

LEADING ARTICLE

7.

THE CONTEXT OF SOCIALIZATION IN DAGBON

The Dagomba kingdom has many of the characteristic features of other societies within the Voltaic culture area including social differentiation of the population into two main groups: an immigrant ruling class, whose military power and political privilege have been based upon control of calvary and armaments; and the indigenous population identified with the land, with farming and the cult of the shrines of the earth spirit which are in the care of the Land priests.

Islamization of the kingdom has taken place in the last two hundred years with the result that the major annual and domestic ceremonials contain a large part of muslim ritual and ideology and at the recent census 53% of the population were recorded as being Muslims and that it is thought to be an advantage, as regards personal prestige, to identify oneself with public manifestations of the religion, if not with all the religious observances and life rules. Most muslims are from Yendi and Tamale. Muslim dress and names are very common. In the last few decades there have been some attempts at Christian conversion but the success has been negligible. Five per cent of the population say they are Christians. Most of these converts in the area are foreigners resident in Dagbon.

The population is about 260,000 and not very dense, about 20 per square mile over much of the area, though this is high in density when compared with their southern neighbours, the Gonja. People live in nucleated villages most of which have less than 200 inhabitants. The few larger communities which we could term towns, in that people cannot have personal face to face contacts with everyone else in the community and there is a considerable degree of economic specialization, - correspond with the distribution of the more important divisional chiefdoms within the political hierarchy.

The Dagomba are subsistence agriculturalists depending more upon grain and yam cultivation than livestock for food, though cattle form an important store of wealth and goats and fowls a source of sacrifice and protein.

Surplus foodstuffs are sold in the local markets, which are held in six day cycles and are the focus of much of the internal movement and a means of spreading news.

The observer soon gets the impression that the population is a highly mobile one, for there is frequent short term travel to distant markets; to visit relatives; to attend funerals and other festivals; there is considerable personal migration to find better areas to farm; to follow related chiefs as they succeed to office and to find better opportunities for craft specialization. Spatial mobility is also a function of the kinship system, brought about by rearing of children with parents' relatives in other towns, separation of spouses after birth, movement at marriage and so on. It may very well be that the amount of short and long term spatial mobility of the population varies, in the different groups in the society. The indigenous population probably are more strongly rooted in the local parishes or ritual areas in which they are born, while high mobility is correlated with holding of titles in the political hierarchy, and pursuit of specialist trades and crafts, partly because these latter men are often linked by ties of clientage to the chiefly class.

With regard to the traditional political organization, however little tangible power the chiefs may now have in the modern political context, they do have a considerable amount of prestige and influence and traditional political offices are still the object of much jealous competition and rivalry, candidates often spending large sums of money on trying to obtain success, moreover educated men take part in these political rivalries. At the apex of the political hierarchy is the Ya Na, the king or paramount chief, who has often had in the past and still has a difficult task to wield into one loyal unit the divisions of sub-chiefdoms held by jealous princes often ready to usurp his skin. There are several ranked categories of chiefs, each in charge of a larger or smaller segment of the kingdom, subject to the authority of the Ya Na and each chief in turn in charge of lesser chiefs and village headman under him. One important feature of the system, as I have already mentioned, which affects mobility and village composition is that chiefs move around in graded ladders within the ranks of the political hierarchy from one village chiefship to the next till they reach their terminus.

According to their rank and status chiefs are served by a number of musicians who act as praise singers, news vendors, recorders of history and

genealogical experts; by warriors, political advisers, servants (some formerly slaves) and others. A number of these plus relatives and hangers-on attach themselves to a particular chief for their mutual benefit and follow him in his migrations so long as it suits them. In the larger towns and divisional capitals the professionals and trade specialists tend to live in their own wards under their respective heads. Thus there may be a drummers' section with a head drummer and several junior drummers who either gained their offices from a previous chief or followed the present one and have been rewarded with titles for their favours. Drummers' titles vary from place to place but several titles are common. The head drummer in Yendi is the chief of all the drummers in Dagbon. Similarly the warriors have their ranked and graded titles, while the butchers, barbers, blacksmiths have one or more title holders in a town. The head of each group is responsible for seeing that the chief's needs are satisfied. The relationship between chief and specialist is often one in which strong ties of patronage and clientship bind the two in a reciprocally advantageous relationship, services being exchanged for favours, goods and privileges. As we shall note elsewhere often patron and client are bound by real or fictitious ties of kinship or affinity.

