Confidentiality and pseudonyms

A fieldwork dilemma from Ghana

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Fig. 1. Akua Mansaa with two grandchildren.During the last years of her life she could be seen every morning sitting in front of her simple house, doing practical things to help the family.

The first article of the ‘Statement on Professional and Ethical Responsibilities’ drawn up by the Society for Applied Anthropology contains the following clause: ‘We shall provide a means throughout our research activities and in subsequent publications to maintain the confidentiality of those we study.’ That same article emphasizes that anthropologists owe it to the people they study to disclose their research goals, methods and sponsorship. Strangely enough nothing is said about what I consider even more important: the obligation to return the research findings to the people among whom the study was carried out. Unfortunately, confidentiality may prove hard to reconcile with openly sharing research findings, as I came to realize after my fieldwork in a Ghanaian community.

Early research

Thirty years ago I undertook anthropological research in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town in southern Ghana. My intention was to stay with one extended family (*abusua* in the local language, Twi) and study its social ambiguities – its oneness *and* its internal conflicts. On the one hand, the *abusua* was presented as a locus of ultimate belonging; on the other hand opposing interests, secret and open hostilities and lifelong vendettas revealed cracks in the old institution. My interest had been fuelled by an African ethnography (van Velsen 1964), which had also revealed some other ‘cracks’, these ones in the once dominant structural functionalism, which had always emphasized the harmony of African kinship. Van Velsen’s fine analysis showed that communal values and kinship terms of unity often served hidden private interests. The transactionalism of Barth, Bailey, Goffman and Boissevain was in the African air.

I settled with a family of approximately 75 adults and adolescents. The fieldwork led me to three areas of considerable conflict in the *abusua*: marriage (and divorce), death (and inheritance), and witchcraft accusations. The last area proved particularly sensitive, as witchcraft (*bayie*) was believed to be only effective when practised between close relatives. Several proverbs were cited to explain this, one of them being: *Aboa a òhye wo ntama mu, na òka wo* (‘Only the insect in your own cloth bites you’). The members of the *abusua* told me that the closer the relative, the more dangerous he/she was. At first, most of them were reluctant to reveal names, but when I assured them that I would treat their information confidentially and that they could speak safely to me as an outsider, they began to mention some cases of witchcraft. Moreover, I made it clear to them that I already knew about quite a few skeletons in the family’s cupboard. Only some older people refused to discuss the topic with me. There were a few whom I did not dare approach, as I knew they had been frequently accused of practising witchcraft.

Most ‘informants’ told me in strict confidence what they had heard from others or what they had experienced themselves. I never heard anyone openly accuse someone else. All ‘accusations’ were made in secret and took the form of gossip, sometimes in a tone of concern and anxiety, sometimes uttered with malicious intent. A few informants seemed to enjoy tarnishing others’ reputations with witchcraft accusations. These were usually directed at elders who had treated them unfairly (cf. Bleek 1976). In all I heard 71 stories of witchcraft involving members of the family.

Two years later I returned to Kwahu-Tafo to conduct research for my PhD on sexual relationships and birth control, including the practice of induced abortion. Abortion was and still is a delicate issue in this region. It is practised on a large scale by young people, and in a sense it is a quite ‘normal’ thing to do when one becomes pregnant while still in school. At the same time it is a scandalous practice

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[1] The research discussed in this paper was carried out with the help of many people. Most prominent during the first two periods of fieldwork was the assistance given by my close friend Kwasi Nimrod Asante-Darko, Nana Boateng and Kwasi Anim. The most important helpers during the more recent research among elderly people were Kwame Fosu, Samuel Sarkodie, Patrick Atuobi, Anthony Obeng Boamah, Benjamin Buadi and Yaw Darko Ansah. Although this paper deals with other ethical aspects of the anthropological profession and problems related to concealing identity, I should point out that anthropologists often unjustly conceal the role of their assistants and key informants, presenting texts produced by others as their own to the extent of plagiarism. Harry Whitehead (2000) provides a rather shocking example of this practice in the ethnographic work of Franz Boas, who obscured the contribution of his assistant (‘co-author’ would be a more appropriate term) George Hunt. Two recent publications that give due credit to the ‘assistant’ are Pool 1994 and Mommersteeg 1999, both of whom make clear reference to the co-production between anthropologist and assistant in their ethnographic work.

