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POVERTY AND THE „CHARM“ OF OLD AGE IN GHANA

A NOTE ON IRONY

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Mentioning “Africa” in my own country The Netherlands does not often elicit thoughts of peacefulness and well-being, but there are a few topics where Africa scores well. One of them is old age. There is a general belief that older people in Africa – as in most ‘non-western’ societies – are in many ways better off than their age-mates in the North Atlantic countries. Three aspects of old age in Africa seem particularly enviable: the respect that older people receive, their enjoyment of continuous companionship, and their vitality followed by a timely death. Not surprisingly, these attractions of African old age represent what is often lacking in the lives of older people in my own country. Without falling into gross stereotyping and generalisation, one may say that old age in The Netherlands is not regarded an attractive period. ‘Old’ is mainly a negative concept conveying physical and cognitive decay and social marginalisation. The advantages of old age, for example regular pension, leisure time, chance to travel or follow one’s hobby, presence of grandchildren, are recognised but enjoyed in spite of being old. There seems to be little pleasure in old age itself. One would rather be young(er).

With regard to the second charm of African elderhood, permanent companionship, the contrast with the condition of “western” older people is obvious. Loneliness and boredom seem to be their most deeply felt disappointments at the end of life. In a research among people aged over 85 in the Dutch city of Leiden, the aged expressed worries about decreasing physical and mental capacities, but loneliness had a much greater impact on their experience of well-being (Von Faber 2002).

Another frightening aspect of growing old in ‘the West’ is the long period of decreasing health, both physically and mentally, and the delay of death. The legislation of euthanasia in The Netherlands and Belgium in 2002 points at attempts to do something about the inaccessibility of death but actively hastening death is a difficult decision for obvious social, emotional and religious reasons. Moreover, there are indications that older people meet more resistance if they request euthanasia than younger ones (Van der Geest & Niekamp 2003).

The romanticising ideas about old age in Africa rose before me when I carried out anthropological fieldwork among older people in a rural town in Ghana. Reflecting on these European dreams I was overwhelmed by an intense feeling of irony. The ‘charms’ of old age in, for example, the town of Kwahu-Tafo in Southern Ghana where I did the research, often did not exist. Moreover. *If* they existed it was mainly thanks to circumstances which older

people in The Netherlands would find far from 'charming', in one word: poverty. My paper discusses this irony in the romanticisation of old age and its implicit aestheticization of poverty.

Kwahu-Tafo

My ambitions are limited. Research notes from one arbitrary little town in an equally arbitrary African country do not claim to speak for 'old age in Africa'. Observations in African cities would produce a much more disconcerting picture of the so-called beauty of African old age. Poverty in the cities is pungent and the marginalisation, loneliness and physical and mental misery will easily pass the European degrees of old age frustration (e.g. Sagner 2002, Van Dongen 2002). My feeling, however, is that the case of Kwahu-Tafo is fairly representative for those semi-rural communities on the Sub-Saharan continent which enjoy peace and relative stability and are not affected by war, hunger and epidemics.

Kwahu-Tafo is a rural town of about five thousand inhabitants. Most of them are Kwahu, a subgroup of the about seven million Akan who live in the south of the country.

The research at Kwahu-Tafo was a 'revisit' to the place. More than twenty years ago I had spent three periods of about six months there during which I studied the language and did anthropological fieldwork. I had not been forgotten. The *abusua* (lineage) which at the time had accepted me as a member, claimed me back as one of them. It meant that the research had a smooth start, but it also implied considerable social - and financial - obligations on my part which turned the research into a complex emotional experience.

Kwahu-Tafo has not much improved since I left it in 1973. Many houses in the old centre of the town have become dilapidated due to erosion. New houses have been built between them, at a level of about one meter below the old ones. The town now has electricity but only a minority can afford to wire their houses. Piped water is available but many taps are closed because there is no one to survey their use and collect the small payments for the water. The wells are still the main suppliers of water.

