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### Labour of love

*Secrecy and kinship among Ghanaian-Dutch and Somali-Dutch in The Netherlands*

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## Labour of love: Secrecy and kinship among Ghanaian-Dutch and Somali-Dutch in The Netherlands

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### Abstract

This paper examines the productive role of secrecy in the nexus of transnational mobility, kinship, and intimate relations among Ghanaian-Dutch and Somali-Dutch in the Netherlands. Whereas secrecy is typically understood as one person concealing knowledge from another, implying the latter's passivity, we argue that secrecy depends on mutually constitutive interactions. Secrecy is explored as the result of an interaction between those who obscure knowledge in creative ways and those who maintain a not-knowing. The paper analyzes how people negotiate moral expectations regarding sexuality, respect, and loyalty, while also manoeuvring to fulfil their personal aspirations. Especially in kinship relations, when people are bound to each other by moral and social obligations, the management of secrecy often makes people mutually dependent. Secrecy is revealed as skillfully choreographing relations by the ebb and flow of information where kinship, respect, or love and (not-) knowing reinforce another.

### Keywords

secrecy, kinship, sexuality, African diaspora, migration studies

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## Introduction

In March 2017, Amisah Bakuri<sup>1</sup> recorded with surprise in her fieldwork diary that one of her interlocutors said: 'I am only telling you, my family don't know and so keep it as such' (Muna, 32 years old in 2017).<sup>2</sup> Amisah was amazed because during their previous meeting Muna had spoken about how her mother was her best friend and had reflected about their relationship in such a way that she interpreted their bond as trustworthy. When Amisah inquired; 'Why do you keep these secrets?', Muna had responded by saying: 'I do not want to hurt my family, especially my mum, who always advises me on the need to marry a Somali man; a man with a career who can take good care of me and our future children. He must be a practising Muslim'.<sup>3</sup> However, Muna's previous boyfriend and current boyfriend both were white, Dutch men, and not Muslim. She spoke fondly about her relationship with her boyfriend and explained how they were ready to make the next step towards marriage. However, out of fear of rejection and of losing the love and respect from her family - most importantly from her mother - Muna was living what she called a 'secret' life. A secret life she was ready to labour for, so as not to hurt her mother, and by doing so she hoped to gradually win the support of her mum for the choice of the man she desired to marry.

During fieldwork in February 2017 to July 2018 in the Netherlands, several young and unmarried women told Amisah how they were, or had been, romantically involved with men with different ethnic and religious backgrounds than their own. Often, this led to arguments with their parents and/or other kin whenever they had gathered the courage to talk about their relationships. These confrontations made clear how they were torn between their personal desires about the route they wanted to take in life and the expectations held by their kin. When Muna explained she had an obligation to be respectful towards her mother, she also made clear that she did not feel it is necessary to obey her. This apparent contradiction is related to the fact that, as Muna clarified, the time before marriage is crucial to manage kin relations so that someone can always fall back on the extended family in times of need, whereas after the wedding a couple usually gains more autonomy. Muna got caught up in a triangle of conflicting loyalties between her mother, her partner and herself and as a result she decided that the best way out of this dilemma was to keep her relationship a secret from her mother and from the extended family.

Like Muna, many other interlocutors often expressed how important their kin were to them and how they found themselves in contradictory positions when their kin also became an obstacle in the pursuit of personal aspirations. As a consequence, they navigated their communication with kin by creatively revealing and concealing information so as not to offend them. During the research, it also became clear that kin were often aware of what was going on, or at least suspected

something in that direction, but decided not to pursue further knowledge of it. The lives of Ghanaian-Dutch and Somali-Dutch that feature in this article articulate social formations that have partly emerged through the maintenance of family ties and other relationships at the country of origin but also, crucially, partly by the social ties in the Netherlands. Keeping secrets can be understood as a way to manage the moral and emotional dimensions of these 'affective circuits' (Cole and Groes, 2016) and we focus on the productive nature of secrecy in these formations. Whereas secrecy is often seen as someone concealing knowledge from another, implying the latter's passivity, we argue that secrecy depends on mutually constitutive interactions between people.

Secrecy is often a substantive element in the refashioning or rekindling of relationships that situations of geographic, social and economic mobility engender. It is commonly both an element in, and an expression of, inequalities in relationships between the young and old, between the genders, in general between those in power and those subservient to it. Secrecy bespeaks the inequalities in power and status that are engrained in kinship relations and may produce a sharpening of these inequalities (Bochow, 2012a). In that sense, knowing when and how to keep certain aspects of private lives and relationships a secret to others, becomes important in avoiding conflicts and tensions, and for ensuring that a good standing, public status and respect is being maintained for all parties involved. Maintaining secrecy implies skillfully choreographing relations by the ebb and flow of information; i.e. a skill of affordances and avoidances of what can be shared with whom without damaging relations of trust and social hierarchies of status and respectability.

