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## Complexities of Elder Livelihoods

### Changing Age-Inscriptions and Stable Norms in Three Villages in Rural West Africa

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#### Abstract

The intergenerational contract seems to be a dominant social norm of senior care all over the world, in which older adults are cared for reciprocally by those for whom they have cared. Yet in three villages in northern Benin and northern Togo, this intergenerational norm seems to be breached, with older adults living alone and in poverty. However, standardized surveys from a comparative research project established that kin groups do not abandon their older adults, if one considers the kin group to be containing classificatory children instead of the nuclear family with biological children and remittances to substitute for daily care. This article argues that the apparent contradictions between the intergenerational contract and the actual practices of providing care in old age are not so stark. The creative living arrangements of older adults in response to social changes of migration do not challenge the intergenerational contract, but instead are the ways of fulfilling it. The analytical concept of age-inscription (see Alber and Coe in this issue) helps to explain the gap between discursive norms and individual creative solutions of senior care. The social norm of the intergenerational contract persists through new age-inscriptions.

**Keywords:** *West Africa, elder care, migration, housing, intergenerational support*

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# Complexities of Elder Livelihoods

## Changing Age-Inscriptions and Stable Norms in Three Villages in Rural West Africa

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### Introduction

When Kiyakou-Kouroumou is hungry, she goes out for a walk. Normally she gets a meal from her daughter or granddaughter who live in the neighborhood. But sometimes they are busy in the market or the fields and nobody comes by to bring her something to eat. Kiyakou-Kouroumou is about 80 years old; her brother Adjanda who is living in the same compound is two years younger. While Kiyakou-Kouroumou goes for a walk “greeting” the neighbors nearby or visiting her deceased husband’s relatives about two miles away and receives a meal, her brother Adjanda stays at home and prepares his own meal. When being asked, they insist being well provided by their offspring.

(Observations from the village of Asséré, northern Togo, 2007–2013)

This vignette from my field notes among the Kabre of northern Togo about two aging siblings, who share a compound and yet live in an environment that exposes them to occasional neglect, seems to signal a breakdown of the intergenerational contract, in which adult children are expected to live with and care for their parents (see also Foner 1993; Roth 2008). The importance of sustaining the intergenerational contract in the village context cannot be underestimated, given that a formal social security system does not exist in this region. While entering the field at the first time in 2006, I asked myself: How can it be, that older adults live alone under such seemingly difficult circumstances while insisting they are well provided? Children do not always live in the same compound as their aging parents and sometimes are permanently absent due to migration. Like the two siblings in the vignette above, some older people who lived independently seemed at first glance not to be adequately provided for, and yet they said that they were.

In West African societies, the social norm of senior care would generally be seen as fulfilled if older adults resided with their children and were provided with sufficient and personal care (as it is described for the Ghanaian case by Apt 1992; 1995). The unwritten normative expectation of “reciprocity over a lifetime” (Grogger & Kunkel 1995; Hollstein 2005; Apt 1992, 206) between children and their parents means that after being raised by your parents you have to care for them when they become old and needy. This norm I call the intergenerational contract. The social practice, which I observed during my research, however, caters to a variety of creative individual solutions to senior care, housing, and social relations, with a resident kin member in the neighborhood substituting for migrant and absent children. In other societies in the world, this intergenerational contract shows many variations and discrepancies: grandparents who care for their grandchildren with or without the financial support of the migrant biological parents (Leinaweaver 2010), and older people staying in nursing homes (Thelen 2015), living together with their siblings (Häberlein 2016, 190ff), or staying at home by themselves (Bertram 2000). Some older adults are financially stable owing to

the monthly pensions they draw and can live in self-determined ways (see Gambold this issue). I would argue that there is a consistent contradiction between a prevalent norm—such as the intergenerational contract—and the diverse practices concerning living conditions in old age. This contradiction applies in particular to African societies, where the image of the wise, respected old person sitting in the shade of the tree surrounded by younger relatives is still powerful.

The article answers first the empirical question of how older adults are provided for despite social transformations in housing patterns and migration. Carefully observed and collected data from a larger pool of older adults in three villages in rural West Africa show that despite appearances of looming destitution, older adults are nevertheless supported—albeit under terms and conditions different than adult children caring for them on a daily basis.

