

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### THE NUCLEAR FAMILY AND ITS DERIVATIONS: *THAT'S* WHAT KINSHIP IS!

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*What Kinship Is – and Is Not*, by Marshall Sahlins, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013, 110 pp.

‘You have to be an intellectual to believe such nonsense. No ordinary man could be such a fool.’  
(George Orwell)

‘The cultural interpretation of procreation varies greatly ..., and its salience may for some peoples be implicit (but not ... unknown or irrelevant). In their prototypic manifestations, mother – and even fathers – are quite recognizable across cultural boundaries. Prototypic mothers are the women who give birth to their children, raise and nurture them. Prototypic fathers are the men who live with these women, are their sexual partners, are married to them, and provide care for their offspring. The categories may be extended to include those who are mother-like and father-like genealogically, behaviourally, structurally; and they may incorporate ... those who share some but not all of the characteristics that converge on the prototypes.’ (Keesing 1990: 163-4)

*Abstract.* Sahlins claims that kinship in human affairs is has to do with ‘culture,’ not ‘biology,’ but this dichotomy is antediluvian. More specifically, he claims that kinship is about a ‘mutuality of being,’ but his only evidence for such ‘mutuality’ consists of native platitudes, and these have little or no bearing on what people seem to think and actually do. Instead, the argument is put forward that all forms of kinship, or relations idiomized by kinship terms, derive logically from nuclear family relationships.

This book should be seen as a continuation of the arguments presented in *The Use and Abuse of Biology* (Sahlins 1976), which drew a sharp distinction between ‘a naturally given set of blood relationships’ (the last two words in quotes, suggesting derision) and ‘a culturally variable system of meaningful categories’ (Sahlins 1976: 22-3). Three things, however, have changed since that volume appeared. The Marxism that characterized it and some of Sahlins’ earlier writings (e.g. 1959, 1960, 1972: 1-39) has been largely replaced by a subscription to Durkheim’s ancient arguments on the priority of ‘society’ and ‘social facts’ over ‘the individual,’ ‘psychology,’ and (by implication) ‘biology’ (Durkheim 1982[1897], 1995[1912]); the sociobiology that *Use and Abuse* attempted to counter has now given ground to evolutionary

psychology; and, although several of Sahlins' earlier publications dealt with kinship (e.g. Sahlins 1961, 1962, 1963), the book under review, as its title indicates, is intended to provide nothing less than a definitive statement on anthropology's foundational subject.

Hence Sahlins entitles the two parts of his book as follows:

'What Kinship Is – Culture'

'What Kinship Is Not – Biology'

Can there be any doubt, then, about what he's talking about? Well, yes, there can. Consider what we now know about the development of incest taboos. More than a century ago Westermarck (1903: 544) suggested that 'there is an ... aversion to marriage between persons living very closely together from early youth.' The suggestion was ignored for decades, when Spiro (1975[1958]: 347-9) noted that, in the early days of the collectivist *kibbutz* movement in Israel, children who had been raised together never married – this despite there being no external prohibition on marriage other than close kinship. These findings would soon be supported by Shepher (1971), who stressed native statements of repugnance toward such marriage possibilities: 'We sat on the same pottie together,' one of his informants observed. Around the same time and continuing onto the present, Wolf (1966, 1970, 1993, 1995; Wolf and Durham 2004) noted something remarkably similar in his research in rural Taiwan. In traditional Chinese marriage husband and wife met at the wedding ceremony, provided the groom's people could afford the brideprice. If they could not, an alternative was available. The girl could be sent to the boy's home as early as age one, to be raised by his parents. Then, around age 16-18, the couple was married. Wolf found (1) that such 'second-class' marriages produced significantly fewer children than 'first-class' ones; (2) that they were sometimes resisted altogether; (3) that divorce was significantly more frequent than in 'first-class' marriages; (4) that men who married 'second-class,' though usually poorer, nonetheless frequented prostitutes more often than their more affluent compatriots; and (5) that women who married 'second-class' were more likely to pursue adulterous affairs than more affluent women. Lively debate has developed around the *kibbutz* and Taiwanese findings (e.g. Lieberman 2009; Lieberman and Lobel 2012; Shor and Simchai 2009), though in the main it seems to me that Westermarck has been vindicated. In fact there is some reason to believe that his hypothesis has wider ethnographic validity (Gardner 2009).

This being so, the conclusion is inescapable that when experience comes in, biology doesn't cease. We now know this more generally from the decoding of the human genome over the past decade or so: the key point is that our genes are *environment-sensitive* (Ridley 2003). Sahlins' view of biology is thus hopelessly antediluvian: it rests on the image of an entity – here the human embryo – whose destiny is predetermined until birth, when it is subjected to 'socialization' by external sources, themselves having been 'socialized.' The 'culture' into which it is 'socialized' is imagined amoeba-like, akin to the oozy blobs of the Grade-B sci-fi films of our – Sahlins and mine – boyhoods. Pinker (2002) has dubbed this the Standard Social Science Model, noting that a part of this model is an entirely discredited 'blank slate' notion of the brain.

