

Cambridge University Press

0521278236 - Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective

Robin Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

*Preface to the
Cambridge University Press Edition*

It is now sixteen years since this book first appeared. The response to it has never ceased to amaze me. I did not expect the wide readership, the many translations (including Japanese, Hindi, and Malay), and the numerous 'adoptions'. When I wrote it, kinship was an exotic concern of a few anthropologists; it has now become part of the common currency of conversation. Some areas remain esoteric—kinship terminology is not yet a popular concern—but debate about 'matriarchy' and the 'nuclear family' is now commonplace, and primatologists and zoologists—to say nothing of evolutionary theorists—are busy analysing kinship systems in areas where, sixteen years ago, the concept was as foreign as it was to the public at large. Of course it never should have been esoteric and only became so because of the myth that kinship was a property of primitive societies and had been replaced by citizenship, or 'universalistic roles', or whatever, in modern ones. There has certainly been change, and opposition between church and state on the one hand and kinship on the other remains strong. But since it has been realized that what we call 'kinship systems' are in essence the assortative mating systems of the species *Homo sapiens sapiens*, and that any and every population of the species must have such a system (as opposed to random mating), then it is easily seen that 'kinship systems' are inescapable. They are always with us as much as the prefrontal cortex or the bipedal walk are with us, no matter what the local circumstances.

It was suggested that I prepare a second edition of this book to elaborate this point. It would have had chapters on kinship in evolution, kinship in nature, the nature of kinship, and so forth. This was tempting, but it would have meant re-writing the whole book, and I was persuaded by

Cambridge University Press

0521278236 - Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective

Robin Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

my colleagues not to do so for the following reason. As it stands, they said, the book is a good 'neutral' introduction to kinship studies. It contains the basic things that one needs to know to tackle the subject at all. Once learned, these can form the basis for more advanced considerations. Thus a teacher is at liberty to go on to the mathematical analysis of kinship terminology, multidimensional scaling analysis of kinship avoidances, kin-selection theory and inclusive fitness, or whatever. If the book were to be changed and rewritten from a particular point of view (such as that of evolutionary biology), it would be robbed of this neutral quality and become less useful. Also, it was urged, most of what I want to say about kinship as an evolutionary product I have said elsewhere, and people can refer to these other sources.

I am persuaded. It was hard for me to accept easily since I never saw this as a textbook—I do not favor textbooks and have always refused to write them. I actually saw the book, when I wrote it, as a contribution. For one thing it tried to synthesize the two major views of kinship—alliance and descent—that held the field at the time. And it did this from a particular biological, ecological, and logical standpoint: It took the mother-child unit as the basic mammalian and hence human unit, and worked out the logic of kinship systems from there—from the minimum assumptions necessary. I would still stand by both these points. Alliance and descent I no longer regard as competing theoretical views, but as empirical components of all kinship systems. Put simply, whatever else kinship systems do, they divide people into categories of kin and then define marriageability in terms of these categories. They define descent, if you like, and legislate alliance. And they do this because that is what kinship systems do—it is what they are *for*, in nature. In studying human kinship systems we are studying one form of assortative mating which has the interesting component of culturally defined categories. The rest of nature lacks this—but it does not lack kinship and non-random mating. Indeed, if modern evolutionary theory is correct, kinship and differential reproductive success, as summarized under

Cambridge University Press

0521278236 - Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective

Robin Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

'inclusive fitness', are at the heart of the evolutionary process. What we study as social anthropologists is an interesting variant of this general process. I only dimly saw, in the 1960s, that the resolution of conflicting ideas on kinship systems would lie in a proper understanding of evolution. But the position I adopted then fits in well with these modern theories. They completely confirm the correctness of the social anthropologist's faith that kinship is the most central of all social processes. I have dealt elsewhere with the peculiarity of the response from many anthropologists that human kinship 'has nothing to do with biology'. I did not accept that in 1967, and I do not do so today. It stems from a narrow notion of 'biology' and boils down to nothing more than the assertion that the cultural categories of kinship and degrees of real genetic relatedness may overlap but are not identical. True but, to my mind, trivial.

