

|Book Symposium|



## What kinship does—and how

Comment on SAHLINS, Marshall. 2013. *What kinship is—and is not*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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One of many family stories that made a vivid impression on me as a child was told by my mother, Ruth, who related how, as a young woman in her mid-twenties, she had once been on a journey, about to catch a train from one European city to another.<sup>1</sup> Standing on the platform, she suddenly had the feeling that something was wrong at home. For no obvious or explicable reason, instead of taking her intended train, she took a different one—travelling in the opposite direction—and went directly home. On arrival, she discovered that her brother, to whom she was extremely close, had just received a diagnosis of leukaemia. He died just a few weeks later and, as the manner in which Ruth told of these events made clear, her life from then on was irrevocably changed.

I was reminded of this story when I first read Marshall Sahlins' wonderful, scholarly, and humane account of *What kinship is—and is not*. What is most striking about Sahlins' discussion is the evocative way in which he captures something immediately recognizable about kinship. Across cultures, eras, and social backgrounds, the sense that kin "participate intrinsically in each other's existence," that they share "a mutuality of being," and are "members of one another" (Sahlins 2013: ix) is intuitively graspable—not as an analytic abstraction, as many definitions of kinship seem to be, but in a way that palpably makes sense of a whole range of human experience as described in the ethnographic record, and also our own. My mother's narrative was about the ineffable experience of kinship between siblings so close that they know each other's thoughts before they are uttered, and can

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1. A longer paper incorporating this commentary was delivered at a colloquium in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Michigan in April 2013. I am very grateful to the audience there for their comments and the ensuing conversations, and especially to Gillian Feeley-Harnik for her generous hospitality.

sense each other's anxieties or pain even when apart. Such stories are often told about twins—though my mother's concerned not twins but siblings separated by just fifteen months. This immediately recognizable quality of kinship is captured, too, in the beautifully selected epigraphs to Sahlins' book. One, by E. B. Tylor, concerns "South American tribes who consciously believe that different persons are not necessarily separate beings, as we take them to be, but that there is such a physical connexion between father and son, that the diet of one affects the health of the other" (Tylor 1865, cited in Sahlins 2013);<sup>2</sup> the other, from an article on "What baseball does to the soul" in the *New York Times* in 2012, describes how "We become the children of our children, the sons of our sons. We take on the burden of their victories and defeats. It is our privilege, our curse too. We get older and younger at the same time." (Colin McCann April 1, 2012)

The juxtaposition of *New York Times* baseball commentary and exotica from nineteenth century evolutionary anthropology is vintage Sahlins—reflecting the breadth of knowledge encompassed, and also the exuberance and wit with which it is presented. Sahlins' discussion of "what kinship is" not only makes sense of a huge diversity of human experience, it is also immensely good fun to read. The attractiveness of this latest venture into the contested terrain of what constitutes kinship lies in its generosity of spirit, its capaciousness, and synthetic brilliance. This is not a work for the analytically mean-spirited; it is expansive toward both its readers and its subject matter. Rather than focusing on the divide between kinship and what we might call "not-kinship," Sahlins eloquently illuminates kinship's inclusive tendencies, its seemingly endless capacities to shape-shift, appearing in different guises with different effects: food, houses, land, procreation, memory, emotion, and experience—to mention just a few—can be effortlessly encompassed by the idea of "mutuality of being."

The appropriate response from the reader to the author of this work seems to be one that echoes its register of generosity. Sahlins has included a truly remarkable amount in a very short book and, my comments are reflections sparked by the stimulation of his argument. One point worth noting, I think, is that Sahlins—following in the path of many scholars who write on kinship—tends to concentrate on the positive aspects of kinship rather more than the negative ones. "Mutuality of being," on the whole, emanates a warm, fuzzy glow rather than a cold shiver. Kinship, however, as Veena Das (1995), Michael Peletz (2000), Michael Lambek (2011), and others have noted, often carries ambivalent or negative qualities, which anthropologists tend to dwell on rather less. Indeed, Jeanette Edwards and Marilyn Strathern (2000) have commented on the "sentimentalised view of sociality as sociability and of kinship ('family') as community that pervades much Euro-American commentary of an *academic* kind" (2000: 152; original emphasis), and that this is a reflection of the positive, generative ideological force of ideas about

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2. I was unable to locate this exact quotation in the 1865 edition of Tylor's work. I consulted in the National Library of Scotland. There, Tylor (1865: 292) notes " . . . a number of distinct and distant tribes deliberately holding the opinion that the connexion between father and child is not only, as we think, a mere relation of parentage, affection, duty, but that their very bodies are joined by a physical bond, so that what is done to the one acts directly upon the other."

connection, belonging, and kinship in Euro-American cultures. Differentiation, hierarchy, exclusion, and abuse are, however, also part of what kinship does or enables—in Euro-American contexts and elsewhere.

