

Hanna Heinrich / Harald Grauer (eds.)

**Wege im Garten der Ethnologie**  
**Caminos en el jardín de la etnología**



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## **Some aspects of marriage alliance among the Chacobo (Panoan, Bolivian Amazonia)**

Lorena Córdoba and Diego Villar

The aim of this paper is to offer some descriptive, preliminary results of ongoing research about Chacobo marriage alliance. Nearly eight hundred Chacobo own 510.000 hectares located between the Geneshuaya, Benicito and Yata Rivers in the Beni department of Northern Bolivia. With the Caripuna, the Caxarari and the Pacaguara, the Chacobo have been traditionally labelled as ‘Southeastern Panoan Tribes’. However, their comparative position within the Panoan family is far from being settled, and canonical affiliation could easily misrepresent two important matters. First, it is not completely certain if the existence throughout the centuries of the ‘Chacobo’ as a collective subject can be affirmed –the very meaning of the term ‘Chacobo’ is in fact a historical, contingent construction (Villar, Córdoba & Combès 2009; Córdoba & Villar 2011). Secondly, although there are certain features of Chacobo culture that resemble archetypical Panoan groups, like the Matis or the Cashinahua, Chacobo ethnic identity seems to be strongly influenced by a fluid complex of historical contact with neighbouring societies of the Bolivian Amazon that belong to other linguistic stocks, such as the Cavineña, Araona, Tacana, Reyesanos, Cayuvava and Movima (Kelm 1972; Córdoba 2006; Erikson 2000; Villar 2004; Villar, Córdoba & Combès 2009).

Reliable authorities such as Erland Nordenskiöld (2003) and Alfred Métraux (1942) believed the Chacobo were ‘subtribes’ of a larger ‘nation’: the Pacaguara. This view seems to be quite problematic. If we think that names such as ‘Chacobo’, ‘Caripuna’ or ‘Pacaguara’ correspond to discrete, stable sociological units, we are forced to postulate the sudden appearance and disappearance of thousands of people in order to account for the continuous mutation of ethnonyms: when d’Orbigny visits the region, in 1832, he finds 1000 ‘Pacaguara’ and no ‘Chacobo’ at all. Nowadays not even a dozen people consider themselves ‘Pacaguara’, but there are nearly a thousand ‘Chacobo’ who speak the same language and live in the very same places (Córdoba, Valenzuela & Villar 2012).

An alternative interpretation would see in ethnonyms a set of generic categories that work within a contextual web of mediations and relationships. These labels do not designate stable, precise populations but mutable historical experiences of connection between the Southern Panoan groups and missionaries, explorers, military agents, rubber barons and Nations. Until 1850, the historical record shows a preponderance of ‘Pacaguara’ from the Madre de Dios region in the West to the Mamoré River in the East; and from the Abuná River in the North to the Southern Jesuit missions of San Borja and Reyes. When Father Negrete tries in 1795 to establish a ‘reducción’ in the confluence of Itenez and Mamoré Rivers, he finds the

'Pacaguara' and also two groups they call their 'kin': the *Xēnabo* ('worm people') and the *Isabo* ('hedgehog people'). These last names are *maxobo*, named groups which posterior Panoan ethnographers labelled as 'clans'. The terms 'Chacobo' and 'Caripuna' do not appear until 1845, in the context of the rubber fever and the consolidation of national frontiers. While the 'Pacaguara' gradually disappear, Palacios and other explorers commissioned by Bolivia find 'Chacobo' in the very same sites where Keller, Leuzinger and other explorers commissioned by Brazil find 'Caripuna' –which, needless to say, were the very same places infested by 'Pacaguaras' in the past (Villar, Córdoba & Combès 2009; Córdoba & Villar 2011). From this perspective, the current notion of a unified 'Pueblo Chacobo' denotes but a policy of unification and sedentarisation by the Bolivian government, which in 1950 began to assemble different Chacobo partialities in a place called Núcleo Indígena Ñuflo de Chávez. It is precisely in this context that the missionaries of the Summer Institute of Linguistics began to work among the Chacobo and remained for 25 years (Córdoba 2012).

