

CHAPTER 25

Age of Wisdom: Elderly Black Women in Family and Church

Jane W. Peterson

Among all living organisms, the process of birth, growth and death constitutes a familiar biologic cycle. For human beings this process is often divided into phases based on the development of the individual. Variations in importance of one phase versus another of this universal process occur as a result of the cultural context.

Age as measured in years is a fairly meaningless concept for the black American population with whom I worked. For them, age does not measure years on a fixed continuum but reflects those important life events which mature a person. This latter is believed to occur upon overcoming a struggle. One often hears this phenomenon referred to by the phrase, "You grew today." For this population the culturally significant phases of growth and development are: having a child, which is a sign of procreation; raising a child, a sign of maturity; and becoming a grandparent, a sign of having reached the "age of wisdom." This last stage refers to experience and knowledge gained while raising a child, which can be imparted to the next generation.

"Old age" and "aging" are not part of the language of this community, although members understand these concepts as used by white Americans. However, when speaking among themselves these words are not heard. The words used are "maturity" and having reached the "age of wisdom." The old are commonly referred to as "the wise."

For black Americans, cultural meaning grows out of their African heritage, the experience of slavery and their continued oppression within a largely white Anglo-Saxon, Protestant American culture. Today, elderly women in the black community continue the oral tradition of passing on cultural meanings, such as the value of children and self-reliance, to succeeding generations.

It is therefore common for elderly women in the community to announce that "one more came along today" in reference to a birth. Children are highly valued. Because of

their dependence on adults, they create the possibility of potential relationships between adults through kinship, biological or fictive.

“Wise” women continually instruct others about the importance of human relationships. They admonish against becoming too attached to possessions, for these can be taken away easily. The reference used is “Remember slavery days.” Therefore, one does not aspire to accumulate possessions but relies on one’s self, an education which is “in your head,” and relationships with others who can be “counted on.” One way to build such relationships is through the care of children.

Two very strong beliefs, emphasized by virtually every elderly black woman to members of a younger generation, are the importance of family and the importance of religion. This chapter addresses these two issues.

Data are from fieldwork I conducted among a black urban population in the Pacific Northwest between 1979 and 1980, with continued intensive short periods of fieldwork since then. In this work, family matters were defined culturally as “women’s area of concern.” As a black woman, I was readily incorporated by “wise” women into discussions on family matters. Religion was quite different. My formal instruction came from a preacher, a “wise” man who sat me down with an indexed Bible and made me read passages that he, and only he, could interpret and analyze. When it became a matter of participating in church activities, I was assigned to the Nurses’ Unit, a group of prestigious women who had the wisdom and the authority to monitor my behavior. Although I am a nurse, my nursing license was not the credential that allowed me to participate with this group. Rather, the preacher’s perceptions of my interpersonal skills and my dedication to understanding the doctrines of the church were my credentials. These informants, the women who told me about families, the preacher and the nurses, were respected elder members in their community, having reached the “age of wisdom.”

OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A brief overview of selected references on the black family reveals that although the elderly are an integral part of the family they are not a major focus of black family literature. The exception is E. Franklin Frazier’s (1939) classic study, *The Negro Family in the United States*. The chapter devoted to “Granny” describes black grandmothers as wise, strong leaders. The 1960s literature focusing on women in the family is largely devoted to young black girls as unwed mothers (Moynihan 1965). Although this interest continues in subsequent literature, the focus shifts to issues of sex, marriage and family (Staples 1973) as young girls reach womanhood (Ladner 1971; Dougherty 1978b).

An early study of older women by Jacquelyne J. Jackson (1972) finds similarities between married and single older black women in their instrumental and affective relationships. The author suggests that relationships with oldest children and closest friends are most important. Faustine C. Jones (1973), writing about older women in families, describes the role of grandmother as highly respected and “lofty.” They are a “source of love, strength, and stability for the black family . . . a steady, supporting influence, as well as a connecting link between branches of the extended family” (Jones 1973:19). Elmer P. Martin and Joanne M. Martin (1978) also explicitly address “the old” as members of extended families who impart “old-fashioned” values to “the young.” Linda M. Burton and Vern L. Bengtson (1985) describe the timing of entry into grandparenthood for black women as critical in defining their role.