Some of these double-edged qualities emerge clearly in the ethnography of Southeast Asia. Thus while the inclusive tendencies of Malay kinship are very apparent, it can often also have a coercive tinge. This not only affected the course of my own fieldwork, but is central to what kinship does and how. The diverse sources of kinship that Sahlins enumerates, and their capacity to enlarge its scope, are part of the texture of everyday life—the warm and nurturing hearth that is central to the experience of kinship. They can also have long-term consequences in historical contexts of demographic mobility, such as those that obtained in Southeast Asia, where they readily enabled the incorporation of outsiders (Carsten 1997; Reid 1988; Scott 2009). Gestures of simple hospitality—coercive or not—can thus acquire a cumulative significance as they are enfolded into the political expansion of dominant lowland states, which extend their reach into outlying regions. On a more local level, fostering children could be a benign process of care testifying to the moral worth of the foster parents, but it can also take the form of exploitation and be a means for a household to express and improve its dominant position in a local hierarchy (see Schrauwers 1999). And, as is the case in many cultures, amiable relations between neighbors and kin may be transformed overnight into jealousy and rancorous accusations of witchcraft.

Sahlins, in fact, has a suggestive comparison of kinship and magic, the latter, “a technique for the transpersonal imposition of being into other subjects” (2013: 58). But he argues that “the intersubjectivity of magic may be coercively introjected, in which respects it is not the same as the mutuality of kinship” (59). There seems, however, to be some hesitation here as, commenting on Achuar magic, he continues, “by harming or consuming the other, sorcery (‘black magic’) and witchcraft are quite analogous to failures of kinship, and in such regard they can be included in the same animist ontology, if on the darker side thereof (59). One might suggest, however, that it is not the coercive quality of the intersubjectivity that distinguishes witchcraft from kinship—kinship itself often has a coercive edge (see, for example, Carsten 1997; Foster 1990). This can be particularly evident in feeding relations which, as Bloch (2005) notes, are often fraught with danger. Poisoning is, of course, a classic form of witchcraft (see da Col 2012 for a recent discussion of this association), and Sahlins concludes this passage by stating that “as the consumption or penetration of the body of the other with the intent to harm, witchcraft and sorcery are rather, by definition, negative kinship” (Sahlins 2013: 59). Thus it is the “intent to harm,” he argues, that distinguishes the positive from the negative. But rather than making a sharp opposition, we might want to draw out the more subtle gradations in qualities and intent between kinship as positive, and witchcraft as negative, force.

This point also highlights that a focus on what kinship is or is not, and on definitions of kinship, necessarily pays less attention to the ways that kinship accumulates or dissolves over time—processes of “thickening” or “thinning” of relatedness. Here one might want to look at the way that certain vectors or registers of “mutuality of being,” which Sahlins brings together, such as feeding, procreation, living together, memory, or land, complement or counteract each other in particular contexts. Thus, for example, residence rules—particularly following marr-

riage—may, without dissolving ties of birth, lead to a “thinning” of those ties where adult children move away from the natal home, and this effect will tend to be compounded if distances are great and visits are rare. But these are complex matters—paradoxically, moving away may also intensify nostalgic ties of memory to a natal home as, for example, Joelle Bahloul (1996) documents in her wonderful ethnography of memories of a Jewish-Muslim home in colonial Algeria. Here temporality becomes significant, and not just in relation to a remembered past. While most studies of kinship are necessarily synchronic—though sometimes encompassing different kinds of evidence about the past—kinship futures remain unknowable. In the study of reunions between adult adoptees and their birth kin that I carried out in the late 1990s, I was struck by the way that seemingly trivial avenues of communication, such as Christmas cards, left small openings for the potential reestablishment or strengthening of bonds in the future when they seemed unable to proceed in the present—too heavily encumbered by the weight of the past. Whether such potential was in fact ever activated is unknown to me, but it underlines that our interpretations of kinship are severely hampered by the limitations of our methods.

Sometimes, however, a long familiarity with a particular field site and its people may surmount these constraints. Michael Lambek’s evocation of “Kinship as gift and theft” (2011) illuminates how knowledge of a particular family over many decades can shed light on the ways in which death brings about a rearrangement of relations among the living—involving a thickening in some cases but a dissolution or rupture in others. The gift of succession from parents to children in Mayotte can also involve illicit acts of theft when one sibling claims ownership of spirits that might have been thought to rightfully transfer to another. Kinship, as Lambek writes, “entails promises and breaches of promise, acts and violations of intimacy, and acts of forgiveness and revenge” (ibid.: 4). In the case he examines, when one adult offspring successfully laid claim to the spirits raised by her mother, she simultaneously erased the prerogative of her older sister. And Lambek documents how this act was in fact the culmination of a long process of exclusion experienced by the older sister.

