# UNIT 3 DESCENT APPROACH•

**STRUCTURE**

## 3.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will able to:

- Explain the meaning of the concept of descent in kinship studies

- Trace the historical development of descent

- Explain how different anthropologists used decent approach to understand kinship systems

- Explore the application of the kinship systems in India

- Offer a critique of descent approach.

---

•Written by Dr. Archana Prasad, Delhi University

## 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Kinship is generally a system of recognising relationship by marriage, blood and social relationship. The relationships can be based on blood -- known as consanguineal or through marriage termed-- as affinal. If the relationship between one person and another involves descent, the two are consanguine ("blood") relatives. For example, relationship between father and son. If the relationship has been established through marriage, it is affinal, a classical example of this is the relationship of husband and wife.

Kinship relations can be studied could thus be understood through three approaches:

(i) Descent approach- emphasis on blood/consanguine relations

(ii) Alliance approach- emphasis on marriage

(iii) Cultural approach- focus on kinship as cultural

The first approach also known as lineage theory focused on study of kinship system by tracing the biological connection between indigual (referred as ego in anthropology) and his ancestor, living and dead. The theory made a distinction between the relatives from the line of descent and those formed by marriage. The blood relation was considered as primary to the affinal relations that was secondary. In the alliance approach, the focus shifted from blood tied to relations formed as result of marriage. The core of the theory was the exchange of women for formation of groups. The alliance theory was criticised for focusing on women as object and treating the opposition between affine and consanguine as universal. Due to the limitation of both descent and alliance theory there was a cardinal change in the way kinship was studied and 1970's saw the "undoing" of kinship.The cultural approach argued that kinship could not be understood only with reference to biology. The reference to biology was seen as nothing more than ethnocentric view of kinship, derived from European culture. Kinship was to be understood with reference to cultural practices of every society.

In this unit, we are going to learn about the descent approach to the study of kinship system. According to this view, a person's place in society was largely determined by his or her position within the kinship system. Crucial was the determination of an individual's position within the line of filiation privileged by a given society (descent). Proponents of descent theory presented non-Western societies as based on their kinship organisation.Non-Western societies were seen as emphasising one particular line of descent whose analysis was believed to unpack their social mechanisms and account for the maintenance/reproduction of the social

order.The emphasis is on tracing the genealogical origin by blood relations or in terms of descent.

## 3.2 DESCENT IN KINSHIP STUDIES

In anthropology, kinship has been used to refer to the network of genealogical relationship and social ties. Every society has developed means of categorising individuals as either kin or non-kin. One of the method of doing this is to trace relation with the ancestors and decent refers to the line of connection between individual and his/her ancestor both living and dead. Descent group includes those individual who are descended from an ancestor in a particular way. Thus two individual who are regarded as kin may be related to each other in one or other of the two ways: one is descended from the other or both are descended from a common ancestor (Dumont 2006).

### 3.2.1 Meaning of the concept of descent

Descent can be defined as a relationship defined by connection to an ancestor (or ancestress) through a culturally recognized sequence of parent-child links.In anthropology various terms 'line', 'lineal', 'lineage' are used synonymously with the term 'descent. These terms have been used in kinship studies in four different ways:

i) To denote corporate descent groups, i.e., a group united for economic and political purpose

> **Functions of descent**
> (i) It enables to trace of relationships inter-generationally through real, putative, or fictive parent-child links.
> (ii) It refers to person's offspring or his parentage.
> (iii) It is used to trace one's ancestry.

ii) To denote the chosen line of inheritance and succession

iii) To refer to the type of kinshipterminology

iv)Regardless of which lines (matrilineal or patrilineal or both) are chosen for theabove three purposes, lineal relatives refer to one's ascendants or descendants.Lineal relatives are those who belong to the same ancestral stock in a directline of descent. Opposed to lineal relatives are collaterals who belong to thesame ancestral stock but not in a direct line of descent.

Morgan defined descent as a cultural rule which affiliates an individual with a particular selected group of kinsmen for certain social purpose such as mutual assistance or the regulation of marriage (1949:15-16). The structural-functionalist define descent as a process regulating the recruitment of members into a social group, either through the father or mother
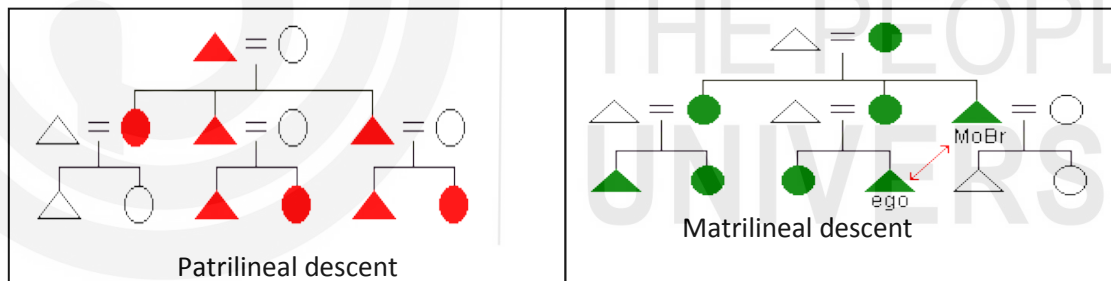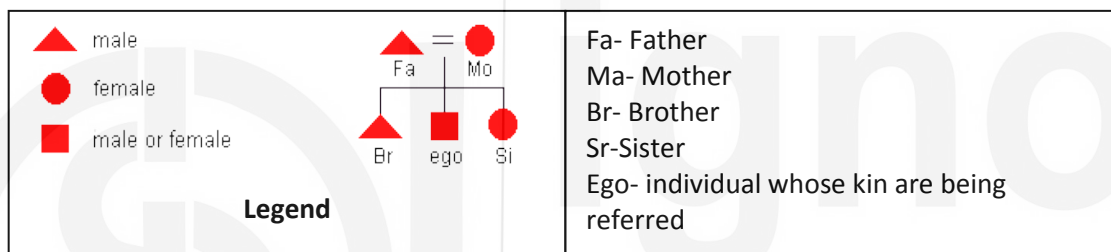
(River 1924). As per this definition, the term descent denotes the process of automatic recruitment into a social group on birth but the membership is exclusive and does not overlap. Thus Leach (1962) defined descent as a principle of recruitment into a unilineal descent group.

### 3.2.2 Types of Descent

*1. Unilineal*-This traces descent only through a single line of ancestors, male or female. Both males and females are members of a unilineal family, but descent links are only recognised through relatives of one gender.

The two basic forms of unilineal descent are referred to as:

- Patrilineal – tracing decent through the male(father) line



**Legend**

Fa- Father
Ma- Mother
Br- Brother
Sr-Sister
Ego- individual whose kin are being referred

Patrilineal descent

Matrilineal descent

- Matrilineal- tracing of decent through female(mother) line

The depiction of societies as neatly ordered by unilineal descent into clearly bounded, nested units of different scale was quite far from everyday political reality. Personal experiences of kinship could vary considerably from the normative models.

*2. Double Descent* –descent is traced through both the patrilineal and the matrilineal group with attendant rights and obligationsbut assigns to each a different set of expectations. For example, the inheritance of immovable materials, such as land, may be the domain of the patrilineage, while the matrilineage controls the inheritance of moveable objects such as livestock.The Yako of Africa have the system of double descent. Among the Yako, patrilineal

descent has economic rights to farmland, house sites, and cooperative labour. Further it practices joint residence for all members, that is, men of the same patrilineal clan live together and cooperate in farming activities.They also recognise matrilineal descent, which governs the inheritance of transferable wealth, such as livestock and currency.

*3. Cognatic*-The system of descent in which a child is recognised as a descendant equally of both the father and the mother.It is also referred as bilateral or bilineal descent system.Here no unilineal groups can be formed but group structure can becognatic, that is, the group of kin-persons on the father's and mother's side.Membership can be acquired through either the father or the mother.



Cognatic Descent
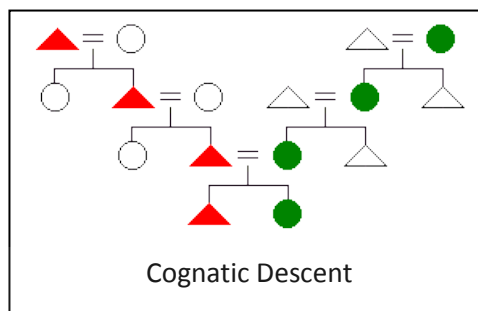
*4. Ambilineal*- patrilineal and matrilineal principles both operate at the societal level, but at the level of the individual various rules or choices define a person as belonging to either the mother's or the father's group.

Among the four types of descent group, emphasis has been on first type. The unilineal descent has been described by anthropologist as exogamousgroups. They also acted as corporations: their members held land in common, acted as a single unit with regard to substantive property, and behaved as one "person" in relation to other similarly constituted groups in legal and political matters such as warfare, feuds, and litigation. That is, the members of a lineage did not act as individuals in the politico-jural domain, instead conceiving themselves to a considerable extent as undifferentiated and continuous with each other. This corporateness was the basis of the stability and structure of a society formed out of unilineal descent groups" (Source: https://www.britannica.com/topic/kinship/Descent-theory).

**Check your Progress 1**

1. Define descent.

…………………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………………………....

2.What is the difference between unilineal descent and double descent?

…………………………………………………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………………………………………….

### 3.2.3 Other related terms

*Clan***:** A lineage is an exogamous unit. This means that a boy and a girl of the same lineage cannot marry. A larger exogamous category is called the clan. Among the Hindus, this category is known as gotra. Each person of a higher caste among the Hindus belongs to the clan of his/her father and cannot marry within the clan or gotra. One usually knows about the common ancestor of lineage members as an actual person. But the common ancestor of a clan is generally a mythical figure. In rural areas, often the members of a lineage live in close proximity and therefore have greater occasions for cooperation or conflict. Common interests or actions do not characterise the relationships among clan members because they are usually scattered over a larger territory and their relationships are often quite remote. You would observe that it is common to find these relationships assuming significance only in the context of marriage. That is why we will now discuss caste/ sub-castes as the third characteristic feature of kinship groups in North India. Castes/ subcastes are the endogamous units within which marriage takes place.

