The Kinship Factor in Ngologa Politics*

I

Theoretical pronouncements tend to look threadbare after a quarter of a century, and we are all well-aware today of the shortcomings of the classic ‘Introduction’ to African Political Systems. Nevertheless it remains the most interesting modern statement of what is still a crucial problem in African political anthropology—the relationship between political and kinship systems. In the course of their argument Fortes and Evans-Pritchard advance the generalisation that where “an administrative organization is the framework of the political structure”, i.e., where there is ‘government’, “kinship and domestic ties have an important role in the lives of individuals, but their relation to the political system is of a secondary order.” (1940:6-7)

My aim in this paper is to indicate the importance and complexity of this ‘secondary order’ of relationship in the social structure of the Ngologa of Western Botswana.

In the centre of the Kalahari there is an arc of ten Bantu villages, strung along a lorry-track which runs about three hundred miles between the furthest-separated villages, and which links up with the lorry-tracks to the East and to the District capital.1 These ten

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1. There are also several hamlets with small populations which are politically united fairly closely with metropolitan villages. I treat them here as
villages have a total population of about 13,000, some 2,000 of whom are Bushmen serfs. The Bantu villagers are predominantly pastoralists, but in the good years they can supplement their diet by agriculture and hunting, and they make some money through migrant labour as well as through the sale of livestock, livestock products, and skin artifacts. The villages are sited on the well-known pans of the Kalahari, in which it is usually possible to tap subterranean sources of water. In between the villages, and for vast distances around, the country is virtually uninhabited.

Seven of these villages are ruled by the Kgalagadi-speaking peoples, the most numerous of the Bantu-speaking peoples of the Kalahari. Two others are ruled by Tswana headmen, but have Kgalagadi majorities. The remaining village is occupied and ruled by Herero. Most of the Kgalagadi-speaking peoples in the Kalahari Districts of Botswana belong to the Ngologa group, who constitute a majority in eight of the ten villages and provide the headmen for six of them. In the course of my field-work I concentrated on the Ngologa, and this paper deals mainly with them.

Until recently, each of these ten villages was governed as a discrete unit by the District Administration. Apart from the District Administration, there was no formal political link between villages. Then in the mid-1950s the Protectorate Government joined the five villages in Northern Kgalagadi District under the rule of one of their headmen, who was given the title of sub-chief. Nevertheless, even in this area the individual villages retain a degree of autonomy, and for the purposes of this paper all the villages can be treated as more or less self-contained units of local government.

Ngologa social life is patterned largely by two sets of relationships: kinship in the narrow sense, and political relationships. But both the domestic or private domain of social life and (although to a lesser degree) the political or public domain are permeated by the idiom of kinship. It will be seen, then, that I use the term 'kinship' in two senses: to refer to a way of talking about various social relationships, and to connote a peculiar, limited set of relationships. There has recently been a good deal of debate among anthropologists over just what we mean when we talk about kinship. I use the term in the classic Fortesian way. When I talk of "kinship in the narrow sense", I mean that the Ngologa, like the Tallensi, "apply the concepts of kinship to describe and define domestic relations and the person-to-person ties that are derived from them." Following Fortes, I also

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parts of the larger villages. The villages are Kalkfontein, Karrakobis, Makunda, Kuli and Nojane (in Ghanzi District); and Hukuntsi, Lehututu, Lokgwabe, Tsane and Kang (in N. Kgalagadi District).
mean by ‘kinship’ an idiom which the Ngologa, like many other peoples, frequently use in talking about “all categories of inter-personal and inter-group relations.” (1949:12-13) Kinship in both these senses conditions Ngologa politics.

