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Abstract of Doctoral Thesis

The Study of Kindred Relations.

The Marriage – attitudes, practices and dynamics

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Cluj-Napoca

2010

Key-words: kinship, kindred, marriage, alliance, wedding, family, rural, urban, attitudes, daily practices.

The present thesis represents the result of research and fieldwork investigations that lasted for almost four years. Initially assumed as a monographic approach, in which I intended to investigate the kinship system from Râșca (Cluj County), a village placed at 60 km. away from the city of Cluj-Napoca, the present study gradually evolved towards focusing upon marriage, pictured as the central point of reconfiguring the kindred process, in the rural as well as in the urban spaces. This orientation occurred after the first year of fieldwork investigations, when I realised that a simple inventory of the kinship system in the above-mentioned village would not be able to answer a series of questions: what exactly do people currently understand by „kinship”? How is this kinship actually produced? How do social actors represent themselves the kinship, at the discursive level, as well as at the level of current practices? And, particularly, how is the marriage (seen as the central, constitutive element of kindred) able to illustrate, to a high degree, the main attitudes, practices and dynamics of the kindred process?

Why the chosen topic?

The main reason for this type of study lies with the little interest manifested by the Romanian researchers towards the subject. With the exception of notable contributions belonging to three authors – Henri H. Stahl, Nicolae Constantinesu and Xenia Costa-Foru – the kinship was mainly studied, in Romania, as only an adjacent subject to the vast monographies. The timid interest manifested by the Romanian ethnologists/ sociologists/ anthropologists towards the study of kinship relations on the Romanian territory is not caused by the fact that kinship would not represent one of the fundamental principles of every traditional society – on the contrary! – and, thus, it would not be possible to document it through a vast range of beliefs, practices and representations. Rather, this lack might be due to the specific ways of carrying out the fieldwork investigations in the Romanian social sciences – by this, I particularly take into consideration the monographic studies. Thus, among the

Romanian specialised contributions, we can find extremely few to consult when interested in the subject of kinship.

The kinship relations, the familial patterns, the family relations, were all only tangentially approached by the contributions of the Romanian school of social sciences. Dumitru Caracostea¹ is one author that placed the kinship relations at the basis of a typology of the Romanian folklore, thus assigning to them a regularizing function, not only at the level of social reality, but at the level of art forms as well. He also accused and suffered from the lack of previous studies regarding the kinship relations specific to the Romanian traditional society. Nevertheless, there is one aspect which all the founders of Romanian anthropology seemed to agree upon: the fact that the kinship level and the level of family life rituals often do coincide and intersect. Yet, if the Romanian ethnologists did dedicate numerous studies to the rituals of family life cycle, unfortunately, the same thing cannot be said about kinship.

While Western studies on kinship already died once and were reborn from their own ashes, in Romania, the same field of anthropology didn't seem yet to elicit a great deal of interest on behalf of the native researchers. No doubt, there are contributions regarding the kinship relations on the Romanian territory. Three of them are particularly notable, as remarked by V. Mihăilescu²: Henri Stahl (1959), Xenia Costa-Foru, Nicolae Constantinescu (1987).³

The second argument is connected to a more personal dimension, of what exactly represents, for each individual, to belong to a particular family. The saying „Family is given, but you choose your friends” continues to represent a constant dimension of people's discourses regarding kinship. I was always intrigued by the extent to which the name, the family one belongs to as an individual, is capable to define a person in front of others, before being able to offer a personal mark of your own quality. One belongs to a certain family by the inherited family name, and thus inherits the symbolic capital associated to it, whether it has a positive or a negative connotation.

¹ D. Caracostea. 1948. *Schiță tipologică a baladei populare românești în poezia tradițională română*, ERL, București.

² Vintilă Mihăilescu. 2005. *Antropologie*. Cinci introduceri. Editura Polirom, Iași.

³ H. Henri Stahl. 1959. *Contribuții la studiul satelor devălmașe românești*, Editura Academiei, București; Xenia Costa – Foru. 1945. *Cercetare monografică a familiei*. Contribuție metodologică. Fundația Regele Mihai I, București; Nicolae Constantinescu. 1987. *Relațiile de rudenie în societățile tradiționale*. Reflexe în folclorul românesc, Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, București.

Why is this topic worth studying?