The identification of social units within a diachronic perspective becomes even more complicated by the fact that the literature has usually interpreted traditional internal divisions of the Southern Panoans as if they were 'ethnonyms'. These groups were organised in named partialities called *maxobo*, a term which literally means 'people of the same head' though it is currently translated into Spanish as 'comunidad', 'pueblo', 'familia', 'grupo', 'tribu' or even as 'tocayos' (namesakes). Each *maxo* was associated with an animal or an object, a generic territory, a facial ritual painting, certain behavioural traits and even distinct nutritional habits. Naturally due to fragmentary evidence, the problem of *maxobo* affiliation is far from being solved. Missionary Gilbert Prost (1983) thinks the *maxobo* were matrilineal. Our information suggests that Ego received a *maxo* name from each one of the parents and that the father's name 'was stronger' –a fact which Chacobo associate with the operation of current Spanish surnames and the transmission of facial paintings, and which seems consistent with several symbolic and practical contexts that show an ideological agnatic bias. Regardless of the never-ending discussion about 'lineality', what is certain is that 18 of 21 marriages between elderly Chacobo who still preserve their group affiliation are between spouses of different *maxobo*, and missionaries describe the same situation when Spanish surnames were just beginning to appear. It also seems fairly certain that the *maxobo* were traditionally organised in pairs of allied groups, and some Chacobo even describe the allied *maxobo* as 'kin'. They also say that there was a constant flow of spouses, military assistance and manioc beer invitations between allied groups; and, from a conceptual point of view, it is evident that in certain discursive contexts each *maxo* adopts some of the physical and symbolic traits that identifies its ally –thus the Chacobo say *tsístebo jascaria xaxobo*, 'coal people and batán people are the same' because the former 'infect' the latter with their warlike personality. On the other hand, everybody agrees that the 'pairs' fought constantly against one another (Córdoba & Villar 2002).

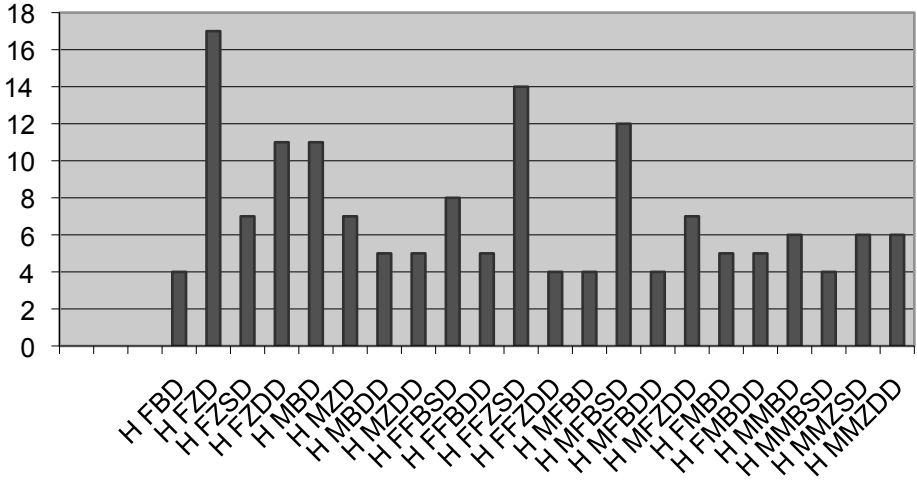
It is not surprising that SIL missionaries, who saw themselves as ‘guardians of a dying tribe’, declared the *maxobo* ‘a dying institution’. Some of them were even trained linguists and anthropologists: well versed in Goodenough’s componential analysis and the tagmemic theories of Kenneth Pike, they did not limit themselves to biblical translation and evangelical duties and endeavoured to establish what they called a ‘culture of meaning and life’. Uxorilocality and the subordination of a son-in-law to in-laws were identified as the structuring principles of Chacobo social structure. These features were explicitly considered as structural ‘constrictions’ that blocked ‘higher needs’ which were supposed to be ‘unconscious’, such as ‘individual freedom’, ‘political leadership’, the rise of the nuclear family and so on. Therefore, uxorilocality was to be neutralized, and the passage from uxorilocality to neolocality would thrust the Chacobo from a ‘mechanic’ and ‘synchronic’ state into a ‘diachronic’ and ‘dynamic’ phase (Prost 1983, 2003).

