The relationship between mother’s brother and sister’s son in African societies has been described in many monographs, and has been treated extensively in articles by Radcliffe-Brown (1924) and Goody (1959:61-88). This relationship is frequently characterized by sentimental and ritual ties. Often a man has what Goody called, “residual rights” in his mother’s brother’s patrilineage (1959:86). Included among these rights are limited access to that lineage’s assets, and the right to seek refuge with its members. The fact remains, however, that a sister’s son is not a member of his mother’s brother’s patrilineage, and does not come under its genealogical charter—a charter which, as Laura Bohannan has pointed out, validates for a lineage member: ties of kinship and marriage, claims to a place to live and farm, help in court cases, conduct in matters of magic and rituals, and decisions against whom to fight and on what occasions (1952:306 and 308). Nor is a sister’s son exempt from the tendency of the lineage to restrict to its own members “the perpetual exercise of defined rights, duties, offices and social tasks vested in the lineage as a corporate unit” (Fortes, 1953:27; cf. Fried, 1957). Under certain circumstances, such as the “danger that rights and offices vested in the lineage may lapse through the extinction of the true line of descent” a lineage may suspend the restrictions on outsiders, give them access to its assets, modify its genealogy and adopt them (Fortes, 1953:27). Except in these unusual cases, lineages tend to maintain their ideology of exclusiveness and restrict their assets to their own members.

1. The basic data on which this paper is based were collected in the Upper Volta during 1955-57 thanks to a Fellowship from the Ford Foundation African Studies Program. Certain materials were rechecked during subsequent visits to the Upper Volta during the summers of 1960 and 1962.
It appears, however, that despite the ideology of corporate exclusiveness, most lineages slowly and continuously absorb outsiders, especially sisters' sons. This absorption, for the most part, follows on the residence of sisters' sons in the territory of mother's brothers' lineages. It occurs so slowly and naturally over time, that only the most careful checking of lineage genealogies and discovery of the presence of unilineal villages where there should be multilinar ones, reveals what has actually taken place. Denial by the members of lineages that sister's sons can be, or are, absorbed, is probably behind the fact that anthropologists who have worked in societies where this process has occurred have not given it the attention it deserves. The result is that the picture of the African patrilineage is less dynamic than is actually warranted. In this paper I shall show how the patrilineages of Mossi society, despite an ideology of corporate exclusiveness, did in fact absorb sisters' sons, and indicate, through the re-examination of other African societies with corporate patrilineages, that a similar process probably took place.

A census of a large sample of Mossi villages shows that from fifteen to twenty percent of the households are headed by yagensedé or sisters' sons. Moreover, there are yagensedé in almost every autonomous Mossi household. The reasons the Mossi give for males going off to live with their yasénamba (mothers' patrilineages) are quite numerous. First of all is the fact that the Mossi believe it improper for first sons to grow up in the same household with their mothers' younger sons, and as a result send these boys to live with their mothers' brothers. They remain with these relatives until a little after puberty and then usually return to their own patrilineages (Skinner, 1961:56; 1964:21). Males also go to their mothers' patrilineages whenever they have a mind to or whenever they need a haven from any form of distress. If a man likes his mother's brother very much, is angry with members of his own patrilineage, or needs more fertile land for cultivation, he goes to live with him. Again, if a man is exiled from his patrilineage for any reason, such as insubordination to a chief or elder, or because he commits incest or any other misdeed, his mother's brother must provide a haven for him. To refuse a sister's son shelter is deemed an insult to the ancestors punishable by sickness or other sanctions. The Mossi believe that since their sisters were sent into the bush (that is, married into another patrilineage), due to the need of a patrilineage to obtain wives for itself, the ancestors are especially sensitive to any affront shown a sister's son who "returns from the bush."

