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## The effect of social change on the matrilineal system of the Ashantis of Ghana

topics:

- traditional patrilineal and matrilineal family systems in Ghana
- concept of marriage and family
- polygamy
- the effect of urbanisation on social values
- counselling programs in Ghana

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Presently I live and work in Accra, the capital of Ghana, some 300 km from my home town in Ashanti. I live together with my wife and three children. In the home I was raised up my mother with her children lived together with the following people: Mother, two sisters and their children, mother's sister with daughter and children. My father lived some 100 meters away with the following people: mother, two brothers, two wives who stayed in their respective homes with their children. My father died a pagan while my mother became a Christian when I was 15 years old. I am the 8th child of the 9 children of my mother. My father had 15 children. None of my parents had formal school education.

Presently, none of my mother and the sisters are living together. Two are living separately with their respective daughter in Kumasi, the capital city of Ashanti. The other one is with the daughter in USA. None of my siblings are living together. At my village home now, only one of my cousins is living with her children.

What is written above is not unique about where I come from. It is a fraction of the story of the Ashanti people. What follows is a bit more of the Ashantis and the changes going on in their matrilineal descent system.

### The Ashantis of Ghana

Ashanti is one of the 10 political regions of Ghana. Ghana is situated on the West Coast of Africa with a population (according to UNFPA'S Population Card, in October 1996) of 18.06 million and occupies a land mass of 238,000 sq. km. Ashanti occupies the central portion of Ghana with a land mass of 25,123 sq. km. The population of Ashanti in 1984 was 2.1 million. Projected to 1996, it is approximately 3.2 million.

Formerly known as the Gold Coast, Ghana obtained its independence from the British in 1957 as the first black Sub-Saharan African country to attain an independent status. Ghana became a republic in July 1960. The country has gone through a series of military rule. A multi-party democracy was established in January 1993 as the 4th Republic of Ghana since 1960.

In the book, *Asante and its Neighbours 1700 - 1807*, J.K. Fynn noted that the history of the Gold Coast in the 18th and 19th Centuries “is largely the history of the consolidation and rise of the Ashanti kingdom and its relations with the neighbouring African and European people.” Ashanti is one section of the people known as the Akans in Ghana. During the second half of the 17th century various Akan speaking people were organised into a military union, aiming at political and economic expansion. By the early 19th century the Ashanti kingdom “was indisputably the greatest and the rising power of West Africa” Fynn states.

The region is rich in forest lands, mineral and vegetable products. The region is considered to be the richest in the country. Farming stands first among the occupations of the population. Cocoa has been a major product in the Region. Timber extraction is also a wide-spread industry in Ashanti. Another leading industry is gold mining. Gold is the main basis of the reputation long enjoyed by the rulers of Ashantis for their wealth in gold. There are also crafts-men, gold- and silversmiths. There are also cloth- weavers, basket-weavers and wood carvers. These carvers can make wooden drums and carve gold ornaments.

The Ashantis cherish a history of powerful kings and successful military adventurers. Ashanti was fundamentally a military union. Thus military power provided the basis of the kingdom and it was by direct military action, rather than by any process of registration or negotiation treaty-making that Ashanti achieved its political and economic success.

One of the notable kings of Ashanti was Osei Tutu. He was also the political and spiritual head of the Ashanti nation. With his friend-priest, Anokye, they worked to weld Ashanti into a powerful kingdom. The priest was his Royal Adviser, seer and designer. The Priest promulgated the mysterious appearance of the Golden stool for the Ashantis. It became the emblem of the new kingdom, the symbol of its authority and the “Soul of the nation” of Ashanti. The Golden stool was supposed to contain the spirit of the whole Ashanti nation, and its strength and bravery depended upon the safety of the stool.

The Ashanti state was at the height of its powers in the early 19th century and became a major threat to British trade on the Coast, until it was defeated in 1873 by the British force. The Ashanti was finally annexed by the British in 1902 to become part of the British Colony of the Gold Coast.

The Ashanti’s everyday life, like most of the people in Ghana, is a communal life. Every household is a complete communal unit. All amenities are shared in common. Ashantis traditionally bear each other's burden as much as their own and by custom and practice are their brother's keeper. This was seen in the discipline of children and the eating from the same bowl by women and also men in a household. Guests also have special and prior attention in every Ashanti home. Custom demands that one treats and devotes time to the comfort of guests.

