
Matrilineages, Economic Groups and Differentiation in West Africa: A Note

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In this note I wish to argue that the distribution of production in two West African societies is related to the structure of economic units often referred to inexactly as 'households'. In so doing, I give support to the view of rural differentiation which gives attention to both external and internal factors.¹

The argument is based on research carried out between 1967 and 1981 among the Serer of the MBayar region of central Senegal, and among the Agni of the Moronu region in south-east Ivory Coast.² The kinship structure is similar in the two societies: the Serer reckon kinship bilaterally but with a matrilineal emphasis, and the Agni reckon kinship matrilineally. Distribution, however, differs markedly between the two cases. Individuals' economic opportunities within wider kin groups tend to be equalized among the Serer, while marked economic differentiation occurs between large- and small-scale Agni farmers. Distribution at the point of inheritance — i.e. over the life cycle — seems more critical to this process than the annual distribution after the harvest. A comparative exploration of the two cases demands attention to the particular way in which economic groups at the base are articulated with one another.

It might be argued that the differences can be accounted for in terms of the economy's productive base. The MBayar region is in the savanna where annual crops (millet and peanuts) are produced on sandy soil; the Moronu region is in a luxuriant forest area where perennial crops (cocoa and coffee) and food crops (such as yam, banana, taro) are cultivated. While these differences in the productive base may be important, they must be looked at within a sociological context in order to reveal the means by which productive economies and domestic structures interact to generate patterns of differentiation.

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THE COMBINATION OF ECONOMIC GROUPS

Beginning with household structures in each society, one can work towards a definition of the groups which provides the framework for economic organization. In this study, only the working population (individuals engaged in the production process) has been taken into account.³

Observation reveals great diversity in the composition of the household in each society, ranging from single individuals to complex groups. Analysis of kinship categories and of generation, however, reveals a systematic pattern of differences between the two cases. In the MBayar region the household encompasses three generations, whereas in the Moronu region only two generations are included. In the MBayar region it includes more uterine relatives of the household head, in particular his brothers. In the Moronu region the household head is generally the only male household member of his generation. Economic individualism is more pronounced in Moronu than in MBayar.

These differences in household membership are consonant with differences in the organization of groups involved in production, consumption and investment. In the MBayar region, such groups have different, overlapping memberships, whereas in Moronu, economic groups are superimposed on one another.

The Dissociation of Economic Groups: The Serer of MBayar

In the MBayar region, the production group and the 'household' have the same membership. The consumption group differs only in that its membership includes non-workers: the very young, invalids and the elderly. The accumulation group, by contrast, is made up of a nonlocalized group of uterine kin who trace common ancestry through four generations. The term 'a ndok ya' designates what I have called an accumulation group and means literally 'a mother's house' (or cabin). It can refer to several different levels of inclusion, the lowest of which is a set of close matrilineal kin within the household, such as groups formed of a man and his brothers, a woman and her children, and, more rarely, a man with his sister's daughter and the latter's own children. A matrilineage comprises several accumulation groups and traces common ancestry back as

far as ten generations beyond the living elders. A production-consumption group is therefore organized into as many 'accumulation subgroups' as there are different matrilineal segments represented. These kin, both male and female, pool the surplus of their economic activities after their individual and household needs have been satisfied.

Serer economic organization is therefore based on an 'institutionalized contradiction': all individuals belong at the same time to a production-consumption group and an accumulation group. They are therefore confronted by two sets of obligations: the activities of production and consumption on the one hand, and accumulation on the other. In order to reduce conflicts, a person will try to match what is given through labour to one group with what is supplied in accumulated property to the other.

As a result of a person's obligation to satisfy the requirements of collective consumption and collective accumulation at the same time, the fraction of goods at his/her disposal for personal needs is limited and individual accumulation is kept to a low level. The head of the production-consumption group cannot take control of the surplus produced by the members because each individual turns it over to his/her accumulation group. These mechanisms, in my opinion, lead to a relative equalization of distribution and hence dampen processes of differentiation. This 'egalitarian rationality' is reinforced by a norm: accumulated property must never serve individual purposes. Economic differentiation reappears at a different level, however, between accumulation groups and hence between matrilineages.

The heritable estate is made up of two categories of property. Property of little value (work tools, kitchen utensils, etc.) is transmitted from father to son and from mother to daughter. Highly valued property (livestock, mechanical equipment and jewellery) is inherited through uterine relatives, first between full or uterine brothers, then by nephews. This property makes up a lineal accumulation, or 'treasure' — 'halal' in the Serer language — made up of livestock, mechanical equipment and jewellery. Individual members contribute to the accumulation of treasure during their entire life. The treasure can be considered, first, as productive capital, with the exception of the jewellery. Secondly, it can be used as an insurance fund in times of need. Thirdly, and most importantly, it serves as a reserve to be drawn on for celebrating the ceremonies which are landmarks in the life of an individual: name-giving, circumcision, marriage and the funeral.

In summary, the dissociation of economic groups contributes to an equalization of economic conditions at the individual level. It hinders the formation of individual productive accumulation, but it cannot prevent differentiation from reappearing between accumulation groups or between matrilineages. The latter groups differ among themselves in number of participants, diversity of sources of income and the variable fecundity of the women. This differentiation is expressed much more in terms of 'collective power' than in individual wealth.

