Getting Along with Kin and Killers

To follow the play, you need to know the characters. If the play is in sports, you need to know what sport it is, the teams, and the rules. For me, lives in Yibihilu were somewhere between a dramatic play and an intense sport. The sport analogy may be a stretch, because the "game" was to manage one's relationship with others in the community, not to defeat a rival team. Indeed, when men and boys played soccer (which patrol officers had introduced), Gebusi preferred the game to end in a tie rather than one team winning and the other losing. In daily life, as on the field, Gebusi were organized into groups. And to know what was going on, you had to know the groups and their rules of engagement. Suddenly a dispute would break out. One group would start swinging clubs against another, which retaliated in like fashion—while a third cluster stood between them as peacekeepers, trying to break things up. It all happened quickly; we couldn't tell why people sorted out as they did. The same was true more generally—groups of people would casually depart to forage in the forest, give and receive gifts of food at feasts, or present costume decorations to initiates. Why did some people act together as opposed to others? And why had some people been killed in the community while most others remained friends?

Kinsmen marching to funeral dispute, 1981.

In all societies, kinship and marriage are important. And if there is one topic that has been cornered by anthropology more than by any of the other social sciences, it is kinship and marriage. On the surface, kinship is simple. Each of us has a family. We know our parents, our brothers and sisters; we know what marriage is, who our cousins are, and so on. But things are less obvious when we consider other cultures—or even when we consider our own more closely.

In Gebusi society and many others, if you ask people what group they belong to, they will tell you the name of their clan. A clan is a named and permanent social group whose members pass down membership through descent from one generation to the next. Clan members should generally not marry each other, as they claim to descend from a common blood ancestor. We say "claim" because clan members often can't trace the actual genealogical linkage between them. Gebusi clan membership is passed down through the male line—like last names being passed down in most Western societies. So we call Gebusi descent groups "patriclans." Within these, some subgroups can demonstrate unbroken links of actual genealogical connection, and these are called patri*lineages*. By contrast, most people in the US don't belong to a clan, a lineage, or, indeed, to *any* continuing descent group. This is because our "families" aren't permanently named; they shift over generations. Among Gebusi, patriclan members

call each other "brother," "sister," "father," "father's sister," "grandparent," and so on, depending on their sex and generation—even though to us most of them are "cousins," "uncles," "aunts," and so on.

Ties of lineage or clanship are crucial for forming alliances with—and oppositions against—other groups. When Sialim's first husband died, she was expected to marry Dugawe, the deceased man's patriclan "brother." This "marriage by levirate" kept her—and her daughter from her first marriage—within the same clan as before. We can graphically show this by using standard kinship symbols: a triangle for a man, a circle for a woman, an equal sign for marriage, a slash to indicate someone died, a vertical line for descent, a horizontal line for siblingship, and a slash across a horizontal line to indicate that kinship cannot be completely demonstrated (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2).

If we want to be more complete, we can add Dugawe's first marriage and the children of the two marriages. We can indicate persons who died

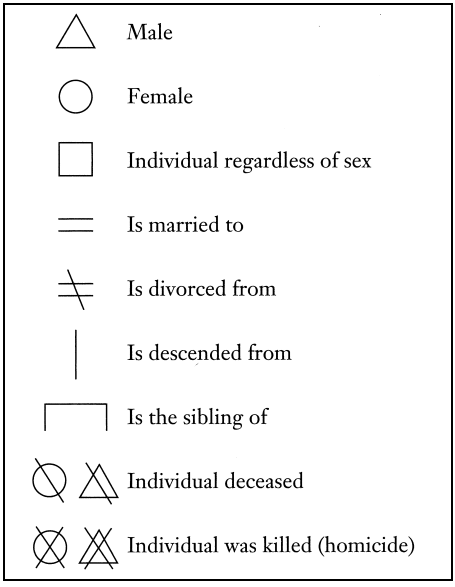

Figure 4.1
Key to
kinship terms

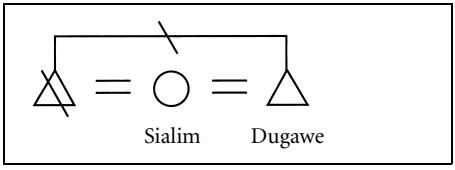

Figure 4.2
Marriage
by levirate

from homicide with an X rather than a slash, and we can show the order of each person's marriages with numbered boxes (see Figure 4.3).

