PART ONE

Restricted Exchange

Your own mother,
Your own sister,
Your own pigs,
Your own yams that you have piled up,
You may not eat.
Other people's mothers,
Other people's sisters,
Other people's pigs,
Other people's yams that they have piled up,
You may eat.

CHAPTER III

The Universe of Rules

Even if the incest prohibition has its roots in nature it is only in the way it affects us as a social rule that it can be fully grasped. In form and in field of application it varies greatly from group to group. While highly limited in our society, in certain North American tribes it is extended to the most distant degrees of kinship. In this case there is no need to add that the prohibition is less concerned with true consanguinity, which is often impossible to establish, if at all, than with the purely social phenomenon by which two unrelated individuals are classed as 'brothers' or 'sisters', 'parents' or 'children'. The prohibition and the rule of exogamy, in this case, are therefore merged. Occasionally both institutions exist side by side. As has often been observed, exogamy by itself is not enough to prevent the marriage of a mother with her son in a patrilineal system, nor of a father with his daughter in a matrilineal system. But in many cases it is the rule of exogamy or the kinship system which is decisive, without taking real relationships, apart from those of the first degree, into account. It is the same law which in the marriage of cross-cousins likens one group of first cousins to brothers and sisters and makes the other half of these same cousins into potential spouses. The same system, and others also, highly recommends and sometimes prescribes marriage between the maternal uncle and his niece, and less commonly between the paternal aunt and her nephew, whereas similar behaviour by the paternal uncle or the maternal aunt would horrify just as much as would incest with the relatives to whom these collaterals are assimilated. It has often been noted that several contemporary legal systems omitted to register one or both of the grandparents among the prohibited degrees. This discrepancy can be explained by the high improbability of such marriages in modern societies, but among the Australian aborigines - otherwise so punctilious - and certain Oceanic peoples, such a union is not inconceivable, although other unions involving a more distant relationship are specifically forbidden. Hence, the prohibition is not always expressed in terms of degrees of real kinship but refers to individuals who use certain terms in addressing one another. This remains true even of those Oceanic systems which permit marriage with a classificatory 'sister', but distinguish immediately between
Theil Universe, Structures, Rules of Kinship

Considering who these parents will be. Consequently, from the point of view of nature it is determination. Nature assigns to each individual determinants trans­
descent, if not in the same way or to the same extent. In the first instance, this permanent independently of changes in this environment. But for the heredity is doubly necessary, firstly as a law — there is no spontaneous genera-

Based on natural facts, which hypothetically are all that are present, how is this introduction possible? As we have just emphasized, nature, like culture, moves to the double rhythm of receiving and giving. But the two moments of this rhythm, as produced by nature, are not viewed indifferently by culture. The first stage, that of receiving, as expressed through biological kinship, finds culture powerless, for a child’s heredity is integrally inscribed in the genes transmitted by the parents; whatever they are, such will be the child. The transitory effect of the environment can leave its mark, but cannot make this permanent independently of changes in this environment. But for the moment let us consider marriage, which nature requires just as urgently as descent, if not in the same way or to the same extent. In the first instance, only the fact of marriage is required, but not, within specific limits, its determination. Nature assigns to each individual determinants transmitted by those who are in fact his parents, but it has nothing to do with deciding who these parents will be. Consequently, from the point of view of nature heredity is doubly necessary, firstly as a law — there is no spontaneous genera-

For much deeper reasons than already given, we are opposed to those concepts, such as held by Westermarck and Havelock Ellis, which credit nature with a principle of determination, even a negative one, for marriage. Whatever the uncertainties regarding the sexual habits of the great apes, and the monogamous or polygamous character of the gorilla and chimpanzee family, it is certain that these great anthropoids practise no sexual discrimination whatever against their near relatives. On the other hand, Hamilton’s observations establish that sexual familiarity lessens desire even among the Macaques. Either there is no link, therefore, between the two phenomena, or, in man, the transition from familiarity to aversion, regarded by Westermarck as the true origin of the prohibition, is accompanied by additional characteristics. How can this peculiarity be explained if, ex hypothesi, the intervention of any step of an intellectual, i.e., cultural, origin has been excluded? The supposed aversion would have to be seen as a specific phenomenon without any sign of corresponding physiological mechanisms. We consider that if this aversion were a natural phenomenon, its appearance would have been anterior or at least external to culture, and unaffected by it. It would be useless to wonder in what way or by what mechanisms the articulation of culture with nature, without which there could be no continuity between the two orders, was brought about. This problem becomes clear when nature’s indifference to the modalities of relations between the sexes is acknowledged, an indifference witnessed to by the entire study of animal life, for it is precisely alliance that is the hinge, or more exactly the notch where the hinge might be fixed. Nature imposes alliance without determining it, and culture no sooner receives it than it defines its modalities.
The apparent contradiction between the regulatory character of the prohibition and its universality is thus resolved. The universality merely expresses the fact that culture has at all times and at all places filled this empty form, as a bubbling spring first fills the depressions surrounding its source. For the moment, let it be enough to state that the content with which culture has filled it is the rule, the permanent and general substance of culture, without asking yet why this rule exhibits the general characteristic of prohibiting certain degrees of kinship, and why this general characteristic seems so curiously varied.

