**Luis Dumont**

**MARRIAGE ALLIANCE**

All societies prohibit marriage with certain relatives,

but some societies complement this prohibition

by prescribing, or preferring, marriage with

other relatives. In this way two kinds of cousins

are sometimes distinguished, marriage being prohibited

between those who are children of siblings

of the same sex ("parallel cousins"), while it is

prescribed between children of siblings of opposite

sex ("cross-cousins"). This disposition is generally

accompanied by exogamy. This article attempts to

sum up recent developments in the theory of crosscousin

marriage.

**Descent and alliance**

The expression "marriage alliance," in which

"alliance" refers to the repetition of intermarriage

between larger or smaller groups, denotes what

amounts to a special theory of kinship, a theory

developed to deal with those types of kinship systems

that embody positive marriage rules, though

it also affords certain general theoretical insights

regarding kinship. Two points may be noted at the

outset: (1) The combination of the positive marriage

rule with exogamy, or at the very least with

a prohibition against marriage between parallel

cousins, is essential to the type of system under

description here; a preference for marriage with

the father's brother's daughter, as found among

some Islamic peoples, is a quite different phenomenon.

(2) The approach here presented is essentially

common to several writers, though an element of

personal interpretation is inevitable.

In the initial stages of kinship studies, the reconstruction

of fanciful marriage rules (or mating

arrangements) as having supposedly existed in the

past was widely used in order to explain seemingly

strange ways of classifying relatives (kinship terminologies).

This practice has brought discredit,

in the eyes of some, to the study of both marriage

rules and terminologies. In 1871 Lewis Henry Morgan

made two assumptions: (1) terminology reflects

behavior, and hence, (2) if a terminology

cannot be understood from present behavior, it

must be because the behavior it reflects belongs to

the past. *[See the biography of* MORGAN, LEWIS

HENRY.]

Quite apart from the difficulty of reconstructing

past behavior, anthropological thought in this matter

is still ethnocentric. The underlying assumption

is that all peoples entertain the same *ideas* about

kinship; their classifying of relatives in different

ways is, therefore, due to differences in *behavior.*

Fully excusable in Morgan, such an assumption is

less so today.

W. H. R. Rivers recognized the link between an

actual marriage rule (symmetrical cross-cousin

marriage) and a certain type of terminology (often

called "bifurcate merging"). For Rivers, the marriage

rule was the cause, the terminology the effect,

and he saw his task as explaining the marriage

rule itself. *[See the biography of* RIVERS.] Once

again, terminology reflects behavior, and again historical

speculation is called in, this time to discover

the "origin" of one item, which is in fact essentially

a normative trait. In our time the different features

of a kinship system are, in practice, often considered

in isolation or are hierarchized according to

what is assumed to be their degree of reality or determinativeness.

This tendency, if not found in

such crudity as in the past, still exerts considerable

pressure even on the best minds, and that it constitutes

a major obstacle to the understanding of

certain kinship systems can be shown by the example

of Australian kinship, a classical subject for

kinship theory. In Australian section systems, descent

is overstressed; the reasons that may elsewhere

justify this emphasis are here misplaced, for

it prejudices the consideration of other elements in

the system.

In writing about Australian kinship systems,

authors vie with each other in stressing that in



symmetrical cross-cousin marriage arrangements,

double descent is always present or implied. This

is unobjectionable in itself, but in the literature it is

accompanied by a bias which makes itself obvious

by repetition, whether it be in B. Z. Seligman's attempt

to reduce the "type of marriage" to "forms

of descent" (1928, p. 534), however strange the

latter forms may appear, or in Radcliffe-Brown's

overemphasis upon descent, or in Murdock's outbidding

of Radcliffe-Brown in this respect. Radcliffe-

Brown was not content with finding an

underlying matrilineal exogamy in his classic Australian

patrilineal systems and with seeing in what

is now called "double descent" a widespread principle

of Australian kinship. He claimed that his

second kind of exogamous group actually "existed,"

whereas he had only inferred it (1931, pp. 39,

439); the point is insisted upon by Goody (1961,

pp. 6 ff). It is perplexing later on to find Murdock

opposing Radcliffe-Brown, while praising the same

discovery in others; but the crux of the matter is

that in Murdock's opinion Radcliffe-Brown had not

gone far enough in stressing descent and descent

groups, for Radcliffe-Brown had maintained, at

another level, the primacy of individual relationships

and marriage rules over the arrangement of

groups (Murdock 1949, pp. 51 ff.).

