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Porpoises and Taro¹

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Magic performed for the benefit of agricultural production in Micronesia usually does not reach a level of importance comparable to that reported for Melanesia. Nevertheless, on certain specified occasions such crop magic is (or at least was, until very recent times) practiced on many of the Caroline Islands of Micronesia. In this paper I propose to discuss one such instance on Woleai atoll, where taro magic is performed whenever a porpoise catch is made.

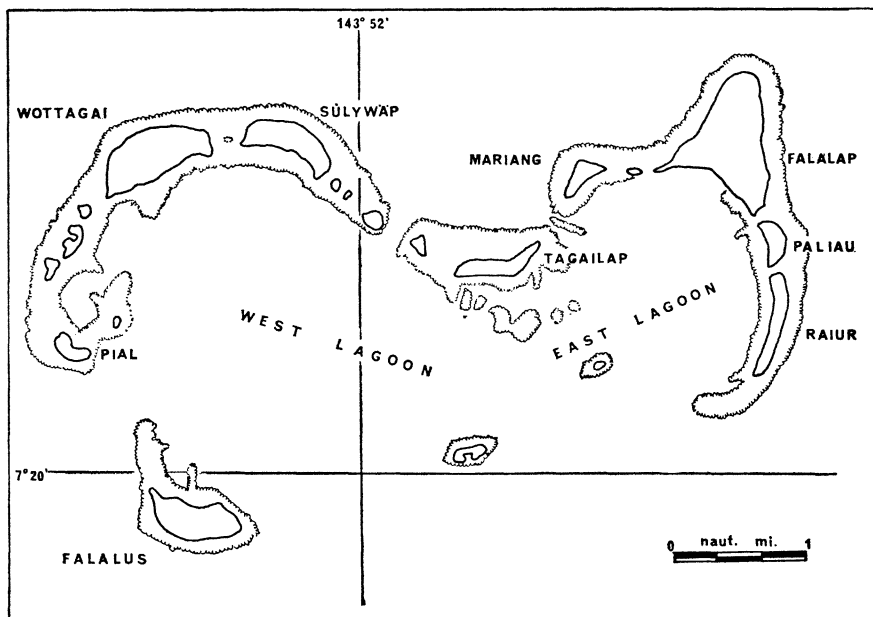
Woleai is an atoll of the western Caroline Islands located some 400 miles southeast of Yap and 500 miles west of Truk, its two nearest volcanic island neighbors in the Caroline chain. The atoll has twenty islands and islets situated along its reef, and seven of these are permanently inhabited. The lagoon of Woleai is approximately five nautical miles long and two and one-half miles wide. A projecting reef near the island of Tagailap tends to subdivide this total area into distinct western and eastern lagoons (see Map 1). The population of the atoll, at the time of my field work in 1965, was approximately 600 individuals. Three hundred and seventy-five of these inhabitants were settled on four of the islands of the eastern lagoon, and the remaining 225 were resident on the three inhabited islands of the western lagoon.² The bulk of the information utilized in this paper was gathered on Wottagai Island, the principal island of the western lagoon. Details of my description, then, may vary slightly among the other islands of the atoll.

Woleai society is composed of a number of ranked matri-clans (sibs), subclans, and lineages. The political organization, in many ways, reflects the geographic separation of the atoll into eastern and western lagoons. Until recent years Woleai, along with its neighboring atolls, was actively linked to Yap in a supra-island socio-economic system.

The inhabitants of the atolls of the western and central Carolines are primarily dependent on subsistence agriculture and fishing for survival. Most of these islands lie within a storm-belt region of the western Pacific and thus are subject to frequent tropical storms and typhoons, which often cause widespread damage to taro and breadfruit, the two principal subsistence crops.³ Magical rituals for the benefit of agricultural crops are performed under three different sets of circumstances on Woleai and nearby islands:

(1) After a typhoon or tropical storm a magician is often requested by the chief or chiefs of the island to carry out the necessary ceremonies which assure the rapid recovery of the crops—taro, breadfruit, and coconut—which

MAP I: WOLEAI ATOLL



have suffered damage. In 1958, for example, a typhoon which struck Lamotrek, Elato, and Satawal proved so damaging that the chiefs of Lamotrek requested that a widely recognized superior magician of Satawal visit their island to perform this type of magic.

