

# REVISITING MATRILINEAL PRIORITY

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Nineteenth century anthropologists widely agreed that early human society was not based on the nuclear family. Lewis Henry Morgan instead championed the matrilineal clan as the first stable institutional framework for human family life. In this, he was supported by theorists who later came to include E. B. Tylor, Friedrich Engels, W. H. R. Rivers, Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud. Until the 1920s, most anthropologists still accepted a ‘stages’ view of the evolution of kinship, in which matrilineal descent systems universally preceded their patrilineal counterparts.

When Morgan’s evolutionist schema was discredited early in the twentieth century, it was largely on the basis of two interventions. First, Franz Boas claimed to have discovered a Vancouver Island tribe (the Kwakiutl) in the throes of transition from *patrilineal* to *matrilineal* descent, reversing Morgan’s supposedly universal sequence. Second, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown offered an explanation of the ‘avunculate’ in terms of universal psychological and sociological principles, claiming that the ‘matrilineal survival’ interpretation of this peculiarity of kinship could therefore be dispensed with.

In this article, I make no attempt to return to the debate or adjudicate on the substantive issues involved. My more modest aim is to recall key features of the debate, highlighting the motivations and agendas involved at the time.

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If there is one thing on which all schools of social anthropology are agreed, it is that the nineteenth century ‘mother-right’ theory of early kinship is of no more than historical interest. Of all the theoretical conquests achieved by Boas, Kroeber, Lowie, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and their allies during the first decades of the twentieth century, the overthrow of the Bachofen-Morgan evolutionary scheme has appeared the most secure. To the extent that twentieth century social anthropology solved the problems it set out to address, those responsible for this paradigm shift must posthumously be accorded full credit. Should we conclude, however, that twentieth century social anthropology stumbled from crisis to crisis, solving not one of the most basic problems facing it, then a search for the roots of our crisis might return us to that decisive moment in the history of our discipline.

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## ***The Discovery of Matrilineality***

Matrilineal exogamy was first accurately described in print by an early English adventurer, John Lederer, in an account of his travels in Eastern North America

published in 1672. He was writing of the Tutelo, an eastern Siouan tribe (Lederer 1672: 10-11; quoted in Tax 1955: 445):

“From four women, viz., Pash, Sopoy, Askarin and Maraskarin they derive the race of mankind; which they therefore divide into four Tribes, distinguished under those several names. They very religiously observe the degrees of marriage, which they limit not to distance of Kindred, but difference of Tribes, which are continued in the issue of the females: now for two of the same tribe to match, is abhorred as Incest, and punished with great severity.”

What Lederer refers to as a “tribe” is, in modern anthropological parlance, a “clan.” In this case, there are four matrilineal clans within the same tribe, marriage within the same clan being equally prohibited no matter how “closely or “distantly” related the partners.

Fifty-two years later, Father Lafitau (1724, 1: 71-2) described in glowing terms the apparent equality and even (in important respects) superiority of the female sex over the male among the Iroquois:

“Nothing...is more real than this superiority of the women. It is essentially the women who embody the Nation, the nobility of blood, the genealogical tree, the sequence of generations and the continuity of families. It is in them that all real authority resides: the land, the fields and all their produce belongs to them: they are the soul of the councils, the arbiters of peace and war: they conserve the finances or the public treasury; it is to them that slaves are given: they make the marriages, the children are in their domain and it is in their blood that the order of succession is based.”

In 1767 the great Scottish historian Adam Ferguson was the first to generalize on the basis of Lafitau’s and other missionaries’ and explorers’ reports. Writing of “savage nations” in general he remarked that (Ferguson 1767: 126):

“...as the domestic cares are committed to the women, so the property of the household seems likewise to be vested in them. The children are considered as pertaining to the mother, with little regard to descent on the father’s side.”

This suggestion was not followed up, however, until in 1861 the Swiss jurist and historian of Roman law, Johann Jakob Bachofen, published his “Mother-Right”. Bachofen knew little at this time of ethnology beyond that contained in the literature of ancient Greece and Rome. His knowledge of the classics was sufficient, however, for him to make a persuasive-seeming case for the priority of matriliney from these sources alone. An idea of the kind of evidence he relied on is given by these two excerpts:

“Of all records relating and pertaining to mother right, those concerning the Lycian people are the clearest and most valuable. The Lycians, Herodotus reports, did not name their children after their fathers like the Hellenes, but exclusively after their mothers; in their genealogical records they dealt entirely with the maternal line, and the status of children was defined solely in accordance with that of the mother. Nicolaus of Damascus completes this testimony by telling us that only the daughters possessed the right of inheritance” (Bachofen 1973: 70).

Or again:

“...I should like to cite a report from Nicolaus of Damascus’ collection of strange customs, preserved by Stobaeus in his *Florilegium*: ‘The Ethiopians hold their sisters in particular honor. The kings leave their scepter not to their own children but to their sisters. If no heir is available, they choose the most beautiful and belligerent as their leader.’ This last observation is confirmed by Herodotus and Strabo. The favoring of the sister’s children is a necessary consequence of mother-right and is also to be found elsewhere” (pp. 135-6).

From his analysis of the myths, literature and ethnological reports of ancient Greece and Rome, Bachofen reached a conclusion which he expressed in these words (p. 71):

“...mother right is not confined to any particular people but marks a cultural stage. In view of the universal qualities of human nature, this cultural stage cannot be restricted to any particular ethnic family. And consequently what must concern us is not so much the similarities between isolated phenomena as the unity of the basic conception.”

J. P. McLellan read Bachofen’s book in 1866, having already the previous year published his “Primitive Marriage” (1865: 123; quoted in Tax 1955: 455) in which he claimed to have proved that “the system of kinship through females” was “a more archaic system of kinship than the system of relationship through males.” It was Morgan, however, who did most to support Bachofen’s case by relating it to evidence concerning the kinship systems of the Iroquois and other Indians of the United States. Morgan (1881:126) related matrilineal clans to the solidarity between sisters living together, and associated this in turn with the idea of “communism in living”. Describing an Iroquois long-house he wrote (pp. 126-8) of its immense length, its numerous compartments and fires, the “warm, roomy and tidily-kept habitations” within the long-house, the raised bunks around the walls, the common stores and “the matron in each household, who made a division of the food from the kettle to each family according to their needs...” “Here”, he commented, “was communism in living carried out in practical life...” In such households, he concluded, “was laid the foundation for that ‘mother-power’ which was even more conspicuous in the tribes of the Old World, and which Professor Bachofen was the first to discuss under the name of gynocracy and mother-right.” Morgan and Bachofen exerted a reciprocal influence on each other. While Bachofen’s ideas on the priority of matriliney became incorporated into Morgan’s *Ancient Society* (1877), Bachofen appreciated the comparisons drawn by Morgan between his own classical materials and the matrilineal clan system of the Iroquois. Bachofen expressed his gratitude by dedicating a book of essays to Morgan (see Harris 1969: 189).

