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Geschiere, P.

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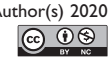
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"The African family is large, very large" mobility and the flexibility of kinship – examples from Cameroon

Peter Geschiere
Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Abstract
When I started fieldwork among the Maka in SE Cameroon in 1971 I was suprised that for them kinship was hardly about ascribing people a fixed position. In retrospect this makes me realize how deeply Talcott Parsons' famous pattern variables – notably 'ascription' versus 'achievement' influenced our perspective. But Maka people turned out to be true masters in 'working'-with kinship, constantly 'discovering' kin in unexpected contexts, making creative equations and switch-es. My subsequent research in the area (up till now) highlighted how over time this plasticity of their kinship arrangements increased with growing urbanization and even more with transcontinental migration. Cameroon's famous 'bush-fallers' have developed their own ways for 'working' with kinship. However, this plasticity should not only be studied as stemming from new and shifting conditions. I hope to show as well that such a more dynamic view on kinship is valuable for re-evaluating classical kinship theory.

Keywords
kinship, mobility, intimacy, witchcraft, Cameroon, migration

Corresponding author:
Peter Geschiere, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam, Sarphatipark, 57, Amsterdam 1073CS, Netherlands.
Email: P.L.Geschiere@uva.nl

The growing interest for kinship in the study of migration made me re-think my own long-term struggle with this topic in my research in the Maka villages in Southeast Cameroon. Since this research started already in 1971 with field-work on the spot and is still going on, this means a retrospect over almost 50 years. Such an historical outlook can relate to the renewed interest in kinship as an important factor for getting a bottom-up perspective on the struggles of migrants. It can also explore the limits *and* the possibilities of classical anthropological theory on this topic, once seen as the discipline's grail.

My reluctance at the time to give kinship central space in my research proposal stemmed from what I then saw as its major limitations: an anthropologists' hobby that set African societies apart as 'traditional.' However, my Maka friends quickly taught me that I had to face this topic if I ever wanted to understand something of the way they dealt with rapid changes. This helped me to see kinship in another perspective, as highly inventive and dynamic. A standard expression of my interlocutors was 'Well, the African family is large, very large' and this became an eye opener for me for understanding the flexibility and resilience of what I initially saw as a 'traditional' leftover. In a certain sense my Maka friends taught me already in 1971 what was to become one of the shibboleths of 'the new kinship studies' about twenty years later.[1]

Thus, my own trajectory might serve to outline the limits of the classical view but also elements in it – notably the search for fixed beacons in the diversity of kinship forms - that can help to further develop a theory of kinship and its dynamic role in the intensification of migration over ever longer distances. We shall see that such a new theory is emerging from recent works like the challenging 2016 collection by Jennifer Cole and Christian Groes, *Affective Circuits, African Migrations to Europe and the Pursuit of Social Regeneration,* or from Andrikopoulos' 2017 study of African migrants and their worldwide networks.[2] The aim of the present collection is to further contribute to this. The question for this particular article is to what extent my by now almost historical struggle with the topic can highlight both problems in using anthropological kinship theory in changing contexts, and outline helpful elements for opening up new perspectives?

Leaving for the field in 1971: Kinship as the antipode of 'modernization'?

I left for the field in Cameroon when the high tide of 'modernization' and its inevitable companion 'development' affected even anthropology. In those days, doing anthropological field-work increasingly seemed to be only justified if it would in one way or another contribute to the development of the society concerned. In my case, for instance, the choice of the Maka area was influenced by the possibility to collaborate with a project for developing a farmers' cooperative for the marketing of coffee and cacao, the area's main cash-crops. These were the days of great optimism for Africa. The continent's 'young states,' seen as unencumbered

by the ballast of age-old, resistant civilizations, could be put on a quick road to development. As one of the elites of 'my' new village, who had made a successful career in town, put in a sign above his office door: 'Be brief, we have little time. We have to do in decades what Europe achieved in centuries.' In such a context, the old anthropological interest in kinship (and witchcraft for that matter) seemed to justify increasing criticism among Africa's new elites, that anthropology was 'primitivizing Africa,' denying all the progress that was already made. So, I was keen on focusing on a more modern theme: the local effects of state formation and the way it affected relations at the village level. Indeed, my Maka interlocutors had a hard time to convince me that for them kinship was important whatever I thought about it.

Why my reluctance against kinship? In retrospect I am inclined to relate this to the impact of the deceptively clear scheme of 'pattern variables' that Talcott Parsons, then still a towering figure in sociology, deduced from Weber. This was the heyday of the Cold War and, despite some criticisms already then (cf. Wright-Mills, 1959), Parsons' version of Weber, proposing an analysis of 'modernization' that could serve as some sort of antidote against Marx, had great prestige in the social sciences,. One of the main reasons was that he succeeded to condense the opposition between traditional and modern societies in just five 'pattern variables,' dichotomies outlining contrasting key-values that supposedly oriented individuals in their social interaction. For each of these dichotomies the transition from one pole to its opposite would be essential for the modernization of a given society. A crucial one, for the theme of kinship, was 'ascription versus achievement.' For Parsons, in modern society one's status was acquired through personal achievements; in traditional settings, in contrast, it was 'ascribed' on the basis of fixed social positions.[3] Kinship would be the main 'traditional' way of 'ascribing' a position to a person. In this view one was born in a 'traditional' society inside a given kinship group, and the concomitant kinship system fixed one's social position.

