# Kinship, Courtship and Conscription: Lévi-Straussian aspects of some alpine village rituals – and their theoretical and institutional implications

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## Abstract

The theory of exchange marriage has had little impact on the anthropology of Europe. Its relevance to European ethnography might increase if it were extended to include representations of marriage exchange between generational groups. An analysis of collective celebrations of kinship and courtship suggests that they express the principles of exchange marriage in a way that fits the corporate structure of many European villages. The celebrations draw on church and military symbolism, and the analysis has some implications for our understanding of popular attitudes to church and state.

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**Introduction**[2]

Attempts to find examples of Lévi-Strauss's elementary kinship structures in Europe have met with very limited success. Examples of asymmetric exchange between lineages have been reported from Greece (but confined to a single generation) (du Boulay 1982; 1984). Working in former Yugoslavia, Hammel (1968) found both direct and asymmetric exchange continuing over several generations – but his data related to god-kinship, not kinship in the usual sense. A number of studies in France have used archival material to look for patterns corresponding to direct and generalized (i.e. asymmetric) exchange, but the reasons for many of the apparent 'exchanges' are unclear, leaving open the possibility that they might be merely the inevitable, but unintended, consequences of repeated marriages in the same geographic area (Segalen and Zonabend 1987: 112-116). Though Lévi-Straussian analyses of European societies still appear occasionally – for instance Pine's (1996) illuminating application of Lévi-Strauss's later notion of household society to a village in the Polish Carpathians – it is fair to say that the Lévi-Straussian trail in European anthropology has gone cold. This cooling of an interest that was never more than tepid may also be associated with Bourdieu's (1977) criticism of structuralism's apparent detachment from purposeful action, and with the more general movement away from 'grand theory' over the last two decades.

The contention of this paper is that we may have given up the search too easily. For one thing, the circumstances for the existence of some form of marriage alliance system in Europe appear to have been rather favorable. Until very recently, the majority of the European population lived in rural communities – many of which were characterized by high levels of local endogamy (Pina-Cabral 1992: 33-34) – and marriage was characteristically a focus of a great deal of attention. Present and remembered marriage alliances would have provided some of the most obvious social ties. What is more, the need for local solidarity was often very real. Even under oppressive governments and landlords, local communities were responsible for organizing much of the practical business of life – and therefore needed enough internal cohesion to undertake collective action and resolve internal disputes themselves. So, on the face of it, both the conditions and the motives for building community-wide systems of marriage alliances were as much present in Europe as in other parts of the world. In some parts of Europe such conditions still exist.

This brings us to the key question. Have Lévi-Straussian structures really been absent from most of rural Europe, or have we been looking for them in the wrong way? In particular have we focused our attention too narrowly on the particular structures described in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (referred to from now on as *ESK*) – rather than looking at the principles underlying them? The answer, of course, depends on what one takes those principles to be. So, to be clear, I should explain from the start that I am not basing this paper on the general 'principles of kinship' which, according to chapter 29 of *ESK*, are applicable to *all* societies (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 478-481) – but rather on the more specific principles that characterize the *elementary* systems which the book actually describes. I will return later in the paper to the question of how these specific principles might be integrated into a more comprehensive account of kinship in general.

The systems analysed in *ESK* rest on three fundamental principles.

1.  The first is that society is made up of descent groups[3] – which continue indefinitely through time and are characterized by relations of solidarity between their members.
2.  The second is that there is an incest prohibition which operates at descent-group level.
3.  The third is that marriages form patterns of exchange, which bind the different parts of the community together.

Might these principles be present in European village life - either at the level of practical organization or of ritual – but possibly expressed in ways that differ from the 'elementary structures' found elsewhere?

I will of course be arguing that they are – and that the evidence for this could be gathered in many parts of Europe. However, since the argument has to start somewhere, I will draw most of the evidence from my own fieldwork in the Carnian Alps in north east Italy, carried out between 1989 and 1991. The villages in the valley where I worked (the Val Degano) were small – few would ever have had more than 300 or 400 inhabitants – and they were not strictly endogamous. Before 1960 village endogamy rates of about 50 percent were common in higher villages, while

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[3] Given Lévi-Strauss's status as the founder of 'alliance' theory, it may seem odd to include 'descent' in a list of his fundamental assumptions. In fact the first version of *ESK* made an even tighter assumption – namely, that exchanges took place between *unilineal* descent groups. In the preface to the second edition Lévi-Strauss remarks that "…I might have indicated the importance of a general study of so-called 'bilateral' or 'undifferentiated' systems of descent, even though I did not undertake such a study" (Lévi-Strauss 1969: xxviii). The analysis in this paper also widens the definition of descent group, but in a different way.

the usual practice in the communities nearer the valley floor seems to have been to choose marriage partners from nearby villages. (Despite this, as later paragraphs will show, the idea of village endogamy plays an important role.) Marriage is generally patrilocal – and was strictly so until very recently. Parents used to leave as much of their property as the law allowed to their male descendents – with equal division between the sons. Houses, in particular, are traditionally left to sons (Heady 1999: 1-2, 31-35, 131-134, 132n.).

