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Do lineage-based inheritance norms matter in kinship care arrangements? Exploring inheritance paths in grandparent kinship care practice in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Kinship lineage and inheritance norms in Ghana play a significant role in shaping family decisions. Research has shown that kinship lineage and inheritance norms determine kin membership for children by specifying whether they belong to their maternal or paternal family, as well as whether they can inherit properties of their biological father or mother. The notion of kinship membership has shaped parenting and child welfare practices in Ghana, including child maintenance payments and parental neglectful behaviours. This research explored whether kinship-based inheritance norms could influence decisions about selecting a grandmother (maternal vs. paternal grandmother) as a child's caregiver. We interviewed 31 grandmothers from matrilineal and patrilineal communities in Ghana to understand how their lineage and inheritance norms influenced the kinship placement processes for children who were living under their care. The findings were mixed, with only three grandmothers confirming the role of inheritance norms in their kinship care arrangements. Most of the grandmothers reported that the influence of kinship lineage and inheritance norms has weakened due to the following reasons: (i) the intestate succession law; (ii) discrimination due to inheritance norms; and (iii) the proliferation of interethnic marriages. The findings highlight the child welfare implications of inheritance norms.

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Introduction

Sociologically, kinship is considered the foundation of society and the pathway on which families are organized (Tenkorang, 2024). According to Kludze (1983, p. 60), kinship constitutes an 'extended group of a lineal descent from a common ancestress [matrilineal] or ancestor [patrilineal]' for socialization and the distribution of wealth.

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Membership of a kinship group is therefore determined by customary rules on descent and lineage formations (Abdullah et al., 2023; Awusabo-Asare, 1990; La Ferrara & Milazzo, 2017). Sustainance of the kinship structure is believed to be achieved only through succession and inheritance paths dictated by customary rules (Awusabo-Asare, 1990). For instance, individuals in matrilineal systems in Ghana trace their membership of a kinship group through their mother's line and are mandated to only inherit their mothers' properties (Awusabo-Asare, 1990; La Ferrara & Milazzo, 2017). Growing research in Ghana has demonstrated how these kinship lineage and inheritance practices influence child welfare and family wellbeing issues, including childcare (Manful & Abdullah, 2021), child maintenance payments (Awortwe et al., 2020), and intimate partner violence (Sedziafa & Tenkorang, 2016; Tenkorang, 2024). But little research has examined how kinship lineage and inheritance practices influence grandparent kinship care arrangements for children who may need alternative care in Ghana.

We postulate that because these kinship lineages and inheritance practices specify a child's membership in a kinship group and determine their eligibility to succeed the properties of either of their biological parents (paternal or maternal), it could influence decisions about which of the grandparents of the child (maternal or paternal) would be selected to raise the child as the kinship caregiver. This research will explore this assumption by examining how kinship lineage and inheritance norms influence grandparenting kinship care arrangements in matrilineal and patrilineal communities in Ghana.

Grandparent kinship care refers to grandparents (either maternal or paternal) who serve as primary caregivers in raising their grandchildren (Bentum et al., 2024; Washington et al., 2018; Winokur et al., 2018). Grandparenting kinship care is common in Ghana and many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, including Senegal, Tanzania, Burkina-Faso, and Nigeria, as it is considered a pathway to maintain lineage structures (Akresh, 2009; Bachan, 2014; Beck et al., 2015; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985; Lawson et al., 2017), foster family bonds (Abdullah et al., 2020), and transmit cultural norms and traditional practices (Imoh, 2012). Kinship care arrangements in Ghana are also regulated by kinship norms within specific communities (Cudjoe et al., 2019; Kuyini et al., 2009; Maundeni & Malinga-Musamba, 2013). Grandparenting kinship care in Ghana is arranged and coordinated informally by members within the kinship group without the involvement of social workers or other child protection professionals (Bentum et al., 2024; Cudjoe et al., 2019; Kuyini et al., 2009).

Kinship lineage and inheritance practice: A sociological analysis focusing on Ghana

According to Nukunya (2003), a sociologist, kinship and descent systems form the basis of social life in Ghana and the foundation for collective practices that maintain shared cultural norms. Nukunya (2003) argued that people who are members of a kinship group have a shared belief that they are descendants of a common ancestor or ancestress, who is often putative. Customary rules are defined to establish how membership of a kinship group should be established through a process referred to as *Descent* (Abdullah et al., 2023; Fortes, 1969; Nukunya, 2003). Descent describes 'the processes of drawing a direct genealogical connection between an individual and their forebears for the purposes

of recruitment into a kin group' (Abdullah et al., 2023, p. 2). If the common ancestor of the group is a female, then the group will draw their membership through the maternal line, known as a matrilineal kinship system. A patrilineal kinship system will be formed if the common ancestor is a male. In patrilineal kinship systems, only males can pass on kin membership to their offspring and children are considered part of their father's kinship group. Whereas in matrilineal kin groups, only females can pass on kin membership to their children, and children are considered a part of their mother's kin group (Siegal, 1972; Tenkorang, 2024).

