

ARTICLES AND PAPERS  
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Part I

Articles and Papers

Typescripts of published and unpublished

Part I

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- (6) Crocombe, R.G., 'Some observations on Land Tenure in the Gilbert Islands'. Confidential. 22nd November, 1965. TS. 20pp.



## FOSTERAGE IN THE NORTHERN GILBERT ISLANDS<sup>1</sup>

Throughout Polynesia, and in neighboring areas of the Pacific, parents often permit their children to grow up in the homes of others instead of rearing them themselves. In most of these societies, the change in residence may become the basis for a formal adoptive relationship which alters the status of the child and links his biological family of orientation to that of his foster parents. Firth (1936:588-596) has pointed out that the adoption customs of many scattered islands and peoples show certain general similarities, as in the fact that the adoptors are usually kinsman of one of the child's parents. There is also considerable variation, not only in the details of the adoptive process, but also in some of the motivations and social functions of the practice. For example, in Mangaia adoption served to mitigate the effects of chronic warfare; among the Maori, to revive claim to land rights in other districts; elsewhere it maintained the line of succession to chieftainship. This paper is an attempt to relate one form of adoption to the institutional framework of a society on the margin of Polynesia, that of Butaritari-Makin in the northern Gilbert Islands. The data to be discussed were extracted in part from the general statements of informants, but to a greater extent from complete or partial analysis of forty-two cases of fosterage on Makin.



## Butaritari-Makin Society

Butaritari and Makin<sup>2</sup> are both coral islands, the former being a true atoll--a partial ring of land enclosing a central lagoon. Makin, which is separated from the northwestern corner of Butaritari by only two miles of open sea, consists of a line of five small inlets. The two islands are situated in a zone of heavy rainfall, but the nature of the soil limits the economically significant crops to breadfruit, cocoanut, some pandanus, and the atoll taro. (*Crycosperma chamissonis*). The taro plant is grown in gardens dug down to groundwater level and fertilized with humus. Each garden is divided into numerous beds cultivated by individuals or groups of siblings. Some varieties of *Cyrtosperma* produce enormous corms, which are a prestige item appropriate for presentation to the high chief and at life-crisis ceremonies. Fish constitute an important part of the diet, and are taken by many methods, both on the reef and from canoes at sea.

The subsistence activities, supplemented by some cash income from the sale of copra, support a rapidly expanding population of about 3400 on the two islands. There are eight villages on Butaritari, the principal one, Butaritari Town, being the traditional residence of the high chief reigning over both islands. Makin has just two villages. Makin Town and Kiebu. The people of Makin and Butaritari constitute a single society, one that differs considerably in its structure from those found on other islands of the Gilbert group.<sup>3</sup>



The traditional society of the two islands was a highly stratified one, the three principal status levels being those of the chiefs, the aristocrats, and the commoners. Each status level was associated with particular rights over land and its products. The great majority of house sites, cocoanut orchards and taro gardens were grouped into estates cultivated by commoner ambilineal descent groups, or ramages.<sup>4</sup> The membership of a ramage embraced those of the founding sibling descendants who had inherited a share of the estate (specifically, a bed in the taro garden) from either parent. A claim to a portion of an estate could be validated either by actual cultivation or by the maintenance of social relations with kinsmen who had the conditional right of utilizing the land. All native-born commoners belonged to several ramages, including some groups whose estates were located in other villages or on the other island. The members of the ramage who actually occupied the descent group's land, and the in-marrying spouses of these persons, constituted a clan,<sup>5</sup> which acted as a unit in the utilization of orchards and in consumption activities. The rules of postmarital residence were such that only a portion of the membership of a ramage was eligible to settle on its house site. From the individual's point of view, the ramages whose land he actually or potentially occupied were more important than the others, from which he might eventually disaffiliate.

Most ramages obtaining a certain size were divided into two or more sub-ramages, each with its own particular land rights. These



rights were created either by an informal division of the original ramage estate, or by the independent acquisition of land from outsiders. Many sub-ramages were eventually recognized as autonomous ramages. The continual fission of commoner descent groups limited their generational depth and prevented them from maintaining significant genealogical connections with other groups of the same status level.

The aristocratic ramages were segments of either of two quasi-patrilinesages, one descended from a high chief, the other from a headman of Makin Town. Succession to those two positions alone was by patrilineal primogeniture, and the numerous children of the high chief, at any rate, inherited on ramage affiliations from their mothers. The younger brothers and sisters of the high chief and the Makin headman founded aristocratic ramages in each generation. The status of these groups was based on their position in the quasi-lineages, and in the collection and redistribution of the paramount chief's tribute they functioned as segments of the larger structures. The affiliation of individuals to both the commoner and the aristocratic ramages was ambilateral, but the latter groups were ultimately interrelated by a patrilineal tie, a fact which justified the use of the term "quasi-lineage" for the more inclusive units to which they belonged.<sup>6</sup>

The headmen of all villages except Butaritari Town and Makin Town



were descended from sons or brothers of a high chief. The founding ancestors of their ramage had been dispatched to the village by the high chief to preside over the councils of community elders, to provide places for the chief to stay on his travels, and to supervise the collection of one form of tribute. The headman's ramage controlled more lands than any other in the village, and had greater prestige than the other local aristocratic descent groups. The headmen of Makin Town, as has been mentioned, belonged to a different quasi-lineage from the high chief and enjoyed a good deal of autonomy, although their power did not extend over the other village on their island.

The great majority of estates were owned simultaneously by two ramage, one aristocratic, the other commoner. Aristocratic ramage, especially those of village headmen, were usually localized on estates also occupied by commoners, who were obliged to contribute to their superiors' support. Other commoners preserved the substance of their independence by linking themselves to aristocrats living elsewhere, usually at Butaritari Town. We may call these "free commoners" to distinguish them from the aristocrats' co-resident tenants. Linked ramage were only nominally co-owners of estates. The aristocrats demanded little beyond hospitality and contributions to their own life-crisis feasts and to presents made to the high chief. Commoner ramage were indirectly connected to the aristocratic quasi-lineages, and hence to the total society, through their relationships with



the co-owners of their estates. Immigrants arriving at Butaritari or Makin from the south became tenants of the aristocrats on whose lands they settled. Only after the passage of several generations were their descendants permitted to occupy separate estates and to take full part in community affairs. The subordination of one ramage to another is now a thing of the past, but the attitude persists that strangers do not have all the privileges of natives, the true "people" of the island. On the other hand, an immigrant may still demand to be provided with the necessities of life, particularly by a chief or a village headman.

Status-level endogamy was preferred, but not prescribed, so that it was not unusual for people to be aristocrats on one estate and commoners on another. Periodic wars over the succession to the high chieftainship led to the losers being deprived of aristocratic rank and thereby maintained the boundary between status levels.

Distinctions in rank have now lost most of their significance. Only the village headmen and the children and grandchildren of high chiefs are still accorded a special status. The end of the succession wars has enabled almost everyone to claim membership in some aristocratic ramage by virtue of ambilateral affiliations. A Lands Commission established by the British colonial government divided all estates between the high chief, who was awarded a quarter of the land, and the aristocratic and commoner co-owners, who received three-eighths each. The lands settlement destroyed the economic



significance of the clan by giving all ramage members equal access to the orchards. Such large numbers of persons are now entitled to collect coconuts on many of the estates that different sections of the owning ramage have to take weekly or yearly turns using the forest lands.

Adoption and Fosterage

There are two main types of fictive kinship in Butaritari-Makin, which I have called "adoption" and "fosterage". Adoption is practiced by childless, middle-aged persons who want to be assured of care in their old age and who prefer to have their property pass intact to a designated heir rather than to be divided among collateral relatives. The adoptee in these cases is most often the child or grandchild of a sibling, or a person who originally entered the adopter's household as a foster-grandchild. (Generational distinctions are not overridden by adoption, so that a classificatory grandchild becomes an adopted grandchild, and not an adopted child.) Occasionally parents mourning the loss of a grown son or daughter adopt the dead child's best friend or spouse as a replacement. Adoption also serves as a means of naturalizing strangers, especially young people who come to the island without their parents. These are often adopted by classificatory parents, or by someone indirectly related to them through fosterage. In former times, village headmen or other aristocrats sometimes adopted immigrant children in fulfillment of their duty to care for needy strangers.



