

Introduction to
Anthropology:
Holistic and Applied
Research on Being
Human

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MODULE 15: KINSHIP AND MARRIAGE

What is Kinship?

Humans are social creatures. We live in families and communities that form the basis of our identity and learn how to live based on pre-established practices, ways of thinking and behaving, and protocols for things like eating, dressing, and interacting. These communities also teach us how to socially organize people, determine our relatives, and understand the factors that relate us. All human groups make families, but we do it differently across space and time. Although all cultures designate kin and mating rituals, there are many ways to identify relatives and potential mates. Genealogical connections may or may not actually play a role in this relatedness. Traditionally, Western cultures propagated the ideas that kin are genetic relatives, marriage is a universal institution, and ideal family structures must include married, heterosexual couples caring for their biological children. Children's welfare was viewed as directly impacted by the quality and stability of their parents' marriage. However, many cultures demonstrate viable alternatives that help us understand that kinship and marriage are social constructs. In this chapter, we will discuss how kinship and marriage look and function in different societies and study examples illustrating the various ways that cultures utilize these concepts.

Kinship refers to culturally defined social relationships typically founded on factors such as birth, age, gender, descent, marriage, mating, and nurturance. The fact that kinship is a cultural construct is important to

recognize because people have such diverse ways of designating kin across the world. Anthropologists describe three types of kin: **consanguineal**, **affinal**, and **fictive**. Consanguineal kin are biologically or genetically related (blood relatives), affinal relatives are related through marriage (spouses, in-laws, stepchildren, etc.), and fictive kin are relatives that are not related by blood or marriage (adopted family members and godparents). These types of relationships are important because they form the foundation of politico-economic structures in society and can influence aspects of life like appropriate marriage partners, ethnicity, religion, inheritance, succession, legal rights, political affiliation, education, and social commitments.

Although we discuss some basic kinship and marriage concepts in this chapter, it's important to acknowledge that cultural change and shifting economic relationships are leading to new types of kinship and family-making. From new reproductive technologies that are reformulating our understanding of blood ties and genetic belonging, to the primacy of non-biological relationships in the LGBTQ community, kinship is not a static concept. Similarly, the institution of marriage is experiencing change as new technologies allow for new forms of communication and courtship. Marriages between people of different nationalities and ethnic groups is increasing as our world experiences more and more international migration. Anthropologists study kinship and family formations to better understand how individual thought and behavior are influenced by these interacting aspects of human communities.

Types of Descent and Families

Generally, kinship serves **horizontal** and **vertical** functions. Horizontally, kinship binds multiple families through the union of two or more people, which is important for political, economic, and social purposes. Marriage is a common example of horizontal unions, which we'll discuss in more detail below. Vertically, kinship binds generations of related people together such as grandparents, parents, and offspring. This vertical aspect of kinship is often used to determine inheritance and succession. **Descent** helps societies determine which offspring(s) inherit or succeed their parents, particularly where a family has accumulated wealth or estates.

Descent can be unilineal or ambilineal. In **unilineal** societies, descent is traced through only the mother's (**matrilineal**) or father's line (**patrilineal**). In matrilineal descent, your mother's sister and mother's mother are considered close kin, while your father's biological parents and siblings may not be considered related to you at all. Property may be passed through male or female kin of the female lineage. In patrilineal descent, on the other hand, your father's brother and father's father are considered close kin, while your mother's biological parents and siblings may not be considered related to you at all. Property is typically passed through the kin of the male lineage, and patrilineal descent is the most common type of descent recognized around the world.

Descent rules often reflect the value a culture places on each parent's roles in creating and raising offspring. For example, beginning in the High Middle Ages, most wealthy European families used the concept of **primogeniture**, where inheritance was required to pass through the male lineage. The eldest son inherited the family title, estate, and trade, and other sons or daughters were expected to find other ways to support themselves and their families. If a family didn't have any sons, then descent rules mandated that other direct male kin, such as the father's brothers or nephews, claimed inheritance. In many cases, daughters could not inherit anything. Strict versions of these laws were in effect until the 1920s, and milder versions still exist today. This demonstrates how descent influences power structures and mobility patterns in a society such as who holds status in public positions or moves to their spouse's village upon marriage.

Furthermore, although a culture may recognize matrilineal or patrilineal descent, it doesn't mean that women or men, respectively, own property and pass inheritance directly. **Matriarchal societies** represent societies where women are heads of households and/or predominantly have positions of power and status within their community. Men may be expected to move closer to the woman's family once they are married (**matrilocality**).



Video 15.1. Check out the video from Jelmer Eerkens discussing how isotopic analysis can be used to interpret kinship in the archaeological record.

Matriarchy is much less common than patriarchy; today, less than 10% of societies are matriarchal. Conversely, a society may practice **patriarchy** where men are the heads of households and/or predominantly have status and power within their community. Women may be expected to move closer to the man's family once they are married (**patrilocality**). In the following video, Dr. Eerkens discusses how locality can be interpreted in archaeological situations using isotopic analyses.