*Lineage* is a descent group traced through only one of the parents, either the father (patrilineage) or the mother (matrilineage). All members of a lineage trace their common ancestry to a single person. Notionally, lineages are exclusive in their membership. In practice, however, many cultures have methods for bestowing lineage membership on individuals who are not genetically related to the lineage progenitor. The most common of these is adoption, although other forms of fictive kinship are also used. Lineages are normally corporate, meaning that their members exercise rights in common and are subject to obligations collectively

*Phratry and Moiety Notes-* When due to any reason many Lineages get joined as a bigger group then such group is calledPhratry. All the lineage of a tribe when divided into two Phratries, then the social structure so form is called dual organisation and every phratries among this is called Moiety. Phratry may beexogamous or may not be. Two Toda Phratries

i.e.Tarathral and Teyevaliole are endogamous,though these are divided in many exogamous liniages. It is said that Moiety of Nagas were endogamous in the past but later on became exogamous. Social organisation of Bondo is dividedin two Moieties—Ontal and Killo. These became region exogamous and lineage exogamous bycoming in contact of their neighbour's culture. Due to this endogamy also developed in theirMoiety.One phratry has many lineages

*Gotra* refers to the lineage segment within an Indian caste that prohibits intermarriage by virtue of the members' descent from a common mythical ancestor, an important factor in determining possible Hindu marriage alliances. Gotra originally referred to the seven lineage segments of the Brahmans (priests), who trace their derivation from seven ancient seers: Atri, Bharadvaja, Bhrigu, Gotama, Kashyapa, Vasishtha, and Vishvamitra. An eighth gotra was added early on, the Agastya, named after the seer intimately linked up with the spread of Vedic Hinduism in southern India. In later times the number of gotras proliferated when a need was felt to justify Brahman descent by claiming for one's line a Vedic seer.

Anthropologist studied simple societies as part of the colonial enterprise of trying to understand societies that were colonised or were explored. These anthropologists were guided by evolutionary theories that looked at some of these simple societies as part of the earlier phases of evolution and hence primitive in their organisation. Influenced by theories developed by Maine and Morgan in which societies transited from status to contract forms of organisation and from corporate to individual forms of property ownership. Of the many questions that vexed these anthropologists were; how are some of the stateless societies organised? how are rights, properties, inheritances etc. transferred and maintained? They found the answers in the study of genealogies where they found kinship systems were great organisational principles in many of these so called "primitive societies". In our next section we will look at some of these anthropologist who looked at descent and the groups formed thereof as way to understand kinship systems and larger societies.

## 3.3 DESCENT APPROACH IN KINSHIP STUDIES

Kinship is important to a person and a community's well-being. Because different societies define kinship differently, they also set the rules governing kinship, which are sometimes legally defined and sometimes implied. Anthropologist in the 19th century in an attempt to

understand the constitution of society gave the theory of descent as the principal of organising the social structure. In this section, let us examine the evolution of descent approach and some of the key features put forward by descent theorists.

### 3.3.1 Evolution of Descent Approach

The functionalist anthropologist in the early stages of the emergence of the discipline of anthropology were in search of an answer to the question, what integrates society. As the primitive societies, studied by anthropologists, were seen as kinship based, integration of the social structure was located in kinship system. As groups were seen as segments of society, they would be integrated only if the principal of kinship organisation were unilineal. For Radcliffe-Brown, only group formed on the basis of unilineal descent did not overlap. Thus the understanding of unilineal decent group as essential for the formation and continuity of social structure. Most anthropological literature during this period were concerned with societies whose social structure rested on unilineal descent and thus creating an impression that descent was the organising principal.

The descent approach was the transformation of the theoretical problems raised by 19th century anthropologists, mainly Maine and Morgan. These early anthropologists were concerned in finding the relationship between kinship and territory and also find the differentiation between family as a bilateral group (tracing relation through both parent) and clan as unilateral group. The main concern was to investigate the constitution of primitive society and their political institution. The unilineal descent group was taken as the criteria for regulating political relations and providing stability to the group. According to Maine (1861), the earliest history of primitive society reveals that the political structure was based on extended ties of territorial relations. Morgan similarly believed that all forms of government can be classified into two categories – society or '*societas*' (clan as unit of organization) and state (formed on basis of territory and property).

The British anthropologist, unlike their predecessor, were not interested in the evolution of the society. They were more concerned with the constitution of the structure and the inter relations between different parts. Therefore society was viewed as having a systematic order resulting due to the inter relation and dependence of different parts. On the basis of the ethnographic study these anthropologist arrived at the understanding that residence/territory

and descent coexisted in the same society. This formed the base of the descent theory that supports the idea of all agnates (male member from same line of descent) have common residence and hence forming the patrilineal descent group. Similarly all uterine (female member from same line of descent) formed the matrilineal group. In both cases, descent provided the basis of group integration.

### 3.3.2 Features of Descent Principal

The key features of descent principal as found in the theories of anthropologist using descent approach are

1. Descent principles have parallel rules of post-marital residence:

☐ Patrilocality: married couples and children live in husband's community. Usually found with patrilineal descent.

☐ Matrilocality: married couples and their children live in wife's community, associated with matrilineal descent

2. Descent rules are used to determine parenthood, identify ancestry and assign people to social categories, groups, & roles on basis of inherited status.

. The descent approach emphasis on the formation of social groups or descent group and have described these groups as exhibiting certain features:

a) Descent groupsare permanent social units, whose members claimcommon ancestry.The membership of the group is determined at birth and is a life-long membership. The descent group endures over timeeven though membershipchanges.

b) Descent groups function successfully as long-term jointproperty owners and economic productionteams.

c) Descent groupsassume important corporate functions suchas land ownership, political representation and mutual aid and support.

d).Descent groups were the mechanisms for maintaining political order in stateless societies. The principle was used to trace lines of inheritance and succession as chieftain.

3. In the development of theory of family and kinship, the descent theories made reference to genealogical charts that helped trace connections between kin.

4. The descent principle helped in the allocation of roles and responsibility among the members of a particular group, kinship terminology were relevant in indicating the allocation.

**Check your progress 2**

1. How did the British Anthropologist differ from their predecessor in the understanding of the nature integration in society?

…………………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………………

2. Mention any four feature of descent approach to the study of kinship.

…………………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………………………….

## 3.4 USAGE OF DESCENT APPROACH BY ANTHROPOLOGISTS

Prominent British social anthropologists of this period, such as Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, and Meyer Fortes, generally advocated a functionalist approach to these questions. The major premises of functionalism were that every aspect of a culture, no matter how seemingly disparate (e.g., kinship terms, technology, food, mythology, artistic motifs), had a substantive purpose and that within a given culture these diverse structures worked together to maintain the group's viability. For instance, these scholars saw the family as a universal social institution that functioned primarily to rear children. From their perspective this function was to a large degree self-evident and cross-culturally constant. The wider groupings recruited through kinship, which were the basis of political and economic organisation, were much more culturally variable and hence of greater interest.

### 3.4.1 Henry Morgan- Descriptive and classificatory terminology

Henry Lewis Morgan (1818-1881) as we mentioned earlier, is one of the foremost cultural anthropologists whose theories had substantial influence in sociology and anthropology. Morgan carried out fieldwork among the Native American peoples. In *Ancient Society* (1877) he attempted to link the evolution of kinship institutions to technological changes and the evolution of property forms. His pioneering work on kinship resulted in a book: *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family*, was published in 1871.He provided an evolutionary thinking according to which kinship was defined as a social institution identifying the earlier steps of societal organisation. Kinship was presented as the epi-centre

of so-called primitive societies' social organisation.Kinship was seen as a principle for differentiated simple society from complex modern societies.Kinship gave explanation of the problem of the maintenance of social order in the absence of state-based organisations.

An important element in Morgan's formulation was the distinction between classificatory and descriptive systems of kinship. In a classificatory system, relatives not in ego's direct line of descent or ancestry—called the collateral kin are placed in the same terminological grouping as lineal kin—relatives in ego's direct line of descent. Classificatory system, such as that of the Dravidian kinship for example, designate the father and his brother, and conversely the mother and her sister, by the same term or indicating a relationship of similarity. In many societies with unilineal descent—that is, systems that emphasise descent through one of the parents'line, but not both—ego uses one set of terms to refer to brothers, sisters, and parallel cousins (those whose genealogical ties are traced through a related parent of the same sex, as in a father's brother or a mother's sister), while another set of terms is employed for cross-cousins (the offspring of a father's sister or a mother's brother). This arrangement emphasises the fact that cross-cousins do not belong to the lineage with ego, ego's siblings, and ego's parallel cousins, thus designating marriage between cross-cousins as exogamous group.

Descriptive terminology, in contrast to classificatory terminology, maintains a separation between lineal and collateral kin; for example, mother and mother's sister, although of the same generation and sex, are distinguished.

### 3.4.2 Radcliffe-Brown- African system of Kinship and Marriage

He insisted on the study of a kinship system as a field of rights and obligations and saw it as part of the social structure.Kinship system should be regarded as a special social relations that form part of a broader general network of social relations called social structure. For Radcliffe-Brown descent is both social and biological and hence the distinction between pater (social) and genitor (biological) father. He differentiated between two types of rights; 'Rights *in personam'* refers to certain rights that a husband has to his wife. By virtue of these rights, he may require the execution of her respective duties. If in relation to his wife, someone commits a violent action, the mechanism will take effect right in rem, and the offense will be treated as a crime against her husband.If in relation to his wife, someone commits a violent

action, the mechanism will take effect *right in rem*, and the offense will be treated as a crime against her husband.

In the study of kinship system, Radcliffe Brown also focuses on kinship and kinship terminology. According to him, kinship terminology enables to understand the social structure. In simple societies kinship is the basis of social organisation, and is associated with aparticular kinship term. Thus, by studying the kinship system and terminology of a society its socialstructure can be understood. He also emphasised upon the study of kinship functionally.