Like most other Kwahu towns, Kwahu-Tafo has a tradition of trading plus farming. The average life cycle of a man used to consist of trading in the first part of his active life and farming in the second. The first phase could also consist of practicing a skill. Many Kwahu became sandal-makers or tailors and later on taxi drivers. There is a common belief in Ghana, not entirely wrong, that when a Kwahu person builds a house, he will reserve one room for a store; trading has become a part of their cultural life. It is also said that a Kwahu who goes into government service does not respect his uncle (i.e. he should rather help his uncle in trading).

Kwahu people are known for their money-mindedness, some will say, their stinginess. *Kwahufɔɔ yɛ pɛpɛɛfɔɔ* (Kwahu are misers) is a common saying. They are astute and industrious traders. They have set up stores everywhere in Ghana and some have become very successful at that. Many well-to-do Kwahu have built impressive houses in their hometowns. Examples can be found in Obo, Twenedurase, Abetifi and Pepease. Kwahu-Tafo has been much less blessed with such beautiful buildings, since its traders and farmers were less successful than those of the nearby towns. Several factors may account for this. In the first place Western education, which started in Abetifi with the arrival of Presbyterian missionaries in 1874, only came to Kwahu-Tafo in 1899. It seems likely that education not only contributed to the success of trading but also encouraged trading as way of living.² Kwahu-Tafo, therefore, was well behind in 'development' at the time. Certain is that at present most of the wealthy Kwahu traders originate from Abetifi and the towns surrounding it (Bartle 1977).

A second factor explaining the 'backwardness' of Kwahu-Tafo could be that in 1951 many Tafo people left trading when the town acquired farm land near Aburaso, about 40 km

to the south. It was the high season for cocoa so they hurried there to start cocoa farming. The entire enterprise ended in failure. Much of the soil proved unsuitable for cocoa and conflicts over the land with the neighbouring Krobo people disturbed their farming activities. Around 1965 when the cocoa trees were beginning to bear fruit, the amount of rain gradually declined, 'culminating' in the drought of 1983 which severely affected the farms.³ To make things worse, many cocoa farms were destroyed by fires, which, people claim, had been intentionally started by the Krobo. It means that Kwahu-Tafo never flourished like some of the other towns either from trading, or from cocoa.

Fieldwork

This essay is based on fieldwork which I carried out intermittently between 1994 and 2002. The aim of the research was to describe and understand the position of elderly people in this rapidly changing society. The research involved conversations with 35 elderly people (18 women, 17 men). All conversations were taped and transcribed. Some people I conversed with only once or twice, others more often, up to ten times. Apart from these long conversations, I often went to greet the old people informally and had brief 'chats' with them. These more casual visits enabled me to make observations about their daily life and the attitudes of other people in the same house. Some local friends became co-researchers and accompanied me on many visits. Most of my observations were recorded in an elaborate diary which I kept throughout the various periods of my fieldwork.

In addition, I discussed old age with many other people in the town including opinion leaders such as teachers and church members and with other key informants. Focus group discussions were held with young people and groups of middle-aged men and women. In three schools of the area students answered a questionnaire expressing their views on old people or completed sentences on the same issue. Some students wrote essays about the old or made drawings of them.

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

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

Introspection (or reflection) was an indispensable tool in my interpretive research. Subjectivity is unavoidable in anthropological research, but it is also an asset. The implicit comparison between 'my' and 'their' experience is a prerequisite for understanding 'them'. If we do not recognize anything from ourselves in them, our data will remain stale and meaningless.

The 'charms' of old age

Respect and the beauty of old age

Kwahu culture respects old age. The common – and probably only adequate – Twi term for 'old' when referring to human beings is the verb *nyin*, which means 'to grow'. The correct Twi translation of the English 'I am old' is *manyin* ('I have grown'). Whereas in English, and most (all?) other European languages, we use an adjective to indicate the status of being old, the Akan prefer a verb. This is not just a linguistic particularity; it expresses the (desired) quality of the experience of being old. *Nyin* indicates a process and suggests a linear type of development: growing, increasing in size, content and time. A child can say *manyin*, if it has

'grown' in comparison to a previous period or another child. It can also be said of an adolescent, a middle-aged person and finally of an elder: *wanyin* (he/she has grown). The statement *manyin* nearly always has a very positive purpose. It commands respect and is often used in a boasting way. When my Kwahu friends spoke English to me, they did not refer to anyone as 'being old'. Their standard English term was indeed: 'He has grown'.

