

**Essay title: Use your chosen ethnography to examine ways in which the ordering of relatives may reveal information about spiritual, political or economic life among the people you have studied.**

## **Kinship in Korea**

Traditionally Korean culture is a collectivist and hierarchical society. These structures are reflected everywhere in Korean life which helps to make sense about how Koreans have strong kinship, respect and obedience to their elders. Many anthropologists suggest that among Koreans there is a strong bond between relatives and clan members. Traditionally Koreans have family centred principles and the extended family is the first place to which people turn when they find themselves in trouble. Kin groups are very important to Korean people's daily life in many ways. It is important to know who has got what surname, because it can be defined whether they are from the same clan or not. Haviland, W (2002) defined clan as a non corporate descent group whose member claim descent from a common ancestor without actually knowing the genealogical links to that ancestor. Even if there are a hundred, or a thousand people who have the same surname, they all believe they all come from same ancestor. Quote from Brandt, V.S.R. (1971)

‘In its ideal form the Korean kinship system is integrated, coherent, and elaborately documented all the way from single households in the village to lineage organizations or sibs that exist on a national scale and can include more than a million members.’  
(p.109)

In western culture, family means father, mother and siblings which can be described as the nuclear family structure. In Korea however, family means something much wider. It includes grand parents, parents, siblings, uncles, aunties, and cousins in the extended family structure. And some people still live as an extended family or live with their elderly parents after marriage. Even though, the nuclear family became a very common family structure in Korea, family members often reside in the same neighbourhood and maintain frequent contact and those who live far away tend to get together on special occasions such as traditional holidays, a relative's marriage and the birth of a new born

baby. So if kinship is one of the significant parts of Korean culture then it could show off in their life in many ways such as spiritual, political or economic life.

Now I am going to present my essay about kinship in South Korea; kinship on spiritual perspective and economic perspective.

First of all, let me explain Korean family kinship and spiritual life. As I mentioned from the beginning, Koreans have strong kin relationships with relatives and they believe that this kinship goes on even after death. They think the ancestors take care of all descendants and if descendants do not worship their ancestors, there will be a misfortune for descendants and even the next generation.

Many practice Ancestor worship (we call '*Che-sa*') to remember their ancestors and to give thanks for them blessing us. Even though 'ancestor worship' comes from Chinese culture, Korean people have been keeping and developing the practice. As I was born in and grew up in Korea, in my experience, I do not think it is something to do with religion or shamanism. I think it is a Korean custom to just respect their ancestor. Brandt, V (1971) suggests that ancestor worship in Korea is not superstitious or on cosmic principles, although there is a superstitious element involved in that ceremony, they just ask for their ancestors help to ensure the happiness, success and health of the living.

For as long as I can remember, my family does ancestor worship three or four times, or even more, every year. It usually happens at night between ten and twelve o'clock on national holidays and the day of an ancestors' death. It is now common to hold ancestral rituals for only two generations of ancestors, and in some cases, people only hold rituals for their deceased parents. The ancestor worship is often held by the senior lineage in the family. It shows there is a hierarchical relationship in the family. While we are preparing food for ancestor worship, we are not allowed to eat any food for ceremony before doing the actual ancestor worship. It is because we believe that during ancestor worship, our ancestors come down from the world of the dead to eat what we prepared for them. After the ceremony we eat the food that we prepared and we believe that our ancestors have blessed the food.

There are strict rules about the ceremony such as what kind of food we need to prepare, where to place the food on the table, how many times we need to bow, and what to wear but it is all changing nowadays. During the ceremony, the atmosphere must be holy and peaceful.

The interesting thing is the ceremony is lead by men and during the ceremony, women are not allowed to join in. This is explained by two reasons, one is Korea is a man centered society, with men controlling everything. Women in Korea have been treated as useless, unimportant and men believe women bring bad luck. Also it is a case of a notion of preferring a son to a daughter. Another one is, Koreans usually think in a family women are not blood members, and they are from another family. When a woman gets married with a man she does not follow her husbands surname, it is from Confucianism. Kin relatives can not get married to each other; if a couple have got the same surname then they originally came from same ancestor. As a mother originally comes from other kin group she is not a blood member. It shows how strong kin relationship is in Korea.

In my opinion, as I have had ancestor worship ceremonies every year, we learn how to respect our ancestor and our obligations for them. Even though my ancestors are not with us, I feel the ancestors who I have not met in my life are family members and I think most of Korean people feel the same.

Kinship has an effect on economic life. Hendry, J. (1999) suggested that in Britain, kin relations are isolated from rest of social, economic and political life. In western culture, kinship is supposed to not be involved in any circumstances outside of the world called 'Family'. This is very different to Korean culture. Kin relationship is essential for Korean people to live in a society.

'Kinship appears as a huge field of social and mental realities stretching between two poles. One is highly abstract: it concerns kinship terminologies and the marriage principles or rules they implicitly contain or that are associated with them. The other is highly concrete: it concerns individuals and their bodies, bodies marked by the position of the individual in kinship relations. Deeply embedded in them are the

representations that legitimize these relations through an intimacy of blood, bone, flesh, and soul. Between these two poles lie all the economic, political, and symbolic stakes involved from the outset in the interplay of kinship relations or, conversely, that make use of them.' (Godelier, 1998: 387).

Traditionally, Korean family structure is extended-family and the male head of the family controls property, usually in the form of land. As farming is a primary industry, if a father has got land for farming, after the father's death it naturally goes to his sons or occasionally daughters. The Korean society use to be a hierarchical society. If a father is upper class then his children will be upper class, if a father is lower class then his children will be lower class. There was no way to change class and wealth was measured by the social division but sometimes wealth could be measure by land.

Since a long time ago, parent's economic situations have an effect on their offspring. With the development of modern industry and services, the traditional family structure has been changing to nuclear family structure and an increasing number of urban families are opting to live apart from their parents however, each adult generation and nuclear family unit has become more or less economically independent. But yet again, there are still inheritances from parents. There is a Korean proverb which says 'if someone is elected as the president of South Korea, then his next three generations will be well off'. This means that if someone has got power and money, then it will have an affect on all his relatives. It shows how kin relationships have an effect on their social lives.

There is one good example, the world famous Korean company 'Hyundai' is the biggest and most powerful company in Korea. General trading company Hyundai Corporation operated through six main division; shipping and industrial plants; machinery; steel; chemicals and materials; information and telecommunications; and investments. Interestingly, top place managers of these companies are all relatives of the Hyundai company founder.

Some people say that it is not fair that they are treated like a royal family in modern society. A modern society is supposed to be a competent society where everyone has the same opportunities. It is changing now but unfortunately it's a traditional Korean custom to hand over their inheritance and it is difficult to change.

To sum up, Hendry, J. (1999) says that in different societies, people have ideas about how to classify their relatives, and how people become related in the first place. As I mentioned in this essay, Koreans have got strong Kin relationships and kin groups defined by their clan. People who have got the same surname as clan members show strong relationships with each other and it has affects on some aspect of daily life. People think their priority is family more than anything. Consequently these strong relationships interfere with economic life. Korean family ancestor worship teaches respect and obligation for their ancestor and it goes on and on to each next generation. Moreover though, ancestor worship helps relatives get along together and tightens up relationships.

## **Bibliography**

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