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|Book Symposium|

It's this, not that
How Marshall Sahlins solves kinship

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

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Shifting position

This is a massive little book. At eighty-nine pages of main text, *What kinship is—and is not* is so dense, so perfect in its construction, that it leaves the reader almost no room to turn around in, but infinite space in which to ponder and re-imagine the topic at hand. The task I have been assigned in this forum is to provide the view from the Arab Middle East, a world region that Sahlins completely ignores in his study. I suspect Sahlins would find the Jordanian Bedouin I work with to be quite conventional in their kinship system. They believe in things like inherited blood, patrilines, and pedigrees, the link between genealogical origins and a person's moral character, and (less familiar) the bonds made when "unrelated" individuals drink milk from the same breast. They could even chat meaningfully with David Schneider about kinship as code and substance. As Muslims, adoption is nominally forbidden to them, but the families I lived with often assured me that certain cousins in the next village were not "true" members of the tribe, just folks whose ancestors had been taken in and protected several generations ago. I could write it in my books, they said, but it would be impolite to mention it in front of them. I was treated like a son and brother, although I was known to be neither; my wife, Sally, was taken into the house of the brother of the man who acted as my local father, which meant we were a patrilateral parallel cousin marriage. The best kind. When people learned that we had been married for three years without producing a child, they shared local remedies that left no doubt that conception, as they understood it, involved my semen, Sally's womb, and sex in the right amount and mood. The Western model, with egg, sperm, DNA, and the rest, is common knowledge among the educated, and it has been adapted to a local idiom of bone, flesh, blood, and seed with minimal dissonance.

For the kind of book Sahlins has written, and judging by his taste for kinship systems that diverge markedly from the "biological fixations" of Euro-American

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kinship, I can see why the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia would be of minimal ethnographic interest to him. Still, given my long acquaintance with Arab kinship systems, I find the anti-organicism of Sahlins' book fascinating, and slightly disturbing. Rather than catalog all the ways in which Arab world ethnography confirms or contradicts his ideas about kinship—it does both[1]—I will go straight to the claims of the book itself. It is written against a variety of assumptions about bodies and belonging that Arabs and Euro-Americans share (or once did), and I will be able to engage more energetically if I do so as a native informant.

Discourse first

Sahlins makes a simple case. Kinship is culture, not biology. It is not a mixture of the two; it is not both at once; even when people think and say kinship is about shared substances, it really is not. How people think and say such things is what matters for Sahlins. Because nothing about human kinship precedes discourse, it follows that kinship is "culture, all culture" (2013: 89). In developing this argument, Sahlins reveals an intriguing series of breakpoints in his own thinking about kinship. He claims so much ground for "culture" that he is forced to assimilate research findings, and acknowledge social patterns, that his discourse-heavy approach would not ordinarily be expected to accommodate. These moments of imperial overreach are, for me, some of the best in the book. I will return to them.

For most readers, the takeaway of *What kinship is—and is not* will be its three-word definition of kinship: "mutuality of being." I sampled this definition on a test population of 435 Anthropology 101 students. They were grateful for its brevity. The best creed is a short one. They also thought it sounded smart and reasonable, with just the right amount of mystery. A few objections surfaced quickly, however, and these were similar to misgivings that arose when Sahlins discussed "mutuality of being" in a lecture hosted by the Anthropology Department at the University of Michigan in 2011. "Mutuality of being" seems to gloss over all the conflict, abuse, abandonment, exploitation, and outright hatred that suffuse kinship ties. "Mutuality," at least among kin, entails divisiveness and inequality. "Being" comes in male and female, young and old, first-born and last-born. How mutual can it be? To make matters more vexing, Sahlins really does think that kinship is based in a generalized "amity," and he has held this position for a long time. In his (probably disowned) classic, *Tribesmen* (1968: 10), he notes that "kinship is a social relation of cooperation and nonviolence (ordinarily). 'Kindred' has the same root as 'kindness,' two words—as E.B. Tylor said—'whose common derivation express in the happiest way one of the main principles of social life.'" In the new version, the positive glow is still there.

> I take diffuse enduring solidarity and the like as the corollary subjectivity of mutuality of being. Aloha is even implied, although of course love is not a relation of kinship alone and no matter that it is honored in the breach. A breach of kinship love also implies the constituted love of kinfolk: the failure includes its own ideal (2013: 24).

