



**"IT IS A TIRESOME WORK"**  
**LOVE AND SEX IN THE LIFE OF AN ELDERLY**  
**KWAHU WOMAN**  
*To the memory of Nana Mary Yaa Dedaa*

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Love and sex are not topics to be easily discussed in Kwahu-Tafo, the town where Nana Mary Dedaa lived most of her life and where I carried out anthropological research. Love between men and women is seldom shown in public. It is only some young people who have the courage to walk hand-in-hand with their sweetheart lover. Kissing in public is "not done". The middle-aged and elderly even seem to dissuade any kind of mutual affection. If demonstrating love is inappropriate, talking about sex is a taboo. Only "bad people" speak about it. Mill and Anarfi (2002: 334) quote people as saying that "...openly discussing sexuality in schools and other public settings would be viewed as a violation of traditional values and culture." Parents, according to the same authors, feel uncomfortable talking about the topic of sex with their children and do not give them instructions on sex. (See also Anarfi and Essah above). Here too, the taboo prevails. Sexual "education" is almost entirely the "task" of peers (Bleek 1976). Sexual desires and practices are secrets that one may share with a special friend who will not divulge them to anyone. It would be "shameful" if others were to find out about one's sexual habits. Parents also do not give their children instructions on sex. Here too, the taboo prevails.

Sex, by consequence, is not only silenced in daily life, it is also silent in research and publishing. Very little information is available on how people in Ghana view sex and what their preferences and practices are. The scarce information that exists is mostly on rules. Virtually no research has been carried out on the *experience* of sexual desire and practice.<sup>2</sup> That holds true for Akan society but also seems to apply far more widely in Africa as is borne out by two overviews (Standing & Kisekka 1989, Savage & Tchombe 1994). It is only in the context of HIV/AIDS that sex is now increasingly being explored, not in its own right as a source of pleasure or as an expression of an emotional relationship, but as a risk factor.<sup>3</sup> HIV-related sex research limits

itself mainly to some technical details and to the question of how condom use can be promoted. It does not deal with affection and sexual attraction desire.

If expressions of love and sexual attraction are kept hidden in Ghanaian society at large, how much more will this be the case for the older generation.<sup>4</sup> The middle-aged and elderly even seem to reject any kind of mutual affection. Indeed sexual desire and activity are widely regarded as incompatible with old age, if not morally, certainly aesthetically. Sexual intercourse between elderly people is considered embarrassing. That idea is found in scientific publications, popular writing and literary work. It seems an almost universal, super-cultural "fact" that a "normal" elderly person is not or should not be interested in sex; and should certainly not *show* his/her interest nor speak about it. The more surprising and refreshing, therefore, were the two conversations about love and sex we had with an elderly woman in Kwahu, Nana Dedaa. She spoke freely about intimate experiences in her life up to her old age. Her style could be characterised as both wise/resigned and slightly "coquettish".

The conversation with Nana Dedaa took place in the context of a much wider research project on social and cultural aspects of growing old in a rural Akan Kwahu community.<sup>5</sup> Topics explored included the concept of "old", the status of *opanyin*, respect and reciprocity, blessing and cursing, various types of care-giving, wisdom and *bayie* ("witchcraft"); the role of money in gaining respect, the importance of building a house and the rendering of post-mortem care in funerals.<sup>6</sup> Towards the end of the fieldwork, sex presented itself as a possible topic, in spite of the taboos surrounding it.

It started one day with a group discussion of about fifteen middle-aged and elderly women who were remarkably open about (their disinterest in) sex. But the break-through came in the afternoon of that same day when I visited an elder in a nearby town. The man was involved in a lively discussion with three friends. I joined the conversation and we talked about the different stages in a person's life, about funerals and various other topics. Then the discussion turned to sex. To my surprise the old men took a keen interest in the topic and seemed to enjoy it. It was indeed a break-through and several subsequent meetings with elderly people were devoted to the same issue. Strength and respect presented themselves as key concepts during those conversations.

Many elderly – and not so old – women complained of lack of strength and said they would rather not have sex anymore.<sup>7</sup> Men, however, rejected the women's objection to sex; women did not need strength, they said, "they only

had to lie down." It was rather the men who needed strength to "do the job".

The link with respect was ambiguous, particularly for men. An *opanyin* (elder) is someone who should be married and, therefore, is supposed to be – at least moderately – sexually active. An elderly man's sexual activity and interest should, however, be orderly and restrained. He should not behave like a young man, that is "chase women". Too much sex would be harmful to him and shorten his life (Van der Geest 2001).

The general fieldwork mainly consisted of conversations with about thirty-five elderly people plus a few relatives or household members. Some of these conversations were lengthy, others short and casual. I met frequently with some elderly people, with others, only a few times. Additional information and understanding was acquired through participant observation, short visits to the elderly and in discussions with young people about the elderly. Finally, I conducted some research in various schools in Kwahu-Tafo and its surrounding towns involving questionnaires, incomplete sentence tests and drawings of an elderly person.

