

<http://larrywillmore.net/ABODERIN.pdf>

Intergenerational Support and Old Age in Africa

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Few Africans have access to pensions in old age, so nearly all rely eventually on their families for income support. Isabella Aboderín, a sociologist at the Oxford Institute of Ageing, reports that this safety net is failing, with the result that many face misery and deprivation in the last years of their lives. Despite the book's title, she focuses not on Africa but rather on Accra, the capital and largest city (population 2 million) of Ghana. In 2004 Aboderín published her principal findings with a more accurate title: "Decline in material family support for older people in urban Ghana."

Aboderín interviewed 51 persons in Accra, recording and transcribing each interview. The initial sample comprised 23 older persons stratified by gender, income group (high, middle, poor) and ethnic group (*Ga* or *Akan*). The sample was stratified "because gender, ethnic and socio-economic group were expected to be possible important influences on people's experiences of, or attitudes towards old age family support" (fn 11, p. 65). Yet differences by ethnic or income group are never mentioned, surely a lapse even for a "qualitative" study. Aboderín extended the sample by adding 28 respondents: "four older people who had been abandoned by their families in hospital" (p. 59) and 24 adult children and grandchildren "chosen from among the potentially available adult children named by their parent" (p. 58). The full sample thus consists of three generations of respondents, all of whom are related.

The core of the book contains numerous direct quotations from transcribed interviews. Most quotes are from older persons (G1), fewer from their adult children (G2), and even fewer from grandchildren (G3). The quotes are revealing, and the reader is able to 'hear' views of the residents of Accra. It is unfortunate that respondents are identified only by name and generation, for example "Mr. Thompson, G1." It would be useful to know also the ethnic and income group to which Mr. Thompson belongs.

Aboderín concludes "the family support system, as it has developed and operates today, can no longer be counted upon to provide sufficient economic protection for the old" (p. 157). In contrast, "family support given to older people in the past was largely sufficient to meet their material needs and even to provide many with a surplus" (p. 100). Cases of non-support of older parents in the past were allegedly rare, whereas today they are common because "parents' entitlement to filial support in old age is no longer unconditional, but—based squarely on the principle of reciprocity—is contingent upon the degree to which they fulfilled their earlier parental duties to the children" (p. 137). Note that it is the children themselves who judge the conduct of their parents. Even if children feel that an aged parent 'deserves' support, this will not be forthcoming if resources are scarce, since the needs of the young have a "fundamental priority" over those of the old. Women are particularly vulnerable, since they live longer than men, so are a burden for more years. When economic times are difficult, adult children accuse their mothers of witchcraft, of "having brought misfortune ... on them and, consequently, deny them support—despite the nurturing their mothers gave them through childhood" (p. 122).

Similar accusations of witchcraft are common in other parts of Africa, and for the very same reasons (Miguel, 2005).

Aboderín questions the applicability of her findings to Ghana as a whole, given the fact that her small sample is entirely urban. But Van der Geest, a medical anthropologist working in Kwahu-Tafo (population 6,000), a rural town in southern Ghana, reports virtually identical results from a similar study. Van der Geest interviewed 35 elderly people, supplemented by observations of other people living in the same house and discussions with younger men and women of the community. What *is* questionable is Aboderín's conclusion that material support for the elderly has declined over the years. Her only evidence is the fact that her aged respondents consistently state that they did not treat the elderly so shabbily in their day. The respondents most likely believe this; it may even be true. We have no way of knowing. Van der Geest (2002:18-19) reports also that his 35 respondents insist that care for the elderly was "better and more guaranteed in the past." He adds, though, "There is hardly any reliable data to confirm it", so "caution must be used when elderly people start praising the past and condemning the present."

From a policy perspective, it matters not a whit whether family care of the elderly was better in the past. What is important is that it is totally inadequate today. Aboderín rejects—correctly in my view—the notion of imposing a legal obligation on children to support aged parents. She approves the introduction of a non-contributory pension, "at least in the urban sector" (p. 160). I agree, but would urge that the pension be for all residents, rural as well as urban. A universal pension might seem a utopian dream for a country like Ghana, which ranks 135th in the UNDP's Human Development Index. But two countries that rank even lower—Lesotho (138th) and Nepal (142nd)—have introduced such schemes with great success. Even a small pension transforms an aged person from a burden into an asset for his or her family.

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