By ‘politics’ I mean (to quote Oakeshott) “the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a collection of people who, in respect of their common recognition of a manner of attending to its arrangements, compose a single community.” (1962:123) Among the Ngologa, these ‘general arrangements’ are attended to by the leaders and the citizens—broadly, the men of the village, excluding Bushmen, organized in the village council (lekgota). The headman and his councillors form a weak executive arm, the headmen enjoying certain privileges which include the chairmanship of the council. The councillors guide the headman, and sometimes oppose him. Real power is shared by the headman, the councillors, and a small group of influential citizens. This elite controls the deliberations of the council, which is the policy-making, judicial and legislative body of the village community. The members of this dominant group are also the leading members of the village factions. In sum, Ngologa politics are largely village politics and the participants are the bakgota—the men in council—led by a small group of partly-hereditary officials and influential individuals. To a significant extent, these politics are what they are because of the place of the village government in the total State apparatus. Here, however, I am concerned only with the main dimension of the community setting of Ngologa village politics, i.e., ‘kinship’.

In the following section of the paper I discuss the kinship idiom as part of the language of politics. I then go on to examine the impact of kinship relationships (mainly “kinship in the narrow sense”) on political groupings, status and action.

II

It is extremely difficult to pin down and translate the main features in the ideology of a people, particularly where there is no authoritative version to guide one. Yet some such attempt is called for here, since the fairly straightforward constitutional notions of the Ngologa are tied-in with their elusive kin-based models. I shall try to bring out the relevant features of this system of thought by looking at the meaning of three key kin-type terms, sirethyo, kgota and lositsa. Sirethyo can mean ‘totem’, but also connotes the Ngologa as a whole (or any other people), and any clan. The people and the clans are thought of as descent groups, each identifying itself by reference to
one of the founding group of brothers, of whom Mongologa himself was the senior. This picture is directly contradicted by some group histories: it is not, however, a reconstruction of the past so much as a rationalisation of the present.

The clans are conceived of as group with a common heritage and shared interests, but no clan is a social group. The members of various clans are dispersed among the different villages and never come together for any purpose. Each clan has a totem, from which it usually takes its name, but the clan does not unite for any rituals. The function of the clan model is not, then, to describe social groups, except marginally. Rather it provides a framework within which individuals and small, active, social groups can, in particular contexts, be ranked and related to one another. This is possible because the Ngologa rank their clans according to the putative seniority of the clan founder in the original band of brothers.

Any Ngologa with whom a fellow cannot trace kinship links may be ‘placed’ by reference to this model. Men of clans senior to Ego are classificatory elder brothers, those of junior clans are classificatory younger brothers. The clan model also serves to identify and rank the sub-clans—the people in a village who are affiliated to one clan. They are grouped under the clan name (though not normally referred to as a sirethyo), and are ranked relative to other sub-clans in certain, primarily ritual, contexts. At initiation schools, at the irregular communal beef-feasts, and on similar occasions, each sub-clan is treated as a unit and accorded differential treatment. Some sub-clans are corporate groups of political importance. Where this is so, the clan model helps formulate their self-image and the way in which other villagers regard them.

*Kgota* is a multi-referential term, but the common element in all its applications is the presence of an element of patrilineality in the group referred to. *Kgota* refers to patrilineal categories of kin and patrilineally recruited (or identified) local groups of various ranges. A clan is a *kgota*, as is any lower level patrilineal group. These lower level groups are sometimes talked of as though they were segments, ‘nesting’ in the manner typical of groups in segmentary lineage societies. Similarly a sub-clan or a smaller coresidential group which is identified with a patrilineal segment, may be termed *kgota*.

*Lositsa* may mean ‘spine’ or ‘seam’; in a social context it connotes the category of people with whom an individual is related by active ties of kinship or affinity. The *lositsa* is conceived of ideally as a bounded group. The borders, informants suggest, are defined by a patrilineal calculus, and the group is made up of intermarrying family-groups. The element of endogamy is stressed by informants as the source of the solidarity and continuity of the *lositsa*. Working at
this level of idealisation, informants find it difficult to explain to the outsider the precise difference in meaning between the terms *kgota* and *lositsa*—while asserting that there is a difference.

Informants agree that there are no groups which correspond to this ideal *lositsa*, but they generally seem to believe that such groups did exist in the recent past. They say that the *lositsa* has been destroyed by a rapid increase in marriages outside the kindred: “The *rrakgari* (father’s sister) is lost to the *lositsa*.”

