, I will marry him.

Another consequence of the secrecy around sex is that there is very little popular or general knowledge about sexual ideas and practices. People have to rely on their own experiences, some “secrets”, and on rumours. It is very likely, therefore, that the information presented here is of a certain idiosyncratic nature—the Kinsey Report of Ghana does not exist.

Village setting

Kwahu-Tafo is a rural town of about 5000 inhabitants. Most of them are Kwahu, a subgroup of the (approximately) six 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.⁴ They have a matrilineal inheritance system which now is undergoing a process of modernisation and individuation, although it is as yet impossible to say where this process will lead. Decisions regarding filiation, kinship adherence, family support and inheritance, which are the result of heated arguments and intensive 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.

Marriage is an uncertain undertaking. Couples often do not stay together because one of them has travelled or is trading or doing other work somewhere else. It is also possible that the wife prefers to stay in her own family house if the husband has no place of his own and the woman is not eager to stay with her in-laws. In most cases marriage is also a temporary affair. Divorce is common and both men and women initiate it (Bleek, 1975, 1977). Very few couples put their money together, which may be the clearest indication that husband and wife do not perceive each other as having one common purpose in life. They are likely to have different interests and they may attach more importance to their family (*abusua*)⁵ ties than to their marriage bond. After all, marriage is only friendship, it is not *abusua*, as the

proverb goes (*awadeè yè òyonkò, ènyè abusua*). As a result, the relationship of a father with his children is ambiguous. He bears responsibility for them but strictly speaking, his children belong to his wife’s *abusua*. The extent to which he bonds with his children and takes care of them depends very much on the person, his character but even more his economic position. The one who is well-off is able to build his own house and have his wife and children gathered together. He will pay for his children’s upkeep and education, and help his wife financially with trading or farming. The wife and children, in return, are likely to stay with him. A poor man, however, may find it difficult to keep his wife and children with him. He has little to offer them and they may therefore seek support from her *abusua*. The marriage may break down altogether if the wife thinks there is no longer anything in it for her. Financially and sexually, she is no longer interested in the marriage and the man may find himself deserted in his old age.

The shifting loyalty, from the marital partner to the *abusua*, is illustrated in an old story that my friend Kwame Fosu told me to explain how matrilineal inheritance came to the Akan.⁶

A certain man, Abu, was about to die. He went to the *òbòsom* (‘fetish’) and asked for help. The *òbòsom* said he would be saved if he sacrificed a child. The man came home and discussed the matter with his wife and they decided which one of their children he would give to the *òbòsom*. When he went to sleep the wife secretly went to the children and told them to run away because their father wanted to sacrifice one of them. The next morning the man looked for his children but they had disappeared. He then turned to his sister and asked her to give him one of her children. The sister felt pity for him and gave him a child. To thank her, the man decided that he would let his sister’s children inherit from him.

Kwahu-Tafo is a poor town unlike some of the other towns on the Kwahu Plateau. Its inhabitants were not very successful in trading and farmers encountered many difficulties due to land conflicts and lack of rain. In 1983 and 1984, severe droughts hit a large part of the country, including Kwahu, and many people lost their cocoa farms. Kwahu-Tafo has electricity, piped water, and a clinic but only a minority has access to these facilities. Erosion and lack of maintenance have caused the collapse of many houses in the centre of town, which gives the place a rather gloomy appearance. Few people have the means to build a new house or repair their old one. A painting on the wall of the house where I lived showed a man climbing a tree. In the tree a snake is

⁴The main ethnographers of Akan culture are Rattray (1916, 1923, 1927, 1929) (who produced five volumes on the Akan), Field (1960), Fortes (1969), Warren (1974), Arhin (1979) and Oppong (1982). Studies focusing on the Kwahu are Bleek (1975, 1976), Bartle (1977) and Miescher (1997).

⁵*Abusua* is the matrilineage. The term can refer to a very large group of related people (a ‘clan’), or to a more restricted group of matrikin, three to five generations deep.

⁶Fosu, a teacher with a special interest in Akan tradition, was helping me with the research.

waiting for him, below are a lion and a crocodile. The text below the painting reads: *Òbra yè den* (Life is hard).

Two conversations

One day, I visited *Òpanyin*⁷ Edward Yaw Addo, an elder in the nearby town of Abetifi. Kwame Fosu introduced me to him. When we arrived, the *òpanyin* was talking with three friends in front of his house. He invited us inside where we had a long conversation. Apart from *Òpanyin* Addo (A), two of his friends *Òkyeame* Safo (S) and Kwame Tawia (T) also took part in the conversation.

We talked about the different stages in a person's life, about the position of an *òpanyin* (elder), about funerals, and about care. Then the topic turned to sex. The conversation was in Twi. Most of the questions were in English and Kwame Fosu (F) translated them. I expected that the old men would not be very keen to talk about this topic but the discussion was lively and open and everyone seemed to be enjoying it. I asked them if elderly people still had an interest in sex. Below are a few excerpts from the discussion that ensued.

