Lineage and generation in Pokomo kinship: a preliminary description

Norman Townsend

The Pokomo number some 30,000 and their home area is Tana River District of Coast Province. Their language is closely related to those of other Coastal Bantu-speaking peoples, but in economy and settlement pattern they are quite different from any of their neighbours. Their agricultural system traditionally depends on the biannual flooding of the river Tana, along whose banks they live from Mbalambala (between Meru and Garissa) to the coast at Kipini. For along most of this length the average annual rainfall is insufficient for farming otherwise. Most of the following information describes the situation in the two sub-tribes (or clan alliances) of Milalulu and Zubaki, about 120 miles inland. No description yet exists in print of Pokomo kinship and affinity, and I would be grateful for informed criticism.

The Pokomo were traditionally grouped into thirteen sub-tribes (vyeti, s. kyeti). Following the imposition of central Government control, Locations were set up, the boundaries of six of which coincide with kyeti boundaries, so that in these cases a slightly greater degree of sub-tribal unity has been perpetuated. Each kyeti consists of from three to eight clans (masindo), and some of the names of these clans occur in several vyeti. Before colonial rule, each kyeti was governed by a council of elders. The present population of those six vyeti which are also Locations ranges from just over 1,000 to 7,000 (the size of the other vyeti is naturally more difficult to discover). The size of clans ranges from about 50 persons to several hundred.

These clans, which are patrilineal, are not localised, and, in general, members of any one clan may be found in several places throughout the kyeti. On average, in any one mile stretch of river, areas of land belonging to all the clans in the kyeti will be found, if not on both banks, then at least on one of the banks. I should add that north of Garsen the Pokomo do not cultivate land that is unlikely to be flooded at some time of the year, so the most important land is that immediately bordering the river to a depth of two or three hundred yards. Land farther back may be cleared and cultivated in a year of high floods, say once in

every five or six years. The land along the river banks is divided into sections that belong to groups of agnatic relatives, such that on each bank there may be ten sections (mafumbo) in any one mile stretch, and, as just mentioned, all the clans will probably be represented. Each fumbo is settled by men from one lineage (mdyango or balabala), and men from another lineage of the same clan will not be able to claim land. In most cases men in the same fumbo can trace their relationship to each other, going back from two to four generations to a common ancestor. Where relationships can be traced, I call it a sub-lineage. In other cases, men sharing the same fumbo cannot detail their kinship connections, though they claim membership of the same mdyango. (I should add that the terms mdyango and balabala are used to describe all kinds of agnatic descent groups, from a two-generation domestic unit up to what an anthropologist would call a lineage. Here is a case, then, of an outsider imposing somewhat rigid categories on what the local people see as a fluid situation).

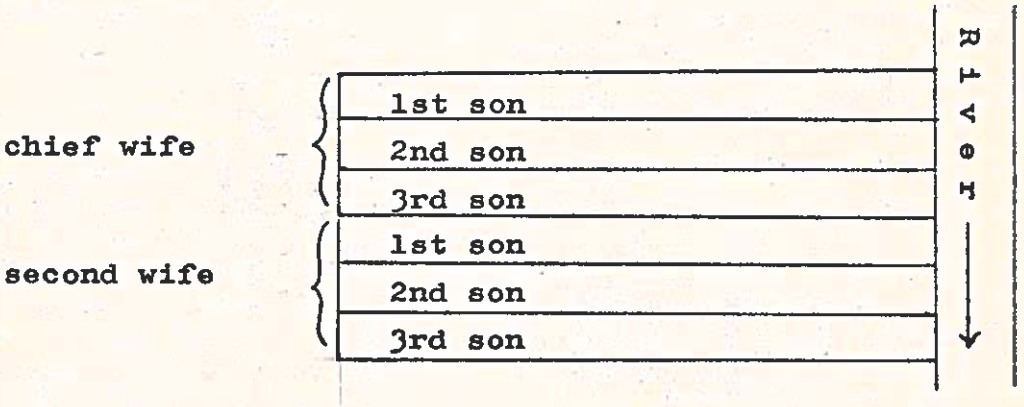
The smaller clans contain only one lineage, and the largest (in Milalulu at least) only five. The Milalulu and Zubaki Pokomo do not generally display much interest in tracing kinship connections beyond about four generations back, so the number of sub-lineages must be constantly changing as common ancestors are forgotten.

