kritisk etnografi – Swedish Journal of Anthropology
2024, VOL. 7, NO. 2
https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-550885
DOI: 10.33063/diva-550885

'The African family' in policy and practice: Older women heads of household and the question of intergenerational support in Equatorial Guinea

Adelaida Caballero | PhD, Researcher, Uppsala University

ABSTRACT: This article investigates how the notion of 'the African family' used pervasively in regional policy on old age-related questions, plays out in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea. It does so by looking at the quality of intergenerational relationships from the point of view of older women who are also sole breadwinners in multi-generational households. Drawing from a social gerontological reading of the concept of moral economy, the article examines how cultural representations of womanhood as self-sacrificial motherhood, conditioned the support that older women were expected to give, but also entitled to receive. The article shows how older women and their younger family members dismissed customary duties in favour of personal judgements regarding the quality of their relationships, and suggests that the strategies older women deployed in an effort to cope with intergenerational tensions both exacerbated conflict and amplified the women's feelings of desertion.

Keywords: older women, intergenerational relationships, social gerontology, Equatorial Guinea

Introduction

The topic of care provision and support for older persons has overlapped with that of intergenerational relationships for much of the history of social gerontological research conducted in sub-Saharan Africa. Early studies, which built on exchange theory, portrayed dependency in later life as a system of intergenerational exchanges in which youths partook for personal benefit, knowing that they too would benefit from the system when they became old.[1] Inspired by modernisation theory, subsequent works argued that factors such as migration and urbanisation eroded traditional forms of social organisation, which resulted in the loss of status of elders, as well as in the dismantling of customary family-based support networks.[2] Pan-Africanist perspectives informed some of these later works, suggesting that solutions to the problems that older persons faced necessarily required the restoration of traditional ways of life.

At the shift of the millennium, talk about modernisation gave way to the rhetoric of development. In developing world ageing debates, international discussions emphasised the

[1] A. J. Shelton's (1968) pioneering research on Igbo eldership illustrates this approach.

[2] Walter H. Sangree's (1992) classic article about grandparenthood among Tiriki and Irigwe peoples in Ghana and Nigeria constitutes a beautiful example of modernisation-oriented research.

Contact: Adelaida Caballero ✉ adelaida.caballero@antro.uu.se

© 2024 Adelaida Caballero. This work is published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0). kritisk etnografi is owned and published by the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography (SSAG).

need for policies "to build on indigenous systems and values of informal family support" (Aboderin 2005: 470). At the African Union's headquarters, legislators reckoned that "traditionally, Africa's development has been a result of the strength of the family," and therefore "building the capacity and resilience of *the African family* to avoid breakage will be an important contribution in the development of Africa" (AU 2004: 3; emphasis mine).

Consequently, when international frameworks such as the United Nations' *Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing* (2002) and the World Health Organisation's *Active ageing: A policy framework* (2002) were introduced, regional legislators devised their own instruments for care provision and support for older persons based on 'the African family'. The African Union's *Plan of Action on Ageing* (2003) exhorts state actors and other stakeholders: first, to "enact legal provisions that promote and strengthen the role of the family and the community in the care of its older members"; second, to ensure that "legal instruments exist to protect the rights of older people within the family and community"; third, to "develop and strengthen strategies that empower older people to contribute to their families"; and fourth, to "implement policies and programmes that strengthen families and are inclusive of older people" (AU and HelpAge 2003: 15-16).

Today, the notion of the family in Africa, often universalised as 'the African family', is still used pervasively in regional policy on old age-related questions. However, the concept of 'the African family' in general, and the concept of the family of African older people in particular, both remain poorly defined and under-scrutinised (Aboderin and Hoffman 2015: 284-5; Hoffman and Pype 2016: 2). A lack of concrete meanings has rendered the term liable to loose interpretations and opportunistic mobilisations in contexts where social security systems are weak or non-existent, as is the case in Equatorial Guinea.

In this small West/Central African country, nationalistic discourses have spurred the belief that if precolonial values and forms of social organisation were restored, the myriad of problems that plague African families today would disappear (Akeng in Mitogo 2025). Nationalistic discourses also have shaped normative representations of 'the African family' (*la familia africana*), which Equatoguineans envisioned as a large household headed by an authoritative man who is also a successful provider; a home where a man's female partner(s) is(are) dedicated chiefly to reproductive and domestic kinds of labour; and a place where elders can spend the last years of their lives living comfortably, resting and fulfilling the precious task of instilling the teachings of *la tradición* in their grandchildren.

With little variation between ethnic communities, normative representations of traditional family life portrayed relationships between older people and their younger relatives as harmonious and synergic. These representations construed older persons discursively in an invariably positive way, usually as timeless, contextless figures of moral authority or as collectively cherished repositories of wisdom. Depictions such as these have dominated the books written by members of the educated elite since at least the mid-1980s, but remain widely popular today (Ocha'a Mve 1981: 62; Nze Abuy 1985: 11-12; Nsé Angüe 2010: 224-225; Eteo Soriso 2013: 120, 216).

This article investigates how the notion of 'the African family' as pictured in regional policy and nationalistic discourse plays out in Malabo, the Equatoguinean capital. It does so by looking at the quality of intergenerational relationships from the point of view of older women who live in multi-generational homes. More specifically, the article examines

the family life of Mamá Angie, a sixty-three year-old woman from the *krío* ethnic group.[3] The purpose of the article is to show, through a gender-oriented ethnographic account of individuals' experiences, intentions, and motives, first, how members of an Equatoguinean family fulfilled or disavowed normative expectations of intergenerational solidarity, and, second, how the position that older women, as mothers and grandmothers, occupied in the local moral economy, conditioned the kinds of support that they were, in principle, obliged to give but also entitled to receive, at least according to 'the African family'.

