

This book is not meant to provide an exhaustive survey of the history of kinship studies and to pass critical comments on the technical problems of various aspects of kinship, descent and marriage which were discussed at length in the past. Other textbooks on kinship have done this and the present one should be seen as a complement to them rather than an attempt to replace them. When paying attention to past debates and controversies as a background to understanding present-day problems in the study of kinship, I concentrate only on those which I consider to be the most important. Needless to say, the selection of problems on which I concentrate reflects my own theoretical and epistemological bias.

1 FIRST PRINCIPLES

The received wisdom in anthropology is that kinship represents the very essence of being human and that in all societies, 'networks that connect individuals as relatives are apparently universally recognized and universally accorded social importance' (Keesing 1975: 14). This is an unobjectionable position as long as it is taken to mean that in all human societies some people consider themselves to be more closely related to each other than they are to other people, and that this mutual relatedness is the basis of numerous and varied interactions in which they are involved or provides legitimisation or rationalisation for them. The difference between those who see themselves as related to one another and those who are not so related underlies differentially distributed rights, duties, roles and statuses. In this sense, it is recognised as a difference that makes a difference. However, the received wisdom starts to look problematic when we consider the culturally specific reasons why people see themselves as related and the various ways in which they draw the line between those to whom they see themselves related and those to whom they do not.

PROCREATION AND NURTURE

People's own explanations as to why some of them are mutually more closely related than others differ from society to society but they are generally based on a notion of constabstantiality (Pitt-Rivers 1973: 92): people see themselves as mutually related to each other because they share a common substance and they see themselves as unrelated to those with whom they do not. In different societies, people consider themselves related because they share the same blood, bone or semen. But they may consider themselves related because they have suckled the same milk or eaten the same food. Some societies thus emphasise procreation as a defining characteristic of relatedness and see some people

as mutually related because they share blood, bone, semen or some other substance transmitted in the process of procreation; alternatively they assume that some of the child's substance, for example bones, was created by the child's father, and some, for example flesh, by the child's mother. Watson (1983) designates this notion of mutual relatedness as 'nature kinship'. Other societies emphasise nurturance and see some people as related because they are of the same substance created through suckling the same milk or eating the same food. Watson calls this notion of relatedness 'nurture kinship'.

One of the problems to which many anthropologists working in New Guinea have paid particular attention is the problem of the rapid and full incorporation of immigrants into groups, usually described as 'clans', whose members see themselves mutually related through the ties of kinship and consider themselves to be 'brothers' or 'sons of one father'. When considering the process through which the Bena Bena grant the status of full group members to immigrants, Langness noted that 'the sheer fact of residence in a ... group can and does determine kinship. People do not necessarily reside where they do because they are kinsmen; rather they become kinsmen because they reside there' (1964: 174; emphasis deleted). Andrew Strathern subsequently argued that food is a mediator between locality and kinship and that eating food grown on clan land creates substance which the immigrants share with other clan members:

clansmen share substance in some way through their descent from an ancestor. Another way in which they share substance is through consumption of food grown on clan land. Food builds their bodies and gives them substance just as their father's semen and mother's blood and milk give them substance in the womb and as small children. Hence it is through food that the identification of the sons of immigrants with their host group is strengthened. Food creates substance, just as procreation does, and forms an excellent symbol both for the creation of identity out of residence and for the values of nurturance, growth, comfort and solidarity which are associated primarily with parenthood. (Strathern 1973: 29)

As long as one is describing the notions about what makes people related to each other – or what constitutes kinship – in a particular society, one can resort to native or emic views of this matter. But for comparative purposes, an analytical or etic notion of kinship is needed which is valid not only for this or that culture or society, but cross-culturally. This notion was established at the very beginning of the

modern scholarly study of kinship by the founding father of this branch of scholarship, Henry Lewis Morgan, who stated that kinship was based on the folk knowledge of biological consanguinity. By most modern students of kinship this idea is expressed in the definition of kinship as a system of social ties based on the acknowledgement of genealogical relations, that is, relations deriving from engendering and bearing children. But how do societies whose members stress the nurturing aspect of kinship and believe that people are kin because they suckled the same milk or were fed the same food fit into this definition? Cucchiari, who points out that kinship systems emphasise either nurturing or procreative notions of consubstantiality, maintains that kinship categories everywhere have procreative referents and that kinship systems can universally be expressed in some cultural model of procreation rather than nurturing:

That is, even where parents are defined more as the people who protect, feed and raise the child, the relationship is still expressed in genealogical idiom. Note, for example, that although the Navajo idea of motherhood is *either* the woman who bore or the one who raised the child, a mother can only be a woman – a person at least theoretically capable of bearing the child. One would expect that a completely nurturing model of the mother-child relation would be capable of including both men and women. (Cucchiari 1981: 35; reference omitted)

So even if nurturance can in some systems lead to the notion of shared substance created, for example, through food, the procreative notion of consubstantiality seems indispensable if the kinship system is to achieve a differentiation between those who are and who are not of the same substance, and a differentiation between those who share substance according to the amount they share. Translating all the cultural notions about shared substance into analytical terms then leads to the view of kinship as a system of genealogical relations.

Cucchiari spells out quite clearly why a kinship system *must be* built on some cultural acknowledgement of genealogical relations deriving from procreation:

In primitive societies characterised by a pervasive general reciprocity, a kinship system based *exclusively* on the nurturing idea would fail clearly to mark off categories even within the nuclear unit – parents from older siblings, for example. If the defining characteristic of the category 'parent' is the one who feeds and cares for the child, even the generational distinction would be weakened as parent and grandparent cooperated in child rearing. Indeed all categories – parent, child, sibling, and spouse – would tend to be semantic

domains with variable boundaries and include no fixed catalogue of relationships. It is for this reason that procreative models are essential to kinship systems in providing the discrete genealogical points that connect broad social categories – a kind of social map. (Cucchiari 1981: 37; original emphasis)

Cucchiari insists on procreative models as essential to kinship systems because such models are logically necessary if we want to isolate kinship analytically from other social relations. Without this logical precondition we would simply not be able to postulate kinship as a separate domain of social relations. I quoted Cucchiari at length for he makes explicit what most kinship theorists implicitly accept, namely that the logical requirement for postulating a separate domain of kinship is to define this domain as a system of social ties deriving from the recognition of genealogical relations. Even anthropologists who noted that creating substance through food plays an important role in the way kinship is conceptualised in some cultures, saw the creation of substance through feeding as analogous to adoption – a legal fiction through which people not related biogenetically become related in social sense. For example, Schieffelin writes of the Kaluli of the Southern Highlands of New Guinea:

A person's mother is thought less as the person who brought him into the world and more as a person who gave him food. Thus, a woman who feeds a child comes to be thought of as his mother after a time, and her children as his siblings. This becomes particularly apparent when the child gets married. Claims for a piece of the bridewealth are in part based on the contribution the person made to 'giving the child food'. After marriage, an avoidance relation is observed between a man and his wife's mother. If for some reason the girl was brought up principally by some woman other than her mother, it will be that woman to whom the avoidance is extended, even if the *real mother* is alive and present in the same longhouse community. In cases like this *'feeding' amounts approximately to adoption*. (1976: 64; emphasis added)

This quote makes it clear that a woman who feeds the child is thought of and is treated as the child's mother. But she is not its 'real mother' just as in the Western conceptualisation an adoptive mother of the child may be thought of as its mother and treated as such but the child's 'real' mother is, nevertheless, a different woman. According to Schieffelin, among the Kaluli, as in the West, a distinction is maintained between ties created through procreation and those created by social convention. In his critique of the study of kinship, Schneider (1984) called the notion of kinship as a system of social ties deriving from the

recognition of genealogical relations the 'Doctrine of the Genealogical Unity of Mankind'. This doctrine is not the generalisation of the observable facts. It is a prerequisite for the conceptualisation of kinship and, moreover, a prerequisite which is not built on some culture-free or cross-culturally applicable logic but which is deeply rooted in Western cultural assumptions. I shall return to this point again in the last chapter.

