

# Complaining and Not Complaining: Social Strategies of Older People in Kwahu, Ghana

**O**lder people in Ghana often complain: about the lazy and disrespectful young people of today, the breakdown of the family, the lack of support they receive from their children, everything being expensive and harvests being poor. They even complain about the weather. Life was better and people were more kind and respectful when they were young. Yet in Ghana, the rules for being respectfully old stipulate that an older person should not complain. This article, drawing on extensive fieldwork in rural Ghana, reflects on older people's attempts to grow old with dignity and their strategies of silence or carefully choosing the audience for their complaints to retain respect or affection from the young, as well as asserting their moral authority.

## Fieldwork

The older people who figure in this essay lived in Kwahu-Tafo, Ghana. I say "lived" because none of them is alive today. I devote these lines to them, as a tribute to their determination to live as honourable and respected elders in a period when they were losing some of their most cherished values and securities. Kwahu-Tafo is a rural town of about 6,000 inhabitants on the Kwahu Plateau in the Eastern Province of Ghana. The local population calls itself Kwahu, a subgroup of the Akan who constitute about half of Ghana's 20 million people. The Akan, who speak Twi, have a matrilineal kinship system, which despite various inroads still stands, both in rural and urban Ghana.

The paper is drawn from a research project on the social and cultural meaning of growing old, carried out intermittently between 1994 and 2004. The research is based mainly on conversations with 30 older women and men and some of their relatives. I found these people by asking friends about older people in their neighbourhood. The concept "old" was not clearly



Nana Adwoa Mansah with grandchildren

defined; I simply chose people who were described by others as old. In fact, old proved to be more a term of respect than of one's calendar age. People were selected to ensure variation in the sample in terms of gender, economic and social status, marital situation, religious affiliation and number of children.

Usually a conversation with an older person circled around one topic, for example, one's life history, the concept of old, the ability of older people to bless and to curse, the care they received and gave, their ideas about a successful and unsuccessful life, respect and reciprocity, security, love, loneliness, sex at old age, death and funeral<sup>1</sup>.

These topics were not planned beforehand, but grew naturally out of earlier conversations. Often one topic was discussed with one person and another topic with another. With some of the older people, I only had one or two conversations, with others, many. In addition to the long conversations, there were frequent casual meetings with the older people, such as short visits to greet or to deliver a message. Observations during these visits constituted a crucial element of the research, as they added depth and context to verbal accounts. All of the longer conversations were taped, translated, transcribed and discussed with my Ghanaian friends and co-researchers and, at times, with the elders.

## Dutch Beginnings

Anthropological research starts with autobiographical concerns. My interest in the experiences and views of older people in Ghana was directly related to conditions of older people in my own society, The Netherlands. Older people constitute an uncomfortable segment of our population. They carry the burden of a rather negative label: old stands for decay and loss, however healthy they may be. Many older people, therefore, live in constant denial of their own old age and emphasize that they are still young. Old are only those who are above the age of the one speaking. The negative stereotyping and social marginalization of old age in Dutch society are exacerbated by present concerns about the rising costs of a rapidly growing population of pensioners. The future of the welfare state has become uncertain, and the generous allowance system for older persons is a key political issue, as one can read almost daily in the newspapers.

Exploring conditions of older people in an entirely different setting seemed to be an attractive way to reconsider old age in my own society. Indeed, there is hardly anything in Dutch society that is more amazing and shocking to Ghanaians than our manner of dealing with older people. Some pointed at our lack of respect and care for older people as a proof of the dehumanization of our society and assured me that they would never allow this to happen in Ghana<sup>2</sup>.

The theme of this paper, complaining and not complaining, also found its beginnings in experiences in The Netherlands. On the one hand, many older people have lots of reasons to complain about the present time. They may have lost their dearest possessions, values and relatives and feel nostalgic for the world of their past. They would like to express their sadness and resentment and complain about the lack of understanding and compassion from the new generation. But they try not to, because, on the other hand, complaining (*klagen*) is one of the most negative qualities attached to older people in The Netherlands. By always complaining, Dutch older citizens make themselves unattractive, boring and irritating

to younger people. Complaining, an attempt to draw attention and sympathy, turns out to be self-defeating: it chases people away. Wise older people, therefore, rather keep their complaints to themselves and take on a stoic appearance in order not to alienate their children and grandchildren. By ‘not being a burden’ (in that sense) to their children, they hope to keep their children’s affection.

