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The nature of the enterprise

This study has arisen out of two interests. First, in the past, accounts of the major oriental and Mediterranean societies have often presented a picture of the position of women, and of domestic life more generally, which seemed to disregard the fact that at marriage they were endowed rather than purchased. Secondly, this approach has led to an opposition between East and West which encouraged ethnocentric notions, sociological and popular, about differences in family and marriage which various authors have tried to relate to the process of modernisation. Some have seen Marx's Asiatic mode of production as characterised by an Asiatic mode of reproduction. In the eyes of others, the more appropriate comparison was with Africa or even Australia. My account tries to reconsider these views by looking at the domestic relations of those societies in terms of certain substantive hypotheses and general theories, as a result of which I try to place them in a context that is in many respects less exotic than these approaches suggest.

The role of the family in the development of 'capitalism', 'industrialisation', 'modernisation', is a common theme of the social sciences and forms the backcloth to the global sociological theses such as those of Max Weber, of many Western historians committed, consciously or unconsciously, to a strong view of the uniqueness of the West, of anthropologists contrasting family and kinship, complex and simple exchange, of demographers interested in and concerned about the demographic transition, the value of children and domestic strategies. It is the general argument of this book that for pre-industrial times, the differences in the Asian and the European structures and organisation of marriage and the family fell within a specific range of variation that is generally consistent with their roughly similar forms of productive activity based on Bronze Age developments.

That is the general framework. But the analysis depends upon looking again at a number of more particular issues in the study of the domestic domain of Asian societies, which is aimed at making them more 'understandable' in European terms, and Europe more comprehensible in Asian

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ones; in other words it is aimed at modifying notions of uniqueness in respect of modes of reproduction, just as elsewhere I have tried to do with modes of production and modes of communication. While I have no intention of neglecting the important differences in forms of family, in means of livelihood, in types of script, and so on, it is difficult to see these as crippling to further development, at least to the development of a high degree of mercantile and proto-industrial activity. My concerns will be principally with discussions of the family, marriage and the farm (or other enterprise) at lower levels of generality, but in the end they bear upon this central question.

That is the general perspective. But I begin this chapter by presenting the more specific hypotheses which I have developed in earlier works, then turn to some of the more general considerations involved to see how these relate to the study of marriage and marital transfers; for we need to clear up the problems in some earlier models before we develop others.

The substantive hypothesis concerns the analysis of the distribution of what I have earlier called the woman's property complex which is linked to the practice of diverging devolution whereby parental property is transmitted to women as well as to men. In a previous volume, *Production and Reproduction* (1976), I drew some general contrasts between the systems of marriage and the family in Africa and Asia, differences that I saw as related to their systems of production. This contrast represented dominant trends which might of course be overridden under particular circumstances: I was attempting to deal with these relations statistically, but in a largely verbal rather than numerical way. Briefly the argument ran like this. The advanced agriculture that arose in the Bronze Age, and which replaced shifting cultivation by plough or irrigation farming, permitted the growth of more complex societies, the 'civilisations' of the European prehistorian (as well as in Chinese usage) that meant new crafts, new occupations and new hierarchies. The individuals and groups in those hierarchies tried to preserve or improve the status of their daughters as well as of their sons. For in the reproduction of the system of stratification, downward as well as upward movement was always possible within if not between groups. This fact had important implications for marriage, namely, the tendency for like to marry like in isogamous unions, for the distribution of property to women in diverging devolution, namely, by the direct or indirect endowment at marriage or by inheritance at death, as well as for the adoption of other mechanisms by which property and status were passed on. One example of these mechanisms is the presence of the type of union where an inheriting daughter could attract a husband for his labour on the farm or for his capacity to produce an heir. But there were also a number of other practices, notions and sentiments, all of which existed in relation to a marked socio-

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economic hierarchy and were therefore likely to vary according to one's position within it.

