

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Kinship at the core

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)



Mr Richard Dyer is one of the oldest residents in Elmdon

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Kinship at the core

An anthropology of Elmdon
a village in north-west Essex
in the nineteen-sixties

MARILYN STRATHERN

WITH A FOREWORD BY
AUDREY RICHARDS

AND AN EPILOGUE BY
FRANCES OXFORD

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

LONDON NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE

MELBOURNE SYDNEY

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521105033

© Cambridge University Press 1981

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1981

This digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-23360-6 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-10503-3 paperback

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties
Marilyn Strathern
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>List of tables</i>	x
Foreword by Audrey Richards	xi
Preface	xxix
1. The idea of a village	1
‘Real Elmdon’	3
Referring to one’s village	7
A model of the village	12
A matter of value	14
2. Elmdon families and the core	18
A matter of context	18
A matter of status	20
‘Real Elmdon’: a summary of contexts	23
Different Elmdon families	24
3. Elmdon as a community	35
The village as a place where things happen	35
Organisations and clubs	38
Leadership	42
Two models of the village	46
Village government	49
The old order	53
Whose community?	57

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties
Marilyn Strathern
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

4. Employment	<i>page</i> 59
The Squire and his workers	60
High farming and the ethic of ‘localism’	65
Rights and rivals	69
Occupational hierarchy	73
An occupational network?	75
Kin connections and work connections	79
 5. Where and how one lives	 85
Interests in the open	87
The case of the new houses	88
Forms of house tenure	91
Money and management	94
Women and economic status	96
Property: inheritance	102
Property: rights	104
Houses as symbols of change	106
 6. Help and dependency: kinship in practice	 110
Patterns of residence	110
Residence on marriage	118
Those who stay and those who leave	121
Households and housekeeping	123
Patterns of care	126
The place of the unmarried	131
Friends, neighbours and non-kin	134
Family occasions	136
Kinship and attachment to Elmdon	141
 7. Ideas about relatedness	 147
Relatives in number	149
Severing the network	156
The significance of surnames	161
The surname as an estate	167

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties
Marilyn Strathern
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

8. Marriage and the significance of outsiders	<i>page</i> 170
Some meanings of marriage	171
Stealing women	176
Like marrying like: change over time	182
Marriage and status: getting out	187
Marriage within the village	190
 9. The real village	 198
 Epilogue: Elmdon in 1977 by Frances Oxford	 209
Characteristics of the population	210
Why live in Elmdon?	219
The cosy community	221
Integration, status and identity	226
 Appendixes	 229
1. Clusters of kin	229
2. Kin connections across village boundaries	233
3. Marriages between Elmdon and Chrishall villagers	235
4. Age of marriage and rates of illegitimacy	239
5. Genealogies of six Elmdon families	242
 <i>Notes</i>	 270
<i>Bibliography</i>	296
<i>Index</i>	298

Illustrations

Plates

Mr Richard Dyer is one of the oldest residents in Elmdon (photograph by David Gillison, 1978)	<i>frontispiece</i>
Ickleton Road, showing the church, with shop and garage on the left (photograph by James Butler, 1979)	<i>page</i> xiii
Old people’s bungalows, built at about the time of our 1964 survey (photograph by John Morgan, 1980)	xvii
Early eighteenth-century cottage with a modern addition (photograph by John Morgan, 1980)	xxi
Elmdon village store (photograph by David Gillison, 1978)	xxv
Mrs Edith Hayes (1912–80), the first Elmdon helper on our survey (photograph by David Gillison, 1978)	xxvii

Figures

1. Map of Elmdon, its neighbouring villages and towns, 1964	2
2. Partial Dyer genealogy showing connections with villages around	11
3. Connections between some of the workers for the Elmdon steam contractor, approximately 1887–1920	80
4. Connections of the Hammonds known to have worked on Lofts Hall Estate, probably at Elmdon Bury Farm	81
5. Kinpersons who tend to be invited, or not invited, to weddings	139
6. Marriages between the four families of the 1964 core	194

Charts

1. Contexts of classification	25
2. A classification of Elmdon families	28

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties
Marilyn Strathern
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Illustrations

3. (a) Kin connections and household ties among some Elmdon relatives	<i>page</i> 128
(b) Examples of care-giving between households	130
4. Household arrangements of single Elmdoner persons, 1964	133