A common term for an elderly person is *panyin*, which at the same time is an honorific title expressing admiration and affection. The *panyin* is honourable, civilised, kind, composed, and wise. Countless proverbs and local sayings confirm this high appreciation of advanced age. The *panyin* represents the beautiful image of old age. He (or she) receives what is most highly regarded in Akan culture: respect. An *panyin* can be a man or a woman, though most will think of a man when the word is used. A respected older woman is called *ɔbaa panyin*. An *panyin* is an ancestor 'to be'; people will remember him after his death because of his good deeds and wisdom (Van der Geest 1998a).

One elder said: "The *panyin* has lived in the house much longer than you. You came to meet him. '*panyin*' is a big word. He is a person who knows what is going on. He must receive respect and obedience." I asked him what shows that a person is an *panyin*. He answered: "It is mostly the wisdom he gives to the young and also how he respects himself. When you respect yourself, the young will also respect you and fulfil your needs." There are mainly three virtues of the *panyin*, which earn him this respect: wisdom, self-restraint and his dedication to the family. I focus here on the first.

When I asked people why they cared for elderly people, the most likely answer was: because of respect. But what did they mean by 'respect'? Young men emphasised that they showed their respect for elderly people by visiting them and doing all kinds of services for them. I could not match their claims about helping the old and listening to them with my observations and conversations. I hardly ever saw them conversing with old people and very few of the elderly told me they did. Their accounts about blessing and cursing did not convince me either. They sounded like things they had once learned and were now politely repeating. It was politeness they were demonstrating to me in their stories about how they behaved towards the old. The young men uttered phrases of ideal behaviour. Their definition of respect cannot be deduced from *what* they said about old people but from the *way* they said it. Respect was presented in its superficial sense of *showing* respect, preventing embarrassment or shame, courteousness, politeness. Respect, in this sense, prescribes how people in public settings should behave towards one another: It is etiquette. These rules on proper behaviour were applied here to the home situation.

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

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

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

Respect, both in its superficial and in its deeper meaning, is usually thought to follow hierarchical lines. The young respect the elderly, children respect their parents, the servant

respects the master. But respect is mutual. One proverb goes: *Ɔpanyin fere ne mma a, na ne mma suro no* (If the elder respects his children, the children will fear [respect] the elder). Several other proverbs confirm this in the negative sense: an elder who does not treat children nicely, will not be respected by them. For example: *Ɔpanyin didi adidi bɔne a, oyi n'asanka*. (The elder who eats greedily, washes his own dish). The meaning is that an elder who does not leave some food for the children, will find no child who is willing to wash the plate for him. Or: *Aberewa, w'ano ye den a, gye wo ban*. (Old woman, if you are quarrelsome, make your own fence).

Respect is no longer something which is automatically awarded to people just because they are older. Respect is *earned*. It is given to those who deserve it because of what they have done in their lives. To respect an older person is no longer a 'natural' thing to do.

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

I had the foresight when I was very young that I would be old one day and would find it difficult to work. So I worked very hard and laid a sound foundation for my old age. Now I am old but very happy because I looked after my children and they are now feeding me. They provide me with what I should wear. In fact, they give me whatever will make me happy. When you are old and you get what you will eat and what you wear and also where to lay down your head, nothing worries you. Just imagine, I am able to sit down and have a lively conversation with my children.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The joys of company

Elderly people in Kwahu-Tafo do not lose their job at a certain age, but can simply adjust their function to their status as elder. They may stop doing certain things and assume new responsibilities such as advising the younger generation, participating in local politics and doing odd jobs in the home.

