

God-parenthood and sacrifice in Northeast Brasil¹

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For Bernard Cohn, in memory
of a teacher and a friend

Remembering the University of Chicago: how the research began

From September of 1983 through August of 1991 I was a Ph.D. student of the Department of Anthropology of the University of Chicago. I already was a graduate student, since March working towards a Master's Degree at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas. The University of Chicago offered me the opportunity of working with students and professors with research in all other parts of the world, which was unusual by the standards of Brazilian anthropology of the time. This was exciting for me, since I had immersed myself in Marcel Mauss's program of a comparative sociology and was somewhat disappointed with the dominant perspective of Brazilian anthropology, which, with the exception of some Amerindian studies, studied mostly Brazil. I considered that our anthropology deliberately refused any type of Lévi-Straussian "view from afar". Later at the "U. of C." I realized this view was rejected for other reasons but there I had the chance to compare all the time, in every conversation I had with my fellow students. At the same time, by 1983 there were very few foreign students in Anthropology there; we were less than ten in a universe of more than two hundred.

I have had several great professors both in Brazil and in the U.S, but worked more closely with T. Turner, M. Sahlins, V. Valeri and B. Cohn. Of all the teachers at Chicago at the time, the latter was the one closer to so called

1 This paper has benefited from commentaries and encouragement generously made by Patrice Maniglier (ENS, Paris & University of Essex, England), who obviously is not responsible for any of its faults.

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“post modernism”, which by 1983 could already be considered a fashionable trend in American anthropology, but one most of the people at the U. of C. then tried to resist. Cohn was a historian as well as an anthropologist and a wonderful teacher, very skeptic about theory but at the same time very open to good theory. He always had many research ideas for his students as well as for the several people he came to influence. He was puzzled by the fact that, after one year in the field, living in the small town of São Bento do Norte, in Rio Grande do Norte, I could still show some interest on “god-parenthood”, which he considered a theme typical of the early fifties, totally *dejá vu* and *passé*. He asked me more than once if that was really important for the people “down there”. I always answered it was, although not in the same vein as in places like Mexico, where it is more evident to the observer, a frequent topic of everyday life. The difference, I would argue, is that similar institutional arrangements may be more or less conscious in different regions (in the case of Brazil and Mexico, Catholic Latin America). *Compadrio* is closer to Mexican than it is to Brazilian conscience, but that does not necessarily mean it is not important for the latter.

I also had another type of answer to Cohn’s questioning as to why bother with *compadrio*, an answer with a more theoretical orientation: by criticizing some theories of the 50’s or even some important contributions to the symbolic analysis of *compadrio* made in the early 70’s by people like Julian Pitt-Rivers and Antonio Augusto Arantes, I aimed to criticize a type “functionalism” that was – and I believe still is- very present in symbolic anthropology. At the same time, I was searching for some type of political “structures” in the lévi-straussian sense of the word. As it is well known, Lévi-Strauss chose not develop studies of politics (cf. Lanna 2005) - exceptions being his early work on Nambikwara chiefs as well as his later work on house societies. I believe a structural understanding of the political would free ourselves of a functionalism that I will describe below as still found – to a greater or lesser degree – in many contemporary analysis of political life, even in that of great authors such as Michel Foucault. This ambition to search for “elementary structures of political life” (Sahlins 2006) was one of the main reasons for me to go to Chicago in the first place, where Marshall Sahlins was developing this type of research. To advance my conclusion in this paper, *compadrio* is somehow present in the Brazilian *longue durée* but at the same time as definitely more than a Braudelian structure: it points us to the formation of

deep bonds of inequality. I attempt to demonstrate here, based on analysis of specific *compadrio* and patronage relations in Northeast Brazil, that there are imbrications between reciprocity (as defined by Claude Lévi-Strauss) and hierarchy (as defined by Louis Dumont). Not only hierarchy is a form of reciprocity but the latter is hierarchical at its core.

Lévi-Strauss's idea of reciprocity has often been incorrectly understood not as a theoretical principle but as directly related to institutional forms (cf., for instance, Viveiros de Castro 1998). It is important to note that it is a principle behind basically all institutional forms. War, for instance, has not been understood as a form of exchange in one of the most important anthropological reflections it received, that of Pierre Clastres (cf. Lanna 2005). When Clastres criticizes Lévi-Strauss and explains alliance by the intention to make war towards a party where women are captured from, he does not answer Lévi-Strauss' fundamental problem: why is it that there is this relation with the "outside" through women³? Worse than that, Clastres' theory here is typical of what Sahlins (1976) named "practical reason": it is not that war could hierarchically encompass marriage (and vice-versa, depending on the context) as it is for Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1993, among others) but Clastres explains both war and marriage by the desire to war. Lévi-Strauss' theory is substituted then for a functional psychology grounded in the search for final causes (cf. Lanna 2005).

Clastres is named here not only for the importance of his contribution to political anthropology but also because the procedure of I criticized in the former paragraph also appears, usually in more vulgar forms, in other authors, most often in the Anglophone world, as it will be seen below. It will become clear that my idea here is not only to offer a theory of *compadrio* but also to make a contribution for a symbolic anthropology of the political which incorporates an analysis of violence.

Compadrio

Descriptions of political and hierarchical relations in Latin America and in the Mediterranean world have frequently been made from an operational and instrumental perspective, without an attempt to understand their constitu-

3 I thank again P. Maniglier's remarks on this point.

tion. I will attempt here to overcome this, describing reciprocal and asymmetrical exchanges that constitute *compadrio* and patronage in São Bento, a municipality in the state of Rio Grande do Norte in Northeast Brazil. I will analyze *compadrio* as a religious and kinship relationship that relates to political and economic spheres. The argument is based on Marcel Mauss's classic *Essai sur le don*.

In a classic article relating god-parenthood to patronage, Mintz & Wolf (1950) put forward a functionalist understanding of patronage systems as "held together" by exchanges relations. It will become clear in what manner this understanding of exchanges differs from that of Mauss. Another classic analysis of god-parenthood are Pitt-Rivers's, for whom the patron has in Andalusia "an ability to operate a system of tacit reciprocities", a system which would be "reinforced through the institution of ritual kinship and expressed in its idiom" (Pitt-Rivers 1977: 34). For this approach, which is also clearly functionalist, spiritual kinship is "exploited for the sake of political ends" and "adapted to uses that have nothing to do with either kinship or religion" (Pitt-Rivers 1977: 68).

In order to achieve a more holistic understanding, I will follow the Maussian concept of total social facts, avoiding the common procedure of segregating, at the outset, political, religious or kinship structures, only to suggest a functional re-integration afterwards. It is not, then, that religious beliefs or institutions are "exploited" or "adapted" or can be reduced to a means for utilitarian ends. *Compadrio* should be understood as a series of exchanges in itself, contributing to the constitution of a broader structure. Kinship and religion are fundamental aspects of this structure, but it is striking that both can both be hierarchically encompassed by political and economical spheres. A paradox, then, surrounds *compadrio*: it is a founding relation, but one that, at the same time, can be encompassed by patronage. We will see how the constitution of *compadrio* imply a series of encompassments. Is hierarchy, defined by Dumont (1980) as "the encompassment of contraries", necessarily and exclusively a religious relationship, as it appears, for some, to be in India ?

Mauss's definition of the gift as a "total prestation" goes beyond the more restricted sense the term "gift" in usual language, that of a present. According to Mauss, a gift is everything that is given and received and creates an obligation of reciprocation. It can be a material or immaterial pres-

tation, including visits, hospitality, invitations, parties and even tributes. It can be agonistic, in the sense that it can embody and convey more or less rivalry or even violence in different contexts.