A yagenga (sister's son) has a privileged position in his yesba's (mother's brother) household. He is usually a confidante of this relative and free to discuss with him matters which the latter would...
never discuss with his own sons. A sister's son also has a joking relationship with his yesba’s wives, and is usually the vehicle by which these spouses and their husband criticize each other for conjugal misdeeds or omissions. In the event of serious marital discord between these persons, such as when a yesba repudiates a wife by putting her water pot in the courtyard, a yagenga has the privilege of restoring conjugal unity. Only a rash man would risk the wrath of the ancestors by refusing to heed the plea of a yagenga to take back a wife. The ancestors are believed to look with favor upon the efforts of their daughter’s son to maintain peace in the household of their sons so that these sons may have more descendants for them. This concern of the ancestors for the role of their daughter’s sons in the household of their male descendants is also emphasized during rituals. A man may not make an important sacrifice to his ancestors unless his yagenga is present. This is especially true of the péléga, an annual sacrifice to all the ancestors of the lineage, whether known or unknown. In summary, then, the sister’s son among the Mossi has, and maintains, close and valuable ties with his mother’s brother’s patrilineage. This is true whether he lives with this relative or not, or whether he lived with him at one time and subsequently returned to his own patrilineage.

While about eighty percent of those sisters’ sons who go to live in their mothers’ brothers’ lineages eventually do return to their own patrilineages, the remainder do not. The reasons for this are several and varied. In some cases men who belong to the commoner patrilineages prefer to remain with their noble or chiefly mothers’ brothers and profit from the “residual rights” which they have there. They often benefit from goods and services received by these nobles and chiefs. Some men become so attached to their mothers’ brothers that, in the absence of any tangible assets to be gained from their own lineages, such as chieftainships or official posts, headship of families, wives, or goods, they prefer to remain where they had grown up. Other men who did not grow up in their mothers’ brothers’ villages prefer to go and live with these relatives so that they could take advantage of good land or other benefits.

If for any reason conditions changed, a man who had lived with his mother’s brother for more than fifty years would think nothing of picking up his family and returning to his own patrilineage. Several such cases were brought to my attention during the course of field research. Included among these was the case of a man who had lived in his mother’s brother’s village all his life but had returned to his own lineage’s village to inherit the chieftainship. Those men who have no reason for returning to their own patrilineages, or are not induced to return there, remain at their yesba’s village until they die.
At that time their lineage brothers may claim their wives, younger children, and property. The sons of a deceased man may voluntarily return to their father’s lineage after his death. Or his sons may elect to remain with their deceased father’s mother’s brothers who, in kinship terms (Omaha), are also their mothers’ brothers. One finds, among heads of the *yagensenė* households in Mossi villages, people who have gone there or stayed there for many of these reasons. Some of these are young men, others middle-aged, and still others are old men who give every indication of remaining residents there until they die.

Although the Mossi welcome their sisters’ sons and are ritually compelled to provide a haven for them they always insist that these persons are lineally distinct from them and may not have the same access to lineage rights as lineage members. Sisters’ sons have no problem in obtaining land on which to farm from their mothers’ brothers. This land is never the subject of dispute, and sisters’ sons and their descendants may stay and farm as long as they desire. To evict them would, of course, incur the displeasure of the ancestors. Nevertheless, the ritual licence which *yagensenė* often have over the lineage rights of their mothers’ brothers implies the lack of normal access to them. For example, sisters’ son can seize a limited number of the lesser livestock from their mothers’ brothers’ compound. They can also “force” their mothers’ brothers to give them chickens by going to their compounds and sweeping the courtyards. A sister’s son can harvest a certain amount of crops from his mother’s brother’s fields without being accused of praedial larceny. And at a certain point in ceremonies, such as funerals, sisters’ sons are permitted to seize and abscond with foodstuffs prepared for those occasions. Sisters’ sons are, however, not permitted to inherit the most valuable asset of a Mossi lineage, its wives (Skinner, 1960:1). Nor may a man give a wife to his sister’s son regardless of how long he has lived with him or of his feelings towards him. All the wives a man obtains from marriage partners belong to his own lineage. A man who is interested in obtaining a wife for a *yagenga* who lives with him, arranges to have the young man do chores for a marriage partner over a protracted period. Then, instead of accepting the woman which the marriage partner proffers and giving her to a member of his own lineage, the *yesba* would act as a proxy father when the wife is given directly to his *yagenga*. Some mothers’ brothers are so meticulous in observing the amenities and preserving the ideology of the inalienability of lineage rights, that they arrange for the wife to be given to the patri-lineage of their *yagenga* which then returns the wife to the young man for whom she was intended.

