

THE DYNAMICS OF KINSHIP TERMINOLOGY
IN SMALL-SCALE SOCIETIES

by E.O. Ayisi*

Kinship refers to a particular category of relationships which exist between two individuals, or a group of individuals. These are relationships which may have their roots in common genealogy, or may be effected through marriage or adoption. For example a grandchild is descended from a grandparent or both may have descended from a common ancestor or ancestress. Sometimes the term consanguinity is used for describing these categories of kinship ties. But the term consanguinity is rather loaded with definite connotations, which do not fit the anthropological usage of the concept of kinship. Consanguinity stresses the biological aspect of kinship while what anthropologists are interested in is the sociological aspect of kinship. When anthropologists talk about descent they mean the pater's ties with Ego and not the genitor's - even if both are the same person. (Pater in this case means the social father, and genitor means the biological father). Kinship by and large refers to specific social arrangements¹ and the ordering of social interactions in society. The study of kinship is important because it is the mnemonics of certain fundamental social arrangements and norms in most societies. Radcliffe-Brown who has done pioneering work in the field of kinship studies observed as follows - in both his own book.

"One common feature of kinship system is the recognition of certain categories or kinds into which the various relatives of a single person can be grouped. The actual social relation between a person and his relative, as defined by rights and duties and modes of behaviour is then to a greater or less extent fixed by the category to which the relative belongs."

* Dr. E.O. Ayisi is a Research Fellow in Social Anthropology.

1. Fontana Modern Masters, Editor Frank Kermode.

Levi Strauss by Edmund Leach p.96.

"When anthropologists talk about kinship they are concerned with social behaviours and not biological facts and the two sets of data are often so widely discrepant that it is often convenient to discuss kinship without any reference to biology".

The nomenclature of kinship is commonly used as a means of establishing and recognising these categories. A single term may be used to refer to a category of relatives and different categories will be distinguished by different terms".

'Kinship therefore results from the recognition of a social relationship between parents and children, which is not the same thing as the physical relation, and may or may not coincide with it".²

The relationships which exist between individuals are expressed in definite terms, thus conceptualizing the norms and the code of behaviour or the type of interactions either open-ended or restricted that should operate between these various categories of individuals who are connected by these relationships. The history of kinship goes back to the eighteenth century when Lafitau published the result of his research among American Indians. 'Among the Iroquois and Hurons all the children of a cabin regard all their mother's brothers as their uncles, and for the same reason they give the name of fathers to all their father's brothers, and aunts to all their father's sisters. All the children on the side of the mother and her sisters, and of the father and his brothers, regard each other mutually as brothers and sisters, but as regards the children of their uncles and aunts, that is, of their mother's brothers and father's sisters, they only treat them on the footing of cousins".³

This discovery triggered off more interest in the study in kinship systems and their functions in the society. Lewis Morgan looked more closely at the same society and in 1871 he came out with His "Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity" thus proving the validity of the Lafitau's thesis, but this time coining a term for this social arrangement... "classificatory terminology".

According to Morgan the classification of a cluster of kinship ties which means using the terms intended for

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2. Structure and Function in Primitive Society, and his Introduction to African Systems of Kinship and Marriage, Structure and Function p.62 and African Systems of Kinship and Marriage p.4.
 3. African Systems of Kinship and Marriage p.8. Published for the International African Institute by Oxford University Press, 1956, Third impression.

lineal relatives for certain collateral relatives facilitates, the ordering of complex kinship ties in societies where these ties are important. 'The distinguishing feature of a classificatory system of terminology in Morgan's usage is that terms which apply to lineal relatives are also applied to certain collateral relatives. Thus a father's brother is father and mother's sister is 'mother', while as in the type described by Lafitau, there are separate terms for mother's brother and father's brother and mother's sisters are called 'brother' and 'sister' and there are separate terms for the children of mother's brothers and father's sisters..... A man classifies the children of his brothers with his own children, but uses a separate term for the children of his sister. Inversely a woman classifies with her own children the children of her sisters but not those of her brothers. Classificatory terminologies of the kind are found in great many African peoples.

Before I go on to examine the social implications of the classificatory systems I would just mention in parenthesis another kinship terminology known as the 'descriptive terminology'.

