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Dennis Galvan

Joking Kinship as a Syncretic Institution

Joking kinship in Senegal is an example of a syncretic informal institution. Thinking of joking kinship in terms of institutional syncretism helps us make sense of the origins, transformations and contemporary political deployments of joking kinship. It is the analytic key to placing joking kinship outside sterile and well-rehearsed “debates” between instrumentalist and primordialist theories of culture, and in the more productive context of a theory of practice associated with pragmatist and constructivist notions of the creativity of action and the decomposability of structure. Institutional syncretism also makes possible a critique and reformulation of the effort to find “positivist” relationships between joking kinship and two dependent variables of interest to many policymakers and analysts of politics in postcolonial settings: “ethnic” cooperation and nation-building.

Thus, the two main goals of this article are, first, to present joking kinship in light of the concept of institutional syncretism, suggesting how syncretism makes possible a different reading of joking kinship than an interpretation rooted more fully in instrumentalism or political economy. Second, the article begins to sketch how and under what circumstances syncretic joking kinship might contribute to cooperation and nation building. In this more positivist side of my undertaking, I will show how a syncretic approach to the institution of joking kinship fundamentally alters how we think about “causality”, such that proposed relationships among “variables” can only be valid in quite *sui generis* and readily mutable circumstances. Before turning to these two goals, let me briefly introduce what I mean by joking kinship and how it serves as the empirical foundation for this analysis.

On Joking Kinship

My presentation of joking kinship as an empirical phenomenon draws mainly on research I have conducted in Senegal since 1988 (in a cluster of about thirty mostly Serer villages informally known as Njafaj, located in the department of Niakhar, region of Fatick, as well as among migrants

from this area to Dakar). Joking kinship as practiced in this part of Senegal generally follows the social patterns as well as the dynamics of reification, transformation and redeployment presented elsewhere in this volume. It consists of widely held notions of perceived relatedness that may link large extended families (patrilineal and sometimes matrilineal clans), or ethnic groups (especially the Serer majority and the Diola and Tukolor minorities of the Njafaj zone). It is not unknown, but less common at the intra-familial level, among in-laws or between grandparents and grandchildren. As observed in the founding colonial anthropological works on the subject¹, and in more recent scholarship (Stevens 1978; Hagberg 2002; Canut 2002), in this region joking kinship typically centers on regularized patterns of mutual ribbing, insulting and teasing, with primary themes of historic subordination/slavery and food insecurity.

For example, upon meeting a person of the Serer ethnic group, a Tukolor might include among the usual greetings a jab like “Oh, you’re a Serer? Then you’re my slave”. To which it would be appropriate for the Serer person to retort, “No, no, all Tukolors are the slaves of the Serer”. Or Serer neighbors with last name Faye and Diouf, also understood to have a joking kinship, might follow this exchange: “Diouf? Diouf, you all eat too much.” “Oh, you Fayes, you can’t invite a Faye over to your house, because you will never have enough food to feed him.” Both parties might continue this type of mutually insulting banter for a short time, and greetings aside, move on to everyday conversation or the particular subject that brings them together.

Beyond these regularized insults, the rhetoric of joking kinship also prohibits open conflict between these metaphorical cousins. Joking kin are usually expected, in spite of (or perhaps *because* of, more on that below) the teasing, to show special willingness to support or provide material resources when their “cousins” are in need. Moreover, it is widely expected that joking kin are especially suited to intervene in the internal conflicts of the group with whom they are paired as cousins.

As an ideological or rhetorical structure, joking kinship seems to deploy metaphorical cousin bonds or vague notions of quasi-kinship alliance to conceal or redirect historical memories of past conflict and/or shared trauma, or to mitigate potential circumstances of conflict in the present day. Oft-repeated banter about slavery and subordination seem to support the idea of joking kinship as ideological salve on historic subordination, or hegemonic tool for maintenance of hierarchy (Fouéré 2004; Smith 2004). Some oral historical accounts emphasize the roots of joking kinship in shared trauma, such as the oft-repeated tale told to explain joking kinship between Serer and Diola. In this story, two sisters, Aguène and Diambone, are said to have set out together in a pirogue (dugout canoe of a sort), encountering

1. The anthropological classics on joking kinship from the era of colonial codification of culture include A. R. RADCLIFFE-BROWN (1940), M. GRIAULE (1948), A. I. RICHARDS (1937), D. PAULME (1939), M. H. LABOURET (1929), M. MAUSS (1927).

a terrible storm that sundered the vessel. One of them floated towards the Siin-Saluum estuary and became the progenitor of the Serer people; the other towards the mouth of the Casamance River to become the founder of the Diola people (Ndiaye 1992; Sambou 2005a). Accounts such as Aguène and Diambone, or the founding story of the Bozo and Dogon joking kinship in Mali², suggest either a greater diversity of historical origins of the practice (in shared trauma for example), or more sophisticated structures of hegemony, masking historic subordination or conflict with pleasing stories of common struggle.

But for our purposes, a search for either the “real” historical origins of the practice (à la primordialist understandings) or for the “real” patterns of material interest or domination behind the deployment of this cultural-rhetorical tool (à la instrumentalist understandings) is not especially fruitful. Joking kinship exists in everyday practice in Njafaj, in Senegal, and elsewhere in Africa, as an element of perceived “tradition” subject to both political deployment by “cultural entrepreneurs”, but also to everyday use and transformation in the hands of non-elite actors. It is a set of habits and informal rules whose content, historicity, subjective meaningfulness, and practical usefulness are not fixed by terms of origin nor by historic domination. Joking kinship is a decomposable structure, currently and at certain times in the past, much the subject of creative reworking. It is thus best understood in terms of an overall theory of practice and in light of the specific notion of “institutional syncretism.”

