

CHAPTER 3

KINSHIP AND LOCAL COMMUNITY IN AKWAPEM

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Kinship Organisation and nomenclature.

Kinship is the common denominator of all social relationships in Akwapem. The household is the matrix of the smallest social group. The basic unit of the household is the extended family. The constituents of the family are usually a man and his wives and his children. In some cases the man who is the head of the household may have living with him his widowed mother, and his youngest brothers and sisters who are not nubile or who have experienced some marital misfortunes, and so have come home to live with the family. Such social units tend to grow in size in a generation or so, where it is customary for the children to live with their parents during the greatest part of their lives, and some bring their wives to the father's home after marriage. Marriage in Akwapem is virilocal. A household may grow in size, until all the members cannot be contained in a single house. In this case a separate house is built as an annexe to the original house, with the heads of these newly built houses forming several points of attachment of their respective children to the main founder of such a social group.

A household may therefore have segments of miniature households with heads who are independent of the main head in several day to day affairs, but all matters relating to religious, jural and major economic decisions are brought under the surveillance of the head of the proto-type household.

The head of the proto-type household may be either dead or alive and he is the crucial link through which all the members of the households express intra-kinship ties with one another. If the founder is dead, then he becomes the spear-head of ancestral worship. Several second generation household heads may occupy a common geographical area with their respective wives and children and the sum total of all these people may form

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a localized group, who maintain links with the prototype household. Members of such separate groups may eat together, and engage in common economic activities. The larger residential groups I have decided to call "cumulative lineages".

In her paper in African Systems of Kinship and Marriage Dr. Audrey Richards described similar social groups among the "Bantus" in Central Africa. "Such larger residential units, usually based on a nuclear extended family with a number of additions, I have called kin-groups specifying whether they are predominantly matrilineal or patrilineal in composition" (1950:210). Dr. Richards's experience bears some resemblance to what I have decided to call "cumulative lineages".

The most important personalities in the household are the man and his wife. They are the focal point of all activities. In order to understand the social structure of the Akwapem people, it is essential to seek to understand the marriage system of the Akwapems.

Marriage is preceded either by courtship or parental agreement Ayete. Minor betrothal is a common practice in Akwapem, and sometimes an unborn child of a friend's expectant wife is betrothed with the proviso that the child is a girl. In marriage certain customary moneys are paid by the man's people.

All marriages are expected to be fertile, and when a marriage is without children it does not usually last long. The purpose of marriage among other things is to procreate and proliferate one's social group. The Akwapems believe in large families, because of the high rate of mortality among the people. The belief is that if the family is large enough, there will always be some survivors when some of the weaklings of the family die. Marriage in every case is approached with great caution, and utilitarian motives. Parental consent is the prerequisite of every good marriage. Before parents give their consent to any marriage case histories of the suitor or future-son-in-law are collected in a clandestine way by the woman's people.

It is a common belief among the Akwapems that the peculiarities and temperament of the individual are transmitted to him at birth. Geneticists maintain that certain female genes produce certain peculiarities of the individual while the male genes are responsible for

other peculiarities. In the same way, the Akwapems believe that an individual is compounded of genes from both the parents.

Among the Akwapem, knowledge of childbirth and conception are gleaned from animal husbandry. Every middle-aged woman who has had children is a free-lance midwife, and can deliver babies. The Akwapem concept of pregnancy and procreation is akin to the simple Mendelian theory of heredity, and recessive characteristics among human beings. The paradigm of avoiding marriage between men and women, when one partner is suspected of a reprehensible character or has had some disease is consistent with the Mendelian theory in its entirety. They have no identical belief in the Akan ntoro concept, but they nevertheless hold the view that every individual is compounded of two parts, blood, and spirit or soul Kra. The distinction between blood and spirit is tenuous indeed in the ideology of the Akwapems, even among the Akans of Akwapem. During my field-work, I asked some of my informants about the concept of ntoro, and I was told that the concept was foreign to the Akwapems, and that they did not believe that blood and spirit, which are the main constituents of the individual, could be designated in that way.