My evidence indicates that the Ngologa exaggerate the decline in close-kin marriages, which probably never accounted for more than about half of all marriages, as is the case today. I do not believe that the ideal *lositsa* ever existed—if indeed such a social group could operate, which on general principles is extremely dubious. Rather, the idealised *lositsa* should be seen as an abstraction, derived from the strongly-felt Ngologa valuation of tight-knit kinship units where affinal and matrilateral ties overlay and reinforce agnatic ties.

The term *lositsa* is also used in a more down-to-earth way, in a sense adequately conveyed by the English phrase ‘whole family’. Using the term in this way, a person speaking of his *lositsa* will mean an Ego-centred and unique group of kin plus affines who are often not kin. Presumably the ideal notion of *lositsa* colours the usage of the term in its everyday context. This may make it easier for an individual to unite a pious belief in lineage solidarity with personal schemes for the manipulation of his own network of kin and affines. The chain of reasoning is becoming rather long here, but this perhaps explains why the people find it difficult to analyse the difference in meaning between the terms *lositsa* and *kgota*.

The vernacular model of Ngologa society, to the extent that it may be said to rest on these key concepts, is clearly on the lines of a segmentary lineage model of the Bedouin type. Like the model of the anthropologist, it is an abstraction from the situation on the ground, but an abstraction built up with very different criteria of relevance and for different purposes. Before going on to discuss ‘real’ kinship-groups, for which a different analytical model is required, I shall try to develop my earlier statement that the vernacular model of kin-

1. The *rrakgari* is probably picked out here since it is the alliance contracted by family-group heads through taking wives and giving sisters in marriage that have the greatest impact. Further, the full impact of these alliances is felt only in the next generation, when the affinal link becomes a relationship of matri-filiation.

2. On the Bedouin, see Peters (1959 and 1967). In the latter article Peters insists that “the lineage model is not a sociological one, but that it is a frame of reference used by a particular people to give them a common-sense kind of understanding of their social relationships. For sociological purposes this means that the lineage model, with its supporting theoretical presuppositions, must perforce be abandoned.” (1967:261)
type groups and relationships is to a certain extent reflected in the political notions of the Ngologa.

The most inclusive level of the model, the notions of people and clan, have least direct relevance to political thinking, for the main focus of Ngologa politics is the village and not the Ngologa people or the clan. Yet they have their importance. They structure the feeling that all Ngologa are one, and a unit in opposition to people of different 'tribes'. I have known this sort of feeling to influence political action, as when all the Ngologa in one district united to vote for a Ngologa headman as their representative in the House of Chiefs. This feeling of identity is also a factor in maintaining divisive tendencies in multi-tribal villages.

Political history, also, is often related in the idiom of clanship, the clan head, by his activities within the kinship domain of action, influencing the political future of his descendants. The following statement should indicate the form this type of history takes:

Although the Basiwana were senior to the Banare, the Banare held the chieftainship. And Mosiwana killed a buffalo and ate its breast. It is customary that the senior should eat first and be given the breast, but Mosiwana did not give the breast to the ruling group. The Banare expelled them. The Basiwana went away and came here . . . (An added complication, which the narrator does not enlarge on, is that the Banare are literally the 'buffalo people'. Mosiwana had thus killed the Banare totem.)

It is within the context of village affairs that the 'kinship model' has close relevance for the conceptualisation of political relations. In explicating this, I shall risk something of a digression, and begin by describing how, according to the Ngologa, a village should be laid out. The Ngologa say that each kgota should occupy its own cluster of compounds in its own sector of the village. These clusters should be laid out in relation to one another in a way which reflects their relative patrilineal seniority. The sub-clan drawn from the senior clan in the village should occupy the easternmost sector of the village, and the other groups should be settled to the west of it, in order of diminishing seniority. The groups which make up each sub-clan should similarly be placed along an east-west axis according to genealogical seniority. And within the family-groups the genealogically senior man should build in the east, his younger brother to the west of him, and so on.