In the early 1990's 10,000 people were living in São Bento. Patron and godfather are not often the same person, but some landlords, merchants and politicians had hundreds of godchildren among their employees or clients. If in Andalusia the word "*padriño*" is "used to refer to anyone who acts as a patron" (Pitt-Rivers 1977: 52), in Northeast Brazil it is the expression "*meu patrão*" that is frequently used in different everyday situations, as a reference among friends or even in more impersonal contexts. In both places the meaning of the words *padriño* (or *padrinho*) and *patrão* converge, and sometimes overlap each other. Consequently the relation between *padrinho* and *patrão* will be taken here not as that between words but as categories, which do not necessarily inform personal relations. Even though my *padrinho* may live thousands of miles away from me, there is a shade of his presence, but not of him as a person or necessarily a shade of his person, in each one of the several *patrões* I will have in my life.

I do not have the space here to describe political and economic aspects of São Bento social life (which can be found in Lanna 2005). Suffice it to say that the main economic activities were cattle, cashew nuts and fishing. The most profitable in absolute and relative terms were *voador* and lobster fishing, but the amount of money made with all fishing was approximately half of what was received by the local mayor from the Federal government as a monthly stipend, the *Fundo de Participação Municipal*, based on the number of inhabitants.

I will now turn to a symbolic analysis of *compadrio*, attempting to demonstrate that it is not a "mechanism" or a "tool to extend or intensify social relations" (Mintz & Wolf 1950: 348), but rather one of the very foundations of community life. When a new community is founded in Northeast Brazil, people immediately begin to establish *compadrio* ties. It was so in the Baixa da Quixaba, where 63 families received a plot of land from the *Reforma Agrária* program of the Federal Government a few months after I arrived in the field, in 1989. A soccer field was laid out, and prayers (*novenas*) began to take place in the house of the school teacher, Maria. Maria and her husband, Zequinha, were often requested as baptismal godparents. They were also often requested as *padrinhos de fogueira* ("bonfire godparents") at the time of harvest festivals (*festas juninas*). After the second harvest, this couple had become *com-*

padre and *comadre* of more than half of that small community's people. For a similar case of community-building through the construction of a church, a soccer field and the establishment of *compadrio* ties in Northeast Brazil, cf. Gross (1973).

I consider it one of the major relevancies of ethnographic research that of being able to watch and describe community foundations, as I did in the Baixa da Quixaba. This framework shows us the typical sophism by petition of principles of functionalism and all final reasoning: it is not then, that *compadrio* as a "spiritual" relation joins or inserts itself amid social relations already given, which would then conform it; it is not either that *compadrio* as a spiritual or superstructural relation doubles metaphorically a social field already constituted, but rather that that spiritual relations such as these can be at the core of human relations. It is not as if there would be society beforehand and then religious or spiritual institutions which would contribute to social life; what we have is the constitution of an enlarged social field which includes not only the individuals directly engaged through *compadrio* but all those who share *compadrio* as a language, as it will be shown below.

We cannot know before hand what is a society or a social relation, therefore we need ethnography. My interest in describing the *compadrio* relation is that of showing it is a structure in the sense of its being a socializing operator. But we still do not know either how it relates to other such operators. What I do not want to do before hand also it to have a theory which distinguishes before hand the "real", infra-structural social relations and the spiritual, super-structural ones. One of the lessons of linguistics for our understanding of social relations is that we cannot treat facts or relations as terms, as if we could later qualify them, attribute predicates to them. The qualification of a social relation is immediately imbricated in its constitution. The sociologist cannot distinguish the making and the qualification of a relation. Not only that, but as we will see, any relation is immediately qualified by reference and difference with any other relation. In other words: mutual obligations among ritual kin are constitutive not only of the institution of god-parenthood itself but of community life in general.

In Northeast Brazil, as many parts of the Old and New Latin world, it is only with baptism that a child gains "jural" membership in his or her moral community: only "as a godchild one is incorporated into community social life" (Kottak 1967: 433). Natural parents "dedicate" their child to a saint,

having godparents as intermediaries. The term “dedication” appears both in Canonic Law (cf. Gudeman 1972) as well as in everyday talk. In this we have the first gift, that of the child. Pitt-Rivers (1977: 62) emphasized the connection of this “dedication” with name-giving in Andalusia, where, as in some parts of Northeast Brazil (cf. Woortmann 1985), the godparents give the Christian name, a «link» between the saint and the godchild. In some regions there are prescribed or preferred names as well as preferred godparents. For instance, the name of the first male child may be the name of the paternal grandfather, who is the godfather, and so on. There are different combinations in different regions. In other places, godparents may simply choose any name (of their godchild) for the “natural” parents. Names, therefore, can circulate through the institution of godparenthood, and in this we have the presence of a second and very important gift.

All over Brazil, as in Andalusia, the formal way of asking somebody’s name is “What is your grace?” (“*Qual é a sua graça?*”). This suggests an assimilation of the gift of the name with that of grace. The godparents give something blessed, since “grace is a supernatural gift by means of which eternal life is conferred” (Hocart 1973: 161). It is a fundamental gift in that it defines the *compadrio* relation as a sacred relationship. For Pitt-Rivers, grace is a “free-gift ... something that is not to be reciprocated” (Pitt-Rivers 1977: 61), but my interpretation is that grace is the exact opposite of a “free-gift”. Since it can never be fully reciprocated, it places the recipient, the godchild and his or her family, in **permanent indebtedness**. The political dimension of exchange relationships is a topic not fully studied in anthropology. For Mauss, a person who receives something she cannot fully repay is put in a position of moral and juridical inferiority. Permanent indebtedness implies unbalanced exchange relations, but not lack of reciprocity. It is not, then, that the godparent’s gifts do not require reciprocity, but, quite the opposite: a relationship with any godparent implies a constant attempt to reciprocate something that can never be fully reciprocated: grace. The gift of grace shows us how gift exchange is always inherently unbalanced: retribution can never be something identical, at the same time, by someone of identical social standing (cf. Lanna 1996, Bourdieu 1996). I conclude from this that exchange can only remain a universal category if it is conceived as a way to merge and qualify two opposed movements, each creating its own debt. Exchange circuits can or therefore should be thought of as debt circuits. At this point one could

describe *compadrio* as the exchange of the godchild for grace, given that those are the two gifts invariably present (name-giving not being necessarily present everywhere).

The political aspect of exchange relations is made evident with the analysis of Portuguese expressions “*de nada*”, “*de graça*” and “*obrigado*”. There is a sacrificial aspect in the latter that explains why it could be thought of as a form of enslavement. Being thankful by saying “*obrigado*” means that I am formally giving myself in return for a favor: I am “obliged”. The person who did the favor therefore assumed a position of superiority; when she answers “*de nada*” she is liberating me from my “obligation”. Exchanges “for grace” therefore have a reciprocal and asymmetrical character. When one says “*de graça*” when does not mean something has been received “for nothing” but rather that something has been received in return of a greater initial gift “of grace” (the latter being supposed to have been virtually made). “*De nada*”, on its turn is a rhetoric formula conveying the idea **as if** no initial prestation had been made.

But what are the counter-gifts to the godparents’ gift of grace, given that such gift is so formidably valuable? Further ethnographic research on this topic is necessary. Descriptions of prestations from the grandchildren to the grandparents are rarely found in the anthropological literature. A possible explanation for this lacuna in the ethnography of the whole Latin and Mediterranean world is that these counter-gifts are seldom ritualized, or that they are not clearly defined as prestations. Another explanation is that these counter-gifts can assume the form of labor prestations. There is ethnographic evidence that, especially in the past, godchildren can work for godparents and that labor can be conceived as the most valued prestation that a godchild can offer in return for grace, even if without ever matching it. It is only in this approximate sense, then, that it could match - even if not with exact equivalence - the sacredness of godparental gifts⁴. One could describe this structure of power as of a ritualized gift on the one side (grace) and a profane counter-gift, on the other, almost invisible (even when it is very concrete labor), or with a tendency for being invisible. Besides giving grace, the god-

4 Evidently, these prestations may be more or less crystallized or formalized, according to different times and places, are different if the godchild is a man or a woman, the position of the godparents, and so on. One should hint that even the clientelistic habit of finding a job to one’s “godchild” (actual or not) has resonances on the fact the godchild:offers labor::godparent:offers jobs.

parents also give the name. In both cases we have things pre-lévistraussian sociologist would call symbolic (some would even say useless) whereas the godchild gives something “real”, his work or, even more important, himself, his life, his body. We have here a supposed exchange of the sacred for the profane, name for life, symbol. The godchild is at the same time a subject that gives and an object which circulates, in many important ways similar to the women in Lévi-Strauss’ elementary structures of kinship, a symbolic value and a carrier of value.

