

# Ageing and old age in pre-industrial Africa: elderly persons among 19th-century Xhosa-speaking peoples

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## Abstract

*Thusfar, African gerontologists have not attended to precolonial ageing, except to subscribe to a 'timeless' perspective rooted in modernization theory's 'golden age narrative.' This paper sketches some dimensions of the ageing experience in a pre-industrial African "nation", the Xhosa-speaking societies in South Africa. It begins with a reconstruction of precolonial residence patterns and the economic status of elderly persons before it turns to the issue of cultural representations of ageing and old age in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Notwithstanding the intimate association of (male) ageing with accumulation of economic resources, the belief in ancestors functioned as a fundamental instrument by which old-age authority was upheld, apart from its colouring the very notion of Xhosa old age. Having examined the religious basis of the ageing experience, finally the gendered nature of old-age security is discussed. In a nutshell, it is argued that even though age was different in social and cultural terms – and was thus an important aspect of any individual's identity, age alone never defined any person's economic status or social identity. Gender and kinship, but also biographically conditioned factors, affected the experience of old age. The notion of old age as an abstract entity is a Western-based construct which reflects an ageist conception, i.e. (chronological) old age as the determinant of old people's identity, and the inadequate comprehension of other prime social processes that moulded the lives of elderly persons rather than the reality of old age in precolonial Xhosa communities.*

## Introduction

Until now, the recent advances in African gerontology (Ferreira, 1997) have not led to any genuine interest in the history of old age in African societies and communities. A paucity of data imposes stringent limits on our ability to reconstruct the history of old age in pre-industrial African societies. The study of African old age, viewed from a historical perspective, is undoubtedly hampered by a dearth of relevant written records and befogged by a lack of reliable demographic and other statistical data which would allow us, for example, to investigate such matters as the position in the household of persons of various ages, their kin relationships, and the actual work patterns of older persons in Africa's past. However, while an African historical demography of ageing

– modelled on recent advances in European and American old age research (e.g. Kertzer & Laslett, 1995) – will probably remain unattainable, at least for the precolonial era,<sup>1</sup> an African history of old age offers some prospects of success. For many African countries, collections of valuable source material are at our disposal – even though they do not touch on gerontological issues *per se* – that have never been analyzed for the purposes of such an academic enterprise. In fact, it could be argued that the lack of a historical perspective in African gerontology mirrors the young discipline's continued reliance on modernization theory (with its attendant ahistoricism) – compounded by a lack of interest in the historiography of old age among African historians – rather than non-availability of respective data *per se*.

According to the standard historical narrative in African gerontology, modernization meant unprecedented and progressive status denigration of and impoverishment for the elderly; old age, once a privileged life-cycle phase, was turned to a socially and economically disadvantaged stage of life in the modern era. Without a doubt, there is evidence that African old people were degraded and impoverished during modernization/industrialization. However, there is a tendency among scholars interested in African ageing to assume, rather than demonstrate, first, the role and status of older persons in the past and, second, the nature of historical transformation of old age during colonialization and modernization. Recent historical research on the history of old age in North America and Europe has succinctly shown that lineal development models (whether modernization or political economy theory inspired) are far too deterministic and simplistic to account for the structural transformation of old age and the lived experience of old people, both in the past and the present (e.g. Haber & Gratton, 1994). It is about time that African old age research attends to the issue of historical (re-)constructions of old age. Before we can hope to develop adequate theoretical and conceptual models of the impact of social change on old age, we have to grasp the contrast between the past and the present. The understanding of the (pre-)colonial experience is also a necessary component in providing African decision makers with background to Africa's alleged looming "old-age crisis" (e.g. Adamchak, 1996).

It is hoped that this article may contribute to such an emerging field of research, despite its limited scope. The paper focusses on the ageing experience in one pre-industrial

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African region, the Xhosa-speaking South Nguni chiefdoms in South Africa.<sup>2</sup> However, this article does not (and cannot) claim to provide a fully-fledged account of the ageing experience in 19th-century Xhosa-speaking communities as space does not allow me to dwell on contemporary historical changes that impinged on the social experiences of older people and cultural representations of old age. There is thus an obvious limitation in the following account – especially as the 19th century witnessed the final drawing of “the Xhosa” into the embrace of mission Christianity and Western capitalism, thereby setting off tremendous changes in the everyday world of Xhosa-speakers. As is well-known, even before the military conquest/colonial annexation of Xhosa politics (completed in 1894) and the accompanying transformation of the precolonial socio-economic and political systems economic expansion, Western technology and missionary activity had already begun to transform the Xhosa economy, politics and ideologies (e.g. Beinart, 1982; Peires, 1981: 95-108). This paper’s objective is thus very modest, and yet clearly ambitious as it intends to review some of the roles and status of premodern Xhosa elderly persons and intends to reconstruct the cultural conceptualizations of (old) age and ageing in these societies, *before* they were reshaped in the course of the intrusion of white agents of the colonial world.<sup>3</sup>

### Sources

The notion “premodern” as used in this article refers to a way of life which existed in the late 18th and early/mid-19th centuries. Although the available written accounts of travellers, missionaries and other contemporary observers must be interpreted with (sometimes extreme) caution (cf. Pratt, 1992), men such as Alberti (1810), Barrow (1801/04), Kropf (1889), Lichtenstein (1811) and Steedman (1835) in the 19th century have left first-rate descriptions of the life of Xhosa communities before European conquest, allowing (at least) a glimpse of the ageing experience in the pre-industrial era. In this context, mention must also be made of the famous 1883 Commission on Native Laws and Customs (Cape of Good Hope, 1883), which is an invaluable mine of information on 19th-century South Nguni societies, though it has to be interpreted with *extreme* caution. In addition, due to scholarly activity over the past two decades, there is a rich literature on the dynamics of pre-industrial societies in southern Africa (e.g. Lewis, 1992). Insofar as these “new” social historians have confronted the problem of social age in their analyses, their work is of utmost relevance for any history of old age.

Since anthropology has a long and distinguished tradition in South Africa, we have some excellent ethnographies on Xhosa-speaking peoples (e.g. Hammond-Tooke, 1962; Hunter, 1936; Kuckertz, 1990). Although “it is obvious that one cannot take contemporary rural societies and cultures as being identical to those of these same societies before contact, yet it is true that *some* customs, values, attitudes and ways of life have persisted to the present (original emphasis)” (Hammond-Tooke, 1993: 9). Cautiously used, 20th-century ethnographic monographs can therefore be used to throw light on the Xhosa past. This applies particularly to Monica Hunter’s seminal study on the Mpondo: based on field research in the early 1930s, many of her older informants were born and had grown up in the precolonial era. In contrast, Fuller’s often quoted review article, *Ageing among Southern African Bantu* (Fuller, 1972), proved to be hardly helpful as it makes no explicit reference to the Xhosa-speaking peoples. It is fair to argue that the article’s selective use of the (then) available sources reflects its rather extensive scope of reference; the latter also contributes to the

decontextualization of the ageing experience of the pre-industrial elderly.

