MANAGING A POLYETHNIC MILIEU: KINSHIP AND
INTERACTION IN A LONDON SUBURB

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Instead of treating kinship as a system subject to ethnic closure, the article explores how the figure of the 'cousin' has come to function as a 'cultural unit' (Schneider 1980a) in a polyethnic and consciously multi-cultural setting. The setting, London's post-migration suburb of Southall, shows young Sikh, Hindu and Muslim South Asians, as well as Afro-Caribbeans and to some extent 'whites', converging upon an emphasis on cousin bonds and cousin claims. This convergence is understood as an internally plural process which, although subject to hegemonic influences, relies upon a variety of 'community'-specific and mutually independent post-migration agenda and thus cannot be reduced to direct dyadic exchanges. Exploring the significance of the cousin as a local multi-'cultural unit', the argument draws both on Schneider's idea of the 'two orders' and on the structural articulation of cousin claims with claims to cross-'community' loyalties. Ethnographic attention to processes of convergence may help studies of kinship to overcome the limitations of regarding ethnic delineations as boundaries of culture.

Introduction

'How come your parents let you come here?', I asked a 16-year-old Hindu boy, his can of beer in one hand and a fragrant joint of marijuana in the other, at an Afro-Caribbean late-night concert or 'gig'. 'I told 'em I was goin' out with my cousins', he answered with a happy grin. 'How did you get into this mess?', I asked a 17-year-old Sikh just out of Borstal after a three-year sentence for armed robbery. 'It was my cousin Raj', was the shoulder-shrugging reply: 'he said I should come along'. 'Why did you bunk off school?', I asked the timid 12-year-old Afro-Caribbean boy from next-door. 'My cousin did, too'. 'If you don't get off, I'll get my cousin Crazy on [to] you!' hollered an adolescent girl molested by a boy, invoking a cousin bond with a well-known member of one of Southall's two violent gangs.

Southall youth of the most diverse backgrounds talk of and invoke, claim and rely upon 'cousins' with a remarkable consistency. This consistency is surprising in a town of such palpable cultural heterogeneity. The 60,000 inhabitants of Southall do not form an 'ethnic group' or 'community', never refer to having a 'culture' in common, and certainly do not share the same system or even conceptions of kinship. The majority of local heads of households were born in former British colonies and came to Southall in the course of the great labour migrations of the 1950s and 1960s. The 1991 census of the densely-populated area counted some 50 per cent. of residents as 'Indian', 10 per cent. as 'Pakistani' or 'other Asian'; 30 per cent. as 'white', one in ten of them 'Irish'; and 5 per

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cent. as 'Black-Caribbean' (OPCS 1992). Among teenage youth, with whom this article is mainly concerned, about half are Sikh, some 20 per cent. each are Hindu and Muslim, and about 10 per cent. are Christian. Such enumerations of percentages, however, need to be read with caution. Contending national loyalties cut across religious identifications, as is the case between pro-Indian and pro-Khalistani Sikhs, and Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims; religious commitments cut across 'racial' identities, as is the case among 'white', 'black' and 'Asian' Christians; and differences of migratory history cut across religious loyalties, as in the case of East African-born 'Asians' faced with fellow Sikhs, Hindus or Muslims born on the Indian subcontinent. To inquire into Southall youths' ideas of peer kinship is thus to address the dynamics of kinship in a polyethnic, culturally plural environment that is characterized by the cross-cutting cleavages typical of a fully-fledged plural society. In dealing with these dynamics, one therefore cannot start with an 'ethnic' or quasi-'tribal' approach to ideas about kinship. While differences of localized historical heritages will certainly take their place in the ethnographic account, the analysis must start out by treating Southall as a single social field. This requires questioning the common assumption that boundaries of culture can be traced along ethnic boundaries.

**Questioning ethnic-as-cultural closure**

The assumption that boundaries of culture coincide with 'ethnic' or 'community' delineations is as prevalent in studies of kinship as it is in studies of urban 'ethnic communities'. It needs to be questioned in both fields. In the literature on post-migration and urban 'communities', the ethnographic record is saturated with reified notions of culture. Many 'community studies' have indeed enshrined the delineation of essentialized 'culture' boundaries along so-called 'ethnic' lines.¹ Empirically, the lines of demarcation may refer to religious difference or national 'otherness', to boundaries of caste or ancestral language, of regional origin or recent migratory path. It is clear that such ethnographic ghettoizing relies on excessively 'narrow definitions of culture' (Phoenix 1988: 153) and on an often biologicist cultural essentialism that has come in for serious criticism from the most diverse quarters.² These critiques of essentialism have sometimes (e.g. Sahlins 1994) overlooked the fact that informants themselves make use of essentialist views of culture and ethnic identity, much in line with what Berger and Luckmann (1967: 106–7) would lead one to expect. Informants' reifications, nonetheless, need to be treated as data, rather than peddled as analytical guidelines.

Dealing with young people in particular, and whether or not one endorses sociological notions like 'youth culture' and 'peer culture', culture cannot be approached as if it were some heirloom woven in a pre-migration ethnic past; nor, *a fortiori*, can kinship, urban or probably otherwise. The cohabitation of Southall residents in one suburb can be expected to spawn meanings and routines, negotiations and understandings which establish a shared, or at least a shareable and internally contestable, culture. My starting point can be placed in parallel to the work of Kuper (1993) and Masquelier (1993), in so far as it refuses to endorse any *a priori* equation between systems of kinship and marriage and ethnic delineations. Just as rural ethnographers have begun to examine
kinship in a regional framework, and pay attention to what happens across so-called ethnic boundaries, an ethnography of post-migration Londoners, too, must trace kinship ideas in the context of an arena of polyethnic, and indeed consciously ‘multi-cultural’, interaction. In attempting to understand local youths’ notions and uses of cousin bonds and claims, the most plausible points of departure must thus be the lexical item ‘cousin’ as it is used in the English language which they share,3 and, building on Schneider’s American kinship (1980a), the recognition of ‘cousin’ as a Southallian ‘cultural unit’.

