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ANTHROPOLOGY

## The Study of Kinship Terminology Out of Context: Some Values and Limitations of a "Field" Technique<sup>1</sup>

Ever since Lewis Henry Morgan's pioneer work in the late nineteenth century, there have been anthropologists who believed that the study of kinship terms provided an important clue to various social and cultural mysteries; and there have been other anthropologists, equally reputable and vocal, who questioned the value of various generalizations drawn from kinship terms. Anthropologists today are by no means unanimous in the importance which they attach to the study of terminology, but there is by now some measure of agreement on the kinds of insights which a knowledge of kinship terms may provide. Certainly a system of terminology cannot be viewed as an exact blueprint of an individual's behavior and attitudes towards his kin group. But the fact that a man groups certain kinds of relatives together under the same name does in many cases reflect actual social groupings and psychological attitudes which are prevalent in his culture.

The compilation of kinship terms, then, may serve as a useful field technique. Traditionally this work has most often been carried out by anthropologists in the field, who could check their hypotheses against first-hand observations of a culture in action. But the value of collecting and studying kinship terms out of their social context is a good deal more open to question. The purpose of this paper is to describe such a study, and to suggest some of the possibilities and limitations of this approach.

The subject chosen is the Ibo tribe of southeastern Nigeria, more specifically, the members of one of the sub-tribes who inhabit Owerri

<sup>1</sup>The writer wishes to extend her thanks to Prof. Conrad C. Reining and to Mrs. Priscilla Reining for many valuable suggestions during the preparation of this paper. Neither, of course, is responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation which it may contain.

province. The material is of two kinds: various monographs on the Ibo by first-hand observers, who outline their social and political organization, and my own recent interviews with two Ibo informants who are currently students in the United States, Mr. Michael Ekechuko and Dr. Albert Nwokeuku. The investigation was begun in a course on ethnological field techniques. At that time, only about an hour was devoted specifically to collecting kinship terminology, but this provided the basis for a skeleton chart of terms for close relatives. More recently, the writer spent about six hours with a second informant, expanding the chart, testing certain hypotheses, and clearing up various ambiguities. The result of these interviews is a collection of terms which extends lineally to nine generations of relatives and collaterally to what we would call second cousins. A few terms for affinal relatives, or "in-laws," were also included. These data do not by any means exhaust all the logical possibilities of Ibo kinship terminology, but they do indicate pretty clearly some of the general patterns underlying the system.

Before these patterns are examined, however, a brief outline of Ibo society is in order (Green, 1947; Meek, 1937). The Ibo are predominately agriculturalists, despite the growing importance of industry in Nigeria, and their system of land tenure reflects their patrilineal social structure. Each town is divided into a flexible number of compounds (the town of Owerri, population about 2,000, has five such divisions) and each compound holds farm lands outside the town for the use of its members. The compound is both a geographical and a social unit. All the male members trace their descent from a mythical founder, and marriage within the compound is strictly forbidden. It is sometimes permissible to marry a townsman from another compound, but in general each town tends to be exogamous. Within each of these compounds are a flexible number of villages, whose members trace their descent for four to six generations back to the village founder. And the villages, in turn, are composed of groups of extended families, or kindred.

The importance of the patrilineage is apparent, then, in the social and political organization of the Ibo town, for the political subdivisions are identical with the social units. But what is less apparent to the casual observer is the almost complete lack of any

centralized political authority. According to Meek (1937), the kindred are the fundamental unit of law and social control, and the village-group comprises the largest unit of the indigenous political system. Each of these groups is headed by an *okpara*, or "oldest son", who is the chief authority and representative of the group. In the compound as a whole the title *okpara* is conferred on the oldest living man, though he may not be an actual first son. His functions, however, consist chiefly of explaining geneologies to couples who want to marry, and settling disputes concerning land boundaries. In addition to these *okpara*, there is a group of town elders who act as mediators in matters concerning the town as a whole, but they do not represent the individual villages or compounds.

The female counterpart of the *okpara* is the *ada*, or "first daughter", who exerts considerable influence over the members of her own sex. Since the land is hallowed, it is considered improper to refuse food to anyone, but the *ada* can withhold food as a punishment if she chooses.

Considerable importance is attached to seniority within the family. And in the larger social units, absolute age entitles a man to some degree of deference and authority. But seniority is by no means the sole qualification for social and political leadership. An informant mentioned one first son who was an idiot; the family bypassed him and conferred the title of *okpara* on the next in line. And even the true first sons must compete for leadership with the rich, titled, or particularly able men of the village group, for these, according to Meek, together form "a kind of senate in this miniature republic" (Meek, 1937:335).