II

The fact of being a rule, completely independent of its modalities, is indeed the very essence of the incest prohibition. If nature leaves marriage to chance and the arbitrary, it is impossible for culture not to introduce some sort of order where there is none. The prime rôle of culture is to ensure the group's existence as a group, and consequently, in this domain as in all others, to replace chance by organization. The prohibition of incest is a certain form, and even highly varied forms, of intervention. But it is intervention over and above anything else; even more exactly, it is the intervention.

This problem of intervention is not raised just in this particular case. It is raised, and resolved in the affirmative, every time the group is faced with the insufficiency or the risky distribution of a valuable of fundamental importance. Certain forms of rationing are new to our society and arouse surprise in minds cast in the traditions of economic liberalism. Thus we are prompted to see collective intervention, when it affects commodities vital to our way of life, as a bold and somewhat scandalous innovation. Because the control of distribution and consumption affects gasoline, we readily think that its formulation was only contemporaneous with the motor-car. But nothing is less true. 'The system of the scarce product' constitutes an extremely general model. In this and many other cases these periods of crisis, to which until recently our society was so unaccustomed, merely re-establish, in a crucial form, a state of affairs regarded as virtually normal in primitive society. Thus, 'the system of the scarce product', as expressed in collective measures of control, is much less an innovation, due to modern conditions of warfare and the worldwide nature of our economy, than the resurgence of a set of procedures which are familiar to primitive societies and necessary to the group if its coherence is not to be continually compromised.

It is impossible to approach the study of marriage prohibitions if it is not thoroughly understood from the beginning that such facts are in no way exceptional, but represent a particular application, within a given field, of principles and methods encountered whenever the physical or spiritual existence of the group is at stake. The group controls the distribution not only of women, but of a whole collection of valuables. Food, the most

1 Porteus has clearly seen this point for Australia: Porteus, 1931, p. 269.

The Eskimo hunter of Hudson Bay who first strikes a walrus receives the tusks and one of the fore-quarters. The person who first comes to his assistance receives the other fore-quarter; the next man, the neck and head; the following, the belly; and each of the next two, one of the hind-quarters. But in times of scarcity, all rights of distribution are suspended, and the kill is regarded as the common possession of the community as a whole.

Another section of this work will describe the matrimonial organization of certain Burmese peoples. The reader need only refer to this section to comprehend the extent to which the native mind sees matrimonial and economic exchanges as forming an integral part of a basic system of reciprocity. The methods for distributing meat in this part of the world are no less ingenious than for the distribution of women. These methods for distributing meat have been carefully described by Stevenson. The recipient groups vary according to the importance of the feast, and those who receive meat during the tsawalam feasts are not the same as those taking part in the hunting

1 Thurnwald, 1934, pp. 119-41.
2 Richards, 1939, p. 197.
3 Ibid., p. 165.
5 Kowalewsky, 1890a, p. 53.
6 Richards, 1939, pp. 199-200.
8 Pt. II, chs. XV and XVI.
9 Stevenson, 1937, pp. 15-23.
or war dances. The system of obligations is again modified at the Ruak hnah, Khan Tseh and Pual thawn funeral feasts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recipients</th>
<th>Khuang tsawi feast</th>
<th>Animals killed in the hunt</th>
<th>Funerals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brothers (class.)</td>
<td></td>
<td>+ (6)</td>
<td>+ (1) + (3) +</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisters</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+ (1) + (3) +</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother's brother</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife's brother</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego (feast-giver, shooter of game, or heir of deceased)</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rual</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headman</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacksmith</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun-owner</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beaters</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous givers of feasts</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sangsuan</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers (at feasts)</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant (at feasts)</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner of Khuang bamboo</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Curiously similar rules have been described for Samoa.¹

In the present example, three buffalo (bos frontalis) are sacrificed for the Khuang tsawi feast, and are cut up in the following manner (Fig. 1).

The distribution is made within the limits of the kinship group (Fig. 2).

