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Old people and funerals in a rural Ghanaian community: ambiguities in family care

S. van der Geest*
Medical Anthropology Unit, University of Amsterdam

Abstract

This paper is based on conversations and observations made during anthropological fieldwork conducted in a rural town in southern Ghana. The author views funerals as a form of care which a family provides for old people after death. Both old and younger members of a family regard a fitting funeral as indispensable to mark the life of a person as successful. It is a family's responsibility to arrange a funeral. The author attempts to understand the meaning of funerals for older people, and draws attention to a common discrepancy between the grandness of funeral celebrations and the poor quality of care and moral support which old people enjoy from kin during the last years of their lives. He concludes that funerals are less a matter of showing respect to the deceased and making his/her life complete, as they are occasions for the family to celebrate itself and indulge in self-praise. If the social prestige of a family is at stake at a funeral, it is understandable that the family will be inclined to expend its efforts on public post-mortem, rather than private pre-mortem care. Most older Ghanaians appear to support this view.

To the memory of Agya Suo

If care exists in activities which people perform for those who can no longer perform the activities themselves, then funerals may be regarded as a form of care. In Ghana, a funeral is commonly regarded as the ultimate form of care which a family provides for a member. The term "ultimate" is used in a double sense: not only is the funeral the last thing that a family does for a person; it is also the most elaborate and expensive activity which it will organize for him/her. A funeral, one might say, is the culmination or climax of care which a family extends to a person who may have been disabled, sick or otherwise dependent for a period of time. Several people with whom I discussed this matter stressed that it is with a funeral that a family shows its deepest love, concern and respect for the person who has died.

In this exploratory paper I place some critical notes alongside this popular view. An immediate reason for doing so comes from observations made during fieldwork in a rural town. In a large number of cases I noticed that old people who during the last years of their life received little care and company, were given sumptuous funerals when they died. This contradictory observation triggered off several questions about family support for ageing members. In the paper I consider types of care which some people enjoy in old age and report on conversations with young and old people on the matter of funerals.

Research

The conversations on which my paper is based were carried out during anthropological fieldwork in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town on the Kwahu Plateau in the south-eastern part of Ghana. The mainly Kwahu inhabitants of the town belong to the about five million matrilineal Akan who live in the South of the country. The aim of the research was to describe and understand the position of old people in a rapidly changing society.

The study involved interviews, or rather conversations with 29 elderly people. All conversations were taped and transcribed. Some people were interviewed only once, others twice or more often. One old man, Nana Ksaku Agyei, was interviewed about ten times and visited daily. Apart from the interviews, I often went to greet the old people informally and had brief conversations with them. These more casual visits enabled me to make important observations about their daily life and the attitudes of other people in the house. Most of these observations were recorded in an elaborate diary which I kept during the four and a half months of my fieldwork.

In addition, I discussed old age with many other people in the town, including opinion leaders such as teachers, church members and other key informants. Focus group discussions were held with young people and groups of middle-aged men and women. In three schools in the area students completed a questionnaire in which they expressed their views on old people, or completed sentences on this subject. Some students wrote essays about old people or made drawings of them.

This study was entirely qualitative. Following on Teitelbaum's (1988) plea for an emic perception of the concept of old age, I tried to arrive at deeper understanding of what it means to be old and dependent. That understanding was gradually acquired through participant observation. I lived as closely as possible to old people. I sat and conversed with them and their relatives and friends. With some of them I farmed, and went to church and to funerals. What resulted was an extremely diverse picture of the lives of the people. Some enjoyed their old age. They lived comfortably in their own house, surrounded by children and grandchildren. They were well fed and had company throughout the day. Others were miserable, lonely, poor and hungry. Reading through my field notes and the interview transcriptions, I tried to find a common underlying theme in these diverse experiences of old age. In this paper I focus on one aspect: how families in Kwahu-Tafo express their care for the old through the organization of funerals.

* *Address correspondence to*
Prof. S. van der Geest, Zwarteweg 13, 2374 BA Oud-Ade, The Netherlands.

The Akan

The Akan are a matrilineal society with a relatively low esteem of marriage. Most Akan will consider their marriage bond less important than their membership of the *abusua* (the lineage). A proverb which was sometimes quoted to me explains that attitude: *Awadee ye yenko, ennye abusua* (Marriage is 'let us go', it is not *abusua*). Marriage, in other words, is a temporary affair while the *abusua* is permanent. The greater weight of the *abusua* can be detected from many phenomena in Akan society.

