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In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 154 (1998), no: 3, Leiden, 397-415

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Marshallese Royal Marriages Generalized Exchange in Eastern Micronesia

'We have seen that, far from being a mystery, marriage with the matrilineal cousin provides an explanatory principle, and that, wherever we encounter it, we can be assured that the kinship system under consideration functions according to the formula of generalized exchange. When this type of marriage is found in connexion with another type, there is the further task of discovering a structure in terms of which both types can be considered as equivalent.'

(Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The elementary structures of kinship*.)

'The parallels in the social organization of Tonga and the remainder of Polynesia and Micronesia are obvious.'

(E.W. Gifford, *Tongan society*.)

In *Island networks* (Hage and Harary 1996) it was shown that social organization in the Marshall Islands in Micronesia was based on the encompassing structure of the conical clan with a class division into chiefs (royalty), nobles and commoners. Historical linguistic evidence revealed that the matrilineal variant of the conical clan found in the Marshall Islands in eastern Micronesia was genetically related to the patrilineal variant found in Tonga in western Polynesia, both of them having a common origin in a stratified, that is, conical, Proto-Oceanic society that spread from the region of north coastal New Guinea and the Bismarck Islands around 2,000 BC (Pawley and Green 1984). This inference is based on Pawley's (1982) reconstruction of a pair of contrasting terms, **qalapa(s)* 'chief' and **qadiki* 'firstborn son of the chief', in Proto-Oceanic. Reflexes of the former are found in the Polynesian languages, and reflexes of the latter in Marshallese and other Nuclear

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Micronesian languages.¹ It was hypothesized that, in the Marshalls as in Tonga (Bott 1982; Gifford 1929), chiefly marriages were based on asymmetric alliance (generalized exchange) and that such marriages, together with relations of genealogical seniority, were instrumental in the formation and maintenance of inter-island empires. My purpose now is to provide some genealogical evidence for this hypothesis by analysing the history of succession and marriage in the royal, Bwij-in-Iroij, lineage which dominated the Ralik chain of the Marshall Islands during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The data come from an unpublished report by Professor Leonard Mason on land rights and title succession in Ralik.² The results lend support to the idea that much of the Austronesian world represents an eastward extension of Lévi-Strauss's (1969) Sino-Tibetan axis of generalized exchange (Blust 1980). They also highlight the oblique aspect of generalized exchange originally emphasized by Lévi-Strauss but sometimes overlooked in theoretical discussions of this marriage type, and they suggest an alliance interpretation of intergenerational or 'anomalous' marriages in Oceania.

Background

The Marshall Islands, located in eastern Micronesia, are divided into two chains, Ralik and Ratak, running from south-east to north-west for some 1,000 kilometres. The islands are all atolls, a fact which may surprise, given the common assumption in Polynesian ethnology that atoll societies are unstratified (Sahlins 1958; Kirch and Green 1987).³ A diagram of the voyaging network which connected all the permanently inhabited atolls of the Ralik chain is given in Figure 1. In the Ralik conception, the islands are divided into two groups: those in the 'Northern Sea', Eon-in-meto, and those in the 'Southern Sea', Rak-in-meto. The dividing line cuts through Ailinglaplap Atoll. The northern group includes a far northern, rather isolated subgroup,

¹ Lichtenberk (1986) modifies these terms to **ta-la(m)pat* and **qaariki* and gives the more conservative glosses 'leader' and 'oldest child'.

² Mason's reconstruction is based on statements in published sources and records (in both German and Japanese) dating back to the latter part of the 19th century, notes from his own fieldwork in the Marshalls between 1946 and 1950, and interviews with elderly Marshallese in 1985. His chronology of Marshallese history is an educated guess based on events and persons described in these records and on an 'ethnographic measure' of 25 years per generation in the genealogies. I am grateful to Professor Mason for making this report available to me and for generously allowing me to make unrestricted use of it.

³ According to Kirch and Green (1987:441), 'It is surely no coincidence that the most highly stratified Polynesian societies arose in large resource-rich archipelagoes or that atoll societies with the most limited resources generally remained at the lowest levels of sociopolitical complexity and integration (Sahlins 1958)'.

