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Why kinship still needs anthropologists in the 21st century

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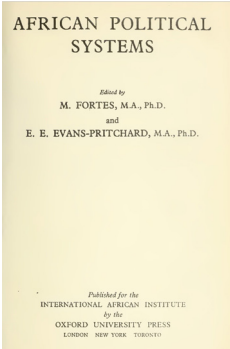
Fig. 1 (above, right). *A view from the hotel window in Kiel, March 2023.*
Figs 2 (below) & 3 (below, right). *Cover and extract from the contents page of M. Fortes & E.E. Evans-Pritchard's* African political systems *(1947, Oxford University Press).*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'If I have a bag and put money into it, to whom does the money belong? To me or the bag?'. I posed this question at a conference titled 'Scales of social, environmental and cultural change in past societies', held at the University of Kiel between 13-18 March 2023.

As the only trained sociocultural anthropologist, alongside Bill Angelbeck, on the conference's 'Prehistory of politics – Politics of prehistory' panel, I wanted to highlight the complex interplay and diversity of kinship and political systems in non-state societies. When asked for their opinion on the above question, the audience, without exception, raised their hands in agreement that the money belonged to me and not to the bag. It was striking to see 50 predominantly white European archaeologists at various stages of their careers reach a unanimous consensus – an unheard-of occurrence in discussions on archaeological topics.

Non-Eurocentric perceptions

The question was borrowed from Audrey Isabel Richards (1940), who once compared the transfer and ownership of money with semen to highlight the diminished importance of biological fatherhood among her field site hosts. Richards drew on this comparison in her contribution to *African political systems* (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1940), based on her study of the Bemba, a matrilineal tribal group in what is now northeastern Zambia. Richards wrote: 'If I have a bag and put money in it, the money belongs to me and not to the bag. But the Bemba say a man puts semen into a woman and yet the child belongs to her and not to him' (1940: 97). This striking example illustrates the minimal importance of biological fathers among the Bemba, who exclusively trace their descent through the female line.

The contrast between the perceptions of the Kiel panel and that of the Bemba is significant; it highlights the importance of moving beyond fixed Eurocentric views and encourages a fresh conversation between anthropologists and archaeologists in areas often dominated by anthropological perspectives. To gain a deeper insight into the social realities unearthed by archaeologists, sociocultural anthropologists should engage in more extensive dialogue with archaeologists, expanding upon the discussions initiated by Graeber and Wengrow (2021).

This article demonstrates the importance of integrating sociocultural anthropological insights into ancient DNA research on kinship and invites sociocultural anthropologists, archaeologists and archaeogeneticists to interpret archaeological data through a non-Eurocentric lens. My approach begins by addressing common misconceptions about prehistoric kinship – particularly those related to descent. I summarize insights into matrilineal and patrilineal descent through ethnographic examples and, finally, emphasize the importance of sociocultural anthropologists' pluridisciplinary engagement.

Going beyond the 'third science revolution'

Acknowledging non-Eurocentric upbringing, care and kinship models is crucial, given recent advancements in archaeogenetics[1] – a rapidly growing field within the 'third science revolution' in archaeology (Kristiansen 2014). Archaeogenetic titles such as *Eight millennia of matrilineal genetic continuity in the South Caucasus* (Margaryan 2017) or *A high-resolution picture of kinship practices in an Early Neolithic tomb* (Fowler et al. 2023) do not often spark the anthropological interest that they merit, and archaeogenetic investigations often make sweeping interpretative assertions that work against anthropological knowledge on kinship.

Sadly, acknowledging the importance of social rather than biological ties in archaeogenetic studies of prehistoric kinship remains more the exception than the rule. Scholars persist in emphasizing the importance of biological kinship and unilineal descent. For example, one study of the Bronze Age site of Nepluyevsky concluded that 'descent was patrilineal, and blood relations among brothers played a structural role in society' (Blöcher et al. 2023). But in the same paragraph, it is revealed that 'only seven of the 32 sequenced individuals were determined to be unrelated in the narrower family sense', which the authors defined as relations beyond the fourth degree and concluded that 'descent was primarily and almost exclusively determined by biological relations' (ibid.: 7). In this case, unrelated individuals comprised over one-quarter of the sample. What more would be needed to acknowledge the importance of non-biological relations in prehistory?

