14 The Fundamental Assumption in the Study of Kinship: "Blood Is Thicker Than Water"

Why is kinship regarded as a privileged system? I have reviewed a number of answers to this question, but there is one more to be considered.

The clue to this answer comes from the fact that kinship has been defined in terms of the relations that arise from the processes of human sexual reproduction. Human sexual reproduction has been viewed by anthropologists as an essentially biological process, part of human nature, regardless of any cultural aspects which may be attached to it.

The question can now be rephrased; why has kinship been defined in terms of the relations that arise out of the processes of human sexual reproduction?

I suggest that it has been so defined because there is an assumption that is more often than not implicit, sometimes assumed to be so self-evident as to need no comment, but an assumption that is, I believe, widely held and necessary to the study of kinship. It is the single most important assumption on which the premise of the privileged nature of kinship and the presumed Genealogical Unity of Mankind rests. It is the assumption that Blood Is Thicker Than Water.

Without this assumption much that has been written about kinship simply does not make sense. Without this assumption it is difficult to understand why so many have written so much at such great length for more than one hundred fifty years about kinship. Without this assumption it is hard to understand why Morgan and McLennan, Maine and Bachofen, Spencer and Durkheim, among many others, put so much weight on the role of kinship in the history, evolution, or development of society and culture, as well as its maintenance and functioning, whatever its form. With this assumption it is easier to understand why Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Lowie, Fortes, Firth, Eggan, Murdock, and Lévi-Strauss, among others, invested so much time in its study in the belief that it was the major institution of "primitive," "tribal," or "simpler" societies.

Because "Blood Is Thicker Than Water," kinship consists in bonds on which kinsmen can depend and which are compelling and stronger than, and take priority over, other kinds of bonds. These bonds are in principle unquestioned and unquestionable. They are states of being, not of doing or performance—that is, the grounds for the bonds "exist" or they do not, the bond of
kinship 'is' or 'is not,' it is not contingent or conditional, and performance is presumed to follow automatically if the bond 'exists.' All kinship bonds are of essentially the same kind. All of this is because kinship is a strong solidary bond that is largely innate, a quality of human nature, biologically determined, however much social or cultural overlay may also be present. It is the biological character and the innateness in human nature and not the sociocultural overlay that largely accounts for the characteristics of the kinship bond. Finally, the strength of the bond depends on degrees of 'closeness' so that each of the above clauses must be qualified by the phrase 'more or less,' depending on the closeness of the particular bond.

This assumption is largely implicit, often taken for granted and simply not discussed or, at best, only hinted at. Morgan is no longer able to testify on the subject. Many living anthropologists can give no more convincing testimony than Morgan, for I believe that many—though not all—are often not aware of the fact that they make this assumption. Yet however self-conscious nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropologists are, their writings reflect the persistence of this assumption in the conventional wisdom of kinship studies.

McLennan, for example, treats the 'thickness of blood' as if it were too obvious to deserve more than passing comment. He says,

The earliest human groups can have had no idea of kinship. We do not mean to say that there ever was a time when men were not bound together by a feeling of kindred. The filial and fraternal affections may be instinctive. They are obviously independent of any theory of kinship, its origin or consequences; they are distinct from the perception of the unity of blood upon which kinship depends; and they may have existed long before kinship became an object of thought. What we would say is, that ideas of kinship must be regarded as growths—must have grown like all other ideas related to matters primarily cognizable only by the senses; and that the fact of consanguinity must have long remained unperceived as other facts, quite as obvious, have done. In other words, at the root of kinship is a physical fact, which could be discerned only through observation and reflection—a fact, therefore, which must for a time have been overlooked. No advocate of innate ideas, we should imagine, will maintain their existence on a subject so concrete as relationship by blood.

A group of kindred in that stage of ignorance is the rudest that can be imagined. Though they were chiefly held together by the feeling of kindred, the apparent bond of fellowship between the members of such a group would be that they and theirs had always been companions in war or the chase—joint-tenants of the same cave or grove. To one
another they would simply be as conrades. As distinguished from men of other groups, they would be of the group, and named after it.

Hence, most naturally, on the idea of blood-relationship arising, would be formed the conception of Stocks. Previously individuals had been affiliated not to persons, but to some group. The new idea of blood-relationship would more readily demonstrate the group to be composed of kindred than it would evolve a special system of blood-ties between certain of the individuals in the group. The members of a group would now have become brethren. As distinguished from men of other groups, they would be of the group-stock, named after the group. (Emphasis added. [1865] 1970:63–64)

McLennan distinguished the ‘‘ideas’’ about kinship from the ‘‘facts’’ of blood relationship. The facts of blood relationship are such that ‘‘there (never) was a time when men were not bound together by a feeling of kindred. The filial and fraternal affections may be instinctive.’’ But the ideas about kinship are distinct from the facts of blood relationship. The facts exist in the nature of things. The ideas are, or derive from, the intelligent observation of these facts. And it is ideas about facts that become part of culture. Indeed, McLennan says, ‘‘no advocate of innate ideas . . . will maintain their existence on a subject as concrete as relationship by blood.’’ This appears to mean that it is the facts that are innate, not the ideas (as Bastian maintained), for the idea only arises when there is an intelligent recognition of the facts.

