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Life without Fathers or Husbands

Clifford Geertz

Cross-cultural comparison is a basic feature of the anthropological enterprise and a source of evidence for many explanations put forward by authors reprinted in this book. For example, some anthropologists argue that hunter/gathers lack warfare. By comparing ethnographies of hunter/gatherer groups and looking for the absence or presence of warlike activity, the assertion can be tested and, if necessary, modified.

This article provides comparative evidence for another general assertion about human behavior and social organization. A long-held view in anthropology is that marriage, the socially approved union between two people, is a feature of all societies. Marriage, anthropologists assert, leads to the formation of a basic domestic unit, the nuclear family, creates systems of descent that confer group identity, allies kinship groups with one another,, and provides for the legitimate birth and nurturing of children..

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But is this universally true? This article, by Clifford Geertz, reviews the work of Chinese anthropologist, Cia Hua.[1] Based on extended fieldwork among a Chinese tribal group, the Na, Hua describes a matrilineal society that lacks marriage entirely. Women and their children live with brothers and other close matrilineal kin in the same household. Men make appointments to "visit" women in their houses (several ways are described here), arriving late at night and leaving just before dawn. Men and women are likely to sleep with many members of the opposite sex during their lifetimes and do not form permanent relationships. Despite this unusual arrangement, Na society has successfully survived for centuries, until now that is. Under intense pressure from the Chinese government to marry in the "approved" way, the system is breaking down.

Love and marriage, love and marriage
Go together like a horse and carriage
Dad was told by mother
You can't have one without the other
-"Love and Marriage," Sammy
Cahn and Jimmy van Heusen[2]

Not everywhere.

Among the Na, a tribal people hidden away in the Yongning hills of Yunnan province in southern China and the subject of the French-trained Chinese anthropologist Cai Hua's provocative new monograph, there is no marriage, in fact or word. Mothers exist, as do children, but there are no dads. Sexual intercourse takes place between casual,, opportunistic lovers, who develop no broader, more enduring relations to one another. The man "visits," usually furtively, the woman at her home in the middle of the night as impulse and opportunity appear, which they do with great regularity. Almost everyone of either sex has multiple partners, serially or simultaneously; simultaneously usually two or three, serially as many as a hundred or two. There are no nuclear families, no in-laws, no stepchildren. Brothers and sisters, usually several of each, reside together, along with perhaps a half-dozen of their nearer maternal relatives, from birth to death under one roof-making a living, keeping a household, and raising the sisters' children.

1This article represents a review of Cia Hua, A *Society without Fathers or Husbands: The Na of China,* translated fTom the French by Asti Hustvedt (New York: Zone Books, 2001). All quotes included in the article are taken from this book.

2"Love and Marriage" by Sammy Cahn and Jimmy van Heusen. Copyright © 1955 (renewed) by Cahn Music Co. and Barton Music Corp. All rights reserved; used by permission of Warner Brothers Publications U.S. Inc.

The incest taboo is of such intensity that not only may one not sleep with opposite sex members of one's own household, one cannot even allude to sexual matters in their presence. One may not curse where they can hear, or sit with them in the same row at the movies, lest an emotional scene appear on the screen. As paternity is socially unrecognized, and for the most part uncertain, fathers may happen, now and again, to sleep with daughters. A man is free to sleep with his mother's brother's daughter, who is not considered any kind of relative, not even a "cousin." There is no word for bastard, none for promiscuity, none for infidelity; none, for that matter, for incest, so unthinkable is it. Jealousy is infra dig:

> "You know, Luzo [who is nineteen] has not had a lot of [lovers], but he has made many visits [his friend said]. This is because he only goes to the homes of beauties. In particular, he goes to visit Seno, a pretty girl in our village. Do you want to go [visit her] at her house?" he asked me.
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> "No! If I go there, Luzo will be jealous," I answered.
>
> "How could I be jealous!" [Luzo] responded. "You can ask whomever you want. You will see that ... we don't know how to be jealous."
>
> "He's right!" his friend interjected. And to explain himself he added: "Girls [are available] to everyone. Whoever wants to can visit them. There is nothing to be jealous about."

