

# Ethnographic encounters with elderly people and an interpreter. A fieldwork experience from Djenné, Mali

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## Abstract

*In this paper, methodological issues of doing ethnographic fieldwork among elderly people are considered. Examples of fieldwork conducted in a small town in Mali are given, to draw attention to the importance of having a close research partner from the local culture. Illustrations taken from both conversations with elderly persons and discussions about them show how in the collaboration between the anthropologist and the research assistant, local images and notions of old age are revealed. The author argues that being dependent on an interpreter, which is commonly looked upon as a handicap, in research on old age proves to be an advantage.*

In June and July 1998 I interviewed some 40 elderly inhabitants of Djenné in the Republic of Mali. Using the method of non-directive, open interviewing, I spoke with them about their opinions and ideas about ageing and being old. It was not my first time in Djenné. In the second half of the eighties and the early nineties, I conducted anthropological fieldwork among Islamic religious specialists (*marabouts*) of Djenné for my Ph.D. thesis.

The small town of Djenné is situated in the Inner Niger Delta and has about 13 000 inhabitants of ethnically diverse origin – mostly Marka/Sonray, Fulani and Bozo. Now the town is of only minor economic importance to the region, but once it was an important commercial city and one of the major centres of Islamic culture south of the Sahara. Djenné's famous mosque (placed on UNESCO's world heritage list) and its many Qur'anic schools still reflect the glorious days of the past.

Back in Djenné after an absence of four years, and my thesis finished, I had decided to combine my renewed acquaintance with the city and its inhabitants with the start of a new research project which aims at describing and analysing the meaning of old age in this community. I had planned to conduct a first series of interviews with elderly people and to use the results of these conversations to identify themes which may be studied in depth in future periods of fieldwork.

To conduct fieldwork in Africa as a Western anthropologist may require working together with an interpreter – a fact which is actually more often the case than ethnographic monographs suggest (see Pool, 1994: 48). Because my competence in Songhay – the lingua franca (or "the town language" as it is called) in multi-ethnic Djenné – is not good enough to converse comfortably on more than a few simple

issues, I have to depend on an interpreter. With the exception of conversations with a few interlocutors who spoke French, I conducted all my interviews in Djenné together with Boubakar Kouroumansé, my interpreter since my first fieldwork period. When we started our "ageing project," Boubakar was 37 years old (my junior by five years). By profession he is a mason and a fisherman – traditionally the trades of his ethnic group, the Bozo. He has a small family of a wife and three children. Thirteen years earlier I had started working with him after he had been recommended to me by Dutch architectural students in whose research in Djenné he had participated. I have never regretted that I followed their advice.

As an interpreter it was Boubakar's task to translate. However, he was not a neutral instrument of translation, putting the questions I formulated in French into Songhay and the answers back into French with a minimum of distortion. Leaving aside the question of whether this was at all possible – since we had to rely on a language which neither of us spoke perfectly, as Wax (1971: 295) puts it, in anthropological fieldwork "a socially sensitive interpreter who can reassure respondents and get them talk easily and naturally (...) is much to be preferred to a socially inept linguistic genius." It was Boubakar who encouraged our informants to co-operate, to answer our questions and to engage in conversation with us. To accomplish this he used his own words and altered mine as he saw fit.

Our co-operation was not limited to the actual interviews, however. Boubakar also did his share in the preparation and transcription phases. Together we discussed the items as well as their position on the topic list we used as a guide for our conversations with elderly persons and together we worked on the transcription of most of the interview tapes. Time and again it happened that an answer which we were given or an incident which we witnessed resulted afterwards in extensive discussions in which Boubakar led me to new insights. Reflecting on his role in the fieldwork, the term "research collaborator" is more appropriate than "interpreter."

In the opening lines of this paper I use the first person singular – the author's "I." I stated that "I" interviewed the elderly in Djenné, that "I" spoke with them. Having employed this conventional narrative construction deliberately, it is now possible to use it as an illustration of one of the keys issues of my article. I was incorrect. It was not "I" who conducted the interviews; "we" did. Boubakar and I were

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both present in the interview settings. We both had our share in the course the conversations took. Therefore, only by using the first person plural can I do justice to Boubakar's contribution to the fieldwork. The interview texts which I ended up taking home were our joint product.

Ethnographic fieldwork is first and foremost a conversational act. Anthropological knowledge ultimately has interactive, dialogical roots. However, often "triologue" would be a more apt term to describe the interlocative nature of fieldwork. This neologism alone reveals the role which field assistants play in ethnographic production. In the fieldwork situation a – what might be labelled – "third voice" sounds. In addition to the voice of the anthropologist and those of the informants who share their knowledge with him or her, there is the voice of the field assistant. Although an assistant also acts as an informant – often even as a key informant – he/she has a much stronger hold on the course which the fieldwork process takes than an ordinary informant.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, his/her voice has to resound in the products which emerge from it.

