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**UNDERSTANDING BLACK
HOUSEHOLDS IN
SOUTHERN AFRICA:**

**THE AFRICAN KINSHIP AND
WESTERN NUCLEAR
FAMILY SYSTEMS**

Margo Russell

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Understanding Black Households in Southern Africa: The African Kinship and Western Nuclear Family Systems

Abstract

Households can be taken for granted in the West because the nuclear family system with its bilateral descent ensures a fairly standard pattern of co-residence, with predictable patterns of pooling resources. In contemporary southern Africa, the tradition of patrilineal descent entails a much wider set of options for co-residence as relatives disperse to make a living in the new global economy. The agnatic idiom continues to give coherence to volatile contingent Black households. The paper traces the distinctive historical roots of Western and African households and argues against the assumption that black South Africans are engaged in some sort of transition to a Western pattern.

Introduction

It is a relatively simple matter nowadays to gain access to a large database containing diverse and interesting pieces of information about contemporary black households in South Africa. In the last decade, official statistics have finally remedied the indifference of the past century to black standards of living, earning, spending and congestion. Black incomes, houses, facilities, educational levels and occupations are now subject to the same ongoing state scrutiny to which white, coloured and Indian householders have grown accustomed to over the years. However, this data presents a new problem for social scientists, namely, how to correctly *interpret* facts and figures collected from black people on the basis of *household*. Does *sharing a dwelling* carry the same implications for black people as it does for those of northern European descent, who devised the household survey strategy, and used it effectively for decades to gather intelligence amongst their own kind? Such surveys rest upon assumptions about the coherence and stability and exclusiveness of co-residential groups which, far from being universal, hold good only under limited cultural and economic conditions. That these conditions prevailed for so long in the West, lulled many researchers in southern Africa into assuming households to be an unproblematic

universal phenomena – differing in size and composition in different societies, but sharing the common characteristic of being, in each instance the basic kin group with shared responsibility for one another’s day-to-day well-being. That complacency is however now passing. Household, kinship and sexual partnerships in southern Africa are receiving the attention long urged by social anthropologists, stimulated in part by new funding available as a spin-off of the AIDS pandemic.

Censuses conducted world-wide on the basis of such co-residential households have returned robust data¹ on such things as age, sex, race, nationality, fertility, occupation, possessions and income. But once such data are aggregated by shared address and/or shared meals, once those sharing are labelled a *household*, once we start producing tables classifying these households by size, age and sex structure, family type, income, health or wealth, and then start devising social policies on this basis, we are in grievous danger of attributing to co-residential groups inappropriate characteristics – like persistence and internal cohesion – derived from alien Western social practice. The problem was well recognised twenty years ago by participants in a workshop on the African household,² at which ‘some participants rejected the usefulness of the concept of household altogether’ (Vaughan 1985: 35). Vaughan instead emphasises the value of that discussion for *discrediting* models of African household which assume common ownership, joint decision-making, firm boundaries, commensality, ‘the conjugal estate’, fixed cultural forms, or a predictable evolutionary trajectory. She highlights the importance of grasping ‘problematically invisible’ *inter-household* relations (Vaughan, 1985:6) as African economies are commercialized; ‘for without a knowledge of these it appears unlikely that we will understand the structure of households’ (*ibid.*), and warns against overlooking the particular historical conditions experienced by different African communities. Harris (1981:51) had warned against extending the image of the household as ‘a separate private sphere... so powerful in contemporary capitalist organization... to cover other radically different structures, using our own categories of thought to interpret different realities’. Nene (1988:2,5), addressing sociologists in South Africa, is adamant that black urban domestic units ‘defy traditional definitions’ and urges that we ‘avoid the temptation of readily transferring research paradigms that are founded on foreign conceptualisations’.

¹ Provided they adequately manage the chronic problems of under-counting and double-counting mobile members.

² Conceptualising the Household in Africa: Issues of Theory, Method and Application. Harvard University 2-3 November 1984. See Vaughan (1985:35-36, 44).

Theoretical Orientations

Over the past twenty years, dedicated international scholarship has been invested in the notion of household, but generalisations seem as elusive as ever. Attempts to establish a valid cross-cultural definition proved so difficult that Wilk and Netting (1984), introducing a collection of papers from a distinguished international panel of historians and social anthropologists gathered specifically to consider households in 1981, effectively side-step the issue of definition. Instead they concentrate on the five *activities* – production, distribution, transmission, reproduction and co-residence – that we ‘know’ are ‘most often’ performed by ‘the small, numerous, corporate social units observers generally agree in calling households’. Whereas before it had been assumed that ‘kinship relations were logically prior to households’, determining the rules of residence, it was now recognised that household organisation lay at least partly outside the realm of kinship analysis. A broader approach was required. Working through each of these five *activities*, ‘commonly performed’ by these ‘corporate social units observers generally agree in calling households’, Wilk and Netting generate at least a dozen stimulating hypotheses about the way *activity* impacts on *morphology* i.e. household composition. They propose that since ‘morphology is a compromise between often contradictory functional imperatives’, there is a ‘constant tension’ driving adaptability and change in household structure through time (*Ibid*: 20).

They detect an ‘evolutionary path’ in the patterning of the *activities* dominating household form, with modern households, like hunter-gatherer households, shaped mainly by only two of the five activities: reproduction and distribution³ They suggest ‘modernisation’ be seen not as a transition from one form of household to another, but as ‘a change in the activity spheres that underlie household form’, usually characterised by loss of productive activities. They insist that household morphology cannot be predicted (*Ibid*).

‘without the specifics of each case and without knowledge of the cultural context of rules and norms by which household form and function are mediated and reconciled...The material flows of labour, goods, and cash in household production, distribution and transmission are negotiated anew in each generation according to the historical circumstances of the moment but always with respect to culturally approved option of co-residence, patterns of authority’ (Wilk & Netting, 1984: 21).

³ The omission of residence is surprising, unexplained.

Household is at the centre of a different theoretical approach developed by Wallerstein, Smith and colleagues in their analysis of the incorporation of the third world (in their terms *the periphery*) into the world economy. They suggest that the term *household* be reserved for domestic groups that are formed *after* incorporation into the world economic system. Household is a social form *created* by insertion into the capitalist world system, *in order* to link individuals to the global economy. It is a social arrangement for managing domestic life wherever access to cash (often, but by no means always, through wage employment) becomes a central goal. It is the appropriate unit for analysing the ways that people fit into the labour force. Household is defined as

‘the social unit that effectively over long periods of time enables individuals, of varying ages and both sexes, to pool income coming from multiple sources in order to ensure their individual and collective reproduction and well-being’ (Wallerstein & Smith, 1992: 13).

This is not how the corporate social unit observers generally agree on the meaning of household, for neither kinship nor co-residence are defining characteristics. Householding is a strategy for resource allocation. They distinguish households from earlier more communal pre-capitalist pre-industrial productive domestic groups, which evolved under different circumstances, such as the patrilineal homestead communities which still survive in southern Africa, though with a reduced economic role.

Working with the same conceptual schema, Martin and Beittel (1987:221-222) describe the emergence of the households in Africa as ‘a radical transformation’ which occurred as pre-capitalist controls over agricultural production and labour were ‘dissolved’. The domestic group was ‘re-orientated’ to ‘uses commensurate with the economic activities of the peripheral zone of the world economy’. The ‘structural integument of the pre-colonial economy failed to survive’. Chiefs and male elders lost control to younger males and household heads. They describe the ‘fitful emergence’ of a smaller group, a smaller set of social relationships which we call the ‘household’, from pre-capitalist structures responsible for producing the labour force (*ibid*). New networks had to be constructed for survival in the new world economy.

Like Hackenberg, Murphy and Selby (1984), they argue that households on the periphery will differ systematically from households at the capitalist core. Although ‘grounded in space’, core and periphery are not regions; for ‘there are multiple layers of coreness and peripherality’ and ‘peripherality exists only in relation to and by contrast with coreness’ (Wallerstein & Smith, 1992b: 255).

‘We can of course also find core-periphery relations within a single country’ (*ibid.*). Their example is South Africa.

Wallerstein and Smith’s analysis proceeds by way of considering sources of household income. The five possible categories of income are from wages, sales, rent, transfers and subsistence. They argue that almost all households, in both periphery and core, over time, get some of their income from each source. However the proportions of income from each source vary systematically with the household’s location in the economy, whether at the core or at the periphery. Households in the core are likely to rely much more heavily on wages, and wages are more likely to be adequate to meet their needs. When these are inadequate they are likely to be supplemented by transfers from the state (so-called ‘benefits’). Households in the periphery are, by definition, never wholly wage-dependent. That is their defining characteristic. The periphery is never truly proletarian. Any wages earned are always insufficient to meet needs, and are supplemented – not with subsistence from peasant production as the traditional view of historical social change implies, but – with petty market operations. Such peripheral households are constantly ‘in desperate need of cash’ because the process of peripheralisation undermines the viability of traditional subsistence activities (Wallerstein & Smith, 1992b:256). They consequently make a living by selling or renting anything, from food and drinks to shacks, drugs and sexual favours. The combination, within a household, of wages and petty marketing is ‘the very mark of peripheralisation’ (*ibid.*).

Contrary to earlier assumptions of development, these semi-proletarian households on the periphery are destined never to become fully proletarianised. Only at the core will a minority of households ever earn enough from selling their labour to live exclusively by this means. The fact that peripheral households make use of an array of income source has predictable consequences. In times of economic recession, such households will expand for in order to diversify their sources of income, they need to draw in more members. By contrast, in times of economic expansion they will contract. A similar correlation, between deprivation and the extension of families, had been observed in industrialising England (Medick 1976). From an employer’s perspective, people from semi-proletarian households are a more desirable source of labour than fully proletarian households because, being less wage-dependent, they will accept lower wages. In times of world economic stagnation, industry relocates to zones where such households are to be found. Wallerstein and Smith conclude, ‘The most interesting outcome of our research is the evidence that there seems to be a type of household structure that binds people to core-like activities...and another that seems to bind people to peripheral activities’ (Wallerstein & Smith 1992b: 255).

Wallerstein and colleague's notions of households are useful to think about. They jolt us out of any complacent search for enduring African household structures, though they remind us that distinctive past practices will persist to shape the new domestic structures. They keep us alert to the power of capitalism to alter economic opportunities, and to limit survival strategies in even remote places. But they attach almost no importance whatsoever to co-residence. In a rapidly changing economy, people will move as they must, and sleep where they can, holding in their heads their sets of lifetime obligations, rights and responsibilities, relying and drawing on them as best they can. These enduring linkages - so hard to pin down, count or quantify - constitute the real domestic structure of peripheral societies. How do we then interpret contemporary data gathered from black people on the basis of co-residence? The problem has some practical urgency, since survey practice, shaped by Western assumptions, is likely (on purely expedient grounds) to remain wedded to samples gathered on the basis of residence.

The Importance of Kinship Systems for Household Structure

My interest in households arises from intense frustration experienced both in personal attempts to conduct household surveys in Africa and in assessing the outcomes of such surveys which others have conducted (Russell, 1984, 1993, 1994, 1998, 2002). The problem revolves around trying to determine the boundaries of a household, for by the inclusion or exclusion of certain people – for example a well-paid worker – we dramatically change the household profile – for example from rich to poor, from female-headed to male-headed. As the literature makes clear, the problem is by no means unique to southern Africa. The inadequacy of household survey methodology to capture reality in Latin America has been well documented (Wilk & Miller, 1997). It arises in an acute form wherever migrant labour separates earners from their dependants. It is exacerbated when, as in South Africa's past, the free movement of people, to live where and with whom they choose, is restricted by what Manona (1991:204) calls (rather kindly) 'the active agency of the state bureaucracy'. But it reaches more deeply than that, for the characteristics of the Western co-residential household (upon which household survey methodology was modelled) have been an integral part and consequence of its atypical conjugal kinship system. Where other kinship systems prevail, where other ways of identifying and classifying who is and is not a kinsman prevail, with consequently different rules about obligations for support, sharing and nurture, co-residence can carry quite different implications. If in the seventies it was realised that household organisation lay at least partly *outside* the realm of

kinship analysis, in the nineties in southern Africa one needed reminding that household organisation lay partly *inside* the realm of kinship analysis. Southern African kinship systems must be understood if we are to understand how contemporary southern African householding works.

This paper therefore starts by drawing attention to the importance of kinship, that whole edifice of socially significant biological, genealogical and conjugal ties which every society constructs to order daily life, in the patterning of economic interdependence and patterns of co-residence. Black and white South Africans are brought up with two radically different kinship idioms. One is derived from the conjugal system which has predominated in north western Europe for at least 500 years; the other is the consanguinal descent system characteristic of most of Africa. Each has been the subject of intense scholarship and debate. Each has exerted a strong influence on patterns of co-residence. We cannot understand contemporary South African households without first understanding the notions of kinship which underpin dependencies and responsibilities.

At the heart of the prevailing family tradition amongst white people is the conjugal couple, who are strongly expected to set up their own independent household in which they alone will rear their own dependent children to maturity. The African tradition, which so fascinated early twentieth century European ethnographers, is very different. Descent rather than marriage is the central principle; in southern Africa, patrilineal or agnatic descent, i.e. descent from father. Kinship imagery pervades African discourse. Mehlwana (1996:83) writes, 'People give meaning to their relationships through describing them in kinship terms...describing significant relationships through the kinship idiom wherever they can'. In Africa, you confer significance on friendship by depicting it as kinship. In the West, to the contrary, people confer significance on kinship by depicting it as friendship: 'She is more of a friend to me than a mother'.

A similar emphasis on kinship system is central to Macfarlane's (1978, 1986) work on households in times past in England, and to Hammel's work on Serbia, where the principles of kinship – lineage organisation, patrilocal⁴ and agnatic bias⁵ – have remained 'remarkably constant' over several centuries (Hammel, 1995: 337). In southern Africa, too, principles of kinship are more persistent and influential than is usually allowed. By highlighting these principles, and in particular by drawing attention to differences between the principles underlying

⁴ Patrilocal: the rule of post marital residence whereby a wife lives with her husband who has remained with his own father;

⁵ Agnatic bias: the tendency for social organisation to arrange itself according to groupings of persons related only through males.

black and white kinship constructions, we make greater sense of accumulating data on black households, which can be very misleading when it is gathered from people for whom co-residence lacks the expected social and economic implications of the West, whatever the apparent similarities in composition of the co-residing group. My approach to kinship is necessarily limited to that of a sociologist,⁶ conspicuously lacking the trained sophistication found in social anthropological accounts⁷.

Political Sensitivities and Cultural Differences

The *apartheid* project greatly complicated the way culture differences are now approached in South Africa. There lingers on amongst liberal white people a great hesitancy to suggest that there are significant cultural differences between different racial groups. Indeed, so great is this hesitancy that the concept of separate *cultures* and *sub-cultures* have themselves become taboo in local social science circles as unnecessarily divisive. The fashionable emphasis is on what people share, and how unequally shares are distributed. Any lingering regard for race-based culture difference is viewed with deep suspicion as the slippery slope back to *apartheid*. Thus Ross (1993, 1995, 1996) in her memorable account of domestic life in *Die Bos* coyly fails to tell us that some of her informants are coloured, some black. In suppressing racial identity, she deprives us of insight into the way race became irrelevant for this community. Two other recent studies of family and household devalue themselves by a fastidious aversion to identifying their subjects by race. Skordis and Welch (2002) miss a valuable opportunity to inform us about black urban households by including, without differentiation, an unknown number of probably differently structured coloured households in their sample, on the grounds that they all live on the Cape Flats. Tellingly, neighbourhood (still a proxy for race in most parts of contemporary South Africa) emerges as the most significant predictor of household members' knowledge of one another's incomes – but only those readers with an intimate knowledge of Cape Town's topography will understand this.

A similar criticism must be levelled at Rabe's (2001) study of marital separation. Her sample of twelve couples who live apart presumably contains black and white people, but it requires some detective work on the part of the reader to establish this, for race is the one factor never mentioned: Would a white man live in a dormitory? Would a black woman live in one of the

⁶ But see Ziehl (2002: 32-33) for an amusing but misplaced attack on me as a 'territorial' anthropologist.

⁷ As for example Kuper (1982) who depicts clans and lineages in southern Africa as fictive creations of ethnographers.

upmarket suburbs of Johannesburg, employ a domestic servant, drive an expensive car take her children out to dinner? Would a black man shoot and kill himself and his wife? Although she tells us ‘the respondents have different first languages’ (Rabe, 2001:279) she makes the surely ill-judged assumption that culture/race is irrelevant in a study of the conjugal couple. A moment’s thought would confirm the profoundly different weight placed on conjugal co-residence by black and white people. Romantic-love-based Western marriage prescribes a shared conjugal household; a marriage contracted within a polygynous idiom against a background of patrilineal extended families long accustomed to migrant labour, is subject to very different expectations. Race would have been an interesting variable to isolate in a mixed race sample.

This squeamishness is easy to understand. The *apartheid* project’s assiduous cultivation of irreconcilable differences *in order* to maintain and justify white domination, affronted the decent-minded amongst the elite who worked hard to subvert the system by sinking their differences and working at assimilation. The assimilation was of course to white Western ways: *apartheid* was decried as inhibiting a natural world-wide evolution towards the dominant Western culture. This strong association between acknowledgement of culture differences and a brutal political programme has been particularly unfortunate for social scientists in South Africa since it has deterred them from exploring other deplorable economic facts which so conspicuously reinforce many racial differences.

No such inhibitions have hampered the writing of African demographers in their attempt to account for Africa’s failure to make the predicted fertility transition.⁸ Contemporary African domestic institutions, in all their uniqueness, lie at the heart of the riveting papers of Lesthaeghe and colleagues (Lesthaeghe,1989). The least inhibited statement of cultural difference comes from the Caldwells (Caldwell, 1976; Caldwell & Caldwell, 1990), concerned with the practical demographic issue of fertility in Africa. Their work is convincing because it rests on at least a hundred published papers by (mainly West) African (i.e. indigenous) researchers. Marital and sexual relations are at the centre of their concern. They are struck by how little variation there is throughout the continent.

