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FICTIVE KIN AS SOCIAL CAPITAL IN NEW IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT: *Fictive kin, defined as family-type relationships, based not on blood or marriage but rather on religious rituals or close friendship ties, constitutes a type of social capital that many immigrant groups bring with them and that facilitates their incorporation into the host society. We describe three types of fictive kin systems in different immigrant populations and argue that their functions are similar across various ethnic groups and types of fictive kin relationships. Fictive kin systems expand the network of individuals who provide social and economic capital for one another and thereby constitute a resource to immigrants as they confront problems of settlement and incorporation. While anthropologists have long noted systems of fictive kin in premodern and modernizing societies, sociologists have paid little attention to fictive kin networks. We argue, however, that systems of fictive kin constitute an important part of the social networks that draw immigrants to a particular locale and provide them with the material and social support that enables them to become incorporated into a new and often hostile society. Data are derived from interviews with informants from various immigrant groups in Houston, Texas, and from a Yoruba community in Brooklyn, New York.*

“Fictive kin” (also called ritual kin) is a term that refers to a type of social relationship that anthropologists have described and analyzed in premodern and modernizing societies for more than fifty years. However, sociologists, who tend to focus more on modern, urban societies, have rarely examined fictive kin structures among the populations they study and have done little comparative or theoretical work regarding the structure and functions of fictive kin systems among different groups. By fictive kin we mean a relationship, based not on blood or marriage but rather on religious rituals or close friendship ties, that replicates many of the rights and obligations usually associated with family ties. In examin-

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ing a variety of new immigrant religious institutions in Houston, Texas, we are discovering how pervasive and important fictive kinship is in these populations. In this article we present some of our findings on fictive kin among new immigrant groups in an attempt to sensitize researchers to the importance of this type of social relationship for understanding ways in which immigrants deal with social problems that arise in the process of settlement and incorporation. The study is exploratory in that we did not set out systematically to study fictive kinship. Rather, in the course of studying religion among new immigrants, we stumbled upon the importance of the concept for understanding both their familial and their religious systems. Because we did not design our original study with fictive kinship as a primary focus, our purpose here is to argue, on the basis of our limited data, for the importance of the concept in immigrant communities and for the need for field researchers to include the concept in future studies.

Before the Immigration Reform Act of 1965, most immigrants to the United States were either Catholic or Protestant Europeans and familiar with the traditional system of godparents, namely, individuals who serve as ceremonial sponsors at baptism and confirmation and who assume special rights and obligations in regard to their godchildren. The "new immigrants" who arrived after 1965 brought with them fictive kin systems, also rooted in religion, that differ in structure and custom from the Christian system and fulfill far broader functions than they do for Americans of European descent. We describe various fictive kin systems among new immigrants and show how this institution provides social capital for them as they confront problems of settlement and incorporation into the host society.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Bourdieu's (1986) expansion of the concept "capital" to include social, cultural, and symbolic, as well as economic, resources provides sociologists with a set of analytic concepts that enrich our understanding of social stratification processes at both the individual and the aggregate levels. Here we concentrate on only one of these types of resources, social capital, and explore the role it plays in the well-being of immigrants. As defined by Bourdieu, social capital refers to positions and relationships in groupings and social networks, including memberships, network ties, and social relations that can serve to enhance an individual's access to opportunities, information, material resources, and social status.

Social networks constitute the specific aspect of social capital that has generated the most interest and research among sociologists during the past decade. Specifically, attention has been directed to the examination of the structures of ties that link individuals, as well as collectivities, and how they affect a variety of outcomes. The extent and types of social networks in which actions are embedded have been found to affect educational achievement (Coleman and Hoffer 1987), income (Boxman, DeGraaf, and Flap 1991), entry into organizations (Bridges and Villemez 1986; Montgomery 1992), perceived potential for career advancement (Ibarra 1995), and actual career mobility (Podolny and Baron 1997). In addition, numerous studies have documented how such networks influence whether and where to migrate (Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Pedraza 1991), return migration

and ties with the home country (Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994; Massey et al. 1987; Rodriguez 1987), and settlement experiences in the housing and labor markets (Baily and Waldinger 1991; Hagan 1994; Kwon, Ebaugh, and Hagan 1997; Massey et al. 1987; Rodriguez and Nuñez 1986).

Despite growing interest in the ways that social networks facilitate the settlement and incorporation of immigrants into a host society, the institution of fictive kin, which is widely shared by immigrant populations from Spanish-speaking countries, Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, has not been studied extensively. Fictive kin systems expand the network of individuals who are expected to provide social and economic capital for one another and thereby constitute a resource available to immigrants as they confront the problems of incorporation in a new and strange society. Nonetheless, a review of recent anthologies dealing with new immigrant groups and their family structures in the United States reveals that little attention has been paid to this phenomenon (e.g., Feagin 1978; Gleason 1992; McAdoo 1993; Mindel, Habenstein, and Wright 1988; Queen, Habenstein, and Quadagno 1985; Roschelle 1997; Takaki 1987; Taylor 1998; Zinn and Eitzen 1993). There are a number of articles that describe specific structures of fictive kin, especially the *compadrazgo* of Latin America; however, systems of fictive kin have not been studied across immigrant groups.¹ Perhaps the reason that sociologists overlook the existence and importance of fictive kin in new immigrant communities is that, historically, the institution has been studied by anthropologists, who focus primarily on non-Western and Mesoamerican societies, rather than on Western, industrialized ones.

