

CURRENT THEORIES ON INCEST PROHIBITION

IN THE LIGHT OF CEREMONIAL KINSHIP

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Within the past three years several theoretical papers on the subject of incest prohibition have been published in the American Anthropologist. White's "The Definition and Prohibition of Incest" was the first of the series; the later papers are essentially rebuttals in which Radcliffe-Brown, W. D. Wallis, and B. Z. Seligman have participated (1). White has favored a "culturological" theory for the origin of incest rules. According to this theory, "...social evolution could have gone no farther on the human level than among the anthropoids..." without the prohibition of incest, by which "...families became units in the co-operative process as well as individuals. Marriages came to be contracts first between families, later between even larger groups." Thus, in a paraphrase of Tylor, "...primitive people were confronted with a choice between 'marrying-out and being killed out.'" (2)

While White argues, then, for the primacy of exogamy, both historically and functionally, the other authors apparently prefer the view that the primary advantage of incest prohibition lies in its reduction of rivalry and quarreling within the family. Wallis throws doubt on the assumption that intermarriage always establishes a closer relationship between families, and both Radcliffe-Brown and Seligman point out that incest prohibition involves something besides marriage regulation in as much as it prohibits extra-marital sexual relations as well. As Seligman notes, in a system of patrilineal descent "...unions between mother and son would be possible if exogamy were the only social regulation." (3)

At the bottom of his own theory of the prohibition of incest White sees an economic motivation. However, this motivation is not at the level of awareness and by "economic" he means "safety as well as subsistence." (4) Employing the same definition, the other authors would have an equal right to claim an underlying "economic" motivation in their view that incest prohibition reduces rivalry and therefore increases cooperation between the individual members of the family. The chief distinction between these two explanations, then, is that White emphasizes the external "economic" advantages of incest rules for groups of individuals thrown into contact by their exogamous practices while the other writers emphasize the internal "economic" advantages of incest rules for individuals recognizing in common a relationship prohibiting sexual union.

Since there are obviously no historical data available on the subject, any attempt to explain the ultimate origin of incest rules will depend upon the particular theorist's conception of what constitutes their primary function or advantage. It is with the functional

rather than the historical aspect of the problem that we choose to concern ourselves here. The purpose of this paper will be to test the above alternative hypotheses against a body of evidence briefly referred to by Wallis, the extension of incest regulations to ceremonial kin. Our attention will be devoted principally to a very prevalent type of ceremonial kinship, the compadre system, found in the Catholic areas of Southern Europe, the Philippines, and Latin America. For want of adequate documentation on the other areas, our examples will be drawn exclusively from Latin America and we shall begin with a brief description of the system in that area.

Shortly after a child's birth its parents select (usually from among their intimate friends and sometimes from among relatives or acquaintances of higher social position) a man and woman to act as its baptismal godparents. These are called, respectively, the padrino and the madrina of the child. The mutual obligations entailed in the relationship between the child and his godparents are known as padrinazgo and consist of such things as special respect behavior and mutual economic assistance. Usually the respect behavior is an obligation of the child and the economic assistance predominately an obligation of the godparents. The godparents may make the child occasional gifts, assist in the expense of its education, or, if it is a boy, help him to secure favorable employment when he is of age. The most customary and important obligation of padrinazgo (at least ideally) is the obligation of the godparents to raise the child in case it is left an orphan.

The godparents of the child automatically become the compadres of the parents and vice versa. The obligations between compadres make up compadrazgo and consist again of respect behavior and economic assistance, this time of a more reciprocal nature. Compadres often aid one another at times of economic and life crises although the exact form and procedure by which such assistance is expressed may vary locally.

Unfortunately, the ethnographic recording of this prevalent cultural phenomenon has been seriously neglected and only in a few recent community studies do we find any extensive reference to it. Even in these studies the presence or absence of incest rules is not always noted. In all cases, however, where such incest rules are mentioned, the occurrence is positive. There seem to be no cases in the literature to date which note their absence in Latin America. Positive evidence for the existence of incest rules within the compadre system exist for southern Brazil(5), the Brazilian Negroes (6), Peru(7), Yucatan(8), Quintana Roo(9), and the Guatemalan and Mexican communities of Chimaltenango(10), Agua Escondida(11), San Antonio Palopo(12), Teotihuacan(13), Yalalag(14), Tzintzuntzan(15), Coyuca de Catalan(16), and Tenia(17).

