

## PEMON KINSHIP REVISITED: THE CASE OF THE LOST CROSS COUSIN

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### *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

IN a perceptive observation tucked away in an obscure footnote in his *Individual and Society in Guiana* (1984: 112 n. 4), Peter Rivière raised an important problem in the social organization of the Guiana highlands—the ambiguity of cross-cousin terms for members of the opposite sex, and the supposed ‘Hawaiian’ elements of relationship terminologies in the area. By focusing on a single Pemon group, the Kamarakoto, the present paper attempts to show that the apparent absence of terms for opposite-sex cross cousins is not systemic but an artefact of the dispersed settlement pattern of the Pemon and the resulting tendency to redefine some children

<sup>1</sup> General fieldwork in connection with the present paper has been carried out for some six to eight months altogether over a number of years. The traditional Kamarakoto terms were collected during a two-week visit to Kamarata in 1995, where a colleague from the University of Freiburg in Germany, Bruno Illius, was working on a re-study of George Simpson as an affiliate of IVIC. My sincere thanks go to him for his critical comments and help in many ways. The Pemon are now increasingly using Spanish kinship terms, but in an idiosyncratic way, for example, substituting *tio* for *a:wo* and *primo* for *ye:se*, a development deserving a study in its own right. The spelling used here corresponds to the way the Kamarakoto presently write their language (even though it has not been completely standardized). The system of abbreviations used for kin types is that in Barnard and Good 1984.

of opposite-sex cross cousins as 'nephews' and 'nieces' (*poitorü/unwanöpü* and *pa'se*) and therefore as marriageable for ego's children.

There is no doubt that the relationship terminology of the Kamarata Pemon<sup>2</sup> in the western Gran Sabana region of Venezuela conforms closely to ordering principles that Henley, in a recent publication, called the "canonical" Dravidianate ideal-type system' (1996: 5). Earlier, Rivière had referred to 'an ideal type [in the region] against which to assess the variations that occur', which he called a 'prescriptive direct-exchange terminology' (1984: 43, 45).

The term Rivière used for what he had formerly called a 'two-line' system is self-explanatory. Henley put the emphasis on cross-cousin marriage or a 'particular configuration of relationship categories associated with a positive rule of marriage which requires an Ego to marry a category of Alter that includes his/her cross cousin genealogically defined' (1996: 5). The problem was that fieldworkers in the area had failed to find separate terms for cross cousins of the opposite sex in some of the ethnic groups or had even declined to consider the respective terms as part of the relationship terminology (Arvelo-Jiménez 1974:129-37, 249; Thomas 1982: 65-8). Having made the point earlier (1971: 7), Thomas wrote an article, the main purpose of which was to insist that there were no such terms and to explain this (1978).<sup>3</sup>

It so happens that the Kamarakoto do have terms for cross cousins of the opposite sex, even though their status may be a matter of dispute. The terms in question are *wörüchi* (ms) and *waratorü* (ws). Already Urbina (Urbina and Heinen 1982: 35-6; Urbina 1983-84: 195-6) had reported *wirichi* and *ukurai* as reference terms for opposite-sex cross cousins among the Arekuna Pemon. The fact that, as Rivière has pointed out, '[t]hese two words are very close to common Carib terms for "woman" and "man" respectively' (1984: 112) should not disqualify their use as kin terms: Simpson (1940: 529) gave them as the Makushi terms for elder brother (ws) and younger sister (ms) without anybody objecting.

The Ye'kwana case is quite different from the Pemon one, because the reciprocal term *yeeta'nadü* (see also Heinen 1983-84: 227) has clearly sexual connotations among the Ye'kwana and is therefore used with great hesitation. As regards the Pemon, there is a greater degree of disagreement among anthropologists as to whether an existing general term should be recognized as a kin term or not. I will therefore concentrate here on the latter, and specifically the Kamarata Pemon, a

<sup>2</sup> I would agree with Thomas (1982) that by and large affines are a subset of consanguines in the area, among the Pemon perhaps less so than elsewhere. Earlier, Thomas denied that the Pemon have a relationship terminology according with 'even a weakened bilateral cross-cousin marriage system' (1971: 9), even though he admits 'that a single term designation for the category 'opposite sex cross cousin-eligible spouse' may at one time have existed in Pemon terminology' (ibid.).