Marital partners are unlikely to stay together in one house if their maternal homes are nearby. In that case, both partners usually prefer to live with their own folk and carry out their marital duties from separate residences. Customary wedding ceremonials have little social significance and in most cases are attended by only a handful of people. Payments and gifts are limited. Divorce is common and easy and can be initiated by the man as well as the woman. On average, a person will experience one to two divorces in his/her lifetime.

In a sense, the interests of the conjugal family are opposed to those of *abusua*. A woman who attaches herself completely to her husband, does so at the expense of the *abusua*. The *abusua* looks somewhat askance at a "successful" marriage. The children of the couple will be kept outside the sphere of influence of their matrikin. By the same token, a man who favours his own children above those of his sister may incur the displeasure of his relatives. In such a situation, one may find the *abusua* more keen to disrupt than to repair a damaged conjugal relationship. "Interference of relatives" is indeed one of the most common reasons for divorce (cf. Bleek 1975a, 1977).

Strictly speaking, the husband is an outsider in his own nuclear family since he belongs to another *abusua* than his wife and children. Unless he is well-to-do, he is likely to remain rather marginal regarding family affairs, such as the upbringing of the children and the maintenance of the family.

Marriage, someone told me with cynic exaggeration, is a necessary evil. If people could have children without getting involved with a partner from another lineage, they would probably prefer not to marry. As a matter of fact, many do not, and prefer to engage in less formal relationships. Many women "stop marriage" when their task of bearing children has been completed. *Mabre awadee* (I am tired of marriage) is a common expression.

It is not surprising, therefore, that marriage is considered a less secure ground in old age. Women often prefer to return to their lineage of origin when they grow older. It is the *abusua* where elderly people are most assured of good care.

Care of old people

It is difficult to obtain a clear picture of the care which old people in rural Ghana enjoy. Some have been successful in life and have been able to give their children a good education which has resulted in a good social position. These people are usually fortunate enough to have their children take good care of them. The children buy their parents everything that they need, especially clothes and luxury items such as clocks, watches, radios, lanterns and ornaments. The houses of such people are often filled with children, nieces, nephews and grandchildren. Their good life attracts relatives who bring company and presents.

The quality of life of the less well-to-do elderly is harder to gauge. Several seem to continuously contradict themselves. One moment they complain that they have no money for food; their children may be far away and hardly visit them; and their children do not remit sufficient money on which to live comfortably. Another moment they praise their children for the way in which they look after them. An admission that their children neglect them would call shame on themselves. Many, therefore, hasten to emphasize that their children do what they can to assist them. Whether they stressed the gloomy side of their situation or the bright one when they were interviewed, depended on the situation in which the interview took place. If an old person's relationship with me was easy and there were no other people listening, the interviewee would be more inclined to reveal his/her worries. Otherwise he/she preferred to keep up a respectful appearance. Another factor of some importance was that some expected help from me and thus stressed their financial difficulties.

Nana Kwaku George, who was 76 years old and had had a stroke about two weeks prior to being interviewed, related his life history to me. He had married five times and had 20 children, two of whom he told me about.

> *My daughter is now going to Abidjan and Lomé, buying and selling things. For four years I have not heard from her. The boy too, who should have helped me now, is at Tumu Waterworks (far away in the North) as a driver. He came home only once, about five years ago. The man is grown. He should have come home to help me but he didn't. I am left alone to my death.*

In relating his story, Nana Kwaku George made two things clear: (1) His children are relatively successful in life, which contributes to his honour as a father; and (2) he needs help because his children do not assist him. When I asked him directly if he expected more from his children, he replied:

> *Yes, I expect more from them. This type of* ***kokoo*** *[plantain] I eat costs 6 000 cedis. They should give more money. If my children help me, I can live longer. When you get good food, you grow old. That's why you get older, because you have proper care.*

Money has indeed become a crucial token of care, or of lack of care, but it cannot replace direct care. Everyday care activities for elderly and dependent people include cooking food for them, cleaning their room, helping them to go to the toilet or – if they cannot walk – emptying their chamberpot, providing warm water for their bath, washing their clothes, and running all kinds of errands for them. Two somewhat similar cases of old and rather poor men illustrate differences in care which is provided.