There is nothing very special about Kwahu-Tafo. It is an "ordinary" rural town on the Kwahu Plateau near Nkawkaw, in the Eastern Region. Due to its altitude, (about 700 meters) it has at least for me – a more pleasant climate than most other, more lowly rural towns in the south of the country. Trading and a high degree of mobility are typical of the inhabitants of Kwahu-Tafo, as it is for all other Kwahu towns. In nearby towns such as Obo, Abetifi, Pepease, Obomeng and Bepong, one finds impressive buildings put up by successful inhabitants as proof of their achievements in life, usually trading and cocoa farming. Kwahu-Tafo is less blessed with such large and beautiful houses. The town looks impoverished. Many of the houses are dilapidated and the streets are in bad condition. The town has electricity but only a minority of the population can afford it. Piped water is available but many taps have been closed because there is no one to supervise their use and collect the small payments. Wells remain the main source of water for most people.

For people of Nana Dedaa's generation, men as well as women, a somewhat common life cycle was to grow up in Kwahu-Tafo, then to travel and trade in Accra or another commercial centre anywhere in the country and finally to return to Kwahu-Tafo to settle as a farmer (cf. Bartle 1977).

Nana Mary Dedaa says she was born in Kwahu-Tafo, on a day that somebody's sheep gave birth to a being half sheep, half man. She does not know the date. She went with her father to Kukurantumi and returned to Kwahu-

Tafo after her father's death. She then went to stay with her mother who was farming in the village of Asubone, now covered by the Volta Lake. She was betrothed to a man in Asubone and two years later, after she had begun menstruating, the man performed the customs of marriage. They had five children together. After her husband died, she married a policeman at Aboam and had five children with him as well. Their marriage ended in divorce. She married and divorced again. From her stories, we detected that she has had a lot of experience with men, apart from her three marriages.

During our conversation she was staying in Kwahu-Tafo but because her family house had collapsed she had been given a room in another house. Nana Dedaa, who had been a farmer all her life, was still very active, selling things, doing chores in the house and visiting friends and relatives, but she had stopped farming. In 1999 she paid a visit to her son in Nkawkaw where she fell sick and died. Her body was brought to Kwahu-Tafo and buried there.

### First Conversation: Love

On the 26<sup>th</sup> September 1996, I paid a visit to Nana Dedaa, a lively and very open elderly lady, with Obeng Boamah, my friend, assistant and key informant. Apparently she enjoyed our interest in her life history and her views on various topics related to old age. She surprised us with her directness and her ability to talk plainly – both with humour and regret about intimate details of her life. In total, we had four long conversations with her. The first one on that day in September was mainly about love, the second one was on building a house, the third one – to be presented later – focused on sex and the last one – fittingly – dealt with death.

After a brief discussion on her life history, in which she related that she was sent to the North to a priest healer to join her husband, Obeng Boamah (OB) and I (S) asked her (MD) opinion about love (*ɔɔɔ*). The following conversation ensued.

MD *It is good to love. You are staying with somebody. You love him and he also shows love for you. If you love me and I love you, we become one. If somebody hates you if you talk, it annoys him and he starts quarrelling with you. That is not good. But the one who loves, even when you offend him, does not take it seriously. When he offends you, you also don't mind, that is love. When he cooks, he gives you some food to eat. When you cook, you also give him something to eat. That is love....*

*Love is being kind. When you meet your brother and he gets money, he gives you some of it. Then you know that he loves you. When I have money, I also give him some. We become one. That is love. But if you have money and you don't give me part of the amount, that is not love.*

*S Ask her to explain the differences in love between wife and husband, parent and child, grandparent and grandchild.*

*OB We have different types of love. Love between husband and wife, parent and children. So we shall deal with them one after the other. What is the sort of love that exists between a mother and her child?*

*MD When I gave birth to my children, I sent them to school. Some of them did not go. It was only one of them who attended school. So he is the one who cares for me. When he gets two thousand cedis (then about US\$ 1.50), he sends it to me. That is love. He cares for me, so I like him very much. Those I cared for, do not care for me, yet I do not hate them. I pray for them. One of them has come back home sick. I have not rejected him, I care for him, I always pray that he recovers. He even attends the Catholic Church.... If you have cared for a child, he also cares for you, the parent. That means he loves you and you also love him/her. But the one who scolds you, does not love you and you also don't love him. When this happens, the only thing you can do is to pray to God that he will change so that you become one.*

*S There is a saying that "When your mother dies, your family is finished". Why is it that a mother loves her own child more than the child of someone else?*

