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RESETTLEMENT / UNSETTLEMENT IN GHANA

Snippets from an anthropological notebook

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In 1994 I carried out anthropological fieldwork in a rural Ghanaian town, Kwahu-Tafo, about 150 km north of the capital Accra, at a distance of some 25 km from the Volta Lake. The purpose of the research was to study the life of elderly people and the meaning of old age. I was particularly interested in how the elderly viewed their own situation, who took care of them when they became dependent, what kind of care was given to them, how they spent their days, whether they enjoyed the company of others and how the younger generation regarded them.

My findings were extremely diverse. Some old people lived quite comfortably, others were less fortunate and spent their days in poverty and loneliness.

In the place where I did the research was a clinic run by three foreign catholic nuns. One of them went every week to a resettlement on the bank of the Volta Lake to hold clinic. She took a special interest in old people and one day she said to me that the life of elderly people in Kwahu-Tafo was 'heaven' compared to that of the elderly in the resettlements. I should come along with her and interview the old people in one of the resettlements. It would give me a more realistic and 'balanced' view of the life conditions of old people in the whole area. I accepted the invitation.

The resettlements along the Volta Lake were constructed between 1964 and 1966, when the Akosombo Dam in the River Volta had been completed and the river slowly started to turn into a lake. I was told that about one hundred villages were covered by the rising water and that their inhabitants were evacuated to forty newly built resettlements.

In 1969 I stayed about five months in the area to study the local language, Twi. I once went to visit some of the nearby resettlements and was struck by two things. Firstly, the resettlements proved completely different from an ordinary rural community. I found straight rows of houses consisting of just one room and a roof covering an area of the size of three rooms. The absence of fences and rooms, which in 'normal' communities produce an enclosed space and provide some measure of privacy, made the place look weird and inhospitable. I realised that these people could not possibly regard themselves as having been resettled. They had been manoeuvred into a highly unsettling situation.

The second thing that struck me was the fact that the resettlements I visited were very hard to reach. They had been built in places without decent roads. Some of them had to be reached by crossing the Lake in a canoe. Apparently, new land for these involuntary migrants to settle on and farm had only been found in remote and hostile places.

The people I spoke to complained that they had been deceived. The soil, they said, was poor, the one-room houses were too small to accommodate their families, and the insulation of the place was contradictory to what they had been promised. The fact that they did not get any of the electricity which the lake produced at their expense, added irony to their fate.

Twenty-five years after my first visit, the situation had little changed. The road to Kwahu-Amanfrom, the resettlement we went to visit, was at times nearly impassable. In the town, many houses still consisted of one room and the people lacked pipe-borne water and electricity as they did 25 years ago. Erosion, due to rains and daily sweeping had done its part. Many of the

houses were undermined and large blocks of cement had broken off. The most striking thing, however, was the scarcity of people between the ages of 15 and 40.

Kwahu-Amanfrom accommodates people from four villages which have been inundated. One of the villages had been far away in the Kete-Krachi area, about 150 km to the North.

I travelled to Kwahu-Amanfrom with my research assistant. When we arrived, we paid our respect to one of the chiefs and informed him about the purpose of our visit: meeting some elderly people to interview them about their life situation. Within ten minutes, five elderly people, four of them blind, had assembled; four men and one woman. The chief and some other people remained seated nearby and listened to the conversation. A few times the chief interrupted the elderly and told them to speak more loudly into the microphone and to come to the point; he meant they should voice their grievances more blankly.

It soon became clear that the chief and the people in the town took our visit as an opportunity to express their discontent and show their misery in this godforsaken hole. They saw me as a potentially influential stranger, or at least as someone who was willing to listen to their complaints. A young man, who had brought us to the chief and was to become our guide during the day, delivered a glowing speech about the pitiful circumstances of their lives. An old man next to me supported his words with a repeated "Yes, very good, very nice!"

The discussion did not produce new insights into the meaning of old age. My questions proved more or less out of place, too academic. Their problem was not old age as such, but living in this place without the possibility to escape from it as most of the young people had. Old age was merely an extra dimension to their misery. When I asked them about the 'blessings' of old age, an apposite topic for discussion with the elderly in Kwahu-Tafo, they began to laugh. Blessings? They were hungry!

I started the discussion explaining to the elderly that I wanted to know more about their lives. Who took care of them? What kind of problems did they face? Who helped them financially? Etcetera. The first person answered:

My name is Edmund Kwadwo Safo. It was President Kwame Nkrumah who brought us to this place Amanfrom. When we came, initially everything was very good for us but later things became very difficult. It does not rain in this place and concerning my life personally, I am sick, I am blind, my knees are troubling me and I don't have a wife, so it is one of my children who struggles to get food for me to eat. I can't go to farm, I can't do any work, my daughter is caring for me. She brews pito (beer made of sorghum). I have been blind for ten years and it is my daughter who has stayed with me throughout. I have five children, one is in Mpraeso, two are in Accra and two in Amanfrom. The two in Amanfrom are managing to take care of me. The children in Accra and Mpraeso sometimes remit me, but not regularly, every six months about, and the money is not even enough. They don't have a good job. If it had not been my eyes and knees, I could have done some work to maintain myself. When I wake up in the morning, I do nothing till the evening. People don't actually visit me. Only those who pass by my house sometimes greet me. I came from Krachi to this place, Amanfrom. I am an Ashanti.

