(gender)

GENDER, AGE, NEIGHBOURS AND FRIENDS

[The following is taken from a report to the E.S.R.C. written by Alan Macfarlane in 1983]

Gender relations

One of the principles frequently employed in societies to differentiate and to unite the world is the opposition between males and females. A great deal of material is buried in the local records concerning gender relations, but is it extremely difficult to interpret. Where gender is used as a major principle or organization, there is usually a very opposition between the ideals and behaviour of the sexes, as in Hindu, Islamic or Mediterranean cultures. In the extreme cases the worlds of men and women overlap very little indeed and there is a very large emphasis on the threat and hostility between the genders and on the inferiority and subservience of women. This is related again to the 'honour and shame' complex; men have honour, women bring shame. Against such a background, what is striking at first glance from our parish records is the absence of a marked opposition. There is a striking similarity between men and women, a relaxed and friendly attitude, a mutual and affectionate sparring of almost equals, an absence of most of what is now known as male machismo, of female 'shame' of a stress on threats to female virginity. Women are not hidden away by dress or by buildings; they are not the vulnerable possessions of men. Though within the family, in relations of power, the man has the casting vote, it is meant to be a rule at the family level where both are 'under the law'. There are only hints of a gender opposition.

Age relations

As important as gender as a principle of social differentiation and cohesion is age. Some societies, particularly those in East Africa, take this to the level of organizing most of their social life around age grades. In most peasant and tribal societies, age differences are very important indeed. The principle friendships and bonds are within age-grades, the principle oppositions and bonds of authority are between the old and the young. Usually this is marked by ritual; there are elaborate rituals of movement from one age category to another, from one social age to the next. Thus puberty and circumcision rites are central, and later rites mark off the very old. There is a very different role for each age groups. Such age sets were found, for example, to be the principle work groups in our Nepalese study. In general, when we look at the English parishes, what is outstanding is the weak development of age as an important structural feature. There are only passing references to age categories. There is no evidence that people grouped themselves for any important activities on the basis of age. Rituals of aging were very weakly developed. Social adulthood was automatic and was not conferred by the society, as it is by marriage or initiation in many other societies. There was no artificial way of divorcing social from physical age and hence keeping men as 'boys', and women as 'girls' all their lives. At the other extreme, there is little evidence that being one of the 'elders' conferred enormous power an dignity. The 'curse' of the old, for example, which is so often important elsewhere, is nowhere visible here. The natural aging process of the human body, just like its natural gender, was not built up culturally to provide a major way of conceiving of and organizing the society. This explains the almost total absence

of those active 'youth groups', bands of young men who plagued many European societies. For example, there is no sign of developed age associations in village ceremonials, though of course it would be carrying the argument too far to dismiss the importance of age totally.

Neighbourly relations

If, as we have argued, the natural features of blood, gender, age were not the basis for the social structure, and if they were not bolstered by constructed kinship and constructed political ties, we may wonder how the society was held together. A great deal of co-operation is required to run any social system. If kin were dispersed and gender and age-bonds not emphasized, how did the society work? One obvious area is in neighbourly relations, proximity. It is thus strange to find once again a far from clear indication of the importance of mere physical proximity in our evidence. It is clear that people did rely on their neighbours quite considerably and inter-acted with them in a relaxed and non-competitive manner which would cause amazement in many familistic societies. On the other hand, in the end even neighbours could be dispensed with. There is less evidence of the presence of institutionalized work groups based on neighbourhood than one would find in many rural societies, for example in Galicia or Ireland. Apart from the legal entity of the 'tithing', there is little evidence of particular groups of neighbours doing anything together and yet much evidence of friction with neighbours. Neighbours, like kin, were forced on one, but in both cases, we have the impression that they had a large area of choice as to whether they used the relationship of not. It was possible to leave a potential relationship undeveloped and yet not to threaten one's subsistence. One passed the time of day with some of them, and co-operated and drank with them up to a certain point, but the relationship was manipulable and if a person moved on, his neighbours were left behind.

Friends

One has neighbours and kin thrust upon one, but can choose one's friends. It is by definition an equal relationship, based on mutual liking. The extreme example is love and marriage, 'married friends'. Thus friendship is different from all the relationships considered before, since it is based on pure selection. In many societies friendship is very weakly developed, or non-existent. The idea of having 'friends', people one likes, trusts etc. outside one's family or village is absurd. The idea of 'friends' of the opposite gender whom one is not courting is an abomination. But in a society where kinship and the other 'natural' principles of association are weak, friendship is given space. The public house is where one meets one's friends, the patterns of games and leisure and the conversations and contacts are with friends. It is possible, through Josselin's diary, and through wills and court records, to show that friendship is one of the pivots of the social structure in this society.

Friendships are usually based on a mutual interest, whether in literature, religion, leisure or business. They are, however filled with sentiment and endure over a long period. It appears that they were complemented in this society by numerous more fragmentary relationships. Indeed they were so fragmentary that it is difficult to perceive them and it is for this reason among others that they tend to escape the notice of the historian. In a society which is dominated by contract, rather than status, many of the relations are single-stranded ones based on exchanges. Such contact, often with

strangers, or with people whom one vaguely knows but with whom one only has a single-stranded type of relation, are absent in many societies where people are mostly involved in complex relations at different levels. Thus, anthropologists have introduced discussions of single-stranded, bureaucratic, balanced reciprocal relationships. The presence of such relations depends on a situation where money is widespread, and contracts can be enforced. Our first impression from these parishes is that such shallow relationships were very widespread here from the start of our documents. It is a world which is largely based on single-stranded, equal, exchanges and contracts. It is, to paraphrase Milson's remark about the late thirteenth world revealed by Maitland, a flat world inhabited by equal neighbours. People seem to have treated each other as potential partners in endless exchanges and contracts. The nearest anthropological analogy is perhaps the endless and individualistic exchanges of New Guinea. We are dealing with a basically transactional society. People are, as we see in the documents, constantly doing deals: buying, selling, hiring, borrowing, promising, agreeing. Such a system has to be protected by an elaborate legal and enforcement code such as that provided by the powerful legal system we have described above, for it is largely based on trust. Life is an endless game or competition, in which people are endlessly striving for minor victories and conquests. People are entrepreneurs and negotiators, constantly concerned not with that improvement in personal honour which is, for example, the obsession of many peasants, nor with splendid consumption, but with wealth and with winning another victory. Thus, when we draw diagrams of the social contacts of individual in our parishes, we find they are the centres of networks of short and longer-term ties, but the alliances are constantly shifting.

Associations

 Sometimes however, the temporary relationships become more strongly re-enforced into associations of various kinds. It is thus one of the curious features of this system that it encouraged numerous associations based on like-mindedness. Although we only find a few of these in our parishes, it is a world which gave birth to such famous institutions as fellows of colleges, trades associations, the boy scouts and girl guides, the women's institute, in other words numerous societies to study and engage in all kinds of activity. At our period, most of these associations were centred on religious of economic activity, for example the Quakers or guilds.