

# SOCI 222

# Comparative Social Institutions

## Session 6 – Double and Bilateral Descent Systems

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# Session Overview

- The Double-Unilineal and Bilateral Descent Systems are systems where both the male and female lines are used differently to trace descent. This session introduces students to the Double-Unilineal and Bilateral Descent systems in terms of membership, inheritance and succession and residential pattern among others.



# Session Outline

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

- Topic one - Double-Unilineal Descent System
  - Membership
  - Examples of Societies Practicing Double-Unilineal Descent
  - Inheritance and Succession
  - Residential Pattern
  - Other Essential Features
- Topic two - Bilateral Descent System
  - Examples of Societies Practicing Bilateral Descent
  - Inheritance and Succession
  - Residential Pattern
  - Other Essential Features

# Reading List

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



Topic One

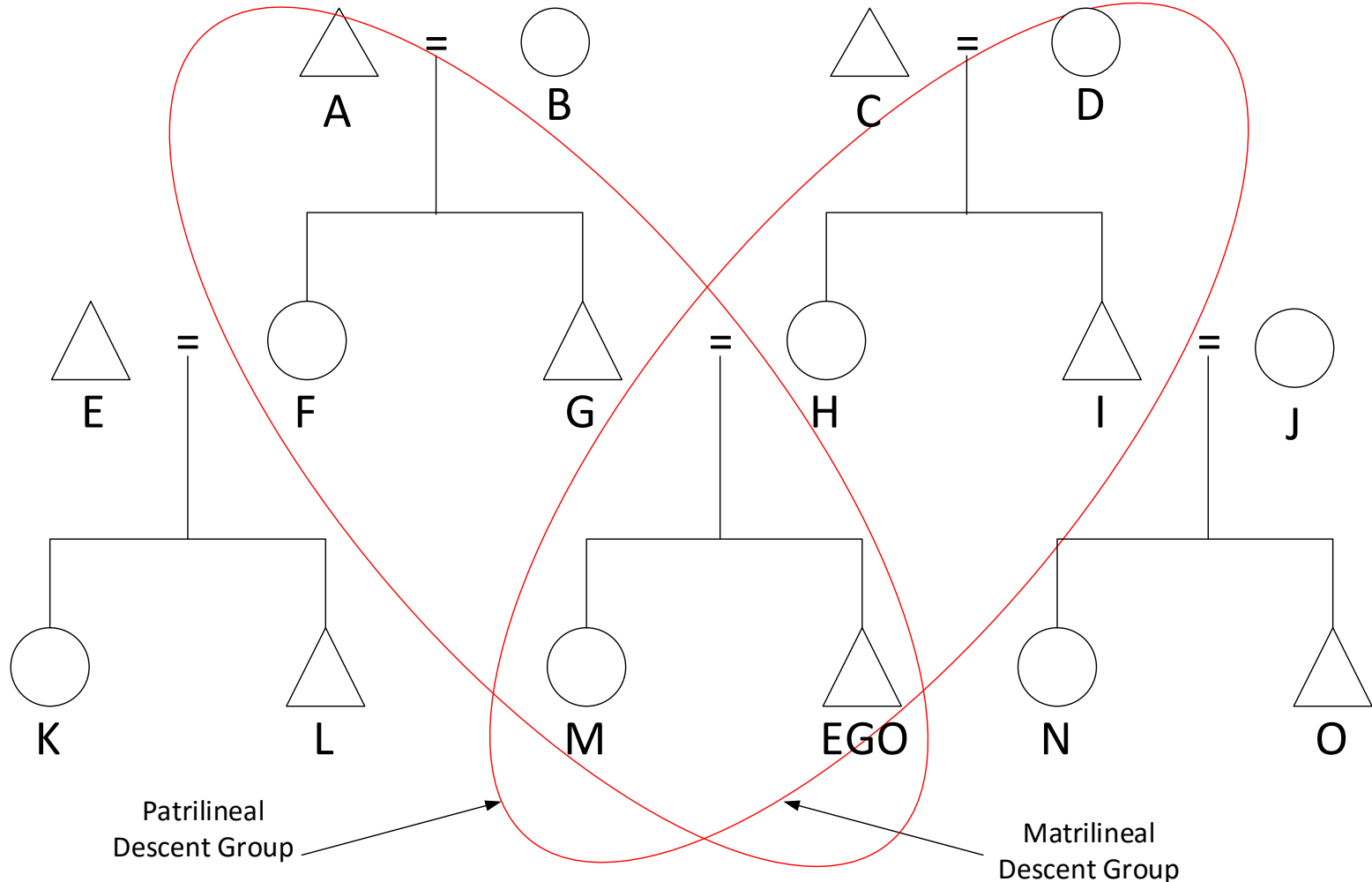
# **DOUBLE UNILINEAL DESCENT SYSTEM**



# Double Unilineal Descent

- This is the system where individuals use both their father and mother's side for the purpose of recruitment into kin groups;
- An individual belongs simultaneously to two unilineal descent groups;
- He/she belongs to the father's patrilineal descent and the mother's matrilineal descent group at the same time;
- This descent is also known as the **Double or Dual Descent**.

# Ego's double unilineal descent



# Examples of Double Unilineal Societies

- Examples of Societies practicing the Double-Unilineal Descent system in Ghana are:
  - Lo Dagaba of Northwestern Ghana
  - Mo of the Brong Ahafo Region
- In other parts of Africa, we have:
  - Yako (Yakurr) of the Cross River State of Nigeria
