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## DEBATE

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## DEBATE

### What does Aging Mean? Repertoires and Embodied Sensoria in Person-Making

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Sharon Kaufman’s prose is so beautiful and clear, the personalities she presents in *The Ageless Self* so vivid, and her analysis so compelling, that I find it hard to argue against her. Yet, my research in Ghana (Coe 2005, 2013, 2021) causes me to question her assertion: “when old people talk about themselves, they express a sense of self that is ageless” (Kaufman 1986, 7). What I value about her argument is that it draws us as scholars of aging to ask, ‘What *is* the experience of aging?’ and even, ‘Do people experience themselves as aging?’ I am convinced that, in the context that she discusses, people did construct continuities across their life narratives in which aging had little meaning to them and made sense of their lives through an elaboration of their individual personalities. However, Kaufman does not qualify her point—that she is talking about those she met in California who lived during the twentieth century—but presents it as a universal truth.

This is my basic critique of *The Ageless Self*: her statements generalise findings that arise in a particular sociocultural context. In the United States, visible signs of aging are stigmatized and a source of status denigration, thus influencing people to construct themselves as independent persons with continuities in personhood across the life course (Hashimoto 1996; Lamb 2014; Savishinsky 2000). The focus on identity and personality is one in which Americans take great delight and are asked to reflect on endlessly in everyday life, at least since the mid-twentieth century, using discursive and material technologies to construct and regulate a sense of self (Foucault 1988). Since Kaufman’s research forty years ago, these individualizing discourses focusing on the continuity of personhood have been elaborated through successful aging narratives and images, which deny decline in older adults. More recent studies (Lamb 2014, 2017) have found that older adults may narrate themselves through successful aging discourses, but they also critique the limitations of these distinctions. Through this work, we see historical changes in ideologies of the competent, autonomous self and how orthodoxies easily generate heterodoxies (Bourdieu 1977; Coe and Alber 2018).

In Ghana, in contrast, old age is a powerful cultural category, although one with considerable ambivalence (Van der Geest 2002). Certain kinds of aging are accorded respect and status, like becoming an elder who uses their power and wisdom to handle disputes. Respected older adults gather, and distribute, resources widely, and such redistributive power depends on their being active, engaged, and in control of a vital resource. As a result, not all older adults attain the status of elder, are accorded respect and power, or receive care in later life (Dsane 2013; Stucki 1995; Tonah 2009). Aging has negative connotations: older people, especially women, can be accused of witchcraft or the power to extract health, fertility, and wellbeing from others for one’s own benefit. People ask, or assume others to be asking, “Why else could a person have lived so long, if he or she were not a witch?” Even though

witchcraft is stigmatized, it is a kind of power associated with aging, albeit a negative one generating feelings of fear and distance (Geschiere 1997). Rather than discussing continuities with their youth and constructing an ageless selfhood, aging activists in Ghana are currently seeking to re-signify what aging means, bending it towards its positive connotations. They propagate considerations of a long life as a blessing from God, not a sign of malevolent power.

In my discussions with older men and women in the course of research for my book on changes in aging in Ghana (Coe 2021), it struck me that many were highly attuned to their aging bodies. For example, one woman in the town of Begoro in Akyem in the Eastern Region said,

In a few months, I will be seventy-three years old. When I was a young woman, I was strong. I could go anywhere. I could go to farm and then return to go to school; I could do everything. When I reached the age of sixty, I became weak and feeble, in my knee, my back, my whole body. Getting up in the morning, I am as tired as if I had worked all night, and if I try to work, I make no headway. That's how weak I have become.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, at a pensioners' meeting in Akropong, another town in the Eastern Region, a retired teacher crossed the room, and the president of the association, a retired nurse, made fun of how she was walking, in a friendly way. The retired teacher joked back, "I want to show that I am an old woman" (fieldnotes, September 3, 2019).<sup>2</sup> These older adults talked explicitly about their bodies in which aging was associated with physical weakness, difficulty moving, and pain, in a context in which walking, physical activity, and the ability to carry and lift loads were necessary for many daily activities, particularly for women. These expressions of physical weakness and pain due to aging were normalized and publicly affirmed as constitutive of one's identity as an older person. This was not done in a stigmatizing, exclusionary way, but in a teasing, affectionate tone

In earlier research, I asked older people to narrate their life stories to me as I tried to understand how certain practices of educational curricula and exchanges of children between households had changed over time. These life stories generally took a standardized form. The more educated men, such as retired teachers, focused on their educational credentials and professional accomplishments, while women detailed the number of children and grandchildren. Both women and men highlighted their birth order among their siblings and documented their siblings', children's, and grandchildren's names, pausing for me to write them down correctly, and mentioned the occupations and accomplishments of their children which were worthy of note. (The family black sheep were overlooked in this record of achievements.) Retired teachers whom I interviewed during my dissertation research<sup>3</sup> were happy to be interviewed, telling me that my visits indicated to their neighbors how important they were, but they were also surprised that, after they had recounted their life story focusing on their individual and family accomplishments, I was interested also in other things, like their experiences teaching primary or secondary school, or in how Ghanaian language and culture were taught during different periods of their career. These conversations left both me and the retired teachers confused; our goals were at cross-purposes.<sup>4</sup>