Given the strength of the Mossi’s belief in the exclusiveness of
their patrilineages, and the importance with which they view direct descent for membership in these social units, it is not surprising to find that most Mossi deny that a sister's son, or any other person, could ever be incorporated into a patrilineage other than his own, regardless of how long the person or his descendants lived with another patrilineage. Even when one points out to them that since about twenty percent of the households in their villages are headed by sisters' sons who have come there during the memory of living persons, and that if, as they declare, this pattern was an old one, then ancient yagensé households must have been assimilated, they still insist that this could not be done. It is only when "errors" appear in Mossi genealogies, and in other aspects of their culture, that the field worker has any proof that their patrilineages did and do absorb their sisters' sons. In one case a man, who was listed as an authentic lineage member in one context, was listed as a yagenga in another, thus indicating that his real status was in doubt and that he was in the process of being incorporated by a certain patrilineage. In another case, two families who were listed as being in the same patrilineage held separate funerals for their dead members, in seeming contradiction to the usual Mossi practice of having one single funeral for all deceased members. An inquiry as to why this was so, produced the response that the two families were in fact members of the same lineage but were now angry with each other. When it was pointed out to the respondents that the drums which were used for one of the reputed families of the lineage had come from a neighboring area, thus indicating clearly that the family was probably a yagenga, they suggested that this was perhaps true, but that the persons who understood these things were now dead.

The clearest bit of evidence that Mossi lineages did absorb their sisters' sons came as a result of struggle over the nam, "that power of God which enabled a man to rule as chief over other men" (Skinner, 1957:744). So important is the nam in Mossi society that, whereas non-noble lineages fission quite easily and forget how they are related to a founder, noble lineages keep careful genealogies of their relationship to the founders of the Mossi nation. When two men were competing for the nam of a village, the seventy-year old district chief was asked about the relative chances of each. He replied that, as far as he was concerned, only one of these persons was eligible for the nam of the village because the other man was descended from a yagenga. Had this fact been widely known among the villager, there would not have been a struggle for the nam. What is more surprising is that a ruling lineage, which traditionally kept a close watch on its genealogy, had not done so in this case. Had the old chief died before the choice of a new village chief was made, than it would have been
quite possible that a sister's son could have achieved the ultimate in social mobility within Mossi society, that is, merging with a ruling patrilineage and attaining the status of chief.

It is clear that it is only due to such "errors" that the field worker or even the Mossi themselves become aware of the way in which their social organization adjusts itself to the sociological reality of absorbing sisters' sons into patrilineages other than their own. It is very difficult to know or to see how this process works because it would not be a successful incorporation if someone found out about it. One notices, of course, that the son of a yagenga and the son of a yesba who, according to the local kinship system, are also yagenga and yesba, refer to themselves as babissi (father's sons). Yet, one is also aware of the fact that when an important lineage right is at stake, erstwhile "babissi" readily assume their proper relationship as yagenga and yesba. It is clear, however, that continued co-residence among the Mossi, with all that this implies, blurs kinship and descent lines, and sisters' sons can become absorbed into their mothers' brothers' patrilineages over a period of time.

Comparable data from other African patrilineal societies indicate that this process of absorption is more widespread than either lineage ideology or informants' statements would lead the field worker to suspect.

