How Children Feel About their Parents' Migration: A History of the Reciprocity of Care in Ghana

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Everyday Ruptures

Children, Youth, and Migration in Global Perspective

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Many studies of transnational family life have argued that transnational migration challenges norms and ideals of family life. Most of these studies have focused on the marital bond in which gender roles and household labor are redefined and contested in migrant households, but a few also examine how children of migrant mothers experience the loss of maternal affection and feel shortchanged when a mother migrates (Hondagneu and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2005; Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie 2002; Wolf 1997; more nuanced in this regard are Gamburd 2000; Glenn 1983; Olwig 1999; and Rae-Espinoza in this volume). These studies highlight how the mismatch between ideologies of family life and a new labor environment results in a renegotiation of those ideologies.

Lacking in this line of research is an appreciation of how family life is composed from a history of everyday ruptures. That is, family traditions, ideals, and norms have been negotiated over time, in contexts of continued instability and change induced by migration. Studies of globalization and transnational migration rarely reference earlier research on internal migration from the 1960s and 1970s, although many transnational migrants first migrated to a city or factory in their home country before going overseas (Sassen 1998; Trager 2005). Without this knowledge, we cannot fully understand ruptures that emerge under conditions of transnational migration. Family ideologies challenged by transnational migration may themselves be a product of a particular historical moment or particular economic conditions. They may have been forged during an
earlier period of internal or regional migration or an encounter with an earlier phase of global capitalism.

Families are crucial to the development of labor necessary for capitalism. Yet, fundamentally, "the family—with its unpaid labors, its allocation of work and resources by solidary social relations, its flows of values from the have to the have-nots, in brief, its kinship economy, not to mention the emotions associated with all this—the family is structurally an anticapitalist system" (Sahlins 2004, 147). One anticapitalist dynamic within families concerns "the reciprocities of care" and entrustments that come from the performance of parenting (Goody 1982; Shipston 2007). Although there are expectations that care of children and elderly will be reciprocated, equivalencies between resources and energy flows are not measured by the same standards as sales in the market. Instead, it is through reciprocities of care that the have in a family—particularly its working members in the prime of their lives—ensure the continued care of the have-nots, such as those who cannot work because of age, frailty, or sickness. Reciprocities of care are maintained by emotion, for emotions guide people in their actions and responses based on their understandings of what is right and their sense of personhood (Reddy 2002). This chapter examines the frictions and fault lines in the reciprocities of care between children and parents in Ghanaian transnational families to highlight the demands global capitalism places on families to ensure social and labor reproduction in particular historical periods.1

A Short History of Migration in Ghana

Legends recount how kingdoms and towns in West Africa were founded by wandering hunters and groups of people moving from one area to another (Johnson 2003; Kwamena-Puh 1973). Historically, people have also migrated as part of their individual paths to success, going far afield for new knowledge, skills, relationships, and trade and bringing these resources to their home communities to achieve wealth and status (Guyer 1993). Refugees and migrants have long been welcomed and incorporated into settled communities in West Africa, because powerful men required followers to indicate as well as generate their wealth and status (Guyer and Enos Belinga 1995). Transnational migration simply extends these migrations farther afield—as Paul Stoller (2002) puts it, New York City and Paris are the newest points on long-distance Hausa trade networks in West Africa.

International migration helped form an elite political and economic class in colonial and postcolonial Ghana, which became independent from Britain in 1957 and was previously known as the Gold Coast. During the 1950s and 1960s, some Ghanaians studied abroad in Europe or the United States for a few years and usually returned to take up high positions in the government bureaucracy, churches, schools, or hospitals. During the economically difficult and politically unstable 1970s and 1980s, international and regional migration increased as Ghanaians traveled to Nigeria and Libya (Twum-Baah, Nabilia, and Aryee 1995), but now every country in the world that is economically better off than Ghana is a potential destination—from the United Kingdom and Europe to Australia, South Africa, Israel, Japan, the Caribbean nations, and the United States. Statistician K. A. Twum-Baah (2005) estimates a population of 21 million Ghanaians resident in Ghana and another 1.5 million outside the country, although the European Union estimates between 2 and 4 million Ghanaians abroad, or 10 to 20 percent of the population (Eurostat/ NIDI 2004).