Anthropologists had some difficulties with such a simplistic version of kinship. After all, the discipline had a long tradition of facing the complexities of kinship 'systems' – even to such an extent that the topic had acquired a somewhat mixed reputation for the dazzling schemes that researchers in this field tended to produce. After the classical Anglo-Saxon focus on 'descent,' Claude Lévi-Strauss complemented this since the late 1940s by his challenging interpretations of 'alliance' (that is, marriage as a form of exchange between descent groups), leading to further complexities (see Fox, 1983). But on one point these sophisticated interpretations converged with the Parsonian vision of kinship: in the societies they studied kinship and alliance 'systems' seemed to follow fixed rules, exhibiting a fairly rigid systemic character. The staunch field-workers among our forefathers (Evans-Pritchard, Max Gluckman) did notice irregularities in everyday life. But this did not come through in the general view of kinship as a static system of ascription. For many anthropologists as well, change seemed to come from the outside. This was seen as a basic difference with 'modern' (read Western) societies where kinship

had definitively lost its dominant position to criteria that were rather based on 'achievement.'[4] At the time anthropologists had no problem with the idea that 'ascription' was highly important in 'traditional' settings – especially in the 'kinship societies' of Africa.

However, when I finally entered my first African 'field,' everything turned out to be quite different from these neat classifications. I soon discovered that living in a Maka village meant to be constantly confronted with people – especially adult men – boasting in most explicit ways of their personal achievements. Villagers turned out to have a true obsession with honorific titles. Even the working groups of mostly young men showed me very proudly their *cahier* that contained mostly an endless enumeration of titles – next to *Président* and *Vice-Président* also titles like *Serviteur du Vin Adjoint* | (vice-server of the wine) – which were regularly used in addressing the persons concerned. Later on I stumbled on the anthropological notion of 'big-men societies' – especially developed in New Guinea and Melanesia (Barnes, 1962; Sahlins, 1963) – and I found this very relevant to the patterns of organization I came to know in the Maka villages. Before the arrival in this area of the Germans (the first colonizers – mostly between 1900 and 1910), these societies consisted of small family villages under the authority of one or several elders. Villages sharing the same descent could collaborate but there were no fixed positions of authority above the village level. Chiefs were only installed by the colonial government and their authority depended (and still depends) on the emphatic support of the highly authoritarian state, in postcolonial times as much as in the colonial period. Up till today these outside imposed positions functions in an uneasy balance with local forms of organization that in many respects are still highly 'segmentary' in character. Groups still have a tendency to split off or reunite, depending on the situation. Leaders still have to show their personal valor (achievement) in order to get respect. 'Big men' are in constant competition to attract followers – accumulating bridewealth paid for their daughters and granddaughters which they then can use to pay bridewealth for marrying their sons and grandsons. So much for 'ascription' as the fixed basis for one's social status.

But my main surprise was the way my new friends 'worked' with kinship. In this special issue Janet Carsten follows Susan McKinnon's seminal contrast between 'being' and 'doing kinship' (McKinnon, 2017). Indeed the Maka taught me what 'doing kinship' means in practice.

> I got a telling example of this right after settling in the village where I hoped to live for some time. I had entered the area through two Dutch Catholic priests who at the time had a mission post in one of the villages where I could stay the first few days. They advised me to settle in a neighboring village. This turned out to be a very good advice in view of my research topic, since this village was more 'modern.' American Protestant missionaries had founded there a school already in the 1930's which meant that several 'sons of the village' had made career in civil service due to their education. And they would prove to be an essential link in my research between national and local politics.

> According to the detailed instructions I had received from the *sous-préfet* when he had checked my official research authorization, I arranged a formal meeting with the village chief to get his agreement for settling in 'his' village. But this quickly turned out to become a most chaotic meeting since a group of men, coming back from their plantations and therefore quite drunk (in Maka villages custom is nowadays that work has to be facilitated by palm wine) joined the session and started to impose their conditions. One was that I should not bring along Meke, the young man whom I had met at the Mission station in the neighboring village and who had come to serve already more or less as my assistant. As one of the men shouted: 'We do not want to have these colonials (= the priests) send us one of their valets.' I was a bit taken aback since I had come to like Meke. But I accepted and promised to hire a young man of the village as my assistant. Meke himself was stoically silent (luckily because this particular man was quite drunk). After much more ado a house was selected where I could live and a few days later I started settling there.
>
> When I was moving, Meke joined me as if this was self-evident, and I did not know very well how to handle the situation. However, already the next day it turned out that Meke had found his own solution. He had discovered that our landlady was 'in reality' an aunt of his. It was quite clear that until then he hardly knew the lady. So I could not help asking how they were related. This turned out to be not that easy to explain. In the end I started to make a genealogy (my first one) to follow how this 'kinship' was constructed. Apparently the lady's mother's-brother came from the same village as Meke's grand-mother. Since colonial times every Maka village consists of several *grandes familles*, who are often not at all related (the colonials forced people to come to live along the road in bigger villages to assure better control). But this was no problem, neither for my assistant nor for the lady. He was now with kin, so he could stay (and there were, indeed, no further protests against him joining me), and the lady was happy to have a good contact inside the white man's house.

This example highlights already how important the elasticity of kinship terminology[5] can be in a context of mobility, even if it concerns only the movement of my assistant from his own village to the next one. But I kept stumbling on other situations in which 'kinship' was used in shifting ways, allowing for all sorts of equations and extensions and where there was no impact of a novelty (like a white man settling in a village). A recurrent example, with clear 'traditional' overtones, that kept baffling me was the way people switched roles during the spectacular funeral rituals.

