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## African Family and Kinship

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# **African Family and Kinship**

*Brian Siegel*

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"Don't be fooled," advised a senior Zambian bureaucrat. "Here in Africa, the family is first. This will never change." I was on my way to study the labor strategies of Copperbelt market gardeners, and I had told him my plans to consult the local officials charged with "developing" the "static rural masses." One should not, he advised, accept such programs at face value, for government offices and officials would never inspire the same loyalties as those of family ties.

The significance of such ties was dramatically illustrated in 1983, when 1.3 million migrant workers from Ghana—nearly one-tenth of all Ghanaians—were suddenly deported from Nigeria. Things looked bad, for severe drought had only worsened the chronic crisis that is the Ghanaian economy. Western relief agencies drew up plans for emergency camps to feed and house the deportees. Yet, this particular crisis soon evaporated, for within two weeks the Ghanaian deportees had all disappeared back into their families at home (Harden, 1990:6).

Still, those who honor their family obligations may do so out of a mixed sense of cynicism, dread, and guilt. Consider the Ghanaian sociologist Kwasi Oduro. With his mother's support, he became the first university graduate in his family. In spite of his enviable teaching job in Accra, his government salary cannot properly support his wife and five children. Yet, he shares his three-bedroom home with eleven home-village cousins (his classificatory brothers and sisters) and, during his rare visits home, cannot refuse his mother's, mother's sister's, and

sister's desperate requests for cash. "I want out of the extended family trap," he says, "and when my mother dies I don't think I'll go back to the village anymore" (Harden, 1990:94).

Family ties are sometimes strained, and Africans do not always honor the ideals of family loyalty. Yet, it is important to note that such cultural ideals are as common to African societies as those of personal autonomy are in our own.

- **COMPARING MARRIAGE AND FAMILY FORMS**

Families take different forms and are invested with different meanings. Whereas we in the United States typically conceive of family as conjugal, or nuclear, that composed of a married couple and their children, Africans generally use the term to denote the extended family, several generations of relatives living at home and away.

Still other aspects of the African family are best understood in terms of the broad historical contrast Jack Goody (1976) draws between Eurasian and black African societies. The preindustrial societies of Europe and Asia were generally based on labor-intensive regimes of plow and/or irrigation agriculture. Here, where permanent and heritable land-ownership was the primary index of wealth and status, marriage was wrapped up in property considerations. Polygamy (except in Muslim societies) was prohibited, premarital sex was discouraged, and parents used whatever property they held—the son's heritable estate or daughter's dowry—to ensure that their children maintained their social position by marrying within their own (or a higher-ranking) class or caste. Such considerations often delayed the age of marriage, and they prevented some—the elderly bachelors or spinsters from poor but honorable families—from

ever marrying at all. In this respect, idealized celibacy, monasteries, and convents were peculiar to Eurasian societies.

Black African societies were very different, for most were based on labor-saving forms of slash-and-burn horticulture (or hoe-farming), in which crops are grown in the ash beds left after cut and dried trees and brush are burned. Thus, garden and even village sites are shifted as the old, unproductive gardens are abandoned. As Africa was generally marked by poor soils and low population densities, land was relatively abundant, and wealth and status were not measured in terms of necessarily impermanent land-use rights, but in control over the laborers needed to work the land. African societies had rulers, subjects, and slaves, but few had landlords, tenants, or serfs. This general lack of class or caste distinctions also meant that marriage patterns were relatively open, for even chiefs and kings, by marrying outside their own lineages or clan, had to marry commoners.

Accordingly, Africans still view marriage as a means for begetting children rather than a strategy for maximizing landed estates and class positions. There is no tradition of idealized celibacy, and many societies take a relatively casual view of premarital sex. Infertility and infant mortality are terrible personal tragedies, for children are desired and loved, Children are also the markers of adult status and are essential for becoming an immortal (i.e., remembered) ancestor; therefore, all normal adults expect to marry—and not just once, but often several times. This is obviously true of men, for all African societies permit polygyny (the practice of having more than one wife), but women also participate in the common pattern of early marriage, divorce(s), and remarriage.

Let me offer a personal example of African ideas about marriage and children. My first child was conceived within days of my wife's arrival in Zambia. No sooner did the hospital

confirm her pregnancy than I took her out to meet my Lamba village hosts. Evenings there are spent chatting around a fire, but one night she was just too exhausted to participate. Although it is Lamba custom not to tempt fate by discussing the yet unborn, I thought it better to tell our hosts about her condition than have them think her unsociably “proud.”

Our conversation took a revealing turn. They wanted to know all about us, beginning with our ages and our previous children, living or dead. Since we had none, they suggested that she married me after her first marriage proved childless, a common ground for divorce. I certainly seemed to be fertile, so they then asked about my other wives and children. No, I insisted, though we were both in our late twenties, neither of us had been married before, and we had chosen to remain childless through a lengthy courtship and nearly three years of marriage.

My friends were surprised. They had just been lamenting Zambia’s rising cost of living, so I explained that life in the United States was so expensive that we often delay marriage and children until we can afford them. Now these Baptist villagers were upset. What had money to do with marriage and children? They were our purpose here on earth. They had always heard we *Basungu* (whites) were a money-minded people, but they had never imagined us to be so perverted as to reduce marriage and childbearing to monetary calculations!

Goody (1976) is right. African ideas of marriage and family are, in these respects, very different from our own.

- **UNILINEAL DESCENT AND DESCENT GROUPS**

Families take different forms, and kinship or family ties can be computed in different ways. Most North Americans are raised in one nuclear family, then, after marriage, begin another. We also have extended families, which may assemble for relatives' birthdays, weddings, and funerals. But we rarely live with them, for our custom is that of neolocal (literally, "new place") postmarital residence.

In fact, we all have more or less distant kin whom we barely know. And even those we do know, like our paternal and maternal cousins, are not necessarily related to each other. This is because we have a bilateral kinship system and trace family ties through the males and females on both our mother's and father's sides of the family. Bilateral descent gives us the largest kinship network of any descent system ever invented. But it makes it difficult to keep track of our kin. And this, together with neolocality, makes it nearly impossible to use kinship in structuring our social order.

