

The politics of early kinship

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Introduction

Kinship is to anthropology what logic is to philosophy or the nude is to art; historically, it has been 'the basic discipline of the subject'.¹ To ask questions about early kinship is to return to many of the political, moral and scientific controversies from which anthropology emerged.

Humans do not just accept the facts of biology. Instead, they collectively reconstruct those facts. A community may decide, for example, that a woman's children include those of her sisters, so that the offspring of two sisters count as full siblings to one another. It may be decided that a man has no rights in his wife's children, these not being 'his' at all. Alternatively, people may adjudicate the other way, decreeing that children belong one-sidedly to their father and his kin at the expense of the mother and hers.

The philosopher John Searle distinguishes between 'brute facts' and 'institutional facts'.² Brute facts are true anyway, regardless of what people think. For example, the sun is hot but ice is cold. Such things are true in a 'brute' sense: even should the authorities declare otherwise, nothing in nature would change. By contrast, institutional facts depend entirely on communal faith. Monetary values are a good example; others are marriage, citizenship, property and government. Imagine a collapse of confidence in the currency. Suddenly, the facts of the economic system dissolve. Revolutions can happen in the same way.

Throughout the twentieth century, anthropologists disputed the status of the facts of kinship. In Searle's terms, they were asking whether kinship was 'brute' or 'institutional'. What is it to be a 'mother' or 'father', 'husband' or 'wife'? Among the founding figures of British anthropology was Bronislaw Malinowski. Malinowski saw kinship facts as essentially 'natural' – 'brute facts', to use Searle's terminology. He acknowledged that people often 'distorted' the 'true' facts of kinship for various collective purposes. For example, his own informants in the Trobriand Islands might claim that a child had multiple 'mothers'. However, he insisted that 'real' or 'true' kinship remained individual and biological despite such native 'distortions'.³

A damaging consequence of the work of Malinowski and his followers was the rupture, within British anthropology, between the biological and social sides of the discipline. Malinowski managed to do two opposite things at once. He claimed to be rooting the science of kinship in biology. At the same time, he divorced anthropology from genuine biological science. The outcome was that the kind of biology that came to be familiar to twentieth century social anthropologists was grotesquely misconceived.

Following his teacher and spiritual mentor Edward Westermarck, Malinowski believed monogamy to be the natural condition among monkeys and apes, humans everywhere

having inherited ‘individual marriage’ and ‘the family’ from their primate forebears. In Malinowski’s own words, ‘marriage in single pairs – monogamy in the sense in which Westermarck and I are using it – is primeval’.⁴ From the early 1930s onwards, Malinowski announced that he was distancing himself from evolutionary theorizing. However, he had no intention of abandoning certain axiomatic assumptions about what he termed ‘the initial situation’. To the end of his life, Malinowski retained the essence of Westermarck’s position on monogamy and the family. He conceptualised human systems of kinship and marriage as cultural extensions of the biological facts of sex and procreation. A female could get pregnant by only one male; a child could emerge from only one womb. The facts of kinship, in other words, were inescapably ‘individual’.

The anomaly

Classificatory kinship is anything but ‘individual’. It expresses the principle of sibling equivalence.⁵ It is the kind of kinship we would expect to emerge if sibling solidarity were carried to its logical conclusion, overriding marital bonds.

Classificatory kinship is so widespread that modern social anthropologists tend not to discuss it. Many prefer to assume that the readers of their monographs will simply understand all kinship terms in their classificatory sense. For earlier generations of anthropologists, however, the whole issue was still a novelty, and heated debates surrounded the significance of this seemingly extraordinary and cumbersome mode of conceptualizing and classifying kin. An unfortunate consequence of the recent lack of interest in this topic has been that palaeoanthropologists and biological anthropologists remain almost unaware of its existence, constructing their origins theories as if the task were to explain kinship and marriage in modern western forms.

Here, I will review some of social anthropology’s basic definitions and findings concerning classificatory kinship – findings that have never been repudiated, but have in recent years become overshadowed by other concerns. Although the sources may seem unavoidably rather dated, such a review of the classical literature may help clarify the issues that a Darwinian approach to the evolution of kinship should address.

