

## **Perception and practice of birth-control in a Ghanaian matrilineage**

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### *Preliminary remarks*

This paper examines perception of family planning and reactions to it in a Kwahu matrilineage in Ghana. An attempt is made to relate both perception and practice of birth-control to some structural aspects of conjugal and sexual behaviour in the lineage concerned. The paper is divided into two parts. In the first part attention is paid to some aspects connected with marriage, such as divorce, premarital and extramarital relationships, and husband and wife roles; in the second part the practice of birth-control is viewed within this social context.

Information is based upon three six-months-periods of fieldwork in a town in the Kwahu district of Ghana. The first period was entirely devoted to language study and getting acquainted with the town. In the second period I carried out research into the social dynamics of a selected matrilineage with special reference to marriage and divorce, inheritance and witchcraft. The third period of fieldwork<sup>1</sup> was a continuation of the previous one. The same lineage was studied, but with a new focus of interest: I examined how social dynamics impinged on the processes that led to birth-control or procreation<sup>2</sup>. The bulk of core material for this paper was accumulated during this last research period and pertains exclusively to the matrilineage.

It should be noted that the population of this 'survey' is extremely small, one matrilineage, or, to be more precise, two main sections of one matrilineage. The sections include about 75 living adults 60 of whom are either women in their childbearing years or men below 65. Of these 60 people only 15 permanently reside in the town; another 15 live in Accra; the rest are scattered either on farming settlements or in other towns. Impeded by the wide geographical dispersion, I managed to interview only 38 of the 60, plus four people closely related to the lineage by paternal descent or affinity.

The Kwahu district is situated about 100 miles north of Accra, the capital. Part of the district is a rather densely populated plateau on which the town of this research is located. The town has over 4000 inhabitants.

The Kwahu number nearly 200,000 people in Ghana's total population of 8 million. They belong to the ethnic group of the Akan and are most closely

related to the Asante who have been described extensively by Rattray, Fortes, Busia and others.

Some summary information about family planning in Ghana as a whole may be useful at this juncture. The National Family Planning Programme of Ghana, formally launched in May 1970, is still mainly centralized in large towns. Its presence in rural areas is more or less token, and merely administrative, but Family Planning Fieldworkers and Family Planning Nurses are gradually penetrating into more remote places. As of April 1973 113 hospitals and clinics had reported visits of family planning clients. The sum of all family planning clients between July 1970 and April 1973 was 244,411; the total number of revisits was 171,271 (Monthly Report on Family Planning Acceptors, April 1973).

## I. SOME ASPECTS OF SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

### 1. *Matrilineage versus marriage*

Marriage has never been in very high esteem among the Akan of Ghana; and its position is certainly not improving at the present time. As in many matrilineal descent systems, conjugal ties are considered of less importance than blood ties, and must be subordinated to them. An Akan proverb, 'Marriage is a bond of friendship, not a bond of blood' (*Awadε ye yenko, εnnyε abusua*) means that a marriage can be broken, but membership in the lineage not. The same tradition, however, warns 'Marriage is not palmwine that can be tasted (and left alone)' (*Awadeε nnyε nsafuo na yeas> ahwε*). That this second piece of advice is not superfluous may become evident in the course of this paper.

Rather than asking people plainly: whom do you like more, your mother or your wife (husband), your wife or your child, etc.<sup>3</sup>, I composed a kind of riddle conveying the same content: 'If your mother, your wife (husband) and your child are going to die and you may save one, whom will you save?' The traditional answer, I thought, would be: 'my mother', because, as a proverb says, 'If your mother dies, your family is finished' (*Wo eni wu a, wo abusua&asa*). I tried this riddle out on 17 members of the lineage to see how alive community norms still are among individuals. Seven respondents said they would save their mother, five their child, three refused to save only one person, and two men said they would save their wives. None of the 11 women whom I asked planned to save her husband. If we divide the answers into two categories: those who would save a lineage member and those who would not, leaving out the undecided, it turns out that 11 chose for a maternal relative (either mother or child) and only three not (two men for their wives and one man for his child).

Gluckman quotes an observer who says, 'A man seeks companionship with other men, loves his sister and sleeps with his wife' (Gluckman, 1955: 78).

This journalistic and exaggerated remark succinctly expresses a very fundamental problem in Akan society. A man's loyalty is divided between his wife and his matrilineage, a woman's between her husband and her matrilineage. It is not surprising that the matrilineal system has been called a conflict-prone system by some social scientists, although it should be noted that intense friction also occurs within some patrilineal societies. Anthropologists have wondered how such a system could ever come into being and continue to function. Audrey Richards described one of its features as 'the matrilineal puzzle', a term which has become famous in anthropology (Richards, 1950: 46). Basehart, speaking of the Asante, uses the word 'paradox'. 'Reports on Ashanti society and kinship organisation present something of a paradox in that they suggest a combination of seemingly contradictory modes for the ordering of social structure' (Basehart, 1961: 270). And Mary Douglas with her usual eloquence even speaks of a 'cumbersome dinosaur', the survival of which 'seems to be a matter for wonder' (Douglas, 1969: 123).

The fact that conjugal ties have to give way to bonds of descent is the cause of many conflicts in Akan society. In another study I have given a detailed account of one such conflict (Bleek, 1972: 48-138), which is summarized in the next case.

#### *Case 1. The rebellious sister*

In a quarrel between a man and his classificatory brother-in-law, the wife of the man chooses the side of her husband against her classificatory brother and lineage head. By doing so she defies traditional norms which stipulate that in a conflict a woman should always join her lineage against her husband and his maternal group<sup>4</sup>. Her action causes a rift in the lineage. Some members secretly support her, using this case as an opportunity to rebel against the unpopular lineage head, but most disapprove of her for the reason that she has broken the traditional laws. It is wrong to love your husband more than your brother. Which of the two is right does not matter. Every lineage member should at any time defend his or her lineage.

As in most stories of anthropologists, or stories that reach anthropologists, the trespasser is 'punished', i.e. she dies. A new conflict arises. During her lifetime the woman had sworn never again to enter the house of her lineage. The lineage head, therefore, concludes that she is not anymore his sister, and refuses to bury her, the greatest shame that can happen to someone. Her husband has to plead on her behalf and to pay some fines before she is finally buried.