Joking Kinship as Syncretic Institution

Institutional syncretism is an ongoing process of everyday creativity in which actors at many levels take apart component elements of institutions derived from more than one origin for the purpose of putting together new, recombinant institutional structures³. In this formulation, institutions can

2. In this account a Bozo mother, setting out on a long journey, once entrusted her children to her Dogon friend while she journeyed. When famine struck the Dogon community, the Bozo children were close to starvation. The Dogon foster parent cut off and cooked part of her leg to feed to the entrusted Bozon children, ensuring that they did not starve, and, as the story goes, forging a joking kinship alliance between the two groups.
3. For my own more complete exploration of the nature of institutional syncretism and how people in the Njafaj region of Senegal have used it to respond to a century of land tenure and local governance changes, see GALVAN (1997, 2004). For similar deployments of the concept to make sense of the incorporation of new organizational structures in Japanese firms in the postwar period see SIL (2002), and to present trade associations as alternatives to perfect market competition and regulated monopoly in early 20th century US industrialization, see BERK (1994). For parallel conceptualizations which share the basic logic of institutional syncretism (decomposability of structure, creativity and reflexivity of agency) but

be understood in terms of layers, as somewhat regularized structures of practice embedded in cultural values and taken-for-granted patterns of behavior, expressed to some degree as informal rules, sometimes as formal codified rules, enforced or promoted by formal organizations. Echoing Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1977), or Dewey's earlier and similar idea of habit (2002), this is a sociological and cultural understanding of institutions, in no way coterminous with formal rules nor even requiring formal organizations.

The concept of syncretism with regard to institutions is rooted in two fundamental ideas derived from pragmatist and constructivist social theory: the decomposability of structure and the creativity of agency. By decomposability of structure, I mean that institutions of various sorts, like joking kinship (or free markets or racial subordination or human rights) must not be understood as extant historical givens, or natural products of evolutionary or teleological development, or artefacts of formative moments of domination. Rather, syncretism in general is about the taking apart and putting together of the "elements" that make up existing "forms" to create new ones⁴. Applied to political life, institutions are the "forms" that consist of

do not use that phrase, see STARK & BRUSZT (1998) on "recombinant property" in Eastern Europe after the Cold War, SABEL & ZEITLIN (1997) on "institutional intercurrency", HERRIGEL & ZEITLIN (1999) on the mutability of institutional forms in Germany and Japan under US occupation, and ANDERSON (1974) on the "concatenation of modes of production". For earlier, but conceptually rather different efforts to deploy to "syncretism" in political contexts, see HAAS (1997) and DI PALMA (1978).

4. I have quite intentionally borrowed the notion of syncretism from religious anthropology, in an earlier work (GALVAN 2004) to critically assess development projects that can productively be understood as "evangelical", also in the religious sense (promoted as universally beneficial and progressive). However, syncretism as part of a theory of action must be distinguished from the way adherents or apologists for religious orthodoxy have usually viewed the concept: as contamination of one extant and essentialist matrix of creed, symbolism and practice with elements of creed, symbolism and practice from some other origin (usually, in this view, from some inferior and also essentialized belief system). While this point seems to escape leading religious anthropologists (e.g. STEWART 1999), treating the concept of syncretism as implicitly essentialist (predicated on essentialist notions of prior, "pure" cultures then subjected to mixing), represents an erroneous acceptance of how defenders of dominant religious orthodoxies conceptualize syncretism. From a subaltern point of view, from the perspective, for example of the ex-slaves in the Caribbean or Brazil who came up with Santeria or Candomble, there is nothing "impure" or "degenerate" about the new belief system pragmatically crafted and recrafted over time in light of local circumstances. From this perspective, locally crafted syncretic religion (be it Afro-Caribbean, Senegalese Sufi or the Islam of the Javanese *kiai*) is as much bona fide religion as any orthodoxy. Indeed, once we move to this perspective, we move very close to the Deweyian pragmatist position about structure and creativity (see below): all religion, and by extension, all elements of culture, and all institutions, are syncretic. They are subject to everyday acts of transformation-in-use by a variety of actors, and in an ongoing process of sense making, are being recrafted in practice, whether the proponents of institutional or religious orthodoxy recognize this or not.

component “elements” which can be taken apart. This may entail recombinant transformations which disassemble the values, habits, informal rules, formal rules and organizations associated with particular institutions, recombining them in ways that suit new circumstances and may reflect new influences or may incorporate elements of institutions borrowed from elsewhere. One might argue, for example, that this is what the Meiji restoration accomplished in terms of public administration in Japan, or what the use of *loya jirga* “traditional” councils as means to legitimate electoral democracy promised in post 9/11 Afghanistan.

What makes a syncretic perspective on institutions different is this fundamental way of looking at structures as always and everywhere *decomposable*. Thinking from a syncretic point of view means recognizing that we cannot take institutions as extant entities, historically “set” by sedimented tradition, hegemonic power, or some temporal determinism of a critical juncture and ensuing trajectory. Just as historians have long denaturalized nation and nationalism, recognizing these as constructs (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Anderson 1983) and post-structuralists/Foucauldians have revealed the work of *making* and *enforcing* behind political normalities such as state power (Mitchell 1988; Mbembe 2001) and development (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1990), the same is true for institutions as Unger (1987), Sewell (1992), Sabel and Zeitlin (1997), Stark (1996) and Grabher and Stark (1997) suggest.

Creativity of action is a closely related, and in some sense more fundamental idea. Rejecting, of course, images of actors as either “cultural dopes” or adding machines of risk and gain, thinking syncretically about institutions means seeing actors as practical problem solvers confronted every day with challenges which require them to use deliberative imagination to tinker with the tools at their disposal. They have some sense of the tool as pragmatic instrument for the resolution of immediate tasks, and have a sense of their ability to modify the tool if that might help solve the task or problem at hand.