(2) Occasionally a chief judges that a crop is doing badly and therefore asks a magician to assure its yield. Informants say that such a request is usually made if the harvest of breadfruit promises to be small.

(3) Magic which is meant to promote taro production is practiced as part of the *galigi* ceremony, which is performed whenever the islanders make a catch of porpoises.

The reasons for crop magic under the first two sets of circumstances seem self-evident; the yield of the crops concerned appears threatened, and magic is therefore required to counteract a critical situation. There is, however, no equally obvious reason why taro magic should be associated with a porpoise catch, and my informants offered no explanation. The catch and hence the ritual are only occasional events and do not usually occur at any critical agricultural period. The purpose of this paper, then, is to offer a possible explanation for this association of porpoises and taro.

SEXUAL ROLES ON WOLEAI

Sharp lines separate the appropriate behavior of the sexes in labor and most other public activities on Woleai. Fundamentally, agricultural tasks are the responsibility of women, and fishing is a job assigned to men. Canoe fishing groups are exclusively made up of men, and taro field labor

of groups of women (with the exception cited below). Sexually mixed groups are seen in these activities only on special occasions when a large work force is necessary and one or the other sex is unable to supply the necessary manpower, notably on occasions when large feasts are to be held. At such times men may help the women transport the inordinate amounts of taro needed from the fields to the village—but they do not cultivate the crop. Similarly, if a large fishing drive is made in the lagoon near the island, the women help the men pull the nets to shore—but they do not enter the fishing canoes.

Men, it is true, tend the coconut trees, and women occasionally engage in reef gathering of fish and shellfish, but these activities are either qualitatively different or are of minor importance in terms of total labor when compared to taro cultivation, on the one hand, or to lagoon and open ocean fishing on the other. The qualitative difference is exemplified by the fact that when men climb coconut trees they do so to pick immature nuts or tap the trees for toddy. Immature nuts and toddy are not classified as “food” in the way that taro and breadfruit are. Mature coconuts, which are a food—and important as such on islands where breadfruit and taro are scarce—are gathered for consumption by women from the ground beneath the trees where they fall. The only other agricultural activity in which men regularly participate is the breadfruit harvest, when they climb these trees to pick the fruit. This is always done at the request of the women, who wait below to catch the fruit as it falls. The division of labor in this instance seems to reflect more the assumed physical abilities of the sexes and the preserving of modesty while climbing trees than any close association of men with agricultural production.

There is one class of men, however, who (if they wish) may regularly participate in taro cultivation. These are the *limarchabwut* (part women)—men who “walk and talk like women.” These men are said to take no sexual interest in women and in western culture would probably be categorized as male homosexuals. Informants stated that it was well known that taro tended by a *limarchabwut* grows faster and better than that cared for by the women. The classification of these individuals supports rather than contradicts the general rules governing the sexual division of labor.

In communal activities a division of labor by sex usually overshadows any other. For example, about twice a year, when the village paths are cleaned, the chiefs of the island set the date for the work and divide the village area in half, assigning one half to the men and the other to the women. The particular half assigned to each sex is changed at each cleaning. The two labor groups also clean the areas around public buildings and structures. The women’s group has the responsibility for those areas around the menstrual houses, the dispensary, and the co-operative store (the latter two being structures of recent introduction). The men’s group cleans the areas around canoe houses and in the past, when such structures were still present on Woleai, the men’s house itself. Any mixture of the sexes in these communal labor groups is unheard of.

Groups are segregated according to sex in other public activities as well.

