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0521017203 - Contexts of Kinship: An Essay in the Family Sociology of the Gonja of Northern Ghana

Esther N. Goody

Excerpt

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## SECTION I CONTEXTS AND PROBLEMS

### 1

#### Problems

This is a study of domestic organization in what was once an important state in West Africa. Indeed, the state of Gonja is still the centre of the world (elsewhere is 'wilderness') to most of its people, even though it has been included first in the British Protectorate of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast (1897), and subsequently in the independent state of Ghana (1957).

Many of the peoples of northern Ghana, and of West Africa as a whole, have a social organization based upon unilineal descent groups. Such groups tend to operate in the political as well as the kinship domain. In Gonja descent groups are of little importance, but despite their absence it has proved impossible to study the patterns of kinship and marriage without also examining some aspects of the political organization. One of the problems of the study, then, is to trace the interrelationships between political and domestic institutions, and to try and understand the working of a largely 'bilateral' system.

This problem could be examined at the level of the state as a whole. But there is considerable variation within the extensive area covered by the Gonja state (now, in 1971, the administrative districts of Eastern and Western Gonja), and I have chosen to examine the material collected in three divisions in the central area of Gonja, even though subsequently I have worked in the east and the west. I shall therefore be particularly concerned with this more local level, concerned with the interplay between activities and obligations based on neighbourhood (contiguity) and those determined by kinship ties, which because of the nature of marriage and child-rearing tend to be widely dispersed.

The limitation of the material to that from central Gonja has another reason. The data are essentially ethnographic. I am concerned with describing the norms, what people see as the correct behaviour, and the patterns of action, what people in fact do. It is important to analyse as much of the relevant material of this kind as possible within the inevitable restrictions of space and continuity. Once the record for central Gonja is available, then the variations in other areas can be described and the differences considered in relation to historical, economic and other factors. If the record were a combined one from the start,

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then later comparative analysis within Gonja would not be possible.

The central problems, however, lie in the realm of the sociology of the family. How does a stratified political system allow marriages between virtually all categories of citizen – Muslims, diviners, people of the Earth shrine, blacksmiths, slaves, and chiefs of all degrees? And what are some of the consequences of such a situation? How is this related to a tradition which has long permitted many young people to seek their own spouses through courtship? Or to the high frequency of divorce and what I have called ‘terminal separation’? Is the common practice of sending children to be reared by their parents’ kin primarily a response to economic constraints, or a function of the short duration of many marriages? Is it related to political factors, or best understood as an aspect of the kinship system? And finally, what kinds of obligations between kin emerge as central in a largely bilateral system like that of Gonja? And how are such obligations sanctioned when these kin are dispersed, often separated by many miles and living in different political divisions? Problems of this sort grow out of the data, but at the same time relate to a number of issues in the contemporary sociology of the family.

At certain points during the course of the study of the roles and norms that are the basis of marriage and kinship, a different mode of analysis is used. At one level of abstraction any system of relationships between those in core roles (husband and wife, parent and child, sibling and sibling) can be examined in similar structural terms. Yet there are also cultural differences between societies that have direct bearing on behaviour but are not simply a matter of different rules nor of the social groupings within which they function. Such differences have to do with the very meaning given to social relationships, and with the ways in which people are believed to influence one another. There are four modes or idioms of relationship which are the stuff of everyday life in Gonja. Without an understanding of these a formal analysis of roles and behavioural regularities cannot be complete. The first of these relational idioms is the complex of greeting and begging behaviour, which is the basis of the respect and deference that are the fundamental characteristic of a child’s relationship with his parents. The same idiom is employed in establishing a wide range of relationships in which one person seeks help or a favour of some kind from another, in return for which respectful support and deference are offered. It operates at the political as well as the domestic level.

The sharing of cooked food is a second idiom for expressing a close, dependable relationship; beliefs in mystical poisons render the accept-

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ance of cooked food dangerous. Therefore when it is offered, not only is nurturance expressed, but trust invited. A number of ceremonies, both in the course of the annual cycle and at key points in the individual life cycle, turn around the sending of cooked food between all the compounds of a village. Here again, as with the greeting idiom, a mode of expressing close relations within the family also operates in a wider political context. In both contexts, these idioms have manipulative as well as expressive aspects.

