

# Role Relationships Between Husband and Wife in Rural Ghana\*

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*Traditionally marriage in Kwahu (Ghana) was characterized by segregation of conjugal roles and deference behavior on the part of the wife. School pupils, however, are overwhelmingly in favor of more jointness and companionship among partners in marriage. Interviews with adult men and women in a rural town suggest that although at present role segregation has decreased, it still plays an important role. The expectation that jointness will increase among the young and those who have been to school finds very little statistical support. Data were collected through tests involving uncompleted sentences among school pupils and interviews with adults.*

Recent studies have shown that the concepts of jointness and segregation of conjugal roles are useful both for classifying marital unions and serving as independent variables.<sup>1</sup>

The discussion on jointness and segregation has, however, mainly been carried on in the Western environment or in urban elite circles of non-Western societies. Marriages in rural Africa, for example, have been largely classified as having segregated conjugal roles, and few attempts have been made to differentiate between more or less role segregation within these rural marriages. Quantitative indices about the degree to which conjugal roles within communities are segregated are few and far between, as most descriptions of married life in rural Africa consist of the usual anthropological material based on qualitative analysis. Moreover, anthropological descrip-

tions sometimes do not clearly discern between what ought to be and what is. This lack of quantitative information about both ideas and practices seriously inhibits the study of those aspects of human behavior which are linked with conjugal role relationships.

In the present work we want to look at some aspects of conjugal role behavior in rural Ghana. The activities on which we focus our attention are derived from the domestic domain. The attitudes of school pupils and the practices of adults will be analyzed. An attempt will be made to answer the question as to whether present conjugal role behavior is different from that of the past and whether any changes are taking place at the moment.

## *The Research*

The data presented in this paper are based mainly on two six-month periods of fieldwork in the Kwahu area of Ghana. Two samples of adults were interviewed: 100 men and 179 women. The women were interviewed by six young Ghanaian women. As for the men, about half of them were interviewed by the author and half by two male Ghanaian assistants. It was discovered that the men tended to react in a more Western-like way to our questions than to those of the Ghanaian assistants. We shall return to this problem later on. All interviews were conducted in one single rural "town" of about 4,000 inhabitants.

In addition, 432 pupils of "middle schools" and secondary schools in that particular town and in surrounding places were submitted to a test involving uncompleted sentences, using a procedure which has been utilized by Molnos

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<sup>1</sup>Jointness or segregation proved to be particularly fruitful in predicting the type of wider social network to which the marriage partners belong (Bott, 1957; Oppong, 1974); marital adjustment and sexual gratification (Blood and Wolfe, 1960; Rainwater, 1965); attitude toward family size (Hill *et al.*, 1959; Westhoff *et al.*, 1961; Rainwater, 1965; Rosen and Simmons, 1971; Oppong, n. d.); and actual fertility (Rainwater, 1965; Dehoyos and Dehoyos, 1966; Stycos, 1968; Back and Hass, 1973; Fawcett and Bornstein, 1973).

(1968) in East Africa. Most pupils were between 14 and 17 years of age. The schools were selected at random.

We estimate that the Kwahu number nearly 200,000 people at present. They belong to the matrilineal group of Akan who comprise about half of Ghana's total population of 8½ million. The Kwahu are most closely related to the Asante (Ashanti) who have been extensively described by Rattray, Fortes and many others. Two studies which deal specifically with Kwahu marriage and sexual relations are by Bleek (1975, 1976).

### *Traditional Pattern of Conjugal Roles*

The position of the married woman in traditional Akan society was rather ambiguous. The casual observer was sometimes led to believe that women took a very submissive position vis-a-vis their husbands. Traditional norms stipulated, for example, that the wife should not eat with the husband; that she alone must carry the foodstuffs from the farm; take water for the husband to the bathroom; sweep the compound; do the cooking; clean her husband's penis after sexual intercourse; and show deference to him in speech and action. One could say that the place of the wife as defined by this set of rules largely coincided with that of children. A married man should never be seen performing any of the above activities.

