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Ageing and Taking Care of the Elderly in Contemporary Daiden (Northeast Papua New Guinea)¹

Anita von Poser²

Abstract

This paper investigates changing notions of ageing and the social situation of elderly people in Daiden, a Bosmun place located at the Lower Ramu River in Northeast Papua New Guinea. It is argued that 'new ideologies of age' are currently transforming local ideas about the social, psychological, and physical alterations commonly called 'ageing' in the gerontological discourse. These ideologies will be variously addressed as 'chronological age', 'bio-medical age', and 'psychological age'. By exploring changing understandings of elderhood and elderly care, I show that a rather positive perception of ageing, as based on emic or so-called 'traditional' worldviews, turns into a rather negative perception, as a result of adhering to new 'Western'-based explanations. Finally, I argue that these new ideologies of age influence local politics of age, eventually leading to a shift in the exercise of power.

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Introduction

In this paper, I analyse how conceptual and societal changes impinge on local notions of ageing in contemporary Bosmun life. During my stays in Daiden in 2004–2005, 2006, 2008, and 2010³, I realised that global and transregional forces have been impacting local demography, causing a drastic rise of the birth-rate and a particular increase of the young population.⁴ When I first came to live and work in the Ramu area, Daiden was populated by approximately 200 people living in 41 households. On my latest return, in 2010, almost every household had at least two new infant members. Many times, in fact, my interlocutors complained in Tok Pisin⁵: “*Ples ya pulap nogut tru lo manmeri na pikinini wantaim,*” which translates as “[Our] place is overcrowded with men, women and children.”

Global and transregional forces are also transforming Bosmun notions of ageing from local to more ‘glocal’⁶ understandings. During earlier inquiries into local ideas of personhood, embodiment, and emotion (von Poser 2009; in press a), interlocutors frequently said to me: “*Nau mipla ol bodi nating. Bifo mipla ol draipla strongpla man!*” (“Now, we are weak bodies. In the past we were vigorous, strong people!”). This statement is exemplary for past and present conceptualisations of ageing in Bosmun subjectivity. In traditional⁷ views, Bosmun ideas concerning the social, psychological and physical changes over time were occupied with processes of ‘maturation’ – in the sense of growth and development and of continual rejuvenation. Put differently: a positive perception of such changes was prevalent. Whereas today, people’s conceptualisations of such transformative processes are becoming increasingly occupied with ‘ageing’, that is, people start to conceive of themselves as bodies that degenerate and gradually but definitely approach an end. This is a more negative perception, and I argue that it leads to the emergence of a kind of “gerontophobia” (Counts and Counts 1985a: 1) previously absent in Bosmun feeling-thought.

Few works in the anthropology of Oceania have addressed the issue of ageing more comprehensively; most notably Counts and Counts in their anthology *Ageing and its Transformations* (1985b). The various social, political, and economic impacts from outside, however, were not specifically taken into account. More than 25 years later, the theoretical strand now variously called “comparative sociocultural gerontology”, “ethnogerontology”, “anthropology of aging” (Sokolovsky 1997: xviii), or “anthropology of age” (Sagner 1997: 143) cannot ignore the social configurations of ageing under changing societal circumstances. Talking of how contemporary Bosmun perceive ageing

³ Since 2004, I have been in close contact with the residents of Daiden, a Bosmun place in the Madang Province of Northeast Papua New Guinea. I conducted 23 months of empirical research in Papua New Guinea. The people of Daiden consider themselves as belonging to a larger socio-linguistic group called ‘Bosmun’.

⁴ Indeed, there has been rapid population growth to a previously unknown extent. Population estimates and censuses of the Bosmun region support this observation: missionary Höltker (1975: 555) estimated a population of 529 individuals in 1936/37, Z’graggen (1975: 44) who collected linguistic data of the wider Ramu region determined 717 individuals in 1975, the Provincial Administration listed 1226 individuals in 2000, and my own data indicate that by now the Bosmun number about 1500 people. This implies that in a few years time the recorded number of Bosmun individuals will have quadrupled compared to the earliest census from 70 years ago.

⁵ Tok Pisin is the Melanesian Pidgin-English, Papua New Guinea’s major lingua franca. Words in Tok Pisin have been italicised throughout the text and words in the Bosmun local language have been italicised and underlined. The translations of these words in the paper are my own.

⁶ My usage of the word ‘glocal’ refers to the notion of “glocalization” stemming from the sociologist Roland Robertson (1995). It refers to the idea that although social actors might begin to think globally, they continue acting locally and thus integrate the global into locally existing frames of meaning.

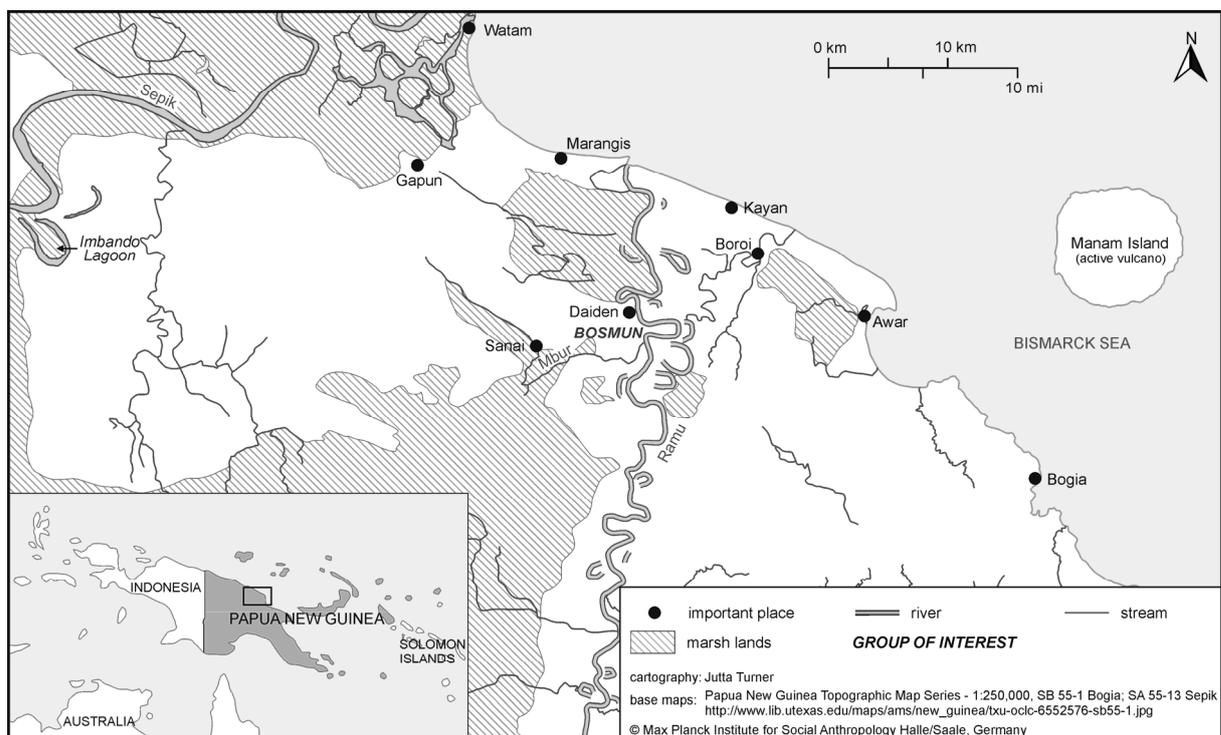
⁷ My usage of the word ‘traditional’ refers to what my interlocutors considered *kastom blo tumbuna* (customs of the ancestors).

becomes impossible without investigating the shifts in meaning, which evolve due to increased outside-experience.⁸

In what follows I show that local conceptions of ageing are currently being redefined by what I call ‘new ideologies of age’. I think of these ideologies along three conceptual lines: (1) ‘chronological age’, (2) ‘bio-medical age’, and (3) ‘psychological age’. I refer to them as ‘ideologies’ because these new flows of knowledge are being used as instruments of power by the young in their attempts to bid farewell to traditional explanations as handed on to them conventionally by the old. After describing the life-world of my interlocutors in Daiden, I investigate the issue of ageing more thoroughly from two distinct and yet related analytical angles. Firstly, I analyse the shifting social construction and perception of ageing. Secondly, I examine local politics of age and how current societal changes influence the social status of people of different ages.