An adopted child becomes a member of its adoptive parent's ramages, although without losing its original affiliations. Adopted children often do not inherit all of the rights of individuals born into the ramage. This is particularly true when there is no close genealogical relationship between the parties, or when the adoptors are of high rank. The claims of collateral heirs may reduce an unrelated adoptee's share of his adoptive parent's property. A descendant of an adopted child can never become head of the ramage, and will not be held in the same esteem as his adoptive kinsmen if the latter hold aristocratic rank. With regard to incest prohibitions, adopted and natural children are on the same footing; one should not marry, or have sexual relations with a descendant of either one's real or one's adoptive great-grandfather. Consanguineal kin terms are employed without modification, to refer to relatives by adoption.

Fosterage apparently stems from the custom of sending one child of a family to be reared by the husband's or wife's parents. The analogy manifests itself in the genealogical relationship of the persons involved, in the term employed to designate their status, and to some extent, in the treatment the child receives in its new home. With respect to descent-group membership and property rights, however, fosterage clearly differs from both the lineal grandparent-grandchild tie and the adoptive relationship. A foster-grandchild who is not subsequently adopted inherits little or no land from its foster-grandparents, because he continues to belong exclusively to the ramages of his natural parents. Instead, the foster-grandparents



receive conditional rights to a piece of real estate from the child's father or mother. The possession of this property binds them to perform certain services for the child, even after he leaves their home, and to rear one of his descendants in each generation. Fosterage thus creates a special bond between descent groups, and provides a framework for the exchange of goods and services. Its importance is, or rather, was, increased by the fact that the group that provided the child was often of higher rank than the group that reared it. The adoption customs of the other Gilbert Islands, which combine elements of Butaritari-Makin adoption and fosterage have been fully described by H. E. and H. C. Maude (1931). The Maudes' article, and other sources, will be referred to when they are applicable to the practices of the two northern islands.

#### The Relation Between Foster-Grandparent and Foster-Grandchild

People who are natives of the society normally foster classificatory grandchildren; that is, collateral kinsmen of the second descending generation. The Maudes' (1931:226) statement, that in the northern and central Gilberts, no fosterage relationship was allowed between persons who did not belong to the same kindred, was probably valid for the traditional Butaritari-Makin society. The fostering of unrelated children occurs at the present time. One informant maintained that it was occasionally practiced in the past, too, and mentioned a term (te tabetaba) specifically designating the children involved.



However, an examination of genealogies sometimes reveals a distant consanguineal bond that has been overlooked in favor of the socially more significant tie of fosterage.

The foster-grandchild is most frequently the great-grandchild of a parent's sibling, or the great-great-grandchild of a grandparent's sibling, the sex of the connecting kinsfolk being immaterial. I recorded two cases of the fostering of a great-grandparent's sibling's great-great-great-grandchild, and another where the two parties were even more remotely related. The nearest of all classificatory grandchildren--a brother's or sister's grandchild--may be adopted, but not fostered, if only because siblings, as joint owners of property, could formerly not make fosterage gifts to one another. The grandchild of one's spouse's sibling may be fostered, although he will usually be adopted later. A few cases were recorded where the foster-grandchild was, genealogically speaking, a "great-grandchild" or "child" of his foster-grandparents. The former cases are not particularly significant, since grandchildren and great-grandchildren are treated pretty much alike, but the latter category demands some explanation. All three of the fostered "children" belonged to the ramage of a village headman, so that in these instances political expediency may have taken precedence over strict adherence to customary rules.

The higher the rank of the parents, the more likely were their children to be fostered in the traditional society (Parkinson 1889:33).



The high chiefs probably never reared any of their own children, while a village headman might keep only the youngest of his sons and daughters at home. A high chief's children were cared for by the members of the aristocratic ramages, especially those residing at Butaritari Town. The children of a headman were usually fostered by the other aristocrats and free commoners of his village. These ramages in turn gave foster-grandchildren to people of their own status level or to ones of lower rank, such as recent immigrants. It never happened that the foster-grandparents belonged to a higher status level than their foster-grandchild. Consequently, people of the highest rank--chiefs and members of headman's ramages--did not act as a foster-grandparent in the traditional society, and the high chief and his siblings do not do so even today.

A difference in rank did not exclude consanguineal kinship. The foster-grandparents of a child of superior rank might belong to a junior line of his aristocratic quasi-lineage, or be the collateral descendants of a woman who had married a high chief or a village headman. Figure 1 illustrates the first type of relationship. D, the heir to the high chieftainship, has been fostered by C. The latter's grandmother, B, was the sister of a previous high chief, A, who was D's great-great-grandfather in the male line. Figure 2 shows an example of the second type of relationship. The founding ancestor of a ramage, E, had had a brother, F, whose son's daughter, G, married



the village headman. G's son's son, I, was fostered by H, a grandson of E.

For the people at the bottom of the social scale--the immigrants--fosterage remains the usual means of acquiring land to cultivate and artificial kinsmen to replace the natural ones left behind on some other island. Most immigrants have foster-grandchildren, and their own children are not fostered by anyone else. An immigrant must generally foster a non-relative, but the availability of affinal and fictive kin permits a few partial exceptions to this rule. For instance, a woman from Marakei fostered both the grandson of a man who had become her fictive brother, and her husband's granddaughter by a previous marriage. In the past, many immigrants reared the children of aristocrats in return for permission to settle as tenants on the estate of the natural parents. This special form of fosterage will be discussed in the last descriptive section of this paper. It did not prevent the same children from being fostered in the ordinary way by natives of the village.

The self-reciprocal term, tibu, which designates a true or classificatory grandparent or grandchild, is often used in reference to a foster-grandparent or foster-grandchild. Since the foster-grandchild is generally a classificatory grandchild as well, this usage requires no change of term. The words that specifically denote a foster grandchild are all descriptive. The commonest is te tob'a, "the nursing baby." The others are ta kaikawai "the one who is brought up",



and te tabetabe, "the one who is picked up". "To foster someone" is tibuna, "to treat as a grandchild," or tobana, "to nurse." Personal names, rather than kin terms, are used in addressing both real and foster relatives.

#### The Motives for Fosterage

The majority of fosterage relationships grow out of long-standing friendships between the natural parents and the future foster-grandparents. Such associations can be documented by a number of case studies. One Na Ruatara was called back to Makin from Marakei by his classificatory son (mother's brother's son's son). When the "son" later moved to Butaritari himself, he left his board house at Makin Town in Na Ruatara's hands. Eventually Na Ruatara informed his "son" that he wanted to foster the "son's" next child. A man named Na Kaibeia fostered his wife's sister's daughter's first-born child after the younger woman and her husband had lived in his house for two years immediately following their marriage. People often foster the children or grandchildren of neighbors with whom they stand in the appropriate consanguineal relationship. Fosterage is a means of transforming the tenuous link that ordinarily connects distant kinsmen into a far stronger and more significant one.

The size of the potential gift is also a motive for entering into a fosterage relationship. The friends of persons of rank are fully conscious that they will be generously rewarded for fostering their



friends' children. In the colonial period, ships' officers and storekeepers, whose wages make them well-to-do by Gilbertese standards, have not lacked for foster-grandparents for their children. People formerly sought to gain the protection and assistance of a powerful man by fosternig one of his children. This may have been the principal inducement for fostering the high chief's children, since the chief himself owned no lands that could regularly serve as fosterage gifts. Nowadays the descendants of chiefs often give their children's foster-grandparents one or more of the quarter-plots they were awarded by the Lands Commission.

Fosterage also affords childless persons the pleasure of rearing children and assures them of care and support in their old age. Unlike people with children of their own, who generally restrict themselves to a single foster-grandchild, childless couples may rear three or more, in addition to adopted children. Repeated fosterage is thought of as a defense against the ever-threatening danger of an ungrateful child; for an ambitious man, it is a means of creating the large retinue of dependents that will give him prestige in late middle age. The several foster-grandchildren are usually unrelated to one another, and, nowadays, may be unrelated to the foster-grandparents as well. However, one man in the village of Eiebu, with no legitimate children of his own, has fostered four children of the same family in order to avoid charges of favoritism from different sets of natural parents. Childless persons frequently adopt their



foster-grandchildren, a practice which will be discussed below.