Regarding the religious beliefs of the Ashantis, they believe in the Everlasting Creator of all. He is known as the unchangeable One. However, as kings linguists, so they believe the Mighty King has linguists in lesser gods who serve him. Also the Ashantis’ religion involves not only the living but the dead and even those to

be born. Divine powers are believed to exist in rivers, stones or rocks and trees and sacrifices are made to them.

To the Ashantis, life and religion are indivisible. Daily activities fail or succeed not because there are natural forces but because there is a universe of spirit-power on which success depends. Thus in times of calamity like illness, death, bad omen, people need to consult the divine person who know the reasons behind the calamity. Again, life is seen to be under the protection and the judgement of spirit ancestors and gods. The Ashanti believes in the continuance of life hereafter.

Let me end this section with some remarks to the status of women in Ashanti. The Ashanti has high regards for women. “We are going to consult the old woman” places the woman as the final arbiter in all decisions in the Ashanti community. The woman is the custodian of all knowledge and treasures of the community. Queen mothers have held powerful positions in Ashanti. In fact wars have been started because the Queen mother said the war should be fought although the men and the chief would have settled for a lesser option. The final battle between the British and the Ashantis leading to the annexing of Ashanti to the Gold Coast was led by a woman. In Ashanti there is little distinction of sex in the social grouping or organisations.

Some cultural and traditional practices in Ghana are similar in many tribal and ethnic groups. However, there are some that are as different as night is from day. Matrilineal and patrilineal descent systems are examples of the latter. Let us look at them.

### **Descent systems in Ghana**

In a rapidly changing society like Ghana, people face varied challenges, especially, in the area of marriage and family life. People are usually bombarded with varied pressures: pressures of tradition, pressures of modern living and pressures of religious beliefs. The society continues to be more heterogeneous, as ethnic groups with their distinctive cultural norms and practices intermingle with others in marriage and other union.

Basically, there are two forms of descent in Ghana: patrilineal and matrilineal. The patrilineal descent system traces descent through the male with people inheriting group membership through their father; whereas the matrilineal descent system traces descent through females, with people inheriting group membership through their mother. Crossing tribal or ethnic lines to marry, for example, traditionally could pose a problem especially with the problem of inheritance and succession. Now industrialisation, urbanisation and education have changed demographic patterns in Ghana. Urban centres and towns are virtually ethnically very heterogeneous. How then does the Ghanaian handle these changes?

In traditional Ghanaian society, membership in a lineage conferred rights of access to farm lands and other resources of the extended family. These rights differed, depending on whether one resided in matrilineal society.

Let us look a bit more closely at those descent systems: patrilineal and matrilineal. We shall focus finally on the matrilineal system and observe how modern changes in the society are affecting such system.

### **The patrilineal family**

Examples of patrilineal societies in Ghana are the Ewes of the eastern borders of Ghana, the Ga at the coast, the Tallens in the North and many other tribes of the North. The common ancestor of the patrilineal descent is a male. The family is made up of the following:

1. A man's children - male and female.
2. Its paternal brothers and sisters.
3. Children of his paternal brothers.
4. His paternal grandfather.
5. paternal brothers and sisters of this grandfather.
6. The descendants of the paternal uncles in the direct male line.

A male parent, therefore, belongs to the same family as his children.

In patrilineal societies, residence is almost invariably patrilocal. A couple after marriage will either live in the compound of the bridegroom's father or in a house he himself has built. The Gas of Ghana, also a patrilineal group, provide an exception to the above. Their residential system, is duo-local. Here a husband and wife continue to live in their natal homes after marriage. Succession and inheritance pass in the male line in patrilineal societies.

Detailed application of the patrilineal system of inheritance differs considerably from place to place, the general rules in respect of ancestral or lineage property are fairly uniform. Lineage property is for the exclusive use of the lineage members and personal property, land or otherwise, passes from father to sons and daughters. As a rule, sons take precedence over daughters.

Traditionally, people tended to marry individuals from their own tribal or ethnic group because there was little mobility and industry was centred in people's own locality.

### **The matrilineal descent system**

As mentioned earlier, in the matrilineal descent system a person traces descent through the female, with the person inheriting group membership through the mother. This system is practised by the Akan speaking peoples in Ghana, the largest ethnic group in Ghana which Ashanti is one. Prof. Nukunya of the University of Ghana has rightly said that "the key to the understanding of Ashanti society is matrilineal descent which forms the basis of their descent groups and interpersonal relations."

The matrilineal family is generally made up of the following:

1. A woman's children, male and female.
2. Her maternal brothers and sisters.
3. Children of her maternal sisters.
4. Her maternal grandmother.
5. Maternal brothers and sisters of the grandmother.

