

A FURTHER NOTE ON *GEG* MARRIAGES

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***Abstract:** Marriages between groups of siblings-in-law, which, using kinship conventions, I call ‘GEG marriages’, resemble cross-cousin marriage or prescriptive alliance but lack the repeatability of such alliances in the immediately following generation(s). Although mentioned in passing quite frequently in ethnographic accounts, theory explaining them is largely lacking. Building on previous work, in this note I address the possible reasons for such marriages, both indigenously (and therefore locally) and as a possible waystation on the path to a society abandoning cross-cousin marriage.*

Introduction

In this note, I would like to return to a topic I have sought to draw attention to in a number of previous publications (e.g. 1992, 2013, 2021), namely the phenomenon of groups of brothers and sisters intermarrying, often intensively, within a generation, whereafter marriages between the two groups or categories to which they belong are banned for the immediately following generations (typically around three generations). Since these can also be seen as marriages between groups of brothers- and sisters-in-law, I use the anthropological abbreviation “GEG” (standing for “siblings’ spouses’ siblings”) as a shorthand for them.¹

¹ In his work on the Etoro of Papua New Guinea, Raymond Kelly calls the asymmetric version of these exchanges (i.e. BWZ = ZHB) ‘agnatic parallel marriage’ (1977: 72; cf. Weiner 1979: 105).

This pattern seems to go along regularly, though not necessarily with bans on egos of either sex marrying into the descent groups or lines of senior kin, most usually parents and grandparents. This, therefore involves dispersing marriages rather than repeating those of the previous generation. The dispersal of alliances² has been much discussed in relation to both Crow-Omaha and north Indian systems, and it provides the basis for Lévi-Strauss's 'semi-complex' systems (1965), but the association with GEG marriages has been noted much less often and has not been theorized to my knowledge.

Such bans are especially, perhaps, associated with societies with Crow-Omaha terminologies, but they also occur without them, as in north India (see the discussion of India's Kangra district below). In many ways they resemble prescriptive systems; i.e., those that give expression to some form of cross-cousin marriage. In both cases, groups of siblings are modelled as intermarrying, but the formal model of prescriptive terminologies shows such marriages being repeated generation after generation, including in the generations immediately preceding and following ego's; this means, for example, that male ego is shown repeating the marriage of his father, while ego's son will repeat ego's own marriage. With GEG marriage these inter-generational links do not occur, so that those in the succeeding generation(s) to ego's cannot repeat ego's marriages by marrying cross cousins and have to look elsewhere for spouses. Another way of viewing the difference is that with GEG marriages, ego already has a relationship with alter, as with cross-cousin marriage, though alter is defined differently in the two cases; that is, as an affine as opposed to a consanguine. This means, *inter alia*, that sister exchange is not automatically covered by GEG marriages, as the two men exchanging their sisters might not have a prior relationship themselves.³ As with prescriptive alliances, GEG marriages can be symmetric, including sister exchange (BWB = ZHZ), or asymmetric (BWZ = ZHB). Cross-culturally, however, if only one of these variants is permitted and the other is not, the asymmetric form tends to be specified, in which case wife-takers are not also wife-givers; it often being the intention to ensure this.

In previously dealing with this topic, I have tended to leave aside reasons for preferring, though not prescribing, marriages of this sort; I would therefore like to start making good on this gap here. This is made more difficult because of the under-reporting of this practice and its academic under-emphasis (see Parkin 2021: 283-4); but in addition, even where it is reported, indigenous reasons for the preference are often lacking from the respective ethnography. Nonetheless, there are cases where such reasons are given, often making reference to the way they allegedly firm up certain institutions and practices in the societies where GEG marriages are important. Most of this note is concerned with showing this with examples. Those in the list below marked with an asterisk I have already mentioned in earlier work (see references above). This topic is relevant in that it bears on the question of the reasons for societies abandoning cross-cousin marriage for, e.g., GEG marriages (see, e.g., 2021: Ch. 4). I end with two possible examples where this phenomenon might be underway, both from northern South America: the Kalapalo (Basso 1970, 1984) and the Piaroa (Kaplan 1975).

Kangra, NW India

² For a brief review of how alliances may be dispersed, see Parkin 2021: 276 n. 1.

³ This corrects a previous argument in which I confused the two situations. See Parkin 2021: 89-91.

