

Elderly people in a pastoral society

A case study of the Karimojong in Uganda

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This paper examines the possible contribution of fieldwork conducted in a pastoral society in Karamoja in northeastern Uganda to delineating the diversity of care provided to elderly individuals. Fieldwork-based research regarding gerontology in African societies has shown that many societies approach the care of elderly individuals on the basis of a social exchange theory of the body and property. A sense of socially engendered moral debt, awe of transcendent existence, and economic rationality encourage elderly people to survive, despite their disadvantaged and socially alienated status. At the same time, these experiences also allow them to appreciate their power. Drawing on individual experiences of aging that are embedded in, and shaped by, the reality in which people live, cultural anthropology has elucidated some of the cultural diversity associated with the experience of aging. In other words, the subjective experience and meanings, including the cues associated with life stages such as menopause and geriatric conditions such as dementia, vary cross-culturally, as they are strongly connected with the social categories associated with age. In the context of such a culturally and morally relativistic perspective, disengagement theory has given way to an aesthetic view of growing older. The poetics of the lives of elders have been ethnographically described, intertwined with the symbols and meanings that define and construct each period in relation to others. However, the existence of the socially constructed body (i.e. as the object of ethnographic description) may result in unsuccessful aging, whereby the body acts under the influence of introjected negative aspects of communal life by committing suicide or is subjected to death-hastening non-supportive treatment or involuntary confinement. Siding with the world and the relation of distress and life that the sick experience, which is beyond pathological intervention, can be the basis of a critical ethnography of gerontology, showing the correlation between the ineffectiveness of therapy and the indignity to human beings.