RESEARCH ARTICLE

Revisiting kinship in contemporary West African societies: The case of role-relationship [version 1; peer review: awaiting peer review]

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Abstract

The extended family is a system that promotes cohesion, togetherness, cooperation and support amongst its members. It has been a cherished tradition in most African societies from pre-colonial era to present period. The existence of this family system accounts for the longevity of ancestral traditions and heritage which is the bedrock and sustenance of most African societies. However, with the adoption of western culture, the effects of global economic meltdown and impacts of inter and intra ethnic conflicts threatens this cherished extended family tradition. This paper explores the role relationship in kinship in selected West African societies. It adopts an exploratory approach; drawing largely from secondary data. This study posits that role relationship in kinship is an indispensable tie among Africans especially in the western region. Also most of its tenets have become resilient in solidifying the nationhood of most African societies despite acculturation. The paper concludes that notwithstanding the relative influence of modernity and urbanisation, African societies can, through embracing modern technology maintain its extended family ties even if spread over a wide geographical area.

Keywords
role relationships, kinship, family, patrilineal, matrilineal, African societies

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Introduction

In traditional African societies, and in particular, West Africa, role relationships in kinship are paramount. Most individual African societies see themselves as a communal whole springing forth from a nexus of behaviours and expectations hinged on role relationships within the family circle. This perspective of African societies is in contrast with western perspective of individualism, rooted in the overriding recognition of the nuclear family which revolves around the father, mother and children (Aguwa, 2005; Ayisi, 1992). For Africans, the marriage institution through which kinship is recognised as in blood relation, is not an individual affair (the spouses alone), but rather a family affair. In some societies, it is a village/community affair (some communities in Eastern Nigeria are good pointers). Evidently, the blood relation tie is somewhat an interactive magnet for role identification and responsibilities in most African societies.

Thus, the West Africa community’s kinship is built on the extended family system. Though nuclear families exist, it cannot be considered a family outside the extended family unit. For instance, among the Yoruba of Nigeria, the head of extended family unit known as the olori ebi presides over meetings made up of members of the nuclear family units (Eades, 1980). The tenacious hold on the extended family unit is based on the belief that members of one’s extended family are his kin; therefore, a man without his kinsmen is without identity. In this light, Africans see themselves as relevant only within the circle of their kinsmen as Ekeh observed that:

“it is difficult to be a good man outside one’s kinship network if one is condemned by the forces of kinship to which one belongs … as the ordinary African affirms, in his everyday conversations, the notion that he is tied to his kinship group by the bonds of a contract” (Ekeh, 2004: 35).

Such bond either biological or cultural cannot be easily broken not even by death. With the existence of kinship bond, members make demands on one another in terms of what they owe to the group and to one another, not necessarily in terms of what they may volunteer to contribute (Ekeh, 2004). They do this perhaps to share responsibilities as the culture demands. For example, it is not uncommon for children in Africa to be raised by several people who are not necessarily their biological parents. This is based on the belief that children are not only begotten by a man and woman but rather their entire kin (Ekopara, 2012). Also, the care for the elderly is communally shared especially if the elder holds the position of the “eldest” amongst the kin. These communal acts of shared responsibilities are individualized in Western societies with an already established “Old peoples’ home” for the elderly and orphanages for orphan children. In light of this, Ezeakor (2013) stressed that although old peoples’ homes and orphanages abound today in Africa they neither limited nor exempted kin responsibilities toward orphans.

Admittedly, role relationship in kinship, especially in blood and cultural ties are very noticeable in most African societies despite western influence. It is responsible for the longevity of the African family system and at the core of its heritage. As it helps to build a bond of fellowship, solidarity, love, unity and progress among its members and the country at large. This behaviour is observable during all significant stages of the human life cycles, such as birth, marriage, and death in most societies. This paper therefore, posits that revisiting the role of kinship ties either cultural or blood ties would serve to solidify communal ties in Nigeria in the face of conflict. As the nation is constantly beset with different forms of conflict threatening the bond of its nationhood, kinship in this guise could be a panacea to menace.

