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# BACK TO KINSHIP III

## A GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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*Back to Kinship III* is the third Special Issue of the e-journal, *Structure and Dynamics* sponsored by the group, Kinship Circle. Each issue is dedicated to current kinship research. The first two issues have both been very successful, as shown by the number of downloads. *Back to Kinship I* (Read and El Guindi 2013) has had a total of 2,696 download since it was published in 2013, which is an average of 207 downloads per article and an average of 385 downloads per year. *Back to Kinship II* (El Guindi and Read 2016) has had a total of 2,405 downloads since it was publication in 2016, which is an average of 172 downloads per article and an average of 601 downloads per year. These numbers reflect the ongoing intense interest in kinship research worldwide.

These two issues of *Back to Kinship* focus on the challenges facing kinship research that began to appear in the 1970s, and on the impact these challenges have had on kinship research. As El Guindi (2020:42) puts it in her just published book, ongoing kinship research has confronted “trivializing or dismissive attempts and unfounded claims which diminish the importance of the kinship phenomenon.” El Guindi continues: “The history of anthropology has shown that kinship knowledge is integral to the cultural knowledge humans acquire and generate, about what constitutes ‘social universe’ and what it means to be a relative. A complex notion of society and culture is unique to humans... and is irreducible to a simplistic transmission of traits or an assumed overarching tradition of nurture” (p. 42). She goes on to describe how kinship study today “involves revisiting old issues with fresh data or generating new models to provide new insights while creatively building bridges with different disciplines which would enhance the conceptualization of kinship” (p. 42).

It is in this sense of revision, elaboration and expansion that the articles in this Special Issue revisit old ideas in kinship theorizing, examining in what way the ideas are right, in what ways they need revising, and if they need revising, how this can be done, thereby adding constructively to our kinship knowledge.

There are 5 articles in this Special Issue, covering a wide range of kinship research questions and topics. The first two articles, by William Young and Warren Shapiro, respectively, employ ethnographic evidence as the reason for revising previous kinship ideas. The next two articles, by Robert Parkin and Dwight Read, respectively, focus on kinship terminology and revisit theoretical issues. The last article, by Alain Matthey de l'Etang, discusses theorizing by Dwight Read challenging the "received view" of kin terms being derived through a genealogical framework and proposing, in its place, that kin terms are structurally organized through a generative logic for the terminology.

The first article in this Special Issue, "Kinship and History: Tribes, Genealogies, and Social Change Among the Bedouin of the Eastern Arab World," by William Young, is grounded in his own field-gathered data on the Rashāyidah Bedouin tribe. He reconsiders traditional models of kinship and social organization for Bedouin societies and discusses the reasons why these models are insufficient for expressing the multi-dimensional character of social relations in the Rashāyidah Bedouin tribe, in particular, and in Bedouin tribes, in general. Traditional models assume a two-dimensional, branching hierarchical structure based on filiation and affinity as the primary means by which kinship relations are formed and structurally organized. However, when considering historical changes within the Rashāyidah tribe, this requires assuming a genealogical basis for changes in their society that are not genealogically grounded. Young suggests that a concentric, rather than a branching, model provides a better model both for describing historical changes in the make-up of the Rashāyidah tribe and for working out the implications that these historical changes have had in the Rashāyidah tribe over the past several decades. In particular, he notes that the branching model, based on the way genealogies branch in future time through reproduction, does not easily accommodate lineages that "attach" (Arabic: *multahaqah*) themselves to other lineages, thereby becoming part of the Rashāyidah tribe.

Young argues that the way in which the Rashāyidah tribe came together in the manner expressed through a concentric model is not unique to the Rashāyidah tribe and occurred as well with the formation of the Jabārāt confederacy in 19th century Gaza and southern Palestine. He then shows that the concentric model applies widely to Bedouin tribes, citing as evidence the frequency with which 'attached' lineages are found to be part of Bedouin tribes and the way the members of tribes envisage their society having the form of a tree with a heavy, central trunk and projecting branches in all directions, getting thinner the greater distance from the trunk of the tree, for which 'attached' social units could be viewed as branches grafted onto the tree. This leads him to conclude that the 'attached' social units of the concentric model are not happenstance or just products of the historical moment, but instead "the concentric model is actually the model of a 'deep structure' of all Bedouin tribes" (p. 31).

