



## Some aspects of the Pemon system of social relationships

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### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide an account of the social conditions of reproduction of Pemon society by analysing three aspects of their social organization: the dynamics of the Pemon social units, the definition of the relationships established between the members of these units and the description of the categorical principles for establishing such relationships.

In the first section of this paper I discuss some aspects concerning domestic reproduction. In the second section, I describe through structural representations and examples the most important patterns of social relationships. In the third, and final section, I analyse the Pemon system of categories.

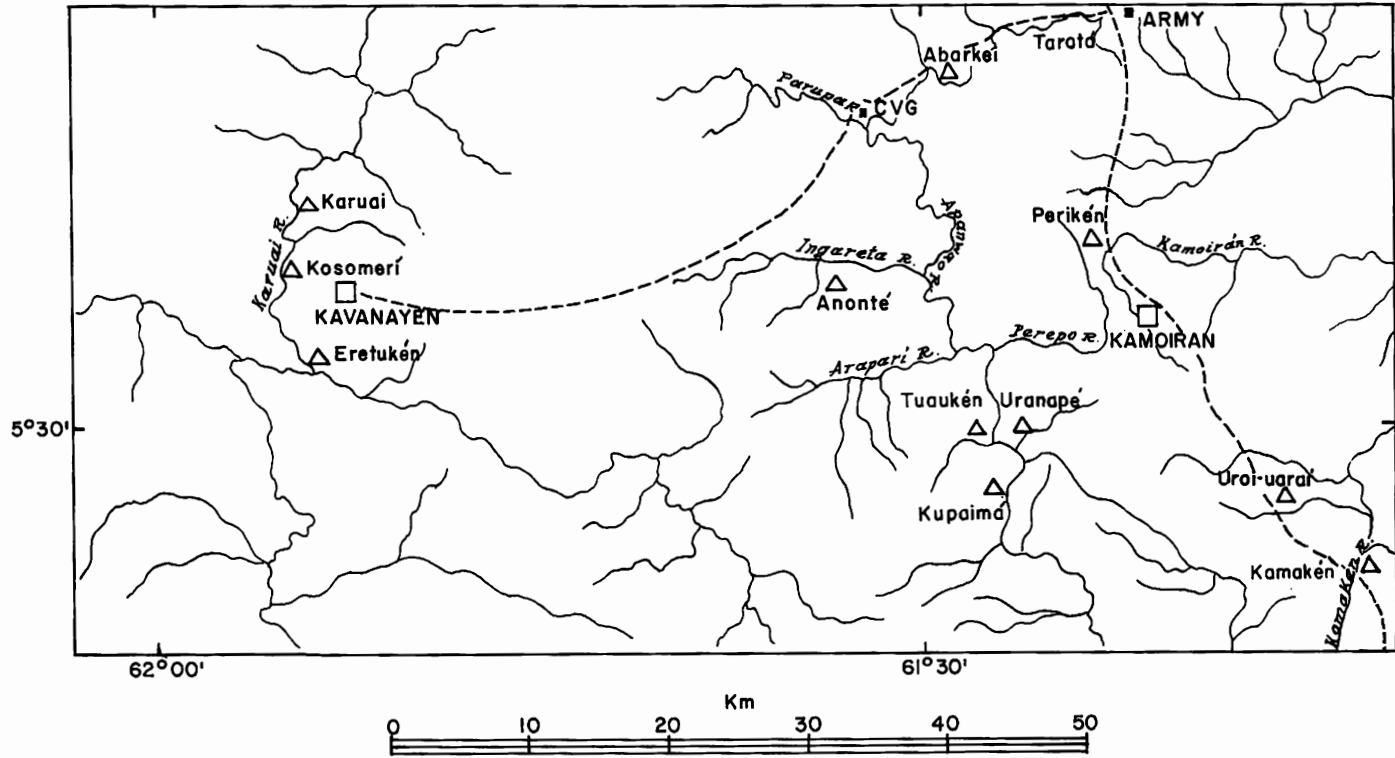
### The domestic reproduction

Before entering the discussion on domestic reproduction<sup>1</sup> it is necessary to provide some information on the spatial framework in which the domestic units operate. In order to do so I take the Arekuna, which are one of the Pemon sub-groups, as an example. The Arekuna are spatially organized in neighbourhoods<sup>2</sup> made up of several settlements scattered along the main river basins (Apanwao, Kamoiran, Kama and Karuai; see Figure 1). The neighbourhoods do not constitute a corporate unit in terms of social permanence, but are temporary units comprised of groups of individuals who circumstantially share a common area for a limited period of time given a pattern of semi-permanent settlements. We can say that the neighbourhoods provide a sort of spatial framework for different groups from different settlements.

<sup>1</sup> See Meillassoux 1981 and Donham 1981 for more theoretical details.

<sup>2</sup> In relation to neighbourhoods see Thomas (1982: 73-75) for complementary information.

FIGURE 1  
THE AREKUNA TERRITORY



The settlement tends to be a more solid unit than the neighbourhood. However, the former is also circumstantial and temporary by definition. It is traditionally small, rarely over sixty individuals, distributed in a number of dwellings which are rarely more than ten.

The semi-nomadic character of Pemon settlements determines in traditional terms the weakness of the connection between people and local territories. This is because settlements are supposed to split from time to time and to give place to new settlements.<sup>3</sup> However, there is a strong idea of a common territory as, for instance, the idea of an Arekuna territory.