**Community rituals of descent and marriage in the Val Degano**

*(a) Descent*
The group of patrilineally related people living in the same house – or in two or three neighbouring houses – share a common nickname with the building (or building cluster) itself. This name – sometimes referred to as a 'house' name, and sometimes as a 'family' name – effectively defines a shallow patrilineage linked by an ancestor who died a generation or two ago.
If villagers were interested in tracing their ancestry further back it would be possible to identify much larger patrilineal groups (as is shown by the records kept by one or two enthusiasts, and by shared official surnames) but these virtual patriclans are not recognized at local level. In Ovasta, the village where I collected most data, people who had married within the village showed no tendency either to prefer or to avoid partners with the same surname. Those who had married someone with the same surname denied that they were relatives – meaning by this that their relationship was more distant than that of *cunsorin* – second cousin.

On the other hand, the house name groups do share an identity – but only so long as the relationships between the people concerned are vivid in people's minds. There is an idea that the members of nuclear families want to maintain their connections – partly as a way of prolonging the sense of the parents' existence – but references to this desire in song and conversation tend to emphasise its ultimate futility. Thus, in a very popular song about a wedding, the parents of the bride are said to experience the event as a foretaste of their own death. Parents are concerned to draw up their wills fairly, so as not to provoke quarrels between their children – but the general expectation is that once the time comes to divide the property quarrels will arise and the unity of the fragile descent group will come to an end.

So there is nothing resembling a permanent descent-group below the level of the village. But what about the village as a whole? Here the picture changes. In the rhetoric of village life, *i nestis vecjos* – "our old people" (a term which covers both the elderly and the dead) – occupy a place of honour, and are invoked in discussions about present day village actions. The people concerned include the actual ancestors of particular families, but the collective way they are referred to makes it clear that they are also considered as the shared ancestors of the whole village. This attitude is reflected in the ritual response to individual deaths. When someone dies, each household in the village is expected to send a representative to the funeral and, if the corpse has been laid out at home, to attend a vigil on the previous evening. The relation to the youngest generation is also celebrated collectively. There is a ritual that represents all the adults of the village as having a shared quasi-parental relationship to all the small children. Once a year, the children call on each household and ask for *sops* – small presents – in return for which they recite a little rhyme wishing that the giver may go to paradise. The image of the village as a quasi-kin group continuing through time is very clear.

So too, is the connection to another – very powerful - set of quasi-kinship representations: those related to the church. I was told that the word *sop* can be used of a present given by a god-parent to a god-child. The idea that people were linked by a kind of collective god-kinship was also expressed in two other ways. In some villages the priest used to be referred to as *Sior Santul* – "Sir Godfather" – and the popular expression for a midwife used to be *santula* or *comari* – the main meaning of both words being "godmother".  Still more directly, each village church contains a statue of the Virgin, which is paraded round the village once a year. Although in a sense there is only one Virgin, it is also true that each village's Virgin is distinct (for instance they are named for different attributes and have their feasts on different days). Thus, once a year, the inhabitants of each village celebrate their shared relationship to their own particular divine mother.

Thus, though the village is neither a single continuing lineage, nor composed of distinct continuing lineages, it celebrates its unity in terms of actual and symbolic kinship links - in ways, which emphasise the continuing, indeed eternal, nature of the connections involved. When talking about particular marriages, villagers may stress that the partners are unrelated – but when they wish to express the unity of the village as a whole, they represent themselves as kin.

*(b) Marriage and exchange*

So the villages are, in a ritual sense, quasi-kin-groups. We have also seen that residence is patrilocal, and that many of the marriages take place between people from nearby villages. If we were looking for a direct analogy with one of Lévi-Strauss's elementary exchange structures, we might expect such marriages to be celebrated as gifts of women from one village to another, with ritual stress on the inter-village ties which the marriage reinforced.

This is not what happens. In a custom that is falling into disuse, the marriage is treated as a *sale* of the bride to her outside partner – the money (the equivalent of $100 (US) in one instance just before my stay in Ovasta) being demanded not by the village as a whole but specifically by the young men who were thereby losing one of 'their' girls. A middle-aged woman commented that such a marriage was a loss, not only for the young men, but also for the whole group of village young people, including the young women, who thereby lost one of their companions. So an external marriage is represented, not as an alliance-building exchange with another quasi-lineage, but as a damaging breach of the rights of insiders, and of the ties between them. There seems to be no feeling that either the marriage or the money forms part of a continuing cycle of inter-village exchange.

Marriage is celebrated as a kind of exchange, but it is an exchange between two groups within the village itself: established households on the one hand, and the village young people on the other. There is a definite sense that an alliance is being celebrated and reinforced – but it is an alliance between the component parts of the same village. It is also an alliance that is not entirely voluntary – parts of the exchange are represented as forced: superficially by the young men, but ultimately by the power of time itself.

