

Musa ukuba yibokhwe ezigusheni:¹ Social gerontocide in South Africa?

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In this paper I argue that a study of the division between victims and perpetrators and the way they have to relate to each other in post-violent societies obscure the many ways people deal with their lives and with each other after an era of blatant and manifest forms of violence. We will have to study the differences within those groups and historical processes to get an idea of what mundane life in (post)violent societies like South Africa means. Contemporary issues such as poverty, oppression, 'everyday violence', abuse, terror and death emerge from a 'politics of evil' that originated in the past and that has deeply divided and destroyed the internal social and cultural structure of populations. With some ethnographic data from my research among older black people in the Western Cape, and a historical analysis, I will show how invisible dramas unfold in their lives and lead to social death if not social gerontocide. This is not to say that older persons are helpless victims. They have developed strategies to survive. I will discuss these strategies and place them in the dynamics of relationships within the group to which older persons belong. I will show that 'human rights' – an important issue in the 'new' democratic state of South Africa – is a dynamic process that might divide populations even further.

[Social death, gerontocide, everyday violence, South Africa, violent societies]

Invisible aftermath. Between victims and perpetrators of Apartheid?

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has written an official history of South Africa; it is, however, fragmented. Some have described the work of the TRC as a historic compromise and an attempt to balance disclosure of violence and justice with a process of amnesty (Bundy 2000: 12). A combination of story telling and healing shaped the activities of the TRC. Its aim was to establish as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of human right violations between 1960 and 1993, and to collect the stories of victims and perpetrators. All South Africans who wished to make a statement were included. After the sessions the Commission had to grapple with what to incorporate into the report, how to code the stories and how to categorise human right violations. The Commission also wanted to single out individual stories 'that illustrate particular events, trends and phenomena as windows on the experience

of many people' (TRC, vol. I, ch. 6, par. 37). The TRC engaged in a process of selection, summary and subsequently a process of silencing. The reports became an official repository of memory (and forgetting). Desmond Tutu stated in his foreword to the Report that people had to close the door on the past.

Several scholars have commented on the work of the TRC. Bundy (2000) criticised the TRC's historical enquiry because it limited itself to the period of Apartheid, while 'a long dawn – a pre-history of dispossession, denial and subordination' (Bundy 2000: 17) preceded the climax of human right violations during Apartheid: What the TRC threatens to do is to uncouple these histories; to define three decades of the past in terms of perpetrators and victims and tightly defined categories of wrong, and to suggest that this is 'the beast of the past'. Others have argued that, because 'only' twenty thousand persons qualified for compensation, reparation is insufficient and will cause envy by "the millions of ordinary victims of apartheid law who did not fall into the category of victims of 'gross violations of human rights'" (Adam & Adam 2000: 41). Mamdani (2000: 61) concludes that the unintended outcome of the work of the TRC has been to drive a wedge between the beneficiaries and victims of Apartheid and it therefore failed to open a social debate between them.

One may conclude, after reading reflections on the work of the TRC (James & Van den Vijver 2000) that the formal history writing of the Commission divided the nation into two groups: victims and perpetrators. Such a division not only hampers the route to reconciliation, but it also overlooks the complexities of relationships between and within different groups in a post-apartheid but still violent society. South Africa's history shows that there are not 'just' 'white perpetrators' and 'black victims'. This complex relationship must be studied.

Writing about these complexities Mamdani (2001) pointed to the often simplistic ways of dealing with the aftermath of violence, war and genocide. In his book, *When victims become killers*, about colonialism, nationalism and genocide in Rwanda, he argues that by the institutionalization of Hutu and Tutsi as political identities, the civil war between them was entrenched. Mamdani asks what the consequences of this would be. One question is whether, by trying to 'forge a political identity that transcends Hutu and Tutsi', Rwanda would follow a course associated with post-apartheid South Africa. (Mamdani 2001: 265). At the same time Mamdani is well aware that there are 'energies that go beyond any national assertion' and that 'such a dynamic will need to be the result of a regional initiative, backed up by international support, which in turn needs to be driven by the urgent need to defuse a simmering volcano before it blows up yet again ...' (Ibid: 282). Of course, the nightmare of Rwanda cannot easily be paralleled with that of South Africa, but we need to look beyond boundaries and recent histories of nations and states in order to find the dynamics – not only at the level of nations and states, but in the daily lives of people, – on which national and international initiatives will have to be based in order to be successful. Underneath the formal history writing, people are struggling to create their own history. We have to distinguish between more groups than perpetrators and victims. We must also ask ourselves how the politics of remembering, silencing and forgetting as well as social, economic, political and historical conditions merge with experiences of *all* groups and persons.

