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**Journal**

Mathematical Anthropology and Cultural Theory, 5(1)

**Author**

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**Publication Date**

2013-05-01

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*BEYOND FICTIONS OF CLOSURE IN  
AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL KINSHIP***

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**SUBMITTED: APRIL 1, 2013      ACCEPTED: APRIL 15, 2013**

**MATHEMATICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND CULTURAL THEORY:  
AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL  
ISSN 1544-5879**

**EVIDENCE FOR SYSTEMIC OUTBREEDING: A REJOINDER TO DENHAM,  
*BEYOND FICTIONS OF CLOSURE IN AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL KINSHIP***

LAURENT DOUSSET

*Abstract:* In his substantial paper, Denham makes an important point with which I can only strongly agree: generational and social closure in Aboriginal kinship are *fictions* distorting the understanding of socio-cultural history in Aboriginal Australia. While there are some points in this paper that probably need further discussion, I would like to use this rejoinder as a space in which to provide some additional evidence that Denham could not have had at hand (because never published) supporting his demonstration, in addition to engaging in a discussion of some points on the general as well as specific nature of Australian kinship.

When kinship studies in their classical forms were still a fashionable topic, the ambition to demonstrate the boundedness of social entities that were difficult to define in the field, such as tribes or local groups, was indeed significant, not to say an obsession, among anthropologists. Because of this obsession and the formal nature of these investigations, kinship studies fell into oblivion from the 1970s onwards, in particular as a consequence of Needham's (1971) and Schneider's (for example 1984 and before) strong critiques. However, during the last 20 years or so, kinship studies have progressively returned to the scene, not just in Australia, so that even David Schneider (1995: 193) had to write that kinship had "risen from its ashes". The context for this strong resurrection of interest in questions pertaining to social organization and kinship is evidently tied to *Native Title* processes in Australia, the legal means through which indigenous groups can gain some sort of recognition with regard to their traditional lands. *Native Title* processes played an important role because, in this context, the durability of boundedness, genealogies and kinship are central elements of the evidence Aboriginal peoples, and their consulting anthropologists, have to present during negotiations with the state or during court hearings. Unfortunately, however, and because of the particular context and legislation of *Native Title*, this "applied" nature of anthropological investigation into the permanence of structure in indigenous societies has not discussed some of the flaws that dominated classic anthropological theorizing of Aboriginal kinship systems. The discipline has more or less taken for granted some of the theoretical models that were the very reasons for the abandonment of kinship studies in the 1970s and is applying them in a contemporary legal framework.

One of these models, as already indicated above, is the idea of social closure, exclusion and boundedness. Aboriginal societies were (and are to some extent still today) seen as closed (almost isolated) social entities each with its particularity, even though stemming from a general common theme. They are seen as social entities with their own values and norms, including their particular kinship terminologies, marriage rules and practices, as well as their elements of social organization such as sections, subsections, moieties and so on; entities that aim at reproduction of self for itself in time and space. The particular nature of the kinship terminology and its implied marriage rules ("prescribed" as per Needham 1963, for example) was seen as one of the main

factors producing this *fiction* of social closure: “direct” or “elementary exchange”, as Lévi-Strauss (1967 [1947]) called it, or “alliance of marriage” as Dumont (1966) labelled it from a slightly different perspective, were the means that allowed the repetition, generation after generation, of social inbreeding. Obviously, because the notion of the “tribe”, as an implementation of Africanist sociology in Aboriginal Australian realities, had to survive, means that allowed this tribe to reproduce itself as a unity of genealogy needed to be proposed as well: the formal structure of Australian kinship systems was considered to provide these means.

