

Kinship: Old problems and new prospects in the conversation between archaeology and social anthropology

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Zusammenfassung

Verwandtschaft: Alte Probleme und neue Perspektiven im Dialog zwischen Archäologie und Sozialanthropologie

Die Zusammenarbeit zwischen der Sozialanthropologie und den archäologischen Wissenschaften hat eine lange und produktive Geschichte. Neuere Forschungen in beiden Disziplinen haben Ideen über die Bedeutung von Blutsverwandtschaft in der Strukturierung menschlicher Gesellschaften hinterfragt und so die Möglichkeit für ein neues Kapitel in diesem Austausch eröffnet. Dieser Beitrag zeichnet nach, wie das Konzept von Verwandtschaft – verstanden als biologische Abstammung – zentral im interdisziplinären Dialog wurde, bevor es Gegenstand fundamentaler Kritik in der Anthropologie wurde. Das Transponieren europäischer Selbstbeschreibung auf anderweitige Gesellschaften und in die Vergangenheit wurde innerhalb der Disziplin zunehmend hinterfragt. Neuere Konzepte sehen Verwandtschaft als fließend und prozessual, auf Sorgepraktiken basierend und stellen die Unterscheidung zwischen biologisch und sozial selbst infrage. Mit der Entlarvung der Blutsverwandtschaft als europäischem Kultursymbol, stellte sich die Frage, ob das Verständnis von biologischer Verwandtschaft jemals bedeutend für die soziale Wirklichkeit irgendwo war. In Verbindung mit neuen Ergebnissen aus Biomolekularstudien lassen sich daher nun Zweifel an der Bedeutung von gemeinsamen Genen für die Geschichte der menschlichen Gesellschaft äußern. Um der Forschung eine neue Richtung zu geben, müssen wir die Trennung von biologischer und sozialer Verwandtschaft aufgeben.

1 Introduction

The long history of collaboration between social anthropology and archaeological sciences demonstrates that invitations to publish across disciplinary boundaries can be a productive and mutually beneficial strategy for theoretical development. However, the transfer of ideas, concepts, and theories consistently proved more complicated than has appeared at first glance. One challenge for anthropology in interdisciplinary settings, and specifically when working together with natural, genetic, or cognitive sciences, is the different epistemological starting points. Usually, anthropologists are asked to deliver answers to »residual« questions, those aspects that seemingly »hard« facts cannot explain and are therefore seen as »cultural«. Moreover, the concepts borrowed have often already lost currency in their

Summary

Collaboration between social anthropology and archaeological sciences has a long and productive history. More recent research in both fields has challenged ideas about the significance of consanguinity in structuring human societies, opening the possibility for a new chapter in this conversation. This contribution traces how the concept of kinship – understood as biological descent – became central to the interdisciplinary dialogue before facing deep criticism in anthropology. Transpositions of European self-descriptions onto societies elsewhere and in the past have been increasingly challenged within the discipline. Newer concepts see kinship as fluid and processual, based on care practices, and question the very distinction between the biological and the social. With consanguinity largely exposed as a European cultural symbol, the question arose as to whether this understanding of biological kinship has ever been significant for social reality anywhere at all. In combination with new results of biomolecular studies, we can now cast doubt on the significance of shared genes for the history of human society. To shift the focus of research in new directions we need to give up the separation of biological and social kinship.

discipline of origin. Both these problems are found in the interdisciplinary research on kinship – a once prominent concept in anthropology that the discipline now generally sees as problematic. Nevertheless, the introduction of new techniques in biomolecular analysis seems to have brought the two disciplines closer again and now might be an appropriate time for a new phase of collaboration. However, this would necessitate revisiting fundamental questions of epistemology and the conceptual history in both fields to avoid what now seem to be dead-ends in interpretation. Therefore, the first section of this contribution traces the foundations of the interdisciplinary dialogue in which kinship, understood as descent, became a central feature of research and served as a foil for a biological interpretation of human organisation. The second section recounts the rise of more fluent and processual understandings of kinship in anthro-

pology since the 1970s. These can serve – as argued in the conclusion – as instruments to interpret the recent datasets from the distant past of humanity and thus open a new chapter in the collaboration between social anthropology and archaeology.