_Currency and patterning of the ‘cousin’ as a cultural unit_

‘A unit in a particular culture’, defines Schneider (1980a: 2), ‘is simply anything that is culturally defined and distinguished as an entity’. Schneider gives ‘uncle’ as an example in American culture. In viewing the Southall ‘cousin’ as a cultural unit, a first concern must be to delineate its currency, and a second to search for internal social patterning of that currency.

The emphasis which Southall youth place on their ‘cousin’ bonds is not only a matter of anecdotal evidence, but is supported by quantitative data. These were collected as part of a survey among some 300 Southall teenagers which I conducted with a colleague (for details, see Gillespie 1992; 1995). Among other things, the survey asked: ‘How many cousins do you have that live in or near Southall?’ and: ‘Do you have a grandparent who lives in or near Southall?’ In summarizing the answers, Table 1 follows the emic distinction of five, putatively bounded, ‘communities’ which most local residents endorse in most general contexts: namely, the religious distinctions among South Asians as Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims, and the distinction of ‘race’ as between ‘whites’ and Afro-Caribbeans (for the latter, the sample was too small to be of use here).

**Table 1. Cousins and grandparents reported to live in or near Southall.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of cousins</th>
<th>One or more grandparents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total no.</td>
<td>None %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikh</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
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In interpreting these answers, there is no way of knowing, of course, whether Southall youngsters report ‘genealogical facts’. Yet there is, in any case, no such thing for a social researcher working outside sociobiological modelling or paternity courts. Instead, the interest of the statistical data lies in the gradations among the four ‘communities’. These make it clear that the cousin claims are numerically plausible, as well as socially patterned. A first glance at the table will
group together the cousin-rich Sikh and Hindu respondents and the cousin-poor Muslim and 'white' youth. The difference can be explained, or rather rendered plausible, in two ways. First, the wealth of cousins, as well as grandparents, among Sikh and Hindu youth makes sense in the light of their families' migratory history. Most of their parents were among the first migrants to settle in Southall in the 1950s and 1960s, were successful in spawning chain migration among siblings and close cousins, and were able later on to sponsor spouses and parents as secondary and dependent immigrants. The (mainly Pakistani) Muslims by contrast, faced with different laws of emigration at home, tended not to arrive in Southall until the 1960s or later and have been less successful in sponsoring a secondary process of migration drawing in their dependants. The reported figures for local grandparents confirm this pattern.

A second way of confirming that the figures are not indiscriminately inflated is by paying attention to the 'developmental cycle in domestic groups' (Goody 1958). Most Sikh and Hindu households reached their procreative peak in the 1970s, thus producing more cousins for their offspring who, aged 12 to 18, responded to our survey in 1989. The majority of Muslim households reached their procreative peak a decade later, and most 'white' households had reached theirs by the mid-1960s. The detailed data for these general statements can be found in local school rolls, which usually distinguish openly among religions as well as 'races' (Kogan 1975: 5-16) and can be counter-checked with extrapolations from the British national censuses. It seems likely, then, that the gradations summarized in Table 1 reflect more than Sikhs and Hindus inflating their cousin claims, and their Muslims and 'white' peers doing the opposite.

Still, the table contains reported claims, not biological data. To assess these claims more fully, it is necessary to pay attention to individual genealogies. Local genealogies were initially collected informally among Southall youth who had become key informants or friends. Genealogies in larger numbers were collected from final-year high school students with whom I was able to work on a classroom project concerned with the 'sociology of the family'. This project also produced data on their command of vernacular terminologies.4

Counting first cousins alone, fewer than half of the Southall youth who volunteered individual genealogies had '10 or more cousins living in or near Southall'. This might make the cousin claims elicited by the survey look rather inflated. Yet, it does not invalidate the 200 or so questionnaire respondents' claims. Rather, the genealogies make it clear that claims to cousinhood must be seen in conjunction with a key factor that many, and probably all, local youth of South Asian backgrounds share: due to the contingencies of selective migration, their local kinship networks are unmistakably diasporic. With far-flung relations residing nearby, and close relations living in India or Pakistan, Canada or Singapore, a mapping of local kinship bonds onto complete genealogies shows, not so much localized branches of family trees, as straggling antennae that reach out in all genealogical directions at once, yet never accommodate a single branch in one locality. To count cousins thus does not mean to count first cousins. To understand the 'cousin' as a Southallian cultural unit requires a consideration of English terminology. As Wolfram has summarized:

The cousin terminology is as such undifferentiated by sex or generation. [...] But distance and generation can be indicated. My parents' siblings' children are my first cousins. My
parents’ siblings’ grandchildren or my grandparents’ siblings’ children are my first cousins once removed. The children of two first cousins are second cousins, of two second cousins third cousins. Cousinhood can continue indefinitely (Wolfram 1987: 69).

