

THE SOCIAL FACTORS OF DONSHIP IN A MEXICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

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Wherever Spanish conquest and influence penetrated to a socially significant degree in the New World, one result has been the widespread adoption of the respect term Don. As a part of this borrowing, the respect term Don is in common usage among the Mexicans who have migrated north to the United States, and principally to California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. Since the term Don has primary reference to the respected man, Donship and its attendant social ramifications among these people can be said to constitute a major, if not a most important, factor for a full understanding of the immigrant Mexican's male prestige system. However, in the sociological and anthropological literature which deals with the Mexican immigrant, the analysis of Donship is equalled only by the paucity of data on the subject. With this in mind, the present study is an attempt to focus upon the social factors, in contrast to the traditional ones, which contribute toward the granting of the respect term in Frontera, a Mexican-American rural community in south Texas.¹

For a proper orientation, a word in general about Donship among Mexican-Americans is in order. From California to Texas, the respect term is used traditionally in a variety of ways. Normally, but not always, the usage is in reference to a male who is also of Mexican background. In some cases the term is used in respect toward a man of position and relative wealth, namely, a patrón who is a dispenser of jobs and a doer of favors. Such a man is roughly parallel with the patrón of Latin-America. In other situations it is common to find business and professional men referred to as Don Pedro, or whatever the given name may be. In this class may be included some doctors, lawyers, and certain representatives of the Mexican consular service in the United States. Still another usage of the term Don is in connection with curanderos, or folk-healers. In this case, the diminutive, oftentimes affectionate, sometimes ingratiating, suffix of -ito is suffixed to the given name, as in Don Pedrito. Don also applies to very old men, and in this instance the -ito is also used.

Finally, and more directly pertinent to the present study, in Frontera there exists a class of men who are called Don though they are not patrones, not business or professional men, not healers, or aged members of the community. Instead, they are men who have met the prevailing conditions of everyday life in a particular fashion and who exhibit particular behavioral characteristics. They are, in short, individuals who represent the Frontera prestige system in successful personification.

The Community

Frontera is a cluster of rural homes in Hidalgo County, Texas. The bulk of the adult population immigrated from the northern Mexican states of Tamaulipas and Nuevo León. The origins of the community are rooted in the

fusion of three major historical events: (a) The revolutionary unrest which engulfed Mexico at the turn of the century, (b) the introduction of mechanized irrigation and large scale agriculture into the Rio Grande Valley, and, (c) the establishment of townsites by real estate speculators and land companies. In 1907, a real estate speculator subdivided a forty acre tract and sold lots to the Mexican immigrants. Thus Frontera began to form.

Today, the community consists of one-hundred and sixteen households in which live over two-hundred and ninety adults. Employment for the men falls into two general categories. They work, for the main part, either in an adjacent brick factory or in the surrounding lettuce, carrot, cabbage, and cotton fields. Oftimes families or individuals migrate during the summer and autumn months, following the cotton harvest through east Texas and hence north and west into Oklahoma. A few of the local families have travelled farther north, to Michigan, to work in the sugar beet fields. With employment in the agricultural fields and the brick factory, the majority of Frontera families are economically situated in the lower brackets. Spanish, mottled with local idiom and modified English words, is the daily language of Frontera.

The young and adult men of Frontera explain that "an elder man should be respected, and you show this respect by calling him Don." However, observation reveals that not all males who fulfill this requirement are called Don. Pursuing the matter further, the few men who are actually called Don by their neighbors are looked upon as being aloof, removed, serious men with whom "one does not joke." To understand the determinants which have led to the granting of the respect title to only a few of the older citizens, and the significance of their aloofness, it is necessary to recapitulate the social environment of which they are a part.

