



Skinship

Touchability as a virtue in East-Central India

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In “What kinship is” Marshall Sahlins (2011) provides a new and provocative answer to an old and much-debated question, defining it as the “mutuality in being.” For the Halbi speakers of the Bastar Plateau in East-Central India kinship is defined by touch: juniors greet seniors with tactile gestures of familial respect that are reciprocated by tactile gestures of familial love. On certain ritual occasions these salutes are adorned with colorful flowers, tasty food, purifying water, sweet-smelling incense, nice-sounding words, and heartfelt sentiments. Non-kin, by contrast, are defined by non-tactile gestures of mutual respect. The general implication of this case for the study of kinship as “mutuality of sensible being,” to give Sahlins’ formulation a slight twist, involves a move away from the study of kinship as the abstract semantics of reference terminologies to a consideration of the pragmatics of face-to-face sensible relations between people. Little ethnographic research has been done on the latter; the Japanese word “skinship,” evoking as it does the coming together of touch and kinship, signifies a fresh approach to the analysis of kinship.

Keywords: kinship, skinship, touchability, modes of address, senses, value, India

The argument

Skinship is a Japanese word most Japanese people think is an English word. It is not in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) but one can understand why some Japanese might think it should be. The word skinship makes good sense to the English ear, evoking as it does the coming together of the sense of touch with the concept of kinship. It suggests a *sensible* approach to kinship analysis, one that gives primacy to tactile communication in the ordering of family relationship by drawing attention to the role of touchability as a non-verbal moral code in “face-to-

Acknowledgements: Thoughtful suggestions from two anonymous reviewers have enabled me to make substantial improvements to this essay. I am also grateful to Professor Akio Tanabe of Kyoto University and the graduate students of my 2004 “Skinship” seminar for introducing me to the wonderful world of Japanese skinship during my short visit to Japan. My debts to the people of Bastar are too numerous to mention but as I rely primarily on data on Maraar kinship in this essay I must single out Mr M.S. Mali who first introduced me to the equally wonderful world of Halbi skinship.

face” relations between people. This is precisely the sense in which I will use the term here because I found, as I struggled to make sense of my fieldwork data on kinship usages of the Halbi speakers of Bastar District in Central India, that the conventional wisdom, which gives priority to the semantics of reference terminology, is abstract non-sense in the literal, non-pejorative sense of that term. Skinship is not only a word we need in the OED, it also signifies a much needed fresh approach to the analysis of kinship, one whose scope and limits I will strive to define in this essay. The notion of skinship, I will suggest, enables us to grasp the sensible principles of virtue that define the cultural specificities of an ethnographic case. Morality is the art of living together well and this presupposes some commonsense values that can transcend generational time and enable people to cope with vagaries of life and the joy and pain this necessarily brings. Familial love and respect are key values found everywhere but everywhere differently for they are shaped by deep historical relations of contiguity. In Bastar these values are polyvalent and embedded in extremely complex forms of verbal and non-verbal modes of address that are culturally specific to this region of India. My essay is divided into three parts. In the first part I briefly examine the question “What is skinship?” by looking at the Japanese origin of the word “skinship” in a cross-cultural context. In the second section I strive to develop the idea of skinship as a theoretical concept for use in ethnographic research. I do this by locating the idea in the context of existing theories of face-to-face sensible communication. In the third section I examine the implication of this concept of skinship for the study of kinship with illustrative data drawn from my own fieldwork in India.

What is skinship?

Skinship in Japan

The Japanese sense of the word “skinship” is our starting point because it raises fundamental questions about the relationship between tactile communication and cultural difference. Wikipedia notes that it was initially used to describe “the closeness between a mother and her child due to the physical contact of their skin” while today “the word is generally used for bonding through physical contact, such as holding hands, hugging, or parents washing their child at a bath” (Wikipedia 2007). Another online source, Wordspy (2007), gives a somewhat broader definition that includes other senses. It defines skinship as “feelings of relatedness and affection between two people, particularly a mother and a child, caused by hugging, touching, and other forms of physical contact.” This is consistent with the only direct evidence I have on how the term is used in Japan. It comes from the seven-part video series called *Childhood* which examines child raising practices in five continents. In one sequence in the second part a Japanese mother called Mitiko argues the case for breastfeeding in the following terms:

I was convinced mother’s milk gives strong immunities that will help the child grow strong. Then there is the “skinship” (*sukinshippu*) between mother and child, eye gazing into eye. Besides I think human milk is best for a human child. (Haines-Stiles and Montagnon 1991: II, 44 mins).

The basic sense of the word skinship, then, comes from touch but it necessarily involves the other senses because it is impossible not to see, hear and smell people when you are close enough to touch them; the only sense not excited is taste.

Different cultures handle this fact in different ways, but in Central India, as we shall see, familial touch is highly elaborated and is deliberately concerned to excite every sense, including taste.

A notable feature of Japanese skinship is that the extremely close relationship between mother and young child is radically disrupted around the age of five or six when all tactile communication ceases. After this kinship becomes an “untouchable” relationship; henceforth familial love and respect is expressed vocally through the use of special terms of address, visually through bodily postures, bowing, seating arrangements, gustatorily through gifts of sweets and food, and olfactorily through gifts of perfumes and the like. So highly developed is the art non-tactile sensible communication in Japan that the casual observer of the culture, as I was for three months in 2004, gets the impression that intense feelings of familial love expressed in these non-tactile ways are a compensation for the proscriptions on skinship that begin around age five.

Skinship in English-speaking countries

Skinship in English-speaking countries could not be more different, a topic Montagu (1971) addresses in his classic work, *Touching: the human significance of the skin*. Skin, Montagu (1971: 1), notes, is “the mother of the senses,” our “first medium of communication.” This is first in the order of sensory development; the distant senses—sight and hearing—attain their full development later than the proximate senses of touch, taste and smell. The three most important senses of *Homo sapiens* develop in a definite sequence: (1) tactile, (2) auditory, and (3) visual. The order of precedence is reversed as the child approaches adolescence: (1) visual, (2) auditory, and (3) tactile. As soon as one has developed the know-how of being human, Montagu notes (1971: 236), “vision becomes by far the most important of the senses.”

This biological ordering of the senses is everywhere given a cultural twist. Western civilization, Montagu notes, places comparatively more taboos on the proximate senses. “One of the great negative achievements of Christianity,” he argues (1971: 237), “has been to make a sin of tactile pleasure.” One of the consequences of this, he notes, is that babies spend a good part of their life alone, a marked contrast to Japan where an anthropological study found that co-sleeping was common and that sleeping alone “is a reluctant alternative most commonly occurring in the years between puberty and marriage” (1971: 249). The standard work on childcare in the US a century ago, Symmott (2005: 41) notes, was L.E. Holt’s *The care and feeding of children* (1929) which advised parents never to play with children under six months, and “the less of it at any time the better.” It also advised that infants “should be kissed, if at all, upon the cheek or forehead, but the less of this even the better.” J. B. Watson, the founder of Behaviorism, gave similar advice in his *Psychological care of infant and child*: “Never hug and kiss them, never let them sit on your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say goodnight. Shake hands with them in the morning” (cited in Symmott 2005: 41).

Symmott also notes that the work of anthropologists such as Margaret Mead played an important role in challenging some of these dogmas. Today many of them have been turned upside down. Walls in maternity wards today are decorated with posters proclaiming the benefits of skin-to-skin contact such as placing the baby on the mother’s body after birth, co-sleeping and the like.

Skinship in Bastar District

Skinship among the Halbi speakers of Bastar District is very much like that in Japan when it comes to very young children but thereafter differs dramatically. Touchability is the basic defining characteristic of all familial relations in Bastar District: kin of all ages in Bastar are defined by those whom you touch. The untouchability for which India is infamous refers to inter-caste relations. Touch can defile and pollute the person touched and while this value can provide some insights into untouchability in India it is not the full story; of equal, if not more, importance are the positive values non-touch communicates. Respect is the basis of greeting gestures the world over; in India, as in many other parts of the world, this implies distance in the case of strangers but it can involve a touching greeting in the case of friends. The notion of respect, then, admits of many variations of which familial respect and its counterpart, familial love, are but two. These values define touchability in Bastar; the touching gesture of familial love quite literally makes sense of the notion “kindred.”

Touchability is the biological condition for human existence but when it comes to the public expressions of touch between kin, friends, neighbors, and strangers different cultures draw the line between touchability and untouchability differently. The location of the line varies throughout India too but in Bastar, and Central India more generally, the complexity of formal greetings are such that the region is home to one of the more touchable cultures in the world.

One shows respect to a foreigner or non-kin in Bastar by holding one’s palms pressed together at chest level and uttering “Johar” or “Ram Ram!” This is usually a simultaneous mutual action in the case of equals but asymmetrical in the case of unequals. When the respected person is a Brahman the respector may raise the hands higher or, in some cases, even prostrate themselves on the ground. The general rule, which admits of exceptions in the case of ritual friends, is that if the other person is non-kin then one does not touch regardless of whether the person is of higher, equal or lower status. Kin, on the other hand, touch when greeting although weddings redefine relatives and turn joking relations into avoidance relations based on extreme mutual respect.