For pragmatists, thinking of agency as creative, practical problem solving depends first on overcoming dualistic thinking and second on deliberative imagination. Pragmatism at its heart is a philosophy concerned with overcoming key dualisms: means-ends, theory-fact or mind-body for the original pragmatists (Dewey 2002; James 1975; Mead 1932), for successors (Rorty 1999; Bourdieu 1977; Unger 1987), structure-agency, interests-institutions, or materialist goals of political economy-primordialist cultural structures. Whereas reigning dualistic theories treat one side of the dichotomy as the object of action conditioned or structured by the other side, pragmatists see these as mutually constitutive because, in the sense that inspires syncretism, they see the structures on both sides as multiple, sometimes incomplete, and always available for new and original recombination.

For example, Dewey undermines the dichotomy impulse-habit (rough translation in contemporary terms: interest-institution) by showing that when we make decisions on new goals or activities (the stuff of impulse) we do

so not conditioned by a pre-determined set of existing habits, but rather by working through in our creative imagination a series of possible futures, conducting “an experiment in making various combinations of selected elements of habits and impulses, to see what resultant action would be like if it were entered upon” (Dewey 2002: 190). This is possible for Dewey because impulses are innumerable and changing, and habits are multiple, overlapping and include fragmentary remnants of old patterns of action. The process of deliberation brings various possible combinations of habit and impulse together as possible courses of action, in which action itself is a syncretic, integrative activity that alters the repertoire of impulse and habit even as it crafts new combinations of them.

It is this sense of everyday experimentation and creativity which makes it impossible to think of joking kinship not as some fixed, reified inheritance derived from the “*bibliothèque coloniale*” nor as a fixed hegemonic structure designed to mask deeper interests in domination on the part of powerful groups. Yes, of course colonialism reified whatever relations existed along the lines of joking kinship in the late 19th century and early 20th centuries. Of course contemporary actors, especially political elites and cultural entrepreneurs like Saliou Sambou in Senegal (the *gouverneur culturel*, see below as well as Smith in this volume and De Jong 2005) or the editors *Le Journal du Jeudi* in Burkina Faso (Habgerg this volume) continue to reify and deploy versions of joking kinship, demagogically, democratically and in other ways that suit their particular political agendas (Douyon this volume). But to privilege these reifications is to ignore the way that a syncretic understanding of structure and agency opens to the door to numerous instances of such transformation, and to the ongoing political contestation that is the necessary concomitant to syncretism.

In my own research in the Njafaj region and among Serer migrants in Dakar, there are numerous instances of such mutability, of the pragmatic transformation and redeployment of joking kinship in new circumstances. Sometimes joking kinships in Njafaj exclude certain ethnic groups; in other circumstances they are included. Sometimes they provide meaningful bases for solidarity and mutual aid, while at other times political allegiances or economic need seem to push joking kinship into the background. Sometimes they can be deployed to resolve immediate conflicts and even contribute to a meaningful sense of belonging and community. These variations are more fully presented in the next section, which explores “positivist” accounts of when and how joking kinship impacts cooperation and nation building.

Joking Kinship in Positivist Accounts of Cooperation and Nation-Building

At least three currents have come together in recent years such that some political analysts and policymakers have grown curious about practices such

as joking kinship as possible independent variables in making sense of cooperation among ethnic groups and nation-building in post-colonial Africa. First, Zartman (2000), the leading US political scientist working on African sub-national conflict, along with others concerned with conflict resolution have discovered resources, practices and institutions of value in “traditional” African culture that supposedly can help to “cure” African internal conflicts.

Second, especially for US social scientists, the end of the Cold War seemed to represent the death of ideology as basis for political mobilization, seemed to unleash new “cultural” bases for conflict both subnational and global conflict (Huntington 1996), and coincided with the rise of democratic transitology (Lijphart 1999), with its attendant concern for “civil society” and “political culture” as the “right” kind of social structures to support pluralist democracy (Tessler 2002; Shin & Wells 2005). Studies of culture thus returned from three decades of intellectual exile, making analyses of institutional patterns behind ethnic cooperation (Fearon & Laitin 1996) acceptable subjects for conference presentation and publication. Indeed, bit-by-bit, the last decade and a half have seen a wholesale revival of key elements of modernization theory, with some openly espousing it in supposedly “updated” form (Inglehart & Welzel 2005).

Finally, with the removal of Cold War financial props holding up a variety of African regimes, the wave of national conferences in the early 1990s, the trappings of democratization, and moves towards genuine openness in many societies, we are witnessing some degree of effort on the part of African elites to reconsider the weak links between postcolonial states and societies largely governed through colonial logics in the first four decades of nominal independence. As a result, some elite discourse suggests a kind of decolonization and “indigenization” of political life, resulting, like all nationalisms, in the reification of neo-traditional practices (such as joking kinship) as possible tools for establishing cultural cohesion and building political community (Habgerg; Diallo in this volume).

To be sure, all three of these currents (conflict resolution notices “tradition”; post-Cold War revival of political culture studies; new decolonization discourse in Africa) point toward or promote highly reified, primordialist constructions of a practice like joking kinship. This is true in the scholarly world because the democratic transitology and state consolidation/conflict resolution literatures of the 1990s and beyond generally return to modernization theory’s teleological notions of change and development when they think about culture (old, static, pre-modern traditions of the non-West evolving slowly into secular liberal individualistic materialism with time and enough “development”). This is true for African elites because essentialized, primordial notions of African culture generally offer more stark contrast with the West and represent, so it is thought, more effective slogans for popular mobilization.

But let us be clear. Simply because mainstream US political science, some international policymakers, and some African elites deploy reified, primordialist constructions of an institution like joking kinship does not mean

that this is the only discourse or practice associated with the institution. In real practice on the ground, both elite and non-elite actors syncretically transform this institution in creative and meaningful ways. The fact that most official rhetoric about joking kinship is essentialized does nothing to obviate the fact of its syncretic deployment and transformation on the ground.

