It is a common place of small-scale societies that relatedness is very important and the basis for the organisation of a great deal of people’s life and activity.

In the case of hunting and gathering societies living independent, self sufficient lives, this has led, among other things, to the formulation of models such as the kinship mode of production and the domestic mode of production. In the kinship mode of production universal systems of kin classification are seen as mechanisms that ensure people access to the means of production over very wide areas, securing survival when local conditions are poor and thus serving as both superstructure and infrastructure. In the case of the domestic mode of production where production and consumption takes place at the household level in economies of concrete and limited objectives, production was depressed and only the involvement in collective
ceremonial and political action temporarily raised production to higher levels. Kinship and sharing are seen as central to economic life in both these models.

Alan Barnard has proposed a shift away from a mode of production analysis to a focus on a foraging mode of thought. The grounds for the dissatisfaction with a focus on mode of production or marxist analysis do not seem to be explicitly articulated but Barnard does say that he thinks that the mode of thought is more resilient than the mode of production. This suggests that, among other things, he has in mind the situation of the descendants of people who just a generation or two ago were self-supporting hunter-gatherers, but are now unemployed and almost completely divorced from any material production or who have taken up radically different economic activities, such as herding or selling their labour, yet demonstrate a great many continuities with the past and still seem to be recognisably hunter-gatherers in some way.

He sees this mode of thought as responsible, among other things, for the continuities and for misunderstandings in the interaction of San peoples with regional bureaucrats. If this is correct, and assuming that there are meaningful continuities, it sounds as if he may be suggesting a high degree of relative autonomy of what may, loosely, be called the cultural sphere.

Although Barnard equates ideology and mode of thought, the mode of thought, as he outlines it, is rather different from an ideology and more like an ideational system or even a cultural account. It is not clear however, whether it is a model of behaviour or a model for behaviour. In the background statement to this session Barnard and Kwon do emphasise that
despite the switch to a focus on a mode of thought, the relationship between economic and ideational structures remains a central issue.

Like Barnard I too have some difficulties with the marxist accounts which seem to be somewhat thin and inadequate especially in the contemporary situation because they are somewhat thin in respect of the complexity of the ideational component of many of the existing indigenous social orders and their relationship to the societies that encapsulate them.

The difficulty I have with the notion of mode of thought as an alternative focus is that a mode of thought implies a concern with that which is self-conscious and can be articulated by the people concerned. While much of the ideational component can be articulated by the people themselves, there are other crucial factors that cannot be, such as the sedimented dispositions of the habitus and despite the emphasis on the importance of the relationship to the economy this relationship is not described. While the range of aspects of social life that Barnard encompasses in his model of a hunter-gatherer mode of thought extends far beyond the economy its internal coherence is not articulated. Crucially there is no clear focus on what it is that is reproducing the mode of thought in the changed circumstances. I suggest that a model of the ‘domestic moral economy’ may overcome some of these difficulties.

**Moral economy**

Although the term moral economy was known in the 1830s it owes its currency to E.P. Thompson who used it in the context of analysing the political culture and traditions of working class people involved in food
'riots' in eighteenth century England and Wales (1971). Subsequently it has been widely taken up, entering anthropology through James Scott’s ‘The moral economy of the peasant: rebellion and subsistence in southeast Asia’ (1976) but is found in much sociological and other writing on topics ranging from female solidarity in Africa (Hyden 2001), to examination of household economy (Cheal 1989; 1996) and the treatment of the elderly in western societies (eg Hendricks and Leedham 1992; Minkler 1991). By moral economy Scott was referring to the moral content of the subsistence ethic. As he says, ‘The problem of exploitation and rebellion is … not just a problem of calories and income but is a question of peasant conceptions of social justice, of rights and obligations, of reciprocity’ (1976:vii). This view was vigorously challenged by Samuel Popkin who typified the moral economy approach as assuming ‘peasants are anti-market, prefer common property to private, and dislike buying and selling’ (1979:5) in a debate that has strong resonances with the more general substantivist-formalist debate in economic anthropology.

Although the term moral economy has now come to be used in a wide variety of ways, Thompson emphasised that in his view of the concept it is much more than an emphasis on values (1991:339-340). As he uses it, it involves a set of beliefs and understandings that assign economic roles to classes and that endorse aspects of customary relations and practices across these class relationships. Thompson was drawing on notion of the moral economy in trying to understand the nature of food riots arguing that the riots were fuel by anger of ordinary people at those with economic control failing to recognise their moral obligations and commitments to enforce laws ameliorating simple profit maximisation in times of difficulty. Somewhat
mockingly he suggests that moral economy, as he uses the term, might be described as ‘dialectical asymmetrical reciprocity’ (1991:344). James Scott’s emphasis is in the same tradition but shifts the focus to access to land, in the context of peasant-landlord relations and customs of land use and of entitlement to its produce that insure the community from risk against a background of memories of famine (Thompson 1991:341).