The descriptive terminology is useful when specific and narrow span relationships are to be identified. For example when first or second order relatives are to be specified. In this case compound of specific terms are applied. This takes the form of 'mother's brother' for one's uncle and father's brother for one's paternal uncle and so on. This system is more specific than the English term Uncle or Aunt if the descriptive terminology is preferred to the classificatory system. This system is useful only for analytical purposes.

This system is rarely used except when specification of relationships is necessary for definite social purposes. The classificatory system of kinship terminology is however important in societies in which kinship determines one's place in them, and prescribes his code of behaviour vis-a-vis other people in the society. Most small scale societies employ the classificatory systems, as observed by Raymond Firth. 'The classificatory system of relationship has been often enough described, so that its general features are familiar. What has not so often been realized, though, is the function of such a system as a stabilizing mechanism in a society. It forms a most

useful mode of grouping people, it establishes their relation to one another. Looked at from this point of view, the old contrast with systems of the descriptive type is meaningless; within classificatory system it is perfectly possible to describe individuals by modification or qualification of terms, or by additional terms for special relatives all of which phenomena are frequent in primitive kinship.¹⁴ The classificatory terminology serves as an indicator to people who are immersed in a 'web of kinship' for appropriate social behaviour, this fact is the core of Leach's observation in his recent book on Levi-Strauss.

'Most kinship facts present themselves to the field anthropologist in two ways. In the first place as I have said his informants use a kinship terminology words like father, mother, uncle, cousin etc. to sort out the people in their vicinity into significant groups, but secondly it emerges that there are various sets of behaviours and attitudes which are considered especially appropriate or inappropriate as between any two individuals deemed to be related in a particular way - it may be said that a man should never speak in the presence of his mother-in-law or that it would be a good thing if he were to marry a girl who falls into the same kin term class as his mother's brother's daughter.'

'If we are trying to understand the day to day behaviour of people living in close face-to-face relationship, facts such as these are clearly of great significance and a good deal of the field anthropologist's research time taken up with discovering just how these two frames of reference the system of verbal categories and the system of behavioural attitudes are interconnected...'¹⁵

Most anthropologists have treated the kinship terminology with due attention in their studies of primitive peoples. For example Fortes in his classical studies among the Tallensi of northern Ghana appeared to imply that kinship was the only means by which any meaningful studies could be undertaken among these people. He observed as follows: 'The Tallensi apply the concepts of kinship to describe and define domestic relations and person-to-person ties that are derived from them. They use

4. We the Tikopia, Beacon Press 1957 p.222, paragraph one.

5. "Levi Strauss" by E. Leach, p.97.

the same concepts in dealing with lineage relation. In the social structure as a whole kinship is the fundamental binding element. It furnishes the primary axioms of all categories of interpersonal and intergroup relations".⁶ Kinship is not only pervasive, but it is the idiom through which the tale social system is expressed in any meaningful sense. The terms which are used to express the values of kinship enjoins the individual men who are described in these social contexts to behave within the customarily prescribed meaning of the terms used. The syntax in the term is not merely rhetorical but morally obligatory. When people who are described as classificatory relatives behave as enemies or strangers then social conscience is outraged in the same way as if the attitude had come from lineal relatives. Sometimes the classificatory terminology is used for describing tribal groups, members of the same tribal groups may therefore treat each other as brothers or lineal relatives expecting appropriate treatment from each other. Kinship terminology particularly the classificatory type is inextricably linked with inheritance and succession. This is in cases where inheritance and succession are not lineal, that is, they are neither by primogeniture nor direct to first generation. Succession to any office is generational.

A group of collaterals of the same generation may all be eligible to a particular office within the group, and therefore the right to inherit any property associated with this office is not restricted to anyone particular person. Kinship therefore confers on individuals common ascriptive status and privileges, especially to members of a royal family. Sometimes a particular office may be of a unique character that only the core within a social group has any right to this office. I call this type of succession arrangements as 'extended-primogeniture' because succession runs lineally through that line, within a prescribed perimeter. Dr. Audrey I. Richards observed that among the societies which do not possess any institution with centralized political authority, certain types of people are collectively treated with deference by others and they therefore constitute what

6. "The Web of Kinship Among the Tallensi" by Meyer Fortes, p.13. Published for the International African Institute by Oxford University Press.

anthropologists call 'dominant clans'.⁷ "In most of the traditional African societies known to us, authority tends to be associated with special lines of descent. In the case of segmented societies, which acknowledge neither a single chief nor a series of chiefs, these descent lines are usually called dominant clans, aristocratic noble lineages, or land owner lines. These privileged descent groups form part of a social structure in which commoners as well as nobles base their status on descent, and kinship usually determines their pattern of settlement and economic life".

