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Seven Aboriginal marriage systems and their correlates

IAN KEEN

Introduction

This paper outlines patterns of kin classification and marriage in seven regions of Australia. It considers the implications of differences in those patterns for such features of economy and society as levels of polygyny, the structure and dynamics of country groups, the form of exchange networks and, very briefly, cosmologies and the roles of religious leaders. The analysis demonstrates certain associations between modes of kin classification and organisational forms such as moieties. Finally, the paper draws conclusions about the environmental and institutional conditions for differences in 'levels' of polygynous marriage, as well as their political and economic consequences.

Comparative studies of Aboriginal kinship and marriage have been rather restricted in scope. In his classic studies, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1913, 1930–31) looked for associations between forms of kin classification and marriage rules, while Lévi-Strauss's (1969) typology of marriage exchange systems defines exchange somewhat narrowly. Other comparative studies have concentrated on kinship semantics (Scheffler 1978) or modelled systems of kinship and marriage as relations among patrifilial groups (Turner 1980). Hamilton's (1980) exploration of the wider social implications of differences in marriage systems is limited to a comparison between the eastern Western Desert and Arnhem Land. This paper attempts to broaden the range of comparison.

The seven cases (Table 1) display immediate contrasts in a number of dimensions. First, they relate to very different environments and resources. Second, the cases represent contrasting culture-areas and language families, both Pama-Nyungan and non-Pama-Nyungan. Third, they sample contrasting social organisational elements, from patri-moieties and patri-groups to gender totems and generation moieties. These are not bounded societies, and not all their names have the same status, but I use them to identify distinct local 'systems'.

The broader study on which this paper is based shows that, in spite of differences in ecology and technology, the basics of the organisation of production and distribution were similar in the seven regions, while kinship and marriage, cosmology, and the ownership of land and waters varied. Differences in marriage bear a strong relationship to some of the differences in the structure of what Sutton (1999) calls 'country groups' and exchange systems, feeding back into the organisation of production, as well as exchange.

Table 1. Peoples and environments^a

People	Region	Environment	Population density
Kûnai (Pama-Nyungan)	Gippsland	Temperate, high year-round rainfall; resources of forests, rivers, lakes, estuaries and coast	High: <i>c.</i> 1 person per 2.5–12 km ²
Yuwaaliyaay and neighbours (Pama-Nyungan)	Barwon-Darling River	Semi-arid, very variable rainfall; resources of savannah grassland, woodland, rivers and lakes	Medium low/low: <i>c.</i> 1 person per 30–60 km ²
Pitjantjatjara and neighbours (Pama-Nyungan)	Eastern Western Desert	Arid zone; low, unreliable rainfall; resources of sandhills and spinifex	Very low: <i>c.</i> 1 person per 80–100 km ²
Sandbeach (Umpila, Kuuku-Ya'û, etc.) (Pama-Nyungan)	Eastern Cape York Peninsula	Tropical monsoon climate, high summer rainfall; resources of rainforest, rivers, coast and sea	Very high: <i>c.</i> 1 person per 2.5–3 km ²
Wiilman/Minong (Pama-Nyungan)	South coast of Southwest Australia	Mediterranean climate, fairly high winter rainfall; resources of heathland, rivers, estuaries and coast	Medium low: <i>c.</i> 1 person per 25–50 km ² (hinterland), higher on coast
Ngarinyin and their neighbours (non-Pama-Nyungan, Worrorran family)	Northwest Kimberley	Tropical monsoon climate; resources of rugged uplands, woodland, rivers, grassland, estuaries, coast and sea	Medium (hinterland) to high (coast): <i>c.</i> 1 person per 10–25 km ²
Yolngu (Pama-Nyungan)	Northeast Arnhem Land	Tropical monsoon climate; resources of forests, rivers, swamps, lakes, estuaries, coast and sea	High/very high: <i>c.</i> 1 person per 4–6 km ² ; 0.5 km ² in some localities

^aThe population estimates are derived from discussions in Hotchin (1990) (Kûnai); Allen (1972) (Yuwaaliyaay); Gould (1969, 1980:69) (Pitjantjatjara and their neighbours); Chase (1980:157) (Sandbeach); Bird (1985:126), Le Souëf (1993:52) (Wiil/Minong); Kaberry (1939) (Ngarinyin and neighbours); Thomson (1937–38), Warner (1937:157) (Yolngu).

