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PALANTLA SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

William R. Merrifield

O. Introduction. Palantla Chinantec social organization may be described in terms of a small number of institutions which function in the life of the village. The village is itself a social institution, of course, which has a distribution within a greater social context, and a rôle to play in the life of the surrounding neighborhood. In addition, some of the institutions within the village such as the kindred, compadrazgo, and ~~competitive~~^{vocative} play groups function across the boundaries of village life. The scope of this paper is limited, however, to institutions as they function within the village of Palantla itself.

In folk cultures such as is found in Palantla, the kinship ~~system~~ is known to be of primary importance in the patterning of social behavior. Palantla is no exception. The Chinantec system of kinship terminology has been described elsewhere (Merrifield 1959). By way of summary, parents and offspring are distinguished from collateral relatives who are classified bilaterally into broad categories on the basis of sex and relative age, disregarding distinctions of generation and degrees of collaterality. The affinal system is extremely transparent in including only parent- and child-in-law terms, and the ~~vocative~~ system is virtually non-existent except for terms of endearment for parents and address forms used between compadres. With this in mind, it is possible to

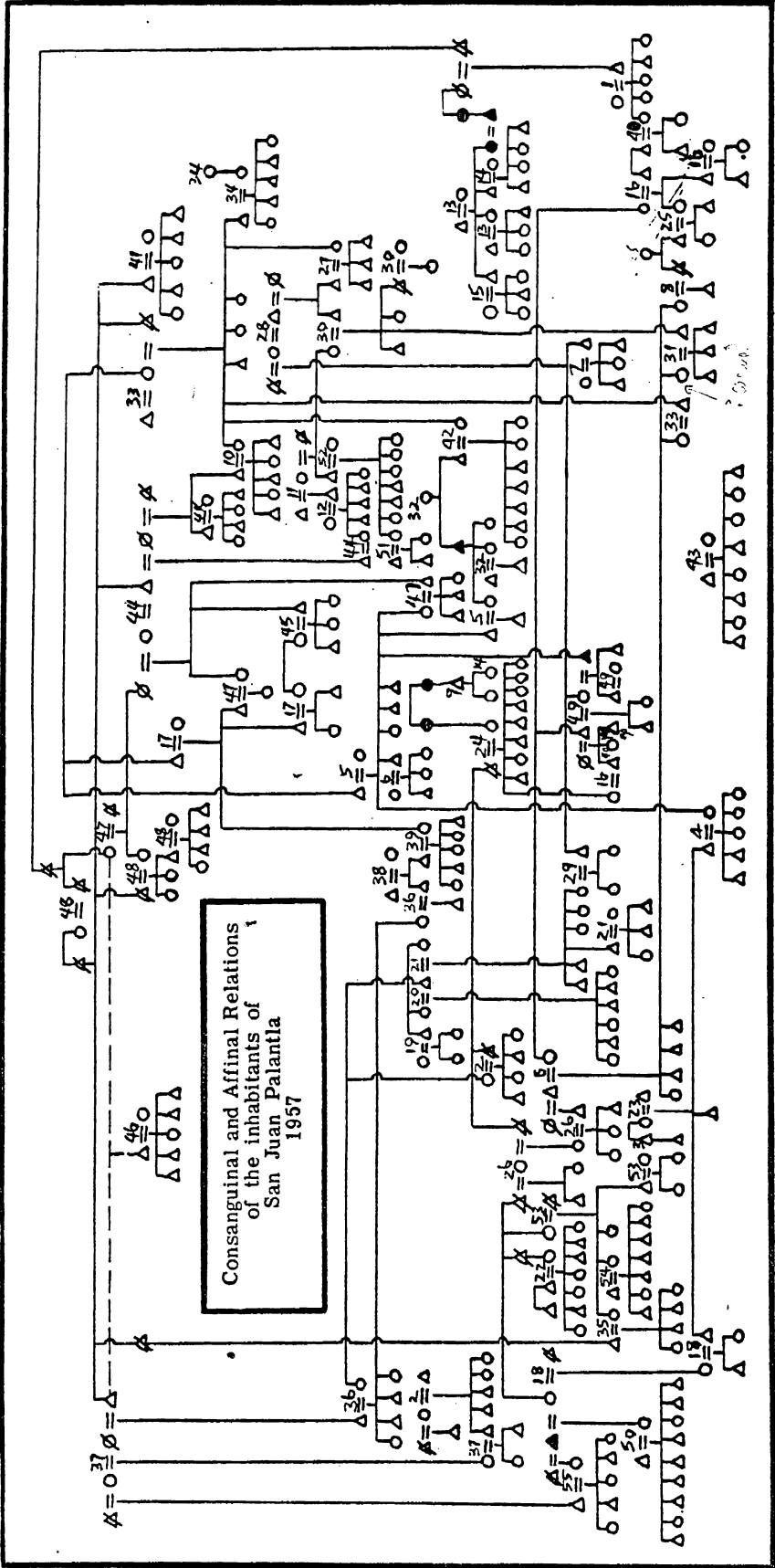


Diagram 1.

reduce the discussion of social institutions in Palantla, which are ultimately based on kinship, to a description of the family, marriage, the kindred, compadrazgo, and a few mutual cooperation groups without further reference to the kinship system as such.

1. The Family. At the time this study was made (1957), the town of Palantla consisted of 362 individuals who resided in 55 households. The distribution of these households, and the general layout of the village may be seen in Map 1. Each household is numbered and keyed to their occupants in Diagram 1 which includes in addition to the actual residents of Palantla in 1957, only deceased persons (indicated by /) or persons living in villages other than Palantla (indicated by shading) who provide affinal or consanguineal links between living inhabitants of the village. The ratio of males to females in residence was exactly 50/50: 181 males and 181 females.

The residential unit in Palantla is basically a stem family, notwithstanding that only 18 households (32.7 per cent) are of this type. Though 33 residential units (60 per cent) consist of the nuclear family, this seems to be largely by default. There are only three nuclear households which consist of a man and a woman of the grandparent generation without unmarried offspring, and these live immediately adjacent to one or more married children.

This is not to say that the stem family is thought to