Conceptual and theoretical discourse

The concept of kinship is broad in scope and form. Simply put, kinship refers to the manner in which people in society identify and group themselves towards the realization of a form of social order. These groupings or classifications are usually tied down to relationships which could be either consanguinity or affinity. Consanguinity is related to blood ties, that is, persons are related by biological descent from the same ancestor. Affinity is related to the fact of marriage, and adoption (Schneider, 1984: 258). Kinship is also seen “as an arrangement which enables persons to live together and co-operate with one another in an orderly social life” (Radcliffe-Brown, 1950: 3) Radcliffe-Brown’s perspective perhaps appears general in the sense of seeing kinship as an arrangement for togetherness and social order without reference to the very nucleus of the family unit rooted in blood ties. However, Radcliffe-brown’s further submission captures the consanguinity and affinity’s centrality of kinship.

“Kinship therefore results from the recognition of a social relationship between parents and children, which is not the same thing as physical relation, and may or may coincide with it. The relationships, of kinship or affinity, of any person are all connexions that are traced through his parents, his siblings, his spouse, or his children” (Radcliffe-Brown, 1950: 4-5)

Anthropologists have identified three major varieties of kinship groupings found in human societies: the nuclear family, the extended family and clans (Sibs) (Haviland, 2002; Nanda & Warms, 2010). The nuclear family is a group made up of a married couple and their unmarried children. An individual belongs to two nuclear families: the one into which he/she is
born and where he is reared, referred to as family of orientation, and the one in which they function as a parent, the family of procreation. The extended family is the common form of kinship grouping. It may be made up of a monogamous, extended joint-family or a polygynous extended family. The monogamous, extended joint-family consists of two or more nuclear families linked through parent-child or sibling relationships. It is characterised by common residence and, accomplished by various shared socio-economic obligations. The polygynous extended family consists of an adult male, his two or more wives and their children. The procedure is similar to that of the monogamous extended family in terms of common residence and socio-economic obligation. The patrilocal, polygynous extended family is commonly practised in West African societies: the head of the family is the oldest man, then there are his two or more wives, their unmarried female children, the male children, their wives – and their children and grandchildren. The clan is an extension of the extended family, but unlike the extended family, members need not reside in the same residential unit or neighbouring residential unit. In fact members may live in different villages or different parts of the country. This clan is often a very large groupings including individuals who may not actually come in contact with each other: all members just assume that they are all descended from a common ancestor (Adewale, 2006).

It is quite evident that though the clan may be geographically apart, the centrality of kinship remains. Consanguinity and affinity relations form the bedrock of the kinship system with its diverse connectivity of genealogies and descents. Malinowski observes that:

“while the family exists in many societies alone, the clan never replaces it, but is found as an additional institution. Again, though certain tribes use kinship terms in a wider sense, they also use them in the narrower sense, denoting the actual members of the family. Or, again, there is no such thing as pure mother-right or father-right, only a legal over-emphasis on one side of kinship, accompanied very often by a strong emotional, at times even customary, reaction against this over-emphasis. And, in all communities, whatever the legal system might be, both lines are de facto counted and influence the legal, economic, religious and emotional life of the individual … The real problem is to find out how they are related to each other, and how they function, that is, what part they play respectively within the society, what social needs they satisfy, and what influence they exert” (Malinowski, 1930: 22).

Malinowski (1930) and Radcliffe-Brown (1950) have been most influential figures in the development of kinship studies. Schneider (1984) noted that Malinowski (1930) functionalism provided a new statement of the relationship between social and physical kinship by shifting to a functional statement of that relationship. That is, social kinship became the ways in which certain fixed conditions of human existence, specifically those having to do with reproduction, were attended to. The physical features of reproduction, the nature of human nature, and the psychobiological nature of human beings as these are related to human reproduction are thus brought into the social sphere as the foci around which the social sphere is organized. It is the social regulation of action so as to meet the problems imposed by the biological, physiological, and psychobiological conditions on reproduction that defines kinship. This formulation of the problem implicitly redefines kinship from what kinship is to what kinship does, so to speak. That is, it is redefined from being a kind of thing or cultural form (a relationship of consanguinity, for example) to a kind of function (the ways in which reproduction is regulated (Malinowski, 1930; Radcliffe-Brown, 1950; Schneider, 1984: 133).

