

## THE ONTOLOGICAL IMPLICATION OF KINSHIP IN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.30799.70560

### Abstract

*Kinship can be understood as a culture's system of recognized family roles and relationships that define the obligations, rights, and boundaries of interaction among the members of a self-recognizing group. It could be defined through genetic relationships, adoption, or other ritualized behaviour such as marriage and household economies. Kinship systems range in size from a single, nuclear-family to tribal or intertribal relationships. Above all, kinship creates a network that gives its members a sense of belonging. The basic question that constitutes the burden of this piece is on how kinship in African ontology can contribute to development. To be better equipped to make this study, it analysed the meaning of development. This led to the submission that kinship network, when properly harnessed can be a vehicle for development in Africa, which can take social, economic, political and moral dimensions.*

**Keywords:** Kinship, African, Ontology, Development, Political, Economic, Social and Moral

### Introduction

Africans are known world-wide for their sense of “kinship or family”. And in fact scholars are generally agreed that kinship, with all it implies, has been one of the strongest forces in African life. The characteristically African family or kinship is an institution in which “everybody is somebody”. Westerman puts this succinctly when it declared that the African society is characterized by the prevalence of the idea of community, “The whole of existence for the African is organically embodied in a series of associations and life appears to have full value only in those close ties” (Westerman, 65). This is one of the most vital features of the African heritage. Reflecting on the dividend of African of kinship,

Achebe writes, A man who calls his kinsman to feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their homes. When we gather together in the moonlight village ground it is not because of the moon. Everyman can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so (Achebe p. 155). This captures the African concept of kinship relationship, as a relationship shared by people of common origins and attitudes, a relationship with its meaning not in precepts but in a life lived in common. This notwithstanding, in this piece, the burden of the researcher is to unveil the African philosophy of kinship and to see how it can contribute to development.

Kinship in Africa involves a close relationship between household members and a clan or an African lineage group. The lineage groups trace their origins to one ancestor that is believed to be a common ancestor of all the descendants in the lineage. Also, there are extended families like brothers and their families. Kinship systems are the basic construct of societal organization. The kinship system in Africa refers to the network of people in a household and those of a larger group. The system involves people related by blood, from the same community, and those that share housing. The African family consists of a man, a wife (or wives), and children. The family could also consist of adopted people from other families. Relatives from a family of the same descent or lineage form a kinship group. Various African families form the kinship system.

### **The Term Kinship In Africa**

Kinship refers to relationship within a community or family. These family ties bond people together in a society and provide organization and structure for relationships. This is the relationship between members of the same family. Different ethnic groups have different systems of kinship. a feeling of being close or similar to other people or things: He felt a real sense of kinship with his fellow soldiers. Family: relations in general.

Mbiti understands kinship as a vast network. He wrote, Kinship system is like a vast network stretching laterally in every direction, to embrace everybody in any given local group. This means that each individual is a brother-in-law, uncle or aunt, or something else, and there are many kinship terms to express the precise kind of kinship pertaining between two individuals. When two strangers meet in a village, one of the first duties is to sort out how they may be related to each other according to the accepted behaviour set down by the society. ( Mbiti p. 104). Furthermore, Kinship can be understood as a culture's system of recognized family roles and relationships that define the obligations, rights, and boundaries of interaction among the members of a self-recognizing group. It could be defined through genetic relationships, adoption, or other ritualized behaviour such as marriage and household economies. Kinship systems range in size from a single, nuclear-family to tribal or intertribal relationships. Above all, kinship creates a network that gives its members a sense of belonging.

Speaking of kinship, Pantaleon believes that the Igbo-African world into which a child is born crying *abatala m ya* (I have come into it) is made up of seven characteristics: common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour and habits, common historical experience and a common destiny. Without any choice of its own, the child is born into the Igbo world. Even as the baby sleeps in its cradle, it already has its being, performance and *akaraka* (destiny) partly enshrined and construed in the Igbo world. And the attachment of this newly individual to the communal is expressed in proverbs such as, *Ngwere ghara ukwu osisi, aka akpara ya* (If a lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be caught by man). This expresses the indisputable and inevitable

presence of, not just the family, but the community to which the individual belongs (Pantaleon, 67).