by the Americans

be the ideal residential unit. The eldest child does not remain at home after marriage until forced out by the marriage of a younger sibling. He more often remains only as long as is necessary to establish himself in a separate household. This not only involves an investment of time and labor in building a house, but also in the development of personal lands and property necessary for independence from his family of orientation. One of the younger siblings does finally stay at home, however, and as has been mentioned, only in a few cases is a separate residence constructed for the aging grandparents.

There are three instances (5.4 per cent) of two married siblings or their equivalents (viz. half-siblings, orphaned cousins brought up in the home) sharing a household with each other and with members of the grandparent generation, and a single instance (1.9 per cent) of a household consisting of two unrelated nuclear families. These are transitional situations, and since 1957 all four of these complex households have dissolved.

Two households include adopted orphans (who are probably related to the families involved by baptismal parenthood ties ?), and one household includes a widowed and childless great-aunt.

The child/adult/household ratio averages out to three adults and four children per household, though this exact configuration does not happen to occur. A more detailed distribution of adults and children per household is given in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Children per household

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|---|---|----|----|---|----|---|---|---|---|----|
| No. of children | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| No. of households | 3 | 2 | 10 | 12 | 6 | 11 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 2 | |
| | 4 | 2 | 12 | 11 | 6 | 10 | 3 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 1 |

Table 2. Adults per household

| | | | | | | |
|-------------------|---|-----|----|-----|---|----|
| No. of adults | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| No. of households | 4 | 29 | 10 | 9 | 1 | 2 |
| | 1 | 34 | 7 | 8 | 3 | 2 |
| | | 61% | | 30% | | 9% |

The residential family, as a social institution, is the most important enculturating institution in the Chinantec community. Most of what a child learns of life in his early years, is learned from those who reside within the household. Lactation continues until about the second year, during which time he is carried on the hip of his mother or older sibling most of his waking hours. Until old enough to be cared for without the close supervision of an adult, he accompanies his mother wherever she goes. If a grandmother is unavailable, a ~~4-year-old~~ ^{new 4-year-old} sibling may be put in charge of a 2-year-old when his mother is busy in the near vicinity, ~~and~~ ^{or} a 7-year-old may care for a ~~2-year-old~~ ^{younger sibling} all day while ~~the~~ ^{their} mother is working in the field.