> As elsewhere in Africa funerals are dramatic occasions in the Maka villages. For an important person, the ritual has to last at least two days and the intervening night. This means at least 30 hours of constant drumming, dancing, drinking and mourning. A large funeral will attract people from all over the area and has all sorts of carnivalesque aspects. In principle there is a strict division of roles, characteristically in kinship terms. The deceased's patrilineal kin is supposed to mourn and cry. At the start of the

> funeral they are identified by the 'daughters-in-law' (that is, all the women married into the lineage of the dead person) who with much ado paint the mourners' faces white. In contrast the deceased's affines (the sister's sons, the daughters-in-law, the sons-in-law) have to rejoice over the loss of the lineage (a good example of what anthropologists call a 'joking relationship' even though the 'jokes' can easily go beyond just fun). They have to dance with great alacrity and give speeches about the dead person full of insulting comments. The deceased's spirit is supposed to see all the performances and to be happy about the dynamic men and women that he has assembled for his group.
>
> However, I soon began to notice that there were people who played both roles. At one moment they were mourning and crying next to the bier, but at the next moment I saw them happily dancing along with the daughters-in-law. Time and again people explained to me that so-and-so was both a patrilineal relative *and* an affine. That is in principle impossible, since one of the basic rules in Maka society is that one can never marry inside one's patrilineal group. But even this basic rule can be 'worked with', if the situation requires so.

I was quite baffled at such occasions about the way two completely different kinship links were construed, but people would laugh at me and quote the refrain I had come to know so well: 'Yes, the African family is large, very large.' This expression has broader relevance since it reflects certain specific traits of African forms of organization. Both anthropologists and historians have emphasized that for a long time wealth in Africa was 'wealth-in-people'; this in contrast with 'wealth-in-things' that would be more current in Eurasia.[6] Or course, such binary oppositions are far too general. But it is striking that in many parts of Africa, land was – until recently – not scarce, which meant automatically that control over labor was the vital factor for any form of accumulation. Yet, such specificities have to be nuanced. Land is now becoming increasingly scarce all over Africa. And even in the forest areas that still have less than 10 inhabitants per km^2 (as in the Maka area), intensification of logging and large-scale land-grabbing by national elites and expatriate firms make access to land increasingly limited. Still, it is clear that the striking inclusive tendencies of kinship terminology in many African settings have to be studied against this historical background of 'wealth-in-people.' This has direct implications for people's scope for 'doing kinship.' If it becomes a true art to include ever more people in one's kinship network, an inevitable consequence will be that there are increasing possibilities to 'work' with kinship. In such settings a notion like ascription is of limited relevance. Clearly this requires a more open approach towards what kinship is than was still recently formulated in Marshall Sahlins' apodictic statement about what kinship 'Is' and 'Is Not' (Sahlins, 2013).

Kinship and migration: the lure of the city

More attention to the flexibility of kinship – studying it as 'doing' or 'making' – becomes even more vital in a context where there is increasing mobility and a

widening of the scale of relations. When I started my research in the Maka area the pull of the city made itself felt in the villages, especially for the younger generation.[7] Young men became obsessed with the new possibilities of finding a job in an urban context, at first the relatively small towns in the East Province, but increasingly in Yaoundé, Cameroon's capital, 250 kms away or even Douala, the country's metropolis, at more than 500 kms distance. Young women were also tempted to try their luck, through education or employment but also selling their sexual favors. For all these projects finding a relative in these new surroundings was vital. for practicalities as lodging or first maintenance, but even more so for the necessary relations. In the 1970's *piston* (litt. 'wheelbarrow') became a winged word. Villagers, especially the young, felt they needed a *piston* in town for anything: to get access to a good school, to find a place to stay, but also in case of trouble with the police. And kinship was the obvious channel to look for this.

It is in such context that what was called before the 'classificatory kinship terminology,' characteristic for the kinship reckoning of the Maka and so many African societies, served a clear purpose. If one could not find a relative, he (or she) had to be 'discovered.' This had clear consequences at the other side of the link. The 'Sons of the village' in the city – as villagers would call such more fortunate relatives in town (among the Maka 'daughters' would only later on come to prominence as urban elites) – were literally swamped by requests and intrusive visits of 'relatives' who appeared out of the blue on their doorstep claiming kinship and the concrete obligations this entailed. Many of them complained that they were 'eaten' by the villagers – a very heavy term in Maka language (implications of witchcraft, see below). Kinship, especially when it can be interpreted with so much flexibility, can thus become a highly ambiguous relationship. Precisely the claim to reciprocity it implies can become a true menace, – relatives pushing their claims in all sorts of ways. No wonder, these 'sons of the village' were often involved in all sorts of strategies to cope with such a proliferation of kinship in new circumstances – mostly with limited success.

To understand the cogency kinship retains in such a new context, it is important to emphasize that urbanization processes in many parts of Africa still retain a quite special profile because of the ongoing commitment of urbanites with their village of origin, even after several generations. In many parts of the continent urbanization does not imply a definitive choice for either the city or the village. Urbanites – also those that are born and bred in the city – emphasize that they still belong to 'their' village. They set great store at continuing exchanges with their 'brothers' and 'sisters' in the countryside and many claim that after their retirement they hope to go back and live there. In practice very few do this because of a continuing gap in comfort between city and countryside. Yet such announcements contain a final truth since it is unthinkable for most urbanites that they would ever be buried in the city. Among the Maka, as in many parts of Africa, this would be a sign of utter disgrace – of dying without having any family left. In many African cities graveyards remain rare since in principle a person has to be buried in the village of

origin.[8] Elsewhere (Geschiere, 2009) I characterized the funeral in the village as a final test of belonging.