Likewise, in spite of the fact that most work on joking kinship as independent variable treats it as a static artefact from an unchanging past, as analysts who understand the dynamics of institutional syncretism, we need not shy away from the policy question: do the real, mutable, heterogeneous practices of various forms of joking kinship bear any relationship to internal cooperation and nation building? In this section, I will begin to sketch out how such a positivist exploration of the impact of joking kinship on internal cooperation and nation building can be undertaken, and will show how it looks very different from conventional approaches, when we recognize joking kinship as a syncretic institution. Let me clarify at the outset that, because this is part of a research project currently underway, my presentation here will offer a conceptual framework, and directions for research, with partial, but not complete empirical support⁵.

There are three main elements to a positivist analysis of joking kinship as independent variable, framed in terms of institutional syncretism. First, we need to disaggregate the basic research question into its behavioral and discursive components, recognizing that in light of syncretism, the former is inseparable from the latter (indeed the two are mutually constitutive). Second, the degree to which a syncretic institution (as independent variable) can be said to impact an outcome of interest must be framed in terms of constraining factors intrinsic to syncretism itself (political economy of meaning at multiple levels), alongside the most critical structural factors we would consider whether the independent variable were syncretic or not (in this case, state-society relations and resource competition). Third, as noted above, generalization across time and space about the universal impact of joking kinship on cooperation or nation building is not possible. Findings apply to *sui generis* circumstances, places and times. Patterns across such instances can only be determined through wide-ranging analytic induction, a massive research program taking into account numerous instances or cases.

The Research Questions

With regard to cooperation between “ethnic” groups, the basic research question can be broken down into two parts. Behaviorally, does the perception of meaningful patterns of joking kinship result in greater willingness

5. This work is part of a larger, ongoing research project that seeks to address the nature and role of syncretic informal institutions in relations between identity groups and nation-building in Senegal and Central Java, Indonesia.

to make voluntary material sacrifices (of resources, time, willingness to voluntarily cede in disputes, etc.) for people thought to belong to different groups? Discursively, does the perception of meaningful patterns of joking kinship help make a rhetoric of the desirability of voluntary material sacrifice for “ethnic others” normative or perhaps hegemonic? “Voluntary material sacrifice” is one useful operationalization because it embeds cooperation in real material practice, but is general enough to take different forms in different circumstances.

It is important to note that this framing in no way accepts the “reality” or historicity of reified categories of ethnicity or identity. Again, regardless of historic reification, ethnic identity exists as a subjectively meaningful structure of identity, and can be presented and analyzed as such in specific circumstances and times without accepting claims that it has always existed in its current form, or that it establishes natural and innate difference, etc.⁶.

Critically, it is probably more often the case that the perception or promulgation of joking kinship operates more effectively on the discursive than the behavioral level, although the two are intertwined and the former lays a foundation for the latter. This is clearly what Governor Saliou Sambou of Senegal has been up to in his much publicized work as a Diola mediator in Serer conflicts⁷, as well as his promotion of the *Aguène et Diambone* Serer-Diola origins myth as basis for a culture of cooperation and peace. Sambou has been a leading force in the promotion of cultural festivals to promote popular awareness of this story and has gone so far as to publish of a full-color, illustrated, large-print children’s book retelling the tale. He sees this as an effort to teach “a new generation of young Senegalese” about their culture and its “virtues” (Sambou 2005b). Whether this has had any real impact on reducing tensions, increasing voluntary material sacrifice for ethnic others, or promoting a rhetoric supportive of such sacrifice is another matter, which might be at least superficially addressed in future research with careful opinion surveys.

With regard to nation building, we can structure the basic research questions in much the same way: does the perception that “people like me” have joking kinship with many “others” increase willingness to make voluntary material sacrifices for the sake of the “nation” (e.g. paying taxes, providing labor or time on behalf of national goals, military or other service or volunteering, voting, willingness to compromise politically for the sake of national well being)? Discursively, does a perception that “people like me” have joking kinship with many “others” help make a rhetoric of the desirability of voluntary material sacrifice for the sake of the nation more normative or hegemonic?

6. See YOUNG (1976, 1994) for further clarification on the constructed nature of “ethnic” identities.

7. See complete presentation of one such instance below.

In the case of nation building, one could consider a host of other operationalizations of “national feeling” or “political community”, but again, voluntary material sacrifice has the advantage of linking national belonging to concrete concerns and calculations, thus representing a “harder” test. This volume is replete with illustrations of efforts to use joking kinship to promote a rhetoric of meaningful national citizenship and belonging (Hagberg, Douyon, Diallo), with implications of membership and its attendant responsibilities. Again, the actual degree to which these efforts succeed in fostering a willingness to make voluntary material sacrifices for the nation, or establish doing so as normative, is another research question.

Constraining Factors

Exploring the impact of joking kinship as syncretic institution on these measures of cooperation and nation-building requires that we contextualize its transformations and deployments in at least three main ways. While there are likely other contextualizing or intermediate factors to consider, the three outlined below rise from my research to date and address the need to contextualize within the process of syncretism itself, and also in terms of major structural conditions. The contextualizing, intermediate factors are the same for analysis of inter-ethnic cooperation and for nation-building, so I will treat these together in the discussion below.

First, thinking of joking kinship as a syncretic institution, subject to decomposition, creative transformation and redeployment in new contexts, requires us to look not simply at elite instrumentalization, but at a wider field of contestation. We need to understand the nature of control over historical memory and the control over the discursive deployment of that memory, that is, a “political economy of meaning” at several scales (local, national, international, at least). In the context of a syncretic understanding of institutional change, historical memories of such structures and the capacity to promote such accounts are themselves moldable resources, over which we can expect social contestation. Those who control historical memories of culture, of who “we” are and with whom we “are supposed” to be allied, in turn can manage the range of possible “cathartic alliances.”

