

FAMILY IDEOLOGY AND THE CRISIS IN TWENTIETH CENTURY KINSHIP THEORY

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‘I believe’, writes Sir Edmund Leach (1961: 26), ‘that we social anthropologists are like the mediaeval Ptolemaic astronomers; we spend our time trying to fit the facts of the objective world into the framework of a set of concepts which have been developed *a priori* instead of from observation.’ First among these arbitrarily-imposed premises, according to Leach, is the idea ‘the family’ in the English language sense of this term was, is and must always remain the hub around which human kinship revolves. Such ethnocentrism, according to Leach, has produced the crisis in kinship theory in turn responsible for the modern crisis in anthropology as a whole. Unable to solve even the most elementary problems, anthropologists in their efforts have ground almost to a halt, spinning out more and more confusing and redundant terms and definitions in the process. The mental constructs of modern kinship theory, concludes Leach, are beginning to look as bewildering and as futile as the cycles and epicycles of those Ptolemaic astronomers who could conceptualize the universe only from the standpoint of the centrality of their own Earth.

Kinship

‘Kinship is to anthropology’, writes Robin Fox (1967: 10), ‘what logic is to philosophy or the nude is to art; it is the basic discipline of the subject.’ But what exactly *is* this thing called ‘kinship’? Is it a measure of biological relatedness? Or is it nothing to with biology at all? ‘Kinship’ was traditionally viewed as the organising principle of stateless societies, but as to what it is, there seems to be little agreement. For Fox (1975: 30), the activity of evolving and utilizing kinship systems is wholly natural, and is something which not only humans but also apes and monkeys do. Chimpanzees, for example, evolve ‘matrilineages’, the ‘classic group’ consisting of ‘an old mother, her sons and daughters, and the children of

her daughters' (p. 16). Human kinship may differ from ape or monkey kinship, but only in the sense that every species differs in certain respects from every other. Kinship groups, writes Fox (p. 30),

'are the outcome of natural processes; they are as natural as limbs and digestion; they are the outcome of adaptive responses and natural selection over millions of years; they are not peculiar to human society. They do not depend for their existence on the equally natural ability to classify and name which characterizes our species; in the absence of language and rules, they would still occur.'

Yet while Fox sees kinship as biology, other anthropologists completely disagree.

According to Fox, 'descent' is a matter of biology. In his view, chimpanzees possess 'matrilineal descent groups'. This way of looking at things might seem self-evident to many. But not to social anthropologist Rodney Needham (1960: 97):

'Biology is one matter and descent is quite another, of a different order... Briefly, a descent system is an ordered set of categories, and it is a misleading error of the most fundamental and elementary kind to suppose that these categories can profitably be analysed as though the relations they govern were biological.'

Although 'Malinowski derived the bonds of kinship from the fundamental biological processes of reproduction', writes Needham (p. 97), it 'is a travesty of the scholarly investigations into descent systems over the last seventy years to represent this approach as characteristic of social anthropology.' Kinship, for Needham (1974: 40), 'has to do with the allocation of rights and their transmission from one generation to the next', rights which 'have no intrinsic connexion with the facts, or the cultural idioms, of procreation' (p. 41).

Needham denies that Malinowski's interpretation of kinship is 'characteristic of social anthropology' as it has developed 'over the last seventy years.' But he has to admit that his own position is a minority one, and that there is really no currently prevailing consensus at all. Having agreed with Fox that kinship is 'the basic discipline' of social anthropology, he tells us that 'an inside ,look at what really goes on' within the profession 'reveals a curious situation' (1974: 39). University teachers 'are apprehensive and uncertain about kinship, and they have as little to do with it as they can get away with.' Few books or papers are written on the subject, and little progress in understanding kinship systems has been made. 'The current theoretical position', Needham concludes, 'is obscure and confused, and there is little clear indication of what future developments we can expect or should encourage.' He comments, in tones indicating a mood perhaps close to despair:

‘In view of the constant professional attention extending over roughly a century, and a general improvement in ethnographic accounts, this is a remarkably unsatisfactory situation in what is supposed to be a basic discipline. Obviously, after so long a time, and so much field research, it is not just facts that we need. Something more fundamental seems to have gone wrong. What we have to look for, perhaps, is some radical flaw in analysis, some initial defect in the way we approach the phenomena.’

But what could this ‘initial defect’ – this ‘radical flaw in analysis’ – conceivably be?

Restricted kinship

A possibility worth investigating is whether the ‘initial defect’ has something to do with the habit of viewing kinship from the standpoint of the ‘individual family’ or the personal ‘ego’ or ‘I’. Anthropologists usually speak of kinship in primitive cultures as being ‘extended.’ The ‘extended family’, for example, is a term designed to refer to family structures which are not ‘nuclear’ or ‘individual’ in the sense that most modern European families are. But could it be that this idea of ‘extension’ actually implies assumptions which we have no right to make? The converse of ‘extension’ is ‘restriction’. Why take the modern European family as the ‘norm’, from which other types are formed by ‘extension’ outwards? Why not take an opposite norm as our starting point, and describe the modern European type of family as the ‘restricted family’? Would not this make more sense?

The ‘restricted family’ would then be regarded conceptually as the result produced when kinship links are systematically severed, shorn off and reduced to the minimum levels consistent with certain reproductive and other necessities. When kinship has been thoroughly marginalized, privatised, emasculated and shorn of all public weight or political power, the ‘restricted family’ and ‘restricted kinship’ are the results. In this kind of kinship-system, the only kin-groups which have solidarity and function as economic units are groups consisting of mothers with their children. Fathers may be attached to these groups and may even (unusually) replace the mothers in them, but in general the attachment of the father depends on the strength of the marriage-tie, which is not a kinship link at all. In this kind of system, each one of us experiences the security of belonging to an indestructible kinship group only in childhood.

As a child, I share my most crucial relationship – my kinship link with my mother – with my sisters and brothers (if I have any). I can say to my siblings: ‘My mother is your mother’ and ‘Your mother is mine’, and this actually means something important to us. It means, for example, ‘Your home is my home and my home, yours.’ The various things

which are implied by the idea of ‘home’ – shared meal-times, play, bed and so on – make this sharing into something transcending sentiment alone.

All of this, however, ceases to be of such importance as we leave our family of origin and get married. ‘Restricted kinship’ reveals its weakness in this, that from the moment marriage is entered into, the bonds between brothers and sisters effectively snap, and are replaced by bonds (which are of a different kind) between husbands and wives. My mother may still be your mother, but how important is this when we no longer live together, and when my spouse is certainly not yours? Our siblings, like our parents, are relations who can be shared. Wives and husbands are not. Once we are married, my home is not yours and yours is not mine; my children are not yours and yours are not mine – and so on. The fact that we once shared our parents and a home is not nearly so important as the fact that our present family lives pull us – often despite our sentiments – apart. It is in this severing of kinship-links that the essence of restricted kinship lies.

So total is the severance of kinship links that a young person who has left his or her family of origin may feel for a period utterly isolated and alone. The old kinship network may wholly cease to perform its function, forcing the individual to recreate around himself or herself a new network, the precondition of which is marriage. In the absence of effective kin, the individual must find a substitute, and the sexual partner is obliged to become this substitute. The marriage relation has to *resemble* a kinship relation – it has to seem, like kinship, something indestructible, something inexhaustively supportive, and capable of bearing the weight which, in other cultures, a whole *complex* of kinship relationships would support. To the extent that this works, children and both parents become a unit, with a kinship solidarity which binds them all. But it has to be conceded that the strains are intense, and that there is nothing ‘natural’ about this kind of ‘kinship’ at all. In fact, to turn a sexual relationship into a kinship relationship is to transform one thing into its opposite. In all cultures in which kinship is unrestricted, this kind of thing never happens at all. The incest taboo ensures that sexual relations are only with non-kin, and these non-kin stay non-kin, just as kinsfolk for their part stay kin and stay united throughout their lives.

