

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 20
Forms of marriage, residence, and their logic

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- Today’s readings 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
 - there is nothing absolute or necessary about any one particular concept of marriage, or unnatural or wrong about others
- Consider our typical American marriage and residence system
 - a man and woman get married (usually, in ideal culture)
 - they form their own household
 - this is a residential group that functions as a separate economic unit
 - again, this is how it is supposed to work in ideal culture
 - in real culture, they may live with one or the others’ parents, may depend on economic help from relatives, etc.
 - they have kid(s), who remain in the same household
 - which is their “family of orientation”
 - until the kid(s) leave their family of orientation,
 - get married to someone from another household
 - and form their own, new household:
 - their “family of procreation”
 - each marriage creates a new residential unit or household
 - made up of a nuclear family
- The American construction of marriage, family, and residence or household structure is just one of many ways to arrange these things
 - our concepts of marriage and family are, you guessed it, cultural constructs
- 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 and in the ongoing matrilineal family
 - think of a single house compound, with associated fields, herds, etc., that people are born into, live their whole lives in, and die in
 - the house and lands remain, as the generations flow through it...
 - women control most property
 - 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, and responsibility to care for 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):
 - it prevents the splitting up of family land, houses, equipment, etc.
 - as opposed to couples constantly splitting off and founding their own small households from scratch
 - eventually splitting their parents' land up among the heirs
 - since families often have more than two kids, that would lead to farms breaking down every generation into smaller and smaller units that are less economically viable
 - and getting recombined randomly with every marriage
 - larger families (because the kids stay in the household) are more practical economic units
 - 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 or grandmother
 - as opposed to trying to arrange cooperation between small family units that all have slightly different self-interests
 - if nuclear families were separate households, each would have interests affected by a different combination of relatives of the husband and of the wife
 - allows couples to be formed based on love or preference, not economic or political decisions
 - thus they can easily split if they are dissatisfied
 - since there is no formal marriage
 - thus no alliances, economic debts, or other 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
 - in-law relations are structurally prone to be tense in most societies
 - from the mother-in-law or father-in-law's point of view,
 - 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

- likely to seem not good enough for the parents' child
- someone at the same age and status 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
 - often are an impediment to being with the lover
 - 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, although the practice is fading in recent decades
 - 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"
 - in effect, this is somewhat similar to the Mosuo system
 - the landholdings, house compounds, equipment, etc. stay intact
 - brothers are born into a household and stay in it their whole lives
 - bringing in one wife for all of them
 - while any daughters may leave to marry into another household
 - monogamy is also common, but is usually harder economically
 - because the man probably gets only a fraction of his parents' land
 - and because there are fewer hands to run the farm
 - 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 for polyandry; 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 children per unmarried woman, vs. 3.3 children per polyandrous woman
 - this population effect is not noticed or mentioned by Tibetans themselves
 - that is, this 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
 - an etic comment:
 - this way of keeping the inheritance together serves the same function as
 - the Mosuo system of matrilineal households and matrilineal inheritance
 - or the system of primogeniture (British culture up into the early twentieth century and many others),
 - except that all the brothers get to use the inheritance, not just the first born
 - why don't we (or modern European cultures) have a way of doing this?
 - because family farm landholdings are no longer so important to us?
 - wife likes it because more resources and the labor of multiple men are supporting her and her children
 - 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?]
- husbands/brothers like it because fraternal polyandry assures a good standard of living
 - access to more land and animals
 - access to inheritance of farm equipment, clothes, jewelry, 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 corvéé 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 of the decline of polyandry 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 of the decline of polyandry 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
- Conservative Shi’ite Muslim polygyny in Fernea
 - the recent chapters in Fernea should be giving you a more personal view of yet another marriage and residence system
 - Muslim men can have up to four wives
 - they are supposed to care for all of them equally
 - usually only men who are relatively wealthy can afford multiple wives
 - men have various reasons for taking a second wife
 - his first wife is not bearing children, or is bearing no sons to be heirs
 - he can afford it and he is not satisfied with his first wife
 - because she is getting older and less attractive or fertile
 - because she was selected by his parents (especially his mother) against his wishes, and now his mother is gone and he has the means to pick a wife on his own
 - he wants to be charitable to a widow, orphan, etc. without a household to support her
 - remember, Islam requires good Muslims to be charitable
 - he needs more labor in his household due to obligations to host guests, feasts, etc., as in the case of Sheik Hamid
 - his first wife is old, ill, etc., and wants help in the household
 - polygyny often leads to conflict among the wives
 - jealousy
 - older wives ganging up against the newest, most attractive wife
 - yet the women BJ talks to still insist that their way is better than the American system of serial monogamy
 - this is a view I have heard repeated almost exactly in news interviews with women in Iraq: our way is better!
 - they say that a man taking a second wife is better than his divorcing the first and leaving her without support
 - men being able to take additional wives provides a solution for widows in a culture where unmarried women have only poor options
- Overall point
 - there are many possible ways to organize marriage, families, residence, household economics, sex, childrearing, inheritance, etc.
 - every culture’s norms for these things are arbitrary cultural constructs
 - they generally make sense to the people who live with these constructs

- there is nothing particularly special about the way we do these things, except that they are our ways...