The Ethnographic Setting

Daiden lies in a rural, tropical, swampy lowland environment. It is directly located at the lower reaches of the Ramu River, Papua New Guinea’s fifth largest river (cf. map 1). The river can be reached from Madang, the provincial capital, via a six-hour drive with PMV’s (Public Motor Vehicles) along the North Coast Road. People use wooden canoes to traverse local waters. Motor-driven boats are rare. Maintenance and fuel are too expensive in a society, which, in terms of food and shelter, still mostly adheres to a subsistence-based way of life.



Map 1: Lower Ramu River, Madang Province, Northeast Papua New Guinea

⁸ Since the 1930s, Bosmun have been exposed to Christian proselytisation and to colonialism, which officially ended with the independence of Papua New Guinea in 1975. Western-based ideas of religion, politics, technology, health, and education have influenced people’s imaginations and have resulted in pluralistic views.

Bosmun are fluent speakers of two or more languages. Most elders fluently speak Tok Pisin and the local language, a so-called Papuan vernacular, whereas the younger generations speak Tok Pisin and English, which is taught in local schools. At the moment, it is mostly the middle-aged, who have the capacity to converse in all three languages. Tok Pisin, however, has become the dominant language of daily life. It both displaces the local vernacular and figures prominently as the language of the indigenous populations of Papua New Guinea. English, in contrast, is still mostly associated with colonial agendas and the ‘white’ expatriate communities living in the country.

Bosmun social structure is made up of two moieties, the moiety of the sun and the moiety of the moon. Both split into several patrilineal clans. The residents of Daiden consider themselves as belonging to the sun-moiety and descending from a large clan named Rom. Male members of a clan usually live near each other. They trace their descent to a common ancestor and most often own areas of land and water adjacent to one another. Social and political decision-making processes concerning communal matters rely on egalitarian ideals. Good leaders in Bosmun thought appear humble. Decisions should be made in special men’s houses, gathering places, where every man has the right to speak. Women exercise power rather informally. Prior to voicing his opinions in the male sphere of a men’s house, a male speaker is likely to have discussed them in the cross-gender realm of the household, where women have considerable influence. As crucial food procurers, women have a high social standing.

Except for the selling of copra and fish in coastal towns and the running of local shops, people carry on a traditional mode of subsistence, which basically relies on harmony in male-female relations. According to Bosmun perspectives, gender-complementarity is significant for maintaining a sociable life within the extended web of relationships. The political, economic, and social fortunes of household units depend highly on joint male-female labour. By customary standards, either brothers and sisters or husbands and wives are obliged to cooperatively engage in the production of sago.⁹ Based on a number of local myths, the work of food production is imbued with social and emotional meaning. Food generosity grounded in male-female collaboration is a core ideal of Bosmun morality (von Poser 2009). This ideal is underscored by a particular premise: no one is allowed to eat from the sago planted by him- or herself. For that reason, regular exchanges of food are necessary.¹⁰ These exchanges can only be accomplished if social relationships in the realms of extended kinship are kept in balance and if nuclear families apply sensible child-spacing. While commenting about the moral behaviour of a neighbouring (and kin-related) family, one female interlocutor stated that this family was no longer able to uphold the ideal of food generosity simply because its members had become too numerous.

Owing to alternative ideals that are trickling in as Bosmun increasingly experience ‘outside life’, local food exchanges are slowly deteriorating. In 2008, a small number of interlocutors raised concerns about the younger generations’ attitudes towards the local convention of food reciprocity,

⁹ Together with fish, sago makes up the all-season staple diet. Cutting the sago palm, removing the bark and scraping the pith are male tasks in Bosmun labour-division. Women do the rinsing of the pith through which a paste-like substance is obtained that is used in cooking. Bosmun take gender-complementarity also into account in adoption. A couple with too many sons is likely to adopt a girl. A couple with too many daughters is likely to adopt a boy.

¹⁰ Economically, Bosmun nuclear families are self-sufficient units. Socially, by contrast, people create “like-for-like exchanges”, to borrow a phrase used by Tuzin (2001: 76) for describing matters of transaction in Ilahita Arapesh, Papua New Guinea. In merging his own data with theories from French sociology and anthropology, Tuzin (2001: 28, 75–77) argues that if sago is exchanged for sago and yam for yam, Durkheim’s (1933) notion of a “solidarity (...) termed *mechanical*” versus “[o]rganic solidarity” (Tuzin 2001: 75; original emphasis) gains analytical relevance. In industrialised societies, organic solidarity exists: social agents are not self-sufficient parts but interdependent ‘organs’, which need to exchange in order to constitute the whole social body. Mechanical solidarity is “promoting interdependency *for its own sake*” (Tuzin 2001: 76; original emphasis).

whereas in 2010 an overall pessimistic view prevailed. The sphere of food-based morality is indeed but one of many in which change is occurring. In fact, this changing morality reflects the influx of new ideologies of age. Prior to addressing these, I provide data about ageing in Daiden as based on emic/traditional explanations.

Traditional Explanations of Ageing

In Bosmun preliterate past, age was determined relative to both birth-rank and important historical events anchored in collective memory such as volcanic eruptions on nearby islands, river floods, food shortages, and ritual performances. My elder interlocutors, for instance, took World War II as a key incident for age-estimation. Some were born prior to and some after ‘the time when bombs dropped in the area’. Further, social function correlating with changing social positions and changing social and ritual obligations was a critical determinant of age. This is similar to McKellin’s note about the determination of age among the Managalase people in Oro Province, Papua New Guinea. McKellin writes:

“Socially, the elderly undergo a transformation that is more significant than even physical change in defining their status. *People are identified as fully mature and elderly by their position in the developmental cycle of exchange and not by their chronological age.* (...) During the course of a person’s lifetime the nature and position in his or her exchange partnerships and associations is constantly changing. Each birth, marriage, and death in one’s social group or network of exchange partners alters the pattern of social relations.” (McKellin 1985: 194; emphasis inserted)

Significant stages and transitions within the Bosmun developmental cycle of exchange are primarily marked by a person’s food-related activities. Bosmun thoughts about the human life-course are mainly thoughts about people’s roles as food-takers and/or -givers across social time and space. Children are said to reach a first important step of maturity (*yaam*, literally meaning to know/to comprehend) once they willingly share food with others. At this point, people emphasised, they are on their way of becoming *memkor yaaon* (good persons). It is also a point in time when parents start to instruct their children in all kinds of practical matters relevant in the local material world. The more children’s bodies develop the distinctive physical signs of maleness and femaleness respectively, the more parents motivate them to actively participate in the gender-specific tasks of food production. It is commonly held that, through the making and sharing of sago, people gradually reach social and emotional maturity and reduce what is called *rorer* (insanity/social immaturity/unsociability) in the local vernacular.

