J. Berting

H. Philipsen

The unilateral cross-cousin marriage: A reply to Needham. (Zie nr. 1577)

In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 118 (1962), no: 1, Leiden, 155-159

This PDF-file was downloaded from <http://www.kitlv-journals.nl>

THE UNILATERAL CROSS-COUSIN MARRIAGE: A REPLY TO NEEDHAM

The nature and especially the tone of Dr. Needham's "Notes on the Analysis of Asymmetric Alliance",¹ the 25 pages of which are for the greater part a rejoinder to our article on that subject,² oblige us to write a short comment.

In our article we spoke of the *three* most important efforts to explain the occurrence of the two forms of the u.c.c. marriage. Now the more or less implicit nucleus of Needham's critique seems to be our relative neglect of his works. This neglect is true, indeed, but can be explained out of the genesis of our article. The preparations for this article were made in 1956—1957.³ Needham's work begins to be published in 1957. When our paper was rewritten in January 1960 we knew that we could not make it wholly up-to-date, having no time for prolonged study on the subject. We only discussed Needham's article on the Purum, because both of us had taken note of that. If we were to write the article now, we would have included Needham in our "most important efforts to explain the u.c.c. marriage". We regret that we did not mention this course of things and we can fully understand why Needham was "piqued".

But other things we really can not understand. We only used Needham's article on the Purum in so far as it had relevance to Lévi-Strauss's theory. We did not discuss Needham's ideas on their own merits, which is an omission on our part as we pointed out above. However, in the light of our limited use of his article⁴ it does not

¹ R. Needham, "Notes on the Analysis of Asymmetric Alliance". *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 117, pp. 93-117.

² Berting, J. and H. Philipsen. "Solidarity, Stratification and Sentiments: the unilateral cross-cousin marriage according to the theories of Lévi-Strauss, Leach and Homans and Schneider". *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 116, pg. 55-80.

³ In a note on p. 55 of our article we wrote that the article is a rewritten "doctoraal scriptie" (= paper for the final university examination).

⁴ Only one page of our article of 23 pages refers to Needham's work.

seem correct to argue in no less than twenty-five pages that we are "uncorrect and misguided" in *relation to our own ideas* and purposes of research, as Needham does.

Another line of Needham's arguing is still more puzzling to us and, although we say it with some hesitation, unfair. In part V of his article he says that some of our conclusions are not *so* important because he came to the same conclusions some years ago.⁵ He even suggests that we had read an article of his in which he came to one of these conclusions, without citing it. (p. 22). This is the sort of argument nobody likes to get into, and certainly one that is utterly out of place in a scientific debate. Needless to say, his accusation is not true. We have, on the other hand, some remarks to make.

1. Although our own conclusions are at least from 1957, we do not think this search for "novelty", which to Needham seems to be so important, a rewarding argumentation.

2. To Needham the normal way to react to our conclusions should have been to conclude that researchers, who worked independently, had arrived at the same results; and this again, normally, should have been given the significance that these results have greater certainty.

3. We came to our conclusions by way of what Needham calls the "superficial" statistical comparison of a number of societies. It appears that both ways of tackling ethnological problems — the functional-comparative method and the structural analysis of one society — can procure supporting results. This in our opinion, is an important conclusion. Both methods have their reason of existence. We do not want to become diehards of one scientific tradition. By wording our position in this way *we* "hope to reduce the tedium of an otherwise theoretically inconsequential debate".

4. Although our conclusions appear partly similar to Needham's, they are not exactly the same. On page 21, for instance, Needham quotes

---

⁵ When we used the distinction between "preferred" and "prescribed" and said: "Needham, too, makes this division" (p. 59) we referred to the distinction only and not to its theoretical consequences with regard to structure, which is quite another question. The distinction was also made by Salisbury in 1954, two years before Needham. (R. F. Salisbury, "Asymmetrical Marriage Systems", *American Anthropologist*, 60.4.1956).

us as saying that prescriptive patrilineal cross-cousin marriage "does not occur at all". This is indeed a conclusion from our table 1. Then he continues that he has stated elsewhere that this form of marriage "cannot exist in theory and does not exist in fact". Here is a difference, although the theoretical point is the same. Our reasoning was: according to Lévi-Strauss's theory the existence of such a form of marriage is not very probable. Can we support this hypothesis from our sample?

Indeed we can: in *our* sample this form of marriage does not occur at all, a fact we could establish by using a significance test. The degree of probability, however, is not 100 % but 91 % which means that there is a chance of one out of eleven that our conclusion is wrong. We did not say that this form of marriage "cannot exist in theory". Needham's line of arguing here is the same as the one he opposed in our handling of the existence of marriage-cycles. There we made, according to him, such a grave error by stating "that it is quite logical that they exist". This seems to be a case of "Be damned if you do and be damned if you don't". It is certainly not our aim to pin our opponent down with his own words. In every piece of work you have to take some things for granted in order to be able to work on your main thesis. One can disagree on the issues we take for granted, but what is the use in disagreeing with so much bitterness?

