On Brothers and Sisters: South Asian and Japanese Idea Systems and their Consequences[*]

Abstract

The role expectations of cross siblings varies across cultures. Such expectations, while usually not rigidly prescribing specific behaviors nevertheless influence relations between brothers and sisters in observable ways. In South Asia, a cultural rhetoric of sororal sacrifice and support coupled with fraternal protection are commonplace. While such noble sibling roles are regularly transgressed these remain powerful idioms of the relationship and transgressions require appropriate cultural justification. In contrast, Japanese rhetorical roles lack such explicit sacrifice-protection expectations from cross sibling interactions and instead include more competitive and conflictual idealized models of cross sibling behaviors. Looking at narrative accounts of cross siblings in ancient texts in South Asia and Japan as well as contemporary rituals and observed sibling interactions, this paper argues that the cross sibling relationship must be understood as part of an assemblage of cultural idea systems which inform behaviors, beliefs and attitudes in individuals.

Introduction

Brother and sister relationships of some sort are denoted in every known kinship terminology. There would appear to be no human society that does not recognize some formal kin relation between people of a collateral generation who share common relations to individuals of the antecedent generation. In other words, if a society recognizes that Person A calls Person B *parent* and Person C also calls Person B *parent* then Persons A and C may well be some type of sibling[i]. The significance and roles associated with that relationship vary, but the existence of the relationship seems to be as universal as the mother-child relationship. It is therefore notable that sibling relationships rarely seem to take the central place in anthropological analyses, despite the fact that they are integral to

every known kinship system. This is both justifiable and regrettable. While it is undoubtedly the case that anthropologists must allow the circumstances on the ground to guide their ethnographic representations, and as a result emphasize descent or marriage over sibling-hood, it is regrettable that the importance of the sibling structures as templates for the construction of the person has been neglected. This is particularly surprising in societies that reckon descent through female relatives and lineage membership is clearly identifiable through cross siblings, such as the Trobriand Island, and to some extent all Crow-Omaha type kinship systems (in which the Trobriand Island example is situated at a medial point between Crow and Omaha). Sibling roles and structures, while sometimes not the stuff of centre stage, are nevertheless vital building blocks for subsequent understanding of both individuals and relations between individuals (one might argue that individuals are constituted *from* the relations between individuals). Moreover, that sibling structures should be understood as sub-systems within an encompassing kinship system which may be cross culturally compared to identify fundamental variation between cultural populations. I shall focus specifically on one type of sibling relationship, that of cross siblings, or brothers and sisters. I examine both the ideal normative structure of brother-sister relations as well as expressions of real brother-sister behavior in the ethnographic records from two locations. The first comes from my own primary data produced in rural Punjab, Pakistan in a Muslim farming village as well as published accounts of brother-sister relations in other parts of South Asia. The second comes primarily from published accounts of brother-sister relations in Japan supplemented with preliminary primary data produced in Fukui Prefecture in western Japan.

Systems and symbols

There are a variety of ways in which one might make sense of culturally defined relationships. One approach is to focus on the transactional level in which there is considerable flexibility and variation within which to look at emergence of patterns from

behaviors. Carsten (1997) uses such an approach to good effect in trying to understand the ways in which kinship relations are maintained and reinforced through shared feeding. Siblings form a core part of the kinship world for Langkawi Malays, according to Carsten, regardless of the presence or absence of living siblings. Everyone, even lone children, have had at least one sibling in their 'placental' sibling. Such a basic defining relationship suggests that whatever else kinship might do, one of the principle outcomes is the constitution of personhood. In a very different ethnographic context, Kirtsoglou (2004) also concentrates on social rules in development as individuals play with various stereotypes and conventions to strategically define their own social worlds. Kirtsoglou's *parea* (group) reject the obvious classification of their relations as instances of lesbianism or homosexuality and instead assert a very different sort of gender politics which is contestable and restricted in applicability. Neither the Langkawi Malays nor the Greek *parea* operate in a social vacuum, however. Their agency in defining the terms of their relations and in producing new forms of social relations is constrained by a number of factors, not least of which is the imaginations of the individuals involved and the limits of communicability between those individuals[ii].

Another approach which complements the emphasis on individual agency recognizes that there are idea systems underpinning individual choice and strategizing which are durable and persistent. Such idea systems are more than referential systems which enable people to relate external facts to indices of signs or symbolic relations, but actually shape the production of things and constitute what people think[iii]. Kinship terminologies constitute a well researched idea system, as does Euclidian geometry[iv]. In the case of Euclidian geometry, the idea system was not derived from ethnographic knowledge elicitation but in a sense from something rather similar-- elicitation about the world of shapes around us. Euclidian geometry is not the only way that such shapes are described formally, but it is one that has worked remarkably well over time and corresponds to facts which enable

people to do things they want or need to do (Leaf 2007: 6). Kinship terminologies are another such idea system which is internally consistent and derivable from a minimal set of axioms about the system itself (Read & Behrens 1990; Read 2001; Fischer, Read and Lyon 2005; Read 2006; Read, Fischer and Lehman 2014). The kinship elicitation method developed by Leaf (1972) during the course of research with Punjabi Sikhs is a clear demonstration of kinship terminologies as idea systems rather than as either imposed logical structures or emergent relational systems derived from individual transactions. Such an approach is illustrative of Fischer's (2005) model of the distinction between information and meaning in which he examines the ways in which information systems (or idea systems) generate knowledge which in the course of communication and interaction *becomes* meaningful.

