Fictive Widowhood in Rural And Urban Mexico

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Ce rapport préliminaire décrit le phénomène du veuvage fictif tel que pratiqué à Jalisco, Mexique. Il semble bien que ce fait social s'étende non seulement à tout le Mexique mais aussi à certains pays de l'Amérique latine.

Neither of the authors has done specific field investigation on this topic, but while residing in Mexico both have had the opportunity to witness the phenomenon.[1] Later, mutual discussion of our experiences and added information contributed by Celia Garcia de Weigand led to this article. Although we fully realize that there are many unanswered questions brought up by this preliminary inquiry, we hope that future field work will produce additional data. Before discussing fictive widowhood, a few general statements about marriage, divorce, and widowhood in Mexico are appropriate.

Status of the Married Woman

In Mexico marriage is regarded as the natural state of a mature woman. An unmarried woman of marriageable age is often regarded with a mixture of pity and sympathy unless well-known extraneous circumstances exist, such as the need to care for elderly parents. The married woman has domestic and procreative roles, and the degree to which she fulfills these roles helps determine the respect patterns accorded her. She is usually supported economically, has more socially approved physical and cultural mobility, and a wider circle of friends and acquaintances than during her unmarried career. Also, she usually has more freedom in her personal choice of leisure activities, novels, movies, etc., than has an unmarried woman. She has the prestige of being a housewife, and is freer to participate in communal activities such as women's social functions, both sacred and secular. Extension of dyadic contracts (Foster 1961)

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occur with the acquisition of affinal relatives and with increased suitability to become a *comadre* (accompanied by her husband). Moreover, a married woman can and should become a mother.

Once the married state has been established, four alternatives to it exist: (1) separation, (2) divorce, (3) widowhood, and (4) fictive widowhood.

Separation and Divorce

The type of separation we are concerned with is the variety brought on by incompatibility of one or both partners. This is physical separation of residence and usually precedes divorce, which under Mexican civil law terminates the marriage contract.

The divorcee has an extremely negative side to her status, as she is often regarded as having failed as a wife and as a woman. She is often seen to be in sexual competition with both unmarried and married women. Divorcees are often the subject of unrelenting gossip, suspicion, speculation, and examination for possible transgressions. Sometimes the divorcee becomes the center for a series of moves designated to isolate her within the community. A divorcee occasionally suffers complete disownment and ostracism by consanguineal kin though her mother will normally not abandon her, and her sisters are generally more loyal than her brothers and her father. The divorcee usually cannot maintain relations with former affines and, of course, is left without an estate when her ex-husband dies. She may become a *comadre*, at times accompanied by her brother, though her participation in this role is infrequent. Becoming a *comadre*, however, depends in part upon the divorcee's personal behavior patterns.

The divorcee cannot remarry within the Catholic Church except in rare instances. She can remarry civilly, but would be considered by the Church as living in sin. She normally may not receive communion after remarriage (although this can depend upon personal arrangement with the local priest). If the divorcee does remarry without Church permission, however, she may gain some degree of social acceptance within the community, particularly if she is considered to merit it, and, especially, if the new union produces children. Occasionally the children of the divorcee's first marriage may suffer from some social stigma, however, this usually depends

upon the reasons for the divorce and is especially true only if the mother was at fault. The divorcee generally reverts to the use of her maiden name, but retains the title *Señora.* The children retain the father's surname, although direct reference to that name is not always made.

Widowhood

Although a widow maintains most of the perogatives of a married woman, such as a greater social mobility, she also loses some, for example, she may no longer bear children with social approval. A widow can maintain relations with her affines, and she may become a *comadre,* accompanied by her brother. A widow is more attractive as a marriage partner than a divorcee because she may have an inheritance, and she can also be remarried within the Church. The widow often retains or gains a high status in regard to the Church and community although her economic condition may decline. A widow cannot lose this position though, of course, it may be modified by remarriage. Sympathy and understanding accompany her status. The widow maintains her deceased husband's name, and can add the designative title *viuda de* before it. She is addressed as *Señora* . . . and occasionally as *Señora* . . . *viuda de* . . . She is referred to as *la viuda de* . . . or *la viuda* . . . She can continue to utilize symbols of marriage, such as wedding bands and also has the right to overtly express her status in dress.

Fictive Widowhood

A fictive [2] widow is a divorced or separated woman who professes widowhood while her former spouse or spouse is living. If never divorced, she becomes a real widow upon her spouse's death and also may have claim upon his estate. In cases of divorce and subsequent death of the spouse, she still maintains her fictive widowhood role, but has no claim upon his estate. The function of fictive widowhood is to strike a middle ground between an undesirable divorcee status and an impossible, but ideally sought after, widow position.

