

| Translation |



## Translator's preface

An introduction to “Joking relations” by  
Marcel Mauss

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A few months ago, HAU's Editor, Giovanni da Col, invited me to translate Marcel Mauss' “Parentés à plaisanteries,” which, although having canonical status in the history of anthropology, had never been translated into English. The invitation arose out of my own suggestion that I translate another short piece from the *Année Sociologique* group by Paul Fauconnet. From friendship with Karen Fields while she was re-translating *The elementary forms of religious life* in the 1990s, and then by working on a paper for a recent collection in *Social Anthropology* on debt (Vol. 20, #4, 2012), I was becoming increasingly aware of the difficulties that can arise from the gaps and possible misconstruals or personal interpretations in the translations, especially of the Durkheim school. I will work on the Fauconnet translation later. For now, I present this translation of Mauss' classic analysis of joking relations, undertaken at the request of the editors. I greatly appreciate their confidence that I could do it justice.

Several challenges in translating Mauss' article bear explicit indication to the reader, for historical as well as possible conceptual and technical interest.

### The title

The only slight nuance over convention that I have made is to render *parentés* as “relations,” thereby retaining the plural form of the original and of the conventional English “relationships,” while also moving the English meaning somewhat closer to the kinship implied by *parentés* without importing the abstraction that the singular “kinship” brings. Both of the title's terms could have been rendered otherwise. *Plaisanteries* evokes a more verbal interaction, like “bantering” or “teasing” rather than “joking,” especially as the latter is used in American English where it comprises practical jokes and gestures, both big and small, as in “joking around.” Mauss derived “joking,” however, directly from English—from Lowie's ethnography of the Crow Indians—and does include many instances of what might colloquially be referred to as “horseplay.” I have found the following allusion: “joking with her (wife of a fellow clansman), even of an obscene character, was freely indulged in” (Lowie 1912: 187). *Parentés à plaisanteries* and “joking relationships” quickly became the accepted translations of each other. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown's (1940) article entitled “On joking relationships” uses *La parenté à plaisanteries* for the title of French abstract, and also the plural *les parentés à*

*plaisanteries* in the text. He refers explicitly to Mauss' piece as a "brief theoretical discussion" of phenomena on which they had already exchanged ideas. I have yet to discover whether Mauss himself created the French term. Henri Labouret published an article under this title very soon after (with *parenté* in the singular), in 1929, but I have not found a previous allusion.

## Other concepts

The sense of an as-yet unstable analytical vocabulary is mentioned in the text itself, particularly on the concept of *alliés*, which much of the following literature in English might have rendered as "affines." It seems clear, as with *parenté*, that Mauss was working with the implications of what L. H. Morgan had called "kinship societies," where all relationships can be thought of in kin or affinal terms. I have retained "allies" and "alliances" in most places, since Mauss generally specifies the kin categories at issue while explicitly wanting alliance to be a more encompassing term. In his own article on joking relationships, Radcliffe-Brown, like Mauss, keeps the concept of alliance open to non-kin possibilities through the use of "consociation." It is worth noting that up to today scholars are finding the latitude beyond kinship, in the narrow sense, useful in applying the findings and theorizations about "joking relations" to other associational dynamics. One recent example is Trevor Marchand's (2003) work on interethnic and master-laborer relations among the masons who build and repair the buildings of Djenné, Mali.

More difficult, and worth an entire theoretical discussion, is the translation of *fait*: generally rendered in English as "fact," as in the concept of the "total social fact" from Durkheimian theory. It is clear that current disciplinary English, especially in the wake of Mary Poovey's (1998) work on the epistemology of the modern fact, and of the movement of "phenomenon" from its strict etymology in "that which appears" into a philosophy of experience (phenomenology), would employ several different terms where Mauss uses *fait*: finding, fact, practice, construct, phenomenon. The slippage between *fait* and "fact" is the retention in *fait* of the traces of their common etymology in the Latin *facere* (to do, make, or drive), hence that it is a construct rather than an external given (which would give *donnée* in French and "data" in English). The reader of the French has in mind that a *fait* has a human creative process behind it: either from the world or the researcher. Having seen how French philosopher Bruno Karsenti (1994) uses the concept of phenomenon in his critical appreciation of the "total social fact," I have chosen to render *fait* in slightly varied terms, each according to context. The English discussion of the concept of the total social fact focuses more on the "total" and "social" than on the meaning of "fact" (see Karen Sykes 2005), but "fact" would benefit from closer attention.

## Smaller points

- (1) Mauss uses the concept of *étiquette* quite frequently. Since English has imported this word (like *bouquet*) to give an elite or refined character to the behavior at issue, I have used "ceremonial" in contexts where it is a practice, and "formality" where it is an abstract characteristic.

(2) Where Mauss uses *tabou*, especially with respect to the mother-in-law, I have used the conventional disciplinary term in English of “avoidance.”

(3) Radcliffe-Brown: Mauss refers to him as “Brown,” which was his birth name. Hyphenation was added later, but we have included it throughout the translation, for the sake of clarity.