Now according to Ngologa ideology, kinship not only determines the lay-out of groups on the ground, but also patterns the distribution of power. Thus at every level the distribution of abodes should mirror the distribution of power. It is assumed that the sub-clan

1. In Ngologa symbolism the East is identified with life-giving forces; the West with weakness, inutility and death.
is an administrative and political unit headed by the genealogically senior man, who should live at the eastern extremity of the sub-clan sector. Within the sub-clan, minimal lineages and family-groups should similarly be ruled by their senior members, who should live on the eastern end of the group's settlement. The village as a whole is ideally led by the senior man in the senior family-group in the senior section of the senior sub-clan. And because these groups are conceived of in the idiom of kinship and corporateness, members of the headman's family-group, minimal lineage or even sub-clan may, depending on the context, be called the 'owners' (benyi, sing. munyi) of the village.

This is not the place to multiply details. Let me sum up the application of the kinship model to the conceptualisation of the 'constitution' of the village. First, the political community may be thought of as divided into groups of kin—or, indeed, as itself constituting a kinship-group. Second, the kinship model may be used to 'explain' the formal distribution of power. Third, the traditional specialised political roles of headman and councillors may at times be characterised as kinship roles—the headman, as (ideally) the senior patrikinsman, may be spoken of as the 'father' of the village, while his councillors are often termed banawe ba kgosi, the younger brothers of the headman.

Why is the kinship idiom used in this way? On the one hand, the kinship idiom is felt to embody the basic verities of Ngologa social experience. On the other hand, it has considerable elasticity; it can readily be applied to various kinds of social relationship. (I chose to dwell on the way the Ngologa idealise the kinship/residence/power matrix precisely because it brings out the adaptability of the kinship model.) The kinship idiom is thus both an obvious shorthand way of thinking about political relations and something more, for it carries with it some of the moral load of "kinship in the narrow sense." Viewed in these terms, the compromises and concessions of politics may be made more acceptable; and the conflict which characterises all political relationships is contained, even ideologically transcended. Above all, the idiom implies a notion of community. When a man is away from home he refers to the people of his village as ba i gotswe, a term usually reserved for the people of one's father's kgota. The feeling of community is sometimes invoked in political debates in this way: "We are all the children of Headman X"—i.e., let us sort out these family differences as brothers.

Political relations are not, however, conceived of only in terms of the kinship model. There is in addition a distinct range of constitutional notions, which is summed up in the concept of molao, the 'law'. In certain contexts this is the idiom which is preferred; and its main
emphasis is on the rule of the code of law which overrides kinship status. Linked to this is the image of the citizen which the Ngologa have, and which emerges from the observation of behaviour rather than from the analysis of a system of ideas. To take one example, a man appointed by the village council to the paid position of borehole 'pumper' retired and handed over his job to his son. When the council queried his action, he argued that a son always succeeds to his father's status. The council rejected his line of reasoning. Someone ironically suggested that he should be responsible for paying his son, so underlining the contrast between jobs in the politico-jural and in the domestic domains of village life. The council argued, in effect, that public appointments of this kind cannot be automatically ascribed as a function of kinship connections but must be legitimated by a political decision. In court cases, councillors frequently try to ease the way for the condemnation of a miscreant by citing precedents of headmen sentencing their own sons: we are all kin, but the law must take its course.

III

When one moves from the ideological system to the system of action it becomes necessary to distinguish more specifically the different levels of kin-type relationships. There is a significant difference between the kind of behaviour conditioned by close, active person-to-person relationships of kinship and affinity and that conducted in terms of the more general categorisation of people as Ngologa or as members of such-and-such a clan. The more inclusive patrilineal categories impinge less directly on political action, though they contribute to the image various factions may have of themselves and of each other. They also have some impact on the politics of multi-tribal villages and on the more occasional inter-village political relationships.