In this brief outline are indicated several major principles, or tendencies, of Ibo social structure: 1. the importance of patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence in the social, political, and to some extent the geographical organization of the town; 2. the importance attached to seniority, both within the family and in the larger social units as well; 3. the "atomistic" nature of the social and political units; and 4. the diffusion of authority even within these units. Assuming that these are the most, or at least among the most, significant principles of Ibo social organization, and the available literature

indicates that they are, it now remains to indicate the extent to which these tendencies are reflected in the Ibo system of kinship terminology.

Perhaps the most striking fact about this system is the large number of alternate terms for kin, ranging from the general to the very specific. First, one may refer to any biological relative by using three terms singly or in combination. These key terms are *na* (father), *nne* (mother), and *nwa* (child). The suffix *m*, meaning "my," serves to make the relationship to the speaker clear.<sup>2</sup> Thus, a man may refer to his brother as *nwa-nnem* (literally, child of my mother), and to his mother's brother's son as *nwa-nwa-nne-nnem* (child of the brother or sister of my mother). The same principles of combination may be used to refer to any relative.

The second kind of term is more specific. If Ego wishes to distinguish the sex of the referent, he adds *nwoke* (meaning man) or *nwanyi* (meaning woman) to the appropriate term. For example, *nwa-nwoke-nwa-nne-nwanyi-nnem* can be translated "son of the sister of my mother", although such explicitness is rare. The speaker may also wish to indicate that a relative is the oldest son (*okpara*) or oldest daughter (*ada*) of his (the relative's) immediate family. Thus, the first son of Ego's first daughter would be *okpara-adam*. By using these highly descriptive or specific terms in combination, it is possible to express a great many distinctions: one can indicate the generation of a relative, his age within his generation (if he is oldest), the fact that he is related genetically rather than by marriage, the fact that he is a lineal or collateral relative, his sex, and the sex of the connecting relatives, all in one term.<sup>3</sup>

When an attempt is made to relate these terms to the principles of Ibo social structure, two points are clear: 1. the principle of seniority within the sib group may be expressed by *okpara* and *ada*, which are kinship as well as social terms. 2. The fragmentary or atomistic nature of the social and political units is paralleled by the extreme specificity of some of the kinship terms. Thus far, how-

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<sup>2</sup>Some of these terms are given in the appended list. Orthography is that used by Mr. Ekechuko, although there are minor regional differences in terms.

<sup>3</sup>A. L. Kroeber (1909) lists eight distinctions which a system of terminology may express, though no one system includes all of them. Of these possibilities, only the sex of the speaker (apart from such terms as "husband" and "wife") and the condition of life of the connecting relative lack expression in Ibo terminology.

ever, there are no clues which would point either to the importance of the patrilineage or to the pattern of diffuse social authority which characterizes the Ibo.

At this point one may note that there is an inherent contradiction between two of the "principles" which have been ascribed to Ibo society. The patrilineal inheritance of rights, privileges, and obligations must, by definition, draw certain relatives together into a network of mutual responsibilities; and it must, at the same time, differentiate these relatives from those who are related in the mother's line. Patrilineage, then, is a unifying and ordering principle. But this is the exact opposite of social atomism. To the extent that the terminology expresses *distinctions* between individuals, it must fail to express their social *unity*. To what extent, then, does Ibo terminology express the unity of the patrilineal kin group, if at all?

This question raises a slight but instructive digression on the subject of field technique. After an hour spent eliciting kinship terms from the first informant, a skeleton chart of the terminology was worked out which seemed remarkably consistent as far as it went. It was clear that the majority of terms were highly specific, and that the key terms were combined in a systematic and logical way. But several peculiarities were apparent. First, the terms of address for grandparents seemed to violate the rules. The father's father is called *nam-uke-uku* (literally, "my great father"), but the other three grandparents, both male and female are called *nnem-uke-uku*, which the informant translated "grandmother". Clearly, this called for some explanation: obviously the term "grandmother" served to merge the three grandparents who were unimportant in the lineage system, and to emphasize the importance of the father's father.

The other anomaly in the system was the fact that a man addresses all his children as *nwam*, and may refer to his daughter as *nwam-nwanyi* (woman-child), but there is no comparable expression for "male-child". This suggests the hypothesis that among siblings and children personal attachment takes precedence over sexually differentiated behavior, while among more distant kin the sex of the referent is relatively more important. Again, this is a reflection of the principle of patrilineal descent.

