

Proto-Micronesian Kin Terms, Descent Groups, and Interisland Voyaging¹

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The historical method of comparative linguistics is used to reconstruct Proto-Micronesian kin terms. Linguistic evidence suggests that Proto-Micronesian society was matrilineal rather than bilateral as Murdock proposed in an early typological reconstruction of Micronesian society. The weakening or disappearance of matrilineal institutions in Micronesia is associated with the demise of regular long-distance voyaging.

1. INTRODUCTION. In a typological approach to culture history, Murdock (1948) argued that Proto-Micronesian society was “Hawaiian” in type, with generation-Hawaiian kinship terminology (parent = parent’s same sex sibling, sibling = cousin, child = sibling’s child), bilateral kindreds, bilocal residence, and the absence of unilineal descent groups. According to Murdock, matrilineal residence, matrilineal descent, and Crow terminologies (with generational skewing) and Iroquois terminologies (with separate terms for cross-cousins) were later developments. Murdock’s reconstruction of Proto-Micronesian society was consistent with his more general reconstruction of Proto-Malayo-Polynesian society as Hawaiian in type. It was accepted by many anthropologists, most notably by Goodenough (1951:95), who wrote: “That the Hawaiian type of kinship system was ancestral not only to the system now found in Truk but to those found throughout Micronesia has been demonstrated by Murdock (1949).” Goodenough (1955) proposed a major amendment to Murdock’s interpretation by adding, as a basic feature, the presence of cognatic landholding descent groups.

Murdock followed the method of reconstruction outlined in *Social Structure* (Murdock 1949), arranging types of kinship systems in a purely logical sequence independent of any historical linguistic data. Without such data, however, it is difficult to give a typological sequence a temporal interpretation. The actual historical sequence in Micronesian societies may have been just the reverse of that postulated by Murdock, with bilateral Hawaiian (and patrilineal) features developing out of the matrilineal organization of Proto-Micronesian society. In this paper

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we reconstruct Proto-Micronesian kin terms using the comparative method of historical linguistics. Linguistic evidence suggests that Proto-Micronesian society was matrilineal to begin with. The weakening or disappearance of matriliney is associated with the demise of regular long-distance voyaging.