The occasion that expresses this sense of exchange most clearly is an annual celebration of courtship, known as "throwing the *cidulas*" – a word that means both 'wheels' and 'disks'. During the day the young men[4] who are old enough to be considered adults (the key age is now 18) but have not yet married go round the village – accompanied by an accordianist. They sing

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[4] In recent decades there has been a tendency to widen participation in the tour of village houses, and in the disk throwing itself, to include young women and even, occasionally, children. However, these roles used to be strictly male – and, at the beginning of the 1990s, there were several villages in which either the disk-throwing or the tour of the village still was. This relaxation of the rules coincides – as can be seen from the main text – with a decline in the practical importance of the economic and social institutions which gave the ritual its former significance.

outside each house, and then go in where they sing some more, and are offered food and (alcoholic) drink, and gifts (formerly food, now usually money) to take away with them. The atmosphere is mildly aggressive, but friendly. This is expressed in the words of one of the main songs, which make fun of older people; in the very fact that the young men enter each house as of right - something which would be out of the question at any other time; and in their general boisterousness, as they get increasingly drunk. At the houses they visit, people sometimes express surprise, or interest, that particular participants have already reached the age of 18.

The next, and most spectacular, episode occurs just after nightfall. The young men have previously prepared a large bon-fire on a slope above the village, round which they have arranged small wooden disks – the *cidulas* referred to above – cut from the trunk of a sapling. They light the fire, and once the disks themselves have caught light, they throw them, one at a time, towards the village. Each disk is jointly dedicated to a young man and woman from the village – with the implication that they are courting each other (though nowadays, given the end of village endogamy, this is never actually the case). In many villages the dedication is given in the form of a rhyming couplet, which is generally friendly but also, often, mildly obscene. Down in the village, the young women and a few other people gather to hear the announcements and watch the burning disks. Because of the darkness, the young men themselves cannot be seen, and both the burning disk, and the shouted dedication appear to issue from the fire itself.

These two episodes form the core of the *cidulas* celebration, so now may be the moment to pause and decode their symbolism. The first thing one needs to know is that young people's love making was stereotypically supposed to take place in the woods, meadows and stalls above the village – not in the houses of the village itself. (One young man told me that he would not make love in his parents' home out of 'respect' for them.) The next is that circular motion – expressed here in the tour of the village houses, and in the spinning of the burning disks – is used in many contexts as an expression of unity. The third is that fire has a triple symbolic meaning. It can stand for power and vitality in general; it can stand for sexuality; and it can also stand for the kitchen fire, which is the focus of family life. Indeed, *fouc* – the word for fire – has 'household' as a secondary meaning.

Given these associations, we can see the two episodes in terms of a move away from, and then back to, the collectivity of village households. The starting point of the drama is the young

men's self-constitution as a group which is separate from, and opposed to, the village households in which they grew up. The next step is their symbolic assertion of power over those households – by breaching their boundaries, and simultaneously breaking normal rules of good behaviour. The third step is the establishment of a rival focus of symbolic power outside and above the village – embodying the semi-illicit sexuality of young people. So far, the movement has all been away from the village and might seem an act of simple rebellion by the young people. However, the last step – the dedicating and throwing of the disks – fundamentally changes the meaning. The sexual activity of youth is seen to result, not in generalized promiscuity, but in the formation of couples – potentially at least the nuclei of future households – and each couple's return to the village in the form of a small fire which implicitly calls to mind both their mutual attraction and the domesticity of family life. Taken as a whole, the ritual expresses an exchange, between the world of households and the semi-wild world of young people – in which, as children grow up, they are first released from the world of existing households to the semi-autonomous world of youth – but then, once they have chosen their life-partners, are returned to ordinary village life as the next generation of householders.

The two remaining episodes of the *cidulas* cycle reinforce the theme of exchange between young people and their elders. The first is a village dance – to which all generations are invited - held directly after the disk-throwing, in a hall which has been decorated by the young people. This is seen as a gift from the young people to their elders. Finally there is a collective supper (possibly some days later) for the young people – paid for by those contributions from the tour of households which were not spent on organizing the dance. This is seen as a gift from the older people to the young. As in the two main episodes, young people and householders appear to bring complementary qualities to the perpetuation of village life: sexuality (in the form of the dance) and the domesticity associated with kinship (in the form of the supper).