The incest rules in the compadre system applying to individuals united by padrinazgo and compadrazgo are, of course, in accordance with Catholic doctrine which stresses the "spiritual" relationship contracted at baptism between the sponsor and the child and its parents which is "an impediment to marriage." (18) In Latin America both the compadre system and its incest rules are undoubtedly of Spanish origin, but their wide adoption throughout the area would argue against their diffusion simply by virtue of Spanish indoctrination. That functional syncretism has also been important is born out by some of the further extensions of the rules beyond the present Catholic doctrine. Among the Brazilian Negroes sex relations are barred between persons having the same godfather, for these individuals are considered to be brothers and sisters through their common godparent (19). The daughter of one's godfather is also taboo among the Brazilian Negroes (20). In Yucatan the daughter of either godparent is taboo (21). In San Antonio Palopo (22), Chimaltenango (23), Agua Escondida (24), and among the Maya of East Central Quintana Roo (25), sex relations are barred between all the children of compadres. For Agua Escondida it is said that these individuals feel like first cousins. From these examples a close and obvious parallel can also be seen between incest prohibition in the compadre system and its extension under many kinship situations to relatives classed with parents or siblings (26).

Further evidence for the contention that incest rules in ceremonial kinship are not simply a result of historic accident is provided by their occurrence in New World examples where the means of effecting the relationships, as well as their obligations, are sufficiently different from those of the compadre system as to make any Spanish origin appear unlikely. Thus, among the Yahgan, sponsors in the ciexaus initiation rite were barred from later marriage with their charges (27). Smith, after establishing a "blood-brotherhood" bond with an Araucanian Indian was introduced to the women and children of the family as son and brother respectively (28). The Apinaye bar sexual relations between those bound by their kranged relationships (29). The same is true of the hapin relationship of the Eastern Timbira. Here, those so related cannot even speak on sexual topics in each other's presence (30).

Another important question which must be treated here is whether the incest rules in the compadre system actually involve the same feelings of incest horror as those applying to blood relatives. Although infractions of the rules are reported, infractions of incest rules between close relatives also occur. We have already noted that persons with the same godfather were considered to be like brothers and sisters among among the Brazilian Negroes and that children of compadres were considered like first cousins at Agua Escondida. For Teotihuacan it is reported that, "The worst conceivable crime is adultery between individuals united by the spiritual bonds of compadrazgo." (31) Foster records that in Tzintzuntzan, "Sexual relations between compadres or godchildren

and godparents are considered especially reprehensible, and one known case of an affair between a man and his marriage godmother was considered an unusually choice bit of gossip."(32) A myth collected by Redfield in Merida, Yucatan, asserted that incest between compadres was "...more terrible than that between mother and son." However, he felt that infractions in the former case were probably more common than in the latter(33). In the Mayo Indian village of Tenia in Sonora, informants agreed that sexual relations between compadres were unthinkable. There was one case in the village of a man living with his wife and widowed comadre but apparently no suspicion of polygamy was entertained by the villagers whatsoever. However, in a similar case where a man was living with his wife and her sister, the possibility was occasionally discussed. It is also believed in Tenia that if compadres or close relatives have sexual intercourse with one another, they become huge water snakes after death. These snakes are considered dangerous and cause severe storms when they pass overhead on the way from the sea to lakes in the Sierra. After a violent storm it may be remarked, "Por aqui paso la comadre."(34)

There is evidently a widespread feeling in Latin America that women should not receive male visitors while alone save for very close relatives. For a compadre to be considered a close relative in this case may be equally widespread, but we are limited to only four examples. In Chimaltenango a woman may be alone in a house with her compadre without incurring gossip(35). This is apparently true as well in Southern Brazil(36), in Coyuca de Catalan(37), and in Tenia(38).

It would be difficult on the basis of our evidence to say that the feeling of incest horror between individuals related through the compadre system is as strong as that existing between close relatives and the members of the nuclear family. However, if we avoid the difficulty of attempting to measure "feelings" and concern ourselves purely with the behavioral evidence, there should be no doubt that we are dealing here with a phenomenon that can be safely classified under the general heading of incest prohibition.

The ceremony of baptism is by no means the only way in which compadre and padrino relationships may be contracted in Latin America. There may be padrinos for innumerable occasions, such as marriage, confirmation, housewarmings, or padrinos selected to participate in some special religious ceremony for a sick person. The obligations incurred by such relationships appear to be less important and less binding than those of baptism. Though incest rules seem to apply in some of these cases as well, it may be that they, like the obligations, are weaker than for the baptismal relationships. Unfortunately, we know of only one case where this distinction has been clearly made. De la Fuente reports that in Yalalag cases of sex relations between compadres and comadres of rosario do occur and that such infractions are considered less grave than for baptismal compadres(39).