We focus here on three types of fictive kin systems and show how each is structured in different immigrant communities. We then describe the functions that fictive kin serve and argue that these functions are similar across various ethnic groups and fictive kin types. Finally, we explore the implications of fictive kin for these communities, both for mitigating against the development of alienation and social disorganization and as a resource for the solution of problems. Data are derived from interviews with informants from various immigrant groups in Houston, Texas, and from a Yoruba community in Brooklyn, New York.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first systematic accounts of fictive kin by anthropologists focused on *compadrazgo* (e.g., Foster 1953; Mintz and Wolf 1950; Paul 1942), a concept that refers to a web of interpersonal relationships established primarily through participation in the Catholic ritual of baptism. This rite involves three individuals or groups of individuals: the initiate, usually a child, who is being baptized; the parents of the child; and the ceremonial sponsor(s) of the child. As a result of baptism, three sets of relationships are established. The first links the child and his or her ceremonial sponsors, one or more persons who are often, but not necessarily, outside the limits of the child's immediate biological family; the second links the parents to the child's ceremonial sponsor(s); and the third consists of ties between the sponsors (when there is more than one). The Catholic church also prescribes a sponsor or godparent to stand for a child at confirmation. This individual must be at least fourteen years old, of the same sex as the candidate, and not a parent or

baptismal godparent. Marriage godparents are also customary in some countries but not required by the Church. In some Latin American communities, godparenthood has been elaborated into the ceremonial sponsorship of houses, crosses, altars, carnivals, circumcision, the future crop, and commercial dealings. Nutrini and White (1977) describe thirty-one well-established occasions on which individuals enter *compadrazgo* relationships in rural Tlaxcalan.

Beginning in the 1950s, anthropologists began to document institutions comparable to *compadrazgo* in other societies and cultural traditions: Spain (Foster 1953; Pitt-Rivers 1958), Italy (Anderson 1956), eastern Turkey (Magnarella and Turkdogan 1973; Sertel 1971), Hungary (Fel and Hofer 1969), Yugoslavia (Hammel 1968), Greece (Aschenbrenner 1975a), Sri Lanka (Stirrat 1975), and Belgium (Vandekerskhove 1981). Although there are variations in the structure and functions of ritual kinship systems among these societies, each system is based on the Catholic practice of godparenthood established at baptism, and therefore there are common characteristics as well, including a spiritual affinity between godparent(s) and godchild, as well as between godparent(s) and biological parents; social and economic expectations; affective ties that extend beyond godparent-godchild to the adults involved in the co-parenthood relationship; proscription of sexual involvement and marriage among ritual kin; the integrative function of ritual kin networks for linking people of the same or different social classes; and prescriptions of respect and ritual etiquette on the part of godchildren toward their godparent(s), of biological parents toward the godparent(s) of their children, and of co-sponsors toward one another. As Gudeman (1975) argues, these obligations are expressions of underlying moral relationships; they are the outer signs of the spiritual bonds that are inherent in the Catholic tradition of baptismal sponsorship. As a result, ritual kin bonds, and the obligations inherent in them, take on a sacred dimension, become to some degree "spiritualized," and are deeply engrained in the moral culture of the society.

The anthropological literature also includes examples of ritual kin systems that are not embedded in a specific religious tradition, such as the *dharma-atmyor* kinship structure in rural Bangladesh described by Sarker (1980). In this system, fictive kin relationships are established among Hindus, among Muslims, between Hindus and Muslims, and between upper- and lower-caste Hindus. Kin types exist for such basic relationships as godfather, godmother, godsister, godbrother, and friend. The reasons for establishing such relationships are both social and economic. For example, couples who have no children may have a godchild or godchildren whom they treat as they would a natural child, or individuals who do not have blood brothers or sisters often take on godbrothers or godsisters whom they treat as blood brothers or sisters. Fictive kin relationships also make it possible, for example, for poor persons to ask influential persons of the village for financial assistance in exchange for taking care of them in their old age. *Dharma-atmyor* is established between two persons through a social ceremony in which the relationship is made public and mutual rights and duties are sanctioned by the community. The system is deeply embedded in cultural tradition, but it is not directly tied to religious practice.

Japan, likewise, has a fictive kin system that is unrelated to religious tradition, the *oyabun-kobun* (Ishino 1953). Persons usually unrelated by close kin ties enter

into a compact to assume obligations of a diffuse nature similar to those ascribed to members of one's immediate family. The relationship is established by means of a ceremony involving many of the expressive symbols of birth and marriage. The terms of address and the assignment of roles in the oyabun-kobun network are patterned on the Japanese family system: the leader becomes a ritual parent, and his followers become symbolic children. These "children," in turn, are ritual siblings to one another, and seniority among them is formally recognized. Like a blood-related family, this ritual family can extend over several generations.

Two exceptions to the dearth of literature on fictive kin among new immigrants are Li's (1977) historical study of Chinese immigrants and Fjellman and Gladwin's (1985) work on Haitians in South Florida. Li shows how fictive kin ties were developed by Chinese immigrants to cope with laws that sought to bar them from the United States. During the exclusionary era, one of the few classes exempted were children of Chinese-American citizens. Thus were born the "paper sons," Chinese men who claimed fictive kinship with a Chinese-American father. The Chinese Americans falsely reported sons born in China as a means of obtaining birth certificates, which could later be sold at great profit. Sometimes actual fictive kin relationships were established between Chinese-American "fathers" and their "paper sons." Often, however, the parties never knew each other. In the case of the Chinese, therefore, Li shows how fictive kin ties may be formed and may function as a response to existing immigration laws. Fjellman and Gladwin describe how a Haitian extended family system, inclusive of both biological and fictive kin, makes it possible for immigrants to survive, and in some cases prosper, under harsh conditions in South Florida. The wide range of blood and fictive kin can be called on for reciprocal support even when family members live in different cities and communities. For example, the Haitian Creole relationship of *kouzin* is considerably broader and involves more mutual obligations than the American counterpart, cousin. *Kouzins* may not be blood relatives at all but close friends of oneself and one's family.

