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## EYE OF THE FAMILY

**H**is father needs money to pay a hospital so "a computer can test my blood to know the particular place where the sick is." The old man also needs a new foam mattress. His mother needs money to install electrical wiring in her house. She also wants cash to set herself up as a market lady. She could use a little extra for new dresses and imported gin to take to funerals. And she has a stomach ulcer that puts her in regular need of assistance with doctor bills. His sister, unhappily married to a polygamous sub-chief, needs money for school fees for her five children. His brother, a secondary school dropout, wants money for truck-driving lessons. His aunt, who is believed to have magical powers and has confessed to being a witch, badly needs to see a dentist.

The inventory of needs, bubbling up from the ranks of distant cousins, goes on and on. In Dawu, an upcountry village of mud houses, bad water, and wormy children, the kin all want a piece of what they imagine to be the big-city prosperity of Kwasi Oduro. Oduro teaches sociology at the University of Ghana. He is the only member of his family with a university degree, a government job, and a house in Accra, Ghana's capital. The university pays him \$83 a month. Whenever he can, he tells the folks back home that that is not enough to feed, clothe, and educate his own five children. But the folks back home do not believe him. Oduro sometimes despises his family.

"They are vultures. I say they are pickpockets. They are very cunning. They want money from you and they know how to get it. They will tell you lies calculated to soften your heart. Your grandmother talks to you about some chest trouble and you give her money and the next thing you know she is drinking gin."

His anger and cynicism, however, do not wash away his guilt. Oduro's family, especially his mother, sacrificed to put him through school. There is a saying in his tribe, the Ashanti, "If your elders take care of you while you are cutting your teeth, you must in turn take care of them while they are losing theirs."

Oduro owes his family.

"My guilt is an expression of my failure to measure up to their expectations. Sometimes you crawl back home with certain gestures. The crawling back can only happen to the guilty."

I met Kwasi Oduro a few days after his wife, Margaret, had visited his family in Dawu and had come back to Accra with the list of needs. Oduro himself had not been to the village of his birth for nearly a year, and he was finding it harder and harder to ignore his guilt. The list made it worse. But, as usual, he did not have any extra money. He was searching for a way to finance a trip home. I happened to be in Accra searching for someone around whom I could build a story about the African family. He solved my problem and I solved his. I paid him a research fee of \$160 and he agreed to take me back with him into the West African forest.

In his scholarly, self-confident way, Oduro told me it would be a homecoming of a kind that occurs millions of times every weekend across Africa as the extended family recalls its own. He said such trips always were costly, emotionally draining ordeals. They emptied wallets and submerged civilized Africans in the antiquated culture of their childhood. Our weekend journey, however, proved far more of an ordeal for Oduro than he had bargained for. If he had had any inkling of the trouble that awaited him in Dawu, he undoubtedly would have told me to keep my money.

vides the continent along ethnic lines while dictating patterns of government patronage and sometimes boiling over into civil war, family loyalty operates on a smaller, more intimate stage—one populated exclusively by blood relatives. With its labyrinthine web of rights and duties, the extended family is a day-care, social security, and welfare system. It babysits the children of working parents and keeps the elderly from feeling useless. It feeds the unemployed and gives refuge to the disabled and mentally ill. It pays for all this by redistributing resources between haves and have-nots. Money, medicines, and galvanized washtubs filter out to the village. Yams, bananas, and home-brewed gin filter into the city. Country cousins come knocking on city doors in search of familial favors. This system of commerce and welfare does not follow free-market precepts, Marxist dogma, or the rule of law. It is governed by ties of blood, of tradition, of guilt. With independent Africa stumbling through its third decade of hard times—as corrupt leaders bleed national treasuries, as prices for farm commodities skid downward on world markets, as the average African grows poorer every year—the extended family functions as a kind of home-grown glue. It holds together the world's poorest and most politically brittle continent.

The hooks of the extended family cut into the hearts and pocketbooks of almost every African. Unlike tribal loyalty, which di-

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"There is really no alternative in Africa to the extended family," Sawyer said. "Its functioning is a major way to distinguish African society from that of Europe or the United States. And it is not going to go away. Every single person you meet in Africa who has got anything is sharing it with his kin."

The family affairs of Kwasi Oduro, as they unfolded in front of me, proved Sawyer right. But Oduro's trip home also showed that the extended family in Ghana and across Africa functions under immense stress. Like a bridge that has borne too much high-speed traffic for too many years, its foundations are cracking. Decades of Western education and urban migration have lured family members into different worlds. The rural old and the urban young are separated by hundreds of miles of bad roads and centuries of development. On the campus of the University of Ghana in Accra, where Oduro lives in a university-provided house, there is a nuclear physics research laboratory. In Dawu, fetishes hang in every house to ward off evil. Oduro does not bring along his city-bred children when he goes home. Village water gives them diarrhea. Village cousins beat them up and steal their food. Nor does he, a nondrinking, born-again Christian, bring home the traditional bottle of schnapps that his uncles pour on the ground as a libation to the ancestors.

The dissolution of the African family has been authoritatively prophesied for at least thirty years. "The family cannot survive under a Western economic and political system, and if the family cannot survive neither can the values [of African] morality and spiritual pride and strength," announced British anthropologist Colin Turnbull in 1962. Eight years later American sociologist William Goode concluded that the African moves between disparate cultures with no legitimate home. He argued that Africans accept both traditional and modern values without making strong moral commitments to either.

Mountains of studies and statistics bode ill for the future of the family. The most alarming is the speed at which Africans are abandoning villages and moving into cities. African cities have the highest growth rates in the world. The urban growth rate, about 5

percent a year, is fast turning the character of the continent inside out. In the late 1980s, Africa was still the least urbanized region in world, with only 30 percent of its population living in towns and cities. By 2020, however, the U.N. Centre for Human Settlements predicts that more than half of all Africans will be city people. Half of all Ghanalans are expected to live in cities by the turn of the century.

