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The Nonunilinear Descent Groups of Samoa¹

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INTRODUCTION

PERHAPS as many as one-third of the world's societies lack unilinear descent. Yet, nonunilinear descent groups have received very little attention from anthropological theorists; consequently, as Murdock (1949:57) has observed, "... ethnographers rarely notice their presence and almost never report their absence." This is in spite of the fact that we have much evidence, unclassified to be sure, that descent groups are present in many nonunilinear societies.

For example, we know that Samoa lacks unilinear descent groups. But there clearly are other kinds of descent group in Samoa which, owing to our traditional indifference to such groups, have not been clearly identified in the literature. The present paper, which is based upon data I collected in American Samoa during 1955-56,² is designed to fill this gap in the literature. In so doing, it seeks to show that the hitherto elusive data on nonunilinear descent groups are as amenable to systematic study as the data on unilinear descent groups.

Traditional classifications of kinship systems cannot help us in identifying the descent groups of Samoa since these classifications have dealt primarily with unilinear kinship structure. If we are to identify the Samoan descent groups so that they might be systematically compared with descent groups elsewhere, we must first have a classification which abstracts the major types of nonunilinear descent group, preferably in a way which permits their comparison with unilinear types.

We are fortunate that a paper by Davenport, which appears in the present issue, provides us with such a classification. Surveying the ethnographic literature, Davenport finds that nonunilinear descent groups are coordinate in most respects with unilinear descent groups. Accordingly, he suggests or implies the following typology of nonunilinear kinship structure. Corresponding to the unilinear term "sib," the term "sept" is proposed for the nonunilinear descent group whose members acknowledge a bond of common descent but are unable to trace the actual genealogical connections between individuals (see Murdock 1949:47 for the definition of a sib). In the sib, the bond of common descent is said to reside in the paternal or maternal line; but in the sept, the bond of common descent is said to reside in either or both lines. A descent group produced by either unilinear or nonunilinear descent is known as a "lineage" when it includes only persons who can actually trace their common relationship through a specific series of remembered genealogical links in the given line or lines of descent (cf. Murdock 1949:46). Groups intermediate between sibs (or septs) and lineages may be called "sub-sibs" (or "sub-septs"). And lastly, the term "clan" can still be reserved for the localized segment of a sib (or sept), plus

TABLE 1. CORRESPONDENCES BETWEEN UNILINEAR AND NONUNILINEAR DESCENT GROUPS

| Unilinear Descent Groups | Nonunilinear Descent Groups |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Sib | Sept |
| Sub-Sib | Sub-Sept |
| Lineage | Lineage |
| Clan | Clan |

their in-marrying spouses and other dependents (cf. Murdock 1949:68). For ease of reference, the correspondences between unilinear and nonunilinear descent groups are listed in Table 1.

Given Davenport's classification of nonunilinear descent groups, we can proceed to the identification of the descent groups which structure traditional Samoan kinship. Our discussion will be concerned with three structural features of each type of descent group: (1) membership (Who belongs to the group?); (2) residential distribution (Where do the members live?); and (3) relationship to land (What are the group's rights to land?).

THE SAMOAN DESCENT GROUPS

There are three types of descent group in Samoa, only two of which have generic names. They are: (1) the sept or *'aiga sa*; (2) the sub-sept or *faleitama*; and (3) the clan.

The sept or *'aiga sa* includes all those people who acknowledge common descent from the founder of the group. It is exogamous since the incest taboo is extended to all known relatives. Associated with each sept is a totemic fish or fowl and one or more *matai* titles. The sept takes its name from the senior of its *matai* titles which is named after the founder of the group; for example, a given sept named the *'aiga sa Faoa* may be defined as the maximal group of consanguineal relatives acknowledging descent from the original holder of the title Faoa. There is no regular rule of succession to the senior *matai* title; anyone who belongs to the sept may be selected by the members of the sept when they assemble to decide on a new title-holder.

Between 10 and 30 septs are found in a given village; that is, the lands, house sites, and titles of all such septs are located in the territory of that village. In a given sept, however, the members also include residents of other villages. Moreover, the village members of a given sept do not all live on the stretch of house-site land which belongs to the sept; in fact, most of the village members of a sept live on house sites and use lands which belong to other septs of the village.

That most of the members of one sept do not live together is due to the fact that membership in the village septs is overlapping. A given person may consider himself a member of up to seven or eight different local septs. In order to claim membership in a given sept, a person traces a lineal but not unilinear

consanguineal relationship to the present and/or a previous holder of the *matai* title which identifies the sept. A person's potential affiliations are reduced by failure to maintain sept obligations (e.g., contributing food for wedding or funeral feasts) and/or by forgetting consanguineal connections.

Traditionally, cultivable lands and house sites are controlled by the sept as a whole, and the authority or *pule* over such properties is vested in the senior title of the group. This authority must not be equated with ownership in the Western sense, since sept property cannot be transferred by the senior *matai* without the consent of an assembly of the members of the sept. It is for this reason that earlier writers on Samoa spoke of the senior *matai* as the custodian of sept property.

Although the sept is the kin group which controls cultivable lands and house sites, it is the clan which actually uses them. But before we go into exactly how these properties are divided among the members of the clan, we must first identify the sub-sept.