Actually, the hypothesis of underlying matrilineal

exogamy among the Kariera and Aranda accounts

for the allocation of alternate generations to different

groups. Among them, the patrilineal group is

conceived not as a unity over a continuous series

of generations but as a duality made up of two

alternate generation-sections, called by different

names and following different marriage rules (the

grandson falling back, so to speak, into the grandfather's

section). This is the simple, concrete

sociological fact, widespread in Australia. If we

take this for granted, together with intermarriage

between the named sections, we can in each case

draw a simple diagram of the whole tribe. In

Figure *1* the sign [=] denotes intermarriage in both

directions, the letters *A, B,* etc., represent patrilineal

groups, and the numbers 1 and 2 are used for the

two alternating generation-sections in each patrilineal

group. The system of Ambrym (Balap) is

easily represented in the same fashion (Deacon

1927). All three systems represent variations on

the same theme, the number of patrilineal groups

being respectively two, four, and three, the number

of sections four, eight, and six. Each of the three

systems may be conceptualized as forming a single

whole through a regular chain of intermarriage and

patrilineal descent. The differences in the arrangement

follow necessarily from the numbers of

groups (for details, see Dumont 1966). I do not

pretend that a second unilineal principle cannot

be said to underlie these systems, but only that the

above is a simpler view of them. Let us now turn

to the general theory that, like the above analysis,

recognizes intermarriage as a basic element in

those systems which possess a preferential or prescriptive

marriage rule.

**Levi-Strauss**

We must neglect the scholars who had previously

advanced the distinction and description of the

types of cross-cousin marriage (e.g. Fortune 1933;

Wouden 1935) and start with the general theory

of Levi-Strauss. His monumental book *Les structures*

*elementaires de la parente* (1949) goes far

beyond our limits. Josselin de Jong (1952) has

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provided an able summary of the book, while

Leach (1961) and Needham (1960) have sympathetically,

but sharply, criticized its detail. Our concern

here is only with its leading ideas.

From the present point of view, the work is first

of all a comparative study of positive marriage

rules, informed by a general theory of kinship.

Preferential marriage rules and marriage prohibitions

are accounted for within an integrated body

of theory. The prohibition of incest is recognized

as universal; it is seen as a basic condition of social

life. A man cannot take in marriage the women

who are his immediate kin; on the contrary, he has

to abandon them as wives to others and to receive

from others his wife or wives. Levi-Strauss considers

this situation as a universal principle which

lies beyond sociological explanation—and which

implies an opposition between consanguinity and

affinity as the cornerstone of kinship systems. He

views marriage as predominantly a process of exchange

(between one man and other men or between

one domestic group and others), and he

sees in positive marriage rules devices through

which this exchange is directly regulated, giving

rise to what he has called "elementary" structures.

Let us note that a kinship system is viewed here,

starting from its basis in the incest prohibition, as

an entirety resting on an opposition and not as a

mere collection of features in which one feature

might, for a priori reasons, be considered to determine

the others. Abstractly, a kinship system is

taken as combining a number of features (descent,

inheritance, residence, affinity), and an effort is

made to characterize the whole by the relations that

prevail between the different features. Thus, a system

is called harmonic if all transmission between

generations takes place in one and the same line,

dysharmonic if some features are transmitted

patrilineally, others matrilineally. The rule of crosscousin

marriage, where it exists, correlates with

this. Theoretically three types may be distinguished:

bilateral, matrilateral, and patrilateral. In bilateral

cross-cousin marriage, the spouse is at the same

time mother's brother's child and father's sister's

child. Two intermarrying groups exchange women

as wives and thus constitute a self-sufficient unit.