*MD The reason why she loves her own child most is, that it is her own blood that brought the child to life. It is God who put the seed into her womb for months. When the child is born she feeds it with her breast. So it is her blood that brings him up and so if the child grows, it is his responsibility to care for his/her mother. When he is young, it is the mother who directs the child: You should not go here or there because of these reasons. Listen to my advice. If you take my advice, all will be well with you.*

*OB It is through the blood of both the father and the mother that the child is produced. Does the father have the same love for his child as the mother?*

*MD Yes, it is through the man that a woman becomes pregnant by the grace of God. So if the man cares for the child, the child will also grow and love the father. Some of the men do not care for their children. They*

*don't love their children while some do. Some men join their wives and care for their children. Some men shirk responsibilities and the burden goes to rest only on the mother. He will not take care of the child's education.*

OB *Does a child love his mother more than his father?*

MD *If the father takes good care of his child, the child will love the father but if he does not, he will love the mother most.*

OB *What do you know about love between men and women?*

MD *When you marry a woman, you become one with her. You love her, she also loves you. You see to it that she does not become hungry. There are some who marry but later become enemies. Others marry and love everything of you, even excuse me, your sex organ. He loves your clothes, your body and your sex. That is love and the two of you become free. There are some who become angry and insult you if you talk to them. You may even be surprised at being insulted that way. When you are hungry he will not give money to cook yet if you cook, he will eat. That person does not marry you with love.*

OB *What will a woman do to show her love for her husband?*

MD *She does not let the husband go hungry. Even if the man does not have money, she will cook and give him some of the food to eat. I remember one day in my life, my husband was not there. When he came, I had prepared food for him. He asked how I had managed to get money and I told him I had my own money. When my husband ran short of money, I used my own money to cook.*

OB *What is the difference between love today and love in the past? The way you used to love people and how people love one another nowadays?*

MD *During our days we showed real love. We stayed with our husbands alone but the present women leave their husbands and go after other men. This is the practice of present women. In our youthful days, we were not doing that. Our husbands could leave us for over a year yet we never followed other men. But some of these children can't abstain for a week. We really loved our husbands.*

OB *You told us before that when you married you were a child. In your days parents chose marriages for their children. How did men take wives their parents had picked for them? Was there real love?*

MD *There was love, especially for the beautiful ones. Some refused to take ugly wives. In our days, it could happen that somebody staying in Accra or Europe would request his parents to arrange a marriage for him. At*

*that time they used to examine certain things, for example, if there was any illness; if she had a good character and was hardworking. The man would then be invited to come and marry her. Then the father performed the customary rites. But sometimes he refused to marry the woman his parents had chosen.*

*OB In the olden days, it was the parents who chose wives for their children but now it is the men and women themselves who meet and decide, take their decision. Which of these types of marriage lasts longer?*

*MD That of today does not last. Even when a man is with the wife, the woman leaves the husband and goes to visit another man. In our days, it was not like that. If the husband had anything against you, you had to stay until he sent you to your father. When you go they will ask "Did she steal your things?". When you marry, you marry. You are made to swear the oath, Kwasi Atia Mfia, which says that when the woman gets any good thing, for example, wealth, she sends it to her parents. When she runs into debt, it is the man who pays for it.*

*S What is the difference between "Medo wo" (I love you) and "Mepɛ wo" (I like you)?*

*MD When someone tells you he likes you that is not very good because "I like you" does not last. The like vanishes but when one loves someone, it lasts forever. For example, when there is dry season, the leaves are dry. It is when it rains that the weeds begin to grow. As for love, it is always there...*

*OB Who is happier, a man who has only one wife or one who has two or three wives?*

*MD In the olden days a man had several reasons for marrying more than one wife. He might get one woman who was good in washing and tidying up the house. Another woman might be very good in cooking and the other might be good in "sleeping". These were some of the reasons why some of them married many wives. Sex was very important. Some liked it very much.*

*S So a man who has married three women, can he share his love equally, among the three wives?*

*MD Please, when a man marries three women he has three tongues. Wherever he goes, he goes to tell sweet stories to make the woman believe that he loves her most. He would also go to the others and tell similar sweet stories to make them believe that he loves each of them most.*

*S So he is playing a game. What about the women?*

*OB How do the "rivals" (co-wives, akorafoa) stay?*

*MD He will not let them know.*

*OB Once he has performed the rites, would they not know that he has other wives?*

*MD Some of the men who have money may decide to marry as many wives as they want. The rich man may tell the wives who don't agree that they can leave. One of the women may detect that the man loves the other two more than her. She may decide to ask for a divorce. Another woman may stay in spite of the maltreatment because she has children with him. She will continue to endure all hardships and stay like that until death separates them.*

*S Why is it that a man can marry two wives but a woman can't marry two husbands?*

*MD That is how God made it: that a woman should get one husband. A woman can marry a second husband only after she has divorced. A man on the other hand can marry as many women as he likes.*

