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## Genealogical and Demographic Information on the Wai Wai of British Guiana

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During December, 1952, and January, 1953, we conducted archeological survey and stratigraphic excavations along the upper Essequibo River in southern British Guiana, a region inhabited at present by the Wai Wai Indians. Although our time was limited and all communication had to be via an interpreter, several considerations prompted us to take advantage of the opportunity to record certain kinds of ethnographic information. Our interest centered on ethnographic practices that might be reflected in archeological remains, including clearing size, practices of refuse disposal, preparation of the house site, etc. (Evans and Meggers, 1960, pp. 260—262 and fig. 107), as well as the kind of social relations correlated with a semi-permanent sedentary type of community pattern. In addition, the recent introduction of resident Protestant missionaries, as well as the effects of European diseases and other disrupting influences, made it evident that Wai Wai culture would not survive many more years. We knew of no ethnographic fieldwork planned, and since earlier material principally collected by W. C. Farabee in the 1920's emphasized material culture, we attempted to record some of the myths and to obtain genealogical information and kinship terminology. As it turned out, a Danish expedition spent several months with the Wai Wai in 1955—56 and collected more complete information on most aspects of the culture than we were able to obtain (Fock, 1963). However, the greater degree of disruption in the aboriginal pattern at the time of their visit makes it seem worthwhile to publish our genealogical data and related findings.

The genealogies were obtained during several days interview with one of the oldest women, Shirika. She was the wife of the head of Mawika village, a man who had high status among the Wai Wai partly because he was an older man and a shaman, and partly as a result of having been designated as the Wai Wai intermediary by the Boundary Commission when it was operating in the area in the late 1930's. With Florine Hawkins serving as interpreter, Shirika was interrogated about the genealogy of each adult. Questions were of the following type: What is the name of X's mother? What is the name of his father? Did his mother (designated by name) have other children? Who are they? Who is the father of each? etc. For deceased children, the informant often indicated whether they died at birth or later. When cause of death was volunteered, it

was recorded. The genealogies of different individuals often merged or partly overlapped, providing a check on accuracy when individual diagrams were assembled into village genealogical charts.

Back in Washington, single sheets showing individual genealogies were combined so that all persons in one village were assembled on the same chart. This produced considerable complexity because of the multiple marriages typically engaged in by both men and women, often including people of different generation levels. The majority were contracted sequentially and not simultaneously. The principal polygamous marriages are cases of a man, his wife and her daughter by a previous husband, and a woman, her husband and his son by a previous marriage. Both these marriages are usually temporary, until the younger individual finds a suitable mate of his own. Another type is sororal polygyny. In one case, four sisters were married to the same man. In another, a man took his wife's sister when her first husband died. With these and a few other exceptions, the main cause for the complex marital history of an individual is the high death rate, coupled with the practice of initial marriages between persons of disparate age.

A man or woman who reaches middle age may expect to outlive four or five spouses. The most frequent explanation given for remarriage was death of the former spouse. However, other reasons included illness of the spouse, moving away (usually to, or from, the Brazil side), «giving away» of a wife by the husband (particularly when he had two), or abandonment because the spouse was «too lazy». A distinction was made by the informants between couples who were «really married», having gone through the proper formalities, and those who were «not really married» but simply living together. Such liaisons varied from temporary arrangements to unions as stable as «real» marriages.

Analysis of the village genealogical charts sheds light on two aspects of the social organization: descent and residence. It is evident that marriages involving consanguineal relatives are all in the male line. There is no case of marriage between individuals related through females, i. e., of a man and his mother's daughter by a previous husband, his mother's sister's daughter, his mother's mother's sister's daughter, etc. However, as soon as a male enters the sequence, marriage apparently becomes possible. A man may marry his father's daughter by a different wife (see fig. 1), his mother's brother's daughter, his mother's mother's brother's daughter, and probably his father's brother's daughter and his father's sister's daughter (although there are no examples of the latter two in the genealogies).

Matrilineal descent is reflected in matrilocal residence. The core of each of the four villages is two or more sisters, or a woman and her daughters. At Weelya it is Kachamaru and her half-sister Kayaochiri (fig. 2); at Yaka Yaka it is Tochi and her daughters Akmurie and Ratarie (fig. 3); at Mawika it is Shirika and her sister Machareme (fig. 4). Yewara was in a state of flux at the time of our visit and was inhabited by brothers and sisters with no dominant family line.