- A. When you grow old, you have to leave behind all the work you did and think about what is ahead of you. You may know whether you are progressing or going backward. Going after women is based on love and happiness (*Efisè mmaa-pè no yède òdò ne anigye na èfa*). This time I am not happy because I am not strong. You see I am not strong. But chasing a woman takes more energy than felling trees. It is very tiring (*Èyè den papa, èyè den papaapa*). If you are old like me... now I have sons and daughters... If I go to take someone while my son has not yet been married, it would mean, that I have not thought about my son. If you resort to chasing women it is not good. There is no use in doing that. Even your children will not look after you.
- F. Is it you yourself who decides to stop going after women or is it because there is no feeling for it?
- A. Listen, it gets to a time that when you try to lift up your penis it is not possible. It is dead (*Tie, èbètò*

bere bi no na wopagya wo kòte koraa a na ònkò baabiara. Na awu). And if your penis is not strong there is nothing you can do with it (*Sè wo kòte yi nso nni ahoòden a biribiara nni hò a, wubetumi de ayè*).

[...]

- F. Is it true that men keep their interest in sex longer than women?
- A. In fact, you have asked a question. We men are quicker with our mouths (*Mmarima, yèn ano na èyè hare*). A woman feels a man more than a man feels a woman. Men are quicker in asking for it. You go to tap her shoulder. Women won't ask for it. Look, if you leave your wife and stay in Hweehwee [a nearby town] for only four days, she will think you are fornicating over there. By all means she will think that you are going to do something. You see? I conversed with a certain woman as we are doing now. She said that as for us men, we are only quick in speaking about sex. She said I should ask a feather with which we prick our ears: Is it the feather or the ear that feels the sensation (*Takra no na èyè dè anaasè uso no?*)? I could not give any answer [laughter]. I could not answer. You see what I mean? Therefore, as regards the feeling, it is women who get most of it. Yours is once, that of the woman is thrice.
- F. So if a woman grows to be *aberewa*...
- A. Every woman...
- S. She will never stop?
- F. But as for a man his...
- A. His is short.
- S. That of the woman is everlasting (*Èmmaa deè no deè sè èwò hò ara ne no*).
- A. Hers [her vagina] is a path, it always lies there. His [penis] hangs, it bends down and does not lift itself up anymore.
- Sj. This morning there was a conversation with ladies, some old, some younger. But they all said they were not interested in sex. They remarked: I have no strength, I have no desire (*Minni ahoòden, me kòn nnò*). I wonder if there is a difference in the enjoyment between men and women.
- A. The man's enjoyment is once, but the woman's is three times.
- F. Did you say a woman may grow very old before her mind gets away from it?
- S. Yes.
- F. And that a man does not grow very old before his mind gets away from it?
- A. At all! As for a woman, even if she becomes very old... It is a path. A bicycle can ride on it.
- [...]
- T. It is over a year since I took a woman (*Mefaa èbaa èboro afe*) [looking miserable].
- S. Yet, he is there (*Nso òwò hò*).

⁷*Òpanyin* ('elder') is someone past middle age who is considered wise and experienced and behaves in a civilised and exemplary way. According to Rattray (1916, p. 23) the term is derived from *nyin* (to grow) and *apa* (old, long-lived). My co-researcher Anthony Boamah gave a different etymology: *Wapa nyin* (*ho*), which means: you have passed (*wapa*) the age of growing (*nyin*). The *òpanyin*, therefore, is someone who has stopped growing (taller). For a more elaborate discussion of the concept of *òpanyin*, see further below in this article (see also Van der Geest, 1998).

- T. I am still alive. I have no desire for it (*Me kòn nnò*).
- Sj. You have no desire?
- T. Yes.
- A. He has grown old.
- T. I have grown old... Nothing attracts me in sex. I sleep. My mind has moved away from it (*M'adwene afiri so*). I am old.
- Sj. What about you [to S]?
- S. As for me, I speak the truth. I am old, I am old. Sickness disturbs me but as for me I do it small small (*Me deè meyè no kakra kakra*). [laughter] I have spoken the truth. If you are doing anything with somebody it is nice to speak the truth. I for one, I do it a little bit. When I am doing it I tell her to take time. I tell her not to rush. I am not all that strong (*Ahònden nni hò papa*).
- [...]
- F. An old man may marry a young woman or an old woman may marry a young man. Do people approve of that or do they speak against it?
- A. I am old. If my uncle dies and I marry his young widow people would mock her.
- [...]
- F. (to Sj): They will laugh at her because her husband is an old man. Is it because the old man is not strong sexually?
- S. Yes.
- F. What about an old man who does not inherit and marry a widow but marries another woman? For instance, you have your wife, your equal. And then you go to marry another wife in addition to your first wife. What will people say about it?
- A. They will tell you: Oo hou!
- F. Oh hou means what?
- A. Why? They will ask you: Why? An old man taking this young lady. Will she stay? (*Akwakora woakòfa ababaawa yi. Obètenda?*)
- F. Why won't she stay?
- A. Because even though you can give her anything to eat, you cannot sleep with her.
- S. You cannot fuck her (*Worentumi nni no*). Say it plainly to him.
- [...]
- F. What, if an old woman marries a young man? What will society say about that?
- A. When an old woman marries a young man, people will ask her whether she can pound fufu. At your age, you want to marry a man. Can you go and fetch water, can you pound fufu? Can you go and fetch firewood?
- F. They will ask the woman?
- A. Yes. An old woman should not marry a young man since she is not strong.
- [...]