But even after the funeral the lineage members continue to harass the man, as if they want revenge because he once turned the mind of their sister against them. At a meeting about the legacy of the woman there is a new clash between the man and his lineage-in-law. His own daughter even bears witness against him, showing that she has learnt from her mother's mistake and knows that she belongs to her mother's family.

The man in a casual conversation says with assurance that he will not let his six children go to their mother's lineage; he himself will look after them. But a few months later they have all left his house and are staying with their maternal relatives. A stable marriage of 20 years which produced six children has been reduced to nothing.

This case discloses a root cause of the chronic crisis involving the institution of marriage which disturbs Akan society. A strong marital union is a threat to the lineage, it disrupts the unity of its members. The lineage can

only maintain its position when marriage remains a weak and fragile institution: 'The institutionalization of very strong, lasting or intense solidarities between husband and wife is not compatible with the maintenance of matrilineal descent groups'. (Schneider, 1961: 16).

## 2. Divorce

The foregoing argument makes clear that one cannot expect a stable marriage pattern in Akan society. Several authors have noted a high divorce rate. Fortes found that 45% of 262 ever married men in Asante had separated from a marriage partner at least once (Fortes, 1954: 263). His survey dates from almost 30 years ago. In more recent years Pool carried out a much wider survey of 2,700 women in Accra and 3,000 women from rural areas in every region of Ghana<sup>5</sup>.

Pool records 43 of his urban female sample in the 40-49 age category has divorced at least once. The ever-divorced percentage of their rural counter parts is 23% (Pool, 1968: 236). Most remarkably he finds that the incidence of divorce sets in already during the first years of childbearing capacity, a phenomenon which he calls 'a break with tradition' without specifying what tradition.

My own data give a still higher incidence of divorce. Since they pertain to only one lineage in a single town in Kwahu, however, they are liable to be a gross misrepresentation of the overall situation among the Akan and even among the Asante and Kwahu, although I have no reason to believe so<sup>6</sup>. In any event, the findings are certainly reliable for this lineage. In order to avoid misunderstandings let me emphasize that from this moment on, I restrict myself to talking only about this lineage.

My first research sample consisted of 63 people who had contracted a total of 182 marriages. The term marriage here refers to both customary marriage and to what I call 'free marriage' (*mpeɔna awadeɔ*). Free marriage, which is not strictly legal, enjoys enough social recognition to warrant classification. When we take as divorce ratio the number of marriages ended in divorce expressed as a percentage of all marriages, the figure is 55.59. When we use divorce per head of ever-married population, the ratio is 1.60. Or, finally, calculating the percentage of ever-married population divorced at least once, the divorce rate is 79.36 (Bleck, 1972: 192). All three computational methods yield ciphers which are the highest I have ever met with in anthropological literature. I do not really believe, however, that the divorce rate of this lineage is so exceptional. I rather think that the high rates are a direct result of my research methods. By limiting myself to only one lineage, I was able to collect more information per respondent than I could ever have collected doing a large scale survey. I think that in-depth studies in other, especially matrilineal, societies would yield similar results. Nonetheless, I would be grateful to anyone able to show me higher rates elsewhere.

For members of the lineage, divorce and separation are not the exception

but the 'rule'. Only 25 marriages out of a total of 182 had lasted longer than 12 years and not (yet?) ended in divorce. Divorce is an inherent part of the marriage concept. Most members have no lifelong union in mind when they embark on marriage, or at least, they are aware that divorce will probably come their way. This instability of marriage, as we have seen, is inversely proportional to the integration of the descent group. The one's meat is the other's poison. Meddling relatives, an oft-repeated complaint, is not uncommonly cited by marriage partners as a cause of divorce. Propinquity of relatives has a destabilizing effect. Other grounds for divorce, infertility, for example, can be linked to family interference, since if a woman does not bring forth children or if anything else goes amiss with a marriage, matrilineal relatives will reclaim her.

Genealogical data going back three generations from the present suggest that high divorce rates constitute nothing new in the lineage and that 50 to 80 years ago divorce was equally common (Bleek, 1972: 193-7). The divorce rate of the current generation is even slightly lower than that of preceding ones, but this declension is a result of a lower contemporary 'marriage rate'. More people today remain single for a longer time and/or prefer short-lived lover relationships to marriage than was true previously, a development I will examine subsequently.

### 3. *Residence*

The matrilineal puzzle also makes itself felt in the residence pattern. Ideally, the Kwahu are virilocal, i.e. viri-neolocal. Every man dreams of building his own house for wife and children, but it is safe to say that for most this remains a dream. Only *les arrivés*, those who have been successful at trading and farming, realize such hopes. Even then the new house often shelters the owner's mother and other relatives as well.

In practice then, few men are able to build a new house, and necessity converts virilocal residence into viri-matrilocal or viri-avunculocal. In other words, a woman has to put up with the lineage of her husband. This is often asking too much. How can she and her children cut off from her maternal home live peacefully and safely surrounded by strangers (her husband's lineage members)? In fact a woman not seldom disagrees to such a living arrangement and prefers to stay at home with her own relatives. If she does agree, she may have some special reason. Escaping conflict, for example. This type of residence is the oft-described 'duolocal' residence of the Akan. Duolocal residence principally occurs when the woman and the man's lineages inhabit the same town. Under such circumstances a woman is able to fulfil her basic conjugal duties without departing from her mother's house. The norm 'blood ties before marriage ties' prevents the woman from staying with her husband. It is a different matter whenever a couple lives elsewhere than the wife's home town. Then she cannot combine her conjugal duties with residence at home, and will usually dwell with her husband. Indeed, it

is because of increasing migration and geographical mobility that the practice of duoloc residence is decreasing, certainly not because of any change of norm.

What is most puzzling about duoloc residence is that almost everybody ventured an opinion against it. According to Table I not less than 35 out of 38 lineage members think that a wife should live together with her husband; only 3 believe that she should live with her relatives. Remarkably not only men but women also have this ideal. Among a variety of reasons spontaneously advanced were 'A man and his wife should be one', 'A man can look after his wife and children better when they stay together', and 'There is less risk of interference by relatives'. Four men explained their view by saying that they preferred to keep their wife's relatives ignorant about how much 'chopmoney' (money for food) they gave her. Evidently a delicate point, as will emerge later on. One young man expressed himself in a proverbial, if rather possessive, way: 'You don't buy a goat to let it stay in someone else's house' (*Obi nta aberekyi emma no ntena obi fie*).