The essence of classificatory kinship is that siblings occupy similar positions in the total social structure. Their ‘social personalities’, as Radcliffe-Brown put it, writing in this case of Aboriginal Australia, ‘are almost precisely the same’.⁶ Where terminology is concerned:

A man is always classed with his brother and a woman with her sister. If I apply a given term of relationship to a man, I apply the same term to his brother. Thus I call my father’s brother by the same term that I apply to my father, and similarly, I call my mother’s sister ‘mother’. The consequential relationships are followed out. The children of any man I call ‘father’ or of any woman I call ‘mother’ are my ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’. The children of any man I call ‘brother’, if I am a male, call me ‘father’, and I call them ‘son’ and ‘daughter’.⁷

By the same token, if a woman has a relationship, any of her sisters may in theory join her in exercising the rights or fulfilling the obligations that it entails. As far as this level of formal structuring is concerned (other levels being ignored for the sake of argument), she may stand in for her sister (just as any of her sisters may stand in for her) in any kinship capacity, whether it be it as mother to her (the sister's) child, as mother-in-law to her sister's daughter's husband – or even, theoretically, as wife to a sister's husband. Since sisters are each other's equivalents, it follows that theoretically, no mother should discriminate in favour of her own biological children as opposed to those of her sister. All of their joint children are addressed as 'daughter' or 'son' indiscriminately, and all are in theory collectively 'sisters' and 'brothers' to each other.

In societies with strong sibling solidarity, the logic of treating siblings as terminological equivalents becomes immediately apparent. If a woman has a child, her sister can stand in for her as that child's mother. Indeed, the mother's sister is already the 'mother', because the expression 'my daughter' means indifferently either 'my daughter' or 'my sister's daughter'. The Hopi Pueblo illustrate this:

Sex solidarity is strong. . . . 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.⁸

It is as if coalitions of sisters had such solidarity that they refused to distinguish between 'mine' and 'thine' with respect to children, each saying, in effect, 'my sister's child is my child'. As this logic is followed over the generations, the class of people who can be considered theoretically one's 'sisters' (or 'brothers') may expand indefinitely. It is as if society were made up entirely of immense coalitions of 'brothers' acting in reciprocal solidarity with coalitions of 'sisters', all refusing internally to distinguish between one another's possessions or relationships.

Lewis Henry Morgan's discovery and cross-cultural analysis of this seeming anomaly⁹ established social anthropology as a scientific discipline.¹⁰ The basic principle of classificatory kinship – the formal equivalence of siblings – initially seemed merely 'confusing' to investigators. As a certain Reverend Bingham wrote to Morgan, describing an example from Hawaii:

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'. . . .¹¹

The usual European conclusion was that the natives must be confused. During the later decades of the nineteenth century, Sir Henry Sumner Maine was celebrated as a leading authority on ancient law. As he struggled to make sense of Morgan's bothersome principle, Maine felt moved to ask 'whether all or part of the explanation may not lie in

an imperfection of mental grasp on the part of savages?’¹² To Maine, it was clear that real kinship was one thing, the imaginings of savages quite another. When Bronislaw Malinowski later adopted a similar approach – insisting that ‘real’ kinship was always to be considered ‘individual’, regardless of native ideas to the contrary – this style of thinking came to predominate within anthropology as a whole.

In fact, the problems were straightforwardly ideological. As Robin Fox in his classic kinship textbook explained:

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.¹³

Classificatory kinship does not work like this. The individual is not the point of departure. Neither is the marital couple. Although such kinship does not eliminate intimacy or individuality, it operates on another level – where the collective has primacy over personal interests or relationships. On this level, there is a profoundly meaningful sense in which it really does not matter who the individual is. What matters is everyone’s participation in the solidarity and joint identity of a coalition of people in similar positions, each group defining in opposition or alliance with others.

