CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN MARRIAGE PATTERNS AND GROUP FORMATION IN A SOUTH ITALIAN TOWN

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One of the most notable recent developments in the analysis of kinship and marriage systems in the Italian south is a growing divergence in both theoretical perspectives and substantive research findings between the anglo-american pioneering studies of the late sixties and seventies and the work of a new generation of mainly indigenous, often annales or structuralist inspired, social historians and ethnographers.

Despite a substantial and continuing post-war anglo-american ethnographic tradition in southern Italy, there is a dearth of recent specialist studies of kinship and marriage. Many of the key findings and approaches of classic kinship research studies by Cronin, Davis and J. & P. Schneider on heirship strategies, patterns of post-marital economic and political co-operation, the meaning of marriage payments and the formation of wider kinship groups (Cronin 1970; Davis 1973; J. & P. Schneider 1976); early attempts to combine historical demography with anthropological analysis (Bell 1979), have not been followed up adequately. Most recent surveys (Douglass 1980, 1991; Galt 1991*a*, 1991*b*) are by-products of research in other fields and are largely concerned with variation in family organization. The main source of continuity is a constant (in my view, over-generalized) insistence on the primacy of honour ideologies and gender differentiation which, almost by default, have become the imputed hallmark of southern kinship and family systems.

With no major inputs from anglo-american ethnographers over the last decade, the most significant recent advances in the study of family and kinship forms on the southern mainland have come from social and demographic history and from the work of a new generation of indigenous ethnographers of central

and southern Italy (for example, Solinas & Clemente 1983; Arioti 1988; Minicuci 1989; Palumbo 1991). Historically, two sets of studies stand out. Da Molin's (1990) large-scale survey of household composition and marriage patterns between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is a benchmark study which seeks to delineate both the main structural characteristics of southern systems nuclear families, early marriage, an absence of domestic servants, and the main sources of variation and change. From an anthropological standpoint, however, the "annales inspired", social and economic history of Delille and his pupils is far more challenging (Delille 1988; Ciuffreda 1992). Delille's detailed specification of *quartiers lignages* in Campania and matrilineal "inflexion" in south Puglia calls into question the well established anthropological view that south-west Europe is characterized by nuclear families and bilateral kinship systems; his analysis of repeat marriage between kin, patterns of affinal re-linkage and marriage classes, and his claim that early modern south Italian marriage forms constitute an intermediate type between elementary and complex systems, is equally subversive of a Mediterraneanist tradition which has confined kin group endogamy to north Africa and the middle east (Goody 1983).

Although Delille's insights have been largely ignored by anglo-american scholars, they are both influenced by and, in turn, have increasingly shaped the research agendas of the new, much more cognitively sensitive and historically conscious ethnographers of the Italian south. Thus, for small, relatively isolated, communities at least, we now have a much fuller understanding of indigenous kinship categories and classifications, the relationship between ideology and practice in reproductive systems, the symbolism of ritual kinship; and also clear, if still tentative, evidence of the persistence well into the twentieth century of patrilineal ideologies, shallow patrilineages, preferential marriage rules, systematic repeat marriage, and a far more accurate perception of sources of variation in kinship and marriage forms (Minicuci 1981,1989; Palumbo 1991; Resta 1991). Above all, it is in their concern with the formation, definition, and symbolic representation of wider kinship groups *razze, casate, ceppi,* and more informal affinal networks and territorial and ritual associations that the new Italian ethnographers most sharply differ from their anglo-american

predecessors. Indeed, this difference in perspectives provides a striking refutation of the recent claim that the British genealogical method, with its implicit emphasis on blood-line and pedigree, ineluctably leads to an over-emphasis on lineage and descent and fatally prejudices our understanding of south European kinship systems (Bouquet 1993). The exploration of these differences in the context of changing inheritance and marriage patterns and their impact on wider group formation in the small north Puglian town of Ascoli Satriano is the main theme of this paper.