Currently, more Ghanaians would leave Ghana if they could, because they find it increasingly difficult to make a living and raise a family there, but it is generally members of the urban middle class who are able to migrate. Many migrants hope to return to Ghana once they have earned enough money to build a house, start a business, or pay for their children's education, although some are planning to remain abroad until retirement, finding it too difficult to earn enough in Ghana to sustain a middle-class life.

Ghanaian migrants, both men and women, primarily go abroad to work. Many migrate in the prime of their lives, between the ages of twenty and forty, when they also wish to marry and have children. Although women in Ghana manage to combine motherhood with income-generating activities quite easily, they do so in a context where other women and children over the age of eight are willing and available to assist with child care, whether for short periods of time or in more long-term arrangements known as child fostering, a common practice in West Africa (Ardayfo-Schandorff and Amissah 1996; Clark 1994; Goody 1982). However, many Ghanaian parents find that raising children abroad is difficult, given their work hours, the lack of affordable child care, and the lack of relatives to assist with child care. As a result, many find that sending their children to Ghana or having them stay there when they migrate makes better social and economic sense. Rather than spending six hundred dollars a month on child care abroad, they can send home two hun-
dred dollars and support both the child and the caregiver, generally an-
other family member such as a parent’s sister or mother who would also 
expect remittances from the migrant. A child can go to a well-regarded 
private school in Ghana rather than to schools in the lower-middle-class 
neighborhoods where parents tend to live in the United States. Instead 
of spending afternoons and evenings without parental supervision while 
the parent works long hours, children and adolescents will be better su-
ervised in Ghana, where there are more adults in the household, and 
more income generation is integrated into household work. Although 
they may raise their children in Ghana, many transnational migrants 
expect that their children will become migrants as well, particularly by 
the time they have completed secondary school (see Reynolds 2002 for 
a similar situation among Nigerian Igbo migrants to the United States). 
This is partly because of the competitive admissions policies of state uni-
versities in Ghana, but also because as young adults, they can begin to 
work and contribute to the household income.

Thus, many Ghanaian transnational families live in a situation that 
one child of Ghanaian migrant parents termed “scattered” — parents and 
children live apart from one another. It is striking that through these 
arrangements, transnational families may be distributing the costs of 
the care of children — and the training of the next generation of labor —
to their countries of origin (Meillassoux 1975). This chapter explores 
the feelings of children and parents about the situation of the scattered 
family, placing those feelings in the longer historical context of family 
life and migration in Ghana, in order to understand the discontinuities 
and continuities in Ghanaian family life. Social change may create new 
benefits for some, costs for others. While social change can lead to emo-
tional pain, emotional pain does not in itself signal social change; that is, 
one may experience emotional pain in a situation that is relatively stable.2

Understanding Family Life Today and in the Past

My contemporary data come from interviews and participant observa-
tion with people from all over southern Ghana—from the coastal areas 
of Cape Coast, Sekondi/Takoradi, and Accra; the hilly Eastern Region, 
and the inland Ashanti Region. I have been conducting participant ob-
servation in a Ghanaian church in a major East Coast city in the United 
States since 2004, and through contacts through the church, I inter-
viewed parents and young people who came to the United States as teen-
agers. Another set of interviews came through a visit to Ghana in the 
summer of 2005, when I visited the children and families of four parents 
I had interviewed in the United States. I also conducted focus-group in-
terviews with a total of forty-two students in three secondary schools 
and one private school in a town of approximately nine thousand people 
(Akropong in the Akwapem area of the Eastern Region) and a city of 
just over a million (Kumasi in the Ashanti Region). I also visited twenty-
ine of those students’ guardians, with whom I had informal, untaped 
conversations for about half an hour. I then interviewed those children’s 
parents who were living in North America (one was in Canada, the rest 
in the United States) in late 2005. Thus overall, this chapter is based 
on thirty-five interviews with parents (either singly or as a couple) and 
focus-group discussions or private interviews with fifty-two children.

