

Cognatic Kinship Organization: Some Theoretical Considerations

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Within the past fifteen years, anthropologists have been concerned with the problem of nonunilinear descent. For many years, anthropologists have recognized the fact that all societies of the world do not have unilinear kinship systems, but there were no quantitative studies to determine the incidence of nonunilinear descent. Murdock (7) in his definitive work on social organization used a sample of 250 societies and noted that only 75 societies, or 30 percent of the sample, follow a nonunilinear rule of descent. The problem that arises is that of classifying the kinship organization of approximately one-third of the world's societies into definite structural units so that a comparative analysis of their attributes can be made.

Murdock's first attempt at classifying nonunilinear kinship systems led him to arrive at the concept of bilateral descent, which is defined as the absence of any unilinear emphasis (7). The kindred, he noted, is the commonest type of bilateral kin group. Murdock felt that the kindred is an attribute of all bilateral societies.

The presence of the kindred in a number of societies is noted by the fact that Ego knows and acts accordingly with certain relatives on both sides of his family. In societies where unilinear kin groups are absent, the kindred becomes an intermediate group between the nuclear family and the community. Given the definition that the kindred is a group of people related nonunilinearly to a particular individual or sibling group, certain conceptual problems arise. The kindred, by definition, cannot be the same for any two individuals who are not siblings, and because of its personal nature, the personal kindreds of different persons overlap and intersect, rather than coincide. Kindreds are ego-oriented and their relationships are traced laterally rather than lineally, and their point of termination is collateral, usually with second cousins.

It is clear to see that kindreds are not permanent groups, their composition is always shifting; for this reason kindreds cannot form discrete and separate segments of an entire society. Although the kindred may define the jural rights of an individual, it can never act as a corporate group and hold property (land, material goods, religious secrets, etc.). As a matter of fact, the kindred is a kin group only from the point of view of one individual or sibling group.

Because the kindred cannot be defined in linear terms, students of social organization agree that it is not a full-fledged descent group. Mitchell (6) contends that the kindred is not only a characteristic of nonunilinear societies, but is a characteristic of all societies. Anthropologists have long recognized the fact that even in societies where unilinear kin groups are present, Ego is bilaterally filiated with both maternal and paternal relatives as far as kinship rights and duties are concerned. With this in mind, the concept of the kindred must be approached with some reservations: 1) we should recognize that the

kindred is an ego-oriented kinship structure and its membership consists of people who stand in a definite relationship to Ego; 2) that the concept of the kindred is valid in all societies; 3) that anthropological observations of the social participation of Ego with his kin is more important than native linguistic categories in the derivation of social structures; 4) that the term kindred is generic and refers to a variety of structural types; and 5) that the kindred, because it is ego-oriented, differs from the corporate kin group and that both groups have different system-references and cannot be abstracted from the same order of social relations. The kindred is not a valid descent group, because as we have seen, it is not structured along linear principles; its point of departure is ego and those who stand in a bilateral relationship to him.

Further investigations into the nature of nonunilinear descent groups have shed some light on different types of intermediate cognatic social structures. Goodenough (4:72) proposes a generic term for all societies where descent groups are composed of members who trace their relationships lineally through either or both sexes to a common known or unknown ancestor. Under the heading of "non-unilinear descent group," Goodenough classifies a variety of cognatic kinship structures. Davenport (1) has introduced the term "sept," and suggests that it be employed for kin groups where descent is reckoned ambilineally. The conceptual scheme of rules of descent originally proposed by Murdock (7) can no longer be used; his four rules of descent: patrilineal, matrilineal, bilateral, and double descent, must be revised. A new conceptual scheme would retain four rules of descent, but would replace bilateral with cognatic, and under this latter heading would be included all types of nonunilinear descent. An individual, in a society where unilinear rules of descent are absent, can reckon his kin by three cognatic principles: bilaterally, through all of his relatives, regardless of sex, on both the maternal and paternal sides; quasi-unilineally, very similar to unilinear principles but deviating sufficiently enough to warrant separate consideration; and ambilineally, through either parent but shifting from one side to the other in successive generations.

With cognatic kinship organization as the generic term for non-unilinear descent systems, it becomes possible to analyze a number of different types of intermediate kinship structures. Murdock (9) proposes that cognatic kin groups be classified into three different "kinship types," with linguistic and social criteria being the basis for this classification. The three types of cognatic kinship structures are: Bilateral/Eskimo; Quasi-unilinear/Carib; and Ambilineal/Polynesian.

