FAMILY CHANGE IN AFRICA: A REVIEW

by C Oppong*

The fact that there is taking place a world-wide series of changes in family patterns towards some type of individuated, nuclear family system, in which the keystone is the conjugal bond, rather than ties of consanguinity, has been proposed and discussed in a vast array of recent work. Goode (1963) among others, referring to material describing rural and urban societies from several continents, has attempted a comprehensive documentation of this trend. Much detailed work has also centred upon the changing nature of the husband-wife relationship, the fact that in many societies the distribution of power, resources and labour between husbands and wives, both inside and outside the home are altering. Studies such as those of Blood and Wolfe (1960) in Detroit, have demonstrated what some of the important variables are, associated with these alterations and variations, for example the level of education, ethnic origin and type of occupation of the spouses. Marriage is increasingly observed to be an individual contract rather than a compact between two bodies of kin (see Radcliffe Brown, 1950:42 ff.).

There is ample evidence that the effects of economic, demographic, political and religious innovation upon systems of kinship and marriage in Africa have been immense. Some of these effects have been examined by observers from the point of view of the changes in relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, as well as between members of the conjugal family and their kin. General works describing some of the trends include Forde (ed. 1956), Southall (ed. 1961) and Lloyd (1967). A number of detailed monographs and papers documenting changes at the domestic level include Wilson (1936), Richards (1940), Barnes (1951), Phillips (ed. 1953), Marris (1961) and Mitchell (1962).

'The Unitary Market System'

Gough (1961:640-1) has pinpointed what she considers is the 'root cause of kinship change', precipitating the disintegration of descent groups and the functional individuation

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of the conjugal family. She suggests that it is the incorporation of societies into a 'unitary market system' in which goods, land, labour and other resources become privately owned and potentially marketable commodities and therefore may become fragmented and dispersed. This market system is the result of the introduction of international trade, wage-labour, cash-cropping and education. Men and women become increasingly economically and jurally independent of kin groups, as the access to resources and positions of power depends more upon voluntarily entered labour contracts and the personal acquisition of wealth rather than rights in jointly held family estates. The introduction of educational institutions, as well as training people to earn incomes and to fill new jobs, often channels their talents away from their home areas and at the same time diminishes the value of the authority, knowledge and skills of the senior generation. In some cases the economic, political and religious functions of descent groups are assumed by other agencies leaving them with a vestige of their traditional power. There are however instances documented in which such groups continue to operate relatively effectively in one or more areas of contemporary life, such as inheritance of property or succession to local, hereditary offices (Busia, 1951). This is perhaps especially likely to occur in regions in which some highly valued good is at stake, such as modern cash crops, where land and crop are at a premium (Richards, 1940:10; Watson, 1958:221).

Urban Migrants' Households

An effect of the large scale migration of individuals townwards, in search of new opportunities, is a rapid increase in the number of first-generation, urban dwellers, living in conditions entirely different from those experienced in their youth. Not only are many of the new, urban migrants separated from most, if not all, of their kin, but there is a predominance of ethnically mixed neighbourhoods in many communities, even single houses containing people of different origins. Residential separation of spouses, parents and children and the coresidence of distantly related people and strangers, over-crowding and the temporary nature of much accommodation, are common. (Busia, 1950; Banton, 1957; Acquah, 1958:50; Hellman, 1958; Southall & Gutkind, 1957; Pons, 1969). There is evidence that household size may be related to income, people with larger incomes finding themselves

housing a proportionately large number of kin (Banton, 1957:202).

The Kin Network

Though people migrate to the towns to gain the rewards offered by the new educational and economic opportunities available there, effective links still join kin in the urban and rural areas. A considerable proportion of wages earned in labour centres is sent back to relatives in the villages (Wilson, 1941:40, 52; Barnes, 1951:85). Urban workers often maintain claims to financial and social security in their home villages in the form of buildings and plots. In addition both urban and rural dwellers often see the advantages to be gained by sending their children to be reared and educated either with kin in the town or country (Colson, 1958:100). As regards domestic decision-making, family meetings may still take place and be attended by urban migrants. There is however a noted tendency for kin to have fewer controls over urban couples.