The migrant parents interviewed in this chapter reflect the dimen-
sions of migration in Ghana. The period of parents’ residence in the 
United States ranged from one to thirty-five years, with an average stay 
of ten years. Fourteen (or 40 percent) were raising their children in 
Ghana; another fourteen were raising their children in the United States; 
and the remainder had children in both places. The most common occu-
pations of parents in Ghana were teaching, government work, and trad-
ing; in the United States, they tended to work in health-care or retail es-
tablishments. The majority (63 percent) had resided in a major city prior 
to migration. A minority (20 percent) had received a university degree in 
Ghana.

Similar data on families from earlier historical periods has been dif-
ficult to come by. One productive source has been records from family 
disputes heard in courts run by chiefs and elders in Akwapem, a cocoa-
growing area in the Eastern Region, and courts run by colonial officials 
in Accra, the capital, where Akwapem people sometimes had their cases 
heard, because of its relative proximity. The court records reveal rela-
tionships that were troublesome and conflictual at a particular historical 
moment, illuminating social fractures (Fallers 1969; Roberts 2005). Al-
though the court records differ in form from interview data, both can be 
mined for information about idealizations of family life as well as about 
areas of conflict between family members regarding the reciprocities 
of care. The court case data is supplemented by accounts of local Afri-
can Christians, catechists, and ministers in a Twi-language newspaper 
produced by the Basel Mission that was located in Akwapem and other 
parts of southern Ghana, as well as by oral history interviews conducted 
with cocoa farmers between 1955 and 1960 in Akwapem by geographer
Polly Hill, whose papers reside in the Herkowitz Library of African Studies at Northwestern University. Although the geographical locations of the court data do not correspond to those of the interview data, my argument based on the court cases supports the research of other scholars using historical data from the Ashanti region (Allman and Tashjian 2000; Austin 2004; Clark 1994), and thus one could argue that it broadly reflects social patterns in southern Ghana.

**Children's Pain about the Scattered Family**

As a group, children experienced more pain about the migration of a parent or both parents, with or without their siblings, than did their parents. They complained about two aspects of this migration: the scattering of a nuclear family—of two spouses and their children—by transnational migration, and the quality of care that they received from their caregivers in the parents' absence.

Children of migrant parents were more likely than migrant parents to openly express sadness, lamenting a family now scattered. Beatrice, age thirteen, said in Twi that she would like it if "our family would be one and live together. . . . We are all one family and we could live together." Her father went to the United States eleven years ago, her mother followed him six years later, and they now have a new baby. Beatrice is being taken care of by her mother's younger sister, whom her mother helped raise. A secondary school student, a boy of fifteen, whose parents and another sibling are in Italy while he and a sister are in Ghana, said, "The family is, is like scattered, because I hardly see them." Emma, age fourteen, complained that migration "brings about separation of the family." Her father had migrated some years ago to the United States with her mother, leaving behind her elder sister and brothers in Ghana. When the mother died tragically and suddenly in the United States shortly after managing to bring over their children, the father decided to move back to Ghana, taking Emma with him, and leaving his oldest three children—now young adults—to attend college in the United States.

Many of the children seemed to hold up as an ideal a nuclear family ideology in which parents and siblings lived together. It is significant that in Beatrice's quote in Twi, she used the English word "family," for which there is no equivalent in Twi (the word abusa, sometimes used as a translation of "family," refers to lineage; the term fie refers to house-

hold). The presence of siblings is as important as that of parents for these children, which is not surprising given that in their parents' generation, older siblings sometimes played a major role in bringing up their younger siblings, paying their school fees or fostering their younger siblings.