As I mentioned before, kinship seldom constituted the subject of a social study research. While outside our country the studies regarding kinship represented a central pursuit of the social and cultural research, from the very beginnings of anthropology as a science, the same assessment doesn't apply for the Romanian territory. The Western kinship studies are nowadays living a second life, after being able to reborn from their own ashes thanks to Janet Carsten's contributions. In Romanian anthropology, however, they seem to be perpetual blocked in a rather incipient phase. Meanwhile, society faces major changes, structural modifications of all practices regarding kinship, thus erecting new challenges for the social researchers, challenges that need to be approached in their studies. At the same time, my pleading for a study of kinship relations is founded on the surmise that kinship relations represent, at micro- level (the level of private scene), that which social relations represent at macro- level (the public scene), in society.

Starting from these aspects, my working hypothesis was the following: the marriage represented, and continues to represent in Romania, the pivot of kinship relations, and also constitutes the main source of individual relational power on the horizontal, in one's social milieu. In my approach, I intended to leave aside the classical definitions of marriage and to operate with those expressed by my informants, following the main attitudes, practices and dynamics, located nowadays at the level of both discourses and common practices.

The thesis is structured on two sections: the first one illustrates the study of kinship and marriage in anthropology from a historical perspective, as well as the most significant leads in the contemporary studies. The ascertainment that the history of anthropology intertwines with the history of kinship studies, and particularly with that of marriage as a constitutive part of the relatedness process, is a well-known fact. The very first major anthropological contributions centred on kinship: H. L. Morgan, K. B. Malinowski, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown are but some of the anthropology's pioneers who dedicated extensive studies to kinship relations; they were also considered the „founding fathers” of cultural and social anthropology. The first three chapters dedicated to the historical perspective have a different length, but this aspect only illustrates better the significant interest elicited by kinship in the context of Western anthropology, as well as the poor interest manifested in our country regarding the subject. As for the second part of the thesis, there I review and analyze the main coordinates of my fieldwork, undertaken during the doctorate years (2005 – 2009), in both rural and urban areas. I introduce the subject by a short review of the most relevant

expressions and words associated to marriage on the Romanian territory, as well as their etymology, while I dedicate a whole subchapter to the privileged relationship that can be observed between the Romanian terms denominating *family-house-woman* (*familie-casă-femeie*).

Further on, I debate the most significant juridical and canonical aspects, starting from the idea that the two public dimensions of marriage (the religious and the civil marriage) are placed under the juridical and canonical spectrum. I then considered advisable a short presentation of marriage from a demographical perspective, founding my approach on the latest population census data, the one in 2002.

The fifth chapter, *Marriage – the basis of kinship system. Attitudes, Practices and Dynamics*, presents a number of case studies on the subject of marriage, in the rural, as well as the urban social environments. A distinct material is constituted by the analysis of a funeral from a rural area, intended to highlight the ways in which the kinship network, mainly constituted through marriage, becomes extremely active in the case of a death in the family. After all, the funeral can be seen as a „wedding ritual upside down”, which assures the dead man’s aggregation to the „other” world, to the network of already deceased relatives (Gail Kligman). These case studies are completed by the interviews realised with informants from both residency milieu – rural and urban – helpful in underlying the particular attitudes and dynamics specific to the present-day kinship.

The thesis aims to pinpoint, by following the alliance theory belonging to Claude Lévi-Strauss, the ways in which the marriage is centred upon associating two distinctive groups unrelated by sanguinity, fact accomplished, in the great majority of societies, through women.

There is, in Romanian, a subtextual connection between the terms belonging to the semantic sphere of marriage. The analysis approached also the terms that can be directly or secondarily linked to marriage, sustained by Vasile Scurtu’s study from 1966⁴ – I might add, a remarkable contribution, unequalled so far in Romanian specialised writings, on the subject of kinship. At the same time, an important subchapter approaches the relation existing between the terms *family-house-woman* (*familie-casă-femeie*), with a short incursion into the symbolic of this triad, which I consider to be placed at the very foundation of what is, even nowadays, understood by the term „marriage”. Three different perspectives can be added to the particular

⁴ Vasile Scurtu. 1966. *Termenii de înrudire în limba română*. Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, București.

issue presented during the above-mentioned subchapter, perspectives that highlight the marriage as a central dimension in the lives of social actors: it is a phenomenon regulated and governed by an entire branch of civil law, it also represents one of the 7 Holy Sacraments of the Orthodox Church regulated by the canonical code, moreover, it stands for an essential dimension of the demographical analysis of the population.

