# Kinship and Descent

# Descent and Marriage Reconsidered

## Fredrik Barth

A reconsideration of some of the themes from the debate on descent and filiation, so prominently shaped by Meyer Fortes over a number of years (Fortes 1953 *a*, 1959 *a*, 1969) may serve as a fitting tribute to a teacher and senior colleague. My approach in the following departs from the main trend in this debate in two respects: I give greater attention to how native concepts and social groups are shaped by interaction and experience, rather than how they constitute cognitive schemata; and I introduce some further materials, mainly on Middle Eastern systems, into the discussion. By these means I hope to contribute to the debate on the nature of kinship, descent and filiation, and to shed some light on the properties of the Middle Eastern systems.

The intent of Fortes' central original article (Fortes 1953 *a*) was by the examination of a variety of new ethnographic materials to formulate a general understanding of the nature of descent and descent groups. These materials were heavily weighted towards certain African societies; and in retrospect we may see that some of the confusion and disagreement which those early generalizations engendered arose from empirical differences in the descent systems of different areas, i.e. from the common anthropological tendency to transform particular ethnographies to a paradigm of Man. This was first made clear by Leach (1957, last two paragraphs), a lead later developed by Schneider. The basic puzzle was that the classical descriptions (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Fortes 1945) depicted the segmentary structure as a logical entailment of unilineal descent, while later ethnographic accounts (of the 'alliance' systems of South East Asia) reported basic structural differences in such segmentary systems. In Schneider's formulation (1965 *a* : 58)

> Two different kinds of system, each made up of identically structured segments, are really at issue. In [the alliance] system, the segments are articulated into a logically interrelated system by the descent rule, the mode of classification of kinsmen, and the relationship of perpetual alliance between segments. In [the descent] system, segments are defined by the descent rule, exogamy, and the variable bounding of the segments in terms of specific functions (domestic, jural, political, residential, territorial, and so on).

From descriptions of some Middle Eastern societies (Peters 1960, 1967; Lewis 1961; Barth 1959; Pehrson 1966) we may add a further kind of system. Here, segments are defined by the descent rule, but no rule of

3

*Descent and Marriage Reconsidered*

exogamy relates these segments in marriage exchanges with their social surroundings. Allowed or preferred parallel cousin marriage creates an individuated network of kinship ties within and across segments, and the functions of different orders of segments depend on the variable limits of joint estates. These features have implications so that 'it is erroneous to regard Arab patrilineages as typologically one with the more commonly encountered exogamic patrilineal descent systems, for endogamy not only changes completely the relations between lineal components but alters the very internal structure of these groups' (Murphy and Kasdan 1967: 2).

Problems have also arisen in the application of the descent concept to New Guinea Highlands societies (Barnes 1962; for a summary of the subsequent debate see Strathern 1969). At issue are the mode of recruitment to segments (by cumulative patrifiliation rather than descent according to Barnes 1962: 6), the mode of articulation between segments (by locality; in accordance with descent dogma; by marriage alliance; by ritual exchange), and the ecological prerequisites of the social forms (the effects of density and land pressure). In attempts to accommodate these materials to a general anthropological vocabulary, or vice versa, distinctions have been made between how descent is applied by the actors themselves as (1) a principle of recruitment (2) a conceptualization of group unity (3) a statement of the proper composition of the group, and (4) a statement of the group's relation with other groups (Scheffler 1965; but see also his different treatment of the question in Scheffler 1966).

Where would such wider comparisons seem to bring us? We are faced with an increasing number of types of descent system in which the very concept of descent can imply a range of different things. This outcome is characteristic of a tradition of anthropology which proceeds with each individual society as if it were dissecting an organism, and seeks to depict the morphology of the system by naming its parts, using concepts developed through comparative generalizations. This is the procedure so sharply criticized by Leach (1961 *b*: 2–3); to my understanding it is basic to a structuralism which starts with the empirical epiphenomena of behaviour and works through macro-concepts such as custom and institution to distil an increasingly abstract 'social structure' of which the empirical facts are an embodiment. In contrast to this mode of thinking, I should like to argue very simply that some empirical events are far more pregnant with consequences than others, and that we can construct stratified models of reality where some empirical features are singled out as the sources or determinants of a number of other empirical features. Thus, the practice of using unilineal descent as a principle of recruitment must necessarily produce groups with certain structural properties. Even though the specific consequences of this, on other behaviour, will be affected by additional circumstances such as economic and political context, it remains essential to be

