

PART 1

AKAN PAPERS

## INTRODUCTION

## THE AKAN FAMILY SYSTEM TODAY

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Ten years before the Family Seminar reported in this book, a massive study of matrilineal forms of social organization was published in the United States (Schneider & Gough, 1961). Comparatively oriented, this investigation is distinguished by the circumstance that the editors and all their collaborators have first-hand knowledge, from their own fieldwork experience, of the problems they are analysing. The book makes a detailed examination of nine diverse, well documented and well-known societies with matrilineal kinship and descent institutions of varying complexity, viewed both in historical perspective and in their contemporary situations. It is rounded off with a comprehensive review of the data by Dr. Kathleen Gough, whose researches among the Nayar of South-west India are of unique importance in the study of matrilineal systems. In successive chapters she examines the variables she regards as distinctive of matrilineal systems and considers how such systems might have developed and what their prospects are under modern conditions.

One of Dr. Gough's most confident conclusions is that matrilineal descent groups have been shown to "break down" in modern conditions. Matrilocal, extended family patterns of residence, avuncular authority and above all corporate lineage structure and property ownership tend to go by the board. She attributes this process to the absorption of the traditional social systems in the modern market system based on private property, modern industry, fuel technology, and wage labour, under the overriding influence of colonial domination. The consequence is that forms of familial organisation built up on descent groups and kinship values - patrilineal as well as matrilineal - tend to disintegrate, the matrilineal form being, however, the most vulnerable owing to its lesser compatibility with modern social and economic changes. The type of familial organization most compatible with modern conditions is, she implies, one based on the conjugally centred nuclear family living separately as an economically and legally independent unit under the authority and responsibility of the husband-father; and Dr. Gough's further implication is

Modern  
family

that this family pattern is replacing the traditional descent and kinship based patterns and will do so increasingly in response to modern social and economic change.

Dr. Gough's conclusions are representative of a view widely held, not only among anthropologists but also by historians, economists and civil servants concerned with developing countries, in Africa and Asia<sup>1</sup> and it goes back a long way.<sup>2</sup> Twenty-five years ago, relying on some of the findings of the Ashanti Social Survey (on which, incidentally, Dr. Gough also draws), I would have concurred in her prognosis as it pertained to the Akan communities of Ghana. The past decade, however, has provided evidence, through the field researches of Hill, Brokensha, Caldwell and others, that matrilineal institutions are by no means obsolete, and that the conjugal nuclear family is by no means becoming the dominant form in the social structure of Akan communities today. The papers dealing with the Akan communities in the present volume confirm this. To be sure these institutions have undergone modifications. There has for example been a considerable restriction of the kinship range within which matrilineality has social and legal efficacy. But a core of distinctive character bringing out the contrast between the norms and patterns of matrilineal family organisation and those of other family systems, remains firmly entrenched. This is clearly apparent from the papers in this volume, and what is of particular interest is that they bring out the features that are most distinctive of and central to the Akan matrilineal system.

Let us consider, first, one of the most tangible of these distinguishing features of the Akan family systems, the patterns of residence. Professor Vercrujisse and his colleagues have investigated this by rigorous survey methods in a number of Fante communities. Modern education, Christianity and incorporation in the wage labour and market system, as well as in the modern political structure, have long been established in this area. Yet here, as they note, the basic domestic functions of sleeping, cooking, eating and earning, normally combined within a single unit of residence in the western nuclear family, are distributed and dispersed among different residential units. This pattern was common in Akan village in the nineteen forties, as I reported in the publications referred to by Professor Vercrujisse and his colleagues. They have found, correspondingly, that one-third of the compound-units they visited are "of the matrilocal-matrilineal type", with spouses living in separate dwellings. The practice of

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not being  
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Supporting  
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each individual earning his or her own living is likewise reminiscent of traditional Akan family economy. Finally, though matrilineage connections appear to be ineffective, and a man's first obligations are said to be to his wife and children, a secondary obligation to sisters' children is still admitted. This, too, is in line with the traditional form.