Tables

1. Family status of adult Elmdon residents, 1964	<i>page</i> 31
2. Summary of village composition by individuals' family status	33
3. Birthplace of adult Elmdon residents, 1964	33
4. Full-time occupations of Elmdon residents, 1964	62
5. House tenure: enumeration by household, 1964	91
6. Part-time occupations of Elmdon women, 1964	101
7. (a) Residence in same house over twenty years, by household	111
(b) Residence in same house over twenty years, by individual	111
8. House moves within Elmdon: number of houses in which Elmdoners have lived	112
9. Elmdoners' residence immediately on marriage	119
10. Marital status of present-day Elmdoners	122
11. Position of parents on marriage and spouses' villages of residence	123
12. Selected characteristics of Elmdon residents showing connections in the village	150
13. Numbers of cousins present in Elmdon among Elmdoners, 1964	151
14. Miscellaneous connections between immigrants and Elmdon as noted in table 12, for 1964	153
15. Length of time residents have been in Elmdon, all adults, 1964	154
16. Marital status of immigrants on settlement in Elmdon	155
17. Extant marriages made by Elmdoners: residence of spouse at time of marriage	180
18. Origins of spouses of Elmdoners and their siblings (all marriages)	181
19. Turnover of population, Elmdon village, 1967–77	210
20. Length of residence in Elmdon, 1977 (adults)	211
21. Immigrant population by distance of birthplace from Elmdon, 1977 (adults)	212
22. Connections of adult entrants into Elmdon, 1967–77	213
23. Local connections of adult Elmdon residents, 1977	214
24. Age structure of all Elmdon residents, 1977	215
25. Tenure of property in Elmdon, 1977	216
26. Location of work of adults in full-time employment, 1977	218
27. Full-time employment of adults, 1977	220

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Foreword

We have called this book an anthropological study primarily, I suppose, because most of us who were involved in the work are anthropologists. But what are its specially anthropological characteristics?

I have lived in a number of small African villages, making quite a close study of one, and I had often wondered whether it would be possible to do the same sort of work in an English village of roughly the same size.¹ In 1962 I had an opportunity to do this, when Edmund Leach and I, both then members of the Department of Social Anthropology at Cambridge University, decided to give some of our students a little experience in interviewing and the handling of notes before they started out to do fieldwork themselves. We felt that the collection of genealogies and family histories would be a practical way of giving them this opportunity, and thought that Elmdon, the village where I had a cottage,² would be a suitable place to start. It was a small community, with an adult population of about 202 in 1962, and it lay conveniently near to Cambridge which was only fourteen miles away. An additional advantage was the fact that I already had contacts in the village, which made it easy to start work quickly.

We were interested in the degree to which kinship ties and even kinship groups continued to survive in the 1960s in an English village so near to Cambridge and Saffron Walden, the market town and shopping centre of the area, some six miles away, and within fifty miles of London itself. A cursory glance at the most recent electoral roll showed that there were ten households in the village occupied by people with the surname 'Hammond'. Seven of these houses were occupied by married couples and three by single men, bachelors or widowers. Five of the married couples lived in council houses only a few moments walk from each other. Did these households form a kinship group such as those which perform such

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Kinship at the core*

important functions in villages in Africa, Ceylon or Burmah, where one or other of us had done fieldwork? Was such a grouping of kinsmen a common characteristic of settled communities with a long history of occupation, or was it an accident of the distribution of housing by the local council, or of the allocation of tied cottages in an agricultural community in which young men were often able to get jobs, and therefore cottages, from farmers who had employed their fathers or uncles?

We felt there might be some further geographical groupings of people with the same surname in other parts of the village, and Edmund Leach started on a sketch map of the houses and their occupants on the first afternoon, as far as I remember! These and many other aspects of kinship immediately caught our anthropological interests and constantly raised points of comparison between the social structure of Elmdon and those of other villages we had studied in other parts of the world or in the ethnographic accounts written by colleagues.