Choice and Change

Since households of migrants are perforce relatively isolated from kin, traditional patterns of kinship behaviour cannot continue to operate in their entirety. The range of kin with whom the urban migrant remains in effective contact is of necessity incomplete miscellany. These ties with kin have been seen as forming an egocentred network rather than a corporate group, comprising relationships he may choose at will to activate and manipulate (Southall, 1961:32, 34; Gutkind, 1965). The lack of customary sanctions may be such that the migrant can afford to seek out some kin to carry out traditional kinship obligations on his behalf, while at the same time avoiding the acceptance of kinship obligations considered too onerous. For the urban wage-earner, personal choice is also important in choosing marriage partners, as well as kin with whom to maintain effective contacts. Though the force of customary sanctions may be breaking down, there is evidence that in many communities bridewealth payments continue to be made and parental consent is still sought and given and customary marriage rites widely performed (Barnes, 1951:59). It is, however, the comparative ineffectiveness of the customary sanctions regulating marriage and family relationships in the towns, the individual's ability to choose to shirk responsibility and avoid obligations, resulting in the widely

reported increases in marital conflict, infidelity, divorce, irregular unions, prostitution and illegitimacy, which has led some writers to deplore the state of disorganization and anomie, thought to exist in some African towns (Wilson, 1936:551; Richards, 1940:734; Barnes, 1951:20). An important element in this situation may be the conflict of laws. Often there exists a plurality of legal norms and sanctions, based upon customary law, Christian Church law and statutory law which may be a copy of a colonial model (Richards, 1940:82-4; Phillips, 1953; Allott, 1960).

The Allocation of Resources

It is upon the matter of the urban dweller's decisions, as to which domestic duties and family obligations to accept and which rights he or she wishes, or has the power to claim, that the crux of the problem of analysing the direction of social changes taking place in the family partly rests. The analysis of these decisions is vital to an understanding of the way in which the conjugal family is, or is not, becoming more functionally individuated and whether rights and duties based upon the conjugal tie are superseding those based upon sibling and filial bonds.

The recognition and fulfilment of many domestic obligations, both conjugal and consanguine, requires the expenditure of money and time to provide the needed goods and services. Not only are the material resources in demand, such as income and living space, limited in the town, they are often pitifully inadequate to provide the necessities of life, even for close dependents. The personal conflict, ambivalence and even feelings of guilt which men feel, when faced with the problem of selecting which claims of kin to honour and which to avoid, have been frequently stressed (Richards, 1940:27; Southall, 1961:126). Wife and children on the one hand and patrikin and matrikin on the other have at various times been labelled "parasites", since they demand and consume the hard-earned income of the urban wage-earner, (Busia, 1950; Baker & Bird, 1959; Comhaire, 1956:49). Those who think that the man's income should be spent only on his wife and children see the claims of consanguines as a continual drain on his resources, while those who favour the opposite view, see wives as the useless drain and the kin group as the unit for common spending, saving and security, in situations where social security benefits, organised on nationwide bases,

have scarcely begun.

The urban migrant has to establish his own ego-centred set of effective relationships and with respect to his available resources and power position, decide how to allot his scarce time and money and other benefits among them. To discover the source of some of the forces affecting his decisions it has been suggested necessary to examine the pressures exerted by kin, spouse, neighbours, friends, colleagues and other sets of people, to see how they try to wield an influence (Barnes 1951:20; Banton, 1961:114). For though the general trends of changes taking place in African urban family life and their major correlates have been frequently indicated, the precise and detailed changes in family relationships and the positions of individuals which are happening, the choices people are making in the domestic domain, their prescribed norms, expectations and activities and the social factors influencing these are less well documented and understood (Southall, 1961:23).

The Educated Urban Workers

There is a widely held assumption that it is among the educated, urban workers that changes in family life have been most radical and shifted furthest away from traditional patterns. The particular categories of urban, educated frequently noted as forming significant reference groups and viewed as being in the vanguard of change, include the civil servants and professionals and the university students destined to join their ranks (Tiger, 1967; Levine et al., 1967). Two early, unpublished studies of educated, urban West African couples in these categories, from Ghana and Nigeria, are those of Acquah (1950) and Bird (1958). Emphasis has been placed in these and elsewhere upon the fact that changes in the family lives of such people appear to point towards the so-called 'Western' conjugal ideal of marriage and family life. Some writers even see the choices of the educated as being modelled on Western European stereotypes (Jahoda, 1959; Omari, 1960). Marriage among urban, educated Africans has been said to be increasingly based upon romantic ideas and companionate aims (Little, 1966; Little & Price, 1967).