Ailiñ-kan-eañ, and an important far western subgroup in Kab-in-meto, the 'bottom of the sea' – a reference to its downwind location. The mythological and political centre of Ralik – the home of the founding ancestress of all the clans in the chain and the seat of the dominant paramount chiefs, the Eon-out – was located on Namu. The southern atolls are wetter and more populous than those in the north. According to a government census taken in 1912, the total population of the Marshall Islands was 9,569 and that of the Ralik chain 4,290. The populations of the islands shown in Figure 1 were, from south to north: Ebon (701); Namorik (521); Jaluit (1,083); Ailinglaplap (593); Namu (195); Lib (74); Kwajalein (349); Lae (223); Ujae (153); Wotho (74); Rongelap (122); and Bikini (80).⁴ The richest atolls were Ebon and Namorik, both of which figure prominently in the political history of Ralik in the 19th century.

The Marshallese conical clan, called *jowi* in the western, Ralik chain (and *jou* in the eastern, Ratak chain), consisted of a group of lineages, *bwij*, which traced descent through female links from a common ancestress (Erdland 1914; Krämer and Nevermann 1938; Mason 1947). Lineages were ranked by a rule of primogeniture and divided into three classes: royal or chiefly lineages (*bwij-in-iroij*), noble lineages (*bwij-in-bwirak*), and commoner lineages (*bwij-in-kajur*). Some clans consisted only of commoner (*kajur*) or noble (*bwirak*) lineages, but others of all three classes. Every lineage had a head who was, ideally, the eldest son of the eldest lineage sister. The head of a royal lineage held the title Iroij Lablab, 'very big chief or king'. Beneath him, and under his control, were the *iroij elap*, 'big chiefs', drawn from his eldest sister's and his eldest sister's daughter's family, and next in rank the *iroij erik*, drawn from his younger sisters' families. Ideally, eldest sisters' eldest sons succeeded to the position of Iroij Lablab, while younger sisters' sons were sent to administer outlying islands or lands on such islands. The relation between them was analogous to that between the elder and younger sons of paramount chiefs in the Tongan empire in Polynesia (Bott 1982:62-3).⁵ Chiefs of *iroij* lineages occupied a position at the head of a feudal system of land tenure and had the right to demand tribute and political support from members of *bwirak* and *kajur* lineages. They possessed substantial autocratic powers, and had, by virtue of their descent, an exalted, sacred status.

The main geographical location of the Ralik clans and lineages is shown in Figure 1. Ebon was ruled primarily by *bwirak* nobles of the Erroja clan, and Namorik by *iroij* chiefs of the Erribra clan. The northern atolls in Eon-in-meto

⁴ There were an additional 74 persons on Jabwot and 48 on Rongerik, bringing the total to 4,290.

⁵ As in Tonga (Bott 1982:109-10), chiefly estates were scattered over a number of different islands.

Figure 1. A diagram of the voyaging network of the Ralik chain (with clan and lineage locations).

were dominated by a number of small independent chiefdoms, most of which were headed by *iroij* chiefs of the Ijjirik clan. The Bwii-in-Iroij lineage, which eventually came to dominate most of the Ralik chain, was centred at Namu and later, as the political centre of gravity shifted toward the southern islands, at Ailinglaplap. The Iroij lineage, also located at Namu and on other islands in the north, was distinct from but related in some way to the Bwii-in-Iroij lineage.

Modern published accounts of Marshallese kinship say nothing about any system of matrilinear cross-cousin marriage or generalized exchange. The kinship terminology has a special term, *reliko*, for opposite-sex cross-cousin and terms for mother's brother and a man's sister's child, but is otherwise Generational-Hawaiian (Spoehr 1949a). Spoehr, in his ethnography of Majuro Atoll in Ratak (Spoehr 1949b), mentions a preference for bilateral cross-cousin marriage and its reflection in the cousin terminology. Kiste and Rynkiewicz (1976), in their comparative study of Marshallese incest prohibitions, found no such preference in Arno, on the other hand. In fact, they found that 'marriages between kinsmen of any type are the exception rather than the rule' (Kiste and Rynkiewicz 1976:219). They interpreted the preference for bilateral cross-cousin marriage in Bikini as a 'statement of [the] unavoidable', given the small, highly endogamous population of this relatively isolated atoll. Contrary to these reports, we hypothesized in *Island networks* (Hage and Harary 1996) that chiefly marriage in earlier traditional Marshallese society was based on generalized exchange in the form of an asymmetric, hypergamous relation between chiefly (*iroij*) wife-taking and noble (*bwirak*) wife-giving lineages. Marriage with the matrilinear cross-cousin, the mother's brother's daughter, is the prototype of this relation but not its only modality, as we shall see. We noted several indications of generalized exchange in the Marshalls, including:

1. Erdland's (1914:73) general observation that 'through marriage and inheritance each *iroij* has one or another *bwirak* [*bwirak*] who pays tribute to him. The subchief puts his subjects at the high chief's disposal for free labor, fights for him, and supports him in the most important matters.'
2. The unusual respect for and elevated position of the sister (Rynkiewicz 1972; Spoehr 1949b), which suggests hypergamy and the sacred sister complex of Oceanian societies (Mabuchi 1960; Rogers 1977).
3. The designation of the sister's husband as 'big father' (*jema lallab*) and of the wife's brother as 'male child' (*neju emman*), which is reminiscent of the use of senior and junior kinship terms for wife-givers and wife-takers in the hypogamous Austronesian societies of eastern Indonesia. (See, for example, Clamagirand 1980 on the Ema of Timor.)
4. The fact that generalized exchange is a common correlate of the conical

clan. In Tonga there is a long history of generalized exchange between chiefly, senior and junior lines of the conical clan (Bott 1982; Gifford 1929):

Bwij-in-Iroij marriage alliances

Mason's account concerns marriage alliance and chiefly succession in the Bwij-in-Iroij lineage. A genealogy of its principal members, together with an indication of their marriages to members of other Ralik lineages from about 1800 to the early 1900s, is given in Figure 2. The encircled numbers indicate the, strictly matrilineal, line of succession to the title of Iroij Lablab. For the sake of clarity, Figure 2 does not show all of the polygynous marriages of Bwij-in-Iroij paramount chiefs, nor all of their children. Lañinni, for example, had numerous wives in addition to Lijabar and Limijerre; he had five children by the former, but only the two, Litakilañ and Laukuk, who were significant figures in Ralik history, are shown. Loeak had four wives in addition to Libebe at the time of his death. It is not known how the men of the Erribra or the Iroij lineages were related, nor how the two Erroja descent lines were connected. The five-generation Ijjirik descent line represents, as is often the case in conical societies, a junior line whose founding chiefs had overthrown a senior line (Sahlins 1981).

Mason's reconstruction of the political history of Ralik in the 19th century from the perspective of the royal Bwij-in-Iroij lineage can be summarized briefly by following the genealogies in Figure 2. The legendary founding ancestress of the principal Ralik clans (*jowi*) was a woman named Liwatoinmour. Her daughter, Iroij, was the ancestress of the Bwij-in-Iroij lineage. Iroij's children, Litarao and Letalju, and Liwatoinmour's sister's son, Jemaliut, are regarded as the first real people of the islands. According to traditional history, Jemaliut originally shared the lands of Ralik with the descendants of Iroij. Around 1800 Jemaliut went to war against his matrilineal cousin, Letalju, in an attempt to gain complete control of Ralik. The fighting began at Kwajalein, where Jemaliut killed some of Letalju's family, continued with a pitched battle at Ebon, and ended with Jemaliut's defeat and death at Namu. Letalju's victory was due in part to two marriage alliances: one with the Erroja lineage of Ebon through his marriage to Lijabar, and one with the Erribra lineage of Namorik through the marriage of his sister, Litarao, to a high chief, Lakkabuk. Lakkabuk's lineage, being of *iroij* status, volunteered military assistance, while Lijabar's lineage, being of *bwirak* status, was obligated to do so. By adding Jemaliut's lands to his own, Letalju became the most important paramount chief in Ralik.

Letalju was succeeded by Lañinni, his sister's son and his ally in the war against Jemaliut. Lañinni evidently preempted his older brother, Lailiju, by

his exceptional talent for leadership. Lañinni, who may have been born as early as 1765, strengthened the position of the Bwij-in-Iroj lineage through a combination of marriage alliances, assassinations (connived at by those surrounding him) and military victories. Following Marshallese custom, Lañinni married his predecessor's widow, Lijabar, thereby preserving his lineage's hypergamous relation with the noble (*bwirak*) Erroja lineage. Unfortunately, very little is known of the symbolic aspects of Marshallese kinship, but Erdland (1914:123) notes with respect to this particular custom that

'When a chief dies, a brother or some other close relative takes the widows (levirate). This is done so that no common subject will have intercourse with the women whose bodies have become inviolable by virtue of their having had conjugal contact with the chief.' (Human Relations Area Files translation.)