<sup>3</sup> This is actually also the gist of Thomas's 1978 article. It is unfortunate that he was not quite right about the non-existence of the 'eligible spouse' term.

list whose traditional relationship terminology appears in the Appendix below. I will argue that a case can actually be made for both positions. We shall see, however, that Pemon behaviour in this matter depends on circumstances, in particular on there being sufficient genealogical distance from the opposite-sex cross cousin for his or her offspring to be declared 'nephews' and 'nieces' and therefore marriageable for ego's children. In practice, this device is used more often by male than by female egos.

#### *The Case of the Missing Cross Cousin*

If it is awkward to refer to somebody as a 'possible spouse', it is even more so to call somebody such. So it seems quite natural to subsume such people in daily life under the terms 'brother' and 'sister'. This is even more the case as, in the apt formulation used by Henley (1996: 8), 'within the canonical Dravidianate, same-sex siblings are equivalent elements'. In practice this means that parallel first cousins, second cousins, third cousins and so on will be referred to and called by the same terms as brothers and sisters.

But other than avoiding embarrassment, the practice has additional advantages for the speaker. A Pemon is supposed to marry *wa'nin mure*, the 'child of a cross aunt', i.e. the child of FZ or her classificatory equivalent. If a male ego called a given female by a 'sister' term, she would automatically become a *wa'nin* to his children, and therefore ego's children would become marriageable for her children. However, if he used a possible cross-cousin term, she would then be his potential spouse and classificatory 'mother' to his children. These children would have to call her *paikoi*, even if she was not MZ but only MPssGD. Her children would not be *wa'nin mure* for ego's children.

Rivière observes aptly: 'However, presumably when the female cross cousin is married to a brother of ego, as she should be according to the logic of the terminology, her children are classified as a brother's children' (1984: 112). In practice women, who according to the uxorilocal residence rule stay close to home, follow the kinship logic more closely than do men, who often range widely and establish 'sibling' ties with genealogically non-related individuals. In a given generation, therefore, a male ego is able to reduce the 50% of individuals in a Pemon agglomeration (the term proposed by Rivière for 'sub-tribe') that are not marriageable for his children to a theoretical 25%—no mean feat. It will not work in all cases, because a closely related female cross cousin will consider herself *paikoi* to his children, but it opens the door to manipulations in case of distant kin.

*How the System Works—sort of*

Tables 1 and 2 give the Kamarakoto reference terms for male and female ego respectively, while the Appendix (items 1 to 29) gives the traditional Kamarata Pemon relationship terminology.

As Thomas himself has pointed out (1971: 7), it would be contradictory for terms for opposite-sex cross cousins to be missing, though this can obviously be maintained for a certain period. According to Thomas, F calls the offspring of *na:nai* and *pa:chi* (address terms, NB) *poitorü* and *pa'se*, even if the former are cross cousins, with the exception of WZC, who, of course, is equivalent to 'own child' here (1982: 68).

But for that man's S, who wants to marry his father's *pa'se*, her M in this case is not *wa'nin* but *paikoi* (in Arekuna *amai*). Therefore, the union contradicts the rule, confirmed by Thomas, that one should marry a *wa'nin mure*. One could of course argue that, since F calls the woman 'sister', she should be *wa'nin* to his son. But under *wa'nin*, Thomas gives only FZ (and MBW), not FMBD and FFZD, because these are not *wa'nin* but *paikoi*.

