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Read, Dwight

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Kinship Terminology

Dwight Read, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Los Angeles, CA, USA

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Abstract

Kinship terminologies consist of the terms used to reference culturally recognized kinship relations between persons. These terms have been assumed to identify categories of genealogical relations (despite ethnographic evidence to the contrary), and kinship terminologies are classified using differences in genealogical referents of kin terms. Recent analysis, however, by building on ethnographically validated procedures for computing kin relations from kin terms without reference to genealogy makes evident the underlying generative logic for the structure of kinship terminologies. Making the generative logic of terminologies explicit provides a more rigorous comparative basis for the study of kinship terminology systems.

Introduction

All societies have terms that are used to address and to refer to one's kin (*see* Kinship in Anthropology). Address terms are the expressions used to address a person during social discourse that reflect the kinship relation between speaker and listener. Multiple terms can be used within a society for the same kinship relation, with the word form varying according to the aspect of the relationship between speaker and listener being identified by the address term. Using an address term presumes the parties involved already know the kinship relation between them. English speakers, for example, might address the woman who has the kinship relation of *mother* to speaker by mom, mommy, mother, mama, ma, mum, mummy, and so on, depending on the age of speaker and the emotional relationship between speaker and listener being foregrounded in their conversation.

Terms of reference, in contrast, overtly express the kinship relation understood to apply between the individuals of concern. Collectively, the terms of reference used by societal members form what anthropologists refer to as a kinship terminology. By a *kinship terminology* is meant, then, the terms used to refer to, or express, the corpus of culturally recognized kinship relations one individual can have to another individual in a particular society. Kinship terminologies differ from one society to another not only because of language differences, but, what is more important, due to cultural differences regarding the meaning, content, structure, and organization of the kinship relations expressed linguistically through the kin terms comprising a kinship terminology.

A kinship terminology is not just a nomenclature system for the kinship relations recognized in a particular society, as it expresses both the organization of, and conceptual interrelations among, the kinship relations making up a kinship terminology (Leaf and Read, 2012). The terminology linguistically expresses a society's indigenous theory of kin relations through the semantic content of kin terms and through the culturally understood conceptual relationships among the kinship terms. The terminology can thus be viewed as an idea system composed of the conceptual relations structurally linking the terms in a kinship terminology into a conceptually bounded system of kin relations. For this reason, formal studies of kinship aimed at elucidating the kinship ideas and concepts that are part of the cultural milieu of a society focus on the terms of reference making up a kinship terminology rather than the terms of address.

Consanguineal and Affinal Kinship Terms

Within a kinship terminology, there is generally a single term corresponding to each culturally recognized kinship relation, though two individuals may have more than a single kinship relation between them, as occurs, for example, when a male and a female who are already related as kin marry and thereby take on a new kinship relation as well. The corpus of kinship terms making up a kinship terminology is typically divided analytically into two parts: *consanguineal* kin terms based on the assumption that the primary kinship relations are determined through biological procreation (hence kin relations are said to be blood relations) and *affinal* kin terms that designate kinship relations determined through marriage. The division into consanguineal and affinal terms with procreation and marriage the basis for the contrast has, however, led to extensive controversy regarding what is meant culturally by kinship and kinship relations, and is not a satisfactory division. In many societies, kin relations can be established by criteria other than procreation and marriage, such as *sponsorship* (which includes adoption, a godparent relationship, and kinship through suckling (El Guindi, 2011)), a name giving-name receiving relationship, food sharing, or coresidence, among other means (Sahlins, 2013).

For English speakers, the kinship terminology includes the consanguineal terms father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, nephew, niece, and cousin, and the affinal terms include father-in-law, mother-in-law, son-in-law, daughter-in-law, brother-in-law, sister-in-law – the terms marked with the '-in-law' suffix. Some English kin terms, such as aunt and uncle, are both consanguineal ('my parent's siblings') and affinal ('my parent's sibling's spouse') and therefore said to be defined disjunctively, while the English kin term cousin does not have an affinal form and the English kin term spouse is only an affinal term.