### 3.4.3 Evans-Pritchard- The Study of Nuer of Africa

Evans-Pritchard's study of the Nuer of the southern Sudan (1951) focused on kinship groups, particularly groups based on descent in the male line from known ancestor.He showed how clans functioned as political groups in Nuer society. He emphasised on the recruitment, perpetuation and functioning of such groups in Africa. Evans-Pritchard asserted that their social idiom is a bovine idiom and calls the relationship between cow and Nuer "symbiotic," because "cattle and men sustain life by their reciprocal services to one another".Nuer's life is of necessity migratory and transhumance, and is not governed by an evolved governing institution.Evans-Pritchard described the Nuer social system as 'ordered anarchy' because in their social life was actually strongly regulated on the basis of kinship.

Evans-Pritchard, in his study of the Nuer, developed the concept of 'segmentary lineage. Among the Nuer, a patrilineal society, lineage is a kinship group that traces descent in male line. Evans-Pritchard has described the Nuer clan as being highly segmented. The segments are genealogical structures, and we therefore refer to them as lineages. Though the clan is divided into segments, its lineages are distinct groups in relation to each other. Thus, in the diagram below, A is a clan which is segmented into maximal lineages B and C and these again bifurcate into major lineages D, E, F, and G. In the same manner, minor lineages H, I, J, and K are segments of major lineages E and G; and L, M, N, and 0 are minimal lineages which are segments of minor lineages H and J. The whole clan is a genealogical structure, i.e. the letters represent persons to whom the clan and its segments trace their descent, and from whom they often take their names.

In tribal society, the segmentary lineage systems has an important place, especially in those tribal societies where lineage groups are based on descent through the male line. These agnatic groups are responsible for economic and political functioning of society. The patrilineage has collective ownership of, or particular claims on, important resources such as land and water sources. Segmentary lineage is found in society where there is the absence of organised political institution. And even without a stabilised government, lineage segmentation helps in maintaining formidable relation among the members of clan.

### 3.4.4 Meyer Fortes – The study of Tallensi and Ashanti Kinship System

In Fortes "The Structure of Unilineal Descent Groups" (American Anthropologist, 1953) he gave the theory of segmentary lineage. He suggested that the structure of unilineal descent group could be generalised and its position in the complete social system can be viewed.

The social structure exhibited how territory and descent would connect with each other.Fortes portrayed Tallensi society in Northern Ghana as entirely built around the "lineage system.

Whether he is worshipping ancestors, arranging marriages, allocating work, or exerting judicial authority, a Tallensi man's rights and responsibilities are determined by his position

in his patrilineage. Although lineage membership is determined by kinship criteria, its functions are economic and political.

**Descent and Filiation**-Filiation stemmed from being the legitimate child of one's parents and was normally "bilateral, i.e. children were filiated to both parents. Descent as jural status was determined by pedigree — descent from a particular ancestor. In patrilineal cases, a man had descent and filiation links on his father's side, but only filiation on his mother's side.Filiation was relevant only in domestic contexts and descent was a politico-jural matter.Decent is unilateral whereas filiation is always bilateral.

> **Complementary filiation**
> **Matrifiliation-** The filiation with mother's side in patrilineal society.
> **Patrifiliation**- the filiation with father's side in matrilineal society.
> **Quazi filiation**- the purchase of filiation by father in matrilineal society

**Check your Progress 3**

1.Describe theSegmentary Lineage used by Evans-Pritchard in the study of Nuer Society.

……………………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………

2. Discuss the difference between descent and filiation.

……………………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………

## 3.5 CRITIQUES OF DESCENT THEORY

The descent approach was the dominant mode of studying family, marriage and kinship in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The theory helped to comprehend the social structure of society as neatly organised by the principal of unilineal descent (tracing decent in one line, either male or female). Descent was the basis for the political structure and the key to understanding these societies. Much of the features of descent theory were derived from the study done by British anthropologist in Africa. However, when anthropologist from United States and other parts of the world started doing research outside Africa, they realised that unilineal descent was not the only mode of group formation.The depiction of societies as neatly ordered by unilineal descent into clearly bounded, nested units of different scale was quite far from everyday political reality. Further these anthropologists also pointed out that descent theory only recognised sharing of blood whereas the importance of marriage in the formation of groups was negated. Descent theory therefore led to the differentiation between agnatic and affinal kin. The model given by the descent theorist was more or less normative and personal experiences of kinship could vary considerably from the normative models.

The inherent contradictions and limitations in the descent approach to the study of kinship propelled thinker like Levi-Strauss to construct a new theory based on exchange of women or alliance. Like the contemporaries, Levi-Strauss considered unilineal descent group as the core structure of kinship however he advocated the formation of alliance due to the exchange of women. His theory was termed as alliance theory and was regarded as an advance to the descent theory. The alliance theory also critiqued Radcliffe-Brown's understanding of the relation between family and clan. Radcliffe-Brown regarded elementary family universal as it created sentiments which took solidarity among siblings to a larger grouping. Levi-Strauss on the contrary argued that the siblings can be linked through the exchange of sistersin marriage. Another advance argument was made by Edmunch Leach who critiqued the concept of complementary filiation given by Meyer Fortes. Complementary filiation, according Fortes was the result of the opposition of relation between affinal and consanguineal relations. For Leach, it was the systempreferential unilateral marriage alliances linked to the local group that helped to reckon segmentary lineage systems. Despite the critiques offering an alternative to the study of kinship system, the importance of descent approach cannot be negated. The theory contributes to the evolutionary understanding of society were formed. It also helps in moulding itself into other broader modelsof society.

## 3.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have learnt about the descent approach to the study of kinship. According to the descent approach a person's place in society was largely determined by his or her position within the kinship system. The descent theorist emphasised on tracing the genealogical origin by blood relations or in terms of descent.Some of the key anthropologist who used the descent approach were Henry Maine, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard and Meyer Fortes. The descent principle has been practiced differently in North and South India. The descent approach has been critiqued and led to the evolution of alliance approach to study of kinship.

## 3.7 REFERENCES

1. Dumont Louis (2006). *An Introduction to Two Theories of Social Anthropology*Bergham Books

2. Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1940. *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

3. Fortes, Meyer and E.E. Evans-Pritchard (eds.). 1940. African Political Systems.London: Oxford University Press.

4. Fortes, Meyer. 1953. 'The Structure of Unilineal Descent Groups'. In D. A.Baerreirs, A. Spoehr and S.L. Washburn (eds.), *American Anthropologist*, Vol.55, No. 1 (pp. 17-41). Chicago: The American Anthropological Association.

4. Gough, E. K. (1959). The Nayars and the definition of marriage. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 89(1), 23-34.

5. Karve, I. 1994. "The Kinship Map of India". In Patricia Uberoi (ed.) Family,Kinship and Marriage in India. Oxford University Press: New Delhi.

6. Parkin, Robert. 1997. Kinship: An Introduction to Basic Concepts. Oxford:Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

7. Parkin, Robert and Linda Stone (eds.) 2004. Kinship and Family: AnAnthropological Reader. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

8. Maine, Henry. (1861). 2006. Ancient Law. London: Book Jungle.

9. Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1931. The Social Organisation of Australian Tribes.Melbourne: Macmillan and co., limited.

10. Unit 2 –Descent and Alliance theories–E-gyankosh, available online at
   http://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/41275/1/Unit-2.pdf

11. Online lecture, video available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPMz847Cy94

## 3.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Check your Progress 1**

1. Descent can be defined as a relationship defined by connection to an ancestor (or ancestress) tough a culturally recognized sequence of parent-child links.

2. In unilineal descent a single line is used to trace genealogical connections, it is either through male or female line. It is known as patrilineal descent when the male line is used and when female line is used it is called matrilineal descent. In double descent both male and female lines are used for tracing descent. In such society there is the formation of both patriclan and matriclan.

**Check your progress 2**

**1.** The British anthropologist, unlike their predecessor, were not interested in the evolution of the society. They were more concerned with the constitution of the structure and the inter relations between different parts. Therefore society was viewed as having a systematic order resulting due to the inter relation and dependence of different parts.

2. The features of social groups formed on basis of descent are:

i.Descent groups are permanent social units, whose members claim common ancestry.

ii.Descent groups assume important corporate functions such as land ownership, politilrepresentation & mutual aid and support.

iii.Descent groups were the mechanisms for maintaining political order in stateless societies.

iv.Membership of the group is determined at birth and is a life-long membership. The descent group endures over time even though membership changes.

**Check your Progress 3**

1. Segmentary lineageis a model of social organisation based on a branching system of kinship descent. Lineage is a kinship group that traces descent in male line. Evans-Pritchard has described the Nuer clan as being highly segmented. The segments are genealogical structures, and we therefore refer to them as lineages. Though the clan is divided into segments, its lineages are distinct groups in relation to each other.In tribal society, the segmentary lineage systems has an important place, especially in those tribal societies where lineage groups are based on descent through the male line. These agnatic groups are responsible for economic and political functioning of society. The patrilineage has collective ownership of, or particular claims on, important resources such as land and water sources. Segmentary lineage is found in society where there is the absence of organised political institution. And even without a stabilised government, lineage segmentation helps in maintaining formidable relation among the members of clan.

2. Meyer Fortes made the distinction between descent and filiation. Descent refers to the genealogical connection recognized between and a person and any of his/her ancestor/ancestress. Filiation refers to the relation an individual develops as a fact of being the child of a specified parent. It denotes the relationship created by the fact of being a legitimate child of one's parent. Descent may be unilineal but filiation if always bilateral, having attachment to both the parent.

# UNIT 4 ALLIANCE [*]

**Structure**

## 4.0  OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to explain alliance as an approach to study kinship. After reading  the unit, you will be able to:

- Explain alliance approach and its significance in kinship and the rules of marriage
- Discuss the complex structure of kinship as developed by Levi-Strauss
- Look at the Dravidian kinship of cross cousin marriage as explained by Louis Dumont
- Narrate the revisions put forward  by Rodney Needham
- Discuss the salient feature of alliance approach in kinship.

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Kinship is a system of recognising relationship by marriage, blood and social relationship.  Thus,

---

[*] Written by  Dr. Archana Prasad,  Delhi University , New Delhi

kinship relations can be studied through three approaches--cultural approach, affinal, consanguinal / biological approach. Descent approach dominated the British social anthropology from the 1940s to 1960s. It was developed out of earlier anthropological theories which had as their central concern the relationship between kinship and territory and between family and kin group. This school of thought interpreted the kinship behaviour in terms of the function of corporate groups, sibling solidarity and agnatic unity (relatives from the male/father's side) , and drew attention to important issues such as the organization of local groups, kinship relations, regulations of marriage, residence, inheritance and succession.