Up until the 1970s, adolescent boys and girls underwent long-lasting phases of ritual seclusion before re-entering communal life as adults. During that period they were given lessons on, for instance, gender-specific spiritual knowledge or knowledge about adult body hygiene. Ritual seclusion lasted until boys and girls had changed so much in their physical appearance so that the community would have had difficulties in recognising them. Today, Bosmun teenagers attend school and, therefore, the phases of ritual seclusion have been reduced to a minimum of time.

Young adults are considered to be ready for marriage once their families acknowledge them as active food procurers, thus granting them a sense of responsibility. With the birth of their own children, spouses take over more and more responsibilities regarding the provision of food for the entire household. At this stage of life, I was told, people feel most at ease; they are now in the position

to reciprocate what they received by previous parental and grandparental generations, and they create new relationships by taking care of the upcoming generation. With the birth of their grandchildren, people gradually hand over major household responsibilities to their children. With the complete retirement from food-procuring activities, feelings of becoming old are said to emerge. Principally, such feelings are not to be mistaken as feelings of becoming sad or fearful in view of the advanced age. Elderly people do hand over their responsibilities in building social relations to the next generation but they also gain new responsibilities and new forms of esteem to which I return later.

From an emically oriented, social constructionist perspective, which seeks “understanding, if not explaining, individual processes of ageing as influenced by social definitions and social structures” (Bengtson, Putney and Johnson 2005: 15), it is the Bosmun notion of *rerak* that has to be given special attention in a discussion about ageing in Daiden. Conceptually, *rerak* variously refers to Bosmun aspects of the person, the self, and the body. Several times I was told that senility and increasing functional disabilities only occur if people transgress certain taboos and directives. If they abide by them, they are able to mature in a healthy way, or put differently, to ‘rejuvenate’ (*rerak*). Bosmun use *rerak* to refer to a snake’s moulting of the skin and to a human’s possibility of keeping physically and mentally fit. During rituals, I repeatedly expressed my admiration for the beautiful dancers, their dresses, the way their bodies were anointed as well as the way their hair was styled and dyed. Listeners often said that a ritual performer has to appear as a *yumbu rumbus*, a ‘complete body’ – shining, fragrant, agile, and beautiful. They also explained that the ancestors had always looked like this in the past, not just when rituals were staged but in daily life. They had followed the customs, which existed to take proper care of the human organism. Even old people looked like this, I was told, since they cared for themselves during their entire life-course. Bosmun ageing, including the notion of *rerak*, is thus not to be seen as an automatic and inevitable progression from one stage in life to another but as a process depending on the behaviour of the individual who is believed to be able to slow down, if not avoid, the signs of natural degeneration.

Bosmun ideas of rejuvenation are deeply anchored in local mythology, which explains the creation of the world and the patterns of human sociality. There are two important cultural heroes said to have instigated the many ways of *rerak*. Mambra, a male character, set up the rules for men. Nzari, a female character, did so for women. Interestingly, both characters were able to transform back from old to young age. Nzari, for example, is imagined as a young and beautiful woman who intentionally took the shape of a frail, uncared-for elderly person. She acted as if she was vulnerable and needing help, and she made herself look like *roondorom*¹¹ (literally: wrinkled). In so doing, she wanted to examine her social counterparts’ reactions towards her decrepitude. Nzari revealed her true stage of maturity only to those who took pity on her, and endowed them with vital knowledge. She gave fire to humankind, and she taught women the wisdom of proper childbirth. She created sentiment for the aged in human hearts.¹² According to the myth, prior to Nzari’s era, men’s sisters, wives, and daughters died in a primordial kind of Caesarean section. Owing to Nzari’s power, women did not only survive delivery and live on as mothers; they also received lessons on how to maintain optimal stages of maturity.

¹¹ The term *roondorom* is used to describe wrinkled skin/physical decline/immobility/loss of sight/inability to work; but people do not use it as a term of address for the elderly.

¹² Bosmun speakers use the local language phrase *vut mon* to refer to feeling-states. *Vut* denotes the beating of the heart and every pulsation that people feel in their bodies. An elder female interviewee, for example, pointed at her temples, her neck, her hands, and the part between her ankle and heel when I asked her to explain *vut* to me. As a noun *mon* means ‘intestines’, as a verb ‘to do/to act’.

Already in childhood and during phases of male and female initiation, Bosmun are taught to consume herbal substances. Specific herbs are said to enhance social, psychological, and physical development.¹³ Moreover, bathing in the river several times a day is believed to help in the renewal. Other than old riverbeds and waterholes, it was explained to me, the river takes the dirt away to the open sea.¹⁴

Finally, controlled heterosexual contact is of utmost importance. In places where survival depends on self-subsistence people are acutely aware of food-, land-, and water-shortages and of the threat of overpopulation. Hence, as probably elsewhere, distinct solutions to contraception evolved in Bosmun life, which ensured a pattern of birth-spacing different from the present. Following ancestral lore, spouses were not allowed to sexually reproduce after their own children began to reproduce. Furthermore, Bosmun women had to stay secluded in a birth-house during and after each delivery. The period of seclusion only ended as newborns made their first attempts at walking. This was the sign that they would survive. Seclusion, thus, lasted a considerable time. In addition, Bosmun birth-spacing practices were based on the idea that a couple was only allowed to reproduce once the lastborn grew to a size matching the height of the father's hip. Delivering in local birth-houses was still common at the time I lived in Daiden. Nowadays, however, a mother returns to her household after less than a month and resumes her regular chores much earlier. According to several myths in which male characters such as Mambra appear as main figures, men lose their vitality in heterosexual intercourse. Female fluids are thought to have a debilitating influence on male bodies,¹⁵ an idea quite common throughout Papua New Guinea (e.g. Godelier 1986: 58–63; Hogbin 1996: 95; Keesing 1982: 7, 9; Meigs 1984). In addition, small children are believed to pull energy from others' bodies for their own growth.

It was important to not lose vitality because, in the past, men had to collect strength especially for the playing of secret flutes during ritual procedures and for headhunting endeavours, the common warfare tactic in the region until probably the 1950s. Physical vitality is, in fact, still indispensable for all kinds of activities in Bosmun territory. Hence, ideally, excessive heterosexual contact is always to be avoided. Women, I was informed, do not lose vitality in intercourse and childbirth until they have delivered more than four children. Being important managers of household life and of social networking via regular food transactions, they, too, have to save energy.

During their lives, Bosmun women and men do not only become involved in different social obligations, which might reduce their time spent together, but also engage in other recognised practises to direct sexual reproduction. Regular penile incision, for instance¹⁶, makes sexual intercourse temporarily inadvisable for men. Unlike women, who lose blood during menses, men have to incise themselves to dispose of female blood believed to be contained in male bodies through birth. Even if couples do not refrain from sexual intercourse, they might fall back on local herbal substances known to cause abortion or infertility. Since, in ancestral theories of personhood, newborns are

¹³ Interestingly, character traits such as stubbornness or hot temper are traced back neither to the subjective interiority of the individual nor to failed disciplinary tactic but to wrong or irregular herbal consumption.