Kinship as an analytically separate domain of social relations is much more than merely an aspect of social reality which can be conveniently isolated from other aspects of social reality and analysed independently of them. It has been a time-honoured adage in anthropology that to understand the kinship system of any simple society is a necessary basis for studying all social activities in that society. Kinship ties which people acknowledge and distinguish determine whom to marry, where to live, how to raise children, which ancestors to worship, how to solve disputes, which land to cultivate, which property to inherit, to whom to turn for help in pursuing common interests and many things besides. But why should this personal system of relations, typical of many simple societies which anthropologists traditionally studied, be built out of kinship relations? Why exactly should kinship, of all relations, be so tremendously important? Beattie answers this question in the following way:

[In] all human communities, even the most technologically simple ones, the categories of biological relations are available as means of identifying and ordering social relations. This is so even though some of these categories may be differently defined in different cultures. Everywhere man is begotten by men and borne by women, and in most societies the bond of parenthood and the bonds of mutual dependency and support that it implies are acknowledged. This leads to the recognition of other links, such as those between siblings and between grandparents and their grandchildren. So even in the simplest societies kinship provides some ready-to-hand categories for distinguishing the people one is born among and so for ordering one's relations with them. Apart from sex and age, which are also of prime importance, there is no other way of classifying people which is so 'built in' to the human condition. (Beattie 1964a: 94)

The generally accepted definition of kinship derives from this assumed universal utilisation of biological relations among people as the basis for ordering their social relations. Morgan, the founder of modern kinship studies, speculated in his *Ancient Society* (1877) about

the earliest stage in the evolution of human social organisation in which no notion of an incest taboo existed. With the gradual introduction of the ban on marriages between parents and children, a 'consanguine family' emerged from this original stage of 'primitive promiscuity'. It was a group based on the intermarriage between brothers and sisters. In this type of marriage it could not have been known who was the actual biological father of a child and a kinship terminology, which Morgan considered to be a survival of this extinct form of human mating, reflected this fact. Morgan found such terminology in Hawaii, where all relatives of the parents' generation were called by a single term and the terminology differentiated only between males and females. This means that the same term was applied to one's father, to all his brothers and other collateral male relatives of the father's generation (like the sons of the father's parents' siblings or grandsons of his grandparents' siblings) as well as to mother's brothers and her other male collateral relatives. Similarly, not only one's own mother but also all her sisters and other collateral female relatives as well as all father's sisters and other collateral female relatives on the father's side were called by the same term. To Morgan, this suggested that if the mother's brothers were called by the same term as the father, they must have all been previously the child's fathers and that was possible only if brothers were married to their sisters and had sexual access to them. Mother's sisters were called by the same term as one's mother because they were all wives of one's fathers. The other kinship terms in the Hawaiian system supported this speculation. In Hawaii, a man called not only his own children sons and daughters but also all his nephews and nieces. This was again because, according to Morgan, all the man's sisters were his wives and they were simultaneously wives of all his brothers. If they were his wives, then logically all their children were equally his children. And according to the same logic, in one's own generation the same term as to one's own brothers and sisters applied to all one's cousins.

Van Gennep (1906) was the first to criticise the notion of the ignorance of biological paternity which, according to Morgan, must have existed in his hypothetical 'consanguine family' and he pointed out the basic difference between *parenté sociale* and *parenté physique*. In his early study of the family among the Australian aborigines, who were reported to be ignorant of physiological paternity, Malinowski clearly drew the difference between biological kinship and its social or cultural

conceptualisation. He emphasised that consanguinity as a sociological concept is 'not the physical bond of common blood, it is the social acknowledgement and interpretation of it' (Malinowski 1913: 182). He made it clear that consanguinity 'is the set of relations involved by the collective ideas under which facts of procreation are viewed in a given society' (1913: 179). Schneider sees this shift of emphasis from the social recognition of biological bonds arising out of procreation to the sociocultural aspects of the real or putative biological relationships as the major modification in kinship studies since Morgan (Schneider 1984: 54). Since this shift, anthropologists have been at pains to emphasise that the genealogical relations of interest to students of kinship are not biological but social relations. As Wagner expressed it, 'the essence of kinship is *interpretation* of genealogy, rather than genealogy itself' (1972: 611; original emphasis). Or in the words of Lévi-Strauss, '[a] kinship system does not exist in the objective ties of descent or consanguinity between individuals. It exists only in human consciousness; it is an arbitrary system of representations, not the spontaneous development of a real situation' (1963: 50).

As recently as in the late 1950s and 1960s, the question of to what extent kinship relations can be seen as based on actual genetic relationships between individuals re-emerged in the debate about the 'nature of kinship' triggered off by Gellner's consideration of the philosophical problem of the ideal, that is, fully unambiguous language. Gellner suggested that kinship terminology might provide a suitable avenue for investigation and he argued that physical and social kinship are logically distinct but, nevertheless, inextricably linked in practice (Gellner 1957: 235-6). His view provoked a response from a number of kinship theorists (Needham 1960b, Barnes 1961, 1964, Schneider 1964, 1965, Beattie 1964b, Buchler 1966) who, looking at the problem of what kinship is all about from different angles and viewpoints, all agreed that Gellner's insistence upon the biological nature of kinship was entirely misplaced (for the review of the debate see Harris 1990: 27-39).

Kinship theorists are agreed that genealogical relations are not relations of biological or genetic connection. They define them as relations deriving from the engendering and bearing of children as this process of human reproduction is known or understood in any given society and not as it may be known by biologists or geneticists. As Scheffler has expressed it, 'the foundation of any kinship system

consists in a folk-cultural theory designed to account for the fact that women give birth to children, i.e. a theory of human reproduction' (1973: 749). All societies have their own theories about how women become pregnant. As these theories may ascribe widely different roles to men and women in procreation, the notions concerning the relation between the child and its father and the child and its mother may differ considerably from society to society.

THE FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Since Malinowski's study of *The Family among the Australian Aborigines* (1913), anthropologists have made a distinction between two kinds of 'fathers' designated by terms borrowed from Roman law as *genitor* and *pater*. *Genitor* is not the genetic father, that is, a man who 'supplies the spermatozoon that impregnates the ovum that eventually becomes the child' (Barnes 1961: 297) but a man who is believed by members of his community to have impregnated the child's mother or to contribute in some other way to the being of the child. In all societies, including the Western ones in which the *genitor* is ideally held to be the genetic father of the child, the role of a *genitor* is assigned on the basis of cultural rules even if modern medicine can through DNA testing confirm or eliminate genetic fatherhood in particular cases. The role of cultural rules in determining fatherhood was made abundantly clear in a recent lawsuit in Norway which was widely reported in the press and subject of a special documentary in Norwegian television. It concerned a man who conceived a child in an adulterous union with a married woman and who wanted to assume his parental responsibility towards the child and claim his parental rights. To prove that he was indeed the child's father he wanted to subject himself to a DNA test but was prevented from doing so by a court order which invoked the family law of 1981 according to which the father of a child born to a married woman is the man who is legally married to her. Barnes (1964), who stressed the importance of distinguishing between the *genitor* and the genetic father pointed to various legal conventions which modern societies use to assign paternity as examples of the fact that in all societies, including those equipped with the knowledge of the laws of genetics, the role of the *genitor* is assigned on the basis of indigenous

theories of procreation and on the basis of people's knowledge and opinions about the sexual conduct of the putative parents.