The alliance approach is a development over the descent approach and criticises it on the ground that it lays too much emphasis on consanguineal relations, leaving behind relations formed by marriage. In this approach, the emphasis is to understand those kin members who are related by affinal relation and thereby understanding the kinship network. Kinship according to this approach consists of a number of components – descent, inheritance, marriage, affinity and residence. Levi-Strauss and Dumont in their '*The Elementary Structures of Kinship*' and '*Marriage Alliance'* respectively talk of the alliance approach. The basic features of alliance approach to the study of kinship are:

- It holds that the basic principle of kinship is the incest taboo: i.e. the near-universal rule that one marries outside of a close category of relatives.
- In tribal societies, this is expressed at the level of the lineage or clan in the rule of exogamy.
- The function of this rule is to establish marriage ties between lineages and so knit the society together.
- Most basic form is symmetrical alliance, in which two lineages, groups of lineages or moieties exchange women between them.  Levi-Strauss also referred to this as restricted exchange and saw it as disharmonious because only two groups were united in marriage alliances.  Basic monad was two kinship groups exchanging women.
- A different form was asymmetrical alliances, in which wife-giving lineages, wife-taking lineages and others are distinguished and marriages are arranged such that theoretically all lineages can be related to each other in a kind of chain.  This Levi-Strauss also termed harmonious exchange.  It is found in highland south and Southeast Asia.

## 4.2 MARRIAGE AS A FORM OF EXCHANGE

According to Louis Dumont 'alliance' refers to the repetition of intermarriage between larger or smaller groups. The concept of marriage alliance was developed by Levi-Strauss to deal specifically with societies which practice cross-cousin marriage. According to Levi-Strauss such forms of marriage are but specific aspects of system of the exchange of women between groups which creates perpetual marriage alliance between them. He considered the exchange of women as a primary form of exchange which preceded symbolic exchange of gifts. Exchange of gift was a medium for the transition from the animal world of nature to the human one of culture. The exchange of women was considered as supreme because of their ability to reproduce the gift and hence he regarded women as supreme gift. This gift had to be exchanged because of incest taboo which prohibited women from entering into sexual relation with men of their close group. Thus women had to be exchanged reciprocally among groups to ensure continuity of the society. Thus the twin principle of reciprocity and incest taboo led to marriage alliance through exchange of women.Marriage as a form of exchange helps us differentiate between two groups i.e. the wife-takers and wife- givers as placed in a structure of hierarchy in the social system. The status of the two group depends on the system of descent. In patrilineal society the status of the wife-taker is higher than the status of the wife-giver and it is the reverse in matrilineal society.

## 4.3 RULES OF MARRIAGE

Marriage is not only about sexual relationship and reproduction but also as a mechanism for reinforcing alliance between networks of groups of people. As such the creation of the alliance goes along with certain rules or guidelines that specify who should marry whom, as either a matter of preference or prohibition. Incest taboo and exogamy is the foremost rule regulating the formation of alliance.

### 4.3.1 Incest Taboo

The rule of incest which prohibits sexual relation between certain categories of person is the most important rule which regulates mating. In the West incest is defined rather narrowly as the sexual relation between parent and children and between siblings. By contrast the Nuer concept of '*rual'* which Evans-Pritchard used for incest prohibited sexual relation between members of same clan, between cognates upto six generations and between man and woman who married other men of his lineage. Whether defined narrowly or broadly, the basic principle of incest rule is that it implies that members who are prohibited from having sexual relation are automatically

forbidden from getting married. The rule of incest prohibition has been expressed positively by Levi-Strauss in the sense that rather than prohibiting members from having sexual relation it forces men to seek spouse outside their own group. Because of the rule the men are not allowed to marry women of their group, hence should search for their spouse and they do so by giving their daughters and sisters in exchange of wives. The rule of incest thus not only enables looking for marriage partners but also establishing an alliance between two or more groups, thus creates solidarity between them. In his understanding of the incest prohibition as a positive rule, Levi-Strauss considered rules of marriage and rules of sexual relation as synonymous. However it is not same in all societies and there is a need to differentiate between the two. In some societies, sexual relation between certain categories of kin are allowed but marriage between them strictly prohibited. One of the most important rules governing marriage is the rule of exogamy.

### 4.3.2 Rule of Exogamy

The rule of exogamy prohibits marriage within specific groups and thereby prescribes marriage partners outside one's own group. The function of the rule of exogamy is thus to establish exchange between families and to integrate them into a larger social structure. In many societies, the rule of exogamy prohibits marriage between social categories which includes near relatives but also to distant consanguineous or collateral relationships. The rule of incest and rule of exogamy can be explained in terms of prohibition and the prescription which helps in understanding the of alliance approach. In all societies it is seen that there is prohibition of marriage with certain relatives and prescription of marriage with others relatives. The prescribed rule is a positive rule of marriage whereas the prohibition rule is a negative rule of marriage. For instance in the Dravidian kinship the prescription for marriage is cross- cousins and prohibition is for the parallel-cousins. According to Levi-Strauss societies with positive marriage rules have elementary structure of kinship and societies with negative marriage rule have complex structure. Thus, alliance theory is developed to deal with those types of kinship systems that embody positive marriage and helps in further understanding kinship network. It consists of the combination of the positive marriage rule with exogamy, or atleast a prohibition against marriage between parallel cousins.

## 4. 4 LEVI-STRAUSS- ELEMENTARY AND COMPLEX STRUCTURE

In his book *'The Elementary Structures of Kinship'*, Levi Strauss asserted that 'the primitive and irreducible character of the kinship unit is a consequence of the incest taboo'. The taboo has no other object than to permit the circulation or women. Thus kinship was based on alliance or exchange of women. Owing to the universal taboo on incest, no descent group and no family could perpetuate itself alone. All were compelled to contract alliance in order to reproduce themselves for regeneration of family and society. Thus for Levi-Strauss, alliance takes precedence over descent as the core for the functioning of kinship and kinship is nothing but the exchange of women between two or more groups.

The exchange of women depended on the type of marriage rule, on the basis of which Levi-Strauss differentiated between two different structural "models" of exchange.

1) **Elementary structure**- societies that followed positive marriage rules that prescribes the category of person one could marry. The rule states that the cross-cousins are prescribed marriage partners. These structures are found among the Australian aborigines, certain parts of South-East Asia, Southern India and Aboriginals of South America.

> **Two types of cousins**
> **Parallel cousins** are children of siblings of same sex (e.g.- Mothers' sister daughter/son and father brother's daughter/son
> **Cross cousins** are children of siblings of opposite sex (e.g.mother's brother's daughter/son or father's sister

2) **Complex Structure- the** practice of negative marriage rule i.e. one is prohibited from marrying a person from a certain category. The negative rule does not allow one to marry one's parallel cousins, siblings and parents. This is found in Europe, Africa and among the Inuit/Eskimos.

In his discussion, Levi-Strauss focuses more on the elementary structure and treats marriage rules as the institution that binds society together. To demonstrate how this occurs, he distinguished between two types of elementary structures- **Generalized and Restricted exchange**.

**Generalized exchange** involves preferential marriage between groups, larger than the conjugal family.It involves three or more groups exchanging women in one direction. If we denote the groups as A, B and C then the direction of exchange is that group A gives woman to B, group B to C and group C gives woman to A thus forming a circle.Here exchange is delayed and indirect.



**Generalized Exchange**
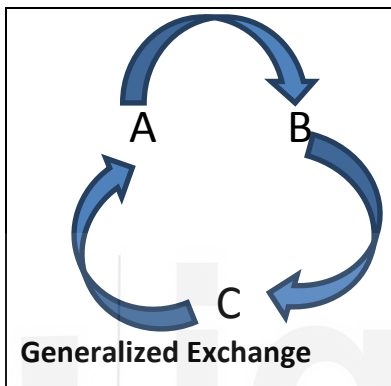
Generalized exchange is also referred to as asymmetrical or disharmonic because there is no relation of equality between wife-takers and wife-givers.

---

**An Example of Asymmetrical Exchange: The Purum of Assam**

- The Purum have a ranked lineage system.The crucial rule in such systems is that a lineage that gives wives to a group cannot take wives from it.
- All lineages are therefore divided into:
  - Wife-giving lineages.
  - Wife-receiving or wife-taking lineages.
  - One's own lineage.
  - Other lineages with whom marriages have not been contracted.
- Marriages are with the classificatory mother's brother's daughter.
- Hence women characteristically move in one direction, goods and bride-service move in the opposite direction.

---

**Restricted exchange-**In this type of exchange, two kin groups, other than the family, supplies each other marriage partners. The men of one group marry women from other group and vice-versa. Such a system occurs in all parts of the world but is particularly popular among the aborigines in Australia. If we denote the society with the letters A, B, C & D, the marriage rule may be depicted by the following diagram:

**Restricted Exchange**
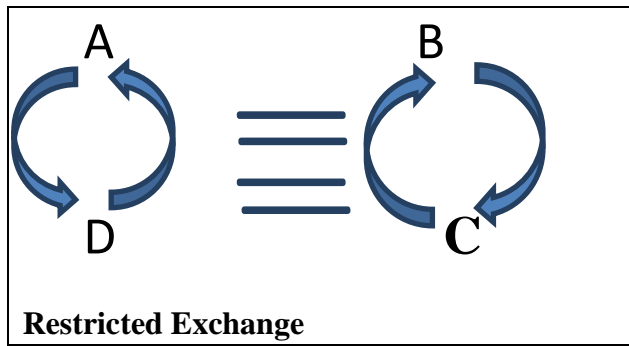
In the diagram the double lines connotes the pairs of sections that supplies each other with marriage partners (A& B, C& D). All four sections are connected with each other through the fact that children do not belong to the section of either of the parents. For example, if a man from section A marries a woman from section B, their children belong to section C. A woman of section A marries a man from section C, their children belong to section D. Similarly C & D inter marry and their children belong to A or B depending on the particular father-mother common. A or B never inter-marries directly with C or D. According to Radcliffe-Brown, these sections do not refer to local groups but are merely status groups whose members must marry members of some other group. Here the reciprocity is direct and immediate. It is also known as symmetrical, direct or harmonic exchange because there is a relation of reciprocity between two groups exchanging women.