It is obvious that even if we look at the formal structure of these kinship systems, as Denham does for the Alyawarra and other groups, that the systemic repetition of “tribal inbreeding” marriages was not viable and, furthermore, was in fact not the strategy Aboriginal groups adopted. Quite the opposite, at least among desert groups: diversification of alliances and thus marriage partners in social, spatial and genealogical terms seems to have been far more the norm than the exception. Ian Keen’s (2002) “sifting webs” is much more than a theoretical model here; it is I believe an explicit practice and a well-thought-out as well as a discussed strategy. This is at least evident in the Western Desert, covering about one fourth of the Australian continent with over 40 dialectal groups (Dousset 2011 and 2013). Evidence for what Denham and myself are advancing is abundant. Below are a few condensed examples: the first one on terminology, the second on marriage rules and practices, the third on marriage networks. Finally, I will add some illustrations of the wider applicability of what is advanced.

### **Terminology as prescription or as a vehicle for shifting webs?**

Elkin (1938-40) and others, staying often only a few weeks or even days with Western Desert groups, claimed to have observed a terminological system in which people do not distinguish sisters from wives. And since the distinction is not made, or in fact since wives are supposedly called sisters, they thought that Western Desert culture, or Aluridja as it was called, was one that did not even embrace the most elementary and nearly universal aspects of incest prohibition. Difficulties obviously increase when one observes, as Elkin already did, that these people distinguish mothers from fathers’ sisters, which fits well into the general theme of cross-parallel distinction. Theorists, such as Lévi-Strauss or Tjon Sie Fat, have struggled with this problem. The former ended up calling it an “aberrant system” (1967), while the latter recalled that it was described as one of the most “intriguing” systems with “anomalous or inconsistent terminologies” (1998:78).

What happens in fact, as I have already explained elsewhere (2013), when the ethnographer stays for longer periods and observes terminological usages over time, is that Ngaatjatjarra-speaking people, and other groups of the Western Desert, apply three terminological sets, or in fact three modes of classifying the same people differently depending on particular contexts (Dousset 2003). The first terminological usage is one that testifies to closeness, if not to identity. It comes from an idiosyncratic expression: *Kungkankatja*, *Minalinkatja* (Dousset 2002), freely explained as “children of a brother and of a sister are identical”. Those who should be cross-cousins are first of all considered as themselves brothers and sisters. The cross-parallel distinction is extinguished. They are made of the same substance, the same heritage, have often grown up close to each other

and thus become siblings. Similarly, never would I call my actual uncle “wife’s father”, or my actual aunt “wife’s mother”, even though, again, structurally speaking they sit in the same category. To summarize, closeness is here expressed through a formally speaking unexpected usage of the terminology, one that transgresses the structural rule of bifurcate merging. At the same time, this systematic transgression seems to point to another level of cultural prescription to which I will return below.

What is significant here is that the usage of the sibling terminology for people that are or should be cross-cousins is not limited to this apparent deviation from a structural rule, but is the result of other processes and situations that have little to do with what we traditionally understand as being kinship. Whether children of actual siblings or not, people who share experiences or substances in a prolonged and repeated manner are perceived in the same way: they become simply too close, too identical to be cross-cousins and thus potential spouses. Kinship terminology is associated with generic and typified behavioural expectations and norms depending on which category people sit in. However, the opposite is true as well: experiences can produce the conditions in which the usage of terminology is defined by means other than the categorical position in which the relationship stands. Life experiences and geographic as well as genealogical proximity are built into the kinship terminology and thus have, as we will see, consequences for marriage patterns and rules.

The second terminological usage, which I refer to as “sociological”, goes even further. In certain contexts, when generational opposition is the core of the discussion, uncles and aunts can be called father and mother without hesitation or confusion. In these ritual contexts, father (*mama*) and mother (*ngunytju*) become cover terms in a context in which generation and gender are the principal, if not sole, factors creating distinctions. The conflicting opposition but ontological complementarity of the parent-child couple is extended to all participants in ritual activity. They are the contexts in which people place themselves as actors in the reproduction of the cosmological order. Actual genealogical relationships here lose their significance.

The third terminological set sheds light on the previously mentioned usages. The above-mentioned usages and their contexts underline the question of similarity and identity. On the other hand, the third context, which I call “egological”, redistributes people in accordance with the structural (bifurcate merging) rules expected by the anthropologist. This is involved when interlocutors are discussing the actual marriage of an actual person. It is about setting up alliance strategies between individuals and families. Here, distant aunts are aunts, not mothers, and distant uncles are uncles, not fathers, because they could become actual in-laws. It is the potentiality of future affinal relationships that places people in the category in which they structurally already sit. Obviously, placing people in the affinal category defines who can become a spouse or a parent-in-law.