Table I: Practices and attitudes concerning conjugal residence

	Persons living with partner*	Persons not living with partner	Persons never married	Total
Prefer common residence	17	10	8	35
Prefer separate residence	1	2	-	3
Total	18	12**	8	38***

\* Those divorced referred to their last marriage.

\*\* Of these, nine live in the same geographical location as partner.

\*\*\* Excluded are one man with two wives, two women with no opinion, and one affine.

The almost unanimous preference for common residence in marriage suggests the intricacy of the present day situation. On the one hand members have little confidence in the institution of marriage, on the other, they have very high marital expectations. The two attitudes exist simultaneously and counterbalance each other. Because expectations remain unfulfilled, marriage remains frustrating.

#### 4. Roles of husband and father

What role is left for a married man in such a setting? Schneider, speaking in general, writes 'Matrilineal descent groups do not require the statuses of father and husband' (Schneider, 1961: 14). Does this mean no role remains for a man to play? Ollenju, an expert on Akan customary law, writes 'Chil-

dren in a matrilineal society are entitled to support, training and education from their deceased father's estate' (Ollenu, 1966: 205). Jones Quartey concludes, 'Such a statement seems to imply a corresponding responsibility during the father's life time' (Jones Quartey, 1971: 8).

Restricting attention to the lineage, I must say that a wide gap divides ideals from reality. To external observation, at least, both father and husband roles appear meagre. There are nevertheless, indications that both were more important in the past and it is by no means impossible that undisclosed emotional and psychological bonds continue to exist. When ties do not reveal themselves through frequent interaction and communication, however, they are of little value to the social scientist who is interested in social behaviour.

In instances of duolocal residence (about one third of all marriages in our sample), the husband usually stays with none of his children. Thus separation considerably curtails not only his husband role, but also his father role. His status has more in common with the status of a visitor or someone who can be paid a visit than with that of a father in the European sense of the word. Furthermore, after divorce – not an unlikely event in the lineage – if a man has not already lived apart from his children he is almost certain henceforth to be separated from them.

In our sample, 23 men and 18 women have a total of 137 living children. Of these 137, 69 were either born out of wedlock or experienced the divorce of their parents. In both cases a decision had to be reached about with whom the children were going to stay<sup>7</sup>. Only 6 children were taken by their father, 7 are on their own, and two live with a relative of their father's. All the others (54) now reside with their mother or her maternal relatives. Moreover, two of the six children staying with their father, have a father who belongs to a patrilineal ethnic group.

Table 2: Fathers and mothers of the lineage and number of their children residing with them.

	Number of parents	Number of children with them	Number of children with some- one else	Number of children on their own	Number of children who died	Number of children total
Fathers	23	21	44	14	6	85
Mothers	18*	40	17	1	9	67
Total	41	61	61	15	15	152

\* One woman (affine) excluded, to avoid double entry of children.

Table 2 shows that decisively more children reside with their mother than with their father. Setting aside children who have died and who live on their own, the fathers have one third of their offspring with them, the mothers two thirds.

One should not imagine that this situation can be fully explained by the rule of matrilineal descent or by legal claims which the mother and her relatives have on her child. It also happens that a man who is allowed or perhaps even encouraged to take his child along with him, refuses to do so.

Even when a man does not stay with his child, he is expected to care for it, and to pay his wife, or former wife, or, to say the least, the mother of his child, some money every month for the child's upkeep. I have no complete and detailed information about payments, but my very strong impression is that financial support, when forthcoming, is in most cases very small. In general, men claim that they pay and women complain that they do not, or not enough.

All married women of the lineage in Kwahu are active in agriculture. A few find additional means to earn some extra money for their family, mostly by petty trading. Except for some well-established farmers, the men have a middling income and can spare little to give their wives. Most wives receive 12 to 18 cedis a month, about £ 5.00 to £ 7.00; some get less. A wife often contributes more to her household than her mate. The financial prowess of women has noticeably impaired husband-father status, and has made the position of wives more independent.

#### *Case 2. The kenkey seller*

Yaa Kate is married to Mr. Ben, a respected and quite well-to-do man in town. He is about 50, she 35. Their marriage has lasted ten years. Mr. Ben has built his own house, but Kate is not staying with him. She is living in her mother's house.

Before she married Mr. Ben, she had one child from someone who did not marry her, and she was pregnant by Mr. Ben. At the moment they have five children together, two of them stay with Mr. Ben's elder sister who has no children of her own.

At the time of their marriage, Mr. Ben had already one wife with seven children. Later on he divorced her, and Kate was his only wife till he again took another. Kate pretends she does not know how many children the other wife has. Kate is very critical of her husband and seems to be tired of bearing children. She is now in her eighth pregnancy. She hopes he will stop sleeping with her after the next child.

When I asked her about the financial arrangement in her marriage, she started laughing and remarked 'He does not work, so he does not give me anything'. Later on she admitted 'He gives me 6 shillings every day (¢ 18.00 a month). I myself work, I sell kenkey at the market. That is how I manage. I make about one cedi a day'.

#### *Case 3. Married to an unemployed man*

Rose is 36 years old. Strictly speaking she does not belong to the lineage, but her father is the lineage head and everybody from her mother's side of the family she says, has died. Her father did much for her: he let her go to school and complete middle school. She even attended a vocational school in Accra and Cape Coast.

When she was 24, she became pregnant by a teacher. They married and had two children. He always gave her 18 cedis a month for the household. After 6 years she left him, because his relatives were troubling her.

For three years she remained single. She had a friend during that time, but they did not marry. After the three years she became pregnant again and married a Fante who was working as a carpenter in a town 5 miles away. The man already had one wife. Rose and her new husband stayed separately in their own places. They had one child. After one year the marriage ended because he did not look after her well.

She met another man who had come to work in the town. They married and had



one child. Later on the man lost his job, and since then, about two years ago, the situation has been very difficult. Formerly he gave her 8 cedis (£ 3.20) a month, but since he has been without work, she has received nothing from him. She tries to earn a living for herself, her children and her husband by selling cloth and sewing, but she is not healthy.