Most African countries are known to practice the patrilineal kinship system, including countries like Sudan and Eswatini (previously Swaziland). Angola, Zambia, Malawi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) largely practice matrilineal systems (Siegal, 1972). However, different ethnic groups in Ghana are noted for practicing different kinship lineage systems. Specifically, the Akan ethnic group, comprising the Asantes, Bono, Fante, Akuapem, and Akyem, is a typical matrilineal kinship group in Ghana (Gocking, 2005; Sedziafa & Tenkorang, 2016; Tenkorang, 2024). Statistically, the larger Akan ethnic group, which practices matrilineal kinship systems, constitutes over 47.5% of the entire Ghanaian population; they occupy the southwestern part of the country (Sedziafa & Tenkorang, 2016). It is argued that the ancestors of the Akan ethnic group are among the early settlers in present-day Ghana (Gocking, 2005). Notable ethnic groups in Ghana that practice patrilineal kinship systems include the Ewe, Ga Adagme and other smaller tribes in the northern parts of Ghana (Kutsoati & Morck, 2012).

The kinship lineage system provides privileges, status, wealth, and resources to members according to customary rules (Moscona et al., 2017; Sedziafa & Tenkorang, 2016). Women in matrilineal systems are known to wield more power, privileges, respect, and influence (Tenkorang, 2024). Whereas in patrilineal systems, men have more power and influence, including decision-making powers (La Ferrara, 2007). For example, women in matrilineal cultures in Malawi have access and control over resources and properties within the lineage, including land (Kathewera-Banda et al., 2011; Liwewe, 2008). But this control and advantages shift to the men's side in patrilineal systems. Hakansson (1994) reports that male kin members in patrilineal communities in eastern and southern Africa control land, cattle, income, and employment.

A key aspect of the kinship lineage structure is the customary rules and rights that govern children's inheritance of their parents' properties (La Ferrara, 2007; La Ferrara & Milazzo, 2017). People within maternal kinship groups descend and inherit properties, rights, and privileges from their maternal ancestors, whereas those from the paternal kinship groups descend and inherit through their paternal ancestors (Sedziafa & Tenkorang, 2016; Takyi & Gyimah, 2007). For example, children (mostly sons) in patrilineal systems inherit their fathers' properties. But a man's children in a matrilineal system do not inherit his properties because they don't belong to his kinship group. Instead, a man's properties in matrilineal systems are transferred to males of his maternal family, including sons of a uterine sister, a man's uterine brother, and sons of the deceased mother's sister (La Ferrara & Milazzo, 2017). Therefore, in a matrilineal system, such as that of the Asantes in Ghana, a son's affiliation with his father's family group is often reduced, not as a direct consequence of exclusion, but in alignment with inheritance norms that do not recognize him as a successor to his father's property. The

impact of the kinship lineage system on inheritance, membership and belonging within a family may influence decisions about which grandparent (maternal or paternal) will be chosen as a kinship caregiver.

Influence of kinship lineage-inheritance in childcare and family welfare

Research evidence highlights how kinship lineage structures and associated inheritance practices influence child welfare and family wellbeing issues. Takyi and Nii-Amoo Dodoo's (2005) study, using demographic and health surveys, found that women in matrilineal lineage structures in Ghana had greater influence and control over their reproductive decisions (including when to give birth and how many children they should have) than non-matrilineal women. Also, Manful and Abdullah's (2021) study in Ghana found that men from a matrilineal system neglected their children and parenting duties because they considered the children to be part of their mothers' family. They also held the view that the children would not take care of them in their old age because they do not hold any strong cultural bond or allegiance with them. A similar result was reported by Awortwe et al. (2020) regarding noncustodial fathers' commitment to paying child maintenance (child support) fees in Kumasi-Ghana as evidenced in the quote below:

... My wife and her mother constantly tell my own children that I'm the stranger in the family just because they won't inherit me. So, how do you expect me to keep dying for the children when they have been brainwashed this way? (p. 5)

However, the influence of kinship lineage and inheritance norms on child welfare issues was expected to diminish in Ghana due to urbanization and globalization (Nukunya, 2003), and the effects of the Intestate Succession Law, 1985 (PNDCL 111). The Intestate Succession Law, 1985 (PNDCL 111) radically changed inheritance transmission rules within matrilineal groups (especially Akans in Ghana) (La Ferrara & Milazzo, 2017). It provided a formal structure for inheritance and the disposal of a parent's properties among their children in the absence of a will. The law specified that children are among the primary beneficiaries of their parents' properties (Woodman, 1985). Also, the law granted children (both male and female) the right to inherit their parent's properties, regardless of the community's system of kinship-based inheritance rules (La Ferrara & Milazzo, 2017).

