Chapter VII
Descendants of brother and sister in Oceania
Notes for a new analytic model (1974)

What a safe word “relation” is; how little it predicates! Yet it has overgrown “kinsman.”
Samuel Butler, Erewhon (1872)

The deep kinship structure of greatest importance in all of Oceania is undoubtedly the solidarity between brother and sister, and the consequences that follow from it. Whether filiation is matrilineal, patrilineal, or non-unilineal, the descendants of a brother and sister are bound by complex relationships, around which is structured the kinship system and with it, often, the political system. This principle may be seen at work in two major domains: matrimonial alliance and filiation. We shall see presently how the association of patrilateral marriage and sexual affiliation offers a limiting case, revelatory of a structure of vast scope, and sheds light on the facts we first present in the two initial sections of this article.

The brother-sister pair in matrimonial alliance
Although few Melanesian systems are prescriptive, the cross relation is always fundamental, as shown by the large proportion of “Iroquois” and “Dakota” terminologies. Marriage is very often conceived not as alliance with a certain prescribed terminological category of kin, but as the conjunction, after one or more generations, of the descendants of a brother-sister pair, or else negatively as their exclusion over a certain number of generations. But whether the relation is maintained with a view to the exclusion or contraction of marriage, an idea
of kinship connects uterines to agnates, expressed in ceremonial prestations, sorcery practices, and/or prohibition of fighting. Moreover, it often seems that alongside a negative formulation of possible alliance relations between descendants of brother and sister, a positive formulation is always possible and sometimes (as seemingly in Ambrym) enunciated. It is as if many Melanesian societies have been haunted by the idea that after a certain number of generations it is necessary to reunite agnates and uterines by marriage. This perhaps explains why these systems which appear almost always to be complex are often formulated, at least at the ideological level, in terms of elementary structures, leading some ethnologists to be tricked. This ideal image, in fact, is not necessarily normative, and one does not know whether it is a representation the society makes of itself, or an ideal that material constraints prevent ever being realized.

A. C. Van der Leeden (1960) has followed G. J. Held in demonstrating the importance of the brother-sister pair in New Guinea and its structural value. Among Samarokena whom he studied (Van der Leeden 1956), the ideal is that descendants in the uterine line of a woman given in marriage ought, if they are female, to marry in this woman’s group after at least three generations. In certain cases, the descendant of a sister may “return” after only two generations, if there have been conflicts with the wife-taking group. When there has been no sister exchange, the maternal uncle may himself recoup his niece (sister’s daughter) as wife. On this subject, Van der Leeden remarks that a system like this cannot be interpreted in terms of bilateral filiation, but at the very most as being bilineal, because “return” of

1. Lévi-Strauss, who refuses to distinguish between prescriptive and preferential systems, is therefore perfectly coherent when he asserts that in the last analysis elementary structures cannot do without the criterion of degrees of kinship (1967). In this regard, however, either one may hold that the Oceanic societies we are discussing actually possess imperfectly realized elementary structures, or it becomes impossible to distinguish clearly between elementary and complex structures if one considers only the scheme of exchange. More particularly, it becomes impossible to consider patrilateral marriage as a separate “elementary structure” (see below). The simple categorial indication of a particular relative as spouse (be it “prescribed” or “preferred”) is not sufficient to make a structure elementary and to argue for its existence. An elementary structure is further defined by creation of a holistic order which is not the simple mechanical consequence of a matrimonial prescription, and may involve only a particular class or category of persons in the society and not necessarily all the individuals who belong to it.
ceded women is difficult to realize in a system founded on simple laterality: the criterion of simple laterality implies rather prohibited degrees and free matrimonial choice. As we will see, consideration of matrimonial structure in fact demonstrates the inadequacy of an interpretation in terms of simple bilateralism which has been given for Oceanic systems.

The Waropen refuse to explain matrilateral marriage as the alliance with the matrilateral cross-cousin. In their ideology it is the brother-sister relation, and not the cousin relation, that is pertinent: “The son of a sister has to marry the daughter of a brother” (Held 1957:116). Hence, they do not recognize that the system implies a wife-giving group and a wife-taking group, and they do not distinguish terminologically between mother’s brother’s daughter and father’s sister’s son: only the distinction between “children of sister” and “children of brother” is pertinent. Similarly, among southern Fore, who proscribe the patrilateral cousin and prefer the matrilateral, betrothal of children is not explained in terms of cousinage, but by the consanguineal relation between a sister and a brother, and as an element of the prestations and obligations of reciprocity uniting them. In no case of betrothals of this type are the parents of the couple not consanguines (Glasse 1969). The father of the daughter may reject his sister’s son only on the pretext that the sister has not fulfilled her obligations toward him.

Asymmetric exchange is thus not expressed as a relation of affinity between groups, but as a union between descendants of brother and sister: it has a genealogical expression, requiring consideration of at once the agnatic line and the uterine line, but not in an undifferentiated manner, as some maintain for this society.

This way of expressing affinal relations depends on the absence of a prescriptive alliance system. Further, relations of reciprocity are not made between groups which are distinct from the spatial point of view (the rule of harmony between filiation and residence is not respected). The spatial dimension is in fact, especially in the New Guinea highlands, a separate dimension, whose significance is essentially political. One allies with neighbors or “faraways” independently of genealogical relations. There is no necessary recovery between genealogical and spatial relations, as in a “classic” system of generalized exchange (cf. Strathern 1968). Moreover, asymmetric alliance structures often coexist with symmetrical systems. What is essential however, especially in New Guinea, is that sister exchange is frequent,
but that it excludes all marriage between descendants of the two exchanging groups for a number of generations. By this means, symmetric and asymmetric dimensions are closely associated. This is true especially in lowland New Guinea, often taking the form of tendencies toward constitution of dual categories. These are occasionally exogamous units (as among the Iatmul).

