*Why Swaziland does not have an old age Problem

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In 1983 a well-meaning group, influenced by pressures from international agencies, held a two-day conference on Ageing, at the University of Swaziland. The event was symptomatic of a malaise amongst the Third World's international elite: a readiness to accept Western definitions of and solutions to social problems, without proper analysis of whether the problem exists or should receive priority. The liberal 'one-world' ideology propagated at the United Nations, epitomised in the "Year of ..." practice, encourages the idea that there are indeed common problems with common solutions. To think otherwise is to discriminate.

But other factors influence the readiness with which third world nations are drawn into this particular conformity. One is the existence of a sprinkling of professionally trained Western social workers, vanguards of the new order of specialists expert in the bureaucratic control of people's intimate lives. Their opinion is inevitably sought whenever the question of welfare provision arises. They are as unlikely to question the legitimacy of their professional existence as the potential donor nations are to question the wisdom of their interference. The social workers are indeed likely to recommend their multiplication. So country by country slips into inappropriate Western moulds.

Prepackaged problems and their prepackaged solutions - women's rights, children's rights, the rights of the aged - are exported from Geneva and New York by a hundred happy evangelists of the new international standardisation, lured not only by the promise of free rides to new international gatherings, but by new opportunities for "redistribution".[2]

Ready-made solutions give rise to postulated problems as night follows day, prematurely eroding social institutions. For example, recent research in South Africa suggests that the impact of State old age pensions has been to isolate the elderly: not only do the young cease to feel an obligation to the old the old reciprocally cease to feel an obligation to the young.

> Civil pensions are available to the aged in Bantustans .... This means that old people need not depend to the same extent on younger kin; indeed we find that isolated households comprising old people with pensions are amongst the least insecure in both areas. In Qwaqwa particularly the isolation of such people can be a positive advantage by limiting the number of people who can make a claim on the pension.[3]

The heart of the indigenous and prevailing welfare system in Swaziland is a strong set of norms prescribing chains of responsibility along familiar lines of kinship and descent. A characteristic of the system lies in the wideness of the resulting network of potentially interdependent kinsmen. This would seem to be a wise adaptive response to the high death rate (16.8 per 1000). The principle of substitution is well-established. Thus if a father dies or fails, another 'father' exists within the logic of descent and kin. 'He' may even be a woman.[4]

*This paper draws on arguments in an unpublished paper presented by the author to the Conference on Ageing held at the University of Swaziland in April 1982.

The narrow compass of familial dependency in the West, pared down to parent-child, husband-wife, contrasts starkly with the richness and complexity of relationships amongst the Swazi, which exist not just in name but in active exchanges of money, goods and services.[5]

The advantages of the indigenous system are appreciated by the people themselves. In a bold move in 1982 a children's orphanage, established under christian auspices years before, was closed down, on the grounds that "as Swazis we have no orphans'. This is true. Despite a casual attitude to procreation and a very high rate of births outside of marriage[6] or perhaps because of them, there is a well-developed set of rules to incorporate children and allocate responsibility for them. The existence of the orphanage was properly perceived as a social threat to those institutions, and eliminated.

Whereas the existence of children without two parents is seen as a potential problem in Swaziland, and one which calls forth elaborate institutional arrangements, the aged are not perceived as a problem at all.

In the first place they are very few in number relative to the rest of the population. While in the UK there are 4 able-bodied adults and one and a half children under 15 to every old person; in Swaziland there are 24 able-bodied adults and 24 children to every person over the age of 65. Demographically, there is no old age problem.

SInce the few aged present no organisational problems in their need for care and support, we should not be surprised to find attitudes towards them very positive. In 1947 Kuper wrote,[7]

> Age carries privilege (p.128)
> Old men are regarded as the "fathers" of the law and their words carry great weight in council ... they do not hesitate to dismiss opposition somewhat arbitrarily with, "Be quiet. You are still a young man and know nothing" (p.118).
> Their age entitles them to organise work and distribute the reward of food, keeping special portions for themselves (p.118)
> Even the privileges of birth are limited by the authority of age (p.119)
> Respect your elders. This oft repeated trite phrase is put into action in Swazi homesteads. Its meaning is where necessary beaten into the young, but usually less drastic teaching is sufficient (p.117)

