

## Family, kinship, and descent

© Copyright Bruce Owen 2007

- So, we have seen that gender identity is socially constructed
  - that takes us naturally to marriage and sex
  - which will then take us to descent
    - **descent**: rules by which we identify and categorize our ancestors and offspring
  - which will then take us to kinship
    - **kinship**: rules by which we categorize and interact with all our relatives (our **kin**)
  - which in turn plays a big role in creating personal identities and structuring marriages...
  - remember "culture is integrated" and "culture can be understood as a system"
    - each of these parts (identity, gender, marriage, descent, kinship) is profoundly shaped by the others, and affects the others in turn
    - you can't really understand any one in isolation
    - each only makes full sense in the context of all the rest
- Marriage, family, and kinship are... socially constructed
  - variable from one culture to the next
  - we think of marriage as being
    - a personal choice made by two people
    - having largely to do with romantic love and sex
    - this fits with our atomistic concept of personhood in general
  - many, if not most, societies see marriage very differently
    - as a choice made between groups (the kin groups of each spouse)
    - for social, economic, and political reasons
  - Nuyoo (story of widowed Fernando seeking a new wife)
    - it is about partnering for economically complete, successful life and kids
    - that is, a household can only survive with the combined contributions of a man and a woman
      - who do different, complementary tasks
  - the view of marriage as a contract between two kin groups is shown by widespread practices of
    - negotiating approval from the family of each spouse
    - marriages being arranged by kin with only minor input from the spouses, sometimes even before they are born
    - negotiating exchanges of goods and/or labor between the groups
      - *relatives* of the spouses negotiate, not the couple!
    - rights and obligations of the kin groups
      - in cases where a spouse dies young
      - if a wife dies, her relatives may be obliged to provide a replacement wife, typically the dead wife's sister (**sororate**)
      - if a husband dies, his relatives may be obliged to provide a replacement husband, typically the dead husband's brother (**levirate**)

- for raising the children, etc.
  - this fits with more widespread concepts of personhood that stress the embeddedness of identity in social relations
  - remember the Nuyoo la Ninde who was reminded of how he did not own himself; he was owned by his parents, kin, village, and God...
- **kinship**: a society's system of classifying and relating to relatives, forming families, etc.
  - depends in part on the **descent** system
  - socially constructed
  - based in part on biology, but largely arbitrary
    - as in the Nuyoo, who consider some people to have multiple mothers
    - the one who gave birth to them, and the one(s) who nursed (breast-fed) them
    - if even who counts as your mother is culturally constructed, clearly kinship is not made up only of biological facts
  - US kinship system is very reduced compared to most societies
  - kinship: who you are related to
  - and what you call them
  - and which you classify as being the "same" or "different"
    - is your mother's brother (your maternal uncle) related to you the same way as your father's brother (paternal uncle)?
  - how you interact with them
    - do you interact to your father the same way as to his brother (your uncle)?
- **nuclear family**: parents and children (including adoptees: **fictive kinship**)
  - US typically sees nuclear families as relatively autonomous, basic unit
  - but other societies, like Nuyoo in Monaghan and Just, nuclear family really does not exist as a separate entity; always part of a larger network of kin
- **extended family**: variable meaning.
  - Often, family with three or more generations living together
  - Or, two or more nuclear families living together
  - Or, a nuclear family with additional relatives living together
- **collateral family**: family with multiple siblings living together, with their spouses and kids
  - that is, all your aunts, uncles, or both living together
  - with their spouses
  - and their kids: you and your cousins
- **family** refers to two different things:
  - **family of orientation**: family one is raised in, usually one's parents and siblings
  - **family of procreation**: family one forms with a spouse, including one's children
- descent: how you identify and classify ancestors and descendants
  - **patrilineal descent**: emphasizes male line and relatives
    - as we do for surnames
    - as my father does when he pursues genealogy
      - he follows up ancestors of male ancestors

