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Changing Webs of Kinship: Spotlights on West Africa

Erdmute Alber, Tabea Häberlein and Jeannett Martin

Abstract: Changes in kinship relations are part of the broad social change in all African societies. This article highlights trends and characteristics of changing kinship relations in West Africa. Its analysis focuses on the twentieth century, which was shaped by the colonial conquest and profound societal transformations like the political independence of the African colonies. In analysing three important kinship relations – parent–child relations, marriage, and care for the elderly – this article depicts the trends and conditions of historical change of these relationships. It also shows whether and how these changes are accompanied by conflict, and how people refer to the different ways of dealing with those conflicts. The article is based on empirical data from three thematically intertwined research projects.

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The importance of kinship, belonging and mutual support pervades everyday life in Africa. Everywhere, whether among farmers or herders, in urban spaces or in transnational family constellations, kinship relations determine people's lives and survival. They are vital to the production and distribution of resources; caring for children, the old and the sick; and securing biological and social reproduction. The kin group is also a source of emotional and spiritual belonging. Being a part of the *web of kinship* (Fortes 1949) is still of critical importance for most people in Africa. In view of the poor development of social security systems outside the family, hardly anyone would wish to escape the power of kinship ties. This is evident not only in ceremonies or during crises, but also in countless everyday situations.

However, the concrete organization and expression of kinship relations in Africa can take on various forms. There are different socio-spatial units, such as houses or compounds, different forms of marriage, different child-rearing practices, and different ways of providing social security for elderly people. The nature of interpersonal relationships and the flow of resources within kin groups also vary, and they belie oversimplified images of the family in Africa, such as the (still widespread) image of the "African extended family". Such variety is not least a result of the fact that African societies, including their kinship and family practices, are subject to continuous processes of change.

Such transformation processes are the focus of this article. We enquire into changes in kinship relations in different local contexts in West Africa during the twentieth century, when political independence was an event of overwhelming importance throughout the continent. In our study, however, our primary concern is not the effects of political independence on kinship relations; rather, we seek to analyse local kinship processes and the way they have been affected by political, legal and economic changes on the regional, national and global levels.

Social processes of change frequently contain social conflict potential, thus also intra-family conflict potential, especially when core family tasks are affected, such as caring for children, arranging marriages, or providing for the elderly. In our case studies, we therefore also ask whether, and in what way, social changes have led to kinship conflicts in the past few decades. In theoretical terms, we seek to show the role played by conflicts in the transformation of kin relations, and that played by conflict avoidance, which according to Georg Elwert (2004) is one of several possible strategies for coping with conflicts. Family conflicts occur as a rule on the level of concrete practice, but they can also be an occasion for renegotiating normative kinship expectations. In addition, we ask what kinds of kin relations are less

affected by change than others, or if there are relations that are not affected at all.

In our analysis of central issues in kinship relations and observable tendencies regarding change, we also reflect on whether it is possible to generalize on the dynamics of changing kin relations. However, we do not attempt to offer any general explanation of change in kin relations in West Africa in terms of simple factors, or to interpret it in the framework of uniform tendencies (such as “modernization” or “homogenization”). This does not seem appropriate in view of the many different kinds of kin relations, with very different local dynamics.¹

The *web of kinship*, of which Meyer Fortes spoke so vividly, consists of a great number of possible relationships. In this article, we examine change in three types of relationships: parent–child relations, marriage, and inter-generational relations in regards to providing for the aged. One example of each type is discussed on the basis of an empirical case study.

We look at changes in parenthood in the Borgu region of northern Benin, where the Baatombu and the Mokolle live as peasant farmers. We reconstruct processes of change in the institution of child fosterage here that have taken place since colonization began at the start of the twentieth century. We then look at changes in marriage relations in the Lokpa region in the northwest of Benin, tracing transformations that mainly began after independence. Finally, we ask in what ways the provision of care for the aged changed with colonization, basing our discussion on the example of the Kabiye region in the northeast of Togo. All three cases are taken from projects carried out within the framework of research in Bayreuth on family change in Africa.²

All of our case studies relate to rural areas in the hinterland of big towns, and are thus located at the periphery of national developments. We

1 For this reason, we also do not offer a comparative discussion of other case studies. As indicators of change, we refer only to those factors which are significant in our concrete case studies. We also do not discuss factors that may have led to substantial changes in kinship relations in other regions which do not play an important role in our research areas, such as the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS.

2 Research in Bayreuth on family change began with the research project “Family Change in West Africa” within the collaborative research centre 560, “Local Action in the Context of Global Changes”. The basic assumptions and theoretical considerations of this research centre provided a fruitful starting point for our case studies. They were continued as dissertation projects and research projects funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). We would like to express our thanks to the DFG and the University of Bayreuth for their financial support over a period of several years. Special thanks to Ruth Schubert for the translation of this text from an earlier German version.

will show that global and national changes affect even these areas and that the effects are actively received by the local actors.

We start from the basic assumption that kinship should not be reduced to a “kinship system” in the sense of a structural principle that endures for generations. Rather, the importance of the structural principles of kinship, which for decades were the central object of kinship anthropology, can be witnessed in “daily lived practice” and “changeable practice” (see Carsten 2004; Schnegg et al. 2010). The key question is: Which normatively anchored forms of belonging are manifested in concrete exchange processes (see for instance Strathern and Edwards 2000)?