Then I attended my first funeral, a multi-day and expensive celebration with loud music and coordinated clothing. I was handed an elaborate funeral program with pictures and a biography of the deceased as its centerpiece. Here was the standard narrative that I heard over and over again in my interviews! Given my own cultural background as an American growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, where mortality was not discussed and death was isolated in hospitals (Kaufman 2005), I was blissfully unaware that my research participants had been rehearsing their obituaries in their interviews with me, using our conversations to cement their legacies beyond their anticipated deaths. Later, in my research

on aging, I pursued this question of advance preparation for death more systematically (Coe 2021). Many of my aging friends told me that they had already planned their own funerals, from the songs that would be sung and the Biblical texts that would be read to the polished life narrative and photographs that would be presented in the funeral brochure given to attendees. Thus, I would argue that my research participants in Ghana constructed their selves as old, both through their experiences of their bodies which they were willing to publicize and perform for others as weak or in pain and in narrating their selves in ways that presaged the remembrance of those selves after their deaths. They were not constructing an ageless, continuous self, but one which anticipated death and looked backward to their youthful capabilities and achievements, looping time both forward and backward from the present moment. Their society gave them the cultural resources to construct their selves in this way, through elaborate and expensive funerals and public recognition of their embodiment and physical presentation.

That aging is a cultural construction is a truism in anthropology and one long and well-rehearsed. It was key to Margaret Mead's popularization of anthropology within America (Mitchell 2002). So in many ways, my critique of Kaufman is not a very interesting insight. The concept of culture has also been sharply criticized within anthropology, such that some anthropologists refuse to use it (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1997). There are parts of 'culture' and 'self' that I consider important. I have retained these elements in previous work through the concept of *repertoire*, a toolbox of practices, skills, and ideologies. Repertoire allows me to think about the ways people can activate or downplay various ideas and practices they are familiar with in addressing the problems they encounter in their lives (see Coe 2013). It enables me to consider embodied and habitual forms of patterned learning, as well as those that are elaborated in discourse, and the relationship between the body and discourse. Like Sherry Ortner (1997), I think one of the virtues of using repertoire is its synchronic nature. It changes over the life course and through historical time, and can in this way be used as a window onto struggles and contestations. One aspect of that repertoire is the cultural sensorium. Kathryn Geurts (2002) makes a powerful case for how people's perceptions of their bodies are affected by cultural concepts; I would argue that their perceptions of their bodies are part of their ever-shifting repertoire. Working in Ghana, she discusses how people focus on certain senses, or embodied sensations, in their practices and discourses about pregnancy, childbirth, child development, and health. For example, a sense of physical balance is more articulated in Ghana than in Western contexts and considered a sense in its own right. This sense is elaborated through discourse as well as practice: children from an early age are trained to balance loads on their heads and their ability to balance or stand is a key sign of child development. Although Geurts did not mention the aging body, but focused on infant and child development, her concept of the cultural sensorium is relevant for the study of aging.

In contrast, the physical and bodily aspects of aging do not arise much in *The Ageless Self*, probably because Kaufman's research participants did not find them meaningful and downplayed them in relation to their personalities. Furthermore, although Kaufman emphasized the importance of the "phenomenological understanding of self" (1986, 162), she was quite taken by psychological theories of the life course and symbolic interactionism (Erikson 1959, Mead 1934). These theories, popular within anthropology at the time, focused on an understanding of self which marginalized a physical experience of the body. Yet, I would argue that this experience of and through the body is part of what we should be trying to discover in the experience of aging. Relatedly, but just as important, is an understanding of how the social world—through medicalization, play and other activities, linguistic terms, and everyday commentary—provides language and practices for discerning the body's wellbeing, level of discomfort, and physical changes. Sensory experience can find recognition in others' eyes, as in the example above, where a person noted another's unsteadiness or weakness; equally, the sensation of the body may not

always be visible to or affirmed by others, who take other signs of aging as more important—whether wrinkles or years of life.

What Kaufman’s work pushes us to discover is the experience of aging people. What do they find meaningful in their narrations of the self and the life course? How do they experience their self across time? These are questions worth pursuing. Their experiences are both narrativized and embodied. As scholars of aging, we need to frame these processes within the wider world which affects the changing repertoires through which people make up their selves and sensoria, thereby illuminating the stakes in these processes of person-making.

## Notes

1. Original in Ashanti Twi:

*Me nso megyina ha a aka bee bosome bi na madi aduoson mmeensa. Na mmere a.. me senea mehuu se mmere a na meye ababaawa no na me ho ye den. Metumi ko baabi ara, metumi ko afuo ansa na mabesen ako sukuu, metumi ye biribi ara. Nso menyini duruu aduosia a mereba no hodwodwo aka me, wo me kotodwe, me sisi, me ho nyinaa. Adee kye koraa na meresore koraa wobeka se maye adwuma anadwo no a, wobeka se makoye adwuma a menhu me ho ano, enti na maye betee* (group discussion, July 9, 2014).

2. Original in Akuapem Twi: “Mepɛ se mekyere se meye aberewa.”

3. I wrote about these interview failures in Coe 2001.

4. My dissertation was on the teaching of national culture in Ghana (Coe 2005).

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