Following some suggestions made by Marx, Engels wrote his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) in order to show the way in which Bachofen’s and Morgan’s positions gave strength to the interpretation of human evolution and history which he and Marx had evolved. For Engels, the base line from which alone the study of kinship-solidarity could begin was provided not by the modal of “the family” in anything like the modern European sense but by the model of the matrilineal clan. Just how important this seemed to him can be judged from the following evaluation of Morgan’s work (Engels 1884: 181-2):

“The rediscovery of the original mother-right gens as the stage preliminary to the father-right gens of the civilised peoples has the same significance for the history of primitive society as theory of evolution has for biology, and Marx’s theory of surplus value for political economy. It enabled Morgan to outline for the first time a history of the family,

wherein at least the classical stages of development are, on the whole, provisionally established, as far as the material at present available permits. Clearly, this opens a new era in the treatment of the history of primitive society. The mother-right gens has become the pivot around which this entire science turns; since its discovery we know in which direction to conduct our researches, what to investigate and how to classify the results of our investigations.”

This was not a hasty judgment. It should be remembered that even as early as 1844, Marx (1844: 147) had written that the “immediate, natural and necessary relationship of human being to human being is the relationship of man to woman”, and that “from this relationship the whole cultural level of man can be judged.” The matrilineal clan, based on the solidarity of women within large, collective households, seemed to Marx and Engels merely a concrete embodiment of something in which they had always believed – namely, an “original form of social organization in which the sexes had been equally powerful and in which not even the rudiments of private property, class-exploitation or the state had as yet evolved”. Marx and Engels wrote in “The German Ideology” (1846: 21) of “...property, the nucleus, the first form, of which lies in the family, where wife and children are the slaves of the husband.” Morgan’s view (1881: 128; 1877: 474, 481, 512) that private property had emerged through the break-up of the originally communal matrilineal households of an earlier phase of social evolution seemed to dovetail neatly with this idea and was taken up eagerly by Engels. Morgan (1881: 128) described how the transition to patrilineal descent had been associated with the breaking of women’s own kinship bonds and their isolation from one another in the home:

“It thus reversed the position of the wife and mother in the household; she was of a different gens from her children, as well as her husband; and under monogamy was now isolated from her gentile kindred, living in the separate and exclusive house of her husband. Her new condition tended to subvert and destroy that power and influence which descent in the female line and the joint-tenement houses had created.”

Engels (1884: 217) commented:

“The overthrow of mother right was the world-historic defeat of the female sex. The man seized the reins in the house also, the woman was degraded, enthralled, the slave of the man’s lust, a mere instrument for breeding children.”

He continued, rooting the central features of class society in the original processes through which marriage-bonds had undermined the solidarity of women in the matrilineal joint household and clan (p. 225):

“The first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamian marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male.”

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### ***Boas and the Kwakiutl Case***

The matrilineal priority hypothesis rested on two fundamental props:

1. A number of matrilineal descent systems were known to have shifted towards patriliney in recent times. No case of a society evolving in the reverse direction was known.
2. In certain African societies with patrilineal descent, apparently inconsistent principles could be discerned. These anomalous features – such as the ‘special’ relationship between a child and its mother’s brother – could be interpreted as matrilineal survivals.

The first prop was attacked by Franz Boas. Boas, Lowie (1960: 420) reminds us, had begun as a unilinear evolutionist. In 1888 he had defended “the current view of a necessary precedence of matrilineal forms of family organization” (Boas 1940: 635). But then came... “the new facts”. Writing of Boas, Lowie explains:

“...his critique of evolutionary schemes is the psychological equivalent of the experimentalists’ critique of ‘the biogenetic law’. The facts did not fit the theory, hence the theory would have to be modified or discarded... L. H. Morgan teaches that the individual family is an end-product, preceded by various stages including that of a clan organization; Morgan, Bachofen, and Tylor teach the priority of matrilineal descent. Boas found that in the interior of British Columbia clanless tribes with a family organization and a patrilineal trend adopted from coastal neighbours a matrilineal clan organization. Diffusion thus disproved the universal validity of the formula that Boas himself had been defending in 1888.”

These were large claims, and they certainly served their purpose. Less well-known is the fact that they were stretched to fit the case – as Lowie himself was eventually forced to concede. Although “the Kwakiutl facts are very interesting”, as he later put it (1960: 28), “it is highly doubtful whether they have the theoretical significance ascribed to them.” The Kwakiutl *numaym* groups were not matrilineal but “mixed”, the reckoning of a child’s affiliation being “indeterminate”, and the descent groups not being exogamous at all. “For these reasons”, Lowie later concluded, “the Kwakiutl conditions do not seem to furnish a favorable test case.”

Summing up the incident, Marvin Harris (1969: 305) concludes that the “extreme interest” of Boas’ handling of his material

“...stems from the fashion in which he and his students seized upon this case to destroy the supposed universal tendency for patrilineality to follow matrilineality and at the same time to discredit the entire historical determinist position. On the basis of this one drastically deficient case, there gradually diffused out of Schermerhorn Hall at Columbia, through lecture, word of mouth, article and text, the unquestioned dogma that Boas had proved that it was just as likely that patrilineality succeeded matrilineality as the reverse.”

Harris<sup>22</sup> describes how, following Boas’ sensational claims, a stampede against Morgan and his followers was let loose. When the Kwakiutl case was cited in the general textbook that Boas had edited, Gladys Reichard referred to it as “more convincing” than the other possible instance among the Trobrianders (“also” – as Harris puts it – “highly

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<sup>22</sup> Harris (1969: 305).

dubious, however”) because “the details of its cause are more positive”.<sup>23</sup> Boas’ speculations concerning a patrilineal to matrilineal transition among the Kwakiutl actually gave rise to an attempt to show that this sequence was the normal one. Thus, John Swanton<sup>24</sup> tried to demonstrate that in America it was precisely the matrilineally organized tribes, such as the Haida of the Northwest, the Zuni and Hopi among the Pueblos, and the Creek and Natchez of the Southeast, who were the culturally most ‘advanced’ peoples, while the groups that were organized on a patrilineal and a bilateral basis were deemed ‘primitive’. Lowie, Kroeber and Goldenweiser<sup>25</sup> all eagerly seized upon this idea. As Murdock<sup>26</sup> has shown:

“This inverted evolutionistic scheme of a bilateral-patrilineal-matrilineal succession in the forms of social organization became an established dogma in American anthropology.”