(4) Mauss refers to all other scholars by the honorific M(onsieur), as in M. Lowie. This is confusing in modern English so they have been eliminated.

## General

Undertaking this small work has reminded me of the enormous intellectual and artisanal efforts on which accurate theoretical thought depends. Karen Fields' (1995) spontaneous retranslation of Émile Durkheim's *The elementary forms of religious life* came to mind. In searching for *le mot juste*, I have depended on the very detailed French-English dictionary I received as a high school student in 1961. *The concise Oxford French dictionary* (edition of 1958, compiled by Chevalley and Chevalley) was largely “concise” only in that the print was very small. The authors were still devoted to “warn students and translators against innumerable pitfalls by the use of printed indications and short cautions” (Chevalley and Chevalley 1958: vi). To meet this imperative, the entries for *faire* and *fait* take up almost three columns. First published in 1934 (so fairly near to the time of Mauss' article), the 1958 edition has a brilliant introduction about how languages change, not only in the content of the vocabulary and the correspondences from one language to another, but also in “the force and colour of . . . words, especially when used in the figurative sense . . . languages are like houses; they must be *lived in*—from attic to basement—before they can be called ours . . . (one also needs) a taste for words as words; an instinct of divination” (ibid.: vi). All reprints from 1934 onwards included “corrections” responding to this approach. We are all beneficiaries of this extraordinary work.

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| Translation |



## Joking relations

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*Translated from the French by Jane I. Guyer*

**Translator's Abstract:** This article brings together published ethnographic evidence from North America, Melanesia, Australia, and Africa to define a type of “relationship”—usually, but not exclusively, of kinship and affinity—which allows joking, teasing, and even insult and bullying in societies where respectful address is otherwise important. These practices are specific to certain peoples, but widespread and strikingly similar enough to merit close attention as a general human phenomenon. They also resemble practices in our own societies in instances where people escape from excessive formality into play. They are not, however, reducible to social psychological motivation. The relationships designated as “joking relations” are often between particular kin, affines, and marriageable categories in prescriptive marriage systems. Seen in this way, they also pattern with formalized avoidance—for example, between a man and his mother-in-law, and with the broader system of exchange and hierarchy, even approaching the drama and contest of the agonistic gift exchange of the potlatch kind. Indeed, there are ceremonial, aesthetic, and religious aspects to joking relations. The ethnography, and their authors’ first interpretations, suggest that joking relations are systematically designated within social and kinship systems, where they define occasions and expressive forms for displaying particular dimensions of who one is.

**Keywords:** Joking, relationality, kinship and marriage, avoidance, social drama, potlatch

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This question connects to the whole set that we have been posing for many years: exchanges and hierarchies between members of clans and families amongst themselves and with those of allied families and clans: a social phenomenon altogether human. Its study will render visible, on the one hand, one of the origins of moral realities that are still striking from our own folklore, and also one of the origins of

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**Editor's note:** This essay is a translation of Mauss, Marcel. 1928. “Parentés à plaisanteries.” *Annuaire de l'École pratique des hautes études*. Section of Religious Sciences. Paris: Texts of a communication presented at the French Institute of Anthropology in 1926. We are grateful to Jane Guyer for her detailed translation.

less widely distributed, more developed phenomena: rivalries between kin and allied groups, in the potlatch in particular.<sup>1</sup>

## I

On this subject, let us consider some African tribes (Bantu). Mlle. [Lilias] Homburger, while mentioning the very numerous ceremonial expressions in black, Bantu and Nigritian areas, has very specifically reminded us of the meaning of the word *hlonipa*, in Zulu: “to be ashamed of.” In reality, the exact translation of this term into French is not possible; but the Greek word (in Greek in the text), and

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1. On these rivalries between kin, see *Rapport de l'école des hautes études* (1907, 1908, 1909, 1910, 1913, etc. . . . 1919, 1920, 1921). [Georges] Davy (*La foie jurée*, passim) and I have elucidated the question of these transmissions, hierarchies, and rivalries between kin and allies but only with respect to the *potlatch* and these contractual systems in the American Northwest and in Melanesia. Meanwhile, these phenomena, however important they be, are far from being the only ones or the only typical ones. Those with which we are concerned here are equally so.

All, moreover, are part off a vaster genre of institutions that we have proposed, many times (cf. Mauss 1925), that we call: systems of total prestations. In these systems, a group of men, ranked or not, owe to a certain number of other men, kin or allies, occupying a symmetrical or superior position, equal or inferior, or different due to sex, a whole series of both material and moral prestations (services, women, men, military support, ritual foods, honors, etc.) and the whole series of what one man can do for another. Generally these total prestations are accomplished from clan to clan, from age class to age class, from generation to generation, from one allied grouping to another. [Alfred William] Howitt (1904: 756–79) has given a good description of food exchanges of this kind in a considerable number of Australian tribes of the South East. Generally these prestations are made within groups, from one group to another, following the rank of individuals: physical, jural, and moral, very precisely determined, for example, by date of birth, and well displayed, for example, by placing in the camp-site, by debts of food, etc.