Political and demographic context of Equatorial Guinea

A former Spanish colony for economic exploitation, Equatorial Guinea became an independent nation in 1968. The country's first constitutional president, Francisco Macías Nguema, built his entire political discourse on a certain ethnic Fang nativism, the strategic invocation of which gave rise to *la tradición* – a nostalgia-imbued notion regarding a certain primordial Afro-Bantu way of life that has become lost in time and constitutes the marrow of Equatoguineans' Africanness (Caballero 2023: 30). By mobilising *la tradición,* President Macías projected an image of himself as a strong, proud, 'authentic African' leader as opposed to his adversaries, critics, and intellectuals whom he regarded as 'whitened' individuals, traitors who lost their traditions and now pledged alliance to Western imperialism (Nerín 2024: 166).

Shortly after taking office, President Macías became aware of the economic and administrative weaknesses of the postcolonial state, and opted for complete centralisation. Discourse on *la tradición* helped him legitimise his autocratic rule. All moments of power became invested in his person, yet he was no despot who reigned like a chief, namely through self-serving definitions of the customary (Mamdani 1996: 22-23). As invoked by President Macías, *la tradición* did not promote the revitalisation of any particular precolonial values or ways of life. Instead, it covered up the social fragmentation provoked by the violence of his administration. While *la tradición* supposedly implied a revival of kinship ideology, Macías, in an effort to eliminate any potential dissidents, encouraged youths to denounce their own family members. This practice developed into a virulent culture of denunciation that lives on, and that, some authors maintain, has permanently torn apart the close-family structure of the majoritarian ethnic group, the Fang (Nze Nfumu 2004: 46).

President Macías was ousted in 1979 through a military coup led by his nephew, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who has remained president of the country ever since. A nationalistic discourse that legitimises, on the grounds of cultural distinctiveness, non-democratic forms of governance in the modern Equatoguinean state, has maintained his authority unscathed (Ocha'a Mve 1985: 38-40). Such discourse is a virtual extension of *la tradición* as Macías once invoked it, but its meanings have changed in significant ways.

One of the first actions that President Obiang Nguema took after ousting his uncle was to call upon a national conference of traditional chiefs (Evuna Owono 1994: 224-232). At this event, he effectively restored the chiefs' dignity and entitlements, which Macías' militant Youths (*Juventudes*) had been trampling for over a decade. In the months that followed, President Obiang Nguema re-established economic cooperation relations with Spain, and

[3] Krío is a form of Creole. Kríos are the descendants of Fernandinos, a demonym meaning 'from the island of Fernando Po', present-day Bioko.

reinstated the authority of the Catholic Church – an instrument of colonial domination which Macías had proscribed. Through these three actions, President Obiang Nguema consolidated his leadership. He obtained the support of the gerontocrats, the sympathy of the international community, and the gratitude of the Equatoguinean Catholic majority.

National discourse on *la tradición* as it persists today thus has, at its roots, a weak rendition of Fang nativism, but it also incorporates a certain economic mindedness as well as a comfortable partnership between Catholic morality and authoritarianism. This bricolage version of *la tradición* defines the national discourse on gender and local renditions of 'the African family', even if family life in the country hardly resembles the traditionalist ideal.

Today, Equatorial Guinea has a population of 1,594,432, which is divided into a total of 399,533 households (INEGE 2024: 14). The median size of an Equatoguinean household is of 4.0 family members, with households in rural areas being smaller (3.5 members) than in urban zones (4.3 members) (INEGE 2024: 58). In Northern Bioko, the province to which Malabo belongs, 37.0% of all homes are extended households, this is, they are composed by several adult blood relatives of the head of household or his/her partner (INEGE 2024: 59). Mamá Angie's case, which I will examine in upcoming sections, provides an example of life in a typical urban Equatoguinean extended home.

National sources estimate that 64.8% of all households are headed by men, while 35.2% are headed by women.[4] Of the households headed by men, 75.1% are biparental and 24.9% monoparental. When it comes to those headed by women, 20.9% of all households are biparental while a staggering 79.1% are monoparental. The highest level of education that 74.3% of all women heads of household have completed is secondary education, and the most common activity sector in which these women work is domestic service – they account for 88.3% of all workers in this sector (INEGE 2024: 63, 65). Other jobs the women do include independent agricultural ventures, small business initiatives, and street vending. These jobs fall within the category of informal employment, the kind of employment undertaken by 83.0% of the working population (INEGE 2024: 127).

The economic burden that women heads of household bear in monoparental homes is amplified by the fact that they also tend to be sole breadwinners. Family members who are of working age (18-64 years) and might be expected to be successful providers often do not have the possibility to make any significant economic contributions to their households. In 2023, the youth unemployment rate was reportedly 16.35% (TE 2024), yet national sources estimate that only 19.3% of people aged 14-19 received a salary, while 57% had remittances as their main source of income (INEGE 2024: 143).[5] Remittances included family support in cash and kind, as well as an allowance paid from a parent's salary, alimony, or other benefits.

---

[4] This number is problematic. Surveyors counted as 'head of household' (*jefes de hogar*) anyone whom household members referred to as such, regardless of whether the person in question actually lived in the home (INEGE 2024, 61). Equatoguineans believe that the role of head of household 'naturally' befalls a man, and a home that does not have 'a man upfront' (*un hombre al frente*) is hardly considered a home. This means that a man who is related to, or has a relationship with, a woman, but does not live at her home, will still be referred to as the head of her household. Men who live at home but are unable to make any economic contributions due to inactivity or unemployment will also be regarded as heads of household. This situation suggests that the number of women who are *de facto* heads of household is probably much higher than the statistics show.