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Systematic Study of Kinship Terminologies

Kinship terminologies are universal: there is no society that does not have a set of reference terms used to express the kinship relations recognized in that society. Kinship terminologies vary in the number of terms from about 10 or so to around 30 terms and differ not only in the number of kinship relations that are recognized linguistically, but in the interrelationships among these kin terms. The systematic study of kinship terminologies traces back to the seminal work of Lewis Henry Morgan (1871), in the mid-nineteenth century, who carried out a worldwide study of structural differences among kinship terminologies by asking respondents for the kin terms that a terminology user would employ for each of a series of genealogical relations. The relations were aimed at determining the way the kin terms in a terminology refer to lineal and collateral genealogical relations defined with respect to speaker. Morgan assumed that kinship relations are determined through procreation and marriage, hence a kinship terminology represented a particular group's organization of the domain of genealogically defined kinship relations. Subsequently, anthropologists have generally assumed that kin terms are linguistic labels for categories of genealogical relations determined through procreation as it is culturally understood.

Morgan's systematic study of kinship terminologies began with his interest in the terminology of the Seneca (Iroquois) Indians, as their terminology made kinship distinctions lacking an obvious genealogical basis. For example, rather than having a single term referring just to genealogical mother (as happens with the English term *mother*), the Seneca term *no-yeh'* refers not only to genealogical mother but also to mother's mother's daughter, mother's mother's mother's daughter's daughter, and so on. Thus *no-yeh'* refers both to a lineal relation (genealogical mother) and to collateral relations (mother's mother's daughter, mother's mother's mother's daughter's daughter, and so on), contrary to the English and many other terminologies. (A sexually symmetric pattern occurs with the Seneca term *hä-nih'* used to refer to genealogical father, genealogical father's father's son, genealogical father's father's father's son's son, and so on.) In addition, the terms, *ah'je* and *ka-gä* used to refer to genealogical older sister and younger sister, respectively, were also used to refer to the genealogical daughter of any person referred to as *no-yeh'* or *hä-nih'*; that is, the terminology used the logic among the kin terms that a *ka-yä-wan-da* ('daughter') of a *no-yeh'* ('mother') or *hä-nih'* ('father') is an *ah'je* ('older sister') or *ka-gä* ('younger sister'), thereby expressing, without reference to genealogy, a consistently expressed conceptual relationship among the kin terms *ka-yä-wan-da*, *no-yeh'* or *hä-nih'* and *ah'je*/*ka-gä*. (A sexually symmetric pattern occurs with the kin terms for genealogical son and genealogical older and younger brother.) From the perspective of the kin terms, the category of genealogical relations associated with these kin terms derives from this logic expressing the relationship among the kin terms and not the reverse.

Classification of Kinship Terminologies

Most kinship theorists consider that genealogy is the foremost driver of kinship relations and so the terminology linguistically expresses their conceptual organization of genealogical relations, and so the terms are linguistic labels for a priori categories of genealogical relations. The Seneca pattern of including both lineal and collateral genealogical relations under the same kin term – a pattern that occurred in a number of other terminologies elicited by Morgan through his schedules – led him to refer to terminologies that systematically included collateral with lineal genealogical relations as *classificatory terminologies* and all other terminologies that distinguished lineal from collateral genealogical relations, such as is the case with the English terminology, as *descriptive terminologies*.

Early kinship theorists expanded on Morgan's two part typology, culminating in George Peter Murdock's (1949) extensive, comparative work that led to a six part typology still widely used today, based on shared genealogical features in ego's generation. Each of his six types is named for a society whose terminology is an exemplar of that type. Murdock divided the descriptive terminologies into Sudanese (also known as *bifurcate collateral* due to paternal and maternal genealogical cousins being terminologically distinguished) and Eskimo (also known as *lineal* due to all genealogical cousins having the same term and distinguished from genealogical siblings). The classificatory terminologies were divided into Hawaiian (also known as *generational* due to genealogical siblings and cousins not being distinguished), Iroquois (also known as *bifurcate merging* due to genealogical parallel cousins (see below) being distinguished from genealogical cross cousins (see below) and grouped with genealogical siblings), Crow (a bifurcate merging terminology in which the same term is used for genealogical father's sister and father's sister's daughter), and Omaha (a bifurcate merging terminology in which the same term is used for genealogical mother's brother and mother's brother's son). Subsequently, Iroquois has been divided into Iroquoian versus Dravidian terminologies (the latter used by Dravidian speakers in southern India) based on different ways in which genealogical parallel and cross relations are recognized in the terminology.

