

DEDICATION & DETACHMENT

Essays in Honour of Hans Vermeulen

FLIP LINDO & MIES VAN NIEKERK (EDITORS)



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Gracefully old

SJAAK VAN DER GEEST

In a special issue of the Dutch journal *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Gezondheidszorg* entitled 'Successful Ageing', the physician Smalhout (1997) has fulminated against the Dutch system of forced retirement for people over 65. The 'right to retirement', he argues, has been transformed into 'retirement terror' – unjust, offensive and foolish. It is unjust and offensive to those who have reached the age of 65 and want to continue working – it's a new form of discrimination, ageism. It is foolish because it harms the organisation that sends its older employees into retirement – every such departure is a rupture of existing relationships, political, commercial and professional. The climate of ageism in Dutch society, and in its universities in particular, is painfully illustrated by a quote from a monthly newsletter at the Humanities Faculty of the University of Amsterdam. The text caricatures older people who decide to attend university lectures after retirement as

grey, flaking, often seriously decrepit senile beings who come sit next to you like mother and father complexes incarnate, with their drooping bosoms and tumorous paunches, slaving with Alzheimer's and a hunger for knowledge. (Meyer 1993: 8)¹

As Smalhout observes, if something like that had been said about blacks or homosexuals, the law would have clamped down ruthlessly. But older people in Dutch society are obviously just sitting ducks.

Are the Netherlands and its neighbouring countries really and truly ageist societies? Is old age indeed perceived as a virtual disgrace? Or can growing old also be a graceful experience? These questions are prompted by Hans Vermeulen's retirement and the consequent publication of this collection of essays, as well as by my own experiences of beautiful old age in a community in Ghana.

The disgrace of age

One cannot help being struck by the overwhelmingly negative associations with old age in Dutch and, more widely, European and North American society. No, I am not forgetting the fact that people above 65 have never had it so good and comfortable as they do today. The point, though, is that *being old itself* is not valued in their lives. Their enjoyment of life occurs *in spite of* their old age. Their style of living is, in essence, a denial of their age. Countless bou-tades reflect the concealment and denial of old age, and the ways that people try to see themselves as relatively young as long as they possibly can. I say ‘relatively’, because they only regard as ‘old’ the people who are older than they are. The dividing line between ‘young’ and ‘old’ climbs upward every year with the accretion of their years. The prolific production of euphemisms for ‘old’ is another proof that being old is not endowed with any intrinsic positive value.

This largely disparaging attitude towards old age is not a new phenomenon in our culture. Reading through European literary works of the past five centuries, one predominantly encounters descriptions of old age that express feelings of loss, loneliness and fear of physical and mental decay. The dominant ‘philosophy’ of growing old in our past and present culture is a cyclical one. The most common metaphors applied to the ageing process involve various cycles – the cycle of human life, the cycle of the seasons, the cycle of the day. All of these portray growing old as a decline. In art and literature (McLerran & McKee 1991), the ‘four ages’ of the human being are variously depicted as a transition from life to death, from growth to standstill, from warmth to cold, from gold to iron (Ovid), from spring to winter, from morning to night. Shakespeare wrote in his celebrated 73rd sonnet:

*In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the West,
Which by and by black night doth take away.*

In his poem ‘Hälfte des Lebens’, Hölderlin (1988: 308) describes the bitterness of old age by contrasting the coldness of winter with the fullness and abundance of summer:

*Mit gelben Birnen hängen
Und voll mit wilden Rosen
Das Land in den See,
Ihr holden Schwäne,
Und trunken von Küssen
Tunkt ihr das Haupt
Ins heilignüchterne Wasser.*

*Weh mir, wo nehm ich, wenn
Es Winter ist, die Blumen, und wo
Den Sonnenschein,
Und Schatten der Erde?
Die Mauern stehn
Sprachlos und kalt, im Winde
Klirren die Fahnen.*

The analogy between the sadness of growing old and the passing of spring and summer returns in the following four lines:

*Das Angenehme dieser Welt hab ich genossen,
Die Jugendstunden sind, wie lang! wie lang! verflossen,
April und Mai und Julius sind ferne,
Ich bin nichts mehr, ich lebe nicht mehr gerne.*
(Hölderlin 1988: 376)

Resentment about the loss of physical strength and beauty have rarely been put into words as forcefully as by the aestheticist Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde juxtaposes the change of seasons with the human condition – for humans, no new spring.