There are many different ways to touch kin when greeting in Bastar; these tactile gestures are used along with a variety of other visual, audio-vocal, olfactory and gustatory signs to order kin in terms of closeness through the expression of various degrees of respect and affection. The basis of everything is the familial kiss. This is a form of tactile communication that presupposes reciprocal recognition between two people who give and receive familial respect and love. The familial kiss defines and redefines kin relations on a daily, weekly and yearly basis. Estrangement, anger and hate are facts of life in Bastar as everywhere; when domestic violence replaces domestic harmony the clenched fist replaces the familial kiss as the dominant mode of expression. Needless to say familial love and domestic harmony are valued positively as virtues, hate and violence as vices.

The Halbi for kiss is *cumto*, a word I first heard in the context of a greeting where one person touches the feet of the other and receives a touch on the chin.²

2 This article contains a mixture of Halbi, Hindi, and Sanskrit words. I have decided not to use diacritics to avoid confusion for the general reader. For example, some Halbi vowels are long while Hindi vowels are short for the same word.

The action did not match my conception of the English word “kiss.” As the word “*cumto*” is of Sanskrit origin and always translates as “to kiss” I reconciled the difference away as a quaint tactile euphemism of a culture where public displays of affection, and especially kissing, are taboo. Further ethnographic research on salutations in Bastar revealed that my understanding of the Bastar kiss was constrained by my unexamined Eurocentric conception of the kiss, a problem that has its origins in the English dictionary definition of the kiss.

The OED definition—to press or touch with the lips (at the same time compressing and then separating them), in token of affection or greeting, or as an act of reverence—captures the basic sense of the English kiss. It is something that you do with your lips be it to your lover, your mother, the other or the Pope. Even non-tactile kisses are made with the lips: the sonic kiss is the smacking sound we make with our lips; the visual kiss is the pouting gesture we make with our lips.

This definition of the kiss is perhaps not so much Euro-centric as lip-centric as a closer look at the Bastar kiss reveals. The untrained outsider’s eye observes what appears to be a simultaneous gesture when one person receives a touch on the chin and whilst touching the other’s foot. The indigenous interpretation is different. The Bastar familial salutation consists of two integral parts: an action and a delayed reaction. A junior person initiates the greeting by touching the feet of the senior. This, the people say, is an expression of respect (*man*). The senior person then touches the chin of the junior as an expression of love (*maya*). Only the second greeting is called a kiss (*cuma*). The first action is called *pay parto*, literally “feet push,” an act of respectful humility and obeisance. The familial kiss in Bastar, then, is a *reaction* by a senior to an initial action of a junior; the bodily instrument of this kiss is the right hand and not the lips. The Bastar familial kiss, then, is a solicited salutation; it a non-verbal expression of familial love, a reciprocal recognition of familiarity and a feeling in the literal sense of that term. Furthermore, it is something that only a senior has the right to convey, and something that he or she will only do if they are shown respect in the first place.

In Europe it is the other way around: the public kiss is an expression of profound respect. The Pope, and his like, hold out their hand to be kissed; they do not do the kissing except when greeting a higher divine authority, be it Mother Earth or Jesus Christ. The exception, and a highly significant one as we shall see, is the Christian wedding where the groom is enjoined to kiss the bride at the end of the wedding ceremony. This one-way ritual male kiss serves to define the *couple* as the family unit in Europe. In Bastar, by contrast, the familial kiss defines the kindred, the members of the brotherhood, *dadabhai*, and the familial “otherhood,” *sagar*; at the wedding the unity of the bridal couple is defined by a mutual feeding ritual, not a one-way kiss.

The Bastar familial kiss has many features that define it as culturally specific to Bastar District, features that simultaneously reveal it to be a recognisable variation on a general all-India, non-lip kiss theme. Hindi-speaking migrants in Bastar, I have noticed, do not use the word Hindi word kiss (*cuma*) to describe a senior’s reaction to a gesture of respect and nor do they make the hand-to-chin gesture. Rather they place their hands on, or over, the head of the junior in a reaction that is called a blessing (*ashirbad dena*). Like the Halbi hand-to-chin kiss, this is an expression of familial affection. Another form is the so-called “sniff kiss” which seems to be widespread throughout Asia as a whole.

The basic sense of the Indian hand-to-chin kiss, then, is a complex multi-modal one that could not be more different to the English lip kiss. Like kisses everywhere, the public expression of a kiss in India is subject to taboos and unwritten moral codes that become apparent only when violated. Thus when the actor Richard Gere embraced and lip-kissed Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty on the cheek at an AIDS awareness rally in New Delhi on 15 April 2007 it was an act that could not have been better planned to offend local sensibilities. The right-wing Hindu nationalist group Shiv Sena viewed it as an obscene act, burned effigies of Gere and set fire to pictures of Shetty. Court charges have been brought against Gere. Such is the case too with Bollywood star Aishwarya Rai who was ordered to appear in an Indian court after a screen kiss with co-star Hrithik Roshan in movie *Dhoom-II* was deemed “obscene” even though Rai kissed the actress lightly on the cheek.

Another source of cross-cultural misunderstanding here is the many different meanings of the word “kiss.” The Halbi word for kiss, *cumto*, has two distinct meanings as a form of touch. It can refer to an expression of sexual attraction between lovers or to an expression of familial love between kin. The physical expression of the sentiment, too, is quite distinct: the former is an action of a very private kind that should not be performed in public; the latter a familial gesture of a public kind that is, on certain ritual occasions, obligatory.

The English word “kiss,” too, has this dual meaning and although there are variations in the modes of their expression which reflect the different cultural contexts. The lover’s kiss is a private act that should not be performed in public, but the violation of this norm does not excite the strong emotion it does in India. The familial kiss is a public gesture in the same way that a Halbi kiss is but it is usually a mutual rather than a one-way action. Furthermore, in the Australian culture that I am familiar with, it is something that men do with female family members, not with males. Thus I give my aunty a mutual closed lip-to-lip kiss, but I shake my uncle’s hand, an action I also perform with non-kin.

Skinship as a theoretical concept

The preceding discussion has examined the history of the word “skinship” and some of its possible referents in different cultures. The task now is to define the concept in a theoretical way that is useful for ethnographic research. It is obvious that the scope of the idea of skinship is vast and that a keyword like “kiss” varies greatly in semantic range and cultural significance both across cultures and within them. Not all kisses are gestures of familial love and not all gestures of familial love are called kisses. Nevertheless it is clear that a touching familial gesture, be it called a kiss or something else, is an elementary form of face-to-face interaction within families everywhere. This much is true by definition: family members are familiar with one another in an intimate, sensible way. Familiarity as a value informs the expression of touching familial gestures but always in the context of respect, a value that has even greater generality. But respect is a value that creates distance between people in face-to-face interactions whilst familiarity draws them together. A general concept of skinship must capture this inherent tension in the micro-space and micro-moments of face-to-face interaction.

Skinship as sensible face-to-face communication

At the most general level skinship can be defined as sensible face-to-face communication. The word skinship privileges touch but the intimacy of touch means that it excites all the senses.

As a *sensible* mode of communication it necessarily involves both verbal and non-verbal communication. The study of the referential semantics of kinship terms, while obviously an important branch of the study of kinship, abstracts from non-verbal forms of communication and is quite literally non-sense in the literal, non-pejorative sense of the term. Skinship, as the concrete study of sensible communication, must precede the study of semantics; it is a complement to the study of kinship semantics not a critique of it.

As a face-to-face mode of communication skinship is concerned with both verbal and non-verbal modes of address. A reference term such as “father” can function as a mode of address but with a totally different significance. The use of “father” as a reference term raises the question of the *synchronic* relationship between ego as propositus and alter-ego as referent; it also raises the question of the *logical* relationship of the term “father” to reciprocal terms such as “son,” “daughter,” and “child.” The use of “father” as an address term, by contrast, raises the question of the *inter-temporal social* relationship between addressor and addressee; it also raises the question of the *affective* relationship of the term “father” to alternatives such as “dad” and “daddy,” and to familiar reciprocal usages involving names, nicknames, and terms of endearment. Address terms, as the linguist Jakobson (1960) notes, raises the question of the emotive and conative functions of language, not the referential. Understanding modes of address, then, is a very different theoretical agenda.

As a form of *communication*, skinship is concerned with the differences between public and private modes of communication with emphasis on the former because these public “interaction rituals,” as Goffman (1967) has termed them, provide the key to understanding the unwritten moral codes and values that inform face-to-face interactions.

The definition of skinship as a sensible mode of face-to-face communication is very broad and the critic might well ask how this differs from the classic approaches of Hall (1968) and of Goffman (1967) to the study of face-to-face communication. This is a question that must be answered with some precision because it is on the foundations laid by these theorists of sensible communication that the idea of skinship as a theoretical concept must be built.

Hall’s (1968) theory of sensible communication is the most general. He is concerned with the defining characteristics of human communication as a species of sensible communication in general. Goffman (1967) for his part is concerned with the defining characteristics of one specific type of human face-to-face communication, that which occurs in the hierarchical institution. He conducted fieldwork in a hospital and developed a general theory of “interaction ritual” from this particular case study. His central concern was to show how respect as a value expressed itself in face-to-face rituals of deference and demeanor. The family is a hierarchical institution and as such his work provides a general conceptual framework for analyzing respect. But familiarity is a key value in the household and Goffman’s conceptual framework needs to be extended to allow for this value but at the same time restricted to a consideration of familial respect. Skinship thus becomes the analysis of sensible modes of face-to-face familial communication.