*S Why is it so?*

*MD It is God who made it so. When a woman visits any other man the husband has every right to divorce the woman. The man who has got money can marry four, five or even more women. If a woman visits another man and the man gets to know it, he will have to be compensated by the other man.*

*OB Is there any special reason why a man can marry as many as he likes while a woman cannot do so?*

*MD God did not create it that way. God took one rib of a man to create a woman. So man is made the head of the family. Men control women. Women do not control men. Sometimes a man can take another woman. When the woman learns of it, he compensates the woman and they continue their marriage. Some women do not accept the compensation but rather go and fight the other woman. That is not a good habit. The mother of that man did not bring him up for you alone. He has the right to marry as many as he likes. Any of the women who behaves well stays as a wife while those who cannot cope go away or divorce.*

*S In my country, men and women sometimes show their love in public. They can kiss, hold hands and embrace each other in the street. Why do you not show love in public?*

*MD Our custom does not teach us that. Your custom is different. If you hold*



*the hand of somebody's wife, the husband has every right to collect compensation money from you.*

OB *No, he means when you are walking about with your own wife.*

MD *That is not our custom. We feel shy to do so..*

S *Why do you feel shy? Is it a sin?*

MD *No. It is not, but your custom is different. You may see a man holding the hand of his wife but kissing the wife in public is not good. It is not good. It is shameful. God did not create us like that in this country.*

OB *If you can kiss your wife in the room why can't you kiss her in public?*

MD *It is different in the room. You may have sex in the room and during the course of it, you may do it, but not in public. It is shameful. If you are staying with your wife in the house, do you have to kiss her in public? Your custom is not good. Ours is very good. It is because we have to respect each other. It is in bars and hotels that some people may do so while drinking but you can't do it in public. So that practice is never good.*

S *What is the difference between marriage according to customary rites and mere friendship which is not officially known to the parents?*

MD *Please, there may be people who love their friends more than their wives, but friendship does not last. Marriage, on the other hand, lasts. It is your wife who usually cares for you. When you are sick, she is there. When you are dying, she is there.*

OB *We want to know whether there is more enjoyment in marriage or in friendship (mpenafa).*

MD *Really there is more enjoyment in friendship.*

OB *What makes that more enjoyable?*

MD *It is because you may not like what your wife will do you may not like but you will like whatever your lover (mpena) does. I have had lovers some years ago and really there is enjoyment in it. Your lover gives you better treatment. However, she does so with fear. She fears your wife may start a fight with her when the affair becomes known. However, if there is no quarrel then you will feel happy. There is always interesting conversation. In marriage you may not converse so nicely. The man may not have much time for the wife. Instead of appearing nicely, before going to bed, he goes to drink. But when going to visit his girlfriend, he will not drink before sleeping. He goes with clear eyes and converses a lot. Sweet conversation, but it does not last long. Eventually you have to go back to your wife.*

- S *When you get a lover, you get emotional feelings. Does it remain until the end or does it diminish as years pass by?*
- MD *When you love somebody you may love him to the end. You may also love somebody and getting to the middle of it, the love is lost. My first husband, for instance, I loved him and it was death that separated us. He loved me as I loved him. He used to give me a clothes every six months, during the Christmas and in the middle of the year.*
- OB *Did you love him because he provided your needs?*
- MD *No, not only that. I rather believe that it was the work of God. Just after he had declared his love to me, I also began to love him. God blessed it. When he died, I felt miserable.*
- S *Is there any difference between the love men have for women and the love women have for men?*
- MD *Yes, there is a difference. Men usually do not give their love to one woman. They visit other women. They may compare the character of the new friend with that of the old one and decide to stay with the latter. There are some women who are called "bediiwaa". They come only to consume. They come to demand whereas other women are prepared to stay even if the man is poor.*
- OB *We want to know the difference between the love a man has for a woman and the love a woman has for a man.*
- MD *They may love one another equally. He may have a good character and the woman also may have a good mind. Their love will be one. When they are like that, they don't divorce.*
- OB *You said earlier on that men do not love one woman. They may jump from one woman to another and now you are saying their love is the same. How do you explain that?*
- MD *Yes, I told you earlier on that some men marry three wives. The love of today's youth is different from what we were doing. In our time, we respected each other. A lot of these young women visit other men when the husband fails to provide them with their needs. But if that man takes proper care of them, they may remain faithful.*
- OB *So are you telling us that just as the man can't stay with one woman, a woman can't stay with one man?*
- MD *Yes, that is it. A pregnant woman who gets to know that the man who made her pregnant is incapable of taking care of her, may even give the baby in the womb to another man. She will drive the man away denying that he was the one who put her in the family way. Some men also detect that the*

women are not stable and they refuse to accept the pregnancy of their girlfriends. That is the character of the present generation.... Some men drive their girlfriends away when they become pregnant. The girls attempt to abort the child and meet their death.

