

## CHAPTER 3

### KINSHIP AS FRIENDSHIP

#### BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN KWAHU, GHANA

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Siblingship and friendship have a paradoxical relationship. They are in one respect each other's antipode, but they also share common sentiments of belonging and affection. To paraphrase the French poet Jacques Delille, fate chooses your siblings; *you* choose your friends. Friendship seems voluntary, siblingship ascribed. "[Friendship] . . . evades definition: the way in which friendship acts to express fixity and fluidity in diverse social worlds is exciting and problematic for the people that practice friendship and for the social scientists that study it" (Killick and Desai 2010: 1). Friendship has in common with marriage that it is a voluntary bond, but it "lacks religious and legal grounding, rendering the creation, maintenance, and dissolution of friendship an essentially private, negotiable endeavor" (Tillmann-Healy 2003: 731).

Philosophers, psychologists, and also anthropologists have tried to point out the distinctive differences between marital love, sexual love, kinship, and friendship. Friendship stands apart from kinship bonds, as we have seen, because it is not framed by rules and rituals; is not based on common "contractual" interests such as economic security, income, and shared responsibility for children; and does not involve sexual attraction. Even though institutions like marriage and kinship may vary considerably across cultures and classes, friendship's distinctive difference seems to apply widely across social and cultural boundaries (see Adams and Allan 1998, Bell and Coleman 1999,

Desai and Killick 2010).<sup>1</sup> Its most outstanding distinction seems to be that it is *not* encased by social rules and religious sanctions. Of course, that appearance is an illusion; nothing can remain untouched by the conventions and restrictions of its surroundings. But comparatively, friendship appears to us as a relatively free attachment that is admired and cherished universally because of its disinterested and untainted character.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that friendship appears to escape the nets of society's regulations gives it an almost utopian status and makes it a phenomenon that presents an alternative to the Hobbesian world we live in. Friendship is seen as unselfish and disinterested and, therefore, does not need the formal rules that marriage requires. Because of its altruistic appearance, friendship is often portrayed as the purest form of love, almost a glimpse of a better world.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, kinship—and siblingship in particular—proves a favorite metaphor to express or engender friendship. The terms *brother* and *sister* are commonly used to emphasize the close emotional relationship between people who are not in any way related through biological kinship. David K. Jordan (1985) shows this attraction to kin terms in Chinese bonds of friendship, which he coins “sworn brotherhood.” Rita Smith Kipp (1986) describes how lovers in Northern Sumatra, Indonesia, use sibling terminology to express their affection. “Lovers cast each other as siblings,” the author summarizes in her conclusion. Auksuole Cepaitiene (2008) applies the metaphoric grasping of friendship in sibling terms to people who have together gone through moments of crisis and great danger. Finally, Reidar Aasgaard (2004), an exegete, analyzes the use of *brother* and *sister* in the letters of Saint Paul to early Christian communities. Being members of one religious minority group and sharing a common destiny is compared to being members of one family. That the concepts of friendship and kinship merge in these particular contexts is intriguing given the fact that scholars have exerted themselves separating and juxtaposing the very same concepts almost as mutually exclusive.

In this essay, I will unravel the sometimes overlapping, sometimes opposing appearances of kinship and friendship, based on ethnographic observations and conversations in a rural Ghanaian community. By looking at kinship from the perspective of friendship, I intend to shed

more light on sibling experiences—a largely neglected area in the once so popular study of kinship.

### SIBLINGHOOD IN EARLY KINSHIP STUDIES

In the ethnographies of the forties, fifties, and sixties of the previous century, when kinship took a central position, brothers and sisters only received cursory attention next to husband-wife, grandparents-grandchildren, and so on. Moreover, the picture was a rather static one, as was the anthropological mode at that time. The authors attempted to sketch the “structural” character of the relationship based on what people *said* and on what, according to them, *ought to be* rather than on what they observed. I do not, however, agree with the rather easy critique of some present-day anthropologists who disregard structural functionalists for their static perspective. They were aware that they were describing rules rather than realities. Meyer Fortes (1970: 3), for example, wrote, “When we describe structure, we are already dealing with general principles far removed from the complicated skein of behavior, feelings, beliefs, &c, that constitute the tissue of actual social life. We are, as it were, in the realm of grammar and syntax, not of the spoken word.” The insights that structural functionalism produced in the first half of the twentieth century should never be thrown overboard, but rather included in our attempts to understand the complex and whimsical nature of daily life. This chapter tries to sketch these intertwinements and contradictions of rule and reality—grammar and “spoken word.”