The consequences of different ways of reckoning descent for domestic group structure have been exhaustively analysed by Goody (1973). His monograph convincingly establishes the singularity of the African pattern, with its commitment to bride wealth exchange at marriage, as quite distinct in structure and consequences from the dowry-based marriage systems found in parts of Europe and Asia, with which it is sometimes confused. By shrugging off the

⁸ From high to low fertility as a response to a falling death rate.

persistent notion that South Africa is different from the rest of Africa, by seeing South Africa as a more integral part of the continent, we would gain a clearer perspective on the way Western penetration has modified black domestic institutions in the industrialised south. We need to feel free to recognise what is distinctive in the African tradition, and to acknowledge how acute the collision of the African kinship with Western expectations has been, and continues to be. Congruencies between black and white household structures have too eagerly been interpreted as evidence of convergence.

This paper suggests instead that the new domestic strategies adopted by black people in South Africa to accommodate changed circumstances are *within* the *agnatic idiom*, which is proving no less resilient and adaptable than the Western *conjugal idiom* in providing a charter by which most black South Africans continue to order their radically altered domestic lives.

In most of Africa, descent-based kinship, rather than being confined to a residual, intimate, domestic sphere, has been the basis for the day-to-day organisation of production, and for the distribution of authority. This holds for societies as different from one another as the mid-twentieth century acephalous Nuer of the Sudan and the centrally co-ordinated chiefdoms of the Zulu of South Africa in the nineteenth century. Ekeh (1990) attributes the persistent attachment to kinship as an organising principle in Africa to the impact of the transatlantic slave trade. He argues that as interior raiding intensified, people retreated from proto-feudal slaving states into the safer independence of unilineal kin groups. Such groups were ‘a reaction formation’ (Ekeh, 1990: 681). Underlying his argument lurks another theme, consonant with van den Berghe’s (1978) thesis, that there is something regressive, underdeveloped, about kinship as an organising principle, which needs to be blamed on outsiders, without whose aggressive interference Africa might have evolved beyond such considerations to some more impersonal and atomistic form of social structure. The paradigms of social change devised by social science in the 19th century are all infused with this same bias. Progress implies shedding tiresome inherited obligations to kin in favour of egocentric individualistic voluntaristic attitudes more suited to expanding world capitalism. We detect it in those favoured theoretical oppositions between ascription and achievement (Linton, 1938), particularism and universalism (Parsons, 1951), *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* (Tonnies, 1957), mechanical and organic solidarity (Durkheim, 1893). The limited range of people reckoned ‘close kin’ in the Western conception has been depicted as an intrinsic part of Westerners’ superior rate of progress. Africans have been portrayed as *held back* by outdated notions of responsibility to too wide a range of dependants. The argument is the secular counterpart of the sustained Christian missionary attack on polygyny, levirate, sororate, ancestral spirits, and other institutions of African domestic life.

Contemporary black South African ideas about appropriate patterns of co-residence and family behaviour have been shaped in the tumult of the last hundred years. Expectations, derived from the agnatic kinship system evolved over centuries as pastoral cultivators, have been confronted by a transformed political economy, undercutting the material base on which kinship practices were originally constructed. They have also come up against Western expectations, powerfully propagated by Christian missionaries acting as the gatekeepers of social mobility in the colonial era. New patterns have had to be forged within the peculiar constraints of the urban industrial economy as constructed in South Africa, with its excessive preoccupation with control of all internal migration, of all access to land, housing and formal employment, and its simultaneous inability to control the spread of ideas, especially urban American ideas of individualism and consumerism as celebrated in popular song and on screen. Different observers, each with their own biases, have at different times assigned different weights to these influences. Unsurprisingly, observers working in rural landholding communities are the most convinced of the continuing hold of traditional kinship ideas, for it is amongst these that such ideas continue to make most sense, and are most strongly defended.⁹

The past fifty years have exerted contradictory pressures on black South Africans' perceptions of their past. On the one hand, there has been continuing pressure to dissolve old norms and practices, since the land-based economy in which they emerged has been eroded by industrial capitalism; on the other hand, there have been pressures to deliberately revive past notions, sometimes as a device for political mobilisation in reaction to state policies of racial exclusion, sometimes as a device encouraged by the apartheid state itself to divide and rule. People's reactions to the very notion of 'tradition' have consequently become convoluted. Pride in the past is ambivalently tempered with renunciations of the conservatism with which 'tradition' is necessarily linked, and which apartheid rule assiduously cultivated.

'Tradition' has been exposed as a powerful tool in Africa which continues to be cunningly manipulated to shore up this or that power base whenever the possibility presents itself. It is an aspect of that ever-present African mobiliser, ethnicity (Vail, 1989). But it is also an important indigenous cultural resource for ordinary people with which they impose comforting continuity in the interpretation of their everyday lives (Spiegel, 1991). Spiegel and McAllister (1991:1) underline the flexibility of tradition to transcend the traumas of social transition: 'traditions...are constantly reworked'. In this sense, tradition cannot be a guide to the past, only to the present. But we need an adjective to describe

⁹ My work experience in Swaziland where popular rights to land are constitutionally entrenched has shaped my bias.

and isolate those sets of kinship practices which by all accounts are grounded in the past. 'Traditional' seems as good a word as any other, despite its contemporary political resonances in South Africa.

Guyer and Peters (1987:200) remind us that 'culturally specific rubrics' still shape domestic practices in Africa. Wilk and Netting (1984:21) remind us not to forget the 'cultural context of rules and norms' determining household form and function. Wallerstein and Smith (1992: 13) make room for such a notion in identifying ethnicity as one of the five factors (or 'orienting propositions') to be taken into account in trying to understand household variation in the contemporary world economy (The other four are determined by the world market and the state). They define ethnicity as 'a collection of cultural norms, perhaps a common language, sometimes a religious affiliation, which marks us off from others of the same class and nation' which people powerfully but mistakenly believe to be immutable (Wallerstein & Smith, 1992:19). They suggest that households constitute themselves in part by drawing on the pre-existing, taken-for-granted rules of appropriate behaviour between kinsmen, which are more persistent than other cultural elements because they are acquired and transmitted as part of early socialisation. These norms refer 'most importantly' to the operation of the household itself (*ibid*).

This paper is concerned with drawing attention to these culturally specific rubrics. Generalisations for the southern African sub-continent are both foolish and hazardous. Schapera's (1971) work on the Kgatla and the Kriges' (1943) work on the Lovedu are sufficient to remind us how differently kinship is constructed and manipulated amongst the Tswana in comparison to the Nguni, from whom most of the material shared here is drawn. The Xhosa, Zulu and Swazi comprise about half of the population of South Africa, and over 60 per cent of the African population (SAIRR 1994/5: 12). Less displaced from their land than other black South Africans to the north, they may have a greater stake than others in maintaining fine kin distinctions from the past. Manona (1991:204) suggests something like this in attributing ex-farmworkers' emphasis on filiation rather than agnatic descent to their lack of heritable property.

Western Households, Western Kinship

Paradoxically, our confusion about culture stems as much from a failure to consider the nature of Western kinship and household systems as from any ignorance of African systems. The Western household cannot be taken for granted as the norm but must be seen as a culturally specific and unique institution. Very briefly, the Western assumption is that a *household* typically comprises a *family* formed by a *conjugal couple*. It will contain their dependent

offspring if they have any, and may include frail aged parents taken in towards their life's end,¹⁰ but readily reverts to a couple when offspring attain maturity or parents die. To oversimplify, in the West, *household* and *family* coincide. Because 'family' can be read off from co-residential household in the West, we tend to assume this holds true everywhere. This assumption underlay Steyn's (1993) research strategy in 1988 when, using a national sample, she took *co-residential household* data as evidence of *family type*, and then shifted, in successive publications of her paper, between the two terms as though the distinction was of no importance.¹¹ But the two notions are conceptually different. Family – a term spurned by social anthropologists for its notorious ambiguity – refers nowadays,¹² loosely, to those kin considered closest. The Oxford dictionary captures the contemporary British usage of the word, giving as its 'core sense' 'a group consisting of two parents and their children living together as a unit', but also several sub-senses including 'a group of people related by blood or marriage' (Pearsall, 1999: vii, 512). The term 'household' nowadays shifts our focus from kinship to economic interdependence; having said which, we must acknowledge an even greater disagreement. For although the 'house' in 'household' implies that members of a household live together, this merely betrays the word's rootedness in English practice. As we have seen, in other places, especially where economic migration is common, kin who are economically interdependent in the sense of commitment to consciously supporting one another, may live far apart from one another for a great part of their lives.

In the West, the people living together tend to be members of a *conjugal nuclear family* in some or other stage of their domestic cycle. They may be childless newly-weds. They may be a pair of pensioners whose grown children have set up their own independent households. They are somewhere along a predictable trajectory, from birth into a simple two-generation conjugal nuclear family household, to death as part of the disintegrating remnant of what was once another two-generation conjugal family household. The Western family is short-lived and 'self-liquidating' (Goldthorpe, 1987).¹³ Distinctively, a one-generation heterosexual couple is a common household form in the West.

¹⁰ Kertzer (1995) calls this 'a nuclear reincorporation household system' and sets it beside the 'pure nuclear family system' as a 'variant'.

¹¹ Steyn's 1993 publication 'Urban *Family* Structures in the Republic of South Africa' re-appears in 1995 as 'Urban *Household* Structures in the Republic of South Africa'.

¹² See Williams (1988) for the shifting uses of *household* and *family* in England over past five hundred years.

¹³ Goldthorpe (1987) succinctly summarises the unfolding history of the sociology of the Western family.

The accuracy of this stereotypical Western household, has been somewhat undermined by dramatic developments in the past thirty years (Bawin-Leguos 2001). In Britain, for example, rates of marriage have plunged and the proportion of marriages ending in divorce has risen. Some writers observe the renewed importance of extended kin as part of this new pattern, particularly amongst the working class (Mitchell & Green, 2002). Others are more struck by the apparent disintegration of the whole system. A third of births in England and Wales are now premarital (Coleman, 2000: 51-64). First pregnancies are postponed as women spend more time as wage-earners. Efficient contraception ensures that child-bearing is confined to a briefer portion of women's lives. Increasing numbers of people live alone or share households temporarily. Reconstituted families are so common that British schools have been instructed not to reinforce older notions of domestic propriety and school reading books have been adjusted accordingly. Sex and conception are increasingly divorced, the former less a private act than a public art form, obsessively discussed, displayed, dissected and disseminated daily by the media; the latter is less a matter of nature than science and medical technology, with *in vitro* fertilisation now promised as a right to all British women of child-bearing age. A similar disintegration of the family has been recorded for places as far east as Siberia (Mikheyeva, 1998).

These recent changes have rendered the mid-twentieth century picture of the conjugal family, with its cosy gender-based division of labour and authority, less convincing as the apposite template for the 21st century. Yet certain features of the Western household remain obstinately unchanged. The couple, more than ever, is the central element around whom households are formed (Beck & Beck-Gernschein, 1995). Westerners may uncouple more frequently, but they also re-couple with great readiness, if not heterosexually, then homosexually. The absence of the couple amongst black South African households is but one of the markers of a very different system: Steyn's (1993) data suggest that less than 3 per cent of black households are composed of just a heterosexual couple, compared to 24 per cent of white households.

Bi-Lateral Descent

Parsons (1949) has suggested why the Western household takes this form. In this neglected essay (written in 1943) he subjected the kinship system of the USA to an anthropological-style analysis. He demonstrated how the bilateral mode of reckoning descent¹⁴ inevitably produces the familiar taken-for-granted series of discrete conjugally-anchored co-residential domestic groups, Western households. Hence the difficulty Westerners have of distinguishing family from household, and the casualness with which even social science texts slip from the one term to the other. It is unfortunate that his essay is now remembered only for its ill-judged and now unfashionable insistence on the structural necessity of a sexual division of labour.

He argues that because, in the conjugal system, descent is conceived as flowing simultaneously and equilaterally from what are colloquially described as ‘both sides of the family’ (as shown, for example, in the fact that there are no terms of forms of address to distinguish father’s from mother’s kin: all are alike *grandparents, aunts, uncles* or *cousins*), there can be no ‘solidary’ descent groups (Parsons’ clumsy word for the clans, lineages and agnatic clusters found in other societies). Uniquely in this system, no two individuals (with the exception of immature siblings) share the same array of kin. Instead, every individual has his/her own unique constellation of close relatives, ‘ego-centred’, acquired first by birth and then by marriage and procreation. The roots of Western individualism go very deep.

In this system, the conjugal family household established at marriage is the only possible corporate kinship group. The absence of a more inclusive corporate kinship group is another marker separating white South African from black South African domestic systems. The consequent difficulties and tensions, which are endemic in attempted Western family gatherings, are well established in Western drama, film, literature and folklore, and are likely to arise whenever the conjugal couple attempts to gather together its scattered mature offspring and their ‘families’. The principle of the independence of each conjugal household sits uneasily with necessity for order on such occasions. There are no readily shared rules about authority or seniority to guide behaviour, instead, an anarchic individualism. The contrast with the African tradition, with its idiom of formally ordered kin relationships, determined by age, gender and descent, is stark.

¹⁴ Van den Berghe (1978) helpfully defines bi-lateral descent as ‘a social rule of descent that ascribes equal or nearly equal significance to all ancestors’.

Typically, in the Western conjugal system one has, over a lifetime, membership of two conjugal family households: one into which one is born, and a second one created by marriage (Reality is of course more complex: a minority never marry, or marry more than once, but Parsons is describing the *ideal type*).¹⁵ Conjuality is the central privileged relationship in this system. The coming together of the conjugal couple (traditionally in marriage) is the cue that a new household is about to be formed. This tight relationship between household formation and the couple is the hallmark of the Western system. Marriage takes place at a relatively late age because the (self-selected, same-age) couple must acquire the means to set up their household and live independently of other kin. Western wedding gifts reflect this emphasis on household (cutlery, crockery and electrical gadgets for the non-elite, with lists now fashionable to acquaint friends with what will be required) in contrast to, say, traditional Indian wedding gifts of jewellery and lingerie to adorn the bride and thence to enhance her fecundity. She has no need of household goods because (in a patrilineal system) she will join her husband's parents' household which is already established and equipped, inherited down the generations of successive sons and their wives. In southern African black society new wives were similarly absorbed into an existing domestic group. By contrast husband and wife in the West are in principle both outsiders in relation to one another's natal families: the continuing participation of each in their own childhood families, once so intimate, is now altered, constrained and limited by their new allegiance to their spouses. It is in this sense that each conjugal family is *structurally* isolated (not to be confused with socially isolated: the 'discovery', by Parsons' critics, that married people often maintain close contact with their natal group, strengthens rather than undermines his analysis).

The Historic Roots of the Western Household

Historical research shows that this conjugal family household is a resilient social form. It has been characteristic of English society for at least 500 years. Macfarlane (1986) says 700 years. The 'discovery' of the antiquity of the conjugal family household in the Western Europe must be credited to Laslett (1965) who by 1971 had encouraged the transcription, from parish registers and other listings between 1538 and 1841, of details of households in over 900¹⁶ English communities (Laslett, 1972: 256-7). He had also co-ordinated the comparative study of pre-industrial communities in France, Serbia, Japan,

¹⁵ A Weberian device whereby social scientists select as defining characteristics certain observable aspects of behaviour or institutions and exaggerate these to form a coherent intellectual construction. (See Marshall 1994:231)

¹⁶ Ziehl's dismissive statement that 'Laslett bases his claims about England on one community alone' (2002: 27) suggests unfamiliarity with his extensive work.

colonial North America to establish how common or uncommon this conjugal household was (Laslett & Wall, 1972). Serbia and Japan, with their relatively high proportions of complex households, emerged as significantly different from the Western European communities where, despite similar household sizes, complex households never constituted more – and usually much less – than a fifth of all households (Laslett, 1972: 61).¹⁷ Wall (1972:159), examining *printed* sources on 409 English settlements for the same period, concluded that ‘multiple family households, or extended family households....are certainly impossible to discern in the statistics’.

This work of the Cambridge historical demographers threw a gigantic empirical spanner into the comfortable assumption on which sociologists had been coasting for half a century, namely, that conjugal households were the creation of industrialisation. The implied hypothesis of an inevitable world-wide convergence of family patterns as industrialisation spread, suddenly seemed less secure, as Goode (1963), its most distinguished exponent, was the first to acknowledge¹⁸. The alternative hypothesis, that the adoption of a conjugal household might *induce* industrialisation, remained attractive. Goody (1972) and Hajnal (1969) both toyed with the idea that English household formation might have been significant in triggering the industrial transformation there.

It was left to Macfarlane to take this idea further. As he explains, ‘If the family system [of England] predated, rather than followed on, industrialisation, the causal link may have to be reversed, with industrialisation as a consequence, rather than a cause, of the basic nature of the family’ (1978: 198). He argued that the English data lent no support to the popular notion that the industrial revolution in England had transformed a peasant population, reliant on family labour for production for itself, into a proletariat, selling its labour to capital. There had been no discernible peasant population in England for centuries. He found no evidence of family ownership of land and little of continuity of ownership by descendants. Instead there was a vigorous property market dating back to the thirteenth century, with individual titles bought and sold. Wage employment had been widespread in England at least four hundred years before industrialisation, with a mobile labour force of young people needing to accumulate resources before marriage. He characterises thirteenth century English people as ‘rampant individualists’ ‘Ego-centred in kinship and social life’ (Macfarlane, 1978:163).

¹⁷ Ziehl (2002: 27) once again misrepresents Laslett, who was perfectly aware that some people spent some of their lifetime in extended family households. See Laslett and Wall, Table 1.3 (1972: 61).

¹⁸ In the Preface to the 1971 edition of his work.