We draw on what Smart (2011) has called a 'choreography of secrecy management' to analyse the extensive effort that goes into maintaining secrecy. Particularly, manipulating the flow of information not only involves hiding information but also directing the significance of information by tone and demeanour, foregrounding the cultural importance of verbal indirection and discretion (Dankwa, 2009). But the maintenance of secrecy depends *also* on not-knowing (Dilley and Kirsch, 2015) and un-knowing (Moore, 2013). Importantly, knowledge and obliviousness are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. In both ways, then, through keeping secrets and upholding a not-knowing, people use secrecy skilfully to maintain relationships as they navigate broader social expectations while pursuing personal aspirations. In the sections that follow, we focus on the tensions that often arise from the moral obligations in kin relations and from the way in which people organize their lives.

We present the case from the perspective of a daughter, from a mother, and from a husband to show how secrecy is crucial to the maintenance of kinship relations. Although two of the three cases deal with intergenerational relations and one with transnational marriage, these themes are not the locus of our analyses. Instead, the three different social positions in the wider network of affective circuits occupied by the interlocutors exemplify three diverse sequels in the choreography of secrecy.

## Kinship and secrecy

Kinship relations are built on mutually constitutive social roles (such as parent-child, sibling-sibling, and spouse-spouse relations) and on moral obligations regarding the importance of care and respect toward another. Popular, but sometimes also scholarly, conceptualizations of African kinship tend to represent an overly harmonious and romantic idea of kin relations based on reciprocity; locating practices such as jealousy, fighting, among others, outside the domain of kinship. Yet, moral obligations towards kin also have a darker side (Andrikopoulos, 2017; Geschiere, 2003; Nieswand, 2011; van Dijk, 2004). Although in this paper we concentrate on the effects of love, respect, and care in the maintenance of kinship, there are also motivations to be secretive that came up in this research, such as fear of witchcraft, also in relation to an avoidance of triggering jealousy, anger, or violence, to mention few. De Klerk (2012) and Krause (2010) discuss how, in times of misfortune, kinship relations become shaped by processes of concealment; this can relate to such actions as hiding information about the sick from the public to avoid gossip, but also hiding the fact that kin are increasingly unwilling and unavailable to provide care for the sick. These processes signal the shadow sides of kin relations when it comes to care, loyalty, and reciprocity.

Both reciprocity and its shadow sides are central to the 'affective circuits' (Cole and Groes, 2016) that constitute people's lives in the African diaspora in the Netherlands. These circuits are the social formations emerging from the circular movement of the 'myriad exchanges of goods, people, ideas and money through which migrants negotiate their social relationships' (Cole and Groes, 2016: 2), revealing the extent to which personhood is relational and 'emerges at the intersection between personal ambitions, on the one hand, and obligations to wider social networks, on the other' (Cole and Groes, 2016: 11). According to Cole and Groes (2016) people achieve valued forms of personhood when they move from the margins to the centre of these circuits and this implies that the person transforms to a provider of resources, but also that the circulation of many other resources pass through her/his control. Affective circuits are therefore important in people's efforts to achieve valued forms of personhood as wo/man, adult, kin, spouse and so on, while navigating the social world. Kin and intimate relationships are characterized by affective practices of care that combine material (money, goods) and relational elements (love, obligation, respect).

By reworking relational ties by manipulating information, new frameworks and networks are produced that newly link kin across time and space, contributing to processes of social regeneration. Metaphorically, such circuits of reworking of kin relations can be likened to the path of an electrical current: Feldman-Savelsberg (2016: 57) explains that 'the metaphor of electrical current, subject to short circuits and regulated by circuit breakers, helps us appreciate the discontinuous nature of these flows: they can be slowed, dropped, blocked, and picked up again'. Flows can take the forms of remittances, feelings of obligations, and practices of care. The managing of secrecy substantially affects how these flows are produced and require

constant vigilance. Over time, people develop skills to maintain the manipulation of the flows as smooth as possible. In other words, relational skills are crucial to the generation of affective circuits.

Whereas the notion of affective circuits is coined to address particular dynamics in the context of migration, in this article we do not present transnational mobility (or migration) nor ethnicity as a focal point to understand the choreography of secrecy but rather as the context. As Dahinden (2016) maintains, migration intersects with other categories of difference, such as gender and age that affect people's socio-economic position and social status. Foregrounding people's navigation in life, instead of their migrant background, is an important move to 'de-migranticize' the African diaspora in Europe.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, our interlocutors comprise both first and second generation Ghanaian-Dutch and Somali-Dutch persons, and between those generations there is a significant shift in their sense of belonging. Instead of understanding such shifts from the framework of migration we aim to foreground the interpersonal relations and the different cultural and social dynamics of kinship herein (see the introduction of this SI).

