

Between respect and reciprocity: managing old age in rural Ghana

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Abstract

Two principles underlie the attitude towards elderly people and their care in the Akan culture of Ghana: respect and reciprocity. The author argues that these principles are often in conflict with one another. Elderly people are entitled to respect because of their advanced age but they may not deserve it in terms of reciprocity. The ambivalence in the Akan attitude towards elderly people should be seen in the light of the contradiction. A culture of pretending provides young and old with the means to solve this contradiction. Outward respect is showered upon the elderly, both by younger generations and the elderly themselves, but adequate care may be withheld. A "fitting" funeral is the approved design for finishing off this uneasy condition gracefully. This article is based on anthropological research in a rural town in the southern part of Ghana.

To Nana Afua Oforiwa

Introduction

Between 1994 and 1996 I spent almost seven months doing anthropological fieldwork in Kwahu-Tafo, a small rural town in southern Ghana. The aim of the research was to describe and analyse the meaning of old age in that community. Most of the approximately 5 000 inhabitants of the place are Kwahu, a sub-group of the matrilineal Akan. Their language is Twi.

The research consisted mainly of long conversations with a total of 35 elderly people and their relatives. These meetings were complemented by casual visits which enabled me to observe daily routines in the lives of elderly people. I also discussed old age with numerous people in the town, including opinion leaders such as teachers and church members. I conducted focus group discussions with groups of young people and middle-aged men and women. Students at three schools completed a questionnaire in which they expressed their views on old people, or completed sentences regarding old people. Some students wrote essays about the old or made drawings of them.

Respect and reciprocity

Over my 25 years of study of the Akan culture of Ghana, respect (*obuo*) continuously emerged as one of the core values of that culture (see Van der Geest, n.d.a). Respect regulates social behaviour. The term refers to etiquette or politeness. "If you don't show respect, people will insult you," an informant remarked. Respect shows and delineates

social categories: those who give respect and those who receive it. The categories are relative and change depending on the context. Young people respect older people, women respect men, children respect their parents, workers their employers, pupils their teachers, laymen respect sacred people, and poor people respect the rich. This view ties up with culture as theatre, something carried out before the eyes of others.

The term respect – in particular "lack of respect" – is frequently used in conversations. Disapproval of someone's behaviour is usually expressed with the help of this concept. The most common way to say that a child behaves badly is *ommu adee* (he is disrespectful). The verb *bu* can mean many different things: to bend or fold and to crack or break are its basic meanings. Christaller (1933) lists 30 entries of *bu* in combination with various nouns but the etymological connection with its meaning of "respect" remains obscure. Neither Christaller, nor Rattray (1916) pays attention to the term and none of my informants was able to explain it either. *Obu me* means he respects me; *obu adee*, he is respectful (lit. he respects a thing).

There is no common Twi term for reciprocity but, as I hope to show, this does not mean that there is no awareness of it as a principle in human relations. On the contrary. Several proverbs express its importance in everyday life, e.g. *Nsa ko na nsa aba* (A hand goes and a hand comes) and *Benkum dware nifa ena nifa adware benkum* (The left hand washes the right one and the right hand the left). In its abstract sense, reciprocity, typically, is an etic concept, an anthropological tool for analysing and comparing cultures (Weiner, 1996). The type of reciprocity characterizes the type of relationship. Reciprocity either holds people together or separates them. Some reciprocal links last an entire life, others are allowed to exist only a few moments. A market transaction is an example of the latter, kinship of the former. The more exact the counting of reciprocity, the less trustworthy the relationship.

Words of respect

In Akan culture, respect is endowed on elderly people in the first place. Sarpong (1974: 65) states:

Old age is sacred as the old person is thought to be in closer proximity to the ancestors – he is likely to die before the others – than the young... Hence it is in relation to the sacred that a respectful attitude should be shown towards authority, old age, the mysterious and the spiritual.