Child care is somewhat indulgent but not excessively so. A small child is not allowed to cry lest an evil spirit think he is not wanted and cause him to die. An older child may be beaten with a switch or denied entrance into the home if recalcitrant.

A young girl begins to learn household tasks such as kernelling corn and grinding at about age four. A boy also helps with the corn and sometimes accompanies his father to the field. He begins to plant his own field before age 10, putting to use the skills learned from the older males who reside with him.

2. Marriage. Monogamy is the rule in Palantla. There is a single case of sororal polygyny, however, The fact that it is sororal does not seem significant since the husband also has a sister in another town who is one of two wives of another man. Polygamy is said to be disapproved of but there is no stigma placed on this particular man who is esteemed equally with other elders of the village. There are no other plural marriages in Palantla.

The arrangements for a marriage are made in the following manner:

When a young man reaches his middle or late teens, his parents approach him and offer their services in arranging a marriage. He has the option of handling the affair himself, but usually has his parents attend to it. The choice of the girl may be left to the boy, but the parents often make a suggestion if the boy has no one in mind. The arrangements are made with the parents of the girl, and involve a number of weekly visits to her home at which compliments are exchanged. A highly stylized oratory is used which includes idiomatic phraseology ~~which is~~ no longer analyzable into constituent morphemes. Neither the boy nor the girl are present at these meetings.

If, after several weeks of visiting, an agreement is reached, the boy himself appears at the home of the girl to ask for her hand in person in order to show that he personally desires to marry the girl, and will not later leave her saying he had nothing to do with the arrangements in the first place. The final arrangements are made with the drinking of a quart ^{liter} of ^{rum} whiskey furnished by the parents of the boy, and with the setting of the time for the actual marriage. Depending on the ages of the boy and girl, the wedding may be scheduled almost immediately, or may be delayed as much as a year.

The boy's parents are required to give gifts to the relatives of the girl. These gifts usually take the form of cash at present. An average price ^{in 1960 was} ~~is~~ twenty pesos for each parent, ten pesos for other adult relatives, and five pesos for each younger relative. If the boy's family is unable to pay for his bride, he may be required to live in matrilocal residence. Or, in some instances, regardless of the boy's ability to pay, the parents of the girl may not agree to the marriage unless residence is to be matrilocal. In such a case there is some release from the financial obligation of the boy's family.

With the exception of clandestine meetings, courtship is not practiced. Young people of the opposite sex are not permitted to talk with one another in private. The phrase "to speak to a woman" ^{is a euphemism for} ~~is used in the sense of~~ extramarital sexual relations, and a boy seen talking with a girl on the trail may be taken to court by her parents or by the family

of her prospective husband (provided marriage arrangements have already been made).

Weddings include both civil and church ceremonies in compliance with both Mexican law and Roman Catholic ritual. These ceremonies take place in Valle Nacional or Tuxtepec, either before or after the actual commencement of cohabitation. Cohabitation is initiated with a celebration at the bride's home in typical festival fashion with music, if possible, a meal, and ^{rum} whiskey.

Avoidance, special salutations, or prescribed modes of behavior are not practiced between in-laws, except that the relationship between the parents of the bride and groom is equivalent to that between parents and baptismal sponsors (see compadrazgo below).

Second marriages after the decease or departure of a previous spouse, are contracted by the mutual consent of the parties involved and without legal or religious ceremonies.

Residence is bilocal with patrilocal residence being numerically prominent. Since 1928, 75 per cent of the marriages have resulted in patrilocal residence, and 25 per cent (14) in the groom either living in the same house with his in-laws or building his home adjacent to it.

56 per cent of known Palantla marriages in the last thirty years have involved a change of residence from another village to Palantla for one of the spouses. An additional unknown number have left the village upon marriage to live elsewhere. Of those who have moved to Palantla to marry,

75 per cent are women with the result that ⁱⁿone half of the patrilocality residence _^the bride has come from another village, and in one half of the matrilocality residences the groom has come from another village.

3. The Kindred. Every individual chinantec has a personal kindred known as his hu³ro²13. He refers to all other persons as za² sia²2 other people. The kindred is essentially an incest group within which marital relations are not permitted.