Others, however, have used the term closer to the way that Thompson says he is not using it, to cover the allocation of resources to the reproduction of social relationships at the cost of profit maximisation and obvious immediate personal benefit (eg see Cheal 1989), that is, in Popkin’s terms, as anti-market. This latter orientation is sometimes referred to as the political economy approach and although contrasted with the moral economy orientation, is, of course, another form of moral economy but naturalised in the context of a capitalist economic context.

In the context of encapsulated fourth world peoples there are two aspects to a moral economy model. There is the aspect relating to the allocation of resources to the reproduction of relations internal to the indigenous social order, and there is the aspect relating to the notions about the nature of the asymmetrical reciprocity relations with the encapsulating society. I suggest that at least initially the relations of the domestic moral economy are likely to be the basis for relationships with outsiders.

The advantage of a focus on the domestic moral economy is that it explicitly invites attention to the beliefs and values associated with economic behaviour, both those which are or can be articulated by the people
concerned, and those which are not or can not be. With its focus on accounting for the allocation of resources, it directs attention to circulation, which allows it to bridge, without difficulty, the conditions of self-sufficiency and of dependency. Like the marxist models it gives a central role to kinship and to sharing, which reflects the ethnographic importance of these in people’s everyday lives and it opens the possibility for an account of the factors leading to the reproduction of these features of the domestic moral economy.

I propose the following trial of a model of the domestic moral economy.

**The domestic moral economy**

At least four elements seem important to accounting for the place of kinship and sharing in the domestic moral economy. In very briefly accounting for the four elements I will refer to past situations of self-sufficiency and deal with the relevance of the model in the present at the end.

- An ethic of generosity informed by a social pragmatics of demand sharing
- Embedded in a universal system of kin classification that requires a flow of goods and services to reproduce social relationships
- Personhood constituted through relatedness but valuing an egalitarian autonomy
- Emphasis on polite indirectness in interaction which makes open refusal difficult
Generosity and sharing, and universal systems of kin classification (Barnard 1978) are two well established features of hunting and gathering societies. The significance of generosity, as manifested in giving and taking, has been widely documented among hunter-gatherers generally, and was clearly central to the workings of their subsistence economy. This centrality was not just in terms of day to day survival but also in terms of the production and reproduction of social relationships through the maintenance of a flow of materials. A performative view of kinship emphasises the extent to which, particularly in contexts where a person is formally linked to everybody else, relations have to be produced by social action. It switches attention away from the formal aspects of kinship systems, with their emphasis on rule bound behaviour, to focus on the giving and taking that is involved in producing and reproducing relationships. This is a great deal more contingent, strategic and pragmatic than more received views of sharing and constructs generosity as much in terms of responding to demands as of spontaneous giving.

The performative perspective on systems of universal kin classification helps highlight a third central feature of the domestic moral economy: this is the centrality of the relational constitution of the indigenous self, where individuality has to be achieved rather than being taken as the starting point about which a social network is then built up. Children are born into a web of connectedness with many people having interests in them that entail reciprocal obligations for the child: these can relate to naming, a wide range of rights in the child including as spouse, as bestowee, as provider of services or resources and as member of a kin group. This web, expressed
mainly in the idiom of kinship, substantially subsumes the individual such that they are seen and see themselves in terms of their relations with other people. Yet at the same time there is often a fierce independence and high value placed on personal autonomy although this is not so much in terms of the individualism of modernity, but of individuals asserting that they are equal to all others.

With sharing so central to the constitution of social relations and selfhood, saying no, outright, is not only tantamount to breaking off relations, but it is also egotistical and confrontational. The deflecting or avoiding of demands to share is a constant and delicate issue in part responsible for the indirectness, intentional vagueness and decentredness that inflects much hunter-gatherer communication giving rise to a characteristically anonymous style of discourse.

**Conclusion**

Together these four elements provide the framework for a cultural account of the place of kinship and sharing in the domestic moral economy both past and present. The nature and extent of kinship networks may be related to the benefits, costs, risks, uncertainties involved in sharing and these in turn related to the constitution of the person and the emergence of the individualism which lies at the heart of the modern condition. It supplements the notion of a domestic mode of production by switching away from the focus on production, organisation and control to circulation and the causes and consequences of resistance, persistence and accommodation in the
contemporary situation, opening up the way for an account of the part played by encapsulation in reproducing contemporary indigenous social orders.

References