In so doing, we focus on people's need to manage personal desires in view of the social expectations of kin. As people honour, resist, or redefine (cultural) notions of social obligation, they reproduce, contest, and transform their social relations and cultural norms and, in turn, are criticized for doing so by the people who are intimately important to them. More often than not, certain conflicts arise when people cannot or do not honour moral obligations and make decisions without involving their kin. In many cases, these people decide to keep certain aspects of their life hidden. Secrecy is not essentially about withholding knowledge as practices of secrecy involve movements of both concealment and revelation. Smart's (2011: 549) 'choreography of secrecy management' outlines how people manage the flow of information to create particular impressions. The manipulation of information is inflected by hierarchies of age, gender, and social status; in other words, by one's position in wider social networks that tend to change dramatically in processes of transnational mobility and the subsequent intergenerational shifts. Keeping secrets should be understood as relational and contextual: who speaks, to whom, what is said, how it is said, and what is withheld are all embedded within a wider matrix of relationships, hierarchies, cultural norms, and sanctions (Hardon and Posel, 2012), which are further subject to contextual dynamics such as transnational mobility.

Too often secrecy is presented as a unidirectional, relatively passive act of withholding; Smart's conceptualization of the choreography of secrecy management however, already has the advantage of pointing instead at its active, productive character. Furthermore, secrecy is not only about the ebb and flow of information but about the intensity and quality of the flow. Important elements in the choreography of actors that engage with the production of secrecy are cultural norms of verbal indirection and discretion so as to keep intentionally vague the content of the information shared as well as the way in which it is communicated, instead of being clear and concrete (Dankwa, 2009). Not only does it require labour to

hide and manoeuvre certain content, but it also requires active not-knowing (Smart, 2011) of matters that are potentially disruptive to the relationship. In many African societies, relationships between elders and youth, women and men, and parents and children entails specific forms of knowing and un-knowing (Moore, 2013). Not-knowing and un-knowing are intimately linked with cultural norms of verbal indirection and discretion; out of respect or love for another, it may be deemed considerate not to openly confront another with painful information. Open conflict is experienced as more harmful than manipulating information and not-knowing (Spronk, 2018). The idea that secrecy implies concealment has too often created a blind spot for the involvement of the party that is (partly) aware and decides not to recognize that knowledge explicitly. Secrecy thus depends on concealing, verbal manoeuvring, and active not-knowing; it both maintains social networks or kin relations and produces them in the way it relies on the intimacy and its accompanying care for each other.

## Methodology and context

The paper is based on an ethnographic study by the first author about the lives of self-identifying Ghanaian and Somali -Dutch<sup>5</sup> in the Randstad area (the cities of Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam, and Utrecht) in the Netherlands from February 2017 until July 2018. In the first phase of fieldwork, data was collected from interviews focussing on personal life stories; as the relationship between the researcher and the interlocutors deepened, fieldwork included participant observation and in-depth interviews. Fieldwork was conducted mainly in people's homes, but also at religious, cultural, or corporate meeting sites, such as picnics, barber shops, hair dresser salons, and the offices of organizations that work with migrants.

In total, sixty-one interlocutors were involved, forty Ghanaian-Dutch and twenty-one Somali-Dutch; thirty-three were women and twenty-eight were men; and the youngest was twenty years old while the oldest was sixty-six years old. All the Somali-Dutch involved in this study identified as Muslims. The majority of Ghanaian-Dutch identified as Christian (thirty-two) while eight were Muslims. Social status varied widely among the research group; interlocutors were single, married, living with partners, unmarried, divorced, or in informal relationships. Their educational background also ranged widely, from elementary school to tertiary level. They came from different socioeconomic backgrounds and worked as sales personnel, taxi drivers, lawyers, cleaners, social workers, journalists, and non-governmental organization (NGO) employees, and a few were self-employed with their own shops. Some were on social welfare support from the Dutch government, others were seeking job opportunities, and a small number (four) consisted of tertiary education students. To ensure the anonymity of the interlocutors we use pseudonyms and have also changed their countries of transit, occupation and residence when these characteristics were not directly relevant to the analysis.

People of Ghanaian and Somali descent make up the majority of sub-Saharan African migrants to the Netherlands. According to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS, 2018)<sup>6</sup> there are an estimated 40,000 Somalis and 24,000 Ghanaian registered migrants. These numbers fluctuate, largely due to continuing onward migration of especially the Somali group to the United Kingdom and elsewhere. Migrants without proper documentation are not counted in the official registration statistics of Dutch municipalities, so the actual number is unknown.

In this study, one group of interlocutors were first-generation migrants who crossed borders and are currently residing in the Netherlands. Being newly arrived inhabitants, they faced a variety of predicaments with regard to acquiring legal documentation, salaried work, housing, health, maintaining transnational kinship relations, among others (Al-Sharmani and Ismail, 2016; Andrikopoulos, 2017; Liberatore, 2017; van Dijk, 2002). Even after settling down - more or less - life often remained a struggle because of their precarious labour conditions, transnational family lives, and unmet expectations. Nevertheless, being able to send remittances home was considered a source of pride, and many managed to create a rich social life in religious communities or other social associations. Their children, the second group, faced dilemmas of a different nature such as racism, educational constraints, questions of belonging in terms of religion and culture (Liberatore, 2017). Both parents and children are proud that, in general, second generation Somali-Dutch and Ghanaian-Dutch are doing better in terms of education and in accessing the labour market. For both groups, the moral obligations in parent-child relationships came under pressure because of divergent conceptions of lifestyle choices, particularly marriage. While marriage often became a bone of contention, at other times the family dynamics were less characterized by tension; also here, conflict and goodwill are not mutually exclusive. By foregrounding the vicissitudes of daily life and the contradictory nature of kinship and intimate relations, ethnography plays an important role in critically looking at the way migrants are framed by scholarly and public debates (Moret et al., 2019).