1. The study that best connects the Arab/Muslim world to the concerns of Sahlins' book is Morgan Clarke's *Islam and new kinship: reproductive technology and the shariah in Lebanon* (2009).

When an audience member at the Michigan lecture asked Sahlins if "mutuality of being" did not, in fact, describe many relations that were not kin-based, including that between master and slave, Sahlins said that such a relationship could not be one of mutual being, at least not of the sort kinship presupposes.

At a deeper level, in the "epistemic murk" (32) of philosophy, lie challenges of a stiffer sort. It would appear that "being," for Sahlins, is not rooted in material substances, in blood or genes or even in physical bodies, nor is "mutuality" a quality of separate individuals who participate in each other's lives on the common-sense model of sharing, reciprocity, or altruism. The mutuality of kin, Sahlins argues, is experienced in their *joint* being. They live and die together, feel joy and misery together, *as one.* Again, some listeners at the Michigan lecture had reservations, asking if mutual being, especially that between kin, was not always realized in the exchange of materials objects, which are as essential to defining mutuality (or being) as is the exchange of, say, bodily fluids or terms of endearment. It is a good question, and Sahlins has a reply.

> Referring usually to independent entities, philosophical notions of being have a common tendency to devolve into notions of "substance," even as "substance" conjures a sense of materiality. Hence mutuality of being—insofar as "being" carries such connotations—would be an inadequate determination of kinship. For as argued here, "being" in a kinship sense denies the necessary independence of the entities so related, as well as the necessary substantiality and physicality of the relationship. To the contrary, the being-ness of humans is not confined to singular persons. Moreover, the most famous determination of the reality of the *human* being—the *cogito ergo sum*—precisely by virtue of (symbolic) thinking, is radically opposed to merely material substance (*res extensa*) (32).

So far, so Sahlins. All the trademarks are here: the distaste for individualism (bourgeois or methodological), the aversion to biogenetic substrates, and the subordination of physical objects and materiality to meaningful discourses about them. Indeed, the deep structure of the book, which is never far from the surface, is the claim that kinship systems pre-exist the individuals they create—therefore, procreation and genealogy do not make kin; they are not at the heart of kinship; instead, "a system of kinship relations and categories" gives newborn children their "specific position and relative value" in the social world they enter when they leave the womb (65). Birth, in this formulation, is a metaphor for the kinship system, but kinship is not a metaphorical representation of relations grounded in human procreation. For Sahlins, the metaphor only goes one way.

Déjà vu

The idea that phylogenetic and other material constraints on human reproduction (defined as "biology") do not, per se, have anything to do with human kinship systems is language designed to send us to battle stations. As Sahlins masterfully deploys it, the idiom is binary, winner take all, and it has the virtue of being utterly predictable in its analytic consequences. Since we are dealing with strong doctrinal positions, I should confess (apt word) that I also believe that human kinship is cultural. But I do not think that culture—of the discursive, internally constituted, symbol laden, and highly structured kind Sahlins has preached for decades—is enough to explain what kinship does, how it works, why it varies, or, least of all,

how it develops historically and has evolved, as a discrete range of behavioral and interactive tendencies, over millions of years of primate evolution.[2] If Sahlins were simply claiming that kinship is cultural, or insisting that kinship has little (or even nothing) to do with biology, his book would correspond to fairly standard anthropological claims. His goal is more radical. He wants to demolish the idea, itself based on a rich tradition of direct ethnographic observation, that kinship is a cultural system in which procreation (human reproduction) plays a *formative* role.

Sahlins admits from the outset that he is "cherry-picking" his evidence in order to "exemplify rather than verify" his claims (2). The ethnographic studies he cites are ample and always interesting, but their cumulative effect was, for me, bewildering. Its anti-biologism and claims to analytical novelty aside, so much of *What kinship is—and is not* leads us back to kinship as we have long known, taught, and argued about it. It is "Kinship" as a chapter heading in the great book of anthropology; kinship as it pertains to marriage, adoption, food sharing, name sharing, descent, filiation, terminology systems, cross and parallel cousins, sex, incest taboos, theories of reproduction. The bulk of this material derives from the most stereotypical of anthropological locations: Melanesia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Amazonia, the Arctic, and the Pacific Northwest Coast. Sahlins occasionally mentions illustrious Western minds (Aristotle takes a star turn), but the cast of characters otherwise reads like an updated version of *Tribesmen*, with all the pastoral nomads left out. We see very little of the Asian civilizations, the Islamic world, or the self-consciously (post)modern and Occidental. When the latter appears, it is usually a chance for Sahlins to remind us that Euro-Americans (as anthropologists and plain folks) suffer from a peculiar "local model" of kinship that we must get beyond (to better understand kinship systems in which women give birth to tortoises and children determine where they will be born and what their sex will be; "begetters, begone" indeed!).

