

# On the Non-Existence of "Dravidian Kinship"

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ISBN: 1 900 795 05 1

Paper Price: £2 inc. postage and packing

# On the Non–Existence of “Dravidian Kinship”\*

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The proposition underlying this paper is a simple one, namely, *that there is no such thing as the Dravidian kinship system*. Naturally, such a stark statement requires a great deal of qualification and explanation if it is to represent anything more than gratuitous iconoclasm. I shall try to satisfy that requirement in three ways, as follows. *Empirically*, I shall show using published ethnographic evidence that the great majority of Dravidian speakers in South Asia do not have a Dravidian kinship system as conventionally defined. Neither the relationship terminology nor the preferential marriage rules are in fact as they have been conventionally represented. Rather more briefly, I shall also claim that, *taxonomically*, “the Dravidian kinship system” forms one element in an inadequately constructed typology of kinship systems; while, *theoretically*, the notion of a “kinship system” leads to an overly static analysis, and involves an unacceptable degree of reification. First, however, it is necessary to say something about the nature of kinship, and explain why there is nonetheless an over–riding need to grasp it as a whole – though as a *totality* rather than as a *system*. This explanation has two aspects: the first deals with the definition of kinship, the second with the levels at which kinship manifests itself. Both issues have been discussed more fully elsewhere, so I shall merely summarise the main points.

## Definition

In line with the approaches of Leach (1961: 107) and Southwold (1978: 369) to the definitions of “marriage” and “religion”, respectively, it is assumed that “kinship” is only a usable concept in comparative anthropology when defined polythetically (Needham 1975). Exactly the same applies to the various phenomena usually taken to constitute “kinship”; not only “marriage”, but also “alliance”, “descent”, etc. With this in mind, any polythetic definition of “kinship relationships” is likely to incorporate at least some of the following attributes (cf. Barnard & Good 1984: 188–9):

- ascribed by birth and persist throughout life
- initiated by marriage
- explained or justified in terms of a biological idiom
- create expectations regarding conduct
- constitute an ‘in’ group or category, in opposition to those not so assigned
- involve use of relationship terms in a reciprocal, systematic way
- involve members of a single domestic unit or household
- involve systematic, enduring relationships between domestic units or households
- entail joint ownership, and/or use, and/or serial inheritance, of resources
- serve as a medium for assigning hereditary social positions
- assign responsibility for the nurture and upbringing of children
- involve making prestations without expectation of immediate or direct return

However, no single “kinship relationship” need have all and only these attributes, for two reasons. First, none of them is universally applicable, and some are likely to be wholly or partly absent in any given case<sup>1</sup>. Second, it is entirely appropriate to add further items to this list, as required. In other words, a polythetic definition is an open ended check–list rather than an all–inclusive blueprint.

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<sup>1</sup> Some elements in such a definition may be mutually exclusive, as with the first two here.

## Levels

Like any other social phenomenon, “kinship” is manifest at several different levels simultaneously. Thus, it consists of a set of ideas, a set of rules, and a range of behaviour, i.e., it has categorical, jural, and behavioural aspects (cf. Needham 1973)<sup>2</sup>.

- the **categorical level** comprises the nomenclature in terms of which people talk and think about kinship.

This is largely taken for granted and implicit. People use its categories, but cannot necessarily define them and are not required to do so in the normal course of events. The *relationship terminology* is the most obvious example.

- the **jural level** comprises the laws, customs, rules, and values which collectively represent society’s ideals about kinship. Jural rules are phrased in terms of the categories just mentioned, but unlike them they are explicit, subject to disagreement, and can be broken. *Marriage preferences* are among the most studied phenomena of this type, but all statements about what ‘should’ or ‘ought to’ be done are included.

- the **behavioural level** consists of what people actually do. Behaviour can be looked at in two ways: there is collective or *statistical behaviour*, e.g. marriage or divorce rates; and there is *individual practice*.

Behaviour and jural rules are inter-related in a complex way, but two points are crucial: (i) rules do not necessarily determine behaviour and are just as likely to serve to justify it; (ii) consequently, behaviour which ‘obeys’ the rules is every bit as problematic as behaviour which ‘breaks’ them.

As kinship exists at all three of these levels, it follows that in order to study kinship properly all three must be taken into account. Yet in practice analysts have tended to focus upon one level at the expense of the others. Thus, ‘descent theory’ was basically a jural–level analysis, and ‘alliance theory’ was primarily applicable at the categorical level. Most of the differences between the two approaches, and the impassioned debates to which they gave rise, arose because the two camps were therefore talking past each other, at cross–purposes.