The African notion of "family," by contrast, typically refers to the extended family system. Not only do members of an African extended family often live together, but they find it relatively easy to keep track of their kin. This is because the vast majority of African peoples have unilineal ("one line") descent systems that trace kinship through just one sex—either patrilineally, through a line of fathers, or matrilineally, through a line of mothers. With unilineal descent, Africans create still larger familistic groups, the unilineal descent groups called the lineage and clan. The difference between the two is largely one of size and genealogical depth. While the members of a given lineage can spell out their precise genealogical links, the members of a clan—which is usually composed of many constituent

lineages—only know that they are somehow related. Such descent groups are so large and encompassing that they conveniently structure the organization of social life.

The point should be stressed here that while lineage members can specify their genealogical links, these are representations of sociological ancestry and do not always constitute objective historical or biological facts. Until the advent of writing, elders were free to interpret and edit their genealogical knowledge, and there is, over time, a common tendency for the smaller, less prolific lineage segments or lineage dependents, like the descendants of domestic slaves, to be assigned a suitable ancestor and be incorporated into its dominant segments. Wilson (1979:53-55), for example, tells how, from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, European and Muslim shipwreck victims along the southeastern African coast were absorbed into the neighboring chiefdoms' descent groups. And Lan (1985) tells how, during the 1971-1980 liberation struggle in northeastern Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe's ZANU guerrillas established identities as the symbolic "grandchildren" of the local Shona's ancient chiefs.

The patrilineal Nuer of southern Sudan, as described by Evans-Pritchard (1940), inspired generations of anthropologists to study the genealogical charter of African social life. According to Evans-Pritchard (1950:368), any Nuer "can establish kinship of some kind—real, assumed, by analogy, mythological, or just fictitious—with everybody he comes into contact with during this lifetime and throughout the length and breadth of Nuerland... for all social obligation of a personal kind is defined in terms of kinship." Their patrilineal social structure is more accurately understood as an idealized model of the society (Gough, 1971; Mair, 1974:124, 133-134; Southall, 1986). In short, kinship is less a "God's truth" account of objective historical fact than an ideological framework, or plausible sociological fiction, for the ordering of social life (Moore, 1969; Karp, 1978; Vansina, 1980).

In theory, then, every individual is born into a conceptually immortal descent group that includes the living, the dead (ancestors), and the yet unborn. Like the corporations in our own society, a lineage or clan transcends the lifetimes of its individual members and controls property rights to such things as land and herds, leadership positions, and spiritual powers. As each lineage or clan is a giant extended family, its members must marry outside their own descent group. Thus, marriage more closely resembles an alliance of two preexisting families than the creation of a new one. And, like family, lineage or clan members have a collective obligation to assist one another, especially when it comes to settling disputes or paying compensation for each other's mistakes.

A final characteristic of the unilineal extended family is its lumping of different kin together under the same kinship term. Take parents, for example. The term "father" almost always includes your father's brothers, and the term "mother" includes your mother's sisters. The children of all these "mothers" and "fathers" (half of your cousins) are your "brothers" and "sisters"; and among most African peoples their children are your "children" too. While you cannot have sex with or marry your "brothers" and "sisters" (i.e., father's brothers' and mother's sisters' children), your "aunt's" (father's sisters') and "uncle's" (mother's brothers') children are fair game because they do not belong to either parent's descent group. In fact, these "cousins" (the other half of your cousins) are often your preferred marriage partners.

This may sound awfully confusing, but it does not entail any confusion over biological parentage. Such classificatory kinship terms merely reflect the elegant simplicity of unilineal descent and tell individuals how they are expected to relate to one another. My Lamba friends were just as baffled by our indiscriminate lumping of aunts, uncles, and cousins, and wondered how we managed to tell them all apart.



- **AFRICAN DESCENT AND RESIDENCE PATTERNS**

Patriliney, or descent through males, is the most common descent system in Africa and throughout the world. It is strongly associated with the pastoral (herding) peoples of the savannas of western and eastern Africa—like the Fulani (Fulbe) peoples (stretching from Senegambia to the Central African Republic), the Nuer (southern Sudan), and the Maasai (western Kenya and Tanzania). But it is also common to a wide variety of horticultural peoples—like the stateless Tiv (east-central Nigeria) and Gikuyu (central Kenya), and the state-level Yoruba (southwestern Nigeria) and Ganda (Uganda). All of these, like the vast majority of patrilineal peoples, practice patrilocality, in which, after marriage, the bride leaves home to live with or near her husband's family.

Descent was formerly regarded as a primary social fact, but Murdock (1949) persuaded most anthropologists that descent systems result from the composition of cooperative work groups and consequent patterns of postmarital residence. More recent research has broadened the notion of cooperative work to include warfare and trade with subsistence activities, for a key predictor of residence is whether a people have a history of internal or external warfare (Ember and Ember, 1971; Divale, 1974). Where a people has a history of internal warfare—intercommunity raiding between people speaking the same language—patrilocality and patriliney seem to result from the clear advantage of keeping a defensive core of related fathers, brothers, and sons living together in one place. Where, on the other hand, warfare was purely external, or between different peoples, patrilocality and patriliney seem to result from males' close cooperation in managing common land or cattle estates.

In patrilineal societies, the children born to a marriage legitimized by bridewealth or bride service (see "Marital Alliances" below) are members of their father's patrilineage or patrician. Since descent is traced through fathers, a man and his brother, their children, and their sons' children are all members of the same descent group. Women are too, but a sister's or daughter's children will belong to their fathers' groups. Children do recognize kinship links with their mother's patrilineal relatives and often enjoy especially close ties with their mother's brother, but such matrilineal (literally, mother's side") links are of secondary importance in the formal scheme of things. Yoruba women, for example, enjoy the same patrilineal inheritance rights as their brothers. But where the heritable resources—such as houses, cocoa lands, titles, or political offices—are in scarce supply, the patrilineal principles of inheritance tend to favor direct male descendants over sisters' children (Eades, 1980:52, 55-56, 60, 98; Lloyd, 1965:570).

