

9.3.2 Descent and filiation

While terminologies are among the most important elements researchers need to record in the domain of kinship studies, they are not the only aspects concerning the network of relatedness based on a biological idiom. With the emergence of the British structural-functionalist school at the beginning of the twentieth century with scholars such as Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Fortes, and Evans-Pritchard, research increasingly concentrated on the relationship between kinship and political and economic systems. How people were recruited into corporate groups and how these groups also become landowners or land users, for example, became an important aspect of research. Anthropologists were particularly interested in the relationship between social organization as discussed above and kinship, and it was during this period that the notions of lineage and clan received their most comprehensive definitions and articulations. Early on, researchers recognized that these categories' principal mode of recruiting people was the control of descent and the transmission of membership and ownership from one generation to the next. As with systems of terminologies, anthropologists have identified a ↴ certain number of types of such modes of transmission which the researcher needs to understand before tackling their linguistic aspects.

p. 225

Three general types of descent systems have been identified: unilineal, non-unilineal, and mixed systems. In the field, the most visible type is the unilineal system. As the name indicates, unilineal systems trace the process of corporation, inheritance, and transmission through a single line: the father's line or the mother's line. In a patrilineal descent system (the Baruya, for example), membership of a group is inherited through the male line. Children belong to the same group as their father, but to a different group from their mother. In a matrilineal descent system, such as the Navajo, membership of a group is inherited through the female line and children belong to the same group as their mother, but to a different group from their father. In the latter system, the matrilineal uncle (the mother's brother) usually has a very important educational role for his sister's children, and marriage bonds are usually quite weak. It should be evident by now that unilineal systems are those most often found in clans and lineages, and are often also associated with terminologies which distinguish a group of consanguines (one's own lineage) from a group of affines. But this needs to be meticulously investigated, since it is not usually as clear-cut as theory would like to have it.

Among the non-unilineal systems, the most representative is the cognatic descent system. Non-unilineal systems, and in particular cognatic systems, are considered unable to sustain enduring corporate groups. Indeed, in a cognatic descent system, children belong indistinguishably to their mother's group or family and to their father's group or family, or inherit rights and property indistinguishably from their father's side and their mother's side. Hence the general principle of inheritance and transmission does not make it possible to create enduring distinctions between descent groups, since at every generation families or groups are conflated in the children's generation. In practice, however, societies that have a cognatic descent system are able to constitute enduring corporate groups through other mechanisms. In certain parts of Europe, where the cognatic system is the rule, the norm of primogeniture also existed, according to which the first-born male would inherit landownership and constitute, with his close and enlarged family (*kindred*), a land-based enduring group, he himself transmitting landownership to his eldest son and so on. Younger brothers had to leave the family group or work under the authority of the older brother without ever becoming an owner. Thus, while in theory and in discourses children inherit goods and rights from both their parents' sides, in practice one side may be considered central and the other peripheral, as we shall see below with the concept of 'complementary filiation' and 'double descent'.

p. 226

Among the mixed systems, the 'ambilineal' one is probably the most difficult to identify, but also very interesting, since it is open to political and economic contextualization and strategies. In an ambilineal system, a person may choose to follow the mother's line or the father's line, depending on opportunities or social pressure. But once he or she has chosen to link up to one or the other side, this ↴ choice may not be changed later in life: one is expected to stand by the group or family from which one claims inheritance. In the Australian Western Desert, again, the system at work is very similar to an ambilineal system but, unlike