



# Chapter 9 Kinship and Family Structures

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## Learning Objectives

- Identify and explain the various kinship systems in different cultures, including the types of kinship terminology, descent, and residence patterns.
- Explain how kinship systems contribute to social organization and structure in different societies, including the roles and obligations of kinship relationships.
- Discuss the cultural significance of kinship, including its role in family life, social identity, and cultural practices such as marriage, inheritance, and gender roles.
- Analyze the impact of globalization on kinship systems and family structures, including how migration, technology, and changing social norms affect kinship relationships.
- Apply their knowledge of kinship concepts to contemporary social issues, such as same-sex marriage, adoption, and the changing role of the family in modern society.

## Introduction

Families are important in nearly every society. An individual grows up with a family from whom they gain their values and ideals. A family provides an individual with a sense of belonging and a place of refuge where one can go for aid and support. It assigns an individual with basic roles, rights, and responsibilities in relation to other relatives. Finally, the family controls wealth and material necessities, such as a home or agricultural land, needed to survive.

Traditional American family consisting of a married couple with children is changing in many ways. Cohabitation is on the rise, more adults are delaying or forgoing marriage, and a growing number of children are living with unmarried parents (Thomas, 2020). According to the PEW Research Center (2015), in the early 1960s, babies typically arrived within a marriage; today, four-in-ten births occur to women who are single or cohabitating with a partner. Not only has the family structure changed, but so has the role of mothers. As more moms have entered the labor force, more have become, in many cases, the primary breadwinners in their families (Thomas, 2020; PEW, 2015).

Despite these changes and the growing diversity in the American family makeup, many types of kinship patterns and practices exist in other societies that many Americans may have trouble understanding. For example, imagine that your father was female, had no genetic relationship with you, and was married to both your mother (her wife) and a man (her husband). This would be the case if your father was the “female husband” in a **woman-to-woman marriage**. This is a form of marriage between two women in which the female husband assumes control over her wife and has full custodial rights over the children. This customary marriage is predominantly found in Africa and is, to some extent, still conducted by various African communities (Cadigan, 1998; Kareithi and Viljoen, 2019). It is important to note that all ceremonial aspects are observed, including practices of bridewealth, celebration, and potentially divorce.

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*This would be the case if your father was the “female husband” in a woman-to-woman marriage.*

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This type of marriage is not a love match or companionate marriage as we are accustomed to in America. These are marriages built on love, intimacy and personal choice rather than as a social obligation (Guest, 2017, p. 360). Most Americans would wonder, if it is not for love, then why would a woman marry another woman? One reason is that such a marriage is a culturally sanctioned and accepted practice that allows a barren woman, single or married, to have children. In many African societies, a woman's traditional social obligation is to marry and procreate. Therefore, a barren woman is often considered a failure and is ostracized (Cardigan, 1998; Kimutu, 1994). Woman-to-woman marriage is a strategy available to barren women to have children and improve their social and economic position in society.

You may be wondering how in a woman-to-woman marriage a child is born. Depending on the cultural practices in a community, the genetic father is chosen by the female husband or her wife. If the female husband is married, she may choose her own husband or any of her husband's close male kin to reproduce with her wife. This is the case among the Igbo and Kalabari communities of southern Nigeria (Cadigan, 1998, p. 92). Many single barren women who enter a woman-to-woman marriage will allow their wife to choose their own lover.

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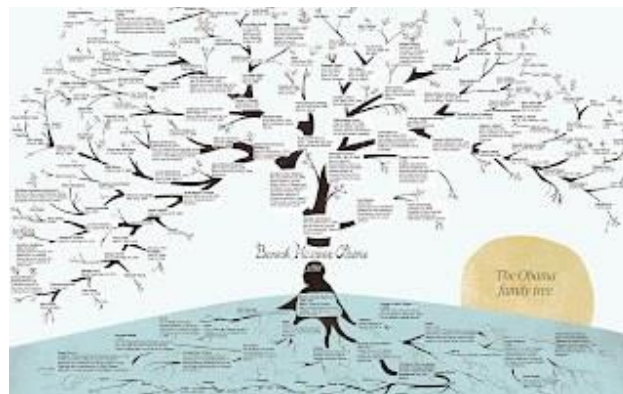
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The most important outcome of woman-to-woman marriage is that it grants the female husband the rightful legal and social father of all children birthed by her wife, despite the genetic father's role. Once married, the female husband conceptually assumes the male role (Obloer, 1980; Cardigan, 1998). That is, the community endows the female husband with rights traditionally held only by men, such as property ownership, inheritance, and child custody, and responsibilities, such as financially supporting her wife and children. These rights and access to resources (property, children, and a wife's labor) provide women with an agency and power customarily reserved for men.

A second reason a woman would seek a woman-to-woman marriage is to increase her wealth. This instance is most common in West Africa, where women have more opportunities to acquire wealth. Like a man in a polygynous society, a woman who has accumulated enough wealth to provide a bridewealth may take a wife (or wives). Like a man with multiple wives, a female husband with many children earns prestige, and it can allow her to increase her economic status. For example, traditionally, among the Igbo in Nigeria, a wealthy woman would take a wife to free themselves from domestic responsibilities allowing her to devote her time to increasing her wealth (Amadiume 1987).

