

Sjaak van der Geest

**Wisdom, an intergenerational gift?
Notes from Kwahu-Tafo, Ghana**

Alt wird man wohl aber klug?¹
Goethe (Faust)

The assumption of a link between growing old and becoming wise seems universal.² Popular sayings, proverbs, songs and stories in the most diverse languages and cultures tell us that, as the Dutch saying goes, wisdom comes with the years. Included in that popular connection between age and wisdom is the idea (or wish) of older people that their wisdom can benefit the younger generation. American grandfathers, for example, expressed a strong desire to ‘instil important values within their grandchildren and to help them learn how to make difficult future choices about their personal lives’ (Waldrop et al. 1999: 44). Kenyon (2003) presents the wisdom of older people as an exchange of telling and listening to stories. Wisdom, again, is seen as something to be shared with others.

In Kwahu, Ghana, where I have carried out anthropological fieldwork intermittently between 1969 and today, the image of the old person with wisdom is also firmly established. One of the favourite sayings of the people I talked to in Kwahu was: ‘Unlucky the house without an elder.’ Such a family would miss the advice and experience of an older person. *Wunni panin a, due* (‘Pitiful if you do not have an elder’) is also the title and theme of an old Highlife song:

There is trouble in the family.
If we have an elder, he would settle it for us.
But since there is no elder in the family,
They are taking all of us away.³

¹ ‘Old one may grow, but will one grow wiser?’

² See, for example: Clayton 1982; Dittman-Kohli 1984; Erikson et al. 1986; Holiday and Chandler 1986; Cattell 1989; Assman 1994; Waldrop et al. 1999; Kenyon 2003; Edmonson 2005.

³ Transcription and translation by Brempong 1986: 486-487.

Oral statements by both young and old paint a picture of harmonious continuity between the generations in the form of advice, stories, knowledge of the past and wisdom.

The purpose of this essay is to look again at my data on old age and wisdom in the light of recent discussions in gerontology and psychology. In psychology it is mainly the concept of 'generativity' and the debate on 'wisdom' that have prompted me to write this reflection. The research materials that are being 'reconsidered' in this essay have already been dealt with in articles on elderhood, loneliness and the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren (Van der Geest 1998a, 2004a and 2004b, respectively). Here, however, I will present the elders not only as grandparents in relation to their children and grandchildren, but also as a historical generation somewhat in the sense of Karl Mannheim: people who lived in a different time and a different world, those who never, or hardly ever, attended school, who travelled within their country to trade but never dreamt of going to Europe or America, who worked on their farms, treasured the tradition of eloquence during disputes and libation, and survived without the facilities that the present generation enjoys. They certainly never visited an Internet café or disco.

Research and setting

The paper is part of a larger research project on the social and cultural meaning of growing old in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town of about six thousand inhabitants on the Kwahu Plateau in the Eastern Region of Ghana.⁴ The local population calls itself Kwahu, a subgroup of the Akan who constitute almost half of Ghana's 20 million people. The Akan, who

⁴ 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, Anthony Obeng Boamah and Patrick Atuobi. Benjamin Boadi and Yaw Darko Ansah typed most of the research material. I am also deeply indebted to Isaac Oppong, Kofi Ron Lange, Kofi Owusu-Daaku and *Abusuapanyin* Nana Daniel Osei Yeboah for various kinds of support, and of course to the old people who shared their knowledge and concerns with me. An earlier version of this article was discussed at the Generations panel during the AEGIS conference in London, June 2005. I thank the participants for their comments, in particular Susan R. Whyte, Erdmute Alber, Wenzel Geissler and Mette Line Ringsted.

speak Twi, have a matrilineal kinship system, which, in spite of various inroads, still exists in both rural and urban contexts.⁵

The research is based mainly on conversations with 35 older people (18 women, 17 men) and some of their relatives. The concept 'old' was not clearly defined before I began the research. My 'sample' consists of people who were described by others as 'old'. In fact, 'old' proved to be more of a term of respect than of calendar age per se. My only concern in selecting respondents was to guarantee some variation in terms of gender, economic and social status, marital situation, religious affiliation and number of children.

Usually a conversation with an older person circled around one topic, for example, his or her life history, the concept of 'old', the power of older people to bless and to curse, the care they received (and gave), their ideas about a successful and unsuccessful life, respect and reciprocity, wisdom and witchcraft, love, the experiences of loneliness, sex during old age, death and funerals.

These various topics were not planned beforehand but grew 'naturally' out of earlier conversations. This often meant that one topic was discussed with one person and another topic with another. With some of the older people, I only had one or two conversations, with others, many more. The eloquence of some of the older people was striking.