Meyer Fortes (1969) devoted more attention to siblings than most of his contemporaries.<sup>4</sup> He did this in a collection of articles on “Kinship and Social Order.” His discussion revolves largely around juridical concepts such as rights, property, inheritance, and succession. Most of his examples are taken from his research in Ghana in the 1940s among the Asante, an Akan society that is closely related to the Kwahu where I started my fieldwork more than twenty-five years later. Fortes shifted his attention to the Asante after his extensive fieldwork among the Tallensi in northern Ghana. About siblingship in the Asante family, he observed, “The often quoted proverb ‘The lineage is like an army but your own mother’s child is your true sibling [that is, your closest kinsman]’ expresses pithily the Ashanti ideal of siblingship. The unity of the sibling group is exemplified in the norms of residence;

their solidarity is stressed in the assumption that absolute loyalty and unrestricted confidence and intimacy distinguish the relations of siblings, irrespective of sex, by contrast with the conjugal relationship, and their jural equivalence is shown in the rules governing inheritance and succession” (Fortes 1969: 172). Those rules stipulate that inheritance and succession do not pass from parent to child but from sibling to sibling: “Full matri-siblings are ‘one person,’ ‘of one womb,’ a corporate unit in the narrowest sense, and sibling succession expresses the recognition of this indivisible corporate identity of the sibling group in opposition to the total matrilineage” (Fortes 1969: 175). But, concluding his discussion, he makes an important reservation that reveals his awareness of the relativity of these strict kinship rules: “[Behind these rules and restrictions] lies the assumption that siblings as autonomous persons are rivals beneath the surface of their amity” (Fortes 1969: 176).

Interestingly, authors of that period who did write about siblings in their ethnographies usually provided cases of conflicts between brothers and sisters, since peaceful and harmonious relations do not constitute a proper “case” in the eyes of most anthropologists. Nevertheless, the final analysis of such conflict cases usually resulted in a reconciliatory conclusion, thus honoring the harmony principle of functionalism. Conflicts were only temporary crises that eventually led to a reintegration or reshuffling of the conflicting parties and a strengthening of the overall kinship system.

My own fieldwork (Bleek 1975)<sup>5</sup> in Kwahu, Ghana, was an attempt to question or at least nuance the harmonious and somewhat static perception of family life in the context of Akan society. Looking back, I may have been too harsh and too pessimistic in my zeal to disprove the idyll of a firm underlying unity, but I still hold on to my view that the family I stayed with was riddled with conflicts and jealousy, also between siblings, that rarely were allowed to appear in the open. I will return to this research later on in my text.

After the 1960s, kinship largely disappeared from ethnography, at least as a central interest. The focus shifted to politics, economy, religion, indigenous knowledge, and symbolism. Kinship studies became the *pars pro toto* of an outdated type of anthropology, and the complex kinship classifications and terminologies were jokingly referred to as “kinship algebra.” It was only in the late 1990s that kinship

returned to being a focus of anthropology, not as a structured system of descent and alliance, but as a process and a lived experience of belonging (see, for example, Carsten 1997, 2000). But in spite of this fresh look at kinship, the mutual belonging of siblings was still largely overlooked—an enigmatic blind spot, if one takes into account the metaphoric charm of siblings mentioned before and the prominent presence of brothers and sisters in drama,<sup>6</sup> Biblical stories,<sup>7</sup> novels,<sup>8</sup> fairy tales (Clerkx 2009), and movies.<sup>9</sup>

Now, more than fifty years after Fortes's work in Asante, conversations with people in the same town where I carried out my earlier research show an extremely diverse picture of brother-sister relationships. It has become impossible to speak of brothers and sisters in general terms. Experiences of love, jealousy, and animosity concerning brothers and sisters differ depending on issues such as age, filial position, migration, economic dependence, life stage, personal character, and biography.