Carrithers (2005; 2007; 2008; 2009) offers something of a meeting ground between rigorous empirical formalism and agent-centric culture-construction-as-emergent-process. He has rather grandly labelled the approach rhetoric culture theory and while it perhaps falls short of offering a coherent theoretical approach to culture, it does provide tools for dealing with both idea systems and fluid instances of such systems in action. He suggests that people are constantly in the process of communicating and attempting to move others in some ways rhetorically. Inspired by Burke (1969) and Fernandez's (1974; 2009; 2010) innovative application of rhetoric within anthropology, Carrithers has expanded what might constitute rhetorical acts well beyond that normally discussed by more classical rhetoricians. The ambiguity of sociality leads people to try to influence situations through rhetorical acts derived from the pools of story seeds which serve as short cuts to more fulsome social understandings which hopefully clarify the ambiguity within specific contexts.

The sibling relationships with which I am concerned are an example of both an idea system, or part of an idea system, and a set of story seeds. Sibling sets are culturally

constituted and derive their meaning from ideas about kinship, household, genealogy, gender and family (Read, Fischer & Lehman 2014). The role expectations of these sets depend on the social and cultural context and are not derivable solely from observations of interactions of actual brothers and sisters, but must instead come from a combination of such observations with a complementary analysis of representations of idealized (or other model) sibling interactions. In some cases the expected behaviors and roles may be relatively easy to formulate since people within the society may have access to one or more well articulated rhetorical packages which are easily communicated. In other cases, it may be more subtle. In the two ethnographic cases I present here, one has a more highly articulated and prescriptive set of sibling expectations (South Asia) and the other would appear to have a less rigidly defined set of idealized expectations (Japan). Nevertheless, both cases exhibit regularity and some measure of predictability, at the very least in the range of actual interactions that are likely to take place and the extent to culturally relevant justification required for deviation from the shared cultural rhetoric.

Sibling Studies

Sibling studies are more common in psychology than anthropology. Psychological studies of siblings are interesting both for what they reveal, as well as what they can sometimes glaringly neglect. Weisner (1993) aptly suggests that what he calls the 'cultural place' is arguably the single most important thing to know in order to understand sibling-hood. By cultural place, Weisner means both cultural and ecological settings. He argues that studies of genetics and inheritability of siblings point to a number of interesting cross-cultural regularities, but the ecocultural context means that such regularity gets expressed rather differently in different societies.

Anthropologist's concerns vary depending on the region but it is perhaps fair to say that anthropologists focus on descent and marriage have tended to leave less space for concerted focus on siblings. This is not to say that anthropologists have ignored siblings or

not seen siblings, but rather that in the attempt to identify critical patterns which permeate the societies in which we work, siblings have not figured as prominently as other social relations. The exception to this is arguably Oceania, where Rivers (1910) recognized sibling-hood as being of special significance early on. However, even though Rivers rightly identified the importance of sibling-hood in Polynesia and Melanesia and provided a careful description of the ways in which the father and his sister were central to a number of other relationships, he paid surprisingly little attention to the actual relationship between brothers and sisters. Instead, the actual sibling relationship was dealt with indirectly as the definitional relation which triggered particular types of social relations between father's sisters and nieces and nephews. Firth, likewise understood that siblings matter and not just in Oceania. In his Royal Anthropological Institute presidential address from 1955 he briefly summarized the importance of sibling groups for social organization more generally (Firth 1955: 4-6). In his work with the Tikopia, he also examined the importance, like Rivers, of parents' siblings for triggering role linked behaviors between other categories of kin. Marshall's (1983) edited volume on sibling-hood in Oceania extends the gist of the ideas produced by the likes of Rivers and Firth, but also focussed more directly on the relations between siblings in their own right.

Radcliffe-Brown compared his own findings on the relationships between mother's brother and sister's son from Fiji and Tonga to groups in South Africa to challenge the argument that the importance of the mother's brother in Africa was evidence of a survival of matrilineal descent. Goody (1969) argues that Radcliffe-Brown's analysis of the mother's brother-sister's son relationship is too simplistic and emphasizes particular evidence support a notion of 'privileged familiarity' in the relationship. Goody suggests that the relationship between mother's brother and sister's son is considerably more complicated and involves both avuncular familiarity as well considerable respect (1969: 40-41). Of course, such analyses, which recognizing that sibling relations serve as critical reference

points within kinship systems, contribute little to an understanding of the relationships *between* the siblings themselves.

It is hardly surprising that Lévi-Strauss left sibling relations largely undiscussed, since his primary interest in kinship lay in marriage. To the extend that siblinghood introduces varying prohibitions against marriage and incest, it is therefore understandable and defensible that siblings remain firmly embedded within broader systems of relationships and are not analyzed in their own right. He does, however, recognize that cross siblings should be understood as constituting part of the 'atom' of kinship (1963: 72-73). In an effort to identify correlatives within kinship systems, Lévi-Strauss suggests that where one finds positive attitudes between husband and wife and negative attitudes between brother and sister, one would also expect to see corresponding positive attitudes between father and son and negative attitudes between maternal uncle and nephew (1963: 73). We can learn little from Lévi-Strauss of the more detailed ethnographic accounts of relationships between brothers and sisters (the 'positive' or 'negative' attitudes). For understandable reasons, cross sibling roles and relations have not been extracted from most kinship studies either of the sort that concentrate on formal systems or those more concerned with empirically documented behaviors and attitudes.

