

Prescriptive Matrilateral Cross-Cousin Marriage in Asymmetric Alliance Systems: A Fallacy

Author(s): Lorenz G. Löffler

Source: *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Summer, 1964, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Summer, 1964), pp. 218-227

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/3629327>

## REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[http://www.jstor.com/stable/3629327?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.com/stable/3629327?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*

JSTOR

# PREScriptive MATRILATERAL CROSS-COUSIN MARRIAGE IN ASYMMETRIC ALLIANCE SYSTEMS: A FALLACY

LORENZ G. LÖFFLER

THE AIM OF THIS PAPER is to show that the notion of "prescriptive matrilateral cross-cousin marriage" cannot be usefully employed in the analysis of asymmetric alliance systems, as its use leads to serious confusion and misinterpretation of facts as well as of theories. The term has been used in nearly all publications of recent date which relate in some way to Lévi-Strauss's "*Les Structures Élémentaires de la Parenté*." Since 1960 Needham (1960:274) prefers to speak of "prescriptive alliance", but he still uses "prescriptive unilateral cross-cousin marriage" as well (Needham 1962:57). And it was Needham who introduced the use of the word "prescriptive" as a technical term into English language discussions of the topic (Leach 1961:343). My paper, therefore, will deal mainly with some of Needham's publications; I shall attack him and argue that he is wrong. But I shall not contend that his theory is faulty or that he has misunderstood the systems he is analyzing. On the contrary, my critique is a defense of his analyses, as I shall maintain that his critics misconceive the debated structure or that, when they attempt to discuss the system in terms of "prescriptive matrilateral cross-cousin marriage", their notions relate to a different problem. (cf. Berting and Philipsen 1960, Eyde & Postal 1961, Lane 1961, Lane 1962, Lounsbury 1962, Coulthard 1962).

"Prescriptive marriage" connotes, according to Needham, that "the category or type of person to be married is precisely determined and this marriage is obligatory" (Needham 1962:9). Salisbury earlier (1956:640) had proposed to use "obligatory marriage", "to refer to such a compulsory rule" (although, by the way, he was in error when he reported that Lévi-Strauss had called this "mariage privilégié", cf. Lévi-Strauss 1949:154). Both authors make reference to Lévi-Strauss: Salisbury says that "Lévi-Strauss deals mainly with obligatory rules" (Salisbury 1956:640), while Needham maintains that "Lévi-Strauss is concerned to analyze prescriptive rules of marriage, not preferential" (Needham 1962:11).<sup>1</sup> Still, all the societies in question have what has been called by Needham an "asymmetric alliance system". There can be no doubt that this system is a funda-

1 As a matter of fact, Lévi-Strauss used both terms, preferential and prescriptive, to characterize the marriage rules of the societies he analyzed. I shall return to this question at the end of my paper.

mental feature of these societies, and Needham in his various publications has shown how it works and what it implies.

What is the role of "prescriptive matrilateral cross-cousin marriage" in such societies? In order to develop my argument let me turn to a prime example of Needham's, his analysis of the Purum. Needham revised his analysis of 1958 in 1962, but as the first is more extensive I shall begin with it. In both papers Needham maintains that "the prescribed marriage is with the 'mother's brother's daughter'" (1958:79, 1962:76). The quotation marks are meant to indicate that more than one degree of relationship can be taken into consideration. As Needham (1958:79) says:

Das explains that "the rule of mother's brother's daughter marriage is not always and everywhere absolute. There may be more than one mother's brother's daughter. Moreover, marriage is allowed in the sib of the mother's brother," i.e. with a girl who is not the daughter of the maternal uncle but simply a member of the correct generation of his clan.

