Akans have no household imagery, either linguistically or residentially. Rather than households, what pertains in Akan culture are better conceptualized as various constellations of living arrangements. At the core of Akan living arrangements is the domestic arena, with its empirical boundaries best delineated by the *bokyea*. 
Rethinking the Akan Household: Acknowledging the Importance of Culturally and Linguistically Meaningful Images
Kobena T. Hanson

Conceptualizing the household, especially in non-Western cultures, has never been easy. Studies undertaken in sub-Saharan Africa indicate that what we consider the household is a fluid, open-ended interaction of diverse dynamics, which are often contingent upon and enmeshed within specific sociocultural interactions and economic relations, raising questions as to how meaningful a Western household conceptualization is to research in these cultures. Apart from the obvious cultural sensitivity lesson (people in different cultures do things differently), there is no doubt that the extant household conceptualization and its focus on location, residence, fixity, and simplicity reflects a modernizing, capitalist world, which privileges individual property and domesticity as a goal to be attained. This paper contends that Ghanaian Akan families do not reside in households; rather, they exhibit living arrangements that are unique to this ethnocultural group. It is critical that research in this culture adopt a more culturally and linguistically appropriate image—namely, the bokyea (cooking-hearth and eating group)—if we seek to understand and map out the lived worlds of Akans.

Introduction

Conceptualizing the household, particularly in non-Western cultures, has never been easy (Guyer 1981; IDS Bulletin 1991). Studies carried out in sub-Saharan Africa indicate that what is often considered the household is a fluid, open-ended interaction of diverse dynamics, where conflicting interests, powers, and tendencies are continuously reworked and rebalanced. Interactions here are contingent upon and enmeshed within overlapping
and embedded sociocultural interactions, communication processes, and economic relations. The dynamics of these interactions raise questions as to whether this unit and its conceptualization can, and/or should, be universalized across cultures (Russell 1993).

Taking my cue from the above prepositions and drawing on the experience of the Akan ethnocultural community in Ghana, I question not only the appropriateness in conceptualizing the Akan living arrangement as a household, but also the employment of Western household models and conceptualizations in cross-cultural studies. Apart from the obvious cultural sensitivity lesson (people in different cultures do things differently), there is no doubt that the Western conceptualization and its focus on location, residence, fixity, and simplicity, reflects a modernizing, capitalist world, which privileges individual property and domesticity as a goal to be attained. I contend that Akans do not reside in households as defined in the extant literature, but exhibit living arrangements that are unique to the ethnocultural community. In so doing, I draw upon feminist research (Amadiume 1987, Kesson-Smith 1996) and African ethnographic literature (Clark 1994, Guyer 1981, Oppong 1981, 1982, Russell 1993), and I concur with Oppong (1981) that it is critical to discard a priori assumptions about the congruence, coresidence, commensality, joint ownership, pooling of income, and shared consumption when exploring Akan living arrangements.

My paper offers more of a theoretical than empirical analysis of the issue. It is inspired by an inadequate articulation, in the literature and policy circles, of the power and import embodied in language and its meaning for a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment. I seek to draw attention to the implications of using a borrowed and ambiguous concept such as the household in a cross-cultural setting, in this case the Akan ethnocultural community. Experiences from field investigations while conducting my doctoral research in Ghana, and a critical review of the extant literature led me to question and ultimately conclude that the Akan domestic arena could not be conceptualized as a household.

This article is organized into seven sections. Following the introduction, section two discusses the quandary surrounding the household concept and its applicability to Akan society. Section three provides a cursory look at the various perspectives and models of household conceptualization: New Household Economics (NHE), alternative economic, anthropological, feminist, and an ethnographic analysis of the Akan situation. Section four highlights the differences between the Akan reality on the one hand and extant household conceptualizations on the other. In section five, I offer an explanation as to why, in spite of the observed plurality of residential forms, many studies still universalize this arena. Section six addresses the importance of employing a culturally and linguistically meaningful image to map out the diverse living arrangements that characterize the domestic arena in Akan society. To this end, I submit the bokyea (cooking-
The Quandary

While many studies have shed light on the complexity of the West African domestic arena in general and Akan matrilineal situation in particular (Brydon and Chant 1993; Guyer 1981; Guyer and Peters 1987; Okali 1983; Oppong 1981, 1982; Robertson 1984), most analyses have attempted to conform to the norm by conceptualizing their observations as “households.” Often, observations that are not easily understood or those that do not fit assumed models are labeled under the general rubric of being “traditional” or “exotic.” By so doing, the fluid dynamics and the social relations that shape and dictate individual, kin, and lineage interactions that ultimately define the domestic arena are presented in idyllic terms, which tend to gloss over important cultural microprocesses. Few note that the word *household* has no synonym in Akan parlance (Tipple et al. 1994). Employing the term *household* positions the domestic arena in a way that detracts from the meaning and power embodied in culture and language (Amole, Korboe, and Tipple 1993). Thus, while such studies are informative, and make for fascinating reading, they have only added to the obfuscation of reality by concentrating on the exotic and ephemeral.