Another case in point is an extensive kinship tree from Gurgy, France, whereby researchers reveal seven generations of biological links and 'a strong social selection of individuals of different patrilineal lineages' (Rivollat et al. 2023: 6), concluding that 'biological relatedness mattered in the organization of the necropolis, and that whatever combination of social principles organized biological reproduction in this group left behind a strongly patrilineal pedigree structure' (ibid.: 6). However, these are genetic lines of paternal inheritance and not necessarily large corporate groups.

Gurgy individuals were strictly monogamous, unlike those at the Neolithic Hazleton North (Gloucestershire, UK) long cairn, where six instances of males reproducing with multiple female partners were observed (Fowler et al. 2022: 586). The latter study, appearing in *Nature*, also lingered on patrilineal descent in which women established significant connections between parallel lineages of related male individuals and highlighted the importance

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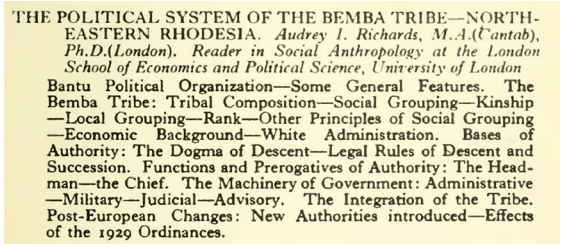
THE POLITICAL SYSTEM OF THE BEMBA TRIBE—NORTH-EASTERN RHODESIA. *Audrey I. Richards, M.A.(Cantab), Ph.D.(London). Reader in Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science, University of London*
Bantu Political Organization—Some General Features. The Bemba Tribe: Tribal Composition—Social Grouping—Kinship—Local Grouping—Rank—Other Principles of Social Grouping—Economic Background—White Administration. Bases of Authority: The Dogma of Descent—Legal Rules of Descent and Succession. Functions and Prerogatives of Authority: The Headman—the Chief. The Machinery of Government: Administrative—Military—Judicial—Advisory. The Integration of the Tribe. Post-European Changes: New Authorities introduced—Effects of the 1929 Ordinances.

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of social fatherhood, based on an analogy to 'a pattern observed ethnographically in societies such as the patrilineal and polygynous Nuer' (ibid.: 587).

Collaboration among sociocultural anthropologists, archaeologists and archaeogeneticists is still emerging; however, an outstanding study of nine interments in Room 33 at Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, uncovered striking parallels in mitochondrial genomes, indicating a shared matrilineal ancestor (Kennett et al. 2017). The researchers deduced that these entombed individuals 'were members of a single, elite matriline that played a central leadership role in the Chacoan polity for ∼330 years' (ibid.: 3). To establish this claim, the study carefully considered archaeological, ethnohistoric and archaeogenetic data but also raised some ethical concerns (Cortez et al. 2021).

The predominant lack of sociocultural anthropological thought or ethnographic knowledge entrenched in archaeogenetic studies is evident. Archaeogenetic interpretations of 'social fatherhood' are predicated on a purely biological framework; however, men in a large social group – even within patrilineages – are considered fathers regardless of genealogy. Moreover, using 'social kinship' to interpret a non-biological relationship overlooks the fact that most kin groups comprise many individuals without detectable biological relationships. Kin groups are fundamentally social constructions. The treatment of biological versus 'social' unwittingly projects European experiences onto prehistoric settings (see Thelen 2023).