Finally, among some agricultural communities, a woman-to-woman marriage practice is a recognition that a married woman will need help with domestic chores and farm work. In these cases, a sonless woman will marry a woman on behalf of her non-existent son. The married couple refers to each other as "mother-in-law" and "daughter-in-law," and the children are considered to be the female husband's grandchildren (Hakansson 1985).

## Why Study Kinship?



Studying kinship is valuable for several reasons. First, as a fundamental aspect of human organization, kinship provides insights into how societies are structured, how families are formed, and how individuals relate to one another. Second, studying kinship systems provides a window into how people organize and define family relationships. Studying kinship allows us to appreciate and respect the rich cultural diversity of human societies. Third, by examining kinship patterns and dynamics, we can gain insights into the forces (local or global, politically or historically) that have shaped human social behavior over

time. Fourth, it offers practical applications because it provides a foundation for understanding family dynamics, marriage customs, inheritance patterns, and caregiving practices, which are relevant in various professional contexts. In summary, studying kinship enhances our understanding of human societies, cultural diversity, and evolutionary origins and has practical applications in various fields.

## What is kinship?

### *Kinship as a Set of Rights and Obligations*

**Kinship** can be defined most simply as “relationships between persons based on descent or marriage” (Stone, 2010, p. 5). However, as shown in the above discussion on woman-to-woman marriage, how descent and marriage are established varies by culture

Kinship may be embedded in a culture’s economy. This is the case in some pastoral societies in East Africa that anthropologists call a **cattle complex**. In these societies cattle are used for their milk and blood rather than killed for their meat (except on ceremonial occasions). Cattle are also used by individuals and families to increase their cultural wealth and status in the community.

An example of a cattle complex is the Dinka of South Sudan, who proudly refer to themselves as “Cattle Keepers.” Unlike other pastoralists, whose cattle are used as a regular source of meat and are sold or traded for economic income, the Dinka do not eat their cattle (except on ceremonial occasions) and do not sell their cattle for money. It may seem odd to an American whose diet is largely made up of beef and who sees cattle as only a source of food or profit. However, for the Dinka, cattle are central to a vastly more critical component of their life than food or money. For the Dinka, cattle are central to building and strengthening kinship relations. It begins before a Dinka child’s birth. At marriage an exchange is made. The bride moves to the groom’s family’s home and the groom’s family provides the bride’s family with cattle. This is called **bridewealth**. This exchange, or movement of cattle from one family to the other is what determines a child’s father and, therefore, the child’s clan identity. Clan members believe they are descended from the same common ancestor.

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*For the Dinka, cattle are central to building and strengthening kinship relations.*

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This identity, one’s clan membership, determines a significant aspect of a Dinka man or woman’s life. For example, kinship dictates with whom one can eat, live with, and marry. It also dictates who a man can call on to help care for his cattle or who can call on him for help. During the dry season, the Dinka migrate with their cattle in search of pasture and water. With whom one migrates with is based on one’s kinship relations. Finally, a man can only call on his male kin to help establish the cattle needed for his bridewealth for marriage.

Kinship among the Dinka also endows an individual with obligations to his kin. A man cannot refuse to help a kin member who requests food, help to carry cattle, or help to build a cattle barn or home. A Dinka woman cannot refuse to cook or clean for male kin or help female kin with domestic chores or childcare when requested. If a Dinka man or woman has money or material items such as a dress or jewelry, they cannot refuse a kin member’s request for them. Men who are employed have an obligation

to aid kin not only with money from their salary, but to assist male kin in finding employment. This embeddedness of kinship within an economy is foreign to US culture, where laws have been enacted to prohibit this practice, that we call nepotism. A cross-cultural comparison of kinship over time and across the globe shows that while the “roles played by kinship vary considerably across societies, kinship relations, in general, entail the idea of rights and obligations” (Stone, 2010, p. 5).

### Kinship is a cultural construction.

As a cultural construction, kinship is **not** fixed, natural, or universal. Instead, kinship is created and maintained by a society's cultural beliefs, values, and norms. Furthermore, kinship is **not** static. As a society's values, historical contexts, and power relations (locally and globally) change, so may its kinship practice.

### Kinship as a processual concept

Kinship as a processual concept refers to the dynamic and ongoing nature of kinship systems and relationships. This perspective views kinship patterns and relationships as actively constructed, negotiated, and transformed through various social interactions, practices, and cultural contexts.

Kinship as a processual concept is:

- Constructed
- Negotiated
- Contextual and Culturally Specific
- Flexible

The processual nature of kinship recognizes that kinship is not predetermined or fixed by biology at birth. It is instead continuously shaped and redefined by culture and context. Individuals must continuously negotiate rights, obligations, and responsibilities with their kin. Different cultures have distinct kinship systems, terminology, and rules. For example, marriage takes many forms around the world. In some societies, it is not only a norm but a law that marriage is only between two people, while in other societies allows for multiple spouses. The transformative and flexible nature of kinship systems means it is constantly evolving. Factors such as migration, globalization, social movements, or legal reforms may create changes to long-established kinship patterns or practices. For example, the practice of dowry in India had once enhanced a bride's status but is now often the cause of dowry-related violence, abuse, and even murder.