This contradiction should really be obvious right away if ego looks at the supposed *wa'nin*, FMBD which, if she is not also MZ, is either MMZD (mother's female parallel cousin), that is, a classificatory M, or MFBD (also mother's female parallel cousin) and ego's classificatory M. Consequently, Thomas says (*ibid.*) that if ego's M calls somebody *pa:chi* or *yakon*, this woman is an *amai* (Kamarata *paikoi*) to ego.

However, there are factors in the Pemon settlement pattern that promote marriage unions with, and the assimilation of, genealogically unrelated individuals, to which I now turn. Another factor is a certain tendency among the Pemon towards marriage with (classificatory or real) ZD, so-called adjacent generation marriages (cf. Henley 1983–84), which I shall briefly mention.

*The Gran Sabana Environment and Pemon Kinship Behaviour*

The majority of Pemon live in the Gran Sabana area of south-east Venezuela. Unlike forest-dwelling groups, the Pemon have an extremely dispersed settlement pattern and live mostly in isolated homesteads; nucleated villages are a recent development, for example, around missions such as Kamarata and Kavanayen. Even though most researchers recognize agglomerations variously called 'neighbourhoods' (Thomas) or *vecindades* (Urbina), Pemon are indefatigable travellers, mainly on foot, but also by canoe.

Far-flung trade relations create networks of personal friendships that, according to Pemon tradition, are expressed in the kinship idiom. Many Pemon call each other 'elder brother' and 'younger brother' without the existence of concrete genealogical connections or because their fathers called each other that way. But if

an individual is looking for a spouse for his children and there is nobody with the right characteristics in the right kinship category available, they will also look further afield, even though the ideal for a Pemon male is to avoid strange parents-in-law because of the dangers and hardships involved in uxori-local brideservice.

According to the Pemon kinship calculus, an individual should marry his or her children to somebody a male calls *poitorü* 'nephew, son-in-law' or *pa'se* 'niece, daughter-in-law', and a female calls *unwanöpü* 'nephew, son-in-law' or *pa'se* 'niece, daughter-in-law', that is, someone by whom they are called *a:wo* if male and *wa'nin* if female. These are, for a male speaker, *poitorü* 'nephew':

MZDS	MBSS
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FBDS	FZSS
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or *pa'se* 'niece':

MZDD	MBSD
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FBDD	FZSD
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and for a female speaker, *unwanöpü* 'nephew':

MZSS	MBDS
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FBSS	FZDS
------	------

or *pa'se* 'niece':

MZSD	MBDD
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FBSD	FZDD
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Besides the children of their opposite-sex siblings, there are eight cousin categories for a male speaker and eight for a female speaker that conform to two broad specifications and are marriageable for ego's children. They are the children of opposite-sex parallel cousins (PssGosCC) and those of same-sex cross cousins (PosGssCC). So far so good.

Now, unlike an exogamous agglomeration with a negative marriage rule (like the Winkina Warao: see Heinen and Henley 1998–99), in an endogamous 'prescriptive direct-exchange' system you have about fifty per cent of marriage partners in your generation theoretically excluded independently of genealogical distance, because they are equivalent to siblings. In our case, all PssGssCC and all