Cross Siblings in South Asia

Brothers and sisters in South Asia have long attracted the attention of sociologists and ethnographers of the subcontinent. Nuckolls (1993b) edited volume, while dealing with all combinations of sibling relations provides ample evidence that the cross sibling relationship is both structurally and emotionally powerful. A crude characterization of the ideal brother-sister relationship is one of protective brother and sacrificing and nurturing sister. It is not difficult to see the brother-sister relationship as a cultural script for relations between men and women more broadly and between husbands and wives, fathers and daughters and grandfathers and granddaughters in particular. The focus of ethnographic

studies which address brother-sister relations has tended to be on the emotional and economic significance of the roles for people. De Munck (1993), for example, examines the range of brother-sister relations in a Muslim community in Sri Lanka. Rather than rigorously complying with idealized notions of protective brothers and sacrificing sisters, De Munck observed self interested strategies being employed coupled with attempts to justify transgression from the norm through the invocation of alternative cultural values and roles. Justifications for non-compliance with the idealized roles appear to be of varying effectiveness but they were sufficiently powerful to enable brothers to decline protection and support in some cases.

It was not, however, the case that De Munck's informants attempted to deny the rough characterization I have provided for brother-sister relations, but rather that the actual expression of relations was contingent on more than simply an understanding of the shared norms. Using Schwartz's idea of an idioverse, or a 'loosely orchestrated system of behavioral complexes' (De Munck 1993: 143), De Munck demonstrates that despite consensus on roles there is considerable intracultural variability when it comes to real sibling relationships. I would extend this (as I am sure would De Munck) to all relations which have both instantiated (i.e. real life) examples as well as idealized models for behavior. It is somewhat inconceivable that it could be otherwise. The shared norms, cultural scripts, templates, structures and so forth are powerful information systems which provide the building blocks for decisions, attitudes and behaviors, but these do not exist in isolation. Not only are there contingencies which fall entirely outside of any particular cultural structure, there are multiple cultural structures, systems, templates, norms and so forth which might be invoked in particular situations. Take as a very simple example, a situation very common in Muslim Punjab, of first cousins who are about to marry. They have hitherto known each other as some category of cousin-sibling (*chachazad-bhai* for example which means literally 'father's-brother's-child-brother) and may well have referred

to one another as sibling. This might be the case particularly when there is no cross sibling who shares the same parents for one of the cousins. Upon entering into a new form of relationship, that of spouse, they are then confronted with a systemic contradiction. On the one hand, they have been known to one another as quasi siblings perhaps for a very long time and so were not meant to engage in sexual relations (though of course such things to happen and while they are not considered incestuous they are highly problematic). On the other hand, they are eligible marriage partners and are meant to reproduce. One might imagine that either the practice of referring to one's potential marriage partners by a sibling term should cease or the pool of people from whom one selects marriage partners might gradually shift to exclude those people with whom one uses sibling terms. Neither of these imaginary responses has, or is likely, to occur in Muslim Pakistan for very good reasons. Humans are capable of holding contradictory positions simultaneously rather easily. It might be the source of anxieties and potential pathologies (à la Bateson 2000), but it also appears to be a relatively trivial intellectual task for humans.

Nuckolls (1993a) addresses issues of ambiguity in sibling relations and inconsistency between the mythical idealized versions of sibling relations and the realities of actual sibling interactions in an examination of myths involving siblings in southern India. He argues that myth enables people to mediate between social interactions and ideal social patterns. In the case of the myth of Ramanamma, a sister turned goddess, Nuckolls analyses the myth as reflecting tensions both within the patrilines and between patrilines and affinal groups. For my purposes that concern is less pertinent than the myth itself as a model of sibling relations.

In Nuckolls' account of the myth, Ramanamma is born to a family with seven sons. Her birth is somewhat miraculous and she is apparently 12 years old from birth. After being pursued by a 'Koya' (the name that Telegu plains dwellers use to refer to all tribal peoples), she is impregnated and made 9 months pregnant in 9 minutes. She flees to avoid the

condemnation of her neighbors and parents and attracts the support of three goddesses (Parvati Devi, Sarasvati Devi and Laksmi Devi). They protect her and hide her in a well. They transform the child into a flower (*parijata*). Her brothers come searching for her and eventually find her. She transforms herself into a demon for a short time but then reverts to her original human form so that her brothers will recognize her. Upon finding her the brothers want to take her home but she says that she will only leave and return to her home city for a festival. She stipulates some of the conditions for the festival and her brothers go home to their father and beg him to take their money and do the festival. The father agrees and the Ramanamma returns. Unfortunately she apparently eats people and so the brothers decide that they must repeat the festival for her every three years (Nuckolls 1993a: 203-205). To interpret this in the current context, it is useful to look more carefully at the ambiguity of sororal divinity that may shape or influence at least the rhetoric of cross sibling relationships.

This ambiguous potential divinity of sisters is not solely a South Indian phenomenon, however, across India the *raki* ceremony symbolically reminds people of the gift of divinity bestowed upon Yamaraj by his twin sister Yami or Yamuna[v]. De Munck suggests the difference in manifestation of postmarital cross sibling bonds between north and south India reflect the fact that in the south cross siblings have more investment in one another's children as potential marriage partners (De Munck 1993: 147). In practice, however, this is probably not as great a difference as one might imagine. Despite a slight stated preference for patrilateral cousin marriage in Muslim communities in north India and Pakistan, there is evidence to suggest that cross sibling marriages are equally desirable. In the area in which I worked in the late 1990s, the incidence of repeated cousin marriage rendered the issue somewhat irrelevant as well since cross cousins were normally from the same patrilateral group in any event (see Lyon 2004).

