

## COMMENTARY

### LÉVI-STRAUSS AND THE AUSTRO-ASIATICS: ELEMENTARY STRUCTURES UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

In the thirty-odd years since its original publication in 1949, Lévi-Strauss's *Elementary Structures of Kinship* has been the lodestone for kinship studies - the one work, if any can be so identified, towards which both theoretical and ethnographic analyses have been oriented. These comments are no exception, and perhaps none of them will seem original, save in the present ethnographic context. But there may be some value in showing how much (or little) credibility can be found in Lévi-Strauss's observations concerning just a few ethnic groups, most of which have a great deal in common linguistically and sociologically. This is especially significant, since some of his conclusions concerning them are used to support the general theoretical arguments of *Elementary Structures* in a number of places. To base any judgment as to the soundness of the book as a whole on such a tiny number of its ethnographic sources would however be foolhardy and unfair. And this is not simply a critique: these ethnographic examples in *Elementary Structures* have steadily been superseded by subsequent research, and these comments are intended similarly to bring things up to date.

The ethnic groups concerned are certain of the Austro-Asiatic speakers of eastern India, who form a linguistic minority distinct from speakers of Indo-European, Dravidian, or Tibeto-Burman languages. Most are found in southern Bihar and northern Orissa, on the Chotanagpur plateau, but one group, the Khasi, live in Meghalaya. All can advisedly be classed with the 'tribal', rather than the 'caste' area of the Indian social spectrum.

A first oversight on Lévi-Strauss's part is that he does not seem to recognize or appreciate the ethnic and linguistic autonomy of the Austro-Asiatics, and in two places in *Elementary*

*Structures* he alludes or refers to certain of them, quite erroneously, as Dravidian: the Bhuiya and Munda on pp.425-6; and the Munda, Santal, and Mahali on p.417 (where he is repeating Risley's apparent mistake - 1892: xxxvii).<sup>1</sup> The first of these references occurs in that part of Chapter XXVI (on 'Asymmetric Structures' in India) where he is refuting Rivers' suggestion (1907: 622-3) that cross-cousin marriage among Dravidian groups may be the result of dual organization. It is not this, however, but the author's treatment of the two Austro-Asiatic groups referred to in the course of this refutation that must be questioned. Take first his analysis of the Munda kinship system:

Each Munda village is divided into two groups of *khut*, called *paharkhut* and *mundakhut* respectively. The first provides the religious chief, the second the secular chief: the first is regarded as 'older', the other as 'younger'; the first is regarded as superior, and the other as inferior. Both *khut* of a village belong to the same clan or *kili*, have the same totem, and cannot intermarry. Marriage can only take place between *khut* belonging to different villages and clans, and according to the following rules, viz., if a marriage takes place between two corresponding *khut* of two different villages, other marriages of the same type are sanctioned within the limits of the same generation, but a prohibition ensues for the following generations which lasts as long as the first couples live, and even as long as both *khut* preserve the social relationships derived from the intermarriage. Conversely, if a marriage has taken place between *paharkhut* of one village and *mundakhut* of another, this type of marriage is prohibited in the following generation, while that between two *paharkhut*, and that between two *mundakhut*, are allowed (*Elementary Structures*, p.426).

...the simplest interpretation is that of a system originally based on marriage with the father's sister's daughter.... Here...we are faced with a pseudo-dualism, which in this case masks a system of patrilateral marriage (*Elementary Structures*, p.427).

The *khuts* are in fact lineages, and there are often more than just two in any village, despite the implications of the passage to the contrary. While the two mentioned above are the dominant ones, there are apt to be representatives of other lineages and/or clans, affinal and non-related, present also. Nonetheless, the tendency for villages to be associated mainly with one dominant clan has led to a preference for village exogamy (on

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<sup>1</sup> References to *Elementary Structures* in this article are from the 1969 edition published in Boston.

which Lévi-Strauss's model in part depends), clans being strictly exogamous (Roy 1912: 115 ff., 400; Sachchidananda 1957: 8).

What is at issue is the identification of this system with patrilateral cross-cousin marriage. Certainly the two models have in common a rule of 'delay' in repeating alliances in ensuing generations: but the delay is of a different sort in each case. In the theoretical model of patrilateral alliance it is the reciprocity that is delayed, the return of the woman who is to replace that one taken in the previous generation. There is no question of the complete *prohibition* on re-alliance in the following generation, which is the key feature of the actual Munda system, according to Lévi-Strauss's sources. His interpretation is also countered in two respects by recent ethnographic reports. Firstly, both Das and Choudhury state unequivocally that all cousin marriages are banned among the Munda (A.K.Das 1965: 10,12; Choudhury 1977: 62). Secondly, Yamada (1970) reports that the ban on repeating alliances lasts for longer than a single generation (as the above passage hints at one point). A tendency to remember only one's own clan name reduces the usefulness of the clan system as a regulator of marriage, despite this ostensibly being its chief function. Generally, however, people know the villages of their affines and immediate ancestors, and use this knowledge as a basis for deciding questions of marriageability: it is advisable to marry into a village with which there *has* previously been a marriage, but not for at least three generations (Yamada 1970:263, 384-5). This rule is also reported in Hoffman (1930-1941: 2969, 3827), Lévi-Strauss's original source for the above passage.<sup>2</sup> A similar rule occurs among the related Santal (Bouez 1975: 120). It is, I suggest, how the passage should really be interpreted, i.e. as a means of avoiding marriages with unacceptably close relatives, not as a system of patrilateral alliance. A final but by no means minimal point is that both the feasibility and the existence of prescriptive<sup>3</sup> systems of this