In any case, these issues, as we agreed, can be argued after the basics have been learned. Nonetheless, I want to stress that the book had a point of view from the beginning. It was even then making a case. If it is true, as many kind commentators have said, that this is the clearest and most comprehensible account of kinship systems to emerge so far, then that should be attributed as much to the viewpoint as to some contingent skill of exposition.

There are one or two matters of detail that require revision. In most of the chapters, the descriptions of various elements of kinship systems can stand unchanged. There have been later developments, more and better examples, and refined techniques of analysis. But in most cases, the fundamentals have not been altered, and such slight revision as is needed can be supplied by a teacher. This is, after all, an introduction, not a text. I have added a brief bibliography of more recent works which should be consulted. And I never did try to cover everything—this again would have defeated the objective.

In one particular case, however, there is need of revision. My model of the Murngin system in chapter 8, while it works at the analytic level, does not correspond to the total

Cambridge University Press

0521278236 - Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective

Robin Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

social reality as ethnographers have more recently revealed it. In particular, the work of Warren Shapiro has shown quite clearly that it is the exchange of sisters' daughters' daughters between men of the *same* moiety (but of different patrilines) that is involved. This 'results in' but does not 'result from' the exchange of sisters/daughters between moieties. I corrected the model in a publication in 1972, but this has not been in popular circulation among anthropologists. I mean to spell it out even more clearly in a future publication (in preparation, Cambridge University Press). This is the most important correction.

The most unfortunate omission was probably any discussion of patrilineal parallel cousin marriage (marriage with the father's brother's child). Critics have rightly pointed out that this mars the discussion of cousin marriage and exogamy. It has been dealt with at length by Germaine Tillion and Jack Goody (see bibliography), and readers should refer to these discussions. The 'exogamic continuum' should really start with the endogamic cases—strictly with brother-sister marriage, moving to half-sister marriage, to parallel cousin marriage, then to cross cousins. Even with the latter, the Tylorian theory of 'hostage' exogamy will not really do, since intermarrying lineages or moieties produce, in effect, small endogamic systems. It seems more likely that jockeying for individual (or familial) advantage *within* groups is the starting point for the development of these elementary systems, rather than reduction of intergroup hostility or wider social ties. This should be explored in the light of modern kin selection theory.

That I was right to separate incest and exogamy ('ruthlessly', as Lucy Mair said!) has become more and more obvious, and if anything needs revision it is chapter 2, in order to make the distinction even clearer. However, that chapter has been expanded at length in *The Red Lamp of Incest: An Enquiry into the Origins of Mind and Society* (Notre Dame Press, 1983). Here the latest thinking on the Westermarck effect and primate kinship is examined in the context of brain evolution, and a theory of the basic structure of kin-

Cambridge University Press

0521278236 - Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective

Robin Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PREFACE TO C. U. P. EDITION

5

ship systems is advanced. Again, rather than make an expensive revision of chapter 2, it is simpler to refer readers to *The Red Lamp*, which is virtually a companion volume.

I have not been much moved by criticism of my failure to include details of the formal analysis of kinship terminology. For a start, most of it is too technical for a book of this kind. However, had it developed to the point where it made a real breakthrough, I would have felt it necessary to give some account. It has not, it seems to me, reached that point, and there would be less than marginal returns in including it. Interested teachers can always deal with it in more advanced courses if they wish. This is not the place to indulge in detailed criticism. Where it has worked best has been in defining with exactitude the differences between different systems of terminology which had previously been lumped together with confusing results (Buchler and Selby 1968, Scheffler 1978).

On one other point I should make a comment. Feminists have complained about the style and substance of some of the earlier chapters. In one or two places I was perhaps less than even-handed in my remarks about women and I regret any offense these now cause. They occasioned no comment at the time, but times change and sensitivities with them. In fact, at the time, this book was regarded by many women as a liberating document, because it attacked the 'tyranny of the nuclear family' and asserted the primacy of the mother-child bond when campaigns for the rights of unwed mothers and concern over 'captive wives' in the suburbs were becoming popular. It is for the sociologist of knowledge to analyse the odd reversal of this attitude in the late 1970s, when many women were denigrating the mother-infant bond as detrimental to their 'self-fulfilment', or whatever, and hence condemning this unfortunate little effort as reactionary. I think the only thing to do is to sit tight. Fashions in indignation change: The facts stay the same.