This last interpretation is an error (resulting from the misleading notion of prescriptive matrilateral cross-cousin marriage), corrected in the new paper where we read that marriage is also "with a woman who does not stand in any particular degree of relationship" (Needham 1962:76). "Within Ego's own generation all the women of any wife-giving group are *nau* (*nu*), one of the genealogical specifications of which is 'mother's brother's daughter'" (1962:78). But this term "which we translate as 'mother's brother's daughter,' applies to the wife's brother's daughter as well" (1958:81). This is very instructive: we might argue that if "mother's brother's daughter" may be Ego's wife's brother's daughter he must have married his mother. He apparently must not; that is, the translation of *naunu* by "mother's brother's daughter" is fallacious, and it is unwarranted to tell us that there is a prescription to marry "mother's brother's daughter" (cf. also Leach 1962:153).

Needham is well aware of the problem, since he comments on his own translation: "Though informative to a degree these translations are misleading, and we must not forget that as Purum concepts they connote . . . 'potential wife' (cf. Hocart 1937)" (Needham 1958:80). This is equally wrong, since *naunu* is also (and primarily) used to designate Ego's younger sister who, to be sure, cannot be regarded as his "potential wife". And if we read Hocart we find that he rejects amongst others a translation of native kin terms by "potential wife" (Hocart 1937:546-547). If Hocart's paper has anything to tell us, it tells us,

first of all, that faulty translations should be avoided because of the wrong connotations and impressions they provoke.

To be sure, mother's brother's daughter is among those who can be married by a Purum man, but not every marriageable woman is a (true or classificatory) matrilateral cross-cousin; there may even be marriages with members of a neighboring tribe. Thus, the characterization of the Purum system by "prescribed matrilateral cross-cousin marriage" is not only extremely misleading but also flatly wrong if "matrilateral cross-cousin" connotes, as it conventionally does, mother's brother's daughter and not anybody else. Again, a man cannot but marry a girl whose father he will call *pu*. Mother's brother is called *pu*, but other relatives are called *pu* as well. Suppose we should call our fathers-in-law "uncle"; this would not make our marriages more prescriptive than they are.

I shall return to the question of kin terms and types, but first it is necessary to consider that, even if there is no prescribed marriage with a "matrilateral cross-cousin" in this system, Needham may be correct in that marriage is prescribed with a structurally determined category of women. We learn that "Ego-group, wife-givers, and wife-takers . . . are *structural groups*" and "members of these three structural groups . . . are terminologically related in the same way as individuals in particular marriages" (Needham 1958:76, 80). Who, then are the members of these groups?

The Purum prohibit marriage in one's own sib; this forms the Ego-group. In former times there were rules governing the marriage relations between sibs, but these have broken down. Today a man may marry a woman from, and give a woman to, any other sib. But there are subsibs, and Das, the ethnographer, maintained that they have replaced the sibs in regulating marriages. Yet, despite Das's assertion, his table of subsib relations shows cases of reciprocal marriages between subsibs. Das's genealogical charts, on the other hand, evidence a strong tendency to maintain an established affinal relation between subsibs. Moreover, from the table of affinal subsib relations it becomes clear that Purum informants were not able to provide a generalized chart specifying marriage relations, and equally, that their opinions sometimes were inconsistent with actual marriage connections. A considerable number of subsibs do not stand in any actual relationship; if knowledge of previous marriages is lacking, the mutual position remains undefined. Hence new connections can be created which may conflict with others of which the contracting parties had no knowledge. It follows that marriage was not and is not necessarily contracted between kinsmen, although there is an obvious preference to marry into an established wife-giving subsib (perhaps containing one's mother's brother). That is, marriage is prohibited with one's wife-

takers and preferred (but not prescribed) with one's wife-givers; or more precisely, with those who have been established as one's wife-takers or givers. Who, then, is prescribed categorically?

