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0521290023 - The Character of Kinship
Edited by Jack Goody
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THE CHARACTER OF KINSHIP

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JACK GOODY

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*For
Meyer Fortes
on his
retirement
from the
William Wyse
Chair*

Introduction

I had two aims in editing this volume. The first was to produce a series of essays by those who have worked with Meyer Fortes, on the occasion of his retirement from the William Wyse Chair in Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. The second was to produce a volume of general essays on kinship which would attempt to reconsider some general problems.

Editing a volume of this kind is sometimes like putting one's hand in a barrel of straw dust and pulling out a series of gift-wrapped packages. Some of the contributions may have been lying around in attics for a long time, others may have been hurriedly got together to meet a looming deadline. It was partly to try to avoid such an outcome that I asked contributors to confine themselves to a specific field, namely kinship. But also because in reviewing recently the latest work on kinship I was struck by its rather narrow focus, its neglect of many problems. So within that field I asked for essays dealing with more general themes rather than ethnographic conundrums or descriptive minutiae, in the hope that we would get some reconsideration of certain central problem areas, including those examined by an earlier generation of anthropologists and still raised by scholars outside the discipline itself. For in recent years we have largely abandoned that whole middle-ground that exists between the detailed analysis of single societies and the generalised discussion of concepts, such as filiation and descent, alliance and affinity. Both these other perspectives are necessary, but they do not exhaust the anthropological study of kinship; indeed they exclude what could be its most promising field, the theories of the middle range. Some middle areas such as the study of lineage systems and prescriptive marriage have made progress, even though there has been a marked tendency for the writers in these fields to identify their interest with the study of kinship, even anthropology, itself. It is easier nowadays to see such hallucinations as what they are – the kind of illusion derived from a tendency to blow up work of interesting but limited scope into theories of world-shattering significance. In other words, as delusions of grandeur.

This is not the occasion for an appreciation of the work of Meyer Fortes nor for an account of his career. But the choice of the theme of kinship is clearly related to his own achievements in this field and this in turn to his academic career. Meyer Fortes was born in South Africa of parents who had emigrated from the Crimea. Brought up in a small town in the Cape district, he went to the University of Capetown in March 1923, where he overlapped with Isaac Schapera. On finishing his degree in English and Psychology, in October 1927, he was awarded scholarships to come to do post-graduate work at the University of London, where he began to

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work on inter-racial intelligence tests with Morris Ginsberg and then with Charles Edward Spearman. Ginsberg also put him in touch with Dr Emanuel Miller who was then working at the East London Child Guidance Clinic, established under the auspices of the Jewish Health Organization. Miller had read natural science and philosophy at St John's College, Cambridge, where he had been influenced towards psychiatry by the Director of Studies in Moral Sciences, W. H. R. Rivers; he therefore had some acquaintance with the wider fields of psychology, psychoanalysis and anthropology. Fortes' job was that of educational psychologist and he was involved in the attempt to devise a non-verbal test of intelligence for inter-racial use, material that was later developed into Raven's Progressive Matrices Test. It was Emanuel Miller who helped him expand his interests in a way that led him into the field of anthropology. But apart from widening his vision in this general way, Fortes also became interested in some of Miller's more specific concerns, namely the relationship between family structure, sociology and psychology, which was most clearly reflected in his book, *The Generations: A Study of the Cycle of Parents and Children* (1938). It was this work that led Fortes to analyse his own fieldwork material from the Tallensi of Northern Ghana in terms of a developmental cycle, and to study, with such perception, relationships such as those between following siblings, a man and his first born, and other interpersonal situations centering upon the domestic group. It is an aspect of his work that links him to Malinowski as well as to psychology, and one that has received remarkably little comment or follow-up. It is a theme to which he has recently returned in his lecture on 'The Firstborn', the first of the Emanuel Miller memorial lectures given in London in 1972. As the present volume shows, discussion has tended to dwell on the more formal, more inclusive sides of his work on kinship, the organisation of (unilineal) descent groups.