Unlike the *genitor*, the *pater* is a socially recognised father, through whom the child may claim kinship with other people. The principle of the Roman law according to which the child's *pater* is a man who can prove that he married the child's mother, or the principle of proverbs such as 'children belong to the man to whom the bed belongs', is the basis for assigning legal fatherhood in many societies. The Nuer of the southern Sudan not only followed this principle but developed it up to the limits of its logical possibilities. They legalised marriage by transfer of bridewealth cattle and the *pater* was always the person in whose name the cattle had been transferred to the woman's kin. Every Nuer man should have married and had sons through whom his name would have been remembered. But often a man died before he was married, some married men had only daughters, or their sons died before their marriage arrangements had been completed. In these cases it was a duty of one of the man's kinsmen, usually his younger brother, to marry a wife in his name. If this obligation of kinship was neglected, the dead man's ghost might haunt his kin. In this type of marriage, the legal husband and *pater* of the children born to the woman was not the man who married her on behalf of his deceased kinsman, and who cohabited with her, but the 'ghost' of his deceased kinsman. As brothers married in order of seniority, the man who married on behalf of the ghost would himself die without heirs and another kinsman would have to make a 'ghost marriage' for him. Evans-Pritchard estimated that there must have been as many ghost marriages as ordinary marriages among the Nuer (1951: 109-11).

Among the Nuer, it was also possible for a barren woman to provide bridewealth cattle and to marry another woman. The woman-husband then asked one of her male kinsmen, friends or neighbours to beget children by her wife. The woman-husband had the same legal rights as any other husband and she could claim damages if her wife had relations with men without her consent. She was the *pater* of all the children borne by her wife and they addressed her as their 'father' (Evans-Pritchard 1951: 108-9).

Sometimes the assignment of legal fatherhood is dependent on the performance of specific rituals. For example, among the Toda of southern India, it was customary for a woman to be married to several husbands, who were ideally brothers. The socially recognised father

of the children was that one of them who, before the birth of her first child, performed the ritual of 'presenting the bow'. Until another of her husbands performed the ritual, he was the pater of all the subsequent children, even if he died before their conception (Rivers 1906).

Among the Nayar castes of Kerala in southern India, a girl was regarded as having attained the status of a mature woman, ready to bear children, after she had undergone a ceremony in which her ritual bridegroom tied a gold ornament (*tāli*) round her neck. After this ceremony, she might have sexual relations with any number of men of her own or an appropriate higher caste. When she became pregnant, one or more men of appropriate caste had to acknowledge paternity by making gifts to her and to the midwife immediately after the birth. Any man who had visited the woman in the appropriate time period was required to make these gifts and if no man would consent to make the delivery payments, the child was deemed to be illegitimate and the woman and her child were expelled from the caste and funeral rituals were performed for her (Gough 1961a: 358–61).

As the result of the speculations of Victorian scholars about the ignorance of physiological paternity in the early stages of the evolution of human society (Bachofen 1861, Engels 1884, McLennan 1865, Morgan 1870, 1877), anthropologists have been intrigued by the possibility that the role of sexual intercourse in reproduction and hence the contribution of the man to the birth of a child are not recognised in some societies. In his celebrated essay on virgin birth, which triggered off extensive debate in the pages of *Man* in 1968 and 1969 (see Barnard and Good 1984: 170–4), Leach argued that natives' statements denying the role of men in procreation should not be treated as instances of their ignorance or as objective statements about factual knowledge. They should instead be interpreted as social dogmas or ideology. They do not suggest that natives are necessarily ignorant of the facts of physical paternity, but that they regard it as irrelevant. The ideological denial of the relevance of physical paternity can be expressed in ideological doctrines of virgin birth or in beliefs of conception by clan spirits (Leach 1966). The best examples of societies which held precisely such beliefs were some Australian Aborigines and the Trobriand Islanders of Melanesia. The Trobrianders alleged that the birth of a child was caused by the spirit (*baloma*) which entered the woman's body through her head, or through her vagina when she was wading in a lagoon. The 'spirit child' was always the reincarnation

of one of her ancestors, whose spirits had departed after their deaths to the Island of the Dead and eventually had returned to earth floating on water. During pregnancy, the woman ceased to menstruate because the blood nourished the child in her womb. Although the *baloma* spirit was the real cause of conception, a woman could conceive only after the way had been 'opened' for the entry of the spirit child. This was normally accomplished by intercourse but the Trobrianders saw it merely as a mechanical process which could be accomplished in other ways (Malinowski 1929: 179–86).

According to this theory of procreation, the mother and child shared the same substance – blood – because the mother made the child out of her blood while the father did not contribute anything to the child's substance. This led Malinowski to conclude that the Trobriand father was not the child's kinsman but merely the child's mother's husband, that is, a person related to the child only affinally through a marriage link. This was the reason why the Trobrianders referred to the father as *tomakava*, which means 'stranger' or 'outsider' (1929: 50–7).

The Trobriand Islanders traced descent in the matrilineal line, which meant that mother and child belonged to the same subclan while father and child were members of different subclans. Examining the symbolic aspects of paternity and affinity in the Trobriand Islands, Sider argued that the paternal relation was one of affinity only when it involved the relationship between father and child as representatives of their respective subclans but not when it involved their relationship as private individuals (Sider 1967). The Trobrianders maintained that a child never resembled its mother, brothers and sisters, or any of its maternal kinsmen but that children always resembled their fathers (Malinowski 1929: 204). The paternal resemblance derived on the one hand from the father nursing the baby in his arms or holding it on his knees and 'because his hands have been soiled with the child's excrement and urine' (1929: 20–1). On the other hand, it derived from the personal relation between husband and wife. The Trobrianders explained it in the following way: 'Put some soft mash on [the palm of the hand] and it will mould like the hand. In the same manner, the husband remains with the woman and the child is moulded' (1929: 207). Although the Trobrianders did not posit any physical connection between father and child in the sense that they did not suppose that father and child shared any physical substance, they supposed that

copulation functioned to form or shape the foetus so that children resembled their fathers in some aspect of their appearance. Sider (1967) argued that, as a symbol of relationship, shared appearance resembled blood in that it too was a characteristic which was involuntary, unalterable and permanent; it was transmitted from individual to individual and did not disappear upon the death of the father or the divorce of parents. After his death, the dead man's kinsmen and friends came to visit his children so that they could 'see his face in theirs' (Malinowski 1929: 207). While blood and appearance shared common characteristics as a symbol of relationship, they differed from the symbolic aspects of affinity which was a relationship established voluntarily and one which was not permanent and unalterable but could be terminated either by death or divorce. Although the Trobrianders' notions about the father's role in reproduction might have been completely different from the notions current in modern Western societies and from the notions of biological science, it would be wrong to assume that the Trobrianders had no notion whatsoever about the genealogical connection between the child and its father.

