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## *The Extension of Incest Taboos in the Woleai, Micronesia*

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### I

ALL societies extend incest taboos to some relatives outside the elementary family, but no one of these relatives is tabooed in all societies. Illustrations of this principle are the commonplaces of anthropology. While the Ba-Ila forbid marriage with a mother's brother's daughter and approve marriage with a father's sister's daughter, the Siriono prefer marriage with a mother's brother's daughter and forbid marriage with a father's sister's daughter. Marriage with a deceased wife's sister is approved in many societies and required in some, but in England it is a crime. This variability is often used to criticize biological and psychological theories of incest taboos. Functional theories seek to explain why incest taboos are universal even though the incest boundaries vary. There has been less interest, however, in explaining the variability itself.

Murdock maintains that the extension of incest taboos, that is, their application to relatives outside the elementary family, is determined almost entirely by the nature of the consanguineal kin groups in the society. He believes that the influence of other factors is so minor that we need not consider them (1949:303-304). His belief in a primary relation between kin groups and the extension of incest taboos illustrates and derives from his broader conclusion that "social organization is a semi-independent system comparable in many respects to language, and similarly characterized by an internal dynamics of its own" (1949:199).

White suggests, however, that the extension of incest taboos depends upon a combination of many circumstances, including habitat, technology, subsistence, methods of defense and offence, the division of labor between the sexes, and the degree of cultural development (1948:428). Some of these circumstances are clearly outside the conventional orbit of social organization. White does not pursue this suggestion by referring to individual societies in which these or similar factors determine the extension of incest taboos. He provides neither a discussion of the relative importance of these various factors, nor an analysis of how they influence the incest restrictions in specific cultures. Nevertheless, he may be right.

Are the kin groups that function in a society the sole determinants of incest boundaries, or may other factors exert a significant influence also?

We shall show that other factors are responsible for the incest boundaries in a particular case. We shall compare several closely related societies that differ in the relatives to whom incest taboos are extended and determine what specific circumstances are associated with this difference. The critical factors in this instance are demography and ecology, factors that are often neglected in analyses of social organization.

## II

The Woleai is a group of coral islands in the west-central Carolines of Micronesia. Seven principal inhabited islands and atolls form the nucleus of this group (Smith 1951:16). These islands are almost identical in speech, economy, technology, and other aspects of culture. Their kinship organization is matrilineal in descent and predominantly matrilocal in residence. The functioning kin groups are the elementary family, the matrilocal extended family, the matrilineal lineage, and the clan. The clans are not localized: most of them are represented on several different atolls. The lineage owns most of the property which is inherited matrilineally, although a man may pass some personal property on to his sons. Succession to chieftainship is matrilineal. The kinship terms, however, extend bilaterally to relatives of the same generation and follow the Hawaiian pattern.

The senior author gathered complete censuses and lists of the primary kinship relations of all persons living on four of these islands in 1951. Two of these islands, Falalap and Falalis, are parts of Woleai proper, the atoll which gives the culture area its name. The other two islands, Eauripik and Lamotrek, are different atolls within the same area.

These data show that there is no variation among these islands in the extension of incest taboos to matrilineal relatives: there are no marriages between two clan mates. There is variation, however, in the extension of these taboos to nonclan relatives (Table 1). Falalap, Falalis, and Lamotrek report no marriage between persons for whom a consanguineal relationship is traceable. This suggests that on these islands incest taboos extend bilaterally. The data for Eauripik, however, show two instances of matrilateral cross-cousin marriage, and two other marriages between persons who are more distant consanguineal relatives. Since both of the cross-cousin marriages are matrilateral, incest taboos may extend only to patrilateral cross-cousins. In the first of the more distant relationships, the husband's maternal grandmother and the wife's paternal grandmother are sisters, making this a marriage between second cousins or fifth degree consanguineal relatives. In the second case, the husband's father and the wife's maternal grandmother are siblings. This is a case where a man married his first cousin once removed, a fourth degree consanguineal relative. Thus on Eauripik there are two marriages between tertiary relatives, one between fourth degree relatives, and one between fifth degree relatives. Therefore, incest taboos are not extended bilaterally to all tertiary and more distant relatives. Our data are of actual practices and not of cultural norms.