Lévi-Strauss (1969) (as cited by Schneider, 1984), observes that there are only three possible elementary kinship structures. These three structures are constructed by means of two forms of exchange; and these two forms of exchange themselves depend upon a single differential characteristic, namely the harmonic or disharmonic character of the regime considered. Ultimately, the whole imposing apparatus of prescriptions and prohibitions could be reconstructed a priori from one question and one alone: in society, what is the relationship between the rule of residence and the rule of descent? Every disharmonic regime leads to restricted exchange, just as every harmonic regime announces generalized exchange. Schneider (1984), citing the assertion of Lévi-Strauss (1969) avers that, “A kinship system does not consist in these objective ties of descent or consanguinity between individuals. It exists only in human consciousness; it is an arbitrary system of representations, not the spontaneous development of a real situation”, may present him as not been entirely consistent (Lévi-Strauss, 1969; as cited in Schneider, 1984:141).

Kinship in Africa: Who are the African kinsmen?
Traditional African society strived on the solidarity and continuity of the family. In other words, the African family is the foundation upon which the uniqueness and continuity of the African race resides (Ezenagu, 2017). Thus, one cannot speak about the African kinsmen without mentioning family. For kinship is the product of successive generations of families. The family is a universal feature of all human societies and beyond. Even the lower animals maintain a minimal level of family life. In other words, the family as elaborately defined by Okafor (1992)

“is a social institution consisting of all persons who are descended through the same line from a common ancestor, and who still owe allegiance to or recognise the over-all authority of one of their member as head and legal
successor to the said ancestral founder, together with any persons who though not blood descendants of the founder, are for some reason attached to the households of persons so descended, or have otherwise been absorbed into the lineage as a whole” (Okafor, 1992: 1).

As the bedrock upon which societies were organized, human families are hedged with customs and traditions for its posterity and continuity. These customs and traditions to this day still serve as yardstick for the establishment of families and they differ from one community to another. Primarily, the basic form of family (nuclear) constitutes man, woman (women) and children. To Africans, families limited to just the above persons (man, woman and children) are individualistic contrary to their norm of communal life (Adewale, 2006). That is why in Africa one can rarely find a nuclear family in isolation. This small unit grows into the extended family unit. Therefore, a typical African family goes beyond man, woman (women) and children to include people related to the above persons through blood, marriage and social affiliation or bond. The extended family from a particular descent make up the lineage. Several lineages make up the clan with a common ancestor (which could either be patrilineal or matrilineal) and this constitutes the kinship system (Mwizenge, 1998). This wider family network was built upon the foundation of a single unit of nuclear family. Based on the formation of kinship, the extended families take precedence over the nuclear family.

Kinship ties in Africa are not limited to blood relatives. They also include relatives through marriage alliance and that created by social bonds. Thus, whether kinship is a purely social tie or biologically based; such relationships have been of immense importance to the human race. This is especially true in Africa where one without kinsmen is without an identity (Ayisi, 1992). Illustrating this, Aguwa (2005) asserted that kinship organization begins in the family of kins providing the individual a firm and indispensable anchor. Further buttressing the relevance of kinship, he stated that the idea of community, village or town – *Umunna* (Igbo) or *Ilu* (Yoruba) – is based on the kinship system (this implies that communities were founded upon kinship organization), which is generally patrilineal in Nigeria where a different model exists, such as the matrilineal organization of the Akan or Ashanti of Ghana, the kinship relations still prevails. Amongst Africans tracing of one’s kin along one descent is common as Siegel (1996) observed that vast majority of African peoples have unilineal (one line) descent systems that trace kinship through just one sex—either patrilineal, through a line of fathers, or matrilineal, through a line of mothers. In other words, African kinship tie traceable through the father patrilineal or mother matrilineal emanated from the extended family made up of several units of nuclear families. Therefore, to Africans, members of one’s kin are descents of the extended family (Mwizenge, 1998).

In West African societies, members of the extended family which constitute the kinsmen may be interchanged with lineage and clan. Among the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria, Eades (1980) observed that the Yoruba terminology relating to lineage, lineage segments, households, families and ego-centred kin groups is similarly vague and imprecise. He observed that the normal Oyo Yoruba term for descent group is *idile*, which literally means the stem or root of a house, though a person in Igbetor Ogbomoso would be far more likely to talk about *awon ara ile wa*, - the people living in our compound, or *awon ono ile wa*, - the members of our compound (by birth), than about his *idile*. In summary, he opined that *idile* has a more precise meaning, but is less commonly used. While among the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria members of the extended and kindred are referred to as *Umunna* following the patrilineal pattern of descent common amongst them. The name *Umunna* implies children from the same paternal ancestor and “can be seen as one of the most important pillars of Igbo society following their allegiance in ensuring the longevity and continuity of family traditions” (Ezenagu, 2017: 33). According to Adei (2003) the Akan or Ashanti of Ghana, use the word *Abusua* for both the extended family and the clan which is considered as a bigger family.