Two things stand out in this conversation. The first is that the men were very concerned about respect. Interest in sex should not damage one's reputation. A good father diverts his interest from sex to taking care of his children and avoids competing with his sons for women. That would be extremely embarrassing for him as well as for his sons. Public censorship also extends to other aspects of sex at later age: a young woman who marries an elderly man will be laughed at, which also affects the man. The second striking thing is the men's emphasis on sexual potency and strength in a more general sense. Chasing a woman, one of them remarked, was harder than felling a tree. Women, they thought, do not have that problem. They can continue to have sex much longer than men.

This conversation and another in the morning of the same day marked the beginning of several discussions about sex that took place both with men and women, elders, middle-aged people and youngsters. Usually, when I approached women on this topic, I asked Monica Amoako, a woman of 55, to accompany me. A year after the above conversation, Monica and I visited an old lady, Yaa Amponsaa, in Kwahu-Tafo. The lady showed us a church document, which stated that she had been born in the year 1905. We (A = Amponsaa, M = Monica, S = Sjaak) talked about the way a man and a woman loved one another in the olden days and how a girl was prepared for marriage. We then broached the topic of love and sex in old age and asked what she thought about it.

- A. Now I am old. It is many years ago that I slept behind a man (*medaa barima akyi*). When you grow old, you begin to change and when you are changing, you also change your character.
- S. Is it because it is difficult when we get to a certain age that we don't want to do it [have sex] anymore?
- A. Well it is a type of work that you should stop when you grow old. There are however some old people who still like it.
- S. Did you stop doing it because you lose the enjoyment of it or did you stop because people will say: This woman is old but she still goes after men?
- A. I do not have the taste for it.
- M. I agree with you. When I was a young woman at the age of 30 I remember how I enjoyed having sex with my lover but now that I am around 50, I have lost the sort of feelings I had during my youthful days. So I do agree with you if you say you don't have interest in it. I do not know what will happen if I grow to your present age, but I may also dislike it.
- S. Why are you not interested in sex?
- A. It is not something I need like we need food. A

nurse once came to educate us that there is no need for a woman to run after a man. What is important is that you should eat a little in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the evening. That will help you to be healthy. Good health does not remain by meeting a man. That is the advice my granddaughter gave to us in the church. I took that advice and have stayed away from sex and I look healthy every day.

- S. Why is it that women always say they do not have the strength to meet a man. Is there any special strength that you need before you meet a man?
- A. I do not know that. According to my character I do not like to do it. If you are a woman and you become older, you should not indulge in that act. It is bad to do that work.
- M. I believe that the whole reason is that you don't have the feeling or taste for it.
- S. If you would marry now and your husband wanted to have sex with you, would you do it?
- A. That is different. When an old man is staying with an old woman in marriage, that is different. When one day you are there with your husband and he likes to come to you, you will agree but that is different. Once in a while if the old man wants to do it, you may allow him.
- S. If you are there with your husband, and the man loses his sexual power and he wants to play with your sex organ, will you allow that?
- A. That is possible because the woman remembers his strength when he was young. You will know how to stay with him and play with him.
- S. Which of the two, a man or a woman, keeps the desire for sex longer and which of the two enjoys it most?
- A. I can't tell what happens to others. What I know is that a man and woman can marry during their youth and stay together until they become old and are separated by death.
- M. I believe it is the men. Because some men who are rich during their old age, may go and marry a young girl. If they did not have the strength or desire, they wouldn't have done so. It never happens that an old lady marries a young man. The old lady who does so is the one who was once a harlot. Men at the age of sixty or even older sometimes marry girls who are eighteen years.
- S. This is a difficult question but you must try to answer. Do women have more pleasure during sex or is it the men who enjoy most?
- A. It depends on their love for one another....
- M. I believe that the woman enjoys most. I remember when I was young how I had the feelings. So if you divide the enjoyment proportionately it will be one for the man and two for the woman. Mother, what is your opinion about it?

- A. Well, that is something natural. When you see the man then you have the desire for it. The two of you become happy so if he sleeps with you (*òfa wo*) about once or twice, then you all sleep. That is what I know.

[...]

- S. Suppose you grow old and have a husband but you feel you are not strong enough to have sex with him. If the man wants to go and take another woman as his lover (*mpeña*), will you agree?
- A. When the man wants to take another woman, I can't tell him to go and find a woman. It depends upon his own character.
- S. If he secretly takes a woman and it becomes known to you, will you stay unconcerned or will you quarrel with the woman.
- A. I will not say anything. If a man has the feeling and goes out, I will not say anything. If you don't mind him it is there that he will pamper you and provide you with your needs.
- S. A lot of people believe that it is because of money that young girls or young women marry old men. What is your idea about that?
- A. Yes, that is true. When the young girls see that somebody is rich, they may go to him with the intention to collect money.