The urban exodus is pushing more and more Africans into the wage economy, forcing their children to attend Western-type schools, and isolating the elderly back in villages. Nana Apter, a University of Ghana sociologist who has been studying the extended family in Ghana for the past decade, told me that Ghanaian families are divided as never before. She said young people, having attended school and secured jobs in cities, find less and less value in the authority, knowledge, and skills of their elders. While literacy in English has become a necessity for the economic survival of the young, about 80 percent of the old cannot read or write in any language. Apter estimated that one in four elderly people in rural Ghana has been marooned by the rush to the city and receives little or no financial assistance from children or relatives. She said that middle-aged civil servants in Accra have begun making inquiries about retirement homes for their burdensome parents.

There are a growing number of modernizing forces in Ghana and across Africa that want to snip the family ties that bind. Ghana's military government, for instance, would like nothing better than to break down family loyalties that foster nepotism and frustrate economic growth. The senior kinship buster in Ghana is the minister of mobilization and productivity. Huudu Yahaya (pronounced Yaa-Yaa) told me he wants bureaucrats to care more about the quality of their work than about the importing of a hungry cousin who needs a job. To that end, he has set up "manpower appraisal committees" made up of managers, workers, and outside government observers to supervise the paring down of the country's civil service. The committees are supposed to make sure that layoffs are guided by criteria of competence, not kinship. Ghana promised the World Bank in 1988 that it

will shed fifteen thousand civil servants a year for three years. When it made that promise, it already had sacked more Africans on a public payroll than any black-ruled government. In five years, it cut fifty-five thousand employees from the Cocoa Marketing Board, an infamously overstaffed public-owned corporation.

All governments in black Africa suffer from elephantine bureaucracies born of the marriage of state resources and family loyalty. There has been an across-the-board 160 percent increase in government employment since independence. About 30 percent of government spending in Africa goes for wages, as compared to about 13 percent in industrialized countries. The bigger African bureaucracies grow, the worse they perform. Ghana's Cocoa Marketing Board employed 105,000 persons (until Yahaya and other reformers started swinging the axe) to handle a crop half as large as that which 50,000 people handled more efficiently in 1965. Jobs have been parceled out, by and large, along kinship networks. Kinship has "undermine[d] the importance of doing a job, in relation to having it," argues Jennifer Seymour Whitaker, a specialist on Africa at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. "Job creation often became an end in itself, the desk preceding the task."

Not only does family loyalty gum up African governments, it can hobble the careers and limit the achievements of individual Africans. Jealous relatives often harm each other. Gossip, curses, land disputes, homicide, and witchcraft are aimed at successful relatives whose remittances to the family fail to meet expectations. Aggrieved kin demand not only a share but also influence in spending a relative's income. A continent-wide survey of family studies has found that kinship "squabbles thwart the individual's initiative and creativity and interfere with his efficiency."

I asked Huudu Yahaya if rapid urbanization, widespread education, and the inexorable spread of greedy Western culture might not make his kinship busting easier. Might they not speed the breakdown of the extended family and limit familial obligations, as sociologists and anthropologists have been predicting?

The tall, bearded, and surprisingly young minister (only thirty-three years old) told me not to hold my breath. He said his own

relatives—he has fifteen brothers and sisters and several hundred aunts, uncles, and cousins—were furious with him for not handing over some cushy jobs. He said they sneeringly called him “The Reverend Father” and “White Man Has Said.” He told me not to fret about the future of the extended family, at least not until Ghana’s economy could generate Western-style prosperity in both cities and the countryside.

“We don’t change human behavior overnight. It is a historical process. In Africa there hasn’t been much economic development, and family loyalties are tied to development. You need economic prosperity to break down these loyalties. The economic collapse of Ghana has done nothing to pull people away from the family system for the first twenty years of independence. If a man’s family remains poor when he gets a government job, there is a gap. The family looks to him with expanded expectations. . . . In these circumstances, a distinction between one’s privately owned and socially owned possessions is hard to make.”

In 1969, Godwin Nukunya, the son of a Ghanaian onion farmer who grew up to be a sociologist, wrote a book about kinship ties in his tribe, the Anlo Ewe, a coastal ethnic group of farmers and fishermen. He concluded then that, in absence of the kind of social and welfare services that exist in Europe and the United States, the “sense of mutual obligation will continue for a long time to sustain kinship ties as the dominant concern of everyday life.” Twenty years later, Nukunya stands by his words. He told me that the Africans who feel the tug of kinship most powerfully—like a rope around the neck—were people such as himself and Kwasi Oduro.

“First-generation literates owe an obligation to their parents,” Nukunya said. He said that even though he has been at the University of Ghana his whole adult life, his family and village relatives still harbor fantasies about his wealth. “The kind of life you lead here is unknown to them. They think you are wasting money on your wife and children and that you should send it all to them. When you are at the university, they feel you are having it easy.”

Just before we traveled to Dawu, I visited Kwasi Oduro at his city home. The lecturer and his family did not seem to me to be having it easy. His university-provided house on the campus of the University of Ghana appeared well on its way to falling to pieces. In need of paint, with tattered curtains poking out through torn window screens, the two-bedroom rambler sat in a dirt yard crowded with children and a few chickens. The concrete front porch was crisscrossed with sagging lines of wet laundry. In the living room one bare light bulb glowed from a corner wall fixture, casting a harsh light on the grimy white ceiling. Most of the floor tile had been ripped off the floor. There were two easy chairs, both of them partially padded with yellowed, chewed-up foam rubber. The refrigerator was broken.

The house, however, did have electricity and indoor plumbing and there was lots of sleeping space on the living room floor. As such, it was a magnet for kinfolk. When I walked in the front door two shirtless men were seated at a long table. They were slumped over, sound asleep, mouths open, drooling on the table top. Oduro told me they were two of the eleven “cousins of a sort” who lived in the house along with his wife, himself, and their five children. The permanent house guests included: A man who works for the Bank of Ghana and is the son of Oduro’s mother’s next-door neighbor. A woman (and her infant daughter) who is the daughter of Oduro’s wife’s sister. Two printing contractors—the ones drooling on the table—who are distant cousins of Oduro’s father. The number of house guests was down from a recent high of eighteen. The printers, Oduro said, had sent their seven partners back to the village.