Types of kinship and marriage systems

The systems of kinship and marriage of the seven case studies sort quite well into four types according to the general form of the kin classification, listed in the following sections. These systems share certain features (Scheffler 1978). According to what Radcliffe-Brown referred to as 'the equivalence of siblings', a parent's sibling of the same sex is referred to by the same term as that parent, so that one's mother's sister is a 'mother' and a father's brother is one's 'father'.

Consequently, one's mother's sister's child is one's 'brother' or 'sister', and so on. This equivalence ramifies through the system: one's mother's mother's sister is one's 'mother's mother', and so on.

A related feature shared among the terminologies is a pattern of 'bifurcate-merging' in the parents' generations: one's parent's same-sex siblings are terminologically equivalent to that parent, but one's father's sister is of a category distinct from one's mother and her sisters, and one's mother's brother is distinguished from one's father and father's brothers. However, the systems differed in many other ways.

'Hawaiian' terminologies

Kûnai and Yuwaaliyaay shared a relatively simple system of kin classification with 'Hawaiian' or generational features in Ego's generation (Ives 1998:100) and, in the Kûnai system, the child's generation as well. All relatives in one's own generation were 'brothers' and 'sisters', but differentiated by relative age. (On Kûnai kin classification and marriage, see Bulmer 1994, n.d.:18; Fison & Howitt 1880:199–204; Howitt 1904; Scheffler 1978:111–112; Smyth 1878:46; Thomas 1860. On Yuwaaliyaay and related systems, see Austin *et al.* 1980; Fison & Howitt 1880:42–49; Howitt 1904:217; Parker 1905:12, 15, 55–56, 81; Ridley 1875; Teulon, in Curr 1886–1887:196.)

Kûnai and Yuwaaliyaay marriage systems differed, however. A Kûnai person was supposed to marry a distantly related 'brother' or 'sister', of a different residence group and patrilineal guardian totem. While some father–daughter and brother–sister bestowal was practised, many marriages apparently had the form of institutionalised elopement; a young couple typically took the opportunity of a large ceremony to abscond. Marriage exchanges sometimes occurred between brother–sister pairs, and it is apparent from the marriage network (reconstructed from Howitt's account of marriages between localities) that reciprocal marriages often linked residence groups.

Among Yuwaaliyaay people, however, infant betrothal appears to have been the norm. Moreover, exogamous totemic matri-groups and matri-moieties (conceived of as having different geographical origins and 'blood') governed marriage. This appears to have taken the form of reciprocal exchange among matri-groups, and may have included sister-exchange between men. Yuwaaliyaay and their neighbours had also adopted a section system, not fully integrated with matri-group exchange.

'Aluridja' terminology

The kin terminology of Pitjantjatjara and their neighbours was of the 'Aluridja type' in Elkin's (1938–40) scheme. It bore some similarity to Kûnai and Yuwaali-

yaay in that one's parallel-cousins and close cross-cousins counted as 'siblings' (differentiated by sex and relative age). However, distant cross-cousins were distinct from siblings. The terminology equated children of one's same-sex sibling with one's own child, but distinguished one's opposite-sex sibling's child from the former. The kin terminology maps neatly on to generation moieties. (On Pitjantjatjara kin terminology and marriage, see Berndt & Berndt 1945:50; Dousset this issue, and pers. comm.; Elkin 1938–40; Long 1970; Munn 1965; Peterson & Long 1986; Scheffler 1978:88ff.; Yengoyan 1967.)

Marriage was preferred between distant cross-cousins or distant cross-grandkin (see Dousset this issue). Infant bestowal was the norm; it was linked to relations between male initiand and circumciser, who became a potential wife's father, and the exchange of sisters and daughters occurred (Dousset pers. comm.).

'Kariera' terminologies

Sandbeach and Wiil/Minong people both possessed Kariera-like systems of kin classification, which merged parallel-cousins with siblings, but distinguished both close and distant cross-cousins from siblings. They differed in the classification of grandkin and children, but they shared the feature in which one's parents' siblings' children were classified by the relative age of the linking parent's sibling (so one's father's younger brother's children were of a different category from one's father's elder brother's children). The Sandbeach terminology had Omaha features, according to which one's close matrilineal cross-cousins were treated as equivalent to one's 'mother' and 'mother's brother' (see McConvell & Alpher this issue). This feature appears to have been linked to the prohibition of marriage with a close cross-cousin. (On Sandbeach kin terminology and marriage, see Chase 1980:174–177, 399–402; Thomson 1935, 1972; on Wiil and Minong kin terminology and marriage, see Bates 1985; Hassell 1936:679–711; Nind 1831:39.)