The smallest unit among the Pemon is constituted by the members of a family living in a single dwelling (see Figure 2). This tends to be composed of a married couple with their children. Commonly, several dwellings are made up of a cluster of relatives within close proximity to each other which I call the domestic compound.<sup>4</sup> The members of a dwelling can be considered as a basic economic unit, subordinated to a larger unit consisting of members of three generations and which shows a strong tendency toward matri-uxorilocality (see Figure 3). The members of this domestic unit are drawn from a bilateral extended family. The domestic unit also keeps common areas of gardens and its members depend heavily on each other to perform different activities. This is also the first step in the distribution process, which tends to be more collectivistic.

Arekuna informally refer to the domestic unit as *upayunukton dare echi*, which means "those who live with daughters and sons-in-law." This is quite significant because it indicates the importance of daughters in Arekuna society, and, given the matri-uxorilocal character of the unit, the importance of sons-in-law in the reproduction of this unit. Birth and marriage are the most important events in domestic reproduction since in both cases new individuals are incorporated into the domestic units. Moreover, in the case of marriage, a set of relationships with a constellation of people is created or reinforced. The marriage of a daughter consolidates the status of a mature couple with grown children as an autonomous domestic unit, formally separated from the former domestic unit and on its way to becoming a discrete unit. If we take an imaginary couple as an example, we have the first stage (see Figure 4) of development corresponding to the short period during which the couple is living in the dwelling of the wife's parents. Later, in a second stage, usually defined by the arrival of the first child, the couple builds a separate dwelling close to that of the wife's parents. By this time, they start to work a

<sup>3</sup> I say "supposed" because the present tendency of Arekuna settlements is toward sedentarization.

<sup>4</sup> I take the term "compound" from Goody (1958) who used it to refer to the situation of expanded households among the LoWiili and LoDagaba. Thomas (1982: 52) says that the most common form of domestic unit (he uses the term household) found among the Pemon is the nuclear family. He argues that extended family units are usually of short duration. I disagree with Thomas' assessment of the domestic configuration of Pemon society. In my opinion it reflects the fact that Thomas did not take into account other aspects, apart from that of "people living in a dwelling." I take into account two situations in order to define domestic units: first, people who are living together not only in a single dwelling but also in clusters of close dwellings; second, people working together in common areas of gardens. Following these two factors and by observing the dynamic of relationships in daily life, I was able to identify domestic units.