In this paper I present some of the conversations which Boubakar and I had with elderly persons in Djenné, as well as some discussions we had with one another. My purpose here is to reflect on the practice of ethnographic fieldwork among elderly persons. In doing so I want to emphasise the importance of having a close research partner from the local culture to discuss the fieldwork and to make sense out of it. By bringing the conversations with the elderly interviewees and with my research assistant together, local concepts of old age become clear.

### **God has given you a long life**

The list of questions and topics which Boubakar and I used as a guide for our conversations with elderly persons in Djenné was in two parts. The first part dealt with factual data, such as ethnic group, (approximate) age, former (or possibly current) profession, activities and family situation (especially regarding caregiving). The second part concerned opinions and ideas about ageing and being old.

Considering the fact that one of the factors which indicate "successful ageing" is personal happiness in old age (see Apostel, 1993), I had decided to start the second part of our interview guide with the question: "Are you content with your life today, at this age?" In Boubakar's translation this ran as follows: "Are you pleased with your long life?" The first two answers we received, one from a woman well into her seventies and one from an 81-year-old man, were:

*Very much! I didn't give my life to myself. It is God who has given us our life. What God has given me, I can't give myself. All my friends except three persons died.*

*Yes, indeed; a lot. Until now God has let me live. He hasn't let me die when I was young. So I'm content with my life.*

A couple of days later, after we had interviewed other elderly persons, I was working on the transcription of a tape. Listening to the recording I realised that instead of translating the above question as: "Are you pleased with your long life?" Boubakar had asked "God has given you a long life, are you pleased with that?" Apparently Boubakar had been inspired by the way in which our two first interviewees had answered this question. They both had stressed that they were content with life because "God has given it." Boubakar had adopted their expression.

From that day onwards Boubakar consistently referred to God when phrasing the question. I had a problem. What was the value of a question like this? Certainly nobody in Djenné

would give a negative answer when asked if he or she was content with the long life which God has given him or her. As a woman, in her mid-seventies, said when she explained why old age is pleasant: "Because when you are old your mind is occupied with God. And as God Himself has said, when He gives you a long life you have to thank Him."

I pondered asking Boubakar to leave God out of it, but realised that such a remark could be interpreted as a sign of mistrust, as if I lacked confidence in his translations. Fortunately, when we had conducted a dozen interviews, an occasion arose for me to raise the subject. One morning while working together on the transcription of an interview, we came across a saying in Songhay which was hard to translate in French. Soon we found ourselves in a discussion in which the difficulties of translating, the tasks and trials of an interpreter, and the characteristics of our collaboration came to the fore.

At a certain moment Boubakar related that once in a while it happened that instead of literally translating my questions he needed more words to make them understandable. To provide an example I mentioned the question with which we asked elderly persons if they were content with their life in old age.

Taking up my example, Boubakar stressed the following points. First, he made clear, by making an allusion to God he expressed to our interlocutor that we were, as he called it, "serious." In this way he emphasized "the importance of our words." For it is God who gives life and old age. Especially when talking with old people he considered it suitable to stress this. Moreover, the inclusion of God's name in the formulation of our question not only rendered it serious but also made it more understandable. He told me that he had noticed that people understood this question more easily when it was formulated in this way.

To put it in other words, all that Boubakar did – which is what a good interpreter should do – was to make my question more culturally fitting and answerable. Thus his way was the proper way to ask such a question in Djenné, at least when talking with elderly people. A couple of weeks later this was nicely illustrated. During an interview with an old man, one of the man's middle-aged sons was present. At Boubakar's insistence the son acted as interpreter. To translate my question, whether the 86-year-old man was pleased with his life at his age, the son needed many words, each time phrasing the question differently, but without referring to God. After several attempts the old man still did not understand his son's question. Then Boubakar came to his aid and as usual said: "God has given you a long life, are you pleased with that?" The old man smiled. Of course he was content. When God has given you a long life, you are very pleased with that, he assured us.

Taking advantage of the opportunity to discuss Boubakar's translation, I also brought up the issue which occupied me the most. I expressed to Boubakar that by translating our question as he did, he made it almost impossible for the other to give a negative answer. Boubakar did not respond directly, but brought up another interesting point. In his opinion, this question was first and foremost an introduction to the two questions that came next in our interviews. With these latter questions, he explained, we specified the subject, asking which were pleasant and unpleasant aspects of old age. God not only gives each person a certain life span but also allots each individual happiness as well as misery. Therefore Boubakar saw fit to mention His name when discussing all of this. In this way, as he had already explained, he showed that our conversation was serious.