Nana Amponsaa is honest: she is no longer interested in sex, but she is also pragmatic and tolerant. She would willingly undergo sex out of love for her husband, if she had one. She would even allow him to have sex with another woman, if he wanted. But sex, she emphasises, is not something we really need like we do food. A few times Monica spontaneously joined in, projecting her own feelings: women lose their interest in sex when they become old.

The culture of sex

Sex is not a common topic for discussion. What you feel and how you do it, is a secret you share with a close friend, not just with anyone. Nana Kwaku Nyame (N) was asked if people could speak freely about sex. The following conversation ensued:

- N. Yes. When old people who are friends meet, they talk about it. When friends meet, they are able to talk about what may be termed as 'nonsense' on sex (*Sè ayònkofòd hyia a, yètimi di nsèm hunu ho nkòmmò*).
- S. Can an old person talk about sex to his own children?
- N. No. No one can. Impossible.
- S. What about if the child asks him about it?
- N. Even the child can't ask such a thing.

Nana Amponsaa also denied that sex was a topic for discussion. Monica asked her if in the olden days

parents or elders instructed the young about sex before they married.

- A. No. Once the man has called you to the room, the two of you know that it is a custom that you meet in sleep (*wo ne no hyia nna*). The proverb goes: *Obi nkyerè akwadaa Nyame* (“Nobody teaches a child who God is.”—i.e., there are certain things which do not need to be taught).

Monica agreed with Yaa Amponsaa saying that no mother tells her daughter that when she meets a man to have sex, she should act this way or that way. What mothers instruct their children on are the ways to keep the sex organs and other parts of the body clean:

- M. Is there a rule that after a man and woman have had sex, the woman should clean the man or the man should clean the woman?
- A. We were not taught, but it is common sense that when you go to a man you should take with you a handkerchief. The man too may have his....
- M. Which means one couple may do it this way and another couple may do it that way. No one knows what the other one does.
- A. Yes, because that is not taught.

Moreover, there is the idea that one should not be too interested in sex. Foreplay, “romantic play” as some call it, is probably not practised very much. It is ‘bad’ because it shows that one “likes the thing too much.” A man or woman who is fond of it will be called *òdwamanfoò* (a ‘loose’ person). A woman should not make sounds during sex nor indulge in unconventional sexual acts. The secrecy surrounding sex is part of a more general culture of modesty.

One person suggested that the paucity of sexual techniques and the absence of romantic foreplay could lead to an early loss of interest in sex among women: “If the man inserts his penis before the woman is sexually aroused, the intercourse may be unpleasant and even painful to her. She may not reach her orgasm before the man has ‘finished’ his and gradually becomes frustrated and starts to dislike sex.”⁸ Sex becomes a tiresome thing,

⁸Pellow (1977, p. 162), who studied the lives of women in Adabraka, a suburb of Accra with a high concentration of Kwahu, suggests that many women derive little pleasure from sex in their marriage. She then refers to an article by a Ghanaian woman journalist, a ‘been-to’ [i.e. someone who has lived in Europe or North America]: “In a 1970 article entitled ‘Woman, do you lie about ‘it’?’, Ms Addo alludes to the past when the woman’s role on a marital bed was a simple one. She was expected to be submissive and unresponsive. Her place was not to receive pleasure but to provide it (*The Daily Graphic*, 19 October). Now, she writes, there is a more liberal attitude towards the woman’s role in general and sex in particular, yet many women still find the sex act a disappointment.”

equated to “work” she has to do in the night while she had hoped that her day’s work was finished. Moreover, some women complain of pain in the vagina, a sickness they refer to as *pintayè*.

Sexual problems can be the reason for divorce, but this is rarely disclosed. Here again, the taboo on sex prevents people from mentioning their problems to others. The woman may just say that the love has ended (*òdò asa*). Speaking about it openly could lead to others talking about it, a shame which is very much feared. Opoku, the *òkyeame*, however, stressed that if a man looked after his wife well, she would love him and take care that no one would ever hear about his impotence. Impotence is something a man will try to hide at all costs. When this secret gets into the open, he will be publicly mocked and called names such as *Aban agye ne tuo* (The government has collected his gun) or *Òda Benada* (He sleeps on Tuesday).⁹ A man whose impotence is revealed may be so ashamed that he commits suicide. The “impotence” of a woman is not ridiculed and talked about as that of a man. People may just say: she fears man (*òsuro òbarima*).

The question as to who enjoyed sex most and who kept their interest longest, men or women, always engendered a lively discussion. Taking into account that the question is impossible to answer, it is not surprising that the opinions differed. However, it is striking that men often thought that women enjoy sex more than men and that women often held the opposite view.