The Ramanamma myth is telling for a number of reasons. The role of protective brothers is present, though they manifestly failed to protect their sister. The supportive and sacrificing sister can be discerned, with some effort, in that Ramanamma was transformed into a goddess herself and through the act of venerating her in a three yearly festival she provides some benevolence of a sort (though one reading of her benevolence could be more akin to mafiosi agreeing not to blow up a shop if the owner pays them money). Aside from the crude role characterizations, however, there is something more significant for the brother-sister cultural template which harks back to the Vedic account of the origin of Yamaraj's divinity. In both cases the sister was the source of miraculous events which persisted. The brothers were instrumental in some ways but the instigation in both cases was the sister. Such instigation, I shall suggest, is not coincidental nor is it insignificant.

In the following origin myth of a Muslim shrine in northern Punjab, it is clear that as in the case of Yami and Ramanamma, the sister is critical to the brother's position. In the origin myth of Baba Shaikh Daud's shrine, the sister not only performs the only explicit miracles but continues to provide the substantive validation of her brother's saintly status. The shrine is situated on a small mountain just outside of the village of Bhalot in Attock District, Punjab (Lyon 2004). I have briefly mentioned the shrine in earlier work on the role of food distribution and local systems, but here use the shrine for different analytical purposes. The village is relatively large though lacking much state infrastructure. With a population in the late 1990s of perhaps 4000 (despite repeated surveying the population number remained a hotly contested topic) the village was and is overwhelmingly dominated politically and economically by a small set of interrelated households. The landowning households are referred to by the honorific title Malik (king in Arabic, used more commonly in Khyber-Pukhtunkhwa to refer to subordinate agents of Khans). In other parts of Punjab the same family is referred to as Chaudry and the family has at various times in the past been referred to as Khans. Prior to Pakistani independence the village was all Muslim and

far enough from populations of Hindus to avoid the worst scenarios of the brutal and bloody partition of India and Pakistan, however, there were personal and strategic connections between Hindus and members of the village. Very few people in the village or region claim descent from non South Asian populations (with a neighboring landlord family being a notable exception-- they claim descent from 'Abbas ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib, a paternal uncle and companion of the Prophet Mohammad). Although some individuals object to what they perceive as Hindu influences on South Asian Islam, such a view is not frequently voiced nor did it appear to be very widespread. Most people were unaware of which aspects of local practice were orthodox Islam or might have some overlap with Hindu or Sikh practice and they did not seem to be troubled by such considerations. Indeed, when specific practices were identified and queried as possibly of Hindu origin, everyone with whom I spoke cheerily accepted that it might be a Hindu practice but brushed aside potential criticism by explaining that they were thinking of Allah while carrying out the practice.

The shrine of Baba Shaikh Daud is centered on the gravesite of an ancestor of the local landowning Maliks. In the late 1990s it was the centre of considerable religious activity which was neither controlled nor regulated by the Maliks. All villagers appeared to accept that Baba Shaikh Daud's grave site was a place of spiritual power where one could request support and help in dealing with problems. Indeed I had recourse to ask Baba Shaikh Daud for help myself when my mobile phone went missing. I was advised to go up the mountain and spend time with Baba Shaikh Daud and ask if he could help in recovering my mobile phone. Along the way I was told to buy sweeties for Baba-ji (an affectionate honorific used for local saints) and to tell everyone where I was going since Baba-ji would be pleased that I publicly declared my faith in his help. Upon my return after sunset I found my mobile phone and charger waiting for me on my bed. In the absence of

hard evidence to the contrary, I am prepared to accept that Baba Shaikh Daud effected the return of my mobile phone.

The origin of the shrine is, however, somewhat curious. It has almost nothing to do with Baba Shaikh Daud himself, but rather with his sister. The short version of the origin myth is as follows. Baba Shaikh Daud's sister was wanted in marriage by two rivals from other villages. She did not want to marry either man. On the day that the two suitors arrived with their friends/gang to collect her she went up the mountain and asked God to rescue her. God opened up the mountain and swallowed her. Her *chadder* (shawl) was trapped when the mountain closed behind her. To this day people say that they can see her *chadder* (shawl) flapping on the mountainside sometimes. The shrine, is not, as one might expect, in honor of Baba Shaih Daud's sister, however, it is to her brother. So while she was the one who initially demonstrated a capacity to get her requests to God answered in a rather dramatic and immediate fashion, it was her brother who wound up being the one that people ask for help. Surprisingly, the proof, so to speak, of the miraculous nature of the shrine is not typically provided through tales of requests granted, but rather through the periodic appearance of Baba Shaikh Daud's sister's *chadder* flapping in the wind.

Given the strong emphasis on patrilineal relations and the idealized model of patriarchal authority that is embedded in the dominant religious doctrine of Islam, it is no surprise that not only is Baba Shaikh Daud's sister not made into a goddess (which would of course be a blasphemous suggestion in a monotheistic religious context), but she does not even get a name in the origin myth. She is referred to as Baba-ji's sister only.

The extent to which this pattern is found in representations of other types of familial gender relations appears to be evident within texts and oral myths going back for some time. Black (2007), for example, describes the process of Satyakama establishing his Brahmanic origins in the Upanishads, the latest group of ancient Vedic texts written probably between 700 and 300 BCE (Black 2007: 3-4). Satyakama's paternity is

something of a mystery, which of course introduces a problem for determining whether he is a Brahmin and entitled to the knowledge and wisdom available to those of that status. His mother, Jabala, explains to him that she doe not know his father's lineage. She was a young servant and moved around so evidently did not know much about the father. Satyakama repeats her story word for word to Haridrumata who praises him for his honesty and declares that only a Brahmin could speak in such a way (Black 2007: 159-160). While conferring Brahmanic origins is perhaps not as grand as transforming someone into a god, it is notable that as with Baba Shaih Daud's sister and Yamuni, it was the gift (in this case the story) from the woman to the man that is offered as pivotal in the transformation of the man's subsequent status.

