

Introduction

Dwight W. Read
Department of Anthropology
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA USA
Email: dread@ss.ucla.edu

In this issue of *Kinship*, we feature two articles that share the same challenge. How do we determine, when an article asserts that it is providing an account of kinship relations, that this claim is valid?

One article, written by Roland Alum (2024) and titled *The Continuing Relevance of Compadrazgo Spiritual Kinship in Latin America*, makes the assertion that the behaviors associated with *compadrazgo* relations, constitute a form of kinship and should be understood as such. At the same time, it is recognized that *compadrazgo* relations, even if viewed as a form of kinship, are not understood to only derive from procreation and marriage. Some authors, such as Alum, view these relations as making up *spiritual kinship* since they derive from relations determined and sanctioned by the Catholic Church and are not just from relations derived through procreation and/or marriage. This, however, does not clarify in what sense *compadrazgo* refers to relations that should be understood as kinship relations associated with the Catholic Church. The association with Catholicism does not make *compadrazgo* relations, per se, into a system of kinship relations. As El Guindi (2024) discusses in her contribution to this issue of *Kinship*, the relations making up the *compadrazgo* relation have not been shown to be kinship relations. So what, if anything, is the connection between *compadrazgo* relations and kinship relations? Is spiritual kinship simply another kind of kinship?

The other article, published in this issue of *Kinship* with title *Caste and Jāti* and written by the now deceased Russian ethnographer, Elena N. Uspenskaya, discusses how the caste system of India has a long western history connecting it with kinship even though, she argues, the connection is not justified. From the very first western accounts of the caste system to current western accounts of it, it has been assumed by western scholars that kinship in India and the caste system are intertwined as if they are inseparable from each other. Yet as Uspenskaya has shown through her extensive ethnographic accounts of the *jāti* system, “[t]he institution of *jāti* is rooted in prehistoric tribal concepts and usages. In Hindu society *jāti* acts as the real agent which manages all the tasks and aims inherent in and regarded as important by this society. Thus *jāti* is a basic ‘structural unit’ of Hindu society” (Uspenskaya 2010) and is “the term traditionally used to describe a cohesive group of people in the Indian subcontinent, like a tribe, community, clan, sub-clan, or a religious sect” (Wikipedia contributors 2024). Thus, considering the caste system to be a kinship system ignores the way the *jāti* system is a kinship system distinct from the caste system.

Though she is not well-known in the West, Uspenskaya, before her death in 2015, was a highly regarded Russian ethnographer due to her extensive ethnographic accounts of southeast Asia. From her *Obituary*:

Since 1985, for more than 25 years, Elena N. Uspenskaya worked on the ethnography of South and South-West Asia and published under the title “Anthropology of the Indian Caste” [Uspenskaya 2010] ... [This is] the main book in the researcher’s life [and it] radically changed scientific ideas about caste and the specifics of the Indian caste system, since Elena Uspenskaya not only ... described the sociocultural ... phenomenon of “ethnocaste community”, but also [rejected] the concept according to which castes and ethnic groups in India [were understood through] ... the implementation of the constructivist methodology of the British colonialists. ... Elena Uspenskaya’s conclusion from the experience of studying the Indian caste, ... is that in reality this system is not built on an absolute hierarchy, but on the “equality of family and kinship groups” [Uspenskaya 2009], which allowed her to analyze the positive, “life-sustaining” aspects of *Jāti* for Indian society, which in turn explains the extraordinary stability of this phenomenon in time and space.... Elena Uspenskaya’s conclusion from the experience of studying the Indian caste ... is that in reality this system is not built on an absolute hierarchy [as assumed by westerners], but on the “equality of family and kinship groups” [Uspenskaya 2009], allow[ing] her to analyze the positive, “life-sustaining” aspects of *Jāti* for Indian society, which in turn explains the extraordinary stability of this phenomenon in time and space.