THE MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

While the Trobrianders' theory of procreation does not credit a man with contributing anything to the physical substance of the child, according to other folk theories it is the women who do not contribute anything to the physical or spiritual substance of the children. Such theories have been reported from some Australian Aborigines (Montagu 1937), from Ancient Egypt (Barnes 1973: 68) and from some Melanesian societies. For example, among the Baruya in New Guinea, a mother is not seen as contributing anything to the child's substance. The substance of the child, whether a boy or a girl, is created solely from the semen. The mother's milk is also seen as male substance in female form, for when copulating with his wife, her husband makes her milk from his semen. When the woman nurses the child with her milk and makes it grow, she therefore again nurses it with the substance created in her by her husband. The mother's body acts solely as a mediating vessel for passing on the male substance both before the delivery, when the foetus in her body is created from the male substance, and after the birth when the child is made to grow by being again nourished

by the male substance (Godelier 1986). Other Melanesian peoples, for example Madak (Clay 1977) or Gimi (Gillison 1980) maintain that a child's body is made solely of the father's substance. The Gimi liken the mother's womb to an empty bamboo vessel in which the child is merely 'housed' for the period of gestation (Gillison 1980: 163). Similar views have not been absent from the West. An example of them is the Turkish villagers' theory of procreation according to which the man plants the seed and the woman is seen to be like a field. The nurture that women provide during pregnancy in the form of blood in the womb and after parturition in the form of milk affects the growth of the child but not its identity, which comes exclusively from the father (Delaney 1986: 496-7). This was clearly stated by a Turkish villager:

If you plant wheat, you get wheat. If you plant barley, you get barley. It is the seed which determines the kind of plant which will grow, while the field nourishes the plant but does not determine the kind. The man gives the seed, and the woman is like the field. (Meeker quoted in Delaney 1986: 497)

However, the two opposed cultural views, which allege respectively that either the man or the woman does not contribute physically to the child, are not simple mirror images of each other. What makes them different is the fact that women give birth to children after the period of gestation of the foetus in the womb. This fact, which has been experienced and repeatedly observed by people everywhere, makes all the difference in the way in which the roles of mother and father are socially assigned. While the role of genitor is always ambiguous and can be assigned only on the basis of specific cultural rules and beliefs, its female equivalent – the role of genetrix – is always unambiguous because it is determined by the natural fact of parturition and not established on the basis of culturally specific theories and beliefs. This asymmetrical construction of motherhood and fatherhood has been part of anthropological kinship theory from its very inception (Weismantel 1995: 691). Morgan's view that matriarchy preceded patriarchy in the evolution of human society followed logically from the assumption that under the conditions of original primitive promiscuity and the 'group marriage' which evolved from it, only the mother and not the father of the child could have been known and therefore descent could only be traced in the female line. Whilst motherhood has always been taken as a 'natural' fact, the father can

only be identified through his relationship to the mother of the child. And as Strathern notes, 'we should not be confused here with the issues of legality. The so-called "natural" father has to demonstrate a "social" relationship to the mother as much as the jural father whose paternity is established through marriage' (1992b: 149). The Norwegian case which I mentioned before bears this out. It triggered a debate about the change in legislation and the Norwegian Department of Justice is considering whether a man who claims to be a child's father should be permitted to have his case tried and the child's genetic material compared with his own even if the child's mother is married to or lives with another man.

Because the father could only be presumed, that is defined on the basis of his relationship to the mother of the child, the father could be split into the genitor, who is presumed to be genetically linked to the child, and pater, who is linked socially to the child through his relationship to the mother. As the relationship of the mother to the child was constituted in nature and hence observable, the splitting of mother into the genitrix and mater did not seem necessary. Whereas fatherhood was socially constructed, motherhood was part of nature and not the result of social construction. As Barnes (1973: 59–61) put it, physical maternity is empirically self-evident through the biological facts of pregnancy, parturition and lactation in a way that physical paternity is not.

This view may well correspond with the Western view of procreation but as Strathern argues (1988, 1992a), Western notions about procreation and nurture which postulate maternity and paternity as irreducible facts, cannot be assumed to apply everywhere. Although undoubtedly everywhere physiological maternity is more visible than paternity, the Western view of maternity as certain and obvious and paternity as always only presumed or socially constructed would not make sense to societies whose theories of procreation are different from those held in the West. According to theories of procreation and nurture reported from various parts of Melanesia, paternity may be as self-evident as maternity and maternity may not simply be imagined as a 'natural fact'. For example, among the Baruya (Godelier 1986), relations between mothers and children, which appear to the Westerners as natural, are consistently denied. On the other hand, paternity is far from as inferential as the nineteenth-century theorists presumed when they postulated matriarchy as a stage which preceded patriarchy in the

evolution of human society. If anything, while paternity may be seen by the Baruya as certain, maternity is 'patently secondary' (Jolly 1991: 55).

The same can be said of the Nuer. Although they made a distinction between genitor and pater and although they recognised the relationship between genitor and his offspring, they were remarkably unconcerned with physiological paternity, did not attach any great value to it and paid little regard to the manner of begetting. What mattered to them was that each child should have a legal father or pater (Evans-Pritchard 1951: 120). His identity was not established on the basis of his sexual relationship with the woman who bore the child but through the transfer of cattle to the woman's family. In the way the Nuer talked about children, it is as if they imagined that cattle and not men begot children: 'our children' are 'children of our cattle' – *gat ghokien*, they used to say (1951: 22, 78). Paternity established through the transfer of cattle was neither inferred nor ever in doubt. As maternity was visible in the actual birth of the child, paternity was visible in the distribution of cattle because, as the Nuer used to say, 'the cattle and the child must not meet in one place' (1951: 120). When the boys grew up in a domestic union with their mother and a man who was their genitor, in every practical sense they regarded their genitor as their father. However, this situation changed when they reached adulthood:

A youth with close kin who possess herds does not care to live in the home of his genitor after his initiation, for he is always regarded there as to some extent an outsider, whereas in the home of his pater he is there by right of birth: 'He will visit his mother and the man who begat him now and again, sometimes for a month or two, but his home is the home of his dead father.' (Evans-Pritchard 1951: 149)

In a very real sense, the Nuer saw their paters as their 'real' fathers. In that respect, their ideas about paternity differed from those prevalent in the West. In the West, adopted children see their biological fathers as their 'real' fathers. Although a Nuer boy may have grown up with his genitor whom he treated as his father, he was eventually pulled towards those to whom he was related through 'real' paternity which was as self-evident as maternity.

Even in the West we have recently become aware that the asymmetry in the conceptualisation of motherhood and fatherhood does not derive from the 'nature' of these two relationships but from the way we conceptualise them. They are both social constructions (Scheffler

1991: 372). This was made obvious by the consequences of new reproductive technologies. Whereas before assisted reproduction became available the facts of nature had been, as it were, indivisible in the sense that fertilisation, gestation and parturition could not be separated, the new reproductive technology has separated conception from birth (Rivière 1985: 5). The availability of new reproductive technologies has brought into question not only who the child's 'real' father is but also who its 'real' mother is (Warnock 1985: 37), that is, who is going to count as the child's genetrix. In case of the surrogate mother, it is possible to split apart ovulation and gestation, which in nature are contained in the body (Strathern 1992a: 39), and if the ovum belongs to one woman and the womb to another, the question then poses itself of who is the genetrix. This question was one of those which arose in the debate on assisted reproduction which went on in Britain in the 1980s and which was, among other things, specifically concerned with the problem whether the woman whose ovum was fertilised outside her body should count as the child's 'real' mother or genetrix, or whether the genetrix is the woman in whose womb the fertilised ovum was implanted and who subsequently gave birth to the child (Strathern 1992a: 53). Ultimately, who is to count as the child's genetrix has to be defined by law. Genetrix : genitor is thus not nature : culture (Barnes 1973). Both genitor and genetrix are cultural constructs which invoke the facts of nature.