The two remaining relational idioms are less benign. The ability to control mystical forces and direct these against enemies is associated by the Gonja with the power to change shape, and to fly through the night, as well as the hunger for human souls which we term witchcraft. All powerful and important men are thought to be witches, in part because it is believed that one element in the achievement of positions of power is fighting by means of witchcraft. Women are, however, more feared as witches than men, for they are thought to attack those who annoy them through witchcraft poisons put in the food they cook. Thus relations with men in positions of authority, and with all women, are potentially dangerous. Individual motivation is as complex in Gonja as elsewhere, and those who possess the power to harm may always do so for their own private ends as well as for more public purposes.

Finally, it is not only relations between humans that are of importance. The several forms of supernatural forces to which men are subject are partially controlled with the help of diviners, shrines and various propitiatory acts. When these forces are thrown out of balance a state of mystical danger exists which threatens a man, his dependants and all his activities. The mystical dangers inherent in contact with shrines are not greatly feared, though where community shrines are involved they are more serious, and annual purificatory rites are the rule. Of greater personal concern is mystical danger associated with the breaking of norms governing close relationships. One class of such norms limits sexual intercourse in relation to childbirth, while the other, the most serious of all, specifies obligations to kin. Thus all activities, but especially those involving kin, carry with them the threat of precipitating a state of mystical danger. In normal everyday life this is guarded against in a number of simple ways. But care is necessary, particularly where moral obligations are involved. In this sense the moral community includes the conjugal family, the community, and kin wherever they are living.

The links between political and domestic institutions occur at several levels then: in terms of the domestic groups which live together,

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co-operate in various ways and are subject to the single jurisdiction of the compound head; in terms of citizenship through one's father in a social estate and a specific territorial division of the kingdom; in terms of the individual's links with kin of both parents which provide particular ties with a set of relatives and the entire villages in which they live; and finally in terms of the idioms of behaviour through which relations are established, interpreted and maintained both within the domestic sphere and with the wider political community.

Before it is possible to see how these links between the domestic and political spheres work in practice, it is necessary to look separately at the institutions concerned. In the remaining two chapters of this first section the political and economic context of life in central Gonja is described, detailed consideration being given to the organization of the village and structure of the compound. Section two examines several aspects of marriage, since this institution is fundamental to the establishment of domestic groups and to their development. In section three, I discuss the delegation of some aspects of parenthood when children are sent to be reared by kin, and relate this practice to the strong ties which continue to bind kin however far apart they live. Finally, section four examines patterns of residence in space and through time, and seeks to relate these to both the political context and to the form taken by authority in the kin group.

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## 2

## The historical, political and economic setting

The brief sketch of the historical, economic and political background which follows is essential for an understanding of the status system of central Gonja. All of these factors together provide the setting for an examination of domestic life.

Formerly Gonja was an important state, the northern neighbour of the Ashanti, one of a cluster of savannah states in the Voltaic area. Today the old kingdom of Gonja forms two administrative districts in modern Ghana whose independence was celebrated in 1957 while I was working there. The districts of East and West Gonja extend across the breadth of northern Ghana, from the Black Volta on the west where the river marks the border with the Ivory Coast, to the River Oti in the east just inside the boundary with Togo. Immediately above the eighth parallel the Black Volta swings east and flows across the country before dropping south to the Atlantic; this eastern course marks Gonja's southern boundary (Map I). The area of the administrative districts of Western and Eastern Gonja covers a total of 14,469 square miles, about the area covered by the Gonja kingdom in the late nineteenth century. In 1948 the population was 80,112, with an overall density of 5.5 per square mile. By the time of the 1960 census the reported population had increased by a dramatic 48%, and stood at 118,229, with a density of 8.2 persons per square mile.<sup>1</sup>

Before independence the Gonja people had experienced some fifty years of British colonial rule, with the associated taxes, labour levies, district officers' attempts at adjudication and intermittent efforts to codify and reorient political institutions. On the whole many Gonja traditions and institutions escaped relatively lightly from these attentions because of the remoteness of most villages and the sparse population; undoubtedly the most profound impact was made by the outlawing of the use of force except by the colonial power. I am not

<sup>1</sup> A large proportion of this increase is accounted for by migration into Gonja of LoDagaa in the west and Konkomba in the east. Comparison of the census figures for 1948 and 1960 for the three central Gonja divisional capitals studied shows increases of between 9% and 20%. Even these figures are difficult to interpret, however, as two of these towns have moved, and the third has been augmented by people of more remote villages who wished to live on a road.