Children also talked about missing migrant parents, using the term "love" with the modifier of "maternal," "paternal," or "parental," to indicate that this kind of love was special and unique, something only such a person—mother, father, parent—could give. It is significant that this phrase was also in English, and it seemed tied to a romantic version of a family promoted by Christianity as well as by Western, West African, and Asian videos shown on local television stations and available for sale. Children also mentioned love much more than their parents did. However, they did not distinguish between parental gender in these statements, missing fathers as much as mothers, unlike the findings of some studies from Latin America and Asia (Aranda 2003; Moon 2003; Parreñas 2001; Schmalz-Bruer 2004). At a focus group discussion at one secondary school, two girls talked about missing the migrant parent intensely, even though one parent stayed behind. Bertha, age sixteen, said that she stayed with her father but missed her mother who was abroad. Even though she talked regularly to her mother on the phone, "still I even cry. I wish she was here. I miss her." Mercy, also age sixteen, said: "When my dad was here, I was very close to my dad. I was always with my dad. Now since he's left, I've lost that kind of paternal love. So whenever my dad calls, when I call him and I talk to my dad on the phone, I fall sick—I don't know—because, like, I miss him." A year later in a private interview, she told me again that she felt sick after her father left. He used a certain cologne and if she happened to smell it, she would feel sick again. But gradually she became used to his absence.

Children sometimes linked the absence of the migrant parent to a lack of resources, even though the migration of a parent theoretically is associated with greater material resources. The key indicators of material care were food, clothing, and money, and the Ghanaian English term they tended to use was "cater," meaning "to provide for." Dinah's parents had lived in London since she was two, and she lived with her grandmother. Now sixteen years old, she said: "As for me, I don't have any problem with them [her parents] staying there, but most people complain, because as for their parents, they don't cater them. They go there and that's all. They never hear from them again." Some explained this lack of material care by complaining that their caregivers were diverting the parent's remittances for purposes other than their care. Grace, age
fifteen, who was sent back to Ghana because she was not doing well in her Canadian school, said: "One of my friends, her mom went and her dad went; they left her with the mom’s sister, and [she] always maltreats the girl. When they bring her clothes or money, instead of using it to cater for her, they use it for their [own] children. Oh—it was bad." Beatrice said that she wanted to live with her father and mother, both of whom were in the United States. When I asked her why, she replied in Twi: "Maybe if I live with my mother, I will be more comfortable than living with someone else. Because if I live with my mother, my mother will do what I like for me." Many of the students in the focus group at Beatrice's private school complained about not getting all the money that their parents sent back and said that they felt sad and materially deprived. The idiom of material deprivation was a culturally resonant complaint that they could wield about the relationship.

As the children described it, the lack of emotional connection was related to material care; they were shy about telling their caregiver of their material needs, as they would not be in telling a parent. Grace said that one of the negatives of her situation was "being without my parents. My siblings are out there. Sometimes I feel lonely; I won't lie. At times, you can't get what you want, because my parents are not here and it's just my grandmother. I can't always be worrying her." Daniel, age sixteen, said that the difficulties of staying with relatives "make you miss your parents too much." When I asked about the nature of those difficulties, he responded that while parents will provide for you, you do not get even "petty, petty things" (such as pocket money for snacks at school) from your relatives. Others in the focus group at his prestigious government secondary school agreed with his assessment.

Many migrant parents likewise took seriously their financial obligations to provide for their children, sending both cash and gifts. While it is more expensive to mail or ship material objects than to wire money, children consider gifts more valuable than cash, because they are signs of the parent's attention and commodities from a prestigious world. One mother ships a big crate of food to her three children in Accra. While her friends tell her they can get imported food in stores in Ghana, she says she would rather send them food than give them money to buy it themselves, so that they know she is thinking of them. A father says that when his children were in Ghana, he called them every week faithfully and sent them clothes, toys, and shoes. Everyone knows how much he's given his children, he told me, saying that he hasn't "played" with them, meaning he takes caring for his children as a serious matter. Of course, there are parents who are no longer in contact with their families, usually fathers who did not have a formal relationship with the mother of the child, and have children with other women to whom they are more committed.