The facts of blood relationship are that they constitute bonds, feelings of kindred, instinctive affection. Such is McLennan’s view. Morgan’s formulation is remarkably similar. He says,

The family relationships are as ancient as the family [original emphasis]. They exist in virtue of the law of derivation, which is expressed by the perpetuation of the species through the marriage relation. A system of consanguinity, which is founded upon a community of blood, is but the formal expression and recognition of these relationships. Around every person there is a circle or group of kindred of which such person is the centre, the Ego, from whom the degree of the relationship is reckoned, and to whom the relationship itself returns. Above him are his father and his mother and their ascendants, below him are his children and their descendants; while upon either side are his brothers and sisters and their descendants, and the brothers and sisters of his father and of his mother and their descendants, as well as a much greater number of collateral relatives descended from common ancestors still more remote. To him they are nearer in degree than other individuals of the nation at large. A formal arrangement of the more
immediate blood kindred into lines of descent, with the adoption of some method to distinguish one relative from another, and to express the value of the relationship, would be one of the earliest acts of human intelligence. (Emphasis added. 1870:10)

Thus far, for Morgan, the facts of blood relationship exist; it is their recognition, the discovery of their existence, that constitutes an act of human intelligence. They are then put into formal arrangement—a set of ideas—as a system of consanguinity. But Morgan does not say what the facts of consanguinity entail, only that they exist, and their cultural constitution follows upon their discovery as existential, as facts. But of all of the myriad of facts is there something special about these facts? Morgan does address this question, but almost in passing, in the following:

There is one powerful motive which might, under certain circumstances, tends to the overthrow of the classificatory form and the substitution of the descriptive, but it would arise after the attainment of civilization. This is the inheritance of estates. It may be premised that the bond of kindred, among uncivilized nations, is a strong influence for the mutual protection of related persons. . . . the protection of the law, or of the State, would become substituted for that of kinsmen; but with more effective power the rights of property might influence the system of relationship. . . . In Tamilian society, where my brother’s son and my cousin’s son are both my sons, a useful purpose may have been subserved by drawing closer, in this manner, the kindred bond, but in a civilized sense it would be manifestly unjust to place either of these collateral sons upon an equality with my own son for the inheritance of my estate. Hence the growth of property and the settlement of its distribution might be expected to lead to a more precise discrimination of the several degrees of consanguinity if they were confounded by the previous system. (Emphasis added. 1870:14)

Here Morgan implies that if a man knows his own son, then he naturally wants to leave his estate to him. But if he cannot know that his son is indeed his own son, then he cannot have this desire. Notice that Morgan is discussing the father-son relationship. He and McLennan, and others, agreed that it was a wise man who knew his own father, and that unless and until there was monogamous marriage with restraints on sexual access, this state of uncertainty was unavoidable, and necessarily marked in the kinship terminology. Only with the advent of “marriage of pairs,” that is, monogamy, was there a likelihood that the child of the wife was the child of the husband too.

Of the Iroquois Morgan says, “the League was in effect established and rested for its stability, upon the natural faith of kindred” (1901:86). Again Morgan seems to take the tie of kindred as natural, and for granted, needing
no further stipulation. The fundamental assumption is implied in these quotations. Blood relationship constitutes a bond, a tie, "a bond of kindred," "a strong influence for the mutual protection of related persons." Similar ideas, similarly vague, can be found in Maine (1861:123–29).

There is an obvious problem with the view that the bonds of kinship are innate or instinctual: if they are innate, why did they not show themselves automatically and, if they are as self-evident as the color of the sky, why were they not automatically noted and immediately converted into those ideas of kinship which constitute what Morgan called a "system of consanguinity"? If, for example, there is indeed a natural tendency so that "it would be manifestly unjust to place either of these collateral sons upon an equality with my own son," how is it that a man does not naturally, automatically, feel the compulsion of the bond between him and his own son? Does Morgan mean that before a man can feel the bond of blood kinship, he must first know, as an intellectually established fact, that that bond actually exists? This contradiction seems to be true of both Morgan and McLennan. Let me put it in another way. If the earliest state of mankind was that of primitive promiscuity, followed by the social tie between the mother and child, that is, matrilineal, because this relationship is so easy to see that it cannot be overlooked, and at the same time the tie between mother and child is so close physically and there is an instinctual love and affection and the tendency to protect her own child is so great—the maternal instinct, in a word—then the question arises as to how there ever could have been a condition in which the relations between mother and child did not constitute the condition of some kind of family organization, or at least, a strong relationship between mother and her child. And this indeed is very much the argument of those who denied that a state of primitive promiscuity could ever have existed. In the nature of human nature, the family built on the mother-child tie must have been the first set of existential relationships which were immediately translated into social forms as well. If I understand him correctly, this is Westermarck's (1891) argument. But those who followed McLennan and Morgan rested their case on the separation of ideas from action: it is ideas that constitute culture. The relationship between mother and child as an instinctive one does in fact exist, but the idea does not necessarily exist at the same time. Indeed, this remains true even of those societies which have reached the state of patrilineal: the mother-child relationship remains in force, but the social forms or ideas of descent are patrilineal, not matrilineal.

