

Book Review

Lyon, Stephen. M., *Political Kinship in Pakistan: Descent, Marriage, and Government Stability*. 137pp., Lexington Books 2019

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Stephen Lyon's fascinating book uses the lenses of descent lineage and marriage to demonstrate the ways in which "one part of the world both establishes and resists control over groups of people" (p.1). It draws on extensive in-depth anthropological fieldwork conducted over two decades in Pakistan, mostly in a Northern Punjabi village, and uses ethnography, interviews, map-making, surveys, genealogical diagrams, life-histories, and multiple other methods. Through analysing village kinship relations, land disputes, coalitions and alliances, Lyon provokes larger readings of multiple sites of national and political party organisation and power. While Lyon views kinship as a resilient, binding force, nonetheless he asserts, intriguingly, that it 'makes no assumptions about mutual affection or agreement' (p.2).

Chapters 1 and 2 deftly establish the key relevant social scientific approaches to power. Foremost is the management of conflicts and resources, and identifying points at which groups and individuals clash (p.3). Therein the study also encompasses violence and conflict in a society with 'a high tolerance for the theatricality of conflict' (as with Bourdieu in Algeria, and Gilsenan in Lebanon). The key questions concern ways conflict and power are refracted through kinship in everyday political life. At the heart is a paradox concerning "Pakistan's seemingly dual nature". That is, while political society is deeply hierarchical, pre-eminent groups are prevented from consolidating power unchallenged. Kinship and politics here, greatly summarised, work in tandem. Kinship challenges over-consolidated kin groups *and* the state, with the result neither descent groups nor marital alliances permit people to maximise political outcomes or individual interests.

Lyon rejects the British structural-functionalism of anthropologists like Evans-Pritchard and Radcliffe-Brown and their emphasis on descent lineages, and Lévi-Strauss's structuralist focus on marital *alliances*, while emphasising the central importance of both. He also rejects a Foucauldian position on the final primacy of language and sees limitations to the dominant approaches to politics and power in

Pakistan—for example authors like Siddiqi who highlight the over-dominance of an authoritarian military, or others such as Lieven, for example, who praise the stabilising force of Pakistan's military structures. Lyon additionally gives short shrift to explanations that attribute Pakistan's democratic struggles to wholesale failures of government, centre-province power disputes, intertwined state and commercial interests, or competing concepts of Islam, and he criticises the discourse which views Pakistan as a resilient, robust state that is simultaneously permanently on brink of collapse and fragmentation (e.g. as represented by Jaffrelot). Rather like medieval Italian merchant families, Pakistani kinship among *elite* political groups resembles a kind of 'aristocratic politicking' that generates bonds of loyalty, reciprocity and blends with other patron-client relationship systems. People strategically use relationships of descent *and* marriage. Interacting with political systems, kinship systems form the frameworks of attachments that enable power.

Rather, Lyon's focus is on cultural *systems* that ensure Pakistan is *more* stable than it *should* be, and on kinship as the driver of all major economic, social and political organisations. Yet any systems analysis also begs questions about mechanisms that *do* allow for *change*, or for ways power shifts and is maximised elsewhere in the hierarchy—and about the extent to which social mobility and political change are indeed possible.

The paradox under examination is reminiscent of Fredrik Barth's work on political organisation among Yusufzai Pashtuns. Indeed, Lyon pays tribute to Barth. For Barth competition, rivalry and conflict *maintain* structural arrangements and the exercise of power within a broader-based system of political organisation—and prohibit supremacy from residing exclusively or independently with any single leader. While Barth does not account for cults of personality surrounding individual leaders (as does Lyon)—he does analyse in great detail why individual ambitions to power, within a framework of kinship support and dependence, are thwarted, and conflicts *within* a political

system stabilised. Whereas Barth (to simplify) deploys culture strategically as a resource, Lyon views culture as a *system* of interrelated cognate, ideational and thought-making processes that produce resilience in Pakistani political leadership.

Lyon brings systems of culture, genealogy and politics provocatively back into the academic frame, resisting current tendencies to jettison systemic explanations—to explain resilience without discarding elements of action and change. This is different to Lieven's insistence that kinship dominates all relationships in Pakistan because of the conservative culture of Pakistani society. Zaidi (2012) criticises Lieven for applying Thomas Metcalf's 19th century notion of traditional Indian villages as "little republics" to 21st century Pakistan. For Lieven, kinship networks, "by far the most important foci of most people's loyalty" are "central to the *weakness* of the Pakistani state", and he insists on the impossibility that people can transcend "deeply ingrained patterns of Pakistani life". While there are clear problems linked to any implicit or explicit primordialist, civilising discourse, which Lyon rightly avoids, both authors pose a similar question. Why do so many people collude with relationships of power that manifestly benefit others more than themselves?.