## FIELDWORK

My initial fieldwork in 1971 in a rural Kwahu town in Ghana explored the dynamic and conflictual character of kinship and family life (Bleek 1975). The research was carried out in one matrilineage (*abusua*) of about a hundred and fifty members, of whom forty-five had died in the two previous generations but were very much present in the conversations I held with forty-six living members. In total, I “collected” seventy life histories, some extensive, others rather brief. I lived six months in the house of the family head, where I observed what happened, from the drudge of daily life to the more dramatic political and ceremonial events that are bound to take place in the house of a family head (formal greetings of travelers, lodging complaints, and settling conflicts and other cases). The direction of the research was determined by a case that involved the family head himself. Inspired by Van Velzen's (1967) “extended case method,” my Ghanaian friend and I used that case as a starting point for our study. It led us to three “hot issues” that caused considerable friction and conflict in that Kwahu family: marriage and divorce, death and inheritance, and witchcraft accusations. In all of these, siblings played prominent but ambiguous roles.

One and a half years later, I returned to the same family for research on sexual relationships and birth control (Bleek 1976). My quite intimate knowledge of and good relationship with most members of the family helped me to pursue this rather delicate topic of “shameful” practices such as secret sex and abortion. Siblingship as such was not the subject of that research and did not present itself as a relevant concept except for the fact that brothers and sisters sometimes helped one another in love affairs.

I did not go back to Ghana until twenty-one years later when I started a research project on experiences of growing old and care for older people. In the years that followed, I developed an interest in several other—often underexposed—aspects of Kwahu culture. Brother-sister relationships were added to that list after a discussion with Erdmute Alber, which drew my attention to this touching, yet largely forgotten, domain of kinship and social belonging.

I reread my early fieldwork notes and publications and held conversations with twelve people on brother and sister relationships during visits to Kwahu in 2007 and 2008. I also asked fifty-seven students of the local senior high school to write an essay about their relationship with a brother or a sister.<sup>10</sup> The main body of my “data” derives from this more recent work and confirms the diverse and highly ambiguous nature of the way that brothers and sisters relate to one another.

All conversations were held in the rural town of Kwahu-Tafo, which has a population of approximately six thousand according to the 2000 Census. Kwahu-Tafo is an “average” Kwahu town. Most of the inhabitants are—at least part-time—farmers. Many, women in particular, run a small store selling daily necessities. The town has electricity and running water, but only a few households benefit from the latter. Wells and rain still constitute the main supplies of water. Stores sell sachets with drinking water. There are about ten different primary schools, public as well as private, and about fifteen different Christian churches in the town. A mosque is in the *Zongo*, the Islamic quarter.

Kwahu people belong to Ghana’s about ten million Akan<sup>11</sup> and have a matrilineal kinship system. Traditionally, and as explained by Fortes for the Asante, marriage is less binding than lineage membership, which may cause considerable ambivalence in people who have to

negotiate between their marital partner and the matrilineage (*abusua*), including their siblings.<sup>12</sup>

## THE DIVERSITY OF SIBLING RELATIONS

To explore the intertwining of experiences concerning siblingship and friendship, we first need ethnographic light on the variety in siblingship. The question as to whom one loved most or to whom one was closest (sister or brother?) prompted lively discussions among friends. Their answers, including detailed stories about childhood, adolescence, and life after marriage, provided an extremely diverse picture. It all depended, most emphasized, on character and behavior, on who happens to be around, and on age differences. Moreover, the English terms *brother* and *sister*, as well as the local term *onua* (used for both male and female siblings), were problematic. In the Akan language Twi, the terms are also used for cousins, primarily first cousins but also those who are more remote. People do not always make a sharp distinction between brothers and sisters from the same mother and others. If cousins grow up in the same house, the distinction may not be made at all, which complicates *and* enlightens the discussion, as we will see further on. I will attempt to point at a number of “trends” in the conversations we held.

### Brother to Brother, Sister to Sister

Several women said they liked their sister(s) more than their brother(s), because as sisters they have more in common. They enjoyed conversing with their sisters about problems and issues that affect them as women and mothers—for example, bringing up children, kitchen affairs, clothes, finances, and marital concerns. In the same vein, men said they had more in common with their brothers and preferred to discuss matters with them. One man said, “Being a man, you can discuss every problem you have with your brother but not with your sister. You take your brother as your friend. Moreover, sisters travel with their husband to another town, so you may not have contact with them. So, to me, a brother is more important than a sister.” Both men and women remarked that they shared secrets with their brothers and sisters, respectively. “Sharing secrets” was a favorite definition of

friendship by an elder whom I will quote extensively toward the end of this essay.

