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van der Geest, S.

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Resilience and the whims of reciprocity in old age: An example from Ghana

Sjaak van der Geest

Anthropological research among older people in a rural town of Ghana brought out two concepts that epitomized their main concerns: respect and reciprocity. 'Respect' takes different meanings in different life situations, from outward deference to deep personal affection. According to people I talked to, the hidden principle that determines the type of respect is reciprocity. The quality of relationships between young and old depends on what the older generation long ago invested in the younger. Life is a bank account; you receive what you put into it. My observations and my conversations with older people largely confirmed this 'iron law' of old age security. In this presentation, however, I intend to look more deeply into one case that seems to contradict the rule of reciprocity: extreme poverty or loneliness in spite of life-long investment. Examining people's life accounts helps to reach a more nuanced understanding of reciprocity as the key to security at old age and to see resilience as a way to cope with the whims of reciprocity. Field notes and transcriptions show, however, that understanding if and how reciprocity works is further complicated by contradictory and confusing statements by older people and their environment.

[reciprocity, resilience, livelihood, old age, anthropology, ethnographic fieldwork, Ghana]

This paper discusses two problems that I encountered doing fieldwork about the pleasures and pains of growing old in a rural town in Southern Ghana. The first problem lies with the concept of *reciprocity* that was almost unanimously presented as the key to understanding the quality of life of older people. I will argue that that reciprocity is intertwined with resilience: where reciprocity seems to fail (as it does not bring material security), emotional reciprocity may compensate this 'failure' and provide the older person with psychological contentment and the strength to endure (resilience).

The second objective is methodological. Ethnographic conversations are characterized by perplexing contradictions and 'missing pieces' of people's life-puzzle. The longer contacts with older people and their relatives last and the more intimate they become, the more questions arise that make the researcher hesitant to draw conclusions about life at old age (and for that matter, life in general). Reciprocity (and resilience in its wake) has its whims, but communication is also whimsical.

Research publications and policy documents about poverty, HIV/AIDS, children, older people or gender inequity are buzzing with terms such as vulnerability, resilience, resistance, livelihood, security, reciprocity and social capital. The meanings of these concepts vary in different disciplines and contexts, but everywhere they seem to overlap to some extent and are difficult to delineate from each other. In this paper I will illustrate and discuss shifting and complementary meanings of reciprocity and resilience using an example from my fieldwork among older people in a Ghanaian rural community. The concepts and their interplay will deepen our understanding of the life of the elderly woman whose last miserable *and* peaceful years I witnessed. The story of this woman will also shed light on the theoretical and practical usefulness of these concepts.¹

Terms and concepts

Let me first attempt an approximate delineation of some of these popular concepts from the point of view of my own discipline, social / cultural anthropology. *Vulnerability*, a concept much used by Robert Chambers and his colleagues, stands for exposure to harmful influences and defencelessness. 'Exposure' refers to external conditions; defencelessness to internal qualities, the inability to cope with harm and damage done (cf. Chambers 1989). Such damage may be physical or emotional. When physical damage has been inflicted, but the person is not 'defeated' by it and succeeds in keeping himself together, the vulnerability is only partial. Taking the term by its Latin root (*vulnus* = wound), one could say that the person is not really injured by the violence or damage that has been inflicted.

Livelihood refers to the means that people need to live, by which most authors think of material or financial means (cf. Chambers & Conway 1991, Kaag et al. 2004, Quaadvlieg 2007). In this paper I will point out that – obviously – people need more than material means to survive (cf. Reijer 2007). Depending on their disciplinary background authors use more or less comprehensive definitions of livelihood. Social relations, cultural values, emotional qualities also prove indispensable for living. Wartena (2006: 74) in her study of styles of making a living in South Bénin remarks:

Much of the livelihood literature portrays producers as *homo economicus* who strategically and rationally combines assets to reach economic goals. Non-economic goals, values and perceptions, for example cultural ones [and emotional ones, SvdG], are lost out of sight.

The economist Polanyi, who coined 'livelihood' in his posthumous *The livelihood of man* (1977), already showed a strong awareness of the social roots of economic behaviour in his famous earlier work:

... man's economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships. He does not act so to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods; he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets (Polanyi 1957: 46).

