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RITUALIZED PERSONAL RELATIONS

BLOOD BROTHERHOOD, BEST FRIENDS, COMPADRE, ETC.: SOME COMPARATIVE HYPOTHESES AND SUGGESTIONS

by

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The purpose of this paper is to present a set of tentative hypotheses on the social conditions in which a certain type of institutional behaviour, which at this point may be called 'ritualized personal relations,' exists and functions. Under this term I shall include a variety of phenomena such as blood brotherhood, blood friendship and 'best' friends, compadre relations and the godparent relation in several peasant societies, as well as relations of contractual servantship existing between members of different castes in an Indian village,1 or the Kan-shing relationship reported by Fried in China,2 which perhaps do not come at first sight under this general category. My general contention will be that all these relations have some basic characteristics in common, although they vary in the intensity of these characteristics, and that these characteristics are related to some similar or parallel social conditions. With the exception of B. Paul's unpublished thesis,3 most of the work on these subjects has been confined to one or two types. Thus, blood brotherhood and best friendship have been lately summarized by Tegneus and Gibbs,4 while Mintz and Foster have summarized and analysed the material on compadre.5 The various ethnographical papers which report these data are numerous, but usually contain very little comparative analysis.6

While many of these analyses show much insight, it is nevertheless my feeling that most of them do not analyse in a systematic enough way the conditions in which these types of relations exist. Nor do they recognize sufficiently—if at all—some of the basic characteristics and conditions which are common to most of these phenomena.

In this paper, no new data will be brought forth. Its only purpose will be to present, on the basis of existing data, some systematic hypotheses concerning the conditions in which this type of behaviour exists and the functions which it performs in its social setting. In this way perhaps some lacunae in the data as well as some further possibilities and directions of research may be indicated.

Some Basic Social Characteristics of 'Ritualized Personal Relations'

I may perhaps begin by pointing out the common basic analytical characteristics of all these relations. These seem to be four—they are particularistic, personal, voluntary and fully institutionalized (usually in ritual terms). By particularistic I mean that the incumbents of the relationship act towards one another in terms of their respective personal properties and not in terms of general universal categories.7 In this they are very close to kinship relations and groups (which are also predominantly particularistic) but unlike the latter in that they are incurred in a voluntary way. Thus, those who participate in these 'brotherhood,' etc., relations in this case do not do so by virtue of their 'hereditary' positions but are chosen by each other.8 Unlike many other voluntary, contractual relations, however, these relations, because of their particularistic connotations, are not 'anonymous,' i.e. directed towards universalistic categories of people, but are very personal and intimate. On the other hand, unlike many personal relations both in those societies and in our own, e.g. various types of personal friendship, of clique membership, etc., these relations are usually fully institutionalized, sanctioned by some of the most important and severe, usually ritual, sanctions of the society. This is true both of the pure types of 'ritual kinship' and of the 'looser' types of relations like the Kan-shing, etc., although in the latter cases, the extent and duration of mutual obligations is shorter and the severity of sanctions is weaker.

In order to understand more fully the nature of these relationships, we should also inquire into the contents and nature of the obligations that they incur. The fact that these relations are both voluntary (hence to some extent contractual) and also particularistic and personal indicates that we have here some interrelation between solidarity and institutional obligations. In all such relations there exists a set of mutual obligations in the instrumental and economic fields. Some such obligations seem to recur in most of these cases—e.g. mutual help in cases of economic hardship, illness or other calamities, some sort of mutual insurance in common economic enterprises, participation in funeral expenses, participation in some costs of educating children, etc.9 In some cases the extent of mutual obligations is much broader, including general hospitality, sometimes up to sharing of wives,10 help in litigation and against the demands of powerful men,11 while in others it may be narrower. But some institutional obligations do always form a basic component of this type of relationship. Therefore, Gibbs's contention that this type of relationship is purely 'affective' and non-institutional is not correct.12 There is, however, an important element of truth in his contention and this is related to the fact that all these mutual (or, as sometimes in cases of godparent—godchild relations, unilateral) instrumental obligations are set within a framework of diffuse solidarity. These obligations are not defined as stemming from some specific, limited contractual, market-type commitments and relations, nor are they set in terms of universalistic categories of people.
They are set in terms of diffuse, solidary relations, symbolized usually in some ritual act, and it is in terms of these relations that the instrumental obligations are defined. At the same time, however, the instrumental obligations are not of secondary importance or only accidental derivations of the solidary relationship. Sometimes (probably very often, but the data are not adequate on this) the main, and even explicit, reason for contracting this relationship seems to be these potential instrumental benefits. We have here then a peculiar and distinct type of combination of instrumental and solidary relationship, in which the solidarity provides the basic framework, yet within this framework various instrumental considerations, albeit very diffusely defined, are of paramount importance.