4

*Fredrik Barth*

able to show how this empirical process of recruitment generates other empirical features. I therefore see the task of analysis as one of locating such identifiable determinants and sources, and explicating the processes whereby their consequences ensue, rather than developing heuristic abstractions for describing structural patterns.

This indeed I feel has also been the intention of Fortes and Leach, among others, in their debate when they turn to the elementary kinship relations of father-child, mother-child, and spouses to find the sources of descent systems. Whatever they might claim to be doing, it has seemed to me that they are turning to real people, in real life contexts, to discover where the factors arise which generate the larger systems. But in wishing to go further and make this a crucial feature of anthropological model-building, I am forced to make clear what remains unclear in the structuralists' representations, viz: the dialectic between the concrete behaviour of persons, groups and categories on the one hand, and the collective institutions of culture and society that persist regardless of changing personnel. I must, incidentally, ask the reader's indulgence for the wide-ranging character of this discussion with the plea that, whenever one seeks to modify a theoretical framework, some previously simple points become unaccustomedly complex while some previously vague but complex questions become disappointingly simple.

To depict the connection between individual behaviour and collective institutions, it is necessary that one construct models with clearly differentiated micro- and macro-levels. I find it reasonable to see social institutions and customs as the outcome of a complex aggregation of numerous micro-events of behaviour, based on individual decisions in each person's attempts to cope with life. This is not to deny the existence of culture as a pre-established framework for choosing behaviour and interpreting experience – on the contrary, it is precisely to depict the interconnection of culture and behaviour that we need the models. Though every actor is dependent on his knowledge and codification, and hampered by conventional blinkers, there must none the less be a dynamic relationship between individual experience and learning, and the socially recognized collective facts which we call culture and institutions. The simplest form of this interconnection would seem to depend on sharing: individual behaviour produces experience, a confrontation with reality which may or may not seem consistent with preexisting conceptualizations and thus may sometimes tend to confirm, sometimes to falsify them. If a number of persons in communication share a similar opportunity situation, experience the same confrontations with reality, and have the same conceptualizations falsified, one would expect them to develop shared understandings and modify their collective culture and expectations in accordance with this. Obviously, this is not a complete theory of culture change, but may be sufficient for our purposes, as will

5

## Descent and Marriage Reconsidered

emerge shortly. On the basis of it, we can ask specific questions about how such shared understandings emerge, and what their everyday relevance becomes. It is from this perspective I hope to elucidate the connections between descent systems and actual behaviour.

This simultaneous interest in (native) models and behaviour has been criticized as a 'failure to distinguish the segment as a conceptual entity from its concrete counterpart as a group' (Schneider 1965 *a*: 75). Success in making this important distinction must not prevent us, however, from constructing a model that contains both. I would criticize both Fortes and Leach not so much for being unclear on this distinction as for seeking structure and explanation too exclusively on the *conceptual* side of the dichotomy – the argument about descent often focuses mainly on the question whether it stands in conceptual opposition to affinity or to comple-mentary filiation. Let us rather give equal weight to the aspect of con-frontation with *reality* contained in any social experience. Given a certain pattern of membership in a descent group, to what groups and aggregations of actual people can the members of a descent group be counterpoised? And how does the social experience thereby produced affect the concep-tualization of descent and descent group, and the social uses such group membership will be put to in the future? I am arguing essentially that we should consider the 'we–they' confrontation contained in the social inter-action, and inspect how the experience of who 'they' are will mould the actor's conception of 'we'.