I think that neither McLennan nor Morgan, nor their followers, nor those who opposed their theories, questioned the fundamental assumption that the bonds of kinship were inherent in human beings, that they constituted solidary ties of greater or lesser strength. The argument was about when, where, and how the social forms emerged, about whether a self-evident fact of the relationship between mother and child could be ignored so that in some
state of primitive patriarchy no social bond of kinship was recognized between mother and child, and so forth.

In the nineteenth century the bond of kinship was treated as a biological given, a sort of instinct, a state that was inborn, by the third to fourth decades of the twentieth century the biological mechanism tended to be seen somewhat differently. The nature of kinship remained the same: it is a bond that derives directly from the nature of human nature. But the bond now emerges out of certain human predispositions and capacities that develop, mobilize, and emerge in interaction particularly during infancy and early childhood. There remains a notion of something like an instinct of motherhood, but this alone is not responsible for either the social constitution of the bond of kinship or the actual relationship which emerges between mother and child. The fact that the child is part of the mother’s body at first, emerges from it, is cared for, nurtured, and fed by the lactating mother, all constitute essential parts of a process which takes place during the interaction between infant and then child and mother, and which in turn establishes and develops the bond between them. Freud’s theory of the development of personality, which implicitly includes the social aspects, is one example of this point of view: it is in the nature of human nature to create the bond of kinship through the interaction of the relatively uninformed infant with certain general predispositions, potentialities, and tendencies and the adult who cares for it and engages in an affectively intense and binding relationship with it.

Spiro’s statement, which I quoted in chapter 2, highly condensed as it is, suggests this view that the bonds of kinship are in part developed out of the interaction and experience of the relation between adults and their offspring.

every kinship system must attend to certain ineluctable biological facts, among which I would stress the following. Human reproduction is bisexual, and conception is effected by means of heterosexual intercourse; humans are born helpless, and they remain physically and emotionally dependent on their caretakers for a prolonged period; children live, minimally, in biparental family groups, so that it is their caretakers (usually their parents) who, for better or worse, satisfy their dependency needs; dependency being the infant’s prepotent need, feelings of affectionate attachment develop towards the agents of its satisfaction; satisfaction is always relative to frustration, so that these caretakers are simultaneously the first and most important objects of affection, as well as of hostility; siblings are also part of the family group, and, since affection is a scarce—and therefore competitive—good, they, like parents, are the objects of these same conflicting emotions. (1977:4)

It is Malinowski’s position which Spiro says he follows, though Spiro is far more sophisticated. But in its essentials, Spiro’s and Malinowski’s posi-
tions are the same. Malinowski is less clear on the interactional aspects, but more forthright on the relationship between culture and the innate or the nature of human nature. He says,

We can also, now, define kinship as, in the first place, the personal bonds based on procreation socially interpreted; and, in the second place, as the complex system of wider bonds derived from the primary ones by the twofold process of direct extension and of unilateral reinterpretation. . . . In the particular case of Kinship, we were able to show that cultural processes tend to follow the direction of innate biological drives, that physiological facts are made gradually to ripen into sentiments and these again lead to purely cultural institutions. (1930b:165–66)

Kinship is by no means only a cultural construct, but is always rooted in, based on, and grounded in basic human needs, tendencies, drives, and the nature of human nature. Physiological facts gradually ripen into (social) sentiments, that is, they ripen into “purely cultural institutions” (though what the word purely can mean here is not clear to me). But for Malinowski culture is itself an insignificant part of human needs, tendencies, drives, the nature of human nature. These drives, tendencies, and physiological facts are transformed into the sentiments of kinship that are cultural yet remain as the driving forces. Culture, and kinship in particular, is in large part what people as people must do or are most likely to do.

Most important for the problem here is Malinowski’s view that kinship consists of bonds which are essentially psychobiological in nature. Culture can bend them, but only so far, and not very far at that. Malinowski’s view of adoption makes this clear:

Social and cultural influences always indorse and emphasize the original individuality of the biological fact. These influences are so strong that in the case of adoption they may override the biological tie and substitute a cultural one for it. But statistically speaking, the biological ties are almost invariably merely reinforced, redetermined and remoulded by the cultural ones. (1930b:137)

A note on adoption is in order. Malinowski says that adoption is a case in which culture is so strong that it overrides the biological tie and substitutes a cultural tie for it. If this were true it would present a problem, and seeing this, Malinowski suggests that it is really no problem at all because ties like adoption are rare; that is, “statistically speaking, the biological ties are almost invariably merely reinforced, redetermined and remoulded by the cultural ones.”

The problem that Malinowski points to is this. If the blood relationship
is presumed to have inherent qualities of its own which "are" and which "exist" and are so strong and take such precedence, then adoption ought not to be possible, or at most it should be unusual and rarely practiced. For adoption creates "kinship" where none in fact exists, that is, no real blood relationship exists. Hence there ought to be a clear cultural distinction between true kinship and all other kinds of relationship.