To see how the “matrilineal priority” hypothesis appeared within the perspective of later twentieth century anthropology, it may be useful to turn to the words of G. P. Murdock. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, he writes,<sup>27</sup> authorities such as Bachofen, Lubbock, McLennan, Morgan, Spencer and Tylor (i.e. virtually all those who shaped anthropological opinion for nearly fifty years) were generally agreed that the matrilineal clan was the original form of human social organization, that this form of society gave way to patrilineal and patriarchal institutions as the male sex gradually achieved a position of dominance, and that the emergence of bilateral (“family” in the European sense) kinship and the nuclear family marked a relatively late phase of social evolution. “The hypothesis of the priority of the matrilineate”, comments Murdock,<sup>28</sup>

“...was buttressed with a number of extremely plausible arguments – the presumed ignorance of physical paternity in primitive times, the biological inevitability of the association of mother and child, the alleged non-inclusion of the father in the family under early nomadic conditions, the large number of apparent survivals of matrilineal customs in patrilineal societies and the rarity of comparable patrilineal traits among matrilineal peoples, the relative cultural backwardness of matrilineal as compared with patrilineal societies, and the complete lack of historically attested cases of a transition from patrilineal to matrilineal institutions.”

Murdock continues :<sup>29</sup>

The most secure prop of the evolutionist theory of matrilineal priority, that which later anthropologists have had the greatest difficulty in removing, is the complete lack of historically attested, or even inferentially probable, cases of a direct transition from patrilineal to matrilineal descent. No such case has ever been encountered...

The author adds:

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<sup>23</sup> Reichard (1938: 425).

<sup>24</sup> Swanton (1905: 663-73).

<sup>25</sup> Lowie (1920: 150-5); Kroeber (1923: 355-58); Goldenweiser (1914: 436).

<sup>26</sup> Murdock (1949: 189).

<sup>27</sup> Murdock (1965: 131; 1949: 185).

<sup>28</sup> Murdock (1949: 185).

<sup>29</sup> Murdock (1949: 190).

“...the explanation turns out to be simple. There are no recorded cases of such a transition because it cannot occur... the direct transition from patrilineal to matrilineal descent is impossible.”

But be this as it may, the nineteenth century believers in the priority of matriliney appeared to be on very firm ground:

“So logical, so closely reasoned, and so apparently in accord with all known facts was this hypothesis that from its pioneer formulation by Bachofen in 1861 to nearly the end of the nineteenth century it was accepted by social scientists practically without exception.”<sup>30</sup>

Nonetheless, according to Murdock (1965: 132), the Bachofen-Morgan evolutionary schema remains impossible to defend:

“The expansion of ethnographic knowledge and the resulting recognition of the role of diffusion in culture change made these unilinear theories increasingly suspect during the early decades of the twentieth century, and they are now, of course, universally discredited by competent scholars.”

For his part, Marvin Harris<sup>31</sup> simply writes that matriarchies

“...were actually postulated as the primordial condition of mankind by various theoreticians who lived in the nineteenth century. Friedrich Engels, for example, who got his ideas from the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, believed that modern societies had passed through a matriarchal phase during which descent was reckoned exclusively in the female line and women were politically dominant over men. Many modern-day women’s liberationists continue to believe in this myth...”

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### ***Radcliffe-Brown and the Case of the Mother’s Brother***

The avunculate is the peculiar relationship which exists in many tribal societies between a man and his sister’s son. Such a special relationship is not a universal feature of human kinship as such. Obviously, then, it cannot be explained by reference to any assumed universal sociological principle. It is a characteristic of certain kinship systems but not of others, and it is the differences which need to be explained.

The avunculate in this way differs from the mother-son relationship. We do not feel a need to “explain” the relationship which exists between a mother and her child – birth-giving, suckling, maternal affection and so on – precisely because of the universality of this relationship in some form. It is a biologically based universal that there will be some kind of unity – commensal and so on – between a woman and her young son under normal conditions in virtually any conceivable society. It is not a biological universal that the woman’s brother must be included.

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<sup>30</sup> Murdock (1949: 185).

<sup>31</sup> Harris (1969: 85).

In modern western societies, a man is not united in any special way with his sister's son. It is this which, even at the most superficial and immediate level, makes us feel the need to 'explain' the avunculate when we encounter it.

Let us follow Radcliffe-Brown in assuming that, in the tension or choice between matriliney and patriliney in any society, the point at issue is really this: "To whom does the child belong?"<sup>32</sup> If it belongs to the mother's kin-group, descent is matrilineal. If it belongs to the father's group, descent is patrilineal. As far as the abstract question of "descent" is concerned, that is all there is to it. However, we may further follow Radcliffe-Brown in assuming that in practice, as a society actually implements its descent-rule, it finds itself usually forced to do certain other things as well.<sup>33</sup>

For example, to the extent that the mother-child group forms an indivisible unit, whichever group possesses the child will tend to possess the mother as well. If this is not to be the case – in other words, if the mother and her child are to belong in different groups – then this can only be through the "splitting" (in some sense) of the mother-child unit. If the descent-groups have more than cognitive reality – particularly if they are joint property-owning or territorially based units – then this "splitting" would appear to be a somewhat artificial and difficult arrangement to maintain.<sup>34</sup> We would expect to find, then, that normally a woman will be where her child is.

This is in fact what we do find. In patrilineal systems, not only children but their mothers, too, are usually in effect possessed by the mothers' husbands' descent-groups. "In effect", because at first, of course, the women cannot be members of their husbands' groups on account of the rule of exogamy (which in this essay I take as "given"). The women must therefore undergo a *change* in descent-group membership. Practice usually precedes theory, and it is typically not until some time after the actual incorporation of women into their husbands' groups that this incorporation becomes socially ratified. This difficulty – this need for a change in membership – is not experienced in matrilineal systems. The wife's group possesses the child and retains the mother. The husband is excluded from this group and can be because there is none of the "irreducible" or "elementary" unity of the mother-child group in his relationship with his children.

This enables us to understand the fundamental social contrasts between patrilineal systems and matrilineal ones. It also adds another dimension to the "peculiarity" of the avunculate in primitive societies. For where descent is matrilineal, the avunculate does not seem peculiar at all.

It was noted earlier that while the sentimental, commensal etc. unity of the mother-child group could be taken as "given", the inclusion of the woman's brother in this unity

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<sup>32</sup> Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 40).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. pp. 32-48

<sup>34</sup> At any rate, this would certainly seem to be so by comparison with the alternative form of "splitting" - according to which a child would be placed in a different home, village or local descent-group from its father. Although he is not referring to membership in descent-groups, Robin Fox's words seem relevant here: "The irreducible and elementary social grouping is surely the mother and her children. Whatever else happens, this unit has to survive for the species to survive... Whether or not father can be persuaded to stay at home is another matter". Fox (1967: 37, 40).



could not. In some societies, he is included, while in others, he isn't. We may now add that whether he is or isn't has something to do with the difference between matrilineal and patrilineal descent. To the extent to which descent is patrilineal, marriage separates a woman from her brother. To the extent to which descent is matrilineal, marriage does not have this separating effect. Radcliffe-Brown brings out this contrast with his usual precision:

The contrast between father-right and mother-right is one of two types of marriage. A woman is by birth a member of a sibling group; strong social bonds unite her to her brothers and sisters. By marriage she enters into some sort of relation with her husband. To provide a stable structure there has to be some sort of institutional accommodation of the possibly conflicting claims and loyalties, as between a woman's husband and her brothers and sisters. There are possible two extreme and opposite solutions, those of father-right and mother-right, and an indefinite number of compromises.