Now here is where some essential facts constrain us in our model building: through notions of incest and exogamy man makes an arbitrary and culturally varying, but fundamental, association between descent and responsibilities to dispose of women in marriage. It would be simple to construct a general model of unilineal descent alone, and see its implications of nesting segments, balanced opposition, etc. But people everywhere seem to see 'who they are' in terms of the whole kinship network, i.e. both with reference to relations of descent (or filiation), and marriages. Anthropology has been unable to produce a generally acceptable theory of incest and exogamy: we cannot say why persons everywhere in their choice of spouse must think of whose child they are. But the connection, variable in its particular injunctions as between cultures, is yet ubiquitous. When a group recruited by a rule of descent confronts a 'they' group, who 'they' are will be specified by the connected criteria of descent and marriage; and different marriage systems will therefore imply very different experiences of con-frontation, and consequent images of the 'we' descent group.

Let me illustrate this by a straight-forward and extreme ethnographic case: the Marri Baluch (Pehrson 1966). Here, a woman is disposed of in marriage by her closest adult male agnate or agnates. In return for a wife for its member, the extended household gives a brideprice, or a bride, in

6

*Fredrik Barth*

exchange. At the same time, marriage between close agnates, especially
father's brother's children, is preferred. Now imagine the following situation,
exemplified in Pehrson's field materials: The children (D–H) of three
deceased brothers (A, B, C) form a minimal descent group. Marriage
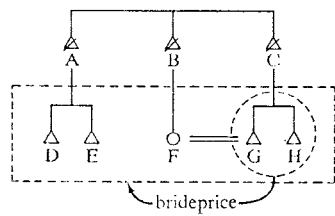


guardianship in the woman F is vested in her closest agnates, D, E, G, and
H. G marries F in agreement with the preferred rule of marriage. He
receives the bride; he and his brother pay the brideprice jointly. The
recipients of the brideprice are his cousins, and he and his brother; i.e. G
and H receive half shares in the brideprice which they themselves pay.
Similar marriages have high frequency in the population, with a number of
confounding effects (pp. 55 ff). The conceptual distinction between parties
giving and receiving a woman is clear enough, and where possible it is
expressed physically as (the representatives of) two distinct descent groups
facing each other (p. 115). But the concrete counterpart of the distinct groups
will often fail to emerge, because persons belong equally to both categories;
likewise the most elementary distinctions of kinship between agnates,
matrilaterals, and affines will be confounded through the practice of such
marriages (35 ff., 42). How different such experiences must be from those of
the Kachin, where the wife-giving line materializes physically as a distinct
group every time and all participants can see them as a corporeal reality,
labelled by an unequivocal kinship term – different again from the Tallensi
who can experience agreement about the presence of a group, but little
agreement about who they are: matrilaterals, affinals, or unrelated.

   The main thrust of the following argument is directed to show that this
difference is not without effect on the meaning and relevance of descent: it
affects the organizational potential of the descent structure, and the kinds of
tasks and activities that are pursued by descent groups. Indeed, I shall try
to show that this perspective can provide the basis for a comparative
analysis of descent systems. This requires (a) concepts whereby one shows
how descent rules and marriage networks produce structures with deter-
minate organizational potentials. But despite such potentials one cannot
deduce from first principles the behaviour which will actually be organized
by the structure in each case, i.e. whether the transmission of rights to real
property, obligations in work groups, responsibility in feud, etc. It has been

7

## Descent and Marriage Reconsidered

argued (Fortes 1959 *a* in 1970 *b*: 97; Leach 1957 in 1961 *b*: 123) that to understand this, one must consider the political and economic context. But what determines which aspects of politics and economics are relevant? Different structures, as potential frameworks for the organization of activities, are more or less suitable for different tasks. We need to explicate how an aggregate of people come to use a certain structure for the organization of a set of tasks, i.e. we need (b) concepts to show the processes whereby tasks are codified and assigned to status positions in the structure.

