
UNIT 1 KINSHIP

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Learning Objectives



In this unit, you will be introduced to kinship studies in ethnographic context for an understanding of the:

- diversity in kinship practices in the world;
- interrelationships among family, marriage and kinship; and
- interrelationships of kinship with other domains of life.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Social/cultural anthropologists say that it was necessary to study social divisions and groups of a society in order to understand social structure and organisation. In most cases organisation of kin groups is found to be very effective means of maintaining social order. Family is one kind of kin groups which is a part of a larger group with common ancestry forming descent group that has been regulating social life of its members. Family has another correlated institution, marriage by which different families and descent groups are interlinked. Large amount of data collected cross-culturally enabled anthropologists to develop certain analytical concepts, methods and theories of kinship and social organisation. In fact, Ladislav Holy remarked, 'if there was a subject which

anthropologists could have rightly claimed to be their own, it was kinship' (Holy 1996).

In the first half of the twentieth century, anthropologists were fascinated with the discovery of kinship as an important feature of small scale societies where law-and-order institutions that are found in the Western society were lacking to maintain the social order. Serious attempts were made for comprehending its dimensions, various functions and efficacy in organising society. It was found that these small scale societies used the *idiom of kinship* to frame most of their activities, including those with political, economic and religious intent. In Western society, the kinship shifted out of society proper into the domain of the domestic, being divested of its political, economic and religious contents, but largely confined itself to the natural process of procreation and regulation of marriage practices.

Till 1970s it was thought that unilineal descent systems were necessary for societal order. However, other evidences later sharply pointed out that social cohesion is maintained by exchange systems wherein men exchanged women bringing solidarity among descent groups. It became clear that social life is organised not necessarily on the principles of unilineal descent instead cognatic, bilineal, double-descent or ambilineal also play significant role in ordering social life. There has been much debate on these theoretical developments to understand kinship and the societal order in small scale societies. The 1980s saw further change challenging both descent and alliance theories that located kinship in cultural domain. In this perspective kinship is a cultural system, persons and social relationships are cultural constructions. So far kinship has been studied through the rules of descent, *jural* norms, rules of marriage, obligations and social cohesion. It also focused on kinship terms and their relationship with marriage practices and kinship behaviour.

A brief account of two ethnographies presented here represent kinship in two different societies from two different theoretical perspectives.

1.2 THEORETICAL PART OF WHICH THE ETHNOGRAPHY *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi* IS AN EXAMPLE

This book is an example of a situation where kinship is the principle of social organisation.

1.3 DESCRIPTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY

1.3.1 Intellectual Context

This book was written when the structural-functional approach, which looked at how societies were the organised wholes, was the dominant approach in British social anthropology.

1.3.2 Fieldwork

Meyer Fortes carried out first hand fieldwork among the Tallensi using the typical anthropological methods of participant observation, interviews and case studies. He lived among the people to understand their kinship organisation.

1.3.3 Analysis of Data

Tallensi¹ inhabit Ghana in Western Africa, earlier known as Gold Coast. They lack centralised political structure or tribal government. The society is divided into different descent groups which are independent, but their unity and solidarity emerge during the annual cycle of the Great Festival.

Lineage, clan, agnatic and cognatic relations

For Tallensi, the generic concept of kinship subsumes all kinds and degrees of genealogical relationships however remote they may be. The maximal lineage and clan are the basic units of social system that organise corporate activities. A maximal lineage is the most extensive group of people of both sexes related to one another by a common patrilineal descent traced from one known ancestor through known agnatic antecedents. A clan is a localised unit consisting of a defined segment of a maximal lineage or a whole maximal lineage. Usually, a clan consists of two or more linked maximal lineages of independent patrilineal descent whose association is accounted by a myth or remote kinship or of age-old local solidarity. The maximal lineage is not only an organic genealogical unit, it is also an organic ritual unit, and its cult is its founding ancestor for whom a shrine is dedicated whose custodian is the lineage head. A maximal lineage is divided into a number of segments, and each segment is identified by reference to its founding ancestor. A point is marked on the genealogical tree of the whole maximal lineage at which that segment's line of descent connects with the other lines of descent sprung from the founding ancestor of the maximal lineage. In this way every maximal lineage is divisible into one or two segments which may be called major lineages. There is further segmentation down the line, and the lowest order is minimal segment or minimal lineage which may be defined as the domestic group comprising the children of the one man. This is the narrowest agnatic group a person belongs to. There is a degree of autonomy of segments at the three levels to have independent ritual, *jural* and economic affairs.

