

Marriage and the Family

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Chapter 10 – Marriage and the Family, pg. 195-219.

One of the few cultural universals is that of groups based on the principles of kinship: mother and child, husband and wife. This does not mean that all societies have the same kind of families or even see kinship ties in the same ways; in fact, humans have developed a surprising variety of simple kinship groups. But in some form or other, kinship groups are found in all societies.

Beginning with the building blocks of families, an extremely varied set of kin groups can be constructed, because kinship [196] ties can be traced out indefinitely from each individual. The only limits to such extensions are human interest and memory. Add to this the possibilities of extending kinship by social fiction, such as adoption, and kinship indeed becomes a versatile principle on which to organize social groups and activities.

BONDS OF KINSHIP

There must be arrangements for encouraging human reproduction and for the nurturing and training of offspring during their prolonged dependency on adults if a society is to be viable. These needs are met in all societies by means of kinship systems.

As we have seen earlier, all role relationships can be broken down into simple pairs. Kinship groups are built on two basic types of paired or dyadic relationships: "marriage" between husband and wife and "biological descent" of child from parent. To these must be added "adoption," which is the social extension of the principle of descent beyond the biological sphere. Anthropologists have devised a set of symbols for these relationships to assist them in their analyses of even the most complex kinship systems (see Figure 10.1).

Omodo

Walter A. Trobisch

On one of my trips I worshiped in an African church where nobody knew me. After the service I talked to two boys who had also attended.

"How many brothers and sisters do you have?" I asked the first one.

"Three."

"Are they all from the same stomach?"

"Yes, my father is a Christian."

"How about you?" I addressed the other boy.

He hesitated. In his mind he was adding up. I knew immediately that he came from a polygamous family.

"We are nine," he finally said.

"Is your father a Christian?"

"No," was the typical answer, "he is a polygamist."

"Are you baptized?"

"Yes, and my brothers and sister too," he added proudly.

"And their mothers?"

"They are all three baptized, but only the first wife takes communion."

"Take me to your father."

The boy led me to a compound with many individual houses. It breathed an atmosphere of cleanliness, order, and wealth. Each wife had her own kitchen. The father, a middle-aged, good-looking man, tall, fat, and impressive, received me without embarrassment and with apparent joy. I found Omodo, as we shall call him, a well-educated person, wide awake and intelligent, with a sharp wit and a rare sense of humor. From the outset he made no apologies for being a polygamist; he was proud of it. Let me try to put down here the essential content of our conversation that day which lasted for several hours.

"Welcome to the hut of a poor sinner!" The words were accompanied by good-hearted laughter.

"It looks like a rich sinner," I retorted.

"The saints come very seldom to this place," he said. "They don't want to be contaminated with sin."

"But they are not afraid to receive your wives and children. I just met them in church."

"I know. I give everyone a coin for the collection plate. I guess I finance half of the church's budget. They are glad to take my money, but they don't want me." [205]

I sat in thoughtful silence. After a while he continued, "I feel sorry for the pastor. By refusing to accept all the polygamous men in town as church members he has made his flock poor and they shall always be dependent upon subsidies from America. He has created a church of women whom he tells every Sunday that polygamy is wrong."

"Wasn't your first wife heartbroken when you took a second one?"

Omodo looked at me almost with pity. "It was her happiest day," he said finally.

"Tell me how it happened."

"Well, one day after she had come home from the garden and had fetched wood and water, she was preparing the evening meal, while I sat in front of my house and watched her. Suddenly she turned to me and mocked me. She called me a 'poor man,' because I had only one wife. She pointed to our neighbor's wife who could care for her children while the other wife prepared the food."

"Poor man," Omodo repeated. "I can take much, but not that. I had to admit that she was right. She needed help. She had already picked out a second wife for me and they get along fine."

I glanced around the courtyard and saw a beautiful young woman, about nineteen or twenty, come out of one of the huts.

"It was a sacrifice for me," Omodo commented. "Her father demanded a very high bride price."

"Do you mean that the wife who caused you to become a polygamist is the only one of your family who receives communion?"

"Yes, she told the missionary how hard it was for her to share her love for me with another woman. According to the church my wives are considered sinless because each of them has only one husband. I, the father, am the only sinner in our family. Since the Lord's Supper is not given to sinners, I am excluded from it. Do you understand that, pastor?"

I was entirely confused.

"And you see," Omodo continued, "they are all praying for me that I might be saved from sin, but they don't agree from which sin I must be saved."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the pastor prays that I may not continue to commit the sin of polygamy. My wives pray that I may not commit the sin of divorce. I wonder whose prayers are heard first."

"So your wives are afraid that you become a Christian?"

"They are afraid that I become a church member. Let's put it that way. For me there is a difference. You see they can only have intimate relations with me as long as I do not belong to the church. In the moment I would become a church member their marriage relations with me would become sinful."

"Wouldn't you like to become a church member?" [206]

"Pastor, don't lead me into temptation! How can I become a church member, if it means to disobey Christ? Christ forbade divorce, but not polygamy. The church forbids polygamy but demands divorce. How can I become a church member, if I want to be a Christian? For me there is only one way, to be a Christian without the church."

"Have you ever talked to your pastor about that?"

"He does not dare to talk to me, because he knows as well as I do that some of his elders have a second wife secretly. The only difference between them and me is that I am honest and they are hypocrites."

"Did a missionary ever talk to you?"

"Yes, once. I told him that with the high divorce rate in Europe, they have only a successive form of polygamy while we have a simultaneous polygamy. That did it. He never came back."

I was speechless. Omodo accompanied me back to the village. He evidently enjoyed to be seen with a pastor.

"But tell me, why did you take a third wife?" I asked him.

"I did not take her. I inherited her from my later brother, including her children. Actually my older brother would have been next in line. But he is an elder. He is not allowed to sin by giving security to a widow."

I looked in his eyes. "Do you want to become a Christian?"

"I *am* a Christian," Omodo said without smiling.

As I walked slowly down the path, the verse came to my mind: "You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel."

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