

The State of the Extended Family System in Ghana: Perceptions of Some Families

Joyce Enyonam Dzamedo¹ Bernard Mensah Amoako² & Patricia Mawusi Amos^{3*}

1,3. University of Education, Winneba; P. O. Box 25, Winneba, Ghana.

2. Bia Lamplighter College of Education, P. O. Box 97, Sefwi-Debiso, Ghana

Abstract

Family is one of the oldest and important social institutions in the world. Its structure can either be a small family size (nuclear family structure) or a much broader family size (extended family structure). Traditionally, Africans tend to revere and arrange their lives around the extended family line whose membership include, spouses and their children together with other relations of common descent such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces and cousins. Social change in modern times has however, cause great transformation in every area of society with the family not spared. This study therefore aims at finding out the state of the extended family in the midst of these changes in society. Methodologically, a qualitative research technique was employed with participants selected from Teshie and Nungua Townships, within the Ledzokuku-Krowor Municipal Assembly in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. Open-ended questionnaires and face-to-face interviews were the main data collection methods used to collect data from 60 participants consisting of 50 members of family and 10 heads of family. The study's findings revealed that the traditional extended family has undergone some transformation marked by a drift towards modernized nuclear family system. The study also revealed that in spite of this drift, the extended family still has quite a strong hold in Ghana continuing to play some effective social welfare roles on occasions such as birth of a child, marriage and funeral rites. Finally, the study revealed that with some consented effort on the parts of both the family and the state it is possible to reduce the impact of modern trends on the extended family by the introduction of Guidance and Counselling programmes in our communities to improve our way of life.

Keywords: Family, extended family, nuclear family, socio-culture

1. Introduction

Family is an essential social institution; especially in Africa. Invariably, most of the world's population live in family settings or units. It is therefore an important social group in the society. Thus, it plays a vital role in the socialisation of individuals. Mondal (2016) regard the family as the first society of individuals. The author is of the view that an individual is born in the family, grows in it, works for it and dies in it. The nurturing a family gives to a child plays a significant impact in the life of the child and imparts to him/her the first lesson in social responsibility and self-discipline. It is unarguably the backbone of social structure (Mondal, 2016).

Before the emergence of the Europeans, with predominantly the introduction of formal education the communities and by extension the Ghanaian (African) societies depended solely on the family; precisely, the extended family system for survival. Undoubtedly, the extended family in those days was the backbone of the family in society. The traditional extended family was an embodiment of the society's values, norms, ideals, morals, and beliefs (Kurankye, 2017).

The role the family plays in one's development in time past cannot be overemphasized as one's socio-cultural development starts from the extended/nuclear family; it moulds one's character/training to fit into society; shapes his or her belief system, etc. According to Kurankye (2017), the family serves as a social control agency. Its function is to protect, to love, to punish its members who offend and to honour those who deserve a reward.

Despite the strong influence on its individual members coupled with the aforementioned roles and functions of the extended family system in the past, in modern Ghanaian civilization following colonialism (with its

associated introduction of industrialization, education, western religion, etc) these influence, roles and functions have taken a nose dive. The multi-million-dollar question therefore is: what was the state of the extended family system in the past and what is this state now?

It is worth noting however that, though these anthropologists, sociologists and the perception of many out there all seems to agree with the fact that the extended family has decline in influence as a result of the above listed variables and many others, they are also quick to point out that this does not necessarily mean the extended family structure is totally extinct.

It's on this premise that this research was conceived. To examine and to find out the state of the extended family in Ghana and to find out the perception out there about the extended family using the families of Teshie and Nungua in the Greater Accra Region as a case study.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of the extended family system?
2. What specific roles does the extended family play in our modern society?
3. How can the extended family system be improved in Ghana?

