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No. 8

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Christine Oppong BA Ph D (Social Anthropology Cambridge University), MA African Studies (University of Ghana), has carried out research and taught at the graduate Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana for more than two decades, becoming Professor of Applied Anthropology in 1999. She has also been Gender, Population and Development Specialist (Research and Technical Adviser) in the UNFPA funded Population Program of the Employment and Development Department of the International Labor Office (ILO), Geneva, where she was appointed in 1979 to work on a global research program, *Women and Demographic Change* in the Employment and Population Branch of the World Employment Program. In 2006-7 she was attached to the sociology department Cambridge University and held a Commonwealth Visiting Fellowship at Wolfson College, where she is now a senior member. She has also been for some years an Associate of the Cambridge African Studies Centre. Currently Adjunct Professor of Applied Anthropology at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, she has published widely on family, population, gender and development issues. A recent co-edited volume focused on *Sex and Gender in an Era of AIDS: Ghana at the turn of the millennium* (Accra: Sub Saharan Publishers.)

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# MARRIAGE AMONG A MATRILINEAL ELITE

A FAMILY STUDY OF GHANAIAN  
SENIOR CIVIL SERVANTS

CHRISTINE OPPONG

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To J. and E.



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## FOREWORD

There is now considerable evidence to support the conclusion that the processes of social change in ex-colonial countries lumped together under the label of ‘modernisation’ conduce to the abandonment of traditional family patterns in favour of a western-type conjugal family, at any rate in some sections of society. In Europe and America the study of the family is a major academic industry, drawing into its orbit social scientists, psychologists, and many other specialists, not to speak of various categories of social workers with practical interests. Much is known about the western conjugal family – which, it should be remembered, is obligatory in law as well as normative by custom. We have learnt to accept that internal harmony and stability are by no means to be taken for granted in western conjugal families. Internal conflicts and tensions are known to be common and to play a significant part in the manifestations of personal and social deviance that are so burdensome to developed societies.

By contrast we know little about the actual working of the conjugal family in developing countries where it is a recent innovation and not legally binding. Dr Oppong’s book changes this situation completely and it is easy to predict that it will soon inspire many imitations. The problems Dr Oppong tackles are of passionate and even painful concern to the persons who collaborated in this study. This calls for the highest levels of professional skill and integrity if objectivity is to be achieved. Dr Oppong succeeds admirably in this without sacrificing the insight and sensitivity that were indispensable for her research.

In pursuit of her enquiries, Dr Oppong has borrowed widely from western family studies; but she marshals these methods and concepts brilliantly in the service of her overall research design. By definition the conjugal family is centred on the relationship of marriage and Dr Oppong’s main aim is to find out how this relationship works out in the segment of Ghanaian society on which she concentrates. To this end she uses the methods and concepts

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drawn from western family studies to find out how spouses distribute and manage the tasks, and allocate their respective resources of income, time and moral commitment, that are required for the family to maintain its distinctive character of an autonomous and exclusive unit. However, as an anthropologist, Dr Oppong knows that it is essential to examine any form of family organization, traditional or new, in its setting in the larger social structure and in its context of norms and values; and this is the basis of her research design.

Dr Oppong deliberately restricts her enquiry to a limited community of common culture, language and historical experience, the Akan peoples of Ghana. Furthermore, she concentrates on a limited social class within this community, which gives her a relatively homogeneous sample of people of the same occupational and economic status and similar life experiences. This enables her to adapt the intensive field methods of anthropological enquiry to her needs and to keep track of distinctive cultural and structural variables.

There are *a priori* considerations that suggest an inherent contradiction between the conjugal family pattern and matrilineal kinship institutions. Dr Oppong's book is among other things a striking test of this expectation, for which the Akan data are particularly adapted. There is a rich and comprehensive literature on the Akan peoples, the traditional marriage and kinship institutions being especially well documented in a succession of studies over the past half century.

