



The Wisdom of Elders

by Paul Stoller, PhD, 2020

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How the wisdom of elders can promote social well-being in troubled times.

"Zankey ga gana albeeri fonda." "Children will follow the path of the elders." —Songhay saying

- 1 Several years ago at an African Studies conference, a tall gentleman approached me at the end of my presentation. He smiled and said in the Songhay language: "Children will follow the path of the elders."
- 2 I had never met this man and I gave him a puzzled look.
- 3 "Do you know that saying?" he asked.
- 4 I nodded yes.
- 5 He asked if I remembered visiting my teacher, Adamu Jenitongo in Tillaberi, Niger. "Do you recall children chanting when you passed a compound on the way to his house?"
- 6 I smiled. "You mean the little kids who liked to chant: 'The white spirit priest is coming. The white spirit priest is coming.'"
- 7 He pointed to himself and nodded.
- 8 "It can't be," I exclaimed.
- 9 "I am now a professor of philosophy at the University of Dakar," he said. "The children follow the path of the elders."

- 10 In some parts of the world, elders continue to be highly respected members of their communities. Considered the **custodians** of wisdom, elders in many societies enjoy considerable degrees of social **reverence**. If a person of power exercises **sound** judgment, he or she relies upon the wisdom of elders to reinforce important social values or to maintain a sense of social justice. In this way, elders have long been an **elemental** source of social well-being.
- 11 The revered status of elders is certainly present among the Songhay people of the Republics of Niger and Mali. For Songhay people, elders are people whose minds have ripened with experience, which means that they alone are capable of receiving and comprehending important knowledge—of history, of social practice, of healing, and, ultimately of the **existential** whys and wherefores of living in the world. The greatest obligation of Songhay elders is to pass on their knowledge of the world—their wisdom—to the next generation. Put another way, among the Songhay people, elders are the foundation of social **cohesion** and **viability**, which means that their path is a good one to follow.
- 12 In contemporary American society many, if not most, elders are neither respected nor revered. Consider Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick's heartless comment that elders, who are at high risk of becoming seriously ill or dying from the Covid-19 virus, should sacrifice themselves for the common economic good. In a March 24 report on NBC News, Jamie Knodel quoted Patrick who at 70 years of age is in the high-risk category: "No one reached out to me and said, 'As a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren?' And if that's the exchange, I'm all in."
- 13 Such an **ageist** statement underscores a **eugenic** worldview in which society purifies itself when its **putatively** weaker members (the old, the sick, and/or ethnic and religious minorities) are deemed weak and expendable—a drain on economic resources. In a June 12 article in *Sapiens*, anthropologist Jayur Madhusudan Mehta rejects this eugenic **supposition**. He writes that ". . . our species would not be where it is today without grandparents to care for younger offspring. Elders are **reservoirs** of knowledge and experience, critical for preserving history, traditions, and survival skills. And as anthropologist Margaret Mead is famous for **opining**, the moment when humanity began caring for those in need is when civilization truly began. Caring for those who are injured, ill, disabled, and/or older was the **genesis** of our humanity."

- 14 Mehta rightly stresses the importance of elders in human evolutionary history, and how the presence and importance of old folks ensured the viability of our species. Mehta concludes that “. . .humanity’s success has long depended upon our elders’ help. Today our moral and ethical success will be determined by whether we return the favor. If we sacrifice the health of our older people and those who are ill for an **ephemeral** economy based on stock market futures and shareholder profits, what will we gain? Not our humanity. Instead, we will lose it.”
- 15 Sacrificing the health of our elders, of course, involves much more than the loss of caregiving resources. Such sacrifice also results in the loss of wisdom, which, classically defined, refers to knowledge that makes life better. Sadly, wisdom is in short supply in these times of conspiracy theories and widespread distrust of the inconvenient truths of science—all the more reason to listen deeply to the practical and existential wisdom of elders.
- 16 In my life, I have had the great fortune to sit and listen to elders of the Songhay people of Niger. When they had something important to teach about courage and cowardice, honor and shame, men and women, children and adults, health and illness and not least, life and death, they would tell me to sit quietly and open my ears. They said that I might not understand the full significance of their message. Even so, they insisted that I remember their “old words.”
- 17 As time has passed and experience has deepened my comprehension of living in the world, I have remembered their “old words,” which have enabled me to understand more completely the knowledge they had **imparted** to me. Almost all of the Songhay elders I knew have joined their ancestors, but their words **linger** in my consciousness. In the **turbulence** of our times, their “old words” anchor me. They give me purpose and direction. By connecting the past to the present and charting a course from the present to the future, their wisdom has given me a way to move toward a healthier and more socially inclusive existence.
- 18 If my experience is **indicative**, we all have much to learn from listening to our elders. When they speak, stop what you're doing, clear your mind, listen deeply (See [Boswell 2017](#)), and remember what they say. In time, you will remember some of their wise words, which are likely to steer you to fruitful and healthful destinations. In these troubled times of pandemic disorder and economic distress, such wisdom can enhance our individual and collective well-being.

References

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