Levi-Strauss has called this form "closed" or "restricted"

exchange *(echange restreint}* and correlated

it with dysharmonic transmission. In opposition

to this type, he has stressed the quite different

properties and implications of matrilateral crosscousin

marriage. This type had been less clearly

recognized by previous writers, though he does not

consider the Dutch literature on Indonesia in which

the type had been characterized (e.g. Fischer 1935;

1936; Wouden 1935). In this type, a man marries

his mother's brother's daughter; a given line B

takes wives from a line A and gives wives to a line

C, generation after generation. Intermarriage is

thus asymmetrical, and if the society is conceived

as a number of discrete groups giving and receiving

women in marriage, the simplest system is that

of a circle: at the end of the series, Z receives from

Y and gives to A (called the "circulating connubium"

by the Dutch scholars). This is what Levi-

Strauss calls "generalized exchange." In opposition

to the closed type, it requires at least three groups

and may accommodate any number of groups. This

type correlates with harmonic transmission, which

may be either matrilineal or patrilineal. Here the

identity of the intermarrying group emerges from

the network of relationships, for one group is not

closely dependent on any other single group, nor

are two successive generations distinguished. Relatives

belonging to different generations within the

same group of affines are terminologically equated.

Since intermarriage is directionally oriented—a

group does not receive wives from the group to

which it gives its daughters—there is a probability

of difference of status between wife-givers and

wife-takers. For a discussion of the further consequences,

see Leach (1961, chapter 3; cf. Fischer

1935).

The third type, the patrilateral, is only cursorily

treated in Levi-Strauss's treatise; it appears there

as a kind of abortive crossbreed between the first

two types and is omitted here because it is somewhat

controversial (Needham 1958Z?; Lane 1962).

Some of the objections that have been leveled

at Levi-Strauss's theory can be briefly mentioned.

One, forestalled by Levi-Strauss, is that he argues

exclusively about viripotestal societies; another

is that his idea of marriage is naive, although this

is beside the point, since he was actually concerned

solely with the forms and implications of intergroup

marriage. A more radical criticism can be

directed at the fundamental character and explanatory

value of "exchange" in Levi-Strauss's scheme

(discussed in Wolfram 1956). To view the prohibition

of incest as the basis for the opposition between

consanguinity and affinity appears tautological

to those who think of consanguinity itself as

fundamental and self-explanatory or appears insufficient

to those who would like a psychological

explanation. Viewing marriage as an exchange may

be questioned on two counts. First, it introduces an

arbitrary analogy between women and chattels,

women being supposed, for instance, to be universally

the most prized of "valuables." Second, "exchange"

here tends to be given so wide and inde22

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terminate a meaning as to be practically devoid of

content. While this is true of "indirect exchange"

and even more so of "reciprocity," the notion of

exchange is certainly useful within limits. In still

another critique of Levi-Strauss, Homans and

Schneider (1955) argue, in the last analysis, that

to look at kinship systems as wholes having explanatory

value in relation to their parts is to resort to

"final causes." This critique has itself been carefully

refuted by Needham (1962).

**Developments**

Since 1949 the Levi-Straussian theory has been

tested and has undergone partial modifications and

developments. To mention only the major themes,

we have first the clear-cut distinction, advocated by

Needham, between prescription and preference in

marriage rules. He claims that prescription alone

has "structural entailments" in the total social system,

and that Levi-Strauss has dealt only with prescription

or at any rate should have done so (Needham

1962). "Prescription" is here defined more as

the characteristic of a system than as simply a

marriage rule: it involves the combination of a

rule prescribing some relatives and prohibiting

others, a corresponding terminological distinction,

and a sufficient degree of observation of the rule

in practice (Needham 1958a, p. 75; 1958£>, p. 212).

The advisability of the distinction has been challenged

by R. B. Lane (1962, p. 497). At first sight

the distinction seems justified, and there is no objection

to isolating a clear-cut type of "prescriptive

alliance." That there is a danger of underestimating

the importance of other types is apparent from the

exacting criteria by which the author excludes the

recognition of forms of patrilateral intermarriage

as "prescriptive" in his sense (Needham 1958£>),

These latter forms, like preferential marriage in

general, do have "structural entailments" of a kind,

as we shall see. Moreover, the two forms are not

easily distinguishable; the distinction, so presented,

is more one of levels than of systems (for a recent

clarification of this question, see Maybury-Lewis

1965).