Accordingly, it is well known that, traditionally, marriage was (and in village communities still is) the frailest of bonds and is secondary to the matrilineal kinship ties focussed in the unbreakable natal bonds of brother and sister, and symbolised by the law of 'nephew inheritance'. Spouses often resided apart, with their close maternal kin, on whom they had everlasting claims. This ensured virtual legal equality between the spouses, as regards control over personal income and freedom of divorce. But it also gave rise to chronic feelings of insecurity among wives, fearful of being left destitute as widows or divorcees by inheriting nephews.

Dr Oppong's investigations reveal an intricate state of affairs in the internal organization of the conjugal families of her respondents. They are caught up in conflicting pressures and aspirations; and the main source of this is the persistence, even among this highly educated, urban-dwelling, economically secure and privileged bourgeoisie, of traditional attitudes, loyalties and apprehensions.

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Dr Oppong's case histories vividly portray these situations, which are further carefully evaluated by means of a number of ingenious quantitative indices and comparisons which she has devised.

Characteristically, it emerges that husband and wife rarely own property in common or have joint bank accounts. Each, by contrast, is apt to own some property jointly with close matrilineal kin, which, for the wives, is thought of as a hedge against destitution. Demands from such kin are frequent and cannot be resisted by most people. But there are reciprocal advantages. The wives, being themselves educated or professionally qualified, object strongly to housekeeping and insist on having paid outside employment. This means having servants to attend to the housekeeping and it is from rural maternal kin that young relatives are commonly recruited for this purpose. In traditional style, wives quote the insecurity of marriage, and fear of dispossession by the husband's maternal kin, as reasons for building up their private resources. Yet they dare not leave their husbands (even if they are known to have 'concubines') since 'fridgeful' men are hard to come by and the economically superior luxurious living conditions they provide are not willingly given up. Tension and frustration inevitably build up in these circumstances.

Among Dr Oppong's most interesting discoveries is that there is a scale of variation between families. At one end are families in which there is no pooling of resources or sharing of tasks or complete mutual trust between the spouses, who are unable to free themselves from the demands of kin and cannot thus achieve 'closure' of the family. It is in these families that tension and dissatisfaction spread. At the other end of the scale however, are families which appear to achieve the mutuality and sharing, the 'jointness' and 'closure' that correspond to the ideal western conjugal family. In these families it turns out that the husband and sometimes both partners, are commonly second or third generation educated people with salaried jobs. In the disharmonious families by contrast, the husbands are usually first generation educated and salaried men. Furthermore, unlike the families that, not being closed, continue to be open to the demands of kinship, the harmonious, closed families tend to isolate themselves from kin and community and resist external demands; and though the wives often have paid employment, they also willingly devote time to their housekeeping. In short it seems that the more a family is able to 'keep themselves to themselves' by reason of secure salaried employment in typically bourgeois style, and the more generations of such family life a couple can look back to for models,

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the better are the chances of their establishing and maintaining a successful and satisfactory conjugal family in the circumstances of a country like Ghana.

As for the future, Dr Oppong ventures no predictions. She is content to spread before us the data she has so brilliantly brought together. This is wonderful material for comparison with the data we have on the conjugal family in Europe and America and for testing many current theories about these data. Perhaps there is indeed something in the very nature and structure of the conjugal family, wherever it exists, that inevitably generates tension and frustration, regardless of the traditional background in a particular society. More particularly, it is only by such close study of limited and precisely definable problems in a culturally unitary population that significant conclusions can be reached about the processes of social change.

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In Memory of Emmanuel Nana Kwame Waddie Oppong,  
without whom this work would never have been imagined or  
accomplished.

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## PREFACE

This book is the revised version of a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology of the University of Cambridge in December 1970. The enquiries on which the study is based were carried out in 1967–8 in the centre and suburbs of Accra. They took me into many homes and offices of senior Ghanaian government employees and I am deeply grateful to all the husbands and wives who cooperated in providing me with the relevant data. Some even sat with me repeatedly month after month to discuss their own life histories, their families and their households.

