

A COMPARISON OF KINSHIP SYSTEMS

by Elena Bayrock, Brandeis University

Awareness and understanding of the world's cultural diversity is important for social progress. The broader our base of knowledge and awareness, the deeper our source of possible creativity. People get stuck believing that their way is the "right" and only way and then are unable to create new, positive and progressive solutions. Simply adopting someone else's approach isn't a practical solution to our own issues. However, exploring other value systems and becoming aware of more than one approach to social issues can widen our own pool of creative resources. Also, by looking at the diversity around us we can put our own values into perspective. By creating an awareness of a world full of many societies with different functional value systems we can actively and productively fight discrimination. Comparing the kinship systems and marriage practices of the Ju/'hoansi and Mbuti band societies, and the Tikopia island clan society suggests that the two band societies create a more egalitarian environment in relation to gender.

In both the Ju/'hoansi and Mbuti kinship systems the maternal and paternal sides are treated equally. The Ju/'hoansi practice a bilateral kinship system whereby descent is recognized on both sides of the family. The only occasion in which favoritism towards either side is expressed is during the naming of the children. In this case, slight preference is given to the paternal side. On top of the bilateral system, the Ju/'hoansi also use a universal kinship system. Anyone they come in contact with can be addressed on kinship terms. This expands the already large kinship group. For the Mbuti, recognition of kinship is of very little importance beyond the level of the nuclear family. Only when proposing marriage is lineage important. The prevalent social structure mechanism for the Mbuti is age. Linear kinship groups are cut horizontally by age groups, each person identifying with one. Neither of these practices, either bilateral or negligible kinship, shows an inequality of gender.

The Tikopia, on the other hand, practice a patrilineal kinship system where children are descendants of their father's family only. The name of the paito or house is carried on by the male offspring. Also, chieftanship and rank are passed down through the patriline. Families will search the farthest branches of kin to find an heir rather than passing the position on to a closer maternal relative. Although this system is male biased there are certain cultural practices that attempt to balance this out. First of all, the maternal family is expected to play an important role in the life of a child. The father's family passes on titles, authority and holds a position of respect. The mothers family, however, may have an informal relationship with the child. They act as caretakers in times of trouble, offering

emotional support. From an early age other adults in the community win a child's affection so that they are not solely dependent upon their parents. The mother's brother builds strong emotional bond with the child and holds a particularly special place in the life of the child. He will also take on the responsibility of the child's burial. Furthermore, the position of authority given to the father's sister helps to equalize the gender balance. If a boy is too young to accept the responsibility of the kava, the names of his ancestors and gods, at the time of his father's death, this knowledge is entrusted to his father's sister so that she may pass it on to the son when he is of age. The father's sister is given great respect and occasionally addressed as Pa E or 'father'. However, even with these customs of female involvement, the weight of importance falls heavily on the paternal side.

Kinship recognition only becomes important for the Mbuti when choosing a spouse. A Mbuti youth is prohibited from marrying kin on their mother or father's side as far back as any of the present elders can remember. It is also considered inappropriate to marry outside of one's age group as this is considered displeasing to the forest. A marriage is recognized once the couple moves in together. As opposed to the Tikopia, the Mbuti have no proscribed rules of post-marital residence. Where the young couple chooses to live depends on the economic concerns of the bands. There is no formal marriage ritual, and consequently no formal divorce ritual. When one spouse leaves and takes up residence elsewhere, the marriage is terminated. Either spouse has the freedom to end the marriage

For the Ju/'hoansi, who do recognize kinship, marriage is a slightly more complicated issue than it is for the Mbuti. The Ju/'hoansi are prohibited from marrying within their immediate family or among kin with whom they have a respect relationship. This includes not only siblings and parents but also aunts and uncles. Complicating things further, these rules not only apply to blood relatives since everyone can be addressed on kinship terms. According to the Wi principle practiced by the Ju/'hoansi, when two people meet the older one determines their relationship and assigns appropriate kinship terms. The Ju/'hoansi are prohibited from marrying anyone with the same personal name as a member of their immediate family, as well as anyone sharing the kinship term of a blood relative with whom one has a respect relationship. By narrowing the prospective field in this manner, the Ju/'hoansi encourage distant marriages.