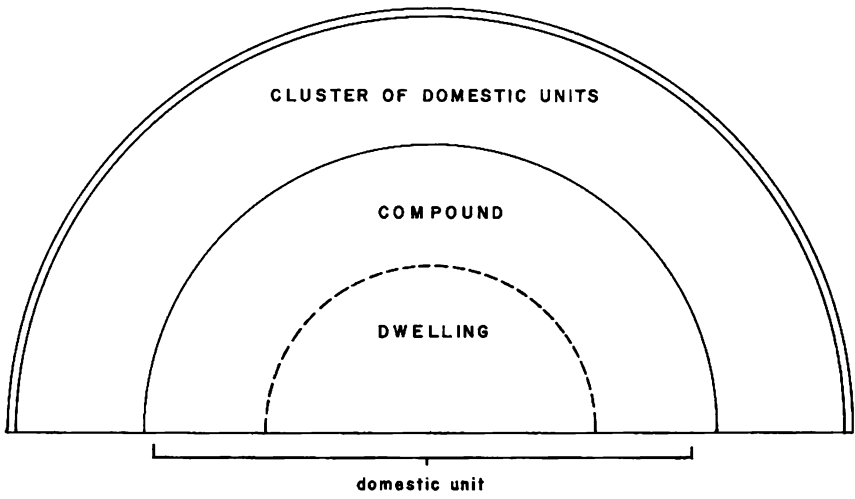


FIGURE 2  
THE SOCIAL UNITS

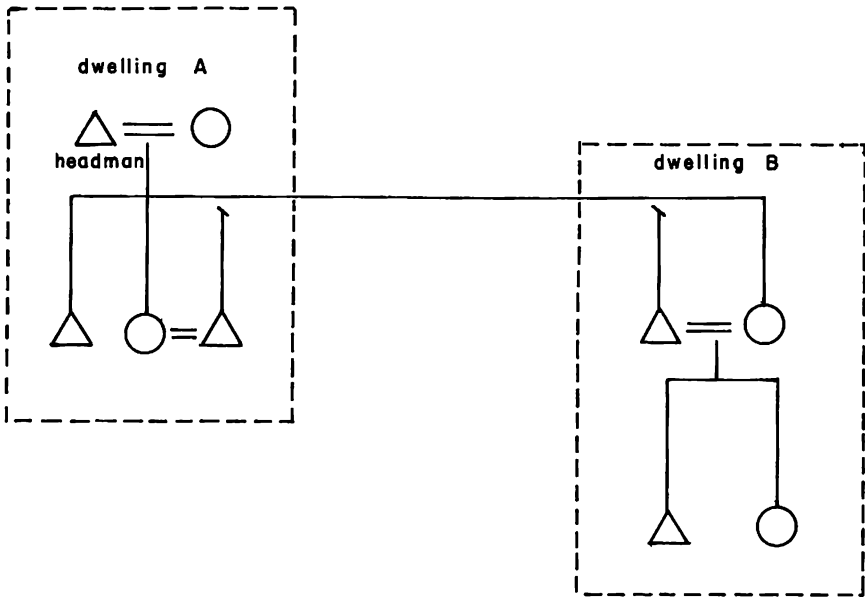
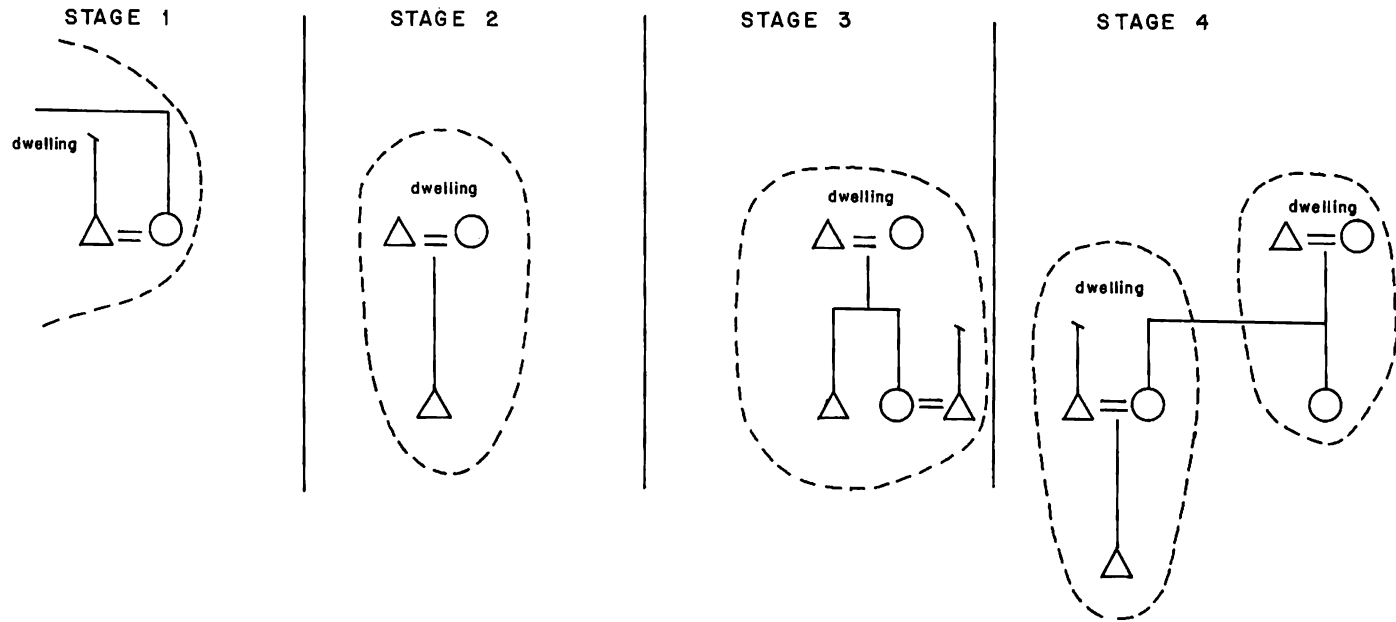


FIGURE 3  
IDEAL DOMESTIC UNIT

FIGURE 4  
DEVELOPMENTAL CYCLE OF DOMESTIC UNITS



separate garden, although they continue helping in the garden of the wife's parents. The third stage commences with the separation of the couple into a distinct domestic unit which can be determined by two factors: the death of the headman, or the marriage of the first daughter. Usually, by the time a daughter of the couple gets married, they have already started to become an autonomous unit because of the fission of the former compound. This stage corresponds to the time in which the daughter and her husband leave the dwelling of the wife's parents and the final step occurs with the death of the headman.

### The social relationships

After defining the social units and their dynamics I will delineate the most important patterns of social relationships using the domestic unit, as it is described in the previous section, as the reference point. Firstly, I have divided social relationships into two dimensions: internal and external. Internal relationships refer to those among members of a domestic unit and external relationships refer to those between members of different units.

The internal relationships in the domestic unit are mostly determined by the position of the members of this unit, position being defined by sex, the generational level and the length of time that a member has been involved in the compound (in the case of the daughters' husbands). The most important position is held by the "old" headman of the group and his wife. The rest of the members of the compound are formally subordinated to them. That subordination is expressed through the acceptance that, ultimately, a decision by the headman, and to some extent by his wife, must be respected. However, the position of the headman cannot be characterized as one of absolute power but as one of absolute authority (see Thomas 1982).

The relations among people of G.0 (zero generation) are determined by several considerations with regard to their sex. From an early age girls are separated from boys within the domestic unit; they participate in different activities which contribute to their training for adult life. The relationships among brothers grow gradually weaker as they become older and as the time approaches when they will have to leave the compound; sometimes these relationships are characterized by a subtle competitiveness. The relationship between brother and sister depends on the age differential. For instance, if the sister is older than the brother, she constitutes a sort of "little mother" for him during the first years of his life, though later the relationship tends towards avoidance, and by the time the sister is married, the avoidance is complete. In the case where the sister is younger, the tendency is to treat her as a "little girl," *manon*, and this situation practically lasts throughout the lifetime of the individuals involved.

The most important relation within the domestic unit is that established between father and son(s)-in-law. This is the basis of the economic and social configuration of Pemon society. When the daughter is just married, the son-in-law commonly spends one year living in the dwelling of the headman and his wife where he is allowed to hang a hammock beside their daughter's (this act ratifies the

marriage). During this time the son-in-law must perform activities such as repairing the house of the headman and helping in the clearing of the headman's garden. It is important to point out that the headman refers to his son-in-law as *upoitori* which derives from the Carib root *poito*, meaning literally "slave." Gradually, the son-in-law and his wife gain autonomy, being allowed to clear their own garden and build a house in the vicinity of the headman's dwelling.