While most fosterage relationships are initiated by an agreement between the families concerned, a few are formally established only after the foster-grandparents have begun to take care of the child. The wet nurse of a baby whose mother has insufficient milk adopts the infant (if she is its true or classificatory parent's sister), or becomes its foster-grandmother. Even in the latter case, she is not necessarily unrelated to the child, since parents are likely to ask one of their kinswomen, or a woman who has already fostered one of the baby's collateral relatives, to act as wet nurse.

Until the virtual abolition of infanticide, a person could become a foster-grandparent by rescuing a newborn baby who was about to be buried alive. The relationship was not formally created unless one of the parents was later willing to transfer land to the rescuer.

#### Rearing the Foster-Grandchild

Would-be foster-grandparents must make their request of the biological parents before, or immediately after, the birth of the child. It is even permissible to ask for a couple's next child before it is conceived. Adoption, in contrast to fosterage, occurs much later in the child's life, since it is based on a consideration of his individual characteristics rather than on his status as a member of a family or descent group. The natural parents can refuse a request to foster their child only on the grounds that it has already been



committed to another family. They would otherwise be regarded as shamefully stingy (Maude and Maude 1931:228). Nevertheless children are not demanded at random, since an approach to non-kinsman or to inappropriate persons would be scorned by the community as being motivated entirely by greed for land, rather than by the approved sentiments of kinship or respect for high rank.

When the baby is born, the foster-grandparent claims it by holding it in his (or her) arms. He often, but not always, names the child. Either a natural parent or a foster-grandparent may name a child after his or one of his own kinsfolk, usually a father, mother, sister or brother. But only a foster-grandparent is permitted to name a baby after himself, or to give it a variant form of his own name (cf. Maude & Maude 1931:229). Sometimes the common concern of a married couple for their new foster-grandchild is symbolized by bestowing on it a compound name formed by joining part of the husband's name to part of the wife's. Generally a man's name is given to a boy and a woman's to a girl, but this practice is not an invariable rule.

The foster-grandparents of a couple's first born child take part in the birth feast of its members of the wife's ramages, which lasts until the stump of the baby's umbilical cord drops off. Later the fostering couple and the woman's own mother accompany her and her baby to a three-day celebration held by the husband's kinsfolk. Finally the foster-grandparents and their kin give their own three-day feast. If the foster-grandchild is not the first-born, the parents



prepare food only for themselves (not even for their siblings) by way of celebration. The foster-grandparents bring food to this modest feast and share in the meal. Probably all the children of the high chief and his siblings have full-scale birth feasts.

The foster-grandparents also render practical assistance to the nursing mother and to their future ward. According to an early observer, they began to care for the mother during her pregnancy, immediately after the establishment of the relationship (Parkinson 1889:33). The foster-grandmother and her female relatives are certainly in evidence after the birth, when they relieve the mother of chores which she may find it difficult to perform by herself. An adolescent daughter of the foster-grandparents may be sent to live with the natural parents at this time to help with household tasks. If the baby falls ill, the foster-grandmother may nowadays stay with it at the island dressing station for a period of time.

The foster-grandparents are entitled to take the child to their home when it is weaned, an event that occurs between the ages of two and three unless the mother becomes pregnant again earlier. (This generalization is exclusive of the rare cases where the foster-grandmother herself nurses the baby). The transfer may be delayed for a year or longer, on the grounds that the child, by its fretfulness, is showing an unwillingness to stay with its foster-grandparents. Sometimes a child will remain with its foster-grandparents only during the day at first, returning to its old home at night. It is believed



that a small child will fall ill if it is not permitted to choose its own place of residence. The supposed wishes of the child are often no more than a pretext, since the parents are very reluctant to part with their son or daughter, and frequently attempt to postpone the transfer as long as possible (Maude and Maude 1931:229). The parents' reluctance is especially great if either they, or the foster-grandparents, are about to leave the island. If even the intervention of senior relatives on the side of propriety fails to win the parents' consent to the separation, the foster-grandparents have to agree to abandon the child temporarily. Later they will send a female member of their household to fetch the foster-grandchild, or perhaps to bring mother and child back together.

The foster-grandchild's status in his new household is patterned after that of a grandchild living with his grandparents. That is, the child should respect and obey his "grandparents," but is treated rather indulgently by them. In most cases, the proper attitudes are facilitated by the fact that the foster-grandparents are past child-bearing when their "grandchild" comes to live with them. Actually their indulgence goes beyond that of natural grandparents, who can be quite stern with a child placed under their direct control. The same observation has been made by other students of Gilbertese custom. According to the Maudes (1931:231, fn. 14), "a Gilbertese usually lavishes more affection on his adopted children than on his true offspring." The missionary, Father Sabatier (1939:75), notes



that adopted children are often badly brought up; all their whims are followed out of fear of displeasing the parents, to whom the child might complain.

People say that a foster-grandchild ought to be "honored" (karineski) or "cherished" (nabeaki); the latter verb is not employed in any other context. In practice, this means that the foster-grandchild is favored over the other children of the household whenever a choice must be made. If the foster-grandparents have only a little money before Christmas or some other church feast, they buy clothing for the foster-grandchild rather than for their own children. The foster-grandchild is served first, or at least permitted first choice of desirable foods. He is exempted from economic tasks that might tax his strength, and is beaten only for serious offenses, such as those involving aggression. If the foster-grandchild is a chief, the foster-grandparents have to be especially careful of his parents' feelings. A generation ago, the foster-grandparents of the high chief's children withdrew their wards from school because they felt themselves disgraced if the foster-grandchildren were beaten by the leader.

A good deal of variation can be observed in the daily life of different households. In one, where the foster-grandfather has a forceful personality and previously reared the mother of his present foster-grandchild, the authority of the older generation is unquestioned. In others, the foster-grandchild is allowed to become a little tyrant. The foster-grandparents in a household of the second



kind did all they could to find some fish for their five-year old foster-grandson during a period of scarcity, because they were afraid he would throw a tantrum if he did not get the food he wanted. While parents often say that they are looking for a particular kind of food "for the sake of the child," they are quick to scold a child who will not eat what is set before him. The true parents sometimes blame the child's misbehavior on the foster grandparents, or remind him that they, at least, are not hesitant about disciplining him if necessary. The foster-grandparents, in turn, may jokingly accuse the parents of being too harsh with the child. I once overheard a comment of this kind after a woman had told an adolescent girl from her eight-year old son's foster-household that the boy had gone angling on the reef. The girl kicked the mother lightly in the ribs and said, "You're forcing our child to go fishing so that he'll die of sunstroke."

The mutual affection of a foster-grandchild and his foster-grandparents usually equals or exceeds that felt by the child for his parents. The foster-grandparents certainly come to be considered as more significant and reliable relatives than the child's distant consanguinal kinsmen, whose interests--with respect to the inheritance of land, for example--may conflict with his own. The trust placed in foster-grandparents can be illustrated by an episode in the traditional history of the society.<sup>8</sup> Once when the High Chief Na Kakiaba was absent from Butaritari Town, a group of commoners revolted against



him. They succeeded in killing all of the chief's children who had been left behind in the village, except for two sons who were hidden by their foster-grandparents.

The natural parents also participate in rearing the child. It is true that a child formally resident with his foster-grandparents should spend the night at their house and even accompany them on trips to other islands. But as long as he and his parents live in the same village he sees them almost every day and often eats with them. One woman did claim that her foster-grandson had become as attached to her that he refused to visit his parents. A more nearly typical example, however, was provided by another boy, who not only spent a great deal of time at his parents' house, but was even occasionally reluctant to return to his foster-home in the evening, probably because he had no children of his own age to play with there. When his foster-grandmother was present at his parents' home, she paid considerably more attention to the boy than she did to his siblings. She bathed him and not the others, for example, and allowed him to accompany her when she went to perform some task. When the boy fell ill with a cough, both his mother and his foster-grandmother slept with him in a vacant house on his father's land. When a young person falls ill while living away from home, whether as a foster-grandchild or as a married woman, his parents will take him back, not because they suspect the other family of neglect, but rather as an expression of their own concern for his welfare.