The foetus, it is believed, is started in the belly, by the fusion of the semen of the man and woman during coitus. The Akwapems are aware of the fact that the belly is different from the womb, but in their everyday idiom and attitude to pregnancy they give the impression that they are ignorant of this difference. When a woman is pregnant, they say wofa yafunu literally she has taken belly or when the emphasis is on the man they say woahye no yafunu, "he has impregnated her". They refer to uterine brothers or sisters as yamu mma or if one wants to describe a uterine sister he says mene yamu ba. They have a name for the womb. They call it Awotwa and when a woman reaches the stage of menopause they say woatwa awo, "she has ceased bearing". The foetus according to the native ideology of pregnancy is started in the womb, and it is activated by the ancestral spirits of the man. During the period of gestation the soul of the individual is formed through the re-incarnation of a dead relative. The Akwapem believe that the ancestors control fertility. The Akwapem idea of re-incarnation is dissimilar to the Indian philosophy about life after death and cosmology.

If an individual's soul is dominated by a good spirit,

that is if a good ancestral spirit influences the foetus, then the future of the individual is prosperous, but otherwise, the individual is bedevilled by vicissitudes. The individual's life cycle starts from the prenatal stage. The religious beliefs surrounding this stage of an individual's life are the same as those described by Professor Fortes. A man's destiny is closely tied up with his prenatal influences. Professor Fortes quotes Dr. Bascom's own account of some religious beliefs of some primitive peoples.

"A person's luck and his success in economic and other affairs is also a matter of destiny (ayanmope, ayanmo) or fate (iwa) which is also known as 'to kneel and choose' (akunleyan). Before a child is born its soul is said to kneel before the deity (Olodumare) and choose (yan) its fate on earth. Those who humbly make reasonable requests for food, money or children receive what they ask during their life on earth. However those who make requests, as if they had the right to expect whatever they wanted, do not receive them.... A person whose destiny on earth is poverty may be able to acquire some money by working hard..... Similar beliefs are held by the closely related of Benin. We learn that before he is born a person tells the Creator what he plans to do with his life and asks for the means to accomplish it... .. These notions also form the core of the rich and complex cosmology and religious system of the Dahomeans, portrayed by Professor Herskovits....."

The native of Akwapem, however, believes that the foetus is protected and nurtured by the semen of the man during the period of gestation. This belief gives the man the right to give the child a name chosen from among his people (patronymic). This belief in paternal authority over the child on one side, and filial piety on the side of the child, which is the common feature of the Akwapem social structure has been expressed succinctly by Professor Fortes in the phrase "The ritual Coefficient of Patriliney". He goes on to explain that "the bonds of physical consanguinity and the concomitant social ties created by parenthood are ipso facto spiritual and moral bonds. They have a ritual

coefficient in which the natives see their deepest meaning and value".

During pregnancy, the man is expected to be kind to his wife, and the wife is expected to be obedient and attentive to the needs of her husband. If for any reason there is strained relationship between the man and his wife any complications in child-birth may be explicable in terms of the anger of the ancestral spirits of the husband. There are special ritual procedures for placating the aggrieved spirits when the offence is established, and admitted, by the woman. In any case, if after such a ritual atonement, the woman does not survive child-birth and also loses the child, death is attributed to unknown offences. Women who have been unfaithful to their husbands usually confess to midwives during child-birth, and the necessary compensation is claimed from the adulterer, there and then for the native belief about this matter is rooted in superstition.

The principle which governs the ideology of kinship ties stems from the belief that both parents contribute to the well-being of the foetus during pregnancy. In Akwapem the family is the most important unit of all social relationships, and though the society is not bilineal, it is not unilineal. Both maternal links and paternal links of the individual are important.