For example, in the Njafaj region of Senegal, inter-ethnic Serer-Wolof joking kinships have not emerged on any meaningful scale, not because these have no “primordial history”, but because of the local political economy of meaning. For decades the elite of the region—the pre-colonial *Gelwaar* monarchy and customary land managers/priests (*lamans* or masters of fire) in the pre-colonial and colonial periods; the new bureaucratic class of French-educated, well connected local officials, many of them veterans of World War II—were in ongoing political and economic competition with Wolof neighbors. For most of the twentieth century, the primary challenge

came from the expansion of Mouride peanut production, a social force perceived in Njafaj in decidedly Wolof terms (Klein 1968). *Gelwaar, laman* and bureaucratic elites maintained memories and narratives of Wolof-Serer antagonism that precluded the redeployment of joking kinship to address this kind of cleavage.

But the political economy of meaning at the local level is not unitary, nor static. Among certain extended families, joking kinship has been recrafted to build specific Wolof-Serer ties. Many patriclan names, such as Faye and Diouf, are common among both Serers and Wolofs, reflecting in part the high levels of intermarriage and criss-crossing migration patterns that actually unite the two groups. Fayes and Dioufs have a well-established inter-familial joking kinship, rooted for many respondents in historical memories of the founding of key villages in Njafaj (Becker 1984). Faye-Diouf joking kinship is nearly ubiquitous when the parties are Serer, but has been redeployed in some instances to incorporate Wolof Fayes and Dioufs in the region under certain circumstances.

Redeployment of inter-familial joking kinship to include Wolofs seems to hinge on the degree of personalism, of face-to-face contact linking a Wolof Faye and a the Serer Diouf (or vice versa). When such a relationship exists between people who live in the same community, are part of the same occupational or patronage network, or otherwise have cause to come into fairly regular face-to-face contact with one another, actors have syncretically recrafted inter-familial joking kinship to overcome the “primordial” ban on such partnerships between Wolofs and Serers⁸.

Here we see a political economy of meaning at work, which is quite distinct from instrumentalization at the elite level. As Hyden (1983) and Berry (1993) have pointed out in African contexts, and as Putnam (2000) or Fukuyama (1995) would argue more universally, investments in personalistic networks are important matters of political economy. Those who have made such investments in Wolof counterparts are willing to buttress these investments by reframing joking kinship to build useful or justificatory ties with a Wolof, because after all, they are Fayes (or Dioufs).

At the national level, civil society actors, subaltern groups, media outlets, and state actors deploy certain images of national political culture and versions of historical memory in the process of recrafting joking kinship in ways they find useful. Hagberg (this volume) outlines this in some detail for the editors of the satirical *Journal du Jeudi*, a major public promoter of certain versions of joking kinship in Burkina Faso. Douyon (this volume) suggests similar mutable deployments of joking kinship depending on who controls and seeks to use which cultural resources and memories in Mali.

8. Observations supporting these claims are for the moment based on qualitative observations; more formalized survey findings will follow in a next round of field research.

It is also apparent in Raphaël Ndiaye's early work (1992) on the regional historical origins of joking kinship, suggesting networks of cognate joking partnerships, which use different names in different locales, but which correspond through migration to shared origins in the central Mandé zone of old Mali. Although he does not mention it, Ndiaye's interpretation echoes contemporary accounts of the origin of regional joking kinships in the Charter of Kurukan Fuga, purported to be the vehicle by which Sunjata institutionalized such relationships (Leach 2000).

Ndiaye (1992: 98-102, 125-127) and others take the discussion one step further, envisioning joking kinship alliances as part of the social webbing for an alternative, more African conceptualization of political community to supplant failed or dysfunctional postcolonial polities. In contrast to Western media accounts of the disintegration of postcolonial states into Hobbesian political anarchy (Kaplan 2000), some West African intellectuals have picked up the logic of Ndiaye's argument to suggest that joking kinship rooted in long-distance regional migration represents part of a real foundation for building regional economic and other organizations that could supersede the nation-state inherited from colonialism (Fall 2005; Barry 2005; Camara 2005). For some, this might depend also on ceding nation-state autonomy to sub-national units of the scale of pre-colonial micro-kingdoms (such as, in Senegal, Walo, Kayor, Siin, Saluum, etc.). Such a move, which parallels the discourse on sub-regionalization in a newly federated European Union (Haas 1986), appears both as a cure for regional autonomy/secessionist movements and as a "return" to a more "indigenous" political geography.

Ndiaye's style of interpretation of joking kinship has also emerged as the basis of a second political project, presentation of Senegalese national political identity as cohesive, inclusive and historically rooted. In this view, the fact that most of Senegal's major ethnic groups are linked to at least one other ethnic group in the country by a joking kinship, as well as the existence of such relations at lower levels (between families, within families, between villages, etc.), constitutes one among several threads in the weaving of a fabric of national identity. Understood as a foundation for political community, joking kinship is thought to generate moments, however fleeting, when actors transcend formerly salient notions of ethnic self and other by establishing new, experientially real and normatively meaningful senses of pan-ethnic self.

This has been central to the efforts of Governor Sambou in promulgating the *Aguène et Diambone* story as a major chapter in the "real" historical origins of Senegalese ethnic groups, as foundational of national political culture, and as the critical tool for resolution of the Casamance crisis. Sambou's efforts to reorder historical memories of the origins and significance of joking kinship have been successful, I would argue, because they find support in other patterns of cultural production, other, more long-standing dynamics in the national political economy of meaning. I would call attention to three groups of national political actors in Senegal, all of whom for

their own particular reasons have promulgated imagery of ethnic inclusion, sometimes rooted in historical imaginations of metaphorical relatedness or “*cousinage*” of the various ethnic communities in the country. First, the most important and politically legitimate actors in Senegalese society, the Islamic brotherhoods, have since the 19th century jihad movements promoted universalistic founding myths, whereby anyone, regardless of language, cultural identity, or other particularism, can accept Islam, follow a Sufi marabout and thereby become assimilated into a national, distinctly Senegalese religious institution (Cruise O’Brien 1975). The idea that the people of Senegal, regardless of ethnicity, are part of one “family”, the family that resides in the *dar-al-Islam* (at least of the Mouride or Tijane variety), is widely circulated in the national political economy of meaning in Senegal.