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Respect, according to Sarpong, is linked to fear. Disrespect is punished by the elderly who have the power to curse. That view was shared by eight young men with whom I had a discussion on old age. I asked them what they meant when they said – as they had been doing – that they respected elderly people. One of them answered:

The meaning of the respect we have for the old is that the old are far more advanced in years than we. So, when you get nearer to them and respect them, they will reveal to you how they got to that age and they will tell you traditions and customs that will enable you also to reach that age.

Another young informant remarked:

The meaning of respect is getting nearer to the old and giving them the necessary honour. Moreover, we think that the aged have a certain blessing because of their mere age, and so when you respect and honour them and they bless you, it will be forever on your life. In much the same way, when they curse you, it will also be forever.

I asked them how they showed their respect and invited them to give concrete examples of respectful behaviour in their own house. The following discussion ensued:

Yes, I have an old person in my house. I fetch water for him. I read his letters for him. I do some errands for him. I have not reached the stage where I can give him money, so I offer him what a child can do.

I also have an old person in my house who cannot even walk. I do everything he needs. I am somehow the young man in the house, so I always carry him into the sun to warm up. I take him to the bath-house and back to his room everyday. I do all these things during vacations when I am in the house.

It is something that we the Akan have done over the years and which has come to stay. White men have a different life-style. I have some relatives who were born and bred in Canada and came back home recently. When they are engaged in a work and you call them, they will not mind you because they want to use their time according to their personal plans without interruption. But Akan are not like this. Even when you are asleep and an old person calls you, you cannot ignore him. Whether you like it or not, you have to wake up and attend to his call. Respect is our tradition. If you are not obeying that tradition, they will call you a bad child. Every child should show respect, especially to the old people in the house. In my own house, I have two old persons. One of them called us today, and asked us whether we know we are his grandchildren and so every morning, when we wake up from bed, the first thing we have to do is to come to his room, greet him, ask his condition of life. In case something is worrying him, we will be the first to know this. If we didn't do all these things, it would not be good.

Mpanyinfo se, akwadaa ɔye somako na odi abodwe dee [a proverb]. (The elders say: If an old person often sends you and you go, he gives you gifts.) If you are a child and you don't respect old people, they may curse you, because the mouth that eats salt and pepper is the same mouth that can bless and curse. (Efise ano a edi nkyene ne mako yi, eno ara nso na yebetumi de ahyira na yede adome.) The Akan actually respect the old. When a young person sees an old person carrying his load from the farm, he cannot ignore him but will help him. When the old person just says 'God bless you,' it is a big gift in itself.

School pupils around the age of 15 who were asked to make associations with "old people" referred most often to their physical weakness and to respectful features such as their wisdom and knowledge of traditions. Completing the sentence "An old man..." a majority of them wrote something about an old man's ability to give advice and his life experience. One of them wrote: "An old man is sometimes important to the family, especially young boys and girls who are yet to start their life affairs. Because they passed through so many things before they advise us on what to do and not in order to lead a good life." Another youth wrote that "young children like to draw near the old man for some historical background of their society." Some of the pupils wrote a brief essay about why young people respect the elderly. They had no difficulty in finding many reasons. A few lines from one of the essays:

It is because the young people feel they [the elderly] are older than they and as such they give them the due respect.

Young people give them respect so that they can approach them with their problems.

Older people know better than the children so the children must be humble and respectful to them so that past events can be narrated to them.

The statements of the young are more than confirmed by the elderly. They praise themselves abundantly for their wisdom, self-restraint, good manners, kindness and dedication to the *abusua* (family). The concept of *ɔpanyin* (elder) contains all the virtues of the elderly person and the elderly like to employ the term to paint a favourable portrait of themselves.¹ Proverbs in particular extol the eminent qualities of the *ɔpanyin*.

Proverbs are the domain of the old. It is believed that they have been made by the ancestors, the eldest of the old. When a proverb is formally recited, it is thus introduced: *Mpanyimfo bu be se...* (The elders have a proverb saying that ...)