In addition to the longer conversations, there were frequent casual meetings with the elderly, e.g. short visits to greet them or to deliver a message. Observations during these visits constituted a crucial element of the research, as they added depth and context to verbal accounts. All the longer conversations were taped, translated and transcribed. During most conversations a co-researcher accompanied me.

I also had conversations with younger people; sometimes we held a formal focus group discussion, but usually our contacts were more casual. My selection of these conversational partners was 'at random' (in the colloquial sense of the term). They ranged in age from young people to middle-aged men and women. Additionally, in three local schools I asked students to fill in a questionnaire expressing their views on old people or to complete sentences on the same topic.

⁵ Other Akan groups include the Asante, Fante, Akyem, Akuapem, Bono and several other smaller groups. Studies dealing with Kwahu society include Bleek 1975; Bartle 1977; Miescher 1997; Crensil 2007.

Generativity

The concept of generativity originates from Erikson (1997) and refers to the human drive for continuity. Kotre (1984: 20) defines generativity as ‘a desire to invest one’s substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self.’ A person hopes to ‘live on’ in his children, who will continue his work and take care of his properties in future. Others may remember him for his ideas and activities or quote him. Kotre distinguishes four types of generativity: biological (bringing forth), parental (bringing up), technical (teaching skills) and cultural (passing on ideas and symbols). Generativity occurs in all stages of life, as Erikson shows (except the first one, perhaps), but becomes ‘acute’ towards the end of life when the biological self is about to be discontinued. That threat to continuity produces a sharper awareness of the need to look for alternative forms of continuity.

In Kwahu-Tafo, generativity expresses itself in older people’s concerns about living a good and successful life, building a house and having a worthy funeral, and in their ideas about ancestorhood.

Success in life is first of all understood in material terms – material success leads almost automatically to social success. People say *sika fre mogya* (‘money calls blood’, meaning: attracts relatives). Those who have been able to amass money and property and pass this on to their children and/or other relatives will be praised after their death and be remembered in gratitude.

Success in business, farming or otherwise should preferably be connected with a good life. A rich person who does not share his wealth with relatives and is suspected of having achieved his success by foul means reaps moral criticism and denigration. The virtues of an older person who has spent his life well show in his good manners. The true *panyin* (elder)⁶ controls his emotions; he does not get angry (*panyin bo mfu*), does not shout at people and does not listen to gossip. The *panyin*’s self-restraint reveals itself also in his attitude towards food and other material pleasures. Greed does not befit him, as the following proverb indicates: *Panyin didi adibone a, oyi n’ansanka* (‘If the elder eats greedily, he washes his own dish’). One elder explained the proverb thus:

⁶ *panyin* (pl. *mpanyimfo*) is an honorific term used for people beyond the age of about fifty. More than an indication of age, it carries a positive appreciation of the person: his/her wisdom, kindness, refined manners and political importance. See further Stucki 1995; Apt 1996; Van der Geest 1998a.

That man is not kind and so he will not call a child to eat with him. He will eat it all alone. When he has eaten like that he cannot call the child to wash or remove the bowl. You will have to remove or wash the bowl yourself. You are a bad elder.

Building a house is one of the most impressive ways of showing and sharing success in life and, by consequence, a virtual guarantee that one will live on in the memory of others (see Van der Geest 1998b). Forgotten are those who did not achieve anything important in their lives, who did not leave anything behind to make people think of them long after they have gone: a farm, precious property, children in a high position or a house. Remembered are those who left their imprint behind when they died. One of the most effective ways to make people remember you is to build a house. 'With a building,' one elder remarked, 'the whole world will be a witness to what you left, and your name will never die.' Another said:

When you build, you become a person (*wosi fie a, na woaye onipa*). If you have a room full of money and you don't put up a building, it is of no use. When you die, only one person will take it, and no one will mention your name any more. With a building, your name will never be lost (*wo din renyera da*). Because of this building, my great-great-grandchildren will mention my name, that *ɔpanyin* Dadeɛ built this house. It will go on till the end of the world.