Belonging to a kin group is manifested, among other things, in caring for and accepting responsibility for each other, in material-resource flows, and in giving affection. To the extent that more recent kinship research is no longer only concerned with timeless, supposedly static, structures, but also with daily lived practice and the many different forms of domestic organization and (re-)production, we believe that the terminological distinction between kin group and family is obsolete. Thus, in this article we talk about changes in kinship relations which become manifest in the modification of concrete conceptions, relations and role expectations – for instance between spouses, or between parents and children – without implying any categorical difference between family and kin group.

Parenthood

In many West African societies, the fact that children do not always grow up with their biological parents, but often with relations such as classificatory grandparents, aunts or uncles, is a firmly anchored feature of family practice (see Bledsoe and Isingo-Abanike 1989; Goody 1982; Lallemand 1994; Meier 1993; Page 1989).³ This is the case among the Baatombu and Mokolle, two peasant farmer groups in northern Benin. This practice, known as *kinship fosterage*, is based on local conceptions and norms with respect to a “proper” childhood and “proper” relations between children and parents. A core element of these conceptions is the belief that if children grow up with people who are not their biological parents, this does not harm their development. But the chief idea is that the giving of children by the biological parents to the social parents is seen as an important form of exchange between

3 For details of the theoretical debates and different explanatory models on the subject of child fosterage, which started with Esther Goody’s pioneering work (1982), see Alber (2007).

members of the kin group, and as a vital expression of group belonging (Alber 2003, 2004a, 2010; Martin 2007b).

Today, many Baatombu and Mokolle children are still brought up by non-biological parents, but proportionately fewer children than in precolonial times. The effects of social processes of change in the colonial period as well as those stemming from the political independence of the Republic of Benin have caused the number of fostered children and the forms of and reasons for child fostering to be considerably modified.

In precolonial times, according to the narratives of elderly Baatombu, almost all Baatombu children were brought up by social parents, preferably distant relatives (Alber 2003). The same is reported by elderly Mokolle, who are close to the Baatombu – if not linguistically, at least in many aspects of their social structure.⁴ Due to the paucity of sources, it is not possible to say exactly what forms this practice took in precolonial times, how it emerged in the first place, and what modifications it underwent.⁵

Up to the arrival of the colonial conquerors from Europe, Baatombu and Mokolle farmers lived under the political influence of a group of mounted warlords who were split by internal rivalries (see Kuba 1996; Alber 2000). Precolonial Borgu was a politically unstable zone in which the life of the farmers was threatened by frequent attacks and raids, and by many feuds between hostile warlords. The raids and feuds were directed not only against foreign groups, but also against the local population. In this situation of latent danger, the voluntary giving of children to other members of the kin group was a means of strengthening social relationships within the group in times of insecurity (Alber 2010). Elderly Baatombu and Mokolle farmers repeatedly emphasized the importance for solidarity within the kin group of relations founded on the giving away of children. In addition, there was a consensus concerning the fact that children learn to work better when they are brought up by foster parents, and that children owe it to those who feed them to work for them. In the precolonial peasant societies, all rights of use in respect to agricultural land, the organization of agricultural production,

4 The Mokolle or Fee, who speak a Yoruboid language, probably migrated to this area in the 15th century from what is today Nigeria. Despite their different language, they consider themselves culturally close to the Gur-speaking Baatombu, who migrated earlier to the Borgu region. Interethnic marriages between Mokolle and Baatombu are accepted and occur frequently along the periphery of the area inhabited by the Mokolle.

5 All written sources relating to this phenomenon date from after the arrival of the colonial conquerors in Borgu at the end of the 19th century. In addition, we can refer to oral traditions and the biographical narratives of elderly people; we will not discuss here the methodological and epistemological problems arising from the use of such data.

and the right of disposal of the products of agricultural labour were in the hands of the men. Women had no land of their own, hardly ever cultivated fields, and seldom possessed their own resources from agricultural production. In accordance with the ideas of that time about the gender-specific division of labour, the work of most women was concentrated on tasks in and around the compound, where they were aided by daughters, foster daughters and other female relatives.

Since land was not inherited and was freely disposable in these pre-colonial peasant societies, it was immaterial for the prospects and the subsequent economic success of the individual child whether he or she grew up in the compound of his/her biological parents or in the compound of non-biological parents.

The establishment of French colonial rule at the beginning of the twentieth century brought far-reaching political, administrative and economic changes to the Borgu region. The power of the local warlords was broken through forced pacification of the region by the French. The new rulers divided Borgu into administrative units (*cercles*) and founded colonial schools in the administrative centres. The French introduced money as the new currency and established commercialized cotton production, which for the first time gave the farmers an opportunity to accumulate private wealth. One result of this was a long-term increase in the cost of getting married (Bierschenk 1987).

Along with the new institutions (including mission schools), new images and norms in terms of family, marriage, parenthood and childhood were also introduced into the region (see Martin 2007a). Through those children who attended school, new job prospects were opened up for the first time, even if only for a few individuals. The few who were educated at a colonial or mission school and later employed in the colonial administration or in church institutions were no longer expected to give their children to relatives living in the village, but this did not prevent many of them from taking in many of their relatives' children. Despite these early normative changes in the urban milieu due to the influence of school education, most Baatombu and Mokolle children in the colonial period still lived with relatives in village households, where they were socialized as peasant farmers and brought up in accordance with the local conceptions and norms of childhood and belonging (Alber 2010).