This implies a perspective not unlike that of Fortes in his use of the concept of *domain* (Fortes 1969: 95–100), whereby he distinguishes the normative concatenation of activity systems from their positional, structural aspect. I have argued elsewhere (Barth 1966, 1972) that these are always connected dimensions of social organization, which both require systematic attention; and I have sought to identify them on the micro-level by the concepts of situation, occasion and task vs. status, status set and person. In one of Fortes' formulations, 'A social occasion, event or institution is not a hodgepodge of casually mixed cultural and structural elements; it has form and texture – that is, an internal structure. And this is because each element of status manifested in it carries with it (or we can turn this around and say is the outcome of) a specific context of social relations to which given norms and patterns of customary behaviour are attached' (1969: 97). In this light, a preliminary version of our question may be: 'What determines the content of descent relations' – or indeed how is the content of any kinship relation determined?

One is led to pose the question this way because of the way we are used to identify kinship statuses. In most fields of social organization, the bundle of rights which composes a status gives, among other things, command over specific resources that provide the basis for enactment of its characteristic role: the feudal lord his land rights, the director his desk and telephone, the priest his temple. But what resources are given to a mother's brother? We identify a status as one of relevance to political structure because it gives command over political resources; thus we are not led to ask what determines the content of political relations because it is precisely in terms of their content that they are identified as political. But we recognize kinship statuses by a few diagnostic traits only; and so we can ask what determines the (rest of the) content of kinship relations. As Schneider points out in his discussion of the definition of kinship: '. . .it seems self-evident that there is more to kinship than meets the simple prerequisites of regulating sexual intercourse, socializing the young, caring for the baby. There are aspects of any kinship system that are so remote from such problems. . .that it is just not possible to account for them, or to hold them to be necessary, in such terms' (Schneider 1965 *b*: 88).

It looks as if, by dichotomizing status and task and putting our question

8

*Fredrik Barth*

in this way, we have manoeuvred ourselves into an impasse. I have chosen
to do so to provide a basic paradigm of the process of institutionalization –
i.e. how individual experience feeds back on cultural standardization – and
thereby expose the kind of argument which may also facilitate the com-
parison of descent group organizations. Let us therefore focus for a moment
on real people in an elementary kinship situation in Western society: one
where relatively newly married spouses are pursuing the core activities of
sexual intercourse, socializing the young, and caring for a baby. These tasks
are assigned to a status set of husband/father, wife/mother, and child. This
set is obviously for the newborn child the first set that he ever participates
in. It can serve as a basis for interaction in a variety of activities, and will
indeed tend to do so. If you look at what happens in such a social system
of married parents and a child, you will see all sorts of role elaborations
emerge as this triad copes with the daily problems of life; and they will
organize all these new tasks in terms of the three statuses in the set, because
they are what is relevant in the domestic situation. The child is, in other
words, trained to participate in this status set; and it is the first he can
handle. As he goes out into the world, and meets new kinds of problems,
he will continue to appeal to this same status set. Faced with a new problem
he will scream for mother, without asking whether it involves tasks organized
in terms of kinship; in every community little boys go out every day and try
to mobilize this basic kinship triad for new purposes. With growing social
experience and competence they will start limiting themselves to doing so
only where the status set is adequate or at least not grossly inappropriate.
Obviously, the father-mother-child set is no good for organizing a group of
boys for an egalitarian operation; for such tasks one must invent or borrow
another organizational framework. But where the activity is one that can
be adequately handled with the kinship statuses, I would expect them to be
mobilized by numerous persons in similar opportunity situations, producing
expectations and patterned ways of responding in alters. The roles in the
set will consequently become more and more complex, compounded from
different kinds of activities that do not have to do with sexual intercourse
or socializing the young; and this organization of activities will become
institutionalized as common, shared learning of how to cope with life.

What becomes kinship behaviour, in any particular culture, will thus
constantly be under pressure of change from two combined set of factors:
one of which we may loosely call ecology – the concrete life situations that
arise where purposes are pursued under technical and practical constraints,
the other of which we may seek in the organizational capacity of kinship
sets and relational networks. I do not claim that the full content of kinship
relations can be deduced from these determinants; but I do claim to have
pointed to mechanisms and processes which act on the tasks and obligations
of kinship statuses and change them by cumulative increments.[1]

9

### Descent and Marriage Reconsidered

I should also perhaps point out that the reasoning expounded above bears little resemblance to Malinowski's type of biographical extension theory (Malinowski 1929), since its crucial elements concern the transformation from status to role and the feedback of experience to routinization (see Barth 1966: 1–11) and not the classification of variant cases with reference to prototypes.