The high regard with which the elderly areheld is intimately linked with ancestral rites through which it is also expressed. Since 'in the world of the dead the hierarchy of age and authority is similarly respected' (p.101) the older the person at death, the more powerful will they be as ancestral spirits' (p.187). When old women are 'completely helpless mentally and physically' they are called lidloti (ancestor) and are treated 'with the respect due to an ancestral spirit' (p.137). A more recent opinion is offered by Nxumalo (1969):[8]

> Old age usually brings increased status .... when death finally comes to the aged Swazi they are elevated to the company of God and the ancestors. Their corpse is treated with the greatest resepct (p.19)

Lassiter (1983) found 83.5% of a sample of 176 High School students agreeing with the statement, 'We respect and look after old people'[9]

The positive attitudes towards the elderly in Swazi society have their roots in religious ideas, which are congruent with both demographic and economic aspects of

the place of the elderly in the contemporary social order. 85% of the Swazi population lives in scattered land-holding homesteads in the rural areas (from each of which on average two adults are away in wage employment elsewhere.[10] The homestead is the locus of production of a considerable portion of the nation's staple, maize, and location of the national her_. 67% of homesteads have cattle; average herd size is 18 head.[11] Smaller livestock and other crops are also produced on the homestead's lands.

As the homestead engages in production, each member of the homestead is likely to be drawn into productive activities, thereby earning the moral right to consume. They are also drawn into providing the myriad services which are essential for the household's functioning. Services which in the West are centrally provided and must be bought for cash, remain in Swaziland within the responsibility of each homestead. The sophisticated provision of services through the advance of technology limits the arena within which household members can prove their usefulness. Swaziland lacks this sophistication. Water must be fetched, if not from the increasingly common communal taps, then from a river. Fuel is obtained, not at the flick of a switch as in the West, but through the exertion of family members gathering wood on often distant bushland. Houses and fences are built, repaired and maintained, not by paid specialists, but by the people of the homestead itself. Old women are particularly valued for their skill in making reed and grass screen fences. Men erect the wooden frames which hold the stone and mud walls, and to which the thatched roofs are attached. Everybody helps to mud the walls, and women make and maintain mud and dung floors.[12]

In the West the family is a unit of consumption: production takes place in specialist institutions. To consume you need money: to get money you need work, and to obtain work you must be able-bodied. Those members of a Western family unable to obtain work are increasingly defined as a burden, and resented. The aged in the West are a problem because they are unemployable.

In Swaziland the homestead is a unit of production, as well as being the place within which consumption takes place.[13] Because the technology of domestic life is simple, it is labour-intensive. Even the aged have an economic role. They are particularly valued as babysitters, but make their contribution in many other ways also.

The key institution in the present Swazi dispensation is communal tenure. Although more than a third of Swaziland was alienated to individual tenure early in the 20th century, almost two thirds is held by the king on behalf of the people. To this land all married men have rights though the chiefs, who manage the distribution of a tract of land to build houses for family and grow food crops and graze cattle is relatively simple through the act of khonta, the swearing of allegiance to a chief to whom one becomes indebted for tribute (usually labour, but commutable). Through this act a man also gains political status and rights, which one may alternatively inherit through one's father's homestead. No man in Swaziland need be landless; and as daughters and wives women also have access to land: indeed, without a wife a man may not hold land.

The homestead on communal land in the rural areas can absorb extra peopleat very little cost. Each extra person is extra labour for daily tasks. Old women can de-cob maize, winnow, weed, fetch wood and grass, make sleeping mats, which they may even sell to raise cash. Old men tote dung, lead cattle, weed, and, when they are tired, offer valued advice on seasons, plantings, pests, cattle sicknesses, and take appropriate ritual action to ward off misfortunes. New technology will render some

of their advice dated, may undermine some of the respect formerly paid to their knowledge, but it is unlikely to undermine their contribution to the domestic economy. It is only when the homestead ceases to exist as a unit of production that the elderly will be defined as economically useless: a change in their ritual status may eventually be entailed.

What then are the prospects for the future emergence of an 'old age problem' in Swaziland? A national problem will not exist until and unless two things simultaneously happen: a demographic transition and the disintegration of the present homestead system on communal land.

