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Polyandry in Kota Society

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THE Kotas of the Nilgiri Hills in South India are not polyandrous in the strict sense of the term. A woman may have but one husband and can acquire another only by divorce from or after the death of her previous spouse. What Kota polyandry amounts to is that a man's brothers have free sexual access to his wife, and when a man is ill or incapacitated or in any way unable to fulfill his husbandly duties, then his brothers take his place. The brothers are, in effect, secondary husbands.

The Kotas are the neighbors of the famed Todas on the Nilgiri plateau. Unlike the Todas, whose whole culture pivots around the care of buffalo, the Kotas have more diversified interests. They are agriculturalists, but also keep herds of cattle and buffalo. A large part of their livelihood is earned by handiwork; they are the aboriginal artisans of the Nilgiri area and provide the other tribes with iron tools, wooden utensils, and pottery. In addition, they are professional musicians who furnish the music that is required for the ceremonies of the other tribes.

There are seven Kota villages, each divided into three exogamous father-sibs. The same three sib names occur in every village, but each village sib counts as a distinct social entity. A man belonging to the *aker* gens may not marry a woman of the same gens in his own village, but is permitted to take a wife from the *aker* gens in any of the other villages. Marriage is a simple affair; the bridegroom bows to the feet of the bride's father, pays a token fee of four annas and a bride price ranging from ten to one hundred rupees. Residence is patrilocal. The normal household consists of several brothers and their wives and children living together under the paternal roof. When the growing families can no longer be accommodated in a single house because of the limitations of space, each of the married brothers establishes his family in a separate house.

A man may have more than one wife and so the Kota marital system includes true polygyny as well as fraternal polyandry. A woman lives only in the house of her legal husband and he is recognized as the father of the children she bears. The husband has precedence to his wife's attention and favors. But in the absence of the husband, any of his brothers have the right and the obligation to act in his stead. It is a right in the sense that a husband may not attempt to interfere and may not exhibit any signs of jealousy when he finds his brother with his wife. It becomes an obligation

¹ Read before the Twenty-fifth Indian Science Congress, Calcutta, 1938. Fieldwork done under a Fellowship in the Biological Sciences, National Research Council, 1937, and under the auspices of the Institute of Human Relations, Yale University.

when the husband is away from the village overnight. No woman will sleep alone in a house lest the sorcerers from the nearby Kurumba tribe find her an easy prey. Therefore the husband delegates one of his brothers to sleep with his wife while he is away. Similarly, when a man is unable to accompany his wife on a ceremonial visit to another village, one of his brothers is duty bound to go along with her and to remain at her side constantly, as would the husband himself. Not infrequently also, a man may want to conduct a liaison on his own and may conveniently divert the care and the attention of his wife to his brother while he himself goes about his affairs.

Although any one of a man's brothers may be the biological father of his wife's child, only the husband is recognized as the sociological father. When a child patently resembles its progenitor rather than its sociological father, any levity on the subject is sternly discouraged. The mother's husband is thus the father of the child in every sense of the word, save the biological. In no way may a man question the right of his brothers to have intercourse with his wife.

This right applies not only to an individual's uterine brothers, but to his classificatory brothers as well. All the male parallel cousins of a man and all the male members of his gens who are of his own generation are classed as brothers. Since the sib groups are small, the number of classificatory brothers is restricted. Nonetheless there may be ten to twenty men standing in the fraternal relationship to an individual.

Underlying the practice of sharing wives among brothers is the operation of a principle whose presence may be discerned in other phases of the culture, the principle of the equivalence of brothers. Just as every member of a group of brothers has equal sexual rights to the wife of any one of them, once the husband's precedence has been allowed, so do brothers share equally in other things. In the economic sphere, a group of uterine brothers till the paternal fields together and mutually partake of the harvest. When brothers live together, they divide the various tasks. One brother acts as herdsman, some as blacksmiths, others work in the fields. The proceeds of their labor are pooled, and each one enjoys an equal part of the total income. When the paternal inheritance is to be divided, it is parcelled out equally among all the sons.