The process of change continued after Dahomey gained its political independence. In the 1960s the technology of the ox-drawn plough was introduced in many Mokolle and Baatombu households, and the boys living in the household were entrusted with the task of caring for the oxen. In 1972, the Marxist regime led by Mathieu Kérékou came into power, bringing with

it a growing state apparatus that reached even the most remote villages of the Borgu region. Government agricultural advisers subsequently introduced further innovations in the peasant economy. It was at this time that the women of the Mokolle and Baatombu began to have their own fields – at first in groups and then individually – and to cultivate them independently. Since, in addition to their work in the compound, women now also cultivated their own fields and controlled the crops they produced, their need for additional labour increased.

Overall, these changes in peasant production led to changes in the demand for labour, in the way work was organized in individual households, and in the norms regarding the gender-specific division of work. These changes also affected the practice of child fosterage. This was increasingly discussed in terms of the additional labour power gained by taking in children. Women in particular, as a result of their increased workload, showed a continuous and even increasing interest in fostering girls who would be able to help them.

After the introduction of a structural adjustment programme financed by the World Bank in 1981, the cultivation of cotton was expanded and production increased. This development, which gave the farmers (including the women) greater opportunities to accumulate capital, meant more work for the female household members. The girls living in the compounds, including fostered girls, were especially affected. Increases in the workload and changes in the peasant mode of production had already been a cause of intra-family conflicts in the 1970s, when the economic success of a household came to depend more and more on the labour power of children, and agreeing on who had the authority to make decisions concerning the children was critical. Intra-family accusations concerning the treatment of children were also increasingly expressed publicly, even though it was an important rule for biological parents in earlier times to never speak in front of others about how their children were being brought up by the foster parents. The accusations included, for instance, claims that foster parents exploited the labour power of the foster children while sending their own children to school. It slowly became possible to articulate such accusations – so much so that conflicts over children were carried out more and more openly.

Parallel to these changes, the state school system, especially the secondary school system, was expanded under the Marxist-Leninist regime, which also led to gradual changes in the established norms. However, the number of pupils was still comparatively low, even in this period.⁶ Developments on

6 On the development of the school system in Benin, see Guinigo et al. 2001.

the constitutional level also had an influence on the practice of child fosterage among the Baatombu and Mokolle. After the political changes at the beginning of the 1990s, the Benin government enacted a new family law in 2002, in which Western conceptions and categories of family and global human rights, especially the rights of women and children, were emphasized. The law favours the biological parents, and provides for the adoption of children only in exceptional situations, analogous to family laws in European countries (République du Bénin 2002: 51ff.). This view is supported by many human rights and children's rights organizations, and by education campaigns against child trafficking, which refer to the dangers of allowing children to live with people who are not their biological parents (Alber 2011). In addition, the influence of global media that transport new images of family, upbringing, marriage, etc., has increased, and the new images have been referred to as *travelling models* (Rottenburg 2002).⁷ Of importance here are the introduction and spread of local radio stations and private television companies, and the mass popularity of new image media such as videos and DVDs.

Massive expansion of the primary school system since the beginning of the 1990s, financed and influenced mainly by Western donor organizations, is the greatest single factor affecting conceptions and practices of childhood, upbringing and parenthood among the rural and urban Baatombu and Mokolle today (see Bierschenk 2007, Fichtner 2009). Due to this policy, primary education is now a reality for the majority of Baatombu and Mokolle children, no longer the privilege of only a few, like it was in the colonial period. The spread of primary and higher forms of education has led to more differentiated chances in life, so adults are forced to struggle with new decisions and to enter into new negotiations: Which children should be sent to the "French" school, and who should pay for their schooling? How can the loss of their labour be compensated for? These are questions seriously negotiated in many families today.

As a result of these developments, child fosterage rates in rural areas have sharply decreased, according to our observations in three Baatombu and three Mokolle villages. While 52 per cent of the Baatombu we interviewed who are over 50 years old and 60 per cent of the Mokolle of the same age group were not brought up by their biological parents, in the generation of their children this applies to only 30 per cent among the Baatombu, and 23 per cent among the Mokolle (Alber 2005; Martin 2007b).

A special feature of these changes is that the decrease in traditional forms of fosterage is gender-specific: It applies more to boys than to girls.

7 On *travelling models* of parenthood images, see Thelen and Haukanes 2010.

This is because the education of boys is often considered more important than that of girls. Many parents therefore try to keep their biological sons at home in order to be able to directly influence their education.

There has also been a massive increase in fosterage for purposes of attending school, especially in the urban centres of Borgu. While there is still a demand by women for foster daughters in the traditional way, boys are being sent to school in greater numbers than ever before, and usually for a longer time than girls. In order to enable them to attend secondary schools, they are sent to live with relatives, usually in the town or in large villages – a model which was shown to be viable by the first boys who went to school in the colonial period. Today this model is extremely widespread (Alber 2011).⁸ This development in urban Mokolle and Baatombu households has led to a diversification of the forms of fosterage – in other words, a combination of “traditional” and neo-traditional arrangements. The main distinction is that whereas in traditional arrangements all rights and obligations regarding the children are transferred to the foster parents, this is no longer the case when a child is fostered for the purpose of attending school (see Alber 2005; Martin 2007b).

One characteristic of the process of change in foster relations is the high number of intra-family conflicts over children, which, according to our observations, have become more frequent.⁹ Today more than ever before, there are arguments about whom children belong to, who has which obligations towards them, and who possesses which rights, especially regarding their labour power. The conflicts in the villages, and in the interaction between urban and village actors, are serious matters for those involved because the issue is not only who will provide for the children and their future,

8 According to standardized interviews carried out in 1999 by Erdmute Alber in four school classes in Cotonou, around 30% of the pupils live with foster parents and not with their biological parents. According to another survey, which confirms this figure for Cotonou (31%), 39% of the children of school age in Parakou were not the biological children of the head of the household in which they were living (Pilon and Vignikin 1996: 484).