## The Kinship Code

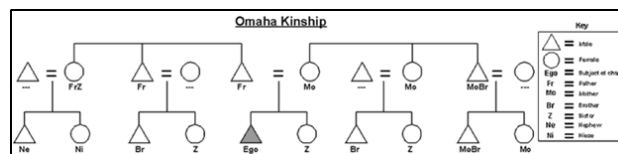
### Genealogical method

In **kin-based societies**, such as the Dinka discussed above, it is necessary to collect genealogical data because of its importance to the daily lives of its members. Developed by an English anthropologist William H.R. Rivers, in 1898, the **genealogical method** is a simple but systematic way of classifying all kin relationships of an individual/informant. This method provides a visual chart of an individual's kin and creates a diagram of the individual's social, economic, and political relations within the family and larger society. Widely used during the past century, this method became a vital tool for understanding all sorts

of relationships in non-industrial societies, where political, economic, and social institutions are based on kinship relationships (Welsch and Vivanco, 2015).

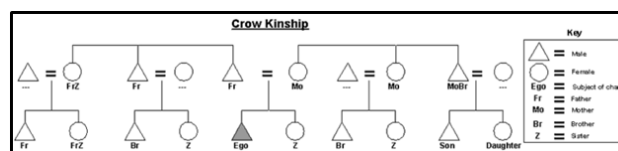
## Kinship Systems

Below are diagrams of three kinship systems that illustrate how kinship is contextual and culturally specific. In a kinship diagram, the ego is the starting point for whom all the relationships are referred. For example, let's compare the kinship patterns of three Native American cultures. Among the Omaha (Figure 9.1), the offspring of ego's father's sister (aunt) are considered nieces and nephews, while the offspring of ego's mother's brother (uncle) are called mothers or uncles. This system differs from the Crow (Figure 9.2) in which the offspring of any of ego's mothers or fathers are considered siblings, while the offspring of ego's mother's brother (uncle) are considered ego's offspring. Among the Iroquois (Figure 9.3), the ego's fathers and father's brothers are called by the same term, while mothers and mother's sisters are recognized by the same term. Therefore, the father's brother's children and the mother's sister's children are both considered to be siblings to the ego.



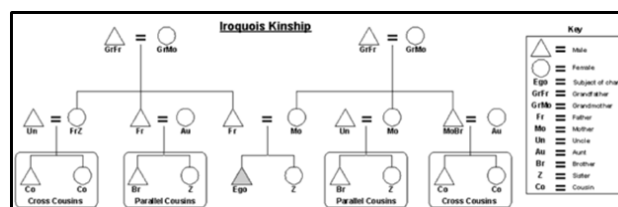
1 - Figure 9.1 Omaha Kinship System

Image from Wikimedia Commons.



2 - Figure 9.2 Crow Kinship System

Image from Wikimedia Commons.



3 - Figure 9.3 Iroquois Kinship System

Image from Wikimedia Commons.

## Types of Families and Descent

Anthropologists describe three types of kin: **consanguineal**, **affinal**, and **fictive**. Consanguineal kin are biologically or genetically related (blood relatives), affinal relatives are related through marriage (spouses, in-laws, stepchildren, etc.), and fictive kin are relatives that are not related by blood or marriage (adopted family members and godparents). These types of relationships are important because they form the foundation of politico-economic structures in society and can influence aspects of life like



appropriate marriage partners, ethnicity, religion, inheritance, succession, legal rights, political affiliation, education, and social commitments (Palmiotto et al., 2022).

Despite its decline (as discussed above), most Americans think of the traditional **nuclear family** (parents and children) as the ideal, but many cultures see the **extended family**, a household that includes multiple generations, as the ideal. For example, in China is customary that a son takes care of his parents. Therefore, it is common for a Chinese household to be made up of a man, his wife, children, and his parents.

**Decent groups** are based on a belief in a shared ancestry. This belief helps societies determine which offspring inherit or succeed their parents, particularly where a family has accumulated wealth or holds a position of power.

Descent can be **unilineal**, where descent is traced through only the mother's (**matrilineal**) or father's line (**patrilineal**). Alternatively, it can be **ambilineal**, where descent is traced through both the mother's and father's lines.

Descent groups may be **lineages** or **clans**. Both types believe members descend from the same apical ancestor (the apex or top). The difference lies in whether the descent can be demonstrated or is only stipulated. Lineages use demonstrated descent – that is, they can recite the names of their forebearers in each generation from the apical ancestor through the present (the recitation is not always accurate but believed to be). Clans, on the other hand, use stipulated descent. They can't trace their genealogical lines but believe they have the same apical ancestor.