In each village, composed of a single communal house, there are other individuals, some of whom have kinship ties and others who do not. These can be described village by village.

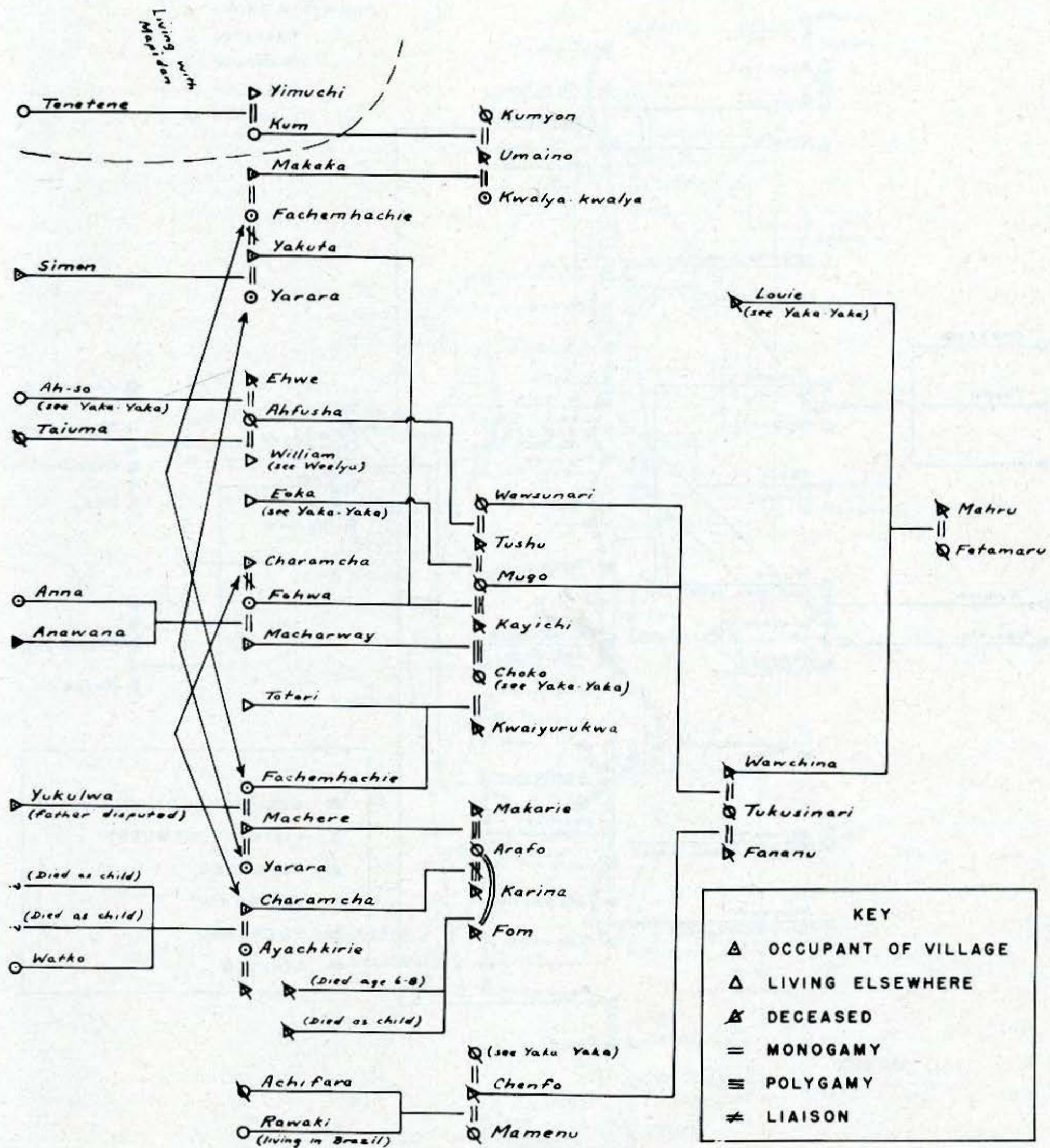


Fig. 1 Genealogies of Residents of Yewara

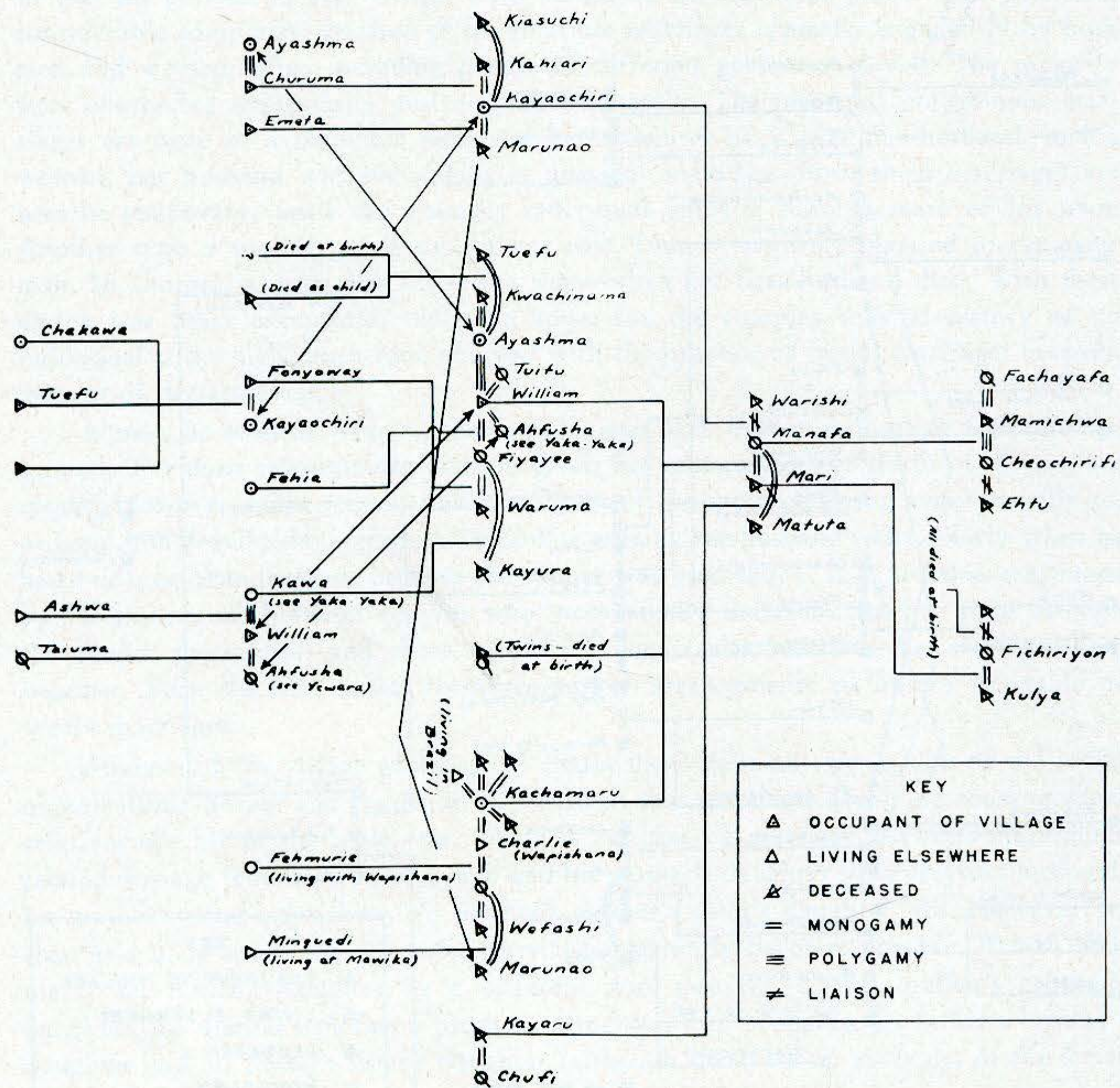


Fig. 2 Genealogies of Residents of Weelya

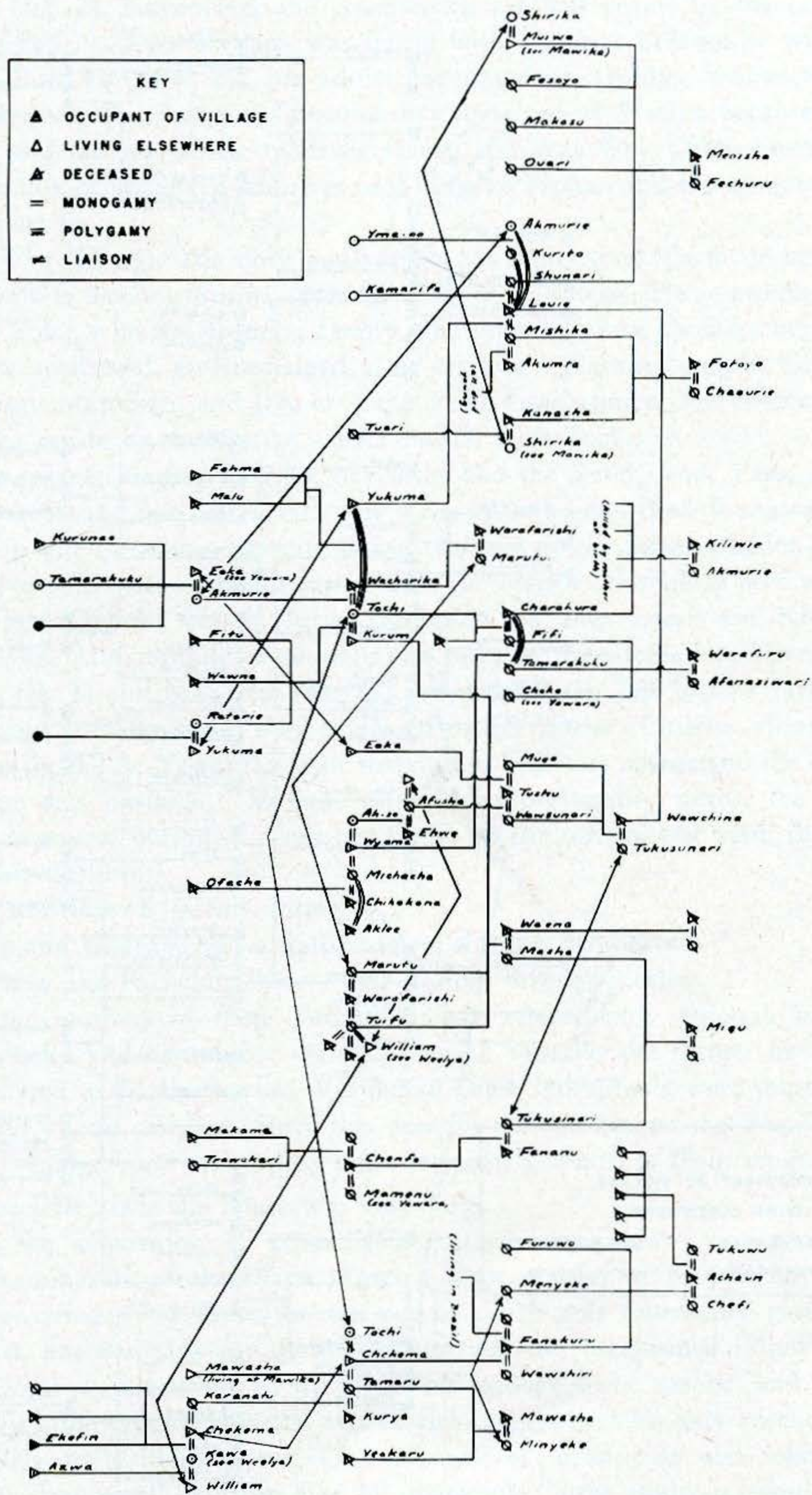


Fig. 3 Genealogies of Residents of Yaka Yaka

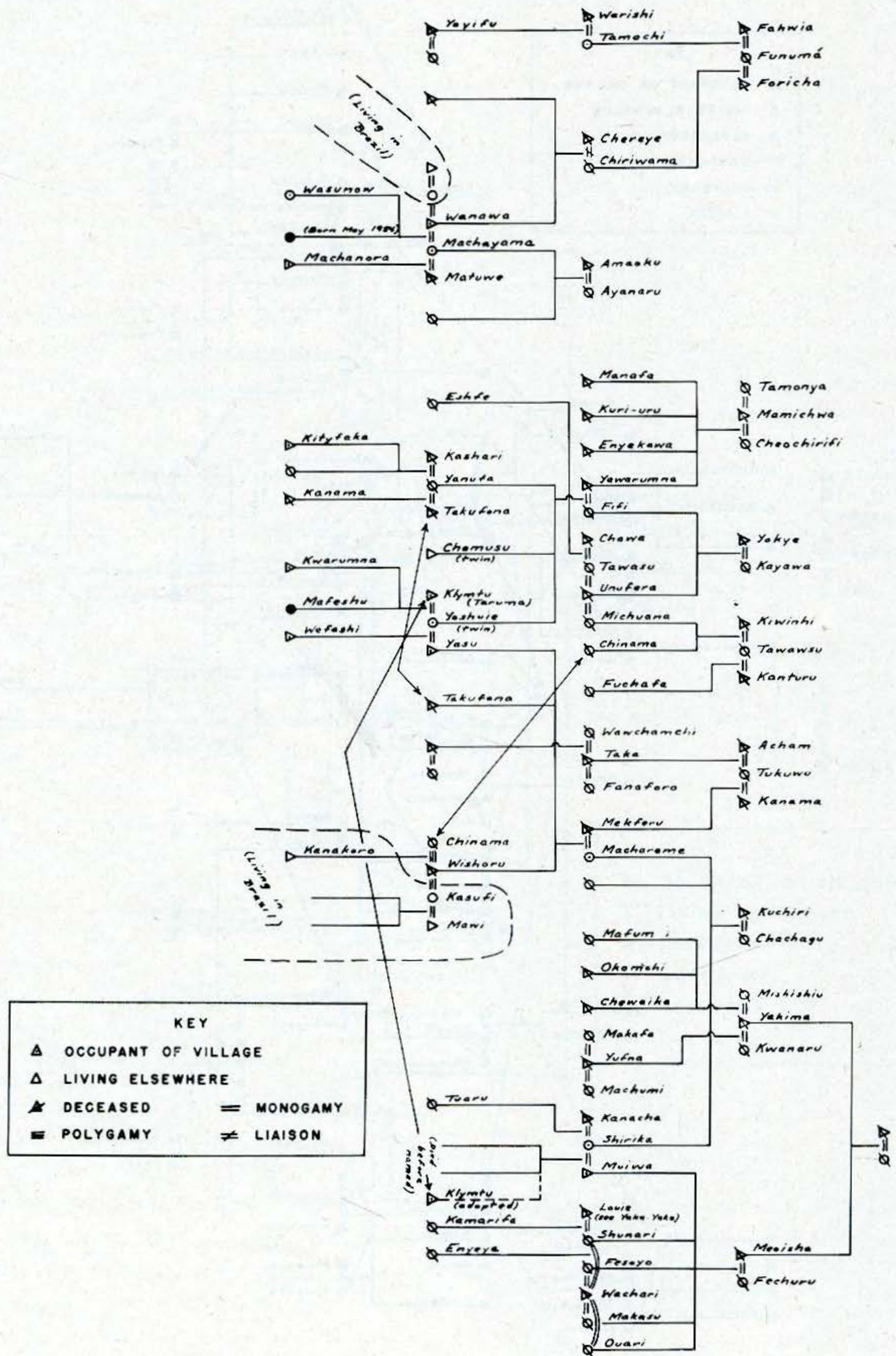


Fig. 4 Genealogies of Residents of Mawika