### Homesteads, production and older persons

The precolonial Xhosa inhabited large tracts of today’s Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. Cattle were the mainstay of their economy, permeating almost every aspect of social life, from marriage to religion. Milk provided the main food, although agricultural produce was an important supplement.<sup>4</sup> Patrilineal kinship and economically almost self-sufficient homesteads were crucial structural principles defining the social identity of the individual (cf. Kuckertz, 1990). The Xhosa lived in large complex homesteads (*umzi*, pl. *imizi*), both lineally and laterally extended, and, as a rule, comprising several independent (partly) polygynous joint families (i.e. households). Women moved to the homes of their husbands on marriage. As marriage was exogamous, wives belonged to other descent groups (i.e. clans) than their husbands, making them structural outsiders in their new homes. According to the 1848 census of the Ngqika Xhosa – the first census of an African people in southern Africa – the average homestead comprised between 24 and 25 persons (Lewis, 1992; cf. Brownlee, 1858: 128-129). In his seminal analysis of this census, Lewis found that the largest homesteads comprised more than 100 persons, while the smallest housed only three individuals.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, marriage did not automatically lead to the establishment of an independent *umzi* (e.g. Cape of Good Hope, 1883: 1479, 1518, 7746;<sup>6</sup> Hammond-Tooke, 1962: 35, 39). In fact, Lewis found that about half of all married men lived in larger *imizi*. Even though pre-industrial life-course trajectories and cultural beliefs encouraged all men to marry and to establish their own *umzi*, many married men remained in their parents’ (or other kin’s) homes – particularly younger sons (e.g. Alberti, 1810: 58; Kropf, 1889: 131). Among the Bhaca there was a saying: “As he is the youngest [son] the parents must die with him” (Hammond-Tooke, 1962: 152).

As heads of (composite) households, younger married men who still lived in their parents’ homesteads held authority within their respective households but not beyond. “In fact the homestead head was a little king within his domain, with powers of life and death over all who lived in it” (Hammond-Tooke, 1993: 55). Among the Xhosa proper and other South Nguni, all homestead members remained minors in economic and legal terms, irrespective of their respective (biological and/or social) age. But even if sons did move out, immediate pragmatic concerns such as availability of near kin and cultural prescriptions made them settle nearby. As a consequence, *imizi* of close patrilineal kin used to group together for mutual assistance (agnatic clusters). Further, independent residency did not mean abandonment of the parental homestead or complete liberation from parental control. Among the Mpondo there was a saying that *yonke impahla kayise xa uyise esekho*, meaning “all his property is his father’s while his father is alive” (Hunter, 1936: 121-122). During his father’s lifetime a man remained under his authority (e.g. Kropf, 1889: 134). (This even held true beyond death, when the father assumed the character of an ancestor spirit (cf. Pauw, 1975: 156-165).) As an African witness to the famous 1883 Commission on Native Laws and Customs put it:

*Had he [the father] any power over you after you got married? – Yes, I was under my father all his life time. If a father tells his son to go to another kraal, he gives him so many cattle, and says ‘go and build over there.’ The father commands the whole family during his life time* (Cape, 1883: 1480).

The complex and large settlement structures were strongly related to the particular economic and political circumstances faced by precolonial Xhosa communities. First, given the scattered residence patterns of homesteads, effective military protection depended to some extent on a large number of able-bodied men (Holden, 1866: 226; Native Economic Commission (hereafter NEC), 1930-32: 3410). Second, homestead size was intimately related to the control of economic resources. The availability of land and access to cattle affected a married couple's decision to disengage from the husband's parents' *umzi*. As males accumulated productive resources as they grew older, younger men (and their families) often perforce encountered fundamental problems of getting access to necessary economic resources and establishing their independence. (Although land was not a scarce resource *per se* in precolonial Xhosa chiefdoms, well-watered and fertile fields often tended to be (cf. Kay, 1833: 142).) Further, since cattle were the principal medium of exchange in marriage contracts, it was primarily elderly men who could acquire many wives and thus fields, thereby in turn increasing their wealth and – as status largely depended on dispensing hospitality and showing generosity – prestige. Hence, larger and wealthier *imizis* tended to be controlled by older men (and members of the royal families).

Structurally, there was then a main contradiction between unmarried men, married men who settled in larger *imizis*, and the mass of younger homestead heads, often indebted to wealthier heads of homesteads on the one hand and the small group of older and dominant homestead heads, who controlled a large part of the societal economic resources in the form of cattle, labour and productive land, on the other hand (Lewis, 1992).<sup>7</sup> According to the 1848 Ngqika census the wealthiest 25 per cent of homesteads owned over 60 per cent of the total cattle population (Lewis, 1992: 68-70). Since economic and political processes were inextricably linked in pre-capitalist societies, it is little wonder that this minority of older and wealthier homestead heads played a commanding role in the chiefdoms' political life: they sat at the *inkundla* (chief's council) and held positions of political importance. As counsellors (*amaphakathi*, lit. "those inside"), or great men, they were the natural allies of the chiefs. Although a chief redistributed part of his accumulated cattle resources among the chiefdom's poor and needy (Peires, 1981: 32, 33; NEC, 1930-32: 3035-36), main beneficiaries were his great men whose loyalty he needed most. As Shaw observed in the mid-19th century:

*Hence [i.e. to render himself popular] his [the chief's] frequent presents of cattle to the most important and influential of his people, ... (Shaw, 1860: 441; cf. Cape, 1883: 7608).*

The generational conflict sketched above informed the expansionist drive of precolonial Xhosa chiefdoms as younger men strived for their economic and social independence (cf. Kay, 1833: 152). As Dugmore (1858: 35) noted: "There are always numbers of young men of a restless, roving disposition ready for any career of adventure that holds out the prospect of obtaining cattle." However, in times of political change, the structural conflict in the socio-economic organization could vent its destructive force on the "old elite": as new incumbents to chiefly power were keen to build up their own power base and tried to tie men of their own generation to themselves, the old chief's advisors could constitute a great hindrance to a young chief's economic and political advancement. Notwithstanding the fact that witchcraft accusations were most likely hurled at women, in times of political change "one after another of the old *amap(h)akat(h)i* [fell] a

victim to an accusation of witchcraft, the Kaffir state engine for the removal of the obnoxious" (Holden, 1866: 326; cf. Boyce, 1838: 61-63; Warner, 1858: 94). In the end, wealth, power and old-age seniority (see below) offered no reliable protection for the old and most influential *amaphakathi*.

However, this is not the only reason why a simple "golden-age" model of old age does not do justice to the ageing experience in precolonial Xhosa communities. Apart from profound gender-based differences (see below), early reports show clearly that not all older men presided over such large *imizis*, but lived rather solitary lives in very small homesteads (e.g. Kay, 1833: 77). Moreover, the relative affluence of older men must be set within the context of general scarcity in premodern Xhosa chiefdoms. The economic position of all remained fragile and perilous (e.g. Steedman, 1835, Vol. 1: 41-42, 195-196, 253), even though smaller (and younger) homesteads tended to be more vulnerable to the vagaries of droughts and other natural calamities.

### Life course, ageing and old age

Similar to other cultural core concepts, the endeavour to define the notion of (old) age among the pre-industrial Xhosa poses some profound problems of cultural translation. While the English term "old" usually refers to somebody who has advanced in years, chronologically measured, chronological age did not inform Xhosa concepts of age. As Alberti (1810: 43-44; cf. Lichtenstein, 1811, Vol. 1: 346) put it:

*The description of the age of a child that is absent is usually described by holding the flat hand above the ground to indicate his height and to deduce his age from that. In the same way a woman says that she is one, two, three, or more children old, meaning that she has given birth to that number of children. Both methods of indicating age are, however, very unrealistic and apart from this, are only applicable in the case of children or women. The Kafirs do not at all know how to indicate a greater age.*

This is not to say that chronological (absolute) age was not indirectly available. In fact, for observers it would have been possible to calculate people's approximate age, based on reference to historical incidents and/or "family time." (For the Xhosa, however, this (theoretical) possibility was irrelevant as they subscribed to notions of cyclical rather than lineal time, defined by seasonal agricultural pursuits. In short, time was not an abstract entity but was indissolubly connected with social practice as it acted upon the passage of the seasons (cf. Comaroff, 1985: 66, 127).) Family memory tended to associate a person's birth (as well as initiation and marriage, etc.) with then contemporary historical or political events (cf. NEC, 1930-32: 3023). Often personal names made even direct reference to some incident which had happened at the time of a person's birth (e.g. Hunter, 1936: 155). Further, the Xhosa showed a great concern with relative age, particularly in the family circle and among kin. Every person could be exactly placed according to his relative age *vis-à-vis* his (patrilineal) kinsmen.