Having common interests and competencies is also likely to develop into helping one another in tasks that are gender specific. One woman cited how her mother received help from her sister in bringing up two of her children. Or should we rather say that her mother helped her sister by giving her two of her children? “Two of my mother’s sisters could not have children; one of them took care of me and my sister. We stayed with her from our infancy until we got married. It is not so long ago that I came to stay here [she moved to her mother’s house after her husband had died].” Both men and women emphasized that from childhood onwards, games and other activities tended to become more and more gender specific. Separation of the sexes occurs also in the work that boys and girls carry out in the house, although that distinction is not always strict. Girls are more likely to sweep, wash cooking utensils and clothes, and carry garbage to the “boiler” (dung-hill) at the outskirts of the town. Boys are more engaged in weeding, carrying heavy loads, and activities involving domestic animals.

Sleeping arrangements are another factor contributing to the demarcation between brothers and sisters. One man said, “My mother had eight children, only one of whom was a girl. We the boys always slept together in one room. Our sister always slept with our mother.” And he continued, “As girls are closer to the mother, they sometimes act as ‘informants’ and report everything the boys do to the mother.” To summarize, growing up in Kwahu society, as everywhere, is a process of “genderization” that slowly drives boys and girls apart and widens the gap between brothers and sisters, and, according to some, leads to a closer relationship between siblings of the same sex.

This is, however, only one side of the coin. Common interests, as sisters or brothers may have, could also lead to competition and feelings of jealousy if one is more successful than the other (see also Pauli, this volume). In fact, conflicts and envy among sisters was a common observation that was raised during our conversations. Here is an excerpt of one such conversation between three men and myself:

*P:* Sisters in the same house often quarrel. Especially when they get children and the children begin to grow, each of them is concerned about her own children. This causes deterioration in their relationship. Men are not like that.





**Figure 3.1** Sisters Doing the Dishes



**Figure 3.2** Two Brothers, Senior and Junior, Carrying Garbage to the Dunghill

*Sj*: Why are men not like that? Are they not concerned about their own children?

*P*: Men are able to cope, but three sisters from the same mother staying in the same house; not a week will pass without them quarrelling.

*Sj*: (to *M*) do you agree with what *P* is saying?

*M*: Yes, I second him. Women staying in the same house, whether they are from the same mother or not, they will quarrel and gossip.

*Sj*: (to *B*) What do you say about this?

*B*: What they are saying is true. When their children are fighting, each mother will defend her own child . . . There will hardly be peace when women (sisters) stay together.

Women bear long grudges, another man said, while men make up after quarrels. Another man remarked that the relationship between sisters turns sour more easily than between brothers. One may be inclined to discard these as typical male chauvinistic views, but women said similar things. To quote one of them, "If there are many sisters, there are many quarrels. They quarrel. Everyone knows how women are. If my brother gives me a cloth, the other will complain that he did not give one to her." Jealousy may start at a young age if one sister (or brother) is more loved by her or his parents or teacher than another. One man remembered, "Perhaps I am more absent from the house than my brother and I am punished. My brother does not go out much, so he is called to do a lot of things, even though I am the senior [!]. If such a thing happens, I will begin to hate him. There will be suspicion and jealousy. [He continued with a similar example in a school context]." The remark about being "senior" is important. Brothers and sisters have a strong awareness of being older or younger. The younger should "respect," or show deference, to the older (*ɔpanyin*). If for some reason the younger commands more respect than the older (for example because of higher education, more success in life, or being more popular), the relationship is under stress. In his survey on child training practices in Ghana, Barrington Kaye (1962: 159) also found the concept of seniority to be very strong throughout the country. Although younger children in Asante may enjoy certain privileges from their parents, they are subordinate to their older brothers and sisters and must help them with household chores such as sweeping and carrying water. In return, the juniors expect their older siblings to give them food or money to help them

pay their school fees. “Young children are taught to respect their older siblings” (Kaye 1962: 164). Kaye starts his chapter on siblings with a quotation from an unrevealed source: “The first-born is regarded as the head of other children in the house; he has the right to punish or reprimand a younger brother or sister” (Kaye 1962: 159). That sense of responsibility for younger siblings starts early in life: older children take care of younger brothers and sisters, carry them, and give them instructions.