People will perhaps be surprised by these last remarks. They will believe that we are definitively abandoning the theories of L. H. Morgan (*Systems of consanguinity and affinity*; *Ancient society*, etc.) and those that they lend to [Émile] Durkheim on primitive communism, and the confusion of the individual within the community. There is nothing contradictory there. Societies, even those supposed to be deprived of the sense of the rights and duties of the individual, in fact give the individual an altogether precise position: to the right or left in the camp-site; the first or second in ceremonies, meals, etc. This is proof that the individual matters, but it is also proof that he matters exclusively as a socially determined being. Meanwhile, it does remain that Morgan and Durkheim, in the end, have exaggerated the internal formlessness of the clan and, as Malinowski makes me remark, have given insufficient space to the idea of reciprocity.\*

\*Erratum: Changes to the translation, first to correct a mistranslation from Mauss' original phrasing in French “système des prestations totales” (first sentence of the second paragraph in Footnote 1), and second to rephrase the wording of the last paragraph in Footnote 1, have been made on May 12, 2014 at 14:28 GMT. (Original release date: September 16, 2013 at 14:03 GMT.) —Author (Jane I. Guyer).

the verb (in Greek in the text) have very much the same sense: at one and the same time shame, respect, modesty and fear, especially religious fear, in English *awe*. Among those that inspire these sentiments are relations of one sex to the other, of mother-in-law to son-in-law, of father-in-law to daughter-in-law, to the older brother, and to the chief amongst the Zulu: similarly, and in addition, to the mother's brother<sup>2</sup> amongst the Ba-Thonga.

The reasons for these deferences are fundamental; very certainly, they give expression to a certain number of relationships, above all religious, economic, and juridical, in the interior of the family or allied groups. We previously proposed, in 1914, at the Ethnographic Congress of Neuchâtel, an interpretation of mother-in-law avoidance from this information, and in particular, from Zulu and Thonga documents. These latter, which we owe to [Henri Alexandre] Junod, show that mother-in-law avoidance gradually diminishes in proportion to the discharge of the *lobola*, the husband's bridal payments; the mother-in-law, in this case anyway, is a kind of consecrated creditor.<sup>3</sup>

But these relations have their opposites, which, meanwhile of the same kind, by their same nature and function, are able, like an antithesis to a thesis, to serve towards the explanation of the genre in its entirety. In the face of (in Greek in the text), there is the (in Greek in the text);<sup>4</sup> in the face of respect there is insult and breach of manners, there is bullying and ease; in the face of boundless duty without counterpart, there can be unlimited rights, even without reciprocity, in certain cases. The populations improperly termed primitive, the people referred to as primitive, in reality a very great number of classes and people amongst our own, still in our own day, do not use moderation in their politeness nor their rudeness. We ourselves have known such states of excessive daring and insolence towards

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2. On this relation between the mother's brother and the nephew = son-in-law, see Radcliffe-Brown (1924: 542–45). Radcliffe-Brown has seen these institutions function in the Tonga Islands and in Bantu Africa; he has even made one of the comparisons that we make further on. But the exclusive aim of Radcliffe-Brown is to explain the relationship of the uncle to his sister's son in these societies. We are perfectly satisfied to accept the interpretation that he gave to it (*ibid.*: 550), and its attachment to the *lobola* (payment for the fiancée and wife). We do not accept the hypothesis that this is sufficient to explain the position of the maternal uncle.

3. The progressive attenuation of the avoidance of the mother-in-law is attested equally among the Ba-Ila; mother-in-law avoidance is more a practice of the engaged couple, and partially ceases at the moment of the giving of the hoe at the moment of marriage.

That this taboo has its origin in a sort of contract between the son-in-law and his wife's mother, entering into effect as soon as there is sexual contract or the promise of a contract, is clearly evident in the practices of a tribe of the Nilotic group, the Lango. The taboo is observed even in the case of clandestine sexual relations. Often these come to be known by the mother of the girl, simply by virtue of the fact that the lovers avoid her. Furthermore, in the case of a successful hunt, he should deposit one share of the kill in the granary of this kind of mother-in-law.

4. This is Mauss' original phrasing. We have been unable to track down the specific text—and thus the actual Greek terms—Mauss is referencing here. If any readers are familiar with Lilius Homburger's work on Bantu linguistics and might know what text to consult, please do inform the editors at HAU. A list of Homburger's published work can be found in the Bantu Online Bibliography, <http://goto.localnet.net/jfmaho/bob.pdf>. —Ed.

some people; excessive timidity, embarrassment, and absolute constraint towards others. But there seems to exist a type of moral, religious, and economic phenomena, grouping quite numerous human institutions, at least at a certain degree of development,<sup>5</sup> that correspond to this description. [Robert] Lowie, and after him, [Paul] Radin have proposed to give to them the name of joking relationships, *parentés à plaisanteries*, a name well chosen. It is towards this kind of phenomenon that we would like to display an extended interest; if only for encouraging new observations as long as these are still possible.