Despite these outward rules, however, women held considerable power and commanded wide respect. They played a role in traditional politics and religion and were nearly always economically independent of their husbands. Moreover, women enjoyed a high degree of freedom to enter and to terminate marital unions, and in the matrilineal society of the Akan they were the focal points of descent lines. Rattray, who was the first ethnographer of Akan culture, writes that it took him several years before he realized the social importance of women in Asate. When he asked the elders why they had not told him about this, they replied, "The white man never asked us this; you have dealings with and recognize only the men; we supposed the European considered women of no account, and we know you do not recognize them as we have always done" (Rattray, 1923:84). This hint that reports by Western social scientists about male dominance in Africa are projections of male dominance within their society

has often been repeated since then (e.g., Evans-Pritchard, 1965; Singer, 1973).

We can have little certainty nowadays whether the traditional norms of conjugal role behavior and division of labor were really adhered to in the past. Statements by old people seem to suggest that in private, deference behavior on the part of women was considerably less. A very old man was asked whether he ever saw a man eating with his wife in the past. He answered, "I never saw anything like that. . . . I only ate with my wife when I was in the village (isolated farming settlement); outside that place I did not eat with her. You can eat with your son but not with your wife." The same person was asked whether in the past a husband sometimes assisted his wife pounding the fufu.<sup>2</sup> His answer was, "If your wife is preparing fufu . . . you can give her a helping hand when the main gate is closed because a husband feels shy."

The possibility that traditional norms were publicly followed but privately neglected—at least to some extent—hampers a clear comparison between past and present role behavior in marriage. A second handicap is the ambiguity of female deferential behavior. We cannot simply draw conclusions about changes in the position of women on the basis of an increase or decrease of female submission in the performance of domestic tasks.

A final problem is the validity of answers in the male adult sample: men tended to report more conjugal segregation in front of a Ghanaian interviewer than in front of a European.

### *Present Attitudes*

Two uncompleted sentences which referred to role behavior between husband and wife were given to school pupils for completion. The sentences are: (a) A man who eats together with his wife . . . ; (b) A man who helps his wife to pound the fufu . . . .

The great majority of pupils associated both activities with a positive value as is shown in Tables 1 and 2. The few negative associations that were made came predominantly from male pupils, as might be expected.

Positive associations with regard to sentence

<sup>2</sup>Fufu is a staple food in Southern Ghana. It is made from yam, cocoyam, plantain or cassava which is boiled and then pounded into a sticky paste. The pounding is heavy and tedious work.

TABLE 1. ASSOCIATIONS BY PUPILS TO "A MAN WHO EATS TOGETHER WITH HIS WIFE" (PERCENTAGES)

	males (N=70).	females (N=32)	total (N=102)
positive	69	81	73
ambivalent	4	3	4
negative	17	3	13
unclear	10	13	11
total	100	100	101

TABLE 2. ASSOCIATIONS BY PUPILS TO "A MAN WHO HELPS HIS WIFE POUNDING THE FUFU" (PERCENTAGES)

	males (N=70)	females (N=41)	total (N=92)
positive	63	66	64
neutral	16	7	12
negative	8	2	5
unclear	14	24	18
total	100	99	99

completion indicate that eating together is an expression of love: *i.e.*, "loves his wife very much;" "always wants peace between himself and his wife;" "always plays with his wife in his free time." Other sentence completions indicate that spouses who eat together are happy: *i.e.*, "are always happy;" "converses with her or sometimes the wife will sit beside him telling him the home news;" or simply that a husband who eats with his wife is a good man. Associations that have been classified as ambivalent approve of eating together for some negative reason, for example: "is a bad man because he knows that if the wife eats alone she will take all the meat and give him little." The negative associations state that a man who eats with his wife is foolish and lowers himself: *i.e.*, "is foolish because a man who eats with his wife will let the wife not obey him;" "although it is good it is not good because when you and your wife are eating and your friend comes in and sees you he will laugh at you;" "likes his wife too much, so if he stops eating with her she will stop the marriage."