In an attempt to specify Needham's categories, I turn now to his paper on the Vaiphei (1959), which contains a table entitled "Vaiphei categories of descent and alliance". This table shows kinship terms in a systematic arrangement implying special equations, and it is equations of kinship terms which "clearly indicate an asymmetric alliance system based on prescribed marriage with the matrilateral cross-cousin" (Needham 1959:402). Needham rejects the term given by his source for mother's brother's daughter; this shows that he can do without it in his analysis. The main basis for his judgment is indeed the equations, especially those of mother's brother and his wife with a man's parents-in-law and of father's sister and her husband with a woman's parents-in-law; the complete set may be entered in a diagram based exclusively on matrilateral cross-cousin marriage. Evidently, Needham has inferred the "prescriptive mother's brother's daughter marriage" from diagrams. But "a kinship system is not a social group, nor does it ever correspond to an organized aggregation of individuals" (Murdock 1949:91), and a structural analysis is no excuse for wrong inferences from diagrams. An illustrative example is provided by the Lhota system.

Needham classifies the Lhota as "non-prescriptive" (1962:55). According to Mills (1922:95), a man may not marry:

(1) his mother's sister's daughter, even if his mother's sister has married into another clan . . . ; (2) his own sister's daughter (*orrhovo*); (3) his father's sister's daughter (*orrhovo*); but he can marry his mother's brother's daughter (*oyonung-howo*). A man is rather expected to take his wife from his mother's clan. There is no fine for not doing so, but his mother's clan are likely to take offense.

Subsibs, formerly sibs ("clans"), are exogamous, and marriage is preferred within the village. Thus there is no notable difference with the rules of exogamy reported for the Purum, since rules (2) and (3) indicate that a man cannot marry women of the (structural) wife-taking lineage. But the Lhota kinship terms, by equating relatives on the wife-givers' and the wife-takers' side, are partially indicative of "échange restreint" (for details cf. Lévi-Strauss 1949:340) and, therefore, do not fit Needham's "prescriptive" diagram.

The Lakher constitute another example. Lévi-Strauss treated this case as an example of "échange généralisé", but Needham asserted that their terms "although they can be forced into such a categorization, do not in fact possess the specifications which denote an asymmetric system, and we know that [this society

is] not so organized" (Needham 1959:402). This statement may be contested since, two years before, Leach (1957) discussed Lakher as an asymmetric alliance system; his analysis, like that of Lévi-Strauss, was based upon Parry (1932). It is true that the cousin terms reported by Parry do not suggest an asymmetric system, but those provided by Lorrain (1951) and evaluated by myself (Löffler 1960) should leave no doubt. In 1962 Needham (1962:55) reaffirmed his earlier judgment, remarked on inconsistent ethnographic data for Lakher (which I fail to see), and classed them as "non-prescriptive, to judge by the explicit ethnographic reports concerning marriage". However, Parry (1932:293-295) reports specifically that "the most favored marriage is with a mother's brother's daughter", that the "children of two brothers do not marry", and that "a man should not marry his father's sister's daughter." These are the very conditions of asymmetric cross-cousin marriage, and the fact that the Lakher follow the rules of an asymmetric alliance system has been reconfirmed by Lehmann (1963:122). Needham's judgment may have been influenced by the fact that the Lakher do not forbid marriage between the children of two sisters. But there is no positive evidence that this is not the case with the Purum as well. Sisters, mother's sisters' daughters, and mother's brother's daughters are called by the same Purum terms (differentiated according to relative age), while the Lakher use the same pattern of terms (equally differentiated) in address. The "non-prescriptive" Lhota, on the other hand, forbid marriage with a mother's sister's daughter. According to Needham's "categories", then, what should the rule be?

In the diagram used by Needham to illustrate the asymmetric alliance system, mother's sister is identified with mother, her husband with father, and their children with siblings; they should not be marriageable. But suppose that men of two affinally related sibs both marry into a third sib, as is the case among the Purum on subsib level; men of A may marry women of B and C, and men of B may marry women of C. In this case, mother's sister's daughter will be a member of a wife-giving sib and may be classed accordingly. If Needham wants to assert that the members of the three structural groups (Ego-group, wife-givers, wife-takers) "are terminologically related in the same way as individuals are related in particular marriages" (1958:80), he will have to maintain that a mother's sister's daughter can be a "mother's brother's daughter", too. Purum terminology cannot help solve the question: sister, mother's sister's daughter, and mother's brother's daughter are called by the same term.

