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978-0-521-09318-7 - Marriage Among a Matrilineal Elite: A Family Study of Ghanaian Senior Civil Servants

Christine Oppong

Excerpt

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I

THE PROBLEM

INTRODUCTORY

The present study has three interrelated aspects. First, it is offered as a contribution to the growing body of data on marriage and family life among urban, educated West Africans. As such it is concerned with the description of facets of conjugal and kin relationships among a section of the educated inhabitants of Accra, the Akan Senior Civil Servants. Secondly it is an exercise in methodology, in which the aim has been to evolve ways of documenting and comparing two major aspects of conjugal family relationships: the division of labour, resources and power between husbands and wives, and the extent to which the conjugal family is a functionally discrete unit in a number of domestic activity areas. This documentation and analysis has been carried out to facilitate the ultimate aim, the examination of marital continuity and change among educated, urban migrants from a region characterized by matrilineal descent and inheritance. Changes in urban family relationships have attracted much attention in recent years. Here a number of such domestic problems are presented. They were documented in Accra in 1967–8, a time and place characterized by marked social changes in many spheres of life, including the political, demographic and economic, as well as the domestic.

The central themes are familiar to anyone acquainted with the home life of educated Ghanaians. The practical problems involved are the frequent subject of popular debate in press reports, at society meetings and formerly in parliament. Similarly the academic problems, associated with the study of these effects, are ones of perennial concern to students of comparative family systems and to sociologists and anthropologists in general. They involve no less than the study of the processes through which customary norms and behaviour patterns persist in new social and geographical environments, and the social factors associated with change and conflict at the domestic level.

In the course of informal, preliminary investigations of conjugal relationships among educated Ghanaian couples in an Accra suburb

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in 1966, two types of emphatic statements were noted, which focussed attention upon certain problem areas. The first type of statement was that customary kinship norms and practices associated with matriliney considerably affect the domestic behaviour of educated, urban Akan men and women. A few men spoke of the financial strain they experienced in fulfilling their multiple obligations as matrilinkinsmen and fathers. Apprehension was voiced by several Akan women concerning the potential financial insecurity of themselves and their children, since they did not belong to their husbands' 'families' and so did not, according to custom, share rights in their property, a factor which it was said, might easily bring a disturbing element of tension into the marriage. The documentation of such conflicts inherent in matrilineal systems, centring upon a man's obligations as brother, son, uncle on the one hand and husband and father on the other have a long history. Over forty years ago they were graphically described by Malinowski (1926:100–11) among the Trobrianders and Fortune among the Dobuans (1932: 1–21).

The second type of statement was that there is a marked difference between the marital and kinship ties and expectations of people from educated families, with one or more generations of educated forebears, who have worked as businessmen or salaried employees, and those who are first-generation educated, the children of illiterate farmers and fishermen. Coastal Akan, from communities exposed to the influences of education and salaried employment for several generations, and who consequently considered themselves 'enlightened', claimed that they expected a 'closer' marriage tie and a more 'independent' nuclear family than the Akan of the hinterland, who only began to have opportunities for widespread formal education a generation or so ago.

That both traditional modes of reckoning descent and length of exposure to formal education play an important part in moulding the changing patterns of domestic relationships of urban African migrants has been observed for some time. Over thirty years ago Wilson (1936: 549) and Richards (1940: 8–9) were making such observations. Recently Lloyd (1966: 30) has suggested that,

Within the elite (educated African) nuclear family the pattern of the relationship between husband and wife tends to be one of shared roles, greater intimacy and equality. Yet the patterns to be found in any one part of Africa will vary widely, according to the traditional relationships and perhaps to the levels of education found in the ascendant generations.

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In the present enquiry two different types of data are examined to see possible areas of continuity, strain and change. They include a survey of married men's reports of aspects of their domestic relationships, and a panel of twelve case studies of couples collected over extended periods of six to twelve months as well as extensive descriptive data collected through participant observation and interviews. All the data discussed in detail here were collected in Accra from Akan Senior Civil Servants and their wives. The modes of collecting and analysing the data from the cases and survey and the framework used for classifying them are described below.

The conjugal families selected for study, being those of professionals and administrators employed in the senior ranks of government service, form a relatively homogeneous population, in respect of type of occupation, level of education, wealth, and place of residence. At the same time the diverse origins and educational experience of themselves, their wives, their forebears and kin, are such that the sample provides a suitable laboratory for the controlled comparison of the effects on domestic life of matrilineal norms and practices and extent of schooling. This type of limited comparison of adjacent, economically homogeneous sectors of the Ghanaian population, to examine effects of matrilineal and other norms upon aspects of conjugal and kin relationships, has already been used to considerable effect in studies of local rural communities.¹

It was intended from the outset that the survey data should assist as elsewhere in the 'synchronic analysis of the general structural principles' of the sets of relationships under discussion, and that they would be dovetailed with case study material. The latter was intended to be used to present what Van Velsen has called 'a diachronic analysis of the operation of principles by specific actors in the domestic situation' (1967: 149).