Thus Sahlins can say that some things are 'culturally variable,' so, presumably, the contrastive category is 'biologically constant.' Thus he can also say that in studying human communities, 'we are not dealing with a lone man and woman copulating on a desert island' (p. 74), that people come into this world linked not only to a pair of parents but, as well, to a wider community consisting of both the living and the ancestral dead. I have no idea who he thinks he is contesting here. In any case, from the many examples of 'culture' he provides, it seems relatively clear that he has in mind the sorts of ethnographic particulars that anthropology is famous for. But then he dismisses as 'biology' the sort of particulars emphasized by Floyd Lounsbury and Harold Scheffler (Scheffler and Lounsbury 1971). He duly notes that Lounsbury and Scheffler deal not with genealogical connection as reckoned in biology but in native or *folk* theories of procreation, with what may be called *ethno-embryologies*. But why is this too not 'culture?' Because, I would suggest, it emphasizes more or less discrete relationships between quite discrete *individuals*, not something we can expect someone who writes contemptuously about 'bourgeois individualism' – the expression occurs repeatedly in the work under review – to take to heart. So what we have here is partly a collectivist polemic which, supposedly, is supported by the considerable ethnographic material at his disposal.

Thus in a rhetorical flourish Sahlins tells us that 'kinsmen are people who live each other's lives and die each other's deaths' (p. 28). One problem with this formulation is that it *is* a rhetorical flourish. Scheffler and Wolf have managed to say some important things about human beings by writing plainly, but this is not Sahlins' style, and it obscures the clarity of his exposition. Let me, moreover, suggest that a man who deals so heavily in rhetorical flourishes is likely to take seriously the rhetorical flourishes of others. More on this later. But the key question

for now is whether the proposition that kinship is a ‘mutuality of being’ – a subjective sense that two or more people feel themselves to be in some sense one – is a *definition of kinship* or a *discovery about kinship*. Sahlins is apparently unaware of this distinction, which just happens to be crucial to scientific inquiry. I think he thinks it’s a discovery: kinship, all instances of kinship, however defined, have a ‘mutuality of being’ in common. So kinship by definition, by this perspective, is whatever ethnographers and others have called ‘kinship.’ But this is a motley set of things, as Sahlins knows – another point to which I shall return.

I need first to deal with this posited ‘mutuality of being.’ Personally I have no doubt that people *sometimes* have a sense of unity with other people, but my personal impressions, like Sahlins’, are not ethnographic facts. He and I both need to rely upon idiomatic and ritual expressions of this mutuality, but neither may tell us much about what people really feel: anthropologists have grappled with this problem for some time (e.g. Halpin 1983; Leach 1954: 13-14; Needham 1972). Moreover, idiomatic expressions are just other people’s rhetorical flourishes: they tell us *something*, but not everything, and the ‘something’ may be misleading.

I really need to illustrate all this. Let me therefore turn to the outstanding ethnographic materials we have on the Mae Enga of Highland New Guinea: these are especially apt, because Sahlins employs them here and, to judge from some of his previous publications (e.g. Sahlins 1965, 1968:106 *et seq.*; 1976: 32), it seems to be his favorite ethnographic case. Sahlins (p. 82) lays great emphasis on Meggitt’s first-hand report that Mae Enga men idiomize a group whose core consists of men related exclusively through agnatic links as ‘a line of men begotten by the one penis’ of an ancestral founder (Meggitt 1965: 8). This, Sahlins (*ibid.*) maintains, evidences ‘the integration of the ancestral group in the composition of the foetus,’ which perforce is deemed to be not just a product of the sexual intercourse of its parents. Here is Meggitt (1965: 163) on the matter:

People believe that the mingling of semen and menstrual blood in the mother’s womb creates the foetus. Four months after conception a spirit animates the foetus and gives it an individual personality. ... Men say that the spirit is not a reincarnation of any particular ghost ... Instead it is in some way implanted by the totality of ancestral ghosts. ... The existence of the ancestral ghosts is thus as necessary for the birth of a normal child as is the initial conjunction of semen and menstrual blood. ... The psycho-physical dualism implicit in this summary emerges clearly in the people’s everyday comments on human conception and childbirth. They place little emphasis on the father’s biological role and are more concerned with the child’s acquisition of a spirit and ultimately of a social identity as a consequence of his father’s [group] membership.

From all this Sahlins (p. 83) concludes, for the Mae Enga, ‘that the so-called primary kinship of fatherhood is secondary to the extended brotherhood of the [patri]clan.’ This is logical nonsense. If group ‘brotherhood’ is ‘extended’ – and I shall show momentarily that it most certainly is – how can it also be ‘primary?’ In kinship semantics the two notions are antithetical, and the Mae Enga provide no exception. Thus elsewhere, in an article ignored by Sahlins, Meggitt (1964b: 193-4) tells us that, although all men of the father’s generation in his local group are referred to by the local ‘father’ term, the biological father is singled out as the quintessential member of his kin class – i.e. by modifiers which Meggitt translates as ‘without a doubt’ and ‘completely.’ He is, in a nutshell, the Real McCoy, what in kinship semantics is called the *focal* member of his kin class. By contrast, the other members of this class are members by *extension* – comparable to individuals nominated in English as *stepfathers*, *fosterfathers*, and *fathers-in-law*. It might also be said that their position is *modeled on* his, that they are *fatherish*, like the father in one way or another but not the Real McCoy. And that his position is *logically prior* to theirs. Note that whereas in English nonfocal membership is signaled by a specialized linguistic form – what semanticists call a *lexical marker* – ‘step-,’ ‘foster’ etc. – it is focal membership which is so marked in Mae Enga (‘without a doubt’). Such marking, as we shall see, is a recurrent feature in systems of kin classification.