Citing proverbs, moreover, is a favourite activity of elderly people. In the knowledge of proverbs and their ability to use them, they distinguish themselves from the young who lack this art. In reciting proverbs and other forms of traditional culture the elderly demonstrate the "added value" of old age. Thanks to their long life, old people have gathered a deeper understanding of life and possess knowledge of their tradition. Proverbs are an apt way to express that status, because they both reveal and conceal. They show the young superior knowledge but do not show everything. If the young want to understand, they have to ask the elder. Finally, many proverbs are about the *ɔpanyin*. In the proverb the *ɔpanyin* provides an ideal picture of himself, how he wants to be seen by others. Proverbs are in the true sense of the word "strategies for dealing with situations" (Burke, 1957; Yankah, 1989: 37). That strategy is to persuade people of the excellence of the *ɔpanyin*.

Proverbs also proved a useful research tool. Since the elders like to engage in the use of proverbs and especially enjoy people coming to ask for their explanations, I decided to do precisely that in some of the conversations. I asked old people to explain to me the meaning of certain proverbs.

My co-researcher Kwame Fosu (F) asked *ɔpanyin* Addo (A) and *ɔpanyin* Sefa (S), two elders in Abetifi (a nearby town), the meaning of the proverb *ɔpanyin ano sen suman* (The *ɔpanyin*'s mouth is more powerful than an amulet) and its variant *ɔpanyin ano sen ɔbosom* (The *ɔpanyin*'s mouth is more powerful than a god). The following discussion took place:

- A You don't have the experience the old man has. (*Nea ɔpanyin ahunu no wo wunhunu bi.*) You intend to do something and he tells you to stop.
- S He says stop but you don't stop. (*Ose gyae wose mer-enneyae.*)
- A You go to do it. And this is what we say: *ɔpanyin ano ye ɔbosom.* The old man's mouth is a god. We told [warned] you but you did not pay heed.
- F If he goes to do it, what will happen?
- S You are travelling and we warn you that today is *Awukudae*,² so you should not go. You don't agree and you go. If you go and the lorry gets into the ditch, we say the old man's mouth is like a god. If you had paid heed to his advice and stopped going there you would not have been in trouble.... He has the experience and he tells you how it is. But you say it is not so.
- S We say: The old man said it. (*ɔpanyin no kaes.*)

Nana Kwaku Agyei, an elder in Kwahu-Tafo, added:

It is the same as Wusian ɔpanyin ho a woka ne nkon mu. (If you try to jump over the elder, you will get stuck at his shoulder.) It means: If you don't give respect to elderly people you will fall into trouble.

The good manners of an *ɔpanyin* are rooted in self-control. He controls his emotions, he does not get angry and does not shout at people. The ability to check himself shows itself foremost in the way he deals with information that is given to him and in his ascetic attitude. His careful dealing with rumours is expressed in many proverbs. Nothing shows so well that one is still a child as when one cannot hold one's tongue. The elders at Abetifi explained to us the meaning of *ɔpanyin due mante mante* (somewhat freely translated as: The *ɔpanyin* says, excuse me, I haven't heard, I haven't heard.)

- A It means I am a chief. I should not listen to hearsay. Suppose my brother Yaw Pepra comes to tell me that Nana X says this and Nana Y says that. If you listen (and take action), all your subjects will desert you. So make up your mind that if somebody tells you something you will not take action (immediately).
- F X says this or that. What does it mean?
- A He will tell you that a European has come to my house. He has brought a big case and so if you do not go to stop them there will be a serious case. But you say: It does not concern me. I have not heard it.
- F Why have you not heard it?
- A Because *ɔpanyin mmɔ nsekuo* [an elder does not gossip]. He does not listen to lies.
- F It means what he is saying is a lie?
- A It is a lie.... Suppose, people report to you that your small child has gone to pick mangoes. You don't ask him [to find out the truth] and you beat him. You see? Maybe it is not true. That's why we say *ɔpanyin due mante*. It is the same as 'They say, they say' destroys the town (*Yese, yese bo kuro*).