If the situation within marriage appears difficult, outside it is even more so. According to female accusations, many ex-husbands cease or reduce their payments as soon as they are out of sight or become involved with another woman. Some men have no interest in their child, others have no money. The minimum contribution expected from every father is payment of his child's schoolfees and purchase of a school uniform; but even in these duties they are sometimes delinquent. It can happen that a father himself, still in school is unable to pay anything, while at the same time his relatives are unwilling to contribute either. A man in straits may even be denied recognition as a father altogether. Or, he himself may pretend the child needing support is not his. Such a case illustrates to its fullest measure the reduction of father-husband status.

Smith writes about British Guiana that the status of the father-husband is related to some socio-economic factors in society. If a man belongs to a higher class, he can bestow prestige on his children and wife, and is therefore fully recognized as father and husband. If he belongs to a lower class, the reverse will take place (Smith, 1956). There are some parallels with the Kwahu lineage. The conjugal position of the destitute husband is weak, but those who are rich can override norms and become the centre of the family.

It is further interesting to observe that this lack of real father-husband status is compensated for by a display of authority which makes men masters and raises them high above women who are nearly reduced to servants. A man does not eat with his wife, a man does not carry foodstuffs from the farm (his wife should do that), a man does not carry a bucket of water for his bath (his wife or one of his children ought to take it for him to the bathroom), etc. Someone who sees through these externalities, however, will notice that the society is much less male-dominated than it appears to be at first sight<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, it should be reported that these practices are gradually disappearing among the young generation.

##### *5. Premarital and extramarital relationships*

Premarital sex is nothing new in the Kwahu lineage. Case histories of today resemble repetitions of what happened 60 years ago. The same probably also applies to extramarital relations. Nowadays, however, because young people postpone marriage and have premarital sexual contacts at an age at which formerly they would already have been married for a long time, it is more difficult to differentiate the two.

About 100 years ago, when infant betrothal was still a common practice,

premarital sex was, theoretically, not possible. A girl was married to a man when she was four or even younger, and this union was consummated soon after her first or second menstruation (cf. Denteh, 1971 : 10). When a girl started an extramarital affair it was usually because she did not like her present 'husband'.

After infant betrothal disappeared, premarital sex became more common. When it resulted in a pregnancy, the event was usually welcome. It proved the girl's fecundity and became a motive for marriage. It is only recently that premarital pregnancy has become a source of concern. Childbirth can disrupt the educational program or personal ambitions of a young girl (rarely those of a man).

Extramarital relationships are of two types: relations between persons currently married and relations between persons who are not. The former is condoned only for men; the later, to some extent, also for women. Monogamous husbands during the last months before and the first months after their wives' childbirths often sleep with another woman. As polygyny has become rare, extramarital sex has probably become more common. It should be noted, however, that such conduct is not in response to any postpartum taboo or any taboo during pregnancy which may obtain in the lineage or in the entire town. It is mainly for esthetic reasons that most partners decide to abstain from congress voluntarily from an average of 2 months before until 5 months after delivery. During this period of abstinence many husbands seek other partners. Such a temporary relationship, which borders on prostitution, is rarely considered as real friendship, and is not mentioned when one asks about 'friends' (*mpe nanom*) outside marriage. This does not mean that people try to hide it. Men do keep the contact a secret from their wives (although wives usually know or suspect what is happening), but when interviewed about their behaviour, many will frankly admit to having such an arrangement. They are convinced that it is ordinary and normal practice: every man does it. The problem is how to prevent pregnancy. For this reason, men may pay their attentions to barren women or to women who 'can take care of it'.

The other type of extramarital relationship involves unmarried people: those who are divorced and those who, for some specific reason, are not married. It is of course possible for a hybrid of the two types to occur: it is very common, for example, for an unmarried woman to have an affair with a married man. Public opinion about pre- and extramarital unions is very ambivalent. People may disapprove nominally, but at the same time assure someone who asks that nothing could be more normal and that they themselves have had the pleasure. It would be mistaken to think that such relations are regarded as evil or that people feel guilty about them.

There are indications that increasing numbers of young people are postponing marriage and maintaining semi-permanent sexual relationships. In a prior study, based on my earliest research, I found that of 20 lineage members between the ages of 17 and 28 only four were married customarily,

while all 20 were actively engaged in some kind of liaison (Bleek, 1973 : 2). It was further noticed that among older women a certain disenchantment with marriage occurred, resulting in a refusal to enter formally customary marriage again (Bleek, 1971 : 161-7). When I returned from my second stint of research, although I was not able to interview all 20 young people again, investigation satisfied me that little had changed. Table 3 gives a general view of the marital status differentiated by age and sex of the 42 lineage members of my sample.

Table 3: Marital status by sex and age.

		Customary marriage	Free marriage	Lover rel.	Single divorced	Single never married	Total
Male	under 25	—	—	—	—	4	4
	25-39	7	1	1	5	—	14
	40 and over	4	1	—	—	—	5
	total	11	2	1	5	4	23
Female	under 25	3	1	2	—	1	7
	25-39	9	1	—	2	—	12
	total	12	2	2	2	1	19
Final totals		23	4	3	7	5	42

If free marriage is considered an institutionalized union, then it emerges that 27 lineage members are participants in an institutionalized union and 15 are not (over one third of the total). The proportion of unmarried is higher among men than among women. Whether the relatively advanced age at marriage for men is a new development is difficult to say. Age at marriage has always been higher for males than females (c.f. Fortes, 1950 : 278). Exact information about the past, however, is elusive. The estimates of older people about their age at marriage are not particularly reliable.

## II. BIRTH LIMITATION IN THE LINEAGE

### 1. *Divorce and birth-control*

The high frequency of divorce affects attitudes towards and practice of birth control in two principal ways. In the first way it appears likely to encourage birth control; in the second it seems to loom as an obstacle to effective family planning in the future.

First, every married woman is aware of divorce as a real possibility. She

realizes, given the high 'abscondity rate' of men after divorce, that one day she may very well have to stand alone with her children. From her point of view it is advantageous to reduce number of births in order to avoid literally creating a situation which may later be difficult to handle alone.