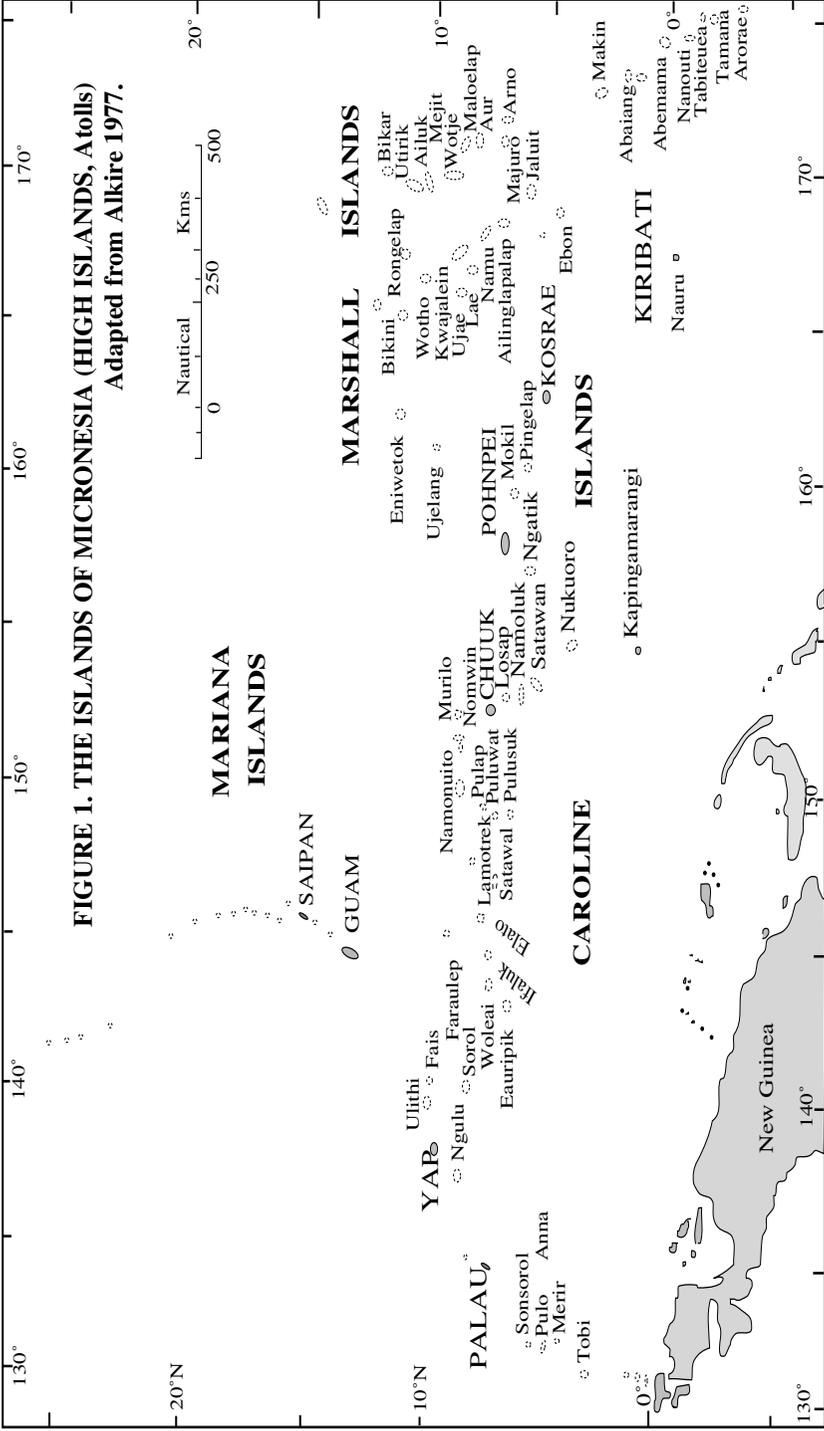
2. NUCLEAR MICRONESIA. “Nuclear Micronesian” languages are those languages of geographical Micronesia that descend from “Proto-Micronesian” (PMC) and consist of all the languages of geographical Micronesia other than those of the western high islands (the Marianas, Yap, and Belau) and the Polynesian outliers, Nukuoro, and Kapingamarangi (figure 1). With the exception of three high islands in the Carolines—Pohnpei, Kosrae, and Chuuk (formerly Truk)—all the islands where Nuclear Micronesian languages are spoken are low islands, atolls and, in the case of Nauru, a raised reef structure. The region was settled by 2,000 B.P. from Vanuatu or the Southeast Solomons (Kirch 2000).² The center of linguistic diversity is in central-eastern Micronesia, implying earliest settlement in the eastern Carolines, the Marshalls, and Kiribati (Grace 1961, Blust 1984). However, the relative lack of linguistic differentiation in the Micronesian (MC) languages and the high level of voyaging technology suggest that settlements began spreading through the eastern and central islands and groups rather soon after the area was encountered and colonized (Bender and Wang 1985).³

Micronesian languages are Oceanic (Oc) Austronesian (An) languages of the Eastern Oceanic (EOc) rather than Western Oceanic (WOc) variety. They seem to have diverged quite early from EOc in Melanesia, but the source is not clear. Changes in sound systems give the appearance of affinities with northern Vanuatu languages, mostly those of the far north around the Banks Islands (Grace 1961). However, a few—but more diagnostic—sporadic sound changes and changes in morphology put the Melanesian source for MC in the Southeast Solomons (Blust 1984), and the Cristobal-Malaitan group in particular. The special affinities are so thin that early divergence (about 1,000 B.C.) is implied, but it is also possible that MC diverged from languages that no longer exist, due to language replacement. Internally, except for Nauruan, the age of the group’s common ancestor would seem to be on the order of 2,000 to 2,500 years B.P. Comparative linguistics suggests divergence from other Oc languages much earlier than this, but it is possible that much of the unique developmental period occurred on Nauru, where archaeological resources are essentially absent due to phosphate mining. And, as mentioned previously, divergence from other Oc languages may have been later and from languages no longer extant.

The subgrouping of MC is currently as shown in figure 2. Chuukic includes a large number of languages, all of which are part of a vast dialect chain stretching from Tobi in the far west to Satawan in the southeast (Quackenbush 1968).

