9.4 Structure and Substance

Let us now come back to the example quoted at the beginning of this chapter in order to formulate a few concluding remarks. *Kungkankatja, minalinkatja*, literally 'from a woman, from a man', meant, in the context of the question asked, that the children of a woman and those of her brother are to be considered identical. Let us also recall that this happened in a context in which the researcher expected a Dravidian-like terminology, because he had recorded direct exchange-type discourses about the marriage system and because he had constructed terminologies through the genealogical method. Structurally, children from a brother and his sister are cross-cousins, not brothers and sisters. They are what anthropologists call affines (potential or real in-laws), not consanguines. But the definition of consanguinity is cultural. We have seen that there are some universal rules of incest prohibition that denote what kind of people are everywhere (more or less so) considered too close to have sexual relationships or to marry—parents, siblings, and children are among them. However, humans expand the biological idiom of this basic kinship nucleus to include other relatives: aunts, uncles, and their children etc., depending on local rules and norms. Who in this lot is a consanguine, and cannot be married, or not, is a question of local definition according to a local semantic system.

A brother and a sister are, in the example quoted above, locally thought to give birth to children that are identical, that are thus themselves brothers and sisters, and not cross-cousins. They are identical because they are thought to share too many substances. They may have eaten at the same place and of the same food, they may have played together as children and have an extensive shared memory, they were looked after and raised by the same people, they lived at the same places, in the same region, they sat around the same fires. What they share is not so much blood itself, as the term 'consanguine' suggests, but other material and immaterial substances: memory, bodily substances, experiences. Pitt-Rivers (1973) therefore proposed using the term 'consubstantiality' rather than 'consanguinity'. Everywhere people believe they share things—their body, their spirit, or whatever—with other people. The distinction between those with whom one shares something and those with whom one does not is significant and needs to be described. The expressions and explanations that are given for this consubstantiality are crucial in the understanding of social organization, local ideologies, and religious beliefs of the social body in general.

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9.5 Conclusion

The study of kinship is a study of language, and of a language as it reflects the deep representations that lie beneath a local system of human and social reproduction. This language is made up of rules and norms, of a grammar, made up of rules of descent that define and determine membership and rules of marriage that define exchanges and the network between groups. This language also has a vocabulary made up of kinship terms that are themselves systemic, and of complex nomenclatures of social organization. This language is applied, but often contextually adapted: economic, political, or religious factors play important roles. Bodily substances, experiences, and prerogatives are spelled out in the realm of kinship in ways which, far from appearing to be rules, seem rather an integrated body of social practices and beliefs. It is the researcher's task to identify its elementary constituents and to understand their interaction and interrelation.