In return for this material care, parents expect children to reciprocate in the parents' old age. Just as the parent cared for the child as the child’s teeth were coming in, so should the grown child care for the parent as the parent’s teeth are falling out, goes a well-known 'Twi proverb.' One father advised me to have children: "When you are old, you want to have children who can look after you." A minister in a Ghanaian church in an East Coast city blessed a middle-aged couple and their children, saying that the children are "an investment." He continued: "When the parents are old, their children will take care of them. Hopefully, their children will become 'somebody'”—important people who are respected and materially wealthy. For Ghanaians, like other West Africans, the reward of parenting is the lifelong ties of obligation among those one has raised (Bedside 2002; LeVine 2003). The accomplishment of this goal requires that at least one child be able to materially provide for a parent and want to do so, through his or her good character and sense of obligation.

Thus, while there is a desire to provide one's children with the material resources that will set in motion reciprocal relations, parents also do not wish to "pamper" their children, something which would "spoil" their characters, as they put it. Parents were also ambivalent about the effect of material goods on the behavior of the child's caregiver back in Ghana: they worried that a caregiver would do anything to keep a child from complaining and thus jeopardizing the flow of the parent's remittances. A mother thought that only 20 percent of her friends would raise her child properly: "Because they [her friends] will want the money, they will spoil and pamper the child." She felt that only her mother or sister cared enough about her to discipline her child. One father said that there are "problems when people raise" your children. They might "pamper the child because of remittances." Ghanaians, like Sierra Leonean parents (Bedside 1990), value hardship and struggle as important components of training a child to be disciplined, respectful, and hardworking, the attributes necessary for success. Some parents resort to sending a child who has been misbehaving in the United States back to Ghana. But the father just quoted believed that, if one sent children back, one should "send them to places where conditions are hard," such as a village near Tamale in northern Ghana, associated in the minds of southern Ghanaians with a lack of development and amenities. Parents thus felt some ambivalence.
about providing material care to the extent that it might interfere with
the child's later ability or desire to respond reciprocally.

One might expect that state forms of social support in the United
States would encourage Ghanaian immigrants to be less reliant on their
children for eldercare and thus to change some of their goals of child so-
cialization. To some extent, this occurs, but many Ghanaian immigrants
in the United States work in the health-care field, and many women in
particular work as home-health aides or in nursing homes. As a result,
they have firsthand knowledge of how the elderly are cared for in the
United States, and it dismays them. Their work experiences serve as a
sharp encouragement to return to Ghana by the time they are old. For
instance, one woman who works as a home-health aide in the United
States told me about a friend, a male migrant whose mother and sister
had deceitfully taken away the house he had built back in Ghana—their
betrayal caused him to decide never to return to Ghana. My informant
reported that she had told her friend that in his old age, he would re-
gret his decision because she sees what the elderly in the United States
go through. In her opinion, only if one is upper middle class could one
afford quality care; nursing homes, she commented, are not nice.

Those migrants whose adolescent or young adult children are in the
United States do not expect their children to accompany them back to
Ghana upon the parent's retirement, but rather to continue with their
education and work in the United States, sending remittances back
home to help support the parents. Having followed his father and step-
mother to the United States, one young man, age twenty-two, was at-
tending community college and sending back some of his meager pay
from a retail job to his mother in Ghana. Children's ties of obligation to
their birth parents continue to be important, albeit through remittances
rather than bodily service.

While parents miss their children, what is paramount in their minds
is anxiety about raising their children to be model persons—successful
and responsible. They, like their children, also desire a household com-
posed of the nuclear family, but somewhat paradoxically they see mi-
igration as a way to accomplish this goal. One father told me that he was
building his own house in Ghana because "I would not like to go back
and live in someone else's house." Living on his own in the United States
while his wife and children were in Ghana, he said: "I only want to live
with my wife and kids, so I spend a lot on rent in Ghana too because I
want my privacy." Another girl, age sixteen, explained that her father's
migration allowed her mother and siblings to live together; previously,
they had been living in a compound house with "other people." Employ-
ment as civil servants, medical personnel, or teachers encourages this
ideal of the nuclear family household, because employees in such jobs
are more likely to receive housing through their employment that ac-
commodates only a nuclear family. Christianity has also played a role
in encouraging obligations to the nuclear family and in cutting ties to
the extended one (Meyer 1999). Migration may result in a family's ul-
timately being able to live together but causes tension in the short term
when family members live apart.