The first batch of four students arrived in Elmdon in August 1962. Marilyn Strathern, then Evans, was among them before she left for fieldwork in Papua New Guinea the following year. This first group of students stayed for a week or so but they worked with great intensity and speed. They were asked to collect the genealogies and family histories of some of the long-established families, including those who are called ‘real Elmdon’ people in this book. The first families were selected haphazardly on the basis of my personal contacts. The household heads were all agricultural labourers, working or retired. Six of the main family groups are described in *Some Elmdon Families* published in 1975.³

We did not know how the people of Elmdon would react to being interviewed and therefore asked the students to open their talks with questions that were likely to interest them, such as the history of the houses they were occupying. This inevitably led to talk about the history of their own families and much other information. The resulting conversations proved popular and we only had two refusals at this stage of the work.⁴ It was quickly assumed that we had come to the village to write a history of Elmdon. This was quite a well-known occupation since Women’s Institutes had organised a collection of village histories some years earlier, but I confess I did not realise how universally we were classed as historians until I heard myself announced to a housewife as ‘Here is Miss Richards, come about “the old days”’.⁵

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)



Ickleton Road, showing the church, with shop and garage on the left

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Kinship at the core*

But the students were also asked to write down, in anthropological fashion, any extraneous information they were offered and their notebooks filled with data which we did not expect, such as cases of brother and sister exchange marriages, the use of nicknames in the community, agricultural rites and festivities, and intervillage fights, as well as accounts of family squabbles and comments on the behaviour of relatives. The work became in fact an exploratory survey of the type used in anthropological work, and it led us into many fascinating problems.⁶

But if this approach was popular it had a disadvantage: most of the people interviewed initially were in their sixties and seventies, either because we were referred to them as people likely to know the past history of the chosen families or because the older people were usually at home during the day and therefore easier to interview. I confess we do not know much about the concepts and attitudes of teenagers and young adults to the problems we were discussing, or the extent of their knowledge of and interest in their family relationships. This information would have been a great addition to the subject of this book, which Marilyn Strathern describes as a study of Elmdon people's concepts of kinship. Nevertheless all the young people who grew up during the survey were interviewed in 1974 as to their birthplace, housing and occupations.

Because our study started as a teaching experiment, the work was necessarily discontinuous. Practical considerations, such as the dates of university vacations, the shortage of housing in Elmdon, and the teaching and other duties to which Edmund Leach⁷ and I were both committed, made it difficult to arrange continuous periods of research. Some twenty or so students came to Elmdon between 1962 and 1975 but they were rarely able to stay more than a week or two.⁸ But after the first exploratory interviews in 1962 and 1963 we began to systematise as publication then seemed a possibility. We were at that time able to get help for longer periods. For instance Ann Whitehead undertook a village census for five weeks during a summer vacation in 1964 and returned for two weeks in 1965 with Rosalind Winton. I asked Vanessa Maher and Peter Cresswell each to make a detailed study of two old Elmdon families, the Hammonds and the Reeves, for a fortnight and this led to a much more concentrated study of two genealogies and family histories chosen from our six selected family groups. This method proved fruitful – the history of the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Foreword*

fortunes of a village, its periods of prosperity, its occupational changes, and the cause of its emigration and immigration rates were thus elicited by three and four generation genealogies. It is a method that has been adopted since by several WEA classes studying social history. In 1971 an African student worked in Elmdon for a month with great success. She was as stimulated by the unfamiliar conditions as European anthropologists are in African villages.

At the same time we started subject studies. Andrew Strathern had already written notes on village activities as early as 1962, and in 1969 Julian Laite, a sociologist, spent three weeks working on housing problems with Paul Atkinson, an anthropologist, and Colin Murray produced material on farming. In 1970 David Woodhill, a sociologist, and Rosaleen Taylor, a historian, were employed for nearly a year on documentary work. But in spite of these longer stretches of study which became possible in the later years of the survey, it remains true that the bulk of the work was done in very short stretches compared to the practice common in more orthodox village studies.

Thus the survey was inevitably long drawn out. During this time the composition of the population of the village and the major occupations of its inhabitants changed drastically. The numerical extent of these changes is recorded in Frances Oxford's Epilogue to this book, but there were also changes in such aspects of life as schooling, and wedding celebrations – from the era of coffee, beer and sausage rolls in the small Elmdon school to receptions in the large school hall of a nearby village with an outside caterer, wine and spirits. There were marked changes too in fêtes and holiday patterns, in transport, and even in the position of the 'core families' relative to each other. The large surname groups from 1962 have been diminished by death, emigration or the marriages of women outside the village, and their influence and reputation in the village has changed. By 1979 there was only one Hammond householder in Elmdon.