¹⁴ During floods, the Ramu River reshapes the ground by turning solid soil into mud and later into swampy places, where sago palms can easily grow. The growth of the human body is correlated with the growth of the sago palm. One might argue that, in an ontological sense, people and land form a substantial unity, and that the river renews human bodies as it renews the ground.

¹⁵ Infants are strongly associated with the motherly body. Therefore, fathers must not get into sensual contact with their children until the age of approximately five, when they are considered strong enough.

¹⁶ Cf. Hogbin's (1996 [1970]) study *The Island of Menstruating Men* in Wogeo, located offshore the North Coast of Papua New Guinea.

considered socially not complete¹⁷, infanticide during times of food crises or ongoing wars was also an option to regulate population growth.

My interlocutors rather reluctantly approved the continued practise of penile incision, abortion, and infanticide. Owing to Christian influences, traditional modes of regulating population growth are now being stigmatised as primitive and sinful.¹⁸ The consequence of stigmatisation is that past customs are being marked with a “brand of ‘auto-orientalism’” as expressed by Wardlow (2006: 35) for the Huli living in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. That is to say, people increasingly represent themselves in a negative light, thereby applying images of the self which, in fact, have been produced by others. Apart from the shadows that Christian morality casts, ideas about ageing from Western lenses have begun to seep into emic explanations.

New Ideologies of Age

There are three flows of knowledge in particular, which I explore as ‘chronological age’, bio-medical age’, and ‘psychological age’, that currently impair the life-quality of the elderly in Daiden.

To think of “chronological age” (Counts and Counts 1985a: 4; Baars 2009), or “numerical” (Barker 1997: 408), “calendrical” (Friebe 1996: 78), or “absolute age” (Lang 1993: 138) as one might also call it, is to think of linear time measurements. Knowing one’s exact birth-date is a common marker of identification in so-called literate societies. It is, in fact, the first and foremost set of numbers through which a person identifies. Uncertainty of one’s birth-date renders a person socially vulnerable; it implies that he or she is lacking proper relationships with others, most likely the parents, who should have taken the responsibility of identifying their child according to conventional calendar-based knowledge.

In Daiden, the idea of chronological age was first introduced by missionaries who noted down people’s dates of birth and death in parish registers. Nowadays, locals and health-care workers document them in government-issued registers and in clinical passes for newborns and thus confer numerical identity to people. Especially younger Bosmun, who strive for a ‘modern’ life, proudly express on what day of what month and year they were born. Having to approximate someone’s age according to conventions of the past is now interpreted as signalling a marked lack of knowledge. I sometimes gained the impression that subtle mockery is now made of the elders who are able to estimate their stage of maturity relative to birth-rank, historical affairs, or social occupations, but who cannot provide the correct set of numbers.

Through what people learn from local and regional schools and via media such as newspaper and radio, they become acquainted with new role models for certain stages correlated with years along a chronological life trajectory, including models for the elder members of the society. To illustrate this: younger interlocutors considered S, a man around the age of seventy and one of the oldest living persons in Daiden, as old according to what they estimated as the man’s lived years. Middle-aged and

¹⁷ For similar classifications of newborns in other parts of Papua New Guinea, see Fajans (1985: 372), Keck (2005: 119) or Barker (2008: 76).

¹⁸ The outcome of adapting to new morals is that, on average, Bosmun women now bear six to ten children, as opposed to the average of four in the past. According to local opinions, this has led to a dilemma: too many children prevent the mother from providing each child with proper care and attention. This dilemma has also been expressed in a songline recently composed by a male Bosmun elder:

Ndoŋono Ndoŋono Ndoŋono
Rome Rome Rome
Mi#re songae
Mbaaŋa naase

[Women of the place/clan-group] Ndoŋon Ndoŋon Ndoŋon
 [Women of the place/clan-group] Rom Rom Rom
 [You women] like to deliver [children]
 [But you are] lazy to care for [them]

elderly interlocutors, by contrast, interpreted S's age according to his activities and to what they knew about his state of ritual maturity. He had been among the last boys who had undergone all phases of male initiation. He had also been taught how to *rerak*, that is, how to rejuvenate physically and mentally. During a fire in 2004, S's household was destroyed. Instead of asking his adult sons for help, he rebuilt the household slowly as every Bosmun male adult usually does at the prime of his life. He did so without accusing his sons of neglecting their duty towards him as an elderly person. After all, he did not feel too old.

Elderly men and women are now being addressed by the younger with the Tok Pisin term *lapun*. When asked about its meaning, younger interlocutors answered that *lapun* means old and that it hints at the loss of former competencies. My impression was that the younger apply the term *lapun* in a two-fold and indeed ambivalent way. They call the elderly *lapun* since they are expected to show respect towards them by avoiding their personal names. They also call people *lapun* who are senescing, i.e. people who are not merely increasing in years but declining physically and mentally (cf. Medawar 1952: 46–47). In discussing the meaning of this word with a couple aged about 60, it turned out that the couple felt offended by being called *lapun* by their children-in-law. The couple complained (in overlapping voices):

“Ol sa kolim mitupela lapun tasol mitupela i no lapun tumas! Wanem ol liklik wok i stap em mitupela sa wokim! Em sa go kisim fis kindam. Mi yet sa wokim ol liklik bilas, sa lukautim ol tumbuna na disela kain.”

“They call the two of us old but the two of us are not that old! We still fulfil several small tasks! She [wife] catches fish [and] prawns. I [husband] produce small items for decoration [and I] look after the grandchildren and so on.”

To them, the meaning of *lapun* differed from the meaning linguistically encoded in the traditional local idioms, which imply that getting older is a desirable and valued phase of life. One conventional way to address the elderly is to use the respective kinship terms. Due to an increasing loss of the local vernacular, however, young Bosmun have begun to confuse these terms. Instead of calling the father's father or mother's father *ton*, which is the correct term, the young now say *saate* (father) to basically every male kin member of the preceding generations. Another conventional way is to use the phrase *moto xoor* (*mot* = male, *xoor* = big, admirable) for a male elder and *mese romndes* (*mes* = female, *romndes* = ironwood tree, a strong wood not eaten by termites and hence used for the making of strong house-posts) for a female elder. Both phrases refer to seniority but neither refer to the process of senescence nor to a phase of “cultural ostracism” (Carucci 1985: 120) as sometimes experienced elsewhere by elderly people. Even if a person is no longer able to work or move around independently, ostracism is not considered the rule.

For those who grew up with ancestral values, elderhood is seen as a time of positive social experience, when people ‘finally sit down [i.e. resign from food-procuring work] to tell stories which others want to hear.’ For those who have been exposed to flows of outside knowledge, the life-phase starting with ‘the number 50’ is layered with difficulty. One man, in his beginning fifties, said:

“Yupela i gat ol masin blo wokim wok. Mipela i gat ol masol tasol. Taim mipela kamap fifti nau, em nau, mipela i lapun na slek olgeta nau.”

“You have the machines that work for you. We have only muscles. When we turn fifty, that's it, we get old and entirely weak.”

This statement contradicts with S's situation mentioned earlier. It shows that the social advantages of high age have become less important whereas the biological disadvantages such as muscles growing weak once the age of fifty is reached have gained in importance in Bosmun discussions of ageing. In his comparison between collective self and the other (that is, Papua New Guineans and 'white people' visiting or living in the country), the man also comments about the technological advantages of the other such as having machines and the lack thereof among Papua New Guineans. That said, it adds to his explanation in bio-medical terms.