- **Case of Agya Tano.** Agya Tano is an old blind man. His clothes are rags. He spends his days sitting on the threshold of his door with a pipe in his mouth, or lying on a mat on the floor of his squalid room. His children have virtually deserted him. Whenever I visited him he asked me for tobacco, shoes, a coat, food and money. The only person who seemed to care for him was an old lady who happened to stay in the same house. He called her his sister but the exact relationship was more remote. Agya Tano regards himself as an old man (*akwakora*) because he can do nothing. He cannot go out, he cannot farm, he can hardly get up. He says "You can only eat the food which will be given to you. Because of my eyesight I am *akwakora*. Sickness also makes people grow old. Because of sickness I am *akwakora*. If people do not hold me, I cannot go anywhere."

  In the past, he says young people took good care of the old but nowadays it is different; his own sons live around the corner but he has not seen them for about six months. The "sister" joined in the conversation: "When I was young I

saw my mother's mother. She was very, very old. She would be carried from the room and washed outside. Sometimes she was brought outside and her room was swept and tidied before she was carried back to the room. But nowadays children don't do that." "Why can't children do that nowadays?" I asked. "*Asasaa.* Laziness. They don't want to work." "Don't you think it is because they don't have respect?" "Yes, a lazy person does not respect. *Woye osasaafoo, wommu adee.* This is because if he respects you, you will ask him to do something. *Obu adee a wobesoma no.* But when you send him, he tells you 'I won't go', just out of laziness."

Agya Tano's wife left him a long time ago, when he became ill. (Desertion in old age is a common phenomenon in this community. Women often retreat to their family of origin when their husbands are no longer able to support them. Their own family holds more security for them than a destitute and disabled husband.) During his active life, Agya Tano was a drummer in the shrine of a local deity and very close to the *okomfoo* (priest). He is very knowledgeable about cultural traditions such as poetry and music but nobody is interested in his stories. People never visit him, he complains. As a visitor I was an exception. Our first conversation ended thus: "What do you do from morning till evening?" "When I sit here for some time, I go to my room to lie down." "You lie down for some time and then you get up to sit here?" "Yes. Sometimes, when I am lying down, my sister knocks on my door to give me my food."

- **Case of Agya Kofi Manu.** Agya Kofi Manu is about a hundred years old. About 60 years ago he came to Kwahu from the Volta Region as a wood splitter. He married a local woman and had nine children. Agya Manu is blind. The blindness began 16 years ago. His daughter who looks after him says: "When he wakes up in the morning, he opens his door. Then I come in to check his condition. I take his urine and throw it away. If he has eased himself in the chamber-pot, I carry it away from the room." When I asked her what the old man did during the day, she replied: "He eats, sleeps, wakes up and eats." She cooks food for him, washes his clothes, and brings him water to bath. He is able to bath himself in the bathroom. A long rope is tied from his room to the toilet enabling him to find his own way to the place.

  Sometimes people come to greet him but very few stay for some conversation. There is little he can talk about except the past, since most events in the town pass without his noticing them. His daughter and grandson say that they converse with him but the conversation is probably very limited. The daughter says that he used to tell her about his life in the past, how he moved to the Afram Plains and to Kwahu, and how he lived with her mother. "..... but nowadays, because of the state in which he is, I don't really bother him too much. I just ask him his condition every morning."

  The daughter was living with her husband in Kumasi when she realized that her old parents needed someone to help them. She asked her husband's permission to go and look after them and he agreed. This happened eleven years ago. Her mother died four years ago at the age of 95 and now she continues to look after her father. Every two weeks she goes to Kumasi to visit her husband and spends a few days with him. During these times one of her sisters looks after the father. When asked why she, of all the children, is the one to look after the father, and whether she is happy about being separated from the husband, she replied: "It is not happiness but it has just happened that I should come and stay here. The rest of my sisters claim they can't leave their husband, their children and their work. So I have to sacrifice myself and come. When I first came, some of my children were staying with my mother who looked after them. When I remembered the sort of help she gave me and how she looked after my children throughout their school time, I knew I also had to do something for her when she became old. And when she died I could not leave my father alone." When asked whether this means that she loves her parents more than her brothers and sisters, she said: "I cannot tell. When you are born, not all children are the same. The fingers are not of the same length. Some children may be more helpful than others."