Let me also seek to clarify the kind of analysis I am attempting by schematizing it, in contrast to a schematized version of structuralist analysis. This may be useful because my purposes are closely similar to theirs, my language is largely similar, yet some of the basic premises and analytical operations are drastically different. Let us limit ourselves to a simple, and hopefully not unacceptable, distinction between structural premises, social patterns, and individual cases of behaviour, belief, or action. As I understand the procedure of many British social anthropologists, these three are connected in linear fashion. In terms of the anthropologist's model, structural premises explain social patterns which in turn explain, and are exemplified in, individual cases. In terms of the anthropologist's investigation, it proceeds the opposite way, from individual cases to social patterns
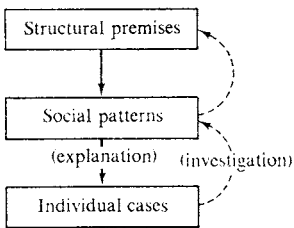


to structural premises, which once they are discovered provide the key to model building. The type of model I am seeking to construct is one based on a micro-macro distinction, as follows: the crucial explanations lie in the transformations between these two levels: (i) how individual cases are generated by choices constrained by empirical social patterns *and*



10
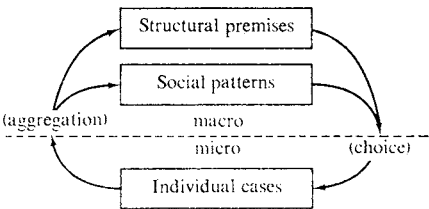
*Fredrik Barth*

structural, or as I should prefer to say, cultural premises, and (ii) how these individual cases are aggregated through interaction to social patterns and through reality confrontation, learning and sharing to cultural premises. The 'premises' and 'patterns' are only connected through behavioural ('micro') events, not directly in terms of homology and structural fit; the social patterns (e.g. a concrete empirical network of marriage relations) have a primacy in explanation equal to that of structural or cultural premises (e.g. a rule of exogamy).

Let us then pursue the analysis of descent systems in this framework. We have asked what determines the organizational potential, i.e. the structure, of a descent system. This potential derives essentially from the form and scale of the unambiguous status sets defined by descent available for use by the individual actors. We are, in other words, focusing first on the right-hand side of the model: the options presented by the system to the actor. The particular rules of exogamy will obviously have an immediate impact here: within the bounds of exogamy there will be a complete orderliness in the distribution of kin statuses on persons so that only a limited range of consanguines are found within the exogamous descent segment. Positive marriage rules will also create a type of order in patterning the overlap of consanguines and affines. But indeed, since *any* distribution in fact constitutes a pattern, it is the whole concrete network of pre-established marriages to which we should give our attention, not the general rules, since these consummated marriages will determine the total kinship composition of groups to which ego belongs or is confronted, and thus furnish premises for his own actions and understandings.

In Middle Eastern communities with patrilineal descent organization, the ordering effect of exogamy extends only to lineals and first order collaterals; thus no cousin is prohibited. A positive *right* to marry FaBrDa has been reported from many areas; however, since this refers to a specific genealogical relationship it should not be regarded as a positive marriage rule. Whether the explicit right is formulated or not, the actual frequency of such marriages, as a sub-category of descent group and family endogamy, is high. Crude counts vary from around 10% (Ayoub 1959, Khuri 1970) and 20% (Patai 1965), in some communities up to 30% (Barth 1954, Pehrson 1966). There has been some useful discussion of the significance of such percentages (Ayoub 1959, Gilbert and Hammel 1966, Goldberg 1967, Hammel and Goldberg 1971), clarifying how they combine the effects of local endogamy and postmarital residence with the effects of a specific preference for the particular relative FaBrDa. However, in the present context we are concerned with the frequency of the event and its implications, not its causes. These are only exacerbated by its association with rates of descent group endogamy of 40–80%, and even higher rates of 'family' and 'village' endogamy.

11