Yes, Mr Gray, the gods have been good to you. But what the gods give they quickly take away. You have only a few years in which to live really, perfectly, and fully. When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, and then you will suddenly discover that there are no triumphs left for you, or have to content yourself with those mean triumphs that the memory of your past will make more bitter than defeats. (...) Time is jealous of you, and wars against your lilies and your roses. You will become sallow, and hollow-cheeked, and dull-eyed. You will suffer horribly. (...)

The common hill-flowers wither, but they blossom again. The laburnum will be as yellow next June as it is now. In a month there will be purple stars on the clematis, and year after year the green night of its leaves will hold its purple stars. But we never get back our youth. The pulse of joy that beats in us at twenty, becomes sluggish. Our limbs fail, our senses rot. We degenerate into hideous puppets, haunted by the memory of the passions of which we were too much afraid, and the exquisite temptations that we had not the courage to yield to. Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth! (Wilde 1948: 45-46)

Wilde created a new version of the Faust legend. Dorian Gray sells his soul to the devil not to acquire knowledge and science, but to preserve his youthful beauty.

In his poem 'J'aime le souvenir', Baudelaire similarly extols the beauty of the youthful body and expresses his abhorrence of bodies in decay ('tordus, maigres, ventrus ou flasques'):

*O monstruosités pleurant leur vêtement!
 O ridicules troncs! torses dignes des masques!
 O pauvres corps tordus, maigres, ventrus ou flasques
 (...)
 Mais ces inventions de nos muses tardives
 N'empêcheront jamais les races malades
 De rendre à la jeunesse un hommage profond,
 À la sainte jeunesse, à l'air simple, au doux front,
 À l'œil limpide et clair ainsi qu'une eau courante,
 Et qui va répandant sur tout, insouciant
 Comme l'azur du ciel, les oiseaux et les fleurs,
 Ses parfums, ses chansons et ses douces chaleurs!*
 (Baudelaire 1995: 16-17)

Anthropologists and other social scientists have added their voice to art and literature in order to bring the Western debasement of old age into focus. If life is seen as movement, then the older people's fear of declining mobility is understandable. Thornton (1993), who did participatory research in 'mobility and movement' groups amongst British pensioners, describes the members' obsession with staying healthy and mobile. 'Healthism' becomes an escape route away from old age (and *also* a new prison, as the author points out).

The old body full of wrinkles, scars and defects becomes the almost proverbial symbol of negatively perceived old age. When seen on human beings, the scars and wrinkles otherwise admired on old trees and ancient furniture and buildings can utterly horrify the members of a society that sanctifies youth. Pictures of naked old bodies evoke shock and repulsion. Woodward (1991) describes such reactions at a display of a photograph of a naked old man in the USA. Leder (1990) came up with a new term for this phenomenon – the old body not only disappears (so as not to offend aesthetic and moral taste), it also 'dys-appears'. 'Its presence is felt as pain, disease and dysfunction' (Hepworth 2000: 46).

