This article considers the various approaches that may be applied in analysing the ‘doglientiri’ relationship among the Bulsa, which allows a woman to raise her brother’s daughter (her ‘doglie’) in her household and to marry her off to a man of her choice by virtue of life-cycle rituals. By exploring the specific underlying cultural and religious concepts, the article seeks to show that ‘classical’ approaches to kinship complement each other in the case of ‘doglientiri’. The analysis of ‘doglientiri’ as practised by the Bulsa and their neighbours (the Kasena, Frafra and Tallensi) encompasses the Bulsa marriage and descent systems, as well as fundamental concepts of personhood. To comprehend ‘doglientiri’ in its entirety it is necessary to combine both the French structuralist approach to kinship, which focuses on affiliation, and the British structural-functionalist approach, which stresses descent.

Among the Bulsa, a segmentary ethnic group in the north-east of Ghana, a ‘doglientiri’ relationship allows a woman to raise her brother’s daughter (her ‘doglie’) in her household and to marry her off to a man of her choice, preferably to her own husband. Though the practice of fosterage in West Africa has been thoroughly studied from both a functionalist and a structuralist perspective, neither of these classical approaches has been able to explain fully the phenomenon of ‘doglientiri’, a relationship that does not fit easily into categories determined by European concepts of fosterage. In a ‘doglientiri’ relationship an older woman takes on the role of a ‘female father’, including the (male) right to give away a younger woman in marriage. The older woman may ideally be training her own future junior co-wife—another aspect that cannot easily be accommodated by the term

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1 The data for this article were gathered during field research in 1988/89, 1990/1991 (in Sandema, Bulsa District), and in 1994/95 and 1997/98 among Bulsa migrants in Accra. These projects were financed by the German Research Association (DFG).
fosterage,\textsuperscript{2} which implies a parent-child relationship. Moreover, fostering has generally been studied from either a conjugal or a descent perspective exclusively. The conjugal perspective lays emphasis on the wife-husband relationship as the core relationship. Insufficient attention has been paid to the sister-brother relationship in matters of descent and reproduction. While focusing on the kinship system as a distinct domain of social life, the cosmological and ritual aspects of claiming children or ‘doglieba’ (sg. ‘doglie’) have been overlooked. It is crucial for the understanding of this practice to ask on what grounds a woman acquires ‘ownership’ over specific children. This requires basic information on how life is transferred—issues that are usually subsumed as concepts of personhood—as well as empirical data on how these concepts are enacted, whether they are non-negotiable principles or are being flexibly adapted to or contested by modern life-styles.

In this article I explore the cultural and cosmological background to the ‘doglientiri’ relationship to shed light on its implications for both marriage and descent. ‘Doglientiri’ qualifies as a ‘total social fact’ in the Maussian sense, as it simultaneously cuts across religious, social, economic and legal domains and actions (cf. Gofman 1998, Lallemand 1988). To comprehend ‘doglientiri’ in its entirety, whether in the savannah villages or the coastal urban centres, one has to combine both the French structuralist approach that focuses on affiliation and the British structural-functionalist approach that stresses descent. The aspects relevant to the relationship between a married woman and a younger woman or girl from her patrilineal family that I would like to discuss in this article are the following: (1) the sibling relationship between Balsa women and their brothers, which requires more attention than it has received to date; (2) the ritual and cosmological foundations of women’s rights over their brothers’ off-spring; and (3) ‘doglientiri’ as polygynous marriage.

\textbf{Classical Approaches Reviewed}

One of the major approaches to relationships between related females, which had an impact on my earlier work on this topic (Meier 1993a), is certainly Esther Goody’s (and Jack Goody’s) structural-functionalist

\textsuperscript{2} While the editors of this volume prefer the term ‘fostering’ to ‘fosterage’ due to their focus on negotiated relationships, I prefer the term ‘fosterage’ despite other reservations because of its emphasis on the institutionalized aspect of the relationship.