A worthy funeral not only confirms the deceased's successful life, it also contributes to his remembrance. Those who attended the funeral will talk about it and still remember the event – and the deceased – many years later. De Witte (2001) describes how funerals in today's Akan society are made memorable. A funeral 'industry' has evolved to satisfy the demands of families that want to organize a grand funeral. One aspect is particularly significant in this context: the filming of the event. Videos that record the attendants and repeatedly zoom in on the dead person's body lying in state contribute to the old person's 'life after death'.⁷

Ancestorhood is the realization of outliving oneself. Several people with whom I discussed 'ancestors' emphasised the continuous role and influence of the dead in the lives of the living, but the most existentially felt meaning of 'ancestor' was the idea of continuity, of generativity (see Crentsil 2007: 86-93). I asked one of the elders why he poured a libation for the ancestors and why he reserved food for them since he himself would eat it in the

⁷ Elsewhere (Van der Geest 2000) I have emphasized another aspect, which is less relevant in this context, namely that funerals serve the glory of the (living) family more than the honour and memory of the deceased.

evening (as he confided to me). Did he think that the ancestors still existed somewhere, alive, and that they would really eat and drink? He frankly admitted that he did not know: no one had ever returned from death to tell him what death looked like. So why did he pour a libation? To remember the ancestors, he said. Remembering and being remembered because of what one had achieved in life seemed the outstanding feature of ancestorhood.⁸

Knowing during your life that your children and grandchildren will remember you after your death because of what you did for them gives satisfaction and happiness to the older person. Libations, funeral anniversaries, pictures, tombs, houses, inscriptions on the wall, all contribute to the remembrance and help to maintain the concept of ancestor, which itself sheds light on the cultural codes involved in the life of an *panyin*. The kind and reconciliatory comportment of the elder is a subtle invitation to start remembering him dearly and to continue doing so after he has died. To be an ancestor is to be remembered.

Wisdom

Wisdom is another ‘tool’ to facilitate generativity and invite remembrance. It is the fruit of a well-spent and successful life and shows that the older person has proceeded to the stage of a deeper understanding of life. Wisdom presents itself as an intergenerational gift: ideas and an attitude that should be passed on and allow the older person to continue his life after his death. Wisdom is different from many of the other ‘things’ we inherit from older generations because of its immateriality.

‘Wisdom’ is indeed a common term used when speaking about old age, but what it is, is far from clear. Most literature on wisdom in Africa is either ‘popular’ (stereotypical and romanticizing) or philosophical. Kresse (2005) gives a somewhat exceptional anthropological account of the social dimension of knowledge, including the concept of wisdom

⁸ Ancestorhood is the focus of a study of the Anufɔ people in northern Ghana. The following quotation summarizes the Anufɔ view of life and generativity: ‘All of life is a procession of events in stages toward becoming elder and death. But this is not considered the end of the person. Rather it is the gateway to ancestorhood – the ultimate goal of every Anufɔ. In a sense, ancestorhood is a more normal human state than corporal existence on earth’ (Kirby 1986: 82). At this point the author refers to another ethnography of northern Ghana, on the Sisala, where similar observations are made (Mendonsa 1974: 338). See also Goody’s (1962) classic work on the Northern LoDagaa.

(*hekima* or *busura*), in a Swahili context (Mombasa). He presents ethnographic cases that illustrate ‘intellectual activity within social practices’. He also looks at the criteria for the social appreciation of intellectual activity. His purpose is to discuss ‘what it means to be an intellectual’ in the context of Swahili society. Overall, however, his paper is more about an intellectual elite – let us call them amateur philosophers – than about the ordinary elders who are regarded as wise within their community. I do, however, find his brief definition useful: ‘Perhaps, wisdom is to have the ability or good sense to put knowledge into action’ (ibid: 18). The Ghanaian philosopher Gyekye (1996: 137) writes that wisdom includes:

... the ability to think out ways of making success in one’s personal life – to analyse and solve the practical problems of life – and the ability to pay reflective attention to fundamental principles underlying human life and experience.

In the local Twi language, *nyansa* is the most common term used for ‘wisdom’. *Onim nyansa* (‘he/she is clever’, lit. ‘he/she knows knowledge/wisdom’) is commonly used in everyday situations and can apply to young as well as older people. Another term, which has roughly the same meaning, is *nimdee* (lit. ‘knowledge thing’ or ‘knowing things’). The people with whom I discussed the different nuances in meaning did not fully agree. Some emphasised that *nimdee* could best be translated as expert knowledge that almost borders on wisdom – authoritative knowledge – whereas *nyansa* is wisdom that may not necessarily stem from knowledge but rather practical experience. Someone else felt that *nimdee* is not wisdom but just knowledge.

