

Growing old in Cameroon

Gender, vulnerability, and social capital

Reviewed by Sjaak van der Geest

Charles Che Fonchingong, *Growing Old in Cameroon: Gender, Vulnerability, and Social Capital*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2013. Paperback, ix + 247 pp., \$36.99. ISBN: 978-0-7618-6125-6.

The central question of this study about growing old in Cameroon is how the elderly cope and what policies could increase their well-being. Additional questions include: ‘Do the old constitute a burden or an asset to households and communities? What forms of care do old people receive and what gender inequalities are associated with the provision of care and support for the elderly in rural and urban areas? How are highly disadvantaged and vulnerable groups like widows and widowers surviving? Can semi-formal forms of coverage provide adequate safety-nets for old persons? Can old persons still rely on traditional forms of reciprocity and other social networks for their daily care and material support?’ (p. 15). The field-based research consisted of 130 personal interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions in the two English-speaking regions of the country (northwest and southwest). The 130 men and women were sixty years or older and were purposely selected. The study is based on the author’s PhD dissertation, for which the fieldwork took place between 2006 and 2010.

The first five chapters of the book are mainly based on literature and discuss the various modes of social security for older people in several sub-Saharan African countries, including Cameroon, and the theoretical perspectives underpinning existing studies of ageing in Africa (such as modernization, dependency, neoliberalism, and feminist critiques). Social capital theory is presented as the most useful approach for the author’s engagement with older

people's individual and collective agency when confronting their diminishing livelihood prospects and growing poverty. The sixth and seventh chapters discuss the research methods and data analysis. In chapter 8 the older people speak about their condition, including claims that they are not a burden, the relevance of particular cultural traditions, how they cope with poverty through money-generating activities, the importance of reciprocity, and experiences of (dis)respect and elder abuse. Chapter 9, the last chapter before the conclusion, is an extensive overview of 'semi-formal' initiatives that elderly people engage in to fill the security gap between kinship and government policy.

The broader context of the study is the crumbling of family care and support for the elderly and the almost complete absence of the state with regard to improving older people's security. The 'semi-formal' mechanics of overcoming this vacuum are clearly the field where the author's main interest and expertise lie. The book's principal contribution to a deeper understanding of ageing in sub-Saharan Africa, and Cameroon in particular, is his description of the kaleidoscope of institutions and associations that enable older people to supplement their meagre financial income. This kaleidoscope includes savings societies, men's and women's organizations, trade unions, faith-based organizations, and NGOs.

The author's focus on these activities reveals his interest in the monetary aspect of elderly well-being, which is often underexposed in anthropological studies of ageing in Africa. But it also implies an underexposure of another aspect of ageing within this study; if social capital, social security, and reciprocity are key concepts in the study, one would expect a much wider view than one limited to economic status and money-generating activities. Social capital is first of all 'capital' that is valuable in the family context. The reward of a good life is to a large extent nonmonetary security in old age within the family. Even if family-based security is diminishing due to migration, urbanization, and economic hardship, as the author remarks, we still need to know what has remained of the supposed traditional family solidarity.

The quotes of older men and women speaking about their living conditions are arranged according to themes such as livelihood, rural-urban differences, gender, care, remittances, informal economy, kinship, faith-based support, and widowhood. But this fragmentation of the narratives into small bites prevents a more contextual picture of the lives of these people. The reader does not get to 'know' the speakers. The information does not provide insight into the daily lives of people growing old in Cameroon. Narratives are supposed to provide that kind of insight, but these narratives have been reduced to insulated pieces of text. I hope I am not being unfair to the author by asking him to be more anthropological in the presentation of his data. The objective of the research was first of all to critique the social policy framework for older people in Cameroon; an ethnographic picture of the daily living

conditions of older people had less priority. But the readers of this journal are undoubtedly interested in more general aspects of growing old in Cameroon.

The most captivating observation in the study – at least to me – was the systematic (and possibly intended) chaos in the public administration responsible for the payment of pensions and other allowances. The following quote from a sixty-nine-year-old man illustrates this:

I retired in 1990 and had to wait for ten years before I could get my entitlement. I thought I was the only one in this situation until I met a colleague who told me he waited for fifteen years. I cannot imagine how such actions by unscrupulous officials has [sic] hastened the journey to the grave for many pensioners as many have died without receiving what they sweated for. The documents are what they already have but we are compelled to compile another set of unrelated documents. When these documents get to CNPS [National Social Insurance Fund], they get hooked and you have to make them move by offering bribes. You can imagine that I was entitled to arrears of 415,000 CFA [approximately £415] and I had to offer bribes of 100,000 CFA [£100]. (p. 141)

Delayed (or worse, denied) pensions and allowances are a recurrent theme throughout the study and confirm Cameroon's reputation as a deeply corrupt country. The consequences for older people are shocking. The chapter on semiformal activities describes a logical response to these failures of the state. At the same time, however, this discussion of bureaucratic injustice to pensioners shows a likely bias in the sample of older people; 40 per cent of the men are entitled to a pension after formal employment (as teachers, civil servants, policemen, etc.), which seems a fairly high percentage if we take into account that about 70 per cent of the population is believed not to be part of the formal economy. It is not entirely clear on what basis the author selected his sample.

The author's emphasis on social security as a monetary condition logically leads to the conclusion that older women suffer greater hardship since they have lower incomes than men and less access to material resources. In addition, they face cultural barriers and discrimination that prevent them from keeping poverty at bay. I would like to know, however, whether older women enjoy family security in reciprocation for the care and dedication they gave to their children and grandchildren in their active years, and how their position within the family compares to that of older men.

In conclusion, this study contains a wealth of information regarding the economic insecurity and vulnerability of older people in the Anglophone part of Cameroon, and it provides extensive comparative data on the economic hazards of ageing in other sub-Saharan African

countries. It offers less insight, however, into the conditions of older people in their daily lives and family contexts. And, finally, it is yet another testimony of an African state ignoring the plight of its elderly citizens in the apparent assumption that families will continue to take care of them.

About the author

Sjaak van der Geest is Emeritus Professor of Medical Anthropology, University of Amsterdam. Fieldwork in Ghana and Cameroon. Present research interests include pharmaceutical anthropology, ageing and care, culture and hygiene, and privacy concerns.