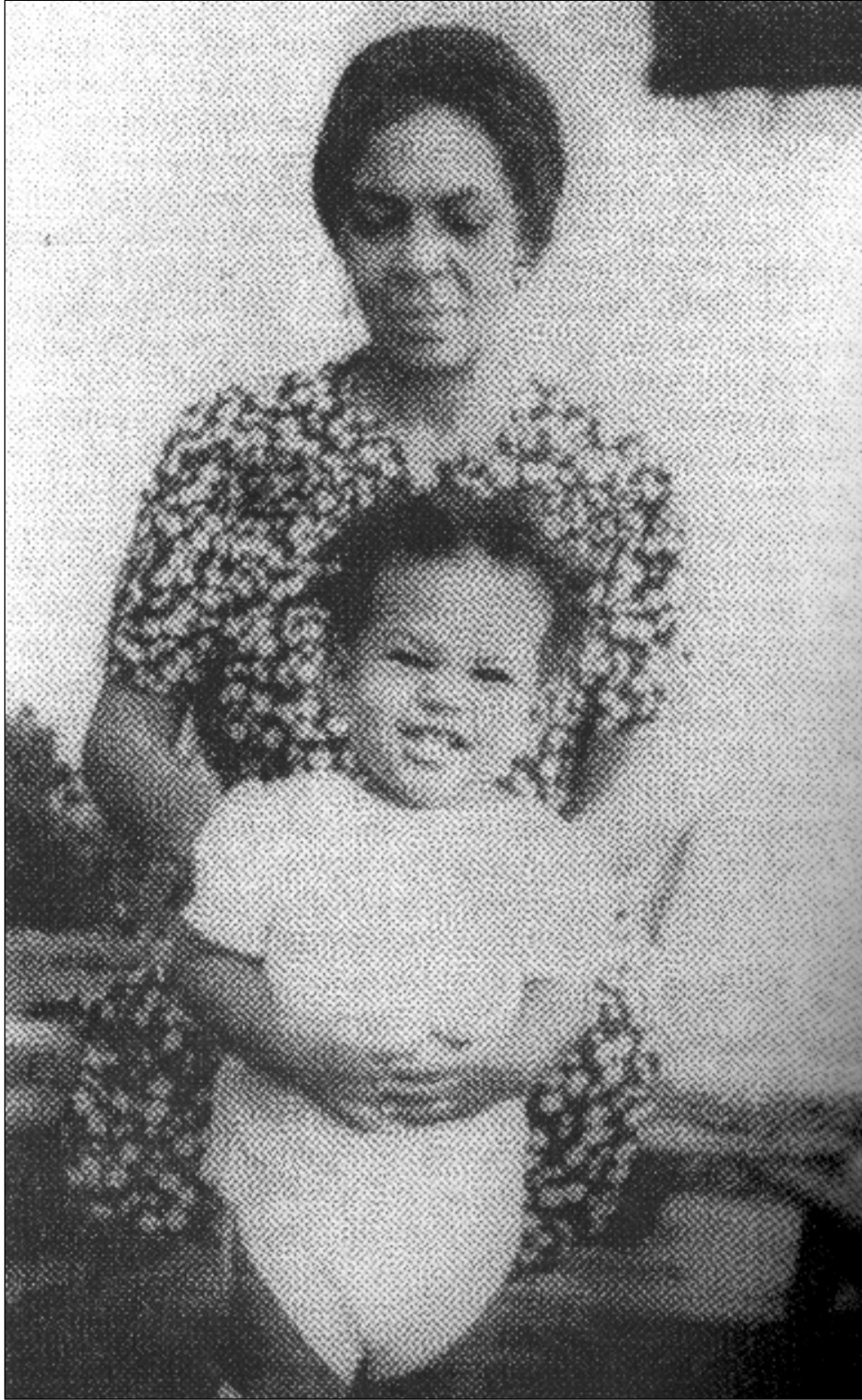


Image 25.1
Grandma and baby. Courtesy of Seattle University Publications Department.

Those women who enter this “elder” phase of life early (25 to 38 years old) feel the pressure of role conflict and tension in the social support they receive. They perceive grandparenthood as a “tenuous” role. Those who enter grandparenthood “on time” (42 to 57 years old) have less conflict but can also feel the pressure of integrating family and occupational roles. Meredith Minkler (1994) discusses the problems of grandparents who become parents unexpectedly. This can occur when an adult child is a drug or alcohol abuser, divorced or has AIDS, or when a teenager becomes a parent. Other recent literature on family and the older black population describes demographic characteristics (Jackson et al. 1988), sources of support (Walls 1992; Watson 1990) and gender differences (Taylor, Keith and Tucker 1993) which show that elderly black women maintain stonger kinship, friendship and religious ties than do elderly black men.

An early study of older women by Jacquelyne J. Jackson (1972) finds similarities between married and single older black women in their instrumental and affective relationships. The author suggests that relationships with oldest children and closest friends are most important. Faustine C. Jones (1973), writing about older women in families, describes the role of grandmother as highly respected and “lofty.” They are a “source of love, strength, and stability for the black family . . . a steady, supporting influence, as well as a connecting link between branches of the extended family” (Jones 1973:19). Elmer P. Martin and Joanne M. Martin (1978) also explicitly address “the old” as members of extended families who impart “old-fashioned” values to “the young.” Linda M. Burton and Vern L. Bengtson (1985) describe the timing of entry into grandparenthood for black women as critical in defining their role. Those women who enter this “elder” phase of life early (25 to 38 years old) feel the pressure of role conflict and tension in the social support they receive. They perceive grandparenthood as a “tenuous” role. Those who enter grandparenthood “on time” (42 to 57 years old) have less conflict but can also feel the pressure of integrating family and occupational roles. Meredith Minkler (1994) discusses the problems of grandparents who become parents unexpectedly. This can occur when an adult child is a drug or alcohol abuser, divorced or has AIDS, or when a teenager becomes a parent. Other recent literature on family and the older black population describes demographic characteristics (Jackson et al. 1988), sources of support (Walls 1992; Watson 1990) and gender differences (Taylor, Keith and Tucker 1993) which show that elderly black women maintain stonger kinship, friendship and religious ties than do elderly black men.