Men and women do not dance together, although male and female dance groups may compete with one another. There are ceremonies when the women of an island or district present food, i.e., breadfruit or taro, to the men and in return receive fish or immature (drinking) coconuts or palm toddy from the men. Sexual restrictions are often attached to the actual preparation and consumption of food. Men with special magico-religious training are not allowed to eat with women or to have their food prepared on the same fire. Women during menstruation (and for a specific number of days afterwards) are not allowed to prepare food for men. And anyone who has eaten fish (a product of the men) during the preceding day is prohibited from entering the main taro field (the domain of women).

The areas fronting canoe houses and the paths near the shore are generally considered the "men's" region of the island, while the interior and the main path of the island, which always passes behind the canoe houses, are the "women's" areas. The canoe house is the man's domain, the dwelling house that of the woman. If a woman approaches a canoe house she does so cautiously and from the rear, i.e., from the interior of the island. When she nears the structure she bends over at the waist in a posture called *húparog* (or *húoro*) which symbolically assures that her head will be below that of any man seated in the canoe house. On certain occasions when a woman must pass in front of a canoe house when she is ceremonially unclean (perhaps because the required number of months or days have not elapsed since the birth of a child or her last menstruation) she detours far out on the reef or into the lagoon—perhaps in water to her waist—in order to keep a considerable distance from this center of male activities.

The dwelling house (which is usually on the interior side of the main path and perhaps near the taro fields) is also associated with a number of restrictions—some formal and others informal—but in this case they are observed by the men. Foremost among formal restrictions is that which prohibits men from taking any magical paraphernalia they use into a dwelling; to do so would be to invite the wrath of the spirits concerned. Such objects must be kept in a canoe house or a special spirit house. With respect to informal restrictions, a man who spends most of the daylight hours near his living house rather than in a canoe house is ridiculed by his friends. The measure of a worthless or lazy man, in many cases, is the amount of time he spends in his dwelling. The rule of residence on Woleai is matrilineal, and the dwelling usually belongs to a man's wife's lineage. During the day the women of the homestead are nearby preparing food or perhaps engaged in weaving within the house itself, which is the work area for women as the canoe house is for men.

Further sexual restrictions which are commonly observed on Woleai require that a man or woman who walks alone along a path may not stop to talk to a member of the opposite sex, for this would invite gossip by any third party who might observe them. If the individuals are closely related the woman usually steps off the path, perhaps in *húparog* posture. In this manner a conversation can be carried on from a distance. Only man and wife ordinarily engage in normal conversation alone in a public place.

There are also numerous prohibitions associated with sexual intercourse. Foremost among them is the rule that forbids men from going fishing if they have participated in sexual activities during the preceding night. Men of magico-religious training are required to observe a multitude of other sexual taboos, some of them often lasting a year or more. Women are similarly restricted during menstruation and for several months after giving birth, at which times they may not engage in any work in the taro fields.

In sum, the rules governing sexual roles and behavior on Woleai are elaborate. These restrictions are perhaps an ideal way of regulating behavior and maintaining social control on a small island where members of both sexes are in more or less constant face-to-face contact, for without them it is possible that jealousies and competition might multiply and jeopardize the whole community. Nevertheless, it is also reasonable to assume that such strict rules, in themselves, often generate conflict and dissatisfaction.