Under patrilineality, the lines of descent and authority converge in the person of one's father or husband. A wife, at the time of her marriage, exchanges the authority of her father for that of her husband, and in many patrilineal societies, especially in southern Africa, a wife is gradually absorbed into her husband's patrilineal descent group. Children typically view their father as an emotionally distant disciplinarian, for whatever affection they may feel toward one another is compromised by the respect and obedience they owe him as the immediate representative of their lineage or clan.

Matrilineality, on the other hand, is largely confined to a few pockets in or near the coastal forests of western Africa (e.g., the Asante and other Akan peoples in Ghana), and to the broad "matrilineal belt" that stretches across the wooded savannas of south-central Africa, from Zaire and Angola to Tanzania and Mozambique (e.g., the Lamba and Bemba of Zambia). Here, where warfare was largely external, or where hunting or trading took men away for prolonged

periods, and where most of the hoeing and weeding is performed by female work groups, the residence and descent patterns reflect the advantage of keeping a cooperative and related core of mothers, sisters, and daughters living together in one place (Ember and Ember, 1971; Divale, 1974).

Most such societies have either matrilocal or avunculocal residence. Under matrilocality, the groom leaves his family to live with or near his wife's matrikin, while under avunculocality the couple lives with or near the husband's mother's brother (*avunculus* in Latin) and the husband's matrikin. These two residence patterns can exist in the same society. A Lamba marriage, for example, is supposed to begin with an extended period of matrilocal bride service. Then, several years and children later, after proving his ability to care for his wife and children, the Lamba husband requests permission to remove them to his mother's brother's village. Should his wife's family refuse him, he can either "lump it" or terminate the marriage.

In matrilineal societies, a person is born into his mother's matrilineage or matriclan regardless of her marital status or the payment of bridewealth. Descent is traced through mothers. Thus, a woman and her sister, their children, and their daughters' children all belong to the same descent group. Men do too, but a brother's or son's children invariably belong to their own mothers' groups. While children in matrilineal societies recognize some affiliation with their father's matrikin and often enjoy warm ties with their father, such patrilineal ("father's side") links are of secondary importance when it comes to the inheritance of property, titles, or political office. For in these societies, one is supposed to inherit such resources from the mother's brother, the matrilineal authority figure, rather than one's father, as is the case in patrilineal societies.

Matriliny is not matriarchy (rule by women), for the formal positions of authority in a matrilineal descent group are usually held by either brothers or mother's brothers. Neither is it a mirror image of patriliney, for here the lines of descent and authority are split, and the husband's authority over his wife and children is strictly limited. A man may be the authority figure for his sister and her children, but his own wife and children fall under the authority of his brother-in-law. Matrilocal or avunculocal residence only complicates the issue, for a brother, his sister, and her sons and daughters may all live in different villages. The resulting tensions are, from the male's perspective, known as the "matrilineal dilemma."

The "war between the sexes" is a daily reality in such societies, and it is one in which women—at least those who are mothers—have a decided advantage. A mother's interests are narrowly focused upon the rights of her children, while the father's are divided between two rival groups—that of his wife and children, on the one hand, and that of his sister and sister's children on the other. While a married brother must try to balance these competing demands, his wife and sister need only be good mothers. Mothers can and do exploit men's divided interests to their own and their children's advantage. Whatever men in a matrilineal society may say about the inherent weakness and inferiority of women, they find it very difficult to control their wives and sisters (Beidelman, 1986:17-22). It is little wonder then, at least in eastern and central Africa, that marriage ties are notoriously more brittle in matrilineal than in patrilineal societies.

Anthropologists have devoted a lot of print to the question of matriliny's future and whether or not it restricts economic enterprise. As Mary Douglas (1969) notes, it seems to perform well under conditions of open opportunities and unrestricted resources. In southern Ghana, for example, the matrilineal cocoa-farming migrants from the Asante and other Akan peoples enjoy

a distinct advantage over those from patrilineal societies, for they alone are able to form cooperative, descent-based "companies" for buying and recruiting labor—at least so long as their wives and poorer relatives can expect to receive their own farms for their efforts (Hill, 1963, 1986:134-138; Okali, 1983).

But matriliney's conflicting loyalties and diffuse authority relations are not well suited to conditions of interpersonal competition and restricted resources. Among the matrilineal and matrilineal Chewa-speaking people of southeastern Malawi (of mixed Nyanja and Lomwe origins), custom (perhaps reinforced by the present scarcity of land) denies most men access to their matrilineages' lands, and the land disputes between sisters in a given village have led to a wider recognition of the lowly, immigrant "sons-in-law" as nuclear family heads (Peters, 1994). Matriliney does not guarantee female solidarity. But since it generates "a political economy that minimizes male control of power and resources" (Poewe, 1979:115), most discussions of its future tend to assume a male perspective.

It is not surprising that Karla Poewe learned that male and female entrepreneurs have different attitudes toward matriliney. The Luapula River valley, along Zaire's southeastern border with Zambia, has long hosted the long-distance trade in fish and crops and is famous for a long tradition of wealthy entrepreneurs. The large fish- or crop-trading businessman in Zambia's Luapula province has little use for his matrikin's claims for support. Like the opportunistic "therapeutic Muslim" converts described in David Parkin's (1972) study of Kenya's Giriama cocoa entrepreneurs, he becomes a Jehovah's Witness or Seventh-Day Adventist and uses their ideology of the patriarchal nuclear family to distance himself from such claims. While such men see matrilineal claims as an economic threat, the large Luapula businesswoman feels threatened by the marital claims of her husband and his matrikin. She

avoids the churches her husband prefers. Through multiple divorce and refusal of the levirate (the inheritance of a deceased man's widow by his brother), she seeks to distance herself from the claims of her husband and his family and to preserve her wealth for her children's and brothers' benefit (Poewe, 1980).

In the present century—due to the historical impact of the slave trade, Islam or Christian mission teachings, labor migration, cash-cropping, and other forms of enterprise—many matrilineal peoples have adopted some of the customs of neighboring patrilineal peoples (Phiri, 1983; Colson, 1961). Chewa men in both Zambia and Malawi, for example, have adopted the bridewealth customs of the neighboring Ngoni to obtain permanent custody of their children. And, with the consequent emergence of patrilocal residence, village headmanships often pass from fathers to their children, rather than to a sister's children (Phiri, 1983; Skjønberg, 1989).