In the solution provided by mother-right the sibling group is taken as the most important and permanent unit in social structure. Brothers and sisters remain united, sharing their property, and living together in one domestic group. In marriage the group retains complete possession of a woman; her husband acquires no legal rights at all or a bare minimum... Rights of possession over children therefore rest with the mother and her brothers and sisters. It is these persons to whom the child must go for every kind of aid and comfort, and it is they who are entitled to exercise control or discipline over the child...

The solution offered by father-right is opposite. Possession of a wife, and therefore of the children of her body, are surrendered by marriage to her husband and his kin... The mother's kin, her brothers and sisters, in this kind of marriage, have no rights over the children, who, in turn, have no rights over them. The jural bonds between a woman and her siblings are severed by her marriage.<sup>35</sup>

It may be said, therefore – assuming Radcliffe-Brown to be right – that matrilineal descent is based on the unity of the brother-sister group, while patrilineal descent is not. To the extent to which father-right prevails – or to the extent to which children are incorporated, along with their mother, in their father's descent-group (patriliny) – the sibling group is split. As Radcliffe-Brown puts it in the passage just quoted: “The jural bonds between a woman and her siblings are severed by her marriage.”

It is for this reason that the avunculate seems “peculiar” when it is encountered in a predominantly patrilineally-organized kinship system. In a matrilineal system, it is perfectly normal. Brothers are united with their sisters. Their unity with their sisters' children follows as a matter of course. In a patrilineal system, on the other hand, women are incorporated, along with their children, into their husbands' descent-groups. If, despite this, children are considered to be in some way strongly bound to their mother's brothers, we are faced with an apparent anomaly. It would seem at the outset that, however this relationship is going to be explained, it will have to be accounted for on grounds other than those of patrilineal descent.

An approach to this phenomenon must start from the obvious standpoint that “pure” matrilineal systems, like “pure” patrilineal ones, are abstractions. They do not exist. All real groups embody a mixture of conflicting principles, and are far more complicated than are the models which we use to try to comprehend them. Nevertheless, understanding anything involves the use of abstractions – what is now fashionably termed “model-building” – and the differentiation of opposite poles or “extremes” in

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<sup>35</sup> Radcliffe-Brown (1950: 77-78).

these abstractions seems to be a necessity rooted in the nature of all processes of thought. In the study of kinship systems, two such indispensable polar opposites are the ones which are contrasted in the passage of Radcliffe-Brown's quoted above. For analytical purposes, we develop the two corresponding "models" of social organization – matrilineal systems (or the "matrilineal complex") on the one hand, and "extreme" patrilineal ones (or the "patrilineal complex") on the other. These models have certain empirical counterparts – there really do exist (or did exist) human communities whose kinship systems approximate to the matrilineal "extreme" (just as there exist or existed communities approximating to the opposite extreme). But just as important is the fact that these models facilitate the analysis of the much larger number of social systems which fall somewhere between the two extremes, and may be thought of as embodying some combination of the two opposing principles of organization.

When we are discussing such "combinatory" systems, we cannot speak of "pure" mother-right or "pure" father-right, but only of the extent to which one or other principle prevails. This usually involves an evaluation of the social functions of the various descent-groups involved. As far as any particular unilineal descent-group is concerned, membership can descend only in an "all-or-nothing" way, either in one line or the other. But wherever both principles are in operation, this is made possible by the fact that more than one unilineal descent-group exists. In such a case, to describe a community as "strongly matrilineal" could only mean that the matrilineal descent groups were of predominant importance in its social organization. The actual descent-groups themselves (if they are unilineal) cannot be "strongly" or "weakly" matrilineal (or patrilineal) – they are either matrilineal, or they are not.

A "strongly patrilineal" community is, therefore, one whose patrilineal descent-groups are of preponderant social importance. As far as concerns membership in these groups, the descent-rule completely severs a child from any connection with its mother's brother. To the extent that a woman remains with her child, she, too, must be severed from this individual (her brother). If, despite this, there remains a group which includes both her and her brother, it can only be at the expense of her incorporation into her husband's group and her unity with her child. If, despite patriliney, there is a group which includes both her brother and her child, it can only be at the expense of the importance of the patrilineal descent-groups as such. Whatever her brother and her child share – whether it is meal-rights, residence-rights (temporary or otherwise), property rights, sentimental affinities or merely a name, emblem or "totem" – cannot be exclusively allocated on the basis of membership in patrilineal descent-groups. Whatever is retained within the province of the mother's brother-sister's son group is, by that very fact, taken away from the exclusive province of the patrilineal group. In other words, patrilineal descent groups are not the only groups into which the community is divided. There are also other groups, and these – if they include men, their sisters, and their sisters' children – are matrilineal descent-groups. These may not be property-owning groups or "lineages" in any sense of the word. If membership of them involves nothing more than shared religious rights and duties, then they are purely religious groups. It may even be that membership of them involves nothing more than the sharing of certain "sentiments". That, at least, would seem to be a theoretical possibility, although in that case the groups would hardly be of much significance. But even then, if the sentiments concerned were shared exclusively through membership of

these groups, what we would have would be matrilineal descent-groups defined by the sharing of these sentiments.

To the extent to which patrilineal groups are important in a given community, then, it follows that husband-wife and husband-son (father-son) bonds must also be stressed. To the extent to which matrilineal groups are important, brother-sister and brother-sister's child bonds must be stressed. In one sense, these two sets of bonds are mutually exclusive – for a woman to be in her brother's group is to be outside her husband's group and vice versa. If only one kind of grouping existed in a community, that would be that – it would be “all or nothing” either way. But since different kinds of groupings usually exist, what is involved is the relative importance of different kinds of bonds. To the extent to which matrilineal groups are important one can say, with Radcliffe-Brown, that the “result is to emphasize and maintain a close bond between brother and sister at the expense of the bond between husband and wife”, while to the extent to which patrilineal groups are important the opposite result occurs: “The bond between husband and wife is strengthened at the expense of the bond between brother and sister.” Schneider (1961, p. 11) makes a similar point.

All of this seems fairly straightforward until we come to the famous essay (“The Mother's Brother in South Africa”) in which Radcliffe-Brown, in the course of a polemic against Junod, found it necessary to deny any connection between (a) the existence of the brother-sister unit in primitive societies and (b) matrilineal descent. The purpose of this essay, which was written in 1924, was to attack an argument put forward by Henri Junod (1912), namely that the avunculate among the Thonga of South Africa was a matrilineal feature of an otherwise largely patrilineally-organized kinship system, and could be interpreted as evidence that this tribe were once organized along matrilineal lines.