---

**An Example of Symmetrical Exchange: The Kareira of Australia**

- The Kareira of Australia are a patrilineal society who follow restricted exchange.
- They have four section system in which two sections are subdivided into two or more by generation.
- The four sections are *Karimera* and *Burung* and *Palyeri* and *Banaka.*
- Both exchange wives between themselves; i.e. *Karimera* and *Palyeri* will exchange women and so will the *Burung* and *Banaka.*
- Children of a *Karimera* man and *Palyeri* woman will be *Burung*; children of a *Burung* man and *Banaka* woman will be *Karimera.* Vice-versa if we consider women, since this is a patrilineal society.
- Entire universe is divided into 'us' and 'them', those who you cannot marry and those who you can and should.

---

**Check Your Progress 1**

**Note:** a) Use the space below for your answers.

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1)  Compare and contrast the two types of exchange in elementary structure of kinship.

    -----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
    -----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
    -----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
    ----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

2)  Explain the feature of symmetrical exchange as practiced among the    Kareira of Australia.

    -----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
    -----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
    -----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
    -----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

## 4.5 LOUIS DUMONT- DRAVIDIAN KINSHIP

Louis Dumont studied the Dravidian kinship as an expression of marriage. He viewed affinity as an enduring system through which the continuity from one generation to next occurs. His main thesis was that kinship terminology is a reflection of alliance rather than descent. In his study of Tamil Kallar kinship system in South India, Dumont showed that there is a preferential marriage rule of cross-cousin, i.e. there exists an explicit rule that states that a man should marry a woman who is either a true cross-cousin or is placed in the same category as his true cross-cousins by kinship terminology. Thus, Dravidian kinship terminology is explicitly associated with cross-cousin marriage rules. The consequence of the cross-cousin marriage rule that affinity (kinship through marriage) is transmitted from one generation to the other. If all transmissions between generations takes place in one and the same direction, it is known as harmonic. If some features are transmitted patrilineally and some as matrilineally then it is a disharmonic system. Dumont argues that affinity thus acquires a diachronic dimension, which Western systems only attribute to consanguinity. He outlines three types of cross-cousin marriage:

1. **Bilateral Cross-cousin marriage-**The ego (individual) marries his MBD (Mother's Brother's Daughter) who is also his FZD (Father's Sister Daughter). In other words, two intermarrying groups exchange women as wives and thus constitute a self-sufficient unit. It is also known as sister exchange. Levi-Strauss called this type of exchange as closed or restricted exchange and correlates with disharmonic transmission.

**Bilateral Cross Cousin Marriage**

| | |
|---|---|
| ▲ | = Male |
| ● | = Female |
| ⊓ | = Sibling |
| ⊔ | = Husband-Wife |
| ╲ | = Descent |
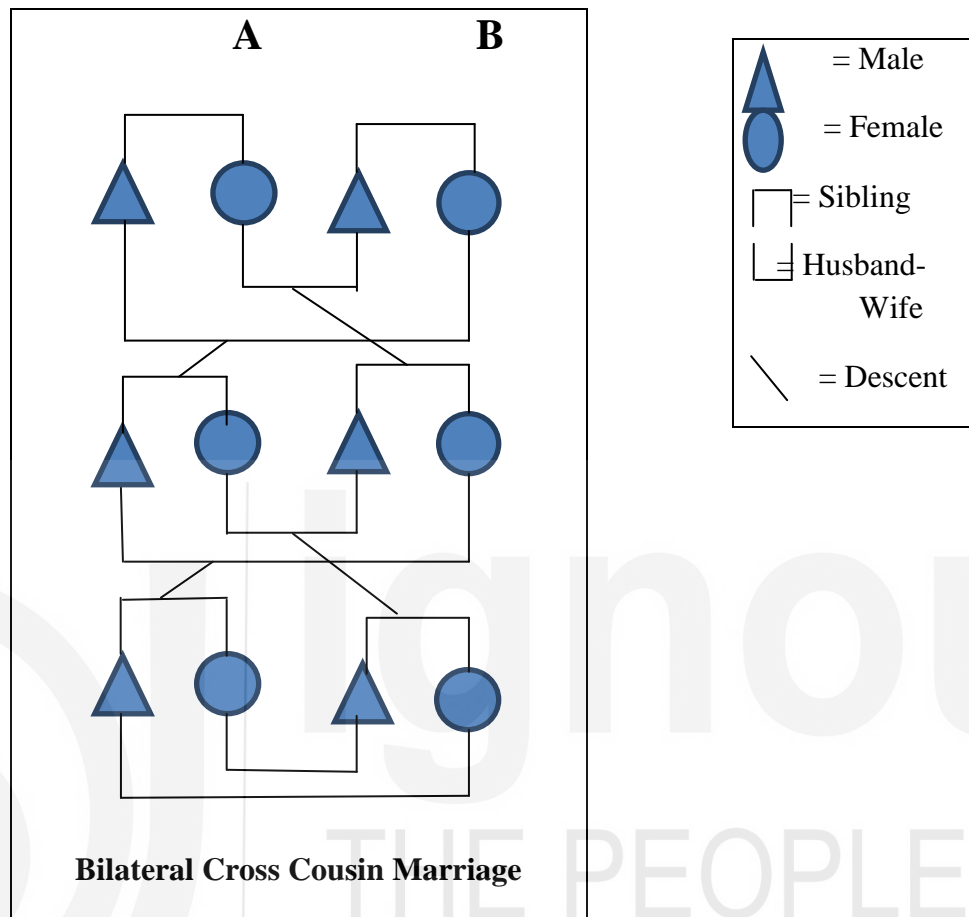
The regular application of the bilateral cross cousin marriage rule creates a permanent alliance between a pair of lineages (A and B) through the continuous intermarriage between the men of A and the women of B and vice versa. This arrangement is often further articulated into dual organizations or **moiety** systems, in which basic social units are composed of paired groups linked by marriage relationships. The Yanomamo of Amazonia provide an example. Their basic social unit is the village, composed of between 50 and 200 inhabitants. Each such settlement is composed of two localized patrilineages or, in effect, patrilineal moieties. The lineages are closely bound into a unified social order by intermarriage through the firm imposition of the bilateral cross cousin rule.

2. **Matrilateral cross-cousin marriage-** The ego marries his MBD who is his matrilateral cross cousin. If this rule is applied consistently to everyone, the pattern of lineage intermarriage established in the previous generation is duplicated exactly. Ego, a man from lineage B marries a woman from lineage A, a repetition of the marriage of Ego's father and mother. This pattern is repeated for all the other lineages in the same manner as depicted in the diagram below.



**Matrilateral cross-cousin marriage**
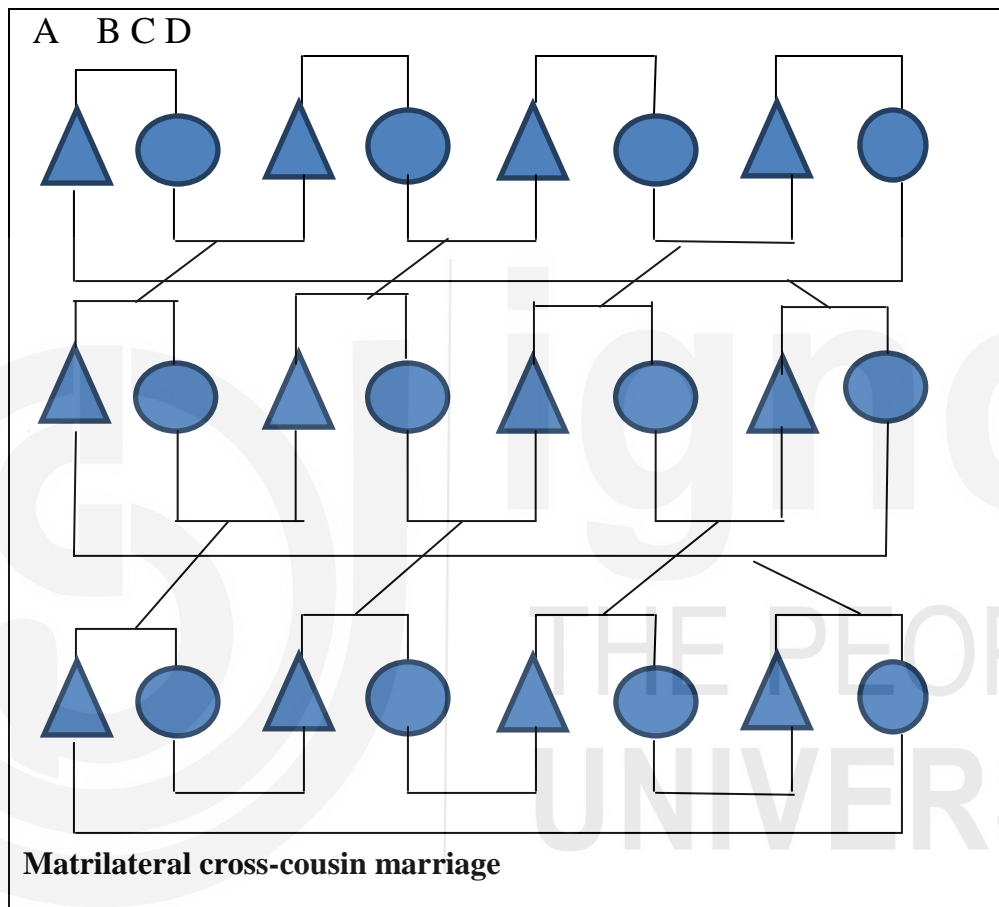
The application of the same cross-cousin rule in the next generation continues the circulation of women into the same lineages as in the previous two.Where a system of bilateral cross cousin marriage results in exchange and alliances between paired lineages, matrilateral cross cousin marriage can unite any given number of lineages in a continuous pattern of circular exchanges.Because of the cycling of marriages through the system of matrilateral exchanges, this system is sometimes termed **circulating connubium**.