What is often conceptualized as the household is not a neutral, universal category (Guyer 1981; IDS Bulletin 1991): it is a culturally loaded and historically specific construct (O’Laughlin 1998; Russell 1993). The concept of household cannot be perceived of as a monolithic structure with a uniformity of experience and a universality of structures and functions across cultures. As postmodern scholars (Foucault 1986; Habermas 1981; Lyotard 1992) also caution: society and world cultures are fragmented and particularistic. One cannot attribute normative values to all societies.

Conceptually, the household, with its connotations of coresidence, spatial enclosure, and common property, is a Western standard. Many other societies and cultures do not sharply differentiate household and family. While the family–household distinction is conceptually clear, it is often blurred in reality (O’Laughlin 1998); the boundaries are culturally and socially defined. In Africa in general, and among the Akans of Ghana in particular, residence, consumption, and production groups are not always the same: the boundaries of domestic groups are flexible and may not fit into neat hierarchical structures (Abu 1983; Chamlee-Wright 1997; Oppong 1981, 1982; Robertson 1984). Residents of a house in this culture seldom constitute a single family, let alone a household in any functional sense. Residents of a house, especially the traditional compound house (which accounts for more than 67 percent of all dwelling types in Ghana) will,
aside from core family members, include fostered children of relatives, in-laws (both paternal and maternal), fictive kin, and friends. As a result, these individuals, even if being catered for as a unit, will not come from the same abusua (family). Similarly, the members of a family or household do not always eat or sleep in the same house or under the same roof. To this end, extant studies that label the Akan domestic arena as a household capture only a part of reality by failing to privilege language, diversity, difference, cultural fragmentation, and the local voices that inform their observations. Their use of a concept that has no linguistic or local interpretation has contributed to creating ambiguity and deepening the confusion surrounding this domain (Korboe 1992b; Tipple et al. 1994).

In the ensuing section, I offer a cursory look at the household literature, its criticisms, and countercriticisms. I then analyze the Akan context and how it unsettles Eurocentric images of the household. Central to the analysis is a call to rely on culturally and linguistically appropriate images, rather than privileging borrowed concepts and images.

Household Conceptualization: A Mirage of Myriad Disciplines

Theorizing the household has traditionally been the domain of economists, anthropologists, and sociologists (Becker 1981; Evans 1991; Fapohunda 1988; Folbre 1986a, 1986b, 1988). Starting with the New Household Economics (NHE) approach, the concept has gained widespread attention across the social sciences, and hence can no longer be considered the realm of any specific subject area. Today, the household is accepted as the social mechanism through which all welfare and labor allocation decisions of an individual are determined, and such locales are now acknowledged as principal instruments whereby the critical tasks of social living are organized, directed, and executed. It is, in essence, an individual’s “immediate ecology” or “little community.”

The NHE Perspective

NHE theorizes the household in terms of decision-making (Becker 1981, Low 1986). Proponents of NHE are mainly neoclassical economists of the Beckerian tradition who see the household as encompassing a joint welfare function with altruistic consensus based on interdependent utility functions and headed by a “benevolent dictator” who ensures altruistic decision-making. An underlying assumption of this perspective is that all income is notionally pooled before being reallocated equitably according to joint welfare-maximizing principles (Becker 1981). Critics have pointed out the flaws in this conceptualization (Evans 1991; Kabeer 1994; Sen 1990). For example, the observation of distributional inequalities within the household (Folbre 1986a) has been employed to point out the fallacy of intrahousehold welfare maximization. Again, it has been criticized for
failing to consider the significance of macro constraints on individual action or the social implications of economic behavior. Thus, today, the NHE view is regarded as static, reductionist, and oblivious to domestic power differentials [Browner 1989].

**Bargaining and Contracting Models**

Alternative economic conceptualizations (bargaining or contracting models) reject the romantic notion of absolute intrahousehold altruism, as assumed in the NHE model [Lundberg and Pollak 1993, 1996; Manser and Brown 1980]. To some extent, alternative conceptualizations attempt to model the social reality of the family as described in the anthropological and sociological lexicon. These conceptualizations make a conscious effort to tackle “the boundaries, structure and internal organization . . . concerns which are conspicuously absent in the NHE” [Kabeer 1994:108]. Proponents of such models claim that because of gender, generation, social status, or economic differences, household members have different goals and preferences resulting in decision-making that rests more on negotiation and bargaining than on altruism [Haddad, Hoddinott, and Alderman 1997; McElroy 1990].