The Tallensi draw sharp line between kinship and in-lawship. Marriage implies the absence of kinship ties between parties. As the kinship ties exist in their own right, the marriage ties are artificial and contractual in nature. Marriages are bound by rights and duties which did not exist before. Procreation depends not only on the sexual fluids ejaculated in the act of coitus of both man and woman, but also on an active principle, the *naamis* – mingling of the male sexual fluids with the female sexual fluids. Thus function of the male is as essential as that of the female in procreation.

Patrilineal descent is the vertebral principle of social organisation and it is the vehicle of the continuity and stability of the social structure. From a father a man derives his rights to inherit land and other property, his clan membership and the political rights and ritual obligations which are essential for obtaining the goodwill of the ancestors. Equally significant principle of social organisation is maternal parentage which is based on sentiment and affection rather than on rights. It is founded on the norm of sibling equality and a bond between sister and brother, and between mother's brother and sister's son either of the first degree or in a classificatory sense.

¹ Tallensi means all the inhabitants of Taleland.

Homestead – Domestic Family

Homestead is built for a particular family. The social relations in it run on two lines: lineage, on the canons of agnatic descent, and individual, on the bonds of marriage and parenthood based on bilateral kinship. On the lineage front they are brothers but with different mothers; they are oriented to different matri-centered segments. A homestead covers a circular or oval area, with public place, and in the centre granary which belongs to the head of the house. No one enters it without his authorisation. Around the space centering the granary living-quarters of the homestead are located for wife or wives and her or their children. The senior woman, mother of the head of house or senior wife is the mistress of the homestead. Each wife has three separate quarters or rooms, one for sleeping, a kitchen and a store of her own. The joint family may be seen as a transitory unit as the younger male members grow up, marry, and have children of their own and inner tensions begin to split up which may take place in the life time of the head or after his death. The senior most son may leave to farm independently and set up his family or cuts his own gateway at the same homestead and may come back after the death of father to become the head of the house. The practice of levirate has significant effect in the constitution of joint family.

Land and wives stand for fulfillment of fundamental social needs which run through the thoughts of the Tallensi. Wealth pre-eminently consists of livestock acquired through savings or in exchange of surplus grain or cash, and the livestock principally put is equivalent to acquiring wives. Wives are always highly prized because they were always at a premium. In consequence, no woman of child bearing age need to endure an intolerable marriage for she always finds another husband. But women rarely take advantage of this partly due to the stability of the patrilineal lineage system expressed in inter-personal relations in the power of father's authority and obedience. The father exchanges a daughter for cattle which in turn helps to acquire a wife for son or for self. The marriage may break either through the actions of one of the spouses, generally the woman or through her guardian for nonpayment of bride price or for any other reason. There is no formal procedure for divorce, just woman runs off from her husband's house to return to her parents or brothers. Despite initial pitfalls, families do get established and remain stable.

A woman does not forfeit her status in the natal lineage or clan or her personal ties with the parents or siblings; her natal family and clan have claims over her all her life. A woman brings up her own private resources, farming the land given to her by her husband, and gifts given by her parents and siblings. She can go back to her father's home and settle there for her sustenance as a matter of right. She continues all her life under her patrilineal ancestors and observes their totemic taboos. She is always stranger in her husband's family; she does not adopt the totemic taboos of her husband, and does not participate in the cults of his lineage ancestors. Marriage is forbidden within the lineage or clan and also mother's clan or lineage. A woman maintains a general attitude of deference, modesty, and compliance towards her relatives-in-law.