Ideally, at least, Sandbeach kin terms mapped neatly on to patri-moieties; for example, one would have expected to find one's parallel grandkin, father, siblings and brother's children in one's own moiety, and one's mothers, cross-grandkin, and sisters' children in the opposite one. The Wiil and Minong terminology does not divide so neatly into two 'lines'; grandkin appear to be sorted into 'mother's side' and 'father's side'.

Sandbeach people practised infant bestowal, and the preferred spouse was a distant cross-cousin, but preferably from a geographically close community. Wiil and Minong people also practised infant bestowal and preferred marriage with people of distant communities. As the terminology distinguished distant cross-cousins from close ones, it seems likely that the preferred spouse was a distant cross-cousin.

'Karadjeri' asymmetric systems

Ngarinyin and Yolngu terminology both have asymmetric features, linked with matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, classified by Radcliffe-Brown (1930–31) as 'Karadjeri'. The Ngarinyin terminology possesses some 'Aranda' features as well. (On Ngarinyin kin terminology and marriage, see Blundell & Layton 1978; Elkin 1932, 1970:698; Love 1936; Lucich 1968; Rumsey 1981; Scheffler 1978:387ff.; Turner 1980:99ff. On Yolngu kin terminology and marriage, see Chaseling 1957:61; Keen 1982, 1994:80, 108; Morphy 1978; Scheffler 1978:278ff.; Shapiro 1968, 1981; Warner 1937.)

Certain features of the Yolngu system of kin classification, including the classification of grandkin, cousins, parents' cousins, and their children, resulted in a pattern in which kin terms could be sorted into five 'lines' traced through men: those of one's MMB, MF/FMB, FF, (f.s.)S/ZS, and (f.s.)DS/ZDS. The preferred marriage was between a man and his close matrilineal cross-cousin (MBD, MMBDD) (a woman and her patrilineal cross-cousin) or relatives of the same categories in alternative generations (*e.g.*, MBSSD, MMBSSDD). Marriages appear to 'flow' one way on the diagram of kin terms—those of women from the MMB line to the MF/FMB line, from the MF/FMB line to the FF line, and so on. From Ego's point of view, the kin terms map on to the patri-moieties. People projected kin relations on to patri-groups according to broad marriage relations between them, so that one group was the 'mother' of one, the 'mother's mother' of another and so on; and patri-groups as wholes bore a kin relation to an individual, so that one group was his or her 'mother group', another his or her 'mother's mother' group, and so on.

Yolngu practised infant and wife's mother bestowal. While sister and sisters' daughter exchange were not legitimate forms of marriage, the system did make possible the exchange of sisters' daughters' daughters between men related as WMMB (*ngathiwalkur*) to ZDDH (*dhumun.gur*). These were distinct categories in some varieties of Yolngu kin classification, forming seven 'lines'.

Ngarinyin and their neighbours projected kin relations on to patri-groups in a similar way to Yolngu, but the Ngarinyin mode of kin classification differs in interesting ways. One difference is that there are distinct MF and FMB 'lines', so these grandkin and their patrilineal descendants are not terminologically equivalent. In a second, the MM and (f.s.)DCh/ZDCh categories are self-reciprocal (an Aranda-like feature). Third, kin terms in the MF line are subject to Omaha skewing, and this skewing ramifies through the system. The form of skewing is distinct from that of Sandbeach terminologies, for here the same term applies throughout the 'patriline'.

The preferred marriage was between a man and his FMBS (of the 'father's mother' category) and other women of the same category, who could also have been his MMBDD. Marriages between first cross-cousins (MBD-FZS), classified

as 'mother' and 'woman's child/sister's child' apparently attracted mild sanctions, but did occur. In spite of the self-reciprocal character of WM-DH terms, the exchange of sisters' daughters seems not to have been practised, at least not as a norm (Alan Rumsey pers. comm.).

