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Ghana Traditional Patterns of Social Relations

http://www.photius.com/countries/ghana/society/ghana_society_traditional_patterns~99.html

Sources: The Library of Congress Country Studies; CIA World Factbook

The extended family system is the hub around which traditional social organization revolved. This unilineal descent group functions under customary law. It is a corporate group with definite identity and membership that controls property, the application of social sanctions, and the practice of religious rituals. Many local varieties exist within the general framework of the lineage system. In some ethnic groups, the individual's loyalty to his or her lineage overrides all other loyalties; in other groups, a person marrying into the group, though never becoming a complete member of the spouse's lineage, adopts its interests.

Among the matrilineal Akan, members of the extended family include the man's mother, his maternal uncles and aunts, his sisters and their children, and his brothers. A man's children and those of his brothers belong to the families of their respective mothers. Family members may occupy one or several houses in the same village. The wife and her children traditionally reside at their maternal house where she prepares her food, usually the late evening meal, to be carried to her husband at his maternal house. Polygamy as a conjugal arrangement is on the decline for economic reasons; but where it has been practiced, sleeping rosters with the husband were planned for the wives.

For the patrilineal and double-descent peoples of the north, the domestic group often consists of two or more brothers with their wives and children who usually occupy a single homestead with a separate room for each wife. Also, the largest household among the patrilineal

Ewe includes some or all of the sons and grandsons of one male ancestor together with their wives, children, and unmarried sisters.

Irrespective of the composition of the family in either matrilineal or patrilineal societies, each family unit is usually headed by a senior male or headman who might either be the founding member of the family or have inherited that position. He acts in council with other significant members of the family in the management of the affairs of the unit. Elderly female members of matrilineal descent groups may be consulted in the decision-making process on issues affecting the family, but often the men wield more influence.

Family elders supervise the allocation of land and function as arbitrators in domestic quarrels; they also oversee naming ceremonies for infants, supervise marriages, and arrange funerals. As custodians of the political and spiritual authority of the unit, the headman and his elders ensure the security of the family. These obligations that bind the group together also grant its members the right of inheritance, the privilege to receive capital (either in the form of cattle or fishing nets) to begin new businesses, and the guarantee of a proper funeral and burial upon death. The extended family, therefore, functions as a mutual aid society in which each member has both the obligation to help others and the right to receive assistance from it in case of need.

To ensure that such obligations and privileges are properly carried out, the family also functions as a socializing agency. The moral and ethical instruction of children is the responsibility of the extended family. Traditional values may be transmitted to the young through proverbs, songs, stories, rituals, and initiations associated with rites of passage. Among the Krobo, Ga, and Akan, puberty rites for girls offer important occasions for instructing young adults. These methods of communication constitute the informal mode of education in the traditional society. It is, therefore, through the family that the individual acquires recognition and social status. As a result, the general society sees the individual's actions as reflecting the moral and ethical values of the family. Debts accrued by him are assumed by the family upon a member's death, and, therefore, his material gains are theirs to inherit.

Land is ordinarily the property of the lineage. Family land is thought of as belonging to the ancestors or local deities and is held in trust for them. As a result, such lands are administered by the lineage elders, worked by the members of the kinship group, and inherited only by members of that unit. Although sectors of such land may be leased to others for seasonal agricultural production, the land remains within the family and usually is not sold. However, it is not unusual for a man to set aside a portion of his acquired property as "reasonable gifts" for his children or wife, as has been the case, particularly, among matrilineal

groups. For such gifts to be recognized, tradition requires that the presentation be made public during the lifetime of the donor, allowing the recipient to hold the public as witnesses should the gift be contested afterward, especially following the death of the donor.

A network of mutual obligations also joins families to chiefs and others in the general community. Traditional elders and chiefs act for the ancestors as custodians of the community. Thus, in both patrilineal and matrilineal societies, and from the small village to the large town, the position of the chief and that of the queen mother are recognized.

The chief embodies traditional authority. Chiefs are usually selected from the senior members of the lineage or several lineages that are considered to be among the founders of the community or ethnic group. Chiefs have extensive executive and judicial authority. Decisions on critical issues, such as those made by family elders, are based on wide discussions and consultations with adult representative groups of both sexes. Traditionally, legislation has not been a primary issue, for the rules of life are largely set by custom. Discussions are usually focused on the expediency of concrete actions within the framework of customary rules. Decisions, when taken by chiefs, are normally taken by chiefs-in-council and not by lone dictatorial fiat. The legitimacy of traditional authority, therefore, has usually been based on public consensus sanctioned by custom (see [Traditional Religion](#) , this ch.).

Although chiefs or other authority figures might come from designated families or clans, the interest of the common people is never ignored. Where the process of selecting as well as of advising chiefs is not given directly to the populace, it has often been vested in representatives of kin or local residence groups, elders, or other types of councils. Among the Akan, for example, the *asaf* (traditional men's associations, originally fighting companies--see Glossary) have played important roles as political action groups to protect the interests of the common people. The priests of some local shrines also acquired substantial authority that helped balance the powers of local chiefs. It was such checks and balances within the traditional scheme of authority relations, especially among the Akan, that led the British anthropologist, Robert S. Rattray, to refer to the traditional political structure as a "domestic democracy."

Data as of November 1994

NOTE: The information regarding Ghana on this page is re-published from The Library of Congress Country Studies and the CIA World Factbook. No claims are made regarding the accuracy of Ghana Traditional Patterns of Social Relations information contained here. All suggestions for corrections of any errors about Ghana Traditional Patterns of Social Relations should be addressed to the Library of Congress and the CIA.