Hilberg (1992) distinguishes at least three groups in post-violent societies: perpetrators, victims and bystanders. He shows that these three groups are distinct from each other and have their own perspective and reactions. Yet great variety exists within those groups. The literature on the Jewish catastrophe, as Hilberg calls the Holocaust, shows how social reconciliation runs the risk of becoming a proven method of 'glossing over suffering and putting the victim in the wrong', because to the survivor reconciliation is a social trap, a betrayal to his people and the dead. But by refusing reconciliation, the victim would exclude herself from society (Sofsky 2003: 218). Hilberg, however, does not focus on societal, economic and cultural conditions that shape relationships between and within those groups in the aftermath of violence. To explain such conditions, we will have to take into account the history of violence, because violence, genocide, war or apartheid has been a painful, gradual process and creates a 'cycle of violence [that] has alternated positions between victims and perpetrators' (Mamdani 2001: 280).

South Africa offers a sad history of what Crais (2002) calls 'the politics of evil'. This politics of the colonial and postcolonial world has shaped common people's experience in the face of hardship and persecution, the rise of a colonial order and the development of the state in the context of cross-cultural contacts and the translation of colonialism into South Africa's own concepts. According to Crais (p. 1-31), "state formation and political transition have raised anew the relationship between politics and the occult, the issue of authority and legitimacy, and the problems of suffering and evil." The history of South Africa gives us ample evidence that post-violent states have more to deal with than the effects of an apartheid era.

An outburst of 'the simmering volcano' followed after 1994. The image of South Africa during the first years after apartheid was that of a 'violent society', a dangerous society, portrayed in the media as having the highest rates of rape, and with crime becoming increasingly violent and brutal. Regardless of whether such an image was correct or not, particular categories of violence contributed to this perception without being explicitly linked to criminal forms of violence. Taxi violence, attacks on farmers, Pagad activities,² such as the bombings in Cape Town and political upheaval in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal destabilised the country and left people in fear. Urban terrorism, violent crime and low intensity war in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal raised serious questions about the way South Africa dealt with the past and the relationships between its people. Right-wing white organisations, having gone underground, made use of the precarious equilibrium to try to establish their former status quo; Pagad and other fundamentalist organisations had their own hidden agendas, corruption, greed, incompetence and political faction formation. Chieftain factions in rural areas; poverty and unemployment – to name a few – seemed to be a continuation of a politics of evil, that left the population with deep frustration, envy, conflict and hatred. These qualms were not directly observable or visible in South Africa after 1994, on the contrary, after 1994 nobody wanted to be nasty about the new South Africa. Everyone was full of hope and goodwill; there was loyalty to the great historical moment. I was impressed by the optimism, the openness and the enthusiasm, but I also sensed disappointment, anxiety, anger,

envy and even hatred. It would have been odd to talk about it at the time of my studies (2000-2004).

The tensions – accompanying those ‘loud speaking silences’ – could not only be sensed between different groups but also within them. The clash between Bones and Sylvia (in the next section) and the life stories of older persons from the different ethnic groups made me aware that the difficulties and suffering in the aftermath of South Africa’s colonial past and apartheid would need an explanation of the ways people try to live their mundane daily lives. Such an explanation also has to incorporate the dynamics of social relationships at the ‘bottom’ level of life in South Africa, because as Nordstrom and Robben (1995: 6) write: “War, rebellion, resistance, rape, torture, and defiance, as well as peace, victory, humor, boredom, and ingenuity, will have to be understood together through their expression in the everyday if we are to take the issue of human construction of existence in earnest.” Such experiences were not restricted to Pagad activities or the low intensity war in KwaZulu-Natal. The fear of a 76 year old African woman that she might be raped in the streets by young gang members in Gugulethu or Khayelitsha³ convey a reality of post-violent nations that exceeds common explanations of human rights violations and processes. This reality can perhaps be best understood by studying the everyday experiences of people who live in it.