As a rule, Oduro’s house guests pay no rent and eat for free. But Oduro was hoping that the two men I saw snoozing on the table would, when their ship comes in, repay him for his hospitality. They had been living in the house for two years while trying to land government printing contracts. They had promised Oduro 2.5 percent of their first contract. “I thought they were a good horse to bet on,” Oduro told me. “I accommodated them here as a form of investment. None of them was working for money for a

long time, so I had to feed them. I had to raid my own resources. As a teacher my resources are my house and the animals I can raise around it. The raid was on my chickens and ducks and sheep. I lost nineteen sheep and four hundred ducks and I don't know how many chickens. A lot of people in the neighborhood complained that there were too many people in my house. But the business opportunity is genuine. They have just won a large printing contract with the government. So I am looking forward to getting a little something. It was a gentlemen's agreement."

Most relatives do not and will not compensate Oduro for staying in his house. When I asked him why he didn't throw these freeloaders out, he shrugged. "I suppose I should be thorough and dislodge all of these traditional obligations and call them humbug. If I decide for my urban family, I would be saved a lot of headache. But I cannot turn out anybody if there is space to sleep. You don't know what they will go to the village and say. That sort of thing counts a lot. I am not so worried about this talk of witchcraft. That is not what worries me at all. What worries me is my own conscience."

Oduro is a compact, well-muscled man, with a rounded face, a touch of gray in his hair, and a booming voice toughened by long hours of monologue in large lecture halls. He is articulate, argumentative, and sometimes eloquent. He loves to talk and is easily prompted into long orations on African issues: politics, economics, literature, and, especially, the sociology of the African family—his academic specialty. He has a lecturer's habit of stopping himself in mid-oration, asking himself a rhetorical "Why?" and then resuming his monologue. In conversation, he listens impatiently when someone else interrupts him. Then, rather dismissively, as if he were speaking to a sophomore whom he suspected of not having completed the assigned reading, he says, "Thank you," and launches his rebuttal. He told me he is five-feet, ten-inches tall, but he appears to be about four inches shorter. He also told me he is thirty-eight years old, but his father gave me a birth date indicating Oduro is forty. He is the oldest of seven children.

As a child, Oduro raced on Sunday morning from mass at the Roman Catholic church in Dawu to sacrificial ceremonies at the fetish house on the far end of the village. There, chickens, goats, and an occasional cow were offered up as sacrifices to the various gods in the Ashanti pantheon. An Ashanti priestess allowed Oduro to eat freshly slaughtered meat.

"We grew up in this kind of environment with all the fetishes around. But I was probably somehow a rebel. I just did not take any of these things serious, like my brothers and sisters. I was born into the Catholic church, I always had a belief those [fetishes] were effective over people with weak wills. When I say I don't believe in it, it does not mean I don't recognize the concern of people about these things. But I ate the fetish meat because it tasted good and I was always hungry."

An outstanding student, he was—and remains—the only person from his village to obtain a postgraduate university degree. He has a masters in sociology from the University of Ghana. His schooling took him from the Catholic mission primary school in Dawu to several private middle and secondary schools around Ghana. These schools demanded fees, a burden born primarily by Oduro's mother.

"My mother was convinced that I must have an education. She felt that among her children, they were all trying, but I was good. She told me, 'You don't throw away anything that is good to chase another.' None of my siblings had secondary education. My mother paid for me and that was all she could afford."

In his first year of secondary school, while his maternal grandfather was still alive, Oduro said his grandfather made sure that earnings from a village cocoa farm were set aside to pay his fees. But when the grandfather died in 1969, maternal uncles were not as generous. They held a family meeting and decided that the responsibility for Oduro's education rested with Oduro's father. Peter Marfuh had a heart attack in 1968. He never worked after that.

"My father didn't have the money. But my mother insisted I keep in school. Twice, she sold her cloth [hand-woven kente cloth,

the multicolored apparel of Ashanti royalty] to see me through school. This cloth was her most valued possession.

"I was an all-rounder in school, a good sportsman. I played football. I happened to have lots of girls around me and my mother did not like that. When I had an illegitimate child with some woman, I was in secondary school, about sixteen years old. My mother took care of the child until I got to university. The boy is in Cape Coast [a city west of Accra] with his mother now. That scrape could have cost me my education. My mother sat me down and talked to me about how I was 'the eye of the family.' She said that she had spent a lot of money on me. She said why don't you pick one [girl] and marry? The youngest girl around me, there were not less than five of them, was the one who became my wife. That pleased my mother so much. I also considered the fact that she was paying. If she expressed concern about that side of my life, I could not defy her.

"I was also lucky because some of my teachers liked me. My headmaster at one school waved my arrears [on school fees] because he knew I couldn't pay. Another headmaster made it possible for me to win a Rotary Scholarship. The only smooth ride I had throughout my schooling was at the University. Then I didn't have to go home to get money. Mostly, I didn't go home at all."

The University of Ghana was more comfortable, more luxurious, and more free than Oduro had imagined possible. Situated on a hill outside of Accra, it resembled Stanford University, with white stucco buildings, red tiled roofs, flowers and lawn everywhere. It was the most handsome university campus in black Africa. Oduro was a beneficiary of the idealistic thinking that followed Ghana's independence.

Like most young African nations, Ghana built European-style universities that afforded a select few an Oxonian idyll. Tuition, housing, food, medical service, books, and spending money—all were free. The entire tab was picked up by the state. Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, as part of the grandiose public building spree that helped bankrupt his country, commissioned the construction of three major universities. They were supposed to churn out a generation of post-colonial Africans who could shep-

herd a pre-industrial country into post-industrial prosperity.\* Free higher education impressed Oduro. It unchained him from his mother. It colored his politics, convincing him that the state had an inherent obligation to foot the entire cost of higher education for poor-but-able Ghanaians. As the government of Ghana went broke in the 1970s, Oduro fought for higher education. He led student strikes that closed down the school three times. One of the strikes, in the late 1970s, precipitated the fall of a military government in Ghana.