The relationships between sons-in-law are strongly cooperative. However, they are mediated by the headman who constitutes a sort of "common link." Usually, this situation lasts until the headman dies and the compound splits into several units thus leading to a redistribution of the extended family.

The external relationships are determined by two parameters: "proximity" and "social distance." Proximity refers to the spatial distance, i.e. people in the same settlement, neighbourhood, etc., whereas social distance is determined by the participation in networks of social relationships derived from marriage exchange between domestic units. Usually, both parameters combine in the establishment of external relationships. The developmental cycle of the domestic unit is maintained by the circulation-exchange of males among different units as a consequence of the matri-uxorilocal rule. This is the most important social event in the relations between units which are economically almost self-sufficient, but socially dependent on other units, not only for the maintenance of the developmental cycle but for the reproduction of a bigger unit. The latter is constituted by several domestic units joined by multiple social links defined in terms of a categorical system outlined in the following section. I refer to this as an extended family unit.

Traditionally, the extended family units were spread over large areas because of the prevailing settlement pattern. In this sense, the marriage exchanges contributed to the maintenance of relationships between spatially isolated domestic units. Marriage created networks of social relationships among different domestic units. These networks can be clearly observed among the Arekuna whose domestic units are cognatically linked to other similar units which are located either within the same settlement or in other settlements within the neighbourhood, or even at a greater distance. The result is that one extended family may not only interconnect local groups but may spread into several settlements and so determine the pattern of inter-settlement contacts.

For instance, Anonte village is constituted by a single domestic unit (DU301) composed of several dwellings (see Figure 5). It is strongly linked to another domestic unit located in Kupaima (DU302). Enrique Guevara,<sup>5</sup> the headman of DU301 is married to three women. Two of them are sisters of Lorenzo Landa who is the headman of DU302 (Kupaima). Enrique Guevara was born in the Luepa neighbourhood where one of his sisters lives (Abarkei, DU401), who is married to Pedro Salcedo. Enrique married a sister of Lorenzo Landa and went to live in the dwelling of Lorenzo's father in Kupaima. After the death of Lorenzo's father, Enrique moved away and founded his own settlement in Anonte, about fifteen years ago. During the last five years two of Enrique's daughters have married two of Lorenzo's sons.

<sup>5</sup> The names used here are fictitious.

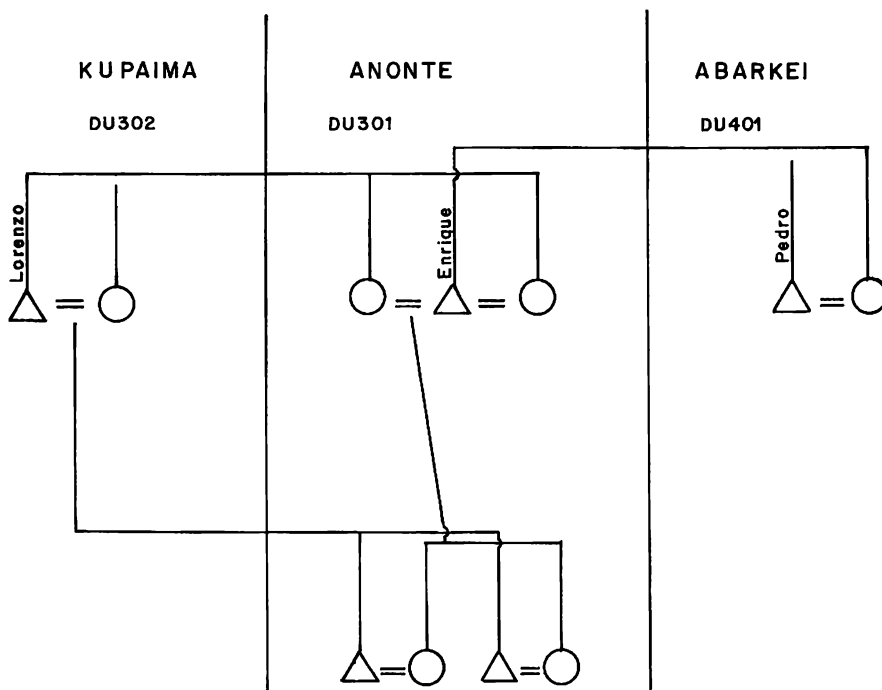


FIGURE 5  
LINKS BETWEEN DU301, DU302 AND DU401

Both domestic units maintain strong contacts through visits during the year. For example, Enrique has spent an average of one month per year in Kupaima whereas members of DU302 come every year during Easter to work with tourists and they stay with Enrique.

Relationships between Enrique's and his sister's compound are practically non-existent; they never get in touch. It seems that a compound's relationships are established on the basis of marriage exchanges at the level of the new generations, which tend to replace or reinforce old links. Geographical proximity is an important factor. The fact that Anonte and Kupaima are villages within the same neighbourhood, linked by the Apanwao River, facilitated the frequent contacts between Enrique's and Lorenzo's children. The distance between Anonte and Abarkei, on the other hand, did not permit easy contact between Enrique's and his sister's children.

Another pattern found among the Arekuna is one of several domestic units strongly linked to each other in a single settlement. For instance, in Tuauken the four domestic units which constitute this village are strongly related to each other through matrimonial alliances in the various generations. To illustrate this fact we may take as an example the relationships of one of the domestic groups with the



others (see Figure 6). Margarita Pérez, the principal woman of the group DU304, was the sister of Demetrio and Bienvenido Pérez, former headmen of group DU306, who have since died. Two of Margarita's daughters are married to the two sons of Bienvenido. Similarly, one of Margarita's sons is married to a daughter of her brother Jaime Pérez, who is the headman of DU305. Another of Margarita's daughters is married to a young member of DU 305. In this group the principal woman is considered to be a classificatory cross relative. Only two of Margarita's daughters are married to outsiders who came to live in the settlement.