The reasons for applying one rather than another terminological set to people are linked to the notion of extended networks (Keen’s shifting webs). Marriage, closely tied to terminology in this context, is the main element under discussion; marriage and all the obligations and rights that flow from it. Western Desert people are clear about how this should be done: the initiator, who

must be someone from a distant community and a classificatory MB, promises his or a close daughter; in return, the initiator's son will marry the initiate's sister. Direct exchange as in the textbook. But Ngaatjatjarra people also have another set of rules and discourses about these rules: you should not marry someone you are already linked to, you should marry somewhere else. "No need to marry a man who is already your actual brother-in-law... it wouldn't be the right way", a woman once told me. Thus, hardly anyone marries his promised spouse, but rather finds another partner, from another distant location, while both his promised and his actual spouse are, with their families, tied through comparable obligations and rights (see below). Diversification of relationships to people and of access to resources, and not repetition and closure, is the social strategy.

Hence, there are two series of ideals and rules that cohabit. One concerning initiation and direct exchange in which closure and confinement, repetition and confirmation are central values. The second series, on the other hand, is about diversification, openness and network. Here we are talking about politics and economy. The distinction between these rather arbitrarily separated domains becomes apparent when observing people's actual decision-taking processes. Should one call a man father / close uncle, or should one call him distant uncle and thus father-in-law. The decision has its consequences and is elaborated, discussed and finally made after taking into account the structural capacity of a man or a woman to become an actual in-law and, more interestingly, after an explicit discussion about the intention and possibility of getting involved in a strongly exogamous affinal relationship with enumerated benefits.

### **"Never" marry a person with whom you are already connected**

As we have seen above, there is an element of choice even in the application of the prescriptive terminology in order to orient actual marriages (and thus extend the network) in certain directions rather than others. Deciding on whether to apply to a classificatory mother's brother the term "uncle" (*kamuru*) or "father-in-law" (*waputju*) is decisive regarding whether the latter's daughter is marriageable or not. Exogamy, be it genealogical or spatial, is a strong ideological imperative that is considered when taking such decisions. The explicit ideal and objective is to diversify the network of affines as far as possible. This diversification of the network (as against repetition of identical relationships) is supported by other elements which I will present in the following section: the normative and pragmatic mechanisms through which people find actual spouses and the avoidance of reciprocal marriages.

The discussion below is based on research done among the Ngaatjatjarra-speaking people of the Western Desert since 1994. The data is based on genealogies going back as far as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond (note that first contact with the Western world took place only in the 1950s for this group, see Dousset 2011). This dialectal group, which cannot be labelled "tribe" following the usual understanding of the notion (see Berndt 1959 for a discussion), is itself divided into several "regional groups" (see maps below). Since these groups or subgroups are not the exclusive landowners of the areas which they inhabit, I prefer the label of "regional groups" rather than that of "local groups", the latter having some connotation of patrilineality and its transmission of ownership, features that do not exist in this form in the Western Desert.

As I have shown elsewhere (Dousset 1999), there are four normative mechanisms through which a man (or a woman for that case) can obtain a spouse. It is important to note that they are not exclusive of each other and that they imply identical rights and obligations, such as access to land and resources, the obligation to share and redistribute wealth, or that of mutual support between affines (the couple and their respective close families). These four types are called *pikarta*, *pampurlpa*, *karlkurnu* and *warngirnu*. The first two types are ritual, the second two take place in a secular context.

#### **Pikarta (ritual bestowal by a man)**

Still today, every boy, at some time between the age of 14 and 22, must be initiated to become a man (*wati*). Discussions are held among the boy's family to decide and find an appropriate initiator (*waputju*). In each case, this initiator must be a man living in a geographically distant community (if possible even outside the dialectal group) and genealogically unrelated (genealogical memory is quite shallow and hardly goes back further than 3 generations), since through the act of initiating the boy he will also become the boy's father-in-law (also called *waputju*). During the painful initiation ceremony, the initiator will promise his daughter or a close daughter to the boy whom the latter will refer to as *kurri pikarta* (*kurri* = wife, *pikarta* = through pain).