It is only a small step from jealousy, mentioned before, to accusations and suspicions of witchcraft.<sup>13</sup> Nearly all my informants agreed that women are more likely to practice witchcraft. However, it did not always become clear if their supposed witchcraft was mainly targeted toward their sisters or relatives in general. During my first research (Bleek 1975), I discovered a dense network of witchcraft accusations within one (extended) family. Nearly every member of the family was involved as accuser, accused witch, or suspected victim of witchcraft. I categorized the relations between the “witches” and their “victims.” Out of a total of fifty-four accusations, twelve referred to supposed witchcraft between siblings and ten between the children of sisters (who call one another “brother” and “sister”). I also looked at the relationship between accuser and accused (which seemed to me a better indication of a strained relationship). The highest number (twelve) were children of sisters. I did not mark the sex of the accusers and accused, but in general women were far more accused of witchcraft than men.

In conclusion, sharing interests and having common ideas and experiences at first appears as a favorable condition that fosters a close relationship between siblings of the same sex, particularly among sisters. However, that very condition is also a potential risk that may disturb the relationship and turn intimate siblings into rivals for the same material or social benefits. Numerous proverbs, which mostly allude to witchcraft, emphasize that closeness is inherently ambiguous and liable to turn into animosity and envy. One of them goes, “It is the insect in your own cloth that bites you” (*Aboa a shye wo ntoma mu, na aka wo*). It is precisely because of this risky closeness that most of the people I talked to thought that the greater distance between brothers and sisters gave more room for love and life-long affection than relations between siblings of the same sex.

### Brother to Sister, Sister to Brother

Most women spoke in warm terms about their brothers, especially those who stated emphatically that having sisters in one house meant quarrelling. They liked their brothers because they showed more willingness to help them, and their relationships were free from rivalry and jealousy. One woman said, "Men are closer to me than women. If there is any job to be done, the men will do it. If there is a problem in the house and the men have no money, they will offer advice, which brings peace to the family. . . . When the men saw that this house was small and they found it difficult to get a place to sleep, they brought money and extended the house." One older woman was very outspoken about her preference for brothers. She had been drawn toward men throughout her life. No wonder that this lady preferred her brothers to her sisters. "These women, when you tell them, 'Let us do this or that,' they will say, 'No,' knowing very well it would be the best thing to do. If something needs to be done, why don't you ask a man? Women disagree among each other. Honestly, I like my brothers better than my sisters. When I open my box and bring out my old photographs, you will see that many of them are my brothers and me. I never took a photograph with my sisters [she had three sisters]." She remembered the special affection she had for her uncle's (*Wɔfa*; mother's brother's) son who came to stay with her mother and became like a brother, although he would also qualify as a good marriage partner. "There was no difference between him and my real brothers. A lot of people thought we were from the same mother and father. I was close to him because he listened to what I said and I also listened to what he said. When he was going to Accra to work, I gave him eight shillings [at that time the transport fare to Accra was four shillings]. I told him, he should inform me whenever he needed money. As for men, I loved them more than women." Another woman, around sixty-five years old, also expressed a strong preference for brothers: "Women only think of their own children [they do not think of the entire family]. Men will never go to a 'fetish priest'<sup>14</sup> or to a spiritual church to pray for their own children only to become successful in life. We the women do go to the 'fetish priest' to get a good husband for their children. Men will never do that." A sister's love for her brother can be intertwined with rivalry toward her sisters. One man told me that his mother was the first of three sisters

and one brother. At that time it was the custom that a sister's son would inherit from his mother's brother (*wɔʃu*). His mother's youngest sister then tried to become very close to her brother, hoping that one of her sons would inherit from her brother. She succeeded in her plan, even though according to the tradition a son of the oldest sister should have priority.<sup>15</sup>

