

(kinship)

Kinship and marriage.

[The following introduction is taken from the report to the E.S.R.C. by Alan Macfarlane, written in 1983]

In so far as one can deduce these things in the absence of listings, it would seem that complex households were also largely absent in Earls Colne. The records also allow us to examine the kinship terminology, both the terms of reference and those of address, and how these change over the centuries. There seems to have been little variation from the 'Eskimo' kinship terminology of present-day England, which terminologically isolates the nuclear family. The other major area for anthropological analysis, concepts of descent, that is how people consider themselves to be related to each other, are readily apparent in the records. The material for both parishes indicates an identical system of an ego-centres and bilateral type, reckoning kinship through both males and females equally, though employing patronymics. This bilateral system fits with the kinship terminology and also with the inheritance practices which are also bilateral. The formal system seems to have changed very little over this period and appears to be structurally similar in the two parishes.

The records allow us not only to study the formal system and the ideal level, but the actual practice, the contents of kinship. In the documents we have many transactions between individuals - borrowing, witnessing, acting as pledges or guarantors, as well as negative acts such as assault and theft. We can watch the family system in relation to religion, economics and politics. Similarly we can devise measures of 'kinship density', that is the degree to which fellow villagers also tended to be kin. The importance or unimportance of quasi-kinship and fictive kinship, of institutions such as godparenthood, fostering, adoption can be analysed. Although many strands again take us outside the parish, it is possible as a result of very considerable effort to reconstruct kinship charts for many village families, a number of those we have created stretching back over several generations.

Likewise we have made some preliminary analyses of marriage patterns. The social and geographical range of marriage partners and the degree to which different occupations inter-marry have for some years now been subjects of historical analysis, as has the question of marriage age. Less widely analysed as yet has been the question of payments at marriage, dowry and bridewealth, as well as marital property after separation, divorce or death. All these economic aspects of marriage are reasonably well recorded in local documents, particularly for the wealthier groups in the village. What are only mentioned in passing are the topics of courtship and love, of marriage arranging and of the quality of the marital relationship. Likewise the rituals of the wedding itself and the subsequent relations between husband and bride's kin are hardly alluded to. The historian has to turn to records outside his sample to answer the questions concerning ritual, symbol and structure which interest anthropologists. As in so many cases, we can observe something of the statistical patterns, but the assumptions and norms which produced these patterns are rarely even indirectly expressed. What are the kinds of impressions which are beginning to emerge from our work?

Kinship and marriage are without doubt the most important principles of social integration in the majority of human societies. Whether one looks at the economic, social or ritual worlds, the family and wider kin provide the prime unit for support. This has led to the many accounts of an opposition between the world of the family and the rest of society, sometimes termed 'amoral familism'. It has led many anthropologists to devote most of their monographs to the practical consequences of kinship. Because of the high geographical mobility, those who lived near each other were characteristically not kin. The basic unit of production was not the family, but the individual farmer, labourer or artisan and his wife. Those who co-operated in village life were mainly non-kin. In other words, kinship, it appears, did not provide the organizing principle for the economy. Nor did it do so for politics. There is only a very little evidence that feuds and factions were organized on kinship lines. Nor was kinship important from a religious or ritual viewpoint. There is no trace of ancestor beliefs, of family rituals (apart from rites de passages) that stretched outside the nuclear family.

The weakness of kinship outside the group of husband, wife and small children, also appears reflected in marriage institutions. In most tribal and peasant societies, where kin groups are discrete and strong, marriage is, in Radcliffe-Brown's words, a 're-arrangement of social structure'. Hence a marriage deeply concerns the whole community and particularly the two sets of kin. It is thus arranged by the kin, often with the aid of a marriage intermediary, a broker. The individual male and female have little say in the arrangement. Often the bride is very young, for her family must marry her off at puberty. There is no question of romantic love or personal choice and little encouragement for the young couple to get to know each other before the wedding. After marriage, the two often maintain their strongest link with others, particularly their siblings and parents; towards each other there is often reserve, often expressed in separate eating, walking, and peremptory commands by the husband. Marriage in such a situation is ultimately a political alliance, about the re-organization of flows of wealth, and in order to produce children.

The glimpses afforded by the local records for Earls Colne and Kirkby Lonsdale do not confirm to this model. There are no traces of marriage brokers. Clearly the young couple were often first attracted to each other. They appear to have been allowed considerable freedom to get to know each other. After marriage, there are a number of hints in the records that the husband-wife relationship was more important than any other and that it was far more egalitarian than one might have predicted. Above all, since what seem to have held the society together were not the personal ties of blood, but the impersonal ties of money (the Market) and of office (the State), marriages did not in any sense 're-arrange the social structure'. A marriage affected the participants very deeply, but it was ultimately, as the Church emphasized, an individual contract between two individuals. Even the neighbours' veto could be avoided, as it often was in Earls Colne, by purchasing a marriage licence which avoided the necessity of the saying of the 'banns'. Thus individuals were not deeply embedded in family relationships, they had freedom of movement. From the time they left home, in their teens, they stood alone. This makes England probably the most unfamilistic pre-industrial society known to us.