

An Overview of Kinship, Land, and Architecture in Urban Ghana

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Abstract: It appears that the process of social change and life-styles have compelled people nowadays to live among non-kin where they engage in economic activities in urbanized areas of Ghana. This bears semblance to the late medieval loosening of family attachments to land and the existence of very active land transactions amongst kinsmen and non-kinsmen. Traditional architecture as an embodiment of civilization is lost in the process through destruction of original buildings and open spaces. This article is based on ethnographic observations and examines the correlation between architecture on one hand and kinship and land on the other. It concludes that, an understanding of this correlation is critical for a more meaningful management and development of urban Ghana and Africa.

Keywords: Architecture, Kinship, Land, Matrilineal, Patrilineal, Urban Ghana

1 Introduction

It is known in human histories that, majority of the people on earth are leading urban lives with every indication that this will continue: about 75% of the world population is expected live in cities across countries and continents (Burdett and Kanai, 2006). In Africa, however, by 2015 half the entire of the population will live in cities (Mabogunje, 1994), but without the economic base to sustain it. Mabogunje's assertion has been recently corroborated by a Report on Africa: the report amongst others indicates, currently only 37 per cent of Africans live in urban areas, but in 25 years the figure will be 50 per cent; meaning that 400 million more Africans will be living in cities (Our Common Interest Report, 2005). The result of which is life in slums, which in turn draws many into social exclusion and marginalization as well as homelessness due to constant threats of eviction of households; living conditions are made worse for such households by the lack of access to land and homes with potable water, good sanitation and other services (UNCHS, 2001). Governments of Africa are overwhelmed by the rapid rate of urbanization in a situation of continued poverty outpacing the financial and administrative capacities to ensure that cities provide efficient locations for economic activities for the satisfaction of the basic needs of the citizenry (Rakodi, 1997)

Traditional/cultural systems of human societies are tearing apart in most African societies due to social changes as a result of urbanisation. There is "individualisation and spatial disruptions"; culminating in varying number of residential arrangements (Gugler and Flanagan, 1979) and this to some extent erodes established kinship ties. For instance, it appears that the process of social change and life-styles have compelled people nowadays to live among non-kin where they engage in economic activities in urbanized areas of Ghana. This bears semblance to the late medieval loosening of family attachments to land and the existence of very active land transactions amongst kinsmen and non-kinsmen (Smith, 1988). Traditional architecture as an embodiment of civilization is lost in the process through destruction of original buildings and open spaces. It is observed that residents affected by the process are dispersed into locations of varying kinsmen and women. This fragments the cohesion of community life. The individual is no longer absorbed, as an integrated personality, into a group, but forms discrete relationships in each of which he fulfils a different role sometimes incompatible with his new habitat (Marris, 1967). The effects are, therefore, anti-social behaviour and crime. Decisions of far-reaching consequences are needed to be made now in this regard; by paying particular attention to cities and other human settlements for sustainable development in the years to come. The Report of the Commission for Africa, (2005) advocated for a cultural challenge to

build on traditional African community strengths in order to create viable urban communities which can be centres of opportunity and creativity. This paper presents general overview of seemingly unexpected links of kinship, land and architecture with focus on Ghana.

2 Approach and Structure

On the basis of the foregone, the principal data used in this paper is based on literature sources and ethnographic observations. There are five main sections: a brief attempt to appraise kinship and its economic linkage. Sections three and four discuss landholdings systems and the nexus of kinship, land and architecture in Ghana. The last section draws conclusions based on the theoretical framework presented in this paper.

3 Overview of Kinship

3.1 Defining Kinship in Brief

People everywhere seem to see “who they are” in terms of the whole kinship network thus, both with reference to relations of decent (or filiation), and marriage (Barth, 1979). According to Schneider (1965b); cited by Barth (1979):

There is more to the discussion of the definition of kinship; there is more to kinship than meets the simple prerequisites of regulating sexual intercourse, socializing the young, caring the baby. There are aspects of any kinship system that are so remote from such... that it is just not possible to account for them, or to hold them to be necessary, in such terms.(1979:8)