Only one man (who had been married four times and had about fifteen children) mentioned the matrilineal principle as a reason sisters are more important to a man than brothers: "It is more important to have sisters because they continue the family line. It is my sister's children who will inherit me, so I am more interested in them." He had—for that reason—sponsored the education of sons of several sisters. I asked him who would take care of him when he grew old. He replied that his own children would, provided he had taken good care of them. During the conversation he shifted his position somewhat and admitted that his preference for sisters was somewhat "theoretical"—more based on family interests than on his own. Continuation of the *abusua* as a reason for men to be close to their sisters proved indeed somewhat abstract. When I asked one of my personal friends about it, he replied, "I do not think about what will happen after my death; however, if there is any help I can give to my sisters and her children, I will do so if I have the means." Brothers usually remain very concerned about the well-being of their sister after she marries. "If the husband of your sister beats her or causes any other damage, she will come to her family house and ask for help. That is the reason that men may intervene when their sisters are not well treated in marriage." Conversely, if the marriage of a sister is "too successful" and draws her to her husband's side, away from her brother, the brother may decide to intervene to pull her back into the *abusua*. The conflict that started my research in 1971 is a case in point. The relationship between a woman, Oforiwa, and her husband Osei was very close. "We did everything together," Osei told me. When a conflict erupted between Osei and the (classificatory) brother of his wife, she chose her husband's side, to her brother's dismay and anger. When she suddenly died two years later, her brother refused to bury her since she was "no longer his sister." A respected older man gave the following comment: "Oforiwa made the big mistake of supporting her husband against her brother. This is unforgivable. Even if the

brother was completely wrong, she should still support him against her husband” (Bleek 1975: 77). Brothers’ attitude of dedication to their sisters starts at a very young age. Boys defend their sisters and fight for them when they are wronged or falsely accused of something. Brothers may also find it difficult to accept their sister’s boyfriend, particularly the first one. They experience this as some kind of betrayal and the beginning of losing her.

Sisters show their appreciation for their brothers by subtle services—for example, washing their clothes or cooking food for them. When a boy becomes interested in girls, his sister may help him to approach a certain girl by mediating for him.

There are several complicating factors, however. The age difference between a brother and a sister may have a profound influence on the relationship that develops. During my conversation with three men (quoted previously), it turned out that all three had only one sister. In two cases, the sister was much younger and the two men never felt very close to that sister. They were too far apart. When they faced problems and wanted to discuss these with somebody, their sister was still a child. In one case, however, the sister was much older and became like a mother for the brother. The real mother was often away, staying with her husband in a farming village and leaving the running of the house to her grown-up daughter and her older brothers. I know both the man and his sister very well and observed that they are still very close. The man’s wife is staying far away, as a teacher, and he spends a great deal of the day with his sister. He takes some of his meals from her and now even spends the night in her house.

Conversely, as we have seen at the onset of this section, men are believed to have more financial means and are expected to help their sisters when they are in need. It is a disgrace if a man who is well off refuses to support his sister, as is expressed in an old Highlife song by Alex Konadu. A woman complains about her brother’s refusal to help her. Her name, she says, is connected to him for nothing; he sleeps on his money without giving her anything. People mock at her saying, “This woman is the sister of a rich man.” The song is a negative confirmation that brothers are supposed to support their sister.

Marriage often entails a breaking point in the relationship of siblings, mainly for two reasons. The interests of the married person shift from his or her siblings to the new partner and particularly his or her

children. In addition, the marriage may involve a geographical move as well, so the brother or sister will be around no more. Several of my friends indicated that traveling and residing elsewhere put an end to their close relationship with a brother or sister. That emotional shift during the life cycle was well expressed by one woman: “We women, as soon as we grow and marry, we begin to think about our children. We unite with them and tear ourselves from our sisters and brothers.” But that move away may be reversed after some time; the same woman continued, “Disunity begins to set in when children grow. At that time, we again become closer to our brothers.” The reason for that return to the brother is, as we have seen, that brothers are believed to be more prepared to think outside their nuclear family and to resume their role as *wɔfa* (sister’s brother). Moreover, sisters may indeed be eager to benefit from their brother’s generosity. But suspicion remains on both sides. A proverb goes, “If you say your sister loves you, wait until her children have grown” (*Se wose wo nuabea ne wo ka a, ma ne mma nyin na hwε*). The implication of the proverb is that the sister is likely to still favor her children over her brother.

