KATHLEEN GOUGH AND RESEARCH IN KERALA

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I cannot begin to talk about Kathleen and her work in Kerala without first mentioning a few reminiscences about my own interaction with Kathleen. When I received a grant back in 1958 to go to Kerala to carry out a study of family life and child-rearing practices among matrilineal groups in the Malabar District of Kerala, I asked Mort Fried if I could write to Kathleen. He said, "by all means. She is a very open and friendly person and you should not hesitate to write to her." So I went ahead and wrote. Kathleen responded in great detail, expressing not only interest in the work I was doing but also giving me names of people to meet and visit with, suggesting that I might want to work in one or more of the villages where she had gone, and even giving me the name of the man who had cooked for her. As it turned out, I did go ahead and work in one of her villages for the first part of my time in Kerala. It was both good and bad, because I was forever aware of her unique legacy. For example, she was a fantastic walker, never worried about falling down crevices or being besieged by wild dogs, whereas I always had poor balance and eventually ended up using a walking cane. Everywhere I went people had stories to tell about her amazing energy as well as her extreme kindness, and people constantly asked me how she was doing. The young men talked about how she used to come and sit with them in the toddy shop, something I felt less comfortable doing since it was an arena where women usually did not go. They also talked about how she never seemed to get tired, staying up night after night to watch the traditional possession ceremonies during the "Theyyam" season (when ritual possession ceremonies take place).

When I returned from my field work in Kerala, Kathleen suggested that I stop in Ann Arbor so that we could talk about our mutual interests and about what was going on in Kerala. I was totally overwhelmed when she handed me the manuscript of her chapters for the book she was doing with David Schneider on *Matrilineal Kinship* (1961). I still remember feeling how I could never write anything that was comparable to that, even though my own research had focussed on vastly different issues.

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Just before I left for my second trip to India in 1962, Kathleen and her young son passed through New York and stayed with me on her way to visit her mother in England. It was a real delight to be with both of them, and Kathleen and I spent many hours talking about Kerala where I planned to go first to study the Namboodiri Brahmins. She carried with her an unexpected surprise, the only copy of her thesis that she personally owned. Since those were the days before xeroxing, I remember staying up half of each night after Kathleen went to sleep so that I could read and take notes from her thesis, which is an excellent study of the lineage system and the effects of legal reforms of the 1930s in the Malabar District (the northern half of present-day Kerala).

To turn from the personal, Kathleen Gough was a member of the first corps of British-trained social anthropologists to carry out systematic research after the end of World War II. She went to Kerala immediately after Indian Independence in the late 1940s. This was a period of considerable turmoil in the area. During the 1930s in each of the main regions of Kerala (Travancore, Cochin and the Malabar District of Madras State), a wide variety of legal reforms had been enacted that led to profound changes in the structure and organization of life among the land-owning matrilineal castes. Kathleen was the first to study these changes in detail, as well as the earlier changes that had resulted from contact with the colonizing Western powers, the invasions of Malabar by Haider Ali and his son Tipoo Sultan and the subsequent betrayal of the Zamorin of Calicut by the British which led to British rule in Malabar.

Her unpublished doctoral thesis (which is to be published posthumously in India) focussed specifically on the effect of all of these historical forces and the legislation passed in the 1930s in Malabar District (which was then still part of Madras State) and the northern part of the then-separate state of Cochin (which was quite similar to South Malabar). While her thesis was not published, she did publish a number of seminal articles based on this early research, as well as several chapters in the book *Matrilineal Kinship*.

She worked in two parts of the former Malabar District: (a) in a small town in South Malabar, and (b) in the northern part of the District in a village about 18 miles from the coastal cities of Cannanore and Tellicherry, where she studied not only the Nayars but also two other matrilineal groups, the Tiyyas (or Ezhavas) and matrilineal Muslims, as well as (c) in a village in Trichur District of Cochin State.