Parallel and *cross relations* refer to two patterns for the sex of sequential, genealogical positions in a genealogical pathway connecting ego and alter, with kinship relations having the same pattern being given similar sociological treatment by the users of the terminology. For example, many terminologies distinguish between a genealogical *parallel cousin*, who is the genealogical offspring of anyone referred to as a 'brother' of a 'father' or a 'sister' of a 'mother' (sometimes referred to, but incompletely, as 'the offspring of the same sex sibling of a parent') and a genealogical *cross cousin*, who is the genealogical offspring of anyone referred to as a 'brother' of a 'mother' or a 'sister' of a 'father' (sometimes referred to, but incompletely, as 'the offspring of the opposite sex sibling of a parent'). When the parallel/cross distinction is recognized in the terminology in the parental generation, parallel cousins are usually included terminologically with siblings, hence, from a sociological viewpoint, they are not marriageable under an incest taboo forbidding marriage with siblings, whereas cross cousins may be prescribed as the ideal choice for marriage partners.

Other terminology types have been distinguished when other patterns for differences among kinship terminologies have been recognized. While Murdock's typology has helped organize the variety of kinship terminologies, it is also widely

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recognized as being inadequate as it assumes similarity in the categorization of genealogical relations in ego's generation implies similarity in the categorization of all other genealogical relations. Using Murdock's criteria, for example, the terminology of the !Kung San, a hunter – gatherer group in northwest Botswana, is classified as an Eskimo type of terminology along with the English terminology, yet except for having a single term for all genealogical cousins, the !Kung San terminology has little resemblance to the English kinship terminology.

Relationship between Terminologies and form of Social Organization

Part of the motivation for organizing the worldwide corpus of kinship terminologies was the assumption that kinship terminology variation would relate to variation in forms of social organization, especially differences in marriage systems. Evolutionary schemes for past systems of social organization were hypothesized, assuming that current kinship terminology distinctions reflected past forms of social organization and associated marriage rules (*see* Kinship, Evolution of). Superficially, bifurcate merging terminologies appeared to correlate with unilineal descent systems, at least when a society had a moiety form of social organization in which the society is divided into two exogamous descent groups. (A descent group consists of all persons who trace through genealogical parents of the same sex to a recognized ancestor when tracing is through genealogical fathers or to an ancestress when tracing is through genealogical mothers.) With descent groups, a man and his terminologically identified brothers are in the same descent group and similarly for a woman and her terminologically identified sisters. With a moiety system, a person's parallel cousins are in the same descent group as that person, hence are not marriageable, whereas that person's cross cousins are in the opposing moiety, hence marriageable. Thus there are parallels between a bifurcate merging (classificatory) terminology with a cousin marriage rule and a moiety form of social organization, but neither bifurcate merging terminologies nor cousin marriage rules are restricted to societies with a moiety form of social organization and each may occur in societies without organization as descent groups. As Rodney Needham concluded, the "assumption that societies with similar terminologies … are thereby sociologically similar" (1971, p. 22) does not hold up to ethnographic evidence.

Absent a connection between terminology and social system through genealogy, there is no need to assume genealogy is the basis of kinship relations. Numerous ethnographers have commented, for the group they are studying, that kinship and kinship relations are far broader and richer than what is implied under the assumption of kinship relations being created through procreation – even when taking into account the cultural construal of procreation – and then expressed through genealogy.

Genealogical Hypothesis and Kinship Terminologies

Early challenges to this genealogical assumption considered kin terms to identify social categories determined through commonality in social relations. The social category argument logically collapsed under Floyd Lounsbury's (1965) formal demonstration, using rewrite rules, of the genealogical logic underlying the Trobriand Islander's kinship terms, contrary to Edmund Leach's (1958) claim that their terminology made no sense from a genealogical perspective and could only be understood as identifying social categories that were part of their social system. (Rewrite rules (Lounsbury, 1964) specify, for the genealogical definition of a kin term, how the primary genealogical relation in that definition may be rewritten to obtain the other genealogical relations in the kin term definition.) Lounsbury's formalism, however, had a critical flaw; he had to assume that each of the kin terms in classificatory terminologies had a primary genealogical meaning that was then extended to other genealogical relations. This *extensionist hypothesis*, though, leads to circular arguments since the hypothesized extensions lack cultural grounding. The hypothesized extensions are neither recognized as such by the users of the terminology, nor are criteria given establishing when one society will make use of the hypothesized extensions in its kinship terminology and another will not. Why English speakers, for example, do not make use of the hypothesized extensions but the Trobriand Islanders do so, is not accounted for.

