



Nigerian Matrifocal Societies in the Ethnographies of Daryll Forde, Simmon Ottenberg and Philip Nsugbe: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

In traditional societies, kinship arrangements are central to the structural, holistic understanding of a particular culture. This is because culture is integrative and social relation is understood best when we look at the structure a particular society adopts. Ethnographers have found three major kinship structures in the Eastern part of Nigeria. These are patrilineal, matrilineal and double descent systems. This review paper, therefore, explores three matrifocal societies in ethnographic accounts of Daryll Forde, Simmon Ottenberg and Philip Nsugbe. There are similarities as well as differences in the accounts of these three scholars on the societies they each studied.

Key words: *Comparative Analysis, Ethnographies, Kinship, Matrifocal, Matrifocal Societies,*

Introduction

In non-industrial societies, kinship systems, descent groups, and marriage organize social and political life (Kottak 2008). Afikpo, Yakö, and Qhaffia are classified along this line in the works of Simon Ottenberg, Daryll Forde, and Philip Nsugbe respectively. It is my aim to identify and compare the matrifocal attributes of these societies. In doing this, I will be limited to the ethnographies of the trio. Nevertheless, before this, the concepts of kinship systems and descent groups need an overview.

Let us establish that everybody has a relation. This relation might be because of having one biological father and mother, grandparents, or great ancestor in common. In addition to this biological relation, one might establish a relation through marriage. Consider also a situation where a father or a mother is related to a child of which they have no biological relationship with, but accepts to be the social parents. All these categories of relationship are explained by the concept of kinship. Kinship systems establish relationships between individuals and groups on the model of biological relationships between parents and children, between siblings, and between marital



partners (Marshall, 1998). Although apt in its own conceptualization, this definition of kinship systems negates the role of social father or mother and emphasized only biological and marital relationship.

Kinship systems therefore, establish relationships between individuals and groups on the model of social and biological relationships between parents and children, between siblings, and between marital partners. When descent is traced from the male, such that the ego, the hypothetical person being traced, inherits from the paternal, it is referred to as patrilineal kinship system. When it is traced through maternal lineage such that the mother's brother transfers right of inheritance to the ego, it is known as matrilineal kinship system. However, when descent is traced from both sides such that the ego inherits from both sides, it is referred to as double descent kinship system.

A descent group is a permanent social unit whose members say they have ancestors in common (Kottak, 2008). These members believe they share, and descend from a common ancestor. The group endures, even though its membership changes because members are threatened by natural and social forces.

Theoretical Framework: Diffusionism

This study adopts diffusionism as the theoretical frame of analysis. The advocates of diffusionism believe that culture develops and spreads through migration and diffusion. Anthropologists in the German-speaking countries of central Europe, Germany and Austria, on one hand and those of America on the other were early contributors to diffusionism and systematic regional enquiry (Ember, Ember & Peregrine, 2007). In Germany and Austria this was called *Kulturkreis*, a term that is translated as culture circle. Americans developed theirs as 'culture area' Invalid source specified..

Materials and Methods

This study adopted regional controlled comparison. In a regional controlled comparison, the anthropologist compares ethnographic information obtained from societies found in a particular region – societies that have presumably similar histories and occupy similar environments (Ember,



Ember & Peregrine, 2007). Yakö, Ohafia and Afikpo are presumably found within the same culture area.

The regional controlled comparison is useful not only for generating explanations but also for testing them. Because some of the societies being compared will have the characteristic that is to be explained and some will not, the anthropologist can determine whether the conditions hypothesized to be related are in fact related, at least in that region.

Philip Nsugbe's Ohafia: A Brief Description

According to Nsugbe, Ohafia [*sic*] is one of the Cross River Ibo [*sic*] groupings. The others are the Nkporo Ada to the north of the Ohafia, the Ihe and the Aro to the south, the Abam to the southwest, and the Abiriba to the west. The territories of these communities, including the Ohafia, mark the geographical frontier of Iboland in the east. Ohafia itself is located closest to the river, on a 'hoe-shaped' ridge at the extreme north-north-eastern corner of the Bende Division.

Nsugbe reports that the Ohafia claims to have migrated from Ibeku Igbo. However, there is a marked difference in the social structure of the duo. Whereas Ibeku, like majority Igbo groupings, is patrilineal, Ohafia is matrilineal. He gives three mythical accounts of the source of the Ohafia matiliny, nevertheless, two of the accounts I shall narrate.