Another possible explanation for the lack of ritual around the godchild’s gifts would be that godchild and natural parents do not distinguish labor from other “ritual or social practices”. In other words, represent labor as not constituting a valued prestation in and on itself, do not see it as autonomous but rather as embedded in the social, using K. Polanyi’s famous expression. The godchild and natural parents, as hierarchically inferiors, assume they can only offer counter-gifts to the more valued gift of grace, which is integral both to personhood as to communal participation. This type of representation of labor is frequently found (for a few examples and a comparison with the political economists’ conception of labor, cf. Cartier 1984). One could show in the future that such a representation of labor is integral to *compadrio*.

But if the most valued prestation that **a godchild** can offer is labour, the most valuable prestation that **the natural parents** can make, is, as I have said, the gift of their own child, or of certain jural rights over that child. This suggests the importance of research on the sacrificial aspect of *compadrio* and of representations of labor. All counter-gifts directed to the godparents, including labor, represent, then, a fourth type of gift, also constitutive of the *compadrio* relationship. In parts of Northeast Brazil labor prestations to the godparents are prescribed (cf. Arantes 1970 for Bahia, or Woortmann 1985 for Sergipe). This is important as a logical possibility, since this prescription is in fact not frequently found in Brazil. The preference, on the part of the godchild, to work for the godparent also does not occur in practice.

According to Canon Law, it is only after “the godparents receive in baptism the individual they baptize” that the latter receives “the gift of the Holy Spirit ... the gift of faith” (Gudeman 1972: 49-50). Natural parents are then giving to godparents the control of the rights over their children and the latter are giving grace (or faith) and community membership in return. This “community membership” is obviously not that we associate with citizen-

ship, following the individualistic Illuminist tradition. The relation of biological parents to godparents is conceived as a relation of the natural to the spiritual, the latter being hierarchically superior to the former, who are “identified through the sinful process of copulation and parturition” (Bloch & Guggenheim 1987: 379). “As the birth of Christ stands to the birth of a man, so baptism stands to natural birth” (ib.). In this sense, “baptism imparts life” (Hocart 1973: 156). This explains why in Northeast Brazil “the godchild is seen as indebted towards his godparents: `they made us Christians, therefore we owe them a lot” (Arantes 1971: 24).

I was saying ethnographers of Latin and Mediterranean worlds have not reported on the retribution to these gifts from the godparents. The case of São Bento offers an interesting exception, because godchildren make a formal Easter visit to godparents. It is evident this visit is another gift: one gives his or her presence or, as it is said in French “*on paye de sa personne*”, which includes visits made among friends and also other relatives. I found some ritualization in this visit, although the habit was not as strong as it had been in the past. The godchild asks for small gifts, usually food, referred to as “alms” (“*esmolas*”). If the godfather is a fisherman, he would give fish to his godchild, storekeepers would give cookies, agriculturalists coconuts, and so on. We therefore have in São Bento additional gifts constituting *compadrio*: the visit, reciprocated with the *esmolas*. This visit occurs on Good Friday, reinforcing the sacrificial aspect of the relationship. According to the point I have made of god parental gifts being more ritually given, the retribution from the godparents, the *esmola*, is more formalized and encompasses the relationship. The exchange of the visit for the *esmola* reproduces the whole *compadrio* structure: the hierarchically inferiors make the initial, sacrificial gift, which is quickly reciprocated for something more valuable. *Compadrio* is therefore a paradoxical relation in the sense that its founding gift is made by the hierarchically inferiors and later encompassed by the retribution from the godparents⁵.

5 Many other instances of *compadrio* are found in São Bento. I am focusing on the most important, “baptismal *compadrio*”. All forms of *compadrio* are defined by gift exchanges. For instance, high-school graduates have their godparents. A girl chooses her godmother, a boy his godfather, whom, in the graduation ceremony will give the high-school diploma. The development of this form of *compadrio* is obviously related with the conception of the diploma as a gift. Another important example of godparental gifts is offered by Woortmann’s (1985) description of a complex land inheritance system through the godfather. The latter is defined as the land giver par excellence by the agriculturalist people Woortmann visited, in the state of

I argue elsewhere (Lanna 1995) that the permanent indebtedness incurred by the godchild and his parents allows for practices of separation on the part of godparents. I also argue that this permanent indebtedness explains the lack of redistributive acts on the part of São Bento's patrons. This reasoning presupposes the possibility of a **logical transformation of the figure of the godfather into that of the patron**. This type of transformation only makes sense on the perspective of an symbolic anthropology of power which, as I have argued above, is still being built. Political relations, just as mythical-logical relations considered by Lévi-Strauss in his *Mythologiques*, are to be explained by symbolic constraints. **Given its importance for the establishment of communal bonds, compadrio is one of the exchanges that constitute patronage**. Patrons frequently conceive their employees as being in continuous debt towards them. One could argue, again in a lévi-straussian fashion, that this disequilibrium in the exchange relations make the political dimension: there is power and hierarchy (I have not much space to elaborate in detail the relation between these two concepts) when the exchanges present debts, that means, gaps and even some type of unilateralism. There is more: this infinite debt is before everything a debt of being: one owns to the other his or her being⁶, his or her existence (which evidently is simultaneously real and symbolic, or as Sahlins likes to remark, its only real because symbolically constructed). Not only debts make power as power makes debts: like the godfather or the patron, the State also acts as if our political existence is his. In other words, as it also happens in *compadrio*, the exchanges that constitute patronage can also acquire minimal material content. But this should not be equated with a total absence of reciprocal relations, for without reciprocity we would simply not have community relations. My interpretation of the gift of grace made this clear for *compadrio*, and I tried to show elsewhere (Lanna 1995) how it also occurs in patronage and State formation. We have then a structural context which allows for ample manipulation of exchanges on the part of patrons and godparents. Both are in a position to minimize the material contents of their own gifts. Patrons are also in a position to maximize the material content of the prestations they receive. Excessive manipulation of this structure can develop into situations of deep crisis (institution-

Sergipe, Northeast Brazil. I make short comments below on bonfire godparenthood ("*compadrio de fogueira*").

6 I owe this important point again to P. Maniglier (personal communication).

alized in the figure of the “bad patron” / “*mau patrão*”), which in turn can lead to all sorts of rebellions and even the transformation of minimal reciprocity into absence of reciprocity.

Just as we should not equate minimum material content of exchanges with absence of reciprocity, we should not equate symmetric aspects of *compadrio* -, whenever they exist and are institutionally emphasized in particular ethnographic and historical contexts - with inexistence of hierarchy. There is symmetry, for instance, in the fact that spiritual and natural parents refer to each other as *compadres*. In São Bento, as elsewhere, one “cannot refuse his *compadre* anything that he asks” (Pitt-Rivers 1977: 58), since “a man is bound in sacred duty to his *compadre*” (Pitt-Rivers 1977: 69). As it is also commonly acknowledged for other regions, *compadres* must be respectful towards each another. But, contrary to what happens in the community in Panamá visited by Gudeman (1969), in São Bento respect among *compadres* does not imply that it is not good to owe money to a *compadre*. The exact opposite occurs. In São Bento, it is said that “*compadres* are those who help each other”. The *compadrio* model is therefore reproduced in everyday practice, not only ritually, and not only by those actually related as *compadres*. Other types of relationships, such as friendship, can model themselves on *compadrio*. The transformation therefore is not only between the figures of godfather and patron but includes other categories, such as friends, namesakes (“*xarás*”). Another São Bento ritual which was going into disuse by 1990 was the mutual help in death, for the *compadre* usually helps to pay or organize funerals; in the past, a *compadre* would also make a speech at the burial, the “*discurso de cova*”.