In other societies, descent is **bilateral** and traced through both parents' lines with both sets of relatives considered equal. **Nuclear families**, including only two generations of parents and offspring, are more common among groups that recognize bilateral descent, such as in the United States. However, some cultures do not operate around the idea of a nuclear family as the primary family unit. **Extended families**, including at least three generations of parents and offspring under the same roof, are common in other cultures around the world, particularly in societies with unilateral descent. The difference between these types of families is how households are organized and who lives together in the same space.

People can further be organized into **families of orientation** and **families of procreation**. People often have both types of families throughout their life, and these types of family can co-exist. Individuals are born or adopted into families of orientations and do not pick these families. Rather, it is largely involuntary and reflects where you were raised. Conversely, individuals create families of procreation when they choose to marry, create their own household, produce children, or adopt kin.

Kinship Systems

When discussing families and relatives, anthropologists adopt a standard method where a "family tree" template is designed around one person. That person is designated **ego**. Ego is important because kinship terms are often relative. For example, you are an offspring to your parents. However, if you have children, you are also a parent. One person serves multiple kinship roles throughout their life, and which role they tap into is dependent on the context. You are a parent, a grandparent, an offspring, a sibling, a niece or nephew, or an aunt or uncle, depending on who you are interacting with at

any given moment. There are specific expectations of each role, and you may act differently in each situation. Because these terms are context-specific and relative, an ego is established by which to understand the lines of relatedness within a family or community. However, it is important to recognize that these terms and kinship levels may change if a different ego is designated.

Anthropologists recognize at least six different kinship systems that are used by cultures all over the world. These kinship systems are named after the first documented example of a kinship practice, many of which were observed in the late 19th century by Lewis Henry Morgan. For example, the bilateral descent and nuclear families observed throughout much of American and European culture are an example of the Inuit kinship system. Each system designates who is related (or not related) to ego, the terms used to address those relations, and the general strength of those relations.

However, these systems represent simplified versions of kinship relations and ties. Early anthropologists approached kinship studies with the assumption that kin designations predominantly rely on genetics and dichotomized sex and gender roles. However, later ethnographic research demonstrated that genetics may or may not be an important role when establishing families, lineages, and kin. Additionally, in situations where more than two genders are recognized (see Module 14: Gender and Sex), these rules are altered. Therefore, many variations of these kinship systems are practiced by groups around the world.

Inuit

The Inuit kinship system emphasizes bilateral descent with emphasis on close or nuclear families (see Figure 15.1). Terminology is based on gender and generation. While extended families are recognized, terminology and relationship strength are the same whether the extended kin are from the mother or father's side. As mentioned, this type of kinship is practiced by most people in dominant U.S. culture.

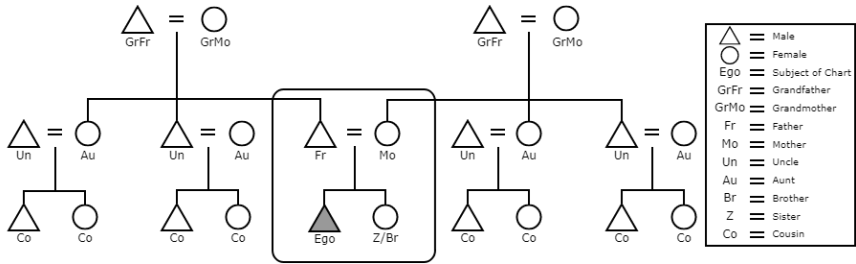


Figure 15.1. Example of the Inuit kinship system. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Hawaiian

The Hawaiian kinship system is comparatively simpler than the other systems, with fewer terms used to identify relatives (see Figure 15.2). This system emphasizes **ambilateral** descent with emphasis on extended families. Ambilateral descent is like unilateral descent, but an individual chooses whether they affiliate with their mother or their father's side. Among Hawaiian kin, the mother, the mother's sisters, and the father's sisters are all called by the same term. Similarly, the father, the father's brothers, and the mother's brothers are all called by the same term. In other words, all maternal figures within a generation are called mother, and all paternal figures are called father. There is no distinction between parents, aunts, and uncles. All cousins are called siblings, while all individuals in the offspring generation, regardless of biological parentage, are called sons and daughters.

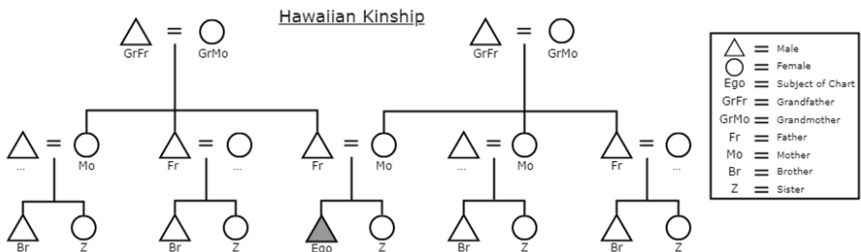


Figure 15.2. Example of the Hawaiian kinship system. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Sudanese

The Sudanese kinship system represents the opposite extreme from the Hawaiian system (see Figure 15.3). Common among patrilineal societies with complicated social hierarchies, everyone is assigned to a distinct term based on their age, sex, and parentage. Few kin are grouped by the same terms. In other words, an uncle on the mother's side is called something different than the uncle on the father's side. A female cousin is different than a male cousin and different again based on whether that cousin is from the mother's or father's side of the family. This complicated kinship system is found in socio-economically stratified cultures with substantial class-based differences.