A very well-described example is Jonathan Parry's work on Rajputs in the Indian district of Kangra (1979: 287-93). Here marriages between groups of siblings are associated with the viability of the Hindu joint family: given the latter's tendency to split up when the incoming wives are of different origins and therefore have a greater interest in their own conjugal families than the joint family as a whole. The fact that they are sisters and therefore of the same origin is thought to minimize the threat of partition. Generally, repeat marriages between sibling groups appear to be asymmetric here, that is, are between BWZ and ZHB, in accordance with the prevailing *kanya dan* ('gift of a virgin') philosophy of wife-takers being superior to wife-givers. Also possible, though less approved because symmetric and therefore involving direct exchange, are marriages to ZHZ/BWB, preferably classificatory siblings-in-law only. Parry says that repeat marriages within the same generation are extremely common, but in the long run ego can only repeat marriages in the third generation; i.e., repeat those of FFF's generation or above. Other considerations are that an incoming wife will feel less isolated if her sister also resides in the same joint family and that, as an existing affine, she is a known quantity.

Meerut, India

Sylvia Vatuk reports a similar preference for the intermarriage of these same GEG categories in her study of urban Meerut (1972: 90). Again, this reflects a preference for marrying known affines, either in the same generation, as here, or among the descendants of a generation preceding that of the grandparents. Both here and in Kangra, this is in line with the operation of the so-called 'four-got rule',⁴ which rules out a marriage if any of the four grandparents of bride and groom coincide. Vatuk also says (*ibid.*: 83-4) that there is a reluctance to allow a man to marry a woman with no brothers because, among other reasons, certain key functions of the wife-givers in terms of giving gifts and hospitality to their wife-takers might eventually become impossible through a lack of 'givers'; in other words, it would interfere with the proper operation of hypergamy.

****Roy Wagner among the Daribi of Papua New Guinea (PNG)***

"Often clans undergoing segmentation will intermarry extensively in the process, *thus perpetuating their association as a community...*" (1969: 65, my italics). And further: "the high concentration [of GEG marriages] seems to indicate [a] *concerted policy*" (*ibid.*: 66, my italics).

****E.A. Cook among the Manga of PNG***

"...marriages establish kin ties which ideally last for a specified two generations, after which the descendants are again regarded as non-kinsmen..." (1969: 100). And further, "Sister exchange is the most common method of spouse acquisition..." (*ibid.*: 101); in courting a girl, a boy will promise to find a wife for the girl's brother (ZHB/BWZ marriage; *ibid.*: 102).

****James Weiner among the Foi of PNG***

⁴ A *got* is a patrilineal descent group, especially associated with the upper castes in India. One should also mention the *sapinda* rule, which rules out remarriages within seven generations on the father's side and five on the mother's, often followed imperfectly.

Here sets of brothers can marry sets of sisters. Although two brothers (apparently actual) can marry two sisters from the same clan (perhaps classificatory); they generate different sets of affines (pp. 104, 105). Nonetheless, this tends “*to produce congruence in and increase the overlapping of bridewealth distribution networks*” (*ibid.*: 105, my italics). This suggests it has a stabilizing impact on such networks, which *ipso facto* must also be true of marriages. This is also an asymmetric practice, being “congruent with the asymmetric nature of the WB-ZH relationship” in Foi thought (*ibid.*), although Weiner found that the Foi had a neutral attitude to sister exchange and that actual alliances were symmetric. Weiner sums up the relevance of such practices among the Foi as follows: “*Intensive intermarriage promotes congruence and balance in bridewealth debts over time. The Foi give their lineage sisters to certain men and receive wives from these men’s clan brothers. They can therefore maintain the asymmetrical nature of affinal relations [cf. the asymmetry of WB-ZH relations mentioned above] while restoring a symmetry [sic] in bridewealth debts over time*” (*ibid.*: 106, my italics). This presumably relies on a ban on repeating such alliances for as many generations as it takes to obliterate the memory of the original exchanges, which are in themselves symmetric, not asymmetric.

John Ives on the Shoshone of North America

“What is particularly interesting about these groups is their fluid composition: the Shoshone not only adopted levirate and sororate practices, but they expected several brothers to marry several sisters, or a brother and a sister to marry a sister and a brother” (Ives 1998: 112, after Julian Steward and Fred Eggan). There is no mention of bans on repetition, though we are told that terminologically all cousins were classed with siblings. Ives states that one of his sources, Fred Eggan, “thought this important in *creating an extensive kin network for sharing information on food resources*” (Ives *ibid.*: 116, my italics).