Now we come to some replies to Needham's detailed criticism of our article. The shadow of Lévi-Strauss looms large in the articles of both of us. Now Needham makes two remarks in relation to Lévi-Strauss which surprised us.

A. According to Needham, Lévi-Strauss does not say that the matrilineal cross-cousin marriage is commoner than the patrilineal form of marriage because it is "better" for society. It appears evident that we have adopted our "phrasing directly from Homans and Schneider", partly because we do not cite a passage from *Les Structures Élémentaires de la Parenté*. Again this is a half-hidden accusation. As we mentioned *Les Structures* as one of our sources, we do not feel inclined to discuss this argument. In the meantime we wonder what is wrong with our (and Homans and Schneider's!) interpretation of this point in *Les Structures*. We are puzzled by a passage like the following: "Si donc, en dernière analyse, le mariage avec la fille de la soeur du père est moins fréquent que celui avec la fille du père de la mère, c'est que le second, non seulement permet, mais favorise, une meilleure intégration du groupe, tandis que le premier ne réussit jamais qu'un

édifice précaire fait de matériaux juxtaposés, n'obéissant à aucun plan d'ensemble, et que sa texture discrète expose à la même fragilité que celle de chacune des petites structures locales dont, en définitive, il se compose".⁶

B. Now we turn to a more serious matter. On p. 96 Needham writes: "Berting and Philipsen are equally mistaken in rendering Lévi-Strauss's theory as: "a man marries his (mother's brother's daughter) or rather somebody makes his (sister's son) marry his daughter, because he is aware of the structural consequences of this marriage"." On page 97: "They complete their characterisation of Lévi-Strauss's position with the words: "At the same time one must observe that there are surveyable and constant relations between descent groups"." These two passages are really startling. We might assume that the author of a critical article of such a length had read our text carefully at least. But we never stated that this is Lévi-Strauss's theory. What we said was this: his argument that marriage with mother's brother's daughter is better for society than marriage with father's sister's daughter can be right, but is only a *causa finalis*, i.e. explains a phenomenon through its consequences and functions. We then go on to say (following Homans and Schneider) that to make the phenomenon wholly understandable a *causa efficiens* theory is also necessary, i.e. to explain a phenomenon by the factors that influence the origin and continuance. We went on to say (p. 57): "This is indeed absent with Lévi-Strauss. We may say that for the theory of Lévi-Strauss a *causa efficiens* has to be found like the following: a man marries his mother's brother's daughter or rather somebody makes his sister's son marry his daughter because he is aware of the structural consequences of the marriage. At the same time one must observe that there are surveyable and constant relations between descent groups". We will leave the conclusion to the reader. Much that follows in this paragraph is beside the point as a consequence of this misinterpretation.

On p. 98 we said: "The number of cycles which Needham is able to construct is very large.... Starting from one of the 13 marriage-groups Needham already constructs 16 cycles. So there are perhaps 13 times 16 or 208 cycles, ..."

Now Needham gives the impression that we think this exact number of 208 cycles very important. That this is not the case could easily be

⁶ C. Lévi-Strauss, *Les Structures Élémentaires de la Parenté*. Paris, 1949, p. 558.

deduced from the word "perhaps" in the above-mentioned passage. We did not try to find out from Needham's analysis of the Purum how many cycles there "actually" were; we only hinted on the *rather large number of cycles*. Our argument on p. 58 still holds with regard to a number of 74 cycles, which too seems to us a *rather large number*.

So Needham's note on p. 99 in which he states "...that the arithmetical procedure by which Berting and Philipsen arrive at the figure of 208 is an unimpressive demonstration of statistical competence on the part of critics who dare to reprimand Professor Lévi-Strauss with such words 'he has not taken the trouble of finding out what we measure with the significance tests'" is unjust and far-fetched.

Speaking of statistics we might say that Needham himself misses the point where he says on p. 95 "...that nearly half the recorded Purum marriages are with women of clans other than that of the mother, and that a further proportion are with women who, though of the mother's clan, are not daughters of the maternal uncle. These facts have an obvious bearing on Homans and Schneider's theory of sentimental genesis of mother's brother's daughter marriage.... On this basis, I assert that their theory 'cannot be right' ". Here Needham attacks Homans and Schneider's propositions with statistical arguments, where they themselves explicitly state that they are speaking about "norms", i.e. statements by members of a society with a strong "*ought*" character. They do not say that the *actual frequency* of mother's brother's daughter marriages in relation to the total number of marriages contracted is important for them.

It will be obvious that it is quite impossible to reply to all the criticism contained in Needham's 25-page article. We hope, however, that we have demonstrated in these few pages that our article too is "not so devoid of merit" as it might appear from Needham's pages.

J. BERTING
H. PHILIPSEN