Lañinni also married Limijerre, the niece of a rival paramount chief, Liñidrik, of a northern Iroj lineage, who was said to be the most respected chief residing on Namu, the traditional capital (Eon-out) of the Ralik chain. In an exquisitely orchestrated plot Lañinni conspired with Limijerre to eliminate Liñidrik together with all his matrilineal heirs:

'[Limijerre] had four brothers, of whom three lived in Eon-in-meto and one in Ailinlaplap [Ailinglaplap]. Lañinni tactfully persuaded her to enflame a latent rivalry between Liñidrik and his three nephews in the north to a point where they conspired to kill him. At the same time she called upon Liñidrik's warriors from other Ralik islands to come to his aid on Namu. But when they arrived in their sailing canoes off Namu, they were too late. Their leader had already been murdered. Limijerre then urged them to avenge his death, which they did by killing the three assassins. Limijerre, as the only surviving relative of Liñidrik in Eon-in-meto, succeeded to the chiefship and shared it with Lañinni. They had no children, however, and upon her death Lañinni assumed full authority.'⁶ (Mason n.d.:10.)

Lañinni's wars in the north culminated in among other things a victory over Joaje, a paramount chief of the Iroj lineage in Lae, who led a rebellion of Kab-in-meto chiefs against him. Joaje had married an Ijirik woman, Libol, but his specific Iroj connections are unknown. Joaje was banished and his lands were added to Lañinni's growing realm. The result of these wars was a reduction in the status of Eon-in-meto lineages from chiefly (*iroij*) to tributary (*bwirak*).

When Lañinni established his control of Ralik by recourse to warfare and intermarriage between the clans, the sociopolitical status of leading lineages in Eon-in-meto changed for the worse. Where once the title of Iroj Lablab was proudly and

⁶ Lañinni arranged a separate death for Limijerre's fourth brother.

correctly exercised in the small chiefdoms of the north, it was now reserved for the Bwii-in-Iroi. Tribute in goods and services had to be rendered to high chiefs whose base of operations lay many miles to the south. Former titled chiefs in Eon-in-meto bowed to the new authority and were compelled to serve as local representatives of the new leadership ...

The term Iroi became the sole prerogative of those in the Bwii-in-Iroi. Marriage to women not of that *bwii* meant *bwirak* status for the children of Iroi males.' (Mason n.d.:50-1.)

In the next generation Lañinni arranged two successive marriages of his sister's daughter, Limijwa, in order to strengthen his position in the south. Limijwa first married Lañinmilloñ, a high chief of the Erribra lineage in Namorik, with whom she had three children, two of whom, Loj and Lamari, are shown in Figure 2 (marked by asterisks).⁷ Later she married Lañinni's son Laukuk, with whom she also had three children, including Lañinni's presumed eventual successor, Kaibuke. The second marriage is the only one in which the Bwii-in-Iroi lineage was a wife-giver instead of a wife-taker to an Erroja *bwirak* lineage. One explanation is that Laukuk may have 'held an independent title as Iroi to lands in Ebon and other parts of Rak-in-meto from his mother's clan Erroja' (Mason n.d.:17). Lañinni's sister's son Lamarein, who may have died before he could succeed to the Iroi Lablab title, took wives from both the Erroja and Ijjirik lineages.

Lañinni was probably succeeded by his sister's daughter's son Kaibuke, who ruled from about 1840 until his death in the late 1860s.⁸ Like his chiefly predecessors, Kaibuke married an Erroja woman, Neimakwa, his mother's mother's brother's daughter's daughter. It is said that Kaibuke married her while serving his mother's brothers as *iroij erik* on Ebon and Jaluit Atolls. Kaibuke's brothers, Lajutok and Lamari, also married Erroja women: the former married his mother's brother's daughter Libolur, and the latter his mother's mother's brother's daughter Litakilañ. Kaibuke's elder sister, Loj, married Lowōr, an *iroij* Erribra man of Namorik, thereby repeating a marriage alliance of her mother, Limijwa. Sometime during Kaibuke's reign the seat of the Ralik paramount chiefs, the Eon-out, was moved south from Namu to Ailinglaplap due to the growing importance of the Bwii-in-Iroi marriage alliances with the Erroja and Erribra lineages of Ebon and Namorik, and due also to the concentration of European trading and mission activities at Jaluit.

Kaibuke was succeeded by his elder sister's son, Loeak, who was chal-

⁷ The third child, Bouliej, a minor personage whose marriage is not known, is not shown in Figure 2.