#### **Pampurlpa (ritual bestowal by a woman)**

At the same time, a classificatory wife of this initiator will occupy an important role during the initiation process. In particular, she will massage the boy in the smoke of a fire, just as aunts and mothers massage a new born baby in this smoke, providing it with a first and secret name. This classificatory initiator's wife stands in the position of mother-in-law to the boy and promises her daughter (born or as yet unborn) to the boy; a girl which the boy will refer to as *kurri pampurlpa* (the wife of/from the one that massages/touches). I have not found any case in which *kurri pikarta* and *kurri pampurlpa* are actually the same person. Thus, after initiation, a man already has two promised wives. But moreover, rarely will he actually marry one of these two women, but will find yet another spouse. The relationships with these ritual spouses and their close families, with the rights and obligations that stem from the relationship, however, remain as efficient as if they were actual marriages.

#### **Karlkurnu (non-ritual bestowal)**

Most men will obtain a wife through *karlkurnu*, which literally means the promise of goods, services or wives. The future son-in-law will insistently follow (*wanarni*) his potential parents-in-law at a distance and provide them repeatedly with presents (*yunganyi* = gift), until the parents-in-law consider the marriage to be equitable. Nowadays, these gifts can be a four-wheel drive or cash. Their girl will then leave the parental household to live with her new husband.



### Warngirnu (elopement)

This is the last of the mechanisms through which a couple can marry. It takes two forms. The first, less frequent, is the elopement of a couple that are in a structurally “incestuous” relationship but have fallen in love with each other. Marriages considered incestuous are infrequent and amount to only between 2 and 3 percent of all marriages. They usually involve people who are genealogically distant but in a parallel, rather than cross-cousin, relationship.

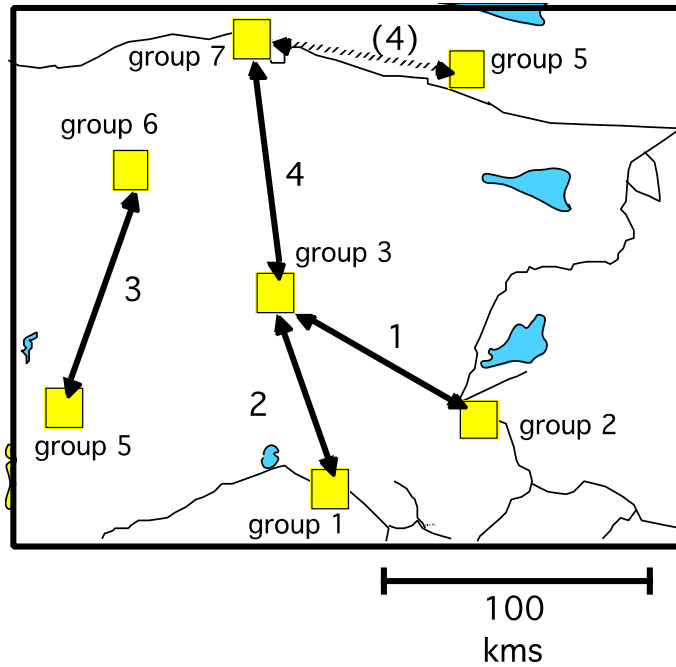
Far more frequent are *warngirnu* that involve marriages not classified in any of the above 3 mechanisms. If the couple has not been ritually promised to each other and if the young man does not have the means to repeatedly provide his future parents-in-law with gifts, then the couple will elope. Because this elopement and marriage has not been the consequence of previous negotiations between parents-in-law and because no presents or services have been provided, the family of the girl chases the couple to bring them back and punish them for not respecting the “law”. However, in most cases, this chase is ritualized and people make sure the couple can safely elope and return later to the community as an approved married couple.