"He caused a lot of trouble, but he has calmed down," vice-chancellor Sawyer told me. The vice-chancellor said Oduro has matured into one of the university's most energetic and popular lecturers.

Before we left for the hundred-mile journey to Dawu, I asked Oduro if he was looking forward, after a year's absence, to seeing his parents and the rest of his family. He was not. "Going home is what I dread. That is why I call myself an economic exile. I look at the [family] sacrifices that have been made for me to get where I am and the kind of expectations that are bunched around me, and then I look around at my house and the size of my pocket, and I realize that I cannot do much for the family down home. If I give

\*Like many well-intentioned projects inspired by socialist ideals and a desire to imitate colonial powers, African universities grew out of control. In a 1988 report, the World Bank said African universities soak up limited resources that would be better spent on primary education. The report said the per-capita cost of the universities is sixty times greater than primary education. In Asia or Latin America, higher education is far cheaper. For all this money, African universities turn out graduates whose skills are "no longer well-suited to the requirements of development," the report said. The sixty-forty mix of liberal arts to science graduates was the same in the late 1980s as in 1960. This continues despite a desperate need for technicians and engineers. Most graduates are ill prepared, with test scores consistently lower than other graduates in the Third World.

Part of the reason for the failure of African universities is that they are ludicrously overstuffed, in part, because of kinship obligations. Typically, a professor tries to get his brother a job—as a teacher, if the brother has any education, as a janitor, if he doesn't. There are about twice as many university teachers per student in Africa as there are in industrial countries. The problem is far greater with nonteaching staff. In Western universities there are about six students for every nonteaching staff member. At the University of Ghana the number of nonteaching staff actually exceeds the number of students. Under pressure from the World Bank, Ghana and a score of other countries have begun to slash university staff and reduce student benefits. This has caused riots and repeated shutdowns of universities in Ghana and across Africa.

them money, I will not be responsible to my own family here.

"The idea of going home frightens me. There is always that chance that you may ignore one or the other and then there is trouble. It always comes after you are gone. There will be trouble for your mother. Relatives will go to her and say, 'Your child came here and you monopolized him and what did he bring you?' This is what I call social strain. In my situation, there are too many norms competing to guide my life. The source of my trouble is that I have made a decision to combine all of them."

After six hours in a van on roads that deteriorated from good to bumpy to barbarous, Oduro, a young woman named Stella Adegi, and I were dropped off late on a Friday afternoon in Dawu.

Oduro had introduced the woman in the van as his research assistant. I learned later that he and Stella consider themselves to be man and wife. He first met her a couple of years ago when she was an undergraduate taking his Introduction to Sociology course. They have been seeing each other ever since. A year ago, Oduro went to Stella's parents, proposed marriage, and received their blessing. Although there has been no formal ceremony, Oduro has told a few of his university colleagues that Stella is his second wife. Polygamy is an accepted and honorable institution in his village and among his tribe, the Ashanti. But Oduro has not made up his mind about it. As a born-again Christian, he has "moral problems" with having two wives. Monogamy and polygamy are two of the most troublesome norms competing to guide his life. Nevertheless, he was taking home Stella for the first time to meet his parents.

Oduro left his wife of fifteen years, Margaret, back in Accra with their children. He has never mentioned his second marriage to his first wife. Margaret, who has only a primary school education, does not like Stella. The two have met only once and it was not pleasant. Margaret burst into Oduro's office at the Department of Sociology while Stella was there sleeping on a couch. She ripped Stella's dress. Screamed accusations and indignant denials echoed down the halls of the sociology building. The chairman of Oduro's department was annoyed.

When we arrived in Dawu and for our first twenty-four hours there, I was not aware of the polygamy problem.

Dawu has one unpaved street and one shop, a kiosk selling cigarettes, soap, and bread. A portrait of Michael Jackson (which faithfully reproduced the pop superstar's cosmetically narrowed nose) was painted on the front of the kiosk, along with the slogan, "No Hurry in Life." Nearly every other structure in the village was made of reddish mud, impregnated with thumbnail-sized pebbles, and surmounted with roofs of rusted tin. Greenish trails of sewage leaked from beneath these houses into shallow ditches that drained off into the surrounding forest. Between the houses, cocoa fruit dried in the sun on elevated woven mats. Even in the late afternoon, it was very hot—the humid air heavy with the sweet fermenting aroma of cocoa and the biting odor of excrement.

The village has a population of about fifteen hundred people—when everyone's working-age children come home from the cities. Excepting Christmas and Easter, they don't come home all that often. They drift back on the odd weekend to meet family obligations. Like tens of thousands of ancestral villages across rural Africa, Dawu is semi-abandoned and sleepy, with more than its share of the very old and the very young.

During the long ride from Accra, Oduro dipped into his childhood memories and told stories about his village. He described a village ruled by magic, a place far more mysterious than the red-mud, rusted-tin reality. The tales sounded as if they were lifted from the pages of Gabriel García Márquez. There was a stream on the edge of the village, Oduro said, where a powerful god lived. The god prevented robbers and hooligans and slavers from sacking the village. Long ago a heavy rain in the surrounding hills washed nuggets of gold onto Dawu's main street, Oduro said, and everyone became rich for a while. He remembered, too, that his aunt and uncle had been forced to declare themselves, in public ceremonies in the village, to be witch and wizard. Oduro had not seen the god in the stream or the gold in the streets. He had been told about them as a child. He could not remember what black magic his aunt and uncle were supposed to have performed. He could only remember watching them confess to having evil in



their hearts. He recalled that his uncle and aunt, although officially absolved of their sins by public confession, remained strange and frightening to the children of Dawu.

"The theater of African life is in the village," Oduro told me. "What is happening in the village is so crucial in determining the shape of the society that is emerging. You cannot talk about the family unless you go back to the village and see what is going on."