Of course Boubakar's rephrasing of my words to make them culturally appropriate was in itself informative. It gave

insight into religious ideas and the way in which these ideas were alluded to in daily life. Moreover, the answers that were given on a few occasions to this question referred to themes such as illness, health, the continuation of an industrious life and the loss of peers. For example, a 78-year-old man, when we asked why he was, as he expressed, "very much" pleased with the long life which God had given him, answered thus:

*I thank God, for He has given me health. He didn't let me fall ill. And what's more, the work I'm still doing as a leatherworker, in the whole town, there is nobody of my age who can do the same. That is a gift of God.*

However, looking back on this experience, I can only come to the conclusion that my question was rather clumsy and certainly out of place. The whole issue of asking old people in Djenné if they are content with their life is trivial and at least has an ethnocentric bias. Boubakar, for his part, had dealt with this non-question in a creative way. By rephrasing it he showed our interlocutors that we were sincere and respectful. By mentioning God's name he gave praise to Him and set the right tone for a conversation with an old person.

### Respect or food

One evening, a few days after my arrival in Djenné, we made small talk after dinner. Suddenly Boubakar remarked: "Ah, Gérard, we are going to have a great time with the old people. You have chosen a good topic for research this year. Anyway, it won't be easy, but we are going to succeed. I know a small thing which old people do need. If we give it to them, everything will go well." Responding to the silence which Boubakar let follow upon his remark to enlarge my curiosity, I said: "Kola nuts" – thinking of the traditional small gifts which especially elderly men relish. "No, Gérard," Boubakar countered, "it is not kola nuts I am thinking of. It is respect, I have in mind. When we show respect, everything will go well."

Several authors focus in their studies of the elderly in Africa on the way in which respect for older people is changing. (e.g. Rosenmayr, 1988, Van der Geest, 1997). One of the questions I had planned to ask elderly persons in Djenné was: "What, in your opinion, are the differences between being old nowadays and being old in former times, in the days of your parents?" I had formulated this question because I more or less saw it as an introduction to respect and old age. That evening, just before we started our visits to elderly persons, Boubakar's words confirmed my expectation that old people and respect constituted a proper theme.

Two months later it turned out that of all the people whom we interviewed, only two had brought up the item of respect when we asked them to tell about the differences between being old at present and being old formerly.

*Now, our time, and before are not the same. When we were children we couldn't behave impolite to someone of old age. We couldn't do anything without their approval. The children of today don't have any respect any more. That is the difference. (67-year-old man)*

*Before, when children were playing in the streets and an elder passed, they stopped their game and ran away. Everybody made way for the elder. Nowadays, when children see an elder person approaching, they firmly take their positions in the middle of the street. Before, young people feared the elderly. Now they don't any more. (83-year-old man)*

"Why," we asked the 83-year-old man, "were children in the past afraid of the elderly?" "It was not a matter of fear but of

good manners," the old man responded. "Today children aren't polite any more. Before they had respect for the elderly. Now there is less respect."

Almost all the other answers to the question regarding differences between being old now and in the past stressed another fact: in the past people had better food. Before, life was less hard. Nowadays farming and fishing yield far less than in former days. As a consequence of the great droughts that had struck Mali and the other Sahelian countries in the early seventies and again in the early eighties, harvests and catches today are much smaller than in the good old days. Again and again the old people emphasized this in their answers.

Although in the nineties Djenné has known years in which the rains fell abundantly and agriculture and fishing had rich yields, compared with the especially good decades of the fifties and the sixties, the present ecological conditions certainly have deteriorated. The elderly of today saw their own parents ageing in good times. Those are the days they remember. A man, age 72, explained:

*Before, old people ate heartily. What we see today isn't the same as what we saw in our time, when we were young. I've seen my grandfather, I've seen my father, I've seen my aunts and my uncles. They all ate heartily. Their children did everything for them so they could live the good life. They left their house only to go to the mosque. That was all they did. That was their labour. In those days the plain was entirely inundated. People weren't in need. Now, today we have the drought. We eat but we don't satisfy our stomach.*

A woman, in her mid-sixties, first praised the present time. "Old people don't like heavy work," she stated. Fortunately, now there are grainmills and a water supply system in town. These modernisations make life easier. Before, all rice and millet had to be pounded by hand and to draw water one had to walk far. However, when we asked her a couple of questions later about the difference between being old now and being old formerly, the woman immediately answered that the past was better. Before, one could buy good food for a few francs. Before, there was a lot of milk. Now there is less of everything.