The Pokomo live in villages of from 15 to 150 houses; the average figure is about 75. In most villages men from all the clans in the kyeti will be found; in some cases one or even two clans may not be represented. In the past members of the leading clan of the kyeti would build their houses at the upstream end of the village, and the junior clan at the lower end. Little evidence of this exists today, but agnatic relatives in the same sub-lineage tend to build near each other. When crops are ripening people will move to their gardens, which are at most half an hour's walk away, but usually only ten minutes. Here they will build temporary houses of grass and will stay until the maize has all been harvested, returning with the harvest to the village. On average a fumbo is 175 yards in length and will be divided into plots for about 8 men, the boundaries all at right angles to the river's edge. These eight men will normally be close agnatic relatives. Mafumbo belonging to any one lineage can usually be found in many places throughout the kyeti, and any man can probably lay claim to land in at least five mafumbo in different stretches of the river (but not outside his kyeti). He will not, of course, be able to cultivate more than two of these at any one time. As in any small-scale agricultural society, it is impossible to separate the description of kinship from that of land tenure, and I shall come back to it.

The basic domestic unit is a man with wife or wives and children. Very occasionally one finds households in which a man is feeding and housing a widowed mother or sister, but three-generation households account for only 8% of all households (sample size: 112). Because men are generally older than their wives (by 4 to 8 years for first wives, and up to 30 years for subsequent wives) there are few widowers (only one in two villages of 134 men), but widows are more common (15 out of a sample of 132 ever-married women). I include here widows who were inherited by their husbands' brothers, and then divorced; most leviratic

marriages last only a year or less. Widows are not deprived of their husband's land, and most continue to cultivate by themselves. The traditional bee-hive-shaped* house of poles and grass, is giving way all along the river to rectangular mud houses with thatched roofs. With the older type of house each woman had her own house, even when very old and infirm. With the newer houses, which are more time-consuming and expensive to build, sometimes two wives, and a widowed mother or sister may live under the same roof, but in this case they will have separate rooms, sometimes with separate outside doors. On average a household contains 2.5 adults and 2.5 dependent children. The polygamy rate among ever-married men is 25.2% (sample size:123), with 20.3% having two wives, and 4.9% with three wives. There a few, locally well-known cases of men with four wives.

When a man marries a second wife, he divides his land into two equal halves, the chief wife (who is not always the first wife) taking the upriver half. As they reach puberty the sons of each wife are given shares of their mother's land, the oldest son of each taking the upriver share of his mother's plot. So that a man with two wives and, say, three sons by each wife, will divide his land like this:-



If one wife has only one son while the other wife has several, that one son will inherit half his father's land, while his several half-brothers will have to share the other half between them. (This may lead to ill-feeling and sometimes to sorcery accusations). The land is subdivided again in the next generation. Again one can see how closely integrated are the kinship system and the land tenure system, for one can read kin connections from the organization of land holding.

Men who are full brothers are closerto each other than they are to their half-brothers. This difference is even more noticeable in the case of groups of men who are half-brothers with the same mother but different fathers, where the mother was widowed and inherited. Ideally the sons of a leviratic marriage are counted as belonging to the dead man, but opinion is changing these days.

*that is, inverted-bowl-shaped (not the shape of the local beehive)-Ed.

Thus the eldest son of the first marriage should have authority over the sons of his mother in any leviratic marriage. There is however a stratagem which can be employed if the younger half-brothers want to establish their independence (kujigula). By paying 80/- each to their mother's brother (who controls the marriage of their mother) they can, following the death of their father, be counted as the sons of this real father and thus as an independent descent group.

Following the death of his father, it is the eldest of a group of brothers who controls the marriage of his sisters, but while he is respected by them, his opinion in a discussion counts no more than theirs. Likewise, there are no clan or lineage leaders, or any individual men in whom clan land or authority over clan or lineage members is invested. In each village there is one man for each clan who acts as local clan treasurer and convener; he is not necessarily the oldest or genealogically most senior member of his clan locally. These days clan members meet as a clan only on rare occasions. For example, when there is sufficient money collected from clan members whose daughters have recently married and who have, following custom, turned over a small part of the bridewealth money to the local clan treasury, a small feast will be held. Again, clan members will probably meet at some time during the days immediately following the death of a fellow clansman, as part of the matanga condolences, but here they will meet members of several other clans too. Even at cases involving internal disputes over clan land, they will meet members of other clans, who may have come to act as witnesses, or out of interest.

However, while unilineality may be clearly evident in matters of land tenure, clan feasts, funeral contributions, the levirate and naming customs, it is not very apparent in the kinship terminology. There are, for example, no terms that can be applied in blanket fashion across the generations. Take the mother's brother (abu); his son is not abu, neither is his father. All first cousins are brothers (ndugu). Moreover if one's mother comes from a certain clan, one does not call the men in that clan abu; only her brothers. Indeed some of the men one might call abu will belong to other clans entirely, e.g. one's mother's mother's sister's son. Thus the definition of 'brother' (ndugu) does not depend on patrilineality. It becomes clear that there is a strong emphasis on generation. All men of one's parents' generation may be called baba, and all women of that generation are mama. All father's sisters are anoe. There are no other terms for members of the first ascending generation within one's descent group. All men of one's grandparents' generation, regardless of how they are related and of what descent group they belong to, are called mchahua; the same term is used by men for a grandchild of either sex. All women of one's grandmothers' generation are yeye, a term which also means grandchild of either sex, and is used by women only. There are no other terms for people in alternate generations.

