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Australian Kinship

There is a strange custom in Australia, among the Aborigines. A man and his wife give their five-year-old daughter to a young boy to be the little boy's future mother-in-law. From that moment on, throughout their lives, the boy will call the girl "mother-in-law", will show her extreme respect, will never be familiar with her, and will send her gifts of meat when he's successful in hunting. Thirty or forty years later, when they have grown up, the boy's "mother-in-law" will begin sending him her daughters as wives as they reach fifteen years of age or so. In my talk today I shall use Darwinian selection theory to offer an explanation of this strange custom, which may, until recently, have been extremely widespread, perhaps universal¹ in the 500 or so tribes that covered Australia.

Key words: Australia, Aborigines, kinship, sections, subsections.

Introduction

Australian Aborigines offer probably the best example available of what our hunter and gatherer ancestors were like, for the Aborigines occupy an entire continent. They were not marginalized by agriculturalists. No matter how complex or confusing their customs, it is worth our while to try to understand their functions.

This custom of promising each of one's daughters as a mother-in-law is a result of another custom. Throughout Australia marriage is anticipated between par-

¹ A. P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines: How to Understand Them*, Angus & Hardback Third Edition, 1956; A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Social Organisation of Australian Tribes*, Oceania Publications, Sydney, 1931; Warren Shapiro, *Social organization in Aboriginal Australia*, Australian National University Press, Canberra (ACT)1979.

ticular kinds of cousins, sometimes first, sometimes second, sometimes more distant, but always on the same generation, never between adjacent generations. From an early age, every individual knows who of his kin are marriageable and who are not. And this anticipated marriage between particular kinds of cousins powerfully influences their kin terms. The particular marriage expected influences which kinsmen will be seen as potential affines (in-laws) – not just potential spouses and their siblings, but also the spouses' parents and their siblings. For example, in some tribes males are expected to marry a daughter of their mother's brother. In this case, one's mother's brothers will be seen as potential fathers-in-law (and one's father's sisters seen as potential mothers-in-law). Sometimes there are no affinal terms whatever, only kin terms are used. The particular marriage anticipated, of course, will be consistent with the mother-in-law bestowal described above, so that the daughters of the boy's bestowed mother-in-law will always be the right kind of cousin for the boy to marry. Thus, the question: what can explain why cousins are expected and encouraged to marry, and why young daughters are given as mothers-in-law? Even complete knowledge of the various psychological mechanisms involved in mate choice offer little explanation for who has mated with whom among Aborigines for the past forty or fifty thousand years. Traditions – cultural behavior passed down from ancestor to descendant – that are widespread today and presumably ancient must have aided those who followed them to leave descendants, which thereby increased the frequency of those traditions. That is, widespread traditions may be a result of Darwinian selection during recent human evolution.

Kinship

The antiquity of Australian traditions offers a tantalizing key to understanding not only kinship in general but its crucial relationship to the structure of society. For more than a century, anthropologists have struggled to account for why Australian kin terms are extended to distant kin and affines the way they are. Levi-Strauss' fame, for example, is based on his unsuccessful attempt to solve the riddle of Australian kinship. But no one has used an approach based on selection.

One widely recognized, but rarely emphasized, fact of Australian societies is an extremely high level of violence and killing between males competing directly or indirectly for mates. But the relationship between this violence and their kinship and marriage systems has not been recognized. Like tribal societies generally, Australians are polygynous, and we here at this conference on human behavior and evolution can understand why the violence and killing between males could be related to their high level of polygyny. Old males tend to get most of the young wives, requiring younger adult males either to wait for many years to get a reproductive wife or to risk their life committing adultery with nubile wives of an old male. This is not because males control females. After their first marriage, which ends when their old husband dies, females can choose their subsequent husbands, staying within the proper kinship category. And their first chosen husbands will tend to be the most desirable: old and influential.