Conversely, lack of material goods can be compensated by possession of social and cultural assets, social and symbolic capital, as Bourdieu called it.

Security ('safety'), or social security, is a state of being free from danger or anything that damages one's livelihood, usually understood as financial or material security (even if the adjective 'social' is added to it). Security is the approximate opposite of vulnerability.

One of the most effective ways to secure security is through investment in the future, either financially (insurance, pension) or through the building of a social network that can function as a safety net when one's livelihood is under threat. Both strategies are based on the principle of *reciprocity*. In the latter case, one receives back what one has given, though not exactly in the same kind. Bourdieu (1996) has pointed out that returning the same gift is rather a denial of the type of reciprocity we are dealing with here. Receiving and giving goods and services creates bondage and mutual dependence. Reciprocity is the cement that holds people together in families and wider groupings. Returning the same gift (within a short period of time) would be interpreted as a refusal of that mutual dependency, in the same way that paying for services or goods with money avoids dependence. Dependency implies trust that the other will help me, as I helped him. The interval between giving and receiving can last many years, a whole life, in relations that are characterized by deep trust and intensive interaction, as is the case in small-scale kinship groups. The credit that one has built up with others can be called *social capital*, the network of social relations one can draw on in times of need.

This leads to *resilience*, which usually is taken to mean that a person – or a group of people – is capable of surviving in spite of heavy damage or shock. In boxing jargon one could say that resilience is the ability to 'take' the blows of the opponent. Its original Latin meaning is 'jumping back' like a spring, a metaphor that has been retained in German: *Spannkraft*, and in Dutch: *veerkracht*. The concept is extensively defined and discussed in some of the other articles in this special issue.

Resistance is a more active concept. To resist is to fight back, as in military terms. The violence is countered, the damage is repaid; the aim is to remove the sources of violence and oppression altogether. In the literature the difference between resistance and resilience is less clear, however. The two are sometimes used as near synonyms. In his *Weapons of the weak* about 'everyday resistance' among peasants in Malaysia, Scott uses the term 'resistance' in a sense that others may call 'resilience.' The peasants are unable to change or improve their physical condition but they do succeed in keeping themselves sound in spite of worsening conditions. Their acts of 'hidden resistance' have first of all a psychological or moral or symbolic effect. They see themselves as superior to those who oppress them, because they live respectfully according to the rules of the traditional moral economy while the rich have degraded themselves by their selfish asocial behaviour. What Scott calls everyday, or hidden or passive resistance, I would rather call 'resilience', a term that is absent in his book.

During my fieldwork about care and security for older people in the Ghanaian town of Kwahu-Tafo, everyone assured me that security depended on reciprocity. Those who had worked hard during their active life and helped their children and others

could be sure that their children and the others would help them during their old age. An iron law, it seemed, yet the law of reciprocity produced less security than they suggested. I will now look at the imperfections of the system and try to make sense of the 'whims' of reciprocity and the saving role of resilience.

Fieldwork

The fieldwork I refer to was carried out between 1994 and 2006 in a rural town of Ghana called Kwahu-Tafo. The mainly Kwahu inhabitants of the town belong to the approximately seven million, matrilineal Akan living in the south of the country. The aim of the research was to describe and understand the position of older people in this rapidly changing society.

The research involved interviews – conversations may be a more appropriate term – with about 35 older people. All conversations were taped and transcribed. Some people were interviewed once or twice, others more often, up to ten times. 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 observations about their daily life and the attitudes of other people in the same house.

What resulted was an extremely diverse picture. Some of the elderly 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 conversation transcriptions, I tried to discover some common underlying themes in these diverse experiences of old age. In this essay I discuss one important aspect: how does the principle of reciprocity work in the final years of older people?

Maame Mercy Ofori

One of the 35 older people I used to visit and converse with was Maame (Mother) Mercy Ofori (her real name). She was between 70 and 80 years old when I met her in 1994, and blind. One of her legs had been amputated after an accident on the farm. She lived at the outskirts of the town in a small rickety room of her son's house, a couple of mud structures with grass roofs. Her condition looked miserable. Her roof was leaking. A great deal of the day she was alone in the house. The son and his wife left for the farm and the children went to school. Few people passed the place as it was not in the town and visitors hardly came. For hours she was sitting on a cement block in the opening of her door, looking into the darkness of her life and listening if someone might pass. During my last visit to her, between two heavy showers, I found her locked up in her own room. She was sitting motionless in the double darkness of the room. The floor was muddy, the air penetrating.