  What would she have done, I asked her, if her husband had not agreed? "I don't have any power. The Bible says the husband is the head of the woman and the man's head is Christ, and the head of Christ is God, so I begged him. I said my parents were very old. If I did not go to help them and they died, people may insult me that I did not look after my parents, so there is no need for me to come to their funeral."

The quality of care for old people, as shown in these two cases, varies. Some old people are poor, neglected and miserable, while others are relatively well-off in terms of care support from kin. For all, the care that they receive in the last years of their life may dwindle to very little, if seen in comparison to the attention which they receive after death.

Funerals

During the conversations with old people, the subject of funerals[1] came up repeatedly. An old man remarked during an interview: "As I am sitting here now, if I die and my people don't give me a fitting funeral, it will be a disgrace to them."

As old people approach death it is natural that they should think about funerals, particularly their own. To be given a decent and worthy funeral is recognition that they have lived a useful and worthy life. Moreover, it is seen as a sign of affection and respect of the young for the old. Funerals express gratitude for what the deceased has done during his/her life. As a woman explained:

> *A certain man married a woman who already had children. The man looked properly after this woman's children who were brought into the marriage. Therefore, the children cared also for him in his old age and when this man died, the children buried him and organized a proper funeral for him.*

Similar appreciation of a funeral was expressed by another woman:

> *I had a relative who never gave birth but her junior sister had children. This barren woman made kenkey and sold it to help her younger sister to look after her children. This woman died recently and you should have seen the sort of coffin the children bought for their mother's sister. To be frank, nobody in this town has ever bought such a coffin!*

Such statements reflect a part of the meaning which funerals have for the old people. An interesting observation was that large, sumptuous funerals are also held for people who do not seem to deserve one, who were regarded as a failure, and who met with social contempt during their life. For example, an outcast who was a leper was given an elaborate funeral celebration. A similar case concerned a bedridden ex-soldier who was disliked by the people in his compound and treated

very harshly. When this man died, he too was given a large funeral which was attended by a crowd of people who had never cared about him. During the funeral I learnt that a number of the mourners had never seen the deceased during his life.

Another observation made is that funerals have become very costly. The people complained about the excessive cost of funerals and did not seem to be able to contain the costs. A brief item in *The Daily Graphic* of 3 June 1994 described "... expensive coffins, psychedelic funeral parlours, elaborate banquets and display of extravagant items". Such funerals, the item continued, "... are not meant to express grief but rather to show off".[2]

Funerals have indeed become occasions to show off. New technical developments have increased the possibilities for people to impress others. Highlife music has taken over from traditional drumming and dancing at funerals in Ghana.[3] Huge amplifiers blast music over the town, which is interrupted by loud announcements of donations. In many parts of the country the erection of mortuaries have added another dimension to funerals. The longer that a corpse is kept at a mortuary, the more prestigious is the funeral. Not only does a longer period enable the family to make more extensive preparations for the funeral; the duration that the corpse remains in the mortuary also commands respect. People know that mortuary fees are high and they will estimate the amount of money which the family could afford to pay to keep the corpse at the funeral parlour. The more money that is spent on the funeral, the more the family is admired. (Money, one could say, is a measure of social prestige.)[4] Growing numbers of relatives abroad play a crucial role in this trend. It is they who request that a burial be postponed until they can return to the country to be at the funeral. It is also they who pay for the extra costs. Having well-to-do relatives abroad adds more to the success of a funeral than the life of the deceased.[5]

Criticism of lavish spending on funerals becomes particularly pungent when the deceased was largely neglected during the last years of his/her life. A woman in one of the focus group discussions remarked:

> *To be frank, some old people in this town are in a good condition and they have helpers who are caring for them but others are in critical and poor condition. When you see or visit them, you would not like to leave them alone. Some of them don't have caretakers and others don't have places to lay their heads. Some of them even sleep on the floor without a mat. In such instances, it is not that such people don't have families or relatives; they have big families and when they die, the families will perform big funerals for them. But while these needy old people are alive, they don't have people to look after them and care for them.*