Secondly, this article asks on a theoretical level, how one can understand the contradiction that people are insisting that they are well provided for under the terms of the intergenerational contract, while social practice tells a different story. As Cati Coe and Erdmute Alber observe, interfacing between social norms and accepted social practice are so-called “inscriptions”, or evolving patterns of social practice that tide people over during difficult times, sometimes discussed, but at other times implicit or tentative, so that they either disappear after the condition no longer persists or they become social norms (see Alber and Coe this issue). As Alber and Coe indicate, “the somewhat unformulated, experimental, and tentative practices around aging which we call inscription signals the lack of stability of this stage in the life course” (2018, 10). This article uses the analytical lens of “age-inscription” to understand how the seemingly destabilizing factors of migration and changing housing patterns influence the everyday life of older people. The two age-inscriptions that are significant in this situation are: migrants’ remittances being considered a form of care and kin other than the adult children being considered classificatory children who can substitute for the adult children. These two age-inscriptions explained the living conditions of older people in three ethnographic fieldsites in northern Togo and Benin and why, at a discursive level, they did not complain about a sense of abandonment.

At the normative level, the intergenerational contract was accepted and considered to be maintained, while at the level of practice, the basic needs of *some* older adults were unmet, but *most* of them do not live in need, even if it might have initially seemed so. Van der Geest argues that favorable care for older adults depends firstly if they could manage to build a house, and secondly if they could provide care for their children when those were young (2003, 12). I argue that the issue of older livelihoods and care is more complex than this. I found very concrete influences of social change, independent of the accomplishments and behavior of individual older adults, resulting in creative solutions to sustain older adults.

My central argument is that the intergenerational contract in society is still binding, despite new housing and migration patterns. Senior care in African societies has become more challenging, since migration from villages to other places is important for the younger age groups. This migration is not only temporary,<sup>i</sup> but can span longer periods of time away from parental home. Housing concerns and migration processes deeply affect older people on a daily basis. I argue that the age-inscriptions of remittances-as-care and classificatory children help to *maintain* the credibility and integrity of the intergenerational contract in the majority of cases.

The first section of this article delves into different social structures that shaped the residential patterns in all three villages under investigation. This is necessary in order to understand the ways in which

the life course and the aging process are determined by a complex interplay between distinctive social structure and other factors, such as natural environment, agricultural use of land, and population density, that all in all result in distinct housing patterns. I also show how those conditions generate new or modified age-inscriptions. The second section delineates the different migration patterns in the three villages. The impact of migration varies, depending on migration patterns, which determine not only the migration demographics but also the configuration of the remaining population and the modalities of circulation of goods and persons. The interplay of absence and presence as a result of the prevailing migratory patterns generate specific age-inscriptions, according to which various modalities of aging are practiced, accepted and acknowledged. The third section presents recent data about older people's material supply, as a way to illustrate the positions that open up for older adults in daily exchange relations. Some of those detected patterns of livelihoods which contrast with the norms can hint at age-inscriptions that calibrate care obligations with the circumstances of the contemporary period, instead of insisting on compliance with time-honored arrangements.

## Methods and the Context of the Elderly People in Rural West Africa

Since I began my studies on senior care in West Africa in 2006, I heard older people complaining frequently about illness and physical infirmity in aging. But no one ever complained about his or her own children. Of course, there is shame in doing so, as well as a vicious circle of conflict and social pressure. Accusing the younger generation means potentially cursing them—and doing so, becoming a witch or a sorcerer. Being accused as a witch or sorcerer in old age would decrease the younger generation's care, not in terms of the essentials of food, but in terms of visits from neighbors and gifts of clothes. I recognized the older person's concern about the status of his or her social relations. However, it is also shameful for the younger generation to abandon the aging and needy. Nevertheless, over the course of a decade of field research with older people, I did see older adults abandoned and hungry, albeit rarely.<sup>ii</sup>

The data presented in this article derives from a larger research project, driven by intense team work. Because of respect for the head of the project and my collaborators in the field, I speak of "we" when I discuss the research process. In the analysis of the data, I use "I" to mark my own interpretations.

In the larger research project,<sup>iii</sup> we explored how senior care in three villages in the hinterland of West Africa is embedded in general flows and exchanges of resources among kin. In order to better understand the "real" position of older people and senior care provided in rural West Africa, we asked people in three villages in Benin and Togo over the course of one year about their resource exchanges on a bi-weekly basis using a complex questionnaire that included questions such as: What did they receive and earn during the last two weeks, and what did they give to whom? This research design investigated how people interacted with each other through everyday exchanges of goods, money, food and care. We asked people about "care actions" towards their spouses, siblings, and children as well as towards older adults. This standardized research was accompanied by intense qualitative methods that included participant observation and interviews to gain in-depth knowledge about the three villages and their inhabitants. Over the course of one year, 2009-2010, we observed and asked a total of 81 persons of different ages and genders in these villages about their daily income and expenditure, provision, and care. All research participants were adults whom we knew personally. Among the 81 persons, I focus mainly on the 33 older adults of the sample for this article.<sup>iv</sup>