The notion that a person degenerates with progressing age is based on what I address as the 'bio-medical age'. It refers to explanatory models and treatments of the various stages of the ageing process and of illnesses as offered by Western biology and bio-medicine. As gerontologist Baltes and colleagues have put forward, biology, indeed, transposes a rather negative picture upon this human transition:

“Where evolutionary selection and the ontogenetic biology of aging are concerned, the life span of humans displays a loss in plasticity and, in addition, an increasingly unfinished architecture. These insights might be captured with the sentence: ‘Biology is not a good friend of old age’.” (Baltes, Lindenberger and Staudinger 2006: 576).

Although this statement sounds highly 'scientific' in both its content and style, its very message informs a widespread understanding of ageing across Western societies. Caws and Glahn have called this message “the merciless truth: we do age and this process is inexorable, irreversible and unstoppable. We grow from birth to maturation to maturity to decline, eventually to death.” (Caws and Glahn 2009: 16). I argue that 'culture', as grounded in my understanding of Bosmun traditional notions of rejuvenation, is a 'better friend' of ageing and especially of old age.

The introduction of bio-medical explanations into Bosmun theories of ageing also includes what is commonly known as “medicalisation” (van Eeuwijk 2003: 242) in medical anthropology. Made prominent in the works of Foucault (1963) and Zola (1972), medicalisation has come to stand for a Western belief in the controllability of all bodily phenomena using changing medical treatments geared towards the defined biological age. It also refers to strategies applied by agendas of power that, in order to control the pharmaceutical market, have been redefining 'normal' human conditions as diseases. As critical medical anthropologists have revealed, several 'misconceptions' are in circulation; especially women suffer under these, being treated for 'female problems', from menarche to menopause (e.g. Schücking 1997). By and large, Bosmun women explained that such female bio-transitions had occurred to them without signs of inner distress. They also said they had heard vague reports that women elsewhere suffered from these transitions.

Medical anthropologists have further pointed out that the members of non-Western societies take risks resulting from self-medication. People have relatively open access to remedies such as aspirin and antibiotics without being provided education in their proper medical use (e.g. Obrist van Eeuwijk 2003). Indeed, Bosmun exposure to bio-medical remedies showed a rather eclectic use. If affordable, antibiotic creams and pills were taken to overcome all sorts of pain. Medical remedies were easily available at either town chemists or in tiny stores along roads leading into the rural parts of the country. My presence in Daiden also triggered ideas of easy access to remedies. In the beginning, I was meant to provide everyone with the right pill. I explained that I was willing to help with plasters and bandages but, due to a lack of expertise, not with oral medication.

First Bosmun contacts with bio-medicine date back to the establishment of an aid post in the 1950s in Ndonjon, another Bosmun place (Healy 1951/52: 9; Frawley 1953/54: 10), and an infant welfare clinic in the 1960s (Browne 1968/69: 10; Douglas 1970/71: 5) located further up the river, now operating as a health-care centre. Due to better road conditions today, outward mobility has increased and thus people sometimes visit the hospital in the provincial capital Madang. Here, they collect ideas about cells and germs, see x-rays, take blood tests, are treated with pills, and undergo surgery such as sterilisation, the modern way to prevent excessive population growth as opposed to the traditional way of sexual restriction.

Apart from medication and surgery, bio-medical information on body hygiene also influences local customs. In 2008, for example, I listened to a young mother complaining about the local custom of child delivery. Having delivered her youngest child in the hospital of Madang, the young mother was supposed to enter seclusion once she was back in Daiden. Calling the birth-house *kalabus* (prison) in the presence of her female kin, she refused seclusion and emphasised the advantages of giving birth in a clinic. During earlier conversations, both younger and elder women had stated that the birth-house was a female *haus tambaran* (spirit-house), a locus of female wisdom, where the young women learned from the old.

In another conversation, a man told me he had heard at the adjacent health-care clinic that penile incision should be abandoned for hygienic reasons. The man had not received any further explanations regarding hygiene and germs. Nor had the clinic personnel taken efforts to explain that, from a bio-medical point of view, female fluids do not negatively effect male bodies. The man thus thought it was a question of proper instrument use and not of abandoning the custom at all. As a consequence, he had started using a broken piece of glass instead of the traditional (secret) object used by the ancestors. Clinic personnel working in the rural parts of Papua New Guinea often hail from other areas and therefore lack knowledge about locally existing forms of health and hygiene, regeneration, and, of course, symbolic body connotations.

Bosmun do make use of “medical pluralism” (Keck 2005: 7), which is the combination of emic and etic, past and present medical ideas and practices. There is the general belief that if one medical system does not work in a particular case, the other hopefully will; yet, especially the younger generations are eager to acquire information about the *marasin blo waitman* (the medical system of white people). Consciously or unconsciously, they thus not only vie with their elders for collective recognition but even make them appear more vulnerable. A case in point is the situation reported earlier in this paper about the couple which complained being called *lapun* (old) by the young.

When people start to count their years lived and hear what they probably have to face in terms of biology when they reach a certain numerical age, they psychologically build up new attitudes towards the different stages in the developmental process. Ageing is not something that just happens on the outside:

“The distinction between inner and outer worlds allows chronological age to be peeled off from psychological age. One might be classified by others, looking from the outside, as 24, 48 or 96, whilst the internal experience of self could be at any of these ages at any one point in time.” (Biggs 2005: 154)

‘Psychological age’ is, of course, highly subjective and individual, depending on a person’s biography and surroundings. Still, ethnographies of emotion that are theoretically grounded in social constructionist approaches (e.g. Rosaldo 1980; Abu-Lughod 1986; Lutz 1988; Röttger-Rössler 2004)

have variously exemplified that the internal experience of self is also socially moulded. In some societies, a feeling-state may be “hypercognized”; it may be conceived of as an emotion as long as “there are a large number of culturally provided schemata for interpreting and dealing with it” (Levy 1984: 219). However, in other societies, it may be the case that this feeling-state is “hypocognized”, meaning that such schemata are lacking (Levy 1984: 219–220).

With regard to the psychological dimension of ageing, I argue for the historical evolvement of a distinct feeling in Bosmun emotionality within the contemporary context. From Bosmun ancestral logic and from my personal encounters with the elderly, I assume that people formerly underwent the transition into old age without the fear labelled ‘gerontophobia’. Local schemata concerning notions of care and of how care was earned made sure that high age was an aspired phase in Bosmun lifetime; emotionally and, as I show later, politically. Today, it is argued, gerontophobia is slowly emerging due to various incoming flows of information. Counts and Counts write about gerontophobia in traditional Pacific societies:

“Although most of us can expect to achieve old age, *in preindustrialized societies old age is still an experience limited to a very few.* (...) We die of the degenerative diseases of old age and, consequently, *we perceive death primarily as the inevitable result of growing old and frequently treat the subject of aging with dread and avoidance: we suffer from ‘gerontophobia’* (...). In contrast, most people in tribal societies die of infectious disease, trauma, animal bites, childhood illness, and childbirth rather than of the degenerative diseases of old age.” (Counts and Counts 1985a: 1; emphasis inserted)

Compared with other countries, general life expectancy at birth is still very low in Papua New Guinea. According to estimations of the World Health Organisation, life expectancy at birth is 60 for males/64 for females, and healthy life expectancy is 51 for males/52 for females (World Health Statistics 2008).