More often than not, archaeogenetics assumes that prehistoric kinship was matrilineal or patrilineal without adequate contextualization of data or close consideration of biologically non-related individuals beyond 'social kinship' or 'social fatherhood'. It is incumbent on sociocultural anthropologists to emphasize that patrilineal and matrilineal descent are just two among a variety of umbrella terms for prevailing kinship practices found within various sociopolitical constellations.

Unilineal descent and cognatic kinship

Descent was a central focal point of the British functionalist school, but many elements of 'old kinship' studies have long fallen out of fashion or become obsolete (Schneider [1968] 1980). Today, descent is seen as a system in which ties of filiation 'are repeated generation after generation … if the social emphasis is on the whole series of such links, backwards into preceding generations and, prospectively, forwards into the future ones' (Parkin [1997] 2003: 15).

For anthropologists, descent is a social principle formed by practice and memory, and descent groups are not necessarily biologically related – members can also integrate into descent groups through adoption, milk motherhood, alloparenting etc. For example, Scheffler (2001) distinguished between filiation (automatic membership) and affiliation (the right to membership enacted through choice), demonstrating that descent groups include non-biological co-members. Moreover, groups can combine with others to establish new descent groups or change the membership principles over time.

In British research traditions, anthropologists categorized descent based on the strength of paternal, maternal or bilateral social ties – but it is crucial to underscore distinctions between these types of descent. Unilineal descent is defined by one line of descent, in which children are integrated into either the maternal or paternal 'side'. Cognatic descent occurs when children belong to their father's and mother's descent groups through different practices (e.g. ambilineal descent groups, bilateral descent) (Fox 1984). In the West, kinship is traced bilaterally through cognatic descent whereby every biological ancestor and descendant is a socially recognized relative, and children are members of both their father's and mother's families (Fox 1984; Parkin [1997] 2003).

However, patrilineal, matrilineal and cognatic descent do not coincide with sociopolitical models of social organization. Ethnographic examples showcase why matrilineal or patrilineal descent does not denote a single practice or model. Moreover, descent groups are not coterminous with genetic 'lineages' that merely trace individual lines of inheritance.

Matrilineal descent: Not one practice but many

Among the *Ethnographic atlas*'s 1,265 documented societies, 13 per cent are matrilineal (Murdock 1967). Alongside weak representation on a global scale, societies with matrilineal descent display significant systemic variation between them (see Schneider & Gough 1963; Stone & King 2019). This is evident through the well-known ethnographic cases of the Hopi (see Eggan 1950; Schlegel 1992; Whiteley 1985) and the Trobrianders (see Malinowski [1922] 1978; Weiner 1988).

Comparing the Hopi and Trobriand variations of matrilineality leads to several insights. First, societies of matrilineal descent do not necessarily share the same residence pattern. Second, women do not necessarily own houses, storage or land. Third, women are not necessarily the heads of households. Fourth, women do not necessarily hold the highest political office. Last, societies of matrilineal descent may be centralized or decentralized sociopolitical systems in chiefdoms or other decentralized tribal constellations.

The Bemba are a case in point of how messy blood relations can be when plotted on a kinship diagram. At the time of Richards' observation (1930-1933), the Bemba were shifting cultivators, moving their villages every four to seven years. The Bemba's descent was through the female line, with inheritance via women, not men. They valued ties between brothers and sisters 'born of the same womb' and maternal nephews and nieces (Richards 1950: 222). A child was part of the mother's clan (*mukoa*), which governed marriage rules, social interactions, hospitality and compensation practices. Additionally, Bemba traced their ancestry through a matrilineage or 'house' (*Ɲanda*), spanning 3-4 generations for commoners, 13-20 for court officials and 25-30 for paramount chiefs.

If a woman moved into her husband's house after marriage, she did not become a permanent member of that group. She would return after the death of her husband or if she ceased childbearing (ibid.: 226). Bemba fathers were consulted about daughters' marriages. However, the mother's brother made decisions about the life and death of his sister's children, opting sometimes to sell them to settle blood debts.