The second one, the woman, presented herself thus:

My name is Akua Nsromoah. I had thirteen children but only three of them are alive. I am blind. My biggest problem is that I can't see anything. To go to the toilet is even a problem.

I have two brothers who are looking after me but I am staying with three of my children who are caring for me. We are all staying in the same house. I cannot do anything, when I wake up in the morning, my children give me some food to eat and I will sit at one place till the evening. I have been blind for twelve years. I don't have my husband, I married twice and all the men are dead. It is about eight years now when my last husband died. We were staying together.

The chief, who was listening from a distance, interrupted asking the old lady to speak the truth. She should say that she has nobody who cares for her. Her son, who, is alive, is also blind. The third old person who attended the meeting said:

My name is Opanyin Kwadwo Agyapong. I am a sick person. I have hypertension since 1963. I have been blind for more than thirty years. Because of my sickness, I can't do any work.

The old people in Amanfrom could not look after their children very well. They were not able to send them to school to become important people. Most of these old people were very poor during their middle age because of the poor and hard environment they found themselves in. There were no jobs for us in Amanfrom and the farming work we were doing was not progressing because of lack of rains. We don't have food in this town at all, people bring food from the nearby villages and we exchange the fish we have for the food, so that the children and the old people can get food to eat. This is the sort of life we are living. So it is very difficult for us over here. We are only crying to God and the government. We are still looking up to the government to come and do something for us, we don't have a clinic, our roads are poor. We don't have good drinking water, no proper toilet.

I asked them if all old people had children to look after them, or were there instances where some of the old people did not have children to care for them? One of them answered:

Some don't have any children who look after them and even those who have children are not properly cared for by them because they don't have a good job. The farming which the children are doing is not progressing because it doesn't rain. All the children have run away to Accra and other big towns.

The fourth person presented himself:

My name is Okyeame Kusi Boadu. I have been in this town for so many years and I am a sick person. I was in the army and was hit by a bullet. I have been to the hospital several times to be treated but doctors claimed the bullets cannot be taken away from my body. I cannot work. I have children, but because I have been sick for many years, I could not look after them well to let them attend school and get good jobs. Now they don't come to look after me. I am in a very difficult situation. I have a wife. My children have travelled to other places, but they are not able to look after me because they don't have good jobs.

The following conversation ensued (Q = question; A = answer):

Q: Do young people in Amanfrom respect the old?

A: (1) The children don't respect the old at all. When I send my grandchildren, they don't go. If I want to go to the toilet, I have to get a child to take me there. I will ask them several times but they don't come, so I sometimes ease myself in a chamber pot.

A: (2) Because of poverty, children in Amanfrom are also suffering and don't respect the old. Before a child would respect an old person, the old person should be able to occasionally give presents to the children. But these old people are not able to do so. That's why the children don't respect them. If the old people say that the children don't respect them, I totally agree. The difficult life in Amanfrom has brought about this situation.

Q: Is it difficult for someone who is blind to send a child? He may not see the child and has little control over the child?

A: It is very difficult.

Q: How do you send children for an errand?

A: We use their footsteps to call them, but if you are not able to identify the person, you may call several times, they will not mind you. If you are able to identify them by their voices, then it is easy to call them by their names and they quickly respond.

Q: Are children afraid of the old people?

A: It is not that they fear us, but they don't respect us because we have nothing to give to them.

Q: Does the resettlement cause special problems for the old people?

A: When we first came to Amanfrom from Krachi District, the government was supplying us goods like oil, rice, sugar, fish, etc., so life was not difficult. The old people were getting food to eat. But since Kwame Nkrumah has been overthrown, nobody has ever visited us. The old people are dying from hunger.

A: The resettlement actually affected the old people. Most of these people had big houses with many rooms in our old settlement, but when we came here, we were given only one room and people were staying in this single room with their entire family of fifteen to twenty people. Some of these old people also had big farms in the old settlement, but when they came here, farming was not progressing. They were forced to eat food they were not used to and so most of them have died. Only a few are still here, living in misery.

The Chief added:

Most of our traditions and customs were lost when we were resettled. The old people actually don't have any good thing to give to the young people. We were good farmers in our old place, we had our own food to eat, we had a good environment and everything was successful, but in this new settlement, poverty is killing us.

The original plan Kwame Nkrumah made for this town was that, Amanfrom was to become a centre with roads to Accra, Asesewa and Nkawkaw. The ferry would also be in Amanfrom. But after his overthrow the road was directed to Adawso and this is one of the reasons that we are in a difficult situation. There is no clinic. If the Catholic Sisters had not helped us, our situation would have been even worse.

