

After the United Nations World Assembly on Aging conference called to discuss the aging of the world's population, African countries joined an already raging debate about the impact of a high older adult population on a country's resources. In the western countries where population aging has been an issue for sometime, the debate is often couched as an economic, a fiscal or an intergenerational issue, especially as the cost of maintaining older people increases. In Africa, the debate has focused mainly on traditional eldercare institutions, values and norms, public policies and programs that are necessary to cater for the needs of older people. Framed in these ways, the emphases have been on how much time and money is devoted to older people.

Given that older people are viewed mainly as sources of expenditure, we are tempted to justify these expenditures by putting economic value on the work they do in our communities. In our quest to "balance the books" between what older people take from and what they give to society, we have focused mainly on the three commodities older people have most: childcare, and family caregiving. This leaves out many aspects of their activities that are vital to the sustenance of African way of life. Thus, valuing older people's contributions mainly in economic terms tends to neglect the social dimension of their roles in society that is difficult to fully quantify. Against this background, this paper focuses on the role older people play in maintaining African culture, using as reference, their participation in marriage and funeral celebrations among the Akan people of Ghana. The Akans are found in the southern half of Ghana.

The author uses "older people" and the term "elders" interchangeably. The term "elder" in Akan is fluid; it has philosophical, religious, social, demographic and political meaning. Socially, an elder is an old person with a lot of life experience and wisdom, as well as a spiritual being. In this paper, the author refers to an elder as a living older person, either male or female, who is perceived as a wise person in Akan socio-cultural context, and people who hold eldership position in Akan society. He uses the term "elders" generically to include all personality traits, norms and roles associated with eldership.

To better understand the role the elders in maintaining and protecting Akan culture, the author gives a brief background of the Akan social organization, with emphases on family arbitration, marriage, and funeral ceremonies. The author discusses how in the performance of their social roles the elders safeguard the basic principles – interdependency, communalism, mutual obligations, collective responsibility, and reciprocity – that underlie relationships in Akan society. Like in any other human society, not all members abide by these principles. It falls on the elders to ensure that offenders are forewarned of the implications for their actions and institute appropriate sanctions for offenders.

The author discusses the pressures Christianity and western culture had exerted and still exerts on the Akan culture and the efforts of the elders to defend it. The author opines that despite the challenges pose by the effects of colonization, Christianity, western education, and contemporary civil laws, the elders continue to safeguard the culture of the Akans. The elders find ways to deal with the conflicting situations in ways that preserve their authority and the culture.

The author advances five main points to show the significance of the elders in maintaining and protecting Akan society.

(i) Akan marriage and funeral ceremonies contain values that go beyond their basic

function as ritualized processes by which couples are joined in marriage and the death are buried. Through the performance of rituals associated with these ceremonies, various Akan social and philosophical views are enacted in memorable settings by the elders. In the process, people at marriage and funeral gathering are taught the Akan way of life.

(ii) One of the unique aspects of Akan funeral is the financial contribution members of other lineages in the community make to the lineage of the deceased to defray the cost of the funeral rituals. Funeral donation is a way to ensure that bereaved lineages are not left with debt upon the death of a member. The elders, by seeing to it that this practice continues rekindle the Akan's value of community support and interdependency. This renews the hope and faith people have in their society, and help maintain their communal living.

(iii) When elders address people during marriage ceremony and funerals or pour libation or say prayers at such gatherings, they present individuals as members of their community and lineage thereby reiterating the core Akan values of mutual obligation, reciprocity, cooperation, and communal living. The elders demonstrate this through their regular presence at such gatherings. The elders, by their words and actions, create a community of support for people in time of sorrow and happiness. Through this, the social and mental well-being of all lineage members and the community is promised and sustained.

(iv) In Akan society, "everything" happens for a purpose and is caused by "something" (e.g., witch, an offended ancestor, a curse, etc). Consequently, many Akans who attempt to make meaning of the death of love ones, turn to their faith or religion for answers. For those who believe in Akan traditional religions, the libation and other rituals performed by the elders have the potential to reduce their stress and anxiety, and contribute to good mental health.

(v) In the face a shrinking global plane, culture crosses easily from one corner of the earth to the other within a matter of seconds. The world news is filled with reports of conflicts resulting from the clashes of the world's cultures. The elders are in the forefront of keeping the peace between the Akan culture and other cultures that come into conflict with it. For instance, in marriages and funerals where the Akan culture conflict with some aspects of the Christian customs, they negotiate with adherents of Christianity to find satisfying solutions that ensure peaceful existence of the different cultures. The elders could be termed as defenders of the Akan culture; they guide against disruptive changes thereby ensuring the continuing existence of the Akan way of life.

The author opines that the elders' influence in Akan social arena is still strong. The continuous need to organize social functions such as funerals and marriages means the elders are still crucial to the maintenance of African societies. The author suggests that older people be viewed in the light of their positive socio-cultural contributions, rather than emphasizing the costs of demographic change to society. The implications of these for public policy and research are discussed.