Love and sex are very much a matter of money and gifts. If a man does not give his wife money and does not provide her with a cloth every year, with sandals, headgear (*duku*), she will not stay with him. The same applies to lovers. Gifts (money is also considered a gift) prove and measure a man’s love. “No self-respecting woman would remain in a ‘friendship’ without material recompense”, Pellow (1977, p. 208) writes. Nana Dedaa described the good quality of her first marriage thus: “He loved me as I loved him. He used to give me a cloth every six months at Christmas and in the middle of the year.”

Two basic views of old age, a positive and a negative one, prevailed during discussions. They are contrasting but do not necessarily exclude one another. In both views the idea prevails that sex and old age do not go well together, though for very different reasons.

The *òpanyin*: beautiful old age

The *òpanyin* (elder) represents the beautiful image of old age. He (or she) receives what is most highly regarded in Akan culture: respect. *Òpanyin* is an honorific term. It is the title which elderly people like

⁹I have in vain tried to trace the origins of these mockeries.

most for themselves. An *òpanyin* can be a man or a woman, though most will think of a man when the word is used. Usually, an *òpanyin* is someone of advanced age: “He has lived in the house much longer than you. You came to meet him. ‘*Òpanyin*’ is a big word. He is a person who knows what is going on. He must receive respect and obedience,” according to one of the elders. The *òpanyin* gains this respect by possessing three virtues: wisdom, self-restraint, and dedication to his¹⁰ family.

The fact that one has lived for a long time means that one has seen many things and has begun to understand how they are connected. Life experience, in other words, teaches how events follow one another. On the basis of that understanding, the *òpanyin* is able to predict the future and advise people on how to act in order to prevent trouble. The second virtue refers to the good manners of the *òpanyin* and his overall self-restraint. The *òpanyin* controls his emotions, does not get angry, and does not shout at people. The ability to keep one’s self in check is revealed foremost in the way he deals with information that has been given to him and in his ascetic attitude. The *òpanyin*’s careful dealing with rumours is expressed in many proverbs. Nothing shows so well that one is still a child as when one cannot hold one’s tongue. The *òpanyin* is indeed the opposite of a child. The *òpanyin*’s self-restraint reveals itself also in the attitude toward food and other material pleasures. Greediness does not befit him. One proverb says: *Òpanyin mene nsono* (“the elder eats his own intestines”), i.e., that he can forego food. If there is not enough food in the house, the *òpanyin* will give his part to the children. He has eaten enough in his life. The third virtue is love for the family. The *òpanyin*’s gentleness and wisdom are directed first of all to the *abusua*. It is the *abusua* that benefits from the *òpanyin*’s life experience and civilised manners. He may have travelled a lot, but in his old age, when he reaches the stage of *òpanyin*, he will come home and spend his days with the members of the family. He will give them good advice on all kinds of problems and promote peace and unity among them. He will mediate in conflicts. “There is nothing left for him to do than guarding the people in the house”, according to one elder. That is why they say *Òpanyin ntu kwan* (“the elder does not travel”).

All three virtues, and the second in particular, point toward a declining interest in sex at old age. The *òpanyin* sees himself primarily as someone who has left behind the tempestuousness of his youthful days. Sex too is regarded as something from the past. It is a passion that may cause people to act without thinking. Sex often implies loss of self-control, it is selfish and may harm the interests of the *abusua* or the children. As one

of the Abetifi elders said, “Whatever I am doing, I reserve it for my children. So, I am not going to take a woman.”

The idea that the *òpanyin* has left behind his youthful turbulence was vividly expressed by Nana Frempong (F) when I (S) asked him how he felt, being an old man. He answered:

- F. When you grow old, you lose interest in a lot of things which are of interest to the young.
- S. At this age, do the activities of the young remind you of your own youth?
- F. Yes, but they also set my mind on the saying of Saint Paul in the Bible, which goes: “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.
- S. Wouldn’t you like it, if you were a young man again?
- F. No, because when you are young, you make a lot of mistakes. Now that I have grown old, I have realised it, and I don’t want to become young again.

A few minutes later he added:

- F. When you are an *òpanyin*, money does not have much value to you. You always remember that money is the root of all evil (*bòne nyinaa ti ne sika*).
- S. Do you value the presence of your children and grandchildren around you more than money in your hands?
- F. Yes, when they are around and they provide me with my food, it is enough for me, because now I have no plans to put up a building or buy a car, so I don’t need money for anything.
- [...]
- S. Nana, you mentioned women just now and I know your wife died a long time ago. Don’t you feel the desire to be with her?
- F. Yes, because there are some things I need which she could do for me, for example providing me with hot water in the morning to have my bath. In fact providing me with such services is the main reason why I wish she were with me. Apart from that I don’t need her for any other purpose.
- S. Nana, I know very well that your wife also would have been an old lady if she were still alive, but would you still sleep with her?
- F. No, because at this age it will not do me any good to sleep with a woman. It will reduce my strength and my life span.