According to Uchendu at the birth of a child, the community rejoices and welcomes his arrival, finds out whose reincarnation he is, gives the person a name and interprets that arrival within the circumstance of the birth. As the child grows, he becomes aware of his dependence on his kin group and community. He also realizes the necessity of making his own contribution to the group (Uchendu 65).

As observed by Alyward, , the African traditional life is centred around the family. The family is where life is generated, a basic unit of life which represents in miniature the life of the entire people; it is in the family that the values of the clan, the tribe and of Africa are transmitted. The family unit is a centre of learning. The family embraces grandparents and grand children as long as they are traceable, the living dead, the in-laws and the intermediaries which include their ancestors (Alyward, (197). The African concept of the family also includes the unborn members who are still in the loins of the living. They are, for the African, the buds of hope and expectation. During one of the feasts organized by Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, his uncle Uchendu revealed the essence of the Igbo-African kinship, we do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him (Achebe 1949, p.132).

Kinship controls social relationships among African people, and since there are different kinds of kinship terms to express the different kinds of relationship between persons, knowing the kind of kinship relationship that unites one with the other is of paramount importance. Once an African discovers the kind of kinship relationship that unites him with the other, he begins to respond to it. For instance, when a Nigerian meets another African elsewhere outside Africa, he would ask him about the country he has come from, having ascertained the country, if he is a fellow Nigeria, the Nigerian relates to him as a brother. But the Nigerian would not stop there, he would ask him again, about the state he has come from in Nigeria; if he tells him that he has come from the same state with him, a profound kinship is established. The Nigerian wouldn't end there, he would ask him again from which local government; if from the same local government, and the relationship is deepened. He would go further to ask about his village; if the same village and the same clan, they would relate in an intimate way. If someone were to see me in America and discovers that we are all from orlu village, he would not just call me a brother; he would call me *nwa mazi*, this would make me feel at home with him and he as well, even though we are both in America. The concept of personhood within a kinship is not attained in isolation from the community. African philosophy accepts that personhood is something attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through performing the various duties imposed on him or her by living in the community. A person is defined by reference to his kinship, and as such, the reality of communal world takes precedence over the individual. Mbiti sums up the African view of a person in these words: "I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am" (Mbiti, p.108). This does not mean, as Obiechina opines that the hold which the community has over the individual African is not so constructive that the expression of individuality is completely frustrated is true. Individuality, instead of being frustrated, is helped and defined by the community. Kinship in Africa survives on the contributions of individual endowments.

It is in this regard that Chidili opined that the African admits pluralism, but harnesses it and makes proper use of it. As a result of the strong kinship relationship among Africans, they hold lots of meetings together, so as to offer each member the opportunity to share his own gift with his brothers and sisters, because community itself is seen by the African as a gift from God which must be preserved. Wherever Africans meet, they create avenues for continuous meeting and sharing. When Nigerians meet in Canada and identify themselves, they fix days for meeting and come together to share the successes and difficulties of one another. With regard to morality, there is a strong connection between moral rules and the type of communal kinship relationships that exist among African societies. A crime committed by a person, say stealing, has implications not only for the thief but also for the kinship relationship; for what is stolen is first of all considered to be a thing of the member of the kinship, perhaps of one related to the thief in one way or the other. In the contention of Adewole the offence not only affects the victims of the theft but the whole community, and the shame as well also goes to the whole community. In some quarters, the punishment not only affects the thief but also the close relatives, as in the case where a person is asked to leave the village with his entire family. Genealogy plays a significant role in African kinship system.