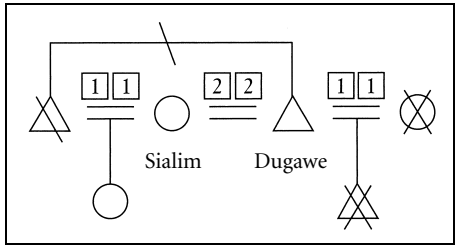

Figure 4.3
Families from leviratic marriage

Though kinship diagrams take some getting used to, they are important to understand social relations in small-scale communities. They also alert us to things we might otherwise miss. For instance, Figure 4.3 reminds us that the marriage between Sialim and Dugawe was actually the second one for each of them. It also shows that Sialim had a surviving daughter from her first marriage, that Dugawe's first wife and son were killed, and that Sialim and Dugawe's own marriage did not produce any children.

Because Gebusi trace descent through the male line, connections of "brotherhood" and "sisterhood" pertain only as long as ancestry goes through fathers (see Figure 4.4). For us in the US, by contrast, the people we consider "cousins" are traced equally on our mother's and father's sides. But for Gebusi, a cousin on your father's side is a "brother" or a "sister," whereas a cousin on the mother's side is not a clan member and can even be marriageable.

Does this seem complicated? It certainly was for me! In college, I thought kinship and calculus were similar: I knew they were important, but I couldn't really see the point—and I wasn't very good at them. But across the globe, cultures use hundreds of ways to align relatives, assign who is "really" related to whom, establish rules and patterns of marriage, and structure alliances and oppositions between groups. And when during fieldwork your friends are dating, marrying, fighting, giving gifts to one another, and so on, you can't figure it out *except* through kinship.

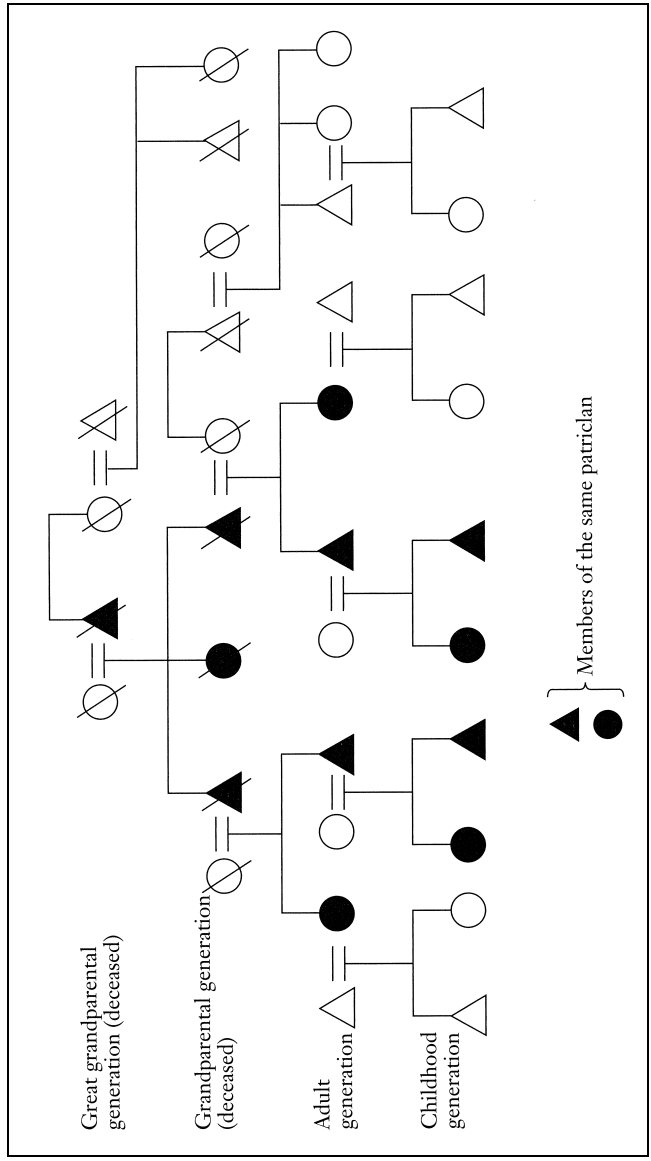

Figure 4.4 Gebusi clanship

For instance, Gebusi marriages are ideally paired between clans or lineages. If a "sister" of the husband also marries a clan "brother" of the bride, neither side gives up a woman without getting one back. This may sound strange, as if women were exchanged like pawns. But among Gebusi, sister-exchange is more interesting and surprising than this.