[5] Of the remaining 23.7% of occupied youths, 10.9% worked autonomously, 0.5% lived off rents, and 12.3% had other types of income (e.g. migrant remittances).

Besides unemployment, and despite the massive revenues that the oil and gas industry has provided the country since the discovery of oil in the mid-1990s, poverty also remains an acute problem in Equatorial Guinea. With a value of consumption of 8.2 USD per capita per day in PPP 2017, it is estimated that 55.3% of all Equatoguineans live in poverty (INEGE 2024: 175, 171). Poverty levels are higher in rural areas (59.7%) than in urban zones (46.7%). However, the high population density of urban zones has resulted in that more than half of all the poor live in cities (INEGE 2024: 169).

The World Bank places Equatorial Guinea in the group of countries with moderately-high levels of inequality.[6] Relief through international aid, however, is unfeasible for the most part. As a middle-income country, Equatorial Guinea is not eligible to participate in most World Bank and IMF funding programs, and neither is it eligible for the European Development Fund (EDF) given the country's refusal to ratify the revised 2019 version of the Cotonou Agreement due to reservations on the clause on support for the International Criminal Court.

The hardship posed by poverty and unemployment has resulted in a reduction in extended family obligations, as well as a decrease in potential intergenerational economic support. Between 2020 and 2021, the youth dependency ratio in the country increased from 60.5 to 66.7, the elderly dependency ratio increased from 3.9 to 5.4, and the estimated total dependency ratio increased from 64.4 to 72.2 (CIA 2024). While higher dependency and lower potential support ratios seem to indicate that families are facing increasing difficulties in providing support for their younger and older members, the fact that the youth dependency ratio has increased seems to suggest that family obligations are functioning differently from how they functioned before – it is increasingly not the younger generations that support the older ones, but vice versa.

This situation is not new, nor is it unique to Equatorial Guinea. Scholars of ageing in Africa are familiar with the role of carers that older people play in contexts affected by poverty, youth unemployment, and health epidemics such as HIV/AIDS (see e.g. Ardington et al. 2010). Studies show that family life in the continent rarely meets the expectations set by 'the African family'. Ghanaian late life scholar Nana Araba Apt (1993: 301), for example, argues that loose conceptualisations of traditional African extended family organisation tend to overemphasise its structures of support and patterns of solidarity, and she refers to such solidarity as a 'myth'. Drawing from her research among older Abaluyia people in Kenya, anthropologist Maria Cattell (1997: 37, 14) highlights the fact that since what is usually conceived as traditional African family life encompasses at least three generations, much of the support and solidarity that such family life emphasises is expected to take place across generational boundaries. Intergenerational solidarity, writes Sjaak van der Geest (2008: 309), is premised on a kind of reciprocity that, however the younger and older Ghanaians with whom he worked regarded as "the key to security at old age," was of a "whimsical and unpredictable nature". Also based in evidence from Ghana, policy researcher Isabella Aboderin (2005: 146) suggests that shifts in the material support that family members offer older persons, are the product of "a complex interplay between resource constraints and shifting normative ideas." Cameroonian social worker Charles Fonchingong (2013:

[6] The per capita consumption of the richest 10% of the population, 258,000 Central African Francs (CFA) [ca. 410 USD], is more than ten times the value of the consumption of people in the poorest decile, whose per capita consumption is 23,000 CFA [ca. 36 USD] (INEGE 2024: 168).

224) believes that solving the challenges posed by such shifts in material support, requires "a rethink of pension reforms and other direct social assistance schemes that takes into cognisance specific needs of all categories of older people."

In varying degrees, all of these scholars recognise the inadequacy of 'the African family' to fulfil the normative roles of caregiving and support that policymakers have ascribed to it. Yet the means through which the trope is mobilised as part of nationalistic discourse, and the consequences that such mobilisations ultimately have for older persons, are still to be studied in detail. The present article is a contribution to filling this gap in the literature.

The moral economy

While accounting for the normative character of the expectations of care and support presupposed by 'the African family', I draw on the concept of moral economy. My approach to the concept differs, however, from the way in which recent anthropological and African Studies scholarship theorise it, namely with regard to the relations between morals and capitalism, with a focus on "how the material economy is morally perceived, constituted, and contested along various vectors of distribution and redistribution" (Salverda et al 2024: 141). Although the strictly economic dimensions of exchanges between persons that current understandings of the moral economy emphasise remain an important component of the forms of support implicit in the notion of 'the African family' – not only for what money allows people to afford, but also for the strain that lack of money puts on their relationships – I do not focus exclusively on such economic dimensions.

For the senior women with whom I worked, moral and social kinds of support obviated in talk about 'the African family' – being able to rely on others when it comes to practical help with everyday tasks, keeping company, knowing that one is safe, feeling respected and appreciated – were highly important yet rather scarce assets. The women tried to obtain such assets through a constant negotiation of their relationships with relatives and younger family members. A crucial part of such negotiation was daring to question otherwise normative assumptions and expectations, as well as passing judgement regarding the fairness of the demands to which such expectations gave rise.