In societies with Bilateral/Eskimo type kinship organization small domestic units are found to be prominent, and there is an absence of larger extended family units. Marriage is usually monogamous with occasional polygamy. Residence is either ambilocal or neolocal and unilinear descent groups are absent. Incest tabus do not extend to first cousins and cousin terminology is of the Eskimo type with lineal or bifurcate collateral avuncular terms.

Quasi-unilinear/Carib societies represent a transitory stage between cognatic and unilinear structures. Small domestic units give way to larger extended families. The rule of residence is usually unilocal and

incest tabus are not extended to first cousins. Cousin terminology is of the Iroquois type, distinguishing cross-cousins from parallel-cousins, and avuncular terms are bifurcate merging.

In Ambilineal/Polynesian type societies extended families are prominent, and the ramage is nearly always present. The rule of residence is ambilocal. Incest tabus are extended so that any type of cousin marriage is forbidden and, as would be expected, Hawaiian cousin terminology and generational avuncular terminology prevails.

All of the above classifications are for kinship systems and in two of the systems descent groups are present. In the Quasi-unilineal/Carib kinship system lineages are sometimes found as a result of the unilocal rule of residence coupled with the occurrence of large extended families. Ambilineal/Polynesian kinship systems are characterized by the presence of ambilineal ramage. A ramage is the functional equivalent of a lineage, it is a kin group in which membership depends on genetic relationships, not affinal ties. Just as lineages are susceptible to segmentation, so are ramage; just as the core of a unilocal extended family is called a minimal lineage, so can the core of an ambilocal extended family be called a minimal ramage. Murdock (9) suggests that the term "sept" be applied to a maximal ramage just as the term "sib" is applied to a maximal lineage. The major differences between a lineage and a ramage are two: first, membership in a lineage is exclusive, an individual can belong to only one group at a time, but membership in a ramage is nonexclusive (1); the second difference is that affiliation with a lineage is definitive, determined by a strict rule of descent, while membership in a ramage is more a matter of choice (3).

Goodenough (5) notes that ego-oriented and ancestor-oriented kin groups differ from each other in the fact that the former are laterally organized while the latter are lineally organized. In keeping with this distinction, Goodenough writes that "ancestor based or lineally organized groups are the only ones which can be properly called descent groups (5:1343)." The author of this paper has kept this distinction throughout and as it is a valid distinction, it channels the efforts of social scientists in the direction of laterally organized structures.

"Recognition of local groups organized as laterally rather than lineally oriented kin groups gives new substance to what Murdock (1949) called the 'deme' (5:1346)." This statement lends overwhelming support for the retention of the concept of the deme. The deme, like its unilinear counterpart, the clan, is both a genetic kin group and a residential unit, thus eliminating the need for any compromise. Membership in the deme is restricted to those individuals who are related to each other both laterally and lineally by either genetic relationships or marriage, and who reside together. For the most part, the deme is an endogamous local group with bilateral descent and as Murdock notes, it should be regarded as a kin group rather than as a community (7:63).

Although the deme is defined as an endogamous local group, Murdock (7) was aware of the fact that exogamy might extend from the kindred to the entire community. This forces members of the deme to seek their spouses from outside of the community and in doing so, a unilocal rule of residence is usually followed, and the composition of the

group changes. If the rule of residence is matrilineal, the endogamous deme becomes an exogamous matriline.

The deme, as has been noted above, is not only a kin group, but is also a community group. Driver (2:305) defines the deme as a "community (village or band) which is not further segmented by unilineal descent . . ." Murdock (8:669) redefines the deme as "communities which reveal a marked tendency toward local endogamy without being composed of local exogamous units." The deme is the only kin group which does not divide the local community into members and non-members; its membership is non-exclusive.

In conclusion, the author wishes to point out that cognatic kinship systems are now being examined more thoroughly by students of social organization and it is hoped that this research will produce significant break-throughs into the types of intermediate structures. As demonstrated by this paper, only two types of cognatic kin groups on the intermediate level exist: the kindred, which is not a descent group, and the ramage, which is. On the level of the residential kin group, only the deme has been explained.

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