

COMMENT ON DENHAM'S
BEYOND FICTIONS OF CLOSURE IN AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL KINSHIP

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Denham begins his paper on Australian Aboriginal marriage with two diagrams, Figures 1.1 and 1.2, which he describes as 'canonical mechanical models of Kariera and Aranda kinship' (p. 4). These are what he calls examples of 'generational closure' because they, and so many other similar kinship term charts, indicate 'systematic bilateral sibling exchange in marriage' (p. 6 footnote 2). He then goes on to argue, persuasively, that for reasons of human biology, including the need to avoid inbreeding, and because of a significant average age gap between Aboriginal men and their wives under the classical regimes, such closure could not have been practicable. As a result, these societies were in fact more open than closed, as kin networks or groups, than orthodoxy would have us believe. In other words, men could not have, as a general rule, married their actual mothers' brothers' daughters as the kinship diagrams purported to describe.

While I agree with Denham's views about the impracticability of sustained first cousin marriage, and his views on societal openness (which was nevertheless highly variable depending on climatic regime), I do not agree that closure has been the orthodox model. It has always been my understanding that diagrams such as those reproduced by Denham at the start of his paper are meant to show the kintypes that are the designata of the kin terms. They always show, for example, not only a marriage for Ego but also siblings of both sexes for Ego's parents, and the offspring of those people. As everybody knows, not all parents have siblings, not all parents' siblings survive childhood, and not all mothers' brothers marry let alone have children. I am puzzled that Denham has taken these schemata literally instead of semantically.

Denham appears to assign a closed-system view on cousin marriage to A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1930-31). But a reading of the latter work shows that Radcliffe-Brown was fully aware that Australian prescriptive marriage systems varied from those that prescribed first-cousin marriage but also practiced marriages between distant or remote classificatory kin of the same two classes, to those that firmly prohibited first cousin marriage but prescribed second cousin – usually between a man and his MMBDD - or more distant marriage, to those that prohibited both first and second cousin marriage and insisted instead on marriages between more genealogically and geographically distant kin belonging to a range of prescribed or acceptable classes. Not all of the latter were cousins, either. For a continent-wide range of examples see Radcliffe-Brown (1930-31: 48, 210, 212, 224, 231, 236, 245, 329, 333, 335, 337, 339, 446-447). These include the following statements about the Kariera, one of Denham's prime alleged examples of an anthropological report claiming first cousin marriage as a canonical model:

Marriage of actual first cousins is approved and indeed is regarded as the proper form of marriage, though of course *it only occurs in a limited number of instances*. (Radcliffe-Brown 1930-31: 210; emphasis added, PS)

In the marriage system of the Kariera a man looks first for a wife to his mother's brother, *i.e.* to his mother's horde. ... But even in the tribes of the Kariera type there are factors tending towards the expansion of solidarity, the widening of the social circle. ...When a youth is to be initiated into manhood he sent on a journey which lasts frequently for several months. ... Now it seems *that a man tries to obtain a wife from a distant horde on his own [initiation] road, and sometimes succeeds in doing so.* ... This aspect of the Kariera system is, I think, an important one intending to produce a wider integration. (Radcliffe-Brown 1930-31: 446-447; emphasis added, PS)

Recall, also, that Radcliffe-Brown regarded the west coast Kariera as lying at one extreme in even permitting first cousin marriage. In the majority of groups described by him in 1930-31 this is prohibited or at least frowned upon. At the other extreme were for example the east coast Kumbaingeri in which 'It is considered desirable that every member of a horde should establish by marriage relations with some distant horde' and first cousin marriage was prohibited (Radcliffe-Brown 1930-31:448).

Another of Denham's main points, and one of his more admittedly speculative ones, is that there have long been in Aboriginal Australia 'cyclical changes between more closed and more open societies' (p. 66), operating in a kind of pulsating or oscillating pattern over time. In the absence of conclusive evidence I am nonetheless inclined to support this view. It is reminiscent of Radcliffe-Brown's hypothesis that the more closed and more open prescriptive marriage rules of different Australian groups were elements of

an evolutionary process, for evolution, as the term is used here, is a process by which stable integrations at a higher level [e.g. as in Aranda] are substituted for or replace integrations at a lower level [e.g. as in Kariera] (Radcliffe-Brown 1930-31:452)

Denham's cyclical model is also consistent with what we do know, especially from the intersection of recent ethnography with regional linguistic prehistories, about the correlation between societal openness (e.g. assigning land rights biographically and spiritually rather than by membership of corporate descent groups) and recent migration or language spread, on the one hand, and relative closedness, patrilineality and long-term *in situ* linguistic efflorescence on the other (e.g. McConvell 1996; Sutton & Vaarzon-Morel 2003).