Impact on brother sister interactions

As De Munck (1993) rightly points out, there is sufficient discrepancy between shared norms and idealized behavioral scripts[vi] and actual interactions that we can dismiss any idea that individuals are merely automata prescriptively obeying dictatorial cultural structural rules (not that any anthropologist has tried to argue such a thing that I am aware of). So while it would make little sense to try and observe the cultural script in action literally, we can nevertheless make sense of the choices and behaviors observed in light of such hypothetical scripts. For example, in one of De Munck's cases a women's brothers refuse to support her either financially or morally (1993: 151). Indeed, they condemn her with allegations about her poor moral behavior (in their view), but De Munck makes it clear that this is considered a transgression in local terms and must therefore be justified in some culturally meaningful way. In another of his cases, he provided money for a man to take his sister's ill son to the hospital. The brother apparently pocketed the money and did not take his sister and her son to hospital. When De Munck asked him about his action (or inaction) he did not respond (De Munck 1993: 152). His silence is telling in that he did not

seem to have a culturally meaningful justification for his behavior and it would be unacceptable for him to voice the obvious explanation (he is a greedy man).

In other situations across South Asia it is also clear that the idealized expectations of cross sibling behavior do indeed influence the way people talk about brothers and sister even if, as De Munck says, there is always an element of self interest in actual transactions. I was initially alerted to the importance of these relations in the course of field research in the late 1990s. I had been given a large amethyst ring by my sister. I wore this ring rather proudly on the middle finger of my right hand because that was the finger which matched the size of the ring best. During the first few weeks I was in Bhalot, villagers frequently told me how ugly the ring was and that I should not wear it on the middle finger of my right hand, but should instead wear it on my little finger (on either hand, they did not seem bothered about which hand in went on). I initially dismissed such suggestions by saying that I liked the ring where it was and that is where it fit so that is where it was staying. After some time this got a bit wearing because people persisted in telling me how much they disliked my ring. After a rather longer time than I care to remember, I finally said that the ring was a gift from my sister and therefore I wanted to wear it because it reminded me of her. The criticism ceased almost instantaneously. My best friend and host in the village, Malik Asif Nawaz, sucked in his breath and nodded his head knowingly. He said he understood now and thereafter whenever someone new came along and criticized my ring, the person would be told in hushed tones that the ring was a gift from 'Steve-sahib's sister' and the criticism was stopped before it had properly begun.

Perhaps a more telling example also involves my good friend, Malik Asif Nawaz. Malik Asif was, at the time, involved in a series of tense land disputes with some of his paternal cousins. His wife is the sister of the cousins with whom he was actively disputing. The cousins' house was next door to Malik Asif's and there are private passages joining some of the Malik households so the women can move more freely back and forth[vii]. Malik Asif

came to my room (in one part of his housing compound) and I asked how his family was doing. He told me that his wife had gone to visit her brothers. I was slightly surprised because I knew that he and his wife's brothers had threatened each other's sharecroppers with guns a short time before and that they had been involved in a heated protracted dispute over a patch of land that their fathers had also argued about a generation earlier. One of the cousins had apparently filed a police report against Malik Asif and his brothers and had only been persuaded to drop the charges after much criticism from other branches of the Malik family. I asked him if relations with his agnatic cousins had improved and he told me they had not. I then asked him why he allowed his wife to visit her brothers[viii]. He looked perplexed as if I had just said something utterly absurd and told me that they were her 'real' brothers (*sakka bhai*) and he was 'only' her husband. He explained to me that brothers and sisters are 'real' relations.

One final example will suffice to illustrate both the power of cross sibling relations and the influence of shared idealized role patterns which influence not only the explanatory narratives individuals use to justify their behaviors but also the behaviors themselves.

Cross Siblings in Japan

Japanese cross siblings offer an interesting contrast to the strong sibling models of South Asia. Whereas South Asian brothers and sisters are intricately enmeshed in ongoing social relations which are metaphysical, economic and political, Japanese sibling ties would appear to contain more tension both at mythological and practical levels. To be sure, I am less aware of the literature and range of ethnographic representations of Japan than those of South Asia, nevertheless, there are striking differences in the brother-sister relations portrayed in the foundational myths of Japan. Coupled with very different residential postmarital residential patterns and definitional boundaries of family, such portrayals suggest that brother-sister relations may present an important difference between the core information processing systems of South Asian and Japanese cultures. Such information

processing systems enable individuals not only to make sense of the world around them, but also in a very real way to construct the world around them through their own decisions and actions.

I start with *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi* or *Nihonshogi,* the 8th century accounts of 'ancient things' of Japan. The *Kojiki* was compiled in 712 A.D. and is the oldest extant book in Japanese. The book was commissioned by the emperors to establish the legitimacy of the noble lineages and produce a 'record of ancient things' (which is a literal translation of *kojiki* (Philippi 1968: 3)*.* It was apparently begun a century earlier but all but one volume was lost in a house fire. The *Kojiki* tells the origin story of Japan and the Japanese and in particular legitimizes the position of the emperor's and other aristocratic lineages. The first part of the book recounts fantastical stories of the births of numerous deities, most of whom do not actually get mentioned by name. The part of the *Nihongi* which deals with the mythical time of the creation of Japan largely duplicates what is found in the *Kojiki,* with minor variations which are to be expected from compilations of multiple sources telling the same stories.