One of the accounts says that their refugee guests from Osa Ibeku kept themselves separate from the rest of the Ohafia. As a group in a minority, the Osa were reluctant to part with their daughters as wives to the Ohafia. If they did so, they accepted no marriage payment, and so were able to insist that the children of such marriages would inherit from them and would belong to their descent group. The Ohafia, however, asked for and received marriage payments for any daughter married to the Osa. The Ohafia, in this order, lost their rights over their sons' as well as their daughters' children, and this made their refugee guests multiplied more than them. This version account was why Ohafia, in the end, adopted matriliny.

The other account speaks of the flight of an Ohafia man who had killed a fellow Ohafia, probably, a close relative, purportedly by accident. He fled to a patrilineal kinsman, who, however returned him to the his relative. The man managed to escape once more and on this time ran to a sister who,



chose to give her own head in place of his brother, rather than give him up. It was in this way that the man was saved. When he was dying years later, he thought that he should show his gratitude for the self-sacrifice of his sister by passing all his possessions to her children. He did not see any reason why those who could not save would inherit his possessions. It was in this manner, according to this version, that Ohafia people came to adopt matriliney.

Simmon Ottenberg's Afikpo: A Brief Description

Ottenberg describes Afikpo Village-Group as one of more than two hundred relatively autonomous groups of Igbo-speaking peoples in south eastern Nigeria. The twenty-two villages which are collectively known as Afikpo Village-Group, lie in the easternmost portion of Igbo territory, on the west bank of the Cross River. Afikpo forms one of sixteen village-groups, all but two of which are Igbo, which make up Afikpo Division, an administrative unit in Abakaliki Province. It is a hilly region, with sandstone ridges which run in various directions. The altitude is not high, being about five hundred feet above sea level. It is a transitional area between open grassland and tropical rain forest, the rainfall of about seventy-seven inches a year, coming mainly between June and November.

Ottenberg's account portrays Afikpo history as being complex. The complex nature of the Afikpo is as a result of gradual movement into the area over the past several centuries of various peoples, mainly Igbo-speaking, with very little emigration. This has resulted in a rather complicated organizational structure in the village-group, including double descent. It seems evident that the Igbo who moved into Afikpo were basically patrilineal in descent, the persons from Aro mainly so, and those from some other Igbo areas probably more completely so. The tales of their movements into Afikpo are the stories of the founding of patrilineal groupings, not of matrilineal ones.

The Igbo seemed to have come in stages in small groupings of families, sometimes led by two or more brothers bringing patrilineally controlled shrines with them. However, they pressed in



considerable numbers, gradually conquering the smaller matrilineal groupings, which probably lacked firearms or other weapons the invaders had.

The Igbo did not kill all the indigenous population, though some apparently fled east of the Cross River, nor did they destroy the matrilineal system of land tenure. Igbo married indigenous women and acquired matrilineal land rights by doing so, involving themselves in the uterine descent system. In addition, they retained their patrilineal organization, which was the basis of their pattern of residence

Daryll Forde's Yakö: A Brief Description

According to Forde, the Yakö of the Middle Cross River area of Obubra Division live in five compact villages a few miles apart, each of which was formally autonomous in its political as well as its ritual organization. They have a common tradition that their forebears all came from the east together with the people of Okuni, a settlement some fifth mile away up the Cross River. They were not a river people and had moved overland in several parties and over some years.

The Yakö, it seemed, according to Forde, lived very much in the present. At least they had no institutionalized narratives of the past in relation to any of their major institutions. However, the Yakö recognizes the role of migration to their social structure.

The Yakö recognize and distinguish clearly between patrilineally and matrilineally derived rights to property and status. Although the greater part of accumulated wealth in rod-currency, livestock, and harvested crops passes at death to matrilineal kinsmen, patrilineal succession is paramount in the territorial organization. Rights to farm land, house sites and benefit from co-operative labour



are established within and by the general consent of the group to which the individual belongs normally in virtue of his patrilineal descent.

Nsugbe, Forde, and Ottenberg's Matrifocal Societies: A Comparison

In Qhaffja, like Afikpo, the term for any matrilineal relative, regardless of the nature of the relationship is *ikwu*. Unlike Qhaffja, distinction is made between *ikwu nne* (matrilineal relative – mother), and *ikwu nna* (matrilineal relative – father) in Afikpo. Although Ottenberg did not give a comprehensive analysis of the kinship terms among the Afikpo, the *ikwu* as used in both societies present the similarity between them. Like Afikpo, but unlike Qhaffja, Yako kinship terminology clearly expresses the dichotomy between matrilineal and patrilineal affiliations (Nsugbe, 1974; Ottenberg, 1968; Forde, 1964).

Among the Yakö, the terms used for parents *uwo* ([my] father), *muka* ([my] mother), may also be employed in a classificatory sense when referring to collateral kin of their generation, if they are of the same sex, as well as the same lineage as the parent. Thus, F, FB, and FFBS are all referred to and may be addressed, as *uwo*, but an MB will not. Similarly, MZ and MMD will be called *muka*, but FZ will not (Forde, 1964).

