WHERE DO THE OLD FOLKS LIVE?
THE RESIDENCE OF THE ELDERLY
AMONG THE TEMNE OF SIERRA LEONE

ABSTRACT. This article deals with the residence patterns of the elderly, defined as those aged 60 and older, among the Temne of Sierra Leone, West Africa. The primary data bases consist of ethnographic information, the writer's censuses taken in what was the chiefdom of Kolifa Mayoso in 1955, 1963 and 1976 and in the administrative, service-center town of Magburaka, some fifteen miles from Kolifa Mayoso in 1963 and 1976. Concern is thus with rural changes, urban changes and rural-urban differences in residence from a household perspective. Special emphasis is placed on the composition of the elderly cohort in terms of sex, marital status, household headship or relation to the household head, the life-styles of the elderly, and on how the elderly see themselves and how they are seen by their juniors.

Key Words: elderly, residence of elderly (changes over time and rural-urban differences), life-style of elderly, status and treatment of elderly

The truth of the matter seems to be that in primitive societies aged men and women have everywhere relied on the family for care and support and that such assistance is very nearly a universal social phenomenon, irrespective of the form of the family or any other cultural variations (Simmons 1945:214).

The truth to which Simmons referred in the above citation has long been appreciated by aging people of both sexes over time and throughout the world. It would be surprising indeed if the elderly did not try to manipulate family and other relations so as to maximize their position and hence their chances for longer life, or at least their chances to spend their last years in greater comfort and security. A key factor in this maximization is the selection, when choice is possible, of a household within which to reside and live. Simmons himself (1945:216) closed his chapter on “The Functions of the Family” in noting: “Indeed, in broad cultural perspective, it would seem that few social expedients have been left untried by the aged in their search for security within the confines of the family...” The collective success of the elderly is to be seen in what Caldwell (1976, 1978 and 1981) has characterized as the “upward flow of wealth,” a system by which the elders benefit from a disproportionate share of goods and services produced. Older men came to hold power in the domestic group, to control most of the wealth and the labor of women and juniors. Control of wealth brought political clout, enabled the holders to acquire and monopolize techniques to control the supernatural, to direct non-kin based social organizations, and, most important for the present topic, to acquire more wives and have more children.

Demographers have long been aware of the "old age security motive for fertility" (Nugent, 1985) or the "old age security hypothesis" of which Willis (1980:43) has noted: "It has long been hypothesized that an important and perhaps dominant motivation for childbearing in traditional societies stems from the economic returns that parents expect from their children in the form of child labor and old age security" (Willis 1980:43). Not all agree on the strength of the motive in causing or abetting high fertility, since the rate of return from child investment seems to be positive in some situations but negative in others. However, as Willis (1980:44) observes, even when it is negative, it may yet be a motivation for high fertility; if one child can't support me, I'll need three, six or as many as possible. The return on an investment in a well-educated child who is successful, of course, would be greater than that on several who do not reach elite status, hence parents make sacrifices to educate a promising child. The competitive quest for future old age security is a factor in co-wife disputing (Dorjahn 1988:376). Old age security considerations thus play an important part in the reversal of the intergenerational wealth flow.

Among the Temne of Sierra Leone, a predominantly agrarian people, the elderly look to the children both for help in work and old age security. The parent-child link, however, is only one of several in the family that can on occasion be utilized. Elderly men in a polygynous marriage system usually marry younger women who will normally outlive them and thus be able to provide care and security. Elderly women do not have a comparable option, although it is not unknown, as an aftermath of a polygynous situation, for an elderly widow to live with a younger widow, a former co-wife. Also of importance for old age security is the sibling group; aged Temne of both sexes may live with and be at least partially supported by a brother or a sister (and the sister's husband). Only in the occasional rare instance does a friendship tie rival kin ties in this regard. Since women generally marry earlier than men in Temne, there are more widows than widowers, and children are more often responsible for an elderly mother than an elderly father. Hence, there is the oft-heard pathetic stereotype of the childless old woman. Such, however, are among the women who manipulate fostering patterns (Bledsoe 1985a, 1985b; Isaac and Conrad, 1982). The final family link of some relevance to old age security is the grandmother-grandchild link. This is especially important to middle aged widows (or divorcees) who, rather than marry again, go to live with a son and forge strong links with the grandchildren.

The elderly require a place to live together with opportunities for social interaction, food and other necessities, eventually care and assistance, and tasks within their capabilities which provide some satisfaction for them and are recognized as useful by others. Most of these needs are met in Temne, predominantly, by members of the households in which the elderly reside. Non-resident kin often visit, may contribute to support and so on, but household and village residence are critical. Thus, this article centers on the residence of Temne elderly or aged, those defined here as 60 years and older.