Nana Frempong pointed out an important nuance. If it does not befit the *òpanyin* to be interested in sex, it

¹⁰ For the sake of style, the masculine pronoun will be used to refer to the *òpanyin* throughout.

does not mean he should not be married. On the contrary, a true *òpanyin* should have a wife to serve him (not to have sex with). As one elder remarked: “People don’t respect an *òpanyin* who does not have a wife. Even if he were impotent, he could still have a wife.” At that age, marriage is first of all an institution that brings social esteem. Sex would rather harm the *òpanyin*. It makes him (her) sick and weak and accelerates old age. It is better to abstain from it. “If you desist from too much sexual activity, you will stay longer,” according to another elder. Having no interest in sex is a sign of wisdom, discipline, moderation, and gentleness. It enhances the status of the *òpanyin* and the beauty of old age.

“No strength”: miserable old age

Losing interest in sex was seen a sign of maturity and wisdom, but others saw it as one of the unfortunate consequences of old age. I asked two elderly men, Agya Kwaku Martin (M) and Mr. Asare (A), who were friends, whether it was true that sexual desire diminishes when people grow older.

- M. Yes it is true, but not for everyone. Some will be old yet their organs will be strong and effective, while there are also young men whose organs are weak and ineffective. We are all human. Our organs become weak and unable to operate. When you are young, you can go two or three times per night but as it is now, if God doesn’t help, you cannot go even one round.
- S. Because of what?
- M. Because of the pains and lack of interest too. We have done this thing all our life. We become fed up.
- S. Can the old man who finds it difficult to have sex with an old woman have sex with a young one?
- A. Yes, a beautiful person can generate the machine to erect and do a small job.

The topic of ageing was intensely discussed in the group of Christian mothers mentioned earlier. Monica first asked the women if they would have liked to remain young. During the discussion that followed, one woman said:

At first, when we were young, we were able to do a lot of things that we can’t do now. At first I could chase my child, catch him and punish him but now I can’t do it anymore. You may start having grey hair and when you dress it does not fit you as when you were young. The strength also decreases. When you see these signs, you know you are ageing and there is nothing you can do about it.

Monica then asked what was more painful in growing old, the loss of strength or the loss of beauty. They all agreed that strength was more important to them. When she asked them what they needed beauty for, three of them answered:

I am now growing old, my face has changed, what do I need beauty for, whom am I going to show beauty to? I don’t need it. I need only strength.

When you are ageing the time of beauty is gone, you don’t need it. Your husband and you got married when you were both young. When you are ageing he is too, so both of you don’t need beauty for anything. Both of you saw the beauty you had when you were young. So we need only strength.

If you have strength, you have beauty because you can work and get money to buy clothes, which will make you beautiful. So we pray for strength. When there is strength there is beauty all the time.

At that moment the discussion turned to sex. Monica asked: “Is it true that when men and women grow old, they lose interest in sex?”

- W1. When you are ageing and you see a man, you don’t regard him as a person you can sleep with. The strength I need is not for marriage. You are not happy about sex and you don’t have any feelings for it. That is what I think about it.
- W2. As for me when I see a man, it does not come to my mind that you can do something with him. I am not interested in it. I just don’t get any feeling when I see a man. Even now I don’t notice that a man is handsome (*Sè mehu obarima a ne ho yè fè a, menhu*).
- M. Must we conclude that ageing people and the old are anti-sex? What we want to know is if they still have a desire for men or not. For example some of you are widows. Do you think that you would be sleeping with your husband in case he were still alive?
- W1: As for me, sex does not interest me. I just don’t have a feeling for it.
- W2. As for men they never grow old but women grow old. No matter how old a man may be, he has the feeling for sex. In case I were to have a husband, I could sleep on the same bed for over one month without inviting him to do anything but a man can’t do that. So to me when you are old, you don’t have the feeling for it.

The idea that men have more strength and, therefore, more interest in sex is generally accepted among women as well as among men. The following statements were made during a discussion with some “station boys”, young men who hang around in the lorry park and help

drivers and passengers with odd jobs. Three of their remarks are quoted below:

There is a stage when an old man or woman won't have the desire for sex. There are cases when old women do not let their husbands sleep with them. It usually happens among the women.

It is so among the women. The women usually don't have the strength for it when they become old, so they will refuse, especially those who brought forth many children. But as for a man, the desire is always there unless he becomes impotent.

To me, it is only impotence that can make the desire for sex in a man vanish, nothing else. Because no matter how old you are, when your man gets it up (*wo barima sòre a*), you will by all means have the desire for it.

There is a difference between the “strength” a woman needs and the “strength” men refer to when discussing sex. The women complain about lack of strength in a general sense. They are tired at the end of the day and want to sleep. As for sex itself, the Abetifi elders insisted, women don't need any strength. They don't have to “perform”. They can lie down, “as a path; a bicycle can ride over it”. They can continue doing so in their old age. Nana Posuo, a blind man who used to be a mason, held the same opinion:

The desire leaves a man earlier and stays longer in a woman. Even in their old age women have the desire for it and demand it. A man may become weak. At times a man's penis can become weak and without medicines to revive it, it becomes useless.