In the socio-economically better-off areas of the towns, housing and circumstances are such that conjugal families generally coreside and the number of kin who can reasonably

live in the same small, two-bedroomed accommodation is limited. The comparative residential separation of the conjugal family may be heralded as the emergence of the 'nuclear family'. But though the educated are thought to be at the forefront of change, on closer examination of the written evidence the facts are relatively few, statements are sometimes imprecise and often based upon the unwarranted assumption that changes are undimensional and in one vaguely specified direction. Accounts are often more heavily larded with references to changes in material culture, and 'style of life', than to changes in systems of domestic rights and obligations since the former are more easily ascertainable (Smythe & Smythe, 1960). As Gutkind (1962) pointed out a few years ago, facts relating to the family in developing, urban areas of Africa are yet few and far between, most are culled from more general works, but there is sufficient evidence to show that while the African, conjugal family may be radically changed in some ways in the new urban context, yet its members may retain traditional elements of their strong links with kin.

When we consider only West African towns in the coastal areas, a beginning has been made upon the detailed documentation of some of the changes taking place in educated, urban family life (Lloyd, 1966; Lloyd, 1967; Levine, 1967; Clignet, 1967 in Miner; Caldwell, 1968). We are still far however from achieving the kind of sophisticated analyses which have been produced by anthropologists in the last few decades for rural systems of kinship and marriage in Africa.

Matrilineal Systems

Not only has it been stated that high, achieved status in the new occupational system, (where rank is to a large extent based upon educational attainment), is associated with radical change, in domestic relationships in the new African urban areas, but it has also been proposed and to some extent demonstrated that ethnicity, status ascribed by descent, is also an important variable, affecting the kinds of changes occurring. As Goode (1963:2) notes, family systems in various areas of the world may be moving towards similar patterns, but they begin from different starting points. A question frequently discussed is whether kin relationships in matrilineal systems can survive the impact of modern economic changes, and the

adaptations required by such innovations as labour migration and salaried employment (Watson, 1958:226; Gough, 1961:631-652; Douglas, 1967). As the latter authors note, many sources including Murdock (1949:207), Turner (1957:113), Colson (1958:118) and Goody (1961:110; 1962:348) have observed that matriliny is particularly vulnerable to the spread of private property ownership and inequalities in the distribution of wealth. Evidence from at least fourteen different matrilineal societies subject to such changes, in Africa and elsewhere including the Tonga, Bemba, Yao and Ndembu, has been compiled to indicate the extent to which the conjugal family is emerging, or has already emerged, as the key kinship group, with respect to residence, economic co-operation, legal responsibility and socialization, being linked to other elementary families by a narrow range of interpersonal kinship relations spreading out bilaterally (Gough, 1961: 631). For purposes of inheritance however there is a noted tendency for the matrilineage to split up into small groups of uterine siblings and their descendants rather than conjugal families. Although the trend, in the several systems sufficiently well documented, seems similar, the steps in the change process observed have varied and there are significant differences in the degree of change experienced, both within individual matrilineal kinship systems and between one system and another.

Conflict

The one factor common to all changing matrilineal systems is the strain engendered by the changes, that is between conjugal family ties on the one hand and relationships between matrikin on the other. Even within the traditional subsistence economic setting however, there is ample evidence that the conjugal family in matrilineal society is prone to a number of kinds of structural strain and problems. The phrase "matrilineal puzzle" was coined by Richards (1950) to refer to the inherent difficulty of combining recognition of descent through women with the rule of exogamous marriage, involving the question, among others, as to how descent groups can simultaneously retain control over both their male and female members, who are at once members of conjugal families and matrilineages.

