Lecture 1: Kinship and Marriage: A Testing Relationship

Introducing the ways descent theory and alliance theory have sought to make sense of the significance of marriage for kinship, this lecture will introduce key concepts in kinship theory. We are going to revisit the debates about the ways in which marriage was seen as somewhat peripheral to “kinship” by some theorists, and as central to the theories of others. In exploring these differences, we will be exploring the very nature of the anthropological study of kinship and marriage. I will outline some of the ideas of the British school (“Descent theory”) in the ideas of Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard, and will explore the interventions of the French school and the contributions of Levi-Strauss’ alliance theory and the meanings of “affinity”.


Further reading:

Lecture 2: Pre-Marital, Marital and Post-Marital Love: The Meanings of love for Marriage

This lecture will address the question of love (pre-marital, marital and post-marital); homosexual, heterosexual in the context of marriage and kinship. Is there a place for the anthropological study of love in kinship and should we be privileging marriage as the locus of our studies of love? How have anthropologists addressed desire and intimacy outside of companionate marriage?


Fuller, Chris & Harpriya Narasimhan 2008. “Companionate marriage in India: the changing marriage system in a middle-class Brahman subcaste” in JRAI, 14, pp. 736-754


Lecture 3: Marriage as Politics, Marriage as Law: A Historical Overview

In the last lecture we reflected upon the changing nature of marriage. Of course, in the present day and age, marriages “happen” within community but nonetheless are heavily regulated by the state. This lecture starts by thinking about the anthropological issues that arise over the legal regulation of marriage.
We consider the colonial debate in India on the abolition of sati, and the ways in which it debated the so-called meanings of “Hindu” marriage. Opposition to abolition was mounted on the premise that it interfered with the religious basis of Hindu marriage, whilst those who wanted to outlaw it emphasised the “material” aspects of families wishing to be rid of the burden of a widow. We thus see that debates enacted at the level of the state are often about the conception of proper / appropriate marriage and also the legal regulations governing transmission of property. So for instance, we look at how and why the colonial state wanted to legislate for civil marriage in India when no group was desirous of such an “enabling” law, as the moral outcome of such marriages was considered loathsome to “native” society. We also look at the ways in which marriage and exchange came to signify state relations between India and Pakistan, in the form of laws, enactments and parliamentary and public debates about the return of women who had been abducted during the violence of Indian Partition, even though many of these women were now married. We then examine a very contemporary scenario of the marriage rituals amongst Punjabi Jat Sikhs in the UK which demonstrate the “entanglement” of marriage with the migratory process and the relationships developed between migrant groups and the British state; a relationship that is vividly demonstrated in their new marriage rites. Similarly, we will examine the ways in which Charsley’s work shows that the primary motivation for transnational arranged marriages between Punjabi Pakistani men and British Pakistani women are not about the obligations to kin but rather focus upon the emotional aspects of kinship. We will finally look at the new Forced Marriages Act (2007) which seeks to protect individuals being forced into unwanted marriages and ask in what ways are laws about marriage also about wider questions of citizenship and the relationship of minority groups to the state.


Or, Menon, Ritu 1999. “Reproducing the Legitimate Community: Secularity, Sexuality and the State in Postpartition India” in Jeffery, Patricia and Amrita Basu (eds), Resisting the Sacred and the Secular, Kali for Women: Delhi

Lecture 4: The Meaning of Gifts: Dowry / Brideprice and Gifting the Virgin

What are the ways in which anthropologists have viewed the difference between marriage and weddings, and the different types of gifts given at marriage? How is dowry differentiated from brideprice and what models of society and kinship have anthropologists built upon the edifice of marital gift-giving and the gift of the virgin bride? In this lecture we will look at the ways in which changes to the practices of marital exchanges can have far reaching personal and social consequences (Masquelier, Yan). We return to some of the questions raised by alliance theory and consider the question: How different are marital gifts from other sorts of gifting?


*J. Goody (1973) 'Bridewealth and dowry' in J. Goody & S. Tambiah (eds.) Bridewealth and Dowry

J. Comaroff (ed.)(1980) 'Introduction' to The Meaning of Marriage Payments