Both NHE and alternative economic conceptualizations have come under criticism from anthropologists and sociologists [Agarwal 1988, 1997, Wilk 1989]. For instance, feminist work in economics, sociology, and anthropology has emphasized that the consensual structure of patriarchal authority normatively assumed in the NHE model abstracts from real-life tensions resulting from gender and generational differences [Evans 1991, Fapohunda 1988]. Further, microlevel ethnographic studies indicate a great diversity of household composition and social relations, mediated through marriage and kinship, creating a variety of conjugal and residential arrangements [Whitehead 1984]. In response to such criticisms, Sen [1990], proposed a negotiation (cooperative-conflict) model in an attempt to address the concerns raised by feminists and anthropologists. Sen posits that three key factors determine an individual’s decision-making position within the household: perceived economic contribution of household members, relative levels of well-being in the event of a breakdown in cooperation, and perceived interest response of household members. Sen’s model is insightful in that it allows for decision-making among individuals within households, addresses more explicitly the issue of gender and power within households, and acknowledges structural factors that mediate between the individual and the rest of the society—an important issue, ignored in NHE and other bargaining models. Additionally, Sen’s framework offers a more plausible hypothesis that altruistic behavior within the household is likely to be associated with a lack, rather than a monopoly, of decision-making power [Kabeer 1997:264].

Despite its insightfulness, Sen’s model—much like the NHE and bargaining models—is still inadequate. Central to this criticism is the fact that his framework does not consider leverages that an individual may...
possess due to specific cultural rules, rights, and obligations. Such leverages are prevalent, not only in Akan society, but also in many others. As Agarwal (1997) notes, Sen’s model, like other bargaining models, pays little attention to some critical aspects of intrahousehold gender and generational dynamic. Issues such as what role social norms and perceptions play in the bargaining process, and how these factors are themselves bargained over, are not fully addressed. Equally, gender relations beyond the household—especially the link between extrahousehold, notably lineage “ties,” intrahousehold bargaining, and intragenerational transfers of resources—are inadequately articulated.

**Fragmented and Pluralistic Perspectives**

Anthropologists have generally indicted the tendency in Western thought to impose on the entire world a model of a universal nuclear family household, tailored to its own normative image, which does not capture the diversity of domestic groups anywhere. Drawing on critical empirical studies, the conceptual parameters that traditionally defined households have been questioned (IDS Bulletin 1991; Guyer 1988; Russell 1993). The dynamics and interactive relations among gender, generation, kin, and other social relations have been put forward as key elements for the observed complexity in conceptualizing the household. This is something of relevance to the Akan context in particular, and non-Western situation in general. Indeed, a cursory look at the anthropological and ethnographic literature on Africa brings to the fore the diversity of domestic arrangements across the continent (Akwabi-Ameyaw 1982; Guyer 1981; Guyer and Peters 1987; Robertson 1984; Russell 1993). Such studies have critically analyzed the manner in which class, gender, and age differentiation occur, and questioned the income-pooling notion of households (see also Clark 1994; Fapohunda 1988). Thus, today, there is a basic consensus that what is often termed “the household” should not be viewed as a homogenous unit and that its diverse empirical reality should be acknowledged and interpreted as pluralistic.

**Mapping the Akan Experience**

Far from being a discrete entity, what is often termed a household is fragmented and particularistic, and its boundaries are often permeable. Nowhere is this more evident than among Akan ethnocultural communities of southern Ghana, where the “household” (or what I term the domestic arena) is often a shifting, flexible structure, in which boundaries are difficult to discern (Abu 1983; Dwyer and Bruce 1988; Guyer 1981). Research conducted in this culture highlights the manner in which gender and generational differentiation occur (Kesson-Smith 1996; Okali 1983), indicating the separability of activities, rights, responsibilities, property, income, costs, and benefits between spouses and between generations.
While Akan husbands and wives seldom form a unified production unit, there is no denying that there is much mutual dependence and complementarity within the arena. In general, spouses tend to cooperate in producing the obligatory component of collective subsistence needs and use their residual time to pursue their own-account activities. This gender-specific assignment of resources and responsibilities, coupled with the acceptance of spatial separation in marriage (also referred to as duolocal residence), totally decenters the married couple and unsettles Eurocentric images of the household. Even in urban settings, women often reside with maternal relatives in their *abusua fie* (family-house), rather than under one roof with their husbands. It should be noted, however, that although spouses “may live apart in *senā strictu*, residential boundaries are regularly transcended for purposes of economic, social, and sexual interchange” (Brydon and Chant 1993:137). Similarly, children within the domestic arena in many Akan communities are not always born of either parent in that union. As a result of cultural responsibilities and obligations to assist less-fortunate lineage members, it is common to have children, and even adults, in a domestic arena who are either close or distant relatives related by either blood or marriage ties. Central to these entanglements is the fact that, unlike in the West, marriage in Akan society, while it may seem to be between two individuals, is in reality a contract between two families. The marriage ceremony itself involves, “not just the couple, but an entire retinue of immediate and distant relatives” (Gyekye 1996:79). Critical livelihood functions (i.e., production, consumption, and reproduction) in most Akan communities thus do not necessarily coincide coresidentially. As Oppong (1982) notes, while such domestic groups are often thought of as the basic units around which processes of reproduction and production revolve, the processes central to the maintenance of human life are not necessarily conducted by a single-boundary maintaining unit. Many domestic arena resources are therefore managed and claimed interdependently, although not wholly equitably. Similarly, the control and allocation of resources within the domestic arena is a complex process that always has to be seen in relation to a web of rights and obligations.

