

Out of Sight, out of Mind?

Lineage and Inter-Generational Family Ties in Ghana

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1 Introduction and Background

Lineage systems as informal institutions that structure the organization of kin groups and consequently society as a whole have received considerable scholarly attention, both in the past and in the present. Throughout the past century, these systems have primarily been studied by anthropologists, who focused on documenting their occurrence and function within specific ethnic groups (e.g., Goody 1974; Murdock 1949, 1967). In recent years, the analysis of lineage systems has witnessed a revival in cultural and institutional economics, where scholars have begun to triangulate earlier anthropological accounts with contemporary survey data to explore their historical origins, persistence, and present-day consequences (e.g., La Ferrara 2007; Lowes 2020, 2022; Ranucci et al. 2025). A substantial part of these older and more recent strands of research has focused on Sub-Saharan Africa, where most ethnic groups have been classified as either *matrilineal* or *patrilineal*. In the former case, descent is traced through the female/maternal line, while in the latter it is traced through the male line. Against this background, it has been argued that inheritance, residence patterns, as well as kin support and obligations systematically vary according to the respective lineage system that is adhered to (Goody 1974; Nukunya 2003: 30, 48, 50-52).

With respect to residential patterns, anthropological accounts have documented a close connection between lineage and post-marital residence. Whereas a newly married (heterosexual) couple is often prescribed to live with or close to the kin group of the female partner (i.e., *matrilocal* residence) in matrilineal groups, spouses are usually expected to reside with or in proximity to the male partner's kin group among patrilineal groups (*patrilocal* residence). In consequence, it has been argued that women retain close ties to their own kin group after marriage in matrilineal groups, while their relocation to and embedding in their husband's kin group in patrilineal groups implies a weakening of the bonds with women's own kin groups, with the opposite pattern holding for men upon marriage. Against this background, lineage systems and their corresponding residence rules, as long as they are adhered to, can be expected to exert a profound structuring effect on the configuration of inter-generational ties and the organization of family networks more broadly.

However, existing insights into this structuring role of lineage systems with respect to inter-generational relationships are largely based on dated ethnographic accounts, and little is known about their relevance for contemporary family life in Sub-Saharan Africa. For Ghana as the particular context that I focus on in the present study, several anthropologists

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have documented the co-existence of both patrilineal and matrilineal systems and corresponding residence patterns. Yet, these findings are mostly based on data collected over 50 years ago, while more recent scholarship suggests a weakening of inter-generational ties (Aboderin 2017) and a gradual *nuclearization* of the Ghanaian family (Kpoor 2015; Nukunya 2003: 48-52; Oppong 1977), which implies a disembedding of newly married couples from their wider kin groups, including their parents. In this context, Nukunya (2003) has argued that structural changes such as the spread of Christian churches, urbanization, labor migration, and the diffusion of (perceived) Western family ideals all had a weakening effect on the traditional kinship system organized according to lineage.

Given that families remain the primary source of social assistance and protection in the context of low levels of formal welfare provision in Ghana (Amoah 2020; MacLean 2002; Wood & Gough 2006), patterns of inter-generational relationships can be assumed to entail profound implications for the well-being of individuals across generations. For example, (grand-)parents have been argued to form part of co-operative and flexible childcare arrangements that are common across SSA and allow for sustaining relatively high fertility rates (Caldwell 1977; Hrdy 2009; Oppong 1982). More specifically, Sear and Coall's (2011) review suggests that maternal (grand-)parents tend to benefit child survival and health, while paternal (grand-)parents are often found to promote fertility. Others have argued that proximity to and close ties with the own kin group constitutes a social resource that is especially valuable to women in the context of an overall patriarchal society (Lowes 2020; Warner et al. 1986). Despite these documented implications, there is a sparsity of basic descriptive research documenting the forms of inter-generational relationships in contemporary Ghana and SSA more generally, which might to some extent be explained by a lack of appropriate data sources. Many recent studies on this subject are limited to the analysis of household composition, although the application of this approach to the African context has been repeatedly criticized, given that boundaries between households are often fluid (Caldwell 1977; Rabe 2008).