Close-kin relationships, on the contrary, underlie much day-to-day political activity. An understanding of the structure of the active network of kinship within a village—networks which may condition conflict as much as co-operation—is fundamental for an understanding of village politics.

Within the village there are three levels of kinship grouping. First there is the family-group, a tight association of households, varying in size from a single nuclear family to an association of ten or more households with a total population of up to perhaps fifty. The core of the family-group is a set of male household heads, recruited almost universally from among the sons, brothers and brother's sons of the group heads. (Full brothers and their sons are more likely to be members of one group than brother by different women.)
Associated with this group may be a few households occupied by unmarried related women, usually of mature age and often with children, and perhaps one or two occupied by men, usually illegitimate, who are affinal or matrilateral connections of the group head. These associated household heads have no independent political base, and are usually economically dependent on the group members.

The inner ring of male agnates form a corporation which is usually headed by the genealogically senior man, though old age, ill health or incompetence may bring about the leadership of the next senior man. The group head is ultimately responsible for the estate owned by the members, including ultimate control of the group’s rights over its members, women and children. He is the main representative of the group in the village court or council, where he is normally assumed to speak for his group as a whole; and the court may hold him responsible for the torts of members and their wives, children and serfs. He also arbitrates when disputes arise within the group, and he chairs the wider kinship council which may deal with marital disputes. (Such a council may include junior agnates from other groups and parents of the wives of group members.) Associates are excluded from the corporation and from the jural control of the group head.

These family-groups do not normally survive the death of their head. Yet although secession is so common a feature of the social scene, family-group fission is frequently accompanied by severe conflicts over authority and the disposal of property. These conflicts may be expressed in the idiom of mystical attacks. (People sometimes say: “If a man dies, his brother has killed him.”)

The process of fission and the subsequent realignment of family-groups bring about territorial separation and the redistribution of rights over people and property. But this directly threatens effective agnatic connections, which are based on the patrilineal definition of rights in property and in people, and which are ideally symbolized by a special pattern of residential alignment. Sometimes agnatic connections are severed, amidst mutual recriminations. Typically, a man will refuse to consult his brothers about marriages he or his children may make, and will settle apart from them. If the dominant family-group within an alliance splits, the conflicts generated by the process of fission may escalate. Agnates in related groups may be drawn into the disputes, and a whole sub-clan may at last be broken up into rival factions.

Sometimes close agnatic relationships do survive the fission of family-groups. Marriages between close agnates, which are fairly common, may help to contain the damage. In most cases at least some of the family-groups which emerge from the ashes of the parental group will site their households alongside each other, and maintain their
former relationships, though in a diminished key. The junior group will, for example, regularly consult the head of the senior group on matters concerning marriage, minors, cattle and the political relations of the group. Such alliances of family-groups constitute the second level of kin-based political groupings within the village. Naturally, although the members of such an alliance will act together in most political affairs, they are not as bound up with one another as the members of a family-group (unless the family-group is on the brink of fission).

The third level of political grouping is typified by the sub-clan. Sub-clans present a variant of the structural pattern I have described for family-groups and alliances of family-groups. They are also built around a patrilineal core. In the case of active sub-clans this core may be made up of family-group heads who are close agnates. Like the lower level groups, they include some affines and matrilateral kin, and perhaps even members of small unrelated groups. In ritual contexts the patrilineal definition of the sub-clan is usually fairly strictly asserted, but in political contexts the more fluidly defined group may operate.

Where the sub-clan is a co-operative, coresident group, the sector it occupies may be considered a political and administrative subdivision of the village. As with the family-group and the family-group alliance, the sub-clan may then settle its internal disputes without reference to the council, and will normally present a united front when contentious issues are debated.

As I suggested earlier, the sub-clan is not always a solidary group. In a number of cases sub-clans have been broken up into factions as a result of conflicts between close agnates. These factions are structurally similar to family-group alliances, but because they exclude some close agnates, their existence conflicts with the notions of kinship solidarity which provide the charter for the co-operation of members of family-groups alliances and sub-clans. They are of central importance to village politics, but citizens sometimes deny all knowledge of them. While operating as political factions, pitted especially against the brothers with whom they have broken, these groups do not form administrative sub-divisions in the village.