2. Dates cited in Kirch (2000) include 5 B.C. and A.D. 240 in Pohnpei (Athens 1990), between 108 B.C., A.D. 244 in Kosrae (Rainbird 1994).

3. Kirch (2000) cites a date from Maloelap Atoll in the Marshalls around A.D. 100 (Weisler 1999).

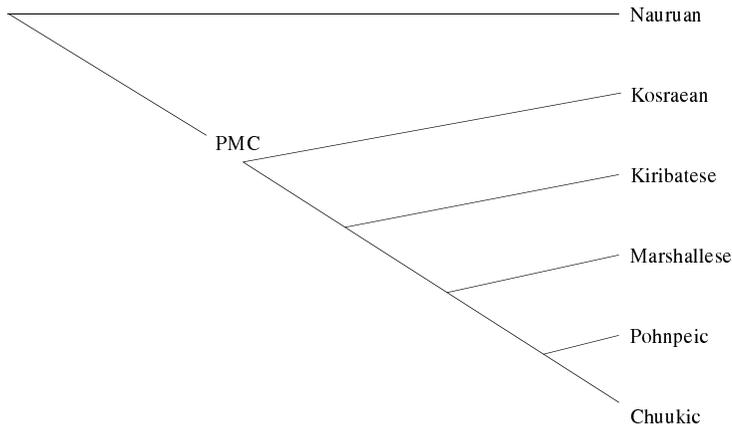


Sociologically, descent in Nuclear Micronesia was predominantly, although not exclusively as Murdock implied, matrilineal. Cognatic descent was found throughout Kiribati, patrilineal descent in two Marshallese outliers, and patrilineal or double descent in three atolls of the Pohnpei region. Hereditary chieftainship was present in the Marshalls, in northern Kiribati, in the high islands of Pohnpei and Kosrae (but not Chuuk), and in many atolls of the Carolines (Alkire 1977).⁴

3. PROTO-MICRONESIAN KIN TERMS. The PMC kin term system is descended from the Proto-Oceanic (POc) system and is closely related to the Proto-Polynesian (PPN) system. Proto-Oceanic (Lapita) society and language originated in the region of the Bismarck Archipelago in Western Melanesia around 1,500 B.C. (Kirch 1997). Proto-Polynesian society developed as the easternmost expansion of the Lapita peoples into the Fiji-Tonga-Samoa region around 1,000–900 B.C. Proto-Nuclear Micronesian society represents a northern Lapita expansion about 1,000 years later (Kirch 1997). The languages of Polynesia and Fiji belong to Central Pacific (CP), while Nuclear Micronesian is a separate subgroup that diverged from other Oceanic (Oc) languages at about the same time as CP.

POc and PPN kin terms as reconstructed by Milke (1958), Pawley (1981), Pawley and Green (1984), and Marck (1996) are shown in table 1. The two terminologies are almost identical. Both are bifurcate merging, *not* generational in type, as Murdock thought, for males in the first ascending and descending generations: father = father's brother \neq mother's brother, child = woman's sibling's child =

FIGURE 2. A FAMILY TREE OF THE MICRONESIAN LANGUAGES



4. Nauruan is normally considered a daughter of PMC. However, due to its apparent status as the most divergent of the group and the common reconstruction of “PMC” forms without reference to the language (about which we have little information) we chart NAU outside the group in this figure to clarify the status of our “PMC” reconstructions (some of which are made without reference to NAU or other “external” cognates).

man’s brother’s child ≠ man’s sister’s child. It is uncertain whether there were separate terms for father’s sister.

PMC kin terms are as follows.⁵

**tup* ‘u’ ‘grandparent, grandchild’, POc **tumpu*, PPN **tupuna* ‘grandparent’, NAU *ibwi-*, KIR *tibu*, MRS *jibi-* ‘grandmother, grandchild’, PPNPCK **tupwu-sio* ‘to be born’, PNP *ipw-di*, MOK *ipwi-di*, PCK **tupu-tiwo*, MRT *upwu-tiw*, CHK *wupwu-tiw*, PUL *wupwu-tiw*, STW *supwu-to*, CRL *ibu-tiw*, WOL *subu*, ULI *subu* ‘to be born’.