Unrestricted kinship

Under modern ‘nuclear family’ conditions, effective kinship is either (a) the support-structure that forms around us during childhood and disintegrates as we reach maturity or (b) the support-structure we are supposed to find as we settle into marriage. Let us term this ‘restricted kinship’. ‘Unrestricted kinship’ is then just the opposite. Where kinship is unrestricted, kin-groups do not simply coalesce around babies, only to be discarded as

these grow up, or coalesce around marriage-partners, only to die when these partners themselves die or split up. Groups such as clans have a stable structure which survives intact despite individual life-cycle events such as birth, marriage or death. In this context, to speak of kinship as ‘essentially individual would be absurd.

Most stateless societies use the ‘classificatory’ system of reckoning kinship (Fortes 1959: 156). In fact, so much is this taken for granted by social anthropologists that ethnographic accounts often fail to mention that all kinship terms should be read in their ‘classificatory’ sense. Almost any book on a library shelf describing a so-called ‘primitive’ or ‘traditional’ culture will depict a people with ‘classificatory’ kinship. A group without such kinship (such as the !Kung or Inuit) appear in this context as very unusual. ‘Classificatory’ kinship is characteristic of virtually all tribally-organized peoples throughout America, Africa and Asia. Wherever there are clans – whether matrilineal or patrilineal – with a rule of exogamy (‘marrying out’), we can expect the kinship terminology to be ‘classificatory.’

The ‘classificatory or tribal type of kinship reckoning’ (Warner 1957: 8) was given its first description in print in 1724, when Father Lafitau, a French Jesuit missionary in north America (quoted in Tax 1955: 445), reported:

‘Among the Iroquois and the Hurons, all the children of a Cabin regard their mothers’ sisters as their mothers....’

Sisters referred to each other’s children as their own, the very language itself apparently not permitting them to distinguish in this respect between ‘mine’ and ‘thine.’ Brothers did the same. The essence of ‘classificatory’ kinship resides in this.

Lafitau’s discovery, though, remained unnoticed for over a century. No attention was paid even when a certain James Edwin, leader of an expedition into the American West (quoted in Tax 1955: 446), wrote that among the Omaha Indians,

‘...children universally address their father’s brother by the title of father, and their mother’s brother by that of uncle; their mother’s sister is called mother and their father’s sister aunt. The children of brothers and sisters address each other by the title of brother and sister...’

This was in 1823. Such was the Europeans’ ignorance of Indian kinship structures that when, in 1846, Lewis Henry Morgan (1871: 3) repeated Lafitau’s discovery of the Iroquois system, he thought it to be ‘both unique and extraordinary in its character, and wholly unlike any with which we are familiar.’

In 1858, Morgan discovered among the Ojibway Indians on the southern shores of Lake Superior ‘the same elaborate system which then existed among the Iroquois’ (Morgan 1871: 3). But it was not until the following year that the significance of the discovery

began to be realized: the same basic system was found to prevail throughout the five principal stock-languages east of the Rocky Mountains. Morgan (p. 135) was later to comment on how astonishing it was that Europeans who had a thorough knowledge of the Indian languages, and had lived among Indians for decades, had previously failed to notice the peculiarity of their kinship systems at all.

In 1859, Morgan concluded that the universality of the 'Iroquois' system among the American Indians was 'extremely probable' (p. 4). His eyes now turned towards the rest of the world. By now a recognized authority on Indian life, Morgan was able to secure the backing of the United States Secretary of State and the Smithsonian Institution in drawing up and distributing a questionnaire on kinship terms to a number of American religious and diplomatic missions in foreign countries. It usually took two or three years for the complicated forms to be returned, completed, from many of the most far-flung regions of the globe. But eventually the extraordinary conclusion emerged. The principle underlying the Iroquois system – the principle according to which sisters (and brothers) would say to each other 'My child is your child and yours is mine' – was, although previously quite unnoticed, apparently universal among the 'uncivilized' cultures of humankind. In 1870, Morgan published his results in an enormous work of scholarship: 'The Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family.'

The enthusiasm with which Morgan's work was received by Marx and Engels is well known. Today it is less well known that up until about the time of the First World War, social anthropology as a whole seemed to be uniting around the paradigm which Morgan's achievements had come to represent. In 1914, W. H. R. Rivers – under whose influence, whether direct or indirect, social anthropology as a distinct discipline in Britain was first formed – wrote these words:

'I do not know of any discovery in the whole range of science which can be more certainly put to the credit of one man than that of the classificatory system of relationship by Lewis Morgan. By this I mean, not merely was he the first to point out clearly the existence of this mode of denoting relationship, but it was he who collected the vast mass of material, by which the essential characters of the system were demonstrated, and it was he who was the first to recognize the great theoretical importance of his new discovery' (Rivers 1968: 4-5).

Even so relentless an anti-evolutionist, anti-Marxist as Robert Lowie (1960: 383) conceded the immense significance of Morgan's discovery of classificatory kinship. As he put it in 1936:

'Missionaries and others had, of course, noted that primitive peoples classify relatives according to non-European norms. But prior to Morgan no one had seen a problem in such exotic usage; no one had systematically garnered the several nomenclatures, compared them

with one another, attempted a typology or interpretation. Morgan, evincing that ‘eye for essential fact’ which even Lubbock was willing to concede, devoted twenty years to assembling the pertinent facts, partly by personal field studies, partly through the services of numerous correspondents. The result is a mass of raw material incomparably fuller than anything yet brought together by any of his successors. The work represented the terminologies of 139 distinct tribes or peoples and presented them, on the whole, in the greatest detail. Anyone who has worked out a single system in the field knows what is implied in this statement.’

Social anthropology in Australia, under the influence of men like Lorimer Fison, A. W. Howitt, Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, was formed almost wholly within the conceptual framework which Morgan had provided. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1977: 1, 300) writes simply that Morgan’s ‘Systems of Consanguinity’ actually founded kinship studies and the science of social anthropology.

Classificatory kinship

What, then, was the significance of Morgan’s discovery? What was the significance of the fact that, where children were concerned, sisters (and brothers) were apparently unable to distinguish between ‘mine’ and ‘thine’? One result was predictable: children were apparently unable to distinguish between each other’s parents. To the Western or ‘civilized’ observer – whose individualism was so ingrained as to render him incapable of viewing kinship from a standpoint transcending the ego or ‘I’-this seemed confusing or simply absurd. Evidently the strange, ‘primitive’ terminology was so cumbersome and inefficient that using it, no-one could tell which relative a person meant! As a certain missionary, the Rev. Bingham, put it, writing to Morgan from Hawaii (Morgan 1871: 461):

‘The terms for father, mother, brother, and sister, and for other relationships, are used so loosely we can never know, without further inquiry, whether the real father, or the father’s brother is meant, the real mother or the mother’s sister... A man comes to me and says *e mote tamau*, my father is dead. Perhaps I have just seen his father alive and well, and I say, ‘No, not dead?’ He replies, ‘I mean my father’s brother’...’

or some other ‘uncle’ (the Hawaiian system is actually much more ‘loose’ even than usual for classificatory systems). In this passage, it is noticeable how insistently the missionary forces his own interpretations of ‘reality’ on the facts. A child who finds it unnecessary to distinguish between its father and its father’s brother is pinned down, forced to make the distinction – forced to divulge the ‘real’ (‘real’ from a European viewpoint) facts. To the European, it is vitally important to ascertain the precise biological meaning of the kinship-terms being used. The fact that, to the ‘native’, this just doesn’t always seem so important – is treated as somewhat absurd.