Although three decades of missionary activity seem to have been a theological fiasco, their sociological effects should not be underestimated. The missionaries defused the traditional circuit of enmities and accelerated the dislocation of the *maxobo* system, promoted the idea of a unified ‘Pueblo Chacobo’ and assembled formerly antagonistic groups in brand new ‘communities’. They encouraged migration to regions where the Chacobo could be integrated in the regional market; installed devoted families as community leaders; attacked uxorilocality, cross-cousin marriage and polygamy; and systematically imposed Spanish surnames, with consequent impact upon the criteria of definition of endogamy and exogamy (Córdoba 2012). During the 1980s SIL staff was replaced by members of the Swiss Evangelical Mission, and finally by missionaries of native evangelical churches.

Even a preliminary study of Chacobo genealogies helps to clarify how marriage alliance has adapted to several decades of missionary experience. The matrimonial network considered involves the totality of Chacobo population: 1049 people, 348 marriages and 21 settlements<sup>1</sup>. Some general features are that genealogical reckoning is highly cognatic (a fact consistent with Chacobo onomastics), that polygyny and leviratic marriage have diminished but still hold in settlements of the Benicito and Yata Rivers, and that uxorilocality persists as the main structuring feature of Chacobo social organisation (Erikson 2002; Córdoba 2008; Villar 2012; Walker *et al.* 2013).

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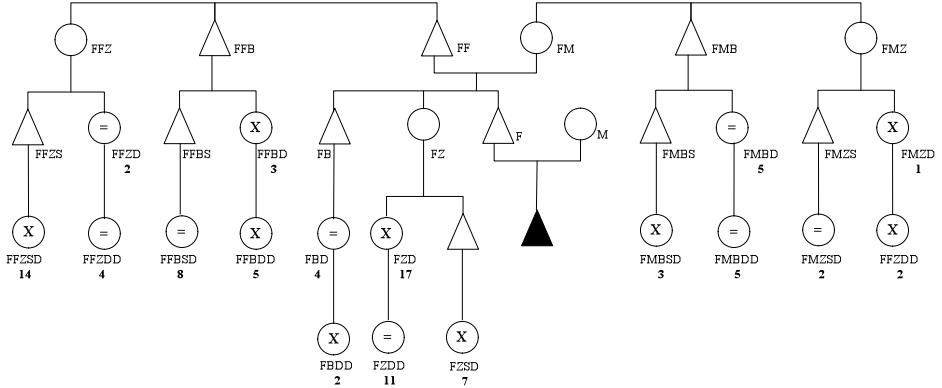
<sup>1</sup> The genealogical data have been analysed by combining both traditional interpretive techniques and the use of PUCK (Program for the Use and Computation of Kinship Data), developed by the “Traitement informatique des phénomènes de parenté en anthropologie et en histoire” research team.



**Fig. 1.** General spouse choice

Male Ego, involving 1 affinal link up to 3<sup>rd</sup> degree

Non exclusive (e.g. a singular spouse can be simultaneously FZD, FMZSD, etc.)

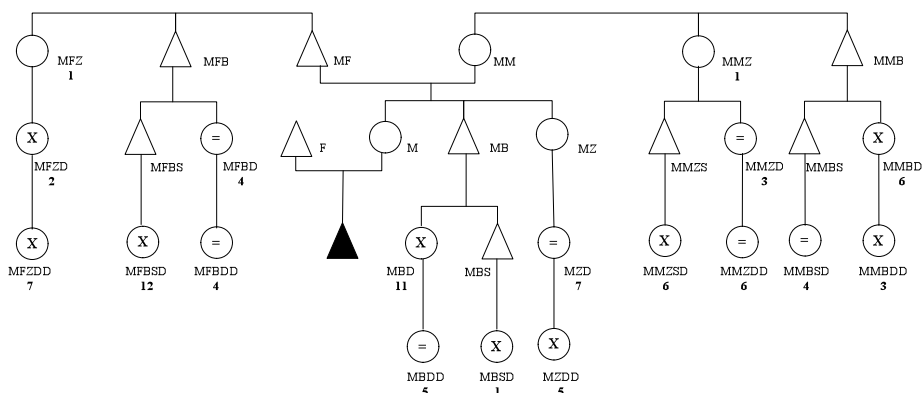


**Fig. 2.** Patrilateral marriages involving 1 affinal link

(Male Ego, up to 3<sup>rd</sup> degree)