In looking earlier at the distribution of these features, one obvious area in which the tendency to endogamy (or, better, in-marriage since we are rarely talking of an obligation but rather a tendency) had been modified was in Europe after the Roman period. From that time marriage between close kin was prohibited, although not of course 'class' endogamy in a more general sense, as Marc Bloch insisted when he spoke of circles of marriage. So, too, was adoption, concubinage and the levirate which many other Eurasian societies had used as 'strategies of heirship' – or perhaps better, 'strategies of continuity' since maintenance in life as well as at death was involved. In a subsequent volume entitled *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (1983) I tried to offer some explanation of certain 'pecularities' of the Western situation in relation to the 'ideology' and practice of the Christian Church. Those I interpreted as partly shaped in accordance with the demands of an ecclesiastical organisation which commanded a dominant position following the break-up of the Roman Empire, shaped perhaps 'casually', perhaps by 'elective affinity', perhaps intentionally, more likely by implicit selection.

In this third part of the enterprise, I return to the concomitants of diverging devolution, and specifically to the relationship between a woman's role as daughter, whose status is a matter of continuing concern to her natal family, and her role as a wife who in many cases marries away even if not out, that is, within the same group or grouping. In my view the implications of this dual position have been neglected by many recent anthropological theorists of the 'other cultures', at least in Asia, partly because their models are often derived from a 'simpler' set of societies (simpler not only from an economic standpoint), and partly because of the tendency to dichotomise the human universe into 'primitive' and 'advanced', placing Asia firmly in the former category and Europe in the latter. This is part of a wider failure properly to evaluate the place of the East in human history. In this volume I want to try and point out how I think the position of women in the natal family, the conjugal family and the wider kin group, especially the lineage, has often been misrepresented or partially represented in these societies (especially in terms of brideprice, incorporation and similar notions) and in what direction these ideas should be modified. I am particularly concerned to point out some general trends, some common institutions, found in these Asian societies which relate to their own socio-economic situation and which at the same time provide a link with pre-industrial (and indeed proto-industrial or non-industrial) Europe and the Mediterranean. Not common in the sense that everybody possesses all of them all the time. But all are in a significant sense 'available' for inclusion in the cultural repertoire, although

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those adopted at any particular time, place and strata will depend upon a variety of political, religious, ecological and other factors.

So I am trying to carry out two related tasks. Firstly, I am looking at the position of women in relation to their natal and conjugal families, especially with regard to the continuation of their ties with the former and their possible incorporation in the latter. Secondly, I am trying to point to various related aspects of marriage and domestic organisation in different cultures which represent variations drawn from a wider set of possibilities distributed throughout the major societies of Asia and the Mediterranean, and which have to be seen against the background of some broad differences with African societies.

I want to develop the argument by examining accounts of societies or communities from a particular point of view, starting with the negative rather than the positive side, that is, by calling attention to the problem with accounts of the way in which wives are said to be incorporated in their husbands' families or lineages. One of the main facts that impressed me, and which led me to query the adequacy of these notions, was that in those very examples chosen by comparative sociologists as the extreme cases of the incorporation of women, namely, China and Rome, daughters in the upper strata were often endowed with property, whether at marriage, directly or indirectly, or later on as an inheritance. To take a dowry as one's entire 'portion' or 'lot', as we say in English, may appear to be cutting oneself off from one's natal family and to be attaching oneself to that of one's husband with whom one establishes, sooner or later, some kind of a conjugal estate. As with those, usually younger, sons in parts of Europe or Japan who took their endowment and had no longer any legal claim on their family wealth, this was often the case in dowry systems. But of course relationships with natal kin continued to be important in many other spheres of social life. Even if they left for long periods the prodigal son or daughter was welcomed back; and more usually they lived in the vicinity if not the neighbourhood and continued to interact with their kin.

A related institution that seemed to me critical was that of the marrying-in son-in-law.[1] This practice was virtually unknown in Black Africa, except in a more generalised form in some matrilineal societies and again as bride-service, a preliminary to bride-removal, in some others. But it is a recurrent feature of the major agricultural societies of Europe and Asia where it is usually associated with a daughter acting as heiress in the absence of sons. Filiacentric unions (often called uxorilocal, although I prefer to reserve this latter term for the situation where this represents the major form of post-marital residence) are often practised more widely for other reasons in dominantly virilocal societies, as has been shown for southern China and for Finland (Wolf 1985a; Abrahams 1986) where they are also used to augment