In this literature four salient points come through. First, marital status makes little difference to elderly black women in terms of role relationships. Second, gender does make a difference in maintaining kinship ties. Third, grandmothers are highly respected individuals and, fourth, early entry into grandmotherhood and the unexpected parenting create conflict in these roles within the family.

Selected references from the literature on religion and blacks emphasize religion as an outlet for the oppressed. Religious beliefs, as Emile Durkheim (1915) suggests, are a collective representation that belongs to a whole group despite the fact that no one individual possesses total knowledge. Religion creates a social reality; this holds true for blacks and their religious outlook.

Studies on elderly blacks describe religious participation as a way to help blacks cope with stress by offering material and emotional support (Meyers 1978; Watson 1990; Walls and Zarit 1991; Walls 1992; Bryant and Rakowski 1992). Elderly black women,

specifically, believe that the church is important in this respect. Robert J. Taylor (1988) shows that church-based support is offered to black elderly in the form of material, emotional, spiritual assistance and as information and advice. Similar to these findings, Gurdeep S. Khullar and Beverly Reynolds's (1985) study supports the thesis that females, blacks and the elderly are the groups most likely to attend church services. However, contrary to these studies, their findings show blacks who score high on "religious participation" score lower than whites on "life satisfaction" indices. The reason for this finding is unclear. Economic security is the one intervening variable that markedly affects the association between "religious participation" and "life satisfaction." One can hypothesize that "life satisfaction" measures control over one's life, a feeling which many blacks do not share and the very reason they go to church. The church is perceived by these blacks as the one arena in which they have been able to maintain their cultural traditions in face of social ostracism, economic deprivation and political marginality.

Peter Goldsmith (1985) also finds that religious participation is important among blacks in the Georgia Sea Islands. He suggests that ideological principles in church doctrine account for the differences between black Baptists and black Pentecostals. Baptists hold a belief of the accountability of the individual for life events, a view similar to the dominant white culture. They perceive a clear distinction between the scientific and religious spheres. On the other hand, the Pentecostals embrace a holistic view of a "divinely directed social order" (Goldsmith 1985:94) in which it is impossible to separate healing from worship, mind from body, man from spirit and natural being from social being. He then concludes that the use of healing in worship services can be seen as an index of non-acceptance of white culture by church members. This is noteworthy as, in the Pentecostal Church discussed here, worship and religious matters are the concern of the preacher and the (male) elders only, whereas healing is also the concern of the wise women who are nurses.

Cheryl T. Gilkes (1985) explores the role of women in the Sanctified Church (of which the Church of God in Christ is the largest denomination), which emphasizes independence, education, economic status and political autonomy. She finds that black women have been a well-organized force, self-reliant and economically independent since slavery. In the Pentecostal Church of God in Christ, where women are not allowed to preach from the pulpit, they have made a place as equal or interdependent with men. The powerful older women are leaders among church women (Gilkes 1986). The structure of the Pentecostal Church is analyzed from a different perspective by Melvin D. Williams (1974). He describes a hierarchy of elite, core, supportive and marginal members who range from socially close to socially distant to the pastor. The elite group includes powerful older women of the church.

The role of religion for older black women, as seen in this literature, is twofold. On the one hand, these women find within the church material and emotional support, especially in times of illness. On the other hand, the church offers them a place to gain power and exercise their leadership skills.

It is through the two themes of family and religion that the meaning of "maturing" and "age of wisdom" is elucidated in this chapter. The discussion on family centers around a wise woman, Lottie Waters (all names used are fictitious), who has "twice reached the age of wisdom." She is a great-grandmother and, like the wise women before her, keeps track of family relationships traced both through biological and non-biological

ties. The discussion on religion presents data on a group of respected wise church women known as “Mothers.” In both instances, wise women are seen as organizers and leaders within their settings.

FAMILY

Here I want to introduce a woman who has reached the age of wisdom. She occupies a traditional family role, that “lofty” and respected position of grandmother. She is also the nurturer and disciplinarian of children, the family historian, the hub of the family network in which decisions are made, and the convener of family events.

Mrs. Lottie Waters is a fifty-five-year-old great-grandmother who invited me to call her by her first name. She was born in a small rural town in southern Texas. When Lottie was born, her fifteen-year-old mother and her father lived with his older sister, Auntie Elsie, who became a midwife. Auntie Elsie and her mother, known to Lottie as Grandma Lucy, delivered Lottie. Lottie was “raised” by Grandma Lucy, who always retained parental rights and responsibilities over her, an uncle and his family, and Auntie Elsie.