Although the reciprocity between households and youth is balanced at the level of the village as a whole, this does not apply at the level of individual households. The debt of village youth to specific households is implicitly denied, while the ties of new couples to their young contemporaries are symbolically reinforced by uncancelled debt. An aspect of the *cidulas* ritual that used to matter a few decades back (though not at the time of my fieldwork) was that the particular young man who was linked to a young woman in the *cidulas* dedication had the right to escort her to the dance, even if her parents disapproved of him. Implicitly she was being taken

from her home by the power of youth, not transferred to the world of youth by parental generosity. On the other hand, the on-going connection between the newly formed couple and their young contemporaries is made clear in two ways. The first is that a bridegroom from within the village does not have to pay for his bride: the implication being that, since he is a member of the village, there is no reason for him to cancel the debt. The young couple's debt to their village contemporaries was further marked by the fact that the bride's women friends made the mattress for the marital bed.

Since the group of village young people plays such a prominent role in these symbolic exchanges, it is reasonable to ask whether it had any collective existence outside these specific rituals. The answer is yes, but that its role was social rather than practical. In the past the group of village young people was thought of as a definite social group – which was expected to play a specific role in maintaining the unity of the village – and to some extent the idea was still present in 1990. Young people played a role in running various village festivities, and until about 1950 also used to enforce the rules of courtship and marital fidelity  - particularly by charivaris directed at people who violated accepted behaviour in various ways (including bridegrooms from other villages who tried to take away their brides without paying). However, their most important function was to be seen visibly to get on well together. Young people were thought to be able to laugh off the envious rivalries that often divided their parents. During my stay, middle-aged friends several times commented approvingly on villages where the young people were thought to get on together, and remarked that this was a good sign for the future.

*(c) Endogamy and the incest taboo*
As we saw above, the incest prohibition which actually regulates partner choice in Carnia is the ban on (or rather discouragement of) marriages between second cousins or closer. Looked at in relation to the descent groups discussed above, it is clear that this ban would amount to something like a de facto prohibition on marriage within the same house-name group – but that it has no obvious relation to the symbolically much richer representations of village-level descent and exchange. If an incest taboo is to form part of a quasi-Lévi-Straussian pattern it too must operate at village level – and (because the villages are partly endogamous) it must amount to something other than a direct ban on marriages.

At the same time, if we are serious about looking for Lévi-Straussian rules in Europe, the concept of incest taboo used here must be one that would – placed in the lineage framework of *ESK*'s case studies – have prohibited marriage within the lineage, and so provided the necessary basis for bride-exchange. An approach that meets this condition is to make the link between the idea of a descent group and the incest taboo a matter of the relationship between mental categories, rather than a mere rule. I shall refer to this idea below as the *categorical incest taboo*. This idea would be broadly consistent with the later trend of Lévi-Strauss's thought, as well as with his contention that the principles of kinship exchange are somehow rooted in the mind (Lévi-Strauss 1977: 34). It would also, in certain circumstances, produce the rule as a direct consequence.

If we posit that, for human beings, the idea of membership in a common descent group necessarily involves a rejection of the idea of sexual relations with another member of the group, two law-like propositions follow.

1. If people are thought of as members of the same descent group, then there will be a taboo on sexual relations between them.
2. If two people (or groups of people) are though of as actual or potential sexual partners, they cannot be thought of as members of the same descent group.

In the *ESK* set-up, in which membership of a particular lineage is taken as given – even though the actual structure of lineages varies between societies – it is the first proposition which applies: in the form of the descent-group-level incest taboo. In the Carnian case we will see that both propositions apply – but in different circumstances.

In Carnia, as the last two sections have shown, the two images of the village - first as a single descent-group, and secondly as the scene of a process of marriage exchange – are just that: images. In this situation, the propositions outlined in the previous paragraph apply not to some (as yet undefined) fundamental village structure, but to the images themselves.

For the image of the village as a single descent group, the first proposition ought to apply – namely that the imagery of descent group unity must exclude the idea of sexual relationships. And the proposition is indeed satisfied. As we have seen, the representation of the village as a quasi-descent group draws heavily on Christian imagery – both of the giving of *sops* and of the

village *Madonna* – and is entirely chaste. The imagery of parent-child relationships is celebrated and shared, but with no hint that these relationships result from sexual partnerships.

When the village is represented as the scene of courtship, and of marriage exchange, the second proposition is the one that matters: namely that the potential sexual partners should not be represented as members of the same descent group. And this – at the level of imagery – is just what happens. The young men are represented from the start as a separate group, opposed to and distanced from the collectivity of village households and its norms of good behaviour. The young women on the other hand are firmly located, as children, within the village households – and it takes two ritual moves - the tour of the houses, and the throwing of the *cidulas* – for the young men to liberate them from parental control and take them to the dance. Of course everyone knows that the young men and the young women both actually live in the same set of households. The point is, however, that in order to imagine the young people as sexual partners, the young men are depicted as beings from right outside the village and its household-based parent-child relationships.