The kin-based groupings I have been discussing are the main political groupings within the village. It must be stressed, however, that kinship does not mechanically determine political behaviour—one cannot deduce the structure of political relationships in a village through studying family-trees. Nor are the various groups frozen into postures of co-operation or opposition. The primary alignments of individuals and groups are balanced by cross-cutting ties of kinship and affinity, and on some issues the interests of groups within the
larger alliances may diverge. There is always sufficient flexibility in political alignments to permit shifts of allegiance on different issues.

I have also simplified the picture by ignoring two sets of groupings where the kinship factor is of less importance. First, there is the group of ‘progressives’ which has crystallized in some villages since Botswana’s independence. This group is made up largely of ex-migrant labourers, who have brought back new standards and aspirations from South West Africa and South Africa. It is led by a new political figure, the District Councillor, to whom I shall return later. Second, there are the church groups, which may be connected with political factions but are not normally coextensive with them in membership. The churches provide opportunities for leadership outside the political system, but do not impinge on the political process in the ordinary course of events.

The generalisation may be allowed to stand: political alliances and oppositions are patterned largely by kinship. More broadly, the structure of kin-groups affects the definition of the political field itself. Within the village it delimits a domestic domain of action which the political institutions seldom penetrate. Matters involving close-kin, particularly members of one family-group, rarely come before the council, and when they do they are treated with caution and a certain embarrassment. Such an intrusion of the council into close-kin affairs usually marks a painful break in the pattern of the relationships of the people concerned. Considerations of ‘kinship’ may also extend the political field, involving villagers in affairs of other villages. This may happen, for example, when a related group is embroiled with rulers from alien tribes.

Having described the political importance of kinship groupings, I turn to the place played by the kinship factor in defining political roles.

The basic political role, that of the citizen, is theoretically open only to legitimate men. The Ngologa sometimes assert that a man cannot speak in the council if bogari (a bridewealth payment) has not been handed over for his mother. The logic here is that the bogari establishes a man’s membership of this father’s kgota, and political identity in Ngologa society is a function of membership of the various patrilineally-defined groups I have described. The rule is not rigidly enforced, and illegitimate men normally participate in council debates. Their status is nevertheless a real political handicap, for they are forced to rely on matrilateral and affinal relatives for support. The connection between incorporation in the kinship system and political status is sharper in the case of the Bushmen. They are excluded from both systems of relationships, and the Ngologa speak of this dual exclusion as two aspects of the same social process.
Of the specialised political roles, that of the headman is the most narrowly limited to those with specific claims by birth. The Ngologa state the rule of primogeniture, but readily cite instances where the first-born was passed over because he was unacceptable to the community. Nevertheless it is extremely rare for the headmanship to pass from the ruling family to an unrelated group. In most cases a headman is succeeded by one of his sons or brothers.

Gluckman (1949) has suggested that (at least in what was then British Central Africa) the headman’s role is immensely complicated by his domestic kinship ties. Whatever the situation may have been in ‘Central Africa’, the Ngologa headman, who is never related to all his subjects, cannot rule from the narrow base of support provided by loyal close-kin, and must transcend his narrow family interests. His kinship status in these small, tightly-knit communities does complicate his political situation, but in the long run it seems to allow him sufficient freedom for political manoeuvres.

Other important political roles are less closely tied to kinship status. The headman may, if he is permitted by the council, place one of his immediate family in the civil service job of court scribe, but the others members of the small band of village decision-makers—including the councillors, leading members of opposition factions, and often one or two politically active independents—are recruited on diverse criteria. Close agnates of the headman are likely to be councillors or leaders of opposition factions, but some are not. One can also expect to find heads of other sub-clans in this group, but some councillors and other leaders have no kinship claim to political status. They win influence through experience abroad or through their skill in law and in debate. These men are, however, more likely than the headman to be influenced in their political actions by considerations of kinship.