**tama* ‘father’, POc **tama-*, PPN **tamana* ‘father’, KSR *tuhma*, KIR *tama*, MRS *jema-*, MOK *jama-* ‘father’, PNG *seme-*, PCK **tama*, MRT *sama-*, CHK, STW, CRL *sema-*, Crn *hama-*, LAM, IFK, WOL, ULI *tama-*, FAI, PUA, SNS *tama* ‘father’.

**tina* ‘mother’, POc **tina-*, PPN **tinana* ‘mother’, NAU *ine-*, KSR *inae*, KIR *tina*, MRS *jine-*, MOK *ina-*, PNG *inae*, PNP *ina-*, PCK **tina*, MRT, CHK *ina-*, PUL *yina-*, STW *ina-*, CRL *ila-*, Crn *ina-ina-*, LAM, IFK, WOL, ULI, FAI *sil-*, PUA *dina*, SNS *dir-* ‘mother’.

TABLE 1. PROTO-OCEANIC AND PROTO-POLYNESIAN KIN TERMS[†]

	PROTO-OCEANIC	PROTO-POLYNESIAN
grandparent (grandchild)	* <i>tumpu</i>	* <i>tupuna</i>
“father, father’s brother”	* <i>tama</i>	* <i>tama(na)</i>
“mother, mother’s sister”	* <i>tina</i>	* <i>tina(na)-</i>
mother’s brother	* <i>matuqa</i>	* <i>tuqa-tina</i>
father’s sister	* <i>aya</i> (?)	* <i>masaki-tanga</i> (?)
elder same sex sibling	* <i>tuqaka</i>	* <i>tuaka(na)</i>
younger same sex sibling	* <i>tansi</i>	* <i>tahina</i>
woman’s brother	* <i>mwaqane</i>	* <i>tua-ngaqane</i>
man’s sister	* <i>papine</i>	* <i>tua-fafine</i>
opposite sex sibling		* <i>kawa ~ weka</i>
child	* <i>natu</i>	* <i>tama</i>
man’s sister’s child	* <i>(qa)lawa</i>	* <i>qilamutu</i>
grandchild	* <i>makumpu</i>	* <i>makupuna</i>
spouse	* <i>ansawa</i>	* <i>qahawana</i>
spouse’s parent	* <i>pungao</i>	* <i>fungawai</i>
child’s spouse	* <i>pungao</i>	* <i>fungaona</i>
“wife’s brother, husband’s sister”	* <i>ipaR</i>	* <i>maq</i>

[†] Sources: Proto-Oceanic: Milke (1958); Pawley (1981); Pawley and Green (1984); Proto-Polynesian: Marck (1996).

5. We use the following abbreviations: CHK, Chuukese; CNR, Saipan Carolinian northern dialect; CRL, Saipan Carolinian, southern dialect; FAI, Fais; SNS, Sonsorol; KIR, Kiribatese; KSR, Kosrae; LAM, Lamotrekese; IFK, Ifaluk; MOK, Mokilese; MRS, Marshallese; MRT, Mortlokese; NAU, Nauru; PCK, Proto-Chuukic; PNG, Pingelap; PNP, Pohnpeian; PPNPCK, Proto-Pohnpei-Chuukic; PUA, Pulo Anna; PUL, Puluwatese; STW, Satawalese; ULI, Ulithian; WOL, Woleaian. The reconstructions are PMC unless otherwise noted. An appendix of our general data for the present work is available on the Internet: <http://home.att.net/~jeff.marckMCKinTermAppendix.rtf>.

**m'aane* 'cross-sex sibling' or possibly 'woman's brother', POc **mwaqane*, PPN **tua-ngaqane* 'woman's brother', NAU *mwán* 'cross-sibling', KIR **m'aane* 'cross-sex sibling', CHK *mwááne-* 'woman's brother'. The CHK form seems a neologism; it has otherwise come to mean 'man, male' through Nuclear MC.

***feefine* 'man's sister', POc **papine*, PPN **tua-fafine* 'man's sister', CHK *feefine-* 'man's sister'. (Double asterisk “**” is used to mark a dubious reconstruction. This is certainly a neologism of Chuukese and not attributable to PMC).