It is this combination of solidary and instrumental relations that may provide us with a starting point for the discussion of the conditions in which these types of relations develop and exist.

The Social Conditions in which Ritualized Personal Relations Exist

I should like to propose the hypothesis that such conditions arise mostly in some types of predominantly particularistic societies and are related to some tensions and strains inherent in these societies. By predominantly particularistic societies I mean societies in which (a) the incumbents of the most important roles act towards other persons according to the familial, kinship, lineage, ethnic and other properties of those individuals in relation to their own, and (b) membership in the total society is defined in terms of belonging to some particularistic sub-group (lineage, caste, etc.), and the most important institutional roles in the political, economic, ritual, etc., spheres are allocated to such groups or their representatives. It seems to me that in such societies there exist two main areas of strains and consequent problems of integration. The first are strains which exist within the basic constituent groups of such societies (lineages, clans, castes, some territorial groups, etc.) and which are inherent in the structure of these groups. Second are the various strains and tensions between the main groups and categories of people of which such societies are composed, and the consequent problems of their integration.

The Internal Tensions within the Main Sub-groups of Particularistic Societies

Most of these tensions can be related to the fact that in such groups, by the very nature of their organization, there usually is but little specification of the allocation of the various major obligations within the group or category. These are left—at least on many occasions—to the internal arrangements of the particular group. Sometimes these relations may be structured and clearly defined—quite often in ways which may increase the tensions (as in the rigid prescription of seniority rights)—but quite often they may be left to some internal unspecified arrangements of the group involved. These may enable the exercise of many pressures, of bargaining and of illegitimate power, etc. Moreover, it is not always specified, and in many cases cannot be specified by the very nature of the case, which of the members of a group will start a chain of activities or become involved in some problems or conflicts, which may then affect the whole group. Thus it can never be known who will start a particular feud which may involve the group or some of its members, or who will engage in various commercial or economic activities with other groups, etc., or who will show more initiative or ambition in any field of organization, etc. While it may perhaps be easy to identify such persons in terms of individual idiosyncrasies and characteristics, these do not necessarily coincide with any definite structural positions within the group or within a broad category of people. Thus the very nature of such particularistic groups, with their emphasis on diffuse solidarity (sometimes also on seniority, etc.), lends itself to easy manipulation by certain people who may easily go beyond what seem to other persons to be their legitimate rights. This is especially so in those areas of life and in those enterprises which involve not fully structured intergroup relations, which are not entirely contained within the group and regulated by it, and which yet may easily involve the group itself and many of its members by the very existence of clear definition of situation.

An additional factor of strain in such societies is the possibility of conflicting claims and pressures from different groups or categories of people or any persons, and the limiting of the area of the individual’s choice or private life through such pressures. This seems to be especially important in problems of inheritance, the amount and type of property that one can bequeath according to his own wish, etc.