Read (2001) in a related account, observes that: kinship according to (Schneider 1984) is essentially undefined and vacuous: it is an analytic construct which seems to have little justification even as an analytic construct and hence “kinship is a non-subject”. Read (2001) citing Rivers (1924) continues that more than a half century earlier, when considering the four modes by which kinship might be defined, Rivers (1924) began in a similar vein by asserting that blood relationship (consanguinity) is inadequate for a definition of kinship as it would not account for the practice of adoption and other practices which make it evident that “fatherhood and motherhood depend, not on procreation and parturition, but on social convention” (Rivers 1924).The second mode for defining kinship – the one Rivers’ (1924) decided upon -was through genealogy which, though it might be determined through blood relationship, could also be determined through some other social procedure. Next, Rivers (1924) considered the possibility that kinship is defined through the terms of relationship, but found this lacking as he considered that pedigree and genealogy determine the terms of relationship and not the reverse. Rivers (1924) fourth mode was by social function, whereby “(p)ersons are regarded as kin of one another if their duties and privileges in relation to one another are those otherwise determined by consanguinity”. Read (2001) in presenting the controversy of defining kinship, noted; the notion of genealogy reintroduced consanguinity after its initial rejection into the discourse of kinship [Rivers (1900) cited in Read (2001)] and this led to (Schneider 1972) comments that;

All Rivers really does, then, is to say that kinship is in the first instance defined in terms of consanguinity . . . and that sometimes social convention alone may confirm a kinship relationship even in the absence of a relationship of consanguinity but that, when it does, it is created in the image of a consanguine tie.(1972:54)

This insistence on a consanguine tie has several times led Schneider to reject kinship as a domain of study (Read, 2001). Schneider (1984) asserts that “the way in which kinship has been studied does not make good sense; since (Schneider 1972) [i]t exists in the minds of anthropologists but not in the cultures they

study. Read (2001) infers that Schneider's rejection of kinship as domain of study does not connote the impossibility culturally identified relationships of one person to another, but the presumption that these relationships, if they are to be called "kinship relationships," are biological/reproductive, with its attendant universal genealogical grid, allegedly relevant to all cultures.

3.2 Kinship and Economics

According to Marris (1967), different occupations and levels of income promotes different conceptions of kinship, justify by different systems of values. Kinship obligations (Marris, 1967) extend only to those who see themselves in the same light and share similar economic interest. In appraising the way in which economic factors seemed to have influenced the evolution of family life in an Africa urban society from a study on Lagos Marris (1967) observed that:

The presence of urban society reinforced some kinship ties, weakened others, and people reacted differently according to their circumstances. But the trend was always consistent with the search for economic security. If their occupation seemed to protect them against hardship more surely than marriage, women would give it precedence. If the reciprocal obligations of kinship no longer balanced, the prosperous would try to limit their involvement. But family association could be formalized as a resource for recruiting capital, exploiting family property or rationalizing the distribution of welfare and educational support, the wealthier and more sophisticated members of the family might be active in its promotion. If fathers lost their influence when the family farm was no longer the economic basis of life, mothers might become powerful matriarchs, acquiring wealth and property in their own right from business enterprise. The vesting of property in individual titles rather than in families, which is characteristic of urban economy where land must be freely marketable, redistributes control of resources, in Africa as in America, to the advantage of the elderly widow. (1967:45)

Kinship in economic terms is not new and also not peculiar to urban societies. Many writers including; Opong (1974), Priestley (1969) cited in Gugler and Flanagan, (1979) have also emphasised the link between kinship and economics in Ghana and West Africa in general. Kinship prevailed in land economy in many medieval societies with semblances and opposing concepts to what pertains in Africa (Marris, 1967).

Ravi (1988) argues that there were land transfers (both *inter-vivos* and *postmortem*) in English rural communities over the period 1250–1850 among family members. Divisive effects of economic change were systematically distributed among peasants who already possessed different quantities of land because of their demographic characteristics (Smith, 1988). Households became more nuclear; and where an industrial interlude failed to mature, patriarchal control continued; the nuclear family became important, relatively loosening the kinship network, and close kin was preferred in matters of family property; villagers were active in the land market (Smith, 1988). There existed townships in which villagers practice both the marital inheritance mechanism and the commercial mechanism to participate in the late medieval land market; moving from a patriarchal system based on land, and a family cycle in which the young gradually attained a greater voice through their labor, to manufacturing and commerce (Smith, 1988). In the context of the foregoing, the next two sections examine the landholdings systems and the nexus of kinship, land and architecture in Ghana.