Setting and historical background

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Ascoli was a small town (a city in the eyes of its inhabitants), with a resident population of just over 2,000 inhabitants, situated in one of the most land-rich and commercially dynamic regions of the southern mainland. Its small size (partly the consequence of a mid-seventeenth-century demographic crisis, partly the result of excluding transhumant shepherds and seasonal estate workers from the count) is deceptive and belies its importance as one of the more significant trading and administrative centres in a still sparsely populated south Tavoliere. Although retaining a firm subsistence base, with most families having access to land on the outskirts of the town, by 1700 it already had a strongly differentiated and monetarized economy. Although commercial enterprise and forays into the wider market were precarious and unstable, its overall prosperity depended as much on commerce as on direct agricultural exploitation. At most no more than one-half of its resident male population was employed full-time in agriculture. From the outset, Ascoli can hardly be classed as a traditional peasant community.

Under the *ancien régime,* Ascoli's economy (and some 80% of its territory) was controlled by the *Regia Dogana* (Royal Customhouse) which with its carefully controlled mix of state regulation, inverse transhumance, commercial grain production and peripheral feudalism provided a major source of revenue for the Neapolitan monarchy (Marino 1988). With land plenty

and an abundance of work opportunities in the surrounding countryside, Ascoli was also a highly mobile society with a high incidence of inward migration. Migrants came from as far away as Malta, Milan, Provence, Sicily, but mainly from the trade route communities of central Puglia, Irpinia and Campania. In each generation a small sub-set of migrants was absorbed into the population often through the practice of widow marriage. Already by the mid-eighteenth century Ascolani were acutely aware of the emergence of a "second" Ascoli: on the one hand, a largely endogamous urban core of some 150-200 families landowners, ecclesiastics, merchants, artisans, estate foremen, smallholders, town-based manual workers whose ties to each other and to a few selected outside families were consolidated by the practice of repeat marriage, on the other, an increasingly amorphous mass of migrant seasonal labourers who slowly took up residence on the outskirts of the town.

With the abolition of the *Dogana* in 1806 and the introduction of Jacobin legal and administrative reforms which swept away feudal tenure and jurisdictions and confiscated monastic estates, land use and property distribution in the Tavoliere communes was slowly but systematically transformed. Transhumance was gradually replaced by ranching; trading (and marriage) links with the interior declined. In the second half of the century, with increasing capital inputs into agriculture, there was a steady conversion from pastoral to arable farming and the expansion of specialized cereal producing latifundia which by the 1880s had become the hallmark of the south Tavoliere. The release and sale of *Dogana* lands and ecclesiastical properties after Unification attracted land speculators from all over Europe. As Snowden (1986) puts it, the Tavoliere had become a new frontier. In this process Ascoli's urban role was transformed from that of administrative and trading centre to classical agro-town. Between Unification and the First World War its population more than doubled (5,000-11,000), as peasant cultivators from surrounding regions, tempted by the prospect of small-scale land distributions and jobs on newly created latifundia, moved into the town. With the rapid expansion of landowner-financed peasant housing, Ascoli, like Snowden's Cerignola, took on the aspect of a company town. Its urban institutions and amenities were swamped by the "second" Ascoli;

its core citizens complained of being submerged in a sea of agricultural labourers.

The twentieth century brought further change: the growth of rural syndicalism and overseas migration in the early years; the widespread mechanization of agriculture; land reform and mass migration after the Second World War. By the early 1970s Ascoli's population was in rapid decline; its urban role was transformed once again to that of *paese di passaggio* (town of passage). With a modest degree of industrial development and agricultural specialization and a recent decline in overseas migration, its population has now stabilized at just below 7,000.

Marriage and the generation of wider kinship groups and associations in eighteenth-century Ascoli

Although the research on which this paper is based is still far from complete, initial analysis of both eighteenth-century notaries books and marriage records, and contemporary pilot fieldwork suggest significant continuity in kinship and marriage practices at least until the eve of the Second World War (1). Already by the beginning of the eighteenth century, Ascoli displays an unambiguously bilateral system of inheritance and kinship recognition. Wills and marriage contracts constantly stress the importance of parity in dividing property between children: exceptional cases disinheritance for immoral behaviour or neglect of parents are explained at length; both lists of potential heirs and occasional notarial discussion of the *parentado* imply bilateral networks of kin which, like their modern counterparts, extend out to (but not much beyond) second cousins.