Lottie, like her mother, delivered her first child when she was fifteen years old. Lottie says she did her best to “raise” her five children, giving them to Elsie to “keep” when she was unable to care for them. Elsie was by then a wise woman. When Lottie’s second child, her oldest daughter, had her first child, Kermit, Lottie joined the ranks of wise women. She was 32 years old. When Kermit’s first child was born, Lottie was 52 years old and her daughter 35. Lottie celebrated being the mother of a wise woman as well as having “twice reached the age of wisdom.” Lottie Waters’s kinship chart relative to this discussion shows these relationships (Figure 13.1).

As a wise woman, Lottie was expected to care for children, her own and those of others. Often when she took her children to the park she “came upon childrun runnin’ wild and unruly.” She talked to them, teaching them right from wrong, and scolding them when necessary. It is not uncommon for the wise to admonish any youngster who is misbehaving. The wise do not need permission from biological parents to discipline children. It is their duty to teach any child, should the opportunity present itself. It did not take long for these “unruly childrun” to call Lottie “Grandma,” follow her home, eat with her, and a few even slept at her house. Two children stayed with her for over a year. As Lottie became mother to these children, their own relatives would visit, introduce themselves and thank her for what she was doing for the children. Eventually, the adults would come to Lottie for advice in child raising or for themselves. Some would run errands for her; others would bring food or clothing. On one occasion she was given a car to “carry the children around.”

Lottie’s biological children considered all the children in the house brothers and sisters or sons and daughters, depending on their ages. When it came time to have a Waters family reunion, Lottie set the date and supervised its organization. She alone made up the invitation list. Those invited were all her grandchildren and those related to them. She was the anchor of a large family network held together by interactions involving children. All family members knew their obligation to her and honored the woman through whom they were all related. Lottie, the oldest, and her great-granddaughter, the youngest, were the center of attention on that day. Lottie says, “Had

Grandma Lucy or Auntie Elsie been there they would have been honored with all manner of fine gifts.”



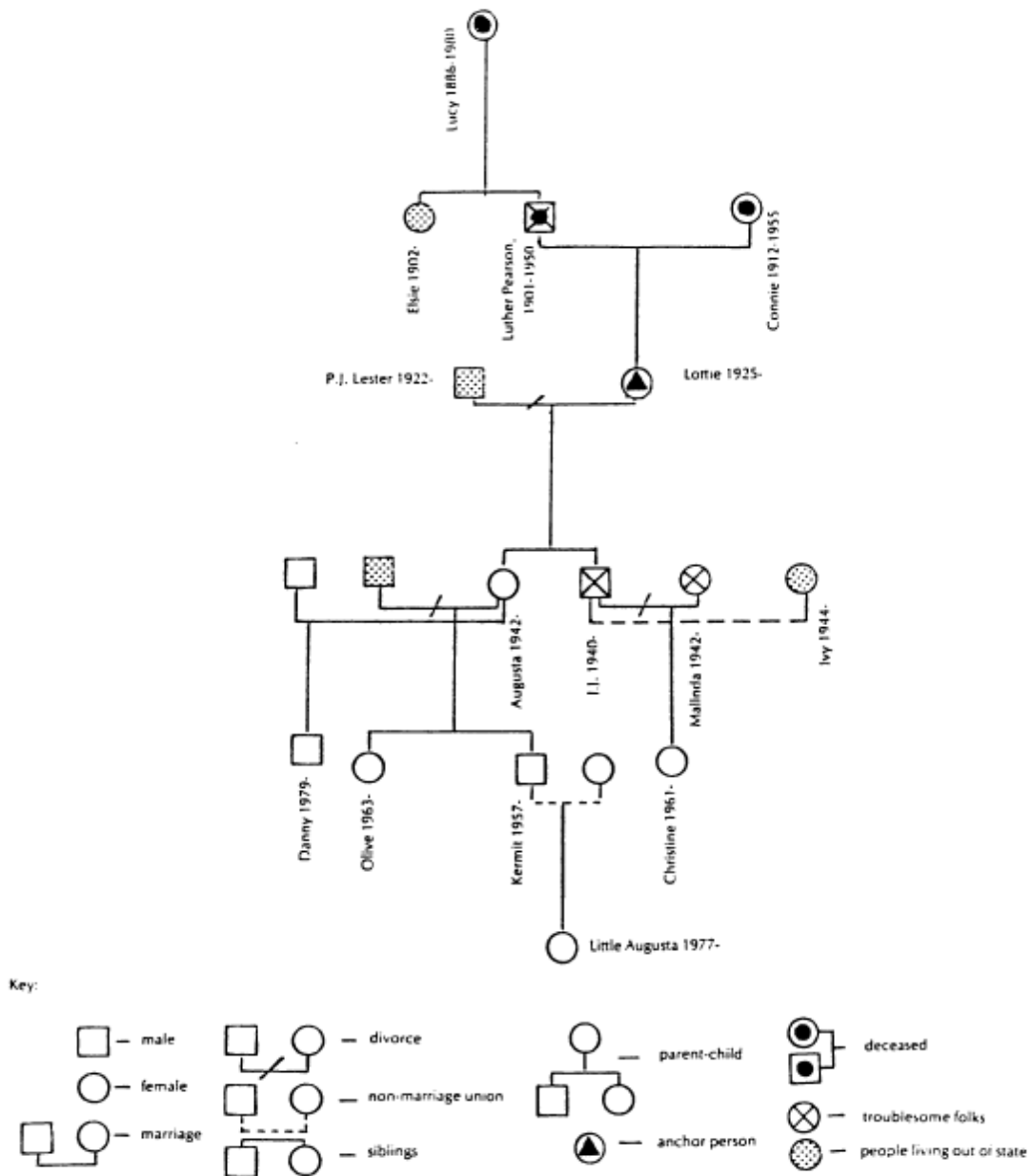
Image 25.2

Great-grandma and woman visitor. Courtesy of Seattle University Publications Department.

