

Anthropological Perspectives on the Household

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For more than a decade, feminist anthropologists and economists have been engaged in debate with both economics and with the classical corpus of anthropology over the concept of the household. Others, of course, have made major contributions but it has been particularly in relation to intra- and extra-household gender relations that reconceptualisation of the issue has occurred. A substantial literature has emerged. The modest purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the state of the debate. It focuses principally, however, on the debate over households in Africa for it is in this that both empirical and conceptual work has most vigorously contested the relevance of inherited models.

In one respect, providing a short history of anthropological perspectives on the household is a less forbidding task than might be supposed, for the concept does not have a very long history! In other respects, however, it is a difficult task because anthropology brought to bear on the concept its tradition of analysis of two other institutions which distinguish its approach from that of other social sciences. These are *kinship* and the *domestic domain*.

In an article published a decade ago, Jane Guyer contrasted anthropological and economic concepts of social organisation and production in Africa. Anthropology, she pointed out, 'had been concerned with building models of social and political structures, economics with explaining aggregate patterns of individual behaviour' [Guyer 1981:89]. She focused on the concepts of lineage and household as the paradigms of the two different theoretical traditions. The lineage refers to a politico-jural unit, constituted from particular social principles of kinship and descent, with collective ownership of resources, collective responsibility in law and collective responsibility in wider arenas. It is not the unit of daily production, of reproduction or of residence, the kinds of activities associated with the household to which relatively little attention had been paid in the classic corpus of anthropology. In this tradition, the term household has generally been merely descriptive of 'a collection of people living and eating together' [Cheater 1986:170]. However, the sphere of daily activities of production, reproduction and living together had been conceptualised within anthropology under the term 'the domestic domain'.

In contrast, the concept of the household has been central to the tradition of economic theory especially with regard to decision-making in small-scale agricultural societies. In Guyer's opinion, this is because the household appears to lend itself to such analysis: 'It apparently has a locus, resources, and a labour force, and is a universal enough kind of unit to be worth making a model of' [Guyer 1981:98]. Economists use the concept of the household to define a domestic unit with decision-making autonomy about production and consumption. Maureen Mackintosh, a feminist economist herself, summarises the problems of this conceptualisation in the African context:

Economists had in the 1970s, and still have, a commitment to the idea of the African household as the basic unit of farming and consumption . . . By the household enterprise, (they) generally mean a household-based farm . . . operating independently, within a given labour base, and under the domination of a single head, usually characterised as a patriarch. The crucial assumption . . . is the unequivocal hierarchy of power and decision-making over resources . . . This model is highly misleading when applied to Senegalese farming systems and, indeed, anthropological studies suggest, to a wide range of farming systems in West Africa [Mackintosh 1989:28-29]

The reason why anthropologists find such a model misleading goes back to the concept of lineage as politico-jural unit and its relationship to that of the domestic domain.

Perhaps the best known work in British social anthropology which focuses on this relationship is the collection of essays edited by Jack Goody [1969]. This explored the processes of social reproduction, that is, the institutional mechanisms, customary activities and norms which serve to maintain, replenish and transmit social capital from one generation to the next. The 'workshop', as Meyer Fortes called it, of social reproduction is the domestic group, a residential, 'householding and housekeeping unit organised to provide the material and cultural resources needed to maintain and bring up its members' [Fortes 1969:8]. But residence, Fortes argued, is not a primary factor of social structure of the order of kinship, descent, marriage and citizenship, the constituents of the

politico-jural domain. Residential groups and the organisation of householding and housekeeping are governed by relations to this external field of the politico-jural domain. 'Every member of society is simultaneously a person in the domestic domain and in the politico-jural domain. His (sic) status in the former receives definition and sanction from the latter' [*ibid*:12], the latter being the domain in which are defined inheritance and succession to rights over property and resources, material and human, productive and reproductive. Thus anthropologists find it difficult to conceptualise the domestic domain as an independent decision-making unit or as one with autonomous control over resources. Moreover, since authority over resources derives largely from the position of each individual within the external domain, there can be no unequivocal hierarchy of power over resources which can be deduced from an analysis of the domestic domain in isolation.