Considering the various terminologies used to describe or represent kin groups; this points to its relevance to the foundation and maintenance of African communities from antiquity to date. Hence, the African kinsmen include both those who could trace their descent to a common ancestor and those whose descent can no longer be traced due to the passage of time and also those who by bond of marriage and social relations share common ties. This tie is strong and compels members to seek physical and social as well as the moral and general well-being of all their members. As Mozia (1987) observed families pool their strength and encourage each member’s co-operation for the growth and development of their members.

**Role differentiation among African kinsmen: The quintessence of relationships**

Kinship systems rest on culturally defined biological relationships; kinship systems are thus cultural phenomena. The ways in which society classifies kin are cultural; they may or may not reflect a scientifically accurate assessment of biological ties (Nanda & Warms, 2010). This is because kinship ties although also biological ties that are either through the father’s or mother’s lineage, could also be by marriage or a completely cultural bond. Nanda and Warms (2010) further stated that culturally defined ties of kinship have two basic functions that are necessary for the continuation of society. First, provides continuity between generations and secondly defines a universe of others on whom a person can depend for aid. Just as Ezeakor (2013) noted that kinship ties are the crucial means by which resources and favours can be
accessed and are therefore the means to political influence and material gain. Beyond the gain of material possession, Agwu (2005) stated that kinship regulates individual rights, duties, residence, marriage, inheritance and succession. Onwumechili (1998), posits that most, “African communities provided for the maintenance of social order through their systems of kinship. These systems played such an important role in traditional life that they have stood up to severe strains of social change. The kinship where small groups were members knew each other and as the group grew larger, newer kinships were formed. This ensured that the groups remained small, manageable, and efficient” (Onwumechili, 1998: 11).

From the above, it is clear that “in most of the world’s cultures, kinship is central in determining people’s rights and responsibilities” (Nanda & Wams, 2010: 170). Such duties are executed and rights exercised when an individual can clearly identity kinsmen. Many Africans, especially Nigerians, sustain and maintain the family group (kinship) through network of responsibilities shared amongst members of a common ancestry (Ayisi, 1992). Role differentiation amongst African kinsmen is therefore not a strange phenomenon. Chief amongst these roles is ensuring security and safety of kinsmen. Providing identity gives members of any kindred a sense of belonging. Thus, by being able to identify with and be identified by members of one’s kin assures an African of his safety and security in times of crisis. This assurance of safety was demonstrated by Ghanaian kinsmen in Ghana during the Nigerian government repatriate of Ghanaian’s in Nigeria. Siegel (1996) citing (Harden, 1990: 6) illustrated kinsmen’s ability to provide for the safety of members. He stated that in 1983, when 1.3 million migrant workers from Ghana—nearly one-tenth of all Ghanaians—were suddenly deported from Nigeria, things looked bad, for severe drought had only worsened the chronic crisis that is the Ghanaian economy. Western relief agencies drew up plans for emergency camps to feed and house the deportees. Yet, this particular crisis soon evaporated; for within two weeks the Ghanaian deportees had all disappeared back into their families. Thus, the concept of state coming to citizenry aid was non-existence in traditional societies which behold such responsibility as that of kinsmen.

Hence, beyond the assurance of safety comes security. To Africans, the security offered by kinsmen is not limited to economic, social and psychological. Economic security includes the offer of material aid to other members on low economic status. Financial aids are constantly sort by members of the extended family from affluent members. Most times even when such aid is difficult to provide family members would deem such aid a right to the detriment of the caregiver. Siegel (1996) gave a clear illustration of Africans’ commitment to kinsmen considering a Ghanaian sociologist Kwasi Oduro who narrated that with his mother’s support, he became the first university graduate in his family. In spite of his enviable teaching job in Accra, his government salary could not properly support his wife and five children. Yet, he shares his three-bedroom home with eleven home-village cousins (his classificatory brothers and sisters) and, during his rare visits home, cannot refuse his mother’s, mother’s sister’s, and sister’s desperate requests for cash (Harden, 1990: 94). Old members of African families are cared for by the younger ones either biological children or otherwise rather than kept away in old people’s home. Such roles are highly priced as the caregivers are constantly blessed by the elders (Blanc & Lloyd, 1994).