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<sup>2</sup> Though it admittedly does not occur in Koppers (1944), probably his immediate source, due to the scarcity of Hoffman's *Encyclopedia*.

<sup>3</sup> Preferences for marriage with the father's sister's daughter are, of course, another matter. From his Figure 80 (*Elementary Structures*, p.727) it is clear that Lévi-Strauss envisages for the Munda what anyone else would call a prescriptive system. It is true that elsewhere he has dismissed the distinction between the two as merely that between rules and behaviour (1966: 17-18); but Needham has frequently shown the fallacy of this view (1973, etc.), just as Korn has shown the extent of the confusion inherent in Lévi-Strauss's reasoning here (1973: 36-8).

sort have been questioned by Needham (1958; 1962: 106-7, 111 ff.).<sup>4,5</sup>

The second point I should like to raise concerns Lévi-Strauss's interpretation of the Bhuiya term *bandhu*, and the imputation of matrilineal alliance to this group.

...the Bhuiya of Orissa, who practise village exogamy, are divided into *kutumb*, or villages where the members are prohibited spouses, and *bandhu*, villages in which marriage can be contracted. Because the social organization of the Bhuiya is harmonic, viz., patrilineal and patrilocal, and *bandhu* designates maternal relatives, there is a double reason to conclude upon a system of generalized exchange (*Elementary Structures*, p.726).

Thus the term is glossed as i) 'marriageable', and ii) 'maternal relatives', in successive sentences. It is not easy to follow the reasoning here, but the implication is presumably that marriageable categories are also maternal ones, and that this suggests a system of repeated alliances of the sort characteristic of a rule of matrilineal marriage, a conclusion further supported by the 'harmonic' regime.

There are two things to quibble about here. First, it is clear from Roy (1935: 134-5), Lévi-Strauss's source for the above passage, that in the present case only the first interpretation of *bandhu* - 'marriageability' - is the correct one. Lévi-Strauss's view that the term means 'maternal relatives' (*Elementary Structures*, p.411 and n.6; p.426 and n.5) is based on a footnote in Held (1935: 71 n.1) in which the latter is quoting Hocart (1924: 103 n. ). Whatever the justice of this gloss as regards the Mahābhārata and the age of Manu, it is not applicable to the Bhuiya, nor to two related groups where the term also occurs, and in the same sense, the Juang and the Kharia (McDougal 1964: 322-8; Roy and Roy 1937: 188-9).<sup>6</sup> Secondly,

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<sup>4</sup> This observation of Needham's has itself generated some controversy though without really being disestablished.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Lévi-Strauss applies his interpretation of the Munda system to other parts of his overall argument (*Elementary Structures*, pp.199-200, 445, 463). I leave it to others, especially Australian specialists, to comment on any changes in the significance of these parts, in the light of what has been shown here.

<sup>6</sup> Like the complementary term *kutumb* ('agnate', 'tabooed in marriage'), meanings of *bandhu* vary considerably both regionally and diachronically (cf., for example, Inden and Nicholas 1977: 15-17, 117-9, nn.1,4,7,8).

ethnography which should have been available to Lévi-Strauss (and in one case clearly was) undermines his conclusion that the Bhuiya have 'generalized exchange'. While Roy states that marriage with cousins is allowed, he implies, solely on the basis of the terminological equivalence of mother's brother and father's sister's husband, that the system here is, or used to be, one of bilateral or 'restricted' exchange, not unilateral or 'generalized' exchange (1935:142-3). Ray Chowdhury goes even further, in that he regards cross-cousin marriage as disapproved, and not at all mandatory or preferential. The fact that marriage into one's mother's clan ('sept' in the original) is banned within at least three, and sometimes as many as five generations, also reduces the possibility of prescriptive matrilateral alliance existing here (1929:102, 106-7).

This is not the only example of the latter sort of error. Earlier Lévi-Strauss had told us that:

Certain tribes still practising matrilateral marriage justify it by disparaging the maternal lineage as too insignificant to merit a special prohibition. Thus the Santal, who incline towards matrilateral alliances, have the proverb: 'No man heeds a cow-track, or regards his mother's sept' (*Elementary Structures*, p.416).