It is very difficult to say much about the Dagomba kinship system in general at this stage for this is a differentiated society in which each group needs to be examined in detail. It seems, on the basis of the little data collected so far, that it is true to say that the Dagomba have nonunilineal descent groups or descending kindreds. These appear to fit Davenport's description (AmAnth 1950) in that groups exist in which members trace their relationship lineally through either or both sexes to a common ancestor. These groups are four to six generations in depth and each group has its own identity, - being referred to as the children of a particular named grandparent possessing certain property in common such as cows and heirlooms and participating in corporate rituals. Marriage is regulated by group members - for although these are not exogamous or endogamous groups two kin cannot marry into the same one and one man cannot marry two wives from the same one. The kindred or "dang" appears to segment into groups of siblings who are represented in family matters by the oldest sibling, who has influence and authority over his junior siblings. These descent groups seem somewhat dispersed and membership is overlapping, for a person may continue to participate in more than one group. Investigation may show that residence

and social participation are often factors fixing affiliation to one or more such descending kindreds. The descent group head is the oldest man (or woman) of the senior generation. He possesses inherited ritual and other family property, informs members of family festivals, arranges and sanctions marriages, and supervises sharing of inheritance between heirs. Part of his duties are delegated to the senior siblings of component segments who may deal with family matters after informing him.

The depth of personal genealogy remembered and significant to the individual varies from group to group and person to person. The royal patriline can trace its politically significant genealogy back for sixteen or more generations. The feat of remembering this in all its ramifications is the task of the drummers. Thus anyone who can trace relationship with a member of the ruling dynasty can automatically work out his genealogy for sixteen generations or more. Also men who have succeeded to professional titles may be able to count back through several generations of holders of the office either in the patriline or matriline, whereas on the other hand commoners, for whom it is of no political or other advantage to remember many forebears may only recount back as far as a grandfather or great grandfather in any or all lines, depending upon filiation. For commoners it is widely ramifying cognatic ties which seem important and are remembered. Then in the case of slaves incorporated into families, in enquiring into the genealogy, one may find it stops abruptly one generation back. Thus the depth of genealogy remembered and the particular cognatic ties accounted significant by an individual are partly a function of the political or professional titles held by his ancestors and the significance of certain ancestors for his career or well being.

The basic unit of social organization is the household living in a single walled compound or house. Its nucleus is an elementary or polygamous family to which may be attached the descendants of the head's grandfather, that is the head's classificatory or full brothers and sisters and their children and grandchildren, and since marriage is virilocal, also the head's wives and his sons' and brothers' wives. The strong ties daughters and sisters retain with their natal homes and the practices of fostering are such that in a sample of households there were found to be as many people related to the household head through his daughters and sisters as through his brothers and sons.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Census data from 58 households was collected in one village by Tait. Records are deposited in the Balme library, Legon.

Thus almost thirty per cent of the inmates were the daughters and daughters' children of the household heads while only twenty two per cent were sons and their wives and children.

The male head of the household wields domestic authority and supervises the economic activities of the household. He also prays to his ancestors on behalf of the members of the household. As regards organization of domestic affairs the resident sister, or occasionally mother of the householder or his first wife, is the senior of the women. Especially in chiefs' houses the latter has an important and respected role to play. In polygamous households domestic and marital functions are performed by each wife in turn.

The size and composition of the domestic group in which a child is reared and trained varies considerably according to the estate, rank, occupation, wealth and maturity of its household head. Households may vary in size between one and fifty or more occupants. While those chiefs, limams, ward heads tend to have twenty or more members there is some evidence that the mean and modal sizes are much lower, approximately 8 and 5 respectively, showing that the majority of untitled commoners' households are relatively small partly because the latter seldom have more than two or three wives while a chief may have ten or more. Children are generally related by ties of kinship or marriage to the head of the household in which they live and should a friend's son come temporarily to live in the house to be trained, his relationship to the head will still be expressed in the kinship idiom.

On the basis of actor's statement, household censuses and analysis of questionnaires administered to school children it would seem that the following observations concerning the child and its near kin have some element of general application.