Detailed discussion of the connections between these levels is beyond the scope of this paper. Briefly, however, behaviour is best understood as taking place within an ever-changing context, to which it is to some degree dialectically related. It is given meaning and simultaneous or retrospective justification by the rules and values of society, which form a relatively constant element in that context. These explicit rules—which are opaque in the sense that they may be controversial and are always open to inspection and debate—are expressed in terms of unexamined, implicit, taken-for-granted, transparent categories, which are even less susceptible to change. Finally, the three levels need not be perfectly congruent (indeed they cannot be, since otherwise the rules, for example, would be wholly implicit in the categories, and therefore superfluous qua rules) but there must be a degree of consistency among them (Good 1981: 127; 1991: 93-6).

## The Dravidian Kinship System Defined

The most obvious place to begin is with ‘the Dravidian kinship system’ as portrayed by the two modern writers widely regarded as the most authoritative on the subject. Their views are at first sight strikingly similar, and both of them characterize the system with reference to both the categorical and the jural levels.

**Dumont:** ‘Dravidian kinship terminology... can be considered... as springing from the combination in precise configurations of four principles of opposition: distinction of generation... , distinction of sex, distinction of kin identical with alliance relationship, and distinction of age. [Moreover,] the system embodies a sociological theory of marriage... and supposes—as well as favours—the rule of marrying a cross cousin’ (1953: 39).

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<sup>2</sup> For more complete versions of this argument, see Good (1981; 1991: Chs 5 & 6). The terms ‘set’ and ‘range’ are intended to convey the idea that the ideas, rules, and behaviour pertaining to “kinship” are not precisely circumscribed.

**Trautmann:** 'Sex, generation, relative age, and crossness ... are the semantic dimensions of Dravidian kinship terminology ... I do not hesitate to construct for the Proto-Dravidian kinship system not only a terminology but a rule of social organization logically required by it ... the rule of cross-cousin marriage' (1981: 231, 235, my emphasis).

Despite their similarities, these descriptions differ in two crucial ways. First, Trautmann explicitly engages in conjectural history (cross cousin marriage is an 'ancestral rule'; *ibid.*: 236); though unsympathetic to such an approach in general, I shall confine myself to one specific criticism of it in the final section of this paper. Second, the italicized phrase suggests that Trautmann envisages an almost deterministic link between categories and rules. Indeed, he rejects as 'ineffectual' the view (attributed to Scheffler) that terminological distinctions and rules 'are not invariable concomitants of one another' (*ibid.*). By contrast, one of Dumont's most enduring contributions to kinship theory has been his aphorism that 'kinship terminologies have not as their function to register groups' (1964: 78), a point further elaborated in Needham's systematic demonstration (1967: 43) that categories and rules need not be congruent.

### The Empirical Evidence

Despite such differences, both writers would agree that the relationship terminologies employed by inhabitants of South India and Sri Lanka are structured as in Table 1 and Figure 1. This particular case concerns the terminology used by Kondaiyankottai Maravar, members of a numerous caste in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu state. It is a classic example of a symmetric prescriptive terminology, and represents the formal equivalent at the categorical level of a jural preference for bilateral cross cousin marriage. In fact, however, Table 1 does not accurately characterize the terminological usages of the majority of castes in southern Tamil Nadu. Far from being exemplars of 'Dravidian kinship', these Maravar are in fact a very special case, not least by virtue of their system of matrilineal, exogamous 'branches' (*kilai*, cf. Fawcett 1903; Dumont 1957a; Good 1981).

All other castes in the region from which this terminology was collected<sup>3</sup> turn out to have a rather different terminology. It involves an almost identical set of terms but these are deployed in a significantly different way, as Table 2 and Figure 2 show. There are thus two distinct terminological structures co-existing even within a single village—although precisely because the actual terms are more-or-less the same in both cases, people are not always aware that their neighbours apply them differently.

As shown in Figure 1, the formal structure of the Maravar terminology can indeed be generated by the across-the-board application of the four structuring principles identified by Dumont and Trautmann, in the following order: parallel-cross; senior-junior (relative to ego); male-female; and generational distance (Good 1981: 114; 1991: 58-9; Trautmann 1981: 229-37)<sup>4</sup>.

Table 1 : Terminology used by Kondaiyankottai Maravar

NO	TERM	REFERENTS
1	<i>tāttā</i>	FF, MF, FFb, MFb, FMB, MMB
2	<i>pātti, ācci</i>	FM, MM, FFz, MFz, FMz, MMz
3	<i>ayyā, appā</i>	F
4	<i>periyappā</i>	FeB, MZH (older than F)
5	<i>sittappā</i>	FyB, MZH (younger than F)
6	<i>attā, ammāl</i>	M
7	<i>periyammāl</i>	MeZ, FeBW
8	<i>sinnamāl, sitti</i>	MyZ, FyBW
9	<i>māman</i>	MB, FZH, WF, HF
10	<i>attai</i>	FZ, MBW, WM, HM
11	<i>māmiyār</i>	HM

<sup>3</sup> Full details are lacking as regards local Brahmans, but as they are known to practise eZDy marriage (Beck n.d.; Dumont 1957b: 186; Good 1989: 239), their terminology must be closer to that in Table 2 than to Table 1.