Thus Mbiti avers that children are made to learn the genealogy of their people with a sense of depth so as to transmit them to the next generation. Through genealogical ties, the African is able to know how he is related to a certain person in a group. More so, through genealogies, clans (the clan is a major subdivision of the whole tribe) are easily made as the kinship expands. Those clans whose descent is traced back to the father are called Patriarchal clans, while those whose descent is traced to the mother are called Matriarchal clans. If the members of a clan cannot marry each other, they are referred to as exogamous clan, while where marriage within the clan is allowed, it is called endogamous clan. Apart from localizing the sense of kinship, clan system provides closer human co-operation, especially in times of need. In case of internal conflicts, clan members join one another to fight their aggressive neighbour. As regard marriage in Africa, it is not simply the affair of the individual couple but of the community. The community approves or disapproves a marriage, and invokes God's blessings on the married couple which now constitutes a household in the kinship system.

According to Adasu, the birth of a child is a response to prayer as well as a blessing on the community and the family. The child must ensure the continuity of the individual as he is seen as the externalization of the father's personal immortality. Each family must make sure that its existence is not extinguished. For Mbiti, this is the concept that reinforces polygamy in Africa, for unless a person has close relatives to remember him when he has physically died, then he is nobody and simply vanishes like a flame when it is extinguished. In every African kinship relationship, there is hierarchy based on age and degree of kinship. In this relationship, Mbiti avers that the oldest members have a higher status than the youngest. Within this hierarchy, there are duties, obligations, rights and privileges dictated by the moral sense of the society. Failure in performing one's duty either as parents and children or otherwise, there are consequences attached to them. It is the duty of kin members to be hospitable to relatives, friends and even strangers. The African kinship system is thus a strong social network, with wide extension capacity.

### **Benefits of Kinship in Africa**

Kinship in Africa encompasses a complex web of social relationships and obligations that extend beyond biological ties to include social, economic, and political dimensions.

Understanding the benefits of kinship in African societies requires delving into its multifaceted roles and functions within various cultural contexts.

### **Social Cohesion and Support Systems:**

Kinship networks in Africa serve as fundamental pillars of social cohesion and community solidarity. They provide a framework for individuals to navigate life's challenges and celebrations. Within these networks, kinship ties foster a sense of belonging and identity, which strengthens social bonds and fosters collective responsibility. For instance, in many African cultures, extended families or clans come together during important life events such as births, weddings, and funerals, thereby reinforcing communal ties and support systems (Parkin, 1997).

### **Economic Support and Redistribution:**

Kinship plays a crucial role in economic activities across Africa. Traditional systems of reciprocal exchange and redistribution often operate along kinship lines. For example, in rural agricultural communities, labor may be shared among extended family members during planting and harvesting seasons, ensuring collective prosperity and food security (Bohannon, 1959). Moreover, financial resources are frequently pooled within kin networks to support education, healthcare, and entrepreneurship initiatives, thereby enhancing economic resilience and development (Goody, 1971).

### **Political Organization and Governance:**

Kinship ties historically underpin political structures and governance systems in many African societies. Traditional leadership often revolves around familial or clan affiliations, where elders or lineage heads wield authority and resolve disputes based on customary laws (Richards, 1989). Kinship networks also serve as channels for political mobilization and influence, shaping local and even national decision-making processes through informal networks and alliances (Foster, 1965).

### **Cultural Transmission and Identity Preservation:**

Kinship networks are crucial for the transmission of cultural values, norms, and traditions from one generation to the next. They serve as repositories of oral history, rituals, and practices that define cultural identity and continuity (Fortes, 1958). Through kinship, young people learn about their heritage, language, and customs, reinforcing a sense of pride and belonging within their community (Wiredu, 1980).

### **Social Welfare and Safety Nets:**

In the absence of formal social welfare systems, kinship networks often function as informal safety nets. They provide emotional support during times of crisis, such as illness or unemployment, and offer material assistance to vulnerable members (Meyer, 1977). This informal social security mechanism underscores the resilience of kinship systems in mitigating poverty and enhancing social welfare outcomes.

### **Challenges and Adaptation:**

Despite its benefits, kinship in Africa faces challenges in the context of modernization, urbanization, and globalization. Nuclear family units are increasingly prevalent in urban settings, leading to the fragmentation of traditional extended family structures (Mbiti, 1969). Moreover, socioeconomic changes and migration patterns pose challenges to maintaining close-knit kinship networks across vast distances.