Although most research on friendship networks among Anglos fails to document any type of fictive kin relations (e.g., Adams and Bliezner 1989; Rubin 1986), two studies of older Anglo women mention fictive kin. MacRae (1992) found that 40 percent of her sample of elderly women reported having at least one fictive kin relationship; and Rubenstein, Alexander, and Goodman (1991) discuss "constructed" kin ties among never-married, childless, older women. These relationships, however, are not embedded in deep cultural traditions that would make them normative or common in Anglo society. The proliferation of stepfamily relationships during the past several decades (Cherlin 1981; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991) and the increasing number of gay families (Weston 1991) are introducing a type of fictive kin or "quasi-kin" (as Furstenberg and Cherlin [1991] call them) into Anglo culture. However, these emerging forms of family are not yet widely embedded in the culture, and they lack the stability and normative acceptance provided by the centuries of tradition surrounding the fictive kin systems being brought into the United States by new immigrants.

The most promising sources of ideas about the possible role of fictive kin among immigrants in the United States are studies of the African-American community, where this phenomenon has long been recognized by scholars (Aschen-

brenner 1975b; Stack 1974). In fact, Gutman (1976) provides evidence that during the transport of African slaves to the Americas, and later on the plantations, parents and other adults taught children to address older persons, who were unrelated to them by either blood or marriage, by the title "aunt" or "uncle." This practice, he argues, served two important functions. It helped to socialize children into the slave community, and it acted to bind unrelated individuals to each other through reciprocal obligations. Two types of fictive kinship networks still exist in the African-American community. One form develops among unrelated age peers (Anderson 1978; Liebow 1967). Common expressions to denote these special ties are "going for brother" or "going for sister" (Liebow 1967; Stack 1974). In the other form, fictive kin relationships involve the incorporation of unrelated individuals into an extended family network (Aschenbrenner 1975b; Kennedy 1980; Stack 1974), where they are referred to as "aunt or uncle," "play mother/play father," or "play brother/play sister." Because both African Americans and new immigrants experience a disadvantaged status in U.S. society, including the challenges that accompany discrimination, social dislocation, and, often, poverty, it would not be surprising to find that in both communities fictive kin serve as social and economic resources that can be used to survive in a hostile social environment.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this exploratory study are derived from three sources: (1) a four-year (1988–92) in-depth study of a Yoruba community in Brooklyn, New York, and a briefer study in Houston (1997–98); (2) thirty interviews conducted in 1996 with members of eight immigrant groups in Houston; and (3) data from a three-year project on religion, ethnicity, and the new immigrants (RENIR) in fourteen religious congregations in Houston.²

Houston is one of the five urban areas in the United States that receive the largest number of immigrants, and it does so from a variety of sending countries. The 1990 census listed Houston's population as 27 percent Hispanic, including immigrants from Mexico and every Central and South American country. The projection for the 2000 census is that Hispanics will constitute 39 percent of the Houston population. In the 1996 study, we included ten informants from a range of Latin American countries (Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Honduras) where we knew the system of *compadrazgo* was long embedded. In the RENIR project we interviewed more than one hundred Hispanics who were members of three Hispanic churches or two multiethnic churches that had a sizable Hispanic membership.

In 1990 approximately 4 percent of Houston's population identified themselves as Asian, with the largest number of Asian immigrants coming from China, the Philippines, India, and Vietnam. The Asian population in Houston is projected to increase to approximately 7 percent by the 2000 census. In 1996 we interviewed 12 Asian informants, including 3 from India, 3 from Vietnam, 2 from China, 2 from Korea, and 2 from the Philippines. As part of the RENIR project, we interviewed approximately 200 Asians who are members of Chinese and Vietnamese Buddhist temples, a Pakistani mosque, Protestant churches, Catholic churches, and a Zoroastrian religious center.

Because we were interested in cultural patterns rather than individual attitudes and opinions, in the 1996 study we used the informant technique, with its long history in anthropological research (Agar 1980; Casagrande 1960). Informants were selected on the basis of their key positions (e.g., civic and religious leaders) in each of the groups. In the RENIR study, we interviewed samples of religious leaders, immigrants who had been in the United States for more than ten years, newly arrived immigrants, and second-generation members. In the case of multi-ethnic congregations (such as the Yoruba House that had members from Cuba, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Columbia, El Salvador, and Nigeria, as well as African Americans and Anglos), we interviewed members from varying ethnic and racial groups.

Given the limited number of interviews with members in each ethnic group and the fact that our insights regarding the importance of fictive kin arose as part of a larger project, this study of fictive kin is exploratory rather than systematic and hypothesis testing. Issues such as the extent to which fictive kinship expands the social networks of blood and marriage-related kin, why systems of fictive kinship are stronger in some immigrant groups with the same ethnic/racial origins than others, and ways in which fictive kin function at different stages of immigrant adaptation and assimilation await future research designed specifically to study these issues. In this article we present preliminary evidence to indicate that fictive kin is central in many immigrant communities and that awareness of its importance may enrich our understanding of the social resources that immigrants use to negotiate their adaptation and settlement in U.S. society.

STRUCTURES OF FICTIVE KIN

In this section we describe three different systems of fictive kin among immigrants: *compadrazgo* among Hispanic immigrants, the kinship structure of the Yoruba based on priesthood and houses of Ocha, and the system of respect and kinship established among Asian immigrants. We do not pretend that these three systems exhaust fictive kinship systems among the new immigrants; rather, we present them as examples of variations in such systems.