We present three cases – of a daughter, a mother, and a husband – to show how secrecy is crucial to the maintenance of kinship relations. The cases exemplify how people get caught up in balancing their moral obligations and affections toward their kin while taking personal routes in life that are regarded by others as problematic. Together, they demonstrate that people improvise solutions to the complex and contradictory situations that they find themselves in, how they come to hide information from kin, and how kin are actively involved in not-knowing.

The first case involves tensions arising from divergent perceptions of dating and marriage between a parent and the child, as recounted from the perspective of the daughter whose mother migrated from Somalia. In many a parent-child relationship, the parental demand that a young woman should marry a practising Muslim man, preferably from the parents' country of origin, creates a wedge between parents and children. This was the case for Muna, whose story shows the tensions between personal aspirations and the moral obligation to be a dutiful daughter. In the second case, the perspective of a mother is presented. The case of Fawzia shows

how her actions articulated the care of a mother and how, by not-knowing, she manoeuvred between the expectation that her daughter is respectful to her while knowing somehow that her daughter, Zara, was going against her wishes. In the third case, the complexities of transnational marriage are described from the perspective of a married man who migrated to the Netherlands and married a second time in order to obtain legal documentation. Allotey's story demonstrates how moral obligations toward kin in Ghana and the need to have a good life in the Netherlands brought him to marry again.

### *Case 1: Muna, a daughter's perspective*

Muna was a fun person to be with, full of stories and eager to entertain her friends. Amisah and Muna met riding their bikes in the western district of Amsterdam; they took an immediate liking to each other. Muna is a self-confident Somali-Dutch young woman wearing a hijab. While explaining how Islam is very important to her, having been raised in what she called a 'typical Somali home', at other times she would explain that her interpretation of a 'practicing Muslim' also includes drinking alcohol once in a while. Her decision to wear a hijab was a pragmatic one that enabled her to negotiate the pressures from her family and other members of the Somali community; it was a way to avoid others' judgements about her religiousness and it relieved her from having to explain herself too often. 'I have my own personal relation with Allah', she said, explaining how praying and reading the Quran strengthened her.

At the time of the research, Muna was thirty-two years old, and had been living in the Netherlands for twenty-eight years, together with parents and her five siblings of which she is the oldest. In 2014 her father passed away and her mother continued running their family alone. Muna entered into her first relationship when she was twenty-one years old with a man about the same age in 2007, when they were both students. Her boyfriend was white Dutch and a non-Muslim. After six years together, she and the boyfriend felt that they needed to get their 'family blessings' to officially get married, and she decided to inform her mother. Although she knew her mother disapproved in principle of a non-Muslim and non-'Somali' son in law, she felt emboldened by the potential joy that a family feels when a member announces the desire to marry, and so she gathered the courage to tell them. Her mother was very displeased, however, and started complaining about the kind of man she wanted to marry; her mother preferred she married a Muslim and a 'Somali'. According to Muna, the relationship with her boyfriend became rocky and, coupled with the tensions created by her mother, she decided the relationship was not viable. After seven years together, they broke up.

In 2016, she met another boyfriend, white, Dutch and non-Muslim, who she was still dating when fieldwork was underway. Based on her previous experience, Muna had not told her mother about the new relationship. But in between these two relationships, Muna tried unsuccessfully to find a Somali partner, someone employed in what she called a 'good job' while also being a 'practising' Muslim.

She tried online dating and attended some events in London with the aim of meeting a Somali man who met her standards, but did not meet a match. Similar to the experience of many of the younger generation of Somali-Dutch and Ghanaian-Dutch involved in this study, it proved difficult for her to find a husband who fitted the criteria of their kin: a person from Somali or Ghanaian descent, a practicing Muslim or ‘born again’, and a professional.

Knowing her mother would not approve of her courting, let alone marrying a man who was not a Muslim, she kept her relationship a secret. She devised an assemblage of tools and tricks to control the flow of information about her life. For instance, it was crucial to avoid discussions with her sisters on dating and sexuality in general, as she knew that her sisters might inform her mother. There was the constant fear that in such discussions she would give out some clues or make certain references that could reveal her involvement in acts that were ‘un-Islamic’ and ‘un-Somali’. She protected information on her phone with a secure password that her sisters could not decode. Muna also avoided talking on the phone in the presence of family and instead used only text messaging and WhatsApp chats to communicate with her boyfriend.<sup>7</sup> When she did, on occasion, speak with her partner on phone, she was careful not to talk about certain things or only when she was in her room and sure no one else could hear their conversation. When she was dating her boyfriend she enrolled in another programme university, and so she chose one that was in another part of the country, away from where her family lived. This would give her time to anticipate and organize visits from her family so that they would not encounter her boyfriend. All these practices and arrangements were agreed upon between her boyfriend and herself.