9 The childhood memories of older people who grew up as foster children permit the conclusion that the practice of fostering was not conflict-free in earlier generations either (even if some of the older people we interviewed claim that it was). Our impression is that the issues that give rise to disagreements and arguments have also changed, and that conflicts have possibly become more frequent. Today, education and healthcare cost a lot of money, and this makes taking on responsibility for a child an expensive business. Thus, the question of to whom a child belongs is linked to negotiations about who has to pay for the child. It seems that in earlier times, arguments tended to be about deciding who a child should live with, when several parties were interested in fostering the same child.

but potentially also who will provide for the (social or biological) parents when they are old. Unlike in the old days, today people argue about who must bear the costs of treatment for a sick child; who has the power to decide about sending a child to school, and who must pay which of the ensuing costs; who has the right to benefit from the labour power of a girl or boy, and what price must be paid for it; and who is responsible for paying the dowry or buying the trousseau. In settling these questions, different normative frames of reference are used, including ideas about compulsory education spread by development and human rights institutions, in addition to “old” and “new” concepts of relatedness and belonging between children and parents. In many cases, this use of different norms leads to conflict-intensive negotiation processes, and the fostering of children often results in strained family relations. For this reason, many parents today avoid fostering children with their relatives.

That these processes of change may also be less conflict-ridden is shown in the following section, which deals with changes in the marriage process in a Lokpa village in the Atakora region of Benin.

Marriage

In Tchitchakou, a village in northern Benin near the border with Togo, in the area inhabited by the Lokpa, the rituals associated with marriage have changed since the independence of the French colony of Dahomey/Benin: The initiation rites for young women were replaced relatively abruptly at the beginning of the 1960s by Islamic marriage rituals.

In the 1950s, young men in the Lokpa region still performed bride service, meaning they worked in the fields of their future in-laws before marrying. Until this time, such marriage agreements were made between friendly or related families, by joining boys aged about 15 to infant girls through the system of bride service. The boy was obliged to help his future father-in-law in the fields, and to send food at regular intervals to his future mother-in-law, which was to be prepared for “his” girl. The suitor paid regular visits to the family of his betrothed over several years, so that the girl could gradually become used to him. In precolonial times, the majority of marriages were concluded in this way among the Lokpa. On the occasion of the ritual transition to adult life, when both marriage partners were initiated into the class of marriageable young men and women, further gifts of millet beer and food were brought to the family of the bride and to the bride’s maternal uncle. After this, the young woman went to live in the compound of her husband. As part of her preparations for this new life, the young woman also learned to weave. After moving to the bridegroom’s compound, she practised this

craft for the benefit of her mother-in-law. After the 1950s, the “traditional” courtship process described here changed. It was no longer carried out for all wives, but only for the first one.

In the colonial period, many young men left Tchitchakou with their wives in order to seek fertile land in Togo or the Gold Coast. At the same time, this was a way of avoiding the taxes imposed by the French colonial government. The colonial migration lines and resulting close social links with certain regions in Togo and Ghana still mark the village of Tchitchakou today. The migrants who returned upon the country’s independence in 1960 had a strong influence on life in the village: In addition to new goods, they brought Islam to the village and with it the Muslim marriage.

The imams propagated that only persons who had had a Muslim marriage could be honoured with an Islamic burial after their death. Beginning in the 1960s, as a result of this new norm, most men upon their conversion to Islam went with their wives to the imam to be married again. Well into the 1970s, such “belated” weddings took place at a relatively low cost, for in these cases bride wealth was not required. For new marriages, the expected value of bride wealth in this period was around 20,000 FCFA.

In the 1970s, industrially manufactured fabrics from Europe with African designs began to take over the markets of West Africa. This led to a decrease in demand for traditional woven fabrics, and the young women in Tchitchakou stopped producing them for their mothers-in-law. As a result, the husband’s family could no longer claim the money earned by the new daughter-in-law through her weaving. At the same time, the obligation of the husband’s family to provide for her also ceased. This was now primarily the responsibility of the husband. Thus, the relationship between the spouses assumed a more central position in their lives, and the importance of other relationships created by the marriage (between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, brothers-in-law, etc.) became weaker.

Besides the migration of young couples, Islamization, and the cessation of weaving by wives for the benefit of their husband’s families, there were other changes in the family life of the inhabitants of Tchitchakou: Couples were betrothed as children less and less frequently, and instead the young men and women became increasingly free to choose their partners themselves. In addition, women from Tchitchakou began to spend time in the capital of the Republic of Niger, Niamey, in order to earn money to support themselves and/or their children, who were left with the husband’s family. For these women, the matrimonial economy became independent from both that of their family of origin and that of their husband’s family. This development reflects the same trend we outlined above, namely one that goes toward strengthening the relationship between the spouses, while the

other relationships between the two families created by the marriage become less important, and the families have less influence on the marriage.

With the cotton boom in the 1980s, the cost of the marriage process increased further. The acknowledged bride price rose (today it is around 60,000 FCFA), and the value of the expected gifts multiplied. Providing a lavish reception for a large number of people became standard practice. In addition, it came to be expected that the bride should be provided with a trousseau in the form of household equipment for the matrimonial home. In the 1990s, as a reaction to this development and out of concern about the progressive increase in the transaction costs of marriage, a decree was issued in the Lokpa region which prohibited public display of the trousseau. This was intended to protect young women and their families from being driven into poverty by the social pressure of having to display a large and thus very expensive trousseau.