Marriage tends to complicate social relations in Akan domestic arenas, as spouses are expected, and often encouraged, to maintain close socioeconomic ties with their respective matrikin, who constitute their “real” families in contrast to the conjugal unit (Awanyo 2003; Oppong 1981). Matrikin traditionally have a right to inherit property of a deceased person to the exclusion of the spouse and, in the case of a man, to the exclusion of his children. As a result of this, married couples customarily have no communal property (Okali 1983:16). The aforementioned is in part due to the fact that, in Akan society, members of a conjugal unit, consisting of a husband, wife, and children, do not constitute members of single lineage (Akwabi-Ameyaw 1982). Central to the above is the belief that children belong to their mother’s and not their father’s lineage, because children obtain their “blood” from their mothers.
Aside from lineage membership, positions of seniority such as wealth, age, and marital status can also restrict or enhance preferential access to resources. Thus, one might argue that customary rights to property, such as those arising from membership of the matrikin, provide *de jure* access to resources and fallback options, but cultural concepts of seniority, and the fulfillment of obligations and responsibilities toward the *abusua* and community at large, also provide an individual with a good measure of symbolic capital (Awanyo 2003:287, Gyekye 1996, 1997). Such cultural-specific norms within the Akan community have implications for gender and generational relations within the domestic arena, and are difficult to capture or explain with borrowed household models or explanations.

Consequently, I submit that employing conceptualizations such as Sen’s model, the NHE approach, or a bargaining-contract model to understand the empirical reality of the Akan domestic arena, its organization, decision-making, and how tasks, responsibilities, and resources are allocated becomes inadequate. Anthropologists have already cautioned against extending assumptions rooted in Western middle-class experience into such contexts (see Amadiume 1987). A key reason is that lineage ties, particularly matriliney, provide both males and females in Akan society a secure and partly independent position, with access to housing, land, and the labor of kin—critical resources that impact an individual’s bargaining position relative to others within the domestic arena. Such culturally sensitive norms and values not only impact decision-making, reciprocity, and power dynamics within the domestic arena, but also impact and are impacted by the nature of extraconjugal ties. For example, practices such as gift-giving and expenditure on family networks often lead to the accumulation of symbolic capital, which is especially important in positioning oneself within the domestic arena and the *abusua*. These dynamics are further reinforced by state-recognized customary law, which allows married women to control their own finances, property, and inheritance. Invariably, it is this negotiability and contingency, so prominent in Akan lineage and marital obligations, that serve to ensure that women, be they single or married, are not excluded from access to capital resources (Clark 1994:334; also see Awanyo 2003).

The lineage again acts as a safety net, for members within the domestic arena, against unforeseen mishaps such as divorce, illness, or bankruptcy. Because both partners in an active marriage still belong to their respective lineages, matriliney serves as both a form of moral economy and a fallback position, providing individuals and/or families with benefits such as interest-free credit, intergenerational transfers, and nonmarket transactions upon which to rely (Clark 1994; Glewwe and Twum-Baah 1991). So strong are lineage ties that the network of social relations goes beyond the conjugal unit. All people belonging to the lineage, whether directly related or not, are seen as members of the same *abusua*, and are required to extend a hand of welcome and assistance to one another. The resulting dynamic
entanglements of social assistance mean that the interactions of the Akan
domestic arena are a multifaceted process of events occurring between
spouses, their children, kin, colleagues, and significant sets of associates
and reference groups with whom they exchange goods, services, and com-
munications. These social norms and values, when viewed in their totality,
are pivotal to understanding the nature of the Akan domestic arena. The
domestic arena in this sense is not only biological, but also social. Decision-
making and organization thus encompass an eclectic interplay of interac-
tions between individuals, environments, and circumstances, underscoring
my point that any meaningful appreciation of the domestic arena must be
couched in an exploration of culture and social norms.