- he thinks of female ancestors as marrying into the family from outside
  - for him, their ancestry rarely worth pursuing
- **matrilineal descent**: emphasizes female line and relatives
  - you are related to your mother's kin - your father just marries in, and his relatives are not interesting or important to you
  - as Trobriand Islanders do
    - even denying that males contribute more than a little "food" to a fetus
- **bilateral descent**: emphasizes both male and female lines
  - as we do in recognizing equal relatedness to both father and mother's relatives
  - as in "uncle" for both mother's brother and father's brother
- kinds **descent groups**
  - these are a subset of kin groups
  - **lineage**: people related by descent from a known shared ancestor
  - **patrilineage**: people related through fathers (in US, the people born with a given surname, like "the Smiths")
    - theoretically traceable to a known male founding ancestor
  - **matrilineage**: people related through their mothers
    - theoretically to a known female founding ancestor
  - **clan**: like a lineage, but the founder is too far back for people to trace their known genealogies back that far
    - the founder may be mythical, even an animal or other non-human
      - a non-human founding ancestor is a **totem**
    - may be a matrilineal clan or a patrilineal clan
- rules about who you can marry:
  - **incest**: prohibited in all societies
    - but specifically *which* relatives are considered too close to marry varies
    - some societies see cousins (parent's sibling's kids) as too close, thus incestuous
    - others see cousins as the ideal marriage partners - not too close to marry, but not strangers, either - still within the trusted circle of well-connected relatives
      - note that the genetic risk of first cousin marriage is pretty small
      - only serious if a seriously harmful recessive allele (gene) is present
        - in that case, a child of a brother-sister marriage has a 25% chance of being affected
        - a child of a first cousin marriage will have a 6.25% chance (one chance in sixteen) of being affected
      - not good, but not disastrous, either
    - the Lakher (Southeast Asia) are extremely patrilineal; a child is not considered related to mother's relatives at all
      - if a boy's mother divorces, remarries, and has a daughter with a different man, the daughter is not related to the boy through any male relatives
      - so he can marry her - what we would consider incest between half-siblings
      - point: even incest is culturally constructed
  - **exogamy**: rule that one must marry outside of one's own group
    - must specify what group is meant

- matrilineage exogamy
- clan exogamy
- village exogamy
- etc.
- **endogamy**: rule that one must marry within one's own group
  - again, must specify what group is meant
- rules may combine both exogamy and endogamy
  - as in clan exogamy with village endogamy, etc.
- where a newly married couple lives
  - **virilocal** (sometimes imprecisely "**patrilocal**"): lives with groom's relatives
    - as in Chinese case
  - **uxorilocal** (sometimes imprecisely "**matrilocal**"): lives with bride's relatives
    - as in Ju/wasi case
  - **neolocal**: sets up household apart from both sets of relatives
- Crucial in the economic exchange aspect of marriage
- Crucial for which relatives are most involved in rearing children - and have claims on them
- Nuyoo example, Monaghan & Just pp. 83-84
  - groom's family pays part of bridewealth (see below) to bride's family
    - newlyweds live in the house of the bride's parents until her first child
    - groom works for bride's father as brideservice (see below)
    - wife has first child in a familiar place, with mother handy
  - then the groom's family pays the rest of the bridewealth
    - the couple moves out to their own house
    - usually near the groom's family
    - that is, the transaction is completed
      - the full bridewealth and brideservice has been paid by the groom's relatives and the groom
      - the bride has demonstrated that she will, in fact, produce children for the groom's people
      - the bride is transferred from her relatives to the groom's relatives
- economic aspects of marriage
  - **bridewealth** (formerly brideprice): payment from groom or groom's relatives to relatives of bride
    - compensates the bride's relatives for the loss of her company, work, property, and future children
  - often incurs long-term obligations
    - Trobrianders: groom's matrilineage pays bridewealth to bride's matrilineage
    - groom then has to pay back the debt to his matrilineal relatives
  - adds to stability of marriage
    - prevents marriages where groom has few resources himself and/or lacks support for the marriage from relatives
  - creates bond of appreciation and debt between the sets of relatives