The genealogical assumption for kinship terminology systems was subsequently criticized extensively by David Schneider (1984) because, he argued, it reflected a western, folk science based on genitor viewed as physical father and genetrix as physical mother and not universal properties of kinship systems. Schneider's critique led to the extreme position of denying that kinship existed as a culturally salient analytical category, despite the fact that all societies make a fundamental social and conceptual distinction between kin and non-kin. What Schneider identified, however, was not the nonexistence of kinship, but of kinship universally derived from relations determined through procreation and expressed using biologically grounded genealogical criteria. Schneider recognized that kinship should be seen in a manner other than through the genealogical lens that had been used since the time of Morgan, but he neither identified what that different lens might be nor recognized that an alternative to assuming the primacy of genealogy for understanding kinship relations was being developed at the same time he was critiquing the assumption of a genealogical basis for the kinship relations expressed through the kin terms making up a kinship terminology.

Structural Logic of Kinship Terminologies

Missing from the genealogical assumption of kinship terminologies has been a way to account for the structural logic whose existence was made evident through the formalism of the descriptive system of rewrite rules discussed by Harold Scheffler and Floyd Lounsbury (1971). Their work made it evident that kin terms are logically interrelated, but failed to identify its underlying structural basis. In a paper published in the 1970s, Murray Leaf (1971) showed that it is possible to elicit a kinship terminology without making use of the genealogical method of elicitation developed by W.H.R. Rivers (1910[1968]) and used extensively in ethnographic research on kinship terminologies. Leaf showed how he was able to

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elicit the kin terms of the Punjabi terminology through the kind of kin term calculations that have been widely reported in the ethnographic literature as the means by which users of kinship terminology systems compute kinship relations without reference to genealogy. Two persons can compute the kinship relation they each have to the other simply by each person knowing his or her kinship relation to a third person, even absent knowledge of the genealogical connections among these three persons and without needing to know the genealogical definitions of the kin terms.

The computation is essentially like the computation discussed earlier for the Seneca kin terms. More precisely, and illustrated here with the English kinship terminology, if person A does not know his kin relation to person C, but person A (properly) refers to person B as, say, *uncle* and person B (properly) refers to person C as, say, *daughter*, then from those two kin relations person A, as a user of the English kinship terminology, knows to (properly) refer to person C as *cousin*, without needing to know the genealogical relations involved, if any, among persons A, B, and C (C might be the adopted daughter of B), and without needing to know the genealogical definition of the English kin terms *uncle*, *daughter*, and *cousin*. We may refer to an indigenous calculation of this sort as a *kin term product* (Read, 1984) and write the equation: *daughter* of *uncle* is *cousin* (or more formally, *daughter* o *uncle* = *cousin*, where 'o' stands for a binary product operation). Beginning with the primary kin terms that relate to family relations, the kinship terminology may be elicited by first using kin term products of the primary terms to elicit nonprimary kin terms and then by using products of the primary terms with any elicited terms until no more terms are elicited. The result of the elicitation may be shown as a graph, referred to as a *kinship map* when the graph shows the outcome of the process of eliciting kinship relations, or as a *kin term map* when the graph shows the formal relations among the kin terms expressed through the kin term product equations obtained through the elicitation process (see Figure 1). The kinship map and the kin term map are isomorphic data models showing the structure of the kinship terminology that results from the structural logic embedded within the terminology. The rewrite rules developed by Lounsbury are a consequence of this structure, but the structure is not evident from the rewrite rules.