So, both images of the village – as descent group, and as scene of courtship – conform to the propositions that follow from the categorical incest taboo. The trouble is that the two images are mutually incompatible: the village cannot *at the same time* be a single descent group without internal love affairs, *and* the scene of love affairs between unrelated young men and women. In order to give both images some credibility, the village has to flip between the two, while preventing their inherent contradictoriness from fatally undermining either. This is a problem that does not arise in the case of any of Lévi-Strauss's original elementary structures. In a moiety system, for instance, members of descent category A cannot have sexual relations with other As (proposition 1); and the people who they do consider possible partners, the Bs, belong to a different category (proposition 2) – so no contradiction arises. The reason why a contradiction does arise in Carnia, is that the young people who are represented as each other's ideal sexual partners, are the young men and women of the same village, who are also represented as members of the same village-wide descent group.

*(d) Kinship, property and village citizenship*
In a later section, I will return to the question of how the symbolic contradiction is resolved. However, the question I would like to tackle first is the reason for this contradiction-generating

conflation of descent-group membership and sexual partnership. To start with, at least, it is convenient to break this question into two parts: why recommend marriage to someone else within the village; and why treat all the inhabitants of the village as members of a single quasi-descent-group.

The widespread European preference for village endogamy has often been attributed to a desire to keep property in the hands of village residents - the suggestion being that, when daughters (or sons) leave for other places, their inheritance rights will ultimately be passed on to outsiders. Restricting marriage to members of the same village would remove this danger. Pina-Cabral (1992: 33-34) has expressed skepticism about this explanation, suggesting an ideal of village self-sufficiency as an alternative. In the specific case of Carnia, the desire to preserve the village inheritance seems unlikely to have been the main motive – mainly because it would not have been necessary. Until recently the inheritance system was heavily biased in favour of men, so that an out-marrying daughter would have taken little with her. I was also told that it was usual for her family of origin to be offered the chance to buy back whatever land she did inherit in her native village. The fact that, taking high and low villages together, most Carnian marriages were actually exogamous at village level, also suggests that people must have been pretty relaxed about the material consequences of out-marriages. It looks as though it was the idea of marrying within the village that mattered, at least as much as the actual marriage rates.

The second question was why represent everyone in the village as members of a single quasi-descent-group, rather than – for instance – as members of one or more actual descent groups. No obvious motive in terms of inheritance offers itself in this case - so we need to consider instead what image of inner-village relationships is conjured up by the quasi-kin-group imagery. If we start by looking at the *sops* ritual – in which all adults are depicted as quasi-parents to all children - the answer seems to be, a benevolent relation between the generations, the equivalence of people of the same generation, and the non-recognition of special links between particular children and particular adults. If we look at the annual procession with the statue of the Virgin, a similar point emerges, all are equally under the protection of the same divine mother, regardless of generation, sex, or kinship ties. If, instead of quasi-descent, actual descent had been the focus of ritual stress, a number of differences would have emerged, in terms of terms of distinctions between members of different lineages, and – within larger lineages – people whose mutual connection could be traced through recent ancestors, and those whose

connection was more distant. The effect of stressing ritual quasi-kinship instead is to emphasize each person's equal tie with the village community as a whole.

Approaching the symbolism of courtship and marriage in the same way yields a similar result. By providing every household with the same ritual wife-giver and wife-taker – namely the collective youth of the village – the *cidulas* ceremony and associated customs play down the particularistic ties that marriage would generate if it were interpreted as a tie between specific households or lineages within the village. Equally, by stressing marriage – or the prospect of marriage – to near age mates within the same village, the rituals play down the differentiation within the village which would arise if some families married within the village more often than others, and if different families developed marriage alliances with different external partners. Looked at in this way, the preference for endogamy can be seen as an aspect of a more general drive to intensify and homogenize all kinds of kinship tie within the village.

Why were homogenous relationships within the village so important? One way of answering the question is to ask whether any other aspect of village life required an emphasis on homogenous relationships. In fact there are two aspects – almost certainly linked. The first, which is still very much in evidence today, is a marked emphasis on village unity. People are always commenting about whether a particular village is, or is not "united". A favorite criticism of another village is to say that its inhabitants make a show of unity, but in fact are split by internal quarrels. If one enquires further, one finds that unity is valued not just for itself, but as the precondition of common action. Nowadays this justification is rather circular, because the most important focuses of common action are various village-wide celebrations whose main purpose, apart from having a good time, seems to be to convince the participants, and visitors from neighbouring communities, that the village is indeed united.

However, until two thirds of the way through the twentieth century, shared work was a vital part of the local economy. Up to that time, most households were involved in subsistence agriculture and small scale dairy production. These required common action: for instance cooperative work to maintain the pathways to the high pastures and, in the winter, to clear snow from the road to the valley. Each village had its collectively-owned dairy, in which the milk was collected and made into cheese – and which was responsible for controlling the standards of hygiene in each member's cattle shed. These dairies were rather imposing buildings with an upper story which

functioned as a meeting hall and social center, and sometimes also as the site of the village primary school. The important point is that the basic unit, both for the allocation of common tasks, and for participation in the shared ownership of the dairy, was the household – not any wider group of kin. Thus, for instance, when snow had to be cleared from the road, equal portions of road were measured out – and allocated to the different households by lot.

