

## Opinion

# Ubuntu, African elderly and the African family crisis

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### Abstract

*Ubuntu, the African ethos of caring and sharing, has crucial implications for the elderly throughout sub-Saharan Africa, especially regarding the current situation of family crisis in Africa and African responses to this crisis. Case studies from research on Kenyan elderly illustrate the meanings of ubuntu in everyday life. Policy implications are also considered.*

I first heard the word "ubuntu" in 1995 when I was in Kwazulu-Natal doing research on Zulu grandmothers and granddaughters (Cattell, 1997). Although the word was new to me I quickly realized its meaning because, as a cultural anthropologist, I have read about many different African societies. From this reading I learned about the African ethos of caring and sharing and how it is expressed in various African family systems.

I learned more about ubuntu from my years in Kenya, where I have been doing research on older Abaluyia people and their families in rural western Kenya (in the areas called Samia and Bunyala) and in the city of Nairobi since 1982 (Cattell, 1990, 1994).

My deepest understanding of ubuntu however probably came about in the same way that Africans learn about it – through personal experience. Of course, Africans begin learning about ubuntu from birth. I already had grown children when I went to Kenya to do my first fieldwork, so I had a late start to my lessons in ubuntu.

I briefly describe a few of my personal experiences with ubuntu and also a few case studies from my research which illustrate how I see ubuntu working, and sometimes not working, today in the lives of older Kenyans. I also say a few words about what I see as the current crisis of social change in African families and then conclude by speculating on the future of family life in sub-Saharan Africa.

### Ubuntu in action: my experiences in Kenya

I have two families in Kenya: the Owiti family of Samia and the Mahaga family of Bunyala. I am a member of these families because I have a son in one, a daughter in the other. I acquired these children by a kind of reverse process of motherhood. I did not give birth to them. My Kenyan daughter and son have very black skin. My skin is quite pale. But it is not our biological relationship that matters. What matters is that

during the years I lived in Kenya, and in the many years since then, I have acted like a mother to them. I helped in their education and in other ways. They call me Mama. To be called Mama is not just a courtesy. It has meaning, it brings obligations. I don't know if these Kenyan children will take care of me in my old age. But I do know that there is a place for me in their homes whenever I go to Kenya and a place for them in my home whenever they come to the United States, as my Kenyan daughter is about to do for the second time next year.

There are more general, family-wide obligations too. When my brother in the Mahaga family died last year I was unable to attend his funeral in Kenya. But our mother Paulina, a widow in her seventies and head of the Mahaga family, sent word that each family member was to contribute 5,000 Kenya shillings (US\$100) for the funeral. She even sent me a special message, reminding me that "you are still my daughter." I knew what that meant: pay up or else! What could I do? If I wanted to continue to be a family member, I had to act like one. So I paid up!

### Ubuntu: the African family system of shared social support

Underlying such experiences in Kenya is what in southern Africa is called ubuntu. Ubuntu is a philosophy or set of ideals about being human, being a good person. It is about becoming a person through one's relationships with others. It is about the connectedness of all things and the continuity of generations. Ubuntu emphasizes the group over the individual and ideals of respect, harmony and interdependence which are to be expressed in a person's daily behaviour.

These ideas about life and living are found in most, if not all, African cultures and are well documented in the ethnographic literature. In practical everyday terms these ideals mean that family members are expected to rely on and to support each other in the African family system of shared social support. When you need help you turn to your family. Older children care for younger children, adult brothers and sisters help each other, grandmothers care for grandchildren, younger family members care for older family members. These are the ideals and also what people do, or at least try to do.

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## **African family crisis**

Today the African ideals of ubuntu remain strong but African families are under a great deal of stress. In fact, there is a family crisis in Africa (Weisner, Bradley & Kilbride (Eds), 1997). African family life has become less stable as a result of extensive economic and political changes, increased poverty, civil wars, famine, AIDS and other problems. Migration and urbanization have separated family members physically. Modern education and different life experiences have separated the generations intellectually. Everywhere in Africa, families are having increasing difficulty coping with the daily needs of family members, including children, those who are ill or disabled, the unemployed, the elderly. And Africans everywhere are concerned about the loss of their traditional values.