Further analysis, however, of the hierarchies of gender, generation and social rank deriving from the external domain as they impinge on the organisation of production and decision-making in the domestic domain was largely to await the adoption of the concept of the household by anthropologists. It remains to be said of Goody's collection which influenced a generation of anthropologists, that it was scathing of attempts to classify residential and domestic groups, or what we would now call households, by 'type' such as nuclear family, extended patrilocal and so on. Those were the results of census methods, not of the anthropological understanding of the developmental cycle of domestic groups. Female-headed households, to which subsequently so much attention has been paid, would, within this conceptualisation of the domestic domain, be either a condition of descent and inheritance impinging on the personnel of the domestic group as in, for example, matrilineal systems of descent, or an incidence of the developmental cycle of the domestic group.

The attention to lineage and domestic domain was characteristic of the anthropology of small-scale and/or stateless societies, particularly of Africa and the Pacific. Since the 1960s, however, anthropology has increasingly been concerned with the transformation of such societies in the process of the development of capitalism and of the nation state. It was in this context that anthropologists were attracted to the literature concerning rural producers in class-based societies: the peasantry [Guyer 1981]. In Africa, and indeed elsewhere, social anthropology did not accept the concept of the peasantry without a struggle. Saul and Woods [1971] insisted on a distinctive African peasantry arising from the interaction between international capitalism and traditional socio-economic systems. Polly Hill, an economist who has influenced several generations of anthropologists, insisted that at least Ghanaian cocoa farmers should

not be described as peasants at all, but as capitalists [Hill 1963]. Nevertheless, the grounds for analysing the organisation of production of African and other farming systems in terms of peasant systems of production were established. The particular significance of this development lies in the importance of the 'family economy' or 'the peasant household' as the principal unit of production and consumption in peasant societies.

This encounter between anthropology and theories of peasant economy led to a spate of literature on family or domestic modes of production which drew particularly on the work of the Russian economist, A. V. Chayanov, concerning the peasant household as economic enterprise. But as Harris and other feminist anthropologists were to argue, this intellectual tradition was flawed with respect to two assumptions concerning households [Harris 1981]. The first concerns the assumption of an analytical distinction between the household and the rest of society. This is the problem of the relationship between household and politico-jural domain which I have outlined above. The second concerns the unity of interests of household members: the assumption of 'an undifferentiated autocracy, or even an undifferentiated communality' [*ibid* 57] is misleading in the extreme. Intra-household relations, whether those of gender or generation to indicate but two possible divisions of resources and authority, have to be specified.

These two problems concerning the model of the peasant household have constituted the core of anthropological debate over the last decade. Both pose problems of a specific kind to feminist anthropology, that of deconstructing the assumption that the household is 'outside' society and subject to principles of organisation and regulation through relationships which are pre-social or natural. The object of numerous studies has been to 'denaturalise' the household and intra- and extra-household gender relations in particular and to conceptualise them as historically produced, culturally specific and socially constituted.

Harris's seminal article entitled 'Households as Natural Units' [Harris 1981: a paper originally presented at the Subordination of Women Workshop held at IDS in 1977] is part of a feminist literature in anthropology and other social sciences which deconstructs a number of concepts converging on the idea of the domestic domain. These include the household, the family, the sexual division of labour the division between the public and the private spheres. As Moore puts it, these amorphous concepts and entities 'overlap in complex ways to produce a sense of the domestic sphere' [Moore 1988:54]. The object of the feminist critique is the assumption that women, through their biological capacity for reproduction, are naturally embedded in the family or

the domestic sphere and that this 'natural fact' is the basis of the sexual division of labour and the organisation and regulation of household productive and reproductive activities.

Anthropology, of course, conceptualises kinship systems as of social rather than biological origin, constituting as they do the politico-jural domain. It possesses a great literature which distinguishes between systems of conjugal relations with respect to the merging or separation of property at marriage, between monogamous and polygamous systems of marriage and between different forms of rights over women's sexual, reproductive and productive capacities. Nevertheless, anthropology has had greater difficulty in accepting the social origins, forms and history of the family as domestic group. The universality of the nuclear family as the basis for residential and child-rearing practices, based on the alleged biological requirements of procreation, was demolished by the 1960s. It was replaced, however, by the notion of mother and dependent children as the universal fact determining the organisation of domestic groups [Moore 1988:24]. By the 1980s the defences of biologism were crumbling under the combined forces of historians of the family in Europe, Africa and elsewhere and a developing interest in the socially and culturally determined practices of mothering.