Although a similar pattern exists among Lamba villagers, it is most obvious among the cash-cropping Lamba farmers, who abandoned the "noise" (quarrels) of village life to establish their own patrilocal extended family farms. They and their sons consider the custom of matrilineal inheritance to be fundamentally wrong, for how can a man enlist his wife's and children's help in building a family farm if it will eventually pass to his sister's children? Many have adjusted their descent lines accordingly. In one such case, a farmer's sons and grandchildren deny being members of their mothers' clans, but, instead, claim to be members of their father's and paternal grandfather's (matrilineal) clan (Siegel, 1984:180-188).

Such a change in inheritance does not necessarily weaken the matrilineal system (Colson, 1980; Peters, 1994). Few people are able to refuse the means of advancement potentially available through matrikin assistance or inheritance, and the same people who resent the claims made by their matrikin show no hesitation when it comes to pursuing identical claims of their

own (Colson, 1980; Poewe, 1980). "The security associated with the extended matrilineal kinship network is thus still significant"—especially, but not only, for the poor—and "matrilineal descent is highly adaptive, especially under conditions where one needs access to a diversity of support" (Colson, 1980:372-373).

Johan Pottier (1988) has documented a parallel trend among the patrilocal and patrilineal Mambwe, who straddle the Zambia-Tanzania border between Lakes Tanganyika and Malawi. As described by William Watson (1958), the Mambwe became a classic example of a people who prospered during the flow of migrant laborers to the Copperbelt mines. The neighboring Bemba suffered from the loss of male labor migrants because, being matrilocal and matrilineal, their villages lacked a core of related males (Richards, 1939, 1940). But Mambwe men were permanently attached to their heritable land and cattle estates at home. So the younger men, while away, could entrust their wives, children, and garden labor to older patrikin.

But the 1970s collapse of the Zambian copper industry forced many Mambwe back upon increasingly scarce lands. Divorced or widowed Mambwe women have always left their children with their husbands' kin and returned to their fathers' villages. But now, to obtain secure land rights and cooperative female labor for their cash crop gardens, they remain in their natal villages even after remarrying. Thus, many villages include a core of matrilocal but patrilineally related women, each with a mother or daughter living in a Tanzanian border village. Such mother-daughter links are now a valuable resource, for they serve to establish family partnerships in the extralegal Zambia-Tanzania border trade. Here, where population pressure effectively precludes further agricultural intensification, it is ironic that the welfare of so many patrilineal Mambwe depends upon family ties traced through women (Pottier, 1988).

Finally, a handful of peoples in western and south-central Africa practice dual (or double unilineal) descent. They have both patri- and matrilineal descent groups, though each serves a different purpose. Among the Yakö of southeastern Nigeria, rights to garden lands are defined patrilineally, whereas inheritance rights in movable property are transmitted matrilineally. The basic difference between double and single unilineal descent systems is that under dual descent, the kinship rights and obligations are split between two different descent groups, each with divergent interests in the same individual. Analogous descent group rivalries also occur in single unilineal societies, as when, in a patrilineal society, a mother's brother's patrilineage takes the part of their sister's son in a dispute with the members of his patrilineage. But here the rivalries are between descent groups of the same sex.

- **MARITAL ALLIANCES AND TRANSACTIONS**

In Africa, marriage is not so much a union between two individuals as an alliance between two extended families and descent groups (Sudarkasa, 1980). In some respects, the personal identities of the married couple are less important than the alliance they represent. African marriages are most commonly marked by the exchange of bridewealth, formerly (and misleadingly) called "bride price," in which the bride's group accepts livestock or other movable property in compensation for the loss of their daughter's labor and fertility. In most such societies, bridewealth is essential for legitimizing a marriage and its children.

This is rarely paid in full or all at once, for the bride's group maintains some leverage over their in-laws by keeping the groom and his kin in their debt. Bridewealth expenses vary with the number of marriageable men and women, herd sizes, and the opportunities for earning cash,



so they reflect the laws of supply and demand. Yet, if the immigrant Shona farmers in Zambia are any example, the men and women involved in such transactions do not regard bridewealth as the calculated buying and selling of wives but as symbolic tokens of women's value (Siegel, 1984:223-229).

Where bridewealth involves a substantial amount of property, older men can use their greater wealth to monopolize the supply of younger, marriageable women and, by contributing to their bridewealth, to gain influence over their junior kinsmen wanting to get married. Such influence is always resented, but this is especially true when, instead of helping his adult sons, a man uses his wealth to accumulate additional young wives for himself. This kind of selfishness, however, has its own risks, because such a situation can turn ugly and divisive should the father discover that his young wife is romantically involved with one of his sons.

Bridewealth can also operate to strengthen marriage ties. The cruel, abusive husband might forfeit his bridewealth and alienate his kinsmen if his wife should leave him. The same is true for the wife, because, unless she has sound reasons for deserting her husband, her kinsmen must refund their shares of her bridewealth. Since both groups have a vested interest in perpetuating a given marriage, high bridewealth payments are associated with low divorce rates. It was precisely this realization that forced the Christian missionaries in Botswana to abandon their opposition to the "heathen" custom of "bride price" (Schapera, 1940:74-76).

In still other African societies, marriage is marked by the custom of bride service. This is particularly true where the tsetse fly (and sleeping sickness) prevents the accumulation of livestock. Here the groom, like the biblical Jacob, offers his parents-in-law his labor instead of property. From the male's perspective, this has several disadvantages over bridewealth. First, it requires the husband to accept a subordinate position in his wife's village. Since his labor is his

own, he has no relatives to defend his interests, while his wife can rely upon her family's support in any dispute. Such marriages are more unstable, and the husband forfeits his investment should the marriage end. It is little wonder, then, that those societies that emphasize bridewealth exchange regard bride service as an inferior, "poor man's" alternative.