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**Fig. 3.** Matrilineal marriages involving 1 affinal link (Male Ego, up to 3<sup>rd</sup> degree)

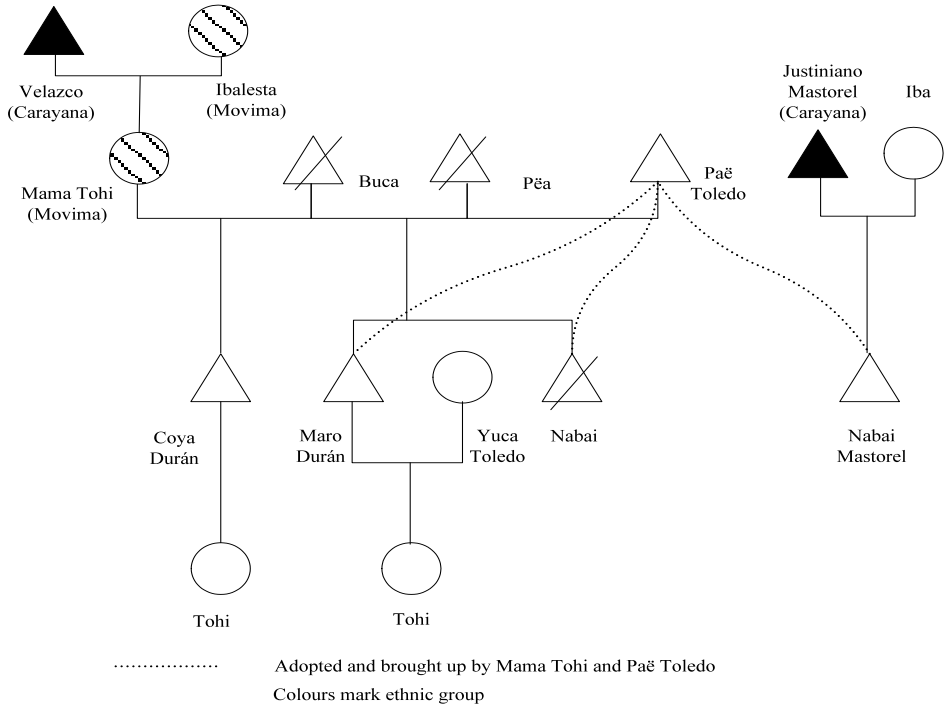
Non exclusive (e.g. a singular spouse can be simultaneously FBD, MBD, FMBDD, etc.)

“=” and “x” refer to “parallel” and “cross” according to dravidian logic

Despite missionary efforts, genealogies also suggest that cross-cousin marriage has endured. If we consider the matrimonial network as a whole, including unions with unrelated foreigners, marriage with first and second degree cross-cousins still account for 21% of the unions (71/348). But if we consider a nuclear core of marriages that involve any given singular affinal link between Ego and Alter up to the third degree (e.g. FZD, MBD, FZDD, etc.), first and second degree cross-cousin marriage accounts for 49% of the unions (71/146). These figures should not obscure the missionary impact: e.g. the scarce FBD marriages, which were traditionally avoided, seem to be a direct consequence of missionary imposition of different surnames within a set of siblings.

We would like to stress here two particular dimensions of the matrimonial network. The first one is the fluid absorption of foreigners. ‘Mixed marriages’ or ‘ethnic purity’ are simply non problems for the Chacobo. This tendency has deeply historical roots. During the colonial period, Western ‘Pacaguara’ appear in missions as Santiago de Pacaguaras or Misión Cavinás intermixing with Tacana-speaking groups, and we also know that the Eastern ‘Pacaguara’ had close relationships with the Cayuvava and Movima in strategic places like Exaltación –in 1796, Miguel de Zamora, governor of Mojos, even plotted a policy of intermixture between the rebellious Pacaguara and the more docile Cayuvava in order to civilize and pacify the former. Later, during the rubber era, credible observers reported Movima and Cayuvava Indians fleeing the *siringa* camps to settle among the Chacobo of lake Rogoaguado (Villar, Córdoba & Combès 2009). A hundred years later, genealogies

show the swift absorption of Movima, Pacaguara and *Carayana* (criollos) groups within the Chacobo matrimonial network: marriage and residential proximity, language and onomastics are the main factors that suffice to transform strangers into ‘puro Chacobo’ in just a couple of generations.