Junod linked the avunculate to the phenomenon of brother-sister unity which characterized, according to his information, the marriage-arrangements of certain matrilineally-organized Central Bantu tribes. He quoted an authority to the effect that in these systems, “the wife remains in the village of her group”, so that her children “belong to the mother's group and inherit its property.” Unlike her brother, a woman's husband in these matrilineal systems was something of an outsider:

The husband is only a lodger or a frequent visitor in his wife's village; he is a mere begetter of other people's children, and pays for this privilege by working for his wife's group or occasionally presenting it with gifts.

Children are subject to the authority only of their own village members: “the mother's brother has power over them, not the father.”<sup>36</sup>

Although among the patrilineal Thonga the effects of marriage upon a woman were very different, this seemed to be mainly a result of the introduction of cattle (or, in more recent times, European-made iron hoes) by means of which husbands were enabled to “buy” their wives. Instead of having to visit his wife in her village and work for her and her relatives, a husband could, by making a large enough “lobola” payment, remove the

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<sup>36</sup> Junod (1927), p. 122 (quoting W. C. Willoughby).

woman from her village and take her to his own. In this way, her links with her natal village and with her brothers were naturally weakened. Her ties to her husband and his relatives were strengthened correspondingly. Nevertheless, it was the natives' own view that the "true" ties of a woman were with her natal village, and that this applied to her children as well. The idea that it was "only the cattle" (i.e. only the lobola-payment) which took a woman and her children from her brothers and natal kin was accepted everywhere by the natives. And it was also universally agreed that even the lobola-payment could not sever the "true" links which united a woman and her children to her natal village and kin.

To Junod, it seemed obvious that the strong husband-wife bonds of the present-day Thonga were a result of the lobola-system, and that the notion of brother-sister unity was a much older ideal, with much deeper roots in the religious system of these natives. In religious sentiment, one's bond with one's mother's relatives was conceived of as being fundamental, while that with one's father and his relatives was "only on account of the oxen":

In fact, as Mankehulu said in his picturesque language, "as regards sacrifices (timhamba), the mother's relatives mostly perform them. They are the stem. My father is the stem on account of the oxen, my mother is the true stem; she is the god; she makes me grow. Should she die when I am an infant, I will not live. At the village of my mother it is at the god's (*ka mamana hi ko psikwembyen*) (Junod 1912, 1, 294).

If matriliney means "children belonging to the mother's group", then it would seem that in religious matters, at any rate, this principle was still very much alive among the Thonga of Junod's time. But matriliney remained operative not only in this context of religious sentiment. It was also present as a constant "threat", as it were, which motivated the giving of lobola-payments. Among the Thonga (unlike in our society), husbands did not at all take for granted their rights in their own offspring. In no way did these rights seem "natural" or automatic. On the contrary, men felt that they could acquire rights in their offspring only by considerable sacrifice-by making payments to their wives' kin involving large quantities of wealth. "Father-right", wrote Junod,

rests on the lobola. This is so plain that any child being born of a woman who has not been paid for, belongs to the mother's family, bears her *shibongo* name and will live at the *malume's* [mother's brother's – CK] village.

In this sense, men could feel quite insecure about their rights in their offspring. Whenever Junod discussed with them the possibility of government legislation against the lobola system they would reply: "Who will guarantee to us the possession of our children if lobola is suppressed?" ( p. 263).

Matrilineal principles also asserted themselves in rights of property-inheritance. When a man died and his implements – weapons, tools and so on – were inherited, his sister's sons were assumed to have a sort of prior right to choose which items they wanted. Obviously, this right could hardly have been fully exercised without seriously undermining the whole structure of patrilineal descent. If lobola had been paid by the man to his wife's relatives, then his own offspring were his legal heirs. The contradiction was overcome by a customary stipulation that the "true" (matrilineal) heirs should voluntarily give way to the "legal" (patrilineal) ones. The sister's sons, according to the formulation of the natives themselves, were the original heirs, but they

allowed the deceased's sons first choice, and then made their own choice of implements themselves. "In this way", wrote Junod,

*ba nyiketa pfindla*, they give over the inheritance to the legal heirs This is a most vivid representation of a right which no longer exists, having in fact become obsolete, but which asserts itself however in virtue of an old custom. ( p. 257.)

There is no need here to multiply examples of "matrilineal" features of the kinship system of the Thonga. It is perfectly obvious that this system was not the embodiment of any consistent logical principle of organization but contained contradictory elements. It is clear that in many respects it was a system of double unilineal descent, even if the matrilineal groups were not property-owning lineages. The evidence that the Thonga were once matrilineal has been summarized by Murdock (who endorses Junod's interpretation) as follows:

1. Avunculocal residence is customary in childhood. Boys and girls, as soon as they are weaned, go to live in the village of their maternal uncle and remain there for several years, in the case of girls sometimes until they are fully grown. (This is normal in matrilineal societies with avunculocal residence, e.g. the central and western tribes of the Central Bantu).
2. When a man has no patrilineal heirs to carry on his line, he may require one of his sisters to remain in his settlement. Her children reside in his house, and the males continue his lineage and clan. (This re-capitulates the household pattern of the matrilineal eastern Central Bantu).
3. If a man has no immediate patrilineal heirs, his sister's sons inherit his property in preference to remoter patrilineal kinsmen. Even when he has patrilineal heirs, his sisters' sons can claim certain items from his estate, e.g. his spears. (Inheritance by sisters' sons is normal in matrilineal societies).
4. A maternal uncle has a right to a definite share in the bride-price received for a sister's daughter. (He can ordinarily claim most of it in a matrilineal society).
5. The officiant at all sacrifices in a man's life-crisis ceremonies is his mother's brother. (In a matrilineal society this duty naturally falls to a man's maternal uncle as the head of his lineage). (Murdock 1959, p. 378).

Murdock argues that all of the various Bantu tribes must once have been matrilineal. A number of them, he writes, still are, and these are the groups that possess few cattle. In his view, the transition to patriliney was in many cases accomplished only recently, as a direct result of the introduction of cattle.

If this view is correct, then the breaking (for descent purposes) of the bond between a man and his sister's children was the final result of a process by which women were separated from their natal kin by means of the lobola system. Each increase in cattle-breeding within a particular tribe would have made possible a raising of the level of lobola-payments and a corresponding intensification of the rights of husbands (and husbands' kin) over their wives. A concise formulation of this evolutionary argument has been put forward by Harold Schneider:

In Africa the most thoroughgoing patrilineal societies seem to be those in which livestock, particularly cattle, are an important asset – that is, where the number of cattle per person is about one or more. Where there is no asset that can be transferred for compensation, we find matrilineal-matrilocal systems. As compensation increases the husband is allowed to remove his wife to his father's home, so that the system becomes matrilineal-patrilocal, but with the male children moving to live with their mother's brother when they marry

(avunculocal residence), since mother's brother owns them despite the patrilocality of the marriage. As compensation reaches a higher level the system shifts to patrilineal-patrilocal, and this increases in intensity as the amount paid increases until at the other extreme one gets patrilineal-patrilocal systems in which there is no divorce. (Harold Schneider 1974, p. 145).

