

GETTING
WISE
ABOUT
GETTING
OLD

DEBUNKING MYTHS
ABOUT AGING

Edited by
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Part 1

PORTRAYALS AND REALITIES OF AGING

1

Myths and Realities about Seniors

Ignace Olazabal and Julien Simard

The French term *aîné*, which can be read as the translation of the English term *elder*, has now been enshrined in both Quebec media and Quebec government publications as the synonym for all the less consensual terms that designate old age (such as “old,” “elderly,” and “golden age”) and is associated with the concept of old people in general. Semantically, *aîné* in French refers to the oldest sibling in a family. Being the oldest child often comes with the rights of the firstborn (especially with regard to the family estate) and certain responsibilities with regard to the younger siblings. Despite the fact that *aîné* is also employed in Canada to define a specific age group (people aged 65 and older), the use of the term to refer to a segment of the overall population is rarely questioned. For instance, the Dictionnaire Robert defines *aîné* in terms of the hierarchy among siblings, simply adding that the word is used by extension in literature to refer to ancestors or forebears.

Social anthropologists study the position of the older generation in traditional societies and the foundational myths that sustain the social phenomenon of the elderly. Various legends glorify old age as the culmination of a long, well-lived life. Some societies have venerated old age by attributing powers and often supernatural qualities to it that younger generations lack the necessary experience to possess. This idealized image of old age is perfectly encapsulated in the foundational myth of Judeo-Christian culture, as described in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. In that account, three

elderly patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, and Moses – led the Israelites through many trials and tribulations and were the only ones with the authority and status to converse with God.

In the sixteenth century, Michelangelo provided a superb material representation of the archetypal elder governing his community in his statue of Moses. In this Renaissance masterpiece, Moses is a very old man, but he is also wise, physically strong, and exudes a reassuring presence. He is the leader who sets the course for his people to follow.

The figure of the heroic elder is also found in cultural output of Antiquity, such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, written by Greek poet Homer in the eighth century BCE. In such epics, heroic elders not only become wise with advancing years but conserve all of their mental and physical vigour despite their old age. During the same period, the militarily renowned Kingdom of Sparta revered its older men as heroes for having survived successive wars. Although two elderly kings ruled Sparta, ultimate authority was vested in a Council of Elders – “the *gerousia*, consisting of 30 old men chosen by acclamation among citizens aged over 60.”¹

In many traditional preliterate societies, as in mythology, elders were highly valued because they were considered the repositories of knowledge and collective memory. Because writing did not exist, older people’s knowledge and experience were considered indispensable.

Older People in Preliterate Societies

Various societies throughout history, albeit culturally very different in other respects, held their elders in high social esteem – for example, precolonial West African societies and all traditional societies that lived off hunting, fishing, and gathering (the situation of most precolonial Indigenous societies). In those societies, the oldest members actively participated in the transmission of both practical knowledge, such as plant-based healthcare, the art of hunting, and the ability to differentiate between edible and poisonous foodstuffs, and symbolic knowledge, such as religion and genealogy. Preliterate societies were perpetuated from generation to generation via oral tradition, with the individual memories of men and women who had considerable experiential and practical knowledge constituting the society’s collective archives. This reality was aptly expressed by Malian writer Amadou Hampâté Bâ: “When an old person dies, it is as if a library goes up in flames.”² We should also bear in mind that longevity and life expectancy were much shorter in those societies than in contemporary Western societies.

Because people generally died young, older people were a somewhat exceptional social category.

In most early hunter-fisher-gatherer societies (by definition nomadic, organized into bands, and generally without a single leader), there were two opposing categories: between men and women, and between children and adults.³ Quebec anthropologist Bernard Arcand notes that the elderly among the Cuiva Indians of Colombia were treated on the same footing as all adults. However, social status was based on social utility and respect for the group's rules of conduct, and these two qualities tended to develop with age. The oldest adults thus enjoyed special social standing thanks to their longer lives and greater accumulated knowledge. This knowledge, transmitted through collective memory, constituted the intergenerational driving force of the group, guaranteeing that the practical knowledge essential for survival would be transmitted. Knowledge could be jealously guarded by the elders until the end of their lives, implicitly ensuring that the demand for its transmission – and thus the elders' social value – was maintained despite their old age.⁴ The elders were also recognized for their ability to interact with the realm of the sacred as mediators between the living and the dead in these societies, in which dead ancestors or forebears were always an integral part of the world of the living (through ancestor worship).