Levels of polygyny

These varieties of kinship and marriage were broadly correlated with 'levels' of polygyny as recorded in the early ethnography of each region: (i) 'Hawaiian' (Kúnai and Yuwaaliyaay): low polygyny: men were married to up to two, occasionally three, wives concurrently; (ii) 'Aluridja' (Pitjantjatjara and their neighbours): low to moderate polygyny: up to five wives concurrently; (iii) 'Kariara-like' (Sandbeach, Wiil/Minong): low to moderate polygyny: up to four wives concurrently; (iv) 'Karadjeri-like' (Yolngu, Ngarinyin and their neighbours): Ngarinyin and neighbours: high polygyny: up to seven wives concurrently (Worrorra); (v) Yolngu: very high polygyny: up to 26 wives concurrently.

Differences in kinship and marriage had profound effects on social networks, and differences in levels of polygyny affected the structure of groups, and exchange. First, though, I consider the conditions for high levels of polygyny.

The conditions for high levels of polygyny

A number of distributional features in the case studies stand out. One is that the 'Hawaiian' terminologies, associated with low levels of polygyny, occurred both in the rich environment of Gippsland and the semi-arid environment of the Darling Basin. 'Kariara' kin terminologies, associated with patrilineal country groups, and what Lévi-Strauss (1969) called 'restricted' exchange, are also widespread, located at opposite ends of the continent in the case studies (Sandbeach, Wiil/Minong). The 'Aluridja' terminology was restricted to the arid zone. Societies with asymmetric terminologies and high to very high polygyny appear to have been restricted to the coastal regions and large habitable islands of the north coast.

This distribution suggests that ecological conditions placed constraints on levels of polygyny (*cf.* Ives 1998; McConvell & Alpher this issue). High population densities and residence groups at the top of the range of variation were necessary (but not sufficient) to sustain high to very high levels of polygyny, which were not practicable in arid and semi-arid conditions. Yolngu population densities reached about 1 person per km², while densities in the Western Desert were of the order of 1 person per 80–100 km² (Table 1). The main reason suggested is that, with a sparse population and where small residence groups and high mobility were required, high polygyny would have resulted in an inadequate balance of male and female labour for a proportion of groups (Nicolas Peterson

pers. comm.). It would also have been difficult for a highly polygynous male to maintain the cohesion of his family.

The low polygyny of the Kûnai shows that rich resources and a high population density were not sufficient conditions for high polygyny. Population density among Kûnai people was probably high, in a region of relatively high rainfall, and rich resources of estuaries, rivers and extensive lakes. A second condition was institutional. In these case studies, asymmetric matrilineal marriage was required for high levels of polygyny, and this may have been a more general prerequisite.

Reported polygyny among Worrorra people (neighbours of Ngarinyin speakers) (Love 1936:95, 100) lends support to the hypothesis advanced in Keen (1982) that the demographic properties of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, in conjunction with certain other features, make high levels of polygyny possible. Ngarinyin/Worrorra and Yolngu systems shared the feature of marriage between a close or distant MMBDD and MFZDS, which tended to replicate the age difference between potential spouses from generation to generation. Regular marriage between FMBSD and FFZSS, with which the former was combined, would have had the same tendency. Marriage between MBS and FZD, and between certain other varieties of cousin permitted in Kariera-like and Aranda-like systems, do not reproduce appropriate age differences in the same way (Keen 1982; see also Rose 1960a).

Combined with patrilineal groups, high levels of polygyny have important implications for the demographic structure of groups, and processes of growth, decline, fission and fusion.

The structure and dynamics of country groups

Low polygyny

The low polygyny societies of the case studies were associated with non-patrilineal land-holding in the Yuwaaliyaay case, and probably 'weak' patrilineal land-holding among Kûnai people. Patri-moieties were absent in both.

Kûnai combined totemic gender categories with the prohibition of marriage between close kin, and exogamous residence groups (Bulmer, in Curr 1886-87: 546, 1994:7-8; Fison & Howitt 1880:199; Howitt 1904:148). People did share patrilineal guardian totems, and did have rights in the father's country as well as on other grounds, but it is not altogether certain that patrilineal groups 'owned' countries in this region (see below), and there is little correlation between patrilineal totems and the totemic significance of country (Bulmer 1994:7-10, n.d.; Howitt 1904:135).

Yuwaaliyaay and their neighbours seem to have been attached to country on the basis of birth rather than through patrilineal land-holding groups (Allen 1972:

105; Beckett 1967:457; Mathews 1906; Parker 1905:46; cf. Radcliffe-Brown 1954). Instead of the gender totems of Kûnai people, Yuwaaliyaay had exogamous totemic matrilineal groups and matri-moieties (Parker 1905:16).