The picture that is suggested is one that might seem to fit Dr. Gough's prediction of the breakdown of the descent group. But there is no evidence that the conjugally-centred nuclear family has replaced the traditional form or that paternal authority and responsibility have completely ousted the traditionally complementary roles of father and mother's brother in these respects. My inference is that the characteristic Akan matrilineal bias, which conduces to a latent opposition between the conjugal bond and the bonds of maternal kinship, still exists in some strength in these Fante communities and that it is the continued strength of the tie with the mother and her kin that mainly regulates residence patterns.

This impression is confirmed when we look at Mrs. Hardiman's data. The common features underlying the contrasting social and economic situation of the villages she has investigated, are particularly to the point. In the Akwapim village, in spite of the general level of schooling, Christianity and participation in the urban market economy centred on Accra, the matrilineal residence group, still remains prominent. Women have a large degree of economic and legal independence and responsibility, especially in providing for their own children, working their own farms and controlling their own households. There appear to be relatively fewer absentee husbands in the Brong-Ahafo villages but the matrilineal bias still comes out. The father's authority and responsibility are shown particularly in decision taking about such matters as the education of children. In this, and in their general disciplinary role, fathers are behaving very much as they were expected to thirty years ago. But this does not signify the displacement of matrilineal kinship values by those of the conjugal nuclear family. "Ties based on matrilineality still seem to be important in the ordering of social relations" is Mrs. Hardiman's conclusion. The picture she draws is in broad conformity with the norms that prevailed thirty years ago as I have indicated. Dr. Ayisi's contribution is relevant here. As he shows, the traditional Akan theory of conception, according to which the individual

is compounded of "blood" derived from the mother and "spirit" derived from the father, prevails in Akwapim, albeit in an attenuated form, and as in the traditional system, it is still reflected in the complementary roles of father and mother's brother in the family organisation.

Professor de Graft-Johnson shows the same traditional notions to prevail also in modern Fante society, where it is said that spirit (sunsun) comes from the father and blood (bogya) from the mother. A person's physical well-being thus derives from his mother and therefore links him with his matrilineal family and ancestors. "Family" Professor de Graft-Johnson explains, is a "permanent and corporate entity" and all property whether self-acquired or inherited is vested in the "family". It is obvious from his account of the rules of succession that he is using the term 'family' in its Ghanaian sense to signify the matrilineal descent group as a perpetual corporation. His analysis of the selection and appointment of successors and of the devolution of 'family property' and 'personal property' and of the parental and familial responsibilities and privileges entailed, tally closely with the accounts given of these institutions and arrangements by early authorities. He adds that they are still largely practised.

In connection with Dr. Gough's prognosis, Professor de Graft-johnson's observations on the continuing legal and structural importance of the corporate matrilineal descent group is of great significance. He leaves no doubt that paternal connections and conjugal rights take second place and stand opposed to those of matrilineal origin. The numerical data he cites show very clearly that matrilineal succession is still the dominant norm among the Fante, in marked contrast to the patrilineal Ewe.

We must conclude that in the rural Akan communities of Ghana matrilineal patterns and norms of family organization and management still generally prevail and have not been ousted by the patterns and norms of the conjugal family. The restriction of range of common matrilineal descent to the closest matrilineal kin (i.e. the children or grandchildren of one woman) for the selection of heirs and successors is not out of keeping with the traditional norms. What might seem to be a crucial test of the conditions conducive to the

Oppong  
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 establishment of a conjugal family as the norm is provided by Dr. Oppong. The highly educated urban professional families she deals with do in fact follow the residential norms and make determined efforts to live up to the patterns of economic support, domestic organization, decision-taking and child-rearing that are accepted as distinctive of the conjugal-nuclear family. But as she shows, these efforts are very frequently unsuccessful; and the main reasons for this are not as one might suppose personality defects or attitudes of irresponsibility but the pressures of emotional and social attachments and obligations to matrilineal kin on the part of both spouses. I am particularly struck by the continued emphasis on the desirability or even the rights of spouses to build up property holdings and economic self-sufficiency often in association with matrilineal kin and independent of each other. Associated with this is the implication that wives should endeavour to safeguard their own future and that of their children - by consolidating their separate earning capacities and resources. This is quite in line with the preoccupations of wives and widows in the thirties and forties. There is not much evidence of decision-taking or of the main tasks of family support and of directing the activities of wives and children being vested in the husband-father. In these circles, too, the conjugal bond tends to remain relatively insecure in contrast to the bonds of matrilineal kinship for the partners.