<sup>4</sup> In an earlier presentation I generated this structure by applying these principles in a different order (Good 1981: 114). The end result is the same but the argument offered here suggests that generational distance is *logically* the least basic.

12	<i>amaṇ</i>	Be, FBSe, MZSe
13	<i>akkāl</i>	Ze, FBDe, MZDe
14	<i>tampi</i>	By, FBSy, MZSy
15	<i>taṅkacci, taṅkai</i>	Zy, FBDy, MZDy
16	<i>attān</i>	MBSe, FZSe, WeBe, HeB, eZH
17	<i>matini</i>	MBDe, FZDe, WeZe, HeZ, eBW
18	<i>maccinaṇ, māppillai</i>	MBSy <sub>ms</sub> , FZSy <sub>ms</sub> , WeBy, WyB, yZH <sub>ms</sub>
19	<i>koluntan</i>	MBSy <sub>ws</sub> , FZSy <sub>ws</sub> , HyB, yZHy <sub>ws</sub>
20	<i>koḷuntiyāl</i>	MBDy <sub>ms</sub> , FZDy <sub>ms</sub> , WeZy, WyZ, yBW <sub>ms</sub>
21	<i>sammanti, nāttinār</i>	MBDy <sub>ws</sub> , FZDy <sub>ws</sub> , HyZ, yBW <sub>ws</sub>
22	<i>sammantakkāraṇ</i>	DHF, DHM, SWF, SWM
23	<i>makaṇ</i>	S, BS <sub>ms</sub> , ZS <sub>ws</sub> , HBS, WZS
24	<i>makaḷ</i>	D, BD <sub>ms</sub> , ZD <sub>ws</sub> , HBD, WZD
25	<i>marumakaṇ</i>	BS <sub>ws</sub> , ZS <sub>ms</sub> , WBS, HZS, DH
26	<i>marumakaḷ</i>	BD <sub>ws</sub> , ZD <sub>ms</sub> , WBD, HZD, SW
27	<i>pēraṇ</i>	SS, DS, BSS, ZSS, BDS, ZDS
28	<i>pētti</i>	SD, DD, BSD, ZSD, BDD, ZDD

Table 2: Normal South Indian Relationship Terminology  
(Associated With eZDy Marriage)

NO	TERM	REFERENTS
1	<i>iāttā</i>	FF, MF, FFB, MFB, FMB, MMB
2	<i>pātti, ācci</i>	FM, MM, FFZ, MFZ, FMZ, MMZ
3	<i>ayyā, appā</i>	F
4	<i>periyappā</i>	FeB, MZH (older than F)
5	<i>sittappā</i>	FyB, MZH (younger than F)
6	<i>attā, ammāl</i>	M
7	<i>periyammāl</i>	MeZ, FeBW
8	<i>sinnammāl, sitti</i>	MyZ, FyBW
9	<i>māmaṇ</i>	MBe, FZH, WF, HF, FZSe, MBSe, BSe <sub>ws</sub> , ZSe <sub>ms</sub> , eZH, HeB, WeBe
10	<i>attai</i>	FZ, MBW, WM, HM
11	<i>māmiyār</i>	HM
12	<i>amaṇ</i>	Be, FBSe, MZSe, ZSe <sub>ws</sub>
13	<i>akkāl</i>	Ze, FBDe, MZDe, ZDe <sub>ws</sub>
14	<i>tampi</i>	By, FBSy, MZSy
15	<i>taṅkacci, taṅkai</i>	Zy, FBDy, MZDy
16	<i>attān</i>	HeB, ZHe
17	<i>matini</i>	ZDe <sub>ms</sub> , MBDe, FZDe, BDe <sub>ws</sub> , WeZe, HeZ, eBW
18	<i>maccinaṇ, māppillai</i>	MBy <sub>ms</sub> , WBy, HeB, yZHy <sub>ms</sub>
19	<i>koluntan</i>	MBy <sub>ws</sub> , MBSy <sub>ws</sub> , FZSy <sub>ws</sub> , HyB, ZHy <sub>ws</sub>
20	<i>koḷuntiyāl</i>	ZDy <sub>ms</sub> , MBDy <sub>ms</sub> , FZDy <sub>ms</sub> , WZy, yBW <sub>ms</sub> , MZy <sub>ms</sub>
21	<i>sammanti, nāttinār</i>	BDy <sub>ws</sub> , MBDy <sub>ws</sub> , FZDy <sub>ws</sub> , HyZ, yBW <sub>ws</sub>
22	<i>sammantakkāraṇ</i>	DHF, DHM, SWF, SWM
23	<i>makaṇ</i>	S, BS <sub>ms</sub> , ZS <sub>ws</sub> , HBS, WZS
24	<i>makaḷ</i>	D, BD <sub>ms</sub> , ZD <sub>ws</sub> , HBD, WZD
25	<i>marumakaṇ</i>	BSy <sub>ws</sub> , ZSy <sub>ms</sub> , WBS, HZS, DH, MBSy <sub>ms</sub> , FZSy <sub>ms</sub> , WBy
26	<i>marumakaḷ</i>	ZDy <sub>ms</sub> , WBD, HZD, SW, MBDy <sub>ms</sub> , FZDy <sub>ms</sub>