There is a further point pertinent to our discussion which involves a suggestion already made by Parsons and Foster, namely, that the compadre system fulfills the functions of the kinship group outside the immediate family and may in some cases have replaced it(40). Obviously, the parallels between the functions of the compadre system and those of extended kinship units are striking. The compadre system provides insurance for the welfare of the young as well as obligations of mutual assistance in time of need between adults. It lacks one important feature of most extended kinship units. Its relationships extend primarily between individuals or pairs of individuals; it does not create large exogamous groups. The protective function of the extended kinship unit through its weight of numbers does not hold for this type of artificial kinship. However, in the catholicized areas of Latin America today such a protective function is not as necessary as it may once have been in pre-conquest days. The territorial state has now absorbed that function. If the primary function of incest rules is to create larger protective alliances, we have a curious condition in Latin America today. The alliances formed by the widely adopted compadre system are between individuals, not groups, and they apply to the same individuals to which the rules of incest apply.

Exogamy plays no part in the compadre system. Instead of being forced to marry outside of a kinship group, the individual obtains relationships through the system which bar marriage and sexual relations with otherwise eligible mates. Obviously, however, until an individual reaches adulthood, his participation in compadrazgo and padrinazgo will be more limited than it will be after he and his age mates have married and commenced to raise families. After marriage he will become a compadre of the godparents of his own children and a compadre of the parents of those children for whom he acts as godparent. The incest rules of the compadre system bear their greatest weight, therefore, not in the prohibition of marriage (except in cases of remarriage), but in the prohibition of extra-marital sexual relations. It is just this type of incest which would be most disruptive to the harmony of the compadre system.

As yet the information on the compadre system of Latin America is too scattered and meagre to be conclusive, but if further work supports our present evidence it would seem inadvisable to consider out-marriage to be a primary function of incest rules. By providing us with an example where one variable, group exogamy, is absent, the evidence on incest prohibitions in the compadre system lends support to the contention that incest rules apply primarily to extra-marital sexual unions and have their principal advantage in effecting more harmonious relations between the individuals to which the rules apply. We must agree, then, with that explanation of incest prohibition which emphasizes the internal "economic" advantages of incest rules for individuals recognizing in common a relationship prohibiting sexual union.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) White, 1948, pp. 416-435; Radcliffe-Brown, 1949, pp. 503-509; Wallis, 1950, pp. 277-279; Seligman, 1950, pp. 305-316.
- (2) White, 1948, pp. 425 and 423.
- (3) Wallis, 1950, p. 278; Radcliffe-Brown, 1949, p. 504; Seligman, 1950, p. 306.
- (4) White, 1948, pp. 424 and 426.
- (5) From material obtained in a personal interview with Mrs. Auta Muniz Hohenthal of southern Brazil at Berkeley, California, on July 7, 1950.
- (6) Eduardo, 1948, p. 38.
- (7) From material obtained in a personal interview with Oscar Danino and Henry Gold, University of California students from Lima, Peru, at Berkeley, California, on July 7, 1950.
- (8) Redfield, 1941, p. 212.
- (9) Villa Rojas, 1945, p. 88.
- (10) Wagley, 1949, pp. 17, 19, 37.
- (11) Redfield, 1945a, p. 523.
- (12) Redfield, 1945b, p. 90.
- (13) Gamio, 1922, p. 243.
- (14) Fuente, 1949, p. 169.
- (15) Foster, 1948, p. 264.
- (16) From material obtained in a personal interview with Jose de la Puente, a University of California student from Coyuca de Catalan, Guerrero, Mexico, at Berkeley, California, on July 13, 1950.
- (17) Erasmus, Charles J. Unpublished field notes on Tenia, a Mayo Indian community of Sonora, Mexico.
- (18) Herbermann and others, 1907, p. 272.
- (19) Eduardo, 1948, p. 38.
- (20) Ibid., p. 42.

- (21) Redfield, 1941, p. 212.
- (22) Redfield, 1945b, p. 90.
- (23) Wagley, 1949, p. 37.
- (24) Redfield, 1945a, p. 523.
- (25) Villa Rojas, 1945, p. 88.
- (26) Seligman, 1950, p. 306. See also Murdock, 1949, p. 287.
- (27) Cooper, 1946, p. 92.
- (28) Smith, 1855, p. 262.
- (29) Nimuendaju, 1939, p. 32.
- (30) Nimuendaju, 1946, p. 101.
- (31) Gamio, 1922, p. 243.
- (32) Foster, 1948, p. 264.
- (33) Redfield, 1941, p. 212.
- (34) Erasmus, see footnote 17.
- (35) Wagley, 1949, p. 19.
- (36) Hohenthal, see footnote 5.
- (37) Puente, see footnote 16.
- (38) Erasmus, see footnote 17.
- (39) Fuente, 1949, p. 174.
- (40) Parsons, 1936, p. 70; Foster, 1948, p. 264.

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