This is in fact the preponderant view. What is confusing is that adoption is confounded with the blood relationship by being called or treated as if it were the same kind of relationship. But in fact anthropologists have consistently treated adoption as something quite different from true kinship. For Maine, adoption was the first legal fiction, and as such allowed families to add new members by means other than birth. But there is no question that it is different from true kinship, blood relationship, the difference marked by the term *fictive*. Anthropologists have generally distinguished between "true" or "fictive" or "putative" or "classificatory" kin, or kin who are classed as kin by "extension," "True" or "real" kinship presumes that there is some biological relationship between persons so related. And adoptive kin were distinguished from "real" or "true" kin by Rivers (1904: vol. 5, p. 123) in his collection of genealogies in the Torres Straits and are so distinguished, generally, by most anthropologists.

Fortes seems to hold exactly the same position including the implicit recognition of the possibility for logical contradiction and the disinclination to pursue the matter.

If a person who is not a kinsman is metaphorically or figuratively placed in a kinship category, an element, or at least a semblance, of kinship affinity goes with this. It is conceivable—and I for one would accept—that the axiom of affinity reflects biological and psychological parameters of human social existence. Maybe there is sucked in with the mother's milk, as Montaigne opined, the orientation on which it ultimately rests. (1969:251)

In the end, then, the significance of interpersonal interaction in infancy and childhood experience (as often occurs in cases of adoption) does not seem to be held decisive by anthropologists; a bond of some intrinsically biological sort must be "there" for the bond of kinship to work. If the bond between the parent and the natural child and the adopted child were equally strong, of essentially the same quality or significance, then there would be no reason why the distinction between adoptive, putative, fictive relationship and "true" or "real" relationship should be so consistently drawn, as it has for the past hundred years or more.

Further, it is generally held that this distinction between "true" and "real" kinship and "extended" or "classificatory" kinship is universally
made—it is found in all cultures. Malinowski’s jibes against the ideas of “collective motherhood” and his insistence on “individual motherhood” is but one case in point. If every culture makes the distinction between “true” kinship and “classificatory” or “extended” or “fictive” kin, then that distinction must be of significance to all peoples. It is significant, presumably, because there is something fundamentally different about the biological fact of the bond and the social definition of a bond where that fact is absent or missing.

Lévi-Strauss pays almost no attention to the assumption that Blood Is Thicker Than Water, but hints that he subscribes to it, as in the following:

the value of exchange is not simply that of the goods exchanged. Exchange—and consequently the rule of exogamy which expresses it—has in itself a social value. It provides the means of binding men together, and of superimposing upon the natural links of kinship the henceforth artificial links . . . of alliance governed by rule. (Emphasis added. 1969:480)

Finally, the most recent, explicit, detailed, and developed commitment to the premise that Blood Is Thicker Than Water is made by the sociobiologists. They do this in numerous publications which need not be quoted here since they are so well known (see, for example, Hamilton 1964, Alexander 1979, Chagnon and Bugos 1979, and Wilson 1980).

I turn now to the qualifier “more or less” in the fundamental assumption: kinship consists in bonds on which one can more or less depend, which are more or less compelling and take more or less priority over other kinds of bonds, and so on. The qualifier, I said, depends on degrees of closeness.

Degrees of closeness can be calculated in various ways. Primary relatives are closer than secondary, secondary are closer than tertiary, and so on. Civil law, canon law, and genetics provide other modes of calculating closeness and distance, but for the problem at hand the differences between these methods are irrelevant. All depend on the assumption that what has been called “genealogical distance” is a crucial variable in the strength of the bond of kinship, and genealogical distance is a measure of the magnitude of the biological component and hence the strength of the bond. The closer two kinsmen are genealogically the greater the biological component of their relationship. For example, Murdock, discussing the criterion of collaterality, says, “The criterion of collaterality rests on the biological fact that among consanguineal relatives of the same generation and sex, some will be more closely akin to Ego than others. A direct ancestor, for example, will be more nearly related than his sibling or cousin, and a lineal descendent than the descendent of a sibling or cousin” (1949:103). It is “the biological fact” that Murdock says is decisive here. Malinowski puts it this way: “The primary and fundamental elements of the parent-to-child relationship—the fact of procreation, the phys-
iological services, the innate emotional responses—which make up the family bonds vanish completely from the relationship within the clan” (1930b:164).

The fundamental assumption, then, postulates not only the presence or absence of a biological component, which is held to determine the bond that exists, but also that the strength of the bond depends on genealogical distance or the magnitude of the biological component. A further qualifier that I have not discussed is the difference in the quality between different kinds of kinship bonds. Thus, for example, women are assumed to respond to the biological component more strongly and with a different quality of relationship than men. But it is unnecessary to the point here to do more than note that this qualification exists and is also assumed to be a direct function of the biological constitution of the bond of kinship.

I have spoken of the Doctrine of the Genealogical Unity of Mankind as essential to the study of kinship. It states that genealogical relations are the same in every culture. If they were not, cross-cultural comparison would not be possible. It is precisely the assumption that Blood Is Thicker Than Water that makes the Doctrine of the Genealogical Unity of Mankind both tenable and forceful.