In-law terms are likewise few, and do not cross generation boundaries. In one's own generation there are men whom one calls

sode, that is one's wife's brother and one's sister's husband, for the term is reciprocal. It is a relationship composed of both friendship and hostility, characterised by pointed jokes about completing payment of bridewealth. Secondly there are women (one's wife's sister and one's brother's wife) whom a man calls muyamu; there is much joking involved in this relationship. The third kind of same-generation in-law is a woman's husband's sister, or her brother's wife: these she calls mefi. The term is not used by men. Sode and mefi are terms used between in-laws of the same sex, and muyamu between opposite sex in-laws.

For in-laws of the generations above and below there are again three terms. One's mother's brother is abu, as is one's sister's son. Another reciprocal term is mkwangu, for the father and mother of one's wife and for one's daughter's husband. It can also be used for the husband of an anoe, and for the son of a wife's brother. The use of the third term is tied in with Pokomo naming customs. The first son of a marriage must be named for his father's father, and the first daughter for her father's mother. The other children will be named for their father's siblings. Now, two people who have the same name will call each other mogo, whether they are related or not, and the mother (or potential mother) of a mogo will be called namogo (= nina wa mogo). Thus, for example, a man and his wife will call their son's wife namogo; so will the man's siblings.

The importance of the generation principle is shown in another sphere too, that of marriage restrictions. One may marry anyone of one's own generation, except of course a full or half-sister. I have collected data which show marriages between men and all kinds of first cousin except a father's brother's daughter. Elders say that in the past all such first cousin marriages were forbidden; they now amount to some 7% of all marriages. A man may also marry any woman who is classified as a grandmother or granddaughter. However, a man may not, ideally, marry anyone who can be classified as a mother, father's sister, a daughter, and in fact any woman who belongs to an adjacent generation. As I have said, the classificatory principle works in such a way that any cognate can quickly be placed in his appropriate generation. But in fact, if the relationship is not too close, this restriction can be got round, for there is a custom called 'removing kinship' (kuburya uluko) by which an expensive cloth (a hida) is presented to the intended wife's mother's brother (if the restricting connection is via her mother) or to her father (if he is, for example, your 'brother', 'grandfather' or 'grandson'). The closest link that I have discovered removed in this way was between a man and his mother's mother's brother's daughter, whom he wanted to marry. He did in fact do so, but it has led to lasting bitterness between him and his wife's brother, for it was widely felt that this woman was too close a 'mother' for the link to be removed.

This sort of behaviour is regarded with distaste by the lower

Pokomo, who say that these upper Pokomo "don't care whom they marry". The Buu kyoti, for example, forbids marriage not only between adjacent generations, but also between members of the same caln; they have a moiety system with four clans in each moiety and in the past these moieties also may have been exogamous.

Relations between alternate generations are affectionate, but a man owes respect to all members of the generation above him. This will naturally be tempered if some of his 'fathers' or 'mothers' are younger than he is. But a young boy who has a 'brother' sixty years older than himself will still treat him as a brother and call him by his name, something not done between members of adjacent generations. So strong is the generation principle that I have been unable to find anything but respect even in the relationship between a man and his mother's brother, a relationship that elsewhere in patrilineal Africa contains many affectionate elements. As might be expected, relations between in-laws of adjacent generations are characterised by great circumspection. Even now many elders insist that their son-in-law eats at a separate dish. Ideally, if a man has dealings with his father-in-law over the payment of bridewealth, they should be transacted by his father. The same two elders are the ones who will be involved in any transactions for the return of the bridewealth cash in the event of divorce. Divorce is not infrequent. If we express the number of marriages ending in divorce as a percentage of all marriages except those that have ended by death, the figure is 36.7% (sample size: 248 marriages). There is unfortunately a dearth of information on the divorce rates of peoples in Kenya, so that I cannot say how this compares with other areas. But a proper assessment of the factors involved in the divorce rate would have to follow an anlysis of Pokomo marriage. The importance of generation and age in traditional Pokomo social structure is also reflected in the existence of age groups (maluwa, s. luwa). But the maluwa today have little significance for kinship or marriage. In the past the young men spent much of their free time in the village men's house, and this house was a centre for the social life of most of the young people of the village. But luwa membership is not tied in with generation membership; the sons of one father may be found in several maluwa.

I have in this short article tried to show the importance of the principle of patrilineality in the explanation of Pokomo kinship and social organisation. Another principle, perhaps of equal significance, is that of generation.