What Risley, his source, actually says, however, is:

The Santals...are said to make up for their sweeping prohibition on the father's side by allowing very near alliances on the mother's side - a fact pointedly exemplified in their proverb...(1892: xlix).

The entire section of which this latter passage is a part is, as Lévi-Strauss realizes, a discussion of *sapinda* rules, and especially the feature widely found in North Indian tribal and caste society whereby the number of generations excluded in marriage is fewer on the maternal side than on the paternal side (*ibid.*:xlix-1), i.e. it deals with the extent of prohibitions, not with the existence of preferences, as one is apt to infer from Lévi-Strauss's words. What is more, the extensive literature on the Santal, admittedly mostly quite recent, shows not only disapproval of cross-cousin marriage, but also restrictions on marriage with maternal kin, contrary to the statements of both Lévi-Strauss and Risley.

Another point of difficulty concerns the Khasi. Lévi-Strauss adduces this group in support of his theory, reasonable enough in itself,<sup>7</sup> that matrilateral alliances do not depend on a particular mode of unilineal descent (*Elementary Structures*, pp.273-4). He chooses them under the belief that while the Khasi proper are

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<sup>7</sup> Cf., for example, Needham 1961; 1962: 64; 1964:237; etc.

firmly matrilineal, one of their sub-groups, the War, are apparently patrilineal. His evidence for this is the supposed existence among both groups of the *seng*, a descent group that is matrilineal in the case of the Khasi, but patrilineal (because of its descent from three *male* mythical ancestors) among the War. The mistakes occurring here were copied from Hodson (1925: 163-4), and are refuted by both recent and previously available ethnography. In fact the *seng* only appears among the War, and as a non-exogamous, cognatic, land-holding descent group; i.e. it is not in either sense unilineal, nor is it involved in the regulation of any sort of alliance system. Moreover, descent *per se* among the War is no less matrilineal than among any other Khasi sub-group (Das Gupta 1961: 152; 1968: 135). As for the Khasi '*seng*', this seems to be something quite different: *ka iing*<sup>8</sup> *seng*, merely a synonym for *ka iing khadduh*, the household of the senior maternal uncle of the matrilineal descent group, and headquarters of its ritual activities (Gurdon 1914: 88). Finally, the restriction against marrying one's mother's brother's daughter in the lifetime of her father (*ibid.*: 78) tells against the Khasi having any prescriptive marriage rules or systems, yet again contrary to Lévi-Strauss's assumptions. Cousin marriage is again not particularly liked here (Roy 1938: 130), probably due at least in part to the fact that over fifty per cent of Khasi are Christian.

Last but not least, we must register the fact that none of the literature on any of the Austro-Asiatic groups with which Lévi-Strauss deals - especially that available to him before the late 1940s - offers any clear evidence of present-day prescriptive marriage rules or systems, nor much on preferences for any particular category of relative as spouse.<sup>9</sup> Yet these are precisely the topics<sup>10</sup> of *Elementary Structures*, and the choice of these groups as examples intended to support its overall argument is unfortunate, since they do not fit his requirements.

Some further remarks can be devoted not to his use of sources, but to his choice of them. Thus his source for saying that the Kharia practise cross-cousin marriage is not the first-hand ethnography of Roy and Roy (1937) or Das (1931), but - of

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<sup>8</sup> Not *iing*, as in the English translation (*Elementary Structures*, p.274).

<sup>9</sup> Some of the Austro-Asiatic groups with which he does *not* deal are another matter, however. Also, cross-cousin marriage may be allowed in those related groups he does use, as among the Kharia, for example (Roy and Roy 1937: 223); but such non-regularized behaviour will hardly have the systemic significance in which Lévi-Strauss is interested.

<sup>10</sup> Speaking advisedly, that is: we have already alluded to Lévi-Strauss's unfortunate attitude to the relationship between prescription and preference (see note 2 above).

all people - Frazer (1919: 126), whose own source, Russell and Hira Lal (1916: 447-8) is not even credited. Even in 1949, when *Elementary Structures* was first published, Risley's work of 1891-2, a gazeteer-cum-encyclopedia rather than a proper ethnography as such, was well out of date, and hardly to be compared with Biswas (1935) or Roy (1912). Lévi-Strauss also places as much weight on Koppers (1944), a secondary source, as on the first-hand reports of Roy (1935) and Hoffman (1930-1941), though the latter is admittedly quite rare; and as much on Hodson (1925) as on Gurdon (1914), on whose original monograph the former based part of his article.

I am in no position to say how far this often cursory misreading and misinterpretation of out-of-date and ill-researched sources is typical of *Elementary Structures* as a whole, nor, in fairness, to what extent it has generally been overtaken by subsequent ethnography. I can only say that the few items it has of interest to my own research into Austro-Asiatic kinship have not improved my confidence in the veracity of its results or the validity of its author's methods; and that they have led me to believe that the monumental and ambitious task of producing an adequate theory of such kinship systems, well-substantiated by good-quality ethnographic examples, still awaits its redactor.

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