Probably the most striking feature of Ascoli's inheritance and marriage practices in this period is the high priority given to women's marriages and claims to family property. Most women are married by their early twenties; widow re-marriage is the norm; and in the absence of local convents female celibacy is rare. Brothers routinely contribute to dowry, reduce and occasionally renounce their own claims to family property, and are generally expected to postpone their own weddings until

sisters are satisfactorily married. The politics of non-marriage, expressed through the pursuit of ecclesiastical careers, is almost exclusively reserved for middle ranking and upper class males. This priority is plainly articulated in the will of a peripheral member of Ascoli's elite who, while regretting that he is unable to provide his sons with anything more than "immaterial" inheritance (the patronage of the local bishop), insists that a father's first duty is to marry his daughters according to their station (Archivio di Stato di Lucera. Atti Notarili, s.2, Giove, prot. 1806, f. 19, 1710).

By this period, the rudiments of a sex-linked property system are already in place. Women ideally bring into marriage high-cost festival clothes, linens, jewels, a house, *vigne* (orchard land with some arable mixed in), and money, and not surprisingly are expected to renounce further claims. As in nineteenth-century Sicily, the cost of personal effects is sometimes greater than that of immovables (Schneider 1980). Sons must await the death of fathers, or more usually subsequent division among brothers, before inheriting the residue of the estate. Within marriage there is a strict division of property with women retaining control of personal effects and the trousseau and part of the cash settlement. Although both sons and daughters are entitled to share the assets of both parents, the mother's dowry is almost always earmarked for daughters. Only at the extremes of the social order is this pattern varied. Thus, upper class daughters typically receive a personal trousseau and a cash settlement: the urban poor little more than parapherns and minor sums of money.

Plainly this usage favours daughters at the expense of sons. Property given to daughters is up-front, ritually displayed, openly assessed by the contracting parties aided by publicly appointed officials, and, with the exception of monies given in promissory form, has tangible value. By contrast male expectations, although not without a material base, are less substantial, more speculative, more subject to the attrition of the life cycle. Above all they carry the aura of immaterial inheritance the passing down of good-will, trading partners, patrons, leases, networks of social relations. Indeed, an initial small sample analysis of household properties registered in the *Catasto Onciario* of 1754 suggests that, even after male

inheritance, for middle ranking families and below the greater part of family assets derive from the wife's dowry. And both elite and artisan patrimonies are commonly saddled with the accumulated debts and interest payments from daughters' settlements. Thus, in a period of rapid shifts in fortune and status, male forays into commerce, investment in sheep, short-term leasing of both large and small cereal estates hold out the prospect of spectacular success. But it is the wife's dowry secured from creditors and loss by legal safeguards against alienation that provides a secure subsistence base. This system of property transmission and divergent devolution shapes kin group formation and informal patterns of co-operation between extra-familiar kin and affines in two distinct ways both encouraging the development of kinship-based neighbourhood associations and the generation of shallow patrilineages among local elites.

In a well known article, Davis (1976) argues that the development, in nineteenth-century Pisticci, of a female property base and a sex-linked property system in which houses became the most distinctive dowry item led to the emergence of matrifocal neighbourhoods and a growing emphasis on affinal connection at the expense of fraternal solidarity. Intergenerational co-operation between sisters and first female cousins and their respective husbands spread out into the public domain where it was reflected in patterns of economic, political and honour collaboration. Within a radically different time-frame, Delille's claim that matrilineal "inflexion" is the hallmark of south Puglian communities throughout the early modern period is based on broadly similar considerations (Delille 1988; see also Palumbo 1985). In many ways, eighteenth-century Ascoli corresponds quite closely to the Davis/Delille model. While it lacks ritually defined *quartiers lignages,* and both surnames and chapels are seemingly scattered at random throughout the town, preliminary computer analysis of a particularly fine series of State of Souls listings covering the years 1709-1765, reveals that its apparently unstructured neighbourhoods contain significant clusters of maternal kin loose associations focused on dowry-housed sisters, in-marrying husbands and spiritual kin less dominant, perhaps, but not dissimilar to those described for contemporary Pisticci. Both