Since 2000, cotton cultivation in West Africa has been in a crisis, and more and more young families have migrated to Ghana. In addition, it is common for young women to leave the Lokpa region in order to earn money for their trousseau, which they have to pay for themselves; today they mostly work as maids in the southern cities of Benin (see Alber 2004c and 2010). Young men have also been leaving the village before marriage in increasing numbers in order to work for one or two years in fertile areas of Benin or Nigeria. They return with motorbikes, generators, money for furniture or fertilizer, and, not least, money for their Islamic marriage. The bride service traditionally performed by young men for the family of their future wives survives in Tchitchakou today only in a symbolic form: The bridegroom and his brothers carry out a concerted action in the fields belonging to the parents of the bride. Here, too, the building up and maintenance over many years of bonds of solidarity between the two families has given way to individualization of the young couples.

A marriage pattern that has remained constant in Tchitchakou, as in many other parts of West Africa, is polygyny. Contrary to all modernization theories, contrary to the national law on marriage and family,¹⁰ and against the religious backdrop of Islam, which permits men to marry up to four wives, both men and women confirm the importance and continuity of polygynous marriages up to the present day.

The change described here can be summed up as being triggered by two factors. The first is Islamization of the region, which has led to girls, in particular, choosing to marry at an older age. It was marriage according to Islamic rites that led to the introduction of a new norm requiring girls to

10 See Rép. du Bénin: 27, Art. 143 on the recognition of only monogamous marriages.

have a material trousseau in the form of various household items. The girls found themselves obliged to earn the money for this themselves before they could get married. As a result, they are older when they marry, which today is usually after they return from working in the town, at around age 20. The second factor is connected with the monetarization of the region and the commercialization of cotton cultivation. The cultivation and sale of cotton opened up new sources of income for the farmers of Tchitchakou. This led to the substitution of bride service by bride payments, and the possibility for young men to court their wives themselves, thus reducing the influence of their parents and their family of origin (see also Bierschenk 1987). Today marriages are not agreements between families joined by bonds of solidarity, but principally agreements between individuals.

Interestingly, the new forms of labour migration, which are today part of the standard biography of young people among the Lokpa, have not led to inter-generational conflicts. Young Lokpa women earn money for their own trousseau in the towns, while young men work as migrant labourers in order to earn enough for a big reception. The parents are not happy about the migration of their daughters, but they accept it as necessary and tolerate it because it is the modern way. In our interpretation, the acceptance of this new kind of youth migration is a result of historical experience in this region, which has long been characterized by mobility and migrant labour. During the colonial period, the migration of whole Lokpa families to Ghana, and of Lokpa women to Niamey, was an option for ensuring the survival of the family.

The process of Islamization, which began in the 1960s, was also not a source of conflict between the generations, despite the fact that it led to significant modifications in the marriage process and intra-family relations. The change triggered by Islamization took place peacefully because it was possible to integrate the new processes of courtship and organization of the Islamic wedding ceremony into existing cultural patterns – in particular, the initiation ceremonies and the many years of courtship. Women's initiation was reinterpreted and embedded in what was at that time still the “new” Muslim marriage process. Because this change of norms affected the whole of society equally, Islamization did not give rise to conflict between Islamized children and their parents. In addition, it was possible to fall back on the existing norms of inter-generational gift-giving institutions (see Moebius 2008), so that conflicts could largely be avoided despite far-reaching changes in the marriage process. Parents in Tchitchakou still help their sons marry by paying the bride price, just as they supported them in the old days to court infant girls. The flow of resources between the generations has changed, but in substance still exists. In addition, the change was felt to be from within:

Islam came to Tchitchakou not from global religious institutions or as a result of (colonial) state structures, but through migrants who returned from Ghana after 1960 and managed to establish Islam in their village, since their economic success made them a role model for others. Against the backdrop of these processes of change, it is clear that relations between the generations in Tchitchakou are stable, despite fundamental changes in the marriage process (see Alber and Häberlein 2010).

Caring for aged relatives is a topic that more frequently causes friction between the generations, especially in view of today's migration processes. This is demonstrated by the following case study from Togo.

Care for the Elderly

In Asséré, a village in the area inhabited by the Kabiye in northern Togo (Région de la Kara), there is no standard solution to the problem of providing for the elderly. In this village, some old people live in multi-generation compounds, but there are also many who live alone in semi-derelict compounds. On the normative level, the inter-generational contract still holds today among the Kabiye: Children are supposed to care for their parents when they become old. In practice, however, the fact that young people tend to move away from their home village leads to serious problems in terms of providing for the old people who are left behind.

Several changes brought about by forces outside Togo have contributed to these problems. In the nineteenth century, the region was dominated by slave raids that tore many families apart. Residual compounds with old or sick people who were left behind by the slave hunters were the first models of a pattern in which old people lived alone and were cared for by neighbours and distant relatives in the village. The forced resettlement programmes carried out by the colonial government at the end of the 1920s, and again in the 1950s, also had a far-reaching impact on the living conditions of old people among the Kabiye. The French colonial government ordered that the sparsely populated but fertile region in the centre of Togo should be forcibly settled by Kabiye, among others. This region was largely uninhabited until then because in precolonial times it was a buffer zone between slave-raiding catchment areas. The aim of the colonial resettlement policies was to open up these fertile regions for agriculture and to have labourers available for building a railway line and a supply road from Lomé, the capital, to the north. One consequence of this resettlement policy and the resulting emergence of a diaspora was that the villages in the north, which previously had a comparatively dense population of 150 inhabitants per square kilometre (Nyassogbo 2005: 507), were demographically relieved.

