



*Argonauts of West Africa. Migration, Citizenship and Kinship Dynamics in a
Changing Europe*
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migration, citizenship and kinship dynamics in a changing Europe**

This dissertation is about the novel and often experimental ways West African migrants in the Netherlands use kinship in their quest for international mobility, employment and legal residence. In the social sciences and political philosophy, there has been a general tendency to assume that the emergence and growing influence of the state will restrict the societal role of kinship and its entanglement with politics and other domains of social life. This study shows that it is precisely the evermore intensive interventions by the state – notably new measures to control mobility across borders, access to the labor market and citizenship – that trigger new efforts by migrants to mobilize and develop kinship in order to use it for creating footholds in new surroundings. A focus on kinship, a classical anthropological topic, turned out to be surprisingly relevant for understanding migrant struggles to retain agency in the face of mounting external pressures. Yet, this new context can also inspire a critical appraisal of the basic tenets of older approaches to kinship. Close attention to kinship's dynamics and flexibility is imperative. But even more important is the attention to inequality as a complement to the usual tendency to pair kinship with reciprocity. Instead of seeking a normative answer to what kinship is, this dissertation examines what kinship enables and how it does so. The emphasis on the practices of kinship relativizes its glossy cover of reciprocity and solidarity, shedding light on its dark side, which is often neglected in formal statements by both migrants and scholars.

Summary

This book is about the novel and often experimental ways West African migrants in the Netherlands use kinship in their quest for international mobility, employment and legal residence. In the social sciences and political philosophy, there has been a general tendency to assume that the emergence and growing influence of the state will restrict the societal role of kinship and its entanglement with politics and other domains of social life. This study shows that it is precisely the evermore intensive interventions by the state – notably new measures to control mobility across borders, access to the labor market and citizenship – that trigger new efforts by migrants to mobilize old forms of kinship and develop new ones in order to use it for creating footholds in new surroundings. Changes in wider contexts, such as the 2009 European economic crisis and the increasing presence in the Netherlands of migrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, prompted further innovations by West African migrants in the creation of kinship networks. A focus on kinship, a classical anthropological topic, turned out to be surprisingly relevant for understanding migrant struggles to retain agency in the face of mounting external pressures. Yet, in this new context, this also requires a critical appraisal of the basic tenets of existing approaches to kinship. Close attention to kinship's dynamics and flexibility is imperative, as advocated by the new generation of kinship scholars. But even more important is the attention to inequality as a complement to the usual tendency of recent approaches to kinship to pair kinship with reciprocity.

This dissertation investigates how legally precarious West African migrants mobilize and produce kinship, especially siblinghood and marriage, to obtain identity documents, such as visas, work permits, residence permits and passports. These documents enable them to travel, work in formal jobs and stay legally in Europe. More specifically, it examines the role of kinship for West African migrants in circumventing restrictive immigration policies and border controls, securing waged employment in the strictly state-regulated Dutch labor market, and acquiring legal residence in the Netherlands. In this regard, this book focuses on the interplay of citizenship and kinship. It examines the process of kinship in a setting of unequal access to citizenship and its means of proof: identity documents. Thus the aim of this study is to question the role of civic inequality in the formation, reproduction and possible decline of kinship and kinship relations. How does unequal access to citizenship (civic inequality) trigger new dynamics of social relations that West African migrants in Amsterdam frame in terms of kinship?

More generally, this book argues that exploring the relationship between kinship and inequality, in this case unequal access to citizenship and other state institutions, is analytically and theoretically productive. Showing how state-generated inequality impacts new assemblages of social collaboration and how this may proliferate kinship relations contributes to the long-standing effort to reconceptualize the dyadic opposition between traditional and modern societies and debunk the presupposition that kinship organizes social, political and economic life only in traditional societies while in modern societies kinship exists separately from political and economic activities.

The first empirical chapter of this book, chapter two, critically examines the dichotomy between modernity and tradition and the assumption that kinship is an institution of traditional societies which loses its importance with the emergence of the state. This dichotomy informed the anthropological debate on personhood and the distinction between the Western autonomous individual and the non-Western partible person (“dividual”). Taking the person as a unit of analysis, this chapter critically engages with the debate over the constitution of personhood and the consideration of dividualism and individualism as different types of social being in modern and traditional societies respectively. For Marcel Mauss, a key moment for the transition from one type of personhood to the other took place in ancient Rome with the institutionalization of citizenship which constituted the person as a legal entity. In other words, the social contract between the citizen and the state as a centralized form of authority emancipated individuals from the necessity of relying on others. Although this argument seems plausible, chapter two points out that citizenship is not only an inclusive institution that grants rights and protection to its holders. Citizenship is also an exclusive institution, because in order to grant rights and protection to its holders it has to first exclude non-members. This chapter investigates the impact of the inherently exclusive side of citizenship on the formation of personhood. To do so, it examines the repeated and complex efforts of a poor Ghanaian migrant, Jason, to travel “to an advanced country” and how he managed to achieve his migratory and life goals by engaging in “identity fraud,” or what I prefer to call “unauthorized identity craft.” In his journey to Europe, which passed through many countries in Africa and Asia, Jason used various identity documents of different nationalities. Sometimes he was able to convince border authorities that he was the legitimate holder of these documents, and sometimes he was not.