The past was better. In nearly all our conversations with elderly people in Djenné, this was emphasized. The past was better and therefore in the past the elderly had a better life. However, as I had more or less expected, diminishing respect was not mentioned in the first place as characteristic of these transformations. The elderly were mostly concerned about the climate. Compared with the present predicament, the living conditions in former days were by far better. And this was all due to the climatological changes. A 72-year-old man explained:

*Before, in days of old, the elderly lived happily. We too, who are born and raised in those times, we lived happily. Now we are struck by the drought. The rains don't come. The river is low. Someone who is in need and someone who has never known hunger, they aren't the same. When you go to the cemetery today and you see the bones of the elderly of former times, than you will notice the difference. The older bones are much more solid than the recent ones. In former days the people satisfied their stomach, today we aren't satiated.*

### The good and the bad life in old age

In her preface to the volume *Ageing in culture and society*, Christine Fry (1980) mentions a few basic questions for the anthropological study of ageing and the aged. One of these

questions reads: "What are the values which define the 'good life' in old age?"

Apart from the non-question about contentment with life, we asked elderly persons in Djenné what makes old age pleasant in their opinion. This was, as Boubakar indicated, a better question. It made the subject more concrete. Confronted with this question a man of 92 – he was the oldest person whom we interviewed and one of the two oldest men in town – answered: "It is pleasant that you have seen a lot. You have seen difficult times and you have seen pleasant times." A woman in her eighties replied:

*What is pleasant in old age? When I have my little necessities, my little needs. When I eat and my soul is peaceful, when I eat and I have a little bit of milk, and I have a little bit of oil, and other small things, that is pleasant in old age. My soul becomes calm because of it.*

The majority of the responses to the question about the pleasant side of old age related to health, leisure, being cared for (lit. "To have someone who can ease your fatigue") and "good food." Yet a man, age 67, introduced another topic in this context. At first he mentioned that "to have children who can take care of you until the time of your death" was pleasant for old people. Asked if he knew of anything else which was agreeable in old age, he continued:

*If you are as old as I am, you have to believe in God. Whatever happens to you, either good or bad, you have to follow the road of God, you have to do what God has ordered you to do and to refrain from what God has forbidden.*

A similar thing happened when we asked an 80-year-old man the question about the negative side of old age. "What is unpleasant in old age?" we asked the man. "Whatever God doesn't want," he answered rather cryptically. He added: "At this point, where my age is now, everything that God doesn't want, and I don't want to do, is unpleasant." We asked for an explanation. "God has forbidden to do wrong to one another, Muslims or non-Muslim. God doesn't like injustice," the man said. "But," I remarked, "when we talk about old age – for injustice relates to everyone, isn't it – are there any matters which are especially unpleasant for people of old age?" "One has to try to abstain from everything that God has forbidden. When you do what God doesn't like, that is unpleasant," the man answered.

Later on, while working on the transcription of this interview, I told Boubakar that such an answer was far from clear for me. What did it mean when someone answered the question on what is unpleasant about old age with "Whatever God doesn't want?" More importantly, I doubted if we had asked the right questions. Were our questions understood in the right way?

To explain why I did not know what to make of the old man's answer, I gave a few examples of answers which I thought elderly people in my own society would give when asked this question. They might say that old age is unpleasant because they suffer from poor health, because their children never visit them, or because they feel lonely and depressed. But Boubakar reassured me that there was nothing wrong with our questions. It was all evident. He began his explanation rhetorically:

*Why do old people answer this way? When you are young, you only think about the good life and pleasant matters. As the saying goes, as the griots [bards] say: 'If God gives you wealth may He give it when you are young. If God gives you knowledge, may He give it when you are young. And in case*

*God turns you insane, may He let it happen while you are young.' What does that mean? When God gives you money when you are young you can do a lot. You can travel everywhere. You can marry beautiful women. You can eat delicious food and you can wear nice clothes. That is wealth. When God has given you knowledge when you are young you have the possibilities to develop yourself. You don't need much sleep. You can work all day, it doesn't bother you, you can support it. You can learn a lot. You can do much.*

