Some Implications of
Dominant Kinship Relationships
in Fiji and Rotuma

The purpose of this paper is to explore the implications of "dominant kinship relations" as defined by Professor Hsu (1965:640), in the two Oceanic societies of Fiji and Rotuma. Before getting into the ethnographic material, however, I would like to consider briefly some of the difficulties inherent in Hsu's framework.

Perhaps the most fundamental problem in operationalizing Hsu's scheme lies in the very concept of "dominant kinship relationship." Is there an unequivocal way of defining dominance so that it satisfies the demands placed upon it by the scope of Hsu's hypothesis? Even a precursory examination of the papers contained in this symposium should convince the reader that the answer is no. Dominance cannot be determined in the abstract, but only in relation to well-defined contexts and specific hypothetical variables. The difficulty in applying Hsu's concept is that it fails to take into account some important analytical distinctions. For example, a fundamental distinction can be made between defining a dominant relationship on the basis of importance for the social system and defining it on the basis of importance for the psycho-social development of individuals growing up within the society. If one takes the systemic view, stress is likely to be laid upon such matters as the control and transmission of property, integration of the domestic group and larger social units, marriage and residence choices, and the like. From this vantage point the

possibility must be allowed that a triadic or even larger set of relationships can more appropriately be selected as the unit of analysis than any of the dyadic sets that compose it. In this regard Lévi-Strauss's argument for the inclusion of a pair of spouses, their children, and the wife's brother in the fundamental kinship set for most societies certainly cannot be summarily dismissed. If one takes the developmental approach, stress is more likely to be laid on such matters as the importance of particular classes of people as role models, as dispensers of reward and punishment, and as objects of hostility or affection. This point of view involves complications also. For example, developing children engage in a sequence of relationships, and the one that is dominant at one stage in development may not be at a later stage. Thus, during infancy the mother is apt to be most important in any society, but as the child matures, his father, siblings, and perhaps others may become more central to his development. Furthermore, males may go through a different sequence than females. At a particular point a boy's mother's brother may provide his most important role model, while his sister may look to her mother. We must also acknowledge the possibility that non-kin may assume socialization roles of primary significance, as peers or nursemaids do in some societies. Another problem, one that is relevant to either view, has to do with the dimensions of interpersonal relations. For example, if we take the systemic view, do we rely solely on formal qualities of interaction or do we take into account informal, or sub-institutional, qualities? Or, if we take the developmental approach, do we concentrate on cognitive or affective learning? It is quite possible that the most important person for shaping cognition is not the same person that is most important for shaping emotion.

While it is conceivable that in a given society the strength of one dyadic bond is so great that it is dominant no matter how one approaches the problem, as may be the case for China where Hsu makes a strong case for father-son dominance, a review of the ethnographic literature suggests that this is rare. Furthermore, there are good logical and empirical reasons to assume that, with the possible exception of the father-son bond, a single dominant relationship is highly unlikely, if not impossible, in the sense that Hsu uses it (cf. Marion Levy's paper in this volume). Comparable difficulties could be detailed for Hsu's concept of "intrinsic attribute," but since it is not germane to my analysis of the ethnographic data, I will not discuss them here.

Even though the grandiosity of Hsu's scheme may render it impracticable, the central idea underlying it—that the strength of particular kinship ties within the domestic group exerts pressure toward certain cultural possibilities and places constraint on others—is credible and deserves attention. In my opinion the best way to explore this proposition is to look for specific correspondences between kinship relations and cultural patterns or institutions. Where correlations are found, the mechanisms that produce them must then be designated if we are to develop any measure

of theoretical sophistication. The lack of postulated mechanisms consti-
tutes one of the most serious weaknesses in Hsu's original formulation.

In the analysis that follows I take the developmental view. Within this
framework I explicitly consider only the cognitive development of males.
My thesis can be summarized as follows: In Fiji a boy's father is his chief
socializer and provides him with his most significant role model, while in
Rotuma, primary-group relations are more diffuse, with peers playing a
much greater part in the socialization process. These differences produce
different cognitive styles that are in turn reflected in social organization
and in political behavior.