By 1986, he had assembled a great deal more evidence in support of this hypothesis through an examination of marriage transactions (Macfarlane, 1986). As early as the twelfth century, the young couple had been required to form an independent unit at marriage, which necessitated savings, and hence allowed capital accumulation. Notions of private property – ‘the impartible individually owned estate which could be bequeathed to specific individuals’ (Macfarlane, 1986:340) – were well established by the 13th century, including children’s individual right to property independent of their parents. As servants, apprentices and wage earners, people saved in order to take independent personal responsibility for themselves right into old age. He argued that the basis of this conjugal family household system was a pervasive philosophy of individualism which had preceded urbanisation, industrialism, democracy and Protestantism, and could ‘float free’ of them (Macfarlane, 1986: 343). In such a society, non-kin institutions – the state, the guild, the towns with their independent charters – held sway. Kinship was of little consequence. Kin were narrowly defined, their influence confined to the domestic sphere.

Following this line of argument, we suggest we should say of the conjugal family household that it weathered the transition to industrial capitalism rather well.

The unsettling implications of this work remain largely unassimilated in sociology. The inevitability of the transition from extended to nuclear families has been uncritically absorbed into much South African sociological writing. Indigenous African communities have presumed to be set – if not far advanced – on such a course, if not by choice, then by relentless bureaucratic and economic pressures. ‘Evidence’ of the progress of such a transition has been sought in counts of the proportions of black households exhibiting apparently nuclear composition despite Fortes’s (1958) demonstration that such procedures were likely to be unreliable, since they overlooked the inescapable cyclical changes in co-residence effected by births, marriages and deaths. The work especially of Murray (1976, 1981, 1987), Spiegel (1980, 1982, 1986, 1987, 1994, 1995, 1996), Sharp (1987, 1994) and Webster (1987, 1988), with their finely observed detail of the complexity of black co-residential patterning, has by and large been ignored. Proponents of an inevitable transition to nuclear family household draw strength from theorists like van den Berghe (1978) who has gone further than Goode by explicitly linking such a process to social evolution. He argues that elaborate kinship belongs to the past ten thousand years of human history, to be eclipsed by the rise of states. His contention that the nuclear family is a natural species-specific form is woefully ethnocentric. African societies have developed a different and more flexible set of options for reproducing the species.

Southern African Kinship and Household in Times Past

The Western conjugal family household is traditional for only a small minority of South Africans. Not even all white South Africans trace their descent to a north-western European diaspora. Greeks, southern Italians and others descended from peasant societies have different expectations of kin and marriage (Hajnal, 1969). The African tradition is very different from both. The contrast has been spelled out in many publications (Caldwell & Caldwell 1990; Goode, 1970; Goody, 1973; Lesthaeghe, 1989). Ethnographic texts are one published source on this tradition in South Africa. A surprising newer source is to be found in the recent writings of the new generation of historians of South Africa, who show great sensitivity to the unique role of black kinship and household formation as factors shaping the South African past, and have recovered valuable and vivid evidence of black domestic life stretching back over a hundred years. It is to this source that we turn first.

The Nineteenth Century: Insights from the New Historians

South African historians working in the eighties have paid particular attention to the role of black domestic institutions in power struggles in the nineteenth century.¹⁹ With far greater sensitivity than that shown by sociologists to the importance of domestic group, they present in their writings a series of vignettes of the way black kinship actively shaped and was reshaped by the new circumstances of industrial and settler expansion. For example, in the way Shaka, by siphoning off the young men from their homesteads into regiments to minimise challenges, institutionalised a division of labour at the homestead by age and sex in which women and children played the major agricultural role, thereby unwittingly smoothing the way for capitalist penetration via migrant labour in the twentieth century; or the way Shepstone manipulated the levels of bridewealth in the Natal Code to ensure a steady labour supply without disrupting the system of homestead production and chiefly control; or the way black patriarchal power and patrilineal descent made sharecropping with white landowners on the highveld a viable option for a brief period at the turn of the twentieth century.

The historians confirm the picture of domestic life a hundred and fifty years ago already portrayed by the ethnographers working fifty years before them (from

¹⁹ Inaccurately, in the opinion of anthropologist Hammond-Tooke (1984).

whom they are anxious to distance themselves)²⁰ of societies in which ‘agricultural production for subsistence needs was undertaken largely within individual homesteads, grouped in lineage-based villages’ while

‘surplus produced in the village was thus extracted in the form of tribute paid by the commoners to chiefs, who were in turn expected to redistribute at least part of this to the old and needy and in the form of ritual feasts to the community at large’ (Marks & Atmore, 1980: 10).

Chiefs and lineage heads controlled both the distribution of land and that ‘pivot of society’, cattle, upon which everybody depended (as bridewealth) for marriage (*ibid*). The resilience of the patrilineal homestead, as the tributary power of chiefs was steadily undermined by colonial, capitalist or settler invasions and innovations, was striking. Throughout the surging changes of the nineteenth century, ‘the patrilineal lineage structure, which was given material expression in the homestead, remained more or less intact’ (Marks & Atmore, 1980:12).

Harries (1982) selects kinship as the single most important factor structuring social relations in pre-colonial southern Mozambique. He analyses the power of homestead heads to control the labour of able-bodied younger kinsmen – including migrant labour to South Africa – through control of bride-price, even when, following cattle epidemics, this was paid in cash earned by the young men themselves. Keegan (1986a, 1986b) confirms the centrality of the black patrilineal kinship system to the economic survival of poorer *white* farmers on the highveld in the nineteenth century, who survived by sharecropping with displaced black families. The whites had title to land but lacked capital and labour to work it. Black people had almost no land but plenty of homestead labour, and cattle, for draught. Sharecropping brought black and white into a symbiosis which lasted well into the twentieth century. Black productivity rested on patriarchal command the patrilineally extended households – a fact well appreciated by the white landowners, who, for instance, in Klip River in 1906, vigorously opposed the anti-squatting laws of 1895, which defined black families in Western conjugal terms, and then limited them to five per farm. To farmers’ dismay the law invariably caused ‘the whole kraal’ to leave the farm. They petitioned that

‘its enforcement interferes with one of the principles of native family life. The general practice is for a married man to live with

²⁰ Marks and Atmore (1980: 9) write, ‘though every anthropological monograph has its information on aspects of production and technology, there are considerable difficulties in using this material for the precolonial period; pitfalls which historians ignore at their cost’.

the head of his kraal; either his father, or, if his father is dead, his eldest brother. The strict enforcement of the present law necessitates dismissing young married men, members of the larger kraal' (Keegan, 1986b: 239).

Wider kinship links were continuously exploited in the black strategies to secure a livelihood, but these same kinship obligations exerted 'levelling tendencies' and inhibited the accumulation of exceptional wealth. As Keegan observes,

'kinship obligations still remained intact. Even where the extended homestead had given way to the nuclear household (as was generally the case with the Christian elite) there still seems to have been a sense in which the patrilineage had a claim on accumulated capital, particularly livestock, should these be required to commence or re-establish tenant farming' (Keegan, 1986a: 84).

Trapido (1986) shows how *rich* white investors exploited black land shortage and extended family structure, in similar fashion. The mine magnates Marks and Lewis settled the first of 250 black families as sharecroppers on their twenty-two farms on the Vaal River in 1879. This arrangement

'had the advantage of providing not only rent and labour, both domestic and agricultural, but capital in the form of horses, oxen, ploughs, wagons and housing. It ensured that the tenant family by self-exploitation would produce food, part of it handed over as rent, the other part exchanged in the market place for commodities' (Trapido, 1986: 339).

Beinart (1980) writes of the persisting viability of homesteads as Pondo chiefs lost out to traders as suppliers of scarce goods at the end of the nineteenth century. In both Slater's (1980) and Guy's (1980, 1982) accounts, Zulu kinship practice plays a central role. Slater describes 'the remarkable revival in the economic fortunes of the lineage' following the 'overthrow of Zulu power' (Slater, 1980: 155). Guy's analysis of the destruction and reconstruction of Zulu society focuses on bride-price. He identifies the Zulu king's control of all marriages, through the age-grade regiment system, as a major source of his power. The effective diversion of these young men (via hut and poll tax, and statutory fixing of bridewealth payments) from the king to the mines, railways and farms was the colonial state's trump card, leaving intact lineage-based homestead production of subsistence and labour. Guy gives us the most detailed reconstruction of this 'patrilineal lineage system' (Guy, 1980: 113-118), but he is carried away by his theoretical imperatives, and his account is a little wooden. His claim that ordinary men amongst the common people ('ninety percent of the

population’) had ‘two or three wives’ each stretches demographic credulity. Likewise, his neat account of the process of homestead fission, in which ‘every man in Zululand on, or soon after, his marriage would set up a homestead of his own’, is too readily informed by Western assumptions: a man without grown children would have little incentive to leave his father’s labour-rich homestead. Fission there certainly was, but only when and if a man had sufficient labour to make such a move practicable. Significantly, Guy makes no mention of inheritance of the homestead, for in his account all children leave home.

For all their preoccupation with the lineage mode of production, the revisionist historians do not always deliver as much as they promise. As radical materialists, concerned above all with the place of the black majority in shaping South African history, they take black domestic institutions very seriously, but their sensitivity to change as a pervasive fact of history, combined with the benefit of hindsight into what lay ahead, infuses their accounts with an understandable pessimism. If racist capitalists who were about to triumph and remake the world in their own image chose to let certain ‘traditional’ African practices and forms persist, that was only to manipulate them, to drain them of their original content, thereby deceiving a gullible population into an easier submission. Their work is marked by a reticence to recognise and celebrate the independent viability of African patrilineal structures. With perhaps too great a readiness to concede the destructive power of capitalism, they choose to document the relentless transformation of the self-sufficient landholding homestead, with its complement of patrilineally linked kin under patriarchal and chiefly control, into little more than a source of migrant wage labour. One misses from their accounts that phase, noted by Arrighi (1979: 165) when homesteads, still secure in the indigenous African economy ‘raided the money economy’.

Revisionist historians’ insistence on the power of the impinging alien economy in the nineteenth century to destroy indigenous institutions leaves one with the impression that any assertion that such systems somehow survived into the 21st century must be misguided. This is doubtless the source of their disquiet with the earlier ethnographies. It would indeed be foolish to think social arrangements devised for the 19th century would persist unchanged through the cataclysmic experiences of the 20th century. But we should not underestimate the resilience of old institutions to linger on as models for modified behaviour under changed circumstances. We certainly should not discount the creative power of people to adapt their cultural resources to new situations rather than to adopt, by imitation, the culture of others.

The Early Twentieth Century: Ethnographers' Accounts

Early twentieth century ethnographers were struck by how differently kinship operated in the non-West. Fertility was at a premium. Polygyny, concubinage, levirate and ghost marriage all signified the preoccupation with increasing the number of descendants, upon which the ability to command a good life depended. People were surprisingly free to maximise descendants through several sexual partnerships. Polygyny was not the only route. A man could have children with a woman he did not marry. He might be obliged by custom to impregnate a woman on his brother's behalf if the brother was sterile or, more surprisingly, dead. The contrast with the West, in the matter of sex and reproduction, could not be more marked. The emotionally and sexually exclusive conjugal couple, lynchpin of the family and central to the Western ideas of marriage and household, was invisible. Men did not even necessarily attend their own weddings (Hunter, 1936). But elaborate rules embodied strategies for claiming descendants, from the binding exchange of bridewealth, which gave men rights over all of a woman's subsequent progeny, to the practice of fathers buying their out-of-wedlock children. Kuper (1947:88) describes the Swazi practice whereby a man could 'simply *lobola* the children, leaving the woman to marry elsewhere'. Hunter (1936) reports the same practice amongst the Pondo. Descent rather than marriage was what mattered. Premarital pregnancies were not always welcomed but there was no conception of an illegitimate birth²¹.

We cannot be sure how far this system, as reported by ethnographers in the first half of the twentieth century, had already been reshaped by collision with white settler society in southern Africa, nor how far the ethnographic record has been distorted by the selective perceptions of both informants and scribes. Both tended to assume a happier past before the coming of missionaries, settlers, investors, traders, speculators, teachers and bureaucrats. Both attributed the prevailing domestic discontents (sexual infidelity, extramarital births, recalcitrant children, errant sons) to the uncertainties brought about by too rapid a transition from a subsistence to a market economy. Some yearned for a return to a golden past. Others anticipated an affluent future, when black and white would be more happily integrated into a shared world economy.

These early southern African ethnographers were uncommonly sensitive to historical context, despite the prevailing theoretical emphasis in early twentieth

²¹ Mair (1953), summarising existing ethnographic accounts of marriage and family in southern Africa, reports much harsher attitudes to premarital pregnancy, including the murder of the child (amongst the Kgatla) and of the families of both its parents (amongst the Zulu).

century social anthropology on the coherence of others' social practices, and a disciplinary pressure to present *cultures* as bounded systems. Murray expresses a fashionable contempt when he dismisses them as 'conceived within a synchronic and functionalist paradigm' (Murray, 1981: 100), yet social change was a major preoccupation in their work, as Spiegel and McAllister (1991) acknowledge. Thus Hunter (1936) took the *reaction to conquest* as the major theme in her examination of the effects of contact with Europeans on the Pondo of South Africa. Kuper's second volume on the Swazi (Kuper, 1947b) is devoted exclusively to the impact of settler colonialism. Schapera (1971:7) described his account of married life amongst the Kgatla of Botswana as 'a social history' of the 'transformation [of] the traditional domestic institutions' after a century of exposure to 'the influences of contact with Western European civilisation'. Far from reconstructing a golden tribal past, he opens his book with a courting couple eating chocolates in a taxi in Johannesburg. The contemporary neglect of these texts as colonial fossils is unfortunate for it deprives us of valuable insights into the past.

From their work, a consistent picture emerges of distinctive black domestic arrangements in the second quarter of the twentieth century in southern Africa. In the countryside most people still clung to standards of domestic propriety shaped by centuries as agro-pastoralists in a relatively under-populated and often hostile continent, where lineage had served the dual function of enabling easy mobilisation for defence against predatory neighbours, and of maintaining numbers in an economy where labour was in constant demand. Despite the absence of increasing numbers of men, including now, (as not before), married men, rules of patrilineal descent still determined how domestic authority, rights and obligations were assigned.

Hunter's (1936) work is suffused with her perception of the decline of traditional Xhosa cultural practices and their replacement with a new individualism. Kinship was being eroded and was of decreasing importance as an organising principle of social life in Pondoland. She detected in the rural areas 'a growing tendency for each married man to set up his own *umzi* [homestead]' (Hunter, 1936: 59), rather than to remain in the homestead of his father, and a concomitant lessening of responsibility to classificatory fathers and brothers. The use of kinship terms was coming to imply little more than courtesy. Neighbours were replacing kin in social relations. Education, wages, the legal system and Christianity were undermining the authority of the elders. The circle of close kin was contracting to exclude all but those of the first degree.

But it was in the urban areas that 'the whole complex of economic obligations of kin' was becoming 'disorganised' (Hunter, 1936: 449). She saw urban social life

as structured around new special interests: religious, political and sporting. Wealth and education were replacing descent as a determinant of status. A 'speedy transference of at least the superficialities of [European] culture' (Hunter, 1936: 467) was occurring amongst the schooled elite: European fashion, European slang, European houses, furniture and food; parties with American rag-time music and the fox-trot, cinemas, concerts, afternoon tea parties, tennis parties, bathing picnics at the beach. As she says, 'In towns it is smart to be as Europeanised as possible' (Hunter, 1936: 437).

For the poor, town life was harder. In 1924, a third of all non-white babies in East London were dying in the first year of their life. Half the surviving black children never got to school but were often left unsupervised to play on the streets, where eventually 'sheer boredom drives them to drinking, gambling and hooliganism' (Hunter, 1936: 476). Children were becoming disobedient and bad-mannered. Sons, liberated by wage earning, and by Roman-Dutch law which conferred independence at 21, neglected their fathers, who could now be sued for assault if they attempt bring them into line with a 'traditional thrashing' (Hunter, 1936:480). She writes of 'a loosening of mutual economic responsibilities' (*ibid*). Although the amount of money sent to the country remained 'considerable', permanent town dwellers did not 'normally' give money to fathers or elder brothers unless as payment for fostering their children.

Hunter depicts the emerging urban household in East London as a conjugal family: 'The usual household in town consists of man, wife and their minor children' (Hunter, 1936: 59). They were unlikely to have kin living close by, since 'relatives appear to make no special effort to establish their households near to one another' (*ibid*). This 'smaller household group tends to draw husband and wife closer together' (*ibid*). She saw in the urban practice of giving children their own dinner plates a new individualism. Distinctions between maternal versus paternal kin were losing significance for children growing up without wider kin. Undiscriminating Western kin terms, *oom* (Afrikaans for uncle) and *auntie* were being incorporated into the vernacular, replacing older classificatory kin terms. The same carelessness about kin terms amongst younger Tswana had been reported by Schapera (1971). Away from the self-subsistence of rural areas, Pondo husbands were becoming less economically dependent on their wives, who were at the same time becoming less submissive to their husbands (Hunter, 1936: 461). Urban marriages were fragile, taking place at a later age, or not at all.

Sexual licence was increasing, and, with the Christian attack on the older contraceptive sexual practices of the unmarried, *ukumetsha*, there was much premarital pregnancy. *Ukumetsha*, charmingly translated by Hunter as 'sweethearting', is more earthily defined by the Mayers (Mayer & Mayer, 1961)

as external intercourse. By presenting a girl's parents with a series of gifts including cattle, a boy had been able to establish his (non-exclusive) right to spend nights at her home, but was strictly prohibited from impregnating her. Non-penetrative sex was also practised when young people spent nights together as part of the ritual of other people's weddings. Knowledge of the practice was part of a girl's initiation. It was explicitly not a preliminary to marriage: 'Elders disapprove of the marriage of sweethearts' (Hunter, 1936:190). A similar disdain for love matches was reported by Kuper for the Swazi.