6. The descendants of the maternal aunts in the direct female line.

It is seen that a father does not share the same family as his children.

One important aspect of matrilineal system is that it is the mother's brother who performs the functions normally reserved for the father in patrilineal societies. Often a father has his residence with his matrilineal group while the mother stays with the children in her descent group. Thus, the fact that the father and child do not belong to the same descent group and also do not stay together often greatly limits the father's role in terms of authority and discipline.

Is there any explanation of the Ashanti matrilineal descent system with its inheritance and succession? Usually three unconfirmed postulates are given to support the Ashanti's matrilineal system position, namely:

- a) No cock has its chicks following it. Hence it is natural for children to follow their mothers.
- b) It is only mothers who know the father of their children. Thus, there is no way the husband could tell if the child the woman is carrying is really his, and finally,
- c) There is a story about a chief who was struck with a strange disease. When the gods of the land were consulted they demanded a human sacrifice for pacification. The chief conferred with his wife that one of their children be sacrificed but she refused to give up one of the children. The chief's sister after being consulted wholeheartedly gave one of her children. He was cured and when he was dying willed that because of what the sister did for him, his property should go to his sister and her children.
- d) Ashanti concept of a person is used to explain the matrilineal descent. It is believed that at birth a person receives his lineage ties through the mother's *mogya* (blood) and from the father *sunsum* (spirit). It is believed that the blood is about 85% of the person, hence the maternal ties. In addition to the blood and the spirit the person receives the soul from the supreme Being.

Now let us look at some aspects of family life in the matrilineal descent system:

### Concept of marriage

In Ashanti, like many other ethnic groups in Ghana, a marriage is regarded primarily as an alliance between two kinships or family groups. It is only in the secondary aspect that it is considered as a union between two individual persons. Marriage is the normal state among adults in all rank of Ashanti society. Almost everyone unless handicapped by physical or mental illness is expected to get married upon the attainment of adult status.

### The mate selection

Since marriage is considered to be a communal event as shown above, decision about marriage is thus seen to be too important to leave in the hands of children alone. Traditionally, choice would come from the young person's locality. From the above, marriage based on romantic love or intimate friendship and acquaintance before marriage was not practised.

## **Purpose of marriage**

Procreation as the chief end of marriage was emphasised. In the matrilineal descent system as well as the patrilineal system, the importance attached to the procreation and ownership of children was vital. Thus in Ashanti barrenness or sterility is an ominous situation. It is considered a valid ground for divorce. Often families put pressure on husbands to either seek divorce or take on additional wife if the original wife is incapable of having children. In fact many children in a marriage is a sign of pride, no matter the quality of children. For example the birth of a tenth child to a woman is considered heroic. The father receives a congratulatory ram from the wife's family and he becomes the envy of his peers for that accomplishment.

## **The Ashanti corporate life**

The extended family forms the matrilineal descent system. The individual finds his true identity within this system and the community. The matrilineal family is seen as a source of support for its members. As we have seen earlier, the support system is quite wide and each member sees her self as supporting to sustain the system.

The individual has obligations and responsibilities towards the members of the family. The family is also the individual's strength and security which he can turn to anytime he is in difficulty. Illegitimacy is unknown in Ashanti. Children born outside marriage and adultery still belong to the matrikin, and hence get some sense of belonging. And since fathers usually did not care for their children such children born outside marriage have uncles to care for them.

## **Polygamy**

In Ashanti there is toleration and even approval accorded to polygamy. A marriage according to Ashanti law and custom is potentially polygamous. In its form and subsistence there is no legal impediment to the contracting of another marriage by the husband. The possession of a number of wives is normally a mark of importance and success in life.

## **Youth sexuality**

Premarital chastity was valued in Ashanti. Premarital pregnancy was frequently considered very shameful. Girls were not expected to have sexual relations before their puberty rites were performed. These took place shortly after they had had their first menstruation. Girls usually married shortly after this ceremony and thus entered their first conjugal unions as virgins. Thus pre-nuptial chastity was highly valued.

The above constitute some of the basic features and character of family life as found among the Ashantis. We now want to consider some of the changes which have occurred as a result of modern influence. Factors such as colonialism, Christianity, money-economy, urbanisation, education and other social factors which have affected the matrilineal descent system will be examined.