THE BWAMBA

According to Winter, an Awamba often tried "to convince his sister's son to come and live with him" (1956:87). The Bwamba generally held that a mother's brother is "like a second father" to his sister's son and therefore should provide a place for him to live. "Men commonly join their mother's brothers. The relationship between the two is a very warm one, and the mothers' brothers are among the first people of whom a man thinks when intending to change his place of residence" (1956:91). Co-residence of an Awamba with his mother's brothers often led to a weakening of descent lines which separated these two classes of person. Winter declares: "Sometimes the affection of a mother's brother for his sister's son may reach such a high degree that he is tempted to break through the barriers set up by the lineage structure and make the latter his heir and successor. In actual fact, the sister's son among the Bwamba is never allowed to become his successor although in rare cases he manages to inherit most of the property. Even in this he runs into great opposition from other members of his mother's brother's lineage" (1956:183-184).

Thus, the overt ideology and practices of the Bwamba patrilineages were seemingly opposed to the absorption of sister's son into mother's
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brother's patrilineages. But, as in the case of the Mossi, it was only after Winter questioned a suspicious genealogy of an Awamba that he was able to establish as fact his suspicion that this process nevertheless took place. A man had previously told him that he was a member of a certain patrilineage. However, when Winter met this man's mother, she said that she was a member of the same patrilineage. Since, according to the logic of kinship, this could not be, Winter asked the young man to explain the situation. He replied that his mother had committed incest with a brother, and that he was the son of a man of his mother's own lineage. It was only after Winter had come to know the informant better that he learned the true facts: This man's mother had been married into another lineage, but had divorced his father and had brought her son to live with her own patrilineage. The man wanted to belong to his mother's patrilineage and was falsifying not only his own genealogy but his mother's marital relations as well. Winter tried to discover how often the Bwamba rearranged their genealogies, but they "vigorously denied, not only that it ever took place, but that such a procedure is even possible" (1956:212-217). Yet, he found several such cases of what he called "social mobility" among these people.

THE TIV

The Bohannans found the usual pattern of close relations between Tiv mother's brothers and their sisters' sons, and a high degree of co-residence between these classes of persons. Sisters' sons went to live with their mothers' brothers "at pleasure; requests to do so are said never to be refused" (1953:24). In some of the villages' censuses Bohannan found that of the seventeen percent of Tiv men who lived outside of their own patrilineages, about fifteen percent of these lived with their mothers' brothers (1954:11). Furthermore, he found no restriction on the amount of time they could remain with these relatives (Bohannan and Bohannan, 1953:18).

A Tiv often had a privileged status in his mother's patrilineage. The people of his mother's patrilineage could not refuse him food "either to eat at the time or in the shape of a reasonable amount of livestock (chickens or goats) to take with him; on certain occasions—marriage, circumcision, or the performance of some distinguished action—they are said to owe him a chicken." Moreover, they had to give him land "for use so long as he lives with them. The latter right is dependent upon residence (farmland is implied when permission for residence is given) and lapses if a man is not resident" (Bohannan and Bohannan, 1953:24).
Tiv, like the people of the two societies treated previously, also had the ideology that only authentic lineage members could enjoy all the rights in their patrilineages. They considered their sister’s son “a ‘child of a woman’ and therefore, his jural (or citizenship) rights are limited to those of a woman” (Bohannan and Bohannan, 1953:50). Nevertheless, it appears that here, too, continued co-residence often blurred the descent lines between the “children of women,” and the “true” children of the lineage. In an important footnote Bohannan tells us what happens over a period of time. He declared: “Included in the 83 per cent of ‘agnates’ (who live in Tiv communities) are those men who may have female links in their ‘agnatic’ genealogies three or four generations past, but not if the female links are closer than this. These female links do not affect a man’s rights in his agnatic lineage if they are three or more generations removed” (1954:14). In other words, it took three or more generations for Tiv lineages to absorb sisters’ sons.