The focal member of a class is sometimes called its *primary* member. Now Sahlins, who shows no familiarity whatsoever with kinship semantics, has a major problem with this word: recall his rendering of the position of the Mae Enga father as ‘so-called primary kinship.’ The implication is that only in the eyes of us bourgeois individualists is this position primary. Not so! Because the Mae Enga designate the father as the member of his kin class ‘without doubt,’ it is perforce primary for them as well. Moreover, as we shall see, comparable designations occur elsewhere by which close ethno-embryological kin are separated from other members of their respective kin classes: this, in fact, is one of the most secured ethnographic findings we have. For now it needs to be noted that this *semantic primacy* is not the same thing as *ontogenic primacy* – i.e. primacy in the course of an individual’s life – though the correlation between the two sorts of primacy is very high (Scheffler and Lounsbury 1971: 61-3). Nor, finally, is semantic primacy the same thing as *historical priority* (ibid.: 59-61). Sahlins (p. 66) fails utterly to make these distinctions.

All of a sudden, ‘tribal’ people seem not so unlike us. More specifically, the Mae Enga, I am certain, know very well that the members of a clan are generated by the several penises of their fathers. Why then is such group said to be ‘begotten by the one penis?’ I think this is a rhetorical flourish rather like the idea that George Washington is the Father of My Country. But then what about the ancestral ghosts and their connection with normal foetal development? The poet e.e. Cummings once wrote that ‘it takes three to make a child,’ by which he presumably meant what others have construed him to mean, viz. a mother, a father, and God. Sahlins would, I am certain, resist the similarities between us bourgeois individualists and the Mae Enga, but they are there for all to see.

There remains the downplaying of the father’s role in the creation of a foetus. There are several possibilities here. This may be the case when group solidarity is emphasized. And/or when people are being polite. In the working-class sections of Brooklyn from which both Sahlins and I hail, mention of one’s parents’ sexual life, or one’s sister’s, or one’s wife’s invites a punch in the mouth at the very least. In the Mae Enga case whatever tendencies of this sort exist are compounded by an extraordinary emphasis on the pollution alleged to emanate from women (Meggitt 1964a). A final possibility: individual paternity may be so obvious to Mae Enga men that they don’t bother to emphasize it; it doesn’t, in short, invite a rhetorical flourish.

Sahlins is so given to such razzle-dazzle that he actually *believes* the Mae Enga adage ‘We marry the people we fight’ (Meggitt 1965: 101) (p. 83 of the work under review). But Meggitt doesn’t. He *does* tell us that Mae Enga men take as wives women of other local patrilans, with whom they do indeed wage warfare (Meggitt 1977: 10). But this warfare is subject to several contingencies, based primarily on such considerations as that the wife’s brother of one man becomes the mother’s brother of his sons, and, in both Mae Enga theory and ours, people do not aggress against close kin. Thus it happens that a man and his sister’s son find themselves in opposed battle camps, but they avoid fighting each other, focusing upon men on the other side who are less closely related (Meggitt 1965: 215; 1977: 25, 81). Indeed, it sometimes happens that a man ‘refuses to join an attack on the [group] of his [maternal] uncle or [sororal] nephew and tries to warn his relatives of the danger’ (Meggitt 1965: 215). He may even join his maternal kin in battle, even against his natal group – though in such cases he avoids combat with his own brothers and other close kin (Meggitt 1965: 37; 1977: 29, 126-7). So there good reason to doubt that the ‘mutuality of being’ within the group trumps the so-called ‘so-called primary kinship.’

Close kinship is salient in other areas of Mae Enga life. Meggitt (1965: 169-71) notes that an individual may be attacked by the ghosts of deceased kin, and that '[t]he most formidable are those of members of his domestic group, especially of the father and mother and of siblings and children' (1965: 169) – as if nuclear family members are bound by a supernatural link not shared, or not as strongly shared, with more distant kin. Such supernatural links are often held to exemplify what anthropologists call 'the *couvade*,' to which Sahlins pays considerable attention in his argument for a 'mutuality of being' among kin. But note that in the Mae Enga case the strongest of such mystical ties are those within the nuclear family. This is also true of similar notions in Amazonia, the *locus classicus* of *couvade* theory (Shapiro 2009), and elsewhere (Aijmer 1992; Doja 2005). Which is to suggest that, to the extent that a 'mutuality of being' can be operationalized through what people say and do, it applies primarily between individuals reckoned to be close kin by ethno-embryological standards.