The sub-sept or *faleitama* includes all those people who acknowledge common descent from a brother, son, sister, or daughter of the founder of the sept. A sept always has at least two sub-septs (cf. Mead 1930:18, 21). One is the "male line" as Mead describes it; this sub-sept is said to descend from the brother or son of the founder of the sept. The second sub-sept always found in a sept is the "female line" in Mead's terms; this sub-sept is said to descend from the sister or daughter of the founder of the sept. A village sept may have three or four sub-septs, but these always include at least one "male line" and at least one "female line." A sub-sept normally possesses its own *matai* title; when there is such a title, the sub-sept takes its name from it. For example, if the title is *Palaita*, the sub-sept is called the *faleitama Palaita*. But if there is no title associated with the sub-sept, it takes its name from the founding brother, son, sister, or daughter. As in the case of the senior *matai* title of the sept, there is no regular rule of succession to the *matai* title of a sub-sept. Anyone who belongs to the sub-sept may be selected by the members of the sub-sept when they assemble to decide on a new title-holder.

In a given sub-sept, the members include residents of other villages in addition to residents of the home village. And, as in the sept, the village members of a sub-sept do not all live on the stretch of house-site land which belongs to the sept. That is, membership in the sub-septs of the village, as in the village septs, is overlapping. In order to claim membership in a given sub-sept, a person traces a lineal but not unilinear consanguineal relationship to the present and/or a previous holder of the *matai* title which identifies the sub-sept; or, if there is no such title, a person traces his relationship to someone who is acknowledged to belong to that sub-sept.

We come now to the clan. This group includes all those members of the sept who live on the stretch of house-site land which belongs to the sept. Numbering up to 50 persons (Turner 1861:280), the clan normally comprises at least three extended families, all of which are normally headed by *matai*s whose titles belong to the sept. One of these titles is the senior one of the sept, and the

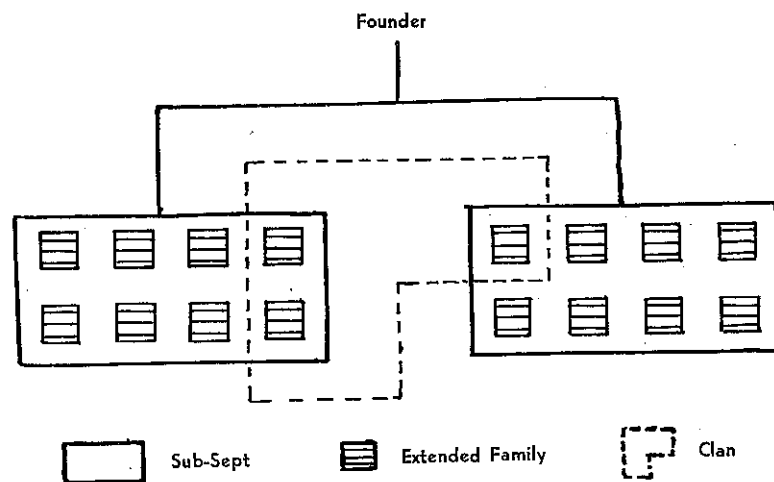


FIG. 1. The structure of the sept.

other two or more are each associated with a sub-sept of the sept. The nuclear families comprising a given extended family of the clan may be affiliated through the parent-son relationship (or the parent-daughter if there are no sons), or they may all be headed by brothers. In short, the clan comprises a number of households the heads of which claim descent from a common ancestor (cf. the definition of a clan in Webster's dictionary, as quoted in Murdock 1949:68).

The cultivable lands and house sites which belong to the sept are divided among the members of the clan as follows. One or more particular house sites and one or more particular parcels of cultivable land are reserved for the extended family which is headed by the holder of the senior matai title. Similarly, one or more particular house sites and one or more particular parcels of cultivable land are reserved for each of the other extended families of the clan, since they each represent one of the sub-septs of the sept.

After the holder of the senior matai title dies and a new title-holder is chosen, the cultivable lands and house sites which had been used by the extended family of the deceased title-holder are given over to the new title-holder's extended family. Similarly, the extended family of the successor to a sub-sept's matai title inherits the use of those house sites and cultivable lands which are reserved for that sub-sept.

In summary, the three types of descent group found in Samoa are differentiated as follows. The sept is a perpetuating, corporate descent group whose members trace a nonunilinear relationship back to the founder of the group. The sub-sept is a perpetuating, corporate descent group whose members trace a nonunilinear relationship back to a sibling or child of the founder of the sept. The clan is a nonperpetuating, noncorporate descent group which is defined by the fact that its members live on and use the land of the sept. The clan is not

perpetuating in that its membership is subject to periodic replacement; at the death of the holder of a matai title which belongs to the sept, the deceased man's extended family is replaced by the extended family of the successor to that matai title. Thus, in contrast to the sept and sub-sept, whose members live in other villages in addition to the home village, the clan is a residential as well as a descent group. Finally, although the sept is the land-owning kin group, its cultivable lands and house sites are used by the clan. One of the constituent extended families of the clan has usufruct rights over certain house sites and cultivable lands because it is headed by the holder of the senior matai title of the sept; that is, the land this extended family lives on and uses is reserved for the senior matai. Each of the other constituent extended families of the clan has usufruct rights over certain house sites and cultivable lands because it represents one of the sub-septs of the sept; that is, the land each of these extended families lives on and uses is reserved for the sub-sept it represents. So that the reader might have a clear picture of how the three types of Samoan descent group are related, Figure 1 provides a diagram of the structure of the sept.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis of the Samoan descent groups does not hold for recent times. Although the sept and sub-sept still continue to function to some extent as interacting groups, there have been important changes in their residential distribution and relationship to land. Moreover, the clan has all but disappeared, owing to these changes. A complete account of the postcontact changes in Samoan kinship structure, based upon my field study of differential culture change in three villages of American Samoa, will be presented in the near future.

NOTES

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