The Fiji Islands consist of approximately 300 islands in the southern
Pacific Ocean, of which about 100 are inhabited. In 1874 the group was
ceded to Great Britain and has been administered as a colony since then.
The island of Rotuma lies some 300 miles north of Fiji and is not con-
sidered part of the group. Nevertheless, it was included in the colony in
1881 and has been politically and economically integrated with Fiji since
then. Racially, linguistically, and culturally the Rotumans are distinct,
having more in common with such Western Polynesian peoples as the
Samoans, Tongans, and Futunans than with the more Melanesian Fijians.

For data on Fiji I shall rely mainly on Marshall Sahlins' excellent eth-
nography of Moala, an island in the Fiji archipelago with a population of
slightly more than one thousand. Sahlins offers the following general
description of social relations within the Moalan family:

> The distinctive characteristic of the Moalan family is its organization by
> seniority. This organization functions, as shall be seen, to effect a co-
> operative domestic economy. But the rigor and principles of family ranking
> transcend the requirements of domestic co-operation, and they reflect more
> than adaptation to nature. In its system of internal ranking, the family is the
> microcosm of larger kin groups and communities. The principles of rank within
> the family, and even of the terminology of rank, are identical to those which
> politically organize higher levels of social integration. Thus the family seniority
> system at once reflects the larger organization of society and supplies, in the
> activities of daily life, a set of principles of social behavior consistent with
> effective political action at higher levels.
>
> Thus "every man is chief in his own house," Moalans say. The head of
> each dwelling unit—be it only an element in an extended family, the
> leading house of such a family, or an independent house—is its *turaga*,
> "chief." His wife is the *marama*, the "lady" of the house. These are polite
> terms of reference for married men and women so long as the reference is to
> their position in the home. Yet they are the very terms applied to people of
> high status in supradomestic groups: in large kin groups, villages, or in the
> island as a whole.
>
> The children of the house are, of course, subordinate to their parents, but
> they are also ranked relative to each other by birth order. In aboriginal
> polygymous families children were first ranked by order of marriage of their

mothers, and then, between full siblings, by birth order. The first child of
the family has a special status and title of reference, *ulumatua*, and the
oldest male child is the successor of the father. An older brother is politely
and euphemistically the "chief" (*turaga*), relative to a younger brother,
while the latter is "common," "of low rank," *kaisi* relative to his older
siblings. The term *kaisi* also has the more general denotation of "peer (or
group) of low status" in a local kin group, village, or island. (Daughters
enter the rank hierarchy in the same way as sons and are treated respectfully
by both younger brothers and sisters, but normally a girl marries out, and
she does not succeed to the headship of the family.) [1962:105–106]

It is evident that within this context a boy's father is his main socializer
and primary role model:

Obedience and respect are demanded of the child by the father. After
infancy the child is constantly taking orders, doing tasks delegated by his
parents, from whose command there is no recourse save fleeing from the
house.

Punishment by the father is the outstanding disciplinary mechanism in
the family. The father's anger is proverbial; younger children he whips,
older children he lectures harshly (*vunauci*). The child should accept either
punishment stoically.

A boy of sufficient strength is enlisted by his father to work in the family
gardens, and receives his life training here. [1962:113]

If a boy has an older male sibling the latter may substitute for the father
in teaching necessary skills, but in such cases he is quite clearly a father
substitute and assumes an authoritative posture. Relations between elder
and younger brothers, in other words, replicate to a marked extent the
relations between father and son.

Social relations between brothers are very much affected by seniority. The
older brother is to be implicitly obeyed by the younger. The duty of the
younger is to serve: "If I see my older brother pick up his knife to go to the
bush," observed one man, "I follow."

A definite atmosphere of reserve seems to grow between brothers after
childhood. As one man put it: "The custom of brothers is mutual embarrass-
ment." [1962:112]

All this is in marked contrast to social relations within the Rotuman
family. Rank and seniority are relevant principles, but their jural force is
mitigated by a strong concern for the feelings and opinions of others.
According to jural rules the head man of a household is in charge of all
male activity, and he has the authority to give orders to his sons and other
male residents in his household; but in fact he rarely does so. Only if there
is a special job to be done that he is unable to do alone will he request
assistance, and even then it is apt to be done apologetically. One almost
never hears commands being given.