The structure of the Qhaffja political system in a sense could be described as pyramidal. It is a broad base, which derives directly from a system of age-grade organization. From this, it builds up, firstly by formal recognition into *Akpan*, and later by selection into *umuaka*. The *Akpan* constitute a group of boys who are in the prime of their youth. They carry out the enforcement of decisions made by the *umuaka*. The *Umuaka*, being much older than those of *Akpan*, are the most powerful governmental body in the village; from *Umuaka*, then finally by survival into *Ndi Ichin*. The *Ndi Ichinis* made up of men who because of their age have retired from active participation in the running of the affairs of the village. Each of these is ranked above the one below it based on age, but at the same time, each is an association by specific principle of recruitment. In parallel, there are the *Ikperikpe*, the female counterpart of *Umuaka* – who are the traditional law-keeping body of Qhaffja women folk, and the village polity – *Ama ala*, as well as the village head, *Eze ogo*. The roles of the last two lie on the periphery of village politics (Nsugbe, 1974).



Like Qhaffja, Yakö political system is also pyramidal. In the traditionally dominant governing body of the ward *Yakamben* (the leaders) – there was succession to membership from certain lineages and patriclan heads were admitted. However, there was no formal chain of authority or ritual continuity between the patriclans and ward. Unlike Qhaffja, the ward leaders of Yakö were sustained by their own spirit and were not regarded by Yakö as a conclave of clan elders, nor did they function as such. They viewed their ritual powers, their rights, and obligations territorially in terms of the ward and its population. For it, they performed an annual rite and periodic initiation of its boys. They recognized the formation of new age-set and through their announcer *Edjukwa*, called for the public services of the junior ones. The ward leaders of Yakö, like the *Umuaka* of Qhaffja, heard and gave judgments in disputes within the ward. They transfer the power of punishment to the *Ebiabu* just like the *Akpan* in the case of Qhaffja.

In Afikpo, control of clan affairs, as in the case of the major patrilineage, is in the hands of its elders and the priest of its major shrine. The central meeting place of clan is the compound of its priest, who is guardian of its shrine, *Nja*, located in his compound. *Nja* is also the term for the spirit associated with the shrine, which is not ancestral in nature.

Unlike Qhaffja and Yakö, in Afikpo, the shrine is the central symbol of the matrilineal clan. Its control rests with the priests and the clan elders. The latter are those clan males who have reached the degree of seniority so that they belong to age groupings, which have been organized on a village group basis; that is, they are roughly over fifty-five years of age, the same as elders of the major patrilineages and the villages. Specific individuals do not represent lineages in the clan in this elder's group. If a lineage contains no elder, no member will attend the leaders' meetings unless a matter especially concerning that lineage is being discussed. Unlike Qhaffja and Yakö, there is no formal ranking among the clan leaders in Afikpo.

In Afikpo, the productive property of the matriclan is extremely important. The clan controls several kinds of property but its most important corporate interest is in farmland. About 85 per cent of the Afikpo farmland is matrilineally controlled.

The clan elders insure that the property of deceased member is inherited according to the custom. The main interest of the clan here is the movable wealth of the deceased especially money and



trade goods. Contrasting the general supportive and protective role of the matrilineal clans the matrilineages have much specific concern with personal uterine interrelationship, and most directly involved with property controls, and have quite distinctive pattern of authority.

Authority over the matrilineage, its land and other properties, rest in its senior male member, whether or not he is the closest in genealogical ties to the founding ancestor of the lineage. The head may be young or middle-aged, unlike the clan leaders.

It is the duty of the matrilineage head to maintain control over the lineage land, to see to the performance of the required general sacrifices to it, and he often does this himself. Females have virtually no authority or control over matrilineal lands, though, of course it descends through them. The interests of the members of a matrilineage in land overshadow their concern with the control of groves and of water areas. Farmland holding is much more valuable.

However, the matrilineal clans and lineages are not static organizations as they always record growth and decay. On the Afikpo, there are three main processes which are at work. There are the fission and the accretion of clans. At the same time, there is segmentation: the continual breaking up and reforming of matrilineages within the clan without losing attachment to their larger organizations.

It is recorded among the Yakō, unlike Afikpo, that dwelling sites, farming land, and the more important forest resources are acquired by virtue of membership of a patrilineal group. However, like Afikpo, if attention is transferred from rights in economic resources to the transmission of accumulated wealth, matrilineal kinship comes into prominence. The funeral and the disposal of a dead person's property are supervised by a close matrikinsmen, an MB or ZS, who in the case of a man is chief heir. All currency, whether it is in brass rods or modern coinage, and all livestock should by custom pass to matrilineal relatives, who also receive the greater share of the implements, weapons, household goods and any store foods. The movable property of women, which is usually less considerable, pass mainly to their daughters, but sons should expect very little from their parents.



