REVIEW ARTICLE

STUDYING KINSHIP

ALAN BARNARD and ANTHONY GOOD, *Research Practices in the Study of Kinship*, London etc.: Academic Press 1984. xiv, 189pp., Indexes, Bibliography, Figures, Tables. £21.50/$32.00.

Although a considerable amount of work on kinship is based on comparisons of already published ethnographic accounts, the raw material ultimately has to be collected through the usual fieldwork techniques of questioning and observation. The principal aim of this book is to introduce these techniques to new students in anthropology by presenting aims and approaches and outlining the chief practical problems that are likely to arise in the field. However, the authors are also keen to eschew 'mechanical procedures' and to show that such research cannot be carried out in ignorance of or isolation from broader theoretical questions. Hence we are offered neither a text-book nor a step-by-step 'instruction manual' but a comprehensive discussion of the problems of conducting fieldwork on the basis of theoretical questions relating to kinship - whether the latter are illuminating or, as is more usual, pose further questions of their own.

In fact, there is enough discussion of theoretical concerns for this book to provide the comprehensive, balanced and clearly written introduction to kinship that has been sorely needed and which might prevent a large proportion of anthropology students from regarding the topic as just a chore to be undertaken on their way to researching something they find more interesting. For the last twenty years or so this gap - at least in the English-speaking world - has been filled mainly by Robin Fox's *Kinship and Marriage* (1967), a useful and uncomplicated book, though one of use to a general rather than specialized readership. Indeed, its coverage was always limited, in addition it was flawed for many by the

early versions of ecological and biological determinism for which Fox has since become even more notorious, and it would anyway need updating to take account of more recent developments. The other 'authoritative' introduction mentioned by the authors is Dumont's highly acclaimed *Introduction à deux théories d'anthropologie sociale* (1971), though this was written specifically for a French readership and is unlikely to be translated in the near future. Other available introductions are either even more basic and limited than Fox, or else simply unreliable. Thus although the book demands some prior knowledge of its topic, for teaching purposes it is undoubtedly important, especially since its clarity and thoroughness surpass anything similar; yet it will also be invaluable as a guide to current theories and literature for established staff and researchers in the field.

While the book is reasonably well balanced in the attention it gives to the multitude of viewpoints present in kinship studies, it is certainly not neutral. *Contra* Leach and others, it takes an explicitly Popperian view of social anthropology as a science because of the testability of its hypotheses (p. x). The authors' view of the significance of kinship to anthropology resides in its importance in most of the societies anthropologists have traditionally studied; yet they also point out that it has a place even in those from which the latter most usually come. As a consequence, kinship 'lends itself to (and indeed *demands*) comparative study' (p. 2, original emphasis). Yet the importance they place on comparison does not lead them to expect universals - instead, 'in our view the more immediate concerns of anthropology lie with the *differences* between societies, not with...similarities between them' (ibid., original emphasis).

Because of the complexities of comparison, Barnard and Good frequently invoke Needham's polythetic idea, and they apply throughout his distinction between the three levels of data - categories, rules and behaviour - first proposed in full in 1973. They also adopt, from this same article, Needham's revised statement as to the status of the vexed term 'prescription'. It would seem that Good has been the prime mover in introducing these ideas into the book, since he has used them far more in his own independent work than Barnard has in his. Be that as it may, this constitutes a degree of bias in the book and will strike many as making it more polemical than the authors claim. I will concentrate on these issues, taking each in turn.