Generative Basis of Kinship Terminologies

By making explicit the structural form of a kinship terminology, we can then analytically determine its generative basis, if any, by determining, if possible, the generating kin terms for the structure and the structural equations underlying its form, with the requirement that the generating terms and structural equations have cultural saliency, as the goal is not a formal

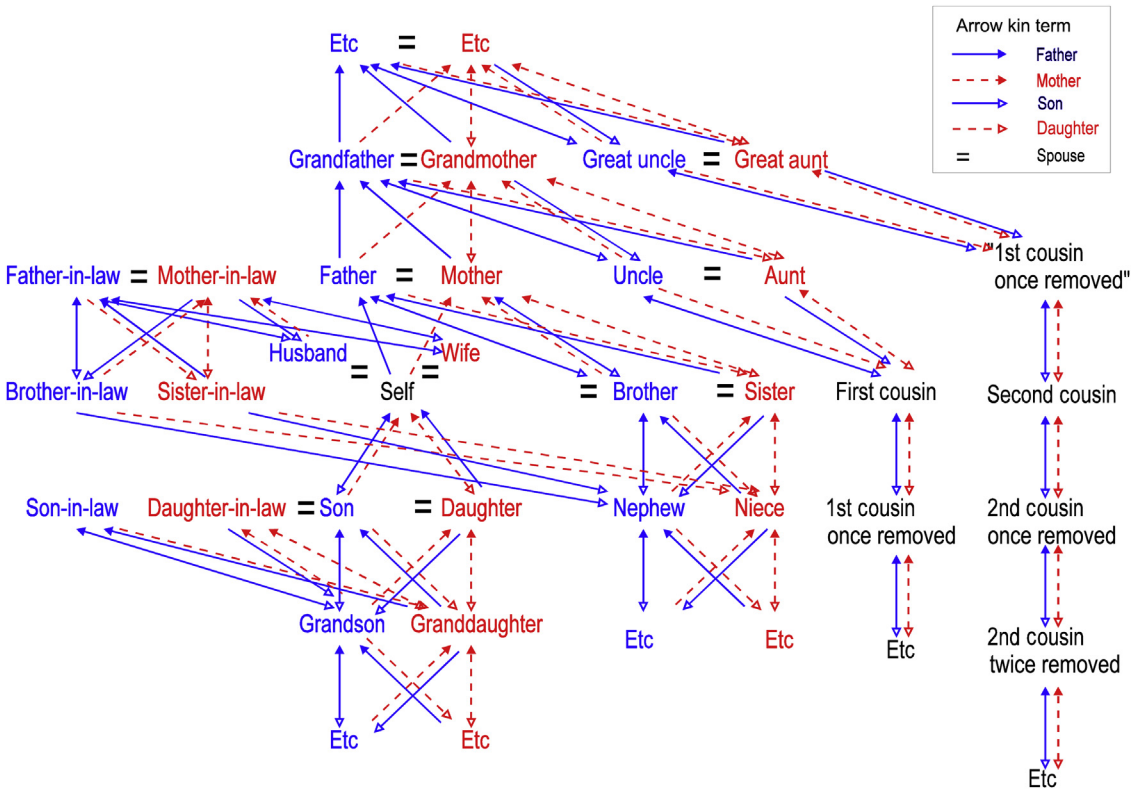

Figure 1 Kin term map for the American Kinship Terminology, based on the primary kin terms father, mother, son, daughter, and spouse. Male terms are blue, female terms are red, and neutral terms are black. Etc indicates that the kin term map continues in the same way without any structural changes.

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representation, per se, but a formal account of the cultural kinship knowledge embedded within a kinship terminology (Read, 2007; *see* Formal Models of Kinship). Thus this analytical method is based on a falsifiable theory about a cultural domain, namely that kinship terminologies have a logically consistent and culturally salient structural form (Leaf and Read, 2012). Failure to find a culturally salient set of generating kin terms and structural equations for the structure shown in a kin term map would falsify the universality of the theory. To date, no counter examples have been found.