Morgan's follower in Australia, A. W. Howitt (1904: 157) in this connection noted that the typically ethnocentric European

‘...seems to consider that the terms of relationship which he has been taught to use are, or ought to be, of universal application among mankind.

When such a man is brought first into contact with a race of savages who use the classificatory system, he feels in most cases surprise, mingled with pity, and even with contempt, for those poor creatures who are so low in intellect as to think it possible to have several fathers and mothers, and a vast number of brothers and sisters.’

Possibly Howitt had been reading a work by Sir Henry Maine, for long one of the greatest British authorities on ‘ancient law’, who in a passage on the perplexing problem of classificatory kinship had written:

‘May I suggest that it is at least worthy of consideration whether all or part of the explanation may not lie in an imperfection of mental grasp on the part of savages?’ (Maine 1883: 289).

It astonishing how, throughout the history of social anthropology, Europeans have been able to invert reality sufficiently to enable them to project their own very real ‘imperfection of mental grasp’ – amounting, in fact, to a total inability to transcend the egocentricity characteristic of their own cultural experiences of kinship – upon the ‘natives’ whom they were supposed to be understanding.

For several years after Morgan's discovery, anthropologists continued to assume that there was a vital distinction to be made between ‘real’ kinship on the one hand, and the ‘pretended’ kinship of classificatory kin-terms on the other. The only conceivable ‘real’ kinship, of course, was kinship defined along the biological lines recognized by Europeans. The first major opponent of Morgan in this respect was the Scottish lawyer, J. F. McLellan (1876: 361-2; 366), who wrote that classificatory kinship terms were ‘barren of consequences’, comprising only ‘a code of courtesies and ceremonial addresses in social intercourse’, the whole system of classificatory kinship being ‘a system of mutual salutations merely...’ Interestingly, McLellan pointed to the fact that the Indians invariably tried to relate to Europeans on kinship terms as proof of his position. The Indians would call a white man ‘brother’, for example. But how could this be true? McLellan's reaction helps to explain why Europeans never took any notice of the classificatory system at all. Finding himself called a ‘brother’, the European's immediate response would be to think to himself: ‘But I'm not really this man's brother’. Excluding himself in this way from the kinship fabric, the white man would follow this logic through, thinking: ‘When Indians call

each other ‘brother’, ‘sister’, ‘mother’ and so on – they don’t really mean it’. Engels (1891: 35) commented:

‘It is as if one were to argue that the terms father, mother, brother, sister are merely empty forms of address because Catholic priests and abbesses are likewise addressed as father and mother, and because monks and nuns, and even freemasons and members of English craft unions, in solemn session assembled, are addressed as brother and sister.’

Morgan’s own reply (1877: 531) was conclusive:

‘It was as impossible that ‘a system of modes of addressing persons’ should have grown up independently of the system of consanguinity and affinity; as that language should have grown up independently of the ideas it represents and expresses. What could have given to these terms their significance as used in addressing relatives, but the relationship whether of consanguinity or affinity which they expressed? The mere want of a mode of addressing persons could never have given such stupendous systems, identical in minute details over immense sections of the earth.’

Despite this, however, ideas like those of McLellan continued to seem convincing to some. A. L. Kroeber (1909), for example, was still insisting – decades after McLellan – that classificatory kin terms ‘reflect psychology, not sociology’, are ‘determined primarily by language’ (whatever that might mean) and ‘can be utilized for sociological inferences only with extreme caution.’ Sol Tax (1955: 464) has pointed out that McLellan’s objections to Morgan in many quarters succeeded in delaying the scientific study of kinship for thirty years – until it was revived again (in Britain) by W. H. R. Rivers.

For those whose experience of kinship has been limited to the ‘family life’ of European bourgeois ‘civilization’, it is indeed almost impossible to comprehend what classificatory kinship really means. In Aboriginal Australia, where the classificatory (‘my relationships are your relationships’) principle was carried to extremes, a person could travel across the landscape, transferring his or her relationships from ‘sister’ to ‘sister’, from ‘brother’ to ‘brother’ and from every kind of relative to a ‘sibling’ of that relative wherever he or she went. It has been said (Murdock 1949: 96) that

‘...a native could, at least theoretically, traverse the entire continent, stopping at each tribal boundary to compare notes on relatives, and at the end of his journey know precisely whom in the local group he should address as grandmother, father-in-law, sister, etc., whom he might associate freely with, whom he must avoid, whom he might or might not have sexual relations with, and so on.’

To grasp that the Earth moves is nowadays – for most of us, anyway – just about possible. But can we imagine a kinship system which insists not only that ‘I’ am not the centre of my kinship world, but that ‘I’ am actually interchangeable with ‘you’?

Writing of the problem of classificatory kinship, Robin Fox (1967: 184) in a moment of lucidity observes:

‘It is because anthropologists have consistently looked at the problem from the ego-focus that they have been baffled by it. They have placed ego at the centre of his kinship network and tried to work the system out in terms of his personal relationships.’

The result has been disputes and confusion without end. Approaching the problem from the ego-focus is the surest way to guarantee that nothing will make any sense. But then, what is the alternative?

Can we internalize the logic of a system which runs counter to our deepest assumptions concerning what sex, life, death and love are all about? Can we internalize a logic according to which you and I, as (say) ‘brothers’, ‘occupy similar positions in the total social structure’, so that our ‘social personalities are almost precisely the same’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1931: 97)? In Aboriginal Australia, this kind of thing is taken for granted. If ‘you’ and ‘I’ are ‘brothers’ (or ‘sisters’) living on opposite coasts of the continent, ‘I’ can slot myself into your marital and family relationships, and ‘you’ can slot yourself into mine. You can eat my meals as a matter of course, and I can eat yours. You can sleep with my spouse, and I can sleep with yours. Your home, your children, your parents-in-law etc. etc. are my home, my children, my parents-in-law etc. etc., and mine are equally yours. But can we ever hope to make this kind of logic our own?

The most basic premise of restricted, bourgeois, kinship is that ‘I’ am not ‘you.’ My marriage is not yours, my home after marriage is not yours, my children are not yours – and so on. This is so utterly self-evident to us, so utterly basic and indisputable, that to each one of us it is felt as inseparable from our very being. And this is the academic, the scholarly, scientific problem. Is it possible to visualize ourselves in a system of the precise opposite kind? Can we imagine a kinship system according to which each one of us is considered to be interchangeable with anyone of a large number of ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’? In which my children are yours and yours are mine? In which – in principle and, periodically, in practice – your sexual partners are mine, and mine, yours? And in which each one of us is said to be loved -- from infancy onwards – by not one but a multiplicity of ‘mothers’, ‘mothers’ brothers’, ‘fathers’ and other relatives? Can we imagine a kinship system which gives us ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’ scattered all over our known world? Which tells us that ‘home’ consists of all those places in which we have such ‘kin’? Which gives us the right to eat or sleep in anyone of an immense number of these ‘homes’ at any time and as a matter of course? And which insists that ‘love’ is not necessarily to do with sex and is not an intimate, personal matter at all – but is the very kinship-stuff of which

‘society’ (the society of all our known and unknown kinsfolk combined) is made? Can we visualize our personal selves from a standpoint outside ourselves? Can we internalize a logic which refuses to agree that the personal subject or ‘I’ is the standpoint from which kinship should be viewed? Which insists not only that you and I are siblings (let us say), but that we are ultimately interchangeable – within even our most intimate relationships – even should we live the breadth of a continent apart? Can we imagine a system which tells us that neither you nor I are the centre of our kinship universe, but only ‘We’? And that this ‘We’, in principle, envelops the entire Earth?