In the above example we see again the importance of proximity in the relation between domestic units. It seems that marriage alliances established locally are a good thing in the eyes of the Pemon. However, this concentration of residence units was possible in Tuauken because the resource potential of the local area was sufficient to enable four domestic units to join together and keep large enough areas of cultivable land and other resources for subsistence. Had it been otherwise, this settlement would have had to split following the normal pattern of population distribution. In this case relationships tend to be reinforced through marriages in the younger generations.

The traditional patterns of distribution of domestic units have been affected by changes in settlement patterns as in the case of Kavanayen and Kamoiran, whose populations have risen to over 200 individuals, distributed in several domestic compounds concentrated in a single large settlement. These settlements are like concentrated neighbourhoods. In this sense, the pattern of domestic unit relationships is adapted to the increased proximity. For example, in Kavanayen more than twenty domestic units are concentrated in one settlement. They are organized, however, into clusters of domestic units. The DU121, DU122, DU123 and DU124 groups in Kavanayen constitute an example of this kind of cluster. In the skeleton genealogy (Figure 7) it may be noted that the members of these groups are mainly joined through marriage among the members of the younger generation. In the elder generation there are no close links, apart from those existing between Guillermo and Abel, on account of the formation of Kavanayen. People from different places came to live there. Thus, Ramón Parra came to Kavanayen from Kamarata about twenty years ago. Simplicio Pérez came from the Apanwao area about five years ago, and Guillermo Lamas came from Luepa approximately forty years ago.

The above examples show how clusters of domestic units are developing in large settlements, constituting separate and defined "quarters."

The changing patterns of social relationships have the greatest effect on the people living in large settlements which at the same time are exposed to more external contacts. However, the most important differences between the compound relationships in traditional areas and those of the large settlements are connected to the "proximity" parameter. This factor exerts a greater influence in traditional areas—owing to the prevalence there of extended family units which are more circumscribed socially and spatially—than in the case of the bigger settlements. Nevertheless, in the large settlements the internal relationships tend to remain "unaltered" whereas the inter-compound relationships are assuming a new "form."

