

THE CHANGING PRIVILEGES AND CHALLENGES OF OLDER PEOPLE IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT: *This study is an investigation of the changing privileges and challenges of older people in contemporary African society. Prior to the contact with the West, older people were highly valued in African society because of their accumulated knowledge and wisdom, which they used to settle disputes, integrate the society and educate the young. In return, they enjoyed many privileges in the society. However, changes in the structure of African society occasioned by the introduction of formal education by the West neutralized this traditional system of caring for older people as they are now facing many challenges. Modernization theory was adopted in analyzing the study. Data for this study were purposely collected through the secondary sources. The findings revealed that older people are facing the challenges of basic needs such as food, shelter, love and proper care. Depressions in older people are misdiagnosed or mislabeled as normal aspects of old age. Old age is sad accompanied by inevitable decline. Older people as other age categories need money weekly to provide for their needs and that of their household. It was therefore, recommended that elderly people should be cared for by their entire extended family system. In addition, African government should pay monthly allowance to both the retired and the unemployed elderly people to assist their family to take proper care of older people.*

KEYWORDS: Older people, privileges, changing, challenges, contemporary, African society.

INTRODUCTION

Every age comes with wisdom and its challenges. One society may treat older people with great reverence, while another sees them as a burden. Like gender stratification, age stratification varies across culture. Societies world over have some method of age stratification that accompanies certain cultural roles and privileges with distinct periods in life. In the traditional African society, older people were highly esteemed because of the important roles they played by helping to integrate the society, preserve its cultural values, transmit knowledge and skills, settle disputes and educate the young. People in the traditional African society holds positive views about older people. They got the best available food, drinks and their judgments were highly valued and respected. Anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists classified such societies as gerontocracy (a system of government ruled by older people). Infact, Mboto (2002) claim that the word senator is a Latin word for older people. Traditionally, older people basic

needs for food, clothing and shelter were provided through their extended family and/or clan system. As Giddens (2009:30) indicate:

In traditional societies, older people were often accorded a great deal of respect. Among cultures that included age-grades, the elders usually had a major-often the final say over matters of importance to the community. Within families, the authority of both men and women mostly increased with age.

In the traditional African society, family and friends cares for older people at home until their dying days. There was an atmosphere (attitudes) that parents make supreme sacrifices for their children and, in turn, their grown children have to sacrifice for their elderly parents (Abanyam 2011). However, changes in the structure of African society neutralized such privileges enjoyed by older people in African society. These changes brought about evolution of many challenges, which older people did not, experienced. This study is therefore, designed to investigate the changing privileges and challenges of older people in contemporary African society.

Literature Review and Theoretical Underpinning of the Research

Cardinal to this study is an investigation of the changing privileges and challenges of older people in contemporary African society. However, attempt is made here to review related literature on the topic understudy. Specifically, review of related literature dwells on privileges enjoyed by elder people in African society in the past and the changing privileges of older people in contemporary African society. Modernization theory will be considered appropriate in analyzing this study.

Privileges enjoyed by Older People in African Society in the Past

Prior to the contact with the West, older people had several privileges, which were associated with their status. Infact, “transition to the age-grade of elder in traditional culture often mark the pinnacle of the status an individual could achieve” (Giddens, 2009:301). One of such status or privileges was the right to receive respects from the younger Ones who in some ethnic group must prostrate or kneel down (squat) to greet them. Younger persons were not expected to call older person by their names. If they meet at a narrow road, younger ones were obligated to enter inside bush to clear way for older person. In this meeting, only elder person has the moral rights to extend hand of friendship. Young ones were not even allowed to look inside the face of older people.

Another privilege enjoyed by older people was freedom from criticism while they themselves freely criticized. This is because in African society, old age was regarded as wisdom hence the saying that, “when the society lost older person its lost the present when its lost young person it is said to lost the future”. Due to their reservoir of knowledge and wisdom, older people were free to criticize the younger ones. Abanyam (2013:22) revealed that:

In most traditional African societies, elders or parents gather the younger ones by fireside or moonlight, inside or outside the compound and tell them stories of how a

particular personality outsmarted another, stories of exploitation of a group by another group and how God liberated those exploited group were all recounted to the younger ones. Some of these stories drive most children into tears or strengthen their hearts to withstand any hardship in their potential social encounter (instill fear or confidence). Songs were composed in those stories to stir children into action and to control most socially unapproved behaviours. Lazy ones, deviants, terrorists and those who perpetrate injustice in the community were ridiculed.