Still in preliterate times, a typical model of social respect for elders existed in many precolonial West African societies – sedentary societies in which it was easier for older adults to establish their power and authority and that contained, unlike the societies described above, highly differentiated social categories whereby men were totally dominant vis-à-vis women, as were elders vis-à-vis the young. Everyone belonged to a tribe, ethnic group, specific lineage, and predetermined caste, but, above all, men and women belonged to a given age-based class. The oldest men were considered *elders* in the true sense of the term: they enjoyed the highest social status and, simply by belonging to the oldest age group, they were generally rich and powerful.⁵ But the elders were also the narrators of the traditional stories and transmitted cultural-identity values by conversing with the younger generation. This process has been described by Boucar Diouf, a Senegalese-born humourist, scientist, and broadcaster, in his stories about his grandfather.⁶ Although the gerontocratic power of West African elders was not officially challenged prior to colonization, it was nonetheless coveted by the younger members of society. At the same time, the latter generally accepted the prevailing hierarchical order and waited their turn. In such societies, people moved from one age group to the next when the last representative

of the immediate older group died. All members of a single age group progressed simultaneously because they were class siblings throughout their lives, with this subjective variable being a particular feature of African societies of bygone days.

In the past half-century, all traditional societies have undergone major social transformations. Not only do they now use writing and documentary records, but many of their members pursue higher education and have fully adopted information and communications technologies. Oral traditions are gradually becoming less important, and the knowledge that was previously held secret or sparingly transmitted by the elders is now recorded in books and accessible via Google. As a consequence, knowledge transmitted by collective memory is no longer considered sacred or indispensable, which has resulted in a considerable decline in older adults' power in those societies as Western technical and legal knowledge, invariably transmitted in written form, is integrated. Older people's privileges have also been diminished as monotheistic religions and capitalist values have taken hold. Older adults are thus gradually losing their prestige and social utility and are now more likely to be considered, simply, old. This social change can also be observed in Quebec and in the West in general, where literacy, the importance of academic education, and access to technologies have contributed to devaluation of the traditional knowledge transmitted by the oldest practitioners of certain trades.

In the 1970s, anthropologists who compared the social status of older people in modern societies with that in ancestral societies observed that this status has declined with modernization.⁷ Social change, especially in technological terms, has accelerated in advanced modern societies; this can be a handicap for many older people as societies focus on the future without regard for the past. The social utility of the elderly and the need for younger people to receive knowledge from them have therefore declined accordingly.

The Elderly and the *Âinés*: The Quebec Reality

A Quebec government publication states that "in Quebec, old people are generally designated by the term *ainés*. In other parts of the Francophone world, the terms '*seniors*,' '*personnes de l'âge d'or*' [golden-agers], '*personnes du troisième âge*' [senior citizens], '*personnes du quatrième âge*' [elderly], and '*adultes vieillissants*' [aging adults] are also used."⁸

The concept of *ainés* to designate everyone aged 65 or older came into effect in Quebec without much fanfare in the early 1990s. It became the official term in public policy and was also adopted for this segment of the population by civil society, the media, and scientific literature. Does the concept of *ainé* have an explicit meaning, other than simply being 65 or older? And why was a concept with ancestral connotations chosen as a term of reference? It is, in fact, relevant to question the terminology used to describe old age, because the meaning of words is not value-neutral.⁹ Could it be that the term *ainé* is being used to valorize elders on the basis of the sacred and mythical character of elders in the past – whereas, in reality, many older people these days are either abandoned or, at best, excluded? Moreover, their knowledge is seldom considered to be worthy of transmission.

In Quebec, there are greater numbers of *ainés* – or the people designated as such when they reach “pension age” – than ever before, and they will become even more numerous over the next 30 years, as the baby-boomer generation gets older. This reality is accentuated by another variable, that of greater longevity. There are actually several categories of old age now due to higher life expectancy, which is currently 81 years for men and over 84 years for women. Increasing numbers of people have exceeded these ages and are said to have reached “old-old age.” Between the beginning of old age, in the early 60s, and end of life, two or three stages of old age may occur, with the parents of the current 65-to-70-year-old age group now constituting the oldest of the *ainés*. Moreover, given the increased variability in quality of aging, the 65-and-older age group has become totally heterogeneous.¹⁰

Some people considered *elders*, in the anthropological sense of the term, do exist, but they are the exception rather than the rule. These people represent a benchmark outside the sphere of their own family because their experience and expertise are valued and they are socially involved, primarily through the quality of what they say and the respect that their words evoke. Many of them are intellectuals, scientists, artists, entrepreneurs, administrators, politicians, media personalities, and other notables – for example, poet and singer-songwriter Gilles Vigneault and former Quebec politician Françoise David. Another example is Janette Bertrand, whose autobiography describes what life is like for her as an elder (although she says she is simply old rather than an elder), because her life experience is also of interest to younger people.¹¹

At the same time, we must not forget that it is largely the media that determine which older people deserve to be heard and seen – and it is the media that reflect prevailing ageist prejudices.¹² Society often derides old age by infantilizing older people even though, in reality, many older people are actively involved in their families and communities, and thus in society. Their voices receive scant media coverage: old age, it seems, is a “hard sell.”