The Social Environment

In Frontera, the most basic premise for social relations is that the world external to the bilateral extended family is looked upon as one of brittleness in inter-personal relations, of fickleness and undependability. It is a social world in which the universe acts upon the individual, the individual but minimally affecting that universe. The intentions of people outside the family are suspect, and often a stranger is judged guilty until proven innocent. To meet this "hostile" world, the Frontera male believes he must be prepared in terms which are understandable to him. In order to do so, one must be "ready," "quick," "able to defend oneself," to quote some local explanations. How does a Frontera man learn to "defend" himself?

Beginning with the male when he is a boy, it is considered important he be "educated." By education the reference is not to the projected goals of a formal education, but more specifically to learn the art of urbanidad, or urbanity. As used locally, the word urbanity broadly defines the system of expected courtesies and politenesses which serve to maintain a formal social distance vertically between youth and elders, horizontally between one family and another, or between one stranger and another. Such requisites as the use of the formal usted when addressing an elder, of standing at the door until asked to enter another's home, or to remain standing until given permission to sit by the host, all serve to demonstrate respect which, in essence, is lack of familiarity and hence distance. Thus, the object of

"education" is to learn "manners," how to maintain social distance, and how to "defend" oneself. Today it is common for a youth to drop out of school during the sixth, seventh, or eighth grades for by now, theoretically, he has acquired enough English to be able to defend himself while dealing with English speaking people. Thus far, while still a boy, the male in Frontera is considered to have gained but the rudiments of an "education." What is lacking, according to the Frontera viewpoint, is the most important ingredient, that is, experience. Experience comes only with time, and it is considered an indispensable component of "education."

At about nine to twelve years of age, and sometimes lasting until the early twenties, it is common for a young male to associate informally with a group of similarly aged males. Locally, such an informal association is called a palomilla, the diminutive of paloma, meaning pigeon. Grammatical technicalities aside, the metaphor signifies young pigeons who leave daily to wander, always to return home at night. While a member of a palomilla two significant events take place. First, the boy begins to learn a defense against the verbal dueling which is characteristic of the palomilla. This is an event of considerable importance, for such dueling is by no means restricted to the informal association. In one form or another it is indulged in by the majority of Frontera males, young and adult. Verbal dueling is a form of masculine assertion. Consisting of a complex use of metaphor which contains insinuations, innuendos, and outright accusations of effeminacy, weakness, and lack of courage, the young male must learn to thrust and parry with the members of his palomilla. Quite often his agility at the game determines his position within the group. Because of the nature of the game, the novice quickly becomes suspicious of the remarks his age-mates make. For example, seemingly innocent remarks containing the word leche, or milk, may be interpreted as a veiled reference to sperm. Words like "key," "whip," and "walnut," may refer to male genitalia. A remark containing the word "eye" may refer to the anus, as might the word "pocket." In short, the metaphorical significance may be derived from common, everyday words and one must be wary enough to distinguish between the common usage and the verbal thrusts. In addition, there are refinements. The fully competent opponent is expected neither to reveal his intentions and meanings, nor his reactions, during an exchange. In such cases, one is never quite certain of the intended meaning. Furthermore, it is believed that the highest refinement in verbal dueling is achieved when the implied meanings are phrased in such a manner as to convince the victim that he has been greatly complimented. For this reason, the male of Frontera is highly suspicious of flattery.

A second event of importance takes place while the young male is a member of the palomilla. From within this group the individual youth gravitates toward another with similar tastes and preferences. This other young man then becomes his closest friend and confidant, or, in local terms, amigo de confianza. Normally, confidants do not oppose each other at verbal dueling, or, should they do so, it is with the tacit agreement that the purpose is to sharpen their wits. Communication between these two young men is free-flowing, confiding, and uncritical.

Approaching the age of twenty, the palomilla begins to dissolve. The young man, by this time, may have sought employment at the neighboring brick factory, in the agricultural fields which surround the community, or with a

trucker who organizes a crew. From companions at work, other adult men in the village, and often from the father, the young man is now inculcated with the view that the world other than that of the family is virtually organized to cheat him at every turn. If he works at the brick factory, he hears from the other workers that the foreman, also a citizen of Frontera, "works against the good of the entire community, keeping the choice jobs for his own sons and relatives."