Pa and nau receive three alu and three amifi (the heads to the closest relatives, and the joints to the more distant).

Farnu ngai get one akawng each.

Hlam hlaw farnu get one ahnawi each.

Nupu and papu share the pusa, or entrails.

Rual (ritual friends) get one azang each.

The assistants, the headman, the blacksmiths, and so on, get an equal portion from the distribution.

These rules and those determining the distribution of the bride-price are not formally of the same type, but are organically connected. There are at least two indications of this. A man is always paired with one of his sisters who is called his ruang pawn farnu, ‘body-paired sister’, whose bride-price he receives, and whose husband’s nupu he becomes. On the other hand, the generosity expended in the feasts has the effect of raising the price which may be demanded for the marriage of the daughter.²

¹ Buck, 1930, pp. 119-27.
² Stevenson, 1937, pp. 22, 27. Other schemes for sharing may be found in Shirokogoroff, 1935, p. 220, and Lévi-Strauss, 1948a, fig. 17.
kidneys to the wives, the tail and the rump to the relatives-in-law, and a piece of the loins to the maternal uncle. In certain regions of East Africa, the rules are infinitely more complicated since they vary for oxen, sheep or goats. In addition to the relatives, the headman and those who helped in getting the beast have the right to a portion. This distribution is made less ostensibly than the division in the village square whose end is 'that those who are eating, and those who are not, may be seen'. Authority within the family is in fact based on 'the possession and control of food'.

Finally, the same observer's description of the division of a great antelope among twenty-two adults and forty-seven children must be quoted:

'During the division of the animal the excitement was intense... Before the meal there was a buzz of expectation. Women ground extra flour with enthusiasm, "Because we have so much meat to eat with it"... Directly after the meal the women gathered near me talking in loud voices. They kept describing with ecstasy how full they felt... Another old lady cried light-heartedly, hitting her stomach, "I have been turned into a young girl again, my heart is so light..."'

For some years we have doubtless become more aware of the dramatic import of such situations. In any case, the reader inclined to appraise them in the perspective of our traditional culture, which likes to contrast the pathos of unhappy love and the comedy of the full stomach, cannot be too carefully forewarned. In the great majority of human societies, the two problems are set on the same plane, since, with love as with food, nature presents man with the same risk. The lot of the satiated man is just as liable to significations of love as to the division of gifts; this explains why a native shares his earnings with others.'

1 Richards, 1932, p. 80. 2 ibid. p. 81. 3 ibid. 1939, pp. 55-9. 4 ibid. 1932, p. 162. 5 Kowalewsky, 1890, p. 480. The same symbolism is to be found among the Christians of Mosul where the marriage proposal is stylized: 'Have you any merchandise to sell us?... Upon my word, yours is excellent merchandise! We shall buy it.' Kyriakos, 1911, p. 775.

intense emotions, provides the basis for some of his most abstract ideas, and the metaphors of his religious life... To the primitive man it may come to symbolize some of his highest spiritual experiences, and express his most significant social ties.'

Let us first examine the feature of growing scarcity. There is a biological equilibrium between male and female births. Consequently, except in societies where this equilibrium is modified by customs, every male should have a very good chance of obtaining a wife. In such circumstances, is it possible to speak of women as a scarce commodity requiring collective intervention for its distribution? It is difficult to answer this question without posing the problem of polygamy, any discussion of which would go too far beyond the bounds of this work. We shall confine ourselves, therefore, to a few rapid considerations which will be less a demonstration than a brief indication of what seems to be the soundest position in this matter. For some years, the attention of anthropologists, especially those attracted by the diffusionist interpretation, has been drawn to the fact that monogamy seems to predominate in those societies which otherwise appear to be at the most primitive economic and technical level. From this and similar observations, these anthropologists have drawn more or less hazardous conclusions. According to Father Schmidt and his students, these facts must be seen as the sign of man's greater purity in the archaic stages of his social existence. According to Perry and Elliot Smith, they attest to the existence of a sort of Golden Age before the discovery of civilization. We believe that each author observed the facts correctly, but that there is a different conclusion to be drawn. At these archaic levels, it is the difficulties of daily existence, and the obstacle they present to the formation of economic privileges (which, in more highly evolved societies, are easily recognized as still providing the substructure of polygamy), which limit the cornering of women for the benefit of a few. Purity of soul, in the Vienna School sense, is never a factor in what might more readily be called a form of abortive polygamy rather than monogamy, for, in these societies as well as in those which favourably sanction polygamous unions, and in our own, the tendency is towards a multiplicity of wives. It was earlier indicated that the contradictory nature of the information about the sexual habits of the great apes does not allow any resolution, on the animal plane, of the problem of whether polygamous tendencies are innate or acquired. Social and biological observation combine to suggest that, in man, these tendencies are natural and universal, and that only limitations born of the environment and culture are responsible for their suppression. Consequently, to our eyes, monogamy is not a positive institution, but merely incorporates the limit of polygamy in societies where, for highly varied reasons, economic and sexual competition reaches an acute form. The very small degree of social unity in the most primitive societies accounts very well for these particular characteristics.