Formal marriage ritual is common among the Ju/'hoansi, unlike the Mbuti. On the wedding day the groom carries the bride from her parents' hut kicking and screaming, which symbolizes marriage-by-capture. The young bride is expected to stay in her husband's hut that night and try to accept the marriage. However, if she continues to resist her husband, she is not forced to remain with him. Often the bride is many years younger

than the husband and sexual intercourse is postponed until she matures. This allows her to get used to living outside of her parents' hut.

The age difference, marriage-by-capture ritual, and the bride's passive role in the arrangement of her marriage may seem to place the woman in a subordinate role. However, she is given much freedom in deciding whether or not to stay with her husband and receives no chastisement should she decide to leave. The marriage-by-capture custom allows the woman to symbolically express her defiance towards her parents and husband. And despite the age difference, it is accepted, and even expected, for the woman to solicit or refuse sexual intercourse. The Ju/'hoansi approach sex with an overall egalitarian attitude in which both partners gain pleasure and work to achieve orgasm. The post-marital residence of the Ju/'hoansi is most commonly uxorilocal, due to the young age of most Ju/'hoansi brides. After a few years, when the couple has children, they may decide to move back to the husband's people. Often, however, the family becomes close to the wife's band chooses to stay there. Relationships with kin in other bands are kept up through frequent visitations and hxaro exchange.

For the Tikopia, marriage is prohibited between members of the immediate family, including siblings and parents. Marriage between first cousins is looked down upon by the society, although not prohibited. Like the Ju/'hoansi, the Mbuti have a marriage-by-capture ritual where the husband carries the woman off with him to his hut. Post-marital residence of the Tikopia is patrilocal. The wife takes on the name of her husband's paito, or house, and the kinship obligations that go along with it. However, if the wife is unhappy with her husband she may return to her kin until he sends a gift, apologizes, and asks her to come back to him. Since the children are descendants of their father, the woman cannot take the children away from him. To get back at an unfair husband, the wife may attempt to turn the children against him.

A double standard in the Tikopian gender relations is evident in societal attitudes towards adultery. The community frowns upon all adultery, but a man's infidelity is tolerated much more than a woman's is. If a woman is found to be cheating on her husband he and his male kin may punish her severely. The conditions of marriage in Tikopia paint a picture of female subordination, with men holding power of descent and title.

Tikopian personal relations between husband and wife offer a kind of balance to gender inequality. Husband and wife both have the power to command and refuse each other. If the woman is busy or does not feel like following her husband's orders, she may tell him so. The man, although he has the same veto power, is expected to respect his wife and her wishes and often completes tasks that she commands him to do. An adulterous

man is not chastised by the community but will probably have to face the wrath of his wife. These levels of personal respect and freedom of confrontation add a level of equality between men and women within the marriage.

For the Ju'/hoansi and the Mbuti, kinship is a mechanism for expanding the social circle and defusing any possible concentration of power. For the Tikopia, however, lineage and descent determine a person's standing in society and put men in a position of superiority. On the personal level of the Tikopian society there are customs which help to bring a sense of gender equality into daily life. Even with these checks and balances, the Tikopian society places unequal value on the roles of men and women. From the perspective of kinship and marriage practices in these three societies, Tikopia shows a greater trend towards gender inequality.

For the Ju'/hoansi and the Mbuti, survival of the band is the primary concern. It would be futile and counter-productive to assign rank or to value one person over another since each individual's tasks are necessary to the well-being of the group. In a society that places such emphasis on the individual (personal success, wealth, and happiness), as American society does, we would find the structure of these band societies stifling and oppressive. Such a tight structure is also unnecessary in American society where daily survival is not such a main concern. However, we forget that, even in American, our structure depends on many different people in many different positions fulfilling their own tasks. We would benefit from the Mbuti and Ju'/hoansi examples by being less arrogant and realizing that the highest salary does not translate to highest importance.

From my own perspective, as a young woman growing up in American society, the relationships between men and women in the band societies offer examples of some desirable dynamics. Women are not seen as their husband's property in the Mbuti or Ju'/hoansi bands and are free to leave without chastisement should the marriage become unacceptable. In America women are in danger of losing their own identity when they marry and are often trapped in a bad or abusive marriage because of a lack of support from their community. The Ju'/hoansi and the Mbuti have respect for the decisions and wishes of both the men and the women in relationships. Although women in America have made huge progress towards equality both socially and economically, there is still an underlying belief in female inferiority.

Even though structural patterns can be identified, a society is made up of individuals. Each individual makes their own value choices and we can choose to affect the people around us and the structure we live in with awareness, understanding and an acceptance of inevitable diversity.

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