This concern with birth order was reflected in kinship terminology: there were different terms for an older and a younger brother and for an older and a younger father's brother, etc. In premodern Xhosa communities even slight differences in age carried notions of superiority and inferiority; the elder had small but real prerogatives. Thus "the younger sons of a family [were] not competent to marry while their elder brother remain[ed] single" (Dugmore, 1858: 47). Seniority was then a relative concept; at first glance it was relative age that distinguished a senior (*omdala*, lit. oldster) from a junior (*umntwana*, lit. child) (Kuckertz, 1990: 278).

With increasing age there were more and more relationships in which one was the elder; consequently, more and more respect could be expected. However, given the demographics of reproduction, seniority by relative age did not necessarily equal seniority by generation, and vice versa. In fact, age-based hierarchy and inequality were easily eclipsed by genealogical/kinship differences, based on primogeniture (and generational membership); this reflected the significance of the patrilineal principle in South Nguni societies. Seniority as a cultural concept and social practice was, therefore, not unambiguous nor as clear-cut as a simple gerontocratic model would imply (cf. Fuller, 1972). Referring to the Mpondo among whom the eldest grandson inherited the property of his grandfather, Hunter stated:

*So strong is the emphasis on primogeniture that when the eldest son of an eldest son is already a married man when his grandfather dies, he takes precedence of a younger brother of his father living in his deceased grandfather's umzi, and becomes head of the umzi. 'It is the nephew who kills. He is older than his uncle' (sic!) (Hunter, 1936: 29; cf. Hammond-Tooke, 1962: 49).*

Hunter's observation shows, again, that spiritual authority was *not* vested in old age *per se*. And spiritual authority did not necessarily coincide with economic and political power. In any case, age and kinship differences constituted only two loci of morally sanctioned seniority. Rank (referring to the noble/commoner divide) and gender (see below) were others.

The Xhosa-speaking peoples also conceptually distinguished several stages of life. Neglecting differences between the sexes, these stages were childhood, boy-/girlhood, young adulthood, full adulthood and senior adulthood<sup>8</sup> (Wilson *et al.*, 1952: 109-110; cf. Van Eeden, 1991: 11-24). Ideally, these stages stood in a hierarchical relationship to each other. With the passage from one stage to the next, a person acquired more status and seniority, most notably within his/her gender group. For women this increase of authority was revealed, for example, at rituals and beer drinks (e.g. Liebenberg, 1997: 361-363). Linguistically the last stage was set apart by putting the adjective *-k(h)ulu* (lit. large, great, big) behind the nouns *indoda* (i.e. (full) man) and *umfazi* (i.e. (full) woman). However, apart from boys' initiation and girls' puberty ceremonies, transitions from one life-stage to the next were only rarely marked by distinctive rituals. This almost complete lack of life-course rituals – as symbolic expressions of the transfer of individuals from one social position to another – after initiation (and marriage) showed that ageing was conceived as a gradual process without conspicuous status breaks and changes. Except for promotion to the status of full adulthood which tended to be formalized and signaled by a feast in the local cultural models, there was no vital change of status in later life which had to be “managed” by any ritual.

Although we lack conclusive evidence of premodern Xhosa formal age categorization, following Wilson's and Van Eeden's research, one may infer that the social promotion of (full) men (*amadoda*) and (full) women (*abafazi*) to the status of senior adulthood (i.e. old age) was traditionally rather flexible; according to them the transition neither took place on a formal basis nor was it tied to any particular social role (e.g. grandparenthood) or physical state (e.g. menopause). Monica Wilson *et al.* (1952: 114) quote an informant, in 1950, stating that a man or a woman knew “when it was their time” to become an *indoda enkulu* or an *umfazi omkhulu*, despite the lack of any fixed cultural timetable for these promotions. Van Eeden (1991: 19-20), referring to his field research among the Xhosa proper in the late 1980s,

stated that “old age and the aged in Xhosa society cannot be considered independently of other age categories in the life cycle,” as formal transition to senior adulthood was, in the case of women, “determined by marriage sequence as well as the number of younger women who [had already] joined the ranks of [the old age] category.” A similar logic, based on the number of initiation associations ascended to senior adulthood status, arguably prevailed in the case of men. In both cases the transition to senior status was made individually, effected by common consent of the already senior men and women. Looking at the ageing experience in the 20th century, both authors argued that in chronological terms the life stage of (formal) old age started at about 60. From a demographic point of view, there is no *a priori* reason why this should not have been the case in 19th-century Xhosa communities as well.<sup>9</sup>

However, earlier sources would suggest that old age (i.e. senior adulthood) denoted, colloquially at least, primarily “maturity,” and referred to manhood (*ubudoda*) and womanhood (*ubufazi*) (cf. Cape, 1883: 1470-71). It is significant that the Xhosa expression *abantu abadala*, commonly translated as “old people” and considered an alternative term to categorize senior men and women (Hunter, 1936: 231; Van Eeden, 1991: 15), is rendered as “grown-up people” in McLaren's dictionary (1915). This corresponds closely with other earlier evidence. African witnesses told the Native Economic Commission in 1930, for example, that in “the olden days” only long-married women “who had at least four children” and “were [thus] old” were allowed to attend beer drinks (NEC, 1930-32: 3020, 3040). Interestingly, Van Eeden (1991: 18) emphasized that permission to attend such feasts was an indication that a woman had reached the stage of (full) womanhood. And a male African witness pointed out that a man regarded himself as old when he had a “big son” (NEC, 1930-32: 2712). Arguably then, the cultural distinction between old age and full adulthood was a difference of degree rather than kind, despite the prevailing system of formal age categorization. Hunter (1936: 237) indirectly realized that, when she indicated that an “old” woman was “not necessarily past child-bearing, but a person of consequence in her *umzi*” (Hunter, 1936: 237).

Principally, formal age categories as cultural constructs were to a large extent divorced from chronological or biological ageing. This was particularly evident in the social construction of manhood. In most South Nguni societies, circumcision was a *sine qua non* for distinguishing boyhood from manhood. An uninitiated adult man was therefore a contradiction in terms, or, as Warner put it: “An uncircumcised male, though as old as Methuselah, would still be considered but a *boy* in the estimation of Kafir society (original emphasis)” (Warner, 1858: 103; cf. Dugmore, 1858: 160). Evidently, age identities were not a simple intrinsic attribute of the ageing process. In fact, despite the transformative power and centrality of rituals in some life-course transitions, age identities were rather a capacity which had to be revealed in interaction with others. In other words, a person's age identity was, in part, informed by what he/she did (and how he/she did it). Arguably, this held particularly true for the normative redefinition of a person as “old”. To describe old-age identity as an abstract status would thus be to reify it unwarrantably.