  - Afikpo Igbo of Nigeria
  - Nuba of Sudan



# Marriage and Residential Pattern

- The Double-Unilineal Descent is largely exogamous;
- This means that marriages are forbidden among members of the patrilineal and matrilineal sides of the double-unilineal descent system;
- The rules of exogamy applies to both sides of the Double-Unilineal Descent;
- Residential pattern is largely **Patri-local** in the Double-Unilineal Descent system.

# Inheritance

- There are two principles of inheritance in the Double-Unilineal Descent system:
  - Movable properties such as jewelries, money and clothing are inherited matrilineally i.e. individuals inherit movable properties through the mother's line
  - Fixed/Immovable/Landed properties like houses, lands and farms are inherited patrilineally i.e. through the father's line.

# Other Essential Features

- The Matrilineal and Patrilineal sides of the Double-Unilineal Descent system differ in many respects:
  - The Matrilineal side of the Double-Unilineal descent is not localized since the members are dispersed and are not involved in co-residence and co-activity
  - The Patrilineal side is however localized and members are involved in co-residence and co-activity marked by conflict and rivalry from frequent interactions.

# Other Essential Features

- The Matrilineal side do not own landed properties and the common corporate they are identified with is the shrine
- They however have a leader and members meet regularly to discuss issues of common interest
- The Patrilineal side on the other hand owns landed property and other economic resources
- They have a leader and legal personality and the members meet regularly
- Although the Patrilineage provides individuals with economic base, they are always looking at the matrilineal kinsmen for affection and support