This interest in range of variation is not matched by Denham in his treatments of Australian language-group size and rates of linguistic exogamy. Several times he cites the allegedly average size of 500 people per Australian 'tribe' or linguistic/territorial group (pp. 7, 11), and although he does say we cannot be sure about this number (p. 26), more should be said here. The massive actual range of such group sizes makes such an average misleading at best. Denham would have improved this discussion by reference to my discussion under the heading 'Language group size' in Sutton (2003:79-80), where I described a part of Cape York Peninsula, with a figure of 35-60 people per named linguistic group, as being in deep contrast with western New South Wales, from which contact-period language group population estimates of 3,000 to 7,000 are reported. Further, Denham's tendency to make an equivalence between these named linguistic groups and

'societies' is not discussed as problematic, when it is indeed highly so. Multilingualism and social integration between owners of different languages was traditionally very high in Australia and in some remote regions still is. Denham relies on linguistic exogamy evidence (p. 13) that only includes cases where the exogamy rate ranges between 7.7 and 22.7 per cent, yielding a continental average of 14.8 per cent. In my view this is at the low end of the range of variation.

For example, in a detailed study of a copious sample of 291 traditional marriages among Aboriginal people of the Wik region of Cape York peninsula, carried out in the 1970s but using genealogies dating back to the pre-settlement era, I made the following observations (Sutton 1978:109-111):

1. Nine named dialects of the region could be subdivided into five distinct languages, the latter being languages (mutually unintelligible varieties) in the linguists' sense of the term.
2. Marriages between partners having the same named dialect of the same language were 26% of the total.
3. Marriages between partners having differently named dialects of the same language were 12% of the total.
4. Marriages between partners having differently named dialects of *different* languages were 62% of the total.

These figures included marriages of owners of three dialects of one particular distinct language whose linguistic exogamy rate was 100%. This was simply because their members, in any one generation, were all classed as siblings, while they shared the Wik marriage rule that a man must marry a woman classed as his MB-D (junior cross-cousin). Linguistic endogamy in their cases would have required them to break their own incest taboo.

I will give here just one other example, this time using the field data of Norman Tindale and Joseph Birdsell. Tindale in 1953-54 and Birdsell in 1954 recorded genealogies of Aboriginal people at various locations in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia. I have examined the marriages of Nyikina and Mangarla people in these genealogies, and the following figures are based on marriages which occurred only in the upper generations (late 19th and early 20th centuries), so as to minimise any possible effects of post-colonial impacts (see Tindale 1953a).

Nyikina – non-Nyikina marriages: 23 out of 41 = 57%

Mangarla – non-Mangarla marriages: 3 out of 13 = 24%

It would not take the addition of very many more similar cases from other regions of Australia to send the continental average used by Denham climbing upwards at a steep angle. It should be recalled that Tindale's (1953b:182) calculations leading him to a continental percentage of 14% for 'extra-tribal marriages' were based on a list of marriages that contained a very large number of language groups for which only one or a very few marriages had been recorded. In fact for 36 of Tindale's 102 'tribes' – 35% of the total - only a single marriage was used for his analysis. I'm no statistician but methodologically I would feel a whole lot more comfortable with much greater numbers of marriages per 'tribe', even if that meant using data on many fewer 'tribes'.

Small samples are a problem for tribe-specific linguistic exogamy calculations as well. For example, Denham's Alyawarra data on this topic (p. 13) are copious, consisting of 207 marriages, and yielding a linguistic exogamy rate of about 30%, just under a third. Tindale's Alyawarra marriage data (1953b:183) consist of 34 marriages and yield, instead, only 8% linguistic exogamy. The variance is huge, even though Tindale's sample is large by his usual standards. Where only one or two examples of marriages are available per group, percentages approach meaninglessness.

Language group size has a more or less mechanical effect on linguistic exogamy rates. The larger the language group, the more likely one would be to find an appropriate spouse who happened to be of the same language as oneself. The latter, by the way, is not usually recorded as a local cultural preference. The smaller the language group, the more likely one was to marry outside one's language group. The issue of 'permeating social boundaries' does not necessarily arise in the latter case any more than in the former, contrary to Denham's implications. Distant people of one's own (large) language are likely to be far more distant kin than people of adjacent countries but different languages, absent a recent history of abutment and contact, such as is demonstrable at the linguistic and genetic 'Aranda scarp' in Central Australia (Birdsell 1993:453). The key social barrier is usually genealogical distance and absence of affinal links. Language difference is only a barrier when it coincides with other forms of distance, including both genealogical distance and distance between marriage rules. Language groups are and were not societies. And they only approach being 'populations' in any relatively closed sense where they demonstrably have high endogamy rates. Many do not.

I will mention a few other disagreements very briefly. Dousset's data on section terms are presented as being of the Western Desert (e.g. p42) while they actually come from both the Western Desert (a single-language area of low dialectal diversity and recent migration, McConvell 1996) and neighbouring languages from different and more stable stocks. The role of 'genocide' and 'stolen generations' in Aboriginal colonial-era depopulation (e.g. pp26-27, is exaggerated at the expense of the epidemiology of infection clearly involved in most of the loss of life and fertility on and after the frontier. And the attribution of long historical memory to traditional Aboriginal people (p53) is repeatedly contradicted by evidence from various eminent field scholars that traditionally these were a people who were profoundly ahistorical in outlook.

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