The same as relations of respect, joking relations are quite well indicated by Junod amongst the Ba-Thonga. Unfortunately, this author has not pushed the study of excessive familiarity very far, and the definition of allied kin who are submitted to these practices is poorly specified, except for cases that concern: the mother's brother and sister's son relationship; and that of the husband with the junior sisters of his wife (so possible wives for him).<sup>6</sup> Radcliffe-Brown has devoted a whole work to this position of the sister's son and his rights with regard to his maternal uncle in Bantu and Hottentot areas. We are certain that ties affording rights of abuse are very widespread and also generalized to many relationships in Bantu areas; they classify together quite well those people to whom one is owing (particularly one's wife's father) and people from whom one is owed. But our research is neither sufficiently extended nor sufficiently broadened in this

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5. In fact the system of total prestations, which includes the system of joking relations, does not seem to be developed in Australia in the sense that we are following; respect is more the rule. The only example of joking that I have found attached to precise kin relations is not very important; and is found only in only one tribe, the Wakelbura; it concerns only a child, an only child; they give him the name of "little finger" (= the fifth finger; the Wakelbura call their children by the order of birth, according to the number of the fingers). Muirhead specifies that "this joking is only permitted towards the boy and while he is small, and only for the children of brothers and sisters through the mother. The wider kin do not join in this teasing" (Howitt 1904: 748). In general there seems only to be developed: the system of avoidances, most of the time absolute or almost so, and linguistic indirection, if not by etiquette, vis-à-vis the older or younger sister, in accordance with the kinship systems, and vis-à-vis the mother- and father-in-law. Avoidances developed here before joking. In any case, the two latter are clearly tied to the system of total prestations, which is itself strongly emphasized. Example: Arunta: etiquette tied to the gift of hair (Spencer and Gillen [1899] 1904: 465); Urabunna: linked to the giving of food to the father-in-law (ibid.: 610). Among the Unmatjera, Kaitish, and Arunta, food seen by the father-in-law becomes taboo. "There has been *equilla tunma* (projection) of his odour onto it." Among the Warramunga there is giving of food but no taboo. Among the Binbinga, the Anula, the Mara, Spencer and Gillen establish the existence of a taboo but not of language, but of the face of the father-in-law; while intelligently remarking: "This trait altogether constant in gifts of food to the father-in-law could be associated in its origin, with the idea of a sort of payment for the wife." Following [J. R. van] Ossenbruggen, we have given another interpretation of these practices (Mauss 1925: 57).

We see in which direction we must search to explain part of the etiquette. But a complete demonstration would fall outside our subject. And these indications serve only to reposition joking with a more general framework.

6. Joking with the wife of the maternal uncle, who will become the wife of the nephew on her widowhood, etc.



ethnographic province, where the observers may also have overlooked many factual aspects.

The two groups of societies where these customs are most in evidence, and which have been the best studied, are those of the American Prairie and those of the islands of Melanesia.

It is amongst the Crow Indians that Lowie had the merit of identifying, naming, and specifying joking relations for the first time. He recorded them there first of all between “sons of fathers” (that is between clan brothers); then, amongst the Crow and Blackfeet, between the group of brothers-in-law and that of sisters-in-law (that is between permitted husbands and permitted wives); amongst these latter the language is extremely licentious, even in public and even before kinsmen. He then discovered the same practices amongst the Hidatsa between sons of the brothers of fathers (who are not clan brothers; the clan being here, as is normal in Sioux country, traced in the female line). Amongst the Hidatsa, like the Crow, joking relations carry not only this right to rudeness, but further give an authority of censorship: through their joking, they exert a true moral surveillance of one over the other. The “myth of origin” of the institution amongst the Crow even reduces it to this purely ethical theme.<sup>7</sup> Since then, Lowie has recorded these relations amongst the Comanche, but not the Shoshone, who are meanwhile their race-brethren; amongst the Creek, and the Assiniboine. No doubt that this “trait” of “civilization” is very characteristic of this region.

It is also in a Sioux tribe, the Winnebago, that Radin encountered the most developed form and has studied it the best.<sup>8</sup> In principle, a man is extremely reserved and polite with everyone of his own kin and affines. To the contrary, he never ceases to make fun of the following kin and affines: children of fathers’ brothers and mothers’ brothers (that is, cross cousins, permitted husbands and wives), mothers’ brothers, sisters- and brothers-in law.<sup>9</sup> “He does it” (sharp teasing) “each time he has the chance to do so, without the other being able to take offense.” In general and practically, this teasing hardly lasts longer than the time it takes to enter into the matter at hand; and it is reciprocal. And Radin notes with subtlety that one of their reasons for being could have been “that they procure a respite from the constant formality that impedes relations of ease and comfort with all close kin.” Religious respect is in fact compensated by the secular insolence between people of the same generation who are united by quasi-matrimonial ties. It remains only the maternal uncle, whose singular position is best marked in Melanesia.