The chief flaw with these explanations is that the mother's father is *not* called grandmother; and there *is* a perfectly good word for "man-child": *nwam-nwoke*. The interesting "anomalies" of the kinship terminology proved to be the result of faulty communication. As soon as the errors were discovered, the case for patrilineage fell apart. This experience points up one of the chief limitations of approaching a culture through the kinship terminology.

The search is not entirely futile, however. Since the kinship terms range from the general to the very specific, it is the few terms which are used in a general or classificatory way which reveal some glimmerings of the patrilineal system. The term *nwa-nnem*, for example, which means "brother" or "sister", may be used to refer to any member of the extended family, that is, anyone who is born into the father's kin group. It may also be used to refer to the mother's relatives, but here it is not extended so far. It applies only to her immediate brothers and sisters and their children and grandchildren. The use of the term *nwam* (child) is even more suggestive of the patrilineal principle. A man addresses his own children and grandchildren as *nwam*, and he may extend the term to include the children of his brothers and sisters, provided he is an adult and has children of his own about the same age. That is, he must earn the right to assume the parental tone. He may also address other children of the patrilineal group as *nwam*, regardless of their generation, again provided he has children of his own at least as old. But the more tenuous the biological relationship becomes, the more the term resembles the English "son" or "sonny", although there is no female equivalent for these in English. And so a man who is very old, or unusually friendly, may address any child he meets as *nwam*, whether the child is related to him or not. Among the matrilineal kin, however, the term is not used *as a kinship term*; for, as the second informant put it, "they are not related to our family". In other words, an elderly man might call his mother's brother's grandchild *nwam*, but only in the sense of "sonny".

The way in which the terms meaning "child" and "brother" are extended does suggest that the Ibo feel "related" to the father's kin group more than to the mother's. But it is difficult to judge the importance of these terms in the total context of Ibo speech and

behavior. An Ibo may refer to certain relatives as *nwa-nnem*, but it is not clear how likely it is that someone will ask "what *kind* of brother is that?" The classificatory terms are used fairly frequently in addressing relatives, too, but so are personal names and the respectful term *dede*. Here is one of the major difficulties of studying terminology out of context. The main parts of the puzzle are present, but not their significance.

Authority among the Ibo is quite diffused (this is a corollary of the fragmentary social structure). Meek indeed referred to the basic political unit as a "miniature republic". There is, of course, no way of translating these tendencies directly into kinship terms, but in the process of interviewing, there is the strong impression of certain basic attitudes which seem to be relevant to this point. Of the large number of alternate terms for kin, most are used only in referring to relatives, but some are used also in direct address, and one of the major problems was determining which were which. But it proved to be exceedingly difficult to get any consistent answers. The indication is toward what seems to be an important Ibo attitude: the idea that an individual is not bound by any rigid rules of "correct" address. And even within the framework of conventional terms of address, there is a wide latitude for personal and family choice. The second informant and his brothers and sisters, for example, never called their father *nam*, but always the respectful *dede*, although he stressed that *nam* is the more common. And there were various other usages in which individual families often deviate from the norm. The term of respect, *dede*, is used only in addressing older people, but both informants noted repeatedly that "You don't have to use it if you don't want to". The respect must be genuine. It would be stretching a point to say that individual choice in the matter of name-calling is incompatible with a highly structured society. But this constant emphasis on the fact that "You can if you want to" and "You don't have to if you don't want to" certainly suggests an ideal of personal freedom among the Ibo, and a resistance to external compulsion. And these attitudes coincide very closely to what Meek has reported about their social and political behavior.

A second attitude which emerged from the interviews is less directly related to what is known of the Ibo, but it does point up an

interesting contrast between Ibo and American points of view. There are certain terms such as *ada-anyi* (our oldest sister), *okpara-nna-ya* (the first son of his father, used by a father), and *nwa-nnem-nta* (little brother or sister), which express more than the usual intimacy and affection. They are, of course, entirely optional. Both informants indicated that one uses such terms "when you want to coerce someone", or "when you want to bribe him". There are similar terms used by husbands and wives "when you want to get something" from them.

This discussion has indicated certain positive results which may be achieved from the study of kinship terminology. The principles of patrilineal descent and seniority, and the tendency to social atomism are all reflected, to some degree, in the system of terminology. And certain attitudes or patterns of thought have been recognized which seem to be consistent with the diffuseness and flexibility of Ibo society. On the negative side, it is apparent that mistakes are easy to come by. And even if what terms are used can be determined accurately, this does not guarantee that one knows how often they are used, or in what situations, or with what precise meaning. This is the chief limitation of studying terminology out of context.

