XXVI. Carolinian Land Tenure

The post-war complexities regarding land tenure, described in Chapter XI, apply to the Carolinians as much as to the Chamorros. The destruction of farm land through construction of military bases, of records regarding land titles, and of boundary markers, together with the lack of a clear-cut post-war program of resettlement and clarification of land ownership, has resulted in a highly confused situation for the Carolinians as well as the Chamorros. In this section an attempt will be made to set forth the contemporary principles of Carolinian land tenure, though this is largely based on pre-war events.

Carolinian real property, as in the case of the Chamorros, consists of farm land and town site (sitio). It was the consensus of informants' opinion that, by traditional Carolinian custom, farm land, sitio, and buildings upon either were "owned" by the women members of a maternal lineage. If a man built a house, it automatically became his wife's. On his death, or in case of divorce, the house was retained by his wife. Further, the land of the lineage was not divided on the death of members of the lineage but was retained for the individual use of lineage members, who might build separate houses upon it and cultivate different parts of it but who did not split ownership of land holdings among themselves. The vehicle for the ownership and control of land was therefore a corporate group, a maternal lineage. Some older women said that clans were the corporate groups, and this may once have been the case, but I could find only one instance, later to be described, to support the assertion.

Unfortunately, contemporary Carolinian land tenure cannot be comprehended on the relatively simple basis of the maternal lineage as a corporate, land-holding group, for contact of the Carolinians with Chamorros and with European and Japanese administrators has acted to produce a complex system in which introduced factors have modified original concepts.

The German administration issued certificates of title to all landholders. The Japanese continued this system and kept careful
records of land titles and transfers. In cases where Carolinian lineages held land, the oldest woman in the lineage was apparently considered for administrative purposes the legal owner of the land. On her death, either the next older sister or the deceased's eldest daughter—the point is not clear—succeeded to the position, and a new name was then entered as that of the legal owner. In some cases, more than one name might be entered, probably because the Carolinians began to rent their land to Japanese, and other lineage members wished to have their names registered as co-owners in order to protect their share of the rents received. Unfortunately, very few certificates of title survived the invasion, so the effect of the introduction of written records is not altogether clear.

The system of using a maternal lineage as a landholding corporation has by no means passed away. A number of cases follow:

At the time of World War II, a piece of farm land consisting of 1.7 hectares was recorded as belonging to Joaquina, the oldest of three sisters. Joaquina had in turn received this land from her mother, Maria, who in turn had received it from Dolores, her mother, who came from Satawal in the nineteenth century. In 1950, all these women were dead. The land was being used by Joaquina’s daughter, her son, two daughters’ daughters, one daughter of one of Joaquina’s sisters, and a daughter and daughter’s daughter of Joaquina’s other sister. All these women, as well as Joaquina’s son, were married. The land had no registered living owner, as the American administration had not recorded land titles. But it was clearly understood by the users that the land was to be kept undivided and that the maternal lineage was the landholding group.

Also at the time of World War II, Katalina was the recorded owner of three hectares of land, used also by her three younger sisters. Her brother, Frederico, did not use this land, but worked the land of his wife instead. Katalina and two of her sisters are now dead, as well as her brother. Katalina had one daughter, Rosa, and three sons. At the present time Rosa and her husband are working part of the land and have built a farmhouse on it. The consensus of Carolinian opinion was that when a new owner is to be recorded, Rosa, and not Katalina’s surviving sister, should be the one, though all female members of the lineage and their elementary families of procreation have a right to use the land.