“Familial” in this instance can be defined as the relations of contiguity, consanguinity and affinity. Kinship, as the title of Morgan’s (1871) pioneering study illustrates, is classically defined as the study of consanguinity and affinity. Contiguity is sidelined; it is deemed to have no determining role in the definition of kindred. The study of skinship as face-to-face familial communication inverts this classic definition and assigns pride of place to contiguity. But what does “contiguity” mean in this context? Enter Hall and Goffman. Their theories of face-to-face sensible communication are based on a very precise conception of the idea of contiguity, one that recalls the Latin origin of the word “*contingere*,” to touch.

Hall coined the term “proxemics” to refer to what was previously called the “social space of bio-communication” or the “micro-space of interpersonal encounters.” He was concerned with the human perception of and use of space in general. He defines four zones of interpersonal encounter—the intimate, the personal, the social, and the public—which begin at distances of 0 feet, 1½ feet, 4 feet and 10 feet respectively. These old measures of distance evoke the idea of contiguity as touch in an evocative bodily way that metric measures do not. When the feet of two people are intertwined in the centre of the intimate zone tactile communication is at its maximal skin-to-skin limit and all senses are excited; as the feet draw apart gustatory communication drops out and tactile communication becomes restricted to the reach of the hand as we move out of the intimate zone and into the personal; touch begins to get very difficult as the beginning of social zone is reached at 4 feet; thereafter tactile communication becomes impossible and this allows the visual and auditory-vocal modes of communication to reign supreme. Skinship, as a social relationship of contiguity, occupies those zones where touch is possible, the intimate and personal; but it also appropriates some untouchable space in the social and public zones where it consigns estranged kin and those kin who must be avoided.

This kiss lends itself to an analysis of this type (see Table 1). Neither Hall nor Goffman were concerned with gestures of this kind but it is useful to illustrate their concept of contiguity in terms of an analysis of the kiss to identify both the importance and the limits of their theories. Not all kisses are gestures of familial love but they are a useful starting point for trying to get some idea of the concept.

The mouth-to-mouth or lover’s kiss is literally the most sensible and most communicative because this is the only form of kiss that excites all the senses. It is the most intimate mode of communication and the one with the highest degree of multi-modality. When we kiss we taste with our tongue, we touch with our skin, we pick up aromas with our nose, sounds with our ears, and the sights with our eyes if we choose to keep them open. The paradoxical fact about this most supreme form of communication is that we cannot speak. The other important fact, of course, is that the kiss is the site of human sexual reproduction and is associated with the most intense of all human emotions: those “animal passions” of ecstasy, anxiety, jealousy, anger, sorrow, shame and hope.

The lover’s kiss admits of a great number of sub-types. Chapter 3 of the *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar 2002) deals with the question of kissing. In keeping with the Indian passion for classification, it distinguishes sixteen types of kiss and eleven places on the body where a kiss can be placed. The sixteen kinds of kiss fall into two broad classes: the first is the lover’s kiss of which there are 15 types; and the second is the so-called “transferred kiss” which gets only a passing

mention in the *Kamasutra*. The latter is the key to understanding the familial kiss but to grasp this notion it is necessary, firstly, to consider the lover's kiss.

Table 1. The communicative dimensions of different types of kiss

Type of kiss	Zone (feet)	Sensory mode						Degree of multi-modality
		tongue	skin	nose	audio-vocal ear voice	eye		
mouth	zero (0)	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	5.5
skin	intimate (0-1½)	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	5
sniff	personal (1½-4)	no	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	4
sonic	social (4-10)	no	no	no	yes	yes	yes	3
visual	public (10+)	no	no	no	no	no	yes	1

Notes: In metric terms Hall's (1968: 92) intimate zone is less than 45cms, the personal zone between 0.45 and 1.3 meters, the social-consultative zone between 1.3 and 4 meters, and the public zone above 4 meters. Buckminster Fuller (1975: 801.09) estimates the maximum range of the senses to be as follows: taste 5 cm, touch 1 meter, smell 2 km, sound 160 km, and sight 10 quintillion km.

The very first type of lover's kiss is called the "nominal kiss." This is when "a girl only touches the mouth of her lover with her own, but does not herself do anything." Next comes the "throbbing kiss" when "a girl, setting aside her bashfulness a little, wishes to touch the lip that is pressed into her mouth." This leads logically on to the third type of kiss, called the "touching kiss." This is when "a girl touches her lover's lip with her tongue, and having shut her eyes, places her hands on those of her lover." And so the classifying goes on until we reach a type the ultimate lover's kiss called "fighting with the tongue."

The fundamental principle informing the lover's kiss, the author of the *Kamasutra* argues, is the norm of reciprocity. This is expressed in a verse which goes as follows:

Respond to an action with a counter-action,
to a blow with a counter-blow, and by this same logic,
to a kiss with a counter-kiss. (Doniger and Kakar 2002: 45)

This observation is of anthropological interest because the "battle of the tongues" marks the limits of reciprocity for here two people become one as they engage in the mutual consumption of shared bodily substances through the mouth and the mutual inhalation of breath through the nose. The symbolic potential of this idea of two-becoming-one is something that theologians and poets of all ages have exploited, and something too the Freudians have long noticed. A highly significant fact about the tongue kiss, Phillips (1993) remarks in his Freudian essay on the kiss, is that we cannot do it to ourselves. We can hit ourselves, stroke ourselves but not kiss ourselves. The tongue kiss is a communicative act, but is one that we cannot

perform until we stop talking. The lover's tongue kiss, he adds (Phillips 1993: 103), is about mutuality not domination: "When we kiss we devour the object by caressing it; we eat it, in a sense, but sustain its presence." Kissing on the mouth, notes Phillips, can have a mutuality that blurs the distinction between giving and taking, a point he illustrates with a quote from Shakespeare: "In kissing do you render or receive?" asks Cressida. "Both take and give," comes the reply.

The lover's kiss, then, is a gustatory form of human communication where the distinctions between the obligations to give, receive and repay are blurred as giver and receiver become one. All the senses are involved except speech but taste, or rather simultaneous mutual tasting, is its key defining characteristic along with simultaneous mutual inhalation. This is the most sensible of all forms of human communication.

After the lover's kiss comes four types I have arbitrarily labeled the skin, sniff, sonic, and visual kiss. These can be distinguished by transcultural sensible criteria summed up by the degree of multi-modality shown in the final column of Table 1. The skin-to-skin kiss, which admits of many sub-types, occurs in the intimate zone at a distance of less than 1½ feet; all senses except taste are excited by interactions of this type. Next come the non-touch kisses: the sniff-kiss that relies on the nose assisted by the ear and eye; the more distance sonic kiss that relies on the ear and eye; and finally the visual kiss, the most distant of all that relies on the eye only.

The *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar 2002: 45) groups these four types under the generic heading of the "transferred kiss." This is a particularly apt expression because the "transferred kiss" takes us from the private world of erotic love to the public world of familial love and from simultaneous mutuality to unilateral giving of which a mother's loving kiss is the supreme example. Skinship in the Japanese sense of the word begins here. A mother's loving kiss to the head of her breast-fed baby is part of human nature in the sense that it is not an interaction ritual of the type that poses difficult problems of cultural interpretation. The mother's kiss is the most intimate of the transferred kisses in the intimate zone. More distant kisses in this zone are doubly-transferred gestures of affection and familiarity; they take us from the realm of motherly love to interaction rituals of a type that do pose problems of cultural interpretation. The gestures of affection and familiarity found in this slightly more distant zones admit of a multitude of culturally specific types, not all of which, we have seen, are called "kisses."

The Bastar familial kiss is one such example. Its form is obviously based on the mother's kiss in that it is an asymmetrical gesture of affection given by a senior to a junior. Halbi speakers use the word "kiss," *cuma*, to describe both but there is an important conceptual difference: the mother's kiss is an unsolicited one-way act whereas the familial hand-to-chin-touch gesture is a solicited ritual interaction. A child solicits this chin-touch salute by showing respect (*man*) to an elder by touching their feet. The elder person will then touch the chin of the younger and may utter "*tch tch*." This is an expression of familial love (*mayā*). This familial kiss is a classic example of culture as learned behavior. Children are taught to show respect with a foot-touch salute from about the age of three or four years; they begin to return the chin-touch kiss to younger siblings around the ages of nine or ten. The inter-temporal nature of the solicited gesture of familiarity means that the senior has the option of not conferring kinship upon the junior, something that can happen if kin become estranged and familial hate prevails.

Skinship in the anthropological sense that I want to give the term begins with doubly-transferred tactile gestures of familial love and affection and includes other non-tactile kisses of the sniff, sonic and visual types. These are all interaction rituals of a symbolic type that pose problems of cultural interpretation. Take the so-called “sniff kiss” for example. In some pastoral societies this form of familial kiss is modeled on the behavior of animals towards their young. The Vedic poets, Sanskrit scholars (Hopkins 1907: 121) tell us, had no word for kiss; they employed the word meaning “sniff” or “smell” (*ghra*) to describe an action that was explicitly modeled on the behavior of their animals. Just as a cow recognizes its calf by means of smelling, so must the father recognize his new born child with a “thrice sniff at the head” (1907: 121). Other texts describe how a father when returning from a journey must sniff at the head of his children and low like a cow (Müller 1879: par. 11).