A further expression of the same basic principle is the levirate (or sororate) – inheritance by a person of his or her deceased sibling’s spouse. Many Europeans are familiar with this primarily from the Bible:

If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead [man] shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband’s brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband’s brother unto her.¹⁴

Both levirate and sororate seem to have been universal throughout Aboriginal Australia.¹⁵ In the rest of the world, the tradition is so common that ‘it is easier to count cases where the custom is positively known to be lacking than to enumerate instances of its occurrence’.¹⁶

In the levirate/sororate, a person steps into the marital role of his or her deceased sibling with little or no ceremony and as a matter of course. In a sense, the living sibling was ‘married’ to the spouse already, since siblings are kin equivalents and marital contracts are arrangements not between two private individuals but between the kin coalitions on either side. Among the North American Navaho, for example, where the levirate and sororate once existed, the payment of bride-price ‘made each partner the potential sexual property of the rest of the clan . . .’¹⁷

In concrete social situations – at least in the contemporary ethnographic record – the ‘equivalence of siblings’ is rarely carried through to its logical conclusion, which would be to give every woman tens or even hundreds of ‘sisters’ formally equivalent to herself,

and a comparable number of ‘potential husbands’. In practice, this equalising logic tends to be weakened or distorted in its implications by other factors, such as day-to-day foraging necessities, marital bonding, emotional compatibility, distance or closeness of relationship and residence. In practice, for example, women do tend to favour their own biological offspring over and above those of their sisters, although this may be publicly played down or denied. And in practice, in most secular contexts, individual spouses take and assert their special sexual rights in individual partners of the opposite sex.

Strictly speaking, however – that is, to the extent that ‘classificatory’ principles prevail – the logic implies that in each generation, those entering into relationships are neither individuals nor marital couples. They are groups of sisters and of brothers: ‘The unit of structure everywhere seems to be the group of full siblings — brothers and sisters’.¹⁸ In quoting this statement, Meyer Fortes offered his own opinion that it constituted ‘one of the few generalisations in kinship theory that . . . enshrines a discovery worthy to be placed side by side with Morgan’s discovery of classificatory kinship . . .’. He added that, like Morgan’s discovery, this generalisation ‘has been repeatedly validated and has opened up lines of inquiry not previously foreseen’.¹⁹

Radcliffe-Brown²⁰ noted that where ‘the classificatory system of kinship reaches a high degree of development’, husbands and wives are always grouped apart from each other. On a formal level – that is, where terminology and publicly professed ideals are concerned – husband and wife do not merge or combine their social identities. They do not share in using the same kinship terms towards others. They do not form a corporate unit in sharing relationships, property or even offspring (which, in some formal sense, will always ‘belong’ on one side of the family at the expense of the other).

To this picture of pronounced *separation* between spouses we may add that in a very large number of cultures, particularly in South America, Africa and Oceania, spouses were traditionally not allowed to eat together – ‘an arrangement’, as Robert Lowie put it, ‘almost inconceivable to us’.²¹ In Africa, it is a common Bantu custom that ‘the husband and wife do not eat together after marriage’.²² Among the Bemba:

The first division of the community at mealtimes is along the lines of sex. Men and women eat separately. Even husband and wife never share a meal, except at night in the privacy of their own hut. It is considered shameful for the two sexes to eat together.²³

Very often, the rationale is that meal-sharing is a sign of kinship – only kin should share food, so that for husband and wife to share meals would make them kin – that is, would tinge their relationship with incest. In various parts of the world, menstrual avoidances, menstrual huts, post-partum taboos, in-law taboos and ‘men’s house’ institutions help ensure that gender distinctions are not blurred, incestuous confusion is avoided – and spouses are effectively kept apart for much of the time. Uncomfortably for those who argue for the universal centrality of the ‘nuclear family’, in other words, we find that it is the disjunction of spouses, not their conjunction, which is the most strongly emphasised ritual and structural norm.