Matrilineal descent does not determine a society's residence patterns, property rights or sociopolitical organization. By considering ethnographic nuances between societies with matrilineal descent (see Johnson 2016; Schlee 2009; Schneider & Gough 1963), scholars can avoid reducing society to its descent system (see Blöcher et al. 2023; Rivollat et al. 2023). Moreover, descent constitutes only one of four corners of kinship analysis, alongside terminology, alliance and residence, posing a limitation when analysis is reduced to one axis alone. Descent is an imaginary way of tracing ancestry rather than a society's sociopolitical determinant. This has been a common opinion among sociocultural anthropologists for decades (Collier & Yanagisako 1987; Godelier 2011).

Patrilineal descent: Not one practice but many

To explore the homogeneity of societies of patrilineal descent, we can compare ethnographic evidence among the Nuer (see Evans-Pritchard 1940, 1951) and the Baruya

1. Archaeogenetics is the analysis of genetic material preserved in archaeological remains using molecular approaches, such as genome-wide DNA sequencing, used to understand human and other biological histories. It combines techniques from archaeology and genetics to analyze genetic material from past populations, revealing insights into human evolution, migration and relationships between ancient groups.

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Fig. 4. *Deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) symbol with transparent background. DNA, the language of life, encodes the traits that make us unique. But tracing family lines through it requires deciphering not just biology but the vibrant cultural kinship narratives across generations.*

(see Godelier 1986). Such societies often prioritize patrilocal residence, though exceptions exist. In societies of patrilineal descent, men most commonly own houses, storage and land – but are not necessarily the heads of households – and women may decide on household-related matters. Men likely hold the highest political office. Nevertheless, not all men have equal power, as elders may be more respected. They may be organized in centralized and decentralized sociopolitical settings, with significant variations. Matrilineal, patrilineal and cognatic descent can be found across hunter-fisher-gatherer, farmer, state-based and other societies.

Such nuances between societies practising matrilineal and patrilineal descent have been documented to be self-evident within sociocultural anthropology. This shared understanding within the discipline highlights its need to inform conclusions about prehistoric kinship. Recognizing different human possibilities lies at the core of anthropology as part and parcel of a fieldworker's professional responsibility. When engaging with emerging discourses, we must voice reservations and forward new ways of thinking about prehistoric kinship.

Ethnographically grounded insights

Considering ethnographically grounded insights yields three significant archaeological implications. First, matrilineal descent does not necessarily imply a leading role of women in all aspects of social life. Among the Hopi, women were heads of households, but both older women and men made decisions in the council of elders. Therefore, when discussing matrilineal descent in prehistoric times, it is important not to assume that this automatically meant women played the leading role in private and public life.

Evidence supporting women's leading roles in households and the public domain should be carefully examined through archaeological contexts and intersectional frameworks. To avoid bias, archaeologists should embrace positionality and situated knowledge (see Haraway 1988). Such reflections diversify scholarly views to include indigenous knowledge and ways of being in the world in their interpretations. This is particularly important since kinship, as we know it in the West, defined primarily through blood, is not globally applicable (Schneider [1968] 1980).

Second, social inequality, frequently associated with patrilineal descent groups in archaeogenetic interpretations, must be thoroughly investigated and not assumed by default. For example, the Baruya and the Nuer exemplify societies of patrilineal descent, organized in decentralized sociopolitical constellations, in which social inequality between men was minimal, and social inequality between households was negligible. These examples contrast with the evidence for kinship-based social inequality in Bronze Age Europe (Mittnik et al. 2019). For instance, in the latter study, which wonderfully integrated multiple lines of evidence, the authors questionably associated patrilineal households in the Early Bronze Age Lech valley with *oikos*, 'the household sphere of classic Greece, as well as the Roman *familia*, both comprising the kin-related family and their slaves' (ibid.).