The kinship system further reflects the operation of the principle of fraternal equivalence. A man calls the children of his brother by the same terms as he uses for his own sons and daughters. This is true for the children of classificatory brothers as well as for the children of real brothers. The brothers of one's father are equated with the real father and are called

"younger father" or "elder father" according to their age in relation to one's own father. The presence of this particular type of kinship system is not to be taken as either the cause or the effect of the fraternal principle. There are societies which possess this kind of system and which do not have the idea of fraternal equivalence, and conversely, there may be cultures in which the fraternal principle exists and which have an entirely different type of terminology. The concurrence in Kota culture only means that the terminological aspect of the social structure is in symmetrical accord with a dominant social motif.

The presence of this principle is also apparent in Kota religion. There is a paramount triad of gods composed of "Elder Father God," his brother "Younger Father God," and "Mother God." The junior male god shares the wife of the other. It is not so much that "Younger Father God" is a co-husband, but that Kota deities, like Kota men, have fraternal rights to the wives of their brothers. In this culture as in many others, the attributes and behavior of the deities are direct projections and elaborations of patterns valid in the society.

Incidents in the folklore illustrate the cultural setting within which the formula of fraternal equivalence works. There is a tale of two brothers, the elder called Katpedkamaten, the younger Parkul. In the words of the story, The elder brother became the headman of the village and always walked about with a leaf umbrella [a symbol of wealth and dignity]. He had many servants. When the time for sowing came, the men spread manure over the fields. The elder brother told the younger to carry manure with the servants but the younger brother took his loads of manure and poured them into the bushes instead of over the fields. When the elder brother heard of this and berated Parkul, he replied, "I am your brother, not your servant. If you work, I will work; if you stand with a leaf umbrella, so should I." Katpedkamaten grew angry and beat his brother with a stick. . . . Then an old man rebuked him with the proverb, "Even if a man becomes a king, to his mother he is only a son and to his younger brother he is but elder brother." And the old man went on to tell Katpedkamaten, "Bring back your young brother, for when an elder brother sits, then also must the younger brother sit."

To this episode the informant added his own comment that "Until today, brothers who live in the same house are equal in position. When each has his own house and his own land, then only may one have more than the other." There is absolute economic equality among a group of brothers who live together. When they no longer live in one household, they still are bound to render economic assistance to a brother who is in need. If a man suffers any misfortune, it is his brothers who come to his aid, who cultivate his land, do his craft work, care for his family. The essential

economic solidarity of the fraternal group is maintained even though the brothers no longer pool the proceeds of their work.

The fraternal equation does not prevail with mathematical infallibility. In certain circumstances it may come into conflict with another cultural axiom and be cancelled out. One such situation arises in the case of the priests. There are one or two men in each village who perform the sacerdotal duties, occupy a priestly office, and are scrupulously segregated from contaminating contacts. Thus the Kota priest may not eat from vessels used by laymen; he must occupy a certain reserved portion of the house when he visits the home of a fellow villager; he may no more join in the ordinary social dances than a bishop may publicly demonstrate the tango. Since women are most potently charged with ceremonial pollution, and since the priest must be most carefully insulated against such pollution, the rules which regulate the contact of the priest with women are stringent. He may have only one wife and may not have intercourse with any other woman. The wife of the priest partakes of his sanctity and she, in turn, may not have intercourse with any man but her husband. It is in this respect that the principle of the equivalence of brothers gives way before the more demanding principle of the segregation of the priest and his wife from contaminating mundane influences. The brothers of a priest do not have access to his wife since that would impair her sacrosanct nature. The priest may not have anything to do with the wives of his brothers since they would trespass his consecrated presence. The priestly principle is dominant over the fraternal principle because its effective rating, to use Professor Linton's phrase, is higher. That is, the society is more concerned with preserving the purity of the priests than it is in consistently equilibrating the rights of brothers. The priesthood complex has greater potentialities, in this instance, for influencing societal behavior than has the fraternal complex.

Sometimes the application of the concept of fraternal equivalence overrides some other fundamental of the culture. A basic observance is that a woman may not be forced into an association repugnant to her. A girl may be married off to an elderly man for the sake of the bride price he pays, and many kinds of social pressure will be exerted on the girl to persuade her to abide by her parents' choice. But if she adamantly refuses to stay with one husband, she is usually able to get another. In the numerous legal cases concerning illicit sexual relationships, the crucial point at law is whether the woman willingly formed the alliance or whether she was forced into it. If it was voluntary, her partner's penalty is light; if involuntary, it is more severe. The volition of the woman is of primary importance. But when a

woman dislikes the brother of her husband and refuses him, she is ultimately forced to tolerate the relationship. In this case the woman's will is disregarded because of the paramount idea that brothers must enjoy equal privileges.