From the example above – about the ease with which one person at a Maka funeral could perform different kinship roles at the same occasion – it will have become clear that the funeral is *the* occasion when all sorts of tensions in the kinship reckoning are being acted out. New forms of migration – in the 1970s still mainly urbanization – added new tensions. For most urbanites a funeral in the village – whether it is of an urbanite brought 'home' or of a relative in the village – is a most ambivalent occasion. It is unthinkable that one will not attend – heavy sanctions are invoked against an urban person who missed the funeral of a close relative – but is also the occasion for the villagers to get even with their urban 'brothers' always suspected of neglect. The obligation to bury in the village is therefore a powerful knot tying migrants to their rural belonging. It entails a wider array of obligations. A most important one is, for instance, that one has to have built a house in the village in order to be buried there. The wish among many urbanites to retain at least some land in the village is therefore not only inspired by economic motives – though these do play a role in many contexts - but has also a more spiritual inspiration. It assures one of a proper funeral. Thus, the often dramatic funeral rituals come to play a crucial role for sealing kinship connections in changing circumstances. No wonder that all over Africa funeral rituals are becoming ever more extravagant, involving ever more money and ostentatious consumption, preferably of luxury goods of foreign provenance. New distances may constitute a potential threat to the coherence of kinship networks. But the obligation to bury in the villages, affirmed by ever more adorned funeral rituals, provides a powerful antidote against this.[9]

New perspectives: Kinship and transcontinental migration

Such tensions – shifting balances between growing distance and the resilience of kinship obligations – come even more starkly to the fore with new practices of transcontinental migration. Cameroon's Southwest Province – where I did fieldwork in the 1990's - witnessed then a sudden intensification of migration to the richer parts of the globe: Europe but also the Gulf and Southeast Asia. The Southwest is a very different part of Cameroon. Ever since the German times when the new colonizers created a huge plantation complex on the volcanic slopes of Mt. Cameroon – that remained unique for West and West Central Africa – this became one of the economic hotspots of Cameroon. At the end of last century a new term emerged here: *bush-falling,* expressing a new and quite special view on transcontinental migration.[10] *Bush* stands here for Europe or any richer part of the world - in itself a surprising transformation, since *bushman* used to be a direct insult, meant to mock someone for his coarse behavior. In contrast, present-day *bushfallers* are persons who are top-notch since they succeeded in getting out. The image seems to be that of a hunter, who ventures himself into the bush and 'falls' into luck – that is, returns with rich booty. The term and its

popularity aptly sum up the now increasingly general idea that young people, men *and* women, have to leave somehow since there is no future anymore in the country itself. Indeed, the adventurous ways in which people now try to make the passage – through the desert, across the sea, paying important sums of money to 'travel agents' of highly limited reliability – betray deep disappointment with the situation at home.

However, transcontinental migration was not completely new to this area. Profiting from the relatively good educational facilities in this part of Cameroon – it came after World War I under British control - earlier generations had used their school certificates to obtain scholarships, especially in the US. In a pioneering article, the Cameroonian journalist Julius Nyamkimah Fondong (2008) compared these earlier generations of migrants to present-day *bushfallers* emphasizing the deep differences between earlier migrants, called *America Wandas* in pidgin, and present-day *bushfallers*. The *America Wandas* were educated individuals who obtained scholarships to study abroad where they were well received. They planned to return after their studies, their diplomas guaranteeing them well-paid jobs in public service. However, with the shrinking of the government after 1987 and the general context of crisis, many chose to remain in America and find a job there. Yet, they maintained good relations with the family at home, sending regular remittances, and initiating developments projects there. For Fondong the profile of today's *bushfallers* is totally different. They are hardly educated and even if they have diplomas, they hardly use these in their efforts to get out.[11] They mostly leave, just taking their chances without any contacts in the country they plan to reach; and if they succeed at all to get out, they often end up in another country than planned. Yet, even for them, families will emphasize that they heavily contributed for their son's or daughter's migration project. The problem is, that the more adventurous character of the *bushfaller's* undertaking makes it quite uncertain whether (s)he will return or even maintain any links with the family at home. The metaphor of the hunter who ventures himself into the bush and returns with rich booty has a flip side here: many stories about hunters tell also how they found greener pastures in the bush, and decided to found a new settlement there. So the family will double its efforts in binding the migrant and making sure that (s)he will not '.forget.' even when at considerable distance (Alpes, 2011, 2017).

Again, the resilience of kinship stands out despite an almost vertiginous increase of scale of social relations. One focal point in these by now truly global settings remains the funeral. A typical reaction of the older *American Wandas* is described in a seminal article of Ben Page (2007) who describes that one of the first projects set up by the association of migrants in the US from Bali (Northwest Cameroon) for bringing prosperity to their hometown was . . . a mortuary. The reasoning is clear: if a migrant would die far away, organizing a decent funeral 'at homé would take a long time. So it was essential for the elites' well-being - and in their view also for the good of the local community – that the body of the dead person could be properly conserved on the spot. Many locals clearly worry whether the *bushfallers* will be as scrupulous in honoring their obligations to the family at home. Yet, Alpes (2017) shows with a wealth of details in her pioneering monograph that these

new-style migrants still have great difficulty in keeping distance. Below I will come back to more hidden ways locals have of affirming these kinship bonds – even at unheard of distances.

The relevance of 'new kinship studies'

From the above it will be clear that the 'new kinship studies' – heralded by Susan McKinnon, Janet Carsten and many others - converge in many respects with what my Maka friends have taught me since the 1970s. The main point of convergence is clearly the emphasis on the flexibility of kinship. Indeed, the Maka turned out to be true masters in 'doing kinship.' For them working with kinship terms seems to be a lot of fun – even if such fun always has a serious background. A few rapid examples may outline the broader implications of this convergence in what they taught me in the 1970s and the 'new kinship studies.'