In both cases – assuming the *compadrazgo* system is best understood as a kinship system despite it being a creation of the Catholic Church, and not recognizing the *jāti* social system as a well-developed kinship system – what is meant by a kinship system has not been articulated. It has been assumed that a kinship system is determined through procreation and marriage, but as El Guindi (2020) has shown through detailed empirical analysis, kinship is not determined solely by the two pathways of procreation and marriage, but also by a third pathway that is not subsumed under procreation and marriage. The extensive field work conducted by El Guindi, both among the Zapotec in Oaxaca, Mexico and among the middle eastern Arabs engaged in the *jāti* system, have led her to articulate the criteria by which kinship can be empirically recognized. More specifically, she argues that kinship involves not only the two pathways of procreation and marriage, but also a pathway that is articulated in culturally different ways as can be demonstrated through extensive empirical analysis. What is missing in the assertion that *compadrazgo* behavior involves kinship behavior is an empirical demonstration that *compadrazgo* behavior empirically satisfies what constitutes the third pathway that El Guindi has identified is central to what

constitutes kinship behavior. Similarly, missing from western ethnographic accounts of the caste system is the empirical demonstration that castes satisfy – or fail to satisfy -- the third pathway identified by El Guindi. What Uspenskaya has shown, empirically, is that it is the *jāti* system and not the caste system that satisfies the third pathway identified by El Guindi, hence simply asserting that the caste system is a kinship system is inadequate and instead this must be shown empirically.

The empirical demonstration that the *compadrazgo* system or the caste system (among other behavior systems that are also claimed to be kinship systems) is a kinship system is necessary and cannot simply be assumed. While El Guindi has systematically studied the Valley Zapotec, her work has been theorized to meet the structural criteria of ritual, but as yet, as she discusses in her article for this issue of *Kinship*, neither her research nor the research of others on the *compadrazgo* system has yet been empirically shown to meet kinship criteria. In contrast, El Guindi does not assume that suckling by Arabian women is a manifestation of kinship, but empirically demonstrates that suckling establishes a kinship relation between the woman doing the suckling and the child being suckled. She has shown that the fact of suckling may change the incest kinship relation of the child being suckled in a possible marriage and this change will be recognized by other women in the community as it affects who may marry whom. The women will refer to the way that a sucking events that took place in the past may now make what seemed to be a desirable marriage into a marriage that will now violate incest restrictions due to the sucking event that took place, even if it took place years before, just as time does not erase whether a possible marriage would be incestuous or not. The empirical evidence in the form of discussing past suckling events and how these events affect whether a possible marriage would be incestuous provide empirical evidence showing how suckling creates kinship relations that may not have existed before the suckling event took place. It is through examples like this that El Guindi establishes empirically whether or not suckling affects kinship relations and it is the absence of such empirical demonstration that is missing in accounts asserting that the *compadrazgo* system is a kind of kinship. What is needed is empirical demonstration that the *compadrazgo* system and/or the caste system empirically satisfies what El Guindi refers to as a third pathway leading to the creation of kinship relations. While El Guindi has systematically studied the Valley Zapotec and has theorized what should be empirically observed in order to meet the structural criteria of relating *compadrazgo* relations to ritual behavior, relating *compadrazgo* relations to kinship criteria has yet to be empirically examined.

References

- Alum, Roland Armando. 2024 “The Continuing Relevance of *Compadrazgo* Spiritual Kinship in Latin America.” *Anthropology News* website.
- El Guindi, Fadwa. 2020 *Suckling: Kinship More Fluid*. London: Routledge.
2024. *Revisiting compadrazgo: Issues concerning ‘What kinship is’*. *Kinship* 4(1).
- Uspenskaya, Elena N. 2009. On the question of the nature of the Indian caste. *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology* 3:150–171.
- 2010 *Anthropology of Indian Caste*. St. Petersburg: Nauka.
- Wikipedia contributors. 2024 "Jāti." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Accessed 29 Jan. 2024.