Should the young man seek work in the fields, there too the prevailing conditions are of suspicion and distrust. Both farmers and truckers, regardless of ethnic background, are looked upon as people who "cheat workers at every opportunity." In the event that a Frontera male has the fortune of acquiring a truck and recruits a crew, a rare occurrence, his attitude toward his workers is one of watchful wariness. Thus, in worker relations and neighborhood conversations, the Frontera man further becomes inculcated with the outlook that a hostile world is working against him.

Within the community, through rumors and gossip, the male facing the adult world learns still another axiom by which he will live. Here he learns that "few men are strong enough to resist temptation." According to the inhabitants, in the recent past there occurred an incident which "proves" the validity of this viewpoint. Funds for construction of a church were collected through a series of fiestas, dances, raffles, donations, and suppers. For the protection of the community's interests, two treasurers were appointed. Despite this precautionary move, funds are said to have disappeared through dishonesty of one of the treasurers. Another similar incident is said to have taken place in the local Mutual Society which is composed of a few men working primarily for mutual health benefits. In this group, two treasurers were elected in addition to a collector of dues. Funds are said to have disappeared here too. To the men of the community, these incidents are used to demonstrate that one must not only be suspicious of employers, but also of one's own neighbors.

As the young man approaches marriage, usually between eighteen and thirty years of age, and even following marriage, he hears other men assert the conviction that women are basically unfaithful creatures. To support this contention, stories with a cuckold theme are told virtually whenever men congregate. Stories with a cuckold theme normally have no definite locale. Closer to Frontera, gossip circulates regarding suspicious behavior by married women in the fields or when their husbands are away. In fact, people still discuss a neighbor who is said to have indulged in sexual experiences with the wife of his own compadre, or co-parent. The major premise, then, in male-female relations is that women are unfaithful and other men covet one's wife.

In addition, attitudes toward women are also demonstrated in the men's musical preferences. Songs which have been popular in Frontera for the past four years were analyzed for themes. Of seventy-four songs thus analyzed, a total of fifty-eight contained as the principal theme unfaithfulness and desertion. Such constant repetition of the desertion theme in popular music tends to remove such lyrics from the realm of pure poetic license. When juxtaposed with other types of evidence, such as cuckold tales, controls over visiting, accusations of infidelity, and gossip, the

desertion theme in popular music becomes another indicator of attitudes between the sexes in Frontera. Significantly, then, only sixteen of the seventy-four songs analyzed did not mention the theme of desertion.

Another major factor which the Frontera male faces as an adult is that of envidia, or envy. It is generally believed that public evidence of success in work or home is reacted to with envy on the part of neighbors. For example, with the purchase of a newer automobile, envidia may become manifest through verbal barbs and gossip. Should a young man declare ambition to change his station in life, people may speak of him as envidioso, or envious of others. Literally meaning envious, the word envidioso quite often is used as a synonym for ambitious. Envidia is a strong force in Frontera, so strong in fact that the citizen of the community refers to it as a dominant characteristic of la raza, or, "the race," as he commonly refers to people of Mexican ancestry. Since envidia is considered as pervasive among la raza, it is said that "one's own people will always seek a way to make a successful man fail."

Envidia may lead to witchcraft. Since persons bent on such activities often may be one's own neighbors, the hostility of the surrounding social environment is thereby reasserted. It is believed by many that witches transform themselves into bats and fly about during the night, seeking their victims. In addition, while walking about at night a Frontera male may "see" shadows and shapes which augur harm. Often, as a consequence, the result is susto, or fright. Within a few days of the experience he must be cured, or a more serious illness such as tuberculosis may befall him.

