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THE CONCEPT OF KINSHIP*

With Special Reference To Mr. Needham's "Descent Systems and Ideal Language"

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The purpose of this paper is not merely to reply to Needham's arguments[1] and to correct his errors, but also, in the course of this, to throw some light on the anthropological concept of kinship. For simplicity of reference, it will be useful to number Needham's errors.

(1) Needham (p. 97): "Biology is one matter and descent is quite another, of a different order."

This is not so. This mistake of Needham's is particularly important, for two reasons: it plays a crucial role in the internal economy of Needham's argument, and it is a mistake which is not merely a personal idiosyncrasy of Needham's. It is a dangerous travesty of a valid idea, and a mistake which is perhaps shared by others: thus its discussion serves a wider purpose.

That it is a mistake can best be seen as follows. Suppose an anthropologist observes, in a society he is investigating, a certain kind of recurring relationship between pairs of individuals or of groups. (It may be a one-one relationship or a one-many or a many-many one. It may be a relationship of authority, or a symmetrical one of, say, mutual aid, or of avoidance, or whatnot.) Suppose the autochtonous term for the relationship is *blip*.

The crucial question now is: Under what conditions will the anthropologist's treatment of the *blip*-relationship fall under the rubric of kinship structure?

It will be so subsumed if the anthropologist believes that the *blip*-relationship overlaps, in a predominant number of cases, with *some* physical kinship relationship. Otherwise, naturally, the *blip*-relationship will be subsumed under some other rubric, such as of "authority" or "economy". What, other than at least partial overlap with physical kinship, *could* conceivably lead a relationship to be classified as a part of "kinship structure"?

The remark which Needham makes immediately after the assertion of his crucial error is important: "They (i.e. biology and descent) will usually be concordant to some degree . . ." Needham believes this statement to be (i) a proposition which reports, as it were, a *de facto* usual concordance, and (ii) a minor concession which does not affect his main contention, namely that "the defining character of descent systems is social".

In fact, however, the remark about the "usual concordance" of biology and descent unwittingly contains the operational *definition* of "kinship structure", or "descent system", giving away the condition under which a recurrent relationship can come to be classed under those terms. Far from

* Received November, 1959.

[1] See *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 96-101.

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it being the case that, as it were, *it so happens* that biology and kinship are "usually . . . concordant to some degree", the fact that some social relationship is "usually concordant to some degree" with physical kinship is, on the contrary, the main condition for that relationship being classed as "kinship". This is not primarily a discovery about societies, but rather about the anthropologist's use of terms. Moreover, it is not a minor concession compatible with Needham's argument, but a decisive refutation of it.

My point can be seen not merely from the consideration of what "kinship structure" *could* possibly mean, but equally also from examining the actual use of kinship-structure classifications of anthropologists. Needham goes on to claim that *his* point can be "seen in some institutions as . . . unilineal descent reckoning . . . adoption . . . leviratic marriage . . . ghost marriage". But Needham's own examples and indeed the very notions conveyed by each of these terms in fact prove the very opposite from what Needham imagines they illustrate.

Let us take Needham's examples, sticking also to his own accounts of the meaning of the relevant notions:

"Leviratic marrage, in which a man marries a deceased brother's widow and raises descendants in his brother's name". This is the simplest case of all: the leviratic relationship and its offsprings are, as Needham's own definition clearly shows, a function of kinship. The anthropologist's kinship term "leviratic" is only applicable when certain real kinship relationships obtain. The relationship, and its offspring, can only be identified by the anthropologist *as* "leviratic" because the anthropologist knows that the fiction by which offsprings are raised "in the dead man's name" is indeed a fiction. If the anthropologist did not know this, if he too accepted the social fiction of the dead man's name, he would not be able to notice and identify the phenomenon which, as Needham's account lucidly shows (contrary to his intention) is defined in terms of a *systematic*, regulated disparity between physical and social kinship. The identity of the deputy for the dead man is also fixed in kinship terms.[2]

One of Needham's confusions (error 2) is the idea that a "function" is always "identity". Identity is indeed *a* functional relation, and perhaps the simplest one, but of course there are innumerable others.

Take "adoption". Again, as with leviratic marriage, the very use of the notion, the possibility of classifying offspring as adoptive, depends on the observer's knowledge of the disparity between the social and the physical relationship, and it is this disparity which gives the term its meaning. It is true that in this case the social kinship relation is only negatively a function of the physical one: only a disparity is required, and the applicability of the term "adoption", unlike "leviratic marriage", does not also require specific

[2] There is one complication here: it might be objected that the brotherhood relation between the deceased man and his substitute-genitor might itself not be physical but a consequence of an earlier social "fiction". In individual cases, certainly, but if it happened regularly, this would itself affect the classification of the kinship structure in which it happens.

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physical kin relationship (e.g. the dead man's brother being the physical father). And note: it is not just contingently true that a physico-social disparity occurs in the case of adoption, but it is, roughly, what "adoption" *means*.

With regard to "ghost marriage" similar observations apply.

Finally, there is the example of "unilineal descent reckoning". (I have spent some considerable time studying obe society of this kind, and can hardly be supposed to be as ignorant of the phenomenon or its implications as Needham supposes . . .) This, again, is a clear case. In such a situation, a person's membership of a lineage is determined by the lineagemembership of *one* of his parents and theirs in turn similarly, and so on. Again, there could hardly be a clearer case of social kinship being a function of physical kinship. The "function", the rule specifying the connection, is that a person's lineage is that of his male (or female) parent only, and physical and social parentage overlaps.

