

anthropology,
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Anthropological Perspectives on Kinship



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2 KINSHIP, DESCENT AND MARRIAGE

Most anthropologists have taken kinship to be the network of genealogical relationships and social ties modelled on the relations of genealogical parenthood (Keesing 1975: 13). Every individual is at the centre of such a network which is potentially boundless. If people are assumed to be directly related to their parents through a genealogical tie, they are also assumed to be less directly related to those individuals who are connected to their parents and children through a direct genealogical link and beyond them to many more individuals to whom they are connected through their parents' siblings and other collateral relatives, that is siblings of lineal forebears (parents, grandparents) and their descendants (Scheffler 1973: 751, Keesing 1975: 13). Obviously, people cannot expect the same help and support from all those to whom they can trace a genealogical connection and they obviously cannot have the same obligations towards them. To make genealogical relations meaningful and practically operational, people everywhere somehow have to limit the range of those who are seen as being genealogically related and to whom an individual can turn for help and support and who can expect similar help and support from him or her. Individuals who are presumed to be genealogically related to each other are usually conceptualised as forming a distinct category – the category of kin.

CATEGORIES OF KIN

If we had the necessary information available about all past genealogical connections, we would be able to put all the members of any given society on a huge genealogical chart. In practice, we cannot do that because we lack the necessary information. So lapses of memory are responsible for the fact that we do not categorise all people we know

or know about as our kinsmen but only some of them. In British or American society, people whom anthropologists call kinsmen are usually called 'relatives' or 'family'. Americans state explicitly that relatives are persons related by blood or marriage but when a decision is to be made about who is and who is not a relative, or who is to count as a close or as a distant relative, the actual genealogical distance may be just one of the factors taken into consideration. A physical distance or what might be called a socio-emotional distance are also taken into consideration when a decision is made about whether a particular person is a relative or not (Schneider 1968: 62–75). The British draw the boundary around the category of people whom they consider their kin in pretty much the same way (Firth, Hubert and Forge 1969: 92, Robertson 1991: 7). The lack of any formal or clear-cut way of delineating the category of kinsmen is a characteristic feature of the kinship system of modern Western society. In many other societies, categorisation of some people as kinsmen and of others as non-kinsmen is not left solely to the failures of individual memories or to individual idiosyncrasies and preferences. There are other means for categorising only some people as kinsmen, which are established as culturally appropriate, or other culturally appropriate means for drawing a boundary around the category of people considered to be kin. There are basically two ways in which this can be done.

The first is by tracing a genealogical connection to some living person, that is, to define egocentrically the category of people considered to be kin. A focal point of this category is a particular living individual and all members of the category are related to him or her but are not necessarily related to one another because they do not share a common ancestor. There is a considerable confusion in anthropological writing about the analytical term by which to describe such a category in societies in which it exists as a culturally meaningful one. Firth, Hubert and Forge (1969) use the terms 'kin unit', 'kin set', 'kin group' or 'kin network' when talking about it, but the most widely used term is 'kindred' (Freeman 1961, Mitchell 1963, Scheffler 1973: 751).

Kindred is an ego-centred kinship category. It may be visualised as a series of concentric circles with ego in the middle, surrounded by members of her or his nuclear family and beyond them by circles of more distant kinsmen, the knowledge of whom becomes less and less intimate the further removed they are from ego, and the relationship with whom is seen as being progressively less determined by the

mutuality of kinship. Because kindred is an ego-centred category, kindreds necessarily overlap: every individual is potentially a member of many categories of kindred and only full siblings share the same kindred.

The overlapping nature of kindred and the fact that any individual may be a member of a number of kindreds, make it difficult for a kindred to crystallise as a group. One kindred cannot be, for example, in feud with another when both share members who would have to decide which side to join and support. Similarly, because the boundaries of kindred are defined only from the point of view of a particular individual, kindred cannot corporately own land or any other property.

Kindreds act as groups only occasionally and the groups recruited on the basis of kindred membership have typically a character of action groups or task groups. They consist of individuals who assemble in some organised fashion to perform jointly a specific task. They have only a limited existence in time and they dissolve once the task for which they organised themselves has been completed. Groups whose members belong to the same kindred crystallise in action especially for the performance of life cycle rituals like births, initiations, marriages or funerals or, particularly in Western society, for periodic reunions at special birthdays or 'family' holidays like Christmas. The distinction between kindred as a culturally recognised category and an action group whose members are recruited because of their membership of the category, is phrased by Firth, Hubert and Forge in terms of a difference between 'kin units of more regular nature' and 'assemblies of kin for specific social occasions' (1969: 266; original emphasis).