3.3 Kinship and Landholding Systems Ghana

The land tenure system of Ghana before the introduction of colonisation remains the same as of now (Abdulai and Ndekugri, 2007). Landownership pattern is pluralistic (Larbi, 2006) and mostly dominates the private land sector and the allodial or paramount interest in land is vested in communities represented by

chiefs and families/clans. The landownership manifested itself in the kinship and chieftaincy institutions. Agboso (2000) indicates that the social organization of African societies is centered on kinship for economic activities. He (Agboso, 2000) notes further that:

Rodney identifies social relations to be crucial in the daily existence of a number of African societies, “because” as he writes. “*the land [the major means of production] was owned by group such as the family or clan- the head of which was responsible for the land on behalf of all kin. Including fore – parents and the yet unborn*” Rodney identifies the Ashanti of Ghana amongst other tribes as African societies that place greater emphasis on matrilineal ties. (2000:11)

Collier and Garg, (1999) observe that individuals belong to kin groups which impose reciprocal obligations upon their members as a common feature of African societies. While kin groups are found in other societies, African kin groups are distinctive both by their ubiquity and by the strength of their claims upon members (Collier and Garg, 1999). In some communities in Ghana, families are represented by family heads and the customary land sector accounts for more than 90% of landownership in the country (Kasanga, 1988). In matters of landownership in Ghana, families as allodial landowners derive their legitimacy mainly from prior occupation (Abdulai and Antwi, 2005). Where, the allodial interest is vested in families, chiefs play only the traditional governance role, whilst the ownership and management of land is vested in the families (Abdulai and Antwi, 2005). Many observers and writers (Opong and Adarkwa, 2008; Adarkwa and Opong, 2005; Kasanga, 2003; Antwi, 2000; Larbi, 1994) have emphasized that the most significant attachment of the people to land; ownership and possession of land carry a social obligation to serve the larger community in Ghana

4 Findings and Discussions

4.1 The nexus of Kinship, Land and Architecture in Ghana

In Ghana, the structure, composition and size of households differ among the various ethnic groups based on the prevailing kinship, and the two broad descent and inheritance systems are the matrilineal and patrilineal (Ghana Statistical Service, 2005). In the patrilineal system, inheritance and descent are traced from the father’s line and household heads are mostly men (Ghana Statistical Service, 2005). In the matrilineal systems which trace descent from the mother’s line, a large proportion of household heads are women (Ghana Statistical Service, 2005). The matrilineal system, which is peculiar to Akan groups, also allows for couples to live apart and grants economic and legal autonomy to females. Living arrangements among societal groups are largely influenced by socio-cultural factors. The family system, whether extended or nuclear, depicts the type of kinship ties that exist in a particular society. Different cultural systems influence the nature and characteristics of the household structure, size and composition in the various parts of the country (Ghana Statistical Service, 2005).

Censuses in Ghana apart from 1960 have placed less emphasis on the ethnic and cultural composition of the population; however, it is recorded that 100 linguistic and cultural groups roughly exist in Ghana (Ghanaweb, 2008). The major ethnic groups in Ghana include Akan (49.1%) Mole-Dagomba (16.5%) Ewe (12.7%) Ga-Dangme (8%) and non-Ghanaians (3.9%) (Ghana Statistical Service, 2005). Each of these ethnic groups is either patrilineal or matrilineal. The matrilineal ethnic groups believe that “in the process of procreation the female or mother provides the blood (*mogya*) of the child, while the male or father provides the spirit (*ntoro*) of the child” (Fortes, 1956), and since the belief is that the blood is superior to the spirit, inheritance is traced through the mother and not the father. Akan women have a more significant social status than their counterparts from the other tribes (Fortes, 1956). In the patrilineal descent system (agnatic descent), an individual is considered to belong to the same descent group as his or her father kinship structure; typically among the Tallensi of northern Ghana.

Most Ghanaian house structures are composed of a variety of characteristics, each of which may predominate in one part of the country; for example, rectilinear layout is found in the south and circular layout in the northeast. A typical compound house is normally composed of non-related renters. In the rural areas, the traditional compound house has provided the basis for strong and extensive social relations. Whole communities of people form a chain of kinship relations with strong matrilineal or patrilineal lines. The house is generally open to the public, and one enters and goes out with little or no hindrance. Where there is a main gate, it is not closed, except at night or during periods when there is nobody at home (Oppong and Ayeribi, 2007).