From such stories, folkstale, songs, etc important lessons were drawn. According to Dzurga (2012:106)“such wise saying teaches ideas such as the evil of jealousy, selfishness, wickedness, hypocrisy and greed while inculcating virtues such as love, kindness, gentleness, impartiality, fairness or justice and humility”. This was aimed at equipping the younger ones with the necessary skills and attitudes that would help younger people to function effectively in the society (Ering, 2008 and Abanyam, 2013). This was the case in all traditional African societies.

Another privilege enjoyed by older people in the traditional African society was the privilege of sending young persons on errands while it was considered indecent of a young person to send older people on errand. In African society, every child in the community was regarded as the child of every person. Therefore, older people have the right to send any child not necessarily a child of his. It was morally right for older person to physically discipline a deviant child in the community irrespective of his or her parental background. Among the Tiv people of central Nigeria for instance, when death occurs, the eldest person in the family is the first to be informed. This is because he is the one vested with the authority to summon the council of elders who investigate the cause of the death and show a place where grave would be dug. Therefore, it was an abomination for young person for whatever reason to refuse to go on such errand.

Moreso, in the traditional African societies in which gerontocracy existed, elderly people especially title holders or affluent ones had more access to beautiful women than younger one. They marry the most beautiful girls within their jurisdiction. Examples abound in the Hausa-Fulani emirate (Abiodun, 2002).

Furthermore, special diets like meat, drinks, food and other gifts were presented to older people first before younger person could take their share, especially during ceremonies such as marriage, burials, festivals and naming ceremonies. For instance, among the Tiv people the burial of elderly people were treated differently because elderly people were highly valued that is why when an elderly person dies, prior to the burial a message was sent to the ancestral spirit of the Tiv nation prior to the burial (*Takuruku Anyam-Azenga*) to come and welcome the person back to his home. Only elderly persons considering their social status enjoyed this privilege.

In addition, older people enjoyed the greatest privileges of care through their extended family. Through this channel, their social and material needs were fully met. In African

tradition, it was an obligation for family members to care for the elderly ones among them.

The Changing Privileges and Challenges of Older People in Contemporary African Society

Growing old in the olden days in African society was quite different from what is obtainable in contemporary African society. Traditionally, elderly care was the responsibility of the family and was provided within the framework of the extended family system at home. However, changes in the structure of African society resulting to the geographical dispersion of the extended family system and the tendency for family members to be educated and work outside the home affected older people. Culture contact with the Europeans through colonization marked the beginning of African perspective of taking care of their elderly ones (Abanyam, 2012 and Abiodun, 2002).

Emphasis on formal system of education introduced by the Europeans had enormous (tremendous) effects on the elderly. Firstly, the access to knowledge through formal education has led to the reduction in the power and prestige given to the accumulated wisdom and knowledge of older people. Their knowledge and experiences are seen as not being directly relevant to the needs of the modern age (Mbotu, 2002).

Secondly, the linkage of education with occupation and income has considerably or highly reduced the economic status and privileges of older people completely. Giddens (2009:301) observed that “In industrial societies, by contrast, older people tend to lack authority within both the family and the wider social community”. With the emergence of industries, the desire of every young person is to acquire material wealth. The need to acquire material wealth resulted to geographical dispersion or mobility of families to be educated and search for white color jobs, which has affected the care that was given to older people by their extended families. Similarly, Abanyam (2011:95) opined that: Modern literacy and its ties to technology are putting the elderly at a disadvantage. Formal educational systems are replacing old peoples with highly trained people for transmitting socialized knowledge. When the children have grown up, married and move from home because of marriage, to pursue education or find a job. The aged are often left alone without any person to socialize with.

Many families in African society today, isolate their old people and put them in elderly homes. Abuse of elderly people in resident’s home in Africa is a sad reality. Most of these elderly homes are under-funded and understaffed (Abanyam, 2011). Some societies are unfortunately known to have practiced senilicide – the killing of elderly people because of extreme difficulties in-taking care of them. Traditional nomadic tribes often end up abandoning their elderly during their unrelenting and frequent travels. Even those that managed to acquire some level of education are discriminated. As Bond et al (1993:48) pointed out:

Society tends to reward present work: it does not reward past work and therefore it does reward old age. Elderly people are discriminated against by economic and social policies,

which benefit the young employed, and the well off. Thus, poverty in old age and the dependent status of elderly people are related to low resources and restricted access to resources through the life cycle.

Nevertheless, older people deserve much care because at old age the body lost its viability. Indeed, the body reaches its peak of efficiency before the age of thirty (30) years. However, deterioration sets in and it is after the age of forty (40) years that people begin to notice the lost of efficiency and changes in the body. Charles et al (2011:65) noted that:

In old age, loss of weight is now more definite and as the body dries up and the subcutaneous fats disappears, the skin becomes dry and wrinkled and the eyes sunken and lusterless. Bones become brittle whilst teeth decay and loosen. Movement becomes slow, awkward and difficult.