Problems of Intergroup Relations and Tensions

Generally speaking, there may exist two main areas or types of intergroup tensions in these societies. One type of tension may arise from various strains engendered through close relations and obligations which exist between these groups, relations and obligations which are necessary to their existence and which may yet cause difficulties because of the very strong solidarity of each of these groups. The second type of tension may arise in those particularistic societies in which the relations between such groups are very ephemeral and which need therefore some mechanisms through which regulated relations between their members could be maintained. In all such societies there exists some degree of interdependence and interrelationship between the different sub-groups, in different institutional spheres, ritual, economic, political, etc. The exact spheres in which such interdependence is greatest and the extent to which it is organized differ of course, from one society to another. But in all cases such interrelationships include certain patterns of mutual obligations, entailing many types of duties in the instrumental field. These may be connected with economic exchange necessitated by marriage and bridewealth arrangements, or with various complementary economic functions between clans, etc. Or there may be obligations to provide manpower for public works or for military and
political purposes, etc. In some cases they may entail such relations between potentially hostile groups which nevertheless have to cooperate in some areas of life and common interest.

It seems to be characteristic of most of these relations and obligations, especially in the instrumental field or in political relations (as, for instance, among the Azande), that they are not entirely 'contained' and regulated by the particularistic criteria and relations of each of these groups and by what may be called their routine interrelations. Many of these mutual obligations are not clearly and concretely defined simply because they are not stated in general, universalistic and specific ways but rather in more diffuse and particularistic terms, and are limited within the framework of diffuse solidarity relations. Thus the exact demands that a noble can make of a commoner among the Azande, or a member of a superior caste among the Tanala towards a member of a lower one, are not usually clearly defined and may give rise to a lot of 'private' interpretations and extortions. The same seems to be true of the demands of members of senior age groups towards younger ones (see Driberg, op. cit. in note 6), or of the demands between certain family groups in the spheres of intermarriage, etc. This is especially so in cases of eruption, or continuous existence, of hostile relations between such groups or their members. In such cases the exact definition of mutual obligations, compensation, etc., may be a very vexing and uncertain problem.  

In other words, it seems that the very kind of social organization existing in such societies creates some types of undefined situations or types of situations of potential conflict malintegration. These situations may be of either of the two main types mentioned earlier. They may arise in those cases wherein the internal solidarity of each of such sub-groups may come into conflict with various exigencies of cooperation and interrelationships between such groups. Or the extent of interrelationship between such different sub-groups may be so loose and small that it is difficult to maintain any regulated relations between them or their members.

Many of these strains and tensions have been analysed in anthropological literature. Various social mechanisms which deal, as it were, with these problems have been pointed out. Among these the most important are the various mechanisms of kinship-extension, of kinship as opposed to lineage obligations, of various types of so-called associations, of rules of hospitality towards strangers, of joking relationships, and generally of various ties cutting across different groups and categories of people.

It is our basic hypothesis that the various forms of ritualized personal relationships constitute also a mechanism of social control which tends to mitigate some of the tensions and strains of predominantly particularistic societies analysed above.

**Situations of Strain and Ritualized Personal Relations**

The evidence available at this stage of research is as yet inadequate for a full analysis of the exact relations between the various types of mechanism mentioned above and the various types of ritualized personal relations. It is thus as yet difficult always to say exactly when the different mechanisms are fully adequate, when they generate new types of tensions and strains and to what extent one mechanism helps in the alleviation of tension created by another. This has to be left for further research. But it is perhaps possible to put forward, in a very tentative way, some propositions as to the nature of the more specific strains with which ritualized personal relations seem to deal. They seem to be most closely related to those situations in which the internal strains engendered within the different sub-groups of these societies are connected, in some way, with some of the intergroup strains, the last reinforcing the first. Thus, among the Didinga, the internal solidarity of an age group may become strained because of demands made by a representative of a senior age group on some member of the junior age group and the latter's demand of help from his age mates. Among the Azande, the several individual members of a family may become involved by one of their members in disputes with the nobles, etc. In Dahomey and among other West African groups, sharp conflicts over the testamentary disposal of the property of an individual may arise between his family and other kinship, etc., groups, and pressures may be exerted on him by the group which can claim his greatest formal allegiance. Illustrations of this sort can easily be multiplied. What seems common to most of them is that some incompatibility develops between an individual's instrumental obligations, his solidarity obligations, and his predispositions in these spheres. His solidarity relations to some groups or categories of people may become strained because of conflicting or illegitimate claims in the instrumental field made by members of such solidarity groups, and/or he may be incapable of fulfilling his instrumental obligations and aspirations because of such solidarity claims or because of lack of what to him seems adequate support from his solidarity groups. It may therefore be a plausible suggestion that this type of strain is most likely to occur in those situations in which both problems of intra-group solidarity and of intergroup relations arise. In other words, in such situations there arise problems both of societal integration and of individual tension and adjustment.