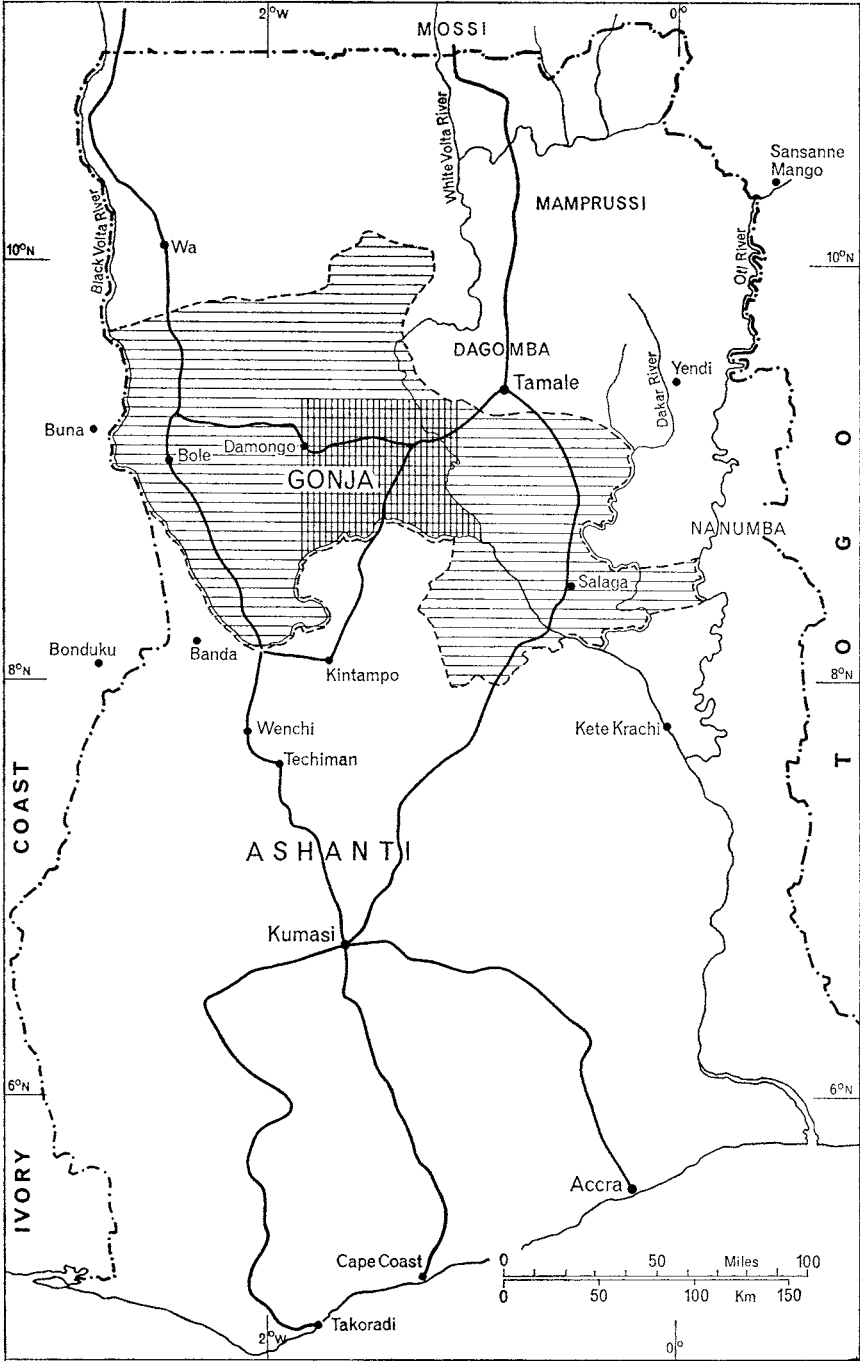
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Map I. Ghana, showing the State of Gonja. Cross-hatching indicates the area of central Gonja in which fieldwork was carried out.

