R. Burling
Some remarks on the relation between social structure and ethnographic description


This PDF-file was downloaded from http://www.kitlv-journals.nl
SOME REMARKS ON THE RELATION BETWEEN SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND ETHNOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION *

The remarks which I make in the following pages have grown out of a recent reading of Chie Nakane's monograph, *Garo and Khasi*. This monograph raised in my mind a number of questions concerning the relationship between the abstractions which anthropologists refer to as social "structure" and the more directly observable ethnographic phenomena. These questions are hardly new, but since they remain important it may be worth considering them again, using some rather detailed examples from Miss Nakane's book as a context within which they can be discussed.

The monograph which stimulates these remarks was written in 1961 but was long delayed in publication. It gives results of field investigations conducted by Miss Nakane in 1955-56 among the Garos and Khasis of Assam, India, and after a section on each of the two tribes it concludes with an analytical chapter considering some rather abstract aspects of their contrasting forms of matrilineal kinship. In order to provide a setting within which I can discuss the relation between structure and observed data, I must start by sketching a few aspects of Garo and Khasi culture as Nakane describes them.

Garo and Khasis are alike in allowing one daughter and her husband to inherit all of her parents' property. Other daughters must set up new and separate households. The Khasis but not the Garos always let the youngest daughter be the heiress. The Garos expect that the man who marries the heiress will be his wife's FaSiSo — i.e. the spouses should be matrilateral cross-cousins, and the husband should be a member of his father-in-law's matrilineage. This gives the in-marrying men of a Garo household a kind of bond which the in-marrying men of a Khasi household lack, since they are generally not related to each other except by their marriages. The Garo marriage rule would seem to have implications for the interrelationship of Garo lineages, and this may help to explain the more thorough incorporation of Garo men into their marital households. Nakane sees the Garo household as a more or less balanced group since it contains women of one lineage and men of another, and since both lineages have a continuing

interest in and responsibility for the household. The Khasi household is focused more exclusively upon the women, for in-marrying husbands are less securely attached, while out-marrying brothers retain a greater interest in their natal home. Both Garos and Khasis have named and exogamous matrilineal descent groups, but only among the Garos do these pyramid up to two large exogamous moieties, and Nakane sees the balanced opposition of these moieties, tied together by marriage but frequently in competition in other ways, as an important clue to Garo social structure. Among the Garos, Nakane says land has been traditionally held jointly by the village, or more particularly by the matrilineal lineages of a village, with plots only temporarily assigned to households for slash and burn cultivation. Khasis are more likely to allow ownership rights to be permanently assigned to individuals or households and this serves to emphasize the individuality of the Khasi household, whereas overall village structure is said to be more important among the Garos.

Nakane includes solid factual materials on some Garo and Khasi villages — lists of households, maps of village land, and kinship diagrams — but she is far more interested in the abstract "structures" of the societies than she is in banal factual data, and it is here that I see problems, for I am often puzzled about what evidence we need before concluding that a society has a certain "structure", or about how we can justify one "structure" over another. Nakane is by no means alone among anthropologists in her interest in and search for "structure" and if in the following pages I seem to be unfairly attacking her for what all of us do, let me make it clear that I do so only because I regard this monograph as an important example of widespread anthropological practices, and I think these practices deserve serious scrutiny. I will have more to say about her treatment of the Garos, partly because her treatment is a bit longer (60 pages on Garos to 40 pages on Khasis) but also because my own field work among the Garos, which was simultaneous with hers, gives me a special perspective. My criticisms are not, however, meant to be quibbles about the facts of Garo or Khasi ethnography, but to raise questions about the relationship between observable data and the anthropological theories we all like to spin. I must give some examples.