Research among Dutch older people (e.g., De Jong, 2004; Rietveld, 2002; Von Faber, 2002; Von Faber, unpublished) shows that older people actively try not to complain. By dissociating themselves from others who complain, they present themselves as successful and attractive in their old age. An 87-year-old widow who had been suffering from severe stomach pain told Von Faber (unpublished):

*They [her children] did not even know how sick I was. I never told them. I have hidden my problems from them. I thought: if I tell them, they will think: “She is nagging (ze zeurt). All people at that age complain.” If they came to visit me, I tried to be as good as possible. After they went home, I went straight to bed. If they phoned and asked me how I was doing, I turned the conversation to another subject.*

Not complaining is not only a matter of keeping silent and being stoic, but also a strategy to attract others and to keep up one’s social network. One should maintain an active interest in the life of the younger generation. Older people who want to remain popular should not always talk about the good old days (and implicitly condemn the present age), but keep themselves informed about today’s developments and show an interest in the experiences of the young.

## **African Observations: Complaint Discourse**

Older people in Africa have been shown in many ethnographic and other studies to have similar complaints to the ones I have outlined for older

people in The Netherlands, including bodily pains, general weakness, loneliness, and lack of attention and respect. However, the literature on the extent and manner in which older people articulate these complaints in Africa points to an approach that seems to differ from that in The Netherlands. Starting from my personal experiences, I was surprised to read in African ethnographies about complaining as a strategy by older people to negotiate for more respect, attention and care.

- Rosenberg (1997), in an article that appeared in 1990, wrote about the constant complaining by !Kung San elders in Botswana as a way to “mark their continued presence in the world” and to remind their children: “I am still alive” (p. 39). She notes that many complaints are fabrications contradicted by facts. One of her older informants admitted: “Old people have long complained; it is an old thing. Even if the child did everything for them, they would complain” (p. 33). Rosenberg explains—and illustrates with various quotes and observations—that ‘competitive complaining’ is a common and popular way of communicating among !Kung San people. She suggests that complaining is not typical of old age. Everybody complains. It is a levelling discourse and reminds people of reciprocal obligations. It is “public exhortation to keep goods and services circulating” (p. 39). “We have to talk this way. It’s our custom,” one older woman explains to the anthropologist.

- Cattell (1997; 1999), in her studies of older people in Kenya, a society where complaining is not generally practiced by all age groups, speaks of a “discourse of neglect”: older people complain that they do not receive the care they deserve. It is not clear, however, to whom they complain. Do they, in fact, direct their complaints at their children and others whom they blame for neglecting them, or do they reserve their worries for the anthropologist who asks them about their feelings in old age? Cattell’s

claim that older people complain to “ensure or maximize support” is not substantiated by her observations. She reports several examples of family neglect, but does not provide any observations of older people expressing their discontent and frustration directly to their caregivers.

- The same inconclusiveness about complaining as a strategy by older people to have their needs fulfilled is found in an article by Sagner (2002), set in Xhosa society, South Africa. Sagner quotes older people complaining bitterly about the way they are treated by the young and contrasting this with their respect for elders when they were young. “When we were young, we used to honour old people, but today . . .” Sagner interprets these complaints as a way for older people to air their frustrations and claim moral superiority over the young. However, their complaints are revealed to the researcher, and it is not clear whether they are also addressed to the young.

- Further studies from South Africa that highlight older people’s complaints fail to clarify to whom these are directed (Cloete & van Dongen, 2004; Makoni, 2002; Møller & Sotshongaye, 2002).

Other current studies from the African continent, in contrast, point to older and younger people censoring their complaints:

- De Klerk, working on a study (unpublished) of older people in Kagera, Tanzania, heard older people urging each other to ‘tolerate’ (*kwegumisirisa*), to accept their suffering without complaining. Everyone has problems, so it is better not to complain. They say: “You die with your worries in your heart.”
- Ringsted (unpublished) heard long stories from young women in Kenya about how their husbands and relatives had unfairly treated them. The stories often ended with sentences like: “But I said nothing” or “I kept silent.” They



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Nana Frempong, posing

could do little else than complain to Ringsted or to their friends, but at the same time, they emphasised their moral superiority by holding back their complaints before their relatives.

The above findings bring into relief critical, but so far little considered questions in exploring the significance of older people’s criticisms of the young in Africa:

- Who is the intended audience of older people’s complaints?
- And how does this relate to the purpose of these complaints?