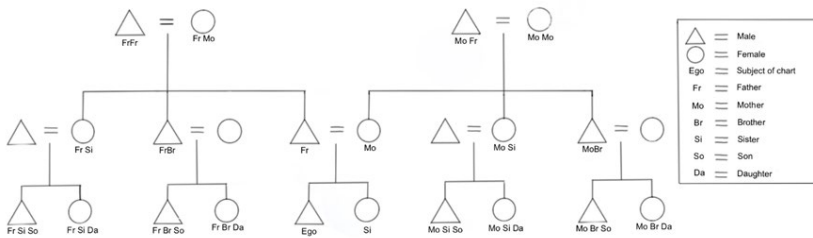


Figure 15.3. Example of the Sudanese kinship system. Original art by A. Nagle.

Omaha

The Omaha kinship system emphasizes unilateral descent (patrilineal) with emphasis on the merging of kin types and relations (see Figure 15.4). The term father applies to ego's father and the father's brother, while the term mother applies to ego's mother and the mother's sister. The offspring of any of ego's mothers or fathers are considered siblings. In other words, parallel cousins (i.e., offspring from ego's paternal uncle or maternal aunt) are considered siblings just as much as genetic siblings. **Cross cousins**, depending on whether they are from the mother's or father's side, may be called nieces, nephews, uncles, or mothers. The offspring of ego's father's sister (aunt) are considered niece and nephews. The offspring of ego's mother's brother (uncle) are called mothers or uncles.

The offspring of ego's same-sexed siblings are considered ego's offspring, too, while the offspring of ego's opposite-sexed siblings are considered ego's nieces and nephews. Therefore, individuals from different generations are called by the same terms, and compared to the Inuit bilateral system, there is inconsistency across generations. However, this cross-generational terminology contributes to familial cohesiveness and provides an effective way to provide support and connections.

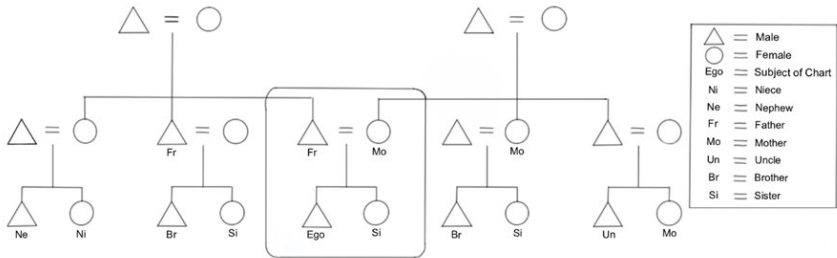


Figure 15.4. Example of the Omaha system. Original art by A. Nagle.

Crow

The Crow kinship system mirrors the Omaha system. It emphasizes unilateral descent (matrilineal) with emphasis on the merging of kin types and relations (see Figure 15.5). The term mother applies to ego's mother and the mother's sister, while the term father applies to ego's father and the father's brother. The offspring of any of ego's mothers or fathers are considered siblings, while the offspring of ego's mother's brother (uncle) are considered ego's offspring, too. In other words, parallel cousins are considered siblings. The offspring of ego's father's sister (aunt) are called father or aunts. Cross cousins, depending on whether they are from the mother or father's side, may be called offspring, aunts, or fathers.

The offspring of ego's same-sexed siblings are considered ego's offspring, too, while the offspring of ego's opposite-sexed siblings are considered ego's nieces and nephews. Therefore, individuals from different generations are called by the same terms, and compared to the Inuit bilateral system, there is inconsistency across generations. However, this cross-generational terminology contributes to familial cohesiveness and provides an effective

way to provide support and connections.

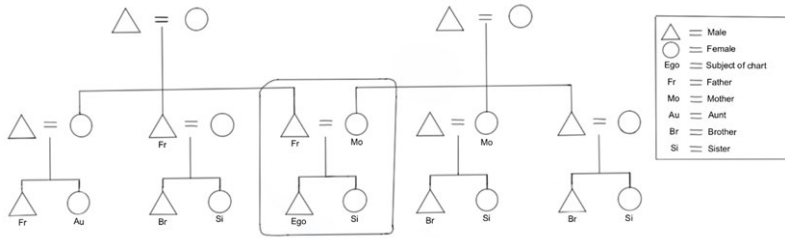


Figure 15.5. Example of the Crow kinship system. Original art by A. Nagle.

Iroquois

The Iroquois kinship system emphasizes unilateral descent (matrilineal or patrilineal) with merging of kin types and relations (see Figure 15.6). Fathers and father’s brothers are both called by the same term, while mothers and mother’s sisters are both recognized by the same term. Consequently, the father’s brother’s children and the mother’s sister’s children are both considered to be siblings to ego. The children of ego’s same-sexed siblings are considered ego’s sons and daughters, while the children of ego’s opposite-sexed siblings are considered ego’s nieces and nephews. The offspring of ego’s mother’s brother (uncle) and ego’s father’s sister (aunt) are recognized as cross cousins. In many cultures that practice Iroquois kinship conventions, cross-cousin marriage is preferred.