The second article in this Special Issue, Rethinking Navajo Social Theory, by Warren Shapiro, examines whether ethnographic accounts of Navajo kinship are concordant with a Schneiderian motivated account of their kinship system. Shapiro focuses on the lack of fit between ethnographic evidence relating to Navaho kinship and the account of Navajo kinship pre-

sented by Gary Witherspoon in his 1975 book, *Navajo Kinship and Marriage*. He argues that Witherspoon's account of Navajo kinship is heavily indebted to Schneider's earlier publications on kinship that were then developed more fully in his book, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*, published in 1984. Shapiro develops a contrast in this article between what the ideas about kinship systems developed by Harold Scheffler imply about Navajo kinship versus what Witherspoon's account, based on the ideas of David Schneider, informs us about Navajo kinship. Shapiro sets forth the reasons he considers the latter to be seriously flawed from an ethnographic perspective despite the fact that Witherspoon considers his account to be in accord with the way the Navajo view their kinship system.

The primary question being addressed by Shapiro is: Does the ethnographic material support a Schefflerian account of Navajo kinship or the Schneiderian account espoused by Witherspoon? As in his other recent articles addressing similar issues regarding the meaning of kinship relations in other contexts, Shapiro marshals, in support of his argument that Navajo kinship is better understood using the ideas of Scheffler rather than the ideas of Schneider, an impressive array of ethnographic accounts with both extensive depth and breadth in their coverage of the ethnographic facts relating to Navajo kinship. For Shapiro, the ethnographic evidence clearly supports the application of Scheffler's notion that kin terms translated as 'father' ('mother') are characterized by the semantic centrality of biological father (biological mother) in the meaning of that kin term. Shapiro argues that Witherspoon does not deal with the ethnographic evidence he (Shapiro) has marshaled showing the relevance of semantic centrality to the way Navajo kin terms should be understood, despite Witherspoon's claim that his account -- in accordance with Schneider's discounting of kinship accounts on the grounds that they are based on imposition of Western ideas about kinship -- takes into account Navajo understanding of kinship relations. Shapiro counters Witherspoon by noting that Witherspoon fails to provide the ethnographic evidence for his assertions about Navajo kinship; e.g., Witherspoon (1975:20) simply comments, Shapiro observes, that, following the ideas of Schneider, the Navajo imbue the act of giving birth with the meaning of "diffuse, enduring solidarity," yet provides no ethnographic evidence showing that this is the meaning they attribute to the act of giving birth.

Shapiro's primary critique, then, is straight-forward: Witherspoon's account of Navajo kinship does not derive from the ethnographic facts regarding their kinship system and their kinship behavior but from the imposition of ideas about kinship that trace back to the writings of David Schneider. The ethnographic facts, Shapiro argues, are consistent with Scheffler's ideas about the semantic centrality of kinship terms in classificatory kinship terminologies, hence Navajo kinship is based on paternity as reflecting the biological father. The first part of his critique derives from careful reading of the relevant ethnographic accounts and, to the extent that there is agreement on the ethnographic facts, is not, itself, controversial. The second part of his critique, namely that paternity universally refers to the biological father, is more controversial, if only because it does not account for why it is not universal for terminologies to have a kin term whose sole referent is the biological father or whose sole referent is the biological mother defined as the woman who gives birth to an offspring since identification of the latter is not controversial. Whether the reader agrees with Shapiro's take on the biological father as the focal meaning of a kin term translated as 'father,' the main point of his article remains intact, namely the

role of ethnographic facts as the arbiter of claims kinship theorists make regarding the nature, content and meaning of kinship systems.