Bones, Sylvia and the Apocalypse: The malaise of older persons

We – Bones, my research assistant and I – worked with the elderly in an old age home in a township near Cape Town. Although most elderly speak English very well, sometimes when it came to ‘cries of the heart’, they spoke Xhosa. Bones translated. We sat in Sylvia’s room on a sunny afternoon. Most older persons took a nap or sat outside, warming ‘their bones’ in the sun and looking from behind the fences and the iron gate onto the street where cars and pedestrians rushed on their way. The old age home – as many homes in South Africa – looks like a military camp with fences, barbed wire, guards and gates. The elderly (and others as well) view the streets as a dangerous and ‘wild’ realm. Sylvia’s room was almost empty and had little colour, apart from some pictures on a table, blue curtains and a cover on the bed. A wobbly sliding door gave the impression of some privacy. Sylvia was 77. She told how she had left her house, leaving her children without furniture. She had sold it all, because she had worked for it – “It came out of my shoulders” – and she thought her children could work for it as well. Her children were “nasty” to her. When she became older, they neglected her, brought their friends into the house, drank and smoked dagga (marijuana). While Sylvia recounted the problems in her family, she became very bitter and suddenly said:

The children are no good at all. We must listen to them. They don’t want to take food from us. If we tell them: Don’t do this, they will tell you: That was your time. Don’t come and tell us. This time is ours. That’s what they are answering. Can’t they see that God punishes them? He gave them AIDS. This AIDS is from children, not from good people. [...] I think it is their punishment, because they don’t want to listen to old people. [...]

I think now it is finished, the end of the world. Because I have never come across a time like this. We were not grown up like this. We grew up to know a big person is a big person. Like your father. You call him a big person. The children of today don't believe.

From the corner of my eyes I saw Bones' set face; her outburst of anger when she linked AIDS to punishment from God annoyed him. He kept silent during our conversation, but when we reflected on Sylvia's story outside the home, he aired his irritation. To him, Sylvia exaggerated and did not understand the struggle for freedom and democracy. She did not realize that values and norms had changed. The submissiveness and modesty of the elderly had exacerbated oppression. In fact, Bones "accused" the elderly of having contributed to the situation.

Sylvia was not the only person who expressed her anxiety and contempt towards the younger generations. A main finding in my material was that older people made harsh remarks about their children, grandchildren and young people in general. In the old age home, one found many frustrated and angry older persons. Elsewhere (Van Dongen 2004; Cloete & Van Dongen 2004) I have described how their life stories became moral comments on the present. I explored the relationships between young and old as the older people experienced it. Harrowing stories were told, such as the story of Grace:

Grace is seventy-eight and was born in Port Elisabeth. One can hardly imagine the impact of the losses she experienced in her life on her well-being. Three years after she left school, she married a "man of the church". She worked as a matron in a prison. Grace had six children, but three of them died of high fever. One son was beaten to death in the streets. Grace said: "He died. I was in a conference at that time. I came back and he had already died... I never saw him again." Her husband was also deceased, but Grace commented on my inquiry about her marriage ("Was it a nice man?"): "No, I have had it with him. He died now." The husband died of diabetes. Grace had two brothers and two sisters. All of them have passed away, except one brother. The two surviving children migrated to Cape Town, leaving their mother behind in East London. After many years, her children invited Grace to come to Khayelitsha (a township near Cape Town) to visit them. She did, but shortly after her arrival Grace had a stroke. She was completely paralysed and could not speak. The children brought her to the hospital where she stayed for eight months. When she was discharged, the children brought Grace to the old age home. It was the last time she saw her son and daughter. I met her in the home, deeply sad and almost without clothes. After our conversation, she asked me for underpants: "I feel naked without..." Grace felt ashamed to sit without underwear. All her possessions were left behind in East London. The loss of contact with her children was her worst loss, leaving her alone in the old age home in a place she did not know. A fragment of her lament:

My two children, I have a daughter, but they never come and see me here. (Els: What do you think about that?) I don't know what I think, but I think and think and think and then I get sad. They said: Mother, come from East London to see us and I came. But they never came back again. I came to see them. I don't know this place. I don't know Cape

Town. (Els: Your children brought you to the old age home?) Yes, and I don't want to be here. I want to go back home. (Els: Why didn't they bring you to East London after the hospital?) I cannot go back there. (Els: Where do you want to go?) I want to go to Khayelitsha. (Els: You want to go to your children?) No, because they say: Don't come. They don't come here. I don't know why; what is the reason? ... They stay together, no more worries about their mother.

Grace's situation is an example of total neglect by her children and of social death. She felt imprisoned, not able to go where she wanted. Grace was not the only one. The situation and living conditions of many elderly are staggering. Their stories are testimonies of increasing violence, abuse and neglect. The violence and abuse occurred – according to Keikelame and Ferreira (2000: 10) in 'the context of social disorganization, specifically domestic violence, exacerbated by crime, alcohol and drugs'. But also outside the household, older people experience all sorts of violence. Neighbours would swindle and nag them; witchcraft accusations often affected elderly who had some wealth. Older persons who were in need of permanent care were kept in the house, lying in bed day and night, yet hardly taken care of. Others came to old age centres during the day and withdrew into a corner of their homes at night, because they felt redundant or unwanted in their families. The elderly's stories were about loss of material possessions, health, relationships, psychological well-being and self-esteem. They sought refuge in or were sent to the old age home. Such homes, although familiar among the white and coloured population of South Africa, have become symbols of failure and shame, especially for the black population. Social and cultural ruptures, insecure positions and many other hardships have harmed social relations in such a way that many elderly lost contact and respect. They also lost the care supposed to be given by their children and neighbours.