OB But what do you say about a man's love for a woman?

MD Yes, you men are very wicked. You are sometimes not honest. Today's youth have different ideas. A lot of young men put a woman in the family way and refuse to take care of her.

S We have heard that there is "konya" (juju, magic) for marriage. What do you know about that?

MD Yes, in our time when a woman refused to accept a love proposal, the man could use that magic. He made it in a pomade form, and rubbed it on his head and face. As soon as the woman saw the face of the man, she developed love for him. The girl disliked him perhaps, yet when he rubbed the medicine on his face, the woman developed love for him. There was another type called "sokosare". In applying that magic, the man will mention the name of the girl and press it. Wherever she might be, she will have to go to where he is. That was what some men were doing. When this happened, a woman developed extra love for the man, which could even lead to marriage.

OB Does the power in the juju not end abruptly?

MD Yes, sometimes the power was lost in the middle of the marriage so that the woman decided to leave the man.

OB What were some of the causes which made couples divorce?

MD A reason could be that the man failed to take good care of the woman, for example, if he did not give her clothes. Some women preferred going naked without a husband to having a husband and going naked anyway.

OB Why did some women ask for a divorce?

MD It might be because the women were not good. They perhaps refused to help their husbands to do their jobs. Perhaps she did not go to farm with the man or refused to wash his clothes. Those were some of the causes. Some women were lazy, some men too were lazy. They would not go to farm. Some divorced simply because they had lost their love for the other.

OB Are there other reasons for divorce? For example, childbirth?

MD Yes, that is correct. When the two do not get issues, it sometimes causes divorce. The fault could come from any of the two. They may separate and try to have children with someone else.

If there is a constant theme in this conversation, it is the material basis of love. Beauty counts, certainly to the men, but it is material support which is decisive. Love is proved in the faithful daily provision of money and food and in the thoughtfulness of giving presents. Mill and Anarfi (2002) describe how this traditional value still holds among young people today. Young women take lovers who give them money, food, cloth and other gifts. Love relationships may shade into strategies for economic survival or take on a more commercial character (cf. Bleek 1976; Dinan 1983).

In the case of Nana Dedaa, faithfulness is indeed more a matter of continued material support than of sexual restriction. It is not the material goods in themselves, however, which show and feed love, it is their capacity to be a token of the attitude of the other, which makes them valuable. However small the support may be, it is valued in the light of the other's ability. Where the material signs of love disappear, the other partner is likely to leave unless another pressing matter – usually children – continues to bind him/her. Reciprocity is the oil of any love relationship. That also applies to the love between parents and children, as Nana Dedaa explained several times.

Children are indeed the *raison d'être* of marriage. Nana Dedaa does not say much about it, it is too obvious to mention it. But when we asked her explicitly about it, her answer was clear. Finally, she is ambivalent about extra marital love. On the one hand, she extols marital fidelity, using her own first marriage as an example. On the other hand, she acknowledges that things in marriage may become boring and that there is more excitement in a love affair.

### Second Conversation: Sex

On the 4<sup>th</sup> October 1996, I invited Nana Dedaa to the house of a good friend of mine, Monica Amoako, a single woman who, after several marriages, did not hide the fact that, for her, sex was something of the past. Her frankness about sexual experience made her an ideal person to reassure the old lady in speaking freely about sex in her own life. We felt, however, that the topic was too delicate to discuss outside where others undoubtedly would come to listen to the conversation and perhaps join it, so we retreated into Monica's room. I asked most of the questions, which were sometimes repeated and clarified by Monica (Mon). These repetitions have not been recorded in the transcription. The conversation started on sex at old age but soon widened to sexual experiences throughout her life time.

- S *Some people say that only the young have a desire for sex. What is your opinion?*
- MD *When I was young I used to indulge in it but I have stopped.*
- S *Would you not sleep with your husband now if you had one?*
- MD *I would do so but not regularly. Now I don't have one but I stopped sleeping with my husband quite a long time before he died because he was weak.*
- S *So if you had a husband at this age, would you show your love for to him by sleeping with him?*
- MD *I would do so occasionally. If he had the strength and desire to do it regularly, I would respond. I would allow him to go to another woman. I would explain to him that whenever I had the strength for it, I would let him know.*
- S *You talk about strength. Does a woman need it? I think it is rather the man who needs strength.*
- MD *It is a tiresome work for a woman because the man is strong. When I was young, I was able to do it twice in a night but now I am old and don't have a man. I have been living with a dependent son for the past eight years, I could have got a man if I had wished and had sex with him at least once a week or once a month. Anyway now I am old and I can't do it any more. (Matwa mu) I have passed the stage.*
- S *If you have a husband, and his sex becomes weak, can't you help him in another way to make him feel satisfied?*
- MD *My husband who died was in that situation and he did not allow me to sleep in the night. He always made an attempt to do it but it was impossible. Throughout the night he could worry me till the next morning begging me to let him try again (Wo des, ma menhwe se sbeys den a). He would be saying: "Oh let me try, oh let me try", till day break. (Wo des, ma menhwe, wo des, ma menhwe, saa na ades akye). In fact, it was annoying.*
- S *If not because he was overdoing it, wouldn't you have enjoyed it?*
- MD *No. I always asked him to stop it because it was useless. He was only keeping me from sleep.*
- S *What did he do?*
- MD *He always wanted real sex by penetration but he couldn't because the thing was soft (Ope se ohwe se ebeko anaa, nanso ades no aye mmers).*
- S *Wouldn't you have liked it if he had used another method, for example, using his fingers?*