The matrilineal puzzle

Taken to its conclusion, brother-sister corporate solidarity produces matrilineal descent. The English adventurer John Lederer seems to have been the first to describe matrilineal exogamy accurately in print. His words refer to the Tutelo, an eastern Siouan tribe:

From four women, viz., *Pash*, *Sopoy*, *Askarin* and *Maraskarin*, they derive the race of Mankinde; which they therefore divide into four Tribes, distinguished under those several names... now for two of the same Tribe to match, is abhorred as Incest, and punished with great severity.²⁴

Lederer's "tribes" correspond to what would later be termed "clans". In the Tutelo case, marriage within the clan is prohibited irrespective of closeness of relationship.

Half a century later, Father Lafitau described in glowing terms the honoured status of women among the matrilineally organized Iroquois:

Nothing...is more real than this superiority of the women. It is essentially the women who embody the Nation, the nobility of blood, the genealogical tree, the sequence of generations and the continuity of families. It is in them that all real authority resides: the land, the fields and all their produce belongs to them: they are the soul of the councils, the arbiters of peace and war...²⁵

Some decades later, the Scottish historian Adam Ferguson remarked of "savage nations" in general that the "children are considered as pertaining to the mother, with little regard to descent on the father's side".²⁶

Johann Jakob Bachofen published his *Mutterrecht* in 1861. Drawing on ancient Greek historical texts and myths, he advanced the following propositions: 1) humanity once lived in a state of sexual promiscuity; 2) there could be no certainty of paternity; 3) kinship was traced originally through females alone; 4) women's status was correspondingly high; 5) paternity certainty through monogamous marriage emerged relatively late in history. According to Bachofen²⁷:

...mother right is not confined to any particular people but marks a cultural stage. In view of the universal qualities of human nature, this cultural stage cannot be restricted to any particular ethnic family. And consequently what must concern us is not so much the similarities between isolated phenomena as the unity of the basic conception.

The legal historian J. F. McLellan read Bachofen's book in 1866, having the previous year published his *Primitive Marriage*, which independently proposed "kinship through females" as the "more archaic system".²⁸ More effective in supporting Bachofen, however, was Lewis Morgan, who was excited to discover living matrilineal traditions among the Iroquois and other Native Americans. Morgan's *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1871) marked the birth of the scholarly study of kinship; it may also be regarded as the founding document of social anthropology as a discipline. In this and in his subsequent *Ancient Society* (1877), Morgan championed the historical priority of the matrilineal clan over the nuclear family. The ideas of Bachofen and

Morgan appeared in varying degrees persuasive to E. B. Tylor, Friedrich Engels, A. C. Haddon, W. H. R. Rivers, Emile Durkheim and many others. For several decades, almost all scholars accepted the essentials of the Bachofen-Morgan paradigm.

It was Morgan who discovered the classificatory principle. As we have seen, this gives a child multiple mothers. Equally, it gives an adult at least theoretical rights in more than one spouse. This follows from the fact that if a person is termed 'spouse', that term must equally apply to any brother (or in the case of a wife, any sister) of that spouse.

Are such equivalences taken literally? Are they acted out? Or are they mere linguistic formalities, without practical consequences? Morgan's contemporary James McLellan sought to diminish the impact of Morgan's principle by reducing it to linguistics – the natives, he concluded, surely didn't mean what they said. A man might *refer* to his brother's wife as 'my wife' – but to act on the supposed equivalence would be another matter. Morgan agreed, but only up to a point. He postulated a lag between practice and theory, between behaviour and formal terminology. Brothers who conceptualised a wife as 'ours' were, Morgan believed, honouring a tradition inherited from an earlier time when she would have been in every sense shared. Morgan postulated an original condition of 'group marriage', which survived in terminology long after people had abandoned their former sexual communism.