**Fig. 4.** Interethnic marriages (Movima)

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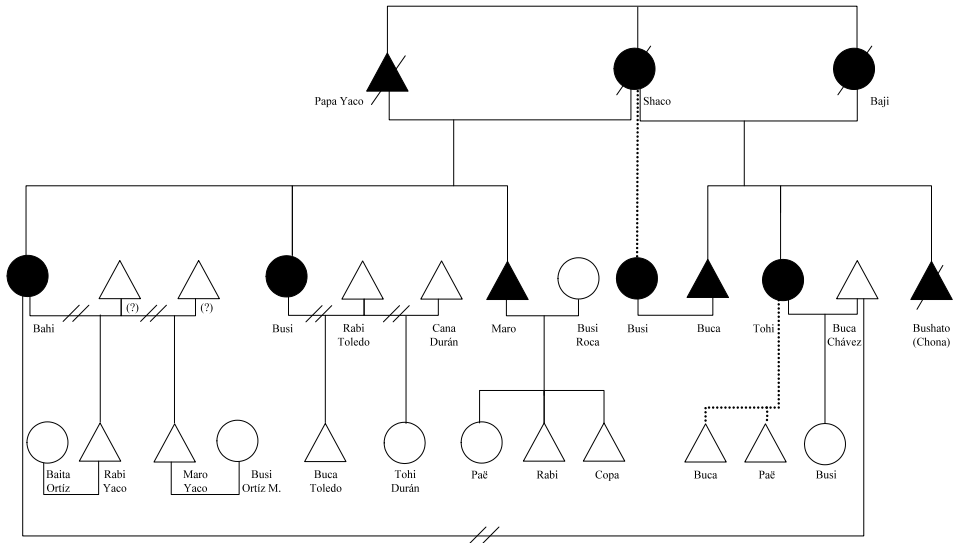


Fig. 5. Interethnic marriages (Pacaguara)

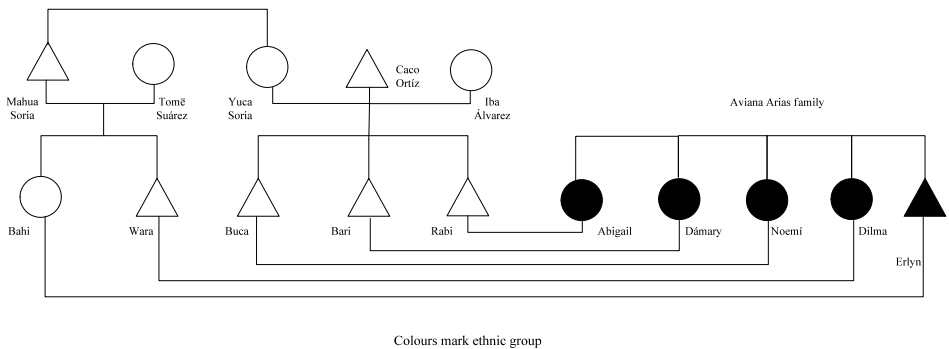
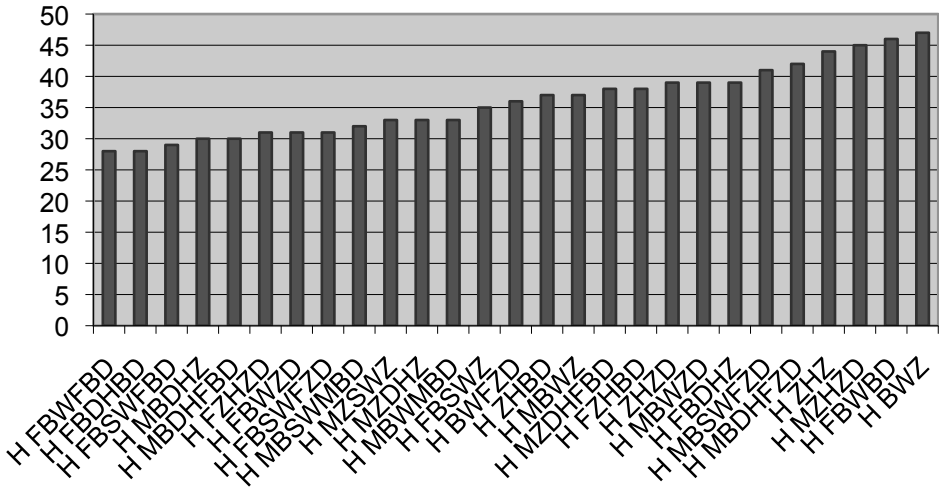