Southall youth may or may not know this; but a consideration of their command of Punjabi terminology must indeed render the English term ‘cousin’ a cover-all. Its nearest equivalent is the term bhaanjii, which was used to refer to the children of MZ, FB and FZ. It was also widely used to refer to the offspring of the MB, whom other Punjabi-speakers sometimes distinguished as mavel or niane. Bhaanjii, the nearest equivalent to ‘cousin’, was further used to refer to the children of WB, WZ, HB and HZ. Some of the young Punjabi-speakers further substituted the ‘cousin’ term bhaanjii for bhaanji, that is, the offspring of one’s own brother or sister and thus one’s English-language nephews and nieces (Karve 1968 [1953]: 143-9). It is thus likely that Table 1 contains a number of nephews and nieces of proximate ages, as well as a number of other peers with whom consanguineal bonds are believed to exist, though they are not specifiable. This accords well with the genealogical data. In discussing these, Southall youth would often refer to ‘cousins’ and yet be unable, on closer questioning, to identify any precise genealogical link.

Among South Asian youth, a further reason for cousin claims devoid of genealogical specificity lies in the loose usage of the English terms ‘uncle’ and ‘aunt’, or undeji and auntieji, which children are taught to use as honorific terms even for the most distant local relatives, as well as for friends of their parents born in the same village. The children of these classificatory relatives are in turn often called ‘cousins’.5 It is tempting to trace this emphasis on classificatory kinship links to processes of urbanization, as Vatuk (1969; 1972) has considered in the case of rural-urban migrants in north India. Yet Vatuk carefully adds that ‘urban residence is intermediate in the causal chain leading toward changed kinship organization’, and she discerns ‘an underlying chain of forces which begins with education and permits occupational mobility, consequent geographical mobility, and neolocal residence patterns’ (1972: 191).6 The Southall data do not allow me to identify consistent differences in the classificatory kinship patterns of rural-urban migrants, as opposed to migrants who previously lived in urban areas of the Indian subcontinent or East Africa.

The construction of ‘cousin’ bonds entails different dynamics among local youth of Afro-Caribbean backgrounds. Yabsley (1990), who did fieldwork in Southall in 1989, pieced together the genealogical links among several Afro-Caribbean youth. As figure 1 shows, bonds of half-siblinghood do not require a common parent, and bonds of cousinhood likewise may be claimed and socially recognized well outside the range of consanguinity and even affinity.

Such detailed accounts of ‘cousin’ bonds, which involve several consensual unions in the parental generation, are hard to come by, as the persistent questioning that they require is clearly impossible without the most exceptional rapport. The data provide additional evidence, however, for the view that the emphasis on cousins observable among Southall youth is shared across locally salient ethnic, religious and cultural boundaries. In order to highlight this cross-‘community’ agreement, I shall use a term borrowed from another context, the word ‘convergence’, which in mathematics describes two vectors that independently approach the same point. I have used this term elsewhere in order to
a. Genealogy of three classificatory half-siblings.

b. Genealogy of five classificatory cousin bonds.

Note: Question marks indicate uncertainty within the cousin group about the matrilateral or patrilateral provenance of these bonds.

FIGURE 1. Genealogical links among half-siblings and cousins.

describe Southall people’s ideas about the shared ‘truths’ of different religious traditions (Baumann 1994). Used in relation to cousin claims, it may give a clearer shape to the exposition of further data.

Convergence: distinctive pathways towards homogenization

By convergence, I refer to a process of cultural homogenization in which separate traditions, let us call them A and B, come to approximate a further tradition C, originally alien to both of them. The term does thus not imply a cultural change based on dyadic or direct exchange, as so many studies of ‘acculturation’ have done. On the contrary, A and B are seen to converge upon C for their own, different reasons and following their own agenda and paths. They thus remain separate from each other, yet in the process of converging upon the same model C, they do increase their observable similarities. Such processes of convergence clearly do not develop in a power vacuum. Rather, they unfold in a social and cultural context within which certain practices or conceptions, namely those of C, are considered desirable or are accorded a hegemonic influence. To approach Southall youths’ emphasis on cousins as a process of
convergence thus helps to pinpoint some salient questions. One would wish to locate the hegemonic influence; work out the different agenda within each converging tradition; and assess the significance of cousin claims right across the cleavages of different ‘communities’, that is, to locate it in Southall as one social field.

The hegemonic influence behind Southall youths’ convergence on cousin claims appeared not to lie with ‘white’ youth, but with their Punjabi-speaking peers. ‘Whites’ engaged in cousin claims with remarkable caution, as I shall later explain. The cultural unit ‘cousin’ clearly involved the English language, the shared first language of virtually all Southall youth. Yet it relied on the parole of young people from Punjabi-speaking backgrounds who constitute the vast majority of local youth. While more than half of these are Sikhs, it would be unproductive to try to distinguish the hegemonic influence of Sikh youth from that of Punjabi-speaking Hindu youth: the boundary between Sikhs and Hindus is highly ambiguous as the literature shows (McLeod 1989; van der Veer 1994a). To attribute the hegemonic influence to Punjabi-speakers also makes sense in the light of three factors which predate their migration to Britain: a tradition of recognizing classificatory sibling bonds among closely-related peers; pre-migration conventions about the use of the English-language term ‘cousin’; and the hierarchical ranking of both authority and responsibility by relative age.