The Nuer

There are sisters’ sons (gaat nyiet or children of girls) living in every Nuer village. “Nuer say of the maternal uncle that he is both father and mother, but most frequently that ‘he is your mother.’ He is a man’s greatest supporter when he is in trouble. If a youth has committed adultery or involved himself in some other trouble, and his father’s people refuse to aid him, he goes to his maternal uncle for help. He will help his sister’s son for his mother’s sake” (Evans-Pritchard, 1951:162). Nevertheless, the Nuer had strict rules with respect to the relationship between a man and his sister’s son. For example, a man and his mother’s brother were not allowed to tether their cattle together. A man could not give his sister’s son a spear-shaft because of the belief that the gift might cause the boy serious injury. Nor could a man and his sister’s son use the same sleeping-hide or sleep in the same hut. According to Evans-Pritchard:

“These rules, especially those which forbid a man tethering his cattle in his uncle’s kraal, skinning his uncle’s beasts, and sleeping in the same hut as his uncle, seem almost designed to keep the two apart, to prevent a youth identifying himself with his maternal kin instead of his paternal kin” (1951:164).

Continued co-residence of sisters’ sons with their mothers’ patrilineages seems to have led to the same results among the Nuer as in the societies already treated in this paper. Evans-Pritchard states that these men become so identified with their hosts that they “will
not tell you that they are not members of the dominant lineages of these sections, and will allow you to assume that they are, for in community relations there is a degree of linguistic assimilation of all residents other than members of the dominant lineage to that lineage, and people do not wish the fact that they are strangers in the tribal area to be publically stressed (1940:205). There was also a “common practice for strangers who have been brought up at the home of their maternal kinsmen, who are aristocrats, to regard themselves as members of their mother’s lineage, except in ceremonial situations, and to consider its members, rather than their father’s lineage as their true kinsmen” (1940:227). The situation among the Nuer, then, is that while from the point of view of ordinary community relationships sisters’ sons are assimilated to their mothers’ brothers’ lineages, they still remain distinct as far as rituals and ceremonies are concerned. To cite a final example from the Nuer: “When a Gaatiek man said . . . , ‘Now that I have come to settle in Cieng Kwoth I am a man of Cieng Kwoth,’ he meant that outside ceremonial situations he identified himself with the Kwoth lineage rather than with his own” (Evans-Pritchard, 1940:210).

One wonders, however, how long can sisters’ sons and their descendants consider themselves members of their mothers’ brothers’ lineages for the purposes of community activities and still remain lineally distinct as far as rituals and ceremonies are concerned? This question has important relevancy, especially since “the Nuer have no organized cults of ancestral ghosts. The dead are buried quickly and crudely in unvisited and unremembered tombs; only in very rare cases are sacrifices offered to them; and there are no sacred places associated with them” (1940:209-210). The clue to their ultimate fate is given in a statement by Evans-Pritchard which follows the one cited in the preceding paragraph where he talks about the Gaatiek man identifying with Cieng Kwoth:

“Even one man is a potential lineage and several brothers [who may have gone to live with mother’s brothers] more so. A minimal, and then a minor, lineage comes into being which has only ritual status towards the other lineages of its clan, whereas with the people in whose village and district its members have grown up it has a mutuality of interests and a community of experience. The group thus develops into a distinct lineage. It intermarries with the other people of its home and very often it intermarries so frequently with the dominant lineage of the district that further marriage between them becomes impossible without breaking incest regulations. In this way lineages twine around one another and a texture of cognatic relationships unites all member of the community. Only a few such lineages establish themselves and survive as lineages. Many either die out or lose much of their individuality and become attached to larger and stronger lineages . . .” (1940:210-211, italics mine).
The data here are so comparable to those cited for other groups treated in this paper that one is led to believe that the reason why so many potential Nuer lineages never become established or survive is because they are stillborn. Their potential founders are incorporated into mothers' brothers' lineages.