In addition, there was a change in the ratio of men to women: In the age group 25 to 39, there were now only 72 men to 100 women (Nyassogbo 2005: 515). The departure of the young men also caused an increase in the average age of the population in the original villages: In these northern villages there are now many more elderly people living alone in otherwise empty compounds than there are in the south (see Nyassogbo 2005: 515 and Piot 1999: 156-171).

The peculiar situation of many old people living alone is also attributable to the fact that the compound structure of the Kabiye is different from that of other ethnic groups. The sons of Asséré are required by their fathers to build a compound of their own close to that of their father when they found their own family. The fathers hope to be able to transfer their compound to a younger son, so that they will not have to live alone and will be provided for when they are old and no longer capable of carrying out strenuous physical work. This wish is not always fulfilled in Asséré due to the departure of many of the young men. Another reason for the fact that many old people in Asséré live alone is that the practice of fostering children is far less widespread there than, for instance, in the Borgu region of Benin. Among the Kabiye, older persons do not have the normative right to claim a grandchild to assist them.

Nevertheless, the established mechanisms for taking care of the old continued to exist in Asséré after the colonial resettlements in the 1920s: It is still an accepted part of the inter-generational contract that sons give a part of what they earn to their parents. Helping old people is part of the exchange of persons, gifts and information between villagers of the north and family members living in the southern diaspora. Young men and women from the village do seasonal work in the fields of Kabiye living in the south, and come back home with money and food. The sons in the south bring their parents food on their regular visits to their home village. These home visits usually take place once a year, on the occasion of burial or initiation ceremonies in the original settlement area of the Kabiye. During these visits, inter-generational gift-giving flourishes and family bonds are reinforced. Not only provision for the old, but also the many rituals, such as burial ceremonies and initiation rituals regarding age classes, are financed by the Kabiye living in the southern diaspora and are kept alive by the continuing importance attached to them and their cyclical repetition (especially by the southern Kabiye) (Piot 1999: 166f).

The established practices of providing for the old also have a gender-specific component. Old people count mainly on their sons to supply them with food, which happens sporadically in the form of sending money or sacks of maize. But with regard to the preparation of food and meeting daily

needs such as fetching water or washing clothes, old people depend mainly on women to help them. These would normally be the daughters-in-law living in the compound, but in the case of old people who live alone, these tasks are performed in a best-case scenario by married daughters or nieces who live close by.

After the independence of Togo in 1960, there was a phase of economic prosperity and consolidation of the power of President Gnassingbé Eyadéma; in the 1970s and 1980s his dictatorship was supported by the West, as part of the bloc politics of the Cold War. In the 1970s, President Eyadéma pushed through the green revolution with the support of many Western development projects; southern Togo became the bread basket, or rather the “maize basket”, of the Kabiye. The cotton boom of the 1980s led to an increase in the amount of available cash. Into the 1990s, many old people in the village “back home” profited from the food produced in the south and the money gained from cotton cultivation.

These decades of relative economic stability in Togo were followed by an economic crisis, triggered by the worldwide wave of democratization that started in 1990. Dictator Eyadéma categorically refused any political change, and donor countries (EU countries and the US) consequently imposed political and economic sanctions. The government was no longer able to help farmers by providing subsidized seed and fertilizer. This situation has created new problems for the old people in the north because the young men are no longer able to send material support in order to compensate for the lack of their labour power.

However, the north–south migration pattern has been a fixed part of Kabiye biographies for almost a century, and the existence of old people living alone in the north is so widespread that today in Asséré it is considered normal to leave old people behind alone, even if this puts them in a precarious situation. This practice is locally unpopular, but nevertheless common.

Old people have no control over the presence of their children. Being old in Asséré means having prestige, status and control over the family resources in the “third age” of life. But as soon as their physical powers start to wane and they pass into the “fourth age”, and especially when the sons have moved away and are no longer there to keep up their father’s compound, old people have problems providing for themselves, and their social status drops. However, this process is not necessarily irreversible: If the sons return home with their wives, the old parents, as long as they are still mentally and physically able, can return to the “third age” in social terms since, through their sons, they once again have control over the resources produced by their own farm. Once again, this shows how much old people, and

their social age, are dependent on the availability of their children. Thus, it cannot be denied that there is an underlying inter-generational conflict caused by the departure of sons to live in the southern diaspora, but it is a conflict that has been going on for decades and, astonishingly, it only rarely leads to open disputes.¹¹ This is all the more surprising when one sees how much the amount of aid sent by the sons to their old parents, in the form of food and money, has shrunk since the turn of the millennium due to the cotton crisis. The Kabiye, like farmers in other regions of West Africa, have lost parts of their relatively secure cash-crop income. In Asséré, this affects how much can be spent on the organization of rituals, and on caring for the old people. For many Kabiye in the south, travelling to the north has become too expensive, so people cannot visit their home villages as often as they used to. Today, in order to have enough cash for their own needs (for instance, to pay for the education of their children), they sell their surplus crops instead of sending them to their old parents at home.

