9.1 Introduction

Kungkankatja, minalinkatja was the answer of an elderly man to my question, 'How come you call your cousins as if they were your siblings?', when I expected to hear different words, one for sibling and one for cousin. This episode occurred at a very early moment of my initial fieldwork in the Australian Western Desert; certainly early enough to set the stage for some investigations into the complex nature of people's own (emic) views of the idea of human relationships, while considering them against the structure of universal (etic) typologies of the human family. *Kungkankatja, minalinkatja*, literally 'from a woman, from a man', meant in the context of my question that the children of a woman and those of her brother are to be considered identical. Although I shall not go into the analytical details of this particular example (see Dousset 2003; 2005), it will nevertheless provide us here with some elementary guidelines for the conducting of linguistic investigations ↳ into the structure of those human relationships anthropologists call kinship and social organization. As we shall see later in this chapter, such short phrases have the capacity to flatten out pieces of intertwined and complex semantics.

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'Kinship and marriage are about the basic facts of life,' Fox once wrote (1996[1967]:27). 'They are about "birth, and conception, and death", the eternal round that seemed to depress the poet but which excites, among others, the anthropologist.' 'Kinship is a system of social relationships that are expressed in a biological idiom ... It is best visualised as a mass of networks of relatedness, no two of which are identical, that radiate from each individual,' as another scholar wrote (Tonkinson 1991[1978]: 57). Kinship also appears as a 'huge field of social and mental realities stretching between two poles. One is highly abstract: it concerns kinship terminologies and the marriage principles or rules they implicitly contain or that are associated with them. The other is highly concrete: it concerns individuals and their bodies, bodies marked by the position of the individual in kinship relations' (Godelier 1998: 387).

While many anthropologists would agree today that there are no so-called kin-based societies (Godelier 2004; Dousset 2007)—societies in which kinship provides the overarching ideological domain for social structure and behaviour—they would also argue that in many, if not in most, societies it is an important vehicle of social structure, behaviour, and moral order. Be it landownership and its transmission, behavioural codes, role distribution in ritual contexts, status attribution and its political and economic consequences, etc., the domain of kinship is often involved with considerable effects. The fact that in Euro-American systems of law children usually inherit property from their father and mother is a matter of kinship. The analysis of the domain of human relationships thus involves multiple and intertwined levels of social reality—from the human body to the social and moral order, and from spheres of practice to the domain of the symbolic.

This chapter is limited to pointing out a few central concepts and processes that are elementary in the investigation of human kinship. It is strongly recommended that the reader consult some further readings that are particularly useful, such as Carsten's *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship* (2000), Schweitzer's *Dividends of Kinship* (2000), or Stone's *New Directions in Anthropological Kinship* (2001), for contemporary discussions on the kinds of research interesting students of kinship nowadays. Above all, however, I recommend Holy's *Anthropological Perspectives on Kinship* (1996), which is the most comprehensive and open-minded piece of work on the topic I have come across.

For the sake of organizing data collection and analysis, it is useful to split the complexities of kinship into its various constituents from which in-depth analysis can proceed. The chapter is thus divided into three parts. In the first, we will discuss the concept of social organization as distinct from but related to kinship itself. The next part will introduce the reader to the constitutive domains of the study of kinship, which are called 'kinship terminologies'. The use of jargon has ↳ been kept to a minimum, but avoiding all of these special terms is neither possible nor helpful. At the first use of each of these terms, their meaning will be

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