Loss of a partner or other supporting persons mainly affected the men. Divorce and separation are common, even in old age, which fits the general picture of marriage as an uncertain undertaking in the matrilineal Kwahu society. 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; often the wife is not eager to stay with her in-laws. In most cases marriage is a temporary affair and divorce can be initiated by women as well as by men (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 (consanguinal) family (*abusua*⁴) ties than to their marriage bond. After all, marriage is only friendship, it is not *abusua*, as the proverb goes (*awadeε ye ɔyonkɔ, εnye abusua*). As a result, the relationship that a father has to 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 most of all, on his economic position. The well-off man is one who is able to build his own house in which he can have his wife and children gathered together. He will pay for his children’s upkeep and education, and help his wife financially to trade or farm. 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 the wife’s *abusua*. The marriage may break 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. Elderly women may thus regard separation as a relief and find new security in their own *abusua*, with continued support of their children, while elderly men may end up with virtually nothing if they have not invested in social relationships during their active lifetime.

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

My tentative conclusion about the people we interviewed is that those elderly who are most dependent on others for company get it the least. Elderly people who are mobile and strong

are able to go out and visit their friends and converse. But those who cannot leave the house and have to wait until others visit them complain that people have forgotten about them. They hardly have any visitors to receive. The claim that old people are respected because of their knowledge of tradition and wisdom and that they are consulted for advice is hardly supported by my findings. Instead, the interviews and observations suggest that the present generation is not interested in the knowledge of the elderly. That knowledge has become redundant and/or irrelevant to them. What they need to know to succeed in life is not something stored in the old people. The following conversation between Kwame Fosu (K), my co-researcher, and Agya Suo (S), an elderly man who was once a drummer and an expert on traditional knowledge, now blind and miserable, may serve as an example:

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

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

In 1994 and 1995 we had several conversations with *Ɔpanyin* Kwadwo Gyima who was then about 80 years old. I quote from my field notes: He is a devout Catholic and has outspoken ideas about a lot of issues. His wife died about five years ago. When I carried out my first research in Kwahu-Tafo in 1971, I had a very lively conversation with him in Accra. He told me his life history, about his marriage, his children, his work and especially about his religious ideas. He was then a poor sandal maker in Accra. Many of his relatives considered him somewhat as a failure. He had never 'made it' and had remained poor throughout his life. When I met him again, 23 years later, he had reason to boast: one of his sons is living in Japan and sends him money. The son is putting up an impressive house at the edge of the town. The old man has since long stopped the work in Accra and has returned to Kwahu-Tafo to spend the last years of his life 'at home'. He is still full of energy and is doing almost everything by himself. Nobody takes care of him. He spends most of the day at the building site to watch the materials lying about. Usually he also sleeps there, in one the rooms that have been completed. When we asked him what 'old age' meant to him he answered: "I don't know the meaning, but the old has wisdom in his head".

Several times during our meetings he (G) complained, however, about the disinterest of the youth in his knowledge and wisdom. Two examples:

- G. The most painful thing of death is that if an aged person dies there will be no one to tell you some important history. I used to ask my elders when I was young and I am now handing it over to the children. Recently one grandchild asked me something and I was at a loss. In fact I had to tell him that I did not ask my elders when I was young. So I don't know. Even now at this my age, I keep on asking those older than me a lot of things. Yesterday I was complaining to someone that I don't understand why my grandchildren and the young people in my house don't come and greet me and ask me about a lot of things I know.
- I. Why don't they come?
- G. I don't know. I want them to come and ask so that I tell them but I don't get them. If you don't come well, I will die and take it along (*Mewu a na medekɔ*).
- I. So you will go with it?
- G. Yes my head is full of things but I will go with them because they won't come.

One day, one of my friends (B) went to see the old man at the building site and found him conversing with a woman. The following conversation ensued:

- G. This woman is just a friend. She often comes to keep me company whenever she visits her farm nearby.
- B. What about your relatives, do they pay you visits or do you visit them?
- G. I have many relatives but they don't visit me, except on rare occasions, they don't care much about me especially the young ones. You know I am the eldest of all the people living in the family. Thus it is my desire and wish that the young educated ones will come to me so that I will impart my rich knowledge about our clan and my life experiences to them. But they will not come.
- B. If they will not come, why not go to them?
- G. It is against my principles and also against the tradition to do so. If they will not come, it is they and not I who will lose in the long run.

