Family, kinship, and descent

Copyright Bruce Owen 2010

– So, we have seen that gender identity is socially constructed
– that leads us naturally to marriage and sex
– which then leads us to descent
– descent: rules by which we identify and categorize our ancestors and offspring
– which leads 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 that “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 (or construct) marriage as being
  – a personal choice made by two people
  – having largely to do with romantic love and sex
  – this reflects our egocentric concept of personhood in general
– many, if not most, societies see marriage very differently
  – as a relationship established between two groups of kin
    – not just the couple
  – marriages are often negotiated by the families of the bride and groom
    – the couple may or may not have much say
    – often the bride or groom can make suggestions about potential partners that the families
      take as starting points for negotiation
    – or can veto suggestions made by their families
    – in some societies, the families can make arrangements before the bride or groom are
      even born…
  – the families typically negotiate exchanges of goods and/or labor between the groups
    – or make choices based on political alliances
    – or make choices based on how the marriage will affect the social status of the families
  – the kin groups then have obligations towards each other
    – obligations to raise the children
    – rights to the labor of one or both spouses and/or the children, etc.
    – replacement of a spouse if he or she dies too soon
      – if a wife dies, her relatives may be obliged to provide a replacement wife, typically
        the dead wife’s sister
      – this practice is called the sororate
– if a husband dies, his relatives may be obliged to provide a replacement husband, typically the dead husband’s brother
– this is the practice of levirate
– these practices can salvage the complex economic, political, and social commitments that were negotiated between the two families
– if a man dies right after his wedding binds two families together, it makes sense for his brother to step in and replace him…
– why blow a crucial, once-in-a-generation deal just because a young person died?
– this reflects a more sociocentric concept of personhood
– in which your identity and behavior depend crucially on your position in social networks, especially of your kin
– remember the Duo Donggo la Ninde who was reminded of how he did not own himself; he was owned by his parents, kin, village, and God…

– kinship system: a society’s system of classifying and relating to relatives
– depends in part on the descent system
– socially constructed
– based in part on biology, but largely arbitrary
– as in the Nuyoo of Oaxaca, who consider some people to have multiple mothers
  – the one who gave birth to them
  – and the one(s) who nursed (breast-fed) them
– versus European tradition, in which a “wet nurse” was little more than a servant
– certainly not a mother
– if even who counts as your mother is culturally constructed, clearly kinship is not made up only of biological facts
– kinship: how you classify and name your relatives
  – which relatives you classify as being the “same” or “different”
  – we call a parent’s bother our uncle
  – but are all uncles equivalent (related to you in the same way), or is your mother’s brother (your maternal uncle) different from your father’s brother (paternal uncle)?
– what about spouses of uncles and aunts… they are also uncles and aunts, right?
– yet the descent relationship between you and your uncle is clearly different from that between you and his wife, who is not biologically related to you at all
– point: how we lump people as being the “same” relatives or different ones is arbitrary and culturally constructed
– how you interact with different relatives
  – do you interact with your father the same way as you interact with 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, the 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 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, the ancestry of his female ancestors is rarely worth pursuing
  – **matrilineal descent**: emphasizes female line and relatives
    – you are related to your mother’s kin - your father just marries in
      – his relatives are not as interesting or important to you
      – as Trobriand Islanders do
        – they think (or thought) that males contribute little 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 “aunt” meaning both mother’s sister and father’s sister
      – we consider the relationship to be the same on both the father’s and the mother’s side
  – a society can use different descent systems for different purposes
    – inheritance of property might be patrilineal
    – inheritance of religious or clan affiliation might be matrilineal
    – inheritance of surnames might be bilateral
      – Maria Vargas marries John Smith and becomes Maria Vargas Smith
        – possibly all in one society…
    – so it is not very clear when someone says “society X is patrilineal”, because we have to ask “Patrilineal for what? Inheritance? Social rank? Family name?…”
  – “matrilineal” and “patrilineal” describe descent systems, not power relations
    – they say nothing about whether a society is “patriarchal” (men have power) or “matriarchal” (women have power)
    – there are many societies with generally matrilineal descent for family names, property, status, etc., but strongly patriarchal distribution of power
      – Trobriand Islands: Chiefs are men (patriarchal distribution of power), but men inherit their chiefships from their mother’s family (matrilineal descent)
      – eldest male of the village’s highest-ranked matrilineage is the chief
- kinds **descent groups**
  - these are a subset of kin groups in general
  - **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**
    - clan membership may be matrilineal or patrilineal
  - example: Scottish clans
    - MacAulays, Fitzpatricks, etc.
    - patrilineal, identified by last name
    - theoretically descended from some shared, founding ancestor, but most or all cannot actually trace ancestry to such a person
    - since early 1800’s, also identified by a shared tartan (plaid pattern in cloth)
    - if you are a Fitzpatrick and meet someone wearing the Fitzpatrick tartan, you immediately feel kinship with him/her