## Marriage

### ***Why do People get married?***

Most Americans believe marriage is about love, sex, and companionship. Americans also believe marriage is a private decision between two individuals and, therefore, individuals have the right to choose their marriage partner. However, in many societies around the world, marriage is more about cultivating political and economic relationships between two families than it is about the preferences of the couple. Marriage is a way to create or reinforce alliances between groups of people and the couple. In such societies, who and into which family an individual marries directly affects all their family members' political, economic, social, and cultural status. These cultures believe that marriage is too important to be left to the whims of an individual and it is an accepted practice for family members to choose an individual's marriage partner.

Whether a marriage is a **love match/compassionate** or **arranged** by family members, marriage provides social recognition of the ties between the couple and their families, as well as the social legitimacy of the children. Marriage also carries legal and financial benefits. These benefits may include tax advantages, inheritance rights, access to healthcare and insurance, property ownership, and decision-making authority in certain situations (For example, end-of-life care decisions).

Cultural norms and religious beliefs often emphasize the importance of marriage. Many individuals may choose marriage to conform to societal expectations, maintain cultural traditions, and gain acceptance within one's community or religious group. Religious groups may also define who is, or who is not, an

acceptable mate. It is important to note that motivations for marriage can vary significantly between individuals and cultures. People's reasons for getting married are influenced by personal desires, cultural norms, societal expectations, religious beliefs, and legal considerations.

## Forms of Marriage

There is no single definition of marriage broad enough to apply easily to all societies. Broadly speaking marriage is a socially recognized and sanctioned relationship that may establish parental rights, children's descent, rights to property and inheritance, rights and obligations to spouse's and in-laws. Anthropology has recorded, over time and across the globe, a variety of marriage practices. One interesting variation is the number of partners involved in a marriage.

**Monogamy** refers to two individuals joined in an exclusive relationship, while **polygamy** refers to marriages with more than two individuals in the relationship. These may include multiple wives with one husband (**polygyny**) or multiple husbands with one wife (**polyandry**).

Many Americans are influenced by the long-standing tradition of monogamy, a religious belief that renounces polygyny, or US law that makes polygyny illegal and punishable under the law. We subscribe to monogamy as the correct and best form of marriage and find it difficult to accept or understand why someone would accept, enter into, or even prefer a polygamous marriage.

Most Americans are often unaware that plural marriages provide many benefits for both the male and female partners. Polyandry is generally viewed to have evolved as a response to peculiar, localized conditions. For example, in a community where there are more men than women, where adult male mortality is high, or where male absenteeism is common (when one husband is absent, another will be protected and assist her) polyandry is seen. In regions where land is scarce, **fraternal polyandry** (marrying all the sons of a family) allows a family to keep their agricultural estates together. Rather than dividing the land among the sons as each one marries, all sons marry the same woman keeping the land intact. Polyandry is also found in cultures that believe that fetuses develop in the womb as the result of multiple contributions of semen throughout a pregnancy. In these societies, more than one man is recognized as the father of a single child.

In most cultures, women contribute significantly to the household's wealth. Thus, polygyny has several economic, social, and health advantages. With each wife, the husband acquires more labor and economic benefit. In a society where women outnumber men, or when male mortality is high, polygyny ensures opportunities for women to marry and have children. More wives mean more children, both of which enhance a male's status in the community.

Studies also show that polygyny can also have a positive effect on maternal and child health. Cowives can rely on each other during pregnancy and postpartum recovery to help with childcare and daily domestic chores. Polygyny supports adequate birth spacing for the mother to recover and focus on caring for her newborn. For example, there is a firmly held taboo among the Dinka that a pregnant woman must remain sexually abstinent until her child stops breastfeeding, about two years. During this time, cowives create opportunities for sexual companionship, which allows a breast feeding woman to maintain her abstinence. Cowives are also a source of support and alliance when a husband is not fulfilling his roles and responsibilities. **Sororal polygyny**, in which a man marries all the daughters within



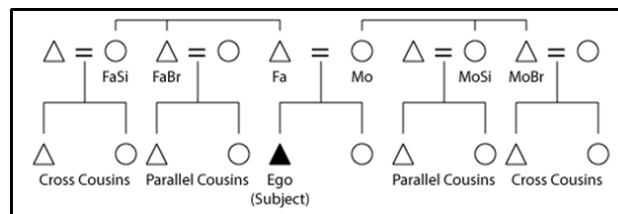
a family, is preferred in some societies. It is believed that the sisters as cowives are more mutually supportive and less argumentative.

A second variation in marriage practice is the rules that dictate who an individual can and cannot marry.

**Exogamy and endogamy** are examples of how some groups determine appropriate marriage partners.

Exogamy is the practice of marrying individuals outside of one's own social or cultural group. In exogamous societies, individuals are encouraged or expected to seek partners from different social, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds. This practice promotes social diversity, intergroup connections, and the exchange of resources, ideas, and genetic material. Exogamy can promote the formation of alliances or connections between different groups or communities. Endogamy refers to marrying within a specific social, cultural, or ethnic group. In endogamous societies, individuals are expected or encouraged to marry someone from their social or cultural background, such as their caste, tribe, religion, or community. The practice of endogamy creates or maintains social, cultural, or religious continuity, preserves traditions, reinforces social boundaries, and protects group identity and resources.