Although this argument sounds reasonable, I must admit no member of the lineage but rather respondents from town mentioned it. It is my belief, however, that in some obscure or opaque form this idea abides with many people. A general aura of insecurity surrounds marriage. It might be pointed out that a woman who is suddenly left to raise her children single-handedly remains part of her lineage on which she can always fall back for financial assistance. True, but one should not overestimate the willingness of the matrilineage to offer material help.

One member of the lineage thought that a woman with many children was not foolish but wise, because, if her husband left her, she would have many children to take care of her. Yet, children are usually still young when divorce takes place. In general, I suspect that the instability and insecurity of marriage may make a woman more aware of children as a potential burden and therefore more receptive to family planning ideas. Whether such anxiety also induces actual practice of birth-control is another question. The case below deals with suicide which, with some licence, can be regarded as a radical form of divorce which did drive a woman to birth-prevention.

*Case 4. The desperate widow*

Akosua Badu divorced her first husband. She had two children from him, but one died. Her second marriage, which resulted in one child, came to an abrupt end. Her husband hanged himself. She says 'A week after his death I found out that I was pregnant. Because the child would have no one to look after it, I decided to abort it. Nobody else advised me. People did not even know I was pregnant'. She caused abortion with a concoction made of the roots of a pawpaw tree.

The high divorce rate can also obstruct family planning. Marriage still has for its primary aim reproduction. Every new marriage must prove fertile. A woman who has, for example, six children and is interested in having no more, has suddenly to abandon that restful idea if she, by any chance, enters a new marriage. Men must similarly be prepared to engender offspring by every new wife. They are in any event less likely to be reluctant to have more children because the prospect of dependants after divorce does not cloud their horizons. Birth-control, especially an irreversible method such as sterilization, is definitely impeded by this factor. Sterilization is a decided risk for those of reproductive age who are liable to terminate one marriage and start a new.

In Kwahu not only is male sterilization, or vasectomy, not practised, it was until recently, except to one member of the lineage, unknown. By way of contrast, in Kenya (Nairobi) vasectomy has for years been the most familiar method among men (Dow, 1967). The confusion of vasectomy with castration which exists in other places also arose in Kwahu as soon

as villagers heard about the technique. That vasectomy is not practised, as far as I know, anywhere in Ghana can be accounted for by the high incidence of divorce and, probably also, of polygyny<sup>9</sup>. The American medical director of the Kwahu Hospital at Atibie explained to me that they do not perform vasectomies because the operation is culturally ill-advised: every male is likely to contract a new marriage at some point in his life, and should his new wife fail to become pregnant, not he, but she will be blamed for it.

In the same hospital at Atibie 40 tubectomies were carried out between 26 October 1972 and 30 May 1973<sup>10</sup>, slightly less than six every month. In most cases tubectomy was resorted to after a second or third difficult childbirth. Whether it is also seen simply as a method of birth-control by women who have time and again reproduced without complications I do not know, but it is certain that it is quite popular, particularly from a male vantage<sup>11</sup>. It is widely known and called *twa awɔ* (cutting child-birth) in the local language. No less than 10 of the 42 lineage members thought tubectomy the best method of birth-control. Remarkably these advocates of tubectomy, 7 men and 3 women, belong to those in my sample least interested in family planning; they have had hardly any previous contraceptive experience and are considerably older than the others. Table 4 compares these characteristics of theirs with those of the rest of the lineage. The working of the 'birth-control-attitude scale' will be explained subsequently. The lower the score, the higher the interest in family planning.

Table 4: Characteristics of members who find tubectomy the best method of birth-control, compared with the others

	Number respondents	Average no. methods ever used	Average score on birth control attitude scale	Average age
Find tubectomy best method of birth-control	10	0.2	12.4	40.0
Find tub. not best method of birth-control	32	1.9	10.2	29.1
Totals	42	1.5	10.8	31.7

One can think of several reasons why this type of person is most in favour of tubectomy. In the first place, the method interferes least with the sexual act, a preference which can be expected from a more conservative group. Secondly, they are the older group: the women are nearing the end of their reproductive age and the men are less likely to remarry a young woman. A further contributing factor, one they themselves reported, is confidence in the doctor, a motive also alleged in connection with other methods. Since

the medical doctor is highly trusted in general, any method which he vigorously promotes has a good chance of success.

Tubectomy is also popular because it is understandable and easy. It was observed that although people are in favour of spacing their children they are not inclined to achieve spacing by artificial means. Rumours about pills, the loop and other methods that 'spoil the womb' are quite virulent, and few people dare to start using contraceptives before they feel certain of having their desired number of children. Tubectomy can be carried out once that particular goal has been reached. Even then, however, the prospect of possible divorce and remarriage crops up and revitalizes resistance against sterilization.

Paradoxically, those for whom sterilization would make slight or no physiological difference are in favour of it, the rest, indifferent or averse.

## *2. Premarital and extramarital birth-control*

Pool writes that considering the high percentage of mutual consent unions, 'to survey "married" women alone may restrict the usefulness of results in Ghanaian and possibly other African "family" studies' (Pool, 1968 : 253). There is no doubt that someone who observes and records the ideas and practices of only lawfully married members in the lineage, will compile a totally mis-representative picture of actual birth-control in the lineage. On the contrary, it would be possible to acquire a far more complete understanding by restricting notice to the not-married and the semi-permanently attached and to what the lawfully married do outside the bonds of marriage. A provocative claim, but I will undertake to demonstrate its validity.

One preliminary remark: although some tables will be used to clarify certain aspects of the lineage quantitatively, I found it extremely difficult to capture the essence of the situation with quantitative measurements. Since the complexity and the turbulence of conjugal histories defy the use of statistics and parameters, I rely on a descriptive approach.

