



Redefining Kinship: A Study on Human and Non-Human Relationships

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Abstract

This article challenges the traditional notion of kinship as being limited to biological or marital ties. Drawing on anthropological theories and ethnographic examples, it argues that kinship must be redefined as a culturally constructed and emotionally lived phenomenon that also encompasses relationships between humans and non-human animals. The idea of relatedness, as explored by scholars like Janet Carsten and Radhika Govindrajan, shows how everyday interactions, care practices, and ritual participation foster bonds that transcend species boundaries. The article also examines examples from popular culture and real-life practices—such as pet keeping, ritual sacrifice, and symbolic reverence—to show how kinship is expressed and lived across human–nonhuman lines.

Keywords: Relatedness, Kinship, non-human, pets, kin

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Introduction

In sociology and social anthropology, the concept of kinship has undergone significant transformation. Traditionally, kinship was understood in terms of biological descent or marital connection, but recent scholarship has moved toward a more fluid, culturally grounded understanding of relatedness. This article argues that kinship should be seen as a social and emotional construct that can include non-human animals as active participants in relational networks. Drawing on Janet Carsten's concept of "cultures of relatedness" and Radhika Govindrajan's ethnographic work in Uttarakhand, this study explores how kinship is created not only through blood and law but also through shared space, care, ritual, and emotional intimacy between humans and non-humans.

Changing Idea of Relatedness

Carsten argues that kinship could not only be understood with reference to biology and reproduction. She looks at the idea of relatedness in various cultural contexts. Her essay also sets a background for a new approach to the study of kinship. Carsten

mainly emphasises that the foundation of relatedness is not solely limited to biological ties, as in the West, but it is also social in nature through multiple practices like naming, adoption, and marriage. In her work, she quotes the example of the Inupiat tribe, which believes that the foundation of kinship is not biological but mostly based on social ties. The anthropological history provided by Carsten is mainly influenced by the work of David Schneider and takes culture into the study. Instead of kinship, the authors use relatedness to show that there are indigenous ways in which one can be related and not only dependent upon previously established ideas; this usage can also help in avoiding certain assumptions regarding biological and social (Carsten,2000).

Schneider, through his analysis of American kinship, argued that the core idea of kinship lies with sexual reproduction, which is defined by substance and code. Schneider, on the one hand, claimed that there is nothing biological and only cultural interpretation exists, but at the same time, he also posits that there are natural facts which he distinguishes from how they are

culturally constructed (Carsten,2000). For example, among the Trobriand islanders or Yapeese, the link between sexual activity and procreation is not taken into consideration, and the cultural understanding of relatedness differs from the Western belief. In addition, Carsten takes into account the works of Lambert, Hutchinson, and Stafford, demonstrating how the kinship systems of Rajasthan, Nuer, and Chinese vary and focuses on the significance of local practices in defining relatedness and how it varies across cultures.

Relatedness often seems to be constructed through everyday practices, like performing rituals or customs together, and also through interactions that take place every day, which include the primary activities like participation in community events, sharing and feeding of meals, and provision of support. Carsten also quotes the example of Malay, where relatedness is defined by procreation but also through everyday activities and staying together. Across different cultures, relatedness is defined by substances including land, material resources, etc. Among the Nuers, the idea of relatedness is also seen through soil and cattle, which shows that kinship relations can be socially constructed. Janet Carsten explores the biological and social idea of defining kinship relations in regard to different contexts, which demonstrate that kinship relations are also culturally developed (Carsten,2000).

An Ethnographic Perspective

Radhika Govindrajan, in her ethnographic study of Kumaon Village in Uttarakhand, delves into the kinship relationship between humans and non-human animals, mainly shedding light on how the knots of connection develop a sense of relatedness shared in this kind of relationship. She quotes a case of a widow named Munni who stays in a goth with her Jersey cow Radha because her house was destroyed in the rain, she was asked to move from there, but as Radha is ill and not consuming anything,

she prioritizes the cow's health over her safety. Munni is hesitant to leave Radha, after all, she considers her family. Munni's life was mainly tied to animals, and these knots of connection provide a link between humans and non-human animals. Govindrajan's approach towards relatedness rests upon the belief of Kumaon villagers that kinship is a multispecies affair; for them, it is important to develop a relationship with other animal persons. Here, the focus is not only on single species but delves into diverse kinds of animals, ranging from goats, cows, monkeys, wild boar, etc. (Govindrajan,2018)