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The theory of sexual communism

If you are my same-sex sibling, and if my relationships are formally interchangeable with yours, then it follows on logical grounds that my spouse must be your spouse and your spouse, mine. Among the Aborigines of West Arnhem Land, Australia (Berndt and Berndt 1951: 47):

‘...a wife may have access to a number of tribal ‘husbands’, and ‘brother-cousins’ of her actual husband; while a husband enjoys the same privilege with his tribal ‘wives’, the classificatory sisters of his wife and wives and their female ‘cousins’. Should the husband or wife object, or take steps to terminate such a union, this would be contrary to public opinion, and the protesting party is soon made to understand that he or she is part of an institution which legally sanctions such relationships.’

In this part of Australia, people ‘marry’ in something like the European sense of this word, but ‘...extra-marital relations are the norm, expected and enjoyed as additions to married life.’ Sex is considered important (p. 58):

‘Women are always practising, so these aborigines say, to make the sexual act as enjoyable and nearly perfect as possible.’

And it is during ceremonial gatherings – when large numbers of people come together – that classificatory kinship comes into its own and people take advantage of the rights which they have. ‘It is said’, write the Berndts (p. 57),

‘...that some women are satisfied only after a number of ejaculations--one insertion being ‘too quick’ for them to enjoy completely. This probably explains why some native women desire the attentions of more than one man during a night....’

The term for ‘classificatory spouse’ (i.e., roughly-speaking, ‘spouse’s ‘sibling’’) is in this culture *’ma:mam*. During the Jamalak ceremony (a time of story-telling, dancing and entertainment occurring frequently throughout the year), sexual and erotic play are

encouraged from the very beginning 'to create an atmosphere of good will.' The Berndts (p. 142) comment:

'This is carried out quite blatantly before either husband or wife, indeed one party 'pushes' the other to take part. As with legalized pre-and extra-marital license, the association is normally between men and women who call each other *'ma:mam*. When the camp is large, with an influx of 'stranger' groups, the choice is wide, and is mostly made by a husband for his wife. But women are allowed to take the initiative with or without their husband's consent; public opinion would soon squash any demonstrations of jealousy. It is often conventional for the wife, when told by her husband to get up and 'go *'jama:lak*' toward a particular *'ma:mam*, to act shyly and pretend that she might offend her husband if she took him at his word. However, after a little pushing she goes only too willingly; for she likes variety in sexual intercourse, and this is an excellent opportunity to choose a desirable *'ma:mam* who may not have been accessible under the extra-marital relationship. Young girls disport themselves with evident enjoyment, while the men to whom they give their attention usually behave shyly...'

In the Goulbourn Island-Oenpelli area, men sit in groups singing or dancing, and the women come up to them, teasing their classificatory 'husbands', challenging them in sexually provocative ways, grabbing hold of them and pulling off their clothes. 'Finally', write the Berndts (p. 143),

'...a woman will drag the man out to the darkness near the singing... Some of the more adventurous women may drag out three or four men or more in one evening.'

In the ceremony which the Berndts observed at Manbullo (p. 143):

'...the women and girls came on to the ground and held on to the shoulders or neck of the dancing men, touching their bodies, pressing themselves to their backs, and dragging them from their dancing. After this had been going on for some time, certain men and women went in pairs to the darkness on one side of the main camp and copulated, while the singing and dancing continued.'

The whole point of all this was (a) to have fun and (b) to make a living reality of the 'equivalences' which the classificatory system entails, generating an intense solidarity which no marital unions would be permitted to disrupt.

Because sexual communism stems from the logic of classificatory kinship, it may be that observers in the past have sometimes inferred the practice merely from a knowledge of the formal terminology. That is, it may be that in some cases, observers have discovered, say, that a woman called the brother of her husband 'husband' and have concluded from this that the woman concerned had sexual relations with her husband's brother.

To insist that this must necessarily be the case is to forget that reality can change while theory lags some way behind. Let us suppose that in Australia, ceremonies such as the *'jama:lak* gradually became less frequent or were suppressed, so that wives were increasingly prevented from having sexual relations with men other than their individual husbands. This would not immediately mean any change in the linguistic system or the system of theoretical 'rights.' A woman would still call her husband's brothers by terms (such as *'ma:mam*) implying the possibility of her having sexual relations with them, even though it might begin to be forgotten why such terms had originally come into use. In this context it is worth quoting Engels (1891: 192), in a passage in which he himself quotes Morgan and Marx:

“The family”, says Morgan, “represents an active principle. It is never stationary, but advances from a lower to a higher condition. Systems of consanguinity, on the contrary, are passive, recording the progress made by the family at long intervals apart, and only changing radically when the family has radically changed.” “And,” adds Marx, “the same applies to political, juridical, religious and philosophical systems generally.” While the family continues to live, the system of consanguinity becomes ossified, and while this latter continues to exist in the customary form, the family outgrows it.’

Even so persistent an opponent of all ‘evolutionism’ in social anthropology as Robert Lowie (1960: 388) conceded this point:

‘Trained to view ‘survival’ arguments with suspicion, I have become convinced that the avowed skepticism on this point harbors as much cant as the evolutionary zeal of our predecessors. Indubitably cultural changes proceed with uneven velocity, hence certain elements lag while others spurt ahead; further, linguistic phenomena are markedly conservative. These accepted facts warrant the assumption that a terminological feature in harmony with a certain custom may survive that custom.’

So a terminology which seems to imply sexual communism does not necessarily indicate a corresponding practice within the culture concerned. The lag of language and theory behind evolving social reality may give rise to confusing situations, in which outside observers – particularly if they rely for their information on what is said, rather than on what is actually seen to be done – are likely to be deceived. This would seem to be the explanation for many reports of sexual communism made by earlier historians.

The Greek Nicolaus Damascenus (quoted by Bachofen 1967: 145) wrote of the Galactophagi that they were ‘distinguished for righteousness and hold their women and property in common. Consequently they call all older men fathers, the younger men sons, and their contemporaries brothers.’ Herodotus perceived a similar state of affairs among the Agathyrsi, noting that they cohabited in common ‘in order that they should all be blood

kin and that their family relationships should prevent them from harbouring envy and hostility toward one another' (Herodotus, 4. 104; quoted in Bachofen, p. 145). Julius Caesar deduced similar arrangements from the classificatory systems prevailing in the British Isles. 'Among the inhabitants of these islands, he wrote (quoted by Morgan, 1877: 438), 'by tens and by twelves, husbands possessed their wives in common; and especially brothers with brothers and parents with their children.'