Rather far down the line of gods and goddesses there are a particular set of siblings from which it is possible to identify something that might constitute a cultural template or script for both parallel and cross sibling relations. To be sure, there are no shortage of siblings among the gods and goddesses and brother-sister incest seems to be not only common but inevitable amongst Japanese gods. That is clearly *not* part of the cultural script for the Japanese and must be situated in the same way as Egyptian pharaonic and Hawaiian royal sibling weddings. These are transgressions of norms which in some way mark the difference between ordinary people and divine characters (or in the case of pharaonic Egypt, to mark membership of certain privileged classes). So I leave the incest accounts to one side for the moment and instead concentrate on those behaviors which may reveal something about the attitudes and expectations associated with sibling relations. Among

the hundreds of deities (the number fluctuates but 800 is frequently cited), there are three siblings which play a central role in the creation of Japan and the Japanese: Amaterasu - sun goddess, Susa-no - sea god and Tuku-yomi (or Tsuki-yomi) night god or moon god. It is not an exaggeration to say that relations between the brothers and the sister are tense. Interestingly, there is very little direct interaction between Susa-no, the sea god, and Tuku-yomi, the moon god. The *Kojiki*, in contrast, provides detailed accounts of the conflicts between the sister and each of the brothers.

Amaterasu and Tuku-yomi

In the *Kojiki,* we learn that Amaterasu and Tuku-yomi were given control of the heavens by their parents, Izanagi and Izanami (Kojiki, Book One, Chapter 12, 1968 [712]). The *Nihongi* or *Nihonshogi* then recounts a story of Tuku-yomi or Tsuki-yomi visiting another deity, Uke-mochi, who had prepared a feast for him. The food emerged from Uke-mochi's mouth and included 'things rough of hair and things soft of hair' (Nihongi 1972 [720]: 32). Tuku-yomi was enraged by this and killed Uke-mochi with his sword. Amaterasu was very angry and told her brother, 'Thou art a wicked deity. I must not see thee face to face' (Nihongi 1972 [720]: 32). Consequently the sun and moon remain separated in the skies and night and day were created.

Amaterasu and Susa-no

The battle between Amaterasu and her brother Susa-no is altogether more convoluted and interesting for understanding the forms of cross sibling relations. Following the death of Izanami, the siblings' mother, Susa-no spent his time weeping and not ruling over his lands. Susa-no's father, Izanagi, realizes that his son is not obeying his command and ruling over his domain wisely. He banishes Susa-no and tells him that he must leave the land of the gods. Susa-no agrees but asks to visit his sister, Amaterasu, to say goodbye. Izanagi agrees. When Susa-no approaches Amaterasu she is suspicious of his motives and arms herself to defend her own lands. Susa-no assures her that he has no evil

intentions but is going to leave the lands of the gods forever and wanted to say goodbye. He offers to swear oaths and bear children with Amaterasu as proof of his honest intentions. After they have born numerous children Susa-no rages with victory and claims that because more of the children were born from his possessions than from Amaterasu's possessions he has won. He then becomes very destructive and breaks down ridges and rice paddies and defecates all over the hall where the first fruits are tasted. At first Amaterasu tried to be patient but Susa-no only got worse. She then locked herself into a cave and deprived the world of light. This then created problems for all of the 800 deities who became involved in the dispute. They first tricked Amaterasu out of the cave and secured her with ropes to prevent her from going back in. As a compromise to ensure that she would voluntarily continue to provide light to the world they made Susa-no pay some form of compensation ('a thousand tables of restitutive gifts' (Kojiki, Book One, Chapter 17, 1968 [712]). They banished Susa-no, shaved his beard and the nails of his hands and feet. Susa-no must then live in exile from the other gods. Interestingly, when he meets the first people in exile and they ask his name, he introduces himself first as the brother of Amaterasu before giving his own name. Although he remains a character to be wary of, he nevertheless redeems himself after the excesses of his time in the land of the gods.

These foundational myths and narratives inform idealized expectations for cross sibling roles and would appear to result in noticeably different cross sibling interactions. I offer three cases of sibling interaction which reveal a number of key points. Firstly, that while inheritance systems clearly impact on sibling relations and feelings about one another, there are nevertheless culturally specific mechanisms for expressing and dealing with those feelings (often of animosity as a single sibling inherits the bulk of an estate while others receive relatively little). Secondly, that whereas there is a cultural expectation of sororal sacrifice in South Asia, there appears to be rather the reverse in Japan, in other words, sororal deprivation is a legitimate response to needy or demanding brothers. And

thirdly and lastly, that one consequence of the combination of the *ie* system[ix] with the cross sibling relational ideal is that there is far less expectation that cross siblings will remain closely involved in one another's lives throughout the entire life cycle.

Sibling Set 1: Sato[x] household

The Sato sibling set is composed of one brother and five sisters. The brother was the youngest child but the inheritor of the main house in the *ie*[xi] system. The five sisters are said to have doted on the youngest brother when he was very young, but relatively quickly tensions began between the brother and his sisters. The parents, especially the mother, were very strict with all of the children, but particularly their daughters. As the sisters grew up they began to make choices of which their mother disapproved. One of the sisters married a foreigner (a Korean), another sister married a disabled man. Both marriages were condemned by the mother and the father and the son (the brother) sided with his parents and was critical of his sisters' decision to make choices which their parents did not like. All the siblings are grown with their own children and grandchildren now and it is fair to say that although the old tensions are not discussed openly anymore, there remains residual ill will and considerable distance between the sisters and their brother. He appears to have been identified with his parents as head of the *ie* (or heir apparent while his father was still alive) and that took precedence over the sibling relationship.