These changes were stimulating to observe yet put us in a quandary. Were we to describe the Elmdon of 1964 when 41 per cent of the whole population had been born in the parish and 43 per cent of the male workforce were employed in agriculture, or that of 1973 when 32 per cent were 'in agriculture' and 25 per cent in professional occupations, and when the influx of outsiders, retired people or commuters was increasing steadily? We settled on

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Kinship at the core*

1964 because our index cards and our map had been most fully checked for that year, but we felt obliged to make additions. In 1974 two students interviewed the young people who had become eighteen since 1964 and were therefore now eligible for a place on the electoral roll, and in 1977 Frances Oxford visited recent newcomers to Elmdon. She contributes the Epilogue to this book. As far as the figures of emigration, immigration or employment changes are concerned we have been able to stick fairly consistently to the year 1964, but the comments and views of the inhabitants are quoted from the whole period of our work.

The difficulty of the long-extended survey is one which British anthropologists have rarely had to face. They have usually had to leave England to do their fieldwork, with a limited amount of money, and therefore the opportunity to work only for a restricted period of time, a year or perhaps two. Every fieldworker knows the temptation to stay just one more week or to observe just one more ceremony, but there has to be a definite end. Here we were in a rather different position since it was so easy to get to Elmdon from Cambridge, and in my case I was, so to speak, living in my 'field'. The problem was when to stop!

Another problem, not so much a result of the extension of the work in time, but of its discontinuity, was the difficulty that students had in doing real participant observation of the kind which has been so characteristic of anthropological fieldwork for the last fifty years or so. Only two students managed to secure housing with an Elmdon resident, one for two weeks and another for five,⁹ and in the average period of a week to ten days which the rest spent in the village it was difficult to become intimately acquainted with individuals. Students attended meetings and sat in pubs but they could not become accepted figures on the landscape or follow current gossip. Hence most of the material collected comes from interviews checked as far as possible by data from parish registers and other documentary sources. As a resident at week-ends and vacations from 1957, and permanently from 1964 onwards, I could, and did, provide continuity. I made notes of important happenings. My cottage stands beneath the church so that I have a good view of funerals, with their formal processions of relatives arranged in order of nearness to the dead, and of weddings, and I often join other Elmdon residents who gather at the church gate to watch proceedings. I took part in village activities and was, for instance, secretary of a village hall committee which was engaged

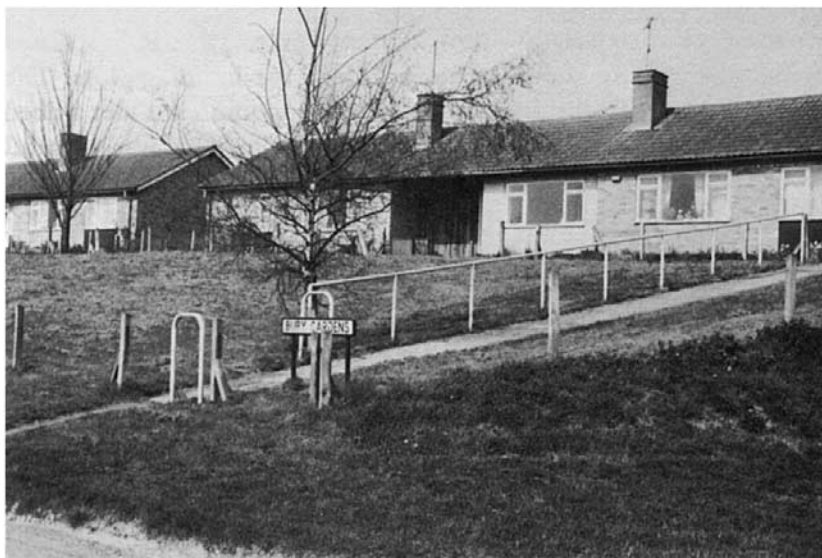
Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)



Old people's bungalows, built at about the time of our 1964 survey

xvii

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Kinship at the core*

for some years in a fight, often acrimonious, to prevent the sale of the village reading room and its grounds for building-plots. The fight was between the trustees of the hall appointed under a deed of gift dated 1905, and the rest of the village. This was a useful experience for me since one of the best ways to study the organisation of village activities is, to my mind, to play a part in such activities.

But there are advantages and disadvantages in being a resident observer. The anthropologist in an exotic community is in a sense play-acting, trying to learn the ways of the people and to follow them as far as possible, asking to be taught how to cultivate, to cook, to entertain, or to pray. The role of a learner was accepted by the African communities I worked in. 'We are teaching her how to do things – teaching her the Ganda way' said a woman in Kisozi village, the community I was studying in Uganda in 1955. This was how she tried to explain my position to an outsider. There was no question of my becoming completely identified with the local inhabitants in people's minds. The difference in language, education, clothing and general life style and, in the case I cite, in skin colour, were too great, try as I might to lessen them and to join as best I could in everything going on, from harvesting groundnuts to assisting at childbirth. This 'join-in-everything' was the pattern of anthropological fieldwork at the time.