The situation can also be made clear as follows: anthropologists frequently say that, for instance, kinship is of great importance in simpler societies, or that in some societies of this kind a man's position in the social structure is determined by his birth. Suppose for a moment that Needham were right, and that this meant (merely) social kinship and (merely) social birth, and that the connection of these with physical kinship or birth were merely contingent and sociologically irrelevant. The meaning of the statements cited would then degenerate into saying something almost wholly vacuous, namely that simpler societies have some kind of structure of relationships, and that a man's social position is determined by *something* . . . These almost vacuous statements however would hardly differentiate one kind of society from another. The only content possibly left to these assertions *might* then be, that the structure of relationships or the social position of an individual in simpler societies are conceived by their members in terms borrowed from physical kinship. But the original statements meant far more than this, and in any case, this degenerate statement, to the effect that social relationships are described by participants in terms borrowed from physical kinship, would be highly suspect: for the ethnographer has to decide how *he* translates the autochtonous social terms, and the main reason he can normally have for translating them as *kin* terms is that their application does in fact overlap with physical kinship. If it did not, or if the overlap were contingent and irrelevant, the merely terminological overlap which, by implication, we should be left with on Needham's analysis, would be at the mercy of the vagaries of an inherently arbitrary translation.[3]

[3] For instance: in a certain society, the same term is used by a woman to describe her husband's father, and (by everyone) to describe the chief of the clan. Of course there is a tenuous connection between the two notions, but one would *not*, on the strength of this terminological overlap, place an account of clan chieftancy (which in this case is *not* a function of the kinship position of its holder) in the chapter dealing with kinship structure. *If* the overlap or otherwise with physical were really irrelevant, one would then have to deal with chieftancy under kinship in this context, for one *could* say that the term is borrowed from kinship.

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Needham's next error (3) is the assumption that if one thing is a function of another, it is a function of that other thing and of nothing else. Functional dependence may be complex. A thing may "be a function of", i.e. regularly vary with, a number of other "things" or variables.

To sum up this part of the argument: "kinship structure" or "descent system", and the more specific terms used in connection with them, are anthropologists' terms (not terms used by the people studied). Their meaning, as implicit in the actual practice of anthropologists, is that set of social relationships which largely, though not completely, overlaps with *some* of the physical kinship relationships of the people studied. They can be said to be those social relationships which are a function of physical kinship relationships, though the function (i.e. the rule specifying just which kinship relations correspond to which social ones) need not be a simple one, and indeed often is complex.

It goes without saying that social kinship relations are not the function of each and every physical kin relationship obtaining in a society. There are systematic omissions, and the manner in which the significant physical kin relationships are selected is of course just that which it is the job of the anthropologist to find out.

Moreover, the functional relationship between physical kinship and social kinship roles is such that it needs only hold in the predominant number of cases, whilst allowing of individual exceptions: for instance, an undetected infidelity on the part of a wife may lead to a disparity between the physical and the social relationship of fatherhood, without this having any social consequences and hence without being of any great interest to the social anthropologist.

It might be supposed—erroneously—that difficulties arise for this account of what "kinship structure" means, from two kinds of sources: (*a*) the fact that, as stated, social kin relationships needs only overlap with the corresponding physical ones in a predominant number of cases, but not invariably, and (*b*) from the fact that discussions of kinship structure also include accounts of *some* relationships which, *as* relationships, do not, at any rate directly, overlap with any physical kin relationship at all. In other words: not only may individual cases of a relationship be exceptions to the concordance, but a whole class in type of relationships may be exceptional in this respect. Neither of these difficulties invalidate the case, but they will have to be examined in detail.

(*a*) The issue may best be discussed with the help of an example. In our society, the (social) father of a child is generally also his physical genitor, and it may be said that the social role is a function of the position of the two individuals on the physical kinship map. But it is also true that occasionally there may be a disparity between social paternity and the genetic one, a disparity of which the persons concerned may or may not be aware. Does this possibility show that social paternity is not, after all, a function of physical kinship ?

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Not at all. Suppose for a moment that our society changed: suppose promiscuity became so widespread that, instead of disparity between social and physical paternity being fairly rare, it became so general that it would be unusual for a person to know the identity of his physical father. At the same time, suppose the social institution of "fatherhood" to remain unchanged.

If it were true, as Needham claims, that a descent system is a thing "of a different order" from physical kinship, and has no connection, or only a contingent one, with it, we should then be forced to say that the kinship system of the second society is the same as that of our present one. For, ex hypothesi, nothing has changed in the social roles and relations.

But, on the contrary, the "kinship structure", or "descent system" such as our present one, in which social paternity generally is ascribed to the physical genitor, albeit with some exceptions, both conscious and unconscious, is quite different, and would by any social anthropologist rightly be counted as different, from a system in which physical paternity were unidentified or disregarded, and social paternity then ascribed in virtue of some fact (necessarily) other than physical paternity. It would count as different despite the the fact that the social role of the "father" vis-a-vis his "offspring" and society might in all other respects be similar to that of a father in our society.

This *gedankenexperiment* shows that, although occasional divergences between social and physical kinship do not affect the principle that a social kinship role is a function of a physical kin relationship, a *regular* divergence results in a difference in what counts as kinship structure. The kind of convergence there is, or lack of it, is *part of* what anthropologists mean by the kinship structure of a society, and not something contingently true of it and sociologically irrelevant.

