

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-39649-3 - Kinship and Class in the West Indies: A Genealogical Study of Jamaica and Guyana

Raymond T. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

Introduction: assumptions, procedures, methods

If there is one point I have consistently tried to make throughout this book, it is that psychology, anthropology, and the social sciences in general, have repeatedly falsified their ‘observations’ by unrecognized epistemological and ideological closures imposed upon the system under study.

Anthony Wilden 1972

West Indian family life has always interested social scientists, but few have understood it. Like other aspects of Caribbean ethnography, it is difficult to grasp in terms of accepted social theory, and because of this the study of West Indian kinship assumes a wider significance. Even in the eighteenth century West Indians discussed the peculiarities of their kinship arrangements. One Jamaican-born writer published, in 1793, in German, an essay on ‘The Nair system of gallantry and inheritance,’ subsequently expanded into a romantic novel preoccupied with love and marriage (or the absence of it), entitled *Das Paradies der Liebe*. The author, James Henry Lawrence, used the Nayar of Malabar as the model on which to construct a utopian system of perfect equality of the sexes, in which children would be affiliated only to their mothers (Lawrence 1976 [1811]). Eighteenth-century West Indians were prolific writers, and they rightly felt themselves to be an integral part of the modern world in which egalitarian ideas were increasingly common, but one wonders how much of Lawrence’s inspiration came from his Jamaican background. The Caribbean has its own history, with social and cultural systems that must be studied in their own right. For all their appeal to advocates of free love, and other social reforms, the kinship systems of the Nayar and the West Indian slave societies were rooted in the soil of hierarchy – not egalitarianism.¹

This book looks at the effect of hierarchy in West Indian societies before and after the abolition of slavery, attempting to show the interaction of various ideologies with a persistent system of social practice, and the particular manifestations of that interaction in the domains of family and kinship. The broad outlines of West Indian kinship are well known, and

¹ See Dumont 1980 for a discussion of hierarchy.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-39649-3 - Kinship and Class in the West Indies: A Genealogical Study of Jamaica and Guyana

Raymond T. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Kinship and class in the West Indies*

have been for several hundred years, but the social science literature on this topic has developed a peculiar myopia that is, it will be argued, a by-product of theory. Hence the statement by Wilden at the head of this chapter.

Contrary to commonsense ways of thinking there is no reason for the Caribbean as a whole, or any of its constituent territories, to possess the bounded system of social relations and integrated culture that social scientists have generally assumed to be 'the unit of study,' or, even more erroneously, the unit of empirical existence. On the contrary, this has always been a region of open frontiers, shifting populations, vast cultural heterogeneity, complex economic relations and unstable political authority. Caribbean history has been turbulent, bringing together peoples from every part of the globe in a swirling vortex of greed, lust, and striving reminiscent of the destructive hurricanes that sweep through the region every year. It is remarkable that Caribbean peoples have constructed for themselves a social and cultural existence that defies the contingent aspects of history, defining, delimiting and giving meaning to experience, even determining what that experience shall be. The social and cultural systems so created are far less closed than some social scientists would have us believe. Stable enough so that cultural assumptions outlive novel experiences, they are neither completely consistent nor well-integrated, 'logico-meaningful' wholes.

To study the West Indian family one has to understand the relation between what people say is correct behaviour and what they actually do. This requires reexamination of accepted ideas about the boundaries between classes, races, cultures and societies. It is comparable in many ways to the study of creole languages. A great deal has been known about the form and content of such languages but new theoretical perspectives, relating language to the context of its use, have led to new insights and understandings – but not to agreement (Hymes 1971; Labov 1972; Silverstein 1972; Bickerton 1975; Sankoff 1980). So, in the study of Caribbean kinship the issues are theoretical and not factual. There is general agreement that illegitimacy rates are high, marriage unstable and that women play an unusually prominent role in the domestic and kinship domains. There is much disagreement as to why this should be so. The most general aim of this work is to recognize the coexistent opposition between open and changing social processes and the relative stability of the cultural conceptions through which those processes are mediated and, to a considerable extent, constituted. Some kind of picture, or model, of the culture of kinship has to be made for purposes of analysis, but the primary aim is to remain sensitive to the complexities of the historical process itself.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-39649-3 - Kinship and Class in the West Indies: A Genealogical Study of Jamaica and Guyana

Raymond T. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction***1. Cultural diversity, anthropological method, and historical process**