Leonora is the older of two sisters and holds title to two pieces of land totalling about two hectares. Leonora received the title to this land from her mother, who in turn received it from her mother. Leonora was positive that on the death of an oldest sister, title to the land should pass by custom to the daughter of the oldest sister and not to younger sisters first. In the case of Leonora’s land, Leonora’s assertion has held true. The older sister has only title to the land, however, and the other female members of the lineage have usufruct rights. In fact, the old woman who holds title to the land has a responsibility to provide land plots for younger sisters.
The largest single piece of Carolinian-held land is located at As Maliti, on the northwest fringe of Lake Susupe, and is about ten hectares in size. Just who is the actual title holder is not clear. The Carolinians using the land say that it belongs to the re-sauwalei clan and was first settled by a woman of this clan who came from Pulusuk in the nineteenth century. In the Japanese period there were said to be five persons recorded as the legal owners; four of these (three men and one woman) were re-sauwalei and the fifth was a man married to a re-sauwalei woman. There are, however, other re-sauwalei people in the community who do not have any connection with this land, and I suspect the corporate unit in this case has been a maximal lineage rather than a clan. Also, men are named as title holders rather than only women, a feature that may be the result of Japanese influence. At the present time there are six farmhouses built on the land, with six families. In three families, however, the husband’s or wife’s father belonged to the re-sauwalei lineage holding the land. The land itself has never been divided, as far as ownership is concerned.

These three illustrations are given to indicate that the lineage still has strength as a mechanism for holding ownership of land. A question arises as to how sharply the Carolinians differentiate ownership from usufruct rights. I could not find that the distinction is sharply made. Informants will often say that a single man works his sister’s land for the benefit of his sister and her family, but that a married man works his wife’s land in order to support his own wife and children. This statement is true enough, but one can also find examples of a married man’s working a plot of land belonging to his own lineage in order to support his wife and children, not his sister. One can find additional cases of a husband and wife who are working a plot of land they occupy by virtue of a connection, through the father of either one, to the lineage controlling the land, as in the last example cited above. Whether these people are making use of usufruct rights only was certainly not clear to either the Carolinians or the ethnographer. The answer is probably that in the present confused land situation it does not matter to the Carolinians so long as those families who wish to cultivate a plot can do so. It should be added that Carolinians do not rent land from one another.

When the Germans initiated a homestead plan, a number of Carolinians homesteaded land, the title to which was registered in the man’s name. Land of this type has been inherited in several ways. There are cases in which the father gave this land to his daughters, who have since kept it intact and undivided as the property of a maternal lineage of which they were the founders. In one other case, the father gave his land to his two children, a son and a daughter, who have kept the land undivided. The daughter has died, though the son is still living. Children of both
work the land, but its eventual disposition is undecided. Finally, there are cases where the father has given his land to a single child, male or female, who considers it his own, to dispose of as he sees fit.

The mechanism by which land is held and passed on from generation to generation varies from a maternal lineage to individual inheritance from parent to child. In none of the cases so far cited, however, has land been divided, when it passes from one generation to the next. Carolinians are emphatic in asserting that by Carolinian custom land should not be divided. Nevertheless, cases to the contrary do exist.

Jesús owned two hectares of land, to which he held sole title. Before World War II, he divided this land equally among his two daughters and one son. Jesús has since died and each child has taken his own share as his or her individual property.

In German times, two sisters received five hectares of land from their father. One sister had three sons; the other sister three sons and one daughter, María. When the two sisters died, formal title went to María, the land being kept intact. When María died, the land was divided among her three brothers and her three male cousins, with one share going to María’s children, who were all small.

From this discussion, it should be evident that Carolinian land tenure is in a period of flux. Case material indicates that land inheritance exhibits much variation, though the lineage is still important. In cases where land is owned by an individual and inherited from individual to individual, and where it is divided among heirs at each successive generation, Carolinian practice has been assimilated to Chamorro custom.

The Pwöl

A distinctive feature of Carolinian farming is the women’s communal taro plot (pwöl). Before the war, there were two of these: one in the swampy area just to the south of Tanapag village, and a second at Puntan Mucho, near Garapan. In 1950, the Tanapag pwöl was on a military reservation and not available for the use of the Tanapag women, much to their resentment. However, the Chalan Kanoa Carolinians cultivated two plots, totalling about five acres, located in a swampy area in the low-lying land at the margins of Lake Susupe and east of Chalan Kanoa village. Approximately fifty women work these two plots.

The women do not work these communal plots as a single group. The two cultivated areas are divided into small patches, called ruo.
Each of these small patches is cultivated by one woman, or a woman and her daughter. Boundaries between *ruo* are sometimes marked by stakes, but the plots are small and each woman knows by sight the limits of her own plot. The women often help each other in planting and cultivating. The area was originally cleared of its dense cover of swamp grass by the Carolinian men, but the communal plots are maintained by the women.