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labour on the farm even when younger brothers are around. But wherever it appears, the institution of the in-coming son-in-law marrying a brotherless daughter is highly significant, first, because this union represents one of several alternative strategies of heirship, which, like strategies of management, and especially the management of labour disposal and dispersal, are also mechanisms of continuity; secondly because it results from a preference for passing property and other rights between members of the elementary family, daughters if there are no sons, rather than seeking heirs among more distant males in the collateral line. Looking at the same question at the level of succession to office rather than inheritance of property, England owes the earlier and present Queen Elizabeth (and the latter's marrying-in husband) to this practice. The Dutch royal family have provided an even more striking example in recent years. Inevitably the presence of this practice must modify the notion of an agnatic lineage or dynasty holding continuing rights to office or property, such as we find in Africa, since under a set of recurring circumstances these rights are transmitted through the women of the elementary family rather than to cousins or more distant males, not to heiresses alone but in a smaller measure to all other women in the form of dowry or inheritance. In other words, the system places more emphasis on maintaining the position, the status, the style of life, of one's own daughters, than of members of the lineage in a wider sense. By 'style of life' I mean not only those features pertaining to a particular class or strata, but also those reflecting the standard of living of a particular family.

It is these lower level concerns that tend to bring the kinship systems of Europe and Asia together, even though some have 'lineages' and some do not. That is to say, in all the major Asian societies we find 'domestic groups' of limited but varying size to which are linked an estate, that is, a conjugal fund, a family farm or larger 'joint undivided family' of the Indian type; sometimes as in the Chinese case these groups operate within a charitable corporation of the lineage type, sometimes as in North India within a wider unilineal descent group, and elsewhere within a bilateral range of kin. The particular kin-group context is important in various ways. But in each case the position at the domestic level contrasts with that associated with the so-called 'corporate' kin groups of Africa, where the estate, usually of the more open kind appropriate to shifting cultivation, is not subject to the same kind of internal economic stratification nor yet to the pressures for maintaining the status of daughters at the expense of lineage interests. Such differences were concealed by earlier, undifferentiated notions of lineage, clan or descent group, which were intrinsic to much nineteenth-century (and later) theorising about kinship and marriage, and which saw them as self-contained boxes, as exclusive compartments of social organisation, the presence

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of which defined social systems as being patrilineal or matrilineal. These notions needed considerable modification in the Eurasian context, since they failed to take account of the allocation of rights to daughters (and hence to wives and mothers) as well as to sons (and hence to husbands and fathers), rights whose exercise could lead not only to internal fission but to a measure of exclusion (or to the appearance of exclusion) from the 'lineage' itself. The potential claims of women and their physical movement at marriage pose problems both for the families they leave behind and for those they join when they enter into a virilocal marriage. Their rights are often limited, but the very fact that women inherit as 'heiresses' clearly provides some kind of handle, model or incentive for claiming a 'share' even when they have brothers; this we see clearly in Hebrew and other texts. The continuity of the family estate depended primarily on males, indeed sometimes on one selected son, a situation that could lead to a conflict in the attempts to meet the claims of those who are left and of those who leave. While the continuity of the lineage or 'extended family' might be patrilineal or agnatic in this loose sense, its particular status depended upon its departing daughters as well as its resident sons.

In drawing attention to similarities I do not wish to set aside or underestimate cultural or subcultural differences in kinship patterns of the kind that, among others, A. Wolf has recently discussed for China (1985a) or Karve (1953) for India. Some of these differences may be linked to specific social and ecological factors while others seem to be virtually 'free variations' within the repertoire of the overall system (though we need to be careful lest such a suggestion lead to a loose analysis and to unfortunate reifications). Nor do I wish to ignore the fact that kinship and marriage have changed significantly over time in relation to political, religious or economic factors, as for example when individuals and families in China placed property in charitable trusts to maintain ancestral halls, temples and schools, possibly in order to counteract the potentially democratising influence of the newly introduced examination system, thus creating 'lineages' (that is, corporation lineages) in a special sense (Beattie 1979:118, 128; Baker 1979:136ff.). Any systematic consideration of such changes over space and time, even a review of the very broad kind I gave in my account of pre-industrial Europe (1983), is well beyond the scope of this essay and the capacity of this author.