TABLE 1. *Kamarakoto Reference Terms for Male Ego*

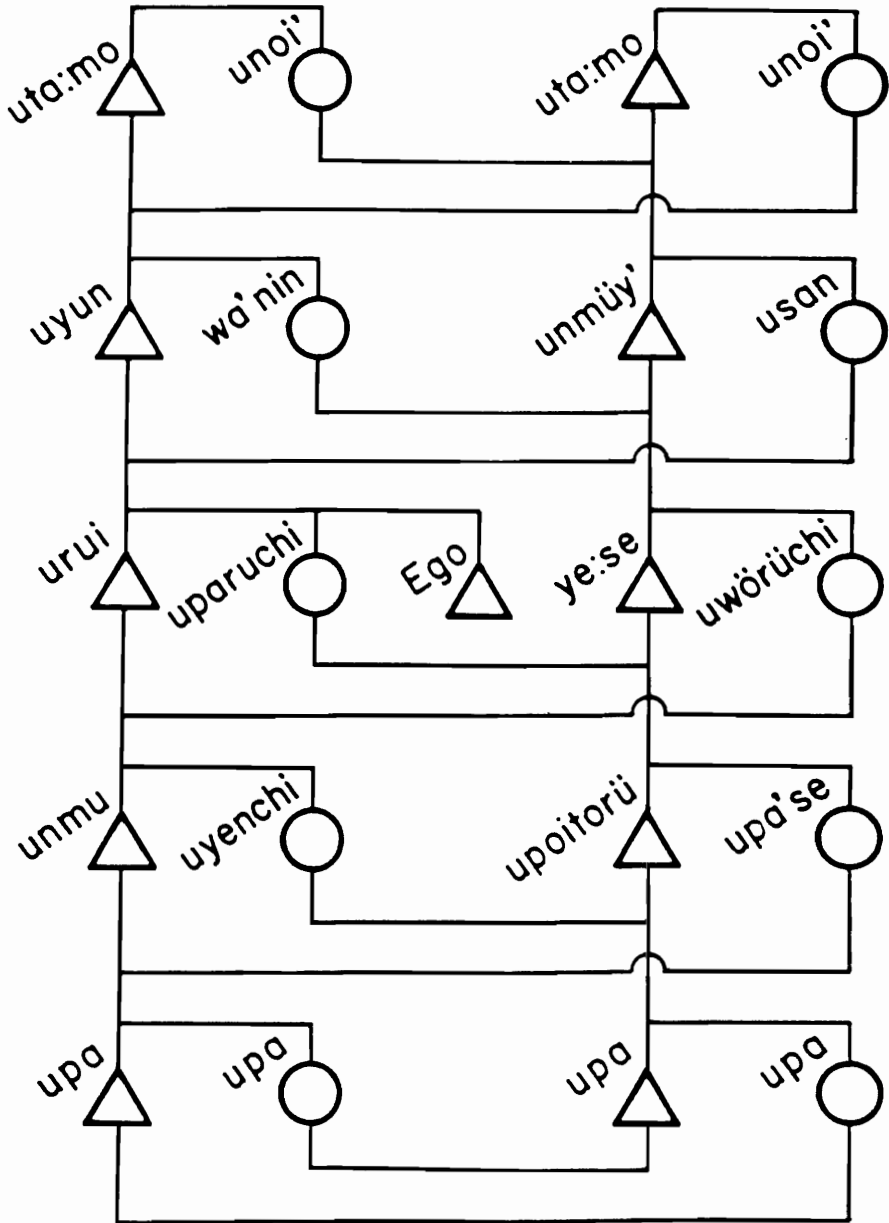
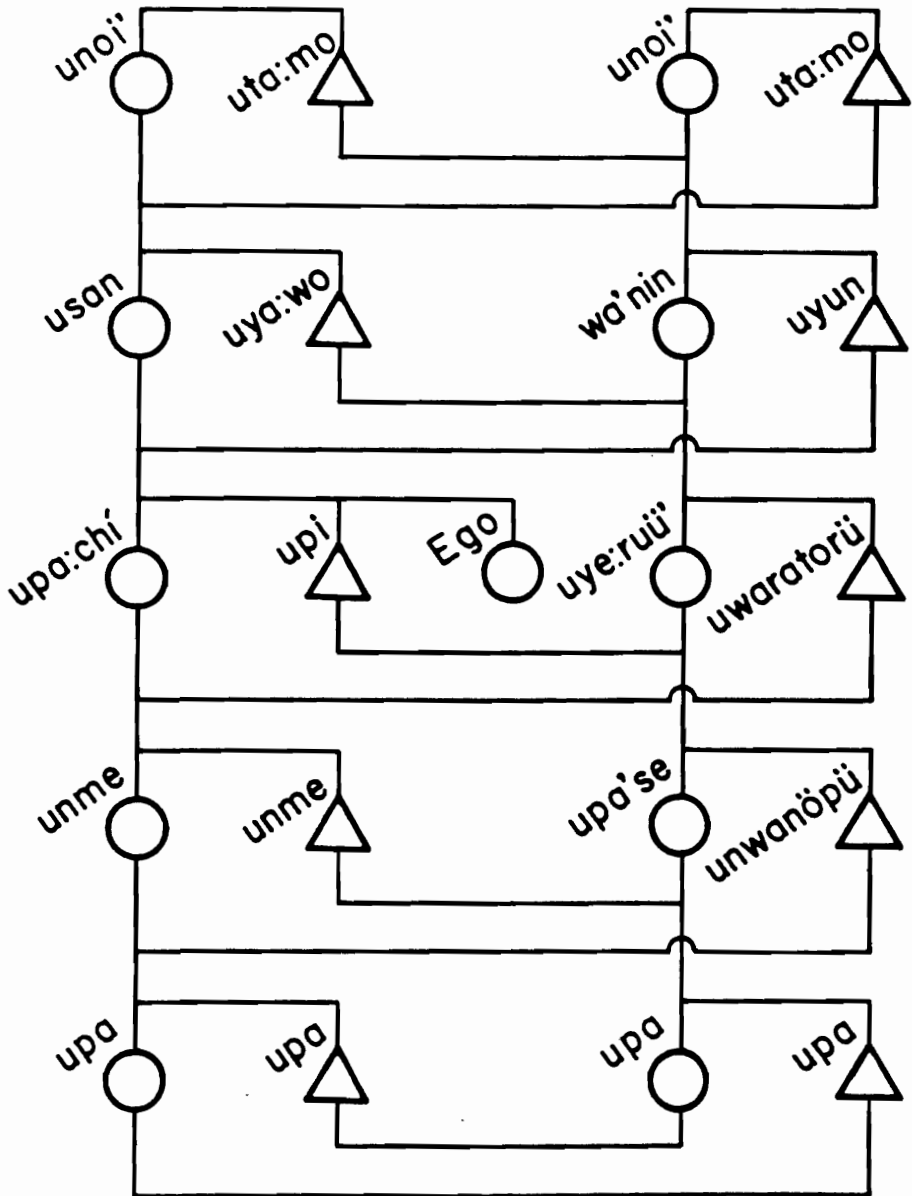