Given the indigenous Xhosa notion of personhood as a processual entity (i.e. as something continuously growing with the acquisition of experience and age), the available evidence would indicate that old age was culturally construed not as decay but as perfection of the former stage of full adulthood. This was mirrored in the metaphorical association of

old age with wisdom and experience – the latter being one of the fundamental signifiers of old age (Holden, 1866: 112, 115, 124; Laubscher, 1937: 92). However, precolonial Xhosa conceptions of ageing were somewhat contradictory. On the one hand Xhosa concepts of ageing were definitely non-linear, i.e. they went beyond biological and bodily states and processes. Its essence resided in its relation to the *umzi*, law (*isiko*) (cf. Mayer & Mayer, 1970: 173) as well as the supernatural sphere of the ancestor spirits (*amathongo* or *izinyanya*) (see below). Contrary to modern Western conceptions, functioning of bodily parts was not a major concern of cultural old-age constructions among the Xhosa. On the other hand there was an awareness of age-related physical changes (e.g. grey hair, declining physical vigour), which were regretted and looked upon as bad things or even dreaded (Holden, 1866: 124, 204; Kay, 1833: 73; Kropf, 1889: 82, 155). This ambiguity reflected an implicit ambivalence of the notion of adulthood itself, most notably manhood (*ubudoda*). While *ubudoda* as an abstract notion was explicitly defined morally, not biologically – following Moodie (1994: 37-39), *ubudoda* was tantamount to the just, responsible and generous management of the *umzi*, in social praxis it also tended to be associated with physical prowess (cf. Breckenridge, 1998: 674). Among the Mpondo, apart from small children and pregnant women, only elderly people were thought to be in danger from a particular class of strong medicines (*amayeza*) (Hunter, 1936: 156), reflecting their culturally inferred decreased body strength.<sup>10</sup> One of the terms used to address a great-grandparent (arguably, an old person in chronological terms) was *gogo* (Hammond-Tooke, 1962: 52; Hunter, 1936: 55), literally meaning “a thin dried-up person or thing” (Mc Laren, 1915: 46). The verbal derivation of the word, *ukutigogo*, refers generally to somebody who “walk[s] with difficulty, like a hobbled horse” (Kropf, 1899: 122).

In short, physical decline (and death) were, *in part*, taken as inevitable consequences of old age, i.e. as part of life's normal experience. Like their Zulu brethren the Xhosa believed that, to use a quote from Ngubane, “What is natural and alive has an inherent quality of breaking down of its own accord – it ages and dies” (Ngubane, 1977: 23; cf. Lichtenstein, 1811, Vol. 1: 315; Warner 1858: 91; Hunter 1936: 272, 310; Pauw 1975: 146).<sup>11</sup> However such age-related physical changes were, arguably, culturally not construed as markers having implications for a person's social identity although obvious frailty in old age did affect individuals' social identities.<sup>12</sup> But even obvious physical frailness did not imply a negative status *per se*: such persons were primarily interpreted as liminal figures, associated with ancestor status. Generally, old age was seen through the lenses of a religious model that conceptualized very old persons, particularly if frail, as “travelling” to the supernatural realm (see below). The important thing was then not the presence of frailty but its being a symptom of something more important. The notion of pathological old age – in contrast to normal old age (a distinction prominent in Western thinking) – was thus absent from the Xhosa cultural model.<sup>13</sup>

With increasing age the male-female gender opposition was somewhat eclipsed by the conspicuous category of age. As Hunter (1936: 247) stated: “A very old woman is ‘like a man’.” Following Ngubane (1977: 77-99), this is little surprising as the social and cultural construction of “otherness” of women in patriarchal Xhosa tradition was rooted in their reproductive powers. Linguistically, this blurring of the sexual distinction among old people was expressed by using one term of address and reference for both grandfather and grandmother (*umakhulu*) (Hunter, 1936: 247, fn 1; cf. 54; Kropf, 1899: 228). For women, ageing brought increasing

integration in the homestead and clan of her husband, both socially and ritually. This was reflected in the relaxation and, partly at least, even ending of many restrictions and taboos imposed on younger women. They could engage in a variety of activities not permitted younger women, such as attending beer feasts. Arguably, this change of female identity in old age was paralleled by a convergence of interests among (senior) men and women, *vis-à-vis* the youth. However, ageing did not lead to a reversal of gender roles. As structural outsiders in their husbands' descent groups, women had far fewer opportunities to translate their old-age status into action than men (cf. Liebenberg, 1997: 365-366). In general terms, male-female gender roles remained complementary to each other and the power of husbands (heirs and other male guardians) over their women was not offset in old age. As in other southern Africa's pre-industrial societies, in indigenous Xhosa culture women held, irrespective of age, a marginal status within the political economy and cosmology (cf. Guy 1990). In a word, although women's power increased upon ageing, there is no historical or ethnographic evidence in support of Gutmann's (1975: 181) “cross-over effect,” according to which old women's increased freedom of action tended to be paralleled by old men's growing passiveness and dependency.

Most men and women retained work-related roles well into old age. Even though there was the socially-constructed and culturally-founded expectation that virtuous people should be able to “sit back” when they had reached a certain age – meaning the gradual phasing out of strenuous work in favour of more managerial tasks, there was never a complete cessation of work at any stage of life or a complete “exit” from work in pre-industrial Xhosa societies.<sup>14</sup> In short, withdrawal from strenuous work was not a response to the decline in physical strength but was socially constructed (cf. Hunter, 1936: 74). The organization of production processes, the flexible nature of the division of labour and the lack of specialization meant that even (impaired) elderly people remained integrated in the daily routine of the communities and were thus able to contribute to the economic well-being of the homestead (e.g. Hunter, 1936: 85, 87, 93; cf. Halperin, 1987). In fact, (social) age even qualified a person for certain occupational roles; for example, midwives or circumcisers were ideally old people (Dugmore, 1858: 161-162). And while most crafts were considered common knowledge or done by specialists, some crafts were *de facto* the work of older women (e.g. weaving) or older men (e.g. the manufacture of skin dressing) (cf. Hunter, 1936: 99-101).

Finally, there was no sign, either for men or women, of sharp demographic boundaries in adulthood. Women only stopped bearing children when their eldest daughter was going to have a baby (Kropf, 1889: 152), at the earliest (cf. Hunter, 1936: 208). Arguably, women bore children until their mid- or late thirties (or even later). As men married later than women and, if feasible, even married another wife in late life, Xhosa men – but also women – tended to simultaneously perform grandparental and parental roles in old age. Among the Xhosa, old age was not a “post-parental phenomenon” (Gutmann, 1975). Even if older individuals had no small children of their own, their homesteads often comprised such youngsters, as it was quite common for parents to send one of their children to the latter's grandparents. Among the Mpondo, for example, it was “customary for the eldest son of an eldest son to go to his paternal grandfather when weaned, and to grow up in his *umzi*,” apart from this, maternal grandparents could also ask for the “loan” of a grandchild (Hunter, 1936: 24, 27-28, 47, 120; cf. Hammond-Tooke, 1962: 52,

152-153). In any case, there was no particular residence pattern that could be clearly associated with old age.