This leads us to consider the paradox of “patrilateral marriage” in New Guinea. It has been noted that it never exists in a pure state. However, it would be false to reduce it to restricted exchange (Needham 1958). It is moreover true that patrilateral marriage is not a process apart, but rather the symptom of a structure much more complex than prescriptive cousin marriage. The association of sister exchange and prohibition against the issue of this exchange intermarrying for a certain number of generations is reminiscent of systems of the “Aranda” type. But if these systems join direct and indirect reciprocity, they have an essential difference from those of New Guinea: they constitute a global system. The symptom of this “globality” is, at the level of cousin marriage, a relative indifference to the prescribed side, which may be matrilateral or patrilateral. Completely opposite, in New Guinea the choice of one side rather than the other is rarely neutral, and matrimonial choice attempts precisely to reconstitute the equilibrium and complementarity of the two sides of filiation, as well as contributing to its disruption.

The paradox is thus that, despite the practice of sister exchange, cousin marriage is not the expression of a symmetry of alliance and of two lines of filiation. As we will see, the choice of “patrilateral” in place of “matrilateral” is the expression of the significance here of asymmetry, even in its simplest form: of making the uterines\textsuperscript{2} “return” to the agnates. In the matrilateral formula this return is assured only if the society is composed of a closed system of groups, and if these groups are not so numerous that the uterine relation risks being for-

---

2. And more generally the male uterines. The return may be effected matrimonially or by the simple reclamation of a right over the uterines. At the two extremes in the Pacific one has, for example, the Hawaiian ho'i (return of the sister’s daughter, who is taken in marriage) and adoption of the sister’s daughter among Mundugumor. One return is effected by marriage, the other by adoption, but the significance of the institution and its deep structure seem identical. In Hawaii, moreover, there is also a return by adoption, much more frequent, that recalls sexual filiation: daughters are adopted by maternal grandparents, and sons by paternal grandparents (cf. Handy and Pukui 1972).
gotten in the meantime. The patrilateral formula is in its own right an index of the blurred character of groups and their relations, in societies that have chosen it, at the same time illustrating that the ‘patrilateral’ marriage system does not amount to a holistic system unto itself, comparable to the matrilateral system. We believe rather that only the “brother-sister,” “agnates-uterines” optic adopted here permits us to show this in a positive fashion (even at the level of models) and not only negatively, as Rodney Needham did in his 1958 article.

The combining of bilateral and unilateral elements is well documented for New Guinea. Occasionally, moreover, the society’s ideal systematically joins the two processes, such that Edwin Cook (1969) believed it possible to show that among Manga a single model allowed them to be unified.

In island Melanesia, one often finds restricted and complex exchange coexisting. Also there, restricted exchange has a tendency to appear as a patrilateral formula. This is the case in the Trobirians, where patrilateral marriage of the chiefs of Omarakana appears in reality, according to Bagido’u’s genealogy, as a symmetric alliance between the chiefly line (Tabalu) and that of the “magicians” (Kwaynama), which thus divides power. In fact, Malinowski was the dupe of an illusion when he asserted that political power is transmitted matrilineally and magic patrilineally. The post of magician being given— with his sister—by the chief to his wife’s brother, each type of power (political or religious) is from the systemic point of view transmitted in the uterine line, that is to say to the sister’s son, who is also the daughter’s husband (Malinowski 1935; 1962). One meets here the ambiguity between patrilateral and bilateral models. A comparable system is used by the leaders among Siuai of Bougainville (Oliver 1955).

This insistence, very frequent in New Guinea and in certain areas of island Melanesia, on patrilateral marriage or marriage of those who are the issue of patrilateral cousins, shows, to our eyes, a precise will to express the necessity or possibility of return of the descendants of sisters who were ceded by their agnatic ancestors. At the same time, one understands another important feature of the same societies, more or less accentuated, according to which exogamy excludes not only agnates (as implied by the theory which makes exogamy depend on the corporate patrilineage), but also a certain number of degrees of cognates. Whether rules of the “return” of uterine descendants are directly or only vaguely expressed, by prohibition of degrees of consanguinity, a like tendency seems to manifest itself statistically, in the
conjunction in alliance of the descendants of a brother and sister who, over the generations, have lost their kin relation.

To be sure, the tendency toward dispersion of matrimonial alliances often prevails in certain societies or at certain times. Enga are in this sense an extreme case, because they prohibit marriage of a man not only with his agnates, but also with all descendants of women of his clan, with women of the subclan of spouses of his own subclan, and with women of the subclans of his father’s mother, his mother’s mother, his mother’s father, his mother’s husband (in the case of her remarriage), his mother’s sister’s husband, and his wife’s mother (Meggitt 1965). Mendi prohibit union with all lineages related by cognation and affinity (Ryan 1969), Huli exclude the local agnatic groups of mother and mother’s sister’s husband (Glasse 1968), and Maring prohibit the clans of mother, mother’s sister’s husband, and father’s sister’s husband (Rappaport 1969). Many other societies limit themselves, as we have seen, to prohibition of the mother’s clan.

In the islands at the southeast of the district of Papua, Crow systems indicative of simple prohibitions seem to predominate. Nevertheless alliance, while dispersed, is made within a more or less limited territory. Malinowski shows that in the Trobriands ‘political’ marriage is made with 10–12 villages of the same district. Since there are some restrictions depending on clan exogamy and totemic prohibitions, choices are ultimately more limited than one would think (Malinowski 1962:82-83). Likewise on Rossel (Armstrong 1928) and Tubetube (Seligman 1910). In the Trobriands, further, the politically least important units are also the most territorially endogamous.

In the same region, other societies with different kinship systems show a strong tendency toward district or village endogamy. This is notably the case on Dobu (Fortune 1932) and among Siuai of Bougainville, these latter having a significant proportion of marriages within the hamlet (Oliver 1955).

Hence, the “dispersal of alliances” decreed by the kinship system is sometimes tied to concentration of choice in a given territory, or as in highland New Guinea, to a “distance” that limits choices. Meanwhile, in the preferential systems with local endogamy, as we saw above, the preference or the prescription indicates positively a given territorial segment.