The main development has probably been a refinement

of the concept of alliance and the substitution

of a more structural for a more empirical

notion. At the start the theory, although anchored

in the notion of complementarity, was in large part

concerned with the exchange or circulation of

women between the major exogamous components

of the society. To begin with, three authors have

asserted that the units which may be said to exchange

women are, in concrete cases, smaller than

the exogarnous units. In 1951 Leach sternly insisted—

with empirical, if somewhat dogmatic,

good sense—that the agents arranging marriages

are as a rule the males of the local descent groups,

as distinct from the wider exogamous units and

from the "descent lines" used in terminological

diagrams and often unwittingly reified by the analyst

into actual groups (see Leach 1961, p. 56; cf.

Needham 1958a). Quite logically, Leach went on

to criticize the assumption that a matrilateral marriage

rule should necessarily result in the groups

intermarrying "in a circle," an idea which Needham,

on the other hand, tried to refine (1958a;

1962). A criticism from Berting and Philipsen may

also be noted: to be meaningful, they suggest, the

"marriage cycles" must be limited in number, and

the people themselves must be aware of them

(Needham 1961, p. 98). While such "alliance

cycles" (Needham) do meaningfully exist in some

cases, their existence does not exhaust the function

or meaning of marriage alliance. On this all

our authors agree, for Levi-Strauss (1962, p. 333)

himself recently recognized—if my interpretation

is correct—that "conscious rules" have emerged

from recent research as more important than their

results in terms of "exchange." Leach had pointed

out that, in the absence of cycles, the basic relationship

is "one of the many possible types of continuing

relationship between paired local descent

groups" (1961, p. 101). Elsewhere, while marriage

alliance does not result in a system of exchange

at the level of the group as a whole, it is an integral

part of the system of categories and roles as conceived

by the people studied (Dumont 1957,

pp. 22, 34).

Needham has gone furthest in submitting Levi-

Straussian structuralism to criticism from the inside

and in referring the "mediating" concepts of

exchange and reciprocity back to that of (distinctive)

opposition (1960, p. 103). The more fundamental

"integration" is not that of groups but

rather that of the categories as it occurs within the

social mind: the marriage rule is part and parcel

of this system of ideas. Like everything else, social

relationships are defined by classification. Studying

the "symbolic order" of the Purum and others,

Needham (1958a) found that asymmetrical intermarriage,

although it could not function with less

than three intermarrying or "alliance groups," can

be dualistically conceptualized (wife-givers and

wife-takers) in accordance with an over-all dualist

scheme. Here are found "structural entailments"

different from the group arrangements on which

attention had first focused. The expression "marMARSH,

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riage alliance" thus covers both the general phenomenon

of mental integration and the particular

phenomenon of group integration.

In its restricted field this truly structural theory

alone transcends the bias inherent in our own culture.

Such expressions as "cross-cousin marriage"

are technically useful but basically misleading.

Real understanding is reached when the marriage

rule understood as marriage alliance is seen as

giving affinity the diachronic dimension that we

tend to associate only with descent and/or consanguinity.

By this means we are able to transcend

the limitations of thinking based upon our own

society and make comparisons in terms of the

basic concepts involved (consanguinity and affinity).

Much remains to be done. Certainly the implications

of marriage alliance for status, economy,

and political organization (i.e., the physiology of

the system) should be worked out (Leach 1961,

chapter 3). But even regarding the morphology,

our analyses are as yet imperfectly structural; we

still take too much for granted in the study of

terminologies. Before attempting ambitious (^constructions,

the basis in comparative data must be

strengthened and extended, and we must obtain a

clearer view of the limits of the logical integration

of features, or conversely, of the plasticity and tolerance

of systems, which can in some cases go so

far as to deny in effect the ideological primacy

postulated above in principle.

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