

THE TURKISH SYSTEM OF KINSHIP

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The Turkish languages are rich in words for the various grades of kinship, both blood relationship and relationship established through marriage. Many of these words are employed very differently in the different dialects so as to produce the impression of being flotsam from a broken-up vessel and having now been again pieced together to fit into a new synthesis.

To take an instance, the word *yegän* in Osmanli Turkish now designates any nephew and niece, in somewhat older language also son (but not daughter) of uncle or aunt; for Chagatai Turkish the dictionaries give only the meaning 'daughter's son', whereas in Kazak(-kirgiz) *jiyän* means 'cousin through mother's sister',¹ and in Altai Turkish *yän*, *yän* means both 'son of mother's younger sister' and 'son of (presumably elder) sister'. Among the Yakut the word has had its sphere of application much extended, for here *siän* denotes any person related to the speaker through a woman, such as all one's daughter's or sister's descendants, children of one's nieces, aunts or even great-aunts etc. But there is definite evidence that in former times the word meant specifically 'son of younger sister or of daughter', for in this sense it occurs as an early loanword in Mongolian in the form *jege* (Ordos *jē*, Kalmuk *zē*), and this is also the signification we must assume for the word in Old Turkish. All the other meanings are readily explained as analogies from and extensions of this basic one, developed only after the system into which it fitted had fallen into decay.

But through all semantic fluctuations two general traits emerge clearly. One is the absence of a common term for brothers or sisters. As a rule there is one word for elder brother and another for younger brother, and correspondingly for sisters. The same holds true for the older generations. Where collective terms do occur, they are either more general terms arbitrarily narrowed down in range of application, as when formerly the Yakut used the word *juortu* 'fellow clansman' for elder and younger brothers and sisters together, or they are recent borrowings, as when

¹ KATARINSKIY: Russko-kirgizskiy slovar'. Orenburg 1899, p. 377 b.

now-a-days *juortu* has been superseded by the Russian importations *brāt* and *siästrä*.

Another prominent feature of the Turkish terms of relationship is the application of the same word to persons belonging to different generations. An example which will be familiar to all readers of the Orkhon inscriptions is the word *eči*. In Old Turkish it is the current term for elder brother as in the frequent opposition *eči – ini* 'elder brother – younger brother'. But in the Orkhon inscriptions Bilgä Qayan and his brother Kül Tegin allude to their father's younger brother and successor Qapayan Qayan as *ečim qayan*, which we must by necessity translate as 'my uncle the kagan'.

This type of kinship term is extremely common, as a few examples will show. Old Turkish *küdagü* still preserves the (to us) double meaning of 'son-in-law (daughter's husband)' and 'younger brother-in-law (younger sister's husband)' in most of the dialects in which it occurs (Chagatai, Eastern Turki, Karagas (*küdä*), Chuvash (*kerü*) etc.). Yakut *surus* (*surj-*) seems to denote any younger male relative of a woman, both younger brothers or cousins, and brother's or sister's sons. Altai-Turkish *yäñä* and Chuvash *inkä* signify 'wife of elder brother or of father's (younger) brother', whereas for the wife of one's younger brother an entirely different word, which at the same time designates the wife of one's own son, is used, namely *kelin*, which is also found in many other dialects. In South Turkish the word now appears to be restricted to the latter signification (daughter-in-law) besides meaning 'bride' in general. Chuvash is especially rich in terms of this type (or has been especially well described by Ashmarin); to the examples already quoted or occurring in the following can be added *piččä* 'elder brother and father's younger brother' with *akka* (also *appa*) as the corresponding term for females. Even in some cases where a term changes meaning, it does so without violating the general principle. Thus *yeznä*, which is rendered by Kashghari (Central Asia, 11. century) as 'husband of elder sister' occurs in Chagatai (Central Asia, 16. century) for 'husband of (younger) sister or daughter', but has been borrowed by the Chuvash on the Volga (*yisna*) with the meaning of 'husband of elder sister or of younger sister of parents'.

These two facts taken together, namely on the one hand that persons whom we class together as belonging to the same generation are treated as belonging to distinct layers of the family, and on the other hand that many words overstep what we are apt to regard as rigid lines of demarcation between generations, suffice to prove that the Old Turkish system of relationship differed fundamentally from that of many modern Turkish peoples as well as from our own. In the following an attempt will be made to reconstruct the main principles of that system at the hand of the linguistic evidence and of stray information on certain archaic types of Turkish society still subsisting in Siberia.

It will be wise, however, first to recognize some of the obstacles impeding the view. One difficulty is of course that the system has not remained stable. The word material has changed considerably, and the old Turkish tribal society has been modified by the various cultural environments with which the tribes were brought into contact in the course of their migrations.