It is tenable because the assumption that Blood Is Thicker Than Water says that whatever variable elements may be grafted onto kinship relations, all kinship relations are essentially the same and share universal features. Hence the genealogical grid can be used as an etic grid: comparable things are being compared and analyzed by first establishing their identity and universality and holding constant the components that make them comparable. This is a necessary but not sufficient condition to the privileged position which kinship is accorded in the conventional wisdom of anthropology. The Doctrine of the Genealogical Unity of Mankind is so forceful and has a specially privileged position precisely because Blood Is presumably Thicker Than Water. This assumption makes kinship or genealogical relations unlike any other social bonds, for they have especially strong binding force and are directly constituted by, grounded in, determined by, formed by, the imperatives of the biological nature of human nature. They are the cultural formulations of what are held to be inherent, relatively inflexible conditions of the biological bases of human behavior.

It is no accident that the assumption that Blood Is Thicker Than Water is fundamental to the study of kinship. I chose the aphorism precisely because it is so commonly encountered in the daily life of our culture, at least since the eighteenth century, though the idea behind it is far older, I think. But it is an integral part of the ideology of European culture. I have spelled this ideology out in detail elsewhere (Schneider [1968] 1980) and there is no need to repeat it here. What is important to note is that the folk conceptions, categories, and ideology in general are carried over into the analytic scheme, the etic grid,
with but minor modifications, and without subjecting it to critical examination or evaluation and precisely contrary to Goodenough’s formulation of how an etic scheme should be constructed.

A further point should be made in this connection. First, this assumption is but a particular instance of the more general characteristic of European culture toward what might be called “biologist” ways of constituting and conceiving human character, human nature, and human behavior. Man’s humanity tends to be formulated in terms of his place in nature, with a few caveats about his free will, intentionality, conscience, and his (self-defined) extraordinary intelligence distinguishing him from other natural organisms.

Return to the rephrased question: Why has kinship been defined in terms of the relations that arise out of the processes of human sexual reproduction? The answer that I offer here should be no surprise. It is simply that so much of what passes for science in the social sciences, including anthropology, derives directly and recognizable from the common sense notions, the everyday premises of the culture in which and by which the scientist lives. These postulates of European culture are simply taken over and put in a form that is customary for rational scientific discourse, appropriately qualified and made slightly more explicit in places and served up as something special, sometimes even in Latin. That is, the study of kinship derives directly and practically unaltered from the ethnoepistemology of European culture. It is hardly any wonder that the assumption that Blood Is Thicker Than Water is not often fully explicit. It is taken for granted as a fundamental truth of our culture and has remained so even when transformed into a part of a presumably rational, presumably explicit, presumably intelligently articulated theory.

This point applied equally well to two other features of the conventional wisdom of kinship: the idea that kinship forms a system, and the idea that kinship can be understood and treated as an isolable institution, domain, or rubric—that it is a distinct “thing.”

I do not mean to imply that I have offered a complete, comprehensive, or exhaustive answer to the question of why kinship has been defined by anthropologists in terms of the relations arising out of the processes of human sexual reproduction. But I do mean to imply that such a definition is open to question on theoretical as well as substantive grounds. In this chapter the theoretical and substantive questions centered on the premise that Blood Is Thicker Than Water. But further, I have raised the question of whether this cultural premise applies beyond the bounds of European culture, that is, whether it is, as the Doctrine of the Genealogical Unity of Mankind would have it, universal. Quite apart from the theoretical and substantive justification for the premise is the question of whether it constitutes a premise universal to all cultures. This I seriously doubt.

In sum, for Maine, McLennan, and Morgan, among others in the mid-
nineteenth century, kinship was taken for granted as, if not the very earliest, among the earliest forms of social organization of mankind. Why is kinship regarded as among the very earliest social bonds? The choice of kinship as the earliest or among the very earliest bonds on which social forms could be built was surely motivated. If these scholars saw it as the most primitive tie, why was it the most primitive? If it was the most basic tie, on which others could be built, what made it so? For later workers like Westermarck and then Malinowski, society without the family was inconceivable. For Westermarck there was no society before the family, for only with the family did social life truly begin. Once in place, kinship could then constitute a base on which other organizational forms could be built, but without such a base organizational development was impossible. For Malinowski the family was the cornerstone of society: extrafamilial kinship grew out of the family by extension, again, as for Westermarck, the family served as the foundation for the invention and development of other social forms. Why is the family of such central importance? Why is the kin-based society the simplest and most primitive? What makes it possible for a society to be "based on" kinship? Why should kinship be the idiom in so many societies for political, economic, and various other organizational forms? Although economics, politics, and religion can serve as idioms expressing certain social conditions, they rarely serve as the all-pur- pose idiom that kinship is said to provide. How can this be? Why should adoption and other forms of "fictive" kinship be so clearly differentiated from true kinship—always for anthropologists, and allegedly for all societies?