Insofar as it focuses on how older women dealt with normative expectations of care and support through a negotiation of their relationships with members of the younger generations, the concept of moral economy that I use in this article is akin to the one used in social gerontological research. This reading of the moral economy refers to the notions of reciprocity and 'fairness' that, upheld collectively in a given society, are supposedly determinant of moral obligations between age groups (Minkler and Cole 1992: 116-21; see also Hendricks 2005). I do not focus, then, on the morality of an economy, but on the economy of a morality – on the negotiable aspects of interpersonal relationships that a certain moral order structures and defines in a normative manner.

Oriented in this way, a moral economy perspective suits the purpose of this study because it allows for two key considerations: first, consideration of the moral reasoning through which older women and their families justified discrepancies between normative expectations and factual outcomes; and second, consideration of how gender norms influenced the amount of family support that older women were supposedly entitled to receive versus what they in fact obtained. The insights that the moral economy perspective can potentially produce in relation to gender are highly relevant, as the gendered processes

that condition the quality of the intergenerational relationships that older women have, and thus the amount of support that they might receive or be denied, remain key questions for systematic empirical inquiry in contemporary social gerontology (Aboderin 2011: 216).

Virtuous womanhood

My understanding of the moral economy is a substantivist one – it is grounded on the general understanding that the older women with whom I worked, had, of morality. This understanding, I have shown elsewhere (Caballero 2023: 206-223), encompassed notions of relational autonomy, care, respect, and reciprocity, all of which were defined situationally yet taking dominant cultural representations of gender and old age as a point of departure. Such cultural representations pertained, almost invariably, to 'virtuous womanhood', the national discourse on gender. I refer to this discourse as 'virtuous womanhood' because of the emphasis that it places on the notion of virtue. The discourse built on three historically determinant, fundamentally different, yet conveniently overlapping themes (Caballero 2023: 132-134, 192). The first theme, what some informants referred to as 'Afro-Bantu' *tradición*, painted Woman (in the singular, *la Mujer*) as a fertile, strong body accompanied by a weak mind, gendering women in three ways: female reproductive sexuality; domestic division of labour; and female subordination to men on the grounds of Woman's alleged intellectual and moral weakness. The second theme, Francoist National-Catholicism as represented by 'The Good Wife' of Proverbs 31:10-31, foregrounded Woman as a procreator, a good wife, a good mother, a good Catholic, an industrious labourer for the benefit of her husband, and a good citizen for the benefit of the nation. The third theme, Equatoguinean men's current interpretations of more modern discourses on gender equality, pushed for the idea that in order for a woman to be entitled to demand the same rights enjoyed by men, she first needed to fulfil not only her own roles at home but also the roles of her husband. Fusing these three themes, the national discourse on gender conceptualised womanhood as correlative primarily with wifehood and motherhood as prerogatives for women's labour. Paramount womanly virtues were industriousness, discipline, economic proficiency, humility, obedience, and selflessness.

National discourse on virtuous womanhood informed the position that women occupied in the local moral economy. It established that being a proper woman – a virtuous woman – was to be a doting mother, and that the primary duty of all good mothers (*buenas madres*) was to sacrifice themselves for the welfare of their children (Caballero 2023: 81). My analysis of Mamá Angie's family life thus departs from two premises: first, that self-sacrificial motherhood, as determinant of female moral personhood, affected the perception that people, especially men and youths, had of older women heads of household; and second, that such perception had a negative impact on the amount and quality of the support that family members, especially men and youths, were willing to offer older women heads of household.

Methods

The case that I examine in this article, Mamá Angie's case, is an example taken from a much broader research that I conducted among older Equatoguinean women street vendors in 2017-2018. The research, which served as the basis for my doctoral dissertation (Caballero 2023), documented the hopes, wishes, attitudes, concerns, and interests that a number of

older women with different ethnic backgrounds (Fang, Bubi, Annobonesa, Krío, Ndowé) manifested through daily conversations, relationships, encounters, and experiences at home and in the streets. Recurring themes in the women's conversations included dependency, intergenerational relationships, evil understood both as witchcraft and as state violence, state dishonesty as disseminated through the national media, sexuality in later life as an attribute of gender, and the women's strife toward autonomy in their search for moral personhood. One of the key findings of the study is that national discourse on gender creates a trope of self-sacrificial motherhood that, in turn, fosters relations of negative interdependence in multi-generational homes. Members of the younger generations tend to resent older women's authority, especially when the women are sole breadwinners – an authority that, on the one hand, clashes with the women's widely perceived position of vulnerability as females of advanced age and low socioeconomic standing; and on the other hand, contradicts the 'traditional' gender order that places the authority of a home over a man, a husband or a son. Many older Equatoguinean women – mothers and grandmothers whom people referred to as *mamás* – encountered tensions of this kind every day within their multi-generational homes, regardless of ethnic ascription (Caballero 2023: 76-97). Mamá Angie's family life is representative of many of these tensions, while it also shows the effects that such tensions have on older adults when combined with other common societal issues such as poverty, substance abuse, and health problems related to growing old.

Like the larger ethnographic corpus to which it belongs, I documented Mamá Angie's case primarily through participant observation and in-depth unstructured interviews. Interviews were carried out in Spanish or English, recorded, transcribed, coded, and translated. All participants have been given pseudonyms. I chose to keep Mamá Angie's use of profanity in order to illustrate the nuances she showed in everyday interactions at home.

Mamá Angie

When she and I worked together in 2018, Mamá Angie was sixty-three years old. She had never been married and did not have any biological children, but she had raised a number of nephews, nieces, and foster children. For over fifteen years, Mamá Angie had been selling grilled edibles – pork ribs and chicken – outside her home and, for the better part of that time, the business had been the only source of income for her household.

