

## **BONE AND FLESH, SEED AND SOIL: PATRILINY BY FATHER'S BROTHER'S DAUGHTER MARRIAGE**

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**Behind patrilineal descent is an asymmetrical descent structure based on sex, and father's brother's daughter marriage. Because it is a means of constructing the patrilineage, patrilateral parallel cousin marriages continue to exist. The Kurds in eastern and southeastern Turkey illustrate this apparent paradox with the position of women in the patrilineage and their structural relationship with the mother's brother. (FBD marriage, patriliney, Turkey, Kurds)**

Patrilateral parallel cousin marriages occupy a special place in the study of kinship and marriage. Such marriages are characteristic of Middle East peoples and are referred to as preferred. Thus, "in some social contexts Middle Easterners assert that if a woman and her family choose not to marry a father's brother's son, his consent and that of his family must be obtained" (Eickelman 1998:169). Such consent implies that the father's brother's son has priority of marriage with the father's brother's daughter. The fact that tribal societies (e.g., Arabs and Kurds) where such practices are followed are also patrilineal makes father's brother's daughter (FBD) marriage problematic.

Bourdieu (1991:32), for example, points out that "structuralism either ignores or brackets off" this problem, but structural-functionalist theory holds this marriage type provides stability in family and kinship relations. While Barth (1986:396) emphasizes that these marriages enhance in-group solidarity and prevent corporate group fission, Murphy and Kasdan (1959:18), in contrast, claim that the factor underlying segmentation is FBD marriage. These positions are in opposition, yet both attribute to FBD marriage the function of providing homeostasis for social and political organization. By contributing to maintaining harmony within the family (Khuri 1970:597), FBD marriage is credited with having a positive function for social and psychological stability, and economic factors reveal a similar stability. Through FBD marriage, property remains intact within the family (Rosenfeld 1958:1138), thus preserving established property relations.

Underlying these arguments is the presumption that "parallel cousin marriage is the only structurally pertinent form of marriage: other forms of alliance do not constitute 'normative unions'" (Atran 1985:667). Atran (1985:686) criticizes this presumption because it reduces kinship and marriage forms to "a single mechanical model," when FBD marriage should be understood as "a matter of social strategy."

Bourdieu (1991:49) emphasizes that FBD marriage “can never be fully defined in genealogical terms,” and separates practical kin, relatives that are present in a relation set by the individual, from official kin, those relatives that are included in the genealogy (Bourdieu 1991:33–35). For him, matrimonial strategies are material and symbolic capital, managed by relatives in practical groups who “rest on a community of dispositions (*habitus*) and interests which is also the basis of undivided ownership of the material and symbolic patrimony” (Bourdieu 1991:35). He points out that FBD marriage assumes various meanings and functions that differ with context. “Marriages which are identical as regards genealogy . . . may thus have different, even opposite, meanings and functions, depending on the strategies in which they are involved [and that] any two marriages between parallel cousins may have nothing in common” (Bourdieu 1991:48).

However, patrilineal descent is accepted as a given in these discussions and analyses are based on it. Although researchers (e.g., Eickelman 1998:171; Atran 1985:665) have pointed out that kin relations with both the father’s and the mother’s sides are equally important with tribal societies in the Middle East, these analyses are based on a presumed patrilineal descent system. That descent system is determined by indications such as to whom property is passed and from whom descent is traced (Patai 1965; Fortes 1971; Keesing 1975). With the model of patrilineal descent, the position of women has been made a secondary role and blurred as a result of being included in the field of “complementary filiation” (Fortes 1953, quoted in Kuper 2004:89) for situations that do not fit the model.

A clearer understanding of what patrilineage means comes from giving attention to the local ideational system and in the bond women have with complementary filiation; that is, in their relation with the mother’s brother. This essay proposes that a patrilineal descent system has an asymmetrically separated (dual) descent structure masked by a patriarchal ideology, and that patrilineal descent is constructed by FBD marriage. This article attempts to illustrate the structurally critical position of women in patrilateral parallel cousin marriage with examples from Sunni Kurdish people in eastern and southeastern Turkey who practice FBD marriage. The shift of focus will also reveal the continuing preference of the father’s brother’s daughter as a marital partner.