The third article, “Substitutability of Kin and the Crow-Omaha Problem,” by Robert Parkin, reexamines still unresolved issues over the rationale for the Crow-Omaha terminologies. Parkin addresses the as yet unresolved question regarding what constitutes the rationale for the occurrence of Crow-Omaha terminologies with their genealogical equations crosscutting generations, yet lacking the inter-lineage organization of marriages associated with the social systems distinguished by Lévi-Strauss under the rubric, *les structures élémentaires de la parenté*. These are social systems that have marriage alliances in one generation repeated in the following generation in a regular and well-defined manner, whereas the Crow-Omaha terminologies typically lack repeating patterns of inter-lineage alliance formation. To shed light on this difference, Parkin takes the reader back to the arguments of A. Radcliffe-Brown and Josef Kohler regarding what they each viewed – differently – as the *raison d’être* for the Crow-Omaha terminologies. Parkin notes that for Radcliffe-Brown, the equations cross-cutting generations reinforce the unity of the lineage, whereas Kohler suggested that the equations have their rationale in defining the inter-lineage marriage pattern for second and subsequent marriages rather than first marriages. Parkin does not consider either argument to be sufficient, but neither, he says, should their arguments simply be rejected out of hand despite inadequacies in both sets of arguments. Parkin sets as his goal a review of ethnographic accounts for societies reported to have either a Crow or an Omaha terminology so as to examine the extent to which, and manner in which, the ideas of Radcliffe-Brown and Kohler are supported by ethnographic accounts and in what ways their arguments need to be modified. Parkin recognizes that this may not lead to a universal theory accounting for the Crow-Omaha terminologies, but that is not his goal in this article.

Instead, Parkin considers several societies with Crow or Omaha terminologies in detail, first showing how the genealogical equations relate to Radcliffe-Brown’s notion of the unity of the lineage, and second how they relate to Kohler’s idea that it is for the second and subsequent marriages that the Crow-Omaha vertical (skewing) equations can be seen as expressing marriage equations. For Radcliffe-Brown, Parkin adds to his argument by relating lineage unity to the inheritance of exchange obligations in societies with Crow-Omaha terminologies. He observes that the Crow-Omaha equations define males within a lineage who are substitutable for one another for purposes of such inheritance, thus reinforcing the unity of the lineage. Nonetheless, he still finds that the fit with inheritance is suggestive and not precise.

Parkin addresses the lack of inter-lineage pattern in marriages by shifting the focus from marriages in future generations to repeated marriages within the same generation. It is here, he suggests, that Kohler’s idea of relating the features of Crow-Omaha terminologies to second and later marriages finds support since repeated marriages in the same generation do not have the restrictions affecting marriages in subsequent generations. Like his modifications of Radcliffe-Brown’s argument for the unity of lineages, patterning in subsequent marriages within the same generation is also not complete. In sum, Parkin writes:

Ultimately ... marriage preferences and lineal unity need to be combined within a single analysis if we are to arrive at a plausible hypothesis for the existence of Crow-Omaha terminologies. ...Crow-Omaha terminologies express lineal unity over long time periods

... unlike cross-cousin marriage and the prescriptive terminologies associated with them, where ... the repetition of an alliance is expected in the following generation .... (p. 21)

In the fourth article, “Why Can Hunter-Gatherer Groups Be Organized Similarly for Resource Procurement, Yet Their Kinship Terminologies Are Strikingly Dissimilar?: A Challenge for Future Cross-Cultural Research,” the author, Dwight Read, considers the following anomaly: on the one hand, small scale hunter-gatherer societies are similarly organized for the purpose of resource procurement, but have strikingly different kinship terminologies giving rise to varied modes of organization of kinship relations. Typically, Read points out, the demographic size of a residence group (defined as those persons who reside together on a day-to-day basis, allowing for change in the families residing together over a yearly round of resource procurement) is around 30 persons, and collectively the society composed of those persons who are interconnected through the kin terms making up their kinship terminology (discussed in Barnard 1978; Bird-David 2017) is around 600 persons (Read 2012). Read discusses how social organization in this manner derives from having kinship terminologies generated from the relations making up what Read refers to as a Family Space. The kinship terminology, then, is not simply a compilation of linguistic terms, with each term, in the Received View, the label for a category of genealogical relations formed, it is assumed, largely through factors external to the kinship terminology such as marriage rules, including, but not limited to, specification that marriages must be external to one’s residence group.