After I paid a bridewealth for my assistant – his first wife had died suddenly and most tragically – he started to address me as 'my father' (after all, it is by paying bridewealth for his son that a father affirms his paternal authority). But when his new marriage was blessed with a son – his first one after four daughters – he gave the baby my name.[12] Since then he addresses me also as 'my son,' and he switches with some alacrity from the one to the other, but also depending on the situation (that is, depending on what he wants when he addresses me). Moreover, as for new kinship studies, it was the growing mobility of the people I worked with – first moving to the city and then even over larger distances – that made me understand fully how important it was to take this emphasis on flexibility seriously.

But there also more specific points of convergence. One is that the new emphasis on flexibility seems to go together, also for the protagonists of 'new kinship studies,' with relativizing the view of kinship as being self-evidently linked to solidarity, a premise taken for granted by earlier generations of anthropologists. At least among the Maka, flexibility seems to go hand in hand with ambivalence. The close link between 'witchcraft' and kinship – I came to see witchcraft as 'the dark side of kinship' (Geschiere, 1997, 2013) – seemed to follow directly from the poly-interpretability of kinship relations and the way people could work with them. Another inspiring point, as Susan McKinnon notes (see also Carsten 2000 and, this volume), is that the emphasis on 'doing kinship' should not blind us for the cogency of 'kinship as being': it is 'process' *and* 'essence' at the same time (McKinnon, 2017: 175). She sees kinship's materiality – in inheritance, objects, houses – as a crucial focus for understanding its substantiating tendencies. This is certainly relevant for kinship among the Maka as well, but the main anchor for giving it a substance of its own is rather the rules of exogamy and bridewealth, endlessly contested but nonetheless most cogent in daily life. Related to this is that, despite all their emphasis on kinship as a social construct, the Maka also attribute special force to blood and the links it creates. Of course, here as well 'blood' is a cultural construct, but its material reality makes that biological parenthood had special weight in kinship.Against a certain tendency in at least some recent

publications on kinship (see notably Sahlins, 2013) to link a biological view of kinship to European prejudices, it might be worthwhile to emphasize that Westerners are not the only ones who tend to relate kinship to biological parenthood. Below I will briefly deal with these more specific points – the link with 'witchcraft' and with 'blood' – and then I want to return the gaze: what has classical theory to offer for a more flexible view of kinship - especially for its role in contexts of mobility over increasing distances?

First the close link the Maka see between 'witchcraft' (*djambe*) and kinship (*bjel*). Since this is a central theme in two books of mine (Geschiere, 1997, 2013) I have to be short on it here. All my Maka interlocutors agreed that the worst kind of *djambe* – a term they now always translate as *sorcellerie* or witchcraft – is the *djambe le ndjaw* (of the house). The somber core of the *djambe* imaginary is that witches – people who make an effort to develop the *djambe* in their belly – are able to leave their body at night; then they fly off in the dark to meet witches from other groups to deliver their own kin to them. Witches have a special hold over the people of their own house, and the *nganga* (healer) will therefore always look for the culprit behind a witch attack first inside the victim's own house. The apparent self-evidence such representations had for my new friends came as a surprise to me. But when after my first field-work stint I began to consult the anthropological literature on witchcraft – this was yet another topic forced on me once in the field as I had prepared myself to study politics – I saw that I should not have been surprised. The link between kinship and witchcraft is a fixed adage in the classical literature on the topic, at least for Africa. However, these monographs – mostly from the 1940s and 1950s – were village studies, focusing on a setting in which almost everybody is kin in one sense or another. It is only with increasing mobility, when people come to live more and more among relative strangers that the ongoing link people see between witchcraft attacks and kinship stands out. Clearly the Maka are not exceptional in making this link. In my last book on the topic (Geschiere, 2013) I tried to generalize by comparing with the ways in which witchcraft is related to intimacy in other parts of the world. The main conclusion was that there are indeed good grounds for characterizing 'witchcraft' in more general terms as referring specifically to an attack from close by. This implied also that witchcraft is seen as particularly shocking because it highlights bitter aggression within the intimate sphere where only peace and solidarity should reign.

In the preceding this inherent link between kinship and its dark side came up already several times – indeed the two seem to be inseparable in everyday life. The urban elites in Makaland, who complained to me that they felt like being 'eaten' by the villagers with their endless requests, were directly referring to this dark side. In the 1970s, several of them insisted that this was one of the main reasons why they had to keep their distance from village life. Venturing themselves too often into the village meant exposing themselves directly to the jealousy, and therefore to the witchcraft, of their 'brothers.' Similarly, if one wants to understand the nervousness of Cameroonian *bushfallers* or other African migrants once they have made it to Europe, it is vital to realize that the African 'house' (like the

Maka *ndjaw*) is not strictly localized. It is first of all a social term, defining a group of people. Thus urban migrants remain part of the *ndjaw*. Apparently this applies even to transcontinental migrants, despite a vertiginous increase of scale. But this implies also that people remain vulnerable for the *djambe le ndjaw* (witchcraft of the house). This is why my Cameroonian friends in the Netherlands so often change their telephone number. Calls from home are wonderful, but they can be also terribly threatening. The whole imaginary of the 'witchcraft of the house' gives threats and curses by furious relatives a deeper impact (see further Geschiere, 2013: ch.2).