## RESEARCH METHODS AND SETTING

Fieldwork in the eastern and southeastern parts of Turkey was conducted since 1987 and ranged from a few weeks to a few months. Research employed open-ended and structured interviews and participant observation with Kurdish tribes. The data collected include kinship terminology and adages and proverbs

that reflect the local ideational system, especially with regard to the mother's brother.

The eastern and southeastern parts of Turkey vary in economy and settlement pattern. Agriculture and livestock breeding prevail in the provinces of Van and Şanlıurfa. In Van, members of different tribes reside together in most villages. Prior to World War I, various ethnic groups (e.g., Kurds, Turks) resided in relatively distinct regions. After World War I, nomads and villagers, who were mostly Kurds from surrounding countries, were settled together by legislation. Recently, Van has experienced an overwhelming surge of refugees from Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Major development projects are transforming both provinces. Each province has a university and an airport. While television and mobile phones have changed the texture of urban and rural life, the ideational system dealing with lineage, blood, and honor, retains its power.

#### DUAL DESCENT AND WOMEN

Recent feminist literature has provided a new approach to the position of women in patrilineal descent systems. For instance, Joseph (1999:126) shows how Lebanese sisters and brothers actualize patriarchy through the brother's role of protector. In return, the sister upholds her family's honor through upright behavior. The responsibility of protecting family honor extends from the brother and sister to their children as well. It is similar with Kurds. Older brothers are like fathers or father's brothers, and are responsible for the honor of their sisters and the rest of the family (Yalçın–Heckmann 1991:206). In Rgaybāts (Northwest Sahara), Caratini (1989:135) says that a brother is closer to his sister's children than he is to his brother's. As a woman continues to be a member of her lineage after marriage (Yalçın–Heckmann 1991:196; Solinas 1995:78; Abu–Lughod 1988:54) and continues to be regarded as a member of her family of orientation, revenge for all injustices she experiences is taken not by her husband or her husband's family but by her own family. This also is true for the Kurds of eastern and southeastern Turkey. The family there must guarantee the livelihood and honor of all its members, even married daughters. Although a woman joins her husband's family when she gets married, her position as a bride remains that of an outsider. Restoring a married woman's stained honor belongs primarily to her family of orientation (Solinas 1995:78). They also must support a woman who has problems with the family she married into.

In the region of research, a man does not include his daughters when counting the number of his children. Especially in rural areas, to ask the number of daughters is an absurd question because they will marry and leave their father's home. A proverb explaining this uses the metaphor of seed and soil. Informants declare, "Without seed (i.e., men), weeds grow in the field, but if you

sow seed, the field yields wheat or barley.” This is related to a passage from the *Quran*: “Women are given to you as fields to be sown, so go to them as you wish” (Kur’an, 2:223). Like a field, a woman’s womb makes no contribution to procreation. This lack makes women and children subject to men (Berktaş 2000; Sabbah 1995).<sup>1</sup> Some scholars interpret Islamic scripture to mean that both men and women contribute to procreation. This is expressed in a metaphor about bone and flesh that appears in the work of the Islamic philosopher, Ibn Qayyim, in answer to the question, “from what is man created?” The Prophet says, “He is created of both, the semen of the man and the semen of the woman. The man’s semen is thick and forms the bones and tendons. The woman’s semen is fine and forms the flesh and blood” (quoted in Musallam 1983:52).