Structural Properties of Kinship Terminologies

The structural analysis of kinship terminologies has consistently found structural equations that are culturally meaningful and ethnographically justified. The analysis also makes evident the extent to which properties of a kinship terminology are determined by its internal logic versus considerations external to the terminology. For example, the distinction between descriptive and classificatory terminologies is structurally the consequence of which one of two ways that a sibling relation may be conceptualized is culturally salient: (1) a sibling is the *other child* of one's parents or (2) siblings have the *same parents*. The first concept implies that the kin term referring to the sibling relation is a derived kinship concept: *child* o *parent* = *sibling*, where the instantiation of a kin term product is understood to exclude the speaker. The second implies that the kin term referring to the sibling relation is a primary kin term and corresponds to societies in which sibling relations are central in the domain of kinship relations. The first concept also implies that sibling is not a generating term and a parent kin term (sex-marked in most terminologies, but not in the English terminology) is the primary (consanguineal) generating term. This leads to the descriptive terminologies. The second concept implies that sibling is also a generating term, which then leads to the classificatory terminologies. The second definition for a sibling relation also provides the logical basis for A.R. Radcliffe-Brown's (1950) *equivalence of siblings*, proposed by him as a way to account for the pattern of kinship relations for genealogical mother and genealogical father found in the Seneca and other classificatory terminologies. Radcliffe-Brown, however, did not account for when the equivalence of siblings was culturally salient; we now know that it is culturally salient when their concept of siblings corresponds to the second concept given earlier.

By working out the structural basis of kinship terminologies, we can distinguish the features that are the consequence of its generative logic, such as having kin terms that distinguish between older and younger sibling, or are due to distinctions embedded in the kinship terminology for social and cultural reasons, such as a distinction between older and younger mother's brother in the Tongan terminology that relates to patterns of inheritance (Bennardo and Read, 2007). In addition, rather than assuming features of terminologies are simply added to or removed from a terminology in an evolutionary account, change in features must be related to changes in the structural logic of the terminology (*see* Kinship, Evolution of). For example, terminologies in Australia distinguish between older and younger sibling regardless of the sex of speaker, whereas in the Polynesian terminologies the older/younger distinction generally depends on whether the sibling is a parallel (same sex) or a cross (opposite sex) sibling with regard to speaker. This difference is a consequence of differences in the structural logic of the terminologies from these two regions and so an evolutionary account linking these terminologies must be formulated at the level of changes in the structural logic of terminologies. Using a structural logic approach also makes it possible to form a typology of kinship terminologies based on differences in their respective sets of generating terms and structural equations (Read, 2013a), thereby clarifying what are structurally feasible evolutionary changes in kinship terminologies, as has been shown for the Polynesian terminologies (Read, 2013b). The evolutionary pathway of the Polynesian terminologies determined through their structural analysis is consistent with the work by historical linguists on changes in the word form of the kin terms, but requires different root terminologies for the Polynesian and Oceanic terminologies than the one posited in historical linguistic accounts.

Conclusions

Historically, the study of kinship terminologies began with the assumption that they are mainly names for genealogical categories whose origin is external to the terminology (*see* Family and Kinship, History of). Kinship relations were assumed to be determined through procreation and expressed genealogically. This approach left unspecified how the categories were determined and has been contradicted by ethnographic research that repeatedly finds that kinship ideas and kinship systems are not based in an obvious way on genealogy (which is not to say that kin terms do not relate to genealogy as it is always possible to provide genealogical definitions of kin terms in a post hoc manner). Reaction against the genealogical hypothesis led to the untenable assumption that kinship does not exist, rather than viewing kinship terminologies as cultural objects in their own right. The latter makes it possible to identify the structure embedded in a kinship terminology by identifying the way the kin terms are interrelated through the culturally salient kin term product. This, in turn, has led to analytical determination of the generative basis of the structure of a kinship terminology, thereby bringing the formal analysis of kinship terminologies back to the ethnographic study of kinship systems and the meaning of kinship relations. The analytical approach that has thereby developed makes possible a vibrant and deep-seated understanding not only of kinship terminologies as the expression of the kinship ideas of a particular society, but more broadly of what is meant by culture as a constructed reality, for the kinship terminologies of human societies are cultural constructs through which a kinship domain is formulated that is not the codification of already existing patterns of behavior. The analytical study of kinship terminologies now has the potential of making evident the interrelationship between kinship and social systems in a sound and rigorous manner.

See also: Family and Kinship, History of; Kinship in Anthropology; Kinship, Evolution of; Kinship, Formal Models of.

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