****Fred Eggan on the Hopi of North America***

“Two brothers occasionally marry two sisters or marry into the same clan, although it is not a definite rule. Such marriages *may increase the solidarity of the household group and are supposed to eliminate quarreling between the sisters-in-law*” (1950: 35, my italics). The household group at issue here is a matrilineal extended family containing more than one nuclear family (*ibid.*: 29). Apart from the descent rule, it therefore resembles the patrilineal Hindu joint family addressed by Parry in being confronted with its possible dissolution.

****Gumuz of Ethiopia***

Wendy James found that, among this group, “the [marriage] system as a whole is run by the elders, who *attempt to preserve (at least in theory) equal outcomes to the parties to a marriage/life-giving exchange, and hence the closure of that generation*. Repetition of an exchange between the offspring of the same parties is banned; that is, bilateral cross-cousins are not marriageable” (2012: 140-141, my italics). James also gives sources for the existence of simple sister exchange among the Gumuz going back to the early nineteenth century (*ibid.*: 141). A different situation is found among the Amba of western Uganda, where exchange marriages were made illegal by the colonial government in 1947 (*ibid.*: 149).

****Richard Feinberg on the Anuta of Oceania***

Feinberg mentions a mild preference for marrying a sister-in-law, especially BWZ (reciprocal ZHB), an asymmetric arrangement. This is claimed to strengthen the existing alliance between ego's brother and the latter's WB, "and it maintains the social and economic solidarity of sisters by bringing them into the same [patrilateral extended family] (1979: 343, my italics). Like the Kangra example above, this is a very clear case of the indigenous view of such marriages as affirming and strengthening native institutions like marriage, the family or wider kin group and entire communities of kin.

Ho of India

GEG marriage is confirmed here, mostly, it seems, to produce symmetric exchange marriages within the village. Previously I wrote the following on this case (1992: 155, after Serge Bouez 1985):

The Ho themselves explain this with reference to the separatist tendencies of clans within the same village and insist on the immediacy and complete symmetry of exchange in such cases in order to preserve village unity: this might be threatened if a permanent, asymmetric relationship between clans were established....

The *Shavante* and *Sherente* of central Brazil both have a preference for asymmetric marriages between groups of brothers and groups of sisters, evidently classificatory, while the latter, at least, forbid the exchange of sisters between groups (Maybury-Lewis 1979: 228, 231). Similarly, among the *Omaha* of Nebraska, there is a preference for intermarriage between sibling groups in the same generation. Again, though, classificatory GEG is evidently meant as strict sister exchange is banned. Indeed, there is a sense of asymmetric transfers about Omaha marriage practices in general (Barnes 1984: 166, 198).

I end the core part of this note by considering whether societies with cross-cousin marriage can be said to abandon it for GEG marriages as one of their options.

****Basso on the Kalapalo of South America***

"...the only statement Kalapalo make about marriages is that persons who are classed as *ifándaw* ('spouse-exchangers at ego's generation') are the only kinds of kinsmen who can legitimately become spouses..." (1984: 33). And further, "Kalapalo marriage is, in the first place, an alliance between sibling sets... who are considered suitable spouse-exchangers because of their social distance, *not because of some a priori exchange relationship*" (*ibid.*: 37, my italics). Called *itsahene*, such marriages are apparently allowed in the immediately following generation, or, from the perspective of that generation, also applied to the preceding generation. Although cross cousins are not mentioned in this context, the *itsahene* of one generation can evidently be repeated in the next. This indicates that the Kalapalo may be on the cusp of a change away from cross-cousin marriage that has already been set in motion. Earlier, Basso (1970: 412) mentioned cases of sister exchange and of men serially marrying related women in circumstances of the loss of a spouse through divorce or death. This practice, too, seems like a halfway house between GEG marriages and the sororate. In her thesis (Becker⁵ 1969: 85), however, Basso states that she found "no examples of such exchanges occurring over more than two generations" and that "...the present system does not contain elements of permanency.... The [intermarrying] kinship-based groups have no definite existence beyond a single generation." This sounds much more like the "standard" GEG marriage situation.

⁵ Her maiden name. Thesis quoted after Dole 1984: 60.