Christaller’s old (1933) dictionary provides the following synonyms: *nyansa* (knowledge, learning, wisdom, skill, dexterity, art, artfulness, craft, cunning), *nimdee* (knowledge, understanding; intelligence, wisdom), *anitew* (lit. ‘the eye has opened’; prudence, intelligence, sagacity, shrewdness, good sense, judgement, judiciousness, understanding) and *anifere* (sharpness of insight, quick-sightedness, penetration, sagacity, acuteness, cunningness, skilfulness, slyness). None of these terms is unequivocally positive, as seems to be the case for the English term ‘wisdom’. The intelligence that is referred to in all these synonyms can be applied to doing well but also to doing harm or seeking selfish ends. The line between *nyansa* (wisdom) and *bayie* (witchcraft) is thin (see Van der Geest 2002).

Our conversations were sometimes held in Twi, sometimes in English, with the various concepts passing in both languages. My inkling is that the more educated people with whom I discussed ‘wisdom’ had largely adopted the inherently positive meaning of the English term, as we will see further on.

Let us now look at wisdom in relation to ageing. Christaller’s classic collection of more than three thousand Akan proverbs (Christaller 2000) contains 23 that refer to *nyansa* or *nyansafo* (wise person) and three with the term *nimdee*, but none of these refers explicitly to old age. Other proverbs do praise the older person for his wisdom and life experience, but in a more implicit and metaphorical way (see below). In other idioms and contexts *nyansa* is also associated with being old. Asked what shows that someone is *panyin*, one old man replied: ‘You can see it in the wisdom he passes on to the young.’

When I invited school pupils to associate freely about ‘grandmother’ and ‘grandfather’, about one third of them mentioned that grandparents gave advice to people in the house, told them stories or helped them in other ways (see Van der Geest 2004b). To see old people as wise *because* they are old is part of an almost ‘natural’ tendency to respect (or fear) what is more extended in terms of space or time (see Culpit 1998). Elders in Kwahu society are to be feared and respected because they can bless and curse, and some are suspected of having witchcraft. Showing respect and praising them for their wisdom is one way to avoid problems.

During a discussion in English about the concept of ‘wisdom’, my friend Obeng Boamah stressed its moral dimension.⁹ Being wise, he said, cannot go together with an improper and disorderly life. Wisdom includes both cleverness and virtue. ‘A wise person does not ‘chase women’ and does not steal; he lives with his wife and is respected because of his success in family and business affairs.’ If someone is able to settle a dispute or convince others, it is not only thanks to his knowledge and eloquence, but also because his own life confirms his words. Conversely, being successful in life is almost tantamount to being wise (stupid people don’t become rich). One of Christaller’s (2000) proverbs alludes – tongue in cheek – to that link between financial and intellectual capital: *Wowɔ*

⁹ The moral quality of ‘wisdom’ is also frequently emphasized in publications on wisdom in a ‘Western’ context (see, for example, Edmondson 2005: 345; Waldrop et al. 1999: 39).

sika a, na wɔfrɛ wo nyansafo, ('If you have money, you are called a wise man'; no. 3443).

To conclude his statement about wisdom, Boamah cited a popular saying about the 'chief's elder brother': *ɔpanyin a wammɔ obra pa, na yɛfrɛ no ohene nua panyin* ('The *ɔpanyin* who does not lead a good life is called the chief's elder brother'). The elder brother of a chief is typically an inferior person, someone who should have been made chief but was bypassed because he lacked the capacities needed for the role.

If the ability to give advice and solve problems is seen as the core of wisdom, the question can be raised: Advice about what? What kind of problems? Older people may not have knowledge about education, jobs or getting a visa for Europe, but they do have superior knowledge about how to behave in public gatherings, how to deal with relatives or neighbours, how to solve conflicts over land, property and inheritance. One saying pithily expresses the importance of the elders for land and property: 'It is the uncle (*wɔfa*, mother's brother) who knows the boundaries of the farm.' Without his knowledge you may be cheated by your neighbour. Similarly grandmothers may share their experiences of marriage and bringing up children with their daughters and granddaughters. I doubt very much, however, if young people consult their grandmothers about their love affairs. I rarely heard of this, although I admit I never asked them explicitly. The beginnings of love and sex mostly take place in secrecy (see Bleek 1976; Bochow this volume) and are only shared with peers.

The most outspoken virtue of older people in Kwahu-Tafo is indeed their wisdom – at least, that was strongly impressed upon me during conversations with elders, as well as with younger people. The older one becomes, the more knowledge one collects. Wisdom, knowledge, life experience and the ability to foresee what will happen and to offer advice are indeed considered the qualities of old men and women. The fact that one has lived for a long time means that one has seen a lot of things and has begun to see how they are connected. Life experience, in other words, teaches one how events follow one another. 'Wisdom of hindsight' is usually an ironic reference to the opposite of wisdom – cheap advice that comes late – but this view needs correction. Wisdom is by definition derived from 'hindsight': learning from past experiences. Hindsight becomes foresight. The *ɔpanyin* may, on the basis of his understanding of the past, be able to predict the future and advise people about how to act

in order to prevent trouble. When I asked an elder to define *panyin*, he said:

An *panyin* is someone who, through his experience in life, has gained a lot of wisdom and can know what is good and what is not good.... Wisdom is the ability to think carefully about things before doing them. The young don't have that quality; they just get up and do things.

