2. A Note on Matriliny and Marriage in Accra¹

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In this paper aspects of the economic rights and obligations obtaining between Akan Senior Civil Servants and their kin and wives are examined, the main aim being to demonstrate the extent of the persistence of certain traditional domestic norms and behaviour patterns among a section of the educated urban elite in a West African city. In order to demonstrate this continuity, an outline of the customary system of kinship and marriage is first drawn. In particular matrilineal descent and inheritance and their implications are discussed.

Matriliny

Since Bosman observed in 1704 that on the death of an Akan husband or wife, the relatives come and immediately sweep away all, leaving the widow or widower without anything, several writers have discussed the kinds of economic rights and obligations that exist between kin, spouses and affines in the Akan system of kinship and marriage (1967: 201 also Bowdich, 1966: 260). The legal and social implications have been documented in particular by Sarbah (1897) Danquah (1922, 1928), Rattray (1923, 1929) and Fortes (1948, 1949, 1950, 1963, 1970). Though the social and economic system has been constantly subjected to changes, many essential features have remained viable. Sarbah's work, is still the authority referred to when the legal rights and duties of Akan husbands, wives and kin are in dispute, in cases subject to customary law.

The Akan of Ghana number some three million or more and constitute over two-fifths of the total populations.² They inhabit an area stretching from the coast in the south to the Gonja state in the north and from the Volta in the east to the Ghana-Ivory Coast border in the West. They are divided by dialectical differences into a number of subgroups, the largest of which are the Ashanti and Brong in the hinterland, the Nzima and Fanti on the coast and the Kwahu, Akyem and Akwapim in the east. The Akan social system is characterised by matrilineal succession to political office, inheritance of property and descent. The majority of the people are self-employed farmers, two-thirds of the men who farm and two-sevenths of the women growing cocoa, the main export crop of Ghana. They have, over the past eighty years, become increasingly wealthy.

¹ The samples of data reported form part of a survey carried out in several government institutions in Accra during 1968. This survey was undertaken during the course of a study of aspects of conjugal relationships among some educated Ghanaian populations, which is a contribution to a cross-cultural enquiry into marriage carried out in Accra, Freetown and Edinburgh and organized by the Department of Social Anthropology, Edinburgh University, in collaboration with the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. Many thanks are due to Professor Kenneth Little, who administered the grant from the Social Science Research Council, which supported the project.

The inheritance of wealth, as well as cocoa farms, continues to be mainly matrilineal.

Because of the right of matrikin to inherit the property of anyone deceased, to the exclusion of the spouse, and in the case of a man, also to the exclusion of his children, married people customarily have no community of goods. Each traditionally retains his or her own property and when it comes to making provision for the domestic budget, man and wife or wives, adjust the matter together and share the costs (Sarbah, 1903: 6). Even when a wife labours to help her husband to acquire and maintain property, such as a house or farm, it is legally the sole possession of the husband (Sarbah, 1903: 60). The economic rights of the wife and children consists essentially in maintenance from the husband's property, both during his lifetime and after his death. Then the responsibility devolves upon his heir, who inherits the care of the widow and her children, together with the property. The latter may only receive a share of the husband's or father's property if a gift inter-vives or will is recognised by the husband's matrikin. Only one category of wives and children of Akan husbands have a right to inherit a portion, should the husband die intestate. They are those subject to the provisions of the Marriage Ordinance of 1884, whereby a widow is entitled to two-ninths of her deceased husband's estate.

Because of this potential lack of permanent economic security in their husbands' households and their enduring matrilineage rights, Akan women at the time of their marriage are said to be told by their matrikin to take their property to their maternal homes and their debts to their husbands. It is an Akan saying that one does not get rich from another person's matrilineage, a warning to wives not to expect to benefit from their husband's family property.

In addition to lacking common property the conjugal family is not invariably a coresidential unit. Duolocality often occurs for shorter or longer periods at some stages in the duration of the marriage (Fortes, 1970b). Then the wife usually lives with her matrikin by day and sends cooked meals to her husband and goes to sleep in his home at night. Thus in the post enumeration survey after the 1960 census 18 per cent of rural Ashanti married women were found to be living in different houses in the same localities as their husbands. Similarly a considerable proportion of Akan children do not reside with, and are not reared by, their fathers. There is a tendency for children to stay with their fathers when small and shift to their mothers' households later on, living in the main where their mothers are residing (Fortes, 1949). Akan men are expected to rear and educate their own children, but cannot be compelled to do so. In the era of school attendance, fathers and maternal uncles share the responsibility for the education of children, accepting the responsibility for their own children more often than for their sisters' children. They only take on the latter task as a duty, if the father fails to do so (Fortes, 1963: 64, 66).

The comparatively independant social and economic position of Akan women is a striking feature of Ghanaian society. Like women in several other matrilineal systems, they owe this both to their own hard work and enterprise and control of property, through farming and trading, as well as to the social and economic support of their matrikin, who protect their rights and with whom they share the use of lineage land and houses (cf. Colson, 1958: 116–117; Kluckhohn & Leighton, 1946: 55 etc.).

Other factors, associated with the Akan system of domestic relationships, in-