Arantes argued, against Gudeman, that “the sacredness of *compadrio* does not inhibit economic cooperation among ritual kin” (Arantes 1971: 39). This difference between Arantes and Gudeman may be due to local specificities in the cases of the different communities each visited. Furthermore, I see no reason for Arantes’ radical differentiation between “economic transactions and interests”, on the one hand, and “other levels of exchange, as for example, the moral one” (Arantes 1971: 36), on the other. For Arantes, moral, reciprocal exchanges implied in *compadrio* would be devoid of economic sense, being merely an “incentive to work,” in a similar fashion as Trobriand ceremonial exchanges were for Malinowski (for a criticism of this procedure and how it is reproduced by Sahlins 1972, cf. Lanna 1996). I return to this relationship between moral exchanges and economic interests in my conclusion below.

We saw how symbolic analysis of *compadrio* refers it to the foundation of the community as such and unveiled its character as simultaneously reciprocal and asymmetrical. We saw that power cannot be thought of in a maussian fashion if not we do not think of every reciprocal relation as asymmetrical, but one that should not be related to exchange so much but rather to debts and compensations. In the case of *compadrio*, the asymmetry necessarily relates then to a specific type of political-economic exploitation, patronage, one which presupposes class domination but differs radically from the capitalist type of political-economic exploitation. There is, then, an overlapping of different types of asymmetrical relations implied in different modes of social production. This point should be associated to that, often made, according to which a “community may be involved in commodity production - based on exchange value - but this need not be its total culture” (Gregory 1986: 64). For us to understand patronage, we do not have, then, to postulate a “radical transformation of god-parenthood which will take us into realms where spiritual affinity is forgotten” (Pitt-Rivers 1976: 324). Rather, we have to acknowledge that the relationship of *compadrio* itself “tends to be of the patronal kind” (Willems 1962: 77).

It is not, then, that “the *compadrio* bond serves to re-affirm and stress the pre-existing patron-client relationship” (Arantes 1971: 25). Neither is it that “previous links through kinship, co-residence, economic bonds take logic precedence over *compadrio*” (Arantes 1971: 20). There is no reason for us to see patron-client relationship as “pre-existing” *compadrio*. In the same vein, we cannot conclude that “economic bonds” necessarily “take logic precedence” over *compadrio*. There is no reason either to believe that “the performance of the [asymmetrical] mutual obligations [among ritual kin] is assured through a personal bond which transcends the usual existing groupings and categories of people and cut across them” (Eisenstadt 1956: 93, my italics). One cannot assume the existence of a group or community “before” *compadrio*. In a word, Arantes, Bloch and Guggenheim and Eisenstadt see god-parenthood as a super-structural bond. They reduce *compadrio* to its instrumental character in order to understand it as a form of social control, thus repeating the functionalist procedure I noted to be found in Mintz and Wolf’s classical 1950 paper. Writing after Mintz and Wolf, these four anthropologists have all evidently given us important contributions, going beyond a pre-symbolic functionalism, for which “ritual sponsorship is a dyadic bond, formed

on the basis of choice” because it has an “utility”, as the “individual aims to strengthen his position” (Mintz & Wolf 1950: 358). But neither one of them did free us from an understanding of *compadrio* that is impregnated with what Sahlins (1976) defined as “practical reason”.

The understanding of *compadrio* as a superstructural bond is also present in the works of other symbolic anthropologists influenced by Karl Marx, such as Chevalier (1982: 328). According to their view, “baptism is often used to mystify class relations, by giving them a pseudo sancticity, ideologically transforming domination into the gift of creation” (Bloch & Guggenheim 1987: 385). My own proposition is that we should take more seriously “the sacredness of ceremonial kinship” (Willems 1962: 76). Instead of taking it as “pseudo sancticity”, I would understand this ethnographic reality as a form of ideology, not in a marxist fashion but rather in dumontian terms as related to all social - and therefore not only economic - values (cf. Dumont 1977).

We can conclude that baptism and the performance of mutual obligations among *compadres* which follows it create political inequalities that obviously are not of the same type as class domination, but are inherent to the sacred foundation of society. In other words, the gift of creation itself implies some sort of political dominance. We see how important it is to study not only the legitimacy of the sacred foundation of power but also its constitution. In order to do stress this point, I will now turn to a demonstration of the fact that *compadrio* creates fundamental inter-family bonds.

Gudeman (1972) has argued that “the most central features” of godparenthood are “the fact that **parents are universally prohibited from choosing themselves as godparents** and the fact that ... there is no direct reciprocity in the selection of godparents” (my emphasis); Chevalier (1982: 310) went a step further remembering that “reciprocal selection does occur”. The fact that parents are universally prohibited from choosing themselves as godparents, is strictly analogous to the prohibition of incest in Lévi-Strauss’ model of the elementary structures of kinship. This similarity is further emphasized by the fact that there is in fact reciprocity in the selection of godparents. Just like in the elementary structures of kinship described by Lévi-Strauss, this reciprocity can be more immediate or deferred through time. The shorter cycle is that of a couple choosing as godparents of their child the same couple who has chosen them before as *compadres*. The opposite situation would be one of potential reciprocity: a couple chooses another couple as

compadres in the hope that in the future, descendants of the latter could possibly choose as *compadres* descendants of the former. But the reciprocity cycle can also assume a “middle range”. An example was found by E. Woortmann (1995) in a community in the northeastern state of Sergipe, where there is the preference for a man to choose as godfather of his child one of his own father’s godsons. The hierarchical position each lineage occupies is in this case inverted not only *in potentia* but rather in actual practice.

The prohibition of parents choosing themselves as godparents does not suggest a lack of reciprocal relations, as Gudeman wants it, but rather that, through *compadrio*, reciprocity is established outside the sphere of domestic production. Longer cycles would be more apt to the development of “transcendental affinity”⁷. From longer to shorter cycles, a couple can have *compadrio* relations with:

- a) saints or priests, sometimes chosen as godparents in São Bento, but more commonly so in other parts of Northeast Brazil, such as the Zona da Mata, even if opposed by the official doctrines of the Catholic Church, or
- b) patrons, who represent “the domains of commodity production”, or
- c) more “horizontally”, with friends or neighbors or even relatives.

In my survey of the municipality of São Bento, I found that, in 1989, only 3.5% of godparents had kinship relations with their godchildren. São Bento evidently contrasts with other places in Northeast Brazil where specific relatives are prescribed. In the community visited by Galbraith (1983), for instance, paternal grandparents are the godparents of the male first born, and maternal godparents are chosen for the female first born. But the specific situation of each community could in the future be conceived, in a Lévi-Straussian fashion, as a variant of another.