ecclesiastical and notarial records provide ample evidence of the importance of neighbourhood associations of this sort collaboration between brothers-in-law in running *vigne* or re-building houses; the provision of apprenticeships; joint membership of the same confraternities; oaths in support of a neighbour's testimony and reputation in court; petty reciprocities and privileged loans; occasional examples of matrilineal succession to ecclesiastical and public office and professions. These associations are not formalized, named or even co-terminous with the *contrada* they occupy. They are also short lived. Thus, although it is often possible to trace the passage of dowry houses and distinctive jewellery from mother to daughter over several generations, the neighbourhood associations generated by this system of transmission rarely persist beyond a single lifetime. A wife's first duty is to her family of procreation and, in periods of economic difficulty, houses and other dowry goods are readily sold despite legal obstacles. Sisters disperse, and in each generation the set of in-marrying husbands profoundly changes. In the absence of clear ancestral or ritual focus, or a stable corporately owned property base, these associations can hardly be described as "matrilineal". Despite their role in ordering the territorial distribution of kin and affines, and in providing women in particular with a sense of social and spatial identity (as well as moral and economic support), they are essentially ephemeral in character. Overall, the concept of matrilineal "inflexion" has limited application in eighteenth-century Ascoli.

In this respect, the inheritance strategies of its landowning and professional elite (30-40 families) provide an instructive contrast. With cash dowries and a battery of restrictive heirship strategies high rates of celibacy, entails, trusts (*monti*) to meet the needs of poorer collateral kin, in-group marriage they are in a far stronger position to maintain a corporate property base through time. Town mansions are normally passed in the male line, and are large enough to be internally divided to permit both fraternal co-residence and to accommodate unmarried heirs. Wherever possible *masserie* (arable farms) with their vital building complexes and costly *mezzane* (enclosed pasture for draft animals) are kept intact, and are commonly jointly owned and run by brothers, occasionally first patrilineal cousins. Sales

of arable land are mainly to close collaterals, and are usually hedged with redemption clauses. Undoubtedly, elite families have a strong sense of corporate identity, house-style and character, reinforced by clearly articulated patrilineal ideologies, dedicated chapels, coats-of-arms. The relative permanence of a score of *case* (households) occasionally, *casate* (households; shallow, three or four generational patrilines) into which they are grouped, is reflected in their impact on the contemporary urban and rural landscape. Their mansions serve as key identifiers to the topography of the old town: their names are recorded in the place names of rural *contrada* and *masserie,* long after the families that once owned them have disappeared. Yet, once again, it is important not to over-emphasize the significance of these "pockets of patriliny" in an otherwise bilateral system. Less than one-half of Ascoli's eighteenth-century *casate* survive into the twentieth century. A combination of high risk agricultural and commercial enterprises, ecclesiastical dowries and marriage settlements for daughters, migration to major urban centres, patriline extinction, all take their toll.

A third, less clearly defined, type of grouping derives from the practice of systematic repeat marriage. For the first half of the eighteenth century, between ten and fifteen per cent of all marriages among the urban core are of the *dubbrera* type, or close affinal re-linkages. There is also a small number of first and second cousin marriages among the elite. In the absence of computerized genealogies and marriage records, it is impossible to estimate the incidence of more distant affinal and cousin marriages. Nevertheless, on the evidence of a small number of hand-reconstructed genealogies, Delille's thesis (1988) that most such marriages fall just outside canonically prohibited categories seems quite plausible for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ascoli. What is less certain is whether these unions are based on conscious choice, or are an unplanned result of community size.

The most visible consequences of these usages is the creation of a system of marriage circles or classes at least among middle and upper ranking Ascolani families. Such families have a restricted set of habitual marriage partners families and *casate* with whom the greater part of marriages are contracted: other families of equal standing are systematically

ignored. The marriage circles that result from this practice are neither exclusive nor exhaustive. Both upwardly mobile Ascolani and outsiders from neighbouring trade-linked communities are constantly drawn into particular circles. There is, however, surprisingly little overlap between different, competing circles. They are neither named nor firmly bounded, their composition varying from one generation to the next. These affinal alliances operate at three different levels. First, in a period of increasing status differentiation, in which marriage is a crucial test of standing in the community, they bring some stability and restraint to a competitive marriage market that tends to absorb a disproportionate share of family patrimony. Secondly, they shape factional rivalries for communal and ecclesiastical resources. A third function is to re-inforce commercial, trading and educational links with important provincial and regional centres Foggia, Barletta on the coast, a checkerboard pattern of towns to the west, along the main trade routes to Avellino and Naples.