Sibling Set 2: Suzuki household

The Suzuki family are urban and therefore not constituted so faithfully along *ie*-logic. Nevertheless, the assumptions about inheritance are similar. The eldest son is supposed to inherit the bulk of the estate including all land. In this case, the father died while the children were all relatively young and so the estate was already largely depleted during the course of the children's upbringing. There are three brothers and one sister in the Suzuki household. The sister is the youngest. She married in her mid 20s to a man in neighboring city. In the first years of the marriage she felt she was treated overly harshly by her

mother-in-law and argued with her husband to protect her more. She called her mother on one occasion to tell her that she had had enough of the marriage and was 'coming home'. Her mother bluntly informed her that she was 'home' and she had to make her new location work. She did not appeal to her brothers for help nor did she rely on them for emotional support or complain to them. In adulthood two of her brothers divorced from their partners. The second brother was the first to divorce his wife when his daughter was still in pre-school. The eldest brother divorced his wife after his children were grown and had got married and moved out of the parental house. In both cases, the younger sister disapproved of her brothers' decisions to get divorced and it introduced distance and tension in their relationships. She rarely sees either of the two brothers anymore and only appears to see them at major family functions such as weddings and funerals. The third brother, who is closest in age to the sister, has also become somewhat distant following the final years of their mother's life. In the last few years of their mother's life, she needed considerable care and none of the children were in a position to provide the round the clock care plus nursing required. She was moved into a nursing home where her daughter visited her frequently despite running an extremely busy household which included three generations of people needing attention. She resented her brother's relatively less frequent visits and lack of financial support. Equally, she was angered that he did not take care of their parental house. Although the bulk of the estate was spent bringing the children up, there remained a traditional wooden house on a small plot of land. The house fell into disrepair through neglect and became uninhabitable fairly quickly. As a consequence the sister does not see her third brother very often anymore either. Following the death of their mother, it looks likely that the siblings will no longer see each other at all except on very rare family occasions. As it is, they do not all attend even important family functions such as weddings.

As in the case of the Sato sibling set it seems that the relationship between the siblings (in this case both parallel and cross siblings) is heavily mediated by the relationship to the parents. The siblings relate to one another via the parents and in the case of the Sato siblings as if the brother were a proxy for the parents.

Sibling Set 3: Yamada Family

The final family is illustrative of the difference in expectation and feeling associated with the cross sibling relationship between Japan and South Asia. The Yamada family is the smallest of the examples. There are two sisters and one brother. The brother is the youngest. The eldest daughter is seven years older than her brother and two years older than her sister. They are all adults with partners and children of their own. The brother lives in the parental household with their parents. He is expected to inherit the bulk of the land and the parental household. Unfortunately, the brother left school without completing any qualifications and has only found unskilled or semi-skilled employment which does not earn a sufficient salary to maintain the house or the lands. The father of the siblings has not yet retired so this is not currently a major problem but the sisters fear that this risks a catastrophic future for the family. The brother apparently gambles money that he does not have and the family worries that he has begun associating with members of organized criminal organizations. The sisters are openly critical of their brother within the family (to their parents and spouses) and express muted criticism to others. The eldest sister states that she feels no guilt for not helping her brother. She thinks he is responsible for his financial predicament and her concern is only for her parents and her brother's children. Her younger sister is also very critical and expresses her concern for her parents. Neither of the sisters has shown any desire or willingness to make additional sacrifices for their brother and the sacrifices they have made in the past were not directed towards their brother, but rather towards their parents or his children. The brother in turn, shows little affection or interest in his elder sisters. He does not visit either of them and although he

can be affectionate towards their children, for the most part he seems uninterested in the activities of his siblings or their children. From stories of their childhood it would seem that he was not encouraged to think of himself as protector of his sisters, but as heir apparent to his household he did pick up the idea that he should have some sort of authority over his sisters-- an idea that both sisters categorically reject.

While it is always problematic to assume one can *know* another's feelings, particularly if the other person comes from a different culture and therefore expresses those feelings in potentially alien ways which translate poorly, but it seems that the siblings behavior in this case matches the foundational mythical story of Amaterasu far more closely than anything found in any Vedic scriptures. Rather than sacrificing for their brother, these sisters attempt to control him and to deprive him of the opportunity to damage their parents situation.

Conclusion

It should come as no surprise that sibling interactions differ across cultures. Nor should it be a revelation that representations of idealized relations between brothers and sisters correspond to such differences. It is nevertheless useful to identify such differences and compare them. In the case of the regions examined here, it is clear that idealized representations and expectations of cross sibling relations are found manifest in observable sibling behaviors and the rhetorical framing of those behaviors. There are a number of conclusions one might draw from such examples, but perhaps the most obvious among them is that sibling relations, like all social relations among humans, must be culturally created. This is not to deny an underlying biology of sibling-hood where it exists[xii], but rather to point out the obvious, that what people think about the world is to a very real extent the 'world'. The observable cultural differences in attitudes and behaviors in sibling relations between South Asia, Japan evident here, and in Oceania as evidenced in the ethnographic record (notably Marshall 1983), provides a strong demonstration of the powerful cultural influence. Further to the obvious, the rhetorical packaging and invoking of

sibling-hood suggests that idea systems form what people actually think rather than being detached referential indexing systems of signs. That is to say that behaviors follow idea systems even where there are contradictions with some explicitly stated ideals and shared norms, as in the examples provided by De Munck (1993). Such idea systems must not be unitary or such contradictions would be far less accountable, so as Leaf (2005) and Lyon (2005) have argued, the most effective way to understand the production of culture is as sets of independent idea systems. Each idea system operating within its own frames of reference and logic but not in concert with one another. Some such idea systems are more fundamental and what Leaf and I have called core and these tend to shape aggregated expressions of idea systems and inform behaviors in multiple domains.