In contrast to customary and to free marriage, other, more temporary unions, seldom have the production of children as a primary aim. Sometimes the wish to have no children (yet) is the very reason that partners do not (yet) contract a customary union. Sometimes conversely, the very awareness of the transient character of a relation instigates the use of means to prevent pregnancy. This is one of the most striking differences between customary and temporary union. Eleven of 42 people when asked whether it is 'good' or 'wrong' for a married woman to use contraceptives, answered 'good'. Why do more people approve of birth-control among schoolgirls than among married women? The answer is probably contained in asides about the married woman which respondents made. 'Why should she use contraceptives? Is she not married? She should bring forth children'. Three people further explained that although it was wrong for a married woman to practise birth-control before she had (enough) children, once she had reached

the number she wanted it would be good for her. I believe more people had this thought who did not formulate it. For them the idea of a married woman not wanting to reproduce was so alarming that it precluded drawing any distinctions. It may therefore be postulated that not as many respondents are entirely against contraceptive use in marriage as the above figures suggest, and that basic information can clear up many misunderstandings and convince doubters of the benefits of marital birth-control. It is worthy of special emphasis, however, how a central cultural value – fecundity – is set aside when considering a certain category of young women: those in school. A young woman in marriage is not allowed birth-control; a young woman in school is. The statistical difference between the two groups is small and inconclusive, but nonetheless it is noteworthy considering that in other societies, which are more censorious at premarital relationships on ethical grounds, an opposite ratio could be expected.

Information gained from formal interviews, observations and casual conversation strongly suggests that with the sole exception of tubectomy birth-control is generally associated with illicit sexual intercourse. People in a lawful union, who condemn premarital and extramarital relations, are consequently more critical of birth-control and less experienced in it than people not in a lawful union. But – and this is crucial – those now in a customary union may have had a temporary union before for the duration of which they, too, made use of contraceptives, or else they may still indulge in extramarital liaisons, for which purpose they practise birth-control. Such respondents, although classified as customarily-married, will report a higher experience with birth-control and a more positive attitude toward it. With this realization in mind let us compare the lawfully married with those involved in some type of informal sexual relationship.

To measure attitude towards birth-control I composed a scale based upon responses to ten questions ranging from 'feeling' about having many children to 'feeling' about induced abortion. Pro-birth-control answers were awarded a zero score, anti birth-control responses a 1-, 2- or 3-score depending on how radical the content of the question was. Answers approving of a man's having many children, for example, received a 1-score, while answers disapproving of induced abortion a 3-score. The highest possible total pro-birth-control score, 0, was achieved by no one; one person accumulated the highest possible total anti-birth-control score, 18.

Table 5 shows the average score, the average number of methods ever used (not the frequency!) and the average number of methods known. Abstinence has not been included in the list of methods ever used. Abstinence was sometimes practised, but it was difficult to decide whether it had been used consciously for contraceptive purposes or not.

Contrast between the lawfully married and others is greatest in number of methods ever used. The latter have tried more than three times as many methods as the former. In the other two variables differences are clear but less pronounced. The possibility should not be ruled out that those who are

Table 5: Averages of birth-control attitude, number of methods used and number of methods known by lawfully married and not lawfully married

	Number	Average score birth-control attitude	Average number of methods ever used	Average number of methods known
Lawfully married*	27	11.4	0.8	6.5
not lawfully married**	15	9.7	2.9	8.3
Total	42	10.8	1.6	7.1***

\* Includes both customary and free marriage.

\*\* Including those who are not married.

\*\*\* A list of 12 methods was read to the interviewee who indicated which ones (s)he knew. After every method (s)he said (s)he knew, the person was asked to explain the method.

not lawfully married were more open about their practice of birth-control than the others. It is plausible that use of contraceptives took place in extramarital affairs which husbands or wives chose not to reveal.

When during the interviews someone reported the use of a birth-control method, he or she was usually asked whether the method had been practised with a marital partner or someone else. Sometimes this was clear from the context or mentioned spontaneously by the respondent. In two cases identity of partner has been guessed with a high degree of certainty. Results have been set out in

Table 6: Number of people who ever used a method of birth-control in or outside marriage, by sex.

	Males	Females	Total
Used method(s) in marriage:	4	3	7
Used method(s) outside marriage:	15	12	27
Total of those who ever used a method:	15	12	27
Used no method:	8	7	15
Final total:	23	19	42

Not even one person practised birth-control exclusively in marriage; but 20 out of 27 users of contraception practised birth-control only outside marriage. Moreover, two of those who did use birth-control in their marriage were involved in borderline cases of customary marriage. One such marriage is the subject of the following case

*Case 5. The undesired wife*

Amoa is a teacher of 28 years old. He has had ten girl-friends in the past ten years, but managed to stay out of marriage until now. Once he intended to marry someone, but upon discovering that the girl's previous lover was still on the coast, Amoa left



her. After that he made pregnant a girl from the school where he was teaching. The girl, who was an orphan and staying with some relatives, was very troublesome and her stepparents were happy to use the pregnancy as a pretext to throw her out of the house and, in addition, to earn some money by fining Amoa an amount of C 260.00 (about £ 104.—) for seducing her (the legal fine for impregnating a schoolgirl is much higher than for impregnating an 'ordinary' girl!). The girl had nowhere to go. To Amoa's chagrin, she moved in with him. They caused abortion and Amoa took care not to make her pregnant again in order not to be saddled with her permanently. He used 'Emko', a contraceptive foam, and some obscure pills such as 'Alophen' (a laxative) and 'Special Female Pills'. After about 6 months Amoa managed to get rid of his undesired wife.

The next case presents a more typical marriage situation:

*Case 6. The enterprising taxi driver*

Yaw Ofori, 27 years old, is in his first marriage. His wife is 22 years old and has two children by him. They are living in Accra where Ofori is a taxi driver. Ofori is very frank and down-to-earth about his sexual life. Before he married his present wife, he says he slept with about 15 to 20 different girls. Three of them were more permanent friends. At first he did not take any precautions and his first friend became pregnant. They caused abortion with herbs. He became more careful and used pills, 'Appil and Steel', condom, 'Emko' and coitus interruptus. The last method he admitted reluctantly. Nevertheless, his third friend also became pregnant and they caused abortion with a solution of herbs. Afterwards Ofori made up his mind to marry this girl and when she became pregnant a second time, they kept the pregnancy intact. He was also afraid that something would go wrong if he caused abortion a third time.

Both times his wife delivered, Ofori did not sleep with her for six months, three months before and three months after the delivery. During that time he visited a girlfriend and again used contraceptives. Because his wife has already two children and they only want four, they have decided to stop for a while. His wife takes a pill every time before they have intercourse, he does not know the name of the pill.