Temporality, then, offers the possibility of exploring the gradations and accumulations of kinship as well as its ruptures and dissolution. But Lambek also underlines how recent kinship studies have tended to focus on procreation and birth rather than other moments or processes, such as marriage, death, or succession. While he makes an argument in this context for the importance of *ritual* as opposed to everyday practices of kinship, I would prefer simply to reiterate his suggestion that we continue to hold all of the lifecourse in view rather than allowing birth to overshadow other significant processes. As examples from Southeast Asia (and elsewhere) attest, it is in the gradual accumulation of everyday experiences through living together over time—in both the ritual and non-ritual moments—that kinship acquires its particular power.

Procreation and birth have, of course, a special significance in Euro-American understandings of kinship, and also, as David Schneider underlined, in anthropological accounts. Sahlin is the latest here in a long line of scholars to frame his discussion of kinship around the dichotomy between culture and biology, social ties and birth ones. And here we might note that this symbolic opposition provides one deep-running axis in a rich repertoire of idioms for participants in Euro-American

cultures to reduce or undercut, but also to thicken, their own potentially infinite universe of kinship ties (Edwards and Strathern 2000). Thus idioms of social ties may be mobilized to reduce, replace, or reinforce biological ones—sisters or mothers and daughters may be so close that they are “best friends,” but friends, in the absence of kinship ties—or sometimes in contrast to them—can also be “like sisters.” Mostly, in English kinship reckoning, as Edwards and Strathern point out, the reduction or cutting of kinship ties proceeds implicitly and gradually, without paying it undue attention.

It is perhaps because this opposition is so deeply etched in European cultural history that it is sometimes difficult to keep all its effects in view. Sahlins has done anthropology a huge service in brilliantly and succinctly synthesizing a wealth of ethnographic evidence around this theme to demonstrate that the intersubjective relations of kinship are, in his words, “the *a priori* of birth rather than the sequitur” (Sahlins 2013: 68), or “relations of procreation are patterned by the kinship order in which they are embedded” (76), not the other way around. In spite of his chapter titles then (“What kinship is—culture” and “What kinship is not—biology”), Sahlins concludes that,

It is probably better not to speak of “biology” at all, folk or otherwise, since few or no peoples other than Euro-Americans understand themselves to be constructed upon—or in fundamental ways, against some biological-corporeal substratum. For many their kinship is already given in their flesh. (77)

As he puts it, commenting on Meggitt’s ethnography of the Mae-Enga of the New Guinea Highlands, “The larger structures and values of society are realized in the microcosm of human reproduction” (84).

The attempt to shift the definition of kinship away from the enframing division between the “biological” and the “social” is welcome, and echoes previous discussions—for example, my use of the term “relatedness” as a way to sidestep the biological/social dichotomy and the particular baggage that “kinship” carries as an analytic term (Carsten 2000; see also Carsten 1995, 1997). It may, of course, meet with similar criticisms from those scholars who advocate maintaining a strict analytical distinction between kinship and non-kinship relations. Here we are faced with a sticky paradox in the kind of endeavor Sahlins has taken on. A broad and inclusive definition of kinship runs counter to a long tradition in kinship studies that is the product of Western history and philosophy in which “what kinship is” is precisely defined against what it is not, and in which biology has a defining role. And so, the more one tries to dispense with the dichotomy, the more one seems to end up reiterating it. Actually, and importantly, as Sahlins neatly demonstrates, in the end, this too-pervasive distinction disappears up its own tail—in the sense that, if kinship is intrinsic to human nature/culture, then it is also biologically given. Or, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro puts it more pithily (and with shades of Lévi-Strauss) on the back cover: “what is natural in human culture is what is cultural in human nature: kinship, precisely.”

Everything depends on what you want to keep in view. Here I am firmly with Sahlins whose starting point is the experience that makes aspects of kinship mutually comprehensible across different cultures and historical epochs. My mother’s story of kinship with which I began conveys just this kind of recognizable quality—

which may occur between good friends just as well as between siblings or other categories of kin. Such stories take their place in a wider frame. When my maternal uncle, Siegfried Moses, the gifted favorite of his family, fell ill at the age of twenty-three in 1936, he had already been forced under the anti-Jewish legislation enacted in Germany in 1933 to give up his place at medical school, and instead had taken an apprenticeship as a locksmith.<sup>3</sup> Before the end of that year he died, and a few weeks later my mother began a new life as a refugee in England. The irrevocable sense of loss that I sensed as a child in her narrative referred also to this larger story, one embedded in a long history and multiple temporalities of European ideas of blood, race, and kinship, and in the hierarchies and exclusions that are part of what kinship enables.

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3. I am very grateful to Gayle Rubin for information on the content and chronology of the relevant legislation, and for supplying helpful references.

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