Kinsmen also share emotional grief especially in times of bereavement. In occasion of the death of any member, others rally round the immediate members to condole and assist in bequeathing the dead with befitting burial by raising the necessary funds. Also on the stance of death, Ekeapara (2012) stressed that when any member of the extended family is bereaved, all the other members will rally around to condole, help and assist the bereaved members in the burial of the deceased. While in some African cultures, certain men and women avail themselves to keep company with the bereaved family till some days after the burial. Such roles reduce the emotional trauma of the deceased’s family.

Also, African kinsmen’s role and responsibilities or commitment to one another is further illustrated in child rearing and the socialization of members. In light of this, Obidi (2005) noted that the traditional Nigerian family did not only provide protection and physical care, but also taught the ways of the society to children. They believe that “if the child must exist in his community and exist socially, he must learn the patterns of behaviour of the community” (Obidi, 2005: 29). To execute this role, parents and other adult family members generally exert considerable influence as teachers and role models for children through skill building, limit setting or discipline, and as models of healthy and competent behaviour (Perrino et al., 2000). This collective rearing is illustrated right from birth. In most African cultures when either the mother-in-law or mother of the nursing mother assists in caring for a new-born baby and the nursing mother, it lessens the emotional and physical burden that a nursing mother goes through during the early period of childrearing (Wusu & Isiugo-abanihe, 2006). The joint efforts of the extended family in rearing children in Africa gave rise to the popular maxim that a child does not only belong to her/his parents. That is why orphans, rather than being kept away at orphanages, are bequeathed to financial and morally capable family members. With the efforts of the extended family, children are nurtured under the watchful eyes of kinsmen who are authorized by tradition to discipline erring children both in the presence and absence of biological parents. And as a result of this practice, the moral fabric of the community is maintained.
Patrilineal and matrilineal kinship relationship in selected West African communities

Kinship relationship as earlier noted cannot be discussed outside the family system. Family is crucial in considering organizations and structures of any society. This is because most traditional African societies are organized chiefly along family lines which run through lineages, clan and kindred. Membership into African family is descent based, that is assigning individuals social identity on the basis of ancestry. Descents are of various kinds, but this work is limited to looking into just two: patrilineal and matrilineal descent system of some West African communities. Comparing the popularity of both descent system amongst world cultures, Siegel (1996) observed that:

“Patriliny, or descent through males, is the most common descent system in Africa and throughout the world… Matriliny, on the other hand, is largely confined to a few pockets in or near the coastal forests of western Africa (e.g., the Asante and other Akan peoples in Ghana), and to the broad "matrilinal belt" that stretches across the wooded savannas of south-central Africa, from Zaire and Angola to Tanzania and Mozambique (e.g., the Lamba and Bemba of Zambia)” (Siegel, 1996: 8-9).

Therefore, patrilineal follows male descent, a man, his children, his brother’s children, his sons’ children while matrilineal follows a woman, her siblings, her children, her sister’s children, her daughter’s children and so on. The uniqueness of these systems of kinship ties is discussed considering the patrilineal descent of Yoruba and Igbo of Nigeria and matrilineal descent practiced amongst the Akan of Ghana looking at marriage residence, succession and inheritance. In reference to Nigeria, Falola (2001: 118) stated that the most common of these is patrilineal descent, which traces one’s descent through the male ancestors, especially the father. Matrilineal descent is much less commonly used. Concurring with the above, Chigere (2001: 41) stated that “in a typical traditional Igbo family the extended family is understood as a patrilineal group comprising of a man, his immediate brothers and their families, who trace their common descent back even to the fourth generation”. Despite the dominance of patrilineal kinship amongst the Igbo, Ejiofor (2016: 50) observed that “parts of eastern or Cross River Igbo have matrilineal lineage system”. Elaborating on the Igbo patrilineal, Ezeakor (2013) stated that

“The patrilineal extended family is the central domestic unit of everyday Igbo traditional life and of collective economic enterprise where eminent men (clan heads, title men and paramount chiefs) represent the major political players and take decisions in customary law, for example inheritance and marriage law. The line of succession travels through the male line, which means that a woman can gain status on the basis of the birth of a male son” (Ezeakor, 2013: 27).