In a closely related way, Senegalese political elites have largely avoided divide and rule strategies toward ethnic communities, preferring to promote imagery and narratives of cultural unity. Senegal might have been more like its regional neighbors in this regard, its leaders tempted to favor one particularistic group over others, were it not for the fact that the state relied on the Islamic brotherhoods for social mobilization throughout most of the twentieth century. Because the brotherhoods gathered the votes, ensured some degree of agricultural productivity and labor quiescence, national elites did not need to develop their own tentacles or techniques of mobilization. This was true throughout Senegal, except of course, in the region where the brotherhoods were historically weak—the Casamance (Mark 1999). Here, not surprisingly, the symbolism and narrative of national unity is less resonant, and the dynamics of conflict are more pronounced and problematic.

Finally, it has also been in the interests of Senegal’s cultural and intellectual elites (to the extent they stood outside the state and thus constitute a distinct category—a sometimes questionable claim) to promote notions of national unity and cultural relatedness. This is true whether one considers Cheikh Anta Diop’s somewhat fantastical notions of the Egyptian origins of the major ethnic groups of Senegal (1960), the insistence on French as a national language for educational purposes, *mbalax* as the syncretic, pan-Senegalese official national musical style (derived from the artistry of griots—which griots? Wolof? Serer? *It doesn’t matter*), to of course, a profound (and universal?) popular national unifier, football.

In all these realms of symbolic propagation, the message is more or less the same: there is a unified Senegalese national culture, that either pulls together elements of kindred distinct cultures (Diop and *mbalax*) or supercedes them with a new national cultural identity (French and football). For most of the twentieth century, this served well the interests of national elites who, as *assimilé* elites converted to a French (Crowder 1967), or at best *négritude* cultural identity (Vaillant 1990), had relatively weak cultural connections, and weaker patronage connections, to their ethnic communities of origin. Thus, the *assimilé* elite was better equipped to speak to, and

perhaps mobilize, a population unified around symbols of *assimilé* nationhood (negritude and Diop's afrocentrism, francophilia, *mbalax*, football) than to reach out into and form a political base among ethnically distinct communities.

What does this have to do with joking kinship? The efforts of Sambou and others to recraft and represent Serer-Diola, Serer-Tukolor and other joking kinships as bases for national identity are continuous with and supported by other, some longstanding, elite promulgations of historical memories and narratives of national unity in Senegal. Joking kinship as "authentic" basis for a Senegalese national political community is not the first effort to use imagery and metaphors of family to help imagine the nation. Indeed, to the extent that Sambou and other cultural entrepreneurs of joking kinship are working out a new basis for civicness and belonging (not a new basis for or form of democracy, as Smith, this volume, insightfully suggests), this consists, I would argue, largely in recrafting the imagery and perhaps the substance of citizenship in the language of family rather than liberal individualism. Emergent national political community is based not on social contract rational individualism, but on the notion of political community as a series of overlapping networks of relatedness imagined as metaphorical kinship, into which the ideology of the *petites patries* feeds (Smith this volume).

Treating joking kinship as a syncretic institution requires that we consider who deploys what cultural resources and historical memories, with what power and potential to establish normative or hegemonic attitudes as we assess the influence of joking kinship on cooperation and nation building. In addition, we should recognize that structural factors, which themselves are not intrinsic to the process of syncretism, also play a role in the degree to which this institution might contribute to outcomes of interest.

The nature and degree of state consolidation bear on the operation of joking kinship as a mediator of ethnic relations and component of nation building in Senegal. The nature, of state building in Senegal has long reflected the basic constructivist insight that cultural identities are decomposable resources that can be recombined in politically advantageous ways. A clear example is the long-standing policy of placing civil servants of various sorts (from regional Governors like Saliou Sambou to Water and Forest Service agents) somewhere other than among their ethno-linguistic kin (Hesseling 1985). This was always a simple and straightforward nation-building strategy, rooted in some sense in the assimilationist vision mentioned above. A national political community could be built by giving the officials of the state the chance to experience the cultural diversity of the country, working with and developing some respect and empathy (it was hoped) for communities other than their own⁹.

9. A version of Benedict ANDERSON's (1983) itinerant clerks and judges learning and imagining the nation in their travels.

In some cases, this has had the unintended effect of directly scaling up the applicability of joking kinship relations. One of Governor Sambou's most famous "successes" in the use of joking kinship provides an example. In Njafaj in the late 1980s, a local conflict was brewing over succession to a Rural Community presidency in a village where I have conducted field research since 1988. The incumbent wished to run for another term in office and had well mobilized clients and supporters who wished to install him. He also faced repeated charges of malfeasance and corruption, which had enraged a great many of his constituents during his previous terms in office. Both sides saw electoral processes as untenable, certain the other would rig the voting. Rumor had it that arms were being collected in anticipation of a violent confrontation at the time of the ballot. Governor Sambou, when alerted to the situation, came out to the region and convened a meeting of the antagonists. They came with large numbers of their supporters, many armed. Sambou divided the crowds and insisted that if they wanted to harm someone, they should first harm him, their Diola cousin. He mocked and insulted them as Serer (hot-headed, impulsive, stupid, drunk; insults characteristic for a joking cousin). He reminded them that as a joking cousin, if they spilled each others' blood, he would have to drink it: "Did they really want him to have drink that much blood?" He convinced the competing groups to accept his mediation, and worked out an arrangement whereby the incumbent Rural Council President stood down, in favor of a person both conceivable as an ally to the incumbent and acceptable to the opposition. Numerous respondents in the villages affected, when recounting this now famous local saga, insist that it was only because Sambou is Diola and evoked joking kinship (and certainly not because he was a Governor) that the conflict was resolved peacefully. This was the beginning for Sambou, it is worth noting, of his use and promotion of joking kinship as a tool to promote not just ethnic cooperation, but national unification and resolution of the Casamance crisis.

