

Elisa Essner
Rob Walker
Cultural Evolution and Change
Ethnographic Questionnaire
LANGUAGE: Woleai
Due: March 24, 2010

Description

Woleaian (code: woe) is a Micronesian language spoken on the atolls of the Caroline Islands in the western Pacific Ocean. It is spoken in the Woleai region of Yap State, which includes the islands of Ifaluk, Eauripik, Faraulep, Elato, Lamotrek and Woleai. Dialects vary from atoll to atoll; these dialects are mutually intelligible among native speakers. English is also spoken by many of the men of this region, but by very few of the women.

The Woleai islands are very similar in speech, economy, technology and other cultural aspects (though variations do exist).

The area around the Woleai islands has been influenced by Spain, Germany, Japan and the US (since late 19th century). This part of the Pacific Ocean was a central location of WWII fighting. In 1986 the islands became part of the Yap state (Federated States of Micronesia); a treaty of "free association" with the US exists but has little affect on the governance of the islands.

Though the Woleaians accept change, they are able to maintain many of their traditions (thanks to isolation and sufficiency of resources). The protection of tradition is a responsibility of the chief.

Economy

Diet

The Woleaian economy is primarily one of subsistence. Typical diets include fish, taro, breadfruit and coconut. Children enjoy fruits when in season. White rice is purchased by those who can afford it. Bi-monthly feasts may feature pig, chicken or dog meat.

No refrigeration exists on the islands, and long-term storage of cured meats/smoked fish is difficult because of animal scavengers.

Land tenure

The Woleaian system of land tenure is rather complicated; land control exists with a clan's most senior women, who assign cultivate plots to sisters and daughters. Property rights are defended by the menfolk of a matrilineage. Property rights extend to lagoon and reef areas (access to all environments of an island).

Land is never sold, but can be transferred from clan to clan as a gift.

Land plots are assigned an "ilet" value, described below (under distribution).

Production, distribution and trade

Taro is harvested only by women; fishing and coconut collection is done by men. Fishing techniques vary greatly, and are seasonally dependent. Fishing is done on canoes (owned and maintained by a specific matrilineal). Men and women sometimes interact when collecting breadfruit; men climb the trees and women collect the fruit they knock down.

Men are also responsible for building and maintaining houses and other buildings, and manufacturing canoes and other fishing equipment. Men engage in a great deal of cooperative labor.

Resource distribution (specifically, fish) takes several forms. Primary distribution types are: canoe owner and "ilet"

(village and atoll level). Distribution will only take one of these forms at any given event. Secondary distribution types are: men's feast and fishermen. These usually occur in conjunction with a primary and/or secondary distribution type.

An "ilet" distribution refers to a value assigned to land plots, and affects food resource flow. The value is generally based on population size, and relates proportionately to the amount of food and resources a village or atoll receives.

Fish allocated for a "men's feast" are cooked at an island's men's house and eaten by any hungry male 14 or older. In fishermen distribution, fish are distributed directly to the man who caught the fish and then consumed at his residential compound.

Again, the Woleaians have a subsistence economy; most of the things they make are used locally. Their primary crafts include canoes, woven loincloths, shell belts/necklaces. There are some examples of inter-island trading networks, as well as some participation in Yap exchange systems (for times of shortages, often due to natural disasters (i.e. typhoons)).

The primary Woleaian currency are cigarettes. Cigarettes have important social implications for men and women on the islands (affect of 19th century colonization).

Anthropometry

Life history, mating and marriage

Marriage

Woleaian marriages are all monogamous, though this may not have always been the case, especially among chiefs. Divorce and remarriage have become increasingly uncommon because of influence of Catholicism on islands.

Marriages are arranged or at least approved by one's maternal uncle, usually to someone from outside the clan (exogamy; related to incest taboo, concentration and growth of clans). No marriages are made between two subclass mates, though incest taboos don't extend to all relatives (tertiary and beyond) on all Woleaian islands.

Marriages are rarely arranged for girls before the onset of menstruation (though this hasn't always been the case).

Traditionally, clans exchange food only to mark a wedding occasion.

