

Book review

Coping with old age in a changing Africa

by Nana Araba Apt

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Students of ageing in Africa will welcome *Coping with old age in a changing Africa*. It meets the need for a book written by a gerontologist committed to portraying an insider view of Africa's social problems and finding home-grown solutions.

The title, however, is misleading. Apt's book is about growing old in Ghana, as indicated in the minute subtitle which appears on the title page but not on the cover of the book. Nevertheless, readers will learn much about Africa from the Ghanaian case study.

Contents

The book is divided in seven chapters. The first chapter addresses ageing in Africa in relation to global trends and pinpoints salient features of social change which have affected ageing on the continent. Apt shares the sociological viewpoint of E.W. Burgess which states the problem as follows: "As societies evolve from tribal and agrarian economies to an individualized and urbanized style of life, the traditional high status of the elderly becomes undermined while the roles typically allocated to them become greatly modified" (p. 4). A recurrent theme in the book is that modernization in the form of urbanization and education has brought changes to the traditional power structure in African society, has stretched the cultural gap between young and old, and has made older women particularly vulnerable. An important reference point for Apt is the 1982 Vienna World Assembly on Ageing where African delegates found that they shared a commonly held notion of African ageing that "... modernisation has brought about widespread alterations in the traditional extended family system ... these have ... [had a] negative impact on the support and well-being of the elderly in our society" (p.13).

The middle section of the book discusses the degree to which the extended family system has been eroded in Ghana to the detriment of the power and respect enjoyed by the elderly.

Chapter 2 analyses the Ghanaian family system from the perspective of the elderly. The picture painted by Apt is of an ideal society where theoretically, at least, a gerontocracy accorded the aged authority and respect which was never challenged. The elderly were fully integrated into social and economic life and the extended family system of exchanges of services provided a safety net in old age.

Drawing on census statistics and the literature, Chapter 3 outlines the social changes which occurred in Ghana during the period 1960 to 1980 which have transformed society from the traditional ideal. Apt identifies migration, urbanization,

education and wage labour as the main factors which have affected the living arrangements and support system of the elderly in the current age.

We are then presented with the findings of a sample survey of elders conducted in 1988 in Ghana's coastal Central Region. Over 1 000 older men and women of mainly Akan ethnic origin were interviewed personally in four urban and rural sites. Chapter 4 gives the characteristics of the survey sites; Chapter 5 reports on quantitative findings on living conditions and life satisfaction of the elderly and a follow-up study of coping strategies adopted by older Ghanaian women. The survey identified occasional trading, economies and alms as the three most important methods of making ends meet. The follow-up studies analyze in greater depth survival strategies which build on intergenerational exchanges including occupational gifting, taking in lodgers and offering child care.

Chapter 6 reproduces the complete life histories of 20 older Ghanaians collected in 1988 and 1989. The cases illustrate situations ranging from complete social integration to marginalization and isolation. The case histories include the personal evaluation of current life circumstances and commentary on the attitudes and behaviour of younger generations.

In conclusions drawn in Chapter 7, Apt recommends social policy designed to strengthen what still remains of the family support networks in Africa to promote the living arrangements and social integration of the elderly which will restore their dignity and general wellbeing. In her view, intergenerational programmes and policies which are seen to benefit both the young and the old, will be attractive to the youthful countries of Africa and stand the greatest chance of success.

Historical perspective

The format of the book is essentially that of a research report on ageing in Ghana prefaced by a general introduction to global ageing and the demographic transition and followed by a set of recommendations to resolve ageing issues by way of conclusion. The book brings together a rich collection of original research conducted by the author and colleagues working in Ghana over several decades, which creates a heightened awareness of history and social change. The materials span more than three decades from the sixties to the early nineties. However, the retrospective is strong; the older materials dominate to the extent that one wonders whether the book was held up in press. The bulk of the research material is from the mid to the late eighties and the anchor data from

Ghana's population census go back even further. We are not given more recent census figures, possibly because none are available, but we are not informed that this is the case. Similarly, over four-fifths of the references (some 81 of 98) are to works published before 1990, the exceptions being mainly the author's own work.

The subject index and glossary make the volume a useful reference work for students of gerontology. In the glossary readers learn that Apt favours the usage of the term "ageing" to "elderly" or "aged" in line with that of United Nations experts. Ageing connotes continuing development and change in later life rather than a fixed period of life.

A final quibble is that the editing of the book is indifferent in some sections.

Lessons for South Africa

What can readers in southern Africa learn from Apt's account of ageing in Ghana?

