

Fanti Kinship

Language, Inheritance, and Kin Groups

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Abstract. – Inheritance has previously been shown to structure the Fanti kinship terminology in important ways. Fanti inheritance falls within matrilineages, for which shared membership is spoken of in terms of siblingship. Inheritance is based on seniority, which Fanti speakers express via a set of non-kinship modifiers. This paper presents and analyses the use of the special terms used by Fanti speakers to discuss lineage relevant siblingship, the seniority markers and the gender markers with which they interact, and the rules for assessing seniority within the lineage relevant to inheritance. The discussion considers what other information must be included with a formal analysis of a kin terminology if that analysis is to speak effectively to functional or comparative questions. The paper concludes with a discussion of modern changes in inheritance and the effects of these changes on the kin terminology. [*Fanti, kinship, inheritance, descent groups, analytic method*]

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In earlier papers (1973, 1975) I have described and formally analysed the Fanti kinship terminological system, and have detailed the influence of inheritance rights on it. I want now to explore some important further interactions of inheritance with kinship categories and kin groups.

Inheritance rights in Fanti are based on lineage membership and seniority, and lineage membership can be framed in terms of types of siblingship. But yet the basic siblingship and seniority information relevant to inheritance are expressed in Fanti outside of the basic kin terminology. In

this paper I want first to show how these kinds of information are expressed and how the information specifically shapes inheritance rights and then to examine the effects of inheritance on lineage segmentation. I will conclude with a look at some linguistic consequences (in the kin terminology) of changes in cultural expectations regarding inheritance – changes which stem from effects of Ghanaian law on inheritance and from changes in the obligations involved in raising children.

Each of these issues – siblingship, seniority, inheritance rights, and change – will be examined separately for its interaction with the wider kinship system, and thus for what it contributes to the feedback relations among the kin terminology, the inheritance and socialization relations that shape the terminology, and the kin groups that have precipitated out around these inheritance relations. This discussion of the interrelationship among kin terminology, kin groups, and succession will necessarily raise the further analytic issue of what *other* linguistic information (beyond that minimally necessary to a formal analysis of the kinship terms themselves) belongs in a kinship terminological analysis – if that analysis is addressed to these kinds of functional questions.

The Fanti are a matrilineal linguistic/cultural group of subsistence farmers and fishermen on the coast of Ghana in West Africa; my data come from the small fishing village of Egyaa No. 1. Christensen (1954) and Manoukian (1953) provide a general description (including the kinship system) and Kronenfeld (1973; see also 1975, 1980a, and 1980b) describes the kinship system more specifically and provides some correctives of earlier views; Fortes' work (1949, 1950) on the closely related Ashanti also generally applies to the Fanti. The Fanti have corporate matrilineal descent groups which control inheritance and which own – but do not normally control – land, political “stools” (i.e., thrones), and other property. As we shall see, there is, within the lineage, a normal order of inheritance rights – which, however, can be