This process could be described as a progressive severing of the brother-sister bond. At first, a woman's marriage may simply remove her physically from her brother's village to that of her husband, although she is still considered to "belong" to her brother's village. The next stage may be for her to be considered the sexual property of her husband and his group, although her children still do not belong to them. Finally, both she and her offspring may be considered the property of her husband's group. At every intermediate stage in this process, there is always something left of the old brother-sister unity, but it exists despite the patrilocality and patrilineality of the marriage and descent system, not because of it. To the extent that it survives in any particular culture, the tradition which it represents may be traced back to the earlier, matrilocal and matrilineal system of the group in question.

This is one kind of explanation for the peculiar unity between brothers and sisters which exists even in some of the most strongly patrilineal societies in Africa. It is certainly not a full explanation, because another question remains: Why, even under patrilineality, do so many of the earlier matrilineal elements remain? What functions, if any, are served by their survival? Why do the patrilineal elements of so many African societies seem so incompletely formed, and so deeply penetrated by matrilineal ones?

The question why matrilineality survives is an important question, but it is not one which can be discussed adequately here. Briefly, my own view is that Mary Douglas is right when she describes matrilineality as "essentially a system for wide extension of kinship ties." In her view, matrilineality "has some of the wide-range, solidary effects which in alliance theory are attributed to matrilateral cross-cousin marriage", and may readily maintain a "system of general transfers" of food, as opposed to "a system where the norm is for each family to produce for itself..." (Douglas, 1969, pp. 128-30).

Admittedly, Douglas is here referring to predominantly matrilineal kinship systems, rather than to double unilineal descent systems or other "composite" forms. However, I think her arguments still apply. The bond between married brothers and sisters, which patrilineality tends to disrupt, is something which few primitive societies can afford to relinquish entirely. This bond cuts across local family loyalties, uniting individuals to their natal groups despite the separation which marriage (often entailing removal to a distant village) brings. The reason for the survival of the brother-sister unit even in patrilineal societies in Africa seems to me to be indicated quite adequately in these words:

Matrilineality is a form of kinship organization which creates in itself cross-cutting ties of a particularly effective kind. This is not to suggest that societies with patrilineal systems do not have such ties: they can produce them by means of cult or other associations, but

matrilineal descent produces them by itself. This is in its nature. if there is any advantage in a descent system which overrides exclusive, local loyalties, matrilineality has it. ( p. 128).<sup>37</sup>

At this point, we may turn to the argument put forward by Radcliffe-Brown in his famous essay on the mother's brother. How does he account for the peculiar unity between brothers and sisters which exists even in some of the most strongly patrilineal societies in Africa?

Unfortunately, we cannot answer this question because – surprising as it may seem – Radcliffe-Brown does not offer an explanation. Or rather, he adopts two courses. When (in various of his works) he is discussing the question of matrilineal descent, he ascribes the unity of brothers and sisters to the implications of this descent-rule, as was noted above. On the other hand, in his famous essay on the mother's brother relationship – in which he is discussing the avunculate in patrilineal societies – his purpose is to eliminate the topic of matrilineality from the discussion. He does not ascribe brother-sister unity to something other than matrilineality, however. Instead, he does not ascribe it to anything. He treats it as a metaphysical “principle” – as something which, precisely because of its wide distribution in primitive societies, does not require to be accounted for at all. Brother-sister unity, in this essay, is treated as a particular expression of the “equivalence of brothers”, a “principle” which is “most commonly adopted in primitive society.” (1952, p. 18).

Elsewhere, Radcliffe-Brown writes: “The unit of structure everywhere seems to be the group of full siblings – brothers and sisters.” (1950; quoted by Fortes, 1970, p. 76). Fortes writes that this principle is

one of the few generalizations in kinship theory that, in my opinion, enshrines a discovery worthy to be placed side by side with Morgan's discovery of classificatory kinship; and, like Morgan's, it has been repeatedly validated and has opened up lines of inquiry not previously foreseen (1970, p. 76).

Needham makes the remark that this principle has obviously not been “repeatedly validated” – in some societies the brother-sister group is the unit of structure, while in others it is not (Needham, 1971, p. lxxxvi). Schneider (1961 p. 11) makes the point that the “interdependence of brother and sister” *is* characteristic of matrilineal descent-groups but is *not* characteristic of patrilineal ones. And Murdock (1949, p. 121) attacks the whole idea of using such “principles” to explain social facts as follows:

In the first place, the alleged principles are mere verbalizations reified into causal forces. In the second, such concepts as “equivalence of brothers” and “necessity for social integration” contain no statements of the relationships between phenomena under varying conditions, and thus lie at the opposite extreme from genuine scientific laws. Thirdly, being

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<sup>37</sup> Douglas adds: “The poorer an economy, the more primitive its technology, the more uncertain the yield of crops or game, the more should the pattern of distribution be wide enough to even out gluts and shortages... As a cross cutting device for this function, matrilineal descent is more easily related to the distribution of food than are age or cult associations... In a bad year the channel is there for directing crops into the neediest homes. It is obviously easier to divert crops to private subsistence needs in a system of general transfers than in a system where the norm is for each family to produce for itself and to make special calls on kinship ties only in an emergency.” ( pp. 129-30).

unitary in their nature, they provide no basis for interpreting cultural differences; they should produce the same effects everywhere.

The main point of Radcliffe-Brown's essay is to show that the avunculate has something to do with brother-sister unity. This was taken for granted by Junod himself, who of course saw brother-sister unity as having something to do with matrilineal descent. Radcliffe-Brown wishes, if I may put it this way, to have his cake and eat it. He wishes to ascribe the avunculate to brother-sister unity, but not to matriliney. In my view it is this aim which forces him to make of brother-sister unity a sort of "ultimate fact" beyond which inquiry should not proceed.

We are informed, to begin with, that "there are certain fundamental principles or tendencies which appear in all societies, or in all those of a certain type" (1952, p. 18). As an example of a "certain type", Radcliffe-Brown cites "primitive society", in which, we are told, "there is a strongly marked tendency to merge the individual in the group to which he or she belongs" (p. 25). Which precise "group" Radcliffe-Brown has in mind is not very clear. Is it the husband-wife group, the territorial group, or what? It seems to be the case that what Radcliffe-Brown particularly means is the brother-sister group. Skillfully avoiding any mention of matriliney, he argues that in societies in which "the classificatory system of kinship reaches a high degree of development", husbands and wives are grouped apart, while brothers and sisters are grouped together (pp. 19-20). The fact that this is precisely what matrilineal systems do, and the opposite of what patrilineal systems do, is not mentioned. The crux of Radcliffe-Brown's argument is that in these "certain societies" wives are not "merged" in the groups of their husbands, but are "merged" in those of their brothers. At times, Radcliffe-Brown seems to be suggesting that this pattern of grouping and of separation is the result of a universal principle. In one place, however, he himself admits that "in some parts of Africa and in some parts of Polynesia" a totally different principle "does seem to have been adopted" (p. 19).