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aiming to reconstruct the past but to analyse life in Gonja as I found it in 1956 and 1957; nevertheless, it is necessary to include a sketch of the past as it is seen by the Gonja, since this has such importance in their present way of looking at the world.

## THE GONJA PAST

The Gonja kingdom was situated at the point where forest met savannah and where the trade routes from Hausaland in the north-east and 'Mande' in the north-west reached the hinterland of Ashanti, rich in kola and in gold.

It seems to have been the strategic position of this area for trade which led to its conquest and unification. Gonja traditions place the origin of the kingdom in the seventeenth century, when a band of Mande horsemen ended a period of wandering by conquering and settling the land between the three rivers. According to the legends, they came on horseback, armed with spears. With the help of a certain Mallam called Fati Morukpe the invaders easily subdued the autochthons who opposed them on foot, armed only with bows and arrows. Although the conquest is usually described as though there had been only a single battle, there are subsidiary traditions which indicate that it must have taken place over a much longer period. For instance, there is a spot at the junction of the Black and White Volta rivers where the canoe of ManWura is said to have sunk in an earlier campaign. ManWura's son, NdeWura Jakpa, is usually credited with the creation of the kingdom. Yet he is variously said to have come into Gonja from the north-east, from the south, and from the south-west. All accounts agree, however, that Jakpa was responsible for the foundation of the political system, with its semi-autonomous territorial divisions. Tradition holds that Jakpa divided the new land among his sons, sending one to rule each of the important towns with its subordinate villages. It is these units which are designated as divisions (see Map II). Jakpa himself continued to lead the horsemen in new campaigns, and it was during the conquest of Kawlaw in the south-east corner of the kingdom that he was fatally wounded. He was carried back to Buipe, where his youngest son was chief, and it is there he died and was buried.

Jakpa's title was NdeWura, 'chief of the towns'. His pre-eminent position rested, almost certainly, on his generalship of the armies. With his death, and the pacification of the country, the question of routinizing the succession arose. The position of paramount chief was in fact institutionalized in the office of YagbumWura, 'chief of the great



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company'. This paramountcy was held in turn by the 'sons' of Jakpa, and subsequently by the descendants of these 'sons' in the male line. Since the sons had been sent to rule the outposts of the kingdom, this meant that the paramount came from each of the territorial divisions in turn, but always from among the descendants of the invading horsemen, the Gbanya.

Nyanga, the former capital of the Gonja kingdom, had but few villages under it. Their chiefs were the councillors (*begbampo*) of the paramount. The capital, situated as it was off the major trade routes, was always considered remote. The usual explanation given for a divisional chief refusing his turn to become the paramount (a decision which might cause his division to be permanently dropped from among those eligible) is that he did not wish to leave his native division in order to 'sit in the bush' (*tchena kapunto*). For aside from the right to one tusk of each elephant killed anywhere in the kingdom, and the right to marry twin girls, the paramount had few tangible perquisites. On the other hand, divisional chiefs whose land was crossed by trade routes could count on considerable profit, both from direct levies placed on caravans passing through their territory, and from the sale of food, beer and services to the wayfarers.

The conquerors settled among their subjects, intermarried freely with them, and both became incorporated in the new political system. The peoples found living in each locality were recognized as owning the earth and still today provide the Earth priests (*tindaana*, *kasawalewura*). While the authority of these ritual office-holders is less than that of their counterparts in the stateless societies to the north (e.g. among the Tallensi and LoDagaa), it is still recognized in ritual matters concerning the earth.

## THE SOCIAL ESTATES

Past history has resulted in a political and status system, many features of which persist today. The major social categories consist of the ruling estate (*Gbanya*, *ewuribi*), Muslims (*karamo*) and commoners (*nyemasi*).

The ruling estate consists of the primary segments of the dynasty which are localized in each of the divisions. It is the members of these segments that fill the major chiefships, for which there is still intense competition. But only in the division of his father is a man eligible for a major chiefship; and it is from one of these first rank chiefships that a man is promoted to the chiefship of the division itself. And in the same way it is from among the divisional chiefs that the paramount is appointed.