Fear of death shapes Bosmun emotionality to a considerable extent. People in this particular environment are frequently confronted with death, and only few arrive at a high age. In this case, of course, “longevity of the elderly needs explanation” (McKellin 1985: 182). According to Bosmun ancestral views, longevity is the ultimate sign that a person has led a sociable life and has built a huge network of benevolent relationships. Women are said to lead more sociable lives than men and therefore live longer. Due to patrilineal inheritance and the ideal of virilocality, men have to fight over ground and women. They are exposed to more trouble and that more regularly, I was told, and therefore die earlier. Thus, emically, illness and death are not the result of growing old and senescing but of failing to maintain harmonious social relationships. Death and preceding decrepitude either arise from unsolved social conflicts¹⁹ or from sorcery (death-magic) attacks made by social or political opponents.²⁰

Based on indigenous modes of explaining illness and death, I do not think that fear of old age was too prevalent amongst Bosmun in general and their elders in particular. Of course, people reaching a relatively old age compared with others realise that there are not many contemporaries left. Facing the fear of loss in old age is a marked emotional experience. There is not only the subjective experience of loss that elderly people may be confronted with along their life trajectories, but also communally elaborated grief, rendering the loss of a beloved or renowned individual a recognised rupture to society. Since male-female-labour is so much a part of what is considered a good life, the loss of the partner is considered the worst. However, the loss of contemporaries is said to become balanced by

¹⁹ Cf. Keck’s (2005) analysis of the medical system of the Yupno living in the Finisterre Range of Papua New Guinea.

²⁰ For the Managalase, cf. McKellin (1985: 181).

seeing the offspring grow and expanding the web of relations, which were started long ago by the now-elder. Intergenerational relationships, indeed, have to be taken into account when exploring the states of people of different ages (cf. Nicolas in prep.), especially with regard to the question of who is to care for the young and the old alike.

Taking Care of the Elderly – A Question of Reciprocity

Barker (1997: 407) addresses a vital aspect regarding the classification of elders across time and space. In drawing a line of “distinction between decrepit and intact elders”, she claims that anthropologists should examine the respective behaviour shown towards both. Based on work on the Polynesian island of Niue, she illustrates that a frail elder intentionally receives neglect because he or she is thought to be in a transitional stage, “not-quite-human-but-not-quite-ancestor”, a “ghost-in-the-making” (ibid.: 423), as it were, and that neglect helps to progress the transition. Tracing written sources about Niue, she also finds historical evidence for the ‘mistreatment’ of impaired elders (ibid.: 419–420).

To my knowledge, decrepit Bosmun elders were not markedly neglected. K, one of the eldest men I met in the Bosmun area, for instance, was an intact elder when we first met in 2004 and a physically and mentally frail elder when we saw each other again in 2006, a few months before he died. One could say that, from a bio-medical point of view, he clearly showed the signs of senescence; his vitality had obviously declined, he was very thin and weak by 2006 and no longer able to participate in the kind of lively conversations we had shared so many times before in 2004. Interestingly, though, the middle-aged and elder members of K’s kin group were convinced that he did not die of advanced age but because of an attack by a malevolent spirit. To me, K did never appear neglected in social, nutritional, or hygienic terms.

The case of A, a man slightly older than K, also rejects neglect as a Bosmun answer to human frailty. In 2010, I was with A and his family as he was about to die. A was constantly watched, washed, and fed. Very old people turn into infants, I was told, and thus have to be cared for in the same way. Moreover, his family told me that he had been a good husband, father, and grandfather. One day, I witnessed how his wife, a daughter, and a grandson literally called him back to life, thus making attempts to prevent the man’s transition into corporal death. The wife repeatedly yelled at him “*Yia!*” (an intimate name used by the couple to refer to each other), the daughter yelled “*lapun man...yu kaikai hap erok!*” (“old man...you have to eat a bit of sago-pudding!”), and the grandson “*saate!*” (“father!”).

Elderly people are usually looked after by their children and/or grandchildren. Being cared for by one’s offspring is considered valuable in Daiden. This is different, for instance, with elderly people in North America, where social dependency on children is seen as a stigma and as a way of encroaching upon one’s identity (Sagner 1997: 154). I had the impression that Bosmun elders felt especially comfortable in the presence of grandchildren who cared for them. Moreover, the children of cross-sex siblings are expected to have particular respect for elderly relatives and visit them regularly once these become dependent on others for food and hygiene. The children of cross-sex siblings are also held responsible for one’s burial. A linkage of special relevance is said to exist between men and their sisters’ offspring and between women and their brothers’ offspring. Once the children of cross-sex siblings are born, men and women ideally feel obliged to care for them with particular caution. In so doing, they build up their old age provision. If they fail to care for their younger relatives, they know

they cannot expect feelings of concern from them at later moments in life when they become vulnerable.

This is acceptable according to shared understandings as I saw, for example, in the case of Y, a man above thirty, who had lost his parents in early childhood and who had suffered from neglect by his mother's brother who should have watched him. Several times, I heard Y openly addressing the issue of neglect in conversations amongst kin, declaring that he was not going to look after his elder relative. Interestingly, Y was commonly held to be a generous and concerned man despite his obvious and explicitly verbalised rejection of his mother's brother.

Another incidence of known neglect, which was not morally condemned, occurred in the case of W, a man in his late twenties, and P, his classificatory grandmother, a frail elder above 70. P had lived in town for two decades before she was sent back to Daiden by her sons and their wives. The couples still lived in town. Only one daughter-in-law visited P on weekends. W, the grandson, received money to look after her but was said to spend most of it on other purposes. Yet, nobody really blamed him. Some even took pity on him. W did not really know P. Hardly ever had P visited Daiden during her years in town. The sons had sent her back to her birthplace in order to die. Those who had known P before she had left Daiden had died, and P herself had returned in a condition too late to reintegrate herself in socially meaningful ways, that is, too late to 'work for her respect'. The sons thought that dying in one's birthplace was the proper way but they, too, had spent most of their lifetimes in town, being busy building economic and social relationships outside of Daiden. They, too, had suffered the loss of respect through failing to reciprocate the traditional way.

Van der Geest (2002), exploring care for the elderly in rural Ghana, makes a similar point. He describes how respect, as vehicle for mutual care, evolves: "Respect is *earned*. It is given to those who deserve it because of what they have done in their lives" (van der Geest 2002: 26; original emphasis). Thus, if gerontophobia was to emerge in Bosmun feeling-thought, it was probably due to one's own confessions of having failed as a sociable agent in interpersonal life. Without taking into consideration the power of reciprocity, intergenerational relationships in Daiden, as well as elsewhere (cf. Sagner 1997: 153–154), cannot be fully comprehended. As a mutual and lifelong caring attitude between young and old, reciprocity guarantees the humane continuation of intergenerational relationships. In local epistemology, the lack of reciprocity frees a person from obligations including the obligation to care.