The conflict of the same two principles but with opposite results occurs in the remarriage of widows. If the equivalence of brothers were the most powerful social coefficient in this instance also, a widow would be compelled to marry one of her deceased husband's brothers. As it is, the levirate is the preferred remarriage; it is socially approved, but yet is not compulsory. Should a widow refuse to marry one of the brothers, she may not be coerced into the match. She must then surrender to the brothers all the property left by the deceased and must even give them the jewels given by her late husband. The fraternal principle demands that the material possessions be equally distributed among the brothers if there are no sons to inherit, but the brothers are defeated should they attempt in this case to overrule the maxim that a woman's stubborn will must prevail.

The question then arises as to why a woman may reject the brother of her husband after her spouse is dead, but may not do so while he is alive. The answer is that the refusal while the husband is alive immediately disbalances the fraternal prerogatives, denying to one brother what the other possesses. But when the widow remarries to some one not in the fraternal group, then none of the brothers have access to her and the equivalence is maintained.

The Kotas themselves do not calculate this outcome with deliberate nicety. Indeed, they are hardly aware of the existence of the fraternal principle. That, however, does not militate against its reality and influence. Even the members of the highly verbalized societies of Western civilization do not consciously formulate the basic configurations of their cultures.

Nor does the fraternal principle have the same meanings for all the tribesmen. One informant rationalized the practice of fraternal polyandry on the grounds that it encourages friendship between a man's wife and his brothers, and when it becomes necessary for the brothers to aid the wife and the children, they are not reluctant to do so. The polyandrous custom, in this informant's understanding, created a sort of aboriginal insurance policy for one's family. Less articulate informants merely returned the stock answer, as their rationale for polyandry, "We follow this custom because our forefathers did."

Individual variations likewise occur in the application of the principle. A man who recently died left behind him little property and no close relatives to pay for the expenses of his funeral. It was clearly the duty of

his parallel cousins, in their capacity as classificatory brothers, to provide for the cremation. They did not feel impelled to do so since the deceased had been a man of little consequence and, as they would not inherit from him, any expenditures for the funeral would be sheer loss. In the end the husband of the dead man's sister and his widow's brother provided for the necessary ceremonial display. For if the body had been ignominiously disposed of, the disgrace would have redounded to them, his nearest of kin. The parallel cousins were men of some rank and any adverse criticism of their action would not harm them greatly. But in other instances in which parallel cousins were obligated to provide for the funeral of a classificatory brother, they unhesitatingly did so. Some men feel constrained to fulfill their social obligation, others may ignore it.

The principle of the equivalence of brothers extends to a group of sisters. Thus a man has sexual access to all the sisters of his wife. The sororate is preferred, but is not compulsory. If a newly married couple find that they are not compatible, the husband may exchange his wife for one of her sisters. But the equivalence of sisters is not as thoroughgoing as is the fraternal principle because a set of female siblings may be married off into different villages and will not frequently meet; therefore a sororal group does not constitute as tight a social and economic entity as does a fraternal group.

A noteworthy topic of inquiry in a society which permits a number of men to share the same woman is whether any friction arises over the uniform allocation of privileges. Among the Kotas, as in other cultures where polyandry or joint uxorial rights are sanctioned, any manifestations of sexual jealousy within the fraternal group are drastically squelched. There is a tale of a man who asked his brother to keep away from his newly acquired second wife so that more of her time might be available to her husband. For this mild and seemingly reasonable request, the husband almost was outcaste, had to pay a heavy fine and send the woman to live with his brother for a time. The slightest sign of sexual jealousy between brothers arouses the relatives and the sib members of the jealous man to bring all the persuasion and social force at their command to eradicate the symptoms of jealousy.

