

Why do humans marry?

Avoiding the trap of ethnocentrism in defining marriage is a challenge which emphasises the division between functionalist and structuralist understandings of what marriage is. If marriage is what marriage does then, when faced with a relationship in the field, ought the western ethnographer to identify as marriage only those relations which replicate the functions of marriage in western society thus enabling the anthropologist to undertake cross-cultural comparisons of like phenomena? Conversely, if the definition of marriage is to be rooted in emic categories for conferring social recognition onto given kinds of relationship then would this not necessarily preclude the universalising comparative impulse and furthermore, how is such a definition to be reconciled with the disjuncture between prescriptive terminology, preferential rules about who one should marry, and actual behaviour – in order to allow us to reach the question, “Why do humans marry?”

To take the starting point of the 1951 *Notes and Queries* definition we find a focus on procreation and social legitimacy: “Marriage is a union between a man and a woman such that children born to the woman are the recognized legitimate offspring of both partners”¹. This definition encompasses the social aspect of marriage as a

¹ Cited here from Alan Barnard and Good, Anthony, *Research practices in the study of kinship* (London: Academic Press Inc., 1984),

collectively recognised relationship. Barnard and Good note that because of this quality social rules forbidding specific unions depend upon those unions not being socially endorsed: “As marriage (whatever else it may be) is by definition a socially recognized relationship, such rules are upheld by social pressures operating before (to forbid) the event, rather than afterwards”². Of all the cultural manifestations of heterosexual mating³ recognised and tolerated in a society, therefore, marriage is a public one.

A lacuna in the *Notes and Queries* definition must surely be that it essentialises the generation of offspring within the institution whereas marriages in which children are not produced would not be included under such a definition. A further problem with the definition is it does not recognise as marriages, formalised institutions such as Nuer woman-woman marriage, leviratic unions, forms of polyandry such as those among the Nayar documented by Kathleen Gough, and homosexual unions such as those of Western Egypt described by Walter Cline. Gough’s development upon this definition expands the idea of “legitimate offspring” into the more specific rubric whereby offspring are accorded “full birth-status rights common to normal members of his society or social stratum”. Gough also allows that marriage be “a relationship established between a

p.89

² Barnard and Good (1984), p.93

³ The question of homosexual marriage will be returned to. This formulation is derived from H.R.H Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark’s 1955 lecture to the Royal Anthropological Institute, cited here from Edmund Ronald Leach, *Rethinking Anthropology* (London: The Athlone Press, 1961), p.107.

woman and one or more other persons”⁴.

Edmund Leach’s 1961 work *Rethinking Anthropology* assesses the implications of instances of polyandrous polygamy upon conceptions of marriage as a mechanism that legally defines the social father. Leach comes to conceive of marriage as a “bundle of rights” which are conferred upon its adherents. These are listed in full since whilst Leach did not suggest that each was universal, they do delineate his view of the institution in a way that does not yet relinquish functionalism:

- a.) To establish the legal father of a woman’s children.
- b.) To establish the legal mother of a man’s children.
- c.) To give the husband a monopoly in the wife’s sexuality.
- d.) To give the wife a monopoly in the husband’s sexuality.
- e.) To give the husband partial or monopolistic rights to the wife’s domestic and other labour services.
- f.) To give the wife partial or monopolistic rights to the husband’s labour services.
- g.) To give the husband partial or total rights over property belonging or potentially accruing to the wife.
- h.) To give the wife partial or total rights over property belonging or potentially accruing to the husband.
- i.) To establish a joint fund of property – a partnership – for the benefit of the children of the marriage.
- j.) To establish a socially significant ‘relationship of affinity’ between the husband and his wife’s brothers.

Through these possible rights within “marriage”, we approach one explanation of why people enter into marriage. If the mutual safeguarding and social regulation of rights such as these has become codified and formalised within an institution of “marriage”, then humans may marry in order to secure these rights. Leach’s conclusion regarding polyandry in what was then Ceylon is that if marriage is viewed as a socially

⁴ Barnard and Good (1984), p.90

mandated entitlement assurance, two differing institutions should be distinguished in the context of the Sinhalese that “resemble”⁵ marriage. One is legally recognised, the other is less formal yet “by virtue of its public recognition, serves to provide the children with claims upon the patrimonial property of the men with whom the woman cohabits and publicly resides”⁶. For Leach then, the legal rights approach is privileged and thus it is fruitful to discern that there exist among the Nayar *sambandham* who are socially “recognized lovers” yet who have no ritual status or legal paternity.