## The present state of family life in Ashanti

Direct and systematic colonial administration exerted lasting changes on Ghanaian society in general and the Ashanti in particular. It could also be seen that colonialism gave support to other agents of change, namely, Christianity, formal school education and money-using economy. Specific areas of change are considered as follows:

### Forms of marriage

Traditionally there was one basic way of contracting a valid marriage in Ashanti. The distinctiveness of this marriage as discussed earlier, is the presentation of gifts by the family of the man to the girl and her family whom he wished to marry. The marriage rites are termed customary rites and they gave legality to the marriage. The gifts could be in the form of drinks (Whiskey, Gin) cloths, money, and ornaments. These days the marriage presentations and gifts are abused by families, especially when the girl is highly educated. As mentioned earlier, customary marriage is potentially polygamous. To remove this polygamous factor and make marriage more acceptable to the colonial government and the church, marriage under the Ordinance was introduced. This is marriage contracted according to the provisions of the marriage Ordinance. The most important features of this form of marriage are its monogamous nature and the fact that it cannot be dissolved except by a valid judgement of divorce. Many educated women like this form of marriage because it gives security to them and the children. Some men shy away from it because of its monogamous nature, and the huge expenses in contracting it with its Western wedding rites. Some Christians prefer to have marriage under Ordinance in the chapel so it could be combined with formal blessing of the union in the name of the Lord by the Minister. The licensed Minister thus performs both a civil and an ecclesiastical duty during the ceremony.

There is another reason why some people stay away from Ordinance marriage apart from its monogamous nature, that is, some Ashantis and others feel that it is an alien institution, involving consequences inimical to the spirit and traditions of the Ashantis. What is being referred to is that Ordinance marriage puts emphasis on the nuclear family, rather than the extended matrilineal family. As a result of this, a man's loyalties are primarily directed towards his wife and children. This again is reinforced by the Christian teaching of 'one flesh' nature of the marriage union, emphasising the spouses primary loyalty to one another. This is clearly seen to counter the tenets of the matrilineal descent system.

As noted earlier, under matrilineal descent system, children and wives are not considered members of the father and husband's family as far as rights to his property is concerned. Customary laws of the Ashanti do not give rights to widows, sons and daughters except where the deceased chose to make a will in their favour. It is not uncommon to have lineage heads and sisters of the deceased locking out widows and their children from their matrimonial home only to protect properties of their deceased kinsman.

By their good behaviour children of a deceased father may be given the right of sojourning or residing in their own father's house. Ordinance marriage with its Christian implication and other recent laws (to be discussed later) try to remedy the issue so described.

## Choice of a spouse

It has been said earlier that traditionally, choice of a spouse was the work of parents or elders of the extended family. Marriage was considered a communal event and a decision about a mate was too important to leave in the hands of children alone. Conflicts are being created now between some young people and their families in the area of mate selection. Urbanisation, formal school education, ease in communication and transportation have made family control over many young people very minimal. Changed demographic patterns have created an ethnically heterogeneous society. Thus young people meet in urban centres and college and university campuses and fall in love. Often parents are unhappy about such relationships because most parents want marriages from their own ethnic groups. Another factor of modern changes that affect mate selection is the question of the two forms of descent systems in Ghana. Because of limited mobility the traditional Ashanti married from Ashanti. Things are different now and the challenge of marrying from an ethnic group with varied descent system has inherent problems.

## Urban life

The growth of towns has brought with it many alterations in social life as well as many social problems not associated with the traditional social organisation.

The modern life style of the towns and cities and related factors have weakened the hold of the extended family on the lives of its people. For example, one of the major alterations in towns and cities is the living arrangement. Here, most urban couples have common residence, separate from that of either family of orientation. It is noted that in such neutral territory, the conjugal family is a more cohesive social unit. And because fathers are staying together with their own children the children's education and welfare are catered for. The other side of the coin is that in urban centres marriages could be unstable because the traditional support system and restrictions are removed.

The following are some of the results of urban living.

- a) A prevalence of premarital and extramarital sexual relations. Here, the traditional restrictions and restraints have been removed. Money economy also contributes to this picture.
- b) there is also greater incidence of inter-tribal/ethnic marriages since the pool of eligible partners has increased. This often creates problems for the extended family.
- c) there is improved communication, educational and health facilities.
- d) youth problems are common especially unemployment and drug usage. The traditional system ensured that the child's upbringing was a collective effort, involving all members of the extended family. In towns and cities the young person is unknown and people careless of what happens to him.