This is not to say that jealousy outside the fraternal line is unknown. A husband will not usually tolerate any sexual relationship between his wife and a man who is not one of his brothers. If he suspects such a relationship, the husband will threaten the paramour, or remove his wife from temptation, or utilize any of the devices available to jealous husbands in other societies beside the Kota. Whatever the root causes of jealousy may be in

Kota culture, they are certainly as deep lying and are perhaps similar to those operating in Western societies. Since Kota men are conditioned to exclusive sexual possession of their wives in respect to most males, it seems likely that they may have the desire for personal possession in respect to the fraternal males also. The feeling for individual privilege which is socially encouraged in the one circumstance may carry over into the other. Since the dictates of the culture so effectively repress any manifestations of such sentiments, it is difficult to find many direct evidences of intrafraternal jealousy. But there are certain indirect clues.

There is a proverb which says, "Do not climb a rope down the face of a cliff [as is sometimes done in gathering honey], except in the company of your male cross-cousin." The implication is that one's brothers are not to be trusted too far.

Another clue is the prevalence and frequency of quarrels among brothers. While the assertion of individual aggression is rigidly tabooed in the sexual sphere, there is no restraint of hostility in other matters in which a group of brothers share rights. Violent disputes among brothers occur about property division, about distribution of inheritance, about the allocation of work when a joint enterprise is being conducted. It is my impression that intrafraternal disputes are more numerous and more vehement than other kinds of quarrels. It may be that the hostilities generated by sexual jealousy within a set of brothers find their outlet in the economic relations of the fraternal group.

Polyandrous societies are not as rare as it was once thought they were. The Eskimo, Tibetan, and Wahuma cases have long been known. Recent reports indicate that a number of North American tribes practiced the custom, among them the Shoshoni, Paviotso, Northern Paiute, Pawnee, Wichita, Kitsai, Arikara, and Comanche. The Comanche in particular institutionalized the exchange of wives in a manner similar to the Kota system. The Lhota Nagas of Assam also extend the rights of a husband to his brother.² In South India polyandry is of especially frequent occurrence. Six polyandrous tribes have been reported from Cochin; the Nayars of Travancore and the Irava of British Malabar have this form of mar-

² R. H. Lowie, *Primitive Society* (New York, 1920), pp. 43-46; J. H. Steward, *Shoshoni Polyandry* (*American Anthropologist*, Vol. 38, 1936, pp. 561-64); W. Z. Park, *Paviotso Polyandry* (*ibid.*, Vol. 39, 1937, pp. 366-68); O. C. Stewart, *Northern Paiute Polyandry* (*ibid.*, pp. 368-69); A. Lesser, *Levirate and Fraternal Polyandry among the Pawnees* (*Man*, Vol. 30, 1930, No. 78); R. Linton, *The Study of Man* (New York, 1936), p. 136; J. P. Mills, *The Lhota Nagas* (London, 1922), p. 154.

riage; while the Todas are the classic example of a polyandrous people in the textbooks of anthropology.³

The historical aspects of Kota polyandry frame a significant problem. Before the English came up to the Nilgiri plateau, its inhabitants were relatively isolated from the main currents of South Indian life. Contacts with the people of the lowlands were few, since the journey up the hills was hard and hazardous. Soon after the Europeans discovered that the climate of the plateau was a life-saving refuge from the fevers of the plains, roads and later a railroad were built. In the wake of the English came Tamilians and other lowland Hindus. Within the last fifty years the advent of these newcomers has effected significant changes in the tribal culture. New deities have been adopted, new legal procedures have appeared, new fashions in dress taken on, new methods of cultivation practiced. It is striking that there has been no change in the practice of polyandry. Other of the tribal institutions, economic, religious, political, have been affected, yet polyandry flourishes with full vitality.

Such has not been the case in other polyandrous communities. Dr A. Aiyappan says of Irava polyandry, "Wherever modern European culture has penetrated and modified indigenous culture, polyandry is giving way to monandry . . ." Only among the rural and remote Irava does polyandry still exist. Aiyappan ascribes the absence of jealousy and discord among Irava co-husbands to several causes: the joint marriage ceremony, the desire to limit heirs, the supervising influence of parents, the force of public opinion.⁴ Among the Kotas, however, there is no joint marriage system, nor any desire to limit the number of heirs, nor any particularly potent supervision by parents. The one common factor that remains is public opinion. But public opinion is an omnibus term which may encompass any number of differing social forces and phenomena.