First, Gebusi take the ideal of marital balance loosely. Because they have complicated ways of extending "siblingship" beyond even the patriclan, they sometimes find creative ways to define a woman as a kind of sister. Second, the bride-to-be has veto power in most marriages. If a Gebusi woman really objects to marrying a certain man, her wishes usually hold sway. Alternately, a teenage girl and a young man may fall in love even though there's little chance that a "sister" of the young man could marry a "brother" of the young woman. These "unreciprocated" unions provoke strong objections from the young woman's fathers and brothers. But the young couple can prevail if the woman is strong willed or runs away with her new husband. Though the parents or brothers of the woman get upset and might beat her if they find her, many of these romantic unions endure and are ultimately accepted as marriages.

As in all human cultures, marriage between certain Gebusi relatives is completely prohibited, including between a mother and her son. But other rules about who is marriageable are wildly diverse, including how large or small the group is that is "exogamous"—that you have to marry outside of. In Western societies, marriage is not legally prohibited except within the nuclear family and sometimes between very close cousins; the whole rest of society is in principle an open field for marriage. Until recently, however, you couldn't marry someone of the same sex. And during a large span of American history, it was illegal for a white person to marry someone of African-American descent: you had to marry within your racial group.

Among Gebusi, you generally have to marry someone outside your clan (which averages 18 persons in size) plus one or two additional "brother" clans. Adding in a few other restrictions, about two-thirds of the village was potentially marriageable to the average young person in Yibihilu. In fact, most Gebusi do find their marriage partners within the village, or in a hamlet close by. As such, Gebusi communities are largely "endogamous."

Community endogamy among Gebusi combines with sister-exchange marriage, and vice versa. If a young woman likes her own brother and his new wife—not to mention the new wife's brother, her own potential

spouse—then she looks forward to completing the marriage exchange. The two couples will typically live together as a joint family, and such family units tend to be strong and cooperative. Ultimately, however, Gebusi sister-exchange is "preferred" rather than required. Perhaps a bit like eHarmony pairs up couples today, Gebusi parents can "suggest" a prospective partner but seldom mandate one. In fact, just over half of Gebusi first marriages (52%) were sister-exchanges. Most of the remainder were "romantic unions" that did not follow rules of sister-exchange.

Taken as a whole, Gebusi villages bubble with kin relations traced variously through mothers, fathers, brother- and sisterhood, and intermarriage. The 52 residents of Yibihilu identified with 13 different clans. The men of the village belonged to seven clans and 11 different patrilineages, and about one-third of them were totally unrelated to each another. As such, Gebusi villages are "multiclan" rather than clustering around men of a single patriclan. This helps explain just why Gebusi place such a high value on *kogwayay*, on collective good company: their ethic of friendship knits the village together and helps it stay integrated and cooperative across diverse lines of kinship, and non-kinship!

Having summarized Gebusi social organization, we can now put it to use. In particular, we can ask what patterns emerge from kinship that combines very small lineages, preferential sister-exchange marriage, community endogamy, and residence based on diverse ties of kinship, marriage, and friendship. As we have seen, only half of first Gebusi marriages are balanced through sister-exchange. This creates a problem, because Gebusi lack effective ways to recompense a lineage or clan that loses a sister or daughter in marriage. In some parts of Melanesia, Africa, and Asia, a woman in marriage can be "paid for" by valuable gifts. These payments to the bride's kin are sometimes called "brideprice." Many anthropologists prefer the term "bridewealth," though, because the transaction is not a human purchase but the opening round of wealth exchange that may last for years between the kin of in-laws linked by the marriage.