Two other customs reflect the alliance aspect of marriage: the levirate and the sororate. Given both the desire for children and the distinctly complementary roles of men and women in the sexual division of labor, marriage is essential to an active and productive life. Should one spouse die, the marital alliance provides the other partner with a replacement. Under the levirate, a man assumes the responsibility for his dead brother's widow and children, while under the sororate, a woman takes the place of her dead or barren sister. These replacements need not be actual biological brothers or sisters; rather, they might easily include those cousins who, according to African systems of (unilineal) descent, are considered "brothers" or "sisters" of the unfortunate spouse.

African peoples enforce these duties with differing intensity. They are undoubtedly burdensome when custom compels a person to perpetuate a marital alliance against his or her will. But this is equally true when a Christian church, in forbidding polygamy, forces a respectably married deacon or elder to leave his church for honoring his customary obligations to his dead brother's widow. Most peoples, however, permit greater personal choice in honoring these obligations. Elderly widows and widowers are often tired of marriage and prefer to live with a married son or daughter. In most respects, the levirate and sororate provide a valued security net for widows and widowers.

- **FAMILY TIES AND SOCIAL ORDER**

Family ties are more than a curious feature of African social life, for they also play an important role in political relations and the maintenance of social order. This is particularly true in traditionally stateless societies—those decentralized political orders without a bureaucratic hierarchy and coercive authority, as Thomas O'Toole discusses in Chapter 3—but the same general features also operate in traditional state-level societies. People everywhere are socialized to learn the boundaries of expected and acceptable behavior and to share some concern for what others might think of them. While gossip and slander, ridicule and shame, and the fear of other negative sanctions are common mechanisms of social control in all societies, they are particularly potent ones in politically decentralized societies, where the political, economic, and religious aspects of social life are all wrapped up around family ties.

The Lugbara, for example, are a traditionally stateless horticultural people in northwestern Uganda. As described by Middleton (1960), the Lugbara live in dispersed, patrilocal, and patrilineal extended family clusters of some twelve to sixty members. Each extended family cluster is under the direction of a single male elder, the senior representative of a local lineage segment. His dependents treat him with a respectful mixture of affection, obedience, and fear, for, as the custodian of their ancestors' shrines, he has direct access to the guardians of customary morality. While it is the ancestors who punish their sinful descendants with sickness and misfortune, it is the family elder who brings such troublemakers to their attention; therefore, lineage elders—when supported by the ancestors, mystical curses, or special knowledge of medicines—can use the threat of misfortune to exercise some control over their

juniors (see Saitoti, 1986:82, 92, 141-143, and Bohannan, 1965:539-543, on the Maasai and Tiv, respectively).

But misfortunes strike the just and unjust alike, and the fear of such sanctions tends to backfire where people believe that the same troubles can be credited to jealous, antisocial witches. The Lugbara family cluster goes through a predictable cycle of internal growth, conflict, and fragmentation as, over time, its elder finds it increasingly difficult to reconcile his dependents' competing needs for land. As discontented factions form around the elder's rivals, the suspicion grows that his witchcraft is the cause of their chronic misfortunes and quarrels. Here, as among the matrilineal peoples of central Africa (see Marwick, 1965; Turner, 1957), witchcraft accusations are the standard device used by rival, would-be leaders to split away and establish their own settlements elsewhere. When based on the fear of misfortune, such patriarchal authority often contains the seeds of its own destruction (Middleton, 1960).

Perhaps the most famous example of the political role of familistic ties is Evans-Pritchard's (1940) classic account of the Nuer and their segmentary lineage organization. Like the Tiv, who share a similar political organization (Bohannan, 1965:523-525, 531-533), these fiercely independent cattle pastoralists in southern Sudan are stateless people, and political relations within and between each of over a dozen Nuer tribes can best be described as an "ordered anarchy" (Evans-Pritchard, 1940:5-6). The tribe was the largest sovereign and peacemaking group, which merely means that fellow tribesmen should not raid each other's cattle and that they should pay compensation for intratribal injuries or killings. Members of different tribes, on the other hand, may raid each other's cattle, but they should avoid destroying granaries or killing women and children. No such rules apply where foreigners are concerned.

Nuer political relations are modeled on the ideology of patrilineal descent. As each tribe has its dominant clan, the Nuer speak of their villages, districts, and still larger tribal sections as the localized segments of the dominant clan. Each segment in this genealogical pyramid corresponds to a similar territorial section of the tribe. These genealogical relations are most important in pursuing disputes, for most Nuer disputes are settled through the threat of force. The parties to a common dispute each recruit as many supporters as they possibly can, and it is the genealogical distance between them that determines whom they can call upon for support.

In general, more closely related lineage segments are supposed to unite against more distantly related ones. But as differing disputes involve different levels of genealogical distance, the rivals in one dispute will be allies in another. Two neighboring villages, for example, will set aside their quarrels when a new one pits a member of their district against someone from another. Should these districts belong to different tribes, their quarrel will pit one tribe against another. Ultimately, all Nuer tribes will unite against a common foreign enemy. And, Kelly (1985) argues, it was the organizational effectiveness of these dominant clan genealogies that enabled the nineteenth-century Nuer to cut and occupy a 35,000-square-mile swath through the territory of their Dinka neighbors.

Such situationally determined alliances are only temporary, however. Once the common threat is removed, each alliance dissolves into its mutually antagonistic segments. A political system based on the segmentary lineage organization is one of balanced opposition, a constantly fluctuating equilibrium between the fission and fusion of lineage segments. There is order in this apparent anarchy, and it is organized and expressed through the plausible sociological fiction of the dominant clan's patrilineal genealogy.

A third example of the political role of familistic ties comes from Elizabeth Colson's (1953) elegant analysis of crosscutting social ties among the Plateau Tonga in southern Zambia. The Tonga are matrilineal and patrilocal, but every person is considered a member of both his or her mother's and father's matrilineal descent groups. Ever in search of good land and cooperative neighbors, these cattle-keeping plow farmers settle wherever they choose. As a result, the residents of any given village, and of the seven to eight villages in a given neighborhood, are likely to represent most of the Tonga's twelve dispersed matrilineal clans. Neighbors are bound by ties of kinship, marriage, and friendship, as well as by cattle loans and the exchange of labor. One's sense of community has less to do with kinship than with residents' cooperative interdependence.