The Bantu of North Kavirondo

The people of North Kavirondo often permitted "clan-strangers (avamenya)" to settle in their villages. "Such avamenya are mostly relatives of the clan: viz. in order of frequency: so-called avifwa (sister's son), i.e., the sons of the married women of the clan and their offspring . . . In some areas these persons comprised about thirty-seven percent of the inhabitants of a clan's territory" (Wagner, 1949: 56). The Kavirondo people did permit sister's son to inherit the knowledge of special magical techniques from their mothers' patrilineages. They also permitted these men to "infringe upon the territorial unit of the clan," and to "settle on clan lands" (Wagner, 1949: 56, 76, 261). The result of this co-residence of sister's sons with mothers' brothers is what one would expect: "Socially . . . the status they enjoy in the host-clan after a prolonged residence begins to resemble that of the clansmen, provided that they fit in with the life of the clan and identify themselves with its interests" (1949:567). Nevertheless, the Kavirondo people assured Wagner that, "By staying in the territory of another clan the avamenya (clan-strangers) do not under any circumstances become members of their host clans" (1949:567). Wagner also noticed that in "most parts of the North Kavirondo District the clans still form clearly distinguishable units" (1949:567). There were only two possible explanations for this state of affairs, given the fact that clan-strangers made up about thirty-seven percent of the personnel of the inhabitants of a clan territory. Either all of these strangers were absorbed by their hosts, or they left their hosts' territory after a certain period. Wagner chose the latter explanation, stating: "In the majority of cases . . . the residence of clan-strangers on clan territory appears to have been only of a more or less temporary nature, for otherwise the clan would have completely ceased to be territorial units which, however is not the case" (1949:567). If Wagner had asked himself whether or not it was possible for all thirty-seven percent of clan-strangers to return to their own clans, and if that was not possible, what would have been the result; he would have arrived at the conclusion that the Kavirondo patrilineages, or in this case patriclans, did in fact absorb sisters' sons who remained. In this they were not different from the other societies discussed in this paper.
Conclusion

One of the aspects of the close relationship so often noticed between mothers’ brothers and their sisters’ sons in African patrilineal societies is a high degree of co-residence. Sisters’ sons seek and receive shelter from mothers’ brothers for a variety of reasons, and, while a certain percentage of these sisters’ sons do return to their own patrilineages where they have full rights as lineage members, a certain proportion remain with their mothers’ brothers. Sisters’ sons initially have a marginal, though privileged, position in their mothers’ brothers’ patrilineages, but as has been shown for the societies treated here: Mossi, Bwamba, Tiv, Nuer, and North Kavirondo, prolonged co-residence with these relatives results in their complete identification with them. The residual rights which sisters’ sons had in their mothers’ patrilineages are gradually extended to include full rights of membership in these units. This process takes place despite the objection of lineage members and the existence of the lineage’s ideology of corporate exclusiveness. To legalize this occurrence sisters’ sons are eventually placed under the genealogical charter of the lineage.

There is no doubt that the conscious absorption of sisters’ sons strengthens a lineage, but, except in a few restricted cases, this absorption appears to be a slow, and largely unconscious, process stemming from the co-residence of sisters’ sons. Whenever lineage members notice that sisters’ sons are gaining illegal access to their rights, they object to it. Furthermore, noble lineages try to maintain accurate genealogies in an attempt to prevent strangers from gaining access to their valuable assets. Nevertheless, it does not appear, at least from the data cited here, that even noble or aristocratic lineages can prevent the identification of commoner sisters’ sons with them. Co-residence then, especially when sanctioned by kinship ties, seems to be a stronger factor in blurring descent lines and facilitating the absorption of sisters’ sons into their mothers’ brothers’ patrilineages than the explicit ideology of lineage exclusiveness.

We have here, then, an illustration of how structural principles or cultural forms are manipulated and accommodated to the ongoing processes of social organization and social activities.

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