The three villages we focused on for our study are located in the Republic of Benin (Tebo and

Tchitchakou) and Togo (Asséré). They are relatively small (Tebo has 800 people, Tchitchakou has 500, and Asséré has 600) and represent different ethnic groups. Asséré, in northeastern Togo, is a mountainous village that can be reached by car only in the dry season, as the access road is flooded by rainwater in the rainy season. The village is located in the Lama (Kabre) area near the border with Benin. The dispersed settlement of predominantly single farmyards is built on stony soil (see Häberlein 2016). However, the area is quite densely populated and used relatively intensively for agricultural purposes. The village of Tchitchakou, also a dispersed settlement of farmyards of different sizes, is situated about 12 miles east of Asséré in northwestern Benin, but as it is built on sandy lowlands, it can be reached throughout the year. The inhabitants identify themselves ethnically as Lokpa. They acknowledge kinship to the Kabre and conduct coming-of-age ceremonies in a similar way. Marriage between the two ethnic groups is common. Asséré (Togo) and Tchitchakou (Benin) have a comparatively long history of migration to more fertile rural regions in southern Togo and northern Ghana respectively.

The third village of our sample, Tebo, is located another 124 miles east of Tchitchakou in northeastern Benin, near the border with Nigeria. Tebo is situated in the area of the Baatombu people, an ethnic group structured much more hierarchically than the Kabre or Lokpa (see Alber 2000). In 2009-2010, it was a remote village that could hardly be reached by car. Land for cultivation is still available in the surrounding bushlands, enabling shifting cultivation. Because the Borgu area of Benin is less populated and the soil is of richer quality than in the other two villages, Tebo has a lower rate of external migration. Aside from those differences, the three groups are similar in their livelihood. In all three villages, the inhabitants depend on subsistence farming, cash crops (formerly cotton, nowadays soya), and animal husbandry (poultry, goats and sheep, and a few cattle). Albeit to a different extent, all three villages are affected by an increase in the rate of temporary migration among the youth to Nigeria and urban centers in West Africa.

Combining data from participant observation, survey and questionnaire responses, and interviews, I will explore the issue of care to older adults in kin-based rural societies in order to bridge the gap between discursive answers and practical solutions of senior care. I argue that all recognized contributions from and to older adults in the presented research are influenced by housing patterns and migration. In the last section, the livelihoods of older adults will be presented to explain to what extent their lives mirrored the social norms despite the local age-inscriptions developed by housing patterns and migratory movements.

## Social Structure and Housing Norms

The most characteristic feature distinguishing the villages outlined here is the different forms of settlement, that is, housing patterns, that are deeply interconnected with normative conceptions of village social structure. In Asséré and Tchitchakou, dispersed settlements of different sizes testify to societies organized by age-class systems. In contrast, the village of Tebo is characterized by large closely built compounds. The societal organization here is based on complex hierarchical distinctions. Habitat and housing have an impact on the daily life and care provision of older people. Here, I describe the influence of those societal housing norms on young as well as older adults to highlight the ways in which different daily routines are bound to social norms and age-inscriptions.

The age-class societies in Asséré and Tchitchakou create dispersed settlements, as men show their capacity to be an adult by building a separate dwelling. In contrast, social stratification among the

Baatombu in Tebo demonstrates criteria other than age, especially owing to the prevalence of hierarchies among the royalty and other local stakeholders, and therefore allegiance (Alber 2000). In Asséré and Tchitchakou, unmarried youth have relatively greater personal freedom in deciding to provide care and assistance to their parents, given their acknowledged need to migrate to fend for themselves. Yet, living with their fathers also provides them with economic freedom. A part of “becoming adult” by initiation and by marriage is fulfilling the duties of a responsible family member and sharing money, goods, and in the caretaking of their aging parents. Youth in Tebo, in contrast, experience greater restrictions, and are required to provide care (and even are a source of livelihood) for their aging parents. Following marriage, they gain more economic control.

A second factor shaping adulthood, especially among young men in Asséré or Tchitchakou, is the expectation to create their own homesteads, as a way to confirm their adulthood. The social significance of owning a homestead is immense. Even if the property is quite small in the beginning, higher status is generated through property ownership, economic wealth, and social independence. If men do not leave the village permanently, they build their own homestead for their wife or wives and children, sometimes not far away from their homestead of origin. These kinds of social structures’ expression in housing affect older people’s lives as well. As a result, an age-inscription emerges in which older parents live by themselves in the “parental homestead,” often an old building falling into a state of gradual disrepair.