Obviously, this is an interesting place for an anthropologist-especially for an anthropologist brought up on that King Charles's head of his profession, "kinship theory."

There are two major variants of such theory, "descent theory" and "alliance theory," and the Na, Hua says, fit neither of them. In the first, associated with the name of the British anthropologist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and his followers, the "nuclear," "basic," or "elementary" family-a man, his wife, and their children-"founded as it is on natural requirements," is universal, and "forms the hard core around which any social organization revolves." The relationship between parents and children, "filiation," is critical, and out of it are developed various "jura!," that is, normative, rules of descent which group certain sets of relatives together against others: lineages, clans, kindreds, and the like. "Families can be compared to threads which it is the task of nature to warp in order that the social fabric can develop."

In the alliance model, deriving in the main from the French anthropologist, and Hua's mentor, Claude Levi-Strauss, "the institutionalized exchange of women" between families "by the alliance of marriage [is taken] to be the central point of kinship." The universality of the incest taboo, "a natural phenomenon," necessitates marriage and the creation of the "transversal [that is, affinal or 'in-law'] networks of alliances [that] engender all social organization."

Since the Na have no matrimonial relationship they falsify both theories. They neither form elementary families out of which a filiative social fabric can

be spun, nor, though they have a variety of the incest taboo (an odd variety, in that with its father-daughter twist it does not exclude all primary relatives), do they form twined and expandable affinal networks, or indeed any networks of "in-laws" at all. "From now on," Hua proclaims at the end of his book, "marriage can no longer be considered the only possible institutionalized mode of sexual behavior." The Na "visit" demonstrates that

> Marriage, affinity, alliance of marriage, family, [usually considered] essential to anthropology, ... seem absent from this culture. The Na case attests to the fact that marriage and the family (as well as the Oedipus complex) can no longer be considered universal,, neither logically nor historically.

This is a little grand, for there are other "institutionalized modes of sexual behavior"-concubinage, prostitution, wife-borrowing-just about everywhere, and whether the Oedipus complex is universal or not, or even whether it exists at all, is not dependent upon marital arrangements. But clearly, "the visit" is an unusual, perhaps though one never knows what is coming next out of Papua, the Amazon, or Central Asia-a unique institution sustaining a most unusual "kinship system," its existence often regarded as impossible. It is a system in which the facts of reproduction (though recognized-the Na know where babies come from) are incidental and all ties are (conceived to be) "blood ties"-the entire house can be called consanguineous.

The Na "visit," for all its fluidity, opportunism, and apparent freedom from moral or religious anxiety, is as well outlined a social institution, as deeply embedded in a wider social structure, as marriage is elsewhere. (The Na are Tibetan-style Buddhists, nearly a third of the adult men being monks, whose sexual practices, a handful of Lhasa-bound celibates aside, are the same as those of laymen.) This is clear from the exact and explicit terminology that marks it out:

> Society calls a man and a woman who set up this kind of sexual relationship *nana ȿeȿe hing*, which means people in a relationship of furtive meetings; the man and the woman discreetly call each other *a9ia* ["discreetly" because of the "incest" taboo against public references to sexuality where opposite sex consanguines may hear them]. The term *a9ia* is made up of the diminutive prefix *a* and the root *9ia*. The Na add *a* to names and proper nouns to indicate intimacy, affection, friendship, and respect; *9ia*, when used as a noun, means lover. The same word is used for both sexes, and as a verb it means literally to lie down and figuratively to mate, to sleep and to tempt. *A9ia* means lover.
>
> A Na saying depicts those who are *a9ia* very well: ... It is not enough to say that we are *9ia* for it to be so, sleeping together once makes (us) *9ia*.