In other words, kinship relations among the Igbo are shaped by patrilineal, male authority. Apart from the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, Eades (1980) affirmed that the Yoruba of western Nigeria also practice patrilineal kinship. In his opinion the patrilineal emphasis in most areas were based on two factors: the virilocal pattern of residence on marriage, and the close economic cooperation between father and son. This accounts for the reason, in patrilineal societies, that the most important source of male authority and control is the man’s position as father and husband (Ejiotfor, 1981; Nanda & Warns, 2010: 176). With authority resting on the male, Siegel (1996: 8) asserted that “the vast majority of patrilineal peoples, practice patrilocality, in which, after marriage, the bride leaves home to live with or near her husband’s family”. Evaluating this act, Eades (1980) asserted that what gives Yoruba kinship its strong patrilineal emphasis is of course the pattern of residence after marriage. Beyond stating the residence pattern, patrilineal descent controls the course of succession and inheritance. With this practice sons are the major heirs but in rare cases female are co-heirs with sons as practiced amongst the Yoruba of Nigeria. As Eades (1980) observed Yoruba women generally have inheritance rights similar to those of men where possible. In the Igbo patrilineal society, the female child or women rarely receive any inheritance from their families of birth and marriage. Married Igbo women can acquire wealth and assets such as personal property and she is at liberty to give it to her children not following the succession of inheritance.

According to the Yoruba patrilineal kinship, procedure of inheritance and sequence of succession on the event of death, a man’s possession are equally shared amongst his children (males and females alike). Eades (1980) noted that if a man has three wives, all of whom have produced children, the property is divided into three equal shares, irrespective of the number of children in each sibling group. Whether the mother was a legal wife or a casual lover is also immaterial, as long as the children contribute to the expenses of their father's funeral. In addition, Eades (1980) stated that a Yoruba man only passes on to his children property he acquired, while the property he inherits passes to his siblings. The same is applicable to the Igbo. When a man dies in traditional Igbo community, his personal possessions would be divided amongst his sons, the eldest son inherits among other property the late father’s house. The lineage property under the care of the deceased is passed on to the deceased brother(s) who also inherits the widow, if the widow decides to remain in the deceased husband house. Hence among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, at the event of death, the widow of the deceased will be inherited by any of the deceased male siblings but if the deceased’s successor (first son) is of age, they might decide to inherit the father’s widow (other widows). This passing on of the widow to another within the deceased husband’s family is
dependent on the widow’s decision and choice. However, among the Yoruba the younger male descent of the deceased inherits the wife. A young widow with or without children who did not want to marry anyone in her husband’s compound could repay the marriage prestation, and either move back to her parents’ house or marry anyone else she chose (Eades, 1980). In the case of a childless widow or a widow without a male heir in Igbo community, she has the option of producing heir for the husband through “woman marriages” as permitted by the Igbo custom. In this case, she marries a young woman who would be impregnated by men of her choice from the deceased husband’s lineage so as to produce heirs.

In spite of a patrilineal emphasis, the Igbo have developed a special set of relationships with maternal kin that is sometimes called complementary affiliation. Through this complementary affiliation, people are considered to have special rights in their mothers’ patrilineages. A typically example of this form of relationship was illustrated by Achebe (1949) in the book “Things Fall apart” when Okonkwo upon committing accidental murder with the penalty of ostracism fled to his maternal patrilineal. Acts of this kind gave rise to the saying among the Igbo “Osu chuba nwa na be nna o gbana n’ikwu nne” – when a child is chased away from his paternal home, he runs to his maternal home. In other words, an African child who may belong to either patrilineal or matrilineal kin group is nevertheless recognised by both parents’ lineage (patrilineal and matrilineal) alike.