But for an English woman working in an English village, and a permanent resident at that, the situation was very different. There was no need to explain my presence. I was just an outsider – 'a lady from Cambridge' – who was a familiar sight, since I had lived in the village for five years before the survey began. Nor was there any necessity to explain Elmdon ways of living to me although I, in common with most of the students, had not lived in an English village before and had much to learn about patterns of Essex agriculture and housekeeping.¹⁰ It would have been absurd to try to act like a villager or to imitate an Essex dialect, although I had made great efforts to acquire the exact intonation and accent of Cibemba, the language spoken in the northern province of Zambia where I worked in 1930, or of Luganda, spoken in Buganda. Furthermore, which group of villagers would I have to try to identify with? Elmdon society, like those of many other English villages, includes a number of sub-cultures, mainly based on class. The ladder of respect and even subservience is today [1979] much shorter than it was when I first went to the village. Christian

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Foreword*

names are now used almost universally except for outsiders of some age like myself.¹¹ Relations at village functions such as fêtes or fund-raising ‘coffee mornings’ seem easy but the life styles of agricultural or factory workers, farmers or those in professional occupations remain quite distinct. There is little difference in clothing between these groups nowadays, but patterns of eating, entertaining, housing, furniture, burying the dead or marrying are clearly differentiated. In most of the small African villages I have lived in, whatever distinctions in social status or rank are recognised, people mostly eat the same food. They are said to have a ‘staple food’ in fact, whether it be rice, maize, millet or bananas and they eat at the same hours of the day. But in Elmdon eating rhythms differ from group to group. For instance, agricultural and factory workers mostly have a high tea round 5.30 p.m., while those in professional occupations tend to eat from 7 to 8 p.m. since commuters return from London at about that time. These and many other different patterns of behaviour are known and accepted by the village as a whole. Joint activities such as committee meetings are arranged to fit each group’s convenience, in relation to meal-times, holiday seasons, and periods of agricultural overtime. The older Elmdon families are perhaps the most convinced of the unique character of their way of life. When a student was invited to live in an agricultural labourer’s house I heard women say in the shop ‘She’ll never stick it’ or ‘She won’t know how to do things.’ Another student was asked to a party in the house of one of the old Elmdon families when ‘party games’ were played. The host said ‘We wanted to show you what *we* do at parties.’

It is because these different patterns of behaviour are so clearly recognised that I have called them, in anthropological language, ‘sub-cultures’. The difficulty they pose for a resident research worker is obvious. A student newcomer could identify with one group as the anthropologist in an unfamiliar society tries to do, but a resident of some years’ standing has already been placed in a sub-culture. I was an outsider, a university teacher, ‘a lady from Cambridge’, and so I felt I had to remain.

Another practical difficulty is the fact that people who live for some time in a village acquire friends and they become loath to write statements which may hurt the feelings of such friends. An account of village life which makes no reference to the extent of illegitimacy, to family quarrels, bad treatment of relatives or cases

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Kinship at the core*

of snobbishness gives a very false impression of reality: yet to give an 'unbiased' account of facts and comments may cause real distress to friends and acquaintances. This is a problem which troubles all sociologists or anthropologists working in their own society, and Marilyn Strathern has handled it sensitively in this work. Resident observers also begin to see their fellow villagers as individuals with their own quirks of character and peculiarities of appearance, and not as representatives of an occupation, a class, or of a particular geographical origin as the sociologist must try to do. One finds oneself in fact becoming more of a novelist and less of a scientist.

Lastly, the resident observer ceases, in sheer self-defence, to take notes. For a full-time anthropological fieldworker the evenings are usually spent in scribbling at hot speed notes on the happenings of the day and comments from the actors which seem significant. But as an intermittent observer, also engaged in teaching elsewhere, I found it impossible to keep such notes fully and consistently. Exhaustion stepped in and the reader will understand that I heard with mixed feelings the offer by a very good informant to spend every evening from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. telling me what I wanted to know. Fieldwork is a full-time, or full-and-a-half-time, job and not an occupation which can be taken up from time to time.