It is with other members of his elementary family that the child is usually most closely involved, with his mother, father and siblings. The father is the most respected and kind in giving things to his children while the mother is most beloved and seen most often. Considerable dislike of siblings is expressed, which may possibly be directed against successive rather than much older or younger siblings, towards whom the relationship may assume some of the characteristics of parent filial tie.

The next two relatives who figure most prominently in the child's domestic environment are the father's sister, who is often resident in the household or the relative to whom a girl is sent to be reared; and the mother's brother, who may be visited frequently or in whose house a child may be living. Both are considered kind but the father's sister is also the object of fear and dislike. Throughout her life a woman retains strong links with her family of origin, which are periodically renewed by more or less prolonged stays with her father or brother, after parturition, divorce, widowhood and at the menopause. This results in a considerable number of household heads' sisters residing with them. Twenty five were found living in a sample of fifty eight compounds. (cf E. Goody 1960). The role of the house-owner's sister is a respected one and has greater prestige and authority in old age than even that of first wife, for a sister takes precedence over her brothers' wives and is addressed by them as husband.

Grandparents are typically kind and indulgent to their grandchildren. Two factors however which affect the composition of the households mean that a majority of households have a two generational structure, so that most children do not live with their grandparents, especially as they are growing older. The two factors are namely, that sons tend to split away from the parental household when they have children of their own (in sixty eight households only eight were found to contain heads' sons and their children and these were mainly households of senior titled men). Secondly women who leave their husbands tend to go to stay with their brothers and not their sons and so live as father's sisters in their kinsmen's households not as grandmothers in their sons' households.

Mother's sisters play a relatively unimportant role in a child's life as they are not often coresident. On the other hand the father's younger brother is often living in the same household as his brother's children (17 were found to be resident in 58 households) and it seems as though he is sometimes disliked, presumably for the beatings he may give and a number of children also live in the households of their father's older brother. In summary then we may say that in the majority of cases the relatives living in the same households as the growing child are his parents, his own siblings, and father's siblings. Certain mechanisms are at work however in a number of cases which detach the child from his natal household and attach him to another. Dagomba dogma and practice both clearly demonstrate that in a

considerable number of cases it is not the real parent of a child who is the main socializing agent during his youth; instead it may be the father's sibling or mother's father or brother or another relative who becomes, in a sense, the social parent of the child. For both maternal and paternal relatives hold and may exercise certain rights to rear and train a couple's children. These rights and the exercise of them may vary according to estate and professional group membership and with personal economic, domestic and other circumstances. These practices of rearing relatives' children, here termed fostering, and adoption may be viewed as specific 'mechanisms which detach the child from its parents and attach it to members of the wider kinship group' (cf Firth 1936 p.190). The term fostering is here used to refer to the institution through which parents temporarily hand over the responsibility for rearing the child to a relative. The child goes to live with the foster-parent to serve and be trained by him or her. There are no binding sanctions compelling him to go or stay with the foster parent and his relations with his true parents are in no way severed. Adoption is used to refer to the practice whereby a child is ceremonially and ritually transferred from its parents to its adopted parents (who are maternal relatives) after being chosen by divination. The child or his parents refuse the summons to go on the pain of death. The adopting parents retain some claims in the child throughout his life and he may continue to live with them till marriage or after. After discussing the dogma concerning rights and claims to children held by particular relatives in the light of a sample of data I shall draw some tentative conclusions about the functions of fostering and adoption.

It is plainly stated by individual Dagomba in discussions about rearing children that parents never have complete control over their offspring while their senior siblings and parents are alive, for the parents themselves are under the control of their own parents and also under the influence of the heads of their kindreds. Indeed parents are not even thought to be the best or most competent people to bring up their children and should not keep all of them! So even while children live in their parents' house other people influence their mode of training such as by preventing a father from sending a child to school. In the extreme case a father's sibling may come to claim a son on pain of death, or again grandparents may curse their children with death, disease or hell for not giving them some grandchildren to rear and serve them (cf Rattray 1932 p. 263). As regards the claims of paternal relatives Dagomba

