

A DANCE OF RELATIVES

The scene is a clearing in a tropical landscape, but there are no clues by which one might locate it in terrestrial history or geography. Eight figures are dancing, arranged in pairs. Most of the time each pair occupies one quarter of the clearing, and it is the male from the south who speaks. The audience are anthropologists, and the speaker displays a grasp of their language, mentality and limitations which is unexplained.

You wish to understand this dance of ours, its rules and its meaning. First I must introduce you to the other dancers, for we are all relatives. I had better warn you that a good deal of what I shall say at first is only true in the most metaphorical of senses; but this will become clear later on.

This, then, is my sister, who always dances close beside me; since we circle round each other our mutual position is indeterminate. My father and his sister, circling similarly, are further off. At this particular moment they are in the west, on my left as I face into the circle. Opposite them, in the east, are my mother and her brother. Just as my mother and father married a generation ago, so did my father's sister and my mother's brother. Their children, my bilateral cross-cousins, are the pair opposite us, there in the north. The girl is my fiancée, the boy will marry my sister. From time to time we change places with our cross-cousins, and so does my father's pair with my mother's; sometimes the whole dance group circles clockwise or anti-clockwise; but a pair never changes place with an adjacent one. So pairs that have intermarried, or will do so, always end

up opposite each other, with neighbours who are always of the other generation. At this particular moment the scene is like this:

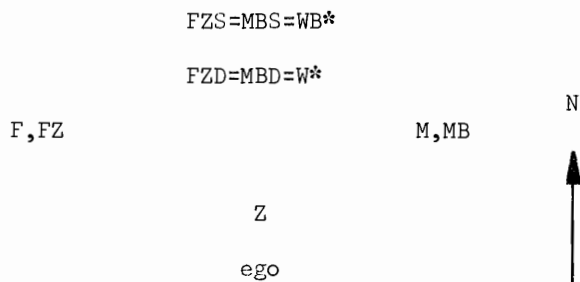


Fig.1 The eight relatives. Asterisks for *future* W(B) (i.e. wife + wife's brother; this convention for the use of brackets recurs in several formulae below).

My sister and I take each other very much for granted - it would be hard for you to guess what emotion we feel for each other, if any. It is very different when, as the dance frequently demands, we set to one or other of the other pairs. If you watch closely enough, you will be able each time to distinguish three elements, male-male setting, female-female and male-female, but it is something else that will strike you first. When I and my sister set to F+FZ our movements are constrained: we advance towards each other, avoiding physical contact, even eye contact. I feel reserved in the presence of my father, and FZ is my future mother-in-law; in both cases the sentiments are reciprocated. The quiet slow rhythm expresses the formality of the encounter, for while we are setting to our F+FZ, our cross-cousins are doing the same to theirs. In contrast, when we (and they) set to M+MB, you will sense rather a certain warmth, détente and closeness. With our cross-cousins, the relationship is ambivalent. The threatening gestures we exchange seem to imply an element of real hostility, but the exchange ends in laughter, and some of the time our gestures are frankly erotic, foreshadowing the sexual coupling of affianced and married couples with which the dance will end.

While we set to another pair, the syllable we chant is the one appropriate to that pair - you might call it a kinship term. I use your English numerals, rather than trying to express the phonetics of our chant. F+FZ are my term 1 relatives, the cross-cousins are term 2, M+MB are term 3. If I address my sister, it is as term 0. From the first you will probably have registered a

small, weary, inward protest at the fact that it was a male who was to act as spokesman and presenter of this sacred dance, the essence of our culture. However, so far, the male bias, as you call it, makes little difference: my relatives are my sister's relatives, and when we set to another pair the attitudes we express differ only in detail. It may now seem that my sister and I diverge fundamentally, for while we both address each other as term 0 and both address our cross-cousins as term 2, *she* calls F+FZ term 3, and M+MB term 1, while I do the converse. Actually this apparent divergence is an artefact of your ethnocentric view of relationships. What we actually do, both of us, is use term 1 for same-sex parent (ssP) plus the latter's opposite-sex sibling (osG), and term 3 for osP(osG).