Radcliffe-Brown looks at the avunculate as primarily a matter of "sentiment". He almost wholly ignores the various specific features of this relationship noted by Junod among the Thonga: avunculocal residence in childhood, rights of inheritance, rights in bride-price and so on. For him, the basic feature is the sentimental "indulgence" towards the sister's son on the part of the maternal uncle and the corresponding sentiments of the child. The most important question to answer, in his view, is not "How or why is the institution maintained?" but "How do the child's sentiments come to be formed?" He answers this question by (a) describing certain aspects of the social structure of the kinds of societies he is considering and (b) showing that there is some harmony between this structure and the way in which the child's sentiments are formed.

In the societies which he is considering, authority over children is in the hands of fathers, while brother-sister unity is strong. Consequently, authority over children is to some extent shared by fathers along with their brothers and sisters. On the other hand, in these same societies, "tenderness and indulgence" are to be expected from a child's mother, and also from her sisters and brothers. The distinction between authority (paternal) and indulgence (maternal) on the one hand, and the unity of brothers and sisters on the other hand, predetermines the formation of sentiments in the child's mind:



The pattern of behaviour towards the mother...is extended with suitable modifications to the mother's sister and to the mother's brother, then to the group of maternal kindred as a whole, and finally to the maternal gods, the ancestors of the mother's group. In the same way the pattern of behaviour towards the father is extended to the father's brothers and sisters, and to the whole of the father's group... and finally to the paternal gods (pp. 27-8).

We are asked to accept this as an explanation for the fact that children after weaning live with their maternal uncles, see their maternal relatives as the "true stem", belong to their mother's group if the lobola has not been paid and so on. Radcliffe-Brown's aim is not just to modify or improve Junod's interpretation but to discredit it and replace it with an entirely contrasting explanation. In his own words:

The point of the paper on the mother's brother may be said to be to contrast with the explanation by pseudo-history the interpretation of the institution to which it refers as having a function in a kinship system with a certain type of structure (1952, p. 14).

Murdock's sentiments are my own:

The indicated contrast is clear. In the eyes of the present writer, however, it takes the form of an opposition between sound historical scholarship and untrammled sociological speculation (1949, p. 378).

However, if Radcliffe-Brown's paper is useless as an alternative to Junod, this does not mean that it is without any value at all. In actual fact, by stressing the link between the avunculate and brother-sister unity, Radcliffe-Brown's paper takes us back to matriliney by another route, and dovetails quite neatly into Junod's own framework. What it provides in particular is a means of explaining the difference between (a) the avunculate in a society which has not undergone transition to patriliney and (b) the avunculate after this transition. Junod himself was unable to explain why, among the Thonga, the avunculate was so "lop-sided" in favour of the child. A boy could "do as he pleased with his maternal uncle, eating his food, flirting with his wife or wives and wandering in and out of his house without even asking, while the uncle himself had virtually no reciprocal rights in or authority over the boy (Junod 1927, pp. 232-3). Such a pattern is not at all typical of matrilineal societies, in which the relationship is a much more "balanced" one, a man having definite rights in and authority over his sister's son.

So the avunculate in a patrilineal society cannot simply be treated as a survival. The survival is transformed in the process, and no longer serves quite the same functions. Radcliffe-Brown's contrast between "authority" and "indulgence" in this context is a useful one. The transition from matriliney to patriliney (e.g. through the introduction of the lobola-system) may typically be expected to transfer jural rights and authority with respect to a child from its maternal uncle to its father (the mother's complementary rights being probably diminished somewhat in the process). This is a matter of definition, in the sense that the child must have "belonged" to its mother's brother's group before the transition, and to its father's group after it. If possession confers authority, then the transfer of authority must accompany the change in the rule of descent.

If it is assumed that, despite the loss of the mother's brother's authority, the child's relationship to its maternal uncle remains intact in many other respects (emotional,

religious and so on), the difference between this relationship in a patrilineal society on the one hand, and a matrilineal one on the other, would appear to be explained. It is easy to imagine that the new authority of the father would be less able to tolerate the mother's brother's rights in the boy than the reciprocal rights of the boy in his mother's brother. The rights of adults in children are probably of more consequence to social structure than the reciprocal rights of children in adults. Hence the transition to patriliney would "soften" the avunculate (removing the element of adult authority from it) while leaving the child's rights much less reduced. This, at any rate, would seem to be what has happened among the Thonga.

Radcliffe-Brown's comments on the role of the father's sister would also dovetail easily into scheme. Among the Thonga, the father's sister is a relative very much to be respected. We can see why this should be so, and also why this pattern is so typical of societies in which the mother's brother is an "indulgent" figure. In a transitional society which is still far from consistently patrilineal, a woman, despite patrilocal marriage, will still remain closely bound to her brother. Under the earlier, matrilineal, system, she would have been bound to him still more closely, but this would not have given her any authority over her brother's child. Once patriliney (or father-right) has been achieved, however, her brother has authority over his child, and her unity with her brother ensures that she shares some of this.

For reasons of space, the more recent attempts to account for the avunculate will have to be surveyed extremely cursorily. In fact, the only point I wish to make is that all of them follow Radcliffe-Brown in taking for granted the post-marital unity of a woman with her brother, and in this way by implication link the avunculate with matriliney. Evans Pritchard (1929 p. 193), for example, bases his argument on the following unexplained premise:

Now, in most savage societies, the wife's brother is the pivotal relative in the institutions of marriage and the family, and the attitudes of husband and wife are more pronounced towards him than towards other members of their kin and are more pronouncedly different.

It is obvious that if the wife's brother is the "pivotal relative", then some form of avunculate is going to be pronounced. The question is this: Why is it that in "most savage societies" the wife's brother is the "pivotal relative?" In actual fact, where father-right is strong, it is not brothers who give away their sisters so much as fathers who give away their daughters. One might expect the father-in-law, therefore, to be the "pivotal relative". To some extent this is true, but then the very fact that a father "gives away" his daughter entails a loss of his rights in her. As the husband's rights increase, the father-in-law ceases to be so "pivotal". It is only to the extent that matriliney prevails that the opposite pattern obtains. In this case, the brother of the woman retains his rights in her and her children, even despite her marriage to her husband. It is obvious that he must therefore remain "the pivotal relative in the institutions of marriage and the family." What I am saying is that the degree to which he is "pivotal" depends on the degree to which he retains his rights in his sister and her children – i.e. it depends on the degree to which matrilineal, as opposed to patrilineal, principles prevail. Once again, therefore, the avunculate has something to do with matriliney, although Evans-Pritchard is no less anxious than Radcliffe-Brown to assert the contrary.