Furthermore the linguistic and ethnological facts at our disposal are presented to us as interpreted in the light of a preconceived mental questionnaire, the framework of which was in each case determined by the cultural background of the investigator. Many words contained in dictionaries and elsewhere have unconsciously been defined either too widely by a rash identification with a seemingly suitable equivalent in the investigator's mother tongue, or too narrowly because the wider applications of the word were such as it would not readily occur to a European or Muslim observer to inquire for. Mahmud al-Kashghari is an early example. He was a born Turk, but belonged to the Mohammedan society of the eastern provinces. His great dictionary contains only some twenty terms of kinship, all very summarily and often obviously defectively translated into Arabic. His definition of *yezñä* as quoted above is only one among many examples.

Lastly it must not be forgotten that even among the Turkish tribes which have preserved most of the ancient mode of life the family or clan system is now-a-days in a state of rapid disintegration. Pekarskiy, who collected the materials for his great Yakut-Russian dictionary in the eighties and nineties of the last century, already complains² that the kinship terms were difficult to verify as they were falling into oblivion. He had to rely largely on deductions from pedigrees provided by an old Yakut whose familiarity with the ancient tradition he had reason to trust. Still, many of his articles testify to the advanced state of dissolution already reached more than half a century ago. Ethnologists will do well to bear in mind that Jochelson's list of relationship terms in 'The Yakut', New York 1933, pp. 123-131, is based entirely on excerpts from Pekarskiy's dictionary.

In this preliminary sketch the best we may hope to attain is to present a rough outline of the fundamental principles of the old Turkish system of kinship, while details must be left for future investigations.

The linguistic evidence alone is enough to show that the Turkish kinship system differs from our own stratificatory system of horizontally arranged generations. According to our system of genealogy all members of a set of brothers and sisters belong to the same generation, which also comprises all other relatives who are removed by an identical number

² Slovar' yakutskago yazyka I-III. Leningrad 1917-30, footnote to *kütüö*, I 1346 b.

of direct forbears from a given ancestor. Each member of the said set of brothers and sisters furthermore stands in absolutely the same relation to all other generations above them as well as to all more remote members of their own generation (cousins in various degrees) and the latter's descendants. Any person's father, aunt, nephew etc. is also the father, aunt, nephew etc. of all his brothers and sisters. The only exception concerns the offspring of the circle of brothers and sisters under observation, a person's children being sons and daughters in relation to himself, but nephews and nieces in relation to his own brothers and sisters. This is an absolute system of horizontal generations, the limits of which are defined independently of the individual members filling out the framework, and can be adequately illustrated by the well-known scheme of genealogical tables.

No such illustration would fit the Turkish concepts. The family is here regarded not as successive layers of generations, but as a continuous string of individuals chronologically arranged, the sole factor determining the positions of an individual being his date of birth. An instance is provided by the Yakut *abaya*. This word is applied to one's father's elder brother or to his cousin by an elder brother of one's grandfather, but only on condition that the said half-uncle is older than one's father. Otherwise a different word must be used³.

This never-ending stream of family-members begins with the oldest living member of the household and ends with the latest-born baby, and is intersected at points which are different for each individual. One generation runs from myself back to my father; all males born between these two extremes, whether younger brothers of my father or my own elder brothers, are characterized by the same word, with a parallel term for the females. For father and mother there are special words. As soon as we pass beyond the parents a different set of terms comes into force till we reach my grandparents, who again have special names. When we pursue the family-line in the other direction from myself, a secondary incision manifests itself. The primary classification is that into sections extending from father to son (or daughter); but inside these sections further differentiation is possible. No Turk applies the word for younger brother (or sister) to his own son (or daughter). For these he mostly uses the general terms *oγul* 'boy' and *qīz* 'girl' though Old and Middle Turkish also possessed the specific word *urī* for 'son'. (Another special term cutting into the generations is the very common *aya*, which primarily means 'head, chief, elder', but is secondarily (and not vice versa, as is often assumed) used for eldest brother, eldest paternal uncle etc., i. e. the first of a number of brothers. But such cases are rare). In other respects no difference is made between males younger than myself.

³ PEKARSKIY op. cit. s. v.

The wives of sons and younger brothers (or the husbands of daughters and younger sisters) are always designated by the same term. Examples have been given above.

As will be seen, the generations as defined by the terms of kinship are delimited differently for each individual belonging to the family. We can retain the word generations, but we must think of the Turkish generations not as horizontal and absolute, but as vertical and relative.