First, South Africans will learn more about their own society by comparison. Given the dramatic account of social changes occurring in Ghanaian society in earlier chapters, this reader was surprised to learn that the majority of Ghanaian elders (no percentage figure is given) are still living in the family or ancestral home and with family. Just under 10 % live with maids who care for their needs rather than family and a further 2 % live entirely on their own (p. 74). In comparison, almost all non-institutionalized elderly in South Africa live in multigeneration households (Ferreira, Møller, Prinsloo & Gillis, 1992).

Perhaps the deepest insights are to be gained from Apt's discussion of survival strategies of the elderly, which will be familiar to readers of the *Southern African Journal of Gerontology*, and the life histories. There is no doubt that Nana Apt's book will find its rightful place on the bookshelves of African gerontologists, who may be inspired to replicate the Ghanaian life history project in their own region as part of a new African research agenda in social gerontology.

Social change comes alive in the oral histories of the elderly Ghanaians. Ordinary Ghanaians share with readers their innermost thoughts and afford glimpses into their personal lives to complete strangers. Readers are made fully aware of the degree to which old-age security hinges on personal care and financial support received from children. Older Ghanaians had invested in their children and the ancestral home in the expectation that this support would be forthcoming in their old age. The portraits of ageing in Chapter 6 represent valuable material against which African gerontologists outside of Ghana can compare the pace of change occurring in their own societies. Comparisons may be somewhat blunted by the fact that Akan extended families of the Central Region are organized along matrilineal lines. Readers who are not familiar with the matrilineal descent pattern may have difficulties in appreciating the significance of some behaviour patterns, although Apt thoughtfully provides guidance to finer details in footnotes.

The description of the survey sites and the life histories portray Ghana as a less developed society than South Africa. South Africa's post-apartheid campaigns to introduce piped water and electricity even to remote rural areas should make the contrast yet more striking in future. Further, rural livelihoods in South Africa tend to focus on non-agricultural sources of income. Remittances and government transfers represent the main sources of income for the South African rural poor, including the elderly (Ministry in the Office of the President, 1995). However, if the South African government were to reduce pension benefits in future, the social security situation of elderly South Africans would become more simi-

lar to that of their elderly counterparts in Ghana. In short, Apt's basic recommendations bear listening to in all parts of Africa.

Nana Apt generally paints a gloomy picture of ageing in Africa. Her survey respondents lament the passing of traditional society and the more prosperous past. The elder in Case 4 even goes so far as to regret "our independence from our colonial masters" (p. 110). Apt makes no allowances for the discourse of complaint which the elderly are known to engage in; the complaints of the elderly are taken at face value. Indeed Apt appears to side with the elderly who complain about the rising cost of living, corruption and the disrespect of the younger generation in contemporary Ghana. Nonetheless, Apt is fully aware that the olden times cannot be brought back. In the lessons learned from female traders' strategies for survival in old age and her conclusions she strikes an optimistic note. Africans will find their own appropriate solution.

Some South African readers might take exception to Apt's distinction between "black Africa" and "South Africa" (p. 143). Apt may have good reason to set South Africa apart from the rest of Africa. Only South Africa and Namibia operate a non-contributory state old-age pension system which provides an extra safety net for elders (Lund, 1993; Adamchak, 1995). However, most will agree with Apt's views that gender issues and intergenerational support should be on the policy agenda for all of Africa.

Apt recommends intergenerational social welfare projects, policies and programmes – ideas which can be applied throughout Africa. As regards the application of domestic arrangements with in-built intergenerational support in the South African situation, the migrant labour system and harsh apartheid laws have eroded the extended family system. Nevertheless, the vast majority of older black South Africans continue to live with family in multigenerational households. It remains to be seen in future whether the new housing and economic opportunities which have opened up to black South Africans in the post-apartheid era will favour nuclear families or the kind of intergenerational solutions favoured by Apt. Judging from the recent decline of the average household size, the domestic arrangement with in-built intergenerational support may be on the way out.

It will not pass unnoticed by southern African readers that Apt's agenda for an intergenerational society set out in the conclusions is associated with human rights and the coming of democracy to Ghana. "Democracy requires the recognition of all its constituent parts and the elderly are a growing and ultimately a predominant constituency" (p. 144). Core recommendations refer to the contributions which the elderly can make to society to reduce the welfare burden, the need to strengthen existing and new intergenerational programmes to enhance the wellbeing of the elderly, protection and assistance to promote the economic independence of older women, and the re-education of society to restore traditional values of social esteem of the aged. No doubt Apt will strike a sympathetic chord among her South African readers when she appeals to African self-confidence and pride and recommends building on indigenous institutions to find suitable solutions to meet the challenges of ageing in a rapidly changing society.

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