An Iroquois longhouse, in Morgan's view, was living proof that communism worked. The women of the longhouse would be related to one another as mothers, sisters and daughters. Committed brother-warriors would defend their womenfolk against all outsiders. Men from other clans – technically 'enemies' – would be allowed to pay regular visits, staying overnight by arrangement with brides of their choice. But these outsiders – 'bridegrooms' or 'husbands' – could never expect to belong in the household of their brides. They would not be allowed sexual or reproductive rights in any woman of the longhouse, all children remaining under the custodianship of mothers, mothers' brothers and other kin within the lineage. And there was a final point. Visitors would have to pay. Wives would offer a welcome only to husbands who could prove themselves as hunters. A visitor who failed to supply meat for the household would satisfy no-one and would soon be thrown out. He would have to go back and stay with his own classificatory mothers and sisters, defending them and living off their marital earnings as of right. In fact, even the most successful hunter would be a frequent returning visitor to his own natal longhouse, enjoying here full rights as a kinsman – including shared custody of his sisters' children.

Describing an Iroquois long-house, Morgan²⁹ wrote of its immense length, its numerous compartments and fires, the "warm, roomy and tidily-kept habitations", the raised bunks around the walls, the common stores and "the matron in each household, who made a division of the food from the kettle to each family according to their needs..." "Here", he commented, "was communism in living carried out in practical life..." In such households, he concluded, "was laid the foundation for that 'mother-power' which was even more conspicuous in the tribes of the Old World, and which Professor Bachofen was the first to discuss under the name of gyneocracy and mother-right."

In such an establishment, the well-organised management took collective possession of all incoming provisions:

Whatever was taken in the hunt or raised by cultivation by any member of the household...was for the common benefit. Provisions were made a common stock within the household.

Morgan cites personal correspondence from the Reverend Arthur Wright, for many years a missionary among the Seneca Iroquois:

‘As to their family system, when occupying the old long-houses, it is probable that some one clan predominated, the women taking in husbands, however, from the other clans; and sometimes, for a novelty, some of their sons bringing in their young wives until they felt brave enough to leave their mothers. Usually, the female portion ruled the house, and were doubtless clannish enough about it. The stores were held in common; but woe to the luckless husband or lover who was too shiftless to do his share of the providing. No matter how many children, or whatever goods he might have in the house, he might at any time be ordered to pack up his blanket and budge; and after such orders it would not be healthful for him to attempt to disobey. The house would be too hot for him; and, unless saved by the intercession of some aunt or grandmother, he must retreat to his own clan; or, as was often done, go and start a new matrimonial alliance in some other. The women were the great power among the clans, as everywhere else. They did not hesitate, when occasion required, to ‘knock off the horns’, as it was technically called, from the head of a chief, and send him back to the ranks of the warriors. The original nomination of the chiefs also always rested with them’.³⁰

As Marx and Engels read all this, they excitedly realised that Iroquois women must traditionally have possessed what modern trade unionists could only dream of – collective control over their own bodies and productive lives.

Malinowski: the ideology of the family

The political reaction against all this culminated in the mature work of Bronislaw Malinowski. In various public statements, the celebrated inventor of functionalism reiterated tirelessly and indeed tiresomely that ‘the tradition of individual marriage and the family has its roots in the deepest needs of human nature and of social order’, seeing it as his professional task to ‘prove to the best of my ability that marriage and the family have been, are, and will remain the foundations of human society’.³¹ Whereas, W. H. R. Rivers ‘would lead us to believe that what I like to call the *initial situation* of kinship is not individual but communal’³², Malinowski’s own view was the opposite. The family and marriage, he insisted, ‘from the beginning were individual’.³³ Culture’s ‘initial situation’ was dominated by 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.³⁴

Lest anyone imagine that this was a dispassionate scientific rather than thoroughly politically motivated judgement, let me quote Malinowski at greater length. Here are the

words in which he denounced what he termed the ‘group motherhood’ theory which until recently had been integral to the dominant anthropological paradigm:

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 upheavals of the French revolution and the economic changes of Bolshevism are insignificant. 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.³⁵

It was in the light of these considerations that Malinowski came to declare that ‘classificatory terminologies do not exist and never could have existed’,³⁶ while what he termed the ideas of ‘a whole school of anthropologists from Bachofen on’ were branded not only wrong but ‘positively dangerous’.³⁷ The family and its kinship terminologies had always been ‘individual’. The family conjoining husband and wife was the fundamental unit of kinship and the foundation of all social order. It has been this politically motivated conception of an ‘initial situation’ which has kept social anthropological kinship theory in a state of crisis ever since.

