

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 17  
**Forms of marriage, residence, and their logic**  
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- Today’s readings (and last time’s) are examples of how differently cultures may construct marriage
  - shows how this seemingly fundamental institution is actually variable and arbitrary
  - each system makes sense and works in its cultural context
  - and there is nothing absolute or necessary about any one particular concept of marriage, or unnatural or wrong about others
- Nari or Mosuo “walking marriage”, “friend marriage”, or *sisi*
  - both male and female children remain in their mother’s household for entire lives
    - so households are matrilineal
    - inheritance of land is also matrilineal, so landholdings, houses, etc. stay together in the ongoing matrilineal family
  - women control most property
  - no formal marriage ceremony or obligations
  - men leave at night for long-term relationships with women in other households
    - but return in the morning to work for their mother’s household
    - no ceremony of marriage, no formalized relationship
    - no social recognition of obligations between kin groups
    - no economic exchange between kin groups
  - men’s obligation is to children in their own household
    - that is, children of their sisters
    - not to the children that they have with lovers/wives in other households
    - from the child’s point of the view, the important “father figures” in their lives are their uncles (mother’s brothers)
    - these uncles are the ones that have authority over them
  - men may have a friendly relationship with their own children, but it is not obligatory
    - children usually know their biological fathers, but their relationship with them is more casual, flexible, friendly, with little or no discipline from the father
      - more like US children’s’ typical relationships with their uncle(s)
  - why this marriage and residence arrangement makes sense, according to the Mosuo (emic view)
    - larger families are more practical economic units
      - as opposed to couples constantly splitting off and founding their own small households from scratch
      - more hands among which to divide up the work
        - having more people helps in scheduling tasks that must be done at the same time, but in different places
        - as is often the case for farmers who have to plant, irrigate, harvest, move animals, etc. at specific times in specific fields or pastures in order to get good results
    - reduces conflict in the family, because all the members are working for the same economic unit, headed by their own mother

- as opposed to trying to arrange cooperation between small family units that all have slightly different self-interests
- since in traditional family units, any relationship by birth with one spouse is a relationship to an in-law of the other, the obligations to cooperate with other families are weaker or even conflicting
- allows couples to be formed based on love or preference, not economic decisions
  - thus they can easily split if they are dissatisfied
    - since there is no formal marriage
    - thus no alliances and obligations between kin groups that would be disrupted by a split
  - results in very little fighting
- prevents contact and problems between mothers and daughters-in-law
  - says a Mosuo, Luo Sang Yi
  - actually, between any parents in children-in-law
  - these in-law relations are structurally prone to be tense in most societies
    - this was an early insight of anthropological study of kinship and family relations
      - most associated with Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, an early British social anthropologist
    - because the son-in-law or daughter-in-law is competing for the attention of the child who used to be exclusively the parents'
      - the son-in-law or daughter-in-law seems to be an outsider, an interloper
      - who makes demands on the parents-in-law's resources, including the love and labor of their child
      - someone at the same age and maturity level as the child, but who is less responsive to their authority
    - from the son-in-law's or daughter-in-law's point of view, the mother-in-law or father-in-law is someone who wants to exercise authority over them, but never has before
      - the mother-in-law or father-in-law seems pushy and an impediment
      - someone who demands the authority of a parent, but really isn't one
  - Mosuo "walking marriage" minimizes the problems between parents-in-law and children-in-law by generally minimizing their relationship and contact between them
- Fraternal polyandry in the Himalayas
  - common in an area of northwestern Nepal and adjacent areas of Tibet and India
    - Limi region in Nepal
    - some speakers of Pahari languages in India
  - multiple brothers marry one wife
    - considered the optimal form of marriage
  - oldest brother is dominant authority
  - children consider all the brothers to be their fathers
    - in some areas, all are "father", modified by "elder" and "younger"
    - in other areas, the oldest brother is called "father" and the rest are "father's brothers"
  - monogamy is also common, but is usually harder economically
  - polygyny is also OK, but rare
    - usually when a first wife produces no children