Rather than localised totemic ancestors, in the cosmology of Yuwaaliyaay and their neighbours, common creators associated with the sky (Baiaame and his family) were shared across a wide region, and totemic places had associations with Baiaame, his wives or sons, sometimes in conjunction with other totemic identities. In this way, Yuwaaliyaay cosmology and local totemism brought local groups together as related to Baiaame, although other totemic aspects of sites differentiated them (Parker 1905:101–104). The strongest totemic differentiation, expressed in initiation rituals, belonged to the totemic *matri*-groups, whose leaders probably dominated their organisation. Few matri-group totems bore a direct relation to places.

Polygyny does nothing to increase the resources of matrilineal groups and categories; a man cannot increase membership of his matrilineal group through having more daughters, for they belong to his wives' groups. In any case, only some of the institutional requirements for even moderate levels of polygyny seem to have been present among Yuwaaliyaay and their neighbours, and ecological factors may have worked against it. The kind of competition and group dynamics associated with high levels of polygyny were, therefore, not a feature of Yuwaaliyaay political economy.

Moderate polygyny

Both the 'Kariera' and 'Karadjeri' systems coexisted with exogamous patrilineal land-holding groups and patri-moieties (see McConvell & Alpher this issue). Ancestral/totemic associations both differentiated and linked patri-groups and their countries in these societies.

Sandbeach country groups appear to have been relatively simple patrilineal groups, divided between the patri-moieties (Chase 1980:132, 138, 140–141). If men of some groups married at the expense of others, then the moderate levels of polygyny may have enhanced processes of growth and decline. In the event of a group failing to be reproduced through the male line, succession was to the mother's country (Chase 1980:136; Rigsby & Chase 1998:196; Thomson 1933:501).

Wiil/Minong people appear to have owned country through the father and father's father as well (Barker 1992:12 January 1830; Le Souëf 1993:36). Unlike Sandbeach, Minong countries and country groups seem to have been divided among four localised patrilineal semi-moieties (see Barker 1992:3 July 1830; Bates 1985:193–194; Green 1989:6, 33; Grey 1841; Nind 1831:42–43). If country groups had a similar constitution to Sandbeach ones, then the moderate level of polygyny had similar implications for the dynamics of Minong patri-groups.

High and very high polygyny

Yolngu patri-groups and their countries were divided between the patri-moieties, differentiated by totemic associations, and linked (mainly within the moieties) by short and long ancestral journeys (e.g., Morphy 1991). Very high levels of polygyny among Yolngu people may in part account for the very complex and varied structure of Yolngu patri-groups ('clans'). This complexity may have been the result in part of the fast growth and decline of patri-groups, together with processes of succession, as well as the exchange of sacra and identity between groups (Morphy 1997; Peterson 1983; cf. Keen 2000).

Among Ngarinyin people and their neighbours, patrifilial groups (*dambun*) were (and are) divided between exogamous moieties. Patri-groups and their countries were differentiated totemically, but connected by long ancestral (*wanjina*) journeys and by the ubiquitous Wunggurr serpents associated with rain and conception (Redmond 2001; Rumsey 1996). The countries of patri-groups of the same moiety clustered together to form swathes of country of the same moiety (Blundell & Layton 1978; Capell 1972; Rumsey 1996:7). Like Yolngu, country groups as recorded by Blundell exhibited some degree of complexity, for example: the sharing of a *dambun* name by two 'top' and 'bottom' groups; the common *dambun* identity of three Worrorra groups, one said to be of Wunambal origin, having migrated, and with distinct affinal relations compared with the other two groups; and the division of a patri-group into three lineages, each associated with a distinct area, but sharing a *wanjina* site; the group had changed its language identity (Blundell 1975:vol. 1, 87–88, 92, 99, 107, 109, 162; Rumsey pers. comm.).

This complexity may have derived in part from the demography of polygyny in conjunction with the several bases of succession. The high level of polygyny recorded among Worrorra people (Love 1936:95, 100) would have given rise to fast-growing and declining lineages, through similar processes to Yolngu ones.

