XXVII. Changing Patterns of Kinship

Apart from whatever usefulness the preceding data on the Carolinians may have in a purely descriptive ethnographic sense, as showing a pattern of Carolinian social organization contrasting with that of the Chamorros, the theoretical significance of the data lies in the field of culture change. In the crops they grow, in the way they live, in their religious beliefs, in crisis rites associated with the church, there is little doubt that in the last half century the Carolinians have gradually become more like the Chamorros. In this process, the most striking feature of change in Carolinian social organization is the gradual diminution in importance of the lineage principle.

Recent ethnographic field research in various parts of the world has greatly increased our knowledge of lineage-structured societies, a matter that has most recently been reviewed, in masterful fashion, by Meyer Fortes (1953). At the same time, case material is accumulating on the changes produced in lineage-structured groups under the force of acculturation. A common feature of the acculturation process in societies where kinship provides a broad base for the organization of social relations is the decline in the social importance of descent groups, such as clans and lineages, a retraction in the range of the kinship system, a breakdown of extended families as residence groups, and a relative strengthening of the elementary or nuclear family. Among the Saipan Carolinians there has indeed been a decline in the social importance of clan and lineage, as expressed in political organization, in land tenure, in the matrilocal extended family, and in marriage and crisis rites. Maternal clan and maternal lineage both appear to be going the way of functionless groups, and lineage as an organizing principle seems to be of less and less significance.

At the same time, kinship is still a major facet of Saipan Carolinian social organization. The kinship system is widely extended, and the bonds of kinship underlie many co-operative activities. Kinship terminology, it should be noted, is of a generation type. This fact leads to the main point of this concluding section. Has
the terminological system always been of a generation type or was it once of Crow type, later changing its form as maternal clan and lineage themselves became of less and less significance?

Enough is known of the group of atolls just to the west of Truk, atolls from which the main body of Carolinians migrated to Saipan, to be able to recognize that clan and lineage were important social units. Unfortunately, there are no detailed studies of the kinship systems of these atolls. To the west, Burrows and Spiro's (1953) data from Ifaluk reveal a variant form of a generation type system, as does Sarfert's material from Sorol (Damm, Hambrüch, and Sarfert, 1938). On Puluwat, a main home atoll for the Saipan Carolinians, however, Murdock and his colleagues found a Crow type system (n.d., Human Relations Area Files). Truk itself has a Crow type system (Murdock and Goodenough, 1947; Goodenough, 1951). Truk exerted a dominating influence on the neighboring atolls, and it is more than likely that a Crow type kinship terminology prevailed not only on Puluwat but also on the other atolls listed on page 326 as being the principal ones from which the Saipan Carolinians came. This can at least be proposed as a hypothesis of a marked degree of probability.

If the hypothesis is true, then the Saipan Carolinian terminological system has changed its form from a lineage to a generation type. Inconsistencies that may have appeared have been ironed out. The present terminology is consistent and shows no glaring contradictions of the system of kinship behavior as a whole.

From this conclusion we may derive a second hypothesis: When Crow type terminology is found in a society that is strongly structured on lineage lines, and lineage as an organizing principle undergoes progressive weakening in that society, the kinship terminology will shift to a generation type.

Finally, such a shift in terminology is expressive of a tendency inherent in changing societies toward patterned forms of social organization. The study of kinship terminology is useful primarily in the insight that results as to the nature of these forms and the manner in which they change. What we know of kinship systems as configurations of behavior leads one to believe that when a kinship type changes, it does so in a definable direction toward another definable type. An important task, as Murdock (1949), Eggan (1951), Schmitt and Schmitt (1952), and others have indicated, is to determine the conditions controlling the direction in which kinship systems can and do change.