In Fiji, by way of contrast, the familial “sniff kiss” is mutual rather than asymmetrical. When mother and daughter greet they touch cheeks and make a sniffing noise. However, this is an outsider’s perspective. Closer observation and discussion reveals that, conceptually speaking, the gesture is similar to the Bastar familial salute in that it consists of an inter-temporal action and reaction: the junior makes the first move as a show of respect; the mother responds with her gesture of affection a fraction of a second later. The sniffing action poses an additional problem of interpretation here because while the nasal gesture sounds like a sniff Fijians do not perceive it as such. No Fijian I have spoken to has been able to interpret the gesture for me but agreed that “mutual inhalation” rather than “mutual sniff” was a more accurate description.

The “mutual inhalation” interpretation suggests itself from a triply-transferred kiss of the type that takes us from the realm of kinship to that of religion. Oneness is a key religious idea and the symbolic potential of the lover’s kiss has been exploited by many a theologian. The early Christian theologians, Perella (1969) notes in his scholarly book on the Christian kiss, used the mouth-to-mouth kiss as the symbolic key to unlocking the mysteries of Christian ritual symbolism right from the beginning. The medieval mystic St Bernard, to take but one example, argued that when the priest asks the groom to kiss the bride she is receiving an infusion of the Holy Spirit because the groom’s kiss transmits the breath of Christ. In other words, the groom is Christ for this sacred moment. Furthermore, when the Gospels say “I and the father are one” this is to be interpreted as the Mouth-to-Mouth Kiss of Father and Son. The mutual breathing brings about an indwelling of the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father. And so the idea is developed year after year, century after century and in country after country in Europe. Christianity, then, transformed the erotic lover’s kiss into a religious salutation; they got rid of the sensual dangers that lurked in kisses, Perella (1969: 29) notes, by defining as impure that kiss which someone does for a second time because they found it enjoyable.

The Fijian mutual-inhalation familial kiss poses the question of the relationship of kinship and religion. Hocart (1952: 198) who conducted fieldwork in both Fiji and South Asia among other places, argued that “nine-tenths of all kinship systems are religious in origin” and that the key to understanding them is to be found in ideas of re-incarnation. Bastar skinship, as we shall see, gives tactile expression to this idea.

However one might want to interpret the Fijian familial kiss it is an “interaction ritual” in Goffman’s sense. But what does this mean?

Goffman on ritual interaction

Goffman (1967: 57) informs us that he uses the term “ritual” to describe face-to-face interactions “because this activity, however informal and secular, represents a way in which the individual must guard and design the symbolic implications of his acts while in the presence of an object that has special *value* to him” (emphasis added). Values inform the symbolic actions and respect is the supreme value for Goffman. Respect for him means sentiments of regard such as obeisance, submission, and propitiation; affection and belongingness; politeness and honor. By “interaction” he means *face-to-face* relations between two people for a *moment* in time and a limited extension in *space*: the glances, gestures, positioning and verbal statements that people consciously and unconsciously exchange on these occasions. These moments of time are “necessarily evanescent, created by arrivals and killed by departures” (1967: 2); “the intimate spaces are where there is ‘a close meshing with the ritual properties of persons and with the egocentric forms of territoriality’” (1967: 1).

Goffman’s analysis is concerned in the main with the analysis of the actor and the patient in a ceremonial context. He takes the ego-perspective of the actor in his analysis of the two components of ceremonial activity, deference and demeanor. “Deference” refers to the respect for others that the agent displays whilst “demeanor” refers to the agent’s self-respect through deportment, dress and bearing. He notes, of course, that the patient sees things differently. “Rules of conduct,” he notes (1967: 49), “impinge on an individual in two general ways: directly, as *obligations*, establishing how he is morally constrained to conduct himself; indirectly, as *expectations*, establishing how others are morally bound to act in regard to him.” “What is one man’s obligation,” he adds, “will often be another’s expectation.”

Goffman’s general analysis of respect behavior in a institutional context such as a hospital can, as mentioned above, be extended to the familial context of a household by (a) restricting the notion of respect to familial respect and (b) introducing the question of familiarity as a value. The latter introduces the re-actor into the picture; this is the valuer who literally makes sense of familiarity as a value. Thus in its most elementary form skinship is an interaction ritual that involves not just rituals of deference and respect but crucially also solicited rituals of familial love and affection. These loving gestures quite literally make sense of kinship but only for people involved in face-to-face relationships in historically specific moments of time in intimate geographical spaces. These interaction rituals, in turn, are embedded in ever-larger historical times and ever-wider geographical places which the ethnographer must consider. Kinship as skinship is a fragile state of reciprocal recognition that must be continually reproduced because of the ever-present danger that feelings of familial love will turn into its opposite, familial hate. Gesture in this negative a micro-space is important too and there could be no better illustration of it than the line in *Othello*: “I understand the fury in your words. But not the words.”

Implications of the concept of skinship for the ethnographic study of kinship

The Hall/Goffman notion of “contiguity” enables us to define skinship in general terms as face-to-face relations of familial communication of a touching kind. But what are the implications of this for the study of kinship? The answer to this question, as I see it, is that it takes us from the study of kinship as the semantics of reference terms to the study of kinship as the pragmatics of modes of address. This takes us from a concern with kinship as a relation of consanguinity and affinity to kinship as a relation of contiguity.

Trautmann’s classic analysis of Dravidian kinship exemplifies the importance of the semantic analysis of reference terms for the development of human understanding. It reveals how the anthropological method of abstraction and comparison can yield transcultural generalizations of great explanatory power. Interestingly, while the relations of consanguinity and affinity were his primary focus, his work represents a departure from previous work in that he stressed the importance of historical relations of contiguity. This notion of contiguity, however, bears no relationship to the notion contiguity developed above. Space for him is not the micro-space and micro-time of Goffman but the cultural geography of Indian kinship that a deep history of migration has produced. He finds that the three great waves of migration into India that began about 3-4000 years ago—the Dravidian and Indo-Aryan speakers from the west and the Munda speakers from the east—have defined three distinct zones of kinship. His comparative study of reference terms has identified these regions. Cross-cousin marriage characterizes the southern Dravidian system, the absence of cousin marriage combined with the superiority of wife-takers characterizes the northern Indo-Aryan system, while cousin marriage and alternating generations distinguishes the “frontier zone” in central India.

Trautmann’s analysis is abstract in that the study of modes of address is beyond the scope of his analysis. In this respect his approach is conventional. He deals with terminological data from over twenty different dialect areas of India but never once considers the problems posed by address terms. The fact is that he could not have considered them even if he wanted to because the ethnographic data is simply not available for the most part. Bean’s *Symbolic and pragmatic semantics: a Kannada system of address* (1978), is the only book I am aware of that deals with the pragmatics of address in an Indian culture and even then her account is restricted to verbal modes of address. One searches long and hard to unearth the few articles on the subject that do exist (See, for example, Das 1968, Mehrotra 1977, Vatak 1969).

Of course, it is a perfectly legitimate exercise to abstract from verbal and non-verbal modes of address when the problem under investigation is the semantics of reference; nay more, the method of semantic analysis requires it. If this mode of analysis has its shortcomings then it is in its very success. The analysis of reference terms has been a central concern of anthropology since the days of Morgan and there are few comparative problems left to solve. An important recent collection of essays edited by Trautmann and others (Godelier, Trautmann and Tjon Sie Fat 1998) has tried to revitalize the study of kinship but, paradoxically, has failed to precisely because it has successfully resolved most of the interesting comparative questions that remain.

What then does a move from the study of the semantics of kinship terms to the pragmatics of modes of address entail? The conceptual framework that I consider necessary for such a task has been spelt out above. In general terms it involves an ethnographic investigation of the role of the values of familial respect and familial love as expressed in face-to-face ritual interactions. Of particular importance is the manner in which the tension between the closeness and distance of kin is resolved (or not resolved). However, when one contemplates the implications of this for ethnographic research it becomes easy to see why the analysis of reference terms has dominated the agenda. Semantic analysis has the advantage that it is relatively easy. Kin lexicons are relatively small data sets, with most systems having between eighteen and thirty-five distinct reference terms (Kroeber 1909). This fact, combined with the abstraction from sensible modes of expression, simplifies the analytical task. Of course, analyzing these terms can become very complicated as one struggles to comprehend relations within and between systems and their diachronic transformations.

Ethnographic data on modes of address is as complicated as reference lexicons are simple. Whereas a reference lexicon consists of a list of 20-30 terms, data sets on modes of address are of seemingly unlimited size. Halbi, for example, has fifty-six reference terms of which around thirty also function as modes of terminological address. In addition there are countless personal names and nicknames as well as four distinct call sounds, *e na!*, *e go!*, *e O!* and *e ho!*, that are used in highly specific ways. They also have a complicated system of non-verbal modes of communication of which the familial salutes are the most important. These consist of eleven gestures of respect and nine gestures of familiarity which, when combined in different ways, are capable of generating a large number of salutations that define many shades of grey between the “black” of extreme respect and the “white” of extreme familiarity. To complicate matters further, usages depend on whether the occasion is private or public and whether a public occasion is an everyday interaction or a life-cycle ritual. Usage also varies over the life cycle of a person. Finally, the values of respect and familiarity that inform the ritual interactions are difficult to access, influenced as they are by local religious beliefs and traditions that have become “natural” to insiders.