Over the years, there have been exogenous influences on architectural building forms (Faculty of Architecture, 1978; Pellow, 1988). Whatever the building types, however, they still express one central concept in a traditional sense. Accordingly, ethnic groups in the country have different cultural practices, influenced in part by their geographic allocations. The dynamics of social and economic development have caused many people to settle outside their ancestral home in recent times. The sharing of homes by households of different class background is a common practice across the country. There are neither social nor architectural and religious impediments to free social intercourse. In the event of a vacancy, anyone can rent a room. Thus, kin and non-kin, men and women, have free access to all semi-public spaces in a compound house. In earlier times, these were defined more narrowly along the lines of kinship, gender, and activity. Consistent with the communal lifestyle of most communities, pseudo-kinship relationships are quickly forged in these compound houses, resulting in much symbiotic behaviour (King, *et al.*, 2001; Fortes, 1956).

Nevertheless, social change and life-styles have compelled people; nowadays; to live among non-kin where they engage in productive activities in urbanized areas of Ghana; resembling; the late medieval loosening of family attachments to land and the existence of a very active *inter vivos* traffic in land purchases and leases (Hughes, 1988; Smith, 1988). There is groups and kin dispersal (Fortes, 1956). New neighborhoods in Ghana consist of non-lineage members with the world view that “*baabi ara ni ha*” (lit. every place is as good as one’s hometown). There is no effective kin group apart from the nuclear family in urban Ghana. The “family house” (*Abusuafie*) concept which is considered the embodiment of the kinship lineage is gradually losing its importance.

Most of such “architectural legacies” (family houses) have become derelict (Plate1) and ran down as result of neglect and a break down in kinship ties. Demolition of ran down building is difficult let alone



Plate 1 A dilapidated family house (Abusuafie) Sefwi- Asawinso in the Western Region of Ghana. This picture is universal representation of the fate of most family houses in Ghana as a result of breaking of kinship ties.

Source: Authors’ field data, (2007).



Plate 2 An architect's impression of a proposed 4-bedroom "self-contained" for a Civil Servant and his nuclear family to be built in an urban area in Ghana.

Source: Architectural Firm in Kumasi-Ghana, (2005).

selling off; in several respects, earlier studies in Ghana have concluded that, a building or a house is never considered a commodity to be sold off completely (Adarkwa and Opong, 2005). Even in spite of severe economic constraints, family members do not exercise the option of completely selling off or relinquishing their interest in land or property inherited from their ancestors (Adarkwa and Opong, 2005). There are all sorts of beliefs associated with extended family houses in Ghana; rendering them "untouchables".

Acquisition of property (land) has rather become urbanized and inheritance takes place between close kin and affines. Nuclear family households dominate the urban kinship in Ghana; this is revealed by the emerging architecture of "self-contained" buildings – where a house contains the father, mother and children on individualized piece of land (Plate 2). Land is normally apportioned with physical dimension of 30m x 30m. The traditional house forms of northern and southern Ghana are gradually disappearing. Most of the houses in new estates are single family flats containing two or three bedrooms with toilets and bathrooms, living, dining and study rooms as well as kitchen, store and garage (self-contained) (Opong and Ayirebi, 2007). The new flats are completely foreign forms that prevent people from following traditional lifestyles.

Nowadays, courtyards in buildings are compromised and the introduction of modern kitchens makes the preparation of traditional foods very uncomfortable due to the enclosed nature of the kitchen. The single family flat does not offer many places for socialising, as outdoor living areas are completely absent. The single flat affords a high degree of privacy to individual occupants, but does not promote easy and free neighbourliness with the construction of high security walls designed against burglary. Entry is provided through a metal gate with a manned security house, quite unlike the traditional housing where the openness in design and layout of houses provides inherent security as well as kinship intercourses (Andersen, *et al.* 2006; Opong and Ayirebi, 2007).

5 Conclusions

5.1 Comments

The objective in this article was to document and understand a "trio concept" of kinship, land and architecture in urban Ghana. This paper has attempted to establish a link between kinship; land; and architecture. It has shown a linkage between economics and kinship; and that; system of land tenure is based on kinship lineages in most African societies. Again, in several respects, it appears authentic autochthonic architecture is gradually becoming oblivious: in Ghana a building or a house is never considered a commodity to

be sold off completely; but rather left to ruins as a result of breaking of kinship ties and associations. It also appears that, residents affected by the process of social change due to urbanisation are fragmented and dispersed into locations of varying kinsmen and women. The individual is no longer absorbed, as an integrated personality, into a group, and the effects are many forms of social vices. The occurrence of the social changes of similar kinds can also be observed in other parts of Africa and elsewhere; and concerted efforts underpinned by science and technology researches are needed to build on traditional legacies for the enhancement of sustainable African community living in the emerging housing environment (Real Estate Development) in Ghana and Africa as whole.

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