The range of the kindred is clear, but difficult to state concisely. Two individuals share kindred relationships (i.e., they are kinsmen) if they are both lineal descendants of a third individual who is not more than five generations removed from one, and not more than six generations removed from the other. This is best illustrated by means of Diagram 2. Alter is Ego's kinsman if the distance of his relationship to Ego may be expressed in terms of the distance of any

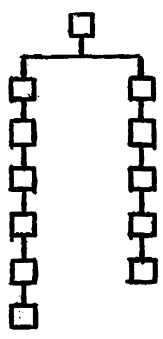


Diagram 2.

Handwritten note: This is the kindred of the ego. The ego is the first box in the diagram. The boxes are arranged to represent the kindred of the ego.

box in the diagram to any other. In determining whether or not two young people who are distantly related are eligible for marriage, kernels of corn are arranged to represent

the intermediate relatives of the two in the form of such a diagram.

The number of kinsmen in a single kindred may be very large, and usually includes individuals in several villages. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to collect complete information on kindred membership outside Palantla, but figures may be extracted from Diagram 1 for those who reside within the village. The average Palantleño had 44.4 kinsmen living in Palantla in 1957. The distribution of kindreds by size is given in Table 3. Notice that though the average is only 44.4, 50 individuals have 100 or more local kinsmen.

Table 3. Size of Kindreds¹

| No. in kindred | 0-9 | 10-19 | 20-29 | 30-39 | 40-49 | 50-59 |
|-----------------|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| No. of kindreds | 60 | 52 | 54 | 19 | 56 | 19 |

(Table 3 con't.)

| 60-69 | 70-79 | 82 | 90-99 | 100-109 | 110-119 | 120-124 | 151 | 166 |
|-------|-------|----|-------|---------|---------|---------|-----|-----|
| 18 | 20 | 1 | 13 | 14 | 17 | 15 | 1 | 3 |

¹only includes residents of Palantla and excludes Ego.

Broken down into age and sex groups, the average adult male had 32.4 kinsmen in Palantla, the average adult female had 26.5, and the average child (i.e. not yet married) had 54.6. The figure is largest for children since they share the kindreds of both their parents. This, of course, was also true for the present adult when they were children, but many members of their kindreds have left the village since marriage

for one reason or another, and many have died. The fact that men average more locally-resident kinsmen than women is a function of the trend towards patrilocal residence (p. 7).

Though all families except one are related by kindred ties into a single inter-related group, incest taboos seem to be strictly honored. To avoid this in a small village like Palantla, one of two things is done. Either a spouse is sought from another town, or more than one marriage tie is made between two families.

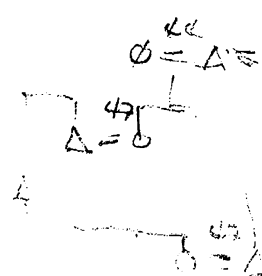
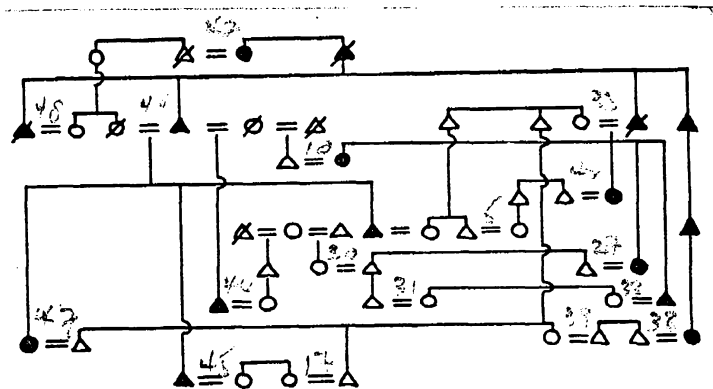


Diagram 3.

Multiple marriages between families may be illustrated courtesy of the Martínez family. Members of this family are indicated in Diagram 3 by shaded triangles and circles (deceased individuals are marked by /). By virtue of eight marriage contracts to four Martínez brothers and their direct lineal relatives, two families have become related to the Martínez family in three instances, and one family has become related to them in two instances. Further, by virtue of

eleven additional marriages, six other families have become related to both the Martínez family and to another family also related to the Martínez family by marriage. Notable among these is one which has become related by marriage to the Martínez family in three instances, and also has become related to three other families related by marriage to the Martínez family. In all, ten families have become exceedingly well inter-related by virtue of nineteen marriage contracts. Of the nineteen nuclear families formed by these marriages, the offspring of only five have no consanguineal relationship with the Martínez family and therefore would be permitted to marry a Martínez.