In the present study, I seek to examine whether and to what extent lineage systems as long-standing informal institutions continue to structure patterns of inter-generational relationships in contemporary Ghana. To this end, I draw on a sample of $N = 1068$ relatively young married or cohabiting couples from the *ISSER-Northwestern-Yale Long Term Ghana Socioeconomic Panel Survey* (GSPS; Osei et al. 2022), collected in 2010, to examine the relationships that couples belonging to different lineages maintain with their non-coresident parents in terms of residential proximity and contact frequency. By capturing family ties with non-resident relatives, I overcome a key limitation of many recent studies (e.g. Baafi et al. 2025; Donald et al. 2024; Esteve & Reher 2021, Pohl et al. 2025; Ruggles & Heggeness 2008) that are constrained to the analysis of household compositions, and thus provide a more comprehensive empirical account of inter-generational relationships beyond the immediate residential unit. At the same time, I seek to contribute to an emergent stream of literature examining the persistence of traditional post-marital residence patterns in developing countries (e.g., Grujters & Ermisch 2019 for China; Reynolds et al. 2023 for South Africa), as well as to a more established literature on inter-generational relationships in higher income countries (e.g., Fingerman et al. 2020).

2 Data and Methods

For the empirical analyses, I draw on the first wave of the *ISSER-Northwestern-Yale Long Term Ghana Socioeconomic Panel Survey* (GSPS; Osei et al. 2022), which was carried out in 2009/2010. A two-stage stratified sampling design was used to obtain an initial sample of 5010 households that is representative both at the regional and national level. A unique feature of the GSPS is that detailed data on close to 58000 non-resident relatives are collected, including (close to all) parents of both the household head and his/her spouse(s). For the present study, I confine the sample to $N = 1066$ married and cohabiting heterosexual couples as focal units, in which the female partner is between age 18 and 35. In selecting this particular age range, I follow Leopold et al.'s (2024: 6) motivation to capture one particular relatively young family generation in order to study the relationships with their parents bottom-up. I restrict the sample to married and cohabiting couples in order to examine the intergenerational ties of couples that already have formed their own nuclear family unit, which is in the vast majority of cases associated with moving out from the parents' home according to own analyses with the GSPS.

The methods comprise descriptive mappings of inter-generational ties between couples and their parents in terms of residential proximity, as well as visits and contact frequency, broken down by lineage ((1) *matrilineal*, (2) *patrilineal*). Subsequently, I run a set of multivariate regression models that allow me to include potentially confounding covariates. First, I run four separate models for all four parent categories (his/her mother/father), subsetting the sample to couples for which the respective parent category is alive. In these models, I construct a binary outcome variable distinguishing between (1) *parent is co-resident or living in the same village* and (2) *parent is living in another village*. This binary indicator is regressed in a linear probability model on lineage and the covariates. In a second step, I subset the sample to couples which have at least one living parent for each spouse, in order to focus on *relative* residential proximity which simultaneously considers proximity to both spouses' parents. I start by descriptively mapping the distributions of couples with respect to relative proximity, distinguishing between (1) *patrilocal*, (2) *matrilocal*, (3) *bilocal*, and (4) *neolocal* residence. Subsequently, I estimate a multinomial logistic regression model with this relative proximity variable as the outcome and lineage and the covariates as independent variables. Third, to examine visits by parents and other contact frequencies as further outcome variables, I start again with a descriptive mapping of their respective frequencies across lineage. Next, I estimate tobit regression models to account for visits and other contacts taking the value zero for deceased parents.

Preliminary analyses show that lineage systems continue to structure inter-generational relationships in contemporary Ghana, as it is found that matrilineal couples are more (less) frequently co-residing or living close to the female (male) spouse's parents compared to patrilineal couples, a pattern that is also found regarding contact and visit frequencies. However, somewhat unexpectedly, the data also suggest that even among matrilineal couples, residential proximity and contacts with his parents are more common than with her parents. A further noteworthy finding is that differing parental mortality rates among matrilineal and patrilineal couples reduce the structuring effect of lineage with respect to inter-generational proximity in actual lived experiences, since the male partner in patrilineal couples tends to be older and his parents are thus more likely to be deceased.

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