1 Richards, 1932, pp. 173-4. 2 Miller, 1931, p. 392.
Even in these societies, moreover, monogamy is not a general rule. The Nambikwara, semi-nomads of western Brazil, who live for most of the year by collecting and gathering, sanction polygamy for their headmen and sorcerers. The securing of two, three or four wives by one or two important persons in a band of sometimes less than twenty people necessarily obliges their companions to be celibate. This privilege by itself is sufficient to upset the natural equilibrium of the sexes, since male adolescents occasionally can no longer find wives available from among the women of their own generation. Whatever the solution given to the problem - homosexuality among the Nambikwara, fraternal polyandry among their northern neighbours, the Tupi-Cawahib - the growing scarcity of wives does not appear less serious a problem in a society however predominately monogamous it might be.1

But even in a strictly monogamous society, the considerations of the previous paragraph still retain their validity. This deep polygamous tendency, which exists among all men, always makes the number of available women seem insufficient. Let us add that, even if there were as many women as men, these women would not all be equally desirable - giving this term a broader meaning than its usual erotic connotation - and that, by definition (as Hume has judiciously remarked in a celebrated essay2), the most desirable women must form a minority. Hence, the demand for women is in actual fact, or to all intents and purposes, always in a state of disequilibrium and tension.

Considerations drawn exclusively from the study of relations between the sexes in our society could not reveal the truly tragic nature of this disequilibrium in primitive societies. Its sexual implications are secondary. Indeed, primitive society, even more than our own, provides many ways of overcoming this aspect of the problem. Homosexuality in some groups, polyandry and wife-lending in others, and finally, almost everywhere, the extreme freedom of premarital relations would prevent adolescents from experiencing any discomfort while waiting for a wife, if the wife's function were limited to sexual gratification. But, as often noted, in most primitive societies (and also, but to a lesser extent, in the rural classes of our own society) marriage is of an entirely different importance, not erotic, but economic. In our society, the difference between the economic status of the married man and the unmarried man amounts almost solely to the fact that the bachelor has to replace his wardrobe more frequently. The situation is altogether different in groups where the satisfaction of economic needs rests wholly on the conjugal society and the division of labour between the sexes. Not only do man and wife have different technical specializations, one depending on the other for the manufacture of objects necessary for their daily tasks, but they are each employed in producing different foodstuffs. Accordingly, a complete, and above all regular, food supply indeed depends on that 'principal cooperative', the household. The Pygmies, who consider women and children as the most valuable of the active part of the family group, say that 'the more women available the more food'.1 Likewise, Hottentot women, during the marriage ceremony, chorus the praise of the groom and of the men who, like him, are looking for a wife, 'since today they have enough to eat'.2

It would be almost impossible for an individual by himself to survive, especially at the most primitive levels, where hunting and gardening, as well as collecting and gathering, are made hazardous by the harshness of the geographical environment and the rudimentary nature of techniques. One of the deepest impressions which I retain from my first experiences in the field was the sight, in a central Brazilian native village, of a young man crouching for hours upon end in the corner of a hut, dismal, ill-cared for, fearfully thin, and seemingly in the most complete state of dejection. I observed him for several days. He rarely went out, except to go hunting by himself, and when the family meals began around the fires, he would as often as not have gone without if a female relative had not occasionally set a little food at his side, which he ate in silence. Intrigued by this strange fate, I finally asked who this person was, thinking that he suffered from some serious illness; my suppositions were laughed at and I was told, "He is a bachelor." This was indeed the sole reason for the apparent curse. This example could be multiplied many times. Denied food after bad hunting or fishing expeditions when the fruits of the women's collecting and gathering, and sometimes their gardening, provide the only meal there is, the wretched bachelor is a characteristic sight in native society. But the actual victim is not the only person involved in this scarcely tolerable situation. The relatives or friends on whom he depends in such cases for his subsistence are testy in suffering his mute anxiety, for, from the combined efforts of both husband and wife, a family often barely derives enough to avoid death by starvation. Hence, in such societies it is no exaggeration to say that marriage is of vital importance for every individual, being, as he is, doubly concerned, not only to find a wife for himself but also to prevent those two calamities of primitive society from occurring in his group, namely, the bachelor and the orphan.