In cases of intra-family *compadrio*, the latter relationship brings an “*acrescimento di senso*”, to use Valeri’s (1979) expression, to kinship bonds. In fact,

7 I borrow the term from Viveiros de Castro (1992), allowing myself to use it much more loosely. *Compadrio* is “spiritual affinity” also in the sense that sex is universally prohibited between *compadre* and *comadre*, the mating of whom is said in São Bento to generate terrible beasts. *Compadrio* should also be thought of as a form of meta-affinity, since it implies the spiritual union of two couples, even when the godfather and godmother are not married. The indigenous association between marriage and *compadrio* in São Bento is also evident in the name given to an important -- and strictly required -- god parental gift, the trousseau (*enxoval*), which is composed by the new clothes that the godchild uses at the ceremony of baptism. Another clear analogy between *compadrio* and marriage is the fact that a non baptized child is said to be “single” (“*solteira*”) and that some men call their wives “*comadres*”.

there is an *acrescimento* of respect. When a man chooses his brother as *compadre*, he starts to call him “*Senhor*” (and vice-versa), as I witnessed in Carpina, a municipality of the Zona da Mata of the Northeastern state of Pernambuco. Cândido (1951: 294) observed the same fact decades ago in the plantations of the Southeast. This shows how *compadrio* can encompass consanguinity.

But, in São Bento, *compadrio* is not an intra-family affair. Since many of the 10,000 inhabitants are connected through ties of kinship, godparents are carefully chosen from outside the circle of relatives⁸. *Compadrio* introduces the possibility of recruiting “co-parents from almost any walk of life and expecting their ‘charitable’ assistance as if they were ‘real’ kindred” (Chevalier 1982: 310). *Compadres*, then, are “spiritual affines”. Through *compadrio*, people from different domains, even those previously united by ties of consanguinity, become related as affine.

According to my survey, only 20% (or 74 out of 349) of São Bento’s *compadrio* ties are supposedly “horizontal” (I borrow the expression from Mintz and Wolf 1950). But in most of these the most prestigious fishermen were chosen by poor agriculturalists and the opposite never occurred. There is then an asymmetrical aspect also in “horizontal” *compadrio*, given that São Bento’s fishermen make much more money than agriculturalists. In all other cases, the *compadrio* had an evident vertical character, since storekeepers, boat or land owners, politicians and other representatives of “civil society”, like military, teachers and civil servants, were preferentially chosen as godparents.

We see that, in all districts, the godfather is associated with the figure of the patron; if god parenthood is sacred, it also can be associated with money and the market. Godparents in São Bento must always **pay** for baptism, and in case of marriage godparents, also for the civil and/or religious ceremonies they witness. *Padrinhos* also pay for drinks on the day of baptism; this once was an obligation in other parts of Brazil as well (Cândido 1954: 356). Another obligation of the grandparents in São Bento is to **pay** for the new

8 Of 349 cases (106 in Caiçaras district, 63 in S.Bento, the village-seat of the municipality, 55 in Favela, 43 in Socorro and 82 in Guajerú districts), only one godfather was an uncle of his godson in Guajerú, four were uncles and two greatparents in Caiçaras. In the seat of the municipality, São Bento village proper (with 500 inhabitants), three uncles and one couple of greatparents were chosen as godparents. No relative was chosen as a godparent in the very poor and marginalized neighborhoods, the Alto do Socorro and Alto da Favela. In these places, god parenthood creates a bond between their inhabitants and the town at large. This would give the superficial, apparent impression that god parenthood is more important for the lower spheres of São Bento’s social hierarchy, something I do not believe to occur (cf. Lanna 1995).

white clothes used by the godchild in the ceremony of baptism, the *trousseau* (*enxoval*), something also found all over Brazil. Some parents wait for years to perform the baptism ceremony of their child until the chosen godparents have money for the *trousseau*.

Many of São Bento “patrons” nowadays refuse invitations to become godparents of poor people in order to avoid the costs it implies.⁹ Some say only fools have many godchildren; they have “no love for their money” (“*não tem amor ao dinheiro*”). One should not conclude from this, however, that generosity is not an elite value, but only that the elite is not willing to be generous “with anyone” (“*com qualquer um*”). In accordance with their practice of separation, the richer celebrate their marriages and baptisms in the state capital, Natal. Alliances, then, tend to assume extra-familial forms, on the one hand, but also an intra-patronal character, on the other. An example is given by the bank manager, who came from the state capital and after a few years’ residence in São Bento had many *compadres* in the elite.

A local patron would therefore rather “give” or “dedicate” his children to richer godparents living in the state capital. Conversely, a politician, for instance, would gladly assume the role of *compadre* of someone poorer as long as this would help him have political influence in the district where his new *compadres* live. So we have that, in São Bento, godparents tend to be richer than godchildren. If *compadrio* is indeed a form of transcendental affinity, it is characterized in São Bento by some sort of “hypergamy”. And it is common for a rich or prestigious god parent accumulate godchildren just as it is for a chief to accumulate wives (cf. Lanna 2005).

The “common people” will preferentially choose as a *compadre* not a “big boss” but “small patrons”, slightly richer than themselves, and, among them, especially those who are atypically generous. These are, in general, not entrepreneurs, but often *empregados* (employees), who do not show a great desire for monetary accumulation. In the past rich godparents were prescribed to give a pig or a calf to the godchild. Today, the ideal god parental couple is

9 For example, the Pereira family, who owns the notary (*Cartório de Notas*) for decades. The Pereira women have most of the jobs in government posts; four member of the family were elected as mayors between 1950 and 1990. One of them told me that “the wise ones - *os mais sabidos* - always invite me. The problem is the *trousseau* (*enxoval completo*)”. He meant that he would not accept all the invitations he received because of the prescribed gifts. The series of god parental gifts is the *arrumação*; it consists of the *trousseau* plus all church and state taxes and the price of the celebration, which consists at least of some drinks, for the men only, or of a more generous *festa*.

still generous and a little richer than the natural parents, but not too much richer. Luis Magi, for instance, a very rich old man who once had 40 houses and 13 boats in Caiçaras, is so stingy people believe he made a pact with the devil; not coincidentally, has only one godchild.

In 1989, two couples had more than one hundred godchildren. In Caiçaras, the bigger and richer fishermen district, Zé Lino, a small storekeeper with no employees, had 123 godchildren. He carried the list with the name of all his *compadres* in his pocket¹⁰. In S.Bento, the seat of the municipality, Querubino and Dona Riva also had more than one hundred godchildren. Riva is a school teacher, while Querubino helps his brother, Valdir, in his large store. Both belong to the Pereira family. Just as Zé Lino, Querubino is the paradigmatic godfather, but not the paradigmatic politician. His brother Valdir is the politician, being in 1991 the President of the Councilmen's Chamber (*Câmara dos Vereadores*). Valdir and Querubino were constantly arguing, because according to the former the latter gave credit to too many people at his store.

Couples that are frequently chosen as godparents never fail to give the series of prescribed gifts, which would cost at least U\$ 10. One of Zé Lino's *compadres* told me that he liked him because "he does not like to make promises [that he can not fulfill]" ("*não é de prometer*"), therefore being just the opposite of a politician who is the one who promises (as we will see below). A good godmother should remember with affection her godchildren and show interest in the life of her *compadres*. D. Riva, for instance, said she only accepts an invitation for being the godmother of a child when she knows his or her parents well and considers them as "good friends".

It is clear that the preferential godparent is one who avoids the practice of separation I described as a feature of the Brazilian patron. I have witnessed a situation of *compadres* of Riva and Querubino moving from São Bento to a larger city. Their relationship became less personal, but not necessarily weaker. As Evans-Pritchard taught us long ago, social distance is not a necessary

10 Zé Lino was elected twice as councilman (*vereador*) before being persecuted by ex-mayor Jomar, who belonged to an opposed faction. During Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985), locally represented by Jomar's political faction, the latter managed to find enough lawful, bureaucratic reasons to finish Zé Lino's career as a politician ("*caçando*" his political rights): this was possible because Zé Lino never went to his party's official meetings, his only and fateful "mistake", which ruined his career as a politician. The example shows in practice the difference between the categories politician and god parent (which is not to say they do not have similarities; the important thing is that, whatever practice, at a more abstract level, one is a structural transformation of the other).

a corollary of physical distance. Gifts would not necessarily become less frequent nor visits cease to occur, but the opposite may actually happen (cf. Sahlins 1997 for an analysis of structure and history in migration).