In the mountain regions, the relationship between humans and animals is often described by the experience of residing together in the land of the gods, also called Devbhumi. Due to the common subjection and relatedness to the devi-devatas, it is often regarded that the Pahari animals are kin to the Pahari people. For instance, a Pahari goat has a better understanding of the necessity of ritual sacrifice for the local god than the goats in the plains. The phenomenon of Pahari leopards hunting humans according to the orders given by deities to punish deviant individuals is also found in the village. The relationship between Pahari animals and humans developed not only through shared respect for devi dyavta but also through similar experiences of oppression and inequality. (Govindrajan,2018)

Here, the focus of the article in understanding the relatedness is specifically around the ritual sacrifice of a goat in the Kumaon village of Uttarakhand. Govindrajan sheds light on the connection between the one who sacrifices and the other who is being sacrificed and to whom the sacrifice is made. In one instance, a family of eight goats was sacrificed in the Kalika temple by a lady named Neema who had prayed to goddess Kalika for her husband's success and promised athwart was quoted in her work. The ritual sacrifice

takes place in such a way that the goats are often kept in an open-air shed. In her work, she also argues that the goats are often seen to be terrified as they breathe in blood on the ground, and some often keep moaning. The sacrificer is seen cutting the goats with ease, and the leftover meat after the sacrifice is handed over to the family. (Govindrajan,2018) During the whole process, Govindrajan also noticed that Neema's nephew did not participate in the whole process of sacrifice, which seemed too barbaric in nature and did not consume the prasad, which Neema found as an insult to Devi.

The ritual sacrifice of animals originated in the mountains because, back in earlier times, the goddess was satisfied only if blood was offered, and the offering of coconuts or flowers couldn't satisfy the desire for blood. Goats were considered the devotees of the gods, and the deities expected the sacrifice of a devotee. Even though most people considered animals as their children, they were given for sacrifice because there was pain endured in it. The act of animal sacrifice was viewed with complete hatred by animal rights activists, members of Hindu reform groups and many young Paharis. Govindrajan, in her work, also delves into the aspect of ritual sacrifice as relatedness.

In Uttarakhand, performing ritual sacrifice to the deities, and evil spirits is considered of utmost importance. The regular act of sacrifice reinforces the relationship between the devotees and deities and is repaid through wealth and prosperity in the families. In the arguments posed by the Pahari people regarding the value of kinship, the goat was seen as sacrificed in order to save the members of the family. The belief that animals are like human children is based on the fact that labour has gone into raising them; the animals are sacrificed instead of children. Through this, it is evident that the relationship of the

sacrificial goat with the family seems to be ambivalent. (Govindrajan,2018)

The villagers often compare the raising of both children and goats by stressing the fact that they tend to run away when not under supervision. Looking at the condition of women in relation to animals, they are mostly expected to do a huge amount of labour in the care of animals, which eventually creates a better emotional and social bond with animals. Women frequently made remarks about how mischievous goats are and require more labour than cows. Govindrajan also argues that most women spend time caring for animals and their children, and it also shows the relatedness or sense of kinship felt by women for animals is rooted in everyday rearing practices and care. Through her experience at the grazing ground in the Pokhri, the author recognizes the importance of the labour associated with raising the animals and the kinship the villagers feel for the non-human animals. The kind of kinship that existed among the Pahari villagers and animals was never one-sided and also reciprocated by the animals by showing care towards the humans. (Govindrajan,2018) At the end of the section Govindrajan emphasizes the importance of kinship between both humans and non-human animals and how it varies among the different families in the village.

The interspecies relatedness, as argued by Govindrajan, is not only confined to the ritual sacrifice of goats; she also argues about the relatedness that humans share with cows and the kind of distinction created between the Sacred cow and Jersey Cow. Sacred cows are considered as *gau-mata* by the people, whereas the Jersey cows are often subjected to slaughter. This also shows the kind of classification in the kind of animals that are subjected to sacrifice and also the ones slaughtered for meat. Her ethnographic text also includes how the relatedness and intimacies of multispecies could be seen as queer kinship.