Subcontinental speakers of Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi are widely known to classify peer kin within the biradari or village lineage as ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’, and Ishwaran (1974: 173-7) has emphasized the continued interdependence of elementary and extended family ties even in urban settings. It would thus be plausible to view many cousin claims among Southall’s Punjabi-speakers as a transformation of classificatory sibling bonds into English-language ‘cousin’ bonds. Regarding pre-migration conventions about the use of the word ‘cousin’, it is worth noting the continued currency of the composite term ‘cousin-brother’, a usage which pre-dates the migration of Punjabi-speakers to Southall. A third factor that would make sense of attributing the hegemonic position to Punjabi-speakers concerns the pre-migration heritage of hierarchical ranking within the peer kin group. According to Punjabi traditions, older siblings and cousins should assume authority over, and responsibility for, their junior kin. One would thus expect to hear references to older ‘cousins’, particularly in contexts which imply a hierarchical ranking. The expectation is confirmed by the many cousin claims that involve protection from violence, chaperoning while going out, and the devolution of moral blame – all of them concerns which repeatedly occurred in the anecdotal evidence of Southall youths’ cousin claims.

In tracing the locally hegemonic influence to Punjabi-speaking Southall youth, the argument has so far emphasized the salience of ethnically or regionally specific kinship heritages. This accords well with Yanagisako’s (1985: 17-20) insistence that kinship patterns in a post-migration diaspora are shaped by, among other factors, distinctive pre-migratory traditions. At the same time, Yanagisako is right in laying equal stress upon the symbolic reconstruction of these traditions in the post-migration environment, and on the role of personal experience and practice in the new local context (1985: 17-20, 247-55). Some of these factors will be seen more clearly as the argument moves from the question
of hegemony to an examination of the different kinship agenda within each ‘community’.

Tracing these ‘community’-specific considerations among Sikhs, I have already mentioned that parents from the rural Punjab often classify friends from their home villages as ‘uncles’ and ‘aunties’ of their children and may thus contribute to ‘creating’ more cousin bonds than their children would otherwise recognize. Among Sikh parents, one can sometimes observe a second set of circumstances in which they ‘create’ additional cousin bonds for their children, and this is connected to the conventions which govern children’s marriages. Most Sikh families disapprove of marriages within any of the eight lines of descent (got) of the potential spouses’ great-grandparents, and youth are often under strong pressure to agree to one or other of several potential ‘matches’ selected by their parents. Local Sikh youth, by contrast, tend to aspire to a ‘love marriage’, albeit with a Sikh wherever possible. Faced with children who do, or might, develop close relations with Sikh peers of the opposite sex, Sikh parents sometimes rule out any unwelcome sweethearts by classifying them as ‘cousins’. This may be based on genealogical knowledge, but it certainly need not be.

There were two cases at least when local Sikh parents had to write back to India to inquire about the precise genealogical bonds between young couples previously discouraged from intimacy on the basis that they were cousins. Older relatives had to be consulted as to whether the couple could marry within the eight-got rule after all, and whether they were really cousins, as the parents had come to convince themselves.

Another example of parental rules which reinforce young people’s emphasis on cousin bonds relates to Southall’s Hindus as well as Sikhs. It concerns the control over youngsters’ peer influences. If teenage children insist on going out at night, many Punjabi parents demand that they go with a cousin, especially a male one. Whether this is a genealogical cousin or not, one knows his parents, one can double-check, and can safely rely on his keeping one’s daughter ‘safe’ and one’s son ‘on the straight and narrow’. In practice, of course, the ‘cousins’ know each other well enough to ‘cover’ for one another should the need arise. Yet many parents feel that they can at least save face by insisting on this precaution, however elusive its benefits. In Sikh and Hindu households, Southall youths’ emphasis on cousin bonds can thus draw upon some active parental encouragement. To stylize distant kin or non-kin into cousins helps to bring cohesion to diasporic local networks, can serve to dissuade youngsters from unwelcome flirtations, and promises a last resort in keeping peer activities within the ambit of family control. This constellation is certain to differ in Muslim households, due to the special role accorded to marriage with a classificatory cousin. Muslim parents are less likely to use the term ‘cousin’ as loosely as do their Sikh and Hindu counterparts, and are more likely to insist that their children socialize in single-sex networks. Faced with a daughter who insists on going out after school or at night, Muslim parents are thus unlikely to entrust her to the protection of a male cousin.

Among Afro-Caribbean youth, cousin claims are related to quite another set of kinship considerations. An example may be seen in the comparative instability of domestic unions which was implicit in Yabsley’s data mentioned above. While consensual unions are not considered ‘the norm’, they are by no means
rare, and classificatory cousin bonds can help children and youth in the task of ordering complex genealogical links. At the same time, the friendships established through consensual unions can easily last beyond the time of sexual involvement, and Yabsley (1990: 77) found herself 'struck [...] by the links which are maintained with ex-lovers, whether or not any children resulted from the relationship'. Parents may conceivably find reasons to discourage their children from recognizing particular half-sibling or cousin bonds; but I expect these cases to be the exception, rather than the rule, especially in the light of a distinctive local settlement pattern.

Unlike their Sikh, Hindu and Muslim neighbours, Afro-Caribbean residents regard Southall not as 'their' town, but as an outpost of their wider west London settlement. Afro-Caribbean households stretch in a crescent, some fifteen miles long, from the western districts of central London through the north-western suburbs to the far western outskirts, and Southall sits on the western-most edge of that crescent. The social life of both adult and teenage Afro-Caribbean residents is of a far wider geographical range than that of virtually any other ethnic category, and one of the commonest 'cousin boasts' is that one has 'cousins all over the place', meaning the whole of west London. The boast implies the claim to having an enviably active, free-ranging, resourceful leisure life, since with cousins one can meet up in distant discos and clubs and then spend the rest of the night in each other's flats. Cousins among Afro-Caribbean residents thus take on a function that is less prominent among their South Asian neighbours by providing a regional network well beyond the confines of 'way-out Southall'.