During a conversation about funerals with four elderly men in the nearby town of Abetifi, I asked the following question:

> *Akan culture requires that the young look after the old. It also requires that if someone dies, we give the person a fitting funeral. It strikes me as a stranger that the second rule is much more practised than the first one. I have seen, for example, that some old people in the last years of their life are quite lonely and poor, but as soon as they die, there is a big funeral. Can you explain this to me?*

A lively debate ensued about young people who like to spend money on funerals and about the fact that such things did not occur in the past – a claim which is far from correct. They appeared to miss the point of my question, which was why people are more inclined to spend money on dead people than on living people. I tried again:

> *If someone dies and you don't attend the funeral, there will be trouble. You know you have to be there. But if you don't look after your old parents, it seems there is less social disapproval. Why is there less social pressure on looking after your old parents than on attending funerals?*

My Ghanaian co-researcher added:

> *In many towns, when there is a funeral and someone does not attend, there is a case for that person. But if someone's father or mother is sick or old, that person does not look after the parent. Why is this so? Do you understand what I am asking?*

One of the men replied: "As for me, I don't understand." For another, an explanation lay in the new phenomenon of people joining societies which offer insurance to cover funeral expenses.

> *My son has sold me after my death. He is a member of a society. When his father dies, the society will donate heavily on him. He cannot claim any money from the society while I am alive. It is only when I am dead that he will receive the money, at my funeral. He has also contributed to other members' bereavement. You see? In the olden days it was not like this.* ***Nsawa*** *(donation) was known in those days as small drink (****nsa-wa****).*

The man continued on how funerals had become a commodity:

> *When civilization spread and towns grew larger, people travelled farther away. It became difficult for someone to go to Aduamoa to purchase a pot of palmwine and carry it here. So when there is a funeral, he donates about a shilling to you in order to pay for the palmwine. This is your small drink,* ***nsa-wa****. This has brought about the offering of donations at funerals. And this has continued up till now. People will donate what they feel will make them important and respected. If there is someone who does not look after his father and mother, people abuse him and will say: 'Look how his father lived and now that he is dead, look what he is doing. He has gone to Auntie Animaa to hire a bed, but the father may never have slept on a bed in his whole life.'* (Auntie Animaa owns a drinking bar and is at the same time a funeral undertaker, from whom one can buy coffins and hire beds, decorations for the funeral parlour, sound systems, etc.)

I asked what happens when someone, who did not look well after his father, organizes a big funeral for him. Two of the men replied: "We abuse him, we abuse him very much." When I asked them for a concrete example which had occurred in their town, they could not give one. Instead, one man related the following story of a "disgraceful" funeral:

> *Sometimes it happens that mourners do not go to eat the food which has been prepared. I remember the case of a very rich man. Whenever someone was bereaved, he would offer about one pound sterling – in those days a lot of money. 'Take this and some palm wine.' When his mother died he prepared plenty of food, meat and the rest. The chief ordered that whoever had received a donation from the man, should refund it to him [the chief]. He collected all the money and asked the linguist to send it back to him and tell him that they were not waiting for his donations. They rather expected that he would come*

and drink with them at the funeral ground. Because he never drank with them at the funeral, they too would not drink his wine. They did not need his money.

I asked him what happened to the funeral. He answered: *Eyee basaa* (it was a failure).

Undoubtedly, the story revealed the old man's most pressing concern about funerals. Not attending other people's funerals is criticized more than a lack of care for the deceased person during his/her life. It is also more likely to result in the failure of one's own funeral. He gave another example of an unsuccessful funeral due to people's boycott of the occasion:

Why should we go? You are rich, but when my mother died, you did not come. You did not bring meat. Now that you are dead, I should come and enjoy your meat? Some of the meat got rotten. We did not go. His funeral did not come ***N'ayiye no koraa amma.***

The most pertinent conclusion to be drawn from the discussion was that, somewhat contrary to my expectation, the four old men were less concerned about the discrepancy between the quality of "care" before and after someone's death, than about the disgrace of not attending the funeral. They themselves proved to be too deeply involved in the game of honour and shame at the funeral, to perceive what I as a stranger saw as the more serious disgrace.

I put the same question to Nana Kwaku Agyei.

An old man may have many children, but his children do not come regularly to visit the old man. At his death the children come and organize a big funeral for him. Is this good or not?

