•UNIT 9 RELATEDNESS AND FICTIVE KINSHIP

Kinship studies in the early 1980s witnessed the emergence of the concept of relatedness as an approach to study kinship system. The idea of relatedness was preceded by shifts in the focus of kinship studies from traditional reliance of descent and alliance as determinants of kinship to recognition of cultural specificity in understanding the basis of kinship ties. In the former, theorists like Morgan, W.H.R Rivers, Levi-Strauss, Malinowski, A.R. RadcliffeBrown, Fortes made valuable contributions to the North American, European and British Schools through their writings on kinship. They operated within the purview of the descent and alliance models of kinship, that is, kinship through either blood or marriage.

The latter view of kinship, the cultural approach, emerged in the 1970s. Instead of forcibly trying to fit theoretical approaches of descent and alliance that had originated in western kinship theories to understand kinship cross-culturally and essentially in the non-west, the cultural approach turned focus on the need to understand how kinship was lived in everyday experience. Rather than explanations of the structure of kinship, a shift was made to practice of kinship. A pioneer of this view of kinship was David Schneider. For Schneider norms, values and symbols were important and thus kinship is cultural. He pointed out that accepting the descent and alliance theories of kinship as the only explanations of how kinship operates resulted in a restricted view of kinship. He emphasised on cultural distinctiveness of kinship and relatedness, in place of relying of western anthropological studies on kinship.

Schneider’s cultural approach to kinship led to resurgence of anthropological studies that focuses more on culture. These studies have been referred as ‘New Kinship Studies’ as they explore the non-biologically rooted relatedness with focus on how kinship emerge over time through caregiving relationships and in response to affirmative ‘choices’ to create kinship ties (Weston 2013). These studies have highlight the new and emerging forms of kinship in the West. Some of the issues brought into the body of kinship studies are instability and divorce in heterosexual marriage, the advent of same-sex marriage, gender equality, gay rights, falling fertility rates, increasing numbers of people living on their own and so on. The concept of ‘relatedness’ became relevant in understanding a wide range of relations that was constructed in non-biological manner. This led to a greater awareness among scholars and social scientists that kinship does not simply mirror physical relations but is socially created in specific cultural contexts.

2 UNDERSTANDING RELATEDNESS IN KINSHIP STUDIES

Recognising the diverse ways in which cultures interpret and observe relatedness, recasting of kinship is necessary in order to go beyond traditional kinship theories. The focus in recent years has been on broadening the definition of kinship to accommodate relationships that are not based on blood or marriage, but nevertheless enjoy importance, status and recognition as kin because they fulfilled the functions that such kinship roles were expected to perform, such as is the case with fictive kinship. Introducing openness to kinship may be attributed to the developments in anthropology within the cultural perspective on kinship that stress the need to understand kinship from the viewpoint of the indigenous who experience it as part of their everyday existence. How do people we study define and construct their notions of relatedness and what value do they give them?

Relatedness emerged in the context of kinship studies in the 1990s to challenge definitions that restricted criteria for claiming kinship to either consanguinity (blood ties) or affinity (marriage ties). The term was used for the first time by Janet Carsten in her work, ‘Culture of Relatedness’ in which she argued that kinship could not be understood only with reference to biology and reproduction. Relatedness implied that kinship is more social in the sense that relations are constructed through caring and sharing non-biological substances as well. It reflected the shift from a more formal or restrictive definitions of kinship based on blood ties and alliance to informal relation formed by being related. Relatedness can be established through construction of kinship relationships among strangers. In includes relations constructed outside biological and marital ties. It is fluid and susceptible to change. Such relationships that dislocate kinship from blood, marriage and property by realigning it with invented family bonds and traditions are called fictive kinship (V.Geetha, 2007:86). According to Janet Carsten, it would be better to characterise the relatedness that people act and feel. This enables to arrive at a new and more flexible study of kinship in anthropology (Carsten, 1995: 236).

 For Carsten culture of relatedness provides a ‘processual view of personhood and kinship’, where people become complete social beings in society through the process of becoming kin. Therefore kinship was not to be regarded as fixed or given entity or as a process to be discovered in terms of blood relation nor negotiated by affinal network. Kinship is rather a process which is constructed and assigned meaning in everyday interaction through sharing of food, residence and friendship bond. Kinship is really about people’s everyday lives and the way they think about the relations that matter most of them.