If the old body evokes revulsion and protest, it is no wonder that sexual activity by older people causes similar discomfort. The cultural prejudice that sex is not (or should not be) part of old age was crassly reflected in the two historic Kinsey Reports (Kinsey et al. 1948, 1953), which uncovered much 'shocking' information about the sexual behaviour of men and women in the mid-twentieth-century USA. The survey sample of 18,000 adult men and women

contained not a single person above age 65. Apparently, older people were not considered part of the sexually active population. Kellet (1991) rightly wonders whether the reduction of sexual activity at old age may be more cultural than biological in origin (and see also Gibson 1993). Cri Stellweg (1998: 117), a Dutch writer and columnist, has described the repulsion at older people's sex through the memories of young girl who heard her parents having sex:

She couldn't help listening to it, and then seething with revulsion. Two antiquarian people bringing the bed into a rhythmic thump. Jeezus! To her it was the ultimate defilement of an act that should be the prerogative of smooth young bodies like hers, to be performed in ethereal delight, gentle, tender and joyous – not in these obscene, lumpish jolts.²

The decrepitude of old age is experienced most vividly by the growing number of people suffering from dementia. Dementia, as Cohen-Mansfield et al. (2000: 381) have recently described it,

destroys the brain and confuses the mind; it disintegrates the self and degrades one's dignity and soul. Sufferers of dementia describe the disease as a frightening shadow which sneaks up on them and steals portions of their memories, dreams and selves.

An excerpt from a diary written by a dementia sufferer illustrates the personal impact of the disease:

No theory of medicine can explain what is happening to me. Every few months I sense that another piece of me is missing. My life (...) my self (...) are falling apart. I can only think half thoughts now. Someday I may wake up and not think at all, not know who I am. Most people expect to die someday, but whoever expected to lose their self first? (in Cohen-Mansfield et al. 2000: 382)

Numerous novels, stories and ego documents have been published in the past ten or fifteen years dealing with dementia. Dutch examples are Bernleff's *Hersenschimmen* (1984) and Voskuil's *De moeder van Nicolien* (1999). Both novels trace the advancing loss of memory, orientation and self, Bernleff from the patient's point of view and Voskuil as told by an outside observer.³

How the loss of identity in elderly people is exacerbated by their environment was disenchantingly documented by the anthropologist Jules Henry in his study of three nursing homes for the elderly in the USA in the 1960s.

In many primitive societies the soul is imagined to leave the body at death or just prior to it; here, on the other hand, society drives out the remnants of the soul of the institutionalized old person while it struggles to keep his body alive. Routinization, inattention, carelessness, and the deprivation of communication – the chance to talk, to respond, to read, to see pictures on the wall, to be called by one's name rather than "you" or no name at all – are

ways in which millions of once useful but now obsolete human beings are detached from their selves long before they are lowered into the grave.

(Henry 1965: 393; see also Kayser-Jones 1981; Biggs et al. 1995: 84)

All the symptoms of old age's disgrace described so far are captured by the cyclical metaphor of ageing. It represents growing old as a return to the point of departure, to babyhood, with infantilisation as the end result. This cycle has been depicted in illustrations and texts from time immemorial. One early source is the Greek poet Aristophanes. Best known are probably Shakespeare's lines from *As You Like It* that begin with 'All the world's a stage'. The English poet describes the final two phases of the human being's life as follows:

*And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.*

This belittling view of old age reduces older people to the status of small children. They are entirely dependent on others, their movements are restricted and monitored, they have no access to 'dangerous' objects like knives, matches or the gas tap, they need to be spoon-fed, they are not supposed to be interested in sex and they are talked to like children. Hockey and James (1995: 30-31) cite several authors who have analysed the infantilisation of older people. One of them, Gresham (1976: 205), who did research in a nursing home, recorded the nurses' use of child's talk:

An elderly woman (age 82), who has just finished her breakfast, which was fed to her by a practical nurse, gets a patronising pat on the arm from the nurse, who says: "Good girl, you ate all your breakfast."

Infantilisation, as Hockey and James (1995: 32) observe, is 'more disabling than the biological fact of growing old'. Biggs et al. (1995: 84) have rated infantilisation as one of the most debilitating forms of age discrimination, as did Kayser-Jones (1981) in her study of aged care in Scotland and the USA.

