Foreword

Kinship systems have long held a central place in the attention of anthropologists and of all those concerned with the common and distinctive features of our human social life. It is easy to see why this should be so. Human beings, everywhere and always, with only minor exceptions, have lived in families. We have developed our wider social institutions in conformity with, and sometimes in direct articulation with, our patterns of family living. In particular, some of the most complex intellectual achievements of human communities are the various symbolic systems which they have evolved for describing relations between kinsfolk and for specifying what the content of these relations should be. The development and perpetuation of these intricate schemes has scarcely been correlated with the attainment of technical mastery over the natural environment, for some of the societies most advanced technically manage with quite unimpressive systems of kinship.

Sporadic excursions into the comparative study of kinship go back a long way, but just over a hundred years ago, with the publication of Morgan's *Systems of consanguinity and affinity*, scholars were provided for the first time with a substantial corpus of data on kinship systems throughout the world. Ever since then, questions of kinship have remained matters of active debate among anthropologists and comparative sociologists. The questions have changed as one phase in the debate has given way to the next but the same body of data, continually augmented by the results of fresh field research, has been under sustained scrutiny.

During the 1950s this debate had several foci or storm centers. One of them was what interpretation should be given to the evidence from various societies in several different parts of the world where, so it was reported, every man is typically required to marry either a daughter of one of his mother's brothers, or else some other woman whom he refers to by the same kin term

FOREWORD

as his mother's brothers' daughters, and where he is also forbidden to marry any of the daughters of any of his father's sisters, or any of the women he classifies with them. Some protagonists in the debate took the view that if these rules are present, the kinship system of the society concerned is rightly described as an asymmetric prescriptive alliance system. In societies with these systems, they asserted, marriages, although arranged as occasion demands between individual men and women, are nevertheless determined by enduring relations of alliance between corporate groups; these alliances are asymmetric, in the sense that if group A has an enduring relation with group B which is manifest in group A providing brides for men of group B, then women of group B never marry men of group A; and the kin terms of reference which members of one group apply to their relatives in the other are the names of social categories of persons, into which various relatives may happen to fall, rather than the names of genealogically-specified person-to-person links. The literature of the debate between those anthropologists who made these assertions during the '50s and '60s and their colleagues who attacked them on one or other ground is voluminous indeed and cannot be summarized here. The interested reader fresh to the controversy might begin by looking at the divergent critiques provided by Needham (1971) and Scheffler (1972) and by following up the references they give.

On the basis of the ethnographic evidence then available, advocates of the existence of asymmetric prescriptive alliance systems included in their roster of societies the Karo Batak of North Sumatra. This is the society described by Dr. Singarimbun in this book and to which he belongs by birth. The theoretical axe that Dr. Singarimbun grinds consists of a denial that the Karo Batak belong to this analytic category of societies, and this denial is taken further in the appendix contributed by Dr. Scheffler, where he queries the validity of the concept itself. It is not for me to comment in detail on the arguments they bring forward, but I do wish to draw attention to a wider aspect of the debate. Elsewhere, Scheffler (1972:323) remarks that "Anyone who ventures for the first time into the contemporary literature on systems of kin classification may be excused for wondering if he should take any of it seriously." One of the reasons for this is that the ethnographic data available for many

FOREWORD

of the societies under discussion were often meager and inadequate. Indeed, the poorer the ethnographic account of a society, the more controversial its analytic status was likely to be. The debate was conducted in an epistemic limbo, neither adequately rooted in empirical reality nor liberated from the contingent constraints of time and place. Dr. Singarimbun now supplies just the evidence needed to show why questions of kinship are still serious, and how they can and should be lively and interesting as well. Unlike so many of the societies which have served as pawns in the debate between theorists, the Karo Batak are, thanks to Dr. Singarimbun's work, well documented and very much alive.

It is sometimes said that anthropology needs not more fieldwork, yielding only more monotonous data, but more critical ideas. Like most dichotomous assertions, this proposition may have heuristic value but is plainly false. Both ongoing fieldwork and careful imaginative analysis are essential for any cumulative scientific study of human society and culture. The debate that lies behind the presentation of Dr. Singarimbun's account of Karo kinship was, in my view, particularly plagued by dichotomous polarization: descent versus alliance, categories versus genealogical links, and so on. Uncompromising dichotomies are useful, perhaps even unavoidable, in periods where an established mode of analysis has ceased to be fruitful; but once a new analytic stance has achieved recognition, they should be replaced, wherever possible, by more sensitive measures. Yet even the dogmatic assertions and counter-assertions of the '50s and '60s may, in the long run, prove to have been less sterile than they seemed to be at the time if they stimulate empirical inquiry of the high quality shown in Dr. Singarimbun's work. With the full evidence before us, set out here with a degree of clarity that I can only envy, we see that the real world of Karoland is much more complicated, and very much more interesting, than the rival simplistic models between which we were supposed to choose. Despite the existence of a few self-reciprocal kin terms, Karo kinship is characterized by a remarkable profusion of asymmetric relations. Institutionalized reciprocity is absent from the domain of kinship to an extent that contrasts strongly with other aspects of Karo culture, as well as with many well-known kinship systems. But if in this respect the Karo Batak

FOREWORD

approximate to the paradigm of an asymmetric prescriptive alliance system, Dr. Singarimbun demonstrates convincingly that by other criteria their kinship system departs radically from the requirements of this paradigm.

The opportunity to introduce Dr. Singarimbun's book to a wider public gives me great personal pleasure. I have known the author for many years and have followed his work with much interest. I once had the singular good fortune to spend a few days in his company living in an adat house in Kuta Gamber, one of the villages described in this book. I still recall the impression I gained of a lively and vigorous local community, confident in the appropriateness and moral worth of its distinctive way of life, ready to adapt to changing external and internal conditions but determined never to surrender to them. The Karo Batak have been well served by their first own ethnographer, and rightly so.

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