Topic Two

# **BILATERAL DESCENT SYSTEM**



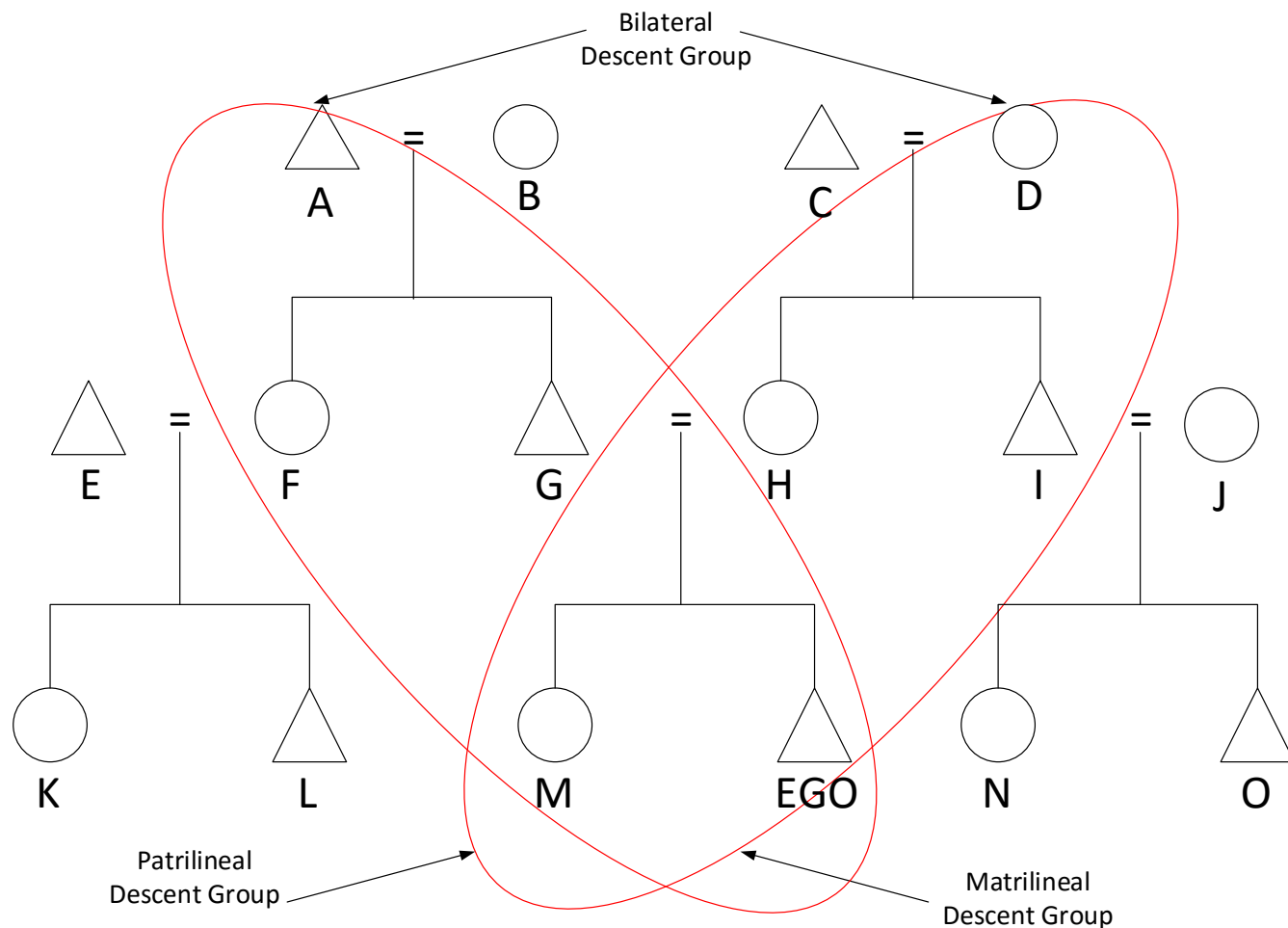
# Bilateral Descent System

- The Kinship ties in the Bilateral descent go beyond the patrilineal and matrilineal sides
- In other words, an individual's kinship ties are never limited to those involving members in his/her descent on the patrilineal and matrilineal sides
- This is because the basis for recruitment into kin group is not on lineal considerations
- It is rather genealogical connections and once there is that connection, it can form the basis of group alignment.

# Bilateral Descent System

- This is why the Bilateral descent is also known as the Non-Unilineal Descent; because it does not use the lineal consideration,
- Individuals in this system are not born into a pre-determined descent group, since there is an element of choice as to where to belong;
- At birth, the individual has numerous possibilities of kinship ties to utilize for purposes of group alignment;
- He/she may choose to align with the two parents, grandparents, and great grandparents and others further removed are sources for utilizing descent ties.

# Bilateral Descent System





# Examples of Bilateral Societies

- In Ghana, societies practicing this system of descent include:
  - The Gonja of Northern Ghana
  - Dagomba of Northern Ghana
  - Mamprusi of Northern Ghana
- In Africa, bilateral societies include:
  - Lozi of Zambia;

# Inheritance, Succession and Residential Pattern

- There is an element of choice depending on the relations and generations an individual decides to identify with (Patrilineally or Matrilineally)
- In terms of Inheritance, an individual can inherit either from the father's side or mother's side or even from the grandparent side depending on the choice
- However, succession is purely based on the lineal principle in the Bilateral descent i.e. it is only through the male line
- Residential pattern is based on either paternal or maternal sides in a convenient manner.

# Other Essential Features

- Fostering is an important feature of Bilateral societies
- In fostering, children are normally given to or claimed by their relatives to be brought up
- Paternal or Maternal relatives can serve as foster parents and the position of a foster child qualifies him/her to inherit from foster parents
- As a result, it is often said Kinship is Bilateral while Descent is Unilineal, because an individual's kinship ties go beyond the lineal lines but descent is largely unilineal.

# Sample Question

- What is meant by *'Kinship is Bilateral while Descent is essentially Unilineal'*?



# References

- Nukunya, G.K. (2003). *Tradition and Change in Ghana (2<sup>nd</sup> edition): An Introduction to Sociology* Accra: Ghana University Press. (Pages 36-40)