There is still more evidence for this in the Mae Enga case, particularly in mourning ritual. Thus Meggitt (1965: 181) tells us that '[t]he members of [the deceased's] immediate family withdraw from everyday life for several weeks.' Further, in an informative if ghastly analysis of the incidence of the severing of parts of fingers in mourning, Meggitt (*ibid.*: 184) found that the vast majority of such self-inflicted amputations were carried out by primary kin of the deceased. Finally, when the body is prepared for burial, '[m]embers of the immediate family ... are too grief-stricken to participate' (*ibid.*) There is more evidence that I might adduce here, but it should be clear from all this that, Sahlins to the contrary notwithstanding, what anthropologists have long dubbed 'primary kin' are primary to the Mae Enga as well.

There are two much more general points in all this. The first is that people favour close kin, whether in New Guinea or New York: they are less likely to abuse them physically, more likely to mourn their passing, and, although we need to look elsewhere for evidence of this, more likely too to share with them things more substantial than a 'mutuality of being.' The second point is that there's more to getting or analyzing ethnographic data than repeating native platitudes. 'Pop' anthropology and the tourist trade do this; professional anthropologists used to be held to a higher standard. I pursue this later.

I return to the Mae Enga case below. Can we say much the same for other parts of the world? As indicated, I believe we can for Amazonia. As it happens, the Amazonian materials figure conspicuously in Sahlins' analysis – none more than those gathered by the Brazilian

anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro from the Arawete of Central Brazil (Viveiros de Castro 1992). As is typical of indigenous populations in this area, the Arawete have what has been called a ‘universal system of kin categorization’ (Barnard 1978) – kin terms are applied to everyone. Is this, then, a state of universal ‘mutuality of being?’ Sahlins (p. 44) seems to think so, because he fails regularly to distinguish between *kinship* and *kin class*, but he is dead wrong. As I have shown elsewhere (Shapiro 2005), in such systems there is invariably a kin/nonkin distinction, with kin terms applied to nonkin as a sort of honorific – ‘Brother, can you spare some change?’ – and the sphere of kin is similar to what we bourgeois individualists posit. The Arawete do not disappoint in these regards. They have a term which Viveiros de Castro (1992: 160) translates as ‘relatives,’ and he further notes expressly ‘that the Arawete do *not* consider all the members of the group ‘relatives’ to whom kinship terms must be applied’ (ibid.; emphasis in original). Moreover, the two ‘parent’ terms, in their unmarked forms, are applied *only* to one’s actual parents (the real McCoys); others of their respective kin classes are lexically marked by suffixes (ibid.: 156). Viveiros de Castro does not tell us what exactly what these suffixes mean, but he *does* note quite plainly that they signal ‘derivations of the focal term of the class[es] translatable as] ‘father’ [and] ‘mother’ ... (ibid.: 159). Note immediately the similarity with Mae Enga in the lexical isolation of parents from others of their respective kin classes, as well as the contrast: in the Arawete case it is the nonfocal members of kin classes who are lexically marked, comparable to English *stepfather*, *stepmother*, *foster father* etc.

Now this selfsame marker, in its male version, is also applied to a lover of one’s mother (ibid.: 156). The Arawete, like many other Amazonian populations, have an institution which has been called ‘partible paternity’: both a man and a woman may have other sexual partners than their spouses, and, since there is also a notion that several sexual acts are necessary to form and develop a foetus, paternity may be shared by several men. *But not shared equally!* Beckerman and Valentine (2002) have implied that this is not the case, that what we have here is akin to the ‘group marriage’ theories of many Victorian thinkers, who posited that such collective mating was at one far-distant time practiced by our ancestors. But as I have shown (Shapiro 2009) their arguments are utterly preposterous: throughout Amazonia there is a lexical distinction within the local ‘father’ kin class between a woman’s husband and her lovers, with the former assigned focal status; that the former, not the latter, is most likely to be the biological father of her children, for the very good reason that he has the most sexual access to their mother; that

couvade restrictions apply mostly or entirely to him; and that the implied libertarianism of the institution is severely limited by male jealousy and rampant sexism. And I used the Arawete materials, along with many others, in support of these conclusions.

Furthermore, although Viveiros de Castro does not expressly say so, it appears that the biological parents are also the foci for Arawete kin class extension rules. Thus he tells us that the nonfocal 'father' term is applied to any man the biological father calls 'brother,' and that the nonfocal 'mother' term is applied to any woman the mother calls 'sister' (ibid.: 156). (Compare this rule of American kinship: any man my father calls 'brother' I call 'uncle'). This is of the utmost importance in kinship theory. When Lounsbury first put forward the extensionist position, he included intellectually intimidating quasi-algebraic extension rules employing detailed genealogical chains (e.g. Lounsbury 1964, 1965, 1968). Critics were quick to suggest that these rules were in his head but not those of the natives, who usually did *not* engage in detailed genealogical reckoning (e.g. Buchler and Selby 1968:44-45; Coult 1967; D'Andrade 1970). This allowed many anthropologists who were never comfortable with kinship semantics to ignore the whole extensionist argument and to posit, like Sahlins, that kinship is not everywhere based on ethno-embryological ties. Not so fast! We now have a rather large body of ethnographic data indicating that extension rules *are indeed* in native heads, albeit in Arawete-like form: they take one individual whose kin class relation to the individual doing the reckoning is already known (say, 'mother') and call his or her offspring by the kin term appropriate to the offspring of that other individual (in this case 'brother' or 'sister'). To be sure, the mother/child relationship is genealogical, but no detailed genealogical reckoning is necessary. Sometimes only relations between kin classes are involved, with no genealogical reckoning whatsoever: I might call a man 'brother' because a man I call 'father' calls him 'son' (see e.g. Mayer 1965; Scheffler 1972; Shapiro 1981: 34-5).