For all these reasons the notes I took during a period of over twenty years' residence in Elmdon are not as systematic as those which resulted from two fifteen-month trips to Zambia in 1930–1 and 1933–4. I have, of course, a much richer supply of those stored memories and impressions on which anthropologists rely to give life to their descriptive work, but these, unfortunately, can only be used by the observer who has them, and they will perhaps never emerge.

However, by 1972 quite an impressive amount of material on Elmdon had been collected, in spite of the difficulties of the survey having originated in a rather casually organised teaching experiment. We had a census of the whole adult population of the village, giving the date and place of birth of each adult, their occupational and housing history, their marriages and the origin of their spouses. This had to be brought up to date in 1971, 1974 and 1977. The whole was finally checked by Marianne Leach in 1977.

In 1972 Jean Robin started to work as a research assistant on

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)



Early eighteenth-century cottage with a modern addition

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Kinship at the core*

the survey; she elaborated and checked the data by a systematic analysis of the material in the three censuses of 1841, 1851 and 1861, the parish registers from 1618 onwards, and other documentary sources. We had also accumulated between us special studies of housing, marriage, the history of the school, of the land-acreage and of the farming families, as well as a preliminary general account of the village. As a result *Some Elmdon Families* was produced in 1975 – a small book designed for the people of Elmdon themselves. It was published privately, the greatest number of copies being sold at a village-hall meeting in 1975 and by the village shop. After that Jean Robin became anxious to write a more serious study which would be in effect a social and economic history of Elmdon as a whole from 1861 to 1964 – a history of land use, agricultural practices, the retail trade, labour (particularly the employment of girls and women), and immigration and emigration. The results have already appeared in *Elmdon: continuity and change in a north-west Essex village 1861–1964* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), and a more detailed history of this part of the work is given in that book.

I had meanwhile been interested since the first week of our work in the group of people who described themselves as ‘real’ or ‘old’ Elmdon people. Anthropologists so often find themselves stimulated by some vivid impression formed in the first days of their work. They give priority to a study of chieftainship because it appears immediately that the people’s lives are dominated by this institution, or they decide that their work should be centred on magic and witchcraft because the people seem so constantly concerned with the subject. I was struck in the first few days by remarks made at a visit with a couple of students to a woman who had lived forty-four years in Elmdon and had acted as midwife to the village. She was pushed aside by her sister-in-law who said ‘Don’t ask *her*. She knows nothing about the families. She is a stranger here.’ In the same week a butcher, a stranger from Ely with seven years’ residence said bitterly ‘Don’t ask *me*! You’d have to have been here since Hereward-the-Wake to belong.’

Who were these ‘real Elmdon’ people? The families which actually had been the longest established as checked by the parish registers, or were they the owners of plots of land passed on by inheritance; men with rights to work or housing; people of the highest status in the village, or men and women of high status in the lowest status group, which here were the agricultural labourers?

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Foreword*

The problem nagged at me as Marilyn Strathern quotes (p. 16) and I found it to be of interest to French and Swedish anthropologists with whom I discussed it. The phenomenon is probably common in English villages but had never been fully investigated.

I hoped it might be possible to use much of the material we had collected on the structure of the village, its joint activities, its land tenure, and housing, in the course of my examination of the group that called themselves 'real Elmdon' people, and so to produce something like an old-fashioned anthropological village study. But a temporary run of bad health made me doubtful whether I would be able to complete the work. At this stage Marilyn Strathern, with unparalleled generosity, offered to analyse our kinship data, which was complex owing to the degree of intermarriage in the village. However, it soon became clear that the book must be hers alone. She had developed very interesting ideas on the phenomenon of the core families which were of greater complexity and originality than my own would have been. *Kinship at the core* is the result. Anyone of less courage would, I think, have been daunted. She was presented with seventeen notebooks, poorly indexed, some rough drafts on various topics as listed on p. xxii and of course the figures collected for Jean Robin's social and economic history. Anthropologists have sometimes edited dead colleagues' notes, but they have not, I think, tried to produce a new synthesis of the data based on other people's notes. These had to be indexed for her own purposes. She had to select case histories from the mass of material in order to produce the elaborate and valuable charts designed to show the composition of the core families and the relationship between them. Her book is not a village survey, but an examination of one aspect of the problem, the people's own concepts of their identification with the Elmdon community. This was a particularly difficult problem to handle since we never collected material specifically to illustrate it; for instance, there were no special questions designed to reveal these concepts.