Of special interest to the topic of this collection might be, moreover, that the contours of 'the house' – that is of intimacy and kinship and therefore the reach of 'witchcraft' - seem to shift over time. Among the Maka, for instance, in the 1970s an urbanite who kept his distance from the village seemed still to be protected against the *djambe le ndjaw* of his 'brothers' in the village. But in the 1990s, when contacts between city and village had become much more regular, the rumors were rather about relatives bringing urban forms of witchcraft into the village. In those days people in the coastal areas of Cameroon would still say 'witchcraft does not cross the water (= the sea).' Yet, with transcontinental migration becoming more and more frequent, there are clear signs now that people feel witchcraft *does* cross the sea. The frameworks of kinship and witchcraft seem to be closely intertwined in their shifts over time.

For the Maka it is indeed difficult to talk about kinship without referring to its inherent dangers. Again we should not be surprised. Also elsewhere – including societies that are now characterized as 'modern' – intimacy is highly ambivalent. The present-day popularity of the notion in social sciences seems to highlight preferably its rosy side, but it is an everyday experience for most people that it can bring both bliss and danger – and the latter is all the more frightening because one is so vulnerable for attacks from close by. In this perspective McKinnon (2017: 166) is right when she warns that characterizations of kinship as linked to, 'sharing', 'care' (Borneman, 2001) or 'love' (Povinelli, 2002), or even 'axiom of amity'(Fortes, 1969) tend to 'prejudge what kinship is all about.' In her enumeration McKinnon mentions also 'mutuality of being' launched by Sahlins in his most recent book (2013) as a replacement for his earlier linking kinship to 'reciprocity.' Interestingly, in his 2013 book, Sahlins mentions, on the very first page (ix) that 'kinship takes its place in the same ontological regime as magic, gift exchange, sorcery and witchcraft.' But while for him the second item in this quartet (gift exchange) seems to be intrinsic to kinship, the others are carefully set apart. The plethora of positive adjectives for kinship as 'mutuality of being' throughout the book makes the concept lose its relevance in situations where people have to 'do kinship' in often most precarious situations as an ultimate solution to realize some sort of belonging. Such situations are commonplace now for many migrants (see Andrikopoulos, 2017, see also Feldman-Savelsberg, 2016 b). But I regularly noted similar struggles in everyday situations in the Maka village where I lived in the 1970s. There also kinship offered clear possibilities for claiming belonging and

support, but it made people also feel vulnerable to unsettling forms of danger. Such ambivalence seems to be inherent to any form of kinship.

Then to the second point, inspired by McKinnon and her emphasis that kinship is not only process but also essence – both 'doing' and 'being.' Trying to follow the kinship constructions through which Maka order their everyday life – and my assistant's discovery of his 'kinship' with our landlady was only one example of this – made me often wonder if anything was possible: were there any limits to such flexibility? As said, in my Maka research, it were especially the rules of exogamy positioning different groups in a more or less given relation to each other that stood out as giving fixity. For the Maka the basic exogamy rule is quite simple: kinship excludes marriage, which means inversely that a claim to exogamy implies a recognition of kinship and therefore of solidarity. In this sense such a claim works in everyday life as setting a boundary to the flexibility and constant re-interpretations of kinship relations. I was constantly warned that I could not marry the daughters of a house - somewhat to my unease since I had no intention to do this. Later I understood that this implied a claim to kinship: if marriage is excluded this means that one is among kin. However, even the maintenance of this simple rule implies a constant struggle between elders, as the guardians of 'tradition' and the young, eager to marry. The recurrent complaint of the elders that the young want to have intercourse indiscriminately - 'like the pigs in the courtyard'- highlights what is at stake. The whole system of exogamy rules and bridewealth payments between groups that are not kin – formerly in prestige goods, now requiring ever higher sums of money – is basic to the gerontocratic tenor of Maka social organization. The young men depend on their elders for paying bride-wealth and for properly approaching the group of their desired bride. So, the application of these simple exogamy rules is severely contested. Groups that now claim to be one lineage (*ndjaw boud* – people of one house), which automatically means that internal marriages would be impossible), are often worried by the fact that at a given funeral one segment of the group will function as the mother's brothers of the deceased's group. Apparently their pretense to form an exogamic unit and therefore one kin group is quite recent and the product of a specific situation (for instance, of the wish to constitute a larger group so as to outvote the other lineages in the election of a village chief). Yet even if all sorts of shifts and re-interpretations are possible, issues of exogamy and therefore group consolidation constitute a fixed beacon in 'making kinship.'

It is in the context of debates about such demarcations that blood plays a crucial role also for the Maka. Even if in everyday life kinship for the Maka can constantly be reconstructed, this does not preclude recurrent references to blood and biological parenthood. Many rituals emphasize the crucial meaning of blood. When I clumsily cut myself with a knife so that blood gushed out of a wound in my arm, the 'mother's brothers' of the family came over to stage a ritual with some mock show of violence. They came to remember 'my' family – I had immediately been claimed by my landlord to belong to his *ndjaw boud* – that I was their son as well and that it was also 'their blood' that had been spilled. A dramatic show of

anger had to warn my relatives that they should take better care of this blood, and the attackers had to be reconciled with a few gifts (some food and a chicken).