Studies of transnational families have argued that migration facili-
tates the commodification of love, that material goods from an absent
parent replace the emotional intimacy of a present parent. Furthermore,
transnational migration—with its split families living in multiple house-
holds—is seen as disrupting nuclear family households in which women
fulfill domestic duties (Parreñas 2005; Schmitz 2004). Neither rep-
resentation applies to Ghanaian transnational families. The reciprocal
responsibilities that migrant parents and their children expect of one an-
other show how material and emotional bonds are intertwined, allowing
an exchange of resources between generations. As such, they are critical
to how families manage their own survival and reproduction within ex-
isting and changing economic conditions. Furthermore, the significance
of both material ties and nuclear family households arises from the his-
tory of family life in Ghana, forged during an earlier period of internal
migration and global capitalism. What may seem to be a rupture that
causes pain among the children of migrant parents is the result of ide-
als formed from earlier ruptures at an earlier stage of global capitalism.
To illustrate this point, I turn to an examination of the reciprocities of
care among families from the area of Akuapem in southern Ghana who
migrated to participate in the cocoa boom that began in this area in 1892
and ended around 1917, when the world price of cocoa fell.

**Reciprocities of Care among Akuapem Cocoa Migrants, 1905–1930**

In the early twentieth century, the towns of Akuapem tended to be de-
serted as a result of migration (Ofori 1907). Akuapem was a traditional
kingdom, comprising seventeen towns along a ridge and farm villages
in the valleys below, located in what is now the Eastern Region. Because
of its history, Akuapem was made up of two ethnic groups who defined
themselves as Guan and Akan, differentiating themselves on the basis of
language and kinship practices. The primary reason for migration during this period was cocoa, a newly introduced cash crop grown for export: to grow their cocoa trees, Akuapem peasant-farmers, on their own initiative, gained access to land to the west, traveling farther and farther afield for prime forestlands. Men also traveled to the inland city of Kumasi for trade or the coastal city of Sekondi to work on the railway, and men and women migrated to nearby cities and towns for trade, as part of the growing informal urban sector, itself fueled by the cocoa boom and the railway.

During the changes and ruptures caused by the move from subsistence and regional market-based economies to export cash-crop farming, the need for capital and the need for labor prompted many transformations within the family. Significant here are some of the transformations that contributed to the nuclearization of the family. As has been observed in other parts of southern Ghana, migration tended to spur nuclear family residence, at least during the period of migration. Decades later, for example, when Asante men established cocoa farms far from their hometowns in the 1930s and 1940s, they took their wives and children with them as laborers (Allman and Tashjian 2000); and when Kwahu people migrated to the cities in the 1970s, husbands, wives, and children tended to live together and share their resources and expenses with one another far more than they did when the families returned to their hometown, where a husband and wife might each go back to stay with their respective kin (Bartle 1980). Akuapem cocoa migrations did result in nuclear family households, but split family households were also common. A man might well stay with his wife and children near his farm plot, but some men with several wives and cocoa farms in multiple locations might leave a wife and her children at each farm to care for it, while he rotated between these locations. Sons and nephews who followed men to work for them were likely to receive a share of the land, but "if a son did not serve his father, he would get nothing," reported a chief to Polly Hill. As school became more popular, children might be sent to live with relatives or a teacher in a town on the ridge while they attended school, while the parents stayed at the farm village, where there were no schools or only primary schools (Brokensha 1966; Opoku 1893). A man might migrate alone, for the purposes of trade, leaving his wife and children behind. Both nuclear family and split family households might include fostered children and apprentices, migrant laborers from other areas, tenants, and other family members.