Mrs. Waters is considered a wise woman because she has “raised” two generations and is raising a third. She was fortunate also to have two living generations above her. Those in the younger generations know that only such a wise person can recite a family history. Such a request is honored only when the “wise one” is ready. The task of keeping track of family ties is no easy matter. Wise women, like the griots of West Africa, train and practice this oral skill until they have mastered it. Recounting and reckoning family is still part of an enduring tradition.

The “wisest of wise” were those, like Lottie’s ninety-three-year-old grandmother Lucy, who seldom but with great ceremony correct a “wise” one or who are used to legitimize a recitation. No one would dare question Grandma Lucy’s description of Lottie’s birth. Grandma Lucy saw the caul over Lottie’s face at her birth.¹ This unusual circumstance is believed to be a sign of an exceptional child. It is only by Grandma Lucy’s account that Lottie’s unusual birth is legitimately documented. When Lottie is challenged on incidents in her recitation of the family history, Grandma Lucy with a simple gesture could acknowledge Lottie as a wise woman not to be questioned and scold the questioner for daring to challenge a wise woman.

Figure 25.1
Kinship Chart for Lottie Waters



The position of wise women is also seen in child raising. As one reads even fragments of Lottie’s life history one notes that she talks about “havin’ children,” “raisin’ children,” and “keepin’ children.” Her distinctions have to do with giving birth, being a parent with the rights and responsibilities that accompany this and babysitting or temporarily taking care of children, which may be for extended periods of time. The relationship between children and adults or between adults is always clear to those involved. Thus, children can be biological or nonbiological. Because biological parents are not always mature

enough to raise their own children, mature or “wise” women can parent or co-parent with biological parents. Thus, a child can be “recruited” into a family (La-Fargue 1981). This means a child might have several mothers and/or fathers. Terms of address and reference for all parents are the same. Lottie had five children; she “kept” many others, feeding and clothing them, and she raised her five plus the two who stayed for an extended period. Her experience with children means that as a grandmother she will be “wise.” She will be sought for her wisdom and life experiences.

In analyzing Lottie Waters’s account, the role of wise woman as nurturer and disciplinarian is seen. Wise women “keep” and “raise” children. They make a significant contribution to the family in this role both in teaching values to youngsters, as Elmer P. Martin and Joanne M. Martin (1978) suggest, and in freeing adults to concentrate on their occupational pursuits.

The wise are also the family historians, as E. Franklin Frazier (1939) found. Lottie fixes her place in the generations as Grandma Lucy’s granddaughter and Kermit’s grandmother. Her cultural identity as having reached the age of wisdom is secure. She is also the one to prove through the recitation of the family history that her daughter reached that stage with the birth of her son’s child. However, Lottie says her mother never reached the “age of wisdom.” Her mother is literally in the same generation as her great-great-grandchild, as neither has raised any children. Lottie can verify that others have reached the age of wisdom or can cast doubt on their life circumstances and retard, if not prevent, entry into that stage of life. She can do this because all important family matters such as parent-child relationships are brought to her. Her decisions are final: only a wise person in a generation above her can reverse her decisions. Older people in this community are vulnerable if they have not raised a child. They have no markers to show they are maturing. They are treated like young persons, who have not yet learned to act responsibly and be accountable for their actions.

Lottie Waters became, at age 32, what Burton and Bengtson (1985) call an “off-time” grandmother. But unlike the off-time grandmothers they discuss, she had a clear position in her family and clear functions to perform. Her fifty-five year old aunt and seventy-one-year-old grandmother mentored and prepared her for this role. Lottie’s daughter expected her child’s grandmother to be someone strong, independent and one whom she could count on for sage advice. The extended family supported Lottie with services, goods, love, status and information when she entered this phase of her life. Her family role was clear: she had achieved the status of wise woman. The only socially meaningful marker of time for Lottie is the passing of generations. She may become wiser with each generation, but it is never spoken of as “older.” Grandma Lucy was grandmother to all generations except her children’s. It was only when Grandma Lottie called Lucy “Grandma” that one had any inkling of Lottie’s chronological age.