Twentieth-century comparisons

Somewhat surprisingly, all three types of informal grouping that I have just considered survive into the twentieth century, despite the substantial transformation of the social and economic conditions on which they were originally premised. The most important of these is the gradual switch throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from a transhumance to an arable economy. The development of a cereal based economy both encouraged the expansion of medium and large estates, and, within an increasingly peasantized population, facilitated the emergence of a more rigorously balanced sex-linked property system. It also led to greater tension and differentiation between the kinship and marriage practices of the urban core and the denizens of the "second" Ascoli whose interests were much more directly focused on the rural economy. In these circumstances, the patrilineal ideologies which had shaped the heirship strategies of a restricted elite spread to a much wider group of landowners,

and, indeed, intensified as, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the years following the First World War, agricultural conditions harshened, and the plentiful supply of land which had characterized the middle years of the century dried up.

Although operating within the confines of a strictly bilateral system of inheritance, this new landowner class used a range of marriage and heirship strategies to maintain the main family house and *masseria* intact through the generations. Younger sons and daughters were discouraged from marrying; dowries were restricted in size. And, as in Villamaura, this group had a much higher rate of first cousin marriage than any other section of the population (J. & P. Schneider 1976). Although family property was often informally divided and assigned to individual heirs, there was a marked emphasis on co-residence (albeit in different apartments) in the family house; and fraternal co-operation in jointly running the estate remained the norm. Younger siblings were expected to identify with and to subordinate personal ambitions to the long-term interests of the *casata*. The nominated heir, typically but not inevitably the eldest son, bearing the same name and surname as the paternal grandfather, received both *legittimo* and *disponibile* (both fixed and discretionary inheritance portions) and hopefully the revisionary shares of unmarried siblings of the previous generation. These ideals were never fully met, but the system as a whole was sufficiently firm to ensure the survival of most upper class properties until after the Second World War.

A similar emphasis on male inheritance and exclusive control of the main productive assets is found among a much larger class of middling and small landowners who, throughout the present century and especially since the fifties have come to dominate Ascoli's increasingly rural economy. Here the ideology of patrilineally extended families and restricted marriage are less marked; daughters marry and receive something close to a fair share of family property. But, again, wherever possible arable land, livestock and machinery are reserved for sons.

Increasing ruralization is also reflected in the patrilineal skewing and conceptionalization of kinship relations. Although the terms *casa* and *casata* have almost disappeared from current usage, they have been replaced by the broader but equally

patrilineal *razza* (patriline, possibly clan) (2). Identity in Ascoli is established by two main questions. The first, «Di chi sei figlio/a?», is mainly addressed to children and elicits the name of either parent according to social context and the perceived social network of the questioner. The second, «Chi siete?» or «A chi appartenete?» almost always produces the name of the *razza*. At the most general level, this term denotes people sharing the same patrilineally inherited surname, with large surname groups segmented by the use of nicknames: more specifically, it describes a set of patrilineal descendants of a common great-grandfather. Outsiders are sometimes absorbed into *razze* (usually through affinal connection), but membership is always exclusive. Unlike the situation described by Palumbo (1991) for San Marco dei Cavoti, they are never confused or conflated with bilateral descent groups. With the possible exception of large landowning families, *razze* lack a corporate base and rarely act as compact groups. In many ways, they represent a male vision of kinship: nostalgic, idealized, sharply focused, rarely detailed, always fuzzy at the edges. They are, however, much more than simple surname sets, and a range of shared features collective character illustrated by a series of anecdotes, physiological characteristics, health, moral reputation, work record, political complexion are commonly attributed to them. Above all, for Ascoli's urban core, and especially for men, *razze* reflect long-term kinship connection, and delineate family interest through time. Townsmen acknowledge that relationships with close agnates are likely to be fraught by property and other disputes, and that for many day-to-day transactions and life course events they must rely on the support of affines and bilateral kin. But such support is contingent and temporary. Over the long run, it is membership of the *razza* that provides a vital element of continuity and stability in the allocation of status and community identity.