Before we go further, let us review some important facts about kinship. First, all tribal societies are based on kinship. That is, cooperation is limited to kinship relations. Second, the more close kin one has, the better are one's chances for staying alive, marrying well, and leaving descendants. Third, all societies have various marriage prohibitions. By prohibiting marriage between close kin, individuals, when they marry, are forced to marry more distant kin. The major effect of such marriage prohibitions is to increase the number of identifiable kin of offspring. For example, if a brother and a sister were to marry, their offspring would have very few kinsmen, for they would lose their aunt and uncle (who are now their parents), and they would have only two grandparents. If first cousins were to marry, because they share many kinsmen, their offspring would acquire fewer kin than if their parents were not closely related. Marrying someone from another clan, rather than one's own, gives one's offspring two clans of kinsmen instead of one. If a Swede married a Congolese, their offspring would acquire at birth all the kin of their Swedish parent and a completely different set of kin through their Congolese parent. The further away parents and ancestors can force the marriages of their descendants, the more identifiable kin their subsequent descendants will have. And the more likely that they, in turn, will leave descendants, and pass on, among other things, the traditional marriage prohibitions.

But the fly in this ointment is that the further away one must look for a spouse, the harder it is to get one. As a Hewa of Papua New Guinea responded when I asked why he did not marry a certain female: "Why would her father give her to me?" What he meant was that she was so distant a kinsman that her father would feel no obligation to help him in any way. Kinship obligations, encouraged by ancestors, always include helping kin to leave descendants. And one necessary condition for a man to leave descendants is to get one or more mates. Closer kin are everywhere favored over more distant kin. In societies with a fairly high level of polygyny, traditional kinship obligations always include helping your closer, younger male kin get wives, and sometimes this means giving them a daughter, or even a daughter-in-law.

So this is the dilemma: the further away your descendants marry, the more kin your descendants are likely to have. But the greater the polygyny, the more difficult it is to get wives, and the stronger will be the obligations to help your closer and younger male kin get wives. Until recently, Australian Aborigines apparently have been quite isolated from other peoples for thousands of years. Their traditions, therefore, are a result of fine tuning by selection, through millennia. Traditions that most help leave descendants tend to replace those that help less. The most widespread traditions are those that have been the most successful. Young boys are promised wives by rather close kinsmen through the gift of a mother-in-law, especially if they behave themselves and stay away from other men's wives. Using the Tiwi as an example, when they are about thirty they will tend to get an old wife who has gone through a number of husbands, and who is likely to be incapable of reproducing. It won't be before they are forty or even fifty that they will get the young, nubile wives promised to them at birth through mother-in-law bestowal. But then, if they outlive their brothers, they will also acquire their brothers' wives.

Through traditional marriage prohibitions, ancestors try to push marriage further away, but their descendants will often marry just beyond the prohibition because their closer kin are more likely to favor them and give them their daughters as wives. In Australia, marriage just beyond the prohibition has become not only an expectation but a kinship obligation. Males expect to receive daughters from certain relatives, and parents are obliged to give their daughters to certain male kin. This has led parents in many, if not all, Australian tribes to bestow each daughter, when young, as a “mother-in-law” to a particular kind of male kinsman who eventually will marry the daughters of their daughter.

There is another problem in societies with high polygyny. As mentioned above, the more kin one has the more support and influence one tends to have. But males, even male kinsmen, can be fierce competitors for wives. And such competition can destroy kinship cooperation and support. One universal solution in Australia is to encourage marriage in one’s own generation and discourage it between adjacent generations. This significantly reduces the chances of male kin in the above generation, including fathers and uncles, from taking females from their sons and nephews. The result of this prohibition is increased cooperation between kinsmen in adjacent generations. Cooperation between male kinsmen is the basis of their individual influence in the world. The marriage usually anticipated in Australia is not to your mother’s brother’s daughter, who, as a first cousin, is usually said to be too close. The most widespread anticipated marriage is with a second cousin, in particular a male’s MMBDD (see Figure 1). This is cited almost everywhere as the proper marriage, the “proper road to follow”, and thus represents the best solution to the problems described above: to push marriage as far away as possible and, at the same time, help your male kin get wives on their generation.

From birth onwards you and your kinsmen know which kin can be your wives, and therefore who their mothers are, your potential mothers-in-law and, hence, even the parents who produce your potential mothers-in-law.

Sections and subsections

There is a related kinship phenomenon in Australia that has attracted much anthropological attention: the so-called section and subsection systems, which are unique in the world. No discussion of Australian kinship can ignore them. Here, I’ll sketch a possible explanation for this unusual phenomenon which not only is consistent with the kinship arrangements described above but, I believe, promotes them.