Mamá Angie lived in a two-story rundown house in one of Malabo's oldest neighbourhoods. The building, which had been in her family for over a century, housed three separate family units. On the second floor, there lived an eighty-year-old distant female cousin with whom Mamá Angie maintained a perpetual quarrel; and forty-five-year-old alcoholic distant niece Sola – an untrained and unemployed single mother of five – together with her children, whose ages ranged between two and twenty-four. The first floor was occupied by Mamá Angie herself, her fifty-something brother Raymond, Raymond's four teenage children – two boys and two girls, Laura and Lola, – and twenty-seven-year-old nephew and foster son Joey. Raymond and Joey were long-term unemployed and thus unable to make any significant economic contributions to the household. Raymond however, helped Mamá Angie with her business, or at least he did so when he was around. Raymond had an active romantic life and loved to party; sometimes a party would take him to other towns, and neither his sister nor his children would see or hear from him for days.

In total, fourteen people lived in Mamá Angie's old family home. With the exception

of Mamá Angie's eighty-year-old cousin, who was supported economically by a member of her own branch of the family, and discounting the 5 kg bags of rice that the father of two of Sola's children would bring to the house bimonthly, everybody living at the house was dependent on Mamá Angie and her grill business. However, Mamá Angie did not consider that all the people who lived at her family home were entitled to depend on her. As far as the *mamá* was concerned, the people whom she was supposed 'to take care of' (*cuidar*) were her brother Raymond, Raymond's four teenage kids, and foster-son Joey. This view left unemployed distant niece Sola and her five children in an unclear situation.

Regardless of her views on who counted as members of her household, Mamá Angie expected that everybody who depended on her business should help in the everyday tasks of prepping, grilling, and selling. Such expectations had a component of need. Mamá Angie was becoming older and she could no longer manage the grill alone. She had terrible pains in her hands and feet, pains that a neurologist she visited said were due to nerve damage after years of daily alcohol consumption, exacerbated by high cholesterol, hypertension, and diabetes. Mamá Angie needed all the help that she could get, yet nobody seemed willing to help her. Why?

Sola

On Christmas Eve 2017, Sola was helping Mamá Angie tend to the business. She was poking the fire, cutting the ribs, preparing the plates. When after a couple of hours Sola reckoned that she had done enough, she asked Mamá Angie for money, but Mamá Angie said she didn't have any. Mamá Angie had lost the little tin box in which she kept the sales money.

Sola became enraged and accused Mamá Angie of lying, saying that she had lost the money because she refused to give her any. Mamá Angie reminded Sola that, earlier that same day, she had given Sola a 5,000 XAF bill (ca. 8 USD), which Sola then spent on cheap gin. Sola did not deny this, but she was adamant that, after having tended the grill, she was entitled to more cash. The argument quickly turned into insults and escalated, to the morbid amusement of those nearby, to Sola threatening to kill Mamá Angie with witchcraft.

Mamá Angie replied that she had indeed lost the money or that she could not remember where she had hidden it. Her memory was not what it once was. But she also purposefully pointed out that even if she had had the money in her pocket, she would not have given Sola any of it.

"I used to give Sola money, but she would go and spend it all getting drunk," Mamá Angie told me. "She would come home late and could never wake up the next morning. Then, because she couldn't wake up, she couldn't help me clean the meat for selling that night." Mamá Angie paused and looked around, making sure that nobody was listening. "Sola's children would come down and bang on my door so that I would feed them because they were hungry, and their mother wouldn't wake up. I stopped giving money to Sola so that I could use that money to feed her children instead." After a brief pause, Mamá Angie continued: "I tried to take care of Sola's kids. But the more I tried, the more their mother neglected them, and the more the kids started to act like their mother, expecting me to do things for them." Mamá Angie took a deep breath. "The children didn't want to do anything by themselves. And it felt like they too, like their mother, were abusing my will to help them. So I stopped taking care of them. They are not my children. I already raised a whole lot when I was younger. Now I want to take care of myself. I don't want to have to take care of other

people's children."

By the time the argument had exploded on Christmas Eve 2017, Sola had not been receiving regular money from Mamá Angie, nor was Mamá Angie feeding Sola's children anymore. As a bystander, I understood that Sola was an alcoholic, but I could also see that denying her money would ultimately result in Sola's refusing to tend the grill, even if her own access to food from Mamá Angie's pots depended on keeping the business running. At the heart of the issue was Mamá Angie's failing health. Relying on the moral capital that her seniority bestowed upon her, Mamá Angie responded with scandalised offense every time Sola brought up the question of getting a salary. Sola, cornered by the truth of her dependence and frustrated by the lack of autonomy that Mamá Angie's seniority represented for her, often told me that she felt like Mamá Angie's slave.

Laura and Lola

Mamá Angie reckoned that her nieces, Laura and Lola, had started to behave differently after spending a few months at their mother's house. The girls' mother, a Fang woman who lived somewhere else and had other children with a different partner, had supposedly tried to make Laura and Lola date, for money, a couple of men of her own choosing. Laura and Lola disliked the men and soon moved back into their father's home, but their relationship with Mamá Angie was strained. They now believed that Mamá Angie treated them "like babies" – for example, by setting a curfew – and protested by freezing Mamá Angie out. They did not speak to her, and often pretended that they did not hear whatever Mamá Angie might have been trying to tell them.

One evening, Mamá Angie and I sat outside her home. Laura, who had made plans for the evening but was eventually grounded, tended to the grill in angry silence. Mamá Angie noticed that the fire was too high and instructed Laura to pour some water on it. Laura refused to acknowledge Mamá Angie by pretending that she did not hear her. Mamá Angie sucked her teeth in disapproval.