The new reproductive technologies have opened the possibility of realising even more complex departures from the previously existing indivisibility of fertilisation, gestation and parturition:

Take the case of an infertile husband with a wife who is fertile but cannot, for some reason, give birth. Her flushed-out ovum could be combined with sperm from a donor and implanted in a surrogate. Here we would have four people involved: a genetic mother married to a prospectively social father plus a genetic father (probably unknown) and an actual genetrix, or birth mother. One can run around the possibilities, with the most bizarre being sperm and eggs from unknown donors being externally fertilized and then implanted in a surrogate who surrenders the eventual child for adoption to two other (possibly infertile) social parents: five people, none of whom had sex with any others. In the case of frozen sperm, a child could be that of a dead man; and with frozen embryos a child could be born to long-dead parents. With frozen sperm and ova from dead parents combined, children could technically be orphans at the moment of conception. (Fox 1993: 120; emphasis omitted)

The Western conceptualisation of kinship is that of shared biogenetic substance and it is the science of biology which tells us not only what this substance is but which also ultimately decides who shares it and who does not. Schneider points out that whatever scientists may find out about biogenetic relationships in the future would constitute knowledge about kinship (1980: 23). According to Marilyn Strathern, 'his prophecy seems to have come true with respect of the reproductive model'. However, she also adds a sceptical note: 'Except that I wonder if the result will be kinship' (Strathern 1992b: 177). Without venturing into speculation about their future development and its social consequences, the new reproductive technologies and their discussion among specialists and general public have significant consequences for the anthropological study of kinship. The reason is that they bring clearly into relief the culturally specific Western assumptions about kinship which inform its conceptualisation and which have guided research into kinship from its very beginning.

If the perceived asymmetry in the conceptualisation of fatherhood and motherhood is no longer tenable, what about the role of mater, the female equivalent of pater, that is, the socially recognised mother through whom the child claims kinship links with other people? Fortes mentions the biblical story in which the barren Rachel sends her maidservant Bilhah to her husband Jacob and the child born to Bilhah is counted as Rachel's child (Fortes 1969: 256). In the Cayman Islands in the West Indies, a girl who stays on in her parents' house becomes a 'sister' to her own children who then refer to her own mother as their 'mother' (Buchler 1966). Although the facts of birth make it possible to identify the genetrix as a result of a natural process which cannot be culturally manipulated, there are situations in which it may become problematic to ascertain who the child's genetrix actually is. The stories about changelings and about children being mixed up in maternity hospitals point to this uncertainty. Special efforts may be made to eliminate such uncertainty in situations where the mother's status is of particular social significance: a high court official had to witness every royal birth in England until quite recently (Bock 1969: 88). These cases and stories indicate that the difference between the role of a mater and that of a genetrix is culturally recognised. Surprisingly enough, although anthropologists have elaborated at length on the roles of paters and genitors in the societies they studied, they have hardly ever commented on the equivalent roles of maters and genetrixes and

the difference between these two roles has hardly ever become the object of elaboration by kinship theorists or even attracted their attention. In spite of the denial by many peoples of the shared substance between a mother and her child and in spite of the fact that the social significance of the mother-child relationship is highly variable across cultures, anthropologists never presumed the existence of peoples 'ignorant of maternity', not even of physical, biological or physiological maternity (Scheffler 1991: 372) in the same way in which they presumed the 'ignorance of paternity'. Kinship theorists have generally assumed that the mother-child (or more precisely genetrix-offspring) relationship is a 'cultural universal' and 'the foundation of any kinship system consists in the folk-cultural theory designed to account for the fact that women give birth to children' (Scheffler 1973: 749). Van Baal expressed the same view by boldly stating that 'motherhood is the basis of all kinship' (1975: 79). This is because the mother-child bond arises from common elements of human biology and is the biological heritage which humans share as the result of evolution. Research into the social organisation of contemporary primates has shown that, in spite of all its existing variation, the stable grouping within their bands is the association of the mother and her young offspring. This led Freeman to argue that 'kinship is an extension and a sort of reenactment of the primary bond so central in the emotional life of each of us' and that 'kinship systems build on the close biopsychological bonding between an infant and the adult, normally mother, who provides closest nurturance in the first year of life' (Freeman 1974). Freeman here aptly summarises the views of a number of kinship theorists who saw the universal experience of 'mothering' as necessary for the biological survival of helpless infants (Fox 1967, Fortes 1969, Goodenough 1970, Keesing 1975). This view has been most succinctly formulated by Barnes:

the mother-child relation in nature is plain to see and necessary for individual survival. An infant may be free to form attachments to mother-surrogates, but most societies would agree that a woman's response to an infant after she has given birth to it is at least in some degree innate or genetically determined. Hence a relation of physical as well as social motherhood is always recognized culturally and institutionalized socially. (1973: 73)

Because a real world which we call nature exists independently of the way in which we socially construct it, 'cultural motherhood is a necessary interpretation in moral terms of a natural relation' and 'our

concept of motherhood is more closely constrained [than our concept of fatherhood] by our lives in the womb and as young children while we are still largely creatures of nature' (Barnes 1973: 73).

Fox has recently summarised the results of scientific research into the bond between mother and child, that is their intense emotional attachment which results from their psycho-physical interactions. The reciprocal mother-child bond starts during pregnancy and continues to develop after parturition (Fox 1993: 68-89). Acknowledging the findings of physiological and psychological research, Fox has the following to say:

I would agree, for example, with those who say that the nuclear family is not a sacrosanct 'natural' entity but simply one kind of institutional possibility. I have been saying so for thirty years or more. But as a student of mammalian behavior, I would have to disagree that 'motherhood' is a similar construct depending on context for its meaning. As a first approximation I would say that no matter the provenance of the genes, a hard look at the mammals tells us that the genetrix does indeed bond with child in the womb and at parturition, and hence has a 'natural' claim to it. (1993: 121-2)

This may well be so. But humans are mammals who differ from other mammals in their possession of culture and there are ample examples which can be adduced to show that culture interferes strongly with, and often effectively overrides, what is ostensibly in our 'nature' as the result of '128 million years of mammalian evolution, 72 million years of primate, and 5 million years of hominid evolution' (Fox 1993: 73-4; see also Fox 1967, 1973). Not only are humans the only mammals who, for centuries, have been able to control procreation in one way or another and who have the ability to terminate unwanted pregnancies. They also practice infanticide and adoption not only when the mother has died or is incapable of nursing the child. They could not do all these various things if their behaviour was determined solely by their biology. However biologically determined the bond between a mother and her child may be, humans have consistently showed through their various social practices that this bond is not unbreakable.