PCK **mwengaya* 'cross-sex sibling', MRT *mwongeya-* 'cross-sex sibling', CHK *mwongeya-* 'brother of a woman', PUL *mwéngeyá-*, STW *mwengeya-*, CRL *mwongeya-*, LAM *mwangúá-*, IFK *mwenga-*, WOL *mwangeya*, ULI *mwángá-*, FAI *mway-anga* 'cross-sex sibling'.

PCK **p'iti* 'same-sex sibling', MRS *bij* 'lineage, crowd, family, tribe', PCK **pwiti* 'same-sex sibling', MRT *pwii*, CHK *pwii-*, PUL *pwii-*, CRL, Crn *bwii-*, LAM, IFK *bwisi*, WOL, ULI, FAI *bisi*, PUA *pwidi* 'same-sex sibling'.

**tasi* 'same-sex sibling', POc **tansi*, PPN **tahina* 'younger same-sex sibling', KSR (*tahm-tahel-*) 'sister of a female', KIR *tari* 'same-sex sibling', MRS *jati-* 'younger sibling', CHK *seti(-pwiturungaw)* 'youngest sibling'.

**natú* 'offspring', POc **natu*, KSR *nahtuh* 'classifier for offspring, tools, pets and toys', KIR *nati*, MRS *naji-* 'child', MOK *noay-noay* 'to have many children', PNP *naay* 'child', PCK **natú*, MRT *nawú*, CHK *néwu-*, PUL *nawú*, STW *nayú*, CRL *laú-*, Crn *naú*, LAM, IFK, WOL *lai*, ULI *léé*, FAI *layu*, PUA *naú* 'child (as a kinship term)'.

**fasu(a)* 'man's sister's child', PPN **fasu* 'privileges of the man's sister's child', STW *fatiw*, WOL *fatiwa* 'child of opposite-sex sibling', LAM *fatiwa-*, IFK *vatuwa-* 'man's sister's child'. Fijian Bauan, Wayan *vasu* 'be related to a man or groups through one's mother and the rights to food and goods from such kinsmen'.

The major difference between PMC and POc (and PPN) kinship terminologies is the lack in the former of a term for mother's brother. This is odd. It is generally true that MC terminologies having a term for man's sister's child also have a term or locution for mother's brother: NAU *aroen* 'mother's brother/sister's child', MRS *wüllepá/rükorea*, PNP *ullap/naue*, IFK *manenepail/vatuwei*, 'mother's brother/sister's child'. ULI has two distinct terms in addition to the generational terms: *mal lapai* 'mother's brother', *fathie* 'man's sister's child'. FAI similarly has two additional terms: *mwalelapa* 'mother's brother', *fadiya* 'man's sister's child'.

In 13 of 13 PN terminologies in Marck (1996) and in 17 of 19 Oc terminologies collected by Rivers (1914), terms for mother's brother and sister's child are both present (Hage and Marck 2001). PMC may have had the kin category 'mother's brother', which came to be labeled in different ways. Rivers, in fact, noted the great diversity of terms for this relative in Oceanic kinship systems. Interestingly, "in the matrilineal region of the Eastern Solomons we find the terms *tumbu*, *nimbu*, *nia*, and *kulaga*, of which the first was not originally a term for this relative [a reflex of POc **tumpu* 'grandparent']. In other parts of the Eastern Solomons, we find several terms, *uweli*, *mäe*, *maua*, and *mamau* in addition to *ko*, which is also used for grandfather" (Rivers 1914:177).

4. PROTO-MICRONESIAN DESCENT GROUPS. In PMC, **kainanga* has the minimal meaning ‘descent group’ < POC **kainanga*, PNP *keinek* ‘matrilineal subclan’, PNG *keinek* ‘patrilineage’, CHK *jejinag*, LAM *hailang*, IFK *kailang* ‘matrilineal exogamous clan’, PPN **kainanga*.