My own experiences among the Akwapems, among whom I did my field work, reinforces the above thesis, kinship is the matrix of social interactions and the social field is marked and punctuated by kinship ramifications. In the field of social stratification, kinship confers on certain individuals certain rights over others, thus placing others in asymmetrical social juxtaposition vis-a-vis other people in the societies. Even political rights where they are not legitimized by charismatic considerations, kinship credentials confer certain rights over others, and individual are ascribed certain rights within his group. Audrey Richards on this point is very lucid on the transfer of political authority or in other words, the mechanism by which political elites are recruited in most traditional African societies. She hinges her exposition on kinship paradigm as the criterion of political recruitment as this affects the higher reaches of political ranking.⁸ "By Political Rights I shall refer to the claims maintained by a person or a group to the exercise of power or privilege, or position of social precedence — claims which are considered legitimate in the community concerned in the sense that they are accepted as rightful dues. I include for this purpose the claims of an office-holder such as a King, a territorial chief, a clan or a lineage head or a religious functionary, or, in the case of an acephalous society,

7. "African Chiefs and their Royal Relatives," Presidential Address printed from the Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute Vol.91, 1961, page one seq.

8. "Social Mechanism for the transfer of political rights in some African Tribes", Presidential Address Reprinted from the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute Vol.90 Part 2, 1960, paragraph two seq.

the rights of some corporate group such as a major lineage, which consider itself entitled to economic, ritual or other privilege. Such claims are invariably based on precedent. This is in fact what we mean by traditional political right. Some version of historical events gives the privileged the right to enjoy political authority - some myth however fantastic, some legend of migration, conquest or the occupation of new territory, however ill-attested, some line of descent however truncated - versions of the past which social anthropologists now group together loosely under the heading 'historical charters' following and slightly extending Malinowski's (1926) original use of the term".

The legitimisation of political authority at every level according to Audrey Richards is based on what she calls 'historical charters', and in the final analysis descent and therefore kinship predominates among the characteristics of the various political rights. My own field experience among the Akwapims reinforces Richards' point.

The people who are called the Akwapims inhabit part of the range of the hills which are referred to as Akwapem-Ewe range of hills. The area occupies the hill country north of Accra the capital of Ghana. Sixteen of its towns lie in line along the crest of the main ridge. Historically the Akwapims were mainly Guans, but were assisted in a war against another tribe known as Akwamus by the Akyems another tribe from the Eastern side of Ghana. After the conquest, the Akyem mercenaries decided to settle on the ridge and they set out to reorganize the political and the social structure of the Akwapims. The Akyems are culturally Akans, and as result of this historical event the Akans who are immigrants to Akwapim now constitute the dominant groups.⁹

There are three types of internal structures that go to make up the social structure of the paramountcy. I describe and distinguish them by the following adjectives: proximate, contiguous, internal and dispersed. The internal

9. (Cf. Doctorial Thesis: The Basis of Political Authority of the Akwapims 1965, London University) p.214. "The internal structure of the paramountcy"

structure is so named because the members of this structure at this level are part of the Omanhene's household, that is members of the council of chiefs which is traditionally called 'Koman'. 'Koman' means the people who fought to save a nation. This term is a logical derivation from the military origins of the immigration of the Akyems. The forebears of all the Akans in the Akwapim State gave military aid to the aboriginal Akwapim people in the early eighteenth century, and in recognition of their military prowess, and victories over the Akwamus, they were asked to remain in Akwapim and protect the people.