Her earliest articles focussed on issues of kinship and kin relations (Gough 1952a, 1952b, 1952c, 1954 and 1959b) on which she had collected very important materials dealing with the range of variation among matrilineal groups on the Malabar coast. In her 1959 article, she explored the question of what constitutes a marriage among Nayars, looking at the difference between (a) what she found among Nayars in Central Kerala—where traditionally men

continued to reside in their matrilineage homes, visiting their wives only at night and never forming a nuclear unit even within a larger joint household; and (b) most other societies round the globe. She attempted to come up with "a single, parsimonious definition" of what we mean by marriage that is useful for cross-cultural comparisons. Her definition ("Marriage is a relationship established between a woman and one or more other persons, which provides that a child born to the woman under circumstances not prohibited by the rules of the relationship, is accorded full birth-status rights common to normal members of his society or social stratum") provoked considerable discussion and is still quoted today in many analyses. In many ways it is an amazingly progressive definition in that it is one that applied to a wide range of situations including even woman-woman marriage.

From early on her work was comparative and integrated the material aspects of life, political institutions, kinship and emotions into her analysis of change. Another early article, "Incest Prohibitions and Rules of Endogamy in Three Matrilineal Groups of the Malabar Coast" (1952b), dealt with the comparison of the ways in which incest prohibitions are influenced by cultural practices, including religion, in each of the groups she studied, i.e., Nayars in central Kerala, as well as Muslims, Nayars and Tiyyas in North Kerala. Her work on incest was extremely important because it challenged the tendency among anthropologists at that time to try to examine incest prohibitions in isolation from both the kinship system as a whole and other aspects of the culture.

In all of the articles referred to above, she explored in a comparative and historical fashion how kinship systems are moulded by the cultural tradition of the group, its means of subsistence and by its place in the political structure. Thus, she showed that the permanence of the matrilineal lineage was related to its hold on the land and to the size of hereditary estates. In a later article written in 1975, in which she compared the changes in household composition in the Cochin village she had studied in 1949 and what she had found in 1964 when she did a restudy of that village, she showed how with the partition of the large matrilineages some couples were even living with the husband's kin. She correlated this with the transition from matrilineal inheritance to an emphasis on bilateral inheritance resulting from changes in family law. However, she also noted that there are still many joint families in the village and raised the question why they continued long after the collapse of other feudal institutions and the introduction of capitalist relations. She suggested three possible reasons for this: (1) that perhaps kinship relations do not change more than they are compelled to in order to meet the new demands and values created by the economic and political system; (2) the lack of adequate public services for the old, the unemployed, the disabled and the orphaned young; and (3) that the assets of younger and older people often

complement each other, especially for those who are poor yet not entirely propertyless.

In 1953, Kathleen Gough won the Curl Bequest Prize for her essay on Female Initiation Rites on the Malabar coast. This paper linked property rights and psychoanalytic concepts to attitudes of reverence and submission to elders. The ceremony she described was the *talikettukalyanam* or *tali*-tying ceremony, showing its significance in terms of the total kinship system. In the first four parts of the essay she analyzed the ceremony for each of the matrilineal groups she had studied. In the last part she then made a psychoanalytical analysis of the rite and related it to Oedipal fears which she stated were connected to the great power held by elders in these castes, as a result of the fact that traditionally all property was held in common and impartible. One other article from this period also attempted to link a sociological and a psychological analysis; in this case it dealt with traditional Nayar ancestor worship cults.

Gough's articles in the book she edited with David Schneider were the major contribution to and force behind *Matrilineal Kinship*, as her co-editor testified. They were ground-breaking in their impact on Kerala studies and for their theoretical emphasis on change. She pointed to the tremendous variation among the different regions of Kerala and among different matrilineal groups within a single area (the North Malabar region of Kerala). At the time she was doing her work, people tended to ignore history. It was the heyday of functionalism in Great Britain and of Boasian descriptive studies in the United States. The majority of studies at that time focussed on how things "are," how they stay the same, whereas Gough's concerns led her beyond such theories to seek instead a theoretical perspective to explain change. Gough was one of the first to use historical materials to show the impact of the introduction of a capitalist economic system into a traditional feudal economy. This book has subsequently influenced the thinking and work of students and Kerala scholars. It also served as a passage into the later focus of her research, by examining the destructive and exploitative effect of colonialism on a traditional people. She was thus able to show how as a result of the introduction of capitalist economic forces in Kerala, a system that had functioned well for women, in many cases giving them significant autonomy, changed drastically, with the result that some members of a given family came to be far wealthier than others. Though she was aware of how the traditional system had exploited the lower castes, she also saw how it was relatively egalitarian in the distribution of wealth within the large matri-household, whereas the changes wrought by the introduction of capitalist economic forces resulted in women in a single matri-household belonging to different economic strata. Political activism in Kerala during the past 25 years had its roots in two different earlier movements, both influenced by the impact of