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The kinship counterrevolution

'The marriage of mankind', wrote Edward Westermarck in his *The History of Human Marriage* (1892: 72), 'is not an isolated phenomenon, but has its counterpart in many animal species and is probably an inheritance from some pre-human ancestor.' Westermarck devoted the greater part of his life to the attempt to prove the 'biological' inevitability of the European monogamous family. This he did by describing various ape and monkey resemblances to the 'individual family' and to monogamy, asserting that humanity in its earliest days must have inherited such institutions from its ape-like social past. All this was to refute the theories of 'primitive communism' – and particularly of 'sexual communism' – which had been put forward by Morgan and supported by (amongst many others) Marx and Engels.

Engels read Westermarck's book as soon as it was published. He was not impressed. On the subject of sexual communism, Engels commented (1884: 194):

'It has become the fashion of late to deny the existence of this initial stage in the sexual life of mankind. The aim is to spare humanity this 'shame.'

Engels regarded Westermarck's 'assertions....regarding monogamy among anthropoid apes' as 'no proof by far' (p. 195). Taking up the whole subject of comparisons between ape sexual arrangements and those of earliest humanity, he explained that if any firm relationship between these two could be discerned, it was a relationship not of simple identity but rather of contrast. The process of becoming human had involved a transcending of the egotistical limits of primate male sexuality – a transcending of a situation in which, for females, 'only *one* adult male, only *one* husband is permissible.' Human solidarity had necessitated the establishment of 'group marriage'. It becomes apparent, as he put it (1884: 196-7):

'....that animal societies have, to be sure, a certain value in drawing conclusions regarding human societies – but only in a negative sense. As far as we have ascertained, the higher vertebrates know only two forms of the family: polygamy or the single pair. In both cases only one adult male, only one husband is permissible. The jealousy of the male, representing

both tie and limits of the family, brings the animal family into conflict with the horde. The horde, the higher social form, is rendered impossible here, loosened there, or dissolved altogether during the mating season; at best, its continued development is hindered by the jealousy of the male. This alone suffices to prove that the animal family and primitive human society are incompatible things....'

Earliest human society was established by negating the egotism and jealousy of the dominant primate male. In the pre-human stages of development, writes Engels, our primate ancestors may well have had forms of solidarity that were continuously undermined by sexual rivalries and jealousies. They may have survived in small family groups, each under the protection of a single dominant male. But ultimately this was not enough:

'For evolution out of the animal stage, for the accomplishment of the greatest advance known to nature, an additional element was needed: the replacement of the individual's inadequate power of defence by the united strength and joint effort of the horde. The transition to the human stage out of conditions such as those under which the anthropoid apes live today would be absolutely inexplicable. These apes rather give the impression of being stray sidelines gradually approaching extinction, and, at any rate, in process of decline. This alone is sufficient reason for rejecting all conclusions that are based on parallels drawn between their family forms and those of primitive man. Mutual toleration among the adult males, freedom from jealousy, was, however, the first condition for the building of those large and enduring groups in the midst of which alone the transition from animal to man could be achieved. And indeed, what do we find as the oldest, most primitive form of the family, of which undeniable evidence can be found in history, and which even today can be studied here and there? Group marriage, the form in which whole groups of men and whole groups of women belong to each other, and which leaves but little scope for jealousy.'

It was precisely arguments along such lines that Westermarck and his followers set out to discredit and refute.

It is in some ways wearisome to have to return to the writings of Malinowski at this stage, but it seems necessary. More than any other single individual, Malinowski ensured that the path in kinship-studies pioneered by Morgan and taken up later by W. H. R. Rivers and others was abandoned by the discipline as a whole. Between 1920 and 1940 a complete break with the past was effected. The entire conceptual framework within which previous anthropologists had worked was destroyed and replaced almost from scratch. If we are to understand the crisis which afflicts anthropological theory today, it is to this period that we must initially turn.

Malinowski had studied under Westermarck, and frequently stressed the influence of his teacher. Westermarck held that apes were monogamous. He saw this 'fact' as an argument

in favour of monogamy as the ancestral human state. Malinowski (1956: 42) agreed. His argument was that ‘...marriage in single pairs – monogamy in the sense in which Westermarck and I are using it – is primeval.’ He stressed (1955: 194) that the bonds of sociability and co-operation necessary to the development of human culture

‘...must have been derived from the development of the only relationship which man has taken over from his animal ancestors: the relationship between husband and wife, between parents and children, between brothers and sisters, in short the relationship of the individual family.’

The individual family ‘is the biological grouping to which all kinship is invariably referred’ (p. 195), and ‘is also the pattern on which all wider relations are based’ (p. 206). During the transition from animal to human life, the family undergoes ‘changes’. But Malinowski insists (p. 171) that nevertheless

‘...its form remains remarkably unaltered. The group of parents and children, the permanence of the maternal tie, the relation of the father to his offspring, show remarkable analogies throughout human culture and in the world of higher animals.’

The process of becoming human was smooth and gradual, involving only the elaboration and expression of animal instincts, never their overthrow:

‘Thus culture does not lead man into any direction divergent from the courses of nature.... Custom, law, moral rule, ritual, and religious value enter into all the stages of love-making and parenthood. But the main line of their action invariably runs parallel to that of animal instincts. The chain of responses which regulate animal mating constitute a prototype of the gradual unfolding and ripening of man’s cultural attitude’ (p. 198).

In all this, Westermarck’s (1891, 1: 72) insistence that the ‘marriage of mankind is not an isolated phenomenon, but has its counterpart in many animal species and is probably an inheritance from some pre-human ancestor’ was underlined. While claiming to be opposed to evolutionary arguments, Malinowski was in fact a determined advocate of evolutionary theories of a certain kind. If evolutionism could be used to buttress the belief that nothing fundamental had changed in the course of human history, then Malinowski was prepared to exploit it to the full. It is but a short step from Malinowski’s views to modern assertions such as that of Robin Fox (1975: 30), for whom ‘kinship groups are ‘the outcome of natural processes’ and are ‘as natural as limbs and digestion...’ And it is but a short step from such views to those of Robert Ardrey (1967: 350), for whom private property, male dominance, ‘sexual choice exercised by the female in terms of the male’s acquisition of property or status’ and territorial warfare are all ‘human instincts derived from ancient animal patterns.’ Common to all these views is the insistence that nothing can be changed. As Ardrey (1969: 92-3) puts it:

‘We act as we do for reasons of our evolutionary past, not our cultural present, and our behaviour is as much a mark of our species as is the shape of a human thigh bone or the configuration of nerves in a corner of the human brain.’

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The attack on ‘group motherhood’

The western Pueblo peoples include the Hopi, Hano, Zuni, Acoma and Laguna inhabitants of the semiarid Colorado plateau of northern Arizona and New Mexico. They have managed to preserve a portion of their ancient lands and much of their way of life down to recent times. Their classificatory kinship terms are entirely comprehensible in view of their actual relationships. In the village of Hano, for example, groups of sisters call their husbands collectively ‘our bridegrooms’, just as the men refer collectively to ‘our brides’. In their sisters’ homes, brothers ‘take their places at meals as a matter of course’. Groups of brothers and sisters jointly exercise rights in one another’s children and homes (Freire-Marreco 1914: 281-3).