Every tribe in Australia uses both kin terms and ancestral (often called clan or estate) names to identify kinsmen.² In some tribes they also have moiety names

² Cooperation between individual kinsmen is the basis of all human societies. In tribal societies, it is the only form of cooperation. Everywhere, close kin are identified by kin terms which, in English, include father, sister, uncle etc. Although kin terms everywhere are extended metaphorically (a fact that attests to the importance of true kinship), the literal meaning of kin terms always

(from the French word meaning “half”), which are a pair of ancestral or descent names that serve to identify at least an entire tribe (see Figure 2). Because marriage usually is prohibited within one’s own moiety, everyone has a father of one moiety and a mother of the other. Consequently, by these two names everyone in the tribe, and often beyond, is identified as a co-descendant. But in addition to these methods of identifying kinsmen, something like two-thirds of all Australian tribes have what usually are called section or subsection names³ And it is these two systems, more than anything, that have brought anthropologists studying Australian kinship to their knees. But Radcliffe Brown⁴ noted perspicaciously: The relationships between one person and another in the kinship system are individual relationships. In deciding what they are, appeal is always made to actual genealogical connection... [As] to the suitability of a proposed marriage it is the genealogical connection between the two persons that is considered... [W]hen the genealogical connection is too remote to be traced the natives fall back on a consideration of the section or subsection or the clan to which an individual belongs, but... in the minds of the natives themselves they are dealing, throughout all the ramifications of the kinship system, with real genealogical relations of parent and child or sibling and sibling.

Both section and subsection names identify individuals with a line of ancestors and hence, like ancestral or descent names in general (such as a clan or family name), function to identify distant kin who share ancestors. Like moiety names, they identify everyone in the tribe. And like moiety names they are used to distinguish marriageable from non-marriageable kin. But unlike moiety names, they distinguish adjacent generations (which of course is consistent with marriage being prohibited or discouraged between kin on adjacent generations).

Both section and subsection names seem to be determined matrilineally. That is, your name is determined by, but is not the same as, your mother’s name,

implies precise genealogical distance. The function of kin terms is to identify that distance. The metaphorical extension of kin terms, including to distant kin, is aimed at encouraging behavior normally associated with their literal meaning. In other words, when you call someone “father” who is not your father, you are trying to get him to act like a father by implying that you will act toward him as his child. Kin terms also often indicate sex and relative age, which may be the basis of rank.

In addition to kin terms, in all societies perhaps, individuals use descent or ancestral names (such as a clan name or what we would call a “family” name) to identify distant kin, individuals with whom they share a distant common ancestor. Individuals in a tribal society who share the same ancestral name are assumed to be co-descendants (and usually are). Even today, in modern societies individuals with the same “family” name often are suspected of being distant kinsmen. But everywhere in tribal societies, although two individuals may not themselves share a name, if even one grandmother of each of them is called by the same ancestral name, the two individuals are thereby identified as codescendants, even though neither they nor their parents personally bear the name of their common ancestor. That is, if I have a grandmother whose family name is Green, and you also have a grandmother of that name, we are thereby identified as codescendants – kin of one another. Thus, ancestral names function to identify far more codescendants than those who actually bear the same ancestral name.

³ Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines*, 1956.

⁴ A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Social Organisation of Australian Tribes*, 436

which in turn was determined by, but was not the same as, her mother's name and so on.

A section system has four names, two in each moiety (see Figure 3). If I am an X, my mother will be a Y, and her mother an X, and so on. Thus, Y's together with X's are a matrilineal moiety, but one whose members distinguish adjacent generations. And like a moiety, X's and Y's are not expected to marry one another. My father (as well as my spouses) should come from the other moiety, also identified by two names transmitted matrilineally, which also serve to distinguish adjacent generations.

Thus, the four-name section system is used to identify 1) distant codescendants and 2) who is marriageable and who is not (see Figure 4). If I am an X and my mother a Y, my father should be in another section, P in Figure 4. The proper spouse for a Y is a P, and the proper spouse for me, an X, is in the fourth section – Q. Y's should marry P's and X's should marry Q's.

Much has been written on the section and subsection systems, and much is controversial. The problem is this: while everyone in the tribe is identified by one of four names, in each family, three of the four section names are represented: the father is identified by one, the mother by another, and the children by still a third. The same is true of the subsection system: although it has eight names, three are found in each small family. Obviously, these names do not identify any kind of residential group.