The American observers have been very struck by the singularity of these practices. They have a vast field to work and have hardly emerged from it. They

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7. The custom is founded on the final phrase “No, I will not kill him, my joking relations would make fun of me.”
  8. Even the name of the custom is borrowed from the Winnebago language. “If they permit a liberty with respect to someone who doesn’t belong to one of the preceding categories, this person asks : “what joking relationship have I got with you?”
  9. Radin was a little perplexed by his notion of the mother’s clan. But when kinship is reckoned by groups, when it is classificatory, whether in the male or female line, *marriage between cross-cousins is always permitted, save for an explicable exception.*

have slightly exaggerated the originality and almost given up offering an explanation of these phenomena. Radin limits himself to remarking how all these relations are either in the female line among the Winnebago, or between people having reciprocal matrimonial rights over one another. Lowie, as for him, has at least worked at comparison. Under the title, equally apposite, of “privileged familiarity,” he brings them together with Melanesian data; but he believes these to be less typical. In our own sense, however, these are equally clear, and even further, they lead us toward the explanation.

[W. H. R.] Rivers had seen the great importance of these relations, in particular in the Banks Islands. He studied at length the institution of the *poroporo*, which is clearly in evidence there. Kin are classified into people who *poroporo* each other and those who do not *poroporo*. Practical jokes, inflicted penalties, license in language and gesture contrast with the correctness towards other kin. The husband of the father’s sister is one of these favorite targets, with regard to whom they employ altogether special language. *Poroporo* relations are almost the same as for the Winnebago: people of the same generation in the clan into which one marries, plus the junior brothers and the maternal uncle or, rather, the maternal uncles (since we are here, like with the Sioux, in a classificatory kinship system). The only difference concerns the brother’s wife whom one can only *poroporo* a little (in this case it is a question of kin in practice and no longer of kin by right). Rivers recorded the same institutions in the Torres Islands.

[Charles Elliot] Fox, instructed moreover by Rivers to whom he had conveyed the findings, described this complex (ensemble) of contrasting institutions for San Cristobal (archipelago in the East Solomon Islands). Serious prohibitions weigh on all sisters and on the senior brother—a normal state of affairs in Melanesia—and also—abnormally—on cross cousins.<sup>10</sup> To these taboos are opposed the excesses and liberties that hold for nephew and maternal uncle with respect to each other; the nephew having the right, extraordinary but normal, of being, in spite of his age, the prescribed intermediary in the matrimonial negotiations of his uncle—since he can address him and, being from their clan, he can also approach the kin of the girl. The father’s sister has an equally remarkable position vis-à-vis her nephew; she is very free with him.

These institutions have long been known in New Caledonia. Father [Paul Woodbury] Lambert has well described, like all the previous authors, taboos toward the sister, so obvious and important that they have served as the point of

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10. The reason for this rather rare taboo is probably the following: the people of San Cristobal, above all those of the Bauro district, very probably and quite recently have changed their kinship system, and as a consequence, their terminology. In the past, one had to marry a cross-cousin (son of the mother’s brother against daughter of the father’s sister). Then for diverse reasons they moved to forbid this marriage rule. Marriage on San Cristobal being absolutely normless and unregulated, they told Fox “We marry the *mau* (daughter of the father’s sister) because we cannot marry the *naho* (her mother).” The cause of this deregulation is the marked gerontocracy of this little island. It means that one does not marry a father’s sister’s daughter, a person of one’s own generation, but a person in the generation below one’s own. As a result of this marriage becoming the rule, cross-cousins are precisely forbidden, exactly like brothers and sisters. The custom is the same in the districts of Pariginia and Arodi; and the same on Kahua.

departure for a whole theory, for another observer, [J. J.] Atkinson; the senior brother and the father-in-law are less respected, but incomparably more than elsewhere. In this regard, Father Lambert has well shown what extraordinary rights to plunder, what extravagant bullying are allowed between cross cousins, each by the other: the *bengam* or *pe bengam*. A sort of perpetual contract unites them and trains them in absolute privileges of one over the other, where rivalries are born and grow, where endless teasing marks the license that each has with respect to the other, their intimacy and their boundless contestations. The mother's brother and sister's son treat each other in the same way;<sup>11</sup> but, differently from the people of the Banks Islands and the rest of Melanesia, Fiji included, the sister's son has fewer rights than the uncle of the same line.

## II

It is a little early to give an explanation of these rules. These matters are relatively poorly known and not numerous; but it is possible to indicate what route to take to search for plausible justifications.

First of all, these institutions have one very clear function. Radin could see it. They express an emotional state that is psychologically defined: the need to relax tensions; a live-and-let-live that gives respite from deportment that is too stiff. A rhythm is established whereby contrary states of heart succeed one another without danger. The reserve of daily life looks for a counter-state and finds it in indecency and rudeness. We ourselves still have this kind of sudden change of mood: soldiers escaping from standing at arms; pupils needling each other in the schoolyard; gentlemen releasing themselves in the smoking room from overlong courtesies towards the women. But this is no place for commenting too long. This psychology and this ethic explain the possibility alone of these phenomena; only the consideration of diverse social structures, practices and collective representations can reveal the real cause.