- MD *I have always disliked such things since I was young. I am not used to such things because I didn't practise it. I loved my first husband very much and was able to play with him but he died and after that I never played with other men in bed again. In fact, I loved my first husband. I was able to play with him before we did anything (Na yeedi agoruo ansa na se yebe ye biribi a yeaye). I stopped doing such things when he died.*
- S *Is there nothing you can do to help a man you love but who can't sleep [have sex] with you?*
- MD *You can play with him and have conversation until you become sleepy. Then you ask him for permission to sleep. When you play throughout the night, you get pain in your eyes the next day. My first husband didn't have that problem but the second one could not understand that he was not able to do it. If you asked him to get some medicine, he complained that I disgraced him. Because of all this I divorced him. He was jealous and suspicious about my movements and was always thinking that I had another man. I was afraid that he might do me some harm.*
- S *Can a man who is impotent (ne kote awu) but still loves his wife, permit her to go to another man?*
- MD *Some men do it but not my husband. Some men who are impotent permit their wives to go out and have pleasure with other men. All they need is that you come back, bath and sleep with them to indulge in playful acts (di agoraw). But my husband would not permit such a thing.*
- S *Does the desire for sex go down in old age and does it go down earlier in men or in women?*
- MD *The desire stays longer in women than in men (εmaa dee yen ho nyoduwo ntem). I don't like it now but if I had a husband, it would be possible for me to do it.*
- S *Has the desire in you gone due to old age or it is because you don't have a husband?*
- MD *It is because of waist problems that I don't have desire for it. Do you notice how I walk? It is due to waist problems. Otherwise I would still do it...*
- S *When did you notice that your desire for men was going down?*
- MD *I noticed it after the waist sickness started.*
- S *How many years now?*
- MD *About ten years ago.*
- S *Some people in my country claim that the desire for men in some women increases when they grow older. What do you think about it?*

- MD *It has reached the sweetest point (Eyi na ahysi ato ode). That is what people say. If you have a husband, you can do it, but not always. Some people like it and they do it until they are very old. Even when they are old and without a husband, they look for a man. Some old women try to look young to attract men and succeed in doing so until they die. They won't have children any more so they pretend to be young through their dress and take men just for the joy of it....*
- S *If you love your man and he becomes impotent, what would you do?*
- MD *I will explain to him that I love him and that his condition bothers me so we should find a solution to it. If he understands he may allow you to have another man secretly to satisfy your desire.*
- S *Is it possible to like without love or to love without like?*
- MD *A person may like someone and have a desire to have sex with the person because of appearance. That is not love. A person also can love someone but because of appearance may not like to have sex with that one. Anyway, some manage to maintain their love despite the ugly appearance of their partner.*
- S *Some say sex in old age is good, others say it is not good. What do you think is true?*
- MD *If it is possible for you to do it but you abstain from it, you may fall ill.*
- S *There are some children who prevent their old fathers from marrying again after the death of their mother. Why?*
- MD *It is jealousy. They feel jealous of another woman joining them in their father's house. Let me tell you something. Some time ago, I came and stayed in this town for three years while my husband was not here and a certain man proposed love to me. When I told him that I had a husband, he advised me to go back to him, or divorce him so that I could have another man. If not, I will fall sick. I was then very strong and able to work. I could look after myself and did not need the assistance of a man, financially or otherwise. So I didn't take the advice. I stayed for five years without a man and then I fell sick. I was all the time feeling dizzy and weak. It was only after I had gone to my husband, that I became better. By then I had not yet stopped menstruating. So if you are fit to sleep with a man and you abstain from it, you can fall sick (Se wonyaree na se wo gyae obarima nna a, ebebo wo yares). But if your time has passed and you refuse to do it, it won't worry you too much.*
- S *Is it good if an old woman marries a young man? For example if Ababio (Patrick, one of my assistants) married you?*