A seminal work of this kind will, I hope, raise discussion among those studying English rural communities. It should certainly stimulate comparative research. In Elmdon the group which Marilyn Strathern calls 'the core families' is composed of agricultural labourers whose presence in the village is recorded in the early and middle part of the nineteenth century and even in the eighteenth century. Further research would probably show that some of them were settled in Elmdon earlier still. These are not

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Kinship at the core*

necessarily the longest-established families in the village, for the Lofts Hall estate, of which Elmdon formed a part, was bought by a London business man, Nathaniel Wilkes, in 1739 and he and his descendants lived at the manor house of Lofts Hall and in the contiguous manor of Elmdon Bury until 1927 when the estate was put up for sale. Most of the successive Wilkes heirs were born at Wenden Lofts and lived there all their lives, yet though they would have called themselves a 'county family' or an 'old Essex family' they would never, I think, have identified themselves with the village of Elmdon or the still smaller village of Wenden Lofts on its borders. On the other hand, the group of agricultural labourers who called themselves 'real Elmdon' people had had virtually no hereditary rights to land in the area since before the Enclosure Award of 1829, once the small plots allotted to them had been absorbed into the Wilkes estate by purchase. These agricultural labourers then lived in tied houses and, as they do now, in council houses. They did, however, regard themselves as having preferential claims to jobs on Elmdon farms and the houses that went with them, as Marilyn Strathern shows in her detailed analysis of individual cases. They regarded themselves as the core of Elmdon, its 'real' inhabitants, the people who never moved away. Is this core concept a common phenomenon in English villages or one that is associated with a particular type of agriculture, here arable farming, with its demand for large teams of labourers in the nineteenth century? Is it to be found in parts of England, Scotland and Wales where pastoral farming is the rule, where a smaller labour force is needed and where emigration from the village is probably higher, and attachment to the community of one's birth probably of a different kind?

Again, is the phenomenon of the village core, a group of families which regards itself as the permanent and important basis of the community, one which depends on a particular system of land-tenure? In Elmdon there is a pattern of large-scale capitalist farming with its associated labourers, whereas in other areas small-holdings are individually owned and passed on in hereditary succession, so that a highly developed family system is prominent rather than an emotional identification with the village as a whole. The crofter system of the Shetlands or the peasant holdings in many parts of France come to mind as examples of such a situation. Lastly, is the size of the community an important variable when we are looking for the core phenomenon; does its distance

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties
Marilyn Strathern
Frontmatter
[More information](#)



Elmdon village store

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Kinship at the core

from a large rural industry provide opportunities for new ties and loyalties, or is it something as simple as the age of the village, for we must remember that new settlements are being established as we write? How long will it be before cores of people who regard themselves as being the real villagers develop in these new communities, probably by virtue of being the first occupants? *Kinship at the core* stimulates us to ask these and many other questions on the basis of the very detailed and penetrating analysis that Marilyn Strathern gives to the structure of Elmdon, a small village in a part of north Essex.

Audrey Richards

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)



Mrs Edith Hayes (1912–80), the first Elmdon helper on our survey

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

Jake reckons himself as the oldest member of the ‘real Elmdon families’ . . . He is said to have been an active and lively fellow in his youth and was a leader of the young men. Gangs from Duddenhoe End or Chrishall would come in to the Elmdon pub and then be chased out by the Elmdon lads. Sometimes Jake would lay an ambush in King’s Lane and there would be a fight. Chrishall and Elmdon youths were sworn enemies. Why? ‘Well, we didn’t want strangers coming in here taking our jobs.’ Bertha Reeves always adds, ‘They used to fight about girls. They didn’t want boys from other villages taking Elmdon girls.’ She maintains that one of her own suitors was chased away and ‘just had to turn round and bicycle back to Walden’. (Richards and Robin, *Some Elmdon Families*, 1975, p. 125.)

Jake and Bertha belonged to the six Elmdon families whose histories have been recounted by Audrey Richards and Jean Robin in *Some Elmdon Families*. This book is about some of the same people. It is concerned with the place these families hold in the village, and their idea of what a ‘village’ is. Why should Jake identify himself as ‘real Elmdon’? Why should immigrant workers be called ‘strangers’ or men from places close by be seen as rivals? Duddenhoe End, two-and-a-half miles from the centre of Elmdon, is actually in the same parish, while Chrishall to the west, though in a different parish, is if anything nearer to Elmdon. Jake’s remarks are not just about his own village, but put Elmdon into some kind of relationship with others in the neighbourhood.