Turning finally to the cultural specificities of cousin claims among 'white' Southall youth, there are two points to make. The first concerns the plausibility of cousin claims registered in the quantitative survey. While one-third of 'white' youth reported no cousins living in or near Southall, one-third claimed to have from one to five cousins locally resident, and slightly less counted five cousins or more. I had expected 'white' local networks of kinship to be less dense and have less anecdotal evidence of 'white' youngsters referring to cousins than for their Sikh and Hindu peers. In my experience, they refer to 'friends' and 'mates' as readily as they refer to 'cousins', a point to which I shall return in the conclusion.

The second point concerns differences between English and Irish cousin claims. My general impression was that Southall residents of Irish backgrounds invoked cousins more frequently and more emphatically than their English counterparts, and this may be connected to the different systems of reckoning degrees. In England, the traditional Catholic 'canon law' method of reckoning degrees was replaced by the Anglican Reformation. According to this more recent and peculiarly English 'civil law reckoning of degrees', first cousins are no longer kin of the second degree, but kin of the fourth. 'Common thinking in England', comments Wolfram, 'follows the same pattern. Parents and children are considered to be more closely related than brothers and sisters or than grandparents and grandchildren. Uncles and aunts and nephews and nieces (who are in the third degree) are thought of as more distantly related, and cousins more distantly still' (Wolfram 1987: 15). It is possible that Irish migrants and their offspring do not reckon degrees according to this English 'civil
law’ tradition which emphasizes cross-generation bonds, but continue, in the spirit of the ‘canon law’ tradition, to emphasize intra-generational bonds and regard cousins as exceptionally close kin. An alternative way of accounting for differences between English and Irish cousin claims may lie in the difference between migrants and natives, a point to which I shall return very shortly.

This section has tried to stress how processes of convergence follow different trajectories and different agenda in each of their constituencies. Cousin claims can be seen to differ in accordance with different kinship traditions and marriage practices, and also with regard to different migratory histories and post-migration agenda. What remains to be shown is why it should be the cousin who has come to represent a point of convergence in Southall youths’ ideas of peer kinship. In attempting to answer this question, I shall point to two strands of significance that Southall youth attach to cousin claims almost regardless of their separate kinship traditions. A cousin is a special kind of peer; and cousin claims are the structural antipode to claims of cross-‘community’ friendship.

The dual significance of cousin claims

If Southall youth converge upon claiming, invoking, and perhaps even inflating the numbers of cousins, and if they do so despite their different kinship traditions and post-migration agenda, then one needs to ask what it might signify to call someone a cousin. To ‘have lots of cousins’ is useful in Southall. As we have seen, their company, real or pretended, may secure parental leave or offer protection from threats, and their influence can serve as an excuse for one’s own deviance, be it truancy or an armed robbery. Southall youth thus use the kinship term to create and activate special bonds among peers. One aspect of this special significance is evident in the saying: ‘cousins are friends who are kin and kin who are friends’. To explore this point, it is again useful to turn to Schneider (1980a: 29), who suggested that American conceptions of kinship could be seen as ‘a special instance of the two major orders which American culture posits the world to be made up of, the order of nature, and the order of law’:

The natural order is the way things are in nature. It consists in objects found free in nature. It is ‘the facts of life’ as they really exist. […] The other general order in American culture is the order of law. The order of law is imposed by man and consists of rules and regulations, customs and traditions […] (Schneider 1980a: 26-7, author’s emphasis).

Among Southall youth, the two orders that are fused in the idea of a cousin can be more narrowly circumscribed as the quasi-natural order of consanguinity and the social order of structuring one’s relations among peers. Both are essential to one’s daily life, yet they are also fraught with restrictions and dangers. In cousins, the best of both worlds coincides. The social efficacy of this coincidence is tangible in some contexts. A young person who threatens a bully with revenge by his or her cousin can be paraphrased as saying two things at once: ‘I have a friend who will avenge or protect me, and he or she is family with all the axiomatic loyalty and commitment that blood bonds entail’. The young man explaining his involvement in an armed robbery by invoking his cousin, again appears to say two things: ‘I was drawn into it by a friend, and I gave him the trust and the loyalty that one owes to a kinsman’.
This coincidence of family and friendship, blood and mind, attaches to cousins rather than siblings for several reasons. First, the intimacy, as well as the potential rivalry, among co-resident siblings often forestall any consciousness of personal choice. Only where there is residential separation, as with many Afro-Caribbean informants, may claims to half-siblinghood take on an aura of personally-chosen commitments. Secondly, in most of Southall’s co-resident nuclear families, the sibling bond carries high normative expectations: siblings are ‘meant to’ like each other and even to have each others’ best interests at heart, irrespective of individual choice. Cousins, by contrast, are kin whom one has chosen to rely upon and who have chosen, in turn, to lend help or protection. Conversely, to blame a sibling, rather than a cousin, for one’s misdemeanours would amount to discrediting one’s own parental household and nuclear family’s honour. Cousins are near enough in nature to owe one solidarity, yet are distant enough genealogically for the bonds to require voluntary and personal bonding. Unlike siblings, cousins can be claimed with the greatest genealogical ease, as well as blamed with the greatest social facility.