Where the close relationship between a brother and a sister does survive the sister’s marriage, another problem may turn up. The brother may find himself caught between his sister and his wife and fall “victim” to another type of rivalry. The “pure” relation between brother and sister thus becomes entangled in competing claims and interests and will force the brother to choose between one and the other.

We should not take the brother-sister relationship too idealistically, therefore. It is also a practical affair that finds its origin in very mundane circumstances. The most decisive—and most obvious—is the presence or availability of a brother or sister; an intense and lasting brother-sister love is likely to occur where the two happen to be in each other’s vicinity. That idea is beautifully expressed in a proverb: “The sister or brother of a bird is the one sitting on the same branch” (*Anomaa nua ne nea ɔne no da dua krɔ so*). One of my friends provided another translation, making the application even more direct: “The sister or brother of a bird is the one sleeping in the same bed.”<sup>16</sup>

## CONCLUDING: SIBLINGSHIP AND FRIENDSHIP, SIBLINGSHIP AS FRIENDSHIP

During a long conversation, an elder in Kwahu-Tafo compared siblingship, marriage, and friendship as follows:

The inscription on my house reads: *Onipa nua ne nea ene no ka* [A person's brother is the one who loves him]. If a brother does not love you there is nothing you can do. A person who loves you should be everything to you. No matter how a brother may be, you can't do away with him (*Wɔye oo, wɔnye oo, worentumi mpopa*). Whether a brother is good or bad, he will succeed you in the future, but a friend never will. At the same time, the love between friends can be deeper than the love between brothers. I have a friend and the love between us is more special than the one between my brother and me. I am able to disclose all my secrets to him (*Mitumi ne no ka atrimu sem*), something I don't do with my brother. I scarcely converse with my brother and at times our conversation ends in a quarrel. My friend and I are able to share one bed, eat together and even bathe with one bucket of water, something I don't do with my brother. All this is done out of love (*Ne nyinaa ye edɔ*).

Love in friendship is the purest (*Adamfoɔ mu dɔ no na eye edɔ ankasa*) because friends always pray that the other won't die or fall into trouble so that their friendship will last a long time. But it is the wish of some people that their brothers die so that they can take their belongings. Indeed, there is no pure love among brothers. Love in friendship is very deep and there is happiness in it.

Friendship usually starts casually. It starts first with greetings which will later on develop into a conversation. This goes on for some time. Then it develops into full friendship. Friendship may end when one leaves the other and travels to a distant place. But even when such a thing happens, friends are able to maintain their friendship by sending messages to one another. Friendship can last till death. I have seen such a friendship. I had one myself. . . .

Let me tell you about my own friendship. I saw that my friend did not like gossiping and that he respected himself (*obu ne bo*). I also saw that he was hard working. These qualities attracted me. Ever since we started our friendship we have been getting along well. We plan how we can look after our wives. My wife is aware of all these qualities in him so she receives him warmly whenever he is here and she feels happy when he is around. When we were young we used to help each other in clearing our farms (*yedi nnɔboa*). Now that I am old, I can't go to farm,





**Figure 3.3** Brothers or Friends?

but we visit one another frequently for conversation. When we meet we share our meals together. Even when I am not around and there is a problem with the children my wife contacts him for help. . . . A friend is someone with whom you share secrets.<sup>17</sup>

The elder singled out friendship as a virtue that is more precious than siblingship. What makes his treatise on kinship and friendship most valuable is his eloquent reuniting of these two distinctive types of human bonding. The opening line of his response to my questions—“A person’s brother is the one who loves him”—captures the point of my argument.<sup>18</sup> Siblingship is more than biological linkage, *and* friendship and love make two people like brothers. The distinction “voluntary” versus “ascribed” is too schematic. The experience of siblingship could be more a matter of choice and personal preference than the grammar of kinship wants us to believe. Friendship and siblingship become intermingled in various ways. Robert Brain (1977: 16) suggests “that all kin relations within our kinship group are based on friendship and personal choice. One chooses this or that uncle, this or that cousin, even this or that brother or sister to be friendly