The Basel Mission, which came to Akuapem in 1835, promoted nu-
Fathers' rights to their children were dependent on debt relationships with their wives (or wives' families) and, to a lesser extent, with their children. Marriage payments increased sharply in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fueled in part by the cocoa boom (Amao 1907; Asare 1917).\(^6\) As a result, the meaning of the marriage payment changed: it was now taken to be the equivalent of a loan from the husband to the wife's family. As occurred in Asante (Allman 1997; Allman and Tashjian 2000; Grier 1992), through marriage payments, a husband gained creditor rights over his wife and children, who essentially became his pawns. For instance, in one case, the court ruled firmly in favor of the father's custody of his children, stating: "In the native laws, if a man has married under the rules of the natives and has paid any dowry in so doing after the death of the woman, the husband has to claim all children."\(^7\) Because of the importance of children as a form of wealth in this social and economic context, fathers and other male kin tussled over who had rights in children, and if they had paid bride-price, fathers usually won.

Fathers also had various obligations to their children's continuing care: they paid for children's debts and helped them in court cases, paid for their maintenance or provided food, paid their medical expenses when they were sick, and helped male children get land and marry. In return, fathers had rights to their children's labor (including farmwork) and to their daughters' marriage payments (an increasingly important source of capital). Court cases from chiefly tribunals from four of the ridge towns for which records were available show what happened when parties broke this kind of social contract. Fathers who did not pay their children's debts or give them land were not entitled to their service.\(^8\) Increasingly, the legal system appeared to reinforce fatherly rights to children's labor and make more tenuous the rights of other kin.

As fathers gained rights over children, potential guardians who were kin were losing rights over children, which they sought to maintain through debt relationships. From 1906 onward, family members who had customarily had kin rights in children but were not birth parents—generally paternal uncles in patrilineal Guan towns and maternal uncles in matrilineal Akan towns in Akuapem—sought to control the residence and service of their dependents by paying their debts. It is not always clear from the records how these young people got into debt, but there is one case involving a boy in which school fees were judged a form of debt.\(^9\) In a case heard in March 1910, a man testified that when his uncle did not pay his debt, he stayed with another man who did (it is not clear whether this uncle was on the paternal or maternal side).\(^10\) The uncle then reported to the colonial officials in Accra that the nephew had been pawned, and because this practice was illegal, the creditor had to set the nephew free. The nephew then brought the uncle to court for severing his relationship with the creditor. The uncle was annoyed that the nephew had not stayed with him after he paid a pound of the nephew's five-pound debt, which the nephew had contracted in his travels. This uncle thus sought to control his nephew's labor when he had paid only a little of his debt, even to the point of preventing him from pawning himself to another man. In a sense, the uncle expected his nephew to be in debt (and thus pawned) to him, not to another.

Likewise, in patrilineal towns, paternal uncles, also called fathers, expected young men to take them as their fathers in exchange for paying off their debts. A paternal uncle said about his nephews who were minors and whom he had inherited from their father—his older brother—who had died: "If the children would take me as fa [father] then I would pay all the debts, take the children, and let the land remain unsold [whose sale would otherwise pay for the nephews' schooling]."\(^11\) In another custody case, when a father pawned his eldest child, a girl who had been fostered by his sister, the girl's maternal uncle redeemed her from the pledge. The uncle argued in court: "I have paid all necessary fees to ransom [sic] the child, therefore I have the power of using them [the girl and her younger sibling]." The uncle seemed to mean pawning in his phrase "using them," as the father claimed that the uncle had pawned the girl and her sibling for twenty pounds at the cocoa village of Adawso.\(^12\) In essence, those who were nonfatherly kin to dependents and children sought to gain the rights that fathers increasingly had, namely, to access children's residence and service or to use them to raise further capital, through paying debts associated with them. In the meantime, children sought to keep open the array of adults around them who might support them and would run away from one location, provided they could find another relative to take them in. Thus, at this earlier period of time, fathers sought to control the nuclear family unit, while children tended to seek the protection and support of more extensive relations.