The *ɔpanyin*'s self-restraint also reveals itself in his attitude towards food and other material pleasures. Greediness does not befit him. Two elders explained that virtue as follows:

If there is not enough food in the house, the elder will forego his share so that the children will not stay hungry. That is why we say ɔpanyin mene nsono [The elder eats his intestines]. For instance, if a father and his son are

given a small amount of food, the father will leave it for the boy to eat to his satisfaction. When an elder is hungry he does not cry, but a child does. ɔpanyin mpere ɔkɔm [The elder does not complain about hunger].

Gentleness and wisdom, the two main virtues of the *ɔpanyin*, are held together by his dedication to the *abusua*. The *ɔpanyin* is not concerned about anything but the well-being of the family. Approaching the end of his life after which he will join the *nananom* (ancestors), there is no need to toil any more for material gains. His children, *wɔfasenom* (nephews and nieces) and grandchildren will take care of his food and other daily needs. The elderly person stops travelling and devotes his time to the *abusua*. Nana Kwaku Agyei:

A proverb is given on this: Akwakora ntena efie mma asadua mfo [The old man does not stay home to watch the beans getting wet]. You are old in the house and beans are being dried. If it starts to rain, you, the old man in the house, have to go and collect them to prevent them from getting wet. If you stay aloof and the beans get wet, it means that you are not a good person. The application is that an old person in the house must gather the grandchildren around him and teach them the tradition. If he does not do that and he dies, it means you have thrown away the children. It means that you have allowed property belonging to the family to get lost.

Optimism about the respect elderly people enjoy is also expressed by authors who describe the Akan culture. Sarpong (1983:16-17), for example, writes:

Old age is ... dignified. An old person may do funny things but he deserves our respect and our love. Never should one laugh at an old person.... The young must respect the elderly because of their seniority as well as their ripe age and rich experience from which the young should profit.... There is a feeling that before an old person utters a word of caution, he must have intuitively realised what is bound to happen if the warning goes unheeded.... This gives the aged authority which is not enforced by brute physical power. It is enforced in the moral obedience that should be forthcoming from young people. Ghanaians are encouraged to be with the elderly as much as possible and not shun them. This is especially so since to old age is also attributed wisdom. The number of years lived by a person is supposed to be commensurate with the store of wisdom he has.

Sarpong's cheerful account reflects the general popular opinion about the favourable condition of elderly people in "traditional" societies. During my fieldwork I realised, however, that this was a rather stereotypical and wishful picture of lives of elderly people. Kwahu-Tafo was not a paradise for the elderly. Many of them were lonely and lacked proper care. Several people related this state of affairs to reciprocity.³

Deeds of reciprocity

First, some observations. The popular belief that elderly people are consulted by the young for advice and knowledge of the past was contradicted almost continuously by what I saw and by what I heard from the elders when they became more open to me. Talking about death, an elder remarked:

The most painful of death is that if an aged person dies there will be no one to tell you some important history.... 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 want them to come and ask so that I tell

them but I don't get them. If you don't come, I will die and take it along. Mewu a na medekɔ. My head is full of things but I will go with them because they don't come.

It is not only that their wisdom and knowledge are rarely "tapped;" elderly people are often lonely and bored and some make a neglected impression. They receive little care and, contrary to the proverb cited before, they often complain about hunger. *ɔpanyin* M was a popular figure in town when he was vital. He built his own house and, though not rich, he was reasonably well-to-do. Now that he is old, sick, blind and dependent he has become miserable. He spends the whole day lying in bed. The room is dark and dirty and smells badly. He has 20 children but none of them are around to care for him. They are all staying somewhere else. Grandchildren are not available either. He relies on a child of a tenant who empties the bucket with urine and buys food for him. His first wife, whom he divorced more than 30 years ago, brings him some food in the evening. His son has asked her to do so but she does it reluctantly. His friends who used to visit him are no longer coming. One died, the other broke a leg. The compound of his house is bustling with people and noise but the old man is no part of it.