Of more consequence than these mostly ritual interventions are the recurrent conflicts over someone's biological descent. It is true that in principle women can come with children into a new marriage. This mostly concerns kids who were not claimed by their father - for instance because he did not succeed in starting bride-wealth payments (then the children remain with the mother's family). But if the mother takes these kids along into a new marriage, it often leads in practice to conflicts that can sour and even break up the marriage. Such doubts can hover over people for a long, long time. The Maka term *loua,* now often translated as 'slave,' refers rather to a man who does not live with his real father. A rumor that a man was 'carried into the village in a sling' – meaning he was born elsewhere and that he came along with his mother when she married into the village – is a grave insult, putting someone's 'real' belonging into doubt. Characteristically, when in 1994 a new forest law created the opportunity for villages to claim a part of the forest as their own *forêt communautaire,* it triggered a true proliferation of rumors about men being 'really' *miloua* ('slaves,' or rather people not living in the village of their 'real' father). Clearly the prospect of important gains from such a *forêt communautaire* encouraged efforts to exclude at least some people from the new manna as 'not really' belonging. In such a context fatherhood, in a strict genitor sense, can become very important to the Maka as well. The headlines of the two parts of Sahlins' (2013) book – for the first part 'What Kinship is – Culture'; and for the second part 'What Kinship is Not – Biology' suggest therefore too easy a contrast. For the Maka and for many African groups the intertwinement of social flexibility and apparent biological fixing is much more complex than this.[13]

Kinship and migration: What has classical kinship theory to offer?

It will be clear by now that studying the creative use of kinship by migrants highlights interesting elements – emphasis on flexibility and 'doing kinship'- for re-evaluating its role in the contexts that anthropologists used to study (like the Maka village where I lived in the 1970s). But it might be worthwhile to reverse the gaze and look for elements in classical kinship theory that could be valuable for understanding contexts that migration studies are confronted with in our present-day world. A panel at the African Studies Conference in Washington 2016 for launching the book *Affective Circuits, African Migrations to Europe and the Pursuit of Social Regeneration* (Cole & Groes 2016 – quoted in the introduction of this article) led to an interesting debate: to what extent did this book provide elements for a new theory on kinship and migration? The upshot of the debate was that the elements for such a theory were there, more or less in line with important directions in 'new kinship studies.' Indeed, precisely the variety of the contributions – varying from resistance against formal marriage among Mozambican female migrants, to

strategies for claiming belonging by Cameroonian mothers in diaspora in Berlin, or Malagasy women regulating kinship networks in France – highlights the impressive inventivity of migrants in the domain of kinship, giving new dynamics to existing patterns. However, the panel raised also the question to what extent elements from more classical kinship studies in anthropology still had tools to offer for such a new theory. Here is only space left for a rapid mention of one example (be it a surprising one) of this, but the above may have offered already some more leads.

This example concerns the notion of 'classificatory kinship terminology' that played such a central role in the examples from my Maka studies above. Yet, it is important to underline that this label does not stand simply for a wide – or even loose – use of kinship terms. The notion became a favorite tool for kinship addicts trying to work out the systemic implications of different classifications of relatives in different societies. Of interest is notably the implications for the specification of exogamy rules. And, as suggested before, exogamy – as a crucial criterion for categorizing who is insider and who is outsider (even if this can be constantly contested and re-interpreted)-might be a key notion that deserves more attention both in the 'new kinship studies' and in debates about kinship and migration. A striking example is the for me quite unexpected way the almost esoteric analysis of the famous – or notorious (depending on one's viewpoint) - dyad of 'Crow' and 'Omaha' kinship terminology can be historicized and made relevant for understanding important historical processes.

The dyad is as old as the history of kinship in anthropology since it goes back to none other than Lewis Henry Morgan, seen as the arch-father (second half of 19th century) of the discipline. In fact, he launched the term 'classificatory kinship terminology,' which for him had to serve as a tool for trying to capture basic patterns in the way different societies classify kin. In this endeavor he became fascinated by his 'discovery' that the Crow and the Omaha, two First Peoples ('Amerindian') groups – respectively. in present-day Montana and Nebraska – had kinship terminologies that seemed to be each other's opposite in the way they brought relatives from different generations under one term. After Morgan, the Crow/Omaha opposition was used by another American anthropologist G.P. Murdock (1949) in his effort to capture all variations in kinship terminology under six patterns. Subsequently, anthropologists became less and less interested in such ambitious global classifications since it became ever clearer that the distinction of different societies as neatly separated units was highly problematic, also for earlier times. However, the Crow/Omaha couple received a new lease of life when it was picked up by Lévi-Strauss in his alliance theory that in the 1950s/1960s revolutionarized the anthropology of kinship, since it offered an alternative to the preceding emphasis on descent (see above). This was further developed by his epigones at the *laboratoire d'anthropologie sociale* in Paris, notably by Françoise Héritier (1981) in highly sophisticated ways. The Crow – Omaha opposition lends itself, indeed, to mind-boggling interpretations and refinements.

However, also these more sophisticated versions have in common that they oppose societies as fixed units, each with their own way of handling kinship. I must confess that I was always discouraged by the typological tenor of such distinctions. Phrases like 'the Igbo (a huge group in Nigeria) have an Omaha terminology' struck me as slightly ridiculous. But I had to reconsider such doubts when no one other than Jan Vansina, a towering figure in the rediscovery of African history, used the distinction in his pioneering *Paths in the Rainforests* (1990) in which he proposed a reconstruction of one of the main migrations in African history, the 'Bantu expansion' over about half of the continent (from Cameroon to South Africa) and lasting several millennia. The interest for our theme is that Vansina meticulously showed how such fairly abstract distinctions can be historicized and then become most helpful for understanding different patterns of mobility. In his daring interpretations of quite fragmentary scraps of information on how Bantu groups developed different kinship terminologies during their centuries long expansion through the forest zone, he tries to show how Crow and Omaha elements could gradually emerge in the way people tried to order the relations of kinship, notably between the small local groups. Even more interesting for our theme is that he tries to follow the implications of these differences for emerging forms of political organization and patterns of mobility. In his line of thought an Omaha ordering of kin relations would favor ongoing centralization and condensation, while a Crow ordering would rather stimulate an increasing dispersion of groups (Vansina, 1990: 76, 107, 153). Such differences seem to imply a different role in the large-scale historical process of the Bantu migration.