Often dispersal and concentration of alliances stand opposed to one another as the practice of brideprice and its refusal. In the eastern Sarmi area and among Abelam, it is thus. In the highlands, among
Enga, who prohibit sister exchange and practice dispersed alliance, brideprice is very important, whereas among Manga, sister exchange, given its reciprocity, renders prestations superfluous between the “clan-moieties” (Cook 1969).

Are there elementary structures in New Guinea? Certain ethnologists (Van der Leeden, Salisbury) have believed so, while admitting that they are always very imperfectly realized. Van der Leeden thinks that certain New Guinea systems are of the Aranda type: among Ngarawapun the FMBDs and the FFZSD are married (cf. Read 1946). But, as we have seen, these systems do not constitute elementary structures because the marriage rule is not systematically followed.

Likewise, generalized exchange, which exists among Waropen, Meybrat, Muyu of southern New Guinea, and Chambri, is not based on the notion of closure of cycles of exchange. It is an open structure, in that the goods, more than the women, loop back, often in reverse of the direction in which spouses circulate (Waropen). If from a structural point of view an asymmetric system should always be able to close (but for statistical and not mechanical reasons), it is certain that indigenous consciousness insists upon asymmetry (cf. southern Fore) but not on closure, and therefore does not enunciate the idea of a total system basic to elementary structures. And, moreover, the symmetry is realized through the patrilateral formula more often than through the matrilateral.

The social organization of Ambrym has been the object of much discussion due to its apparent affinity with Australian systems. Deacon (1927) tried to show that this system is founded on six marriage classes. According to him, the population of northern Ambrym is divided into three unnamed patrilines (bwulim), and these are in turn divided into two levels of alternate generations (wor). There are also two unnamed matrilineal moieties (batatu). The six classes would be engendered by the intersection of the matrilineal moieties with the patrilines and the generational moieties. Each man must marry in the patriline of his mother’s mother and in the opposite matri-moiet. However, as Harold Scheffler notes (1970), if the classes actually exist, they would be named and they would enable genealogical economy in determining a woman’s marriageability: it would suffice to know her own patriline and moiety affiliation. However, on the one hand the terminological system does not correspond to the system of classes (there is therefore no means of immediately identifying a potential spouse), and on the other hand patrilines and matri-moieties,
which have no names, cannot be anything but the bodies of agnatic and uterine relatives, respectively. One must thus not confound these uterine and agnatic categories with matrilineages and patrilineages; they are conceived in reference to an ego, and not to an ancestor. Hence, it is not a system of alliance between unilineal groups.

Moreover, in Ambrym uterine kin are not distinguished as such: it is impossible to speak of double affiliation. As for the choice of spouse, one finds here also the possibility of sister exchange. But, according to Scheffler, this ought to be seen as expressing each man’s right of demanding the sister’s husband’s help to find himself a wife. Hence, sister exchange is only a particular case of the solidarity between brother and sister, which explains why one calls sisters “roads” to the acquisition of wives” (cf. Scheffler 1970: 58). Incidentally, to determine marriageable women, it is not necessary to make a genealogical calculation; it suffices to know if the potential spouse is a classificatory “mother” of ego’s father. “It is sometimes said that in seeking a wife for his son a man goes to his ‘grandfather’ and asks for the man’s daughter whom he calls ‘mother,’—’give me mother as a wife for my son’ . . . . ” (Scheffler 1970: 60). By the principle of equivalence of alternate generations, one has the following chain of equations. The father’s “mother,” real or classificatory, is like a “brother’s wife,” because she is the wife of the father’s father who, by the rule of alternate generations, is equivalent to a brother. However, she is considered too close to be married. But a marriageable “father’s mother” is the FFZSD and structurally equivalent FMBSD (cf. Scheffler 1970: 59). Without entering into details of the system, one may note with Scheffler that categories of marriageable kin are always reduced in the kin terminology to categories of relatives by alliance (“wife,” “sister-in-law,” etc.). These reductions are made along “paths” which do not pass through obligatory kin categories, and do not prescribe any wife defined by a specific genealogical path.

According to Scheffler, the Ambrym system and those of Epi, Paama and possibly south Pentecost, which are related to it, have many resemblances to the Crow types of Pentecost and Malekula. What is peculiar in these systems is that they are associated with patrilineal filiation, a fact in contradiction with theories that hold Crow to be an expression of matrilineal systems. It would thus not be a system of classes, but a system resembling in certain ways Crow systems (rules of equivalence between agnates and/or uterines separated by two or three generations), and differing in other ways (absence of telescoping
of generations). It remains to be seen if the system of classes is an invention of the ethnologists as Scheffler thinks, or a way of conceptualizing their marriage structure which some Ambrymese have themselves used toward Deacon. As we have seen, the ideal of a society is not necessarily its norm, and even less its functioning. The Ambrym case further shows that if the model of “elementary structures” is insufficient to explain Oceanic societies, the insistent recurrence to the ideological level illustrates that these societies often find themselves in a situation intermediate between elementary and complex structures. In this sense, the theory we propose here is meant to be a first rough sketch of a contribution toward explaining this intermediate status.

**The brother-sister pair in filiation**

The solidarity of descendants of the brother-sister pair appears also in some types of filiation common in New Guinea, and in others found in Polynesia and Micronesia. The criterion of cross is in fact even present in terminological systems of a generational type, in which there are still special terms of address for cross cousins (Van der Leeden 1960:137).

Likewise, in “Iroquois” (or “Seneca”) systems, very widespread in Melanesia, one observes an interesting phenomenon of classification of collaterals in which the only pertinent thing is simple opposition of the sexes between the first link of genealogical calculation starting with ego and the kinsman that one designates is (Van der Leeden 1960; Lounsbury 1964). That is to say, sexes of intermediate links are unimportant, and all kin types like MMZS, MFBS, MMBS, MFZS, etc. are all “maternal uncles,” likewise, the FZ, the FMZD, the FFBD, etc. will all be “paternal aunts.” Consanguineal relations between father and father’s sister and between mother and mother’s brother are thus the foundation of the terminological system, which considers the cross relation pertinent independently of any unilineal, double unilineal, or even bilateral filiation, which are all in contradiction with this system. It is evident just how much an analysis in terms of patrilineal or matrilineal “descent,” or also the hypothesis of supposed “cognatic” systems, should be accepted only cautiously for many Melanesian societies. Ethnologists have had a tendency to confound existence of genealogies (whose significance is often political, especially in Polynesia) with proof of existence of descent groups. We think on the contrary that the conceptual relationship between the categories “brother’s descendants” and “sister’s descendants”—realized genealogically
or not—is much more important as an organizational principle, and
that it appears at many levels of society, and not necessarily at the
genealogical level: in ritual, in mythology, in ceremonial prestations, etc.

