

SOCI 222

Comparative Social Institutions

Session 5 – The Matrilineal Descent System

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Session Overview

- The Matrilineal Descent System forms the Uni-Lineal Descent system where only one line (female) is recognized for tracing descent. This session introduces students to the Matrilineal Descent system in terms of membership, inheritance and succession, residential pattern among others.



Session Outline

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

- Topic one – Membership and Examples of Societies Practicing Matrilineal Descent
- Topic two - Inheritance and Succession
- Topic three - Residential Pattern
- Topic four - Other Essential Features



Reading List

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



Topic One

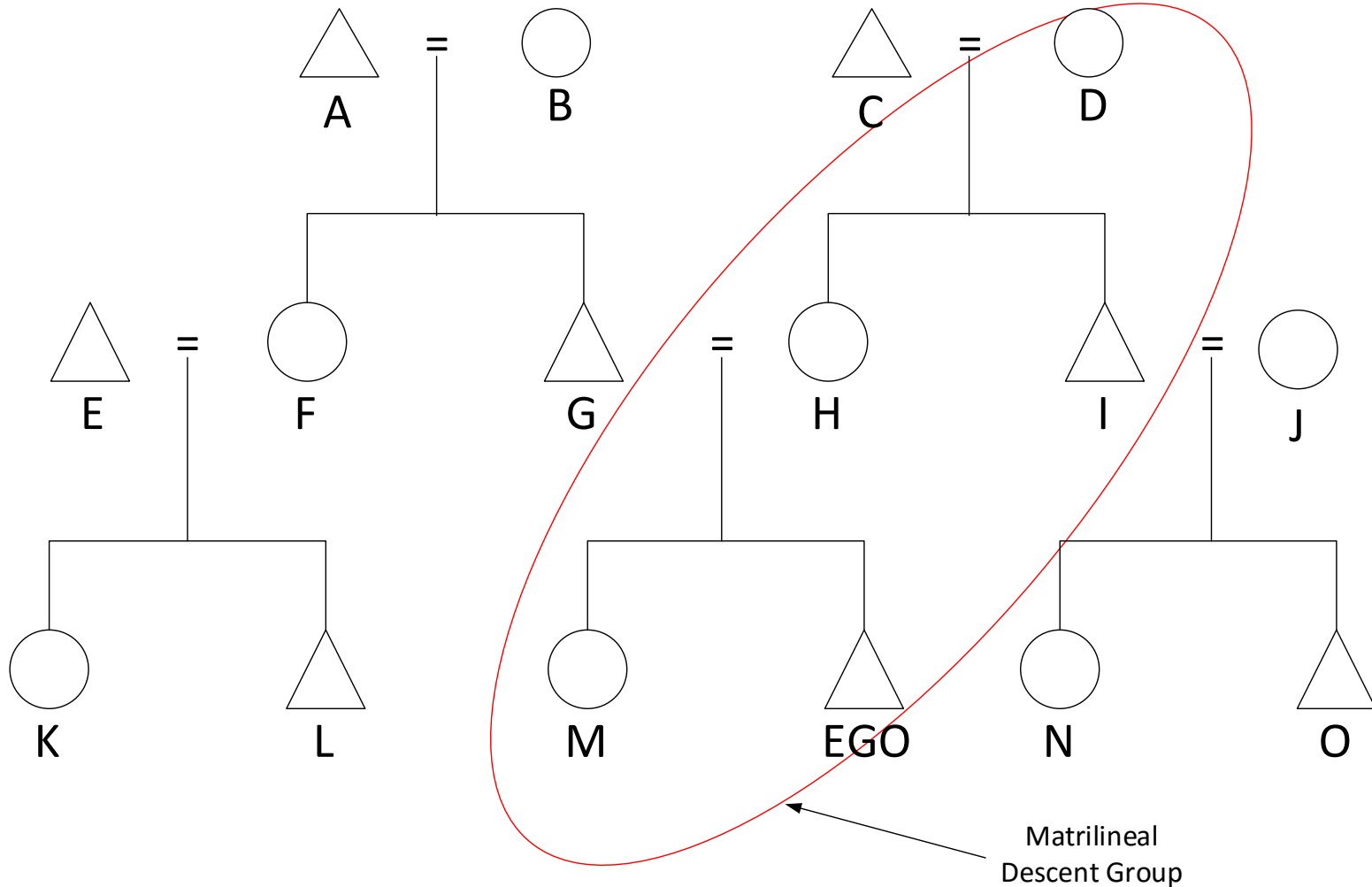
MEMBERSHIP AND EXAMPLES OF MATRILINEAL SOCIETIES



Matrilineal Descent

- Otherwise known as **uterine descent**
- It is a system where an individual belongs to the mother's descent group since membership is through the **female line only**
- The group comprises all persons male and female who have descended through a common female ancestress;
- Children of female members belong to the group but children of male members do not.

Illustrations of Ego's Matrilineage



Examples of matrilineal societies

- In Ghana, matrilineal societies include Ashanti, Fante, Nzema, Kwahu and almost all Akan speaking people
- In Africa, matrilineal societies include:
 - Ovambo of Namibia
 - Bemba of Zambia
 - Yao of Malawi
 - Cewa of Malawi

Topic Two

INHERITANCE AND SUCCESSION



Inheritance and Succession

- It passes through the female line; either from a man to his brother or to the sister's children
- In theory, succession passes from a man to the younger brother who in turn hands over to sister's children
- But in practice, both succession and inheritance usually go to sister's children especially the sister's son directly

Topic Three

RESIDENTIAL PATTERN



Residential pattern and Marriage

- **Matri-local Residence** is where the couple live with the wife's family or kin group
- **Uxori-local Residence** is where they live in a house provided by the wife
- **Avuncu-local Residence** is where the couple lives with the husband's maternal uncle i.e. the husband's mother's brother