One could say that within a social group there is a certain constant dose of respect and disrespect, of which the members of the group are capable, portioned out unequally upon the diverse members of this group. But then—particularly within politico-domestic groups, whose linked segments constitute the tribes to which we have referred—we need to see why certain relations are, so to say, sacred and certain others are so profane that vulgarity and baseness govern reciprocal attitudes. It is clear that we should not search for a single cause for these phenomena. It is in the nature of each domestic relationship and in its function that we must find a reason for such disparate and diverse operations. It is insufficient to say that it is natural, for example, that a soldier would avenge being fed up with the punishments of the corporal; there has to be an army and a military hierarchy for this to be possible. Similarly, it is due to the constitution of the family group itself that certain relations are protected by the code of manners and others are the natural object of injustices and insults, or at least are the victims of license of bad taste. Finally, if these diverse practices and sentiments, if these impulses of

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11. [Maurice] Leenhardt will speak in detail of practices of this kind that he observed in New Caledonia. And we know that these details will be important.

domestic structure express its hierarchies, it is because they correspond to the collective representation that these domestic groups make of themselves and that each member applies to their own share of it. It is on the basis of a sort of ranking of religious and moral values that the prominent people of the family, the clan and allied clans are classified. It is by following this ranking that these diverse and successive attitudes are distributed across time and person.

One could direct research and observation along the following paths.

The ceremonies and interdictions that circumscribe certain relations are beginning to be sufficiently studied, even if not sufficiently understood. Most of them have multiple causes. For example, the mother-in-law is obviously, at one and the same time: a woman of the forbidden generation within the marriageable phratry or in the allied and marriageable clan; she is also the person who, in the case of male descendants who are more or less recognized, is the sister of one's father and through whose shared blood with his wife one has direct connection; she is the "old" person with whom one communicates unduly through her daughter and of whom the sight can "age the son-in-law"; she is the inexorable creator of the "sexual field" that the man cultivates; the owner of the blood of the children who will be born from the marriage; she symbolizes the dangers of the feminine principle, those of the foreign blood of the wife of which she is the creator, and one transfers to her the avoidances, that one takes vis-à-vis one's own wife only at the time of the marriage, menstruation, war, or great expiatory periods. She is the constant object of a number of sentiments concentrated together and all relating, as we see, to her defined position with respect to the son-in-law.<sup>12</sup>

In the same way one can classify joking relations, but one by one and in each society. We can even be surprised that they lend themselves so well to grouping into kinds, and that comparable similarities can be found so far apart, governed by similar structures. Most of these relations are those between allies, to address the vulgar expressions; since we would like better to say just allies and not speak only of kinship in these cases. Among the tribes of the American prairie as in those of Melanesia, it is above all people of the same age, groups of brothers- and sisters-in-law, potential spouses, who exchange familiarities corresponding to the possibility of sexual relations; this licensed behavior is as natural as the taboos that protect the women of the clan, mothers and sisters and daughters of these women descending in the female line, are more serious; especially in the case of brothers-in-law, obligations are complicated by military service and by those that result from sister exchange and the rights that keep the brother-in-law devoted to protection of his sister (theme of the story of Blue-Beard). Of practices that are still tenacious with us between Valentines, those that are operate between young men and maids of honor during the wedding season, offer quite well an idea of these customs that regulate collective contractual relations between groups of potential brothers-in-law: opposition and solidarity intermixed and alternating, which is normal above all in areas of classificatory kinship. [Arthur Maurice] Hocart has already noted these institutions amongst the Ba-Thonga, and this characteristic of brothers-in-law, "gods" to each other. This expression "god" marks moreover not only a religious quality, but a moral quality that also belongs to the gods: superiority of rights: for

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12. We resume here a study of mother-in-law avoidance, in Australia and Bantu Africa, a study that we reserve ourselves to develop elsewhere.

example the rights on the goods of *bengam* cousins in New Caledonia, or the sister's son in Fiji, in New Caledonia to on those of one's uncle among the Ba-Thonga.

Rivers and Hocart have already likened *poroporo* relations and the system of abuses that they entail to the well-known and even classic Fijian institutions of the Fijian *vasu* and to the regular plunder of the maternal uncle by his nephew, in particular in noble and royal families where the *vasu* serves, one says, to collect tribute. For this institution and *tauvu* kinship, Hocart has even proposed an explanation, one that has not had the success it merits. He starts from the observation of Junod concerning the sister's son [treated as if he were a] *chief*. He shows that the sister's son is clearly considered in Fiji a *vu*, a god by his uncle and he stands by this.