A man 'owns' his wife, which means, he has authority over her and is responsible for his wife. She must perform indispensable domestic tasks such as preparation of food for the households, taking care of children, provision of water supplies, etc. A man has right to these services; but it is a right limited by the principles of

reciprocity. The man has to protect and take care of his wife, particularly provide her with home, food, and curative treatment if she is ill. Any money or livestock she may possess passes on to her sons on her death.

The man must show formal deference to his parents-in-law and the relationship rests on goodwill of his parents-in-law for the latter can take back their daughter any time. He has joking relations with siblings-in-law. On the death of parents-in-law he is obliged to attend the mortuary and funeral ceremonies, should provide gravestone, should distribute money freely to the grave-diggers, to the drummers, singers and musicians. The son-in-law is obliged also to send certain food contributions in prescribed kind and quantity to the funeral of parents-in-law. A man is not to have any sexual relations with wife of an affine, which is considered a heinous offence, though not incest. Co-wives refer to one another as 'sisters'. They have a bond of mutual attachment that holds independently of their relations as wives of the same man or the same lineage. They help each other regularly and altruistically; they share such things as foodstuffs and firewood more readily. They do quarrel but nevertheless stay on.

A father's first duty to his children is to provide them with food and clothes. A good father should allow his adult sons to work a little for themselves and so earn enough to buy clothes, and he may allow them to wear some of his clothes on special occasions. He 'owns' his children; has the right and the duty of disciplining them; he has the right to inflict corporeal punishment on them. A father has the right to dispose of a daughter in marriage as he pleases and to use her brideprice as he pleases. A mother's rights are less defined. A mother has the right to the obedience and the respect of her children.

The inner lineage or minimal lineage is the widest segment with common interest and it is smallest corporate unit, as such, when a son dies and his wife marries his brother takes care of the children. Sometimes even daughter's children grow along with son's children, though the children have no claim on patrimonial land. With the natural parents the emotional elements and the *jural* and moral elements of the relationship are completely interfused. The son attains his first degree of freedom of independence only on the death of his own father. A man cannot offer sacrifices to partilineal ancestors in his own right while his father is alive. His father does on his behalf. It is only when his father dies that a man can sacrifice directly to his ancestors. While he has a proxy or classificatory father alive he is still to some extent under paternal authority. In the absence of any senior brother or father's brother, one becomes the head of the homestead or head of the minimal lineage if father was the head of the lineage.

Filial Piety

The fundamental moral principle is that bonds between parents and child cannot be obliterated, and from this follows the duty of filial piety. A man or woman can never disown his/her child, and one must obey one's father, respect him, work for him, take his side against anybody else, even against one's mother. The parents can bless or curse a child. There is a direct connection between this emphasis on the dependence of children on parents and the worship of the ancestors. Similar to the punishment of the parents, the ancestors exercise their power without compunction. They punish and slay as arbitrarily as they bless. The ancestors demand establishments of shrines where sacrifices are offered. A man's mother's spirit is as important as his father's. He has a shrine dedicated to her. These are

inheritable by half brothers also. Filial piety is the psychological bridge between the relations of parents and children in life and in the ritual relationships of the living with the ancestors. All the ancestors are projections of the parents, different manifestations of the images the Tallensi culture draws. The supreme filial piety sons owe to their parents lies in the performance of mortuary and funeral ceremonies. It is believed that a man's ancestor spirits accompany him wherever he goes, but they are most tangibly present in his house where he sacrifices to them.

There exists tension between the generations, the Tallensi explain this in terms of *Yin* or personal destiny. There is inborn antagonism between the *Yin* of a father and the *Yin* of his eldest son. The son's *Yin* wants to destroy the father's *Yin*; but the father's *Yin* desires to live. Therefore, the father must avoid meeting son in the gateway of the homestead. However such restriction is not applicable to other children. Only after the father's death the eldest son is shown the father's granary and his quiver. This is the symbolic replacement of the father's status and his role or the social personality with the eldest son. A person's loyalty and solidarity with his lineage springs from his relationship with his father, his ties with his matrilineal kin from his relationship with his mother.