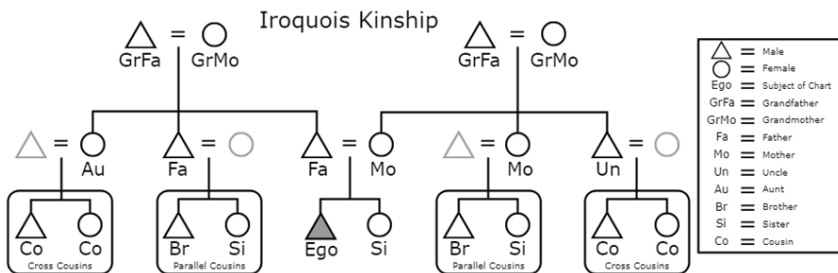


Figure 15.6. Example of the Iroquois kinship system. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Marriage and Mating Rituals

Marriage represents a horizontal form of kinship. Consider what it means to get married in your society: why get married? Who determines the people involved in a formal union? Is age or biological sex an important consideration? Is a marriage formed by the union of two or more individuals? Are your brothers or sisters involved in the marriage? Are cousins appropriate marriage partners? Do you choose your own partner(s), or does your family select an appropriate mate for you? Is a mating union created based on ideas of romantic love, political alliance, economic status, or other concerns? How long does a mating union endure? Does it last for the life of the individuals involved?

While the answers may seem simple to you based on your own culture's norms, **marriage** is a complicated practice that takes many shapes and forms. It typically includes some type of formalized union between two or more people with the intent of supporting a household or raising offspring. Determining appropriate marriage partners may seem straightforward, but there are many underlying factors impacting the identification of potential mates. People may only consider these factors subconsciously because it is so ingrained into our culture. We may not recognize that our brains shuffle through these critical assessments based on kinship and descent rules, and cultural practices. All these rules notwithstanding, what constitutes a marriage or union largely varies by culture as well. While the physical make-up of a marriage has been hotly contested in the United States in recent times, marriages take many different forms throughout the world.

Regardless of how a marriage looks, all societies have rules about with whom marriage is allowed or banned. Exogamy and endogamy are two examples of how some groups determine appropriate marriage partners. **Exogamy** is like incest taboos and refers to prohibited marriage and sexual partners. Commonly, marriage is not allowed between closely related genetic kin, such as individuals within the same nuclear or extended family. Exogamy rules require that people have wide social networks and broad communal relationships to ensure appropriate marriage partners can be found. **Endogamy** refers to rules about favored marriage and sexual partners, including preference for specific ethnic, religious, educational, or

class associations.

Marriage between consanguineal cousins can be observed in many cultures. Even in the United States, it was common until more recently. For example, Albert Einstein and Rudy Giuliani both married their cousins. **Cousin marriage** refers to marriage between the offspring of siblings and is most common in societies with unilineal descent where these kin are considered distantly related or unrelated. **Parallel cousin** marriage refers to marriage between children of same sexed parents (father's brother's or mother's sister's offspring), while **cross cousin** marriage indicates marriage between the children of opposite sexed siblings (e.g., the mother's brother's or father's sister's offspring). This may also represent a form of lineal endogamy, wherein these distantly related marriage partners may be preferred to maintain resources and avoid splitting property and inheritance. In fact, cross-cousin marriage is commonly observed in cultures around the world. It is estimated that around 10% of marriages globally are cousin marriages.

Marriage can also be categorized by the number of partners involved. **Monogamy** refers to two individuals in an exclusive relationship, while **polygamy** refers to marriages with more than two individuals. These may include multiple wives with one husband (**polygyny**) or multiple husbands with one wife (**polyandry**). In the United States, where monogamy typically is presented as the only appropriate type of marriage, people may find it difficult to accept other types of unions. However, in cases where population sex ratios are skewed, environmental conditions are challenging, or fertility issues exist, people are more likely to share spouses. Polygamy provides many benefits for participants, including shared resources, security, and more labor and assistance. Additionally, participants can engage in multiple economic ventures, thus increasing the wealth or status of the family. Multiple parents are involved in child rearing, which lessens the stresses compared to when only one or two parents are present.

The benefits of multiple parents are recognized even where polygamy may not be practiced. The concept of **partible paternity** refers to the social recognition of multiple fathers. In some cases, multiple men are recognized as legitimate fathers to a single child, regardless of genetic relationships or

marriage, and this partible paternity has been associated with higher child survival rates in some regions. For example, some indigenous groups in the lowlands of South America believe that each man contributes to the pregnancy when he has sexual relations with the mother. Semen is believed to accumulate in the mother and helps create the offspring, which results in multiple biological fathers. This type of co-fathering has several reported benefits, including a low-rate domestic violence because extramarital relations are normal, and men don't harbor jealousy and resent. Additionally, females report higher levels of sexual freedom.