Studies examining the influence of intestate succession law on kinship lineage and inheritance practices have revealed that it has impacted parents' commitments to their children's education. La Ferrara and Milazzo (2017) argued that before the passage of the Intestate Succession Law, 1985 (PNDCL 111), mothers in matrilineal systems reported increased investments towards the education of their sons to compensate for the loss of them not succeeding their lands, farms, and other properties. However, their levels of investment diminished after the passage of the Intestate Succession Law (La Ferrara & Milazzo, 2017). Empirical results from their study showed that children (especially males) in matrilineal systems received less educational investment by their mothers, compared to their patrilineal counterparts (La Ferrara & Milazzo, 2017). The changes in mothers' investment levels in their son's education are attributed to the son's eligibility to benefit from and succeed their resources, including lands and

properties, due to the Intestate Succession Law. This evidence shows how kinship lineage and inheritance norms affect parenting decisions (La Ferrara & Milazzo, 2017; Platteau, 2015). It also highlights how parents address the shortfalls of inheritance norms and their effects on children.

However, recent findings on the influence of kinship inheritance norms on child maintenance payments (Awortwe et al., 2020), childcare, and parental neglect (Manful & Abdullah, 2021), may suggest that inheritance norms still influence family decisions. It is therefore possible that it could affect decisions about grandparent kinship care arrangements. Indeed, recent studies have demonstrated the effects of matrilineal vs patrilineal inheritance norms on divorce, separation, and intimate partner violence (IPV) (Sedziafa & Tenkorang, 2016; Takyi & Gyimah, 2007; Tenkorang, 2024). Takyi and Gyimah (2007) found higher rates of divorce and separation among matrilineal women compared to patrilineal women. This is because women in matrilineal kinship systems have greater economic independence, control, and autonomy over decisions within the marriage. It is therefore not surprising that women from matrilineal societies in Ghana (Sedziafa & Tenkorang, 2016) and the DRC (Lowe, 2020) were reported to have experienced less physical and sexual violence than women in patrilineal systems. This study explores how the kinship lineage and inheritance norms influence a family's decision about whether a child should be raised by their maternal or paternal grandmother as a kinship caregiver. It seeks to answer the following two questions:

1. What are grandparents' experiences and views on how kinship lineage and inheritance norms shape grandparenting kinship care arrangements in Ghana?
2. What factors have strengthened or weakened the role of kinship lineage and inheritance norms on grandparenting kinship care arrangements?

Methods

Study design and approach

This research is part of a doctoral thesis conducted by the first author, focusing on the cultural aspects of grandparent kinship care arrangements in Ghana. The dissertation specifically explored how cultural norms on inheritance influence kinship care arrangements, as well as how cultural beliefs on witchcraft accusations towards elderly people motivate the abuse of grandparent caregivers by children in their care (Bentum et al., 2024, 2026). The research used a qualitative exploratory design. Specifically, a narrative approach to qualitative research guided the study. According to Riessman (2008), a narrative qualitative approach focuses on stories about events and personal experiences, oral and life histories. The narrative approach enables researchers to generate detailed stories about specific events, lived experiences, and life histories, such as those of grandparent kinship care. Through narrative research strategies, researchers can analyse and tease out the meanings people associate with life events, personal experiences, and life histories, and unpack how these meanings influence people's decisions and practices (Riessman, 2008). Through the narrative approach, we explored how the Ghanaian collective family norm on inheritance and lineages influences kinship care arrangements, practices, and decisions.

Participants and recruitment

The study participants consisted of 31 grandmothers, who were kinship caregivers, from four communities in the Greater Accra and Ashanti regions of Ghana. The Greater Accra and Ashanti regions are the two most populous regions in Ghana, with an estimated population of 5,455,692 and 5,440,463, respectively (Ghana Statistical Service, 2022). They are regarded as cosmopolitan areas but with contrasting cultural practices due to their unique ethnic composition (Ghana Statistical Service, 2022). The Ashanti region is the traditional settlement area for the Akan, who practice matrilineal inheritance systems, whereas the Greater Accra region is primarily occupied by the Ga ethnic group, who practice patrilineal inheritance (Tenkorang, 2024). Four communities (two from each region) were selected following consultations with a cultural expert at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and the regional department of social welfare.

The recruitment of grandmothers within the communities followed the horizontal network sampling approach (Geddes et al., 2018). This approach is a form of purposive sampling that is useful for recruiting participants who are connected within a network. Specifically, it is useful for selecting participants who have some level of contact or knowledge about each other. This ensured that we were able to recruit eligible grandmother kinship caregivers based on the recommendations of other grandmothers. Horizontal network sampling was deemed appropriate for selecting grandmothers in this study because of the grandmothers' level of knowledge about other grandmothers gained through community activities, such as 'Nmaa Kuo' (women's association groups) in Ghana (Bentum et al., 2024). Also the approach was considered a feasible sampling strategy because of the challenges of recruiting participants online due to the high illiteracy rate among the eligible population.

We recruited eligible grandmothers by first making contact with the four local government representatives (assemblymen/women) in the four selected communities. The representatives served as gatekeepers by facilitating entry into their communities and connecting the researchers with eight eligible grandmothers (two per community) within their respective communities. An additional 39 grandmothers were contacted through the networks of the eight grandmothers who had been previously contacted by local government representatives. Thus 47 grandmothers were contacted by the researchers for potential recruitment as interview participants.