FIGURE 6  
LINKS BETWEEN DU306, DU304, DU303 AND DU305

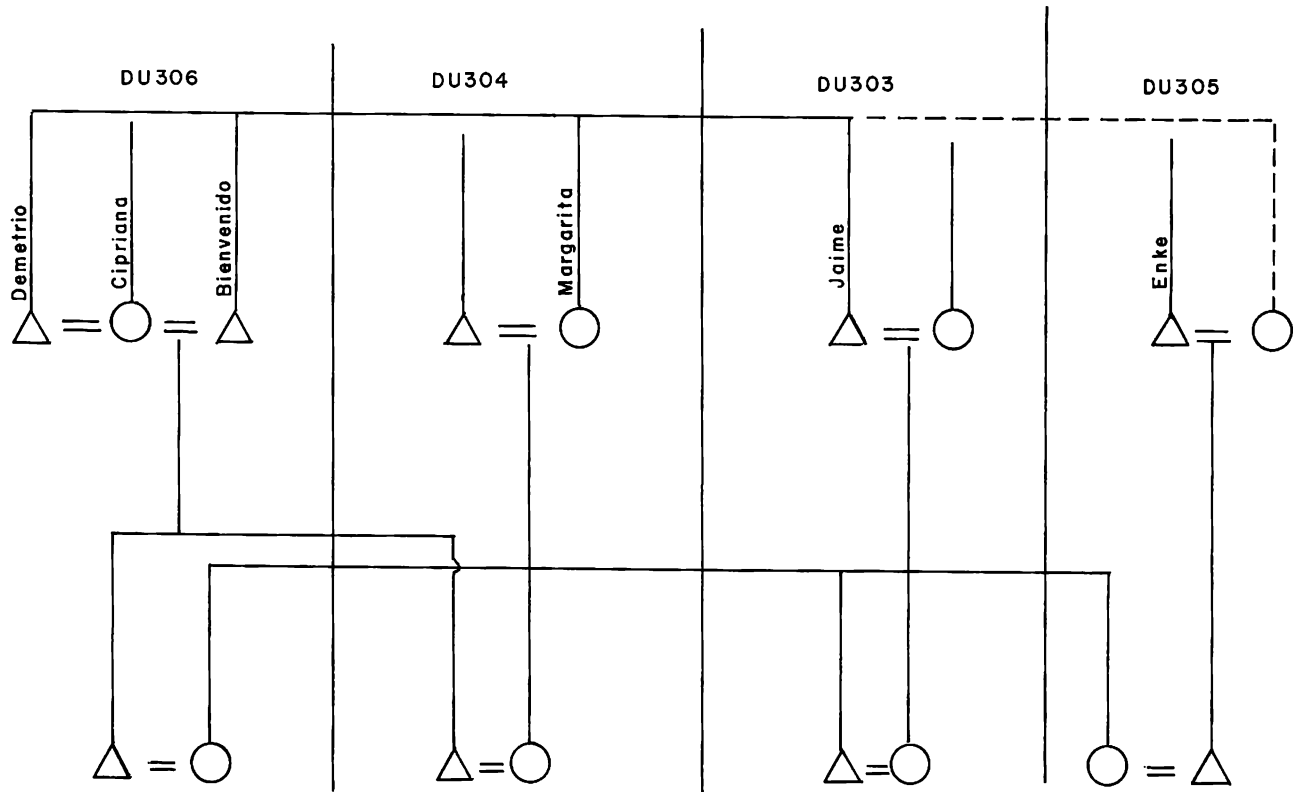
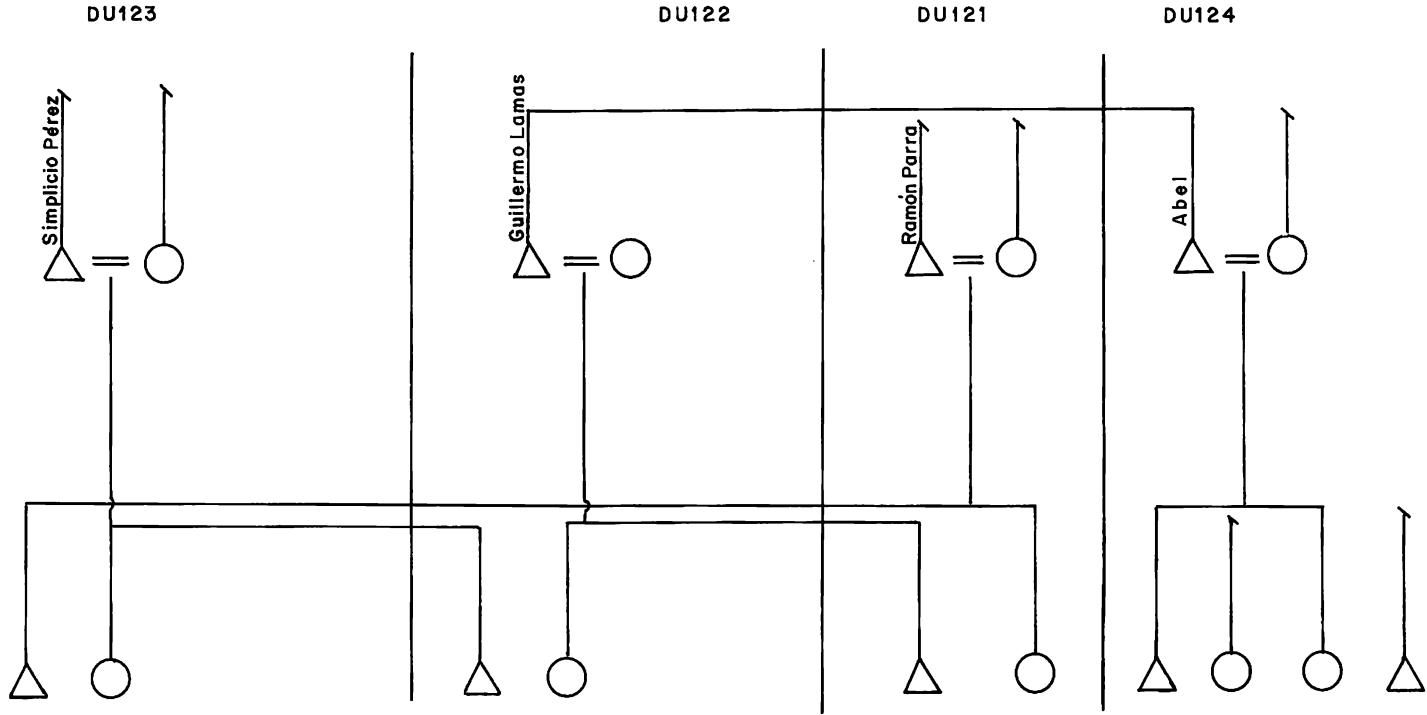


FIGURE 7  
LINKS BETWEEN DU121, DU122, DU123 AND DU124



This situation is sufficiently interesting to constitute the central point of another paper.

### The system of categories

The Pemon categorical system allows for the reproduction of a network of relationships based not on corporate groups but on temporary and changing units. These are constituted by members of the extended bilateral family who share common residence and common areas of cultivable land, and perform together all the activities of the labour process. This system is based on overlapping cognatic kindreds (cf. Freeman 1968; Yalman 1962) which provide the necessary framework for a network of social relationships among the temporary and changing units.

Whereas the domestic units provide a spatial framework for the maintenance of basic economic and social relationships, the kindreds provide an ideological framework for maintaining the social network which contributes to its reproduction. The Pemon kindred is constituted by a cluster of cognatic relatives linked to a particular Ego. In this sense the kindred is ego-centered and hence cannot be regarded as a corporate group. However, at the level of groups on the ground, it can be observed that people share what Goodenough defines as a "kindred node." Referring to the Lapps, Goodenough says: "The local group... represents an area of mutual overlap of all the personal kindreds of its several members, forming a kindred node" (Goodenough 1962: 5). This could be applied to the Pemon case, in which members of a domestic unit share multiple overlapping kindreds.

The kindred system is formulated on the basis of a terminological system of kinship rather similar to the Dravidian system described by Dumont (1953a). The Pemon terminology (see Figures 8 and 9) differentiates, in G+1, G.0 and G-1, between parallel relatives and cross relatives, giving rise to two marriageable classes. Another characteristic of the terminology is the extension of the use of cross terms to refer to, or address "affines."<sup>6</sup>

Among the Pemon, there does not appear to be a significant variation in the terminology used by different Pemon sub-groups. However, in Thomas (1973; 1978; 1982) there are descriptions of Pemon terminology collected mainly among Pemon-Taurepan from the Wonken area which contain some differences in relation to my own data collected among the Pemon-Arekuna of the Northern Gran Sabana. Some of those differences are minor, like the spelling of some terms. However, Thomas (1978; 1982) mentioned a significant structural difference pertaining to the absence of special terms in the zero generation for MBS-FZS and MBD-FZD.<sup>7</sup> The Pemon system of kinship has the effect of creating a sense of

<sup>6</sup> To talk about "affines" in the Pemon case is not strictly accurate since in structural terms the Pemon do not contrast affines with consanguines.