I have mentioned the earlier career of Meyer Fortes because it has always appeared to me that some of the most significant contributions he has made to the study of societies has been at the level of interpersonal kinship. In this he was clearly stimulated by the best of Malinowski, but he also incorporated much from his psychological training. One of the most significant references in the *Web of Kinship among the Tallensi* (1949a) is to Flugel's *Psychoanalytic Study of the Family* (1921). Not that Fortes has been concerned with testing psychological or psychoanalytic theory in a direct way. Rather his examination of the bonds and conflicts, the ties and cleavages, of inter-personal kinship among the Tallensi have set a standard in the analysis of these relationships which no anthropologist has emulated, even twenty-five or more years since the book was written. Again his work in the field of socialisation (especially his essay, 'Social and psychological aspects of education in Taleland', 1938) has had much influence and the position advanced there was commended by Miller and Dollard¹ as 'a very

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sensible account of imitative behaviour'. This work derives its strength not simply from an acute analysis of interpersonal relations, but also from an understanding of the way these relationships were influenced by the wider structures of political, kin and religious institutions. The connection between the lineage and domestic networks is a central theme in Fortes' work, and forms the basis of one of his best known articles entitled, 'Time and Social Structure', published as his contribution to a volume of essays offered to Radcliffe-Brown (1949*b*). This essay develops the idea of the developmental cycle in domestic groups, and the ways in which differences in structure are related to the process of family change over time. This simple but fruitful idea has been particularly useful in analysing the results of small-scale surveys of settlements, and, more recently, has been used by historians for reconstructing the social organisation of European villages from local records.²

The interest in the relationship between the domestic domain and wider politico-jural structures also dominates much of his work in religion, especially on ancestor worship. Here too the interests of psychologists have manifested themselves in his analysis of filial piety as well as of conflicts between the generations. Another aspect of his work on religion to be influenced by his interest in kinship is his analysis of Tallensi concepts of destiny in *Oedipus and Job* (1959*b*), a study of the social and cultural context of beliefs in the different spiritual elements constituting a human being.

It is as well to recall that despite the emphasis he laid on the study of groups (especially unilineal descent groups) much of the vigour of his analysis comes from his observations of the way that the individual (understood here both as a human being and in the Durkheimian sense as physical organism) interacted with such groups (and with the social factor, in the wider Durkheimian sense) in a cultural context, a context that he was able to define in so subtle a manner because of his excellent command of the Tallensi language and his understanding of their concepts. Speaking now as one who has worked among neighbouring peoples, his examination of Tallensi thought (or what is more vulgarly, more superficially and more fashionably referred to as 'the penetration of their code') is more successful than attempts at a facile reduction to a simple formula, such as a table of binary oppositions, or the more elaborate constructions of those others who have failed so signally to distinguish between their own thought and those of their subjects.

In conclusion, I apologise to those potential contributors whom I did not invite. The list of those who have worked with Meyer Fortes includes anthropologists from all continents, and to ask all would have made a volume no-one could afford to buy. I also apologise to those for whom the deadline was too rigid or the field too confined. Max Gluckman and J. Clyde Mitchell had arranged to contribute an essay 'Social factors

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influencing rate of divorce in subsistence society'; as Gluckman had been working extensively on this topic recently, he agreed to produce a first draft. Unfortunately, he had to undergo an operation for a slipped disc, and was unable to complete the work. It was then too late for Mitchell to make an independent contribution. I thank the contributors who have endured editorial comment, or administrative inefficiency. Finally, I thank Meyer Fortes for the intellectual stimulation his work has given to so many.

JACK GOODY
St John's College, Cambridge, January 1973

Notes

- 1 *Social Learning and Imitation*, London, 1945, p. 263.
- 2 See especially L. K. Berkner, 'The stem family and the developmental cycle of the peasant household: an eighteenth century Austrian example', *American Historical Review* 77 (1972): 398–418, and D. Sabeau, 'Famille et tenure paysannes, aux origines de la guerre des paysans en Allemagne', *Annales E.S.C.* 27 (1972): 903–22.