Cross sibling-hood, like sibling-hood more generally, does not appear to constitute an independent idea system, but rather is derived from interactions between the other more core idea systems of kinship, gender and hierarchy (at least in South Asia and Japan). And, as with all idea systems, the expression and practice of idea systems in what Carrithers (2009) calls the vicissitudes of life, is subject to varying degrees of rhetorical ambiguity. In part the ambiguity arises because there are multiple idea systems underpinning expressions and communication in real situations and it is in the assemblage of such idea systems to produce coherent messages that individual decisions become unique. Such uniqueness may lead to misunderstanding and failed communication but the more shared underlying idea systems between two individuals the higher the likelihood of effective, intentional communication despite the creative assembling taking place; this follows conventions similar to Grice's *implicatures* for cooperative communication (1975). While this form of complex cultural communication is arguably less efficient than direct copying of messages it also has the potential for greater flexibility in the face of environmental variation. Culture production is perhaps messy and complex but this is not because the underlying generative idea systems are complex but rather because life is

uncertain; so the particular form of culture which has evolved in humans has proven itself highly adaptive to the diversity of human experience.

I began with a truism about brothers and sisters-- they exist in cultures. While categorically this indeed appears to be true, it says very little about the nature of how those categories are expected to relate and how those expectations impact on people who happen to inhabit those categories. Through an admittedly rapid examination of brother-sister roles, behaviors and representations I have sought to illustrate some of the diversity in how these categories are rhetorically produced in two distant parts of Asia. South Asian brothers and sisters exist in a world in which the representations of idealized cross sibling relationships include notions of fraternal protection, sororal sacrifice and quasi romantic love (in non-divine persons such love is meant to be entirely platonic, to be sure). Japanese brothers and sisters exist in a very different world in which cross sibling relations are more conflictual and distant. Whereas in the ancient Sanskrit Vedas the famous cross siblings refrain from engaging in incest despite a profound love for one another, in the Japanese record of ancient things, siblings regularly reproduce with one another despite high levels of mistrust and antagonism. To be sure, sibling incest is prohibited in both cultural contexts and people argue, cooperate, like and dislike other people who are there cross siblings in both Japan and South Asia. In South Asia there are rhetorical tools for mediating transgressions from shared ideals of mutual love and cooperation because to do otherwise would be to compromise the underlying brother-sister idea system. Such rhetorical tools are less necessary in Japan in part because the idea system is less threatened.

Notes

i   This is not always the case, however. In Japan, for example, if a woman divorces and leaves a child behind with her ex-husband's family (particularly so if the child is a son who is likely to inherit), then subsequent children from a new husband might not be referred to or recognized as *gii-kyodai* (half sibling), though children from both marriages would continue to recognize the parental link of the mother.

ii   See Sperber & Wilson 1986; Klüver & Stoica 2005; Leaf 2005 for the role of communication theory in the production of culture.

iii   See Leaf 2007 for a recent argument on the need for empirically grounded formalism as a way forward in the understanding of idea systems.

iv   I'm grateful to Leaf for providing a number of stimulating examples of different idea systems over the years, including Euclidian geometry. The most important examples are probably to be found in his 1972 monograph on information systems in Sikh Punjab.

v   The passionate but unconsummated love between these siblings is recounted in the Rig Veda. In one famous passage, Yami, the sister, offers (or perhaps pleads is more accurate) to be Yamaraj's wife. He tells her that they must not be husband and wife and she must find a husband elsewhere (Book 10, Hymn X 2009 [1896]).

vi   Though perhaps the word scripts is inappropriate here. This is a common usage of the term in many social sciences, but it should not be read as a directive script in a theatrical sense. Rather, I invoke more of the idea of a storyboard or a cultural algorithm, but retain the word script for stylistic reasons and to facilitate discussion among those who use the term in ways similar to my own.

vii   Due to the rather pronounced gender segregation of the Malik households in the late 1990s I was never able to establish whether or not there was a direct private passage between Malik Asif's house and his wife's brothers' house, but the point stands that the Malik women were able to move freely between one

another's households. Gender segregation appears to have softened somewhat over the last decade,

apparently in response to dramatic increase in wealth thanks to government compensation for the motorway.

viii   Admittedly, this sounds rather awful in a British or American context where husbands would not

typically believe they have the authority or the right to forbid their wives from visiting someone, but in rural

Pakistan this is not such an outrageous question.

ix   The traditional Japanese household organization system, known as *ie,* established hereditary hierarchical relationships between the eldest inheriting son and his eldest male descendants and all of the younger siblings and their descendants (see Shimizu 1987 for a more comprehensive summary of the *ie* system).

x   All names used in this section are pseudonyms.

xi   Despite changes to the law which eliminated the formal recognition of the *ie* as a legal entity, the

logic of main and branch households persists. In urban areas the majority of households are made up of

what would be understood as the nuclear family in England and the US.

xii   Though to be sure, there is not always an underlying biological relationship between people

reckoned 'full' siblings.

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