The reciprocal responsibilities that young people and adults owed one another were being negotiated to enable the emergence of new relations of production around cash crops. In relation to the contemporary data on transnational migration, we see the importance of emergent new relations of production as crucial to the definition of relationships between fathers and children. Rather than signaling the growing commodification of
intimate relationships with the physical absence of parents, family relations in Ghana have long had an economic aspect, perhaps even to the extent of always being somewhat commodified, such that marriage became modeled on a creditor-pawn relationship. Thus it makes sense that children’s idioms of complaint about separated families in contemporary transnational families tend to focus on the lack of material support, and that parents focused on producing respectful, hard-working, and obedient children. Furthermore, unlike the focus on material exchanges, we see that the history of nuclear families in Ghana is relatively short. With the increase in marriage payments, families became more oriented around the nuclear unit, as fathers monopolized the reciprocities of care with children to the detriment of other male relations and sought children’s service as labor on cocoa farms or to raise the capital to buy land for such a farm.

Where Is the Rupture in Transnational Migration?

Early capitalist modes of production, such as cash-crop agriculture dependent on smallholder farmers, generated more nuclear-family arrangements. Other kin who had previously had rights to children gradually lost those rights to fathers, in both matrilineal and patrilineal towns. In this situation, living together as a nuclear family was important because children’s labor was a significant resource for their fathers as they developed their cocoa farms. The chiefly tribunals provided the legal support for reciprocal obligations between fathers and children during an era in which men sought access to labor and capital from their wives and children, when other sources of labor and capital through slavery and pawnage were declining and cash-crop agriculture was generating new demands for labor and capital. The length of time in which children met their reciprocal obligations was considerably shorter than it is today. After about the age of six or seven, children began contributing to the domestic household, whose labor was closely tied to other economic ventures, whether agriculture or trading, with the value of their labor increasing with their adolescence and young adulthood (see Table 5.1).

In the conventional narrative of modernization, capitalism and wage labor is associated with the nuclearization of households and families, and this model seems supported by the evidence presented here, as fathers sought to control the residence and labor of their wives and children to support the development of cash-crop agriculture. However, advanced capitalism, characterized by an even greater mobility of capital and labor, generates conditions in which there are good reasons for members of a nuclear family to live apart and rely on extended family members to support the care of children. In fact, evidence seems to be building that extended family structures are well suited to the increased mobility of labor in a global economy, helping sustain the low wages paid to immigrant workers by lowering the costs of maintaining nonworking family members (Jones 1992; Ong 1999; Schmalzbauer 2008).

One might expect Ghanaian families to cope with the conditions of global capitalism quite easily, given the importance of extended family and of material exchanges for maintaining relationships between children and parents. Material exchanges do not require the physical presence of parents taking care of children, or grown children taking care of elderly parents. Instead, migrants can maintain their reciprocal obligations in the relationship by sending home remittances, and they can better meet those reciprocal obligations through migration, to the extent that the migration is moderately successful. At the same time, such a system requires the involvement of underemployed extended family members, and about this, both parents and children are ambivalent, albeit in different ways. Although both are suspicious that the caregiver does not have the children’s best interests at heart, parents are concerned that the caregiver—perhaps even a member of the parent’s nuclear family such
as a grandmother or aunt—will spoil or pamper the child due either to a
desire to continue to receive remittances or to a lack of strength to phys-
ically punish the child; children emphasize the lack of emotional inti-
macy with caregivers that they see as necessary for proper care.

Has transnational migration created ruptures in Ghanaian family
life? Yes. Have Ghanaian parents and children had to adjust their ide-
als of family life, sometimes painfully? Certainly. But one can also see
how their assessments of their obligations are built out of older con-
ceptual models, now reworked, and that ideals like "tradition" and "the
traditional family" were built out of similar ruptures and negotiations
between family members in a previous era and in different economic
conditions. Transnational migration also seems more disruptive to
newer ideologies of family life—like love—than to those of material care,
which provide some flexibility in living arrangements. Following Sah-
lins (2004), we can see in both the flexibility and resiliency of conceptual
models and discourses in the midst of economic change that discontinu-
ity, looked at from another vantage point, can look like continuity.