In 1966, for the first time, each village elected a District Councillor to represent it in the newly constituted District Council. The men they chose were usually distinguished in the years preceding independence by entrepreneurial enterprise and by early participation in the Bechuanaland Democratic Party. Yet a study of their genealogies reveals that far from being recruited at random from among the men of a village, they are usually members of one of the circles of ‘owners of the village’—i.e., closer or more distant agnates of the headman. In several cases the District Councillors come from lines recently excluded from the headmanship. Here again the kinship factor is seen not to determine but rather to limit political opportunities. It is

1. Always the strongest party in the Kalahari, and now the ruling Botswana Democratic Party.
also worth remarking that the villagers seemed to prefer representatives who, whatever their genealogical position, had detached themselves to some extent from the web of kin-based intrigue which patterns much of village politics.

Finally, I want to consider the position of the individual in the system, for my description of the main political groupings and specialised political roles does not bring out fully the sorts of options open to the individual in search of alliances. In addition to membership of various agnatic groupings, every man has potentially useful affinal and matrilateral ties. Of these, the affinal ties tend to be the less important, partly because marriage is so unstable in Ngologa society. There are exceptions. In one village, for example, I found that two active members of a particular sub-clan were attached to it as a function of their marriages to sisters of core-group members. This is one of the exceptions that proves the rule, for these two men were unique among the elders for having married only once each, and for staying married over the years.

Generally the relationship between sister's son and mother's brother is far more important; in fact it is the strongest non-agnatic bond between men in Ngologa society. It is characterised by warmth and mutual concern, and as Casalis noted among the Basuto over a century ago, it acts as "a counterbalance to the authority of the father and the eldest son." (1861:181) Further, the mother's brother provides an external point of reference for the matrifocal sibling-group, and is thus potentially divisive from the point of view of the agnatic group, even providing a lever which may be used in intra-group conflicts. Because it is free from the difficulties which bedevil agnatic relationships, and because it has strategic value in struggles for property and power between agnates, the mother's brother/sister's son relationship has obvious political potential. As Schapera wrote for the Tswana, the mother's brother

"differs markedly from a father's brother or other agnate in that he need never be feared as a possible rival for either property or position; and, on the other hand, he himself stands to benefit materially if his nephew becomes a man of wealth or the head of a large social group." (1963:171)

The way in which an individual can manipulate ties of this sort is perhaps best illustrated by case material. The following case, which concerns a man named Waatotsi, highlights the political significance of ties of affinity and matrilocalisation, and illustrates something of the feedback from politics to kinship.

Waatotsi was born in Lehututu, the illegitimate son of a woman of the ruling Pebana sub-clan. He was legitimated by bridewealth payment when, after his birth, his mother married, but his position
within the patrilineal group of his pater was weak. He left Lehututu and settled briefly in Ukwi, and then moved westwards to Nojane. After some years he left Nojane, which is ruled by a Tswana headman, and moved to the nearby village of Kuli, ruled, like Lehututu, by members of a Pebana sub-clan. Waatotsi was closely related to the Kuli headman, Ramoswane. His mother was one of Ramoswane's full sisters, and he had himself married a daughter of one of Ramoswane's half-sisters. Ramoswane, in turn, was married to a half-sister of Waatotsi. In discussing his move to Kuli, Waatotsi stressed his matrilateral relationship with Ramoswane:

I came from Nojane, saying there are Tlharo and Rolong (i.e., Tswana) there, and therefore I came here to my mother's brother (malome). I said, I am a Ngologa, my malome is Ramoswane, and I do not want to pay tax to the Tlharo. I came here and I explained to the District Commissioner that I moved because Ramoswane is my malome—like my mother. I did not waste time asking the permission of Keakopa (headman of Nojane), because he is not my mother or my father.