TABLE 2. *Kamarakoto Reference Terms for Female Ego*



PosGosCC should be classified as sons and daughters by ego and therefore not be marriageable for his children. But among the Kamarakoto, like apparently the Arekuna Pemon and the Taurepan Pemon, only the children of same-sex parallel cousins are unequivocally so. These represent four categories for a male ego and four for a female ego:

MAN SPEAKING	WOMAN SPEAKING
<i>umu</i> ('son')	<i>unme</i> ('child')
MZSS	MZDS
FBSS	FBDS
<i>uyenchi</i> ('daughter')	<i>unme</i> ('child')
MZSD	MZDD
FBSD	FBDD

In practice, the remaining eight categories are ambiguous. If the prospective *wa'nin* is genealogically far enough removed, or if, through a marriage between adjacent generations of the sort mentioned before (cf. Henley 1983–84) her kin status is ambiguous, her offspring might be marriageable for ego's children. This comes about because in daily life she has been addressed by her opposite-sex cross cousins with a sibling term (as has been her husband, the prospective *uno'püyun/utamü'püyun*).

Before closing with a few real-life cases, here are the ambiguous categories that I will call 'manipulated nephews and nieces':

MAN SPEAKING	WOMAN SPEAKING
<i>poitorü</i> (manipulated 'nephew')	<i>unwanöpu</i> (manipulated 'nephew')
MBDS	MBSS
FZDS	FZSS
<i>pa'se</i> (manipulated 'niece')	<i>pa'se</i> (manipulated 'niece')
MBDD	MBSD
FZDD	FZSD



*Marriage Behaviour and Relationship System: Some Preliminary Conclusions*

There were not as many cases on the ground as had been hoped, but it nonetheless seems possible to make sense of them. In fact, they turned out more or less as might be expected after reading Rivière's note (1984: 112). This corresponds exactly to what informants say. The net result is that a female cross cousin is called *na'nai* or *paruchi*, but if she marries my brother, she becomes a *wirichi* to me (in my mind), and her children become *umu* and *uyenchi*.