**Sexual affiliation**, common in New Guinea, shows us the central
importance of this relation and at the same time its connection with
the patrilateral marriage formula.

Among Koiai, sons belong by filiation to the father’s group, and
daughters are associated with the mother’s group, meaning according
to Williams’ informants “the daughter belongs to her mother’s unit in
the sense that she is expected to marry into it” (Williams 1932: 80–81). By permitting marriage with a woman considered a member of
the category issued of the FZ, the system asserts the solidarity between
brother and sister—impossible matrimonially—by extending it in the
solidarity between brother’s son and sister’s daughter who themselves
may marry. In summary, this system of sexual affiliation is a means of
expressing the continuity of the brother-sister relation at degrees of
consanguinity where it may have a matrimonial content.

But at the same time (as we will soon see) the Koiai system, just
like the other sexual affiliation systems, allows non-contradictory join-
ing of sister exchange and patrilateral marriage (see diagram I). Sexual
affiliation introduces a principle of differentiation that prevents con-
sidering the cousin that one marries as bilateral. The pertinent rela-

---

3. Cf. also Williams (1932: 75, 77): “it is sufficiently clear that it is among the *nu-
bagha* [cross-cousin] in the actual group of her mother’s brother that the girl
should make the ideal marriage” (ibid.: 77). At the same time, Koiai consider
sister exchange (*damuna*) to be an ideal form of marriage (65, 69)—and the
“bride-price” is only a substitute, often temporary, for an ungiven sister. Inciden-
tally, marriage between first degree cross-cousin marriage, while possible, is rare
and should be avoided for the same reasons as marriage with the sister (69 note
1), which confirms our interpretation. Further, the practice of exchanging true
sisters (69) seems to eliminate conflict between partners of the same generation:
the matrimonial fate of daughters issuing from the exchange inevitably produces
a contrast between the “maternal uncle” and the “father’s sister” who vie for the
girl for their respective children. The privilege of the maternal uncle (to whose
son she ought normally to go) is nonetheless expressed by the fact that the major
portion of the matrimonial prestation is destined for him: “This claim is a very
real one, so much that some groups, as we have seen, gave the rule that the *wai-
uki* [MB] was the principal, and the father only the secondary, recipient” (72).
Williams concludes that “This organization of society into a system or multiplicit-
y of reciprocating pairs is, I think, the logical outcome of sex affiliation com-
bined with marriage by exchange” (78). Our diagram expresses this fact and
shows also that patrilateral marriage is another necessary consequence.
tion is this: the husband has the same relation with his wife that his father has with his sister. The first relation is licit from the marital point of view, not the second. As we will see, and as I have pointed out elsewhere (Valeri 1972), sexual affiliation here expresses a principle which is also present in societies having other forms of affiliation.

Sexual affiliation is also found associated with systems where return of the women is not made by jumping a single generation, and where however the principle of alternating generations is there to ensure, in ritual and symbolic form, return of the uterine line brought about after a greater, generally odd, number of generations. Mundugumor (of the region between the Sepik and Ramu rivers) and Meybrat (of the Bird’s Head region, formerly Vogelkop) offer two particularly interesting and revealing examples whose value for the theory of Oceanic systems greatly exceeds the apparently restrictive scope to which their exceptional character appears at first glance to confine them.

![Diagram 1: Koiari system](https://example.com/diagram.jpg)

The Mundugumor have filiation based on the principle of “ropes” (Mead 1934). A “rope” is composed of a man, his daughters, the sons
of his daughters, the daughters of the sons of his daughters, etc., or starting from a woman, by a woman, her sons, the daughters of her sons, the sons of the daughters of her sons, etc. All property passes via ropes. In this system, each child belongs to the rope of the opposite sex parent. This means that a man does not belong to the same rope as his father, and that a brother belongs to a different rope than his sister.

Mundugumor theory thus implies an opposition between the sexes in the same generation and alternate generations, and their solidarity in contiguous generations. Nevertheless, the brother-sister relation is revealed as the system’s foundation, because it is thanks to a sister that a man may find a wife, since Mundugumor marriage is based on the principle of sister exchange. According to the indigenous theory, men of the same generation are thus united by women to whom they are opposed by filiation; and men of adjacent generations are separated by these same women. Fathers try to extract the sisters from their sons (and consequently the sons’ wives) in order to procure secondary wives for themselves, the prestige and power of a man being based on the number of his wives, who permit him to neutralize his opposition to some men by transforming them into brothers-in-law who owe him prestations.

Neutralization of opposition to men of one’s own generation occurs then by accentuation of opposition to men of contiguous generations. This complementarity of brother and sister is found confirmed by obligation of “ropes” issuing from brother and sister to scarify their respective descendants until the fourth generation. This ritual symbolizes the relationship between the two ropes while waiting until marriage becomes possible again and they reunite in alliance.

Under diverse forms, the Meybrat system functions in analogous fashion and shows the importance of the brother-sister relation. Further, it shows that the relation of husband to wife is like the relation of brother to sister, when evaluating the sister as source of relationships. Effectively, every sister is the wife of someone and every wife is someone’s sister (see also the analysis of the Koiari system).