(*b*) There are other terms which one may encounter in discussions of kinship structure, such as, say "clan" or "godfather", where the independence of the meaning of such a term from physical kinship is of a different kind.

Let us take each of these terms in turn. The point about a "clan" is this: its members may believe themselves to be descended from a single common ancestor, without necessarily knowing just how, whilst this belief is probably false and in any case irrelevant. We have here a case which seems to favour Needham's argument: a "kinship" concept which has a social significance, defining a co-operating group, etc., by means of a kin notion, whilst the truth about the physical links does not correspond to the notion and is irrelevant to it. In brief, we cannot here give an account of the logic of this anthropological concept similar to that given in connection with "leviratic marriage" etc.

The correct account of the logic of such terms is this: indeed, a term such as "clan" does not correspond to a physical kinship reality. But: "clan" is a concept essentially related to other concepts—they might be "sub-clan" or "lineage" or "extended family"—which, in turn, do denote groups for whom some social reality (co-operation, cohabitation, for example) does have a reasonable and systematic congruence with some kinship affinity. A "clan"

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will be a co-operating set (justifying or expressing or reinforcing its co-operation in terms of a kin myth) of sub-groups, which in turn *are* kinship groups in the sense analysed above.

The reason why "clan" occurs within discussions of kinshipstructure is *not* because clansmen subscribe to the myth of a common ancestry, (although they do), but because the relationship of belonging-to-the-same-clan is one which, when spelt out, reads something like this: belonging to a $group_1$ of $groups_2$, where $group_1$ is in fact socially defined (whatever its possible kinship myth), whilst social $groups_2$ have cohesion-supporting kinship convictions whose claims *are* parallel, on the whole, with physical reality. Hence, the relationship of being-of-the-same-clan satisfies *indirectly* the criterion we set up initially for determining whether an unspecified social relationship, *blip*, does or does not fall under the rubric of kinshipstructure.

The case of a term such as "godfather" or "blood-brother" is different from cases such as "clan". Here, it is generally plain both to participants and to the observing anthropologist that there is no physical kinship. What there is, generally, is the occurrence of some kind of ritual which establishes a relationship either similar[4] to, or systematically parallel[5] with, relations dependent on physical kinship. Indeed, anthropologists are liable to refer to this kind of kinship as "ritual kinship". The point about calling this kind of relationship ritual kinship is not the fact that its establishment is accompanied by ritual, for that would not differentiate it from ordinary kinship relationships which are similarly initiated, (though they are functions of the physical position, they *also* depend on the confirming ritual); the force of the expression "*ritual* kinship" is "*only* ritual kinship"—or "kinship—but not really".

There is of course an element of truth in the view Needham stresses (though this element, far from being in conflict with what I originally said, is *precisely* what my scheme was meant to bring out): namely, the fact that social kinship systems are not identical with the reality of physical kinship, but, on the contrary, systematically add to it, omit from it, and distort it.

The kind of situation which brings this out may be instanced by a tribe in which genealogies become untrue at, or after, the fourth generation: men will name correctly their grandfather and perhaps his father, but ancestors beyond that are simply "arranged" so as to express, symbolise, subgroups existing in the tribe now. There will, in the simplest case, be *one* alleged common ancestor for the whole tribe, who will be said to have had n sons, corresponding to the n sub-groups of the tribe. Each of these n minor ancestors may in turn find himself attributed a number of sons corresponding to the number of the sub-sub-groups of his sub-group, and so on, until these fictitious or quasi-fictitious genealogies are as it were tied on to the more accurate three or four generations deep genealogies of living men.

This is a fairly typical situation, and of course many complex variations

[4] A blood-brother may have to behave like a real one.

[5] A godfather does not do the same things as a father, but to every father there may correspond one or a fixed number of god-fathers, performing duties complementary to the father's.

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of it occur. It is this kind of thing, amongst others, which makes anthropologists insist on *not* equating kinship beliefs with kinship reality. But: in order to see how the two diverge, and to say how kinship notions are "manipulated" in the interests of the present group and of expressing its present alignments, one has to know *what* the physical kinship reality is which is being distorted and manipulated and *how* it is manipulated. Where there is a relationship, say *blip* again, which does *not* in any reasonably regular way distort some physical kinship relationship, (i.e. is *not* a function of it), an account of its working will *not* fall into the account of a "descent system". In other words, relationships which *do* fit Needham's claim that they are of a wholly different order from physical kinship do not however fall under the rubric of social kinship (or "descent system") either.

To sum up the position: "kinship structure" or "descent systems" are, by definition, systems of social relationships such as are functions of (are regularly related to) physical kinship, bearing in mind that the function is not identity; the rule relating the physical kinship and the social relation being generally complex, involving additions, omissions and distortions; and all this notwithstanding the fact that individual *instances* of the relationships may occasionally diverge from the rule (e.g. consequence of undetected infidelity), and also that individual *concepts* within the system of social concepts (e.g. "godfather") may fail to be related directly by any rule to physical kinship (for they remain embedded in a system of concepts most of which *are* so related).

It must be stressed that this definition is not a prescription or recommendation, but an *explication* of what is implicit in the actual practice of anthropologists. Needham in all probability knows *how to use* the notion of kinship or descent. It is only when, as in his article, he attempts an explicit account of the concepts that he goes off the rails.