2.1 Janet Carsten: The ‘Code’ and the ‘Substance’ of Kinship Inspired by Schneider’s ideas, Janet Carsten pursued the idea that relatedness carried a different meaning in each specific cultural context and explored the relevance of previously unrecognised elements such as gender, the body and personhood in the understanding of kinship in cross-cultural contexts. Carsten studied the Malay kinship system, among whom the belief exists that substance in the form of food and residence, when exchanged and transferred among people, became the basis of relationality and kinship between them. Commitment to shared commensality is a way of emphasising their relatedness.

Janet Carsten carried out her study while residing for 18 months with a Malay family in Langkawi and subsequently for four months more at a later visit. During her stay, Carsten shared food with them and participated in household activities, which led to her being recognised as kin. In her ethnographic study among the Malays in Pulau Langkawi, Carsten found that relatedness in terms of becoming a person and participating in social relations is based on feeding, that is, giving and receiving nourishment and residing in a common space. It challenges the clear boundaries drawn between the biological and the social.

 In western society co-residence would be regarded as social, while in other societies such as the people of Pulua Langkawi in Malay studied by Janet Carsten, indigenous understandings would not make a clear distinction between biological and social. Malays become complete persons, that is, kin, though living and consuming together in houses. Identity and substance are mutable and fluid. These perceptions suggest a processual view of kinship and personhood. They challenge anthropological definitions of kinship, which focus on procreation and which assume a universal division between the “biological” and the “social” (Carsten, 1995:223). Personhood, relatedness and feeding are intimately connected through the theme of substance---blood through which people relate to each other. The fluidity of kinship between biological and social is well brought out in Carsten’s work among the Malay. She finds that, among the people of Pulau Langkawi kinship ties are also “made by living together in houses and sharing meals. Over time, accumulation of shared meals and cohabitation can establish ‘natural’ links between those who may have been originally unrelated but were brought together by in-migration, fostering or marriage. Thus, opposition between biological and social is not always followed---both are accommodated in the same society (Carsten, 2000:687).

To be meaningful as a concept, kinship has to be understood as culturally specific notion of relatedness deriving from shared bodily substance. In the West and several non-West societies, this is explained as resulting from sexual reproduction, in other cultures, it may result from sharing food, living together in the same house.

2.2. The ‘Code’ and the ‘Substance’ of Malay Kinship

 Among the Malay people residing in the region of Pulau Langkawi, sharing meals and residing in the same house are as fundamental to kinship as procreation. Kinship cannot be defined solely in terms of biological procreation but is also social because commensality is recognised as establishing kinship. Birth defines only the beginning of the process of being, of existing as a person. Becoming related is an ongoing process which continues throughout one’s life, as long as people consume food together in houses. Since the people ones eats with change several times during one’s lifetime, kinship is thus mutable and fluid, rather than fixed. Kinship then clearly involves sharing of substance. This substance can be in the form of the seed at the time of conception from the father which is nourished by blood from the mother during gestation in the womb. But this manner of biological procreation is only one form of establishing relatedness. Bodily substance is not something that one is born into. Notions about substance are acquired through feeding. Therefore, relatedness in Malay is also based on eating together, which implies common blood.

Kinship is recognised through blood and since food nourishes blood, among the Malay, feeding is an essential basis of designating kinship. Sharing of nourishment is a means of acceptance into the family group. Shared substances relate to establishment of a blood tie, but not necessarily in the biological sense. Blood ties may be shared in the form of food cooked on the common hearth and mother’s milk. Shared blood is shared female substance, it is never paternal blood. There exists a continuum between food, blood and milk. Food in the form of rice is consumed by the mother and enriches her blood. Mother’s healthy body produces milk for the child. The manner in which food constructs relatedness:

 1. Food in the form of rice cooked in the same house hearth and shared on a daily basis contributes to strengthening blood in the body. Blood is created from food. Thus, those with whom food is shared in the house are considered equivalent to blood relatives.