Another unique characteristic of the Akan domestic arena is in situa-
tions where a father passes away prematurely, or decides to shirk his respon-
sibilities toward his children. In such a situation, these responsibilities
are ideally taken over by his matrikin (Allman and Tashjian 2000; Clark
1994:103; Gyekye 1996). While some tensions and contestations do occur in
the process of negotiating parenting and parental rights and responsibilities,
Akan children neglected by their fathers can always count on the support of
the matrilineage. This support is at the core of Kwame Gyekye’s argument
that the “concept of the ‘illegitimate child’ or ‘the child born out of wedlock’
does not exist in the traditional [Akan] society” (1996:77). Thus, unlike in
other societies, where the burden of supporting such children might fall
on the shoulders of the mother or a social-welfare institution, in the Akan
setting the matrikin assumes this responsibility.

Last, given that polygamous marriages in this culture are not only per-
vasive, but also that it is conventional for spouses in an operative marriage
to live in separate accommodations, delimiting what group of individuals
constitute a “household” requires an approach that is culturally meaning-
ful. In the event of such an approach not being pursued, the complexity of
the unit will only result in its romanticization or blurring. Unless research
acknowledges the importance of culture and language as key to interpreting
social relations, it will miss important aspects of how Akan livelihoods are
organized spatially.

In light of the aforementioned, I submit that the Akan domestic
arena cannot, and should not, be treated as a bounded socioeconomic
entity; rather, it should be theorized as an intersection of sets of social rela-
tions that extend over particular spaces. Again, given the specific rights
and obligations that individuals, husbands and wives in particular, have
toward their respective lineages, as well as the conjugal unit, the Akan
domestic economy is better characterized as a set of loosely knit, overlap-
ping economies. Some of these are exclusive to the arena, but many more
stretch beyond this boundary.
Rethinking the Domestic Arena

In spite of the calls by many scholars across disciplines that research needs to privilege diversity, difference, and cultural fragmentation, studies still continue to employ the household concept in its monolithic form. In so doing, such studies not only fail to articulate cultural reality, but also blur the lived experiences of the communities they presume to study.

In this section, I try to provide answers to why this call has gone for the most part unanswered. I then go on to show that adopting a linguistically and culturally meaningful image as proxy for the domestic arena, particularly in the Akan situation, is not only feasible, but also empirically superior to relying on borrowed concepts. I contend that three issues are to blame for the rather slow response to privileging language, local voices, and culture. First, many scholars still seem to hang on to the long-discredited notion that with Westernization and modernization, the traditional family structure with its extensive ties to lineage will shift to a more nuclear, conjugal model. This transition has yet to occur. Second, even scholars who acknowledge the contentious and sometimes ambiguous nature of the household concept are hesitant to suggest we look for an alternative. Alison Evans, for example, argues that “if instead we adopt the individual as our analytical unit, we end up turning full circle into the realms of orthodox neoclassical theory, which always privileges the status of the individual over all other economic agents” [1991:58]. She notes that notions of power, inequality, sharing, and reciprocity are virtually meaningless in utilitarian models. Thus, she argues with Ann Whitehead [1984], that “the importance of retaining the household concept lies in the extent to which it is the locus of a number of sets of relations—family, conjugal, economic—and the extent to which some resources are managed and claimed collectively if not equitably” [1991:58]. Naila Kabeer similarly submits that “the empirical significance of household relationships in the daily management of resource entitlements, and as the routine context of people's lives, suggests that it has a certain facticity, despite its shifting guises” [1994:114; see also Brydon and Chant 1993:10].

Third, the postcolonial inheritance of the Western concept of the primacy of the nuclear family with a house and a separated place of employment, has led to the perpetuation of “invented” norms and standards, often at odds with societal needs, family size and structure, and cultural preferences [Hardoy and Satterthwaite 1986]. For example, in an attempt to standardize census data and national surveys, to allow for international comparative studies, surveys, and/or censuses, many non-Western nations, Ghana included, employ United Nations guidelines to map out their data; however, these guidelines in reality mirror the Western model, and hence do not often fit local circumstances. The result is a situation where each census household definition has some attached footnote or endnote that seeks to clarify how the boundary of that census “household” was mapped out (Guyer 1981; Tipple et al. 1994).
These developments have occurred in spite of research that continues to showcase how cultural values, beliefs, and traditions attain preferred meaning as borrowed models and pathways continue to fail (Chamlee-Wright 1997). While the urge to reduce the Akan domestic arena, or for that matter other African and non-Western domestic arenas, and myriad living arrangements to a simpler, more manageable concept—the household—is understandable, doing so only serves to blur the reality of these people’s lived world. For instance, Kwame Gyekye (1997) points out that urban life has not vitiated the communal sensibilities and outlooks among most Ghanaians. Neither has urbanization nor Westernization dramatically altered the perceptions of Ghanaians regarding their obligations towards the greater lineage. The process has not subverted the individual’s and the family’s relations to other relatives or the values of solidarity with, and sensibilities to, the needs of other members of the kinship group (see also Korboe 1992a).