It is because of these various characteristics of situations of strain that the different types of ritualized personal relations are so closely related to them. The basic characteristics of ritualized personal relations, analysed in the first part of this paper, enable these relations to mitigate precisely these types of conflicts. In order to avoid imputation of any teleological implications in this argument it should be stated at the outset that we do not assume that, whenever such tensions exist, these (or any other) mechanisms of social control always develop, nor that these are necessarily the only types of such mechanisms which could perform this function (for a fuller discussion of these methodological problems see my From Generation to Generation, op. cit., chapters I and VI). But we shall come back to these problems later when discussing possibilities of further research.

A closer analysis of the different types of obligations
incurred through relationships of ritual kinship, as well as of its voluntary and personal nature, will illustrate the way in which these relations tend to mitigate the above-analysed tensions, from the point of view of both the individual and the social structure.

As has already been indicated, most of these obligations contain some element of insurance against unexpected risks and calamities. These may be cases of illness, of death, of unexpected sudden economic demands, hardship, etc. In still other cases we find some sort of assurance of safe ways in strange and hostile parts of the country.

But in all these relations there exists an additional basic element—namely, that the performance of these obligations is assured through a special personal bond which transcends the usual existing groupings and categories of people and cuts across them. This bond is usually seen as no less binding—sometimes even more—than that with the categories and groups. In some cases, this bond is more or less expressly oriented to assuring the individual's will against possible pressures from different groups. This is most clearly seen in Dahomey where the best friend is the executor of an individual's will.18

In general it is true, as Gibbs has rightly stressed, that these ritualized personal relations provide the individual with very strong bonds of personal-emotional security—a bond which is of special importance in the various situations of strain and tensions analysed above. From the point of view of social integration, these relations may help in mitigating the potential conflicts or tensions between different sub-groups, family groups, lineages, status groups, castes, etc., of these societies. They furnish an additional tie which cuts across existing corporate groups, and provides the individual with some security and defence from the pressures of his group while at the same time also enhancing the individual's interest in the maintenance of smooth relations between different groups. In those societies in which the main problem is that of alleviating tensions between too closely related sub-groups, such ritualized relations may help in mitigating these tensions by providing various cross-cutting ties. In the more loosely integrated societies they may provide for some regulation and stabilization of intergroup relations.

The available data seem to support our suggestion and hypotheses about the type of social conditions and strains to which various forms of ritualized personal relations are connected and which they help to mitigate. Truly enough, at this stage it is difficult to relate these relations to other types of mechanisms, such as joking relations. But at least we have been able to indicate in a general way the place of these relations within the framework of such mechanisms.

Additional support for our hypothesis can be found in an examination—necessarily rather cursory—of the variability and distribution of these relationships. While the data on this point are not always clear and systematic enough, and while only in very few reports do we find a full statistical analysis of the distribution of these types of relationships between the members of different groups in the society, yet some general indications can be adduced from some of the existing data. One thing that strikes us immediately is that in different societies these types of relationships are not always established between the members of the same groups. Thus, among the Didinga, as well as among the Plains Tree, they seem to be especially important between the members of different age groups or military-warrior groups. Among the Azande they are limited to the commoners, while among the Tanala they seem sometimes to cross 'status lines.'

Mintz and Wolf have shown that the distribution of the compadre relationship differs greatly in several Latin American communities. They have summarized the data in the following way:19

The mechanism may be contrasted, then, in several distinct contexts. In the first context are Tusik, Barrio Poyal and Pascua. These communities are alike in their 'homogeneity,' and the horizontal structuring of the compadre system; yet they are markedly different in other respects. Tusik is tribal and essentially isolated from the world market, while Barrio Poyal and Pascua are incorporated into capitalist world economies, and are fully formed working class strata. In the second context is San Jose, with its varied land ownership pattern, its mixed (cash and subsistence) crop production and its several classes. Through the vertical phrasing of its compadre system, San Jose demonstrates a relatively stable reciprocity, economic and social, between the landed, large and small, and the sharecroppers and laborers.