You can now, if you like, work through the terms for the relationships from the points of view of my sister and cross-cousins, but you will not be able fully to appreciate the formal beauty of our dance until I have explained it from the point of view of my parents and their siblings. As I have suggested already, all inter-pair attitudes are reciprocated, but attitudes and terms do not coincide, any more than they did between ego and the +1 level. From my parents' point of view, I and my sister (their children) are term 1, and our cross-cousins (their cross-siblings' children) are term 3. My FZ and MB use term 1, not for us, but for their own children, my cross-cousins; we are *their* cross-siblings' children, hence term 3. In the light of this you can work out the terms we shall in due course be applying to our children's generation. Briefly, one's own children are equated with ssP(osG), one's cross-siblings' with osP(osG).

This equation gives the first hint on how the structure of our dance endures across the years though individual dancers grow old and die. Imagine it like this. In twenty years' time my parents' generation will be nearing sixty and will be retiring from the dance. My F+FZ (term 1) will be replaced by my own children (also term 1), my M+MB (term 3) by my sister's children (also term 3). From my children's point of view, they each replace the PssP of appropriate sex, my son replacing his FF (my F), my daughter her MM (my FZ). It is easy now to see what terms we apply to our grandchildren, who will replace us, and to our grandparents, whom we replace.

I could draw you a filled out Fig. 1 at this point, but you probably dislike working through diagrams, so I shall defer it. Perhaps you are wondering how it is that I talk as if we dancers always come neatly in brother-sister pairs, as if couples were invariably fertile, as if one could ignore same-sex siblings, one-child families, premature death. I have spoken like this for simplicity, giving you a model of the dancers' relationships, not the reality, neither the reality of this particular occasion, nor that of the rules of the dance. In reality all our relationships are 'as if' or 'classificatory', for we tend to think of same-sex siblings as essentially indiscriminable, mutually replaceable, identical in nature. A man and his brothers, or a woman and her sisters, are as it were replicas one of another,

totally representable by one of their number. The logic of same-sex sibling equivalence operates across generations as well as within them, filling in what would otherwise be the gaps in the system arising from demographic accident. A male dancer may not have a real sister (a PD, a parents' daughter), but FB is as good as F, MZ as M, so their daughter (PssGD) is exactly equivalent. And if his father lacks a B, or his M a Z, they will have parallel cousins of some degree, who by the same logic are exactly equivalent. What a laborious way of approaching what to me, coming at it from another point of view, is utterly obvious!

Now that same-sex siblingship has been introduced Fig. 1 can be filled out like this:

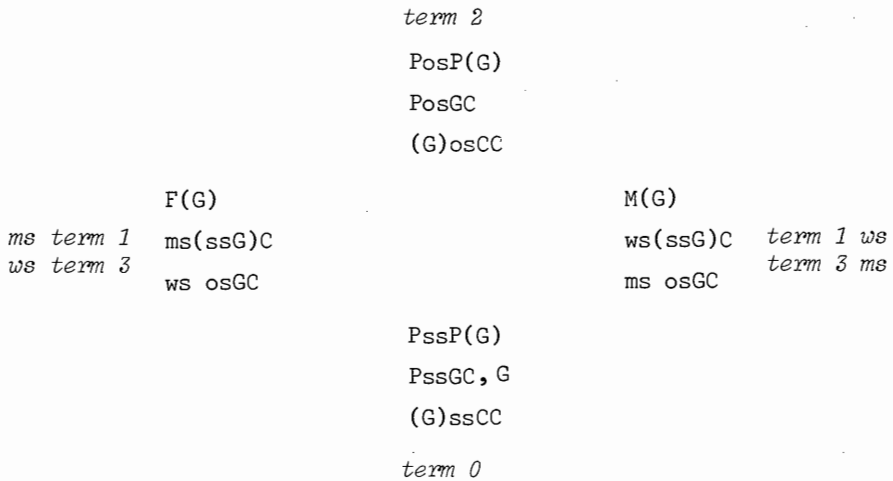


Fig. 2 The four classes of relatives, alias the four sections.

(G)ssCC means, for male ego, SC + BSC + ZDC.