Among Gebusi, however, bridewealth or brideprice was negligible; when there is no return marriage, there is also no payment to mollify the bride's kin for her loss to their group. So what happens? Though this causes

Antagonists at a funeral make peace by passing a tobacco pipe over the deceased's grave, 1981.

resentment, Gebusi tend to sweep it under their cultural rug. Most in-laws claim they accept marital imbalance and get along well. And in-laws coreside just as often when the marriage that links them is unreciprocated as when it is balanced through sister-exchange. Given their cultural emphasis on good company, it is not easy for Gebusi to admit or address this tension.

Here is where issues of kinship, residence, and social etiquette get particularly useful and interesting: they help explain how Gebusi have had such a high rate of violence and killing associated with sorcery accusations. Important here is that Gebusi sorcery accusations are especially likely between kin groups linked by a marriage that has not been reciprocated. Gebusi themselves don't emphasize this, and even when a community member is accused of being a sorcerer, the closest relatives of the accused typically say nothing. They may even continue joking so as not to lose public face. Instead, as shown in Chapter 3, tangible "evidence" should be used to verify or dispel the accusation, including perhaps a "sign" by the corpse, a packet of "skin and blood" identified by a spirit medium, or divination food that the suspect has undercooked. To Gebusi, these signs are physical evidence, like fingerprints on a smoking gun. Why was the sorcerer accused or attacked? Because, Gebusi say, the evidence shows him or her to be guilty! Such evidence is widely convincing to the community.

This is where social organization becomes important: beyond what Gebusi think and say, it provides evidence that I myself find to be compelling. We all know that people sometimes say one thing and do another. In

American society, marriage may be promised "till death do us part"—but almost half of all marriages in the US end in divorce. This is an important statistical fact even though it captures neither the joy of a good marriage nor the pain of a bad one.

Anthropologists have often debated which is better—a close-up portrait that is rich with people's own views, or objective views that are more detached but also more encompassing. Is a statistical depiction more scientific or more dehumanizing? My own sense is both views are needed as an effective complement and counterbalance to each other. Zooming in, anthropologists sometimes foreground the rich detail of individual lives and experiences. But at other times, they draw back—as in the present chapter—to look more dispassionately and statistically at a bigger picture.

Among Gebusi, I gained a society-wide view by collecting census material, residence histories, and kinship diagrams. By charting the genealogies of 18 clans—as far back as they could be remembered—I documented all the causes and frequencies of death, and double-checked the results with other Gebusi. It was tedious work, but Gebusi were interested in the details and usually proud to present them correctly.

So how do we know that Gebusi who are related via marriage often accuse one another of sorcery, even though Gebusi themselves don't say this? Because statistics reveal that persons related by marriage are more than three times as likely to accuse one another of sorcery than expected by chance. In father-in-law/son-in-law relations, the rate of sorcery accusation is a whopping 15 times greater than would be expected. In sorcery accusations across a marital link, over 70% of the time, the marriage was never reciprocated. In structural terms, this makes sense. Gebusi marriage is based on "person-for-person" exchange. If the woman is not replaced by another woman in marriage, she can be replaced by the taking of another life. More generally, the life of the sorcerer is taken "in exchange" for the death of the person who died of sickness. The lack of exchange for a woman in life thus increases the chance of violent revenge between two patrilineages when one of their members dies from illness.

Killings of Gebusi were remarkably frequent. Of all adult deaths, almost one-third were homicides (129 of 394, or 32.7%). This toll of violence is

greater even than that of the Yanomami, the so-called fierce people of the Amazon rainforest. On a per capita basis, the rate at which Gebusi were killed exceeds the carnage of the bloodiest human war in history—World War II in Europe, including the Holocaust. Not all Gebusi killings were individual executions of sorcery suspects, but the majority were—61%. Another 21% were the result of Bedamini raids, in which large numbers of Gebusi could be killed simultaneously. Only 5.5% of violent Gebusi deaths resulted from battles or fights between massed groups of Gebusi warriors.