The domestic unit, interactions, conflict

A household usually has between six and eight members; usually this includes a one or more old women (sisters), their daughters and unmarried sons, as well as in-marrying husbands. It should be noted that unmarried sons sleep at the men's house or a canoe house.

Everyone in the house participates in childcare. Adoption is also very common.

Children have a lot of freedom and are rarely punished (usually for fighting with other children). A mother's brother is charged with lecturing or mildly punishing a child who misbehaves.

Adolescents are encouraged to display conduct appropriate to each gender (boys: canoe house; girls: home, garden).

Inheritance

Property is owned collectively (through lineages), so inheritance issues are rare. Any inheritance is done matrilineally within the lineage, then within the subclan and then within the entire clan. Gender specific tools and possessions are passed mother-daughter, father-son.

Sexual deviance

Rape has been coded as absent in Woleaian society, though "sleep crawling" (attempts to have sex with a sleeping

woman) is more common.

Warfare and homicide

Warfare between islands has been nonexistent for over 100 years, most likely due to inter-island exchange and trade (peaceful interactions).

Feuding has been coded as absent in Woleaian society; warfare has been coded as never or rare. Aggression is most frequently directed against property (i.e. houses).

Socio-Political organization and interaction

Thought the Woleaian islands are primarily self-governing chieftainships, many inter-island links are created via marriage and exchange (trade) networks. On each island, there are several distinct villages (districts, on the lagoon shore), each with a number of matrilocal compounds. In each compound, there are several houses, composed of either nuclear or extended families. On the island of Ifaluk, for example, there are: 4 villages, with 5-13 compounds, with 1-4 houses and 3-37 residents.

Woleaians demonstrate a matrilocal post-marital residence pattern, though men maintain a strong bond with their "natal compound" (i.e. he must work, fish for this compound and not his "residential compound"). Clans are thus NOT localized, and members can be found in any village.

Power and respect in the community defers to men and older generations. Knowledge of traditional domains (navigation, divination, canoe-building) garners additional respect.

Political system

Villages are ruled by clan chief, however. This position is matrilineally inherited (oldest son of current chief's sister will become next chief). Chiefs and elders within a clan have a right to organize labor and rituals, invoke taboos, specify fishing practices, coordinate home-building, and regulate alcohol, to name a few.

Chiefs and elders also are able to maintain social control through sanctions and punishments (for disturbing peace or taboos). These controls could include fines (redistributed within community), cutting down offender's trees (very shameful), forced labor, denial of harvesting rights, imprisonment or exile.

Some Woleaian islands have a "paramount chief" with authority over all the villages. The Woleaian islands also participate in the Yap state legislature and the Federated States of Micronesia's national congress.

Micronesia's traditional drinking circle is forbidden among Woleaian groups. Women are generally not allowed to drink alcohol (largely ignored); men cannot drink with peers and younger men can only drink with older men when inquiring about group traditions and culture.

Other social interaction

Woleaian men and women are segregated during the days, largely due to different labor functions. Women work in the taro patch (off-limits to men).

Each island (or sometimes, individual villages) have menstrual houses located near the beach (but at a distance from canoe houses). Though Woleaian islands previously all had men's houses, these structures only exist on Ifaluk and Eauripik today.

Each compound has a separate (communal) cook house. Woleaians sleep on earthen mat-covered floors.

Ritual, Ceremony, Religion

Most residents of Woleai are "nominally Catholic," but there persists a general adherence to tradition. The

traditional Woleai religion is animistic and ancestor-focused, and these beliefs are generally synthesized with Christian traditions. Woleaians use the term "Yalus" to refer to all gods, spirits and ghosts.

Data from William Lessa indicates "the presence of aggressive magic" on Ifaluk in particular and Micronesia in general. More recent research has shown that although magic still plays an important role in native beliefs about the environment, those traditions are not being passed down and the last remaining magicians are dying out.

Traditional religious practitioners include diviners, curers, navigators*, and weather/crop/fishing magicians.

Missionaries are banned from proselytizing in the region, but may approach men when they leave the island to work. Islands in the region are visited several times a year by priests from nearby Ulithi.