However, it is good to point out here that these rights of inheritance are associated with corresponding obligations. These responsibilities range from debts of matrikinsmen to readiness to make reasonable loans at need, and the duty of providing a part, although a minor share of the currency and goods transferred by ZS at marriage

The position of women as wives and as owners of property in their husband's farms is similarly the concern of their matrilineal kin. When a wife dies, both her right and duties in her husband's farm pass for the rest of the farming season to one or more matrikinswomen. If she dies after a harvest, her yams in the household yam store are claimed by her matrilineal kin and are usually taken by a Z or a grown D.

Matrilineal kinship confers no settled rights to economic resources, which are exploited within the patrilineal, that is, to farm plots as distinct from specific harvest, to oil-palm groves or to planted fruit trees. Nevertheless, the categories are not entirely clear-cut, since matrikin should supply one another when there are special and occasional needs.

Nsugbe records that among the Qhaffia, the lands immediately beyond and adjoining the village building lands belong as a rule to the matrilineages. Such lands are called *agbugbo ezi* (literally the back of the residential land). It is left to say that patrilineage groups have the rights to building land where they build their houses. Since members of a matrilineage in Qhaffia are dispersed, it follows that the matrilineage, owning *agbugbo ezi* lands cannot live on these themselves. What generally happens, according to Nsugbe is that the male (or female) head of the matrilineage owning such lands will take charge of them, however many and wherever these lands are. It is the responsibility of the head of the matrilineage to protect the rights of his matrilineage in lands and their resources in or upon them, such as oil palms, raffia-palm groves, clay and chalk pits. It is the responsibility of the male head of the matrilineage to supervise the use of these lands with the aid of the other adult members of the group.

Lands lying sometimes many miles away, beyond *agbugbo ezi*, are generally also owned by matrilineages. There are also private lands – lands purchased or otherwise acquired by an individual are private lands. However, at the owner's death, provided the lands are not built on, such lands will be inherited by the appropriate member of the deceased's matrilineage, usually a



ZS, or in the absence of one of the closest male or female member of the man's matrilineage. In addition, when a man dies within Qhaffja, claiming his movable property by his ZS or by the closest matrilineal male or female kin present no problem but this can be a problem if the man dies outside Qhaffja.

Conclusion

There are two recognized descent-groups in Qhaffja: the matrilineage (*ikwu*) and the patrilineage (*umudi*). The matrilineage is not only exogamous but the main property inheriting and land-owning group in Qhaffja. The patrilineage in Qhaffja is a non-exogamous, and it can only inherit certain categories of land.

Like Qhaffja, Afikpo and Yakö recognize two descent groups. Like Qhaffja, Afikpo matrilineage is also exogamous. In addition, like Qhaffja but unlike Yako, Afikpo matrilineage controls 85 per cent of the farmland. It remains to say that in Yakö, rules governing the right to inherit lands recognize the patrilineal line only, although in the same group, members of the matrilineal kinship group should take precedence over patrilineal in the inheritance of all transferrable wealth, especially livestock and currency, in the receipt of marriage payments made to a woman's brother at her marriage. Yakö patriclan is strictly exogamous.

What is left to state here is that Nsugbe has taken every known possible explanation of matrilineality. He has argued on the favour of cultural ecology, debunking diffusionism. This is because he had tried to look at the germinal features of matrilineality, most which is simple subsistence strategy as exemplified in horticulture. He even made definite case not to group Ohafia as a double descent system in line with the Afikpo and the Yakö. However, he insisted that even if an attempt is made to do so, the dominance of matrilineality should be seen in the Ohafia social structure.

If we accept the separate accounts of these scholars, how can we explain the similarities and differences among them? Diffusionism has been pointed out as early regional attempt at the explanation of culture. In the particular case of the central Europeans, one of the foremost names in this tradition, Wilhem Schmidt, advocated that ethnology should seek to understand "the conditions existing among primitive peoples today but also to recognize in them witnesses and



survival of the oldest development of mankind...and with their help to construct the objective succession of events and thereby the actual genesis of culture among the different peoples”Invalid source specified..

Advocates of *Kulturkreis* attempted to group human societies worldwide according to culture circles. They believed that culture spread through diffusion and migration. The contribution of the Americans was in the shape of culture area. Culture area is an ecological continuum with a centre from which the culture trait complexes were supposed to have developed and diffused. It remains to say that these groups are at the margin and may have had influence from more than one culture area. What is left, is extensive research on the original matrilineal source of the three societies

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