To delineate the reasons why Kota polyandry has stood steadfast in the face of the influx of new customs let us return to the cultural motif which was found to underlie the functioning of polyandry. The encroachment of foreign concepts has not yet invalidated the principle of the equivalence of brothers. Inheritance, marriage, family organization are still influenced by this factor. Since the principle continues to function in other

³ L. K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, *The Cochin Tribes and Castes, Vol. I* (Madras, 1909), pp. 9, 161, 173, 209, 301, 346; *Nayar Polyandry* (Man, Vol. 32, 1932, No. 320); A. Aiyappan, *Nayar Polyandry* (*ibid.*, No. 99); *Polyandry and Sexual Jealousy* (Man, Vol. 37, 1937, No. 130); A. Aiyappan, *Fraternal Polyandry in Malabar* (Man in India, Vol. 15, 1935, p. 108 ff.)

⁴ Aiyappan, *Polyandry and Sexual Jealousy*.

phases of the culture, it is understandable that it should continue to work in the matter of polyandry. It continues to work because the fraternal principle is still economically justified. The economic set-up is usually the part of a culture most vulnerable to change, and it is precisely here that the fraternal principle finds its primary validation. Although new crops are being cultivated, although the old intertribal commerce has broken down, although the material equipment of the household has been revised, the major economic pursuits of Kota men are still blacksmithing, music, agriculture. Each of these occupations demands the cooperative effort of a team of men. In blacksmithing, at least three must work together: one to operate the bellows, one to hold the iron, a third to wield the hammer. In music, the minimum number for a band is five players. In agriculture, it is becoming easier for a man to care for his fields alone, but cooperative effort is more efficient. The groups that work together in the smithy, in the fields, and in providing music, are generally groups of brothers. Since the Kota depends on the economic cooperation of his brothers for his livelihood, it is small wonder that the close knit ties of the fraternal group hold their grip and that the principle of the equality of brothers yet prevails. A proverb which aptly states the case says, "If the mother dies, there is no good food; if the father dies, there is no happiness; if a man has no brothers, he has no strength of arm."

The economic dependence on group effort is the condition that makes the supreme civil penalty, outcasting, so powerful a force toward social cohesion. One who persistently disregards the rules of the culture in regard to the fraternal principle or in any other important respect, is outcaste and denied communication with his fellow tribesmen. He consequently is unable to earn a living, since he cannot single-handedly make tools or provide music or reap a full harvest. The one man in the tribe who has for some time defied the consequences of being put into the Kota Coventry, is the one man, a school teacher, whose livelihood does not depend on the traditional occupations. He is now strenuously campaigning for reforms in the tribal habits of wearing long hair, of eating carrion, of protracted menstrual and childbirth seclusion. A number of young men have come to support him. But in the matter of polyandry, the reformer seeks no change. There is neither incentive nor opportunity for altering this tribal custom.

Kota polyandry then, has remained unimpaired because the underlying functional principle and its economic validation have remained intact. Not that the economic factor is the only important element motivating the fraternal principle. Childhood conditioning, family organization, emotional attachments, also play a significant part. But the economic

props will probably be affected before the others, and then polyandry will be threatened. When imported tools completely supplant the articles of Kota manufacture, when no income is to be derived from musical services, when improved agricultural techniques and availability of hired labor make the Kota more independent of his brothers, then it well may be that the equivalence of male siblings and the practice of polyandry will no longer be maintained.

The factors responsible for the continued preservation of polyandry in this tribe need not be the same as those operating in other polyandrous societies. The Todas have a form of polyandry similar to that of the Kotas, and Toda polyandry too, continues to flourish. But Toda economy and social organization are vastly different from that of the Kotas, and the resistance of the Toda institutions may be due to reasons different from those posited for the Kota case. It is to be noted, however, that Toda economic life has changed even less than Kota within the last half century. A study of what has happened to polyandry among the Todas and studies of other polyandrous peoples would make the Kota instance more meaningful. A deeper insight into the nature of the cultural processes may best be secured through the comparison and integration of controlled bodies of evidence regarding culture change in various societies.

Through Kota society there run certain dominant themes which link seemingly disparate elements of the culture, motivate the cultural dynamics, establish the basic configurations of the society. Within the scope of these basic configurations, there is room for individual variation in some matters, no allowance at all for personal deviations in other matters. A dominant personality will utilize all the leverage permitted within the configuration to introduce changes. The principle of fraternal equivalence is still current because it is economically worth while. If its economic value should fall, then we may look for a corresponding decline in the practice of polyandry.

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