Of course, old people like to tell you that things were different in the past. Many Kenyan elders made comments such as: "In our days, young people respected elders. Families took care of the old people. Nowadays, young people don't want to sit with us. And they turn to books when they need advice." Younger Kenyans, including professional social workers and government officials, agreed with the elders. From younger people I heard many similar comments, such as: "The extended family is falling apart." "We're forgetting our African traditions." "Old people don't get respect and care as they used to." "Our old people are being neglected."

However, I doubt that the past was perfect. What we know of family support of the elderly in the past, we know mostly from what today's elders tell us. Often they idealize the past, as people throughout the world tend to do when they remember "the old days." However, in the old days, as now, people had limited resources. In the old days, as now, there was conflict between the generations. We simply do not know how well African families cared for elders in the past. We do not know about childless or destitute elders. We do not even know for sure how many old people there were, though undoubtedly relatively few compared to today. There is probably no way to measure what kind of family care African elders received in the past, and no way to compare the past with the present.

What we can take from elders' comments on the past are the ideals and cultural values expressed in their memories. These are the ideals of ubuntu including the notion that when people are old and frail, their families should take care of them. As many Kenyans, both young and old, said: "An old person should be able to sit and eat." What they meant was that a frail elder should be able to sit, relax without working, and still get food and other necessities. An example is Opiyo from Samia in rural western Kenya.

In 1985 Opiyo was about 80 years old. He was so frail and weak that he no longer went to work in the fields. Opiyo did not visit kin and friends, nor did he go to market, church or the chief's meetings. He did not even go to funerals. Opiyo stayed constantly in his modest family compound where one day was much like another. He got up from bed at about 07:30, when the sun's rays were warming the compound. He went outside to sit on his stool. Here the frail old man sat, chin in his hands, until noon. Then he ate lunch, prepared by his wife or daughter-in-law, rested a bit in his house, and sat on his stool again until he went to bed. Opiyo had no complaints about the care he received from his family. What bothered him was his inability to walk or to do any work. Like older people everywhere, he did not like feeling useless.

Opiyo embodied the "sit and eat" ideal. I knew others like him who were too old to work but who were cared for by their families in their own homes. Elders who were still active also received various kinds of assistance from family members,

especially sons and daughters, daughters-in-law and grandchildren. In fact, the majority of old people in a survey I conducted in 1985 reported assistance in the form of money, other gifts and work from family members. The majority of these old people also lived in multigenerational households.

These findings are not unusual in Africa. Other researchers in Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe and elsewhere (e.g. Apt, 1996; Togonu-Bickersteth, 1997; Peil, 1991; Møller, 1993; Nyanguru, Hampson, Adamchak & Wilson, 1994; Cattell, 1993) have also found that most African elders live with their families and are cared for by their families. The elders may not be cared for as well as they would like. Indeed, younger family members may think they are not doing as much for their elders as they should. But it is not only the old people who suffer. Most Africans struggle with poverty on a daily basis. Sometimes difficult choices must be made between paying school fees for a child or providing money to an ageing parent, or between employment in an urban area and leaving that work in order to care for the frail parent. But clearly, the ideals of ubuntu are still guiding African family life. Most people are still trying to live up to their own ideals, the ideals of ubuntu.

And what about the others, the elders who are not in this majority receiving at least some family care? Yes, they exist. The few old people with no children, or those who lack sons are likely to find life especially difficult. For example, Manyuru was a Samia widow whose only son was dead and whose only daughter lived a day's walk away. The daughter helped a little but for the most part Manyuru was on her own. She lived in a compound with her two living co-wives. Sometimes the co-wives shared food with her but Manyuru counted much more on the help of a nearby stepson, the son of yet another co-wife (their husband left about 30 widows when he died in 1964). When I first knew her, in 1985, Manyuru was about 85 and could still walk with the help of a walking stick. But by 1987 she was totally blind and unable to walk. From 1987 she just stayed in her small house. Yet, through the help of her extended family, which provided minimal necessities, she lived another five years, dying in a housefire at the age of 92.