Ethnographic sources attest both types of regulation within asymmetric alliance systems: (1) mother's sister's daughter always forbidden (even though her father be a "wife-giver"), and (2) mother's sister's daughter classified as

marriageable according to the alignment of her father (cf. Löffler 1960). But even in a case of the second type (mother's sister's daughter marriageable on condition that she does not belong to Ego's own or wife-taking group) not every woman of the wife-givers' category is eligible for marriage; mother and her sisters are still proscribed, not prescribed. There is nothing in the exchange theory underlying the concept of prescriptive marriage to explain the fact that some women of the wife-giving groups are always excepted from eligibility, and it is doubtful that Needham is correct when he says: "An important feature of such societies is that the prescriptions are related to marriage prohibitions in such a coherent fashion as to present systems of positive and negative rules which can be studied as wholes" (1958:75). Are they really correlative aspects of the same system? Not a single prescription has been encountered thus far, with the possible exception of the Lhota, whom Needham, however, considered "non-prescriptive."

Recent ethnographic field work in societies with asymmetric alliance systems elaborates my argument. Thus Lehmann (1963:122-123) remarks:

I agree with Needham that a prescriptive (as against a merely preferential) rule of marriage exists only where it results in systematic and enduring structural relationships among local descent groups, but the injunction not to give wives to groups who are wife-givers, and vice versa, is in itself quite sufficient to produce this very result. The Haka Chin have the negative rule of marriage in question . . . Haka Chin, in any case, *prefer* to marry a real or classificatory mother's brother's daughter. No other prescription or preference is given. They are absolutely forbidden to marry a father's sister's daughter.

Lehmann concludes: "The Haka Chin, then, have prescriptive matrilateral cross-cousin marriage" (1963:122-23). The consequences are rather curious, since we must infer a system of prescriptive matrilateral cross-cousin marriage where matrilateral cross-cousin marriage is preferred but not prescribed. This is not the fault of the Haka Chin and Lehmann's study; it is just that Needham's term is inappropriate. Let me generalize: in an ordinary asymmetric alliance system there is neither a prescription to marry a mother's brother's daughter nor a prescription to marry a woman of established wife-giving lines. Further, the consequences of a system where marriage with a matrilateral cross-cousin is really prescribed have been sketched by Lane (1962:473), who demonstrated that it will result in a bilineal section system of the Murngin type. Surely no-one can believe that it automatically causes "*échange généralisé*", as Berling & Philipsen (1960:77) have maintained. It is quite futile, therefore, to attempt to identify

the conditions leading to a prescription of the matrilateral cross-cousin in order to explain asymmetric alliance systems (e.g., Eyde and Postal 1961). When Homans & Schneider (1955) criticized Lévi-Strauss they missed the point, not because they did not explain the prescription (as is annoyingly repeated by every critic), but because preferential matrilateral cross-cousin marriage, although a common feature of asymmetric alliance systems, is completely unqualified to explain them. Contrary to what Needham has maintained, I would assert that systems of asymmetric alliance are *not* primarily concerned with rules governing the acquisition of a wife *from among kin*.