It is as if Sahlins does not want our attention to stray in directions that readers like us (sociocultural anthropologists, mostly) would expect a state-of-the-art treatise on kinship to explore. What does Sahlins tell us about New Kinship studies? Not much, except to imply that Marilyn Strathern got "dividualism" wrong in a very Western way; hence, the viral spread of her ideas. What of recent research on infertility, genetic research, genomics, surrogacy, in vitro fertilization, cloning, rights to tissues and bodies, and other matters biomedical? Hardly a word. What about seismic shifts in biosocial research on kinship, in which even old-line sociobiologists (like the Wilsons: both David Sloan and Edward O.) have adopted group selection models of human evolution, mixing Durkheim with their Darwin? Still nothing. (That tantalizing "Parenthesis on human nature" is too targeted, too cut off from its larger context and biocultural implications, to count here; end of parenthesis.) What of the burgeoning field of ancient human kinship or comparative analysis of human and non-human primate kinship systems?[3] Again, nothing.

2. Sahlins mentions in a footnote that "change in kinship categories is beyond the scope of the present work"; he also says that "the risk of practice to kinship categories and the possibilities of change" can never be ruled out (11).

3. Of all the overlooked genres I mention here, this is the one HAU readers are most likely not to have sampled yet. For starters, I would recommend Bernard Chapais (2008) and Nicholas Allen et al. (2008).

Sahlins picks up, instead, where Schneider left off, with the sense that American kinship, "our own native wisdom" (ix), has distorted traditional anthropological approaches to relatedness. Sahlins is merciless in his critique of Schneider, whom he portrays as a scholar who made glaring, intellectually ridicu-lous analytical mistakes. Clearly, Schneider went overboard in arguing that kinship is a figment of the anthropological imagination. Subsequent ethnography done by Schneider's own students doomed this claim; something like kinship kept popping up everywhere. Yet is "mutuality of being" what best defines this ubiquitous material, or our tendency to perceive it? I am tempted to argue that Sahlins has imposed his new definition on an older set of ideas and practices, on exactly the topical fixations Schneider came to distrust. Sahlins takes these fixations for granted—his principal concern is to move them as far from biology as possible—and this tendency has the ironic effect of binding kinship studies (oppositionally, but inevitably) to the very notions of procreation and genealogy Sahlins wants to demote.

Strange territory

How do I mean this? To explain better, I should call for assistance from Thomas Trautmann, Gillian Feeley-Harnik, and John Mitani, three colleagues who collaborated with me on a volume called *Deep history: The architecture of past and present* (Shryock and Smail 2011). In "Deep kinship," an essay that moves between history, primatology, and social anthropology, these authors try to do something quite unlike what Sahlins is attempting: namely, they try to break down the barriers between "social kinship" and "biological kinship," both of which are present in all primate species. The lines between these forms of relatedness are not easy to draw in the first place; segregating them takes as much effort as exploring their overlaps. Many scholars of human kinship would nowadays like to use their effort differently, and that is what Trautmann et al. want to facilitate in their essay. As the trio put it:

> The tension between advocates of kinship as culture and kinship as biology has only recently begun to fade. It now seems possible to entertain simultaneously two views, *both of which are essential for the analysis of kinship, neither of which is true in isolation from the other, and each of which becomes self-contradictory when taken to the extreme*: first, that social kinship is the social construction and elaboration of biological relations, that is, biological precedes social kinship; and second, that biological kinship is a form of social kinship developed in the idiom of modern science, that is, kinship is social all the way to the bottom (Trautmann et al. 2011: 163, emphasis added).

How immaculately Sahlins proves these claims, precisely because he refuses to think two ways at once! He demonstrates the extent to which kinship is not biology, but in arguing as strenuously as possible that kinship is only and ever culture, he ends up in strange territory, territory that seems contradictory and not quite true to his positions. If mutuality of being is kinship, everywhere and always; if, as Sahlins bravely contends, "all means of constituting kinship are in essence the same" (29), then what produces this essence and holds it in place? Whatever it is, it cannot be biology—not for Sahlins—but it must do some of the explanatory work done by biology in the opposite (and polemically essential) view of kinship.

