CHAPTER 13

“Keep the wealth within the family”
*Cousin Marriage and Swedish Uncles in Kashgar*

*Rune Steenberg*

Kinship is a matter of local categories. The Euro-centric notion of kinship as biologically based universal social relations subject to secondary cultural variations has long been widely abandoned. In the wake of criticism from Edmund Leach (1961), Rodney Needham (1971), David Schneider (1968, 1984), Marshall Sahlins (1976), and others, William Halse River’s genealogical method lost its central role in research on kinship. Recent studies place emphasis on local conceptualizations of social relations beyond biology and genealogy.1

Gunnar Jarring’s carefully collected, translated, and published material (see Introduction and Schlyter in this volume) presents a unique source of useful insights into social phenomena in early 20th-century Kashgar. As other contributions to this volume testify to as well, Jarring’s materials have been put to productive use by a wide range of scholars in different disciplines and with different foci. Jarring’s close attention to linguistic details has particular relevance for understanding kinship relations, which are always rooted in local categories. Jarring published not only his own deductions and conclusions, but also the source materials in their original Uyghur, or Eastern Turki.2 He made valuable source materials available for future scholars. Far from scientific vanity and egoism, Jarring’s work was oriented towards the future. In its modest self-reflexivity, it can even be said to have prefigured the “Writing Culture” and other postmodern debates.3

In one translation to be discussed below, Jarring provides us with important clues to the social morphology and the conceptualization of kinship in early 20th-century Kashgar. The story of interest is the arranged marriage of a certain Qasim Akhun to his cousin Nisa Khan in 1913 in Kashgar. Jarring, in his

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2 I will in the following use the term “Eastern Turki” for Jarring’s texts, as he does himself, and the designation “Uyghur” for statements pertaining to my own fieldwork and articles using this term. It must be kept in mind, though, that this is the same language at different points in history—as much as the English of Ernest Hemmingway and of Salman Rushdie may be called the same language; see the chapters on language in the first part of this volume.
3 Cf. Clifford and Marcus 1986.
description, invokes a much quoted reason for marriage between close relatives: “to keep their wealth within the family.” My point is to ask more closely who this “family” is. The word “family” does not appear in its local Eastern Turkic version. Jarring is not to be blamed for not providing the Eastern Turkic text, since the original seems to have been composed in Swedish. To some extent this is regrettable, since it deprives us of the local vocabulary, except for some cases where Jarring provides it in footnotes. However, in this very case, the Swedish text retains a crucial piece of information that would not have been preserved in a Turkic version: namely, that the cousin to be married is a matrilateral cousin and not a patrilateral cousin, as a descent-theoretical reading of the material would lead us to expect. The family within which Qasim Akhun is supposed to marry and within which wealth is to be kept is thus not agnatically defined. It includes Qasim Akhun’s maternal uncles. This suggests a minor role of agnatic descent as opposed to a more pronounced structural role of marriage to social structure in Kashgar.

For my argument, the word “family” itself is of little significance. The point I want to make is more structural and concerns social organization: a social unit is clearly imagined “within” which marriage can take place and wealth can be kept. The story of Qasim Akhun hints at the possibility of this unit not being constructed by means of agnatic descent but instead by means of marriage. This interpretation is supported by my fieldwork data from contemporary Kashgar. Used in conjunction with these data, the story provides further insights into continuities and changes in Uyghur kinship and social structure over time. It documents the continued importance of a non-descent based performative conceptualization of kinship and the structural significance of marriage in Kashgar.

History and Marriage

The criticisms of Leach, Needham, Schneider, and others have questioned the analytical utility of anthropological concepts like “kinship” and “marriage.”


5 Cognatic descent is of great relevance to social organization in Kashgar but in this case does not deliver any satisfactory explanation, since Qasim Akhun’s maternal uncles are only his cognatic kin, not that of his father, with whose wealth this story is concerned. Qasim Akhun’s maternal uncles are his father’s relatives through marriage (in-laws, affines; *quda-baja, qeyin’aka/ini*).