Woleaians believe in gods and spirits (both malevolent and benevolent) who exist beyond the island in the sky, sea and land. These gods may be patrons of important regional crafts. Malevolent spirits cause illnesses; natural medicines (from land, sea) and massage are the most highly developed curing techniques.

Ceremonies and rituals in the Woleaian region have both traditional and Christian overtones. Church services and feasts are held on important Catholic holidays (i.e. Christmas feast). Matrilineal houses make periodic offerings at altars dedicated to ancestral spirits/ghosts; other rituals may be held when deemed appropriate by island chiefs (i.e. before overseas voyage, before typhoon season).

Other rituals

Because inter-island travel is so important in this region, navigational skills are at a premium. The "pelu" are highly trained navigation specialists with corresponding high status in local social systems. Young men seek out this training, and go through passage rituals when they've mastered the knowledge and techniques.

Girls go through puberty ceremonies at first menarche; these rituals involve prolonged isolation in the village's menstrual house and a change in dress to a woman's woven skirt.

Cultural material

Song and dance are the most developed arts in the Woleaian region. Music of Ifaluk and the surrounding atolls is "exclusively vocal," with accompaniment by two sound-making instruments: a conch shell trumpet and a rolled up coconut leaf (imitates an oboe). Songs are composed by women. Music is usually accompanied by dancing or other formal, expressive gestures. Dances are sex specific.

Woleaian women engage in complex weaving designs (done on looms). Men decorate "canoe-house lintels" with carved images or paint.

Death and afterlife beliefs

After a death, Woleaians mourn for a period of four days to several months. Those first four days are the most restrictive. Dirges are sung continuously from death to burial. Traditionally, bodies were buried on land or at sea; nowadays, most are buried in the church graveyard.

Various taboos exist surrounding the dead. Harvesting coconuts is banned (length depends on rank of deceased); reef fishing is forbidden if the chief, his sister or mother dies.

Ancestral spirits/ghosts may stick around to aid descendants (communication through mediums) or punish them if taboos are broken. Those who died in accidents, during pregnancy/childbirth may be possessed by evil spirits and stick around to haunt the living.

Adornment

Both men and women traditionally displayed elaborate tattoos; each tattoo would designate a person's position and life and society.

Ordinary clothing involved loincloths for men and woven grass skirts for women.

Kinship systems

Kinship terms follow the Hawaiian cousin pattern.

Clans (matrilineal) are divided into subclans, lineages and descent lines.

Terminology reinforces matrilineal emphasis (separate term's for mother's brother and sister's children). All individuals refer to each other by a personal name.

Census data from four of the Woleaian islands indicate that cross-cousin marriages do not exist (though this is not the case for Eauripik).

SOURCES

My primary sources, which had a lot of the same information were:

Alkire, William H. "Countries and Their Cultures (online encyclopedia)."
Available at: <http://www.everyculture.com/Oceania/Woleai.html>

Sois, Richard. "Ifaluk Atoll: An Ethnographic Account."

For most sections, however, I did seek additional sources to back up or supplement certain topics. I have organized those below.

Description

Economy

Anthropometry

Life history, mating and marriage

Palmer, Craig. "Is Rape a Cultural Universal? A Re-examination of the Ethnographic Data," *Ethnology*.

Warfare and homicide

Otterbein, Keith F. and Charlotte Swanson Otterbein. "An Eye for an Eye, a Tooth for a Tooth: A Cross-Cultural Study of Feuding," *American Anthropologist*

Socio-political organization and interaction

Ritual, Ceremony, Religion

Alkire, William H. "Concepts of Order in Southeast Asia and Micronesia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*.

Burrows, Edwin Grant. "Music on Ifaluk Atoll in the Caroline Islands," *Ethnomusicology*.

Lessa, William A. "Sorcery on Ifaluk," *American Anthropologist*.

Riesenberg, Saul. "Caroline Island Belt Weaving," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*.

*I was able to find an article about smoking and stimulants in the Caroline Islands, but I have not yet been able to access it. I did put in a request, so I may be able to add information about this soon.

Adornment

Useem, John. "The Changing Structure of a Micronesian Society," *American Anthropologist*.

Kinship systems