One possible response to all this is 'Who cares? Why should anyone be concerned with all this?' Actually I've heard this sort of response rather frequently – from students, from the proverbial man or woman in the street, and even from other anthropologists. My answer is this: for all their apparent 'abstractness,' systems of kin classification provide the most extensive data we have on the way in which the human mind constructs categories (Lakoff 1987). Moreover, as I hope to have shown by the end of this essay, they are crucial for settling key debates on the nature of human sociality. For now it should be clear (or even clearer) why so many of my

colleagues shy away from kinship studies, or, like Sahlins, think they've won the day by showing that a variety of criteria other than procreative links are employed by people around the world in creating kinship. These criteria are nowadays called 'performative,' in express contrast to 'procreative.' In the course of the book under review Sahlins mentions several performative criteria. It is impossible to deal with all of these adequately in a single article, so I need to be selective.<sup>1</sup>

One of the commonest, emphasized repeatedly in the performative literature, is that an individual becomes kin to another by simply *acting* as a kinsman should. Sahlins (pp. 62-3) presents evidence of this sort from his own fieldwork on the Fijian island of Moala. Here are his original words, based on an informant's remarks: 'Suppose two men, one a relative of yours and one not, had something you needed, which would you go to ...?' The reply was to this effect: 'I would go to my relative of course. If he didn't give it to me, and the other man did, I would know that the other man was really my relative' (Sahlins 1962: 204).

So the other man became a kinsman by acting as a relative should. But how a relative should act depends upon – is logically consequent on – a prior specification of the criteria which constitute being a relative on Moala; and it is quite clear from Sahlins' fine analysis that the key criterion is ethno-embryological relationship. His words again:

A ... notable distinction within the kindred is between near and distant kin. ... [H]ere Moalans have ... categorical phrases which discriminate degrees of kin distance. They commonly make a distinction between 'true relatives' ... and distant, 'relatives by descent' ... [T]he offspring of one's own grandparents are 'true relatives' ... I have pressed people, moreover, into a further distinction between [primary kin] and [more distant kin with a common grandparent]: the former [are] 'very true relatives ....' (Sahlins 1962: 22-3)

So Moalans have a notion of what anthropologists conventionally call 'the personal kindred,' and this notion is entirely comparable with those found among us bourgeois individualists.

Elsewhere, and some time ago, Sahlins (1963: 40) suggested that such notions are universal, and I think that here, at least, he is just about right.

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<sup>1</sup> I intend a fuller treatment elsewhere. Sahlins pays special attention to the data on Inuit ('Eskimo') populations, and in the original form of this essay I tried to follow his lead – only to find that, by so doing, I would exceed by far the space limitations of this journal. I hope to show in another context that performative kinship among the Inuit is derived from procreative models.

Sahlins does not tell us whether Fijian kin classification displays the sort of focality we have seen for the Mae Enga and the Arawete. For this we are indebted to Nayacakalou (1955: 40), who happens to be both an anthropologist and a Fijian native. This is especially significant, because performative scholars consistently claim that they render non-Western forms of sociality in ways true to native understandings, and they further claim that procreative approaches are ‘ethnocentric.’ It should now be clear that this is not at all the case, and that it is the performativists who superimpose an exogenous plan on their ethnographic materials. I consider below just what this plan is. For now we should return to the stranger who was kind (cognate, it should be noted, with ‘kin’) to Sahlins’ informant – more particularly, to why he was said to be a ‘real’ relative. Yup, it’s another rhetorical flourish – quite comparable, I think, to the panhandler who says to me, after I’ve given him a dollar, ‘You’re a *real* brother!’ But I don’t consider him a real brother, and I don’t think he thinks of me as a real brother. Similarly, two (real) brothers who quarrel may shout at each other ‘You’re not *really* my brother!’ but I think they think they’re really brothers. And I think, finally, that much the same applies in Fiji. In short, such assertions of focal or nonfocal status provide yet more examples of rhetorical flourish, and it is remarkably naive not to see this.