If one compares for the community as a whole eighteenth-century dowry and inheritance arrangements with those which developed after Unification (and which are still broadly followed today), four main changes stand out. First, the eighteenth-century priority given to daughters' dowry claims has largely disappeared, and death rather than marriage has become the single most important occasion for the intergeneration transfer

of property. Secondly, in absolute terms the value of dowry has declined. Ideally daughters still receive a trousseau, household furniture, a house (or more usually a share of a house) and occasionally orchard land, but the last two items tend to materialize only on the death of parents and must be negotiated with brothers. Thirdly, the increasing availability of arable land following the opening up of the Tavoliere permitted a more rigorously sex-linked division of property between heirs. In these circumstances, women's dowry goods acquired new meaning, becoming in Brettell's (1992) telling phrase «symbolic referents of womanhood».

A fourth change is the increasingly dominant role of women in the politics of courtship and marriage. Over recent generations the path to marriage has taken on the quality of a moral potlatch, a competition for female honour and reputation whose antagonists and judges are almost exclusively women themselves. Men formally initiate courtship and at its end fathers and brothers publicly guarantee the contractual and financial seriousness of the impending union. But during ever-lengthening courtships the negotiations and preparations for marriage are essentially handled by women. With growing status differentiation and diversification of the economy, marriage has become more competitive and agonistic. Marriage payments are more and more geared to the public demonstration of moral and financial standing in the community, less toward the endowment of the newly founded household. What then have been the effects of these changes on the neighbourhood associations and marriage classes discussed earlier in this paper?

For most of this century, the provision of dowry houses on a daughter's marriage has been, in practice, the exception and not the rule. But this change has not fundamentally altered the structure of neighbourhoods. And while some informants in contemporary Ascoli rightly point to the association of particular *razze* with specific neighbourhoods, overall they are still characterized by the presence of clusters of matrifocal kin. Sisters rent, buy or try to activate potential inheritance rights in the localities in which they were born: they also seek to draw in-marrying husbands and brothers into networks of economic and political co-operation. Indeed, the resilience of neighbourhood organization in the absence of a routinely allocated property

base, bears witness to the force of social practice and cultural tradition. Dowry arrangements are not in themselves determinative: neighbourhood associations survive because of the specific cultural meanings images of domestic altruism, childhood, sororal solidarity embedded in them. They are a woman's world, reflecting female perceptions of the kinship universe. They also offer constant practical support childminding, protection, the mutual exchange of goods, services and minor favours. As in Pisticci, reputation is ultimately determined by neighbourhood peers. So that in circumstances in which the language of female virtue has become the idiom in which women must compete in order successfully to marry daughters, the moral support of a secure home base is indispensable. Similarly, their potential for group formation and short-term economic and political co-operation has remained intact. Thus, during the run up to the communal elections of 1993, the coalition of parties in office was accused by its opponents of ruling in the interests of one of its constituent *clan familiari* (3). While I am in no position to comment on the substance of this accusation, it is certainly the case that one important faction in the governing alliance was dominated by four brothers-in-law and that a significant part of their electorate was neighbourhood based.

The survival of marriage classes into the contemporary era is more problematic, not least because of the breakdown in the inter-war period of the practice of systematic repeat marriage on which it was premised. Nevertheless, among the urban core a significant incidence of repeat marriage remains. Thus, on the evidence of a small initial sample of 120 marriages of native-born Ascolani in the period 1930-1992, about one-third are of this sort (8 *dubbrera,* 2 first cousins, 17 affinal re-linkages, 12 second or third cousins or slightly beyond). The figures for distant cousins and affines are almost certainly underestimates. Moreover, it is apparent from a detailed examination of courtship histories that many Ascolani who eventually married non-kin had actively considered marrying on a repeat pattern, often with the open encouragement of older members of the family.

The relatively high rate of marriages of this type is puzzling, in part because it has no obvious material base, even more

because Ascolani themselves insist that they have no preferential rules. Marriage with first cousins is scorned; *dubbrera* unions are seen as a form of arranged marriage and somewhat humiliating for all parties concerned. Indeed, by far the commonest explanation of marriage with distant cousins and affines is that they are mere coincidence, a reflection of the limited range of potential partners available in a relatively small community.

Although not without merit, this explanation is not entirely convincing. A first objection is that, even allowing for rules of homogamy, the number of repeat unions between members of the same narrow circles of inter-related families is higher than might be expected by chance and, as in the eighteenth century, seemingly suitable families are invariably excluded. Second, closer examination of courtship histories suggests that "coincidence" is carefully structured and that courtship procedures themselves tend to select for cousin marriage.