The son spoke about his mother with affection and respect. About a year ago he had given up his job as electrician in another town and had returned with his entire family

to Kwahu-Tafo to take care of his mother. He was unable to find electrician work and decided to start a farm. Financially his life had become difficult.

I regularly visited the old lady and the other members of the family, together with a friend who helped me in the research. The first time we met her, we asked her how she spent her day. I quote a few sentences from our conversation:

M.O. From when I wake up in the morning till the evening, I don't do anything. I eat and get people to visit me. I only sit in here in the door opening from morning to evening.

Sj. Did you get visitors today?

M.O. Nobody has visited me except a lady who came here to look for someone and realized that I am here so she just greeted me.

Sj. When was the last time your children living outside Kwahu-Tafo came to visit you?

M.O. It is long time ago they came here.

Sj. Do they send you money?

M.O. They don't, except for one who sometimes gives me money.

Sj. What about your grandchildren who are staying here with you, do they respect you?

M.O. Yes, they respect me, they look after me, they do everything I want. They even fear not to respond to my calls, because their father won't forgive them, if they show any sign of disrespect.

Sj. I can see life is quite hard for you, is that true?

M.O. How is life difficult for me? In what way? I am eating well and my son is taking good care of me, I lack nothing because of my son, he does everything for me.

Sj. What makes you happy in life?

M.O. Oh, nothing worries me. When my things get dirty, they wash it for me.

Sj. Do you get tired of sitting here from morning to evening?

M.O. Yes, I get very tired.

Sj. But still, you are happy?

M.O. Happy? I am not happy at all. How can I be happy after all that I have seen and with this sickness? Not at all!

Around the same time we talked to her son and asked him how he managed with his work, his mother and his own family.

Son. In all, we are eight people including my mother, my wife and children and as you know there is no proper work in this town except farming but I am managing to keep everything under control. I was formerly an electrician. What we normally do is that, in the morning we cook and give my mother what she needs and then leave for farm. Then in the afternoon, when the children come back from school, they cook and give her something to eat, in the evening we all cook together and eat. I also buy other things for her.

Sj. Your mother now has six children alive, do you receive any help from them to look after your mother.

Son. Well, the rest of my brothers and sisters were helping sometime ago, but now they are not here, so most of the help for my mother comes from me.

Sj. Do you receive money from them?

Son. I do receive some when they occasionally pass by.
Sj. Who gives your mother water to bathe?
Son. It is my children.
Sj. Who is cooking for her?
Son. My wife.
Sj. Who washes her clothes?
Son. Her grandchildren.
Sj. Who helps her to go to toilet?
Son. I usually do, especially during the night.

Six months later we had another conversation with the son, while his mother was asleep. We asked him why he gave up his job in the other town and came to Kwahu-Tafo while several of his brothers and sisters were living nearby and could have helped the mother. I quote again from my transcription:

Son. When I was in the other town I frequently paid her a visit and saw that she was not well looked after so I decided to come down and permanently stay with her.
Sj. But you are not the only child, she has daughters. Why is it you and not the other children?
Son. Because I love my mother and I have soft feelings for her more than the other children.
Sj. Are you doing this because she did something special for you which she didn't do for the others?
Son. No, she did nothing for me, nothing special that I can talk of. I even stayed less with her in my youth.
Sj. Did she do something special for the other children?
Son. I did not stay much with her so, I don't know if she did something for them.
Sj. I have heard people saying "My mother did not look after me, so I will not look after her."
Son. I have heard it too, but I am not like that, because I am a Christian. The Bible teaches us to love our parents. Proverbs 15: 16-20 says the wise man is the one who makes his father to rejoice but a stupid man is despising his mother. This and other Bible excerpts counsel me.
Sj. Do her other children visit her often?
Son. [laughs]. They don't if you see them here it is not purposely because of the old lady that they come. Mostly they come to greet her when they have other things to do in town.
Sj. May be they are too busy and cannot come here frequently, they may therefore send her money?
Son. No, they don't send her money. I am here if they send her money it will come to my notice.
Sj. Does your mother often complain about her children not visiting her?
Son. Yes, she always complains and asks where is this son or that daughter? Why do they not visit me?