It used to be customary for the natural parents to bring food to the foster-grandparents at Christmas as long as their child lived with the latter. Other than that, there was no trace of the customary presents, including both food and manufactured objects, which the parents gave the adoptors on other islands in the Gilbert archipelago (Maude and Maude 1931:230). It was assumed, on Butaritari and Makin, that those who reared the child were sufficiently compensated for their trouble by the land transferred as a fosterage gift, especially since they did not regularly bequeath any property to their foster-grandchild.

The Gilbertese rules of residence are flexible enough to permit as many households as possible to have the optimum composition with regard to the division of labor by age and sex, and to allow some exercise of personal choice. It often happens that a fostered child lives with his parents or a parent's sibling for periods of varying length between weaning and marriage. The commonest reason for recalling a child, particularly an adolescent girl, is the need for her assistance in domestic tasks. The foster-grandparents take food to a foster-grandchild who has been removed from their home temporarily and taken to another village. They also visit a foster-grandchild who is lying ill on his kinsman's land, and again bring formal gifts of large taro corms and other food.

Presents of food are also brought to the exceptional foster-grandchild who never lives with his foster-grandparents at all. I only



recorded one occurrence of this state of affairs. It involved the only child of a village headman, who could not bear to relinquish his son and kept taking him back at night. The foster-grandparents were willing to continue the relationship, even though they couldn't rear the boy, because they were afraid the headman would sicken of grief if he and his child were separated.

The parents retain jural authority over a fostered child, since he inherits his land rights and ramage memberships from them. It is recognized that the child frequently has a greater sentimental attachment to the persons in whose home he grew up, but this feeling does not affect his subordination to his natural parents in important matters. A suitor for a girl's hand sends his representatives to her father, not to her foster-grandfather. A youth asks his parents for permission to marry the girl he likes, or agrees to marry one they have selected. The foster-grandparents usually expect to be consulted about their ward's marriage, however, and their advice is sought before he is sent to high school or to work. One woman said that the parents would be acting deceitfully if they made major decisions affecting the child without asking the foster-grandparents' opinion beforehand. In the traditional society, the foster-grandparents had very little power to determine the future of a child of the high chief or a village headman. On the other extreme, a foster-grandfather exercises authority by default over an adolescent whose natural father is dead and whose parents' brothers do not concern themselves with him.



Under these circumstances it may be the foster-grandfather, rather than a classificatory father, who threatens to break off relations with a foster-grandchild who insists on continuing a disapproved marriage.

The members of the natal and foster-households behave toward one another as though they were near kinsmen. If they live in the same village, or even on the same island, they cooperate in a multitude of tasks, from catching land crabs to thatching a roof. People often turn to their relatives through fosterage when the skills of a curer or craftsman are required. These services continue to be performed long after the child has grown up. During my stay on Makin, for example, an old midwife was called on to deliver the baby of her deceased son's foster-grandparents' daughter's daughter-in-law. Foster-relatives also render assistance in emergencies, as when they temporarily exchange houses to enable a sick child to escape the local influences which are thought to be impeding his recovery. Many natives of Makin have travelled to other islands with their foster-relatives, or have lodged with them on Tarawa, the colony headquarters, where young people go for work, schooling, or recreation. Two unrelated children who have been fostered by the same couple maintain a close relationship throughout their lives. One of these foster-grandchildren may even live for a time with the natural parents of the other. In these and other ways, fosterage relationships affect everyone in the society, although only a minority of the children actually have foster-grandparents.



### The Transfer of Property

Throughout the Gilbert Islands, the natural parents transfer a piece of land or a taro bed to the foster-parents or grandparents in return for supporting the child (Maude and Maude 1931:229-230). In the dialect of Butaritari and Makin, the fosterage gift, which is handed over soon after the child moves into his new home, is called te baa-<sup>no</sup>oo-uri, "the Guetarda leaf", since the leaves of this tree are used to wipe young children. It is normally provided by the parent who is himself a classificatory child of one of the foster-grandparents. If both parents are unrelated to the foster-grandparents, the gift is made by the father if they are residing virilocally, and by the mother if they are residing uxorilocally. The recipient is, generally, either the foster-grandparent who is consanguinally related to the child, or the fostering couple jointly. The consanguine kinsman is excluded from a share in the gift only if his spouse had fostered his sibling's grandchild. It is often difficult to determine whether or not both husband and wife are to be considered as foster-grandparents, unless one of them has children by another marriage who may or may not inherit rights to its fosterage gift. In the old days, when sibling sets still cultivated their taro beds as a unit, a group of brothers and sisters might share a fosterage gift and together act as foster-grandparents. Sometimes an entire ramage reared the village headman's child and received property from him.



The fosterage gift included a taro bed in all but two of the twenty-one cases where the property transferred was recorded. Evidently one or two beds are considered sufficient, since in twelve of the cases no other property was involved. It is probable that, in the past, no one turned over his entire inheritance in any ramage taro garden to his child's foster-grandparents, since this action would have entailed the loss of his ramage affiliation. At the present time, claims to ramage membership and rights to estates are based on an official register, and people are no longer bound by the old restriction. Instead of giving the foster-grandparents a specific bed, some parents allow them to utilize all the beds which the child will later inherit, or all the beds located in the village where the child will be reared.

The two recorded instances of the transfer of cocoanut land alone are doubtful or exceptional. However, the village headman's ramage often gave a forest plot, together with taro beds, to the foster-grandparents of one of its children. As a result of changes in the traditional system of land tenure, most estates now have so many co-owners that plots are very difficult to alienate. Consequently, parents can no longer hand over a piece of land completely to the foster-grandparents, but can only assign them the parents' own weekly or yearly turn to collect cocoanuts there. The practice of transferring a turn on a plot of land is limited to wealthy individuals, mostly descendants of recent high chiefs and headmen. The high chief's



steward, at Makin Town, was able to assign his "year" on a large inherited plot to his son's foster-grandmother because many of the chief's quarter-plots had been placed at his disposal. All foster-grandparents are entitled to take an occasional coconut, for food or drink, from their foster-grandchild's lands. A canoe may be included in the original fosterage gift, but it is more likely to be given to the foster-grandparents by the child himself when he is grown up.

The fosterage gift is not spoken of as the "property" of the foster-grandparents (nia b'ai), but as something left in their charge (<sup>tiku irouia</sup> e biku irouia). The residual owner is the foster-grandchild, since the taro bed is "the source of his food," and the orchards will produce copra which is "the price of the things he needs." I am not sure whether the gift is regularly deducted from the share of the parent's lands that the child will eventually inherit. It is customarily reckoned as part of the child's inheritance on the island of Beru (Townsend nd.:#12), and was treated in the same way, in some cases, on Makin also. The foster-grandparents, as conditional owners of the property, occupy a status analogous to that which the people of the clan, as the actual cultivators of the estate, once occupied in relation to the absent members of the ramage. They have full control over the fosterage gift in return for feeding and clothing their ward during his childhood and for fulfilling certain other obligations afterward. The property is not merged with any existing ramage estate,



and is inherited ambilineally, together with the duties attached to it, by the descendants of the original foster-grandparents. The donors are entitled only to prevent the alienation of the property, and to recover it in the highly unusual event of the fosterage relationship's being terminated before the original foster-grandchild reaches maturity. The land can presumably be alienated for the child's benefit. The only available example concerns a taro bed which the recipients sold to pay a gambling debt for another foster-grandchild's husband.

The old men of Makin say that the parents can take back both child and gift if the child is neglected or unhappy at the home of his foster-grandparents. My informants could recall no fosterage relationships that had been terminated for this reason, however. Not only is the mistreatment of children extremely rare, but a foster-grandchild is free to live with his parents, at least part of the time, if he finds his foster-grandparents uncongenial. An occasional fosterage is dissolved because there has been a serious quarrel between the two families about a matter unrelated to the child. In one case, a man accused his foster-grandson's older half-sisters of encroaching on his rights as conditional owner by removing taro from a bed which had been turned over to the foster-grandfather. The mother of the girls then accused her son's foster-grandfather of taking the taro himself, and the relationship was broken off. It was resumed years afterward, but the foster-grandfather made no further claim to the



boy's taro beds. Should the foster-grandchild die before reaching adulthood, the foster-grandparents' "debt is paid" (*e b'ara basia*), and the fosterage gift is theirs to keep. They may replace the dead child with one of his siblings, but are under no obligation to do so.