Despite these *quantitative* changes in the course of the historical period examined here (from the forced resettlements in the colonial period and the time of the economic upswing in the 1970s and 1980s to the decline in Asséré during the 1990s), there has been no visible *qualitative* change in the shared idea that the younger generation is obliged to care for the older generation.¹² The old people in the villages still live in accordance with the same pattern, and are still dependent on the economic situation, physical presence and goodwill of their children. The only thing that has changed is the quantity of support they receive.¹³ There is still no government pension for farmers, and there is no sign of any alternative method of providing for old people, either in imagination or in practice, which would change the relationship between the generations.

Despite the social upheavals since the colonial period, which had enormous effects on intra-family structures and on the care of old people in the Kabiye villages, the latent conflicts between the generations are hidden,

11 See Nyassogbo 2005: 513; for Benin, see Alber 2005.

12 This normative pattern can be observed not only in Asséré, but also in the other places in West Africa where we have carried out fieldwork. Obviously, the claim to reciprocity between the generations regarding caring for the old is a social institution which, unlike the marriage process, is not subject to dynamic change.

13 In the urban context of Bobo-Dioulassou (Burkina Faso), Roth (2010) sees a qualitative change in inter-generational relations, interpreting the reduction in the amount of support given by younger people to their parents that can also be observed there as a loss of power on the part of the old people. In Asséré, we cannot detect any change on the normative level of power and status, despite frequent drastic changes in the amount of support given to the older generation over the historical period.

not open. A possible explanation for this is offered by Eisenstadt, who assumes that when families are subjected to forms of violence from outside that are beyond their control (such as slave raids or forced resettlement programmes), they are so traumatized that they react to these experiences by clinging to old norms that promote cohesion, instead of responding with conflict and social change (Eisenstadt 2008: 160f). The old parents do not make trouble for their sons living in the south, despite both being left behind and the fact that what they receive from them is often insufficient to meet their needs. It is possible to interpret this absence of inter-generational conflict within the family as an expression of the old people's declining physical, material and social resources and their resulting loss of power (on this claim with respect to urban Burkina Faso, see Roth 2010), but it can also be seen as an expression of intra-family cohesion. In Asséré, the fact that the young people are not able to provide sufficiently for their parents does not lead to a fundamental questioning of the norms and expectations, but rather to avoidance behaviour. This consists of not letting this contradiction lead to open conflicts, instead accepting it as given and working out an individual solution in each case.

Conclusions

A summary of our three case studies must first consider the complexity and many facets of existing kinship relations and of the processes of change in which they are involved. Not all kinship relations necessarily change in the same way in one place; certain relations change more, while others – despite far-reaching social changes – remain comparatively constant.

Our case studies have in common that the change in the kinship relations studied takes place in interaction with a general social change. The idea that kinship is an inter-generational structural principle is true only to the extent that the overriding importance of the kinship relations in our case studies maintains despite the changes. However, the great influence of changes in economic, political, social or religious areas on norms and practices with respect to kin relationships shows that these relationships are very much subject to change, even in the hinterland in the villages of West Africa, where one might expect processes to be less dynamic.

With regard to the conflict potential of these processes, there are considerable differences between our three case studies. While the massive change in the norms and practices of parenthood among the Baatombu and Mokolle led to a sharp increase in the number of intra-family conflicts, the changes in marriage customs among the Lokpa were astonishingly conflict-free; such far-reaching changes with regard to the parents' right to choose a

spouse for their child and the introduction of the new normative order of Islam would appear to have a serious conflict potential. However, since the parents also participated in the process of Islamization, and themselves married again according to Islamic rites, the normative frame of reference for marriage in regards to religion changed equally for parents and children, so there was little strain on inter-generational relations. The negotiation processes among the Kabiye over the question of who should provide for the old people also contain a considerable potential for intra-family conflict; however, this is basically handled with avoidance behaviour.¹⁴ This becomes manifest in a contradiction between the constant expectations of ageing parents in terms of being provided for by their children, and the real situation of many old people, which often falls short of what they could expect in terms of their normative rights. There can be no doubt that the normative expectation of reciprocity between the generations is kept alive here by means of conflict avoidance.

Conflicts can have different effects. In the case of child fosterage, intra-family conflicts over the fostering of particular children promote, and are a part of, the process of change, for in them a historical social norm is renegotiated and thus finally changed. From many examples of concrete conflicts among Baatombu and Mokolle families concerning the assumption of responsibility for children, it can be shown that the people involved negotiate, change and in part redefine their normative conceptions of kinship and belonging. As Dahrendorf has put it, these are changes that are caused by, and part of, “structurally generated relations of opposition between norms and expectations” (Dahrendorf 1986: 273).

In the case of changes in the marriage process among the Lokpa, there was an almost conflict-free integration of the new marriage norms and practices. Although the right of the parents to choose a spouse for their child was significantly restricted, and their traditional opportunities to generate resources from new in-law relations were also reduced, this did not lead to far-reaching inter-generational conflicts. The new normative framework was not renegotiated through complex family conflicts, as in the case of parent-hood relations among the Baatombu and Mokolle; rather, the changes, which not least led to a considerable restriction of the parents’ access to resources, were accepted without any great resistance. In this way, the relations between parents and children remained unaffected, while the in-law relations and the expectations of both sets of parents changed along with the general economic conditions.

14 On avoidance behaviour in conflict processes, see Elwert 2004; Alber 2004b; Häberlein 2007.

In the case of providing for the elderly among the Kabiye, the conflicts arising from inadequate support confirm the normative order: Although the old people often live in precarious circumstances, they do not question the norms about inter-generational care and material transfers, although these are not fulfilled at all. This conflict pattern confirms Max Gluckman's theory that intra-societal conflicts can contribute to cohesion when they confirm the existing order (Gluckman 1955, 1963, see also Zitelmann 2004: 42).