Among the Hopi (Eggan 1950: 33), sex solidarity is equally strong. A child calls its mother’s sisters ‘mothers’ quite indiscriminately, and for good reason. In terms of rights and duties, sisters stand in for one another as a matter of course. Eggan (pp. 33, 36, 35) writes:

‘The position of the mother’s sister is practically identical with that of the mother. She normally lives in the same household and aids in the training of her sister’s daughter for adult life.... They co-operate in all the tasks of the household, grinding corn together, plastering the house, cooking and the like.... Their children are reared together and cared for as their own.’

A young boy will normally share a home with his mother’s sisters, but ‘if his mother’s sisters should live in separate households, their homes are equally his....’ (p. 36). Given this situation, it is hardly surprising that no-one feels any need for a separate word to denote ‘my biological mother’ as opposed to his or her other mothers. Each child’s love and security are guaranteed by carers able to draw on the resources of an entire group.

This, then, is what the earlier anthropologists used to call ‘group motherhood.’ No mother is left to cope alone with her child. In the onerous tasks of childcare, she is assisted by a number of sisters on whom she can fully rely. In human societies generally, cooperative childcare is not the exception – it is the rule.

Now we may turn, by way of contrast, to the assertions of Malinowski (1956: 79). When confronted with evidence of cooperative motherhood in various traditional cultures, Malinowski (1956: 79) denied everything and responded with the following joke:

‘The only example of real group maternity I heard of was from a farmer friend of mine; he had three geese who decided to sit communally on a nest of eggs. The result was that all the eggs were smashed in the quarrels and fights of this maternal clan of group mothers. All, that is, but one; the gosling, however, did not survive the tender cares of its group mothers. If ever another group of geese were to try a similar experiment I should like them to be aware of this precedent.’

Malinowski’s view was that the feminists of his day, who were advocating collective childcare, were silly ‘geese.’

Beneath his merriment, however, Malinowski had a serious purpose. He felt disturbed about the way the world was going. He regarded himself as not only a scientist but equally a moral guardian. In this context, questions of practical interest tended to prevail. The debate as to the possibility of collective childcare was no mere academic dispute. Direct political considerations were involved. If ever anthropologists allowed the masses to suspect the feasibility of alternatives to ‘the family’, who could tell the consequences? It was a matter of public duty for a man of his standing to deny all knowledge of any such alternatives. Failure to take this stand could lead to a disaster worse even than ‘Bolshevism’:

‘...all my studies of primitive mankind, all my personal experiences among savages and civilized people, have convinced me that maternal affection is individual. And it is because of that, I believe, that the family and marriage from the beginning were individual. You will remember that I laid great emphasis on the fact that maternity is individual. A whole school of anthropologists, from Bachofen on, have maintained that the maternal clan was the primitive domestic institution, and that, connected with this, there was group marriage or collective marriage. In my opinion, as you know, this is entirely incorrect. But an idea like that, once it is taken seriously and applied to modern conditions, becomes positively dangerous. I believe that the most disruptive element in the modern revolutionary tendencies is the idea that parenthood can be made collective. If once we came to the point of doing away with the individual family as the pivotal element of our society, we should be faced with a social catastrophe compared with which the political upheaval of the French revolution and the economic changes of Bolshevism are insignificant.’

It was at this point that Malinowski (1956: 76) made his most telling remark:

‘The question, therefore, as to whether group motherhood is an institution which ever existed, whether it is an arrangement which is compatible with human nature and social order, is of considerable practical interest.’

Now, political anxieties such as these could never have entered the heads of the Victorian evolutionists. Writing in a period when European colonialism seemed invincible, they had few doubts as to the durability of Western imperialism. The Empire seemed secure, and Marriage and the Family seemed equally so. In this light, the question whether or not certain ‘savages’ in some colonial outpost practised ‘group motherhood’ or even ‘sexual communism’ seemed delightfully intriguing but little more. There could scarcely have entered into anyone’s mind the notion that the practices of ‘savages’ might upset the morals or undermine the institutions of their own social order. For the most part, men such as Maine, Lubbock, Tylor and others saw few if any direct political implications at all in their work. The bulk of them were anything but political radicals. It was precisely their confidence in their own social order which enabled them to be so intellectually free.

The period of upheavals preceding and resulting from the First World War, and in particular the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and its international reverberations, changed entirely the social context within which anthropological thinkers found themselves. An epoch of agonizing instability had set in. No institutions of the existing social order – not even the most basic – seemed secure any more. As late as in 1903, Andrew Lang (1903: 1) had felt able to write:

‘The Family is the most ancient and the most sacred of human institutions; the least likely to be overthrown by revolutionary attacks.’

By 1931, when not only Bolshevism but (worse!) feminism seemed to be presenting real threats, Malinowski (1956: 20) was voicing a very different mood:

‘...within the last generation or two the conditions of life have undergone profound and revolutionary changes. We are all feeling that we have been thrown into a new world, and not a very comfortable world at that. Whither are we moving? In which direction are we going to be driven? Even in the last anchorage of peace, even in our own home, we seem to be threatened.’

Threatened even in his ‘last anchorage of peace’, Malinowski rallied to the defence of marital stability and the sanctity of the family. The whole of his life’s work centred on this. And the paradigm-shift which he was instrumental in triggering found its roots in the same felt need. At all costs, order and stability had to be guaranteed. It was an essential part of Malinowski’s approach that if it seemed useful to stress certain ideas, then this in itself made those ideas true. ‘The ‘truth’ of Functionalism’, as Leach (1957: 124) bitterly put it, ‘is itself a matter of functional utility.’

As in his activities in advising colonial administrators, Malinowski adopted the 'flexible' approach. In connection with family law, for example, he conceded that it would be risky to resist all change:

'Because, as all things alive, marriage has to grow and change. Wise and moderate reforms – reforms, however, which may go deep towards modifying the institution – are necessary in order to prevent disastrous revolutionary upheavals' (1956: 83).

Malinowski urges an end to 'the futile and cheap attacks against the Christian influence on marriage, attacks which have been becoming lamentably frequent in the last few years.' Marriage, after all, is a 'sacrament' (in 'all human societies' regarded 'as a sacred transaction establishing a relationship of the highest value to man and woman' – p. 65). The 'advocates of group marriage', Malinowski adds, 'always underrate the scientific importance of the sacramental or religious side of marriage'. We are therefore reminded of the scientific facts:

'The fact that marriage, throughout humanity is a religious institution proves, then, above all that marriage is an extremely valuable institution' (p. 71).

Malinowski acknowledges that some people may be agnostics. The agnostic, however, must never undermine marriage:

'On the contrary, he must endow the institution of marriage and the family with new values, and so make them stable and sacred in his own fashion' (p. 72).

Malinowski's own scientific efforts have just this consecrating function:

'In showing you that the tradition of individual marriage and the family has its roots in the deepest needs of human nature and of social order, I have contributed my share to what might be called the lay, or scientific consecration of marriage.'

To avoid revolution, then, marriage laws may be moderately reformed. Minor changes of this kind, after all, have often occurred in the past. But the purpose of superficial change is to keep the fundamentals unchanged, just as they have always been:

'Anthropology teaches us two things; marriage and the family have changed; they have developed; they have grown and passed through various stages. But, through all the changes and vicissitudes of history and development, the family and marriage still remain the same twin institution; they still emerge as a stable group showing throughout the same characteristics: the group consisting of father and mother and their children, forming a joint household, co-operating economically, legally united by a contract and surrounded by religious sanctions which make the family into a moral unit' (p. 80).

The idea that women could be oppressed in marriage is inconceivable:

‘There is nothing more important to realize with regard to the institution of marriage than that it is everywhere based on love and affection’ (p. 69).