Another – perhaps extreme – case of neglect is Mr H. Mr H was employed as a pupil teacher/catechist during his youthful days. He later left for the Volta Region to work as a shoemaker. There, he had two children with a woman: a girl and a boy. Their marriage lasted a few years. He came to Kwahu-Tafo to stay at home for some few years working for the Catholic Mission but went back to the Volta Region to continue his work as a shoemaker. When he fell sick he came back home. He has two sisters and many nephews and nieces, but none except one was prepared to render him the necessary help because they said when he was in good health he never helped them. He drinks and sells the clothes which people give to him to buy drinks and to "stake lotto." He sleeps a lot and does not wake up early. He sometimes eases himself in his room and expects that someone will clean the place. No one in the house likes the old man.

A more cheerful example concludes my list of cases. Mother K is partly paralysed and can hardly speak. One of her eight children, a daughter, looks after her. Mother K and her deceased husband worked very hard during their lives. They built the house in which the old woman was staying with her daughter. It is a beautiful and neat building. All eight children are reasonably well-to-do. When the mother became dependent after a stroke, the children had a meeting and came to the present arrangement. The daughter who was teaching in a nearby town came to Kwahu-Tafo to stay with her. The others promised to help financially. Although they do not all fulfill their promise, according to the daughter, the old mother is taken care of very well and the neighbours praise the children.

I asked *ɔkyeame*⁴ Kwame Opoku why some elderly people are well-off while others find themselves in such a miserable situation. He answered:

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. When we were very young our fathers made us work very hard. At that time, we thought he was troubling us but now, we are happy because there is a place to lay our heads and something to wear. All is due to our hard work.

In a discussion with some middle-aged women I asked their opinion on the position of elderly people in their town. One said:

The way I see old people in Kwahu-Tafo, to be frank, some are in a good condition and they have helpers who are caring for them but others are in a critical and poor condition. When you see or visit them, you would not like to leave them alone. Some of them don't have a caretaker and others don't even have a place to lay their head. Some of them sleep on the floor without a mat. It is not that such people don't have relatives, they have big families and when they die, the families will perform grand funerals for them. But while these needy old people are alive, they don't have people to look after them and to care for them.

Why?, I asked. At that moment they started to talk about elderly men. They showed great unanimity in the condemnation of some of them. One remarked:

Most often, the men don't help the women to properly look after their children for the children to become important and wealthy in future. When the parents grow old, and they did not properly look after their children, it becomes difficult for them to receive proper and good care from the children. The extended family expects that your own children look after you in old age. The extended family cannot look after you in the way that your own children will do. If your children do not prosper and become important people, your life condition in old age becomes very difficult.

Divorce and separation at advanced age are common. A woman may find that her husband invested insufficiently in his marriage and feels no obligation towards him when he becomes dependent. He has given very little during his active life and will give her nothing in the years to come. That unattractive prospect may make her decide to leave him and look for her own security, from her children and her own *abusua*. The women with whom I discussed this phenomenon had an outspoken opinion about the matter:

Most of these men are fools (kwaseabuofɔ). The women will toil with some of these men day and night, put all their trust in them, combine their efforts and resources and do everything together. Then these men go and marry another woman. They will give all the work the first wife did to their second wife. The second wife becomes the champion in the house and the men eventually sack the first wife. The first wife is no longer regarded. Here, when a man divorces, he divorces the wife and the children. So the woman takes the children with her and cares for them if her strength allows her. The woman tells the children that their father did not look after them. Because of this, the children are fond of their mother, not of the father. They also care for the mother. When the second wife too does not end well with the man and leaves him, the man becomes miserable and lonely. It is because marriages do not end well that men are miserable in Kwahu-Tafo.