Although the elderly are saved from direct physical threats and neglect in the homes, one can argue that the 'everyday violence' continues. The elderly are physically well cared for by young nursing aids, but psychologically and socially neglected. The young caretakers are not educated in nursing older persons, but nevertheless accepted the job. For them, it was an escape from unemployment and poverty. Elderly were lonely and inactive. They complained about losses of possessions in the home and had become suspicious of what happened to the remainder of their pensions after they paid the monthly fee to the home. I could observe sudden outbursts of people who shouted at the front door that their money had been stolen by the employees of the home. A group of older men, usually sitting in the corridor, only whispered about their losses in the home. The old age home was full of rumours of theft, neglect, bad treatment, indifference of caretakers and profiteers. Such rumours became more tangible on pension days. Almost no older person had visitors during the month, but on the day when pensions were paid, the old age home became crowded with family members, friends and lovers. Most family members went with their parent to the pension pay point, but others came only to collect money. Abie said that his sons only arrived on the particular day when old age pensions are paid out to collect the money he had left after paying the old age home. The tension in the home would rise on such days.

A meeting with one visitor upset me very much. The man had come from Simonstown to “visit his friend”. He told me that he came once a month to “satisfy” his girl friend, get money and then returned home. He needed the money, because he had no work and “this was the best way” to get it.

Whether the rumours and gossip about the management and the caretakers of the old age home were true or not, they were fuelled by reports in the media and by the events in the home. The elderly often felt threatened and misused inside the home. I observed, besides the rumours and silent protest, that the elderly’s personhood was destroyed. Only a few of them had personal belongings in their rooms, carefully locked away in the cupboard. The corridors and bathrooms were clean; the big television room had rows of chairs, making it difficult to sit together. No activities were organised, except irregular visits of the doctor of the health clinic or older nursing aids singing in a sitting room. Handwritten posters warned men and women not to enter the wards of the opposite sex. The elderly had to find their own way of making social contact. Outside, at the front door, groups of men and women would gather to talk or sleep in the sun.

There were different categories of older people in the home. A small group was well-educated and trained as nurses, teachers or ministers of a church. They did not sit at the front door or in the garden. They withdrew into their rooms, reading the bible, knitting or sleeping. Others had come from the Eastern Cape rural area. There was a garden to work in, but during my fieldwork in the home I never saw the elderly doing so. Both groups had little interaction; there was a certain contempt towards each other, which was not restricted to the elderly themselves. The matron of the home remarked:

They (the rural people) lived their own life. [...] They are not very active and doing things. Because they used to run their little places in the country with farming, the cattle and the goats. That is their life. So, here there isn’t much they can do. And that’s why they are so. It is different from the enlightened and educated people, you see. For instance, I like to have a home for the enlightened people. Because they understand. [...] We are on the same wavelength. [...] The other ones are saying and gossiping. It is a class distinction.

Outside the old age home, many older people lived under wretched circumstances. I visited an older couple in their home. The woman had tuberculosis and lay in a bed under damp sheets. She was in the DOTS (Directly Observed Treatment)-programme and had to take medicines after having food, but she hardly had food to eat. I found older persons in sheds in the back of the garden behind what used to be their houses. Others lived in a room or shared their room with their grandchildren, complaining that they had no possibilities to sit together with other kin, while their family commented that the older people liked to be alone. Elderly who hardly could stand on their feet waited in the long lines at the pension pay-out points; in the health centres older people also had to spend long hours before being assisted. Many of them complained that they could not visit these centres because nobody would bring them or – when somebody wanted to accompany them – that person would ask for money. But I also met older persons who were active and had a status and position in their community and family.

They took care of the household and the grandchildren. Their pension was often the only income of the family. Often they worked as a domestic worker, gardener or cleaner to supplement the household's income until they became too frail or until they could not bear the situation in which they had to live. Then they decided to leave their families and put their own survival above that of their children and grandchildren. Such situations were awful and painful and meant a deep, almost irreparable split in the already fragile social relationships.