One day, at a neighborhood beer drink, a man from the Eland clan quarreled with and struck a Lion clan man, putting him into a coma. The victim died some days later, and his assailant was arrested and eventually tried and imprisoned for manslaughter. As Colson (1953) describes it, the Eland clan elders had long anticipated such problems from this quarrelsome troublemaker. They had previously enlisted him in the wartime army and, disappointed in his safe return, had supposedly tried to finish him off with a witchcraft-induced illness. But the Lion clansmen were not satisfied with his imprisonment and, according to Tonga custom, held the Elands collectively responsible for their kinsman's death. In precolonial times, the Lions would have taken revenge against the Elands, thereby precipitating a blood feud.

Though the Elands acknowledged their blood debt, they lacked any way of telling this to the Lions. Following their kinsman's death, the Lions not only cut off all relations with their Eland villagers and neighbors but also began threatening the Eland wives married to Lion clansmen.

Everyone with Lion or Eland spouses was also affected, and the fear of a blood feud soon infected relations throughout the neighborhood.

This placed a special strain on the victim's village headman. He not only had Lion and Eland clan wives and children, but his father was the murderer's village headman. As such, he became the spokesman for all the neighbors with similarly divided loyalties. Working through his father and his Lion and Eland brothers-in-law, he got the Lions to accept the Elands' promise of cattle compensation. Although tensions eased, the Elands delayed their promised payments until the son of an Eland husband and Lion wife fell sick and died. The diviner determined that the victim's angry spirit had caused the death and would continue to afflict his relatives until the Elands paid their debt.

Here the diviner, as the mouthpiece of public opinion, forced the Elands to honor their pledge. But public opinion was shaped by the neighborhood's dense network of crosscutting social ties. Many individuals—Lions, Elands, and others—had divided loyalties and interests in this dispute, and it was these same individuals who pressured for a settlement. This illustrates that when people of different descent groups must marry, live among, and cooperate with one another, their crosscutting ties—together with the pervasive fear of feud (Colson, 1974:42-43)—constitute an important mechanism for the maintenance of social order (Colson, 1953; Gluckman, 1955).

Family ties also play an important, if not always central, role in the political organization of traditional state-level societies. This is probably best illustrated by the Yoruba city-states in southwestern Nigeria. The Yoruba, the largest of sub-Saharan Africa's ethnic groups, might best be described as urban peasants, for while most men are cash-cropping farmers, their permanent homes are in large and densely settled towns (Bascom, 1955). "The Yoruba have

lived in towns as long as they can remember and despise their townless and kingless neighbors" (Lloyd, 1965:554).

Among the more populous, northern Yoruba, these towns consist of a central palace and marketplace surrounded by compound wards, each consisting of a series of linked, rectangular courtyards that house the members of the compound's patrilocal and patrilineal extended family. Some rooms in the old-style courtyards are now often leased to strangers, and some have been razed and replaced by mazes of individual bungalows and two-story houses; nevertheless, the compound's land remains corporate lineage property. Although such a compound is no longer a single structural entity, it "is certainly still a social unit with a strong sense of its unity and cohesion displayed at the regular meeting in the house of its head," or lineage elder (Lloyd, 1974:115). Such elders from the town's prominent lineage compounds also inherit their lineages' titled chieftainships and serve on the town's council of senior chiefs.

The precolonial government of the Yoruba city-state was a constitutional monarchy, one based upon the balanced opposition of its reclusive, sacred king and his council of senior chiefs. The kingship rotated among the rival houses of the royal lineage, and the king was appointed by his council of senior chiefs. In theory, the government was invested in this council, and the king was supposed to accept the decisions of those who had selected him to rule. Just as an unpopular senior chief could be removed by the members of his lineage, the senior chiefs could depose the king by requesting that he take his life. The king had no coercive power over his senior chiefs, but he did have the sacred right to rule, and he could influence the senior chiefs either by playing them off against each other or by rallying his people's support against the will of their own chiefs (Lloyd, 1965:567-572). Here, among the Yoruba, residence, titles, and political organization were all regulated by the principles of patrilineal descent.



In other traditional African states, such as Buganda (in southern Uganda), kinship became secondary to contractual, patron-client ties. Although the Ganda have chiefs of their exogamous (i.e., out-marrying) patricians and clan segments, such descent groups are not strongly localized corporate units, and their chiefs now serve as the managing directors of ancestral burial grounds, a kind of headquarters for their widely dispersed relatives. As the proverb says, "A man goes to live where he finds people of his own sort," and these do not usually include close kin. "The Ganda attitude seems to be that kinship is a good thing—but you can have too much of it" (Southwold, 1965:102).

Originally, the king of Buganda (a position abolished in 1966) was the most prominent of these hereditary, descent-group chiefs. Over the centuries, the kings gained the right to confirm their successors to office and, by creating a new category of appointed bureaucrats with nonhereditary titles and estates, established an unusually centralized state under "a despotic monarch who could remove areas from descent-group control and put in charge of them personal appointees of his own choosing" (Fallers, 1964:172). As these "king's men" recruited their own clients as loyal assistants, Ganda society became dominated by the custom of regularly changing residence and patrons in the search for better prospects (Southwold, 1965:102; 1971:50). Clientship, rather than kinship, became the avenue of social mobility.

Kinship in general is valued, because scattered, distant kinfolk offer a wider choice of places to live. And where tenuous kinship links cannot be traced, they are readily and regularly created by adopting strangers into other clans (Obbo, 1979). Although even unrelated neighbors are regarded and addressed as relatives (Obbo, 1980:115), precise kinship ties are considered an irrelevant embarrassment. The Ganda prefer to use personal names when referring to relatives outside the nuclear family, and as much as eighty years ago, they had an

imperfect command of such rarely used kinship terms (Southwold, 1971:50-51). Social life is dominated by clientship and the linkage of residential and social mobility. "Friendship is stronger than kinship,' the Ganda say—though they add that kinship lasts longer" (Southwold, 1965:103).