Uterine and Extra-clan Relations

The uterine bond is very strong, intimate and is a permanent social bond between two brothers born to the same father and mother. The other siblings – children of different mothers and father's brother's children are differentiated terminologically as well as in behaviour. These brothers are coheirs and come under the same *jural* norms and are members of the same maximal lineage even if they live independently. The clan brothers have no property relations except that they are clansmen. Sexual relations with clan sisters outside the medial lineage are not regarded as disgraceful though it is considered adultery, it is not incest. In fact it is rare; it is reprobated as it is considered individual's act of omission. The bride price received for a girl should be earmarked for the payment of the bride price for the wife of her closet brother. A widow of child bearing age who has children usually consents to marry one of his close brothers. Next to him is brother of late husband's inner lineage brother. Inheritance of a grandfather's widow by a grandson is confined to the inner or at the most medial lineage. A sister's son can marry mother's brother's widow or his mother's brother's father's widow. All these bear out social equivalence of siblings; it is graded according to the genealogical distance.

A man's relationship to his sister's son has a *jural* and ritual coefficient. It is tied to the lineage structure and functions on the lineage principle. A lineage stands in the relationship of mother's brother, and the mother's brother offers sacrifice on behalf of the lineage into which the mother is married in order to secure blessings from the matrilineal ancestors. Often mother's brother's son is identified with mother's brother. Mother's brother keeps his interest in his sister's son, often by giving gifts. They cannot contract debts towards each other. Sister's son enjoys the status of a foster-child, though the latter cannot inherit any property. If one is cared by mother's brother, he will not forfeit his property rights in his lineage. He acts as intermediary between his maternal and paternal clan members and help erection of maternal shrine for the mother's brother. While the lineage system separates individuals and corporate groups from one another, the network

of extra-clan bonds knits them together. The extra-clanship provides complementary function to the clanship. Through marriages that extra-clanship kinship ties are woven into the lineage fabric; and this runs through several generations. These social relations are governed by a general rule of amity, and one is obligated to help in difficulties if possible. Further, marriage between extra-clan kin of any degree is forbidden. Thus, kinship outside the lineage lies in the sphere of individual's sentiment and conduct. It is located beyond the inner lineage in the level of mother's brother's clan. The sister has to fulfill certain customary obligations at the funeral in her or brother's lineage. She, in fact, has very little count in the web of kinship of extra-clan kinship. A man usually informs his sister's sons and his father's sister's son whenever he offers sacrifices to his ancestors, who may participate in it. A man establishes shrine for the founding ancestor as well as his mother and, similarly shrine is consecrated to mother's ancestors also. Thus there is complex of shrines at a homestead.

1.3.4 Conclusion

The work shows that kinship systems are further segmented and these combine to form levels taking care of different aspects of society. The major theme of this book is that unilateral descent groups are corporate structures.

1.4 HOW DOES THE ETHNOGRAPHY ADVANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING

This work shows that in unilateral descent groups, the gender category which is theoretically supposed to be excluded is not really excluded. Fortes, shows that among the Tallensi, women play an important role.

1.5 THEORETICAL PART OF WHICH THE ETHNOGRAPHY *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* IS AN EXAMPLE

David Schneider's work shows that the corporate functions that Kinship plays among the Tallensi are not found among the Americans, yet kinship plays a significant role in the lives of the people.

1.6 DESCRIPTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY

1.6.1 Intellectual Context

The book examines kinship from a symbolic point of view.

1.6.2 Fieldwork

Fieldwork was carried out among Americans using standard tools of investigation, but being an American, Schneider, was able to bring in his own insights into the understanding of American kinship.

1.6.3 Analysis of Data

American kinship is quite different from that of the Tallensi kinship. It is relatively highly differentiated, distinguished from other social institutions and relationships.

There are no corporate activities among the kinsmen with reference to economy or polity or religion.