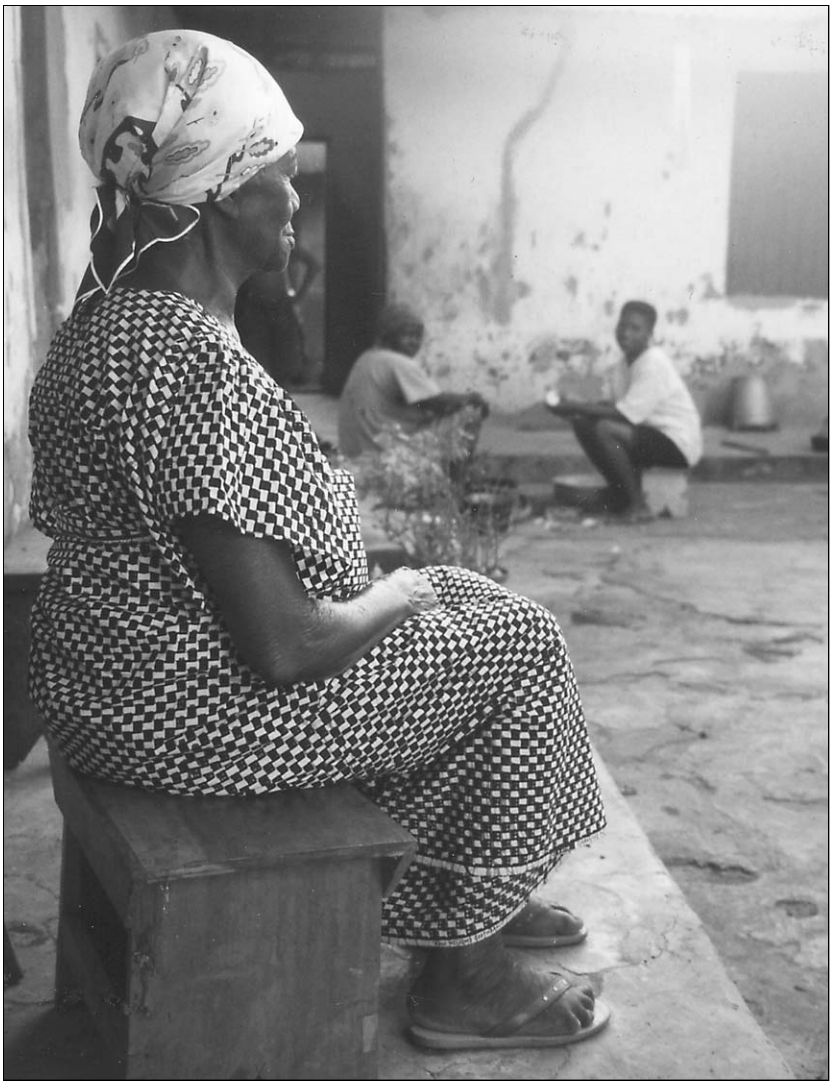
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Fig. 2. Nana Amponsaa in the courtyard of her house. Nana Amponsaa married three times in her life and had five children. Three daughters are still alive. They lived with her in the same house and looked after her day and night. She seemed to be very happy in her old age. When she died two years ago, her relatives claimed she was 113.

and people are terribly ashamed when their actions are discovered (Bleek 1981). Moreover, at the time of the research abortion was a criminal offence, punishable by a maximum of ten years' imprisonment. In Kwahu-Tafo, as in all other parts of the country, abortion was predominantly a self-help practice, carried out in secret. People told me about 53 different methods of terminating a pregnancy, ranging from taking or overdosing on pharmaceuticals to drinking herbal concoctions or applying 'instruments'. The complications linked to this last type of abortion could be serious. Some women never became pregnant again and a few died as a result of the operation. Understandably, the people with whom I discussed the matter were not eager to tell me about their experiences with abortion. Respondents in a questionnaire-based survey lied profusely about their involvement with this method of birth control (Bleek 1987). I was only able to convince them to speak more openly about their experiences after I had promised to keep the information strictly confidential.