The following dialogue ensued:

A It is not good. This is what the Akan describe as ***Abusua do funu*** *[a proverb: The family loves a corpse]. When a person dies, the family receives donations. That's why they like a dead body.*

Q *If someone dies and they organize an elaborate funeral for him/her, is it good or bad?*

A *They want to receive more donations, that's why they organize such elaborate funerals.*

Q *If an old person dies and a funeral is organized haphazardly, is it good or not?*

A *It is not nice. The family is disgraced.*

Q *What about if an old person dies and there is an elaborate funeral. Is that good or not?*

A *It is good. To avoid disgrace, they will organize a nice funeral for their dead old person. Otherwise people may say: 'Look at this big man, when his uncle or brother or mother died he could not organize a nice funeral.' Such a person will be mocked. So out of fear of shame such a person will organize a nice funeral. This is why they say:* ***Feree ne owuo a, fanyinam owuo*** *[Between shamefulness and death one chooses death].*

Q *Why is it necessary that we organize a fitting burial and funeral for our dead?*

A *If I am bereaved, I will purchase some drinks, for example schnapps, and inform my friends that I am bereaved. When the drink is presented as a ritual announcement, this will be done to two or three or five people. When these people come to the funeral they will add more drinks to the funeral. You see, if you announce to your friend with one bottle of schnapps, he will come with an additional bottle. Many people will, therefore, attend the funeral. A funeral brings people together for the society to realize that we love one another* ***Asomasi nso do onipa yi.***

Q *I die and my clansmen fail to organize a fitting funeral in my honour. Will it be against me or against my people?*

A *It will not be against you. It will disturb your people, those left behind.*

Q *Why will it disturb them?*

A *They will be disgraced.*

Q *Why?*

A *Because when someone dies and among the living is someone who is important or wealthy, but he is not able to organize a fitting burial, he will be disgraced. Such a person is called [nicknamed]* ***okwasampani*** *– a good-for-nothing, hopeless being.*

Q *This means that in Akan society there should be a funeral for every dead person?*

A *Yes.*

Q *What does a funeral represent?*

A *Honour. There is a proverb which says* ***Wo hwene bu a na w'anim akyea*** *[When your nose breaks it makes your face crooked].*

Nana Agyei quoted a proverb which reflects a longstanding self-criticism in Akan culture: "The family likes a dead body." It means that funerals run the risk of being misused for making money and for self-glorification by the *abusua* and overleap their original purpose of paying respect to the deceased and putting him to rest. The old man sharply criticizes this trend which appears to have become more common nowadays. At the same time he defends the practice of organizing fitting funerals to render respect to the dead person and bringing people together. Failing to provide the deceased with a proper funeral brings shame on the family rather than on the deceased. In the final analysis, it is the honour of the *abusua* which is at stake in the funeral celebration. But an extravagant funeral overshoots that purpose and so does a funeral which is to cover up the shame of the family's negligence of the deceased when he was still alive.

I posed the question why social pressure to render family care is effective if the organization of a funeral is involved, yet often defective where the provision of material and moral support to elderly members is concerned. Several people replied to the question. They explained that the responsibility of looking after elderly people is a household matter, which is not visible to many people. Funerals, however, are public celebrations and participation, through attendance and financial contribution, is visible to the entire community. A teacher, a respected person, explained:

I have always been saying that, when my mother dies, I will not like to do anything like that [a large funeral] but people say I should not talk like that. They say that because of their opinion of me. I would not like it but it is the pressure of the society. That's the main problem we are facing now. I would like to do things in a simple way but people expect me to do things in such a way that I will be saddled with a lot of debt.

Most outspoken was Nana Kwaku Boahene, one of the old people whom I frequently visited:

A *One of my brothers died and the family bought a coffin worth 200 000 cedis, but while he was alive they did not care for him. When he was sick, nobody cared for him, but when he died they organized a big funeral.*

Q *Why are people doing this?*

A *They are foolish people.*

Q *Why are people spending so much money on dead bodies?*

A *It is sheer wickedness (**Eye aboro**).*

Although criticism of the practice of organizing expensive funerals may be growing, it is unlikely to have any effect. Funerals are first of all occasions where families compete for social prestige. No family can afford to stay behind in that competition. The person and the life of the deceased are of secondary importance.

