KINSHIP AND IDENTITY: INTRODUCTION

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THE present collection of papers derives from a seminar series that I convened in collaboration with Shirley Ardener, Tamara Dragadze, and Jonathan Webber at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Oxford, in Michaelmas Term 1996, on the theme of 'Kinship and Identity'. This was part of a continuing initiative organized by my three colleagues for a number of years past, the original idea being to build further on the foundations of the late Edwin Ardener's work on questions of ethnicity and identity, following his untimely death in 1987. These events have been immensely productive in terms of work delivered, discussed, published and read, and it is an honour for me to be associated with one of them. The original series on 'Kinship and Identity' consisted of the usual eight papers, of which five appear here (the other contributors had already committed their papers elsewhere and were therefore not able to take part in this publication). I would like to thank all the contributors warmly for their willingness to take part, as well as my co-convenors for their unfailing support for the series.

Although questions of ethnicity and identity now have a respectably long history in anthropology—including a recognition of the importance of notions of common descent when listing what might be significant in general terms—there is still not a great deal of work locating kinship centrally in identity construction. One often has to tease the connections that are obviously present out of the material through liberal amounts of lateral thinking and reading between the lines. One obvious candidate in this respect is David Schneider's pioneering work *American Kinship* (1968), which, banal though it may be inclined to the average Euroamerican reader, still successfully insisted—with its stress on the symbolic

meanings of a form of kinship that was very familiar personally to probably a majority of his potential readers—that those meanings were culturally specific and could be expected to change when shifting to other societies in other parts of the world. The influence of the work of this one-time maverick has grown steadily, and it has clearly had an impact on such authorities as Marilyn Strathern, who has sought to show that much professional anthropological discourse about kinship is rooted in similarly culturally grounded and bounded notions (1992). But there have been more explicit approaches recently incorporating the theoretical theme of identity with ethnographically derived notions of kinship. One might mention here Joan Bestard-Camps on Catalonia (1991), Jeremy MacClancy on Basques (1993), and John Bornemann on kinship and identity in the two parts of formerly divided Berlin, where he shows how official policy regarding the family underpinned both themes in both areas (1992). More recently still, David Sutton has reminded us of the connections between kinship and nationalism in terms of metaphors of belonging, and he has attempted to develop this insight using a 'bottom-up' approach in relation to a Greek island (1997).

Qualitatively pertinent though these texts might be, they are none the less quantitatively rather modest. One of the factors delaying a more vigorous use of kinship in debates on identity has probably been the predominance of formal analyses in the tradition of Morgan and Lévi-Strauss, out of fashion though these may seem to be at the present time (but cf. countervailing comments in Parkin 1997). However, it seems to me that these two approaches are far from being unbridgeable. Since I myself have contributed, if very modestly, to the more formal side of kinship studies before, quite a bit later, beginning to pay attention to issues of identity and ethnicity, it might be useful if I introduce some personal history at this point.

My first two research interests in anthropology were kinship and South Asia, and they remain important to me, often in association with one another. However, my work in this respect has really been in the mainstream tradition of analysing kinship systems as if they were discrete, the properties, even mainspring, of certain bounded social systems we used to call tribal. My interest in questions of ethnicity and identity came later and arose out of the realization that the sharp distinctions that Poles and Germans make from one another, and the quite negative stereotypes of difference they hold, has to be balanced by a history of populations mixing and an active tendency by some individuals to shift between these identities, especially in the context of the migration of Polish citizens to Germany on the basis of some demonstrable German descent.

I have, of course, always been aware of arguments from ethnicity and identity in anthropology, if rather vaguely at times. One situation I found myself in as a student in late 1970s—already a post-structuralist period for some, as expressed not least in the pages of earlier issues of the present journal, though no more than late-structuralist for others—was that many of my fellow students were frankly sceptical of these approaches. Many were inclined to argue that they added nothing, really, to what had gone before: what *was* different over the hallowed method of

identifying a particular ethnic group in terms of customary attributes such as descent and marriage systems, rituals, beliefs etc.? Well, what this once vigorous but now rather old-fashioned approach assumed was tribal boundedness and discreteness, as well as a certain essentialism, and a marked reluctance, whether the analyst was basically a functionalist or a structuralist, to account for either process as a dynamic aspect of how social systems were actually constituted, or history in the chronological or at least narrative sense. Supplying the first of these wants shows that social systems are not intrinsically bounded and that in many cases people move between them according to context, whether permanently or temporarily, this being an almost normative aspect of many social systems. Focusing on history allows us to identify not only social change but also processes of ethnogenesis, as boundaries expand and contract, are created and disappear altogether.