Another performative criterion for the establishment of kinship is commensality. In fact probably the most highly acclaimed of the performative analyses is Janet Carsten’s on Malay notions of ‘relatedness,’ as she calls it, preferring not to use the word ‘kinship,’ presumably because of its bourgeois individualist connotations (see Shapiro 2011 for critique and pertinent references). In any case, Sahlins embraces Carsten whole-heartedly (pp. 8-9). Her key argument is that, just as Malay siblings are held to share their mother’s blood, so nonkin can become kin by sharing a rice meal, because, it is also held, rice, once ingested, is transformed into blood. This sounds suspiciously like a native extension rule: the sharing of blood from commensality seems to be *modeled on* the sharing of the blood of procreation. Be this as it may, Carsten pays almost no attention to Malay kin classification, about which we in fact have quite a lot of information, especially from Banks (1974). He tells us that, although all kin of the same generation and gender are *superficially* classified with primary kin (e.g. one’s uncles are called ‘father’), non-primary kin are linguistically *marked* according to genealogical distance (e.g. the uncles are referred to as ‘father one degree removed’) – in the Malay language, of course. So Carsten’s claim of ‘undivided kinship’ in Malay society (Carsten 1995: 115) is quite mistaken:

Malay kinship is in fact decidedly divided – and along ethno-embryological lines. Her analysis, as I have shown elsewhere (Shapiro 2011) is highly defective in several ways. For example, she argues that households usually consist of sisters and their husbands and children, but ignores completely their compartmentalization into nuclear family units. Her entire enterprise seems more like an attempt to find a Marxist-feminist paradise in Malaysia than a discerning statement of native sociality.

Sahlins (p. 71) opines that ‘name-sharing may be the fundamental means of extending kinship widely beyond the residential community.’ By ‘fundamental’ he means ‘commonest,’ not *logically fundamental*, another instance of his abuse of English semantics. In any case, one of the examples he adduces is provided by the !Kung Bushmen of southern Africa, a people who by now have iconic status in both amateur and professional anthropology as ‘everybody’s favorite model of Primeval Man’ (Adams 1998: 70). Their claim to fame rests on the argument, advanced mostly by Lee (e.g. 1968, 1979, 1984), but endorsed by Sahlins himself (1972: 1-39), that they exemplify ‘primitive communism,’ a supposed early state of society characterized by unbounded sharing of resources, gender equality, nonviolence, and (of course) universal kinship. In point of fact, the !Kung are neither primitive nor communists. They have been in contact with foreigners for millennia – first African pastoralists, who pushed them into the undesirable desert areas, then Europeans (Schrire 1980; Wilmsen and Denbow 1990). Their ‘sharing’ is in fact what has been called ‘demand-sharing’ (Peterson 1997): outside the sphere of close kin, one gets by verbal coercion, because of the considerable amount of hoarding. Here is Marshall on the matter: ‘Altruism, kindness, sympathy, or genuine generosity were not qualities that I observed often in their behavior. However, these qualities were not entirely lacking, *especially between parents and offspring, between siblings, and between spouses*’ (1976: 288; emphases added). !Kung demand-sharing, moreover, sometimes goes beyond threats: their homicide rate ‘far exceeds that of the United States’ (Konner 1990: 162). Nor are they gender-egalitarian: men dominate women in palpable ways (Shapiro 2009: 4). As for kinship, they have what has already been called a universal system of kin categorization, but this does not prevent them from drawing a relatively clear line between what Marshall (1976: 22, 210) translates as ‘own people’ and ‘strangers.’ Outside the sphere of close kin, they apply kinship terms according to what Marshall (*ibid.*: 227) calls ‘the homonymous method’ – i.e. according to one’s personal name: for example, someone who happens to have the same name as one of my aunts I call ‘aunt.’ Two things should be noted

immediately. First, putting it this way, which is what the !Kung apparently do, is to translate *a native rule of kin class extension*: one's aunt, related by procreative links, serves as the *focus* for the wider membership of this kin class (see also Scheffler and Lounsbury 1971: 58-9). We have already come across this sort of thing in connection with the Mae Enga and others. The only indication in the ethnography that 'the homonymous method' creates anything like real kinship, according to the !Kung, comes from Lee's report (1984: 71-2) that the !Kung name he himself was given was the same as that of a native man he met, who invited him to visit 'our people,' emphasizing 'our' repeatedly. I think this is yet another rhetorical flourish, an attempt to be polite by being inclusive. For the fact is – and this is the second point – direct procreative kinship is so important to the !Kung that the 'mother,' 'father,' 'son,' 'daughter,' and 'sibling' terms are not the bases of *any* extension: they apply *only* to the closest procreative kin.<sup>2</sup> To the chagrin of Marxists like Lee and Sahlins, drawing on the atavistic nonsense proffered by Frederick Engels, Karl Marx's patron, more than a century ago (Engels 1972[1884]), the core residential group among the !Kung is the nuclear family. Here is Marshall on this:

The !Kung extend the incest taboo to certain categories of persons outside the nuclear family, because they hold that the relationships *resemble* the relationships of the nuclear family. ... A man will say explicitly, for instance, that he must not marry this or that woman because it would be 'like' marrying his mother, daughter, or sister. (Marshall 1976: 254; emphases added to indicate *modeling*)

Now Marshall (1976: 224) tells us that a !Kung man may not have the same name as his father nor a woman her mother. Rather, the preferred source of his name is a grandparent – i.e. someone who, though related, is not *directly* concerned with his *physical* generation. I suggest – though I cannot demonstrate this here – that *the name is associated with one's spiritual generation*. This is quite clear elsewhere, for example, among the Bororo of Central Brazil. Here, although an individual's soul-substance is present at birth, it is increased later, at ceremonial naming. The name-givers are preferably the cross-sex siblings of the young person's parents – his/her mother's brother and father's sister – people who, like !Kung grandparents, are kin but are not *directly* involved with a person's *carnal* generation. As if to underscore the point, the name-givers are expected to refrain from sex just prior the ceremony (Crocker 1985: 63-7).