After reading these two cases, one is not surprised to learn that the fertility of 'mutual consent' or 'visiting' unions is lower than the fertility of customary unions. This has been reported by many other anthropologists and demographers elsewhere, for example by Pool (1968 : 242) for Ghana as a whole, by Ardener (1962 : 54) for the Bakweri in Cameroun, and by Roberts (1955 : 216-7) and Judith Blake (1955 : 28) for the Caribbean. People in 'visiting' unions are also more interested in 'family' planning (Pool, 1968 : 242).

Birth-control has still a furtive and secretive character. Only one of the 27 users obtained his contraceptives from a family planning agent, all the others bought them in stores where they may be even as much as ten times more expensive. Although it is true that family planning agencies are still mainly operating in urban centres, a high proportion of my respondents were living, had lived in or frequently visited the cities of Accra and Kumasi.

It is ironic that contraceptives are put principally to extramarital use, while family planning agencies address themselves to married couples!

The fact that the growing practice of induced abortion also occurs almost exclusively before or outside marriage (see Bleek, 1974), contributes to the bad name of birth-control in general. Induced abortion is widely condemned. Because need for it arises from situations similar to those in which other

forms of birth-control are used, the two are vaguely associated. Some people further pair birth-control, especially the use of the condom, with prostitution. The disrepute likely to accrue with birth-control may be deduced from the following remark made by a lineage member in praise of a woman with eight children, 'she has no bad ideas, she is good and holy and has not committed sin'. Another reason why birth-control is frowned upon is the attitude that children as God's gift, should not be interfered with.

The materials in the section prompt me to make the following observations:

1. The National Family Planning Programme of Ghana makes frequent use of the image of the small nuclear family in its propaganda which advertises 'a better life'. This is in conformity with one of Angela Molnos' conclusions in her study of family planning in East Africa: 'The central "argument" in favour of family planning should be the attractive image of the planned small family' (Molnos, 1968 : 217). It seems, however, that this image only speaks to the elite and sub-elite of Ghana, who live an entirely different life from the rest of the population. The divorce rate, for example, is extremely low among the privileged (Caldwell, 1968 : 36) and the western type of nuclear family life is generally preferred and increasingly practised (Caldwell, 1968 : 34-5). It is indeed feasible that the image of the small nuclear family is too remote from the average Ghanaian to be effectively attractive, and obstructs interest in family planning instead of rallying it. This would mean that since Ghana's high fertility rate stems in the first place from the rural areas (Gaisie, 1969 : 34, 42) and not from the urban elites, family planning propaganda is misconceived to motivate those who need it most.

2. There can be no doubt that the practice of birth-control here described must have some effect on the fertility level of the lineage concerned. The most decisive repercussions are probably the postponement of marriage age and the longer time spent outside marriage by women after divorce. In most societies these schedule changes can be correlated with a decrease of coital frequency and subsequently with decline of total fertility. Not so in the Kwahu lineage. Indeed, without the practice of birth-control, the effect on fertility would in all probability be negligible. In any event most users of birth-control are still young<sup>12</sup> which delays the calculation of impact on fertility for some years. The ineffectiveness of certain methods may well prove to have a deflating influence on expectations of fertility decline arising from the rather high practice of contraception.

3. It has been hypothesized that the high frequency of pre- and extramarital relationships is not an entirely new development in the lineage under study. The introduction of contraceptives and the spread of other means of birth-control, therefore, fit in usefully with an old 'institution'. This 'institution' which formerly posed no problems when it resulted in children, has become

ill-adapted to new socio-economic circumstances. Now children often come too early.

Education has postponed readiness for marriage: opportunities of paid employment has made having many children an economic encumbrance for some parents. The new practice of birth-control, however, facilitates the survival of sex before and outside marriage.

### 3. *The matrifocal quality of birth-control*

The question of who will be more motivated for family planning, husband or wife, has been widely discussed in family planning literature. The answer is likely to vary in different societies. Stycos remarks . . . 'There are several a priori reasons for believing the husband to be less motivated for family planning than the wife . . . There are equally plausible reasons for believing the male might be more motivated for family planning . . . The major disadvantage of children is viewed as economic rather than medical' (Stycos, 1962 : 490-1, cited by Molnos, 1968 : 202). More writers have suggested that the role of the husband in family planning motivation has been underestimated in the past and insist on further investigation of this issue (e.g. Agarwala, 1962 : 37 and Roberts et al., 1967 : 599).

In the Kwahu lineage the economic and medical factors which Stycos believes influence family planning motivation both point to the wife. As has been previously explained, apart from bringing their children into the world and nursing them, many women must contribute substantially towards their upkeep. Men not seldom play a peripheral role. It is to be expected then that women will be more receptive to family planning, or, at the very least, that the ultimate decision about number of children will rest mainly with them<sup>13</sup>.

My findings show, however, that the women of the lineage are actually less interested in family planning than the men. The women desire on the average 5.6 children and the men 5.5; the women practised 1.2 methods of birth control and the men 1.9; the women knew 5.5 methods against the men's 8.4. On the birth-control-attitude scale the women scored about the same as the men: 10.5 against 11.0.

What my data also reveal, however, is that the motivation of the women although certainly not greater than the men's is probably more effective and decisive in precipitating action.

#### *Case 7. The Polygynist*

Kofi Asante is a taxidriver at Sunyani, 150 miles from Kwahu. He is the only polygynist among the 23 male respondents. There are two more polygynists in the lineage but they are about 70 years old and have been excluded from the sample. Asante is 25. Three years ago he already had two wives. The situation caused a lot of friction. He decided to divorce both and remarry monogamously. He says, 'I realized that I was still a child and could not have two wives'. He married another woman, slightly older than he, who had three children. Around the time his new wife gave birth to her fourth

child, Asante made another girl pregnant as well, and decided to marry her. So, it hadn't taken long until he had two wives again.

At the moment Asante has five children. One, his first-born, from a girl he never married ('I was still very young and had no work to do'). In our first interview he claimed that he still looked after this child, but one year later he admitted that he did not know where the child was. His second and third children are from his first two wives whom he divorced. One of these he has also lost sight of. His fourth and fifth children are with his present wives. His last wife stays with him in the same house, the other one lives in another place. Strictly speaking, Asante has five children, but it would be more correct to say he has two (although he stays with only one).