Foster-grandchildren rarely inherited any of their foster-grandparents' property in traditional Butaritari-Makin society. As a native Makin puts it, "You leave property to your child, but you receive property from your foster-grandchild." An exception should probably be made for childless foster-grandparents who, in their old age, have often adopted their foster-grandchildren. Even the high chief's children have acquired additional land rights through this sort of adoption (Kramer 1906:320). An old man or woman sometimes adopts both a sibling's child and a foster-grandchild, dividing the inheritance between them. The foster-grandchild is then considered to be the "grandchild" of his adoptors, and the "child" of their adopted child. The foster-grandparent need not adopt all of his foster-grandchildren. He may choose to leave his property to the one most closely related to him (e.g., a wife's sister's grandson), or to the one who cares for him in his old age.

Since many persons do not formally dispose of their lands until they are on their deathbeds, the foster-grandchild's right to the inheritance may later be challenged by his foster-grandparent's collateral kinsmen, who have the right to inherit in the absence of natural or adopted children. The foster-grandchild may be left with only a small



portion of the property. People in this situation often maintain that their foster-grandparent intended to bequeath them his property, but that either his wishes were never publicly expressed, or that they were later ignored by the consanguineal kin. The foster-grandchildren were quite likely to be deprived of their full shares in the estate while the traditional system of land tenure was in effect. Under this system, a group of brothers and sisters possessed their taro beds as a unit until their deaths. If only one of the siblings had children, the latter attempted to exclude the others' foster-grandchildren from the estate by continuing the fosterage relationship. A natural child invited the foster-grandchildren to live in his house for periods of time and, in general, assumed his own parent's role as foster-grandparent. The foster-grandchildren themselves might be reluctant to press their claims under the circumstances. Nowadays there is less uncertainty, since most taro beds belong to individual owners. The Lands Court insists that, when a person dies without issue, his collateral kinsfolk receive a portion of his beds equal to the share of an adopted child.

Within the last generation, some people with children of their own have begun to leave property to their foster-grandchildren as well. The foster-grandchild's share is usually smaller than that of a natural child, and may even be smaller than the fosterage gift. A single taro bed presented to a grown foster-grandchild can be considered as a payment for services performed in the foster-household



rather than as an inheritance in the strict sense. In other cases foster-grandchildren have benefited from the widespread misinterpretation of the purposes of the government's lands register. When official records were first introduced, a number of ramage elders included the names of distant relatives and foster-grandchildren among the co-owners of estates merely as proof of the existence of a relationship. Few foster-grandchildren of that time had any intention of sharing possession of their foster-grandparents' lands, but their children have claimed the property rights guaranteed by the listing of their names in the register.

The recent changes in the institution of fosterage on Makin and Butaritari have been caused mainly by the gradual introduction of Southern practices, through increasingly frequent intermarriage and marriages, and through the influence of administrators, who tend to favor uniformity in native law. Most Gilbertese apparently do not distinguish fosterage from adoption. The foster-grandchild regularly receives a piece of land, called ta aba-n-tibu, from his adoptor, who has himself been given a fosterage gift by the child's parents. A person adopted (fostered) by either a man or a woman is also adopted by the spouse and normally receives his inheritance from the foster-parent who owns the most land. If the adopting couple is very rich they each give a plot to their "grandchild", although their real children receive somewhat larger shares (Maude and Maude 1931:231-232; Townsend n.d.:#5, 7, 8). The close connection between land rights



and kinship ties is demonstrated by the fact that, in the South, an adopted or foster-child belongs to the descent groups of both his true and his foster-parents, and is entitled to occupy the sitting place of either in the community meeting house (Maude and Maude 1931: 232). In the traditional Butaritari-Makin society, the foster-grandparents passed neither their property nor their ramage affiliations to their foster-grandchild.

#### The Continuing Obligations of Fosterage

A foster-grandchild who has not been adopted moves away from his foster-grandparents when he marries, since he either does not belong to the ramage controlling their house site, or he belongs to a remote branch whose members have lost their right to settle there. A young man sets up his own household on a site previously occupied by his parents or true grandparents. The decision as to his place of residence is made principally by his father, although the consent of the other man living on the site is required. A woman normally lives on her husband's land. Often a foster-grandchild leaves in his teens to join a consanguineal kinsman or to go to work, and never returns permanently to his foster-home.

He is always welcome to make an extended visit to his foster-grandparents. Some foster-grandchildren, especially women who have become estranged from their parents or brothers, return to live for months or years with their foster-grandparents. A woman may give



birth to her first child in her foster-grandfather's house, instead of in that of her parents, if she has quarreled with her father, or if her father is dead and she does not get along with her mother's new husband. Other women take refuge with their foster-grandfathers after leaving their husbands. A man is much less likely to feel the need of escaping from domination by his kinsfolk, but may live with his foster-grandparents for other reasons--to renew the relationship when they return to Makin after a long absence, for example.

The foster-grandparents' obligations, after the foster-grandchild's departure, are based on their continued possession of the fosterage gift. Even the foster-grandchild's ingratitude does not release them from their moral responsibilities. "You care about the child you have brought up even if he doesn't care about you," people say, "because his taro bed which is the source of his food remains with you."

The original foster-grandparents, together with their children and grandchildren, constitute a sub-ramage, whose special rights to the fosterage gift are bound up with certain obligations toward the foster-grandchild. The principal obligation and symbol of the relationship is the delivery of gifts, especially large taro corms, to the foster-grandchild on certain occasions. The total present of the sub-ramage is divided among the children of the original couple, each sibling or pair of siblings being assessed an equal share. The same procedure is followed when the primary foster-grandparents were



a group of siblings. The failure of some members of the fostering sub-ramage to contribute to the present can later serve as grounds for excluding them from the ownership of the fosterage gift.

All the persons who share in the fosterage gift are expected to contribute to, and to attend, the life-crisis feasts of a grown-up foster-grandchild. In theory, the sponsors of the feast ought to show their respect for the foster-grandparents by awarding them a larger and finer share of the remainder of the food than is allotted to either the maternal or the paternal kindred. If the feast is held on some other island, the foster-grandparents may recognize this ward's changed status by bringing him gifts when he returns. When a young woman named Nei Baabara arrived from Butaritari with her first-born baby, the children of her husband's foster-grandmother, Nei Tabou, visited her with presents of cloth, powder, and soap for the infant, and with a pig and some taro for a feast. Some of the gifts were contributed by a son of Nei Tabou's who lives on Tarawa, and delivered by his wife. The fact that Nei Baabara's child was to be fostered by another family did not prevent Nei Tabou and her children from behaving generously on this occasion. The foster-grandchild participated in the life-crisis feasts of the foster-grandparents and their children. His contribution is quantitatively less significant than that made by the foster-grandparents, however, since their sub-ramage may constitute a sizable group of people.

It is customary to hold a feast for a consanguineal or affinal



relative returning from a journey. Such feasts are also given for one's foster-grandparents and foster-grandchildren. In addition, foster-grandchildren bring taro, fish, and toddy molasses to their foster-grandparents' house whenever a kinsman of the latter arrives from another island. Later the visitor is invited to the foster-grandchild's house for a meal.

The foster-grandparents' hospitality is, or was, more liberal when their adult foster-grandchild was of high rank. The traditional history contains an account of the reception of the high chief, Teauoki, but his foster-grandparents. When the chief appeared with a companion at the home of the family that had reared him, a mat was spread for him to lie on, and his foster-grandparents hurried off to dig up taro and catch a parrot fish for his dinner. The huge fish had been fed regularly in a certain spot at the edge of the reef to prevent it from swimming away. The foster-grandparents were very disappointed with Teauoki left just before the meal was ready, because the rattling of his spear had warned him of the approach of a rival.