When action groups get formed for specific social occasions, it is the membership of the kindred that makes any person eligible for becoming a member of the group. But genealogical relationship is often not the only principle of recruitment into the group assembled for a specific social or ceremonial occasion. Actual attendance at these occasions is determined as much by proximity in space and socio-emotional distance as by closeness of genealogical relationship. The vague boundaries of kindred become an inconvenience mainly at celebrations such as weddings where the number of guests must be restricted and those who have not been invited might feel offended.

Functionalist anthropologists tended to see kindreds as kinship categories typical of Western industrial societies in which kinship is not an important structuring principle. In pre-industrial, non-Western

societies, which were seen as 'kinship based', genealogical connections linking the members of kindred could not serve as a means of basic social differentiation as kindred do not form distinct segments of society. As Radcliffe-Brown pointed out, only groups formed on the basis of unilineal descent do not overlap, are clearly bounded and can therefore constitute such segments (1950: 14). Probably as a result of his theoretical influence, most anthropological research into kinship conducted by anthropologists of structural-functional persuasion has concentrated on the study of unilineal forms of organisation which were seen as essential for the continuity of social structure in simple pre-industrial societies in which political and economic relations are expressed in a kinship idiom.

However, even research conducted within the structural-functional paradigm has shown that not only Western societies, but social systems of many simple societies can work efficiently without any form of large corporate kin groups. Such forms of social organisation exist not only among hunter-gatherers or nomadic peoples, like, for example, the Lapps (Pehrson 1954, 1957), but also among sedentary agriculturalists. The Subanun shifting horticulturalists of Mindanao (Frake 1960) and the Iban rice-cultivating farmers of western Borneo (Freeman 1955, 1958, 1960) are the best-known ethnographic examples of societies in which nuclear or extended families constitute the main kinship groups and larger groups are mobilised, when needed, from among the kindred. Writing against the tide of seeing the continuity of social structure as based on the existence of clearly bounded and permanent descent groups which form distinct segments of society, Frake has characterised in the following way the continuity of Subanun social structure:

Despite [the] network of formal and informal social ties among families, there have emerged no large, stable discrete socio-political units The Subanun family [is]... largely a 'sovereign nation'. But ... [its] corporate unity endures only as long as does the marriage tie of its founders. The continuity of Subanun society must be sought in the continuous process of corporate group formation and dissolution rather than in the permanency of the groups themselves. (1960: 63)

While the first way of delineating categories of kin consists of defining them ego-centrally by tracing a genealogical connection to some living person, the second way is to define categories of kin socio-centrally. People are members of such categories not because they

have a kinsman in common but because they have a common ancestor, that is 'any common genealogical predecessor of the grandparental or earlier generation' (Fortes 1959: 207, 1969: 281). Since they are comprised of someone's descendants, such categories are called descent categories.

A descent category includes only those individuals who are descended from an ancestor in a particular way and various descent rules define a particular kind of descent sequence that specifies who is a member of the category. Only three such rules may be distinguished. The first one is the rule of patrilineal or agnatic descent which stipulates that only individuals who trace their descent from an ancestor through an unbroken chain of male links are members of the descent category. Expressed differently, it means that members of the category trace their descent from a particular ancestor through their father, their father's father, their paternal great-grandfather, and so on. The second rule is that of matrilineal or uterine descent which stipulates that descent is traced from an ancestor or ancestress down through an unbroken series of female links, that is, through the ancestor's daughter, daughter's daughter, daughter's grand-daughter, and so on. The third descent rule is the rule of cognatic descent which applies when descent is traced from an ancestor or ancestress down through a series of links that can be male or female, or any combination of the two. In other words, when cognatic descent rule determines the membership of a category, the sex of any genealogical link that connects the category members to their common ancestor is irrelevant. The rules of patrilineal and matrilineal descent, since each traces an unbroken chain of genealogical links through only one sex, are classed together as rules of unilineal descent and they jointly contrast with cognatic descent, which traces an unbroken chain of links through either sex.