As Verdier (1982, 100) notes for the Kabre area, it is a social norm for the youngest son to inherit the father’s homestead. This does not exist in Asséré and Tchitchakou any longer. When regional migration to other rural areas became more popular for the youth of these areas in the 1960s (Alber and Häberlein 2011), this social norm was rendered moot. Today, what was once an age-inscription already appears to be a norm: the youngest is no longer under that obligation and is now free to decide if he wants to accept this inheritance. It is the prerogative of a son (or a grandson) and his wife to accept, or not accept, the old homestead (including the care obligations for the older persons living in it) as inheritance—and sometimes nobody has the requisite capacities or the desire to do so. That means that older persons are sometimes forced to live alone. In contrast, homesteads are closer together in Tebo. Young men create their own “foyer,” a common reference to new buildings constructed for the young family directly adjacent to their fathers’. As a result, in Tebo, young and old people live together in huge compounds.

These different structures—dispersed settlements or agglomerations of buildings inhabited by relatives of different ages—shape the daily care provision offered to older persons.<sup>v</sup> Older persons are provided for in different ways, but also bounded in different ways by social norms of mobility, cooking restrictions, or other kin-related duties (by substituting for migrant adjacent kin). As a result, it is possible for older people in the villages of Asséré and Tchitchakou to live alone. This, however, does not necessarily imply lack of adequate care such as the provision of a warm meal, access to fresh water for drinking, bathing, laundry, etc. On the other hand, huge compounds, with older people surrounded by younger relatives, like in the village of Tebo, do not automatically guarantee care. Neglect is possible even in the midst of kin. In all cases, the housing norms contribute to shaping different age-inscriptions: older people in Tebo are mostly surrounded by younger relatives, such as their biological or foster children and grandchildren. In contrast, older people of Asséré and Tchitchakou sometimes live alone, but are not neglected.

In all three villages, even in cases when children are not living near their parents, other relatives are. Those relatives are not only adult children but include also classificatory children. In biological terms,

they are nieces or nephews, daughters or sons-in-law, grandchildren or fostered children.

Furthermore, the age-inscription is gender-related as a result of the housing patterns. In Tchitchakou and Asséré, older women circulate within their neighborhoods, while older men mostly rest at home and receive visits from others. This symbolizes men's social status.<sup>vi</sup> Such behavioral norms are reflected in the availability of daily food provision, especially in Asséré and Tchitchakou with its dispersed homesteads. As previously stated, an older woman can visit the neighboring relatives "to greet" them when she is hungry at meal time and they will give her something to eat. An older man would wait at home, hoping that someone brings over prepared food, or he has to cook for himself.<sup>vii</sup> Dealing with a daily need in this manner would be impossible in Tebo. Here, a clear responsibility for and affiliation to a special cooking pot or bin of water means an older woman cannot escape a situation of need through "greeting" the neighbors nor an older man by cooking for himself. Older people in Tebo generally do not live alone. They can stay at home with the expectation of being provided for properly by their surrounding relatives. In other words, Tebo people live up to the ideal of the intergenerational contract because there is less migration and the homesteads are more closely built.

To conclude, I see two distinct age-inscriptions affecting how older people are cared for in West Africa, both affected by housing and by different social structures. These are older parents living by themselves and older women having an advantage in food provision. The first inscription of older adults living alone was probably a former inscription that went on to become a norm. Because of the age-class expectation that men build their own homestead as adults and the influence of migration with temporarily absent youth, the probability of living alone at old age has increased in Asséré and Tchitchakou over the past few decades. The option of living alone is still undesirable, but not an issue one hears them complain about. The older people interviewed showed a great deal of understanding for their children's new homesteads. Furthermore, living alone in old age does not mean having inadequate resources, as I will show in later sections. The second age-inscription I identified was that older women have an advantage in providing for themselves in Asséré and Tchitchakou, because of gendered behaviors in old age.

## Social Change and Processes of Migration

Life in all three villages is shaped by migration processes, to the relatively nearby urban centers or to more fertile agricultural zones. This is a "regional" rather than transnational migration, although, technically, migrants do cross state borders when they move to the neighboring countries of Ghana, Nigeria, or Niger. The data we collected from the villages exemplify how migration has become an accepted step in the life course of rural Beninois and Togolese. Migration patterns affect care and livelihood for older adults in the villages, and how people cope with the reality of migrating relatives without breaching the intergenerational contract.