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[2] The type of fiction referred to is defined as : "an intentional fabrication; a convenient assumption that overlooks known facts in order to achieve an immediate goal" (*Webster Third New International Dictionary,* 1964).

A combination of separation, divorce and widowhood occurs within fictive widowhood, and usually in a set sequence. The first stage is normally separation, with or without the fiction being initiated. The second stage is divorce. At this point the fiction is maintained (or more rarely initiated for the first time) or the woman acquires an overt divorcee status.

A fictive widow may retain a few of the advantages of the married woman with the addition of sympathy and understanding because of her new position. This sympathy is different from that received by a real widow as reflected in the phrase *"Pobrecita, se murio su esposo"* (Poor woman, her husband died), something which would never be said of a fictive widow. The fictive widow loses much of her social mobility, for she cannot maintain her relationships with her affines. She may, however, become a *comadre,* usually with her brother standing in the spouse's stead.

The fictive widow will be accepted as such only if she adheres to the ideal of real widowhood in her social interactions. She can lose fictive status and become known publically as a divorcee if she does not adhere to most of these requisites. If she once loses the fictive status, she may actuallly acquire a lower status than the well-behaved, self-declared divorcee.

According to the Church, the fictive widow cannot remarry as long as her husband or ex-husband is living. If she is divorced and does remarry, latitude in receiving communion may be granted her. Life the divorcee, the fictive widow, once remarried, can attain a certain degree of social acceptance if she is seen to "behave well." The children of her first marriage do not usually bear any of their mother's divorcee stigma, but, under certain stress circumstances, her real status might be thrown up to them.

The fictive widow must have the co-operation of her immediate kin in order to perpetuate the masquerade of widowhood. Her consanguineal kin benefit from this lack of divorce stigma as much as she does. It is a reciprocal situation with reciprocal obligations. The woman's major obligation is to live the part of a widow whereas the family's obligations are to refer to and present her as a widow, especially to non-kin. However, horizontal *compadres* (Mintz and Wolf 1950) and very close friends are confided in as soon as, or

even before, the situation materializes. These individuals usually display sympathy and understanding and help perpetuate the fiction. There are, it must be stressed, true sympathetic feelings toward a deserving fictive widow.

If her family is of a relatively high community status, the masquerade will be more effective than if they are of a lower status. For example, if the family head it at or near the top of several vertical dyadic relationships (Foster 1963), the people below him will maintain the fiction in order to continue the relationship favorably. This situation can be reversed. People at or near the top of vertical relationships do not always have the same obligation to honor the fiction toward those below them.

The fictive widows in all of the Jalisco cases discussed below have reverted to their maiden names in introductions and signatures. The fictive widow never uses, again in the same area, the title *viuda* (widow) when signing her name or referring to herself by name, but uses the title *Señora*. The majority of the Jalisco cases do not continue to use overt symbols of the marriage bond, such as wedding bands.

The fictive widow discusses her real status as little as possible even among immediate kin. As knowledge of her real status becomes more public, occasional frank conversations with friends, and less often with acquaintances, are held for her, usually by *compadres* and/or immediate kin, to prevent misinformation from spreading. Though she may not always have adequate knowledge of the degree of success of the fiction, the immediate kin, *compadres*, and intimate friends can usually obtain this information for her.

In general, the older the fictive widow is, the better the masquerade seems to be tolerated in the community. There are several reasons for this. Sexual competition is feared by married female friends of the young fictive widow. Also, the young woman's knowledge of sexual matters is regarded by the parents of her unmarried friends as a disruptive factor in the latter's intersexual behavior.

Four case histories of fictive widowhood are presented below. One is taken from urban Mexico City and three are taken from small market towns within a 60-mile radius of Guadalajara, Jalisco.

The cases from Jalisco exemplify different patterns of fictive widowhood taken from twenty-six known occurrences. The example from Mexico City demonstrates that fictive widowhood occurs in urban Mexico as well. The case from Mexico City follows :

A young, lower middle-class girl, who had married a man suspected of homosexual tendencies, divorced him because, among other things, he had made improper advances toward two of her brothers. In order to protect herself and her child from the societal disapproval demonstrated toward divorcees in Mexico, her immediate family "passed" her as a widow. She lived with her parents even after she remarried.