- *However, among the Ashantis, residential patterns do not follow the matrilineal principle as the most common practice is Patri-local or Viri-local.

Topic Four

OTHER ESSENTIAL FEATURES



Other Essential Features of Matrilineal Societies

➤ **Patriliney and Matriliney**

- The mother's brother in Matrilineal societies performs significant fatherly roles normally reserved for fathers
- The role of the biological father is limited in matrilineal societies as compared to patrilineal societies
- The major reason for this is that children belong to their mother's lineage and in particular their mother's brother
- In this case a person considers his/her mother's family more important than that of their father
- The relationship between the mother's brother and the sister's son is very important and full of cordiality and tension in matrilineal societies

Matrilineal Descent

- In spite of the important role of the mother's brother, the biological father also performs some important functions for a child in matrilineal society
- The father's role and importance is seen in:
 - Providing a father figure and names for the child;
 - The concept of “Ntoro” or “Nton”; the father's lineage from which the father's spirit or “sunsum” provides spiritual care for a child;
- A child of good standing must not only have a recognized father but should also be named by the father before he/she can qualify to inherit the mother's brother
- However, the Ashanti have greater relationship of substance with the mother's people than the father, hence the saying that '*your mother is your family, your father is not*'.

The Matrilineal Puzzle

- The situation whereby a man gives birth to his own children and names them, but the children do not belong to his descent or lineage and they can not inherit him
- E.g. among the *Bemba* of *Zambia*, the mother reminds a man who becomes dictatorial that the children do not belong to him, and that they will leave him for their maternal uncle if they are badly treated.

Sample Question

- To what extent do you agree with the Ashantis that *“where kinship is involved, a person is always looking two ways, but the two ways are by no means equal”*.



References

- Nukunya, G.K. (2003). *Tradition and Change in Ghana (2nd edition): An Introduction to Sociology* Accra: Ghana University Press. (Pages 25-35)