New Guinea ethnography seems to show that where opposition between husband and wife is strong, expressing opposition between allied groups, kinship through the sister is weakly recognized or it is
determined by the exchange of goods. An extreme example is given by the Enga. As against cases where opposition between husband and wife does not express opposition between allied groups, uterine kinship is recognized (as among the Huli, where sisters have an elevated status and cognation is strong). One would expect the Enga case to be elucidated by an exactly reverse principle: husband-wife solidarity yields brother-sister separation; likewise for Huli, it ought to be husband-wife opposition that produces brother-sister solidarity. But the ethnography proves otherwise. When opposition between husband and wife is the index of opposition between allies, we have as a consequence the wife-taking group refusing to yield to the wife-givers the children of their sisters. Among Enga and Daribi (Wagner 1967) children are extracted from their maternal kin by payments. Among Siane, it is maternal blood itself that must be expelled. Thus payments between allies, that accentuate their rivalry and opposition, produce the separation of brothers and sisters and their descendants. It is therefore not surprising that here the distinctive feature of alliance is the prestation of goods on the part of a wife-taker, coinciding with loss of his kinship with descendants of his sisters and gain of a relation with his wife’s children (because among Enga, the body is given by the woman, and the spirit is instilled by the father, as a result of his payments to the allies).

This correlation demonstrates the importance of relations with uterines, but also that alliance, symbolized by exchange of goods, transposes its principle of opposition onto the relation of consanguin-

---

4. Let us emphasize that here we deliberately ignore the perspective of the “atom of kinship.” It is not necessary for us to define a system of “attitudes,” but rather to evaluate each relative in play as a source of other kin relationships, expressed by alliance and filiation or by objectively observable beliefs and practices. We maintain moreover that Claude Lévi-Strauss (1973) is partially engaged in this course. The relations inside the atom of kinship interest us here only as indices of a global kinship system, whereas for Lévi-Strauss, in keeping with principles of structural analysis, only the deliberately restricted domain chosen for analysis is significant. For us, on the contrary, it is not necessary to justify (or to preserve) an “atom of kinship” (or atoms, which is already troublingly different), but rather to explicate the deep structure of certain kinship systems. There is in any case no contradiction between the two levels of analysis. But it is important to emphasize their differences, so that our assertions (for example, about the connection of the two couples husband-wife and brother-sister) not be interpreted in terms of systems of attitudes, because they seem to contradict the structure of the atom of kinship.
transposes its principle of opposition onto the relation of consanguinity between brother and sister.

It can be expected that in societies where a principle of dispersal of alliances is not utilized and where symmetric elements are dominant, opposition of the sexes does not play the same role. In fact, among Orokaiva, the brother-sister relation is as weakly oppositional as that between husband and wife: opposition of the sexes is very reduced, to the point that boys and girls are initiated at the same time into the same cult association (Allen 1967).

Among Mundugumor one finds again the brother-sister opposition correlative with the husband-wife opposition; and indeed the sister is not recognized by the system of filiation as a source of uterine kinship. Opposition among men over procuring wives means that each man recognizes a relation through filiation with his daughters only, and he at the same time tears his son’s tie with them. As we have seen, sexual filiation is in reality the realization of a principle that the sexes are opposed in even and alternate generations, and solidary in contiguous generations. This shows that even in sexual affiliation, the brother-sister relation is important because it is conditioned by the structure of alliance.

Sexual affiliation belongs therefore, as one particular realization, to a single ensemble in which the nature of alliance is closely tied to that of the relation between agnates and uterines, these relations being expressed by filiation, matrimonial prohibitions or prescriptions, ceremonial prestations, by sorcery of warfare practices, and finally by theories of conception expressing respective rights of maternal and paternal kin.

In several Melanesian systems, the mother gives the flesh or blood, and the father the spirit or bone. It is possible to see that certain of these systems have evolved toward forms of sexual affiliation. Kaoka of Guadalcanal, for example, have a theory of bone and flesh that reveals a system much more important from a structural point of view than their rule of matrilineal filiation. According to indigenous theory, the child inherits, in addition to the father’s bone and the mother’s flesh, the lines of his right hand from those of his mother’s left hand, and the lines of his left hand from those of his father’s right hand.

5. Except in the case mentioned above (see note 2), which is in fact the expression of a prestation between brothers-in-law, the uterine niece belonging in reality not to the sister, but to the sister’s husband, and being given as a substitute for her.
Thus the lines inherited from the father will be those that the father inherited from his mother, and those inherited from the mother will be ones the mother herself inherited from her father. Although the data gathered by Ian Hogbin (1964) are far from clear and complete, it is apparent that there is among the Kaoka a system of “sexual affiliation” of the hands (and not of children) that functions like a system of ropes and an ideology that explains alternation of generations and prohibition of cross-cousin marriage. Concerning bone and flesh, it is necessary to maintain the opposition, on one side, between the father’s bone and the father’s sister’s flesh, and on the other between the mother’s flesh and the mother’s brother’s bone. If marriage of cross-cousins took place in each generation, one would have a system of restricted exchange and the bone and flesh of the wife would be identical with those of the husband. Likewise, among Daribi of New Guinea, blood is furnished by the mother, and semen that forms the exterior portion of the body by the father (Wagner 1967).

The essence of these systems is that, while a brother has exactly the same composition of substance as his sister, he cannot transmit the same part of this substance as her. As source of kinship, therefore, the brother and sister are different. They engender children who are not united by the same substance, at least not in a transitive way, meaning genealogically.

Both sexual affiliation and theories of conception arise from a principle of alliance that, while allowing sister exchange, rejects bilateral marriage, yet at the same time does not renounce reestablishment of kinship with the uterine line, after a certain number of generations.

In this sense, the complementary opposition of brother and sister, at the base of many Oceanic systems, depends on these systems’ intermediate position between restricted and complex exchange—on the wish to enlarge the circle of alliances while continuing to practice sister exchange when possible, and to conserve the possibility of return by alliance of the uterine line, of which patrilateral marriage is the minimal formula.

In Vaua Levu (Fiji) is found a system of alternating filiation for the commoners, who distribute children to the father’s and mother’s groups according to their birth order (cf. Quain 1948: 182, n4). This system is another solution given to the problem of relations between descendants of brother and sister. It finds its ultimate expression among Daribi, where each individual position in social space between paternal and maternal kin is defined by the balance of exchange of
goods between the two kinship sides. Definitively, it is not filiation that determines group membership, but relations between agnates and uterines that the goods and their circulation institute or efface.