The terms “desire”, “interest”, and “strength” tend to merge. *Okyeame* Opoku (O), in a conversation with my co-researcher Patrick Atuobi (P), described the fusing of interest and strength. In his view, ‘no strength’ had become a euphemism for ‘no desire’.

- O. No matter how old a woman may be, she can sleep with a man. As for their thing, it does not spoil, it only grows old [laughter]. But with a man it can spoil (*Òbaa deè n'ayi no nsèe da. Dada na èyò na nso ènsèe da. Nanso òbarima deè èbetumi asèe.*).
- P. But why do the women complain that they don't have strength?
- O. That is what I always attribute to individual differences. Some people don't like doing it from their youth, so when they grow older, they lose every interest in it. But some like it and will do it to the end. I know a woman who was about one hundred years old and was still interested in sex.
- P. So when a woman says she has no strength it can mean she does not have the desire for it but not that she can't do it?

- O. Yes. It is exactly so.
- P. What is strange to me is that the women always say: “I have no strength.” (*Minni ahoòden*). Why don't they say: “I don't enjoy it.” (*M'ani nye ho.*)?
- O. They feel shy to speak the truth.
- P. Some women give the excuse that they do a lot of work. They usually say, I went too far, I weeded and I prepared the food so I am tired, when I sleep I don't want a man to disturb me. What do you think about that?
- O. All those excuses mean that she has no interest in it. A woman with interest in it, will agree to do it as soon as she has taken her bath after returning from the farm.

In contrast to women, men need that special type of strength to get “the machine erect and do a small job”, as *Òpanyin* Asare called it. Men would like to do it, but may not have that particular type of strength. When women speak about lack of strength, they complain about life in general; about their poverty, about having too many children, about their hard work, and about the way their husbands treat them:¹¹ Below are three statements of women to illustrate this:

- W1. What I have realised in married life is that if your husband does not shift all the burden on you but helps in caring for the family, this helps you, the woman to have a healthy or peaceful mind. This will go a long way to make you look beautiful, healthy and young.
- W2. What my sister said is true. Before it can be said of a person that she is beautiful, she is strong or healthy, she must be a bit well off. If you have these qualities but you have no money to maintain them, you will soon be like an old lady. But it is different if your husband does his work, if he helps you look after the children and yourself so that the children grow up and are well-off. They will be remitting you money and sending you delicious food, clothes, etc. Then you may never grow old and even if you become old, you can still maintain your beauty, and stay young and healthy because of your high standard of living.
- W3. If you are married and your husband is someone who likes to have sex with you every day, it may weaken your body and make you lose your beauty. Because having sex is hard work. If a day's work on the farm and at home is followed by sex every night, it will not be good for the body. I advise my fellow women to have sex fortnightly. This helps

¹¹ Studies on the heavy workload of women in Ghana, and among the Akan in particular, never discuss the “tiresome work of sex” (Klingshirm, 1971; Bukh, 1979; Fogelberg, 1982; Oppong & Abu, 1987; Dei, 1994; Avotri & Walters, 1999).

them to maintain their beauty as well as to make them strong and healthy.

The women almost seemed to be competing in denying their interest in sex, even those who were middle-aged. No doubt the situation—we were sitting in the back of a church—and the strong views of some of their leaders set the tone for this discussion and for the women's laments about their loss of strength and the uselessness of beauty. However, even if we accept their statements some reserve and take into account the possibly more positive views of those who kept silent, they remain remarkable. Obviously, these women complained about the hard work they had to do and the lack of solidarity they felt with men, a partner or otherwise. Under those conditions, sex had become something of a low priority. That view was succinctly expressed by one of them who remarked that what they really needed was proper food to eat. No doctor had ever told her that she should have sex. On the other hand, many concluded that sex made you more tired and grow old quickly. They not only lacked the strength for sex, they also avoided sex in order to retain the little strength they still possessed.

'Public opinion'

The disapproval or disbelief on the part of younger people that older people do not engage in sexual activity appears to be a near-universal phenomenon. In the Freudian paradigm mentioned earlier, there seems to be some primordial anxiety among children to look upon their parents as sexual beings. I do not know of any research that has explored the inter-cultural variations in the tolerance of children towards their parents' sexual activity.¹² Earlier I called the Kwahu sexual culture modest, even "prudish"—partners should not make any sound during sex, "romantic play" seems limited. One wonders if that muted style of sexual activity and the accompanying secrecy have anything to do with parents' attempts to hide their sexual activity from children who

¹²Some indirect conclusions on the sensitivity of sex between different generations in Africa may be drawn from ethnographies which describe the inappropriateness of a mother getting pregnant after her own daughter has brought forth. The competition between fathers and sons over marriage payment points in the same direction (e.g., Fernandez, 1982, p. 196; Parkin, 1972). This intergenerational conflict seems to imply that the sons expect their fathers to stop being interested in sex and marrying and to make room for them. Fortes (1949) who devoted a whole chapter on "Tensions in the parent-child relationship" among the Tallensi in Northern Ghana, speaks of a "latent antagonism behind their [father and son] mutual identity and comradeship." He continues: "A psychoanalyst might say that the Oedipus complex is built into their social organization"

may be sleeping in the same room. Even younger couples, without children, may be handicapped in their love-making because they are worrying about how to keep their love-making hidden from their parents and older relatives. They too cannot afford to make much "noise." Here the elderly have an advantage, according to *Òkyeame* Opoku:

The elders say, love has reached its sweetest point. When there were children they used to disturb you a lot. After you have stopped having children, there is the time for joy. Whenever you meet you can enjoy freely [laughter] (*Bere biara mohyia a, sè moagye mo ani.*).

