

Revisiting *Compadrazgo*:
Issues Concerning ‘What Kinship Is’

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A recently published article by Roland Alum (2024) on *compadrazgo* describes the continuing relevance of *compadrazgo* in Latin America, which I have found to be significant in light of my analysis of this phenomenon (see references below), but when the author regards the phenomenon to be ‘spiritual kinship’, as the title, *The Continuing Relevance of Compadrazgo Spiritual Kinship in Latin America*, of his article unambiguously declares, I find it necessary to explore further what is meant by spiritual kinship. I have no problem with the claim of continuing relevance of *compadrazgo* based on the author’s anthropological observations. Unsurprisingly, his claim supports theoretical points I had made in earlier works and am about to make in this article. However, I do object to the claim that *compadrazgo* is primarily spiritual and the assertion, which does not seem to be grounded in systematic data, that it is a form of kinship (although I can confidently, on the basis of my systematic data-gathering on Zapotec ritual, predict

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that it is). My concerns arise from critical anthropological issues regarding entwining aspects of data, analysis, and anthropological authority.

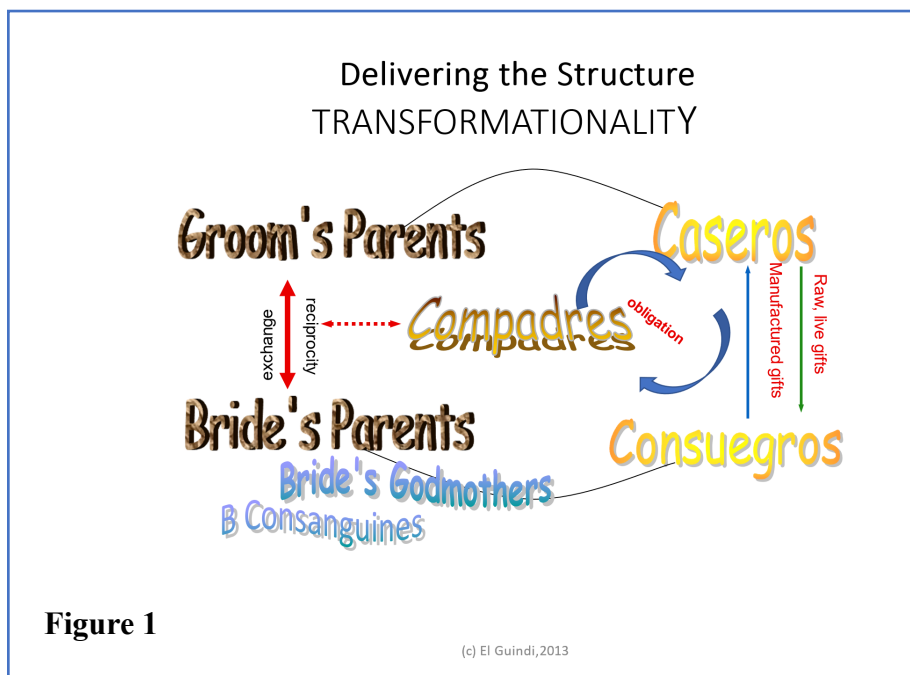
It is interesting that recently there is a rekindled interest among anthropologists in the subject matter of *compadrazgo*², which has been of longtime interest in anthropological ethnography. The question is how *compadrazgo* has been theorized (mostly focusing on its function in society) and how I disagree with the analytic approaches applied to the study of *compadrazgo* and were mostly descriptive of its function as a form of practice or as an institution. My own study among the Valley Zapotec focused on the inner structure of ritual, to which *compadrazgo* contributed centrally, rather than the function of *compadrazgo* in society. Its transformational mediatory quality was thereby established (El Guindi 1986, 2006).

I have a particular interest in this aspect of *compadrazgo* for two main reasons. The first is the extended period of data-gathering time that I spent in the field in Oaxaca, Mexico among the Valley Zapotec studying this phenomenon, among other aspects of their culture. During my long-term, approximately 32 months of field-immersive data-gathering in San Francisco, Lachigoló, Oaxaca, Mexico, funded by NIMH and Fulbright competitive grants, I focused much of my research work on ritual and ritual-related activities. My analysis of primary data gathered in the field throughout this period of study has appeared in numerous single-authored and co-authored publications (El Guindi 1973, 1977a, 1977b, 1982, 1983, 1986; El Guindi and Read 1979a, 1979b, 1980; El Guindi and Selby 1976).