The coincidence of nature and choice in cousinhood has a further significance in the polyethnic arena of Southall. Southall is not simply a town, but a town of ‘communities’ separated on emically reified ‘ethnic’ and ‘cultural’ grounds. Intermarriage between Afro-Caribbeans, South Asians and ‘whites’ is still exceedingly rare and publicly frowned upon. Marriages between Sikhs and Hindus, let alone between Sikhs or Hindu and Muslims, are widely regarded as infringements of family honour (izzat), if not the honour of one’s biradari or whole ‘community’. The few who dare enter such ‘mixed marriages’ will almost always seek lodgings closer to metropolitan London. A Southall youth’s claim to cousinhood is thus, in effect, a claim to an axiomatic loyalty inherent within his or her own ‘community’. It is for this reason that one may describe cousin claims as the structural antipode to claims of friendship across putative ethnic and, as importantly in Southall, religious boundaries. These claims to having good friends in ‘other communities’ are by no means rare, and were clearly evident in the returns of the survey. Our questionnaire asked 324 young people to ‘think of the five people you spend most time with outside school. Does any of them have a different religion from you?’ Forty-seven per cent. answered ‘yes’. This may seem unsurprising in a town of such religious diversity; yet even among young Sikhs, who by their weight of numbers can easily confine their circle of best friends to fellow-Sikhs, 42 per cent. of boys and 47 per cent. of girls sustained the general pattern.

Yet to claim friends of another religion has a very different place in young people’s discursive repertoires. For the young armed robber, a Sikh, to explain that he was drawn into crime by ‘a Muslim friend’ would be an entirely different strategy. I have sometimes heard parents explain deviance in their own ‘community’ by saying: ‘it’s the Muslims [or West Indians, or Sikhs] that have done it to them: they are a bad influence’. But for a young Sikh to blame a Muslim rather than a cousin for his misfortunes would amount to admitting to a lack of social judgement: the very opposite of following a cousin into crime.

The fact that cousin claims invariably invoke support from within one’s own ‘community’ is of special interest in understanding young ‘white’ youths’ position in the society of their peers. Their place is highly ambiguous since, on the
one hand, they form a tiny local minority among teenage youth, while, on the other hand, they are seen to form part of the 'white' majority of the country at large. This 'white majority' includes 'white racists' and, as every Southall youngster knows, 'many whites don't like coloured people'. For a 'white' youngster to refer to cousins is legitimate, for who can blame one for bonds of blood. Yet to claim cousins more than 'friends' and 'mates', as so many of their peers do, would lay them open to the suspicion of 'sticking only with whites' or being short of 'black and Asian' friends. Neither is an impression that any 'white' young person would want to encourage. Instead, 'white' youngsters seemed unusually adamant in explicitly invoking 'a black friend' or 'an Asian friend' when in need of claiming support. The former, 'a black friend', is a commoner claim, for local stereotypes of Afro-Caribbean youth stress the 'hard' masculinity of males and the 'cool', no-nonsense solidity of females. For 'white' youngsters to claim 'black friends' is thus to make three statements at once: one has friends whom it would be foolish to 'mess with'; they are of a local minority as one is oneself; and they are not 'white', proving that one is not a racist.

The choices of 'white' youth, as between referring to cousins and referring to 'black friends', are but a special instance of a more comprehensive and general significance of Southall youths' cousin talk. All cousin claims, located within, rather than across, 'community' boundaries as they effectively are, form the structural opposite of claiming friends of other religions, 'races' or 'cultures'. The ambivalences of 'white' claims to cousins render the connexion more visible, since they lend it a subtle twist; but the connexion itself is valid across the Southall arena at large. That it is a kinship term which affords this counter-balance to 'mixing with all' and 'having friends from other cultures' is worth noting. Kinship, and by implication kinship bonds among peers, represent the epitome, to most Southall youth, of bonds beyond question. Kinship, or simply 'family' or 'blood', provides the one discursive realm that stands for axiomatic certainty. Much of the social world may be characterized by fashion and change, by rules with exceptions and contingencies without rules. Amidst this universe of cultural relativity, kinship represents that which is paradigmatically real, given and natural.

This may not be surprising among teenagers; but it might appear surprising among young people raised in a polyethic environment and highly conscious of its 'multi-cultural' variety. Yet the fact that, say, two Afro-Caribbean classmates are brought up by a single mother and regard each other as half-siblings is regarded, quite simply, as a contingency. Even when Afro-Caribbeans are known in greater numbers to follow different marital practices, this is taken as 'part of their culture', a term which young people in Southall can reify with the greatest of ease. The same applies to those who profess different norms. Sikh and Hindu adolescents are well aware that their Muslim peers are 'supposed to marry a cousin', while they themselves are prohibited from doing so. Yet the high school students to whom I had explained the rudiments of Lévi-Strauss, suggesting that cousin marriage might 'look almost like incest to an outsider', returned nothing but blank looks: the common idea that 'it's part of their religion' was considered not merely a legitimation but an explanation and an endorsement of the moral authority attaching to the 'rule'. At face value, the belief that kinship is 'natural' seems to clash with their knowledge that kinship
is cultural. Yet Southall youngsters do not think of nature and culture as a pair of binary opposites. Rather, cultural variety is human nature or, in the words of a young informant, 'it's natural to do what your culture tells you to do'. People can thus comprehend their lives as an enactment of consciously 'cultural' specificities, and yet at the same time believe that all kinship, just like all culture, is 'natural'.

The same goes for the differences in kinship terminologies. The 18-year-old final-year students of sociology were aware that kinship terminologies differ between Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi, Pashto and English. Yet terminological differences appeared to them as simply that: other words, perhaps more words, perhaps fewer or even missing words, but 'all for the same thing'. Humans are produced, and thus given kin, in the same way the world over, and a cousin is a cousin is a cousin. It is perhaps this apparent certainty of kinship as a real thing, the same across 'cultures' and their 'communities', that makes the cousin such a powerful, and seemingly unquestionable, trope among peers of disparate backgrounds.