A Cultural System

It is a cultural system, a system of symbols; it consists a system of units or parts defined in certain ways which are related to one another in a particular way. These units are cultural constructs that have a reality of their own, and these units in their relationships to one another follow certain rules that determine social action of individuals.

Symbol: “Something which stands for something else or some things else, where there is no necessary or intrinsic relationship between the symbol and that which it symbolizes” [Schneider (1968:1)].

Relatives

For an American, a relative is a person who is related by blood or by marriage. The kinship terms can be divided into two groups: the *basic* terms and *derivative* terms. The derivative terms are made up of a basic term plus a modifier. For example, “Father” is a basic term modified by “in-law” resulting in father-in-law. The other modifiers are “step”, “in-law,” “great,” “grand,” “ex-,” etc. The conception of a blood relative goes in biogenetic terms. A child derives one half of the biogenetic substance from one parent and the other half from the other parent. Therefore, the blood relationship between parents and children and among the siblings or among the blood relatives, nothing can really terminate or change the biological relationship that exists among them.

Unlike blood, marriage is not a material thing in the sense as biogenetic substance. Marriage is natural, a state of affairs; it is terminable by death or divorce. The persons by marriage are relatives because they have the role of close relatives without being “real or blood relatives”. A foster child is taken care of as one’s own child though the other parent may be different. In this case, the natural and material bases for the relationship are absent, but the relationship follows a pattern for behaviour, a code for conduct. However, a person who is related by blood is related by common biogenetic heredity, a natural substance, by a relationship, a pattern for behaviour or a code for conduct. While the blood relationship follows the *nature of order* of things, the marriage follows the *order of law*. The latter is an imposition by society, rules, regulations, customs and traditions. It is a law in a special sense.

Family is a unit that contains a husband wife and a child or children, and they are relatives in the sense that all the relatives are members of the family. In this cultural unit, sexual intercourse (act of procreation) is the symbol that provides distinctive feature for the family and to the members of the family as a cultural unit. Living together also means a man and woman live in sexual intercourse. Children have their own families, implies the same meaning. The family members consisting of husband, wife and children and living together is natural and therefore family is a natural unit. The family is formed according to the law of nature as is found in some animals, birds and even fish. But nature alone does not constitute the family. In addition, there is human reason which selects two orders of world of nature i.e., the order of nature and the order of law. A blood relationship is involuntary, it is through birth - a matter of procreation whereas marital relation is defined and created by the law of man.

Differentiation of Members

Nature distinguishes male and female by sexual organs, one gets sexual identity by physical features such as facial hair for men. In addition there are temperamental differences along with the sexual organs. While man is aggressive, possess great physical strength and stamina whereas woman is passive, has nurturing qualities which men lack. Sex-roles also differentiate man and woman; a man is a policeman, soldier or a clerk and a woman may be nurse, a school teacher or a cook. The cultural constructs of father and mother are made not only out of sexual organs but because they are distinct, father as genitor and mother as genitrix of the child. The members of a family are distinguished among themselves and together as a family also distinguishes itself from other family. Americans hold that family is responsible for the troubles such as poverty, crime, delinquency, drug addiction and so on that it encounters.

The family as a symbol is a pattern for how kinship relations should be conducted and it can be explicated from the opposition between “home” and “work.” Home is different from a house, home is where one lives. A homemaker makes a house into a home, a place for everything and anything in its place. Work, like home, is both place and an activity. Different things are done at home and work towards different ends. There is interstitial area between home and work, the vacation where there is relaxation, there is another area of relationship where individual can be picked up as friends unlike the blood relatives who cannot be chosen but born with them. The friends can be loyal, faithful, and helpful and everything a relative can be. Relatives can also be relatives, as friends can be evaluated and dropped also, so also the relatives.

The symbols of American kinship consist of spiritual unity of husband and wife, and unity of love among the members of the family. The sexual intercourse also stands for love, and love is a relation between persons but not between things. Love is freely and unselfishly given and it is to be never forsaken, betrayed or abandoned. This love can be translated as *enduring diffuse solidarity* for the well being of its members.