The situation of older persons seems to be very similar to what Scheper-Hughes (1993) has described regarding the social indifference to infant mortality in the shantytowns of Northeast Brazil. Scheper-Hughes (2002) uses Girard's idea of sacrificial violence; given-up babies are sacrificed 'in the face of terrible conflicts about scarcity and survival'. I believe this is what is happening with many elderly in South Africa. In the struggle for survival and existence, the old have become devalued. Their existence is threatened when they become too weak to be productive, but they remain 'productive' until they die if they get a pension. Amidst poverty their value depends on their economic situation. They still have 'a social role to play, which includes having things they must do with their pension income, such as buy food for the household, and pay utilities and grandchildren's school fees' (Ferreira 2004: 54). This gives the older people power. But at the same time, this position makes them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, not only from within the family, but also from outside.

In the dynamics of survival, identity making and nation building, the elderly are a resource and a hindrance. Their money, cultural knowledge and even their frailty have become valuable means for others to survive, but are also symbols of 'social polarisation and fear' (Scheper-Hughes 2002: 374). The elderly are stigmatised as 'social pensioners', 'witches', 'frail', 'old fashioned', 'submissive', 'old age home people', etc. Their memories are cut off from the social fabric (Van Dongen 2001, 2004). Such 'symbolic violence' goes hand in hand with social, psychological and physical violence against elderly, so that one may speak of social gerontocide. The questions to be answered are: what made it possible? What are the reasons?

Abanaluxolo: Our sons do not have peace anymore

Modernisation theory seems a powerful explanatory model for what happened in the social fabric of South Africa. The temporary global developments are often seen as symptoms of a profound crisis, characterised by high risk, ruptures, chauvinism, xenophobia, nationalism and fundamental dislocation of people and social relationships. Kroker and Cook (1988: 1) describe present modern cultures as 'panic cultures': 'panic sex, panic art, panic identity, panic bodies, panic noise, and panic theory.' Many others have portrayed the present world as a place where crisis, violence, globalisation and fragmentation lead to a 'sequestration of experience' which means 'that for many people, direct contact with events and situations which link the individual lifespan to broad issues of morality and finitude are rare and fleeting' (Giddens 1991). A popular version of modernisation theory was often voiced in the stories of the older people in my study,

in the conversations with caretakers, managers of old age centres, students who worked in the project, children and grandchildren. They ascribed present violence to the influence of television, import of 'modern' life styles, sexual freedom, the city life, drinking, loss of religion, disappearance of norms and values, etcetera. As Jim remarked: "Its not the same as before. They live in a totally different world. Our sons are *izigebenga*, murderers. They do not have peace anymore (*abanaluxolo*).” In such a view, modernisation has shifted people's perceptions of older people as completely protected by the "traditional" family to contemporary perceptions of families as "disappearing," with elders totally neglected.

Although radical changes in White, African and coloured communities in South Africa have taken place after 1994, when the new democracy was established, the situation of older people and the relationships between older and younger persons cannot be explained by modernisation and democratisation. By carefully listening to the stories full of memories of the elderly, this issue came to the surface. Some older people would tell me that "the children just re-enact the behavior of the generations before. The generations before them have not set the right examples for them." The argument of the old man who made this comment – he was not the only one – points to a historical dimension and to 'a continuum of genocide made up of a multitude of "small wars and invisible genocides"' (Scheper-Hughes 2002: 369). The present social relationships were shaped in the past. In the introduction I already mentioned Crais' idea of the politics of evil. We would perhaps like to believe that South Africa has been thrown into turmoil by the 1994 political changeover and that previously excluded populations are now involved in new forms of political and community practices. But as Crais shows, the ways in which people understood and resisted the violence of powerful colonial and apartheid states and developed indigenous concepts of power, authority and evil is a complex web in which people established rich and violent perceptions to make a world that would be free of oppression, poverty and supremacy, long before 1994. A complete overview of the historical events is beyond the frame of this paper. I will only highlight some events that came up in the stories of the elderly in my study and were also reported by others.