Read observes that research on hunter-gatherer groups shifted from an earlier emphasis on relating features of social organization to cultural properties to a cultural evolution approach grounded in biological evolution driven by natural selection but expanded to also include phenotypic, as well as genotypic, trait transmission. At the same time, groups such as the Ache of eastern Paraguay, the !Kung San of Botswana and the Hadza of Tanzania have been of central importance to this change in research emphasis. This research, according to Read, has been effective in increasing our understanding of the way hunter-gatherer behavior adapts to environmental constraints. However, earlier concerns with relating properties of kinship terminologies to features of social organization have diminished in importance. Yet it is evident, Read notes, that differences in terminologies are extensive even when there is similarity in the mode of organization as it relates to resource procurement. This leads Read to note that there is a major lacuna in our understanding of hunter-gatherer societies, namely the reason for this striking difference between similarity in mode of resource procurement and social relations expressed through kinship terminologies.

This leads Read to focus on the structural organization of the kinship terminologies for the Hadza, the !Kung San and the Kariera of Australia as a first step towards cross-cultural research that addresses the lacuna identified by Read. Read then examines, in detail, the generative logic of the Hadza terminology, based mainly on what is presented in Marlowe’s (2010) book on the Hadza. With respect to their kinship terminology, Read’s analysis of the Hadza terminology follows the theoretical framework and analytical method he has published in numerous publications (see especially Read 2007 and Leaf and Read 2012). This leads Read to develop a “grammar” of the Hadza terminology that can then be compared to the grammar for the !Kung San terminology (presented in abbreviated form) and the grammar for the Kariera terminology present-

ed in Leaf and Read (2012). By comparing the three grammars, Read identifies the structural difference among these three terminologies and shows how the wide diversity in the grammars for these three terminologies is not matched by diversity in their behavioral adaptations. Read concludes: “It is not immediately obvious as to why each of these hunter-gatherer groups has such structurally different terminologies.... Cross-cultural research has tended ... to focus on the way people are mapped onto resources and how resources, when obtained, are mapped onto people, with analytical goals such as determining the extent to which groups have worked out optimal, or near optimal solutions.... This needs to be complemented with a focus on the cultural means by which the organization requirements for effective adaptations are achieved through systems of kinship and other cultural institutions” (p. 29).

The last article in this Special Issue, also on kinship terminologies, is a review article, “Towards a New Paradigm Followed by a Discussion Between the Author and Dwight Read,” by Alain Matthey de l’Etang (henceforth Matthey). Matthey discusses theorizing by Dwight Read challenging the “received view” of kin terms being derived through a genealogical framework and proposing, in its place, a generative logic and structural organization for the kinship relations expressed through the kin terms making up a kinship terminology. He reviews recent publications by Dwight Read arguing the need for a new paradigm regarding how we understand and interpret both genealogically and terminologically expressed kinship relations. Matthey observes that Read takes as a starting point the distinction made by Lewis Henry Morgan between descriptive and classificatory terminologies, with the former those terminologies for which the genealogical referents of kin terms distinguish between close lineal and collateral genealogical relations, whereas the latter are the terminologies for which kin terms reference both close lineal and close (and distant) genealogical collateral relations. Matthey focuses on the ethnographically grounded argument developed by Read for this difference in kinds of terminologies. Matthey observes that Read and co-workers, through their work on the generative structure of kinship terminologies, have developed a theory laid out especially in Read (2007) (hence his article focuses on this article by Read) and in more recent publications that lay out the theory developed by Read in more detail.