Some villages still own substantial collective land – mainly forests – whose use, again, is decided either by an assembly of household heads or (because of legal changes in the twentieth century) a committee elected by all adults in the village. Up until the end of the eighteenth century most villages were self-governing *comuni* – each with its elected officers, and assembly of household heads, exercising control both over the commonly owned land and many aspects of day-to-day work. So each village has, for centuries, seen itself as a partially self-governing association of households. Since the Napoleonic reforms, at the turn of the nineteenth century, which turned the villages into *frazioni* of multi-village *comuni*, the legal basis for this has changed in various ways – but the practice of village self-management survived, and made possible such developments as the building of the village dairies at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the successful struggle of some villages to reclaim their collective land from the multi-village *comune* (Bianco 1985: 7-9, 31-47; Heady 1999: 38-41).

So, the emphasis placed by rituals of kinship and marriage on the homogenous treatment of households, and the intensification of relationships within the community, fits the institutional framework that has organized practical relationships within the village for several centuries. The fact, that villages have for centuries been organized as collective associations of distinct households, provides the material counterpart to the rituals described in earlier sections – and those rituals, in turn, would have reinforced the corporate structure of the village.

*(e) The control of contradictions and the symbolism of military power*
Although the separation of the spheres of courtship and pious kinship is clearly marked, the timing of the *cidulas* celebration makes it equally clear that, at another level, the two things are linked. The evening chosen for throwing the burning disks is always one that also has a religious significance: it may be New Year's Eve, straight after the celebration of a Te Deum to give thanks for the past year; or it may be Epiphany; or it may be the eve of the saint's day of the particular village. This link with a religious celebration makes sense – since collective courtship

and religious quasi-kinship are, as we have seen, the two alternative ways of envisaging village unity. In that sense, they are two contrasted halves of a single whole. However, though this common timing points to a deeper connection underlying the apparent contrast, it doesn't actually make plain whether the authoritative relationship of symbolic kinship, or the relative freedom of symbolic courtship, takes precedence. If, as suggested above, the ultimate intention is to reinforce the commitment of each household to the corporate organization of the village, it is clear that the ultimate accent must be on authority. What is needed is a source of symbolism that can encompass[5] the freedom and rebellion of courtship, while nevertheless subordinating it to order and authority.

The underlying subordination of youthful rebellion to a kind of authority is suggested by a final detail of the *cidulas* ceremony, which is that the disk throwers are ideally supposed to be led by *coscrits* – that is by young men who, in the previous year, have successfully passed the preliminary medical inspection for national service in the Italian army[6]. The army is, in fact, an ideal institution for expression this hierarchical relationship: since on the one hand it is the physical embodiment of the power of young men – but on the other hand clearly subordinates that power to higher authority. This is not just an abstract point: the army is very much a part of local ritual. Young men typically do their national service in units with a local significance – either the *Alpini* (mountain infantry) or the mountain artillery. Ex-service-men's associations are active at *comune* level, holding annual celebrations which combine a church service with a mountain picnic, though these associations were not particularly popular in the lower Val Degano from which most of my data comes. What is more important is the way that military service has been incorporated into the symbolism of family identity and the lifecycle.

Many homes contain pictures of the men folk in the uniform of the *Alpini* or the mountain artillery – suggesting that military service is part of the ideal of what a husband or son should be. Military service is also seen as the affirmation of both manhood and sexual fertility. The young men from each *comune* used to attend the medical inspection in a town outside the valley together – and it was a source of pride if they were all passed fit. (They used to mark this by painting their shared year of the birth, and the words *"tutti abili"* - "all fit" – on the walls of

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[5] This use of the word "encompassment" derives ultimately from Dumont (1970). The immediate inspiration is Stewart's (1991: 68) discussion of the relation between the apparently opposed values of religious and political spheres in modern Greek life.
[6] In principle military service is compulsory for all fit males.

local buildings.) In the first half of the twentieth century the conscripts-to-be would travel to the medical inspection in the same vehicle, which would be covered in flowers. By the time of my fieldwork young men of the same *comune* no longer attended the medical inspection together, but the occasion still provided the opportunity to acquire a neck-kerchief in patriotic colours on which the *coscrit* would then collect the signatures of as many girls as he could. The symbolic function of conscription at the initiation of adult life is extended to the marking of the passage through all of life's stages. People born in the same year – men or women – are referred to as each other's *coscrits*. Fellow *coscrits* from the same *comune* meet every few years for a celebration which includes a church service and then a supper which extends far into the night. Towards the end of one's life one is supposed to make a special effort to attend the funerals of fellow *coscrits*.