Nevertheless, it is important not to fetishize the complexity for just as a tree has its origin in a single seed, so too is the tree that is kinship in Bastar simply complex. To grasp the simplicity in the complexity one needs to focus on the trunk and its main branches, not the leaves that arise and pass away. In the context of Bastar we can do this by focusing on the salutations because the branches they define stem from the two root values of familial respect and familial love. Words of address, as the instruments of fine discrimination, define the smaller branches and leaves. This tree image has its analogue in the notion of a semantic tree of reference terms that semanticists sometimes use. The two trees are different but related in the way that a real tree has to a simplified sketch of a tree.

I now use the Bastar case to illustrate, if only sketchily, what is involved in a kinship approach to the study of familial relations. I do this by examining how the Bastar salutations vary over the life-cycle of person.

The changing form of the Bastar familial salutation over a person's life-cycle

The following data, which is drawn mainly from that used by the Maraar community in north Bastar, charts the changing form of the familial salutation over the life-cycle of a male. Domestic space in Bastar is defined by men in relation to women as brothers then husbands. We must locate ourselves in this domestic male space if we want to grasp the female point of view in face-to-face relations because, as we shall see, cross-sex interactions are the source of most of the complications in the system.

Birth

The life (*jivi*) of a new-born is said to begin around the fifth month of pregnancy when the mother feels her baby kicking. Motherhood begins when the mother starts breastfeeding her new-born baby. Breast milk is an obvious savory definer of the mother-child relation in all cultures but it seems to be especially important in Bastar. For example Gurumai Sukhdai told me a tale about the son of a king who was separated from his mother at birth. His father's jealous co-wives were responsible. They told the mother that she had given birth to a cat and that they had to throw it away. The baby was buried in a pile of manure but survived. He was rescued by a dog and lived in its stomach for a while until he was cared for in a cow's stomach. The boy grew up in this truly fantastic way unaware that he had a mother; meanwhile she lived on never knowing that she had given birth to a son. After some two decades of extraordinary happenings the moment of reciprocal recognition comes at a public gathering where the mother and son come face-to-face and relate their stories. When the truth of the matter dawns on the mother she takes her now a 20 year old son, sits him on her lap, and breastfeeds him in front of the assembled crowd. The jealous co-wives are then tied to a horse's tail which was galloped off with them at high speed.

This tale describes how a breast-feeding ritual converts the grown man into a son. It is not a ritual I have ever seen, or am ever likely to see, but the tale is a classic illustration of the cultural importance of the most intimate sense, taste, in the construction of Bastar skinship. Mother's milk not only gives a child strong immunities and helps it grow strong, as Mitiko the Japanese mother quoted above said, but it is symbolic of a common "milk line" that unites not just mother and child but also brother and sister as "milk siblings." In Bastar the milk line is reproduced down the female line from mother to daughter and from daughter to granddaughter. This fact, as we shall see, gives the brother a moral right to reclaim his share in his mother's milk by requesting his sister's daughter as a bride for his son.

Fatherhood is ritually defined at the naming ceremony held a few days after birth. What anthropologists call "the equivalence of alternating generations" is, for the people of Bastar, a way of talking about rebirth beliefs. A man is reborn as his classificatory son's son which means that the birth of a man's son is the rebirth of his classificatory father. This belief is ritually enacted at the naming ceremony when the father's sister (*bubi*) of the new-born is asked to comfort the crying baby. She refuses to do so until she is given a sari. She takes the baby boy, comforts him, and addresses him as "father" (*baba*). Her brother, the baby's father, also addresses him as *baba*. The baby's mother addresses him with a term of

endearment or by name but never as *baba*. The same ritual takes place when a girl is born but on this occasion the mother alone will address her daughter as “mother” (*aya*) because her daughter is ritually addressed as if she was her reborn mother. Other rituals are performed that strive to establish the exact identity of the reborn ancestor because an individual’s rebirth is never a simple mechanical process. For example if a person consistently and wantonly violates the moral codes of society, such as those that respectful modes of address help to define, then they may be reborn as ant or some other lower form of life.

The new-born infant is the recipient of familial love for the first few years of its life but as it grows up it and becomes more independent the love ceases to be so freely given; the young child must learn how to solicit gestures of familial love by learning how to show respect to elders.

Childhood

As a boy grows up and learns to talk the first kinship language he learns are modes of address. When interacting with his father, for example, he learns to address him as *baba*; he also learns to respond to the different modes of address his father uses when trying to attract his son’s attention. In addition to *baba* his father may the special call sign *e na!* Or his name or nickname to attract his attention. As he gets older he will learn how to show respect to his father and all other relatives senior to him by imitating the hand-to-foot touch salute he sees other youngsters doing. He will expect his salute to be reciprocated by a hand-to-chin familial kiss, a familial gesture he will begin to use himself around the age of nine or ten when younger children give him a respectful greeting. By this time he will have learned how to address a wide range of kin and how to response to different address terms, call sounds and nicknames. Reference terms are the last thing he will learn to master. Understanding the difference between reference and address is a matter of cognitive skill development but learning the fifty-six Halbi terms of reference is another matter. The reference terms used for senior kin are a relatively simple matter because in Halbi, as in most other languages, the same word is usually used for both address and reference. Referring to members of his own generation poses few problems too for in Bastar everyone is either a brother (*bhai*) or sister (*bahin*); the latter are divided into marriageable sisters (*maina bahin*), with whom he has a joking relationship, and unmarried sisters (an unmarked category of *bahin*). Learning how to refer to members of the first descending generation will be the last thing he learns as he addresses these youngsters by name. I often come across young men in their twenties who still get confused when asked to explain this part of their own reference terminology.

By the time a young man and his unmarried siblings have reached their maturity they will have learned the modes of address for about fifty different types of face-to-face relationships. I list just one here, the father/son dyad, to give some idea of the complex way the elementary values of respect and familiarity are expressed.

A young man will refer to his father as “my *baba*” and be referred to by his father as “my *beta*.” These reference terms are part of a semantic structure that makes four semantic contrasts: age, sex, generation and crossness. The reference terms “*baba*” and “*beta*” belong to the same general semantic field in that they are male, ♂, and parallel, II; this field is bisected by generation with “*baba*” belonging

to G+1 and “*beta*” belonging to G-1. These semantic fields, it must be stressed, are not expressions of respect and familiarity as values. The modes of address do this and it ways that strike the outsider as counter intuitive and contradictory.

Table 2. Reference terms and modes of address for the father/son dyad

	<i>Son</i>	<i>Father</i>
Reference term	<i>beta</i>	<i>baba</i>
Mode of address		
term	<i>baba</i>	<i>baba</i>
call sound	<i>e na!</i>	(none)
name	name used	name not used
salute	chin	feet

The familial salute conforms to what an outsider would expect: the son touches the feet of the father as a gesture of familial respect and receives a touch on the chin as a gesture of familial love. This is a ritual interaction in that it is used to mark the beginning or end of some occasion be it the arrival or departure of the son after an absence or on some formal ritual occasion such as a wedding. The fact that a father addresses his son by name whilst a son cannot is also an obvious gesture of familiarity; the son must show his respect by using the term “*baba*.”

The bipolar usage of the term “*baba*,” and the asymmetrical usage of the call sound “*e na!*” By the father when addressing his son, is counter-intuitive for the outsider but they make good sense to the insider because they are part of the unwritten moral code that governs skinship in Bastar. The rebirth beliefs imply the theological oneness of alternate generations which means that mutual respect is the right conduct between members of alternate generations. The reference lexicon contains no evidence of alternation, it appears only in address. We can express this “equation” formally as:

$$baba/baba :: G+1/G-1 :: \text{father/son.}$$

This is a formal way of expressing an interaction ritual: a father in generation G+1 addresses his son in generation G-1 as *baba* and the son replies by using the same term of address. There are many other examples of this. For example when a man interacts with his maternal grandfather they address each as *aja*. The equation in this case takes the form:

$$aja/aja :: G+2/ G-2 :: \text{mother's father/daughter's son.}$$

When a woman interacts with her daughter they address each other as *aya*. Thus:

$$aya/aya :: G+1/ G-1 :: \text{mother/daughter.}$$

When a woman interacts with her brother's son they both use the call sound “*e na!*” Thus:

$$e na!/e na! :: G+1/ G-1 :: \text{father sister/brother's son.}$$

And so on.

The father's asymmetrical usage of the call sound "*e na!*" must be understood in the context of other usages of call sounds. It suffices to note here that it is a sign of respect certain men in the first ascending generation G+1 must show to certain men in the first descending generation G-1. This is an inversion of the expected order of things but the tactile sense of the inversion will, I hope, become clear when we come to the end of our young man's life cycle.

The table of modes of address above, then, seems contradictory: the salutes and naming practices followed by father and son in their interactions follows the "natural" order of respect and familiarity but the usages of address terms and call sounds do not. How do people cope with these contradictions?

If morality is the art of living together well, as Mauss (2007: 156) noted, then "contradictory" modes of address of this kind are the tools that people use in face-to-face situations when practicing the pragmatic art of trying to live together well. The alternative modes of address are, of course, only contradictory from an outsider's point of view. From an insider's perspective they are just different variations on the underlying values of familial respect and familial love. The "web of kinship" is extremely complex and face-to-face meetings with different kin at different times and in different places requires one to act in different ways that are appropriate to the occasion in question. Living together well with kin is an art that must be practiced with a skill learned over time; it is not a simple matter of following rules. Right conduct is a pragmatic question that inter-actors must decide upon given the circumstances they are confronted with.