The wisdom of the *panyin* implies power and prestige. That is why they say *Panyin ano sen suman* ('The *panyin*'s mouth is more powerful than an amulet'), that is, the words of an older person will tell you what is going to happen. You should listen, or you will get into trouble. The old, therefore, tend to regard their advanced age as the most gratifying period of their life. Another elder buttressed his claims to wisdom with a quotation from the Bible:

I have set my mind on the sayings of St. Paul in the Bible: 'When I was a child, I spoke like a child and did things like a child.' Because of this age, you realise that most of the activities of the young are useless, and at times I laugh when I see them indulging in them ... When you are young, you make a lot of mistakes. Now that I have grown old, I have realised it, and I don't want to become young again ... When you grow old, you see a lot of things in life, so it is a blessing from God to grow old. When you die young, without experiencing a lot of things in life, it is not a blessing.

The view that growing older implies increasing wisdom is also expressed in the Twi term for 'growing old': *nyin*. 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 quality of the experience of being old. *Nyin* indicates a process and suggests a linear type of development: growing, increasing in size and content, accumulating whatever is relevant for that process of development. A child can say '*manyin*', if it has 'grown' in relation 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). When my Kwahu friends spoke English to me, they never referred to anyone as 'being old'. The standard English term was indeed 'He has grown'. The same words were used in the translations they made of our conversations with the elderly. Reluctantly I 'corrected' that beautiful idiom into plain English to prevent misunderstanding by non-Twi readers.

The verb *nyin* can be used for any being that 'lives' and therefore has the potential of 'growing': It is applied to humans, animals, trees, plants and

fruits. Because 'growing' is conceived as a linear process, *nyin* is basically a positive concept, implying accumulation, getting more of what the person/animal/tree by nature is supposed to acquire. The more one has 'grown', the more of a human being one is. Accumulation of humanness – life experience, wisdom – is the almost automatic correlate of growing old.

As we have seen above, older people are believed – or claim – to put that wisdom at the disposal of younger relatives in the household. They stop travelling and stay at home to take care of family affairs. Several proverbs express that idea in enticing metaphors. One says that the old person stays home to look after the beans (*Akwakora ntena efie mma asadua mfɔ*): while the other relatives are out, the older person watches the beans that are drying in the sun. When it starts raining he will cover them. The beans, of course, stand for family affairs. The proverb cited at the outset of this article, calling the house without an elder unlucky, expresses the same idea. True wisdom is shared. One proverb explains: 'Wisdom is not like money (or gold dust) that can be tied up and hidden away' (*Nyansa nye sika na woakyekyere asie*) (Christaller no. 2554). Knowledge that a person keeps for himself is not wisdom, but rather selfish cleverness, tending to witchcraft.¹⁰

Wisdom and being old are almost automatically connected in everyday language, even though people may deny this taken-for-granted connection during a more private discussion. Fortes's (1950: 276) line is a good example of that taken-for-granted association: the grandparents, he writes, are looked to with reverence because they are 'the repositories of ancient wisdom.' Perhaps the best-known saying that identifies old age with wisdom is the expression *Yekobisa aberewa* ('We go and ask the old lady'). The elders use it before they withdraw from a dispute or court case for internal consultation. Apparently, the old lady stands for the wisdom they need to reach the right decision.

One of the most touching lines I recorded during my research was the remark of an older man that there was no greater happiness for him than a young person coming to him and asking him a question. My research has taught me, however, that a young person rarely appears on the scene. The wisdom and knowledge of the older people is 'tapped' far less by the

¹⁰ The thought is strikingly similar to what people say about money in general: money is only good if it is used for the benefit of others, for example, to build a house (see Van der Geest 1998b). 'We do not ask for your money, we ask for your house.' Money that is hidden is bad money.

younger generation than is generally assumed.¹¹ One elder, complained bitterly about the disinterest of the youth in his knowledge and wisdom:

... if an old 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 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 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.

Another elder (KA) expressed the same complaint in a conversation my co-researcher Kwame Fosu (KF) and I had with him:

KF: You have many proverbs. Do people come to you to learn proverbs from you as well?

KA: 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 had been living with him in the same house, she answered in the negative].