The function of the kindred in social organization, other than as an incest group, has not been analyzed systematically. It is certainly an institution requiring mutual obligations and allegiance between members, but no institutionalized norms have been discovered. Child play groups and subsequent adult work groups probably tend to revolve around kindred membership, but at least ideally there is said to be no such limitation. By the nature of the kindred, as an Ego-oriented institution, it might prove possible to link all members of such groups to one another in chain-like fashion. Whereas all members of a group might not be kinsmen of all others, kindred ties might nevertheless hold the group together. This is actually the case even at the village level. Though all Palantleños do not make up a single kindred, it is seen in Diagram 1 that almost everyone in the village is

bound together in a complex network of kindred bonds. Only one family (no. 43) stands alone without bonds to others.

4. Compadrazgo. Compadrazgo ties in Palantla have not been investigated in detail. It is known that they are established by sponsorship for infant baptism and by presenting a child with a rosary. There are very likely marriage sponsors as well. The responsibilities and privileges involved in compadrazgo are not known. Most adults have co-parents in other villages where they can expect lodging when passing through. The general situation seems compatible with Foster's description of New World compadrazgo (1953), but further study is in order.

5. Mutual Cooperation Groups. Several types of small cooperation groups function in Palantla society. These are of a more temporary nature than those mentioned above, and more flexible in their structure. They are probably based on marriage, kindred, and compadrazgo ties primarily, but not exclusively so. Since most members of the village can relate themselves to most everyone else by one kind of tie or another, it is difficult to extract clear conclusions as to whether these ties are of basic importance in the formation of such groups or not.

There are at least three kinds of activities in which males function together in groups. Two of these are not merely social institutions, and should probably be handled under economic institutions. The first of these types, assemblies each season when it is time to clear maize fields, small

groups of from 2 to 8 individuals working together, helping each other cut down their fields in preparation for planting. All members of such groups mutually agree to work several days clearing the field of one member of the group, and then an equal number of days in each of the other members' fields. If someone outside the group owes one member of the group a day's work, he may join the group for one day while it works in that member's field. He is not a functioning member of the group, however, since he has only a private agreement with one member of the group.

The second type of male work group, is not as integrated as the first. It may not even prove to be valid to speak of it in terms of a functioning group. The purpose of this group is to assist an individual in replacing the posts of his house. These must be replaced about every two or three years. The membership of this group is based on individual agreements between one individual and each of the others. He promises to help each of the others when the posts of their houses need to be replaced, if they will help him with his. Thus, unless all the individuals make an agreement with exactly the same persons, the composition of the group changes at each house repaired. Such groups may contain 10 to 15 individuals. The same kind of group also functions when the entire house has to be replaced, about every 10 to 15 years.

The third male cooperation group is a play group. There are two such adult groups in Palantla at the present time. They cooperate in buying athletic equipment (basketballs,

baskets, volleyballs, nets, etc.), and play together on Sundays or holidays. Those who have not participated in equipment costs are not included in the play except occasionally when another player is needed. The two factions generate some low-level dissension within the village.

The only groups in which adult men and women function together are for maize planting and coffee harvest. On these occasions, entire families and larger groups work together. Even these, however, cannot be considered functional interacting groups involving both sexes, since inter-action between the sexes is limited fairly closely to family members.

The adult groups very likely develop from early childhood. The small children of a household accompany the adults to other households where they play with the children while the adults visit or conduct business. When the adults of more than one household go together to the fields, the children may be cared for together at one of the homes by an older child or a grandmother. As the children get older, they go back and forth between the houses by themselves in search of their companions. By the time they reach the age of eight or nine they have separated into sex groups. The boys go together to the river to swim, or they fashion themselves slingshots with which to shoot small birds.

The girls play closer to home, not wandering the village as much as the boys. As soon as they are old enough they are required to care for the younger siblings. Two or three girls at the most, who are kinsmen, or later on who

are married to kinsmen, may wash clothes, gather firewood, or take flowers to the church together on Sunday. But the women in general do not form into larger groups like the men.

Very good!
A.