27	<i>pēraṅ</i>	SS, DS, BSS, ZSS, BDS, ZDS
28	<i>pētti</i>	SD, DD, BSD, ZSD, BDD, ZDD

The terminology employed by other castes is less symmetrical, and has to be depicted separately for male and female speakers<sup>5</sup>. The most significant difference is that whereas the Maravar terminology is rigidly structured according to generation, the majority terminology depicted in Figure 2 applies cross relative terms according to seniority (relative age). Thus, the referents of *māmaṅ* in Table 2 include MBe (+1 in generational terms), FZHe (+1), FZSe (+0), MBe (+0), and osGSe (-1). In other words every male cross relative senior to Ego is termed *māmaṅ*, irrespective of the genealogical generation to which he belongs. Whether they depart from it in this precise way or not, it is impossible for groups practising eZDy marriage to employ the classic 'Dravidian' terminology as portrayed by Dumont and Trautmann. As far as relationship terms are concerned, therefore, the classifications employed by the great majority of people in this part of southern Tamil Nadu depart significantly from what is generally meant by 'the Dravidian system'.

More speculatively, careful work<sup>6</sup> is likely to demonstrate that this conclusion is more widely applicable, because—as will now be shown—most people in other parts of South India also express marriage preferences which are intrinsically incompatible with the Maravar terminology in Table 1. Comparison here is less straightforward than in the case of terminology, because of the variety of forms which jural statements may take. Fortunately, discussion can be restricted to the question of marriage preferences, and, even more narrowly, to the preferential 'claim' (*urimai*) which certain relatives are seen to have on one another as potential marriage partners. Not that political, economic, psychological, and aesthetic considerations are unimportant—far from it—but both the authorities cited above agree that the fundamental jural institution is the cross cousin marriage rule, which is 'supposed by' (Dumont), or 'logically required by' (Trautmann) the terminology.

Figure 1 : Structure of Kondaiyankottai Maravar Terminology

<i>tāttā</i>	<i>pātti</i>	<i>pātti</i>	<i>tāttā</i>
<i>periyappā</i> <i>appā</i> <i>sittappā</i>	<i>attai</i>	<i>periyammāl</i> <i>ammāl</i> <i>sitti</i>	<i>māmaṅ</i>
<i>annan</i>	<i>akkāl</i>	<i>matini</i>	<i>attā n</i>
<i>tampi</i>	<i>tankacci</i>	<i>koluntiyāl</i> (ms) <i>sammanti</i> (ws)	<i>maccinaṅ</i> (ms) <i>koluntaṅ</i> (ws)
<i>makaṅ</i>	<i>makaḷ</i>	<i>marumakaḷ</i>	<i>marumakaṅ</i>
<i>pēraṅ</i>	<i>pētti</i>	<i>pētti</i>	<i>pēraṅ</i>

Both writers scrupulously acknowledge that 'cross cousin marriage' is a convenient, but not entirely precise label<sup>7</sup>. First, not all cross cousins are marriageable; the terminology divides them in such a way that only junior female cross-cousins and senior male cross cousins are included in the marriageable category, and rules and practices reflect this. Second, it is not merely cousins who are marriageable, but all relatives falling into that same terminological category. But although Dumont and Trautmann recognize both points, they do not in my opinion take them far enough.

<sup>5</sup> The two structures are identical in the more abstract sense that each has one term for 'junior, cross-relative, same-sex', and two for 'junior cross-relative, opposite sex'. It has recently been pointed out to me more generally that affinity and 'crossness' need to be thought of differently for male and female egos, but this important point cannot be pursued here (Cecilia Busby, pers. comm.)

<sup>6</sup> The problems with much of the published data for South India are discussed in Good (1980: 496-7); it is particularly crucial that methods of data collection distinguish scrupulously between 'terminological' and 'genealogical' identity (Barnard & Good 1984: 44-7).

<sup>7</sup> Dumont explains that the expression "cross-cousin marriage" corresponds to 'forms of intermarriage between categories... as well as to marriage between identifiable close relatives' (1981: 163, orig. italics). Trautmann stresses that "'Cross cousin,"... is our label for a Dravidian category whose meaning is only approximated by... mother's brother's child plus father's sister's child' (1981: 30, orig. italics).