The quote from the Prophet also implies an asymmetry between the sexes: bone is male, strong and enduring; flesh is female, doomed to decay and putrefying. The metaphor of bone as being eternal fits the meaning of lineage in the eastern and southeastern parts of Turkey. A male teacher said, “If it is a boy, it is bone, if a girl, flesh. Flesh is eaten away, but bone prevails.” The deeper meaning is that a son is indispensable for the continuity of the lineage, but a daughter is not. This is apparent with divorce arrangements. It is common among women to believe that the law entrusts daughters with the mother, and sons are left with the father. Women say, “Fathers don’t want to have to raise girls” (İlkkaracan 1998:187).

The “bone and flesh” metaphor can also be understood to mean that a woman and even her brother are the main elements of creation. One male informant explained that the qualities that make a person are derived from the mother; that is, “the child’s nobility depends on the mother.” Although “flesh” in the metaphor indicates that a woman cannot continue the lineage, the “blood” gives her an undisputable place in the lineage. Informants point out that a mother’s brother as well as the mother determine the qualities of the children. They say, “the father can only set an example for the child; its morality, nobility, and assertiveness is received from the mother’s brother.” People believe that some qualities of male identity such as honor, courage, and fighting ability are inherited from the mother’s brother through the mother’s blood. When families begin considering a marriage for one of their young men, not only the wife-to-be but also her brother and mother are investigated. “You should be careful to bring home a suitable woman, as the child will take after her,” is a statement often uttered. As a result, inquiries are made about the girl’s mother, the mother’s mother, and the mother’s brother’s reputations, and this information is regarded as a kind of reference for the girl. A male informant explained that these inquiries are to determine if the girl is honorable. “Her mother’s brother and his children are closest to the girl. They are the ones to be investigated.” Other informants add: “for nobility they say ‘go and look at the mother’s brother of the

girl you're choosing'." The expression, "We have taken a girl from this family," is one of pride from the groom's family and indicates the honored lineage of the bride. There are other signs which point to the structural relationship between the mother's brother (*xal*) and the niece (*xwarzî*).

In a village (Van) where I observed a marriage, the most expensive present (*xelat*), a ram and a revolver, was given from the groom's family to the mother's brother. (It is called the "mother's brother's right" in Şanlıurfa.) The next present in value was given to the bride's brother. Reciprocally, the mother's brother gave a lavish wedding present to his niece (a wardrobe, a sideboard). Therefore, the brideprice the father gets has several functions (e.g., helping to pay for the trousseau, compensation for the loss of the daughter's labor, etc.), but the present given to the mother's brother is more prestigious. Being included in the lineage of the mother's brother does not grant any rights to the niece. She cannot inherit from the mother's brother because his property will be passed on to his sons or other males in his patrilineage, but the prestige and reputation of the mother's brother enhances the girl's value and strengthens her status in the family she marries into.

Although there is a close tie between the mother's brother (*xal*) and his nephew (*xwarzê*) it is more than social and emotional. This is apparent in the identity required not when a man is asked his patrilineage, but when people ask who is his mother's brother in order to determine whether he is reputed to be ridden with vice or endowed with virtue. Having his group identity determined by patrilineal descent and his honor determined by maternal affiliation places the man into a paradox. People say,

One does not kill for his mother's brother but for his father's brother. There is a tribal bond between him and the father's brother, the bond with the mother's brother is outside the tribe. He can confide in his mother's brother but not in his father's brother.

A man is "a person who never kills"<sup>2</sup> for his mother's brother, despite the latter being his closest confidant and strong supporter and because of his patrilineal tie to his father's brother (*mam*) in whom he never confides, and with whom he competes for property, inheritance, and leadership.