While the *nature* of state consolidation in Senegal can support the use of joking kinship as a force for ethnic cooperation, the sometimes incomplete *degree* of consolidation can work in the opposite direction. Local-level access to state economic and political resources is often a function of which clientelistic network one is affiliated with, and what sort of patron one might have at the center. This was especially pronounced under the well-developed patronage politics of the long ruling *Parti socialiste*, whose *tendances* or factions were notoriously complex and fragmentary. It still holds true today, under the *Parti démocratique sénégalais*. As perhaps the most salient of many possible examples of the importance of political allegiances and calculations, it certainly is the case that when individuals who belong to distinct, rival clientelistic networks enter into conflict, clientelistic loyalties often neutralize the cooperative effects of joking kinships that may bind the same individuals. In the Siin region, we find numerous instances of land and local resource conflict which utterly ignore bonds of

joking kinship, but which respond both negatively (actors can be mobilized for conflict) and positively (they can also be restrained) to the needs and commands of the clientelistic networks to which they belong¹⁰.

Finally, like the state, the market can instigate conflict across cultural lines and undermine the impact of an institution like joking kinship. The classic work on this focuses on competition among culturally distinct immigrants consigned to limited labor market niches owing to discrimination or lack of skills. While this has been well documented in the United States (Olzak 1992), it certainly occurs in Senegal and other developing country settings as well. Clearly, this sort of market-driven resource competition can rupture informal alliances built on practices like joking kinship.

Serer maids working in Dakar and other urban centers offer a case in point. Two young women of about the same age from a village in Njafaj (DT and GN) had been friends before migrating to Dakar for work. Their families were linked in long standing relations of joking kinship. While they did not go to Dakar together or at the same time, they did end up employed in the same neighborhood. DT had been employed as a maid in a household in Hann-Plage for a few months, but was fired because her employers were reportedly unsatisfied with both her attitude and her cooking. A few weeks later, DT learned that her friend GN was working in the same household. DT approached GN to ask her not to take her old job. DT tried to invoke their ties of joking kinship, but in an oft-heard phrase in these contexts, GN is reported to have responded "*Cousinage?! Don't say that, village talk. In the city, we need to make money any way we can*". What had been acceptable as "village talk", becomes meaningless in the face of market standardization and the need to compete for work in a context of low wages high labor market competition.

Syncretism and the Limits of Generalization

A positivist effort to explore the relationship between syncretic joking kinship and dependent variables such as "ethnic" cooperation or nation building would need to be clearly situated in the context of constraining or mediating variables of the sort discussed above. But because of the syncretic nature of this institution, generalization about its causal impact of joking kinship across circumstances, time and space is nearly impossible. Instead, one can develop positivist models to suggest that when joking kinship has been syncretically recrafted to take a particular identifiable form (for a finite time, for limited geographical contexts), its impact on cooperation or nation-building will depend in part on political economies of meaning at various levels, in part on the way it articulates with state consolidation, and in part on the dynamics of resource competition. Such findings, already limited by the effect of just a few intermediate variables, can only apply as long as

10. See for illustrations of such conflicts GALVAN (2004).

the particular syncretic variant of the independent variable (joking kinship) remains constant. Given the nature of syncretism, in which every action has the potential to transform the goals and instruments of action, we cannot expect joking kinship to remain unaltered over time, space or circumstance. Thus, generalizations become discrete to particular kinds of circumstances, periods of time and locales, and cannot readily be transported or abstracted beyond these.

Committed positivists will find this formulation entirely unsatisfying for its lack of parsimoniousness and its limited applicability and generalizability. I would continue to insist that unless positivist analysis takes into account the syncretic, and therefore plastic, mutable and thus uncertain and heterogeneous nature of its key variables, positivist analysis remains a form of reification of little use in making sense of social behavior. This at least clarifies why positivist social science has had such a hard time accounting for ethnic cooperation and conflict, successes and failures of nation building¹¹.

When we think about syncretic joking kinship and its effects, the complexity and limited applicability of the version of positivism I suggest above seems to leave two alternatives. First, given how syncretism destabilizes the variables themselves, one could abandon the effort to identify patterns, correlations and possible lines of causality entirely, and turn instead to case-by-case historical-interpretive accounts. Systematic understanding, or, avoiding accounts of “one damn thing after another”, would then depend on interpretive comparison of similar cases. This points in the direction of the other alternative, which is in fact effect a more “scientifically sincere” version of positivism.

Finding patterns, correlations and lines of causality across cases is not inconceivable in light of institutional syncretism. Joking kinship may be reworked and redeployed in innumerable ways, and it may interact with important intermediate variables in many ways as well, but if one were to take into account a sufficient number of cases, and make a commitment to a long, painstaking process of comparative analytic induction, it might be possible to begin to recognize repeated circumstances under which joking kinship contributes to cooperation and nation building, and thus analytically identify the circumstances under which this takes place. This demands that mainstream positivist social science re-commit itself to historiographical and ethnographic methods, and to the building up of a new (genuinely postcolonial) “library” of knowledge, probably over generalizations, before we can claim to have the inductive empirical foundations to begin thinking in general terms about patterns, correlations and causality.

*

11. See for example claims about the expected end of ethnic mobilization under modernization theory (ALMOND & COLEMAN 1960), neo-modernization theory (INGLEHART & WELZEL 2005) and new efforts at “nation building” in Haiti, Rwanda, Iraq and Afghanistan.

There are at least four ways in which a syncretic approach to joking kinship alters how we think about this institution and its contemporary political significance. First, as noted above, it destabilizes the variables at the foundation of a positivist account of the “*causes*” of cooperation or nation building. It thus demands either a stepping back in the positivist social science tradition to an effort at comparative analytic induction as the foundation for seeking patterns, or a shift to more interpretivist modes of analysis, or both.

Second, it establishes an alternative model of agency as the central mode of making sense of institutions and culture. Political anthropology in its first incarnation (among the founding generation of anthropology, in the service of the colonial project) rested on teleological and evolutionary assumptions that rendered agency irrelevant in the face of notions of organic stasis and harmony, and the necessary and mechanistic functionality of extant socio-cultural structures. Africans and other anthropological-colonial subjects, by virtue of this trope of traditionality, had no agency.