The older persons in the study were between 60 and 92 years old. Many of them had migrated from the Eastern Cape, Ciskei or Transkei. Some of them had experienced the hardships of the 1920s and 1930s; the omnipresence of death by epidemics, droughts, famine, poverty, violence and political upheaval. As Greenfeld (1992: 14-15) argued, there was 'a fundamental inconsistency between the definition of social order [traditional identity] expressed and people's everyday experiences.' Capitalist development and (colonial) state formation resulted in a radical dispersal and circulation of people. The world of people was enlarged, not only in space but also in social interaction. The introduction of Christian religion resulted in phantasms leading to new, often religious, communities and new conceptions of evil, good and bad mixed with already existing witchcraft beliefs. Instead of looking for the locale of evil, the individual body became the locus of evil. The problem of evil unfolded in the domestic sphere, while it was also simultaneously involved in the 'politics of power and resistance' fighting oppression and apartheid. A frenzied era of political competition and conflict developed, espe-

cially in the Transkei where many elderly of the study came from. The elderly, their parents and grandparents had not only to grapple with political violence, police, passes, relocation, etcetera; they had to deal with poverty, misery, insecurity, malnourishment and death. Within families there were tensions and envy and witchcraft became a central feature of social life. Several older persons also told how they bypassed the customary ceremonies of for example *lobola* and were kidnapped without paying bride-wealth, because the groom had no cows to pay.

In the fifties, many areas of Transkei and Ciskei teetered at the edge of rebellion and collapse. Tribal collaborators and those who did governmental work such as headmen became targets of assassination, by *tsotsis* [thugs, gangs, derived from zoot suit] from the cities. This and the extreme drought of the 1950s compelled many to leave their families in search of jobs and income. Those migrants converted a part of their wages into cattle. This allowed the men to maintain patriarchal control over their homestead and families. All this, and the extreme poverty of many households in the rural areas of Transkei and Ciskei resulted in conflicts, not only within households but also between them. It inflamed envy and accusations. Cattle theft became a common phenomenon. We can read in Crais (2002: 168) a quote from a chief, which is very similar to the laments of the elderly of today:

The cult of the rural 'Tsotsi' has become so acute that many parents and other adults are now afraid of them. It is an unheard of occurrence for boys to attack men. Many influential Natives... tell me that many boys postpone circumcision which will convert them into men and so preclude their associating with the gangs.

Another complaint cited by Crais is surprisingly similar to the complaints of many elderly in my study: "These young men have no respect now. We are today being ruled by this element." People believed that the younger generations were out of control. Many elderly men of my study belonged to that generation of urban *tsotsi* and migrant-worker cultures. They flouted the authority of the elders, were engaged in 'acts of sexual bravado' and exposed their success by *ifashion*, the popular township clothes. Masculinity and gift-giving, just as today, became linked. It was important for migrant men to give gifts to the women, and men would rather steal than appear poor in the eyes of the women. The descriptions of the elderly and the studies on these topics report experiences very similar to that of today's older people.

Within the cities, migrant men and women belonged to a 'lower class'. They were considered as *amagoduka*, migrants, or rather as *amaqaba*, those who smear themselves with red clay, i.e. pagans. Wilson and Mafeje (1963) describe how in Langa, a black township near Cape Town, there was not only tension between people and police, but also between the people themselves. There was a clear distinction between townspeople and migrants – similar to Crina's (the matron) comment of the old age home!! – and, at that time, the elderly in the townships tried to keep control over the younger generations at the cost of good social relationships. Migration had severe effects on family life and relationships. Although most of the elderly had contributed to their households in the rural areas, they also told about conflicts and divorce, about

their lives in the hostels and townships where drinking and fighting often caused problems between men and between men and women. Mama Bam said that, for example, drinking was the cause of recent violence, but she also related it to the political situation and gave vent to her feelings of the relationships between Xhosa's and Coloureds:

People never use to drink like now. Because by us it was the Apartheid, you couldn't get wine. It was only coloured people could get wine. Glasses, you see. Our people, Xhosa people was decent, even like these oupatjies (grandfathers) here, this oupatjies, they used to buy cows, they used to be gentlemen. [...] You see, they open wine for us. We never got used to wine. They spoiled the whole constitution of the black people. Because the wine it wasn't a thing to be drink by black people. [...] Those papas used to drink this komboti (traditional brewed beer). But no wine. If they see a black man with a bottle of wine, they put him in jail. If a Xhosa person want a bottle of wine, they must go to a coloured person [whispers: give me a bottle of wine] so they bring it sometimes, they drink it there. They were allowed, it's their country. No, they could do what they like. Black people not. Ja, there was everything to be spoiled to Xhosa to open wine, to let them know, you can also drink wine. They use to keep money. When you were in the country you know they use to sit in the barracks and the barracks for the men in Langa. Where the men can sit. Once you were in town, you use to take your son and let him go and stay with them. That man is working and will keep his money. When he wanted to go and visit his mama in Transkei he had got money. Not these days, they have been gone wild and they drink. Our children got spoiled. Of wine!!! Small children, eighteen years can go to the bar.

In this short narrative of Mama Bam, issues that are usually denied or silenced hesitantly came to the surface. Relationships between different ethnic groups, full of contradictions, envy or mutual accusations and negative sentiments, but also – even more hidden – more positively experienced relationships.