Another elder, *Nana* (Grandfather) Kwaku Agyei (A), expressed the same complaint in a conversation Kwame Fosu (F) and I had with him.

- F. You have many proverbs. Do people come to you to learn proverbs from you as well?
- A. They don't come.

[A woman from the house had come closer to listen. When we asked her whether she had learned some proverbs from the old man since she was living with him in the same house, she answered in the negative].

- A. She will not learn proverbs, because the proverbs will not earn her money but in future it will help you. When you are entering a town and you hear on the *abɔmmaa* drums: *Nammɔn tenten reba, nammɔn tenten reba, nammɔn tenten reba*. The drummers are informing the executors that there is someone to be executed. If you understand the proverb (on the drum) you will not be caught and executed. You will run away to save your life. But if you don't understand the proverb you will be caught and killed.

Visiting old people is no longer an act with intrinsic social value, a 'pleasure'. Rather it has become an act of charity or a moral duty one would rather not do. Ironically, it was only a foreign visitor who came to 'tap' their knowledge and wisdom. The growing loneliness of elderly, dependent people seems to me the clearest indication of old people's marginalisation and loss of social significance. The claim that elderly people are respected because of their wisdom

and advanced age is only a figure of speech, wishful thinking on the part of the elderly themselves and lip service on the part of the youth. 'Respect' is shown more by the fact that such claims are still made than in young people's actual behaviour.

Friends explained to me that 'natural occasions' at which young and old meet are gradually disappearing. One such instance was the palm wine bar; which was a very common phenomenon when I did my research in 1971 and 1973. The social and financial threshold to the palm wine bar was low, which allowed young and old from all sorts of socio-economic backgrounds to assemble and engage in conversation. There the old would impress the young with their stories and experiences. As one proverb goes: *Tontom te, tontom te yerenum nsa na yerefa adwen* (While drinking we gain wisdom). Today the palm wine bars have decreased in number and fewer people visit those that are remaining. Bars and canteens that sell beers and soft drinks are taking their place, but are too expensive for the majority of the population.

Another occasion for young and old to meet has all but disappeared: the communal eating of meals. Formerly, brothers would join each other for meals and eat together from one dish. The children would sit near them and listen to their conversation. Nowadays meals have become more individualistic. Many mothers give each child its own plate to avoid fighting over food. Both changes have contributed to the growing separation between young and old.

The problem of a lack of company at the end of one's life was most strongly put by *Okyeame* Kwame Opoku (O) in a conversation Patrick Atuobi (P) and I (S) had with him. Opoku, who is 87, has been an *okyeame* all his life. He is still an active, very eloquent and highly respected person who gets many visitors. In that sense he is an exception to what I have been saying about the elderly.

- S. If someone is old or sick in a room and cannot go out, don't you think the person will still need company of people?
- O. The relatives will be visiting till a certain time but when they see that there is no hope of recovering and they realise that the person will no more be able to leave his room, such frequent visits cease and everyone goes about his own business. Normally, however, the children cannot leave the parents.
- P. What about your sister? Her case is not sickness but old age. Don't you think she needs company?
- O. She needs it and we do it but not frequently. We go there and ask of her health and she may say: I am all right but I couldn't sleep properly last night and so on. We tell her: Oh things will go well. We spend some few minutes with her and leave. It is not good but it has become a tradition among us Akan and there is nothing we can do about it.
- S. You are old but still you are mobile. Do people visit you for conversation and seek your advice and wisdom?
- O. It is someone's behaviour and character which attract people. Some people are not friendly and do not talk nicely to their fellows. A person like this will not get visitors. When such a person becomes immobile, no one will come to visit him. I am not boasting, but because I am sociable and do not talk harshly to people, I have been getting visitors all the time. That is how the world is. If you do not have good intentions towards others and do not talk nicely to them, no one likes your company. The situation becomes worse if you don't have money.
- P. Excuse me *Sebe*, in case you become sick in bed for about four or five years, do you think people will continue to visit you as they do now?
- O. I can't tell but I don't think it will be as it is now. As I said, in such cases people will visit you initially but when they realise that you don't get well, the visits will become more rare.