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<sup>2</sup> According to Lee (1984: 68), even the terms for primary kin can be extended to others on the basis of name-sharing. I suspect he and Marshall worked in different parts of the !Kung area.

Sahlins makes the important point that, in native ideologies of procreation, there is, in addition to the contributions of the parents, that of a ‘third party,’ which is held to be spiritual, like the role just after conception of Mae Enga ancestors. But he seems to regard it as *additive to* the parental contribution. I suggest instead that it more often regarded as *antithetical* to it. Thus in the Bororo case, the ‘third party’ – the name – is not an *extension* of kinship, as locally construed, but *an antithesis of it*, a sort of ‘anti-kinship,’ something which is held to have existed since the Beginning of Things and which, unlike the parentally-generated body, lasts forever. Hence Crocker (1985: 67) expressly likens it to Christian godparenthood (see also Gudeman 1972). But this latter, it should be clear, is *modeled on* physical parenthood: a *godfather* is a special kind of *father*, a *godmother* a special kind of *mother* etc. I submit that a comparable argument can be made for Bororo name-givers as opposed to Bororo parents: the latter are responsible for an individual’s *physical* existence, which enables the *antithetical* construction of a *spiritual* existence made possible, or at least enhanced, by the name-givers. Hence the generalization that both performative kinship and ‘third party’ kinship are *modeled on* procreative kinship – the former as a *reduced* version of it, the latter as its *antithesis*. If this is true, then *all other kinship constructs derive logically from procreative ones*. Presumably these begin *ontogenically* as *nurturance*-based constructs in the minds of small children (Hirschfeld 1989) and are subsequently, with the advent of sexual knowledge, transformed into those based upon procreation. But that they *are* so based has been established well beyond a reasonable doubt.

It should be underscored that generation by naming is very much a part of Judaism and Christianity. In the Book of Genesis this is precisely how God creates the world, and in the New Testament Jesus, who is held to re-generate the world, is regularly referred to as The Word. Note too the emphasis on his asexuality, his separation from carnal generation: he is said to be ‘without sin,’ and to have been born of a virgin. Moreover, his re-generation of things is accomplished by sacrifice, not sex. As it happens, this very antithesis is pursued with a vengeance in ancestor cults around the world. These are virtually always the province of men, with women having at best only minor roles – and even then only if they are virginal or post-menopausal, i.e. non-participants in carnal generation (Jay 1985, 1992). So once again the West/Rest dichotomy, so crucial to Sahlins, is without merit.

Very often re-generative ‘third-party’ ritual is itself *modeled on* procreation but is still held to be antithetical to it. For example, the northeast Arnhem Landers of Australia, among whom I myself carried out fieldwork, circumcise their boys at about the same point in life as the onset of menstruation in girls, and the blood spilled is expressly *likened to* menstrual blood. The ritual is said to be a sort of ‘rebirth’ into manhood, but this ‘birth,’ unlike the first one, is effected only by men. Women are prohibited from witnessing it, and from knowing the myths describing the First – the ‘ancestral’ – performances of this and other sacred rituals. These myths involve acts of creation *through naming and sacrifice* and are, conveniently, bracketed off from everyday experience: just as Jesus’ conception is unlike – indeed, antithetical to – the conception of the rest of us, so my informants, after narrating a myth, would say something like ‘That story I just told you, it’s not from this time now; it’s from the Dreaming,’ i.e. the Creative Period.<sup>3</sup>

Sahlins allows that close kin sometimes quarrel (p. 24) and that ‘tribal’ people sometimes wage war, as the Mae Enga do, though even this he sees – quite wrongly as I believe I have shown – as a corporate exercise. But the gist of his image of people outside the West is that of touchy-feely communitarians devoid of individual initiative and self-assertion. This is quite inaccurate – and not just because men, being men *per se* and not just instantiations of the local ‘culture,’ are inclined to fight over women, if nothing else. Consider again the Mae Enga – this time Meggitt’s analysis of the position of leaders, so-called Big Men – in native trade networks in the area:

[A]most all the Big Men I have known act very much like Tammany Hall incumbents, ... paying off those supporters whose aid is essential to them but also retaining for themselves whatever resources they can [extract] at the expense of the weaker and poorer members of the group .... (Meggitt 1974: 190)

Not much ‘mutuality of being’ here! Rather, and again, we seem to have bourgeois individualists in both New Guinea and New York!