First, consider the superficially simple question of endogamy. Nakane wants to argue that Khasi villages are endogamous, but that the Garos have endogamous regions, rather than villages. Yet in the Khasi village of Kongton which Nakane reports as having 62 households, 20 hus-
bands and three wives had come from other villages to marry locally (pg 114) and there was also a good deal of movement among villages by entire households. Garos are said to be endogamous by region, (though apparently the “endogamous” areas of various villages overlap) but strong factors also encourage Garos to marry within their own village. How much out-marriage is needed to invalidate a rule of endogamy? How much in-marriage is needed before endogamy can be claimed? I doubt if the facts on the ground would fully justify Nakane’s confident conclusion that Khasi villages are endogamous, while Garo villages are not, but this is not quite a fair criticism since I do not believe Nakane intends the term “endogamy” to describe people on the ground. It belongs instead on a more abstract “structural” level, but the problem is in knowing exactly where that “structural” level lies.

Nakane’s central interest is in the descent groups and in their mutual relationships and exchanges. She describes households, villages, and village lineages, but she suggests that Garos and Khasis “lack a bridge between the household and the clan” (pg 153), by which she apparently means the absence of significant lineage organization below the village level. I cannot speak for the Khasis, but I simply do not believe this to be true for any of the Garo areas I knew. Nakane’s failure to recognize such intermediate levels stems, among other things, from her complete neglect of Garo legal disputes, where it is matrilineal kinsmen who take primary responsibility in accusation, prosecution, defense, and punishment. It is neither the household nor the village “clan” as a whole that is concerned with such matters, but rather intermediate groups. Legal disputes also involve out-married men, even those who have moved away to other villages, and this hardly fits with Nakane’s assumption that men are more or less completely incorporated into their new families when they marry. She misses this continuing responsibility to their natal families. In my experience, it is also these intermediate groups that provide marriage arrangements, and by missing them, Nakane contradicts herself, sometimes regarding marriage as linking particular households together (pg 51-52, in her discussion of the nok-chame relationship) and at other times seeing Garo cousin marriage as “practiced as the basis of the whole structure of society” (pg 147) so that it becomes a symmetrical exchange between moieties or at least between the balanced clans which she finds in each village. Missing the intermediate levels of organization between the household at the bottom, and the village, village lineage, or moiety at the top, Nakane gets caught in ambiguities between the two extremes.
Nakane does want to see Garo “structure” in terms of two intermarrying groups, but there are also ambiguities as to exactly what these two groups are. Sometimes they appear as moieties of the society as a whole and at other times as the two localized lineages of these moieties which she says are found in each village. “Theoretically Garo marriages are arranged between two localized lineage groups . . . [this] is symmetrical cross-cousin marriage arrangement on the basis of localized lineage groups” (pg 43). This makes it sound as if the village is endogamous but as already pointed out, Nakane makes it quite clear that it is not. My own conclusions were that marriages are actually arranged by the close relatives of the people involved, not by a whole village, or even by all the members of a localized lineage of the village. I also believe that Nakane overstates the regularity with which villages have no more and no less than two major lineages. By the time one has entered all these caveats, little is left for the picture of marriages being arranged “between two localized lineage groups”, but if one retreats to the claim that the exchange is between the moieties of the whole society, it is impossible to say anything specific about particular marriage arrangements, and the presumed “structure” of intermarrying groups seems in danger of obscuring the people on the ground. Nakane also suggests some tendency for repeated marriages to occur between the same lineages among the Khasi (pg 118), but dismisses this as random, and as not “constituting a cross-cousin institution” (pg 119). Once again “structure” seems to have almost lost contact with the observable facts.

The abstract, almost ethereal nature of Nakane’s “structure” is shown again when she says “The economic loss or gain derived from the matrilateral cross-cousin marriage inside an individual [household] is compensated by the moiety arrangement which interprets this mechanism as the exchange of men between two localized lineages, the economic basis of which lies in the village land” (pg 54). Here three separate things are muddled together: 1) the arrangements of particular households which can hardly be made to appear “symmetrical” by an appeal to larger units; 2) the localized lineages of a village, and 3) the moieties of the whole society.