Most common in societies with unilineal descent, cousin marriage, which refers to marriage between the offspring of siblings, is often observed. It is a form of lineal endogamy (see Figure 8.4). **Parallel cousin marriage** refers to marriage between children of same-sexed parents (the offspring of a father's brother or mother's sister). In contrast, **cross-cousin marriage** indicates marriage between the children of opposite-sexed siblings (the offspring of a mother's brother or father's sister offspring). It is estimated that around 10% of marriages globally are cousin marriages (Bittles and Black, 2010).



4 - Figure 9.4 Cousin Kinship Chart.

Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Another form of marriage is an arranged marriage, where the families of the soon-to-be bride and groom select the bride and groom. Parents consider many factors when selecting a match for their child. Factors include the potential spouse's personality and reputation, education and employment, economic status, caste and religion, and physical features (height, weight, attractiveness) to ensure compatibility and hope for their child's happiness. Arranged marriage is practiced in many parts of the world, including South Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa. For those raised in a culture where marriage is founded on love and is a private decision between two individuals, it is hard to understand why someone would elect to have their family choose their spouse. However, there are many reasons why an individual would prefer an arranged marriage.

I recommend watching the film "Arranged Marriages." It is a great visual to this discussion and provides a glimpse into the process, which is a family affair, and the experiences of Indian men and women as their marriages are arranged. Please note that it is 54 minutes long. To watch this film, click on the following link: [https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cvideo\\_work%7C1784508](https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C1784508) (Use our GGC credentials to sign into the Kaufman Library).

Where arranged marriages are deeply rooted in tradition and cultural values, an individual may feel a strong sense of duty to honor their family and follow this tradition. It may also be that as children and young adults, they saw couples who were in arranged marriages having successful and fulfilling marriages. Seeing this success leads to trust that the process will lead to a happy and successful union. Furthermore, those who accept the idea of an arranged marriage argue that searching for a life partner is, for them, overly challenging and stressful. They trust parents and family who have their best interests at heart.

In some cultures, a professional matchmaker is used to find a spouse. For example, many orthodox Jews in Israel, and the US, use a matchmaker to find their future spouse. The correct term for Jewish matchmaker is shadchan (pronounced SHAHT-khuhn). I recommend watching the film "A Match Made in Heaven." The film follows several Orthodox Jewish men and women in Israel who are looking for marriage with the help of a matchmaker. The viewer gains a more nuanced understanding how Orthodox Jew's view marriage and what they value most. Please note that it is 76 minutes long. To watch this film, click on the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHSUEXegwgU>

For many, marriage is more about bringing two families together than it is about the two individuals. In these cases, arranged marriages often include a practice of gifting (**dowry**) or exchanges (**bridewealth**) between the families of those being married. These gifts and exchanges reinforce both families' shared economic and political interests, which helps facilitate the marriage's longevity.

### Gifts at Marriage

It is important to recognize that bridewealth is an exchange, while dowry is a gift. They function differently for the bride, groom, and families. Bridewealth can be made up of material items (animals, weapons, food, etc.), resources, or money. Typically, the practice of bridewealth indicates that women are highly valued in that society for reasons such as fertility and childbirth. In fact, the purpose of the exchange for the groom's family is to obtain rights over the children produced from the marriage and ensure the children's membership in the groom's descent group. For the bride's family, bridewealth is used to create her brother's bridewealth for marriage. In this way, the bride is able to contribute to the growth of her father's decent group through the children produced in the brother's marriage. Such increases ensure the future viability of the father's descent group.

Bridewealth is often so large that it requires a groom to appeal to his male kin for help. Calling on male relatives for help amassing the needed bridewealth is especially common among pastoralist societies, such as the cattle herders of East Africa, who have traditionally paid bride price with cows. Among the Dinka in South Sudan, a bride's family will not accept money or martial goods as part of a bridewealth. It must consist solely of cattle. Among the Dinka Bor in Jonglei State, bridewealth is traditionally 30 head of cattle but can go much higher. During my fieldwork in Bor, I recorded a bridewealth of 175 cattle. To accumulate even 30 cattle, many Dinka men must "borrow" cattle from their male kin. Borrowing cattle creates a debt, or an obligation to aid his male kin sometime in the future. In turn, the bride's father will disburse the cattle to his own sons and male kin. The father may disburse the cattle to kin who helped him in the past or as a way to "pay it forward," thereby creating a potential source of aid in the future. In this way, the practice of bridewealth both strengthens kin ties and circulates the community's wealth (cattle).

While providing women with value, security, and prestige, bridewealth can also negatively affect women under certain circumstances. One such context is that of divorce. Dinka women, for example, have the right to divorce, but it can be difficult to obtain one. Part of the difficulty is that upon divorce, all the cattle from her bridewealth must be returned to her husband's family. Hence all the connections and relationships the cattle created within and between the families are severed. Both the groom's and bride's families will work hard to prevent the couple from divorcing to avoid breaking up the alliances created by their marriage and the bridewealth exchange.