There is another source of care apart from the one that people normally receive from close kin in daily life. Each individual has formalised relationships with particular members of distant kin. People in this relationship call each other *nzokumbu*.²¹ The relationship does not gain its strength from the knowledge of exact genealogical linkage. Exact linkages were, in fact, often blurred. Interlocutors rather emphasised the force of the *nzokumbu*-relationship by stating that their parents had handed down this relationship to them, so they would hand it down to their children and so forth (only a marriage between *nzokumbu*-partners can break this bond). Interestingly, people connected as *nzokumbu* are bound to participate in one another's suffering: when something happens to one of the partners, the other literally has to live through it, too. In social conflicts, in widowhood and grief, and in phases of illness, *nzokmbur* (plural of *nzokumbu*) are meant to console each other. Further, they have to 'copy' one another's misfortunes. If the one stumbles, the other has to stumble, too. If the one gets caught in rain, the other has to walk through the rain, too. If the tool of the one gets broken, the other has to break his/her tool, too. If the one beats his/her spouse, the other has to beat his/her own,

²¹ For details on Bosmun kinship, cf. von Poser (2009: 93–95).

too (and deal with the consequences). The idea of *nzokumbu* provides a vital pattern of Bosmun emotionality, which rejects loneliness and shows that feeling-states should be shared.

Finally, the local concept of care implies that looking after others shields a person from becoming the suspect of sorcery. The image of the perfect sorcerer reflects what is locally considered the “epitome of an evil character” (Dalton 2007: 41). It is someone, I was told, who does not think about others and disobeys the local morale of social reciprocity; someone who is too individualistic. If one behaves this way, one’s kin are not only entitled but also bound to openly pass criticism on to this person (cf. von Poser in press b). Good social agents remind each other of the ethic of mutual concern. In so doing, they show their inclination to keep away ill will – the ultimate source from which the wish arises to bring illness or death to others.

One could easily argue that in a society where mutual care is so much a core ideal of morality, care for the decrepit members of a society does not simply stop. Yet, as the Niuean case described by Barker (1997) shows, distinct data might be obtained from an investigation into local ideas of personhood. Bosmun notions of the person imply that social death outlasts corporeal death for a considerable time, a notion quite common in the region (e.g. in the neighbouring Kayan area [von Poser 2008]). In a complex sequence of ritual events, the deceased’s spirit is honoured (*ndom* = spirit, *taao* = to honour). Communal mourning is followed by the first burial of the corpse and, several months later, by the second burial during which the deceased’s bones are cleaned and reburied. *Ndom taao* ends with a feast, a number of years later when pigs have been raised (and fed on cooked sago) by the cross-sex siblings’ children. It is vital to note that during all phases of *ndom taao* the deceased’s spirit is thought to be capable of disturbing the ritual procedure (cf. von Poser in press a). Interference means that the spirit is annoyed with his or her kin, thus creating communal social pressure or, at least, gossip. Without interference, the spirit is thought to have lived in comfort. His or her good will eventually makes a feast successful.

Traditional images of elderhood imply a shared notion of the person that has gained wisdom over time and experiences alternative forms of freedom with ageing. In their reproductive years, women and men have to submit themselves to gender separation especially with regard to ritual matters. During this time, they are also the ones most responsible for managing the life of the household, securing its food wealth, and for bringing up the offspring. With increasing age, people are freed from such obligations. Moreover, the issue of gender diminishes. Men and women now spend more time together. In their function as the society’s elderly, they also gather to share and pass on ancestral knowledge to the younger. Finally, Bosmun elders also become more mobile. This is different from other societies in which the elderly often experience socio-spatial confinement and marginalisation (cf. Myerhoff 1978). As their biological and/or classificatory children build up their own households, parents get the chance to alter residence whenever they want to. With increasing age, people belong to several households (collecting censuses in and around Daiden hence turned out to be a challenging endeavour). Following traditional ideals, the elderly know that, as prime keepers of ancestral wisdom, they are welcomed.

Societal Changes and Shifting Politics of Age

The Bosmun societal frame as shaped by ancestral values offered the elderly a powerful position, including the assurance of a good life in old age. This power stemmed from the ancestral knowledge which the elderly possessed. It included the wisdom of rejuvenation. In the past, the younger

generations were particularly eager to acquire this knowledge. Sitting “at the top of a generational pyramid” (Sokolovsky 1997: xx), Bosmun elders were, indeed, very smart in passing on their knowledge to the following generations by only sporadically providing them with bits and pieces. By never revealing the whole picture, they were able to ensure permanent attention. Thus, not only altruistic but tactical considerations motivated the young generations’ interest in their elders: the younger needed the knowledge to keep up mentally and physically, and therefore they had to care for the elders.

The following statement by N, a woman in her beginning sixties, exemplifies female politics of age. According to ancestral convention, elderly women fulfil the tasks of a midwife. In one of our conversations, N addressed this issue:

“Mi gat save lo helpim ol meri bai karim. (...) Meri ya laikim mi (...) em (...) bai mi kam. Mi tok: ‘Nogat! Mi bai no inap kam na helpim em! Mi bai no inap go!’ I go go go nau (...) em nau (...) em krai (...) na mi tok: ‘Orait! Yu wet! Mi kam!’”

“I have the knowledge of helping women to deliver. (...) The woman [a young mother-to-be asking N for help] wanted me (...) she (...) [wanted me] to come. I said [to myself]: ‘No! I will not come and help her! I will not go [to the birth-house]!’ Time passed by (...) okay (...) she cried (...) and I [finally] said: ‘Alright! You wait! I am coming!’”

Due to her renowned knowledge of childbirth, including a magical spell thought to facilitate delivery, N was in a superior position. She had received this knowledge from her mother and her mother’s sisters. N eventually helped the mother-to-be, yet not without previously displaying her power. I observed that other elderly women behaved in similar ways and that they always made sure to disclose only fragments of female wisdom. Male elders also convey only partial knowledge to the younger. I was told that clan members of particular social and political renown are only willing to pass the most secret knowledge (e.g. the true meaning of spiritual names or specific herbal knowledge) on their deathbed. Thus, even in decrepitude the old might be expected to disclose wisdom to the young.

Today, the importance of the elderly diminishes with the influx of alternative views. The reduced importance of ancestral knowledge marks societal changes with implications on the evaluation of ageing: whereas in the past, the elderly were responsible for educating the young and shaping the social, moral, and political life-world, now new forms of education are directly aimed at the younger generations from outside, thus breaking up the local hierarchy of primacy. I frequently heard middle-aged and elder people complaining: *“Ol manki nating i kamap ol bikman pinis,”* that is “Our youngsters have taken over.”

In large part, intergenerational problems arise because outside agendas tend to address the younger members of the society with regard to the implementation of Western knowledge. One may say that the young are literally forced to surpass the elderly. It is the younger members who mostly benefit from the Western-based education system and who become the future persons in charge of circulating the knowledge acquired in local and regional schools. Similarly, it is mostly the younger who become involved in church activities and who are asked to stand in provincial elections, which are based on political structures as promoted by the modern nation-state of Papua New Guinea. Non-governmental organisations and the representatives of state-run health-care programmes and awareness campaigns, such as HIV-Aids or venereal disease campaigns, also make efforts to lure the younger. From a Western point of view it sounds reasonable above all to address the young members of a society with regard to sexual matters. It has also been reported from other parts of Papua New Guinea, such as New

Ireland, that “some elderly people even remark that they do not take much interest in information about HIV/AIDS [and probably other awareness campaigns] since it is a problem of the young” (Eves 2008: 210). However, in Daiden the sexual education of the young was traditionally a task of the elders. As said, sexual reproduction was deeply associated with energy loss, which was only avoidable through taking advice from the elders who held the respective knowledge. In hardly ever addressing the elderly within new models of sociality, power, and responsibility, outside agendas dismiss locally existing codes of conduct.