- MD *I am older than he is so he will become old in a short time (ɔbeyɛ akwakora ntem).*
- S *So it is not good for a young man to marry an old lady?*
- MD *No, it will make him old in a short time. What will come out of him and flow to the woman will be good for her but it will make him old in a short time.*
- S *What about if a young woman marries an old man?*
- MD *It is the same. The water from the old man is not good so it will make the girl old. It will make her ugly and sick.*
- S *If the juice of the old man will make the girl old, why can't the juice of the young woman make the old man young?*
- MD *A young woman can't bring a change in an old man. If the old man is weak he will continue to be weak.*
- S *Do you think the desire in an old man who is weak will become strong when he sleeps with a young woman?*
- MD *It can make him a bit strong (Ebetumi aye no kakra).*
- S *Can an old person keep the qualities which made him attractive when he was young?*
- MD *You can never keep them. The skin would by all means develop wrinkles (Wo honam beyɛ ntwutwo-ntwutwo).... As you grow older, the beauty diminishes.*
- S *Can't a person keep a kind of beauty even in old age?*
- MD *Some people look beautiful to the end (Ebi wɔ ho a wɔnsee kosi se wobewu).*
- Mon. *What I have observed is that farmers who do very hard work without proper nutrition and medical care grow old and are not nice-looking when they reach old age. But those who have money and are able to eat good food and have proper medical care keep some beauty in their old age.*
- S *To me, it seems an old tree looks more beautiful than a young one. Am I not correct?*
- MD *Some are nice but others develop humps.*
- S *In what sense are some beautiful?*
- MD *Some are nice but others bend and develop humps on them, which make them useless for building.*
- S *Let us go back to the tree. What is more beautiful a young tree or an old tree?*
- MD *A young tree is more beautiful.*



- S *Can an old person look beautiful?*  
MD *Yes, some old people look beautiful.*  
S *What makes them look beautiful?*  
MD *They keep themselves neat (Wɔdi wɔn ho ni).*  
S *Is it due to money?*  
MD *Yes, if I have money to buy clothes and if I bathe and wear clothes I will by all means look beautiful.*  
S *A lot of things can determine beauty, even how a person talks.*  
MD *It is true, during funerals, I sing playful songs which make people admire me and they come around me and we joke and laugh.*  
S *What about dancing, does it show beauty?*  
MD *Yes, there is beauty in dancing. When you are dancing, someone can say: "Oh, this woman is old but look how beautifully she is dancing."*

Five things struck me in this conversation. The first was Nana Dedaa's emphasis on strength as a condition for sex. Of course, love is a first condition but without strength, sex is not possible. The man's strength is mainly thought of in genital terms. Sex is indeed an overwhelmingly genital affair. If the potency disappears, sex becomes "useless", that is, impossible. She still vividly remembers her second husband's useless attempts – till daybreak – to have sex with her. It was not only he who lacked the strength, she too become tired of it and finally divorced him. The strength a woman needs for sex has a wider connotation. First of all she has to respond to the strength of her partner. More important, however, is that when she grows older she spends all of her strength on work and needs the night to rest. Sex becomes a "tiresome work". In a conversation with a group of women one of them said:

*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.*

Interestingly, studies on the heavy workload of women in Ghana never mention the "tiresome work of sex."<sup>10</sup> Avotri and Walters (1999) remark that reproductive health problems did not figure prominently in the interviews they held with 75 women in the Volta Region, but sex is totally ignored. The authors quote several women who sum up the many tasks they have to do

from early morning to late at night when they finally go to bed. No one hints at the fact that even then they may still not find rest. The taboo reigns.

A second observation is that "strength" can become a convenient euphemism for desire. "No strength" (*mienni ahooden*) shades into "no interest" (*me kɔn nnɔ*). When I asked another old lady whether elderly men had more interest in sex than elderly women, she answered: "Yes, men have more strength", as if strength and interest were one and the same thing. A similar view was expressed by a man who emphasised that a woman never lacked the strength to sleep with a man "Their thing", he said and laughed, "does not spoil, it only grows old. But with a man it can spoil". So, when a woman said that she had no strength, it simply meant that she did not have the desire, he said.

A third striking conclusion from Nana Dedaa's conversation, as already mentioned, is her exclusively genital view on sex. "Playing" did not attract her, although she admitted that she did it in her youthful days. Although we did not go into details, she made it clear that she firmly disliked any other form of sex. Other conversations during our research suggested that most people, women as well as men, shared that view.

The fourth important point I want to draw attention to is Nana Dedaa's ambivalence towards sex in old age. At certain moments she seems to reject it and provides her own life as an example; at other moments she indicates she would still be interested in it, be it less frequently than before. It is her circumstances, no partner and sharing her room with a handicapped son that prevent her from having sex in her old age.