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Some of the divisions have no rights in the succession to the paramountcy. There are at present only five divisional chiefs who are considered eligible for the office of YagbumWura. In the remaining eleven divisions the members of the ruling estate still consider themselves to be descendants of NdeWura Jakpa, and still hold chiefships on the same basis as the Gbanya in the eligible divisions.<sup>2</sup> However, in these terminal divisions, the divisional chiefship is the highest post to which a man may aspire.

Each of the divisions is ruled from its own capital. Here the divisional chief lives and holds court; within the territory of each division are villages governed by minor Gbanya chiefs, appointed by, and responsible to, the divisional head.

In addition to the dynastic segments, each division contains groups of Muslims, some strangers, and many commoners, into which have been incorporated those of slave descent, formerly a numerous category. As I have noted, the commoners continue to provide the Earth priest, although his role is generally very limited. Also important among the specifically commoner offices are those of shrine priest (*kagbirwura*), holder-of-the-sacrificial-knife (*kupo*), and war leader (*mbongwura*). Perhaps because the bulk of the fighting men were inevitably drawn from the commoner element, in time of crisis they were led by a commoner holding the hereditary office of MbongWura.<sup>3</sup> The war leader sometimes also held the office of executioner for the divisional chief under whom he served, carrying out the sentence passed on witches and others with whom the community had resolved to do away.

The chief of each division is advised by councillors from among such commoner office-holders. Also in attendance at the capital, either permanently or occasionally, are the commoners who hold either village chiefships or chiefly titles by virtue of their maternal links with the ruling estate. These offices, Sister's Son chiefships, are reserved for the children of women of the ruling estate (*etche pibi*). Commoner office holders of either sort are often the most trusted of advisers because they cannot themselves aspire to first rank chiefship, and hence have more to gain from maintaining the power of a friendly chief than from destroying him.

The Muslim estate is represented in most divisions by an Imam

<sup>2</sup> The exact number of divisions of the kingdom has clearly varied over time.

<sup>3</sup> This title is probably based on the Gbanyito word for their Ashanti enemies to the south, the Mbong. War leaders were sometimes refugee Ashanti gunmen, and those who were not no doubt modelled their craft on the powerful and much feared Mbong, who fought with guns while the Gbanya depended upon horses and spears.

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(*Limam*) who is usually selected from a patronymic group known as the Sakpare, who are descendants of Fati Morukpe, the companion of the founding hero, NdeWura Jakpa. In addition there are several other groups of Muslims, of the sort referred to as clans in much of the literature, the members of which claim different origins, some Mande, some Hausa, others from Bornu and Songhai. From among these other groups is appointed the divisional spokesman (*dogte*),<sup>4</sup> who is the equivalent of the Ashanti *okyeame*, or linguist.

To a Gonja, the designation *karamo* (Muslim) means a person of one of the Muslim clans, and thus by definition someone who prays to God. Despite the descent connotations of the term, there are converts to Islam. They seem to belong mainly to two categories, ex-slaves and members of the ruling estate. A large proportion of those who were slaves, or whose fathers were slaves, have adopted the Muslim religion. By so doing they have gained membership of a fellowship, 'those who pray', as well as access to spiritual support. Further, many Muslim men wear a characteristic long gown, and some Muslim women a loose veil, not covering the face, but trailing down over the shoulders. Such distinctive dress identifies one as a Muslim, and for the ex-slaves provides a visible sign of status in the community. It is very doubtful whether most of those professing Islam are aware of the universalistic creed that all men are brothers, though the particular application of this, that as Muslims they receive a measure of respect and status in the community, does not escape them. It is possible for such a convert to become a Muslim priest (*mallam*), though the few who did so lived apart from the main Muslim sections of town and were distinguished in other subtle ways.

The other main source of converts is the ruling estate. In both eastern and western Gonja several of the chiefs openly prayed before taking office, and some at least continue to do so privately. There is still, however, an insistence on the rule that a chief ought not publicly to profess Islam, and in particular that he should not enter the mosque. In central Gonja the chiefs do not pray, but remain aloof from the Muslim religion in their personal lives, while calling on Mallams for the ritual services which they traditionally render.

## INTERACTION BETWEEN ESTATES

The social estates appear always to have been distinguished not only by

<sup>4</sup> In the eastern Gonja division of Kpembe the spokesman is a Sakpare, known by the title of *NsauWura*.