### Elder Sister's Daughter Marriage

The crucial missing element is that for many people in South India and Sri Lanka the most favoured marriage is that between a man and his elder sister's daughter (in Tamil, *akkāḷ makal*), and for most others such marriages are at least as preferable as cross cousin marriage<sup>8</sup>. The marriageable category is therefore significantly broader than 'an affine in one's generation' (Dumont 1957a: 26). For most South Indian men, in fact, *any* junior affine is marriageable, irrespective of genealogical generation<sup>9</sup>. For an astonishingly long time, this widely attested fact was almost wholly marginalised by writing on Dravidian kinship, presumably because it could not easily be accommodated within the terminological paradigm devised by Morgan and formalised by Dumont. Even in his most recent statement on the matter, Dumont felt no qualms about asserting that 'uncle-niece marriage falls outside our purview' (1981: 145), while Trautmann saw it as 'a secondary derivative of the basic cross cousin rule' (1981: 206)<sup>10</sup>.

Yet I do not know of any castes in Tamil Nadu which prohibit MyBe/eZDy marriage unless (a) they have matrilineal, exogamous descent groups, which are of course inherently incompatible with such marriages; or (b) they are Christian, in which case the churches discourage the practice to varying degrees. Piramalai Kallar were long thought to represent an exceptional case of a patrilineal group which did not permit MyBe/eZDy marriage, on the basis of Dumont's assertion that 'les Kallar réprouvent ce dernier vigourement' (1957b: 186), but recent work in a village immediately adjacent to Dumont's field location has shown that the practice is actually quite frequent among such Kallar, and far from disapproved of by them (Sekine 1993: 161).

This widely and strongly stated preference is clearly manifest in kinship behaviour, too. Table 3 summarizes some typical data, arranged in roughly north-south order. In several cases MyBe/eZDy marriage is the commonest form of close inter-marriage, while in most others it is comparable in frequency to marriage with either cross cousin. This is striking, because if relative age rules are taken into account<sup>11</sup> it is to be expected that fewer people will have marriageable relatives of this type than have first cross-cousins. In other words, it seems that a higher proportion of those able to do so actually enter into such alliances than in the case of first cousin marriage, though I do not know of any reliable demographic study that actually quantifies this. Moreover, when spouses are simultaneously related as MyBe/eZDy and FZSe/MBDy, it is always the former relationship which is made explicit.

The groom is always said to be marrying his *akkāḷ makal*, and although the marriage creates a genealogical identity between his eZ (*akkāḷ*) and WM (*attai*), he always continues to use the former term<sup>12</sup>.

Thus, my own empirical evidence shows quite clearly (and the data of many other fieldworkers strongly suggest the same): that MyBe/eZDy marriages are as common as first cross cousin marriages in South India and among Tamils (and Muslims?) in Sri Lanka; that MyBe/eZDy marriages are preferred at least as strongly as first cross cousin marriages by most people; and that as a consequence<sup>13</sup> their relationship terminologies often subordinate considerations of generation to those

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<sup>8</sup> I put it thus for simplicity's sake, but in fact this contrast is a false one, because repeated eZDy marriage is simultaneously marriage with the MBDy. Indeed, I was unable to convince many practitioners that there was any difference between the two.

<sup>9</sup> In a second successive MyBe/eZDy marriage, the bride is simultaneously the man's MBDy (-0 in terms of genealogical generation) and his eZDy (-1); for the third in succession, she is his FFZSDDD (-2) and MMMBSD (+1), too.

<sup>10</sup> He also described it as a 'derivative of patrilineal cross cousin marriage' (1981: 206), a popular view which does not stand up to scrutiny (Good 1980: 490; footnote 8 above).

<sup>11</sup> Husbands must be senior to wives, but the age disparity should not be too great. Thus, MyBe/eZDy marriage is unlikely if the two parties are a full chronological generation apart.

<sup>12</sup> Likewise, his son refers to this woman as *attai* (FZ) rather than *pātti* (MM), even though in both cases a less senior and therefore less respectful term is involved.

<sup>13</sup> A terminology which adheres rigidly to generational principles cannot possibly cope with the by no means uncommon situation mentioned in note 10 above.

of relative age. The most common forms of kinship among Dravidian-speaking people of the region therefore differ in basic behavioural, jural, and categorical ways from the ‘Dravidian kinship system’ as generally understood. In short, *most Dravidians do not have a ‘Dravidian kinship system’*.

### “Dravidian” as a Type of System

Clearly, this paradoxical conclusion highlights the need to re-examine the specific utility of “Dravidian” as the label for a particular type of kinship system. But it also leads to more general criticisms, concerning the fact that the two best known, and historically most widely used, typologies of kinship systems (Morgan 1871; Murdock 1949: 224–59) both contain completely gratuitous<sup>14</sup> ambiguities as a result of their insistence upon attaching such pseudo-ethnographic labels to their constituent types<sup>15</sup>.