2 Foundations

For a long time, and increasingly with the Enlightenment and the onset of colonisation, European knowledge production has rested in large part on transferring concepts of self-description to the past or other regions of the world in inverted form (Fardon 1990; Strathern 2020). This is exactly what happened as the idea of descent constituting kinship became more important with the rise of sciences from the 17th century onwards. Within the emerging disciplinary distribution of labour, anthropology became associated with what M.-R. Trouillot calls the »savage slot« and was assigned the task of describing »exotic« forms of kinship. As it is precisely this circular exchange that constituted the basis for claims of scientific knowledge about the history of human societies in which kinship became a central tenet, it is worthwhile examining the career of the concept in social anthropology and its interchange with archaeology.

Kinship becoming such a central concept rested on two major assumptions that have both been surprisingly stable in much public and academic discourse until the present day. The first is that kinship based on heterosexual reproduction is universally important in human societies. Hence, various techniques have been developed to »prove« and display genetic or genealogical closeness as kinship (Thelen/Lammer 2021). The second assumption is more specific and asserts a decreasing significance of kinship ties in Europe, which supports delegating kinship to the historical past.

The idea of shared blood and its forms of display influenced how early anthropologists – along with missionaries, colonial officers, and other local actors – began to collect manifold systems of kinship worldwide. To document kinship as descent, already at an early stage researchers developed standardised instruments. These were largely based on the equally new ways of presenting genealogies in which the former stress on sibling groups and the representational imagery of trees with extensive political commentary gave way to simplified diagrams that »accurately« recorded relations of marriage and procreation (Hohkamp 2023; Müller-Wille/Rheinberger 2004). A key exponent of this invention of kinship was L. H. Morgan (Trautmann 1987). His famous distinction between »descriptive« and »classificatory« kinship (Morgan 1870) was instrumental in solidifying the separation between »biological« and »social« kinship. The terminology contrasted a European understanding of kinship that was based on heterosexual reproduction and thus traced descent bilaterally – from both father and mother – with systems that grouped supposedly different categories

of relatives under a common term¹. Morgan came up with this differentiation based on his interpretation of the archaeological and ethnographic evidence available at that time. He arranged kinship terms from different regions of the world side-by-side in three large tables, implying that each referred to essentially the same thing. Another factor that lent scientific credibility to kinship as descent was the »genealogical method« developed by W. H. R. Rivers (1910) and used by anthropologists well into the 20th century (Bouquet 1996). Anthropologists would ask for the terms used for various genealogical positions and visualise relationships accordingly. In short, the documented, so-called, »primitive« forms of kinship were seen fundamentally as cultural expressions of biological relations. In a kind of gold-rush, anthropology »discovered« more and more terminologies of descent and alliance. What they brought home, however, were less »scientific facts« than their own European obsessions (Strathern 2006; Živković 2022).

This understanding was neither neutral nor without hierarchy, because European researchers clearly saw their own viewpoint as the factually »correct« model. Thus, it not only reinforced the divide between nature and culture in European thinking, but it was also mapped as a temporal and spatial difference between »self« and »other«. The supposedly neutral collection of different ways to name and understand kinship translated into »bigger« questions of political and economic reproduction beyond families and households. According to the evolutionary theories at the time, the bewildering diversity of kinship was taken as an expression of different stages of human development. Some terminologies were interpreted as supporting theories about the existence of specific pre-historical hierarchies, such as matriarchal or patriarchal orderings. For instance, classificatory systems were famously understood to suggest promiscuity and a lack of certainty about fatherhood. Following the European preoccupation with paternity and patrilineality, the co-evolution of kinship and political systems was interpreted in light of a desire to secure biological fatherhood. Most influential in this trajectory seems to have been F. Engels's essay on *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). While Engels relied on the anthropological knowledge of the time – most notably Morgan's – he offered an opposite interpretation of developmental stages. Instead of seeing a »civilising impact« of private property, he mourned a decline in female power, as men would gradually introduce inheritance to their (biological) children and concentrate political power through patrilineages. In short, the European obsession with fatherhood thus became aligned with and naturalised as economic and political progress. This early evolutionary model linking property, kinship, and power continues to influence many current interpretations of more recent genetic data.

