Mambila Marriage Prohibitions and Incest Regulations and the Role System*

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The main point of this paper is not to offer a new theory to explain marriage prohibitions and incest regulations, but rather to show in a particular case, Mambila society, how these rules are related to certain patterns of expected social behaviour and thus limit the scope of conflict arising from the allocation of mutually antagonistic roles to the same person at the same occasion. The following analysis will be confined to certain aspects of a few selected roles.

The majority of the Mambila-speaking peoples, numbering approximately 18,000 (Census 1952: 26-7), live on the Mambila Plateau, Sardauna Province, Northern Nigeria. At the time of my research, they were subsistence farmers with a comparatively closed economy. All Mambila live in small autonomous villages, which range in size from those having 200 to the largest with 2,000 residents. Virilocal marriage is commonest though uxorilocal and neolocal unions are also recorded. The kinship system is of a cognatic type, the significant kinships groups being non-unilineal in character.1 The bulk of my research was carried out in Warwar, having a population of 605, according to my total census. Most of the data given below applies directly to that settlement though evidence gathered elsewhere leads me to believe that it would apply equally well to other Mambila villages.

Since the rules which regulate the choice of a marriage partner and a lover are the same, we shall for the sake of simplicity phrase them all as marriage prohibitions in the following list:

1. A person may not marry anyone with whom he is known to share an ancestor or ancestress.

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1 Further information on the Mambila may be obtained by consulting the following sources: Meek, pp. 532-582; Schneider, pp. 112-132; Rehfisch, 1955; and Rehfisch, 1960, pp. 246-261.
2. A person may not marry the relative of a blood-brother.
3. A man may not marry a relative of his wife, though he may be allowed to do so in case of her death or divorce.
4. A man may not marry his deceased father’s wife.
5. A man may not marry any permanent resident of his compound whether related to her or not.
5. A man may not wed the widow or divorced spouse of a younger close kinsman. The term “close” is to be understood in both a geneological and spatial sense. The prohibition refers to course to siblings, first and probably also second cousins in all lines, but only if they reside in the same immediate neighbourhood. That is a man may wed his junior brother’s widow or other close kinsman’s widow or divorced wife if her former spouse resided in another village. There is one exception to this general rule and that is if the deceased leaves no junior relative in his own settlement, then and only then may a senior kinsman marry his widow.
7. To marry a woman older than oneself is not strictly prohibited, but is said to be dangerous for the husband, since her vaginal secretions are believed to be too strong for him to cope with and hence may render him impotent or even kill him.
8. Finally while there is no strict prohibition for two or more close male kinsmen living in the same or neighbouring compounds to marry into the same household, it is deemed inadvisable for them to do so.

As already stated these rules define incest as well as limit the number of eligible spouses, but the fact that marriage with a prohibited spouse is disapproved of far more than an illicit affair reflects a sociological reality, namely that the former is a greater threat to the social order than the latter. This for three reasons. Affairs are expected to be of short duration while marriages should be long-lasting. In the case of a marriage there is an open breach of the rules, since a wedding is a widely publicised affair while extra-marital liaisons are kept private. Finally, while love affairs do not extend the range of affinal relations of the two partners a legal marriage does of course do so. It will be shown in the analysis to follow that marriage prohibitions tend to prevent the allocation of the role of affines to individuals who already occupy another status in relation to Ego, which would be incompatible with that of affine. This danger does of course not arise in the case of a love affair for the relatives of the two are not involved.

The rules apply to all three types of Mambila marriage. (Meek, 1931: pp. 537–543, Rehfisch, 1960, pp. 246–261). Infringements of the first six rules are said to result in automatic supernatural sanctions meted out by the deceased ancestors, whether the breach consists of one single case of incestuous intercourse or an incestuous marriage. They, the ancestors, punish the culprits by sending illness or death to one or both partners, or a close relative often a child of these, by rendering the union infertile, or by other misfortunes. Informal sanctions such as jeering songs, public criticism and gossip are also important means of discouraging individuals from breaking the rules.