

LIFE, LOVE AND DEATH

CONVERSATIONS WITH SIX ELDERS
IN KWAHU-TAFO, GHANA

collected by

Patrick Atuobi,
Anthony Obeng Boamah
&
Sjaak van der Geest



Amsterdam
2005

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Biographies

Nana Kwaku Agyei 5
Maame Yaa Amponsaa 7
Nana Mary Yaa Dedaa 9
Ɔpanyin Kwame Frempong 11
Nana Kwaku Nyame 13
Ɔkyeame Kwame Opoku 15

Themes of conversation

Growing old 19
Wisdom and experience 23
Blessing and cursing 25
Respect and reciprocity 28
Money and poverty 31
Love and friendship 33
Building a house 44
Death 47
Funerals 52

Appendix: Anthropological publications 55

Introduction

“I have grown” is the literal meaning of *manyin*, the colloquial Twi expression for “I am old” in English. The difference between the English and the Twi idiom is significant. “I am old” conveys thoughts of decline and decay. In the same way that a car or a tool becomes old and loses its speed or effectiveness a human being decreases in strength. The English language does not make a distinction between objects and persons. All of them “become old”. *Manyin*, however, emphasises growth and progress instead of decline. The older a person is, the more he/she has “grown”, the more of a human person he/she is. Such a person is called *panyin* (elder). The “surplus” of old age is – ideally – observed in the virtues of the elder.

The elder has more experience than a young person and is, therefore, wiser. The elder has become mild and patient over the years and has become more self-restraint. He does not run after fashions and does not get angry. The elder has stopped working and travelling and devotes the last years of his life to the welfare of his family. He gives advice to the younger members of the family and makes peace when conflicts arise. No wonder that one proverb says: Unlucky the house where no elder lives (*Wonni panyin a, due*).

This little book contains fragments of conversations that we held with six elders in the town of Kwahu-Tafo between 1994 and 2000. The conversations took place in the context of a research that was carried out by Sjaak van der Geest who is an anthropologist at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. The research focused on the life of elderly people and how they were cared for. Anthony Obeng Boamah and Patrick Atuobi participated in the research. They held conversations with elderly people, transcribed them and commented on them in discussions with the anthropologist. At that time Boamah was a clerk at the Technical Institute at Kwahu-Tafo and an amateur writer. He has now retired and is more than before devoted to writing. He has a keen interest in the local traditions and how these change under the pressures of modern times. Atuobi was trained as an agricultural teacher and is now a farmer. He shares with Boamah an interest in Kwahu culture and history.

Biographies

The anthropological research revealed that the lives of old people in Kwahu-Tafo are not as “rosy” and peaceful as the opening paragraph of this introduction suggests. Several of them were quite lonely and resented that the young of today did not come to “tap” their knowledge and wisdom. Moreover, not all elderly people are as wise, patient, civilised and gentle as they claim. Not all of them have “grown” into the nearly perfect human beings that proverbs and popular beliefs portray to us. Younger people may even avoid the company of elders because they find them unkind or because they regard their wisdom irrelevant for the problems of today. The appendix provides an overview of some of the anthropological publications based on the research that discuss the ambiguities of old age in more detail.

The purpose of this collection is, however, to bring to the fore the beauty of old age. We have selected some of the most touching pronouncements of six elders on issues such as the art of growing old, respect, money, love and death; themes which will be of relevance for all generations and will never become outdated.

The town of Kwahu-Tafo lies on the Kwahu-Plateau, almost 200 kilometres north of Accra and has a population of about five thousand. In the town five roads meet. They lead to Mpraeso, Bukuruwa, Kotoso, Adawso and Nteso. There are several schools and churches in Kwahu-Tafo, plus a clinic with a maternity ward. The choice of Kwahu-Tafo for this research is arbitrary. Similar conversations could have been conducted in other towns, in the south of the country and also – with different details – in the north.

Originally, the conversations were recorded as they had been held, as dialogues. However, for this publication we have edited the texts in such a way that the questions asked by us have been left out so that the reader only “hears” the elders speak. We have taken care that the meaning of their statements was not changed.

Unfortunately, editing these conversations was delayed. As a result, none of the six elders has lived to witness their publication. We hope, however, that their words of wisdom in this little book will keep their memories alive for their children and grandchildren and for all who read these conversations.