Following are the Jalisco cases :

I. Consuelo had been treated badly by her husband since marriage. Her marriage had been both Church and civil. Beatings, irregular financial support, and infidelity were only part of the grievances. Her case was well-known among her relatives and neighbors and all felt very sympathetic toward her. Finally she could take no more abuse and moved from her family's town to another town of similar size where relatives resided. She asked her relatives to refer to her as a widow and to present her as such in the new surrounding so that she could start a new life. Her statements : "It would be more decent," and "I would have more respect from the people," show the social prejudice toward a separation status. Consuelo's husband attempted to locate her for about ten years. His motive was revenge; some say murder. He was unsuccessful and eventually divorced her quietly. As Consuelo's real status became slowly known throughout the new town, her mother and brothers began to discuss it with friends and newly acquired *compadres,* many of whom already knew and followed the fiction for respect motives. Actual dissemination of the knowledge of her real status was carefully noted by the family, *compadres,* and friends and frank discussions corrected any misinformation. Policy was still not to discuss the matter except when necessary, and people who learned her real status continued to refer to Consuelo as a widow even when she knew they knew differently. Her fictive widowhood was accepted in more face-to-face situations than is usually the case because the situation was known as "cruel." She remarried and had children. The children were told the truth as her real status became

public property. They, too, continued to refer to their mother as a former widow. Before remarriage Consuelo used her maiden name in introductions and signature. She removed her wedding bands at the time of separation and never wore widow's clothing.

II. Magda was also poorly treated by her husband, but many thought his actions within range of acceptability. She left him suddenly and moved from her family's town to Guadalajara. Her husband tried to find her and wanted a reconciliation, but she evaded him and contracted a divorce. Her ex-husband persisted in his attempts to locate her and stated that he wished to remarry her. He finally capitulated except to visit occasionally with his son, the only child, and even then in the company of his ex-mother-in-law, who was rather sympathetic toward him as a father. Magda asked her mother to refer to her as a widow when she returned to town. She stated that she hated her ex-husband, and went as far as to have his name removed from the birth certificate of their son. She forced the same promise from the rest of her family. She never wore her ring and never assumed widow's garbs. She used her maiden name in signature and introductions, but, as does every woman with children, maintained the title *Señora.* With her family's backing, she introduced herself rather aggressively as a widow, stating that her husband had been killed, even though nearly everyone in town knew he was alive. People maintained the fiction to her and her family's face, but gossip was rampant. When she began "behaving badly," specifically, running around with men, more and more people began referring to her as a divorcee. After several years of this even her family dropped the fiction. Her son, who was on his mother's side at first, gradually became disgusted with her behavior, and, at twenty years of age, sought out his father and got to know him. Magda continued to maintain the fiction long after everyone else had dropped it and refused to talk about her situation at all.

III. Doña Silvia was (and still is) among the rural elite — both socially and economically. She owns an entire village, large acreage in farm and pasture lands, orchards, stores in neighboring market towns, and several houses. She was married and divorced five times with no children from any of the marriages. She has always surrounded herself with her poorer relatives who constantly and publicly express their gratitude to her. Although most of her wealth

was inherited, she accumulated a considerable proportion by her own efforts. The divorce reasons most often (and most secretly) given are that the husbands tried to control her property and wealth. She would never stand for this. She still makes infrequent references to her marriages but freely announces that she is a divorcee. The people of her village, however (all of whom hold subservient positions toward her) occasionally refer to her as a widow. Anyone who would not show this or another mark of respect could expect economic reprisals. One offender was seriously wounded by a pistol shot from the Doña herself. In other words, her socio-economic position is so strong that her dependents are afraid not to maintain the fiction even though she does not entertain it herself. She continues to wear her expensive wedding rings but only because she enjoys jewelry.

Concluding Remarks

One respondent speculated that the occurrences of fictive widowhood in her town, in Jalisco, occurred on the average of once in fifty extended families. Concomitant with fictive widowhood is fictive widowerhood. Nine cases from rural Jalisco are known. They all involve the wife's infidelity and the reflection of this upon the male's *machismo* (manliness). Most often the male leaves town and does not welcome further questions about his marital status. The motives — to start a new life, nonrespectability of divorce, etc. — are much the same as the fictive widow's. The fictive nature of the relationship and the pattern of gradual community recognition of the true status also resemble fictive widowhood. Accompanying fictive widow — and widowerhood is a fictive orphan status. Four cases, again from rural Jalisco, are known. They all revolve around male children who spent unhappy childhoods, and, upon maturing, moved to different towns. In effect, they disowned their parents by stating that they were dead. No kin, however, will usually participate in this fiction and the word of the fictive orphan is the sole sources of the relationship.

Existent also is the phenomena of the unmarried mother who is making the dual claim of former marriage and then widowhood. This erases the stigma of sexual intercourse outside the married state and the illegitimacy of the child. These claims protect the mother, child, and mother's kin.

The situation we have reported from Jalisco is probably true for most of Mexico, for the cultural conditions that encourage fictive widowhood exist throughout that country. We have no detailed information for other parts of Latin America, but from the data given by a Venezuelan informant it seems likely that these fictive relationships are also found in other Latin countries.

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