Ancestors and Missionaries

Customary domestic practices had been traditionally legitimated by those most powerful and conservative members of the lineage, the dead, who were accordingly placated, cajoled and appeased in an essentially domestic religion, ancestor veneration. This low-key cult, with occasional rather than regular rituals of sacrifice, no of full-time officiates, and an unsystematic dogma, had been under sustained attack since the early foreign intrusion of Christian missions. In demanding that people renounce their faith in the prevailing power of the ancestors, Christianity came close to unravelling, single-handed, the entire domestic fabric of southern African society. Prudish, locked into British Victorian morality, the missionaries disapproved of almost all the domestic practices the ancestors safe-guarded, including the making of beer, so central to ancestral rites. The Christian deities – three-in-one – legitimated a very different set of domestic arrangements – monogamous, conjugal, private family households on the Western pattern, established on the basis of sexual attraction and committed to lifelong sexual fidelity. Polygynous male converts were required to choose between their wives and abandon all but one (though polygynously married wives could be admitted to church membership).

The sustained ferocity of this attack on the African family system has been nicely documented by Chiwome (1994:57), who portrays the missionaries as 'the vanguard of colonialism...trying to spread their economic and cultural tentacles into other lands', encouraging people 'to free themselves from their culture' and adopt the goal of 'material opulence' (*ibid.*). Unsocialised youngsters were targeted via boarding schools. Western notions of marriage as a private arrangement between lifelong companions were encouraged, celebrated in white weddings which were so expensive, they were often postponed for years. Customary marriage came to be associated with the semi-literate and the non-literate. 'Virginity ceased to be celebrated collectively...became the property of the woman alone' (Chiwome, 1994.:62). Since sex was defined as a sin, people sinned less with wives and adopted mistresses, marriage with whom was now condemned. Children from lovers were condemned as illegitimate,

their mothers shamed and suspended from church membership; the notion of illegitimate as against legitimate children was assiduously cultivated. The attack on the levirate relieved the brothers and nephews of a deceased man from the responsibility of looking after children and wives of the deceased. Traditional patterns of inheritance were destructively reinterpreted.

Little wonder that Hunter (1936:269) had detected ‘a growing carelessness’ about the performance of ancestor rituals amongst the Pondo, and a growing scepticism about their efficacy, which ‘weakens the influence of the ancestor cult as a sanction for respect for seniors and the solidarity of the family. In the urban areas, local authority rules undermined the practice by banning slaughter. Urban children were growing up without the rituals of sacrifice to patrilineal ancestors . Amongst the Kgatla of Botswana at the same time, Schapera (1971:27) reported that Christianity had become so firmly established that ‘little active trace now remains of the old system of worship’ in which ‘each family group worshipped the spirits of its dead ancestors’. Kuper (1947b:127) attributed the ‘weakening of the ancestral cult’ amongst the Swazis in the nineteen-thirties to Christian mission influence.

Twenty-five years later, the Mayers (1961:150) by contrast found ‘the ancestor cult proved tenacious enough to survive transplantation to town’, and described the ingenuity with which sacrifices to ancestral spirits were made in East London, despite stringent municipal rules against slaughter except at an abattoir. By 1961 Hunter, introducing a new edition of her work on the Pondo, likewise acknowledged a resurgence of tradition. Spiegel and McAllister in 1991 interpreted such recourse to tradition as a reaction to too rapid a pace of social change and stressed the changed content of such ‘tradition’.

The appeal of Christianity lay in its ability to bring alternative power to people through literacy, schooling, education, and hence to more rewarding participation in the new industrial capitalist order which was being thrust on them. The appeal to women – very evident in the sex ratios of Christian congregations – lay in the liberation it promised from their traditional subjection to male, lineage authority in the domestic realm (see especially Kuper, 1947b: 10). At first the choices seemed stark, but by the thirties many people were having their cake and eating it. Hundreds of new independent syncretic churches²² were not only accommodating ancestors in the Christian pantheon, but offering new opportunities for ‘self-display and power’ to people otherwise tied down to an ‘ideal of conservative mediocrity’ (Kuper, 1947b: 125). Members of established denominations were making their own private adaptations to the conflicting demands of kin, Jehovah and Jesus. Hunter

²² In 1932 Brookes was able to list 327 registered ‘Native separatist churches’ (1933: Appendix 1). By 1939 the number had grown to 550 (Kuper, 1947b: 122).

(1936:268) describes the devious ways church adherents hedged their bets by surreptitious ritual animal sacrifices passed off as modern or christian celebrations, with tell-tale relics of the *inkomo yobuluunga*²³ ‘discreetly wrapped in a piece of black cloth’ round the neck.

The Later Ethnographers

The Mayers (1961) and Pauw (1963) capture something of contemporary urban domestic life amongst the Xhosa in East London twenty-five years on. It was the division of the Xhosa into two culturally discrete groups, Christians or *School* and Pagans or *Red*, which struck the Mayers in their boisterous account of the adaptation of country-bred Xhosa to town life. The latter were ‘not just a few picturesque survivals’ but ‘a flourishing half of the Xhosa people today’ (Mayer & Mayer, 1961: 4).

At their request, local headmen (from the ‘Bantu Areas of East London and Kingwilliamstown Districts’) had no apparent difficulty in 1958 in assigning and listing every homestead in their ward to one or other side of this two-fold classification. The Mayers trace these two ‘cultural camps’ to ‘the different reactions of an earlier generation to a particular conquest situation over a hundred years ago’ (*ibid*). The *School* people opted for Western institutions, the *Reds* rejected them. On the reckoning of the headmen, traditionalist *Red* homesteads in 1958 outnumbered modernising *School* homesteads, 9,300 to 7,000. The Mayers argued that the same distinction had been observed for other black communities in South Africa,²⁴ and structured their book around the questions why and how, even while living and working in the town, some people should resist urbanisation. Their work on the assertively anti-urban *Reds* captures what they later considered a passing phase in East London’s social history, for revisiting the relocated (and, significantly, re-housed) black population of East London ten years later, they found the *Reds* losing their distinctiveness. The new urban milieu of wide streets and detached four-roomed houses were proving inimical to their old life-style centred around beer-drinking cliques in the slums. By 1970 most *Reds* had conceded the inevitability of their children’s assimilation of elements of *School* culture (Mayer & Mayer 1970).

²³ A specially appointed cow from the homestead herd, dedicated as an intermediary with the ancestors, the tail hairs of which are ritually plucked and twisted with bark to make a bracelet or necklace, which is worn by the supplicant till it disintegrates or until their request is met (Hunter, 1936: 235-40).

²⁴ Wilson says that the rural-oriented migrants in Cape Town are school-educated, and ‘in the country distinguish themselves from ‘reds’ (Wilson & Mafeje 1963: 17).

In the late fifties, most East London Xhosa were still patrilineally or matrimonially entitled to attachment to a rural homestead, the membership of which swelled and contracted with births, deaths, marriages, migration and unemployment. The rural homestead was 'a unified pyramid with the grandfather at the apex, rather than (as in some other systems) an aggregation of nuclear family cells' (Mayer & Mayer, 1961.: 97). The Xhosa preference for having children reared by their grandparents meant that many homesteads were three-generations deep, with the homestead children being the offspring of a variety of homestead members, many of them absentees. The rural homesteads of *School* people differed little from those of the tradition-loving *Reds*. More of their unmarried teenage daughters were likely to have had babies, and more of these daughters were likely to have migrated to town, leaving the babies to be absorbed (with more guilt and consequent deception) into their maternal grandparents' kin group.

A vivid picture of a variety of urban domestic groups and life-styles in the late fifties emerges from the Mayers' account. To the *School* people, towns represented an opportunity to 'get on', to become more sophisticated, to dress better, to own insignia of wealth, fashion and smartness, to become more fully 'civilised' (Mayer & Mayer, 1961: 207-9). Already acquainted, through school, with parties, picnics, cinema, concerts and ballroom dancing, they were 'morally free to become urbanised' (*Ibid*). Since there were different levels of attainment of these goals, *School* people were more diverse than *Reds*, presenting, in town, an embryonic class-stratification.

A major difference between *School* and *Reds* lay in the urbanisation of their women. Unlike *School* wives, who aspired to urban employment, *Red* wives always lived at 'home' in the countryside. They belonged to the 'kraal' and visited their husbands in town infrequently, and then only with pressing purpose – usually medical or financial. Rather it was the duty – and pleasure – of migrants to visit their rural homes. 'Since his wife is not primarily 'his' in an exclusive sense, the Red husband does not consider that he has any right to take her with him when he goes back to town' (Mayer & Mayer, 1961: 99). *Red* men unhesitatingly said that the closest kinship tie a man could have was with his parents, not with his wife.

Although *School* people felt the need to honour the obligation of young wives to their in-laws, many experienced a contrary pressure, to maintain at least a semblance of monogamous conjugal closeness by taking wives with them to the urban areas. Some men brought their wives to town to forestall the temptations of infidelity. Some wives insisted on accompanying their husbands for this same reason. Other men left their wives in the country precisely to enjoy, more anonymously, the pleasures of adultery in town, away from eyes of prying

country neighbours. Both the Mayers and Pauw report a high level of marital infidelity amongst spouses of either sex. To *School* women, married and unmarried, the town offered an escape from traditional restrictions, and an opportunity to earn money with which to acquire the accoutrements of civilisation – clothes, furniture, ornaments – which *Red* women despised.

At the other extreme were those *Reds* who despised European culture and resisted urbanisation by deliberately encapsulating themselves in an exclusively rural-orientated social network, who lived their town life as ‘an extension of home community life’ (Mayer & Mayer, 1961: 94). They had come to town solely in order to build up and support their rural homesteads. They avoided social contact with strangers and clung to rural norms. ‘Whether a man’s residence in town extends to six months, five years or a quarter of a century, observance of these rules can keep him country-rooted and culturally Red to the end of his stay’ (Mayer & Mayer, 1961: 96).

Whereas young unmarried *School* migrants were likely to attach themselves to an established urban household where they had relatives, young *Red* migrants literally shackled-up with age-mates in all-male lodgings. But since sex was prohibited in the cramped shared space (it was seen as turning the room ‘into a kind of brothel’ (Mayer and Mayer, 1961: 103)), many sought rooms of their own, by choice in the, ‘tumble-down and slummy’ sectors where these *Reds* chose to concentrate (Mayer & Mayer, 1961: 109). Not all *Reds* opted for this particular form of encapsulation. Some become caught up in alternative, tight, essentially urban, social networks. Thus some joined gangs of deviants, ‘the urban riff-raff’ (Mayer & Mayer, 1961: 181) who lived by their wits, and cut all ties with their rural homes. A minority got caught up in one of the evangelical black urban churches with ‘predominantly poor and uneducated congregations’ (Mayer and Mayer, 1961:193). They too found themselves unable to go back home: ‘Very few Red men will venture to come home as committed Christians if they have a Red father alive’ (Mayer and Mayer,1961:203). The Mayers’ enthusiasm in contrasting these alternative reactions to urban life is apt to distract our attention from the many others who simply drifted between the two milieus, loyal to the rural homestead but open to urban opportunities.

Traditional Concubinage

Married or single, Red migrants were free to strike up a liaison with one of the divorced, widowed or otherwise spoiled-for-marriage mature, single women found in both town and countryside, the *amankazana* (Xhosa term) or *amadikazi*, (Pondo term) who maintained their own independent quarters elsewhere. Like Hunter in 1936, the Mayers had some difficulty finding an

English equivalent for this category of women who for various reasons (like widowhood, separation) were no longer eligible for marriage, but remained under the guardianship of their fathers or elder brothers, constituting a pool of potential lovers amongst whom married men might legitimately find mistresses. With some diffidence the Mayers called them concubines, but suggested that this over-emphasised the purely sexual element in their position. The Mayers write, 'Strictly speaking a woman who has once been married is always entitled to the status and appellation of a wife (*inkosikazi*) even if she chooses to play the role of *inkazana*. The *inkazana* in the strictest sense is a woman who remains outside marriage' (Mayer & Mayer, 1961:235). It is essentially a *Red* institution, by which a woman, 'although unmarried, is permitted to have full sexual relations and bear children...preferably with married men' (*ibid.*). Their existence reminds Westerners how differently Xhosa handle(d) issues of sexual partnership and reproduction. Spiegel's (1991:150) account of *bonyatsi* - a more or less long-term secret affair between two already married people - amongst the Sotho, together with Peters' (1983:119) statement that 'having regular lovers is common practice among Botswana', demonstrate that the Xhosa are not unique in southern Africa in the explicit institutionalization of extramarital promiscuity (or what Therborn (2001:4) in a nice phrase calls 'an absence of moral sexual asceticism')

Hunter (1936:205-8) had described the *amadikazi* as 'a very large class' in Pondoland, found in rural as well as urban areas. She noted that 'practically every married man has his special friend among them'. They were 'always noticeable by the number of their ornaments and elegance of their clothes, presented by their lovers'. They were more leisured than wives, were the best dancers, and the artists of the community 'having more leisure to do elaborate beadwork or embroidery'. More surprisingly, 'Any woman is flattered if you greet her as *idikazi*' (*ibid.*). Some girls chose to become *amadikazi* rather than wives, for the relative independence it conferred. The Mayers (1961:236) judged their status to be 'less dignified than that of wife' but 'by no means to be despised'.

Sometimes a migrant's liaison with such a woman became so established (often through pregnancy) that she moved in with him, to become his *ishweshwe*, his live-in lover. *Ukushweshwa*, living together, is an exclusively urban institution. Amongst *Reds* it refers to a relationship struck between a married man and his *inkazana*. His wife would remain with her children at his rural home, usually with his parent(s), possibly at his own homestead, if he had managed to establish one. His new urban domestic group established by *ukushweshwa*, although superficially resembling a family formed by a second, polygynous marriage, was regarded very differently. It lay outside the web of kinship that marriage spins between descent groups. His parents, so central to the life and role of his wife,

would never meet his *ishweshwe*. She was not considered related to them. In accordance with the rules of patrilineal descent, an *inkazana*'s children (invariably she has children) belong to her own clan and lineage, the clan and lineage of her father, unless their father were to claim them by cattle exchange. Amongst the Pondo in 1936, five head were required. None of her children ever visited their father's rural home. His financial support of them might be very generous, but it was always voluntary rather than obligatory. The relationship was always in principle temporary and essentially private. The Mayers (1961:265) describe the institution as complementary to marriage, catering for married men and 'women who will never have husbands'.

School people also entered what they called *ukushweshwa* relationships, but these were quite unlike the relationships struck between *amadikazi* and *Red* men. Instead they resembled the pattern of living together found in the West, where a young unmarried couple contemplating marriage, possibly against their parents' wishes and without their consent, move in with one another as the first stage in what they see a more permanent relationship. Unlike *Reds*, young *School* migrants saw town as a place to find suitable wives, but once married they were as likely as *Reds* to send their older children to be brought up by paternal kin in the rural areas.

Some Problems with Classifying Urban Households

This rather drawn out recapitulation of some of the Mayers' findings serves two purposes. It reminds us how comprehensive an account of black town life the Mayers produced, such as was not to be possible for the rest of the century.²⁵ neither the intellectual nor the political climate has since supported such an undertaking by outsiders. And, in its uninhibited detail, it also provides material for illustrating some of the limitations of a census-style approach to household.

How might such a series of domestic groups appear in a household census? The first type of *Red* household, joined rather than established by the new migrant, is an all-male group of peers, some of them close kin. Classified by 'family type' (a usual procedure in household surveys), each person might be recorded as a separate single-person households. Or they might appear as one household comprising 'unrelated', 'mixed' or 'other' relatives. If the latter, it would probably appear at the top of any income scale, since every member would likely be employed. Although their wages, individually, would be low, collectively they would present a higher per capita income than, say, a school

²⁵ See Beinart (1991) for an account of the Mayers' own misgivings.

teacher living with a (house) wife and children. But since the sole rationale of *Reds* being in town is to support the rural homestead, such classification would be very misleading for a major share of this income would be likely to find its way directly back to rural kin in other domestic groups, of which the men would certainly count themselves members. Classified by type of headship (another commonplace of the household survey), these would be male-headed households, though in the rural area the men, if young, would all be subordinate to older kin.

Once a man moves into his own separate accommodation, he constitutes a single-person household. Out of sight is not only his rural kin group, but his *inkazana* or *idikazi*, whose household circumstances we have not yet considered. We know she is likely to be a single-parent, but we cannot guess where her children are living. If she is widowed they might be with their paternal kin. If she is divorced they might be with her maternal kin. If she has never married, any arrangement is possible, including having the children living with her. There are similarly many possibilities for her own residence, which may be with one of her relations, a sister, a brother or a parent, or may be in her own single quarters.

Should she move in with him as an *ishweshwe*, they together form an *apparently nuclear* family, but, as the Mayers makes clear, this is a very different kind of household. She is likely to have children from some other man, for whom she is responsible, and whom she will at this stage (if not before) send to live elsewhere, since Xhosa men are very intolerant of sharing households with another man's children. The woman is additionally uniquely responsible also for any additional children from this *kushweshwa* relationship, for 'the genitor, taking no formal steps to establish his status [vis-à-vis his child] acquires neither rights nor obligations' (Mayer & Mayer, 1961: 277). Any support for the children from their biological father in this kind of household rests on his whim and her wiles, and comes at the expense of his support for his legitimate family in the rural area. A household survey which presumed that the effective household income, for this *apparently nuclear* family, was the combined income of both partners, shared exclusively amongst their joint children (a normal Western 'nuclear family' assumption) would be drawing very misleading conclusions.

Urban households of *School* people have an unpredictable – and fluctuating – membership, as lodgers, relatives and children move in and out of them, shuttling between town and country, and one town and another. They are very unlikely to replicate the demographic structure of the land-holding homestead – of which they may be considered a kind of outpost – but they often are three-generational. Pauw (1963: 137-140) suggests a domestic cycle amongst the permanently urbanised – (a rare category in 1960, which he had difficulty

identifying) of alternating two- and three-generational households, shaped by the premarital pregnancies of daughters, which he singled out as ‘the most notable feature’ of urban family structure. But not a distinguishing feature: Murray (1981:110) noted how common ‘the three-generational household which includes an unmarried daughter with her children’ was in rural areas of Botswana, Lesotho and ‘the Bantustans’. A generation earlier, Hunter, on the basis of 213 urban households in East London, had reached a different conclusion:

‘the standard group is that of parents with their own children’
(Hunter, 1936: 460).