Thus, by assigning the leadership of the *cidulas* ceremony to new *coscrits*, the villagers have neatly resolved the contradiction between the symbolism of village kinship and that of mutual courtship. The immediate effect of identification with the military is to emphasize the newly authenticated separation of the young men from their community of origin – and the shared power and physical fitness which they bring to the roles of potential lovers and challengers of filial piety. However, when the wider symbolism of military service and conscription is taken into account, it can be seen that this rebellious assertion is firmly set in a context which involves ultimate subordination to authority in general - including that of the church - and acceptance of one's place as son, husband, and father in the cycle of adult family life. Courtship has been hierarchically subordinated to a kind of generalized kinship.

**Discussion**

*(i) A composite politico-kinship system*
This paper started with the objective of identifying elements of village life corresponding to the three main principles of Lévi-Strauss's theory: descent groups that continued through time, a descent-group-level incest taboo, and marriage exchanges that bind the community together. The system that has been described does all these things, but it differs from Lévi-Strauss's elementary structures in that it cannot be understood using these three principles alone. It is in fact a composite system, in which representations of descent and marriage exchange are

structured in a way that fits the long-standing economic and political organization of the village as a semi-corporate community of distinct household units – with some of its productive property, and some of its economic activities, managed in common.

In this composite system, descent and marriage were both represented as ties which connected each household directly to the village community as a whole. In the case of marriage, the collectivity of the village's young people was represented as the common exchange partner – with village endogamy as a secondary consequence of this marriage ideal. However, the obligation to look for marriage partners within the village contradicted its image as a common descent group – creating a need for a source of symbolic power that could encase the apparent contradiction in a hierarchical framework.

Two supra-village institutions played important symbolic roles: the church - by providing imagery of shared membership in a single quasi-descent group; and the army - as an institution that both affirmed and subordinated the power of youth.

*(ii) Ethnographic evidence from elsewhere in Europe*

The kind of corporate structure found in Carnian villages used to be very widespread in pre-industrial Europe (Freeman 1973). If the connection between corporate structure and inter-generational exchange marriage, suggested in this paper, is real, young people should also have (or have had) a similar symbolic role in corporate villages in other parts of Europe. So it is interesting that the ritual throwing of burning disks has been reported over a wide area of the Alps, southern Germany and Slovenia (Matičetov 1951/2; Vidossi 1932). Looking further afield, one would not expect to find exactly the same ritual throughout Europe. The important thing is that the role of young people should be recognized in some way, and that they should be seen as collective marriage partners to the village as a whole. The first point does seem to have held fairly generally: Freeman (1973) reports that groupings based on age and marital status were a common feature of the corporate communities of pre-industrial Europe.

To get an idea of what these groupings involved we can take two examples from opposite ends of the Continent: the Nansa valley in northern Spain in the late 1960s (Christian 1989: 18-26) and in the Olt Land in central Romania immediately before the start of the communist regime (Kideckel 1993: 43-45). Both places were characterized by small, corporately organized

villages. In the Romanian villages studied by Kideckel there was a young men's society which was thought of as helping to unite the community as a whole. The society organized the Christmas dance and, throughout the year visited houses where marriageable girls were to be found. The president of the group was expected to marry at the end of his year of office, and other members of the group often married quite soon after their time in the society. In this instance the role of the group as collective wife-taker seems quite clear. Christian describes a village age group known as the *mocedad*, which included young women as well as young men. People joined in their mid teens when they were considered old enough to attend dances in other villages without parental supervision, and left when they got married or reached the age of about thirty. The group used to be responsible for enforcing the custom of village endogamy. So one can say that, as far as courtship was concerned, young people passed from the control of their original households to that of the *mocedad*, returning to the world of households once they were married. As in the case of Romania and Carnia, the *mocedad* was seen as a focus for unity of the village as a whole, and had a relationship of reciprocity with the adult village: organizing village fiestas and in return receiving the right to reap and sell some of the hay from the common meadow to support their own social activities. However, Christian does not describe the ritual activities of the *mocedad* – and so it is not clear whether there was any direct celebration of the group's role of marriage partner to the village as a whole.

Did other European societies also share the Carnian feeling that the young people's courtship role somehow violated the norms of the community of adult householders? This does seem to have been the case in north Spain where Christian (1989: 25) reports that the *mocedad* went in for a good deal of generally transgressive behaviour – of the kind that characterizes the *cidulas* celebration in Carnia. I argued above that, in Carnia, the fact of universal military conscription provided the basis for a symbolic framework in which the contradictory values of kinship and courtship could be contained. Here again there is some evidence of similar symbolism in other, widely separated, parts of Europe. Kideckel (1993) reports that in central Romania men joined the young men's group after completion of military service, and that people of the 'same age, year in school or military cohort' were referred to by a special term. Christian (1989: 23) merely notes that entry to the *mocedad* used to follow registration for military service. However, not far away, in the French Basque country, Ott (1993: 78, 8n, 125) reports that men and women born

in the same year attend each others' life crisis rituals, and refer to each other as *konskritak* – though she doesn't comment on the apparent military origin of the term.[7]

Though the evidence presented here is not as full as one might like, it does appear that some of the connections between the kinship and political systems – suggested on the basis of the Carnian data – also held for villages in other parts of Europe.