Africa's best novelist, the Nigerian Chinua Achebe, used the village as a theater in which he staged the poisoning of African values by the West. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe conjured up a village the white man was about to defile. It was a carefully ordered, intensely religious, highly moral community, where no decision was taken without divining the will of the gods. Villagers did not question the order of a world menaced by evil spirits and protected by tribal ancestors. Sickness and health, fecundity and barrenness, flood and drought: everything had a spiritual cause. There was much to be afraid of. "Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them. Children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits. Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark. A snake was never called by its name at night, because it would hear." The protagonist of the novel was a successful farmer named Okonkwo, immensely strong, drunk with pride, and opposed to any change. When the white men finally did come with religion and guns, Okonkwo disowned his son for becoming a simpering Christian. Then he fought back. In the end, villagers did not side with him. Change was accepted. Okonkwo, utterly alone and facing punishment for murder, killed himself. The suicide gave the British district commissioner material for his condescending memoirs: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.

Things started falling apart in Dawu in the late nineteenth century, when the British, after several military humiliations at the hands of the Ashanti, conquered the region. The coming of white men predates anyone living in the village. Oduro's father, who at age sixty-six is one of the oldest men in Dawu, cannot remember a time before a Catholic church, a mission school, an English

teacher. Yet when I visited Dawu in 1988, the traditions that Achebe describes and that Oduro remembers were only partially in ruins. Things were still very much in the process of falling apart.

Oduro climbed the broken front steps and walked into the house he was born and raised in. His mother, Nana Adwoa Achaah, a thin, handsome woman who looked younger than her sixty years despite being dressed in a worn gray gown, greeted him with a curtsy and turned away at once to fetch water. Ashanti tradition demands that water be offered to guests before inquiries are made. Tradition, too, demanded that Oduro's satchel be carried immediately to the bedroom in which he was born, and that his maternal uncles be sent for. The unexpected arrival of Oduro sent his mother to her bedroom so she could change into a formal-looking black cotton dress and put on some shoes.

Going home to rural Africa means succumbing to, if not sul-focating in, the traditions of one's elders. This is especially true among the Ashanti, Ghana's largest tribe. Before the British invaded the interior of Ghana and burned their capital, Kumasi, to the ground in 1874, the Ashanti Empire was one of the most religiously intricate, commercially astute, and militarily adventurous civilizations on the continent. The Ashanti traded in gold, ivory, and slaves. Early British visitors to Kumasi described a well-planned city with clean, wide streets and carefully planted trees. Houses had lavatories flushed with boiling water, and trash was burned regularly. While subjugating bordering tribes, the Ashanti ruled themselves with a monarchy that had a strong component of participatory democracy. The symbol of Ashanti unity was the Golden Stool, which by legend descended from heaven only twenty-five miles from Dawu, at Kumasi. No one, not even the Ashanti king, was allowed to sit on the gold-encrusted stool; it was the soul of the nation.

The Ashanti, more so than most African tribes, had elaborate rituals to keep elders and the recently dead happy. Elders were revered and sought out for advice on marriage, funerals, and war. Every forty-three days, the graves of recently departed kin were offered food and drink. When an important chief died, his con-

ment in the netherworld was ensured by slaughtering a retinue of servants, wives, and advisors. They were supposed to keep the chief company. These beliefs, of course, have been pared down by time, Christian missionaries, Western education, and English common law. For nearly all the Ashanti, ritual murder is now as repulsive a notion as witch burning is for the citizens of Massachusetts.

And yet ritual murder and ritual violence, despite swift and draconian punishment by African governments, do occur with some frequency in Ghana and across the continent. Juju, or West African magic, remains a powerful and pernicious force. When I was traveling with Oduro in Ghana, an Accra magazine called *Joy Ride* ran a cover photograph of a man who confessed to beheading his nine-year-old nephew. The photo showed the uncle holding up the boy's severed head. In court testimony, the killer (who later was executed by a government firing squad) said he was working for a village chief who wanted the magical power of "parts" to help him win a contract for his construction business. In that same year ritual violence bubbled up across Africa: A Zimbabwe farmer confessed in court to raping his teen-age daughter because his witchdoctor told him it would cure his sore feet. A man and woman in Nigeria were arrested with five human skulls and assorted limbs and charged with trading in body parts. Six prominent Liberians, including a county prosecutor, a judge, a Methodist preacher, and a brigadier general in the national army were sentenced to hang for the murder and dismemberment of two boys. The Liberian boys were kidnapped and mutilated to obtain two left eyelids and a penis. These were to be used to concoct a magical brew that, according to confessions of the conspirators, would win votes in a mayoral election in the Liberian town of Harper City. A year later in Liberia, the number two official in the country, General Gray Allison, was court-martialed and sentenced to death for employing a witchdoctor to behead a policeman. According to his accusers, Allison wanted the "part" of a strong and brave man to give him a magical leg up in a planned attempt to overthrow Liberia's president.

Juju murders afflict modern Africa in a way that shopping-mall

and work-place shooting sprees afflict the United States. Abhorrent, unpredictable, and atypical though the violence may be, it happens often enough to be a symptom, in Africa as in America, of how tradition, myth, and modern stress can twist human behavior. Nursing a grudge and infected with the gun-toting American spirit, a self-styled Rambo goes shopping for nameless enemies with an AK47 assault rifle. In need of a spiritual edge over his competition, a tradition-steeped, profit-crazed African businessman goes shopping for a juju merchant and a fresh head.

"People here are disturbed about these actions that conflict with our notions about being civilized," said Antoinette Saye, a Liberian-born World Bank economist who attended Bryn Mawr College and the Wharton School of Business. I asked her in Liberia about the Harper City juju murders. "We like to tell ourselves that we are developing. Then these things happen and remind us of the past."

In Liberia, I also spoke to the father of seven-year-old Emmanuel Dalieh, one of the boys murdered in Harper City. Joseph Dalieh, forty years old and a professional nurse, told me that on the day of his son's disappearance he had gone out looking for the boy, suspecting a kidnapping by a "heart man" (the term used in Liberia for individuals who murder for body parts). Dalieh said he had even walked past the house where his son was held captive. Dalieh said, however, that the kidnappers had used a "magic powder" that made the boy invisible and silenced his cries. "The children were crying but because of the magic powder no one could hear them," said Dalieh. "Such a magical powder—it works."

