

Naming and shaming

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN any society or community which has been left in peace to evolve and enforce its own rules of living, there will be things which it's impolite to talk about, words which it's impolite to use – a code of good manners, with a code of ethics to deal with those who break it. They will be made to suffer a sense of shame.

I'm going to illustrate this with some final points about mothers-in-law. It will be absolutely my last word on that subject. Then I'll move on to a strange Gaelic riddle which shows the delicate topic of the "forbidden degrees" being discussed in the ceilidh-house.

I've already demonstrated how indigenous peoples in Australia, Africa, America and elsewhere practised "mother-in-law avoidance" with a degree of unanimity which suggests it is, or was, the most natural thing in the world. This was no mere physical avoidance – it went as far as naming. Among the Ngarigo of south-eastern Australia, for example, if anyone happened to mention a woman's son-in-law in her hearing, she'd put her fingers in her ears and say: "Be quiet."

The same applied to her own name. On the Tully River, a young woman and her husband could talk to the father-in-law using his individual name or by the generic one of *ni-ubi*, but the mother-in-law could only be spoken of by the generic term *wai-min*.

In some of the islands north of Australia it was acceptable to mention in-laws' names to a third party, in others the taboo was total. It could cause a lot of problems. In "Totemism and Exogamy" Sir James Frazer cites the case of a man in the Dutch East Indies whose mother-in-law was called Ringgi. This was also the word for the main colonial currency, the rixdollar, so when talking about money he had to speak carefully of *roepia bose* – "large guilders"!

A similar case was reported from the island of Buru, where it was taboo to mention the names of either parents or parents-in-law. For example, if your mother-in-law was called *Dalu*, which means "betel", you couldn't ask for betel by its ordinary name. You had to say *mue miha* – "red mouth".

One tribe which practised mother-in-law avoidance was the Kurnai of eastern Victoria, who are celebrated for the massacres perpetrated against them by a settler from Glenbrittle in Skye, Angus MacMillan. A colonial administrator who knew them well, Alfred Howitt, recalled a Kurnai who was a member of the Church of England, but who nevertheless positively refused to speak to his mother-in-law, and reproached Howitt for expecting him to commit so gross a breach of good manners.

In Africa, it was the custom among the Eastern Bantu for a man to be "ashamed" of his wife's mother – meaning that he must studiously avoid her. In Central Angoniland, where one of a new husband's first duties was to hoe the garden for his mother-in-law, he did his best to avoid her, says Frazer, "from some sense of shame and modesty which hardly finds a counterpart among civilized nations".

This shame had consequences as well as causes. Among the A-kamba of Uganda, if a wife heard that her husband had stopped and spoken to her mother in the road, she would leave him.

In America, too, shame was the motivating factor. Among the Tsetsauts of the north-west, for example, we're told that mother-in-law and son-in-law were "ashamed to talk to or even to see each other". Among the Sioux, if a husband were heard to utter the names of his wife's parents, it would gain him the ridicule of the whole camp.

As in Africa and Australia, patterns of observance varied. The Pawnees didn't have the custom at all, and were therefore regarded by their neighbours as great fools. The Dakotas were at the other extreme. One man who knew them well wrote: "The father-in-law must not call the son-in-law by name; neither must the mother-in-law: and the son-in-law must not call his father-in-law or mother-in-law by name. There are also many others in the line of relationship who cannot call each other by name. I have heard of instances where the forbidden name has been called, and the offender was punished by having all of his or her clothes cut off of their backs and thrown away."

The Dakota expression for “mother-in-law avoidance” was *wisten kiyapi fro isteca*, which means “to be ashamed”. The observer concluded: “None of their customs is more tenacious of life than this. And no family law is more binding.”

Frazer sums it all up pretty well, I think, when discussing the Batta of Sumatra. “A Batta, it is said, assumes that a solitary meeting of a man with a woman leads to an improper intimacy between them. But at the same time he believes that incest or the sexual intercourse of near relations excites the anger of the gods and entails calamities of all sorts. Hence near relations are obliged to avoid each other lest they should succumb to temptation . . . The Dutch missionary who reports these customs adds that he is sorry to say that from what he knows of the Battas he believes the maintenance of most of these rules to be very necessary.”

It’s pretty clear to us that the “calamities” in question are the dangers of in-breeding in small communities. People with superstitious minds either didn’t understand this, or didn’t like putting it into words. According to Frazer’s “Golden Bough”, in New Britain (near New Guinea) “the extent and nature of the calamities which would result from a man’s accidentally speaking to his wife’s mother” couldn’t be named, but “suicide of one or both would probably be the only course open to them”. Frazer points out that the most solemn oath a New Briton could swear was: “Sir, if I am not telling the truth, I hope I may shake hands with my mother-in-law.”

Bringing this back home now, there’s a curious little story in volume two of “Popular Tales of the West Highlands”. It was got by Hector Urquhart in July 1859 from Kenneth MacLennan at Tournai in Wester Ross. A wake (*taigh-faire*) was being held once, said MacLennan, with drinking, singing and storytelling in the usual way. It was the custom for all present to provide a song or a story, and one man who couldn’t think of either was put out the door.

He stood at the end of the barn, being afraid to go any further. What did he see but nine men going past dressed in red (*air an sgeadachadh ann an trusgain dhearga*), followed by nine in green (*ann an deiseachan uaine*), then nine in blue (*ann an deiseachan gorma*).

Bringing up the rear were a man and a woman riding a horse. *Théid mi bhruidhinn ris an fhear a tha siud aig ceann an t-sabhail*, says the woman to the man. “I’ll go and talk to that man at the end of the barn.”

She enquires what he’s doing there, he tells her his plight, and she asks: *Am faca tu duin’ air bith a’ dol seachad bho thuit an oidhche?* “Have you seen anyone going past since night fell?”

He tells her what he saw, and she proceeds to explain it. *Na ciad naodhnar a chunna tu, se sin bràithrean m’ athar . . .* “The first nine you saw, that’s my father’s brothers. The second nine are my mother’s brothers. And the third nine are my own sons. *Agus ’s mic dhan duin’ ud a tha air muin an eich iad uile gu léir.* And they are all sons of that man on the horse.”

She concludes: “That’s my husband – and there’s no law in Ireland, Scotland or England that can find fault with us (*as urrainn coir’ fhaotainn dhuinn*). Now go in, and I reckon they’ve got a riddle to keep them going until daylight (*cha chreid mise nach eil tòimhseachan orra gu latha*).”

So it turns out to be one of those stories where artistic inspiration is got by supernatural intervention. Fortunately the editor, J F Campbell, provides the solution: “The answer is founded on a mistaken belief that it is lawful for a woman to marry her grandmother’s husband. I am told that there are numerous puzzles of the same kind now current in India.”

Personally I don’t see why it shouldn’t all be perfectly lawful, provided “brothers” means “half-brothers”. My diagram shows how it works (the equals sign means “marries”). Ealasaid is the lady on the horse, Iain is her husband, and her blood-line is in red.

It goes like this. Dòmhnall marries Eilidh, has Fearchar and dies. Eilidh marries Iain, has nine more sons and dies. Cailean marries Iseabail, has Màiri and dies. Iseabail marries Iain, has nine sons and dies. Fearchar marries Màiri and they have Ealasaid. When Ealasaid grows up she marries Iain and they have nine sons.

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