2. Mother’s milk is believed to be made from the mother’s blood. Blood, milk and rice meals are derived from the mother. Relatedness operates through women. Feeding is not just a means of gaining physical strength but also a way of forming a strong mother-child bond. When a woman feeds a child who is not her biological offspring, that child becomes part of her family and a sibling to her biological children, making them milk siblings or foster siblings. They are thus, prohibited from marrying each other later in life because such a decision is considered incestuous.

Becoming milk siblings is found in several cases among Malays, as it is quite common to spend childhood in houses other than one’s maternal one. Formal and informal fostering arrangements are quite common. Infants may have been fed casually by women other than the birthmother, such as neighbours or distant kinswoman. Transfer of substances means that kinship was not fixed. Rather, it could flow and have a transformative effect on the person’s relations with others (Carsten, 2011:25). There is constant anxiety about the chance that this woman child could later become a spouse in adulthood, which would count as incest. Due to the principle of avoidance of incest, in recent times, the practice of feeding a child other than one’s own is not done anymore.

2.3 Key Principles of Malay Kinship- Houses, hearths, feeding, women and sibling sets are all bounded intimately with each other.

i. The House –

The house has a central feature of social organisation among South Asian societies, including Malay to the extent that Levi-Strauss described them as ‘house-based’ societies (Carsten, 1991: 426). According to the Malay, living together is an essential criterion in being considered kin. The principle of unity of the family is emphasised in their living patterns:

• Spatial arrangements show minimum divisions.

• Existence of one common hearth or dapur as unifying factor

A number of couples reside together in the same house, but they have only one hearth (dapur), where they all cook and eat meals together. Eating outside the house in the homes of others is disapproved of for fear of it disrupting the unity of the house and kinship bond. Children are taught from an early age to return home for full rice meals. This commensality is a prime focus of what it means to be of one household. If the mother dies, the next best thing the child can be given is water boiled in the hearth of house. This is the closest possible connection the child may have to relate to its mother.

