

SOCI 222

Comparative Social Institutions

Session 3 – Kinship, Descent and Descent Groups

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Session Overview

- We cannot understand traditional people and their social organizations without an insight into their Kinship systems. Kinship determines marriage patterns, residential patterns, inheritance, succession etc in traditional societies. This session deals with the importance of kinship in traditional societies and how it influences the social organization of the members of the respective kin groups.

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Topic one - The Definition of Kinship
- Topic two - Importance of Kinship in Traditional Societies
- Topic three – Describing kinship using symbols
- Topic four - Descent and Descent Groups
- Topic five – Descent Systems



Reading List

- Nukunya, G.K. (2003). *Tradition and Change in Ghana (2nd edition): An Introduction to Sociology* Accra: Ghana Universities Press



Topic One

DEFINING KINSHIP



Defining Kinship

- Kinship is the key to the understanding of traditional societies because it is the basis for the organization of many groups and relationships;
- Kinship is defined as “ social relationships derived from
 - **Consanguinity** (blood relations),
 - **Affinity** (marriage relations) and
 - **Adoption** (social parenthood);
- These three sources are the common sources in all societies by which kinship relationships are established.

Defining Kinship (continued)

- Kinship relationships are governed by specific rules and patterns of behavior, reciprocal duties, obligations and responsibilities;
- The patterns of behavior associated with relatives in a society, together with the principles and rules governing these behaviors are known as the **Kinship systems**;
- Illustration = the rules that determines who marries whom, who succeeds or inherits who and residential patterns all constitute the principles governing kinship relationships.

Topic Two

THE IMPORTANCE OF KINSHIP IN TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES



The Importance of Kinship

- Kinship = the basis of many organizations and institutions in traditional societies;
- Importance of kinship = seen in how kinship and its systems influence some essential institutions and practices;
- **Politically**, kinship determines the rules and principles of seniority and succession as to who succeeds who, who becomes a lineage head or a chief;
- **Religiously**, kinship determines who worships where, who officiates, which spirit should be invoked; since it is kinship that determines the ancestral ritual organized by descent groups.

The Importance of Kinship

- In the **Economic** organization, kinship determines property relations, inheritance and residential pattern;
- In **Marriage and Family**, kinship determines the rules of exogamy and endogamy and residential patterns after marriage;
- In **Education**, kinship determines who socializes the child and provides for the welfare of children;
- In **Health**, kinship determines where individuals will seek treatment and health care and who takes care of the sick;