The obvious question is why do they have them? What function does such a system serve? How have they contributed to ancestral success in leaving descendants? How has a naming system that distinguishes adjacent generations within a moiety helped to leave descendants more than simply having a single name for the moiety? Single named moieties are found in many parts of the world, but nowhere outside of Australia are sections found. How has the unique section system been selected for? Firstly, the two conditions necessary for the emergence of the section system are

1. Exogamous (matrilineal) moieties.
2. Prohibition of marriage between individuals in adjacent generations, which has the effect of preventing competition between "mother's-brothers" and their "sister's sons". These two conditions lead to the anticipation of marriage with a cross cousin. The section system, by distinguishing generations and matrilinities, identifies explicitly who is and who is not marriageable.

The additional condition, leading to the development of the subsection system:

3. Prohibition of marriage with the true cross cousin.

This prohibition does occur in some tribes using the section system. The purpose or function may be, as argued elsewhere, to create more close kinsmen for offspring. The subsection system serves to distinguish first cross cousins, who are prohibited to marry, from second cross cousins, who are marriageable. It also distinguishes all the other relevant categories in regard to marriage.

The answer is simple:

The section system has two functions. First, like a moiety name, it serves to identify distant kin. Second, by distinguishing adjacent generations it facilitates, for both sexes, the identification of whom one can and cannot marry.

And the subsection system? All Australian researchers agree that the subsection system, with eight names, must be related, somehow and in a simple way, to the section system with four names. Like the section names they are determined apparently by the mother's name and identify, like the section system, two matrilineal moieties. But they distinguish twice as many generations in each moiety – not just two, but four (see Figure 5). In the subsection system, four names distinguish a fixed order of generations in one moiety, and four in the other, each name repeating every four generations, rather than two, as in the section system. That is, if one is a D, then one's mother is a C, her mother a B, and her mother an A. And finally, the mother of an A is again a D. But the obvious question is, what is the benefit of this complexity? What does it add to the section system, which already distinguishes adjacent generations?

In many Australian tribes marriage between first cousins is prohibited, and this is true even in many tribes with a four-name section system. Because the individuals in one's own moiety and in adjacent generations in the opposite moiety are prohibited in marriage, the anticipated marriage in tribes using a section system (indeed in most tribes), is with a cousin (called by anthropologists a "cross cousin") in one's own generation in the opposite moiety (the cousins in one's own moiety – who are not marriageable – are parallel cousins, usually called "brother" and "sister" (Figure 4). But, while all individuals in that "spot" in the opposite moiety on one's own generation will have the same section name and be called by the same kin terms, the actual first cousins are often prohibited. The closest acceptable marriage is with a so-called second "cross" cousin, who will be classified by the same section name.

I propose that the eight-name subsection system functions to distinguish, for everyone, their "first cross cousin", who should not be married, from the second cross cousin, who is not only the closest marriageable kin but the one anticipated to be the marriage partner (Figure 6). This is, for a male, his mother's mother's brother's daughter's daughter. In the section system, these two kinds of cross cousins are classified by the same section name (see Figure 4). Because of the marriage prohibition on first cousin marriage, individuals in many tribes have come to distinguish, not only by kin terms but also by subsection names, their first cross cousin, who is not marriageable, from their second cross cousin, who is marriageable. The parents of your second cross cousins, therefore, who are your potential mothers – and fathers – in-law, are in different subsections than the parents of your first cross cousins. A child of an actual mother's brother or a father's sister, whom one should not marry, is in one subsection, while a child of one's MMBD, whom a male not only can marry, but is expected to marry, is in another subsection, his "marriageable" subsection. In the four-name section system, the mother's brother's daughter is in the same category as the MMBDD. In the eight-name subsection system, for

everyone, males and females, they are explicitly distinguished. My argument would be threatened if an eight-name subsection system were found that encouraged or anticipated marriage with the first cross cousin (MBD). Figure 7 shows every male marrying his MMBDD, who is not at the same time his MBD.

Conclusion

In summary, I have argued that the reason why individuals have the four-name section system, as opposed to simply a moiety system, is to distinguish kinsmen in adjacent generations in order to promote marriages on the same generation. The prohibition of marriage between individuals on adjacent generations is aimed at reducing conflict over women between male kinsmen on adjacent generations. The eight-name subsection system is aimed at distinguishing first cross cousins, where such marriage is prohibited, from second cross cousins, whose marriage is anticipated. The subsection system always distinguishes two types of cousins.