A linguistic argument in favor of matrilineal descent in Proto-Micronesian society is provided by Blust (1986–87). In Oceanic societies, the periphrastic locution *orphan* is generally consistent with the rule of descent. For example, in Ere (Manus), ‘orphan’ is *tinan pwi* ‘father none’ and descent is patrilineal; in Samoan ‘orphan’ is *mataaoti* ‘parents dead’ and descent is ambilineal. In Woleai (Micronesia), ‘orphan’ is *silemas* ‘mother dead’ and in Marshallese (also in Micronesia) ‘orphan’ is *ata-jine-mje-n*, containing the elements ‘mother’ and ‘dead’, and descent is also matrilineal. Blust proposes that the terms for ‘mother’ and ‘dead’ in Kwara’ae (*te’a mae*), Lau (*té nofia, ma mae*), ‘Are’are (*nike-tahuna*), Sa’a (*nike-mae*), Arosi (*nanae, ine mae*), Marshallese (*jine-mej*), and Woleaian (*sila-mas*) are a contrast set reflecting Proto-Mailaita-Micronesian *tina mate* ‘mother dead’ (orphan).⁶ If so, this would imply matrilineal descent in Proto-Micronesian society.

5. MICRONESIAN DESCENT GROUPS AND INTER-ISLAND VOYAGING.

If Proto-Micronesian society was matrilineal, and matrilocal to begin with, what accounts for the weakening of matrilineal institutions in certain daughter societies? In Murdock’s scheme, Proto-Micronesian society was originally bilateral and then became matrilineal. Patrilineal and patrilocal features—or at least tendencies—were associated with the development of social stratification in Micronesia. There are counterexamples. In the Marshall Islands, descent was, one could say, hypermatrilineal, as expressed in a matrilineal system of land tenure (Spoehr 1949; Hage and Harary 1996) and a strictly vertical system of matrilineal succession (Hage 2000), and residence was matrilocal or, in the case of chiefs, avunculocal. Stratification was highly developed, with distinct social classes and chiefs with real autocratic powers (Spoehr 1949). In Pingelap Atoll, descent was patrilineal, and residence patrilocal, but stratification was weak in comparison to the Marshalls.

Alkire (1960) attempted to show that matrilocal and patrilocal residence (and by implication matrilineal and patrilineal descent) developed in Micronesia as a result of microvariations in agricultural resources and settlement patterns. The connections seem tenuous at best. Most atolls, as Damas (1979:193) said in regard to Alkire, “fall within a generalized ecological type.” In the atolls of the Pohnpei region, settlement patterns vary, but descent and residence are patrilineal and patrilocal. If double descent occurs, as in Pingelap, matrilineal clans have few functions other than exogamy (Damas 1979).

Damas argues, in the case of Pingelap, Mokil, and Ngatik, three atolls in the Eastern Carolines near Pohnpei, that matrilineal institutions were undermined by relative isolation. In contrast to the atolls in the Yap and Chuukese districts of the Carolines, the atolls in the Pohnpei region had no *regular* contact with any other islands. Damas

6. Blust (1984) proposed that the Mc languages subgroup with the languages of Cristobal-Malaita in the Southeast Solomons.

says that the comparative vitality of matrilineal emphasis in the Yap and Truk districts is closely related to regular reinforcement of those ties through the process of clientship, trade relations, and (in the case of the Yap region) a system of tribute [that] operated largely within a matrilineal context. By contrast, the relative isolation of the atolls and islands in the eastern Carolines appears to have promoted conditions [that] weakened matriliney" (Damas 1979:192). Trade was also significant in the Marshall Islands, and paramount chiefs made regular expeditions to outlying island for the collection of tribute (Hage and Harary 1991).

We can add to these cases two virtually isolated outliers in the Marshalls—Enewetok and Ujelang. The inhabitants of both atolls lacked navigational skills. In both cases, succession to chieftainship was "strictly patrilineal." Chiefs, however, had few real powers. Land was inherited bilaterally but with a definite patrilineal emphasis (Tobin 1967). On Enewetok, matrilineal clans retained the function of exogamy. Tobin attributes the "striking difference" between Enewetok and Ujelang, on the one hand, and the rest of the Marshall Islands, on the other, to a "local development from a matrilineal to a patrilineal [system] on both atolls" (127). He supports this argument "in view of the uniformity of the matrilineal pattern throughout the widely scattered Marshall Islands, and its highly integrated nature and importance in the culture" (127).