When I started to write up the data from my first and second fieldwork experiences, I discovered the awkwardness of my promise of confidentiality. It is a good anthropological tradition to give one's informants and their community pseudonyms, but I soon realized that in this case such a measure would be an insufficient guarantee of confidentiality. Ghana's academic community is like a village. Through my (the author's) name it would be simple to trace the identity of the town and consequently of the informants. Moreover, two young people from Kwahu-Tafo were students at the same university where I was completing my Master's degree. They could easily read my published accounts in the university library. After giving fictitious names to the town ('Ayere') and the people, I decided I had to hide my own identity as well if I wanted to protect the people who had told me about their confidential – dangerous and 'shameful' – experiences. I chose the name Wolf Bleek as a pseudonym for myself.[2]

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Novelists and poets often hide their identity behind a pseudonym, but it is unusual to do so in academic work. Why? Literary authors write mainly about themselves – either directly or indirectly. By using a pseudonym they protect themselves, or their work from censorship. This is an accepted practice in the world of literature, but an anthropologist writing about others is not supposed to use a pseudonym. Apparently, protecting others is a less pressing motive for disguising one's identity.[3]

When I tried to publish an article on self-help abortion in a leading population studies journal, it was rejected on the grounds that: 'the editors would like to publish your paper… but they cannot agree to your using a pseudonym.' No reasons were given, but one can imagine why the editors were uncomfortable with an anonymous author: it seemed irreconcilable with their concept of scientific work. My argument about protecting people's identities did not convince them, in spite of the ethical statement cited at the beginning of this note. After two more failed attempts to have a pseudonymous manuscript accepted for publication I started to submit my articles without mentioning my use of a pseudonym. It worked. The results of my research on witchcraft and abortion appeared in international and Dutch journals and editors and colleagues started to correspond with 'W. Bleek'. In the correspondence I usually revealed my real name but asked them to respect the pseudonym in their published work. As it turned out, the pseudonym in no way prevented me from discussing the content of my work with others and exchanging views on the social, cultural and moral aspects of witchcraft and induced abortion. However, there were other concerns.

Consequences

What were the consequences of using a pseudonym? There were some agreeable side effects. It happened, for

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Fig. 3. Akua Mansaa preparing the husks of corn cobs for wrapping kenkey *(local food). Her daughter sold the food to schoolchildren.*

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[2] Most ethical discussions by anthropologists deal with their fieldwork. Very few focus on ethical problems connected with publishing the results of that fieldwork. One exception is Wittenberg 1984.

[3] I know only a few examples of anthropologists (and sociologists) using a pseudonym: Carl Withers (James West 1945; see further below), Laura Bohannan (Elenore Bowen 1964), and Karla Poewe (Manda Cesare 1982).