Opoku emphasised the respectfulness of older people's behaviour. As we have seen, an *òpanyin* should be married, otherwise he is not respected, but he should not lower himself to "chasing women". Opoku further strongly denounced the attempts of children to prevent their father from marrying again:

Children preventing their father whose wife is dead from marrying again. It is a mistake. You will try to give him food and provide many services but can you sleep with him? When you do that to a father it is great mistake. It means you are disturbing him. I have seen exactly such a thing and because of that the children did not like their father's wife. Whenever such a thing happens the man should be bold enough to talk to the children as a man. You should be bold and tell them not to deprive you from eating (*Èsè sè wo kyerè wòn sè wònsi wo adidiè ho kwan*). If you are not able to stand up in front of them you will be disgraced.

The women's statements quoted earlier suggest that most believe that they had better stop engaging in sexual activity now that their energy is diminishing. Their views were not directed, however, at elderly people in general but were self-reflections of middle-aged women. They did not so much express societal norms but emphasised the uselessness and energy-absorbing nature of sex for themselves. Talking about men too, the discussion did not include moral pronouncements. The women seemed to accept the ongoing interest in sex among elderly men, after their potency had gone, as a fact of nature. "That's how they are."

In the discussion with "station boys", I asked what they thought of older people having sex. One of them answered:

At times when a man and a woman grow to a certain age and have many children, they think that they have achieved what they want so their interest in sex goes away because they see no reason why they should do it.

I (S) asked them if it was good for old women and old men to have sex. One answered:

A. It is good especially for the men because, they have to expel something out of their bodies (*èsè sè woyi biribi fi wòn mu*).

[...]

S. Yesterday, I had discussion with some women and they said it is not good, and now you men here are telling me it is good. How do you explain that?

A. The explanation is that old women don't have the strength to do it. But as for a man, if you are not impotent, you can always do it. Because of their strength, it is not good for women but for me it is good.

In summary, this preliminary exploration suggests that public opinion turns against “unorderly” sex, i.e. sex that takes place outside of a marital relationship. The sexual prowess and secret love affairs of the young are condoned—even admired—but are disapproved of in the elderly. Yet there is nothing wrong with orderly sex between elderly people as long as sexual desires and practices remain unseen and unheard—as if they do not exist.

Conclusion

Nothing has been written about older people's sexuality in Ghana. This article is a first albeit impressionistic exploration of the topic. The ambiguity, which has been reported in the Western literature on sex at old age, is largely born out by my observations and conversations in Kwahu-Tafo. The elderly people—⊖ women in particular—reported a decline in “strength”, which in most cases appeared to be a euphemism for loss of sexual desire. Men, however, indicated that they still had the desire but were not always able to perform the sexual act. Based on both male and female conversations, it seems that sex was almost exclusively conceived in terms of genital penetration. Erotic alternatives, “romantic play” as some called them, seemed little practised.

By the same token, the conversations revealed that some elderly people continued to be interested in sex “till they died”. The younger generation generally accepts that older married people continue to be sexually active provided they do not express this publicly. A public demonstration of love and sexual attraction, one that would be considered acceptable in Western societies, is considered bad taste in Kwahu. As one older woman said: “You may have sex in the room and during the course of it you may kiss one another, but not in public. It is shameful. Your custom [referring to me] is not good. Ours is very good.” If public signs of sexual

attraction are so strictly censored for everybody (although less for youths living in the cities), they certainly are taboo for the elderly. An elder, an *òpanyin*, shows restraint in all his emotions, he is civilised and “cool”. The “heat” of sexual excitement and the wild “foolishness”, which characterise the young, do not befit the elder. The decline in sexual interest is as much a social and cultural as a biological phenomenon.

The term “strength” (*ahònden*) deserves a final remark. It presented itself as the most frequently mentioned word when people discussed old age and sex. Sex is primarily seen as a physical achievement that requires energy. A strenuous, “tiresome work”, harder than breaking stones, one woman assured us. Only once was sex described in terms that referred to tenderness. It is no wonder that sex at old age becomes problematic. The term “strength” seemed to have different meanings when used by men or by women. Men were mainly concerned about their sexual potency. Women, according to the men, had nothing to worry about this type of energy—they simply had to lie down. Women used the term “strength” in a more general way. Their strength to work and to earn their living was decreasing and they needed to rest at night. Sex interfered with that need and made them even more tired. “No strength” was the most effective way for them to express their rejection of sex.

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