**Culture and Language Matter**

This article’s argument is simple: culture and language matter; let’s privilege them. Clearly, cultural and linguistic specificities need to be acknowledged and addressed. Not doing so, and continuously prescribing a concept that clearly has no linguistic and empirical meaning for an ethnocultural community such as Akan society, is to impose on these people a concept that is alien, culturally inappropriate, and statistically inaccurate.

Akans have no household imagery, either linguistically or residually. Rather than households, what pertains in Akan culture are better conceptualized as various constellations of living arrangements. At the core of Akan living arrangements is the domestic arena, with its empirical boundaries best delineated by the *bokyea*. It is well documented that in many traditional Akan communities, cooking is done on the earthen *bokyea* (hearth, cooking-fire). Even in “modern” communities, such as Accra or Kumasi, many families will maintain an “old faithful” *bokyea* in case of a blackout, gas, or charcoal shortage. Hence, this image is not only applicable to the rural or older generation: it has applicability across generational and spatial boundaries.

In situations where the number of individuals being catered for is large and several hearths are required, only one primary *bokyea* is lit (Korboe 1992b). Secondary hearths will normally be lit employing live charcoal from the primary *bokyea*. If an outsider entering such a dwelling asks a grown-up child “how many fires (hearth) do you and your family light?,” the answer will be “one,” if they are catered for as a unit. If a son or daughter marries and brings his or her spouse to live in the compound, a second *bokyea* will be established recognizing this separation (Tipple et al. 1994:446). In such a situation, the response to the above question will be “two,” signifying two separate units.
As many Ghanaians (Akan and non-Akan) and/or foreigners who have lived or conducted research in such communities already know, being able to demarcate specific conjugal units or immediate families within the traditional compound house requires a good understanding of the society (Clark 1994; Okali 1981; Robertson 1984; Hanson 2003). In their quest to accurately map out the domestic arena, such researchers, if they are fluent in the local dialect (or else their translator), will pose the question *Nipa dodo na won nyinara didi wo bokyea baako so?* [How many people are catered for by meals prepared from one stove/hearth?] Being able to do this accurately is critical, given the frequency with which multifamilies tend to share the traditional compound dwelling.

It is this symbolic and representational meaning embodied in the *bokyea*, and its ability to empirically delineate and map out the boundaries of separate domestic arenas, even when located in one physical space, notably the compound house, that makes it an excellent proxy for enumerating the “household” in this culture. This is a view also shared by scholars such as David Korboe (1992b) and Graham Tipple et al. (1994), who both have extensively studied the Ghanaian Akan situation. Korboe (1992b) submits that the *bokyea* is the best proxy for mapping the household, especially in situations where many families—related and unrelated—inhabit the same dwelling.

Employing the *bokyea* as an empirical tool therefore provides us with a linguistically and culturally meaningful image that is also statistically appropriate. This further makes it possible for studies to capture and acknowledge the shifting guises and fluid boundaries of the domestic arena in this culture. The *bokyea*, more than any imagined construct, better captures the essence of the Akan domestic arena and structure: a social space encompassing members who do not necessarily inhabit the same physical space, pool resources, or constitute identical units of (re) production and consumption. A key element that however binds constituent members together is the act of “eating together.” As scholars who have researched the meaning and symbolism embodied in “eating together” and “cooking for someone” in Akan culture note, these dynamics have a power and import that transcend normative explanations [see Clark 1994].

Cultural anthropologists and researchers of ethnography have similarly noted that language, and the use to which it is put, are central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment (deGraft-Hanson 1993; wa Thiong’o 1997). Language has a power and import well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning, and this needs to be acknowledged and respected in cross-cultural research. After all, Akans—be they Asante, Fante, Akuapem, Akyem, Brong, Nzema, or Kwahu—and have no word or imagery in their parlance synonymous to the Western household, a nuclear family with shared residence and pooled resources [Tipple et al. 1994]. Akans map their social lives through words such as *abusua* (family, lineage), *ofi e* or *fie* (hometown, home, place of residence), *dan* (house, dwelling, room), *bokyea* (hearth, cooking-fire), *fie*
foo [residents of a dwelling] and fi e nipa [residents of a dwelling with ties to the owner or landlord [fi e wura]]. Subtle yet pivotal, these distinctions can be meaningfully captured only when social norms, values, beliefs, and language are privileged.