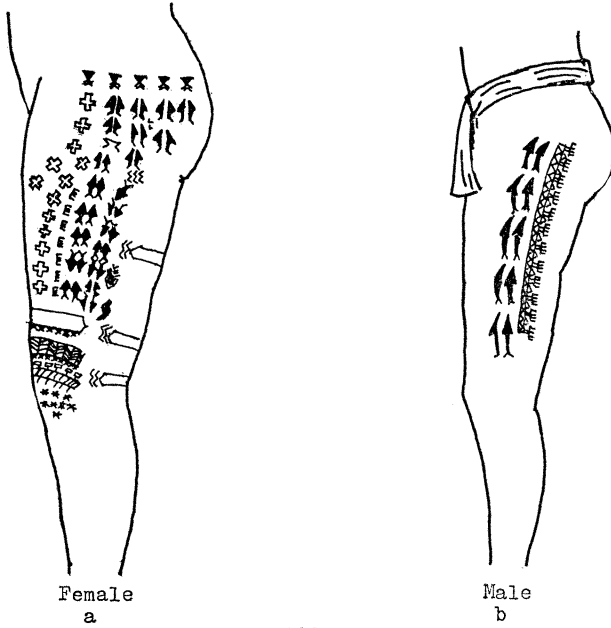
THE PORPOISE AND THE GALĪGI

Informants on Woleai on more than one occasion ascribed anthropomorphic characteristics to the porpoise (*gu*). This mammal, for example, is known to "cry like a human" when trapped or wounded. In the sphere of folklore, Lessa (1961: 38-40) has recorded a story on the closely related atoll of Ulithi which describes the transformation of two porpoises into women. I gathered the same story, with minor variations, in 1962 on Lamotrek. Informants also said that on some islands—although not on Woleai itself—members of Hofalu clan are prohibited from eating porpoises. When asked the reason, they stated that the clan members and the porpoise "were the same"—a reference which is no doubt closely related to the above folktale wherein the "porpoise girl" supposedly gives rise to one of the clans of the Carolines (Lessa 1961: 39).

A porpoise motif in tattooing is one of the most popular in the western Caroline Islands.⁴ Traditionally, the tattoos of a man of high status were of a grand design which covered his chest, back, buttocks, and thighs. Men of ordinary status had their tattoos restricted to their arms and especially their legs. A woman's tattoos, on the other hand, were concealed beneath her skirt—on her thighs and within and around the pubic triangle. The frequency of tattooing on Woleai has been declining apparently from before the visit of Krämer (1937: 225) to the island in 1909. Even with the general decline of this art, however, the porpoise motif has persisted (with stylistic modifications) and, in fact, had practically supplanted all other designs by 1955, when the last instances of traditional tattooing that I know of occurred on Woleai.

In general, I think it can be said that tattooing has a sexual and erotic significance. Traditionally, the first tattoos an individual received were done shortly after puberty. Burrows (1963) recorded numerous songs on Ifaluk (another neighboring atoll) which mention tattoos in association with love making. One explanation my informants offered as to why female tattooing has declined in recent years held that, today with American doctors treating patients, a woman would be highly embarrassed—for sexual reasons—if

FIGURE I
WOLEAI PORPOISE TATTOO DESIGNS



1909

(Based on Krämer 1937:229)



Male and Female
c

1955

(Based on field notes)

during examination the doctor should see her tattoos. A euphemism that men often jokingly use for sexual intercourse refers to "looking at" a woman's tattoos. The porpoise motif—and, by extension, the porpoise itself in this context as well as in folklore—can be said to be a female sexual symbol.

The last porpoise catch in the western lagoon of Woleai was made in 1953—hence my information is based entirely on informants' descriptions. There is some evidence that porpoise hunting was of greater importance in the Carolines in the past (cf. Krämer 1937: 236-237, who cites Kotzebue). Schools of the mammal are still frequently sighted in proximity to the various islands of Woleai, and the fact that they are infrequently hunted today can probably be attributed to a manpower shortage which has developed as a result of depopulation following increased contact with the outside world and, in more recent years, to the absence of many able-bodied men who are often off the island working or attending school either on Yap or Ulithi.