TABLE 1. MARRIAGES BETWEEN RELATIVES

Island	Number of Marriages	Marriages between Relatives
Eauripik	22	4
Falalap	42	0
Falalis	8	0
Lamotrek	38	0

A fifth island in the heart of this area is Ifaluk, which is well reported by Burrows and Spiro (1957) and by Damm, Hambruch, and Sarfert (1938). These reports do not clearly delineate the incest boundaries on this island. Damm says that on Ifaluk a man may not marry women—such as sisters—who live in the same house with him. This restriction on marriage extends to two generations but not to the third generation. Therefore the grandchildren of siblings may marry (1938:75). Since the residence group is the matrilineal extended family, the women who live in the same house with a man should be his lineage mates. Damm’s statement seems to indicate that incest taboos on Ifaluk are extended only to close relatives in the clan and lineage and not to nonclan relatives. Burrows and Spiro give two different descriptions of incest restrictions on Ifaluk (1957:301, 143), but Spiro maintains that “cross-cousin marriage does not exist and it is prohibited” (personal communication). Ifaluk is like Falalap, Falalis, and Lamotrek where cross-cousin marriages do not exist. Eauripik appears to be unique in this area in the practice of marriage with nonclan relatives. Knowing now that there is this difference, we can ask why there is this difference.

### III

If true nonunilinear kin groups existed on Ifaluk, Falalap, Falalis, and Lamotrek, but not on Eauripik, this might explain the bilateral extension of incest taboos on the first four islands and the unilateral extension of these taboos on Eauripik. We have no evidence to show that this is the case. Whatever we know about the kin groups of the Woleai does not help to explain the differences in incest boundaries.

When we consider the demography of these islands we find a much more conclusive variation that is directly relevant to our problem. Nearly half the population of Eauripik (62 of 132) belongs to the Woleai clan. The members of other clans marry Woleai clan members more frequently (19 of 25) than any other clan members. Marriages between individuals who are not members of the Woleai clan reduce the number of potential mates for the Woleai clan members. If there were many marriages of this type, the number of potential mates for Woleai clan members would be so small that some of them would have to remain unmarried. A pattern of marriage in which one spouse is almost always a member of one clan results in maintaining the number of potential mates for all the members of that clan.

This explains why incest taboos are not extended bilaterally on Eauripik. If one spouse were always a member of the Woleai clan, an individual whose father is a member of the Woleai clan would marry a person who is also a member of the Woleai clan. Then the fact that the father and the spouse are members of the same clan would not mean, of course, that there is always a traceable relationship. There would always be an assumed relationship and sometimes a traceable one. This system, therefore, cannot maintain an aversion to marriage with the father's clan mates or relatives. This system is also conducive to the development of a preference for cross-cousin marriages. On Eauripik the cross-cousins of a person who is not a member of the Woleai clan are most often members of the Woleai clan.

If one spouse in all marriages were of the Woleai clan, then the Woleai clan and the other clans would function as exogamous moieties. Three reported marriages between persons who are not Woleai clan members show that there are no exogamous moieties at present. No moieties or phratries exist on the other islands either. It seems, however, that the present practices on Eauripik might well develop a moiety system there.

Burrows and Spiro report that on Ifaluk the Islanders desire to marry into clans that have a higher status than their own (1957:44). Our tabulations show, however, that clans intermarry freely except on Eauripik. Nevertheless, it may be that on Eauripik people marry into the Woleai clan because it has the greatest prestige. The prestige of these clans corresponds to the order of rank of their chiefs, and all of the clans that have chiefs are higher in prestige than the clans without chiefs. On Falalap, Falalis, and Lamotrek there is one male chief in each of the larger clans, while on Eauripik there are three chiefs in the Woleai clan and none in the other clans. We do not know how this developed on Eauripik but it is associated with the great size of the Woleai clan. The concentration of chieftanships may have led to the growth of that clan, or the other way around, or there may have been a common cause for both. The fact remains, however, that bilateral incest taboos are not possible with the unique distribution of population among the clans of Eauripik. It is simply a matter of demography.

A second factor that influences the extension of incest taboos in the Woleai is ecology. Falalis resembles Eauripik in its distribution of the population by clans. Nearly half the people of Falalis (37 of 75) also belong to the Woleai clan. Falalis, however, extends its incest taboos bilaterally. The difference between bilateral Falalis and unilateral Eauripik is ecological. Eauripik is about ninety miles from its nearest neighbors. Its isolation leads to island endogamy. Falalis, however, is one of six inhabited islands of the Woleai atoll. The greatest distance between any two adjacent islands of this atoll is only a few hundred yards. There is intermarriage among the islands of the atoll. Thus Falalis can extend its incest taboos bilaterally and still make it possible for everyone to marry. This is simply a matter of ecology.

A combination of demographic and ecological factors prevents the bilateral extension of incest taboos on Eauripik. These factors are generally not re-

garded to be immediate constituents of kinship systems and social structures. Yet they, and probably others, may significantly affect those systems and structures. We do not know to what extent these ecological and demographic factors determine the incest boundaries in other cultures. Our Woleai data show, however, that social organization, as just one part of culture, is not necessarily an independent and closed system that reacts solely to its own internal dynamics.

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