In general, however, this approach does seem to be fruitful in suggesting relationships between kinship language and kinship behavior—relationships which can only be established with certainty after prolonged first-hand study of a culture in action. Certainly the gathering of kinship terms is no substitute for such a study.

A listing of kinship terminologies follows:

**SELECTED GLOSSARY OF IBO KINSHIP TERMS**

<i>Lineal Relatives:</i>		
<i>Relationship</i>	<i>Terms of Reference</i>	<i>Terms of Address</i>
father .....	nnam .....	nnam
mother .....	nnem .....	nnem
father's father .....	nna-nnem .....	nna-uke-uku
father's mother .....	nne-nnam .....	nne-uke-uku
mother's father .....	nna-nnem .....	nna-uke-uku
mother's mother .....	nne-nnem .....	nne-uke-uku
oldest son .....	okparam .....	okpara-nna-ya
	nwam	nwam
	nwam-nwoke	
younger son .....	nwam .....	nwam
	nwam-nwoke	
oldest daughter .....	adam .....	adam-nna-ya
	nwam	nwam
	nwam-nwanyi	

younger daughter .....	nwam .....	nwam
	nwam-nwanyi	
oldest son of oldest son .....	okpara-okparam .....	nwam
	okpara-nwam	
	nwa-okparam	
	nwam	
	nwa-nwam	
	nwa-nwam-nwoke	
younger son of oldest son.....	nwa-okparam .....	nwam
	nwam	
	nwa-nwam	
	nwa-nwam-nwoke	
oldest daughter of oldest son .....	ada-okparam .....	adam
	ada-nwam-nwoke	nwam
	nwam	
	nwa-nwam	
	nwa-nwam-nwoke	
	nwa-nwanyi-nwam	
	nwa-nwanyi-okparam	
younger daughter of oldest son.....	nwam .....	nwam
	nwa-nwam	
	nwa-nwam-nwoke	
	nwa-nwanyi-nwam	
	nwa-nwanyi-okparam	
other grandchildren .....	(same pattern as above) .....	nwam

*Siblings and Collateral Relatives:*

oldest brother .....	okpara-nnam .....	(NAME or dede)
	nwa-nnem	
	nwa-nnem-nwoke	
younger brother .....	nwa-nnem .....	nwa-nnem
	nwa-nnem-nwoke	nwa-nnem-nta
	nwa-nnem-nta	
	nwa-nnem-ulu (if youngest child)	
oldest sister .....	ada-nnam .....	(NAME or dede)
	nwa-nnem	
	nwa-nnem-nwanyi	
younger sister .....	nwa-nnem .....	nwa-nnem
	nwa-nnem-nwanyi	nwa-nnem-nta
	nwa-nnem-nta	
	nwa-nnem-ulu (if youngest child)	
father's brother* .....	nwa-nne-nnam .....	(NAME or dede)
	nwa-nne-nwoke-nnam	
father's sister .....	nwa-nne-nnam .....	(NAME or dede)
	nwa-nne-nwanyi-nnam	
mother's brother .....	nwa-nne-nnem .....	(NAME or dede)
	nwa-nne-nwoke-nnem	
mother's sister .....	nwa-nne-nnem .....	(NAME or dede)
	nwa-nne-nwanyi-nnem	
father's brother's oldest son**.....	okpara-nwa-nne-nnam .....	(NAME or dede)
	okpara-nwa-nne-nwoke-nnam	

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father's sister's oldest son**	.....okpara-nwa-nne-nnam	.....(NAME or dede)
	okpara-nwa-nne-nwanyi-nnam	
mother's brother's oldest son	....nwa-nwa-nne-nnem	.....(NAME or dede)
	nwa-nwoke-nwa-nne-nnem	
mother's brother's oldest daughter	.....nwa-nwa-nne-nnem	.....(NAME or dede)
	nwa-nwanyi-nwa-nne-nnem	
brother's oldest son**	.....okpara-nwa-nnem	.....okparam (if speaker is much older)
	okpara-nwa-nnem-nwoke	
	nwa-nwa-nnem	
	nwa-nwa-nnem-nwoke	
brother's oldest daughter**	.....ada-nwa-nnem	.....adam (if speaker is much older)
	ada-nwa-nnem-nwoke	
	nwa-nwa-nnem	
	nwa-nwanyi-nwa-nnem	

\*Each of the following relatives may be referred to and addressed as *nwa-nnem*, if he or she is younger than the speaker.

\*\*He or she may be referred to and addressed as *nwam* if the speaker has children of his own who are the same age or older.

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