When a porpoise catch is attempted, however, the men try to trap the mammals on the reef—either inside or outside the lagoon. The porpoises are maneuvered into a position where they are contained on one side by the reef and on the other by a semicircle of canoes and swimmers. The fishermen then move toward the porpoises gradually reducing the enclosed area. The men in the water strike stones together beneath the surface; the porpoises are said to find this particularly annoying and consequently swim away from the fishermen toward the reef. Some of them are thus driven up on the reef, and others are seized by the swimmers. When completed the catch is transported in the canoes to the canoe house of the particular island's highest ranking chief. A ground oven (*um*) is prepared nearby, and the porpoises are roasted. When the catch is removed from the *um* it is divided among the inhabitants of the island. As with certain types of fish, the actual butchering must occur in a specific way utilizing a special sequence of cuts. Any man who is recognized as being well trained in butchering may be asked to perform this task. Two sections of the mammal are specially apportioned when the meat is distributed. The *pach* (tail sections, including the last two or three feet of each mammal) are given to the women, since it is tabu for men to eat them. The flippers of at least one of the porpoises are given to the island's *fälu*, a magician who is specially versed in crop magic. It is at the time of the *galigi* (as well as on the two other occasions previously mentioned) that the *fälu* regularly carries out his magic for the benefit of the taro crop.

From the time of the porpoise catch until the termination of the *galigi* it is tabu for anyone other than the *fälu* to enter the taro swamp. Four days after the catch the chiefs of the island request the *fälu* to enter the main taro swamp (*bwon-nap*) and perform his magic. The magician approaches this area by the particular path called the *elat-tiulong* (west entrance), walking like a woman and carrying a woman's taro basket.

The actual magic consists primarily of a recitation of chants. A single chant is made up of several (in some cases more than 80) named verses.

The *galigi* taro field (*bwul*) chant consists of the following:

<i>Verse name</i>	<i>Situation and/or translation</i>
1. <i>bwusūsul</i>	recited while approaching (footfalls, footprints).
2. <i>halipu</i>	while waving the hand (to wave, to beckon).
3. <i>hakilatalmuchol</i>	for the digging stick.
4. <i>mamaitipilūbwul</i>	asking the spirits to favor the taro fields.
5. <i>witiwitiḷibwul</i>	a coconut is tied with magical immature coconut frond pinnae (<i>ubwut</i>), and the top of the nut is waved toward the taro field.

The magician then returns to the coconut trees near the porpoise oven and recites four additional verses:

<i>Verse name</i>	<i>Situation and/or translation</i>
1. <i>witiroro</i>	for the coconuts.
2. <i>wan-nu</i> (recited twice)	(on the coconut tree).
3. <i>witiwitiṇimuchach</i>	to the interior of the island.
4. <i>fajachapun-nu</i>	for the spirit at the base of the tree (striking with foot).

Of special interest, I think, is the fact that the chant recited in and for the taro swamp utilizes a coconut and magical coconut fronds (*ubwut*), while the verses at the coconut trees make reference to the interior of the island where, of course, the taro swamp is located. The magician repeats his magic each morning for four days, on the last of which he receives a *tur* (woven banana-fiber loincloth or skirt) as a gift for his services from each of the district chiefs of the island. The *galigi* is thus terminated after a total of eight days.

From the time of the catch until the termination of the magic the other inhabitants of the island are permitted or required to observe special behavior patterns. The men are forbidden to fish or to climb any of the coconut trees found in the vicinity of the porpoise oven. They are permitted to eat *fille* (*Alocasia*) and *iaaf* (coconut crab), which are foods usually tabu to them and thus only consumed by women (under normal circumstances anyone who has eaten of either food may not enter a canoe house or participate in fishing). The men are also allowed to tattoo themselves without observing the restrictions associated with certain activities defined as sexual (these tabus apply, for example, to anyone who has "touched someone's tattoos"—a euphemism for having participated in sexual intercourse). Women, on the other hand, may not enter the taro fields during the *galigi*, and they, too, may tattoo themselves without observing certain tabus. Perhaps most significantly, a woman does not have to retire to the menstrual house if her period occurs at this time; in fact, she may even remain in her dwelling or enter the canoe houses when menstruating—actions unheeded under any other circumstances. Joking of a sexual nature between men and women and competitive dancing may also be part of the activities of these eight days.

