

Skin, Kin and Clan: The Dynamics of Social Categories in Indigenous Australia

edited by Patrick McConvell, Piers Kelly
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Skin, Kin and Clan arose out of the second phase of a project called ‘Austkin’ funded by the Australian Research Council and based at The Australian National University. Its first phase focused on recording and cataloguing Australian Aboriginal kin terminologies, the classification of kinship systems, and historical-linguistic analysis of relations among kin terms and social categories. This volume deals with the history of documentation of social categorisation in Australia, and interrelationships among forms of social categorisation – sections, subsections, semi-moieties, phratries, kinship and marriage rules and practices. A number of the chapters deal critically with aspects of these traditional objects of Aboriginalist study, while most of the chapters investigate the developmental histories of kinship terminologies and social category systems. The core concern of the project’s second phase, as the title indicates, was the historical development and dynamics (especially spatial diffusion) of kinship and social category systems. Several of the chapters exemplify use of historical-linguistic analysis to clarify relationships among forms of social categorisation, while others foreground questions of the factors that condition their development.

Following a useful Introduction to chapters in the volume, in a first chapter, Piers Kelly and Patrick McConvell trace a history of (outsiders’) understanding of Aboriginal social categories. Initial shaping in social evolutionist terms was followed by (partial) challenges to this in the twentieth century, and particular impetus has been given to study of kinship and social systems by land rights since the 1960s.

Chapter 3 by Laurent Dousset examines patterns and changes in mappings of Australian social categories (moieties, clans, and so on) – crystallisations of ideas about social forms (and Indigenous society) at particular times. Dousset demonstrates a shift from more bounded to more dynamic cartographic representations.

In Chapter 4 Raymond Madden examines arguments about western Victorian ‘clans’, from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sources (Dawson, Howitt) to more recent ones. He shows how the idea of clans as ‘matrilineal’ became established though the evidence for this is equivocal. The chapter points to the complexity of application of different forms of interpretation (oral and written) to accounts of Indigenous social organisation, intensified in the present period in which Indigenous groups have a keen interest in the ethnohistorical and other documentary accounts of their ancestral groups.

In Chapter 5 Mark Harvey, aiming to compare disputation over kinship and marriage claims with disputation over claims to land in western Arnhem Land, attempts reconstruction of systems in both domains.

Chapter 6 by Harold Koch, the late Luise Hercus and Piers Kelly focuses on six sets of moiety names from the east of South Australia to Central Victoria. They show that the distribution of these famous ‘Eaglehawk and Crow’ and other similar terms does not correlate closely with language. They infer that these sets have spread by diffusion from formerly highly populated regions of the Murray and Darling rivers following the diversification of languages.

In Chapter 7, using notes of Daisy Bates and Radcliffe-Brown, Peter Sutton examines the evidence for patriclan sets or ‘phratries’ in the Ashburton district of Western Australia, and compares them with analogous forms in other parts of the continent. The material illustrates the significance of categories that, though grounded in patrilineal localism, also cross-cut it and created wider regional categories perhaps comparable to groupings such as sections elsewhere.

In Chapter 8 Patrick McConvell follows up his considerable earlier work on the origins of subsections, examining the origins of section systems in Australia’s central north. He sees them as arising from modifications in marriage rules and territorial associations of earlier systems of patrimoiety categories, and proposes a geographic location of such changes.

In Chapter 9 McConvell and Maïa Ponsonnet examine the ‘colexification’ (additional senses) of terms for Indigenous language terms for the category of ‘subsection’, showing that a large proportion have to do with smell, flavour, body, head, name and other aspects of the person. They suggest a location of origin for colexification with (English) ‘skin’ in the northern Arnhem coastal Iwaidjan languages, thence

into the pidgin around the Cobourg Peninsula (where there was an early British settlement). Designation of ‘subsections’ as ‘skins’ was not formerly general usage in Aboriginal English and Kriol, but now has become so.

In Chapter 10 Harold Koch exemplifies how to deploy historical-linguistic analysis, especially close examination of sound changes, to document the relative timing and adoption of subsection terms into Arandic languages.

In Chapter 11 Tony Jefferies argues for the significance in Indigenous social systems of the ‘close–distant’ kin dichotomy. While the importance of this distinction seems beyond doubt, clearer analysis of the dimensions that constitute its terms, socially and spatially, is needed. Some matters presented as relevant to the close–distant dichotomy, such as terminological generation merging in relation to clans, are not clearly shown to be so.

In Chapter 12 Mary Laughren performs detailed analysis of comparable sex- and generation-marking ‘anomalies’ in Waanyi (Gulf of Carpentaria), Warlpiri (Central Australia) and other kin terminologies, examining what might condition them. She rejects a first hypothesis that they can be related to wife exchange and bestowal patterns, but distils some shared features of the terminological systems of the southern Gulf of Carpentaria region along the way.

In the final chapter, Joe Blythe examines the rise of trirelational locutions – ones that encode relations among three persons; roughly, speaker, addressee and a third person – in Murrinhpatha, similar (but not the same as) ‘trirelational’ kin terms documented in various parts of Australia. Calling these ‘incipient’ lexicalisations, Blythe argues that constraints on personal reference, particularly prohibitions on the use of personal names in the context of society-wide kinship, provide the crucial condition. This, I would suggest, treats a need for use of personal names as too determinate; but Blythe’s research methods are interestingly illustrated.

This is a brave effort. Nowadays, treatment of complex kin and category systems is often considered arcane, though it used to be a main part of Aboriginalist studies. Many students of Australian Indigenous social systems today would be hard put to understand some, or parts, of these chapters. They are certainly written in a way that would be beyond the grasp of many people in most Indigenous communities – including those from which the original material came. That is not said as a criticism, but in recognition of a big difference between material treated analytically and that ‘same’ material as the substance of everyday practice. Nevertheless, these chapters show how material of these kinds, some of it older documentation, can be made to address new questions, or old questions in new ways. Principal among such questions is consideration of diffusion of systems across the Australian continent – one principal sense of ‘dynamics’ in the collection. Diffusion raises further questions of social process in relation to Aboriginal Australia, both precolonial and

inextricably linked to colonial incursion. With few exceptions, the conditions and causes of mobility and change are not the subject matter of this volume. Nor would the application of this material to land and native title cases, for example, be simple or straightforward, oriented as it is to dynamism and change in social categorisation. The collection carves out a niche for itself in presenting analyses of categorisation and social structure that illuminate change and contribute to questions that these analyses might help to address.

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