Another elder, *Ɔpanyin* Asare, made the same point when he concluded a conversation about his poor health at old age with the following adage: “The sick man has no friend” (*Ɔyareefo nni adamfo*).

If loneliness is the “unacceptable discrepancy between the amount and quality of actual social relationships compared with desired ones” it is not difficult to determine which discrepancy is felt as the most unacceptable and painful by the elderly people I met in Kwahu-Tafo: respect. As elders they are entitled to respect. Respect is expressed in many ways and, at a first glance, elderly people are accorded a lot of respect: children obey them without the slightest objection, passers-by greet them politely and young people speak about the good advice given by the elders in their houses. In addition, countless proverbs sing the praise of elderly people for their wisdom, gentleness and civilised manners. Respect galore, one would say, but at a closer look, flaws appear in this rosy picture.

As the research continued, elderly people became more candid about their situation in life. The respect they received was criticized as a thin veneer of politeness, while the respect that really counted – listening to their wisdom – was denied to them. Elderly people almost unanimously complained to me that young people were not interested in what they had to say. My own observation concurred with that complaint: I rarely saw a younger person engaged in a proper conversation with an elderly one.

Vitality and the right to die

Health conditions of most elderly people in Kwahu-Tafo are relatively good due to the paradoxical fact that medical facilities are scarce and hard to access. As a consequence most elderly people who are alive are alive because they enjoy a good health. As soon as a person falls sick, it is likely to be the end. Most of the elders I met when I first began this project in Kwahu-Tafo ‘disappeared’ rather suddenly over the course of the years. I began my research in 1994 with 27 elderly people, 13 women and 14 men. Two years later, ten of them had died, although most of them had not given me the impression that their lives would soon come to an end. Every time I received a letter from Ghana, it announced someone’s death, usually accompanied by a description of the funeral. Such letters made me realise how fragile life is in a community which lacks good health care or - more importantly- which does not have the means to pay for the health care which *is* available.

As I said, health of the elderly was generally good. Only one person suffered from Alzheimer’s disease. One major problem was blindness or extremely poor eyesight. Out of the 35 elderly persons who participated in the research, ten were blind or almost blind. This problem severely limited their mobility and made them very dependent on others. One woman could not walk because of an amputated leg, some felt too weak to leave the house, but several were still active, visiting friends, taking part in meetings and celebrations and going to their farm.

Early in the fieldwork, a German lady who had been living in Ghana for about thirty years confronted the author with her opinions about the life of older people in Ghana. She said that it was misguided to expect their lives to be more pleasant and comfortable than those of older people in my own country. The only positive thing I would discover, she predicted, was that old people in Ghana are allowed to die, their lives are not unduly prolonged by medical intervention and, on occasion, enforced artificial feeding. The wish of Ghanaian elders to die was respected, she said. Relatives would place food in front of them, and if they refused to take it, they were not forced. The lack of good medical facilities and poverty, particularly in the rural areas, were blessings in disguise. They saved older people from the torture of forcibly extended lives, which their peers in Europe and North America suffered.

A few days later I met a Ghanaian sociologist with degrees from Canada and the United States, and we discussed intended and contrived deaths among older people. I quote from my

field notes:

He stresses that in the olden days people who are too much of a burden to their family would be 'cleared', that is killed, for example, by poison. Malformed babies were killed by giving them *akpeteshie*¹³ to drink. Old people who felt they had become a burden might also ask to be killed. One expression indicating that the old person no longer wished to live was: *mabre* (I am tired). The ultimate phase for a person would be incontinence: 'sleeping in the toilet' is the end. A person would feel so disgraced that he would rather die. The decision to kill an old person is a family decision which will be taken by only a handful of intimates. If it became known, the people would be in trouble because this type of killing is strictly forbidden by the law. He cites an example from another town. There are strong rumours that a certain business woman was killed by her own daughter, after the family had taken the decision.