The recruitment of grandmothers was guided by the criteria for the broader doctoral dissertation: First, the grandmothers were required to be at least 65 years old. Second, they were required to be caring for a grandchild who was genealogically connected to them (as a kinship caregiver) on a full-time basis for a minimum of six months. The age requirement was consistent with research evidence that most grandparents in Ghana are older than 60 (Geest, 2004; Kpessa-Whyte, 2018). Also the six months' caregiving experience requirement ensured that grandparents could reflect on their current experiences regarding how inheritance norms influenced the kinship care arrangements. Thirty-one of the 47 grandmothers who were contacted met the inclusion criteria and agreed to be interviewed. The 31 grandmothers comprised 11 from the two communities in the Greater Accra region and 20 from the two communities in the Ashanti region. Interviews were arranged with the 31 grandmothers to explore their views and experiences of how inheritance norms influence grandparent kinship care practices in Ghana.

Each grandmother was asked to complete a consent form before she participated in the interviews. The consent form and information sheet, which contained information about the research objectives, benefits, and the risks of participating, were read and explained to each grandmother. The consent form also detailed the grandmothers' right not to answer some questions (if necessary) as well as their right to withdraw from the study without any consequences. All 31 grandmothers provided their consent to participate in the study through either verbal consent, thumbprint, or written signature. The research protocol, including the interview guide, consent forms, information sheet, and risk management strategies, was approved by the Human Ethics Research Committee of Edith Cowan University, Australia.

Data collection

In-depth interviews were conducted with the grandmothers using a semi-structured interview guide. The guide contained open-ended questions that were developed based on the study objectives. Examples of key open-ended questions included: (1) In what ways do you think inheritance norms (matrilineal vs. patrilineal) are influencing grandparent kinship care practices in contemporary Ghana? (2) What practices or factors have affected the strength of inheritance norms in kinship care in Ghana? (3) Can you share a story of how inheritance norms influenced the kinship care arrangement for any of the children under your care? The use of a semi-structured interview approach ensured that we (the researchers) could use strategies, such as paraphrasing and probing, to elicit detailed responses and examples.

Although the research was informed by the narrative approach, some of the interview questions (including follow-up questions) sought to generate detailed insights on the influence of inheritance norms on kinship care and the factors that contributed to the strengthening or weakening of inheritance norms in kinship placement. These questions allowed the grandmothers to share their broader perspectives and opinions in addition to their experiences. Therefore, the narrative research principles of storytelling are applied loosely in this research.

The interviews were conducted by the lead author between July and December 2023. All interviews were conducted at the grandmothers' residences, and were audio recorded following the participants' consent. All but one of the interviews was conducted using the Twi language (a common lingua franca spoken in the area of the study). The remaining interview was conducted using the Ga language with the assistance of an interpreter. The interpreter interpreted Ga responses provided by the respondent into English during data collection. The interpreter was a master's student at a university in Ghana, and was trained by the research team to have a detailed knowledge of the research. The lead researcher is fluent in the Twi language, thus, was able to conduct the 30 interviews without the need for an interpreter. The interviews spanned on average 90 min. A gift amounting to 40 Ghana cedis (USD 2.5 at the time of the interviews) was given to the grandmothers for their time.

Data analysis

The audio recordings of the interviews were translated and typed into English by the research team using Microsoft Word. Thus both translation from Twi to English and

transcription occurred simultaneously. The transcripts of the interviews were reviewed and read by the research team to correct any grammatical and translation errors. The proofread (vetted) transcripts were analysed following the narrative thematic analysis strategy by Fraser (2006) using NVivo 12. In doing so, the transcripts were read at least twice. Common narratives from the data were labelled in NVivo and merged to form holistic stories and perspectives. The holistic stories were analysed based on how they addressed the study's objectives. Specifically, we segmented the holistic stories to identify common themes. Each segmented story was labelled using common phrases within the narratives. Some of the labels were 'Effect of wills', 'It reflects discrimination', and 'Ashanti and matrilineal'. Stories and perspectives within each label were reviewed and merged with others to form themes. Each theme was reviewed to identify and note the cultural nuances for the purposes of reporting. This review enabled the researchers to unpack different inheritance paths (matrilineal vs. patrilineal) and how they affect kinship care arrangements in Ghana. The entire analysis, involving the story segmentation and labelling process, was led by the lead author and validated by the second author. Minor discrepancies that emerged were resolved through consultation with the third and fourth authors during fortnightly project meetings. Finally, the themes and associated stories were considered at the cultural level to highlight cultural nuances within the stories. The cultural-level analysis enabled the researchers to assess the impacts of grandmothers' cultural backgrounds on the stories they narrated.

Characteristics of the study participants

Twenty of the grandmothers in this study were selected from Ejisu and Mampong in the Ashanti region, and 11 were recruited from Teshie and Nungua in the Greater Accra region. Twenty-four of the grandmothers identified with the matrilineal kinship system, while seven identified with the patrilineal system. Comments by three of the 31 grandmothers indicated that their kinship care arrangements are in line with the inheritance expectations of their biological children (the parents of the grandchildren). The grandmothers were predominantly petty traders and farmers, who were aged between 65 and 90, and earned between 500 and 1500 Ghana cedis per month. Most of the grandmothers ($n = 15$) had a basic education (primary school) or diploma degrees ($n = 2$) as their highest educational qualifications. Each grandmother had at least one child living under their care as kinship caregivers, and most of them ($n = 16$) were caring for more than one child.