Another example: Early ethnographers reported that Garo men marry their widowed mothers-in-law. Garos certainly talk as if this were the case, but during my own field work I became convinced that this “marriage” never implies that a man actually engages in sexual relations with a woman to whom he is first related as a son-in-law.
Among the reasons for my conclusion is the doubt that men would be so raucously teased about their mothers-in-law if there was any real possibility of sexual relations between them. Men are teased about their mothers-in-law in much the same spirit that small boys are teased about their grandmothers. It is safe to tease because, after all, one recognizes the absurdity of the relationship.

Nakane, however, believes (pg 47) that Garo men really do cohabit with the old ladies. The problem here is not really that Nakane and I report different facts about the Garos, for the only way to really resolve the empirical question would be to spy into Garo bedrooms, which, so far as I am aware neither of us has done. In the absence of direct evidence both of us are reporting interpretations. How can we interpret so differently? My belief is that the overall logic of Garo household organization would make marriage to one's mother-in-law rather reasonable, but that real Garos cannot actually alter a mother-in-law relationship (which involves considerable avoidance) all the way to a relationship of sexual intimacy. I do not think they really try to do so. Their use of the term jik, for the widowed mother-in-law, a term that otherwise means "wife" is simply one part of a much wider pattern of inheritance of kinship terms, and it certainly implies an economic interdependency which is much like that between proper spouses. I can not help but feel that Nakane, in her search for "structure" has been misled by the logic of the situation into ignoring the psychological difficulties that such a "structure" would entail. This is not because she is unwilling to appeal to psychological factors, for in describing the position of the Khasi husband (pg 126-27) she points out the psychological difficulties of his ambiguous situation, but in this case the psychological argument buttresses, rather than contradicts her "structural" argument. In the Garo case I think she lets abstract "structural" considerations, (helped to be sure by the Garo's own structural statements), override psychological considerations and what I take to be the best available evidence. Possibly Nakane would even argue that what Garo men really do with their mothers-in-law is, in the end, irrelevant, for even if they do not cohabit with them, they should. I admit it would be a structurally reasonable thing to do, and I think the Garos feel that way too. That, I believe, is why Garos often talk as if that is the way they behave, but this is not enough to make me dismiss the counter evidence.

In a few places I think Nakane is almost simplistic in her descriptions. For instance, she rather takes it for granted that in these matrilineal
societies where inheritance follows the matrilineal line, the women can be said to “own” the property, though she also says that men may manage it. I do not know what “ownership” can consist of except a bundle of rights with respect to property, and surely men share rights to property — sometimes with their wives, sometimes with their sisters, sometimes with both. Garos and Khasis may talk as if title passes in some simple way from the mother to her heiress daughter, but to conclude from this that women “own” property strikes me as superficial. And to use such a conclusion to buttress one’s characterization of the “structure” of matrilineal society strikes me as seriously misleading.

Again, in discussing Khasi households, Nakane seems to express contradictory points of view. On the one hand she defines the iing as a sort of minimal matrilineal segment, perhaps a swollen household. It includes the daughters who marry out, but not their husbands or their children, for these children will form a new off-segmented iing. Yet she says “... a wife, if she is not the heiress, is normally oriented to develop surprisingly high degree of independence from her natal iing”. (pg 130). Given unigeniture I see nothing “surprising” in this unless one is bemused by an overly rigid definition of what the “structure” of an iing is supposed to be. The point is not to ask in some simplistic way whether a woman belongs to her natal iing or to her marital iing but rather to examine her relative responsibilities toward the two groups. Nakane also seems to assume (pg 127) that a Khasi man must belong either to the household of his sister, or to that of his wife, and she never quite gets at the division of responsibilities which he may have toward both. When property rights are reduced to a statement of “ownership” and when people’s divided loyalties to different households becomes “surprising” it would seem that some simple abstract notion of “structure” is getting in the way of a clear description of the facts.