A major strategy to manage the flow of information was Muna’s decision to live away from home when she took a job after her studies. Muna worked as an administrator in Amsterdam but lived in Utrecht; this allowed her to live with her boyfriend. Although Muna’s mother lived in Amsterdam and was willing to accommodate her, Muna had refused. This was a deliberate choice. If she stayed in Amsterdam, her mother would have asked her to stay with her as is customarily expected of an unmarried young Somali woman, and there would be several restrictions as to who could visit her and when. Therefore, she had decided to travel between the two cities to help her keep her love life with her boyfriend and show her mother the respect that she deserved.

Muna explained the difficulty of trying to meet social and religious expectations as well as personal desires regarding issues of dating, marriage, and sexual relationships. Her main problem were her mother’s strict requirements. She noted that a mother’s blessing for marriage was very important for her, and her upbringing taught her to never treat this lightly. Going against a parent’s wishes is experienced as a huge burden. Nevertheless, ‘following her heart’, as she called it, and having the partner of her choice was crucial to her happiness as an adult. This predicament was truly a thorny dilemma that caused her much anxiety and pain. She

believed that eventually time and prayers would be able to change people's minds. Muna valued her relationship with her mother and because of that she was willing to put up with the burden of hiding an important part of her life that she knew would cause her mother pain. Muna's experiences reveal her vulnerability as a young woman, the weight of the expectations placed on her to demonstrate that she was a respectful daughter and a good Muslim woman, and her struggle to reconcile her own desires with showing love and respect to her family. Diverging expectations regarding a future spouse frequently create tensions between parents and their children in the African diaspora (Liberatore, 2016). Yet, it also bespeaks the agency that people have in situations of restricted social space, and how the productive nature of secrecy enabled Muna to live her life. While the concept of choreography of secrecy focuses often on the narrative character of the manipulation of information, in Muna's case the choreography also involved geographical mobility.

### *Case 2: Fawzia, a mother's perspective*

Fawzia was born in 1970 in Hoodan, a district of Mogadishu, Somalia. She lived in the capital until the onset of the civil war in 1992, when she moved to Ethiopia for few months and then to the Netherlands. Fawzia travelled with her two little children, who were then two years and four years old, leaving her husband in Somalia. According to her, the husband felt it was better for her and their children to be safer. In 1996, her husband joined them, and they had two more children; however, he became dissatisfied when it became clear that his law certificate obtained in Somalia would not get him a good job in the Netherlands, and the language barrier did not help much either. Her husband left the Netherlands for Kenya in the year 2000 and since then they have lived separately, which is not uncommon in Somali families.

Fawzia spoke warmly of her four children, particularly the eldest child, Zara. According to Fawzia, Zara was a very responsible girl, an example to her other siblings. She was a respectful daughter, dedicated and committed to her studies that eventually gave her access to a well-paying job. Zara always donned her hijab and dated a Moroccan-Dutch man 'the Islam way', as Fawzia terms it. For Fawzia, premarital relations are supposed to remain formal with no physical contact before marriage. Although Zara introduced the man as a 'practising' Muslim to her mum, Fawzia found out from others that he was not as devoutly committed as in accordance with her standards. Fawzia then discouraged her daughter from this relationship and demanded that, as a respectful daughter, Zara must obey her. Fawzia sensed that it was difficult for Zara to end the relationship as she had fallen in love. Zara had told her the relationship was over but, on several occasions, Fawzia had found Zara speaking on the phone with the man in question. So as not to hurt or rush her daughter, Fawzia felt that there was no need to ask Zara to

end all contact, and she thus pretended not-to-know Zara was still involved with the man.

On one cold Saturday evening, Amisah went to visit Fawzia, who asked her to wait while Fawzia quickly collected something from a friend's place. As Amisah was waiting, Zara came in and welcomed her and kept her company. While sipping Somali tea, they had a brief chat, and the topic of their conversation drifted from Somali poetry and music (because it was showing on the TV) to that of marriage and love. Zara explained that she was going to marry the man her mother claimed she had ended her relationship with, stating they were very much in love and she therefore could not give up her own happiness. Zara explained that her mother disapproved of the man's approach to Islam, and while she did not want to disrespect her, she was torn between pursuing love and showing respect for a long time before deciding to get married without approval. As they talked about the challenges in pursuing love and respecting the wishes of family, Fawzia returned and the conversation shifted to work.