"I am sick and tired of these people," Mamá Angie told me. "Here, in this house, nobody likes me. The only person who likes me is my dog," Mamá Angie said caressing Cocky, her mixed-breed medium-sized female dog, which laid half-asleep by her feet, waging its tail lazily.

"Why do you say that mamá?" I asked.

"Because it is true. If I die they will be very happy. I try not to think about such things because it makes my blood pressure go up. But sometimes I cannot avoid seeing things," Mamá Angie said, referring to gestures of passive aggression from her younger family members. "If I have cooked and you come into my house, you will behave in this house," Mamá Angie reasoned. "Because I have Cocky. Even Cocky has more privilege to eat than they do."

With Sola refusing to help without being paid, and without the help of Laura and Lola, Mamá Angie's heavy grill could not get lifted, the fire could not get started, it would get late, customers would start showing up, and the ribs would not be ready. This chain of delays meant two things: customers would leave to spend their money at someone else's business, and the selling time would drag on past midnight. Mamá Angie was chronically fatigued, and she had a very low tolerance threshold when it came to being irritated by others. Remaining open until past midnight often had the ill consequence that Mamá Angie

would mistreat a customer, verbally abuse one of the children, or lash out at literally anyone. English words like fool, idiot, stupid, garbage, asshole, and phrases like "fool piece of shit" (*tonto de mierda*) are a few examples of the expressions that Mamá Angie used every day while talking to, or yelling at, her younger family members.

Joey

While conflicts with Sola, Laura, and Lola were everyday occurrences, most of Mamá Angie's troubles had to do with her nephew and foster son Joey, whom Mamá Angie had raised as her favourite child, and who was now a twenty-seven-year-old untrained and unemployed marijuana enthusiast.

One evening, I arrived at Mamá Angie's home and the entire house was dark. The only source of light in the compound was a little yellow lightbulb shining high above the grill on the sidewalk. Mamá Angie was living in darkness and the food she stored in her freezers was spoiling because when she sent Joey to pay the electricity bill, he pocketed the money instead.

Joey felt entitled to the money that Mamá Angie made because, in his view, she was withholding resources that belonged to him, his siblings, and his cousins. As born-in-wedlock children, Mamá Angie and her brother Raymond were two of the four legitimate heirs to some plots of land that had been in the family for at least three generations. Mamá Angie and Uncle Raymond were trying to divide the land in smaller plots in order to sell them, but the paperwork was a maze and lawyers were beyond the family's budget. Whenever Mamá Angie and Uncle Raymond managed to sell a small plot, buyers would pay in meagre monthly instalments. Payments would arrive with frustrating irregularity, and the money alone was never enough to keep the household running during periods when Mamá Angie fell sick and could not sell.

Joey had grown up aware of the existence of that family land, and he was constantly at odds with Mamá Angie because he felt entitled to it. Joey contended that, if he could sell a portion of the land, he could use the money to start a business of his own, a shisha bar. Mamá Angie was sceptical. She understood that Joey was an addict and worried that he would use any business he started as a front to buy and sell the illegal drugs that he consumed. But even if Joey's intentions to run a legitimate business were real, Mamá Angie also knew that Joey, who sometimes would not leave his room for days on end, lacked the discipline necessary to administer a business.

Caught in a never-ending feud over money and land with Joey, raising her deceased relatives' children was a decision that Mamá Angie had come to regret. "I'm tired! I'm tired!" Mamá Angie once cried out loud in her perfect English, following an argument with Joey. "He's a good-for-nothing, he is just another asshole. I regret, *I regret* looking after everybody's children. It is something that nobody should ever do in their life. *Nobody.* It's not worth it. It doesn't pay. They don't thank you. They are all ungrateful sons of bitches."

Mamá Angie's project

"Do you know how I feel?" Mamá Angie asked me one day, following a particularly harrowing argument with Joey. "I don't have a family. I don't have friends. In fact, I am completely alone."

"You feel that you don't have a family because you support the people who are supposed to be your family, but they don't give you any kind of support, or…?" I asked her.

"Sometimes I wish I'd die."

"Don't say that, mamá."

Loneliness and feelings of desertion were an excruciating result of the intergenerational tensions that Mamá Angie endured at home. As a strategy to cope, the mamá was devising a plan that would allow her, in principle, to live as if she lived on her own.

One afternoon, Mamá Angie dragged me into her bedroom, saying that she wanted to show me her "project." As soon as I entered Mamá Angie's room, I was awestruck by the sight of a massive industrial fridge, the kind restaurants use to exhibit sodas, standing by the side of her bed. Mamá Angie had moved the old fridge from the area of her grill business into her bedroom so that she could lock the door and prevent her nephews, nieces, and Joey from helping themselves to the food stored in it. Mamá Angie was tired of everyone eating the food that she bought for her business, but the problem went far beyond a few tomatoes.

Unlawful borrowings were a common occurrence at Mamá Angie's multi-generational home. Mamá Angie had 'lost' many things over the years: money, radios, televisions, mobile phones (a *lot* of mobile phones), a laptop, jewellery, expensive hair extensions, and even her cooking pots. "When they take my things, I don't notice it. It is when I want to use them that I find them gone."

The fact that the people who 'borrowed' her things often refused to even speak to her, infuriated Mamá Angie. People did not help her, they constantly ignored her, and on top of it all, everybody in the house was stealing from her. Aware of this situation, Mamá Angie tried to set personal boundaries. Moving the industrial fridge from the grill into her bedroom had been part of her efforts toward this end.