More specifically:

- Are the complaints directed at the young who are the subject of the grievance?
- Are they a strategy aimed at rectifying the ills, such as lack of respect or support from the young?
- Or do they serve a different purpose?

In the following discussion, these questions are explored, based on my research and experiences with older people in Kwahu, Ghana.

## Complaining and Not Complaining in Kwahu

My research in Kwahu, Ghana failed to produce evidence of older people complaining to the young about their lack of respect and care. They complained to me about the young. I was a safe audience for them. I know that elders in Kwahu prided themselves on not complaining, as Dutch older people did in the study of Von Faber (2002; unpublished).

In Kwahu, old age is an inherently positive concept. The most common, and probably only adequate, Akan term for 'old' referring to human beings is expressed through the verb *nyin*, which means "to grow." The correct Akan translation of the English "I am old" is *manyin*, "I have grown." *Nyin* indicates a process and suggests a linear type of development: growing, increasing in age, experience and wisdom. *Manyin* does not sound like a complaint; older people rather boast that they "have grown."

The most popular title older people apply to themselves is *òpanyin* (elder). "*Òpanyin*" represents all that is beautiful about old age. The elder receives what is most highly regarded in Akan culture: respect. The *òpanyin* is civilised, kind, composed and wise (van der Geest, 1998). Several proverbs and local sayings mention the expected behaviour and virtues of the *òpanyin*. He is different from younger people because he thinks before he speaks, is capable of giving advice, has good manners, and is self-disciplined. His activities are directed at the well-being of others and, therefore, he deserves respect from the younger generation.

Not complaining is one of the outstanding signs of being an *òpanyin*. The following excerpt from a conversation I (S) had with an elder (N) illustrates this. I asked the old man about the meaning of a proverb, *Òpanyin mpere òkòm* (The *òpanyin* does not complain of hunger):

- N:** It is not good for an *òpanyin* to complain about hunger, as it will make the young disrespect him.
- S:** *Nana* (grandfather), I know you are now old and not healthy and at times you find life very

hard. Would it still be wrong for you to complain?

- N:** Yes, it is very wrong for an elder to complain much, especially about hunger. If you do that, the young will not respect you . . . No matter the ordeal you may be passing through, you have to keep it to yourself because you are an *òpanyin*. It is only children who complain.
- S:** But *Nana*, during our conversation you were complaining about your health and you said you wished to be treated [in hospital] if you had the money. What about that?
- N:** I wouldn't do that in the house in the presence of my grandchildren and nephews. In the house, I do not complain. If I have money, I just call the children to buy me food. But if my niece or grandchild sees that I don't send anyone to buy food, they provide me with some. I know they will never let me go hungry, so I don't complain.

In a conversation about another proverb—*Òpanyin yam adwansae aduasa* (Inside the belly of the elder are 30 sheep)—a Kwahu elder commented:

*You [as an elder] know that you should eat the food brought to you to your fill, but this child of yours has nothing to eat. So you tell him to eat it. I will chew kola and get satisfied . . . The elder has lived his life. He has eaten so much in this world. (Wadi wiase yi mu biribiara.) Therefore, there is nothing left for him to do other than guarding the people in the house.*

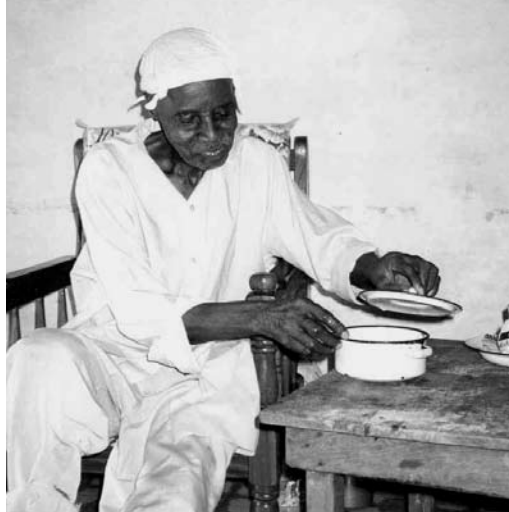
Hunger is a taboo topic, but complaints about other inconveniences of old age are also unmentionable. Loneliness is an intriguing example. At the beginning of my fieldwork, older people usually said that children and grandchildren often came to them to listen to their stories about the past and to seek their advice. By saying this, they implied that they were respected and admired for their wisdom. It slowly became clear to me, however, that most elders were hardly consulted for

their wisdom and superior knowledge. By pretending they received frequent visits, they were in fact keeping up appearances. With time, they began to admit that they felt lonely and disrespected and started to complain to me. I (**S**) had the following conversation with an old man (**G**) about the disinterest of the youth in his knowledge and wisdom.