I believe I have shown that Sahlins’ view of what we used to call ‘the primitive world’ is highly inaccurate. It is not too much to say that, at his hands, cultural anthropology becomes the study of native homilies. ‘Tribal’ people are viewed as they are in the media: Stone Age simpletons in states of permanent communitarian bliss, blindly following ancestral dictates,

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<sup>3</sup> For other examples of such ‘pseudo-procreative’ ritual, as it has been called, see Gregor and Tuzin (2001) and Shapiro and Linke (1996).

incapable of holding complicated cognitive models or acting as individuals or distinguishing between rhetoric and reality. More specifically, he fails utterly to grasp that much of human life involves categories with complicated structures. One of these complications is provided by what have been called *contingency rules* (Keesing 1971b) – rules that take account of special circumstances. Thus as a Mae Enga warrior I fight my mother's people *except for* her brother and other close kin, who I *might* even join in battle against my own group, but in *that* case I do not aggress against my 'without a doubt' brothers.

A further complication stems from what Bateson (1972[1955]: 177-93) called *framing* – the consideration that much of human communication occurs within certain usually implicit understanding or *frames*, some of which involve a denial or downplaying of information communicated in other frames. Bateson's favourite example is play behaviour, in which things happen that can be labeled as 'only play,' i.e. unreal, in the sense that they would not normally or could not occur outside the 'play' frame, or, if they did, would have different consequences from those occurring within that frame. Thus I am *really* a retired anthropologist, not a Mae Enga warrior; I'm *playing* at the latter role *only* temporarily and *only* for expository purposes in this essay. Such role-*playing* is especially common in what we usually dub 'religious behaviour'; hence Turner (1986: 101) has pointed out that such behaviour occurs 'in the subjunctive mood,' i.e. within 'play' frames. Thus my Aboriginal Australian friends bracket off the miraculous events they allege to have happened 'in the Dreaming' from the more mundane actions of 'this time now.' It could even be said that *subclassification* in kinship, something we have already dealt with, is a form of subjunctivity. Thus, to return to my role as a Mae Enga warrior, although I do not aggress against my 'without a doubt' brothers, I have no qualms doing so against those I *liken* to them by classifying them *as if* they were my brothers. Furthermore, subjunctivity and contingency are often combined. Thus a Catholic priest is not *really* my father, though as a show of respect – or a strategy of manipulation – I *might* call him 'father' and treat him *as if* he were.

A final complication has to do with what Keesing (1970: 433) calls 'rules of thumb' – normative statements that may (or may not) approximate effective rules. 'We marry the people we fight' is such a statement, implying as it does that social life is a function of named collectivities – a recurrent error in ethnographic analyses (Keesing 1971a; Shapiro 1981: 118; Wagner 1974). So too are the canonical ethnographic accounts about appropriate behaviour with somebody I call (say) 'brother' in Tribe X. Such accounts, as Keesing (1969) has stressed

elsewhere, are usually based upon native statements of appropriateness that pertain to focal members of kin classes and, as the Mae Enga materials indicate, have little or no bearing upon effective rules of action towards nonfocal members. They *do* suggest, however, that when asked about behaviour appropriate to a member of a kin class, our informants think *primarily* about focal membership.

These considerations, presumably familiar to any ethnographer – indeed, to anyone who participates in social life – are lost on Sahlins. What he offers instead is an anthropology on the cheap, rather like those over-financed people who ‘explore’ other ‘cultures’ via luxury cruising and tourist ‘excursions’ (Sandall 2001).

I do not, in short, regard the work under review as an entirely or even a primarily scholarly exercise. Rather, it seems to me more a badly reasoned defense of an antediluvian collectivist faith. The ingredients of academic trendiness are all in place: the recurrent derogatory reference to ‘bourgeois individualism’ (this from a man who for many years held an endowed Chair at the University of Chicago, founded by John D. Rockefeller); the hostility towards science and the nuclear family; the repeated employment of ‘deconstructionist’ argument, implying that opponents are no more than ‘tools,’ witting or unwitting, of an oppressive Establishment; and the grand conceit that one is part of a Special Class of People who have somehow managed to transcend the bonds which entrap the rest of us and penetrate into Ultimate Reality.

There is something quite wrong with the discipline when someone can pass himself off as an ‘expert’ on human kinship who has nothing resembling a familiarity with semantic theory; who is similarly unfamiliar with related developments in cognitive science and biology; who therefore subscribes to an Everyperson’s biology/culture dichotomy, abandoned by Darwinian scholars for more than four decades (Lehrman 1970); who confounds *kinship* and *kin class*; who mistakes native platitudes for effective rules of sociality; who fails to appreciate the subjunctive nature of much of human action; who makes elementary errors of logical priority and, by so doing, fails to grasp the structure of his own field materials and those of others; and whose primary scholarly inspiration is from texts a century old. Although, as noted, *What Kinship Is – and Is Not* makes one or two good points, it is ultimately not only a failed book but – ironic, this, in view of Sahlins’ ‘radical’ associations – a reactionary one at that, the culturalist’s last stand against the very real advances in Darwinian science (Barkow 2006), ongoing research in semantics and cognition, and more rigorous ethnographic analysis. The author’s main goal is not the

*advancement* of knowledge but the preservation of dogma. His many supporters, similarly cloistered, will love it, but reasonable people should avoid it like The Plague.

**Acknowledgement.** I am grateful to Don Brown and Tom Parides for commenting on an earlier version of this essay, and for encouragement.

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