In Ghana, following the October 1988 execution of ten people convicted in three ritual murder cases, the government-controlled *People's Daily Graphic* carried a long article under a prominent headline: "How To Eradicate Ritual Murders." Earnest and well-meaning, the article captured the time-warp strangeness of Africa reaching out for modern solutions to ancient ills: "If many Ghanaians believe that human heads are buried with dead chiefs, then the onus of proving Ghanaians wrong rests with chiefs. The Superpowers have instituted on-the-site inspection of each other's nuclear arsenals because of mutual mistrust. Chiefs could

also inspire the confidence of the public by removing the strict secrecy surrounding the deaths and burials of chiefs."

Ritual murder, mercifully, is a lost art in Dawu. But Ashanti traditions more central to daily life remain. The most important among these is matrilineal descent, a practice common among the peoples of Central and West Africa. Family property can only be inherited from the mother's side of the family. In the Ashanti tribe, it is much better to have a rich mother than a rich father. For a father's wealth goes to his sisters' children; a mother's wealth goes to her own children.

When Oduro entered his mother's house, he knew his father would not be there. He has never lived there. The only kin entitled to live in the house are the "products" of his grandmother's and his mother's wombs. Oduro's father lives down the road in his mother's house. Maternal uncles, who manage family property and family affairs, loom large in the life of every Ashanti. That was why, when Oduro came home, someone ran to the forest to fetch them.

Oduro has four brothers who could live in the house if they wanted to. Only Marfuh Peter, seventeen, who dropped out of secondary school and works in the family cocoa farm, does so. The other three are part of a poverty-induced diaspora that in the past two decades has sent an estimated 2 million Ghanaians, including some of the best-educated young people in the country, abroad in search of work. Two brothers live in Ibadan, Nigeria; one is a shoemaker, the other a farm laborer. The third is a laborer in Gabon.

While waiting for his uncles, Oduro drank the welcome water brought to him by his mother. Stella, a city-bred woman of the coastal Ewe tribe who was making her first journey to Oduro's home, rejected it, fearing gastroenteritis. Taking my cue from Stella, I said I was not thirsty. All around us, a legion of barefoot children gaped and whispered. In Ashanti, there is a proverb that says, "The family is a crowd." This large house, with eight rooms built around an open concrete courtyard cluttered with dogs, chickens, goats, and no fewer than twenty-one small children, bore it out. They were the children of the matrilineal womb—

## OF THE FAMILY

Oduro's sisters' children, the grandchildren of his aunts. To keep them from smothering us, Oduro gave money to a cousin and sent her to Jamasi (a town about a half-mile away) to buy cookies. News of cookies spreads fast in Dawu. By the time the cousin returned from Jamasi, the number of children in the courtyard had doubled. Fired by the prospects of store-bought sweets, they veered out of control. There was crying and pouting and fisticuffs and not enough cookies. A half-dozen older cousins pleaded with, dragged around, and slapped the crowd of barefoot children until they formed two lines. "I thought it would be a palliative and they would all go away," Oduro said helplessly.

As the cookie riot ebbed, the senior uncle and head of the household lumbered into the courtyard. Yaw Bekoe, sixty-six years old, twenty-one children of his own (all of whom live elsewhere with their four respective mothers), was wrapped in a blue and red paisley print cloth that he wore, in Ashanti fashion, off one shoulder, like a Roman toga. He shook hands, brought out a carved wooden stool, and sat down in elaborate silence to wait for uncle number two.

Peter Amoakahene, in his late fifties, with fourteen children who also live with their mothers, arrived in a similar toga-like wrap and carrying a large transistor radio. Such a radio in village Africa packs the symbolic punch of a Mercedes Benz. It denotes a man of means. Amoakahene, a retired sanitary inspector with a government pension, manages the family's cocoa farm, which is owned collectively by the maternal side of Oduro's family. It is the largest farm in the village and, in a good year, can earn \$15,000. Uncle Peter is a powerful and feared man in the village: a good shot with a rifle, a knowledgeable hunter, and a skilled farmer. He is the uncle who once confessed to being a wizard.

The uncles located a bottle of home-brewed gin, poured a libation on the ground for the ancestors, offered some to Oduro (being born-again, he refused), and snorted back a little themselves. They ended the traditional interval of silence by asking Oduro why he had not been home for a year and why he had not written. Prepared for these questions, Oduro lied. He had planned several times to come back, but university business always inter-

vened. He did not write, he continued, because he had always believed he would be home ahead of a letter. He did not mention his real reason for staying away.

"I don't go home because I can't afford it," he had told me. "My last trip home [fourteen months earlier, in August 1987] was for my grandmother's funeral and it cost me more than three months' pay. I had to get loans from three colleagues at the university."

That funeral celebration went on for two weeks. It was a major and expensive production because Oduro's mother is the "queen mother" of Dawu. Like village chiefs, queen mothers are elected from among certain "noble" lineages. A queen mother has her own stool, the Ashanti symbol of power normally reserved for men, and is the official keeper of the blackened stools of former queen mothers. In addition, a queen mother helps pick the village chief and is the only villager permitted to rebuke the chief in public. She is supposed to supervise the morals of local women. Queen mothers, like chiefs, have lost considerable power and prestige across Ashanti land in the past fifty years. But when prominent elders die in the region, queen mothers are still must-invites. They attend a lot of fancy funerals, dressed in their best kente cloth. And when one of their own kin dies, they are expected to put on a good feed with lots of liquor.

"When my mother goes to funerals they treat her not as an ordinary person. They give her some particular kind of drink. [Instead of home-brewed gin made from palm wine, they serve her British-made Gordon's.] When she had the funeral for my grandmother, every queen mother from the whole district came around and stayed at the house for four days, drinking and eating. My mother treated them in the same way as they treated her. My mother sat me down at that funeral and explained that it costs money. She believes she has a son in the university who can help her. I went to the funeral with 60,000 cedis [the equivalent of \$230] and I came back dry, broke."