While gossip often is regarded as a result of envy, it may entail other ramifications. Gossip is generally referred to as echar mosca, or, literally, to make flies buzz about someone's head. Gossip may concern the particular habits of an individual. Humorous anecdotes, a form of gossip, may dwell upon actions and remarks which may distinguish one person from another. For example, jokes and comments circulate concerning the cigar smoking habit of one man, stuttering by another, an attempt to speak English by still another. Gossip may also concern a person's tallness, his irresponsibility, or failure to demonstrate respect in prescribed situations. Should a man become identified with a particular viewpoint, political or social, he is then regarded with less esteem than another who does not commit himself. Thus, a local espouser of trade unionism is considered somewhat foolish for insisting publicly on his opinions despite repeated failures to recruit neighbors to his way of thinking. Such actions are grist for the gossip mill.

Summary

This, then, is the social environment for the man of Frontera, the system to which he must adjust. It is a world of formalized social distance, where he must learn to "defend" himself. It is one of concealed meanings in verbal dueling and where flattery is considered a prelude to suspect behavior. Employers are thought to work against the individual. One's neighbors are subject to temptation and may abscond with public monies. Other's covet one's wife and women are considered unfaithful. In addition, there are the factors of envy and witchcraft. Gossip singles out personal mannerisms. In short,

it is a social world in which few people may be trusted, for even compadres may succumb to temptation and do harm. In this social environment, how does the Frontera male react to the diverse factors of suspicion, envidia, witchcraft, unfaithfulness, and gossip?

Non-involvement

The Frontera male is expected to react to the hostile world by systematically tending toward an ever narrowing circle of direct, personal contacts. In addition, the pattern of non-involvement is a life-long process.

As a boy he learns to withhold opinions principally because of parental disapproval of contradictions which constitute breaches upon adult authority. The boy also learns to avoid involvement in the adult world because of repeated reminders of his "lack of experience." The same conditions are maintained vis-à-vis the neighbors, and such behavior is aided by the dictates of courtesy which serve to maintain social distance.

With the palomilla, or informal association of young males, the continual verbal dueling is neutralized by the selection of a confidant from among the members. In this manner, the young male avoids potential close contact with the entire group. Still, it is said, "your best friend today may be your enemy tomorrow."

With regard to employers, non-involvement is again found to be the preferred solution to problems. It is relatively common for a man to quit work on the first occasion in which he considers himself offended. This is particularly true with men who attach themselves to a field crew working with an agricultural trucker. While migrating with crops it is relatively easy to change from one truck crew to another.

Non-involvement was also the solution during a cooperative enterprise to construct a church. Rumors regarding stolen monies led to individual men dropping out of participation, with the result that the enterprise came to a complete halt.

In dealing with a general belief in the unfaithfulness of women, and the covetousness of other men, the male looks with suspicion upon visits by other men to his home while he is not present. This problem is resolved by not visiting other homes under similar circumstances and expecting the same in return. Visiting between homes is definitely not a part of Frontera male existence.

In meeting the forces of envidia, or envy, the Frontera man is careful to be neutral, even self-effacing, with regard to his accomplishments and acquisitions. Thus he will avoid situations which may lead to envy. The same is true of situations which may lead to witchcraft and susto.

In the event that a man feels strongly about a movement or belief, he attempts not to reveal his deepest convictions to his contemporaries. Should he be placed in a position requiring comment upon a controversial topic, he often makes recourse to dichos, the seemingly endless store of folk sayings which illustrate a belief but do not constitute a reply.

Overriding the entire pattern of non-involvement is a pervasive insistence upon the independence of the individual man to control and guide his own life. A man is expected to respect this independence, and he may do so by avoiding involvement in the problems of others. Individual independence is often asserted with the declaration that "I don't need anybody to tell me what to do, nor do I need their help."

To summarize, the man of Frontera, by a series of withdrawals from a world which he considers undependable and hostile, thereby declares his independence from that world. But a man, particularly a man with a family, will find it difficult to avoid meeting the outside world, at least on some terms. How does the Frontera male accomplish this?