To show that an implementation of outside knowledge fails without taking into consideration the importance of the elderly, I once more tackle the issue of midwifery. As elsewhere in rural Papua New Guinea, the medical system in Daiden relies on “family based care” (Welsch 1986); except for illnesses that are said to be caused by magic and for which experts have to be consulted. Family based care means also that the younger women of a household can count on elderly female kin for instructions concerning childbirth. Occasionally, there are bio-medical training programmes; clinic personnel are sent out in boats from the health-care centre to the residential areas along the Ramu River to train young women in the basics of nursing and to provide them with sanitary equipment such as umbilical scissors or disposable gloves. In 2005, I knew of two women in Daiden, both in their thirties, who had participated in such trainings and who were considered ‘local nurses’. During a delivery, which I was allowed to attend, both arrived late and without sanitary kit. They felt unsure about entering an unfamiliar birth-house. In the meantime, the mother-to-be had given birth to twins. She had received help by one of her husband’s elder classificatory sisters – surrounded by several other female kin.

Finally, mass media such as newspaper, radio, and television programmes do not only address the young but also spread images (such as Mother’s Day or Father’s Day), which prompt the “nuclearizing” (Gewertz and Errington 1999: 71, 82, 158) of families; that is, social actors begin to escape the customary obligations they have in the sphere of extended kinship and instead focus on the nuclear family. An elderly woman, for instance, broke out in tears when I interviewed her about her situation as a senior member of her community and her family. She said:

“Mi trangu (...) mi mama blo bisnis man ya. Em sa tingim meri wantaim ol pikinini blo em tasol. Em i no wari moa lo mi. Em lusting pinis lo olgeta kastom lo ples.”

“I am [a] poor [woman] (...) I am the mother of a business man. He only takes care of his wife and his children. He no longer takes care of me. He forgot about all the customs of this place.”

All over Papua New Guinea, there is indeed a new necessity to generate monetary surplus. People increasingly participate in cash-based endeavours. It is not only lack of time that prevents the younger generation from close contact with the elders, but the general shift in priorities in an increasingly globalised world. People have to pay the obligatory school-fees for their children, who are now too numerous, it seems, to have a future perspective relying on the limited grounds. Moreover, modern gadgets available in town lure rural people everywhere in the country. Generators, DVD players, or most recently cell phones are items everyone longs for. From the perspectives of my elder interlocutors, it is the desire to earn money, which occupies the young to the extent that the old are abandoned in new, unfamiliar ways.

Conclusion

Sokolovsky (1997: xxiv) points out that a cross-cultural approach to the phenomenon of ageing runs the risk of producing “wildly diverse, exotic tableaux of growing old” and that “the literature on aging in non-Western contexts contains a good deal of romanticized nonsense.” Moreover, he goes on to explain:

“A single cultural system may provide highly successful solutions for some problems of aging but fare miserably with regard to others (...). Not all non-Western, nonindustrial cultural systems provide a better milieu for aging and intergenerational relations than is found in the modern industrial West.” (Sokolovsky 1997: xxv)

And while there are

“various examples of cultural contexts of aging which many North Americans [and others] might care to emulate (...), the ethnographic and historic literature also contain numerous cases of ‘traditional’ societies whose attitudes and treatment of the aged, healthy or frail, provide little to envy.” (Sokolovsky 1997: xxv)

Friebe (1996) makes a similar point in his study on processes of ageing in a Senegalese society and refers to the other extreme representation of elderly people in ethnographic literature: sometimes they appear as victims of domination by the young and have to face senicide, sometimes they appear as gerontocrats with mystic power (Friebe 1996: 13).

With the ethnographic example of Bosmun, I hope to have offered a picture of ageing and being old in a non-Western context beyond romanticised elderhood, cruel abandonment, or mystic gerontocracy. I underpinned that in the past ageing was, compared with the present state of affairs, perceived in a more positive way; yet without attempting to idealise elderhood in Daiden. Instead of simply juxtaposing the image of an ‘idyllic’/‘altruistic’/‘South Pacific’ past with the image of a ‘harsh’/‘westernised’ present, I argued that the question of who was to be offered care was a question of who had earned it. Moreover, I have argued that changing politics of age have begun to alter the situation of the elderly in Daiden: in holding on to ‘new ideologies of age’ younger Bosmun alter existing modes of sociality that used to provide the old with a powerful voice in the sphere of political, economic, and social decisions. With an ongoing decline of old values and an increasing appropriation of new values, the resources for controlling collective fates have steadily been taken away from the elderly.

One could also argue that today’s Bosmun elders themselves triggered this shift in power and the accompanying rise of neglect, when they were in the prime of their own lives. Looking back in recent history, which can be traced through the reports of early explorers, colonial administrators, and missionaries, tremendous exogenous influence successfully spread in the 1950s, when colonial and missionary agendas had already established themselves in the Bosmun region.²² Elderly interlocutors, at that time either youths or young adults, usually remembered this era as a positive journey to new horizons; especially with regard to economic and infrastructural development. At the same time, they admitted that seeking success in cash-based endeavours absorbed a considerable amount of social time. It kept the younger generations away from the household area more frequently. It kept them from

²² For a brief summary of written sources mentioning Bosmun, cf. von Poser (2009: 50–67).

doing conventional social chores such as looking after the old members of the family, and led to a decrease in the perpetuation of the ideal of generosity as grounded in local understandings of reciprocity. Indeed, rather conservative interlocutors assessed their current condition as elder members of society in a much more negative light than those who had had outside-experience or those who had made attempts to 'modernise' local life through, for instance, opening small stores or assisting to build roads that would connect this rather remote part of the country with coastal towns. These latter interlocutors seemed to accept their fate of becoming marginalised; perhaps because of their awareness of having played their part in twisting ancestral conventions of caring.

Let me finally comment on the quality of reciprocity in changing Papua New Guinea. To avoid that elderhood in Daiden becomes a phase of social suffering and felt neglect, there are two options. Firstly, it is necessary to mend the growing structural gap, which is replacing the family-based security system that provided care for the old. There are no retirement homes in contemporary Papua New Guinea, and as far as I know, there is no organised eldercare beyond the institution of the family. It is time that the nation-state does not only promote economic progress in the country but that it offers solutions to people in both rural and urban contexts, who have lost contact with their elders exactly because they participate in the nationally praised economic progress. Secondly, alternative understandings of reciprocity and of social life in old age have to develop. Van der Geest describes for rural Ghana that, under shifting societal conditions, "care from a distance" (2002: 18) via remittances has become common, and that, by now, "[m]oney *is* a gift" (2002: 28; original emphasis). The notion of children living elsewhere and remitting to their parents (or to relatives who look after them) is still very young in Bosmun thought. By the way, 'care from a distance' also does not really match Western morale. Elders do complain about a reduced social life and reduced social encounters with others. Still, care from a distance has become the standard prospect in Western societies when thinking about life at later stages. Money, still irregularly available in Daiden, is considered a powerful material entity. It does guarantee an economically raised level of living but it does not yet equate social and emotional safety from Bosmun perspectives. Such ideational development needs time. I am confident that a new shared understanding of how to care for the elderly will evolve once everybody, across gender, age, and social position, becomes thoroughly familiar with alternative modes of giving and taking.

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