Unlike bridewealth, which indicates that women are highly valued in society, dowry is most often associated with cultures where women are perceived as more of a burden than as a recourse have limited economic opportunities and rely on their husbands and in-laws for support. Dowry practices date back to before ancient Rome and have varied widely in practice and function, over time and across different regions (Khanal and Ruchira Sen, 2020).

In some cases, dowry ensures that the bride's family contributes to the costs of setting up a new household. In other cases, dowry was a means of compensating the bride's family for the loss of their daughter's labor and economic contribution to the household. It has also been cited as a way to provide financial security to the bride in her new household and by sending valuable gifts to their daughter, the bride's family hoped to ensure her well-being and social status within her new family. Dowry is often intended to strengthen a bride's status in her new home with the groom's family.

Today, the type and cost of the dowry demanded, and the bride's treatment in her new home can vary widely. In some cultures, the amount and quality of the dowry have become a matter of social status and prestige, leading to competitive and extravagant dowry practices that include items such as cars, gold, land, and cash. These changes have been, in part, responsible for a rise in dowry-related disputes, financial burdens, and even instances of dowry-related abuse and murder. As a result, some countries have implemented laws and regulations that limit or outlaw the use of dowry.

## **Examples of Marriage and Kinship Around the World**

### **Walking marriage**

The Mosuo (pronounced MWO-two) do not practice marriage in the traditional sense. Among the Mosuo, a man and a woman who are engaged romantically are not bonded together legally or religiously, they do not live together, nor start their own household. Also, because the Mosuo distinguishes sexuality and romance from the domestic aspects of life like parenting and caretaking, there is no obligation to remain a couple for the remainder of their life.

Among the Mosuo, a man and woman who are engaged romantically continue to live within their own family's compound. After permission has been granted from the matriarch (the eldest female member) of the women's household, the man may visit her room during the night. As a matrilineal society, all children from this union are considered part of the mother's lineage. Thus, the children of the couple will live their entire lives with their mother, her siblings, and their grandmother in the same compound. All members of the compound are related by blood. All family members help care for the children and work the family land. When old enough, the children will also work on the farm to support the family. In this way, the family property always remains together. Among the Mosuo, men visit and play with their children but are not responsible for parenting and caretaking. Instead, men are responsible for parenting and caring for their sister's children, who will also live their entire lives with their mother, siblings, and

grandmother. This practice is called zouhun, or in English, walking marriage. Click on the following link to watch a four-minute video on the Mosuo practice of walking marriages titled "A World without Fathers or Husbands": <https://video-alexanderstreet-com.us1.proxy.openathens.net/watch/free-love?context=channel:academic-video-online> (Use your with your GGC credentials to sign into the Kaufman Library).

### Ghost Marriage

There is a good chance you have never heard of a ghost marriage and are wondering why someone would marry a ghost. Seriously, it all has to do with the importance of descent in a kin-based society. Among the Dinka and Nuer of South Sudan, both patrilineal cattle complexes, an individual's kinship and descent are an integral part their lives. Consequently, every man has an obligation to continue his family line through reproduction. This obligation includes a man who has died before he could marry. A dead man's family, never the less, will seek a wife for him to fulfill his duty to add to the family line. In a ghost marriage, all ceremonial aspects are observed, including practices of bridewealth that ensure that all children born of this union will be considered descendants of the dead man, i.e., the ghost, who is the socially recognized father. A male relative of the deceased man, most often a brother, will stand in for the deceased man, including reproduction.

### How is technology Changing and Reshaping How People Think about Family?



In early theories about kinship, motherhood was viewed as “natural” and undisputable. While paternity could be questioned, it was clear that the woman who birthed a child was, without argument, the mother. However, new reproductive technology (NRT) aimed at improving fertility and overcoming infertility has complicated the question of maternity.

NRTs such as artificial insemination, in-vitro fertilization, surrogacy, and egg donation create new categories of motherhood: the biological mother (provides the egg), the birthing mother (carries the children in her womb), the nurturing mother (cares for the child), and the complete mother (provides the egg, carries, births, and nurtures the child).

These technologies have social, legal, and moral implications because they create ambiguity and possible conflict surrounding maternity. Take, for example, a woman who enters into a contract to be a surrogate, refuses to give up the baby arguing that it is biologically part of herself. What should be done?

Some of you reading this may think DNA determines who is the mother. The woman who provides the egg should be the rightful mother and should have custody of the child. Others may argue that it is the woman who carries the child in the womb is the rightful mother. Some of you may believe that fertility or infertility is in god’s hands and that NRTs go against god’s will and should not be used for reproduction. Other readers may argue that if a legal agreement was signed, the surrogate mother is obligated to give the child up to the individual(s) who paid. Decisions about who is the rightful mother, or if NRTs should be permitted, is influenced by one’s cultural values and beliefs.