All these disheartening images in my own culture drove me to look for a more sanguine view of growing old. Where can we find more positive valuations of old age?

Graceful ageing

My fieldwork among elderly people in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town of Southern Ghana, promptly brought me into contact with an radically different view of old age. To convey the distinction I will first need to explain some local conditions and terminologies. People in Kwahu-Tafo call themselves Kwahu, and they form a subgroup of the ten million or so Akan living in Ghana. The language of the Akan is Twi, which has several dialects or sublanguages.

The most common Twi term for 'old' when referring to human beings – and probably the only adequate term – is the verb *nyin*, meaning 'to grow'. The correct Twi translation of the English 'I am old' is *manyin*, 'I have grown'. Whereas in English and other European languages we use an adjective to express the status of being old, the Akan prefer a verb. This is not just a linguistic peculiarity – it reflects the *quality* of the experience of being old. *Nyin* indicates a process and suggests a linear development: growing, increasing in size (in whatever sense of 'size' is appropriate to the current stage of the development process). A child can say *manyin*, if it has 'grown' in comparison to a previous period or to another child. The same verb can also be used for an adolescent or a middle-aged or old person: *wanyin*, 'he/she has grown'. When my Kwahu friends spoke English to me, they never referred to anyone as 'being old'. Their standard English expression was, indeed, 'he has grown'. They used similar wordings in the translations they made of our conversations with older people. Reluctantly I had to 'correct' that beautiful idiom into mainstream English to avoid being misunderstood by non-Akan readers.

The verb *nyin* can be used for any being that 'lives' and thus has the potential of 'growing': it is applied to humans, animals, trees, plants and fruits. Because 'growing' is conceived as a linear process, *nyin* is an essentially positive concept. It implies accumulation, the acquisition of *more* of what the person or animal or tree is already supposed to acquire by virtue of its nature. The English term 'to grow' is a perfect equivalent, as it also implies positive development. Only when adjectives like 'old' are appended to it does the word 'growing' lose some of its positive quality in English.

The conception of 'growing' in living beings – gaining quality and volume – is inherently different from the idea of 'getting old' in non-living objects – *losing* the qualities they are meant to have. 'Old' for living beings and 'old' for objects are diametrically opposed, and the difference is reflected in language. For old objects, the Twi language forgoes the dynamism of the verb and resorts, as in English, to an adjective: *dada*, a negative word. 'Kaa no ayɛ dada' ('the car is old') means that the car is no longer what it should be, it has become

defective and unreliable, it is old. Dada conjures up the image of a vehicle that moves with difficulty and may break down at any moment.

One day I took part in a discussion with three elderly men about growing old. I asked them what they regarded as the happiest time of their life. The 'leader' of the three cited his present situation, because, as he said, his joy at old age was the most complete. His response was not unique. Most elderly people expressed satisfaction about being old, despite any limitations they might have had such as poverty and poor health.

The most common term for an elderly person, *ɔpanyin*, is at the same time an honorific title expressing admiration and affection. The *ɔpanyin* is honourable, civilised, kind, composed and wise. Countless proverbs and local sayings underline the great value attached to advanced age. The *ɔpanyin* represents the beautiful image of old age. He or she receives what is most highly regarded in Akan culture: respect. An *ɔpanyin* can be a man or a woman, though most Akan will think of a man when the word is used. An *ɔpanyin* is an 'ancestor-to-be'; people will remember him after his death because of his good deeds and wisdom (van der Geest 1998). As one elder put it,

The *ɔpanyin* has lived in the house much longer than you. You came to meet him. *ɔpanyin* is a big word. He's a person who knows what's going on. He must receive respect and obedience.

I asked him what things show that a person is an *ɔpanyin*.

It's mostly the wisdom he gives to the young, and it's also how he respects himself. If you respect yourself, the young will also respect you and fulfil your needs.