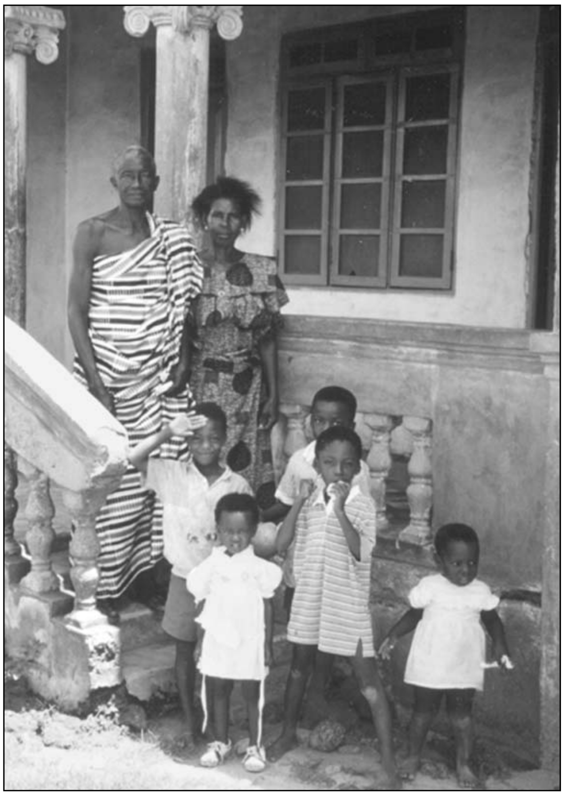

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Fig. 4. Opanyin Dadee with his wife and grandchildren in front of the house he built himself. Dadee is an example of a very successful cocoa farmer and businessman. He has built six houses in the town of Kwahu-Tafo, some for himself and his relatives, some to be rented. Building a house, together with sending your children to school, is regarded as the best investment for a successful old age.

example, that people commented to me on my work without knowing that I was the author. Such comments are usually far more valuable because the conventional politeness is skipped.[4]

The most crucial question, however, was: How effective was the pseudonym? Were the identities of the informants kept secret? Shortly after I had started using a pseudonym, I heard about a similar case. In 1945 the American sociologist ‘James West’ wrote a study about a small town in the United States which he gave the fictitious name of ‘Plainville’. West was not successful in keeping the identity of the town and its inhabitants secret. Soon after the book was published people found out the real name of the author (Carl Withers) and the exact location of ‘Plainville’, which turned out to be Wheatland, Missouri. Gallaher (1961), who conducted a follow-up study of ‘Plainville’ 15 years later, told me that students were the first to identify ‘West’ and ‘Plainville’. Some of them went to visit the town and irritated inhabitants with their questions. When a copy of the book was placed in the local library, someone added the informants’ real names next to their fictitious ones. At first, the inhabitants of Plainville were angry and upset by what Withers had written about them, but later they felt proud of the fact that he had brought them to the public’s attention. In 1961 Withers wrote a foreword to Gallaher’s follow-up study of ‘Plainville’ and signed it with both his pseudonym and his real name.

An author using a pseudonym may be a rare phenomenon in anthropology, but giving fictitious names to informants and places is common practice. The Dutch anthropologist Lodewijk Brunt wrote a book about natives and newcomers in a rural Dutch community. He gave the village another name, but its real name was revealed in the newspapers on the day the book was published.

Many more examples could be cited here to confirm that such disguises do not effectively conceal the identity of informants.[5] I asked William Foot Whyte if he had ever considered using a pseudonym for himself when he published his celebrated *Streetcorner society*. He answered:

> No I did not… I suppose that one of my reasons for putting my own name on the book was the selfish one that I wanted to get whatever credit was due that work. There might also be a more respectable reason: if a book makes any sort of mark at all, it may stir up a discussion in the profession, and it is rather important for the exchange of information and ideas to be able to include the author in that discussion (personal communication, 22 March 1976).

I put the same question to one of the authors of a book about a cancer hospital in the Netherlands (van Dantzig & de Swaan 1978). That book suffered a fate which – as far as I know – has never affected a study carried out in a ‘developing’ country: it was destroyed by a judicial decision. The hospital authorities felt the book presented a biased – in their eyes too negative – picture of the hospital and they sued the authors and publisher. They won the case and all printed copies were sent for shredding before they could reach the bookshops. When asked, one of the authors told me that he had never contemplated hiding the identity of the hospital, let alone his own. Moreover, he added, it would not work in a small country like the Netherlands.

I suspect that he was right. Only when there is – literally and metaphorically – an ‘ocean’ between the academic world of published books and the world described in those books is it possible to maintain the disguise. How could it be removed, if the book itself does not even reach those whose words and activities are quoted in it?