The political pre-eminence of the Akans particularly the Akyem over the Guans, the aborigines is based on 'historical charters' of military intervention and military aid. This point of ascriptive political right is common among most African societies, and its pervasiveness is linked with an accepted jural equality among members of a particular clan or tribe who claim the right to such political authority. Professor M. Fortes, in his lucid and most illuminating synopsis of his new book on kinship, observes that kinship ties which form the basis of one's status may be relevant in both sides of an individual's parenthood, and this is a departure from the orthodox belief in unilineality which dominated anthropology when the problems confronting the subject were mainly those of structural analysis. Nowadays, thanks to Fortes and his colleagues, African societies are not now said to exhibit the type of bizarre features, portraying African societies a little less human than the western type which according to the anthropological evolutionists, were at the top of the evolutionary ladder of civilization.

Let us hear what Fortes has to say in this matter. "Characteristically, owing to the jural equality of men and women in cognatic systems, 'kindred' connexions by filiation on either side of parenthood confer equal or parallel credential of eligibility of citizenship in the political community and hence and succession". By rules of exogamy and preferential marriages, both working in complementary opposition, we find that most of the Akans in Akwapim wield some degree of political power which are ascribed to them either by reason of the father's

lineage or mother's lineage. Here the Akans of the Akwapim State have common cultural features with that of Tiv in their social structures. The dominant group of Akyem descent Akwapim claims descent from Akim Abuakwa. The Tiv according to Bohanan is a Tiv, because has descended from Tiv the eponymous founder of the state.¹⁰

"The Tiv do not present that difficulty so common to Africa: identifying the tribe. A Tiv is a Tiv and can prove it. This proof consists in a genealogy through which every Tiv can trace his descent from Tiv himself".

A similar idea underlies the use of genealogies in Akan society, i.e. to trace descent from a clan founder putative or real.

Kinship studies continue to attract interest because of the significance it has for many African societies in organizing their lives.

But there are some negative aspects of this subject which have been neglected. For example when the classificatory kinship terminology is used for describing tribal groups, this then lifts the meaning on to a different level. It may develop into political rivalries, or alignments. In most modern African states, tribal nepotism seems to derive its matrix from classificatory kinship system and it constitutes the cause of conflict and tension within the body-politic. The cause of the Nigerian civil war is well-known to us all, the Ibos of the south against the western Nigerians. In Ghana too ethnic alignments based on common cultural and geographical identity manifested itself in the ugliest form in the Ashanti region. The polarisation of interests expressed in the formation of a movement known as the National Liberation Movement (N.L.M.), to seize political power from the southerners developed into tribal warfare with concomitant disruption in the prerequisite efforts for attaining independence at the time this objective was in sight. The unrest and political rivalries which gripped the region were set out in a Report of a Commission of Inquiry which sat under Mr. Justice Jackson reported as follows: These few days, between

10. Tribes without Rulers..., Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1958, p.35, paragraph two seq.

the November 2 and 7, 1951 were certainly ones in which any man or woman who happened to be a member of the Convention Peoples' Party was a hare in which any supporter of the Wenchiene was a hound".¹¹

The Ashanti at this time quarrelled among themselves on ideological grounds; this time it was a fission within the tribal group, because the C.P.P. epitomised a non-Ashanti nationalism and supporters were regarded persona non grata, branded disloyal to the Ashanti cause.

The last General Elections were unfortunately plunged into tribal squabbles. "The performance of the seemingly Ewe-dominated N.L.C. Administration left a rather bad taste in many people's mouths because it was claimed that the leaders were practising nepotism, a largely baseless allegation. Gbedemah projected Ewe-tribal nationalism, and Busia Akan nationalism at the expense of national unity. Unfortunately this trend continues".¹²

In most modern states in Africa the conventional social usages, and the idiom in which interactions had operated in the traditional systems, impinge on the newly structured polities. The latter have foreign bases, and their legitimisation becomes so dubious, that tensions and conflicts arise between the traditional political authority, and the legal-rational in this case produces something like a pseudo-charismatic political authority. This looks like an inverted Weberian political typological analysis, but it fits aptly the present trend in African polities.

11. (Commission of Inquiry into Wenchi Affairs Mr. Justice Jackson, page 18, paragraph 117).

12. Eric O. Ayisi: 'Ghana and the Return to Parliamentary Government,' The Political Quarterly Vol. 41 No. 4, October, 1970.