What is the basis for the confusion of kinship relations, marriage prescriptions and preferences, and the rules governing asymmetric alliance systems? To answer this question we must go to Lévi-Strauss. Needham (1962) has recently tried to explain what Lévi-Strauss really meant, but one may suspect that his interpretation was influenced by a desire to disprove the arguments of Homans and Schneider and to fit Lévi-Strauss into his own framework of theory. According to Needham, Lévi-Strauss's theme was "prescriptive marriage", even when he spoke of "mariage préférentiel". Let me requote some passages cited by Needham. Lévi-Strauss characterized his systems by "positive determination of the type of preferred spouse", and Needham notes with regret that "Lévi-Strauss persists in the unfortunate use of the word 'preferred'" (1962:10). If Lévi-Strauss had used "prescribed", his phrase would have been tautological; moreover, we have seen that marriages with a matrilateral cross-cousin are at best preferential. "Preferred" is consistent with the facts and "prescribed" is not. But this is a question of minor importance; it is the "positive determination" which is at issue. According to Lévi-Strauss (1949:ix) this determination is due to the *system*, for his book is about "les systèmes qui prescrivent le mariage avec un certain type de parents". Further, he states (1949:333) "l'union préférentielle . . . résulte d'une relation entre lignées plutôt que d'un degré prescrit entre certains individus". It is not "prescribed matrilateral cross-cousin marriage" but the relation between descent groups, i.e., the asymmetric alliance system, which determines the selection of the marriage partner. And this, to be sure, is the very argument of Needham, and the ethnographic fact.

There remains but one crucial question, that of the "positive" determination. This determination is positive insofar as it helps to continue and to guarantee the system, but this is probably not the sense in which Lévi-Strauss used the expression, since he says that the *system* itself positively determines the marriage rules. The system to which I have referred, following Needham, as the "asymmetric alliance system" has been conceived by Lévi-Strauss as "échange général-

isé"; and one of his main themes has been to maintain that the rules of exogamy cannot be explained from their negative aspect, but that they are positively determined by the very idea of exchange (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1949:52-65, 596-601). He indeed claimed that exchange might lead ultimately to a prohibition of marriage relations which would be destructive of the entire system (e.g., 1949:185), but he was not concerned with whether marriage rules were prescriptive or not. The mere fact that marriage was regulated by an asymmetric alliance system (by "échange généralisé") was sufficient to prove "la détermination positive du type de conjoint préféré" (1949:575).

I shall not deal here with this theory at length. Still, previous paragraphs have indicated that an asymmetric alliance system may be consistent with two distinctive types of marriage regulation for the matrilateral parallel cousin, and that the principle of exchange (circulation of women) will never be sufficient to explain all rules of exogamy. But neither can the system be explained by rules of exogamy alone, unless these rules are considered to apply to complete descent groups.<sup>2</sup> The system requires that marriage constitute "a systematically organized affair which forms part of a series of contractual obligations between two social groups" (Leach 1951:24). Kinship terms may be extended to apply to all members of these groups according to their category. If a man marries into an unrelated (hitherto uncategorized) descent group, it will be automatically included in the system and its members become his kinsmen. This type of marriage might be termed "taxonomic", and Needham's use of "prescriptive matrilateral cross-cousin marriage" replaced by "taxonomic matrilateral marriage". It is obvious that such a taxonomic union can be neither "preferential" nor "prescriptive". If Lounsbury (1962:1307) finds that "we may be concerned more with rights than with obligations", there can be no doubt that he is right with regard to the consequences of these marriages, but this really does not upset Needham's assertion that a man *must* marry a woman of a certain *category* "prescribed" by the taxonomic system.

The question, however, is: can we call this "prescription" or the system by which the taxonomy is effected "marriage"? Lévi-Strauss concluded that we cannot ("Nous n'avons pas pu conserver cette terminologie", 1949:ix); consequently he did not use "mariage préférentiel" or, like Needham, "prescriptive marriage" but called the total complex "structure élémentaire de la parenté". It is the structure which prescribes the nomenclature, and it is the category which is prescribed,

---

2 But the rules may not apply to complete descent groups. This is the reason it cannot be asserted that the Lhota have an asymmetric alliance system.

but not the marriage. "Prescriptive matrilateral cross-cousin marriage", on the other hand, is *irreconcilable* with any form of the asymmetric alliance system.