These questions are addressed in Chapter 3. Here Lyon tracks Pakistani elitism back to the foreign invasions and occupations of Alexander the Great, the Mughals, Sikhs and the British. In the colonial situation, communities formed 'contradictory alliances and friendships in which the "winner" of any political struggle was the "friend" of someone in the kinship group.... The bonds of kinship are not dyadic or short term... kinship in Pakistan (and India) is a long game and it's maintained consciously and unconsciously through easy-to-replicate cultural rituals and patterns that make it extraordinarily difficult to challenge or change' (p. 43). This is the nub of the book's argument.

Lyon does not produce *final* definitive statements about what culture *is*, but seeks to better understand the contribution of the culture concept, in historicised context, in terms of its relevance to modern politics. Most modern and post-modern anthropologists would dispute the idea that culture is bounded, static, immemorial and anything but dynamically enacted, and constituted differently by different agents. Relevant to Lyon's work are the ways cultural systems are distributed such that most people agree on what part of a culture *is* relevant to local contexts of political kinship, and it is here that longer histories (of invasion and colonialism) are important.

Chapter 3 ends by moving towards the post-Partition scenario, and the Urdu-speaking Indian 'Mohajirs' who settled in Sindh and Punjab (notably, most of those who settled in West Punjab were Punjabi-speakers from East Punjab, often with biraderi links in the West). Lyon argues that the massive influx of Mohajirs drove people in Punjab to turn to reliable social and cultural institutions of kinship/descent/alliance. Although this might be so in rural Punjab, it does not necessarily explain processes in urban Sindh after the 1980s, where the MQM

disrupted the traditional Mohajir vote bank and people within the *same* families voted for different parties (e.g. MQM, JI, JUI)—including with new cultural desires to overturn the status quo rather than replace its figureheads. The fact the MQM so effectively reproduced the violence it protested is a different question, but nonetheless begs questions about class and place: how the village as the site of study shapes the book's arguments, how these might differ if fieldwork was conducted in an ethnically diverse city like Lahore, or among non-elite political groups in Punjab?

There may also be some unpacking to be done around the term 'collusion' and its implication that people willingly accept their own inequality and oppression. Lyon states that it is not his desire to criticise Pakistan's deep-seated inequalities and hierarchies, nor is it to comment politically. Certainly, this position plays germanely and even controversially to debates in anthropology about questions of relativism, academic-activism, public and applied anthropology, and the way 'outsider' anthropologists are positioned politically in terms of visibility and action.

Ethnicity, interestingly, has little traction in this analysis. While Lyon does link ethnicity to ideas of qaum, biraderi and rishta in Chapter 4, I suggest the *absence* of ethnicity as a cultural component of kinship or a driver of electoral politics, compared with other communities where ethnicity assumes a strong romantic nationalist and political force, might be a subject for further consideration.

Chapter 4 elaborates on network creation and maintenance. 'I start with a manifesto of sorts declaring not only that kinship is important in Pakistani societies, but that it serves as the *critical foundation* upon which the rest of society depends....' A discussion follows on the importance of 'maternal transmission' and 'matrilineal substance inheritance' to the idiom of patrilineality, wherein women bring corporate interests and histories into a marriage (p.108). Lyon is correct: kinship *does* cross-cut economics, rituals, subsistence, and every other major anthropological theme. Yet I wonder: what about ways people *do* resist the bonds of kinships, within the constraints of kinship? What logic of exchange leads people to remain in ambivalent often fractious relations to their primary ties, affines, and cultural attachments? That is, analyses of historical events and culturalist readings of codes of marriage and descent are important, and draw on national, cultural, and personal pasts and presents. They also return us in new ways to Rousseau's distinction between amour de soi and amour propre—or the pursuit of self-love or personal interests, and the love that binds (marriage, family, nation). Ethnographies of the *longue durée* observe that tensions have always existed in Pakistan between nation, territory and diaspora, centre and periphery, duty and desire, marriage and love, conservation and new invention, and political transformation and stagnation. While this study focusses on specifically Punjabi networks of politics, kinship, and sociality, its address to history also invites recognition of a plurality of multiple Punjabi pasts and

presents. This implicates the ways some historical dialectics of anti-colonial resistance, ethnic conflict, the settlement of millions of refugees, large scale urbanisation, and longstanding Punjabi migrations across the globe contribute to new geopolitical, economic, and cultural spaces. It also bears on ways cultural codes of kinship and tradition and genealogical provenance do *not* always determine behaviour or outcomes, and are transformed and challenged in globalising and diasporic contexts. We might recall the British politician George Galloway, who broke the yoke of *biraderi* politics in Bradford and convinced people to switch their electoral support from Labour to Respect, in part by harnessing the vote of young people and women who felt excluded by the *biraderi* system. Politics and kinship attachments may indeed also be deeply resisted. Lyon rightly states, ‘conflict resides at the heart of all politics’—and, I might add, families too.