<sup>7</sup> We can suggest several explanations for the difference between my data and Thomas' data. One could be the possibility of regional differences, in other words the existence of a different kinship system for the Taurepan who are living in the Wonken area (where Thomas conducted most of his fieldwork). However, this is not quite convincing if one takes into account some data I collected among the Taurepan from the area near the Brazilian border, who do use terms for MBD-FZD and MBS-FZS. A second

FIGURE 8  
MALE REFERENCE TERMINOLOGY

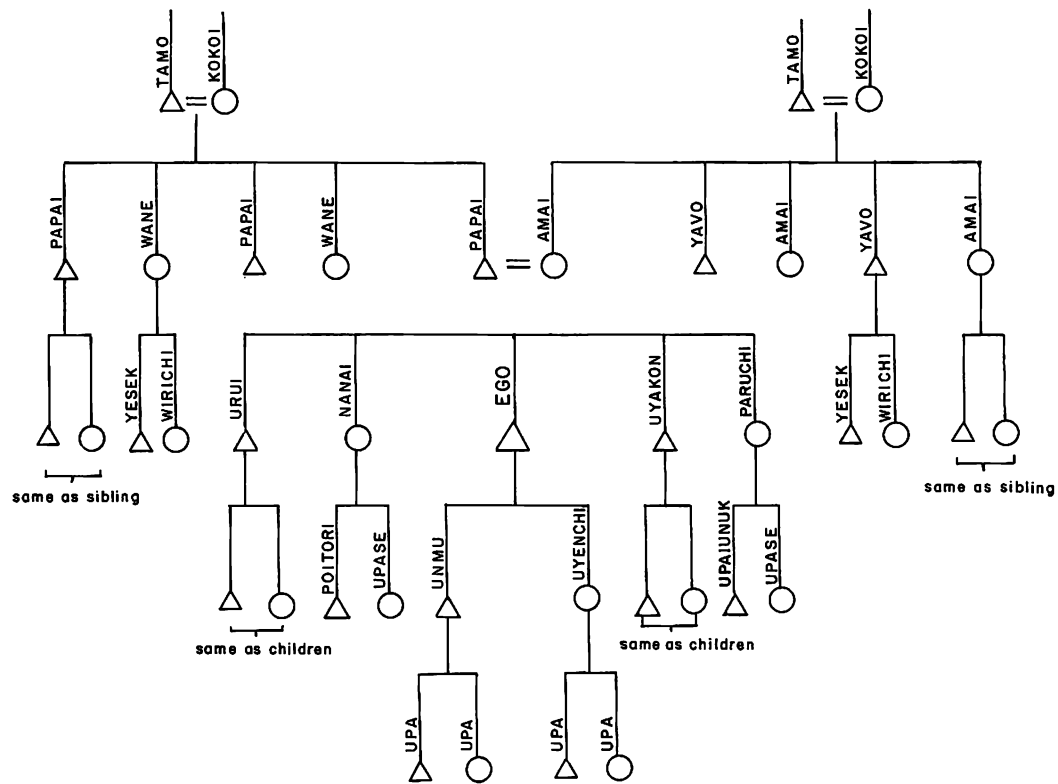
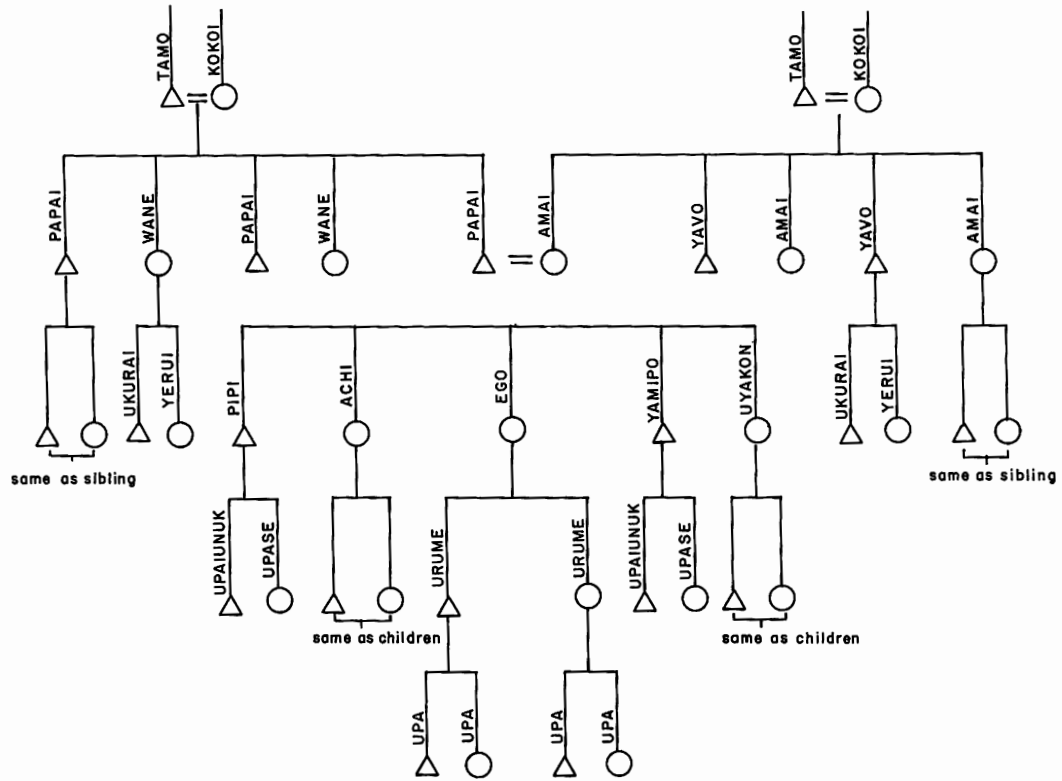