This author thus concurs with researchers such as Margo Russell (1993) and Graham Tipple et al. (1994), who caution that without the appropriate cultural and linguistic images, any data collection is likely to lead to sociological and economic distortions of both living arrangements and residents’ rights and privileges, issues fundamental to understanding domestic arena economies and livelihoods (see also Oppong 1981). As Russell (1993) goes on to argue:

The time has come to abandon the assumption, for too long unquestioned that all populations are necessarily composed of households of some sort or another. This assumption has simplified the task of collecting census and survey data but at the cost of blunting our awareness both of the diversity and complexity of domestic arrangements in many places, and of the ephemerality and transience of many social arrangements for the sharing of roofs, space and meals. (1993:756)

I concur with Russell, contending that the dynamics of the Akans’ lived world are largely shaped by how individuals are structured within society, their kin, family, lineage, gender, asset bases, and ties to wider spaces of influence. The result is a myriad of living arrangement forms. Common examples include, but are not limited to: (a) a group of individuals who live, eat, and sleep together under one roof; (b) a group of individuals who live and eat together, but sleep in separate residences under different roofs; (c) a group of individuals who eat together, but live and sleep in different residences; and, (d) a group of individuals with a constituent member living, eating, and sleeping in a separate place, yet with all aspects of this person’s livelihood taken care of by the group. Such living arrangements normally transcend gender and generational boundaries, but they are sometimes gender- and/or age-specific (Brydon and Chant 1993:137).

Such variations reinforce the notion that the Akan domestic arena, unlike the household, is not necessarily based on fixed and discrete membership. The actual constitutive number increases or decreases with the time of the year, occasion, or change in reproduction and/or development cycle (Goody 1958, 1965; also Abu 1983). It again varies depending on the type of marriage [monogamous or polygamous]. In many situations, members who constitute the domestic arena often extend laterally through the incorporation of kin of the same generation as the unit’s head or spouse. Others are vertically extended through the incorporation of older or younger relatives, such as parents, grandparents, and grandchildren of the unit’s head and/or spouse (Brydon and Chant 1993). These constituent members may or may not live under one roof, rendering any conceptualization that seeks
to tie the domestic arena to residential arrangements alone very difficult. This point is even true of the nuclear or conjugal unit. Methodologically, it is always necessary to disaggregate the arena, trace resources across space, and acknowledge that the members of the domestic arena cannot be defined by common residence alone.

Accordingly, this article, while acknowledging the work of feminists and anthropologists in accentuating pluralism and diversity, contends that cross-cultural research, particularly in Akan communities, needs to look beyond extant household concepts and Western models for culturally appropriate and linguistically meaningful images that better capture the lived world of the community. To this end, I submit that a meaningful empirical conceptualization of the Akan domestic arena should refer to:

An ensemble of kin and/or nonkin individuals who share some feeding and sleeping arrangements and brace themselves for the next day under one roof or set of roofs.

This empirical definition, fashioned around the *bokyea*, not only offers Akans a culturally identifiable image that has both symbolic and representational meaning, but also provides them with an interpretative framework within which to piece their experiences together. Additionally, such an empirical conceptualization will enable research to better map out the *de facto* and *de jure* members of the domestic arena, particularly in instances of polygamy, or in situations where both spouses and children reside in separate physical spaces (Abu 1983). The definitional emphasis on “kin and/or nonkin individuals” is essential because, while most domestic arenas consist of kin (either affinal, consanguineal, or both), it is wrong to assume *ipso facto* that every domestic arena equates to the residential family unit (Brydon and Chant 1993; Tipple et al. 1994). Similarly, the reference to “roof or set of roofs” acknowledges that the domestic arena means more than residence alone, literally and figuratively.

**Conclusion**

In the preceding discussion, I have demonstrated the fluidity and dynamism of the Akan domestic arena. Because of its ambiguity and shifting guises, I argue that employing a monolithic conceptualization harms a nuanced appreciation of Akan domestic social organization. The Akan domestic arena is not a matter of residence alone, or even primarily of residence; rather, it embodies the totality of people’s existence—social, cultural, and economic. It is the individual’s “little ecology,” a place where the critical tasks of living—production, consumption, reproduction—are organized, directed, and executed.

The unique entanglements of cooperation and trade-offs embodied in the interaction of family, kin, lineage, and “strangers” that shape the
domestic arena can be conceptualized as being neither purely altruistic (a bargain or contract), nor one of cooperative or conflictual relationships. The observed interactions are shaped by a specific historical and cultural situation [Akwabi-Ameyaw 1982; Oppong 1981]. The dynamics are characterized by the coexistence of solidarity and confrontation, individual versus collective interests, gender and generational stakes, and conjugal versus lineage obligations. It possesses an espirit de corps, where daily trade-offs, negotiations, and cooperation are developed often within a context of internal inequality, extroversion, and a differential share of burdens and rewards. Thus, any attempt to address the issue of “household” research in this culture needs a conceptualization that not only integrates the full complexity of domestic arena relations, but also takes cognizance of the fact that these individuals and domestic groups produce their own localized geographies. This is critical because how the domestic arena is characterized impinges not only on academic analysis, but also on policy. After all, without understanding a group of people and their culture, it is all too easy to romanticize the prosaic and everyday [Hanson 2003].