What does it mean to say that a study of the West Indies is significant beyond the concerns of Caribbean studies? Throughout the Americas, and for 500 years, Europeans and ‘natives’ have been jointly engaged in productive enterprises ranging from fur trapping to timber extraction, mining and plantation agriculture. The first kinship links were forged between Europeans and Indians or Africans in the context of these joint activities. The links were not legally recognized, and the subject peoples were treated as being less than human, but the first attempts to incorporate non-Europeans into European offshoot societies were made here. This was the formative stage of a worldwide phenomenon; the creation of multiracial, multicultural societies – sometimes called ‘plural societies’ (see pages 5-7 below for a fuller discussion of plural society theory). The habits of mind, understandings, and systems of classification resulting from these first efforts at social incorporation continue to influence social action; their formation is seen most clearly in the colonies of the Caribbean and South America. Anthropology, with its preference for the primitive isolate, for the ‘pre-contact situation,’ has not been a useful guide to this kind of study (notable exceptions include Tambiah 1973, El Zein 1974 and some recent works reviewed in R.T. Smith 1984c). Anthropology has tended to obscure and mystify understanding. In the process of European expansion sharp contrasts were drawn between cultures. Europeans created images of ‘exotic’ or ‘primitive’ cultures, always in contrast to their own; anthropology became the emergent science through which such images were given a spurious precision. Real cultural diversity exists, of course, and there is some heuristic value in comparing that diversity through mental experiments exaggerating differences. But these experiments place culture outside history, and are often confused with reality. Lévi-Strauss has defended the procedure with characteristic eloquence in explaining why he concentrates on ‘primitive’ societies. At the same time he recognizes that:

The circumstances of its [anthropology’s] appearance are comprehensible only in the context of a particular social and economic development: one suspects then that they are accompanied by a seizure of conscience – almost of remorse – that humanity could have remained alienated from itself for such a long time, and above all, that that fraction of humanity which produced anthropology should be the same fraction of humanity which has made so many other men the objects of execration and contempt. (Lévi-Strauss 1966, p. 122)

This attempt to rescue anthropology as the conscience of an exploitative Europe is less than convincing. The distinctive product of European expansion was not the juxtaposition of ‘civilized’ and ‘primitive,’ of ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ societies, nor even the creation of plural societies; it was the formation of colonial societies with properties all their own.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-39649-3 - Kinship and Class in the West Indies: A Genealogical Study of Jamaica and Guyana

Raymond T. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Kinship and class in the West Indies

After two centuries or more of treating Africans as property, totally lacking in civil rights and assumed to be more like beasts than men, the British in the West Indies deliberately changed course in the 1830s. They decided to civilize the ex-slaves and make them part of a new society based on the principles of philosophical radicalism and dissenting Christianity. This recognized a process already begun, but was nonetheless self-conscious and organized. Even though it adapted to the realities of power and the interests of British capital, it stands as the most sustained deliberate effort at social change and cultural transformation in recent history. It is a paradigm of western efforts to do good in the world in the name of progress. Of course, it was a failure. It failed because it equated civilization with European racial superiority, with European economic interests and with European culture, thus contradicting its own universalistic intentions. It encapsulated the anthropological view of profound differences among cultures and overlooked the realities of its own environment. Instead of producing a smooth transition from tradition to modernity, a transition that takes place only in the imagination of modernization theorists, it produced colonial society with all its complex and quite distinctive systems of economic organization, status differentiation, racism, religious complexity and ceremonial symbolism. Many aspects of colonial society exist in the modern world long after the formal ending of colonial rule.

2. Kinship as a special field of investigation

The study of kinship and family life by anthropologists has been particularly sensitive to the observer's intellectual assumptions. Some of those assumptions were the unexamined premises of European culture; others were generated in colonial societies themselves.

Since the eighteenth century (at least), the family of man, woman and their children has been pictured as a universal form of human grouping, appearing with the emergence of man himself and constituting the simplest mode of association out of which more complex structures were built. Sociologists and anthropologists have clothed these old ideas in all kinds of glamorous theoretical dress, but most kinship theories are based on unexamined assumptions that distort observation (see pp. 8-10 below). In the Caribbean, where the evidence showed the functional viability of a wide range of family forms, elaborate theories have been developed to explain why the nuclear family should exist and what forces have inhibited its proper development. Most of these theories assume that the lower classes have 'deviant' families and then attempt to explain why. Explanations vary: some describe transformed versions of West African polygyny; some relate different forms of family to varying modes of socio-economic

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-39649-3 - Kinship and Class in the West Indies: A Genealogical Study of Jamaica and Guyana

Raymond T. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

adaptation; one author invented something called the 'lower class value stretch' (Rodman 1963. See R.T. Smith 1978a, 1984b for a fuller discussion). All these theories assume that the West Indian lower class has a family system different from that of the middle class. Only Braithwaite has questioned this orthodoxy (Braithwaite 1953).