- may have to be repaid in case of early divorce - incentive not to divorce
- **brideservice**: work the groom has to do for the bride's relatives (usually parents)
- **dowry**: goods, wealth that the bride brings into the marriage
  - in societies where women are highly valued, usually little or none, personal items for own family life
  - in societies where women are less valued, often larger
    - compensation to groom and/or groom's family for accepting the responsibility of caring for the bride
- **partible inheritance**: family (or one side's) land, etc. is divided up among heirs
  - leads to conflict
  - ever-smaller plots, need to marry to get additional land, etc.
- **impartible inheritance**: family (or one side's) land, etc. must stay together, goes to one heir (often **primogeniture** = all of the inheritance goes to the first-born son)
  - means other children have to make it on their own, through other careers, marriage, etc.
  - allows for continuing large holdings, facilitates long-term aristocracy (as in England)
    - second son to military
    - third to clergy, etc.
- these rules concerning marriage can have effects far beyond individual families
  - consider the British Empire
    - its marriage and inheritance rules contributed to its formation and persistence
  - patrilineal descent
  - virilocal (patrilocal) residence
  - impartible inheritance, specifically primogeniture
    - with the practice of the second son usually going into the military
  - this set up conditions for a durable, wealthy aristocracy run by lines of first sons
    - living on large estates that had been owned by generations of their ancestors, a seemingly legitimate and permanent situation
    - this aristocracy would have interests in a strong state and military for internal stability, to maintain their positions
  - and it created a military led by well-educated men from privileged backgrounds
    - who would tend to sympathize with the aristocracy's interests, and to have their support
    - but would also have interests in military exploits and foreign venture that could gain them their own wealth, too
    - leading to imperial expansion
- kinds of marriages/families
  - **monogamous** (monogamy): one spouse at a time
    - typically one man and one woman at a time
    - but also other pairs of different gender identities
      - legal or not, two gay men can be monogamous, for example
  - **serial monogamy**: one spouse at a time, but OK to divorce and remarry
  - **polygamous (polygamy)**: more than one spouse at once
    - **polygynous (polygyny)**: one man, multiple women
    - **polyandrous (polyandry)**: one woman, multiple men

- plus more complex combinations of genders...
- Murdoch 1949 study comparing several hundred societies
  - 18% require monogamy
  - 82% allow polygyny
  - <.05% allow polyandry
- Ford and Beach 1951 study of 185 societies
  - 84% of societies allow polygyny
- In a speech in February of 2004, President G. W. Bush supported a constitutional amendment defining marriage as a union between one man and one woman.
  - He complained that "After...millennia of human experience, a few judges and local authorities are presuming to change the most fundamental institution of civilization."
  - do you see some naïve realism here?
  - **naïve realism**: the assumption that an idea, value, practice, etc. is inherently human, "real", thus universal, rather than culturally constructed, thus arbitrary and variable
- polygamy allowed in a majority of societies, but usually actually practiced by only a small percentage of families
  - equal numbers of men and women born mean that actually practicing much polygamy would leave excess of unmarried people of one sex (usually, polygyny leaves excess men without potential wives)
  - having multiple spouses may require more wealth or work
    - typically, only well-off men can afford to maintain multiple wives
  - often creates tensions within families, even in societies where it is allowed
  - Islam allows a man up to 4 wives, but requires him to provide for each equally
    - first wives usually resist later wives - jealousy, etc.
  - African polygynous groups
    - first wives want younger wives to do work, but younger wives often cause conflict
- Kilbride article on African polygyny
  - what are some of the advantages of polygyny
    - for men?
    - for women?
  - why might men prefer not to have multiple wives?
  - why might women prefer not to have other wives?
  - in what ways isn't monogamy working, according to Kilbride?
    - for men?
    - for women?
  - What is Kilbride suggesting about "reinventing plural marriage"?
  - This kind of discussion is only possible once we recognize that marriage rules are arbitrary social constructs
    - not moral or natural imperatives; that is, they can and do change
    - we can understand why
    - and we might even try to influence the process