Marriage networks

The main contrast to be drawn is between what I call 'shifting webs' and more stable marriage alliances between patri-groups. The 'shifting web', which McKinley (1971:411) refers to as 'dispersed affinal alliance', and Hérítier (1981, 2000:29) as a 'semi-complex system', results from the prohibition of marriage between close kin (see McConvell & Alpher this issue). As a result, the affinal and close kin network shifted at each generation, perhaps cycling back every few generations. This kind of pattern, complicated in some cases by reciprocal exchanges between kin groups, was likely among Kûnai, Pitjantjatjara, Sandbeach, and Wiil/Minong people. The nodes of the network can be taken as small patrilineages in some cases, as cognatic kin groups in others. Hérítier (2000:29) has shown that this form of network is compatible with sister-exchange.

The strongly contrasting cases are Ngarinyin and Yolngu, where marriage between close cross-cousins reproduced relations between groups down the generations—potentially each generation among Yolngu people, and alternate generations in the case of Ngarinyin wife-yielder/wife-receiver groups (Blundell & Layton 1978; Keen 1982:631). This potential for repetition led to strong alliances between groups of the same moiety (as wife-yielder/wife-receiver groups) and opposite moieties (as wife/husband groups). Combined with high and very high levels of polygyny, the result was powerful alliances between groups, including some that were fast growing, and which remained large for several generations at least.

Among Yolngu, patri-groups ('clans') often had reciprocal marriage relations with others, although they tended to be asymmetrical between lineages (most consistently between groups of uterine siblings; Keen 1978:130). Links among Ngarinyin patri-groups of opposite moieties appear to have been primarily asymmetrical.

The preference for FMBSD marriage among Ngarinyin and their neighbours requires men of one lineage to marry women of at least two other patri-groups (both classified as 'mother' groups), for a man could not follow his father's marriage. The corollary is that people of one lineage provided wives to men of a given group in alternate generations, and consequently these women were supposed to marry men of at least two other patri-groups. However, only *one* wife's mother group was required (demographic conditions being equal). The marriage network was a dense pattern of exchange in which each patri-group had most of its marriage links with between two and five other patri-groups (usually four), obtaining wives from one pair of groups, and giving wives to a different pair (Blundell & Layton 1978:235, 237).

Reciprocal exchange is a feature of all systems at one level or another, between localities (*e.g.*, Kûnai), moieties (matrilineal, patrilineal and generation), and some kin groups (*e.g.*, Yuwaaliyaay, Yolngu). Sister-exchange occurred among Yuwaaliyaay, Pitjantjatjara (Douset pers. comm.) and perhaps Miṅong people. The exchange by men of sisters' daughters may have been a feature of Western Desert marriage (Douset pers. comm.; Elkin 1938–40:217). Yolngu prohibited this form, but we have seen that the exchange of sisters' daughters' daughters was a formal possibility, occasionally realised.

Exchange in general

Differences in kinship and marriage seem to have had an effect on the form of exchange networks (although the data on exchange networks are rather thin for several case studies). There is direct evidence that peoples of six of the seven case studies were involved in regional exchange networks of some kind,

involving food, durable goods, and in some regions sacred objects and ceremonies. (See McCarthy 1939–40 for an overview.)

Exchange networks appear to have been most highly formalised among Ngarinyin and their neighbours. People represented *wurnan* as a system of ‘paths’ of exchange, homologous with marriage relations, linking individuals, patri-groups, and adjacent regions. Marriage exchanges were thought of as linked to *wurnan* exchange. The goods exchanged included foods such as meat and honey, ochres, stone spear-points wrapped in paperbark, bamboo spears, songs, and sacred objects. *Wurnan* ordered patri-groups into an instituted sequence or rank-order from ‘top’ to ‘bottom’ group, each section under the control of a senior man of a particular patri-group and country (Blundell 1975; Blundell & Layton 1978; McCarthy 1939–40:436; Redmond pers. comm.; Rumsey 1996:6–7).

Yolngu people conceived of the exchange network in terms of directions from which certain goods came and to which others went. Although people did talk of exchange in terms of ‘paths’ (*dhukarr*) of exchange, they were less clearly inscribed in the social landscape (Thomson 1949). The network of marriages between patri-groups here was more complex than Ngarinyin and their neighbours, with more reciprocal marriages between larger patri-groups (but asymmetrical between lineages).

It is tempting to suggest that these regionally integrated systems of exchange, with their ‘paths’ between patri-groups, were in part a product of the marriage networks which, as we have seen, linked groups in series as well as cycles, and which tended to be reproduced down the generations. Some caution is necessary, however, because of the paucity of information on the form of exchange systems elsewhere.