Some of these men like drinking alcohol. When they are drunk, whatever we say to them is thrown away. They start to beat us and punch our mouths. When you go to the farm they don't go with you. The same women who will go to the farm, come back home and cook the food. Moreover, when these men see another woman, they follow her always to the house. If you say something about it, they become annoyed with you. In this situation, the woman cannot serve, struggle and die and leave her children behind, so she leaves the marriage and finds a place to stay and rest. When the woman goes, she goes with the children. So in this town,

there are plenty children staying with their mothers alone, without the men paying their school fees. This has affected most of the children's education. The general consensus is that most of these old people, especially the men, who are alone in old age, became lonely in their middle age and this continued to their old age.

That strict application of the principle of reciprocity to care in old age was vividly brought home in a discussion with five young women. One of them said to me: "If you were my father and you failed to care for me, I would never visit you, not even when you are sick or old." I asked another woman if she had been well cared for as a child. The following dialogue ensued:

A *Nobody cared for me, except my mother.*

Q *Would you also care for her?*

A *Very well.*

Q *Where is your father?*

A *He is in Accra.*

Q *You won't look after him when he becomes old?*

A *I will not look after him.*

Q *If he had cared for you, would you care for him?*

A *Yes, I would.*

Many elderly people are aware that they were not able to provide their children with appropriate care. The most important criterion of a successful upbringing is education. The higher one's training and education, the more one is likely to have success in life. Elderly people who admitted that they had not been able to provide their children with sufficient care always referred to school education.

Summarizing my observations, the condition of elderly people in Kwahu-Tafo was much less comfortable than one would deduct from general statements made by both young and old informants and by popular accounts about Akan culture. Loneliness and marginalization were common. The wisdom and traditional knowledge of the old were losing their influence among the younger generation. Moreover, some of them lived in dire poverty and lacked adequate help. When I asked people for an explanation of this situation, they brought up the principle of reciprocity. They blamed the elderly for having neglected their children when the children were young.

Pretending: the management of ambiguity

Explaining the beauty of old age in Ghanaian society, Sarpong (1983:16) links respect and reciprocity as follows:

The respect that the young owe the aged compels the former to look after the aged tenderly. To neglect one's aged father or mother is to commit an unforgivable act of ingratitude. The Akan philosophise on this thus: 'When someone has looked after you for you to grow your teeth, you should look after him to lose his teeth.'

The assumption that parents did look well after their children is too lightly adopted, however. Sarpong is not the only author who seems to take for granted that parents do indeed "earn" respect by having successfully brought up their children. Authors such as Apt (1996) and Brown (1995) are also quite optimistic about parental care as a basis for support in old age. The observation that care of the elderly is defective because they failed to care for their children is rarely found in the literature.⁵ Especially fathers often fall short of what is expected from them. My research has shown a large number of

cases in which the elderly lacked proper care due to the fact that they had not cared properly for their children.

Before we start blaming the older generation, however, we should put the reproaches of the young in their context. Without asserting that family support of the elderly ever was perfect, I do not doubt that it is now crumbling. Social and economic developments in the Ghanaian society have contributed greatly to the failure of the present old to provide their children with good care and to the failure of the present young and middle-aged to sufficiently support their elderly relatives.

The economic crisis of the late seventies and the eighties prevented many parents from spending enough money on the upbringing of their children. A severe drought in 1983 destroyed most of the cocoa trees and the farm crops. The need for school education meant an additional burden on parents. Children gradually changed from being assets into economic passengers. A child's level of school education became the prime graduator of successful parenthood but many parents were not able to realise that success.

The social and economic context has also contributed to the failure of the young to support the elderly. Migration to larger towns and cities to find employment inhibits them to provide direct care, while remitting money may be difficult when they have a hard time to survive in their place of work.