Figure 2: Structure of Normal South Indian Relationship Terminology (Associated With eZDy Marriage)

#### (a) Male speaker:

<i>tāttā</i>	<i>pātti</i>	<i>pātti</i>	<i>tāttā</i>
<i>periyappā</i> <i>appā</i> <i>sittappā</i>	<i>attai</i>	<i>periyammāl</i> <i>ammāl</i> <i>sitti</i>	<i>māman</i>
<i>aṁṁan</i>	<i>akkāl</i>	<i>matini</i>	
<i>tampi</i>	<i>taṅkacci</i>	<i>koḷuntiyāl</i> (eZDy)	<i>marumakan</i>
<i>makan</i>	<i>makaḷ</i>	<i>marumakaḷ</i> (yZD)	
<i>pēran</i>	<i>pētti</i>	<i>pētti</i>	<i>pēran</i>

#### (b) Female speaker:

<i>tāttā</i>	<i>pātti</i>	<i>pātti</i>	<i>tāttā</i>
<i>periyappā</i> <i>appā</i> <i>sittappā</i>	<i>attai</i>	<i>periyammāl</i> <i>ammāl</i> <i>sitti</i>	<i>māman</i>
<i>aṁṁan</i>	<i>akkāl</i>	<i>matini</i>	
<i>tampi</i>	<i>taṅkacci</i>	<i>sammanti</i>	<i>koḷuntan</i> (MBy, PosGy)
<i>makan</i>	<i>makaḷ</i>		<i>marumakan</i>
<i>pēran</i>	<i>pētti</i>	<i>pētti</i>	<i>pēran</i>

<sup>14</sup> ‘Gratuitous’ in the sense that Murdock’s typology, at any rate, is actually based upon a set of relatively formal terminological distinctions in ego’s own genealogical level.

<sup>15</sup> The following criticisms apply, *mutatis mutandis*, not only to “Dravidian”, but also to “Iroquois”, “Crow”, “Omaha”, “Hawaiian”, “Eskimo”, etc., etc. I suspect that it would often be possible to replicate my empirical demonstration that these very people themselves do not actually operate the ‘kinship systems’ named after them; and nothing is more certain than that not all ‘kinship systems’ elsewhere to which these labels are attached conform to the ideal type, however that may be defined.



Table 3: Frequencies of First Cross Cousin and eZDy Marriage

District & State	Source	Sample	%age of Marriages			Notes
			MBDy	FZDy	eZDy	
Satara, Maharashtra	Valunekar (1966)	-	13	3	0.3	a
Visakh, Andhra Pradesh	Kodanda Rao (1982)	139	23	12	17	b?
Dharwar, Karnataka	Bradford (1985)	550	8 (jointly)		8	
Dharwar, Karnataka	Conklin (1973)	558	11	8	14	b?
Dharwar, Karnataka	Chekki (1968)	569	9	6	10	
Bangalore, Karnataka	McCormack (1958)	518	7	5	10	b
Mandya, Karnataka	Banerjee (1966)	-	14	5	8	
Mysore, Karnataka	Banerjee (1966)	-	9	4	4	
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu	Beck (1972)	525	6	5	7	
Tanjavur, Tamil Nadu	Gough (1956)	-	4	4	4	
Tanjavur, Tamil Nadu	Sivertson (1963)	157	15	15	20	b
Ramnad, Tamil Nadu	Mosse (1986)	625	17	10	6	c
Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu	Good (1991)	969	6	6	8	c

**Notes:** These data are largely extracted from the comparative tables drawn up by Beck (1972: 253), Good (1978: 460), and Trautmann (1981: 218).

- Maharashtra represents the extreme northern fringe of the Dravidian system according to Trautmann (1981: 111).
- The absolute figures are inflated because more distant relatives of the same types are also included; the relative proportions should still be significant, however.
- The sample excludes Christian and matrilineal castes.

Trautmann distinguishes between “Dravidian kinship” used as a morphological construct, and as a (usually covert) historical construct (1981: 3). In the first sense it may be found anywhere in the world; in the second, its spread is restricted to a particular region of South Asia. These two senses were directly linked in Morgan’s mind (*ibid.*: 72), so the structural similarities which he perceived between Tamil and Iroquois terminologies inspired him to engage in speculation about historical links between the two peoples (*ibid.*: 237). By contrast, most writers nowadays would regard it as essential to keep these two senses clearly separate. It is, however, worth noting that Morgan’s work did succeed in setting the trend in one key respect: like his, most subsequent comparative studies tended to focus above all upon the relationship terminologies of the societies in question, and secondarily upon aspects of marriage rules (cross-cousin marriage, in this case), with kinship practice being almost totally neglected. In my view comparisons must be drawn between wholes rather than parts, so that if kinship is to be compared in different parts of the world, then categories, rules, and behaviour must all be given full weight.

