

**COMMENT ON VAZ'  
*RELATIVES, MOLECULES AND PARTICLES***

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This book-length study has several virtues. It is good to see a detailed study of a 'tribal' kinship system in the traditional mould, and especially a study of this particular group, who receive considerable attention in the classic work on Dravidian kinship by Trautmann (1981). Vaz has been engaged with the Madia for some twenty years, and has useful ethnography to report. On the other hand, the text makes very severe demands on its readers – for several reasons.

1. It is not well structured. Normally an academic work starts with an account of the present state of knowledge, factual and/or theoretical, and explains how it is proposed to add to knowledge or revise theory. Grigson's ethnography of a neighbouring group of Madia is mentioned in the second footnote, but the reader is offered no assessment of this work and its data are mentioned only occasionally. Trautmann's major work is not mentioned until p. 90, and one never learns that it contains analysis and discussion of the Madia kinship terminology collected by Grigson. Nor is there any attempt to evaluate Trautmann's approach in 1981, even when Vaz's findings cast interesting doubt on features of that approach (in particular, on the application to G+1 of Trautmann's concept of crossness).

More generally, problems of presentation are pervasive. Although the abstract ends with the claim that the author has 'avoided serious theoretical considerations', in fact reportage and theorising constantly intermingle. One has the impression of wandering into and around the field of study, rather than proceeding from step to step of an argument that has been clearly thought out in advance.

2. Analytical terminology. A major reason why the text is so difficult to follow is the idiosyncratic use of analytical terminology. In the organisation of chapters considerable weight is laid on the distinction between sociocentric and egocentric, the former connoting terms of address, the latter terms of reference. But both sort of term have an ego and an alter and in that sense are egocentric. Sociocentric kinship phenomena pertain to the division of society into enduring groups, usually named, and having a bearing on descent and alliance – here the four, largely exogamic, 'god-groups' (also confusingly called 'sections'), among which are distributed the hundred or so clans.

Again, much space in Chapter 1 is given to 'complementation'. This apparently refers to the fact that the terms for relatives in ascending generations have affinal specifications as well as cognatic ones. The presentation might have been less laborious and easier to follow if it had included the standard genealogical diagram illustrating bilateral cross-cousin marriage (such diagrams are neither used nor referred to – it is not clear why). The distinction between

categorisation and classification on p. 7-8 is equally obscure, and there is indefinite scope for similar critical observations.

3. The study is too long. The chapters bearing on DNA and on elementary particles (as discussed by physicists and cosmologists) give evidence of an adventurous curiosity, and cast light on certain of the author's analyses (for instance her interest in numerology, particularly in totting up the number of terms of different types). However, they are completely irrelevant to understanding Madia or Dravidian ethnography, and would have been better omitted. The same applies to the ornamental *kolam* diagram: one can arrange kinship terms in all sorts of ways on the page, but such arrangements should serve to clarify what might be problematic, rather than to challenge the hermeneutic skills of readers. For the double helix diagram, see §4.

4. Historical conclusions. Although Vaz shows no awareness of diachronic semantics (e.g. loan words), her later chapters argue (mainly on typological grounds such as the number of kinship terms) that the Madia kinship terminology (the language belongs to the Central branch of the Dravidian language family) is more conservative than southern Dravidian Tamil. Nothing enables one to infer the FZD marriage preference from the Madia terms and their specifications, so it is confusing that Vaz attributes to her informants an 'FZD terminology'. Moreover, whatever the opinions of Lévi-Strauss, it is not at all clear that either of the two main unilateral patterns is more conservative than a bilateral one; nor is it clear that the numerous alternate generation equations in Madia reflect the fact that in conventional genealogical models showing FZD marriage the direction in which women move is the same in alternate generations. From the point of view of tetradic theory these particular Madia equations are a survival from the systematic equations that characterised the simplest – and hence presumably the earliest – human kinship systems. So she is right to see the Madia as conserving where the Tamils have innovated, but mistaken in identifying what it is that is conservative.

The point is illustrated by her use of the double helix model. The model is presented (obscurely) as relating to FZD marriage, and no doubt explains her excursion into DNA. In tetradic theory, the two strands of a double helix model represent the two generation moieties, and the point of the model is to help conceptualise the temporal continuity of entities which in generation-based genealogical diagrams may seem to be discontinuous. Generation moieties are of course absent as such among the Madia, but they have left the alternate generation equations as traces of their former existence. Probably that is what the ethnographer is sensing.

If I have criticised the study at some length it is not because I think it should be totally dismissed. On the contrary: it is to try and help the patient reader to tease out certain valuable threads from the tangled mass. As we have just seen, the partial assimilation of alternate generations is an important phenomenon that can be used to support tetradic theory. The distinction between affectionate and aggressive joking relationships (1.3.2) is interesting. Above all perhaps, as was noted earlier, the difficulties involved in deciding whether FZ and M are to be classified as parallel or cross problematizes the very notion of crossness, according well with the worries I expressed in 1998.