There was just one significant case for a man: FZDD was originally called *upa'se* and FZDS *upoitorü*. But after the man had married, presumably to his cross cousin, they became *uyenchi* and *umu*. For women there were a few more cases. In one significant case MBDD was unambiguously *upa'se* and MBDS *upoitorü*. MBSS was potentially *uwanöpü* and open to manipulation, and MBSD was a potential *pa'se*, but they were called *unme* 'my child' without reservation. The same went for FZSS and FZSD, both called unambiguously *unme*. MBDS and MBDD were called *uwanöpü* and *pa'se*, but they should have been anyway.

The preliminary result is that Kamarakoto women seem to stick to the rules, while their men try to turn a 50/50 chance of finding an opposite-sex cross cousin for their children into a 75/25 chance through the device of looking for their *wa:nin mure* and assimilating their own opposite-sex cross cousin to parallel cousins in everyday life. This is why it is difficult to uncover terms for PosCos that definitely exist among the Kamarakoto (*wörichi* and *wara:torü*). The crux of the matter is that one must distinguish carefully between the structure of the relationship terminology and marriage behaviour on the ground.<sup>4</sup>

I would like to conclude with a remark on specific affinal terms. I would argue that too much has been made of the supposed absence of specifically affinal terms among the Pemon. According to Thomas (1982: 61), there is only one such term, namely *payunü* for DH, literally 'father of my grandchildren'.

Now, I can agree with Thomas that the Pemon language opens the 'possibility of a descriptive calculus of relationships' (ibid.). But if we accept a term translatable as 'father of my grandchildren' as specifically affinal, there seems to be no reason not to accept other descriptive terms as such, for example, *yawoipü* 'uncle's wife' for EM, *ummeno'pü* 'wife of my child' for SW (ws), or *uno'püpi* 'wife's brother' for WB. This, of course, could be the topic of another paper based on the seminal analyses of Peter Rivière.

<sup>4</sup> It is true that the last two terms are not used in address, but that seems to be a matter of degree.

APPENDIX. *Kamarata Pemon Relationship Terminology*

REFERENCE TERMS	ADDRESS TERMS	DESCRIPTION
(1) <i>uta:mo</i>	<i>ta:mo</i> <i>pa:pai</i> <i>pamü</i>	PF, male of G+2 MF (lit. 'father') male relative of G+2 (ms) recipr. G+2/G-2
(2) <i>unoi'</i>	<i>noi'</i> <i>amai</i> <i>paikoi</i>	PM, female of G+2 PM (Carib root: 'mother') female relative of G+2 (ms) recipr. of <i>cho:ko</i> (G+2/G-2) (lit. 'mother')
(3) <i>uyun</i>	<i>pa:pai</i>	F, FB, FPssGS, MZH, MPssGDH [MPosGS]
(4) <i>usan</i>	<i>paikoi</i>	M, MZ, MPssGD, FBW, FPssGSW [FPosGD]
(5) <i>unmüy'</i>	<i>müy'</i>	MB, MPosGS, FZH, FPosGDH (ms) [MPssGS]
<i>uköipünüköipünü</i>		MB, MPosGS, FZH, FPosGDH (ms)
<i>uno 'püyun</i>	<i>müy'</i>	WF (ms) (lit. 'wife's father')
(6) <i>uya:wo</i>	<i>a:wo</i>	MB, MPosGS, FZH, FPosGDH (ws) [MPssGS]
<i>utamü 'püyun</i>	<i>a:wo</i>	HF (ws) (lit. 'husband's father')
(7) <i>uwa'nin wa'nin</i>		FZ, MPosGD, MBW, FPosGSW [FPssGD]
<i>uyawoipü yawoipü</i>		EM (lit. 'uncle's wife')
(8) <i>urui</i> <i>uwi</i>	<i>urui(ko)</i>	eB, PssGSe (ms) eB (ms) Arekuna term often used in Kamarata
(9) <i>upi</i> <i>upi</i> <i>uya'mipö ya'mipö</i>	<i>pipi</i> <i>cho:ko, ya'mi</i>	eB, PGSe, ZHe, HBe (ws) yB, PGSy, ZHy, HBy (ws) yB, PGSy (ms, ws, most frequently used by ws instead of above)