2. Method

The research design adopted for this study was exploratory research design. This is because the researchers sought to investigate and find out more on the external family system in Ghana. Exploratory design allows researchers to investigate and find out the current state of issues (Lokesh, 2000) and this design was found to be appropriate for the study of the extended family system in Ghana and how it is perceived today by people. To get the sample from the populace, researchers adopted a purposive non-probability sampling technique. This allowed the researchers to investigate respondents that are directly related to the research topic. A sample of fifty (50) persons from different families were selected for the open-ended questionnaires while additional ten (10) heads of various families were selected for the interview based on the research questions. Thematic analysis was then used to analyse the interview and open-ended responses from the participants.

3. Results

Data was collected from 60 respondents (comprising 50 members of family members regardless of their status in the family and 10 heads of family). The analysis and discussions of the research findings were done in context with the objectives of the study and in response to the research questions as highlighted in the introduction.

3.1 Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of the extended family system?

In line with the objective of the study, the researchers sought to find out how the extended family is perceived using families in Teshie and Nungua as a reference study. To execute this, the researcher adopted three main approaches (Asking family members specific questions, interacting with heads of families and family units) in order to elicit the needed views on the propositions.

Some respondent asserts that;

"I understand extended family to encompass a nuclear family unit together with grandparents, uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, and cousins. Whenever anyone from this broad family base is faced with an issue, he/she seeing himself/herself as part of the family member without hesitation is able to call on any of the members in the family to help".

"we perceive extended family to be all the persons whose lineage is traceable to a particular ancestry home. It is made up of oneself, parents, siblings, nephews, nieces, cousins, grandparents, great grandparents, whether alive or not".

Some family heads responded by saying that;

“Our perception of the extended family is the reason why every family has a family home. All persons whose root is traced to a family home is considered a member of the bigger extended family and expected to participate in all family activities and ‘kusun’ (rituals). As a member, he/she bears the name of the family home”

“You young men and women of this day don’t get it when we talk about a family especially when it comes to extended family. You see this house, it was built by my ancestors. My great grandparents stayed here, my parents and other siblings stayed here with their children. Today some of us in the family are still here others are not here but they are my family. The name my ancestors bore is the name I also bear and so are my siblings and all our children”.

Still on the perceive meaning of family to the people in these communities, a respondent expressed this view

“To really appreciate what a family is perceived to be in our community, one first needs to come to terms with how ‘weku’ (family) was carved. Weku, is made of two words. We (house) and Ku (group). So weku (family) simply means a group of persons from the same family house/home. So, to us the family goes beyond father, mother and children to encompass all those from a particular house. This basically is what folks called extended family and it is on this premise that families are built in our community”.

In a nut shell, a common theme ran through the various perspectives of the respondents as to what extended family means in these communities and that was that, extended family is a broad family base and as some relate it to include specific identifiable groups as grandparents, uncles, aunts etc, others relate it to persons of same ancestry home while some respondents even consider others who might not necessarily come from a particular ancestral home or bloodline but may become a part of the extended family by reason of adoption.

3.2 Research Question 2: What specific roles do the extended family play in our modern society?

Considering that these communities were actually fashioned on the foundation of family houses, the extended family’s importance in these communities therefore couldn’t be overemphasized. And was rightly so expressed by the various respondents. The investigation revealed that the extended family in these communities play very critical roles in activities such as marriage, outdoorings, and funeral rites. This was largely attested to by all the respondents with further emphasis on its role in child upbringing.

A respondent made the following assertion;

“Family, in particular the extended family means a lot to us even though its influence appears gradually diminishing in recent times. In our society a child is considered to have been born into a much larger family than just a family of father, mother and siblings. Hence the larger family actively partake in the child’s outdoorings (kpojiemo), upbringing, marriage ceremony, and final funeral rites (normally performed in the person’s “We”-family house). As the child grows, he identifies himself to the larger family by responding to the name of the We he comes from. This shows the value attached to the extended family by us”.