Conclusion

In analysing the Southall data, I have taken two cues from Schneider's work on American kinship. I have approached the Southall cousin as a multi-'cultural unit' (1980a: 2) and have used Schneider's idea of the 'two orders' (1980a: 26) to point to one strand of significance in the convergence on cousin bonds: they fuse the perceived facts of 'blood' with the conscious choices of friendship. The other strand of significance which I noted lay in the structural opposition between emphasizing cousin bonds and claiming to 'mix with all' or 'having friends from other cultures'. The data might have been analysed without explicit reference to the idea of 'convergence', though the term has several advantages which it is worth drawing out by way of conclusion.

First, it allows the ethnographer to abandon the futile search for dyadic exchanges as the motor of cultural harmonization or homogenization. I wish to treat Southall as one social field, not as a daisy-chain of dyadic exchanges between five reified 'communities'. Secondly, the term has potential in describing other processes of cultural homogenization, such as the development of shared ideas about the commonalities perceived among all religions (Baumann 1994). Another example can be seen in the convergence, observable among Southall youth of all 'communities', upon hegemonic Black-American ideas of body culture, masculinity, and public self-presentation. There thus seems every reason to explore the idea of convergence in its wider ethnographic uses. But the idea of convergence may also have something to say about Schneider's work.

Schneider was repeatedly accused of ignoring 'ethnic' differences when discussing 'American kinship'. While conceding this as 'an error which later research has corrected' (1980b: 122), he raises a highly interesting possibility: 'It is not impossible that the variations in class and ethnicity are but systematic transformations of an underlying or more general set of similarities, and it may yet be shown that there is a single, coherent, and integrated pattern of which that part outlined in American Kinship is but one' (1980b: 122-3). Yanagisako (1985: 255-61) has pursued this suggestion and proposed that 'Americans both
share the same folk model of the relation between their history and their culture and have different models of their respective cultural histories' (1985: 257).

The Southall data on convergence, as well as the dual significance of local cousin claims, appear to indicate a coherent and integrated pattern of defining and contextualizing peer kinship that reaches across a number of emically reified ethnic and 'cultural' boundaries. When Schneider's account first appeared, anthropologists still 'knew', of course, what an 'ethnos' was and that it stood for a 'culture'. So long as ideas of ethnic-as-cultural closure were taken for granted, there could indeed be no valid 'cultural analysis' (Schneider 1980a: 1) of a multi-cultural formation such as 'America'. Yet ethnicist closures have widely ceased to make empirical sense, whether or not they ever made theoretical sense. There is now something decidedly antediluvian about protestations that 'American kinship' cannot be studied because 'America isn't a culture'. Nor is there a Southall culture in any ethnic sense. But if young suburban Londoners come to converge, in the space of a juvenile life-time, on shared notions of cousinhood, as of religious truths, musical tastes, physical ideals and a host of other conceptions and choices, there is much to be said for testing the empirical processes and limits of convergence across so-called ethnic delineations.

Having grown tired of the ethnicist criticisms of Schneider, I am still bound to find my own methods inadequate. I say this quite openly, not least since the fault is not entirely mine. Neither my elders nor indeed my 'cousins' in the subject have given me more than hints on how to study kinship, or perhaps better 'kinship' (Schneider 1972; 1984), across essentialized ethnic boundaries. There may be better ways to do this than by quantifying cousin claims by survey methods or obliging high school students to translate relationship terminologies according to 'Notes and Queries' (BAAS 1929). Our methods may need some refinement, not least in urban research, if kinship studies, too, are to escape from the self-inflicted syndrome of regarding ethnic delineations as boundaries of culture.

NOTES

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1 Strictly speaking, the words 'ethnic' and 'community' should be placed in inverted commas throughout, since they represent notions that I quote from others, including Southall people who use them as descriptive terms. My work in Southall, however, has left me quite unconvinced of their analytical usefulness. What is interesting about urban 'ethnicity', and in particular its discursive devices of 'ethnic' and 'community', is its capacity to hide the very multiplicity of linguistic, regional, national and other cultural cleavages that cut across each other. Any of these cross-cutting cleavages, and several others such as religion and caste, can take on the significance of 'ethnic' or 'community' boundaries, depending on context.

2 Their range is impressive. At the most conservative end of the spectrum, there are programmatic critiques of essentialism endorsed even in the face of the Boasian heritage of American anthropology (Keesing 1994; Sahlins 1994; Vayda 1994). In the genre that questions theoretical
assumptions by pitching them against the exposition of new ethnographic data, see, for instance, Kapferer (1988), van der Veer (1994b) and Vertovec (1995). From the politically engaged end of writing about post-migration culture, a good example is Gilroy (1992).

3 Virtually all teenagers in Southall are born in town and speak English with a recognizable west London accent. Even those whose parents speak Punjabi, Urdu or Hindi to them acquire a flawless command of English as their linguistic competence widens with peers at play-school or primary school and with their exposure to English-speaking media. Southall youth of South Asian backgrounds adjust their remnants of Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu to a sociolect, close to a Mischsprache, which speakers of Punjabi in India recognize as a distinctive Southali.

4 The data were gathered by asking students to translate the English-language relationship terminology according to ‘Notes and Queries’ (BAAS 1929). The results showed a remarkable disparity between the youths’ command of terms of reference, as opposed to terms of address. This is in keeping with the physical remoteness of even close degrees of kin; and it is further explained by the preference, observable among many South Asian Southall youth, for using personal names. This preference is prevalent even in addressing older relatives, ‘especially’, I was told, ‘if they are more westernized’.