In the third context is Moche. Land is held predominantly in small plots; the crops, as in San Jose, are both cash and subsistence, and while Gillin doubts the existence of classes, certainly the compadre system is described as a vertical structuring one. Here, too, the elaboration of face-to-face ceremonialism may help to slow the accelerated trend toward land concentration, a cash economy, and incorporation into the world market.

A closer analysis of these differences will show that they can be explained in terms of our hypothesis. In all these cases the different types of 'ritual kinship' and compadrazgo are usually established between the members of those groups between whom there exists a relatively wide scope of relatively unstructured interaction, or, in other words, they are established in those areas of interaction which may give rise to certain undefined situations and consequent tensions. Not all the interactions and interrelationships between different particularistic groups in these societies are of equal importance from this point of view. Sometimes the relations may be purely on a symbolic plane with relatively little interaction in the instrumental field. In other cases the hierarchical relations between different status groups may be so distant, either in symbolic terms or in actual common interests, as to involve but little common, equal meeting points in instrumental relations. This seems, for instance, to be the case in the commoners-nobles relation among Azande. In all such areas there do not seem to develop any types of ritualized personal relations. Mintz's and Wolf's analysis of the development of different types of such relationships in the Middle Ages seems also to substantiate this point.20

Moreover, the exact contents of the obligations within these types of relationships seem also (in so far as clearly reported in the materials available) to vary according to the nature of the specific sphere of potentially unregulated and undefined situations and interrelations. Thus, among the Didinga, this seems to apply mostly in the field of military
duties and behaviour; among the Azande in defensive relations of commoners against the nobles; among some Africans in semi-commercial relations between travellers of different clans; in Dahomey in economic enterprises, etc.; among the various Latin American groups in the fields of economic relations, provision for education, against illness, etc. While much more systematic research should be done before a full comparative analysis of this kind could be made, even these illustrations and many others available seem to support, in a general way, our hypothesis.

Ritualized Personal Relations as Mechanisms of Social Control

We have seen, then, that the various types of ritualized personal relations serve as mechanisms of social control and mitigate some types of tensions and strains which are inherent in the structure of some types of predominantly particularistic societies. Their ability to perform these functions of social control and alleviation of tensions that arise under the conditions specified above is made possible because the very nature of these relationships is set firmly within the basic structural principles of these societies. As has been pointed out above, they are particularistic, diffuse, and are sanctioned in terms of the most important values and symbols of their respective societies. Thus, they do not go beyond the basic orientations of the society and the consequent expectations of their members, but they rearrange these orientations and the balance between solidarity and instrumental relations in such a way as to mitigate the tensions arising out of the particular organizations of these societies. Moreover, it is the fact that they are sanctioned by the highest ritual sanctions that enables these relationships to 'compete,' as it were, with the usual kinship, etc., relations which are also related to the ultimate values of these societies (I am indebted to D. Aberle for this point).

In a general way it can be said that these relationships are able to perform some functions of social control in these societies because (a) they are organized within the framework of the basic orientations and values of their respective societies and (b) their organization is asymmetrical and yet complementary in relation to the organization of those areas in the organization of these societies in which most of the strains are generated. This is especially seen in the organization of instrumental and solidary relations on the one hand and of personal and particularistic relations on the other. Thus while in these situations in which the strains are generated the instrumental obligations are set within the framework of ascribed, non-voluntary, solidary groups which limit the area of individual choice, in the ritualized personal relations the instrumental relations are also set within a solidary and ritual framework—but one that is personal and voluntary, and that cuts across existing solidary groups. Thus these relations provide a new type of solidary framework for instrumental relations which is different from that of the main groups of the society and yet complements them. In this way they seem to conform to some general characteristics of mechanisms of social control.21