Despite their evident interest in the polythetic idea, Barnard and Good make no attempt to construct such a model, except for their closing definition of kinship itself (pp. 187-8). In his own review of the book Scheffler (1985: 37-8) regards it as particularly strange that they should not do so for descent, especially since this was Needham's pioneering example of the approach. Although they do refer to it, the definition they adopt is that of Rivers (1924: 85-8), the essence of which is the separation of inheritance, succession, residence and authority from descent proper (with which these were and are often confused), which he defined

as membership of (or recruitment to - cf. Barnard and Good, p.71) groups only. There are some problems with this definition, chiefly, perhaps, the failure to distinguish mere *ad hoc* accretions of individuals from indigenously conceived units, and the explicit restriction of it to unilineal descent and descent groups. Nonetheless, he showed that with a little clarity of thought the concept of descent (unlike marriage, for example) could be given an adequate conventional classification without succumbing to what was Needham's basic complaint: the temptation to characterise and even compare whole societies according to one particular descent principle.[1]

In their discussion of Rivers' definition (pp. 68f.), Barnard and Good do not mention the exclusion of non-unilineal descent groups from it, and indeed they give less attention than they might have done to this principle of descent. This may again reflect the influence of Needham, who has suggested that 'cognatic societies constitute a negatively defined class' (1966: 29). Admittedly there was very little theory on such matters before the second half of the 1950s, and the boundaries of such units are apt to be indistinct and shifting, which means that they generally have a less concrete sense of identity than unilineal descent groups. But it would have been useful to have pointed out the often important distinction between ego-centred and ancestor-centred groups here, and the fact that whatever the practices of earlier generations, since Murdock (1949) and Freeman (1961) the term 'kindred' has progressively become restricted to the former.

Needham's distinction (1973) between the categorical, jural and behavioural levels of data and analysis, also adopted as a general principle throughout the book, was undoubtedly an advance on earlier, dichotomous distinctions, whether between terminology and social structure generally, or between ideology and behaviour. The further division of ideology into the categorical and jural is justifiable partly on empirical grounds and partly because the level of category is expressed less consciously than the other two (and is also the least labile): 'Whereas the individual terms which go to make up each system of classification are largely taken for granted and unexamined, the jural rules convey the explicitly recognized ideology of the people concerned' (Barnard and Good, p.13). Moreover, the people of any society are surely capable of realising that behaviour often deviates from the rules that supposedly govern it, and that both rules and behaviour may differ even more widely from one society to another. However, categories and systems of classification, usually closely bound up with a linguistic form of expression, define rather than enjoin or describe, and they are thus more rigid and less evadable than either rules or behaviour.

In the past, Good seems to have regarded this separation of levels as virtually absolute (e.g. 1981: 127), but there has apparently been some retreat from this position, and here it is accepted

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[1] Scheffler regards Needham's definition as no more polythetic than Rivers', though this neglects the Penan example that follows it.

that 'they are not *wholly* independent of one another' (p.13, original emphasis). Indeed, 'we have distinguished them in terms of their inter-relationships as a structured set, rather than according to their content...' (p.14), this being just one instance of the book's 'concern with relationships rather than essences, and with structures rather than contents' (ibid.).

Connected with this question is the third major respect in which Barnard and Good follow Needham, namely in adopting his final definition of 'prescription' (1973) which, especially in its verbal form, was used unproblematically for decades by anthropologists of many different schools, until the controversies that erupted over its use in the 1960s, with Needham and also Lévi-Strauss very much at centre stage. This led eventually to Needham's attempt to resolve the confusion by suggesting that henceforward it should be restricted to the level of category (terminology, social classification) only and abandoned in respect of both rules and behaviour (similar arguments had already been offered in brief by Leach 1945: 59-60 and Löffler 1964: 225-6). Thus prescription was a matter of definition, not regulation, and at the opposite pole from a prescriptive system was not a 'preferential' one, but a 'non-prescriptive' one (though this did not negate the fact that 'any prescription is liable to preferential qualification', 1973: 175). Needham seems to have located prescription at the level of terminology because this best conveyed the sense of inevitability and definition characteristic of this level: prescriptive systems were, in his phrase, 'examples of absolutism' (p.179). However, as he himself realised, this choice could only be made at the cost of distorting the usual and accepted meaning of the term, which 'explicitly invokes rules rather than categories' (Barnard and Good, p.103). This discrepancy is especially apparent when prescription comes to be defined as being 'constituted by the regularity of a constant relation that articulates lines and categories' (Needham 1971: 32), i.e. not as an injunction but as a formal property of the terminology.