The content of the associations with regard to sentence completion in Table 2 correspond largely with those of the previous sentence. The positive sentence completions indicate that a man who helps his wife to pound the fufu is a good man and that he loves his wife: *i.e.*, "will always love his wife because he

doesn't want his wife to become very weak;" "is a helpful husband."

The neutral associations give an explanation for the fact that the husband pounds the fufu. The pupils evidently assume that under normal circumstances a husband would not do so. The most common explanation they think of is that the couple has no children or that the wife is absent.

The negative associations suggest that the husband is being cuckolded or simply that he is a bad person: *i.e.*, "is not good because the wife will be very proud and she will not respect you;" "is a bad person because a woman always cooks for men; a man does not cook for a woman."

The associations show clearly that the majority of the pupils are in favor of a more egalitarian and affectionate bond between husband and wife. They approve of conjugal activities which were disapproved of, or at least frowned upon and ridiculed, in the recent past. The positive appreciation of more egalitarianism in marriage exists among male as well among female pupils, although the little resistance which still exists to conjugal equality is much stronger among the male than among the female pupils.

#### *Present Practices*

Respondents of the adult samples were asked three questions which referred to the performance of domestic activities that reflected conjugal role relationships. The questions were: (a) Do you eat together with your wife (husband)? (b) Do you (does your husband) sometimes help with pounding fufu? (c) Do you (does your husband) sometimes carry foodstuffs from the farm?

As we have pointed out, traditional norms would prescribe a negative response to these questions. An affirmative answer, therefore, would mean a deviation from this tradition. According to the associations made by the pupils, jointness in eating and performing the above tasks would be an indication of a more egalitarian relationship between the spouses. The answers to the questions have been tabulated in Tables 3, 4 and 5.

Before discussing these data we must account for the missing observations. They are mostly cases to which the question does not apply, for example, from respondents who are not married or never eat fufu. The nonresponse rate was very low.

TABLE 3. JOINTNESS AND SEGREGATION IN TAKING MEALS BY SPOUSES (PERCENTAGES)

	males (N=86)	females (N=164)	total (N=250)
jointness	44	31	36
segregation	56	69	64
total	100	100	100

$df=1$   $x^2=3.66$   $p=.056$  missing observations=29

TABLE 4. PARTICIPATION BY HUSBAND IN POUNDING FUFU (PERCENTAGES)

	males (N=83)	females (N=159)	total (N=242)
participation	71	51	58
no participation	29	49	42
total	100	100	100

$df=1$   $x^2=8.26$   $p < .01$  missing observations=37

TABLE 5. PARTICIPATION BY HUSBAND IN CARRYING LOADS (PERCENTAGES)

	males (N=82)	females (N=150)	total (N=232)
participation	77	57	64
no participation	23	43	36
total	100	100	100

$df=1$   $x^2=8.48$   $p < .01$  missing observations=47

The answers to the three questions show a very consistent pattern: male respondents tend to claim jointness more often than females. This consistency can be partly explained by the fact that half of the men were interviewed by a European and, therefore, presented a more egalitarian picture of their marital relationship than those interviewed by their Ghanaian fellowmen. But other things being equal, men still claim jointness more often than women in two of the three activities. This may be an indication of a struggle for equal rights. Wives "accuse" their husbands of never helping them while husbands claim that they do assist them. The pessimism of the women about the incidence of joint conjugal role behavior arises from their more positive appraisal of such roles, while the male optimism about the incidence of jointness is a logical consequence of their less positive appreciation.<sup>3</sup> The difference between male and female

<sup>3</sup>The same trend shows itself in answers of urban elite couples who were asked how often they went out together:

responses further suggests that jointness of conjugal roles is becoming an accepted social phenomenon. If men were ashamed of performing these activities, one would expect that women would claim jointness more frequently than men.