When Herdt (1981) published his *Guardians of the flutes*, dealing with erotic activities in a Papua New Guinean community, he did something rather unusual: he gave the ethnic group a fictitious name (‘Sambia’).[6] The book described some ideas and practices which in North America and Europe would be categorized as ‘paedophilia’. Apparently Herdt wanted to protect his informants and prevent tourists and curious colleagues from crossing the ocean to see (and experience?) things for themselves. I am not sure it worked. Anthropologists in Papua New Guinea know where he did his research. Moreover, the practices he described are not unique to the ‘Sambia’, they occur or occurred throughout the country.

My own triple disguise (informants, location and author) in Ghana did work.[7] Twenty years later my measure proved still effective. There was no copy of my thesis in a local library and no-one had established a link between my publications and the community. I should have been content, but I was not. My decision to ‘go into hiding’ had a number of consequences which I found both unethical and simply annoying. I had kept the outcome of my research study from my informants, ‘for their own good’. On the one hand, I had respected their wish (and the first article of the anthropological ethical code) to keep

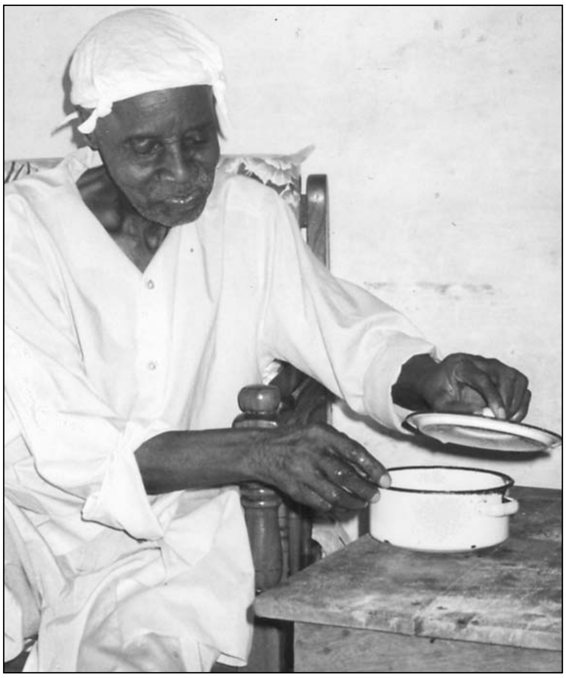

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Fig. 5. Agya Mensah, blind, eating his meal. During the last years of his life Agya Mensah had his daughter living with him. She had left her husband in the city of Kumasi to come and stay with her old parents in Kwahu-Tafo. When her mother died she continued to take care of her blind father. Leaving your husband to take care of your parents is considered the right thing for a daughter to do. Agya Mensah’s daughter visits her husband in Kumasi twice a month.

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[4] When the novelist Doris Lessing submitted her manuscript *The diary of a good neighbour* under a pseudonym, the manuscript was rejected. This happened when Lessing was already a famous writer. Later the book *was* published and the publicity around the case probably compensated amply for the initial deception. Some critics, therefore, suspected that her pseudonym had been a ‘pseudo-pseudonym’ – a clever attempt to arouse more public interest. The same accusation was levelled against me when I published my dissertation on sexual relationships and birth control (including abortion) under a pseudonym.

[5] See also the discussion in Vidich et al. 1964.

[6] ‘Hiding’ a whole tribe was not entirely new, however. Herdt told me that he followed the precedent of Margaret Mead in her Sepik work, where she created pseudonyms for all.

[7] To be absolutely accurate: I also changed the dates of my research and some small details in the life histories of my informants.

[8] See for example van der Geest 1997, 1998, 2002a, 2002b.

[9] A successful example of this dialogue about data with informants is Robert Pool’s study of illness concepts in Cameroon (Pool 1994).