Chapter three examines one solution for unauthorized migrants in finding employment and earning their living in the Netherlands: borrowing the identity documents of

other “lookalike” migrants and finding employment under their name. The relationships between document lenders and borrowers is described by both parties in terms of siblinghood. The analysis of the ethnographic cases shows that regulating access to scarce resources in highly ambiguous and unequal settings requires a stabilizing force. The appeal to siblinghood among the document lenders and borrowers in Amsterdam denotes a sense of obligation that makes it more difficult to renounce. To make these relationships fulfill their expected function, they need, on the one hand, to be framed positively in a language of support and solidarity, and on the other hand, require such a degree of inflexibility that the obligations stemming from these relationships cannot be easily dismissed. The chapter engages with post-Schneider approaches to kinship as “relatedness” (Carsten) and “mutuality of being” (Sahlins). It shows that identity loan results in intersubjective participation which can be indeed framed as “mutuality of being” and “relatedness.” This intersubjective participation is not, however, very pleasantly experienced by migrants who engage in identity loan. Carsten’s conceptualization of relatedness is more attentive to power inequalities within kinship relations. Sahlins places more emphasis on sharing and reciprocity as means of bringing people closer together and participating in each other’s existence, thus running the risk of neglecting kinship’s dark side. The ethnographic material of this chapter demonstrates that the intimacy entailed by intersubjective participation is also haunted by fear and insecurity. Instead of asking what kinship is, as Schneider’s critique of kinship studies triggered scholars to do, this chapter investigates what kinship does and how it does it.

A premise in separating the study of kinship from citizenship in the social sciences was that the state replaced kinship as a mode of political organization and as a mechanism of redistributing resources. The general argument of this book is that the exclusionary aspect of the state, which is an intrinsic aspect of citizenship, has created new conditions for the regeneration of kinship. Chapter four examines this argument by questioning the link between the weakening of transatlantic kinship – expressed in a language of siblinghood (“black brotherhood”) between legally precarious African migrants and Dutch Afro-Caribbeans – and the increasingly more exclusive Dutch migration policies. It examines how legislative changes have negatively affected the forms of exchange between Africans and Afro-Caribbeans in the Netherlands. More specifically, it focuses on how the devalorization of Afro-Caribbeans’ civic resources has affected marriages with African migrants. It also examines the wider implications of the exchanges between the two groups and their appeal to a common belonging. If kinship is something that is made and not given, as a newer

generation of kinship scholars argue, there must also be the possibility of undoing kinship. The processual analysis of new kinship studies has mostly focused on the making of kinship and to a certain extent neglected the unmaking of kinship. The ethnographic analysis of this chapter contributes to the study of kinship as a process and shows how kinship between Africans and Afro-Caribbeans is made and unmade in the context of changing legal barriers to migration. For this reason, the chapter is structured around two extended ethnographic cases of African-Caribbean couples in different periods of time. It looks at how the law regulated their intimate life and also had consequences for their conceptions of belonging. The success and failure of these two marriages suggest that exchange relations between Africans and Afro-Caribbeans have been vital to the process of making and remaking transatlantic kinship. However, it is misleading to look only at material conditions. This chapter also shows that the process of transatlantic kinship has been influenced by other, immaterial, conditions, such as the politics of slavery commemoration in the Netherlands and Ghana as well as other forms of kinship that emerged in the Netherlands. Such alternatives emerged, for instance, especially in Pentecostal churches in Amsterdam. Furthermore, although the devalorization of Dutch Caribbeans' civic resources had consequences for their relations with African migrants in the Netherlands, other forms of kinship and collaboration became important for the survival of African migrants in the Netherlands.

The last empirical chapter continues this line of research by examining the shift in marital practices of West African migrants, especially Nigerians, from choosing Dutch citizens of various ethnic backgrounds as spouses to selecting European citizen spouses from countries of Europe's periphery. Firstly, the chapter documents why marriage to an EU citizen provides easier access to migrant legality than marriage to a Dutch citizen in the Netherlands. The chapter shows that the EU, through the rights it grants mobile EU citizens and their family members, attempts to establish EU citizenship as an institution of a civic community and not simply as a facilitator of a common European market. The question that is central to this chapter, however, is why West African migrants have a particular preference for spouses from the European periphery and not just any EU citizen. The chapter looks closely at the forms of exchange that take place in these marriages and the circulation of emotions, money, civic resources and sexual pleasure. It shows that West African migrants navigate the highly asymmetrical dynamic of mixed-status marriage by choosing peripheral Europeans as partners who, as working class migrants, are in a comparable structural position

in Dutch society. Under these conditions, the exchange of resources, money, emotions and sexual pleasure between spouses results in a more reciprocal dependency.

By exploring how West African migrants rely on kinship in attempting to overcome the uncertainties of their legal status, I want to overcome the dilemma of seeing migrants as either victims of structural inequalities or active agents navigating constant changes. This study shows that kinship offers a means to deal with institutional structures of civic inequality. Kinship's unpredictable dynamics, especially in a context of extreme inequality, may, however, prove more difficult to control than many expected. In a broader perspective, the old anthropological fascination with kinship is – maybe quite unexpectedly for many observers – highly relevant for understanding present-day problems of migration, with citizenship becoming an institution of exclusion rather than of equality. However, such relevance requires new orientations that emphasize kinship as a dynamic process and allow for novel adaptations in changing contexts. In this sense, such new contexts could also outline new ways for reflecting on what kinship is. Instead of seeking a normative answer, this book examines what kinship enables and how it does so. I do so by following the heroes and heroines of this book, the Argonauts of West Africa, and by being attentive not only to their words but also to their practices. The emphasis on the practices of kinship relativizes its glossy cover of reciprocity and solidarity, shedding light on its dark side, which is often neglected in formal statements by both migrants and kinship scholars.