3). **Patrilateral Cross Cousin Marriage-**The ego must marry his father's sister's daughter, or his patrilateral cross cousin. In the diagram below, the man from lineage A marries woman of lineage B, man of lineage B marries woman from lineage C and man from C marries woman

from lineage A. The exchange of women creates a circulating connubium just like matrilateral cross cousin marriage but the difference here is that the direction of transfer of women changes in every generation in such a manner that it is in same direction in alternating direction as indicated by the direction of arrow in the diagram (generation 1 & 3 and generation 2 & 4).



**Patrilateral cross-cousin marriage**(= husband-wife relation,   denotes descent)
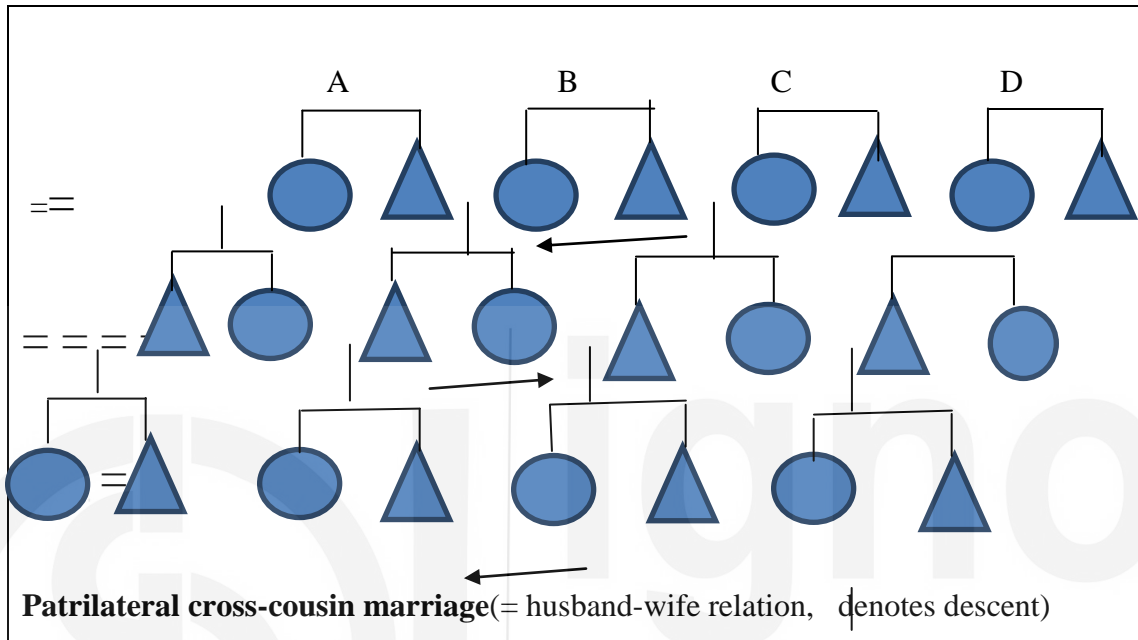
Matrilateral cross cousin marriage leads to a long cycle of generalized exchange while patrilateral cross cousin marriage leads to a short cycle only. The long cycle promotes more solidarity than the short cycle because it creates alliance involving more kinship groups. This is the reason, according to Levi-Strauss for the greater prevalence of matrilateral cross cousin marriage in ethnographic records.

**Check Your Progress 2**

**Note:** a) Use the space below for your answers.

   b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

   1)    Briefly describe bilateral cross-cousin marriage.
         ----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
         ----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
         ----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
         ----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
   2)    Give two difference between matrilateral cross cousin marriage and patrilateral cross cousin marriage.

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

## 4.6 RODNEY NEEDHAM- NEW DEVELOPMENT TO ALLIANCE APPROACH

The theory of Levi Strauss has been criticized by Edmund Leach and Rodney Needham on the following grounds:

1. Levi-Strauss considers women as a commodity, 'something' to be exchanged'. This he does by looking at marriage exclusively from men's perspective and does not go in to details of residence and other aspects of kinship systems

2. He uses incest prohibition and exogamy as synonymous in understanding marriage exchange which is a circular agument.

3. His understanding of marriage as a system of exchange has been questioned on two counts: (a) It introduces an analogy between women and chattels whereby women are treated as property to be universally most prized 'valuables'. (b) There is neglect of women's agency and does not take into account women's feeling while discussing exchange.

4. There is a narrow understanding of the concept of exchange, limited to one-to-one relation. In reality exchange can be wide and abstract happening between many groups of people.

5. According to Levi-Strauss there is a cyclical relation between prohibition, exogamy and positive marriage. He uses the functionalist perspective to explain the relation between parts and whole. This is only one way of understanding social reality and need not necessary be true always.

Due to the above limitations Levi-Strauss' theory of alliance has undergone modifications and developments by Rodney Needham. Needham suggested the following improvement to the understanding of alliance:

1. A clear-cut distinction is made between prescriptive and preferential marriage rule. According to Levi-Strauss prescription and preference marriage rules are more or less the same. Needham criticized Levi- Strauss on the ground that alliance theory of Levi-Strauss deals only with prescription. Prescription is defined more as the characteristic of a system than as simply

a marriage rule. It involves the combination of a rule prescribing some relatives and prohibiting others. It is seen that relations that are prescribed might not be preferred.

2. The main development has probably been a refinement of the concept of alliance and the substitution of it with more structural understanding for a more empirical notion. Needham tries to focus on alliance at the empirical level i.e. at smaller groups.

3. As opposed to Levi-Strauss' understanding of alliance as cyclical, Needham suggests that alliance is dualistic.

4. Further for Needham, the important opposition between the wife givers and wife takers is not necessarily a group activity because it can take place in smaller groups and not always in larger groups like lineage.

Thus,according to Needham, marriage is symbolic in nature. It thus does not deal only with sexual relations (prohibition and prescription) but also with caste purity, recruitment of caste and political significance. He explains this with reference the Nayars of South India, about whom you have read in unit 2. He also highlights how a child gets membership of higher caste and thereby political power due to hypergamous marriage (i.e. marrying a man of higher caste).

**Check Your Progress 3**

**Note:** a) Use the space below for your answers.

    b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) Discuss any three limitation in Levi-Strauss's alliance theory.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------

2) What are the main contributions of Needham to alliance approach?

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------

## 4.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have understood the alliance approach in the study of kinship. It was developed by Levi-Strauss from structural perspective and was further developed by Louis Dumont and

Rodney Needham. We have learnt that Levi-Strauss understood alliance with reference to groups or lineages exchanging women due to the cultural practice of incest taboo and exogamy. He further elaborated the exchange of women in terms of structural models- the elementary and complex. Louis Dumont in his study of the Dravidian kinship argued that affinity was as important as descent or consanguinity in understanding kinship system. The Dravidian marriage rules were based on cross-cousin marriage, that is, the prescribed marriage partner for the ego is either his MBD or FZD. Depending on the type of cross-cousin, Dumont classified three types of cross cousin marriage- bilateral, matrilateral and patrilateral cross cousin marriage. Needham further refined the alliance theory by differentiating between prescriptive and preferential marriage rules.

## 4.8 REFERENCES

1. Dumont,L., 1968,'Marriage Alliance',in D.Shills(ed.),*International Encyclopedia of the SocialSciences,*U.S.A.:Macmillan and FreePress,pp.19-23.
2. Gough, KathleenE.,1959, 'The Nayars and the Definition of Marriage', in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 89:23-34
3. Needham, Rodney (1971) (ed). Rethinking Kinship and Marriage, London: Tavi-stock
4. Lévi-Strauss,Claude,1969,*The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, London: Eyre and Spottiswoode,Chapters1&2,Pp.3-25

## 4.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Check Your Progress 1**

1) Two types of exchange in elementary structure of Kinship

|   | **Generalized/Indirect Exchange** | **Restricted/Direct Exchange** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Rule of descent and rule of residence are same, system is harmonic. That is patrilineal descent with patrilocal residence | Rule of descent and rule of residence are not same or disharmonic |
| 2. | Reciprocity is indirect and delayed, the group does not take woman from the group to which it has given woman | Reciprocity is direct and assured, that is a group takes a woman from the group to which it gives woman |
| 3. | Marriage with either matrilateral cross- | Marriage of person with his bilateral cross |

| | |
|---|---|
| cousin, i.e. MBD (mother's brother daughter) or patrilateral cross cousin, i.e. FZD (father's sister daughter). | cousins |

**2)** The feature of asymmetrical exchange as found among Kareira of Australia are:

1. A patrilineal society with restricted exchange. They have four section system in which two sections are subdivided into two or more by generation.

2. The four sections are *Karimera* and *Burung* and *Palyeri* and *Banaka.*

3. Both exchange wives between themselves; i.e. *Karimera* and *Palyeri* will exchange women and so will the *Burung* and *Banaka.*

4. Children of a *Karimera* man and *Palyeri* woman will be *Bu*rung; children of a *Burung* man and *Banaka* woman will be *Karimera.* Vice-versa if we consider women, since this is a patrilineal society.

**Check Your Progress 2**

1) In the system of bilateral Cross-cousin marriage, the ego marries his MBD (Mother's Brother's Daughter) who is also his FZD (Father's Sister Daughter). In other words, two intermarrying groups exchange women as wives and thus constitute a self-sufficient unit . It is also known as sister exchange. Levi-Strauss called this type of exchange as closed or restricted exchange and correlates with disharmonic transmission.

2) Two differences between patrilateral cross-cousin marriage and patrilateral cross cousin marriages are

a) In patrilateral cross-cousin marriage the ego must marries his father's sister's daughter, or his patrilateral cross cousin. In matrilateral cross cousin marriage, the ego marries his mother's brother's daughter or matrilateral cross cousin.

b)The direction of transfer of women changes in every generation in such a manner that it is in same direction in alternating direction whereas in matrilateral cross-cousin marriage, the direction of exchange of woman is same in every generation.