Gebusi adults of both sexes and almost all age categories could be killed as sorcerers. But those most likely to be accused and executed were senior men and women. By contrast, children have never been accused of sorcery; in Gebusi belief, they are not old enough to know how to perform it. Additionally, young women were almost completely immune from Gebusi sorcery accusation. This makes sense from a society-wide perspective, since young women are crucial to a society's reproductive survival. Though no less excusable in our own moral and ethical terms, the killing of men and of older women has less direct impact on reproduction. Enormous numbers of European men were killed during World War I, but the population was replenished quickly because many young women were available for childbearing. For Gebusi, relative immunity of young women from sorcery execution meant that the homicide rate, high as it was, did not prevent collective survival. Gebusi lived in good company even as they killed persons suspected of sorcery.

How have Gebusi viewed their own killings? This issue is important because sorcery execution was common within communities—the same group that was supposed to be bonded in good company! To Gebusi, however, violence is the exception that proves the rule: the community could continue in good company just *because* those who had been malicious within it had been found out and eliminated. Among the remainder, good company, was, in fact the general rule. Outside the narrow context of sorcery inquests, most Gebusi were good-natured and friendly. Even persons whose close relatives had been executed as sorcerers often lived with, and could be friends with, the families of the killers—as was the case with Sialim, who married the man who had killed her mother. Even when they

wanted revenge, the men of the sorcerer's patrilineage were few in number—not numerous enough to prevail against the rest of the multi-clan community. For most Gebusi, it wasn't murder to execute sorcerers. Rather, it was a proper way to dispense with persons who were believed to have used killing to compromise community good company.

Beyond my deep concern for those who were accused—after all, to me they were completely innocent—of what significance is Gebusi sorcery and violence? For one thing, sorcery accusations reveal the role of culture in constructing or creating stigma. Cultural beliefs can powerfully validate discrimination and legitimize the scapegoating of innocent persons. This justification can be abetted by structural tensions of social organization, kinship, and demography that lie outside daily awareness. Given this, a scientific understanding of structural tensions within a society—beyond the ideas and beliefs of the people themselves—is particularly important to complement and counterbalance the positive views and rich values held within cultures.

In American society, tensions in family structure that result from class inequality, unemployment, racism, and gendered inequality clearly inform patterns of violence, drug use, alcoholism, and domestic abuse. By understanding how inequality works among peoples such as the Gebusi, we may see more clearly how larger patterns of discrimination operate in other societies, including our own. Western cultural values of equality concerning race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and religion are strongly assumed in discourses of human rights, freedom, and democracy. Amid this positive emphasis, which is important and should not be minimized, we also need to unearth patterns of inequality and discrimination that persist in fact.

As with Gebusi, we may confuse how we would like society to function with how it operates in reality. Just as we can believe in marriage despite a significant rate of divorce, we may believe in sexual, racial, and cultural equality and yet find that women are not paid as much as men for doing similar work, or that foreigners or racial or ethnic minorities are relegated disproportionately to low levels of income and status. In the mix, it is easy to neglect patterns of kinship and social organization that are important to ethnic or foreign-born minorities because their networks of affiliation are not well understood by Americans—and may remain outside legal recognition. In various ways, then, cultural beliefs and their discrepancy with actual

behavior can be as strong in our own society—and as linked to the organization of kinship and gender—as we may discover them to be in others.

Cultural anthropologists often look to other cultures and then reexamine their own beliefs and actions. Beyond the value of understanding kinship, community organization, and their relation to conflict or violence in other societies, awareness of these patterns prompts us to look more closely and critically at the challenges faced in our own society.

Update: If Gebusi show us much about cultural difference, their patterns of violence and sorcery show us at least as much, if not more, by their changes over time. Since 1989, as far as I know, not a single Gebusi has been killed, either through sorcery execution or otherwise. As we will see in Part Two, the causes for this reduction are complex, including the demise of spirit séances, divinations, and collective sorcery accusations; changes in burial customs; and an emergent and self-defined Gebusi sense of what it means to be "modern." As we shall also see, the coming of Christianity to the Gebusi has been an important part of these changes, though not exactly in the ways we might expect. The Gebusi's conversion to Christianity was at their own desire and instigation. The pastors had no idea how important Gebusi shamanism, séances, and divinations were to sorcery inquests and the killing of suspects. And for a number of years there have been no police to deter violence. As such, the continued reduction of Gebusi killing has stemmed in large part from their own decisions about how to develop and change over time. Though sorcery suspicions are not a thing of the past, these are no longer validated by public spirit séances or forced divinations, and no suspected Gebusi sorcerers—or anyone else—has been killed in recent decades for sorcery or for any other reason. To me—given how central, deep, and richly engrained Gebusi sorcery inquests used to be—this seems quite amazing.