A discrepancy between what I and what the majority of my informants regarded as "disgraceful," forces one to think more critically about the concept of disgrace. Without a public context, "disgrace" is meaningless. Clearly, funerals generate greater commitment and expenditure than pre-mortem care because the former are public and the latter is private. Neglect of the elderly is viewed as *bad* but carries fewer connotations of *disgrace* because it is less public than funerals. Whilst often complaining about poverty and loneliness, the elderly informants were not too openly critical of their children because that would publicize the latter's failings and impose disgrace upon themselves. Public honour is of greater importance than private welfare. A good funeral therefore not only confers prestige upon the family in the sense that it demonstrates that the members of the family are successful in life, and are respected and admired by others; it also makes a public display of solidarity within the family.

With some exaggeration, one may quote the old Irish philosopher Berkeley: *Esse est percipi* (to be is to be seen). What is not seen, has no value, or does not exist, as it were. In Akan life, show matters more than unseen quality.[6] A correct greeting, for example, is regarded as very important. I have witnessed vehement quarrels and even cases in the family court triggered by a disrespectful greeting, or a refusal to greet someone. Children and young people are told to respect, i.e. to show respect to older people. The colloquial idiom to indicate that a child does not know how to behave is *ommu adee* (he does not respect). The rule of showing respect dictates soical behaviour, not only of the young *vis-à-vis* the old but also of children towards their parents, pupils towards their teachers, women towards men, etc.

It is striking that the Akan term for "eye" (*ani*) figures in many expressions which in English would be more likely to use the heart or the chest as leading metaphor. *M'ani agye*, for example, which literally means "my eye has taken," is the common idiom for "I am happy." *M'ani awu* (my eyes have died) means: I am ashamed.

Public performance is loved in all spheres of life. At family or village gatherings, elders try to excel one another by displaying their eloquence in the use of proverbs and other forms of traditional wisdom. Donations at church assemblies are never anoymous. The name of the giver and the amount of the donation are publicly announced, as they are at funerals. Early missionaries tried in vain to surpress this ostentatious and "Pharisee-like" giving.[7] Their successors nowadays actively encourage public donations as they are the only way to collect money. Secret gifts have, literally, no value for the giver.

To give a last example, husband-wife relationships are hard to understand unless one looks at them from a public performance point of view. Women allow male partners to play a public role of "master," provided that the men allow them to take decisions in the domestic sphere where there are no onlookers (cf. Bleek, 1975b). There can be no doubt that the eye is the first sense: it provides the greatest happiness and the deepest grief.

Similarly, for the elderly the greatest enjoyment of funerals lies in the public bestowal of respect and love; the "proof" of their social importance. If people would get away with shabby funerals without public censure, the implications for the elderly would be mainly negative: less impressive and satisfying social gatherings, fewer visits from their children, fewer roles for them to play in public, and even less financial support as small cash handouts by distant young relatives, which may still be an important source of pocket money to old people.

In spite of all that has been said about the "private disgrace" of neglect of elderly people, the public disgrace of a poorly organized funeral weighs more heavily to the elderly.

Conclusion

Several authors have referred to the "myth" of the African, and more specifically Ghanaian, extended family taking care of its elderly members (cf. Sokolovsky, 1990; Apt, 1988, 1992a,b, 1993; Apt & Katila, 1994). It would be far too sweeping to suggest that the extended family is breaking down but there are certainly strains imposed on it by the geographical and social dispersal of its members. The range of effective functions is narrowing and the focus of its activities and concerns is shifting. Lineages find it increasingly difficult to continue to provide care to the elderly. They cease to operate in a way that makes care for the elderly possible without the disruption of existing domestic arrangements. Someone has to move away from her marital home, or limit her economic activities to care for an elderly person.

In this paper I considered a special kind of family care for the elderly: post-mortem care, i.e. the organization of a fitting funeral. To an outsider, this focus on care after death may appear somewhat morbid; to the elderly it certainly does not. In their eyes, a fitting and successful funeral celebration is the most crucial service which the *abusua* should render to them.