KA: She will not learn proverbs because proverbs will not earn her money, but in future they will help you. When you are entering a town and you hear on the *abɔmma* drums: *Nammɔ tenten reba, nammɔ tenten reba, nammɔ 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.

These complaints contrast sharply with the far more common claim – by the young as well as by the old – that the young do go to the elders to ask their advice and listen to their stories. Elsewhere (Van der Geest 2004b) I have explained that contradiction as a performance of respect from both sides. This is not simply a matter of true versus false, pretence versus reality. Saying words is doing things, as Austin (1962) argued in his celebrated William James Lectures. The young show respect for the

¹¹ Edmondson. (2005: 354) closes her plea for an ethnographic approach to wisdom with a joking remark made by an old Irishman: 'As we get older, we grow in wisdom. But there doesn't seem to be much call for it!'

elderly by telling the anthropologist that the older generation is wise and that they often go to them for advice; the elders seize on that respect by saying the same thing. Admitting that the young do not come to them is painful and could lower their prestige in the eyes of the visitor. My view, however, is that there is still something else at issue: the definition of wisdom.

Discussion and conclusion

Only recently, the concept of 'wisdom' has become a topic of more systematic discussion in the disciplines where it has its main roots, namely psychology and philosophy. Brugman (2001) discerns a parallel trend concerning the meaning of wisdom in both disciplines. That trend is a development from wisdom as knowledge about life to wisdom as an attitude toward that knowledge. The first view refers to practical uses: wisdom is seen as 'superior skills in solving problems of life, in the past, the present and the future' (Brugman 2001: 99).¹² Wisdom in that sense needs to be shared by others. Superior skills and knowledge are handed down to the young, that is, to those with fewer skills and less knowledge.

The second view has a more epistemic character. Wisdom is seen as a middle position between certainty and doubt, as reflexivity and awareness of the illusionary character of life; wisdom is expertise in uncertainty (Brugman 2001: 99). This second view clashes with the first, which implies certainty and superior knowledge. The second view raises doubts about certainty and relativizes it. Wise is he who knows that he knows little.

Brugman (2001: 100-106) then proceeds to investigate the relationship between 'wisdom' and growing old. From this perspective (expertise in uncertainty), the older person who excels in sharing out stories and advice is not the proverbial wise person. It is rather the elder who is open to stories and advice from others and to new experience who is wise (see also Staudinger et al. 1998). Wisdom is 'tolerance for value differences' (Dittman-Kohli 1984).

'Measuring' wisdom, therefore, is not simple. Research by Baltes and Smith (quoted in Brugman 2001: 101, 104) measured wisdom along five dimensions and found no significant relationship between age and wisdom. On the basis of this study and other publications, Brugman

¹² Translations of Brugman 2001 by the author, SvdG.

suggests that wisdom is not an age-related phenomenon, but rather a matter of character. He concludes his essay with a long paragraph on the *demasqué* of the wise elder.

Ardelt (2000) explored the relationship between ‘wisdom’ and ‘ageing well’ among 82 older women in the USA. The definition of wisdom she applied contained cognitive, reflective and affective components. Drawing on the work of Erikson (1964), Clayton (1982), Baltes et al. (1992) and Assman (1994), she defines wisdom during old age as a ‘detached concern with life itself’ (Erikson 1964: 133), life satisfaction and the ability to maintain personal integrity in spite of physical deterioration and closeness of death. The following quotation from Clayton (1982: 315-316) summarises her view:

Older people with wisdom did not begrudge loss of those people or things over which they could not exert control; they treated their infirmities with humor as well as medicine and exuded a contentment and peacefulness that drew the discontented to them.

One of the hypotheses of her own research is that the ‘objective’ conditions in which older people live (health, social networks, the economic situation, etc.) do not have much influence on their satisfaction about life (read: wisdom). Wisdom transcends the restrictions of old age.

That notion of wisdom bears a striking resemblance to the idealised image of the elder or *panyin* in the Kwahu context: patient, mild, gentle, ‘cool’, not worried about trivial things, taking an interest in the well being of others, looking back on a life well spent, and looking forward to a peaceful death (Van der Geest 1998a). But, as I have already said several times, that mature attitude to life is not the prerequisite of older people – it exists among the young too. Gyekye (1996: 145), the philosopher, puts it squarely: ‘Age has nothing to do with wisdom.’^{13 14}

Although Brugman and Ardel and the authors they quote derived their insights from research in a very different, ‘Western’, context, they also throw a refreshing light on my Kwahu ethnographic notes. First, the superior knowledge of the older generation may decline in this time of globalization or lose its relevance to the young generation. What they

¹³ That getting older does not necessarily lead to more wisdom is wittily expressed in a Dutch saying: *Hoe ouder, hoe gekker* (‘The older [one is], the more foolish [one becomes]’).