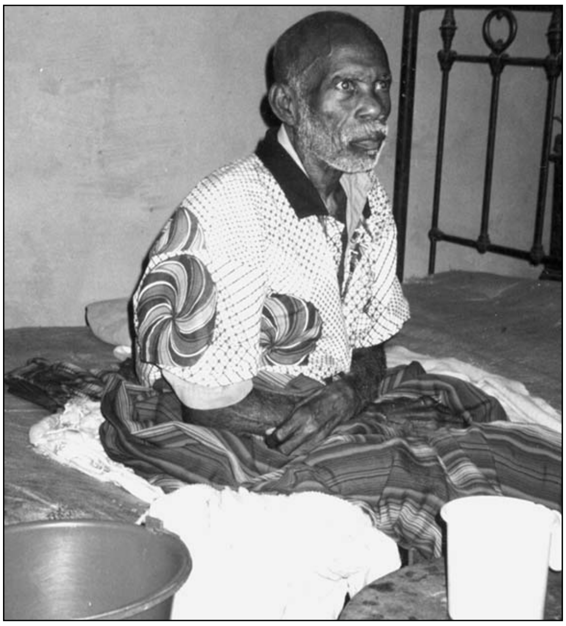

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Fig. 6. Kwaku Martin, blind, posing on his bed. Kwaku, who died three years ago, married five times in his life and had twenty children. He was literate, living in a house he had built himself, but at the end of his life he was lonely and miserable. None of the twenty children, nor any of his many grandchildren, was 'able' to look after him.

delicate information confidential; on the other hand, I had deprived them of the possibility of reading what I had written about them (an exchange which, surprisingly, is not stipulated by the anthropological code). They would never be able to 'talk back'. Though trying to make their voices heard by writing about them, I had effectively silenced them.

In 1973, when I finished my fieldwork in 'Ayere', I asked the head of the *abusua* to assemble as many relatives as possible in his compound. I took a number of pictures of the entire group and promised the old man that I would send him a very large print of the picture to hang in his house. The man's reaction was significant: a photograph would be nice, but 'the book' was more important. I nodded, but knew that I would never be able to give him 'the book'. There was too much in it which would upset him and his relatives. My concern about protecting people's anonymity prevented me from giving them the text which would betray their identities. It also prevented me for many years from returning to the town and the people who had become my friends. I knew that people would ask me where 'the book' was. When, after about seven years, I finally paid two short visits to the place, I had prepared polite excuses for not bringing the book. By that time, the old head of the family had died.

Had I been too concerned? Was my worry about confidentiality an attitude typical of my own culture with its emphasis on individuality and privacy? Had I made the wrong decision when I chose not to share the outcome of my research with them in order to preserve confidentiality?

New research

Twenty-three years after my first research study, I went back to Kwahu-Tafo to study social and cultural meanings of growing old. I reasoned that 23 years was a long period and that things of the past would have lost their pungency; the elderly who had been the main targets of witchcraft accusations had all died and the teenagers who had told me about their romantic encounters and the subsequent pregnancies and abortions were now parents and grandparents. I brought a few copies of my PhD thesis along and formally handed them over to the new head of the family and some others. The head, a former schoolteacher, expressed his disappointment that the name of the town was not mentioned on the cover or inside the book and that neither his name nor any other appeared in the text. In 1973 he had been one of my most straightforward informants. My MA dissertation had contained a long list of witchcraft accusations he had made against relatives he suspected of working toward his downfall. The PhD thesis which I presented to him recorded several stories about his amorous escapades and sexual frustrations. I explained that I had given him and all the others fictitious names to protect them. When I met him the next day he smiled and said he had found himself in the book. He did not complain about what I had written about him and still seemed disappointed that his real name was not used. We did not speak again about the book and I do not know if he ever read it in full.