Fig. 6. Interethnic marriages (Carayana)

Interethnic marriages also reveal the second aspect we would like to underline: the notorious preference for ‘serial affinity’ and matrimonial relinkings –in other words, the tendency, even in interethnic unions, to marry someone from a group with which the own group is already connected by marriage. Though it is analytically possible to distinguish between ‘exchange’ (B and a Z of family ‘A’ marrying a B and a Z of family ‘B’) and ‘double marriage’ (Bs of family ‘A’ marrying Zs of family ‘B’), the Chacobo do not actually differentiate both marriage types. They globally interpret

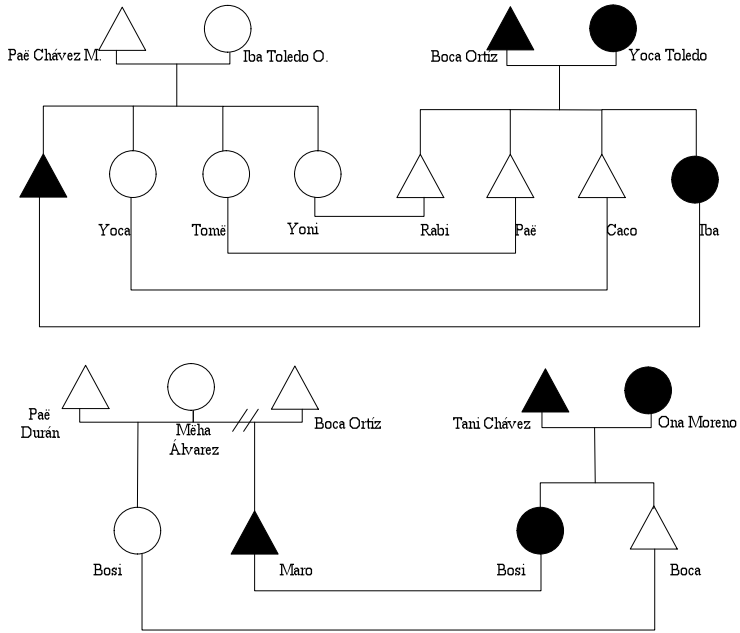
serial affinity in terms of its pragmatic consequences within the uxori-local household, and argue that it is ‘safer’ for a set of real or classificatory brothers to marry a set of sisters because they will not feel alone, and they will be able to form some sort of united front against their in-laws while sharing the burden of uxori-local service (Córdoba 2008). For a male Ego, this preference for alliance duplication translates genealogically into frequent unions with BWZ, ZHZ, ZHBD, BWBD, etc. If we consider marriages involving two affinal links, therefore, we find a frequent combination of genealogical roles such as FZD and ZHZ.