Since the segment of the society within which the domestic relationships were examined is a relatively small and sophisticated one, great pains have been taken to transcribe all cases documented, so that while they depict the reality of the social relationships observed and reported, they are not portraits of any identifiable individuals. Pseudonyms have been used throughout. It is sincerely hoped that no one will feel that an unwarranted intrusion has been made upon his or her domestic privacy.

Throughout the period of work I have been a Research Fellow of the Institute of African Studies of the University of Ghana and have benefited in numerous ways from the understanding help and encouragement of the Director, Professor Kwabena Nketia and from stimulating discussions, on various aspects of my work, with colleagues, both in the Institute and in other departments of the University. The latter include Dr E. N. W. Oppong, Dr M. Peil, Dr K. Arhin, Dr G. Woodman, and Dr G. K. Nukunya. I am also grateful to Mr G. Hagan and to Mrs C. Okali for reading through the complete typescript and for their useful comments. In addition Mr Arthur Johnson, also of the Institute of African Studies, helped in various ways.

During the first period of data analysis in Cambridge, and also during his several short and extended visits to Ghana, I was extremely fortunate to have the invaluable guidance of Professor Jack Goody, who supervised my post-graduate work. Without his kind encourage-

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ment and sympathetic advice over the years this book would never have been written. Also his wife, Dr Esther N. Goody has played an important part, first as a stimulating teacher during my undergraduate years and later as a helpful friend. Throughout, in working with the Akan, first as an undergraduate and then a graduate student in his Faculty, I have had Professor Fortes and his work to inspire me. To him I owe more thanks than I can easily express. I should also like to mention Professor Simon Ottenbeng, who examined the original thesis and made a number of highly pertinent comments.

Last but by no means least I owe a great debt of gratitude to Professor K. Little, formerly head of the Department of Anthropology now Professor of Urban African Studies, Edinburgh University, for the research reported here forms a contribution to a cross-cultural study of marriage organised by the Department of Social Anthropology, Edinburgh University, in which the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana collaborated. Thus it was Professor Little's generous administration of a grant from the Social Science Research Council, which facilitated the collection and processing of these and other data referred to in this work. Through him I was given the opportunity to take part in very valuable discussions with members of his department in Edinburgh, including Dr Mary Noble and Dr Barbara Harrell-Bond, who were at the same time working on similar problems in Scotland and Sierra Leone.

In addition the opportunity which Professor Little gave me to attend a conference on networks at Leiden in 1969 incidentally led to a stimulating meeting with Dr Bruce Kapferer. This meeting prompted an exploration of exchange theory as presented by Peter Blau, an experience which has had an important effect upon the presentation of data in this book.

During the initial stages of the research I gained a great deal from reading preliminary drafts of papers in post-graduate and staff seminars in Legon, Edinburgh, Cambridge and Birmingham. Papers on the subject of conjugal finances have been read at conferences at Leiden Africa Studies Centrum in 1969 and the Institute of African Studies, Legon in February 1971. These and other related papers in which I have already discussed aspects of the domestic lives of Ghanaian Senior Civil Servants are listed in the bibliography.

In 1968–9 I held the Woodall Bye Fellowship at my former Cambridge college, Girton, and thus enjoyed the facilities of a congenial setting within which to carry out the initial processes of data analysis.

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Finally I could not end these acknowledgements and omit a word to the Nananom, without whom this book would certainly never have been begun, Nana Kwame Waddie, Nana Kofi Waddie, Nana Amma Kyerewaa and Nana Yaa Pokua.

C. OPPONG

December 1973,  
Legon

### NOTE

The following customary notation is used to signify relationships:

M = mother	S = son	D = daughter
F = father	Z = sister	B = brother
W = wife	H = husband	