Children are highly valued by black families in general (Achenbrenner 1975; LaFargue 1981) and by the Waters kin group in particular. Not only do they demand cooperation from adults for their care and create the potential for increasing adult relationships, they also mark an adult’s place in terms of which generation he or she belongs to. The family reunion stresses the relationship between generations with persons such as Lottie linking together the broader kin network. The relationship between child and grandparent forms the basic structure of the family. As Lottie says, “All those related to my grandbabies are my family, and they are welcome.” The young parent generation

knows that they depend on their children to establish their place in the family and on the wisdom of their parent to legitimize their place in the family. The greater the number of generations between the old and the young the more prestige the wise person is accorded.

RELIGION

The following data come from fieldwork with the Refuge Church of God in Christ. Members of this church refer to themselves as “Pentecostals, Holiness people, or Holy Rollers.” The literature also refers to them as members of the Sanctified Church (Hurstun 1983; Gilkes 1985). The Refuge Church is part of the larger Church of God in Christ, International. It is Pentecostal in nature because of the belief that the Holy Ghost resides in all believers. The outward sign of a believer is the ability to speak in tongues as occurred on the Day of Pentecost. The church has a formal structure with traditional, gender-defined roles for its members, yet “it is well understood that men and women complement each other” (Curtis and Cyars n.d.:1).

In the church there are age-grades which cross-cut specific gender roles. For females, these are best exemplified in some of the auxiliaries of the Women’s Department. They are: The Cradle Roll for newborns to age four, the Sunshine Band for ages five through twelve, Purity Classes for ages twelve through nineteen, the Young Women’s Christian Council (YWCC) for nineteen to “indefinite,” and the Church Mother’s Board exclusively for wise women, with no specific age stated. The first three age-grades, for ages up to nineteen, are mixed girls and boys. The last two age-grades are sex-specific. The age range is not specified for the YWCC but includes the years of “college, marriage, and motherhood” (Curtis and Cyars n.d.:32). The Mother’s Board is composed of women who have raised their children and have also shown a commitment to the church both in their participation in activities and financially. They are able and willing to assume leadership positions within the church organization. They have reached the age of wisdom.

The church uses a reference from Scripture as the basis of its definition of wise woman:

Let not a widow be taken into the number [of elders] under three-score years old, having been the wife of one man, well reported of for good works; if she have brought up children, if she have lodged strangers, if she have washed the saints’ feet, if she have relieved the afflicted, if she have diligently followed every good work. (I Timothy 5:9–10)

This passage serves to legitimize women over 60 as “wise.” It names the activities a wise woman should have engaged in and reflects values held high by the church.

Within the men’s age-grade, “elder” is used to designate those men who have reached the age of wisdom. However, the church precludes the use of the word “elder” for women (Range 1973:159–160). “Mother” is the term of reference and address used for such women. One refers to a Mother by saying, for example, “Mother Gibson will lead the prayer group on Friday.” Addressing her as “Mrs. Gibson” is a sign of disrespect or the mark of an outsider. A woman who is a member of the YWCC and a biological mother is referred to as a new or young mother and addressed as “Sister.”

Age brings status, respect and prestige to women who have raised a child. Only Mothers teach and instruct and are “seasoned and well informed” (Curtis and Cyars

n.d.:18). They understand their obligations to others. Mothers are in leadership positions within the Women's Department of the Church and have the ability to informally cross gender-role lines and influence the elders. Wise women in the Refuge Church of God in Christ are economically autonomous and are the main fund-raisers and contributors of the church. It is a combination of these factors plus Mothers' special knowledge about birth, their experience with illness and death and their strong faith that gives them their power. This is what makes them part of what Melvin D. Williams (1974) calls the elite group, a group in which gender lines are crossed. Among the Mothers, one is chosen to be the Mother of the Church. This Mother has the most experience, shows a deep commitment to the church, is of unquestionable faith, is well versed in the Bible and has alliances with many groups in the church. She is recommended by the Mother's Board to the pastor who appoints her Mother of the Church. This is a lifelong position and the highest one a woman can attain. Because of physical illness or inability to carry out her duties, the Mother of the Church may retire. However, she is still treated with utmost reverence.

The entire denomination stresses education. A Mother who is an educator with "book learning," experience and oratory skills is highly regarded. The Church Mother is the only female sanctioned to teach from the pulpit. She takes the occasion to reinforce passages from the Bible, restate acceptable codes of behavior and remind the congregation of what it means to be a Mother. She usually ends her teaching on an inspirational note. The fourth Sunday of every month is Mother's Day, and the collection taken up at that service goes to her. In turn, she uses the money for her own "necessities" and distributes the rest to Mothers in key leadership positions for their work in the Department of Women.

One of the Refuge Church of God in Christ's most important units within the Department of Women is the Nurses' Unit. This unit is composed of women with certain characteristics. They are understanding people, have excellent communication skills, are experienced taking care of the ill, can work compassionately with alcohol- and drug-related problems (two areas the church has targeted) and have a strong religious faith. Most nurses are also Mothers. A license in nursing is needed by only one member to satisfy the legal requirement for giving medications.

Nurses "serve at meetings, on trips, in the home, funerals or whatever and whenever there is a need for their service" (Curtis and Cyars n.d.:33). This ability to move in and out of settings is permitted of only a few groups within the church.