Enter Michael Tomasello and company—a band of cognitive development psychologists, primatologists, and evolutionary theorists all—whom Sahlins employs to anchor his model of mutualism in something that approximates innate humanity (37–44). Why do this? Partly, it is a chance to suggest that the "other side" is finally coming around. Partly, it is because Sahlins thinks these studies support his notion of intersubjectivity, which, alas, is probably a bit more mystical than Tomasello and company would themselves be comfortable with. After all, they are speaking mostly of an evolved capacity of human individuals to create shared intentionality, not with the ability of a transcendent intersubjectivity to create and contain human individuals *in kinship relations specifically*. But the models might be made to intersect, given enough (evolutionary) time and the right selective pressures, and Tomasello et al. (2012) have recently tried to determine what those conditions might be.[4] This is perhaps the most productive moment in the book. Sahlins has stepped into the interface of primate/human studies, taking away some of the knowledge created there by controlled comparison of human and chimpanzee cognition. These comparisons make sense, and are telling, because humans and chimps share much of their genetic history. On the scale of deep time, we are very close relatives. We are kin, if Sahlins will forgive the expression.[5]

Another patch of strange territory is located in Sahlins' discussion of the persistent link between kin terms and genealogical relationships. After luxuriating in the postnatal name sharing, identity switching, and kin term skewing of Inuit, Greenlander, !Kung, and Ojibwa societies, Sahlins makes the following observation, which he poses as a problem (for his analysis): "all these postnatal determinations of kinship, including those for which no genealogical connection can be imagined, are nevertheless formulated in (apparently) genealogical terms" (72). Why would Sahlins highlight this fact? Again, he is looking for discursive limits on how individual actors can manipulate kinship. The kin terms Inuit place on each other might be mixed up and constantly re-applied after birth, but they are always (and amazingly) kin terms, identical to those defined genealogically, with parallel interactive constraints. This is indeed a problem for Sahlins. It suggests that a better definition of kinship might be "mutuality of being as formulated in (apparently) genealogical terms." This is a mouthful, and it is contrary to the spirit of *What kinship is—and is not*. Remember, "kinship is not genealogy" (38).

Sahlins has arrived, once more, at a place where the separation of purely cultural and purely biological domains is not easy, or even necessary. It will take

4. Tomasello's (2012) work on mutualism broaches the topic of "group mind," which he argues is not related to or dependent on the evolution of kinship. The latter sinks deep into the primate past. The development of shared and joint intentionality in genus *Homo*, he contends, is a product of foraging strategies, increasing group size, and intergroup competition that led to selection for groups in which individuals showed ever higher degrees of collective identification.

5. He might not. In a sharp footnote, Sahlins says sociobiologists miss the point in comparing humans to "subhuman primates" in terms of reciprocity or altruism. "The point is that humans subsume self and other in a single collective entity, a 'we-ness,' which apes cannot do. In the terms of this book, they are not our 'closest relatives'—one more evidence that kinship is not genealogy" (38). With the helpful dose of Tomasello comes a lingering trace of Wilberforce.

more work, more justification. Suddenly, Sahlins decides to ask four questions (72) that seem to be exactly the right ones. They should not go to waste as rhetorical. Any attentive reader would be prepared, at this point, to answer all four on the spot. As a tutor, Sahlins is that good; the data have been that rich. So I will take the liberty of turning his queries into a dialogue, with Sahlins in italics. Given the ubiquitous use of "(apparently) genealogical terms" to describe even kin for whom no genealogical connection can be imagined . . .