On the other hand, the differences between the answers to the European and to the Ghanaian interviewers (see Table 6) also shows that Ghanaian men are reluctant to admit jointness to fellowmen.

TABLE 6. PARTICIPATION BY HUSBAND IN TAKING MEALS BY TYPE OF INTERVIEWER (PERCENTAGES)

	European interviewer (N=45)	Ghanaian interviewer (N=41)	Total (N=86)
participation	56	32	44
no participation	44	68	56
total	100	100	100

$df=1$   $x^2=4.92$   $p < .05$  missing observations=14

When we take the three activities one by one we see that segregation of conjugal roles is not by any means a general practice. It is most strongly practiced with regard to taking meals and least strongly practiced in carrying foodstuffs. It should be noted that the pupils also reported more negative associations in connection with eating together than with husbands' assistance in preparing the food. It seems likely that, in the past, disapproval of jointness was also strongest with regard to taking meals together.

#### *Changes in Conjugal Role Relationships*

To what extent are the present practices a break with the past? If we assume that in the past 100 percent of the men ate apart from their wives and never pounded fufu or carried loads, it would mean that the present situation constitutes a revolutionary change. But, as we have stated already, it is not likely that role segregation was so strictly adhered to in earlier times. However, if we are to believe old informants, then we must conclude that the husband-wife relationship today is radically

23 percent of the men said "often" as opposed to only 16 percent of the women; conversely, 16 percent of the women said they never went out together against 6 percent of the men (Caldwell, 1968:62).

TABLE 7. JOINTNESS AND SEGREGATION IN TAKING MEALS BY SPOUSES AND AGE OF RESPONDENT (PERCENTAGES)

	jointness	segregation	total	N
0 — 29 years	41	59	100	(130)
30 — 39 years	29	71	100	( 73)
40 + years	32	68	100	( 47)
total	36	69	100	(250)
$df=2$ $\chi^2=3.28$ $p=0.19$	missing observations=29			

different from that of their time. The same old man who emphasized that formerly a man would only eat with his wife and help her with pounding the fufu if nobody could see them, stated that nowadays you can see husband and wife publicly eating from the same plate, or a wife openly calling her husband to pound the fufu for her so that everybody can hear it.

In two recent studies of the Ghanaian urban elite, joint conjugal relationships have been taken as indices of social change. Caldwell (1968:62) asked elite couples whether they ever went out together, and if so, how often. Caldwell considers the practice of going out together as an indication of family change. Oppong, who studied conjugal relationships among Akan senior civil servants in Accra, devised a list of 17 household tasks and asked her male respondents how frequently they performed each of the tasks. One of her conclusions is that spouses who are characterized by joint task performance also share most in decision-making (Oppong, 1974:142). Joint decision-making is believed to be a departure from the past when decisions were made in a much more autocratic way by the husband alone or when spouses decided over their own matters separately. Oppong has written a number of additional papers in which she relates jointness of conjugal roles to other variables such as closure of family organization and attitudes to family size—both innovations in Akan society. Her samples are taken from the occupational upper stratum, from middle class groups such as nurses and primary school teachers, and from the university student population.

The extensive number of studies which view jointness of conjugal roles as an index of social change (both in and outside Ghana) poses the question of whether conjugal jointness is also most common among those most involved in the "modernization" process in rural Kwahu. If this were the case one might presume that joint performance of household tasks would be

most widespread among younger respondents and among those who have been to school. All three activities (eating, pounding fufu and carrying foodstuffs) were cross-tabulated with age and education of respondent. The results were rather disappointing. To our surprise the tabulations did not show a statistically significant correlation between younger age and jointness in role behavior. It is true that one tabulation showed a tendency in the expected direction but did not reach the .05 percent level of significance (Table 7).