### Respect, ancestors and elders

An overriding principle of interaction and social order was – and still is (cf. Liebenberg, 1997; Van Eeden, 1991) – the rule of respect (*intlonipho*) to seniors, especially those of one's descent group (e.g. Kropf, 1889: 94). As Hammond-Tooke (1974: 360) argued: "Perhaps the most fundamental moral prescription [was] the need to show respect ... to lineage seniors as, indeed, to all members of the senior generation. This respect [was] inculcated from the earliest years." Particularly children were taught absolute obedience to parents (Hunter, 1936: 162-3). Alberti (1810: 57-8) reported:

*Children treat their parents with respect, and accept their advice, even when they have reached maturity and are masters of their own households. In fact, parents exercise a certain reasonable authority over their children, which is founded on the obedience of the latter, and which endures throughout their lives. No Kaffir marries without first having obtained the consent of his parents. It is just as unlikely that someone would exchange a head of cattle or undertake something of that nature, without having first spoken to his father about it, and obtained his consent thereto, even in the case of his already being a grandfather himself.*

Old people, whether related or not, were entitled to be greatly respected. Although 19th-century observers may have somewhat romanticized the position of "the" elderly – as a strategy to use Xhosa morality as a model of virtue for their Christian readers (cf. Alberti, 1810: 58), there is in fact little doubt that the principle of respect to seniors permeated pre-industrial Xhosa societies. By showing respect, and thus self-restraint, juniors showed moral strength; by living up to the normative model of generational respect, juniors matured morally, building up their own personhood. However, at the very basis of intergenerational relations lay – apart from old men's control of material resources (see above) – the belief in the spirits of ancestors (*amathonga* or *izinyanya*; sg. *ithongo* or *isinyanya*).

First, there was no clear-cut separation between living seniors and ancestors, reflecting the lack of a basic distinction between the natural and supernatural domains in the indigenous religion of the South Nguni. Xhosa tradition involved definite ideas about the enduring presence of the *amathonga* with the living, localized in the homestead. Persons who were (chronologically/biologically) very old, were even referred to as *amathongo*; in exceptional cases they could even act as an *ithongo* (Hunter, 1936: 231-32; cf. Hammond-Tooke, 1962: 52-53, 89). Hammond-Tooke (1962: 234) quotes an old Bhaca man as stating: "Old people are almost *amathongo* [Bhaca spelling of *amathonga*], and if one disobeys them or is cheeky or stubborn they may curse one." However, though spiritually often quite powerful old people could not act as recipients of sacrificial offerings (i.e. the biological and spiritual domains were only partly blurred). There is some evidence that in Xhosa religious thought, only old people and other persons of weight and influence would become *amathongo* after death, influencing the lives of their living descendants (cf. Pauw, 1975: 130-131, 136). In any case, the reinstatement of a dead person as an effective ancestor depended on his/her having living descendants of the right category. The incapability of youth and social juniors to become *amathonga* points to their cultural representation as not fully grown-up and developed human beings. The use of the term *khokho* for a great-grandparent reflected this association of old age with ancestorhood; according to McLaren's

(1915) concise Xhosa-English dictionary the term may be translated as grandparent, ancestor and progenitor (cf. Kropf, 1899: 190). Obviously, the belief in ancestral spirits was an effective sanction for the respect for seniors; as the prosperity of the living depended upon the goodwill of the dead. "A man would hesitate before quarrelling with some one who after death would be an *ithongo* to him" (Hunter, 1936: 266; cf. Fuller, 1972: 70). This applied particularly to one's father and paternal grandfather who became the most effective ancestors after death, reflecting their former extensive jural powers over their (grand)children. Yet, although ritual and belief were mainly concerned with patrilineal ancestors, in most South Nguni societies deceased mothers – and certain other maternal kinspeople – were also thought to possess ancestral influence over their children and kin (Hunter, 1936: 233; Hammond-Tooke, 1962: 120, 234-235; Wilson *et al.*, 1952: 194).

Second, only ritual elders as the genealogically senior males of the respective agnatic clusters and senior men (and sometimes senior women) could approach the *amathonga*, both the undifferentiated "ancestor collective" of the clan and the recently dead of the localised kinship groups. Elders played therefore the key roles in rituals, both in life-course rituals as well as in life-crisis rituals (e.g. in cases of sickness). As Comaroff (1985: 83) has noted with respect to the Tswana: "Estrangement from these [senior] men meant estrangement from the most potent source of effectiveness in everyday life." Rituals not only confirmed elders' dominant position but also legitimated their control of resources. For example, initiation rituals expressed and reaffirmed the centrality of generation interdependence and intergenerational power imbalances as officially sanctioned values of society<sup>15</sup> (e.g. Kropf, 1889: 127; cf. Turner, 1967: 265). Insofar as genealogical seniority and age were interdependent, the ability to approach ancestors constituted an important age-linked asset.

Third, in the Xhosa cultural model, "There was a complex relationship between harmonious social life and the wellbeing of man, beast and crops" (Hammond-Tooke, 1993: 98). In precolonial world-view it was failure in social relations that caused failure in health and fortune. Apart from witchcraft or sorcery and ritual pollution, wrath of ancestors was the most important explanation of illness and misfortune. Among the pre-industrial Xhosa any violation of the established social and moral order, particularly a lack of respect to senior kin, tended to incense ancestral spirits, courting misfortune on the culprit. As the Xhosa put it in a saying, *uya kuhlelwa ngamashwa edlala ngabantu abadala nje*, meaning "misfortunes will befall him, since he plays the fool with old people" (Qayiso, 1964: 3). Disobedience to the living seniors thus equalled disobedience to the dead ancestors. Old-age authority was a reflection of the authority of the ancestors on whose benevolence all the living depended (cf. Kuckertz, 1990: 227-269).

However, it would be imprecise to picture the concept of (generational) authority with reference only to such supernatural beliefs. First, although intergenerational attitudes and practices were informed by power imbalances, local cultural models also stressed the moral responsibilities of elderly power holders, particularly regarding their lineal descendants (e.g. Kropf, 1889: 139-140). Rights to respect and seniority on the part of the aged were matched by their duties to further the interests of their homesteads, families, kinship groups, etc. Old-age seniority was not meant to safeguard individual rights, but rather the rights of the families. The rule of seniority was tempered by the great stress on the obligations of individuals compared with their rights, so characteristic of

customary law (Hammond-Tooke, 1993: 89; cf. Hammond-Tooke, 1962: 47-48; Hunter, 1936: 121-132).

*You say a son must obey his father whether he is ordered to do a wrong or right thing? - If the thing in itself is wrong, then the son need not obey, because a case of that kind would bring trouble on the family (Cape, 1883: 1558).*

Second, and connected therewith, (dis)respect was situationally defined. Whether a mode of action equalled disrespect or not was dependent on the action's context. In certain contexts, "disrespectful" behaviour towards one's superiors was morally justified. Seniors' alleged anti-social behaviour, such as sorcery, for example, legitimated neglect and cancellation of social and affectionate ties, even with one's (aged) mother (e.g. Kropf, 1889: 60; Steedman, 1835, Vol. 2: 278). This points to an even more fundamental fact: in actual social life "respect," as a moral principle, has never had one referent only; although in Xhosa society intergenerational relations were relations of authority and inequality, modern ethnography would suggest that even the normative rule of intergenerational respect may have always allowed some behavioural leeway as the latter's precise meaning can be easily contentious and negotiable, given the multiplicity of domains of daily life (cf. Kuckertz, 1997).

### Gender, old age and social security

As delineated above, older men tended to head large homesteads; patrilineal descent, religious beliefs and control of economic resources ensured that Xhosa men in old age continued to hold power over their descendants, ensuring security in old age even if they were no longer active workers. Although in customary law a man had no right to dispose of his property by will, thereby disinheriting the legitimate heirs, a man was free to "publicly disinherit a son for repeated misbehaviour" (Hunter, 1936: 121, cf. 241; cf. Hammond-Tooke, 1962: 51, 154). Disinheritance was a last resort open to old men whose sons, as representatives of the homestead's separate "houses" (see Note 16), began "to lose sight of the fact that they are simply their father's agents and ignore the old man and his claims altogether" (Native Appeal Court (Transkei) (hereafter, NAC), 1900: 31-32). Only in very rare circumstances (i.e. in cases of severe frailty) would an ageing homestead head hand over the management of the *umzi* to his son (cf. Alberti, 1810: 58), albeit that he (i.e. the father) would retain his overall ritual and legal authority and status (cf. Fuller, 1972: 54). Besides, assuming control of the *umzi* would entail the prospective heir's responsibility for the care of his parents.