The enactment of such a relationship shows the same detailed cultural patterning: it is not a matter of brute and unfettered physical desire, but of a

modeled, almost balletic self-control.. The rendezvous takes place in the bedroom of the woman around midnight. (A bit earlier in the winter, Hua says, a bit later in the summer.) The man comes in near-perfect quietness, does what he does (Hua is wholly silent about what that might be and about how the cries of love are muffled), and leaves at cockcrow, creeping as stealthily back to his own house. As men and women enjoy "complete equality" and are "in daily contact, in town, in the workplace, and elsewhere," either can make the first advance and either may accept or refuse:

> A girl might say to a boy, "Come stay at my house tonight." The boy might then respond, "Your mother is not easygoing." And then the girl might say, "She won't scold you. Come secretly in the middle of the night." If the boy accepts, he says, "Okay." If the boy refuses, he says, "I don't want to come. I'm not going to come over to sleep." In this case, no matter what the girl says, nothing will change his mind.
>
> When the man takes the initiative ... he often uses the expression "I'll come to your house tonight, okay?," to which the woman responds with a smile or by saying, "Okay." Some come straight out and ask "Do you want to be my *a~ia?"* If a woman refuses ... , she can use a ready-made formula: "No, it is not possible. I already have one for tonight." In that case, the man will not insist.

There are other, more oblique ways of making one's wishes known. One can snatch away some personal object-a scarf, a pack of cigarettes-from the desired partner. If he or she does not protest, the tryst is on. One can shout from a distance, "Hey, hey, do you want to trade something?" If you get a "hey, hey" back, you exchange belts and fix an appointment. These days, Chinese movies-shown virtually every night, though they are imperfectly understood by the Tibeto-Burmese-speaking Na-are a particularly favored setting for putting things in motion:

> The young men and women purchase tickets and wait in front of the theater, getting to know each other.... One man can offer several women a ticket, just as one woman can offer a ticket to more than one man. Once a ticket is handed over, the man and woman move away from each other and only get back together inside the theater. During the film, the viewers talk loudly, often drowning out the sound from the speakers. If they have had a good time during the movie and reached an agreement, they leave discreetly to spend an amorous night together.

The "amorous night" itself may be a one-time thing. Or it may be repeated at shorter or longer intervals over the course of months or years. It may be begun, broken off for awhile, then begun again. It may be stopped altogether at any time by either party, usually without prior notice or much in the way of explanation. It does not, in short, involve any sort of exclusive and permanent "horse and carriage" commitment. But it, too, is, for all its fluidity and seeming negligence, carefully patterned-framed and hemmed in by an elaborate collection of cultural routines, a love-nest ethic.

When the *amant* arrives at the *amante's* house, usually after having climbed over a fence or two and thrown a bone to the guard dog, he will give some sort of signal of his presence-toss pebbles on the roof, crouch at the woman's bedroom window (Hua says that every man in a village complex-four or five hundred people-knows the location of every woman's bedroom), or, if he is confident of being received or has been there often, simply knock on the front door. "In a household where there are women of the age to receive visitors [there may be several such on one night, and even a woman may have, in turn, more than one visitor], every evening after nightfall, the men of the house will not open the front door."

Usually, the woman who is waiting will herself open the door and the two will creep wordlessly off to her bedroom. If the wrong woman opens the door-a sister or a cousin, or perhaps even one of those "not easygoing" mothers-this causes little embarrassment: the man simply proceeds to the right woman's bedroom. During the encounter, the lovers must whisper "so that nothing will reach the ears of the woman's relatives, above all the men (especially uncles and great-uncles)."

No one can force anyone else in these matters. The woman can always, and at any time, refuse the man's entreaties and send him packing. A woman may never, in any case, visit a man; so if she is scorned she is just out of luck. A legend accounts for this virtually unique exception to rigorous symmetry of the system:

> When humanity originated, no one knew how to regulate visits. Abaodgu, the god in charge of setting all the rules, proposed the following test: he ordered that a man be shut up in a house and that a woman be sent to join him. To reach the man, the woman had to pass through nine doors. At dawn, she had reached the seventh door. Then Abaodgu tested the man, who succeeded in passing through three doors . . . . Abaodgu [concluded] that women were too passionate [to do] the visiting. . . . The men [would have to] visit the women.