Whether for financial and inheritance reasons, class or status matching, or religious beliefs, many cultures around the world arrange marriages. **Arranged marriages** are often facilitated through complex gift exchanges between the families of the individuals to be married, which reinforces the partnership or invested nature of both families and helps facilitate the marriage's longevity. In these cases, marriage is less about the two individuals and their feelings and more about the family or community benefits of the union. These exchanges also express the value of marriage to the families. **Bride wealth** represents gifts, resources, and/or payments to the bride's family from the groom and/or his family. Typically, the bride wealth indicates that women are highly valued in a society, for reasons such as fertility and childbirth. **Dowry**, on the other hand, represents endowment from the bride's family, maintained and controlled by the groom, which is used to support the family created by the new couple. The dowry is more common in patrilineal and patriarchal societies and most often associated with cultures where women are perceived as more of a burden. Often, these are agricultural based cultures as women aren't recognized as contributing a family's economic stability since they aren't directly involved with the farming.

Examples of Marriage and Kinship Around the World

With so many considerations for kinship and marriage, there are nearly endless combinations of traits and beliefs that societies may draw on. Therefore, several cultural groups are described below in terms of their kinship and marriage practice to illustrate these diversities.

The Mosuo—A matrilineal, matriarchal society that practices “walking marriages.”

The **Mosuo** represent a matrilineal, matriarchal society that live in southwest China. Traditionally, they are small-scale agriculturists, but more recently, tourism has become a primary source of income as outsiders have gained interest in the Mosuo. Ironically, the increase in tourism has led to a loss in traditional family structures and practices.

Traditionally, the eldest female is the head of the Mosuo household, and she reigns over an extended family, representing several generations of daughters, sons, and grandchildren who live and work together to support their family and raise their children. These individuals are related by blood but not marriage. This arrangement helps maintain family property and avoid split inheritances.

The Mosuo are most well-known outside of China because of their **walking marriage** practice, which is not a legal marriage. Traditional Mosuo family values distinguish sexuality and romance from domestic aspects of life like parenting and caretaking. In a walking marriage, a man and a woman are not bound legally and do not live together or start their own household. Instead, they each live within their own matriarch's compound, but at night, the man may be permitted to “walk” or stay with the woman in her house. For a couple in a walking marriage, they have no obligation to stay together and can remain a couple or part ways as it suits them. They can choose to formalize their union with a public ceremony, but this doesn't alter their living arrangements or familial obligations to the matriarchy.

Any children born from walking marriages are raised collectively by the mother and her family, within their matriarchal compound. In fact, the Mosuo have no word for “aunt” because the biological mother and all her sisters are mothers to the children, regardless of who gave birth. This arrangement is meant to facilitate household harmony, and while the father may be recognized as the biological father of the children, he has no economic or social obligation to the woman or their children. However, children are not fatherless, and status is not impacted by a child's biological origins. While men have no obligation to their biological children, they are

responsible to help their sisters raise their children. In effect, matrilineal uncles serve a father-like role for their sister's children.

This arrangement offers a lot of security and flexibility for both children and adults. Unlike traditional Chinese patriarchal societies, there's less pressure to produce a male heir for economic and inheritance purposes. Women also have substantially more sexual freedom than many other cultures and may take multiple lovers over their lifetime. The Mosuo report there's less jealousy and possessiveness, especially for economic status, and women and children are always taken care of in society.



Video 15.2. Check out the video from Bloomberg Quicktake presenting “Inside China’s last Matriarchal Tribe.”

The Tibetan Highlands – Fraternal Polyandry in a Marginal Environment

Groups in the Tibetan Highlands represent patrilineal, patriarchal societies. Traditional Tibetan society included a feudal system with priests, aristocrats, and peasants, and families practiced agriculture, animal husbandry, and trading to support their livelihoods. Maintaining interest in different economic ventures was critical because the highland resources were marginal because of uneven water access, steep slopes, and little arable land. Consequently, family forms began to vary based on economic status and livelihood. Tibetan Highlanders practice several types of marriage including monogamy, polygyny, and polyandry. **Fraternal polyandry** is one of the most common forms of marriage here. Practitioners indicate that it can help families pursue many different economic interests and preserve family resources across generations.

Traditionally in fraternal polyandrous situations, the eldest brother is the head of the Tibetan household. He finds a wife and arranges the union, and his younger brothers become co-husbands to the wife. Such a marriage requires solidarity among the brothers and wife. Each co-husband has sexual

relationships with their wife, and any refusal to maintain amiable sexual relationships threatens the stability of the union. Additionally, each brother will specialize in a different economic activity for diversity of resources. This arrangement helps maintain family property and avoids split inheritances. Additionally, fraternal polyandrous marriages may partition or separate at any point, though this most commonly occurs when new economic opportunities arise for the younger brothers, or solidarity is threatened. This may occur when too many brothers are involved, fertility issues exist, or the age difference between the wife and co-husbands is too great. In many cases, the younger brothers break away to pursue new ventures.

Fraternal polyandry allows households to become more powerful because family resources are not divided, and larger families can provide more labor. This is critical in marginal environments and when herding or trading ventures require men to be away from home for long periods of time. Additionally, fraternal polyandry provides a control mechanism to avoid population growth that may overwhelm the environment and available resources. Any children born within fraternal polyandrous unions are raised collectively by the mother and all the husbands. All husbands are considered fathers, regardless of whether genetic paternity can be attributed to a specific husband. This arrangement is meant to facilitate household harmony. Each husband is responsible to help his wife raise their children, which provides more security and saves one husband from bearing all the responsibility.