Comparatively, this is quite striking: one of the highest rates of homicide yet documented in the ethnographic record—a rate that had long persisted—has been reduced and then continued at zero for a quarter of a century. This is not only very good news, but a striking larger commentary on the ability of human societies to reduce their level of violence. From a Western perspective as well, this should not come as a surprise: the rate of

killing that was so horrifically high during World War II has dropped to world-historic lows, and stayed there for decades, in the very European countries that had been most deeply involved in this slaughter.

Two other Gebusi "updates" can also be noted. First, senior women and men live longer than before, both because they are no longer subject to sorcery attack and because their nutrition is better than it was before. In contrast to my early days among Gebusi, many older men and women now live long enough to enjoy grandchildren and to remain productive members of their family and community.

The final point concerns Gebusi social organization. Of all the dimensions of Gebusi social life that have changed over the years, their system of kinship and social structure seems the most enduring and constant. Though the structure and size of their settlements have changed, Gebusi patterns of clanship, coresidence, and kinship continue, including most parts of their marriage system. This raises a key question: if tensions in Gebusi social structure informed their previous high level of violence, how are these tensions now managed and defused? Though I have some hunches about this, I can't yet pretend to have an adequate answer. But I hope to investigate this further—during my next visit with the Gebusi!

Note: See Gebusi video clips and commentary on Gebusi kinship relations ("Social organization") in 2013 on www.bruceknauft.com → Gebusi.

BROADER CONNECTIONS
Kinship, Marriage, and Social Organization

- Gebusi social relations are hard to understand without making **kinship diagrams** in standard notation.
- Gebusi **clans**, groups of persons "putatively" related by blood descent, average 18 persons and are traced through male descent (patriclans).
- Gebusi **lineages** of those with demonstrated male descent (patrilineages) contain only a few persons each.
- Gebusi clans are named, endure through time, have collective rights and obligations, and are thus **corporate descent groups**.
- Gebusi usually marry outside their clan, which means the clan is generally **exogamous**.

- Gebusi generally marry within their longhouse and associated hamlet community, which means the community is largely **endogamous**.
- Gebusi marriage by **levirate** (leviratic marriage) occurs when a woman marries a clan brother of her deceased husband. This maintains the association of the woman with the deceased husband's clan—as it did when Sialim first married Dugawe.
- In Gebusi and many other societies, kinship terms are often extended to a larger group of people as **classificatory kinship**.
- The Gebusi desire to balance the marriage of women between lineages or clans reflects a cultural emphasis in **marriage** on **sister-exchange marriage.**
- "Tit-for-Tat" exchange, which can be termed **direct reciprocity**, is evident in Gebusi sister-exchange marriage and also in the execution of alleged sorcery suspects in reciprocity for the death by sickness of the sorcerer's supposed victim.
- Unlike many ethnic groups in New Guinea, Gebusi place little emphasis on material transactions such as **bridewealth** (or "**brideprice**") that compensate a kin group for the out-marriage of their women.
- Among Gebusi, underlying resentment in unreciprocated marriages informed violent accusations of **sorcery.**
- Gebusi sorcery accusations led to one of the highest rates of **homicide** yet recorded. More recently and just as dramatically, however, Gebusi homicide has since reduced to zero and stayed there for the past 25 years. As in Europe after World War II, this shows the degree to which human aggression and violence can be lessened through cultural self-control.
- Comprehensive understanding of a culture combines **"experience-near"** with more **"experience-far"** perspectives (per **Clifford Geertz**). These have also been described as **"emic"** versus **"etic"** views of culture, or "insider" versus "outsider" perspectives.
- Combining insider and outsider views of culture helps balance our appreciation of cultural values with an understanding of **structural inequality** between subgroups or classes of people.
- Continuity of basic features of **kinship and social organization** has been perhaps the most enduring aspect of Gebusi and many other societies over time.