The deconstruction of the natural basis of the sexual (or gender) division of labour will be familiar to readers of the *IDS Bulletin* which published some of the early papers of the Subordination of Women Conference [IDS Bulletin, 1977; see also Young *et al.* 1981; 1989]. The issue here is not only the accumulation of evidence of the distinctively cultural, rather than biological, features of gender divisions of labour. It has specific pertinence to the concept of the household in that the household appears to be a critical site for the construction and reproduction of gender divisions of labour through the intensity of its social relations and interactions. Studies by anthropologists of the historical specificity of gender divisions of labour in the household have led to important reconceptualisations of, for example, African farming systems. Guyer has devastatingly debunked the notion that female farming systems evolutionarily precede male farming systems, arguing that their existence in Africa is a consequence of fairly recent commoditisation of production interacting with gender divisions of labour and differential access to resources in land and labour [Guyer 1984; see also Roberts 1988].

How then do anthropologists define the household? In terms of its functions, probably in the same way as do other social sciences: as the basic unit of society in which the activities of production, reproduction, consumption and the socialisation of children take place. There are two respects, however, in which an

anthropological perspective on the household may differ from others. First, anthropologists do not assume that such a unit exists in terms of indigenous categories or that what appears to be a household, such as a place of co-residence (a house), is actually where all these functions are combined. There may be no indigenous term for such a unit. Languages may present terms referring to some elements of the concept of household, ranging from units of co-residence, to groups of people who eat together, to groups which engage in joint productive activities. These may, but very likely do not in the West African context particularly, coincide. In polygynous societies, units of consumption, or of reproductive activities and very often of productive activities, centre round each wife. In some matrilineal societies, the co-residence of spouses is not a basic principle or condition of marriage, although spouses may collaborate in production and consumption. Key functions of the household, therefore, may not be carried out by co-residential groups and conversely co-residential groups may not constitute groups which cooperate in any or all of the activities of production, consumption or socialisation. The household, then, is a concept: its activities may not have a single locus and a locus may not indicate a single unit of labour or of resources.

Secondly, anthropologists are always aware that households do not necessarily comprise persons recruited solely through kinship and marriage or that persons related through descent and affinity interact through ties of affection rather than contract. Certainly, kinship and marriage may be the chief mechanisms of recruitment to the household. Household and family are not, however, necessarily the same thing. Households in Africa particularly may recruit personnel through adoption, pawning or purchase and may incorporate sharecroppers or labourers who may contribute to the productive enterprises of some members and to the consumption activities of others. Persons who are related through descent and affinity may collaborate in joint household activities under more or less explicit contracts which specify obligations and the resources which each brings to such enterprises. Thus the Hausa term **gandu** refers to a group of men who live together, farm together for specified periods of the day or week and to the farm which they jointly work under the direction of a senior male. He derives his subsistence from the product of this labour, distributes part to these dependents and pays their taxes and bridewealth. The group consists of sons and other male dependents and specifically in the past included slaves. It does not include the wives of the head or of sons although they may contribute labour and receive subsistence. Members of **gandu** do not combine as a unit of consumption, however, and each subordinate member pursues independent productive activities in addition, which may involve farming land individually allocated

by the head of **gandu** or other income earning activities. The income from these belongs to the individual, not to the head of **gandu**. Wives similarly have their own economic enterprises, the product or income from which they control. **Gandu**, therefore, refers to the joint activity of some members of a residential group for part of their time. It does not comprise all the functions of a household and the basis of collaboration is contractual and not affective [Roberts 1989].

Anthropology can provide a taxonomy of co-residential groups which distinguishes between different types of headship, different systems of recruitment and different compositions of members: male and female headed; nuclear or multi-generational households and so on [Brydon and Chant 1989]. But it is less interested in the statistical incidence of these than in the different principles of recruitment, of co-residence, of regulation regarding inheritance of and access to resources which differentiate household members along lines of gender and generation and in the contracts of joint or individual productive and reproductive activity. Anthropology cannot construct the household as an undifferentiated unit of activity and interests. The development of an anthropology of peasantries and class relations, and of the impingement of nation states on the regulation of marriage, or of inheritance, or of property ownership provide further conditions for the understanding of households. As social institutions they interact in their form and functions in relation to land and labour markets, even sanitary regulations and changes in house design. These effect the developmental cycle of domestic groups and the contracts of productive and reproductive collaboration.