We may be permitted to add a hypothesis to this notation. We should consider not only the jural position, but the mythical position that every individual has in the clan. Well, this can be a reason why the nephew could thus be superior to his uncle. In all societies, as in the American North-West, [where] people believe in the reincarnation<sup>13</sup> of the ancestors in a set order; in this system, the sister's son (whether descent is traced in the male or female line has little relevance<sup>14</sup>), belonging by the spirit that he incarnates to the generation of the father of his uncle, has all the authority over him. He is "chief" for him, as the Ba-Thonga say. Similarly, in some systems (very clearly among the Ba-Thonga) the individual of the third generation has exactly the same position as the one of the first and one of the fifth, and since in certain other systems (Ashanti,<sup>15</sup> Chinese dynasties<sup>16</sup>) due to the crossing of two descent lines, it is the individual of the fifth generation who reincarnates his great-great-grandfather, we can understand how a child might have authority over a kinsman of a generation just prior to his own but subsequent to those of the ancestors that he reincarnates. The proof is that it suffices for the number of generations and reincarnations to have another point of origin that, to the contrary, the maternal uncle would have superior rights to his nephew, which is

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13. We have returned very many times, in our work cited above, to this question of reincarnations; it is amongst those designated that prestations operate; they often work in the guise of living representatives of the ancestors; these latter figuring in dances, appearing in possession, noted by names, titles, and personal names.

14. As long as the second generation intervenes for one part, and for reasons that would take too long to explain, this obliges them, in this reckoning, to leap one generation.

15. The finest practice of this type that I know is the one that [Robert Sutherland] Rattray (1923: 38, 39) noted among the Ashanti: When he asked if one could marry a great-great-grand-daughter, "they replied by an exclamation of horror and that 'it's a red light for us.' This is further proved by the name of the great-grand-son and all those of his generation. This name is *nana n' ka*" so ('grandson don't touch my ear'). A simple touch by a great-grandson or a great-grand-niece on the ear of their great-grandfather is said to cause his immediate death." The great-grandson is a sort of dangerous and living "double."

16. This is a theme that [Marcel] Granet (*Danses et légendes de la Chine ancienne*, passim) has extensively developed in numerous places with respect to these stories and genealogies of the Chinese dynastic mythologies.

the New Caledonian case.<sup>17</sup> We can add that, in certain cases, the maternal uncle is also the one to whom one owes one's wife, the father-in-law, as Radcliffe-Brown notes for numerous Bantu peoples, among the Hottentots and in the Tonga Islands.

Let us bring in the other interpretation of Radcliffe-Brown: the maternal uncle being the male representative of the female principle, from the mother's blood, "male mother" as the Ba-Tonga vigorously insist, then "mother who is male" would be exact also, as a translation, and would explain why he is ordinarily ranked below and not above the nephew. These then are several causes which would suffice, each in its own way, but which have almost everywhere functioned more or less simultaneously, and one understands, for example, that the avoidance of the mother should have been compensated by a sort of systematic profanation of her brother.

In any case, it is clear that joking relations correspond to reciprocal rights and that, generally, when these rights are unequal, it is to a religious inequality that this corresponds.

Even more, we are clearly here at the doorstep of practices known under the name of *potlatch*. We know that these practices are identifiable by their agonistic character, by the competitive generosity of the contests: of force, grandiosity, challenges on the occasion of insult, and at the same time by hospitalities. But in these institutions of respectful relations and joking relations, which are simpler institutions, in these exchanges of obligations and exchanges of teasing, which are very visible in the Banks Islands' *poroporo*, we can see the roots of these obligatory rivalries. Moreover, the *poroporo* exists alongside the *potlatch* in Melanesia, like a matrix from which the newborn is not yet detached. In addition, *potlatches* are attached, at least in Melanesia and North America, to diverse degrees of kinship, and diverse alliances and sponsorships. So it is these, then, at least in this case, that should enter into the general category of customs of respect and bullying between people of the same generation within clans and across allied clans, and consequently between people of alternate generations representing yet other generations of ancestors. We see here the bridge that joins the institutions of the *potlatch*, so infinitely developed and the rougher, simpler institutions where the avoidances and manners exist alongside and oppose themselves to insults and disrespect. There we have a first conclusion of its logical history.

We can also grasp a good number of already established types of bullying. In particular, let us note certain functional similarities within these likenesses of "persecution" so widespread in the American North-West and likewise on the Prairie. The customs converge in composing a kind of declaration of who one is.

They can be likened, then, to very large systems of moral phenomena. They allow us even to entertain these practices as a way of studying certain of the most

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17. This position of the individual of a previous generation becoming superior to an individual of the generation of his father (mother's brother and father's brother), by virtue of being a classificatory "grandfather" in classification has been noticed among the Banaro of New Guinea by [Richard] Thurnwald. In the English edition of his work, he calls this kind of kin, the "goblin grandchild"; he likens this kin relation to the *tauvu* kin of Fiji.

widespread of customs.<sup>18</sup> When we consider them along with their opposites, when we compare formal manners with familiarity, respect with ridicule, authority with scorn, and when we see how they are distributed among different persons and different social groups, we understand better their justifications.

These researches also have an evident linguistic interest. Dignity and crudeness of language are important elements in these practices. It is not only forbidden subjects that they address, but forbidden words that they deploy. The manners of language and class (classes by age and by birth) become comprehensible when one studies why, and vis-à-vis whom, people violate them systematically.

Finally, these works could clarify, if we pushed them further, the nature and function of important aesthetic elements, naturally mixed, as everywhere, with the moral elements of social life. Besides, obscenities, satirical songs, insults towards men, mocking representations of certain sacred beings, are at the source of the performance; just as the respects shown to men, the gods, and the heroes, nourish the lyrical, the epic, the tragic.