say that children cannot be taken to the father's side as they are already there and there is no term for fostering by the paternal relatives; nevertheless it is axiomatic that sons should be given to their fathers' brothers to be educated, while girls should be given to their father's sisters for they will be stricter in rearing them and will not spoil them. Thus a child may be given at the age of between four and eight and stay with the paternal uncle or aunt until marriage. In fact a girl's ties with her father's sister may begin before birth and not end with marriage, for a woman may establish her claim over her brother's child before it is born by performing the pregnancy ceremony for her sister-in-law and providing things for her confinement and toilet articles for the new baby. If her ties with the girl are very strong the latter may even choose to go and stay with her after the birth of her own child instead of going to her own mother. It is said that the claim of a senior sister to take a daughter can scarcely be denied because of her influential position in the family. When a girl has been fostered thus by her father's sister it is to her that the girl's suitors will pay their respects when asking for her hand in marriage. As regards the claim of maternal relatives some say it is common for a man to give one of his children to his wife's parents, to quote, "If a man gives his daughter to a man in marriage the husband may give back a child to his wife's father so that the other children who stay with their father may know their mother's side through their brother who has returned there. Having been sent freely the boy may return at will". In actual fact the claims of the mother's side are often recognized and in particular instances are backed by powerful supernatural or political sanctions, which may be denied at considerable personal risk.

An analysis of the first filial generation in a number of compounds shows that the dogma stating that children should be given to their parents' siblings is in many cases actually practised. In those compounds about 25% of the boys and girls were living with parents siblings, which figure compares with the figures for Gonja collected by E. Goody (1960).



TABLE I

An analysis of the first filial generation in Fifty eight households:

| Relationship to Household head | Female |    | Male |    | Total |    |
|--------------------------------|--------|----|------|----|-------|----|
|                                | No.    | %  | No.  | %  | No.   | %  |
| Wife's brother's child         | 9      | 5  | 0    | 0  | 9     | 2  |
| Brother's child                | 13     | 7  | 38   | 23 | 51    | 14 |
| Sister's child                 | 10     | 5  | 26   | 14 | 36    | 9  |
| Own child                      | 155    | 85 | 119  | 65 | 274   | 75 |

Note:- The Data is from a household census taken in a royal village in Western Dagbon by the late Dr.D. Tait in the early nineteen fifties.

It is not until we break down the composition of a number of households according to the profession or estate of the head that some idea of the possible patterns of fostering begin to emerge. For the few figures indicate that patterns vary very much according to profession and estate.

TABLE II

Analysis of first filial generation in households classified according to the profession of the head:

| Households | Head | No. | Wife's sibs child |    | Brother's child |    | Sister's child |    | Own child |     | Total |   |
|------------|------|-----|-------------------|----|-----------------|----|----------------|----|-----------|-----|-------|---|
|            |      |     | M                 | F  | M               | F  | M              | F  | M         | F   | M     | F |
| Musician   | 10   | 0   | 4                 | 7  | 2               | 9  | 0              | 21 | 3         | 37  | 9     |   |
| Mallam     | 7    | 0   | 2                 | 4  | 1               | 0  | 0              | 9  | 13        | 13  | 16    |   |
| Rifleman   | 9    | 0   | 3                 | 3  | 1               | 1  | 1              | 27 | 13        | 31  | 18    |   |
| Courtier   | 9    | 0   | 2                 | 5  | 2               | 0  | 0              | 27 | 16        | 32  | 20    |   |
| Chief      | 1    | 0   | 2                 | 5  | 0               | 4  | 0              | 6  | 1         | 15  | 3     |   |
| Total      | 36   | 0   | 13                | 24 | 6               | 14 | 1              | 90 | 46        | 128 | 66    |   |

Note:- This data includes figures from household censuses taken in three royal capitals.

The data in Table II support the statement that girls are often brought up by their fathers' sisters and that both boys and girls may be reared for one reason or another by their fathers' brothers. It is in the case of the rearing of sisters' sons that the data support the contention that this is not a universally current practice in the society but that it is found in particular groups and often associated with recruitment of boys to specialist social roles. Thus we see here that only in the musicians' households (Iunsi and godzenema) is there a considerable proportion of sisters' sons resident. In fact they comprise about one quarter of the males of the first filial generation in those compounds. The practice of fostering or adoption as a function of modes of recruiting members of the musical professions will be discussed in more detail elsewhere. The statement that royals have considerable claims over the services of their sister's and brothers' children is borne out by the single example of the situation in a chief's compound. Traditionally a chief's own sons were all sent away to be brought up by his title court officials, a custom which has still not died out. Siblings' children were needed in particular to act as grass cutters and grooms for the chief's much-prized horses.