The village is imagined as a social unit, although there is more to this than just some vague in-group feeling. For a start, attitudes towards different places beyond Elmdon vary. Great Chishill lies on the farther side of Chrishall, but in spite of the distance is generally regarded in a more friendly light by Elmdoners, who would agree with Jake and Bertha’s accounts of past relations with Chrishall. In Jake’s own case this is no accident of personal connection: he has two cousins in Chishill, but another cousin married into the rivalrous Chrishall and settled there, as a great-aunt had done a generation before.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Kinship at the core*

The anecdote about competition for jobs and fighting over girls gives us a clue as to what being a 'villager' might mean. Jake was a farm worker all his life, and the jobs he refers to were agricultural positions on local land. When he himself began work in the 1910s there was a single dominant landlord in the area whose holdings included farms in Duddenhoe End and Chrishall as well as Elmdon. Did the workers in Elmdon feel they had some special interest as a group in the employment he offered? The question becomes pertinent when we discover that only a certain number of today's agricultural families living in the village are reckoned to be 'real' villagers. This is where concern over the girls comes in. The kinds of choices made at marriage are crucial to the evaluation of family status. As we shall see, there is a close connection between being a member of a certain family and counting oneself as a native. Jake's claim to 'real Elmdon' status is not based simply on his own long association there, but on a model of the village, shared by most of its residents, which uses the idioms and images of kinship to give it a certain structure and set it into the context of villages around. And this in turn is not simply a matter of locality and geography. An attempt to understand Elmdoners' emphasis on 'the village' will lead us into considerations of rank and status, economic relations, and that mark of English culture, class.

Numerous accounts of English village life have appeared over the last few years. This one springs in part, as Audrey Richards makes clear in the Foreword, from her own twenty years' residence in Elmdon. It also comes from her longer-standing interests as an anthropologist. While Jake Reeves was working on Elmdon's farms, she, his contemporary by all but two years, was teaching and writing anthropology, doing fieldwork in East Africa, and no more 'retired' to Elmdon than Jake ever fully gave up farm work.

Anthropology's methodological rule of thumb, participant observation, plays on the extent to which the fieldworker is simultaneously insider and outsider. Audrey Richards points to some of the difficulties which arise when a culture is largely shared by the observer and the observed. Possibly for such a reason the bulk of village studies has tended towards certain types. There is the systematic analysis of the rural sociologist, who distances himself through an explicit methodology and specific problems for investigation; the reconstructions of local historians, who attend with precision to recoverable aspects of the past and to what cannot be

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

seen from the present – the direction of trends and changes; and personal accounts, autobiographies and impressions from villagers themselves.

This book has the merit of none of these approaches. The patchy conditions under which the material was collected are noted in the Foreword; the book is probably too cavalier in its treatment of time and change, and lacks the vividness and authenticity of first-hand description. Though I have drawn on Richards's own insights and feelings about the village, quite as much as on her extensive data, this is not the book she would have written.

Any merit can be put in a few words. In so far as my account imitates a case study in the traditional anthropological sense, its main line of enquiry takes its cue from what Elmdon people themselves seem to be interested in. A similar premise has informed other anthropological investigations of village life in this country, although I have made few direct comparisons with such studies. In so far as the account is derivative, based largely on other people's material about other people, it has entailed its own kind of distance. I regret not having renewed the acquaintance of the Elmdon people I met briefly in 1962; yet to have taken up further 'fieldwork' there would have turned this into a very different kind of endeavour. At the same time, perhaps distance has led me to create a picture of Elmdon which dwells less on the kinds of differences which are so important to those who are part of its immediate world, and rather on certain of the continuities in social perception which seem to exist between the village and the wider world of English society, to which I do belong. While various sections of Elmdon's residents are conscious of the distinctions between them, in occupation, styles of life, social contacts, and so on, one would be falling short of a complete analysis merely to reproduce these same distinctions in the terms in which they are given. The so-called 'real villagers' indeed see themselves as apart from other residents there. This does not mean that we must understand their position only in terms of difference. Indeed, I argue that such distinctions spring from values widely shared, and that in their notions of village-ness lies something of an agreement between different kinds of resident. This agreement, in turn, is not only about the nature and quality of village life, but about aspects of English society and culture at large.

The intention of *Some Elmdon Families* was to present a record to which Elmdon people could have access, and its account