It is a strongly institutionalized practice for the foster-grandparents to take food to their grown-up foster-grandchild, or to his spouse, if either falls ill while on a visit to another village. If the foster-grandchild is lying ill on his own land, the foster-grandparents should visit him, but need not bring food. The foster-grandparents thus continue a custom they followed when their ward fell ill in childhood. The foster-grandchild reciprocates by visiting his foster-grandparents when they are sick.



Since the 1930's, it has been customary for certain sub-ramages to bring their adult foster-grandchild a large Christmas gift of taro corms and other things when neither he, nor a child of his, resides with a member of the descent group. The custom has never been widely practiced; at Christmastime in 1960 there were only two such deliveries of food to foster-grandchildren in Makin Town. One of them will serve as an illustration of the manner in which a large contribution is parcelled out among the members of a sub-ramage. The recipient of the gift was a married woman named Nei Moanibure, whose mother, Nei Raiata, had been fostered by her father's father's father's sister's son, Na Uakeake, and by his wife, Nei Taara. The taro pit that Nei Raiata's father had given for her support was inherited in eight equal portions, by Nei Taara's six children by Na Uakeake, and by the son and daughter she had borne to her first husband, Nang Kitina (i.e., "Kitchener"). Na Uakeake's children accordingly assessed themselves a total of eighteen taro corms and thirty shillings for the Christmas present, one third of which was to be contributed by each pair of siblings. (In former times, paired siblings, preferably a brother and sister, often cultivated their taro beds as a unit.) The heirs of each of "Kitchener's" children were assessed six corms and ten shillings. Na Uakeake's children had intended to buy cloth for Nei Moanibure, but, as they could find nothing suitable in the store, they decided to give her the money instead. Since all of Nei Taara's children were either dead or too old to cultivate



taro, the coconuts and shillings were provided by some of their children and grandchildren, or by the caretakers (conditional owners) of their beds. From the point of view of the sub-ramage as a whole, the identity of the actual donors was immaterial so long as each segment was represented. The sub-ramage does not necessarily make a gift to its foster-grandchild every year. A corresponding gift was formerly taken to the foster-home by the child's natural kinsmen as long as he resided there. Probably both kinds of presentation, then consisting of food, mats, and cocoanut-leaf skirts, were made at irregular intervals in pagan times, and later revived as Christmas gifts, perhaps after a lapse.

There is a little evidence that the foster-grandparents of a high-born individual sometimes made him gifts in order to honor him publicly. Early in this century, Nei Boata, the oldest grandchild of the headman of Kitbu, went to Makin Town to participate in a general dance. As she walked along the road, members of the ramage that had reared her covered her head with a succession of new cloths. The cloths were taken away, one after the other, by other persons, who exclaimed, "It's faded!" The preparation of a specially reserved large fish for the visiting high chief, an incident referred to above, may be interpreted as another way of honoring a foster-grandchild.

In everyday life, foster-grandparents look out for their adult foster-grandchildren's welfare, and often voluntarily assist the



young people. A foster-grandfather may even decide to give his foster-grandson so valuable an object as a canoe. The foster-grandchild, however, is not permitted by custom to ask his foster-grandparents directly for any item, with the possible exception of small imported objects considered to be desirable but unessential. This prohibition is more stringent than a similar one imposed on individuals with respect to their natural parents.

The foster-grandchild may not legitimately refuse any request for goods or services made by his foster-grandparents, to whom he will be forever in debt for the trouble they took in rearing him. He is under the same obligation to the foster-grandparents' children, whether natural or adopted, since they will carry on the relationship. "My power rests on him," said one man in reference to his adopted son's claims on his foster-grandchildren.

Both a foster-grandparent and a real parent have the privilege of taking an individual's property, but the rights of ownership are more clearly transferred in the former case. A foster-grandfather can, at any time, assume conditional ownership of a canoe belonging to his foster-grandson or to his foster-grand-daughter's husband. Later he says simply, "I took it as my canoe." Sometimes a foster-grandchild leaves his canoe with his foster-grandfather on his own initiative. The foster-grandfather or one of his near kinsmen uses the vessel and is responsible for its upkeep. Unless the foster-grandchild has another canoe of his own, he receives a share of the



catch whenever he asks for it. As the residual owner of the canoe, he has the right to go fishing in it himself, but pays the caretaker a rent called "the food of the canoe." This portion is supposedly one-third of the catch, but often amounts to less than that. Other durable goods, such as bicycles and sewing machines, are also left with foster-grandparents on request. They may be used by the residual owners under the same conditions as a canoe, except that there is no charge for their use.

A foster-grandchild may also be asked for less durable objects, or for money. One man told me how he had asked his married foster-granddaughter for a mat that she had just plaited for her own house. The young woman was annoyed, but in the end gave her foster-grandfather the mat. Had he not cleaned up the messes she made as a baby? No return is expected for these goods. The frequency and size of the demands depend entirely on the will of the foster-grandparent, although he ought not to make them without a good reason. Neither should he take goods without informing the owner, either in advance or as soon as possible afterwards.

Older people who are not fully cared for by their children frequently rely on foster-grandchildren to provide them with some of the necessities of life. For example, a foster-grandson taps palm toddy for a man with no natural son living in the village. Nei Tebou's household, which contained no adult male, depended on a married foster-grandson to supply it with toddy and fish, and occasionally with



taro. Another foster-grandson was unable to provide food regularly for Nei Tebou because he had to support several children of his own, as well as two unmarried sisters. Some old men and women live permanently at the home of a foster-grandchild, or with each of their grown children and foster-grandchildren in turn. In the past, this custom probably resulted in a number of aged people being supported by the village headman's ramage.

#### Successive Fosterage

Foster-grandparents in the northern Gilberts have the right and duty of rearing one of their foster-grandchild's children (Maude and Maude 1931:233-234). When asked the reason for this custom, most people merely affirm that a representative of the foster-grandchild ought to be in the foster-grandparents' home as long as they control the fosterage gift. I was also told that one honored the memory of one's parents by caring for their ward's child. The second foster-grandchild should normally be the eldest child of the first, but exceptions are frequent in practice. If the foster-grandparents happen to be ill or away from the island when the eldest child is born, they are prepared to await the birth of a younger brother or sister. A foster-grandchild who has died without issue is occasionally replaced by a sibling's child. The original foster-grandparents are often dead or in retirement by the time the second foster-grandchild is born, and so the task of caring for the baby devolves on their



children, who are collectively considered as foster-grandparents also. The sibling group usually delegates one of its members to accompany the newborn at the birth feasts, and to rear the child later. In the absence of a previous agreement, the sibling who first picks up the baby wins the right to bring it up in his home. However, the whole group is expected to attend the foster-grandchild's life-crisis feasts and to contribute to his support. The descendants of the primary foster-grandparents may afterwards foster a grandchild and a great-grandchild of the original foster-grandchild. Case histories of fosterage collected on Makin reveal ten relationships that were continued into the second generation, four that lasted for three generations, and two that endured for four generations. It is possible that some of these relationships began so long ago that their actual inception has been forgotten.

The conflicting claims of two sets of foster-grandparents to the same child are normally resolved by one party's agreeing to take a later child instead. It is said that the claim of the husband's foster-grandparents should take precedence over that of the wife's, but the actual order is often the reverse of the theoretical one. Nor is there usually any difficulty when a new family makes a request for the child; the previous foster-grandparents consent to foster another sibling or allow the relationship to lapse, although they cannot be compelled to do so against their will. One informant remembered a case when the hereditary foster-grandparents arrived



at the birth house to find another couple holding the baby. A fist fight was barely prevented by bystanders. Eventually both families were permitted to foster the child. Some aristocrats favor the double or triple fosterage of their children so that the latter will gain in prestige by being attended by a crowd of foster-grandparents, especially on important occasions.