Malinowski commends, in this connection, the practice of burning widows after their husbands’ deaths (the Indian suttee):

‘We repeat in our own marriage service the solemn words, ‘for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish till death do us part.’ But, impressive and final as this is, it would not be enough to a great many peoples. For to many whom we regard as savages or barbarians, not even death can part husband and wife. The widow sacrifices herself or is sacrificed at her husband’s grave, and that not only in India but also in Peru, in West Africa, among the Bantu, in Fiji, in the New Hebrides and the Solomon Islands, and in New Zealand’ (p. 68).

This illustrates how in ‘most human societies’ there exists ‘an almost mystical bond of mutual dependence between husband and wife’ (p. 69). In short, marriage is the bond of all bonds:

‘Marriage and the family are the foundations of our present society, as they were the foundations of all human societies. To maintain these foundations in good order is the duty of everyone. Each must contribute his individual share, while the social reformer and legislator must constantly watch over the institution as a whole’ (p. 83).

For his part, as an anthropologist, Malinowski (p. 28) sees his task as to

‘ ... prove to the best of my ability that marriage and the family have been, are, and will remain the foundations of human society.’

Kinship in crisis

This, then, was the paradigmatic basis on which the study of kinship was reconstructed following World War I. Is it surprising that things then began to go wrong? Is it any wonder that from that moment, nothing seemed to make sense any more?

If the modern crisis in kinship theory had to be traced back to a date, this would be it. Things began falling apart from the moment when the dominant agenda became Malinowski’s – became, that is, to prove that ‘marriage and the family have been, are, and will remain the foundations of human society’. From the moment when scholars began accepting Malinowski’s assertions as fact, chaos and confusion reigned. Astonishingly, the assertions kept being vigorously pressed even though everyone – including Malinowski himself – fully recognized the crisis which began developing as a result. While disagreeing with Malinowski on points of detail, Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 51) eagerly concurred in affirming:

‘The unit of structure from which a kinship system is built up is the group which I call an ‘elementary family’, consisting of a man and his wife and their child or children, whether they are living together or not.’

In Aboriginal Australia, according to Radcliffe-Brown (1931: 104), it is

‘...very plain to the observer who makes an unbiased study of any tribe, that the whole kinship system is based on the family. The relationships between one person and another in the kinship system are individual relationships.’

Astonishingly, however, Radcliffe-Brown was making such assertions even while aware of the enormous theoretical problems now being posed. Equally conscious of the difficulties, Malinowski (1930: 967) addressed the following words to the readership of the journal *Man*:

‘I believe that kinship is really the most difficult subject of social anthropology; I believe that it has been approached in a fundamentally wrong way; and I believe that at present an impasse has been reached. I am convinced, however, that there is a way out of this impasse, and that some of the recent work....has placed the problem on the correct foundation. This has been done by a full recognition of the importance of the family and by the application of what is now usually called the functional method of anthropology....’

This work is still somewhat confused and chaotic, however, and there is the need of a comprehensive contribution which will organize and systematically integrate the results of the functional work, and correct a few mistakes still prevalent. In my forthcoming book on kinship I am making an attempt at such a systematic treatment. Here I propose to indicate in a preliminary fashion some of its results.

It is unnecessary, perhaps, in addressing the readers of *Man*, to labour the point of kinship remaining still in an impasse. The several interesting articles in the present periodical, as well as in the *Journal*, show how profoundly even the few most devoted and most spiritually related specialists disagree with one another. As a member of the inner ring, I may say that whenever I meet Mrs. Seligman or Dr. Lowie or discuss matters with Radcliffe-Brown or Kroeber, I become at once aware that my partner does not understand anything in the matter and I end usually with the feeling that this also applies to myself. This refers also to all our writings on kinship, and is fully reciprocal.’

Robert Lowie (1960: 469) noted long ago how the classical disputes once afflicting anthropology were set aside by being made to seem unfashionable. ‘But though not fashionable’, he concluded ruefully, ‘the old problems do not disappear, for they obtrude themselves at every point unless one deliberately ignores them’. This was in the early nineteen thirties. Since then, the suppression of inconvenient discrepancies has been more effectively achieved.

‘We do not just fail to return to the basic questions’, writes Robert Murphy (1972: 35), ‘we have forgotten what they are.’ One of the basic questions around which the science of kinship once revolved was, as we have seen, that of the meaning or significance of classificatory kinship. In the days – now almost forgotten – when this was a burning issue, social anthropologists used to contrast the kinds of kinship systems characteristic of modern Europeans with those found in other parts of the world. The prevailing consensus was that while modern Europeans had kinship systems of a personal, individualistic kind, much of the rest of the world had systems (known as ‘classificatory’) which in some sense collectivized kinship and gave it social weight. The apparent contrast between polar opposite notions of kinship gave rise to controversies (such as the dispute over ‘group marriage’) concerning the family’s evolutionary origins and the origins of the human race. At the root of these controversies was a dispute as to whether kinship, in its origins, had been ‘collective’ or ‘individual.’ This dispute burned for several decades until, with the triumph of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown in England, and such writers as Kroeber and Lowie in the United States, it was effectively suppressed.

With characteristic logic and consistency, Malinowski dealt with classificatory kinship in the way he had dealt with cooperative childcare. He simply brushed it aside. He asserted that it does not exist, never did exist and could not possibly exist. Any so-called evidence to the contrary, he declared, was patently ‘false.’ Consequently any theoretical problem raised by its existence was equally false. All human kinship, whether traditional or modern, is essentially the same. It is ‘individual’, being rooted in the ‘individual family’ of the kind familiar to us all. All the problems faced by anthropologists in the study of kinship stemmed from their failure to accept this prior assumption. Once ‘false problems’ had been banished from discussion, the difficulties would dissolve:

‘The impasse is really due to the inheritance of false problems from anthropological tradition. We are still enmeshed in the question as to whether kinship in its origins was collective or individual, based on the family or the clan. This problem looms very large in the writings of the late W. H. R. Rivers, of whom most of us in the present generation are pupils by direct teaching or from the reading of his works. Another false problem is that of the origins and significance of classificatory systems of nomenclature. This problem, or any other problem starting from the classificatory nature of kinship terminologies, must be spurious, because the plain fact is that classificatory terminologies do not exist and never could have existed’ (1930: 97).

Was kinship in its origins ‘based on the family or the clan’? The issue was ‘false’. It therefore should not be discussed. But while prohibiting discussion on the question, Malinowski was quite prepared to give the answer. Kinship, in its origins, was not

collective but individual. To raise any objection to this assertion would be to rekindle a false debate.

Kinship should be viewed not from the standpoint of society but from that of the individual child. From a 'child's eye' perspective, everything suddenly became clear. An infant would begin life aware of no-one but its mother. Hence kinship, for such a baby, would be 'individual.' Only later in life would the child become aware of its wider network of relationships. Hence these were obviously a secondary development, not a primary one:

'I believe that every human being starts his sociological career within the small family group, and that whatever kinship might become later on in life, it is always individual kinship at first' (Malinowski 1930: 100).

Admittedly, clans often exist, but even then

'...the clan develops as a derived sociological form of grouping by empirical processes which can be followed along the life history of the individual' (p. 102).

From the standpoint of the individual – who begins as a baby—the 'distortions' of kinship which growing-up involves are seen to be 'derivative'. The child experiences

'....a process in which the family is over-ridden, in which kinship is submitted to a process of one-sided distortion, and in which the group or communal character of human relations, is definitely emphasized at the expense of the individual character' (p. 101).