The idea of the kin-based society, the idiom of kinship, the idea that kinship and the family are the cornerstone of all social life, that kinship is a specially privileged system, that kinship was the earliest, or among the earliest forms of social life—all of these make no sense without the fundamental assumption that "Blood Is Thicker Than Water." There is no doubt that however both physical and social reproduction are ordered they are functionally prerequisite to any form of social life, but so too are breathing, and sleeping. But no one has claimed that there are breathing-based societies, or that sleeping is the idiom in terms of which total social and cultural systems are phrased. Even where societies, like our own presumably, are economically based, kinship still retains a crucial and strategic position at least insofar as the family is a major constituent of kinship. Universality, functional prerequisitiveness, may be important elements in answering the question of why kinship is so important, but they do not serve to distinguish kinship from other social forms, and as I have suggested, kinship is clearly distinguished by many anthropologists from other social forms as a specially privileged one.

My purpose in this chapter has been to suggest that there is a fundamen- tal assumption on which all studies of kinship rest which, when recognized, makes sense of the privileged position which kinship has been accorded by
Maine, McLennan, Morgan, Rivers, Lowie, Eggan, Fortes, and others since their time; of the ideas of the kin-based society and the idiom of kinship, and similar features of the privileged status accorded to kinship. My aim was to make this assumption explicit and to offer some evidence for its existence, and the form in which it occurs, so that the suggestion cannot be treated as purely hypothetical.

Another purpose of this chapter is to suggest that insofar as the comparative study of kinship is tenable or a legitimate endeavor, it must be assumed that kinship is a unitary phenomenon (Needham 1960 notwithstanding) and this assumption rests on the fundamental assumption that "Blood Is Thicker Than Water." If kinship is not comparable from one society to the next, then it is self-evident that comparative study is out of the question. If the comparability of one kinship system with another does not rest on the assumption that "Blood Is Thicker Than Water," on what does it rest? That kinship concerns human sexual reproduction? On the universal functions which center on reproduction? If that is the ground for its phenomenal unity, then assumptions such as the kin-based society, the idiom of kinship, the presumably universal distinction between adoptive and real kin, fictive and true kin, and the privileged position of kinship among social institutions are left unexplained, as is the special position accorded to kinship by the mid-nineteenth-century theorists.

Finally, I have tried to suggest that this assumption is largely implicit, has not been carefully considered and evaluated, and is therefore as dangerous as are all implicit, unexamined assumptions. If the fundamental assumption does not withstand close scrutiny, then the comparative study of kinship must be either set on some other, firm ground, or abandoned.
PART IV

Conclusion
The quartet of kinship, economics, politics, and religion as institutions, domains, rubrics, or the building blocks of society or culture has been part of anthropology since its beginnings. In the mid-nineteenth century the problem for anthropology was to establish the history or development of civilization as this was embodied in European culture. Certain processes of historical development were assumed. Development proceeded from the simple to the complex, from the undifferentiated to the differentiated. European "civilization" was seen as the most recent, advanced, and highly differentiated form of social life known to man. To the extent that kinship, economics, politics, and religion were undifferentiated that society was "primitive," "simple," or "simpler."

An understanding of kinship must take into account the fact that it is one of this quartet of institutions, rubrics, or domains, with this long history, and that this quartet is treated as the most important set. Medicine, education, art, or myth, for example, are of lesser importance. Furthermore, there is a sort of theory of institutions which contributes to the ways in which kinship itself is formulated. The four distinct terms imply four distinct sorts of "things." This implies that each of these institutions constitutes a bounded unit. There is the further implication that each such bounded unit constitutes a system of some sort. Indeed, statements about "the economic system," "the kinship system," etc., abound. As "bounded" and as "system," it is implied that one can allocate concrete "pieces" or "parts" to one or another of these units, and that the institutions are to some degree concrete entities. Hence they can act as the "building blocks" of the society or culture.

Institutions, domains, and rubrics of this sort have been defined as organized around particular kinds of activities, or particular functions, and sometimes as combinations of the two. Religion, for example, is sometimes treated as that system of activities which embodies the ultimate values of the society (a Durkheimian view), sometimes as those activities that involve ritual, ceremony, and worship, and sometimes as anything having to do with a belief in the supernatural. The first stresses function, the second kinds of activities, the third a combination of the two.

Within this very general framework, institutions have been more specifically defined in a wide variety of ways by different workers over the last century and a half. The point is clear from the previous discussion of kinship. These different ways often articulate closely with particular theoretical positions, problems, and aims.
This leads to the next point. Whatever the particular task or theoretical stance—historical, developmental, evolutionary, functionalist à la Durkheim, functionalist à la Radcliffe-Brown, functionalist à la Malinowski, structuralist à la Lévi-Strauss, interpretivist à la Geertz, materialist à la Harris, Marxist à la Goody—the traditional quartet and the presumption of the special importance of the particular members of the quartet has survived intact. To put it in another way, the quartet of kinship, economics, politics, and religion has survived every shift of theoretical orientation, anthropological aim, and problem as well as every anthropologist (and I am sure it will survive me). This says something about the quartet which is worth stressing; it is so taken for granted, so embedded in the ways anthropology is performed, so widely used that there is no general theory of institutions but only the more or less implicit theories of particular persons or particular theoretical stances. If kinship can be studied and understood by Morgan, Maine, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Lévi-Strauss, and Friedrich Engels as if it were the same object, the same monolithic institution, the same "thing" about which each of these can "discover" something different and reveal different "truths," the implication is that there really is something quite real out there above and beyond any particular theoretician’s peculiar views: a truth waiting to be revealed. Epesternes may come and go. Social formations may appear and disappear. Structure can mean different things to different people. A habitus may seize one but not another anthropologist while praxis may be fitfully fashionable. But kinship, economics, politics, and religion have been here for more than a century and a half and have survived as an integral part of the vocabulary of every—and I mean every—anthropologist (indeed, every social scientist) despite the most devastating criticisms.