### Translator's note on references

The following is a list of the works that are likely to have been the ones from which Marcel Mauss drew for his analysis. There is no reference section in the original text, so for works mentioned there but lacking a bibliographical reference in our reconstituted list, this is because we have not been able to find them in time for inclusion. The sources on which Mauss drew are likely to be from the same corpus as those he mobilized for the "Essay on the gift," which was published only one year previously (1925) to the first presentation of "Joking relations" (1926). The review section of the 1923/24 edition (published 1925) of *L'Année Sociologique* offers a source from which we can know for certain which works he was familiar with. The correspondences could be traced more exactly by examining these sources, Mauss's reviews, and the current text.

As a major organizer and contributor to the book and article review section of the journal *L'Année Sociologique*, under the supervision of his uncle, Émile Durkheim, Mauss probably saw dozens of titles every year. He himself regularly wrote reviews. Between 1912 and 1925, there was a long hiatus in publication, due to World War I, the loss of junior colleagues in the conflict, and the death of Durkheim himself in 1917. Mauss took up leadership of the newly constituted series for its first edition of the "New series" in 1925 (for the year 1923/24). The first edition after suspension contains a eulogy to the dead of the group, along with an account of what each had been working on. The famous "Essay on the gift" follows, as the lead article of this edition. The final section is devoted to reviews. It appears to summarize work that had been read for the journal during the hiatus, and it clearly aims to reinsert the AS school into the ongoing scholarship of the time. It runs to 800 pages, and includes reviews of 219 named works, plus some bibliographical notices, written by a total of 1,059 authors named alphabetically in

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18. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, to whom I showed a first version of this work, indicated a certain number of ideas to me on this subject, and very important practices that he is keeping for publication.

a page-referenced list. By a rough estimation, I think that Mauss himself wrote possibly up to half of the pages of these review articles or with colleagues.<sup>19</sup> He reviewed very detailed ethnographies as well as theoretical works, written in English and German as well as French. The “Essay on the gift” and the present article on joking relations clearly draw on his extraordinarily broad reading.

Works starred in this list were either reviewed in the journal (1925 edition), or other, less ethnographic, works by the same author were reviewed. The others are the most logical sources, by date of publication. Where the date is much later, this represents the presently most available edition of that work. —Trans.

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19. See: Guyer, Jane I. 2010. “The true gift: Thoughts on *L’Année Sociologique* edition of 1923/4.” *Mauss Vivant: the Living Mauss. Revue du M.A.U.S.S.* 36: 238–53. —Trans.

20. Granet’s *Danses et légendes de la Chine ancienne* (1926) was dedicated to Mauss, so it was possibly read in manuscript form. —Trans.



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## Parentés à plaisanteries

Résumé de la traductrice : Cet article rassemble des faits ethnographiques provenant de publications portant sur l'Amérique du Nord, la Mélanésie, l'Australie et l'Afrique, pour définir un type de « relation » (généralement mais pas exclusivement d'ordre de la parenté et de l'affinité) qui autorise à plaisanter, taquiner, et même insulter ou intimider, ce dans les sociétés où l'adresse respectueuse est autrement importante. Ces pratiques sont spécifiques à certains peuples, mais répandues et étonnamment assez similaires pour mériter une attention particulière en tant que phénomène humain en général. Elles se rapprochent aussi de pratiques dans nos propres sociétés comme lorsque les gens échappent par le jeu à un formalisme excessif. Elles ne sont cependant pas réductibles à une motivation psychologique sociale. Les relations désignées comme « parentés à plaisanterie » sont souvent entre parents, affins, ou ceux épousables dans les systèmes de mariage de type prescriptif. Vu sous cet angle, elles modèlent aussi l'évitement formalisé (comme par exemple entre un homme et sa belle-mère), et l'ensemble du système d'échange et de hiérarchie, s'approchant même du drame et de la compétition propre à l'échange agonistique du type potlatch. En effet, il existe des aspects cérémoniels, esthétiques, et religieux des parentés à plaisanterie. Les ethnographies, et les premières interprétations de leurs auteurs, suggèrent que les relations à plaisanterie sont systématiquement désignées au sein des systèmes sociaux et de parenté, où elles définissent des occasions et des formes d'expression pour afficher des dimensions particulières de qui l'on est.

Marcel MAUSS (1872–1950) was Chair of Sociology at the Collège de France. A central member of the *Année Sociologique*, the founder of *l'Institut Français de Sociologie* and *l'Institut d'Ethnologie*, and a politically active socialist, Mauss' oeuvre has had a tremendous impact on anthropology and political activism throughout the twentieth century and, indeed, up until the present day. Among his more famous works (translated into English) are: *The gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies* ([1922] 1990, Routledge); *Outline of a general theory of magic* (with Henri Hubert [1902] 2001, Routledge); *Primitive classification* (with Émile Durkheim [1902] 1963, University of Chicago Press); and *Sacrifice: Its nature and function* (with Henri Hubert, [1898] 1964, University of Chicago Press).