⁸ None of Lañinni's other potential successors are recalled as leaders in the Bwii-in-Iroi genealogy; Kaibuke's succession is a historically recorded fact (Mason n.d.:17-8).

lenged and eventually succeeded by Kaibuke's younger sister's son, Kabua. Loeak married his mother's brother's daughter, Libebe, of the Erroja lineage, while Kabua, attempting perhaps to legitimize his claim to succession, married Kaibuke's widow, Neimakwa. Kabua's position in the north was strengthened by his mother's marriage to an Ijjirik man, Jiba. Loeak, in his resistance to Kabua's challenges to his authority, which took the form of threatening displays of force at Ebon and Jaluit, received strong support from his *bwirak* wife's brother, Litokwa. Kabua, who succeeded Loeak in the latter's declining years, relied on his Erroja wife's son, Nelu, and especially on his Ijjirik wife's brother, Launa. Launa, whose status was said to be in between *iroij* and *bwirak* (reflecting the diminished status of the Ijjirik lineage), had previously served as Loeak's bodyguard and navigator, after which he became Kabua's 'Admiral-General', collecting tribute for him from the atolls in Eon-in-meto:

Loeak died in 1904 in Ailinglaplap, followed by Kabua in 1910 at Jaluit. Loeak's sister's son Rijjino married his mother's brother's daughter Nuia of the Erroja lineage, but died before he could succeed his uncle. Kabua was succeeded by his brother Leit, who inherited Kabua's wives. Leit died in 1914, whereat the Bwii-in-Iroij line came to an end.

According to an official German report cited by Mason (n.d.:24-5) the political situation in Ralik near the end of the 19th century can be summed up as follows. Loeak, his sister's son Rijjino, Kabua, and the latter's younger brother Leit were the last men of the Bwii-in-Iroij line who were true *iroij* and therefore eligible to hold the title of Iroij Lablab. They are designated in the report as 'royalty'. Of secondary *bwirak* rank or 'nobility', 'but exercising Iroij Lablab authority over lands of their matrilineages', were Nelu (the last surviving member of his descent line) and Litokwa of the Erroja clan, and Lebomari, an Erribra man whose ancestry is unknown. Ebon was controlled by Nelu and Litokwa; Namorik by Nelu and Lebomari; Jaluit by Kabua, Nelu, Loeak and Litokwa; and Ailinglaplap and the northern atolls by Kabua. The pattern of control was hierarchical in that the *bwirak* lineages of Nelu and Litokwa were wife-givers and tributaries to the *iroij* lineage of Kabua and Loeak.

Clearly, the success of the Bwii-in-Iroij dynasty in its domination of the Ralik islands in the 19th century was due in large part to its marriage alliances, through which it obtained voluntary or obligatory military support and tribute. These alliances included marriages of royal Bwii-in-Iroij men to noble (*bwirak*) Erroja women and marriages of royal Bwii-in-Iroij women to royal (*iroij*) Erribra chiefs. The Bwii-in-Iroij-Errroja alliance was perpetuated for six generations through marriages to a variety of matrilineal relatives, including mothers' brothers' widows as well as mothers' brothers' daughters and more distant matrilineal relatives. The Bwii-in-Iroij-Erribra alliance was

maintained for four generations through three known marriages. There was also an important 'anti-alliance', in which a marriage link was used to eliminate a political rival.

Discussion

The genealogical data just presented raise three questions concerning marriage alliance in Oceanic societies. (1) What is the structural significance of oblique marriages? (2) What is the cyclic structure of chiefly marriages? (3) What is the relation between chiefly and commoner marriage systems?

1. Oblique marriages

In Oceanic ethnology oblique (intergenerational) marriages have usually been interpreted as an aspect of inheritance rather than alliance and as structurally or historically discontinuous with other marriage types. In *The Melanesians*, Codrington (1891) described marriage with the mother's brother's widow or wife as an implication of bride price and the levirate. In the matrilineal society of the Banks Islands,

'The Levirate obtains as a matter of course. The wife has been obtained for one member of the family by the contributions of the whole, and if that member fails by death, some other is ready to take his place, so that the property shall not be lost; it is a matter of arrangement for convenience and economy whether a brother, cousin, or uncle shall take his widow ...

In fact, a woman, when once the proper payment has been made for her, belongs to those who have paid, the family generally; hence a man as in the story of Ganviviris, will set up his sister's son in life by handing over to him one of his wives; not because the young man has a right to his uncle's wives, but because the woman is already in the family.' (Codrington 1891:244-5.)