These differences in our three case studies cannot be explained, as one might assume, in purely economic terms by the different intensity of the changes relating to resource flows and the access to resources – for instance, in the sense that greater changes in access to resources produces a greater number of conflicts. In the case of changes in the marriage process among the Lokpa, there was a significant change in access to resources. Parents (and parents-in-law) have lost the economic potential of their daughters (and daughters-in-law) in the form of their labour, and parents have lost the right to choose a spouse for their children but must still contribute financially to their marriage. That this change has taken place without giving rise to conflicts can only be explained by the fact that the shifting of resources in favour of the younger generation has been accepted among the Lokpa; it has not resulted in constant family conflicts, as in the case of the conflicts over parenthood, which to a certain extent can also be interpreted as conflicts over resources, because they relate to paying for the children's upbringing and providing them with future opportunities. The loss of the Lokpa parents is comparable to the declining possibilities of Baatombu and Mokolle to claim their relatives' children. The difference is that in the latter case, the loss is negotiated through conflicts.

The lack of conflicts caused by changes in the marriage process among the Lokpa seems to us to be plausible not least because of the diversity of the roles played by each person in the kinship network. The same people who have lost resources as parents-in-law, because they no longer have access to the labour power of their daughters-in-law, may be happy that the labour power of their own daughters is no longer claimed by their mothers-in-law and that their daughters can choose their partner themselves if they marry again. The complexity of the roles played by each individual is one of those factors that makes it difficult to talk simply of “winners” and “losers” in the transformation of kinship and inter-generational relations, as would be suggested by a simple economic calculation of loss or gain of resources.

In our three case studies, the changes have taken place at different speeds and are associated with different historical turning points. In the child fosterage case, a slow transformation process, which seems to have begun with the seizing of power by the French and the establishment of

colonial rule, has sped up enormously since the early 1990s. Important turning points in this process were innovations in agricultural production and, especially since the 1990s, the massive expansion of primary school education and debates over children's rights and child labour. The transformation of the marriage process among the Lokpa began in the 1960s and happened very quickly. In this case, an important role was played by migrants returning from Ghana, who had achieved economic success and converted to Islam. In addition, new forms of migrant labour and the introduction of new, industrially produced goods (such as printed fabrics) contributed to bringing about changes in the kinship relations created by marriage. In the case of providing for the elderly in Asséré, the most important turning points are the forced resettlement of parts of the population and the resulting patterns of migration, as well as changes in the peasant economy, especially in the cultivation of cotton. While household structures underwent abrupt and massive changes in the first half of the twentieth century as a result of the forced resettlement programmes, the forms of providing for the elderly have scarcely changed; there have, however, been considerable changes in the quantity of food and/or money sent to the old people. Family change in African societies appears to us to vary locally and regionally and to be the result of many micro and macro turning points, which, generalized and filtered, can then be described as great historical processes of social change. Thus, in all three case studies the introduction and later decline of cotton production, as well as the associated processes of monetarization, act as catalysts for changes in kinship relations, while other factors such as Islamization have observable effects in this respect in only one case. In order to understand changes in kinship relations, whether in African societies or elsewhere, we would emphasize the importance of analysing local structures and processes, while taking into account the historical turning points and influences that have led to these changes.

Our examples clearly show that in Dahomey and Togo, it was not the process of independence that brought about the changes in kinship relations described above. Certain innovations dating from the colonial period, such as the introduction of schools and resettlement projects, were and still are more influential. In the past two decades, Western and Islamic images and conceptions of parenthood and marriage have also influenced society, but we have not been able to observe any comparable, locally received images of old age or ideas of providing for the old which have had any effect on the precarious situation of old people. The idea that the welfare of the elderly in rural areas could be guaranteed by a modern welfare state system is too far removed from reality in the Kabiye villages to be seen as a possibility at the present time.

What our case studies have in common is that they are all concerned with the question of who belongs to whom, and in what way, and what this form of belonging means in material terms in people's everyday lives. This also involves asking about forms of social responsibility and about the resulting transfer of resources between people who are connected by bonds of kinship. In the concrete actions based on the answers to these questions at different times and in different societies, we can see the long-term constants of kinship organization that make up the *web of kinship* in African societies.

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Webs of Kinship im Wandel – Detailansichten aus Westafrika

Zusammenfassung: Der vorliegende Artikel thematisiert Tendenzen und Merkmale des Wandels verwandtschaftlicher Beziehungen im Norden von Benin und Togo und deren Wechselspiel mit Tendenzen des allgemeinen gesellschaftlichen Wandels. Der Blick liegt dabei auf dem 20. Jahrhundert, das von den tief greifenden Veränderungen gekennzeichnet ist, die die koloniale Eroberung und die politische Unabhängigkeit der Kolonien auf dem afrikanischen Kontinent auslöste. Anhand von drei Arten verwandtschaftlicher Beziehungen – Eltern-Kindbeziehungen, Heiratsbeziehungen und innerfamiliäre Altersversorgung – werden zentrale Tendenzen und Bedingungen dieses historischen Wandels beschrieben. Dabei wird auch der Frage nach der Konflikthaftigkeit sowie nach dem Umgang mit Konflikten im Zuge dieser Wandlungsprozesse nachgegangen. Der Beitrag basiert auf empirischen Daten, die im Rahmen von thematisch miteinander verwobenen Forschungsprojekten erhoben wurden.

Schlagwörter: Westafrika, Sozialer Wandel, Familie, Verwandtschaft