I found in São Bento a transformation of the usual Brazilian performance of the ritual blessing godchildren ask from godparents. Around Brazil, especially in the past it was common that the godchild should ask his godparents “bless me (*à benção*), *padrinho* (or *madrinha*)”. The godparent would then answer “god bless you”, or, as it also happens in Rio Grande do Norte state “may the lord cover you with fortunes” (“*o Sr. lhe cubra de fortunas*”). But, in São Bento, the blessing also requires that the godparent kisses the godchild’s hand, and not the opposite. Only when there is greater social distance (or Mintz and Wolf’s “verticality”) may the godparent not kiss the godchild. This structural inversion in the content of the ritual blessing implies a stress on the horizontal aspect of *compadrio*, but at the same time it does not blur the hierarchical aspect. The godparent submits him or herself by kissing the hand of his or her godchild, but it is only a temporary submission. These hierarchical inversions are integral to Dumont’s definition of the hierarchical relation (cf. Dumont 1980, or Tcherkezoff 1987).

Another inversion in the content of *compadrio* I observed in São Bento was that the phrase “*Seu Paulo* baptized that child” had a different meaning there than in the coastal plantations of the Northeast. In the latter, the phrase means that *Seu Paulo* was the godfather, whereas in São Bento it means that a layman - *Seu Paulo* - acted in lieu of the priest before a sick child died non-baptized. In other words, the godparents are the bestowals of baptism in the coast, whereas in São Bento, as it also occurs in the backlands (*sertão*), the bestowal of baptism is the priest. But if *Seu Paulo* were a very well known patron in São Bento, the above phrase could also signify that he was that child’s godfather.

I am mentioning these facts to suggest again that we could, in the future, **analyse the transformations from one manifestation of *compadrio* to another**. In the Marajó Island, in Pará state, for instance, we find another interesting inversion: landowners choose their workers to act as their children’s godparents. All these forms seem to be variants of each other. It is clear that I have in mind Lévi-Strauss study of myths and similar studies of transformations from one social structure to another in South American ethnology (cf., among many others, Viveiros de Castro 1988).

I will end my depiction of *compadrio* with some comments on “bonfire *compadrio*” (*de fogueira*). This type of *compadrio* is found today mostly in the rural districts of São Bento, although it is also valued by the town’s people. In it, a man and a woman establish *compadrio* ties by jumping together over a bonfire during the celebrations of harvest festivals (*festas juninas*). Even in the town of São Bento, away of the rural districts, each house has its fire outside on the nights of Saints Anthony, John and Peter. There is also a large, communal fire. Not being tied to the number of newborns, the practice of bonfire *compadrio* allows for a great number of *compadrio* relations to be established. It is also a practice that unite two individuals and not two couples in a sacred tie.

Youngsters can also become “bonfire cousins”. In the past, people would get married “in the bonfire” (“*na fogueira*”) since no priest lived nearby¹¹. One can become a cousin or find herself a fiancé through this practice. There is then, even today, an association between the figures of cousin and fiancé(e), something also suggestive of the model of elementary structures of kinship. In the past, youngsters previously related as bonfire cousins could become engaged. Today, the opposite is more common: only two people previously engaged become bonfire cousins. This practice lost the ceremonial aspect of an engagement, being referred to as *brincadeira de solteiro* (“single people joking around”). Nevertheless, people avoid playing (*brincar*) like that without having the serious intention of future marriage. This form of *compadrio* also suggests an assimilation of this institution with dancing and joking. It takes place during harvest festivals which are locally defined as “joking with a saint” (*brincadeiras com o santo*), something strictly forbidden during any other time of the year.

11 Maybe this is why a charitable woman from OXFAM visiting the backlands of Piauí state, in Northeast Brazil, in the early sixties, reported being “shocked to find how little the girls here understand of the real meaning of marriage and its wonderful possibilities” (Benton 1977: 164). The same author found “very touching” that a boy would save money for months in order to celebrate his wedding with a communal meal, and that “everyone who was able gave the couple a present” (Benton 1977: 167). In fact, celebrations of marriages “comme il faut”, as described by Benton for Piauí, are increasingly rare in São Bento; poor people just cannot afford it anymore. As I have said, the same cannot be said about the elite people, who now marry in larger cities, developing their own new practices of marriage celebrations. Poor people often enact an elopement, which has also become a new ritual practice, not frequently studied by latin-americanists.

Conclusion: *compadrio* in an ampler context

Ethnographic evidence for Latin America makes it unlikely the general point “that ritual kinship does not flourish under conditions of modern, formal political organization and market conditions” (Eisenstadt 1956: 94). Mintz and Wolf have shown that even commercial dealings may have their ritual sponsors “in various Latin American communities” (Mintz & Wolf 1950: 354). But how is it that market organization and class divisions can “be absorbed within the boundaries of communal structures” (Wolf 1955: 458).

We should not suppose, as does Wolf and many others, that every asymmetry found in a community like São Bento is “an expression” of inequalities produced by the market. My analysis of the hierarchical character of *compadrio* has shown that we have an articulation of different asymmetrical logics, mediated by exchange relations, in such a way that both capitalist and non-capitalist forms of production maintain their distinctiveness.

The anthropological literature shows that, from the point of view of capitalism, ritual kinship and other so called “traditional beliefs” can be very “beneficial”. How can we interpret this fact without reducing it to a practical reasoning, as if *compadrio* were to be explained by its use and solely from the perspective of capitalism? Reliance on subsistence crops in plantations and farms, or even in urban contexts, for instance, can be a subsidy for capitalist accumulation. I believe it remains to be shown that traditional beliefs and exchanges not only subsidize profits but can also assume an integral part of the constitution of modernity, of “post-modernity” and of globalization processes.

Maybury-Lewis, among others, has shown that, in Brazil, state-controlled growth of the capitalist economy “reinforces” the local hierarchical structure. He also mentions that political “parties themselves remain no more than local vote-getting arrangements, and thus perfect **instruments** for the local bosses” (Maybury-Lewis 1968: 163, my emphasis). This argument is in harmony with my depiction of Brazilian “local bosses”, but I have also pointed to the fact that local bosses occupy a hierarchical position in the constitution of communal structures. By doing that, I could avoid the functionalist notion of institutions “reinforcing each other” and an instrumental understanding of the local as well as national and international “bosses”. I have also shown that we also find in São Bento the inverse of what Maybury-Lewis points out, namely, that the local structure generates (and not “reinforces”) state control, just as state-controlled growth of the capitalist economy “rein-

forces” the local hierarchical structure (cf. Lanna 1995). Given the constitution of local structures analyzed here, further studies could demonstrate the existence of a “generative dialectic”¹² between local and state structures, one which is articulated by the *município*, which, in this respect, is “unlike the North American county” (Gross 1973: 141).

I therefore see no reason for us to necessarily correlate, as so many historians and social scientists have done, centralization of political and economic control by the state and debility of local power structures. Support for this argument is given by the fact that the authority of local bosses - mayors, merchants, landowners - has been historically constituted as that of representatives of the central power (again, cf. Lanna 1995).

It should also be clear that there is continuity in the “minimal reciprocity” I described at the local level and the lack of redistributive policies for the poor which characterizes the Brazilian state. This state is paradoxically all-encompassing and at the same time “supposedly assistencialist” (Smith 1985: 107) or “a non-welfare state” (Oliveira 1990: 68), since it redistributes mostly to the rich. My point is that, if some entrepreneurs are subsidized by the state, it is because their social persons are, in a logical way, in continuity with the state, and not only because of their manipulative practices. If in Brazil, the state controls public funds through a “private logic” (Oliveira 1990: 68), my effort here was to further characterize this logic.