Kinship structure *means* the manner in which a pattern of physical relationships is made use of for social purposes—the way in which a physical criterion is used for the selection of members for a group and the ascriptions of rights, duties etc. Of course, the available physical facts are used selectively, distorted (but systematically), with *some* irregularity, etc. But: the elements of the physical pattern are essentially simple and universal, whilst the social patterns imposed on it are highly diversified and complex. And it is just this, the existence of the universal and simple physical substrate, which makes it possible to describe descent systems with some precision and to compare them meaningfully.

Once this central point about kinship notions is grasped, many of Needham's other numerous errors fall into place. I should add that, in one way, I have found Needham's article greatly reassuring. After I wrote and published the article which Needham attempts to criticise, I was somewhat worried by the fact that the point about the logic of kinship was something so obvious that it did not need stating. I knew that some anthropologists spoke *as if* they subscribed to something in contradiction with it, but it seemed charitable

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and reasonable to assume that this was merely a manner of speaking: and when discussing the matter with some of them, I found that this was indeed so. Needham, however, by coming out explicitly, and indeed with astonishing self-assurance, to assert the contrary viewpoint, has put me in his debt by showing that the point *did* need stating . . .

This brings me to Needham's error (4), concerning the motivation anthropologists have for adopting the misleading slogans about the alleged independence of physical and social kinship. (To Needham, of course, they appear not misleading but wholly true.) Needham: "It has nothing to do with the alleged anxiety of social anthropologists about the social nature of their subject . . . but derives from the very nature of descent systems." Needham gives no reason whatever for supporting this *ex cathedra* announcement; presumably, as he holds the misleading slogan to be true, no further explanation of why it is made is required. But in view of the fact that, as shown, the very opposite follows from "the very nature of descent systems", one does need an explanation.

It is indeed true that what Needham says does sometimes, as he puts it, "form an *early* part of *elementary* instruction in social anthropology". (Italics and irony mine.) The valid insight which may be conveyed by means of this type of erroneous formulation, such as Needham's formula about physical and social kinship being of different orders, is that these two are not identical. It is necessary to train the student not to take genealogies at their face value, to put it roughly, and secondly not to accept myths of his own society, such as the "natural" affinity of brothers etc. (What people *say* about their own kin connections is not necessarily or generally true; and if there is an affinity or any other behavioural relationship between kin of given categories, then this is never a consequence of the physical kin relationship as such, but of the social arrangements sustaining it.) All this is true, and in order to stress it, slogans about the independence of social and physical kinship are used. But these slogans, or rather the true element contained in them, are not in conflict with the analysis of "kinship" given above; Needham, however, unlike other anthropologists, takes them too literally and *is* misled.

Indeed Needham is right about this being the *pons asinorum* of the matter, if not about the identity of the *asinus*. It is true that those who have difficulty in seeing even the crude point—that physical and social kinship are not identical—will not see, and might as well not bother with, the slightly subtler point concerning their essential connection. One might add that those who see *only* the crude point, and not the slightly less crude one, may still perhaps do useful ethnographic work: at that level, conceptual self-knowledge may not matter, (whilst a failure to see even the crude point, and thus to be unable to *operate* the concept, would indeed be disastruous). But if, like Needham, one also aspires to give an analysis or account of the anthropological notion or kinship, it does matter a great deal.

The next cluster of Needham's mistakes depends only in part on his misunderstanding of the concept of kinship or descent, springing also from his

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failure to understand the notion of an ideal language. The feature of an ideal language which is relevant to the argument is this: a logically ideal notation is one such that, when a statement is made in it, it is easy to see what is contributed by the rules of the notation itself, and what depends on the particular object of the statement. The elements "contributed by the notation itself" may be said, roughly, to be those features which are true of the subject matter of a statement simply in virtue of it being described, or being describable, in the notation at all. To give a simple example: suppose one describes an area made up of regular squares by giving the coordinates of each square, plus some additional property of each square, say its colour. "4.7; yellow" would then be a statement in a language devised for describing the area and its constituent squares. This language would have the desired logical property. The fact, for instance, that each square is bounded by four other squares, that it is characterised by two numbers, and no more than two, and that no pair of numbers can designate more than one square, is clearly seen to be not so much a property of any particular square, but of the notation. It really specifies the conditions which a "world" must satisfy before it can be properly described by this notation. (For instance, a more than two-dimensional continuum would not be describable by this notation.)

My application of this to kinship systems in anthropology was based on the observation that the subject matter of the anthropological treatment of kinship could be made in some measure to satisfy such conditions.

The subject-matter in question is people plus, as shown above, the nature, overlap, interdependence and divergence of their physical and social kinship and *not* social relations alone, as Needham argues). But the physical kinship relations of people are, ultimately, very simple: these "elements" of the system, i.e. people, are either not related at all, or related by one and only one relation, a triadic one (A and B begat C). They may be related by this relationship either directly, or indirectly by its reiteration (in the course of which, naturally, the same individual may occupy different positions).

This provides us with, as it were, the substrate of the co-ordinates, of physical kinship whose basic pattern is, for the purposes of social sciences, *given*.

Superimposed on this pattern and corresponding to the colours in our simple examples above, are the social predicates, i.e. the kinship terms actually used by the society under investigation, the rights and duties allocated, etc. The subject matter of an investigation into a society's kinship structure or "descent system" is a specification and understanding of these terms and roles, etc., *and* the nature of their overlap with physical kinship: the manner, and extent, in which they are selected out of the physical kin substrate of the society. The type of notation suggested would, if devised, bring out more clearly the elements which are being related.