Until recently, Thailand was one of the most popular destinations for commercial surrogacy; a contractual arrangement between an infertile couple and an unrelated surrogate mother to carry the couple's baby for a fee (Cohen 2015). Once coined “Asia’s Womb,” Thailand’s popularity for surrogacy was due to the fact that the procedure and surrogate costs were much more affordable than in many countries, explicit legislation governing surrogacy was absent, a large number of women were willing to act as surrogates, and medical facilities were well-developed to provide a high standard of care.

These conditions led to the exploitation of Thai surrogates, many of whom lived in poverty and had little means to advocate for themselves in a legal system that provided them little agency in the case of surrogacy. In this environment, relatively wealthy Westerners could hire the womb of women to produce a child without concern for or obligation to the woman or the child born of the surrogacy. In 2014, the Baby Gammy scandal brought this exploitation to the global stage. An Australian couple contracted an agency in Thailand to contract a surrogate. The surrogate had twins, one of which was born with Down syndrome. The Australian couple pressed the surrogate for an abortion, but the woman refused on religious grounds. After the twins were born, the Australian couple took one twin and left the child with Down syndrome. When the Thai public and authorities became aware of the couple's action, the authorities led a much-publicized investigation into the country's fertility clinics. The finding contributed to new laws protecting Thai women from commercial surrogacy exploitation. In 2015, to protect its female citizens from abuse by foreigners searching for more affordable surrogacy costs, Thailand banned commercial surrogacy for international prospective parents

NRTs, such as artificial insemination, in-vitro fertilization, and surrogacy have an additional moral implication; they are expensive. For example, in the US, health insurance typically does not cover the total cost of surrogacy. Prospective parents must pay for these procedures out of pocket and can cost them \$100,000 (Shon, 2017). As a result, NRTs are limited to individuals or couples with high income

levels or with access to large amounts of loans. Thus, the vast portion of the world's families who struggle with fertility and infertility issues are without access to NRTs and the ability to have children.

## Transracial Adoption



*Photos: James Pauls, Getty Images*

*by* Adriauna “Auna” Benjamin

Families also exist outside the sphere of being consanguineal. Parent(s) also create families through adoption, bringing children into their homes who sometimes share their race and ethnicity, sometimes not. This reality of transracial adoption in our postmodern world brings about a conversation that invokes a dispute about its effects on the child(s)’s development and sense of identity as well as their adoptive parent’s capability of bridging the gap between cultures.

Parents of transracial adoptees face unique scenarios in which their child requires certain care that would otherwise not be provided had the parent’s race and ethnicity aligned with their child. Kathryn A. Mariner in her article entitled *White Parents, Black Care: Entanglements of Race and Kinship in American Transracial Adoption* details the experience of a white transracial adoptive mother, Daphne, who has an African American son, Alex. She relays an experience that transracial adoptive families often are confronted with—especially with children whose hair are dissimilar to the “white aesthetic: soft fluff of hair, unbound...” When their child’s hair isn’t up to the standard of their race, it can signal lack of care or ignorance on behalf of the parent and is often brought to their attention by Black women. This has roots in both appearances being integral to how African Americans were treated in the 1920s and hair serving as a point of racial pride. Because transracial adoptive parents aren’t always equipped with knowledge about how to style their children’s hair, it negatively reflects upon them and calls into question their capability. Though it’s a greater effort of a path to navigate, many take it upon themselves to seek connections within the Black community, acknowledging that hair “serves as an embodiment of race,



kinship *and* care.” Daphne bridged the gap and took it upon herself to be educated on this topic. In turn she helped to facilitate a positive racial identity for her son, Alex.

This extra step in learning the ins and outs of Black children’s hair has been utilized as a way to lessen transracial adoption and to encourage more thought on race being a factor in the adoption process. The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) took notice of the negative effects that transracial adoption had on the lives of Black families, as it seemingly contributed to structural racism. In order to keep Black families intact within a racist society, the NABSW took initiative through kinship care, which they asserted should include “family systems, culture and experiences.” They emphasized how Black children would often be robbed from growing in their identity as a black person (Goldberg et. al 2022). This experience is in no way limited to the lives of African Americans, as it affects all ethnicities, carrying a huge impact on the lives of the children. Tom Melina Duarte is an Afro-Latina male born in Costa Rica and was adopted by a white couple who raised him in Connecticut. He was denied any acknowledgement of his heritage, only having a stereotypical depiction of his country of birth being a paper mâché toucan made in second grade. Surrounded in a mostly white suburban area, he was raised to deny being Black, only to laying claim he was Costa Rican. Navigating multiple instances in which he’s faced discrimination made his adolescence a troubling time. Having no support system, he turned to drugs and alcohol as a form of self-medication for his shame and feelings of confliction over his identity.

These important conversations and experiences of transracial adoptive families show a story of communication and human connection erasing boundaries that would have otherwise been left erected by ignorance colorblind beliefs. Through honoring and recognizing the differences of the child, they are prepared to face the realities of the world while also having a larger community that can support them. It transcends the world of the parent and widens their scope of vision on a personal level.