The demographic transition rests not on a drop in the death rate but on a drop in the birth rate. This is easily demonstrated in the population projection figures calculated as part of the 1976 Census. It is calculated that if mortality falls, and the birth rate stays steady, the proportion of old people in the population will by 2000 rise 0.1%, though their numbers will almost double. A drop in the birth rate, however, will have the fairly immediate effect of increasing the proportion of old people in the population since the proportion of young people will decrease.

Is the birth rate likely to fall? Despite growing pressure of population on the land through natural increase, the prospects for a drop in the birth rate, (currently 50.4 per 1000) are poor. The experience of intensive birth control programmes in other overcrowded parts of the world teach us that family size is not likely to shrink until other factors change, making children an economically unattractive proposition for parents. Clear evidence of overcrowding at the national level is not itself sufficient to trigger a response at the level of the individual parent. We are not likely to see the emergence of a Swazi old-age problem through reduced fertility except as a part and consequence of other bigger changes.

The second factor which would precipitate an old age problem is change away from the present homestead structure which rests on communal tenure, a form of landholding which is clearly under attack from a sector of the 'development' lobby, who argue the national benefits to Swaziland of a rapid transformation of the subsistence sector to commercial agriculture. This change, it is argued, will not be achieved without capital, raised from loans secured by land title. Economic history teaches us that it is a short step from individual land tenure to individual landlessness, a condition, which, by creating a landless workforce, will accelerate the viability of commercial farming. The ensuing collapse of the homestead as presently constituted would devalue the aged. But in itself even such a transformation would not create an 'old age problem' as such: it would have to be accompanied by a fall in the birth rate. The economic changes entailed in the collapse of the homestead system might well encourage a drop in the birth rate, but it would also entail so many other new social problems that to select the aged for priority seems rather arbitrary.

The United Nations World Assembly on Ageing in 1982 suggested guidelines to nation states in their programmes for the elderly:

> The ageing should be:
>
> a. encouraged and enabled to live as normally as possible within their own modes of living.
>
> b. encouraged and enabled to influence and participate in decisions concerning their own lives.

c. motivated to engage in meaningful activities in their communities

d. encouraged to play a creative role in their communities

e. considered a valuable resource

f. assured of social, economic and personal security.'[14]

Swaziland, like most non-Western states, I suspect, already has such a programme, not as a self-conscious remedial measure for a deteriorating situation, but as a taken-for-granted part of the status quo where the aged have never been considered a problem.

There are however absolute limits to the continuity of this state of affairs. With or without the developers, relentless economic pressures must ultimately push down fertility, to create the demographic imbalances which the West is experiencing. Whatever the prevailing international fashion, such remote future problems should not be allowed to distract our attention and energies from real, immediate present problems.

Footnotes

1. To encourage participation in the World Assembly on Ageing, a voluntary Trust Fund was set up 'to meet the increasing needs and requests of developing countries. Much of the monies from the Trust Fund were used to sponsor delegates from the developing countries to attend the World Assembly.' (See C. M. Magagula, 'The Banyana Tree, an International Symbol, 1983, p.6).

2. The Africa Region Committee on Ageing, meeting at UN's request, drew up a plan of Action, endorsed by the Economic Commission on Africa, which stated that 'resource transfer to the less developed regions is mandatory' (see Magagula, op.cit., p.9)

3. J. Sharp and Andrew Spiegel, Vulnerability to Impoverishment in South African Rural Areas.

4. M. Russel, 'Beyond Remittances: the redistribution of cash in Swazi society'.

5. Ibid.

6. C.J. Allen, 'Dimensions of Swazi households in rural and urban areas'; N.D. Mbatha, 'The ambiguities of Swazi marriage'.

7. H. Kuper, An African Aristocracy

8. S.S. Nxumalo, Our Way of Life.

9. J.E. Lassiter, 'Culture and Personality aspects of socio-economic development in Swaziland'.

10. F. De Vletter, 'A socio-economic profile on rural Swazi homesteads'.

11. Ibid. "Swaziland Shelter Sector Assessment"

12. USAID - 1978.

13. *Ibid.*

14. C.M. Magagula, 'The Banyana Tree, an International Symbol for the Aged', in A Report on the Proceedings of a Seminar on the Ageing, University of Swaziland, Kwaluseni, 1983.

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