In the first two sections I shall mostly be content to concentrate, though not exclusively, on ethnographic and other accounts from the first part of this century, which rarely provide the range of temporal, hierarchical or geographic variation that one needs. Nevertheless, aside from trying to lay out the features associated with diverging devolution and the particular practices adopted by specific societies or subgroups, I have attempted to

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indicate the ways in which these institutions tend to differ as between higher and lower groups, terms which I use in a highly general way to indicate relative status based on various, locally defined criterion, but always with some implications of access to property. This raises further analytical questions, for while I am concerned with internal differences, mainly hierarchical ones, I am also interested in the general similarities in kinship between societies, for example, in the tendency for widow remarriage to be prohibited among higher groups and permitted among lower ones. Such facts pose important problems for explanation. Once they have been established, one can no longer be entirely satisfied with a purely 'cultural' account, that is, with one framed in terms of the parameters of any particular culture. Nor yet can one be content with an analysis wholely phrased in terms of the structure or functioning of particular societies since the feature displays a wider distribution than its connection with Hinduism or Confucianism might suggest. We have to look at factors operating at a more inclusive level than the study of particular societies, especially ethnographic accounts of village life, might suggest.

In doing this I am following up certain aspects of the analysis upon which Tambiah and I were engaged in an earlier publication. While the substantive subject matter was 'bridewealth and dowry', the underlying problems were wider in scope. Tambiah remarked upon some general similarities (as well as differences) between India and China, calling attention to the necessity of reviewing explanations made in terms of 'Indian cultural values' in view of these 'structural similarities' (1973:71). The specific phraseology is irrelevant; I was interested in similar problems which are not so much cross-cultural as transcultural. Neither of us would wish to deny the validity of exploring a variety of explanations and levels of explanation, those given by the actors, those presented in terms of the actor's concepts, those related to a particular cultural or social formation. All these various types have been accorded much attention by anthropologists, especially by those who have undertaken intensive fieldwork. Neither of us would underestimate the value, indeed the necessity, of exploring all these understandings, especially as a preliminary to more inclusive, comparative explanations. But at the same time we recognise that certain problems, topics and situations are illuminated by the realisation that rather similar forms of belief and practice have a wider distribution which needs accounting for in terms perhaps of modes of communication or production, and which at the same time alters the observer's appreciation of any particular cultural context, irrespective of whether or not it alters that of the actors.

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Theorising

Let me now turn to some of the broader implications for approaches to comparative sociology, for what one might call the theorising rather than the theory. This book represents an attempt to understand aspects of marriage and the family in the major societies of Asia, the Near East (West Asia) and the adjacent Eastern Mediterranean, taking into account the modes of livelihood and the levels of stratification; political, religious and ideological factors also play their part but these I do not consider in any great detail. In any case the enquiry tries to get away from the influential tendency to see 'kinship systems' as things in themselves. For I have recently argued (1985) that while this approach, which has been advocated by such important scholars as Fortes, Lévi-Strauss and Dumont, has led to many gains, the restricted paradigm has also brought about some distinct losses, in particular the failure to provide a link with the studies of scholars in other related fields, especially those in history, demography and sociology. As in much of social theory, such approaches need to be treated as complementary rather than as either contradictory or belonging to separate spheres.

The comparative study of what Morgan called systems of consanguinity and affinity, what we would now call family, kinship and marriage, has undergone many changes of emphasis and direction over the years. In recent times there has been the stress on marriage as a system of exchange (the exchange of women, above all), and there has also been the long-term enquiry into systems of descent and filiation. These particular interests have been broadly associated with two so-called theories of kinship, that of the alliance 'school' associated with the name of Lévi-Strauss and that of the descent school associated with the name of Radcliffe-Brown. In fact the genealogies of these approaches extend back much further, well into the nineteenth century, where we find forms of marriage, and especially since Frazer, of cross-cousin marriage, looked upon as systems of exchange, as well as numerous discussions on the place of clans and lineages (that is, descent groups) in the organisation and development of human societies.