Hua goes on to trace out, methodically and in remorseless detail, the variations, the social ramifications, and the ethnographical specifics of all this, worried, not without reason, that if he does not make his arguments over and over again and [retell] every last fact he has gathered in four periods of fieldwork (1985, 1986, 1988-1989, 1992) his account will not be believed.

He describes two other, special and infrequent "modalities" of sexual encounter-"the conspicuous visit" and "cohabitation." In the conspicuous visit, which always follows upon a series of furtive visits, the effort to conceal the relationship is abandoned ("vomited up," as the idiom has it), mainly because the principals have grown older, perhaps tired of the pretense and folderol, and everyone knows about them anyway.

In cohabitation, an even rarer variant, a household that is short of women by means of which to produce children or of men to labor for it in its fields will adopt a man or woman from a household with a surplus to maintain its reproductive or economic viability, the adopted one becoming a sort of permanent conspicuous visitor (more or less: these arrangements often break up too).

Among chiefly families, called *zhifu,* a Chinese word for "regional governor," successive relationships are established over several generations, leading to a peculiar household alternation of chiefship and a greater restriction on who may mate with whom ....

After centuries of resistance to efforts to bring it into line with what is around it-that is, Han propriety-[the Na] cosmos is now apparently at last dissolving. The pressures on the Na to shape up and mate morally like normal human beings have been persistent and unremitting. As early as 1656, the Manchurian Qing, troubled by succession problems among "barbarian" tribes, decreed that the chiefs of such tribes, including the Na, must marry in the standard way and produce standard sons, grandsons, and cousins to follow them legitimately into office.

The extent to which this rule was enforced varied over time with the strengths and interests of the various dynasties. But the intrusion of Han practices-virilocality (by which married couples live near the husband's parents), patrifiliation (making kinship through fathers central), polygynous marriage (i.e., involving several wives), written genealogies, and "ancestor worship" (the Na cast the ashes of their dead unceremoniously across the hillsides)-into the higher reaches of Na society provided an alternative cultural model, a model that the Na, for the most part, contrived to keep at bay. Members of chiefly families, and some of the wealthy commoners and resident immigrants, began to marry to preserve their estates and to secure a place in the larger Chinese society. But most of the population proceeded as before, despite being continuously reviled as "primitive," "depraved," "backward," "licentious," "unclean," and ridden with sexual disease. (The last was, and is, more or less true. "More than 50 percent of Na adults have syphilis . . . a significant percentage of the women are sterile ... people are deformed . . . . The ... population is stagnating.")

This cultural guerrilla war, with edicts from the center and evasions from the periphery, continued fitfully for nearly three hundred years, until the arrival of the Communists in the 1950s rendered matters more immediate.[3] The Party considered the tradition of the visit "a 'backward and primitive custom' ... contraven[ing] the matrimonial legislation of the People's Republic of China ... [and disrupting] productiveness at work because the men think of nothing but running off to visit someone." The Party's first move against the tradition was a regulation designed to encourage nuclear family formation by distributing land to men who would set up and maintain such a family. When this failed to have any effect at all ("the government could not understand how it was possible that Na men did not want to have their own land"), it moved on, during the Great Leap Forward, to a full press effort to "encourage monogamy" through a licensing system, an effort "guided" by the recommendation of two groups of ethnologists, who insisted that, "with planning," Na men and women

3The Communists of course came to power in 1949, but the Na area remained essentially Kuomintang country until 1956, when the Party installed its own local government, placing Han commissars in the region and effectively ending the traditional chiefship system.

could be led toward setting up families as economic units and raising their children together. Though this was a bit more successful-in Hua's "sample" seven couples officially married-it too soon ran out of steam in the face of Na indifference to the sanctions involved.