Consequently, people in Africa today feared old age and are beginning to see it as an age of increasing tension and insecurity. The challenges facing the elderly people are largely a social creation. These challenges are exacerbated by the existence of ageism. However, elderly applicants are discriminated against when they applied for jobs. Majority of them were unemployed since they were young. These elderly people lived in extreme (absolute) poverty and cannot provide their daily needs. Having retired from labour, especially few of them that managed to secure jobs, they may be poorer than ever before in their lives. Again, Giddens (2009:30) maintained:

In Modern societies, retirement may bring the opposite consequences. No longer with their children and often having retired from paid work, older people may find it difficult to make the final period of their life rewarding. It used to be thought that those who successfully cope with later life do so by turning to their inner resources, becoming less interested in the material rewards that social life has to offer. While this may often be true, it seems likely that in a society in which many are physically healthy in later life, an outward looking view will become more and more prevalent. Those in retirement might find reward in what has been called the “third age”, in which a new phase of education begins.

The changing privileges of elderly people in the contemporary African society tends to place them in a woeful condition as they are facing the challenges of poverty, malnutrition, physical and mental health, transportation problem, problem of shelter, isolation and thought of death anxiety.

MODERNIZATION THEORY

Modernization theory was considered appropriate to guide investigation in this study. Modernization theory assumes that developing societies can achieve development if they follow the same processes of development that were used by developed societies. The basic tenet of this theory is the belief that development requires developed societies to aid developing societies to learn from their own progress. Modernization theorists, according

to Abanyam (2011:15) “often saw traditions as obstacles to development”, hence it encourage societies to leave behind their traditional lifestyles in favour of modern industrial or technological life styles. Modernization theory emerged in the 18th century, (Age of enlightenment) with the ideas that people themselves could developed and change their society. Proponents of this theory are David McClelland, Robert Bellah, Alex Inkless, Walter W. Rostow, Gabriel Almond, James Coleman, Neil Smelser, etc.

In the traditional African society, older people were highly respected and adequately taken care of by their extended family system. However, as the society modernizes the traditional lifestyle of taking care of older people has changed. Changes in the structure of the society leaves older people with many challenges, which they did not experience prior to modernization.

Criticism

Modernization theory is criticized for being unidirectional in its assumption of change and development. For less developed societies to develop there is just one path to follow, the path of the west. Critics may asked, why is it necessary for developing societies to follow this path to development? It is also critically observed that modernization seems to have ignored the fact that developing nations have the option to select an alternative path to development, as did Korea, Taiwan and other Asian countries. The development of these countries is not a dependent development. This implies that less developed societies have alternative path to development outside the path of Europe and America.

Modernization theory is also considered as Eurocentric and racist in outlook. Nearly all the modernization scholars were either Americans or Europeans. They were born and raised in western tradition and were socialized to believe that their cultural values are the best. Thus such concepts like ‘primitive’, ‘advanced’, traditional, modern, etc were used to justify the superiority of American or western societies (Otaki, 2006). Moreso, modernization theorists were too optimistic. If the western societies developed through this model, what makes them optimistic that less developed societies can also developed if they follow the same path development? Nevertheless, modernization theory was employed for this study because it explains the changing tradition of African ways of taking care of older people and the challenges faced by older people because of the changes in African traditional values.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research method was adopted for this study. This approach made use of secondary sources of data collected from textbooks. This method was considered because it enabled the researcher to obtain and interpret information and its meaning and the experiences contained therein, from a relatively broad perspective.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of data used in this study were presented and interpreted in textbooks.

Table 1: Misdiagnosis or Mislabelling of Depressions in the Elderly as Normal Aspects of Aging

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	68	56.67
No	52	43.33
Total	120	100

Source: Abanyam, 2012:85

Data from table 1 above indicates that, 68 (56.67%) respondents out of 120 of the population sampled agreed that depression in the elderly are misdiagnosed or mislabeled as normal aspects of old age. While the remaining 52 (43.33%) disagreed.

Table 2: Research as Means of Identifying Problems of the Elderly

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	31	25.82
No	89	74.17
Total	120	100

Source: Abanyam, 2012:86

Data in table 2 above showed that, 31 (25.82%) respondents out of 120 population sampled indicates that research are carried out to identify the problems of the elderly while 89 (74.17%) disagreed.

Table 3: Basic Needs of the Elderly

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	34	28.33
No	86	71.67
Total	120	100

Source: Abanyam, 2012:89

Data in table 3 above indicates that 34 respondents, which constitute 28.33% of the population sampled, were of the opinion that basic needs are provided to the elderly. While 86 informants (71.67%) disagreed making 120.