KINSHIP AND DESCENT

Underlying the notion of descent as a 'relationship by genealogical tie to an ancestor' (Scheffler 1966: 542) is the analytical differentiation between kinship and descent drawn by Fortes. In Fortes's conceptualisation, descent is a relation mediated by a parent between ego and an ancestor and it has to be distinguished from filiation – a relation deriving from the fact of being a child of one's parent. Filiation and

its corollary, siblingship, are for him primarily phenomena of the domestic domain and form the basis of domestic relationships of kinship. Descent, on the other hand, is a phenomenon of the public or politico-jural domain (Fortes 1953, 1959, 1969). Fortes himself considered the analytical separation of the politico-jural domain from the domestic or familial domain to be 'the major advance in kinship theory since Radcliffe-Brown' (Fortes 1969: 72). According to him, 'human social organization everywhere emerges as some kind of balance, stable or not, between the political order – Aristotle's polis – and the familial or domestic order – the oikos – a balance between polity and kinship' (Fortes 1978: 14). Fortes considered the distinction between the two domains to be

a methodological and analytical distinction. The actualities of kinship relations and kinship behaviour are compounded of elements from both domains and deployed in words and acts, beliefs and practices, objects and appurtenances that pertain to both of these and to other domains of social life as well. (Fortes 1969: 251)

But that more than 'a methodological and analytical distinction' was involved in the separation of the two domains is indicated by the fact that in Fortes's conceptualisation, the distinction between the two domains parallels the distinction between kinship, the ego-centred system of bilateral relations arising from procreative activities taking place in the domestic domain, and descent, the sociocentric system of genealogical relations defining first of all the political affiliations of individuals in 'kinship-based social systems' (1969: 72). Because of the different character of relations pertaining to the domestic and the politico-jural domain, the activities and behaviour pertaining to each domain are regulated by different norms. The domestic domain is governed by 'private', 'affective' and 'moral' norms which underpin the prescribed altruism or 'amity' among kinsmen (1969: 250–1). The 'affective' and moral components' of interpersonal kinship relations are generated by the 'reproductive nucleus' of the mother-child unit:

The nodal bond of mother and child implies self-sacrificing love and support on the one side and life-long trust and devotion on the other. The values mirrored in this relation have their roots in the parental care bestowed on children, not in jural imperatives. Their observance is dictated by conscience, not legality. (1969: 191).

The politico-jural domain, on the other hand, is governed by jural norms upheld by 'external' or 'public' sanctions. As Scheffler pointed out, Fortes tended 'to treat social relations ascribed by reference to relations of common descent as though they were necessarily "politico-jural relations"' (Scheffler 1970b: 1465).

Scheffler, who takes the distinction drawn by Fortes between kinship and descent further than any other anthropologist, describes the ego-centric systems of social identities and statuses as kinship systems and the ancestor-oriented systems as descent systems (1973: 756). As he says: 'To all appearances, all societies have kinship systems (as defined above), and a great many have descent systems as well' (1973: 758). This means that a society which orders social relations among its members by reference to their genealogical connections in terms of common descent, orders them also ego-centrally. Descent rules therefore do not imply only the recognition of certain genealogical ties and the exclusion of others. A society in which descent is traced in a matrilineal line does not deny the genealogical tie between a person and his or her patrilineal kin (kin on the father's side). The same situation obtains with regard to matrilineal kinsmen (kin on the mother's side) in societies in which descent is traced patrilineally. The rule of descent is only a social rule which identifies individuals with a selected category of their kin for specific purposes. People have also certain rights towards the kin of the parent with whom they do not share membership of the same descent category.