## Male and female roles

In Ashanti and as in most tribal societies in Ghana and Africa there are traditionally assigned sex-typed divisions of labour. For example, women are supposed to bear and nurse children, cook food, fetch water and keep the house clean. The men must hunt, build houses, and do the hard work on the farm, such as felling



trees in preparation for a new farm. The problems arise when with improved education and a changing economy more women find themselves with career and formal employment. In a marriage of two career couple, who does what?

Many couples now use house helps to support the family in domestic duties. These house helps thus became the new agents of socialisation for the child. Often these house helps have little or no formal school education, and they spend the greater part of the working day with the child. Many cases of child abuse have resulted in such arrangements. Again, career demands on the couple plus harsh economic changes in the developing world have caused many couples to limit the number of children they can comfortably care for. This limitation of children by means of artificial contraception goes counter to the traditional Ashanti concept of many children for the family.

### **Coping with modern changes**

The paper will end with discussion on what is being done or could be done by the government, the church and others to cope with the changing nature of the Ashanti society:

Social change is inevitable and a necessary part of life. The change results in complex challenges and stresses for individuals, families, communities. Governments, Religious bodies and other groups continue to battle with the product of change to see how its effect can be minimised, removed or coped with. The following strategies are noteworthy.

### **Government's legislation**

Throughout the history of Ghana, from the colonial period up to independence and since independence, there have been four main systems of rules and laws which govern the inheritance of property when a person dies intestate. The rules which would be applied depended on whether the person was married under the marriage Ordinance or under the Moslem family law marriage or Customary marriage expressed in Patrilineal and Matrilineal systems of inheritance.

For example, at customary law, for either matrilineal or patrilineal, there was very little protection for the surviving spouse if the husband died intestate. Neither spouse had a right to the property of the other. Children in a matrilineal system, as we observed earlier, were worse off. They have neither right to maintenance nor inheritance.

The Government of Ghana in 1985, therefore, passed the Intestate succession Law (PNDCL III) with a view of removing the anomalies in the existing laws relating to intestate succession. The idea was to provide a uniform law that will be applicable throughout the country irrespective of whether the deceased comes from a patrilineal or matrilineal community and the type of marriage contracted. The provisions of the law are aimed at giving a larger portion of the deceased's estate to his spouse and children than was the case before the law.

The Church is to take advantage of this Law and educate her members about these provisions. Also individual family members are to be encouraged to make wills.

## Church's family life education and counselling programmes

The Christian Council of Ghana is an ecumenical body made up of 14 member churches and two affiliated organisations. Over the years the Council has tried to catalyse the churches to respond to societal needs through its specialised Departments, namely, Church and Society, Development and Environment, Church Relations, Theology and Research. The general purpose of the Council, in addition to spiritual upliftment of the churches, is to create awareness in individuals, equip them with the requisite skills for empowerment, development and transformation. Some of the prime foci is to confront change, reduce stress and poverty and enhance the quality of life of people.

The Christian Council of Ghana for the past 30 years has tried to strengthen the integrity of the Christian family and to address some of the issues raised through her Family Life Education, Family Counselling and Family Planning Programmes. Some of the challenging problems of matrilineal inheritance can still be tackled through above named programmes.

The following can also be strengthened and promoted.

- a) *Awareness Building* through Seminars, workshops and the setting up of Counselling and Christian Education Services in the Churches.
- b) *Capacity Building*: Counselling Programmes to provide basic skills in effective communication and how to deal constructively with marital and other conflicts.
- c) Provision of relevant *literature* which address some of the issues raised.
- d) *Advocacy*: Mobilise church and communities to form pressure groups to speak against some of these cultural practices that dehumanise people. The need also to speak out on human rights for children and women is to be promoted.
- e) Institutionalising *Premarital Counselling* and making it a pre-requisite before blessing marriages in the Church. In this way some of the issues of say, inter-tribal/ethnic marriages, child bearing, inheritance and succession and the changing nature of sex roles would be addressed before the marriage takes place.
- f) *Family/Couples Support Groups*. Such groups could be a substitute to the traditional extended family which has lost most of its functions in the wake of modern change.

## Conclusion

What has been said about the Ashantis, an ethnic group forming about 18% of the population in Ghana, can be generalised to cover the whole country. The Ashanti society, like the bigger society of Ghana, is rapidly changing.

Individual, family and national concerns resulting from these changes are often complex and unyielding to simplistic solutions. People in our churches and communities need knowledge and understanding to grapple with these changes. The Church can continue to examine the problems and evolve Biblical based solution to help people cope with such life issues.

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