On Portuguese Family Structure

EMILIO WILLEMS

Vanderbilt University, U.S.A.

This paper (1) is an attempt to examine certain relationships between family structure and social class in contemporary Portuguese society. We are primarily concerned with two structural variables, namely the locus of authority in the family and its structural range beyond the limits of the nuclear or conjugal core unit. In other words, the questions we propose to raise are these: who is subordinate to whom, and what consanguine, affinal and ceremonial relatives of a given individual are actually tied to him by reciprocal obligations and privileges.

Our basic hypothesis that these two structural variables are functions of social class, is predicated upon the Brazilian model of the historical, patri-potestal, extended family which is regarded as integral part of the Portuguese heritage. Here authority is concentrated and vested in the oldest male who exercises considerable control over his unmarried and married children, their wives and children. An elaborate set of rules places very definite restrictions on female behavior outside the narrow circle of family and kin group, and limits contact between persons of different sex not closely related to one another, to carefully defined and rigidly controlled situations. Thus the sexes are segregated early, the women secluded and female behavior restricted by rather complex canons of chaperonage. The rules of kinship solidarity extend to a variable number of collateral relatives of any particular family head, especially to the families of his siblings and their linear descendents' families. These groups include baptismal godparents, and if such ritual relationships happen to coincide with consanguine or affinal ones they tend to reinforce these beyond the ordinary degree of kinship solidarity.

The closest approximation to this model is found only in the traditional family structure of the landed upper class of Brazilian society. Gilberto Freyre has shown that Brazilian "rural patriarchalism" already changed under the

1 The field work upon which the present paper is based, was carried out during the months of June, July and August, 1954. It was made possible by grants from the Social Science Research Council and the Institute of Research and Training in the Social Sciences of Vanderbilt University. The field trip was preceded by a careful survey of Portuguese ethnographic literature.
impact of nineteenth century urbanization. (Freyre, 1936). It has since undergone further changes of the kind that may be expected in a society which is rapidly becoming industrialized. The family of the working class, both rural and urban, is not, and probably never was, either patripotestal or extended. It lacks the centripetal power of the latifundium with its associate political incentives for concerted action on the part of the kinship group. In contrast with the upper and middle class family, the lower class family is loosely integrated and relatively unstable. Norms concerning sex, courtship, marriage, child rearing, economic obligations and care for the old and invalid are rather vaguely defined and subject to local and individual variations. (Willems, 1952:65–78; 1953)

The Family of the Portuguese Bourgeoisie

The descriptive model of the traditional Brazilian family applies, mutatis mutandis, to the Portuguese upper class family. Like its Brazilian counterpart it is patripotestal, even in contemporary urban society which is still predominantly preindustrial. What Moigénie had to say about the “women of Lisbon” did no justice at all to the lower classes, or to the peasantry, as we shall see, but it was certainly meant to include all strata of Portuguese bourgeoisie.

Formerly – half a century ago – the women of Lisbon exhibited some characteristics of Circassian harem inmates. They never descended from their carriages, not even to buy a scarf or a soft drink. They concealed and veiled themselves.

It was prohibited to look around and smile. Social disgrace hung over a lady who caught a cold during a drive. She had to refrain from sneezing in order not to be regarded as uncouth. Dancing parties were parades of statues and conversations parades of monosyllables.

Whenever they knew how to read, they were unable to go beyond the prayer book. When they could cook, they were only permitted to make sweets. A lady who sang either fell into complete disrepute, or was at least regarded as comical, which was a grave insult at that time. It was morally bad for a woman to attend a theatrical performance outside her private box, where she was expected to sit haughtily and silent in Olympian stiffness. (Moigénie, 1924:246)

Nowadays, the great granddaughters of Moigénie’s grand ladies go to high school and college as a matter of course. There are women lawyers and women doctors, saleswomen and female clerks, and grade school is predominantly taught by women. Yet in the early thirties, provincial capitals like Beja, still exhibited some of Moorish traits depicted by Moigénie. Upper class women were almost never seen in the streets and stores. Strangely enough, they appeared not even in church. Purchases were mediated by servants who carried samples of merchandise home, where the lady of the house did her picking. Courtship was restricted to few occasions, such as public feasts, trade fairs, hunting parties, and family picnics. Had the lovers reached an understanding their contacts were not allowed to go beyond the verbal stage wherein the lover talked from the sidewalk to the girl who stood at a window of the first floor. Only engaged