*Weelya* (fig. 2). Kayaochiri and Kachamaru are half sisters by the same mother. Kachamaru's full brother, William, was living with his sister because he was currently unmarried. With him was his pre-adolescent daughter (Fehia), whose mother was deceased. Kayaochiri's adult son Churumá has remained at Weelya because his wife is a Mapidian and has no female relatives among the Wai Wai. Other members of the group were a boy of about ten who was said to be an orphan and the immature children of the above adults.

*Yaka Yaka* (fig. 3). The only adult male not married to Tochi or her daughters is Wyama, who is Tochi's brother (their mothers were sisters). He is married to Ah-so, a relative of Eoka, who has no other family. She came to live with Eoka before puberty when she was orphaned, and remained after marriage. Another couple, Chekema and Kawa, are both Mapidian, and live at Yaka Yaka from choice. The former may have established his residence through an earlier liaison with Tochi.

*Mawika* (fig. 4). Besides Shirika, her sister and the latter's son, Yasu, another old woman, Tamochi, and her half-sister's son Wanawa live here. Both Wanawa's wife and Yasu's former wife (Yoshuie) have no living relatives of the same or older generations, hence they live with their husbands rather than the reverse. Yoshuie is now married to a Taruma Indian, Klymtu, who is Shirika's adopted son. Her sister's son, Kityfaka, also lives at Mawika. Also residing there were two boys with no female relatives, Minguedi (see Weelya, fig. 2) and Mawasha (see Yaka Yaka, fig. 3). The latter's father lived at Yaka Yaka, but both boys said they preferred to live in the «Chief's» village.