One can argue that these attempts to give prescription a more formal and rigorous meaning have led to a greater circumspection in its use generally - so much so that it seems to have undergone something of a decline in recent years, as with (by contamination, as it were) the simple verb 'prescribe'. For some, this may simply reflect acceptance of Needham's advice, but others may have been put on their guard by all the controversy the use of the term has created. For 'prescription' now implies acceptance of a particular theoretical approach, a sort of association that would have been unthinkable in the earlier decades of this century.[2] Certainly,

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[2] In English-speaking anthropological circles this tends to mean those who have come under Needham's influence to some extent. In France, it means the influence of Lévi-Strauss for the most part, whose use of the term is still more problematic. One recent French ethnography (Bouez 1985) completely fails to understand Needham's position on this issue and makes no reference to the latter's 1973 article in discussing the difference between preference and prescription.

one can remove one potential source of criticism and misunderstanding today by simply avoiding it altogether.

It is therefore interesting to see Barnard and Good seeking to re-launch the term by accepting Needham's suggestions so wholeheartedly, and even expanding them, in the one section of the book (pp.95-103) where they openly admit to being 'both tendentious and polemical'. Like Needham, they define prescription as a purely terminological device for distinguishing marriageable from non-marriageable kin types, stressing that at the jural level this definition would inevitably appear tautological - and thus making something of a virtue out of one of Schneider's key criticisms (1965) of Needham's pre-1973 approach. They also emphasise the inevadable quality of prescription, in the sense that it 'structures rather than reflects' the more tangible aspects of the kinship system. This is especially true of its redefinition of the categories involved in 'wrong' marriages, which makes it '***not*** a marriage rule, but a self-fulfilling prophecy' (p.102, original emphasis) - one which 'applies whatever happens', unlike rules,[3] which 'are *by definition* breakable' (p.166, original emphasis). Finally, Barnard and Good propose to discard the phrase 'prescriptive alliance' altogether, because 'the epithet "alliance" is best reserved for jural relationships', while the epithet 'prescriptive', following Needham, is, of course, ruled out also. It is clear, however, that Needham himself has certainly not abandoned the phrase but has continued to use it in his subsequent work. Because of the possibility of confusion, therefore, it needs stressing that his usage of 'prescriptive alliance' and 'prescriptive marriage' is mainly applied by him to terminology nowadays, despite the literal sense of the term.[4]

The authors are themselves not entirely free from inconsistency in this respect, since marriage is said to be 'prescribed' at certain points, and the phrase 'prescriptive marriage' also appears on one occasion, in saying that the Tamil terminology implies the

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[3] This is one respect in which it can be argued that rules and terminology come together, though in any conflict between them it is the latter, not the former, which imposes its interpretation on events. What is more, it conveys this interpretation to posterity, since such categorical redefinitions can amount to a realignment of alliance relationships for the future. For an alternative explanation of the connection between the two, see Allen 1986: 100.

[4] One of the clearer examples of this usage can be found in a very recent article, where Needham is referring to Leach's data on the Kachin: 'The relationship terminology, the structure of which is that of prescriptive matrilateral cross-cousin marriage, is constituted by five lines' (1986: 175). Needham admittedly identified 'prescriptive alliance' with terminology in his earlier article ('Prescriptive alliance systems...are indeed elementary structures - not of kinship, but of classification...', 1973:179), but this is still a point apt to be missed with those less familiar with his work.

existence of this purely jural phenomenon (p.55 - clearly Good here). Indeed, they can be accused of compounding the confusion further by describing both differential status at marriage (p.107) and 'a particular ideological view of descent' (p.77) as prescriptive. Such applications of the term outside the realm of affinal alliance, in which its use has already caused so much controversy, will surely increase rather than diminish confusion, especially in the minds of new students, though it is admittedly not unprecedented: Leach has described descent as more truly prescriptive than any rule of alliance, while Southwold has exploited the distinction between preference and prescription in relation to succession to office (1966); and Fortes sometimes (e.g. 1969) used the phrase 'the rule of prescriptive altruism' to refer to his earlier and better known 'axiom of amity'.