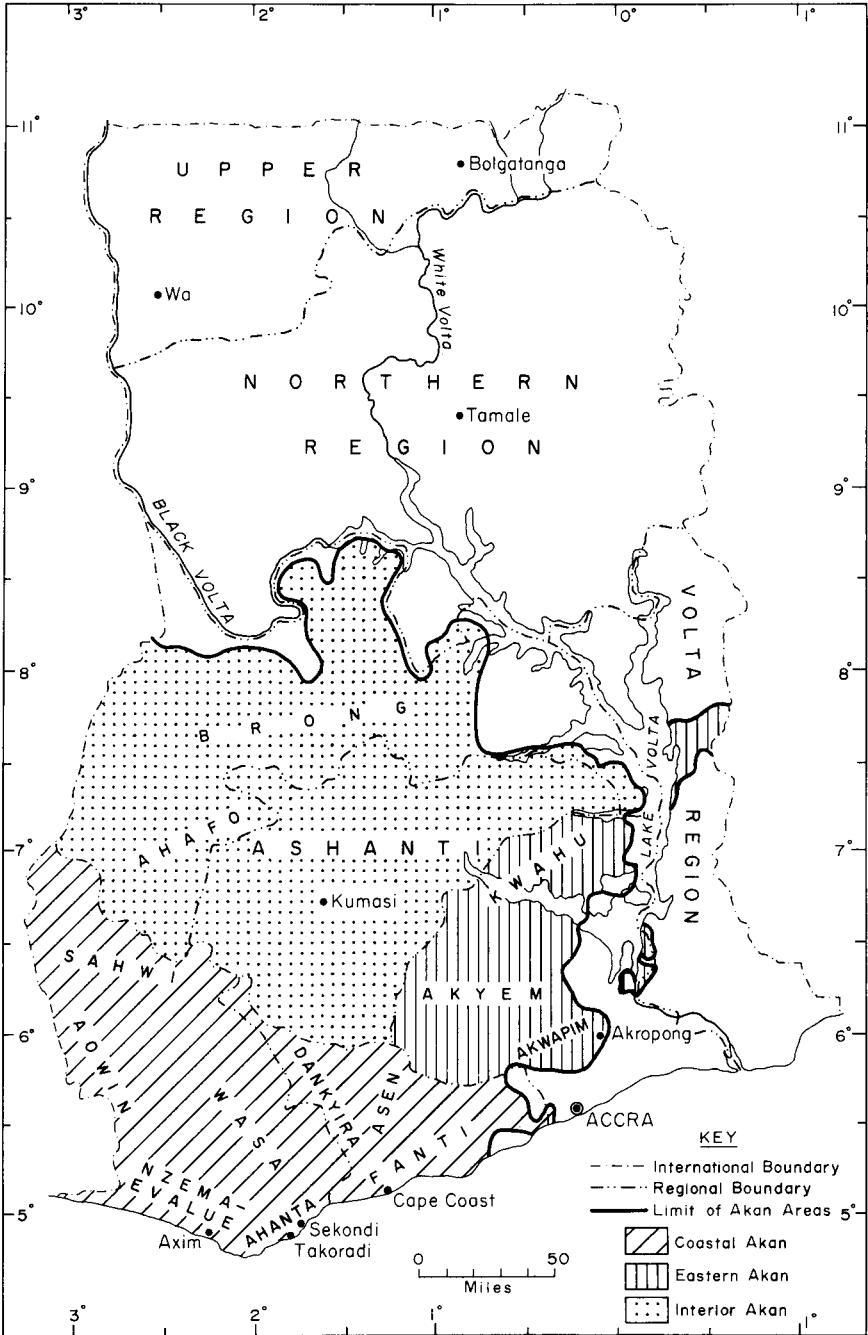


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## PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

This book is a revised version of a doctoral thesis, written under the inspirational supervision of Professor Sir Jack Goody of St John's College Cambridge, and submitted to the Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology of the University of Cambridge in December 1970, nearly four decades ago. During its writing I held a Bye Fellowship at Girton College 1968-9. The text was first published in 1974 by Cambridge University Press, under the title, *Marriage among a Matrilineal Elite* as no. 8 in *Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology*. It was subsequently reprinted under the title *Middle Class African Marriage: A Family Study of Ghanaian Senior Civil Servants* by George Allen and Unwin in 1981.