Compared to Moala, the relationship between fathers and sons in

Rotuma is unauthoritarian and congenial. Mothers are the main discipli-
narians; fathers are indulgent and discipline their children only in unusual
circumstances. A young boy may learn something about farming or fishing
by accompanying his father, but he is not obliged to do any serious work
until he has finished school, usually at about the age of sixteen. Until that
time there is little serious instruction as to adult role performance. Upon
leaving school he assumes the status of "youth" (*haharagi*) and begins to
hang around with the other unmarried young men in his locality. Boys
generally leave their homes at this age to sleep in a young men's house,
although they eat at home and contribute to their family's economy. They
spend most of their time in each other's company and work together in the
bush. They usually obtain a plot of land from one of the large landholders
in their district and work it together, often sharing the produce com-
munally. The younger boys learn from the older ones, and they avoid
working under the direction of their fathers except under special circum-
stances. It is significant in this regard that in the district of Itumuta, in
which I systematically collected information on farming patterns, there
were no instances in which an adolescent son was working on the same
land as his father. This may be interpreted as an attempt on the part of
both to avoid turning their relationship into an authoritarian one. The
older boys informally instruct their juniors in a wide variety of matters
pertaining to adult roles, whereas their fathers rarely do. When adults do
participate with such groups, they do so as quasi-elder siblings, just as
elder siblings in Fiji interact with their juniors as quasi-fathers.

What are the implications of these different relational modes for social-
ization? In attempting to answer this question let us consider two dimen-
sions of role models that contrast in Fiji and Rotuma. One is the specificity
versus diffuseness of available role models. In Fiji a boy's father constitutes
a specific focus for socialization. His elder brothers may also help "train"
him, but they in turn have modeled their behavior after their father's. The
relationship between a boy and his father is intense and specific, although
not ordinarily affectively positive. In Rotuma, on the other hand, the social-
ization role of the father is minimized. A boy's role models are diffuse and
include his siblings, more distant relatives, and peers. The second dimen-
sion is the extent to which the burden of education falls upon completely
socialized persons versus incompletely socialized persons. The former can
be considered more characteristic in Fiji, since the father of an adolescent
boy is a mature adult, while the latter is more characteristic in Rotuma,
where peers play an important role in the socialization process.

In this instance these two factors are mutually reinforcing and lead to
different cognitive styles. The Fijian father has fully learned and used for
some time the skills and techniques that he passes on to his son. As a result
he can teach whole solutions to whole problems, often down to the finest
details. The son is only exposed to one mode of operation, since he has

restricted exposure to alternative models. He is not very likely to be able to suggest innovations that will be accepted, and the difference in status tends to make his learning role one of acquiescing imitation. Under such circumstances there is a strong tendency for learning to be a rote process. Problems are specifically defined and their solutions specifically prescribed. Where this is the dominant mode, one would expect to find a society in which the rules governing behavior are prescriptive, leaving little room for innovation or reorganization. Authority is relied upon to resolve new issues and there are massive restrictions upon the expression of individuality. The learning of behavior patterns by rote not only produces these overt patterns, but also an alloplastic cognitive mode; that is, a cognitive style resistant to reorganization when events demand that problems or their solutions be seen in a new light.[1] Such circumstances favor continuity—the direct replacement of sons in their fathers' status positions. The whole learning process is geared toward such an eventuality.

In contrast to the Fijian case, in Rotuma there is greater flexibility built into the learning situation. A developing child learns from a number of different role models, each with a somewhat different way of doing things. Problems and their solutions are less likely to be prescribed, and innovations on the part of the person being socialized are more likely to get a hearing. Since the difference in status is not great, there is likely to be a tolerance for individual variations in style, and learning is apt to involve an active exploration of possibilities, if not a competition to do things better. Under such circumstances, learning is less likely to occur by rote. Instead, the younger men learn a set of general problem-solving, or decision-making, principles, which they can apply to both recurrent and new situations. There is, in short, less prescription either with regard to the definition of problems or their solutions than where rote learning predominates. Where this is the primary socialization mode, one would expect to find a society in which the rules governing behavior were generalized and unrestrictive. Instead of authority being relied upon to solve new problems, there is a tendency to experiment, either collectively or after a thorough discussion among peers. The learning of generalized, instead of rote, problem-solving principles favors an autoplastic cognitive mode—that is, one that permits relearning or reorganization when new problems arise. It follows, also, that in such societies there is less emphasis on continuity, or the direct replacement of the socializer with the socialized. Correspondingly, and in accordance with Professor Hsu's postulation, there is more room for the expression of status competition, or rivalry.