In the morphological sense, “Dravidian” forms one part of a worldwide typology of kinship systems which has no necessary geographical basis, so that it becomes possible to speak of “Dravidian systems” in South America or Australia. I emphatically reject this use of the term, not because I reject the idea that similar structural features may be found in different places, but rather because, if so — *especially* if so — it seems unnecessarily confusing to name such features after particular language families. The ambiguity is even greater nowadays, since ‘Dravidian’ is not only used as the name of a particular language family, but — in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka particularly — also denotes particular supposed ethnic groups or nationalities, and various political movements associated with them. Its apparently neutral use by past generations of anthropologists (and even more, by comparative linguists) has lent academic support to benign or malign political activities which the scholars concerned usually did not envisage, and certainly did not control. In other words, this particular kind of substantive typologising has practical dangers in addition to its methodological failings.

As for the historical sense of the term, and particularly the idea that the various kinship features found in present-day South India are all descendants of a single ‘Proto-Dravidian’ system (Trautmann 1981: 229), this seems more suited to the realms of philology than to historical sociology. In an early publication (Good 1980), I speculated tongue-in-cheek that if there had been such a proto-system it must have been similar to the structure shown in Table 2 and Figure 2, rather than the Table 1, Figure

1 structure supposed by Morgan, Dumont, Trautmann, and many others. This was done largely to emphasise the arbitrary nature of the prevailing assumption; in reality, I am uninterested in the question of which came first. The important thing, in my view, is to stress that Table 1 and Figure 1 simply do not correspond to the situation across most of *contemporary* South Asia. Moreover, I am not persuaded by the idea of a proto-system, however constituted. It seems inherently implausible that there should have been such a burgeoning of cultural diversity out of primal unity, when the whole trend throughout the region, thanks to greater political, legal, and economic uniformity, and better physical and cultural communications, has been precisely the reverse. If anything, it seems more plausible to speculate that the kinship practices and patterns of the region are tending to converge rather than diverge. There is, in short, rather more likelihood of a ‘Neo–Dravidian’ pattern emerging in the future than of a ‘Proto–Dravidian’ one existing in the past!

The above criticisms cannot all be evaded merely by the use of non–ethnographic names for the types of system concerned, because such typologies would still be constructed on an empirical rather than a formal basis. In other words, because the types making them up are derived from (more or less idealised) real cases, the resulting typologies are historically contingent and *post facto*. They depend upon the state of empirical knowledge at any given time, and the possibility can never be ruled out that future ethnographic evidence might necessitate the addition of further types to the overall list. The use of formal typologies, comprising the complete set of logical permutations of a particular diagnostic feature, seems at first sight more promising, since it does not suffer from the historical contingency of the other approach, and can even predict the possibility of types not (yet) observed in the field. This was the approach taken, for example, by Lowie (1928; 1929), whose diagnostic feature was the patterning of terminological usages in the first ascending genealogical level. On this basis, “Dravidian” is classified as “bifurcate merging” by virtue of the terminological equations

$$F = FB \neq MB \qquad M = MZ \neq FZ$$

Difficulties arise here too, however, notably because of the apparently arbitrary choice of diagnostic criterion. Why should this particular equivalence be significant, rather than some other? Why should it be assumed that relationship terms are always genealogically based? Why, indeed, should types of kinship system be identified on the basis of terminological similarities, rather than similarities of rules or practices?

The final point in this section concerns practical utility. Even supposing, notwithstanding everything that has just been said, we were to accept that there were such things, broadly speaking, as “bifurcate merging”, or even “Dravidian”, kinship systems, what purpose would it serve to label any particular empirical example in this way, when the details differ so markedly from case to case? One could never be content with the label itself, and a great deal of further information would always be required to characterize each example adequately. For example, the terminologies in Tables 1 and 2 both satisfy Lowie’s criterion, yet to label both as “bifurcate merging” would be to ignore the utterly crucial differences between them. Likewise, both are the terminologies of Dravidian–speakers, yet the same reservation applies. In fact, such labelling is at best redundant, at worst a hindrance to proper understanding because it raises expectations which may not, in any given case, be fulfilled.

### **South Indian Models in the Amazon Lowlands?**

In a justly celebrated paper, John Barnes (1962) drew attention to two problems with the New Guinea ethnography of the time. The first arose from the application of the lineage theory developed by Africanist anthropologists, notably Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, to situations which, despite their superficial similarity, were actually constituted quite differently. The second concerned the tendency, frequently found in such comparative efforts, to compare abstract, formal, anthropological models of one society, with observable practices in another, with the result that the latter inevitably seems to be a kind of inferior or degenerate version of an ideal type located elsewhere, rather than a unique society to be understood on its own terms. I would like to suggest that very similar difficulties arise when models developed in the South Indian ethnographic context are applied to other parts of the world, such as Amazonia, and that these are further magnified when what is applied is only a partial model—for example, a model of terminological structure to the exclusion of rules and practices.