*But when you are old. Even if you are rich, the women don't like you. Even if you are well-dressed. Your skin has changed. Your face has changed. You're no longer young. You yourself say that you can't do a lot of things any more because of your age. Even if you feel like doing it, you can't do it. If you have a lot of knowledge, at a certain age you can't teach [give lessons at a Qur'anic school] as you did when you were young. You can't travel any more in search for knowledge. Your health and your strength don't allow it. Your life has three stages. You start young, you become an adult and you grow old. When you're old your strength has diminished. In the same way as when you were a child, you need help again when you are old. Thus, a Muslim, a believer, hopes for the hereafter. That is why at a certain age you turn your thoughts to the future life. Even if you give some thought to this world, you are mostly occupied with the next world. Only he who doesn't think of the future life, will complain about his life here.*

Boubakar had made his point. If elderly people, when asked about the unpleasant side of old age, answer "Anything God has forbidden is unpleasant," it is not necessary to wonder. This is a clear answer. Old people do not care much about their earthly life any more. They look ahead, at the time stretched out before them, at their reward for the way in which they led their life in this mortal coil. Following the course of life, the elderly increasingly "turn their thoughts to the future life."

A month after we had this conversation, a woman in her mid-seventies illustrated Boubakar's words as follows. "What is pleasant in old age," she proffered, is that "when you are old your mind is occupied with good things, bad things you discard. At this age you keep aloof from this world, you have to concentrate on the straight way."

The elderly put the next world before this one, Boubakar told me. Religious concerns occupy them more than mundane affairs. Although this attitude certainly came to the fore in the answers which we were given, worldly matters were nevertheless prominent in them. As said, most people mentioned "good health" as a major value when asked about the conditions which define good life in old age. Conversely, to the question about the unpleasant side of old age, the majority answered "illness," immediately followed by "lacking someone who takes care of you" and "poverty" (which once or twice was defined as "lack of good food").

Health and illness, food and poverty, care and neglect; well-being in this world is definitely not absent in the thoughts of elderly people. However, as one woman showed, it is also possible to refer to both sides simultaneously: the religious as well as the mundane. When we asked her what makes old age pleasant, the woman, well into her seventies, answered: "Your eyes are directed at God and His Prophet." Almost in the same breath she added: "When you eat well, when you are at ease, and have people around you who take care of you, then you have a pleasant old age."

## Final remarks

By listening intently to elderly people, a great deal may be learned about the meaning of growing and being old. To "learn something about the meaning which older persons 'find' in their everyday life," narratives are indeed a valuable source. However, "stories" are always situated in the context of the field encounter (Sagner, 1999).

In this paper I have given a few examples of my own experiences in the field. On the basis of conversations with elderly people and discussions with my research assistant, I have attempted to give some insight in the praxis of my fieldwork in Djenné. By presenting not only the voices of the old people, but also leaving ample room to Boubakar's voice, I not only depicted the role of a research assistant in the process of fieldwork but also illustrated that the communicative events which lie at the root of ethnographic knowledge are often shaped as a "triologue."

To give attention to the triological constitution of ethnographic research can be especially fruitful in studies of old age. In Boubakar's contributions to the conversations with the elderly as well as in his explanations in the discussions which these meetings engendered, local notions of old age were depicted.

As an interpreter Boubakar translated in two directions. First, he made my questions culturally compatible; he made them understandable for our elderly interlocutors. As it turned out, this process of translation could even change the original purpose of a question: in its translated form the question was not asked to elicit information – or at least, not in the first place – but to set the tone for a conversation with old people. Boubakar's second translations considered the answers. Here two phases may be discerned. First, during our conversations with elderly persons he translated their answers more or less verbatim in French. For most answers, that ended the matter. However, some were later on translated a second time. In these cases not only a literal translation was involved but also a contextual one. Together we discussed passages in the recorded interviews which were not clear to me or which raised questions otherwise. Boubakar answered my questions, gave me his explanations, told me how to see things and reflected upon our encounters with the elderly.

Both Boubakar and I were confronted with the elderly people. As neither of us has yet reached old age, our age identities clearly differed from those of our interlocutors. For the

anthropologist as well as the assistant, an elderly person was the "other." With one fundamental difference, of course: Boubakar was a member of the society which I as an outsider was studying. His conceptions of ageing and the aged were embedded in the local construction of old age. Consequently, the discussions following our conversations with the elderly persons generated useful and important data.

Both in the conversations with elderly persons and in those about them, Boubakar's contribution was indispensable. The handicap of depending on an interpreter in anthropological fieldwork turned out to be a benefit.

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## Note

1. See Berreman (1962) who describes how two different research assistants can result in two completely different ethnographies. Lindholm (1982: xxi-xxii) reports that the friendship with his assistant constrained him from doing "many of the things often deemed necessary for good research." Rabinow (1977: 75) mentions how possessive a research assistant can become.

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