The emergence of various versions of functional and structural anthropology, associated with the development of field studies, was accompanied by a shift away from, even a setting aside of, the chronological or diachronic perspective. Nevertheless it was impossible to eliminate that dimension altogether from the agenda. For example, the terms elementary and complex employed by Lévi-Strauss do not have a purely morphological reference, just as the comparison between direct and generalised exchange has a distinct temporal direction about it. Equally with descent and filiation, where the move from unilineal to bilateral systems is generally assumed to

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have had an 'evolutionary' character (e.g. Goode 1963), even if the bilateral reckoning of kin was a characteristic of the Eskimo as well as of Europeans. One thesis implicit in this study is that notions of alliance or descent, as conceived in these discussions, often provide less than adequate categories, models or tools for considering the wider issues, partly because their treatment has been overly formal and underly relational. Too formal, and yet also perhaps insufficiently so. That is to say, the notions have been too gross and require further discriminations to be made, especially when we look at the institutions they purport to describe in relation to other facets of the type of society in which they are found, let alone to those of a particular social formation itself. Cross-cousin marriage or patrilineal descent groups can take very different forms in terms both of meaning (or signification) and of function (or process), depending not only on the particular culture but also on more general factors such as the broad type of livelihood of the people concerned. Some writers, not only ones under Marxist influence, have tried to establish relations between the economy and the lineality of descent groups (including their absence in 'bilateral' systems). We need to look beyond 'lineality' to the structure, organisation and role of kin groups if we are to understand the differences as well as the similarities at this level between, say, China and Africa. Furthermore, for this and for the wider purposes of understanding the overall development of kinship in human societies, we have to examine carefully those aspects of the mode of reproduction that are most closely associated with the type of livelihood, with the mode of production, as well as those religious and political factors which can be of dominating significance in these spheres.

The difficulty arises partly from the idea that kinship and marriage are 'dominant' in pre-industrial societies, a proposition which must be examined with some care even in the simplest. For the concept of kinship as a sub-system of the total social system is of analytic rather than substantive significance when we are dealing with what has sometimes been called the domestic mode of production but is better seen as household production that takes place within various modes or systems of production in the more usual sense. That is to say, it is difficult to point to a specific kinship domain that is not also an economic, political and religious one. There is no institutional distinction as there is, to some degree at least, with the Church in Europe. Where production takes place largely within the household, a wide range of activities are closely interlocked, not simply at the level of some abstract kinship model. For example, marriage, which involves the re-ordering of sexual and other rights over women and men, is the means by which conjugal families are established and households reshaped. Not only is this significant for reproduction but it is of great importance for production too. Hence decisions about marriage will be influenced by the nature of the productive

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process, by the position of the partners with regard to these activities as well as by the existing constitution of domestic groups.

Consequently the situation is already more complex than some theorising suggests. One serious constraint upon any analysis is that social scientists have worked too long with a dichotomous frame in which 'primitive' or simple kinship systems are seen as utterly distinct from more 'advanced' or complex ones. Elementary structures, pre-industrial systems, corporate kin groups, kinship as infrastructure, too much of this discussion presumes a dichotomy between we and they which is not only theoretically wrong and empirically misleading, but spells the death of social anthropology in a very practical sense. As a field of study, we are digging our own graves if we continue to frame our enquiry in terms of carrying out participant observation on the disappearing world of the primitive. But even in a comparative historical enquiry, similar questions are raised. The framework is especially problematic when we find that China and India are only too often included in the elementary category and medieval Europe in the complex. The ethnocentric bias is only too obvious, but why is it also theoretically wrong? Such a categorisation depends on looking at institutions of kinship out of their total social context. But we cannot radically separate marriage and the family from production, as Lévi-Strauss tends to do, nor from property, as Fortes tended to do. Even from the standpoint of exchange alone, it seems questionable to compare cross-cousin marriage in China or India, except at a very formal level, with the Australian systems practised by hunters and gatherers. For one reason the items of exchange had such very different meanings in the different productive systems, not only from the actor's point of view (that goes perhaps without saying) but also from the observer's. To operate at a level of abstraction that treats cross-cousin marriage or the lineage as 'things in themselves' is to adopt an approach in anthropology equivalent to a linguistics that confined itself to phonetics.

It is not only a matter of the separation of modes of marriage from modes of production, but more generally of the nature of anthropological formalism and abstraction; what was chosen as the centre of analytical concern. It seems curious today to think that Murdock and others referred to Europe as having an Eskimo system (even an Eskimo social organisation). They referred of course to a certain type of terminology for close kin, and there was much to be said for the effort earlier anthropologists put into laying out the distribution of certain widespread features of kinship systems, including what Malinowski flippantly dismissed as kinship algebra, and then classifying them in various ways, by types of marriage, types of kin group, types of terminology. These were important activities in which there is still a long way to go.

At this moment in time it was also important to criticise the premature

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