The concept, new at the time, of a »relation« supported these temporal and spatial narratives even more fundamentally than the emerging practices of documentation and categorisation. Since the 17th century, finding a relation became

1 The latter might, for example, label any female relative of the previous generation with the same term as the »mother«.

increasingly of value in, and of, itself in the emerging scientific communities (Strathern 2020). Even today, it constitutes a scientific virtue and contributes to prestige to the point where scientists excuse, or at least regret, not finding a relationship. Thus, for example, a study of the shift to patrilineality in early Bronze Age Iberia, V. Villalba-Mouco et al. (2022), laments that no usable DNA could be found to prove a genetic link. The same study also places much emphasis on the links that can be established – even those as distant as the 7th degree of relatedness. This represents approximately the degree of kinship used for the marriage prohibitions in place until the Late Middle Ages in Europe. These prohibitions supported the power of the Catholic Church, because no one could really know all their possible kin to that degree: essentially any couple could be related and thus every marriage could potentially be incestuous. This leads to the question of whether finding such a genetic relationship has any meaning in early human history beyond academic discourse. If we were interested in social organisation, it might be more interesting to ask questions about the high mobility (visible among young persons of both sexes) and the high number of genetically unrelated individuals present in the settlement, both of which the authors play down: »[...] the burials at La Almoloya seem to emphasize the closest biological ties if we disregard the number of unrelated individuals buried there« (Villalba-Mouco et al. 2022, 3). In accordance with the developmental narrative and although buried men have no adult male genetic relatives at the site, patrilinearity seems to accompany increasing complex and unequal social organisation. However, the valuable items buried with them and the sudden abandonment of the settlement could also suggest that it might have been limited to a small group of elite individuals only to be abandoned again – thus, not suggesting a kind of linear development in one direction. From their finding that adult females had no adult genetic relatives within the settlement, the authors even go so far as to infer a regular and reciprocal Levi-Straussian »exchange of women«. The idea that these females might have had partners of children elsewhere is absent; instead the authors fall back on a norm of male control of female reproductive capacity. Such interpretations show how complicated interdisciplinary dialogue can become. The next section, therefore, outlines some anthropological critiques of kinship that could be useful to formulate new questions and theories about human history.

3 Challenges

As already indicated, understanding consanguine kinship as a universal pattern of human organisation – and also as one that is in decline in Europe – has significant problems. The critique of the racial underpinnings, inadequate understanding of European history, and failure to recognise the diversity of practices to establish kinship can be used to overcome the social-biological divide in the search for new conceptual tools and interpretations.

As described above, adopting an evolutionary perspective allowed Western observers to dissociate themselves from internal and external others. For minority populations or people elsewhere kinship seemed to be the essential mechanism, that Europeans would overcome through modernity. This move rendered their own concept of biological kinship a non-cultural uncontested truth. Through placing kinship in the position of anteriority – the quintessential other to modernity – researchers could also remain silent about any European political interests inherent in that assumption (TallBear 2013). Even today and despite geneticists having invested much work in disassociating their research from older »racial science«, anthropologists have shown that many technologies are based on earlier statistical groupings of populations and therefore reify racial categories². Specifically, if individual samples are taken as representatives of discrete groups or populations, such as »African« or »European«, apparently »hard« scientific measurements of genetic similarity will retain traces of ideas about kinship formed in 19th-century anthropology around ethnic groups being constituted by shared language, culture, territory and blood (Braun/Hammonds 2012). This also effectively obscures the importance of other forms of relatedness, as well as the potential unimportance of genetic ties for human society. The above-cited interpretation of Bronze Age patrilineages as relatedness resembles very much the kinship charts that anthropologists have long used (and criticised). Like racehorse pedigrees, such charts display certain links and hide others in producing winners (Cassidy 2009), thus these displays not only establish those relationships the scientist sees but also erase or »dis-work« others (Bird-David 2019). Selecting some connections to display, while concealing others, constructs kinship by making bonds appear natural, universal, and ontological antecedents to »culture« (Thelen/Lammer 2021).