In post-war Ascoli marriage age for both men and women has steadily increased among all sections of the population. Curiously, over the same period, the inception of courtship has been pushed back close to the end of childhood. Fairly stable courtships lasting ten or fifteen years and going back to early or mid adolescence are now commonplace. Generally, this practice has been encouraged by parents on the grounds that it both maximizes choice of local spouses and also strengthens parental control over the selection process and over children's sexuality. With mate selection invariably justified in terms of an ideology of romantic love, it is plainly inappropriate to talk of arranged marriage: it is equally clear that, especially in cases of early courtship, parents and kin are in a strong position to influence outcomes. Early courtship influences marriage choice in a number of different ways. The first tentative sexual experimentation of many Ascoli teenagers is with the children of kin and affines to whose homes they have ready access. Should these early romantic encounters lead to "hidden" courtships, they are likely to receive the tacit support of at least some members of a common kinship network. Parents usually alert their children to the risks of premature engagements to distant kin and affines. But their warnings (rarely vetoes) essentially stress the importance of long-term kinship connection, and the

problems in breaking off relationships too lightly entered into without considerable family disruption. Thus, while they find it fairly easy to offer reasoned grounds for objecting to courtship with strangers the reputation of the *razza*, health, honour, status differences opposition to proposed repeat marriage is much more difficult to sustain. Although not all repeat marriages begin with adolescent courtship, there is nevertheless a close association between the two.

Furthermore, faced with increasingly aggressive matrimonial competition, parents and near kin have compelling reasons to support marriage of this type. The scope for moral potlatching is much reduced among sets of families who already have a duty and vested interest in protecting each others' reputations. There is less need for competitive display and it is easier to negotiate down the costs of escalating ritual expenditure. These points were well illustrated by a member of one of Ascoli's core families in a comparison of the relative costs, satisfaction and difficulties of the recent marriages of two of his daughters. The wedding of his eldest daughter the third in a series of affinal re-linkages with the same family over two generations had been trouble free: ritual expenditure had been contained; there was little disagreement about marriage payments and prestations; the wedding feast had been judged a success and brought credit to both families. By contrast, the marriage of a second daughter into an unrelated Ascoli family had been little short of disastrous. Throughout, his prospective in-laws had sought to "mortify" his family and to assert their own status position by competitive display and extravagant ritual expenditure. The concluding ceremonials had served only to demonstrate the deep disharmony between the contracting parties.

Although marriage with distant kin and affines is not simply fortuitous, for the twentieth century at least, it is inappropriate to talk of marriage strategy in anything but the most figurative of senses. It is difficult to attribute strategic intent to teenage sweethearts and, although the approval and management of courtship reflects a conscious family decision to support the impending marriage, such support is contingent and opportunistic. With extended courtship one can always graft on strategic content *ex post facto*, and Ascolani readily speculate

about the possible long-term consequences of particular alliances. How far speculation of this sort mirrors the intentions of the couple or their immediate kin is far more difficult to determine. Thus, at a wedding between third cousins direct descendants in the male line of a common great-great-grandfather I was "reliably" informed by another guest that one of the aims of the marriage was to re-capture the lost political influence of two collateral branches of the family that, in recent years, had gradually drifted apart. By contrast, both bride and groom insisted that their marriage was a love match that had survived an eighteen year courtship (4). They welcomed closer relationships with little known members of the *razza,* but had no intention of engaging in political activities of any kind.

The continuing presence of a system of marriage alliances can best be explained in terms of mechanisms of courtship and the needs of individual families to regulate ritual expenditure in an over-competitive marriage market. But this does not imply that repeat marriage has been entirely shorn of its wider structural implications. Long-term coalitions between families who regularly inter-marry have deeply influenced party formation, voting behaviour and the recruitment of officials and leaders in both party and commune and, together with patronage, have helped to shape the structure of political competition in post-war Ascoli. And, if the wider economic functions of these coalitions in particular the regulation of inter-community trade have virtually disappeared, they still provide the single most effective way of distinguishing between "true" townsmen and families from the "second" Ascoli, and of reinforcing the distinctively Ascolani identities of core urban families.

Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to examine the role of kinship based groups and associations, their relationship to marriage and inheritance systems, and the ways in which they have changed over time. In retrospect, it is plain that groups of this sort were neglected, if not entirely ignored, in the classic anglo-

american corpus which, despite stern methodological and empirical disclaimers, was, in practice, over-influenced by a Banfieldian emphasis on the centrality and moral isolation of the immediate family. In this regard, the new social history and ethnography of the Italian south, with its stress on the formation of wider kinship groups and affinal alliances, indigenous classification and the symbolism and ideologies of reproductive systems, has provided a useful corrective.

Nevertheless, one must be careful not to over-state the theoretical or empirical significance of these groups and informal associations. The presence of *razze*, *casate*, marriage classes, and a tendency towards uterine succession to office and patterns of residence and inheritance do not in themselves justify the reclassification of southern Italian kinship systems into unilineal types. As Goody (1983) has pointed out, agnation is fully compatible with (indeed, sometimes the product of) wider systems of bilateral inheritance. As in the case of Ascoli, all three of the associations and groupings that we have examined are, in part at least, a response to the exigencies of divergent devolution attempts to cope, under varying economic conditions, with a normative insistence on the need to provide equally for all heirs. Whatever the emergent forms, the underlying logic is inexorably bilateral.

A similar note of caution is required in evaluating the role of kinship and affinity in the recruitment and organization of social groups of all sorts. In a complex, differentiated society like present-day Ascoli, many formal and informal associations sports clubs, religious associations, environmental groups, recreational bodies have only a slight kinship base; and although kinship and affinal connection play a significant role in the organization of others parties, factions, unions, coteries of office holders it is easy to over-stress their importance. A recurrent theme among local families is the need to curtail the range of kinship obligations which, as in any bilateral system, are potentially never ending. The moral rules of kinship are flexible, almost always open to negotiation and, in an essentially optative system, many Ascolani choose to ignore more distant commitments and, not infrequently, closer ones as well. In these circumstances, any simple attempt to plot computer-based genealogies and marriage listings onto the membership

structures of local organizations and associations inevitably leads to distortion, and must be balanced by a careful evaluation of the social relevance of the relationships involved. Computerate anthropologists like social historians must be careful to distinguish between what Plakans (1984) has called "genealogy" and "kinship", between fortuitous and socially meaningful kinship and affinal connection. Only by accepting the limits of kinship can we fully understand the role of the groups and associations discussed in this paper: in the last resort, all three are examples of restrictive strategies that seek to focus obligation into a more narrowly defined and limited set of relationships.

Notes

1. This paper is based on preliminary archival work and two pilot field studies carried out between 1990 and 1993 as part of an ESRC research project (ESRC R00023 4749 Marriage Strategy in North Puglia 1730-1990 : A Computer Aided Study) still in progress.The findings reported in this paper are still highly provisional. I am greatly indebted to Dr Janet Bagg for the development of the computer methods on which this project depends, and especially for her initial computer based analysis of neighbourhood structures, discussed later in this section.

2. So far I have encountered no archival references to this term. It has certainly been used in Ascoli since the late nineteenth century.

3. This term is not used precisely and can refer to virtually any kin or affinally based grouping.

4. They had begun a "hidden" courtship at the age of thirteen.

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Summary

This paper examines the role of kinship-based groups and associations and their relationship over time to marriage and inheritance systems. Focused on the small north Puglian town of Ascoli Satriano, it explores continuities and variation in neighbourhood organization and the formation of wider kinship groups and affinal alliances in the period 1700-1994. It argues that these groupings and associations can best be seen as attempts to cope, under rapidly changing economic and social conditions, with the exigencies of divergent devolution and an essentially bilateral system of heirship.

Sommario

Centrato sulla piccola città di Ascoli Satriano nella Puglia del nord, questo saggio esamina il ruolo di raggruppamenti parentali - formali ed informali - ed il loro articolarsi nel tempo con le scelte matrimoniali e le dinamiche patrimoniali. Attraverso l'analisi dei cambiamenti radicali e continui nel rapporto città/campagna e nella struttura dell'agricoltura, si indagano le variazioni e le continuità nell'organizzazione del vicinato e nella formazione dei gruppi patrilineari e le alleanze matrimoniali dal Settecento fino ad oggi. Si evince dunque che queste forme di associazioni rappresentano modi di riadattamento delle esigenze della devoluzione divergente entro un sistema di eredità essenzialmente bilaterale.