> *Does it not follow . . . that the relations derived from procreation comprise the primary "code" or "model" of all human kinship?*
>
> They certainly comprise a common model. Whether they are now, or ever were, primary is another kind of question; the answer will vary across time and space. Perhaps the earliest human kinship systems were based on the regularization of mating strategies, foraging, and cooperative child-rearing (e.g., Hrdy 2009). Clearly, relations derived from procreation are not the only model or code of human kinship today. Living, working, and eating together seem just as important. As my Bedouin hosts told me, "After forty days, you become one of us." A brother. A son. A cousin. Potentially a husband and father.
>
> *[Does it not follow] . . . that such "true" relations of genealogy provide the "focus" or "type species" of kinship categories?*
>
> There are too many scare quotes in that question. Who defines what a true genealogical relation is? It is quite obvious, however, that genealogical relations are registered in the idiom of kinship categories, and vice versa.
>
> *Moreover, are not these "primary" terms the means by which anthropologists analytically determine a domain of kinship in various societies?*
>
> I take the risk: yes.
>
> *Never mind the irony that the biological premise has to be saved by a kind of "fictive kinship," in the end is not kinship founded on biological relationships?*
>
> There is no need to invoke fictive kinship. All human kinship is real in its way. As for biological relationships, they are variously defined, even by biologists. Most people/societies think sex is a necessary part of kinship because procreation is. None of this means kinship is founded *solely* on biological relations, or relations of shared substance. Moreover, that these relations are always culturally defined and historically specific does not mean anthropological analysis of kinship is obligated to ignore models of human reproduction as defined by Western bioscience (which is no longer exclusively Western). If the woman who gives birth to a tortoise can teach us important lessons about human relatedness, so can the transmission of DNA tell us things worth knowing about her parentage, where her remote ancestors came from, and how they are related to other human populations.

New tools

In answering these questions, I have tried to avoid taking an intellectual position in which social kinship (or biological kinship) monopolizes all explanatory and interpretive options. It is not hard to do, and I believe this in-between position is actually consistent with data presented in *What kinship is—and is not*. A splendid feature of this book is the care with which the ethnography of others is placed within the argument, such that alternative conclusions can be drawn even as Sahlins heads precisely where we know he will. In the last seventeen pages of the book, he delves deeper into local models of procreation and genealogy, showing how "for many, kinship is already given in their flesh," which is not to be confused with "some biological-corporeal substratum" (77). Meanwhile, other analytical possibilities fly off, like sparks, in all directions. These are refreshing and useful insights, and it is worth highlighting a few. First, Sahlins produces auxiliary definitions of kinship that do conceptual work "mutuality of being" cannot. My favorite is "the transmission of life-capacities among persons" (29), a formulation that dovetails nicely with new approaches to ecology and environment, and with old and equally important approaches to gift-giving and exchange. "Life-capacity" is an expansive concept. It suggests immediate links to the "natural" world and the social worlds we share with other species, whereas "transmission" is central to social and biological kinship, no matter how they are defined.

Elsewhere, Sahlins tells us that "mutuality of being among kinfolk declines in proportion to spatially and/or genealogically reckoned distance" (53). Why should this be? No attempt is made to explain the pattern, but a similar effect can be seen in relation to temporal distance. It would seem that much of what conventional kinship studies have described as the extension of kinship ties and terms is in fact an attempt to offset these spatiotemporal declines, to manage, officialize, or reverse them. Kinship, in this sense, becomes a special mode of travel, a way to engineer secure landscapes and reliable histories. Intersubjectivity is established against discernible, sometimes threatening breaks in the social fabric. Humans willfully create these breaks. In his discussion of cognitive research, Sahlins captures this dual human capacity to articulate and detach. If our default tendency is to feel connection with others, then we must somehow distinguish those who are close from those who are distant. As Sahlins puts it:

> In this view, the work of language and culture is to delimit and differentiate the human disposition for transpersonal being into determinate kinship relations by specific criteria of mutual being: having the same name, eating from the same land, born from the same woman, and so on. Kinship may be a universal possibility in nature, but by the same symbolic token as codified in language and custom, it is always a cultural particularity (44).

It is perhaps in this vein that "mutuality of being" is most promising as an explanatory device. Many readers of *What kinship is—and is not* will complain that "mutuality of being" is too vague, that it describes too broad a range of human cultural forms. But that is what I find tantalizing about it: it is a multi-purpose delineator, separating and encapsulating us. In the species history of humans, kinship has been especially beneficial to us because it compels us to care for each other and, inevitably, to experiment with the extent and terms of that care. We endlessly modify kinship—here, it is perfectly fitting to invoke metaphor and

analogy—to build new modes of interaction, on larger and smaller scales. Hospitality. Friendship. Communion with gods and spirits. Cohabitation with other species. Even nation-states and corporations advertise and, in some cases, formally constitute themselves as families. It is not just mutuality of being that is evident in these projects, but a constant drive to create mutuality where it does not (yet) exist. What is kinship? It is one of our most inertial and adaptable creations. And it is never enough.

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