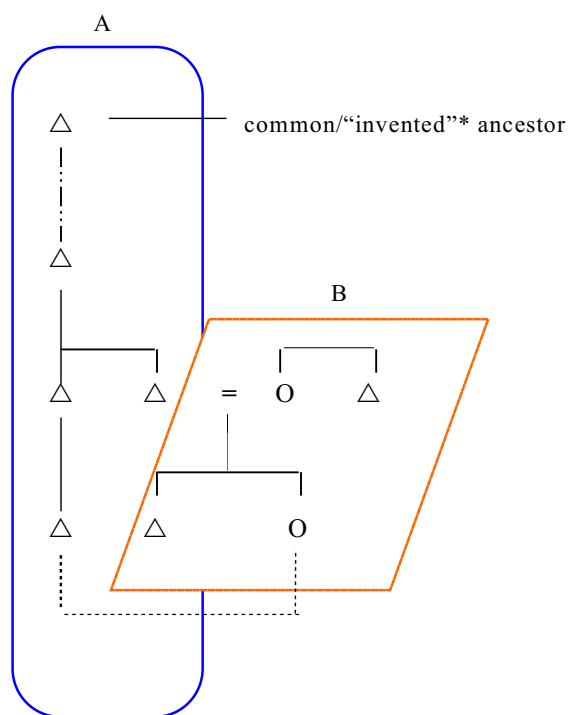
Descent theory fails to adequately consider the local ideational system which in Şanlıurfa is expressed as "becoming [maternal] uncle and nephew" (*xal û xwarzê bun*), meaning the "mixing of bloods" symbolizing the relationship of affinity. One of the people interviewed explained:

We go to the house of the bride-to-be for information about the family because we are going to become [maternal] uncle and nephew and ask, "Is this girl suitable for our family, and who is [her] mother's brother with whom we will mix blood?"

The word *xal* not only stands for the mother's brother but also for the mother and her lineage. It is a classificatory term used for the woman's side, while the term *mal xalan* is used when the man's mother's side or the bride's family is meant. *Xwarzê*, on the other hand, is a classificatory term for a woman's sons. Therefore, one of the two groups established by affinity is called the classificatory *xal*, and the other, *xwarzê* (see Figure).

FIGURE

Asymmetrically separated (dual) descent structure and construction of patrilineality by FBD



A: **patriliny group** (as *xwarzê* is at the same time included in this group, it is the classificatory *xwarzê* group for the men in the *xal* group)

B: **mother's brother group**

\*The concept "invented" has been borrowed from van Bruinessen (1992:51)

The biological tie between the people in the mother's brother group may be defined as a matrilineal structure. Nevertheless, it has a patriarchal appearance: while the niece remains in the mother's brother (*dê-xal*) group, the nephew becomes a member of the father's brother's (*bab-mam*) group. While giving him some rights, this also puts some responsibility on his shoulders, as with handling common property, transferring the inheritance from father to son, and paying a share for blood money. The individual's "natural tie" with the mother's brother group is not broken but differs in quality from the father's brother group. Thus it contains a dualistic structure in its own body for the brother's son (*brazê*) and the sister's son (*xwarzê*) as *mam-xal*. (While a man addresses his sister's children as *xarzê* and *xarzî* according to their sexes, he addresses his brother's children as *brazê* and *brazî*.)

The natural and symbolic bond between brother and sister, originating from the mother's womb and blood, indicates that a woman belongs to her patrilineage even after she gets married. The concept of *xwedî* (possessor, her brother), frequently expressed, signifies this tie.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the *xwedî* of the woman in the father's brother group is her brother and it is through him that she joins the patrilineage. Her brother is in charge of her as her possessor.<sup>4</sup> This is exhibited symbolically during the wedding when he ties a belt around his sister's waist and promises to protect her. "Should there be a problem, I will back you up." This ritual expression is at the same time a reference made to the groom's side about the virginity of the bride.

The concept *xwedî* has two meanings. One is to protect or watch (see Joseph 1999). This stands for the responsibility of the brother to care for his sister's necessities and protect her honor, which is extended to the other women in the family. The other meaning, ownership, links the woman to her father's lineage, and explains why the sister has priority over the wife and why her brother is in charge of her children.

Thus, in spite of the hidden matrilineal framework, it is possible to talk about a descent system that works two ways, one being the chain of ancestral links through males, the other being the line between a woman, her brother, and the woman's daughter, his niece (that is re-established with each generation). Moreover, the difference between the strong patrilineal descent chain and the woman's inclusion in the mother's brother's line by her mother creates an asymmetrically separated (dual) descent structure behind the seemingly dominant patrilineal descent system (see Figure).