capitalism on a rigidly feudal and exploitative society. One of these was the pressure by low-caste Muslims and Christians for permanent rights to land. The other was based on the demands of younger sons and daughters in matrilineal Nayar households (and even in patrilineal Namboodiri Brahman ones) to allow them to partition their ancestral property and to obtain permanent ownership rights to land. Kathleen's involvement in studying these earlier movements for justice played a role in her evolution as an anti-imperialist fighter. Thus she was one of the first to do a material/class analysis of land reform movements in Kerala. She studied the history of the left movement in Kerala and the way in which it affected politics in the 1960s in her articles, "Kerala Politics and the 1965 Elections" (1967) and "Communist Rural Councillors in Kerala" (1968a).

She wrote about some of the mechanisms by which political allegiance is sought and the way in which *panchayats* (elected village councils) functioned. In the 1965 article she showed how and why villagers of different castes and classes, in both farming and suburban areas, supported either the Congress or the Communist parties, how interparty conflict was pursued through local institutions and what factors held this kind of conflict in check. She showed the kinds of conflicts that erupted over the use of public funds obtained from local taxes or provided to the village by government agencies. These tensions often led to stalemates: for example, several village projects were abandoned or delayed by the mutual sabotage between the parties (1965c:419-420). She rooted her analysis of caste in a material/class analysis. In the 1968 article referred to above, she showed the relationship between the organization of the *panchayat* and the Community Development Programme indicating some of the constraints which the latter impose on *panchayats* which in some cases limited the effectiveness of the *panchayat* leaders.

In her article on "Peasant Resistance and Revolt in South India" (1968-69), written in 1968, she analyzed the growth of politization in Kerala as the Communist party began in the 1930s and continued into the 1940s and 1950s organizing both poor and middle peasants. She showed how other political parties got involved in the same struggles, with each party vying for the support of the peasantry. The article presented an excellent summary of left activity in south India in both Tamil Nadu and Kerala. This was her first article to discuss some of the ways in which left (including communist) leaders absorbed in electioneering began to concentrate more on winning seats and less on day-to-day organization in their villages. She showed how in the beginning the communists were able to recruit tenant cultivators of middle-peasant rank into their peasant unions, and how they have tended to rely on the village leadership coming from this class. Yet she also noted that they drew their greatest support from areas where there were many landless labourers. And she showed how when the left actually gained state power in

Kerala, they tried to redistribute benefits among the poor and middle peasants, landless labourers and urban workers.

Her analysis anticipated many of the socio-economic tensions that still plague Kerala today. Thus she noted how the failure in Kerala to industrialize with sufficient rapidity has meant that an increasing proportion of the population became dependent on agriculture with a massive increase in the proportion of landless casual labourers. If this was true in 1968, it is even more true today in the 1990s when Kerala has come to have the highest level of literacy and health care of any state in India, with life-expectancies equal to those in the so-called developed world, but with rampant unemployment and underemployment both among its semi-educated masses and the educated youth. Kathleen clearly recognized that the left in Kerala, by focussing all of its energies on electoral politics and neglecting issues of employment, was not meeting the needs of its constituents—the people who had given it power.

Kathleen's more recent work has all focussed on Tamil Nadu and Vietnam, but she never lost her interest in Kerala and was herself planning to revise and bring out her doctoral thesis. In addition, on the last occasion when she talked to me about her future plans she said that after finishing her Tamil Nadu books and a projected piece of work in Vietnam, she planned to go full circle and do something about what was happening in Kerala in the late 1980s. We shared a common view of the situation in Kerala and were equally distressed by the way in which Kerala was being touted as a "development model" while so many people were without work. Without the funds received each month from expatriates living and working in the Middle East, the Kerala situation would be far worse. We shared our fear about what will happen when this goldmine dries up.

Kathleen Gough's legacy to Kerala studies will never be forgotten. This includes both her careful and painstaking detailed field data from the period just after Indian independence, her deep understanding of the social, economic and political processes at work in the area and her innovative analyses of the data. It is a great loss to our field that she did not have the chance to personally supervise the publication of her doctoral dissertation or to carry out the follow-up studies she wanted to do.

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