But since Hunter had herself established that temporary migrants outnumbered the permanent townspeople 2 to 3,²⁶ some selective perception is at work here. Pauw’s conclusion that, ‘contrary to what might have appeared to be the trend on earlier stages of urbanisation, the elementary family is not the predominant form of domestic family amongst that part of the population which has been established in town longest’ (Pauw 1963: 139), can perhaps be accused of a contrary bias, for his own figures for his small sample of 109 households show more households of this elementary family type than any other, though they are only a third of all households, and involve only 28 per cent of the sampled population.²⁷ Meanwhile Hunter (writing under her married name Wilson)²⁸ was busy re-affirming the trend to nuclear family households in her newest study of Cape Town (Wilson & Mafeje, 1963).

Wilson revels in the urbanisation of black people as an inevitable universal trend, deplors the way the state has inhibited it,²⁹ and welcomes inevitable social change with unfettered optimism: ‘something new is growing in towns: its mark is ...intense vitality...irrepressible humour’ (*Ibid*:181). Stressing the universal rather than the particular, she and Mafeje draw attention to the similarities between the urbanisation of black people in Cape Town and urbanisation in Britain. Their starting point is the way the people differentiate and categorise one another, first on the basis of commitment to an urban as opposed to a rural culture, and then, within these, on the basis of lifestyle. The

²⁶ 43.2 percent were permanent, 56.8 percent temporary (Hunter, 1936: 434).

²⁷ His four main household types are: multi-generation with male head (20%); multi-generation with female head (23%); father, mother and children (38%); mother and children (19%). See Pauw (1963), Table 18.

²⁸ ‘The writing of the book was done by Professor Monica Wilson’ (Wilson & Mafeje, 1963: vii).

²⁹ The Appendix (Wilson & Mafeje, 1963: 182-184) provides an admirable summary of inhibiting legislation to 1963.

differences are matters of attitudes and values, and are reflected in spending patterns.

True 'townsmen' constituted about a third of all Africans in Cape Town in the late fifties. Amongst these they distinguish three sets: first, the Western-orientated elite of educated Christian professionals, for whom 'status is linked with a Western way of life' (Wilson & Mafeje, 1963:146); second, the successful businessmen; and third, the less successful, streetwise urbanites who start life as school drop-outs, drift into gangs, 'given to smoking dagga and fighting with knives' while young, working the system as pilfering employees when older (*Ibid*: 23). The latter are politically astute, contemptuous of Christianity; 'Crooks and smart guys, and crooners, commanding big money, provide their ideal' (*Ibid*: 146). They stand in marked cultural contrast to the first group, who are educated professionals, with 'a lively interest in national and international politics' (*Ibid*: 27), invariably church-goers, often with international connections, who speak English amongst themselves, play tennis, go ball-room dancing and 'entertain'.

Amongst all these three groups they detect³⁰ the declining importance of the extended family, clan and lineage and 'a withdrawal from the wider kinship group' (Wilson and Mafeje, 1963: 82), though grandparents, siblings and their children still 'visit and cooperate' (*Ibid*: 74). Young married couples prefer to live on their own. The changed economy of urban life, especially the absence of shared inheritance of substantial property, has undermined the basis of lineage. As for clan names (*iziduko*), they are 'out of fashion' (*Ibid*: 76). Even the rules of clan exogamy are questioned. They perceive the elementary family as the only definite corporate kin group and, within it, relations between men and women are more equal than they were in the past, because of the education and earning power which women now enjoy. Husbands and wives eat together. There is no polygyny, but 'concubinage' flourishes, and is much resented by wives. Married men frequently have 'girl-friends', and gain kudos from their fellows by taking them out to parties and picnics while wives stay at home (*Ibid*: 80).

Lingering concern with wider kin is expressed in the importance attached to attending their funerals, and, in times of misfortune, in the frequent recourse to diviners who nourish 'the power of the shades' (Wilson & Mafeje, 1963:112).

In sharp contrast, are the rurally-rooted migrants who, whatever their marital status, come to town as single men. They comprised a third of Cape Town's black population in the late fifties. Unlike the 'encapsulated' traditionalist

³⁰ With more enthusiasm than evidence: 'the range of kinship relationships which are actively maintained has not been adequately assessed' (1963: 74).

migrants described by the Mayers in East London , migrants to Cape Town have usually had some schooling and are mostly Christian. As they note, ‘migration to the Cape has been selective’ (Wilson & Mafeje, 1963: 17). Nevertheless, the migrants in Cape Town are despised by true townsmen as ‘uncivilised or raw’ (*Ibid*: 14). They stint on food, clothes and accommodation in order to send money to their wives and children in the country. They usually live in barracks with other men from their rural district, adhering to formally enforced rules of conduct learned back home. Married or single, they may take lovers, or ‘town wives’, and take advantage of restrictions against the movement of women to ‘enjoy themselves with young women’ (*Ibid*: 79). Though stereotyped as ignorant and gullible, they are called upon to assist with the traditional rituals of circumcision of young men, to which almost all townsmen, whatever their sophistication, adhere. For initiation is strictly a clan matter and amongst migrants, clan identity remains daily salient, even for Christians. It cuts across other social bonds, like those between room-mates which are established on the basis of place of origin. Clansmen come together for births, marriages, deaths, sickness and whenever else sacrifices to ancestors are necessary.

The remaining third of the black population are the ‘half-and-half type who are in the process of being assimilated as townsmen but are not yet accepted’ (Wilson & Mafeje, 1963: 14). Generalisations about them are more difficult to find in this impressionistic account. We are told nothing specific about their domestic life, but they are presumably amongst those whose ‘expenditures on travelling in proportion to wages earned’, in order to maintain the involvement in far-flung kinship networks, ‘are a never failing source of astonishment to the outsider’ (*Ibid*: 74).

Wilson and Mafeje’s study reinforces the Mayers’ insistence that the black urban population presents a highly diverse society, most clearly stratified by acceptance or rejection of the culture of permanent urbanisation, but also by the degree of success people have in exploiting the opportunities offered by the urban areas.

Counting Nuclear Households

I have elsewhere attempted to unravel the ideological underpinnings of the contrary perceptions of the incidence of black nuclear families (Russell, 2002). The persistent preoccupation with this issue is reflected in the frequency with which such counts have been published. A careful quantitative study of data

collected in 1946 from over a thousand³¹, mainly Zulu, Durban factory workers by two black scholars in two months, showed 22 per cent of the men belonging to ‘conjugal families’ defined as ‘families consisting of the worker, his wife (or wives)[sic] and children (if any)’ (Burrows, Scully *et al.*, 1948: 187). They comment,

‘The conjugal type of family is characteristic of Western society, and the substantial proportion of such families among Dunlop African workers may be a measure of their detribalisation’ (Burrows, Scully *et al.*, 1948: 188).

Their willingness to classify polygyny as ‘conjugal’ is quite characteristic of this mind set, where all kinds of definitions of nuclear family are stretched to maximise the degree of Westernisation. Steyn (undated) makes a good example when she says the ‘Bantu family’ is becoming more and more like the nuclear type, ‘*but* three factors give it a different complexion from the pure nuclear family’ (Steyn undated: 33, my translation, my emphasis). She then lists several non-nuclear attributes. Exceptional ‘African’ definitions of the nuclear family, to include descendants, ascendants and collaterals, are similarly devised by Hughes (1964) and Amoateng (1997). A more imaginative use of this classification by household composition, as recorded in large data sets, has been made by Simkins (1986). Comparing frequencies of black household types (nuclear and extended) in rural and urban areas over time, he found remarkable stability and similarity in the distributions: urban households were not much more likely to present a nuclear form than rural households, nor did frequency distributions change much over time. He concludes, ‘if there is a trend towards the nuclear household it is a very weak one’ (Simkins, 1986: 41). Even Spiegel, who describes black nuclear families as ‘a pipe dream’, has been tempted by the simplicity of this classification: although nuclear family households in urban Cape Town are ‘often only short-lived’, he and his colleagues counted them, to discover that ‘at least 61 per cent of the households surveyed could not have comprised nuclear family units’ (Spiegel, Watson & Wilkinson, 1996: 8), (leaving a substantial 39 per cent which could be so classified).

As Fortes (1945, 1958) demonstrated half a century ago, co-residential household composition cannot be understood outside the temporal processes of formation, consolidation and dissolution. Goody confirmed that ‘the rhythm of domestic cycle differs from society to society’ (Goody, 1972: 105). Nene (1988) has stressed the need to go beyond household membership to family process. Similarly Peters (1983: 105) has warned against ‘an over-reliance on devising [household] typologies’ at the expense of understanding ‘dynamic processes’.

³¹ Four consecutive samples of 1 in 4 of the thousand-odd Africans working at a tyre manufacturing company.

The fallacy of deducing a transition to a nuclear family system from a count of the relative frequencies of household types had already been lucidly exposed by Murray (1981: 101-102). He found only 18 percent of his sample of 150 households in Lesotho to be *de jure* nuclear families, but insisted that this is 'one typical phase of the developmental cycle' (Murray, 1981:104).

In short, typologies on the basis of kin composition, fairly simple to extract from a survey, tell us very little about relationships and interdependencies. Where this is the *only* source available (as for the British historical demographers reliant on ancient parish listings), it cannot be ignored; the Cambridge demographers have demonstrated the ingenuity with which such listings can be manipulated to produce convincing reconstructions of social structure. But where, as in South Africa, we are surrounded by informants who can explain what they are doing and why and how, it seems perverse in the extreme to proceed as though such listings were our only source. Yet this has been the chosen route of many sociologists.

Household size has proved another irresistible variable, tempting many analysts. Laslett in 1972 cautioned against attributing too much to it. Although often treated as a preliminary indicator of household structure 'mean household size in a community does not appear to be correlated at all highly with degree of complication of the household in that community' (Laslett, 1972: 15-16). The point is proved by Beittel (1992: 218) in his useful summary table of trends in black household composition in Johannesburg, extracted from the Bureau of Market Research surveys of black household income and expenditure from 1962 to 1985. Although average household size remained fairly stable over the quarter century, (at its smallest 5.1 in 1970, at its biggest 5.6 in 1962), its composition changed noticeably. The proportion of female-headed households doubled, from a mere 14 per cent in 1962 to 29 per cent in 1985. At the same time, children, who made up 52 per cent of all household members in 1962, steadily shrank to a mere 25 per cent in 1985. 'Other relatives living in households rose in the same period, from 6 per cent of household members to 20 per cent. It also became much more common for children over 18 to be part of the household. In short, while black household sizes remained unchanged (probably constrained by the accommodation provided) they became more adult and more complex over the period. By 1985, Johannesburg children were conspicuous by their absence. This was a time of great political tension, with urban school pupils in the forefront of political resistance, and urban education subject to constant disruption. Many parents would have seized the opportunities of kinship to disperse their children to safer rural areas. In demographic terms, the households became increasingly unbalanced. Goody (1972) argued that most domestic groups, world-wide, regardless of culture, are about the same mean size – between 4 and 6 people – but are not, therefore, nuclear.

Marital Relationships

Chiwome (1994) blames the Christian missionaries for undermining black family life in southern Africa by introducing the notion of marriage as the lifelong companionship of an independent monogamous couple. A similar analysis has been made by Lesthaeghe *et al* for West Africa: they refer to 'Christian penetration with its concomitant ideology favouring conjugal closeness' (Lesthaeghe, Kaufmann & Meekers, 1989: 240). The attack on African marriage was severe and sustained. It is now all but forgotten that in the Cape as late as 1953 the courts 'refused to regard as valid any marriage in which cattle had passed' (Mair, 1953:19). This ideological pressure has since been reinforced by secular Western mass media. The two distinct models for marriage coexist uneasily: the traditional African one, explicitly structured about fertility and a sexual division of labour; and the traditional Western one, structured about companionship of a conjugal couple. The former is in principle polygynous, and although the incidence of polygyny is low, the principle gives to relationships between spouses a formality and a distance that Westerners find strange. In the Caldwells' words, as long as polygyny is accepted 'all women must anticipate the possibility and order their family emotions and economy accordingly' (Caldwell & Caldwell, 1990: 199). Hunter (1936:461) suggested that amongst the Pondo the ancestor cult, with its continual reminder that wives were outsiders, protected by different ancestors, inhibited conjugal closeness. In Swaziland, as in many other African societies, many wives still kneel when presenting their husbands with food, and may not utter their names³². Similar rituals of deference mark relations between children and their fathers and grandfathers, wives and their in-laws.

This kind of traditional marriage is not a couple-centred institution, but is rather concerned with the linking of two descent-based groups. The marital relationship is of less importance than relationships of descent. Indeed, Fortes (1969:308) argues that in descent-based systems marriage is not essential: 'What is essential is parenthood, and for this any form of permitted procreative cohabitation is sufficient'. Goody (1969: 114) confirms the 'transitional' nature of the family in some societies, with continuity and stability necessary for the persistence of the system provided by descent groups and locality. Hellmann (1935) working in Johannesburg observed that claims of kin got precedence over claims of wife. The Caldwells observe that wives are in control of their sexuality but not their fertility which is 'a matter for her husband and his lineage' (Caldwell & Caldwell, 1990: 209). Schapera (1971: 319) captures the nature of conjugal relations in Botswana in the thirties: 'it is often enough little

³² A British family's horrified confrontation with this practice is recorded in a documentary account made in 2000. See Russell (2001).

more than a prosaic partnership for economic and social purposes and for the production of legitimate offspring'. Romantic love is perceived as destructive within marriage:

'If you have to love one woman more than someone else (whether sibling, parent or partner), then a rationale is established for splitting society into spatially distinct groups based upon monogamous unions. In polygynous societies, 'love', in the sense of preference of one above another, is often a dangerous thing' (Goody, 1973: 38).

Durban factory workers in 1946 saw relatively little of their wives by Western standards. During the (average) sixteen-month work spell, married men were visited by their wives for an average of 3.2 weeks (Burrows, Scully *et al.*, 1948: 114-115). The more recent the marriage, the less likely the wife was to visit her husband, since

'According to custom a newly married woman may not leave the parental hearth if she is the wife of the first son and heir, while if she is the wife of any other son, she cannot be released from the strict supervision of the mother-in-law until the fields have been ploughed, the crops harvested and her own household food supply assured' (Burrows, Scully *et al.*, 1948: 113).

Unfortunately we have no information on how often these men went home. But we do know that 15 per cent of married men failed to return to their homes during the two-week vacation over Christmas when the factory shut down. Only 65 per cent of married men sent money to their wives,

'which in a European society would be a surprisingly low figure. In Bantu society, however, it is customary for money sent by sons to go to the head of the family... who gives what he thinks fit to the wife and supervises the use she makes of the money. Marriage does not automatically lead to a 'hiving off' and the new wife becomes in fact a member of her husband's family' (Burrows & Scully *et al.*, 1948: 146).

The Mayers write: 'Far from setting value on conjugal closeness, Red Xhosa etiquette actually forbids a young husband to be too intimate with his wife' (Mayer & Mayer, 1961: 98), and again 'the particular form of the husband-wife relationship among Red peasants is such that a husband who goes away to town is not necessarily conscious of a great deprivation of marital rights' (*ibid.*). As

they wryly acknowledge, ‘These features of traditional marriage play into the hands of the labour migrancy system’ (*ibid*).

The agnatic system is relatively impervious to corrosive interpersonal emotions. Passionate sexual relationships, which underlie the establishment of Western households, have no constitutive role in the agnatic system. Indeed, as we have seen, they are explicitly discouraged as the basis for marriage in several southern African societies. Thus, in Swaziland, a wife chosen by a man on the basis of love never ranks as highly in a polygynous household as one chosen for him on the basis of more enduring qualities like rank, pedigree, or clan (Kuper 1947).

Instead, sexual passion and romance have an explicit place outside marriage, where they cannot threaten domestic stability. Extramarital sexual adventuring is institutionalised amongst the Xhosa in the *amadikazi*, and *amankazana*, and amongst the Sotho in *bonyatsi*. This explicit dissociation between romantic love and marriage in ‘traditional’ African marriage is another marker distinguishing it from ‘traditional’ Western practice, with immediate implications for co-residential patterning.

The alternative model for marriage, vying for legitimisation and finding it in church and Western media, is the exclusive close conjugal couple. Van der Vliet (1991) depicts how Xhosa women (but not men) envy white women for experiencing the sexual fidelity and intimacy which the conjugal marriage system demands. But the cost is a high rate of marital breakdown and marital unhappiness in the West, where expectations of enduring conjugal bliss are set unrealistically high. Murray is adamant in attributing to married couples in Lesotho a desire for conjugal closeness, arguing that to admit anything less would be to give sustenance to the migrant labour system. He deplores ‘a distinctively African view of marriage and the family which does not presuppose intimacy between husband and wife and which is not therefore undermined by the separation of spouses’ (Murray 1981: 103), and suspects those who express such views of endorsing the base practices of capitalist employers.

The Caldwells (1981) suggest that once the conjugal tie becomes central, concern and expenditure are concentrated on the couple’s own children rather than amongst the wider kin group. The flow of wealth between generations is simultaneously reversed, for in the traditional system, wealth flows from children to parents as a right. They suggest that the direction of the flow of support can be used as an index of the type of marriage. Another index can be found in the length of post-partum abstinence observed by couples (*ibid*). ‘Westernised’ couples tolerate only the shortest period of abstinence because

prolonged abstinence threatens the sexual intimacy which underpins the 'emotional nuclearisation' that characterises such marriages. Prolonged abstinence suggests a more traditional African conception of marriage. Data collected in South Africa in the nineties from a small sample,³³ suggest that, by this criterion, two-thirds of black urban and ninety-five per cent of rural black respondents favour 'traditional' marriages (Russell, 2002). But other data from the same sample indicates less commitment to traditional relations in marriage, especially amongst urban respondents, more than half of whom, for example, expected marital fidelity of one another, and more than half of whom opted for privacy in resolving marital disputes, rather than resorting to the family elders (*ibid.*).