We apologize for amassing a number of quotations and comments here, but it is essential to illustrate if not the generality of these attitudes, which doubtless no one would contest, then rather the vehemence and conviction of their expression in primitive thought everywhere. 'Among these Indians', write Colbacchini and Albisetti of the Bororo, where the observation contained in the previous paragraph was made, 'celibacy does not exist, and it is not even imagined, for its possibility would never be admitted.'3 Likewise, Schebesta says, 'the Pygmy despises and jeers at bachelors as abnormal creatures.'4 Radcliffe-Brown notes: 'One man was mentioned to me as being a

1 Lévi-Strauss, 1948a, and 1948b.
2 Hume, 1886, p. 154. Likewise, 'If all were excellent here below, then there would be nothing excellent', Diderot, 1935, p. 199.
4 Colbacchini and Albisetti, 1942, p. 51.
5 Schapera, 1930, p. 247.
6 Schebesta, 1936, p. 138.
bad man because he refused to take a wife after he had reached the age when it is considered proper for a man to marry. In New Guinea, 'The economic system, the traditional partition of labour between man and woman, makes life tolerable for a community of life between the sexes a necessity. Indeed, all persons attain that state except cripples.' With the Reindeer Chukchee, no man can live a tolerable life without a separate house of his own and a woman to take care of it. A man full-grown and unmarried is despised by the people, and in reality is looked upon as a good-for-nothing, a lounging, idly wandering from camp to camp.

Gilhodes says of the Kachin of Burma:

'As to voluntary celibacy, they seem not to have even the idea of it. It is glory for every Kachin to marry and to have children, and a shame to die without posterity. You find nevertheless some rare old boys or old spinster; but nearly always they are half-witted people or of an impossible temper, and at their death they are given a ridiculous burial.'

Again:

'Some rare cases, however, are found of old single bachelors and old spinster. In their lifetime they are ashamed of their condition and at their death they inspire fear chiefly to the young. Young men and young girls, for fear of not being able to settle themselves in the future, take no part in the funeral meals; the ceremonies are chiefly done by the old men and women and in a somewhat ridiculous manner... The dances are done inside out.'

Let us conclude this brief survey with a report from the Orient. 'If a man has no wife, there will be no Paradise for him hereafter and no Paradise on earth... If woman had not been created, there would have been no sun and no moon, no agriculture and no fire.' Like the eastern Jews and the ancient Babylonians, the Mandaeans make celibacy a sin. The unmarried of both sexes (and particularly monks and nuns) are given up defenceless to the dealings of demons 'and so [evil] spirits and goblins proceed from them which plague mankind'. The Navaho Indians share the same theory. Even in the first three of the inferior Four Worlds, the distinction of the sexes and their relationships is maintained, so difficult do the natives find it to imagine a form of existence, be it the lowest and most miserable, which did not possess this benefit. But the sexes are separated in the fourth world, and monsters are the fruit of the masturbation to which each sex is reduced.

There are no doubt several exceptions to this general attitude. Celibacy seems to be of some frequency in Polynesia, perhaps because in this part of the world the production of food is not a critical problem. Elsewhere, as among the Karen of Burma and the Tungus, it is rather a consequence of the prescriptions with which these people apply their rules of exogamy. When the prescribed spouse is subject to a strict determination, marriage becomes impossible without there being a relative in exactly the required position. In this last case at least, the exception proves the rule.

What would happen, then, if the principle of collective intervention expressed purely formally by the rule prohibiting incest - without regard to particular circumstances - did not exist? It might be expected that privileges would arise in that natural aggregation called the family, by reason of the greater intimacy of its inter-individual contacts, and by the lack of any social rule tending to limit this family and to establish equilibrium in it. We are not suggesting that every family would automatically maintain a monopoly of its women. This would be to assert the institutional priority of the family over the group, a supposition far from our mind. We merely postulate, without posing the question of the historical precedence of the one over the other, that the specific viscosity of the family aggregation would act in this direction, and that the combined results would confirm this action. As has been shown, such an eventuality is incompatible with the vital demands not only of primitive society but of society in general.

1 Radcliffe-Brown, 1933, pp. 50-1.
3 Bogoras, 1904-9, p. 569.
4 Gilhodes, 1922, p. 225.
5 ibid. p. 277.
6 Drower, 1937, p. 59.
7 ibid. p. 65.
8 ibid. p. 17.
9 Reichard, n.d., p. 662.
10 Firth, 1936, passim.