Compadrazgo

Compadrazgo, the complex system of ritual co-parenthood that exists throughout Latin America, is intricately interwoven with Catholic dogma and ritual. It arose from the Catholic custom of requiring spiritual sponsorship at baptism. A single sponsor, or at most two (one of each gender), is required by Canon Law. Sponsors must be baptized persons, in good standing with the Church, and acceptable to the priest who performs the baptism. Parents and members of religious orders are excluded. The primary responsibility of sponsors is to instruct the child on faith and morals and, in the event that parents die or neglect their spiritual duty, to raise the child as a good Christian. Along with this primary spiritual duty, sponsors also assume the obligation to provide for the material welfare of the child if the parents die or lack the requisite material resources.

While the Catholic church also prescribes a sponsor or godparent to stand for a child at first communion and confirmation and, in some countries, encourages marriage godparents, it is the baptismal *compadrazgo* system that is most important in defining both the spiritual and social obligations between individuals. The *compadrazgo* network extends beyond the basic relationship and mutual obligations of baptized child and godparent, whom the child calls *padrino* (godfather) or *madrina* (godmother). It also sets up mutual rights, obligations, and relationships between the godparent(s) and the child's biological parents (*copadre*, for godfather, and *comadre*, for godmother, of one's child). In addition, when two sponsors are chosen for the same child, relationships are set up between the sponsors themselves. One Mexican immigrant man commented that many Mexicans feel closer to their copadres than to their own blood brothers. To ignore or "be mean" to a copadre would be greatly frowned on in his community.

Godparents may be blood kin (other than parents), close friends, or other individuals in the community. Choosing someone, especially a nonrelative, to serve as copadre or comadre to one's child is considered a way to cement close friendships and make a public statement regarding the importance of the friendship. Because a new sponsor is selected for the baptism of each child, the system of co-parenthood extends the fictive kin network into the wider community of friends and relations such that, in time, almost everyone in the community can be related by blood, marital, or fictive kinship ties. If different sponsors are selected for the first communion, confirmation, and marriage of the child, he or she ends up with four sets of padrinos and madrinas who are all part of the fictive kin network. Therefore, as Alvarez (1987) reminds us, if a family has five children, the parents will be involved in a fictive kin network of forty adults.

A Honduran informant remarked that he chose to come to Houston because his *madrina* lived here and he knew she would assist him. Two years later, his parents came. He explained, "[They came] not only because I was here but they had, by then, two copadres and three comadres in Houston, so it was like one big family that welcomed them." He went on to say that Hispanics are very lucky because they have so many people who are "like family." Being Catholic, he was amazed that many Anglo Catholics he met do not keep in touch with their godparents and sometimes do not even know who they are.

Immigrants who are refugees from war-torn Central American countries, such as El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, also report that many fictive kin relationships were established as a result of children being abandoned or orphaned during the war. For example, a Salvadoran male informant reported that his grandfather raised eight children who had been orphaned in the war. The informant still calls each of them "aunt" and "uncle" and treats them exactly as he does his blood-related aunts and uncles.

Yoruba

The Yoruba religion (also called Yoruba, Santeria, and Ocha but most commonly The Religion) is an African religion that has survived in the New World, despite enslavement and persecution of its adherents over the years since it was

introduced by African slaves. The Religion originated in western Africa, where it was the national religion of Yoruba kingdoms. During the slave trade, it was introduced into the Caribbean and Latin America, especially Haiti, Cuba, Trinidad, and Brazil. When slavery ended, followers of The Religion were persecuted as criminals in these predominantly Catholic countries. Practitioners went underground and masked their traditional religion behind Catholicism. Yoruba religion quietly entered the United States in the 1960s, during the civil rights and Black Power movements via the immigration of Cuban refugees. Many African Americans converted to The Religion as a means of rejecting Christianity and replacing it with a form of spirituality that fostered black identity and a return to things African. For the past four decades, because of continued Cuban immigration and conversion, the Yoruba religion has been steadily growing in the African-American and Cuban communities.

The practitioners of Yoruba have an elaborate form of ritual kinship that is organized into structures called houses. The word *house* describes a group of people who think of themselves as being in a family relationship with the deities (Orisha)³ and with each other. Priests, who are leaders of a house, have godchildren who are godbrothers and godsisters to each other. Priests take on both material and spiritual responsibility for people who join the house and are known as “godparents in Ocha.” There are also “aunts and uncles” as well as “nieces and nephews in Ocha.” These terms are patterned after consanguinal or adoptive relationships and carry similar rights and obligations, even though the Yoruba ritual kinship system excludes blood relatives from being part of specific ritual kin relationships such as godparent and godchild. Houses of Ocha (short for Orisha) replicate the traditional segmentary lineage system of Yorubaland in West Africa and are structured similar to, and serve many of the same functions as, traditional extended families.

A Yoruba house is seen as a line of descent of godparents and godchildren and lines of descent of Orisha. When a priest is initiated, he or she becomes an *Iyawo*, that is, a bride of an Orisha. Members of that priest’s house, therefore, have a ritual kinship with that particular Orisha. Practitioners of Yoruba recite a prayer called the *Ijuba* (lit., the act of paying homage) on important ritual occasions, in which they make reference to their house ancestors and consanguinal ancestors, that is, a genealogy of the house. Moreover, each person lists all the living priests in the house senior to himself or herself. As one Yoruba member commented, this recitation continually reminds participants of the membership, both living and dead, of the particular house. Many Yoruba in Houston also make reference on their telephone answering machines to their house and specific ancestors who have died. Through these rituals the subculture of the house, including the ritual kin system, is continually re-created for the individual.