The thesis is completed by an Annex, consisting of a *Glossary of kinship terms*, synthesised from the contributions of two important authors: M. Dean Murphy and Jack Goody, as well as by the *Interview Guide* followed throughout the field research, and by the *General Bibliography*.

I have to admit the fact that my determination to study the kinship relations, on the two different levels of residence area, is somewhat ambitious. Undoubtedly, far from being a finished work, I consider this thesis to represent only an incipient study of some particular aspects specific to kinship on the Romanian territory.

As for the chosen methodology, I can positively say that developing a field methodology compatible with the chosen subject represented, for a certain amount of time, my main concern. Having chosen a rather pleasant theme, about which the social actors are easily provoked to chat, but which also represents a complex challenge regarding the circumscribing of borderlines, I resorted to those particular investigating techniques of the social life that are able to catch the most of different aspects, in the most condensed manner. I couldn't risk approaching this theme from a restrictive perspective, as it is the case, for instance, of a survey based upon pre-defined, closed answers.

It was rather clear, from the very beginning, that this subject should be built around in depth interviews and participant observation. Thus, I wanted to understand what happens today to the relatedness process, particularly to the marriage, following a method of great tradition in classical anthropology: through field research – more precisely, in a particular context, observing the common attitudes and practices from the things that people believe, say or do. In this context, I initiated my approach based on the *inductive method* – by direct participant observation, by carrying out an ethnographic fieldwork. Thus, I aimed to elaborate at the end, based on fieldwork data and observations, a case study dedicated to a process that I consider being crucial in shaping the kinship – namely, marriage. It reflects the ways in which the community constructs its attitudes and practices on the basis of kindred relations. It also illustrates the particular way in which, through the kinship network, the social life of the community is regulated and even gradated. I initiated my approach by ascertaining, based on

the ethnographic fieldwork, the participant observation and the field material, that within the community I studied and, by extension, within all rural communities, social relations often overlap with kinship relations and, thus, a social actor belonging to a dense kinship network would be equally active on the social scene, as long as the scene of social relations intercalate to such an extent with the sphere of kinship relations. Through these relations different forms of social capital is accumulated, which serves to facilitate the gaining of various benefits, and to a tighter connection to social life. The negative effects of this particular form of capital are equally pressured through this network, such as coercions and taboos.

The participant observation was complemented by an interview guide, which contains a number of closed questions, regarding those aspects that can be highlighted by this particular type of interrogations. Nevertheless, the great majority of the questions were open-ended, capable to document the particular ways in which social actors practice or adapt the existing norms from the social level regarding kinship and marriage. It was rather transparent, from the very beginning of the research, that this subject would benefit from in depth interviews and participant observations; nevertheless, I didn't completely renounced the closed-ended questions, because I appealed to those when guessing a certain pattern in individual behaviour, which normally was confirmed (for instance, the attitude of ideal projection in justifying marriage – love).

I have to admit that opting for a predominantly qualitative (interpretative) method has its obvious origin in my initial formation – as an ethnologist – without rejecting what I consider to be a deeper drive, namely, the gender affiliation. Here I address my willingness to predominantly effectuate in depth interviews, semi-structured interviews and life stories, considering that these methods of data gathering would provide me with a profounder image, which I was able to complement with the participant observations. In other words, I assume the fact that feminist ethnography left its mark throughout the thesis, as well as regarding my personal option towards a qualitative approach rather than a quantitative one, both as the method of collecting data, and as the modality to analyse. I intended, in as far as it was possible, to allow my informants, the ones that should be treated as the main source of information, to express themselves. The women represented my main data source, and also my key-informants.

This women-centred perspective is due to considering that they represent the active part of relatedness process, thanks to a number of factors: on one hand, they are the ones through which the exchange between social groups is established – according to the alliance theory; at the same time, during the fieldwork, I was able to observe the fact that, although men continue to represent their family on the public scene, the same as they did in traditional context, the kindred relations continue to be maintained, reconfigured and consolidated, mainly, by the contributions of women. They are, in most cases, the ones that maintain active connections to individuals that represent the close relatives, and, also, they are the ones capable to verbalize, extremely quickly, the prescribed roles for each individual in the context of various public events from the community (wedding, funeral and so on).