We could give innumerable examples of these prestations involving brothers and sisters and relations traced through them: *urigubu* (gifts of food that go from brother to sister) in the Trobriands, gifts of the corpses of sisters to compensate adultery in Malaita (among ‘Are ‘Are, see De Coppet 1970), ritual theft of the maternal uncle’s offerings by his uterine nephew or pillage of his village in Fiji, etc.

At the level of filiation, the importance of the brother-sister pair means that these societies are much more preoccupied with the *relative classification of uterines and agnates* than with problems of the definition of groups in terms of descent. Jan Pouwer has shown that among Kamoro the actually important opposition is that between “children of my penis” and “children of my anus (= vagina).” The first are children of a masculine ego, of his brothers, and of his male parallel cousins; the second the children of sisters and of female parallel cousins (Pouwer 1955). Kenelm Burridge found comparable facts in Tangu (1959), and he showed that descent was calculated starting with a brother-sister pair.

These phenomena show that it is not satisfactory to explain the “bilaterality” of Oceanic societies simply by modifying traditional categories of anthropological theory, and by invoking thus a cognatically structured descent group. It is the very idea of descent group that ought to be put into question. As Pouwer (1966) demonstrated, cognatic kinship is not a system but only a kinship field. The proof of this is given by holders of the theory of cognatic descent themselves who are obliged to introduce non-kinship criteria in order to define this kinship group’s structure. Raymond Firth (1963: 23) must distinguish the cognatic stock of the “cognatic descent group” by an extra-genealogical criterion: the cognatic descent group does not include all the descendants of a spousal pair through males and females, but only those who are “operationally defined,” meaning those who “share common aims and actions in a corporate manner.”

We have tried to show that only an analysis of the ideology of societies themselves allows us to identify their kin structures, and to find the unity within.
Patrilateral marriage and sexual filiation

In the several preceding pages we have tried to show the importance of complementary classification of agnates and uterines in Oceania, by disputing the validity of the trend aiming to reduce the complex reality of these systems to a supposed “principle of cognition.”

It is now a question of returning to a crucial and revealing case, which we have already mentioned at several points, the ambiguous connection between three apparently disparate classes of phenomena: sister exchange, patrilateral marriage, and sexual filiation.

These three phenomena seem to be associated in the Mundugumor system and are important elsewhere in New Guinea in diverse proportions (see for example the Koiari case).

We have already noted an important fact: in New Guinea, sister exchange is not associated with restricted exchange, but with more complex forms of marriage. It is not even a question of opposed and alternative models: their functional connection can be shown. Even more troubling, sister exchange also appears associated with “patrilateral” marriage forms. But it is precisely here that sexual filiation assumes its full significance.

In these systems, the importance of the principle of alternating generations is immediately notable. In its most general formula, this principle involves an opposition between, on one side, father and son, and on the other, between mother and daughter. This opens many possibilities at the level of filiation: complementarity of mother and son, and of father and daughter, that is to say complementarity of “neuter” relations; global opposition of the “male line” and the “female line,” or else complementarity and even neutralization of the two lines, in the case where the form of the exchange stresses global reciprocity between groups, instead of their opposition.

The first two possibilities are realized in sexual filiation systems, the last in “Australian” systems. It is especially important to emphasize that alternation of generations is not the product of a convergence between these types of filiation (as Lévi-Strauss 1973 partly affirms), but rather the contrary: the principle of alternating generations, expression of the different matrimonial destiny of contiguous generations, may also take forms appropriately “affiliative.” As we shall see, sexual filiation is the expression of a type of marriage (of which the patrilateral is only a particular case), rather than just converging with it in effects.
This alternation of generations is the expression of a compromise between deferred and direct reciprocity. But there is a fundamental difference between the functioning of this compromise in a “global” Australian system (Aranda, for example) and in a “New Guinea” system. In the first, the two lines of filiation are systematically reunited. We are in a closed system (from the classificatory point of view, of course). This has the effect of regular neutralization, wrought by the marriage rule (as it operates on the “classes”), of all asymmetry between uterine and agnatic kin. In the second, the conjunction of descendants of brother and sister is not guaranteed by a precise marriage rule. Above all, there is no closed system, where the groups are forever tied by periodic exchange of women. The groups are fluid, their number is not restricted, and they are not classified in a manner permitting the functioning of a matrimonial prescription.

From this follows a double phenomenon: a strong asymmetry between “feminine” and “masculine” lines and the constant attempt, whose success is not guaranteed, to make the first return to the second. There is not here a simple requirement of “conjunction” between two lines, but rather of “return” of the uterine line, even though Lévi-Strauss (1973) does not seem to perceive the necessity of distinguishing these two points of view. An expression of this need of “return” inscribed in the system is the alternation of generations, which functions as a signal, indicating the necessity of “conjunction” after an odd number of generations following the “original” exchange.

This norm is however in conflict with another, which in order to encompass a large and shifting number of groups, postpones from generation to generation the repetition of the original marriage.

The contradictory but complementary functioning of these two principles is expressed then in asymmetry of the two lines and in the rule of their reunion, inscribed in the alternation of generations.

Incidentally, we have already noted that in these systems the point of view is strongly masculine. It is the uterine line that must return, rather than that the two lines must converge. From that comes the primordial significance of patrilateral marriage, minimal expression of the principle of “return” of descendants of given women.

And yet what is the relation between these principles, and the significance of their association with sexual filiation or its variant, filiation through “ropes”?

“Sexual” filiation is the necessary consequence of union of the “patrilateral” formula (symptom of an ideology of “return of the
uterines”) and practice of sister exchange. Without this discriminating criterion, one would always have bilateral marriages, which these systems on the contrary try to exclude, or not to consider as such. Sexual filiation and ropes enable distinction between the descendants of each brother-sister pair involved in the exchange (see diagram 2).