Oliveira (1990: 68) argues for a “publicization of the private”. I am arguing that hierarchical structures are by definition “public” in that they are a generative source of Northeastern social realities. The political sphere therefore goes much beyond that of manipulation; at the same time, there is not a moment of “politization” of the social relations: the presence of godparents and patrons in the constitution of local realities show how the political sphere is inside social genesis – without need for us to return to the theme of an opposition between “interests”, “forces” and the symbolic. My attempt was to reflect about the politic as symbolic from the start, forbidding myself to reduce the symbolic to political functions, as people like Pierre Bourdieu, amongst many others, did against Lévi-Strauss. Given more ethnographic research, the same point could be made for Southern Brazil.

12 I borrow the term from T. Turner (1976), and, as I did with Viveiros de Castro’s notion of “transcendental affinity”, allow myself to use it rather loosely.

My approach here has implicit criticism of other analysis made of Brazilian reality. For instance, if hierarchical structures are by definition “public” in the sense of being social, much like languages, we should not presuppose, as Oliveira, for instance, does as “normal” or universal a particular context where individualism is hegemonic, that of “the nation” (I am here following again Mauss 1969a&b, as did Da Matta 1991). Further ethnographic analysis of municipal mayors, for instance, would show that the state (or, in the words of Oliveira, the “public”) is constituted through a patronal logic (which would be, for Oliveira, “private”). I depict elsewhere (Lanna 1995) the practices of many São Bento mayors, such as the “distribution” of public lands to friends or delaying for several months the payment of wages of public functionaries. Should we consider these practices “archaic”? Instead of being persecuted by law, a criminal mayor is stigmatized by the people in general as a *mau patrão*, but is able of conduct things so as eventually winning the next elections. What kind of authority this mayor has? What is the significance of the votes he receives?

I repeat that we cannot speak of “inexistence of a public sphere” because the practice of hierarchically superiors acquire public significance in Brazil. This can be true of their actions as of their deaths, as it was the case, in April of 1998, of the funerals of Minister Sergio Motta and Deputy Luis Eduardo Magalhães. It is not even evident, as supposes Oliveira, that this public sphere does not assume redistributive practices, only that the direction of this redistribution is not necessarily to the poor. The Government does allocate several billions of dollars for health and education, but also in these cases we have some sort of intra-patronal circulation. This would evidently include more or less criminal practices, part of the budget possibly being deflected through corruption, but what is more important is that there are cultural rules behind the both lawful as well as unlawful circulation of public money. In either case, it is only in this sense that I agree with Oliveira (1990: 70) that we have a “perversion of state logic”.¹³

13 Oliveira is right that “the state is conducted by the logic of the market” (Oliveira 1990: 72). But the state is constituted in Brazil by a redistributive logic, as it also happens elsewhere. I would prefer to think then of an incorporation of the market by the state, and not the other way around, as it ideally could happen in individualistic nations. This domestication of the market has been achieved, for instance, by the distribution of credit to “entrepreneurs”, who were in fact “local bosses”. In the 1970’s the credit was mostly from foreign loans made to the state, which therefore constituted itself in the same fashion as local patrons: through debts.

We can now also understand in a new perspective Da Matta's (1991: 170-87) demonstration of the encompassment of the "individual" by the "person" in Brazil. Da Matta shows that the person is classified in Brazil according to his or her proximity to power, and ultimately to the central, state power. I want to add that this is a proximity to hierarchically valued gifts - including here all sorts of favors, loans, and so on. This explains why a distinction between public and private is not made, in Brazil, in the same fashion as in countries where individualism is the norm. We can also understand why in Brazil "the public service is by tradition a means of repaying personal debts" (Hutchinson 1966: 21): because the public sphere is constituted by intra-patronal exchanges. Therefore, the existence of patronage and of a "clientelistic system is not in spite of, but a result of economic growth" (Gross 1973: 124); or better yet, patronage and clientelism generate a specific form of economic growth and vice-versa.

We can now also understand in a new perspective other fundamental facts such as "domestic production". I have shown that *compadrio* "embodies a basic form of capitalist relation of production" (Benholt-Thompsen 1981: 16), but that it does in a hierarchical sense. More importantly, it is, by definition, a form of non-capitalist production. Many forms of non-capitalist production can encompass capitalism, even if they also depend on wage, credit and market, and therefore are, at a certain level, subordinated to capital. For instance, Sahlins (1988) shows that this was the case of the kwakiutl potlatch. Evidently, as Arantes (1970) argued, capitalism can also take "logic precedence" over non capitalism, but I remember that, not being a hierarchical system, it does not have the same capacity for encompassment as hierarchical structures.

One could extend the argument further and demonstrate that the "permanent tension between a hierarchical reality and a seemingly egalitarian ethos" (Stolke 1981: 36) is inherent to capitalism itself, since, as Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin demonstrated, the existence of the latter is grounded not only in the exploitation of the proletariat but also of non-capitalist forms of production. After all, if domestic labor is "unpaid work", it is exactly because it is not commoditized; it is not only "ideologically [that] it is not considered in terms of purchase and sale". In other words, familial organization itself implies non-capitalist, asymmetrical relationships, but these asymmetries are not of the same sort as those that characterize capitalism.

It seems clear that a non-capitalist system can, even when subordinate, “preserve some meaningful level or degree of autonomy in relation to the dominant (capitalist) system, whereas another one can be thoroughly incorporated” (Turner 1986: 91). Turner points out that this autonomy is achieved whenever a social group “conceives its subsistence production as an integral part of a more global process of social production” (Turner 1986: 101). Turner also reminds us that this is not simply a matter of “incomplete integration of two systems of economic production, but of the incommensurability of different ways of defining and articulating production itself” (Turner 1986: 101)¹⁴.

I described the establishment of specific hierarchical relations through gift exchanges as a constitutive feature of the production of social life in Northeast Brazil. This is not only true of peripheral parts of the country¹⁵. The hierarchical logic is evident in any *casa*, in any region. Furthermore, as Freyre (1936, 1950) and Da Matta (1987, 1991) show us, the *casa* is not just a dwelling but a fundamental Brazilian conceptual category – which very importantly would fit well Lévi-Strauss’ (1979, 1983, 1984) later theory on house societies. Unbalanced reciprocal relations also constitute authority in “the space of the *casa*”. Inside it, men – and not all Brazilians, as Da Matta suggests – can “have all the rights” (Da Matta 1986: 135) and minimal duties. Da Matta is not aware that he presents in this passage a male understanding of the *casa*, and not that of every Brazilian, as he wants it. He presents the same category of *casa* in more complex terms elsewhere (Da Matta 1987). Da Matta’s 1986 definition

14 Understanding this fact could change the way many of us think about the family in a capitalist context. For example, instead of postulating a priori that “rural exodus,” which acquired dramatic proportions in Brazil in the last decades, “can violently disorganize familial life” (Cândido 1954: 367), we should attempt to understand how familial life actually organizes “rural exodus,” since the migrant always goes to places (either city or plantation) where he or she has relatives, returns “home” to participate in festas and religious activities, sends money and gifts to those who stay, and so on (cf. Sahlin 1997). In a previous article, Cândido himself was aware of this: the “perpetuation of the old system of family obligations may be one of the causes of the proverbial success of the northeasterners who migrate to the Southern states” (Cândido 1951: 308).