Actual genealogical distance is always important, but after the “arranged” marriages end, females may marry somewhat more distant kin in the proper genealogical spot. Nevertheless, they should not marry in adjacent generations nor in their own moiety. Both the kin terms and the section and subsection names facilitate the identification of acceptable and non-acceptable spouses, for both sexes. And by marrying acceptable spouses, individuals have tended to maximize the fitness of their descendants. Mother-in-law bestowal, by anticipating the proper marriage, years in advance, has had the beneficial effect of reducing competition for females. The section and subsection systems do the same, by reducing competition between male kin on adjacent generations.

Figure 1: Marriage of a male with his mother’s mother’s brother’s daughter’s daughter:



Legend:

O female

I male

O — I siblings

O — I parent

I

O child

O=I marriage

Figure 2: Matrilineal Moieties

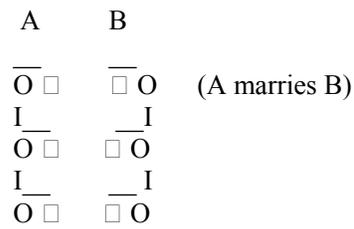


Figure 3: Matrilineal Section System

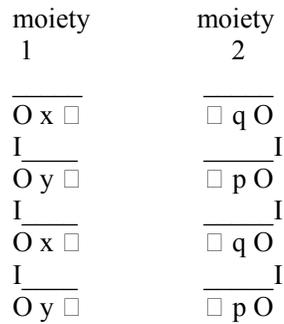


Figure 4: Section System Marriages (Four-names)

Section Marriages (see chart below):

X = Q (X marries Q)

Y = P (Y marries P)

Ideal chart showing matrilineal determination of sections and every male marrying his MBD:

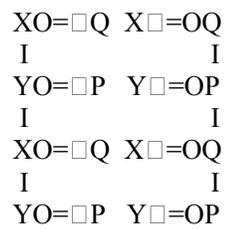


Figure 5: Matrilineal Subsection System

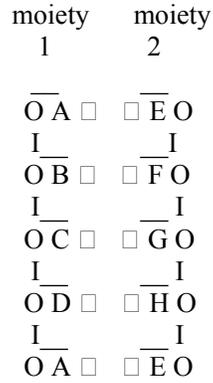


Figure 6: Section vs Subsection Marriage

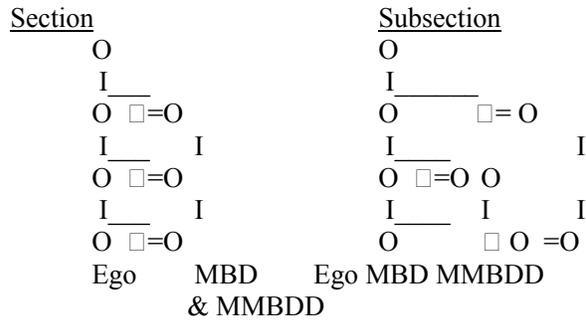
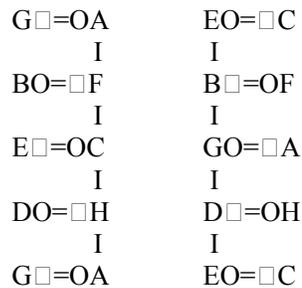


Figure 7: Subsection Marriages

Subsection marriages: A = G (A marries G)
 B = F
 C = E
 D = H

Ideal chart showing matrilineal determination of subsections and every male marrying his mother's mother's brother's daughter's daughter, who is not at the same time his mother's brother's daughter:



Note: Except for the very top and bottom lines, those with the same subsection name are siblings. In regard to mother-in-law bestowal, the couple (female) B=F would give their young daughter, C, as a mother-in-law to (male) H, who would marry her daughter, D. The top couple, (male) G=A, gives their daughter, B, as mother-in-law to male E. The subsection names distinguish other relevant categories, such as one's potential parents-in-law from one's mother's brothers and father's sisters, who may marry. That is, for example, for the bottom (male) G, whose father is B and mother F, these section names B and F also distinguish his mother's brothers (F) and his father's sisters (B) from his potential mothers-in-law (female D) and fathers-in-law (male H).