Topic Three

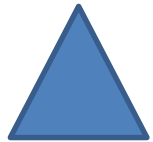
DESCRIBING KINSHIP USING SYMBOLS



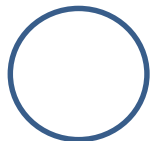
Describing Kinship by Symbols



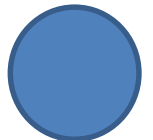
= Living male



= Dead male



= Living female



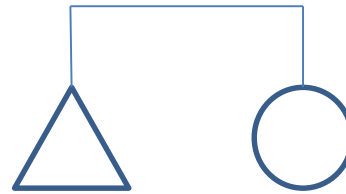
= Dead female



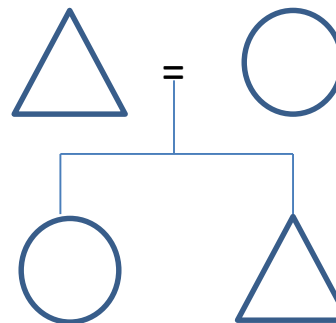
= Living, but sex not known



= Dead, sex not known



= Brother and Sister



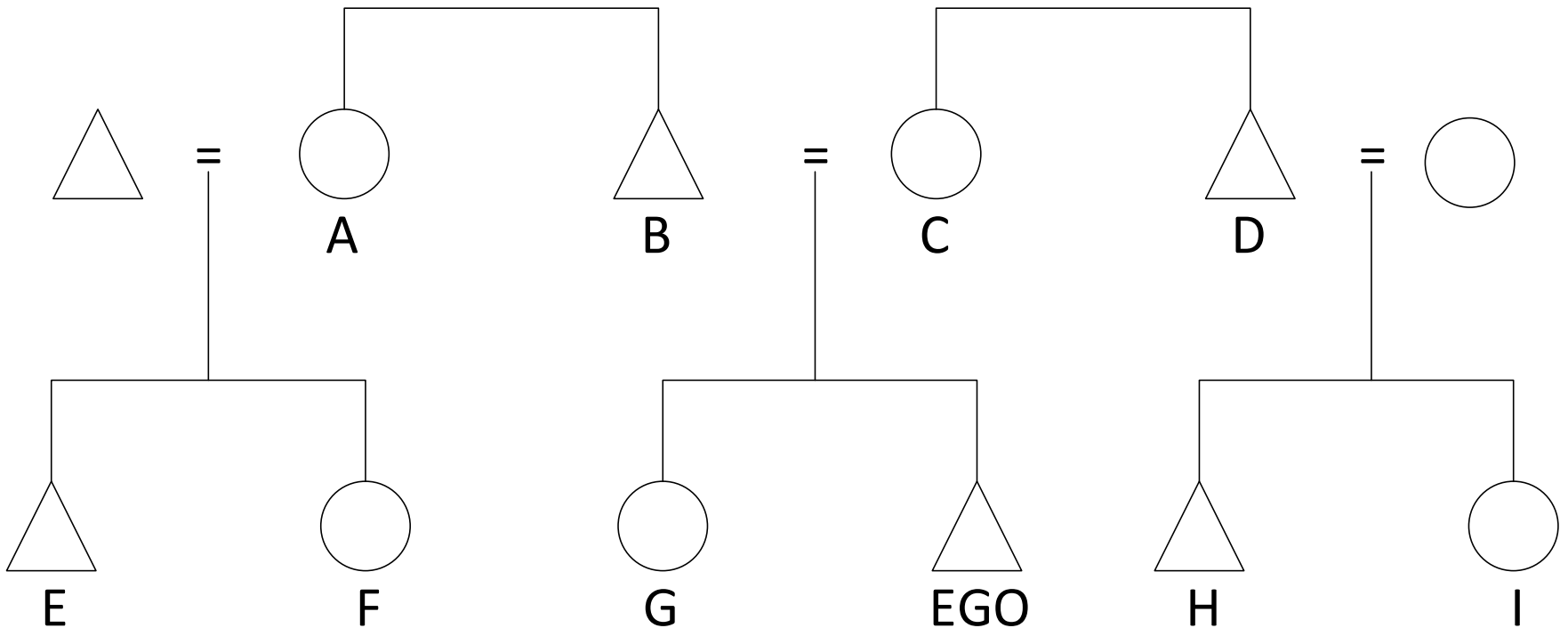
= Husband and Wife

= Their children

Describing Kinship by Symbols

- The symbols used in kinship studies are referred to as genealogical symbols
- The name '**ego**' refers to that individual through which genealogy is traced
- The relationships of those in ego's genealogy are represented by
 - A = Father's sister
 - B = Father
 - C = Mother
 - D = Mother's brother
 - E = Father's sisters son
 - F = Father's sister's daughter
 - G = Sister
 - H = Mother's brother's son
 - I = Mother's brother's daughter

Range of possible relations for 'Ego'



Topic Four

DESCENT AND DESCENT GROUPS



Descent and Descent Groups

- The process by which direct genealogical connection is traced between an individual and his forbears or offspring for the purpose of recruitment into kin groups is referred to as descent
- Usually, but not always, only one line, male or female is recognized for this purpose
- The individuals and groups involved in the organization of the system are known as **Descent Groups**

Descent Groups

- There are two main types of descent groups namely:
 - The Clan and The Lineage
- **The Clan:** “Is a group of people, male and female, who are *believed* to have descended through one line only (male or female) from a common *putative* ancestor or ancestress”.
- The members are only believed to have descended from common source because the group is large.

Characteristics of the clan as a Descent Group

- The founder of the clan is *putative* (unknown) likewise the genealogical ties between the founder and the members;
- It is a large and dispersed group scattered in different localities;
- It is largely exogamous;
- Are associated with Totems which become taboos for the members;
- Do not have regular and frequent interactions among their members.

The Lineage as a Descent Group

- The Lineage in simple terms is a section of the clan found in a locality;
- **Lineage** is defined as a group of people, male and female who have descended from one line only (male or female) from a common known ancestor or ancestress;

Characteristics of the Lineage

- The lineage is a small and localized group;
- The genealogical ties that connects the members to the founder or ancestor/ancestress is known;
- Largely exogamous;
- The Lineage is not an undifferentiated social group; Its highly segmented with **Fusion** and **Fission** among the members.

Characteristics of the Lineage (continued)

- The Lineage is a corporate group. Why?
 - They have a known and recognized leader;
 - It is a property owning group i.e. they own land, houses etc.;
 - They have a legal personality i.e. they can sue and be sued,
 - There is regular and frequent interaction among members to discuss issues of common interest;

Topic Five

DESCENT SYSTEMS



Descent Systems

- In every society, there are principles and rules which regulates individuals in tracing their descent and these are known as **Descent Systems**
- In traditional societies, the principles and rules which regulate the organization of groups within which individuals perform their daily activities are the Descent systems;

Types of Descent Systems

- In tracing one's descent, usually but not always, only one line, male or female, is used or recognized;
- Where the male line is used, the system is called Patrilineal Descent System;
- Where the female line is used, the system is known as Matrilineal Descent System;

Types of Descent Systems

- Where both the male and female lines are used simultaneously, its called Double-Unilineal Descent;
- Where both male and female line are used without emphasis on anyone of them, or where there is an element of choice, it is known as Bilateral or Cognatic or Non-Unilineal Descent System

Types of Descent Systems (Summary)

- Anthropologists have therefore identified four (4) major types of Descent or Kinship Systems:
 - Patrilineal Descent System (Agnatic Descent)
 - Matrilineal Descent System (Uterine Descent)
 - Double-Unilineal Descent System (Dual/ Double Descent)
 - Bilateral/Cognatic or Non-Unilineal Descent System.

Sample Question

- Distinguish between the Clan and the Lineage in terms of:
 - Size
 - Founder
 - Rate of Interaction among members
- What does it mean to say that the Lineage is an undifferentiated social group?



References

- Nukunya, G.K. (2003). *Tradition and Change in Ghana (2nd edition): An Introduction to Sociology* Accra: Ghana Universities Press. (Pages 17-23)