¹⁴ Ringsted (this volume) discusses the concept of wisdom or common sense (Swahili: *akili*) among young people in her study of mothers and daughters in Tanzania.

know about farming, medicinal herbs, traditional customs, family history and ancestors has grown obsolete in the eyes of the young. The new generation needs other types of knowledge to survive and become successful in life: a school education, knowledge of how to contact the right person to acquire a job or a visa to go abroad. Grandparents have little in common with their grown-up grandchildren, and exchanges of information between them are declining.

Secondly, and more importantly, *wisdom* is something else than knowing how and where to farm, how to pour libations and to pray. Wisdom is rather the ability to relativize that knowledge, to see its contingency in the light of changing conditions. Taking Brugman's (2001) terminology, being wise means being an expert in handling uncertainty. Life experience becomes wisdom if it leads to a milder attitude to life. Such wisdom is not a matter of growing old, however, but rather a life-long attitude.

The term 'gift' that I have used, albeit with a question mark, has a long anthropological history, and I must briefly return to its role in this chapter on intergenerational connection and disconnection. In his classic essay (1966), Mauss sees the gift as one of the most effective tools that people employ to initiate and maintain social relations and share culture.¹⁵ A gift is usually the material translation of a social intention that invites counter-gifts; it starts reciprocity, which is the basis of culture and society. Gifts that are not welcome or empty may cause disruption and distance. In this reflection on wisdom and (non) sharing between generations in Ghana, I have described the gradual disappearance of the gift of wisdom, which the elders would nonetheless love to pass on to the young. Their inability to do so constitutes an experience of loss and marginalization, threatening their very status as elders. As we have seen, the gift of wisdom not only rewards the young for the affection and care they show to the older generation, it also reassures the elders that they will outlive themselves in their words of wisdom that the young take on board and will hand over eventually to *their* successors. The disruption of that chain is partly prevented, partly concealed, by the words of respect that young and old utter about one another.

Wisdom is not about the past; it speaks about today. If elders in Kwahu Tafo are unable to pass the gift of wisdom on to the younger

¹⁵ A valuable collection of views and discussions on gift giving and reciprocity from different disciplinary perspectives is Komter 1996.

generation, this is mainly for two reasons: their practical knowledge may not be useful any more in today's world, and they may not be as 'wise' as they claim to be. Older people, who are wise in the sense of being able to accept the demise of their own world and to remain open to the changes that are taking place, are scarce, in my own society as well as in Kwahu. That type of wisdom is indeed a rare intergenerational gift.

References

- Apt, Nana Araba (1996): *Coping with Old Age in a Changing Africa: Social Change and the Elderly Ghanaian*. Aldershot: Avebury.
- Ardelt, Monika (2000): Antecedents and Effects of Wisdom in Old Age: A Longitudinal Perspective on Aging Well. *Research On Aging* 22(4): 360-394.
- Assman, Aleida (1994): Wholesome Knowledge: Concepts of Wisdom in a Historical and Cross-Cultural Perspective. In: D.L. Featherman et al., eds. *Life-Span Developments and Behaviour*. Vol. 12. Pp. 187-224. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Austin, John L. (1962): *How To Do Things with Words*. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Baltes, Paul.B., Jacqui Smith and Ursula M. Staudinger (1992): Wisdom and Successful Aging. In: T. Sonderegger, ed. *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*. Vol. 39. Pp. 123-167. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Bartle, Philip (1977): *Urban Migration and Rural Identity: An Ethnography of a Kwawu Community*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Ghana.
- Bleek, Wolf (1975): *Marriage, Inheritance and Witchcraft: A Case Study of a Rural Ghanaian Family*. Leiden: African Studies Centre.
- (1976): *Sexual Relationships and Birthcontrol in Ghana: A Case Study of a Rural Town*. Amsterdam: Afdeling Antropologie, Uitgave 10.
- Brempong, Owusu (1986): *Akan Highlife in Ghana: Songs of Cultural Transition*. Two Volumes. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International.
- Brugman, Gerard M. (2001): Wijsheid en Leeftijd: Het Demasqué van de Wijze Oudere. In: Y. Quispel and L. Christ, eds. *Ouder Worden: Een Kwestie van Leeftijd?. Theorieën over Leeftijd in Relatie tot Veroudering, Levensfasen en Levensloop*. Pp. 95-109. Utrecht: LBL.
- Cattell, Maria G. (1989): Knowledge and Social Change in Samia, Western Kenya. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 4: 225-244.