‘I believe’, said Sir Edmund Leach³⁸ forty years ago, ‘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’. Leach was one of the few to have realised that by far the most damaging of these arbitrarily imposed concepts was the notion of the nuclear family as a universal institution. Anthropologists since Malinowski, he wrote, have imagined ‘the family’ in the English-language sense of this word to be the logical, necessary and inevitable focal point around which kinship systems must revolve and from the standpoint of which they must be viewed. The systems of most traditional cultures become unintelligible when viewed that way. As a result, Leach concluded, the mental constructs of modern kinship theory are beginning to look as bewildering and futile as the cycles and epicycles of those Ptolemaic astronomers who could conceptualise the universe only by assuming the centrality of the earth beneath their feet.

Some years later, in an evaluation of the contemporary state of kinship theory, Needham³⁹ expressed a similar verdict. ‘The current theoretical position’, he observed, ‘is obscure and confused, and there is little clear indication of what future developments we can expect or should encourage.’ He concluded, in tones indicating a mood 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.

Matters have scarcely improved in the years since Leach and Needham wrote.

Some concluding notes

Early kinship may have been simple; alternatively, we may imagine something more complex. Let us take simplicity as our starting point. For a woman, her brother comes first. To avoid complications, apply this rule strictly and at all times. As children are born, it is the mother's brother who accordingly becomes their primary male guardian. Mothers draw on provisioning support from in-marriage husbands – but without giving them rights.

Relaxing the principle somewhat, we may imagine allowing a spouse to gain control with the passage of time. During the early years of her marriage, for example, a woman might rely essentially on male and female kin, sharing with them responsibility for any child. With the passage of time, however, she might allow an attentive and reliable husband to exercise increasing rights, including claims over any children. Carrying this logic further, she might even agree to place herself under the protection of the husband and his kin, perhaps moving permanently to their camp. Unavoidably, she would then see less of her brother.

In this thought-experiment, I have deliberately set out from theoretical simplicity, deriving complexity by relaxing the rules. The trajectory I have postulated reverses that proposed by Malinowski, who saw classificatory principles as a misleading veneer over the facts of sexual union and procreation. I note that Malinowski promised a book on kinship⁴⁰ but never wrote it. It is doubtful whether any such book could have been composed. Constructed kinship makes no sense when viewed from Malinowski's standpoint. During the 1960s and 1970s, this fact became widely recognised, but only negatively. Social anthropologists may have widely conceded that the nuclear family was no foundation on which to base the science of kinship. Unfortunately, however, matters were left there. Instead of setting out from intellectually sustainable premises, scholars for the most part abandoned the study of kinship altogether.

What are the consequences of putting siblings first? The most obvious one is that it generates a network. Sibling unity generates networks of solidarity and interdependence; pair-bonding fragments and divides. A woman who puts her brother first is not thereby renouncing her husband: she is merely retaining some leverage in her relationship with him. By contrast, a sexual partner may jealously exclude alternative sources of support. By putting her husband first, a mother inevitably puts her brother second. In fact, she risks losing him as a reliable source of support. Equally, she risks losing her mother and other kin. In modern western industrialised societies, this may not matter too much: a mother may have alternative ways of surviving, without having to rely on a kinship network. But in hunter-gatherer and other small-scale egalitarian societies, such alternatives are not available.

At the opposite extreme from Malinowski's nuclear family is the model favoured by Bachofen, Morgan and Engels. Imagine a society in which women make no

compromises. They insist on receiving support from *both* brothers *and* husbands, in addition to female kin. In the case of hunter-gatherers, this will mean ensuring that bridegrooms arrive with supplies of meat. Such bride-service contributions may be conceptualised as payment for sexual access. But 'payment' is a misleading term. The contributions of successful hunters might better be conceptualised in terms of 'gift-exchange'. But whatever term we use, hunter-gatherer women categorically expect meat. If a lover or husband arrives empty-handed, he would be unwise to expect a welcome. In fact, he could be thrown out.