Video 15.3. Check out the video from National Geographic’s Multiple Husbands, a look at fraternal polyandry in the Tibetan Highlands.

Chaco Canyon – An Archaeological Example of Matrilineality in New Mexico

The Pueblo Bonito complex is part of an archaeological site in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, that dates to more than 1,000 years ago. The Bonito Phase (AD 850-1150) is a time of rapid cultural growth, followed by a sudden decline, in the southwest U.S. Within two generations, people transitioned

from living in small family farming groups to joining together and forming large city-like settlements where they built massive stone great houses. These efforts would have required significant time and labor and represents a significant shift away from small-scale farming. These types of large sites and monumental efforts persisted throughout southern Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah for about 300 years. Settlements were connected by roads and there is evidence of trade and ritual between sites. Then, abruptly, the sites and great houses were all abandoned.

Pueblo Bonito is one of the largest and most widely recognized of these sites (see Figure 15.7). It is a massive, semi-circular structure filled with 650 rectangular rooms. There are multiple levels to the compound, and the rooms surround a central plaza with a semi-subterranean circular kiva chamber. Kivas are common features of early U.S. southwest villages that represent ritual spaces where ceremonies were enacted.



Figure 15.7. View of Pueblo Bonito within Chaco Canyon. Image from Flickr/Wass.

Most of the surrounding rectangular rooms of Pueblo Bonito are either for residences or storage. Many of these rooms are believed to have housed extended families, but there is not a lot of evidence regarding domestic

activities, such as trash deposits or hearths. A few rooms contain human burials. One room, in particular, contains 14 elaborate male and female burials. The grave goods include rare shells from the coast and thousands of turquoise artifacts. Archaeologists sampled the individual burials for radiocarbon and genetic testing and based on the dating results, generations of people were buried in the room, spanning over the entire 300 years of the Bonito cultural phase.

Researchers discovered that most of the individuals shared a mitochondrial DNA sequence. In other words, these individuals were matrilineally related and likely represented an example of matrilineal descent. Two mother-daughter pairs and a grandmother-grandson pair were identified, and anthropologists believe that these elite burials were chiefs or leaders of Pueblo Bonito.

The remains were also subjected to isotopic analysis to understand migration and locality. The ratios of stable isotopes, such as strontium, lead, and oxygen, can be used to understand where people were born, where they lived during their adult years, their health and nutrition, and general climatic conditions. In the case of the Pueblo Bonito burials, all individuals buried at the site were born either in the Canyon or in the nearby San Juan Basin, approximately 100 miles away, indicating that the people buried at Pueblo Bonito did not migrate extensively in life. This case study demonstrates that even when the people are long gone, they still leave behind clues that archaeologists can examine to understand kinship patterns, descent, and succession in the past.

The Navajo – A Modern Matrilineal Tribe in New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah

The Navajo, who call themselves Dine or “the people,” are an indigenous group who have lived in the U.S. southwest for nearly a thousand years. Anthropologists hypothesize that the ancestors of today’s Navajo migrated south from Western Canada, originating from a group known as the Athabaskans, between AD 1000-1200. The Navajo were colonized by Anglo-Americans in the 1860s and are one of the few U.S. tribes still residing on a significant portion of their original territory. The Navajo Nation, or **Diné**

Bikéyah, is a reservation larger than the state of West Virginia and located between four sacred mountains. Interestingly, for a Navajo textile weaving to be truly Navajo, it must be woven within the parameters of these four sacred peaks. The Navajo Nation had around 400,000 tribal members in 2021 with approximately 180,000 (45%) residing on Navajo Nation reservation lands.

The Navajo people are a matrilineal and matrilocal culture, and they organize kinship by **clans**. A clan can be defined as a group who believe they are all descended from a common ancestor, real or mythical. Because clans are large, it is impossible to trace a common ancestor. Each Navajo person is a part of the four clans, which reflects kinship, identity, and status. When a Navajo person introduces themselves, they state their name and introduce each of their four clans through their mother, father, maternal grandfather, and paternal grandfather. The English translation dictates, "I am (*mother's clan*), born for (*father's clan*), my maternal grandfather is (*maternal grandfather's clan*), my paternal grandfather's clan is (*paternal grandfather's clan*)."

As a matrilineal culture, the clan system structure results in the mother's clan being carried forward in perpetuity through all generations, whereas the father's clan cycles out after two generations. The four original clans were created by the deity Changing Woman: *Kinyaa'áanii* (The Towering House clan), *Honágháahnii* (One-walks-around clan), *Tódich'i'nii* (Bitter Water clan), and *Hasht'i'shnii* (Mud clan). Today, there are over 100 clans among the Navajo people, and each clan comes from different parts of the Navajo Nation, with their own meaning and associated **totems** (sacred animals) or places. The Navajo people's way of life revolves around kinship or **K'é** (pronounced "keh"), which arises from familial and clan relationships. K'é is a term that communicates more than a system of kinship. For many traditional Navajo, it's an all-encompassing concept that is the primary way that Navajo people locate themselves within their social worlds. It also establishes one's responsibilities to others. K'é has been translated as cooperation, unselfishness, peacefulness, and friendliness, but there is no equivalent term in the English language. The concept of kinship in Navajo culture goes far beyond the idea of being biologically related as K'é creates one's place and obligations in the Navajo world beyond just immediate family. One Navajo person described it as "the feeling you have when you are deeply connected to others and understand and value your roots."