In addition, historical research has long challenged the second central assumption, that kinship was always an important category until the advent of modernity in Europe. On the contrary, the terminology of friendship and kinship was used for a long time, largely interchangeably. Kinship designated all kinds of persons living in a household who could be related by descent or marriage – but also by felt closeness (Teuscher 2013, 100). It is only since the 17th century that kinship became singled out, with friendship (and civil society) seen as contrasting and even mutually exclusive types of relations (Strathern 2020). In the course of these developments, kinship was increasingly reduced, becoming limited to what was now seen as private family relations. More importantly, the stress on kinship as biological descent not only contradicted linguistic usage but also everyday practice. In contrast to the tale of the decline of kinship due to modernisation, it became more and more important politically and economically. Political positions became increasingly inheritable and endogamous marriage helped the accumulation of wealth. A good example is marriage between cousins, which became ever-more widespread

2 Nash 2004; Featherstone et al. 2006; Lee 2017; Jabloner 2019; M'charek et al. 2020; Tyler 2021.

among peasant and urban populations in Europe and North America from the 17th century until the middle of the 20th century (Sabeian et al. 2007; McKinnon 2023). In sum, modern capitalism and the new bourgeois political order were based on kinship rather than on its decline. Nevertheless, the tale of the decline of kinship was and is persuasive in many scientific and public discourses. Enlightenment ideals are thus taken as a historical reality, with a form of social organisation based on kinship projected onto the »traditional« past. In consequence, as shown above, scientists still often work with the (implicitly) evolutionary hypothesis that »pre-modern« or »pre-state« societies were regulated by ties of kinship (Thelen/Alber 2018; Alber et al. 2023). This understanding hampers the interpretation of a more diverse past in which political and economic organisation might be differently linked to forms of belonging.

In parallel to historical research, anthropological research has increasingly criticised the European vision of »biological« or genetic kinship as foundational to all human organisation. First, the assumption that kinship norms would easily translate into practice was challenged with the empirical turn towards on-site fieldwork at the turn of the 20th century. Focussing on rules and terminologies not only obscured historical transformations but also negated differences between norms and practices. Then, from the 1970s onwards, consanguinity as a structuring element was even more fundamentally called into question (Needham 1971; Schneider 1972). This critique culminated in the insight that Europeans had exported their cultural imagery about »blood« ties to the rest of the world. Largely exposed as being a European cultural symbol, the question arose as to whether kinship in the sense of consanguinity had been significant for social reality anywhere at all.

This critique also questioned the idea that contemporary hunter-gatherer societies could serve as a foil to interpret the more distant human past and unmasked the relegation of certain forms of social organisation to a timeless ahistorical void as yet another aspect of the tale of European progress and supremacy (Fabian 1983; Chakrabarty 2000). But even if research on contemporary hunter-gatherer societies might present useful evidence, recent studies suggest that their social organisation seldom takes place along genetic kinship lines. Individual men and women often travel long distances, and the composition of small groups seems to be »remarkably cosmopolitan« (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 122). If they gather as larger residential groups, these are not made up of a tight-knit network of genetically related individuals. Instead, only about 10 % of the existing relations represent shared genes.

The critique brought social anthropological research on kinship almost entirely to a halt until a new wave of research largely inverted the European folk wisdom of »blood is thicker than water«. In the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, a series of studies demonstrated that kinship does not produce care but rather that practices of care establish kinship relations. These studies emphasised that – in Europe and elsewhere – kinship is not assigned once at conception or birth, but in practice must be constantly attested to. These arguments are supported by research in societies in which many or even most children do not grow up with

their genetic parents (see also Alber in this volume). To underline the fluid and processual nature of kinship, authors have introduced expressions such as »doing kinship« or »kinning« (Howell 2006). In sum, kinship is always »assisted«, not just when it is created through reproductive technologies, and always needs diverse »signs of relatedness« to be established, and to remain important it must be constantly affirmed (Goldfarb 2016).