- G:** Yesterday, I was complaining to someone that I don't understand why my grandchildren and the young people in my house don't come and greet me and ask me about a lot of things I know.
- S:** Why don't they come?
- G:** I don't know. I want them to come and ask so that I tell them, but I don't get them. If you don't come, well, I will die and take it along (*Mewu a na medekò*).
- S:** So you will go with it?
- G:** Yes, my head is full of things, but I will go with them because they won't come.

One day, one of my friends (**B**) went to see the old man and found him conversing with a woman. The following conversation ensued:

- G:** This woman is just a friend. She often comes to keep me company whenever she visits her farm nearby.
- B:** What about your relatives? Do they pay you visits or do you visit them?
- G:** I have many relatives, but they don't visit me, except on rare occasions; they don't care much about me, especially the young ones. You know I am the eldest of all the people living in the family. Thus, it is my desire and wish that the young educated ones will come to me so that I will impart my rich knowledge about our clan and my life experiences to them. But they will not come.
- B:** If they will not come, why not go to them?
- G:** It is against my principles and also against the tradition to do so. If they will not come, it is they, and not I, who will lose in the long run.



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**Agya Kwame Mensah, blind, eating his meal**

Another elder (**A**) expressed the same complaint in a conversation Kwame Fosu (**F**) and I had with him.

- F:** You have many proverbs. Do people come to you to learn proverbs from you as well?
- A:** They don't come.  
[A woman from the house had come closer to listen. When we asked her whether she had learned some proverbs from the old man since she was living with him in the same house, she answered in the negative.]
- A:** She will not learn proverbs, because the proverbs will not earn her money, but in future it will help you. When you are entering a town and you hear on the *abòmmaa* drums: *Nammòn tenten reba, nammòn tenten reba, nammòn tenten reba*, the drummers are informing the executors that there is someone to be executed. If you understand the proverb (on the drum), you will not be caught and executed. You will run away to save your life. But if you don't understand the proverb, you will be caught and killed.

Many of my conversations with older people ended in such complaints about lack of interest and respect from the younger generation, resulting in feelings of loneliness and redundancy, but I never witnessed that such complaints were communicated directly to the young.

Complaints about decline of respect and family support are stronger in urban places. Aboderin (2004; 2006), who conducted research on a three-generational sample of respondents in the capital Accra, concludes that young adults often fail to provide their parents with the care they would like to give, as they also face problems in feeding their own family. Moreover, they can now afford to withhold support that they do not want to give, because sanctions for failing to provide care for one's parents have lost their impact on the young (2004: S135). The older people she interviewed complained freely to her, the researcher, about the attitude and lack of support of their children:

*When it comes to contributing . . . to me, she [the daughter] will say: "Oh, I don't have money" . . . But the thing is that she buys expensive things . . . so she is always in debt . . . and . . . there is nothing left to give to me . . . But if she had respect, she would keep the money and give to me (2004: S133).*

Older people also accused the young of no longer fearing God:

*Look, I can tell you that the younger ones now, they don't fear God, they don't fear him how we used to fear him (2004: S134).*

Older parents who suspected their children of being able to give more than they were giving, *did* express their requests for more to them:

*My son like this, he doesn't give me anything. I have asked him to give me, I have asked him three times, four times, but he doesn't mind me (Mr. Mensah, G1) (2006: 109).*

However, there was little evidence that older parents directly criticised their children for their lack of respect and support.

Studies in other settings, for example among older Bengali migrants in Britain (Gardner, 2002),

have suggested that older people's open complaining about the lack of support received, may be an effective tool to get more help from the state. In Ghana, this certainly cannot be older people's intention: the state has nothing to offer to them. However, it is possible that the researcher was to some extent seen not only as a safe person to address one's complaints to, but also a possible source of 'charitable' support.