Upholding your kin obligations is a significant part of Navajo religious practice and one of the ways that the Navajo maintain balance in the world. Navajo ceremonies, which often last for several days, require the presence of kin for the ceremony to be effective. The key to healing in Navajo ceremonials is the restoration and maintenance of social, physical, and spiritual harmony: **hózhó** (see Module 17: Health and Medicine).

Navajo children are traditionally raised by their mother, her sisters, and their brothers. The Navajo practice matrilocality, where it's considered proper for a married couple to move in with or near the bride's mother. A Navajo family lives in an extended family unit, traditionally of three generations, in a **hogan** within a community of other hogans inhabited by matrilineal relatives. Maternal aunts, or the mother's sisters, are much more than "aunts" as they are understood in dominant U.S. kinship. In Navajo kinship, the mother's sisters function as a mother to her offspring and one's maternal cousins are considered siblings. It's often referred to in English as "Sister mother" rather than "Aunt" as it more accurately communicates the nature of the kinship relationship. Navajo women have traditionally owned the bulk of resources and property, such as livestock, and in cases of divorce or marital separation, women retained the property and children.

Clan relationships locate a Navajo person in their social universe, and they also regulate marriage. There are very strict prohibitions in Navajo culture around marrying a person that shares one of your clans. The Navajo practice exogamy or marry outside of their group. Although a Navajo person may be very distantly related to someone who shares their clan, they are forbidden to marry because they're considered brothers and sisters in K'é, and such unions are viewed as incestuous and improper for a good Navajo.

Summary

The study of family, marriage, and social belonging are principal concentrations of anthropological investigation because all humans organize their social worlds in kin networks. Kinship is a complex human invention that is historically produced and determines our position in the social world. Learning another culture's kinship system has been likened to learning another language and, like speaking a language, one's kinship

structure is so deeply ingrained that they are viewed as “natural” rather than culturally produced. As the world becomes more globalized and people continue to (re)establish their identities and values, we see concepts of kinship and marriage modified to fit the needs of society in a changing world. Anthropologists study kinship and family formations to better understand how individual thought and behavior are influenced by these interacting aspects of human communities and vice versa.

Review Questions

- **T/F.** A patriarchal society is only observed in patrilineal societies.
- **T/F.** Families of orientation represent the family in which one is raised.
- **T/F.** The Hawaiian system condenses kin at a generational level, reducing the number of terms and increasing the size of a family.
- **T/F.** Endogamic marriage preferences require communities to have wide social networks and broad communal relationships.
- **T/F.** In partible paternity, multiple men are recognized as legitimate fathers to a single child.

Discussion Questions

- Why is it important for anthropologists to study kinship and marriage to understand cultures?
- Define endogamy and exogamy. How are they different?
- How do cultural norms form what we traditionally consider to be marriage?
- Think about your nuclear family and your extended family. Can you find examples of families of orientation and families of procreation? What about consanguineal, affinal, and fictive kin?
- How does the concept of primogeniture fit into patrilineal societies?

Activities

1. **Kinship Charts:**

- Chart your pets as family – ABP
- Chart your fictive kin and their roles – ABP
- Chart your family and discuss stories – ABP

2. **The Skin Game:** Teaching to Redress Stereotypes of Indigenous People. This activity is taken from Claire Smith and Heather Burke's excellent activity on Australian Aboriginal marriage and kinship, published in *Archaeology to Delight and Instruct*, by Heather Burke and Claire Smith, Left Coast Press (2007). Aboriginal marriage customs are very complex, and this activity helps Westerners understand that just because a society is organized as a band, does not mean they are not "complicated" like Western societies. The game highlights the importance of kinship and moieties in determining who is a potential marriage partner. If you are an instructor, we recommend taking a class period (approximately one hour) to let this game play out and discuss at the end. It uses candy to make it more fun, but even without candy, students generally like this marriage simulation.

Key Terms

Affinal kin: Individuals related by marriage, such as in-laws.

Ambilateral descent: Non-linear systems where an individual may choose to trace their descent through either their mother or their father's side.

Arranged marriage: A marriage in which the bride and groom were selected to marry each other by their parents, guardians, or other family members.

Bilateral descent: Descent is traced through both parents' lines, with both sets of relatives considered equal. **Nuclear families**, including only two generations of parents and offspring, are more common among groups that recognize bilateral descent, such as in the United States.

Bride wealth: The transfer of some form of wealth, such as gifts, resources, and/or payments, to the bride's family from the groom and/or his family.

Clan: A group who believe they are all descended from a common ancestor, real or mythical.

Consanguineal kin: Individuals related by blood, those whom common ancestry is shared amongst.

Cousin marriage: Marriage between the offspring of siblings.

Cross cousin: The offspring of one's mother's brother or one's father's sister.

Cross cousin marriage: Marriage between the children of opposite sexed siblings (e.g., the mother's brother's or father's sister's offspring).

Crow kinship system: This kinship system mirrors the Omaha system. It emphasizes unilateral descent (matrilineal) with emphasis on the merging of kin types and relations.