The same conclusion emerges from a consideration of Dr. Woodman's review of the legal situation seen from the angle of what the courts will enforce. It is relevant to be reminded by him that fewer than 4% of marriages among the Akan people in 1960 were ordinance marriages which give the conjugal bond priority over those of kinship. It would appear that the courts have tended to accept such basic principles of traditional (i.e. customary) Akan family law as the ineligibility of widows and children of a man dying intestate to inherit, though they are expected to be guaranteed the rights of maintenance and training. That such rights are often as difficult to enforce in cases of customary Akan marriage today, as they were thirty years ago, is clearly indicated in the paper by Dr. Ekow-Daniels.

In this connection some remarks of Dr. Addo's come to mind, though his paper is concerned primarily with the demographic composition - not the social structure - of

the households surveyed. He notes that 'kinship obligations demand that a person who has climbed the social ladder...must bear additional responsibilities for supporting younger brothers/sisters and other relatives so that the latter in turn could rise to similar positions in life....' Again, he draws particular attention to the substantial contributions made by married women to household budgets, thus testifying to the economic and legal autonomy that is characteristic of the social status afforded to women in both the Akan matrilineal system and the Ga bilineal system.

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I have commented elsewhere (1971: The Family: Bane or Blessing - Ghana Universities Press) on the continual preoccupation of Ghanaians of all classes with the alleged frustrations and impediments to social progress and individual development of matrilineal kinship ties and values. Whether this is justified or not, the papers in this volume I have referred to confirm the continued power of such ties and values in the Akan areas. The 'matrilineal family' continues to play a decisive part in the lives of individuals and communities in these areas, and the indications are that this will go on for many years to come. The key question is whether or not matrilineal institutions, or perhaps, more narrowly, such critical matrilineal norms and values as are brought out in the present volume (e.g. those relating to residence, conjugal bonds, corporate descent grouping, property rights and kinship claims) conflict drastically with the rational economic order of the market, industry, and wage labour, and with the modern political order of emerging nation states. This is not a question I can attempt to answer here. But it is of interest to draw attention to at least one important recent study that suggests a negative answer. In his book on the matrilineal rural community of Serenje in Central Zambia Dr. Norman Long (1968) provides a great deal of material showing that matrilineal kinship ties can be and are utilised to assist people to establish modern types of peasant farm. He shows, also, that the social composition of the village still tends, in this area, to have a marked matrilineal bias (pages 90-93). Circumstances certainly alter cases, but Long's investigation does seem to suggest that matrilineality is not inevitably a bar to acceptance of social and economic change. What does seem to happen, however, - and here Dr. Gough's analysis is confirmed by both the Ghanaian data and Long's observations - is that the range of matrilineal corporate groups recognised for social and economic purposes tends to be greatly reduced, so that matrilineality becomes much more of a familial and less of a political norm.

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## Notes

1. e.g. Professor Mary Douglas (1969) appears to maintain that there is an inherent compatibility between matrilineal systems and subsistence production.
2. I recently came across the following comment by the officer in charge of the Indian Census of 1911, which shows how long this view has been held in India. "The joint family is thus disintegrating owing to the exigencies of the time and the growth of individualism." Census of India 1911, the Punjab, Part I - Report by Pandit Hari Krishna Kaul, Lahore, 1912.

Recent research in India leads one to doubt this assertion, cf. e.g. Madan, T.N., 1965, Family and Kinship. A Study of the Pandits of Rural Kashmir (Asia Publishing House, Bombay). Discussing partition of joint families in modern times Madan remarks (p. 152) "An interim consequence of the recent economic changes has been, curiously enough, the retarding of partition in some cases." The curious investigator will find the thesis implied in the quotation from the Census of India propounded in its essentials as long ago as 1884 in the first edition of F. Engels' The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State.

## References

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