The figure below shows diagrammatically the linking effects of fostering siblings' children in a system composed of overlapping descending kindreds. The function of such a practice as regards maintaining contacts and communications between networks of dispersed and mobile kin is easily seen. And it is in fact this aspect of fostering which is emphasized by the Dagomba themselves and cases can be described illustrating this effect.

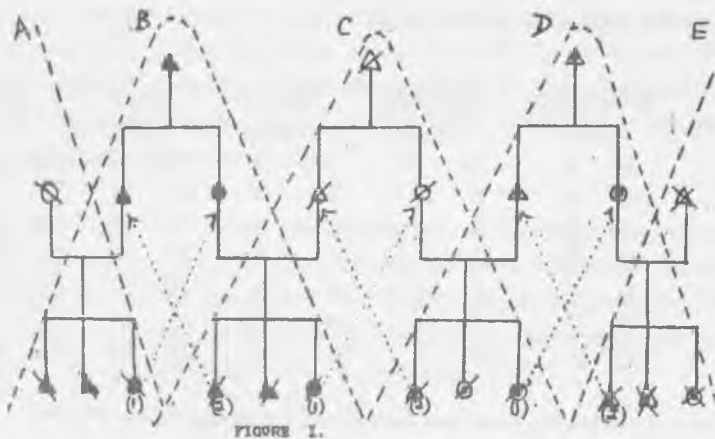


Diagram to demonstrate how the practice of fostering both enhances sibling solidarity and forges links between kindreds.

- ▲ ● = Members of descending kindred B
- △ = Members of descending kindreds C & D
- 1 = Girl fostered by Father's sister
- 2 = Boy fostered by Mother's brother.

Thus in discussion, the manifest functions of fostering children by the father's siblings are readily put forward. First it knits the family together more closely, for the children then get to know their relatives and siblings are linked together by rearing each other's children. Secondly fostering is practised with a view to giving the child into the charge of someone who is experienced and mature and ideally able to care for the child rather than the parents who may be too inexperienced and not so prone to spoil the child or to discipline it too harshly. A further function of the practice is that it spreads siblings' wealth, knowledge, skills and prestige amongst their offspring and recruits the children of female members of a kindred to the professions followed by their brothers. At the same time fostering of siblings' children gives greater corporate identity to the sibling group and also to the dispersed kindred. Moreover it provides enduring links between the members of different kindreds and specialist groups for full siblings may be reared in different traditions of skills and learning. A butcher's brother may be a mallam, drummer, barber etc. So that fostering is an important mechanism helping to link kin who are spatially, economically and socially separated. It creates multiple skeins of ties between groups and communities.

Any intensive study of socialization in Dagbon will certainly need to take into account the practice of kinship fostering. Systematic collection of data on this topic should provide material not only of interest in the field of child development but to kinship theory in general and the structure of functioning of non-unilineal descent groups in particular.

C. Oppong (Mrs.)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- |               |      |   |
|---------------|------|---|
| Blair, H.     | 1963 | Essay upon the Dagomba People   |
| Davenport, W. | 1959 | Nonunilinear Descent and Descent groups<br>Am. Anth. 61 p.557 -   |
| Firth, R.     | 1936 | We, the Tikopia (Allen & Unwin)   |
| Goody, E.     | 1960 | Conjugal Separation & Divorce among the Gonja of<br>Northern Ghana (in Divorce & Marriage in Tribal<br>Societies ed. Fortes C.U.P.) |

- Goody, E.            1966    The Fostering of Children in Ghana. A preliminary Report. Ghana Journal of Sociology Vol.2 No.1
- Oppong, C.           1965    Some Sociological Aspects of Education in Dagbon (M.A. Thesis, Institute of African Studies, Legon)
- Oppong, C.           1966    The Dagomba Response to the Introduction of State Schools. Ghana Journal of Sociology Vol.2 No.1. February.
- Oppong, C.           1967    Local Migration in Northern Ghana. Ghana Journal of Sociology Vol.3 No.1. February
- Tait, D.              1965    Structural Change in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast. Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Conference of the West African Institute of Social and Economic Research, Ibadan.



This work is licensed under a  
Creative Commons  
Attribution – NonCommercial - NoDerivs 4.0 License.

To view a copy of the license please see:  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

This is a download from the BLDS Digital Library on OpenDocs  
<http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/>