Oduro did not tell his uncles that he only came home this time because he'd heard that his father needed money for a blood test, that his mother was complaining of an ulcer, that his aunt's teeth

were giving her pain—and he happened to have received some money from a foreigner who wanted to take a look at his family. He told his untruths and sat with his uncles in uncomfortable silence as fireflies cut curlicues across the darkening courtyard and the late afternoon turned to night. His uncles did not complain about the weather, which Oduro took as happy news that this year's cocoa crop was going to be large. Oduro's mother and younger sister pounded yam and prepared a special beef soup for supper. (Oduro had sent another cousin to Jamasi to buy some freshly slaughtered beef.) Hungry children fought with each other as they waited for their yam and soup. Since it was Oduro's first night home, no relative even hinted that he or she needed money.

"It would be indecent," Oduro told me later. "Tactically, on the second day home, everyone wants to know when you are leaving. Because then they can figure when best to ask for something."

After supper, Oduro, Stella, and I walked in darkness to Jamasi, where we rented rooms in a guest house. Just before I went to bed, I heard the sociology lecturer and his researcher giggling and splashing together in the guest house shower.

Early Saturday morning, Oduro went calling on his kin, as tradition requires. For this second day, he had his own tactics. He was planning to leave Sunday, but he told lesser relatives he was leaving Monday. Only to his parents, his sister, his brother, and his aunt—whom he figured he could afford to help—did he tell the truth. He did not bother with a courtesy call on the village chief. For, as he explained it to me, chiefs in the cocoa-growing regions of Ashanti land no longer count for much.

"Cocoa came to the village in 1923. It was introduced by the British to the chief, and seedlings were distributed free of charge to anyone who wanted to grow it," Oduro said. "Villagers who planted lots of seedlings and worked hard taking care of them started to make money. It was their money and the chief had no claim on it. The most powerful people in the village became those with the most cocoa."

The weekend home was unfolding with less trauma than Oduro had feared. There were no large, unexpected demands for money. Oduro's mother, who had arranged his first marriage to Margaret and had become a close friend and confidante of her daughter-in-law, was tolerably hospitable to Stella. By decree from Oduro, the number of children in the courtyard of his mother's house was kept down to a manageable twenty. Late Saturday afternoon, as shadows lengthened and the stupefying heat began draining out of the day, Oduro, Stella, and I went for a stroll. We were planning to walk back to the Jamasi guest house for a shower and a nap. Turning onto the main street of Dawu, we walked, instead, into trauma.

Margaret, who was supposed to be back in Accra minding the children, stood defiantly in the middle of the dirt street, with her baby boy, Yaw, slung on her back. Oduro's first wife—who had no reason, at that moment, to believe she was anyone other than Oduro's *only* wife—had heard a rumor in Accra that Stella had come to Dawu to meet the family. Margaret caught a mini-bus and tailed us home.

She cast an icy eye at Oduro, and then, spraying obscenities, she rushed toward Stella. The dumfounded young woman retreated behind me. While the previous night's gamboling in the shower had started me thinking, I was, at that moment, as ignorant as Margaret of the two-wife problem. I turned to Oduro for some clue. His eyes were wide and unblinking. His face was slack. I thought he might be having a heart attack.

Oduro had been correct in calling the village a theater for African life. The most dramatic scene of his marital life was staged just down the street from the Michael Jackson kiosk and directly in front of his father's house. The old man was standing out on the stoop, watching as Margaret breathed fire into his son's "moral problem" with polygamy. A crowd of Saturday afternoon idlers gathered to drink in Margaret's rage. As Oduro described it later, Margaret transformed his ethical dilemma into "a public embarrassment."

Oduro managed to grab Margaret's wrist before she could get at Stella. His first wife struggled and howled. He ordered his sec-

ond wife to take a walk. He ordered me to take a walk. His father, from the stoop, yelled, "Let her go." The old man then ordered the unhappy couple to come inside his house. Margaret told Oduro, "I followed you home because I wanted to make sure we were not seen in Accra again as man and wife."

I walked back to the guest house with Stella. A heavy-set young woman in a floral print dress and black patent leather dress shoes, she walked gingerly on the hard-packed dirt road. Although talkative, she mentioned nothing about being married to Oduro. He and Margaret, she said blandly, "will have to work it out." She wondered what her Accra friends, who usually go to the beach on weekends, were doing with their Saturday. Stella then explained, at some length, her problems with her hair. Her mother had insisted that she curl her hair to look more attractive. Stella had had a permanent at a beauty salon, but she needed frequent applications of "the activator" to make the curls curl. "My mother keeps telling me all the time, 'Stella, use the activator.' But I have to put on a bathing cap and it runs down and ruins my dress and it smells."

Two hours later, Oduro sought me out and insisted on clarifying his marital status. He and Margaret have been having marital trouble for years, he said. She has packed up to leave him eight times and actually left the house with the children three times. Being a teacher required peace and quiet, Oduro said, and Margaret was making his life too hectic for a productive academic career. "Screaming and breaking things in the house is one thing, but when she makes a public spectacle that is something I cannot tolerate."

His father had been disappointed in him for being indecisive, for not having told Margaret about his marriage to Stella. "My father told me tonight, 'I always thought you were a boy who could make up his mind.'"

The Saturday night confessional took place in a small bar in the town of Jamasi. A fifteen-minute walk from Dawu, Jamasi was a refuge from the dark night of the village. It had electricity, street lights, a busy highway, cold drinks. Oduro drank Coke, Stella and I drank beer. The evening was humid and still. As we sat in the

stuffy bar, all three of us soaked our clothes with sweat. Oduro talked. Outside on the pot-holed highway, trucks thundered north and south. The big lorries were emblazoned with plithy, hand-painted, multicolored commentary on the African predicament. As Oduro talked, I found myself reading the rolling philosophy. An epigram that caught my eye said, "No Condition Is Permanent."

Oduro explained at length that being born-again made it hard for him to come to grips with two wives. He also complained that it was impossible to afford two houses on a teacher's salary. Stella was helping with expenses, he noted, by having her small university researcher salary deposited directly into his bank account. She also saved money by living with her parents. I interrupted him and asked Stella what she thought of polygamy. She gave me a blank, helpless grin, and drank her beer. Oduro answered for her.

"It is me," he said, "I am the one with the moral problem."