A few months later Amisah visited Fawzia, and was told Zara had relocated to Birmingham for work. A very pale, frustrated, and disappointed-looking Fawzia suspected Zara had married. She explained that she had not been involved in the marriage and it was not a Muslim wedding, as she could discern from a picture on Zara's sister's phone that she chanced upon. Zara's younger sister knew all along about Zara's wedding preparations but did not tell Fawzia, keeping the secret as a way of respecting her sister's wishes. Fawzia went on and on about how the couple did not get her blessing, nor that of Zara's father. Fawzia was deeply hurt by the betrayal of Zara and when Amisah asked her why she did not raise the issue she answered that the truth would be too burdensome to her and that it was her daughter's responsibility to admit having gone against her mother's authority. Although she was hurt by her daughter's action, she pretended not to be, at least not visibly, to Zara. However, she talked about her daughter's 'deceitful' act to her very close friends and to Amisah; perhaps doing so helped to deal with the pain and the burden of consciously not-knowing. She was also worried about the bad precedent Zara had set for her other siblings who were yet to marry. Fawzia articulated the importance of family and the enduring patterns of kin relationships within which religion, kinship ties, and blessings on relationships are crucial. For Fawzia, it is a parent's duty to handle the choice of spouse, and the child's personal preferences can be taken into consideration by discussion (see also Lewis, 1994). While Zara choreographed a process of secrecy, as it would be painful and embarrassing for her to admit openly that she went against her mother, Fawzia played along by not-knowing, in the hope that the relationship would end eventually. Not-knowing was crucial to the management of secrecy, it was a conscious decision to as to avoid the painful moment of outing Zara's deceitful behaviour and providing Zara a way out, that is, ending the relationship. Yet, not-knowing carried a risk: the risk of losing the love and care towards her daughter, and her daughter's love and care towards her mother, ironically exactly why their intentional co-production of secrecy came into being.

### *Case 3: Allotey, a husband's perspective*

Allotey, a man of Ghanaian descent, was about forty-five years old during the study. He came across as a very sociable person. He was very interested in the study and made many jokes about how open-ended this research was compared to the interviews and focus group discussions he had previously participated in. After two meetings he invited Amisah to meet Ama, his second wife, and they welcomed her into their home. A member of the Presbyterian Church in Amsterdam, he explained that he previously belonged to a Pentecostal church but joined his wife because she was more committed to church activities than he was, and it was pleasant to be together in church. They attended church almost every Sunday and always invited Amisah when there was a special church event.

He had left Ghana in 1997 to pursue economic opportunities and improve his life, hoping to provide a comfortable life for his wife Lucy and daughter who were left behind in Ghana, as well as for the wider web of relatives. He explained that, as he had only a secondary school education, finding a well-paid job in Ghana was hard and he was afraid to get stuck in the lower end of the employment market. He did not see any better future for them if he did not travel to Europe. His original intention was to work for about three to five years abroad, make some money, and return home to his wife and child. However, it appeared to be very difficult to juggle paying bills, saving up, and sending enough funds back to care for both nuclear and extended family in Ghana. His father strongly discouraged him from returning to Ghana without having saved enough capital; coming back with insufficient funds would mean that his journey abroad had been fruitless and that, in fact, he had wasted the money the family had contributed to enable him embark on his journey.

In the Netherlands, getting documentation was difficult until he found a Ghanaian woman who had legal documents in 2007. Ama had just walked out of an abusive relationship and, according to Allotey, he took advantage of her vulnerability. Allotey initially depended on Ama for his legal documents to live and work in the Netherlands, and when he received his Dutch passport in 2013 this situation ended. Yet, then he noticed he could not live without her anymore: 'I had come to love her'. Yet, he could not tell her that he was already married; instead, he referred to Lucy as his sister and his daughter as his niece. After two years of dating, they got married, once he had paid bridewealth through trusted family members in Ghana to Ama's family in Ghana. He was now caught in a difficult situation: he had two wives, and neither of them knew about the other. Allotey mentioned several times that he never intended to establish another family in the Netherlands, of which the second one turned out to be a 'good and happy marriage'. This was somewhat unexpected, as he had entered the relationship on more strategic terms. He explained that although he sometimes considered telling Ama about his family in Ghana, he could not do so as he has been keeping quiet for too long.

Allotey is not the only migrant to engage in a second marriage; various studies describe how migrant men from African societies have children and spouses in both the society of destination and at 'home', a situation termed 'transnational polygyny' (Neveu-Kringelbach, 2016: 147). Andrikopoulos (2017) and Beck-Gernsheim (2011) point out that marriage is one of the few remaining routes for non-EU citizens to acquire long-term legal status in the EU. For Allotey handling his two marriages resulted in a complex choreography of information to fulfil expectations of care towards kin in the country of origin as well as manipulating the flow of information in the new set-up to maintain their marriage while avoiding hurting both sides of their kin.