Chapter 5 examines conflict management in rural Punjab and the role of kinship groups and marriages in managing, mitigating and exacerbating conflicts over *zan*, *zar*, *zamin*—women, gold, land—and the historical role of the *jirga* and *panchayat* in mediating conflicts. Kinship cannot explain *all* alliances that emerge over time. Likewise, Lyon argues, marriage as a tool of conflict suppression (marrying in or out of one’s lineage or *biraderi*) can only suppress or redirect conflict, not erase it, and many land disputes may continue but *within* the family rather than *between* families. Conflicts and peace require maintenance and a high tolerance for life amidst the threat of violence. Empirically, this chapter explores a long land dispute between close cousins involving the factionalisation of family strands and the historical divisions of households according to upper and lower village territories. Lyon draws from the rich literature on cousin and community rivalry in Pakistan and the region, ending with the spectre of globalisation: of transnational conflicts between kin over remittances, kidnappings, and girls’ education.

Here one is reminded again of Barth’s calls for the study of political power in conditions of change—and ways rural Punjabi kinship and politics might change with the globalisation of values, international politics, and the mass out-migration of young Punjabi men to Europe and the Gulf.

Chapters 6 and 7 turn directly to national politics, specifically electoral dynastic political networks which reinforce existing power structures and resource distribution. Chapter 6 examines landed elites, a group Lyon finds ‘understandable and relatable’ given ‘the devastating consequences of political incompetence or naïve idealism’ and that protecting one’s resources “is not an idle activity in rural Pakistan” (p.83). There follows a controversial statement: ‘Reliance on kinship relations is an attempt to counter Pakistan’s electoral problems *rather* than the cause of them. Political kinship is not the villain of the Pakistani state, but a logical work-around for a state that, like all states, has some fundamental flaws and lacks the resources of many other states to compensate bureaucratically for them’ (p.84). This statement, rooted in findings and beliefs uncovered through fieldwork,

could not be more diametrically opposed to the many who view the ruling elites and army as the *cause* of Pakistan’s problems. It speaks to important debates and raises larger questions about political elites, political kinship and the army, the power of the army to usurp party politics and the fragility of that relationship, particularly since the army’s tightened grip since the 2013 elections and its interests in the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor also launched that year.

Chapter 6 uncovers fascinating lineage connections between elected officials (MNAs, MPAs) in the 2013 elections. It details powerful connections between leading Punjabi families—the Chaudhrys of Gujrat, and army officer Tahir Sadiq—and tracks Sadiq’s ascent from Attock district politics to the PML-Q and the army through strategic marriages. Next is the Bhutto family. If Bhutto fortunes have been fortified through marriage, landed interests and affinal connections, they are also at the mercy of conflicts with the army—as Benazir Bhutto’s unprosecuted assassination and the fates of her father and brothers have shown. Lyon attributes Bilawal Bhutto’s minimal success thus far to his youth, unmarried status, and his patrilineal bloodline (a Zardari on his father’s side). The overarching argument is that, while in north and central Punjab, stability is maintained through interlinking political and kinship networks, the development of effective participatory democratic institutions is likewise retarded. He writes in Chapter 7 that “there are multiple power bases that control votes and resources in specific domains. The people involved are decidedly self-interested, and operate within sometimes shockingly narrow horizons” (p.106).

Chapter 7 examines the Sharif family’s dominance in national and provincial politics. Lyon compares how Nawaz Sharif and subsequently Imran Khan, an industrialist and a celebrity respectively, ‘were able to circumvent the near monopoly of power held by the landed elite for the majority of Pakistan’s history’. First, while the Sharifs have not relied as much on marriage networks with other influential families, some strategically beneficial unions have occurred. If *not* traditional landowners, their super-wealth enables them to marry within comparable socio-economic bands. Imran Khan is from a prominent political *biraderi*, but did not enter politics via these connections. However, his second and third marriages expanded his support among well-connected political families in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, and amongst Sufi religious communities.

The book’s conclusion reiterates the priority given to kinship as a *system*, and the processes and mechanisms by which people participate in a system which *serves* inequality. To note, Lyon deliberately eschews an engagement with political violence, rising radicalisation, state violence, and the rise of private security and militarisation of society. Might these cases provide interesting exceptions to the importance accorded kinship? The book’s concluding sentence may be read as invitingly provocative: “Rather than seeing the strategic use of marriage and the highly orchestrated manipulation of kinship in the public sphere as a form of

corruption, these should be understood as rational responses to extraordinary political and economic conditions” (p.122).

References

Zaidi, S. Akbar, 2012. ‘Contesting Notions of Pakistan’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47(45): 32–39.