When I asked Asante how many children he would like to have, I realized, as I did in many interviews, how ambiguous my question was. What does 'to have children' mean to him? He replied that he wanted 6 children. Did he intend to say that he wished only one child more? I asked him how many children he wanted in addition to the ones he had. He answered, four: one from his - present - wife, because she already had four children, and three from his second wife who as yet had only one child.

It should be noted that Asante's desired number of children is not determined by the number of children he himself had, but by the number of children his (present) wives have, some of whom are not his own. He even forgets three of his own children and does not include them in the total of the desired number. In other words, Asante's desired number of children depends more on children who do not belong to him (three) than on his own children (two). The reason is evident: how many children the *man* has is not relevant, the *woman's* number is the criterion.

This is a somewhat extreme case, but not really exceptional. The same factors are at work wherever marriage is unstable or expected to become unstable, and the filiation of children to the father is cut off to some degree or likely to be cut off in the future. Asante was rather realistic about his desired family size.

#### 4. Conclusion

Perception of family planning and subsequent reaction to it is related to a very specific conjugal situation in the lineage. The low status and instability of customary marriage, the high incidence of premarital and extramarital relations and the matrifocal quality of most sexual unions have contributed to the facts that:

- 1 Irreversible methods of birth-control will be difficult to accept.
- 2 Birth-control is predominantly practised outside marriage and, therefore, associated with secretive practices.
- 3 The practice of birth-control will mainly depend on the decision of the woman.

It should be further noted that while the social context in which birth-control finds itself is a rather old, the practice of birth-control itself is an entirely new phenomenon in the lineage and still mainly restricted to the younger generation.

- 1 The present family planning campaign in Ghana is not aware of the fact that a sizable group in need of contraceptives is in no position to identify with the image of the small planned nuclear family which the campaign is trying to sell.
- 2 Should the Family Planning Programme continue to restrict its appeal and services to married people only? In so doing it ignores or excludes other sexual unions that have always existed and been tolerated in some region of Ghana and that need birth-control. It is furthermore reasonable to expect people who learn about contraceptives before marriage to continue to use them after marriage.
- 3 The family planning agencies should make still more use of the image of the medical doctor who seems to be widely trusted.

Finally, it has to be emphasized once again that this study concerns one matrilineage only, and that my conclusions ought not to be generalized without undertaking further investigations. The only pretention of this paper is to divert attention to some social situations which are often overlooked in large scale surveys, and to make suggestions for further research.

## Notes

- 1 This research was made possible through a grant from the Institute of African Studies of the University of Ghana.
- 2 In addition 200 women and 100 men from the town were interviewed on the same subject.
- 3 The use of closed-ended questionnaires in anthropological research is much debated, c.f. for example Köbben, 1971: 45.
- 4 This does not mean of course that the traditional norms are unequivocally followed in other circumstances; they are frequently manipulated to serve the personal interests of the people concerned. 'Cognitive dissonance' is still a nearly untrodden area of research in Africa (cf. Bleek, 1972: 293-6; Köbben, 1971: 193-205).
- 5 Unfortunately, Pool seems not to have been interested in the ethnic origin of his respondents, or at least he does not mention ethnic origin in his publications. Cultural differences between some of the ethnic groups in Ghana are vast, and, one must assume, likely to have some impact on marriage and fertility.
- 6 When during a seminar which included ten educated Kwahu men and women, I presented the following characteristics of marriage and family life as typical Kwahu characteristics, the ten experts raised no objections.
- 7 In reality the situation is much more complex. During the first years of his life a child will usually stay with his mother. Later on he may move to another person. The above figures only show the current residence of children.
- 8 Schlegel in her study on male dominance and female autonomy in matrilineal societies classifies domestic authority among the related Asante as brother-dominated (1972: 192). It is hard to judge the correctness of this classification. A in-depth study of Kwahu domestic relations would probably reveal a rather equivocal picture. On the outside women are patently deferential to both husband and brother, but underneath, it must be concluded, the Kwahu woman has a high degree of autonomy. Her position can be best compared to that of the servant in Hegel's famous allegory of the master and the servant: because she is closer to

- reality and is responsible for everything she has gained considerable power in spite of her inferior status.
- 9 Institutionalized polygyny is declining; only one male and four females of the lineage sample were in a polygynous union at present.
  - 10 The hospital has 125 beds and serves a population of about 65,000. In 1972 it had 3,487 admissions of which 1090 were maternity admissions.
  - 11 This must also be attributed to the 'inferior' position of the woman who has to bear the brunt of contraception (c.f. Caldwell, 1968 : 163).
  - 12 It may be useful in this context to mention that I have not come across mention of any traditional method of birth-control in the past, except for continence. The actual spacing of children is probably an - accidental? - result of prolonged lactation.
  - 13 One may be surprised that the 'mother's brother', whose influence has been discussed so thoroughly in anthropological literature on matrilineal societies, is not mentioned in this context. One may hypothesize that a woman's brother has an important role in the decision process leading to birth-control: Data do not substantiate this idea. Both in the case histories which I recorded and in a question about communication on family planning which I administered to interviewees, the woman's brother was conspicuous in his absence. I would attribute the silence to those usually secretive circumstances under which conception and contraception take place.

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## Discussion Wolf Bleek

Discussion concentrated primarily on the question of decision making. In the research area under scrutiny who is it that ultimately decides whether or not to use contraception? The woman, as in Tunisia or, as in Bangladesh, the man?

The speaker was unable to make a clear-cut statement about this point. Birth prevention is resorted to principally in the course of pre- and extra-marital sex. There is frequent mention of the decision to use contraception being reached mutually by partners. The advice of friends also affects non-marital family planning behavior. Within marriage it is the wife who plays the decisive role in deciding whether or not to adopt birth control.

In response to a question about the methods of birth control commonly employed, the speaker replied that people mainly made use of diverse 'foams' and also had recourse to abortion. Condoms were not widely used because they were associated in the people's minds with prostitution. The

unpopularity of condoms is regrettable, moreover, considering the high incidence of venereal disease.

As a final point to cap discussion the speaker asserted that with the exception of a small urban elite, few people in the country – where children were first and foremost prized as a strengthening of the matrilineage – were at all attracted by the western ideal of the small family.