We see that in most cases, a man can thus count on at least three virtual and real spouses, two after initiation with whom he is, in most cases, not actually married but with whom the relationship is identical to that with actual wives and a third actual wife obtained through *karlkurnu* or *warngirnu*. In the great majority of cases, these three women are from geographical communities distant from each other and from distinct genealogical branches. His network has been extended.

In addition to the diversification of the network through these four normative mechanisms of marriage contracting, there is an explicit ideal not to repeat marriages between people who already stand in a close relationship. Actual brothers and sisters-in-law are generally considered too close to become spouses, thus escaping the bounding mechanisms inherent in direct or reciprocal exchange and diversifying the network further. Nevertheless, there are a few reciprocal exchanges which I will now discuss.

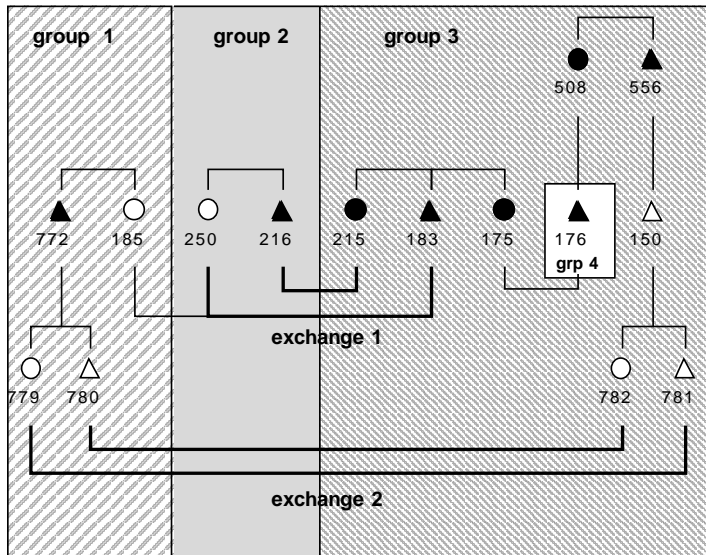
Out of 283 marriages analysed, only 3.2% present some form of reciprocal exchange between two groups of men. These exchanges are always exogamous with respect to the regional groups concerned. Interestingly, six of the eight men involved in these exchanges are or were polygynous, and the marriages reflecting these reciprocities are never the men’s first marriage. Below is more detail on each of these cases.





**Map 1: Geographical distribution of reciprocal marriages (the numbering of groups is not equivalent to Map 2 below)**

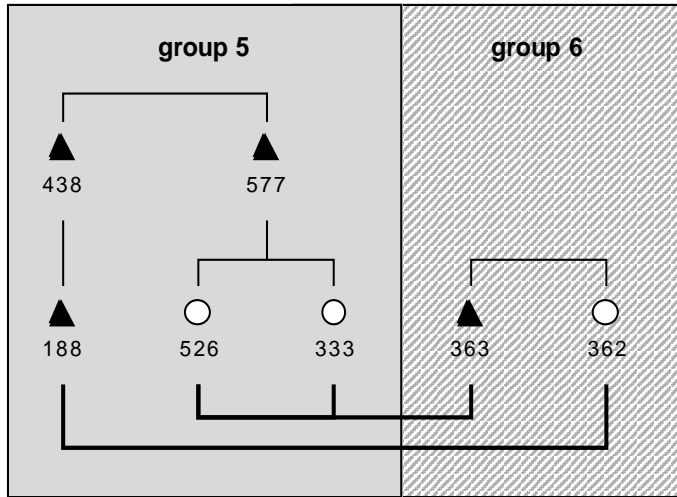
**Figure 1: Exchanges 1 and 2:**



*Exchange 1:* Men 216 and 183 are among the very few who had three wives or more at the same time. The “exchanged” sisters are not their first wives. Indeed, among the 217 married men, only 30 (13,8%) are polygynous, and only 9 (4,1%) have or had more than 3 spouses. Both 216 and 183 were important men in ritual matters for each of their regional groups.