A classical anthropological way of coping with deviation from presumed “structural” principles has been to invoke cultural change under modern conditions, and Nakane does not fail us here. She suggests that certain discrepancies between her observed data and her presumed “structure” are attributable to modern “disintegration of the Garo social organization” (pg 60). When she cannot find clear endogamous geographical units, and when the association between plots of land and particular lineages is nominal, social change can be called upon. I find it dangerous to assume that things were once more orderly than they are today, or to imagine that the rather cleaned up picture that
people may give of their own behavior patterns genuinely corresponds to some earlier arrangement. Like most anthropologists, I suppose, I have found that the longer I am away from the field, the more "structured" is my memory of the behavior I once observed. I believe that people's descriptions of their own cultures are likely to be a good deal more structured than their actual behavior, particularly when they look back to an earlier time. They can fondly imagine that the manifest present complications in their lives were once absent.

I do not quite mean to argue that Nakane is letting a preconception about the structure she expects to find color her description, but it sometimes comes close to that. One related example not dealing with "structure" as such, but with another kind of anthropological prejudice is instructive. Nakane adheres to the popular anthropological disdain of missionary attempts to dress the natives when she says "Educated Christian Garo leaders .... are trying their best to teach the Garos to wear clothes .... Nowadays a barebreasted woman seldom happens to be met" (pg 23). Nakane was in the Garo hills during the cold season when not only shirts, but sweaters are welcome. I saw a good many bare Christian breasts and am happy to report that I know of no attempt whatsoever on the part of either foreign missionaries or of their converts to make the girls more decent by covering them up. Snickers by plains Indians who ogle the girls in the markets are something else, and may indeed impose a new standard of modesty, but Nakane seems to be invoking a traditional anthropological stereotype rather than describing the facts.

I conclude with a final example, one that is rather trivial in itself but it may serve to make clear that I mean something different than just to say that Nakane reports the facts incorrectly. Nakane argues (pg 52, 87) that among the Garos, brother exchange (i.e. marriage of a man to his sister's husband's sister) is forbidden. In a footnote (pg 52) apparently written later than the main text, she responds to an earlier statement of mine in which I reported actual cases of such marriage and denied any rule which forbids them. Nakane points out, entirely correctly, that a few exceptional cases can not by themselves invalidate a general rule. After all, an occasional incestuous relationship, will hardly lead anyone to deny the existence of a rule forbidding incest. Yet the question remains: how consistently must a rule be followed to make it a rule? How do we decide when a rule exists and when can it be ignored? If nobody at all follows a rule does the rule still give better evidence for "structure" than actual behavior does?
Such questions do not seem to be asked in this monograph and we are left with confident claims about the underlying "structure" of Garo and Khasi society and I get the feeling that observed behavior is not seen as particularly relevant to that "structure".

My rather extended comments upon Nakane's work are not meant to belittle her contribution but are made only because I see the problems of this monograph to be characteristic of a good deal of structural anthropology. Where, we must ask, does "structure" lie? Is it in the way the natives describe or think about their own system, or is it the analytical construct of the anthropologist? How uniform must behavior be if we are to credit it as demonstrating a "structure"? Can even a large amount of deviation in actual behavior be reconciled with a given "structure" so long as the natives agree that the behavior is deviant? These are hardly new questions, and the answers to them are by no means simple, but I think at least some answer is needed before it can make much sense to conclude that "... the social structure of the Garo and the Khasi differ greatly". (pg 142). Such a statement is so distant from observable phenomena and so mysteriously related to the "people on the ground" that I find it essentially vacuous.

None of my comments should be taken to minimize the keen mind and enterprising spirit demonstrated by the author of this monograph. She has numerous illuminating passages. I was, for instance, struck by her perceptive discussion of the negotiations by which a Garo youth is finally persuaded to become a husband, and I was fascinated by her description of the warmth and affection which Garo husbands and wives show for one another. In a scant five months of field work, Nakane managed to collect an impressive amount of material and she is to be congratulated for presenting it to our view.

Department of Anthropology, 
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

ROBBINS BURLING