Because they felt threatened, many already developed a strategy in the rural areas of withdrawal and silence,. They told how they were or had become “good Christians”, keeping themselves at a distance from any turmoil. When they talked about their past they usually said that they stayed out of “troubles”. A much heard comment was: “We were decent people.” Others told that they were “wild” but had come to their senses and became “believers”. Abie, a resident of G.'s old age home, told that, after a turbulent life of “dancing”, he converted to Christianity and became a preacher. His children, however, had abandoned him and his wife. They only tried to get hold of his state pension. Many elderly also said that they tried to avoid fights in the townships before and shortly after 1994. Some did not understand “where it was all about”. Others, like Mama Bam, were happy that their children were not involved in the freedom struggle. They said: “Our children are decent children.” In short, many elderly told that they did not want to be “a goat under the sheep”.

From the stories of older people an underlying issue emerged, which is most likely part of the barriers that hinder peacemaking between *all* groups in South Africa. Elderly's memories of the beginning of apartheid contradict those of the next generations. Political activity and the freedom struggle were mainly an issue for the younger

generations, who by becoming involved, came into conflict with their families (Reynolds 1997). Their parents sought to compromise and often kept a distance from political action. Nowadays, older persons reported that the era when they were employed by “the whites” had been a good time in life. For them the decades of Apartheid had something good in it, namely “law and order”. The stories of older people show how employers and employees felt responsible for each other. They were engaged in a circle of care, which replaced that of the elderly’s families. Although the elderly would readily admit that they had to work hard and in a certain sense were exploited, they also experienced these interethnic relationships as supportive and a safety net in poverty and the violence in their own communities. These ideas are at odds with those of the younger generations, who have the opinion that that time was characterised by exploitation and oppression. It is not that elderly deny the state violence – on the contrary they experienced “the time of the passes” as extremely oppressive and threatening. They reported that state violence was an important cause of misery. However, the elderly point to an issue that is often overlooked: there is more variety in violent states than an ‘atrocities triangle’ (Cohen 2001: 14) of perpetrators, victims and bystanders. In everyday mundane life where people experience violence, they tried to find a ‘way out’ and resisted the state’s policy in silence. Often, they did so together. All, both men and women, characterised their actions and attitudes as ‘natural’ and ‘ordinary’ and they related to each other outside the public scope.

One may easily argue that such narratives belong to ‘false consciousness’ or are a denial of the ‘truth’. Or simply a lament of older people who cannot forget the past and will idealise it vis-à-vis others. Or, in the words of my research assistant: “They [the elderly] did not understand what it was all about.” This is a disqualification of an entire category of people; a way, which superficially looks like a suitable means to deal with survival, pain, ambiguous events and old sentiments, but is a poor method of transition to social repair and is part of social gerontocide.

Social gerontocide and the dynamics of human rights

If one defines social vitality as created through relationships, which informs identity and gives meaning to life, it becomes apparent that loss of social vitality means a serious loss of the meaning of existence. One must understand the lament of the elderly that they wait to die in this context. In short: it means social death. I substantively agree with the argument by Card (2003) who states that social death is central to genocide. This argument directs us to older persons’ mourning about relationships that can create and give meaning to community. The harm of social death to older people cannot be captured by the crimes of apartheid nor by a focus on recent violence in the South African society. Besides, the study of what has been done to elderly – like the study of rape, domestic violence or violence to street children – cannot be done without consideration of social connections. Rape or domestic violence begin with issues of disrupting social existence, but they lack the comprehensiveness of social death and gerontocide that are final stages of life (Card 2003).

Older people are neither mentioned in the publications of South African Human Rights Council nor, in the Human Rights Year book. In 1999 – the international year of older persons – South Africa stated that the rights of older persons should be included in the South African Declaration on Human Rights and other relevant national legislation. Policy-makers at the UN and national levels have been slow in the past to address older people's rights. In 1991 the UN adopted the Principles for older people with five key principles: independence, participation, care, dignity and self-fulfilment. In South Africa, Møller (1998) determined whether improvement in living conditions and equality occurred in post Apartheid South Africa. She concludes that no equity had been achieved. HelpAge (2000) published a report on human rights and older people. The report shows a strong relationship between poverty and lack of human rights. The South African Government published an alarming report concerning the neglect and ill-treatment of older persons in 2001. In 2004, during the April elections, older persons were given a voice for the third time (third elections after the end of Apartheid). The mood of the elderly, who set their hopes on a better life against the results of the government policy at that time is captured and described in an anthology by Ferreira and Van Dongen (2004). Underneath the national and international levels one finds the daily dynamics of the struggle for human rights.