Joanna Overing Kaplan's (1975) work on the *Piaroa* of the Orinoco basin may also be instructive here. Kaplan gives extensive data on their kinship terminology, including terms for second and more distant cousins, all of which are linked to first cousins in a consistent Dravidian pattern. The medial three levels are therefore two-line prescriptive, though the ± 2 levels are generational. However, although this formally suggests a system of cross-cousin marriage, the *Piaroa* themselves see their system as one of marrying affines, which suggests GEG categories, though Kaplan does not make this point herself. On the other hand, parents-in-law are ideally MB and FZ (*ibid.*: 72), and first cross-cousins ideal marriage partners. GEG marriages, if that's what they are, therefore "reaffirm" the marriages of the previous generation (*ibid.*: 75); perhaps this means the latter marriages are acknowledged as such without being repeated. Indeed, close kin marriages are said to be rare – few marriages involve "traceable genealogical connexion" (*ibid.*: 140). Exchanges are reinforced by the practice of two brothers marrying two sisters (asymmetric exchanges against the general symmetric character of the system, NB; but cf. italicized sentence quoted below), the sororate, and multiple marriages within the kindred, combined with residential endogamy (*ibid.*: 141; also 132 on the first of these practices). In relation to the first of these practices, Kaplan also says that "two sons can be exchanged for two daughters-in-law; a *chiminya* [male +1 affines] and his *chuhöri* [male -1 affines] may marry two sisters [suggesting an oblique marriage for at least one of them]. *There need be no balance in the number of women moving in each direction*" (*ibid.*: 142, original emphasis). There is no indication that this practice goes along with a ban on repeating such marriages in later generations: indeed, in the indigenous view (e.g.; *ibid.*: 133), marriages should take place with the children of parents-in-law or of siblings-in-law, affinal specifications that rely on links being traced with either of the generations adjacent to ego's.⁶

In this case, nonetheless, there seems to be a loosening of the equivalence in both terminology and sentiment between cross cousins and affines that one would expect from cross-cousin marriage proper. This may be another waystation on the route to the connection between cross kin and affines being completely and irrevocably broken, as with GEG marriages.

Discussion

Clearly, these are only a very few examples, and they are not always as fully explained as in Parry's and Feinberg's examples, but they do provide us with some information on the variety of indigenous reasons for GEG marriages. This very variety also confirms the insight that such marriage rules are purely local in their application. At the same time, however, they provide a structural tool for the manipulation and possible abandonment of cross-cousin marriage which is much wider than the merely local, being found in most regions of the world. Why, objectively, they should work this way is another matter. Not ruled out, therefore, are 1) other possible reasons for GEG marriages, and 2) similar reasons for other ways of marrying.

⁶ This inconsistency, if that is what it is, between marriage preference, terminological prescription and actual marriages is also found among another group in the same region, the Trio. Cf. Rivière (1969: 158): 'ideally there are no oblique marriages, in terms of generation [i.e. defined by age] there are few, terminologically all conventional alliances are oblique [i.e. between genealogical levels], and in practice it is only marriage with the sister's daughter which takes place between genealogical levels.' Cf. Parkin 2013: 210 note 6.

A final consideration here is to compare Crow-Omaha terminologies with the north Indian four-*got* rule mentioned earlier. Generally speaking, both Crow-Omaha terminologies and the four-*got* rule go along with the dispersal of alliances through marriage mentioned in the introduction so as to marry not too close in genealogical terms, though very often not to complete strangers either. As already noted, north Indian terminologies are not typologically Crow-Omaha, and unlike the latter they merge cross cousins with parallel cousins and siblings in order to rule out the former as marriage partners. There therefore may be two ways (at least) in which GEG marriages are associated with other phenomena: with Crow-Omaha terminologies in one case, and with the four-*got* rule and the Hawaiian-ization of terms for cousins in the other. It would be interesting in future research to test the latter correlation more widely and rigorously.⁷

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⁷ I would like to take this opportunity to correct some mistakes in an earlier work on this theme (Parkin 2021, Ch. 3). On line 10 of p. 88, the reference should read "Ives 1998: 112, 116." At the foot of p. 82 and first line of p. 83, the Forge references should read: "144 n. 9." The reference at the bottom of p. 87 should read "65-68". On p. 93, last line, "81" should read "8(1)".

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