Published observations upon conjugal roles, urban families and migrants' kinship ties are now so many and are proliferating at such a rate that only those thought pertinent to the present study have been mentioned. The intention has been to provide sufficient references to put this study into a general framework and a particular context. The latter has been provided by a number of important studies of Akan kinship and marriage referred to below in chapter two.² Caldwell's recent population studies in Ghana, including those on fertility and rural urban migration, provide a valuable backcloth of relevant demographic data (1965, 1966, 1967, 1969). As regards the general framework of the study, comparative material on rural,

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matrilineal kinship systems, subject to change, is offered by a number of studies, including the mammoth work by Schneider and Gough (1961).³ Of particular relevance to the present theme is the latter's discussion of disintegrating matrilineal systems. Pioneering studies, on the changing family in urban Ghana, including the early works of Crabtree (1950) and Busia (1950) and more recently those of Caldwell (1968), Kilson (1967) and Mills-Odoi (1967). Many useful insights and interesting comparative material on changing urban family systems from various parts of the globe have been provided by amongst others Blood and Wolfe (1960), Goode (1963), and the several authors cited in the text. In particular Clignet's recent work *Many Wives Many Powers* (1970), which was read after the completion of this text, provides some interesting comparative data and conclusions for it deals with domestic changes taking place among the neighbouring matrilineal Abouré.

Relevant to the present problems and their conceptualization have been Herbst's (1952, 1954) modes of measuring family data; Bott's (1957) classification of conjugal relationships as *joint* or *segregated*; the classification of nuclear family systems as *open* or *closed*, discussed by Farber (1966) – following the earlier usage of such terms by Redfield (1947) and Weber (1947); and exchange theory as presented by Blau (1964).

Lloyd in his consideration of various social changes taking place in West Africa, has recently pinpointed some of the issues dealt with here, regarding the types of conjugal relationships between members of the urban, educated elite and their wives. These include for example the incidence of tension and the effects of parental educational levels upon marriages and of financial and other resources upon decision-making in the home (Lloyd, 1967: 172, 178–9, 181 etc.).

The data presented in this account were collected from Akan only. Their analysis at every stage has however, been considerably affected by the parallel consideration of similar data collected from the Ga and Ewe elements of the total population studied during the field-work period. Reference is made at several points both to comparisons of the different groups and to analyses including all three populations.⁴

I begin by describing the background of the study. First the general problem of the kind of changes taking place in urban African family life is briefly sketched, with particular reference to the conflicts associated with change in matrilineal kinship systems and the effects of education, migration and urban residence upon domestic life.

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Then the dependent variables, the dimensions of conjugal and kin relationships which are the focus of the enquiry, and the mode of classifying data are defined.

Next an outline of the institutional framework of the conjugal relationships under analysis is presented and then the present social and economic positions of the actors concerned, the Akan Senior Civil Servants – both in the external occupational system and the internal domestic domain. The institutions examined include customary Akan marriage and matriliney, which have shaped the family lives of most Akan Senior Civil Servants, and the schools, universities and Civil Service hierarchy, which have provided the channels for their present careers.

Historical depth is given to this account of institutions, since time span, in terms of generations of exposure to the effects of education and the associated forms of salaried employment and residence patterns, is an important variable in the analysis. Thus I trace some of the historical and present-day factors, which have contributed to the widespread social and geographical mobility, now observable in Akan populations. Of particular interest are the differences among the Akan sub-groups, found in the littoral, in the east, and in the interior. The focus is upon education, treated here as the index par-excellence of individualism and mobility and of participation in the modern sector of the economy of privately disposable goods and skills; for the Civil Servant is seen as the epitome of the mobile, educated man.

In a similar way time-depth is given to the discussion of the present occupational, kinship and conjugal roles of the sample of married Akan Senior Civil Servants chosen for detailed study. The several processes through which they have reached their present positions over time are described; how they acquired the necessary professional and administrative experience to do their jobs; how all incurred binding social and economic obligations to members of their families of origin who reared and educated them, some only to parents others to any array of grandparents or parents' siblings. Next some of the ways in which they have chosen and married their wives and become fathers and heads of urban households are indicated.