For one term, the disparity described had reasons of its own. Punjabi, Urdu, and Hindi ‘bhabhi’, meaning ‘brother’s wife’, was familiar to all as a term of reference, but used by none as a term of address. While middle-aged and older Punjabi-speakers may use the term as an honorific address for the wife of a close friend, the teenagers I asked associated it with the pitiable plight of a newly-wed woman placed ‘under the thumb of her mother-in-law’. This connotes powerlessness and enforced subordination, and for a young person to address his or her sister-in-law as bhabhi would be, in the words of one informant, ‘like calling her a loser to her face’. The term has lent its name to a card game of cunning and deceit which is popular among Southall boys and often entails savage physical penalties for the loser or bhabhi. The semantic shift may reflect serious misgivings about the effects of ‘arranged marriages’ in general and patrilocal residence in particular.

It is notable that both Urdu and Punjabi terminologies contained a number of distinctively Hindi terms such as didi alongside bhen for ‘sister’, bahu alongside nou for son’s wife, and aurat and patni alongside bivi for ‘wife’. The explanation was simple, however: ‘Our parents all watch Hindi movies, and so we watch them, too, and pick up the words. Everyone in Southall knows some Hindi words, and words like these come from the movies’. For a thorough discussion of Southall residents’ uses of Hindi films, see Gillespie (1992; 1995).

5 This observation raises the question of how South Asian Southall youth define their biradari. If classificatory ‘uncles’ and ‘aunties’ are known not to be consanguineal kin, and thus to stand outside the biradari in its narrow sense, then it would appear implausible to classify their offspring as ‘cousins’ and thus part of the biradari in the narrow sense. The definition of biradari, however, has assumed an almost bewildering vagueness under the conditions of the diaspora. Werbner (1990: 97) observes how, among Pakistani residents of Manchester, ‘the notion of biradari is used not only in this restricted sense [of a village lineage] but has a series of segmentary contextual meanings – it is once again a term with a “sliding semantic structure” in Alavi’s terms’. Shaw (1988: 98-102) reports Pakistani residents of Oxford using the term to denote local communities of kin, of caste, and of regional origin ‘even though there were no known kinship links’ (1988: 99). She concludes that ‘the simple definition of biradari […] might therefore be “the group I belong to”, and this sense of belonging widens or narrows its focus depending on the context’ (Shaw 1988: 99). Given the flexibility of the term, considerations of biradari boundaries are unlikely to dissuade Southall youth from classifying the offspring of ‘uncles’ and ‘aunties’ as ‘cousins’. It is also unlikely, however, that all offspring of classificatory ‘uncles’ and ‘aunties’ are classified as ‘cousins’ indiscriminately. I shall return to this element of choice below.

6 To connect a growing emphasis on ‘cousin’ bonds with processes of urbanization, one might also think of the Jewish ‘cousin clubs’ in New York City described by Mitchell (1978). Yet these so-called ‘cousin clubs’ represent voluntary formal organizations recruited on the basis of descent from one or more apical ancestors and differ from the pre-existing, and still continuing, ‘family circles’ only by the exclusion of the oldest cohort of members ‘as the younger members became more Americanized […and] the generation gap widened’ (1978: 11). Their only intrinsic connexion to a process of urbanization appears to lie in their capacity periodically to assemble consanguineal, and often also affinal, kin despite increasing residential dispersal.
Consistent with my remarks on Muslim parental agenda above, the notable exception to this general statement is the cousin with whom a Muslim youth may be expected to contract marriage.

I have discussed the 'culture consciousness among Southall children' elsewhere (Baumann forthcoming). I argue there that 'the adult equation of five cultures with five communities is taken for granted and consciously expressed by children' below the age of functional literacy; and that this
conscious collective among young Southallians describes a heightened awareness that one's own life, as well as the lives of all others, are informed by 'the culture you're from'. Culture consciousness is thus a pervasive awareness that what one does, thinks and 'is', are intrinsically determined by culture in its reified sense (Baumann in press).

REFERENCES


Gérer un milieu polyethnique: interaction et parenté dans une banlieue londonaise

Résumé

Plutôt que de traiter la parenté comme un système enclin à la closure ethnique, l'article explore la façon dont la figure du 'cousin' en est venue à fonctionner comme une 'unité culturelle' (Schneider 1980a) à l'intérieur d'un cadre polyethnique très conscient de son caractère multiculturel: la banlieue londonaise de Southall dans la période qui a suivi les mouvements migratoires. On y observe que les jeunes sikhs, hindous, musulmans du sud-est asiatique, noirs antillais, et même certains jeunes blancs se disent cousins, plus, qu'ils se servent de liens de 'cousinage' pour établir leurs pétitions. L'auteur analyse cette convergence comme un processus plural interne qui, bien que soumis à des influences hégémoniques, repose sur un ensemble de demandes tout à la fois liées à la condition d'émigré et propres à chaque communauté ethnique. Ce processus ne peut donc être réduit à une série d'échanges directs dyadiques. L'argumentation, qui explore la portée du cousin en tant qu'unité multiculturelle locale, repose sur, d'une part, l'idée de 'deux ordres' avancée par Schneider, et, d'autre part, l'articulation structurelle entre les demandes mutuelles que se font les cousins et les exigences de loyauté existant entre communautés ethniques. Cette attention ethnographique dirigée sur les processus de convergence peut permettre aux études sur la parenté de surmonter les limitations d'une analyse aujourd'hui entraînée par une homologie de principe entre frontières ethniques et frontières culturelles.

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