*The Superimposition of Economic Groups among the
Agni of the Moronu Region*

In the Moronu region, the production group consists of a domestic unit, resident in the village, and a unit made up of foreigners established in camp settlements in the fields. The first unit is the Agni household, while the second is made up of unskilled farm-workers, in large majority natives of Burkina Faso who work as share-croppers, earning a third of the harvest ('abusan'). As with the Serer, the consumption group is the same as the production group, with the addition of non-working members: the old, invalids and children from the Agni domestic unit and children from the foreigners' unit. The accumulation group is identical in all respects to the production group. Its most striking characteristic, in contrast to the Serer case, is that the farmer is often the only man of his generation and lineage membership. He is, therefore, the only one in a position to mobilize the labour force of the production group for accumulation purposes, and to appropriate the surplus of the accumulation group.

The production, consumption and accumulation groups are, therefore, empirically the same, and have been conceptually distinguished only for the purposes of analysis. The farmer's privileged position of control in all three types of group means that calculation of production, consumption and investment is done within a single unit, which in turn allows for the possibility of individual accumulation by its head.

Individual accumulation sets up a heritable estate which is made up of several categories of property: the farmlands, income on property and a treasury of liquid assets. This inheritance is transmitted through uterine relatives, first among full or uterine brothers, then among the children of their sisters. Gifts may also be granted among

the living, making it possible for the farmer to deduct some property from the lineal succession. The estate also supports the wives and children of the deceased; the moral obligations of a man to the members of the domestic unit are to be sustained by his heir.

Among the forms of accumulated property, the treasury seems to be particularly significant, since it reveals one of the incentives to economic activity. During the pre-colonial period the treasury was held in security by the lineage head and served as a security fund in fragile and autarchic economies, in order to face exceptional circumstances such as debts, fines and funerals. It served to protect and enlarge the lineage by making it possible to repurchase captured women or to purchase women to hold as captives (see Perrot, 1978, 1982).

At the present time, the biggest farmers use the accumulated assets of their treasuries in a competitive effort to establish themselves as founders of descent units which will be pre-eminent among local lineages. The conditions in the contemporary economy intersect with, and amplify the effects of, the older pattern of treasury accumulation.

We have seen that the Serer and the Agni contrast with one another, yet the basic principles of kinship structure are matrilineal in both cases. An interpretation of the economic process in the two cases therefore depends on analysis of the different structures of 'household' enterprise.

AN INTERPRETATION OF THE ECONOMIC PROCESS

The preceding section deals with the internal make-up of economic groups. It is now necessary to consider the history of these two societies before attempting an overall interpretation.

Ecology, Economy, History

One can posit a set of interactions among the ecological niche, the economic system and outside interventions. The ecological niche conditioned the kind of external interventions attendant on colonial rule, which in turn shaped the economic system. The development of economic organization was conditioned by these economic structures.

The MBayar region is characterized by savanna and low rainfall, and the production process is based on annual crops. Every year, the

cultivated fields worked by the production group are cleared at harvest time. Thus the work effort, as manifest in the fields, does not accumulate from one year to another. Under these conditions, the colonial administration had very little interest in reorganizing production, since there was little potential for cumulative effect. During the period from 1910 to 1950, the administration intervened very little in the economic, administrative or religious life of MBayar.⁴ From Independence in 1960, however, the government tried to modify the organization of production and trade, but the international economic situation meant that price conditions for the main crop, peanuts, did not offer sufficient incentives to the producers. As a result, rural transformation was very limited, in spite of changes in the availability of health services and shifts in demography.

In contrast, the Moronu region is situated in a forest zone with high rainfall and is suitable for the cultivation of perennial crops. A year's labour produces a harvested crop and preserves past investment; hence production leads to cumulative results. The colonial administration intervened in Moronu to coerce labour to a degree never attempted in MBayar: first because a potential existed for cumulative effect on the structure of the rural labour force; and secondly, because the population density was low enough to make the regional labour-supply problem difficult to deal with.⁵ From 1909 to 1931 a policy of forced labour was directed at the local population. From 1932 onwards migrations were organized from Upper Volta towards the southern Ivory Coast, and these continue to the present time. The addition of the foreign labour unit to the domestic unit compensated for the loss of captive and other forced labour. The government's actions therefore intervened in crucial ways to support the acquisition of individual wealth, which was taking place on the basis of social and cultural patterns brought forward from the pre-colonial era.

In both cases, the links between the local and the wider economy reinforced certain aspects of indigenous structure. The present economic processes in the two regions are a function of the dynamic between internal forms of organization and external forces.

Wealth, Power and Glory

A longer-term collective logic underlies the contrasts in short-run economic choices in the two systems, and the differences in the

economic life cycles of individuals. Accumulated assets are not used to reproduce the means of production, but rather to build a heritable estate. The heir is only an administrator in the name of the collectivity of co-heirs; his personal desires cannot hold sway, and he cannot divert the wealth from activities that benefit the community of co-heirs. Norms reinforce the eventual collectivization of highly valued property, and sanctions are stiff: rejection from village life in the MBayar region, and sorcery and poisoning in the Moronu region.