APPENDIX *continued*

REFERENCE TERMS	ADDRESS TERMS	DESCRIPTION
(10) <i>uyakon</i>	<i>yakon</i>	yB, PssGSy (ms) yZ, PssGDy (ws)
(11) <i>ye:se</i> <i>ye:se yanoman</i> <i>uno'püpi ye:se</i>	<i>ye:se</i> <i>ye:se</i>	PosGS (ms) ZH (ms) WB (lit. 'wife's brother')
(12) <i>uwaratorü</i>	<i>pipi</i>	PosGS (ws) (lit. 'my man')
(13) <i>uta:müpö</i>  <i>uta:müpöruí</i> <i>uta:müpödakoi</i>		H descriptive terms (seldom used): HBe HBy
(14) <i>upar(u)chí</i> <i>upar(u)chí</i>	<i>na:nai</i> <i>par(u)chí</i>	eZ, PGDe, BWe (ms) yZ, PGDy, BWy (ms)
(15) <i>upa:chí</i>	<i>achí</i>	eZ, PssGDe (ws)
(16) <i>uye:ruü me:me</i> <i>uye:ruü ye:ruü</i>		PosGDe, HZe, BWe (ws) PosGDy, HZy, BWy (ws)
(17) <i>uwörüchi na:nai</i> <i>uwörüchi par(u)chí</i>		PosGDe (ms) PosGDy (ms)
(18) ( <i>unoptü</i> ) <i>inörö</i>	<i>umudan</i>	W (seldom used) W (lit. 'she')
(19) <i>uno'püpachí</i> <i>uno'püdakon</i>	<i>na:nai</i> <i>pa:chí</i>	WeZ (ms) WyZ (ms)
(20) <i>unmu</i>	<i>unmu</i>	S, BS, PssGS (ms)
(21) <i>uyenchí yenchí</i>		D, BD, PssGD (ms)
(22) <i>unme</i>	<i>unme</i>	C, ZC, PssGC (ws)
(23) <i>upoitorü poito</i>	<i>poitorü</i>	ZS, PosGS (ms)
(24) <i>upayunú payunú</i>		DH (lit. 'father of my grandchildren')
(25) <i>unwanöpü</i>	<i>unwanöpü</i>	BS, PosGS (ws)

APPENDIX *continued*

REFERENCE TERMS	ADDRESS TERMS	DESCRIPTION
(26) <i>upa'se</i>	<i>pa'se</i>	ZD, PosGD (ms) BD, PosGD (ws)
(27) <i>unmuno'pü</i> <i>unmupa'se</i>	<i>pa'se</i> <i>pa'se</i>	SW (ms) (lit. 'wife of my son')
(28) <i>unmeno'pü</i>	<i>pa'se</i>	SW (ws) (lit. 'wife of my child')
(29) <i>upa</i>	<i>upa</i> <i>pamü</i>	CC, PGCC male relative of G-2 (ms) recipr. G+2/G-2
	<i>cho:ko</i>	male relative of G-2 (ws) recipr. of <i>paikoi</i> (G-2/G+2) (lit. 'tender', not a proper kin term)
	<i>ma:non</i>	female (ms) younger than Ego (lit. 'pretty', not a proper kin term)

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