

Listening

Friendship according to Kwame Opoku

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This essay is about two different things: listening and friendship. Strictly speaking they are not directly related, but it was through listening that I learned Kwame Opoku's views on and experiences with friendship. My essay can be read as a plea for listening and a reflection on friendship.

On listening

Spradley (1979: 4) begins his book on the ethnographic interview with a passionate plea for listening: "Ethnography starts with a conscious attitude of almost complete ignorance." Being conscious of one's ignorance makes listening a natural thing to do. Teaching ethnographic methods to students, as many of us have been doing, should, therefore, focus not so much on the art or craft of listening, but simply convince the students that there are things they do not know, which are crucial to know and which other people may know. The 'other people' are of course those we usually call 'informants', 'respondents', or 'interviewees.' Once we have 'discovered' that people we meet in the field have knowledge that we lack, that they have experienced things we never experienced and that we can *learn* from them, that they are *interesting*; once we have made that discovery, listening will come by itself.

It is probably here that anthropology differs most from all other academic disciplines: the conviction that our research 'subjects' should not be subjected to our superior knowledge and scrutiny, but rather that they are our teachers. Once students have acquired that insight, they have crossed the boundary into anthropology.

Spradley provides a beautiful example of such a teacher-pupil relationship between an informant and an anthropologist respectively. He quotes what the anthropologist Elizabeth Marshall wrote about her meeting with a !Kung woman, Tsetchwe, in Namibia:

“Tsetchwe began to teach me ...” In order to discover the hidden principles of another way of life, the researcher must become a *student*. Tsetchwe, and those like her in every society, become *teachers*. Instead of studying the ‘climate’, the ‘flora’ and the ‘fauna’ which make up the Bushmens’ environment, Elizabeth Marshall tried to discover how the Bushmen define and evaluate drought and rainstorm, *gemsbok* and giraffe, *torabe* root and *tsama* melon.... The naive realist assumes that love, rain, marriage, worship, trees, death, food, and hundreds of other things have essentially the same meaning to all human beings. Although there are few of us who would admit to such ethnocentrism, the assumption may unconsciously influence our research. Ethnography starts with a conscious attitude of almost complete ignorance (Spradley 1979: 4; emphasis in original).

In my case, the ignorance was overwhelming. In 1969 I spent almost six months in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town in Ghana, doing nothing else other than learning the language. Some of my teachers were small children. They taught me the words for the things most physically present: table and chair, nose and eye, yam and rice. “The stranger is a child,” was one of the first and most useful proverbs I learnt. Slowly I moved from children to adults... Many years later my interest turned to older people.

Older people

Among all those who could become teachers to the anthropologist, older people stand out. They have lived longest and have the most stories to tell. For many years I was indeed an attentive listener to their stories. Getting older myself, I wanted to know if and how they managed to keep their spirits high in spite of (or thanks to) their advanced age with all its limitations; and if/how they were able to stay interesting and relevant to the younger generations.

Ironically, I was usually the only listener. I remember one instance when I was conversing with an older man who explained to me the meaning of certain proverbs. A woman in the house drew nearer, apparently to listen to our conversation. I asked her if she had learned any proverbs from the old man. She had not, she admitted. The old man cut in: “She will not learn proverbs, because the proverbs will not earn her money.” I realised that the woman had been more interested in what I came to do than in the words of the elder who was with her everyday. Many times older people complained to me that

there were no listeners for their stories. One man told me that his head was full of things but no one came to collect them, so he would take them with him (when he died). Another one said that there was no greater pleasure for him than a young person coming to him to ask his advice. The implication was obvious: such a young person never came. The fact that young people do not come to listen constitutes the greatest reason for loneliness among older people in Kwahu-Tafo (cf. Van der Geest 2004).

Els van Dongen has written some horrifying accounts about the loneliness of older people in South Africa, and the cruelty done to them by the younger generation. One of her most recent articles starts with a quote from an older woman:

The children are no good at all.... If we tell them, "Don't do this", they will tell you, "That was your time. Don't come and tell us. This time is ours!"

She then continues to paint a disconcerting picture of generations in conflict and the rejection of old people's memories by the young (Van Dongen 2008).

I am giving these examples of disinterest and not listening to reiterate the point Spradley was making and to which I referred a while ago. Being a 'stranger' holds tremendous advantages in an ethnographic situation. Familiarity, as we know, breeds contempt, or at least it produces boredom, though none of the younger people in Kwahu-Tafo ever used these terms. They kept saying that they respected their elders and often went to them for advice, but my observations told me this was just wishful – or rather respectful/polite – thinking. After some time most elders confided to me that the young never came. But that problem of boredom with the old stories and even possible contempt did not apply to the anthropologist. I loved to sit with them and listen. One of them fascinated me in particular, Kwame Opoku.