- **CONTEMPORARY TRENDS**

The Ganda's increasing emphasis on clientship as compared to kinship relations is also found in the traditional Hausa-Fulani city-states of northern Nigeria (Smith, 1965:134-135) and among the Hausa traders in the Yoruba towns to the southwest (Cohen, 1969). It certainly resembles the progression from family-based status and politics to the contractual relations and territorial political organization envisioned by the nineteenth-century lawyer-anthropologists and social evolutionists Sir Henry Maine (*Ancient Law*, 1861) and Lewis Henry Morgan (*Ancient Society*, 1877). Yet, it is surely mistaken to think, as they did, that social change follows an inevitable and unilinear sequence and, accordingly, that African peoples are bound to arrive at Western patterns of family and kinship organization. To be sure, they are subject to the same political and economic forces that continue to shape our own society. But in adapting to these challenges, Africans reinterpret their own family and kinship patterns, and their disparate and often contradictory adaptations will reflect a distinctly African blend of the old and new (Epstein, 1981:191-194).

One of the greatest challenges to confront African peoples has been the penetration of the world economic system; the strains and conflicts generated by this intrusive change have themselves generated further change. A good example of this is the response of the Tswana (of

Botswana) to the migrant labor system of central and southern Africa. From 1820 to 1880, first the Ndebele and then the Boers raided the Tswana for their cattle, grain, land, and labor. The protests of the British missionaries had little effect until Cecil Rhodes's British South Africa Company, concerned that the Boers might deny it access to the rumored mineral wealth farther north, joined their petitions for the creation of the Bechuanaland Protectorate in 1885. When the Rand goldfields were discovered in 1886, a cash hut tax and labor recruitment monopolies were established among the overcrowded and impoverished Tswana to supply cheap, subsistence-level labor to the South African gold and diamond mines.

Today, as described by Hoyt Alverson (1978) and Marianne Alverson (1987), 90 percent of the Tswana males in the Gaborone countryside have participated in the migrant labor system, while 60 percent of the males in their twenties are away at work at any time—mostly in the South African mines. Though the Tswana are cattle-keeping plow farmers, only 25 to 30 percent of the households in this area have both land and cattle needed for farming, and rural productivity clearly suffers from rural poverty and the shortage of able-bodied males. So the men go off to work—first, because their wage remittances supply the only source of cash and consumer staples for most rural households and, second, because their savings provide them the bridewealth they need to marry. The women left behind do gain greater personal freedom during their husbands' prolonged absences, but this comes at the expense of greater domestic responsibilities and anxiety for their husbands' return.

But the migrant labor system fosters economic individualism that threatens all kinds of Tswana family ties. The old ancestral cult, which once supported extended family loyalties, was largely dead by the late 1920s (Schapera, 1928). Even the nuclear family is threatened, for "children are less dependent upon parents and less mindful of filial obligations; the social

importance of producing children has diminished; husbands are not so dependent upon their wives; and the family is less intimately connected with other social groupings" (Schapera, 1940:320). Youths seek to escape the grinding drudgery of life at home, and most fathers' estates are so small that the threat of disinheritance provides them little leverage over their increasingly autonomous sons. Sons are well aware that they can earn their own bridewealth and consumer goods by working in the mines. Once there, however, they begin to question the obligation to assist their parents and other relatives, who, they feel, envy their meager material success. Many become lost to the towns and never return. The older ones who eventually do go back resent, in turn, the autonomy demanded by their own children and other youths. And so the cycle repeats itself (Alverson, 1978; Schapera, 1940).

Migrant labor or cash cropping presumes a monetized economy, and this entails economic individualism and the commoditization of social relations. In general, those with limited access to money—like women—are the losers. Bridewealth is a good example, because, inasmuch as the supply of marriageable women is relatively fixed, the monetization of bridewealth payments often leads to rapid inflation of bridewealth costs (see, for example, Bohannan, 1959).

The switch from bridewealth paid in cattle to that paid in cash has had particularly devastating effects upon women among Zulu, Swazi, and other patrilineal peoples of southern Africa (Ngubane, 1987). Here the monetization of bridewealth has transformed it from a cooperative alliance between two extended families into a purely private transaction between the bride's husband and her father, for they alone are involved in calculating—and giving and receiving—her monetary value as a commodity. As such, neither the bride's nor the groom's extended family has much of a stake in the success of such a marriage. And since the cash transaction eliminates most of the former marriage ceremonies, the bride and her mother are

denied not only the ceremonial cattle they once received but also the capital assets, the social and economic security, and the ritual power they represented. But the transformation to monetized bridewealth has also stimulated an increased demand for traditional healers and medicines and for new spiritual cults among women seeking to reverse their situation (Ngubane, 1987).

Reports concerning the death of the extended family are, to paraphrase Mark Twain, both exaggerated and premature. It is often claimed, for example, that the extended family system is an obstacle to economic development and that the obligatory diversion of scarce resources to assist less fortunate relatives is not only wasteful but discourages entrepreneurship and capital accumulation. One can—and Africans do—debate the wastefulness of assisting every needy relative. And while they take pride in this extended family safety net, it does not always work. In times of crisis, orphans, the elderly, and hungry poor must instead depend upon the mercy of formal welfare or relief institutions (Iliffe, 1987:212-213, 245-250).

Still, the economic criticisms of the African extended family system are only half-truths. Much of the assistance given to relatives goes to "the genuinely poor and needy, for whom the state provides no support," whereas the assistance given to finance relatives' schooling surely benefits the entire society. And where wealth and generosity are the traditional path to prestige, as in West Africa, such familial expectations can sometimes be a stimulus rather than a hindrance to entrepreneurship and economic development (Lloyd, 1969:90-92).

There is little doubt that the strain of extended family obligations is most strongly felt by the urban and educated African elite, since they often constitute the first and most important resource—both for food and lodging and personal contacts—for the school-leavers seeking work in town. "The average young Yoruba uses his kin-based network," particularly his close,

well-to-do relatives, "with [the] expectation that this is the best way to secure not only a job but also a particular kind of job." Such hospitality is, however, both a financial and emotional drain, and it tends to wear thin over time. "In several cases, senior civil servants who had grown tired of the demands made on them, had rented slum accommodation for their younger brothers and nephews" (Gutkind, 1977:253; also Iliffe, 1987:172, 180-181). By the same token, unemployed relatives resent being put to work as house servants for their wealthier kin, so they eventually construct their own job-seeking networks and strike out on their own.