I admit I didn't elaborate a sociological sample, intentionally opting in favour of the anthropological method of the snow-ball system. The choice to accomplish these interviews with women only is also motivated by the fact that, throughout my research, in the rural, as well as the urban areas, I encountered a significantly higher availability on the women's part to approach a subject such as kindred and marriage, that doesn't equally apply for men. I initially suspected it had a lot to do with my age and marital status (I emphasize, not married), whereafter I gradually connected men's discretion regarding the subject with a rather more subtle sphere of life, that of roles distribution. Traditionally, as it would appear in one of the subchapters of this thesis, the woman is inextricably linked to the intimate sphere of family life, and also to what we might consider the active part of relatedness process. Through them, alliances between families are accomplished and, in most cases, also through them, these alliances are being activated and reconfigured at the social level. Somewhere, somehow, these role specialisation took place: the man is the one who, at the passive level, by norm and tradition inertia, imposes the name of the new family, establishes the structural rules of this family and he is also the one who symbolically imprints most part of the family's identity outside the domestic perimeter, at the level of the exterior, social representation. At the same time, the woman in the „silent” and yet the active part of configuring family life: she is the one who is expected, as it will be transparent from the interviews, to sustain family unity, to assure moral and emotional support for its members, to (re)produce this family, to assure the well-going of all domestic activities, to constantly maintain active the kindred network (the one on her husband's side, as well as the one on her side), and it is still her the one who has to ensure a good image for the family for the exterior. Not lastly, I chose to discuss a rather

„feminine” perspective upon marriage because, as it was noticed by many authors and confirmed by my personal field observations, any possible variant of marriage attracts upon women far stronger effects than upon men, as it was remarked by E.Flahault: „ *Some (very few) who do not give up, are successful in maintaining their bachelorhood. Then they are suspected of witchcraft, considered evil spirits and, by excluding them, the order of the world is re-established. The widower has a less questionable situation, as long as he was married. However, the widow is not considered any different from the unmarried women, because the life of a woman outside marriage is more difficult to imagine and more meaningless than the life of a man. And, of course, the unmarried ones are worse than the widows.*”⁵

I am aware of the fact that the reader who takes up these pages, hoping to find the answer to the question „what is kinship?”, might be disappointed, for I do not have that answer. Although we learn, as social researchers, to scrupulously pre-define the concepts we employ, after the first part of my field research in Apuseni Mountains I became acutely aware of the distance between the analytical tools and the field reality. I often wondered myself, how was it possible that a rural community, where „everybody was family with everybody”, to not be able to provide me with clear definitions of what kinship means and the ways in which it was produced? I gradually began to understand that the term of „kinship” proves itself to be rather limited in its capacity to reflect the dynamics of practices and attitudes regarding the kinship process. I also understood the fact that *kindred/ relatedness* is a far better choice of words in reflecting this dynamics and I chose the marriage – seen as the crucial process in configuring relatedness relations – as a central issue in my approach. Therefore, the first conclusion of this approach was a rather general one, regarding the research process: when carrying out a social sciences research, one has constantly to be ready to reconsider and reformulate notions which seemed, at the beginning of the research, rather clear and established, whereas, at the middle of the research and by confronting those notions to the field reality, they prove to be different or inadequate. Therefore, the *re-* prefix became essential: to *reconstitute*, to *re-read*, to *re-listen*, to *reformulate*, to *re-write*, to *reconsider*. Following these verbs, I started to observe, to pay attention around. It was there, in those observations, that my first valid ideas about the kindred process in a community were shaped. I was able to see how, avid in my search for kinship and kinship systems, I almost missed the

⁵ E.Flahault. 1996. *Femmes seules, trajectoires et quotidiens. Étude sur la monorésidentialité féminine*, thèse de doctorat de sociologie, coordonator Joëlle Deniot, Universitatea din Nantes, citat de Jean-Claude Kaufmann. 2006. *Femeia singură și Făt-Frumos*. Traducere din franceză de Dana Ligia Ilin. Editura Humanitas, București, p. 29.

kindred process. Therefore, I went back towards everything that meant an event at community level and I rediscovered kinship, – through direct observation, this time. I discovered it not by asking people about it, but by challenging people to speak about their lives, about their child's wedding, about the neighbour's funeral, about their grandparents' property distribution and so on. The first wedding invitations, received from the side of my parent's network, seemed to me rather expensive in terms of data source, as for the funerals, a very unpleasant moment. After all, I was set out to study kinship, not to participate to these types of events. I wasn't collecting information about the wedding or funeral practices and customs... It was a perfect excuse, until I realised how limiting was the material derived only from exterior observations and interviews. And then, in those particular moments of redefining the subject, I learned the lesson that anthropology already had thought me, in my first years as a student: the participant observation. Caught by the theories concerning the kinship, I had forgotten the basic lesson regarding the importance of observing and taking notes. Growing implicated into the daily or the special events of a community, I learned again to pay attention to the „little things” that people say, and even more so to the things they do. After I started participating to public events such as marriages or funerals, I began to understand that the kinship I so determinately pursued was already right there, in front of my eyes. Somewhere, at the intersection of all those attitudes, representations and practices was already my long-pursued kinship. In the ritual of serving the Sunday meal or the holidays meal, in the stories about who is courting who or who is marrying who, in those about somebody's dower, about who would be actively involved in the funeral ritual, about who was the person to whom my key-informant used to appeal to when having an important difficulty to solve, in the wedding of my neighbour's youngest daughter and so on.