This article’s findings have relevance not only within Ghana, but also for other African and non-Western societies. Its relevance is in terms of how the empirical reality of a society’s way of life is better captured when local voice, language, and culture are privileged. Its relevance will also be manifest in the quality of data collected and the accuracy of “stories” told. As Russell, in her work on Swazi domestic groups, submits: “without grounding our understanding of contemporary society . . . [researchers] will fail to understand . . . [African] domestic groups, domestic cycles, and the location and dynamics of poverty and wealth” [Russell 1993: 756–757].

Having said this, I should also make it clear that the relevance of this article’s findings will vary across space and time, and will be shaped in different ways by prevailing sociopolitical, cultural, and discursive elements. The further one is removed, either spatiotemporally or historically, from the matrilineal cultural context within which these observations are generated, the less the applicability that these observations will have.

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NOTES

1. The term Akan encompasses several ethnic groups inhabiting the greater part of southern Ghana, including the Asante, Fante, Akuapem, Akyem, Kwahu, Nzema, Brong, and other Twi- and Fante-speaking ethnic groups. All Akans are subject to similar rules of custom, with slight localized peculiarities. A majority of the Akan population define themselves through their mothers. Thus, except for a few groups, all Akans are matrilineal; they trace descent and lineage through the mother, down to the remotest maternal ancestor.

2. The term domestic arena is employed in this paper as a synonym for the household. It speaks to a sociospatial cultural dialectic of domesticity within Akan society. The domestic arena in this sense is broader and more encompassing than the household, which often connotes a measure of coresidence under one roof. The term is employed not only to emphasize the diversity and plurality of domestic reproduction forms, but also to highlight how flawed it is, particularly in Akan society, to assume that “family,” “household,” “co-residence,” and “domestic function” are interchangeable. Depending on the relationship between members of the domestic arena, this imagery can be as simple as the conjugal unit or as complex as a multigenerational, vertically or laterally extended family. The domestic arena in this context is enigmatic, since in some situations its members all come from the same abusua, and at other times do not.

3. The word family is employed in this paper in its strictest cultural sense, to refer to the members of the matrilineage or abusua, who comprise a large number of blood relatives who trace their descent through a common maternal ancestor and are held together by a sense of obligation to one another (Gyekye 1996). It is for this reason that Akans who speak of their family are often not referring to the immediate or nuclear or conjugal unit, but to the abusua. Thus, when one says “your mother is your family, and not your father,” they are simply translating abusua and not the de facto social realities that assign specific roles to the father. In situations where a husband, wife, and children all reside in one location and cater for their needs together as a unit, they constitute both a conjugal unit and domestic arena, but not a family as defined in Akan ethnography. While many Ghanaian and foreign researchers erroneously use the term immediate family to map out the conjugal unit, differentiating it from the extended family and the broader matrilineage, I argue that this is wrong: I believe it is done for the lack of a better word or imagery. I concur with Akwabi-Ameyaw (1982) that the abusua and extended family are not coterminous in Akan ethnography in that the latter commonly includes one’s in-laws, whereas the former is consanguineal.


5. Empirical investigations indicate that nearly a quarter of rural and two-fifths of urban marriages in Ghana are duolocal, with spouses living in different houses in the same locality, with alternating residence together, elsewhere, or in different localities. Clark (1994) recorded that only 50 percent of all women who reported being married actually lived with their spouses, and Abu (1983) noted that barely 45 percent of married women in her study stayed in the same residence with their husbands.

6. The family house popularly referred to as abusua fie in Akan parlance traditionally symbolizes a house that over time and prolonged association has become “the house” with which the family identifies: each member of the matrilineage (uterine kin) by virtue of birthright is equally entitled to it. Such uterine kin can seek accommodation in this place free of charge, so for the majority of people living in such dwellings, their tenurial status is neither owner
nor tenant, but simply the rent-free tenure status available through familial obligation. For more on this phenomenon, see Amole, Korboe, and Tipple 1993; and Korboe 1992a.

7. This financial autonomy, resulting from fiscal separation, is not limited to Akans alone. Other women in Ghana, specifically the patrilineal Gas, also enjoy this arrangement (Anarfi and Fayorsey 1999).

8. The term living arrangements as employed in this paper refers to the various constellations of domestic residential patterns of Akan society. Patterns will depend on the nature of the union, relationships between its members, age structure of members, and marital status of members. This is so because while most domestic arenas consist of kin (affinal, consanguineal, or both), it is wrong to assume ipso facto that all domestic arenas can be equated with residential family units.

9. In many Ghanaian families, Akans included, cooking is done on the earthen hearth or cooking fire, known in Akan parlance as bokyea. Even in communities with access to electricity, many families still keep a bokyea as a backup cooking-source in case of a blackout (Korboe 1992b; Tipple et al. 1994).

REFERENCES


TODAY

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