Findings

Narratives from the grandparents revealed a global theme (overarching or broad theme) relating to the relevance of inheritance norms in kinship care placement and three sub-themes about the factors that have strengthened or weakened the role of inheritance norms in kinship placement. The sub-themes were: (1) will and intestate succession laws; (2) the notion of discrimination; and (3) the proliferation of interethnic marriages. These themes and the global theme are presented below, supported with quotes from study participants.

Inheritance still prevails but is weakened

Narratives by the grandmothers in this study were mixed, with most confirming that the influence of inheritance norms has weakened in recent decades. Most of the grandparents were emphatic that inheritance norms had no impact on their kinship placement. Only three of the 31 grandmothers discussed the influence of inheritance norms during their kinship care arrangement. A grandmother described how she was chosen as the preferred kinship caregiver due to her inheritance norms:

... when my daughter died, the family met after the funeral to discuss the potential kinship carer for her two children. Although, their father's mother expressed interest in taking care of the children, but the family head decided that I should take care of them due to our matrilineal system. So, that is how they came to live with me. I can confirm that they are doing very well. (P3, matrilineal inheritance)

The narrative suggests that family heads could play an important role in kinship care placement by determining or affirming the lineal grandmother as the selected kinship caregiver. Another grandmother, from the patrilineal system, shared her view on how her husband, who is a family head, followed the patrilineal system in deciding kinship care arrangements:

My husband is the family head now. So, whenever there is an issue involving kinship arrangement in the family, especially for orphaned children, he (as the family head) is involved, of which he follows our patrilineal system in determining who should be given the caregiving role. He normally discusses some of these issues with me. (P29, patrilineal inheritance)

The comment above highlight the role of family heads, who are often males, in the kinship care arrangement. Comments by other grandmothers show that inheritance norms have remained relevant in kinship care due to the potential benefits to families, especially in instances of inheriting family properties.

... Inheritance norms are important because it has impact on succession. So, your side of the family might lose properties in future if you do not follow the inheritance paths to ensure that your granddaughters/sons inherit the properties of their parents. (P12, matrilineal inheritance)

The view shared by this grandmother suggests that the motivation to adhere to inheritance norms in grandparent kinship care arrangements may be informed by the prospect of children benefiting from their parents' properties.

However, most grandmothers argued that inheritance norms do not influence kinship arrangements in contemporary Ghana. The grandmothers who commented about these arrangements mainly shared broader opinions, beyond their personal circumstances.

... in the old days, yes, like 30 years ago. But now, no one takes that into account. They are only concerned about who has the capability and resources to raise the children ... the grandmother is considered to have the strength and resources to take care of the child, will be considered irrespective of what the inheritance practice may suggest. (P4, matrilineal inheritance)

Although it may be accurate that most kinship care arrangements do not follow inheritance, the views and claims that no one follows inheritance norms may not

represent the facts. At least three of the participants in this study confirmed that their kinship care arrangements were largely informed by inheritance norms. Also, participants' views may be limited to happenings within their community.

Details of the factors that have contributed to weakening the influence of inheritance norms in kinship care placement in Ghana are discussed under the following themes: (1) Wills and Intestate Succession Law, (2) Notion of Discrimination, and (3) Proliferation of Interethnic Marriages.

Wills and intestate succession law

Although only four of the grandmothers in this study reported having wills, most argued that the passage of the Intestate Succession Law and increased education about wills had streamlined inheritance processes and weakened traditional inheritance norms. They argued that because the intestate succession law and wills provide a structured process of inheritance, families and communities do not appreciate the need to follow inheritance norms, at least in childcare matters, since it brings no benefit to families. A grandmother shared her opinion on this:

... after the introduction of the intestate succession law by ex-president Jerry John Rawlings, people have changed to focus away from children inheriting the properties of their parents. Because the law makes it legal that the children will benefit from the properties of their parents regardless of who raises the children. (P22, matrilineal inheritance)

This comment suggests that the introduction of policies on inheritance, such as *the intestate succession law*, may have influenced how inheritance norms are considered in kinship care arrangements. Another grandmother corroborated this by sharing her opinion on how an increased awareness of wills influences inheritance norms and kinship care arrangements:

... these days everyone knows about will. Parents as young as 34 years are encouraged to have a will. So, there is no need for us to follow the inheritance paths in deciding who raises the grandchildren, maternal or paternal grandmother. Because there is no extra benefit to the family in terms of succession. The law will be applied as per the person's will or the intestate succession will be used. (P1, matrilineal inheritance)

These narratives suggest that the implicit rationale of the inheritance norms in kinship care was to safeguard succession of the properties of the parents. Another grandmother shared her view, explaining that contemporary understandings of property ownership have shaped the importance of inheritance norms within kinship care arrangements:

It is changing because in these days, whatever belongs to a father also belongs to the child. In so doing, the child can also relate perfectly with his father's family. In past time, importance was greatly given to nephews and nieces but these days, it is not like that again. Therefore, inheritance norms don't really work in arrangement about childcare. (P15, matrilineal inheritance)

Although parents having a will are largely considered a positive thing, the views shared by the grandmothers in this study show that it could affect how inheritance norms are considered in grandparent kinship care arrangements. Another grandmother commented on the potential negative effects of wills and intestate succession laws on kinship care

arrangements. She argued that the strengthening of wills and intestate succession laws has led to a decline in the overall acceptance of kinship care placement, since these laws emphasize the nuclear family structure at the expense of the extended family:

These days a lot of people do not practice it but there are still a few who still enforce these practices. The reason why the practice is gradually changing is that, at first if you have a male child, you were counted among the lucky ones. All the properties that your son makes were counted to be part of the family's property. However, these days, things are not like that. All the properties of the male child is now for the wife and the son or children. Due to this reason, most people do not want to accept the children of their male children. They want their wives to take care of them because if there is a property to inherit, they will be the ones to benefit. However, in the past things were not like that. The property of your son was for the entire family based on the inheritance norms. And this includes his mother and his nephews. (P9, patrilineal inheritance)

This narrative suggests that the will and intestate succession laws appear to be designed to favour nuclear family structures over extended family structures, which then affects how external family members, such as grandparents, commit to caring for children as kinship caregivers.

Notion of discrimination

Some of the grandmothers attributed inheritance norms in kinship care arrangements to notions of discrimination. They argued that the practice discriminates against grandparents who might be capable of raising their grandchildren, whereas others suggested it has led to some grandmothers declining to accept kinship care duties for their grandchildren due to inheritance norms. A grandmother shared her opinion about how inheritance norms, in terms of kinship care placement, are changing because it is seen as discriminatory:

... ooow, no. Not today. Most people describe the inheritance norms as discrimination because it denied you (the grandmother) the opportunity to raise your grandchildren even when you are capable and have the resources. (P19, patrilineal inheritance)

Other grandmothers explained their preparedness to accept kinship care placement of their grandchildren (whether maternally or paternally related) as they labelled the inheritance norms as discriminatory. The following three quotes summarize these assertions:

I will care for the children of my sons just like I will do for my daughter. I believe that when you take good care of the male's children they will choose to remain there irrespective of the norm. In our family, we do not discriminate in such manner. I do not explain to my grandchildren the difference between the maternal grandchildren and the paternal grandchildren. I regard all of them as equals. (P21, matrilineal inheritance)

Even though it is predominantly said in Akan tradition that the child of a male grows in his father's house but he doesn't remain there, I will still provide for them when necessary. In our house, we do not discriminate against the children of the male siblings. (P11, matrilineal inheritance)

I believe all grandparents who are Christians will never discriminate when it comes to caring for her grandchildren. If I take myself as an example, I have accepted to live with two grandchildren who are children of my sons. I did this because I have the fear of God in me. There

are some grandparents who will not accept to live with them. I am not bothered at all at the notion that one day they will move back to their mother's house. For me, it is an honour to have my grandchildren at my feet to be trained. (P31, matrilineal inheritance)

These narratives, including the grandmothers' experiences, reflect the changing notions of inheritance norms in contemporary Ghana. They suggest that Christian religious teachings, families' views of inheritance norms, and grandmothers' personal commitment to childcare influence their description of inheritance norms as discriminatory, in the context of grandparent kinship care arrangements. Indeed, one grandmother argued that those who decline to accept kinship care placement due to inheritance do not have love for humanity:

Oh no. Initially, it was a common practice based on our cultural beliefs. However, currently it is not practised as before. It will be hard for anybody to reject his/her grandchildren irrespective of whose child it is. If someone can do that, then the person has no love. For me, I will gladly accept to live with everybody's child. (P13, patrilineal inheritance)

Proliferation of interethnic marriages

Most of the grandmothers in this study argued that the proliferation of marriages between people from different ethnic backgrounds has weakened commitment to inheritance norms. They argued that marriages involving people with different inheritance paths (matrilineal vs. patrilineal) create complexity regarding the inheritance paths of the children, which further complicates kinship care arrangements. A grandmother explained this in detail:

Things have changed a lot in the last few years. We are now seeing a lot of marriages involving Ashantis (matrilineal) and Gas or other people who practice patrilineal system. So, you will always have children who might have different inheritances paths for their mothers and fathers. This sometimes creates tension and lead to some families ignoring the inheritance norms. (P27, matrilineal inheritance)

The narrative above suggests that inheritance could become complicated for children whose parents come from communities with contrasting inheritance paths, such as matrilineal and patrilineal inheritance. A grandmother confirmed this by sharing her experience of how she became the caregiver of her maternal granddaughter:

We Ashantis practice matrilineal system, but my daughter married a Ga, who are patrilineal. They experienced difficulties at some point and wanted one of the grandparents to take care of their child until things settle for them. My daughter was worried that her husband might not agree for her to send the child to live with me because of his patrilineal inheritance norm. But I explained to her the complexity of the situation; since she has the right to also send the daughter to live with me because of our matrilineal system. Eventually, her husband accepted that the child should come and stay with me because we all agreed that inheritance path is complex for the child and its best for us to concentrate on her wellbeing. (P30, matrilineal inheritance)

It appears that children from parents with different inheritance paths may have the benefit of living with either family or grandparents, as kinship carers, due to the complexity surrounding their lineage paths. A grandmother shared her opinion based on what she has observed in the community:

It is not easy to decide the inheritance paths for a child whose parents come from ethnic groups with different inheritance paths. What I have seen in this community is that such children usually get the opportunity to live with either of the grandparents or families' (P16, patrilineal inheritance).