More fundamentally, this research has started to question the very separation between biological and social kinship. While earlier research in archaeology and anthropology had recognised the importance of cultural differences in understanding and living kinship, this second move to unmask the separation between social and biological kinship as a cultural artifact has proven harder to digest. In their studies of establishing kinship through care, both J. Carsten's work on Langkawi, Malaysia (1997), and M. Weismantel's in Ecuador (1995) have demonstrated the importance of sharing food in establishing kinship. In these contexts, food served as an addition to the idea of sharing blood. In much of the literature, such understandings and practices would be called »social« kinship. However, these authors are actually referring to biological processes believed to make people bodily similar and therefore kin. While somewhat counterintuitive to the well-established separation, these ideas are not so far from studies that research bodily similarity established through sharing a close environment. For example, toxicologists have suggested that humans become more similar to each other through the shared toxic substances within them and in their immediate environment. Such processes can be understood as establishing (chemical) kinship, as J. Lamoreaux (2020) argues. For this interpretation to become more persuasive, shared toxic substances would need to be legitimised and institutionalised as indicators for kinship (Thelen/Lammer 2021). While this might seem a far cry from established wisdom, we only need to remember how much work was invested in earlier instruments of proving kinship (McKinnon 2021). For example, in the Late Middle Ages when the monk Peter Damian first developed the system of counting generations, which is still used today in much of the sciences, it appeared absurd to his contemporaries (Teuscher 2023). This shows the likeliness of kinship understandings to change even if they seem very natural and therefore unchangeable. To be clear, there is no doubt that findings of genetic closeness in archaeological research might be interesting (for example, for medical or migration research) but we should be cautious in attributing an undeniable meaning to them for human organisation *per se*.

With the focus on actually existing relations, a last challenge has receded from sight; genetic links that do *not* result in closeness. Arguably it is always hardest to see what could have been but did not materialise, particularly as finding a relationship is seen as desirable in the European scientific tradition (Strathern 2020). However, any analysis that does not account for all the genetically related people who decided to leave settlements like La Almojola risks imposing anachronistic ideas on the past.

4 Is there a future for interdisciplinary dialogue on kinship?

All of this conceptual criticism begs the question of whether the term kinship still has enough analytical value to serve as a central concept in interdisciplinary dialogue. Surely, kinship can still be understood as the idea of a special bond of belonging that can be constituted through diverse (bodily, emotional, ritual, legal) practices. Empirically, it can be useful to see how specific rights and obligations can be linked to kinship and serve as principles of organisation that define identities and hierarchies (Thelen 2021). However, given the wide scope of different ideas that might underlie such conceptions and practices of belonging, kinship as such has little analytical value. Therefore, one move has been to try to replace kinship with a better term, most notably relatedness, as introduced by Carsten (1997). However, while this has drawn (again) attention to the diversity of cultural understandings of what makes people close, studies have still overwhelmingly stayed in the realm of what always has been understood as kinship and not expanded beyond private households and families. It thus would make much more sense to ask, how care is negotiated and establishes belonging, if we wish to move beyond European naturalised preconceptions of social organisation (Thelen 2015).

Social anthropology and archaeological sciences look back on a long and productive history of shared interest in kinship. However, recent research questions the projection of European ideas into other times and places. With new ethnographic studies and biomolecular data having challenged the idea that heterosexual descent is always meaningful, we can ask such new questions about social organi-

sation. If an adult woman's skeleton is buried with a child's and they are not genetically related, this might now be interpreted as a suggestion that care practice rather than heterosexual reproduction is the central feature in establishing belonging. Moreover, since the former temporality ascribed to kinship as always already there before other ways of human connecting and therefore almost »naturally« serving as a grid for political organisation has discouraged research that asks about its making, we might ask new question about how it is actually made to count or not (Alber et al. 2023).

Finally, some humans with high degree of genetic closeness might have lived together in small groups in the past. But maybe the group was small because other genetically similar persons had left and joined other groups or lived and died alone for various reasons, and either of these might be interesting to explore. In addition to the choice of avoiding or being excluded from contact, questions of hierarchy or care between genetically dissimilar humans are also interesting. We can also take the aforementioned toxicological findings of bodily similarity seriously and ask what kind of substances other than genes made (and makes) people stick together (or not). The move not to take genetic closeness as self-explanatory enables us to ask a whole lot of other questions that could direct research into new areas and improve our understanding of human history. Resisting the temptation to fill gaps of knowledge with what seems logical in hindsight allows us to open a new chapter in the conversation between archaeological sciences and social anthropology and, what is more, would offer a new understanding of the diversity in patterns of human organisation.

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