The Circulation of Children

The practice of distributing children is continent-wide (Page, 1989), almost certainly predating the economic and political upheavals of colonialism and industrialism. African children are expected to circulate between kin, as needed, for errands and companionship. In West Africa, 'support for, and benefit from, child raising are rarely borne exclusively by parents but are shared by many people (Bledsoe & Isiugo-Abanihe, 1989: 442). The Caldwells reckon that up to a third of children in Nigeria and Ghana are fostered to relatives. They paint a picture in which the daily care of children is diffused. Children belong to all older members of the lineage. In the villages, it is often difficult to know who is responsible for their feeding, 'for they wander from one relative's cooking pot to another' (Caldwell & Caldwell, 1990). Similarly costs are widely shared, and few West Africans feel significantly less responsible for the schooling costs of their nephews and nieces than for those of their own children. They explicitly exempt the 'urban elite' from these generalisations about villagers.

In southern Africa, children are expected especially to spend time in the household of their grandparents, both maternal and paternal; paternal, because this is their line of descent, and maternal because this is where they are likely to have been born and to have spent their early years, particularly if they are first born. This is the consequence of the drawn-out nature of black marriage in southern Africa, where the classification 'married/unmarried' is not easily made, and where the status of the union between a newly marrying couple is, as Murray (1981:103) says, 'constantly susceptible to redefinition'. Children can also be sent to childless relatives, especially to their parents' siblings, and of course to paternal grandparents from whom they receive their patrilineal identity, and with whom they significantly 'belong'.

³³ One rural sample (n=110) and four urban sub-samples (n=358). See Russell (2002).

Schapera, writing of the Kgatla of Botswana in the thirties, reports that a relative with no children, or with children of only one sex would 'ask for the loan of a child, but often enough parents agree beforehand that their next child will be 'born for' some particular relative, to whom it is accordingly given soon after weaning' (Schapera, 1971: 220). Hellman (1956) found 31% of children in a black Johannesburg township in 1949 to be living with rural relatives. Van der Waal (1996:51) describes how in the Northern Province, children were 'circulated between households'. Over a quarter of all children observed during one year had been fostered by 'maternal grandparents and other matrilineal relatives or their own older sister' (Van der Waal, 1996: 41) (presumably staying with paternal kin was not considered fostering). Mehlwana (1996: 91, 98) describes how a Cape Town clanship 'facilitates child-keeping and child-exchange', and how such movement of children 'cements relationships'. Peters (1983:119) on the other hand, notes the resentment often felt by grandmothers in Botswana, overburdened with care of absent daughters' children.

This practice makes the kinship structure of domestic groups opaque to the standard social survey, with its standard method of going no further than asking how each member is related to the homestead head. A clutch of children correctly identified as 'grandchildren' – or with greater refinement 'son's child' or 'daughter's child' – may or may not have parents living in the homestead, may or may not have parents actively contributing to the costs of their upbringing. More significantly, it is perfectly within the rules for a grandparent to claim a grandchild as one's own, especially if its mother is one's young, unmarried daughter.

A concomitant of the dispersal of children is the neutralising of the emotional relationship between parents and their own biological children – whether as cause or consequence. Laslett (1977:37) suggested that the effect on the child of its parents and siblings is greater in 'the western tradition' than in other cultures. Van der Waal (1996) was indeed struck by how different from her nuclear family expectations and experience the bond between parents and children was in the Northern Province. 'The pattern of children's dependence on parents differed...because the social relationships that developed around a child were not mainly or exclusively those with family (sic) members'.

Murray (1981:104-106) observes, in a nice phrase, 'the centrifugal distribution of children between households' in Lesotho, but insists, at passionate length, that this has less to do with traditional expectations than with immediate economic pressures. Spiegel (1986) likewise depicts the flow of children between households as a response to poverty. The same argument is made by Reynolds (1995).

Reynold's suggestion that a group of 24 black South African political dissidents had had a peculiar upbringing in this respect is as surprising, coming from a social anthropologist, as is her implicit assumption that children brought up without a nuclear family are somehow damaged and disadvantaged. Despite her disclaimer that nuclear families are not necessary for children's stability, her conception of 'family' remains doggedly nuclear: implicitly, children should be brought up by their father and their mother. She uses this as a marker of domestic stability. Examining the childhoods of her informants for 'disturbance', she finds that 'only 8 per cent lived in nuclear families for all of their first 20 years' (Reynolds, 1995: 30). The distribution of children becomes in her terms the 'fragmentation of care'. More recent research suggests 'that this social arrangement does not detrimentally impact on child welfare' (May & Roberts, 2001:108, citing Maluccio *et al* 1999). Rather than recognise the security to be derived from the experience of a wider circle of actively caring kin (not to mention the precocious independence such experiences confer (Russell, 2002)), Reynolds links mobility with insecurity: 'only' five of the dissidents had spent their first 20 years in one address; 'only' one had not experienced bonds with caretaker being broken by death, migrancy, or marital disruption (Reynolds, 1995). She regards the high rate of premarital pregnancy amongst them, now that they are adult, as pathological. Gloomily she predicts that 'the flux and complexity' of her informants' childhood years 'may be continuing in their adult years' (Reynolds, 1995: 33).

More usefully, Reynolds establishes the contemporary norm for children's place of upbringing in South Africa by analysing data from 8,8000 households collected by the South African Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) in 1993³⁴. Fifty-two per cent of African children live in households that lack their two parents. Only 34 per cent of African children had two parents at home for at least half of the month preceding the survey. She concludes that, at any time, two thirds of African children are likely to be living apart from at least one parent. While it is undoubtedly true, as she says, that the South African state 'consistently and awfully undermined the ability of people to form and nourish families over time' (Reynolds, 1995: 33), her assumption that these would, by choice, be families in which parents reared all of their own children, shows a surprising indifference to a wide-spread African practice which seems to have little to do with political regime. Perhaps what should be emphasised is how the traditional expectations so neatly accommodate the newer economic pressures.

³⁴ Now more commonly referred to as the Project for Statistics on living Standards and Development, PSLSD.

Analysing the same data base (to assess, inter alia, the impact of household structure on educational attainment), Maharaj, Kaufman & Richter (undated) found some 17 per cent of black South African children age 6 to 19 are fostered, usually by a grandparent or by one of their parents' siblings (but a quarter of them live with none of these relatives). 30 percent of black children live in households containing fostered children. The impact on their education and that of the non-fostered children in households is minimal. Indeed, schooling is often the motive for fostering. They draw attention to the fluidity of household structures as these children move through kin networks.

Isiugo-Abanihe (1985, cited Harber (undated)) distinguishes four types of fostering common in Africa besides the crisis fostering, familiar in the West:

1. **Kinship fostering** – to ensure the most effective use of resources within a kin group and to strengthen family ties.
2. **Alliance and apprenticeship fostering** - to give children a chance of social mobility, usually to live with someone who will teach them a trade.
3. **Domestic fostering** – usually a girl sent to give domestic help to a relative.
4. **Educational fostering** - a contemporary form of apprenticeship fostering which entails sending a child to live with someone who will pay their school fees.

Unmarried Mothers and Patrilineal Descent

Patrilineal rules ensure that the child will have a proper identity, either that of its biological father or that of its mother's father. Once again the agnatic idiom displays its flexibility in the ingenuity with which different southern African groups manipulate the patrilineal principle to ensure the legitimacy of every birth. In principle, children belong to the lineage of their (socially defined) father. This is their legitimacy. In Jones's words, 'an extramarital child's position is not compromised by the circumstances of his or her birth' (Jones, 1992: 252). The social nature of this definition introduces some latitude, which people manipulate in interesting ways. Premarital and extramarital births provide the test cases. Premarital births are common³⁵. Data from 1993 show

³⁵ On the management of premarital pregnancy amongst Zulu people see Preston-Whyte (1981) and PrestonWhyte and Zondi (1992).

that about 43 percent of black girls had had at least one child by time they were 19 years old, and at least a third of these young mothers returned to school after giving birth (Maharaj, Kaufman & Richter, undated). Such births lead to the creation of households headed by single women containing their unmarried daughters and daughters' children. The suggestion (see Ziehl (2001:18) who attributes the notion to Marwick (1978) that we see in this phenomenon some kind of transformation from patrilineal to matrilineal principles, is to misunderstand patrilineal descent.

Contemporary Swaziland provides a pertinent example. The rules of patrilineal descent to the Swazi are like the Bible to fundamentalist Christians, like the Pentateuch to Hassidic Jews. They are the charter. You have to know who your father is. This is public information of the most vital kind. In the eighties, unmarried pregnant girls with secret lovers had to reveal the lineage name as they went into labour to gain the protection of their proper ancestral spirits. Grandmothers landed with a houseful of progeny of their unmarried daughters would, on request, cheerfully produce a matching list of surnames for them. And sometimes when their memories let them down they would call a six-year-old from play and say, 'Who is your father?' Children always knew. Dogged with notions of nuclear family, I would want to know where father was and whether he was supporting the child. This type of information was much fuzzier, but grandmothers would always know where father's patrilineal *kin* were. They would have had dealings with them; compensatory cattle or goats might have been exchanged or promised. Marriage might be in the offing – (nearly all Swazi marriages begin with pregnancy). They would know where to put the pressure of obligation if the crunch came. They would know which ancestors to appease if the child became seriously ill. If necessary, they would know where to send the child to live.

The paternity of children of unmarried Swazi girls has relatively little (and decreasing) impact on where young children live: unless the father is rich and rural, they live with their mothers and/or their mothers' mothers. But it is decisive for mate selection once children become sexually active. Sex with someone with whom you share descent is incest, not merely abhorred by all but doomed by offended ancestors. With increasing maturity, children gravitate to their patrilineal kin, who will be their negotiators in marriage settlements. If they are educated girls and likely to command a good bride-price, patrilineal kin will assert their patrilineal rights more vigorously. It is not uncommon to hear adolescent girls complaining that 'Only now that I am getting educated my father is becoming interested in me'.

So contemporary patrilineality provides the framework which confers identity, despite a very high level of extramarital births. The Swazi accommodation to

births outside marriage is so smoothly accomplished and with such pat cultural responses suggested elsewhere (Russell 1993) that the practice must be of very long standing: 'traditional' as they say.

The suggestion that the high incidence of households headed by single women which we see in contemporary South Africa, is evidence of some kind of conversion to matriliney must be viewed with extreme scepticism. As Murray (1981:112) observes, a high incidence of births to unmarried women is 'by no means incompatible with the persistence of the predominantly agnatic structure'

Swazis situate such behaviour strictly within patrilineal rules. Who lives with whom has no consequences for who you are, or what your patrilineal entitlements are. Householding arrangements are inessential. The essentials are tied up with your *isibongo*, your patriclan name, which only your father can give you. It is this which defines who your kinsmen are, who your ancestors are, in which rural homestead you can claim a share. It also defines your obligations: whom you should support. And, of course, whom you should not marry.

The older ethnographies insisted that the children of an unmarried woman belong to her father, since she is a minor and his ward. Once a woman marries, all subsequent children belong to her husband, who has, through payment of bridewealth has acquired her reproductive rights. The Swazi call it 'buying the womb'. But what if the father of the unmarried woman has himself not paid the requisite bridewealth to legitimate his marriage to her mother? This is so common amongst the Swazi that the practice of promising *anticipated* bridewealth from the future marriage of yet unborn daughters has become institutionalised. In this case, the unmarried daughter's mother is herself technically unmarried; the unmarried daughter bears mother's maiden name which is of course, by patrilineal rules, the name of her maternal grandfather. Following the patrilineal rules, the newborn child too must take the name of its mother's maternal grandfather.

Nowadays, most Swazi practice a more direct way of asserting patrilineal principles, by elevating *biological* paternity as the cardinal principle in descent. Just when this new principle was introduced is uncertain. The ritual requirements around this assertion of biologically-claimed paternal rights, with compensation paid in cattle, suggest it is not new (Russell, 1993). The current price (the Swazi talk uncomplicatedly of 'buying' the child) is two head of cattle for a girl, one for a boy. Should the child's father decide to marry its mother, these cattle are counted towards the bride-price.

Swazi newspapers provide an unexpected source of circumstantial evidence that in the nineteen-fifties and sixties many extramarital children were not so bought,

but were seen as members of their *maternal* father's or grandfather's lineage. The evidence appears in the hundreds of legal notices published throughout the nineteen-eighties, to the effect that 'So-and So wishes it to be known that he henceforth wishes to be known as Such-and Such, this being his *natural* name'. The choice of words is interesting. Lineage membership is acquired *naturally* through your genitor. It is this which determines who you *really* are (and with whom, therefore, you can and cannot have sex, and/or marry). By the nineteen eighties, the practice of immediately attaching a newborn premarital child, by name and ritual, to the lineage of its biological father was the norm. Identification of such fathers was not problematic. Fertility is a prized aspect of sexual prowess; promiscuity is the norm. Rather than holding out for children to be bought by their fathers, mothers often return them to fathers' kin as soon as they are weaned, with the implication: 'You bear their expenses!'

Cursory evidence from a small group of unmarried Xhosa mothers in Cape Town in 2002³⁶ suggest a similar concern with the bestowal of proper clan identity, especially for boys. The women considered it essential that each child be properly, ritually, introduced to its correct paternal ancestors, through somebody of its father's clan, if not shortly after birth, then certainly before adolescence and initiation. For boys, this is no casual introduction, but an expensive ceremony, usually involving ritual slaughter.

Amongst the Swazi there is no agreement about the application of the principle in the case of extramarital births to *married* women. People are torn between the older view of children as an asset, and the newer reality of children as an economic liability, for they can no longer be relied upon (as in the past) to support their parents in old age. Indeed, in the AIDS pandemic they cannot be relied upon, whatever their filial piety, to survive long enough to offset the cost of their schooling. Some men still insist on claiming all their wives' children as their own, regardless of biological paternity, and draw on 'tradition' to justify their claim, happily anticipating the labour children provide, the support they will get from sons in old age, and the bridewealth they will receive from daughters' marriages. Others regard adultery as grounds for returning the wife (and this newest child) to her parents. Similar bald economic interests influence the way premarital births are handled.

Patrilineal principles present the unmarried mother with many options for support for her children. The father's kin group are in principle responsible, but the woman's own kin and clan present an alternative resource. What to the Western outsider looks like instability to the insider looks like security. By drawing on the institution of 'circulating' children, such women can free

³⁶ Focus group discussion, Bambanani Women's Group, Khayelitsha, April 2002.

themselves for wage work if they need to, want to. They can send their own children away to be cared for elsewhere or they can ask for an older child from some other household to come and be attached to them for a while – perhaps in exchange for a promise of future school fees, certainly in exchange for board and lodging. In a similar way, women with young children are able to side step the stark choices confronting Western women. Conventionally posed as ‘family versus career’, this sounds like an option only for the educated elite, but the dilemma is as keenly felt by poorer working class women in the West, for whom the considerable costs of child care often outweigh a much-needed second income.

The Saliency of Clan

Spiegel’s suggestion that the social networks which are cultivated in ‘contemporary Africa’ are ‘as much in flux as other institutions’ (Spiegel, 1995: 5) is surely a misrepresentation. To the contrary, everybody is *de jure* part of a social network which is in principle very stable, fixed by agnatic rules. Clan is the social expression of these rules. The most important clan is one’s own clan inherited from father, but of considerable importance also, when appropriate, is one’s mother’s clan, which is of course the clan of her father, and her brothers, each one of whom is that uncle (*umalume*) of whom all Nguni children are brought up to expect much.³⁷ Murray (1981:56-64) captures the reality when he says that, despite the ‘perpetual ebb and flow’ of Sotho households as migrants themselves flow back and forth across the borders - both men and women, married and unmarried, fathering, mothering and dispersing children as they make and unmake fragile conjugal bonds - there is a ‘relatively stable agnatic structure’. The agnatic idiom underpins the apparently chaotic array of household forms. Webster (1987) used the same expression to characterise kinship in north-eastern Natal. Whisson (1976) noted the importance of clan in bringing order into newly urban settlements. Manona (1991:201,216) is more circumspect, arguing (with reference to ex-farmworkers in an Eastern Cape town) that although ‘the structural features of an agnatic kinship system [are] much in evidence’, it is filiation (parent-child links) rather than descent which is ‘emphasised’.

The distinction is, to the non-specialist, a subtle one, which Fortes explains: filiation is one generation deep, and involves both parents, whereas descent is ‘a relationship mediated by a parent between himself and an ancestor, defined as any genealogical predecessor of the grandparental generation or earlier’ (Fortes, 1969: 281). It is ‘an actor-centred instrument for the assignment of right and

³⁷ Never more graphically described than in a short story by Njabulo Ndebele (1983).

status or for establishing interpersonal or intergroup connections' (*ibid.*). Fortes (1969:384) lists the purposes of the lineage established by such descent as 'to endow with citizenship, avenge a wrong against a member, perform rituals and sacrifices of ancestral and similar cults, and carry out mortuary and funeral ceremonies for its members'.

While it is indisputable that in South Africa, with its modern state apparatus, lineages do not endow citizenship or avenge wrongs, it is equally indisputable that there *are* descent groups which perform rituals of ancestral cults, and mortuary and funeral ceremonies for their members. These are the clans, in which, as Manona observed in 1985, there is a resurgence of interest. Clan defines a set of people who are potential kin. 'In classificatory kinship system ordinary clans people can be turned into close kin' (Manona, 1991: 216).

Whatever clan may have meant in the past to Xhosa, Zulu and Swazi society, it now represents a set of people who, by virtue of their shared clan name, see themselves as descended from a patrilineal common ancestor. They *are* therefore all 'brothers' and 'sisters'. The Western practice, of limiting 'true' brotherhood to people sharing both parents, is integral to the Western kinship system: other (classificatory) systems (like the Xhosa) invest this particular relationship with less importance, and elevate, to equal brotherhood status, relations, who, in the West, would be considered too remote to know, for whom therefore no kinship terms exist. Manona calls it 'putative or fictive kinship' (Manona, 1991: 216). In this he follows British usage (Holy, 1996:75). It is British usage to call lineages 'real descent', while clans are 'putative descent'. In the British tradition, Spiegel (1996) too calls clan 'fictional kinship'. But there is nothing fictional about the bonds which you can assume, as a matter of course, with strangers who bear your clan name. As Manona says, 'These clan-ties can be enduring since they are essentially instrumental' (Manona, 1991: 216). To label such relations as fictional, is to adopt an unnecessarily Western view point.