**Check Your Progress 3**

1) The three limitation in Levi-Strauss's alliance theory are:

a) Levi-Strauss considers women as a commodity, 'something' to be exchanged'. This he does by looking at marriage exclusively from men's perspective and does not take into account residence and other related aspects of kinship system

b) He uses incest prohibition and exogamy as synonymous in understanding marriage exchange which is tautological.

c) There is a narrow understanding of the concept of exchange, limited to one-to-one relation. In reality exchange can be wide and abstract happening between many groups of people.

2) The main contributions of Needham to alliance approach are:

a) A refinement of the concept of alliance and the substitution it with more structural understanding for a more empirical notion.

b) The important opposition between the wife givers and wife takers is not necessarily a group activity because it can take place in smaller groups and not always in larger groups like lineage.

c) Marriage is symbolic in nature and emphasis should be paid to meanings and symbols than only direction of exchange.

# UNIT 5 CULTURAL APPROACH[•]

**Structure**

5.0 Objective

5.1 Introduction

5.2 David Schneider's contributions

   5.2.1 Critique of traditional understanding of kinship

   5.2.2 American kinship system

   5.2.3 Cultural & Normative

5.3 Significance of Cultural Approach

   5.3.1 Janet Carsten – Culture of Relatedness

   5.3.2 Marilyn Strathern

   5.3.3 Kath Weston- Families of Choice

5.4 New Kinship studies

   5.4.1 Beyond Biology

   5.4.2 Feminists' Contributions

   5.4.3 New Reproductive Technology

5.5 Post Schneider Kinship Studies

5.6 Let Us Sum Up

5.7 References

5.8 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

## 5.0 OBJECTIVE

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the significance of cultural approach to the study of kinship

- Offer a critique of traditional understanding of kinship

- Discuss the feminist contribution to the understanding of kinship

- Look at kinship in contemporary context

.

## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

---

In anthropology there are two ways of understanding kinship. One argues that kinship could only be analysed from the biological necessities of human reproduction. It was assumed that kinship was based on acts of sexual relation and procreation. The proponents of this view give emphasis on tracing relations through descent and marriage. The other argues that the reference to biology is nothing more than ethnocentric view of kinship, derived from European culture. To them kinship was to be understood only with reference to cultural practices of every society. Thus, kinship is primarily a matter of culture. It was the interpretation of the process of the biological process of reproduction and not simply the process that constitutes kinship. In the first approach, known as biological model or genealogical approach, family and marriage was the focus of analysis. The formation of family through marriage and reproduction was assumed to be natural and universal phenomena occurring uniformly throughout the world. To the proponents of cultural approach, such an assumption was not always true. For example, among the Trobriand Islanders (studied by Bronislaw Malinowski) social relations were constructed without reference to biology. People became relatives without going through the process of reproduction. The understanding of kinship with reference to biology left out a large gamut of relationships formed outside biological family and marriage. Thus, culture and not biology is to be considered as the 'real' foundation of kinship.

In cultural approach the social relationships are examined from the point of view of symbols in which relationships are embedded. The study of kinship is dependent on ethnographic examination of the culture. Thus, according to cultural approach kinship is a cultural or a social construct and according to biological approach, kinship is a natural and given. The pioneer of the cultural approach was David Schneider who examined kinship as a cultural system that is based in shared symbols and meanings. Culture was used to 'denaturalise' kinship on the ground that relations are culturally produced.

## 5.2. DAVID SCHNEIDER'S CONTRIBUTIONS

David Schneider was a symbolic anthropologist who rejected the earlier understanding of kinship in purely biological terms. For Schneider norms, values and symbols were important and thus kinship is cultural. Biology as the basis of kinship is a western notion which is an abstract idea to be found only in the minds of the anthropologists and not in the society which they studied. His pioneering book, "American Kinship: A Cultural Account," demonstrated

that "what we think is nature in American culture is actually cultural". He defined culture as a system of symbols and meanings and considered kinship as a set of symbols and meanings. By challenging the definition of kinship in terms of certain concrete elements like relations by blood and marriage, Schneider took kinship away from genealogies and domestic domain. His contribution marked the beginning of new direction in kinship studies by turning attention to symbolic dimension of biological and affinal relations. It is referred as the cultural turn in anthropology as it gave a cultural definition to kinship.

### 5.2.1 Critique of Kinship Study

David Schneider questioned the applicability of Western understanding of kinship based on unilineal significance of biology. He claimed that that theories propounded by Western anthropologists were limited in their applicability and could not be used to understand family and kinship in non-Western society. In his work, '*A Critique of the Study of Kinship'*, Schneider considers kinship as abstract as there is no such thing as "kinship"—not in the sense of the universal model of the nuclear heterosexual family in which marriage is a social expression of a biological law. He argues that the American anthropologists had a faulty foundation by assuming that the cultural value of blood is thicker than water, a belief common in their own societies.

He goes on to argue that Euro-American folk models understand kinship as the social construction of natural, i.e. biological, facts (Schneider, 1980). Later, he elaborated on this argument by proposing that the anthropology of kinship merely reproduced taken-for-granted assumptions about the biological nature of kinship within these models

He criticises the social anthropologists in on three grounds:-

- Talk of only biological aspect
- They are concerned with only sharing of biogenetic substances. And were not studying the magnitude of sharing,
- There is no difference between structure and culture.

Kinship as said earlier is based on bio-genetic substances, however we need to consider the social aspects too in understanding kinship relations.

### 5.2.2 Cultural and Normative Systems

In his study of kinship, Schneider made a distinction between cultural system of the society and the normative. He defined cultural system as a system of units (parts) which are defined

in certain ways and which are differentiated according to different ideas. The normative system consists in rules and regulations which an actor should follow if his behaviour is to be accepted by his society and community as proper. These are 'how-to-do-it' rules. For example, a middle class father should earn money to support his family not the fact that many actually do.

Culture in the normative-cantered understanding appears to be more static and given and far less processual. In the cultural system, culture concerns the stage, the stage setting, and the cast of characters whereas the normative system consists in stage direction for actors and the role that the actors should play. This is not to say that normative and cultural systems are unconnected. The cultural level is a part of the normative level. The cultural premises provide us that there are two kinds of relation – relationship by blood and marriage. However, it is the normative patterns that provides the ways through which we should treat those relatives. The study of kinship requires one to abstract from the normative system, but relate it to the 'cultural system' which is in practice. Thus, kinship according to Schneider is cultural. Schneider tends to look into the underlying meanings, symbols of a concrete action and how they inter-relate and form a single, coherent, interrelated system of symbols and meanings.

### 5.2.3 American Kinship

While studying the domain of kinship in American culture, Schneider sees that it is only part of the larger domain made up of two different parts:

  i. Shared bio-genetic substance or the blood which is the inherited natural substance
 ii. Code of conduct or moral order which ensures solidarity among related members.

These two elements combine to yield three major categories of kin –

a) When both elements occur together, blood relatives are formed. These blood relatives are considered to be related in nature, and they are part of natural order of things.

b) When code of conduct element occurs alone and without shared biogenetic substance element the category of relatives-in-laws or relatives by marriage are formed. It is a part of a much wider category of order of law, defined in opposition to order of nature.

c) And finally, when the shared bio-genetic substance is present alone the category of relatives in nature is formed.

For Schneider however kinship is not about sharing or not sharing of bio-genetic substances, but how we share it. If the shared elements are conceived in terms of magnitude, than class factors, personal factors must be taken into account. Thus, change in magnitude leads to change in kinship relation. Thus, kinship relations can be reckoned by order of nature and order of culture. While abstracting the pure from the conglomerate Schneider talks about nationality and religion. These two also possess the two components, order of nature and order of culture, like kinship.

**Check your Progress 1**

**Note:** a) Use the space below for your answers.

    b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

  1) Briefly discuss Schneider's critique of the traditional kinship studies. Answer in three lines only.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

  2) How does Schneider differentiate between cultural and normative system? Give example to illustrate your answer.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

## 5.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL APPROACH

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 care-giving relationships and in response to affirmative 'choices' to create kinship ties (Weston 2013). These studies have highlighted 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.

### 5.3.1 Janet Carsten – Culture of Relatedness

After the critique of kinship by David Schneider terms like 'relatedness' and sharing became popular in kinship studies. It reflected the shift from more formal or restrictive definitions of kinship based on blood ties and alliance to informal relations formed by being related. The emphasis is to capture the nuances of everyday interaction in society. 'Relatedness' thus includes relations created through reproduction, marriage, adoption, and other forms. The term was used extensively by anthropologist Janet Carsten. She used the idea of *relatedness* to move away from a pre-constructed analytic opposition between the biological and the social. Carsten argued that relatedness should be described in terms of indigenous statements and practices, some of which fall outside what anthropologists have conventionally understood as kinship. Ideas about relatedness in Langkawi islands of Malaysia, show how culturally specific is the separation of the 'social' from the 'biological' and the latter to sexual reproduction. In Langkawi relatedness is derived both from acts of procreation and from living and eating together. It makes little sense in indigenous terms to label some of these activities as social and others as biological. (Carsten 1995, 236). The concept of relatedness explains kinship as a process where relations are constantly constructed, experienced and negotiated on daily basis.

---

**Activity 1**

Living in contemporary urban city gives us many opportunities to be related to people outside blood relation and marriage. Discuss some of situation where relatedness can be developed.

---

### 5.3.2 Marilyn Strathern

Marilyn Strathern questions the separation of biology and culture into neat categories in kinship studies by questioning the notion of biology brought about by technological interventions. Strathern takes from Schneider to suggest that not only is kinship the 'social construction of natural facts' but also that nature has increasingly come to mean biology. She argues that biology, meaning genetic relatedness, is what has been naturalised as kinship. In her study of kinship in Great Britain, Strathern (1992) has highlighted the shifts in conceptions of biology in the wake of technological changes. Rejecting the dichotomy between nature and culture, she argued that biology no longer constitutes the incontestable ground for kinship. Because the new reproductive technologies make the contribution of human interventions to the production of biological kinship visible, they have resulted in a greater explicitness about nature and biology. When biology and nature are made explicit, taking them for granted is no longer possible, thus requiring that biology be understood as

involving social and cultural phenomena that must be discussed and examined (Strathern, 1992).