Three principal virtues earn the *ɔpanyin* this respect: wisdom, self-restraint and dedication to family. Wisdom, knowledge, life experience and the ability to foresee what will happen and to give advice are the special qualities of the old man or woman. That a person has lived a long time means that they have seen many things, and have begun to see how those things are connected. Life experience, in other words, teaches how events follow one another up. This understanding enables the *ɔpanyin* to predict the future and advise people on how to act to avoid trouble. As one elder said, 'If you're old, you can always predict, because you have experience.' When I (S) asked him to define an *ɔpanyin*, he (F) said:

F. An *ɔpanyin* is someone who, through his experience in life, has gained a lot of wisdom and knows what is good and what is not good.

S. What are some characteristics of an *ɔpanyin* that may not be present in a young person?

F. It is wisdom. Especially the ability to think carefully about things before doing them. The young don't have those qualities. They just get up and do things.

The wisdom of the elder is referred to in a large number of proverbs, one of them being 'ɔpanyin nni biribi a, ɔwɔ abatwɛ', 'If the elder has nothing, he has elbow.' It means that even if an ɔpanyin is very poor, at least he has wisdom.

Wisdom, the ability to foresee, implies power. An elderly person can bless (*nyira*) and curse (*nnome*). That is why people say, 'ɔpanyin ano sen ɔbosom', 'The mouth of the ɔpanyin is stronger than a god.' In a discussion I had with some young men, one of them said,

We think that the old have a certain blessing because of their very age, so if you respect and honour them they will bless you. The blessing will be on your life forever. In much the same way, if they curse you, it will also be forever. We all like blessings, so if you respect and honour them and get closer to them, they'll develop a love for you, and they will reveal to you some of their hidden treasures.

The second virtue involves the good manners of the ɔpanyin, which all boil down to self-restraint. The ɔpanyin controls his emotions, does not get angry ('ɔpanyin bo mfu') and does not shout at people. The ability to hold himself in check is manifested primarily in the way he deals with information that is given to him, and in his ascetic attitude. The ɔpanyin's careful handling of rumours is expressed in many proverbs. Nothing will betray that you're still a child so quickly as when you can't hold your tongue. Indeed, the ɔpanyin is the antithesis of a child.

The ɔpanyin's self-restraint also reveals itself in his attitude towards food and other material pleasures. Greed does not befit the ɔpanyin. One proverb says 'ɔpanyin mene nsono', 'The elder eats his own intestines,' which means he can go without food. If there is not enough food in the house, the ɔpanyin will give his part to the children. He has eaten enough in his life.

The ɔpanyin's third virtue is his love for the family (*abusua*). His gentleness and wisdom are directed first and foremost to the abusua, and it is the abusua that especially benefits from the ɔpanyin's life experience and civilised manners. He may have travelled a lot, but in his old age, when he reaches the stage of ɔpanyin, he will come home and spend his days with the family members. He will give them good advice on all kinds of problems and will promote peace and unity among them. He will mediate in conflicts. 'There's nothing left for him to do but watch over the people in the house,' according to one elder. That is why the Akan say 'ɔpanyin ntu kwan', 'The elder does not travel.'

To depend on other people at that stage of your life is not a disgrace or a sign of failure, but rather a proof of your importance and success in life. It is

not something you consider a loss of control over your own life. It shows you have built up social capital. As Stucki (1995) has pointed out in her study of elderly Asante people, neighbours of the Kwahu, an *panyin* is someone who has accumulated both wealth and followers (the two are not unconnected). Such successful old people 'enjoy their dependence'; their followers lavishly pour care on them.

Elsewhere (van der Geest 1998) I have argued that this positive image of old age is more an ideal cherished by the elderly than an actual daily reality. Yet the point I am making is that to grow old in this way is their *recognised ideal*. Being old, bearing the signs of old age, having the experience and wisdom of an elder, being respected and admired because of one's age, staying at home and being cared for by children and grandchildren, and receiving visitors who come to pay their respect – all these things constitute the attractiveness and gracefulness of old age. Old age is a time to look forward to.