- divorce is easy: a brother can just leave and set up his own household
  - but all the children stay with the wife's household
- two etic explanations; Goldstein says both are wrong
  - False hypothesis 1: fraternal polyandry is a response to a shortage of women, caused by female infanticide
    - not so, because female infanticide is not a standard practice
    - not so, because there is no documented gender imbalance
  - False hypothesis 2: fraternal polyandry is necessary to produce enough food
    - not so, says Goldstein, because it is not the poorest who do it, but mostly the landowning middle class
      - if fraternal polyandry were necessary for survival, presumably the poorest people, closest to not surviving, would do it most consistently
  - is this a valid objection?
    - the poorest do not emphasize polyandry because they have no landholdings to keep together
      - they work for others, rather than producing their own food
    - so in fact, the poorest people *who have land holdings* DO tend to practice polyandry
    - so Goldstein's objection here seems to be a mistake
- an etic explanation that could be correct
  - fraternal polyandry reduces population growth
    - by leaving some women unmarried
      - there are various acceptable, self-sustaining roles for them
        - live at home with parents or, later, brothers and their wife
        - set up own household
        - work as servants
        - become Buddhist nuns
      - about half of these unmarried women have kids anyway
      - but still much lower birthrate than married women
        - 0.7 vs. 3.3
  - this population effect is not noticed or mentioned by Tibetans
    - that is, it is not an emic explanation
    - it takes an outsider to make this connection, someone who thinks in terms of birth rates, population growth, and ecology
- emic reasons for fraternal polyandry
  - prevents division of father's land and animals among multiple sons
    - so it ensures a higher standard of living for all the brothers
  - wife likes it because more resources and the labor of multiple men are supporting her and her children
  - etic spin
    - this way of keeping the inheritance together has the same benefit as does primogeniture, except that all the brothers get to use the inheritance, not just the first born
  - having multiple couples working the inheritance together would be unstable

- because wives are oriented towards their own children, and will compete for a better share for them
- they form “competing sets of heirs”
  - example problem: one wife has one daughter, while another wife has three sons
    - the wife with three sons will demand more resources to support them
    - the wife with one daughter will feel that her daughter is getting slighted, since the wife is doing just as much work and should be entitled to just as much of the household’s production...
- [thought question: why are men less likely to compete for themselves and their children in a polyandrous marriage?]
- for brothers, fraternal polyandry assures a good standard of living
  - access to more land and animals
  - access to inheritance of clothes, jewelry, saddles, etc.
    - each would not get as much land, housing, or goods if he set off on his own
  - less work pressure, since it is spread over several men
    - especially in the past, when aristocrats would demand almost fulltime labor of one man from each household
  - it is hard for a couple to manage both herding animals in distant pastures and tending crops
    - just not enough people to do things at the same time in different places
  - so the tradeoff is between personal freedom and material security
- structural problems with the Himalayan polyandry system
  - leaves some women without marriage partners
    - although there are viable, but less comfortable, roles for unmarried women
  - younger brothers are permanently subordinated to older ones, can cause tension
  - sexual jealousy, especially when brothers vary widely in age
    - youngest brother may be prepubescent or immature, uninteresting to wife initially
    - by the time the youngest husband is mature, his wife may seem too old
- today, fraternal polyandry is declining in popularity
  - no longer need to have an extra man to send to meet corvée labor demands
  - disparaged by dominant groups from India, China, Nepal
  - more other alternatives for subsistence today, with tourism and government jobs
    - since brothers can support themselves in other ways,
      - the inherited land, equipment, and animals would not have to be broken into as many parts if the remaining farming brothers married separate wives
      - with fewer brothers staying in farming, there might be enough land, etc. for each family to make it separately
    - i.e. less reason for a younger brother to give up his personal freedom to older brother, since it is more possible for the younger brother to get by on his own
- several of these explanations typify the “culture as system” approach
  - fraternal polyandry resulted from feudal system of labor rights, and is declining now that that system is gone
  - fraternal polyandry loses prestige when powerful outsiders disparage it

- fraternal polyandry declines as better transportation and globalization increase alternatives for livelihood
- All of these explain what seem to be fundamental and personal ideas about marriage, sex, families in terms of larger systems in which they are embedded: historical changes in politics, economics, travel and communication technology
- several of these explanations typify the “culture as adaptation” approach
  - fraternal polyandry assures material plenty and security
  - fraternal polyandry keeps landholdings intact
  - fraternal polyandry assures sufficient labor for a diversity of tasks located in distant places, like herding, farming, and trading
  - fraternal polyandry keeps the population from outgrowing its resource base
  - Again, explaining intimate aspects of beliefs about personal life in terms of how they function to solve problems posed by economics and ecology
- You might try drawing kinship and residence charts as in the slides for the additional examples in Robbins (and Lee)
  - Trobriand Islanders
  - Traditional Chinese (Han) rural families
  - Ju/'hoansi
- and try answering why each system works for the people who use it
  - economic reasons (inheritance, exchange, viability of subsistence production, standard of living...)
  - inheritance and landholding reasons
  - establishing and maintaining relationships between families
  - how the ability to exert control over people varies in different societies
  - ideas about ancestors
  - ideas about the roles of men and women in the production of children
- Overall point: there are many different ways to organize marriages, families, sex, childrearing, and inheritance
  - ours is only one of many alternatives
  - other forms make sense to the people who use them, in their circumstances
  - family life is very much socially or culturally constructed
  - and we are not going to understand people with other arrangements unless we understand this very important aspect of their lives