3. Plural society theory

These anthropological assumptions are the product, partially at least, of the ideology of colonial society itself, being close to the historically generated myths of the dominant groups. Among those myths the concept of 'plural society' has played a prominent role.

Plural society *theory* (as opposed to the concept of pluralism used by political scientists, or the more diffuse idea of pluralism as cultural diversity) was developed early in the twentieth century by an English colonial administrator, J.S. Furnivall, in an attempt to understand the complexity of the South-East Asian societies in which he worked (Furnivall 1948). A more rigid form of Furnivall's ideas was introduced into Caribbean studies by M.G. Smith (1953, 1956); since then the concept of plural society has been incorporated into various ideologies and stimulated an amount of controversy disproportionate to its intellectual significance, though it has not been widely used in actual social analysis.

Furnivall was struck by the extent to which European capitalism brought together disparate groups of people in places like Burma and Java, setting them to work in economies driven by the profit motive and in the process corroding their customs, religions and values. What concerned him most was the fact that these multiracial, multilingual colonies left intact the social boundaries of their constituent groups, drained away the content of intra-group morality and did nothing to create a wider sense of nationhood. M. G. Smith borrowed much of Furnivall's phraseology about the boundedness of the constituent groups within colonial society, while ignoring his observations about the erosion of culture and the need to create a national 'religion' to replace the several 'cultures' that had been lost. On the contrary, Smith asserted that in societies such as those in the West Indies each 'social segment' preserves (or develops) its own institutions and distinctive culture, so that the totality is held together, and *can* be held together, only by the power of the dominant unit (see Braithwaite 1960 and R. T. Smith 1966 for critical discussions of these ideas).

Over time M. G. Smith has modified his theory to take account of the obvious; such as the potent effects of education upon all segments of the population, and the equally obvious pervasiveness of government institutions. But he still clings to the idea that each segment of West Indian society has its own institutions of marriage, family, child-rearing, inheri-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-39649-3 - Kinship and Class in the West Indies: A Genealogical Study of Jamaica and Guyana

Raymond T. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Kinship and class in the West Indies*

tance and so forth. (Although he says that 'segment' is not 'race,' the units are the black lower class, the brown middle class, the white upper class, East Indians, Chinese and so forth.) By treating these entities as though they are to be understood in terms of their diverse 'substances,' rather than in terms of the relations between them, Smith reverts to the crudities of a functionalism unmodified by the refinements of the 1950s and 1960s. In a previous publication I noted the similarity between M.G. Smith's concept of 'institution' and that of Bronislaw Malinowski (R. T. Smith 1966). There also seems to be a marked similarity between some of M. G. Smith's formulations and those put forward by Malinowski for understanding 'culture contact' in Africa.

In a now classic symposium on *Methods of study of culture contact in Africa* (published as Memorandum XV of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures), Malinowski objected to Meyer Fortes' proposal to treat the 'contact situation' as if it were any other social situation, using the functionalist method developed by Malinowski himself. He acknowledged Fortes' wisdom in emphasizing functionalist methods, and termed himself the 'Arch-Functionalist' in mocking reference to his critics, but pointed out that the functionalist method had been worked out 'with the purpose of describing and analysing one culture, and a culture at that, which through age-long historical development has reached a state of well-balanced equilibrium. These two main presuppositions of functionalism in its simple form break down in contact studies. We have to deal not with one culture alone, but with two cultures and a *tertium quid*' (Malinowski 1938, p. xxxvi). This creates, or recreates, the theoretical foundation of a 'plural society theory' that is closer to M. G. Smith's ideas than to Furnivall's more sophisticated views. Malinowski argues that functionalism in these situations must be a method 'in which the mutual relations and the functional variations of the dependent factors is studied, not within one culture, but with regard to three mutually dependent phases' (p. xxxvii). Change for Malinowski is now an 'interaction between the European and African cultural phases, from which there emerges a third one, wherein the two worlds interpenetrate, achieve a co-operation or a compromise, or remain in the grip of conflict' (p. xxxvii).