Conclusion

In social anthropology, the term *aîné* in French, like the term *elder* in English, refers to an old person who, simply by virtue of being old, enjoys high social standing and respect within his or her family and community. The term also evokes knowledge transmission and social utility in general. In some ancestral societies, elders possessed experiential knowledge and enjoyed rights that their younger counterparts did not; they were positioned at the top of the parental and social hierarchy (the right of seniority). However, those called *aînés* in Quebec are generally deprived of such attributes. The concept therefore seems to be out of sync with the observable reality of ageism prevalent in hypermodern societies: those whom we call our elders are simply considered old.

However, we should not view the choice of this concept, which applies more accurately to bygone societies, as a deliberate strategy of paying lip service by its proponents (especially the Quebec government). In practice, the discourses of governments and civil society promote appreciation for people aged 65 and older, especially the oldest among them. Many political initiatives have been envisaged, such as the World Health Organization’s strategy for maintaining the vitality and social participation of older people. But social recognition is also largely measured in words and how people are labelled, and there doesn’t seem to be an easy answer to what to call such a diversified population category, while also avoiding the discomfort that can arise with terms such as “old,” “elderly,” “senior,” and “golden-ager.” However, as Cameroonian anthropologist Manga Bekombo points out, “Speaking about old age consists not solely of pronouncing words from a glossary, but, even more, of attempting to access an entire system of thought and behaviour all at once.”¹³ Nevertheless, the problem is that the true meaning of this now-official term, which is associated with respect and social recognition, is generally overlooked.

We are living in a society that favours youth and perpetual social change and that tends to view everything that is “dated” with contempt. The value

placed on collective memory (emblems, historical figures, historical dates, and other “sites of memory”) is directly proportional to the value accorded to the knowledge accumulated by the oldest among us, bearing in mind that anyone who has lived a long life has the potential to transmit his or her varied experience and knowledge, which could be very useful socially. A society that looks only to the future and never to the past is one that, by definition, places little value on the knowledge of its oldest members. It is therefore legitimate to question whether our consciences should be clear when we use the term *aîné* in a society that is not overly enamoured of old age.

Notes

- 1 Georges Minois (1989), *History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 64.
- 2 Amadou Hampâthé Bâ (1991), *Amkoullel l'enfant peul* (Mémoires 1) (Paris: J'ai lu éditions) (our translation).
- 3 Bernard Arcand (1982), “La construction culturelle de la vieillesse,” *Anthropologie et sociétés*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 7–23.
- 4 Jared Diamond (2012), *The World until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* (New York: Viking).
- 5 Marc Abélès and Chantal Collard (eds.) (1985), *Âge, pouvoir et société en Afrique noire* (Paris, Montreal, and Khartala: Presses de L'Université de Montréal); Denise Paulme (ed.) (1971), *Classes et associations d'âge en Afrique de l'Ouest* (Paris: Plon).
- 6 Boucar Diouf (2007), *Sous l'arbre à palabres, mon grand-père disait* (Montreal: Les Intouchables).
- 7 Donald Cowgill and Lowell D. Holmes (eds.) (1972), *Aging and Modernization* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts).
- 8 Gouvernement du Québec (2002), *L'activité physique, déterminant de la qualité de vie des personnes âgées de 65 ans et plus* (Quebec City: Kino-Québec), 7 (our translation).
- 9 Alain Montandon (ed.) (2004), *Les mots du vieillir* (Clermont-Ferrand: Centre de recherches sur les littératures modernes et contemporaines); Jacqueline Trincaz, Bernadette Puijalon, and Cédric Humbert (2011), “Dire la vieillesse et les vieux,” *Gérontologie et société*, No. 138, September, 113–26.
- 10 We define “quality of aging” as the level of health and autonomy and the quality of social circles and meaning in life, especially the feeling of social utility, a feeling that gradually declines in society after retirement.
- 11 Janette Bertrand (2016), *La vieillesse par une vraie vieille* (Montreal: Québec Loisirs).
- 12 Martine Lagacé, Joëlle Laplante, and André Davignon (2011), “Construction sociale du vieillir dans les médias écrits canadiens: de la lourdeur de la vulnérabilité à l'insoutenable légèreté de l'être,” *Communication et organisation*, Vol. 40, 87–101.
- 13 Manga Bekombo (2004), “Percevoir et dire le vieillir chez les Dwala,” in Alain Montandon (ed.), *Les mots du vieillir* (Clermont-Ferrand: CRLMC, Presses universitaires Blaise Pascal), 49 (our translation).

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