Certainly, Mamá Angie's attempts at setting personal boundaries did not help her obtain the kinds of support that she needed. On the contrary, Mamá Angie's efforts further alienated her from her nephews and nieces. This alienation was a price that Mamá Angie appeared to be willing to pay in exchange for maintaining a sense of dignity. She did not like feeling lonely, but feeling that people were taking advantage of her was something that she liked even less.

Confessedly having made peace with the idea that she would most likely never receive the kinds of support that she needed, Mamá Angie worried about what would happen, how the family would live, when she could no longer tend to her business. Above all, Mamá Angie worried about her brother Raymond, whose party lifestyle of heavy drinking and smoking had started to weaken his health, giving him a cough from which he could not recover. "I'm tired," Mamá Angie sighed. "Even Raymond has told me that I need to rest. But then I start thinking, 'How will we manage?' And I tell my brother, 'You have no woman. Your children are worthless. If I stop selling, who will take care of you?'"

Discussion

The notion of 'the African family' to which regional policy and Equatoguinean popular discourse allude, is premised on a certain (semi)deontological understanding of morality that sees, as the precondition for being ascribed moral personhood, the successful fulfilment of one's duty toward the community, particularly one's family members (Menkiti 1984: 180; Ikuenobe 2015: 1008). In Malabo, women's duties were defined by the national discourse on

gender, which exalted an ideal of self-sacrificial motherhood. Proper women were, above all, good mothers, caregivers and providers, inextinguishable sources of nourishment for others (Caballero 2023: 81). The willingness and success with which older women, as mothers and grandmothers, fulfilled these duties, determined the position that they occupied in the local moral economy, and also the degree to which others ascribed moral personhood to them.

The older women with whom I worked, as Mamá Angie exemplifies, did not agree with the normative expectation that mothers and grandmothers should be, because of their gender, inextinguishable sources of nourishment for others. They did not regard self-sacrifice as a (grand-)motherly duty, nor did they consider that the fulfilment of such a duty would ultimately determine their moral worth as women or as persons (Caballero 2023: 209-211). Women like Mamá Angie dismissed, as did their family members, the notion of customary duty in favour of individual judgements about reciprocity and fairness, and they made these judgements by assessing, in a personal manner, the quality of their family relationships.

This does not mean, however, that values pertaining to 'the African family' have no relevance in shaping people's attitudes. Like Mamá Angie did, older persons might invoke normative values such as the authority that seniority concedes them, yet the way in which said values shape people's attitudes is not prescriptive. Mamá Angie's invocation of the principle of seniority was accompanied by despotic attitudes toward younger family members whom she considered disrespectful – attitudes that shaped, in turn, her family members' passive aggressive behaviours toward her.

As a determinant of older women's position in the local moral economy, gender plays an important part in configuring intergenerational tensions. Local representations of gender and the 'traditional' duties that people associated to the condition of 'being Woman' (*ser Mujer*) annulled the entitlements that 'the African family' attributed to elders. Mamá Angie should have felt, as an older person, entitled to a certain degree of dependency at home. As a woman, however, she instead found herself fighting unspoken yet prevalent norms that, by portraying women as self-sacrificial motherly providers, allowed younger family members to rob her of personal effects and money whenever they felt that she was withholding resources to which they, as her children, were entitled. When Mamá Angie had to rely, against her will and because of her advanced age, on her nephews and nieces, they punished her by refusing to help. Ongoing, deeper-running conflicts that originated from the youths' unwillingness to recognise the moral authority that Mamá Angie, a woman, had over them as an elder and as a provider, authorised the teenagers' feelings and, at least in their own view, justified their actions.

Condemned by the national discourse on gender to a perpetual ethos of self-sacrifice, older Equatoguinean women tended to experience people around them as unwilling to reciprocate. In light of this experience, the women often felt that their family members were taking advantage of them. They understood that they were expected to take care of others, but who would take care of them? These women, in an effort to care of themselves, and as a means to protect their sense of self-respect, would try to opt out of what they considered unfair or oppressive family relationships. As older women tried to stop being a *mamá*, the people who depended on them became confronted with the facts of their dependence – they developed feelings of frustration, resentment, and anger, which when expressed, exacerbated older women's experience of loneliness and desertion. In the face of outcomes such as these, the principle of normative relationality that undergirds widespread assumptions regarding

the solidarity inherent to 'the African family' proves to be a significant contributor to social suffering, as well as a major source of stress for older persons.

Conclusion

Portrayals of 'the African family' as an ideal provider of support for older persons do not fit actual experiences of family life in Equatorial Guinea. What ultimately determines the amount of support that older women receive is the quality of their relationships with family members. In multi-generational households led by older women who were also sole breadwinners, intergenerational relationships were based on a local moral economy in which women, as mothers and grandmothers, were condemned to a perpetual ethos of self-sacrifice. Women's position in the local moral economy allowed men and youths to reconcile notions of fairness with the unreciprocated support that older women provided. Older women felt taken advantage of, but their strategies for coping generated, instead, more loneliness and feelings of desertion. The humanistic strand of gerontology in sub-Saharan Africa would benefit from studies that document this paradox further, as well as from analyses that consider the different vulnerabilities to which local discourses on gender expose older persons.

References

Aboderin, I. 2005. Changing family relationships in developing nations. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Aging.* (eds) M. Johnson, V. L. Bengtson, P. Coleman, T. Kirkwood. Cambridge University Press.

Aboderin, I. 2011. *Advancing evidence generation on older persons in sub-Saharan Africa.* 7th World Ageing and Generations Congress. St. Gallen, Switzerland.