In the wider sense, however, history presents us with certain problems even in the context of identity. First, are, for example, ethnic identities as a type the product of modern circumstances, such as reactions to the colonial experience or conflicts over increasingly scarce resources, or are they older, much older, as old as human history, even? Clearly, the differentiation of human populations has always led to a difference in identity of some sort, but there are many other bases for identity—class, clan, locality, politics, religion, occupation, life-style, aesthetic taste, sexual orientation, and much more, often in combination—many of which seem clearly more relevant for earlier periods. Another question relates to the bases of ethnogenesis itself, which is sometimes presented almost as arising out of nothing, as sheer creativity is given priority over the bases that must underlie it. In reality, this is unlikely to be the case, and here I appreciate most the position of those like John Peel (on ethnicity; 1989), Anthony Smith (on nationalism; 1986) and latterly Anton Blok (on history; 1992), at least to the extent that they argue for a degree of continuity with the past in respect of such changes. Finally, although identities in general tend to show themselves to the analyst as fluid, unbounded, and historically contingent, ethnic identities in particular are often presented by their spokespersons as essentialist, bounded, and as old as the hills (Parkin: in preparation). This is the familiar difference between the outside observer's perspective and the indigenous one. In seeing social systems as bounded and unchanging, it could be argued that pre-Barthian anthropology was allowing itself to be seduced by the folk models of the people it was studying.

I do not want to present my intellectual development as leading to some sort of spiritual crisis or process of conversion from the illicit delights of formal analysis to a belated recognition of some hard truths about identity, not least because I do not intend to abandon the former for ever (and this position has nothing to do with their possibly being illicit!). Over the years, however, I have come to recognize two things in this context. One is that India, with its hierarchical and at the same time micro-differentiated social structure, is an excellent laboratory for the identity and increasingly also ethnicity theses. Indeed, it may even reinforce these theses, as India exemplifies repeatedly the truth that the

identity one claims for oneself is not always that attributed to one by others. The other consideration is that ethnic groups may portray themselves as different from their neighbours partly with reference to kinship. This can be seen under (at least) two fundamental aspects. One relates to structural features and the realm of practice: we are distinct because of the sort of kinship system we have. This is exemplified in this collection by Llobera's account of the Catalan patrial or stem family and primogeniture as peculiar to the Catalans within this region, and it is also a consideration in India in respect of how one marries, as I attempt to show in my own paper. The other aspect relates to actual networks of relationships on the ground: we are distinct because we are all of one stock. Here one most obviously thinks, perhaps, of descent, and this is highlighted by Clammer in particular on Chinese and other groups in Singapore, and is also touched on by Llobera as regards Catalans. Of course, this may be true no matter what the mode of descent itself is. What is also interesting in Clammer's case is how this has been officially maintained and even created by the Chinese-dominated Singapore government using a combination of neo-Confucianism and modern sociobiology which to a large extent flies in the face of contradictory historical circumstances.

However, marriage may also be implicated in the delineation of supposedly separate 'stocks'. If there is a stress on common substance, there may well be a concomitant tendency to restrict marriage to the group in the interests of preserving that substance from outside contamination: as I also try to show in my paper, this is certainly the case in India, in respect of the endogamy of caste. This is obviously impossible where intermarriage is at all frequent, although both in- and out-marriage may pose a problem in terms of a perceived loss of cultural substance and/or vigour, as the paper by Romain on mixed-faith marriages in Britain shows. However, the nature of the marriage system itself may be less at issue in this particular context: north and south India share the value of endogamy, even though the north characteristically abhors cross-cousin marriage, while for the south it is normative.