The positing of the mother-child bond as a 'natural fact' is rooted in assumptions about the natural characteristics of women and their natural role in sexual reproduction. These assumptions are now coming under attack from feminist writing, a great deal of which is aimed at establishing that biology is not destiny (Sacks 1976, 1979, Schlegel 1977,

Leacock 1978, Caulfield 1981). Feminist writers argue that what we have been used to seeing as a natural relation may not be the result of our unbiased understanding of the natural world but a function of our cultural assumption of universal sexual asymmetry:

[t]here are no 'facts', biological and material, that have social consequences and cultural meanings in and of themselves. Sexual intercourse, pregnancy and parturition are cultural facts, whose form, consequences and meanings are socially constructed in any society, as are mothering, fathering, judging, ruling, and talking with gods. (Yanagisako and Collier 1987: 39)

The assumption of the naturally constituted affective tie between mother and child has been criticised for taking for granted what it should explain, namely how the process of human reproduction comes to be cast as the cause of the creation of difference among people that is seen as making a difference in all societies. This line of criticism emerged as the result of the whole development of feminist anthropology. From its original concern with understanding the position of women in society, it gradually moved to the study of variation in women's roles and experiences, and eventually to its present-day concern with understanding the construction of gender in specific societies. According to some writers, its 'next contribution to the study of gender and kinship should be to question the difference between women and men', or 'to question the assumption that "male" and "female" are the natural categories of human beings whose relations are everywhere structured by their biological difference' (Collier and Yanagisako 1987: 7). What is posited as problematic in this approach is

whether the particular biological difference in reproductive functions that our culture defines as the basic differences between males and females, and so treats as the basis of their relationship, is used by other societies to constitute the cultural categories of male and female. (Yanagisako and Collier 1987: 48)

This type of criticism does not deny the biological differences between men and women. It argues, however, that to acknowledge them does not mean to accept at the same time that they are the basis for the cultural construction of the categories 'male' and 'female' in every society. What is called into question is the assumption that all the observable cultural variations in gender categories are nothing more than different elaborations of the same natural fact. Once we realise that the categories 'male' and 'female' are variously defined in different societies, the assumption that the difference between men and women

is grounded in nature becomes open to question. The assumed naturalness of the mother-child bond is grounded in the assumption that nurturance by the mother is necessary for the biological survival of the helpless infant and that, consequently, people everywhere ascribe cultural significance to this fact (Yanagisako 1979: 197). But this very assumption is called into question by the increasing evidence that the variation in conceptualisation of gender and women's experiences can be linked to different forms of economic, political and cultural organisation. Research into gender ideologies suggests that 'motherhood' is not universally construed in the same way and that different gender ideologies place different emphasis on it (Rosaldo and Atkinson 1975, Rosaldo and Collier 1981). The cases of nannies, wet nurses and surrogate mothers (Boon 1974, Drummond 1978) make the assumption about the mother-child bond as inherent in nature look rather dubious. They suggest that this bond can, after all, be culturally constructed as natural and hence commonsensically experienced as such. If that is indeed the case, the assumption of much kinship theorising that mother-child bonding is rooted in humans' primate nature and hence is something immutable to which any culture can only adapt itself but cannot change, will need to be reconsidered.

BASIC UNIT OF KINSHIP

It is easy to state in general terms that kinship is a system of social ties based on acknowledging genealogical relations but the fact that some societies hold that all the child's substance comes only from its mother, some allege that it comes only from its father and yet others that both parents contribute to it, raises the theoretical problem of *which* specific genealogical relations are universally to be seen as lying at the core of all existing kinship systems.

Kinship theorists have adopted two positions with regard to this problem. Starting from the recognition that no society denies the natural fact that women give birth to children, whatever the native theories of procreation may be, Fortes sees 'the mother and child couple' to be 'the unique and irreducible source of all human existence' (1978: 21) and argues that 'in primitive societies the domain of domestic relations is commonly organized around a nucleus consisting of a mother and her children' (1958: 8), although he attributes at the same

time 'the central position in the kinship system ... to the constellation of the relations of mother and child and the child's begetter' (1978: 21). Adams (1960), Bohannan (1963: 73) and Goodenough (1970: 18) consider the woman and her dependent children the 'nuclear' or 'elementary' familial group in all human societies. This position has been most clearly formulated by Fox who takes 'the mother-child tie as inevitable and given' (1967: 40) and considers the 'basic unit' of all kinship systems to be 'the mother and her child, however the mother came to be impregnated' (1967: 39). The attachment of the child's genitor to this basic unit is highly variable. When he is attached to it in the role of the woman's husband and her children's father, the result is a nuclear, elementary, individual or conjugal family, as it has been variously called. However, in some societies there is no such attachment at all. Among the Nayar, a woman who went through the *tāli* ritual continued to live in her natal household which consisted of her siblings, her mother and her siblings, the children of her mother's sisters, and possibly her maternal grandmother, her siblings and the children of her sisters and her sisters' daughters. The woman's brothers acted as providers and guardians of her children. Her ritual 'husband', that is, the man who tied the *tāli* ornament round her neck, and who remained secluded with her for three days and nights in a room of the ancestral house as part of the *tāli* ritual, had no further obligations towards her once the ritual was over. He was not obliged to visit her, and if he did so, he had no prior claims on her against other men who were her regular visitors and who would come to her after eating supper in their natal home and leave before breakfast. When a man came to visit, he placed his weapons outside the woman's door as a sign to others that he was in the house. If two men came on the same night, the one who came last might sleep outside on the veranda. A woman's regular lovers usually knew one another and informally agreed the order of their visits among themselves. Women could reject particular men and both women and men could terminate their liaisons without any formality. The woman received all her food, shelter and clothing from her natal household and her lovers and her ritual 'husband' had no economic obligations of any kind towards her. On her part, she had no obligations towards them other than granting sexual privileges. Her only obligation towards her ritual 'husband' was that, after his death, she and all her children had to observe fifteen days of ritual pollution (Gough 1961a: 358-61).

A similarly fleeting and tenuous relationship between a man and a woman and her children is characteristic of 'matrifocal families' in the Caribbean in which women and their children form the core of many households. A man may be attached to the woman only temporarily, usually as her lover but not necessarily as a 'father' to her children. Whatever his particular attachment, he occupies only a marginal role in comparison with the close bonds between mothers, children and daughters' children (Smith, R. T. 1956).

A different view of genealogical relations that are basic to all kinship systems also starts from the recognition of a natural fact, namely that it takes a man and a woman to produce a child. Parenthood is thus an inevitable result of the biological process of human reproduction irrespective of how the role of the man who begot the child and of the woman who bore it may be conceptualised in different cultures, and irrespective of which social significance may be attributed to their relationship with the child. Fortes formulated this position very clearly:

The fact of parenthood – that is, the complex of activities which includes the begetting, bearing and rearing of children by specified parental kin – are empirically identifiable in all societies, even if parents and children are not permanently co-resident. At any rate, ethnographers have not failed to find the mother and child couple, and to get evidence of the recognition of genitors and fathers, even in societies where the ostensibly husbandless 'matrifocal family' is the common form, or where physiological paternity is ignored or not understood, as classically among the Trobrianders and the Australian aborigines. (1969: 255; reference omitted)

The cultural recognition of filiation, that is, of the 'fact of being a child of a specified parent' (Fortes 1959: 206) implies the recognition of four sets of relationships: those between the woman and the man who engendered the child, between the child and its mother, the child and its father, and between siblings, that is, children of the same parents. Expressed differently, it implies the recognition of eight 'primary kin types': father (F), mother (M), husband (H), wife (W), son (S), daughter (D), brother (B) and sister (Z). A group which is based on these four sets of relationships and which hence includes the eight primary kin types, is a group which has variously been called the nuclear, elementary, individual or conjugal family. As it is a group which has been considered to be an inevitable result of the biology of human reproduction and seen as necessary for human survival, modern sociologists and anthropologists did not see it as a late product

of the evolution of human society as their Victorian predecessors did, but as the basic unit of human society (Bell and Vogel 1960: 2, Goode 1964) and as the basic building block of all kinship systems. This view has been most clearly expressed by Radcliffe-Brown:

The unit of structure from which a kinship is built up is the group which I call 'elementary family', consisting of a man and his wife and their child or children The existence of the elementary family creates three special kinds of social relationship, that between parent and child, that between children of the same parents (siblings), and that between husband and wife as parents of the same child or children The three relationships that exist within the elementary family constitute what I call the first order. (1941: 2)

Murdock (1949: 94) called the eight kin types connected through this 'first order of relationships' (that is, F, M, H, W, S, D, B, Z) the 'primary relatives'.