In *The history of Melanesian society*, Rivers (1914) interpreted oblique or 'anomalous' marriages, including marriage with the mother's brother's widow or wife, as evidence for an earlier gerontocratic form of social organization. In Rivers' theory, 'younger men could only obtain wives by the gift of their maternal uncles during the lives of the latter or by marrying the widows of their uncles' (Rivers 1914, II:105). Only later, with the breakdown of gerontocracy, were younger men able to claim women of their own generation, namely their mothers' brothers' daughters, as wives. Rivers deduced the existence of marriage with the mother's brother's widow or wife from the terminological equation of father's sister's son with father in the Crow kinship terminology of the Banks Islands. Gifford (1916) extended Rivers' theory by deducing the existence of wife's brother's daughter's marriage from the

equivalence of mother and mother's brother's daughter in the Omaha terminology of the Miwok, a patrilineal society in North America. Following Rivers, Gifford interpreted this oblique marriage as a precursor of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage.

Deacon (1927), like Codrington, interpreted marriage with the mother's brother's widow as a form of levirate, 'on a par with a man's inheritance of his elder brother's wife. (Possibly it may be connected with the sharing of property between MB [mother's brother] and sister's son, and inheritance of his uncle's property by the latter' (Deacon 1927:328). Deacon, in arguing for the existence of a marriage class system in Melanesia, which would classify members of alternate generations together, was concerned to distinguish marriage with the mother's brother's widow from two other anomalous marriages hypothesized by Rivers: marriage with the daughter's daughter or brother's daughter's daughter and with the father's father's wife.

Firth (1968), in his critique of Rivers, expressed the view that marriage with the mother's brother's widow probably occurred only when the sister's son did not already have a wife. He regarded such a marriage as a 'personal act' rather than an institutional arrangement: 'In other words, the phenomenon may well have been a discontinuous one (if indeed it really was ever common)' (Firth 1968:27).⁹ Firth proposed a 'broader formulation' which emphasized matrilineal succession without any implication of marriage and which would give a 'firmer basis' for the terminological equivalence of father and father's sister's son:

In the Melanesian field one of the best early demonstrations of this was given by R.F. Fortune in his work on Dobu (1932, pp. 38, 40). There the FZS is called "father", but only after the death of his mother's brother; till then he is called by a term which may be rendered as "cross-cousin." When his mother's brother dies he is not expected to marry the widow, but he is expected to inherit the status and property of the mother's brother, and to have authority over the children which their father formerly had. So it is quite logical that he should be called "father", not "cousin" when their father dies. The effect is an "elevation" of the inheriting group.' (Firth 1968:27.)

Firth's interpretation may be consistent with the Crow equation $F = FZS$, but we should note that in Dobu, marriage with the mother's brother's daughter is prohibited. In many other societies around the world that have a system of matrilineal descent and a preference or a rule of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, marriage with the mother's brother's widow is common or expect-

⁹ Firth (1968:21-2) thought that Rivers, because he was a bachelor all his life, had a 'naive' and overly 'cerebral' view of marriage as a right of sexual access to and transfer of women, failing to appreciate the 'considerations' which affect its 'actual form and frequency'.

ed. Examples include the Ashanti of Africa (Fortes 1950), the Garo of Assam (Bose 1936; Nakane 1968), and the Tsimshian of North America (Garfield 1939; Garfield, Wingert and Barbeau 1951).

The significance of marriage with the mother's brother's widow from the standpoint of alliance rather than inheritance was clearly brought out in Garfield's (1939) Tsimshian ethnography and in Rosman and Rubel's (1981 [1971]) analysis of kinship and social stratification on the Northwest Coast of North America:

'A man is said to have special access to the wife of his mother's brother during the latter's lifetime (Garfield 1939:234). She becomes his wife after the mother's brother dies. Since it is likely that she is considerably older than ego, she can choose a secondary wife for him, usually a younger woman from her own lineage, who advances to the position of senior wife after the latter's death. This structurally brings about the same result as mother's brother's daughter marriage, as the alliance between two lineages is perpetuated transgenerationally (Garfield 1939: 235). These transgenerational alliances between two lineages as a result of marriages are specifically referred to by Garfield (Garfield et al. 1951:23).' (Rosman and Rubel 1981 [1971]:19-20.)

In the Trobriand Islands in Melanesia, Malinowski (1932) noted that the successor to the district chieftainship inherits his predecessor's wives. Malinowski specifically mentions the inheritance of an elder brother's wives, but this practice would logically include the inheritance of a mother's brother's or mother's mother's brother's wives as well. Although Powell (1960, 1969a, 1969b) doubted that true widow inheritance occurred in the Trobriands, he did emphasize, along with Malinowski, that 'a successful leader repeats his predecessor's marriages', thereby maintaining an alliance hierarchy based on hypergamy and tribute payments. Lounsbury (1965) suggested that widow inheritance in the Trobriands was a practice unique to persons of chiefly status.