This fact led Fortes to develop his concept of 'complementary filiation' (1959). By this term he describes the relation of an individual to the people with whom he is related to that one of his parents through whom he does not trace descent. Thus in a patrilineal society, a man is bound to his father by descent, his relationship to his mother is that of complementary filiation. It is the other way around in a matrilineal society where descent is traced from and through one's mother and the relation to one's father is that of complementary filiation. According to Fortes, complementary filiation has very important social consequences in the situation where unilineal descent groups form the main segments of society. If only ties which bind together members of a descent group were acknowledged, each descent group would remain isolated from all others and it would not be bound together with them into one society. This is one of the reasons why, in patrilineally organised societies, people have certain rights and duties

not only to members of their own descent group but also to the members of their mother's group, and why great importance is often attached to the relationship between a man and his mother's brother. This relationship is an important tie which binds the sister's son to the descent group of which he is himself not a member but whose members are, nevertheless, closely related to him. The tie of complementary filiation constitutes, as Fortes metaphorically expressed it, 'a break into the fence of agnatic kinship' which surrounds each individual in a patrilineally organised society. *descendants*

What Fortes is basically talking about is the functional difference between kinship and descent and the complementary role which they play within the total social system. However, the notion of complementary filiation implies that it is the descent system which is structurally primary and that the kinship system is secondary and that it is merely derivative of the descent system. This is a line of criticism which was raised by Dumont (1971: 76-7). Keesing is critical of the concept of complementary filiation on the grounds that it may in fact confound the principle of bilateral kinship and that of cognatic descent which should analytically be kept separate (1975: 47). The notion of complementary filiation also implies that the ties of marriage which link the members of two descent groups are purely personal and therefore structurally unimportant. This is a line of criticism which was raised by Leach who finds particularly wanting Fortes's assumption that 'any Ego is related to the kinsmen of his two parents because he is the descendant of both parents and not because his parents were married'. In Leach's view, Fortes 'while recognizing that ties of affinity have comparable importance to ties of descent, disguises the former under his expression "complementary filiation"' (1961a: 122).

MARRIAGE

It has been a received wisdom in anthropology that although categories of people who trace descent from a common ancestor are not everywhere culturally recognised, people everywhere recognise relations of genealogical connection and use them as criteria for the allocation of rights and duties. In other words, although not all peoples have a concept of descent, they all recognise culturally a domain which we call kinship. The relations of kinship and descent are conceptualised

as those established in the process of reproduction, that is, as those deriving from genealogical parenthood and the birth of children. Since incest prohibitions almost universally rule out mating among close kin, parenthood presupposes the relationship of affinity, that is a relationship by marriage. The study of the way in which people see themselves as mutually related is thus concerned with three kinds of relations which can be analytically separated: those of kinship, descent and affinity. It is a study of groups and categories which are formed on the basis of these relations, the activities which they perform and the role which they play in social life.

Having already dealt with the difference between kinship and descent, a few words need to be said about marriage. The issue of a cross-culturally valid definition of marriage was debated in anthropology in the 1950s particularly in relation to the interpretation of the *tāli*-tying ritual of the Nayar which I mentioned in the preceding chapter. As an analytical term, the term 'marriage' is taken from the ordinary English language, as indeed are most other analytical terms and concepts employed in sociology and anthropology: concepts like family, kindred, lineage, descent, religion, myth, politics and many others can serve as examples. The difficulty is that in ordinary English usage such words are usually polysemic, that is, have several different meanings. As Leach pointed out, in ordinary English usage, the word 'marriage' is employed in at least four distinguishable but overlapping senses. It is used to refer to the rights and duties of the spouses vis-à-vis each other and to the rights and duties between the wife's husband and her children whom the marriage provides with a legitimate status in society; to the arrangements by which the couple and their children form a domestic group; to the wedding ceremony; and to the relationship of alliance which links the families of both spouses (1982: 182-3). The meaning of the word 'marriage' in ordinary English is therefore too loose to be used without further definition in ethnographic description and cross-cultural comparison. It has habitually been used by anthropologists in the first of its above mentioned meanings to refer to a 'union between a man and a woman such that children born to the woman are the recognized legitimate offspring of both partners' (*Notes and Queries in Anthropology* 1951: 110). Gough interpreted the *tāli*-tying ritual of the Nayar, and the subsequent relations between the woman who has undergone it and the men with whom she cohabited, as marriage, because they limited and regulated sexual

relationships and because they served to legitimise children. She emphasised that sexual relations between a woman and her husband were not promiscuous. They were forbidden within the lineage, within a certain range of affines, and, most categorically, with men of lower caste. It was therefore necessary to have some procedure for legitimising children and for showing that they have been fathered by men of appropriate status. The legally obligatory payments by husbands at the time of birth accomplished this and if no man could be found to make the payments, the woman and her child were expelled from the caste (Gough 1959: 23-4, 1961a: 362-3).