This formulation fits M. G. Smith's view of Caribbean kinship where each of his three 'segments,' black, white and brown, is alleged to have its own institutional forms of family, kinship and marriage, with the brown segment being the result of mixture in a way that the others are not. In his 1940 Presidential Address to the Royal Anthropological Institute, entitled 'On Social Structure,' A.R. Radcliffe-Brown had some sharp criticisms of this kind of theory, calling it 'simply a way of avoiding the reality' (Radcliffe-Brown 1952, p. 202). He went on, 'For what is happening in South Africa, for example, is not the interaction of British culture,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-39649-3 - Kinship and Class in the West Indies: A Genealogical Study of Jamaica and Guyana

Raymond T. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

Afrikander (or Boer) culture, Hottentot culture, various Bantu cultures and Indian culture, but the interaction of individuals and groups within an established social structure which is itself in process of change' (p. 202). The rigidities of Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functionalism are no more useful than Malinowski's version of pluralism, but in this instance his criticism is appropriate.²

In the period after World War II, when so much research was linked to the British Government's programme of Colonial Development and Welfare, it was easy for social scientists to accept the definition of socially significant problems presented to them by the more influential sections of West Indian societies. The poverty of the masses seemed to set them apart from the affluent in every way, reinforcing the old colonial assumption that the lower classes are culturally distinct, have different social institutions, and may not be capable of total assimilation to civilized society. The anthropologist's predisposition to treat the unit being studied – be it village, region, ethnic group, race or class – as if it were a closed system, introduced further distortion (see R. T. Smith 1982b). By avoiding these biases, this study documents the extent to which culture and social relations span income and status differences, and the extent to which the family structure of different classes and racial groups can be understood as variations on a common structural scheme.

4. The matrifocal family

I have continued to use the term 'matrifocal family' in this work even though it has come to be surrounded by a dense fog of misunderstanding, and in spite of some shifts in the meaning I now attach to it. As I used the term in the 1950s, it meant the following:

A form of family life bounded by formal parameters of legal and moral expectation of coresidential marriage as the basis for child-bearing and child-rearing, but actually structured in terms of an array of types of conjugal union – legal, non-legal and extra-residential – associated with variable forms of domestic grouping. The analysis of field data from Guyana emphasized (a) the pattern of variation in household composition over time as households changed from something approximating the 'nuclear family' to more complex forms as daughters brought into the domestic group children conceived outside wedlock, and as more households became female headed in the later stages of their development; (b) the association of this variation with the progression from a phase of relative stability of coresidential unions to a phase of increasing salience of the relations of mother and children within the domestic domain, and (c) the relation between this pattern of domestic group developmental cycle and the low social status of the population group studied, with a consequent effect upon the role performance of male heads of

² For an informed discussion of plural society theory as ideology see Robotham 1980, 1985; see also M. G. Smith's vitriolic rejoinders in M. G. Smith 1983, 1984.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-39649-3 - Kinship and Class in the West Indies: A Genealogical Study of Jamaica and Guyana

Raymond T. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Kinship and class in the West Indies*

households. Thus, the term ‘matrifocal family’ referred NOT to a system of female-headed families, nor to a matriarchal family system, but to a social process in which there was a salience of women – in their role as mothers – within the domestic domain, correlated directly with the class position of the population involved, and focussing on the articulation of kinship and class. (See R. T. Smith 1956)

There is no dispute over the accuracy of the ‘facts,’ broadly conceived. Vast amounts of survey data have been collected, both in the Caribbean and in North America, and all show the prevalence of high illegitimacy rates, relatively unstable unions, and complex domestic relations in which women play a prominent part. What is lacking is adequate understanding of the meaning of these data.

I believe that there is value in retaining the term ‘matrifocal family,’ and I also believe that its genesis and reproduction in the West Indies is closely related to the hierarchical structure of these societies. But it is not peculiar to the lower class, nor is it simply the consequence of certain functional problems within an ideally conceived nuclear family. It is part of a complex of meaning and action that constitutes the West Indian creole kinship system, a complex that necessarily involves all classes and status groups.

If differences in family structure between classes and status groups are so much less than had been supposed, how could misperceptions have persisted through many years of careful investigation?

5. Quantitative analysis and the refinement of error

To discover the nature and extent of variation, social scientists generally make quantitative analyses of selected variables and measure their covariance to determine functional and causal relations. In the case of family structure this has meant the collection of census and survey data in standardized form.