The strategy of putting brothers first is intrinsically matrilineal. Women share custodianship of offspring with brothers, kin being accorded primacy over husbands. Whether this results in a stable system of exogamous matrilineal clans depends on a number of factors. Does it pay to invest in dwellings and in modifying the local landscape? It may do where horticulture can be practised alongside hunting and gathering. Where such investments are made, elements of residential stability may emerge. The outcome is then a matrilineal system of the kind described by Morgan.

The simplest outcome would be a system of matrilineal moieties. Most extant hunter-gatherers are more flexible than this, however. Mobility is high; little investment can be made in dwellings; people manipulate kinship and residence rules or patterns flexibly, settling now in one camp, now in another. Where women reside with husbands, allowing them rights in offspring, elements of patriliney come into play. But hunter-gatherers cannot allow this to threaten egalitarianism or sexual autonomy. When a young man visits his bride, he must make the journey to her own camp, where she remains under the protection of kin. For months or perhaps years, he must perform service for her, surrendering the proceeds of his hunting to his in-laws. Children resulting from the relationship are not his responsibility: initially at least, they belong on the wife's side. Neither does the young man have rights in meat that he brings home: it is for his bride and her kin to distribute as they please. If a hunter wishes to personally distribute hunted game, he must return to his own natal household, where he may advise on the sharing out of meat brought home by in-marrying husbands. In these and other ways, men are subjected to a matrilineal logic, even when this is not pushed to the point of yielding exogamous clans.

On what grounds can it be claimed that this dynamic has evolutionary primacy? Perhaps the most convincing argument concerns investment in children. The consensus is that *Homo sapiens* evolved recently in Africa. From about half a million years ago, brain size began increasing almost exponentially. A large brain is costly to produce and maintain. If evolving mothers proved able to afford increasingly large-brained, slow-maturing, heavily burdensome offspring, their success testifies to their creativity in establishing adaptive sexual strategies. How did these mothers balance their energy budgets?

Non-human primate males spend much energy fighting one another, controlling females and engaging in activities such as infanticide directed against offspring who are not their own. The population-level effects are negative. Where male reproductive differentials and corresponding levels of violence are high, mothers must divert energy to fighting

harassment and resisting infanticidal males. A population faced with such challenges might head toward extinction, even as a minority of its males achieved short-term reproductive success.

But the converse equally applies. According to current models, the ancestors of extant humans comprised a small population dwelling somewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. Geneticists suspect that such people may have resembled a modern ‘endangered species’, possibly no more numerous than today’s mountain gorillas. What happened next was extraordinary. The population exploded, soon colonising the globe. Such rapid expansion is inconsistent with infanticide, sexual harassment or male philandering. If unusually large-brained offspring were being successfully raised, childcare must have been unusually efficient. We know what the optimal solution would have been. Mothers would have done best by resisting male sexual control, inducing their partners to work for them – and taking advantage of every available childcare resource.

¹ R. Fox (1967) *Kinship and Marriage: An anthropological perspective* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), p. 10.

² J. R. Searle (1996) *The Construction of Social Reality* (London: Penguin).

³ B. Malinowski (1930) Kinship. *Man* (N.S.) **30**(2), 19-29.

⁴ B. Malinowski (1956) *Marriage: Past and Present. A debate between Robert Briffault and Bronislaw Malinowski*, M. F. Ashley Montagu (ed.) (Boston: Porter Sargent), p. 42.

⁵ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1931) The social organization of Australian tribes. *Oceania Monographs* No. 1 (Melbourne: Macmillan), p. 13.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 97.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 13.

⁸ F. Eggan (1950) *Social Organization of the Western Pueblos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 33, 36, 35.

⁹ L. H. Morgan (1871) *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution).

¹⁰ C. Lévi-Strauss (1977) *Structural Anthropology*, 2 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin), **1**, 300.

¹¹ L. H. Morgan (1871) *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution), p. 461.

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