THE DYNAMICS OF KINSHIP TERMINOLOGY
IN SMALL-SCALE SOCIETIES

by E.O. Ayisi[*]

Kinship refers to a particular category of relation-
ships 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 marri-
age 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
arrangements[1] 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 recogni-
tion 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.

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[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

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 classi-
ficatory 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 termino-
logy'.

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.[4]   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 dis-
covering just how these two frames of reference the system of
verbal categories and the system of behavioural attitudes are
interconnected..."[5]

Most anthropologists have treated the kinship termino-
logy 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
the e people. He observed as follows: "The Tallensi apply the
concepts of kinship to describe and define domestic relations
and p   n-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 bind-
ing element. It furnishes the primary axioms of all cate-
gories of interpersonal and intergroup relations".6 Kin-
ship 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 appro-
priate treatment from each other. Kinship terminology parti-
cularly 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 elegible 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

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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 line-
ages, 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 indivi-
duals certain rights over others, thus placing others in
asymetrical 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 exer-
cise of power or privilege, or position of social precedence —
claims which are considered legitimate in the community con-
cerned 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,

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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 fan-
tastic, 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 anthro-
pologists 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 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 Akwapems 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
Akwapems 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 fore-
bears 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 'histori-
cal 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 unilinealty 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 evolution-
ary 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 classifi-
catory 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 consti-
tutes 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 expres-
sed 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 indepen-
dence 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

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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 Wenchihene 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.

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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.