The sampling unit has almost always been the household. Everyone knew that household units are difficult to define, but in the interests of practicality an attempt had to be made. The relationship between household and family is another difficult issue dealt with at some length in the report of the British Guiana census of 1960. It began by defining a Private Household as ‘one or more persons living together and sharing at least one daily meal. In general a household comprises a father, mother, children, other relatives, as well as other persons sharing in their household arrangements’ (Trinidad and Tobago Central Statistical Office 1964, p. ix). A family, by contrast, was defined as consisting ‘of two or more persons living together in the same household and bound together by ties of marriage or kinship.’ It continued: ‘Those members of a household who in general comprise a family are a man, his wife (or common law wife), their

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-39649-3 - Kinship and Class in the West Indies: A Genealogical Study of Jamaica and Guyana

Raymond T. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

own or adopted children together with any close relatives of theirs . . . A parent with an unmarried child or children living together in the same household thus comprise a family. However, if a son or daughter marries or forms a common law relationship and brings his or her partner to live in the parents' household, then another family is established within that household' (ibid.). These definitions are arbitrary but they must correspond in some way with the common sense categories of those who planned the census, and indeed we see a gradual shift over time as the categories are questioned. By 1970 the *Jamaica Population Census: Preliminary Report* defines a household as comprising 'a person who lives alone or a group of persons who live together and who may or may not eat together' (p. 6). Whether born of despair or a sense of definitional economy is not known, but it is as good a definition as that found in a sophisticated treatise on kinship theory: 'Operationally households can be defined as "that set of relationships which describes the associations of an individual over a 24 hour period"' (Buchler and Selby 1968, p. 21). The authors express their indebtedness to R. N. Adams for the personal communication on which this definition is based, but they never explain what they mean by saying that 'only one set of relationships is activated throughout the 24-hour period, and consistently enacted, and that is the household' (Buchler and Selby 1968, p. 21). The problem with these definitions is that they are neither native categories nor rooted in a theory where 'households' are a category in a system of abstractions. They are just put together out of the observer's own assumptions. It is impossible to conduct a census or survey without establishing rules for the inclusion and exclusion of household members, and good survey research recognizes the arbitrary nature of these rules. Still, it is tempting to treat the final distributions as representations of social reality; why collect the material in the first place if it is not to be subjected to analysis? (See Kruskal 1981 for an excellent discussion of these problems.)

Having isolated households for enumeration the next step is to establish the exact relationship between members. These relationships, once again, must be specified in a list of categories drawn up by the survey designer. Most usually one individual is designated 'head' of the household, a procedure often surrounded by uncertainty and ambiguity, compounded as the relationship of other members is arrived at. It is not necessary to continue listing the crucial points at which arbitrary decisions must be made in the interest of precision. The categories are predetermined in the survey design and cannot be varied without disturbing the whole structure of data collection, processing and analysis – particularly in large and expensive censuses and surveys.

The analysis of West Indian family structure has also depended on such information as conjugal status, child-bearing history, income, land hold-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-39649-3 - Kinship and Class in the West Indies: A Genealogical Study of Jamaica and Guyana

Raymond T. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Kinship and class in the West Indies*

ing, race, education, age, sex and place of residence. Only the data on sex is reasonably free of uncertainty and ambiguity. Even so, large quantities of material are collected and subjected to ever more sophisticated analytical procedures, a process that too often results in the refinement of error.

6. Procedures used in this study

The data presented in this book were collected in Jamaica and Guyana. Though reference is made to 'West Indian' or even 'Caribbean' kinship, these are *case studies*; detailed genealogical material collected from just a few individuals over a series of interviews lasting from about 20 up to perhaps 150 hours per individual. The reasoning behind this choice of method will be discussed in Chapter 2. Here I shall just explain how we went about things.

To avoid the inherent disadvantages of the *a priori* definitions required for survey research it was decided to find out what concepts are embedded in West Indians' kinship behaviour and family life, and to make a careful record of the whole range of variation, and even ambiguities, in those concepts. One method of doing this is to get people talking about kinship in general and their own familial experience in particular, though we were well aware of the difference between what people say and what they actually do. That relationship was central to our interest, but the emphasis in data collection was on paying careful attention to what people are saying.

Apart from the author, who directed the study as well as interviewing, eight investigators participated in the project. Each one had extensive background knowledge of the West Indies (five were West Indians) and all were familiar with the theoretical aims of the study. All except one were graduate students in anthropology or sociology at the University of the West Indies or the University of Chicago; except for the late Dalton Davis, all are now professional social scientists. The quality of the interviewing was excellent.

The main vehicle for data collection was the extended case study based on multiple interviews organized around the collection of a complete genealogy. The idea was to provide data comparable to those collected by Firth and his associates in London, and by Schneider and his co-workers in Chicago (Schneider 1980 [1968]; Schneider and Cottrell 1975; Firth, Hubert and Forge 1970). The aim of the interviews was to get informants talking freely, with a minimum of interviewer stimulus, about family life, kinship relations, and associated aspects of social life. The genealogy, containing the informant's knowledge of all individuals related in any way through consanguinity, conjugal unions or kinship links created in other ways (to be discussed in Chapter 2), was used as a framework on which the