

Foreword

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How do ethnographies speak to each other across regions? What resonances, insights, or common themes might an anthropologist schooled in one geographical area find in a study of kinship in a region thousands of miles distant from her scholarly “home” territory? These questions inform my reading of Luiz Costa’s intricate and profound exploration of the logic and meanings of Kanamari kinship. I come to this work not as an expert on the indigenous societies of Amazonia but as a Southeast Asianist—and all too conscious of the pitfalls this entails. But a belief in the potential value of such conversations is a fundamental tenet of anthropology, and this book is a testament to its continuing pertinence.

Set primarily in the context of studies of indigenous Amazonia, Luiz Costa undertakes a forensic investigation of the salient elements of Kanamari kinship to show the connectedness and coherence of its central themes: feeding, “ownership,” dependence, and commensality. What, in local understandings, enables kinship relations to be made? To find answers to this question, we are guided through their constituent aspects, taking in relations with pets, the place of children, fosterage, blood, the importance of indigenous chiefs, and of relations with whites (from the early years of the twentieth century during the rubber boom to the contemporary significance of Brazilian state agencies), as well as ritual and myth. Time and again, Costa returns to the centrality of feeding and to the relations of asymmetry on which they are premised.

The philosophical questions that Kanamari people grapple with—and which their kinship can be understood to endlessly explore from different angles—are perhaps fundamental to all humanity. What does it mean to be obligated to another? What are the connotations of dependence? How can autonomy and predation be kept in balance? *The owners of kinship* shows us how the Kanamari tackle these questions, their relative importance, and the answers apparently provided by kinship as a constellation of practices and a “philosophy concerned with human obligation,” as Robert McKinley (2001: 152) has phrased it. But perhaps “the provision of answers” to questions is not quite on the mark here. Rather, as one might infer from McKinley’s apt encapsulation, beyond what people do, kinship is also a realm of speculation about the important relations and qualities of life—the things and people that make life worth living but which also plague us, and which underlie social disjunctures as well as continuities.

The echoes between Kanamari and Southeast Asian ethnography are striking—demonstrated, for example, in the prominence of ideas about food and blood, the centrality of children, and in widespread fostering relations. But, as if to discourage such easy analogies, there are some profound dissimilarities. As with a twist of a kaleidoscope, the pieces have been shaken up and arranged to produce quite different geometric patterns. This is not, however, a matter of mere aesthetic arrangements as the outcome of some untrammelled thought experiment. More profoundly, such contrasts are shown to be the historical issue of relations and circumstances that have no endpoint but continue to change and evolve in local and regional contexts. The outcomes, it turns out, may be perilous for those concerned.

Whereas in the parts of Southeast Asia with which I am most familiar, kinship could be said to be predicated on the reproduction of relations that are based on similarity, and which is elaborated in terms of local ideas about siblingship, among the Kanamari, the fundamental premise of kinship—as other studies of Amazonia have demonstrated—is the condition of alterity. Most starkly, this is embodied in the babies who, after birth, are considered not as close relatives of their parents but as alters. Pregnancy and birth itself threaten the well-being of a baby’s parents through premature aging, and Costa shows how Kanamari couvade rituals are aimed at protecting a baby’s close kin. This danger is materialized in the child’s blood, which not only encapsulates the soul but is particularly dangerous, because the child has not yet been made the subject of feeding. The newborn’s blood is therefore as alien as the blood of an

enemy, and blood in general encapsulates danger and alterity. Through feeding, first with breast milk and subsequently with food by their mothers, babies and children are gradually turned into kin with whom relations of commensality are established. In turn, this feeding is predicated upon ideas about dependence, hierarchy, and ownership—principles that also underlie relations with local chiefs who are conceived as the source and owners of the food that kin of one locality share. Significantly, however, it is not with relations between mothers and children that Costa begins his exposition of Kanamari kinship but, rather, with relations between women and pets.

This choice of starting point turns out to be revelatory. Women rear pets and thus come to be the body-owners of the latter, as they are also of their own children. Pet-feeding, like child-rearing, converts what is foreign and exterior into something familiar and interior. The parallel also contains a crucial difference: whereas human children are gradually incorporated into the world of kin, the feeding relations with pets do not develop into kinship. Pets may never be eaten; instead, they may be items of exchange with white people. Kanamari also rear livestock, which they do not themselves eat, for white people. These exchanges, along with others, in fact inhibit feeding relations, and white people are regarded as cannibals insofar as they eat the animals they rear. Images of cannibalism are also tellingly present in the rituals of force-feeding that were performed in the past between different Kanamari subgroups who were not kin to each other. These rituals of alliance, we are told, acted to inhibit relations of feeding and kinship but were conceived as having a regenerative capacity, rendering the forest fertile and thus enabling future feeding.

The truncated kinship of pets thus reveals the fundamental condition of alterity on which the edifice of the Kanamari cosmos is constructed. Whereas cognatic kinship in the Malay world, one might say, amplifies the sameness of siblings and the absorption of similar others as affines to create further similarity in the future, here the cosmos is created from differences, which carry the predatory mark of cannibalism. While blood in Malay ideas is both a vital fluid and an idiom of shared identity (children share blood with their mothers and with their siblings), for the Kanamari, for whom likewise it is a “vital principle,” blood is also highly dangerous, predatory, and crucially, not a source of shared identity. It is feeding that initiates and constructs kinship and the emotions with which it is associated. Considering these two quite different (and yet somehow resonating) versions of kinship from across the world together also brings to mind that cognatic kinship in Southeast Asia has its own more local mirror

image in the asymmetric alliance systems of eastern Indonesia, which hinge on the symbolic elaboration of differences between cross-sex siblings.

There are, after all, relatively few primary themes with which human kinship is generally concerned. Among these, sameness and difference, interiority and exteriority, dependence and autonomy figure largely, and may be projected onto relationships, objects, materials, and practices. While particular constellations of these have an aesthetic logic, their significance becomes clear in historical time. As Costa unpeels the different aspects of Kanamari kinship, we gradually come to understand how it enfolds loss. Exploitative exchanges with whites in the early and mid-twentieth century, especially in rubber plantations, have gradually been succeeded by relations with the Brazilian state that are conceived in more beneficent terms. But a return visit ten years after initial fieldwork shows how the munificence of the state carries a lethal and predatory effect. Former houses and communities are gone. State support does not allow alterity; instead it entails absorption. Kinship, as this book makes compellingly clear, requires exteriority and asymmetry for reproduction to occur.

REFERENCE

- McKinley, Robert. 2001. "The philosophy of kinship: A reply to Schneider's *Critique of the study of kinship*." In *The cultural analysis of kinship: The legacy of David M. Schneider*, edited by Richard Feinberg and Martin Oppenheimer, 131–167. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.