Typically, three dominant types of migration shape the norms of appropriate aging. The first case is of *family migration*. This pattern only exists in Tchichakou and Asséré and is a consequence of the scarcity of fertile soil near the villages. Young families migrate to more fertile rural areas (in the case of Asséré, to southern parts of Togo since the 1920s, and in the case of Tchitchakou, to northern Ghana since the 1950s). Married couples and their children leave and settle in the new places. They return "home" for ceremonies and invest in better housing or some furniture for their parents. Some migrants return annually; some come less regularly. At the very least, they come home to be buried, as nobody wants to be buried among "strangers." A lively stream of exchange of information, persons, and goods exists between their new

residence and their home in the villages (Piot 1999; Häberlein 2016). Migrants remit goods to their older relatives “back home” once or twice a year. They receive donations on behalf of the extended family in order to redistribute them to the needy, some of them infirm old persons.

A second pattern, *individual youth migration*, exists in all three villages. This migratory movement of unmarried boys and girls became important during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Typically, young men (and more and more women) migrate temporarily to Nigeria as farm workers and stay there for one or two years, in order to return home with savings and goods for their own use. Young, unmarried women from Tchitchakou more often work as housemaids in urban households of Benin than in Nigeria. Meanwhile, some of the Kabre girls work as waitresses in Benin’s urban bars. Youth migrate to earn money to invest in their own futures—as a future taxi driver with his own motorbike, as a future tailor with a sewing machine—or to generate start-up funds for a small business or savings for bridal wealth, particularly their trousseau.

The parents in the villages usually dislike the idea of their adolescents migrating. Firstly, they move out of their social control. Secondly, the families lack labor power on their fields. However, youth migration is honored as an independent decision and a sign of taking responsibility for their own life course. Moreover, older adults accept that the goods acquired through migration are not meant for their own personal use (see Häberlein 2016; Ungruhe 2010 on northern Ghana). In all three villages, individual youth migration is considered an investment for the future, but in so doing, they also evade the normative social control of their parents until marriage. In this sense, the temporary migration of youth is creating a new generation inscription. Nobody would dare to describe the norm of social control of older people over youth as being obsolete, but emergent practices show that youth in these societies have a certain freedom to move out of the control of their elders.

Furthermore, it becomes clear that youth of this age are no longer “available” or responsible for providing care, in some instances, even to their grandparents. Upon their return after a year or two, the age-inscription for youth migrants changes so that they again accept familial duties. Youth migration has changed a normative responsibility for youth to provide care for older adults and re-solidified it for adults past the social stage of youth.<sup>viii</sup>

The third type of migration is an *intrafamilial child migration* that takes place in a significant way only in Tebo. Recently, an increasing number of children from Tebo were hosted in the households of their urban relatives for schooling (Alber 2018). Girls who do not attend school are brought to the households of extended kin as domestic workers and to pursue an apprenticeship in town.<sup>ix</sup> Boys are mainly brought to urban households so they can attend school. In consequence, upon their later entry into the urban labor market, those boys marry and establish new households in the towns. The family members in urban centers of Benin remit money to their families in Tebo once or twice a year (see Alber this issue). Somewhat similarly, children in Tchitchakou often stay with their grandparents when their parents migrate to Ghana so they can continue attending the French-language school system. In this way, age-inscriptions occurred in Tchitchakou in which grandchildren act as caregivers for their grandparents. Parents from Tchitchakou who migrate to Ghana regularly check in on their children staying with the grandparents, and thereby also visit their aging parents.

Alongside these three kinds of migrations, there is a seasonal labor migration in the village of Asséré, where youth as well as adults travel to the south of Togo as seasonal workers. Paid in either corn

and/or cash, they follow this pattern so they can support their families at home.

Because the described patterns of migrations are to some extent life-course specific, in every kin group surrounding an old person, some of the children will be migrants either permanently or temporarily. However, not every relative of an older adult is a migrant, as some remain in or have returned to the villages. Remittances are not many in number but high in terms of value, which creates a division of the labor between those in the villages and the absent migrants. In all four cases of migration, the responsibility of migrants for the relatives “at home” —and here, explicitly older adults—persist. Material flows to these areas where families live remain important. Moreover, those flows ensure the social belonging of permanently migrant people to their villages of origin. Whereas a substantial part of the financial income of older adults is provided by migrants living elsewhere, food and daily support are provided by neighboring village residents. As I show in the next section, old people in particular, in contrast to the very old, benefit from those bonds to migrants.