Allotey took various precautions to keep his secret. Calling his wife in Ghana a sister, he avoided any possible confrontations with his second wife. It did not raise suspicion when he occasionally called and remitted funds to his 'sister' and 'niece' back in Ghana for many years, as many migrants do. He took care by calling his 'sister' and 'niece' at odd hours and avoided the use of words such as 'I miss you' and 'I love you', and so on. In addition, he made sure that not all the remittances were known to Ama. His management of secrecy was extensive and included not just controlling the flow of information but also engaging in a loving way with Ama. While he initially showed Ama the love he thought she expected by being a good husband in terms of providing resources and being attentive to her emotional needs, so that no room was created for suspicion, he became a true companionate husband. He said he was 'romantic', getting her chocolates and Ghanaian fabrics, which are an important source of cultural capital for Ghanaian women.<sup>8</sup> Amisah heard him on different occasions compliment Ama's looks and her style of dressing, which is unusual in Ghanaian circles. He told Amisah that he was a very happy man and she observed indeed how Ama and Allotey were fond of each other.

To avoid a double jeopardy of losing both marriages and his legal residency, he decided to tell Lucy about his marriage to Ama, and explained how critical that marriage was to his survival and by extension their well-being. Lucy conceded, albeit with many quarrels and hesitations. Knowing from the tales that circulate in Ghana about migrants' struggle to survive in another country without proper documentation, she apparently decided she had no choice. According to Allotey, Lucy had understood early on that without the proper documentation he could not visit and support them, as it is commonly gossiped in Ghana that legal documentation was often acquired through marriage (see also Bochow, 2012b).

Ama indirectly referred to Allotey's relationship with his first wife several times in conversations with Amisah. On one of Amisah's visits to their home, she and Ama were watching a Ghanaian movie about a married man who had a girlfriend. Throughout the movie, they debated, made comments, and agreed or disagreed with parts of the story. This was not unusual: often when Amisah visited their home she was entertained with the TV (mostly Salto 2 channel)<sup>9</sup> or a movie and these programmes were usually followed by discussions among those who had watched. One of Ama's comments caught Amisah's attention: watching a

particular movie, Ama said she did not understand why the wife of the man in the movie was fighting with the 'side chick' (mistress). As long as the husband's affair did not occur 'in her face', Ama said, she would not fight with the girlfriend or her husband. Ama added that having extra-marital affairs was 'a man thing'. In addition, she felt secure as she considered herself as the one legally acknowledged as his wife.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Fumanti analyses the importance of recognition and visibility in the Ghanaian diaspora in London (2010b) and their importance to be accepted as a member of the community. In this regard, Ama found recognition as the wife of Allotey. Hence, she did not see why she should waste her time and sacrifice her happiness to pursue someone that the man could not proudly call his. 'I would rather spend that energy on my children. The rest is noise, rubbish', she added. At another time, she mentioned to Amisah that when Allotey goes to Ghana he spends so much time with his 'so called sister'.

Ama knew about Allotey's first wife, but consciously decided not-to-know. She once made a statement that had nothing to do with Allotey but indicated to Amisah that she knew more: 'You play smarter for not trying to know, so far as it does not hurt you, or you find a way to get over that hurt'. She articulated that when people let the other party know they are aware of the secret, they indirectly become involved in the maintenance of the secret, which is tiring. Hence, if Allotey admitted keeping such a secret then it would likely affect their marriage badly, and Ama did not want that outcome. She feared it could even lead to divorce as she would have to openly accept the other woman and her children, which was not an option for her as a Christian. The pain and the loss were not worth it, and, moreover, Ama explained that it was not easy finding a good man like Allotey in Amsterdam. She had therefore decided not-to-know. A crucial part of the choreography of secrecy is thus the not-knowing by one of the parties involved.

### **The labour of love**

Keeping secrets requires labour. The three cases presented above show how those keeping a secret and those engaged in not-knowing all labour in the process. Muna had to move to a new city, away from her family, and commute to work as part of her effort to manage her secret. She also had to visit her mother often to dispel any suspicions that she was living with her partner. This labour included time management and had financial implications, as she had to wake up early to go to work and pay higher fares to commute at peak hours. These were things she would have avoided, had she lived with her mother or told her about her relationship. In Allotey's case, many people were involved in maintaining the secret, and this required quite some labour from his side. He choreographed a network of confidantes, from friends to family members. While some family members were involved in paying the bride wealth for both wives, others were asked to play along his narrative of the hard working single man in the Netherlands. Moreover, as he was dependent on Ama he had to work hard to make his marriage a success, as he often said himself.

Dealing with the inability to freely speak to your child or spouse about certain topics is also hard emotional work. Fawzia had to play ignorant while she knew about her daughter's relationship; she decided to not-know, which was a burden to her and made her unhappy. She had to hide her emotions from the daughter whom she was close with and with whom she should thus not have a strained relationship with. The risk of losing a relationship sustains, contradictorily, the secrecy. And the anxiety associated with managing secrecy can be tiring, as Amisah has observed from spending long times with her interlocutors. She witnessed them having to be very careful so as not to arouse suspicion from others, or 'watch their back' to make sure people did not find out about their secrets.