As for the sphere of kindred relations, I consider marriage to represent the most significant challenge. By marriage are being constructed new relations, while the ones already existing between the members of the groups are being amplified.⁶ No doubt, we can find various definitions for the „marriage” term that highlight all different perspectives from which it can be approached, but the definition of marriage, in my analysis, will be centred upon its socio-cultural dimension. As far as the analysis goes, the marriage will be considered both as process and as causality. The dimension of marriage as a process will be illustrated through the contracted new relations, generated between the members of the involved families, as well

⁶ Nicolae Constantinescu. 1987. *Relațiile de rudenie în societățile tradiționale*. Reflexe în folclorul românesc. Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, București, p. 79.

as through the process of reconfiguring the already existing relations and their evolution in time. On the other hand, by marriage as causality I understand the rights and obligations between spouses, parents and children, husband-his wife's parents and so on, derived from the very process of marriage. In the last chapter, the analysis will examine what exactly social actors understand by marriage, and also what they express through daily practices. While the sociological dictionary is able to furnish a pertinent definition of marriage, the lived, experimented dimension of marriage and the type of relatedness derived from it proves to be extremely nuanced and varied in individual lives.

Regarding the rural-urban dichotomy, it is a perspective that took shape while gradually advancing with the field research in the rural area. It was there, during fieldwork, where I realised that this subject can be approached on both these levels. The initial hypothesis was this: if there were profound changes at the social level during the „democratization” period of the Romanian society (and, no doubt, these changes took place), then they surely mirrored themselves in the sphere of kindred relations as well. I say this because, at micro-social level, it is the family, by the individuals that compose it, that firstly responds to the level of macro-social transformations. The best contexts for observing the process of configuring the kindred relations and, particularly, the ones determined by marriage, was the moment of organising the wedding and the wedding party, in the rural, as well as the urban areas. As for the rural area, the analysis also considered the funeral ritual, taking into account the fact that, even today, the rural milieu still presents a certain resistance to change, precisely observable through these two rituals. The observations carried out in the urban area made me realise that mirroring these two environments would better highlight the blend observable at the level of mentalities and individual practices. The ritual of preparing and contracting the marriage in a rural area was useful to me thanks to its capacity to provide me with a reference term of what could be considered a rather traditional perspective upon kinship, as long as I intended my analysis to take into account the current attitudes, representations and practices regarding marriage, and not the reference information from the canonical monographies. As for the rural area, it still represents a distinctive field of investigations for the social researchers because, as it was also the case for the urban areas, it reverberated to the significant transformations from the socio-cultural level; nevertheless, the mentalities of rural communities proved to be more resistant to these changes. In the rural areas, marriage is still considered an alliance modality that attracts in a kindred network three

distinct families: the husband's, the wife's and the godparents'. In the rural area the wedding can still be considered a public event that interests everybody, centred upon the participants to a higher degree than it is centred upon the grooms. As for the wedding in the present urban area, it expresses more about the grooms and their preferences, than it does about the community. The weddings in the urban areas tend to illustrate, more and more, a process of individualisation of the ritual and of the getting-married process *per se*. In the urban area, when we consider marriage, we speak in terms of a solemn moment with multiple symbolic connotations upon both the grooms and those which, starting from the moment of the wedding, will be placed in new kindred relations. A wedding in rural area reflects various reminiscences from the past of the tradition, which presently confiscate all the possible individual choices of the grooms, regarding their particular preferences about the ceremony. Not lastly, marriage remains, in urban, as well as in the rural areas, the most active process through which new kindred relations are being created and reconfigured, relations that can be subsequently capitalized in various social contexts. In the society of today, where the biological perspective tends to gradually become a notion as relative as all the others from the kinship sphere, the marriage still represents a valid modality to generate new kindred relations.