## FBD MARRIAGE: A MEANS OF CONSTRUCTION

With the descent structure claimed here, the perception of daughters belonging to the mother's brother's group changes the positional distance of cousins in the genealogy. In other words, the perception of FBD marriage taking place between two closely related persons is made invalid, as is the view of lineage endogamy. According to the model that I suggest, in a system that ties a girl to her mother's brother's group, the distance between the father's brother's daughter and the father's brother's son is further than that between the sons of two brothers. In other words, it can be claimed that this marriage takes place between two different lineages because it creates its own out-group in the genealogy. As a result, a marriage of this type is in an emic sense as exogamous as a cross-cousin marriage. Alliance theory (Lévi-Strauss 1969) does not provide enough insight to understand this because, just as with descent theory, it does not handle kinship as a process of construction. FBD marriage is the means of constructing the patrilineage. The asymmetrical structure implied by the metaphor of "bone-tendons" and "flesh-blood" is a point of tension with patriarchal ideology and therefore the women of the father's brother's group are included into it by means of FBD marriage (see Figure).

Lindholm (1996:238) states that men struggle to "transcend the structural contradiction between the patriarchal system and the physical reproduction of their lineages"; that is, the emergence of a patriline from the womb of a woman. However, the patrilineal descent system is constructed by taking a supervisory and dominant role over women and children with all its discourse and practice. This contradiction is not only the source of the asymmetrical descent structure but it also necessitates FBD marriage for the construction of patrilineal descent structure. Lindholm (1996:238) expresses the relationship he establishes between the patriarchal system and FBD marriage as follows: "Father's brother's daughter's marriage, culturally unique to the Middle East, can be understood in part as an attempt to overcome this tension by subsuming the mother's lineage into the father's, marrying 'close to the bone' so that there is the absolute minimum difference between the marrying groups."

The much discussed practice of the "right of the father's brother's son [FBS]" (Patai 1955) can be accepted as a means to guarantee the construction of the patrilineage. While I have not come across an example of such a practice, it is worth mentioning the following statement of an informant:

The father's brother's son has a right over the girl. If a girl's [FBS] had asked to get married to her, it was his right to do so. Let's assume that her [FBS] knew that she wanted somebody



else, he would let her if this person were of his own patriliney [that is, he wouldn't want to marry his FBD, and would consent to their marriage]. If the person were not of his own patriline, he would marry her. If someone came and asked to marry my daughter, I would tell my relatives about it. I would tell my brothers first. Then, I would tell my father's brothers and their sons. If there were someone among these people who wanted to marry my daughter, I would have to give my daughter to my relative. The groom may or may not be aware of the situation.

The announcement the father makes to his patrilineage about his daughter who is asked for in marriage alerts the relatives who are interested to discuss the matter. (The mother's brother is also asked to give his consent.) Even if the father is inclined to accept the proposal, the people who are included in the discussion force the father to favor his patrilineal relatives. The common view is that the girl should marry within the patrilineal descent group. However, from time to time, tensions arise between the families over an eloping, kidnapping, insult, or a girl's committing suicide. Crimes of honor are among the indications of failure in marriage arrangements that I have observed or been told about.

The patrilineal descent structure is not a given model but a process formed by the inclusion of women into it. About the Berti, Holy (1989:58) points out, "By marrying his daughter to his brother's son a man increases, as the Berti express it, his lineage (*warrai*) or his progeny (*dor*). Not only his son's but also his daughter's children will be close agnates."