I have explained the matter using lots of genealogical symbols because I understand that it comes most easily to you to think of relatives as a set of links extending outwards from an ego. I could just as well put it quite differently, starting with my whole society. There are only a couple of hundred of us, you know - those creatures the other side of the river are said to be subhuman - and we are all relatives. Humanity consists of just my four types of relative. The category I belong to is made up of all my term 0 relatives, which is just another way of saying,

all those whom my father thinks of as his term 1 relatives, my cross-cousins as their term 2 relatives, or my mother's brother as his term 3 relatives. If there is a problem, it is that our categories of relatives are a very different sort of entity from yours. Not only do you discriminate between same-sex siblings such as F and FB, and make the oddest equations, as when you call both FB and MB 'uncle'; you are not even self-consistent, for one person's single category 'uncle' is split by his father into 'brother' and 'brother-in-law'. What a muddle! This sort of discrepancy could never arise with us. If two people belong in the same category for me, then they belong in the same category for anyone else, whether or not the term these other people use for it is the same as the one I use for it. All members of one category are identical in nature. So, personally, when I think of relatives, it is at least as natural for me to think in terms of contraction as of extension. A particular type of relative is one section of society, and within that section the context may demand a further narrowing down of attention, down to my father, for instance, or to our section's representative in the dance.

You people already know about four-section systems, about the genealogical diagrams illustrating bilateral cross-cousin marriage, and about the more or less corresponding symmetrical prescriptive terminologies. What you have not met before is our combination of these into a single system of such perfect simplicity. If the simplicity seems elusive, it is perhaps because your own system is so alien that to translate from the one system to the other I am forced to work by approximations followed by corrections. Thus I introduced my fiancée as FZD=MBD, but later explained that this was only true in a classificatory sense. Actually the girl opposite me now in the dance *is* no doubt some sort of parallel cousin of my only FZD, who happens to be an infant, and of my MBD, who was married to someone else a long time ago; but even this is not really the point. For the rule is not that my fiancée should *be* a cross-cousin, but that she come from the same category as a cross-cousin, i.e. that she be a term 2 relative. This is quite a different matter, for if I try I am sure I shall be able to find several genealogical linkages between us that would locate her in my grandparents' level or my grandchildren's. My own term 0 category contains ascendants and descendants from every even-numbered genealogical level, past or present, and my fiancée's has just the same spread. It can perfectly easily happen - indeed it is to be expected - that some brother or parallel cousin of mine will choose to marry a category 2 relative who is two genealogical levels junior to my fiancée. Thus once one moves outside one's direct lineal relatives within a category, the notion of genealogical level quickly becomes ambiguous and unusable. You can, if you like, think of category 2 relatives as 'classificatory bilateral cross-cousins', using the term 'classificatory' in a broader sense than is usual; but if so remember that neither in terminology nor behaviour do we recognise the distinctness of

ego's genealogical level implied by your word 'cousin'.

Although we ignore genealogical levels within intermarrying sections, nothing is more fundamental to us than the boundary between the even-numbered relatives and the odd-numbered relatives of an ego. This is a difference in 'level' in another sense of the word, and in this case a cross-level marriage would be incest. It would throw out the whole system, for the relationship across this boundary is one of child-exchange. We, my term 2 + 0 relatives, are all the children of my term 1 + 3 relatives, living or dead, and the children we produce are what we return to them. By the way our wise old men sometimes argue about the notion of level membership; personally I prefer the view that it begins at conception rather than at birth.

I have one final correction to my original description. The girl opposite me in the dance is a category 2 relative all right, but in spite of what will happen at the end of the dance, she is not my real fiancée. She is only my 'dance-fiancée'—as it happens I am happily married with three children. Perhaps you already suspected this, when I said that the relationships among the dancers were classificatory, not true. It followed that the dancer I had introduced as my father was only a classificatory father, my 'mother' only a classificatory mother, hence the chances were that these two dancers were not man and wife in ordinary life. As it happens, my 'dance-father' is younger than I am, and although of course he is a term 1 relative, the shortest genealogical path to him would make him my classificatory son. I could indeed have introduced him to you as my son, which would mean redrawing Fig. 1 so that the genealogical level other than my own was -1 rather than +1; but the difference would be inconsequential. The point is that we dancers are simply representatives of our sex and section.