These two people were the first *and* – except for one person – the last who tried to convince me that a form of euthanasia existed in Ghana. After I had arrived in Kwahu, every time I brought up the topic, it was denied categorically. A headmaster listened to my account of how older people in my country were kept alive at all costs and by any technical means, even without their consent. When I had finished, he said: 'We in Ghana would do the same, if we had the means. I would fight for my mother's life till the end. Unless the doctor says it is over. I will fight as long as she breathes, until she says 'hmmm'. It is not true that we put the food in front of someone and refuse to feed him if he cannot eat himself. I will spoon feed her, wash her, take her to toilet, everything'. *Opanyin* Frempong made only a brief remark about 'merciful killing'. He thought it may have happened in the past to children with a 'defect', but that was wrong. He did not believe it still occurred today.

I asked Teacher Mensah (M) what he thought of voluntary death. The following discussion ensued:

- M. It is perfectly good. At the moment one of my uncles is sick, so weak that he is praying God to give him away. He is not alone: all the older sick people in bed are craving for death. Especially those who can't control their bowels.
- S. Will the family sometimes help you to die?
- M. The family cannot help.
- S. Have you ever heard the rumour that some people quietly use poison?
- M. The suffering person can do it, if he gets access to the poison, but not an outsider.
- S. If you, for example, found yourself in such a situation, could you ask your wife to find some poison for you?
- M. No, no, she wouldn't do that. She wouldn't like to hear of it.
- S. Because she loves you?
- M. If she loves you, the love is a reason for not doing it.
- S. You have never heard of something of this sort happening?
- M. I have never come across it ... so I cannot tell you of any instance.

His friend Kwaku Martin was more sympathetic towards the idea, but stressed that it was not possible:

You yourself, [and] the sick may be fed up, and the [carer] may also feel the same thing. So if you think there is no proper help, you'd rather die than stay. To die is to gain. After all, if I am gone I won't feel anything. But I don't think you will get someone to help you to die. It would mean going against the rules of God. Jesus Christ said he came to help but not to destroy. So when you help [a person] to die, that means you've destroyed one of the sons of God.

Mr Asare rejected the idea squarely: 'It is against the laws of both God and humanity'. The son of an old, demented and incontinent woman said he would never consider something like

euthanasia. He would just wait for the work of Providence. It was evil, like suicide. He actually knew quite a number of suicide cases, but euthanasia – no. Mary Dedaa gave a concrete explanation for the fact that no one will be prepared to help an old person to die: such a person would contract the sins and the disease of the one dying. Patrick asked her: ‘Ma’me, if someone is sick in bed for a long time, and has a lot of pain, do people sometimes help such a person to die?’ She replied:

- D. The only help people can give such a person is to take him to the hospital. If he does not get well and the doctor sends him back home, it is the duty of the relatives to care for him, till God calls him.
- P. Have you ever heard that people help a sick relative to die?
- D. I have never heard such a thing. Ei! It is not good.
- P. Why is not good?
- D. If you help him, his sins will come on you (*woye saa a na woagye ne bone asoa*).

The only people in the town of Kwahu-Tafo who told me that older people who become very pitiful (demented, incontinent) were sometimes killed were ‘station boys’. One of them remarked:

When someone grows very old and starts to do things like a very small child it is good [that] he goes. For example, when my grandfather became very old, at times he could wake up in the night and start to shout that some people were raiding his room, which was not true. When you went there and asked him where the raiders were, he would tell you, ‘Look can’t you see them climbing the wall?’ So I think it was better that he went.

Poverty and livelihood

Are people in Kwahu-Tafo poor? And do the old suffer the consequences of poverty? Measuring or establishing poverty has its problems, as we know. Lloyd-Sherlock (2002) outlines some of the reasons why poverty is such an elusive concept with regard to older people in developing countries, in particular for statisticians. Reported income does not reflect their economic position; moreover, income data usually refer to households not to individuals; and finally, patterns of old age and poverty change continuously. Strangely, a recent collection of studies on old age in Africa (Makoni & Stroeken 2002) nowhere focuses on poverty. Is it not an issue for older people or are anthropologists not interested in it? Kudjo (2002) writing about rural Ghana in general speaks of “chronic poverty”, measured by etic criteria, but his conclusions lack specificity and emic perspective (cf. Apt 1996). Stucki (1995) does not discuss poverty in its strict economic sense, but emphasises the ability of older people to attract followers. Poverty in the elders’ perspective is not a matter of finances but of people. Money, as we will see later on, should ‘buy’ people.