Even if older sons had established their own *imizi*, homesteads of older men were apt to include younger sons (see above) and, if wealthy, other kin or even unrelated dependants with their families. Moreover, the demographics of marriage (and the polygynous marriage system) guaranteed that older men could usually fall back on the support of at least one wife. In addition, the dynamics of reproduction meant that even in old age many men could hope to obtain bridewealth from the marriage of their still nubile daughters; the bridewealth institution thus functioned as a kind of (male) old-age insurance. The implications of the *lobola* institution went even further: among most South Nguni a man was responsible for assisting his sons in obtaining their first wives, by providing at least part of the *lobola* cattle for them. In return for the *lobola* cattle, "a son was expected to 'keep' his father, i.e. support him in his old age" (Hammond-Tooke, 1962: 47). If the son neglected this obligation the father had the legally recognized right to claim the cattle back. In such cases the court would say in support of the father that "the

father is *maphesahlutha*, a giver and a taker." A father could also demand more *lobola* cattle from his son-in-law at any stage, as bridewealth was normally not fixed before the marriage was consummated (e.g. Hunter, 1936: 191; Steedman, 1835, Vol. 1: 241). Among the Mpondo, men appropriately called themselves the "banks" (*amabanki*) of their fathers-in-law (Hunter, 1936: 191). On the whole, security in old age in general and nursing care in particular arguably did not constitute a major problem for men.

For women, sons (and daughters-in-law) were the primary source of security in old age. Following Lewis (1992: 76, table 1), among the Ngqika Xhosa almost a quarter of all females beyond girlhood were widowed in 1848. Despite the particularities of the socio-economic context in 1848 (see Note 5), it is fair to assume that widowhood was an integral part of the female life course, most notably of the latter life stages. A husband's death, however, did not automatically disrupt an ageing Xhosa woman's life. In fact, the loss of her husband significantly reduced the demands on a woman's labour power (cf. Holden, 1866: 211). According to customary law the late husband's family was bound to support the widow by providing her with the necessary resources for her household economy – as long as she continued to live at the homestead of her husband's heir, or a (reasonable) place designated by him, and was willing to continue to perform the domestic duties of a wife (Bennett, 1995: 416-417). (Apart from the Xhosa proper and the Thembu, a widow who was still of child-bearing age was often taken by a junior brother of her deceased husband; acting as a levir, the latter tried to raise up "seed to the deceased's family" (*ukungena*) (Cape, 1883: 618; Hammond-Tooke, 1962: 138-139; Kropf, 1889: 152).) Besides, any widow could "legally demand assistance from any of those who have partaken of her dowry," for *lobola* cattle was "considered by the law to be held in trust for the benefit of [the woman] and children, should she be left a widow" (Dugmore, 1858: 55; cf. Cape, 1883: 493, 597-580, 1420, 3702, 7403; NAC, 1900: 30-31). Further, as long as an elderly widow remained an active worker, she could get along with only sporadic help from kin. In fact, ageing women had attained skills and knowledge that made them most valuable workers in their homesteads: older women were, for instance, midwives, child nurses and storytellers *par excellence*, and being free from the impurity of menstruation (*umlaza*), older women even fulfilled important ritual roles in their *imizi* (Hammond-Tooke, 1962: 53, 73-76, 84, 106, 109, 238-239; Hunter, 1936: 150-151, 162; Laubscher, 1937: 108).

However, frailty could herald a turning point for an elderly woman, and one which could doom her to great need and want, particularly if she had no children. Having no son was a particular disadvantage as well as a source of personal sadness, for it deprived women both of an important source of prestige – of the mother-in-law role (*vis-à-vis* a daughter-in-law) and of security in case of widowhood. According to Kropf, a mid-century German-speaking missionary in South Africa, in these cases widows often tended to be regarded as servants (*Dienstmägde*) by their late husband's families (Kropf, 1889: 136; cf. Cape, 1883: 2480). Thembu witnesses to the Cape Commission on Native Laws and Customs were adamant that in the case of childless widows (past child-bearing age), bridewealth did not function as "a kind of poor-law" as "the father of the husband gets the cattle back if she has no children; even if she has and they die, the *ikazi* [i.e. the bridewealth cattle] goes back"; in other words, in such cases a woman's own patrilineal connections stopped being a source of power and security against ill-treatment by

the family of her former husband (Cape, 1883: 7043, 7780; but see 3702; cf. NEC, 1930-32: 3026). It is fair to assume that a childless widow's frailty easily led to her economic and social marginalization and discrimination, particularly in homesteads with a disadvantageous balance between productive and unproductive members. There is some indirect evidence of this. In his seminal work on the precolonial Xhosa proper, Peires made clear that it was primarily women who perforce sought refuge on mission stations in the early 19th century; most were widows, others were physically disabled or "just too old" (Peires, 1981: 76; cf. Steedman, 1835, Vol. 1: 47-50). And it is certainly no accident that while there are several 19th-century case histories of destitute and maltreated Xhosa women, there are only very few of impoverished elderly men (Iliffe, 1987: 72-73; Sagner, n.d.).

Generally speaking, older widows preferred to live with their sons in whose homesteads they became the *inkosikazi* (lit. female chief), i.e. the *umzi*'s principal woman. It was not uncommon for women whose adult sons had established their own independent *umzi* to even leave their husbands to live with one of their sons – usually either their eldest son (as among Xhosa proper) or their youngest son (as among the Mpondo) (Hunter, 1936: 24-25; Kropf, 1889: 152-153; cf. NAC, 1900: 18-19). (It should be remembered that adult sons, if they had moved out, tended to live near their father's *umzi*. Nevertheless, such a departure was only feasible if the woman's husband had more than one wife.) In short, not only widows could expect to receive extensive services from their sons (particularly their oldest/youngest ones), their respective daughter-in-laws and grandchildren. In any case, in case of frailty women did primarily rely on (one of) their co-resident daughter-in-law(s) to take care of them. Female care and economic security in old age was, in effect, primarily tied to lineal ties and relationships. In contrast, (older) men depended in these respects more heavily on their wives as "avoidance rules" (*ukuhlonipha*) precluded, for example, their physical care by their daughters-in-law. Effective security in old age exacted thus somewhat different life course strategies from men and women ("investment" in children versus "investment" in wives).

Even though women were perpetual minors throughout life, a son who had inherited the so-called house property<sup>16</sup> on his father's death had to consult his mother about the disposal of it as long as she lived; only after her death could the son gain complete control over it (Hammond-Tooke, 1962: 150, 153; Hunter, 1936: 122). Sons were legally obliged to care for their elderly mothers. However, the extent of filial piety depended on a woman's life-course accomplishments. A woman who had worked hard for the benefit of her household, i.e. who had due to her economic diligence (*inkuthalo*), a female core duty, and shrewdness augmented her "house property" and had thus helped to promote the social career of her (former) husband and, indirectly, her sons, was arguably in a better position to ask for support and assistance in old age (cf. Callaway, 1905: 28; Hammond-Tooke, 1962: 68; Hunter, 1936: 382-383).