- rules about who you can marry:
  - **incest**: prohibited in all societies
    - except special cases like within some royal families, Egyptian pharaohs, etc.
    - one of the very few apparent universals in human culture
    - but specifically **which** relatives are considered too close to marry varies
    - some societies see first cousins (parent’s sibling’s kids) as too close, thus incestuous
    - other societies 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
    - many Americans think that first-cousin marriage is not only repugnant, but also dangerous
      - Americans generally think that cousins risk having children with genetic disorders
      - But in fact, the genetic risk of first cousin marriage is pretty small
        - a 2002 meta-study (Bennett, Motulsky, et al., *Journal of Genetic Counseling*) found that first-cousin marriages have about a 1.7 to 2.8% higher risk of producing children with genetic disorders than do marriages of non-relatives
    - This is part of how we construct our ideas of marriage and incest
      - Using supposedly medical (but really unfounded) beliefs to rationalize an essentially arbitrary cultural construct
  - first cousin marriage is legal in about half of the US states
    - fully allowed: 19 states, including California
– limited (requires counseling before approval, only allowed for older couples, etc.): 15 states
– not allowed: 16 states
– no other western country prohibits first cousin marriage
– extreme example of cultural construction of incest rules: the Lakher (or Mara, of Mizoram in easternmost India)
  – extremely patrilineal
  – a child is not considered related to its mother’s relatives at all
  – if a boy’s mother divorces, remarries, and has a daughter with a different man…
  – the two children of the same mother are not related through any male relative
  – so they are not related at all
  – so they can marry
  – what we would consider incest between half-siblings
  – point: even the prohibition of incest, a cultural universal, is culturally constructed
– **exogamy**: rule that you must marry outside of your own group
  – must specify what group is meant
    – matrilineage exogamy (marry outside your matrilineage)
    – clan exogamy (marry outside your clan)
    – village exogamy (marry outside your village)
    – etc.
– **endogamy**: rule that you must marry within your own group
  – again, must specify what group is meant
  – rules may combine both exogamy and endogamy
    – as in clan exogamy with village endogamy, etc.
– Economic aspects of marriage
  – **bridewealth** (formerly called **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
      – Trobriand Islanders example: groom’s matrilineage pays bridewealth to bride’s matrilineage
        – groom has to get his matrilineal relatives to loan him this wealth
        – he then has to pay them back
          – his wife’s brothers will help him pay back over time
          – the wife, not the husband, owns the farmland
          – and her brothers work on it, and have to give her some of the resulting yams as payment
            – the groom will use some of these to pay back his loans
        – groom’s matrilineal relatives won’t make the loans if they don’t think the marriage will last
        – he will stick with the marriage, since he has to repay, regardless
        – he is grateful to his matrilineal relatives for helping him to marry
his new relatives through his wife support his efforts to pay back the loan
– social bonds are built…
– adds to stability of marriage
– prevents marriages where groom has few resources himself and/or lacks support for the marriage from relatives
– creates bonds of appreciation and debt between the relatives
– may have to be repaid in case of early divorce - incentive not to divorce
– remember how economic exchange is embedded in social relationships – that an exchange creates an obligation, thus a relationship?
– here, the economic obligations create and strengthen the social relationship between bride and groom, and especially between the bride’s family and the groom’s family

– **brideservice**: work the groom has to do for the bride’s relatives (usually her parents)
– **dowry**: goods, wealth that the bride brings into the marriage
  – in societies where women are highly valued, usually little or no dowry, just personal items for her own family life
  – in societies where women are less valued, often large dowry
  – it is compensation to the 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
  – often leads to conflict over the division of property
  – ever-smaller plots, need to marry to get additional land, etc.
– **impartible inheritance**: family (or one side’s) land, etc. must stay together, goes entirely to one heir
  – a common form is **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)

– **Residence**: 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’hoansi case
– **neolocal**: sets up household apart from both sets of relatives
– Residence is crucial in the economic exchange aspect of marriage
– Residence is also crucial for which relatives are most involved in rearing children - and have claims on them
– Dou Donggo (Sumbawa, Indonesia) example (Monaghan & Just pp. 83-84)
  – groom’s family pays part of bridewealth to bride’s family
    – newlyweds live in the house of the bride’s parents until her first child (uxorilocal / matrilocal)
    – groom works for bride’s father as brideservice
    – 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 (becomes neolocal)
– usually near the groom’s family (broadly virilocal / patrilocal)
– 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

– 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
  – third usually going into the clergy
  – any additional sons into commerce…
– 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
– this also set up conditions for an empire
  – 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 and families
– monogamous (monogamy): a person may have one spouse at a time
  – typically one man and one woman at a time
  – but also other pairs of different gender identities
    – in some Native American societies, man and berdache
    – US: two gay men
      – legally in some states
      – actually anywhere
  – serial monogamy: one spouse at a time, but OK to divorce and remarry
– polygamous (polygamy): a person may have more than one spouse at a time
  – 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% allow only monogamy
– 82% allow monogamy and polygyny
– <.05% allow polyandry
– Ford and Beach 1951 study of 185 societies
  – 84% of societies allow monogamy and polygyny
– polygyny is allowed in a majority of societies, but is usually not common
  – it is commonly allowed, but less commonly practiced
  – only a small percentage of families are actually polygynous
  – most families are monogamous, even where polygyny is allowed
– because having multiple spouses may require more wealth or work
  – typically, only well-off men can afford to maintain multiple wives
– Islam allows a man up to 4 wives, but requires him to provide for each equally and decently
– Also because if many men had multiple wives, many other men would have no wife at all
  – a society with a large subset of sexually frustrated men with no family, children, heirs, or long-term future might not be very stable…
– often creates tensions within families, even in societies where it is allowed
  – in conservative Iraqi Muslim families, first wives usually resist additional wives, especially at first - jealousy, etc.
– but in many societies, women are not always against polygyny
  – in the same Iraqi Muslim families, many women approve of polygyny because
    – it prevents divorce by allowing a man to take a younger wife without divorcing the first wife
    – it allows a widow to become a second wife, providing her with necessary economic support and restoring her to a viable role in society
  – in many African polygynous groups
    – first wives want younger wives to do some of the work for them
      – but younger wives often cause conflict and jealousy, because the husband might prefer the new, younger wife
– 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. of one’s own culture is inherent to humans or the real world, thus universal, rather than culturally constructed, thus arbitrary and variable