The social and political implications of these contrasting modes of socialization are multiple. To begin with, we may have an important key

1. I have attempted to point out elsewhere the implications of this for adaptation to a developing economy. See Howard, 1966.

to a controversy that has plagued students of Polynesian social organization: whether or not most Polynesian societies are best considered as unilineal or non-unilineal in structure. Those scholars who insist on treating them as unilineal place their emphasis on ideology, which in most societies concerned has a definite patrilineal bias. Those who favor the non-unilineal interpretation generally place their emphasis on actual choices of group membership or succession patterns.

Now let us assume for a moment that the basic "plan" of Polynesian social organization, the underlying structure if you like, is patrilineal, but that in some societies for various reasons the father-son relationship comes to be emphasized (or continues to be emphasized) while in others it has been de-emphasized. What is likely to happen? First of all, we would expect a son's allegiance to his father's kin to be stronger in the former case, and for patrilocal residence choices to be made far more often than not, with the resulting effects on social structure postulated by Murdock (1949). Succession to chieftainship is likely to be governed by the principle of primogeniture, in which mature sons ordinarily replace their fathers as headmen. Where the father-son link has been de-emphasized, however, we would expect to find a weakening of all of these principles. Allegiance to the father's kin and patrilocal residence would no longer be as significant, since sons would no longer be thought of as direct replacements for their fathers. Correspondingly, there likely would be an increase in the significance of uterine links in tracing ancestry. This would not only occur because allegiance to the father's kin is lessened per se, but also because there would be a lesser emphasis on following the ideal rules; that is, there would be a greater degree of freedom in choosing either residence or successors. In short, where the father-son link is weakened, the culture may be opened up for manipulation and negotiation, with a corresponding increase in the degree to which choices contrary to ideal patterns are made.

At this point let us compare, very briefly, the character of Fijian and Rotuman social structure and the implications of our preceding speculations on the institution of chieftainship.

The Fijian social structure is basically of the ramage type, as defined by Sahlins (1958:139–51). In its ideal form it consists of a series of three agnatic descent groups. In order of their inclusiveness these are known as *vavusa, mataqali,* and *itokatoka.* The *mataqali* that compose a *vavusa* are ranked according to seniority of the founding ancestors, who are presumed to be related, usually as brothers. According to Geddes, "The *mataqali* regarded as being founded by the eldest son is the *mataqali turaga,* that is to say the chiefly *mataqali.* It provided the *vavusa chiefs*" (Geddes, 1959:206). Within this *mataqali,* as well as the others, the chiefs come from the senior line "and thus are supplied constantly from the same *itokatoka,* but there are usually otherwise no significant distinctions of rank among the component *itokatoka*" (*loc. cit.*). Within this organiza-

tion, therefore, the *vavusa* chief held authority over each *vavusa* member by virtue of his real or putative kinship seniority over them.

The traditional Rotuman social structure corresponds more closely to Sahlins' descent line type (Sahlins, 1958:139–51). It was divided into seven districts which in turn were divided into kin-based units known as *ho'aga*, each of which was headed by a titled male. These titles were ranked, and indications are that district chiefs were chosen exclusively from the *ho'aga* owning the highest ranking title. Titled men from other *ho'aga* acted as sub-chiefs. They exercised primary authority over their own units, including the allocation of land and women. Choosing the successor to a title was the right of the cognatic group tracing ancestry to the *ho'aga* which possessed the name. Although kinship seniority based upon agnatic descent was ideologically significant, just as it was in Fiji, any adult male in the cognatic group was eligible to succeed to the position, and strong consideration was given to personal character and other pragmatics. The important point is that lineal linkages, based upon father-son bonds, were not given as much weight as ideology would suggest, and that lateral links, based upon sibling bonds and uterine ties, were given prominence in actual decision-making procedures.