A final point is that any discussion of this controversy should mention the 'lineal' equations and distinctions that Needham sees as at least a precondition, if not a defining feature, of all prescriptive terminologies, as is evident from any of his analyses of them. This seems to derive from the use of 'line' and the confusing use of 'descent line' by Fortune, Radcliffe-Brown, Leach, etc. in discussing what are essentially terminological structures, *not* jural institutions. Barnard and Good barely allude to this point and do not adequately stress the distinction between the formal pattern of what Needham regards as a system of classification and descent groups existing as aggregates of individuals (which is also a distinction between the ego-centred and the ancestor-centred). It is also regrettable, in an introductory book that makes considerable use of Needham's ideas, that they neglect to warn readers that his employment of the term 'lineal' for equations which link parallel kin types with lineal ones and in opposition to cross kin (e.g. the +1 pattern of P=PssG(E)≠ PosG(E)) conflicts with Lowie's earlier and better established use of it. This also occurs in respect of kinship terminology, but in a completely different, indeed quite opposite sense - i.e. for the 'English', non-prescriptive pattern represented by P≠PG(E). Needham's 'lineal' equations are, of course, Lowie's 'bifurcate merging' ones, i.e. those rather more generally known as classificatory. With Needham, 'lineal' refers to a particular type of equation rather than the pattern of a whole genealogical level or terminology, as befits his concern with principles of classification rather than typologies.

In view of the book's probable influence on new students, it will be interesting to see how far this advocacy of Needham's ideas eventually succeeds in spreading them more widely. But I do not wish to convey the impression that they dominate the whole book - they help form its overall framework and set its tone, but take up comparatively little of its content. Indeed, virtually no other approach or attitude that has commanded or might command general attention is overlooked. Apart from the introduction, there are

chapters on collecting genealogies and conducting censuses; descent; marriage and alliance; the economic, political and religious aspects of kinship; culturally specific ideas (including Western ones) about kinship; and two chapters on 'relationship terminologies'. Great attention is paid to stressing that kinship is a social, not a biological conception, and in pointing out the potential pitfalls of genealogies and genealogical ways of thinking generally in analysing certain aspects of kinship. The warnings are commendable ones, especially in an introductory book, even though one detects something of the fanaticism of the convert as regards the second point.[5] The problem has involved, though, not merely ethnocentrism or naivety but also the seductiveness of a definite expository convenience in choosing genealogical minima to represent a whole category. Even Dumont, whose approach is as remote from Scheffler-Lounsbury reductionism as it is possible to imagine, is prepared to take advantage of this.[6]

Inevitably there are some omissions from the very wide corpus of work that has been carried out on all aspects of kinship. Joanna Overing, in her own review of the book (*Man* XXI, p. 356), has already remarked on its limitations for South Americanists, and the coverage of the literature is oddly selective on occasion: for instance, only Lucy Mair is cited as having tried to distinguish bridewealth from brideprice, though others, above all Evans-Pritchard (e.g. 1931), deserve mention just as much. However, no book of this sort can be expected to cover everything or please everybody in every respect, and each commentator will respond differently. There is no doubt that the book can be read profitably by any anthropologist at whatever career stage - and whether already working on kinship or simply bewildered by it.

ROBERT PARKIN

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[5] 'One of us, at least, has been so recently emancipated from this particular relic of a natural science background, that the conceptual struggle involved is still vividly remembered' (p.8; possibly Good here, originally a student of chemistry).

[6] '...I speak of F and MB to introduce the real native major (or "most inclusive") categories which are more exactly rendered as "male consanguine of parents' generation" and "male affine of parent's generation"' (1983: 33); 'We suppose that the categories are well-enough known, in general, for each to be identified by our simply indicating a close relative who falls into it' (ibid.: 177).

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