

*Kinship Organization Among Indigenous Australians*

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Aboriginal population inhabited the Australian continent for thousands of years. Although no definite figure for the number of years or the population of aboriginal population exists, scholars have estimated that 300,000 to 1 million aboriginal people lived in Australia when the continent became a British population. Similarly, carbon-dated remains in the land indicate that aboriginals lived in the land since 45,000 years back. In the Torres Strait islands, there is positive indication that human life existed there at least 10,000 years ago. Anthropological knowledge about the indigenous Australians originates from their oral traditions and the recordings of the European voyagers and settlers in the early nineteenth century (Fryer-Smith, 2002). Although much of the research is speculative, it gives an idea of the ancient lifestyle and social organizations that arose from a typical kinship model.

Social organization and kinship of the Australian aboriginals is a complex system and very different from the western idea. Sutton (1999, cited in Dousset, 2002) wrote "For indigenous claimants to prove their native titles in Australia, among other things they need to show not only that they have rights in country according to their own system of laws and customs, but also that such a system is a rightful descendant of an *organised* society which occupied the relevant area at the time when British sovereignty was established". Although the colonial rulers considered the aboriginals as forming a "non-society", it was quite organized in its kinship structures hence had rigid social organizations and cultural obligations of rules and norms (Dousset, 2002). Hence, cultural recognition of the Australian aboriginals and their rights to the Native Title are closely related to the understanding of the kinship. As Finalyson, Rigsby and Bek (1999, cited in Dousset, 2002) say, "The terms kin and kinship do not actually appear in the

Mabo No. 2 decision, the Native Title Act or the Native Title Amendment Act 1998.

Anthropologists think them important, however, in understanding and describing how individuals and groups come to have or acquire native title rights and interests in land and waters”.

The aboriginal society was composed of a number of language groups, many of which were semi-nomadic, living in the local flora and fauna with very little farming activities. The semi-nomadic lifestyle required hardly any permanent dwelling facilities and a meager amount of tools and possessions. However, the language groups formed their own culture norms based on the local territorial characteristics and the social organizations revolved around child rearing, medicine, food preparations and ceremonies (Fryer-Smith, 2002).

Kinship structures are based on biological roots but goes beyond to encompass rules, norms and obligations that groups of people adhere to (Dousset, 2002). The extended concept of family and familial obligations formed the basis of rights. The basic principle of Australian aboriginal kinship was “the equivalence of the same-sex sibling” (Berndt and Berndt, 1988 quoted in Fryer-Smith, 2002), by which the offspring considers the father (or mother) and the father’s brother (or mother’s sister) as equivalent, that is, both as “father”, one as the biological father (or mother) and the other as classificatory (or formal) father (or mother). Hence, the relationship that the Euro-American world knows as uncle or aunt becomes parents as well in aboriginal Australian kinship pattern in case of same-sex siblings. Thus, one person may have a number of formal fathers and mothers. To continue the lineage, the children of classificatory fathers and mothers are regarded as brothers and sisters, not as cousins. However, if the sibling line is not of the

same sex, then the concept of classificatory parents do not hold. The father's sister is an aunt and the mother's brother is an uncle, as it is in the western kinship order. The same-sex sibling equivalence makes the kinship system even more complex down the lineage. Even distant relations may then turn out to be brothers and sisters in this hierarchy (Fryer-Smith, 2002).

According to Morgan (1965, cited in Dousset, 2002, the anthropologist who coined the term "classificatory kinship", aboriginal Australian society was composed of tribes, defined by territorial land, further composed of patrilineal landholding clans, which again was composed of groups of kinsmen and kinswomen who were descendants of a common ancestor. Clans might have been linked through marriage ties but kinship relations were strictly followed.

From the kinship order follows the social rights and obligations in all matters of food gathering, marriage, child rearing and so on. The kinship structure defined the political, social and economic realm. No person then is isolated and the orphan and widow are looked after the kinship. Any person neglecting these kinship obligations is considered wayward. Concurrently, the kinship structure ordains that some relationships are to avoid proximity. For example, adolescent brothers and sisters (biological and classificatory) should have a distance between them to the extent of not calling each other by their names. A man is barred from talking to or even setting sight on his mother-in-law in order to protect the latter becoming a competitor to his wife. The kinship avoidance rules are most prominent in ceremonies and festivals when the avoiding parties sit in different groups (Fryer-Smith, 2002).

Elders have a significant role to play not only in the kinship structures but also in the language groups formed on the basis of the kinship models. The elders are the main decision-makers in matters of disputes, education of children or property rights. The elders are “heeded and unquestioned” (Jacob, quoted in Fryer-Smith, 2002). However, social decisions were usually taken on consensus rather than by dictate. Stanner said, aboriginal people “needed credible motive for having to choose. ... They need information... They need time, all the time needed to work out the implications, how this will affect that and how that will affect something else”.

Although the aboriginal Australian society was basically patriarchal, in the sense that women left their parental home after marriage and lived in the husband’s house, recent anthropological studies have shown that women had a significant role to play in major kin ceremonies and rituals. At times, women’s voice was heard even in matters of land and property (Fryer-Smith, 2002).

The kinship rights and obligations were strictly adhered to, most significantly through the system of gifts. Although the economic value of the gifts were not important, a man gave gifts of tools and equipment to his initiators as he entered a profession and earthly things to his wife’s family at marriage (Fryer-Smith, 2002). Like giving gifts, sharing food and other belongings was an essential element of kinship.

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