According to Radcliffe-Brown, the genealogical connections between parent and child are extended to connect each individual to the parents of his or her parents and to the children of his or her children; connections between siblings are extended to connect each individual with his or her siblings' children; and connections between spouses are extended to connect each individual with his or her spouse's parents and siblings. These connections constitute what he called 'relationships of the second order'. They result from 'the connection of two elementary families through a common member, such as father's father, mother's brother, wife's sister and so on' (Radcliffe-Brown 1941: 2). Thirty-three different kin types of this order, or thirty-three different types of 'secondary relatives', as Murdock called them, can be theoretically distinguished. Beyond the range of the secondary kin, genealogical relations are extended to the primary kin of the secondary kin who represent the tertiary kin in relation to *ego* (the point of reference). Theoretically, everybody can distinguish altogether 151 tertiary kin types, as for example, FZH, WZD, all first cousins, etc. People have not only their primary, secondary and tertiary kin but also more distant kinsmen – the primary, secondary and tertiary kinsmen of their own tertiary kinsmen. As Radcliffe-Brown says, 'we can trace, if we have genealogical information, relationships of the fourth, fifth or *n*th order' (1941: 2). All individuals who see themselves as genealogically connected to some other individual are conceptualised as belonging to a specific category and the verbal label for this category is appropriately glossed as 'kin' (Scheffler 1973: 751).

According to Murdock, the nuclear family was a 'distinct and strongly functional group in every known society'. It was universally present in all societies either as such or as a basic building block of more complex family forms (1949: 2). New ethnography which has come forward since the publication of Murdock's book has shown that this view was misleading. I have already mentioned the Nayar and the societies of the Caribbean which obviously lack a social group of this kind. Kinship theorists now generally acknowledge that the nuclear family is neither universal nor inevitable (Fallers and Levy 1959, Fox 1967, Buchler and Selby 1968, Clignet 1970, Goodenough 1970, Keesing 1975, Yanagisako 1979) and they point out numerous problems which arise from treating it as a building block of all kinship systems.

One such problem is the assumption that kinship is a system of social ties based on the acknowledgement of genealogical relations following from a jurally recognised marriage union and from the procreation of descendants within it. In other words, only 'legitimate' genealogical connections (that is, those established in wedlock) are acknowledged or recognised for social purposes as Malinowski (1962: 65) and Radcliffe-Brown (1950: 4) seemed to suggest. This is palpably not true. To give just one example: among the Nuer, when a woman married another woman, she counted as pater of all the children borne by the woman she had married, irrespective of who the children's genitor or genitors were, and in a ghost-marriage, the pater of the children was the deceased man in whose name the marriage had been contracted. But it was not only these 'legitimate' connections which were recognised by the Nuer for social purposes. The known genitor also had certain rights and duties with respect to his offspring. When the daughter whom he begot married, he might claim 'the cow of the begetting' or 'the cow of the loins' as his part of her bridewealth (Evans-Pritchard 1951: 121–2) and the prohibition on marriage among close kin applied irrespective of whether their relationship was traced through a pater or a genitor (1951: 31). Children were said to be bound to their genitor by a mystical tie, even if he had little to do with them, and if he was ill-disposed towards them they might suffer injury. A natural son treated all the near kin of his genitor as his own kin and they recognised him as their kinsman. A genitor helped with the marriage of his natural son, if he could. A son sacrificed a bull not only in honour of his pater but also in honour of his genitor and if his genitor

did not beget his own legal descendants, he might have married a wife in his name (1951: 150).

Cases like this lead Scheffler (1973) to emphasise that the various rights, duties, privileges and obligations which are normally associated with fatherhood in Western society, may be allocated to different men in many non-Western societies. A man assumes some of these rights because he is the presumed genitor, others because he nurtures the child and cares for it, and yet others because he is the child's mother's husband. As a note in parenthesis it could perhaps be mentioned that the existing male bias in the study of kinship is indicated by the fact that anthropologists have not paid any attention to the possibility that various rights and duties, which are normally associated with motherhood in Western society, may also be separated and assigned to different people. The neglect of this problem stems of course from accepting the mother-child bond as naturally constituted and biologically determined.

Scheffler argues that all societies posit the existence or necessity of genitors, albeit often in culturally specific ways which differ from Western notions about the relationship of the child to its presumed genitor. Trobrianders' views of fatherhood, which I have mentioned before, are the case in point. As Scheffler sees the relationship between a genitrix and her offspring and the genitor and his offspring as complementary cultural universals, he concludes that: '[t]he elementary relations of any kinship system are best defined as those of genitor-offspring and genitrix-offspring per se' (Scheffler 1973: 755).

Scheffler is undoubtedly right to point out that it is unwarranted to assume that only 'legitimate' genealogical relations are recognised for social purposes and to emphasise that social relations based on 'illegitimate' genealogical connections are equally part of the kinship system of the societies in which they occur. However, his conceptualisation of the genitor-offspring and genitrix-offspring relations as the elementary relations of any kinship system may be as restrictive as the conceptualisation of kinship as based only on the recognition and acknowledgement of 'legitimate' genealogical connections. Noting the fact that people unrelated genealogically may become related in a social sense, as happens, for example, in cases of adoption, or when social fatherhood is assigned to a man who is not the child's genitor, many anthropologists argued that a cross-culturally valid definition of kinship cannot be exclusively based only on the notion of genealogical

connection but must take account of social as well as genealogical relationships (Malinowski 1913, 1962, Radcliffe-Brown 1950: 4, Beattie 1964b, Schneider 1969). In the words of Lowie, '[b]iological relations merely serve as a starting point for the development of sociological conceptions of kinship' (1950: 57), and in the words of Keesing, kinship is 'the network of relationships created by genealogical connections, and by social ties (e.g. those based on adoption) modelled on the "natural" relations of genealogical parenthood' (1975: 13; emphasis added).

To assume that each person is immediately genealogically connected to two others (his or her father or genitor and his or her mother or genitrix) and that this relationship of filiation engenders the set of eight primary kin types through whom each individual is related to many others, does not mean that one has to assume that the unit from which kinship is built is the nuclear family. Scheffler explicitly rejects this assumption (1973: 754) and Buchler and Selby, who do likewise (1968: 23-5), maintain that in every society there is a relational set of primary kin types which arises from the cultural recognition of the relationships of descent, affinity and consanguinity together with the recognition of sexual differences. Descent refers to the relation between parent and child (a relation which Fortes considers not to be that of descent but of filiation), affinity refers to the relation between spouses and consanguinity refers to the relation between siblings (1968: 22, 36).