Anthropologists, of course, define the internal process of formation and dissolution of households in social terms. Birth, copulation and death are social, not natural, events. For example, infertility or barrenness may or may not determine the dissolution of a conjugal relationship if social regulation exists which provides alternatives to biological reproduction. Seniority may be determined by genealogy rather than age; a senior wife in a polygynous system of marriage may be the first married wife, the oldest wife or a wife of free rather than slave descent. What interests anthropologists are the social contracts of recruitment to the household which determine the extent to which resources in land or in people are at the disposition of a notional household head or at the disposition of the individual recruited into the household but retaining rights over the disposal of his/her resources in terms of labour, land or social rank in a community regulated by the political disposition of resources. These 'contracts' of recruitment to the household differ radically in their social form both between members of households and between different societies. The

conditions under which a son works for his father are different from those in which his mother works for her husband. They are different, of course, with respect to the work to be done (the gender division of labour) but also with respect to actual or future rights in resources brought by each member or acquired by each member in the assembly of property in land and labour which constitutes a household. These rights in customary or state law determine the disposition of decision-making and the practices of the division of labour in productive and reproductive activities along the lines of gender, generation and socio-political rank which are constituted within the organisational practices of the household.

Feminist anthropology has been particularly interested in the variable conditions of the conjugal contract [Whitehead 1981]. Ann Whitehead defines such contracts as the 'terms on which husbands and wives exchange goods, income, and services, including labour, within the household'. Such contracts are basic to the household as a socially constructed entity which provides for the productive and reproductive requirements of its members. The nature of these, and of other contracts between household members such as fathers and sons, are indicative of the extent to which households tend towards principles of pooling or principles of exchange in the organisation of productive and reproductive activity. In Africa as a whole, conjugal contracts are marked by a tendency towards exchange, a principle which does not exclude straightforward purchase of goods and services between husband and wives. This fact, which sometimes seems to strike horror into the hearts of those who assume the non-social, affective principles of marriage or household, is critical to the understanding of household formation and the processes of transformation of the gender division of labour, household production and reproduction. It lies at the heart of the anthropological concern with the relationship between the domestic domain and the politico-jural domain in that individuals recruited into households bring with them their legal entitlements, by customary law or state law, to control over property in land or in persons and constitute joint or individual productive and reproductive enterprises within the terms of these contracts.

Systems of unilineal descent and inheritance, prevalent in Africa but not in Europe where the model of the household deployed in peasant studies was constituted, are the conditions under which such radically different notions of the conjugal contract exist. In Africa as a whole, the property of spouses is not pooled. This principle, often described as one in which husbands and wives have separate purses, is one in which spouses collaborate in household productive and reproductive activities with specific expectations of labour input, rights of ownership or access to

resources and share of product or individual control of product for consumption or sale. Wives, sons and daughters may also engage in 'own account enterprises' in which the principles of labour-recruitment, access to resources and use of product may be entirely different from those of joint household activity [Roberts 1988].

These divisions of productive, reproductive and consumption activities are potentially in conflict because of the socially differentiated capacities for recruitment of land and labour and for disposal of their product. Many of the inter-disciplinary studies of household organisation in Africa have learned from anthropology that a unitary concept of the household is inappropriate. Neither ownership of resources, nor disposition of labour, nor allocation of the product of land and labour is at the whim of the household head. Persons recruited into the household bring with them, or contract for, uses of labour or other resources which determine the extent of joint or separate activity with respect to the performance of the conceptual functions of the household. The new political domain of the post-colonial state, which has attempted reforms of the disposition of property at marriage or its dissolution, potentially transforms the nature of such conjugal contracts and therefore of the collaboration of spouses and offspring in productive and reproductive enterprises.

The particular perspective which social anthropology brings to bear on the study of the household largely derives from its analysis of the relationship between the politico-jural and the domestic domains. To this, feminist anthropology in particular has contributed its analysis of the social rather than natural basis of the constituent elements of the domestic domain. In contrast to the economists' model of the household, it produces a notion of the household which is not independent in its resources and decision-making capacity from wider society. It also does not conceptualise the household as a unity of interests between members nor does it assume that the functions of the household are performed jointly by all its members. Originating in the study of small-scale, kinship based societies, this perspective may appear to be less illuminating of household systems in class-based societies or where, for example, the conjugal separation of resources is not a significant feature of the organisation of domestic groups. Yet questioning the unity of interests of household members in different forms of society has proved to be of value in understanding decision making and the organisation of householding and housekeeping.

Anthropology is often accused of being too

particularistic, of not producing universal models, in this case, of the household. Why should it? There is little point in a universal model if there is no universe to which it applies.

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