For nurses in the Refuge Church of God in Christ, treatment is holistic. The areas of spiritual, mental and physical health spelled out in the *Official Manual with the Doctrines and Discipline of the Church of God in Christ* (Range 1973) overlap in actual practice. However, they are discrete conceptual categories that guide the nurse in her assessment and diagnosis of clients. The spiritual dimension is treated with prayer, scriptural reading and interpretations of biblical passages. The mental health dimension is treated with counseling, teaching and a recommitment to belief in God along with visible proof through practice. Giving up "evil practices" (such as smoking and dancing) and being able to have a positive self-regard and high self-esteem are important. The physical aspect is treated with herbs, ointments, teas and referral to professional medical help when necessary.

Among nurses there is a hierarchy. The younger nurses focus primarily on the physical aspects; then with experience and increased understanding of the Bible, they

work with the mental and the spiritual problems of others. This latter area is dominated by nurses who are strong in faith and have much experience in successfully healing others. These are nurses who are also Mothers. Only they can care for persons “between,” those who are vulnerable to being possessed by spirits or of having their spirits leave their bodies “between worlds.” This can occur when a person is unconscious, dying, or during a seizure. At such a time a nurse-mother is needed to protect the ill. This is most clearly seen during the dying process.

During the course of my fieldwork, Mrs. Ella Wilcox, a ninety-eight-year-old retired Mother of the Church, died. Just before her death, the Mother of the Church called the head of the Nurses’s Unit, a renowned nurse-mother in her mid-seventies, and asked her to be present when Mother Wilcox died. The nurse-mother was to make sure that the death was peaceful and that Mother’s body, soul and spirit were one at the time of death.

In anticipation of her death no artificial orifices were to be made in her body. Mother Wilcox’s body should be whole. The spirit is known to be able to leave a body of a sleeping or comatose person and wander around. At the time of death, to be whole means that the body, the soul and the spirit are together. Because Mother Wilcox was comatose and becoming increasingly weaker, several nurse-mothers kept vigil at her bedside. At times they cried and made noise to call the spirit back to the body should it have wandered off. At other times they were quiet and subdued so as not to call the spirit out of the body should it be in the body.

In analyzing perceptions of the elderly in this Pentecostal Church, it is necessary to understand the traditions that underlie the practices observable to the anthropologist. Such tradition is the belief in the wisdom of the ancestors and those who have lived experiences. There is also a belief in the need to keep separate the world of the spirits and the world of the living. Nurse-mothers carefully mediate between these two worlds.

The church reflects the community’s values and its social structure. The Church Mother is the center of a redistribution system in which women pool resources and from which they receive material and social support. Such is the case when services were pooled during Mother Wilcox’s death. Independent from the men, women have built their own social structure within the church. Elders and Mothers have complementary roles in the church. They are like fathers and mothers in families. They preside over religious celebrations which affirm life. Who better to give meaning to life than those who have reached the age of wisdom? For they know of what they speak when they celebrate life.

Church members respect their Mothers. Mothers are looked to for advice. Their knowledge of history, their lived experience and religious faith give them access to information others do not have. This is the source of their power. Although the Pentecostal Church has a clear and strong patriarchal structure, women have created an alternative structure which provides them with power and authority. Mothers in this religious setting are foremost spiritual role models. They are the powerful, capable women who can provide or mobilize both material and emotional support for persons in need. They are the teachers who endorse power through education. They are the nurses who combine healing with worship. Nurse-mothers simultaneously protect the dying and the living while managing the spirit and everyday worlds. They are among the most powerful and feared women in the church, for they walk between the sacred and the profane.

CONCLUSION

The age of wisdom is a venerated life stage in the black community I studied. I have drawn from both the family and religion to shed light on the meaning of “maturing” and “the wise” for this particular group. The women I have focused on are actively engaged in work which is essential to the continuation of the family and the church. Their wisdom, gained through lived experience, is both sought and respected by others.

Comparing the literature on elderly black women in the family and Lottie Waters, one notes that indeed marital status makes little difference. It is hardly mentioned in the Waters family. However, tracing relationships through children and imparting values to the young are seen as essential roles of a wise woman. Likewise, maintaining strong kinship ties is part of her role. Unlike the literature cited, Lottie’s status is conferred by both preceding generations who know of her parenting ability and subsequent generations who establish her position within the family structure. For Lottie, there was minimal conflict in terms of role, despite her “off-time” entry into grandmotherhood. This may be due to the generational pattern of early motherhood followed by early grandmotherhood with the expectation that older women (Aunt Elsie and Grandma Lucy) provided guidance. As a grandmother, regardless of chronological age, Lottie is highly respected.

Comparing the literature on religion and the ethnographic data from the Refuge Church of God in Christ, it is evident that older women can find material and emotional support in the church. However, the data do not emphasize this. What is described are the services wise women contribute to the church and what they receive from the church, namely, material, emotional and spiritual support and information and advice. Specific details of these activities are sparse in the literature. Notwithstanding, the ethnography concurs with the literature when describing wise women who can and do receive prestige and power based on experience, knowledge and service separately from men in the Pentecostal Church.