Strictly speaking, the situation is rather complex, for three levels are involved:

(*i*) The basic pattern is determined by the *given* fact (given to social studies

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by biology) that every person has two physical parents, one of each sex. The same point of course again applies to these parents, and so on. All this is, for social studies, "necessary" and not a result of some findings. (If it were not so in some cases, it would not, ex hypothesi, be *social* anthropology that had found it out.)

Furthermore, it is a part of this basic pattern that other people may and do in fact exist, who will either be unrelated, or related to the initial person either by his mating, or the mating of one of his ancestors, either as a partner or as offspring; and again, by a kind of transitive "contagion", if, for any of the kinds of reason stated above, A and B are related, and B and C, then of course so are A and C.

This and only this gives us the basic physical map, so to speak. In as far as the notation of our proposed language would have to mirror it, the "structure" of all names, at this level, would be identical. (The great practical difficulty for devising the notation would of course be in connection with specifying the type of relations indicated in the second paragraph. The *necessity* of ancestors makes a notational device for their formal specification easy; the *contingency* of descendants, mates and collaterals makes it difficult.)

(*ii*) Within this universal form of every person's name, there could and would be similarities and divergences of structure, in another but still physical sense. Suppose, to take a simple case, a person were the child of parents who were themselves full siblings: this would manifest itself in his "name" by the repetition of the same (incorporated) name in the place reserved for paternal and for maternel grandfather, and similarly for paternal and maternal grandmother. In this sense, the "structure" of a name would *not* be invariable.

(*iii*) Having this "map", the ascription of social kinship terms, roles, duties, etc. to points on it can be expressed in terms of the additional, "synthetic" predicates ascribed to each type of name, relatively to the name of "Ego". ("Ego" would not have to be supplied with a name, but the ego-name would be a kind of permanent "origin" of the system.) If, for instance, Ego's name is A, a rule of our notation would enable us immediately to infer, or rather construct, the "name" of his physical father, say B. The fact that in our society the physical father is also the social one might be expressed by saying that, for the society, F(B).

The occasional occurrence of adoption could be conveyed by saying that, in some cases, "G(X) leads to F(X)", where the *variable* X shows that this social ascription is independent of the physical kin position, and where G, like F, is a social predicate, and in this case means something like "performed acts necessary for adoption".

The job of describing further each of these levels is at present generally done—satisfactorily enough for practical purposes—by the diagrams used by anthropologists to sketch kinship systems and of course by the accompanying prose.

The theory which Needham finds so surprising in my article—that I should start my analysis with a reference to names and not categories—corresponds

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to the fact that anthropologists' diagrams of kinship also start with an individual (typical) "ego".

The ordinary anthropological manner of doing all this is of course satisfactory for practical purposes. But it fails to bring out the difference in logical status of truths of the three levels, and the manner in which they are related. The anthropologist, his intuitions trained and formed by familiarity with his subject matter and his habitual techniques for handling it, knows how to interpret the information despite the logical untidiness of its presentation. An "ideal notation" would however distinguish *explicitly* between information of differing logical status. This might or might not be of practical importance. Perhaps not. But, in any case, it would assist anyone interested in the logic of anthropology to avoid confusions such as Needham's.

As indicated, the central figure of an ideal notation is that it separates, in any statement, that which is provided by the notation itself and that which reflects something in the particular object described. The central feature of "kinship structure", on the other hand, is that it is an account of how social ascriptions—kinship terms, roles, etc.,—are superimposed on to, or recruited in terms of, a pattern of physical relationships which are biologically given. once these two facts are grasped (and both evade Needham) the relationships of the two subjects become clear. The basic rules, co-ordinates of an ideal kinship notation, would utilise the universality and basic simplicity of physical kinship; what would be *said* about each society's own and possibly idiosyncratic manner of arranging its affairs on this basis, would be conveyed by means of the further predicates, contingently attributed to various relative positions or "names" in the scheme.

Needham's specific errors can now be brought out. He believes (p. 1) mistakenly (error 5) that it constitutes a refutation of my argument to say, as he does, that "descent systems do not simply regulate marriage, but are as "importantly concerned" with other matters. Quite so; but the remark connecting kinship structure with the specification of possible mates was, in the context, bringing out that the relationships making up the physical substrate of kinship consist only of the presence, reiteration, or absence of one and only one relationship (the triadic one of mating-procreation), and that the only choice which exists at this level[6] concerns the identity of the partner. Hence, at this level, the kinship structure is exhaustively determined by the rules governing mating. All else on this level follows. The social relationships, the consideration of which become relevant later on, are superimposed on a pattern which is moulded, exclusively, by the pattern of mating, for there is nothing else which can affect it. The social predicates which are then imposed on the pattern, and which also (to complicate matters) enter into the rules determining that pattern itself, were discussed later. This criticism of Needham's is a misinterpretation arising out of his failure to consider the context of the remark.

[6] Disregarding for the moment things such as infant exposure, abortion, etc., which affect the quantity of surviving offspring.

