



Max-Planck-Institut für ethnologische Forschung **Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology**

Workshop

Murdock and Goody Re-visited: (Pre)history and evolution of Eurasian and African family systems April 16th -17th 2015

Organisers: Patrick Heady and Mikołaj Szoltysek
Venue: MPI for Social Anthropology, Halle/S., Germany

OUTLINE

The aim of the workshop is to look again at some classical anthropological questions in the light of recent theoretical and methodological developments, both within anthropology, and beyond. The topic is the reconstruction and explanation of family systems – focusing on the classical distinctions between monogamy and polygamy; patrilocal, matrilineal and neolocal residence; and elementary, stem and joint family households.

The initiative is motivated by what appears to us as a revival of the problematic of historical foundations and spatial patterning of human family organization in social anthropology, and its persistence as a key-theme in historical demography and other social sciences. It is hoped that the meeting, inherently interdisciplinary by its nature, will generate new questions and perspectives, and may lead to formulation of new hypotheses regarding the deep history and long-term change of family systems across Eurasia and Africa.

The speakers, who will be invited by the organisers, will include representatives of the following disciplines.

- archaeology
- history
- evolutionary and social anthropology.

The workshop agenda is both substantive and methodological, and a fruitful exchange of ideas between colleagues in different disciplines will require effective communication at both levels. The workshop will be divided into three different sessions – each dedicated to a specific aspect of our shared concerns. Most speakers will be asked to contribute to two or three sessions – giving two or three short talks (of 15 to 25 minutes each) equivalent in total to a single long seminar paper of 50 minutes or so.

The reason for asking speakers to divide their contributions in this way, is partly to ensure that each speaker covers the full range of the workshop's agenda, and partly to encourage more focused discussions. The overall sequence of the sessions – starting with “assumptions and methods”, continuing with “findings and conjectures”, and concluding with a “technical session” – is intended to take us through each other's work in the most natural way. The first session will hopefully provide just enough conceptual and methodological background to appreciate what underlies the different substantive findings discussed in the second session. The third session will be for the benefit of those who have been impressed enough with findings produced by other methodological approaches to be actively considering trying them out themselves.

In each of the first two sessions there will be ample time for discussion and comparison of the different approaches and findings.

Session 1 Ontology and Epistemology (a.k.a. Assumptions and Methods)

The aim of this section is to share information about the methods which researchers in different disciplines use to throw light on common themes. We are interested in both the methods themselves and the assumptions on which they rest. These assumptions are likely to be both “epistemological” concerning the ways in which data should be gathered and assessed, and “ontological” concerning the kinds of phenomena – including both family and community characteristics, and underlying economic, social, cultural and mental processes – about which conclusions can meaningfully be drawn.

In this session – which will occupy the first morning of the conference – speakers will be asked to provide short overviews of their methods and assumptions, focusing on principles rather than technical details, and lasting not more than 15 minutes per speaker.

Session 2 Current Findings and Future Questions

The themes of this session are firstly the findings that the participants themselves, and possibly other colleagues, have obtained using the methods outlined in session 1; and secondly the questions which they now feel call for further research. Speakers will be invited to talk for 20 to 25 minutes. Apart from that, speakers should feel free to choose their focus; either on specific findings for particular regions and (pre)historical periods, or on the broad sweep of social evolution and the forces that underlie it.

This will be the longest session of the conference – lasting from lunchtime on the first day to lunchtime on the second day, and will be divided into several different sub-sessions. We hope for extensive discussions – both of the substantive findings and research questions and of the possible connections between the findings obtained and the methods used.

Session 3 Technical Session

The main purpose of this session is to provide researchers who feel inspired by any of the methods discussed during the workshop, with some more specific information about how to apply them. Depending on the method concerned, this might include discussion of data-gathering procedures, or of the available datasets and their characteristics, dedicated programs, statistical techniques, and the mathematical formulae that underlie them. We would not expect all participants to contribute to this session. For those who do, we would suggest presentations of about 20 minutes.

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