Person as a Relative

Just as family, the person is another major cultural unit in American kinship that is capable to act. A person may be a father, a policeman, judge or a priest. The father is a person in the family as judge is a person in court. Different elements are blended together in the conceptualisation of the person such as sex, age, job, ability to read, marriage and so on. A person is conceptualised as concrete and as abstract. The concrete one is a real one who should behave in accordance with some norms. Relatives are persons and the family is a group of persons. Family is conceived as a concrete group of persons and the concrete family has a counterpart, an abstract one. In abstract sense one can say about family consisting of husband, wife and children, but in concrete sense one says “my wife,” “my son John” and so on. As blood relatives, persons are firstly to behave according to cognatic love rooted in sexual intercourse. Secondly, relatives should behave towards each other in *enduring diffuse solidarity*.

A person is counted relative in the kinship domain if only a substantive element is present than if there is only code for conduct. Lacking of any of the elements may not be counted as a relative. With both the elements present that person is

most likely to be counted as a relative. Distance and closeness also matter in terms of two persons who share common biogenetic substance. The closeness is only a first measure but this is modified with the code for conduct; even if there is no substantive element, the distance depends on the code for conduct. The distant relatives are termed as “shirt-tail relatives” or “cakes-and-wedding relatives” or “kissin-kin” or “kissin-cousins” who lack code for conduct.

Relative in-law and by Marriage

There are two classes of relatives by marriage. The first is ego’s own husband or wife. The second class consists of the mother, father, brother and sister of ego’s own spouse along with spouses of ego’s brother, sister, son or daughter. All of these take the derivative terms and the in-law modifier. Sometime “in-law” is used for anyone in any way connected by any marriage. Also, it is used as a collective designation for anyone in any way connected through one’s own spouse. There is ambiguity the way relatives are traced by marriage. A son’s wife and daughter’s husband are daughter-in-law or son-in-law, but an uncle’s wife is not an aunt for some. An aunt can be only father’s sister or mother’s brother’s wife. Again if uncle’s wife is an aunt for some, why there is no kin term for cousin’s wife who is also related by marriage but considered as a non-relative? Death, divorce and remarriage raise special problem to understand American kinship. A step-parent, if remarries, there is ambiguity to connect the children of the step-parent’s from the next marriage or step-parent’s spouse also. The relatives by marriage are in a relationship of kinship due to code for conduct, there is no substantive basis. These relatives choose to follow that code for conduct rather than some other code. In this context, it is necessary to note that relationship is also a matter of consent, that is, it is voluntarily undertaken and voluntarily maintained.

As regards to the meaning and association of the concepts “in-law” and “by marriage” in their use in kinship domain referring to those related by marriage is not clear. It is explained in terms of the symbol of coitus. Before offering an explanation it is to be noted that only certain kinship terms are modified with in-law like “mother-in-law” or “brother-in-law”, but there is no kinship term for cousin’s spouse or sibling’s spouse’s siblings though one is related by marriage. Here, it is not clear as why there is this kind of difference when the relatives belong to the same category? The explanation is as follows. The universe of kinship is divided into two parts: nature and that of law. Nature conforms to the ‘law of nature’ and therefore law in its widest meaning refers to order, regularity and obedience to rules. But nature in the inheritance of blood follows the nature as “given” substance which is opposed by in-law which is “made” and imposed upon mankind and man’s nature. Here law is restricted to custom, tradition, the more and the ways of man as against any other way. This order of human reason is within the domain of kinship. It is in this sense that relatives are connected by this law of regularity imposed by the human reason in marriage. The normative construct of relative “by marriage” or “in-law” as a person has the stipulation that, lacking a natural or substantive component, it consists of a particular code for conduct alone. It is voluntary, in that it is up to each party to enter into it, maintain it or opt out of it unlike the blood relationship. It is the kind of relationship “by marriage” not because each of the two parties to it is married to each other but because it is that specific kind of relationship.