Two types of kinship system may be described and distinguished in Akwapem. The type based on matrilineal corporate descent with extended recognition of complimentary patrification, and the other type, with emphasis on the recognition of complimentary matrifiliation. According to Professor Fortes, such corporate descent groups are superficially similar to bilateral filiation, but the concept of descent does not operate in their organization of social relations. Those groups apply other paradigms for the memberships of their groups. Fortes continues to explain these two types of matri/patri-filiations which are found in the Akan system.

"The Akan system of kinship and descent as described both for the Ashanti, and for the Fanti of Ghana, is a test case. Often cited as a straight-forward example of double descent (e.g. by Christensen (1954) with reference to the Fanti) it can be shown in reality to be based on matrilineal descent with extended recognition of complimentary

patrification. (cf Fortes 1959). As Leach points out, issues of theoretical complexity are subsumed in this way of describing such systems. In them the corporate unilineal descent groups are "dominant" as Mrs. Seligman would put it, in jural and political organization, but filiative relationship to and through the parent who does not transmit descent group membership is not only recognized, it is required to be recognized. For it is the necessary complement without which the descent principle cannot operate discriminatively (1963 : 58-59).

Professor Fortes anticipated this combination of patrilineal matrilineal kinship ties in his book The Web of Kinship. He stated at this time that Tallensi Society was a Web of kinship ties, and wrote as follows "The Tallensi maintain, and genealogies of individuals bear this out, that if enough were known of the genealogical relationships of the people of adjacent settlements, they would be found to be related to one another. In the clan itself, under the surface of its strict patrilineal organization, the filaments of cognatic kinship bind individuals together by special personal bonds" (1949:14).

A re-appraisal of the kinship nomenclature, and analysis of the same, became imperative because of the new trend in anthropological thinking. The crisis in social anthropology started with the Functionalists, and the Evolutionists, and the death of the two important thinkers in social anthropology, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown left many problems, that they created by their contributions to the discipline, for their students and successors to solve. The heritage of social anthropology is therefore that of "a rethinking of the basic ideas of the subject-matter of anthropology". Dr. Leach in his own way has done good service to the discipline.

In his Malinowski Memorial Lecture which is now part of his collected papers, covering a wide range of topics on anthropology, Leach criticized the traditional method of dividing primitive people into two opposing categories—matrilineal/patrilineal societies. He appealed to his reader to subject to routine and rigorous questioning all the basic ideas which have nurtured the orthodoxy of social anthropology and seek to find out whether these categories, which were useful when the discipline was young, could be applied to present issues in anthropology. ¹

It is to the credit of Professor Forte's good quality

of ethnography that what he said a decade ago about this problem of kinship from working among the Tallensi, has been found to be true in other societies. The Akwapem who inhabit Southern Ghana have a social structure which resembles that of the Tallensi in many respects. Their social usages are projected on the canvas of kinship nomenclature. They have a word which gathers up all social ties into one conceptual analysis. They use the term abusua to describe all types of social ties which are produced by affinity, and descent. Abusua is a generic term for all kinship relationships within which rules of exogamy and incest prohibition are observed.

Every residential group or cumulative lineage is a corporate group in the strictest sense, and all the members have common land rights, and engage in common economic activities.

Among many peoples, economic interests are intertwined with ritual and religious interests, so one tends to find that people who have common economic interests collaborate in both ritual and religious interests. The residential group is the microcosm of the Akwapem political structure. Each residential group is both a local community, and a political area. It contains several segments of cumulative lineages. It is the basic unit of a village or town.

FOOTNOTE

1. Social anthropology is packed with frustrations of this kind. An obvious example is the category opposition patrilineal/matrilineal. Ever since Morgan began writing of the Iroquois, it has been customary for anthropologists to distinguish unilineal descent systems, and among the former to distinguish patrilineal societies from matrilineal societies. These categories now seem to us so rudimentary and obvious that it is extremely difficult to break out of the straight jacket of the thought with which they themselves impose. See Leach; Rethinking Anthropology, page 2.

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