Among Asians

Although differences in fictive kinship systems exist among the various Asian immigrant groups (e.g., Chinese, Vietnamese, Koreans, Indians), there are striking similarities. Most obvious is the profound respect demanded of younger people

for elders, a tradition strongly rooted in Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucianist religious doctrines. This deference and attention to age differences is reflected in each of the Asian languages. For example, the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Koreans have specific language terms to indicate age position in the family. Not only is someone your brother or uncle, but he is your elder brother (uncle) or younger brother (uncle). In Vietnamese, the word *nui*, which means "caretaker," is attached to the end of the kinship term to indicate variations based on age as well as the responsibilities associated with age titles.

In many traditional Asian households, a man or woman is known by position in the family as first, second, or third son or daughter. Every person older than oneself deserves respect. Frequently, in Asian groups children refer to elders as aunts or uncles, terms that do not necessarily indicate blood ties but obligations established on the basis of age. As one Vietnamese female informant described, "I have a lot of people I call aunt and uncle that are not blood related. In Vietnam, which is a very small country, the terms 'aunt' and 'uncle' are used very loosely to refer to elders who are respected and have a special relationship to our family." Indian children also refer to elders as aunt or uncle, and these individuals take responsibility for advising and disciplining the children.

Vietnamese immigrants have fictive kin relationships that are similar to those of godfather (*banui*) and godmother (*manui*). These individuals function as surrogate parents and expect the same filial respect as natural parents. Chinese immigrants also use equivalent terms, *gan-ba* (godfather) and *gan-ma* (godmother), as well as "covenant brothers," that is, two men who go through a ritual ceremony to declare that they are now brothers. Among Vietnamese and Indians, brothers and sisters may not be consanguinally related but part of a fictive kin network. In the Vietnamese culture, brothers and sisters are "so dear," according to one informant, that "if you do not have blood brothers or sisters, or if you are living in a different locality from them, you adopt a brother or sister to whom you relate exactly the same as if they were your blood siblings." A Jain from western India explained that the concept of brother and sister is so special that, if you don't have a brother or sister, you pick one and say, "Now you are my brother/sister," and you act like brother and sister in every way. There is even a special name for these relationships, which, translated, means "brother by religion" or "sister by religion," although the names and custom have nothing to do with religion. One of the major roles of a sister in Jain culture is to name her brother's children. This custom is considered to be very important. One Jain informant said, "Now, if I had no sister at all I would have to adopt one so she could give my kid a name."

Another basis for fictive kin relationships in Asian communities is close friendships between one's parents and unrelated individuals in the community. Someone's mother's (or father's) close friend would automatically be considered an aunt (uncle), and the same respect, rights, and obligations would be extended to that individual as to aunts and uncles based on blood or marriage. A Vietnamese female informant, who is a social worker in a child welfare agency, explained that the staff has to be very careful about releasing children to Asians (and Nigerians) who claim to be the child's "aunt," "uncle," or, in some situations, even parent. Even though the child may use these familial terms in addressing the adult, he or

she may have no blood relationship to that individual, who, by law, has no custodial right to or responsibility for the child.

Fictive kin among Asians also can arise from the immigration experience itself. As has been the case for many nationalities, it has been common for single Asian males to migrate to the United States first and send for their families only after they have found a job and gotten established. Such unattached males are usually befriended by families in the immigrant community that are already reunited and that often came from the same or nearby localities back home. As one Vietnamese female informant described, "My grandparents were among the first Vietnamese to come to Houston in the 1970s. On any given Sunday, we would have three or four bachelor men at our table. After a while, we children would begin calling them uncle and they would play with us, teach us about our Vietnamese culture, and help us find part-time jobs when we got to be teenagers." As these men brought their wives and children to Houston, they were also incorporated into the family as fictive aunts and cousins. Because many Vietnamese in the United States are poor and often are refugees, they are either forced to share dwellings or placed with others by resettlement agencies. The interactions developed in shared residences often evolve into family-like, or "pseudo-family," relationships. In addition, unrelated individuals often forge close relationships in refugee camps in Southeast Asia, ties that are frequently maintained in the United States. For example, one informant was eleven years old when he was put on a boat in Vietnam bound for the United States. The boat was confiscated on the high seas and its occupants taken to a refugee camp in Thailand. On the boat was a sixteen-year-old girl whom the boat people felt would be a good "sister" for him. The agreement was that she would take care of him and they would become brother and sister. When they finally arrived in the United States, the two lost contact. However, the informant felt very guilty about that. He told me, "After all, she is my sister."

The *compadrazgo* system among Hispanics, the Yoruba system of relationships among members of a house, and familial-like relationships of respect that characterize Asian immigrants are each unique in origin and structure. Nonetheless, they all provide social networks that help immigrants to confront the numerous challenges of being strangers in a strange land. These various systems of fictive kinship are integral parts of the culture that immigrants learn and reproduce in home countries and that constitute social capital available for their use in this country.

FUNCTIONS OF FICTIVE KIN IN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

Regardless of differences in the types of fictive kin systems, the functions they serve for new immigrants are quite similar. These functions include assuring the spiritual development of the child and thereby reinforcing cultural continuity, exercising social control, providing material support, and assuring socioemotional support. That fictive kin provide these services for new immigrants, who often face dislocation, anomie, economic difficulties, cultural shock, and value conflicts in the new society, means that the institution serves as an important buffer and resource.

Spiritual Development and Cultural Continuity

Religious beliefs and practices are an integral part of ethnic identity in many immigrant communities and constitute an important avenue for reproducing the native culture in the second generation. It is through rituals and the telling of traditional stories that a group of people re-create and reinforce a sense of their history as a people, a process that often occurs through religious practices in a sacred place. Immigrant informants in each of the groups we studied were concerned about socializing youth to maintain their ethnic identity. Therefore, adults who assume the responsibility for the spiritual development of youth see themselves as also perpetuating ethnic identity.