It is important to note here that the strength of family ties and obligations varies among different African peoples. Yoruba and Luo (Kenya) job seekers rely upon their urban relatives for assistance, while the Ibo tend to rely upon unrelated homeboys from their village improvement associations (Gutkind, 1977). The Luo migrants to Nairobi are famous for the strong patrilineal organization that links urban and rural kin (Parkin, 1978). But ethnicity is just one of the social identities that determine the strength of kinship ties between town and country. In East London, South Africa, for example, the "Red" (i.e., "traditional") Xhosa migrants remain encapsulated within their patrilineal networks of homeboy ties, while the "School" (i.e., urban, mission-educated) Xhosa are largely lost to their rural kin; but they are characterized by broader social networks composed of like-minded friends and selected maternal and paternal relatives (Mayer, 1971; Pauw, 1972).

African elites are generally tied to their rural kin. Most, however begrudgingly, send some money home—at least to the parents or other kin who reared them. The elite may, depending upon their relatives' needs, the state of the national economy, and the cost of urban life, entrust their children to their parents' care back home. Others provide school fees and lodging for their own or for favorite classificatory brothers or sisters and put up relatives

visiting the hospital or market. The gifts of food these visitors bring can be a welcome supplement to the household diet. Elite wives have a particular investment in maintaining these extended family ties because not only might they recruit a relative to provide childcare when they are away at work, but such ties also offer an insurance against the risk of divorce. And elite men must certainly maintain their family ties if they intend to retire among their relatives at home (Oppong, 1981).

The government bureaucrats in Jacobson's (1973) study of the Mbala elite are an exception that proves the rule. These "itinerant townsmen" are likely to be transferred many times in their careers and, at the expense of their poorer, rural relatives, to invest their energies in cultivating a wide network of similarly privileged friends of friends. Because they intend to retire in or around Uganda's urban centers, they can afford to neglect their relatives' annoying requests for aid and even manage to "forget" their kinship ties to lower-class relatives. This is not, he notes, the general pattern elsewhere in Africa (Jacobson, 1973:57-58, 131-137).

Yet, such family ties often place a real emotional strain on African elite marriages, particularly between the wife and her in-laws. The partners to such marriages are often from different ethnic groups, and the husband's kin may, if they disapprove of his wife's background, do everything to sabotage the marriage (e.g., Schuster, 1979:128-129). In turn, the wife may object when her lower-class in-laws insist on their customary rights to coresidence, property, and financial maintenance. Such couples may attempt to whittle down their extended family obligations in an attempt to realize the Euro-American model of the closed and cooperative nuclear family couple. But old customs die hard, and this is an elusive goal for the first-generation African elite who have little previous experience of geographical and social

mobility. Such adjustments, as Oppong (1981) shows, are far easier for the rare second- and third-generation members of the African elite.

Another problem confronting elite couples are the children from previous marriages or affairs. Among the elite and subelite couples in Lusaka, the general "'rule' is that the man's wishes are paramount" (Schuster, 1979:108). Because household size is a measure of a man's personal prestige, his previous children are reclaimed from their natural mother, while the wife farms hers out to her maternal kin (Schuster, 1989:107-108, 129-130). A similar pattern seems to prevail among the African elite who live in Kampala, Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, and abroad (Obbo, 1987).

Given the cultural emphasis on childbearing, the elite woman courting a particular man must prove she will make a chaste and faithful wife and also demonstrate her fertility. She thus uses pregnancy as a tool—whether it be to lure a man from his older wife, to try to hang on to a man, or to nudge one into marriage. If she fails, she is stuck with an "outside" child who may well resurface, some six to seventeen years later, at the father's home. Given the fierce competition for elite men and her limited hold on her husband, the elite wife has little choice but to ignore her husband's extramarital affairs; instead, she perpetuates the mythical distinction between "good" and "bad" women by focusing her anger on rival female "home wreckers" (Obbo, 1987; Schuster, 1979).

The institution of polygyny persists among the African elite. The Nigerian elite disapprove of traditional "public" polygyny as a "lesser" form of marriage practiced only by "bush" Africans. Nonetheless, according to Karanja (1987), the vast majority of elite men practice "private" polygyny with "outside" wives. Female undergraduates refuse to date their male counterparts. They prefer an "outside" marriage with "a 'mature' man, who will I set them up



nicely' immediately after graduation, rather than insisting upon entering a first marriage with a 'struggling' fellow [student]" (Karanja, 1987:256). While this preference sets up intense conflicts with the male students, it is only the older "sugar daddies" who can provide these future elite women with a rented flat, monthly pocket money, children's allowances, a car, and all-expense-paid shopping trips to the Euro-American capitals.

The overwhelming majority of elite Nigerian women fiercely disapprove of these relationships, but they are unable to prevent them. Their husbands, however, enjoy the benefits and prestige from their peers. They defend such arrangements as a return to African tradition while retaining the semblance of monogamy for public consumption. As in Schuster's (1979) study, men and women entertain very different conceptions of what marriage entails. Although these different conceptions generate considerable tension between husbands and wives, the men continue to do just as they please (Karanja, 1987). As I once heard an African elite male tell a class of outraged female graduate students in the United States, "Africa is still a man's world," a point well documented by April Gordon in Chapter 10.

- **CONCLUSIONS**

African family and kinship systems seem to be headed in varied and apparently contradictory directions. The competition for land and other scarce economic resources often seems to work against matrilineal descent. Yet it persists, and one finds an increasing trend toward female-headed households and the cultivation of matrilineal kin among even the most decidedly patrilineal peoples. Although the penetration of the world economic system has

fostered economic individualism, the narrowing of kinship relations, and greater selectivity of relatives included in personal networks, the same individuals try to maintain, and even create, a wide network of real and fictive kin on whom they can rely for support and assistance. While the specific patterns of African marriage and family forms continue to change, we see the new forms take on old meanings, and old forms invested with new ones. Whatever happens, African marriage and family forms will remain distinctly African. They will never be pale imitations of our own.

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