*(iii) Ways of theorizing European kinship*

Kinship can be thought of as either

(A) a framework for organizing overall social solidarity, or

(B) a framework for allocating property rights and duties of care among close relatives,

or both. For clarity I will refer to the two perspectives as A-kinship and B-kinship.

Lévi-Strauss is a theorist of A-kinship. Anthropologists working on European societies have tended to concentrate on B-kinship – this is true both of contemporary work (see the reviews by Brettell (1991) who accepts this perspective, and by Pina-Cabral (1992) who does not) and of Goody's (1983; 2000) historical work on the development of marriage and the family in Europe. This paper has been an attempt to put A-kinship back on the Europeanist agenda.

How close has this paper's analysis been to Lévi-Strauss's own theory of A-kinship? The emphasis this paper places on representations of common descent may seem rather surprising in the light of the final chapter of *ESK*, which focuses entirely on the principle of exchange. However, as I mentioned at the start of this paper, descent figures prominently in *ESK*'s actual analyses - and Lévi-Strauss's later theoretical formulation of the 'atom of kinship' (Lévi-Strauss 1977: 46) appears to give equal weight to filiation, siblinghood and affinity.

In his paper on "structural analysis in linguistics and anthropology" Lévi-Strauss asserted that whenever a society was organized on kinship lines, the specific system would be consistent with a universal set of underlying kinship principles (Lévi-Strauss 1977: 34, 47-48). Though this claim has seemed extravagant to many readers, it fits in well with the ideas now being

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[7] Ott (1993:78n) attributes the fellow-feeling of *konskritak* to their being 'people who were born in the same year and who received their First Communion together, i.e. the relationship is based on both biological and spiritual factors'.

developed by evolutionary psychologists.[8] The findings in this paper would be consistent with a claim that there was a common underlying mental schema for the construction of A-kinship, which included representations of common descent and exchange – linked to each other by the categorical incest taboo.[9]

Lévi-Strauss wavered on the question of whether all societies had a system of A-kinship. The final chapter of *ESK* boldly asserted that one or another kind of exchange marriage formed a necessary basis of social solidarity in all societies without exception (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 478-481). On the other hand, the paper on "structural analysis in linguistics and anthropology" stated that there are some societies, including our own, in which the overall regulatory function of kinship is "either absent altogether or greatly reduced" – its place being taken by "other modes of expression and action" (Lévi-Strauss 1977: 47). This may be where the present paper's analysis offers something genuinely new – in that I have suggested that A-kinship had not been entirely replaced by the "other modes of expression and action". Instead, there appears to have been a process of mutual adaptation, and partial symbolic merging, of A-kinship and the other institutions involved.

It is beyond the scope of the present paper to explore fully what implications this might have – either for local society or for the supra-village institutions of church and state. However, a particular example may give an idea of what could be involved. Universal, state-organized, military service is a phenomenon of the last two centuries or so – by which time corporate villages had already existed for several centuries.[10] So conscription, as such, cannot always have been part of the symbolic kinship system of corporate villages. Nevertheless the fact that the relation between conscription and the system of age-classes appears similar in four rural areas in the western, central and eastern parts of Europe (see section *(ii)* of this discussion) suggests that the coming of universal conscription provided an opportunity to meet a common symbolic need. What impact might this have had on attitudes to the army itself?

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[8] See for instance Boyer's (2001:57) statement that "Cognitive dispositions that result from the evolutionary history of the species account for certain general or recurrent properties of cultural representations".

[9] The evidence in this paper is not enough to establish the point however. For that it would be necessary to show that the same principles could be applied to other non-*ESK* kinship systems, including the celebrated case of preferential marriage to the father's brother's daughter.

[10] This was certainly true in Carnia. See the earlier reference to Bianco (1985).

In Carnia, at least, the combination of the social meanings that people invest in military service, with some very bitter experience in the twentieth century's wars, sustains a sense of localized patriotism. A song, in the local speech[11], about the death in battle of a soldier on the mountainous frontier with Austria, incorporates references to childhood and to an idealized sexual love. This song, which many local people find very moving, was described to me as 'like our national anthem'. An emotional attachment to the state is one of the characteristic, if little discussed, features of European nationalism – and pride in the national army is one of its most common forms. By leading people to invest so much personal significance in military service, the contradictions of the village kinship structure can be seen as one of the sources of this attachment. Ultimately one might say that the commitment to corporate organization at village level sets a symbolic problem for the system of A-kinship, which – because of the categorical incest taboo - can only be fully resolved by an appeal to the encompassing authority of the state.

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[11] The inhabitants of the Val Degano are bilingual, speaking Friulian – a form of Rhaeto-Romansch - between themselves, and Italian on other occasions.

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