Diagram 2: Association of sister exchange and deferred marriage in the case of sexual affiliation

In the two cases, we have as a result two distinct pairs of lines of filiation, each originated by a brother-sister relation.

In this manner, sexual filiation expresses the possibility of “return” of uterine descendants to the agnatic group of the given ancestress, rather than expressing permanent and bilateral reciprocity between two groups.

Hence the necessity of denying equivalence of the two sides of filiation, of asserting their asymmetry, and therefore the rejection of a notion of alliance which would re-link (and equalize) them in a permanent and structural fashion. We have on the one hand the most direct and pragmatic form of reciprocity (sister exchange), on the
other refusal to consider these women and their descendants as definitely given to the allied group, and thus the jealous memory of the uterine line. The affinal relation is not here the foundation from which the system is constituted. Each group, in each generation, makes sister exchanges with other groups, while trying to recoup periodically, by marriage or by simple recruitment of members, the relations thus strewn across social space.

These systems have occasionally been interpreted as “collapsed” elementary systems, which on the one hand disregards the autonomy of the principle of alternating generations relative to elementary structures, and on the other hand fails to understand sexual filiation. This filiation ought to be taken for what it claims to be. By considering the sex of children (rather than that of parents) as the criterion of filiation, these systems express the complementarity and opposition of the sexes, be it on the horizontal axis (brother-sister; husband-wife) or the vertical (mother-child; father-child).

In sexual filiation as we have considered it in diagram 2, the emphasis is put on the global opposition of sexes: the son follows the father, the daughter the mother; in filiation by “ropes” the accent is put on their complementarity. In this sense, filiation by ropes is a more developed and complex form. It can express the complementarity of the sexes as the complementarity of lines issuing from union (husband-wife) and separation (brother-sister) of the sexes, who are clearly destined to reunite after an odd number of generations. It is possible to show that this system takes direct charge of the principle of alternating generations and of that of “patrilateral” marriage (in its extensive form).

Diagram 3, which makes visible the functioning of the system, shows that one can hardly consider this marriage “patrilateral” in the genealogical sense of the term, much less consider pertinent the apical relationship, four generations back. This, however, is only a limitation introduced by conventions of the genealogical model created by the ethnologist, which privileges the point of view of ego. Whereas here, it is the ancestors’ point of view which must be considered if one wishes to show that there is the “return” of a “rope” issuing from a ceded woman.
Be that as it may, from the conventional genealogical point of view, sexual filiation, combined with sister exchange, enables realization in a more complex manner of the underlying principle of “patrilateral” exchange, namely alternation from one generation to another of the matrimonial fate of brothers and sisters. If, in each generation, there were sister exchanges, from the point of view of the cycle opened by this exchange (and expressed by prohibitions decreed by degrees of consanguinity), women circulate in opposed directions in contiguous generations. That explains, among other things, why at the level of attitudes, the maternal uncle has privileged relations with his uterine niece, and the paternal aunt with her agnatic nephew (Mead 1950: 143, 146; Lévi-Strauss 1973: 11–12). This has a value as signal for a possible but rejected matrimonial “return,” which must nevertheless be emphasized symbolically (like a type of parapraxis) in each generation, before it becomes possible in reality.

The linking of sexual filiation and alternation of generations, and the “signal” value of this, is expressed by obligation of the maternal
uncle to scarify his nephew and by the symmetrical obligations between paternal aunt and niece.

In his diagram, Lévi-Strauss (1973: 25) superimposes the four ropes issuing from an exchange of sisters and thus occludes the link of scarification and filiation by ropes. In this manner he cannot show diagrammatically alternation of generations, as an expression of alternation of sexes from one generation to another, itself the expression of alternation of direction of exchange. The “different status” given to brother and sister in this system and which Lévi-Strauss recognizes as structurally tied to the principle of alternating generations (1973: 26) is above all a different matrimonial status, exactly as in a patrilateral marriage system. This fact, hidden by the principle of sister exchange, is not hidden when we consider the “cycles of reciprocity” revealed by the functioning of the rope principle. So that we are not here accused of confounding diagram with reality: ropes are groups, and from the point of view of ropes, in one generation it is the sister who leaves, in another she “remains.” Thus the principle of the ropes, like Koïari “sexual filiation,” permits expression in another language of patrilateral marriage’s “short cycles” of indirect reciprocity, while retaining the possibility of sister exchange. This naturally raises further problems which Mead’s ethnography does not allow us to resolve, above all regarding the relation of ropes to local groups.

We can nonetheless assert that there is not, as Lévi-Strauss thinks, a convergence between the effects of patrilateral marriage and sexual filiation (which result in alternation of generations), but rather in the two cases, the operation of a principle of inversion of exchanges in contiguous generations, and their identity (the “return,” real or symbolic) in alternate generations.

“Sexual” filiation and patrilateral “prescription” are not therefore two different structures the effects of which are strangely convergent, but rather two languages expressing a common (and complex) underlying system, which contains them as possibilities. This system is based on the principle of periodic inversion (on an interval of n+1) of the direction of exchange and on the idea that follows of the “return” of the uterines.

The n+1 interval shows that these systems are formed by starting with the simplest possible model of deferred reciprocity, and that they develop more complex adopted models as the multiplication and repetition in time of this simple model. This is the reason for the persistence of the principle of alternating generations. Conversely, we
consider the “minimal model” to be only a special case, which demands treatment within a more complex model, which is only the simple ideological extension of the other. This necessity is shown by the fact that no one has succeeded in actually isolating patrilateral marriage as a structural type operating in an autonomous fashion (cf. Needham 1958; 1962).

Indeed, the “patrilateral” system does not seem to exist, except as an unstable state (and thus with the character of a process more than a system) between a moiety system and the principle of deferred junction of lines issuing from a brother-sister pair (of which it is the minimal and occasional realization).

When it operates in association with the process of sister exchange, the principle of sexual filiation must intervene to maintain a distinction between the lines issuing from the brother and sister, a distinction without which “patrilateral” marriage could not possibly exist, because it would merge with bilateral marriage.