In old days, the organization of male elders (*repi*) of the community house was paralleled by a similar organization of female *repi*. Among the duties of the latter was the supervision of the *pwdl*. Taro from the *pwdl* was used to feed visitors who came to the community house, and for special feasts held at the *al*. Features of the older organization tend to survive, in that one old woman is today acknowledged as the *repi*, or leader, of the Chalan Kanoa women who cultivate the present two plots. This old woman was the pre-war *repi* and assumed the position when the post-war plots were started. She arbitrates disputes that may arise over *ruo* boundaries and can expel a woman from the plots in case the woman takes someone else's taro. The use of individual patches is said to pass from a mother to her daughters, or a mother to her sisters.

In pre-war times, attempts were made by both Chamorros and Japanese to encroach on the Carolinian *pwdl*. The two post-war plots are on government land and are held under two revocable permits issued to two well-known, part-Carinlinian men, who obtained the permits so that the women might have their communal plots. As revocable permits were issued up to 1950 without the administrator's having an exact knowledge of the boundaries of land covered by such permits, disputes over boundaries have arisen. In one such case a Chamorro and the Carolinian women were disputing over the boundary of one of the taro plots. In characteristic fashion, the Carolinian women rose in a body and went to the administration, pressing their case until the matter was settled. Once aroused, Carolinian women will act in a group toward a common objective, undaunted by official red tape and unabashed in the presence of an administrator. The *pwdl* is of fundamental concern to these women and it is an element of Carolinian culture that retains much vitality.

**Farms and Farming**

As mentioned previously, Carolinian men have not made a complete adjustment to farming, nor have the Carolinian women shifted
their interests from gardening to “keeping house.” I would estimate that whereas all able-bodied Carolinian men still enjoy and practice reef- and lagoon-fishing, only about half of them do much agricultural work.

In contrast to the Chamorros, Carolinians plant relatively less corn and rely more on taro and sweet potatoes. Taro-raising is primarily women’s work, and women likewise spend much time in the sweet potato fields, though the initial clearing may be done by the men. Some half dozen varieties of sweet potatoes are grown. The planting and cultivation of corn, bananas, cassava and the few vegetable crops (onions, beans, etc.) grown, as well as the collection of breadfruit, is primarily man’s work, as is the care of livestock.

Old prohibitions on conduct still have some force, particularly in connection with taro. Traditionally, a woman did not plant taro after eating a meal, and she slept apart from her husband the night before. Menstruating women never entered a taro plot, and both men and women did not walk directly through a plot but rather walked around the margin to the point closest to the interior spot they wished to reach. These prohibitions are still strong with respect to taro, but they do not apply to crops adopted from the Chamorros, such as corn, except that menstruating women still do not work in the fields.

The calendar of planting and harvesting is approximately the same as in the case of the Chamorros. Taro is planted in September and December and again in June, depending on the drainage of the plot. Sweet potatoes are planted in June and in late September, corn after the beginning of the wet season and also in December. Carolinians have adopted the tools used by Chamorros.

As in house-building, the Carolinians rely largely on kinfolk to provide co-operative labor in farm work. This co-operative labor is confined primarily to the clearing of fields and to the building of farm houses. The relatives on whom a man can call need not be only those of his own or his wife’s lineage, and friendly feeling that may prevail between two relatives is always important. Nor is there the Chamorro custom of measuring amounts of labor given as a claim for labor to be received, in precise fashion.

José wished to clear about three-quarters of an acre in order to plant corn. He asked the following relatives to help him: Manuel, his father’s mother’s sister’s son; Francisco, his father-in-law; Raphael, his mother-in-law’s maternal cousin’s husband; and Juan, his mother-in-law’s brother. The land was José’s own, inherited from his father.
Just as production activities may involve a number of kinfolk, a number of relatives may share in the harvest, even though they did not plant the crop. Though a man and his wife will first provide for their own children, the rest of the crop will often be shared with relatives, in this case particularly those of the wife. Even apart from relatives, a Carolinian will not, by and large, refuse a request of another Carolinian for food.