Kinship in Africa remains a cornerstone of social organization, economic cooperation, political governance, cultural identity, and social welfare. Its adaptive resilience continues to shape African societies amidst evolving dynamics of globalization and modernization. Understanding the intricate roles of kinship networks is essential for appreciating the richness and diversity of African social systems.

Kinship created a social safety net in place of government social security. If a village suffered a famine, people could move to different areas where their kin lived. A woman's kin would care for her if she was widowed or divorced. This system took care of orphans and the disabled as well. The kinship system formed a protective circle that valued family. They took care of one another and would receive the same treatment in kind.

Kinship has played an essential role in Africa. The system determines people's roles within their worlds: who they would marry, what they would inherit, and what their job would be. When someone was ill, orphaned, or disabled, their kin looked after them. While kin groups couldn't trace their common ancestor, they believed they were related.

The most popular kin groups were patrilineal and matrilineal. These systems shaped their societies. Social Networks developed through kinship. People had a sense of belonging and security. They wanted their kin to do well. Kin groups grew as people connected. Political alliances were created through both parties declaring that they were kin. This created a ripe environment for kingdoms to form. People felt connected to one another. If a kin group did well, so did the individuals within it.

### **Kinship Groups in Africa**

There are four types of kinship in Africa: **patrilineal**, **matrilineal**, **double**, and **bilateral**. These groups were created for various reasons but served the same goals. Patrilineal and matrilineal are more popular than bilateral and double. Let's take a closer look at the more popular ones.

### **Double Descent Kinship**

Every kinship member is traced through patrilineage and matrilineage; the responsibilities, roles, and inheritances are split between the two.

### **Bilateral Kinship**

One is equally kin to the mother's and father's separate kin groups and can choose to which one they wish to belong.

### **Patrilineal Kinship**

This is the most common form of kinship practiced worldwide, including in Africa. People who practice it trace their kin through their fathers. When a woman marries, she moves to her husband's clan and becomes a part of his kin group.

Inheritance favors male descendants because society considers them the ones in charge. In some communities, like the Yoruba, women can inherit. The number of available resources determines a woman's inheritance. If there is little to inherit, the male descendant will receive the majority, if not all, of the inheritance.

A significant relationship in patrilineal kinship clans is the avunculate. This is the bond between a mother's brother and her son. The uncle, considered the "male mother", is required to care for his nephew. Nephews might live with their uncles, tease them, or even inherit unique cattle from them.

When communities engaged in internal warfare, they needed the men close to home. They couldn't leave to join other villages, so patrilineal kinship evolved. When communities practiced external warfare, patrilineal kinship developed so that men could work the farms and tend the cattle. **Internal Warfare:** War waged among the same people who share a common language. **External Warfare:** War waged between different groups who do not share a common language.

### **Matrilineal Kinship**

Matrilineal kinship is far less common than patrilineal kinship. People in these societies trace their kinship through their mothers. The forests on the coast of Western Africa practice this dynamic.

The practice of matrilineal kinship developed in areas that partook in external warfare. The men left to go to war against other clans. They were also hunter-gatherers, meaning the men left to collect resources. The communities needed women to work the farms and tend the cattle, so having them remain in groups together was practical.

### **Marriage and Kinship in Africa**

People in Africa married with the intent of having children, as this was thought of as someone's purpose in the world. Someone's place within the clan was determined upon marriage. Marriage between cousins, preferably two brothers' children, was frequent and desirable. Who one could marry was determined by their kin group.

In a patrilineal society, a man had the right to marry his cousin. She, of course, could refuse but would need his permission if she wanted to marry someone else. In a matrilineal system, a man must provide a bride price to his intended's family. This could be in the form of cattle, money, or labour. He would never fully pay the bride price as a reminder that he was forever indebted to his wife's family.