Lest the contrast still be obscure, let us reflect on Leach's data on the Kachin of Upper Burma (1954), which was pioneering in this regard as in many others. Essentially, the Kachin were constituted by a number of more or less antagonistic upland populations who were ethnically and politically distinct in the Barthian sense but who shared much in respect of system and practice. Their distinctiveness could be seen in terms of the claimed common descent of each group, that is, as a set of relationships which each group had for itself and which was not shared with other groups, however similarly constituted. On the other dimension, however, they all had the same *sort* of descent system, which basically consisted of patrilineal, segmented lineage systems, frequently with ultimogeniture in respect of succession and inheritance, the chronologically junior line having status priority in most respects. In addition there were MBD marriage, *nat* worship, chiefly rule, subsistence cultivation etc. As well as tending to unite these politically disparate groups culturally, such features also distinguished these upland populations from the lowland Shan, with their shallow descent, non-prescriptive marriage systems,

princely rule, primogeniture and ancestor worship. Fundamental in Leach's account was the contrast between marriage systems. For Kachin, wife-takers are inferior in status and often political clients. For Shan, the reverse is the case: giving a wife itself indicates political clientship. Therefore, if an ambitious Kachin chief gives a wife to a Shan princely house in an attempt to increase rank, he simply becomes a client in their eyes. Leach's *gumsa/gumlao* model can be seen in part as a simple culture clash. However, it is also true that one set of cultural expectations, the Kachin one, is broadly shared by a number of different groups who see themselves as distinct in terms of shared descent, despite the fact that they trace descent in basically the same ways.

I am therefore not arguing that these two dimensions, that of system and practice and that of actual networks of relationship, are mutually exclusive: the Indian material too shows how they may converge. But there are differences in the ways in which they are put to use. It seems to me that networks of relationship are particularly suitable for marking off one's own group as exclusive and particular. While one may marry out—though with more or less deleterious consequences, perhaps at the cost of no longer counting as a member of the group even in terms of ethnicity (see again Romain's paper, below)—one's birth is less negotiable. There are many groups for whom birth is an essential requirement for full membership: in Europe Germans certainly, and very largely also Jews, even though religious conversion is recognized in principle by the latter. This may seem to apply to some groups but not to others: it may be tempting to cite as an example here the well-known fact that many Nuer are of Dinka origin (Evans-Pritchard 1940). The fact that this is remembered, conversely, suggests that there is still a distinction in terms of Nuerness: outside origins are frequently remembered for generations, even where there is superficial unity, a fact that anthropologists may only become aware of after a considerable time in the field.

The nature of systems and practices, conversely, is such that they can be adopted by anyone, as is shown repeatedly by Indian low-caste status-climbers. As regards this dimension, there is the consideration that whatever the use made of systems and practices in terms of creating an identity, there are some limitations on the variations that one expects to encounter: above a certain level of detail, there are only so many possible ways of actually tracing descent, for example, or of forming an affinal alliance system. Thus, with reference to Llobera's paper (below), the use of Catalan primogeniture as a marker of Catalan identity is potent in the regional context, where the Castilians (for many Catalans simply 'the Spanish') and at least certain Portuguese do not have it, the former being the people from whom Catalans are generally most anxious to distance themselves. However, they are far from being the only group even in Europe to have primogeniture, let alone the rest of the world. Thus, while this may mark Catalanness for Catalans, it does not define Catalanness sociologically across the planet.

Ifeka and Flower's paper in this collection, finally, on the Boki of Nigeria, is on the face of it a little different from the others in that it demonstrates the importance of patrilineal kinsmen in the context of witchcraft accusations which centre

on the accused's consumption of close relatives, especially sons, by spiritual means. Here too, however, there is a dimension of contrast which can be viewed in terms of more all-embracing forms of identity, namely between traditional, collective forms of property rights, and modern, Western-derived ideas that stress individual rights and advantageous empowerment through them. Ardener showed among the Bakweri (1970) how witchcraft, prosperity, spiritual aggression, and destroying one's own may be intimately bound up together in a single nexus, but permanently so—that is, regardless of changing and superficially far-reaching outside influences, which are relentlessly accommodated to it. In the case of the Boki, the particularity and self-centredness of prosperity drawn from supposedly Western-derived attitudes to property is converted through witchcraft accusations into an attack on anti-social behaviour in quasi-traditional fashion. A conflict of identities, in other words, is tackled with reference to a system of retribution which focuses on relations between kin and their apparent denial through witchcraft attacks upon them.

In my belief these papers all exemplify what might be done in the realm of the still comparatively fresh topic of identity by bringing in a further domain, that of kinship, which has always been at the heart of anthropology in some form, and which chronologically was in at the start of what we can still recognize as the modern subject or at least proto-subject, in the work of Morgan, McLennan, Maine, Tylor, Bachofen, and others. It seems to me that there is no reason why these two strands should continue to remain apart and that they are actually capable of enriching one another in all sorts of ways. It is hoped that the papers in this collection may provide a degree of inspiration leading others too towards that goal.

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