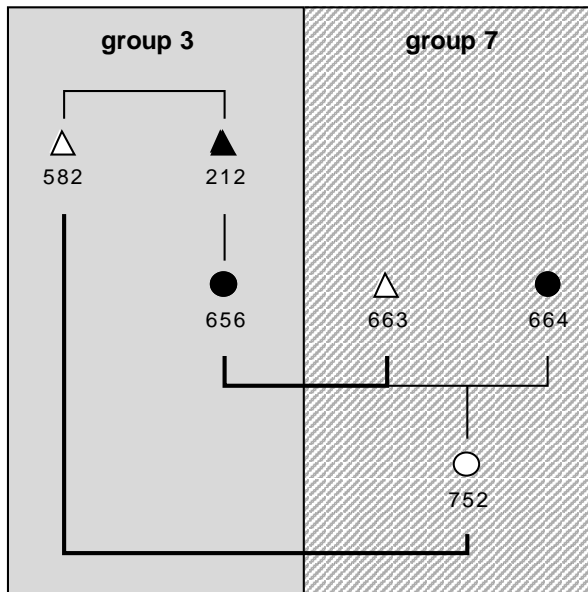
*Exchange 2:* The woman 779 was ritually promised to 781, while 782 was not to 780.

**Figure 2: Exchange 3**



*Exchange 3:* Man 188 was born around 1935 and taken by patrol officers to Papunya in 1964. He had three wives. The woman 362 was his second wife. Man 363 was among the first men to have been brought out from the desert to the Warburton mission in 1965 where he died the following year. With five simultaneous wives, he is the most polygynous man in the genealogies. The two women obtained through “exchange” were his second and fifth wives.

**Figure 3: Exchange 4**



*Exchange 4:* This is the least “classic” exchange of all. Indeed, the marriage between 582 and 752 is considered somewhat incestuous, since the couple is considered to be genealogically too close. Intergenerational marriage, on the other hand, is quite frequent as long as the couple is two generations removed and of the correct affinal/cross category, which is the case here.

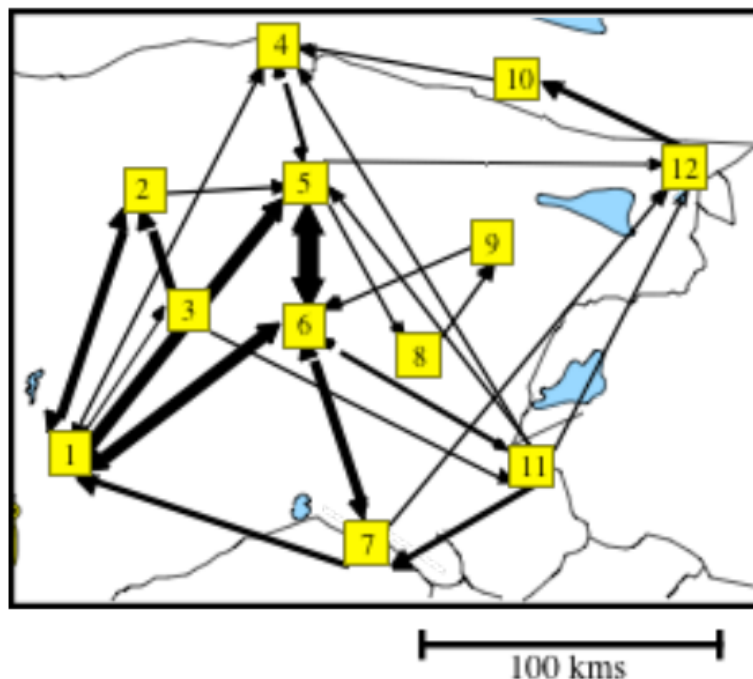
We can see that there are only a very few reciprocal exchanges among the Ngaatjatjarra-speaking people and, moreover, that only two out of these 4 exchanges reflect something Levi-Strauss would have called “direct exchange”. None of the cases reflect what Dumont called “alliance of marriage” (the repetition of identical direct exchanges over generations). Despite the structural and terminological prescription to marry a person with whom you or your parents have already engaged in relationships, Ngaatjatjarra people have developed mechanisms and an ideology that, on the contrary, promote a diversification of relationships and strong exogamy, and thus

openness, rather than repetition, endogamy and boundedness. This fact is even further illustrated when we look at the actual marriage networks established.