To Gough, the 'creation of legitimacy' (Leach 1982: 203) is the defining feature of any institution labelled 'marriage'. To be able to accommodate not only the Nayar case in a general definition of marriage but also the Nuer woman-to-woman and ghost marriages, she proposed that:

marriage is a relationship between a woman and one or more other persons which provides that a child born to the woman, under circumstances not prohibited by the rule of the relationship, shall be accorded full birth-status rights in his society or social stratum. (1959: 23-4)

→ Serious objections have been raised against defining marriage as an institution whose main function is to legitimate the offspring. Rivière pointed out that all such definitions are purely circular in the sense that the marital institution and its function are being used to define each other: if the function of marriage is the legitimation of children, the legitimacy of children clearly depends on marriage (1971: 60-2). According to Leach, definitions which seize on the notion of the legitimation of offspring do not hold even within the ordinary English usage: marriages without issue do not cease to be marriages and adopted children are certainly not considered to be illegitimate simply because they have not been born to their adoptive mother. The point which Leach emphasises is that legitimacy is a social concept which 'is not tied in with the issue of who is the biological parent of the child' (1982: 185-8). The Nuer linked legitimacy to the transfer of cattle through which any valid marriage was established and Nayar legitimacy was established by the child's mother having undergone the *tāli* rite and the child's presumed genitor not being of lower caste than its mother (1982: 203). Furthermore, among the patrilineal Brahmans, with whom it was appropriate for the Nayar women to cohabit, only the

eldest son was allowed to marry with full Vedic rites and to produce legitimate offspring. To prevent the fragmentation of the patrimonial estate, this privilege was denied the younger sons who took women of the matrilineal Nayar castes as their consorts. The Brahmans considered these women to be concubines whose children affiliated with their mothers' and not their fathers' caste. From the point of view of the matrilineal Nayar, the children belonged to their mother's caste in any case and the unions of Nayar women with Brahman men were seen as highly prestigious (1982: 190-1). Here, then, we have a case where the children were treated as legitimate offspring by their mother and her people but not by their father and his people.

As a result of all this, Leach refused as feasible any definition of marriage as an institution whose main function is the legitimation of children and argued that no definition could be found which would apply to all the institutions which ethnographers commonly refer to as marriage. He suggested that we ought to feel free to call 'marriage' any institution which gives rise to the establishing of legal parenthood, monopoly in the spouse's sexuality, rights in the spouse's labour services and property, socially significant 'relationship of affinity', and possibly many more similar rights (Leach 1961a: 107-8). Leach's position has been endorsed by Needham (1971: 6) and more recently reiterated by Barnard and Good (1984: 89-91).

3 KINSHIP AND THE DOMESTIC DOMAIN

Kinship studies conducted by British anthropologists in the first half and in the middle of the twentieth century were concerned mainly with investigating the nature and significance of unilineal descent groups. As a result of the work of Radcliffe-Brown (1935), Evans-Pritchard (1940) and Fortes (1953), most of the important debates and theoretical controversies about kinship have been concerned with what could be seen as the politico-jural aspect of kinship in Fortes's terms. Fox's (1967) and Keesing's (1975) discussion of kinship are good examples of this tendency. They focus mainly on the problems in the conceptualisation of descent groups and on marriage systems as they relate to the structure and interweaving of descent groups, and they pay only marginal attention to family and domestic groups. Like Fox and Keesing, most modern kinship theorists have seen the extra-domestic or 'public' domain of kinship as the main location for the theoretical debate. The result of this concentration of interest was the theoretical clarification and the increasingly precise definition of the basic concepts employed in the analysis of the public domain of genealogically constituted relations which was not paralleled by a similar clarification of concepts employed in the analysis of the domestic domain. Well into the 1960s and 1970s, a discussion went on among anthropologists about how the particular units of the domestic domain should be conceptualised and defined in ways that would be applicable cross-culturally. Henrietta Moore pointed out this conceptual vagueness when she observed that

the major difficulty in talking about the 'domestic' is that we automatically find ourselves having to consider a range of amorphous concepts and entities like 'the family', 'the household', 'the domestic sphere' and 'the sexual division of labour', which overlap and interact in complex ways to produce a sense of the domestic sphere. The family and household are two terms which are particularly difficult to separate clearly. (Moore 1988: 54)