The aim of this discussion is to provide some understanding of the kinds of bundles of material rights and obligations characteristically attached to the position of the Akan Senior Civil Servant. These include the status rights and privileges accruing to him as

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high ranking government employee, in terms of salary, transport and accommodation, all of which put him in a category far above the mass of his countrymen with respect to income and living standard. They also include the persistent sets of social and financial obligations, as well as advantages, associated with his kinship ties, including those as son, brother and maternal uncle. They include thirdly his rights and duties as an urban householder, who must often provide accommodation not only for his wife and children, but also for the kin and affines and unrelated domestic helpers, who constitute one tiny part of the massive flux of migrants currently shifting into the capital of Ghana.

It is with all these facts in mind that the discussion can begin in Chapter 4 of the ways in which Akan Senior Civil Servants and their Akan wives allocate their resources in money and time in the domestic context. This allocation includes the day-to-day provision for the material needs of their households, long-term saving and ownership of property, which may provide future security for themselves and their dependents as well as the study of the division of domestic labour: who is responsible for, and who performs which kinds of housework in the home. In Chapter 5 is given an account of the conjugal power relationship and the ways in which decisions are made about the allocation of these resources.

In the description of budgeting arrangements, chore performance, and decision-making three concerns are paramount. One is conjugal 'solidarity', the extent to which couples act together, or in place of each other. The second is to examine the degree of functional individuation of the conjugal family, the extent to which kin or others perform household activities with the husband, wife and children or in place of them. The third is to locate and analyse tension and conflict in domestic relations, the areas of family functioning in which it typically arises, the kinds of outward forms it assumes and the ways in which it is avoided or resolved.

Chapter 6 concludes the study. Conflict areas are re-examined and shown to be associated with a number of changes currently taking place in the redistribution of several rights and duties in the domestic system. Subsequently these changes are viewed with reference to similar ones noted to be taking place elsewhere in urban populations.

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DOMESTIC CHANGE

The proposition that there is currently taking place a world-wide series of changes in family patterns tending towards some type of individuated, nuclear family system, in which the keystone is the conjugal bond rather than ties of consanguinity has been advanced and discussed in a vast array of recent work. Among others, Goode (1963) referring to material describing rural and urban societies from several continents, has attempted a comprehensive documentation of this trend. Much detailed work has also centred upon the changing nature of the husband-wife relationship, the fact that in many societies the distribution of power, resources and labour between husbands and wives, both inside and outside the home, are altering. Studies such as those of Blood and Wolfe (1960) in Detroit, have indicated some of the important variables associated with these alterations and variations, for example the level of education, ethnic origin and type of occupation of the spouses. Moreover marriage is increasingly observed to be an individual contract rather than a compact between two bodies of kin.

There is ample evidence that in Africa in particular the effects have been immense of economic, demographic, political, legal and religious innovation upon systems of kinship and marriage. Some of these effects have been examined from the point of view of the changes in relationships between husbands and wives, or parents and children, as well as between members of the conjugal family and their kin. A number of general works have attempted to highlight and to document some of these trends.⁵ Numerous monographs and papers have also described in more detail changes at the domestic level.⁶

Gough (1961: 640–1) has pinpointed what she considers to be the ‘root cause of kinship change’, precipitating the disintegration of descent groups and the functional individuation of the conjugal family. She suggests that this is the incorporation of societies into a ‘unitary market system’ in which goods, land, labour and other resources become privately owned and potentially marketable commodities and therefore may become fragmented and dispersed. This market system is the result of the introduction of international trade, wage-labour, cash-cropping and education. Economically and jurally men and women become increasingly independent of kin groups, as access to resources and positions of power depend more upon voluntary labour contracts and personal wealth, rather than rights

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in jointly held family estates. The introduction of educational institutions, and of training which enables people to earn incomes and to fill new jobs, often channels talents away from the home areas and devalues the authority, knowledge and skills of the senior generation. In some cases other agencies assume the economic, political and religious functions of descent groups, leaving them with only a vestige of their traditional power. There are however instances documented in which such groups continue to operate relatively effectively in one or more areas of contemporary life, such as inheritance of property or succession to local, hereditary offices.⁷ This is perhaps especially likely to occur in regions in which some highly valued good is at stake, such as modern cash crops, where land and crop are at a premium (Richards, 1940: 10; Watson, 1958: 221).

An effect of the large scale townward migration of individuals in search of new opportunities is a rapid increase in the number of first-generation city dwellers, living in conditions entirely different from those experienced in their youth. Not only are many of the new, urban migrants separated from most, if not all, of their kin, but there is a predominance of ethnically mixed neighbourhoods in many communities, even single houses containing people of different origins. Residential separation of spouses, parents and children, and the co-residence of distantly related people and strangers, over-crowding and the temporary nature of much accommodation, are common.⁸ There is some evidence that household size may be related to income, people with larger incomes finding themselves housing a proportionately large number of kin.