The field-work for the study was carried out in 1967-8 in the centre and suburbs of Accra. While undertaking this family study I was a Research Fellow at the Institute of African Studies of the University of Ghana. My enquiries were mainly among higher educated Akan people, from among the Twi speaking people of southern Ghana; a population which still to varying degrees practices matrilineal descent and inheritance. My enquiries took me into many homes and offices of Senior Civil Servants from various professions and I remain deeply grateful to all the husbands and wives who cooperate so willingly at the time, in providing me with the evidence presented and discussed here. Some people sat with me repeatedly month after month to discuss their own life histories, their conjugal family stories and to tell me about their relationships with relatives and their household organization. Since the segment of the society within which the domestic relationships were examined was relatively small and sophisticated, great pains were taken to transcribe all the cases documented, so that while they depicted the reality of the social relationships observed and reported, they were not portraits of any identifiable people. Pseudonyms were used throughout.

The main processes under analysis in this work include gendered divisions of domestic budgeting, decision-making and chore performance. These were all topics already beginning to be debated, discussed and compared in the family sociology literature

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of the sixties and seventies. Moreover, as the additional bibliography indicates, they have continued to be matters of considerable interest and research focus for scholars studying change and difference in gender roles and family relations around the world. Indeed now in an era of globalization and rapid political, socio-economic and cultural transformation, in market-oriented capitalist economies, involving increasing absorption of females, as well as males, into paid employment outside the home, there is evidence of a marked disruption of customary gender roles and relations and of profound alterations occurring in traditional familial institutions. Such change is particularly apparent in the case of marriage itself. In view of these transformations ongoing it is not surprising that evidence on variations and changes in domestic organization and on sources of marital strain, tension and conflict, have become matters of popular media interest, as well as global academic concern. Among the evidence collected and analyzed in various studies have been survey questions and time use data, detailing who does which housework; who earns and controls the money in the household and how these have changed, if at all, over time. Significantly patterns of change are not always in expected directions. For the sociologist it is of great interest that such changes and differences in these dimensions of gender roles and family living can be linked to alterations and variations in economic, cultural, political and demographic systems. Accordingly they have for some time been included in over arching hypotheses, linking them to historical processes of modernization, westernization, globalization and population change.

This Ghanaian micro study then not only contributes some empirical evidence to such wide ranging, popular, historical and contemporary debates - another small piece to insert in complex jigsaws - but it also demonstrates the enduring heuristic value of a simple set of property spaces, for examining key and dynamic aspects of difference and change in familial, gender roles and relations - involving resource availability and allocation, normative pressures, the wielding of power and the outcomes of often diverging individual aspirations and agency.

At the same time it provides material for the anthropologists still bent on studying and engaged, if not puzzled, by the continuity of

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matrilineal in Africa, and its implications for contemporary gender roles - involving as it does the potentially greater social space and autonomy afforded to wives in the domestic sphere - a terrain which often remains contested and tension prone. An important consideration is that norms and practices in different spheres of household activity may change in diverse ways and that the distinct and often conflicting goals and the relative resources (especially cash in monetized economies) and powers controlled and wielded by individual agents - female and male, parents and siblings, as well as partners - are critical for the shape of ultimate, contested outcomes. We see how, far from being doomed, matriliney in a number of ways can remain alive and well, even in urban and educated settings.

Furthermore a reason why this domestic study remains of particular cross cultural significance and interest, is because the Akan were notable in the past for their comparatively high levels of gender equality and female conjugal autonomy, as well as for female kin solidarity. In the present study new socio-economic and cultural factors are observed to be at work, altering these traditions. These are alterations which have been argued as potentially retrograde for woman power, a point which still remains subject to debate. The main change factors at work here include migration for male-biased access to higher education, and salaried employment in the modern, post colonial, cash economy.