Where non-care for and non-care by the elderly occur, an awkward dilemma in Akan culture reveals itself: how to harmonize the prescription of respect for elderly people with the principle of reciprocity where the elderly person does not "deserve" respect? The answer lies in what I have termed "the culture of pretence," a public language of respect which not only draws the attention away from embarrassing situations but also provides some comfort: the painfulness of neglect is reduced by the fact that it is not exposed. Both young and old collaborate in this act of pretence. Managing old age is their common task.

The importance of respect in the management of embarrassing situations may be illustrated by a discussion which took place when I asked a few elders to solve the following riddle: A father had two sons. He asked the eldest to go and buy food for him but the son refused. He then asked the youngest the same question. The son answered that he would do so, but did not. Which of the two had been least respectful? After a lively debate they decided that the eldest son had been the least respectful. He had not only refused to obey the father, he had also disgraced him – perhaps in the presence of others. The youngest had at least *shown* respect to his father.

When I asked elderly people whether their children cared for them, they usually started assuring me that they did. It was only later that some admitted that they did not. Apparently, they did not want to wash their dirty linen in public when they first met me. That confession was not only shameful for their children but also for them; it was *their* children who failed and, more importantly, their children's neglect implied their own shortcoming.

The acute feeling of loss which features so prominently in the accounts of elderly people in my own culture, appeared virtually absent in this community. Elderly people, as we have seen above, describe their situation as the climax of their life. Old age is harvest time; one has acquired wisdom and enjoys the respect and affection of the *abusua*. It gradually dawned upon me, however, that these optimistic accounts were ways of coping with the pain of social oblivion and the lack of proper care. They formed part of a cultural complex of pretending.

The young still deliver their contribution to this cultural complex. They too, as we have seen, are prepared to sing the

praise of old age and bestow respect on their grandparents. They may not be willing, or not be able to offer them much practical help, but that negligence will be compensated to some extent by their outward respect.

The "disgrace" of insufficient care for the elderly is kept "in-door" and will be washed away after the old person's death. The hidden shame, which is shared by young and old, should be definitively undone by the public performance of a successful funeral (cf. Van der Geest, 1995). A proper funeral demonstrates how much the family loved the deceased and what an excellent person he or she was. The ultimate act of salutary pretence.⁶ Words of respect make the harsh reality of reciprocity more bearable.

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Notes

1. Elsewhere (Van der Geest, n.d.b.), I discuss the concept of *panyin* more extensively. The term applies to both men and women, but, for the sake of convenience, I will refer to it in the masculine form only. In Twi there is no such problem; the pronouns are all neutral.
2. *Wukudae* is a holy Wednesday (once in six weeks) which traditionally was devoted to honouring the ancestors. People were not allowed to go to their farm or to do any other work (cf. Rattray, 1923: 92-112).
3. Kwasi Boahene, a native from Kwahu-Tafo, made the following interesting remark after reading my somewhat pessimistic observation: "My impression is that the [negative] reciprocity argument is true for poor people. If my uncle did not look after me, but through my effort I became rich, I will give him something to shame him and also to boost my social standing in the community. The society will see me as an upright person who does not repay evil with evil. Generally, old people do not receive good care if they are poor; their families are poor or they have not led a respectable life."
4. *Okyeame* (usually translated as "linguist") is a functionary at the chief's court. Yankah (1995:3) describes his function as "speaking for the

chief." "Being a counsellor and intermediary to the chief, he is responsible, among other things, for enhancing the rhetoric of the words the chief has spoken. In the absence of an okayeame's editorial art, the royal speech act is considered functionally and artistically incomplete."

5. Stucki (1995: 99), who did fieldwork in an Asante community, wrote: "The degree of support that children will provide for their father also reflects the amount of trouble and money he spent on their upbringing."
6. Here I disagree with several authors who regard the funeral as a reflection of a deceased person's life. Stucki (1995: 99), for example, notes: "Those who fail to take advantage of life's opportunities to achieve prosperity are rarely accorded a large funeral ..." Funerals are complex social and cultural events which deserve much more attention than is possible in this brief essay.

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