Descent: The methods societies use to determine which offspring(s) inherit or succeed their parents, particularly where a family has accumulated wealth or estates.

Diné Bikéyah: Also known as the Navajo Nation; the reservation lands that are larger than the state of West Virginia and located between four sacred mountains (San Francisco Peaks, Mount Blanca, Mount Taylor, and La Plata Mountain).

Dowry: A large sum of money or endowment from a bride's family, given to the daughter but maintained and controlled by the husband, to ensure her well-being in her groom's family and support the family created by the new couple.

Ego: The person to whom all kinship relationships are referred, in kinship diagrams or "family trees," as kinship terms are often relative.

Endogamy: The custom of only marrying people from the same social group or category, community, tribe, or clan.

Exogamy: The custom of only marrying people from different social groups or categories, communities, tribes, or clans.

Extended family: The relatives beyond the nuclear family including parents, children, and other kin relations bound together as a social unit, often living in the same household or nearby.

Family of orientation: The family unit an individual is born or adopted into. Individuals do not pick these families; it is largely involuntary, reflecting where you were raised.

Family of procreation: The family unit created by two individuals when they choose to marry, create their own household, produce children, or adopt kin.

Fictive kin: Individuals who are not related by blood or marriage, but who share close emotional relationships with each other, forming kinship or social ties to the extent that they may be considered part of the family.

Fraternal polyandry: A form of polyandry where a woman is married to two or more men who are brothers.

Hawaiian kinship system: Emphasizes ambilateral descent with emphasis on extended families.

Hogan: A ceremonial structure and traditional dwelling of the Navajo Indians of Arizona and New Mexico.

Horizontal kinship: Kinship where multiple families are bound together through the union of two or more people, which is important for political, economic, and social purposes, such as marriage.

Hózhó: A Navajo term reflecting balance in a continual cycle of gaining and retaining harmony.

Inuit kinship system: Emphasizes bilateral descent with emphasis on close or nuclear families.

Iroquois kinship system: Emphasizes unilateral descent (matrilineal or patrilineal) with merging of kin types and relations.

K'é: A Navajo term that communicates more than a system of kinship. It is an all-encompassing concept that is the primary way in which Navajo people locate themselves within their social worlds, the feeling of being deeply connected to others. It also establishes one's responsibilities to others. K'é has been translated as cooperation, unselfishness, peacefulness, and friendliness.

Kinship: The culturally defined social relationships that organize people in families based on factors such as birth, age, gender, descent, marriage, mating, and nurturance.

Marriage: The social bond or some type of formalized union that is sanctioned by society between two or more people that involves economic cooperation, social obligations, and culturally approved sexual activity.

Matriarchy: Societies where women are heads of households and/or predominantly have positions of power and status within their community.

Matrilineal descent: A social group whose members calculate descent through the female line from a commonly known female ancestor.

Matrilocality: A rule of postmarital residence under which a man resides with his wife's parents.

Monogamy: The practice of being married to one person at a time.

Mosuo: A small ethnic group living near Luga Lake in the Yunnan and Sichuan provinces of southwest China. They are a matrilineal, matriarchal society that practice **walking marriages**.

Nuclear family: The basic social unit comprised of two generations, two parents and their immediate biological offspring or adopted children.

Omaha kinship system: Emphasizes unilateral descent (patrilineal) with emphasis on the merging of kin types and relations.

Parallel cousin: The offspring of one's father's brother or mother's sister.

Parallel cousin marriage: Marriage between the children of same sexed siblings (e.g., the father's brother's or mother's sister's offspring).

Partible paternity: The belief that multiple men are legitimate, biological fathers to a single child, common in indigenous populations in lowland South America.

Patriarchy: Societies where men are the heads of households and/or predominantly have status and power within their community.

Patrilineal descent: A social group made up of people who trace their descent through males from a common, known male ancestor.

Patrilocality: A postmarital residence rule under which a newly married couple must reside with the husband's father.

Polyandry: The practice of one woman being married to multiple men at the same time.

Polygamy: The practice of being married to multiple individuals simultaneously, any form of plural marriage.

Polygyny: The practice of one man being married to multiple women at the same time.

Primogeniture: An inheritance pattern in which land or other wealth is passed from generation to generation through the lineage of the eldest male.

Pueblo Bonito: A massive, semi-circular structure that is part of an archaeological site in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, that dates more than 1,000 years ago.

Sudanese kinship system: Represents the opposite extreme from the Hawaiian kinship system. Common among patrilineal societies with complicated social hierarchies, each individual is assigned to a distinct term based on their age, sex, and parentage. Few kin are grouped by the same terms.

Totem: A mythical ancestor, usually a sacred animal or plant, that symbolizes a particular group.

Unilineal descent: Societies that trace their descent through only one side of the lineage, mother's (matrilineal) or father's line (patrilineal), through only one sex.

Vertical kinship: Kinship that binds generations of related people together—grandparents, parents, and offspring. This vertical aspect of kinship is often used to determine inheritance and succession.

Walking marriage: A type of marriage practiced by the Mosuo ethnic group in China. A man and a woman are not bound legally and do not live together or start their own household, rather each live within their own matriarch's compound, but at night, the man may be permitted to "walk" or stay with the woman in her house.

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