With regard to education, only one tabulation produced a significant correlation, namely education and eating together. Segregation in taking meals is most common among those who have not been to school, and jointness is most common among those who have had the most education (see Table 8). Education is not associated with more assistance by the husband in pounding fufu or in carrying loads.

The negative outcome of the other tests seems to suggest that in the rural community with which we are dealing, conjugal role relationships—contrary to expectation—do not become significantly more joint among the younger generation and those who have been to school. The only exception is that educated spouses clearly eat together more frequently than illiterate ones. How strong segregation still is among the educated respondents can be inferred from Table 9 which summarizes the information on jointness and education.

## CONCLUSION

In this rather brief discussion of a few aspects of conjugal role behavior it was shown that school pupils in Kwahu overwhelmingly favor jointness between spouses as opposed to traditional norms which dictate role segregation. A content analysis of pupils' responses indicated that their motive for supporting jointness is their preference for a more egalitarian conjugal bond. There is, however, still a

TABLE 8. JOINTNESS AND SEGREGATION IN TAKING MEALS BY SPOUSES AND EDUCATION OF RESPONDENT (PERCENTAGES)

	jointness	segregation	total	N
no education	20	80	100	(101)
primary school	50	50	100	( 30)
middle school	44	56	100	(105)
beyond middle school	57	43	100	( 14)
total	36	64	100	(250)
$df=3$ $\chi^2=19.63$ $p < .01$ missing observations=29				

TABLE 9. SEGREGATION IN ROLE PERFORMANCE BY SEX AND EDUCATION OF RESPONDENT IN PERCENTAGES (NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS IN PARENTHESES)

	not taking meals together	husband not pounding fufu	husband not carrying loads
MALES: ever been to school	46 (29)	28 (17)	24 (14)
no schooling	83 (19)	32 ( 7)	22 ( 5)
FEMALES: ever been to school	59 (51)	45 (37)	43 (33)
no schooling	79 (62)	53 (41)	43 (32)

discrepancy between what the pupils prefer and what is practiced by the adults. According to female respondents, nearly half of the husbands never assist them in pounding fufu or carrying foodstuffs, and two-thirds of their husbands never eat with them. Male respondents claim more jointness in their marriage. However, part of this may be explained by the fact that half of the men were interviewed by a European.

It is difficult to ascertain to what extent the present practice constitutes a departure from past conjugal role behavior because we do not know how widely the traditional norms of conjugal segregation were really followed. To say the least, some incongruence between the ideal and reality of the past appears probable. The hypothesis that jointness will be more pronounced among the young and those who have been to school is supported by only one of the 6 tabulations: *i.e.*, spouses who have been to school tend to eat together more often than those who have never been to school. However, education does not have an egalitarian influence on the other two activities, and younger age is not at all (statistically) associated with more jointness in marriage. One explanation for this rather surprising fact may be that the introduction of Western education has favored men more than women and has not always brought about the expected enhancement of the position of women.

A second explanation is connected with the role of marriage in Kwahu society. There are

indications that—contrary to the situation in elite circles—marriage in lower socioeconomic groups remains an institution of secondary importance. Spouses have relatively low expectations of their marriage partners and of marriage in general. Men are often reluctant or unable to provide sufficient financial support for their families, and not infrequently women bear the burden of parenthood alone (*cf.* Oppong, 1975). Wives remain more attached to their families of origin than to their partners, and in almost half of all cases husband and wife do not even constitute a residential unit. The relatively low status of marriage in Kwahu is perhaps best reflected in the high incidence of divorce and extramarital sex (*cf.* Bleek, 1974; 1976).

A final point which we must consider in this context is the position of the married woman. We should not draw the precipitate conclusion that segregation of conjugal roles necessarily implies subservience on the part of the wife. Outward male dominance appears perhaps to be a cloak to cover the lack of real male power, and female deference is often nothing more than a sop thrown to the men to satisfy their pride while the women carry on the handling of their own affairs.

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