We would include in this interpretation Kiribati, which became cognatic and in which regular patterns of long-distance voyaging of trading and raiding never developed.⁷ According to Alkire (1977:79), interisland voyaging in Kiribati "was extremely limited in comparison with either the Marshalls or the Carolines. Warfare was limited for the most part to interdistrict disputes." There is no record of interisland trade. According to Lambert (1975:240), "European visitors in the 1840s and 1850s found that the Gilbertese were then voyaging regularly only between neighboring islands ... [Because] skilled navigators were capable of long-distance sailing throughout the archipelago (Grimble 1924:133–134), the reluctance to travel overseas probably had social causes. According to castaways ... strangers were often put to death because they were suspected of being 'spies' or because their teeth and bones were wanted for making tools and ornaments (Wilkes 1845:82). There is good evidence, though, that some fishermen and travelers blown off course and some fugitives escaping from punishment were allowed to settle and to marry local people."

Our interpretation of the relation between matriliney and voyaging is consistent with two complementary perspectives on these institutions. The first perspective is due to Harris (1985), who argues, in general, that matrilineal residence is favored "when warfare, hunting, and trade change from quick short forays to long-distance expeditions lasting several months" (1985:281). Unlike patrilineal residence, in which absent husbands must rely on wives from different patrilineages to manage

7. A possible matrilineal carryover in Kiribati is suggested by Grimble's (1989:167) observation: "Throughout the Gilberts, the relation between a man and his sister's son is held in particular regard. It is generally the sister's son whom a man adopts as his *nati* or *tibu*; and even if no special relationship of adoption has been contracted, a man will consider it his particular duty to be kind to his sister's son."

their affairs, in the matrilineal case, absent brothers can rely on lineage sisters to look out for their common corporate interests. The argument implies an absence of internal warfare achieved by forming expeditions around men from different households and villages. Ethnographic examples include the Iroquois of New York, the Huron of Ontario, the Mundurucu of South America, the Nayar of India (Harris 1985:282), and the Haida of the Northwest Coast (Hayden 1993:310). We can now add to this list those Micronesian societies in which long-distance voyages were regularly undertaken for purposes of trade and warfare (Hage and Harary 1991).

The second perspective is due to Lévi-Strauss (1984), who observed with special reference to Micronesia that absent males are more easily assimilated to matrilineal than to patrilineal descent groups. In rejecting the economic interpretation of matrilineality in Micronesia (Alkire 1950), Lévi-Strauss emphasized the importance of sociological and especially historical factors. "Some Micronesian societies have lived in relative isolation; elsewhere migrations, wars, and intermarriages have mixed up the populations. Further, we find in the first group of societies a retreat from matrilineal institutions: left to themselves, these institutions, by reason of their well-known instability, have a tendency to evolve spontaneously towards other forms. Contrariwise, they provide the second group of societies with a sort of common denominator and a convenient means—the men being more mobile than the women—of incorporating immigrants" (Lévi-Strauss 1984:183). In matrilineal societies, paternity is not the dominant issue in the reproduction of the lineage.

6. CONCLUSION. Proto-Micronesian kinship terminology was almost generational in type, as Murdock thought, with parent terms extended to aunts and uncles and sibling terms extended to cousins. Crow terminologies with generational skewing (as in Chuuk, Goodenough 1951) and Iroquois terminologies with separate terms for cross cousins (as in the Marshalls, Spoehr 1949) were apparently later developments. The only exception to a generational terminology in PMC was a separate term for man's sister's child. The terms for 'mother's brother' and 'sister's child' are strongly symmetric in the Oceanic languages. Hence there may have been a category 'mother's brother' in PMC that lacked a unitary designation in the daughter languages. Contrary to Murdock's typological reconstruction, the linguistic evidence suggests that Proto-Micronesian society was matrilineal rather than bilateral in type. The continuation of matrilineality was associated with the continuation of regular long-distance voyaging.

Murdock's reconstruction of Micronesian society was published long ago. It was never challenged, but rather forgotten, with the loss of interest in historical questions by cultural anthropologists.⁸ Our paper is intended as a contribution to the renewal of interest in culture history on the part of linguists, archaeologists, and cultural anthropologists, for example, Blust (1980, 1984, 1986–87), Pawley and Green (1984), Kirch and Green (1987, 2001), Marck (1996), Hage (1998a, b, 1999a, b, 2001), Hage and Marck (2001), and Kirch (2001).

8. Murdock's (1949) reconstruction of Proto-Malayo-Polynesian society was seriously challenged by a linguist (Blust 1980).

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