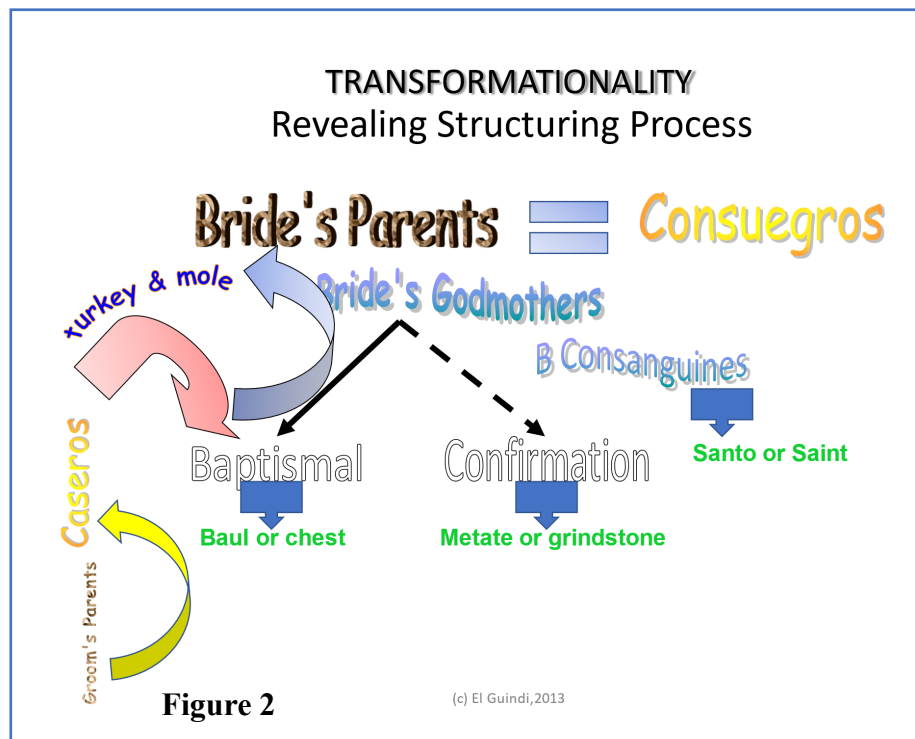
The second reason I am drawn to the topic of *compadrazgo* is my sustained research interest in institutionalized cultural forms of kinship diversely manifested cross-culturally through various cultural traditions that comprise forms of kinship relations in addition to the two most common forms referred to by anthropologists of procreative kinship: birth (traditionally referred to as consanguineal) and marriage (commonly referred to as affinal). Anthropologists consider relations by birth and marriage to be real kinship, whereas other forms recognized and described by anthropologists, such as adoption, blood brotherhood, naming and more have been given labels such as pseudo-kinship, fictive kinship, patronage, ritual kinship among other names. I mention here some of the early publications on *compadrazgo* by (Berruecos 1976; Davila 1971; Deshon 1963; Foster 1953; Gudeman 1972; Jussen 2000; Kemper 1979, 1982; Mintz 1950; Nutini and Bell 1980; Pitt-Rivers 1976; van den Berghe 1966). We see in these publications the various ways *compadrazgo* has been discussed. When these studies make claims that *compadrazgo* is kinship, none seem to contextualize the claim empirically through kinship research. And when they describe it as “spiritual” kinship, it seems to be a claim based on the experiential rather than the analytic realm. The recent article by Alum also puts *compadrazgo* in the spiritual realm, although he brings up other aspects throughout his article that would suggest a different classification if this were empirically pursued further.

² As co-founding co-senior editor of the journal *Kinship*, I announce that there will be one or more forthcoming special issues on *compadrazgo* that will be co-edited by Bojka Milicic <bojka.milicic@anthro.utah.edu> and Helena Schiel <helenaschiel@gmail.com>.