Matthey observes that a key idea developed by Read (and which is the basis for arguing that a paradigm change is needed) is the need to replace the widely held view that kin terms, as he quotes from Read (2012), are: “... primarily names for already established categories of genealogical relations.” Matthey discusses the idea developed by Read, initially in Read (1984), that kin terms form a system of relations through what Read calls a kin term product. The latter refers to what numerous ethnographers have identified as the way the users of a kinship terminology work out kin term relations through the kinship terminology without requiring reference to the genealogical relations that supposedly define the meaning of kin terms. Matthey gives as an example of Read’s definition of the kin term product that, for English speakers, a speaker (properly) referring to alter1 as father, and where alter1 (properly) refers to alter2 as father, knows through her/his cultural knowledge regarding the English kinship terminology to refer (properly) to alter2 by the kin term grandfather. The speaker knows to do this without first having to refer to the genealogical relations (if any) among speaker, alter1 and alter2. Hence, for culture-bearers, the kin term product of the kin term father with the kin term father is the kin term grandfather. Matthey then reviews, and adds to, the ethnographic evidence showing that the kin

term product identified by Read has wide-spread documentation as the means by which culture-bearers work out kin term relations without necessary reference to genealogical relations, contrary to the idea that kin terms are linguistic labels for already determined categories of genealogical relations.

Matthey then discusses the reasons, based on the kin term product, Read advances for the need for a paradigm change that goes from seeing kin terms as secondary to genealogical categories to seeing, instead, kin terms as being structurally organized through the way the kin term product is culturally understood. This leads, Matthey points out, to Read's idea that there is a generative logic to kinship terminologies based on kin term products, starting with the primary kin terms that identify what, Matthey notes, Read refers to a Family Space based on the primary relations of parent/child, brother/sister, and husband/wife. The latter is consistent, Matthey points out, with Morgan's ideas about primary kin terms. Matthey indicates that this leads Read to viewing a kinship terminology as having inherently the form of what mathematicians refer to as an abstract algebra; that is, Matthey notes, Read does not impose the idea of abstract algebras on the domain of kin terms, but is simply making it evident that the domain of kin terms with the kin term product as it is culturally expressed through a kinship terminology has, as it stands, the form of an abstract algebra.

Read then relates kin terms to genealogical relations, Matthey observes, not through viewing kin terms as linguistic labels for externally determined categories of genealogical relations, but through the logic of how the structure of a kinship terminology is generated. For Read, Matthey points out, the categories of genealogical relations previously assumed to be primary for how kin terms are to be interpreted are, in fact, predictable from the kinship terminology without prior knowledge of how genealogical relations relate to kin terms (except for the primary kin terms). Thus, Matthey comments, for Read the categories of genealogical relations cannot be prior to kin terms if those categories can be predicted from the primary kin terms (including how these terms relate to genealogical relations) and the generative logic underlying the structure of a kinship terminology. Matthey then discusses Read's argument that, as has been ethnographically verified, there are two distinct ways that the sibling relation is conceptualized culturally, namely that the sibling may either be conceptualized as those offspring of one's parents other than oneself, or as those persons sharing the same parents. Matthey then reviews the argument developed by Read showing that the descriptive terminologies are generated from the first conceptualization of the sibling relation and the classificatory terminologies are generated by the second conceptualization of the sibling relation. Matthey (p. 28) concludes by noting that:

... the contribution that Dwight Read has made to kinship theory is to show how the paradigm change that he calls for also radically modifies the ideas that can be formulated about how kinship systems, and notably classificatory systems have been (or are) established. Observing that none of the theories that were put forward so far, either the rewrite rules analysis or other accounts appealing to factors external to the terminologies themselves, and supposed to motivate its structure, have provided consistent explicative answers to the existence of the two different forms of kinship terminology structure, the classificatory and the descriptive ... Read went on to argue in detail how different modes



of conceptualizing a sibling may have consequences for generating kinship terminology structures.

Matthey also includes his extensive correspondence with Read regarding questions and issues that Matthey had regarding the argument reviewed by him in this article. This correspondence led to further development of some of Read's ideas in response to the questions and issues raised by Matthey, thus clarifying the argument for a paradigm shift discussed in Read (2007) and in other publications. The substance of this correspondence will not be summarized here; instead, the reader is invited to read through the questions and issues raised by Matthey, the replies made by Read, and the responses made by Matthey to Read's replies.

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