But on one point of substance I do not follow the objection. I claim as a basic premise that 'the men exercise control'. I should perhaps have written that 'the men *attempt to* exercise control'—but this is a quibble. I do not see the

Cambridge University Press

0521278236 - Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective

Robin Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

objection, because this is precisely what feminists are objecting to. If men do not exercise control, then what are they complaining about? Also, I was careful to state that this was only with respect to kinship systems, and that while one could see why it was so, in any instances where it was *not*, the argument would not apply. Contraception, high female incomes, productively independent female kin groups, generous welfare systems, child care—all these could affect the premise. I said clearly that *for the systems we would be discussing* it was a necessary premise—it is impossible to understand matrilineal systems without it—but that did not commit us to it for eternity. So I do not feel any need to change it. I have never found any intelligent woman anthropologist who did not fully understand the point, and I am encouraged by the continuing evidence that these are in a majority and that ideology has not totally triumphed over good sense.

On one point I regret not having gone further. The original draft of the manuscript had a proposed final chapter, on what kinship systems are all about. I never wrote it. It was too much perhaps to ask a brash young anthropologist (then not yet 30) to attempt, but I feel no more comfortable with it now. I am further along the way, as the few remarks in this preface suggest and the things I have written elsewhere attest. But the final word on this still eludes us. And so I leave the book as it was: coming to an end rather than a conclusion. This is the only honest thing to do. One can otherwise only alert the reader to the probings and explorations that are going on. There is no final truth. To say that kinship systems are our species' variant of assortative mating systems seems to me to open up new vistas of understanding. But it leaves whole other areas relatively untouched. I hedge here with 'relatively', for in the great untouched area of the 'history of kinship' it may throw some light on the stubborn *persistence* of kinship. (Is it coincidence that in the Weberian world as we know it 'nepotism' is a grave crime, while to kin selection theorists it is a necessary genetic trait?) But that history is not written, and it should be.

Cambridge University Press

0521278236 - Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective

Robin Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PREFACE TO C. U. P. EDITION

7

The war between kinship and authority is alive in legend. In story and fantasy kinship struggles against bureaucratic authority, whether of church or state. It undermines, it challenges, it disturbs. The Mafia constantly fascinates because 'the family' demands total loyalty and provides total security. When the state fails to protect, people look longingly at the certainty of kinship. And always its language is used for emotional effect: Brothers and sisters take note. A generation of social scientists thought the war against kinship had been won. But I am not so sure. Kinship is resilient and subversive; it is cunning and ruthless. It does not obey the universalistic, meritocratic, and bureaucratic rules. But before the Weberian sociologists read its obituary, let them remember how many obituaries of 'anti-rational' processes they have already recited prematurely – religion and nationalism to name but two. I suspect that kinship will be with us for the foreseeable future and may well have a resurgence that will, as usual, have the social scientists coming from behind with explanations. And so it will always be as long as they persist in their delusion that we are simply role-playing morons shaped solely by our cultures. But here I am breaking my own rule and going beyond the self-imposed mandate of the book. So I leave it as I left it originally, with the hope that it will still be 'interesting and useful'.

R. F.

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J.

March 1983.

Cambridge University Press

0521278236 - Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective

Robin Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Preface

ALTHOUGH the subject of kinship and marriage has long dominated anthropological thinking and teaching, there is no introductory book on it. Radcliffe-Brown's excellent 'introduction' to *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (1950) is still the only piece of general work that can be recommended to first-year students and interested laymen, and it is rapidly becoming out of date. There are sections or chapters in some anthropological text-books of course, but these are rather brief. There is a need for a general book that will try to give an outline of some of the methods of analysis used in the anthropological treatment of kinship and marriage; a book that will be useful to the student approaching the subject for the first time, and of interest to the layman who wishes to know more about this central topic of social anthropology.

