Kinship and Descent Among the Anlo Ewe People
The Ewe people reside in south-eastern Ghana. There, they form the Volta Region of the Republic of Togoland (Nukunya, 1969). This area stretches from the Volta River to the borders of Togo and Ghana. The Anlo Ewe in particular are an ethno-linguistic group among the Ewe who reside on the Ghanaian coast and who utilize their own particular dialect of the Ewe language (Geurts, 2003). “Anlo,” is a particular dialect of the Ewe language (Geurts, 2008). A kingship is upheld by the Anlo Ewe, and their king, termed the Awoamefia, lives in seclusion as he is seen to possess many aspects of a divinity. This kingship is comprised of fifteen clans, two of which, the Adzovia and the Bate, are considered to be royal clans. These clans alternate in providing the Awoamefia for the Anlo Ewe people (Nukunya, 1969).

The clans, Adzovia, Bate, Lafe, Amlade, Like, Bamee, Klevi, Tovi, Tsiame, Agave, Ame, Dzevi, Uifeme, Xetsofe, and Blu, are comprised of smaller lineage groups (Nukunya, 1969). This lineage system is characterized by a kinship system based on patrilineal descent. This means that among the Anlo, only males can carry on their lineages, and any children of a certain descent group are kin of the males in that group. Members of a clan typically can state offhand who their common or apical ancestor is, but being that clans are so large, they are not able to trace their entire line up to this ancestor. Clan membership is ascribed, or determined by birth, and every person among the Anlo Ewe belongs to a particular clan.

Despite ascribed membership, in the past slaves and strangers have been taken up as members of certain clans. However, in years following they were denied their full rights as clan members when it was remembered that they were not related by blood. Thus, a “strangers’ clan,” was developed for these people termed, “Blu,” (Nukunya, 1969).
Members of each particular clan are spread out and reside throughout all areas of Anlo land. Just about every settlement of Anlo Ewe people is made up of individuals from every clan. These clans are corporate systems. This means that they remain intact while members cycle though and continuously change. All of the clans are of equal status. However, each clan serves a different and specific purpose that benefits the Anlo Ewe people as a whole. For example, as mentioned before, the Adzovia and Bate clans provide the King, and the Dzevi provide the chief priest for the War God (Nukunya, 1969). Either the clan represented in the most numbers in a particular settlement, or the first clan to arrive in that area, provides the chief for that settlement.

All of the clans, with the exception of the Xetsofe, have ancestral shrines that are located within the capital of Anlo, called Angola. In the past, it was tradition for ritual pilgrimages to be made to these shrines by the members of the clans. In order for new children to officially become members of whichever clan they were born into, they would have to be taken to the clan’s shrine and bathed in ritual water. These rituals and pilgrimages do not occur often anymore today. Nevertheless, sightseeing visits to these shrines are still commonly made.

As stated earlier, the Anlo people are further divided into lineages. These are smaller descent groups whose members are able to trace their family lines directly back to their apical ancestors. Lineages are residential and members of a particular lineage occupy relatively adjacent houses on the same area of land (Nukunya, 1969). Each lineage acquires its name from its founding ancestor, and each lineage appoints a lineage head (Nukunya, 1969). The head of any certain lineage is always the eldest member of the lineage that is still alive. The oldest member of a lineage is determined by both generation and age. When these two aspects conflict
and are split between lineage members, generation takes precedence since the position of lineage head must run through every generation of peoples before going on to the next (Nukunya, 1969). The head of each lineage has many duties. Most importantly, he serves as a medium between the living and the dead. In turn, all offerings for the dead are presented to him.

Members of Anlo Ewe lineages have particular privileges and rights. Ever male member has ownership over a plot of land, a home, and a creek to fish in (Nukunya, 1969). These men are expected to help those in need in their lineage since they are able with the resources they have acquired. As stated before, each lineage is condensed within a particular village and members reside within a particular group of houses that are close in proximity to each other. Houses within a lineage group are arranged into clusters of families that are placed around the site of the house of the founding ancestor (Nukunya, 1969). This site holds the shine of the lineage.

The smallest unit within a lineage is the hut. The typical nuclear family usually resides within any particular hut. They are comprised of either a wife and her unmarried children or a wife, a husband, and their unmarried children (Nukunya, 1969). Each hut is headed by the eldest male member residing in that particular household. If a hut has no male, leadership of the household goes to the oldest female living there by default. This may happen if, for example, a wife is widowed.

One can often gain insight into the kinship among a people by looking into the kinship terms they utilize. The familial titles used by the Anlo Ewe roughly resemble an Omaha system for kinship terminology. Anlo parents are differentiated in name according to sex (Nukunya,
Mother is, “dada,” and father is, “fofo.” Siblings are referred to by one general term: “novi,” however, age of siblings is often recognized. Older male siblings are called, “efo,” and older female siblings are deemed, “daa,” (Nukunya, 1969). Children can either be distinguished by sex or simply called by one common name. The word for son is “vi-nutsu,” and daughter is, “vi-nyenu.” “Vinye,” is a common term used for children of both sexes, however.