In the meantime the basic dimensions of gendered familial relations discussed here have become of especially widespread interest to politicians and other policy makers as well as social scientists, because there have been in recent years what amount to several transformative and significant paradigm shifts, in much of the social and population policy arena. These concern both the recognition of the centrality of gender to many social transformations now ongoing and at the same time an increasing focus on autonomous gendered individuals, as social actors and parents, rather than on interdependent, heterosexual, married couples with joint resources and life goals. Such a shift in thinking is critical for the shape and effectiveness of models underpinning the design and assumptions of family and welfare policy initiatives. It may now accordingly be of more practical urgency than ever before to study

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the degrees of autonomy of sexual partners and co-parents, their relative equality and the extent of separation of domestic resources and whether these are increasing or in fact declining. At the same time in an age of a rapid increase in the numbers of relatively deprived and lonely elderly, the study of the extent of maintenance and care of older kin is a matter of growing interest and policy concern.

A variety of social science research, as well as feminist rhetoric, has highlighted the finding that domestic inequality (in terms of the division of unpaid domestic activity) is not only a stumbling block to gender equality inside the home, but also to gender equality outside the home, as is unequal access to extra domestic resources and opportunities. Such inequalities have been linked to gendered differences in norms and practices associated with various reproductive outcomes. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo was a watershed in this regard, for it focused world attention on women's relative resources, opportunities and power, in relation to population outcomes. Gender issues and gender gurus have in some cases taken over the central advocacy stage and unpaid domestic activity, as well as paid occupational work, have been perceived to be key elements in the production and performance of gender.

In view of the growing emphasis on what are deemed unacceptable gender inequalities in recent decades a number of large scale household and population surveys and data sets have begun to collect samples of national information on domestic activity, (as well as work outside the home), including budgeting and decision making, such as we have examined here. In the case of Africa, since the beginning of the millennium, a very influential series of national surveys, the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) program, has introduced modules of questions on women's participation in household decision making and resource control (as indicators of their assumed empowerment and so considered potentially of critical relevance to their well being and reproductive outcomes). In this regard the Ghana Demographic and Health Survey 2003 (GSS 2004) has some interesting and not entirely unexpected findings. Traditional patterns of relative female, conjugal autonomy, resource control and heavy domestic responsibilities are found; as

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are diverse patterns of decision making, similar to those described in this study. Moreover the GDHS evidence demonstrates clearly that earning money (as well as age and marital status) makes a significant difference to relative female domestic power. At the same time these recent GDHS findings also support two hypotheses, which underlay the present study; that is that women will have more say in household decisions in the areas of Ghana, such as the Akan, where patriliney does not prevail and that, with higher levels of education, conjugal decision making may become more often joint. This may occur as husbands enter more into the decision making processes involved in traditionally female domains, thereby whittling away customary wifely autonomy. So we do have available recent statistical evidence from Ghana, indicating that some of the tendencies observed nearly forty years ago, among a small select set of educated urban couples, are reflected today in the national population at large. We also have intimations from Ghana and elsewhere that over time, as gender role norms change and risks of role conflicts grow, the potential for marital discord and separation is also likely to increase.

In view of the emphasis in the study on assessing the relative openness or closure of the conjugal families under study and taking into account the economic and other dimensions of the multiple roles played by husbands and wives as siblings and offspring, the study did have some relevance for the then new household economics, which needed to enter and explicate the interior of the black box of the stereotypical household. For in attempting to address some of the gender and culture biases then prevalent in standard household modeling and survey procedures, it confronted challenges with which social scientists are still grappling. At the same time it illustrated the importance and value of studying couples within the nexus of kin and community and the frequent persistence of tension and the possibility of conflict; that families can bring banes as well as blessings. An additional select bibliography appended to this work, of items published since this book last appeared in print, highlights some of the literature relevant to these various concerns.

Many people played an important supportive part in the sixties when I was doing the field-work reported here and writing the text.

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These included in particular members of my family in Accra and England and friends and colleagues at the Universities of Ghana and Cambridge. Thanks are due to all of them, especially to my late father, mother and husband. Financial support for the study was provided by the University of Ghana and also through a United Kingdom Social Science Council research grant, awarded to Professor Kenneth Little, then at the Department of Anthropology, University of Edinburgh. Early drafts of papers on the study were read in university seminars in Birmingham, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Leiden and Legon, Accra.

January 2008

Christine Oppong

Wolfson College, Cambridge.