### 5.3.3 Kath Weston- Families by Choice

The term 'families by choice' or 'chosen family' is used to refer to families of homosexuals (lesbians/gay) who have opted out of their biological family due to rejection and violence. Family by choice is in contrast to 'family of origin', that is, the family in which a person is born. Kath Weston studied the families of homosexuals living in San Francisco to show different notion of kinship based on symbolism, love and friendship. She critiqued the understanding of family as formed only through sexual union between man and woman. Her study of family among homosexuals provides an example of creating kinship through choice. She reminds us not to assume that the natural characteristics of biological kinship and that 'choice' is possible for formation of family outside of biological ties. Weston replaces blood ties as basis of kinship with consensual affiliation because in gay and lesbian families, relationships are based on love and friendship rather than biological or affinal connections. The families are culturally recognisable not only in terms of living arrangements but in the desire to reproduce. In so far as such desire looks forward to the creation of a couple's children rather than back to their own origins, from this point of view the conjugal unit is constituted no differently from others. The distinctive choice lies in the kind of procreative partnership that is set up. The gay/lesbian couple seek to displace biogenetic identity from the definition of reproductive kinship. This is another instance of cultural understanding of family and kinship, where relationships are not given but constructed and negotiated in everyday situations.

**Check your Progress 2**

**Note:** a) Use the space below for your answers.

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1). Explain the concept of 'culture of relatedness'.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

2). Give two differences between biological family and family by choice.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

## 5.4. NEW KINSHIP STUDIES

The cultural approach defined kinship as a symbolic system of meanings that carries over into other ideological spheres (such as religion). Such an approach had a strong influence on subsequent studies. Many later accounts of kinship, both in Western and in non-Western societies, have provided in-depth description of how understandings of kinship differ on account of cultural factors including ethnicity, personal experiences and other attributes. The greatest contribution of the cultural approach was to take kinship beyond biology to comprehend relations that are not based on blood or marriage.

### 5.4.1. Beyond Biology

Schneider's cultural approach was welcomed by many anthropologists who wanted to free kinship from the bonds of biology. Gays and lesbians championed the notion that biology does not set a standard for everyday in the construction of non- traditional families. The cultural approach broadened the understanding of family and marriage to include relations formed outside heterosexual and monogamous sexual unions. The concept of 'fictive' kinship became relevant in understanding a wide range of relations that were constructed in non-biological manner. There is a greater awareness among scholars and social scientists that kinship does not simply mirror physical relations but is socially created in specific cultural contexts. One response to this realization has been to attempt to move beyond ideas of genealogical connections and use more appropriate terms such as relatedness.

### 5.4.2. Feminist Studies

It was utilized the most by feminists who used the approach to deconstruct the understanding of gender. They argued that gender was a cultural construct and its meaning differed from society to society. The feminists put gender at the centre of analysis and emphasized the dynamics of power relations rather than on descent and alliance. Kinship and lineage relations thus became constructed not in terms of rights and duties but in terms of power and strategies to gain power. Collier's work on patrilineal system highlighted how women strategies their position in a patrilocal residence to advance their interests through their husbands and sons.

Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako argued that the study of kinship and gender should not be positioned with reference to biological facts of reproduction because they are themselves

culturally constructed. They emphasized that different cultures have different ideas of male and female, femininity and masculinity. Feminist contribution to kinship studies brought in new direction whereby the emphasis was to view women as agents and not as bodies over whom men have rights and who function to knit together kin group By the 1990s there were large number of studies that documented a shift in the meaning of kin, especially meaning of mother and motherhood. Ragone's study, *Surrogate Motherhood: Conception in the heart* (1994), differentiates the biological mother (surrogate) from the adoptive mother (woman who hires the surrogate). She argues that the adoptive mother is someone who has conceived the child in the heart and not the body. She illustrates how both mothers share the experience of pregnancy in shopping and rituals thus redefining the cultural meaning of motherhood. Motherhood is seen as based on nurturance and not merely biological ties.

### 5.4.3. New Reproductive Technology (NRTs)

NRTs refer to new technologies used worldwide for procreation, including gene transference,

in vitro fertilisation, embryo transfer, gamete intra-fallopian transfer, surrogacy, sperm banks, frozen embryos etc. These technologies make it easy to separate sex from reproduction, allow a woman to conceive without intercourse, and permit a man to be genetically related to the child of a woman with whom he has had no physical contact. NRTs challenge previously held cultural constructions of kinship and bring about new kinds of social relations thus redefining kinship relations.. These technologies enable people make explicit their understanding of relatedness, identity and social-cultural belonging. According to Marilyn Strathern, NRTs have added a new dimension to the ways in which kinship is understood. What was once taken to be natural has become a matter of choice. Thus, technology has de-naturalised kinship. NRT has enabled people to choose to reproduce and also construct relationships. It provides the possibility for the inclusion of new participants in the kinship network, like the sperm donor or egg donor. Thus, technology constructs a new meaning of kinship which is beyond biology and also widens the kinship network.

Susan Martha Kahn in her work *Eggs and Wombs: the Origins of Jewishness*, shows how reproductive technology shapes the cultural construction of Jewish personhood through gender and sex roles. Through ethnographic study of IVF (in vitro fertilization), she illustrates how Jewish women exercise their agency in reproduction by using state-sanctioned reproductive technology. Her research shows how single, childless Israeli women can also take control of their reproductive futures. Thus, kinship is not limited to biology and

marriage. Both motherhood and kinship are cultural constructs where women are not submissive actors, but active agents because they are engaged in the process of assisted reproductive technology. This helps them cultivate a new category of Jewish kinship which is different from the religious and social institution of marriage.

**Check Your Progress 3**

**Note:** i) Use the space below for your answers.

ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) Define new kinship studies.

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

2) Discuss the contributions made by feminist anthropologists to revitalize kinship studies.

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

## 5.5 Post Schneider Kinship Studies

The cultural approach, as propounded by David Schneider, brought in new light for understanding kinship relations covering a wide spectrum of relatedness. There was complete abandonment of the universalistic notion of biological kinship. According to Needham, it is the interpretation of the process that constitutes kinship rather than the process itself, therefore relevance of interpretation and symbolic meaning. Thus, kinship as an analytical category was replaced with the notions of 'relatedness' and 'shared substance'. Further, Schneider exposed the Western bias in anthropological understanding of kinship and demonstrated the value of emic approach, which is an insider's perspective. However, the vision of kinship that emerged post Schneider was quite homogenized. Kinship was understood without differentiating for class, gender, age, or ethnicity. Critics (including Schneider himself in later years) emphasized that, in contrast to this monolithic characterization of cultures individual participants would in fact have articulated different versions of kinship and its meanings depending on their particular position in American society as well as their own life histories. Therefore, there was a strong influence of cultural relativism in kinship studies.

## 5.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we learnt about the cultural approach to kinship studies as advocated by anthropologist David Schneider. The approach lays stress on the symbolic meaning assigned to the process of procreation and reproduction. According to Schneider, kinship as understood by Western anthropologists was problematic as it was based on their assumptions that biology is universal and everyone follows the same rule of relating through blood and marriage. In his study of American kinship, he showed how the understanding of kinship is dependent on how people interpret it. His approach was taken up by other anthropologists to stress on the process of relatedness and sharing substance. It became relevant for understanding kinship beyond biology and also questioned the taken for granted definition of the institution of marriage and family. The cultural approach was used to understand families formed by homosexuals which was based on sharing and friendship. It also re-defined the meaning of mothering and motherhood by highlighting the role played by new reproductive technologies in broadening the universe of kinship. Feminist anthropologists used the cultural approach to explain the power dynamics and strategies that take place in family and household to structure gender relations.

## 5.7 REFERENCES

1. Carsten, Janet, 1995, 'The Substance of Kinship and the Heat of the Hearth: Feeding, Personhood, and Relatedness among Malays in Pulau Langkawi' American Ethnologist, 22 (2): 223-24.

2. Schneider D.M (1980). American kinship: A cultural account. University of Chicago Press,

3. -------------------2004, 'What is Kinship All About?', in R. Parkin and L. Stone (eds.) *Kinship and Family: An Anthropological Reader*, U.S.A.: Blackwell, Pp. 257-274

4. Kahn, Susan Martha, 2004, 'Eggs and Wombs: The Origins of Jewishness', in R. Parkin and L. Stone (eds.), *Kinship and Family: An Anthropological Reader*, U.S.A.: Blackwell, Pp. 362-77

5. Weston Kath (2013). Families we choose: Lesbians, gays, kinship. Columbia University Press

## 5.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Check your Progress 1**

1) Schneider critiqued the traditional kinship studies on following grounds:

a) Traditional theories based on unilineal significance of biology were limited in their applicability and could not be used to understand family and kinship in non-Western society.

b) They were not studying the magnitude of sharing; they are concerned with only sharing and not sharing of biogenetic substances.

c) In these theories there is no difference between structure and culture.

2) Schneider defined cultural system as a system of units (parts) which are related in certain ways and which are differentiated according to different ideas. The normative system consists in rules and regulations which an actor should follow if his behaviour is to be accepted by his society and community as proper. For example, the institution of religion is cultural system and the requirement to go to temple for worship among Hindus is normative.

**Check your Progress 2**

1. Culture of relatedness was used by Janet Carsten to refer to kinship relations developed outside biological and marital relation. Relations are developed on account of being related to each other, for example relations between friends sharing a room.

2. Two differences between biological family and family by choice are:

   a. Biological family is formed by reproduction and procreation whereas family by choice formed by friendship.

   b. An individual becomes member of biological family by birth whereas members join family by choice in their adulthood.

**Check your Progress 3**

1) New kinship studies refer to the shift in kinship studies from descent and alliance approach to cultural analysis. The focus is to understand kinship in a broader framework beyond blood, genetics and marriage. New reproductive technologies, gay/lesbian families and related process has added new direction in understanding kinship.

2) Feminist anthropologists used the cultural approach to deconstruct the understanding of gender relations in society. They argued that gender was a cultural construct and its meaning differed from society to society. The feminists emphasized the dynamics of power relations rather than on descent and alliance. Kinship and lineage relations thus became constructed not in terms of rights and duties but in terms of power and strategies to gain power.