Kwame Opoku

*Okyeame** Kwame Opoku was born in Kwahu-Tafo in 1919. When he was a boy he was sent to another town to learn tailoring, and a few years later he

* *Okyeame* (often translated as 'linguist') is an official at the chief's court, whose function is to speak for the chief and enhance the rhetoric of the words the chief has spoken.

settled there as a tailor. He then stopped his tailor work and opened a store in the nearby town of Nkawkaw. His business flourished. After that he moved to a farming village and started a cocoa farm. During that period he was also buying and selling cocoa. He married three times and when I met him he was living with his third wife, with whom he had six children. In total, he had sixteen children and he was able to send all of them to school, although he himself had hardly attended school. Kwame Opoku had been an *ɔkyeame* at the chief's palace for about thirty years. His work as an *ɔkyeame*, he used to say, had opened his mind and broadened his knowledge on a lot of customary and legal matters. He died in March in 2002. His death came too early; for him and for me. He was one of the most impressive teachers I met during my life as an anthropologist. He had a philosophical mind and a gift for expressing that mind. Whatever topic I broached, he was able to reflect on it, using his experiences as didactic data. The conversations resulted in transcripts that could compete with some of Montaigne's celebrated essays. I had wanted to make a long series of recordings of more conversations but the news of his death disrupted that plan. One of my favourite conversations with him was on friendship and love. I quote a few paragraphs from it.

On friendship*

One day I asked Kwame Opoku what friendship was. He answered:

The inscription on my house reads: *Onipa nua ne nea ɔne no ka* (A person's brother is the one who loves him). If a brother does not love you there is nothing you can do. A person who loves you should be everything to you. No matter how a brother may be, you can't do away with him (*Wɔye oo, wɔnye oo, worentumi mpopa*). Whether a brother is good or bad, he will succeed you in the future, but a friend never will. At the same time, the love between friends can be deeper than the love between brothers. I have a friend and the love between us is more special than the one between my brother and me. I am able to disclose all my

* This text by Opoku has been taken from a compilation of conversations with six elders about issues of 'life, love and death' (Atuobi et al. 2005). Originally, the conversations were recorded as they had been held, as dialogues. I have edited those texts in such a way that the questions asked by me and others have been left out so that the reader only 'hears' the elder speak. The meaning of his statements has not been affected by this.

secrets to him (*Mitumi ne no ka atrimu sem*), something I don't do with my brother. I scarcely converse with my brother and at times our conversation ends in a quarrel. My friend and I are able to share one bed, eat together and even bathe with one bucket of water, something I don't do with my brother. All this is done out of love (*Ne nyinaa ye do*).

Love in friendship is the purest (*Adamsfo mu do no na eye do ankasa*). Because friends always pray that the other won't die or fall into trouble so that their friendship will last a long time. But it is the wish of some people that their brothers die so that they can take their belongings. Indeed, there is no pure love among brothers. Love in friendship is very deep and there is happiness in it.

Friendship usually starts casually. It starts first with greetings which will later on develop into a conversation. This goes on for some time. Then it develops into full friendship. Friendship may end when one leaves the other and travels to a distant place. But even when such a thing happens friends are able to maintain their friendship by sending messages to one another. Friendship can last till death. I have seen such a friendship. I had one. We used to buy the same cloth. I informed him about my love affairs with women and he did the same. None of us travelled without telling the other. I became extremely sad when he died.

There are two major causes, which break a friendship: women and money. These two things mostly bring friendship to an abrupt end. When such a deep friendship breaks there is little chance for reconciliation.

Friendship can spoil someone's marriage, especially among women. Women friends like discussing the 'chop money' that their husbands give and other things. The woman who thinks she is receiving less money and fewer cloths from her husband may develop ill feelings towards him and this always leads to divorce.

Friendship between men can also spoil a marriage. It all depends on the friend's character. If one leads a good life and the friend is also good, a woman will never object to such a friendship. If a woman hears you are discussing problems with a friend, for example, how to look after the children and how to set up a profitable venture, she won't complain because it shows how good the friend is. But when your discussion is about drinking and other useless things it will worry the woman and this can lead to divorce.

Let me tell you about my own friendship. I saw that my friend did not like gossiping and that he respected himself (*Obu ne ho*). I also saw that he was hard working. These qualities attracted me. Ever since we

started our friendship we have been going on well. We plan how we can look after our wives. My wife is aware of all these qualities in him so she receives him warmly whenever he is here and she feels happy when he is around. When we were young we used to help each other in clearing our farms (*Yedi nnɔboa*). But now that I am old I can't go to farm, but we visit one another frequently for conversation. When we meet we share our meals together. Even when I am not around and there is a problem with the children my wife contacts him for help.

A friend is someone with whom you share secrets.

Michel de Montaigne

Every time I read his words I am struck by their depth and eloquence, so similar in style to what De Montaigne wrote in his *Essays* more than four centuries ago. I cannot resist quoting also some of *his* words on friendship.

“... you cannot judge a relationship until the partners have attained strength and stability in mind and in years” [quote from Cicero]. For the rest, what we commonly call friends and friendships are no more than acquaintanceships and familiarities, contracted either by chance or for advantage, which have brought our minds together. In the friendship I speak of they mix and blend one into the other in so perfect a union that the seam which has joined them is effaced and disappears. If I were pressed to say why I love him, I feel that my only reply could be: “Because it was he, because it was I.” (De Montaigne 1958: 97)

Kwame Opoku's words in particular give me an immense sense of happiness, because I was able to salvage them from oblivion by sitting near him and listening. But the words also fill me with regret that I was unable to capture and save more of his gentle wisdom for future generations.*

* I thank Patrick Atuobi who introduced me to Kwame Opoku and joined all our conversations. I thank Els van Dongen for being a colleague and a friend for almost twenty years, although the 'seams' of our friendship never disappeared.

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