These terms were defined in this way by Lévi-Strauss (1963), who advanced a powerful argument both against the treatment of the nuclear family as the basic unit of all kinship systems and against seeing the relations created through the engendering of offspring, whether in the context of a nuclear family or in its absence, as primary. As he points out, kinship is not a static phenomenon but exists only in self-perpetuation. A unit consisting of parents and their children cannot perpetuate itself because of the universality of the incest taboo which prevents mating between the members of a nuclear family or between the 'primary kin'. His point is that the nuclear family, because of the incest taboo, is left without a beginning because the woman who bears the children cannot be her husband's sister, as she would have to be if the nuclear family were a self-perpetuating group. For a kinship system to exist, a man must obtain a woman from another man who gives him his daughter or sister. The most elementary form of kinship, or the basic unit of kinship, is thus not the nuclear family but the

avunculate, that is, a structure which consists of a brother, his sister, sister's husband and sister's son, or, in other words, a man, his wife, their son and the wife's brother who gave the man his sister in marriage. This elementary structure expanded through the integration of new elements is the building block of more complex systems. It is a structure in which the relation of consanguinity, the relation of affinity and the relation of descent are present. The irreducible character of this basic unit of kinship is the result of the universality of an incest taboo in human society, and it is the incest taboo which explains the inclusion of the maternal uncle (the wife's brother) and which accounts for the fact that the relationship between 'brothers-in-law' (that is, the man and his wife's brother) is the necessary axis around which the basic unit of kinship is built. As the group which gives a woman in marriage to another group must be compensated in following generations by receiving a woman in exchange for the one which it gave away, the basic unit has to contain a man who, in the next generation, will give his own sister either directly or indirectly to the group which gave his mother to his group in the first place.

It is theoretically possible to imagine a basic unit of kinship in which the sexes would be reversed and which would involve a sister, her brother, brother's wife and brother's daughter. But in practice such a unit cannot exist for, as Lévi-Strauss argues, it is always the men who exchange the women and not the women who exchange men (1963: 47). This view has been criticised by many anthropologists (Rubin 1975, Weiner 1976, 1992, Raheja 1988) mainly because it reduces women to objects and denies them any active role in the institution of marriage. This is simply not borne out by ethnographic facts. Goody points out that in Asian societies 'women are never simply the pawns of others but themselves players in the game, especially as heiresses' (1990: 68). He argues that the Lévi-Straussian model of the exchange of women hinders our understanding of the role of marriage in creating social relations for it implies women's complete incorporation into the kin groups of their husbands and the severing of their relations with their natal kin. Not only is this only rarely the case but there are societies like the Ata Tana'Ai on Flores, where it is men, rather than women, who are in this position (Lewis 1988: 208). On the basis of Malaysian ethnography, it appears that to conceptualise marriage as an exchange of women by groups of men is at least a dubious generalisation. Peletz suggests that among the Malays

of Negeri Sembilan men, and not women are exchanged in marriage and, moreover, they are exchanged by groups of women rather than by other men (1994: 142–3). Anthropologists who have paid particular attention to native conceptualisations of what is actually being exchanged in marriages point out that it is too simplistic to view marriage as an exchange of whole persons, whether female or male. Writing of the Etoro, among whom both the groom and bride subscribe to arrangements made on their behalf by senior males, Kelly points out that

it is misleading to describe this as an 'exchange of women' without adding a number of qualifications. It would be more accurate to say that senior males exchange the reproductive capacities of both male and female persons. The implicit distinction between 'exchangers' and 'exchanged' that is contained in the phrase is appropriate in the Etoro case, but the 'exchanged' are not whole persons and are of both genders. (1993: 470)

Even if the Lévi-Straussian model of marriage as an exchange of women between groups of men cannot be maintained, his more general view that kinship perpetuates itself only through specific forms of marriage is incisive. Its logical consequence is that the relationships which Radcliffe-Brown called 'relationships of the first order' depend on and are derived from relationships which he considered secondary (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 46–51).

According to Lévi-Strauss, 'the primitive and irreducible character of the basic unit of kinship' (1963: 46) as he has defined it, is a direct result of the universality of an incest taboo. For him, the incest taboo is the first truly cultural act and the essential criterion of cultural life. It marks the transition from 'nature' – the life of other animals who have no cultural tradition to transmit to the new generation and to increase it with every generation – to 'culture' – the mode of life peculiar to humans (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 12). The problem of the incest taboo and its origin has been hotly debated by anthropologists. Attempts to solve these problems in a universally valid way have produced mutually contradictory explanations of the origin and persistence of incest prohibitions (see Fox 1967: 54–76). Given the fact that the range of persons with whom sex is forbidden varies tremendously from society to society, Needham expressed doubts as to whether incest prohibitions constitute a class of phenomena which can be cross-culturally defined as such. In consequence, there cannot be a general theory which

applies to all of them for '[a]ll that is common to incest prohibitions is the feature of prohibition itself' (1971: 29).

Recently, Fox (1993) has argued that incest prohibition is not 'culture itself' as Lévi-Strauss would have it (1969: 12). It is not

the appropriate cultural starting point since avoidance of close inbreeding is common to most sexually reproducing organisms. Taboo certainly is unique to man since it involves language for interdictions, but avoidance is not unique. (Fox 1993: 192)

Certainly the primatologists now appear to be in agreement that mating in primate groups is neither random nor incestuous. The avunculate – a special relationship between mother's brother and sister's son – is thus not the result of the incest taboo and the benefits of exchange. According to Fox, it is built into the dynamics of the mother-child bond – 'the only universal mammalian relationship'. Starting with that relationship, mating can be seen as consisting of the courtship phase, which brings the male and female together, and the parental phase, which keeps them together at least until the offspring reach viability. An alternative to uniting the genitor and his mate in a 'pair bond' is to use for parental purposes the siblings who are united by a common bond with the mother but have an asexual relationship because of the natural avoidance of incest. The latter alternative is a particularly viable option in any situation where, for whatever reason, the mating bond is weak but males still need to be attached to the mother-child unit to protect it or to assist with the nurturance of the infant. As humans can and do separate the courtship bond from the parental bond, this seems to be the step which they have taken 'beyond the primate baseline'. It was thus the combination of the mother-child unit with relatively permanent mating that gave rise to human kinship into which was built a primitive avunculate – 'the first true cultural incursion into nature' (1993: 193).

Although it may seem strange to Westerners on the basis of their own cultural experience, avunculate plays a central role in theories of what it means to be human:

Animals don't do it, even if they may occasionally, as with the primates, end up in a 'special relationship' with the maternal uncle. It seems to be a peculiarly human thing to allow the asexual brother-sister tie to take over certain aspects of the parental role from the husband-wife tie. This gives rise to avuncular responsibilities that may flower into full-blown matrilineal

succession and inheritance, or to the classical indulgences of the patrilineal avunculate, or to the sacred duties towards mothers' brothers in bilateral systems, or even to the 'love triangle' conflicts with them where the power of the maternal uncle threatens to rob the young males of their breeding preferences (Fox 1993: 227).

Certainly, in Fox's view, it is the avunculate and not the incest taboo that is the defining principle of humanity and culture. The mother's brother is in some sense a primitive given in the basic unit of kinship, irrespective of whether we want to regard his special status as the result of the incest taboo and the benefits of exchange, as Lévi-Strauss argued, or as built into the mother-son-daughter triad, as Fox argues.