[D]ivorce in an Ashanti village is a simple affair. A wife need only take a bottle of schnapps to the elders and explain why the marriage cannot work. The husband is then invited to give an account of himself. If everyone agrees that the marriage is hopeless, it is dissolved. For an Ashanti woman, matrilineal tradition can ease the economic pain of divorce. Since man and wife often live in separate houses in a village, property disputes are minimized. The future security of a woman's children is the responsibility of her brothers, not of her husband. Owing to these traditions, divorce is more common among the Ashanti than among most African ethnic groups. By the rules of this system, however, Margaret was not, as it turned out, in a strong position to take schnapps to the elders.

She would, of course, receive custody of the five children. But Margaret's mother was dead and she did not have a maternal family house to retreat to with her children. Nor did she have a job. "She has a wealthy half-brother, but he is her father's son and not a product of her mother's womb, so she has no claim to his wealth," Oduro explained. "My wife's options were limited. It took a while, but she came to her senses."

On Sunday morning, Margaret appeared to have calmed down.

Several village women, including Oduro's mother, advised her that she had overplayed her cards. At midday, she walked into the courtyard of Oduro's mother's house. Stella was there, sucking on an orange, and Margaret pointedly ignored her. Instead, she peeled several oranges for her husband, whose reluctant polygamy she had been forced to accept. She gossiped with her mother-in-law and left. With her baby again on her back, she caught a mini-bus back to Accra.

Since Oduro is the eldest son and the only person in the family with a university education and regular salary in the city, he is regarded as the family's social safety net. For decades, the convoluted priorities of Ghana's government, like those of most black African governments, reinforced these expectations.

To keep urban constituents happy, governments subsidized the housing, transport, and food bills of city dwellers. This was a policy of self-preservation: unhappy city people in Africa have a marked tendency to overthrow governments. For similar reasons, bureaucracies mushroomed to employ the swelling ranks of young school-leavers migrating to cities. Governments funded the system, initially, by paying farmers far less for their crops than they were worth on the world market. In Ghana, for example, cocoa growers in the late 1970s received as little as 15 percent of the world price. The rest was creamed off by the government (and urban middlemen) for salaries and projects that mostly benefited city people. This top-heavy system collapsed in Ghana, as elsewhere, as commodity prices declined and farmers responded to the lack of incentives. They neglected their cocoa trees, changed to growing crops they could eat, or smuggled their cocoa

out of the country. Ghana's cocoa-dependent economy ground to a halt in the early 1980s.

After a quarter century of bleeding the countryside to pump money into the city (which the extended family, in turn, pumped back out to the countryside), the government of Ghana decided in 1983 to reverse the flow of resources. It passed along a much higher percentage of world cocoa prices to growers and started firing government employees. It also devalued Ghana's currency, which help make exports more competitive on the international market. The free-market medicine worked, up to a point. For the first time in Ghana's independent history, farmers had a real incentive to work hard. Cocoa production rose sharply and the economy grew. The point at which the magic of the marketplace fizzled, however, was when the world cocoa price fizzled. That was in 1987. Since then Ghana has been punished, instead of rewarded, by reform.

For a university lecturer like Oduro the net effect of this macro-economic flip-flop has been a guilt-soured mixture of hardship for his urban family and unrelenting demands from the folks back home. Because of devaluation, the dollar value of his monthly check has been cut by two-thirds since 1983 as food prices have soared. Inflation has been running at up to 40 percent a year. "My monthly salary [when it was worth about \$300] used to cover us for about a month. Now my wife and I realize that it is between seven and ten days before the money is gone. There was a time when university teachers lived in decent poverty, but right now it is not honorable. Most of us are in debt to our bankers, to people who sell us food in the neighborhood."

At the same time, the needs of Oduro's extended family have not lessened. The price of cocoa fell to a twenty-three-year low in 1988. Ghana's economic mess does not register with Oduro's mother. Nana Adwoa Achaah needs drugs to treat her ulcer, wants \$400 to have electricity installed in her house, and would like some capital to buy goods for trading. As a "queen mother," she wants to give the right impression at funerals.

"Now that he is working, I expect Oduro should help me to get on. It was a form of investment to help him in his education. I am

the queen mother and Oduro is the one who should help me to perform my public duties by raising my standards," she told me.

Oduro has a hard time refusing his mother's requests for money. He gave her all he had left of the money he brought home. It was not enough to bring electricity to the house, but it would keep her in ulcer medicine. "A drop in the ocean of her needs," Oduro said. His mother thanked him with a lunch of peanut soup and lufu.\*

"I want out of the extended family trap, and when my mother dies I don't think I will go back to the village anymore," Oduro told me. "The extended family for me is a way of spreading poverty."

Late Sunday afternoon, Oduro ended his visit home. He and Stella impatiently ate another dish of lufu. His sister presented them with a heavy basket of plantains and cassava that she had spent most of the weekend gathering in nearby fields.\* Anxious to leave, Oduro quickly loaded the produce into a mini-bus that was making an evening run back to Accra.

Yes, he promised his mother, before the bus roared away, he would be back.

"The fact that they are quarreling shows the strains rural people live under in this country," he said on the way back to the capital. "At one level, they are arguing on a customary level, invoking traditions and making threats about witchcraft. At another, they are working according to the norms of the commercial economy and their desire to control as much land for themselves as possible."

He slipped easily, eagerly, into the jargon of sociology. His spirits lifted. In all likelihood, he faced an ugly fight with Margaret when he got back home. But that did not darken his mood. As Stella listened passively, he lectured. The impersonal language of his city profession gave him a comforting distance from the demands of his village and his family—and from that part of himself that remains tied to both.

\*She walked five miles with the fifty-pound load on her head. Researchers in biomechanics have found that African women can carry up to 20 percent of their body weight on their heads while burning no more energy than if they were carrying nothing at all. Physiologists speculate that women, who start carrying heavy loads at about age twelve, have learned how to walk with extraordinary smoothness, with no back-and-forth oscillation. They also suspect the women have adapted their spines to carry loads with bones rather than muscles. When Western women or men attempt to carry such weight, researchers found, they hurt their necks.