In all three fictive kin systems described above, assuring that one's godchild is being raised with appropriate spiritual values is the primary responsibility of godparents. In *compadrazgo*, this responsibility is carefully laid out by the Catholic church when sponsors are chosen and commissioned in the baptismal ceremony. In fact, sponsors take an oath during the ceremony that they will willingly and conscientiously accept the responsibility of sharing in the Christian education and upbringing of the child. Chinese Christians accept the same Church mandate when they agree to serve as godparents at baptism.

Among the Yoruba, spiritual development of the godchild is the primary responsibility of the godparent, who oversees all necessary divinations, sacrifices, and initiations for the godchild and has the duty to instruct the godchild in religious knowledge, ritual and duties. The godparent also assumes the responsibility of providing a funeral and burial for the godchild if the blood family is not capable of doing so. Reciprocally, the godchild is expected to assist the godparent in rituals and other religious work. Because Yoruba rituals frequently involve elaborate preparations, this assistance includes cooking and cleaning in preparation for a religious ceremony. If at all possible, the godchild is expected to attend all religious activities hosted by the godparent.

Godparents play special roles in the initiation careers of Yoruba. The first initiation, that of receiving *ilekis* (colored bead necklaces representing different Orishas) is considered to be the extension of the protection of the godparent's Orisha to the godchild, who is then given the title *alejo* (stranger resident in the house). At this ceremony the godchild also acquires a secondary godparent called an *ojubona* (witness to the process). It is the duty of the *ojubona* to make sure the initiation ceremony is performed correctly and to replace the primary godparent should that person be unable to fulfill that role. The second initiation, that of "receiving the warriors," is the ceremony in which the initiate receives symbols of the four Orishas (Elegba, Ogun, Oshos, and Osun), and the third initiation is into the priesthood, which allows a Yoruba to function as an intermediary between the Orisha and human beings by practicing divination, performing sacrifices, and possibly undergoing possession. Godparents play a central role in each ceremony.

In the case of Asian immigrants, much of the spiritual encouragement and help that ritual kin provide relates to the maintenance of cultural values, such as rituals of respect for ancestors. For example, the traditional engagement and marriage

ceremony of Vietnamese Buddhists is conducted in the homes of the bride and groom before the altar of the ancestors, who are asked to bless the couple and accept the in-law into the family. One of the responsibilities of "aunts" and "uncles" is to ensure that the ceremony is properly conducted so that the young couple is in good standing with the ancestors. Several of our informants commented that even Vietnamese Catholics seek the blessings of their ancestors, either as part of the church ceremony or in an informal ceremony at home that follows a church wedding.

Informants in each immigrant community expressed concern that many of their young people do not take religion as seriously as the older generation and are succumbing to "the worldliness and immorality of American society," as one Filipino female informant put it. A central part of the role of the older generation of fictive kin is to encourage second-generation youth to learn, value, and practice their ethic and religious heritage.

Social Control

Because fictive kin systems bind people to one another emotionally and socially, they serve as a mechanism to mitigate hostility and aggression in immigrant communities and enhance community solidarity. Individuals involved in the relationship network are expected to cooperate and avoid hostility, as well as to behave in a manner that is a credit to the community. In the *compadrazgo* system, individuals acquire a series of obligations and expectations to behave in ways that will make *padrinos* and *madrinas* proud. It is understood that ritual kin are to monitor, guide, and judge the behavior of their godchildren and that their godchildren, in turn, will not disappoint them. A Taiwanese man explained that in his community, "aunts" and "uncles" not only have the right but also the responsibility to correct the behavior of children in their "adopted family." Children are expected to listen respectfully and to correct any bad behavior pointed out by elders. Likewise, an Indian Jain informant said, "A kid's uncles (and not just blood related) can basically push the kid around like a parent and say 'hey, don't do that' and the kid would obey." This same informant explained that the custom works because individuals who do not conform "get a bad reputation, which can hurt you down the road." He gave several examples of business deals that were aborted when it was discovered that one of the partners did not have the reputation of being "a good Jain."

In Yoruba houses, godparents do not "divorce" godchildren except in instances in which they use drugs or become extremely disruptive of the house. The major mechanism of social control is gossip. One's greatest asset is reputation; therefore, a loss of reputation means a loss of prestige, an inability to attract and retain godchildren, and, therefore, it seriously weakens the house. In one instance among the Houston Yoruba, a godparent was accused of stealing money. His godchildren, some of whom were not yet initiated into the priesthood, decided to sever their relationship with him, an act considered very unusual in the group.

In many immigrant communities, such as the Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese, not only the death of parents but conflict between parents and children

would cause godparents or fictive aunts and uncles to step in and invite the teenager to live with them until the conflict is resolved. For example, a Vietnamese informant reported that, as a teenager, she had difficulties with her parents. Her "uncle," a close friend of her parents, invited her to live with him for a year so she could "mend her ways" and see how much her parents really loved her and wanted success for her.

Systems of fictive kin are also essential in controlling sexuality by defining who may and may not marry or have sexual relations with one another, since individuals within these networks are considered family and are bound by the same taboos and norms as blood kin. In the *compadrazgo* system, not only are godchildren not allowed to marry or be romantically involved with godparents, strong sanctions are placed on the marriage of *copadres* and *comadres* (men and women who are godparents to the same child). One Hispanic informant was incensed because his *comadre*, a co-sponsor for one of his godchildren, had "made passes at him," something that is prohibited in his Guatemalan culture. Another Hispanic man commented that sometimes he is very attracted to one of his *ahijadas* (female child; masc. *ahijados*) but has to control his feelings at all costs because he would be ostracized by his fellow Hispanics if he allowed any type of sexual relationship to evolve.