The Akan of Ghana unlike most communities in Nigeria practice matrilineal descent. As Adei (2003) stated that the extended family among the Akan society follows the matrilineal system. The membership of a matrilineal descent group consists of a woman, her brothers and sisters, her sister’s (but not her brother’s) children, her own children and the children of her daughters (but not of her sons) (Nanda & Warms, 2010). Therefore, in a matrilineal system a man gains sexual and economic rights over a woman when he marries her, but he does not gain right over her children. Children belong to the mother’s descent group not the father’s, and many rights and responsibilities belong not to him but to the woman’s brother (Nanda & Warms, 2010). Thus, the male authority most recognisable in matrilineal descent is the woman’s brother which makes the husband and father less important. Since children belong to the woman’s lineage in matrilineal it follows the matrilocal rule of residence whereby the man after marriage goes to live with the wife’s kin. Among the Akan of Ghana, though matrilineal the male model of ideal marriage should be patrilocal which is not so in many cases. This is because of the life membership of a lineage (abusua) consequently it encourages separate residence even after marriage. As Forte stated:

“In a relatively stable Ashanti community between 40 and 50 per cent, of the population live in matrilineal households under female heads, and only about a third of all married women reside with their husbands, the remainder living chiefly with matrilineal kin. About half of the children under 15 live with their fathers, a large proportion because their parents are living together, and the other half live in households presided over by their mothers’ brothers (Forte, 1950: 262).

With children residing with their matrilineal kinsmen, this validates their position as members of their mother’s lineage. Thus, among the Akan of Ghana, the children inherit property within their matriliny. This account for the reason an Ashanti father has no legal authority over his children. He cannot even compel them to live with him or, if he has divorced their mother, claim their custody as a right… Consequently, they cannot inherit his property, but he can and often does provide for them by making them gifts of property, land, or money during his lifetime or on his death-bed (Forte, 1950: 268). The position of father was replaced with that of the mother who is the maintainer of the family and the lineage. Therefore, a person is always a member of their mother’s abusua, even if married. Married men live with their mothers, while the children live with his wife in their matriline's house. As with other matrilineal systems, the uncle of a child is the most important male figure, and the father of the children passes his wealth down to his sister's eldest son, not his own children (Bledsoe & Isiuugo-Abanihe, 1989).

The Akan law of inheritance was influenced by their belief in the makeup of human personage which comprises of blood, spirit and soul. The blood among these components seems most important and thus the determinant of a person’s lineage. According to Adei (2003), a person is made up of mogya (blood) of the mother, nto (spirit) of the father and okra (soul). He noted that the blood comes from the mother which alone defines descent and kinship, the father provides Nton or spirit and the child inherits the soul on the day of birth. The relevance of the blood in matrilineal descent led the Ashanti to say “one lineage is one blood” – abusua haaku mogya baako (Forte, 1950: 257), while Akan says the death of a mother is the end of your family – Wo ni wu a na wabusua asa (Adei, 2003: 87). In other words, the woman determines lineage and her blood alone entitles one to succession. The king can cannot be succeeded by his son rather his sisters’ son. Among the king’s cabinet, is the queen mother who according to Adei (2003) was the second most important person in the society. She is not the wife of the king but his mother, sister or niece. Unless the king’s wife is a royal in her matrilineal, she does not become a queen or queen mother. This makes the woman and female child the most prized amongst the matrilineal kin group.
Hence, the position of a woman in a matrilineal kinship system as the blood-bearer of the group made her the determinant of inheritance and succession among the Akans of Ghana unlike the patrilineal kinship of the Igbo and Yoruba of Nigeria where the male who is the name-bearer of the family determines kinship continuity. Though for all communities, Akans, Igbo and Yoruba, kinship is blood-based. Yet among the patrilineal communities the inheritance law and succession is chiefly by name and as a result adopted sons are also legal heirs. This accounts for the strength of marriage in patrilineal societies while in matrilineal society with blood determinant even illegitimate children are recognised and as a result marriage has no stronghold on kinship principles. From the preceding argument, Kinship is an essential aspect of African life there can be no understanding of the African social life without an understanding of kinship relationship. As Radcliff (1950) observed, for the understanding of any aspect of the social life of an African people—economic, political, or religious—it is essential to have a thorough knowledge of their system of kinship and marriage. Only within this sphere can an individual be identified and be relevant to the community. A person’s duties and obligations can only be determined within the extended family circle. Thus, knowing the members of one’s kinsmen clearly stipulates those dependent on him.