Though people migrate to the towns to gain the rewards offered by the new educational and economic opportunities available there, effective links still join kin in the urban and rural areas. A considerable proportion of wages earned in labour centres is sent back to relatives in the villages and urban workers often maintain claims to financial security in their home villages in the form of buildings and plots.⁹ In addition people in both urban and rural areas frequently see the advantages to be gained by sending their children to be reared and educated, either with kin or acquaintances in the town or country.¹⁰ As regards domestic decision-making, family meetings may still take place and be attended by urban migrants. There is however a noted tendency for kin to have fewer controls over urban couples.

Since households of migrants are perforce relatively isolated from

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kin, traditional patterns of kinship behaviour cannot continue to operate in their entirety. The range of kin with whom the urban migrant remains in effective contact is necessarily incomplete. These ties with kin have been seen as forming an egocentred network rather than a corporate group, comprising relationships the migrant may choose at will to activate and manipulate.¹¹ The lack of customary sanctions may be such that the migrant can afford to seek out some kin to carry out traditional kinship obligations on his behalf, while at the same time avoiding the acceptance of kinship obligations considered too onerous. For the urban wage-earner, personal choice is also important in choosing marriage partners, as well as kin with whom to maintain effective contacts. Though the force of customary sanctions may be breaking down, there is still evidence that in many communities bridewealth payments continue to be made, parental consent sought and given, and customary marriage rites widely performed. It is, however, the comparative ineffectiveness of the customary sanctions regulating marriage and family relationships in the towns, the individual's ability to choose to shirk responsibility and avoid obligations, allegedly resulting in the widely reported increases in marital conflict, infidelity, divorce, irregular unions, prostitution and illegitimacy, which has led some writers to deplore the state of disorganization and anomie thought to exist in some African towns. An important element in this situation may be the conflict in laws. Often there exists a plurality of legal norms and sanctions, based upon customary law, Christian Church law and statutory law which may be a copy of a colonial model.¹²

It is upon the matter of the city dweller's decisions, as to which domestic duties and family obligations to accept and which rights he or she wishes, or has the power to claim, that the crux of the problem of analysing the direction of social changes taking place in the family partly rests. The analysis of these decisions is vital to an understanding of the way in which the conjugal family is, or is not, becoming more functionally individuated and whether rights and duties based upon the conjugal tie are superseding those based upon sibling and filial bonds. The recognition and fulfilment of many domestic obligations, both conjugal and consanguine, requires the expenditure of money and time to provide the needed goods and services. Not only are the material resources in demand, such as income and living space, limited in the town, they are often pitifully inadequate to provide the necessities of life, even for close dependents. The personal conflict, ambivalence and even feelings

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of guilt which men feel, when faced with the problem of selecting which claims of kin to honour and which to avoid, have been frequently stressed.¹³ Wife and children on the one hand and patrikin and matrikin on the other have at various times been labelled 'parasites', since they demand and consume the hard-earned income of the urban wage-earner.¹⁴ Those who think that the man's income should be spent only on his wife and children see the claims of consanguines as a continual drain on his resources, while those who favour the opposite view, see wives as the useless drain and the kin group as the unit for common spending, saving and security, in situations where social security benefits, organised on nationwide bases, have scarcely begun.

The urban migrant has to establish his own ego-centred set of effective relationships and with regard to his available resources and power position, decide how to allot his scarce time and money and other benefits among them. To discover the source of some of the forces affecting his decisions it has been suggested that it is necessary to examine the pressures and other sets of people, to see how they try to wield an influence.¹⁵ For though the general trends of changes taking place in African urban family life and their major correlates have been frequently indicated, the precise and detailed changes in family relationships and the position of individuals, the choices people are making in the domestic domain, their prescribed norms, expectations and activities, and the social factors influencing these, are less well documented and understood.

There is a widely held assumption that it is among the educated, urban workers that changes in family life have been most radical and shifted furthest away from traditional patterns. The particular categories of urban educated which are frequently noted as forming significant reference groups and are viewed as being in the vanguard of change, include the Civil Servants, the professionals and the university students destined to join their ranks. Two early, unpublished studies of urban educated West African couples in these categories, from Ghana and Nigeria, are those of Crabtree (1950) and Bird (1958). Emphasis has been placed in these and elsewhere upon the fact that changes in the family lives of such people appear to point towards the so-called 'Western' conjugal ideal of marriage and family life. Some writers even see the choices of the educated as being modelled on Western European stereotypes. Marriage among educated urban Africans is said to be increasingly based upon romantic ideas and companionate aims.¹⁶