In the past, such accumulation sought to realize the demographic potential of the community. Among the Serer, cattle were used to acquire women; in fact, cattle are still an important component of bridewealth. Among the Agni, hoards of gold dust made it possible for men to buy back women from captivity or to acquire their own captives. In both cases the emphasis was on the acquisition of women to ensure the perpetuity of the group of accumulators. During a period when population density was low, when economic groups were small, and the environment was threatening, only collective institutions of defence were effective against natural dangers such as famine, or human dangers such as abduction of women and livestock.

Currently, the economic process in both societies can be interpreted as follows: wealth, whether achieved initially through individual accumulation as in the Agni case, or through pooling, as in the Serer case, ultimately results in collective accumulation which preserves the 'power' of the community of co-heirs. In the long run, competition and differentiation take place between matrilineages rather than individuals, and can be better represented in terms of 'power' — including demographic strength and symbolic power — than in terms of 'wealth'. The economic egalitarianism of the Serer of the MBayar region and the acquisitive individualism of the large farmers of the Moronu region are not ends in themselves but means of protecting and enlarging matrilineages.

It is perhaps surprising that social mechanisms still exist, albeit in a modified form. Mechanical equipment has been integrated into the lineal estate in the MBayar region, and gold dust has long since disappeared from the Moronu region. But large-scale productive accumulation in the modern sector is still out of reach for most African village farmers who persistently follow paths of distribution and accumulation inherited from the past.

This is not to claim that such paths have been immune to government or urban influence. They have been shaped by these influences over the century, and at present their efficacy and even

existence may be vulnerable. Government regulation of local institutions — for example, the vigorous introduction of the property and inheritance clauses of the French Civil Code — could destroy the capacity of matrilineages to adapt in a collective fashion. But the indigenous institutions have so far been resilient in the face of recent adverse ecological and economic conditions; adaptation to changing circumstances has not so far been vitiated by the fact that the ultimate purpose or end of accumulation is not expanded reproduction of the means of production, but rather social power, collectively expressed.

One major implication of this analysis for development project planning is that the analytical contrast between individualism and collectivism is not a useful one. In each case the process of production, consumption and investment contains individual and collective moments, individual and collective logics. The two cases differ in the specific points at which the individual is relevant actor, and those at which the collectivity is the relevant actor. Production projects based on one form or another of indigenous kinship organization must envisage both individual and collective phases in the cycle of production, consumption and investment.

APPENDIX

Distribution of the Family Units According to Their Male and Female Composition

1. Ngohé-MBayar in 1970

	No Men	1 Man	2 Men	3 Men	4 Men	5 Men	More	TOTAL
No women	-	12	2	-	-	-	-	14
1 woman	19	73	33	7	2	2	-	136
2 women	4	41	27	14	11	1	-	98
3 women	-	16	21	10	3	1	-	51
4 women	-	3	5	12	2	1	-	23
5 women	-	-	2	1	-	2	-	5
More	-	-	1	1	2	-	-	4
TOTAL	23	145	91	45	20	7	-	331

2. Moronu in 1976-7

	No Men	1 Man	2 Men	3 Men	4 Men	5 Men	More	TOTAL
No women	-	19	3	-	-	1	-	23
1 woman	-	68	33	3	3	3	1	111
2 women	-	59	32	13	4	-	1	109
3 women	-	33	19	11	1	-	2	66
4 women	-	23	10	4	3	2	-	42
5 women	-	7	16	5	2	1	-	31
More	-	13	7	9	5	3	3	40
TOTAL	-	222	120	45	18	10	7	422

NOTES

1. This article develops ideas first explored in Gastellu (1980). The present text has benefited from the observations of Sara Berry, Jane Guyer and Pauline Peters. It is published in French under the title 'Petit traité de matrilinéarité. L'accumulation dans deux sociétés rurales d'Afrique de l'Ouest', *Cahiers ORSTOM, série Sciences Humaines* 4 (1985).

2. The Serer occupy the savanna zone of central Senegal. Rainfall is 600-800mm per year. The major crops are millet and sorghum for food and peanuts as an export crop. The site of research, MBayar, is in the north-east Serer area, close to Diourbel. Field-work was carried out between March 1967 and August 1972. The Agni occupy the high rainfall forest zone of the south-east Ivory Coast. Crops are diversified. They include yams, plantain, taro and cassava for food, and cocoa and coffee as export crops. Moronu is in the west of the Agni zone. Field-work was carried out between March 1976 and August 1981.

3. The samples were from: an exhaustive study in the village of Ngohé, Senegal, in 1970, comprising a total of 1,001 members of the working population; and a combination of samplings in the Moronu region, in 1976-7, comprising a total of 1,897 members of the working population. The Appendix summarizes household composition in the two areas.

4. Sources on Serer history include Martin (1867), Vuillot (1898), Peter (1933) and Pélissier (1966).

5. Sources on Agni history include Kwame Aka (1979), Ekanza (1983) and Dittgen et al. (1978).

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