### Age-Inscriptions and the Livelihoods of the Elderly

When simply asking “Who cares for older people?”, whether one asks the aging themselves or their neighbors, the response generally corresponds to a normative pattern. The common answer is: adult children take care of their parents when they become old. This answer confirms the normative presupposition labeled as “reciprocity over a lifetime” (Grogger and Kunkel 1995; Hollstein 2005) between children and their parents. We nevertheless recognized that some in the three villages lived alone and far away from their migrant children. In order to get to the bottom of the discrepancy of the normative idea that “children care for their parents when they become old and needy” and the social practice of some older adults living alone in their homesteads, we decided to look at their livelihoods and support. Here especially, the results of the standardized research became very useful. Even the people themselves were not completely aware of some common patterns shown in the results.

Caring for older adults in the three villages was not an issue: they were not abandoned by their kin and neighbors; almost all regularly received food and were provided with “the essentials.” In other words, someone fetched water for them, and they received two hot meals a day and some help with household chores. Items on this kind of everyday care and provision with the daily meal was not included in our questionnaire. However, I know from observations that this kind of caring for older people is normally performed by different persons in rural compounds. Analyses of the questionnaires clearly showed that older adults received much less in the form of material exchanges than children of all ages before marriage, and that the gifts they received decreased as they grew older. The fear of being left alone was, in the majority of cases, not an issue, given the fact that most of them, with few exceptions, mainly in the village of Asséré (Togo), were, despite the absence of some migrant children, still surrounded by other resident children or relatives.

A special feature of our research is the focus on the kinds of social relations in which material transactions took place:<sup>x</sup> In 2009-2010, 52.9% of all donations were direct intergenerational exchanges (combining parent-child, grandparent-grandchild, and uncle/aunt-niece/nephew relations). Counting the intergenerational in-law donations, the proportion increases to 63.1%. Most importantly, 35.3% of donations are made within the direct parent-child framework. Those numbers mirror our qualitative finding that neighboring relatives define themselves as classificatory children of older adults (such as nieces or nephews, daughters or sons-in-law, grandchildren or fostered children). In this way, all these

intergenerational donations (63.1%) were meant to support aging relatives, such as parents. In daily exchanges in the neighborhood, older people are provided for by their adult children or other adjacent relatives who substitute for the absent children.

Within the parent-child relation (35.3%), the distinction between parent-to-child or child-to-parent support is important for understanding the care of older adults. As showed in Table 1 below, parents provide young and adult children greater financial support in terms of value and frequency. Far less support was given by adult children to their ageing parents.<sup>xi</sup> This outcome is contradictory to the core ideal of financially supporting older people who are defined as needy. In the age-class societies of Asséré and Tchitchakou, as well as the hierarchical society of Tebo, it is common for those in adulthood and parenthood to expend more on their children than their parents. This duty is depicted in Table 1.

<b>Livelihood Given within One Year (2009-10); n=81</b>		<b>Asséré</b>	<b>Tchitchakou</b>	<b>Tebo</b>
<b>Parents to Children</b>	frequency	288	368	540
	sum [USD]	245.19	1,004.93	743.03
<b>Children to Parents</b>	frequency	174	16	11
	sum [USD]	48.71	19.51	33.74

Table 1: Given Livelihood for the Parents-Children Relation

Table 2.1 illustrates the migration impact on financial and/or material support given to older people. Nearly all the income of older adults came from outside the village, which means nearly all income is derived from migrant relatives' remittances. Shown as frequency (Table 2.2), the difference clarifies the importance of the rare contact with migrant relatives. The old received outside financial and/or material support on an average of 6.3 times a year. In general, older adults were better supported within the village by more regular but smaller amounts of financial or material support such as gifts of clothes, tobacco, corn, or other items. Support of higher value nevertheless come from outside the village.

<b>2.1 All Received Support Summed [USD]; 2009-10</b>	<b>sum [USD]</b>	<b>Ø [USD]</b>
Older Adults (n=33)	2,537.21	76.90
<b>Therefrom: Support from People Outside the Village [USD], 2009-10</b>	<b>sum [USD]</b>	<b>Ø [USD]</b>
Total from Outside the Village (n=33)	2,290.93	69.40

<b>2.2 All Received Support Shown as Frequency, 2009-10</b>	<b>frequency</b>	<b>Ø [n]</b>
Older Adults (n=33)	1,312	39.8
<b>Therefrom: Support from People Outside of the Village [frequency], 2009-10</b>	<b>frequency</b>	<b>Ø [n]</b>
Total from Outside the Village (n=33)	208	6.3

Tables 2.1 and 2.2: Received Support for the Older Adults During One Year (value and frequency, all three villages, n=33)

In order to contrast these findings with other age groups, Table 3 presents a comparison of support between the age groups “adult” and “older adults.” First, Table 3 shows that all older people received more in value than the adults. The average amount of support was about 3 USD. Nevertheless, the value of what the older adults receive from their relatives is often minimal. What counts more than the value itself is the honor of being remembered by the relatives (cf. Van der Geest 1997). The adults were, in contrast, at a disadvantage: they only received amounts totaling about 1 USD from their children on average.