At the local level, high and very high levels of polygyny transformed exchange networks by concentrating marriage prestations through individual polygynous men. As the recipient of marriage payments from intending and actual daughters’ husbands, and as the donor of gifts to wives’ kin, such a man found himself at the node of a very extensive exchange network, ‘channelling’ the flow of gifts in from his own prospective and actual daughters’ husbands and out to his own wives’ kin (of the younger wives at least). A man in this position was likely to be a leader of a large and/or fast-growing patri-group, and of its ritual (Keen 1994:300).

Conclusions

This brief overview suggests that the seven societies differed systematically in their overall character, and that some of these differences had an intimate connection with differences in kinship and marriage.

Kúnai and Yuwaaliyaay kin terminologies, ‘Hawaiian’ in Ego’s generation,

seem to have precluded even moderate levels of polygyny, even though marriage practices and modes of totemic identity differed between the two peoples. Yet this form of kin classification and the low level of polygyny occurred in very different ecological conditions. Patrifilial land-holding was absent or 'weak'. Kûnai marriage created a 'shifting web' with reciprocal exchange between localities, whereas Yuwaaliyaay marriage may have involved geographically close partners, and reciprocal exchanges between dispersed matri-categories.

Among Pitjantjatjara and their neighbours, the level of polygyny seems to have been low to moderate. The 'Aluridja' terminology probably precluded high levels of polygyny on a regular basis, and in any case it is likely that the desert ecology imposed constraints. Again, patrifilial land-holding was absent. The bases for land-holding were multiple, including place of birth and of 'finding' (spirit conception). The marriage network again had the form of a 'shifting web', in this case between cognatic kin groups.

The societies with moderate polygyny (Sandbeach and Miṅong) shared 'Kariera' terminologies and the possibility of reciprocal exchange. (Polygyny among Wiil people appears to have been lower than Miṅong.) They combined these features with moieties (patrilineal or matrilineal), patrifilial country groups with complementary filiation to the mother's group, and, in the Miṅong case, with patrifilial semi-moieties. The two case studies with these forms are about as far apart geographically as one can get in Australia.

The peoples with high to very high polygyny were confined to the better-watered regions of the north, with relatively high population densities. This is consistent with Harvey's (2001) finding that asymmetric terminologies tend to occur in well-resourced areas. However, as the low polygyny of the Kûnai shows, rich resources and a high population density were not sufficient conditions, for their country was similarly rich in resources and it is likely that the population density was similarly high; institutional conditions were also required. The literature on 'gerontocratic polygyny' draws our attention to the authority relations and delay of male marriage entailed by initiation practices and the control of religious knowledge (see Hiatt 1985). However, a particular institutional requirement seems to have been some form of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage. I have shown in an earlier work (Keen 1982) that it was the demographic properties of such systems that made high levels of polygyny possible. Among these case studies, Ngarinyin and Yolngu systems shared these properties. This leads me to ascribe a determinate role to kinship terminologies when allied to marriage rules and practices. Of course, these were not enacted in a social vacuum, and certain demographic and social conditions had to be met for them to be practised. (For example, patri-moiety exogamy may have facilitated the reproduction of complex chains of Yolngu bestowal relations.)

Levels of polygyny profoundly affected the dynamics of Aboriginal political economy. Combined with patrifilial country groups, high and very high levels

of polygyny gave rise to the fast growth and decline of groups, and endemic violent competition over marriage and access to land (Warner 1937:155–158). These kinds of dynamics did not feature in the societies with low polygyny. Indeed, the matrilineal totemic groups of Yuwaaliyaay and their neighbours made it irrelevant. Yolngu and Ngarinyin marriage networks channelled exchanges towards the camps of multi-married males. Regional exchange networks appear to have been most integrated and formalised where marriage exchanges between groups persisted.

Styles of male religious leadership reinforce the contrast. Yolngu and Ngarinyin male leaders were elders of patri-groups that held religious property connected to land, waters and localised totemic ancestors. The more influential men among the peoples with low polygyny combined roles of magician, healer and sorcerer, and among Kûnai people, shaman. These seem to have been achieved statuses, connected to sky-oriented cosmologies. Such leaders mediated between the living and spirits of the dead. However, another paper is needed to explore these contrasts in greater depth.

NOTE

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