According to a family head;

“In the past, when a child was born into a family, the larger family deem it a collective responsibility to ensure a proper upbringing of one of their own. Hence when the child veers of the right path, any member of the family could correct him either through disciplinary measures or by advice. Every relative takes keen interest in the child’s development. Each relative sees it as a duty to correct the child when the need be just as would have been done by the biological parents. Support was also readily available from any relative when the child needed it hence it was a common phenomenon to have most children moving to stay with other relatives and be assured of proper upbringing. But today, it’s not that active or effective in this regard as the responsibility to a child’s rearing is now more centered on the nuclear family than the extended family. Possibly, this might be the case because most of our distant relatives lived closely together within this community (which was then a very small settlement) but this is not the case today because the family is scattered all over resulting in minimal or no contact of other relatives apart from the nuclear family”.

Another respondent asserted that;

“Before the emergence of the state and other agencies, the influence of the extended family in our community was very strong. In that the extended family was in the position to sanction its members for socially deviant behaviours and as members, you have no choice but to conform. But today, these functions of the extended family have been taken over by the state and other agencies leading to the weakening of the extended family’s influence on society”.

The interview also revealed that activities such as outdoorings, marriage and funeral rites were considered in the past more of external family affairs than of nuclear family and participation in some instance was more of compulsion than of a choice. For instance, the interview discovered that a member who failed to take part in these activities, was made to pay fines before he was supported by other relatives in these activities. All the participants unanimously assert that the role of the extended family in these activities has reduced and participation by members is more of discretion than of compulsion. Even though they agree that it still play a major role particularly in marriage and funeral rites, they believe it's not as effective as in the past.

3.3 Research Question 3: How can the extended family system be improved in Ghana?

The consistent theme running through the responses of all the participants to the study is the gradual weakening of the extended family (the transformation of extended family into nuclear family) in modern times even though they acknowledged the fact that it still does play some essential role in the communities. Since the factors mentioned militating against extended family can't be reversed completely, averting the effects they have on the extended family becomes quite impossible. This notwithstanding the respondents believe the situation can be improved if the following are observed;

- i. *Making the learning of our culture an integral part of the western educational system:* Most of the respondents who share this view were of the opinion that the refusal of most educated elite to be part of some extended family activities or rites simply on the basis of they being outmoded are mostly ignorant of what those cultural rites stand for. *"Making our culture an integral part of our educational syllabus would enhance a full appreciation as to the reason and the need for some rites in our families"* a respondent asserted.
- ii. *Imbibing communal spirit in the family member from childhood:* By this they are of the view that, when a child grows fully appreciating the fact that he/she is a communal being, and that his immediate family is just a microcosm of his larger family who equally have keen interest in his wellbeing, it becomes easier for him/her to identify with all other external relatives and comfortably subject himself/herself to the rules governing it. In making a case for this view, an elderly respondent stated *"In the past, the believe was, the wellbeing of the family is the wellbeing of the individual. That is, when the larger family is seen doing well automatically it is seen reflected in the individual members' lives hence it was the business of all at that time to seek the good of the larger family"*.
- iii. *Sharing/caring:* There is a saying that sharing is caring. They believe the vibrancy of the extended family would greatly be enhanced if members stop the overly concentration on just their nuclear family and start sharing to improve the lots of other extended family relatives. *"Sharing however should not be limited to just tangibles but intangibles such as making available one's service for the benefit of other members. For instance, the care of the elderly and young ones in the family"* a respondent asserted.
- iv. *National policy to promote extended family:* The participants consider the state as one very critical system that has worked to undermine the family system. According to one elderly family head, *"extended family used to have its own form discipline when it comes to deviant behaviour but today state institutions such as the court and the police have taken over this role"*. A mention was made of the Intestate Succession Law 1985 which have broken the extended family further. One respondent was of the opinion that *"strong, prosperous extended family is a catalyst to a strong, prosperous nation"*. He further stated that *"since some actions of the state are directly or indirectly affecting the effectiveness of the extended family, a deliberate policy on the part of the state to promote and improve the current state of the extended family would go a long way to enhance its current influence"*.