A number of publications by me have resulted from the field-based analysis of primary data gathered from intensive fieldwork among the Zapotec of Mexico³ (see, e.g., El Guindi 1986, 1983, 1982, 1981, 1977a, 1977b, 1973; El Guindi & Read 1979a, 1979b; El Guindi & Selby 1976). These publications suggest that implicit knowledge underlies culture and shapes structure. In other words, the importance of the phenomenon of *compadrazgo* is due in large part to its significance to ritual, which includes the transformational qualities of kinship, but the focus has not been on *compadrazgo* as kinship. Rather, this research has explored, for example, aspects of the Zapotec wedding ceremony in which live turkeys and raw food gifts are literally waltzed with in musical processions around the village for ceremonial delivery and reciprocal exchange of gifts to specific kin, thereby drawing the boundaries of social and cultural geography and of the kin universe. In my work I have demonstrated how kin categorizations are fluidly defined and redefined in dynamic transformations but within specific parameters. Embedded shared knowledge is revealed in imaginative cultural manifestations (El Guindi 2006). Figures 1 & 2 are copies of original slides (copyright El Guindi 2013) from my Invited Lecture called *Dancing & Suckling for Structure: Ritual and Kinship as Human Universals*, held at the Claude Lévi-Strauss Hall at the Collège de France, Paris, on December 17, 2013. The invitation was extended to me by Enric Porqueres i Gené and Françoise Héritier. They are graphic representations of the structural transformations of ritual, in this case the Zapotec wedding ritual. They represent the analysis of *compadrazgo* as ritual with embedded kinship transformations.



³ The Zapotec field research and data analysis is a project funded competitively by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), (1970-72); Fulbright Fellowship (1970-71); UCLA Academic Senate Faculty Research Grants (1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978); UCLA Regents' Summer Faculty Fellowship (1976) and Funding from UCLA Center for Latin American Studies.



In this article I situate the phenomenon of *compadrazgo* comparatively with another, apparently similar phenomenon manifested in a distant and different cultural tradition, namely the practice among Gulf Arabians of suckling infants by women other than their birth mothers. To examine this practice, competitively based funding was secured through two grants in the Qatar National Research Fund (QNRF) program called the Undergraduate Research Experience Program (UREP) that has the requirement of including undergraduate student training in field research. Student participation was invaluable⁴. Importantly, my research findings on the phenomenon of suckling derived from systematic field-gathered data supported by two competitively funded research projects from the Qatar National Research Fund (El Guindi 2009-2010, 2010, 2012b). The research project focused on the then widespread practice by women (despite denial by many modernists in Qatari society) of suckling infants not their own with the observable out-

⁴ The Undergraduate Research Fund (UREP) is an innovative funding category established by the Qatar National Research Fund (QNRF), a national project of research funding (equivalent to the NSF in the United States) which was set up to stimulate research in a university context, especially among undergraduates working with a professorial mentor. QNRF has other categories of funding. I was particularly attracted to UREP because of its required involvement of undergraduate students. I established a seminar and students were recruited for the seminar by my Qatari faculty colleague, Dr. Wesam al-Othman, on the basis of their academic record and their interest in the subject matter of the seminar, namely 'milk kinship'. The seminar and the research team were formed as follows: Fadwa El Guindi, Ph.D., conceptualization of research subject, methodology and research tools, Wesam al-Othman, Ph.D., selection of student researchers, co-mentoring, coordinating, Shaikha al-Kuwari, student researcher, Sara al-Mahmoud, student researcher, Alanoud al-Marri, student researcher, Raneen Najjar, student researcher, Dana al-Dossary, and Fatima Abed Bahumaid. It was in this context that I noticed Shaikha had promising research abilities and I encouraged her to continue her studies by seeking an anthropology doctorate from a university in the United States. I worked on getting approval from the President of the University as well as, against all odds, Shaikha's parents. As a result, she is now Dr. Shaikha al-Kuwari, Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Sciences at Qatar University, Doha, Qatar. She studied with Professor Russ Bernard at Arizona State University and obtained her doctorate in social science research methods with a focus on medical anthropology. She has just published a book through Springer Nature on her research conducted in Michigan.

come of this practice being the creation of kinship networks lineally and laterally (El Guindi 2012a, 2012c, 2013; 2018a, 2018c, 2020; El Guindi and al-Othman 2013), commonly referred to inappropriately, I might add, as ‘milk kinship’⁵. The implications of this practice seemed culturally meaningful and anthropologically of such significance that it merited a focused, systematic research project of its own.

This comparative base (Zapotec *compadrazgo* and Arabian suckling) problematizes kinship itself as a category and as a cultural practice. Toward this end I briefly discuss a dimension I consider to be central to anthropology and which I contend will shed light on the phenomenon of *compadrazgo* by leading to alternative conclusions regarding *compadrazgo*. At issue is what I refer to as ‘Analytic Authority’.