ii. The Role of Women –

Women are central to Malay houses because they spend most of their time there. Women are associated with the hearth--- the focal point of the house where women cook, carry out their main activities during the day and spend leisure time. The presence of women is important, as seen in the Malay belief that a widow can stay alone, but not a widower because without a woman the house is missing the ‘mother of the house’. Women play a central ritual role during the establishment and construction of a new house. The senior woman who is to live there is made to hold the central post (tiang seri) as the house is erected. The post is believed to be the abode of the house spirit (sumangat rumah), also a female. Houses are decorated and adorned, just as women are. Relatedness operates through women. It is from women that the main kinship link emerges because consumption and feeding of shared substances --- blood (through mother’s womb and milk) and rice cooked by women. Feeding begins in the womb where the child is nourished by the mother’s blood and after birth, by the mother’s milk. Breastfeeding by the mother helps in the physical and emotional development of the child as well as in establishment of a strong mother-child bond. It enables the child to recognise the mother, that is, helps establish kinship. The process of becoming, that is, acquiring substance happens through women’s bodies and actions. The woman’s blood makes the child, the mother’s milk nourishes the child and the food cooked by the woman on the hearth sustains the family and those with whom they share their meal every day, thereby incorporating them into the family fold as close kin. iii.Importance of Children -Houses are closely associated with children. The new house cannot be constructed when the couple gets married but only when their first child is born. Due to this, children are important in marriage. During delivery, semangat (soul) of the child comes into existence when the midwife cuts the umbilical cord. Once the child is physically detached from the mother, the midwife names the child. Thus, the child acquires personhood, with an independent identity. Rites are performed to protect the body from invasion of spirits that may enter from the extremities. This is the reason why the child is swaddled tightly during the first few weeks of life and an iron object is kept near it prevent attacks by spirits. Spirits are attracted by the ‘dirt of childbirth’, which is removed by shaving and bathing the child. These ideas suggest that the child is highly dependent on its mother. Western kinship signals full relinquishing of parental rights in the child by its biological parents while in Malay fostering, connections with the birth parents are maintained alongside foster parents, thereby not causing identity crisis in the child the way adoptees in the West face (Carsten, 2007). Fostering is prominent component of raising children in Malay and is done in case of death of one or both parents, divorce or as an attempt to avoid divorce in case of infertility, balance the sex ratio by having roughly equal number of boys and girls or providing mother relief by caring for her children if she undergoes frequent and several pregnancies (Carsten, 1991). When a child is fostered, he is said to have character traits and physical attributes of those who raised him despite not sharing biological links with them because he has eaten food cooked in the same hearth. This shared food establishes a kinship bond between the child and his foster family. iv. Siblingship -The relationship between siblings is considered the most important among the Malay and siblingship takes priority over filiation. (Carsten 2011: 22). In Langkawi, when people are asked to explain how exactly they are related, they always do so in terms of the sibling bond between ancestors. Many spirits are mentioned in myths and legends as siblings. Siblings are expected to provide aid to each other and remain close all through their lives, especially if they are closer in age. To preserve the sibling bond and avoid conflict, coresidence is discouraged among siblings after marriage. Among sisters who are close, the inmarrying husband is considered a disruption to the natural order of affection, and must incur a ritual fine. This highlights the priority given to the sibling bond. The notion of siblingship comes into play even before birth and continues to influence a person’s fortunes throughout life. The placenta (uri) that surrounds the child in the womb is considered the child’s sibling. The foetus and placenta together constitute a ‘sibling set’ or” birth siblings”. That is why when the child is born, the uri (considered the ‘younger sibling’ ) is washed, put in a woven basket with other objects of ritual importance and buried by the father in the house compound in the way a funeral burial might be carried out to signify that the sibling set remains anchored to the house (Carsten, 1991: 428). The uterus is considered the sibling’s first home and the placenta sibling is the child’s first substance sharing relation through nourishment from the mother’s blood, because they share food from the same mother’s body in order to remain nourished. Thus, even an only child has a placenta sibling. Houses occupied after birth merely create a form of siblingship replicating the one created in the womb. Check Your Progress 3 1. Give two reasons why in Malay relatedness is associated with women. ………………………………………………………………………………………………… ………………………………………………………………………………………………… …………………………………………………………………………………………………2 2. Define ‘sibling set’. ………………………………………………………………………………………………… ………………………………………………………………………………………………… ………………………………………………………………………………………………… 9.3 RELATEDNESS IN ASSISTED REPRODUCTION In families made with the support of new reproductive technologies have kinship network that includes more members than just intended or would be parent/s. Connections are created through technology for assisted reproduction. These members are donors of eggs, sperms or embryo and surrogates. Intended parent/s could be heterosexual partners or same-sex couple or even single mother or father. Assisted reproduction creates various possibilities of relatedness among people not necessarily connected through blood or marriage. The understanding of relatedness in assisted reproduction has led to the creation of new vocabularies, for example the use of term ‘surro-sister’ to describe a sibling through surrogacy. There terms are not fixed nor universal but are specific to certain culture. The experience of relatedness also extends across time and space. In this section, let us examine how sperm, egg and embryo donation and surrogacy have challenged the traditional understanding of kinship. 