Peter G. Rivière’s ‘Marriage: A Reassessment’ is prepared to grant functionalism the sop that considering the social functions of marriage does at least enable us to distinguish it from other kinds of gender relations. Rivière adopts Prince Peter’s principle that the socially recognised mutual self-ascription of the statuses of husband and wife should be acknowledged first, its objective composition determined by applying Leach’s typography and then advocates that the relationship be situated within the structural determinants of the society. Rivière’s thesis is that humans marry because the fundamental difference between the male and female sexes itself suggests a complementarity which can find one form of expression through marriage. The gender dynamic can and does alter over time, but society remains structured by ascriptions of

⁵ Leach (1961), p.112

⁶ *ibidem*, p.113.

appropriate behaviour ascribed by gender and “imbued with moral, attitudinal, and emotional attributes, and accordingly the categories of male and female and the relationship between them are part of the total symbolic system which is society”⁷. Implicitly, to marry is to take part in this symbolic system. Rivière also argues that within marriage the “very nature of the marriage relationship and what it is assumed to do”⁸ presupposes the expectation of permanency since marriage creates a genealogical link with affinal kin.

This structuralist theme of marriage as a mechanism by which alliances are formed is elucidated more explicitly in Barnard and Good who list as one of the four inflexions of meaning of the word marriage in English, the idea of “making a good marriage”⁹. Here marriage is a pragmatic alliance between two descent lines. As such, marriage must be approached with tact and strategic caution – Barnard and Good remark the gradualist approach to marriage which allows “plenty of opportunity for second thoughts, and for checking the *bona fides* of the prospective allies”¹⁰. Their two references to the idea of love in thirty pages regarding marriage bear attention, consisting of an aside to the anthropological truism “that marriage is normally not an affective bond between

⁷ Leach (1961), p.64

⁸ *ibid.*, p.70

⁹ Barnard and Good (1984), p.91

¹⁰ *ib.*, p.113

two individuals, but a politico-legal alliance contracted by two exchange-units”¹¹ and the comment that prescriptive systems are not totalising: “Other factors come into operation here, such as political and economic considerations, sexual attraction, and even – in a few, highly aberrant cases (Little 1966) – romantic love”¹².

To conclude, a practical difficulty in analysing why humans marry stems from the variety of marriage-style relationships / alliances exhibited by peoples studied by anthropologists. As Leach would have it, “all universal definitions of marriage are vain”¹³; nonetheless certain recurring patterns are noted. Leach’s earlier work in functionalism tended to emphasise the importance of the marriage institution in maintaining the stability of the social order and doing so by offering its participants socially safeguarded rights: vouchsafing the communal regulation of mutual duties and serving as a declaration of obligations and intent. Critically, the marriage act is by definition public – a socially recognised manifestation of a given relationship – and as such it offers legitimacy to its participants and therefore usually also the extension of recognition and entitlements to possible offspring. The structuralist approach, conversely, understands the human endeavour of marriage to be one possible expression of male / female relations that emerges out of the cultural reification and inscription of gender differences. Marriage in

¹¹ *ib.*, p.112

¹² *ib.*, p.94

¹³ cited here from *ib.*, p.90

this view is a mode of taking part in the symbolic system of society whilst perpetuating alliance-based control over resources.

Bibliography

Barnard, Alan, Anthony Good, *Research practices in the study of kinship* (London: Academic Press Inc., 1984)

Fox, Robin, *Kinship and Marriage* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967)

Leach, Edmund Ronald, *Rethinking Anthropology* (London: The Athlone Press, 1961)

Mair, Lucy, *Marriage* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971)

Parkin, Robert, *Kinship: An Introduction to Basic Concepts* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997)

Rivière, Peter G., 'Marriage: A Reassessment', *Rethinking Kinship and Marriage*, ed. Rodney Needham (London: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1971)