FIGURE 9  
FEMALE REFERENCE TERMINOLOGY

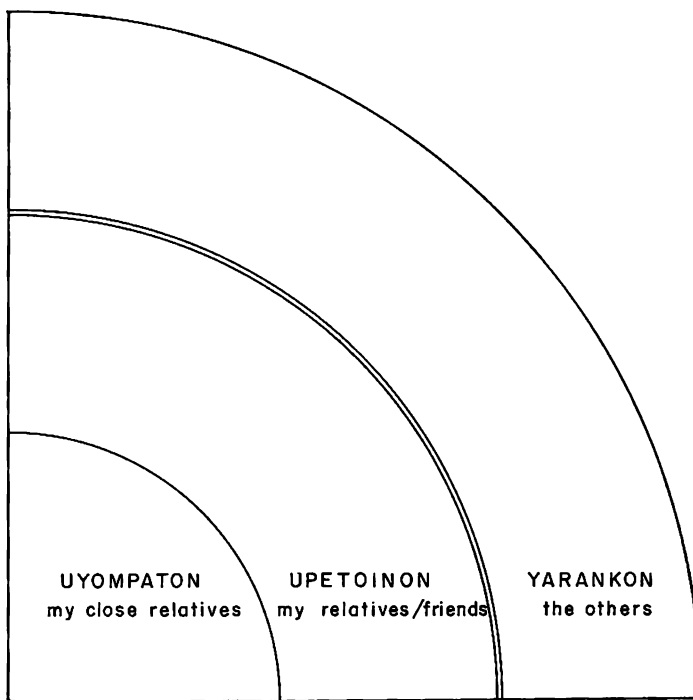


cohesion among the members of the family unit, based on an ideology of "consanguinity." In this sense, Pemon use the terms *uyompaton* to refer to people within the extended family unit, *upetoinon* to refer to distant relatives which are beyond the family group, and *yarankon* to refer to Pemon with whom there is no link. Thus, the relationships among individuals are determined by a feeling of "consanguineal" distance which creates different categories of people collaterally distributed around Ego.

One of the main effects of the Pemon system of kinship is the maintenance of a system of social relationships based on networks of overlapping kindreds. This enables each individual to divide the social universe according to the categories *uyompaton*, *upetoinon* and *yarankon* (see Figure 10).

Another characteristic of the Pemon kinship system is the flexibility it provides in the choice of spouses. This is expressed in the possibility of manipulating the categories in order to find the best alternative according to the circumstances. For instance, a Pemon man must marry a girl whom he addresses by

FIGURE 10  
PEMON KINDRED



explanation could be the fact that the Pemon commonly do not use these terms. Moreover, I noticed that their use makes the Pemon feel embarrassed because of the connotation of "potential spouse." Perhaps, therefore, this situation did not enable Thomas to detect these terms during his fieldwork.

the term *wirichi* (MBD-FZD or the same category), and who addresses him by the term *ukurai* (MBS-FZS). The first option, in practical terms for an individual looking for a spouse, are the members of the prescribed category who are easily accessible, those who are living in the same settlement or neighbourhood. If this attempt should fail, the male Ego is forced to take one of two alternatives; either he marries a member of the local kindred outside of the prescribed category, i.e. elder sister's daughter (eZD), being mother's younger brother (MyB) (see Thomas 1979; Rivière 1969a: Chap. VII), or he marries someone with whom he has no kin relationship. In this second case a "fictitious" kinship is created after the alliance has been formed and members of the spouses' kindreds are automatically included within the corresponding personal kindred as cross relatives.

According to the foregoing discussion, the Pemon system of marriage, based on a system of categories, contributes to the maintenance of a network of social relationships derived from matrimonial alliances and is characterized by the overlapping of kindreds.

## Conclusion

The configuration of the Pemon system of social relationships, whether expressed in groups on the ground, or as a system of categories, creates the necessary conditions for social reproduction of Pemon society. On the one hand, we have a socio-spatial system characterized by scattered settlements organized in a neighbourhood, which is an efficient way of solving problems related to the ecological conditions and distribution of resources in the area. On the other hand, we have a system of categories which provides an ideological base for maintaining networks of social relationships among non-corporate and economically autonomous units.

## Abstract

*This paper provides an account of the social conditions of reproduction of Pemon society. Three aspects of the Pemon social organization are analysed: the dynamics of the social units, the relationships established between the members of these units and the categorical principles for establishing such relationships.*

## Resumen

*Este trabajo trata sobre las condiciones sociales de reproducción de la sociedad Pemón. En él se analizan tres aspectos de su organización social: la dinámica de las unidades sociales, las relaciones que se establecen entre los miembros de esas unidades y el sistema de categorías que sirve de base super-estructural para el establecimiento de dichas relaciones.*