15 Marginal or peripheral regions have been taken by many authors to be “non integrated” (cf. Oliveira 1990: 67, :87, but this expression was found not only in the rhetoric of left wing intellectuals but also in right wing military dictators of the 70’s). My argument is that, if we abandon the functionalist perspective, it becomes clear that this “integration” already exists; it is not “something to be achieved” in the future, an idea which seems to justify economic policies and demands for higher rates of economic growth. Rates of great growth in the national product are taken by many politicians as an objective to be achieved at any cost, but this type of “economic miracle”, typical of the 70’s, has also generated legal and institutional chaos. Furthermore, when this type of growth was achieved, it was often followed by a period of recession, as in the early 80’s.

of the world of *casa* denies the obvious fact that Brazilian women do not have minimal duties in their *casas*. Some male workers also have their duties *em casa*, although most of them do not avoid reproducing at the interior of their nuclear families the practices of separation of patrons and the elite. There is still a minority who prefer to be good providers instead of spending money on drinks and with other women (prostitutes or not, in a context where many children are raised by their grandparents – cf Lanna 1995). São Bento men may be divided in those two groups¹⁶.

It is not true either that, for every Brazilian, “in the space of the street [*rua*] we only have duties” (Da Matta 1986: 135). With this statement, Da Matta now assumes the perspective of Brazilian workers (and here women are of course included). It is probably not correct to say that “only patrons have rights” in the world of the *rua*, but they have a certain monopoly of the rights, or of the distribution of those rights (and this includes the rights for justice, education, health or even if one is going or not to have his place in a queue respected). I tried to show that gifts define the *casa* and domesticity (including here ritual kinship). But these Maussian total prestations are also very important in the *rua* and in the type of capitalist development we have in Brazil. In both domains, *casa* and *rua*, the prestations of the hierarchically superiors are in practice occasional, but that does not make them less important as structures. The contingent aspect of patronal reciprocation assumes a daily character in Brazil only because there are structures that allow for that practice. In order to develop this point, I will conclude with an analysis of the religious vows, or *promessas*¹⁷.

16 Domestic violence associated with alcoholism is one of the main problems of that community. Violence has always been a token of “patronal behavior”, one which poor men reproduce inside their homes. The Brazilian patron presents a synthesis of sacred exchanges, violence and practices of separation. Violent husbands unconsciously chose one ideal aspect of patronal behavior, whereas “good providers” chose another, more peaceful one. At least in São Bento, violence is constitutive of an “ideal type of Brazilian family” which is something that always presented itself, not just “until the nineteenth century” (Cândido 1951: 292).

17 According to its origin myth, São Bento began with a *promessa*. This is also true of many other municipalities all over Brazil. In São Bento the *promessa* was made by Italian mariners, who, lost at sea, promised to offer the image of *Santo Antão*, patron saint of their ship, to the people of the place where they could find rescue. This image is today at the local church. Mariners are conceived as “outside patrons” who make an initial, founding gift. *Antão*, himself a foreigner, became the patron saint of the municipality. I have to add that, although it is located on the coast, São Bento is considered a community of the backlands (*uma comunidade sertaneja*). Sugarcane, which marks the Northeastern coast as a geographical region, is grown 100 miles south of São Bento.

The *promessas* are fundamental religious practices in Brazil. They represent the commitment of giving oneself in sacrifice to a saint in exchange for a miracle. Common forms of reciprocation to the saint are:

- a) the gift of a part of one's body (hair or the *ex-votos*, which are wooden or wax sculptures of a diseased leg, arm, or head), or
- b) the performance of tasks which involve hurting one's self (such as going long distances on one's knees, etc.).

The *promessas* are an intriguing form of sacrifice in that, if one is to use the famous scheme developed by Mauss and Hubert (1981), in it victim, sacrificer and sacrificer (*sacrifiant*) coincide in the same individual person.

At the same time, similar "promises" are made by Brazilian politicians during electoral times. They promise to give something for a person or a group in exchange for votes. These "political promises" (*promessas políticas*, a term that São Bento people frequently use) are so common that they have in Brazil the dimension of a secular, informal institution. Would political promises be analogous to the religious vows? Firstly, patronal and state prestations could be taken as exceptional, almost as much as miracles – like these, they occur, although infrequently. This exceptionality marks electoral times, or "*tempo da política*" in São Bento. Electoral times are exceptional in another way, that in it the common people become superior and the patrons are obliged to ask, even beg, for votes¹⁸. But what type of begging is that? What model does it follow? First of all, "political promises" differ from "religious promises" in that in the first there is a temporary inversion of status positions; but they are similar in that in both cases the relationship is initiated with the inferiors asking for a gift. This "*pedido*" (which we saw to be present in *compadrio*, in the choice of godparents made by natural parents) is an initial prestation. Political and religious promises are fundamentally similar in yet another aspects: both are **promises of reciprocation** and both acquire sacrificial proportions, even if sacrifice occurs in practice in religious vows and only rhetorically in the political promises.

If this sacrificial aspect is more evident in the religious vows, it also gives efficacy to the political promises in that in them the politician promises to "sacrifice himself to the people" just as the latter sacrifice themselves for the

¹⁸ As Elio Gaspari puts it, "*pedir votos na santa mendicância que a democracia impõe aos governantes*" (F.S.Paulo 1:11, 03/06/98).

saints. One notes the inversion implicit in electoral times: the people make the fundamental prestation (the vote) just as a saint in the religious *promessa* (the miracle) or the patron in daily life (money). But in both cases the initial prestation is simply to ask for the favor.

The elections are then a time of symbolic inversions. But, after they are over, life returns to normal: contrary to the saints, who never fail to perform their miracles, the politicians do not necessarily give anything in return for the votes. The political promises do not have in practice a reciprocal character, and that is the most fundamental difference they have with religious vows. The vote is a gift that will not generally (in the double sense of the word: “not often”, and “not for all”) be reciprocated.

Zaluar (1983: 89) noted that, when a Brazilian person makes a religious *promessa*, she is actually offering herself in sacrifice to the saint. And in fact the politician does not sacrifice himself to the people in the same fashion as the latter do for a saint. It is rather the other way around: in a context of extreme poverty, in their everyday life the people literally sacrifice themselves for politicians, *padrinhos* and patrons in general, in a similar fashion as they also sacrifice themselves to the saints. If the person of the godchild is offered as an initial gift to godparents, the “burden” of reciprocity still rests on the former, and on the hierarchically inferior in general. That happens because of the extreme value of the god parental gift of grace, one which creates permanent indebtedness.

Finally, I repeat that in *compadrio*, in the political promises and in the religious vows the initial gift is made by the hierarchically inferiors. The natural parents dedicate their child, the politicians ask for votes and the faithful for miracles. But *compadrio* and religious vows differ from the political promises in that they are the locus *par excellence* of reciprocity in Brazilian life. As political promises show, reciprocity is not often attained in everyday life at the political and economic spheres. My conclusion is that reciprocity is an ideal of everyday life, but it is only put into practice in Brazil when it acquires sacrificial proportions. Reciprocal relations are still the norm of juridical, political or economic life, but in those spheres they assume extremely unbalanced forms. The ideal of reciprocity is achieved only in kinship (including *compadrio*) and at the religious levels (in the vows and in *compadrio*). In this sense, the kinship and the religious spheres constitute social life. At the same time, my depiction of *compadrio* and other institutions, such as the

promises, indicates that the religious sphere is, in Brazil, encompassed by the political one.

Transformations from one type of *compadrio* to another are still to be studied, as well, as those from *compadrio* to patronage and friendship. But we can conclude from what was shown above that behind local specificities there are communities that define themselves by values and circulations rather than by any geographical criteria. These communities have no closed boundaries and exist in cities as well as in rural areas. If we go to a multinational firm in downtown São Paulo we will find *compadrio* ties among the poor as well as among top employees. They also carry values which allow them to interpret modernity. More than that, they collaborate with the construction of urban culture. These values are in great part those referred here as belonging to the Brazilian *casa*. These values are originally unequal and hierarchical, and not functionally repressed by coronelism or clientelism or systems of personal dependency. In other words, this dependency has deeper roots than it is commonly acknowledged and at the same time these communities also teach us lessons about justice and solidarity. Maybe “pure capitalism” does not exist.

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