For example, one of the most common criticisms is that when institutions are defined in terms of function the discreteness or unity of the institution simply does not stand up under examination. Kinship is a good example. Kinship has been defined functionally, for instance, as that institution which attends to the production and reproduction of persons, so that children are produced and parents are reproduced, or sometimes more simply as that institution whose primary function is to order and attend to the problems of human reproduction (see Malinowski 1930a:28 for example). Note that an institution by this definition has a primary function, which implies that it also has other, secondary or derivative functions.

The difficulty, of course, is that examination of the situation in any society shows that this primary function is taken care of by customary activities that spread throughout the whole culture and social system and which are not confined to what is normally considered kinship. At the same time, there is far more to what is usually considered as kinship than simply dealing with the problem of reproduction, even if we allow for the possibility that
many if not all customs are multifunctional. On the other side, there are parts of what is traditionally defined as kinship that only remotely relate to reproduction, if they are related at all. Thus any given custom falls not into one institution or another, but spreads across all of them. This casts doubt on whether any institution can have a primary function at all. For example, if the primary function of kinship is ordering reproduction, and one problem is that of social placement, that is, setting the new member of the society in a particular nexus of social relations with a particular status, the difficulty is that there are a host of religious, economic, and political considerations which always enter into the system of social placement. The establishment of a son and heir to a sacred ruler is different from the establishment of a son and heir to a commoner, yet both entail not merely kinship considerations, but political, economic, and religious factors all of equal importance. Thus the boundedness of the notion of institution is dubious at best, and equally so any idea that institutions can be the building blocks of society or culture. Without some kind of boundedness and some degree of internal systematicity it is hard to see how society could be built of such amorphous blocks.

Let me make the same point in another way. Treating the quartet of institutions seriously has led to the consistent misinterpretation of the potlatch in terms of European notions of economics, which is as inept as the interpretation of Murunin as built on double descent with seven intermarrying lines or the view that Bali can be understood best as a centralized state headed by an absolute monarch.

I have slipped back into criticizing functionalism, which is all too easy. Is there any way of considering these institutions, domains, or rubrics without dealing with them functionally? Considered as forms of activity they again fail to make much sense. With bit after bit of culture the question arises as to whether this bit belongs to religion or to kinship, to economics or to politics? Is the reverence and respect that the Yapese saks pays to his citeamangen a religious or a kinship matter? Or both? If both, what sense is there in distinguishing them by kind of activity?

The notions of the kin-based society and kinship as an idiom depend on the distinction between kinship, economics, politics, and religion. Where there are no such distinctions, there can be no way in which anything could be the special base on which a kind of society rested, nor can there be one form which serves as an idiom for the other forms. These two notions, kin-basedness and idiom, depend on more than just the distinction of kinship from all other aspects of culture and society. They also depend on the premise that at least four major aspects can be distinguished as functions for types of activity. If institutions, domains, rubrics like kinship, economics, religion, and politics do not stand up as analytic constructs, then it follows that kinship does not stand up either. Conversely, if kinship is accepted because it really is a
fundamental, distinct, systematic, bounded sociocultural unit, then necessarily the next question must be: What other similarly constituted units might there be? That question need not be answered by "economics, politics, and religion," but whatever units there are will be conceptualized in ways which are congruent with the ways in which kinship is conceptualized, and thus ways which are similar to economics, politics, and religion.

There are other ways of constituting the units out of which a society or culture is fabricated. One of the simplest analytic devices, and the one which I personally favor, is to first establish the units which the particular culture itself marks off. For Yap it is the tabinau, the binau, pilung/pimilingai, and so forth. For another culture it will be other units which can then be compared with Yap or any other culture and we can then proceed from those.

The quartet of kinship, economics, politics, and religion derives, of course, from the spheres of life which European culture itself distinguishes. That is, they are metacultural categories embedded in European culture which have been incorporated into the analytic schemes of European social scientists. And they are the ideas which all social scientists fall back on under any sort of pressure, for they are ideas which everyone can understand. This is not intended as a critical statement, but as an observation. Theories come from somewhere. They are not made up out of thin air and without reference to the lives and experience of the theorists or those they speak to. That most of social science has its roots in the folk theories of European culture indicates its source but says nothing about its validity, utility, or applicability cross-culturally. On the other hand, experience has shown by now that to simply take the metacultural categories of one particular culture and use them directly as analytic tools with the assumption that they are somehow universally vital functions or kinds of activities just does not work. It is for this reason that I urge so strongly that the first step, prerequisite to all others in comparative work, is to establish the particular categories or units which each particular culture itself marks off; that is to say, the symbols and meanings of a particular culture. Once this is done, without being prejudiced by theories about functional prerequisites to social life or assumptions about universal activities, then comparison can begin and analytic procedures and tools can perhaps be developed.