In the Marshall Islands, as we have seen, marriage with the mother's brother's widow was an integral part of a system of chiefly marriage alliance. As among the Tsimshian and the Garo, it was not discontinuous with, but structurally equivalent to marriage with the mother's brother's daughter. Rather than being a simple matter of matrilineal inheritance and succession, it was part of a system of generalized exchange based on hypergamy and tribute. As shown in Figure 2, Bwij-in-Iroij chiefs married their mothers' brothers' widows almost as often as they married their mothers' brothers' daughters. The two most important successors to the position of Iroij Lablab, Lañinni and Kaibuke, both married their mother's brother's widow, as did Kabua, who laid claim to this title and eventually succeeded in securing it. The significance of such marriages from the standpoint of alliance was noted by Erdland:

'The landed property of a *buirak* [*bwirak*] may be much more extensive than that of an *iroj* [*iroij*]. In order to gain tributary rights over such estates of a *buirak*, the *iroj* have always endeavored to form connections with wealthy *libuirak* [female *bwirak*]. Because Nimökwa [Neimakwa] was the richest landowner of the Ralik group, Kabua who already had many wives, took her in marriage. Despite this marriage, however, Nelu remained the sole owner of all the territories of his mother, Nimökwa, but he paid annual tribute to his cousin and stepfather [Kabua].' (Erdland 1914:72-3.)

Generalized exchange is usually characterized, prototypically, as marriage with a real or classificatory mother's brother's daughter, but, as Lévi-Strauss (1969) emphasized, this is its simplest though not its only formula. Speaking of oblique wife's brother's daughter's marriage among the patrilineal Miwok, he noted that 'The one important point is that the possible spouse shall belong to the required lineage. The generation is secondary and is not taken into consideration unless because of age or for reasons of convenience' (Lévi-Strauss 1969:362). Similarly, among the Kachin in Burma,

'The normal ... marriage ... is with the mother's brother's daughter, who, however, is denoted by the same term as the wife's brother's daughter. There is also marriage with a classificatory "wife" of the father, as well as the levirate and the sororate. Among the Haka Chin, the first is called *Nu Klai*, to marry a relative by marriage. Gilhodes also describes successive sororal polygyny. Thus it seems that the preferred marriage results, not so much from a prescribed and precise degree of relationship, as from a general relationship between all the men of a lineage, creditors in wives, *dama ni*, and a debtor lineage, *mayu ni* in respect of all its daughters and sisters.' (Lévi-Strauss 1969:243-4.)

There is no genealogical evidence, so far, of a Marshallese chief marrying both his mother's brother's widow and his mother's brother's daughter, but among the Garo, a matrilineal society in Assam (Bose 1936; Nakane 1968), when a sister's son succeeds his mother's brother, he marries the latter's widow as well as her daughter.¹⁰ In systems of generalized exchange 'there is nothing abnormal in this situation; quite the contrary, whether the privilege is over the wife's mother (Garo), or the wife's brother's daughter (Miwok), we are only faced with matrilineal or patrilineal facets of the same institution, which itself is only one element in a total structure to which the type of descent is unimportant' (Lévi-Strauss 1969:273). Lévi-Strauss also

¹⁰ This would appear to be a counter-example to Hérítier's (1994) theory of incest, according to which it is dangerous and therefore forbidden for two closely related persons, prototypically a mother and a daughter, to have sexual relations with a common third person, unless Garo is one of those societies in which such unions are actually sought.

notes that in systems of generalized exchange, grandmothers and granddaughters may be included in the class of potential spouses. In Marshalllese society, marriages between real or classificatory grandparents and grandchildren, although rare, were permissible provided that the individuals belonged to different exogamous units (clans or subclans). Spoehr (1949b) and Kiste and Rynkiewicz (1976) interpret such marriages as consistent with joking relations between alternate generations, but they would also be consistent with alliance relations between clans or subclans.

2. The cyclic structure of chiefly marriages

In hypergamous systems of generalized exchange there is always the problem of what to do with unmarried princesses at the top of the hierarchy. There are several 'solutions' to this problem. In Oceanic societies they include: (1) the sacred virgin solution, that is, celibacy of royal princesses; (2) ethnic exogamy – their marriage to chiefs of other domains which do not count in the local system of rank; and (3) brother-sister marriage (Hage and Harary 1991; Rogers 1977). The first and second solutions are known from Tonga in different historical periods and the third solution from Hawaii.