In the section dealing with the continuing obligations of fosterage, it was pointed out that the role of foster-grandparent comes to be shared by all the children and grandchildren of the couple that originally reared the foster-grandchild. In former times, when brothers and sisters pooled both their inherited and their acquired taro beds, the entire sibling group might foster a child jointly and share ownership of the fosterage gift. The body of "foster-grandparents" was then even larger in succeeding generations than when the original foster-grandparent was an individual. If any fosterage relationship endures for more than a generation, the child-rearing group tends to grow in numbers as the children of members themselves inherit membership along with their share of the fosterage gift. The group is a sub-ramage, since it holds distinct, though conditional, land rights, and acts as a corporation in certain matters, although it does not participate in communal affairs the way an autonomous ramage does. Like a ramage, a fostering sub-ramage may lose some of its potential members through disaffiliation. Successive foster-grandchildren of relatively low rank



have more often been the concern of sibling sets or individuals than of larger groups. After two or three generations, some of the descendants of the original foster-grandparents can disinterest themselves in subsequent foster-grandchildren without being deprived of their share of the divided fosterage gift.

Occasionally an entire autonomous ramage of aristocrats or free commoners fostered the child or grandchild of the village headman. The basis for fosterage of this type was a consanguineal relationship between the child and some of the elders of the ramage that reared him. However, the foster-grandchild became a "child of the land" (ateein te aba) (i.e., of the ramage estate), and all the members of the descent group were responsible for his welfare, just as they all benefited from the headman's large fosterage gift. The localized core of the ramage--the members of the clan--provided the foster-grandchild with food, clothing, and the other necessities of life. If the foster-grandparents were aristocrats, their commoner tenants, who shared their communal dwelling, probably supplied most of the fish and taro the foster-grandchild consumed. The foster-grandchild's child would also be taken to live on the ramage's land. After the multi-family house and, with it, the clan, were abolished by the colonial government, the older members of the ramage living in the village took turns supporting the foster-grandchild in their households.

g With a decline of the ramage as a corporate group, there has



been a tendency for high ranking foster-grandchildren to become permanently attached to particular households. These have sometimes assumed control over the portion of the child's inheritance that had been left in the hands of the fostering group. A person probably becomes sole foster-grandparent because he has maintained close and friendly relations with the adult foster-grandchild whose child he will rear. However, he explains the exclusion of the other members of the descent groups from the foster-relationship by referring to their failure to fulfill some obligation. For example, one Kiebu man claimed that he had been the only one of his ramage to take a gift of taro to a young foster-granddaughter who had gone to Butaritari with her father. Children of lesser importance have always been the concern of families and small descent groups, rather than of ramage and clans.

A new fosterage gift need not be given in each generation of a continuing relationship, but additional property is usually transferred in the third generation. Only persons actually engaged in rearing the third foster-grandchild receive the new gift. Nowadays affluent persons sometimes purchase a taro bed on a not-too-valuable piece of land for their foster-grandparents, just as they might leave a canoe in the foster-grandparents' case.

Sexual relations are forbidden between descendants of the original foster-grandchild and those of his foster-grandparents for as long as the relation is remembered. Breaches of this prohibition



are regarded in the same light as incestuous relations between near consanguineal kinsman.<sup>9</sup> The first foster-grandchild's siblings, and their descendants, may marry into the foster-grandparents' sub-range unless the two groups share rights to the same estate (cf. Maude and Maude 1931:232).

Many fosterage relationships are allowed to lapse after the second generation. The obligations attached to the original fosterage gift become vague, and the foster-grandparents' conditional tenure is gradually converted into absolute possession. The grandchild of a foster-grandchild is often left with his natural parents and "kept track of" (*taua i mwina*) by descendants of the foster-grandparents. They may feel that they have fulfilled their formal responsibilities toward the child by holding feasts in his honor at his wedding and when his first child is born.

A change of residence, which can lead to disaffiliation from a range, is also a common reason for the lapse of fosterage. If the second foster-grandchild settles on Butaritari or Tarawa, his foster-grandparents on Makin are rarely able to interact with him, and often fail to bring him presents or to attend his family's life-crisis feasts. It will then not occur to them to bring up any of his children. A difference in religion often terminates a fosterage relationship, especially where parents are forbidden to have their children reared in a home of another faith (Sabatier 1939:75).

Indefinite sentiments of kinship frequently outlast the formal



relationship. These feelings are reflected in a continuing "incest" prohibition between members of the two descent groups. They also serve to secure the support of remote foster-relatives for persons who cannot rely on near consanguineal kinsmen. A man named Nan Teakin, who is now in his seventies, was fostered by one Na Uaaititi. Nan Teakin's daughter was reared by Na Uaaititi's daughter, but then the relationship apparently came to an end. However, Na Uaaititi's great-granddaughter, Nei Betaake, stayed with Nan Teakin for a while when she was about ten years old, because her parents were ill. Later Nei Betaake's parents went to the island of Marakei, leaving her marriage to be arranged by Nan Teakin and her wedding feast to be sponsored by him. Nei Betaake returned to Nan Teakin's house for a month or two in 1961 after quarreling with her husband. Her closest blood relatives on Makin, the grandchildren of Na Uaaititi's second wife, show no particular interest in her.

#### Fosterage and Subordination

In the traditional society, immigrants were definitely subordinated to the ramage that gave them foster-grandchildren, since as strangers they owned no land other than the fosterage gift and had no local kinsmen to turn to for support. The immigrants had less control over the transferred property than ordinary foster-grandparents did. Superior rights continued to be vested in the residual owner, which was either the donor ramage or, if the property was sufficiently large



to be set up as a separate estate, the foster-grandchild himself. The ramage founded by the immigrants concerned "itself with all of the members of the donor ramage, rather than with a single ward in each generation. Its status was similar to that of the commoner ramage on whose estate the aristocrats had settled.

The immigrants offered to foster a child of an aristocratic ramage, or of a commoner ramage that did not share control of its estate with co-resident aristocrats. The village headman's children were especially favored, because his ramage possessed the most extensive land holdings in the district, and because it had the traditional obligation of caring for strangers. The foster-grandparents usually received part of their superiors' house site on which to erect a dwelling. They were also given taro beds to cultivate, but had to share the produce with the aristocratic clan. Sometimes they were allowed to collect coconuts on the forest lands of the superior ramage, and to share its fish pond. In other cases they and their foster-grandchild were allotted part of the estate for their exclusive use. This might be a small area comprising only the inland extension of the immigrants' house site. The aristocrats retained the power of expelling their subordinates or of reducing their allotment in order to enlarge that of another set of foster-grandparents. The disadvantages of the immigrants' status was, in part, balanced by the fact that, as fictive relatives of a powerful ramage, they were secure from attack by other natives.



Now the Lands Commissioners have divided all jointly owned estates, so that ramagees founded by immigrants are no longer in a subordinate position. Some of them, however, have transformed their relationship with their former superiors into one of ordinary fosterage, and still rear one or two of the aristocrats' children in each generation. They have even received additional taro beds as fosterage gifts.

### Conclusion

Fosterage creates a fictive kinship relation based on an asymmetrical exchange of values rather than on common descent, equally shared land rights, and joint responsibility. The parties to the exchange are the original foster-grandparents' ramage, or a sub-ramage descended from them, and the descendants of their foster-grandchild's parents. The first and subsequent foster-grandchildren are by far the most important members of the latter group. The foster-grandchild enters into the relationship as a link between one of his parents and his foster-grandparents. After he attains maturity, he himself becomes one of the main participants in the exchange. The foster-grandparents' principal contribution consists in supporting the foster-grandchild in their home, and in bringing him food when he lives elsewhere. In return they receive use-rights to fosterage-gift, which tends to become their absolute possession in the third generation. They also have the right to demand assistance, consumption goods, or the use of a canoe from their foster-grandchild when he grows up.



The foster-grandchild gains few material benefits beyond support in childhood or gifts in lieu of such support. Even the large contributions made by the foster-grandparents to his life-crisis feasts are not profitable to the nominal recipient, since the donors consume almost the equivalent at the feast itself, and take away the lion's share of the remainder afterwards. But the very presence of a crowd of foster-relations on these occasions increases the prestige of the sponsors of the feast, and of the individual whose life-crisis is being celebrated. The foster-grandparents honor their ward by favoring him over their own children. It is possible that in the traditional society, they continued to honor a foster-grandchild of high rank after he had left their home, by entertaining him liberally when he came to visit, and by calling public attention to him on important occasions. The foster-grandparents of a chief's or headman's children become his allies in times of crisis, and sometimes his direct subordinates. The balance of material advantages, which favors the child-rearers, is redressed by the less tangible increments in prestige and followers that accrue to the child-givers.