Table 4: Aging as Sad Accompanied by Inevitable Decline

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	69	57.50
No	51	42.50
Total	120	100

Source: Abanyam, 2012:91

Data in table 4 above indicates that 69 (57.50%) respondents out of 120 populations sampled observe that aging is sad and is accompanied by inevitable decline. While 5 (42.50%) disagreed.

Table 5: Average Weekly Household Expenditure in Pounds by Age of Head of Household

	Under 30	30-49	50-64	65-74	75 and over	All households
Housing (net)	78.70	84.00	56.80	34.80	30.30	63.90
Fuel and Power	9.90	12.30	13.00	11.80	10.00	11.90
Food and non-Alcoholic Drinks	55.00	73.60	67.10	47.00	34.70	61.90
Alcoholic Drink	18.70	17.90	17.40	7.90	4.90	15.00
Tobacco	7.50	6.90	7.20	3.90	1.80	6.10
Clothing and footwear	25.00	29.80	21.10	12.20	5.80	22.00
Household goods	28.20	37.30	37.80	28.90	14.40	32.60
Household services	20.80	26.90	21.70	17.60	11.80	22.00
Personal goods and services	16.30	17.00	15.70	11.20	7.50	14.70
Motoring	52.00	67.30	67.60	32.70	15.40	55.10
Fares and other travel costs	12.00	11.80	10.10	5.40	2.50	9.50
Leisure goods	18.80	25.60	19.60	14.20	7.30	19.70
Leisure services	38.30	61.20	60.80	34.90	22.40	50.60
Miscellaneous	0.60	1.20	0.60	0.20	0.10	0.70
All expenditure groups	381.70	472.80	416.40	262.60	169.10	385.70

Source: Haralambos and Holborn, 2008:749

Data in table 5 above showed that elderly people like other age category required money weekly to satisfy their needs and that of their household. The basic tenet of this study was to investigate through content analysis of public documentary sources the changing privileges and challenges of older people in contemporary African society. Results from the textual (content) analysis revealed that depressions in the elderly are misdiagnosed or mislabeled as normal aspect of old age. Research is not carried out to identify or ascertain the problems of the elderly. Caregivers do not adequately provide basic needs for the aged. Elderly people like other age category need money for weekly expenditures.

The result of this study agreed with the ideas of Abanyam (2012), Abiodun (2002) and also Haralambos and Holborn (2008) who in their separate studies found that elderly people are not provided with basic needs. The implication here is that African custom of taking care of the elderly is neutralized by changes in the structure of the society occasioned by the introduction of western education. This view corroborates the ideas of modernization theorists that developing societies must leave behind their traditional lifestyles and follow the same processes of development that was followed by developing societies in order to modernize. This change has resulted to the evolution of many problems, which the elderly did not experience before the coming of the Europeans. In African societies today, elderly people are abandoned by their families and some are kept in nursing homes where they experienced the worst dehumanizing and agonizing

conditions. Geriatric services are not provided to aged people. However, African mutual concept of caring for older people should be reinstated and efforts should be put in place by African government to strengthen the traditional support system such as neighborhood, kinship and extended family systems in order to de-emphasize the use of old peoples home while emphasizing community – based support system.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is obvious that the attitude of taking care of the elderly people in African society has undergone a radical transformation. Prior to the introduction of western education elderly people were highly respected and they enjoyed many privileges in the society. Changes in the structure of African society today deprived older people privileges as they are facing the challenges of basic needs like medical care, and other essential needs. This study has offered an insight into the changing privileges and challenges of older people in contemporary African society. We learned through literature that older people need to feed their bodies highly nutritious food. In addition, the need exercises and monthly allowances to take care of their basic needs. Caregivers are also exposed to condition that need to be watched closely in caring for older people. The data presented in the study confirmed this assumption. There is urgent need to reevaluate the culture of taking care of older people and reinstate the cherished cultural values of caring for older people in African society.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Elderly people should be cared for by their entire extended family system. African society had their own peculiar arrangement in which elderly people were cared for. This arrangement should be reinstated.
2. Young members of the family should cultivate the habit of visiting older people regularly. This affection may reduce the amount of depressions in the elderly.
3. Intensive education should be mounted by social workers to enlighten elderly people on how to cope with the challenges of old age.
4. African government should pay monthly allowance to both the retired and the unemployed elderly persons to enable them to take care of their daily needs.
5. Elderly people should embark on physical exercises. This exercise should be carried out based on their ability. This will help to born down excessive fatty tissues and enable the body system to function effectively.
6. Elderly people should be feed with highly nutritious foods that contain the necessary vitamins and minerals. This will enable their body to return optimum performance. The body cannot work effectively if it has fed on incorrect food.

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