Mason's report describes succession and marriage alliance only from the standpoint of the Bwij-in-Iroj lineage. Without additional data concerning the relation between individual Erribra chiefs and between Erroja and Ijjirik descent lines, succession to titles, or the marriages of both men and women of each lineage, it is obviously not possible to give a complete outline of the Marshalllese royal marriage system. As in other conical societies practising generalized exchange, for example Tonga (Gifford 1929) and Kachin (Leach 1954), it may be that 'correct', that is, matrilinear, marriages were incumbent mainly on heads of chiefly lines and then only with respect to their principal wives. But, on the basis of present evidence, we note two possible alliance structures and solutions to the problem of hypergamy in the Marshalls.

Figure 2 shows that the Erroja lineage is a wife-giver to the Bwij-in-Iroj lineage; which in turn is a wife-giver to the Erribra lineage. Unfortunately, we do not know where Erroja men and Erribra women married. But if they married each other, then we would have a cycle of asymmetric exchange. This is not inconceivable, since Erribra and Erroja were powerful lineages located on the two richest islands of the Ralik chain. Erroja's *bwirak* status with respect to Bwij-in-Iroj may not have precluded a wife-taking relation with Erribra. Such logical inconsistencies, that is, cyclic relations of superiority in which A outranks B, B outranks C, and C outranks A, have been noted in Fijian vassalage relations (Hocart 1952; Lévi-Strauss 1963).

The other possibility is that some lineages of *iroij* status were in a relation of restricted, namely symmetric, exchange with each other. In Figure 2 there

are exchanges of both women and men between Bwij-in-Iroij and Ijirik lineages. Such 'regressive solutions' to the problem of hypergamy are sometimes found in systems of generalized exchange (Lévi-Strauss 1969).

3. *Chiefly vs commoner marriages*

We have said nothing about commoner marriages. It is very likely that generalized exchange in the Marshalls applied only to chiefly lineages. This was the situation in Tonga, where generalized exchange was hypergamous and associated with substantial payments of tribute. In Tonga, matrilateral cross-cousin marriages were a chiefly prerogative, 'not extensively practiced among commoners, for fear of imitating chiefs and perhaps also, for alienating goods that a chief might claim' (Gifford 1929:24). Reports of preference for bilateral cross-cousin marriage in traditional Marshallese society (Spoehr 1949b) may refer, then, to the practice of commoners. We note that in *The elementary structures*, Lévi-Strauss (1969:369-70) hypothesizes the coexistence in ancient China of two marriage systems: one practised by peasants, which was based on sister exchange and bilateral cross-cousin marriage, and the other 'of feudal inspiration, and based on cycles of alliance between patrilineages ... and marriage with the matrilateral cross-cousin and niece. That is, a system of restricted exchange and a system of generalized exchange.'

Conclusion

We conclude on the basis of present genealogical evidence that generalized exchange was an important and politically significant feature of chiefly marriage in traditional Marshallese society. In this respect, Marshallese society is similar to other conical societies, in particular Tongan society in western Polynesia.¹¹ Given the reconstruction of generalized exchange (matrilateral cross-cousin marriage) in early Austronesian society (Blust 1980, 1991), its documented presence in western Polynesia (Bott 1982; Gifford 1929), and now in eastern Micronesia, and its hypothesized presence in early Oceanic society (Friedman 1981) and in the Lapita colonization of eastern Melanesia and western Polynesia (Kirch 1988), we believe that further ethnohistorical research will uncover its presence in other Oceanic societies. Oblique marriages with the mother's brother's widow may be a clue to the existence of such systems. Some of these systems may have evolved complex forms of the type described by Tjon Sie Fat (1990), in which the cycles connecting descent

¹¹ For other Tongan-Marshallese similarities see Hage, Harary and Milicic 1996.

groups are repeated but not in consecutive generations.¹² Examples would be the marriage systems of the Admiralty Islands and Dobu as outlined in the models of Eyde (1983) and Kelly (1968). There may also be analogues of generalized exchange. In the northern Gilbert Islands in eastern Micronesia, social stratification was based on a patrilineal variant of the conical clan (Lambert 1971; Hage and Harary 1996). There was no rule of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, but there was an asymmetric rule of fosterage joining chiefs, nobles and commoners which Lambert (1964) explicitly compares to matrilineal cross-cousin marriage among the Kachin.

¹² The book by Tjon Sie Fat contains an entire catalogue of such systems, conveniently displayed on pp. 114-9.

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