The small carrot and the little stick having failed to produce results, the Party proceeded in the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1969) to get real about the problem. Dedicated to the national project of "sweeping out the four ancients" (customs, habits, morality, culture), the People's Commune ofYongning pronounced it "shameful not to know who one's genitor is" and imposed marriage by simple decree on any villager involved in a conspicuous visit relationship. But this too failed. As soon as the cadres departed, the couples broke up.

Finally, in 1974, the provincial governor of Yunnan, declaring that "the reformation of this ancient matrimonial system comes under the framework of the class struggle in the ideological domain and therefore constitutes a revolution in the domain of the superstructure" (one can almost hear the collective Na, *"Huh?"),* made it the law that: (1) everyone under fifty in a relationship "that has lasted for a long time" must officially marry forthwith at commune headquarters; (2) every woman who has children must publically state who their genitor is, cart him off to headquarters, and marry him; (3) those who divorce without official sanction will have their annual grain ration suspended; (4) any child born out of wedlock will also not get a ration and must be supported by his genitor until age eighteen; and, (5) visiting, furtive or conspicuous, was forbidden.

This, supported by nightly meetings of the local military brigade and some collusive informing, seemed finally to work-after a fashion, and for a while:

> [The] District government sent a Jeep filled with marriage licenses to the People's Commune of Yongning. Ten and twenty at a time, couples were rounded up in the villages ... and a leader would take their fingerprints on the marriage form and hand them each a marriage license .... [When] the day [for the ceremony] came, horse-drawn carriages were sent into the villages to provide transportation for the "newlyweds" to [Party] headquarters .... They each received a cup of tea, a cigarette, and several pieces of candy, and then everybody participated in a traditional dance. The government called this "the new way of getting married."

It was new enough, but for the Na it was ruinous. *"No* other ethnic group in China underwent as deep a disruption as the Na did during the Cultural Revolution," Hua writes in a rare show of feeling. "To understand the trouble this reform caused in Na society, it is enough to imagine a reform in our society, but with the reverse logic":

> During that period [one of Hua's informants said], the tension was so high that our thoughts never strayed from this subject.. No one dared to make a furtive visit. Before, we were like roosters. We took any woman we could catch. We went to a

> woman's house at least once a night.. But, with that campaign, we got scared. We did not want to get married and move into someone else's house, and as a result, we no longer dared to visit anyone. Because of this, we took a rest for a few years.

After the accession of Deng Xiaoping in 1981, the more draconian of these measures-the denial of rations, the exposure of genitors-were softened or suspended, and emphasis shifted toward "educational," that is, assimilationist approaches. In particular, the expansion of the state school system, where "all the textbooks are impregnated with Han ideas and values," is leading to rapid and thorough Sinicization of the Na. Today-or, anyway, in 1992-the school, assisted by movies and other "modern" imports, is accomplishing what political pressure could not: the withering away of "Na-ism":

> When students graduate from middle school,, they must complete a form that includes a column requesting information on their civil status. Unable to fill in the blank asking for the name of their father, they suddenly become aware they do not have a father, while their classmates from other ethnic backgrounds do. Some of the Na students, usually the most brilliant ones, find a quiet spot where they can cry in private .... The message [of the sr.:hool]is clear.... There is only one culture that is legitimate, and that is Han culture.

In China, as elsewhere, it is not licentiousness that powers most fear. Nor even immorality. It is difference.

Review Questions

1. Based on the evidence described in Geertz's article, what is the basic domestic unit in Na society and what are its main social and economic functions?
2. The Na are a matrilineal society. Do you think that the absence of marriage described for them in this article could also occur in a patrilineal society? What is it about matrilineal society that is more likely to make such an arrangement possible?
3. Despite an appearance of unbounded "free love" described for Na male/female relationships, Na culture does systematize such activity. What are the culturally defined ways that Na men and women meet and set up assignations? Are there taboos and other restrictions on their sexual activity defined by their culture?
4. How does Na society manage the basic functional needs that marriage is claimed to meet in most other societies?
5. What is the Chinese government's response to the lack of marriage among the Na. How have they tried to change the practice?