Sj. If she asks these questions, what reply do you usually give?

Son. Well [he hesitates] I usually say they will be coming, so don't worry.

(Twelve years after these conversations I went to see Mr. Ofori again to get some clarification about the family situation and his decision to move to Kwahu-Tafo. He told me that one day when he came to visit his mother he saw that she was not well taken care of by his sister, the only child living in the town. The reason, he said, was that the sister's husband was living elsewhere and that she had to visit him regularly. He then decided to come to Kwahu-Tafo and take over the care).

We also had a chat with the son's wife.

Sj. Why is it that your in-laws don't visit their mother?

Wife. I don't know. It is also a puzzle to me and my husband. He brought the issue to the *Abusuapanyin* [family head], so that her other children would come and explain before the elders why they refuse to look after their sick mother. But none came even though they were summoned.

Sj. One of her daughters looked after her when the sickness started. Could it be that they feel is the turn of your husband to look after her?

Wife. I don't know if that is their line of thinking. But if it is so, then they are making a serious mistake, because it was only one daughter. What about the rest of the children?

When Maame Mercy woke up, we asked her if she had had a good sleep.

M.O. No I was just relaxing in bed. Because of my disabilities I am always restricted to lying on my bed. I don't sleep in the morning.

Sj. When did you wake up?

M.O. You know I am blind, I cannot tell the actual time.... I feel pains all over my body.... I cannot see and is difficult to go to the toilet. It would be better if I were dead. When I was at Akosua's [her daughter] place people used to bring me gifts but now they don't. Please help me send me to the hospital.

A few moments later:

Sj. Where are your relatives, don't they visit you or send you gifts.

M.O. I have no relatives because they don't care about me.

When we asked her what she is usually thinking of while she is awake, she replied: "I pray to God for two things; that He heals me or kills me because I am suffering."

The stories of and about Mercy Ofori (who died a few years after these conversations) do not present a clear-cut unambiguous working of the principle of reciprocity. My observations and conversations show abject poverty and misery as well as gratitude for filial respect and affection. It is unclear what her role as mother has been in the past, but

if she sacrificed herself for the well-being of her children, it is difficult to understand why most of her children do not seem to care much about their mother's situation. If the opposite is true and she failed in her role as mother – which does not seem likely – it is hard to explain why this particular son and his family do so much for her. In fact, the son explicitly mentions that he hardly stayed with his mother. Reciprocity in its economic sense cannot explain his extraordinary dedication. Many questions remain. Why did the son return to Kwahu-Tafo? For his mother obviously, but were there other reasons as well?² What was his economic and social position in the other town? Was returning to his hometown advantageous to him? And why did the other children rarely visit their mother (if that is indeed the case)? Did they really fail to return the good care of their mother or did they perhaps have a conflict with their brother who had taken over their mother's care? As we know, every conversation is as much a social event marked by performativity, as an exchange of information. Pretension and 'lying' are part of every conversation (cf., Bleek 1987). More information would be needed to figure out what was happening. But will the information ever be enough?

Indeed, the predictive power of reciprocity seems low, for two reasons mainly: (1) It does not always 'work' as we expect it will; and (2) We can never grasp the complete story of reciprocity. We may misjudge someone's social capital because we do not know all the details of his/her life history.

Local views of reciprocity

There does not seem to be a single term for 'reciprocity' in Twi, but numerous sayings and proverbs emphasise it as a principle of life. The most simple and direct one is: *Woyè ma obi a, na obi nso yè ma wo*. (If you do something for someone, that person will also do something for you). Another one says: *Benkum guare nifa, na nifa nso guare benkum* (The left hand washes the right one, and the right one washes the left one). Friendship and marriage only survive on reciprocity: *Dò me na me nnò wo bi na yède tra wiase* (Love me and I love you, that is how we live in this world), another proverb says. Or more practical: *Sòfa na mensòfa na èma aware sò* (Hold half and I hold half, that is how a marriage succeeds).