In all the instances cited, behavior during the *galigi* is precisely the opposite of normal behavior. The *galigi* as a whole, then, is characterized by a suspension of certain sexual restrictions and by certain inversions in role behavior.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Economic and socio-political activities on Woleai are usually segregated according to sex. In subsistence activities women are primarily responsible for cultivation and men for fishing. Each sex is prohibited from regularly participating in the labor activities of the other, and also from carrying out its usual labors if it has associated with the other sex or been a party to any sexually identified activities during a preceding specified period. Thus men who have engaged in sexual intercourse, tattooed themselves, or eaten sexually restricted foods may not go fishing or enter a canoe house. Similarly, menstruating and postparturient women may not enter the taro fields or prepare food for varying periods of time. Moreover, anyone who has eaten fish during the preceding 24 hours is prohibited from entering the main taro field of an island, since this would "mix" the products of the land and sea and by extension the spheres of men and women.

Behavior which is sanctioned during the *galigi* is in direct opposition to that usually permitted. Many of the rules which restrict the activities of the sexes are relaxed. Men are permitted to eat women's food; women are permitted to enter canoe houses without regard to menstruation. And the *fälu*, a high ranking magico-religious functionary who must normally observe an excessive number of restrictions in his interaction with women, engages in certain role reversals while performing his magic.

The function of the *galigi* in Woleai society, then, might be interpreted—in somewhat negative terms—as one means of dissipating the tensions which are generated by the prohibitions built into the social system—an evaluation often made for similar ceremonies in other areas of the world. The analysis of its functions, however, can be carried a step further and stated positively, for the *galigi* provides an opportunity for the unity and solidarity of the community to be actively and symbolically affirmed—an affirmation which is needed because of the divisive effects of the day-to-day sexual restrictions. The economic contributions of the two sexes in the two main spheres of subsistence production are clearly equated throughout the eight days of the ceremony—tangibly since the primary labor activities of both sexes are suspended for several days, and symbolically because it is the catch of porpoises (a product of the sea) which signals the beginning of a ceremony dedicated to increasing taro production (a product of the land). The suspension of the usual prohibitions and opposition between the sexes is a further manifestation of the unity and solidarity of the community. Finally, the magic of the *fälu* is both the object of and the sanction for the whole *galigi*. The porpoise catch is a time for "male" magic for the benefit of a "female" product, and it is initiated when a female sexual symbol (the porpoise) is taken by the men from their domain (the sea). Hence the association of porpoises and taro.

NOTES

1. This investigation was supported by research grant GS-506 from the National Science Foundation. Field work on Wottagai and Falalus Islands of the western lagoon of Woleai was carried out from January, 1965, to January, 1966. In 1962-63 the author spent fifteen months in field work on Lamotrek, a neighboring atoll, and some of the comparative information included in this article was gathered at that time. The Lamotrek work was supported by research grant M-5125 from the National Institute of Mental Health, Public Health Service.
2. In some cases the spelling I use for the names of the inhabited islands mentioned in this article differs from that found on U.S. Hydrographic Office charts (in parentheses) as follows: Wottagai (Utagal), Falalus (Falalis), Sülywäp (Saliap), Tagailap (Tagaulap), Mariang (Mariaon). No change has been made in the spelling of Falalap and Paliau. In the orthography I use, the following symbols should be read as indicated: *i* in *hit*; *u* as in *sun*; *ä* as in *fat*; *g* (when appearing initially) close to an English *h*.
3. For a detailed description of the economic and social organization of an atoll typical to this area see Alkire (1965). The political organization of Woleai itself is discussed in Alkire (1968).
4. Illustrations of this motif can be seen in Krämer (1937: Abb. 10, 11, 12, 13, 79(26), 92, 93, 146), and Alkire (1965: Plates 38, 39).

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