Clan identity determines how people address one another and how they behave towards one another, particularly in matters of sex. Sex within the clan is strictly prohibited. It is as incestuous as sex between siblings of common parents. It may also be prohibited between certain other clans linked by marriage, for example, one's mother's clan, or the clans of either grandmother. On the other hand, marriage may actually be prescribed rather than proscribed with these marriage-linked clans. Amongst Swazis, marriage with a woman of the maternal grandmother's clan is the most approved marriage possible. The Kgatla also prefer marriage between cousins (Schapera, 1971). Rules differ from group to group, but the point remains that descent identity has daily salience, dividing the people you meet into those with whom you may have sex and marry, and those who are too close to you for such behaviour. Clan and lineage are therefore

amongst the first things people want to know when they meet a stranger. ‘Who is your father?’ they ask.

Mehlwana (1996) is surprised by the small space given to clan in ‘the classical studies’. Clan seemed to have so little salience for urban Xhosa in East London in the fifties that the Mayers overlooked it entirely. The index to their book has only three entries for it, and the references are insubstantial. Hammond –Tooke (1984) dismissed clan as significant *only* in matters of sex and ceremony. Hunter similarly had dismissed clan as having ‘no function other than the regulation of sexual relations’ (Hunter, 1936: 462, 523) – as though this was an insignificant aspect of daily life. Twenty-five years later (writing under her married name of Wilson), she maintained her point of view. Although, in Cape Town, fellow clansmen were sought out for initiation and circumcision, ‘among townees and younger people generally *iziduko* [clan names] are out of fashion. The use of clan names has largely been displaced by the use of surnames which are required in all official contexts, and in dealings with whites’ (Wilson & Mafeje, 1963: 76). She explains the colonial origin of Xhosa surnames (significantly called *ifane* after the Afrikaans *van*): ‘In an earlier generation, school families all took a name – usually that of a male ancestor but sometimes that of an admired European’ (ibid). Chiwome comments on how disorientating this practice was; missionaries showed ‘little knowledge of the role of African nomenclature in creating a coherent social world’ (Chiwome, 1994: 59).

Mehlwana’s (1996) impression is very different. Working with a small sample in Cape Town in 1995, he found clan to be ‘embedded in people’s social lives’. He argued that, far from replacing kinship, as Wilson and Mafeje had argued, the new voluntary associations found in town were actually based on kinship in the form of clan. Although not every clansman was considered close kin, it was with clansmen that relationships were established. The shared clan name guaranteed an enduring relationships ‘through blood’ (Mehlwana, 1996: 24).

All Zulu, Swazi and Xhosa children are made aware of the clan of their father before adolescence. Xhosa youngsters cannot be circumcised except with fellow-clansmen by a fellow-clansman. The people who gather together at times of crisis, to thank, consult or entreat their dead ancestors, are always of the same clan. Only the oldest among them are fitted to address the shades. The opposition of the missionaries to African conceptions of the family can be more readily understood once this link between the living and the dead is grasped. Ancestral veneration rests on a lively sense of the importance of the line of descent. By attacking family practices, the missionaries undermined indigenous religion, and by attacking religion they undermined indigenous families.

The earlier writers' neglect of clan does not necessarily reflect badly on the acuity of their observation. It may be that before apartheid had hardened, acculturation to Western conceptions of social relationships and social organisation had been gaining ground. The apartheid project of ethnic segregation may have reversed this trend by its deliberate stifling of cosmopolitan experiences, and by its assiduous cultivation of distinctive ethnic practices. This was implicitly suggested by Hunter when she came to write a new preface to her older Pondo ethnography. She noted with some surprise the resuscitation of practices abandoned by the more educated a hundred years before, and condemned by them as 'pagan' and uncivilised', including 'sacrifices to the shades' (Hunter, 1961: xvi). The erosion of kinship in urban areas had not been as devastating as she had expected: kinship was holding its own alongside the new patterns of voluntary association. The contemporary prominence of clan consciousness may represent a resurgence of a notion that has been lying relatively inactive in the cultural repertoire, now revived to meet new needs in a new social situation. Manona (1991: 217) predicted a revival of agnatic kinship as part of a new African nationalism. It may be a counter to the anonymity of urbanisation, providing a ready-made but dormant network of potential kin. Spiegel's data gathered in Cape Town supports such an interpretation. But not all migrants cling to old charters in making their adjustments to new economic circumstances. Ross, drawing on her experience of a mixed-race squatter camp forty kilometres from Cape Town, perceives 'a demise of traditional institutions based on descent' and their replacement with 'a range of social sources' such as 'neighbourhood' and 'friendship' to 'verify belonging and ensure assistance' (Ross, 1996 : 6).

Rural Homesteads and Contingent Urban Households

More recent knowledge of contemporary black families and households comes from several discrete, careful studies (*inter alia* Huisman & Sterkenberg (1982), James (1985), Moore (1994), Niehaus (1994), Sharp, Niehaus & Bank (1994)) from the last thirty-five years, during which the apartheid programme gathered momentum, reached its zenith, faltered and gave way to the New South Africa, still mired in the aftermath. Whatever the political orientation of the observers, they describe the adaptation of people fiercely constrained by economic and political pressures. These were not, of course, new pressures: but they had been made more intense after 1948 by the fanaticism of the Afrikaner Nationalists. Freedom of black movement, restricted from the start, was steadily curbed as the apartheid fantasy of all-white towns began to be implemented. With very few exceptions, the right to permanent urbanisation was in principle and in practice

denied to black people. Apart from the privileged few who had been born in towns, their stay in town became dependent on the duration of an employment contract. This impacted directly on strategies of what Spiegel (1996) calls 'domestic consolidation'. Any investment in urban areas looked increasingly risky, yet it was only in urban areas that essential waged work could be found.

The tangled legislative history by which this apartheid project was almost accomplished has been published in many places. The Natives' Land Act of 1913, the Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923, and the Native Administration Act of 1927 are familiar early milestones on the road to racial domination. As early as 1933, Brookes had been able to list 34 discriminatory legislative acts passed since the Union; thereafter the pace quickened. The South African Institute of Race Relations, founded in 1929 to 'initiate, support, assist and encourage investigation that may lead to a greater knowledge and understanding of the racial groups' (Brookes, 1933: 188), has since 1948 assiduously published, year on year, this sorry story.

The impact on black domestic life has always been direct. In Murray's phrase, families were divided. Simkins and Dlamini (1992) talk about extended family networks being fragmented. Spiegel (1994b) writes of households being stretched. Some observers have attributed this state of domestic affairs exclusively to the apartheid state. But the obstruction of black urbanisation and the exclusion of workers' families had been the policy of successive segregating colonial powers before the Union. As Simkins and Dlamini (1992:67) observe, almost a century of conditioning 'may have induced changes in attitude and expectations which may be self-sustaining and hard to alter'.

The impact of changed government policy on patterns of urbanisation following the adoption of universal franchise in 1994 is as yet difficult to discern. Shared solutions to common problems can rapidly become 'traditions'. There is an attractive individual freedom associated with the migration of the single worker to a distant workplace, however onerous the work. The exclusive emphasis on the social deprivation of the migrant, which has characterised liberal writing, is probably misplaced. Mabin (1990), Smit (1998) and Jeeves and Crush (1995) have cautioned against the assumption of any simple rural-to-urban transition in South Africa. Extrapolations from European experience fail to take into account the specific constraints and opportunities in the South African case: the symbolic as well as the practical attachment to land, the economy of land ownership under communal tenure, the value of a rural place as a safety net, the harsh experience of urban settlement in the past century, the unreliable urban labour market. The continuing attachment to land is not simply a reaction to the apartheid regime's determination to undermine black urban settlement. Land is a valued economic resource, paradoxically nurtured by urban migration.

In 1995 Smit found 39 per cent of urban informants in Durban to have both rural and urban bases. He characterised many urban households as 'loose units with only temporary urban bases' (Smit, 1998: 77). For these, migration was circular, involving 'multiple rural or semi-urban bases and a number of work sites' (*ibid.*). In relatively affluent pastoral Botswana, Kruger (1998) found that thirty per cent of households in a poor suburb of Gaborone owned cattle which they kept elsewhere. Half had rural landholdings. Furthermore, the proportion of urban residents with rural assets increased rather than shrank with the length of urbanisation.

Many older studies documented the dependence of rural homesteads on migrants' wages. First (1977) observed the centrality of wages earned in South Africa for rural consolidation in Mozambique. Chirwa (1997) describes how the ban on migrant labour from Malawi to South Africa arrested a process of accumulation which was taking place in rural households there. Murray (1981) depicts a similar situation in Lesotho. Only the poorest households in Lesotho in the seventies had no absent migrant earners. He estimated income from migrant labour in the South African mines in 1976 to constitute 71 per cent of all household income. Without it, people left behind were unable to make effective use of their land. In Lesotho, farming and wage-earning were complementary, not alternatives.

White resistance to permanent black urbanisation found resonance in black rural opinion, as the Mayers' study of Xhosa migrants showed. Burrows & Scully *et al.* (1948) found only one in four married men prepared to bring their wives to Durban if good housing was provided. A similar finding was made for Estcourt five years later (Phillips, 1953). In the seventies Sotho mineworkers were still attached to the ideal of presiding over a rural homestead engaged in subsistence production (Moodie, 1991). This remained the ambition of Swazi men in urban employment in Swaziland in the eighties.

Initially all townward migrants had, by definition, a rural base, but from the start there were always some younger men who were happy to break loose from the rural gerontocracy and explore the possibilities of a new urban lifestyle. All southern African languages have words for these absconders. But not all those who were drawn by the new opportunities of urban life were irresponsible riff-raff. Far from it. Some of the more sophisticated and astute bought urban property, and attempted to settle permanently, but found themselves hounded by the state, deprived of their title deeds, their occupancy threatened. By the sixties, security of tenure of urban property looked increasingly shaky. Cutting ties with rural areas, once a sign of urban sophistication, now seemed rash. Any secure domestic consolidation would have to be rural. But it was just at this time that

South Africa's economy boomed, simultaneously pulling people townwards. The political conflagration provoked by these and other tensions, and their resolution in the last decade of the twentieth century have been described and analysed elsewhere. This is the background against which we try to understand people's residential and co-residential decisions. It rests for the most part on data collected under conditions of stress, from people whose options were unusually constrained.

The rural homestead was always a loose assemblage. The prolonged absence of some members was common. Women, whose marriages contracted them to membership of their husbands' homesteads, retained residual rights in the homesteads of their birth, and would periodically return there. Children would pay prolonged visits to maternal and other kin. The homestead might seasonally divide along age and sex lines, as in the Tswana cattle camps and gardens, or be drained of young males as in the Swazi and Zulu regiments, but it remained the base to which people returned throughout their lives, their rights to membership indisputable.

The changed economic circumstances of, first, colonial and then industrial capitalist penetration set in motion new co-residential patterns, configured around the increasing necessity for at least some homestead members to earn cash in towns, or on mines (White farms were more likely to absorb the homestead *en masse*). Rural homestead composition was thus altered: working-age people, particularly males,³⁸ spent less lifetime at the homestead, but this did not alter their entitlement to membership. At places of employment, new domestic groups were formed.

Unlike homesteads, the composition of these urban co-residential groups was not culturally prescribed, but was contingent upon any number of factors: the employer, who might provide anything from a sleeping space on a dormitory floor to a four-roomed house; the local and state authorities who assumed enormous and arbitrary powers to dictate urban entry and residence patterns; the sending homestead's own labour needs, and the subsequent ease with which people could leave home without undermining the viability of the rural base; what we might call the ideological preferences of the migrant, whether to resist or embrace the new urban milieu and its new opportunities (significantly shaped by religious beliefs); and the purely personal needs of the migrants for food, shelter, companionship, sex.

The linkages between rural and urban areas provide one source of evidence on the extent of incompleteness of domestic groups stretched between these

³⁸ But Kalule-Sibiti and Kahimbaara (1996) report that in Transkei female out-migration now outstrips male out-migration.

different locations. The apartheid practice of ‘dumping’ ‘unwanted’ black urban residents in remote, dense, ‘rural’ settlements has muddied the always rather arbitrary distinction between rural and urban in South Africa. About half the black population of South Africa now at the start of the 21st century are still living in the countryside, half in urban areas. But not all rural residents are ‘living off the land’. Leibbrandt and Woolard (2001) found 43 percent of rural households in a sample of 1,003 in KwaZulu-Natal to have neither cultivated fields nor stock. An extrapolation from this slight evidence suggests that a little more than a quarter of the black population is living the stereotypical African rural life of the coffee table books, growing food for the homestead, tending stock.

Current rural-urban linkages are not as intense as in 1946 when data collected from urban factory workers in Durban showed that 91 per cent of single men and 98 per cent of married men sent money ‘home’ to the rural areas (Burrows & Scully *et al.*, 1948: 145). Comparable data for Durban fifty years later (Smit, 1998) found only half of an urban sample of 244 households to be strongly bonded to rural areas. Nineteen per cent of urban households had no rural links, and another 33 per cent were weakly linked (which is not to suggest that they were therefore self-contained: urban-urban links are under-researched but common, as numerous case studies reported in social anthropological papers make clear. Research on remittances has too long been trapped into a stereotype of a migrant male supporting a rural homestead). Posel (2001) and Flaherty (1995) have demonstrated the *interpersonal* nature of remittances in KwaZulu-Natal. Initial evidence, that the increased level of state benefits in the New South Africa was ‘crowding out’ ‘private transfers’ (Fox & Nel, 1998), has not been sustained by more recent analysis (May & Roberts 2001).

The dependence of rural homesteads in KwaZulu-Natal in the nineties on support from migrant members was much lower than suggested by earlier studies in other places, presumably because many rural people live close enough to their place of work to commute daily. Analysing the PSLSD³⁹ data collected in 1993, Posel (2001) found only 35 per cent of 4,000 rural homesteads to have migrant workers, and only some 80 per cent of these to receive remittances from them – in effect only 28 per cent received money from migrants. Amongst these, the remittances accounted for (only) 57 per cent of homestead income. A not dissimilar picture is reported by Smit (1998) whose remittance data was limited to investment in building. Thirty-two per cent of his sample contributed

³⁹ Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development. This first national South African household survey was made in 1993 under the auspices of the Southern African Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) at the University of Cape Town, with financial and technical support from the World Bank.

regularly to the maintenance and construction of buildings in the rural homestead.

It is worth noting how data of this kind would have depended on who was answering the questions, whether man or woman, old or young, married or unmarried. A young woman in the process of getting married would not claim attachment to her intended husband's father's rural homestead, but once married she would, especially if he was an heir. She might, on the other hand, retain and claim a link with her father's rural homestead. She might contribute to buildings at her father's home even though she intended to leave it permanently. Young men who had not yet built a house at their father's homestead would claim to have no rural base, though they would in time acquire a share in one by this (traditionally expected) investment. Such building is an act of filial piety, not necessarily a statement of intention to return to live in the rural area. Urban identity coexists with rural links in complex ways, differently perceived by different informants. Leibbrandt (1989), revisiting an Eastern Cape rural area forty years after it had first been surveyed (by Houghton *et al* in 1947), found a *decreased* reliance on remittances from absent workers *and* decreased returns from crops, but increased returns from *residents'* wages, and from stock. The apparent switch from migrants to commuters may reflect a growth in local employment opportunities, for apartheid encouraged (with tax incentives) the location of industry close to the *bantustans* as a strategy to make towns whiter. It may also be a matter of the official definition of 'rural': for apartheid simultaneously envisaged black residential areas, with little regard for density or the ways people made their living.

Absentees

Absentees are a commonplace of southern African social surveys. They are frequently listed alongside the other people found in a house (or household or family or homestead), but how exactly to define and identify them, and how to incorporate them into subsequent analysis, remains contentious. Once absenteeism is part of local practice, co-residence loses some of its power to signify domestic group boundaries, yet surveys remain residence-based, with absentees hopefully making up the acknowledged deficiency in the methodology. A moment's thought will confirm that absentees are very differently conceived in rural and urban areas. Established patrilineal expectations shape the formal membership of a rural homestead and are likely to guide informants' conceptions of who will be declared to be absent. Absent sons as co-heirs are *de jure* absentees, but not married daughters, even if they are contributors to their parents' income. The status of absent unmarried daughters is less clear cut: destined for marriage elsewhere they may be (literally) written

off unless they are actively supporting other homestead members (often their own pre-marital children). No reciprocal expectations define urban household membership. A son living away and listed as absent from his rural homestead is very unlikely to consider any of his rural relations as absent from his urban household.

This asymmetry has immediate implications for data collection. Data collected from rural areas will invariably be rich in absentees, and an easy source of information on inter-household dependencies. Palmer (1997), following Netting's (1984) suggestion, recorded 'intermittent co-residents', characteristic of 'peripheral parts of the world where labour migration is appreciable', in two rural settlements in the eastern Cape. Intermittent co-residents are people who no longer live in the homestead but are linked to it by kinship or sentiment and express this through 'correspondence, remittances and visits (Palmer, 1997: 12). He found each of the households sampled had 'a smaller or greater "diaspora" temporarily or permanently absent' (*ibid.*). In all, 42 per cent of the 'total network' of over three thousand people listed, were absent. A similar picture emerged from a sample of 60 households in KwaZulu Natal by Hosegood & Solarsh (2001), who found that 41 per cent of adults and 29 per cent of children listed were not living at the rural homestead. Subsequent analysis of a much larger population of some 85,000 people falling within the demographic surveillance system of the Africa Centre for Population Studies and Reproductive Health in KwaZulu Natal shows a much lower level of absentees: 23 per cent, comprising 32 per cent of adults and 12 per cent of children (Hosegood & Timaeus, 2003: 16).

