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Cyclical Orders and the Problem of Hierarchy

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### Cyclical orders and the problem of hierarchy

In his paper *Ladders and circles: affinal alliance and the problem of hierarchy* (*Man* (N.S.) 25, 472-488) Robert Parkin, following Leach, claims (p. 485) that I have misinterpreted the Kachin origin myth as historical reality. May I refer the reader to the second edition of *The elementary structures of kinship* (Lévi-Strauss 1969), where in note 2, p. 254, I have answered that criticism and demonstrated that it was unfounded?

On the other hand, there is nothing new in the idea that short alliance circles neutralize alliance asymmetry (Parkin, p. 487). Already in 1952, at the *Anthropology Today* conference, I had pointed out that intransitive cycles integrate communication and subordination (in Kroeber 1953: 547). It is only when the cycles lengthen that the system becomes threatened by external contingencies. Apart from going back to short cycles, the remedy is either to admit a limited amount of restricted exchange inside the system, or to give more weight to its bridewealth component (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 266, 268, 276, 452, 466, *passim*). Since then I have discussed several times the problems raised by intransitive cyclical orders in relation to transitive non-cyclical ones; for instance in 1958 (see Lévi-Strauss 1963: 311-12); in 1962 (see Lévi-Strauss 1987: 129-32) and in 1978 (1987: 156-8).

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- Kroeber, A.L. (ed.) 1953. *Anthropology today: an encyclopedic inventory prepared under the chairmanship of A.L. Kroeber*. Chicago: Univ. Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 1963. *Structural anthropology*. London: Basic Books.
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Grateful though I am to Professor Lévi-Strauss for his comments, they are really peripheral to the main purposes of my article, which were to try and find reasons for Leach's apparent reluctance to recognize the existence of alliance cycles as

normal among the Kachin, and to develop a little further our understanding of the relationship between affinal alliance and hierarchy. I claim no particular originality in respect of either short alliance cycles or transitivity as such, though at the same time it was obviously desirable to give a full statement of the problem. In any case, I cannot say that I find much resemblance between my comments and what Lévi-Strauss had written in the places he cites. For instance, the passage in *Anthropology today* treats only transitive hierarchy as a matter of 'social order', locating intransitive hierarchy firmly in myth (except among hens!). The passages in *Anthropology and myth* would seem to have more to do with the closely related but analytically separate matter of the distinction between hypergamy and hypogamy, despite the extraordinary comment that 'from a formal point of view, it is unnecessary to make the distinction between the two forms' (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 131).

As to the famous matter of the five clans of the Kachin and their status as myth or reality, like Leach I find the relevant passages of *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* at least ambiguous (I cite from the 1949 edition, the relevant one in respect of Leach's initial reaction (1961 [1954]: 81)). It is true that, in general, Lévi-Strauss is careful not to confuse myth with reality (e.g. 1949: 301, 308, 309), and he doubts that the five groups in question are any longer 'clans proprement dits' (p. 299) or 'tribus' (p. 300). But he clearly accepts their existence in some shape or form (pp. 300, 308, 309, 353), is able to find names for them (p. 299) and to show how they are allied affinally (diagram, p. 303), and more than once he traces their genesis to a former but now near-defunct (and apparently hypothetical) clan system (pp. 302, 518, 585). For him, in fact, they seem to be a stage in the hierarchization, or at any rate of the evolution, of Kachin social structure, but for Leach they were 'simply a kind of verbal model which the Kachin themselves use to explain the general pattern of their system' (*ibid.*). Small wonder that Leach — who, unlike either Lévi-Strauss or myself, actually did fieldwork among the Kachin — should have felt that some clarification was called for.

Finally, a few comments are in order on Lévi-Strauss's argument relating to the instability of generalized exchange and the dangers of its collapse into restricted exchange, and especially his allusion to the possibility of 'a limited amount of restricted exchange inside the system' as a 'remedy'. In the passages he cites in his letter the main ethnographic example supporting these arguments is once again the Kachin case, though I can recall no passage in Leach referring to the possibility of symmetric exchange among the Kachin: not even the desire to stress equality of status leads to it, but simply to the shortest unidirectional cycles possible (Leach 1954: 136, 151, 203). In what sense is it useful to talk about instability anyway, given the considerable number of societies with

a noticeably continuous history of generalized exchange? Nor need the collapse of particular alliance cycles surprise us, let alone threaten the ideological bases of the system: people are often more mortal than ideas. If anything, the ethnographic situations to be recognized today are those of restricted exchange encompassing the generalized exchange of lower order units (e.g. the Juang of middle India, McDougal 1963) or of asymmetric exchanges taking place under the umbrella of a symmetric terminological scheme (e.g. in south India; cf. Good 1981). Even within an asymmetric affinal alliance system lacking such complications, one would normally expect a reversal in the direction of alliances to reorient the system, not to make it symmetric. The evolutionary model has also been reversed (e.g. Needham 1967: 45-6; 1974: 40-1; Allen 1986; 1989), so that symmetric exchange gives way, if at all, to asymmetric exchange or to a completely non-elementary structure. How strange to find this argument being trotted out virtually unchanged after over forty years, as if none of these later observations had ever been made.

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### Rights in women and the incidence of divorce in patrilineal societies

Sharon Hutchinson's lively presentation (*Man* (N.S.) **25**, 393-411) of her data on Nuer marriage in the 1980s seems to concentrate unduly on the rights *husbands* and their kin acquire in women through marriage. In discussing possible structural determinants of unstable marriage in patrilineal systems, notwithstanding her criticisms, she also appears to attach excessive weight to the acquisition by husbands of genetical rights in their brides. As I pointed out almost thirty years ago (Lewis 1962: 39-43; cf. Lewis 1985: 257-9), there is abundant evidence that the monopolistic acquisition of rights in the fertility of wives is perfectly compatible with high divorce rates and substantial marriage payments. This occurs in some patrilineal cases and not in others.

Comparative study of the stability of patrilineal marriage suggests that a significant factor here is the extent to which the bride retains after marriage substantial legal identity independently of her husband. This is reflected in the degree to which the husband and his kin become, as a result of the marriage, responsible for the legal personality of the bride. Thus, amongst the nomadic Somali where in the 1950s divorce was common and marriage payments high, the husband acquired full uxorial and genetical rights in his wife but did not become fully liable at law for the person of his bride. She retained her pre-marital legal identity as a member of her own patrilineage. Hence, claims for blood-wealth for (or against) a married woman were the responsibility of her own natal kin. In the event of her murder, her own kin and not her husband's sought reparation. Amongst the Nuer (and in some other patrilineal cases), on the other hand, a husband and his lineage assumed full legal responsibility for the bride, according to Evans-Pritchard (1945; 1951) and P.P. Howell (1954: 57-8). This, of course, was in a context, according to these authors, of stable marriage. This prompts the question, in the modern situation of unstable Nuer marriage described by Hutchinson, has there been a corresponding increase in the legal independence of wives and a decline in the legal responsibilities of husbands? How, if at all, has this been affected by the changes Hutchinson recounts? Information on these points would be a valuable addition to the comparative study of marriage stability in kin-based societies.

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