After the conversation, our guide took us to several elderly and dependent people in the town. We met two sisters, who were totally blind. In their house was also a Northerner, who had been staying with them for about ten years. They had only one relative in Amanfrom, a grandson to one of them.

I quote a part of our discussion:

Q: Can you tell us about your life in Amanfrom?

A: Our life is to sit idle from morning to evening. It is God who is caring for us. People who pass by and see our misery, sometimes pity us and give us money to buy something to eat. We don't have anybody in particular who is caring for us, except this old man, Wangara, who sometimes goes to the bush to bring cassava. Nobody in particular is taking care of us, God alone is looking after us.

Q: Where are your children?

A: Our children have travelled.

Q: How many children do you have?

A: I have only one child, a son, in Techiman.

Q: Does he come to visit you?

A: No, unless someone is dead, it is about two years now since he came to Amanfrom.

Q: Does he remit you?

A: Oh! Father, did I not say we are poor?

Q: Did you look well after your son (when he was a child)?

A: He never went to school and I don't know the work he is doing in Techiman.

Q: When was the last time you received money from him?

A: About two years ago and he only brought one thousand cedis (one dollar).

Q: Who is then looking after you?

A: We don't have anyone in particular, but there is one grandson who stays in the next house. He sometimes gives us money.

Q: Who cooks for you?

A: We cook ourselves, we wash our clothes ourselves.

Q: Who fetches water for you?

A: Our grandson.

Q: Does the grandson give you money?

A: Every three days he gives us four hundred cedis (40 dollar cents).

Q: Who is this man to you? Is he your husband?

A: He is a stranger who is staying with us. He is not our husband. We came with him from the old Amanfrom [one of them laughed].

Q: In what way does he help you?

A: He buys fish and sometimes brings food from the farm.

Q: [To the man] What do you do for them?

A: I have been staying with them for some time and everybody knows that they are my wives. Whatever I get, I share with them, we cook together, I sometimes use my money to buy water for them.

Another old lady we interviewed was Maame Akua Koraah. We met her when she was about to leave her house. We sat under a shed in front of her house and had the following conversation:

Q: We would like to know your general life condition.

A: God created us and created sickness in addition. I have been sick for about five years and never get well. My children are also sick. This condition has made me to call death, but death is not taking me and I am also not getting well. I am waiting for death, till the day

death will come and take me away. This is the life I am living here. All the things I brought to this place have been stolen, inside and outside my room. I cannot find meaning to my life. My bucket and my cooking utensils have all been stolen. My sickness is mainly my stomach, it pains me a lot. I cannot walk well.

Q: Who stays with you?

A: I am staying alone. I sleep alone in this house. I have my daughter in the house opposite mine.

Q: How many children do you have?

A: Life here is very difficult. I have two daughters at the other side of the lake and one daughter in Amanfrom. My sons have recently died. All of them were sick. That's why I am very worried.

Q: Who cooks for you?

A: My daughter in Amanfrom cooks for me. She sells kerosine in bottles, so the little she gets, she uses to cook for me. My daughters who are at the other side of the lake send food to me.

Q: When do they bring the food?

A: The day the boat arrives, mostly with one week interval and sometimes more than a week.

Q: What do you do when you wake up in the morning?

A: After bathing, I do nothing.

Q: Do you get visitors?

A: People who are passing by often greet me. They don't come purposely to converse with me.

Q: Do you enjoy being old?

A: Because of sickness I am not happy. If I had strength, I would be happy. I am living in this world but I don't have strength (health). What else can I do? I want death but I am not getting it. When I sleep and I wake up, I cannot sleep again, I will turn myself several times on the bed....

The people in Kwahu-Amanfrom feel betrayed and deserted. They have been sacrificed to an ambitious plan to bring economic progress and technical development to the country, nothing of which has returned to them. The resettlement I visited looked as sterile and intolerable as when it was established thirty years ago. The departure of the young generation adds aimlessness to this general feeling of abandonment.

About two km away is Nsuoano (literally: 'Mouth of the Water'), a small fishing village. Nsuoano is almost the opposite of Amanfrom. It is full of life. Young men have just returned from fishing when we visit them. In no time their harvest of fish has been sold. Young women carry the fish in large baskets to some old trucks which will take them to markets in the neighbourhood. In the village is a festival in honour of the god Kwaku. Men and women, some of them painted blue, dance wildly to the drums. The men are dancing with a rusty knife in their hands. Clouds of sand dust fly about from their moving feet. Akpeteshie, the local gin, flows profusely. We are enthusiastically welcomed and have our part of the dancing and the drinking.

The fishermen originate from the coast, near Keta and Ada. The Lake has provided them with new opportunities to make a living and they have adapted their sea-fishing techniques to the

situation in the Lake. Fishermen have come and settled everywhere along the 500 kilometers of the Volta Lake. They have settled, they have not been resettled. That makes a difference.