### Is Not Complaining a Strategy?

Reference has been made to literature about "complaint discourse." Authors, including Rosenberg (1997), Cattell (1997; 1999), and Sagner (2002), argued that in general terms, "the language of complaint of older people should be read as instrumental and symbolic practice, as a medium of expressive action and as an attempt to intervene in the social process" (Sagner, 2002: 44). More specifically, they describe older people's complaints variously as letting off steam, as a strategy to maximise support (Cattell, 1997), or as desperate attempts to maintain their self-respect and faith in their own moral superiority—a form of resistance. Sagner (2002: 57), following Myerhoff (1978), notes that complaining linked the claim of moral superiority to structural inferiority. However, what these authors have left unclear is the crucial question of the audience and its relationship to the aims, purpose or significance of the complaint.

My exploration of this issue has shown that older people in Kwahu complained to me—the researcher—about the lack of support from and interaction with the young, which made them feel lonely and left with unfulfilled needs. They did not, however, voice these complaints in public or to the young. To them, not complaining—not openly engaging in a complaint discourse although their hearts were full of complaints—was a conscious act. This act was intended, on one level, to ensure respect from the young upon whom they depended for material and emotional support—support they were powerless to enforce.

In other words, it was not complaining that was a strategy to maximise or ensure continued contact with and support from the young. This clearly echoes the Dutch situation described earlier. In Kwahu, not complaining may be seen as a response to cultural ideal: the *òpanyin*, the respected elder, which stresses that complaining, certainly to the young, does not befit an elder. This may be seen as part of what Apt (1996)—with references to two classic authors of Akan culture, Rattray and Danquah—calls “the principle of responsive ageing which underpins Ghanaian attitudes to old age and holds that an older person who has nothing to offer the young forfeits the respect reserved for the elders” (p. 24).

In this context, complaining to the young clearly becomes a self-defeating strategy. It is a call for attention that is likely to be counter-productive, as it undermines the respect accorded to the old by the young, and likely makes them unwilling to fulfil their support tasks.

Complaining to the young about their shortcomings towards them, will cost older people their admiration and affection, even though the young are too polite and careful (or afraid?) to openly show their disrespect. Moreover, as complaining conflicts with the ideal image older people cherish about themselves, one would expect that it also diminishes their self-respect. As we saw in their own statements, by complaining to the young, they humiliate themselves. Thus, and consistent with the Dutch situation as well as that described for Tanzania and Kenya, not complaining may also be a strategy of older people to maintain their moral superiority vis à vis the young, in relation to whom they are in a weaker position.

What, then, was the purpose or significance of older people’s complaints to me, the researcher? It might be, as Sagner asserts, simply an opportunity to relieve their hearts of the grievances they harboured. On the other hand, or in addition, these complaints to me, an outside observer of their society and a potential evaluator of its moral and structural hierarchies, served an aim



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similar to one of the purposes of *not complaining* to the young: i.e., to assert their moral authority and self-esteem vis à vis other people’s evaluation.

In this sense, then, both complaining and not complaining, depending on the audience, could be seen partly as a strategy of older people’s resistance (as Sagner interpreted it): resistance against a moral devaluation on top of their inevitably diminished structural position and dependence.

### Conclusion

My exploration highlighted the importance of not complaining to the young as the best way for older people in Kwahu to maintain good relationships with, and thus support from, the younger generations. Authors, including Cattell and, in particular, Sagner, have discussed complaining as an act of resistance on the part of older people. It is possible, however, that this apparent contrast is merely a function of these authors’ omission to clarify the audience of the complaints. All of us have found that older people do complain to us—the researchers. I contend that these complaints may well be seen as a form of resistance. However, it is a resistance or protest that needs to be hidden from younger generations in their society, if it is to have the desired effect. Indeed, care-



ful reading of Cattell and Sagner shows that they, too, are aware of the risks of open complaining for older people. Sagner (2002: 61), for example, notes that for young people in South Africa, the language of complaint by older people encouraged “negative stereotyping of old age.”

There is, then, a delicate balance that older people try to keep in situations that threaten to render them powerless and lonely and deprive them of their dignity. Not protesting often appears the best option, even if their hearts are full of complaints.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> These conversations have resulted in a large number of articles (see, for example, van der Geest, 1998, 2002a, 2002b, 2004). Some of their 'stories' have been collected in a booklet, *Life, Love and Death. Conversations with Six Elders in Kwahu-Tafo, Ghana* (Atuobi et al., 2005).
- <sup>2</sup> While writing this paper, I received an e-mail from a Ghanaian friend whose wife spent six months in the United States to work as a caregiver for older people: "Afua [pseudonym] finally arrived home yesterday after six months of offering her services to a nonagenarian in America. She pities Americans and Europeans for abandoning their aged in the care of outsiders!"

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