Influence of modernity on African kinship role relationship

African societies are hedged with traditions - the pillar upon which the social fabric of community is designed. Upon these traditions, the uniqueness of African life unfolds. However, with western contact came modernization, a theory that advocates the change from traditional society to modern world. With modernization came education, one of the agents of change brought “western literacy” which stands in contrast to most African traditions (Aguwa, 2005; African Union, 2004). The family system most common to the western world is the nuclear family, unlike the extended family system which is much more prevalent in most African society. To buttress this Uka (1969) stated that in traditional Nigerian society, just before the rapid widespread of Western education in the mid-twentieth century, there was one type of family: the extended family system, which included a man, his wife or wives and their unmarried children, relatives and in some sense, children of the man’s friends. Siegel (1996) also pointed out that the African notion of “family” by contrast, typically refers to the extended family system. Not only do members of an African extended family often live together, but they find it relatively easy to keep track of their kin. The notion of extended family is gradually being replaced with the nuclear family system. As Obidi (2005) rightly observed, the nuclear family of “dad, mum and the kids” has come to be considered as the norm by many educated people. This seems particularly true among middle-class people such as teachers and civil servants in Nigeria today. Commitment to the nuclear family is gradually eroding the extended family system as members clearly evade their duties and obligations to other members.

However, modernization became the gateway to development which led to the growth of urbanization and consequently immigration of the individual from traditional societies to urban centres. This movement disrupted the togetherness of the extended family. As a result, most members of the extended family tend to relegate their roles to the extended family outside their nuclear family network area. This relegation of kinship ties gave room to the growth of inter and intra ethnic conflict because members of an ethnicity are either socially or biologically related. When this bond is broken it breeds conflict which threatens nationhood as witnessed in Nigeria. Also, the relegation of kinship roles is further hampered by the welfare role of the state towards its citizens. Today, the government of almost every state around the globe advocate the welfare of its citizenry as its primary goal. With the help of the state, orphanages were built to cater for orphans. But originally in traditional African society, there was no need for the orphanages since other members within the kindred are always ready to cater for the children of their deceased relatives. In the event of the death of both parents, the children are often kept at the mercy of the orphanage. With such action, one may ask where is the place of role relationship of the traditional African kinsmen? Also, the care of the elderly prized for the blessings of reciprocity is left for the state following the western model of establishing “Old people’s home”. Such a concept is strange to Africa but now acceptable. Members of the extended family find it burdensome to cater for their aged considering the economic conditions. Rather than bearing such a burden, the elderlies are sometimes sent off to “old people’s home”. Therefore, under the guise of modernization, members of most African kin clearly dodge and abandon their role and obligations to other members in need. This behaviour, however, is not the norm in most African societies and is today the root of conflict destroying nationhood.

Conclusion

Kinship constitutes the hub with which people relate with one another for fellowship, togetherness and support. In Africa, and West Africa in particular, members of individual families are expected to display certain behaviour towards other members of the family. These expectations towards one another are dictated by societal norms and constitute the building blocks for family and nation’s cohesion, identification and cooperation. Although, the togetherness, identification cooperation and support noticeable in most African societies appears threatened by the influence of western cultures, urbanisation and inflationary economic systems. Efforts should be made to preserve kinship thus, the following recommendations are made:
i. African societies should embrace modern technology to maintain the togetherness and cooperation that very much characterise African societies. Modernisation and urbanisation should not be seen to erode our togetherness but rather to enhance it. Social media are sound platforms for this possibility.

ii. African kinsmen should continue to protect the needs of the elderly and orphans knowing that traditions demand fulfilment of this obligation as a means of maintaining social bonds within the community and the nation at large. In addition, it is instructive to know that orphanages and old people’s homes in African societies provide for the needs of those either without traceable kinship group or denied by their kinsmen.

iii. African societies should endeavour to maintain the spirit of togetherness, unity, cooperation and support even in diasporas by organising and actively participating in community meeting. Usually such gatherings are held monthly, bi-annually, annually or upon agreement at a designated member’s house. The purpose of this is to maintain family and community ties.

iv. African societies may further employ modern technology to create cyberspace virtual gathering through which family members may interact together. A cyberspace family discussion forum may go a long way to forge closeness and cooperation and support among kinsmen in the diaspora.

**Data availability**

No data are associated with this article.

**References**

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