Secrecy thus requires labour from multiple sides. We have not touched upon the involvement of siblings and other intimate connections, but they also played a crucial role in the choreography of secrecy. We premised the way that sometimes a person is in the know of what is being hidden from them but consciously do not make an effort to know more. For instance Ama knew that her 'sister in law' in Ghana was not really a sibling, while Fawzia knew that her daughter had married at some point. Managing secrecy also involves deciding not to know and take an awaiting position. For many of our interlocutors it was a way to maintain a reputation (as for Ama, as the married mother), to pay respect (as Muna respected her mother and Allotey his wife), and eventually to strengthen family relations. Not-knowing paradoxically binds people together.

In conclusion, secrets are often known, or at least people suspect something. Also, secrecy is not truly meant to last forever. Muna and Fawzia knew that sooner or later, there would be a confrontation where both parties would have to speak out. Muna, for instance, was in touch with a Sheikh, a religious leader, who had been a mediator in such situations more often. Fawzia was waiting for her daughter to come forward about her decisions. In both cases they hoped and prayed that there would be reconciliation. In contrast, Allotey choreographed it so successfully that he had not to fear revelation anymore. Nevertheless he worried that he would take his secret 'into his grave' and that as a consequence he would not reunite the two families he had. His worry articulates the importance of moral personhood and how its accomplishment is entangled in a conflicting situation. In other words, he preferred to end the secrecy but had not (yet) mustered the courage to do so. Depending on the nature of the conflict, people anticipated a future end to the secrecy.

Secrecy is multi-dimensional and situational and therefore do practices of concealment take different forms (Arnfred, 2006), from hiding information, to avoiding confrontations, communicating allusively, moving geographically, to deciding not to know, and more. The burden of secrecy does not necessarily lie in possessing a secret, but rather in the maintenance its choreography requires. The burden also lies in trying to defend it against a loved one who becomes a questioner – and this is the major paradox of secrecy: while managing information out of love or respect so as not to hurt the other party, the practice of secrecy hurts those who are carefully kept away from the information. In examining secrecy as a relational

skill, we suggest that the choreography that comes about is practiced and thought through overtime and in connection with others as people draw on different sources of knowledge. As a consequence, they develop skills in both keeping and maintaining secrecy as well as kinship relations.

The focus on secrecy and how it plays out in kinship relations among our interlocutors is relevant for understanding how people struggle to balance personal aspirations and social expectations. In the face of mounting pressures on families, people feel they are sometimes forced to keep certain information from kin to avoid causing pain or to show respect and love, so as to pursue their goals in life. The concealment of information is more than a reaction to religious morals or the political economy; secrecy is both about directing the ebb and flow of and deciding not-to-know, and it is a way of showing respect, pursuing love, being responsible kin, and honouring personal desires. As such it is a crucial element of affective circuits. An analysis of the choreography of secrecy shows that manipulating information and not-knowing are not mutually exclusive but co-produce the choreography.

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### **Notes**

1. Data was collected by the first author Amisah Bakuri and she appears in the ethnographic cases as Amisah
2. The names of all individuals in this paper are pseudonyms, and places of residence, age or occupation have been changed so as to avoid recognition.
3. People expressed different opinions about what ‘practising Islam’ means: for some five daily prayers were crucial, for others the wearing of the hijab regularly or dressing more modestly for women was understood as central. Many mentioned the participation in Ramadan fasting and the giving of alms; and again for others the seeking of Islamic knowledge was deemed essential. People were often categorized in two camps: those who ‘practise’ and those who do not. All in all, there was a wide variety in religious practices among the interlocutors.

4. De-migrantization is similar to the move Krause and Van Dijk (2016) suggest. They call for de-diasporization to understand how and why different frameworks of identity-formation gain prominence.
5. Several scholars have pointed out how hyphenated identities have become common and the flexibility in self-ascriptions (De Witte, 2014; Kusow and Bjork, 2007; Maier, 2012). In the Netherlands, hyphenated identity mainly used among young-Dutch born people of various black African and racially mixed backgrounds (De Witte, 2014). Not everybody would agree that hyphenated identities exist. During fieldwork, some interlocutors explained their identities using terms such as Somali-Dutch or Ghanaian-Dutch to describe themselves or their children, who were raised in the Netherlands. However, the term Somali- Dutch or Ghanaian-Dutch is not part of the dominating public discourse of migrants' identities or fields of belonging.
6. Information available on CBS website <https://opendata.cbs.nl/Dataportaal/#/CBS/en/dataset/37325eng/table?ts=1541009171442> (last accessed 31 October 2018).
7. WhatsApp is a social media application that allows the sending of text messages and voice calls, as well as video calls, images and other media.
8. According to Ama, he used to buy her flowers occasionally and it did not make sense to her as they die quickly, gather dust, and are expensive. So she nicely found a way to tell him to rather get him wax cloth designed and manufactured in the Netherlands for West African markets, even if it meant only once in a year. See Fumanti's discussion (2010a) of how some Ghanaian women in London pride themselves on the different range of costumes they possess.
9. Salto 2 is one of Amsterdam's local channels which broadcast several Ghanaian television shows.
10. Legal marriage has various forms and layers of legitimation (from customary practice in Ghana, to Dutch Roman Law, to requirements of immigration law, et cetera) and is too complicated to outline in this paper.

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