An impressive man, Waatotsi immediately became an influential figure in village politics. At first he supported his kinsman and affine, the headman, but then, during a political crisis which the headman only just survived, he broke with him and became a political maverick. This political realignment affected his subsequent marriage strategy. He hindered a marriage alliance with the headman's family and fostered one between his daughter and the son of the headman's chief political opponent (and younger half-brother), with whom, of course, he also had matrilateral ties.

Waatotsi's story shows that there is a reasonable expectation among the Ngologa that ties through women can be made to yield political benefits—favourites when immigrating, political support, even office. Waatotsi himself further stresses the feeling of identification with Ngologa as against the Tlharo and Rolong of the Kalahari, who are culturally virtually indistinguishable. The story shows also how quarrels about marriage alliances may originate in political disputes and in turn extend political breaches. In short, men manoeuvre for advantage simultaneously in the kinship and political domains, and their strategies in both domains of action are related.

IV

I have tried to tease out the political significance of kinship—in both senses—in Ngologa social life. As idiom and even perhaps ideology, kinship provides a mode of viewing politics. The kinship idiom sums up much that is fundamental to Ngologa values, and at the
same time it can be used to talk about all sorts of relationships. Among the Ngologa this mode of thinking and talking works well enough, but it would be absurd to argue that there is a necessary connection between particular kinship models and political notions. (Similar idioms are, of course, favoured by authoritarian governments who wish to foster an idealised Gemeinschaft.)

On the level of action, kinship status and political status, political choices and choices within the domestic domain, are very closely interconnected. “Kinship in the narrow sense” is a major reference point for much Ngologa political behaviour. To generalise about the impact of the kinship factor on political groups, one might say that where a solidary descent group forms the framework of a sub-clan, the sub-clan will be politically effective; but that when the leading family group in the sub-clan—the keystone of the arch—splits, the sub-clan itself will break apart and other sorts of faction will replace sub-clans as the large politically significant groupings. These factions owe their genesis to family-group fission and they may—like sub-clans—be cemented by internal ties of kinship and affinity between the members of their constituent family-groups, but unlike the sub-clans they are not conceived of as kinship-groups, and they do not enjoy the same legitimacy.

There is a dynamic interaction between the alliances of family-groups in the field of politics and their alliances through kinship and marriage. Political relations are partly determined by what happens within the domestic (kinship) domain of social relations, and there is also a feedback from the political to the domestic domain of relationship. Neither set of relationships is fully intelligible in isolation from the other. (Neighbourhood relationships, which I have only been able to touch on here, are also not an independent variable, but are part of the central dialectic of village organization. They are partly formed by—and in turn influence—kinship and political relationships.)

So far as the individual is concerned, his kinship relationships constrain him in political contexts and offer him opportunities for leadership, alliance and influence, as well as pushing him at times into political opposition to agnates. Kinship status does not determine his political behaviour, but it does influence it significantly. Similarly, a man’s political status is a factor when he comes to choose a wife or decides to activate or neglect particular kinship relationships.

In conclusion, I want to stress that I am not positing universal functional relationships. The kinship factor may, as among the

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1. The Ngologa, for example, talk of their relationship with their Bushmen serfs in these terms. See Silberbauer and Kuper (1966:177).
Ngologa, have great political significance in a mini-State, but there is no necessary connection between a political structure and any particular kinship system. A reading of Schapera’s comparative study of Southern African tribal governments will show that the political structure of the Ngologa is basically similar to that found at the village level among most Southern Bantu groups, some of which have very different kinship systems (Schapera, 1956). There are therefore a variety of ways in which one political structure may be expected to function, given the variety of kinship systems with which it may be associated.

Furthermore, although it is only in face-to-face (or back-to-back) communities that one finds the complex interaction of relations of kinship, neighbourhood and politics that characterises Ngologa society, the kinship factor is not always significant in small scale polities. Smallness of political scale is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the political prominence of the kinship factor. This is not to say that my analysis is irrelevant to studies of large-scale political systems. Many African States (both modern and traditional) are in practice so decentralised that political life at the village level is similar to that of the Ngologa political community.

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