Several 19th-century observers reported indirect geronticide (through abandonment) in cases of terminal illness or extreme frailty in old age (e.g. Dugmore, 1858: 164; Kropf, 1889: 160; Steedman, 1835, Vol. 1: 48-49; Warner, 1858: 105).<sup>17</sup> Shaw, a Wesleyan missionary, for example, stated that:

*... very frequently, the sick, when supposed to be in extremis, are carried out and placed in some hole, or in any opening in the rocks, and there left to their fate. This was almost invariably done with very aged persons. Unnatural*

*sons have been known to take the aged widows of their fathers, and place them in some crag in the woods, while the poor dying creature has been heard to solicit in vain for water to cool the thirst occasioned by fever. When Missionaries, becoming acquainted with these circumstances, have remonstrated against the inhumanity, the defence was always ready, 'O, this old person is already as good as dead. Why should we prolong a life which has ceased to be of any use, and of one who can now enjoy no more pleasure?' (Shaw, 1872: 172).*

Shaw's observation has to be seen in the total context of indigenous notions of pollution. The practice of abandonment must not be interpreted as an instance of negative attitudes towards the "very aged" (as Shaw implicitly claimed), but rather as a reflection of Xhosa beliefs in mystical disturbance or danger. Generally, among all Xhosa-speaking peoples, death and contact with a corpse were associated with dangerous ritual impurity (*umlaza*). And frailness as a condition of being too weak to fulfil any normal role expectations allegedly could signify abnormality (but see Note 11), being inherently dangerous for "normal" people (cf. Ngubane 1977: 88-89). Until early in the 19th century, the Xhosa proper used to remove a dying person from the *umzi* to meet his end in the veld or forest, and the corpse, except that of a person of some political prominence, was left unburied (Pauw, 1975: 100, 119-121; cf. Kay, 1833: 192-203). As the abandonment of very frail elders (and other intractably sick persons) prevented supernatural pollution of the social world, it was primarily a ritual activity motivated by religious ideology, rather than a seemingly pitiless means of relieving younger people of an economic burden (though that may, occasionally, have played some role). Alberti made this poignantly clear:

*If one sees that a sick person belonging to the ordinary classes is about to die, he is moved out of the hut to the shade of some bushes, a little distance from the abode, and is laid on a grass resting place that has been prepared. A fire is let near to the dying person and a vessel of water placed next to him; also the husband remains with his dying wife, or the wife with her husband, and other close relations also keep him company. At signs of passing, water is poured on his face, in order, where possible, to resuscitate him. If this remedy fails, and one is convinced that he has died, then one moves away from the corpse without delay, and leaves it to the wolves [*hyaenas*], without touching the body again, or removing any of the ornaments. Apart from the husband or wife, no one usually remains with the dying person until his death. The surrounding relatives stay some distance away, and call to the former to enquire about his condition (Alberti, 1810: 93-94).*

In the case of decrepit elders it was not only the threat of ritual contamination which informed eventual neglect. As sketched above, according to local cultural models, such persons were neither fully human nor did they fully partake of the ancestral world; that is, they were in transition. As the Xhosa subscribed to the notion of a limited natural life span (see above), serious illness in old age could also easily be construed as a call by the *amathonga* for the old person (cf. Laubscher, 1937: 105, 295-297). Yet, abandonment as a death-hastening practice was more than just an appropriate means to expedite the inevitable completion of a person's passage to the world of the *amathonga*. When a writer such as Krige (1936: 160) reports a Zulu ritual of "sending home" (*ukugodusa*) the too frail, one is inclined to accept it as widespread among

19th-century Nguni peoples. In the classic terms of Van Genep (1908), abandonment of a frail elderly person may be seen as the segregation phase of the respective person's last *rite de passage*. Hence, by leaving an old frail person in the bush, a space "unconstrained by the categories and relations of the social world" (Comaroff, 1985: 95), the individual's liminal status was symbolized. It is important to note that to the South Nguni, "death [was] merely a change of status," i.e. "the deceased [was] still considered a member of society," though on a different plane (Hammond-Tooke, 1962: 68). Finally, as frailness was tantamount to the loss of the basic human accomplishment of physical independence, it explicitly signified the already accomplished transformation from social adulthood to a state of posthumanity.

There is little doubt that the quality and quantity of care provided for those considered frail (or sick) always depended on the latter's social network; in Warner's words, it was primarily "friendless persons" (people with no relatives) who were "generally carried away before they are dead, and deposited in some fissure of bank or rock, and left to their fate" (Warner, 1858: 105). (Warner wrote at the time of the start of leaving dying persons in huts and burying the dead.) However, even in the early 19th century, premature abandonments were arguably very rare, given the belief in ancestors and the cultural stress on filial piety. It is most probable that it was primarily women (widows) who suffered such a fate (cf. Kay, 1833: 156), reflecting their structural outsider status in their (late) husband's descent group and homestead. However, there is little doubt that in times of climatic and political distress, it was the (too) old and the infirm in general who were especially vulnerable and who were, sometimes, at least, perforce abandoned (e.g. Steedman, 1835, Vol. 2: 269).

## Conclusion

The paper has highlighted some dimensions of the ageing experience of elderly Xhosa-speaking men and women in the late 18th and 19th centuries. In those days there was an intimate relationship between (male) ageing and accumulation of economic resources (cattle, wives, land), which gave elderly men a dominant position in the societal authority and power structure. Central to old-age status was the cultural construction of old persons as representatives of the ancestors, creators and guardians of cultural traditions. Religious belief thereby functioned as a mechanism by which elderly people could impose their viewpoint upon their descent groups and wider society. However, age was just one of the major axes of social difference and identity construction. Gender and kinship (i.e. genealogical status) intersected with age, making for a multiplicity of ageing experiences in premodern Xhosa society. Although ageing brought an increase in men's and women's authority, women as structural outsiders in their husbands' descent groups had less opportunities to translate their old-age status into action than men. The gendered nature of the ageing experience was particularly evident once individuals became too frail to work. Under such circumstances women faced a much higher risk of being neglected and ending their days in absolute poverty than men. On the whole, to equate (social/relative) age with superiority, and *vice versa* (i.e. the gerontocratic model), does not do justice to local praxis, even though age-based seniority was a dominant discursive practice in Xhosa communities.

Turning to the cultural representation of ageing, the paper has suggested that old age was defined morally rather than biologically, even though there was an awareness of age-related physical changes. However, decrepitude could herald abandonment in the bush. But this should not be inter-

preted as a negative attitude towards old age, but must be seen in the total context of religious beliefs. Frail elderly persons' partaking in two worlds turned them into marginal, "polluted" and potentially dangerous beings as their existence generated doubt about the difference between normal and abnormal. The inherent association of old age with bodily decline was culturally neutralized and transformed as the latter was construed as a manifestation of increasing other-worldliness. In short, although frailness signaled a breakdown of "normal" social personhood/identity (and of social constructions at large), bodily/mental deficiencies at the margins of life were not taken as instances for the "natural" problematicity of the aged body and person. Evidently, this indigenous construction of old age/frailness sharply contrasts with many strands of modern (Western) gerontological thinking (cf. Cohen 1998: 87-103).

Despite its limited scope, it is hoped that the paper has shown that the research agenda for an African history of old age is a particularly rich one. Kertzer's statement (1995: 378), though made in respect to the historical demography of ageing, also holds true for the emerging African history of old age: "The work to be done not only promises to provide us with a much better idea of how older people lived in the past but precious insight as well into the lives of all members of society, young and old. Moving away from an exclusive youth-centered viewpoint to take a perspective from the later years of life will continue to challenge some of our most deeply held paradigms of society in the past and enrich our theoretical models of society." Fundamentally, sealing off the past holds the danger that African gerontology universalizes Western-based developmental models all too quickly, thereby jeopardizing the project of a genuine African gerontology which is informed by the continent's unique history and culturally-specific theories of ageing and the life course.