Aboderin, I. and J. Hoffman. 2015. Families, Intergenerational Bonds, and Aging in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Canadian Journal on Aging/La Revue Canadienne du Vieillissement* 34(3): 282–289.

African Union [AU]. 2004. *Plan of action on the family in Africa.* Addis Ababa.

African Union / HelpAge International [AU/HAI]. 2003. *Policy framework and plan of action on ageing.* HelpAge International Africa Regional Development Centre. Nairobi.

Apt, N. A. 1993. Care of the elderly in Ghana: An emerging issue. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 8: 301-312.

Ardington, C., A. Case, M. Islam, D. Lam, M. Leibbrandt, A. Menendez, A. Olgiatia. 2010. The impact of AIDS on intergenerational support in South Africa: Evidence from the Cape Area panel study. *Research on Aging*. 32(1): 97-121.

Caballero, A. 2023. *Shortchanged. Elderly Women Street Vendors in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea.* Dissertations and documents in cultural anthropology. Uppsala: Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University. Accessed: http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1733278/FULLTEXT01.pdf

Cattell, M. 1997. Ubuntu, African elderly and the African family crisis. *Southern African Journal of Gerontology* 6(2): 37-39.

Central Intelligence Agency [CIA]. Equatorial Guinea. *The World Factbook.* Accessed 26 March 2024: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/equatorial-guinea/summaries

Eteo Soriso, J. F. 2013. *Los ritos de paso entre los bubi.* PhD thesis. Departament de d'Antropologia Social í Cultural, Facultat de Filosofía i Lletres, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

Evuna Owono, A. 1994. *El proceso democrático de Guinea Ecuatorial.* Ceiba. Malabo.

Fonchingong, C. C. 2013. *Growing old in Cameroon: Gender, vulnerability, and social capital.* University Press of America.

Hoffman, J. R. and K. Pype. 2016. Introduction. *Ageing in Sub-Saharan Africa: Spaces and practices of care.* Bristol, Policy Press.

Ikuenobe, P. 2015. Relational Autonomy, Personhood, and African Traditions. *Philosophy East & West* 65(4): 1005-1029.

Instituto Nacional de Estadística de Guinea Ecuatorial [INEGE]. 2024. *II Encuesta Nacional de Hogares de Guinea Ecuatorial; Informe de Resultados Definitivos.* Accessed: https://inege.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Informe-Definitivo-de-la-ENH2.pdf

Mamdani, M. 1996. *Citizen and subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism.* Princeton University Press.

Menkiti, I. A. 1984. Person and Community in African Traditional Thought. In *African Philosophy: An Introduction.* (ed) R. A. Wright. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Minkler, M. and T. A. Cole. 1992. Political and Moral economy: Not such strange bedfellows. *International Journal of Health Services* 22(1): 113-124.

Mitogo, F. F. 2025. Te sorprenderá lo que dice la socióloga Araceli Akeng sobre la crisis de autoridad en nuestros hogares. *AhoraEG.* Accessed 18 January 2025: https://ahoraeg.com/sociedad/2025/01/18/te-sorprendera-lo-que-dice-la-sociologa-araceli-akeng-sobre-la-crisis-de-autoridad-en-nuestros-hogares/

Nerín, G. 2024. Nguemismo. Las dictaduras de Macías Nguema y Teodoro Obiang en Guinea Ecuatorial: continuidades y rupturas (1968-2003). *Rubrica Contemporanea*. 13 (27): 153-173.

Nsé Angüe, A. 2010. La familia fang: Ventajas e inconvenientes para el desarrollo y la construcción de una sociedad democrática. In *Perspectivas Antropológicas sobre Guinea Ecuatorial* (eds) J. Aranzadi and P. Moreno. UNED. Madrid, Spain.

Nze Abuy, R. M. 1985. *Familia y matrimonio fan.* Ediciones Guinea, Madrid.

Nze Nfumu, A. 2004. *Macías, Verdugo o víctima.* Herrero y Asociados. Madrid.

Ocha'a Mve, C. 1981. *Tradiciones del Pueblo Fang*. Ediciones Rialp, Madrid.

Ocha'a Mve, C. 1985. *Guinea Ecuatorial, Polémica y Realidad*. Ediciones Guinea.

Salverda, T., C. Lanzano and J. Wiegratz. 2024. Moral Economies of Distribution and Redistribution in Africa: The Right and Wrong of Who Gets (and Gives) What and Why. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 42(2): 125-145.

Sangree, W. H. 1992. Grandparenthood and modernization: The changing status of male and female elders in Tiriki, Kenya, and Irigwe, Nigeria. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology.* 7(4): 331-361.

Shelton, A. J. 1968. Igbo Child-Raising, Eldership, and Dependence: Further notes for Gerontologists and others. *The Gerontologist* 8: 236–241.

Trading Economics [TE]. 2024. *Equatorial Guinea - Unemployment, Youth Total (% Of Total Labor Force Ages 15-24).* Accessed 18 January 2025: https://tradingeconomics.com/equatorial-guinea/unemployment-youth-total-percent-of-total-labor-force-ages-15-24-modeled-ilo-estimate-wb-data.html#:~:text=Ages%2015%2D24)-,Unemployment%2C%20youth%20total%20(%25%20of%20total%20labor%20force%20ages%2015,compiled%20from%20officially%20recognized%20sources

World Health Organisation. *Equatorial Guinea.* Accessed 8 April 2024: https://www.who.int/countries/gnq/en/

van der Geest, S. 2008. Resilience and the whims of reciprocity in old age: An example from Ghana. *Medische Antropologie* 20(2): 297-311.