Among Yoruba, sexual relationships between godparents and godchildren are strictly forbidden, and such relationships between god-siblings are discouraged. In some houses, while such relationships are not be forbidden, they are considered troublesome because they can cause conflicting loyalties.

In all three systems of fictive kin considered here, ritual kin exercise social control over those in the kinship system. Not only do adults, such as godparents, "aunts and uncles," and adult members of a house assure that the young people for whom they are responsible obey norms, but, reciprocally, there are normative constraints on their behavior.

Financial Support

For immigrants, a major function performed by ritual kin is the provision of material support. The *compadrazgo* system forms a kind of social insurance system in the community—lending money, providing assistance in finding employment, a place to stay, or business contacts, and helping with financing such ceremonies as confirmation, the *quinceniera*, or coming-out for fifteen-year-old daughters, and marriage. Parents often seek to obtain godparents of a higher social and economic status than themselves for the material advantages that accrue to their children. As one Central American Hispanic immigrant commented, "I find myself being asked over and over again within my community to serve as *padrino* for children being baptized. Not only do I not have children of my own, but I am seen as having more money than most people they know and I am known for helping my *ahijados* and *ahijadas* financially."

In the event that both parents die or are unable to provide financially for the child, it is the godparents or "aunts" and "uncles" who are expected to take responsibility for the child. In the Hispanic *compadrazgo* system, the godfather acts as actual father to a male child and the godmother as actual mother for a

female child. In Vietnamese culture, if someone is alone and does not have blood-related parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, or uncles to care for him or her, a member of the community will step in to become that person's godfather or godmother and take on the role of *nui*, or caregiver. The idea of homeless or street kids is shocking to Vietnamese immigrants, in whose community there exists a safety net of extended and ritual kin to fill in where parents may fail or become alienated from their offspring. One Vietnamese informant was asked what would happen if a godparent refused to take care of the child in the event of a parent's death. He responded, "This would never happen. I have never heard of any case like this. I have never heard of anyone abandoning a kid. In Vietnamese culture, godparents just take you in. You consider yourself a part of the family, and later in life, if they need help you help them."

Not only do adult fictive kin have a financial obligation to children should parents become unable to provide, adult children likewise assume the responsibility to take care of their godparents and other adult fictive kin if they become needy in their old age. In fact, in many Hispanic and Asian cultures, single persons or couples without children become godparents for one or usually several children, assuming all the various religious, social, and financial obligations entailed, in exchange for being taken care of in their later years. A Honduran immigrant has a godson who just arrived in Houston. He said, "As his *padrino*, I must help him get started here, so he lives with my wife and me and we give him money until he can find a job." He went on to say that he is very happy that his godson has come to the United States, because he and his wife are getting old and have no children to take care of them when they can no longer work. He is confident that his godson will care for them when the time comes.

The expectation that one who "makes it" in America will support not only fictive kin within the immigrant community but also family and fictive kin back home is a strong norm among both Hispanic and Asian immigrants. Among all of the Hispanics we interviewed, the sense of responsibility to routinely send money to relatives in the home country was very strong. One Mexican informant commented that his goddaughter in Mexico City is ill and can no longer work. Her husband has deserted her and her two children so the informant sends her \$400 every month for support.

As the following anecdote demonstrates, Asians also share this norm of assisting ritual kin financially. A Vietnamese woman who had a good job in America returned on a business trip to Vietnam. She was met at the airport by about thirty people, most of whom she did not know but who claimed they knew her when she was young and remained good friends with her father, who was still in the home country. They informed her that they thought of her as their own and felt part of her family. Ten days or so into the trip she began to realize that they expected her to leave some of her American success with them in terms of financial gifts. By then she had begun to internalize that sense of obligation and did provide financial assistance to those who needed her help. Even after she returned to Houston, she continued to send money back to her "aunt," a woman who knew her parents thirty years earlier and was once close to the family. She felt it was her duty to reciprocate the relationship the woman had once had with her parents.

Among the Yoruba, members of a house are expected to take care of each other financially as well as spiritually. There are three principal methods of economic cooperation. The first, the fundraiser, most often takes the form of selling dinners. One's god-brothers and god-sisters distribute notices that a sale is taking place and may also take dinner orders. The proceeds from the sale are used to provide material necessities or provisions for an initiation ceremony for oneself or someone in need. Like the customs in many African and African-American groups (Bonnett 1976; Brink 1991; Buijs 1995), the second form of providing financial support is the *Esusu*, or revolving credit association. A group of people in the same house, usually twenty or fewer, agree to put up a certain amount of money for a number of weeks equal to the number of people in the group. For example, a group of twenty people might put up \$25 for each of twenty weeks. Each week one person collects \$500 ($\25×20 people). Although each person collects what he or she contributes, the system allows each person to have the use of a lump sum when it is his or her turn. The third form occurs when a house collectively decides to give financial assistance to someone, usually a member. For example, on two different occasions members of a house paid for the initiation into the priesthood of two of its members who could not afford the expense. In another instance, a house member needed to "make Ocha" quickly and did not have sufficient money, which was provided by donations from house members. Job referrals and locating living quarters are also sources of support given by house members, especially god-sisters and god-brothers, to one another.

In addition to direct financial assistance, social networks, especially fictive kin networks, help immigrants to locate jobs and housing and contact professionals to assist with immigration papers. When immigrants identify family networks as their most important source of help on arriving in Houston, they almost always include fictive kin as well as blood relatives among "family" who helped them.

Social Support

Fictive kin often include immigrants in family social gatherings, such as special meals, celebrations, holidays, and evening and weekend socializing. Especially for single male immigrants, who often have difficulty establishing social relationships in their work settings because of both linguistic and cultural barriers, the social support provided by fictive kin is very important. As newly arriving immigrants receive help from fictive kin in the United States, simultaneously they establish reciprocal bonds of obligation to those who assist them. Bonds of solidarity and reciprocity became part of the social networks and support system in the immigrant community.