## Notes

1. While scientific (statistical) surveys are a recent innovation in Africa, it is seldom acknowledged that population statistics exist for most of Africa for most of the 20th century (cf. Fetter, 1990). Despite their sometimes severe shortcomings, they might be profitably used for the reconstruction of the demography of old age. Needless to say, this intellectual enterprise "... requires double courage. Scholars must be prepared to deal with dubious and ambivalent data that must be interrogated like unreliable witnesses in a court of law" (Fetter, 1990: 2).
2. According to Van Warmelo's (1935) classic ethnographic classification, the Xhosa-speaking South (Cape) Nguni comprise the Xhosa proper, the Thembu, Mpondo, Mpondomise, Bhaca and the Mfengu. In this paper the ethnological terms "Xhosa/Xhosa-speaking peoples" are used purely for convenience, as a shorthand for the whole South Nguni dialect group. This usage appears to be all the more justified as the indigenous customs and beliefs of "the Xhosa" did not vary conspicuously, although there were some (minor) variations between the composite cultural groups. Though the very existence of the "Xhosa(-speakers)" as a conceptual collectivity was a product of the encroaching colonial world itself, such an understanding was already comprehensible in the mid-19th century. As Tiyo Soga, the first black missionary among Africans, put it in his journal, in 1865: "...the Kaffir races of - Tambookies - Mapondo's - Napondomisi - Mabomvana - Galekas - Zulu's - MaSwazi - These races are all pure, Kaffir races - one in language & manners - with but slight differences" (Williams, 1983: 39).
3. Despite the dangers that such an approach necessarily entails - dangers which were strongly emphasized by one of the anonymous reviewers - there can be little doubt about the heuristic value of such a rather structural analysis and description (cf. Hammond-Tooke, 1993). In fact, the article provides the background of a forthcoming paper which concentrates on the way 19th-century Christianization changed indigenous modes of dealing with/constructing old age and bodily decline (Sagner, n.d.).
4. This is, of course, a rather short if not simplistic description of the value of cattle and agricultural produce in Xhosa societies. For more detailed accounts of these (and other) elements of Xhosa practice and culture, the reader is invited to turn to the cited ethnographic and historical studies.

5. Admittedly, as a result of then prevailing impoverishment and social dislocation (caused by the 1846/47 seventh frontier war), many smaller homesteads had disintegrated in the pre-census months, their former members having joined better established homesteads (Lewis, 1992: 64, 72). Moreover, precolonial history has shown that average household sizes could wax and wane quite considerably over time, depending on the wider political economy of the respective chiefdoms (e.g. Beinart, 1982: 18-22). Nonetheless, there is abundant evidence that confirms that 19th-century homesteads tended to be much larger than today (e.g. Barrow, 1801/04: 192; Steedman, 1835, Vol. 2: 268; Wilson, 1969: 116).
6. This Commission report will hereafter be quoted as Cape 1883; the numbers do not refer to page numbers but to numbered answers given by witnesses to the commission.
7. However, it is debatable whether this small group of wealthy homestead heads constituted a class in the Marxist sense of an exploitive category, *vis-à-vis* the younger male homestead members/younger homestead heads. As Hammond-Tooke (1993: 69) has emphasized, "all members of a homestead were personally concerned in the fortunes of the family herd and sons owed their very marriages to house cattle which, in any event, they would inherit."
8. It must be noted that this is somewhat of an oversimplification. Both among men and women finer life-course distinctions were made, particularly (but not only) with respect to youth and adolescence (cf. Wilson *et al.*, 1952: 109-110).
9. Early sources are rather inconsistent in their observations. Kropf (1889: 84) on the one hand claimed that men and women of 90 and older were not unusual among the Xhosa who used to live to a great age. Lichtenstein (1811, Vol. 1: 346) on the other hand referring to "the estimation of the Christians who have lived for any time among them," was quite adamant that among the Xhosa "the oldest men were not more than between fifty and sixty years of age." Modern demographic studies on the life expectancy of pre-industrial people would tend to confirm Kropf's rather than Lichtenstein's statement. Biesele and Howell (1981: 81-82), for example, referring to the pre-industrial !Kung San, estimated that about 21 of every 100 babies born survived to age 60. According to them it is fair to assume that "old age [in a chronological sense] has always been a regular and unremarkable phenomenon in !Kung life." And Shrewbury, the first missionary to the Transkei, noted in 1832: "There are many aged men and women: persons far advanced in years are to be met with on every river (sic!) and upon average perhaps at every other kraal; ... (emphasis as given)" (Fast, 1994: 155).
10. True, the ageing process was associated with bodily decline. Yet, the aged body was also thought to be inherently powerful as senior agnates could curse junior kin (e.g. Hunter, 1936: 266).
11. This does not mean that decay of vitality in old age was automatically defined and accepted as "natural". Indeed, pre-industrial Xhosa might construe a specific person's bodily decline in old age primarily as the result of social disruption, i.e. as consequence of witchcraft, pollution, etc. (e.g. Fast, 1994: 144). It is important to note that old age was not conceptually linked to any *specific* symptoms (and *vice versa*). In Xhosa world-view, (illness/bodily) symptoms derived their meaning from their perceived underlying causes; their meaning was flexible and externally determined. In short, whether bodily decline/illness in old age was considered as "natural" or as a signifier of socially disruptive events was itself the result of a reflexive inquiry within the respective kinship group/community. Obviously, there was an intimate relationship between this mode of thought and the prevailing notion of personhood which "localized" identity both in bodies and relationships. I hope to go into that highly fascinating subject in more detail in a future article.
12. According to Van Eeden (1991: 23) there was even a special term of reference for frail and debilitated old people, *-guga*, which meant "worn-out" in the early 1990s (Van Eeden, 1991: 23). As this meaning of the term is neither mentioned by Kropf (1899) nor by McLaren (1915), it is most probably of more recent origin.
13. As used in gerontology, normal ageing refers to changes related to the ageing process *per se*, while pathological ageing refers to those changes that are associated with diseases which, it is alleged, usually occur in old age (Atchley, 1989).
14. A form of retirement in the strictest sense of the word existed only among some of the highest political office bearers. Hammond-Tooke (1962: 202) quotes Bhaca men as stating that "It was a recognized principle that when a chief got old and infirm he would relinquish his office in favour of the heir," thereby retiring from active public life. However, early 19th-century sources referring to the Xhosa proper suggest that this might have been a peculiarity of the Bhaca (e.g. Hammond-Tooke, 1972: 131).
15. The metaphorical and linguistic use of generation (and, by implication, age) imagery in the colonial context – Xhosa-speaking people referred to

colonial government as "father" or "as an old man with a white beard" (Hunter, 1936: 9) – is evidence to what extent intergenerational attitudes and practices were informed by power imbalances. (In turn, of course, the usage of this metaphor also echoes the moral obligations of the "white" state in local cultural models.)

16. Among the South Nguni each married woman had her own separate house within the settlement where she resided with her children; the husband was obliged to allot stock to each house which, hereafter, became the property of that house. Ideally, no house property should be disposed of without consulting the wife and the (prospective) heir of the respective house ("house-property complex").
17. The fact that missionaries recorded many such incidents is little wonder, as the latter provided them with an opportune means for their attack on African culture for its alleged immorality and brutality (see Sagner, n.d.).

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