I did not set out consciously to write such a book. But for a number of years I have been giving a course of lectures on the subject to an audience largely composed of second-year university students in the social sciences. The lectures were, in effect, a substitute for the non-existent general book. They were an attempt to give some kind of overall framework of analysis to the students who could then pursue, with their tutors or on their own initiative, points of detail and more advanced issues. They were deliberately designed to provoke questions rather than to provide answers. It was put to me that it might be a good idea to have the lectures easily available in book form, thus freeing lecture time for a more advanced treatment of special topics. This is how the book came to be written. I have retained the rather chatty style of the lectures because it is not wholly at variance with the aim of the book. The introduction was not part of the lecture series. I dealt with the subject systematically and not historically, but when it came to the book I felt that some

Cambridge University Press

0521278236 - Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective

Robin Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

kind of sketch of the historical background, however inadequate, was needed.

The subject has been developing now for almost exactly a hundred years. McLennan's *Primitive Marriage* was published in 1865, Maine's *Ancient Law* in 1861, and Morgan's *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* in 1871. Over this period a huge body of literature has accumulated which probably accounts for more than half the total literature of anthropology. It is almost impossible in the space of a short book to condense this into something that will be immediately intelligible to a layman. Any of the following chapters could be expanded into a book or even an encyclopedia. What I have tried to do, therefore, is to go back to certain very naïve 'first principles', and to follow out the logic of these in order to hang the material on a connected thread of argument about human behaviour and human nature. To do this, I have had to sacrifice a good deal of the subtlety and detail that delights the professional. Some of my arguments may look more like caricatures than simplifications. But that cannot be helped. This has been a subject in which specialists talked only to each other (and some talked only to God), but there is a growing number of students in the social sciences, both in the universities and outside, and they deserve something better than to be told that this is a difficult subject and only for the experts. It is a difficult subject, but that is no reason for throwing in the sponge.

I have not, even so, tried to write down to the audience. On the contrary, I have rather thrown them in at the deep end. Condensation and simplification have meant that in many ways the argument has become more abstract and tighter, with less of the 'sexual life of savages' and more of the analysis of systems almost as systems of logic. Kinship is to anthropology what logic is to philosophy or the nude is to art; it is the basic discipline of the subject. And like both formal logic and figure drawing it is at the same time simple and difficult. This, I feel, is part of its attraction.

Cambridge University Press

0521278236 - Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective

Robin Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

II

As the subtitle of the book suggests, this is an anthropological perspective. The perspective I have chosen is that of the analysis of kinship *groups*. Thus a great deal of the familiar material on interpersonal kinship relations has been left out completely or only hinted at. I have chosen this approach because I think that it is the best way to put over the peculiar contribution of anthropology to the study of this field of social relations. Also, once the reader has grasped the principles involved in this aspect of kinship analysis he will be well equipped to deal with other aspects. Such an approach may also be more useful to teachers and students of sociology who wish to include the study of kinship groups in the study of social groups generally.

As the subtitle also insists, it is an *anthropological* perspective. I am not concerned therefore with all the fascinating questions that people might raise about kinship and marriage; I have only dealt with those questions that some anthropologists have found, in Radcliffe-Brown's mandarin words, 'useful and interesting'. Even so, anthropological opinion is divided about the *general* aims of the subject. Unlike most of my sociologically inclined British colleagues I am not primarily interested in the question 'what is society?', but in what I take to be the truly anthropological question, 'what is Man?'. Sociological analysis in this perspective becomes a means to an end rather than an end in itself; by analysing variations in social structure we learn something about the species *Homo sapiens*.

Finally I must emphasize what should be already clear: this is not a 'text-book' or a 'manual', but an 'introduction'. My aim is to get people interested and to give them a base from which to work. I have not bothered much with the technical terminology of the subject, nor have I used footnotes, references or other scholarly devices. I have not tried to cover everything.

It is not a definitive statement of known truths, but a series of working papers; attempts to arrive at some limited