Proverbs directing marriage preference towards "inside" the lineage occur in various expressions. For example, the saying, "bring a bride home from the tribe" is very meaningful. It means that a woman from the lineage would take great care of the honor of the men and herself. This expression reflects male discourse, its construction process as well as strategy in practice. Discourse of this type—directing the individual toward endogamy and at the same time inculcating the ideal of purity—is a way to separate a man's group from other groups. "Blood," the symbol of the natural group, also is the symbol of the fictive group with this ideal. However, the fictive group has a paradox. The nobility of blood represents the warriors (van Bruinessen 1992:54) and is gained only by means of the "blood" of the woman. Consequently, the structural cause of FBD marriage links at this point with the ideals of male discourse.

A man from an elite family justified FBD marriage with his maternal grandmother's words. She said, "the mother of the wife you are going to choose should be so respectable that her hands can be kissed." According to him, such a woman exists only in his family. The image of "a woman whose hands are worth kissing" is the ideal of purity and nobility (blood and honor). While daughters are made a part of the father's brother's group by means of

FBD marriage, it is by the same means that the blood of the family and lineage is made pure and noble. Abou-Zeid (1966:257), who deals with the concept of "honor" among the Bedouins, draws attention to a similar issue and expresses that Bedouins give much weight to the purity of blood and that the honor of a man depends at the same time on his mother's origin.

Some elite families have had to marry exogamously because of the ratio of males and females in the lineage. They have brought in brides from various groups outside because of the lack of girls of marriageable age in their own group. Still, by means of polygyny, a man can marry both his FBD and someone outside the group.

### CONCLUSIONS

Structural-functional explanations of FBD marriage attribute the functions of marriage preference to the stability and continuity of the system. On the other hand, from the point of the "theory of practice," this marriage type is claimed to have more than one meaning and function and these change according to the context (Bourdieu 1991; see also Holy 1989; Yalçın-Heckmann 1991). For instance, in her study of Kurds, Yalçın-Heckmann (1991:237) states, "[O]ne could conclude that FBD marriage would take different turns and have different meanings when the social standing, overall strategies, and social and material profit increases or decreases of the households are considered." As meanings multiply according to context, there is no marriage made for the same reason as another marriage (Bourdieu 1991).

The metaphor, "the semen and the soil," not only coincides with the definition of the patrilineage, it also determines the position of women. However subtle and secondary, metaphors such as "the flesh and the bone" also refer to male and female imagery. In the latter metaphor, there is no sexually hierarchical but there is an asymmetrical situation. It does not make a woman subject to the man as in the former metaphor, but causes a dual structure and points to the importance attributed to the mother's brother in practice and discourse.

A different appearance of this asymmetrical structure is the mother's brother's group and that of the father's patrilineage. The mother's brother's family represents the biological determinant in the local understanding of procreation, and points to a hidden matrilineal framework due to the presence of male and female children in his group. The father's patrilineage, on the other hand, represents a patriarchal ideology. The fact that male children are the core elements of the patrilineage in a patriarchal system poses a problem for the establishment of the system, as females are left out of the genealogy.

The problem created by a patrilineal descent structure can only be solved by means of FBD marriage. In other words, the construction of a patrilineal descent structure is completed through FBD marriage.

The problem of carrying out this process can be overcome by keeping female children in the patrilineage through marriage. A man can achieve affinity with other lineages for other reasons, but female children are retained within the “web.” The discussions in the patrilineal descent group about taking and giving away girls are made for this reason.

#### NOTES

1. See Mernissi (2003), Ahmed (2003), and Sabbah (1995) for feminist anthropology publications on how the hierarchical structure between the sexes has been constructed in Islamic belief.
2. A man cannot join the blood feud of his mother’s brother because if he kills for his mother’s brother he will have included all of the men in his patrilineage in the feud, which is against custom.
3. During my field research, many women commented on my being single as “fate” but felt sorry for me for not having a brother as “I don’t have a possessor.” A frequently uttered statement was “If only you had a possessor. . . .”
4. The most tragic manifestation of this possession is that it is the brother who kills the sister who “blemishes” (or is believed to have blemished) the honor of the family. Tillion (1983:99) also points out that it is always the brother who kills the sister.

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