Received Support (2009-10)	sum [USD]	n [donations]	Ø USD-sum
Adults (n=24)	1,659.43	1,435	1.16
Older Adults (n=33)	3,377.00	1,205	2.80
Total (n=57)	5,036.43	2,640	1.91

Table 3: Received Financial and/or Material Support: Difference Adults-Elderly during One Year (2009-10)

This quantified data shows two main points with respect to the debate on the socially precarious circumstances of aging people in rural West Africa. First, older people are deeply embedded in constant flows of the give-and-take of goods that connect all age groups. Even in Asséré, where poverty increased in 2009-2010, adult children did not stop remitting to older adults, in contrast to urban Ghana (Aboderin 2004), urban Burkina Faso (Roth 2010), or in rural Tanzania (Van Eeuwijk, 2011; 2016).

Secondly, intergenerational care remains important despite out-migration. Out-migration is highly differentiated and also has differentiated impacts on senior care. Remittances from migrants to the old help to redistribute earnings through the kin group. For example, financial support is considered both to be forms of senior care *and* substitutes for this care, which could be the case if the older person is expected to purchase food rather than wait for a family member to cook and serve the food. In this way, redistribution ensures continued support for older adults directly as well as indirectly. Some literature on the social position of older people in West Africa points to the relevance of powerful elders who controlled all the material and personal resources of their families (Aguilar 1998; Attané 2007; Fafchamps 2001), while others focus on the poor and neglected (de Jong et al. 2005; Förster 1998; Colson 2000). This research supports, at first glance, the neo-Marxist gerontocratic argument of older people in Africa holding power over wealth and people (Gruénais 1985; Meillassoux 1983).

At second glance, the gerontocratic system of powerful old people is supported through migrant remittances, with the outcome that other needy age groups (like children or very old) are supported by means of societal redistribution. Nevertheless, regarding daily supply, older adults receive support from their children or “adjacent substitutes” for their children like nieces or nephews.

## Conclusion

Social structure, housing, ongoing migration patterns and changing life courses are among the most significant factors that studies on the everyday life of older people must take into consideration. The examples I provided demonstrate not just the prevalence of a multiplicity of age-inscriptions that directly address societal and familial mechanisms for ensuring the livelihood and social security of the elderly people, but they also show that societal inscriptions become discernible only in the act of a multiscale reading of circumstances. The main finding of our research is that the normativity of the intergenerational

contract remains the same, and so the intergenerational contract, rather than being erased, is being reconfigured in some novel ways. It also explains how inscriptions are reorganizing practices and dispositions in order to maintain social norms instead of overturning them. For instance, the burden of daily caring for older persons is mainly borne by those who continue to live in the villages, and not necessarily by who is expected to provide care: the immediate kin members. Viewed through the lens of housing patterns, in combination with migration, older adults are supported not only by their children. Neighbors emerge as significant caregivers who cater to their everyday needs and provide them with food, water, and other essentials. Adjacent kin, such as classificatory children living in the same compounds or in the neighborhoods, are the main caregivers who guarantee that the everyday needs of the older adults are met.

Although the substitution of adult children has occurred as a common strategy in senior care, our qualitative research has shown that the social status of older people in the villages is much higher when sons and daughters live close by rather than are successful far away (see Apt 1992, 206). Kiyakou-Kouroumou, the older sibling from Asséré (Togo) discussed at the beginning of this article, is a case in point. As a widow with a daughter living nearby, she has better social standing in the village and her daily needs, including food, are met with greater regularity. Her childless brother Adjanda, who was not able to maintain a good relationship with his foster children living elsewhere, was not as well provided for in his old age. Contrary to the structural functionalist assumption that the position of siblings is structurally equivalent (Radcliffe-Brown 1971; Thelen, Coe, and Alber 2013, 3), there are two significant differences between them even though they live in the same paternal compound. First, there is a gender distinction: old men maintain their social status by staying home, while women customarily visit neighbors for a chat and a meal, especially if the visit transpires during meal times. Another important difference in this particular instance is that Kiyakou-Kouroumou has a daughter living nearby, while Adjanda has no biological children. His foster daughter is a migrant living permanently in the south of Togo, and his relationships with his foster daughter, and other younger relatives living nearby, are at best tenuous.