I am again writing articles and a book about the people of this rural community. I describe how the elderly spend their days and how they are cared for. The articles deal with respect and reciprocity, with money, building a house, wisdom, loneliness, death and funeral; they also discuss topics which were 'anonymized' in my earlier research – witchcraft accusations and sex.[8] I have changed my policy, however. The name of the town, Kwahu-Tafo, is now cited in bold face in the articles, as are the names of the old people with whom I conversed about the pleasures and pains of growing old. I have made it a rule to dedicate each publication to one of the elders. I want them to be proud of the fact that their life histories – good or bad – and their reflections about being old have been published and are being read by people in different parts of the world. Of course, the information they provided is less threatening than what their relatives told me in 1971 and 1973, but I do not hide the less favourable things that are said by or about them. They said they did not like my attempt at confidentiality. They wanted to see their names on paper. Their main worry was that after death they would sink into oblivion. My writing about them will help them to be remembered.

Ethical paternalism?

My struggle with confidentiality and the use of pseudonyms has taught me at least one thing: ethical rules and feelings about right and wrong are as much subject to

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Fig. 7. Nana Dedaa with a calabash.She was very open about her life. She lost her first husband, whom she loved very much, and divorced two others. She also had a number of lovers. The proof of real love, she often emphasized, is the material support the man gives, not his sweet words.

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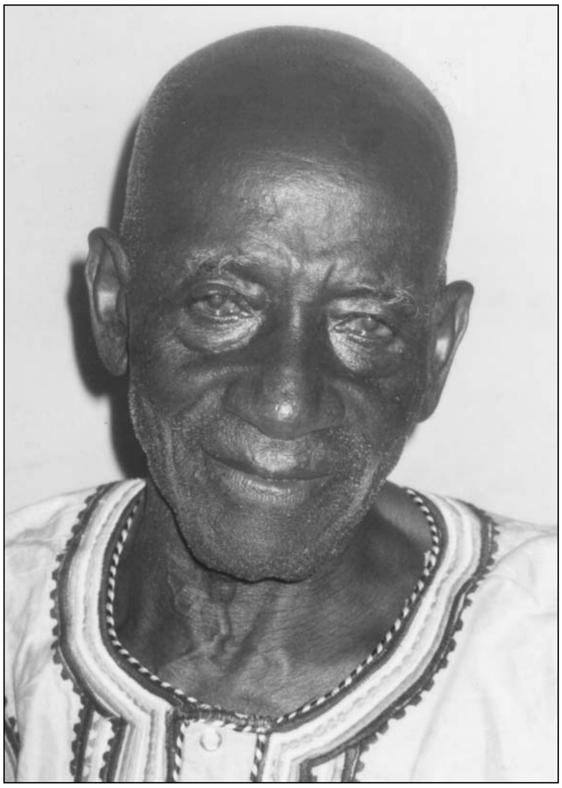

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Fig. 8. Portrait of Okyeame Kwame Opoku. For twenty years Kwame Opoku, who was slightly lame, had been the spokesman of the chief. He was a very eloquent man, the epitome of the wise old man who gives advice to members of the family. In addition he had been a successful farmer and businessman. He died two years ago, probably at the age of 82, although his children claimed he was 90.

cultural variation as the topics and themes we study in other communities and societies. Anthropologists have done their utmost to combat ethnocentrism in intercultural communication, but they have been ethnocentric in applying their own ethical standards in their fieldwork. I admit, nothing is as tricky as seeing moral and human rights through a cultural – and relativistic – lens. The European and American concern about the integrity and privacy of the human individual is a case in point. Looking back at my own cautiousness about protecting people's identities I am not sure I did the right thing. Should I have been less concerned about the anonymity of my respondents and more about sharing my publications with them? And am I doing the right thing now, writing openly about the pains and failures of elderly people? Of course they allowed me to do so, they requested it, but were they aware of all the possible consequences? And how are their children and grandchildren going to react? (Most of the elderly died before I could show them my work, so I gave it to their children.)