*Yewara* (fig. 1). At Yewara, a basic matrilineal unit was absent and the composition of the village was unstable. This was phrased on personality terms; the informants reporting that several persons did not get along. At the time of our visit, the occupants were related as follows:

Yakuta and Fohwa — full siblings

Machere and Charamcha — half-brothers through mother

Macharway and Fachemhachie — half-siblings through mother.

If related, the mothers of these individuals are related only through marriage. In addition, Makaka and his mother were staying at Yewara, the former having been at one time married to Fachemhachie. Various of these individuals were married to each other and had young children. Since this was the village nearest the Brazil boundary, immigrants coming from the «other side» frequently made it their temporary headquarters, especially since the house was very large.

During the acquisition of genealogical information a few vital statistics were recorded. Examination of the charts shows a large number of people deceased before contracting marriage. For juveniles, the age at death was repeatedly given as about 8 or 15 years, but the basis for these estimates was not ascertained. Many cases were reported of infants stillborn or dying before old enough to be named, and instances of this are likely to be greater than the genealogies suggest because only recent or striking cases are likely to be remembered. One example of infanticide was reported (Yaka Yaka, fig. 3). Two small children died by drowning. Three adults suffered memorable deaths, one man hit by a falling tree, another killed by the Yao Indians when he went there to visit, and a woman from a miscarriage. Many individuals were reported to have died shortly after marriage, as young adults.



Another striking aspect of the genealogical picture is the number of marriages without offspring. C. R. Jones, the Indian Service doctor, attributed this principally to enlargement of the spleen from chronic malaria, which in women inhibited conception or promoted miscarriage. This diagnosis seems supported by the increase in birthrate in recent years after DDT campaigns and the introduction of anti-malarial drugs. This situation, coupled with the high incidence of pre-adolescent mortality, sets very low limits on the number of living consanguineal relatives.

An effort was made to estimate the ages of Wai Wai living in the four upper Essequibo villages in January, 1953. The people do not know their actual ages, but could generally tell whether they were younger, older, or the same age as other persons. Estimates of older individuals were deduced by reference to their size at the time of the Boundary Commission survey. Children under five had been born since the arrival of the missionaries and were consequently of known age. The population distribution by age and sex arrived at by this means is shown on table. 1.

Table 1. Estimated ages of British Guiana Wai Wai in 1953.

Age	Female	Male
60—65	2	1
50—55	2	0
45—49	1	2
40—44	1	2
35—39	3	0
30—34	0	4
25—29	4	3
20—24	2	3
15—19	1	5
10—14	3	4
5—9	1	6
1—5	4	3
0—1	2	3
(born in 1954)*	(4)	(3)
	<u>30</u>	<u>39</u>

\*) Shown in solid black on figs. 1—4.

A by-product of the use of personal names<sup>1)</sup> for identification of individuals represented in the genealogies is the information that names are sometimes repeated, usually after a lapse of one or two generations. Seven instances appear. Of these, three are consanguineal relatives (Akmurie, Mawasha, Tamarakuku), one an affinal relative (father's mother's father's father's wife, not shown on the chart), and three apparently unrelated individuals (Fifi, Wefashi, Tuefu). Four are males and three are females.

<sup>1)</sup> Spelling of Wai Wai names is approximate and should not be regarded as phonetically exact.

In general the genealogical and demographic information we collected agrees with that reported by Fock (1963). Two areas of disagreement should be noted, one in marriage practice and the other in residence. Our genealogies show no instance of «avuncular» marriage, described by Fock (p. 202) as with a sister's daughter, although he specifies that two examples exist. Nor does the most frequent form of marriage appear to be between cross-cousins, if this relationship is viewed in other than the classificatory sense as he seems to imply (p. 134). In the realm of residence, Fock's census of the population at Yaka Yaka in January, 1955, shows that a number of changes took place after we left in February 1953. Several residents of Yewara in 1953 subsequently moved to Yaka Yaka, obscuring the earlier matrilineal affiliations of the village population, and leading Fock to conclude that the brother-sister relationship was the basic residence unit, and that matrilocality «should be regarded as an ideal demand which is only occasionally fulfilled and then only temporarily» (p. 200). The conflicting interpretation appears in this instance to be the result of changed conditions between 1953 and 1955, and provides an interesting sidelight on the rapidity of social breakdown among the Wai Wai in the face of acculturative pressures.

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