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Error 6: Needham credits me with the view or assumption that kinship terms are names, individual designations of single human beings. He rightly finds such a view "almost incomprehensible", and one may only wish he had found it *wholly* so. But I am aware, oddly enough, that "uncle" is not a name, like Harry S. Truman. But an ideal language of the kind envisaged would indeed have to begin with names, i.e. with unambiguous devices for picking out single individuals. It does not however follow in the least—nor was it supposed, nor is there any evidence in the relevant article to make it seem so—that these names were to replace kinship terms. On the contrary, kinship terms were to be defined in terms of the relation between *types* and classes of types) of names in the ideal notation, just as in normal anthropological practice kinship terms are defined in terms of the relation between types of position (and groups of positions) on the diagrams. (Needham himself later notices conclusive evidence in the article itself against his interpretation, when he notes that all names in the scheme would have had the same structure.) Kinship terms are indeed classifications relative to an individual, and the intention of my scheme was that a kinship term of a given society would be definable in terms of the *kinds* of names that were to be related by it. (For instance: suppose the names were constructed by including a list of ancestors' names in a certain prescribed order. Then the concept of "cousin", as occurring in our society, would be defined as the relationship ascribed to people whose names contain the identical sub-name at certain places, i.e. the places in which grandparents are named.)

Error 7: Needham supposes he can refute the contention that "for the purposes of social science it is a logical truth that a man has a man for a father" by pointing to phenomena such as a woman becoming, socially, the "father" of a man, etc. I am not unaware of these phenomena. He has, of course, completely misunderstood the assertion: the point is that the presupposed biological truth is given to social anthropology (and is a "logical truth" for *it*), and is *used* by it, and not that there is some common universal pattern of *social* paternity (which would indeed be absurd). Needham, who fails to see that a sociological account of social relationships such as marriage involves plotting their relationships against the existing physical facts (or, in marginal cases, against the lack of physical facts), consequently also fails to see why and how the truth imported from biology plays a part in anthropology. (The same error reappears later in connection with mating.) Needham's confusion here, as above, springs from the failure to see that the very identification, description and explanation of these phenomena requires one to see them for what they are, i.e. as involving a disparity between a social term x and physical kinship category, and to be able to say what the disparity is and how it is sustained. If one were not aware of the disparity with physical fact, about which we are informed by the *given* truths of biology, we should be unable either to note or to categorize these phenomena. Physical kinship categories are universal, as human biology does not vary sufficiently to make this otherwise; the social recognition of physical kinship, the distinc-

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tion and classifications made, the kinds of physical relationships utilised for group-membership recruitment, and the social attributes predicated of the recruited classified persons, may and do vary from society to society. But Needham supposes (error 8, p. 98) that the existence of these social diversities, rather pompously indicated by him by the ill-understood phrase (borrowed from yesteryear's philosophic fad) that each "has to some extent its own logic", constitutes a further objection to my argument. On the contrary, the purpose of my scheme was to have an *orderly* manner of examining and comparing those diversities, which do indeed form the subject matter of anthropological studies of kinship. (Shapes vary; to express comparisons among them, one needs a constant system of co-ordinates. The universal facts of physical kinship were to be used to provide these co-ordinates in terms of which the diversity was to expressed.)

Needham's complaints that a system of naming which remains the same cannot capture the distinctive characteristics of varying kinship systems again misses the point. (Error 9): a system of co-ordinates is not incapable of expressing different areas or shapes just because the system of co-ordinates remains the same and consists of points whose structure is similar. On the contrary, just this is the condition of its doing the job of expressing the diversity of patterns within it.

Needham misinterprets (error 10) the difficulty raised in connection with the existence of two sexes. The difficulty arises because whereas, say, a system of co-ordinates defines a *homogeneous* set of points, the "points" of my system would have to contain individuals of *two types* (male and female), whose differentiation is relevant to what is subsequently said of them. This difficulty arises only at the initial level of specifying the points on the "logical space", and not in connection with what is subsequently said about the points on it, and thus has nothing whatever to do with whether there are "unilineal, cognatic or bilineal" societies.

A similar misconception underlies error 11, expressed by Needham's jibe about Victorian anthropologists, to the effect that no one since then has argued for the primacy of matriliny. The point that it is harder to be ignorant of the mother's identity than the father's, as indeed it is, (maternity is not in doubt, as the deceived husband remarked), was, unambiguously, not a premise for any kind of conclusion about what kind of kinship systems actually occur in simple societies, but only for deciding what kind of logical framework would be most useful (assuming we want one at all) for anyone attempting to construct a formal scheme for the study of kinship systems.

Needham's next error (12) is in connection with what he calls the third misapprehension. He credits me with a failure to realise that what is important about members of kinship groups is what they do. Far from being unaware of it, the scheme as expounded in the original article is intended to bring this out, and is quite unambiguous in this respect. After kinship categories had been picked out from the biological logical space, the social truths about them would be conveyed by "sociological" predicates, *synthetically* applied.

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(Necessarily so: for what people do is *not* entailed in their physical kinship position as such. The social, and not logical or biological, compulsion making them do what people of the given kinship category habitually do in the society, is a central part of the subject matter of social anthropology.) Needham grotesquely misinterprets a phrase referring to social characteristics, which he quotes from me: "*only* synthetic factual truths" (italics Needham's). The force of the "only" was *not* "merely"—I do not consider these sociological attributes to be unimportant, on the contrary; the force of "only" was "exclusively". The whole point of the exercise was to *separate* clearly, and not to disparage, what is logically distinct, i.e. the physical kinship position and the social predicates (including social kin terms) attributed to it. There is no excuse whatever for Needham's complete misinterpretation of my meaning. He proceeds to speculate about what else I might suppose or mean in order to make sense of my alleged disregard of the social characteristics: needless to say, these speculations are as false as they are unnecessary, as the problem they are invoked to solve (why I should underestimate social facts) does not arise.