Political anthropology in its second coming (against which a number of the contributions in this volume rightly react) seems to establish a new and false dichotomy, predicated on another incomplete framing of agency. On the one side, “traditions” and “neo-traditions” rediscovered or rehabilitated from the African past are presented by political actors and some analysts as if they can help address African needs because of some essentialist link between these institutions and a (fairly unchanging) African culture. In this neo-primordialist vision, agency is largely absent (available only, perhaps, to a few cultural entrepreneurs who peddle warmed-over anthropological reifications of African culture). On the other side, this renewed political use of joking kinship and related structures must be unmasked as “instrumentalization”, as either the unconscious revival of that which is inexorably contaminated with colonial reification (and apparently, then, illegitimate), or as a direct and simple function of patterns of historic domination and “political economy”. Both sides of this dichotomy ignore the possibility of creative, incremental, everyday, agency made possible by a pragmatist or fully constructivist framing of an institution like joking kinship.

Thus, the third contribution of a syncretic approach is to overcome the worn out primordialist-instrumentalist debates into which the new wave of political anthropology seems to be sinking. Syncretism opens the door to an alternative way of understanding what actors do with the fragments of culture and institutions, both local and seemingly historically rooted as well as new and seemingly external. By seeing actors at all levels as practical problems solvers whose agency necessarily brings together material interests and cultural/institutional structures in one unitary motion of everyday, ongoing creativity, we begin to see cultural objects and institutions of all sorts as sites of struggle for the construction of meaning and the concomitant allocation of resources. Syncretism requires us to situate actors in terms of their control and deployment of narrative and other historical resources,

in political economies of meaning which help us account for how and to what end they transform culture and institutions, suggesting a means to ground political anthropology in comparative analytic induction to make sense of creativity and its structural consequences.

Finally, a focus on joking kinship as a syncretic institution helps us overcome lingering universalistic-particularistic dualities to be found in the current round of work on joking kinship. In some of the contributions in this volume, African cultural structures such as joking kinship are depicted as false idealizations of a particularistic African political culture, essentialized as “different” from the “culture of the West”. In this depiction, political economy, material interest, and a kind of soft rational choice represent the alternative, or more “accurate” way of seeing the origins and current redeployments of an institution such as joking kinship. These are presented as anti-essentialist accounts *because* they are thought to avoid the mistake of treating Africa as particularistic, instead applying the same “universal” categories of action to Africans as would apply to Europeans, East Asians, or anyone else.

This is a retreat into a false dichotomy for two reasons. First, the alleged universals are simply themselves particularistic patterns of behavior and modes of action most clearly associated with the history of the West, and dressed up as “universals”. Like, “market rationality”, “liberal individualism” or “human rights”, the logic of “political economy” or of “material interest” in its usual, universalistic guise is a reified product of the Western European and US experiences, falsely abstracted on little empirical grounds to represent the logic of action or basic values of humanity as a whole.

More importantly, the universalistic-particularistic distinction is itself a chimera in light of a complete theory of practice of the sort outlined by Dewey, Unger or Bourdieu. Pragmatist and constructivist social theory makes clear that we cannot artificially cordon off a “safe space” for “real”, abstract, “scientifically true” and therefore “universally applicable” motivations, goals and accounts of action, because these are, like everything else, the object of particular, discrete acts of practical problem solving which result in transformations in the very definition and nature of that which is presented as abstract, universal and unchanging. Interests, institutions, goals, preferences, and rationalities, are, in Dewey’s phrasing, “never twice the same” because as they are creatively deployed they are also imaginatively transformed, and the would-be universal is rendered “particular” to that moment, place and circumstance, and will become something else again in the next moment, place or circumstance.

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ABSTRACT

This article builds on empirical examination of joking kinships in a cluster of Serer villages in Senegal and among migrants in Dakar to make three points. First, joking kinship is most productively understood through pragmatist and constructivist social theory in terms of institutional syncretism, a process of disassembling institutions derived from more than one origin for the purpose of putting together new, recombinant structures. Second, framing joking kinship in terms of syncretism fundamentally destabilizes positivist efforts to use it as an independent variable to account for ethnic cooperation and nation-building. In spite of this, a limited and modified version of positivist analysis is possible in light of syncretism. Finally, institutional syncretism helps move the discussion of joking kinship away from sterile primordialist-instrumentalist and universalism-particularism debates and into a more robust political anthropology of changing understandings and diverse deployments of elements of so-called "traditional" culture.

RÉSUMÉ

Les relations à plaisanterie dans une institution synchrétique. — En s'appuyant sur l'examen empirique des relations à plaisanterie dans un groupe de villages serer au Sénégal et chez les migrants de Dakar, cet article parvient à trois conclusions. Premièrement, la parenté à plaisanterie est mieux comprise à travers la théorie sociale pragmatiste et constructiviste en termes de syncrétisme institutionnel, processus qui consiste à désassembler les institutions dérivées d'une origine multiple afin de mettre ensemble de nouvelles structures recombinautes. Deuxièmement, concevoir la parenté à plaisanterie en termes de syncrétisme déstabilise fondamentalement les efforts visant à l'utiliser comme une variable indépendante pour justifier la coopération ethnique et la construction de la nation. Malgré cela, une version limitée et modifiée de l'analyse positiviste est possible à la lumière du syncrétisme. Enfin, le syncrétisme institutionnel permet d'éloigner la discussion de la parenté à plaisanterie des stériles débats primordialistes-instrumentalistes et universalisme-particularisme pour s'orienter vers une anthropologie politique plus solide des compréhensions changeantes et des déploiements divers des éléments de la culture soi-disant "traditionnelle".

Keywords/Mots-clés: Senegal, Dakar, Serer, syncretic institution/Sénégal, Dakar, Serer, institution synchrétique.