The differential emphasis on the father-son link also affects the nature of chieftainship in the two societies. Viewed superficially, the roles of the Fijian *vavusa* chief and Rotuman district chief were nearly identical. Like his Rotuman equivalent, the *vavusa* chief orgainized activities in his locality, was arbitrator of disputes, and was ceremonially honored through precedence in *kava* drinking. He did not exercise primary allocative rights in the land—this was left to the *mataqali* chiefs—but he received a portion of the first fruits, just as the Rotuman district chief did. But despite these similarities, there were some significant contrasts. For example, the *vavusa* chief was a ritual leader by virtue of his direct descent from the deified founding ancestors. His political power was therefore backed up by supernatural sanction, while the authority of the Rotuman district chief was almost entirely secular in conception. Also, since there was closer adherence to the rule of primogeniture, the likely successors to chiefly titles were limited. As a result, the few potential titleholders were treated with considerable respect from birth, and were socialized with an eye toward the chiefly role. From childhood they were trained toward superordination, and their peers learned to be subordinate to their wishes. The Rotuman pattern of succession, as we have pointed out, was much more fluid. The contenders for a title were often numerous, with any ancestral link to a previous chief making a man eligible for consideration. Consequently the number of male children who might eventually succeed to chieftainship was at any one time extensive, and no one was apt to receive the special privileges normally given the Fijian chiefs' elder sons.

These two differences lent to the character of chieftainship in Fiji and Rotuma a distinctly different flavor. Ideologically, both leaders held similar

kind of authority, but while the Fijian chief exercised a genuine domi-
nance, in the psychological sense, over his subjects, the Rotuman chief did
not. To put this another way, in Fiji the powers of the office were con-
ceived as being embodied in the proper individual. They were person-
alized. In Rotuma, the powers belonged to the office alone.

As a result of these differences in culture "content," the nature of
political behavior in Fiji and Rotuma displays some definite differences in
style. In Fiji, group decision-making places a greater emphasis on chiefly
opinion, and the weight of customary rules and ritual is heavy. The chiefs
tend to be political leaders in a very real sense. Their opinions are sought
after and are usually offered freely, and they carry considerable authority
by virtue of the fact that they are chiefly opinions. Only when chiefs
clearly violate customary rules or act flagrantly in their own interests are
they likely to be taken to task. Essentially then, Fijian society is "apolitical"
in the sense that there is a tendency for individuals to rely on established
authority for taking care of their interests. The game of culture is played
according to traditional rules, and people are required to swallow most of
their grievances rather than to press for their interests against the "system."
This does not mean, of course, that chiefs do not play politics among
themselves, or strive for power and influence. They most certainly do, but
this kind of activity primarily involves the chiefs and excludes non-chiefs.
In Rotuma the situation is quite different—nearly everyone is an amateur
politician. Chiefs in Rotuma cannot readily inflict their will on their sub-
jects. Instead of acting as authorities, and offering their opinions as to
courses of action, they tend to stay out of discussions until a consensus has
been reached. At district meetings their role is to sum up arguments and put
into action decisions arrived at by others. It is not that they do not have a
right to express their views; they do have such a right, and some chiefs
make use of it. But they are risking insubordination, for Rotumans do not
hesitate to resist demands they consider unfair, particularly if they sense
that public opinion is on their side. In contrast to Fiji, Rotumans express
rather than swallow their grievances. They argue their cases in public as
well as in private in an attempt to gain support for collective actions that
are to their advantage. In short, Rotuma is a political society to a much
greater extent than Fiji.

To summarize: It is not difficult to conceive of both Fijian and Rotuman
societies as constituting variations on a single structural plan, one in which
the father-son link was emphasized, the other in which it was de-
emphasized. In Fiji, father-son dominance can be hypothesized to have led
to continuity in social units (Sahlins' "ramages"), reliance upon authority
in decision-making, and a generally apolitical society. In Rotuma, a de-
emphasized father-son relationship can hypothesized to have led to discon-
tinuity in social units (Sahlins' "descent-lines"), rivalry for power and
influence, and a generally political social orientation. The difference, if our

presumptions are correct, is the cumulative result of day-to-day decisions rather than of fundamental differences in structural plans.

In general, I regard the evidence from these two societies as favorable to Professor Hsu's hypothesis. It should be emphasized, however, that the differences described in this paper are better thought of as differences in degree rather than kind. Within Fiji, in particular, there are variations by regions and no doubt even between adjacent villages in the extent to which the generalizations made in this paper apply. Finer tests of the covariances suggested by Professor Hsu and this study can only be properly done on the basis of well-planned field investigation.