Further, in many cases the old support younger generations, so that in the course of redistribution, the support they receive will be much higher as well. Some of the old have considerable power in their community and need money to fulfill the demands of their position. Looking at the material support of older adults elucidates the idea of “wealth in people,” a concept that explains why and how money can be transformed into social capital (Ferguson 1992; Guyer 1993; 1995; Guyer and Belinga 1995). The effect of migration underlines this conversion. As shown here, in large part, the remittances to older people come from outside the village (mostly from migrant relatives). In other words, remittances from the migrant community support the gerontocratic system “at home.” Taken as a symbol of honor, financial and/or material support, no matter how small of an amount, remains important in old age. Remittances are taken as a sign of care by migrants.

Those findings explain the complex interconnections of housing patterns and migration and their influence on new age-inscriptions that reinforce the social norm of according a high social status to older persons. Possibly some of these presented inscriptions may disappear soon (if youth migration becomes less attractive through economic revival at home) or even become a norm (if the demographics of youth abroad expands in the ensuing decades). As a result, being cared for by adjacent kin who substitute for children might become a norm. Age-inscriptions concerning remittances, migration and residence, as well as generational inscriptions for old age provision, do not contradict the prevalent social norms. Looking at age-inscriptions illuminates creative changes to simultaneously maintain and reconfigure the intergenerational contract.

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## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> As temporary migration I subsume for example seasonal working for the harvest, staying abroad for one or two years as casual farm laborer or selling food on the markets in neighboring countries. The aim of those temporary migrants is earning money abroad to return with at home.

<sup>ii</sup> For a single case description of denied companionship because of difficult behavior and hardship in later life, see Häberlein (2015).

<sup>iii</sup> The results presented in this article formed part of the findings of the research project “Family Resource Flows and Intergenerational Relations within Families in West Africa,” which is kindly supported by the German Research Foundation, and headed by the chair of Social Anthropology, Erdmute Alber at the University of Bayreuth in Germany. This research project compares intergenerational resource flows that transpire within five to six families from each of the three West African villages of Asséré (Togo), Tchitchakou (Benin), and Tebo (Benin).

<sup>iv</sup> The comparison is based on observations and standardized surveys conducted during the period June 2009 to May 2010. In addition, we also accompanied the selected families for a period of several years and conducted qualitative surveys. In our study, we chose three villages, in which we worked using mostly qualitative research methods for a number of years. Since this particular team had been working over the years in the designated communities, rapport and goodwill had already been established. The members of the research team were also generally acquainted with the individuals and families who had been directly chosen to participate in the study. Local authorities and the participants of our study were informed about our research interests and proceeding before and while conducting research.

<sup>v</sup> Care for ill people is not the main focus of this article (see for this purpose Häberlein 2015).

<sup>vi</sup> This observation is just the contrary to younger age groups, such as adults. At that stage, women are staying at home or in the neighborhood, whereas men are those who go out for a walk in the village visiting friends or going to the fields. But when growing old and gaining the status as old man, one should sit down and expect others to come and greet.

<sup>vii</sup> Cooking by older widowers is a recent phenomenon in Asséré and Tchitchakou, and thus represents a new age-inscription as a way to cope with the absence of younger relatives. Men in other age groups who might be inclined to cook for themselves are a social rarity. Another exception would be young, unmarried male youth preparing small game caught hunting together with their peers outside the homestead. Others are men working on the fields preparing some yams for lunchtime, or when men are travelling.

<sup>viii</sup> All differentiation of age groups is done because of social emic meaning. Age is in this article, according to local understandings of age, defined socially, not biologically or numerically.

<sup>ix</sup> The social role and the belonging of children in the Baatombu case, where kinship fostering is the norm (Alber 2003; 2014), differs strongly from the Kabre and Lokpa cases. While the Baatombu transfer more rights and duties for their children to the foster parents when a child lives elsewhere, the Kabre and Lokpa

parents remain responsible to ensure care for their offspring, even if the children live permanently with other relatives.

<sup>x</sup> All following figures are resulting data from the above mentioned bi-weekly investigation of material resource flows of 81 people of different ages in three Western African villages (Asséré/Togo, Tchitchakou/Benin, Tebo/Benin) over one year (2009-2010). In this article, financial and/or material support is shown as in the currency of USD, whereas in the fieldsites the currency FCFA is used. Further, all material support is mentioned in its monetary value and as such integrated into the shown calculations.

<sup>xi</sup> Here again, Asséré was an exception in terms of given support. Much less in value was given in more frequent donations. In 2009-2010, Asséré was still affected by the cotton crisis. In Benin, the production had already shifted from cotton to soya as cash crop. Asséré followed this shift in 2010 as well. The support in 2009 to 2010 mirror the strategy of hardship: confirming social relations with small value donations was quite common in Asséré, especially to older people, who are the decision makers in the village.

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