9.3.1 Connections through Egg and Sperm Donation According to Strathern in donor-assisted reproduction, kinship is dispersed (Strathern 1995). There is the involvement of a group of third party gametes (other than the biological parent) whose relationship to the child is contained in the act of conception itself. The relationship between the parents and off-springs are negotiated through a number of health service providers. However in most cases donors are anonymous and never have any relation with the babies produced through assisted reproduction. Anonymity is due to the fact that donors are bound by the legal contract signed in the beginning. On the other hand, children born through donations of eggs or sperms do not have a genetic connection but are yet considered as offspring. Donor conceived families are centred on complex relations between parent, children, donors, doctors and nurses in the fertility clinics. Physical and emotional relationship develop between the parent and child irrespective of the absence of biological relatedness. Thus families are created in cultural context. Besides aiding heterosexual couple, who due to medical condition depend on assisted reproduction, to become parents, eggs and sperm donation also provide the homosexual couples the choice of parenthood. Single parent and same-sex couple have used the service of donors to construct families of their choice. This has led to culture around parenthood becoming less prescriptive and more flexible. Men and homosexuals who were earlier excluded from becoming parents now have the possibility to create a family of choice. At the same time women who were destined to reproduce have been given the option of not doing so. 9.3.2 Experiencing relatedness through surrogacy Surrogacy is the renting of woman’s womb to incubate and give birth to a baby for another couple. It involves monetary transaction and hence social and ethical dilemmas. Like sperm, egg and embryo donation it adds to the network of individual who are related to the child beside the parent. The surrogate enters into a legal contract with the fertility clinic that after the delivery of the child, she will have no claim or relations. Surrogacy family functions as traditional family but the only difference is that the notion of maternity is complicated. Motherhood is not defined by the period of gestation but by the capacity to rent a womb. The absence of gestational link between mother and child does not affect their physical and emotional relationship. Surrogacy provides an opportunity to individuals who due to medical reasons cannot conceive, to same-sex partners and those who are want to bring up children without necessarily marrying. 9.4 MEANING AND RELEVANCE OF FICTIVE KINSHIP Fictive kinship also referred as social, quasi or pseudo kinship is a common concept in anthropology and the social sciences. It refers to individuals unrelated by birth or marriage who label or treat one another as kin. It involves extension of kinship obligations and relations to individuals specifically not otherwise included in the kinship universe. In the beginning of the study of kinship only two forms of relation were recognised- first those related by blood and second relations through marriage. All other relations were considered outside the kinship map. The term ‘fictive’ was used to describe all such relation which were treated not-real leading to a distinction between pure/real kinship (blood and marriage) and impure or fictive relations. The use of the term ‘fictive’ was limited till the mid-to late twentieth century when there was an attempt to deconstruct and revise anthropology. It was realised that kinship was not simply a mirror of physical links but also socially constructed in specific cultural context. Each culture has its exclusive ways of establishing fictive kinship. In many societies around the world, fictive kinship is established based on the notion of ‘shared substances’. Substance could include organ transplant, blood transfusion, transfer of semen, mother’s milk, genetic elements (as in the case of reproductive technologies), that is, anything that ensured survival. In this sense, sharing food also is considered substance, since it nourished the blood---the basis of survival. 9.5 FORMS OF FICTIVE KINSHIP There are special forms of fictive kinship relations in different society, examples of some of them are explained below. 1. Feast of Souls-This refers to the use of ceremony to identify kinship ties between participants. Those participating in the rituals are defined as having relation because of the fact of sharing a ritual bond. This required that a ritual takes place in order for the creation of kinship ties to be acknowledged as a formal alliance. 2. Miteri -The term ‘miteri’ literally means friendship and is a form of fictive kinship. Men who form fictive kin bonds are called mit; the female friend of another woman is called mitimi. The generic miteri is simply defined as an individualistic form of fictive or ritual kinship common among Hindu caste and ethnic group of Nepal. There are two rules for establishing a miteri membership, first that the bond is made with someone outside one’s own clan or caste and second that it is only made between people of same sex. 3. Compadrazgo- This a form of fictive kinship found in Central Mexico for past many years. Literally meaning "co-parenthood", compadrazgo is a term to describe the set of relationships between a child, their parents, and their godparents. Beginning with the child’s baptism, godfather and godmother agree to share child’s spiritual and material welfare. This formalizes bonds between godparents, parent and children. 