Thus can be understood the structural reasons elucidating the frequent association of the “patrilateral” principle, sister exchange, and sexual filiation (or of the equivalents we think we have found), and why we do not believe in explaining the principle of alternating generations as a convergent product of three different systems (Lévi-Strauss 1973).

This last explanation seems to be in contradiction with the thesis of the primordial character of exchange in the theory of kinship systems. One fact of kinship, the alternation of generations, is explained in two cases by the principle of filiation, and in one case by the principle of exchange. The continuum that Lévi-Strauss (1973: 28) constructs is heterogeneous, and reduces the scope that he wishes to accord to exchange as a principle structurally explaining the properties of kinship systems (at least, of elementary structures). Lévi-Strauss does not explain by exchange the principle of alternating generations in systems with “double moieties.”

Of course, exchange cannot explain occurrence of alternation of generations in all systems. But it is necessary then to consider it as an

6. As for the idea that alternation of generations would be the product of a dual moiety system, it seems unnecessary to us, because the principle of the alternation of exchanges suffices to explain the existence of alternating generations in the “Australian” systems (cf. Dumont 1966a). The system of dual moieties, if it actually exists, is not the cause, but a possible result.
independent principle, a structure that has its own determinants and that is realized in different ways that do not explain it and are only its expression. Or perhaps it should even be admitted that the principle of exchange may remain as an ideal in some societies, which then express it by fidelity to alternation of generations, interpreted as the possibility of regular alternation of affinal relations, as well as those of filiation. We believe that such precisely occurs in the societies we have considered, and that this ideal of exchange, partially abandoned, always spills onto relations of filiation. This justifies the exceptional importance accorded to the relative status of the uterines and the agnates, which may not be interrelative status of the uterines and the agnates, which cannot be interpreted in terms of unilineal or bilateral descent groups. From this there arises the theoretical interest of these societies’ kinship systems, consisting in their intermediate status between “elementary” and “complex” structures.

These systems involve the notion of time. A continuous or discontinuous character—in genealogical time—qualifies the exchange relation established between descendants of the brother-sister pair. Because of this fact, the brother-sister relation and the different status of the lines they engender appear as fundamental principles of analysis, in that they try to reduce a spatial discontinuity implied by the principle of exchange (“inside” and “outside,” “we” and “others”) to a temporal discontinuity.

The belonging of uterines to “outside” is a question of time, and not an inevitable consequence of the discontinuity introduced by the exchange (itself expression of the discontinuity of local groups). At a certain period in time the uterines are the “outside,” the “other,” but inevitably they must return to the “interior,” the “we” (the inverse possibility being closer to a truly complex system). Some Oceanic systems seem to consider this principle more important than that of exchange, although one may reduce it to an “exchangist” notion.

If one considers pertinent the opposition between continuous and discontinuous, the following classification may be outlined:
**CONTINUOUS**
Exchange systems without
alternation of generations

**DISCONTINUOUS**
Pure “patrilateral”
systems of exchange

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Systems of exchange with</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>alternation of generations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and cyclic repetition of alliance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Systems of sexual filiation with</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cyclic repetition of alliance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of exchange, another classification is possible which overflows into complex systems.

We have seen that, in the systems we have analyzed, alternation of generations is a signal for prescribed or potential reunion of lines issuing from brother and sister.

The kinship systems may thus be classed in a continuum that begins at degree zero (absence of cyclic character and of alternating generations) and proceeds toward greater “degrees of liberty,” but in which the presence of alternation of generations guarantees that there will be a cyclic conjunction of the lines issuing from brother and sister. The more one “jumps” generations, the more the probability of “return” depends on statistical factors. At the same time the probability diminishes of the return’s expression in mechanical terms (i.e., in terms of alternation of generations).

Four types of systems may thus be defined:

1) Moiety systems;
2) “Global” systems (in a sense close to that expressed by Dumont 1966) with alternation of generations and periodic return of alliance between the line issuing from the brother and that issuing from the sister;
3) “Non-global” systems with *anticipated* return of the uterine line, after n+1 generations;
4) “Statistical” systems with conjunction of the two lines after a number *n* of generations, but in which the return is not perceived by indigenous consciousness or is not considered to be relevant.

It is in systems of type “3” that differentiation between descendants of the brother and descendants of the sister tends to be imposed and to become crucial.

Between 3 and 4, the fundamental difference lies in the opposition between return after *n+1* and after *n* generations, meaning in the
presence or absence of the principle of alternating generations. This is
the index of an awareness of the (possibly or necessarily) cyclic char-
acter of matrimonial exchanges.

* * *

In summary:
There is no difference of nature (from the point of view of
exchange) between patrilateral marriage and systems of class number
3. Patrilateral marriage (between an odd number of groups) is the
simplest expression of the principle of return of the uterine line which
is expressed in more complex form in systems of sexual filiation.

There are thus two fundamental oppositions:
1) Between systems of global reciprocity (1-2) and systems based
on the ideology of return of the uterine line;
2) Between systems with a conscious project of cyclicity (alterna-
tion of generations) and systems without this project (without alterna-
tion of generations).

The principle of return of the uterine line exists potentially in the
“global” systems with restricted exchange and alternating generations,
but its relevance is dispelled by the principle of reciprocity. The re-
turn is systematically assured for all partners to the exchange. What
counts—at least at the conceptual and classificatory level—is global
reciprocity. In other systems, by contrast, the principle of return of
the uterine line takes on fundamental importance, because there is no
global system of reciprocity, but on the contrary competition between
groups. The point of view is thus not “systemic,” but centered on each
group: the women given (or something that can substitute for them)
must “return” in the form of their descendants.

A key system, representing a compromise between competition
and return, is that of Mundugumor, which succeeds in combining,
through the rope principle, the most immediate form of reciprocity
(sister exchange) and the deferred form utilized by other means in
“pure” patrilateral marriage.

Indeed, the principle of ropes cannot be explained fully except as
the conjunction of three interdependent principles: 1) sexual filiation;
2) alternating direction of exchanges; 3) alternation of generations.
This last principle expresses at once the ideal of deferred exchange
and that of return of the uterine line.