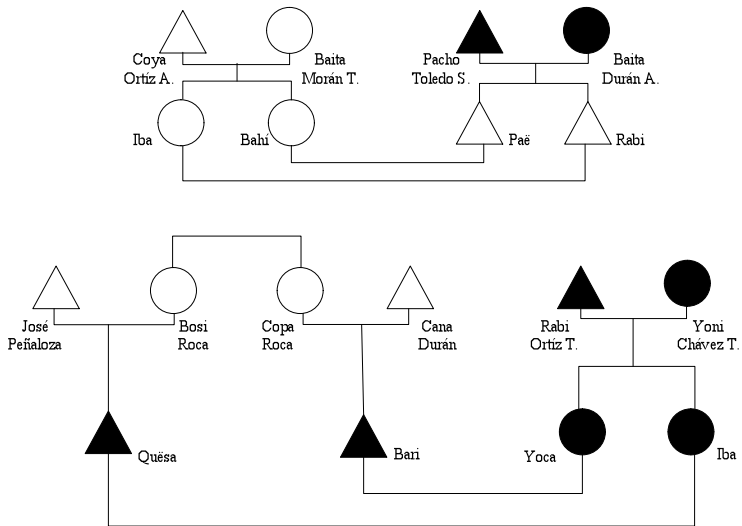
**Fig. 7.** Matrimonial relinkings (2 affinal links, Male ego)

Non exclusive (e.g. a singular marriage can be simultaneously BWZ, ZHZ, FBWBD, etc.)

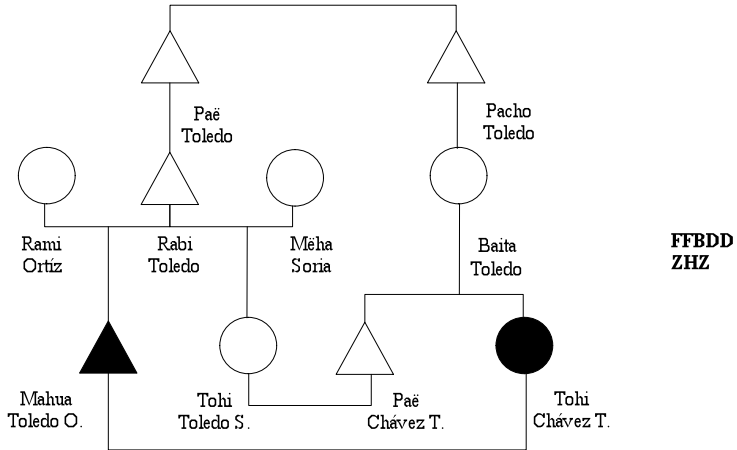
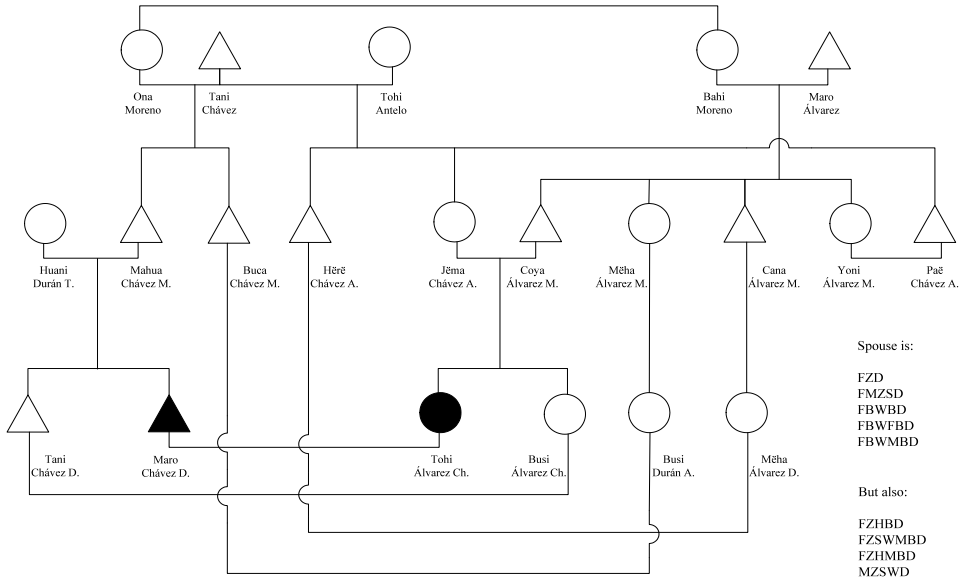
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**Fig. 8.** Matrimonial relinkings (exchange)