Just as women are not a priori leaders in matrilineal groups, social inequality and the leading role of men in all spheres of life are not a priori linked with patrilineal descent. This link should be questioned rather than assumed. Headline-grabbing studies of ancient DNA must be complemented with careful examination of archaeological contexts on both local and regional scales. This way, an argument for a specific sociopolitical organization can be substantiated.

Third, informed archaeological insights can then be further contextualized with cross-cultural anthropological insights by employing 'uncontrolled comparison' (Sahlins 1963: 268), where 'ethnographic reports are mainly meant to exemplify rather than verify' (Sahlins 2013: 1-2). In this way, by integrating sociocultural anthropologists into archaeological teams, the group will not suffer from the 'tyranny of ethnography' (cf. Wobst 1978) but benefit from pushing the boundaries of what can and cannot be known through natural science techniques as well as carving out nuances between different kinship practices as documented ethnographically, through 'simple analogy' (see Wylie 1988). To understand the diversity of human sociopolitical structures in both the deep and recent past, archaeology must eschew essentializing and only equating prehistoric communities with the terms matriliny and patriliny and instead embrace empirical nuances built on the complex realities observed by ethnographic studies.

Bottom-up, cross-cultural methods are vital for analyzing past social structures in archaeology. Considering sociocultural anthropological insights, embracing prehistoric kinship involves more than tracing blood relations and plotting prehistoric individuals on kinship diagrams depicted with lines, circles and triangles. Such simplifications ignore how particular groups organized themselves and dwelt in the world. As much as prehistoric kinship cannot just be about blood, prehistoric politics cannot just be about chiefs. Multiple models of sociopolitical organization documented ethnographically can, therefore, be used to contextualize archaeological contexts informed through cross-cultural insights (see Cveček 2022).

Why kinship still needs anthropologists

To address the state of the art of kinship studies within sociocultural anthropology and its engagement with archaeological insights on prehistoric kinship, it is essential to challenge the notion that kinship has become irrelevant. Since Robin Fox's writing, kinship may have lost its importance within anthropology in a similar way that the nude has lost its significance in fine art (Fox 1984: 10). This perceived decline is contested by ongoing research in the field (see Bamford 2019; Godelier 2011), signalling a need to re-evaluate sociocultural anthropology's contributions to kinship studies. In these interdisciplinary exchanges, anthropologists must not silently protest but actively participate to counteract the perpetuation of bias and racist views in science (see Nash 2004). Echoing Parkin's call from over a decade ago, 'Anthropologists must be in the conference hall too if they are not to find other disciplines making the running for them in areas they have traditionally considered their own – like the kinship of human societies' (Parkin 2009: 196).

Since the 1970s, kinship studies have 'emigrated to other areas of anthropology where [they are] being refashioned and linked to new questions' (Godelier 2011: 10). This shift is mirrored in prehistoric archaeology with kinship emigrating into archaeogenetics. Many archaeologists side with Stockhammer's cynicism that 'Half the archaeologists think ancient DNA can solve everything. The other half think recent DNA is the devil's work' (Callaway 2018). Yet, a sophisticated approach suggests ancient DNA must be informed by cross-cultural, ethnographic and archaeological insights to address old questions of kinship in prehistoric societies in new ways (see Bentley 2022; Ensor 2021; Ensor et al. 2017; Frieman & Brück 2021).

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Fig. 5. *X-KIN: Exploring patterns of prehistoric kinship from sociocultural anthropological perspectives.*
Fig. 6. *Ideal vs actual categorization of descent systems.*

Ancient DNA studies should engage with archaeological contexts through qualitative and quantitative analyses based on extensive ethnographic, cross-cultural archives of kinship. Sociocultural anthropology must be involved (Parkin 2009: 196) to avoid cross-disciplinary misunderstanding and the imposition of Eurocentric perspectives onto global settings. Considering a wide variety of descent reckoning that has been documented cross-culturally, it is crucial that nuanced anthropological understandings of kinship and relatedness (cf. Carsten 2000; Godelier 2011) are being adopted in prehistoric archaeology.