Discussion

This study explored the influence of kinship lineage and inheritance norms on grandparent kinship care arrangements in Ghana. It also examined the factors that have contributed to strengthening or weakening the impact of the kinship lineage and inheritance norms on grandparent kinship care arrangements. Kinship care arrangements are embedded within the cultural and social fabric of Ghanaian communities (Geest, 2004; Kuyini et al., 2009), and are influenced by cultural norms, including norms of community and family cohesion (Abdullah et al., 2020; Abdullah et al., 2020). This study specifically explored how the kinship customary norms of inheritance in matrilineal and patrilineal systems influence decisions on grandparenting arrangements.

Narratives and opinions by the grandmothers in this study about the influence of inheritance norms in grandparent kinship care arrangements were mixed, although most argued that its influence has weakened. Broadly, the findings regarding the diminishing influence of inheritance norms in kinship care practices corroborate Nukunya's (2016) claim that traditional kinship norms have weakened in contemporary Ghana due to urbanization and modernization. When discussing how grandparent kinship care arrangements are made and the factors that are considered, some of the grandmothers shared their views suggesting that grandparents' ability to raise their grandchildren is considered when making decisions about selecting grandparenting kinship caregivers, rather than relying solely on inheritance norms. Grandparents' capacity and ability to raise their grandchildren could be more favoured in contemporary kinship care arrangements in Ghana because of extant evidence on financial hardships faced by kinship caregivers (Abdullah et al., 2020; Baker & Mutchler, 2010; Mutchler & Baker, 2009; Polvere et al., 2018). Therefore, it is possible that decision makers, such as family heads, could consider a grandparent's financial standing and their ability to provide adequate care before confirming a kinship care arrangement.

The focus on grandparents' parenting capacity in kinship care arrangements suggests that the kinship caregiver selection process in some Ghanaian communities considers some of the established practices in countries that practice formal kinship care (Coleman & Wu, 2016; Wu et al., 2023). However, the grandmothers did not specify how and which capabilities of the caregivers are considered in the kinship caregiver selection process. Hence, the evidence should be interpreted with caution, as it was mainly based on the grandmothers' opinions, with no evidence regarding how their capabilities are assessed. Additionally, the perspective that grandmother kinship caregivers are selected based on their capability contradicts Cudjoe et al.'s (2019) findings in rural Ghana about unprepared caregivers who were selected by their family heads to serve as kinship caregivers. Although kinship care practices, including kinship carer selection processes, may be different in rural and urban Ghana, studies that explore how the capabilities of kinship caregivers are assessed in both rural and urban communities could provide further insights into the current findings.

Most of the grandparents argued that the influence of inheritance norms has diminished in their communities. The introduction of the intestate succession law and the uptake of wills were some factors grandmothers cited as contributing to the diminishing effect of inheritance norms in childcare. The grandmothers in this study argued that the Intestate Succession Law, 1985 (PNDCL 111), has made it possible for all children of a deceased parent to benefit from their property, irrespective of whether a will is in place or not. This affirms the primary rationale of the Intestate Succession Law, 1985 (PNDCL 111), which was to address the discrimination and injustices faced by children due to inheritance norms that denied them the right to inherit their parents' properties (La Ferrara & Milazzo, 2017). However, Gedzi's (2014) study among the Anlo (patrilineal) and Asante (matrilineal) communities revealed that several communities do not conform to the Intestate Succession Law, 1985 (PNDCL 111), citing reasons such as cultural imposition. Participants in both communities argued that the framers of the Intestate Succession Law 1985 did not consider the unique cultural traditions that informed customary norms on inheritance (La Ferrara & Milazzo, 2017). Hence, they perceived the Intestate Succession Law, 1985 (PNDCL 111) as a form of cultural imposition. Indeed, evidence on the impact of the proliferation of interethnic marriages on kinship caregiver selection highlights loopholes in the Intestate Succession Law, 1985 (PNDCL 111).