The difficulties with the rubrics or institutions of kinship, politics, religion, and economics are legion and have been detailed more often than can easily be listed here, so I will list none of them. Suffice it to say that one further problem with the whole notion of kinship which I have barely touched until now is that it is embedded in a set of institutions, rubrics, or domains and that there is no satisfactory theory of these or any satisfactory way of justifying their existence or their distinction from one another, the primacy which the four major ones are given, the assumption of boundedness, of system, or
the assumption that they constitute anything more than a valiant attempt to use the constructions of European culture as tools for description, comparison, and analysis. Much of this book has taken it for granted that kinship could be treated as a unit and a thing. The criticisms centered on how that unit or thing was to be understood. It is now time to face the fact that the very notion of kinship, like that of economics, religion, or politics, is essentially undefined and vacuous: it is an analytic construct which seems to have little justification even as an analytic construct. It is to this end that I devoted so much space to the ways in which kinship is defined in the conventional wisdom.
16 Conclusion

First I will review and summarize in highly condensed form the salient presuppositions in the study of kinship. Then I will try to state briefly what I see to be the difficulties with the study of kinship. I will conclude by touching lightly on the question of what might be done about it all.

The ideas of kinship as an idiom, the kin-based society, and much of the notion of the privileged position of kinship depend on the idea of kinship itself. But they also depend on another idea. This is the premise that simple societies can be distinguished from complex societies and that a scale of more or less simplicity/complexity can be established. Another way that this is often put is that societies can be distinguished as more or less differentiated. Undifferentiated is simple; differentiated is complex.

Simple/complex is often associated with theories of history, development, evolution, or growth. Such is certainly the case for Maine and Morgan for example. But the simple/complex dimension has also been associated with those who are avowedly antievolutionary and antihistorical like Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, among others. For these, the simple/complex and related dichotomies represent different modes of organization which have no necessary historical or developmental implications. But it is particularly the simple societies that are said to use kinship as an idiom, to be kin-based because many different tasks have to be done by a single, or a few very simple forms. It is in the nature of kinship—and it is here that kinship per se comes in—that it can and does serve as an idiom, so that the simple, undifferentiated societies can be, and indeed must be, kin-based.

Although the ideas of the kin-based society and the idiom of kinship may, for many scholars, depend in part on their evolutionary, developmental, or historical premises, it is the special qualities of kinship itself that give it its privileged position and that make it necessary, or at least very likely, that the society will be kin-based. The problem really comes down to the nature of kinship itself. How then is kinship understood in the conventional wisdom of anthropology?

First, kinship is one of the four privileged institutions, domains, or rubrics of social science, each of which is conceived to be a natural, universal, vital component of society. Kinship takes its shape in part from being one of these institutions. It is a thing, or a focus of a constellation of varied activities, or it has a primary function, or it constitutes a distinct domain. It is taken as self-evident that it is distinct from the other major institutions, yet also related to them since they all constitute major building blocks out of
which all social systems are constructed. Further, kinship is the specially privileged of the privileged institutions, for it is kinship alone which can serve as idiom for, is the necessary prerequisite to, and out of which, the other three institutions are differentiated.

Second, kinship has to do with the reproduction of human beings and the relations between human beings that are the concomitants of reproduction. The reproduction of human beings is formulated as a sexual and biological process. Sexual relations are an integral part of kinship, though sexual relations may have significance outside kinship and sexual relations per se are not necessarily kinship relations.

Third, sexual reproduction creates biological links between persons and these have important qualities apart from any social or cultural attributes which may be attached to them. Indeed, the social and cultural attributes, though considered the primary subject matter of anthropologists, and of particular concern to social scientists, are nevertheless derivative of and of lesser determinate significance than the biological relations. These biological relations have special qualities; they create and constitute bonds, ties, solidary relations proportional to the biological closeness of the kin (though the correlation between the strength of the tie and the closeness of the kin may not be perfect beyond primary kin). These are considered to be natural ties inherent in the human condition, distinct from the social or cultural.

These, I think, are the three basic axioms used in the study of kinship, and all the rest follows more or less directly from them, though the particular formulation depends on the wider context in which the particular line of development occurs. For example, if the idea of the kin-based society is set in the context of a theory of evolution, it will differ in important respects from the same idea developed in the context of an antievolutionary theory. But the kinship part will trace directly back to these three axioms.

Another example is the Doctrine of the Genealogical Unity of Mankind. The derivation is simple. First, kinship is universal (axiom one). Second, kinship has to do with human reproduction and the relations concomitant to that process. Hence a system of relative products based on the primitives of father, mother, (parent), husband, wife, (spouse), son, daughter (child) is simply developed and extended from that nucleus (axiom two). The genealogy is also universal and follows from both axioms one and two. How far out the genealogy is extended, how it is partitioned, varies from culture to culture, and this follows from that special corollary that the strength of the bonds ("Blood Is Thicker Than Water") diminishes beyond the relations to primary kin. Every culture has a father, mother, husband and wife, son and daughter, but not all of them bother to count mother’s mother’s mothers’ brother’s son’s daughters’ sons.

The Doctrine of the Genealogical Unity of Mankind is one of the most