The precise implications of this example need to be further thought through. I am not advocating that students of present-day migration issues have to take the finesses of the Omaha/Crow kinship terminology on board if they want to understand the dynamic role of kinship in such new contexts. Yet, the example can help to show that insights from classical kinship studies – if they can be liberated from their typological and a-historical implications (the idea that each society has its own kinship 'system') – can be made useful to understand change in a truly historical way.

As many recent publications have shown, the present intensification of migration, all over the world, gives new meaning to kinship and makes people 'work' with it in new ways. Yet, this brief overview of my struggle with the topic of kinship for over 40 years may have shown that it are not just these changing circumstances that require more attention to the flexibility of kinship classifications and the way people work with them. In Maka society, as elsewhere, mobility has always been a necessity, and kinship reckoning was always one way of dealing with this, often in innovative ways. So there is good reason for distrust of the system-orientation of classical kinship studies, each society seen as stuck in its own kinship system. Yet, the examples above may have shown also that elements of the older approaches, if they can be freed from this a-historical tenor can become useful for a more dynamic analysis of kinship and migration. And one precious merit of anthropology's classics on kinship remains: they do highlight the importance of

a consequent focus on the terms people use, and the often unintended implications these terms can take on, due to the ways in which they hang together.

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ORCID iD

Peter Geschiere https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2290-6984

Notes

1. See Geschiere (1982: ch. 2) for an analysis of how Maka people knew how to 'work with' their kinship terms and classifications. Cf. Marilyn Strathern who wrote in 1992 'If till now kinship has been a symbol for everything that cannot be changed about social affairs, if biology has been a symbol for the given parameters of human existence, what will it mean for the way we construe any of our relationships with one another to think of parenting as implementing an option and genetic make-up as an outcome of cultural preference' (Strathern, 1992: 34–35).
2. See also Feldman-Savelsberg's contribution on Cameroonian diaspora in this volume, and her subsequent monograph (Feldman-Savelsberg, 2016a, 2016b).
3. Parsons often referred to Tönnies' old opposition between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* to illustrate this for him apparently self-evident opposition of 'traditional' and 'modern' societies. Cf. also McKinnon and Cannell (2013) and their incisive summary of Parsons' position.
4. See Introduction to this volume, also on the position of David Schneider, who was Parsons' student, in this.
5. Anthropologists speak of a 'classificatory terminology' grouping a wider set of people under one term – 'sister' stands not only for one's direct female sibling but for all the girls of one's generation within the lineage etc. Such a terminology allows for all sorts of equations – as in the example of my assistant and his new neighbor – and thus for making the kinship network wider and wider.
6. The idea of 'wealth-in-people' as special to African forms of organization was implicitly present in Jack Goody's well-known comparison of bridewealth in Africa and dowry in Eurasia (Goody, 1973, 1976). This contrast has to be drastically nuanced but it still highlights important implications. See for a subsequent development of this notion J. Guyer (1993).
7. See further on econmomic changes in the Maka area and the way they affected kinship relation Geschiere (1982).

8. See Cohen and Odhiambo (1992). There are also many exceptions to this 'rule.' In Kinshasa, for instance, funerals have become an urban event (see De Boeck, 2010). There are in this respect also striking differences within one country. The Johannesburg townships have already since the 1930s extensive cemeteries, while in Cape Town, especially immigrants from East Cape continue to bury their dead in the village (see Lee, 2011).
9. See for Cameroon: Monga (1995), Jua (2005) and others.
10. My former Ph.D. student Maybritt Jill Alpes was one of the very first who noted the growing popularity of this term in the Southwest (see Alpes, 2011 – see also Fondong, 2008, F. Nyamnjoh, 2011 and others).
11. Alpes (2017) mentions, for instance, that when her research assistant was offered a scholarship to Europe it took some persuasion to convince her that this was a much better way to go abroad than leaving like a 'real' *bushfaller*.
12. This can have unexpected consequences. Peter Geschiere jr (the poor child was blessed with my full name and he insists now on sticking to it) became later a medical doctor but also – this to my regret - a staunch supporter of the regime of President Biya (that brings Cameroon regularly to the top of the most corrupt countries of the world). Of course, since he is a public person, as head of a regional hospital, he has to support the regime. Still I felt some uneasy when during a recent visit to Cameroon people confronted me with a headline in the journal of the ruling party's newspaper 'Dr. Geschiere insists that Mme Biya (the President's wife) will not abandon us.' The article was about his gratitude for the presents that the association of the President's wife had brought to his hospital. 'Doing' kinship is full of twists and surprises.
13. Such oppositions risk to bring back radical oppositions between the role of kinship in the West and elsewhere –rightly criticized by the 'new kinship studies' - back through the backdoor.

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Author Biography

Peter Geschiere is Emeritus Professor for the Anthropology of Africa at both the University of Amsterdam and Leiden University. Since 1971 he has undertaken historical-anthropological field-work in various parts of Cameroon and elsewhere in West and Central Africa. His publications include *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Post-colonial Africa* (Univ. Of Virginia Press, 1997), *Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship and Exclusion in Africa and Europe* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009) and 'A "Vortex of Identities" – Freemasonry, Witchcraft and Post-colonial Homophobia in Cameroon,' *African Studies Review* 60(2), 2017, p. 7–35.