Furthermore, the grandmothers indicated that several grandparent kinship care arrangements are not made in accordance with inheritance norms because these norms could discriminate against grandparents who are capable of raising their grandchildren. They argued that a paternal grandmother who might be capable of raising a grandchild in a matrilineal system would be denied the opportunity because of the inheritance norms favouring the maternal grandmother, who might not be capable. Discrimination against children's rights to inherit properties of their parents was cited as a core reason why the Intestate Succession Law was promulgated (Gedzi, 2014). Our findings suggest that the inheritance norms could also discriminate against grandmothers by denying them the right to raise their grandchildren as kinship caregivers due to the kinship lineage and inheritance norms. Indeed, some grandmothers expressed their willingness to raise their grandchildren even if the children are not considered part of their kinship group or if the children will return to live with their kinship group. Analytically, and from a child welfare perspective, a grandmother's willingness to overlook the disadvantages of inheritance norms and care for her grandchildren is positive. It shows that these grandmothers will be motivated when caring for these children. But it is important to note that some narratives suggest that there are grandparents who may decline to care for grandchildren who are not considered part of their kinship group, following kinship lineage and inheritance norms.

Despite 28 of the grandmothers in this study arguing that inheritance norms were not considered during their kinship care arrangements, three of them confirmed that the customary rules in their matrilineal or patrilineal kinship systems had some influence in their selection as kinship caregivers of their grandchildren. These three grandmothers argued that decisions to adhere to the customary rules on kinship lineage and inheritance were motivated by the benefits associated with succession. In line with the inheritance norms, children within matrilineal kinship systems are considered part of their maternal kinship group. They are expected to inherit and succeed properties of their mothers, whereas those in patrilineal kinship systems belong to their paternal kinship group

and succeed and inherit properties of their fathers (La Ferrara & Milazzo, 2017; Sedziafa & Tenkorang, 2016; Tenkorang, 2024). Therefore, the sense of belonging through kinship membership and the incentive for children to inherit and succeed properties of their mothers or fathers were reported to have played a role in some families' decisions regarding which grandparent, either maternal or paternal, would be selected as the kinship caregiver. When customary rules of lineage and inheritance are prioritized, maternal grandmothers in matrilineal systems are deemed desirable to serve as the kinship caregiver of their grandchildren, whereas paternal grandmothers are favoured in patrilineal systems. However, it is important to emphasize that only three of the 31 grandmothers in this study mentioned that inheritance norms had some influence on their kinship care arrangements. As a result, a broader conclusion cannot be drawn from this finding.

Limitations

The study findings are limited to the views of grandmothers from four communities in Ghana. All four communities are either urban communities or rural communities close to urban centres. Thus the views expressed in this study might not reflect kinship care processes in more rural and remote communities in Ghana. Studies that focus on grandmothers in rural and remote communities could reveal other nuances, particularly about the influence of inheritance norms in kinship care arrangements. Also, it is possible that the inheritance norms could be influenced by the family structures (external or nuclear family structures). Studies that explore the influence of family structures could provide unique insights into the topic. Although only one participant mentioned the issue of Christian beliefs, religious teachings may intersect with families' commitment to inheritance norms in the context of childcare practices. Research that explores this interaction is strongly encouraged. Further, the findings on inter-ethnic marriages suggest that some children may have different ethnic identities with their grandmother kinship caregivers. Research that explores normative expectations and how kinship care arrangements align with normative expectations in inter-ethnic marriages are encouraged. Particularly, research focusing on the influence of the ethnic identities of the grandmothers and grandchildren in kinship care arrangements is needed. Understandings of inheritance norms and how they shape parenting and caregiving practices may vary across kinship and non-kinship arrangements as well as rural and urban communities. As a result, future studies could explore how inheritance norms influence parenting across diverse community settings to further unpack some of the contrasting findings reported in this study. For example, research involving the biological parents of children in different communities could investigate their uptake of wills and their perceptions of the intestate succession law. This line of inquiry is particularly important because awareness and use of the intestate succession law may be more common among grandmothers, for whom the law was more actively applied during their time compared to younger generations such as current biological parents.

Conclusion and recommendation

Grandparents caring for their grandchildren as kinship caregivers is a common and traditional practice in Ghana. This research explored whether the decision to send a child to

live with a maternal or paternal grandmother, as the kinship caregiver, is informed by cultural norms of kinship lineage and inheritance. The study findings showed mixed results, with 28 of the grandparents arguing that inheritance norms did not influence their kinship care arrangement. Only three of the participants (two matrilineal and one patrilineal) confirmed the role of inheritance norms in their kinship care selection. The introduction of the Intestate Succession Law, 1985 (PNDCL 111), and the proliferation of interethnic marriages were among the core factors that participants argued had contributed to weakening the influence of kinship lineage and inheritance norms.

The study findings have significant practice implications for grandparent kinship care arrangements in Ghana. Practically, the juxtaposition of traditional inheritance norms with the Intestate Succession Law, 1985 (PNDCL 111), and advancements in community education about the need for parents to have a will is important. Despite the perceived negative effects of wills on grandparents' willingness to accept kinship care placements, we recommend that measures regarding the need for parents to have a will should be continued and promoted due to their positive impacts on children. However, such measures should be accompanied by community sensitization on the rationale for wills and kinship care. The consideration of kinship care as a pathway to inheriting properties could undermine the child welfare rationale for kinship care practices, which are to promote the wellbeing, safety and protection of children in need of adequate parental care.

Data availability statement

Data for this project will be available upon request to the lead author, Hajara Bentum, at hbentum@our.ecu.edu.au.

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