The curious thing about some of Needham's errors and conclusions is that they are not even mutually consistent. His opening charge is that I fail to distinguish biology and social function; where he does come across evidence that in fact I *do* distinguish them, instead of seeing that this shows his earlier charge to be wholly misguided, he proceeds instead to invent a further one: he treats my distinction of the physical from the social as evidence for another crime of his own unwarranted invention, my alleged disregard of the importance of the social . . .

Needham is of course right in supposing that the social characteristics are analytically contained in the very meaning of the *autochtonous kinship terms*; and they are of course *not* so contained in the physical kin positions of the individuals as such[7] (as he realises). It is the connection between the former (i.e. roles plus local kinship terms) on the one hand, and the physical kin position on the other, which constitutes much of the study of "kinship structure". The category used *by the anthropologist* to describe the kinship structure of the society is itself, in effect, a report on the manner of this (synthetic) connection, and hence *both* the physical and the social kinship positions are (analytically) implicit in the *anthropologist's* classification. Needham's confusion is complex: seeing (as in a glass *very* darkly) this connectedness, which however he cannot state as he does not consciously believe in the relevance of one of the terms related (i.e. the physical kin position), he stresses instead the near-vacuous connection between native kinship term and social role. But that connection, though indeed it obtains, doesn't amount to much: naturally, a term means what it means. Naturally, "brothers" are expected to be "fraternal": (and this tells us little unless we know *which* people are expected to behave "fraternally", i.e. that they are

[7] Although, conversely, (to complicate matters), a *view* of the physical kinship position — correct or otherwise — *is* contained in the meaning of the autochtonous kinship term.

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also "brothers" in some other—e.g. physical—sense, and which.) In any society, (terms such as) "being-an-X" and "behaving X-wise" are to a considerable extent defined in terms of each other, and we do not get much further by connecting them. We do get somewhere when we discover how (for example) those whom we call "brothers" *and* expect to be "fraternal", are *selected*, relatively to a given individual, from the total population. This gives us the connection between a role and its recruitment. The true and important generalisation that in simple societies the identification of important roles is "in terms of kinship" only escapes vacuity because we can specify just how in each society "kinsmen" are picked out in terms of physical kinship in general. But "brothers act fraternally" or "kinsmen are kinned (kind)" says very little, if "brother" or "kinsmen" are emptied of their *physical* meanings.

Misunderstanding as he does the nature of anthropological studies of kinship (at any rate, when he attempts *to give an account* of them, though perhaps not when he actually *practises* it), Needham has absurd and self-contradictory expectations of what a systematic notation for this study would involve. He seems to expect it to be just one further (native-type) kinship terminology, doing the same kind of work as *one of them*, *and* yet serving to compare them all, and to fuse rather than distinguish the social and the physical as *they* do in their various ways, and yet at the same time to serve for comparing their different ways of doing it . . .

At one stage he complains that the ideal language could not be used by any society as its kinship terminology. Of course it could not, nor was it so intended. When however, *he* comes across evidence that it was not intended for such a role (the fact that the general structure of the "names" remains constant), he treats this as one further complaint against it, rather than, as he should, as a corrective of his first interpretation . . .

There is a further set of heterogeneous errors of Needham's, not all of them specifically connected with his failure to understand what is involved in the notion of a descent system or of what is involved in an ideal language.

There is, for instance, the issue of tangibility. Needham denies (error 13) that kinship relationships are more tangible and stateable with accuracy than most aspects of a simple society. On the contrary, for the very reasons which led me to suggest the schema for a formalised language, they *are* stateable with considerable precision and *are* tangible: the connotation of an autochtonous kinship term can be ascertained *just* because we can plot its denotation against the physical kinship map of the people in question. To take another of Needham's own examples, his account of the Kuki term *tu*: it "covers members of three generations, two distinct descent lines, and both sexes". This, plus of course further specifications concerning how these *tu* are to be picked out, (and what they do and what is done unto them), gives us much of the meaning of the term. Some shadowiness may enter with regard to the rights and duties of *tu*, but even there, matters such as their inheritance claims, the relative disposition of their habitat etc. can be ascertained by the

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observer. Compare this with the practical difficulties of giving a concrete and accurate account of a people's values or beliefs! Things such as values, important though they clearly are for the understanding of a society, are very intangible and hard to assess. With regard to them, the situation which Needham mistakenly supposes to hold with regard to kinship, the possible absence of an equivalent "thing" in our language, does hold. (There is no third, common, universal and given factor, such as the physical facts of kinship, to *mediate* and thus to facilitate comparisons.) Kinship terms may also not be directly translatable, but the very fact that they are essentially related to physical kinship (in a way which varies from society to society—but the idiosyncratic way in which it varies is fairly accessible to observation) which in turn *is* built up from universally identical elements, is what makes them explicable in a language other than that of the people themselves. Needham proceeds to offer some speculations as to why I "appear to think" (mistakenly, according to him) that kinship systems are tangible. These unnecessary speculations of course represent neither what I think nor what I might be supposed to think on evidence found in the relevant article.

