

# Since the beginning of anthropological study

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Since the beginning of anthropological study the idea of kinship has been defined in many ways.

Lucy Mair (1972) classed it " Kinship is the expression of social relationships in a biological idiom" In essence this means that kinship is defined by a society's particular beliefs about biological connections between people. Particularly in small scale societies kinship is an important principle in the organisation of members, which can be based on either marriage or descent. It is this difference that was acknowledged by the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1968) " A kinship system does not exist in the objective ties between individuals: it exists only in human consciousness". Expressed in other terms this simply means that ideas about kinship cannot be grouped together, it is too complex. Kinship can only be studied by looking at the recognition of relationship ties from the perspective of a chosen society. This essay will look at kinship in the form of descent.

Descent can be defined as the socially recognised links between ancestors and descendants. There are 4 major theories of descent that can be used to explain the line of kinship in various societies. These are; Unilineal descentBilineal descentParallel descentBilateral descentA society recognised as having a unilineal descent system will trace kinship only through a single line of ancestors, male or female. If descent is traced through the female side children will belong to their mothers kinship group (a matrilineal society), but if it is traced through the male side the children will become members of the fathers group (patrilineal society). A bilineal descent system (also known as double descent), is one in which a child is both a member of their mothers matrilineage and fathers patrilineage.

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Such a system is illustrated by the Yako of Nigeria where rights are transferred through kinship. Through membership to the fathers group (patrilineal) a child gains rights to land and residence, rights to other moveable goods e. g. livestock are gained through the mothers group (matrilineal). A parallel descent system (also called a 'rope' system) is where the males of a society trace their descent through the male line of their father and the females trace their descent through the female line of their mother. The Mundugumor society in New Guinea, as researched by Margaret Mead (1901-1978) follow this type of descent but have a variation in that males belong to their mothers kinship group and females belong to their fathers kinship group.

Such a descent line is unusual as it is the only kinship system where brothers and sisters do not belong to the same kinship group. A society which follows a bilateral/cognatic system is recognised by a pattern of descent where every biological ancestor and descendant is a socially recognised relative. In effect every child is a member of both their mother and fathers kinship group and so membership along with rights to land can be traced through any combination of the parents descent lines. The Iban of Western Borneo use a cognatic system whereby the link of filiation (being the child of someone) is used for the distribution of rights. In order to further illustrate the distinctive features of certain kinship systems this essay will, using a number of ethnographic examples, concentrate on the theories of unilineal and bilateral descent. As stated earlier unilineal descent can either be matrilineal or patrilineal, the Nuer of Sudan as studied by Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973) during the 1930s are a patrilineal society.

This means that children belong to the patrilineage of their pater – the socially recognised father – as illustrated in the diagram below. People within the society are related if they can trace their descent to the same male ancestor. Membership to such a lineage is significant to the control and distribution of resources such as land and cattle. PATRILINEAL DESCENT In the Nuer society, a man becomes a woman's husband when an agreed number of bridewealth cattle is given in his name. It is this person, who traded the cattle, that will be the pater of any children the woman bears even if another man is known to be the genitor, the biological father.

Evans-Pritchard said that the Nuer have, theoretically, a very strict patrilineal ideology, so much so that it has given rise to the situation where a woman can be seen as a man. If a woman is barren and owns livestock she can exchange bridewealth cattle in return for rights over another woman as a wife. The woman-husband would ask a male from her kinship group to impregnate the wife, but since she was the one who exchanged the cattle she would have paternal rights over any children born to the wife meaning they would belong to her kinship group. Nuer kinship groups are divided up into patrilineal lineages which run parallel to the territorial divisions of the tribal area. Each 'clan' is associated with a certain area of the Nuer owned land, this is shown in the following diagram. NUER TERRITORY & LINEAGE However, Evans-Pritchard wrote that 'the correspondence is not exact' and the Nuer themselves think more in terms of territory than lineage.

This means that in reality membership of a descent group depends on context and situation. This goes back to Claude Levi-Strauss' idea that kinship 'exists only in human consciousness', as people living in the same

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village think of themselves as all being members of the lineage group associated with that village, whether or not they are true members by birth. In comparison to the Nuer, the Ashanti of Ghana are a matrilineal society, unilineal descent which follows the female line, children are members of their mothers kinship group and the father has no rights over any children produced by his wife. The authority figure for any Ashanti children would be their mothers brother, a senior male of their lineage, with whom they live. Ashanti husbands do not live with their wives and children, they instead take up residence with their sister, whose children are his heirs. This arrangement means that one of the most important relationships to the Ashanti people is the one between brother and sister.

As Gluckman wrote ' a man seeks companionship from other men, love from his sister and sleeps with his wife'. Within the Ashanti kingdom are 7/8 matrilineal clans, called Abusua, each of which are founded by a separate founding woman. The Ashanti believe that the undiluted blood from this founding woman (the abusua blood) is passed from each woman of the lineage to her daughter, as illustrated below. TRANSFER OF ' ABUSUA'The Ashanti believe that the bond between a mother and child is absolutely, morally binding. A persons status, rank and lineage membership is passed from the mother and so she is the most important person in validating a child's life.

The strong matrilineal ideologies of the Ashanti also run into the Royal ' family'. The king, the Asantehene ruled in conjunction with his sister or his sister's daughter, the Asantehemaa, who would be the mother of the next Asantehene. Due to this matrilineal line none of the Asantehene's children

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are royal or have a claim to the throne. Again this highlights the importance of the relationship between brother and sister in a matrilineal society as the Asantehene passes his title and status to his sister's son. A bilateral or cognatic kinship system is, in a sense, the opposite to a unilineal system, children have relationship ties and rights on both their mother and father's side. The Lozi of Western Zambia are a 'cognatic' society, studied by Max Gluckman (1911-1975) in the 1940s.

In cognatic systems, membership to a kinship group can be claimed through a variety of ties, the Lozi say of their system that a child 'belongs to both sides'. Such an idea is important as membership to a group involves rights to land. Unlike many societies, such as the Nuer of Sudan, when a Lozi woman marries she does not give up her rights to the husband's group but retains rights within her own natal group and passes them on to her children. In effect, this means that a woman's child can, through her, claim rights to land in their grandparents' village. This is shown in the diagram below where a child can live anywhere as long as he / she has a kinship link. TRANSFER OF RIGHTS & KINSHIP TERMINOLOGY Within Lozi kinship groups relationships are extended outward to not only include a child's parent, but also the parents' siblings.

This is shown in the way relatives address and give reference to each other, these terms are highlighted in the diagram above (in brackets). The use of the same term for many relations, for example 'ndate' for the father as well as his siblings, indicates that the same feelings and behaviour from the child are extended beyond the parents to other close relatives. A Lozi child would have a typically 'motherly' relationship with not only their mother, but also

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their mother's brothers and sisters. As can be seen from the examples given in this essay, membership to a kinship group is important to many aspects of life. In many societies rights to land and residence are passed to the child from other relatives and a child must prove a kinship link exists before they can claim such rights. Kinship can also be used as a form of social control and organisation, if a young adult required help in some way he would turn to members of his kinship group who would uphold their own duty to assist other members.

Clearly with these ideas, without a kinship link a young adult would have small hope of establishing himself as a full member of a society where a kinship link is, in a sense, validation.