Cultural Frame Elicitation of a Kinship Map: Hausa

Kinship terminologies are sets of terms indigenously recognized as designating kinship relationships.   The definitions of the terms interconnect, in the sense that each term is used in the definitions of several of the others. The definitions thereby interlock. We call this system of interlocking definitions the "kinship map."

For over a century, the existence and character of kinship maps has been obscured by the insistence that in some way or another, the meanings of kinship terms had to lie in the biology of sexual reproduction. This was wrong in many ways and at many levels, which there is no need to repeat here. In consequence, it could not be operationalized either as a method for eliciting kinship terms or as a way to explain why people had them.

By contrast, kinship maps are readily elicited and when elicited it is relatively easy to see how they are used.   The method of elicitation is cultural frame analysis. This has been described in numerous publications starting in 1971. The most detailed is "Experimental Analysis of Kinship," published by Leaf in 2006.

Cultural frame analysis is an experimental procedure. Like other experimental procedures, it is best learned if the description is accompanied by demonstration. Eliciting a kinship map by this method normally takes anywhere between a half hour and two hours. But we can illustrate the process more briefly. The accompanying video is a little over 13 minutes. It shows what one writes down when eliciting a terminology by this method. The terminology in this case is Hausa. Leaf conducted the original elicitation in Sokoto state, Nigeria, in 1984. The primary informant was an educated Nigerian woman who also spoke very good English.

The original interview was pencil and paper. The simulation has been made using Adobe Sketch with an iPad. It was recorded with QuickTime Player and edited with iMovie. The original interview took about an hour. The full recording of the simulation is 39 minutes. The simulation proceeds from the beginning of the interview to the point where all of the conceptual elements of the kinship map have been defined and used, so you can see what they are. It then jumps to the end so you can see what the boundary conditions look like. This should be enough to demonstrate the two most important points about this method: that it lets the indigenous concepts take their own form, and that the result is complete and coherent.

Kinship maps enable their users to objectify kinship relations. The internal coherence of the reciprocal relations in the kinship map assure that whatever organizations are created using these ideas will themselves be coherent and consistent, from the points of view of all members, both within each kinship organization of all types, across kinship organizations of the same type, and across kinship organizations of different types. Nothing is more important.

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