An important group of concepts to understand when dealing with kinship among the Anlo Ewe people is their dealings regarding their marriage practices. Anlo lineages are exogamous while clans are endogamous. To clarify, this means that the Anlo Ewe people are encouraged to marry outside of their lineages, but they are told it is better not to marry outside of their clans. As marriage between members of the same lineage is strictly prohibited, it does not happen very often. This prohibition exists in order to keep and establish ties between unrelated lineages.

The Anlo people also do not allow marriage between, “uterine kin,” (Nukunya, 1969). This refers to siblings, cousins, and basically any two people who are known to be relatives to some degree. This rule is not strictly observed in the least, however. Due to the residence pattern of the Anlo Ewe kin are relatively dispersed, and ties that are further removed are easily forgotten (Nukunya, 1969). Thus, marriages between uterine kin occur commonly without any repercussions.

An Anlo man is also not allowed to marry his sister’s husband’s sister (Nukunya, 1969). This to the Anlo Ewe is essentially an exchange of spouses between two lineages that taints relationships between members of kinship groups by turning them into affinal, or marriage, relations. This rule is strongly enforced and hardly ever violated.
Though many types of marriages are not encouraged or allowed, others are greatly encouraged. As mentioned, marriages between members of the same clan are ideal and favored. This does happen incredibly often though, since people typically marry within their settlement, and settlements commonly only have one lineage of each particular clan. Again, Anlo Ewe people must marry outside of their lineages, so this prevents same-clan marriages from occurring frequently.

The Anlo people feel as if marriage between two people who are not connected by any kinship ties is unstable (Nukunya, 1969). Thus, marriages between those with some form of kinship ties are endorsed. This may seem contradictory to the statement established earlier that marriage between uterine kin is prohibited. However, again, this rule is not strongly enforced or withheld, and the Anlo Ewe prefer marriages between remoter relatives rather than, say, first cousins. In order to ensure that marriages within kinship groups occur, they are sometimes arranged by the parents of those who are to be wed. Anlo Ewe marriages are only the legal joinings of men and women. They represent the importance and sanctity of kinship ties.

While marriages are still occasionally arranged, knowledge and encouragement is developing amongst the Anlo Ewe people regarding the individual and personal aspects of marriage. When a boy fancies a young woman, there are certain courting procedures to take place that the boy must see to. In the past, it was tradition that all Anlo girls were given ceremonies when they reached puberty and were paraded through the area in lavish clothing (Nukunya, 1969). This symbolized that the young girl was old enough to be married. In modern
times, however, boys simply may be able to court girls whenever those young women are old enough, and no ceremony is given for them.

When a young man sets his eyes on a girl, he customarily tells a friend, and they both go to the girl’s house later in the evening. This time of day is preferred because by then, all of the household duties have been completed. The boys are welcomed into the home of the girl and are seated. Then, the boy’s friend tells the former’s potential suitor why they have come. The possible couple converses, while the young man tries his best to act appropriately and win the girl’s approval. Wooing can be an, “arduous business,” among the Anlo Ewe (Nukunya, 1969). Girls typically do not say, “yes,” easily, and several courting visits must usually be made by a young man before he wins over his girl of choice.

Every now and then, brave girls go against the grain and propose their love to whichever boy they fancy. A girl will find an opportunity to corner the boy and bluntly state, “Young man! I love you,” (Nukunya, 1969). When the boy accepts the proposal he commonly exclaims, “I loved you first,” in return. Polygyny, or marriage of a man to more than one woman, sometimes occurs within the Anlo Ewe culture. Very few men actually take up more than one wife, however.

The actual marriage between an Anlo Ewe man and woman requires a series of fairly elaborate and intricate ceremonies. When a young man is serious about his intent to marry, a ceremony called, “vofofo,” or simply, “knocking,” takes place. During this ritual, the young man’s father’s sister and mother’s sister go to the house of the bride’s parents and formally ask for the girls hand in marriage and his behalf. The bride’s parents usually take at least a week to
deliberate on the matter, since it is customary for Anlo people to not reply immediately to questions of great importance (Nukunya, 1969).

If and when the bride’s parents agree to the proposal, the bridegroom immediately starts putting the marriage payments together. These payments, or the bridewealth, must be paid from the bridegroom’s family to the family of the bride, in return for the young woman’s productive and reproductive abilities. The payments usually consist of a wooden box filled with various types of valuable cloth and drinks. This must be given to the bride’s family before the actual marriage ceremonies can ensue. The bride’s family may give back any payments they see to be insufficient, and they commonly do. Thus, it usually takes several attempts of presenting the bridewealth before it is actually accepted and the marriage process can begin.