In Hispanic communities, relationships between the adults involved in *compadrazgo*, both between parents of the child and godparents and between *copadres* and *comadres*, often outweigh the godparent-godchild relationship, precisely because they provide social support among age peers. *Copadres* are morally bound to stand by each other in time of need and danger as well as to provide social support to one another. However, social support is also expected intergenerationally. A Hispanic informant showed a great deal of disgust with one of his

godchildren who moved away from Houston and makes no effort to keep in touch with him unless he wants money. His disgust related to the lack of social ties and interaction, ties that he feels constitute the heart of the godparent-godchild relationship. In his estimation, financial obligations should take second place to the feelings and sharing that take place with one's ahijados and ahijadas. He commented that he doesn't mind sending money to his godchildren who keep in touch with him and show affection.

One usually joins a Yoruba house through existing social networks, so there are preexisting social relationships. Frequently, sharing membership in a house intensifies those bonds. Social interaction, visiting, naming ceremonies, and weddings usually include members of one's house. Most house members are women with children, many of them divorced or widowed and in need of child care on a regular basis, especially on weekends. Women in the same house often care for one another's children.

Among Asian immigrants, providing social support for a newly arrived immigrant often establishes a lifelong relationship between that individual and all members of the host family. For example, in the early 1970s a male Indian immigrant arrived at Houston International Airport in a rainstorm. The Indians who were supposed to meet him did not show up; however, an Indian family that happened to be at the airport saw that he was alone and seemed lost. They invited him to their home, where he stayed for three months until he found a job. He, and later his family, whom he brought from India, became part of the host family and remain so after thirty years. The children (now adults) in each family refer to the first generation as "aunt" and "uncle," and the second generation call each other "brother" and "sister." The informant commented, "We fight like brothers and sisters but also know we would do anything for each other."

CONCLUSIONS

Nutrini and White (1977) argue that a strong link exists between the degree of modernization and the centrality of *compadrazgo* in the community, one that resembles an inverted U-shaped curve. Based on analyses of twenty-one rural communities in Mexico at varying stages of modernization, they show that in the more traditional, less acculturated communities kinship is more important than *compadrazgo* in the organization of community life. Clans, lineages, and extended families regulate marriage, share religious and ceremonial functions, and fulfill social and economic needs, and thus there is no need for nonkinship mechanisms to cope with the structural and functional exigencies of social living. In the least traditional, essentially secular and urban communities, neither extended kinship nor *compadrazgo* is needed, because domestic groups and governmental, occupational, and social associations fulfill these functions. It is in the in-between case, the community in transition to modernization, in which the *compadrazgo* system is strongest. In such a setting, kinship is not as pervasive as in the traditional society, but nonfamilial social forms have not yet developed sufficiently to meet needs. It is here that the *compadrazgo* system complements, expands, and amalgamates the basic kinship elements into an organic whole. In many ways, new

immigrants settling in the United States mirror the challenges and uncertainties of people caught in the transition between traditional and modern societies. Often, traditional relations of family and blood-related kin are left behind in the home country and are not fully replicated in the new one. Simultaneously, access to the social institutions that might provide many of the same economic and integrative functions that kin once provided are not yet fully available to immigrants. In this situation, fictive kin can serve to expand the resources and support available to them. Our research suggests that, in fact, within new immigrant communities fictive kin are an important part of the social networks that offer social and material support, provide opportunities, and, thereby, facilitate settlement.

Because of the data limitations in this study, we are unable to estimate the degree to which fictive kin expands social networks based on blood kinship and marriage. However, the case of the Yoruba provides a hint of the extent of such expansion. The *rama* (branch) of Yoruba in Houston gives a new immigrant access to approximately fifty people who can provide housing, jobs, and social support. Such estimates of fictive kin networks need to be the focus of future studies. Obviously, patterns of fictive kin vary by ethnic and religious group, as well as by the social class and migration status of immigrants. Such variables need to be taken into account in systematic studies of fictive kin systems among the new immigrants.

As demonstrated above, we now have a quite well developed literature concerning the importance and functions of social networks throughout the immigration process. The bulk of this literature focuses on familial (defined as blood-related kin) and friendship ties. This exploratory study suggests that systems of fictive kin also constitute an important part of the social networks that draw immigrants to a particular locale and provide them with the material and social support that enables them to become incorporated into a new and often hostile society. Whether systems of fictive kin will continue to be important beyond the second or third generations or will disappear as a result of assimilation remains to be seen. However, for the foreseeable future, fictive kin relationships in these communities provide strong social networks that are part of the social capital that immigrants bring with them to this country and use as an important resource for dealing with social problems.

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NOTES

1. Roschelle's recent book, *No More Kin*, makes reference to fictive kin systems among Hispanics and blacks. However, she offers little systematic analysis and discussion of these structures.
2. These immigrant congregations were (1) a multiethnic Catholic church; (2) a multiethnic Assembly of God church; (3) a Hispanic evangelical Argentine church; (4) a Chinese

Christian church; (5) a Chinese Buddhist temple; (6) a Vietnamese Buddhist temple; (7) an Indian Hindu temple; (8) an Islamic mosque; (9) a Greek Orthodox church; (10) a Hispanic Catholic church; (11) a Hispanic Protestant storefront church; (12) a Zoroastrian center; and (13) a Korean Christian church.

3. Orisha are considered to be aspects of God or forces of nature. They are seen by the Yoruba as specialized forms of the Supreme One that can be called on in various circumstances.

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