Both in the family and in the church, experience, not chronological age, is considered the primary criterion for entry into the age of wisdom. For black women in the family this translates into raising a child who can make one’s mother a grandmother. This value is also strong in the Refuge Church of God in Christ. However, there is the added dimension that wise women in the church must also possess profound religious faith and behave in the manner described in Scripture. Although this age is acknowledged to be 60, it is not by accident that the Church of God in Christ does not give an age range for members of the Mother’s Board. Some women meet the criteria for entry into the Mother’s Board before age 60. Therefore, members of this board range in age from midforties up. Nurses’ ages vary widely. A few nurses are young mothers, members of the YWCC who have the gift of healing, highly developed interpersonal skills, and show a commitment to study church doctrine. These women are permitted to join the Nurses’s Unit before they have entered “the age of wisdom.” Most nurses, however, are wise women who belong to the Mother’s Board and also have the gift to heal.

Aging connotes lived experience. In the family, moving from one generation to the next and raising a child are the experiences women must have in order to reach the age of wisdom. In the church these experiences, as well as being spirit-filled, monitoring life transitions (mainly birth and death) and teaching, are the primary routes to gaining experience and hence becoming a “Mother.”

Neither in the family nor in the church do people refer to the elderly as “old.” Whether a woman is 32 or 71, she can be described as single, a mother, a grandmother, healthy, disabled or ill but not “old.” Old age for black women is a matter of the functions they carry out. For wise women in families this is creating relationships, teaching values and convening the family on certain occasions. In the church, Mothers are religious role models, they establish a system of support for women and children, mediate between the secular and sacred worlds when necessary and maintain independent but collaborative relationships with men in the church. Grandmothers in families and Mothers in churches are the women who have reached the age of wisdom.

This research gives voice to “older” black women born around 1925. They were having children before World War II, became grandparents in the 1950s and were considered “wise” before they turned 65 years old. The historical period in which they grew up was one of overt racial prejudice, idealized traditional European-American family values and segregation, which fostered ethnic communities. Much of the recent research on this population does not address these issues. Instead the research targets current health problems of older black Americans (Gibbs 1988; Edmonds 1990; Wood and Wan 1993; Davis and McGadney 1993; Kart 1993; Spence 1993). Much of this data come from large surveys (Barresi and Stull 1993; Jackson et al. 1988) which do not permit interviewees to choose those areas which concern them. However, more people are able to make their views known on a specific topic, and analysis has generated as many questions as answers. There is however, research on black families which discusses some of the same issues described in this chapter. McAdoo’s (1988) research concludes that support network involvement and kin-help exchange are not class related. The upward mobility of black individuals, she states, is “impossible without the support of the extended family” and is a necessary buffer in “countering the vulnerability of the Black middle class” (McAdoo 1988:166). The initiation of upward mobility and maintenance of black families in the middle class requires intense effort and extensive resources of family members. These resources in turn help to obtain professional training which leads to high-paying jobs and middle-class status. Without this family support, there is a likely decline in class status for families (McAdoo 1988). Billingsley agrees and contends that grandmothers are the backbone of the family support system, for they “provide a great deal of the child care, particularly for the increasing numbers of working mothers” (Billingsley 1990:106). The National Urban League’s Black Pulse Survey also documents the “extensive mutual exchanges” among relatives (Hill et al. 1993).

In all three of these works, the sociological notion of class (lower, middle and upper) has a slightly different meaning for African Americans than it does for European Americans. However, as with the Waters family, the cultural construct of exchange, giving and receiving, is important for African Americans.

The black church represents one of the factors, internal to the African-American community, which has a direct impact on the African-American family according to a study by Robert Hill and his associates. Although they do not single out older African-American women, these researchers emphasize the importance of the church, finding that “the overwhelming majority of blacks have a positive attitude toward the black church” with 80 percent feeling that the church has helped the condition of African Americans (Hill et al. 1993:86).

Such research is compatible with the description of older women in the church described in this chapter. While the work by Hill and his associates points to the general themes of positive attitude, self-help in terms of social services for families and especially youth, this chapter describes a particular case to bring life to abstract notions.

Older women have an important role to play in these two institutions: family and church. They move beyond the potential constraints of class, money and blood relationships to reinforce cultural values of the importance of children, the significance of fictive kin, the problem of clinging to possessions and the wisdom derived from lived experience. Although today, some African Americans minimize the struggles they overcame to arrive at their current status, most, upon reflection, will admit that elderly black females in the family and church were key to their success.

Here the ethnographic data of anthropology helps to shed light on specific cases, while survey data used by sociologists situate the data in a larger framework. Both reveal data that are at the same time unique but complementary. When these approaches inform each other the result is better understanding of an issue. In this case, it is a better understanding of the elderly black woman at the level of the lived experience and from a societal viewpoint.

NOTES

1. A child is said to be born with a caul or veil if the amnion or inner membrane of the sac which contains the fetus and amniotic fluid does not rupture and covers the infant's head at birth.