4. Gurung Tradition of ‘Rodi’-A noted Gurung tradition in Nepal is the institution of "Rodi", where teenagers form fictive kinship bonds and become Rodi members to socialize, perform communal tasks, and find marriage partners. This is an institution by teenagers formed in the aim of socialization, to undertake cultural responsibilities together and to look for marriage potentials. 5. Sorority among American communities-This is a club or organisation of women, usually young and commonly students, formed mainly for social purposes as well as for helping each other out in times of trouble or need. In this type of fictive relationships, usually the members refer to each other as ‘sisters’ in case of girl-groupings and ‘brothers’, in case of boy-groupings. Activity 1 In this section we have discussed the different cultural manifestation of fictive kinship. Look around your neighbourhood and observe such relations. Discuss it in your study centre. Check Your Progress 4 1. What do you understand by term fictive kinship? ………………………………………………………………………………………………… ………………………………………………………………………………………………… …………………………………………………………………………………………………. ………………………………………………………………………………………………….. 2. Discuss two forms of fictive kinship. ………………………………………………………………………………………………… ………………………………………………………………………………………………… ………………………………………………………………………………………………… ………………………………………………………………………………………………… 9.6 LET US SUM UP Kinship studies in post 1970s took a new direction with cultural approach. Schneider was correct in challenging the centrality of procreation as assumed by anthropologists. For him, the category of kinship has no cross cultural value because its definition is bound up by Western notions. The relationship between biological and social was central to the way kinship is defined in traditional theories of kinship which see these two spheres as separate. But Carsten shows through her study of Malay kinship that the separation of social from biological is not always clear cut. Relatedness is derived from procreation and eating and living together. Taking into account the diverse ways in which kinship is understood across cultures is important as this would help to arrive at a new and more flexible approach to the study of kinship. The concept of relatedness further got elaborated with emergence of technologies that led assisted reproduction. Third party gametes through sperm and egg donation further challenged the construction of kinship through biology. Relatedness emphasised on the processual dimension of kinship. 9.7 REFERENCES Carsten, Janet 1991 Children in Between: Fostering and the Process of Kinship on Pulau Langkawi, Malaysia. Man New Series Vol.26, No. 3 (September):425-443. -------------------1995 The Substance of Kinship and the Heat of the Hearth: Feeding, Personhood and Relatedness among Malays in Pulau Langkawi. American Ethnologist, Vol. 22 No. 2: 223-241. ------------------- 2000 (ed.) Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship. United Kingdom: University Press, Cambridge. ------------------- 2000 Knowing Where You’ve Come From: Ruptures and Continuities of Time and Kinship in Narratives of Adoption Reunions in The Journal of The Riyal Anthropological Institute. Vol. 6, No. 4 (December): 687-703. -------------------- 2007 Constitutive Knowledge: Tracing Trajectories of information in New Contexts of Relatedness in Anthropological Quarterly Vol. 80, No.2 Kinship and Globalization (Spring): 403-426. -------------------- 2011 Substance and Relationality: Blood in Contexts in Annual Review of Anthropology Vol. 40: 19-35. Holy, Ladislav 1996 Anthropological Perspectives on Kinship. London: Pluto Press Uberoi, Patricia, 1993. (ed.) Kinship, Family and Marriage in India. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Geetha,V. 2007. Patriarchy. Calcutta: Stree. 9.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS Check Your Progress 1 1. Instead of forcibly trying to fit theoretical approaches of descent and alliance that had originated in western kinship theories to understand kinship cross-culturally and essentially in the non-west, the cultural approach turned focus on the need to understand how kinship was lived in everyday experience. Rather than explanations of the structure of kinship, a shift was made to practice of kinship. 2. David Schneider Check Your Progress 2 1. Relatedness refers to the indigenous ways of acting out and conceptualising relations between people, as distinct from notions proclaimed in anthropological theory. Relatedness can be established through construction of kinship relationships among strangers. It is fluid and susceptible to change. 2. According to theory of relatedness kinship is a “process of becoming kin where people get related to a network of relation beyond marriage and biology. Therefore kinship was not to be regarded as fixed or given entity or as a process to be discovered in terms of blood relation nor negotiated by affinal network. Kinship is rather a process which is constructed and assigned meaning in everyday interaction through sharing of food, residence and friendship bond. Check Your Progress 3 1. Women are associated with the hearth and play a central ritual role during the establishment and construction of a new house. 2. The notion of siblingship comes into play even before birth and continues to influence a person’s fortunes throughout life. The placenta (uri) that surrounds the child in the womb is considered the child’s sibling. The foetus and placenta together constitute a ‘sibling set’ Check Your Progress 4 1. Fictive kinship refers to social, quasi or pseudo kinship is a common concept in anthropology and the social sciences. It refers to individuals unrelated by birth or marriage who label or treat one another as kin. It involves extension of kinship obligations and relations to individuals specifically not otherwise included in the kinship universe. 2. Two forms of fictive kinship area. Feast of Souls- This refers to the use of ceremony to identify kinship ties between participants. b. Sorority among American communities-This is a club or organisation of women, usually young and commonly students, formed mainly for social purposes as well as for helping each other out in times of trouble or need.