The researchers at this centre have adopted an approach which whole-heartedly embraces the advice from a host of small-scale research projects, that in southern Africa co-residence is a poor indicator of social and economic interdependence. They have rejected co-residence as the criterion for household membership in favour of an so-called 'emic' approach, working through the community's own definitions of domestic groups. Data is collected both by the landholding *umuzi* (or homestead) and by the more intimate family or household group, the *umndeni*, which they translate as 'household'. They attempt to capture the 'enormous population mobility and complex, varied social arrangements' (Hosegood & Timaeus, 2003: 3) characteristic of KwaZulu-Natal by tracking changes in the composition of each *umndeni* and *umuzi* in a series of exhaustive, four-monthly follow-up interviews. They have no hesitation in recording multiple memberships – for example of a child with unmarried parents, and thus membership of both parents' homesteads – nor in recording as full members people who are living away – for example an absent working son of the head – provided they have returned home at least one night in the previous 12 months. This ambitious approach promises to 'capture aspects of

household that have been documented by qualitative research in Southern Africa but missed by most other large-scale enquiries' (*op.cit.*: 27). In their first analysis of this data, they find only 2.7 per cent of people have multiple household memberships.

As Hosegood and Timaeus (2003:28) acknowledge, the term *umndeni* is no more fixed in its subjective meaning than the English terms *family* and *household*, for 'no apparent consensus exists' on the 'important inclusion criteria'. However, their population pyramid of all *umndeni*/household members does suggest that some systematic *exclusion* is being exercised, for there is an unexpected shortfall of children under the age of 15.

The nipped base of the pyramid reflects either a dramatic drop in the birth rate, or an exceptional emigration of children, or systematic under-reporting of some children. The first is improbable, though the political violence of the eighties may have impacted on reproduction as war classically does. Condom use may now be pushing down the birth-rate, but this would not have been true in 1985-1990, as suggested by the pyramid (Aids-related deaths impact on a wider age range, especially the sexually active). The second explanation can be discounted by the research protocol which included absentees. We are left with the third possibility, the systematic under-reporting of some children.

The strict operation of patrilineal principles in people's perception of who composes the *umndeni* could have this consequence. Support for this interpretation comes from a table in which Hosegood and Timaeus list people who are actually living at the homestead but who have been excluded, by the informants' own judgement, from *umndeni* membership. Who are these excluded affiliates? Half of them are clearly outsiders loosely attached to houses – domestic and agricultural helpers etc. *But half of them are kin*: they include children and grandchildren of the head of the *umndeni*. On what basis have they been excluded? Possibly lineage. Just such a pyramid would result if all the offspring of the head and his wife were to be listed, but not the children of married daughters, (nor, possibly, of some unmarried daughters) who, by patrilineal rules, belong to their fathers. Their table shows that close kinship, by itself, of some people actually residing with the *umndeni*, is insufficient to prevent their classification, by at least some purists, as non-members.

Their research strategy works because it is grounded in the rural homestead. Physical location is the starting point. Each registered *umndeni* must have at least one member living at the homestead. An urban parallel is difficult to envisage because urban residence lacks all the formal continuity of the *umuzi*. Rural homestead membership is a birthright. Urban residence is where you happen to be.

Data collected in urban areas is always much more sparse. Without probing, inter-household linkages and dependencies are likely to go unrecorded. But simple questions can quickly reveal the complexity of relationships in an apparently nuclear urban household, for example by establishing the identity and location of each parent of a listed 'child' in the household, and the children (with co-parent) of each listed adult. Absent parents, absent children, absent partners are the commonplace of black households.

Absenteeism for reasons other than migration to work is less likely to be detected in standard urban surveys. Absent children are a case in point, discussed below. More perplexing are the criteria for deciding when and which absent adults deserve listing. How do you draw firm lines around permeable boundaries? Most surveys still look for a married couple as the lynchpin, and then turn to their offspring. Relatives falling outside this nuclear core are more likely to be omitted, especially if they are not physically present. An absent husband/father is most unlikely to be missed, but other absent contributors may well be.

As confusing as the absentees are the visitors. Take for example a married daughter with clear commitments to another set of kin. She is very unlikely to be considered a member of her parents' household *unless* she happens to be visiting the household at the time of the survey, when, as a daughter who has been sleeping in the house for the past however-many days, she suddenly very much resembles a household member. That such visiting is common, that people shunt between households, has long been observed in small-scale studies. Anthropological accounts are filled with case studies of people constantly on the move. Murray (1981) found the larger households in Lesotho to be in such a perpetual state of flux that it was difficult to identify *de jure* membership with any confidence. Webster (1987:14), grappling with the same problem in KwaZulu-Natal, was content to identify the bounded household as 'an analytic convenience. I regard it as one part of a matrix of relationships with other households, with absent members in towns, on farms, on mines'.

'It is clear that households have an empirical reality, based partly on residential site, a cohabiting population of fluctuating size (due to migrant labour or inter-household flows of population), a tendency to work cooperatively and share food and services within the household (though this is by no means absolute) and, most importantly, the pooling of income and goods, often from a variety of sources, into a collective consumption fund' (*ibid*).

The image is convincing, but offers the quantitative social scientist, anxious to grasp the bigger picture, little to go on. The economists Leibbrandt and Woolard, using the SALDRU 1993 data and the 1998 KIDS⁴⁰ follow-up study to examine shifts in the economic fate of 1003 African households in KwaZulu-Natal, found that eighty per cent of households had changed size within the five year period, half of them gaining or losing the equivalent of two adults or four children. Those who did both simultaneously, misleadingly swell the twenty per cent who appear ‘unchanged’. They comment, ‘the implications of this work are rather daunting for measurement at the household level because it seems clear that households themselves are endogenous and change and reshape in response to economic circumstances’ (Leibbrandt & Woolard, 2001: 688)

But before we attribute too much to demographic mobility, we must consider how the research protocols may have affected the apparent composition of households. The data Leibbrandt and Woolard worked with included migrants as household members only if they slept at the household for four of the preceding seven nights. Under this rule, all long-distance migrants would have been excluded as household members, with only their remittances included as household income – unless of course it happened that such a migrant worker was encountered at home during the enumeration (or within three days of a four-day – or longer – home visit). In this case s/he would have been included as a household member and consequently all of his/her earnings would have been included in the household income. Thus the chance visit of a migrant to his home at the moment of the survey interview can have the effect of doubling homestead cash income by his inclusion, or halving it by his exclusion should he be, as usual, at work. By the same logic, his random presence can have the effect of halving or doubling the number of female-headed households in the rural area. Research protocols shape data. Part of the apparent instability of the household membership (and its income, Leibbrandt and Woolard’s main interest) could be no more than the chance timing of a migrant’s visit home.

Pooling

The SALDRU 1993 sample of 8,800 households across South Africa (the basis of PSLSD) listed household members both present (*de facto* members) and absent (*de jure* members). Rules for inclusion were very generous: to qualify as a member, an absentee had to have lived in the household for at least 15 days of preceding *year*, as well as to have shared food from a common source when together, and contributed to or shared in a common resource pool. *De facto*

⁴⁰ KIDS, The KwaZulu-Natal Income Dynamic Study, resurveyed in 1998 those households surveyed by PSLSD in 1993 which were in KwaZulu Natal.

members had to have been living in the household for at least 15 days of the preceding *month* (PSLSD, 1994: 34). Their *de jure* household comes close to the conception of household proposed by Wallerstein and colleagues described earlier – the flexible, stretched, divided group, not necessarily co-resident, not necessarily kin, who pool income over a life time (though ‘life-time’ raises new problems). Murray (1981), Webster (1988) and Spiegel (1995, 1996), have all urged the adoption of such a concept.

But the ‘pool’ is not as useful as it sounds. It neatly accommodates the case of the single migrant labourer linked to some struggling rural base where his parents and wife are based, but it rapidly becomes very difficult to operationalise when obligations become more diverse. The idea of the *pool*, containing the shared resources of the range of people who will share over a lifetime, is too vague. Whose lifetime? How do we deal with a married woman’s continuing support (sometimes clandestine) to her own family of origin? How do we draw the line between one ‘household’ and another? When a migrant sets up with an urban partner is she too part of this stretched household? And since she supports her mother (from time to time) in some other rural homestead, are all three domestic units now fused on the grounds that some of their members support one another? Households may ‘pool’ some resources, but those who pool are not therefore a household.

The concept of pooling also draws on the somewhat discredited idea of household as a centralised cooperative. It is in danger of making unfounded assumptions about the coherence of the household. Some *indirect* evidence of how rare pooling is amongst black co-residing urban households comes from Skordis and Welch (2002) who, comparing methods of collecting income data, found co-residing coloureds to have more accurate knowledge of one another’s income than black people had. An analysis of the way Swazi men in work spent their wages showed a spread of erratic responsibilities to people in several different households, some ‘traditional’ – to a wife, a father, a mother, a grandmother – others experienced as immediate personal pressures – to a current girlfriend, to a sister needing school fees, to an ex-girl friend with whom he had had a child (Russell, 1984). Wallerstein and Smith’s neat geometry of adjacent life-time pools of shared resources bears little relationship to the untidy, overlapping, inter-locking, ever-changing networks of dependence and responsibility of contemporary South Africa. Redefining households as those who share, rather than those who live together presents unsolved major logistical problems, and leaves unresolved the issue of how we analyse the masses of information regularly gathered by the simple expedient of sampling addresses. The practical difficulty of applying Wallerstein’s concept of household is shown in Beittel’s (1992) essay, which tries to use his theoretical framework in a comparison of black and white households on the Witwatersrand over eighty

odd years. Working from secondary published sources, he is forced back on conventional definition of households as co-residential groups.

The Compatibility of the Agnatic Form with Modern World

The Western family historians identified individualism as a central factor in the establishment of the conjugal family, and attributed the emergence of individualism to the Reformation and the Renaissance. They depicted the extended family giving way to the conjugal family under the pressure of this individualism. Macfarlane, however, reverses the causal order, making the conjugal family a cause rather than a consequence of individualism. He explicitly attacks the dominant paradigm, arguing that new sources reveal English individualism as an *ancient* cultural trait, rooted in common law and private property, *preceding*, by several centuries, capitalism and industrialism. The Englishman's individualism was 'symbolised and shaped by his ego-centred kinship system' (Macfarlane, 1978: 196).

Goode's (1970) thesis of the compatibility of the nuclear family with industrialisation appeared undisturbed but, in fact, a significant change had occurred: *compatibility* was a much weaker hypothesis. Other family systems could also be compatible with industrialisation. The debate about whether black South Africans are adopting the nuclear family system becomes much more interesting when seen in this light. The question is not the misguided one about how far industrialism, capitalism and urbanisation have pushed people along an evolutionary path to a conjugal system, but what choices people are making, given that they now live in a society in which 'money, profit, contract, mobility, individualism and competition have all asserted themselves. How attractive and accessible is the conjugal pattern? How robust is the agnatic idiom to meet contemporary wants and needs?

The conjugal nuclear family household has been widely misunderstood as a response to capitalist industrial economy. This misunderstanding has been accompanied by an expectation that, wherever capitalism reaches, the conjugal family will eventually follow. This expectation is wrong on at least two counts. First (following Laslett (1965, 1972), Wall (1972), McFarlane (1978, 1986)), the conjugal nuclear household preceded rather than followed capitalism. Second (following Wallerstein and Smith (1992), Martin and Beittel (1987), Arrighi (1979)), in an international division of labour there are no grounds for expecting capitalism to shape uniform households throughout the world. To the contrary, people on the periphery are destined (by definition) to participate in the world

economy in a different way from people at the core, and to construct their households accordingly.

Black people in southern Africa were drawn into the world economy with a set of domestic practices shaped by very different economic circumstances, and legitimated by a conception of kinship (hence responsibility) very different from that in the West. This agnatic system is proving no less resilient at adapting to the demands of the international economy than the conjugal system. The notion that the Western nuclear family, with its limited size and restricted compass, is the ideal flexible unit for capitalism looks suspiciously ethnocentric when measured against the ease with which the agnatic system has been able to deliver highly mobile, single workers to the system – with no talk of a ‘family wage’.⁴¹ The subsequent erosion of African landholdings has changed the basis of this individual independence (there is no longer a kraal full of goats and cows, nor a field of maize and beans behind each worker), but not the culture of individual self-sufficiency which has emerged from an economy in which everyone (particularly women and children) made a significant contribution.

Single mothers stream onto the labour market confident that their children are safe, for in matters of child-rearing South African black society entertains a wider range of kin as carers than the West. Premarital pregnancies – a concomitant of traditionally protracted marriages – take place within an already-established household, that of the girl’s mother. If not already comprised of an ideal child-rearing group (those too old or too young for wage-employment), such kin can usually be called in. A major practical constraint against premarital pregnancies in the West – the absence of a viable household in which a child can be raised – falls away. Receptive households already exist in Africa. The West instead delegates a major share of child care to *non*-kin. All parents in Britain routinely have their parental rights curtailed when their children reach school-age at five. This practice of non-kin child-rearing was imposed 125 years ago in Britain, and has been one of the West’s most conscientious exports to other cultures ever since. The United Nations now routinely measures *deprivation* as – *inter alia* – the proportion of children being brought up by their own kin. That compulsory schooling by professionally trained outsiders is necessarily the better policy is seldom questioned.

‘Household’ in the Western conjugal system is narrowly prescribed. No such prescription limits co-residential patterns amongst black South Africans. May & Roberts (2001, 109) cite ‘preliminary evidence’ from panel studies of large data sets in KwaZulu Natal that ‘both poor and non-poor households may manipulate household composition and structure as a coping strategy at times of economic

⁴¹ Even Marx assumed women’s place was in the kitchen.

duress'. Households can reform in a number of ways at short notice in response to economic (or other) contingencies *because of* the kinship system. The formal multiplication of key statuses – *fathers* rather than father, *mothers* rather than mother – has real consequences. By contrast, the Western household composition is fixed within extremely narrow kinship limits. The African kinship system itself allows, even encourages, absenteeism. The flexibility of residence patterns amongst African children is strikingly at odds with Western expectations.

Although the household is a contingent social arrangement, such an arrangement can become institutionalised when a group of people face the same recurrent problems. The faster the pace of change, the less likely that household structures will be standardised. The tension in South Africa over tradition reflects the pace of transformation. Black family breakdown is a common theme of contemporary commentators. Murray (1981) reports a high rate of marital failure in Lesotho, and a breakdown of broader patterns of obligation between kin, as do Sharp and Spiegel (1985). Ross (1995) makes similar observations. Malao (1994:14) writes of the 'moral disintegration and social fragmentation' of the African family, and lists amongst its pathologies rape, infanticide, incest, adultery and child-mutilation.

A social transition is underway, but its nature is seriously misrepresented as a transition to a nuclear system. As suggested elsewhere (Russell, 2002), it is more helpful to see contemporary economic pressures modifying *both* the Western nuclear and the African agnatic systems in the same direction: greater individualisation, less long-term commitment, higher expectations of self-fulfilment and self-indulgence. The urban environment – the creation, in South Africa, of industrial capitalist entrepreneurship – allows and encourages this self-centredness. A barrage of advertising and a manipulated pop culture legitimate it. The new political culture of human rights, generously supported by capital, slyly underpins it. Urban black people are evenly divided over appropriate domestic behaviour. On the one hand, some adhere to the older standards, which are still upheld with remarkable consistency in rural areas; on the other, some espouse the newer ideas which impatiently reject such notions as personal responsibility for elderly parents, extended family household living, priority to in-laws, and post-parturition sexual abstinence (Russell, 2002: 53). Writing of Africa in general, Lesthaeghe, Kaufmann & Meekers (1989:241) acknowledge the 'weakening of lineage control' as a result of 'integration into the capitalist economy', but state 'at this juncture it is difficult to imagine individuals rejecting the supportive potential of the traditional kinship system completely'.

The implications for social scientists making household surveys are clear and dire. The assumption that those who at some surveyed moment are found living together constitute a persisting bounded interdependent unit, while valid for other parts of the world where conjugal kinship systems prevail, cannot be made in contemporary South Africa. Implicit recognition of this fact in the South African practice of listing absentees, is inadequate, for it makes similar Western assumptions about where people 'really' belong. All data on the distribution of household incomes, especially that which compares rural with urban, must be received with scepticism. New research protocols are urgently required, hopefully devised by imaginative native social scientists able to challenge Western stereotypes and engage directly with their own changing society.

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The Centre for Social Science Research

The CSSR is an umbrella organisation comprising five units:

The Aids and Society Research Unit (ASRU) supports quantitative and qualitative research into the social and economic impact of the HIV pandemic in Southern Africa. Focus areas include: the economics of reducing mother to child transmission of HIV, the impact of HIV on firms and households; and psychological aspects of HIV infection and prevention. ASRU operates an outreach programme in Khayelitsha (the Memory Box Project) which provides training and counselling for HIV positive people

The Data First Resource Unit ('Data First') provides training and resources for research. Its main functions are: 1) to provide access to digital data resources and specialised published material; 2) to facilitate the collection, exchange and use of data sets on a collaborative basis; 3) to provide basic and advanced training in data analysis; 4) the ongoing development of a web site to disseminate data and research output.

The Democracy in Africa Research Unit (DARU) supports students and scholars who conduct systematic research in the following three areas: 1) public opinion and political culture in Africa and its role in democratisation and consolidation; 2) elections and voting in Africa; and 3) the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on democratisation in Southern Africa. DARU has developed close working relationships with projects such as the Afrobarometer (a cross national survey of public opinion in fifteen African countries), the Comparative National Elections Project, and the Health Economics and AIDS Research Unit at the University of Natal.

The Social Surveys Unit (SSU) promotes critical analysis of the methodology, ethics and results of South African social science research. One core activity is the Cape Area Panel Study of young adults in Cape Town. This study follows 4800 young people as they move from school into the labour market and adulthood. The SSU is also planning a survey for 2004 on aspects of social capital, crime, and attitudes toward inequality.

The Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) was established in 1975 as part of the School of Economics and joined the CSSR in 2002. SALDRU conducted the first national household survey in 1993 (the Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development). More recently, SALDRU ran the Langeberg Integrated Family survey (1999) and the Khayelitsha/Mitchell's Plain Survey (2000). Current projects include research on public works programmes, poverty and inequality.