The general principle of all kin interactions, however, is embodied in the common sense of the familial salute. The basic values that inform this mode of address are the gold standard of all face-to-face relations. It is the only mode of address that is common to all sixty-four dyads that can be distinguished. For the young unmarried man or woman this familial salute is what defines their kindred group. Non-kin do not participate in this touching interaction ritual; they are untouchable and are treated with distanced mutual respect or, in the case, of friends incorporated as quasi kin with gestures of convivial mutual respect which may or may not involve touch. In Bastar, and in central India more generally, there is a special category of friend formed by the performance of a religious rite. There are many categories of these "ritual friends" as they are called in the literature (Skoda 2004). Some become "like brothers" but the supreme ritual friends are those who are deemed to become one; they are said to be "identical" as distinct from "equal" or "similar," an ideology that is enacted in their ritual greetings when they unite in one embrace (Pfeffer 2001: 113).

Table 3 recapitulates in visual form my argument about the need to see the Bastar familial salutation as an interaction ritual consisting of two distinct component parts. First comes the junior kinsperson's feet-touch gesture of familial respect. Then, a fraction of a second later, comes the senior's chin-touch gesture of familial love. The final column captures the compound action and re-action which appears, to the outsider, as a simultaneous interaction.

This familial salute, then, defines kin as touchable at the most general level of classification. This is the trunk of the kinship tree with its two root values, familial respect and familial love. The verbal modes of address provide the means of distinguishing one type of kinsmen from another. Unlike the reference terms that group and classify, the address terms divide, specify, and individualize. For example, the salute will identify the interactors as kin in general while the verbal

modes of address will identify them precisely as, say, “Tom” and his “uncle Harry,” Tom’s father’s youngest brother.

Table 3. The two component parts of the Bastar familial salutation

	<i>Type of gesture</i>		
	feet-touch gesture of respect (A)	chin-touch gesture of familial love (B)	familial salute (A + B = C)
<i>Halbi term</i>	<i>pay parto</i> (feet-push)	<i>thori cuma deto</i> (chin-kiss-give)	
<i>Visual form</i>			
<i>Description</i>	action: junior touches the feet of senior with both hands	reaction: senior touches the chin of junior with right hand	action and reaction appears simultaneous
<i>Actor</i>	juniors in age and generation	seniors in age and generation	

For the young unmarried man and his unmarried siblings the touchability of kin is about to be redefined as he and his siblings reach marriageable age. By this time he will have attended countless weddings but with the marriage of his own siblings “closeness” and “distance” acquire a new tactile sense. These new relations can be labeled “affines” but the consanguine/affine distinction is not strictly relevant in Bastar because all kin are “consanguines.” It is more accurate to speak of “generic kin” and “specific kin.” Generic kin are defined, first and foremost, by the familial salute, i.e. by touch. Marriage requires that some of these generic kin be redefined as highly specific kin. These kin are “descriptive kin,” to use Morgan’s language, whilst generic kin are “classificatory kin.”

Marriage

The wedding ritual

The claim by linguist David Crystal that there “seems to be little active role for the olfactory and gustatory modes in human communication” (1987: 399) could not be further from the truth in Hindu India. Hindu ritual, as Eck (1981: 11) has noted,

[I]s sensuous in that it makes full use of the senses—seeing, touching, smelling, tasting, and hearing. One ‘sees’ the image of the deity (*darsan*). One ‘touches’ it with one’s hands (*sparsa*), and one ‘touches’ the limbs of one’s own body to establish the presence of various deities (*nyasa*). One hears the sacred sound of the mantras (*sravana*). The ringing of bells, the offering of oil lamps, the presentation of flowers, the pouring of water and milk, the sipping of sanctified liquid offerings, the eating of consecrated food—these are all the basic constituents of Hindu worship, *pūjā*. For its famous otherworldliness, India is a culture that has also celebrated the life of this world and the realm of the senses.

The Bastar wedding is a Hindu ritual that not only involves “the ringing of bells, the offering of oil lamps, the presentation of flowers, the pouring of water and milk, the sipping of sanctified liquid offerings, the eating of consecrated food” of which Eck speaks, but it is also a celebration of the communicative power of touch. The ritual, which can last for up to a week, is for the most part a joyous occasion involving much dancing, laughing and horseplay with colored water and mud, joking that can at times lead to fights when it goes too far; for the girl’s parents it is a sad occasion involving much open weeping. It is also a serious religious occasion where the bride and groom are anointed with holy oil (*dev tel*) and turmeric to render them auspicious and pure. Relatives spend one day rubbing turmeric-oil (*haldi tel*) on the bride and groom in an upwards direction, and another day applying it in a downward direction. These rituals change the ritual status of bride and groom but other tactile rituals bring about a radical transformation in the relationship between different relatives of the bride and groom.

Marriage of a man’s elder brother

When a man’s brother gets married a new woman enters the household. Because men in Bastar marry “marriageable sisters” (*maina bahin*) with whom they have a joking relationship, it follows that brothers of the groom also had a joking relationship with the new bride prior to the wedding. This very close relationship must now be redefined using new terms of reference, new terms of address, and new salutes. When a man’s elder brother gets married the relationship with the new bride becomes even closer and is marked by a special salute which can be called the *devar* salute, literally the “second husband salute.” The word “*devar*” is the reference term for the bride’s husband’s younger brother. She addresses him as “*babu*,” a term of endearment for young kinsmen in general, while he addresses her as *bohu*. This is a relationship of the most extreme form of familiarity which the term “second husband salute” evokes. The younger brother is deemed to be junior to his elder brother’s wife and as such he is obliged to greet her with a foot-touch gesture of familial respect. As he attempts to do this she grabs his hands to prevent them touching her feet; she then reciprocates this attempted show of respect by a cheek-touch gesture of familial love that involves holding his face between her two hands (see Table 4). Because gestures of familial love are solicited reactions there are no salutes of mutual familiarity in Bastar but this one is very close to it.

Table 4. The component parts of the second-husband salute

	<i>Type of gesture</i>	
	halted foot-touch gesture of respect	cheek-touch gesture of familial love
<i>Visual form</i>		
<i>Description</i>	action and 1 st reaction: junior male tries to touch the feet of the senior female but she prevents him	2 nd reaction: senior female responds by holding the junior’s face between her hands
<i>Actor</i>	husband’s younger brother (<i>devar</i>) then elder brother’s wife (<i>bohu</i>)	elder brother’s wife (<i>bohu</i>)

Marriage of a man's younger brother

When a man's younger brother gets married a redefinition of the polar opposite type occurs. A touchable joking relationship is redefined as a non-tactile relation of extreme mutual familial respect. Again this is marked strongly in the modes of address. The man refers to his younger brother's wife as *bohari* and also addresses her as such. She refers to him, her husband's elder brother, *susara*, and addresses him as "respected person" (*bare man*) or uses the call sign "*e ho!*" But again it is the salute that captures the essence of the relationship. It can be called a "familial salute with touching words." The new bride, the junior partner in the dyadic relationship, pays her respect to her husband's elder brother by standing at a distance, covering her head, bending down, touching the ground in front of him, and saying "I touch your feet." He replies by making an upward gesture with the palm of his right hand and says "Please arise" (*utha*) using the polite form of the verb (see Table 5).

Table 5. The component parts of the asymmetrical verbal foot-touch salute

	<i>Type of gesture</i>	
	verbal foot-touch gesture of extreme familial respect	verbal "please arise" gesture of distanced familial love
<i>Halbi term</i>	<i>laphi pay parto</i> (distant-foot-touch)	" <i>utha</i> " ("please arise")
<i>Visual form</i>		
<i>Description</i>	action: female covers head, bends down, touches ground in front of his feet and says 'I touch your feet.'	reaction: male raises palm of right hand and uses polite form of verb "arise"
<i>Actors</i>	younger brother's wife (<i>bohari</i>)	husband's elder brother (<i>susara</i>)

The transformation of this relationship from a tactile joking relationship to an untouchable avoidance relationship, albeit in one that uses touching words, is created during the wedding in a special ritual called *susara manto*, "respecting the groom's elder brother." This ritual occurs at the house of the husband when the bridal party returns home. When the welcoming ritual is finished the bride sits on the lap of her husband's elder brother. Village people from all castes come to offer them wedding presents. When this is finished, they tell the groom's elder brother to cover the head of the bride. Then the groom's elder brother covers the bride with a new sari. From that day on the bride regards him as *susara*, an avoidance relation, and covers her head in his presence. The ritual ends when the groom's mother takes the bride's hand and leads her inside her new house. This ritual marks the liminal state between the pre-marital use of the generic familial salute and the post-marital use of this asymmetrical verbal foot-touch salute. The message of the ritual is obvious and MS Mali confirmed it. "Look everybody," the ritual says, "these people could joke with each other up to this very minute but not any longer. They should avoid each other from now on." Behavior that was virtuous in

the past has now become a vice. The following diagram (fig. 1) depicts this transformation.