A person who withdraws from the rule of reciprocity is an *òyèmònyonfòd* (someone who accepts other people's food but does not want to give some of his own), a *boniayèni* (ungrateful person), a *mankomeyèm* ('only my own stomach'), an *adifudepè* (someone who wants to eat but does not want others to eat) or a *pèsèmenkomenya* ('I want it for myself alone'). All terms are deprecatory and decry selfish behaviour. To give and take is the prescribed rhythm of life, both in the short and the long term. One older man gave an example of short term reciprocity in his comments below:

When your children come to you and you shout at them: *Kò, kò kò, kò, kò* (Go, go, go, go), they will not fear [respect] you. They will say: "As for this man, that's how he is." But if he speaks kindly to you when you come and if he advises you and pets you, the child will respect you and not be rude to you.

Another proverb advises to serve both the banana and the plantain tree, which points at long term reciprocity and suggests a strategy (from the male point of view) for spreading reciprocity over one's own children and one's (matrilineal) nephews and nieces, in order to be more secure in future. The most popular proverb commanding long term reciprocity, that is care of old people as a moral duty for those who enjoyed care at young age goes: *Wanhwè wo ama wo se afifiri a, hwè no na ne se ntutu* (If he/she looked after you when your teeth came out, you should look after him/her when his/her teeth are falling out).

Reciprocity was mentioned in nearly all conversations, both with elders and others. Everyone argued that it was certain that an older person would be rewarded for the things he did for others during the time he was able to work. One elder said:

Òpanyin³ a wanyin dan mma (An elder who has grown old depends on (his) children). If you bring forth good children, you drink good soup but if you bring forth bad children, you drink bad soup. That is: if you look after your children well, they will grow and look after you but if you don't look after them properly, they will not look after you when you grow old. That is why nowadays everyone should try and look after his children very well so that at your old age they will take good care of you and when you die they bury you. So an old person depends on his children. At that time all the money you spent will be paid back to you.

Another elder took himself as an example. Looking back on a fruitful life, he remarked:

I had the foresight when I was very young that I would be old one day and would find it difficult to work. So I worked very hard and laid a sound foundation for my old age. Now I am old but very happy because I looked after my children and they are now feeding me. They provide me with what I should wear. In fact, they give me whatever will make me happy. When you are old and you get what you will eat and what you wear and also where to lay down your head, nothing worries you. Just imagine, I am able to sit down and have a lively conversation with my children.

The implication is that an older person who is not properly taken care of, has failed to care for others during the years he/she was able to work. According to some women, that failure is particularly common among older men. One woman said:

Most men don't help the women to properly look after their children for the children to become important and wealthy in future. When the parents grow old, and they did not properly look after their children, it becomes difficult for them to receive proper and good care from the children. The extended family expects that your own children look after you in old age. The extended family cannot look after you in the way that your own children will do. If your children do not prosper and become important people, your life condition in old age becomes very difficult. *Abusua no da hò kakraa, nanso wòtwèn ma womma na abè hwè wo, wòndeè owuo mmom na wòhwè anim* (The family is only lying

there big, but they are waiting for your own children to come and look after you, they are only waiting for your death).

One of the elders both acknowledged and nuanced this when he quoted yet another proverb:

We say: *Ohia kan nyè ya sè ohia kyire* (Early poverty is less painful than late poverty). Maybe he did not care for his relatives when he was successful. Therefore, when there is a problem, no one will care for him. That is why we say: *Sè wonya biribi a, ma asiri pè bi ni na ebia na atonkom redi akòda*. Whatever you get, give some to the person keeping vigil to eat because if you give all to the one dozing he may fall asleep and leave you. That is why we advice people not to spend all they get on the wife and children alone. They should also remember the (other) relatives so that in difficult times they will come to your aid.

Again another elder explained that early suffering serves a purpose: you suffer for the well-being of your children who will help you when you grow old. Late hardship is senseless. “Good care and attention”, he concluded, “is the source of all happiness of an *òpanyin*.” When, in a discussion with an elder, I argued that some people may have tried hard but suffered misfortune, he rejected this. He himself also had experienced many disappointments in farming and trading but he had continued trying and had finally been successful.