This ethnographic work mainly presents the idea of relatedness among multiple species and also reflects on redefining the idea of kinship relations. (Govindrajan, 2018)

Human-Animal Bond in Everyday Life

In the study carried out by Nick Charles and Charlotte Aull Davies in South Wales, they try to explore the formation of family patterns and kinship networks, which never was inclined to the aspect of animals to be considered as kin, but eventually through the interviews conducted among the families made it evident that there can be an intimate family-like relation between humans - non-human animals especially pets and their significance in the kinship networks. During the interview, the individuals posed that the idea of family is not only defined in terms of marriage or blood but also includes friends as family, and some people did not know whether they could term their pets as kin members, but, in most cases, they counted their pets as family. The idea of companionship is also not restricted to human beings alone and especially when living in single households, the pets are often seen as companions. During the interview, a woman quoted how her cat provides companionship and help in avoiding loneliness. Apart from the cases in the study, the relationship between humans and pets is seen to be of utmost importance among different societies (Charles and Davies, 2008).

Here, in the following part of the article, through the illustrations of certain movies across cultures, let us look at the idea of the kinship relationship between humans and non-human animals. The Kannada film '777 Charlie' portrays the relationship shared between a man and a dog. The protagonist of the movie deals with loneliness, without many friends or family and eventually, he encounters Charlie the dog, where they establish a mutual relationship and are seen as beneficial in both their lives. Charlie has somehow

escaped from the breeder and sees a savior in the protagonist. In this movie, the protagonist is also seen helping other animals rescue, which eventually makes him close to animals, especially Charlie. The relatedness shared between the protagonist and the animal is not one-sided and reciprocated and also portrays that it is not necessary that blood and marriage relations provide companionship to people and can also extend to different species and in this case, it is a dog. 'Hachi: A Dog's Tale', based on a real-life incident, portrays the bond between a Japanese Akita dog and its master, which defines the loyal and unbreakable relationship they share with each other. The loyalty of the dog is shown as he waits for his master at the train station without knowing that he died. Hachi waited for ten long years for his master to return also shows how deep was the relatedness shared between the dog and master.

Another example that can be quoted here is the event called Jallikattu that takes place in Tamil Nadu during the Pongal festival (Bamarani, 2023). Basically, it's a traditional practice in which young men tame the bull to impress their prospective brides to show their prospective in-laws that they are strong and possess wealth. This event portrays the deep connection shared between the bulls and human beings who rear it, where bulls are considered a significant member of that particular group. In most cases, bulls are given names and also nurtured for a long period of time, often creating a bond that transcends the ideal kinship relations. Certain sections of society, mainly animal rights activists, have criticised the event of Jallikattu because the animals often get injured, which raises issues in animal welfare. Through all the above illustrations given, it is evident that the relatedness or the kinship system is not confined to human relations but also extended to the nonhuman animal relationship, which also varies across different cultural contexts

Conclusion

To sum up, the changing idea of kinship relation has been understood, where the traditional anthropological understanding of kinship was rooted in blood or marriage ties and later changed as Carsten (2000) in her work argues that relatedness is not only biological in nature but also socially constructed through local and every day practices changing across cultures. Taking this into consideration, the article also looked at the interspecies relatedness in the Himalayas through the ethnographic study conducted by Radhika Govindrajan in Kumaon village where our focus mainly engaged with the practice of ritual sacrifice of non-human animal. Later in the article, the pets as family kin are also highlighted and how they act as a significant member in the spectrum of kinship networks. To understand the kin relation among human and non-human animals' examples of movies like '777 Charlie' and 'Hachi the Dog' where there is an emphasis of emotional connection and the idea of companionship. Throughout the article, it is understood how humans and animals also share a kinship relation.

While tensions do exist in these forms of kinship—especially where animals are treated differently based on utility or ritual roles—the concept of relatedness still significantly challenges traditional kinship definitions. If we delve deeper into this, there are certain limits of the nature of kinship relation because the bond shared between all humans and non-human animals is also not the same, because non-human animals play different role of pets, for daily activities and in many ritual sacrifices as seen. And the idea of sacred and non-sacred animals also makes it complex to understand non-human kin. Even though there exist certain limitations, the shared relation between human and non-human animals challenges the conventional understanding of kinship.

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