Sometimes personal conflicts reduce the care received by the elderly. I knew several old women who, though they lived in multigenerational family compounds, were neglected by their families. One such woman, Lucia, was still active but needed some help, which should have been provided by the daughter-in-law who lived in the same home. But Lucia had never got along well with her daughter-in-law. In Lucia's declining years the daughter-in-law was slow to provide food, water and firewood, and even forbade the grandchildren to help their granny. Another woman who could no longer walk was kept in a house off the main path so visitors to the home would not realize that the family was neglecting her – although they had the means to provide for her.

In another case, a widowed old man who lived alone had not seen his only son for many years. The son was employed in Kisumu town, only 100 kilometres from the old man's home and with plenty of public transport available. When the old man died the son was notified but he did not come home even for his father's funeral. Neighbours and other kin who came to bury the old man could not explain why the son did not come. It seems likely that the reason, if one could learn it, was some longstanding conflict between father and son.

There is nothing unusual in such intergenerational conflicts. They occur everywhere in the world and throughout history (cf. Foner, 1984). They are another aspect of caregiving.

Indeed, family caregiving is very complicated. The support and care received by any particular elderly African is affected by many factors such as the cultural values of ubuntu, available resources, the availability of caregivers, family conflicts, and a variety of economic, political and cultural influences from the wider society.

### Where do we go from here?

The African family crisis is real enough. Africans know this better than anyone! They know what it is like to struggle, day after day, to meet the basic needs of family members, young and old. Does this mean, as so many Africans have said, that the African family is disappearing? No, the family is not disappearing. Africans also know this better than anyone! They know what it is like to live in a family system where people are always asking each other for help.

Ask a Kenyan an abstract question – “Are families caring for the elderly today?” – and you are likely to hear that “the family is disappearing” and “our old people are being neglected.” Ask that same Kenyan a different question – “How is everyone at home?” – and you are likely to hear about struggles to get school fees for one’s own or a brother’s or a sister’s children, to take care of “my old mom,” to get help for a sick family member, to make a contribution to a brother’s bridewealth or a cousin’s funeral, or to deal with any number of other demands from the family.

Families are an ancient human institution. They take different forms in different places. They change over time. But I firmly believe that families are here to stay. Families are not going to disappear – but they will change. Indeed, much of the discussion in Africa today about family life, about children, about elders, is going on because Africans are in the process of adapting African family life to the modern situation (cf. Campbell, 1994).

Families cannot do everything. They probably never did, and certainly cannot now do everything. The ideals of ubuntu are one thing, dealing with practical realities another thing. But surely the best solutions to the African family crisis will be those worked out by Africans. And very likely the values of a family system of shared social support, the values of ubuntu, will be a part of the new African family system as they have been part of the old family system.

Another player in this process is the state. African governments like to sing the praises of the family and emphasize the need for families to support the elderly. Some see this as shifting to families – who already have more than enough to deal with – burdens which rightly belong to the state. For example: Should all states not provide pensions to elders?

Ideally, perhaps yes. One may certainly argue about placing too much burden on already over-burdened African families and the need for state intervention in the form of pensions or other welfare measures. We know, for example, that South Africa’s old-age pensions benefit the elders and their families in material ways and in terms of human dignity and worth (Møller & Sotshongaye, 1996). But few other African nations are likely to have the resources to follow that path any time soon.

Nor can any state – not even my own country, the United States, wealthy as it is – entirely support the elderly; certainly not the vast majority of elderly who are healthy but not em-

ployed, and not even the growing number of frail elders. Ubuntu in the halls of government must mean a working relationship between the state and families, because families are always and everywhere the first resort and the last resource of older persons.

Governments can take other, less costly measures than pensions. For example, governments can ensure that modern inheritance laws do not disrupt elders’ ability to encourage old-age assistance through manipulation of resources that their children hope to inherit. Governments can discourage private, individualized tastes – in television programming, for example. Private tastes are a counterforce to family joint interest and mutual action. And of course, governments can try to achieve genuine economic development which raises the standard of living of most of their citizens, not just a select few.

In the long run, family-based and community-based solutions are likely to offer the best solutions to the current African family crisis, including meeting the needs of rapidly growing numbers of older Africans, especially if such family-based and community-based solutions develop from indigenous African values and lifeways, including ubuntu.

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# **African Gerontological Society (AGES International)**

## **THIRD REGIONAL WORKSHOP**

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### *Theme*

## **Ageing in changing societies: Africa preparing for the next millenium**

### *Subthemes*

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