Because of this it can also be understood that these types of relationships do not usually arise or exist under different structural conditions and in different types of societies. The tensions analysed here seem to be peculiar to the type of predominantly particularistic societies discussed here. In other types of societies, many of these peculiar strains are taken care of by other institutional devices. This is especially true of specificity-oriented groups and relations. These may be either particularistic (e.g. guilds) or universalistic (as most modern vocational, economic, etc., organizations). In the first case, the limitation of relations to some specific areas narrows and much more clearly defines the area of mutual obligations. The particularistic specific groups still provide the individual with various benefits of mutual help, etc., but of a much more clearly defined and limited type than in kinship or in 'ritual personal' relations. Foster's analysis shows that in such societies or sectors thereof, ritual kinship relations are very weak, if they exist at all.22

In universalistic societies the multiplicity of such specifically oriented groups and organizations, as well as the clearer definition of jural obligations in universalistic terms, also minimizes this type of tension. It has therefore been rightly shown by Foster, Mintz and Wolf, that ritual kinship does not flourish under conditions of modern, formal, political organization and general market conditions.23

Moreover, it is well known that when universalistic institutions impinge on societies which have these types of relationships, the entire content and direction may change, the relationships may become weakened, become sources of new tensions, etc. A complete analysis of these phenomena is, however, beyond the province of this paper.

Problems for Further Research

If the hypothesis presented here on the social conditions under which the various types of institutionalized personal relationships exist and on their function in their respective societies is in general borne out by the data, it does not yet mean that all the problems connected with it are solved. Rather on the basis of this hypothesis, some new and additional areas of research can be indicated in this field—and it is to be hoped that if such research is undertaken it will help to modify and elaborate this hypothesis. First, we need much more systematic data on the distribution of such relationships—wherever they exist—between different individuals and members of different sub-groups of the society. The same applies to the systematic delineation of the institutional spheres in which these relations are most operative, and the relations between these spheres and the specific contents and durability of obligations covered by these relations.

Second is the general relation of this type of relationships to tensions inherent in a particularistic type of society and to other types of social control operative in it. As has been pointed out above, it need not be assumed that whenever such tensions occur and exist, these mechanisms of social control will necessarily arise. It is, therefore, important to analyse the conditions in which they do not arise and the effect of such a situation on the integration of the society.
Neither, as we have seen, are these relations the only type of mechanism of social control which exists in such societies, nor is it the only type of control which need arise under the specific conditions analysed here (although it seems, if our hypothesis is correct, that only such conditions may give rise to this particular type of relationship).

Within each of such societies there exist, as has been shown, many different mechanisms of social control, some of which may be directed also to these specific problems and tensions. It would, therefore, always be profitable to analyse this particular type of social control along with the others existing in a society, and to analyse their interrelations. Such an analysis would probably throw some light on the differential distribution of this particular type of relationship.

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Notes

3 B. Paul, Ritual Kinship, with Special Reference to Godparenthood in Middle America (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Chicago).
6 Some of the most interesting are:

For a full bibliography, see Tegnaeus, op. cit.
7 This follows the definition used by T. Parsons and E. Shils in Towards a General Theory of Action, Harvard, 1952.

8 This point has been rightly stressed by B. Paul, op. cit.
9 Foster, op. cit.; Mintz and Wolf, op. cit.
10 See D. G. Mandelbaum, op. cit.
11 See E. E. Evans-Pritchard, op. cit.
12 See Gibbs, op. cit.
13 This definition is also based on that by Parsons and Shils, op. cit. For a fuller distinction between 'particularistic' and 'universalistic' societies see my From Generation to Generation: Age Groups and the Social Structure, Glencoe, 1956, Chapter III.
14 See Herskovits, op. cit.; Firth, op. cit.
16 A good illustration of this point can be found → E. Colson, 'Social Control in Plateau Tonga Society,' Africa, Vol. XXIII (1953). I do not know, however, whether among the Tonga there exists any type of institutionalized friendship, but they do have a joking relationship.
17 See, for example, the following:
22 Mintz and Wolf, op. cit., p. 256.
23 Mintz and Wolf, op. cit.
25 See Foster, op. cit.
26 Ibid.