Kinship Terms

It is also important to note that in American kinship there are far more kinship terms and terms for kinsmen than there are kinds of kinsmen or categories of kinsmen. For example, Mother may be called “mother,” “mom,” “ma,” “mummy,” “mama” and so on. Similarly, Father may be called “father,” “pop,” “pa,” “dad,” “daddy,” and so on. In several instances father-in-law and mother-in-law are called “pop” and “mom”. There is variation in usage of kinship terms with regards to who is spoken to and who is being spoken about. In some cases “ma” and “mom” are less likely to be used by daughters than by sons, and that “mother” is more acceptable to daughter than to sons. The father term “father” has formality and authority and respect implications which “mother” does not share.

In case of relatives by marriage or (in-law), there are no kinship terms in some instances as in case of cousin’s spouse though the relationship is recognised, it depends on the consideration if one is a relative or not. When considered as a relative appropriate term is used. Uncle’s wife may be considered a relative and if so called as aunt, if not she is only uncle’s wife. In case of step- and other foster relatives derivatives of kinship terms are used as “step-aunt”- a step-father’s sister, a “step-cousin” – mother’s brother’s step-son etc. Kinship terms are applied to persons who are not kinsmen or relatives as Mother superior in a convent or Father for a priest in order to indicate their role. When this happens, the term is specifically modified to make this clear to the listener. Kinship term is not an object by itself, it invokes certain role. The kinship terms have one of their many meanings of the biogenetic relationship or the code for the conduct of kinship. The uncle’s wife and aunt’s husband are called “aunt” and “uncle” only means that some kind of a kinship role is invoked for them.

1.6.4 Conclusion

David Schneider’s work is a cultural account of kinship. Generally kinship has been studied in small scale societies as it was believed that it is the principle of social organisation in these societies. Modern societies were believed to be free from kinship. Schneider’s work shows the importance of kinship in American society.

1.7 HOW DOES THE ETHNOGRAPHY ADVANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING

This ethnography familiarises us with the cultural aspects of kinship.

Comparison

It is clear from the above description that kinship relationships play significant role but in different ways in the ordering of social life. Among the Tallensi, the kinship relation is such an irreducible principle that it organises all activities related to food production, consumption, other material goods, reproduction, rearing of children so on, besides bestowing rights, privileges and assigning duties. Agnatic and cognatic elements based on descent and sentiment respectively that constitute the domain of kinship complement each other. The genealogical and kinship relations are so extensive that no individual, either alive or dead, or an event does not fall outside the orbit of kinship. The submergence of the individual’s interest in those of the corporate unit is quite obvious among the Tallensi.

American kinship is not a matter of corporate groups. It is person-centered system. It follows the natural principles of animate world; it is a system of symbols expressed in sexual intercourse, inheritance of biogenetic substance and human reasoning following certain code for conduct. Thus, it belongs to both the spheres of nature and culture. Relatives are defined by their biological interrelationships and appropriate behaviour, and those related by marriage are counted on the basis of code for conduct. Individual's interests order the domain of kinship.

1.8 SUMMARY

Though a salient feature in any society, it is difficult to achieve an analytical, universal and adequate definition of kinship and its nature, given the diverse practices that are found. The competing descent, alliance and cultural theories are different ways to approach the subject yet they are inadequate as the massive data gathered so far indicate. The studies on kinship though loom less large these days, the key concepts such as selfhood, agency, gender, childhood, personhood, rights, and construction of social categories that emerge from the study of kinship figure in several other contexts. Feminist anthropology can easily be traced to the cross cultural studies of kinship. Similarly, the Marxist anthropology owes a great deal to kinship studies. Presently, anthropologists are looking at the social relationships and kinship terminologies more than biological or *jural* instead they are concerned with the quality of these relationships embedded in power and processual action, and gendering of bodies into social adulthood in the ordering of the social world.

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Suggested Reading

Fortes, Meyer. 1949. *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi*. London: International African Institute.

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Sample Questions

- 1) Explicate the nature of kinship from the above ethnographies.
- 2) What are the basic premises on which kinship operates?
- 3) What are the functions of kinship?
- 4) How the agnatic and cognatic elements operate in these two societies?