Conversations with elderly people and observations made of their daily life taught me about the ambiguous role of the family regarding care. On the one hand the old people's comments and the living conditions of some confirmed the gradual breakdown of the extended family. Many of the older people lacked basic help and the company of family members. On the other hand the *abusua* showed a remarkable resilience and attempted to uphold their traditional position by organizing elaborate funerals which were attended by all members and other inhabitants of the town. The suggestion presents itself that the importance attached to conspicuous consumption and a display of solidarity at a funeral may in some way compensate for a decrease in the relevance of the lineage in other spheres of life.

The central concepts for understanding the paradoxes between pre- and post-mortem care in this community are honour and disgrace. In spite of their criticism of lavish funerals, the elderly seem to favour post-mortem care above pre-mortem care, since the latter is a mainly private affair which lacks the full recognition it deserves, whereas the former satisfies their appetite for public esteem.

My exploration of the meaning of funerals for old people in an Akan rural community was an attempt to go beyond the

first appearance which suggested that a funeral bestows honour on both the deceased and the *abusua*. On closer examination, funerals appeared to be primarily family exercises in self-congratulation. Many funerals, however, appear to be ritual celebrations to cover the shame and shortcomings of the deceased as well as of the *abusua*. I expected that for insiders, funerals would themselves become disgraceful because of the disproportionate contrast between the sumptuous ritual and the life which this ritual is supposed to celebrate. That view was not shared by the elderly, however. Both young and old are too deeply involved in the game of honour and shame to be greatly indignant about the comparatively poor care which the elderly receive before death.

Epilogue

A few months after I left Ghana, one of my co-researchers wrote to me that Agya Tano, the old blind drummer, had died. His funeral, however moderate in comparison with others, was a lie to the poor man's life, but interestingly the people blamed his children for not lying enough.

Agya Tano died quietly on 19 September 1994 and was laid in state the same night in that big house opposite the former Cocoa Marketing Board office. A canopy was erected in the middle of the house and a few people, mostly relatives and associates, sat down under it. The women occasionally wailed. There was no music at the wake keeping, no dancing or band. When I got there, I could not help but shed some tears. In fact, the corpse was very nice. He was simply decorated with some gold chains and rings and the eyes which were once closed because of blindness, were now firmly closed as if in a sleep. The mouth that had been endlessly smoking the pipe was also closed. Later on, the ***atumpan*** *drums were brought from the* ***aguru*** *and the drumming started almost unceasingly till the next day when he was buried in the evening behind the* ***aguru****. A lot of people were blaming the children for not bringing some sort of music to the wake keeping.*

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Notes

1. The literature on Akan funerals has grown quite extensive. Rattray (1927), Vollbrecht (1978), Chukwukere (1981), Mends, n.d. and Owusu-Sarpong (1992) are examples of anthropological description and analysis. Studies which view the Akan funeral in the context of social and economic change include Bame (1977), Vivian (1992) and Arhin (1994). The emotional meaning of Akan funerals is discussed in Baaré (1985) and Van der Geest (1990).

2. Criticism of the large expenses and other "excesses" of funerals has a long tradition in Ghana and has both an economic and a Christian background. See for example Niako (1954), Garlick (1971: 102-6) and Pobee (1973). In a letter to the editor of *The Daily Graphic* of 17 January 1980, someone wrote: "It is high time we stopped paying too much attention to the dead. We must rather think of how to improve the standard of living of Ghanaians." Arhin (1994), however, argues that funerals are economically useful.

3. For a discussion of Highlife songs which are played at funerals, see Van der Geest (1980, 1984, 1985).

4. For a more extensive discussion on the meaning of money in the life of old people, see Van der Geest (1995).

5. A recent, more rare addition to the elaboration of funerals is the manufacture of an eccentric – and expensive – coffin which represents an aspect of the life of the deceased, e.g. a coffin in the form of a canoe for a fisherman, an onion for a farmer and a car for a taxi driver (Secretan, 1989).

6. Let me forestall a misunderstanding. I am convinced that in my own society, The Netherlands, the "eyes of others" matter as much as among the Akan. The difference is that *we* are less prepared to admit this. It is our cultural code to be autonomous, not to let ourselves be influenced by the opinion of others. We feel ashamed to admit that we feel ashamed, so we deny it. We pretend we do not care about honour and shame. Among the Akan, people speak more openly about shame and honour.

7. Matthew 6: 1-4 urges people to give secretely: "When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing."

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