The point can also be seen from the fact that anthropologists avoid, in their accounts, convenient shorthand terms such as "cousin" and use instead long-hand expressions such as "father's brother's son". Apart from the elimination of ambiguity, the relevant feature of this explicit longhand is that it fixes the relative position of the individuals on the *physical* kinship map so that, subsequently, a society's habit of attributing kinship terms, roles, etc. to the individuals so related can be explained. (And the reason why this anthropologist's longhand is unambiguous is not merely that it breaks up the relationship into its links, so to speak, but also because in this usage the term "brother", "father" and so on are used in a purely physical sense, purged of any of the fraternal, paternal etc. role-connotations which of course vary from society to society, and which can then, like the native terms, be ascribed to the individuals previously identified by the physical, de-socialised terminology). For instance, with regard to our society, it may be said that "cousin" covers father's brother's, and father's sister's offspring, and similarly for the mother. In a schematic notation this information about the range of people or "names" covered by "cousin" would be conveyed in a more condensed and perhaps manipulable way by simply giving or specifying the range of "names" of people to whom cousin-hood, relative to Ego, is attributed.

It is equally wrong to say (error 14), as Needham proceeds to do, that the term *tu* could not be dealt with in my scheme. If a naming scheme such as I proposed were designed, then of course, given the schema for Ego's name, the necessary and sufficient conditions of being Ego's *tu* could be expressed in terms of what types of names (in the devised language, not their own) the *tu* would have to have. (In *their* own language, *tu* are *tu* . . . and behave *tu*-wise . . .) This would merely convey, in a systematic way, the kind of information which Needham in fact gives us in English.

There are also (error 15) Needham's remarks about functionalism. My

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own observations, to the effect that functionalism should bring home the connection, including *systematic* disparity, between physical and social kinship, a connection which is in any case already entailed by the very notion of kinship as used by anthropologists, were primarily an *a fortiori* argument directed at those who, like Malinowski, attempt to isolate specific needs and directly relate them to features of a society. I am not unaware of the fact that this extreme kind of functionalism is not shared by other anthropologists, having elsewhere commented on this fact in print. But in any case, the argument applies, in a different form, even to the functionalism which *is* very widespread amongst anthropologists, and so Needham's objection remains invalid. Given the fact that mating always is regulated and needs to be, and given the fact societies have kinship structures, it is virtually certain that the latter institution plays some part (though perhaps neither exclusively nor exhaustively) in serving the former need. Given this, there will, in any given society, be some regular connection ("function") between the two, and Needham's crucial separation of the two cannot obtain. In any case, functionalism as a widely accepted *method* (and not as a doubtful and widely doubted *doctrine*) does commit the anthropologist to *finding out* the extent to which social kinship arrangements do assist in the regulation of procreation, of the assigning of offspring to groups, and so on—and all this can only be ascertained if one has some knowledge of the physical kinship facts. The remark in my first paper claimed no more.

Needham also accuses my system of being cumbersome (error 16). Though normally shy of openly claiming merit, I assert categorically that my system is *not* cumbersome. My absolute confidence springs from the fact, which inexplicably escaped Needham, that there was *no* such system in the article, which explicitly restricted itself to trying to show that such a system should be possible, and what general conditions it would have to satisfy. A system which lacks existence cannot be endowed with cumbersomeness . . . In this way, as in the others indicated, Needham completely and unnecessarily misunderstood what was stated in the text.

Finally, there are Needham's expressed doubts about the usefulness of rhe intellectual exercice which I was recommending and which he misunderstood; in these doubts he is quite possibly justified, and I am sometimes inclined to agree. But nothing he says actually supports his doubt or sheds light on the issue. There are, I imagine, many criticisms which may justly be made of my paper (not least that it was pompous): but none of those actually made by Needham are amongst them, or have any validity.

There are also certain criticisms of Needham's which are wholly unanswerable—namely, the unspecific ones. He darkly hints at "other erroneous or questionable points", and later at mistakes in another work of mine. (For my own part, I do not wish to suggest that Needham committed any errors other than the sixteen which I have explicitly indicated.)

In one society which I know, a rule is known which calls upon a man to pay *half* the usual blood money if he fires at another and misses, but to pay the

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full "dia" if he takes aim and does not shoot. The reason given is that, as one does not know where the bullet would gave gone, the amount of the compensation must be determined by assuming the worst. Given the quality of Needham's marksmanship, I should gladly forgive him the half-price for his misfired actual shots, but feel some sympathy for the rule which would penalise him for waving his gun about in this manner.

Needham's sixteen mistakes in a fairly brief article, virtually co-extensive with it, are no mean achievement. The grammar and spelling of the article however are in order. Needham's error when analysing the anthropological notion of kinship is important, in as far as it springs from an anthropological manner of speaking which is indeed liable to lead to this kind of error (though I do not think others commit it when they think about it explicitly, as Needham *has*). Needham's other errors are partly corollaries of it, partly unwarranted attribution of positions to the article he attempts to criticise. Failing to see that anthropological kinship terms are classifications of the relation between social and physical facts, he interprets my remarks about the universal physical relation as though they were about the social (thereby of course turning them into absurdities). Of the three charges presented in his summary, (*b*), the confusion of individuals and categories, and (*c*), the confusion of specification and function, are simply misrepresentations, whilst (*a*), concerning the relationship of biology and descent, does show a genuine disagreement, but it is he who is in error.

There is however one further error, diffused throughout Needham's article and implicit in his manner and *obiter dicta* and this is the tone of authority which he assumes. His rather touching[8] self-assurance is in sad contrast with the quality of his argument, and in direct proportion to the uncritical and careless disregard of evidence with which he is ready to ascribe the most unwarranted and preposterous views to others. From his article, two facts emerge: he has a high regard for his own authoritativeness, and he is wrong.

Ernest Gellner.

[8] NEEDHAM: "For my part, I am fairly familiar with the topic of an ideal or logical language..."

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