Analytic Authority

It is not uncommon for anthropology to be reduced to the topics of going to the field, ethnographic practices, the ethnographer’s experiences (facetiously referred to as ‘war stories’) and descriptive accounts of diverse cultural manifestations. Yet I consider as most significant the character of analytic parameters. Fundamental to the anthropological orientation is the analytic authority underlying one’s analysis. The data vary in character and could be embedded in any domain: social, cultural, religious, literary, historical, etc. What is significant is how such data are approached. For observations to be anthropological, the authority guiding the analysis must be anthropology, its theory, principles and approaches. According to Bourdieu, any anthropologist has a ‘native’ within him and any native can become an anthropologist. The key is the anthropological method of training and the ability to turn off, as it were, the native aspect, and to move to the analytic mode. It is a question of whether one’s relation to the subject of study is experiential or analytic. One cannot use, for example, Biblical or Islamic sources as the authority for anthropological observations. One cannot simply argue that such and such a particular practice is legitimized by the Qur’an or the Bible, but rather it must be shown that it was gathered according to the data-gathering canons of anthropology and analyzed according to the parameters of anthropological theory. That is how anthropology becomes different and significant. It is different from approaches used in Area Studies, Religious Studies, Gender Studies, etc. It is what makes anthropology unique and valuable. It becomes clear that those arguing for *compadrazgo* as a spiritual phenomenon are using religion as their authority rather than anthropological analysis, which must go beyond native interpretation and beyond the interpretive view of the anthropologist as native. While anthropological analysis relies heavily on data gathered using people’s interpretations, the anthropological relation to the subject matter, as Bourdieu (Bourdieu 2003) rightly argues, is analytic rather than experiential.

As I have consistently argued, the reason for this is structural not spiritual, and this article by Alum seems to be anchored in the experiential mode. To classify *compadrazgo* as spiritual does not lift it from the Christian realm to the anthropological realm. It raises, instead, a number of issues I consider to be significant for anthropology, some of which I have addressed in this article. I was able to reach this conclusion after doing my recent immersive field data-gathering project among Gulf Arabians and other Arabs living in Qatar (El Guindi 2011, 2012a, 2012c, 2013, 2016, 2018b, 2018c, 2019, 2020; El Guindi and al-Othman 2013; Фадва Эль Гинди [El

⁵ For a discussion of issues regarding the label ‘milk kinship’ as it is used in anthropology, see El Guindi (2020).

Guindi 2018]). The focus in these studies has been on kinship, and it demonstrates how suckling (a non-procreative mode of making relatives) is kinship by using kinship criteria and according to standards established throughout the history of anthropology regarding the field of kinship study.

I conclude on the basis of my field research in two culturally different and geographically distant traditions, the Valley Zapotec and the Gulf Arabians, that the two commonly considered pathways (birth and marital union) that incorporate individuals and turn them into relatives are among three pathways for so doing. I consider this empirically based conclusion to be a significant leap in understanding what kinship is about and why cultural traditions everywhere manifest a third pathway to establishing a kin relation in addition to the pathways provided by birth and marital unions. The insights from my field-based study conducted over a period of a decade in Qatar inform what I am contending here. We await a similar, systematic research project on *compadrazgo* that focuses on whether it qualifies to be considered kinship according to the properties of kinship⁶, as opposed to being just another form of social relations. These qualities must be empirically demonstrated rather than assumed. Such a study would put *compadrazgo* into the realm of the analytic subject of kinship rather than the experiential subject of religion as the quality ‘spiritual’, commonly attributed to *compadrazgo*, suggests.

To sum up. There are two kinds of kinship: procreative and non-procreative. The procreative necessarily consists in both birth and marital union and the non-procreative manifests itself cross-culturally in diverse culturally recognized ways. All three together serve as paths turning persons into relatives, and hence forming the kind of relations we call kinship. Suckling, as systematically studied among Gulf Arabians, has been empirically established to meet kinship criteria and *compadrazgo*, as systematically studied among the Valley Zapotec, has been theorized to meet structural criteria of ritual but is yet to be empirically established to meet kinship criteria. Procreative and non-procreative forms of practices must meet specified criteria to be considered kinship.

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⁶ The kinship properties are: (1) generational depth of kin recognition, (2) corporateness, which includes, in different combinations, the criteria of shared property, wealth, naming, honor, identity, etc., (3) necessarily and significantly culturally recognized incest regulations, and (4) kin recognition manifested through a formal kinship terminology. These are the criteria that distinguish kinship relations from other social relations, and have been the core subject of anthropology, theoretically and ethnographically, since the 14th century when Ibn Khaldun theorized societal development by centralizing kinship in his analytical framework.

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