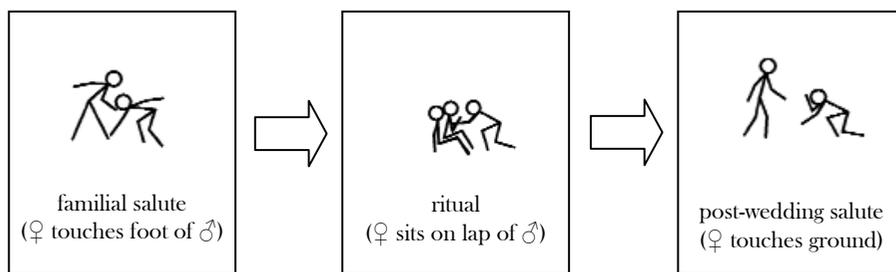


Figure 1. Ritual transformation of the generic familial salute into the distanced verbal foot-touch salute used by the elder brother's wife.

A remarkable feature of this most-extreme-respect salute is that the respect is inherited by the husband's elder brother's children. In other words, the younger brother's wife shows extreme respect not just to the husband's elder brother but also to his children. She maintains an avoidance relationship with them: she must not use their names and cannot touch them. The children likewise treat her with mutual extreme respect. The salutes they give each other are of the verbal foot-touch kind.

Marriage of a man's sister

The marriage of a man's sister is a major turning point in the life of a woman. She has to leave the household home and become someone's wife in another home in another village. No new salutes are introduced at her wedding for there is little need for them. She moves away and daily contact with her brothers and their wives comes to an end. The brother continues to use the pre-marriage modes of address for her relatives. The out-marrying sister, has to learn new salutes as the incoming bride, the ones we have just discussed above.

One's own marriage

Public displays of mutual affection between husband and wife are regarded as bad conduct in Bastar but the wedding ritual, a classic liminal rite, provides the one and only time when husband and wife can not only violate this norm but are ritually obliged to do so. This happens in a game-playing ritual called *citi pasa khelto* which is performed after the tying ritual and before the final feast on the last day of the wedding.

A mat is spread out and the newlyweds sit equally apart on the mat. Rice is then poured from a bowl and the bride and groom compete to scoop as much as they can to their side. When the gathering up is finished the respective rice piles are counted with a small pot. The bride will demand more rice from the groom's parents. "Ale mother of *babu*," she says, "give me rice. Ale father of *babu*, please give me some rice." When this is finished they play another game with cowries or coins. When that is finished they take a leaf and fill it with cooked rice. They each take a leaf of food and try to force-feed each other. This is accompanied by much laughter and joking.

This mutual feeding ritual is obviously a “transferred lover’s kiss” in the sense outlined in the second section of this essay. Mutual feeding, like the lover’s kiss, involves mutual tasting. Mutual tasting is the most intimate of all forms of mutual sensory excitation. It is also the supreme symbol of oneness, an idea that is fully developed in Hindu ideas about marriage. As Inden and Nicholas (1977: 26) note, “A husband is said to give his wife a new life by making her into his ‘half-body.’”

When a man marries it brings him into closer association with his wife’s elder sisters. These relations are generic joking relations. He maintains this relationship with his wife’s younger sister but the relationship with his wife’s elder sister becomes an avoidance relationship of symmetrical rather than an asymmetrical kind. Because a wife’s elder sister is deemed senior to the man he must make the opening gesture of extreme respect. This involves holding the palms of his hands together in a prayer position, bowing his head, and saying “I touch your feet.” She reciprocates not with a gesture of familiarity but with one of equally extreme respect. She covers her head with a sari, bows slightly, and also says “I touch your feet” (see Table 6).

Table 6. The component parts of the mutual verbal foot-touch salute

	<i>Type of gesture</i>	
	verbal foot-touch gesture of extreme familial respect	verbal-foot touch gesture of extreme familial respect with veiling
<i>Halbi term</i>	<i>laphi pay parto</i> (distant-foot-touch)	<i>laphi pay parto</i> (distant-foot-touch)
<i>Visual form</i>		
<i>Description</i>	action: male says ‘I touch your feet’ and bows with hands in prayer position	reaction: female covers head & responds ‘I touch your feet’ and bows with hands in prayer position
<i>Actors</i>	younger sister’s husband (<i>janwai</i>)	Wife’s elder sister (<i>sas</i>)

Once again a special ritual is held to bring this transformation about. On the morning after the last day of the wedding, when all the ceremonies have been completed and the groom’s party is about to depart, a ritual called *sas luga deto*, “giving a sari to the wife’s elder sister,” is held. As they are about to leave the courtyard the bride’s elder sister blocks the way, sings a song, and says, “Give me a *sas luga*.” The groom gives her a sari and from now he regards her as his *sas*. He treats her with respect and the verbal touch salute is one sign of this. She becomes an “untouchable” but a familiar untouchable because the touching gesture is transferred from the tactile sensory mode to the auditory-vocal mode.

Parenthood

When a man and his wife become parents they become respected elders and they acquire the power to confer kinship with gestures of familial love. Age, then, means that people spend less time showing respect to elders and more time responding to gestures of respect from juniors. We move to the other side of the salute so to speak. One's perspective changes but not the forms of the modes of address. No new modes of address are used until one's children marry.

When looking for a bride for his son a man will first consult his sister to ask for her daughter as a bride for his son. This is a birth-ascribed moral right. His sister and her daughter are in his mother's milk line and he has a right to claim the return of the milk. This is called "returning the milk" (*dudh lautna*). Because women are reborn as their classificatory daughter's daughter this is tantamount to the return of the reborn mother. The modes of address express this: a man's sister's daughter may be addressed as *aya*, mother. If the man is successful in securing his sister's daughter as a bride for his son then cousin marriage of the patrilineal cross-cousin kind will have occurred. My data shows that this happens in less than 5% of all cases. Nevertheless, the interactions rituals between kin are performed *as if* it has occurred in all cases. For example, a father will address his son's wife as *aya* even though she does not actually come from his mother's milk line. This means that in 95% of cases marriage creates a consanguineal relation where none existed before. In other words, cross cousin marriage is an *effect* of 95% of marriages not their *cause*. The instrument that brings about this creation of consanguinity is a special kind of familial salute which is performed at weddings. The ritual is the most spectacular of all the familial salutes for all senses are excited.

The ritual is called *samdhi bhent* and it marks the arrival of the groom's side at the bride's house where the wedding ritual will be performed. The parents of the bride greet the parents of the groom outside the front gate of their house. The fathers refer to each other as *samdhi* and address each other as such; the mothers refer to and address each other as *samdhin*. The greeting ritual lasts about fifteen minutes during which time the same-sex pairs pay extreme respect to each other in a series of simultaneous, or near simultaneous, ritual interactions. It begins with mutual feet washing during which they show their extreme respect for each other by drinking the dirty water. They then place auspicious red marks (*tika*) on each other's foreheads, place flowers behind each other's ears, and feed each other betel nut. Mutual hugging ends the ritual which may include other mutual exchanges. The hugging between men is sometimes very vigorous. They clash their bodies together in a manner that borders on the aggressive. Informants say that it is done out of mutual respect (*man*), not mutual love, and concede that an element of hostility is involved. The *samdhin* end their interaction ritual by familiarizing the classic palm-joined Hindu gesture of gesture (*anjali*) with a touch. The *samdhi* use this gesture in their subsequent future interactions. The opposite sex interactions between the parents is not ritualized. They are assumed to be brothers and sisters and give each other peremptory familial salutes of the generic kind. Table 7 captures in visual form the tactile component of this ritual.

Table 7. Close and very-close mutual familial respect salutes

	<i>Close mutual respect</i>	<i>Very-close mutual respect</i>
<i>Halbi term</i>	<i>hat jorto</i> (hands-join)	<i>bhent lagto</i> or <i>gal lagto</i> (meeting-attach or cheeks-attach)
<i>Visual form</i>		
<i>Description</i>	tactile version of the Hindu mutual palms- joined salute	mutual hug to each cheek 3, 5 or 7 times
<i>Actor</i>	same-sex parents of a married couple	same-sex parents of a married couple

This egalitarian nature of this mutual respect ritual presents a stark contrast to what happens in north Indian weddings. On these occasions the father of the bride, the bride-giver, defers to the father of the groom. For example, he will touch the feet of the groom's father who does not react. There are many north Indian migrants in Bastar and the people of Bastar are familiar with these rituals. As such one cannot help but think that the highly elaborated form of the *samdhi bhent* ritual has been developed in opposition to these rituals from the north as a statement of Bastarian cultural identity and distinctiveness.

Death

In the normal course of events seniors die before juniors. For a man the deaths of his father and his mother's brother are liminal states of great importance in Bastar. The father's modes of addressing his son have been considered above from the son's perspective so there is no need to rehearse these again. This leaves the mother's brother/sister's son relation which comes to the fore in death rituals.

Just as a man's sister's daughter is a reborn mother who should be addressed as *aya* (mother) it follows that a sister's son, *bhaca*, is a reborn mother's brother, *mama*. This ideology is expressed in the form of an inverted familial salute. Bastar's unwritten moral code obliges the mother's brother to show his respect to his sister's son by touching his feet. In its most highly elaborated form, which occurs at the mother's brother's funeral, the sister's son receives extreme respect without reacting. In other words, the first part of the generic familial salute is severed from its usual context and turned into a stand-alone gesture of extreme asymmetrical familial respect. Of course, the mother's brother is not around at the time of his funeral to carry out this ritual but his elder and younger brothers, as classificatory *mama*, may be and if so will do it. In some communities of Bastar a mother's brother will show his sister's son this foot-touching respect in everyday contexts throughout his life. The relation between a father's sister and her brother's son is analogous. In other words, cross-parents show extreme respect to cross nephews by means of the unreciprocated foot-touch gesture of respect (see Table 8).