I deliberately do not propose another term to replace that used by Needham. In my opinion, "asymmetric alliance" is quite adequate. I cannot think of any reason for loading our papers with a new term, which may create confusion for the reader and in our analytical notions. It is my hope that, even if the misuse of "prescriptive marriage" continues, my paper will contribute to an increased appreciation of Needham's studies.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BERTING, J., AND H. PHILIPSEN  
 1960 Solidarity, Stratification and Sentiments: the Unilateral Cross-Cousin Marriage According to the Theories of Lévi-Strauss, Leach, and Homans and Schneider. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 116:55-80.
- COULT, ALLAN D.  
 1962 An Analysis of Needham's Critique of the Homans & Schneider Theory. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 18:317-335.
- DAS, TARAKCHANDRA  
 1945 *The Purums, an Old Kuki Tribe of Manipur*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press.
- EYDE, D. B., AND P. M. POSTAL  
 1961 Avunculocality and Incest: The Development of Unilateral Cross-Cousin Marriage and Crow-Omaha Kinship Systems. *American Anthropologist* 63:747-771.
- HOCART, A. M.  
 1937 Kinship Systems. *Anthropos* 32:545-551.
- HOMANS, G. C., AND D. M. SCHNEIDER  
 1955 *Marriage, Authority, and Final Causes: a Study of Unilateral Cross-Cousin Marriage*. Glencoe: The Free Press.
- LANE, BARBARA S.  
 1961 Structural Contrasts between Symmetric and Asymmetric Marriage Systems: a Fallacy. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 17:49-55.
- LANE, ROBERT B.  
 1962 Patrilateral Cross-Cousin Marriage: Structural Analysis and Ethnographic Cases. *Ethnology* 1:467-499.
- LEACH, EDMUND R.  
 1951 The Structural Implications of Matrilateral Cross-Cousin Marriage. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 81:23-55.  
 1957 Aspects of Bridewealth and Marriage Stability among the Kachin and Laker. *Man* 57:no. 59.  
 1961 Asymmetric Marriage Rules, Status Difference, and Direct Reciprocity: Comments on an Alleged Fallacy. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 17:343-351.  
 1962 The Determinants of Differential Cross-Cousin Marriage. *Man* 62:no.238.

LEHMANN, F. K.

- 1963 *The Structure of Chin Society. A Tribal People of Burma Adapted to a Non-Western Civilization.* (Illinois Studies in Anthropology. 3)

LÉVI-STRAUSS, CLAUDE

- 1949 *Les Structures Élémentaires de la Parenté.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

LÖFFLER, LORENZ G.

- 1960 Patrilateral Lineation in Transition: the Kinship System of the Lakher (Mara), Arakan. *Ethnos* 1960:119-150.

LORRAIN, R. A.

- 1961 Grammar and Dictionary of the Lakher or Mara Language. Gauhati: Government of Assam.

LOUNSBURY, F. G.

- 1962 Review of Needham's "Structure and Sentiment." *American Anthropologist*. 64:1302-1310.

MILLS, J. P.

- 1922 *The Lhota Nagas.* London: Macmillan.

MURDOCK, GEORGE P.

- 1949 *Social Structure.* New York: Macmillan.

NEEDHAM, RODNEY

- 1958 A Structural Analysis of Purum Society. *American Anthropologist* 60: 75-101.

- 1959 Vaiphei Social Structure. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 15: 396-406.

- 1960 Patrilateral Prescriptive Alliance and the Ungarinyin. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 17:274-291.

- 1962 *Structure and Sentiment: a Test Case in Social Anthropology.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- 1963 Some Disputed Points in the Study of Prescriptive Alliance. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 19:186-207.

PARRY, N. E.

- 1932 *The Lakher.* London: Macmillan.

SALISBURY, RICHARD S.

- 1956 Asymmetrical Marriage Systems. *American Anthropologist* 58:639-655.

SÜDASIEN-INSTITUT DER UNIVERSITÄT HEIDELBERG

HEIDELBERG, GERMANY