In Kwahu-Tafo the economic position of older people depended mainly on two factors. First, on whether they had been able to build a house, or had a house at their disposal, which attracted relatives to stay with them. Secondly, and more importantly, whether they had managed to care for their children and give them good school education. In that case they could be assured of constant material support of their children.

The subjective experience – or rather presentation – of poverty proved whimsical. At one time an older person would tell me that he (she) had no worries because his children took care of all his needs. Another moment the same person complained about shortage of money, hunger and lack of care. The logic of such contradictory statements was mainly emotional and the contrast was first of all a contrast in performance. In the former case the older person wanted to impress me by the respect he enjoyed; good care, after all revealed not only the virtues of his family but also of himself. In the latter case he had reason to drop that positive front and accuse

his relatives of neglect while soliciting for my sympathy. Interviews are performances, they not only *produce* information, they are themselves informative.

Money draws the young generation away from Kwahu-Tafo, but it also brings them back, in a metonymic way. It is able to produce what Stucki (1995:133) calls 'intimacy at a distance.' Money may undermine family solidarity, but it also reinforces it. Through money, children can show their affection and respect for their parents and other relatives, even though they are not present themselves. They send money through friends and relatives and increasingly through the bank. Money realises love at a distance. The saying goes: *Sika tu tese anomaa* (Money flies like a bird). It usually means that money flies away, gets finished very quickly, but it also suits the opposite meaning: it comes flying to you, it increases your happiness. *Okyeame* Opoku was very clear about the social importance of money: If it remains in the pockets of the rich person, it breeds contempt, envy and hatred; if it is used for the good of the family, it builds respect, honour and solidarity.

Money has the positive quality of bringing the affection of those who live far away, but if it is not coming, the bitterness of old age is increased. Not receiving money from those far away, while others do get financial help from their children, is indeed a painful experience. It demonstrates disrespect. No wonder that some of the elderly - against the facts - wanted to make us and themselves believe that they *were* receiving money from their children.

Whether the older people at Kwahu-Tafo consider themselves poor or rich may remain a matter of taste and debate. What does not need debate, however, is how older people in my own society regard my friends in Kwahu-Tafo. Most of them are extremely poor by Dutch standards. The fact that they have no regular monetary income but almost entirely depend on what their children and grandchildren give to them would be an unbearable dependence to Dutch elderly. The fact that they share the house – and often their room – with many others and are without privacy, would be equally hard for them. The fact that there is no health insurance, that medical services are lacking or poorly equipped and that they may not be able to afford medical treatment would be an outcry to Dutch elderly. The fact that older people die of simple infections, as they do in Kwahu-Tafo, would be a scandal in Dutch society. So, why praising the beauty of old age in Africa?

Conclusion

What is behind the irony of admiring a type of life that one abhors at the same time. Should we call it ignorance, naivety, bad faith? I propose we go one step further and ask what we can learn about ourselves in the confrontation with another culture, with another perspective on life. That, after all, is to me the purpose of anthropology.

My suggestion would be that the – admittedly to some extent enviable – conditions of life of old people in Kwahu-Tafo should make us reflect on the road our own society has chosen for managing old age. Our affluence has produced luxurious but lonely livings for older citizens and nearly unlimited medical facilities which keep them alive long after they have suffered social death. Our affluence – and our need to maintain it – had also provided the mechanics – political, financial, technical and ethical imperatives – which make it impossible to change that situation. The question is how to detonate those imperatives. Can anthropological notes from an African community help?

Notes

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2. Garlick (1971:32), however, noted that around 1960 one third of all traders in Accra were illiterate. A large majority of these were Kwahu. The number of illiterate traders was much lower in Kumase (about ten percent). Most of the traders there were Asante.

3. Many people in Kwahu-Tafo blame this 'change of climate' to the formation of the nearby Volta Lake in the same period.

⁴. *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.

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