In the domestic sphere tension may be engendered over the use and distribution of scarce resources. As a result of the potentially conflicting claims, accusations of sorcery, poisoning and witchcraft, by the sets of people involved, both

matrikin and in-laws, are common. A number of authors, who have produced monographs about matrilineal systems, including Colson (1958), Field (1960), Fortune (1932), Marwick (1965), and Mitchell (1962) have concentrated to a considerable extent on documenting and analysing such tension, present both before and after widespread economic change and alteration in the modes of access to resources. Role strain is noted on the part of men acting as brothers and husbands to two sets of people with conflicting expectations (Mitchell, 1962:30). Conflict is noted between two sets of would-be heirs, a man's children and his sisters' children (Kluckhohn & Leighton, 1946:60; Alland, 1965:495-502).

Colson (1958:177-118) for instance has vividly illustrated the kinds of conflict situations occurring among the plateau Tonga, under changing economic conditions, which have made possible the accumulation of wealth to support some individuals at a higher standard of living than their kin and have enabled some to invest in capital goods and savings of permanent value. As an illustration she quotes the case of a headmen who died and upon divination his death was attributed to the hatred of his matrikin, who were angered that in a period of hunger he had bought sugar, which he ate with his wife and children. "Because of the hatred which they had for his wife, who shared these good things, they decided to kill him, so he died because of his property" (1958:117). Matrikin regard the wealth a man produces as part of his estate, over which they have rights of inheritance, to the exclusion of his wife and children, so they are resentful if a man uses this wealth to raise the standard of living of the latter.

The manifestation of such conflicts however, does not only occur within the rural agricultural setting, when opportunities for wage-labour and cash-cropping facilitate the accumulation of surplus wealth, but it is also observed in urban situations among educated salary-earners.

Matriliny and Patriliny: the contrast

Gough's comparison (1961:649) of the matrilineal Nayar and patrilineal Tamil Brahmans of Tanjor district in South India provides a case in point, showing the kind of situations and tensions which may arise for urban migrants and how those

experienced by people from an area practising matrilineal descent and inheritance appear to be aggravated. Both of these castes have combined salary-earning with land-owning. In the case of the urban Nayar salary-earner, he may spend much of his earnings upon his wife and children living with him and be reluctant to contribute to the investments of his natal matrilineage, since such contributions would detract from the amount of his resources available for his own children. On becoming head of his own matrilineal descent group he may even be tempted to use profits from the group's estate for the benefit of his own wife and children. In such conditions, we are told, acute, tensions arise between the matrikin of the male members. On the other hand among the urban salary-earners from patrilineal groups, investment in lineage enterprises and in the conjugal family are not in conflict to such an extent. As Gough points out, the greater apparent fragility of the matrilineal system may be basically due to the structure of the conjugal family, which is the typical domestic group set up by the socially and spatially, mobile individual, migrating and working in the new labour market. While in the patrilineal system this unit may operate as a minimal segment of the lineage, the conjugal family members in the matrilineal system belong to two different lineages. An increase in conjugal family financial solidarity and loyalty is at the expense of the economic solidarity of matrilineal ties (Schneider, 1961:16).

Summary

The general features of the direction and magnitude of changes taking place in African systems of kinship and marriage, consequent upon widespread migration, wage-labour, urbanization and education have been documented.

A number of observers see the urban educated as being at the forefront of a series of changes taking place, conceptualizing the process as being one of a growing similarity to the family systems obtaining in industrialized Europe and America, the outcome of a process of 'Westernization'. There is however a lack of detailed observation and analysis, and as Goode (1963:18-19) has warned,

> "Even the common assertion that many countries are now becoming "Westernized" may obscure our view of these processes by leading us to believe the countries are changing under the impact of Western influence, whereas often the most important pressure is nationalist and indigenous".

Obviously there is need in examining such domestic change processes to take into account both the effects of external innovations and of indigenous pressures. There are indications that in systems characterised by matrilineal descent and inheritance change is more likely to be conflict prone than in systems characterized by patriliny, since the conjugal family in matrilineal society is already cleft in two by the diverse loyalties and duties of the spouse and children. It is the strengthening of nuclear family solidarity and the incipient shift to father to child inheritance, which have led observers to remark on the apparent trend towards 'patriliny' in matrilineal systems (Richards, 1940:116; Colson, 1958:228-9; Watson, 1958:227).

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