There are both practical and methodological reasons why terms like ‘Dravidian’ should not be used in South American contexts. The difficulty is that one cannot import, say, Dumont’s approach as set out in his R.A.I. Occasional Paper (1957a), into South America, without unwittingly smuggling in a whole contraband cargo of historical, theoretical, and ethnographic baggage along with it, much of which is wildly inappropriate. For example, whereas lowland Amazonia is largely populated by geographically discrete groups living in remote jungles with low population densities, Tamils live in complex, multi-caste environments, often in urban, or even metropolitan settings, in which their next-

door neighbours may be members of other castes with, as exemplified above, quite different terminological structures, rules of marriageability, and marriage practices. This contrast may help account for the interesting distinction recently proposed by Vivieros de Castro and Fausto (1993: 147) between ‘diamétral’ Dravidian terminologies and practices in South India, and ‘concentrique’ consanguine-affine distinctions in Amazonia. To apply a single general rubric such as ‘Dravidian’ to both these very different situations appears fraught with danger. Moreover, when the same paper also draws an explicit distinction between more and less ‘orthodox’ Dravidian systems in Amazonia (*ibid.*: 145), one wonders what the point is in retaining the label ‘Dravidian’ at all.

### Systems or Processes?

Because kinship is manifest at several different levels, it follows that it can only be defined polythetically, in either the ethnographic or the formal sense. From that, it follows in turn that no single feature can be diagnostic, since even if it appears universal in practice, it cannot be either universal or essential in principle. In other words, according to the most commonly accepted definition of the term, *there is no system*<sup>16</sup>. Systems involve closure or boundedness, whereas polythetic definitions are by nature open and unbounded — indeterminate, to use Michael Houseman’s phrase (pers. comm.).

Admittedly the word ‘systematic’ does occur twice in the polythetic definition of kinship originally formulated by Alan Barnard and myself, as paraphrased earlier. I would probably be more wary of bandying about the term ‘system’ were I writing that passage today, but my laxity does draw attention to an important point, namely, that although kinship does not constitute a system in the full sense of the word, it may nonetheless contain *systematic features*. It will be generally agreed, for example, that relationship terminologies have such features<sup>17</sup>. But to ‘have systematic features’ is not the same as to ‘be a system’, so although the relationship terminology is systematic, it does not constitute *a system* either<sup>18</sup>.

In order to qualify as a system it is not enough for the phenomena in question to share a particular ontological characteristic; rather, the key point is that these phenomena should be inter-related in rather intimate and precise ways, so that ‘a change in the value of one of the variables will result in a change in the value of at least one other’ (Rappaport 1968: 4), or that ‘the set is in some way “organised” through the interrelationships between the units [which] exist as a “whole” which is “greater than the sum of its parts”’ (Langton 1973: 128). It has been argued persuasively that few, if any, social anthropological phenomena form systems in this strict sense, and that its use by anthropologists is therefore frequently ‘misleading and reflects sloppy thinking’ (Ellen 1982: 177). It is certainly my contention that ‘kinship’ does not form ‘a system’ according to precisely formulated criteria such as those just mentioned.

This, then, this is the final and most basic criticism. When I wrote at the beginning that there was ‘no such thing’ as the Dravidian kinship system, I did not of course mean that Dravidian speakers do not have kinship, or that there are no systematic features associated with that kinship. It does, however, seem increasingly questionable whether anthropological understanding of their kinship is best served by an insistence on them having ‘a kinship system’. To use an appropriately South Asian analogy, there exist in some regions of India relationships between occupational specialists from particular castes, and their farmer patrons, which can properly be called *jajmānī* relationships because they are so described by those related by them, whereas ‘the jajmani system’ has come to be recognized as a figment of the analyst’s imagination (Good 1982; Fuller 1989). In the same way, a static insistence on the systematicity of kinship, which at the jural level represents a relic of structural functionalism, and at the categorical level a hangover from structuralism, now seems a major obstacle to our understanding of kinship as an ongoing *process* of conceptualisation and strategisation.

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<sup>16</sup> A ‘system’ is defined in *Chambers’ Twentieth Century Dictionary* (1972: 1371) as ‘anything formed of parts placed together or adjusted into a regular and connected whole’.

<sup>17</sup> For example, they can be arranged into reciprocal sets covering most, but for a variety of reasons (Good 1978; Barnes 1978) not necessarily all, usages.

<sup>18</sup> Terminologies are frequently unbounded, for example, although analysts rarely acknowledge the fact. An analysis of the English terminology, for example, would be likely to exclude the terms ‘parent’, ‘child’, ‘grandparent’, etc., in favour of their more precise sub-categories, and to ignore cases where family friends are addressed as ‘aunt’ and ‘uncle’.

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