When the marriage payments are finally accepted, the actual marriage ceremonies quickly ensue. First, the bride is formally handed over to the bridegroom’s parents (Nukunya, 1969). This ceremony is relatively short and takes place in the household of the bride’s father. Both sets of parents give advice to the couple, and the bride and groom state explicitly that they wish to be wed. This “handing over,” is meant to symbolize the transferring of the woman’s sexual rights to her groom (Nukunya, 1969). After this a date is set for the next ceremony.

This next day is deemed, “the powdering of the bride,” (Nukunya, 1969). The woman is bathed in sweet oils and dressed in lavish clothing. She is brought to the groom’s household by her father’s sister and her mother’s sister. While they walk over, the groom and his family are waiting for them, and the consummation bed within the bedroom is already ready and covered
with white sheets. When they come to the house, the bride’s father’s sister hands her over to the groom’s father.

After this occurs, the consummation ceremony takes way. Typically, the groom’s father’s sister performs this ceremony being that she has had a successful and productive marriage herself. The hope and belief is that the bride will follow in this woman’s footsteps (Nukunya, 1969). The older woman leads the bride to the doorway of the bedroom. The bride is told to look into the room three times, and then walk in and out of the doorway six times. Next, she then is brought into the room. As this occurs, if the bride steps on the crack of the doorway it is believed that she will not be a good wife (Nukunya, 1969).

When in the bedroom, she is stripped naked and wrapped in cloth. The bride is then powdered and brought to the bed where she is met by her groom. The older woman states to them, “You are now man and wife, breed as much as you can,” (Nukunya, 1969). This women leaves and they newly married couple are expected to embrace each other for the first time.

While the newlywed’s are consummating their marriage, both families wait outside of the bedroom. After a considerable amount of time, the woman who performed the marriage knocks on the bedroom door, goes inside, and examines the white bed sheets. If the sheets are stained with blood, everyone rejoices, for it means that the bride was a virgin. The consummation ceremony, overall, is a public declaration of the bride’s former virginity. If and when the sheets are not blood stained, the girl is shamed and she must name who she has slept with before. These
men are then charged and fined for fornication, and the rest of the bride’s ceremony is not as showy as it would have been (Nukunya, 1969).

Following the consummation ceremony, the bride is to remain in seclusion in the groom’s new home that he would have recently acquired for himself. She typically remains there for anywhere between four and eight months. During this time, the groom is supposed to take care of and lavish his bride. When the bride comes out of seclusion, she is expected to be pregnant. This gives people hope that their marriage will be a successful one. The main point of the wife’s seclusion is for the husband to express his sexual monopoly over her (Nukunya, 1969).

After seclusion is complete, a ceremony of thanksgiving to the dead is held (Nukunya, 1969). The wife is then dressed up again, and goes out to see her relatives who provide her with many gifts. With this, the marriage ceremonies are officially complete.

The Anlo Ewe people reside in patrifocal homes. This means that men are the heads of household. Particularly, as I stated earlier, the eldest man of each particular house is in charge of that house. Sons become independent from their parents’ home when they are married. Young men are supposed to have their new houses built for themselves and their new wives before they are married. The virilocality rule is typically practiced by the Anlo people, whenever it is financially possible. By this rule, married couples are to live the husband’s family or kinship group.

The Anlo homestead has become progressively more advanced over the years. Originally, they created thatched huts woven with palm leaves (Nukunya, 1969). With the influx
of missionaries in the nineteenth century, two story, wooden houses were built. Concrete houses have been erected more recently as well. In smaller villages, however, mud huts are still quite common.

The elderly and the deceased are very much respected and revered amongst the Anlo Ewe people. An Anlo man reaches his highest point of prestige when he becomes the head of his lineage (Nukunya, 1969). Naturally, this typically occurs when men are rather elderly. Older people are considered to be full of knowledge and wisdom. Because of their age they are associated with the dead, and the awe and immense reverence the Anlo Ewe have for their dead relatives (Nukunya, 1969). They believe their dead relatives to be deities, and provide very elaborate funerals to essentially celebrate the life and death of those people, rather than mourn their passing. Funeral ceremonies incorporate the famous drumming skills of the Anlo Ewe and are incredibly festive and full of life. The Anlo Ewe are also a very passionate and religious people. Religion influences their lives and the nature of their kinship system significantly.

The Anlo Ewe people have very particular kinship and marriage rules. They place great importance in ceremonies, and certainly hold men to be dominant and take precedence over women. Their celebrations are prevalent throughout various life stages including marriage and death. They are on all accounts an interesting and complex people.
Works Cited