with.” In an intriguing discussion of Meyer Fortes’s *Kinship and the Social Order* (1969), Julian Pitt-Rivers (1973) picks out the term *amity*, which Fortes chose to distinguish kinship from other types of relationship. *Amity* stands for “the axiom of prescriptive altruism” (Fortes’s words). Pitt-Rivers then points out that *amity* is just another term for *friendship*, which is not prescriptive in the sense that altruism is among kin. In other words, according to Pitt-Rivers, “Fortes has chosen to define the essence of kinship by appealing to the very concept of what it is not” (90). But instead of rejecting the term for that reason (failing to achieve its mission), Pitt-Rivers welcomes it because “it offers the possibility of placing the notion of kinship in a wider framework and of escaping from the polemics concerning its relationship to physical reproduction” (90). Fortes was right, after all, highlighting the amity that is expected between members of one family. Why? Pitt-Rivers explains, “Despite the common opposition of the terms kinship and friendship, there is room for variants partaking in the properties of both, between the pole of kinship, inflexible, involuntary, immutable, established by birth and subject to the pressures of ‘the political-jural domain’ (in Fortes’ words) and the pole of friendship, pure and simple, which is its contrary in each of these ways. All these ‘amiable’ relations imply a moral obligation to feel—or at least to feign—sentiments which commit the individual to actions of altruism, to generosity” (90). I understand this as follows: Pitt-Rivers suggests that a rigid analytical distinction between friendship and kinship is not helpful to understand how kinship works. Amity—or friendship—enters the domain of kin relations. “True kinship” is not determined by birth but by morality: voluntary altruism and generosity.

Another significant connection between siblingship and friendship is that sibling terms are used to speak to friends and lovers, as we have seen earlier on in this essay (Aasgaard 2004, Cepaitiene 2008, Jordan 1985, Kipp 1986). Mac Marshall argues against an exclusively biological concept of kinship, based on his work in Truk society in Micronesia. He uses the subtle transformations from friendship into siblingship as a case in point. In their belief, “persons who take care of and nurture each other prove their kinship in the process” (Marshall 1977: 657).

Janet Carsten (2000: 73), citing Marshall, remarks that “created siblings are better siblings than natural siblings.” It is worthwhile to quote Marshall more fully: “Consanguineal siblings are . . . born into an inherently ambivalent relationship, a matter that may account for the restraint that surrounds their interaction. Created sibling relationships are not only as good as natural ones, they are potentially better. They are an improvement on nature in the sense that they allow for the purest expression of ‘brotherly love’ in Trukese culture” (Marshall 1977: 649). The paradox is that people choose kinship terms to express love and affection, apparently assuming that the truest love is found in kinship, such as between siblings. But, at the same time, they recognize that a voluntarily chosen relationship is more precious and carries deeper emotional satisfaction than one that has been thrown on them. It would have been more “correct,” one could argue, to use terms of love and friendship to express dear kinship relations. That “more correct” metaphoric terminology, however, has nowhere been observed, as far as I know. Carsten (2000: 73) referred to the same paradox when she wrote, “relatedness based solely on voluntarily created ties of affection is closer to an ideal of kinship than that based on biological reproduction.”

The bond between siblings, and between brothers and sisters in particular, seems closest to the purity and endurance of friendship ties that people engage in during their life. Although the relationship is ascribed, as it is based on kinship, it resembles the friendship that develops independently of kinship rules and obligations. Friendship is free from interests. Reciprocity is not counted in friendship even though it cannot exist without it (see Killick 2010). In the same way, it is believed, brothers and sisters find themselves in a position where unconditional mutual support and love can exist and grow.

Friendship, usually, is between persons of the same gender, and it is very different from love between a man and a woman that is likely to become a sexual relationship and—eventually—also an economic union, a kind of contract. What is remarkable in the brother-sister relationship is that it is a cross-gender bond without, in most cases, any sexual implication.<sup>19</sup> In that sense, it is indeed “pure” love.

Finally, the brother-sister bond lasts a lifetime and passes through the various life stages of people, as the elder said about friendship. It may change its character along the way without losing its fundamental

mutual affection and dedication. Unlike the cross-generational relationships that occur only during a period of one's life, the connection between a brother and a sister remains from beginning to end.

Like friendship, a warm and strong relationship between a brother and a sister is an opportunity one must grasp in life. Like culture in general, the friendship of the sibling is not simply given, handed down, and dictated by biology, tradition, or an older generation; it is a choice that people make—a chance that they take and develop throughout their lifetime.

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