Malinowski can hardly deny that this 'group' or 'communal' emphasis is made, but since it affects the individual only later on in life, this 'proves' that it is secondary:

'Kinship thus always rests on the family and begins with the family. The clan is essentially a non-reproductive, nonsexual and non-parental group, and it is never the primary source and basis of kinship. But the clan always grows out of the family, forming round one of the two parents by the exclusive legal emphasis on the one side of kinship, at times backed by a one-sided reproductive theory. The functions of the clan are mostly legal and ceremonial, at times also magical and economic' (p. 103).

As for classificatory kinship terms, these cannot be taken at face value at all. Malinowski concedes (p. 103) that there may be '...kinship words used in a truly classificatory sense, based partly but never completely on the distinctions of clanship.' For example, a child may use the term 'mother' to denote both its real mother and its mother's sister. But the term only *sounds* the same in each case, Malinowski warns. Since it is used with such very different meanings (Malinowski insists that the meanings *are* completely different, notwithstanding native theory), it cannot possibly be regarded as a single word. It looks like one word, it sounds like one word – and the natives may insist that it really is one word. But the scientist is obliged to distinguish between 'true' kinship and 'false' kinship.

This then enables him to discern two words where native theory sees only one. 'The sounds used in these different senses are the same', as Malinowski (p. 103) puts it, 'but the uses, that is the meanings, are distinct.' Hence every word which seems to be one word is 'really' (to the European who insists on distinguishing between 'real' and 'classificatory', kinship) a compound made up of two distinct words. Hence (p. 103) Malinowski's triumphant conclusion:

'It is only through the extraordinary incompetence of the linguistic treatment in kinship terminologies that the compound character of primitive terminologies has, so far, been completely overlooked. 'Classificatory terminologies' really do not exist, as I have said already.'

The 'anomaly' doesn't exist. The problem is solved.

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The continuing crisis

One of the earliest effective critics of Malinowski was his close colleague Radcliffe-Brown. Radcliffe-Brown agreed with Malinowski that kinship must serve a function. Malinowski always loudly insisted that the functions served by kinship were the reproductive needs of the biological individual. Arguing to the contrary that collective needs must enter into the picture, Radcliffe-Brown disowned Malinowski's whole approach:

'Malinowski has explained that he is the inventor of functionalism, to which he gave its name. His definition of it is clear; it is the theory or doctrine that every feature of culture of any people past or present is to be explained by reference to seven biological needs of individual human beings. I cannot speak for the other writers to whom the label functionalist is applied.... As for myself I reject it entirely, regarding it as useless and worse. As a consistent opponent of Malinowski's functionalism I may be called an anti-functionalism' (Radcliffe-Brown 1949: 320-21).

So what were the teachings of 'anti-functionalism'? As early as 1914, Radcliffe-Brown (quoted in Barnes 1963: xvi) reviewed Malinowski's earliest book (1963), 'The Family Among the Australian Aborigines'. Radcliffe-Brown was surprised to discover that the volume failed to deal with the classificatory systems at all. Politely, he wrote that the sixth chapter on kinship was

'...the least successful in the book. The Australian notions relating to kinship cannot be studied without reference to what the author calls 'group relationships'; in other words, the

relationship systems, classes, and clans. As Mr. Malinowski has confined himself, quite justifiably, to a study of the individual family, this part of his work remains imperfect.'

Radcliffe-Brown did not yet know that Malinowski would later justify his refusal to acknowledge 'group relationships' in a new and daring way. He would flatly deny that such relationships could exist.

Radcliffe-Brown's own view was that kinship in primitive societies was based on brother-sister unity. 'The unit of structure everywhere', as he put it (Radcliffe-Brown 1950; quoted by Fortes 1970: 76), 'seems to be the group of full siblings – brothers and sisters.' Meyer Fortes has written that the affirmation of this principle is

'...one of the few generalizations in kinship theory that, in my opinion, enshrines a discovery worthy to be placed side by side with Morgan's discovery of classificatory kinship; and, like Morgan's, it has been repeatedly validated and has opened up lines of inquiry not previously foreseen' (Fortes 1970: 76).

Radcliffe-Brown notes that where 'the classificatory system of kinship reaches a high degree of development', brothers with sisters tend to be grouped together as a unit at the expense of husbands with wives (1952: 19-20). Any bond between brother and sister, Radcliffe-Brown (1950: 77-8) further observes, must always act to undermine the bond between husband and wife. This is simply because a woman who is primarily attached to her husband cannot be primarily attached to her brother; if a woman *is* primarily attached to her brother, conversely, she cannot be primarily attached to her husband. One side or the other must give way.

Radcliffe-Brown (1950: 17-8) elucidates this dynamic with his usual precision. 'The contrast between father-right and mother-right', as he explains, 'is one of two types of marriage'. He continues:

'A woman is by birth a member of a sibling group; strong social bonds unite her to her brothers and sisters. By marriage she enters into some sort of relation with her husband. To provide a stable structure there has to be some sort of institutional accommodation of the possibly conflicting claims and loyalties, as between a woman's husband and her brothers and sisters. There are possible two extreme and opposite solutions, those of father-right and mother-right, and an indefinite number of compromises.

In the solution provided by mother-right the sibling group is taken as the most important and permanent unit in social structure. Brothers and sisters remain united, sharing their property, and living together in one domestic group. In marriage the group retains complete possession of a woman; her husband acquires no legal rights at all or a bare minimum Rights of possession over children therefore rest with the mother and her brothers and

sisters. It is these persons to whom the child must go for every kind of aid and comfort, and it is they who are entitled to exercise control or discipline over the child....

The solution offered by father-right is opposite. Possession of a woman, and therefore of the children of her body, are surrendered by marriage to her husband and his kin.... The mother's kin, her brothers and sisters, in this kind of marriage, have no rights over the children, who, in turn, have no rights over them. The jural bonds between a woman and her siblings are severed by her marriage.'

What Radcliffe-Brown calls 'mother-right', then, is one result produced (another is classificatory kinship) when sibling bonds are consistently stressed at the expense of marital bonds. Under mother-right, not only do women in effect say: 'My sister's child is my child.' Men say to each other the same thing: 'My sister's child is my child.' As if speaking with one voice, brother-sister groups refer to 'our children' – those to whom men's sisters have given birth. Men do *not* say 'My wife's child is my child.' Neither do women see their children as belonging to their husbands. In this sense, Malinowski's basic principles of 'marriage' and 'family' are denied. Sibling solidarity means that the marital unit is decisively *split*. Conversely, if men can say (as under 'father-right') 'My wife's child is my child', then it is sibling unity that is split. For what this statement really means is: 'My wife's child belongs, not to her sisters or brothers, but to me.' The two statements, (a) 'Sibling's child is my child' and (b) 'Spouse's child is my child' are mutually exclusive, irreconcilable opposites.

We now have to face the fact, however, that Radcliffe-Brown insists on having it both ways. Hence he tells us:

(a) 'The unit of structure from which a kinship system is built up is the group which I call an elementary family', consisting of a man and his wife and their child or children....' (1952: 51).

(b) 'The unit of structure everywhere seems to be the group of full siblings – brothers and sisters' (1950: quoted by Fortes 1970: 76).

How these two mutually contradictory statements are supposed to be reconciled has never been explained.

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