## Chapter Summary

by Adriauna “Auna” Benjamin

Kinship systems worldwide can be constructed, negotiated, culturally specific, and flexible. How cultures identify their kin comes from those who are either related to them through genetics (consanguineal), marriage (affinal) or are chosen (fictive). Families also exist in a variety of ways with different methods of tracing lineage (e.g., unilineal and ambilineal). Kinship is unique to each culture worldwide and tells us a lot about the workings of societies, family relationships, cultural diversity, and so much more.

The varying cultural construction of kinship even plays a big part in how a person interacts with others and what duties they have to carry out. With certain cultures—like that of the Dinka—with kinship comes various obligations to family members and to always lend a helping hand, whether cooking, chores, childcare, purchasing material items, or helping their kin find employment. The last example directly contrasts with the social organization in the United States, where this practice of nepotism is blatantly against the law. It shows how fluid kinship is across the world and what that means for how an individual acts in their society.

Because kinship plays a big part in influencing an individual’s goals, values, and responsibilities, these things also affect other aspects of cultures, like gender roles and social commitments. In China, it is expected of the son to take care of his parents; In this culture, a household consists of the son, his wife,

their children, and the son's parents. Family ties hold great value in this culture, and this tradition has been passed down through generations, strengthening the significance of family.

Progress in science and technology has introduced fresh reproductive techniques that have impacted the definitions of motherhood, fatherhood, and kinship. The introduction of NRTs can complicate the understanding of kinship, particularly a mother's relationship with her child. NRT raises questions about which type of mother has the greatest claim to the child (biological, nurturing, or complete).

Finally, kinship plays a big part in the reality of marriage. Most people in America would agree that marriage is a decision made by two people that stems from feelings of love and companionship, but those ideals are not universal. Marriage can be more political, strategic, and economic to different cultures across the world. The practice of marriage can be completely different in terms of the people deciding who gets married (the individuals or their kin deciding), how many people would be in the marriage (polyandry, polygyny, or monogamy), and what is expected of marriage (walking marriage or ghost marriage).

## Comprehension Questions

1. What is kinship? How is it a set of rights and obligations? And what is meant by kinship as a cultural construction and processual concept?
2. List and describe the various forms of marriage. What advantages and disadvantages does each form offer an individual and/or society?
3. Why would an individual prefer an arranged marriage? What are the benefits of an arranged marriage?
4. What is the difference between dowry and bridewealth? How does the bridewealth strengthen and create kinship relations? How does the bridewealth instill value in women?
5. How is technology changing and reshaping how people think about family? What social, legal, and moral implications do NRTs pose?

## Critical Thinking and Engagement Questions

1. In different societies, several different kinds of rights are allocated by marriage. Describe three such rights? Which among these three rights do you consider more fundamental than others in your definition of marriage? Why?
2. The chapter discussed arranged marriages and matchmakers. How are these practices similar to the methods, or ways, most Americans use to find a spouse?
3. In many societies around the world, marriage is more about cultivating political and economic relationships between two families than it is about the couple. Why are marital alliances so important in many parts of the world but not in the US?

4. Comparing the Walking Marriage Mosuo and the bridewealth of the Dinka, what affect do these two types of marriage have on relations within families and between families.
5. How is your understanding of kinship changed after reading this chapter?

## Resources

### **God Loves Uganda**

This film explores the role of the American Evangelical movement in fueling Uganda's turn towards biblical law and the proposed death penalty for homosexuality. Available through GGC Kaufman Library: <https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/119001?vp=ggc>

### **Le Petite Fille**

7-year-old Sasha has always known she was a little girl, even though she was born a boy. As society fails to treat her like the other children her age – in her daily life at school, dance lessons or birthday parties – her supportive family leads a constant battle to make her difference understood and accepted. Link to trailer: [https://youtu.be/JWRbzD\\_gXD0](https://youtu.be/JWRbzD_gXD0)

### **Thinking Pink, Centuries Before Barbie**

Long before it became a symbol of femininity, the color had both spiritual and fashion appeal: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/thinking-pink-centuries-before-barbie-a0efbff1>

### **Harmful Surgery on Intersex Children**

Despite decades of controversy over the procedures, doctors operate on children's gonads, internal sex organs, and genitals when they are too young to participate in the decision, even though the surgeries could be safely deferred: <https://youtu.be/KeAVdOJOfkK>

### **A Journey of Pain and Beauty: On Becoming Transgender in Indian**

Born a boy biologically and given the male name Abhijit, Aher grew up in a middle-class neighborhood of Mumbai, India. The son of a single mother who nurtured a love of dance, Aher would watch enthralled as she performed: <http://n.pr/2hUWxF1>

## Key Words

affinal	extended family	monogamy
ambilineal	exogamy	NRT
arranged marriage	fictive	nuclear family
bridewealth	fraternal polyandry	parallel cousin marriage
cattle complex	kin based society	patrilineal
clan	kinship	polyandry
companionate marriage	genealogical method	polygamy
consanguineal	ghost marriage	polygyny
cross-cousin marriage	lineages	sororal polygyny
decent groups	love match	unilineal
dowry	marriage	walking marriage
endogamy	matrilineal	woman-to-woman marriage

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