4. Discussion, Conclusion, Recommendations and Implications to Guidance and Counselling

In Ghana, it is known that the extended family is one of the oldest social institutions and still is a revered traditional social institution in our communities as studied. In this regard, the study revealed that the organisation or the structuring of the communities should be an ample testament to the place occupied by extended family in these communities. In these communities as revealed in the findings, the entire society was structured along the extended family lines. Family homes (as the foundation of the communities) called 'We' were established and once an individual's paternal ancestry is traced to a particular 'We' (e.g. Martey We) he/ she is identified as a family member of that 'We' which is basically extended family system of arrangement. This view somehow supports the fact as captured by Odotei (1991) that "In Ga traditional society the basic unit was, and still is, the 'we'. A 'we' is an ancestral house to which all those who trace descent through the male line of a common ancestor belong". By this, it is abundantly clear that the nuclear family structure in these communities was not so recognized/supported compared to the extended family which was and is still revered and practiced as stated in

the layouts of these communities. This was aptly supported by Madukwe and Madukwe (2010) that, “*the traditional African culture does not recognize a nuclear family structure but rather cherished and practice the extended family system*”.

It also brought to fore the critical roles it did play as well as the influence it did wield in time past and the fact that the emergence of certain impeding factors in modern society has led to it being weakened in modern times. The findings of the study have gone a long way to reaffirm the views as held and expressed by many with regards to the immense roles the extended family plays in the nurture of its members and also for being there for its members in times of birth of a child, marriage, caring of the aged and funeral rites. For instance, a role of the extended family as aptly captured in MAFE Working Paper 32 corroborating the findings of this study was with regards to marriage where it stated that “this extended family role includes going to ask for the hand of the woman in marriage on the man’s side while on the woman’s side, they are key in deciding whether to accept the offer/proposal being made by the man”. Its further states “in the context of marriage, the extended family also mediates in marital problems and able to a large extent assist in arriving at amicable solutions without resorting to the courts or divorce”.

Finally, it ended up by revealing some means by which the impact of modern trend on extended family could be curtailed or minimized. The quest of this study was not just to find out the state in which the extended family is in but to also postulate effective ways to improve it. It therefore identified the integration of Ghanaian culture in the western educational system; inculcating communal spirit in individuals from childhood, sharing and policy on the part of the state for the promotion of extended family as means to improve it.

Based on what the respondents gave with regard to the improvement of the family system, guidance and counselling plays an integral role in the extended family system. Culture is embedded in guidance and counselling and services such as consultation, follow up, evaluation is all being practiced in our marriages, naming ceremony, puberty rites and extended family system. Therefore, if learning of our culture becomes part of our educational system, Guidance and Counselling coordinators will play a part in the education of our culture through the services they provide.

Guidance and Counselling programmes such as information giving will also be organised in the schools and the community to imbibe communal spirit in the students. Again, services such as consultation and referral will instil the act of sharing and caring for each other since students will not keep their issues and problems to themselves, but will consult family members who will be of utmost help to them. Also, family members will refer each other when one needs something in the family as well as the community.

It is recommended that the extended family system structure needs to be strengthened. Also, members of the nuclear family should not neglect the extended family in their needs. Modernisation of the family system in Ghana should not change its fundamental function and policies on family should be extended to the extended family system.

Extended family has always been an important age-old family structure in these communities and by extension Ghana. It has been there through the ages to play varied and effective guidance and counselling roles in society on occasions such as a birth of a child, education of its members, marriage, funeral rites of members, etc.

Even though this family structure is still alive and playing some of these roles quite well in modern days, the overwhelming opinion is that modern trends have significantly affected the importance of the extended family with associated effects of a change in the family structure with a tendency towards nuclear family and has become less active in the provision of guidance and counselling interventions for its members. It is expedient that the Professional Guidance-Counsellor should ensure that programmes in our schools should centre and depict the traditional-family practices and functions so students will not depart from our traditions.

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