**Fig. 9.** Matrimonial relinkings (double marriages)

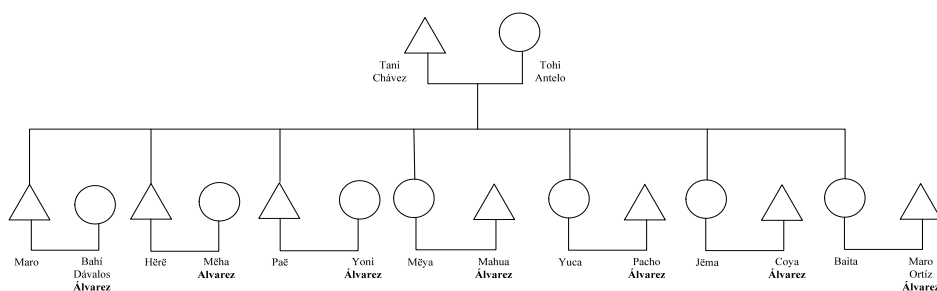


**Fig. 10.** Matrimonial relinkings. Random examples

From the point of view of uxorilocal families, serial affinity seems to express at least part of the former dynamic of *maxobo* alliance and opposition. Under SIL's tutelage, the Chacobo slowly adapted to the new conditions of village organisation and surname exogamy. There is a marked preference for repeating matrimonial

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exchanges between certain extended families throughout the generations. In fact, most of the villages are formed by a series of marriages between two uxorilocal constellations structured around focal men, their daughters and in-laws; in these cases, all the people in the settlement share two or three ‘core’ surnames: Suárez and Peralta in the villages of Yata River; Antelo and Toledo in Benicito; Chávez, Durán and Roca in Cachuelita, etc. In Alto Ivon, the biggest Chacobo village, consistent matrimonial exchange between kindreds resembles *maxobo* dynamics in a more complex way. The serial exchange between allied families has divided the village in two de facto ‘moieties’ or ‘factions’, and 70% of the marriages conform to what we could call ‘moiety endogamy’: on the one hand, the Chávez, Álvarez, Toledo and Durán families, associated with the former *Tsístebo* and *Xaxobo*; on the other hand, the Ortiz, Morán and Soria, associated with the *Canabo* and the *Sanibo* (Córdoba & Villar 2002).



**Fig. 11.** Surname exchange

We do not intend to portray a simple, automatic correspondence between traditional social organisation, contemporary surnames and uxorilocal factionalism. It is impossible to describe exactly the ways in which surname exogamy may have affected the collective adaptations of the *maxobo* system. If some parallel marriages can be explained in terms of surnames imposed by missionaries, we also know that Chacobo that have migrated from the Southern Yata settlements, where missions were absent, had no surname at all, and when married adopted their wives’ or in some cases even their sons’ surnames; and that some Chacobo have even changed their surnames simply because they did not like them. Besides, any reconstruction of the ancient social organisation is inevitably bound to the foggy limits of oral memory: elder Chacobo are only sure about their own *maxo* and sometimes not even that, and therefore the attribution of external affiliations beyond a certain genealogical distance tends to be contradictory and partial. On the other hand, it seems that processes of collective affiliation change according to different contexts, and that structural variations can overlap or differ in the particular cases –for

instance, the Chacobo of the Yata River have been historically isolated, independent, and therefore more 'endogamous' than the mixed partialities of the Benicito River. The contextual association between *maxobo* affiliation, the strategic use of Spanish surnames and sociological distance between kindreds is thus persistent but variable. What seems curious, though, is that when trouble arises between factions, people tend to interpret their reciprocal behaviour in terms of ancient *maxobo* dynamics: expressing the dialectics of distance and proximity of alliance in *maxobo* key, the 'dying institution' still accounts for a great deal of physical fights, political struggles and sorcery accusations.

To sum up, a preliminary analysis of Chacobo matrimonial network reveals both the importance of serial affinity and the translation of kinship in a spatial dimension – from the Chacobo point of view, the dissociation of the genealogical network and the residential arrangement makes no sense whatsoever. On the other hand, the information suggests that a proper understanding of Chacobo marriage alliance can not be limited to the logical structure of the 'kinship system', but should inevitably bear in mind a wider set of relations which include historical matters such as the mutable meaning of ethnonyms and social groups, the recycling of interethnic relationships, and the sociological impact of missionary activity.



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