Some may object to the term 'social gerontocide'. I draw on Scheper-Hughes (2002: 369), who uses the concept of 'a continuum of genocide' conducted in the normative social spaces' such as old age homes. This concept can be applied in the case of the elderly. They fall into the category of "less than fully human". However, the concept needs an addition: social gerontocide is a socially dynamic process in which the refusal of social support and care of family and others is countered by the elderly with resistance and strategies. That is: older persons are not helpless victims.

The first point is 'the work with memories'. Elsewhere (Van Dongen 2004) I have discussed how older people use their memories to make moral statements about the present. Such stories are not only told to the anthropologist; older people tell them to each other and others who want to listen. They belong to the silent shame of the communities and may polarise communities further.

Another point is the complex ambivalence of economic and cultural power elderly (still) may have and that can be used to counter social death and social gerontocide. Because the elderly often make a substantial contribution to the household in relation to care and finances, they have a certain power over their family members. This is particularly clear when an older person decides to leave the household. This often happens when he or she cannot bear the burden of attending to children and dependents and of family life. There also exists a gulf between conventions about elderly and their actual treatment; categories that conventions should hold together are forced apart. Besides, two sets of ideas affect relationships between elderly and younger persons. The first derives from values that link family ties to the supernatural and natural order of things and enable older persons to make arrangements for their offspring. The second derives from ideas that inform policies of, for example, social security and which enable older persons to exercise power over household members (see for an example Reynolds 1997: 142-143).

A third point is that the elderly are aware of and will make use of their rights if needed and when they are informed about their possibilities. An example is Nothemba. She lives in an old age home and has fled from the problems with her daughter and her neighbours who robbed her of her money and wanted to take over her house. Nothemba managed, with the help of the social worker and the police, to “lock” her house. She said: “Everything is coming alright now. The police took up my case now. Now my heart is a bit better. But that lady [the woman who robbed her from her pension and wanted to take over the house, EvD] is still looking after me. Old people, they can do everything, but they can’t never throw me away!”

Action like those of Nothemba imply considerations such as “do I want to give up my social ties, my kin ties?”, because when the elderly decide to leave their households, they will also lose their social relationships. At this point a gerontocidal capacity comes to the fore.

Some final thoughts

The irony is that despite the changes in South Africa since 1994, many are trapped in painfulness and the impossibility of undoing the harm of a ‘spoiled history’. Like Mama Bam commented: “The blacks are now fighting among themselves.” The Truth Commission was ‘a complicated political gamble in which justice is traded for truth telling’ (Scheper-Hughes 2002: 375). The younger generations want to do away with the horrible past. But in the socio-cultural space between reconciliation and forgetting on the one hand, and the torment of mundane everyday life in which people have to deal with the burden of memory, on the other, the ambiguity of the history of violence and collusion between the different groups hinders justice and remorse.

There are “issues” that seem to be too painful to settle in the present. The memories, experiences and sentiments are endless. Perpetrators, victims, watchers, bystanders, collaborators, the silent ‘helpers’ and people who tried to relate to each other during apartheid will have to live together. That this is not an easy task, is shown by the present brutalities, such as social gerontocide. They are signs of a deeper rupture in the South African society. To cut off the past is immoral and to make collective apologies for the past to whole groups is preposterous, argues Cohen (2001: 248). The author gives the example of the reconciliation walk of 400 US Lutheran Orient Mission Society hikers in Jerusalem who wanted to apologise for the Crusaders. Cohen argues that instead of being greeted and thanked they should have been told to go back home. These thoughts are echoed in the words of an old man, who said: “*Mabaguquke* (They must repent).” ‘They’ were the younger people. But can one ask to acknowledge the suffering of older people when one has to survive in poverty? Questions as ‘who is responsible for this suffering?’; ‘what to do with the past?’ or ‘what about justice and human rights?’ are discussed in policy making, human rights movements and academic studies, but from my research it has become clear that human rights are contested in the daily lives of people. As Orwell wrote in his *Animal Farm* – all people are equal, but some people are more equal than others. Would it be solved with equal patterns of equal distribution?

Social justice – a prerequisite to stop preludes of genocide/ gerontocide – is less a matter of equal distribution than a matter of patterns of interaction, through which life is lived.

Notes

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- 1 Don't be a goat under the sheep.
- 2 Pagad means People against gangsterism and drugs. Originally a collaboration between Christians and Muslims, later associated with Muslim violence.
- 3 Townships at the Cape Flats, Western Cape Province.

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