A concrete illustration of the general principles set forth above can be taken from the kinship-system of the Siberian Karagas. The material is provided by a few short texts taken down by Katanov in 1890⁴. Among the Karagas all males born after my father and before myself (i. e. father's younger brothers and my own elder brothers) are called *aža*, the females *uba*. The above-mentioned *aya* also occurs. Father and mother, the turning point of the generations, are *ada* and *iñä*, addressed as *paba-m* 'my daddy' and *aba-m* 'my mammy'. Between parents and grandparents all males are called *irā* and all females *änä*, and these terms, somewhat surprisingly, include the grandparents themselves, though the latter are addressed as *kiryān paba-m* 'my ageing father' and *kiryān aba-m* 'my ageing mother'. There is no information available on the still older generation except that the great grandfather is addressed by the Mongolian word *öbügäm* 'my old man' and his wife *öbüg' änä-m*. It might look as if *irā* and *änä* serve for all relatives older than father, only with special words of address for those crucial points the direct ancestors.

Younger brothers and sisters are called *tuñma* indifferently with the possibility of prefixing *ōl* (< *oyul*) and *kis* (< *qiz*) for the sake of clarity when required. For son and daughter *ōl* and *kis* are the only words in use, though children can be called collectively *uruy* 'seed; offspring'. But women married into the family make no distinction whatever between their own children and their husbands' younger brothers and sisters. They address them all indiscriminately as *oylum* 'my boy' and *kizim* 'my girl'.

For all the ties of relationship that are established through marriage there are special terms. As is evident from the stray examples quoted on the foregoing pages, they confirm the general picture of the structure of the family, but cannot for reasons of space be dealt with systematically here.

A natural consequence of the social system reflected by the system of kinship terms outlined above is that any person has more or less a parent's responsibilities towards all family-members younger than himself. This is evidenced in various ways. An early instance is provided by an Old

⁴ Published in: RADLOFF: Proben der Volkslitteratur der türkischen Stämme IX (Texte), St. Pet., 1907, pp. 618 and 624 sq.

Turkish funeral inscription⁵ from the time of the Uigur empire of Central Asia (745–840). In this inscription the defunct nobleman first states his name, social status, general merits and wealth, and then goes on: *enim yeti, urim üç, qizim üç ärti. äblädim bayladim*⁶, *qizimin qaliqsiz bertim. marima yüzär toruy bertim. yegänimin atimin körtüm* 'My younger brothers were seven, my sons three and my daughters three. I provided (my younger brothers and sons) with a yurt (each), I had (my daughters) married into a clan. I gave my daughters away (in marriage) without (demanding) a bride-price. On my (Manichean) preceptors I bestowed a hundred bay horses each. I saw (i. e. lived to see) the sons of my daughters and the sons of my younger brothers and of my sons.'⁷ The whole passage is intended to show that he had acquitted himself honourably of his responsibilities towards those among his relatives who were dependent on him, and is interesting by proving that his younger brothers and his own sons were in this respect on a level.

There is no reason to suppose that the family system dealt with in these pages was restricted to the Turkish-speaking tribes. On the contrary, there are definite indications that it was formerly in force among other Central Asian peoples. I must content myself with quoting a few examples chosen at random from the Mongolian. Lit. Mong. *bergen* means 'wife of elder brother; mother's sister' i. e. any woman between myself and my parents, related by marriage. Among the Ordos Mongols a man names his father's second wife (i. e. taken after the speaker's own mother) by the same word (*awujī*) as he uses for his own elder sister.⁸ Highly interesting is furthermore the Kalmuk custom that so long as the grandfather is a member of the household he is called *etsege* (the normal word for father), while the father is reduced to the intermediate position of *bāwa* (uncle). Similarly with the grandmother, who is *ēji* 'mother', thereby reducing the mother to *āka* (synonymous with *bergen* above). The Tibetan also deserves notice as is indicated by a word like *mna'* -*ma* 'wife of younger brother; wife of son or grandson'.

But these are mere hints. They are offered in the hope that they may act as a first inspiration to a thorough study in the structure of an interesting primitive family-system.

⁵ Edited by RAMSTEDT: Zwei uigurische runeninschriften. Journal de la Soc. Finno-Ougr. XXX, 3, pp. 3–9. Here quoted with some improvements of the text.

⁶ Of this word only traces are left on the stone, but the reading heregiven seems to be the only one possible. The word is a derivation of *bay* 'clan'.

⁷ *ali* 'son of younger brother or of son' is the counterpart of *yegän* (see p. 1) and was like the latter adopted into Mongolian, which confirms the meaning here given.

⁸ MOSTAERT: Dictionnaire Ordos, Peking 1941–44, s. v.

⁹ RAMSTED: Kalmückisches Wörterbuch. Helsinki 1935, pp. 20 b, 38 a.