The foster-relationship is stronger than most consanguineal ties. The reciprocal attitudes of foster-grandparent and adult foster-grandchild resemble those of parent and adult child, except that the foster-grandparent does not normally have authority to make major decisions affecting the foster-grandchild. In both relationships, the junior kinsman must repay a life-long debt to the senior by granting



him the right to take any of the junior's goods for his own use, by heeding his demands for assistance, and by caring for him in his old age. The parent or foster-grandparent ought to come voluntarily to the younger person's aid in time of need. An individual living apart from his parents and siblings frequently relies on his foster-grandparents to replace them, as in sponsoring a life-crisis feast or providing a temporary home. A case was also cited in which these roles were reversed, so that a young woman sought shelter with the aged foster-grandson of her own great-grandfather. The foster-grandchild's natal and foster-households cooperate, both in daily life and in emergencies to about the same degree as the families of procreation of two siblings. People related by consanguinity alone generally do not interact to this extent unless they belong to the same minor ramage, a group composed of a set of middle-aged full siblings and their children.

Some type of fictive kinship is probably a structural requisite of Butaritari-Makin society, at least in its traditional form. Although the individual belongs to several ramage, some of which have a fairly large membership, he can rely on only a relatively small number of kinsfolk in important matters. First, he can normally play an active role on whose house site he lives. An affiliation with a descent group is of minor significance to him unless he or his children have the right to settle on its estate. However, the rules of residence prevent many of the members of a large ramage from joining its



clan. Second, the likelihood of conflict between members of the same ramage tends to increase with genealogical distance. Even full siblings compete covertly for larger shares of the inheritance, and may suspect one another of currying favor with their father in order to achieve this objective. Half-siblings or cousins may openly express their conflicts, particularly over land rights. Ramages tended to undergo fission about three generations after their founding, because their segments did not want to share responsibility or property rights. Conflict was relatively frequent among the aristocracy, where the stakes were high and segmentation nearly automatic. A high chief's most dangerous rivals, for example, were the sons of his father's full brothers. For these reasons, a solidary relationship beyond the small circle of near kinsmen cannot be based on consanguinity alone. Nor can it be based solely on friendship or political allegiance if it is to be considered as binding in this society.

Fosterage often develops from a personal attachment that transcends the usual feelings of distant kinsmen for one another. The friends formalize their relationship by sharing a piece of property, but in a different sense from the co-ownership of land by siblings or members of the same ramage. The rights of the child-givers and the child-rearers to the fosterage gift are complementary rather than identical. This complementarity is reflected in their respective behavior patterns, which rarely lead to serious conflict. The



approximate equivalent of the Gilbertese fosterage relation is found in unilineal societies, in an individual's relationship to the lineage of the parent from whom he does not derive his own lineage affiliation. In a patrilineal society, this group is the mother's lineage; in a matrilineal one, it is the father's (cf. Fortes 1953: ). In an ambilineal society, complementary relations cannot be based on filiation, which always implies membership in a corporate group there.

The fostering of a child of high rank is a special case of the extra-ramage relation. The children of aristocrats were preferred as foster-grandchildren, partly because their ramares had, on the whole, greater freedom to alienate land than commoners did. Some aristocrats, especially the ramares of village headmen, used their power to extend their holdings at the expense of other estates. This land could be converted into fosterage gifts, which gained for the headman both allies and direct subordinates. He did not have much control over the other descent groups of the community, for whom he was only the executive officer of the council. The ordinary foster-grandparents of the headman's children and grandchildren were sometimes not individuals but autonomous ramares, which required relatively large fosterage gifts, but which also brought a considerable fraction of the village's population into the circle of the headman's fictive kinsfolk. The headman's ramage also gave foster-grandchildren (sometimes the same ones) to immigrants who settled on part of the estate as the aristocrats' subordinates. In these cases the donors gained followers



without depriving themselves of any of their superior land rights. They did run some risk of losing old tenants whose allotments had been reduced in order to accommodate the newcomers. Immigrants also fostered the children of other aristocrats, and of free commoner ramage, although not so frequently. The hereditary character of fosterage made for stable political relationships. Inter-status marriage, on the other hand, produced children ranking as aristocrats on one estate and as commoners on another. Such unions tended in time to blur the distinctions between status levels. They were prohibited entirely between aristocrats and commoners who shared ownership of the same estate.

The structure of fosterage in Butaritari-Makin shows certain analogies to that of prescriptive matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, as described by Leach (1961). Both institutions connect any descent group with a limited number of others on a semi-permanent basis, since it must provide wives or foster-grandchildren for the same lineages or ramage in each generation. The flow of persons of particular kinds of goods, and of such intangibles as protection or the right of residing in a new community is irreversible in both cases; a Kachin does not marry a woman of a lineage to which his own gives wives, nor do Makin ramage exchange foster-grandchildren. The possibility of placing a different value on rights over people, goods, and services makes both asymmetrical fosterage and asymmetrical cross-cousin marriage consistent with a system of social stratification. Child-givers may be of the same or of higher rank than child-rearers



in Butaritari-Makin, but never of lower, just as wife-takers never outrank wife-givers among the Kachin and Batak. Like prescriptive mother's-brother's-daughter marriage, fosterage creates a kinship bond between political superiors and subordinates without leading to equality of status.

We may summarize the conclusions of this essay by stating a hypothesis. Fictive kinship will be important in societies that assign roles to consanguineal kinsfolk primarily on the basis of generation and sex, but that restrict an individual's interaction with most of the persons with whom he is theoretically affiliated. Such fictive kinship can take the form of fosterage where the actual residence of children is a matter of some indifference.<sup>10</sup>



NOTES

1. This paper is based on material collected in the course of field research on Makin Island from June, 1959 to October, 1961. The research was sponsored by the Tri-Institutional Pacific Program under a grant from the Carnegie Foundation. A shorter version of the paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, held at San Francisco in November, 1963.
2. On most American maps, Butaritari is designated as "Makin", and Makin as "Little Makin" or "Makin Meang."
3. Partial descriptions of Southern Gilbertese social structure are given in Goodenough (1955) and Maude (1962).
4. "Ramage," as a general term for an ambilineal descent group, was proposed by Firth (1957:6), and has been adopted by Murdock (1950:11). An alternative term, "sept," was proposed by Davenport (1955:562). It has been employed by Ember (1959) for Samoan descent groups resembling those of the Butaritari-Makin commoners. Sahlins (1958:161) has called the Samoan groups "descent lines."
5. The term, "clan," is employed for the compromise or localized form of the ramage by Davenport (1959:562), Ember (1959), and Murdock (1960:11).
6. In a paper on the descent system of the Huli of New Guinea, Glasse (1959:179-183) describes a group, which he calls a "auasi-lineage," consisting of ambilineal descent groups occupying adjacent or nearby territories and tracing descent from a pair of brothers, or from a brother and a sister. Quasi-lineages unite to form lineages, again provided that they occupy adjacent or nearby territories. The apical ancestors of coordinate quasi-lineages are always said to have been brothers. Sahlins (1958:140) applies the term, "ramage", to the segmentary groups of Polynesia, which show a bias toward patrilineality at the higher levels of their genealogies. Sahlins regards "descent lines" (my "ramages") and "ramages" (my "quasi-lineages") as characterizing different societies, but I am here describing both types of group in a single society.
7. Men's names are distinguished by the prefix Na or by one of its variants, Nam, Nan, and Nang. The corresponding prefix for females is Nei.



8. An extensive collection of myths and semi-historical narratives was made in the early 1950's on the initiative of the High Chief Na Kaiea II. I was able to read and copy the notebook containing this collection through the kindness of Mr. Richard Turpin of the Colony administration.
9. Sexual intercourse is prohibited between first or second cousins (i.e., persons whose grandparents were siblings). It is also theoretically prohibited between the descendants of a common ancestor, no matter how remote, who belong to different generations, and who therefore stand toward one another as classificatory "parent" and "child." The majority of sexual relationships between foster-grandparents and foster-grandchildren would be incestuous for this reason alone.
10. The foregoing analysis is partly based on a suggestion by Dr. Allen Hoben.



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