A man could practice polygamy if he could afford multiple wives. This was a widespread practice that became less popular after the introduction of Christianity into Africa. The mother determined family unity. A mother and her children would live in one home, while the husband's other wives lived in separate houses with their children.

Marriage traditions were different based on where the couple lived and what form of kinship they practiced. In some traditions, a married couple will move closer to the avunculate. Or the couple might move into the husband's family compound. They might just move into the husband's village. Marriage is a rite of passage, and a couple might not be considered married until they've conceived or given birth to one child.

Divorce is possible, though it is easier in some clans than others. Sometimes, a woman can divorce her husband if he is infertile and vice versa. Kids might live with one parent, an uncle, or another family member. Men tended to be older than their wives because they would try and have as many children as possible.

### **The Relevance of Kinship in Africa in the contemporary society**

In contemporary African society, kinship remains highly relevant despite ongoing social, economic, and political changes. Its importance continues to manifest in various facets of daily life, influencing social relationships, economic activities, governance structures, and cultural practices.

#### **Social Cohesion and Community Support:**

Kinship networks provide a crucial framework for social cohesion and community support. In urban and rural settings alike, extended families and clan affiliations serve as networks of mutual aid and solidarity (Mbiti, 1969). They offer emotional support during personal crises and celebrations, fostering a sense of belonging and collective identity within communities (Fortes, 1958).

#### **Economic Cooperation and Development:**

Economically, kinship networks play a vital role in fostering cooperation and development. In rural areas, reciprocal labour exchanges and resource pooling among extended family members remain common practices (Bohannon, 1959). Moreover, informal credit systems and investment opportunities often circulate within kinship networks, supporting entrepreneurial endeavours and enhancing economic resilience (Goody, 1971).

#### **Political Influence and Governance:**

Kinship ties continue to influence political dynamics and governance structures across Africa. Traditional leadership often derives authority from familial or clan affiliations, influencing local decision-making processes and community development initiatives (Foster, 1965). Kin-based networks also serve as channels for political mobilization and civic engagement, particularly in rural areas where formal institutions may be less accessible (Richards, 1989).

#### **Cultural Identity and Heritage Preservation:**

Culturally, kinship remains integral to the preservation of identity and heritage. It serves as a repository of oral history, customs, and rituals that define community identity (Wiredu, 1980). Through kinship ties, younger generations learn about their cultural heritage, language, and traditional practices, fostering a sense of pride and continuity in cultural identity (Fortes, 1958).

### **Conclusion**

The foregoing has studied the concept of kinship in African ontology. It has further studied the contribution of kinship to development. In this regard, the political, economic, ethical



and social contributions of kinship to development were discussed. A cursory glance reveals that scholars have criticized the African concept of kinship as promoting over-dependence, and creating avenue for incompetence and laziness since everyone hides under the shadow of the community; a critical analysis of the African kinship system reveals that it is far beyond that. The strong emphasis on community presupposes a prior acceptance of a degree of individual sacrifice whenever the need arises: so that others may live, so that others may eat, so that others may have joy, and so on. The Igbo proverb *Oke pe mpe, ma nmadu baa uba* (let shares be small but let human beings be many) is instructive here. In clear contrast to this kind of spirit is Western capitalist mentality, which encourages unlimited personal accumulation, leading to aggression and violence, and an attitude of consumerism that undermines solidarity and cooperation. The African good sense of kinship is the factor behind the comparatively low rate of suicide in the continent. The spirit is accommodating: “all are responsible for all”. This is the basic content of the African philosophy of kinship. Man is defined by reference to the community. And the feeling that a person matters to the extent that others care about his or her welfare, carries every individual through the vicissitudes of life and makes life worth living, thus rendering the contemplation of suicide remote. This kinship network, when properly harnessed is also a wheel for development, which can take social, economic, political and moral dimensions.

Understanding the diversity of kinship systems is crucial for comprehending how societies organize familial relationships, inheritance practices, and social roles. Each type of kinship system carries its own set of cultural meanings and impacts social dynamics within communities worldwide.

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