Being cared for at old age, everybody claimed, is the unfailing outcome of an industrious and caring life. The care may be simple, if the children are poor, but some measure of care will be guaranteed. Misery and loneliness at old age, on the other hand, is the result of a selfish, irresponsible life. The care, which is given to the elderly, is increasingly a measure of the care that they gave to their children when they were young. That past determines their present status. Stucki who did research in another Akan community, describes the status of elderhood as a result of careful management, based on a successful life. One of her informants remarked:

You need money to have people come and greet you – they will want drinks. If you do not have anything to offer, they will not come back. If no one in the family comes to you, you will stay in your room and ‘rot’. You will be worried because when you are sick no one will come and you will die and no one will know (Stucki 1995: 120).

Being well at old age and having a partner, children and grandchildren who care for you ‘shines’ on the old person. It gives him/her respect. The beauty of good care at old age is what can be *seen*: respect; the ‘engine’ of the care arrangement is more hidden: reciprocity.

The whims of reciprocity

When people in Kwahu-Tafo assure me that reciprocity brings security in old age, they formulate a traditional rule and ideal, not a 'fact.' It is wishful thinking and wishful speaking, performative language: by saying it, they hope to make it come true. But they know it can never be guaranteed. There are no 'iron laws' in human behaviour. The system of reciprocity may fail in a material sense when those paying back do not have the means to do so. The system may fail emotionally as well if the children are unwilling or unable to care for their ageing parents for whatever reason.⁴ Let us look more closely at both possibilities.

As I said before, material vulnerability may not be countered by reciprocity because those who are supposed to pay back also find themselves in precarious economic circumstances and are not able to provide sufficient food, shelter and other material livelihood essentials to the elderly. One inherent 'injustice' of reciprocity is that those who have little, also have little to give to their children and may receive little or nothing back from them. Aboderin (2006) describes this dilemma for older people in the city of Accra. Kabki (2007), who studied local and transnational support networks in the Asante Region, points out that those who are well-off (built a house, successful in trading or farming, etc.) are also the ones who receive most help when they face a crisis. The saying *Sika frè mogya* ('Money calls blood/relatives') is also true in this sense.

Of course, material security is always a relative experience as phenomenologists and supporters of the 'relative deprivation' theory have argued in the past. Mercy Ofori's situation is a case in point. Her life is miserable in many respects, but she praises her son and his family for their constant help. What is lacking materially – food, shelter, health – is compensated by the social and moral support she receives. Her positive reactions to our questions demonstrate a remarkable resilience which no doubt can be attributed to the social and emotional capital that is paid back to her by the family living in the same compound with her.⁵ Reciprocity, after all, presents itself as the hidden source of resilience. Or, referring back to the 'soft' and comprehensive definition of livelihood at the outset of this paper, Maame Mercy also needs emotional 'food' to survive in her miserable condition.

I just wrote "paid back", but remarks by her son indicate that he did not so much pay back what he had received from his mother in a direct line; he hardly stayed with her during his childhood. His concern about his mother's welfare is more complex: a general feeling of debt that children owe to their parents, underwritten by Biblical quotations (the son is a staunch Jehovah Witness). Moreover, society is watching. Children who do not take care of their parents are heavily criticised. Sanctions of public shame and loss of respect thus contribute to the principle of reciprocity. Only when older people made a mess of their life and neglected their parental and familial duties entirely, society will show more understanding and condone the children's reluctance or refusal to take care of their elderly parents. But even then, they are supposed to provide at least the most basic services. Mr. H. is an example:

Mr H. was employed as a pupil teacher/catechist during his youthful days. He later left for the Volta Region to work as a shoemaker. There, he had two children with a woman, one girl and one boy. Their marriage lasted a few years.

He came to Kwahu-Tafo to stay there for a few years working in the Catholic Mission but went back to the Volta Region to continue his work as a shoemaker. When he fell sick he came back home. He has two sisters and many nephews and nieces, but none except one prepared to render him the necessary help because they said when he was in good health he never helped them. His children are not around. It is his sister who is assisting him. Mr. H is drinking and sells some of the clothes given to him to buy drinks and stake lotto.

The failures of children to provide social and moral support for parents and other older relatives who did fulfil their duties in the past is a more enigmatic whim of the reciprocity system. My tentative 'explanation' is that children (apart from – obviously – character differences) who live nearby can indeed not afford to fail in this respect. The community will criticise them and brandish them as disgraceful. For those who live further away, however, the social sanctions are less pressing. Respect and shame are predominantly matters of the eye. Visible presence in the town or in the house where the older relative is living, which does not result in social attention and moral support is severely criticised. Absence, however, provides more leeway to failing one's obligations.⁶ One who 'runs away' is not seen and therefore falls largely outside the realm of public condemnation. Moreover, there is also the excuse that the absent person may be sending money, which is a more private act that cannot be openly observed by the wider community.