Table 8. Foot-touch component of the familial salute as gesture of extreme respect for the cross-nephew

<i>Visual form</i>	
<i>Description</i>	senior kinsperson touches feet of junior kinsmen who does not reciprocate
<i>Actor</i>	cross parents to cross nephew

These implications of this salute are two. Firstly, the fact that it is not reciprocated in its most elaborated ritual form means that only parallel parents in the first ascending generation have the power to confer kinship on a junior with their familial touch. Secondly, it means that the sister's son, *bhaca*, becomes the most respected of all kin. People say that he is "just like a Brahman." But why is the cross nephew treated with extreme respect "just like a Brahmin?" Such are the questions that arise from a study of Bastar skinship but readers interested in the answer will have to await the publication of my forthcoming book because the answer requires a much more detailed investigation of the basic data than I have been able to give here.

Estrangement

The wonderful order the Bastar familial salute creates is extremely fragile. The above discussion presupposes that the gesture of familial respect always solicits a gesture of familial love. This is the key gesture because, by definition, it confers kinship by either affirming a pre-existing relationship of consanguinity or creating one anew as in the case of the *samdhi bhent* ritual at the marriage of one's children. A touching gesture of familiarity presupposes familial love but if familial hate prevails the gesture may not be reciprocated. If the familial hate is mutual the initial gesture of familial respect may not be forthcoming, a sign of familial estrangement. This is a moral sentiment of great force and importance in the world of skinship. Familial hate in its most extreme form is expressed by the swing of a sword, a transcultural fact evidenced by the data on the large percentage of homicides within the family.

Familial estrangement can be asymmetrical or mutual. The father who refuses to recognize the love-child of an affair as his child is an example of the former; a bitter dispute between brothers over the inheritance of their father's property can provide fertile grounds for the development of the latter. Mutual familial estrangement is a form of skinship because it involves the creation of new gestures of avoidance that strive to negate sensible communication. When the brothers are forced to live in the same intimate space as neighbors in a divided house this becomes a highly developed and difficult art. Tactile interaction is relatively easy to avoid but great care has to be taken to avoid eye contact; smells and sounds are almost impossible to control, especially those bad smells and loud sounds sent deliberately to annoy. Then there is the problem of the wives and children of the quarrelling brothers, who are also enjoined not to communicate with each other as they roam the neighborhood playing, attend school together and bump into each other at the weekly market.

My fieldnotes are full of examples of cases of this kind but this is something that is not peculiar to Bastar. Only a few moments reflection is necessary to unearth examples in one's own family history and in those of friends from whatever country. What distinguishes Bastar is the existence of a special salute for ending the period of estrangement. The salute presupposes that one party has wronged the other and that they seek forgiveness. The guilty party lies prostrate on the ground in front of the wrong party touching his or her feet. Forgiveness is begged and usually always received if go-betweens have arranged the event properly (see Table 9).

Table 9. Foot-touch component of the familial salute as a gesture of ultra-extreme humility

<i>Halbi term</i>	<i>danda-saran-pay-parto</i> (begging for shelter)
<i>Visual form</i>	
<i>Description</i>	kinsperson lies on the ground touching the feet of wronged kinsperson and begs for forgiveness
<i>Actor</i>	estranged kin

Salutes for non-kin

Salutes to non-kin assume a variety of types, many of which are distanced forms of a familial salute. Familial salutes are within touching distance, non-familial salutes are beyond it. In other words, relations of contiguity are the grounds upon which face-to-face salutes of different sensible kinds are located: the tongue and the hand are the primary means of expression in the intimate and personal zones of the familial salute; the voice, ears and eyes in the social and public zones of the non-familial salute.

Table 10 illustrates just three of the many types of “untouchable” salutes in Bastar. It is obvious from visual inspection that these are distanced versions of some the familial salutes considered above.

Table 10. Some distanced salutes used for greeting non-kin

	<i>Mutual respect salute</i>	<i>Extreme respect salute</i>	<i>Ultra-extreme respect salute</i>
<i>Halbi term</i>	<i>johar jhokto</i> (salute-throw)	<i>johar jhokto</i> (salute-throw)	<i>danda saran pay parto</i> (begging for shelter)
<i>Visual form</i>			
<i>Description</i>	non-tactile: mutual palms-joined salute with verbal <i>johar</i> ' greeting	non-tactile: unilateral palms-joined salute with head bowed	non-tactile: prostration with optional blessing sign
<i>Actor</i>	friends, strangers	low/high caste	devotee/deity, subject/king

Competing values

A common feature of these salutes, familial or otherwise, is the role of respect as the central value. In the intimate and personal zones familial respect is complemented by familial love but as the boundaries of kinship are reached, then breached, respect emerges as the supreme value. But here it faces competition from other values. Untouchability, from the perspective of kinship, is an expression of respect of some kind, be it mutual or ultra extreme. Other values can inform untouchability and ritual pollution is the classic example used when talking about India. For some indigenous Halbi-speaking people of Bastar this value is a temporary affliction that affects people such as menstruating women, but not whole communities in some permanent way. One woman I know was deeply insulted when a guest, who perceived herself to be of higher status, refused to accept water from her hand. The guest did it because of the “impure” status of her host. The host, for her part, interpreted the guest’s action as one of extreme disrespect, the height of bad manners, and felt that her dignity as a person was insulted. Respect is for her the dominant value when engaging in face-to-face sensible actions of a familial or convivial kind. Market-places relations, by contrast, are governed by different values which inform her actions as she tries to bargain down a seller’s price. The pursuit of market values does not compete with respect for her; indeed, good manners requires it to be done in a respectful, good humored way (unlike, it could be added, the lending practices of certain finance companies in the global economy today).

Respect, then, is only one value among many but for some women in Bastar it is the dominant value. For moral philosophers like Kant (1797) respect, too, is a supreme value; nay more, it is the *only* moral sentiment his moral philosophy admits. For Kant respect is what makes us human. “The respect which I bear others or which another can claim from me,” says Kant (1797: 127) “is the acknowledgement of the dignity of another man, i.e., a worth which has no price, no equivalent for which the object of valuation could be exchanged. Judging something to have no worth is contempt.”

This brings us back to Hall and Goffman on the defining characteristics of human sensible communication but ahead to a student of Kant’s thought, Sarah Buss, who has noted in her essay, *Appearing respectful: the moral significance of manners* (1999), that experts on manners have a “strikingly similar drum beat” when it comes to discussions of respect and human dignity. Manners, she argues, plays an essential role in moral life. Virtue, she notes, is essential to good manners. The study of systems of manners, then, is the study of morality, a thesis she argues that will probably strike “people uncorrupted by philosophy” as obvious.

But the obvious needs to be stated now and then. Values inform face-to-face ritual interactions but there is more than one value. While the study of abstract moral philosophies of people such as Kant are no doubt important, both philosophers and anthropologists still have much to learn from the moral philosophers of the concrete found in places like Bastar. Ethnography theory has its origins in the concrete study of concrete problems but kinship theory, as the study of reference terms, has overlooked the obvious point that modes of address of a sensible kind are primary.

If anthropologists are unsure about what kinship is then the people of Bastar have no doubts. For them it is first and foremost a relationship of contiguity rather than a relationship of consanguinity and affinity, a “mutuality in sensible being” to give Sahlins’ (2011) formulation a slight twist. They measure kinship distance in feet, by how far apart they are on a common ground, not by the number of consanguineal and affinal steps on a genealogy. Touching gestures of familial love and respect in Bastar can affirm relations of consanguinity but in most cases they create it anew; salutes also have in them the potential to render consanguineal relations asunder. Reciprocal recognition of familial love and respect is the basis of the former, mutual familial hate the basis of the latter. Kinship as “mutuality in being” makes senses as skinship but not as an abstraction from it. Skinship is a reality for them; its being is literally felt.

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Skinship: la touchabilité comme valeur en Inde du Centre-Est

Résumé: Dans « What kinship is », Marshall Sahlins (2011) offre une nouvelle et stimulante réponse à une question ancienne et très débattue, en définissant la parenté comme une « mutualité d'existence ». Pour les locuteurs Halbi du Plateau du Balstar de l'Inde du Centre-Est, la parenté est définie par le toucher: les jeunes honorent les anciens par des gestes tactiles de respect familial auxquels il est répondu par des gestes tactiles d'amour familial. Dans certaines occasions rituelles, ces salutations se parent de fleurs multicolores, de plats goûteux, d'eau purifiée, d'encens aux parfums doux, de paroles agréables, et de sentiments sincères. Ceux qui ne sont pas parents, par contraste, sont définis par des gestes de respect mutuel qui ne sont pas tactiles. L'implication générale apportée par cet exemple pour l'étude de la parenté en tant que « mutualité d'existence sensible », pour détourner légèrement l'expression de Sahlins, implique un déplacement des études sur la parenté en tant qu'abstractions sémantiques de terminologies de référence vers une réflexion sur les pragmatiques en jeu dans les interactions sensibles de face à face entre individus. Peu de recherches ethnographiques ont été conduites sur celles-ci. Le mot « parenté de peau » (*skinship*), dérivé du japonais, par son évocation du toucher et de la parenté comme venant ensemble, engagerait une approche originale de l'analyse de la parenté.

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