Moving beyond simplified segmentary lineage system logic (as per the Bedouin proverb 'Me and my brother against my cousin, me and my cousin against the world') and embracing interdisciplinary collaboration may also bridge divides between proponents of new and old kinship studies inside sociocultural anthropology. My idea of anthropological engagement with archaeogenetic studies echoes Tim Ingold's plea for engagement with 'evolutionary biology' beyond 'turf wars' (Ingold 2007: 14). Such an approach highlights our discipline's strengths:

> anthropology has always looked beyond its borders for sources of theoretical inspiration, and has sought creative conjunctions between ideas that other disciplines may have maintained in separate compartments. This eclecticism is the very source of its openness and vitality. (Ingold 2007: 15)

We should be looking back while moving forward in prehistoric kinship studies. The privilege of accessing a vast dataset empowers us to contextualize, challenge and critically assess certain conclusions arising from recent archaeogenetic enquiries.

X-KIN as a way forward

Establishing interdisciplinary dialogue requires a common language, and such efforts are the core of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action project 'X-KIN: Exploring patterns of prehistoric kinship from socio-cultural anthropological perspectives' that I will carry out at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago and the Austrian Archaeological Institute in Vienna (2023-2026). X-KIN addresses how material structures such as settlements, buildings, artefacts and biological markers can be read as 'material codes' of prehistoric kinship. The project explores how ethnographic reports can act as translations at the intersection of the humanities and the natural sciences to contextualize rather than verify variability in kinship practices during prehistory. Without saying the same thing (see Parkinson 2017), X-KIN will help establish a shared language concerning kinship between sociocultural anthropologists, archaeologists and archaeogeneticists.

X-KIN improves on past calls for dialogue between disciplines in several ways. First, research will be conducted with other experts in the field rather than in isolation. Second, the project will prioritize qualitative over quantitative approaches for integrating multiple data pools. Third, X-KIN will revisit the inventory of old and new kinship studies, a distinction 'not quite so hard and fast as it seems' (Bamford 2019: 7), together with archaeogenetic, archaeological and bioarchaeological data.

Fig. 6. *Ideal vs actual categorization of descent systems*

Emphasis	Biological connections	Social construction of kinship
Descent models	Unilineal (patrilineal or matrilineal), cognatic/bilineal	Fluid systems
Roles and power	Clear-cut associations with descent type	Complexities and nuances in social roles
Challenges	Misinterpretations due to oversimplification	Eurocentric bias, overemphasis on biological ties

Following *The task of a translator* (Benjamin [1923] 1968), I propose that sociocultural anthropologists should be willing to translate data between disciplines: 'A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium to shine upon the original all the more fully' (ibid.). By committing to transparent translations between discipline-specific concepts (e.g. descent, haplogroups etc.) and allowing the original to shine, sociocultural anthropologists can assume their responsibility to foster productive dialogue among sociocultural anthropology, archaeology and archaeogenetics. Meanwhile, natural scientists studying human prehistory should remember 'it is the social that simply ruins everything by not lending itself to being scientifically captured in a proper way, standing between the social scientist and his or her aim of being truly scientific' (Hage & Kowal 2011: 2).

Conclusion

These reflections allow us to revisit whether the archaeologists in Kiel were wrong about the money in the bag. Ultimately, their shared Eurocentric perceptions were no more or less valid than the Bemba's. Like in many other matrilineal societies, the primary social and economic responsibility of rearing a child lies with the mother and the mother's brother (Schneider & Gough 1963). In the eyes of the Bemba, the act of placing money into a bag would not confer ownership any more than a biological father's contribution would confer paternal ownership of a child.

It is more important than ever to challenge Eurocentric presuppositions and embrace indigenous power to illuminate the social realities of the worlds that archaeologists study. The example from the archaeology conference at Kiel, where the seeds of Franz Boas' four-field approach were planted during his doctoral studies, leaves no doubt as to why kinship still needs anthropologists in the 21st century. ●

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