As a result, it is not only reciprocity that determines who cares for who, but also proximity, as I argued in an earlier publication (Van der Geest 2002). Who happens to stay with an older person in the same house is supposed to take his/her responsibility for that older person. So we see a mixture of long-term, general, reciprocity with the type of short-term reciprocity that occurs in daily interactions of give-and-take, action-and-response. Life is indeed a complex of long- and short-term obligations, ranging from deeply felt indebtedness to obeying public rules of decency.

Resilience

Reciprocity is fraught with ambiguity and contradiction. Is my understanding of Mercy Ofori's situation anywhere near to how she experienced her old age? My guess is that she felt miserable about her extreme poverty and dependency and about her physical disabilities in addition to the long hours of loneliness. At the same time she derived comfort from the fact that her son and his family respected her and tried their utmost for her. The emotional satisfaction she derived from this gave her the resilience to endure the hardship of her old age.

Resilience in the case of Mercy Ofori was not her ability to rebuild her life after surviving the blows that life meted out to her. Resilience in old age is the emotional

strength to accept the gradual decline in physical health, mobility and social importance without giving in to chagrin or bitterness. That ability, I have tried to argue, draws its strength from the social capital that has been built up in the past and/or still surrounds the older person today. It turns old age into a highly ambiguous enterprise. Poverty, misery and loneliness may accompany inner feelings of contentment. That contentment derives from the conviction that one's life has been meaningful to others and therefore to oneself.

In the case of Mercy Ofori, gratitude alternated with moments of sadness and bitterness. Next to her complaints I heard her speak moving words about the goodness of life thanks to her son and his family. I have taken her situation as a case to demonstrate the whimsical and unpredictable nature of reciprocity as a determinant of security or insecurity at old age. But if we could fully understand her experiences and knew the details of her life history, reciprocity would perhaps prove less whimsical.

Notes

The author is a cultural and medical anthropologist at the University of Amsterdam. Personal website: www.sjaakvandergeest.nl; email: s.vandergeest@uva.nl.

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- 1 My choosing the experiences of one older person to engage in a discussion on theoretical concepts has been inspired by Pat Caplan's touching portrait of one woman's experiences of old age in Tanzania (Caplan 1998).
- 2 In another case, a woman left her husband in the city of Kumasi (about 120 km from Kwahu-Tafo) to stay with her old parents who needed help. She said that her husband agreed with her decision and that she went to visit him every two weeks. Neighbours and other people praised her for her action. After her parents had died, she never returned to Kumasi to join the husband. Today, twelve years after the death of her father, she has settled in Kwahu-Tafo. She apparently had additional reasons to come and stay there.
- 3 *Òpanyin* (elder) is an honorific term. In a strict sense it refers to an older man who has been successful in life and enjoys people's respect but the term is also more loosely used for any older man (cf. Van der Geest 1998).
- 4 Aboderin (2006), who studied intergenerational reciprocity in an urban context in Ghana, mentioned two main causes for the decline in material support for older relatives: "shrinking resource capacity of children" and "changes in the normative basis of filial support." The latter implied, among other things, a shift from past-directed to future-directed support, that is: giving increasingly "priority to the needs of the young [one's children] before those of the old [one's parents]."

- 5 For Bourdieu, respect, honour and family cohesion are ‘symbolic capital’. He writes: “symbolic capital is ... denied capital, recognized as legitimate ... in the sense of gratitude aroused by benefits ... which, along with religious capital ... is perhaps the only possible form of accumulation when economic capital is not recognized” (Bourdieu 1990: 118). I prefer to call it ‘social capital’ because these values are inherently social and I want to emphasise that emotional support is as much part of social capital as material help.
- 6 A devastating example of the whims of reciprocity is presented in Cliggett’s (2005) study of older people in Zambia. The absconding of their children to distant towns leaves older people completely on their own. Some of the migrants openly admitted that living far away helped them to save resources for their own needs.

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