Is it fathers who give away their daughters in marriage, or brothers who give away their sisters? This depends upon the descent-rule. In concrete cases, of course, it is usually a bit of both, but the fact is that for fathers to be able to “give away” their daughters, they must in some sense “possess” them in the first place. If young women are considered to belong not to the group of their fathers, but only to the group of their brothers and mothers’ brothers, then as they are married it will not be their fathers who give them away. They will be given away by their brothers or maternal uncles. Whether a bride is given away as a daughter or as a sister has therefore some importance in any discussion of the avunculate.

Lévi-Strauss obliterates this distinction by writing of marriage as a system in which one man gives another man “a daughter or sister.” This would not matter very much, perhaps, were it not for the fact that the essay in which he does this is precisely the one in which he ventures his own explanation of the avunculate. In his view, the avunculate just exists. Men simply do have sisters, and they do give them away in marriage. Hence the avunculate. Why the avunculate predominates in so many “primitive” societies while being absent (or virtually so) in our own is not explained. We are simply told that the relation between a man and his sister is one aspect of the “primitive and irreducible character of the basic unit of kinship”, while this itself “is actually a direct result of the universal presence of an incest taboo” (1963, p. 44). Then follows the passage in which Lévi-Strauss slips in the words “daughter or sister” quite unobtrusively as if it made no difference which was which, overlooking the fact that the rest of his argument presupposes that it is as a sister that a woman is given away:

This is really saying that in human society a man must obtain a woman from another man who gives him a daughter or sister. Thus we do not need to explain how the maternal uncle emerged in the kinship structure: He does not emerge – he is present initially. Indeed, the presence of the maternal uncle is a necessary precondition for the structure to exist (1963, p. 44-45).

The basis of this argument seems to be that there is nothing to explain. I would argue, however, that there is something to be explained. What needs to be explained is an observed difference between (a) the relationship of a child to its maternal uncle in our own society and in certain other societies (including some apparently “primitive” ones) and (b) the relationship of a child to its maternal uncle in the great majority of “primitive societies. Between (a) and (b) there is a relation of opposition or contrast. That is precisely why we regard the avunculate as, in a sense, “peculiar” (by our standards). In our society there is no “pivotal” or “special” or “pronounced” relationship between a boy and his maternal uncle. In many “primitive” societies, on the other hand, a boy lives with this relative for several years, or inherits his property or his widows, or can eat or use or “steal” his property or food at any time etc. etc. Why this difference? We all observe incest-taboos, so the difference cannot conceivably be explained as (in Lévi-Strauss’ words) “a direct result of the universal presence” of this taboo. A fundamental rule of elementary logic is that constants cannot be used to explain variables. We have to look for a difference between our own society and the kinship systems typical of “primitive” social groups. In my view, this difference has something to do with the question of the unity of brothers and sisters. In our own society, siblings become separated from one another as a result of marriage. Women, in particular, are in no sense jurally “possessed” by their brothers after marriage, and do not normally live

with their brothers. In many “primitive” societies, on the other hand, brother-sister unity survives marriage. To the extent that matriliney prevails, a man not only “gives away” his sister to another man, but retains his own rights in her and her children throughout the marriage. To the extent that patriliney prevails, this is not the case – but what is important in this case is precisely the extent to which patriliney does prevail. “Extreme” patriliney or “father-right” on the Roman model is unusual in “primitive” societies, and usually marriage does not prevent a woman from returning to her brother or seeking his protection when she needs it. In other words, something of brother-sister unity remains, and the avunculate is (as virtually all writers have agreed) a more or less inescapable corollary of this.

Homans and Schneider (1955) adopt Radcliffe-Brown’s position. That is, they assume brother-sister unity as something which is given, and which therefore does not need to be explained. We are told, for example, that a boy behaves towards his mother’s brother in the same way as he does towards his mother “as a result of the identification of the mother with her brother, who is her protector...” (p. 22). The authors are here referring to “the patrilineal complex”, it should be noted. But in the “patrilineal complex” (as opposed to the “matrilineal complex”), there is no reason why a woman’s brother should be her protector. Or rather, if he is her protector, then this must be explained: it cannot be accounted for as something inherent in the patrilineal complex, which actually makes the husband the “protector” of a woman and severs her links with her brother (Schneider 1961, p. 11). Once again, Homans and Schneider are taking as “given” the very thing which has to be explained, and manage to dissociate matriliney from the avunculate (in patrilineal societies) only by adopting this stratagem.

Goody (1969) takes a woman’s unity with her brother as given, but then does something for which his professional colleagues have never forgiven him. He leaves the distinct impression in the reader’s mind that even in patrilineal societies, matrilineal descent and the avunculate are linked. Worse, he even uses a formulation which would seem to make of the avunculate a matrilineal “survival.” He writes, for example, that among the West African Lo Wiili, the “legitimization” of a marriage gives the husband’s group (his patriclan) rights in the child of this marriage. In this way, the child is “excluded” from the mother’s group. Its claim to share the property of the mother’s brother or to inherit from him is thereby denied. But father-right is not consistently or rigidly applied. For one thing, a woman remains united with her brother – she continues to belong to her own patriclan, to which her brother also of course belongs. And for another, her child, despite exclusion from her group, “has nevertheless a shadowy claim upon the group by virtue of his mother’s position” (p. 78). The avunculate is in this way explained.

Leach (1961), in a discussion of the avunculate among the Lakher of India, cites N. E. Parry (1932, p. xiii), who saw in this institution “traces of a very recent matrilineal system.” This provides Leach with an occasion to attack Goody’s position as “only marginally different” from Parry’s “totally mistaken” evolutionist “doctrine” (p. 16). Schneider (1965) then supports Leach:

Leach’s disquiet over such terms as ‘shadowy claim’, ‘submerged rights’ and ‘residual sibling’ is not entirely misplaced, in my view... The point is that if the rights of the sister’s son over bits of property held by the mother’s brother, including perhaps the mother’s brother’s wife, whom sister’s son may ‘inherit’, are rights which are based on the

consanguineal tie through his mother, then these rights are transmitted exactly as is descent group membership. These are rights, that is, that are based on descent. If this is so, the problem is whether matrilineal filiation is not in this sense a 'descent rule' and so all patrilineal descent systems with matrilineal filiation are by definition double unilineal descent systems (p. 54).

In other words, according to Schneider (who follows Leach), Goody's position once again links the avunculate with matrilineal descent. But ever since Radcliffe-Brown, it has been one of the central purposes of professional anthropologists throughout the West to exorcise this spectre and lay to rest once and for all the old "doctrine" which held that there was something general about matrilineality in primitive society. To me it seems that the more these anthropologists try, the less convincing they are. The more they try to dissociate the avunculate from matrilineality, the more entangled in matrilineality they become. Perhaps the time has come for anthropologists to question the usefulness of the whole enterprise in which they have been engaged, now, for half a century.

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