A recent 'incident' illustrates what I have called the 'cultural variation' in ethics. Francine van den Borne, a Dutch anthropologist, carried out research on casual sex and condom use among young girls and women involved in the sex trade in and around places of entertainment such as bars, bottle stores and discos in urban Malawi. Aware that these women might, if asked directly, provide socially desirable answers, she used, as one of her research methods, a rather 'aggressive' form of participant observation technique: she introduced fake male customers to find out how, why, with whom and when women barter casual sex in an area with a high incidence of HIV/AIDS. Some fake customers ended up in bed with their informant in a resthouse. To their surprise, women who negotiated in the bar for condom use, even bought the condoms and carried them to the room, were willing to accept unprotected sex. Her research proposal was discussed by the Ethical Review Committee of the Ministry of Health and Population in Lilongwe prior to the field work. The Committee agreed with the proposal and its ethical implications but was concerned about the fake clients 'wasting' the women's time and causing them financial losses. Provided the fake customers compensated the women for their 'lost opportunities', the Committee did not have any ethical objection. Committee members were not concerned about the unconsented and fraudulent research method. After all, are we not always playing roles and – to some extent – deceiving others about our true intentions? Their point was rather that others should not suffer financially from anthropologists' 'cheating'. Members argued that the country and the Ministry would benefit from the deception: the research would produce more reliable information on sexual practices in an HIV-infected society and thus provide a basis for better policy-making.

However, when van den Borne submitted an article (2001) about this field methodology and its ethical implications to an international journal, it was rejected. The (anonymous!) reviewers and the editor considered her method to be a gross breach of the ethical code. They took the view that she had misled her informants, which is never allowed – not even, it seemed, if this served an extremely important purpose. By contrast, the Malawian Ethical Review Committee found her method justified provided the girls and women were compensated, but what they considered right for their own society was overruled by an alien code of Western scholars who had probably never set foot on Malawian soil. In her reaction to the editor, van den Borne wrote:

> A straightforward application of those international guidelines [the anthropological code] remains problematic and is unable to address the tensions between universalistic and relativistic perceptions of ethics when dealing with transcultural research. The intention of my article was exactly to present those ethical concerns to my international colleagues and start a discussion. By not publishing this article such a discussion is prevented from taking place. By publishing the article your journal would show its concern about proper ethical conduct in the field.

But she failed to convince the editor. I agree with her defence and expect that her article will eventually be published. Returning to my own 'case', the challenge which anthropologists face is to weigh the duty to protect informants against the importance of sharing research data with them. More than three decades ago John Barnes (1967) suggested that the researcher should show his or her data to informants and discuss them with them *before* publishing. That advice is followed by a growing number of anthropologists, not only for ethical reasons but also because it improves the quality of their description and interpretation.[9] It is a method I have also used in my discussions with elderly people and their relatives in Kwahu-Tafo. ●

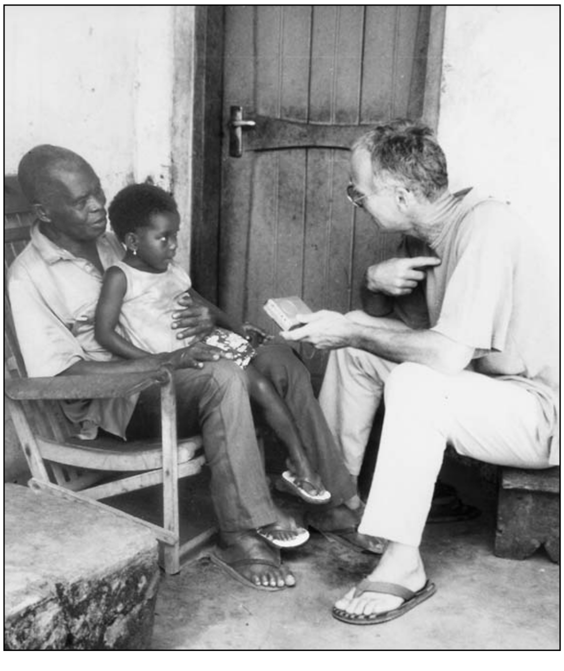

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Fig. 9. The author recording a conversation with Opanyin Kwaku Nyame. All conversations with the older people were recorded and transcribed during the research. Kwaku Nyame was a cocoa farmer who built his own house with the money he made from cocoa. In 1984 life became hard for him when his cocoa plants died after a severe drought.

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