Retrenchment

Contacts with the outside world take on a pattern of building an extended family as a bulwark against the hostile social environment. Within this group, the father attempts to manipulate the individual members with respect to affairs outside the home. Young children, about six to ten years old, are normally assigned the role of contact by performing simple errands. Ultimately these errands may become quasi-specialized chores. Thus, for example, those who speak most English become the principal contact with the Anglo-American world.

Normally, the elder son is the contact with the world of employers, reporting back to father for final decisions. Other sons and daughters perform duties such as making purchases in department stores, making payments when due, and returning with information and news. It is the mother's obligation to look after home cures during illness. She is also the direct contact with the church. As a consequence of the required roles of children and mothers, the father now assumes the role of decision-maker.

To reinforce his retrenchment in this position further, the father will attempt to provide money to assist married sons in the construction of their homes on adjacent property, or, within the confines of Frontera. As the family grows in size, the principal effort is toward self-sufficiency, both economically and socially, for the family as a unit. The resultant structure of the family is such that the father, now a grandfather in many cases, is at the apex as director, decision-maker, and defender.

If the father is successful in his efforts to establish a familial domain, there remains one requirement, the most important, for him to fulfill in order to merit the respect of the community. Now the principal key to a man's accomplished retrenchment is his ability to maintain aloofness with regard to his neighbors. His aloofness is simultaneously an expression of his withdrawal from community affairs and an assertion of independence. By his aloofness he avoids exhibiting or eliciting envidia. He adopts a formal attitude toward life and people. He steadfastly refuses to talk as an equal with younger men. He makes his own decisions without recourse to the opinions of others. In short, he acts out his self-reliance, the preferred reply to a hostile world. Such a man remains at home most of the time. On occasion, when at the local tavern, he does not associate with younger men. They, in turn, greet him with deferential tones. Other men talk of him as one who

can "control" his family, command the respect and fear of his sons, and does not pry into other people's affairs. It is generally "known" that such a man is "educated" in the ways of the world. Even more important, because of his years he now has experience, and it would not be a simple matter to dupe him in any way. Finally, such a man does not place himself in a position requiring an explicit personal opinion. He does not join trade unions. He does not attempt to change the opinions of others. And he attempts not to ally himself with local factions. His view toward the world outside his family is one of neutralism demonstrated by aloofness.

Now, with his aloofness and his age, the citizens of the community begin to grant him the title of Don. It is a respect title, the reward for a successful retreat and retrenchment. The respect term becomes a part of his name. This, then, is the man's social reward for success in the eyes of the community. He has their respect. He has succeeded in his bid for Donship.

Conclusion

In Frontera, the respect title of Don is granted (1) in the traditional manner based upon wealth and/or power, and (2) on a popular basis signifying successful solution of the major problems which face the local male. Of these two categories, the latter is of more importance with respect to the male citizenry of Frontera. Such a Don is defined in terms of the manner by which he meets the prevailing conditions of Frontera life. He is a man who has succeeded in minimizing his contacts with the world outside his family, a man who is aloof, removed. It is a popular declaration of the all-important male independence. As such, he epitomizes the successful male in the community. And the men called Don are models of success toward which many younger men are striving today.

Finally, popular Donship comprises a system of prestige which is self-reduplicating. One can expect such a system wherever Mexican immigrants are found in the United States, since, in essence, any given male may become a Don.

ENDNOTE

- (1) The two years of field research for this paper are part of the Hidalgo Project, an on-going study of differential culture change in three Mexican-American communities in South Texas. The project is directed by William Madsen, assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Texas, and supported by the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health. Prior to the Frontera study, the writer had done field work among Mexican-Americans in southern California and made extensive observations in New Mexico. For the present paper, grateful acknowledgment is made to George M. Foster for his critical inspection of the manuscript.