They do say that in the beginning things were very different. If I may speculate for a moment, I imagine it something like this. Outside the clearing we lived in fluctuant territorial groupings, mating like animals, having no recognised rules of marriage, no fixed structure. When we began to assemble regularly in the clearing, many sorts of choreographic groupings were tried out, dualistic, quadripartite, and more complex still. Sometimes all fit adults participated, sometimes we used one out of a variety of methods for selecting the dancers. These gatherings always involved copulation, but at first the combinations of participants had only a tenuous correspondence, if any, with the pattern of mating outside the clearing; this sexual activity in no sense constituted anything like a tribal kinship system. However we were learning gradually, experimenting with the possibilities of structure and exchange, miming the speeded-up passage of the generations. As we came to set more and more value on these occasions of communal excitement and collective creativity, we decided to carry over into ordinary life the rules for sexual activity developed during experiments in the clearing. At that period, then, the dance was the model for profane life, rather than its reflection, and it was thus that our society gained

the holism and clarity of its structure. Actually the number of aesthetically satisfying structures is not great. For instance, a four-section structure equating new members with PosPss rather than PssPss does not allow reciprocated inter-section attitudes.

I have talked a good deal about today's dance in relation to our system of kinship and marriage, which perhaps it helped to create. You will see now how the eight of us epitomise everything significant in the enduring structure of our society. But this is not all, for our dance also embraces the non-human world all about us. So far I have implied that, barring the odd personal detail about an ego's close relatives, our system would be described identically by a spokesman from any section, that one section is as near to being indistinguishable from the others as is biologically possible. Of course the individuals it contains are different, and its size and age structure fluctuate statistically (though excessive fluctuations would be corrected by adoptions). You know too that we hold all members of one section to share the same nature or essence, and you perhaps inferred, correctly, that it is an essence different from that of other sections. But this difference has been given no specific character, and so far it is only my presence as spokesman-cum-ego that has enabled you even to tell which section is which. From an absolute viewpoint all sections have exactly the same activities or functions, and it is only *relative* to one particular section that they differ - one providing it with mother's milk, one with fatherhood, one with spouses. Perhaps this was once the whole picture. Nowadays, however, each section has a number of properties or associations that do differentiate it absolutely from all the others. Each may be associated with a compartment of the cosmos, with a totemic species, a colour, element, humour and cardinal point. Over the generations we have been exploring these various possibilities, incorporating them in dance, drama, chant and body decoration, both reflecting on the world around us and using the links we establish to influence it. Our myths tell us about the original allocation of these properties to sections, or rather to their founding ancestors, but how it really happened I do not know, and logic can not tell you either.

I believe you anthropologists have neither discovered nor imagined a tribe patterned so neatly and symmetrically as ours. It is curious that, for all your talk of elementary structures, you have not previously identified the most elementary ones that are logically possible. I use the plural, because one can devise several other elementary structures, transforms of our own, and perhaps no less simple; but the ethnographic data known to you will make ours seem the least exotic and implausible. I do slightly wonder why none of you postulated us. Perhaps part of the answer lies in the literature's underemphasis on relative sex and its overemphasis on exchange between 'lines' rather than levels.

In any case I think there are two reasons why our tribe may interest you. Firstly, if you think clearly in the abstract about the most elementary possible forms of social organization, it may clarify the concepts you use in analysing the empirical

ethnographic world. Secondly, we pose again, and in a form that you can hardly dodge, the old question of origins: did the social systems familiar to you descend from ones like ours? I can not tell you the answer, nor can I even be certain that the question is properly phrased; but I can counter one possible objection. You tell me that in the past evolutionary theories have so often proved unprofitable that most people have given them up. Why should this one be any different? Well, there is a difference, because of that quasi-mathematical aspect of kinship studies, which is so off-putting to so many. It is not a matter of intuition or guess-work that four-term kinship terminologies are the simplest possible ones of any significance; it is a matter of utterly dry and formal logical argument. Of course, ordinary symmetrical precriptive terminologies *may* derive historically, not from the simplest possible terminologies of the same type, but from altogether different types; but if so, it is curious how often they show equations between alternate genealogical levels, a feature so reminiscent of our own system. What do you think?

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