The final topic that raised my interest and which will take us back to the first, was her concept of beauty. Growing old, in her view, meant losing beauty and attractiveness. That held for people but also for trees. Wrinkles, whether on a human face or in the bark of a tree implied loss of beauty. Her definition of beautiful included smooth, young, tender, neat. Loss of beauty was usually linked to hard work. Those who grow old in years may succeed in retaining some of their beauty if they do not have to work so much. If they have money to buy good food, medicines to keep their skin smooth and fancy clothes, they will stay young. As some other conversations bore out, having only a few children and not being forced to do hard work – two prerogatives of the well-to-do – also helped to retain youthful beauty. One middle-aged woman remarked:

*Before it can be said of a person that she is beautiful, 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.*

Monica spontaneously joined in the conversation at this point. The common saying *sika ye abrantes* (money is a young man, that is when one has money, one looks young, handsome and strong) could be extended to *sika ye ababaawa* (money is a young lady).

### Love and Sex in Old Age

Dedaa's account contains two trends in marital life which I found to be common during my conversations and observations with all elderly people I encountered during my fieldwork. The first, but least prominent, is the marriage which lasts a lifetime and is only dissolved by death. Nana Dedaa's first marriage represents that trend. It was a good marriage in the sense that both partners continued to support one another throughout their lives.

The second, more common, trend was that a marriage dissolves in old age as the woman does not see the "use" of continuing it. The reason, usually, is that she feels that her husband has little to offer her any more and that she is not bound to him because he has failed to give her substantial (material) support during his active life. Marriages survive or end on the basis of reciprocity. Where a husband has failed to invest in his relationship with his wife and children, the wife does not feel obliged to stay with him and to care for him at old age. It is more attractive to her to leave him and either return to her *abusua fie* (family house) or to stay with one of her children. Love, as we have seen, is measured in material terms. Old age is the time for drawing up accounts and taking things into one's hand. The slogan that Cattell quoted from elderly Kenyan women suits the attitude of Nana Dedaa: "Praise the Lord and say no to man" (Cattell 1992).

As far as sex in old age is concerned, Nana Dedaa's views largely conform with what has been published about this topic on Northern societies. On the one hand, they report a general decline of interest in sex among elderly people. On the other hand, they notice that sexual desires continue to be felt throughout the

life course and that their apparent reduction is as much a social and cultural as a biological matter. The phenomenon that the younger generation disapproves of continued sexual activity among the elderly and that the latter tend to comply with that disapproval, seems nearly universal. It was also found among other elderly people in Nana Dedaa's community (see Van der Geest 2001).

That ambivalence towards sex in old age, self-censorship and loss of desire ("strength") on the one hand, and continued interest on the other, showed itself in Nana Dedaa's disarming personal account.

### End Notes

- 1 The research was carried out with the help of many people. I am particularly grateful to Monica Amoako and Anthony Obeng Boamah who accompanied me during my visits to Mary Dedaa.
- 2 Two earlier collections with contributions on Ghanaian women (Oppong ed. 1983 & 1987) keep silent on the topic of sexuality. An extensive bibliography on Ghanaian women (Ardayfio-Schandorf & Kwafo-Akoto 1990) with 754 annotations has only three references to "sexual behaviour". Two exceptions, studies that do contain some description and discussion of sexual practice in Ghana, are Kaye (1962) and Bleek (1976).
- 3 See for example: Vance (1991), Anarfi (1993), Awusabo-Asare et al. (1993), Ankomah (1998), Mill & Anarfi 2002.
- 4 Apt's (1996) study of elderly Ghanaians does not contain any reference to the topic of sex.
- 5 The research was carried out with the help of many people. Most prominent was the assistance given by my Ghanaian co-researchers Kwame Fosu, Samuel Sarkodie, Patrick Atuobi, and Anthony Obeng Boamah. Benjamin Boadu and Yaw Darko Ansah typed most of the research material. I am further indebted to Monica Amoako, Martin Asamoah, Abena Ansah, *Abusua Panyin* Daniel Osei Yeboah, Marek Dabrowski and Grzegorz Kubowicz for various kinds of help. I dedicate this essay to the memory of Mary Yaa Dedaa. May she rest in peace after all her hard work!
- 6 *Opanyin* ('elder') is someone past middle age who is considered wise and experienced and behaves in a civilised and exemplary way. According to Rattray (1916: 23) the term is derived from *nyin* (to grow) and *apa* (old, long-lived). For a more elaborate discussion of the concept of *opanyin*, see Stucki 1985, Van der Geest (1998b).
- 7 These themes are discussed in various articles (Van der Geest 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2000, n.d.a, n.d.b, 2001, 2002).
- 8 Pellow (1977: 162), who studied the lives of women in Adabraka, a suburb of Accra with a high concentration of Kwahu, suggested that many women derived little pleasure from sex in their marriage.
- 9 All conversations, except the very casual ones, were taped, transcribed and translated into English. Only a few were conducted in English.

- 10 See for example Klingshirn (1971); Bukh (1979); Fogelberg (1982); Oppong & Abu (1987); Dei (1994); Avotri & Walters (1999).

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