When older people in Dutch society manage to live 'gracefully' and enjoy their old age, that is usually because they deny and defy age. Their happiness lies in the 'fact' that they can stop the ageing process. They do not feel the years they actually number. And they have people around them who keep reiterating this. Their *joie de vivre* is possible thanks to their success in keeping old age outside the door, in not receiving it as a welcome guest. That can make retiring from work a pleasure; many people even accelerate that moment by taking early retirement. They are going to enjoy life 'before they get old'.

The ageing anthropologist

My inspiration for this brief reflection derives from an article by John Blacking (1990) on the ageing of the anthropologist and the discovery of new meanings. Blacking, who died before his article was published, carried out anthropological fieldwork in Venda society (in present-day South Africa) between 1956 and 1966. He wrote about music, dance, initiation rites and growing up. That fieldwork was his 'initiation rite', his *rite de passage*: it changed his life. Fieldwork, he wrote, can leave an anthropologist 'scarred for life', a kind of (positive) 'trauma'. It renders him incapable of living without 'anthropologising' every social encounter. 'Life experiences are often measured against the yardstick of beliefs and patterns of action observed in the field' (Blacking 1990: 122).

But at the same time, many experiences and observations in the field take time to be fully grasped.

I am convinced that I now understand many of the things that were done and said to me in the field more clearly than I understood them at the time,

and that this would not have been possible without many years of experience and reflection. (1990: 122)

Blacking's own understanding of metaphysical matters, for example, was formerly constrained by the behaviourist and positivist premises that underpinned his research and world view during that period of his life. Growing old, he recognised he had become more receptive to the metaphysical values of the people he had met so many years before. Writing about himself and writing about 'them' now almost flow together in his thoughtful recollections:

Growing old was therefore a pleasure, not only because it could bring to people more power and influence in social and political life, but also because it could bestow deeper understanding and experience of the spiritual reality of the universe. For this reason, several young grandmothers, who were less than forty years old, liked to be called 'old lady' (mukegulu); and one friend of mine kept on reminding me that he was an 'old man' (mukalaha), even though he had no grey hairs. I spent very many hours with one old man, who (...) often alluded to the growing sense of peace and spiritual strength that he felt as time passed and the changing seasons touched his face. (1990: 124)

My own purpose in writing this brief essay was to express my hope that anthropologists will indeed be 'scarred' by the respect and grace of growing old which they observed in their fieldwork during their youthful days. While that may seem a self-evident statement, apparently it is not. When I became interested in the social and cultural meanings of growing old, I discovered that no older anthropologist in the Netherlands had ever linked his or her own age to this anthropological theme. The only 'exception', perhaps, was the sociologist Norbert Elias (1985), who wrote his essay about the loneliness of old people when he was in his eighties. Elias described how (social) death enters the lives of elderly people long before they actually die. It is a rather gloomy outlook on being old in our society. Interestingly, Elias does not refer in any way to his own experience of growing old. In actual fact, his life in old age formed a sharp contrast to the conditions he described in his essay. In spite of his visual impairment, Elias retained his central position in his circle of friends and intellectual kindred.

For the anthropologist who has lived among the graceful elderly, that experience should be a lesson and a promise – even against the current of the surrounding society. After all, life experience, wisdom, patience, caution, leniency, gentleness and reflexivity are the true signs of 'civilisation' that shine through most of our physical and cognitive limitations. Significantly, Hölderlin (1988: 78), who wrote with such bitter melancholy about old age ('ich lebe nicht mehr gerne'), also succeeded in capturing its beauty:

*In jüngern Tagen war ich des Morgens froh,
Des Abends weint ich; jetzt, da ich älter bin,
Beginn ich zweifelnd meinen Tag, doch
Heilig und heiter ist mir sein Ende.*