- Christaller, Johann G. (1933): *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi)*. Basel: Basel Evangelical Missionary Society (Second Edition, Revised and Enlarged).
- (2000): *Three Thousand Six Hundred Ghanaian Proverbs From The Asante and Fante Language*. (Translated By Kofi Ron Lange). Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Clayton, Vivian (1982): Wisdom and Intelligence: The Nature and Function of Knowledge in the Later Years. *International Journal of Aging & Development* 15: 315-323.
- Crentsil, Perpetual (2007): *Death, Ancestors, and HIV/AIDS among the Akan of Ghana*. Research Series in Anthropology. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press.
- Culpit, Geoffrey (1998): Justice, Age and Veneration. *Ethics* 108: 702-718.
- De Witte, Marleen (2001): *Long Live the Dead: Changing Funeral Celebrations in Asante, Ghana*. Amsterdam: Aksant.
- Dittman-Kohli, Freya (1984): Weisheit als mögliches Ergebnis der Intelligenzentwicklung im Erwachsenenalter. *Sprache & Kognition* 2: 112-132.
- Edmondson, Ricca (2005): Wisdom in Later Life: Ethnographic Approaches. *Ageing & Society* 25: 339-356.
- Erikson, Erik H. (1964): *Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytic Insight*. New York: Norton.
- (1997 [1982]): *The Life Cycle Completed* (extended edition). New York / London: Norton.
- Erikson, Erik H., Joan M. Erikson and Helen Q. Kivnick (1986): *Vital Involvement in Old Age: The Experience of Old Age in Our Time*. New York: Norton.
- Fortes, Meyer (1950): Kinship and Marriage among the Ashanti. In: A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and D. Forde eds. *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*. Pp. 252-284. London: Oxford University Press.
- Goody, Jack (1962): *Death, Property and the Ancestors*. London: Tavistock.
- Gyekye, Kwame (1996): *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*. Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company.
- Holiday, Stephen G. and Michael J. Chandler (1986): *Wisdom: Explorations in Adult Competence*. Basel: Karger.
- Kenyon, Gary M. (2003): Telling and Listening to Stories: Creating a Wisdom Environment for Older People. *Generations* 27(3): 30-33.
- Kirby, Jon P. (1986): *God, Shrines and Problem-Solving among the Anufɔ of Northern Ghana*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag.

- Komter, Aafke E., ed. (1996): *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Kotre, John (1984): *Outliving the Self: Generativity and the Interpretation of Lives*. Boston: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kresse, Kai (2005): *Knowledge and Intellectual Practice in a Swahili Context, Mombasa: 'Wisdom' and the Social Dimensions of Knowledge*. London AEGIS Conference Paper.
- Mauss, Marcel (1966 [1923]): *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Mendonsa, Eugene L. (1974): *Divination among the Sisala of Northern Ghana*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Cambridge University.
- Miescher, Stephan F. (1997): *Becoming a Man in Kwawu: Gender, Law, Personhood and the Construction of Masculinities in Colonial Ghana, 1875-1957*. Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, Evanston.
- Staudinger, Ursula M. et al. (1998): What Predicts Wisdom-Related Performance? A First Look at Personality, Intelligence, and Facilitative Experiential Contexts. *European Journal of Personality* 12: 1-17.
- Stucki, Barbara R. (1995): *Managing the Social Clock: The Negotiation of Elderhood among Rural Asante of Ghana*. Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, Evanston, US.
- Van der Geest, Sjaak (1998a): *ɔpanyin: The Ideal of Elder in the Akan Culture of Ghana*. *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 32(3): 449-93.
- (1998b): *Yebisa wo Fie: Growing Old and Building a House in the Akan Culture of Ghana*. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 13(4): 333-359.
- (2000): Funerals for the Living: Conversations with Elderly People in Ghana. *African Studies Review* 43 (3): 103-129.
- (2002): From Wisdom to Witchcraft: Ambivalence towards Old Age in Rural Ghana. *Africa* 72(3): 437-463.
- (2004a): "They Don't Come to Listen." The Experience of Loneliness among Older People in Kwahu, Ghana. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 19(2): 77-96.
- (2004b): Grandparents and Grandchildren in Kwahu, Ghana: The Performance of Respect. *Africa* 74(1): 47-61.
- Waldrop, Deborah P. et al. (1999): Wisdom and Life Experience: How Grandfathers Mentor their Grandchildren. *Journal of Aging & Identity* 4(1): 33-46.