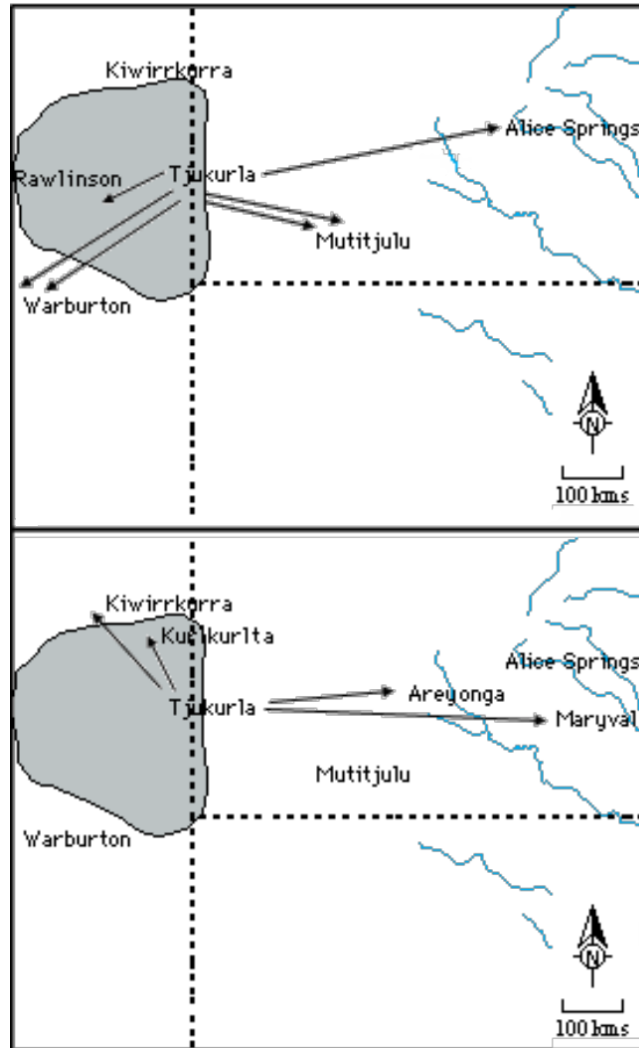
### The reality of marriage networks

The above discussion should have made it clear that marriage networks among Ngaatjatjarra-speaking people are extensive. While the large majority of people will follow the prescriptive rules defined by the terminological and genealogical positions of spouses – that is, marry people in the cross-cousin category – they will also tend to marry people who have distant social and geographical affiliations. Map 2 illustrates the relative amount of intermarriages in the general Ngaatjatjarra area. Interestingly, there are core exchanges between groups that warrant the reproduction of the group as a group (such as between 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7), but there are also many marriages that diversify the network and include other and more distant groups to the north and east.

The “core” Ngaatjatjarra groups are those numbered 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8 in Map 2. Groups 1 and 2 are mixed Mandjildjara and Ngaatjatjarra-speaking people; groups 4, 10 and 12 are Pintupi people; and group 11 is a mixed Ngaatjatjarra and Nyangaatjatjarra-speaking group. Map 2 only represents those marriages that took place between what could be called the general Ngaatjatjarra dialectal group, including its periphery. The widths of the arrows are proportional to the number of marriages.



Map 2: Marriage network between the Ngaatjatjarra and their immediate neighbours.



**Map 3: Two examples of networked marriages**

**(Top)** The mother of this family is from Tjukurla, the father from Kurlkurlta to the north-west (see below). They have six children: one daughter married to a man from Alice Springs, another to a man near Mutitjulu (Ayers Rock), a son married in Mutitjulu itself, two daughters married in Warburton and a son married to the Rawlinson Ranges group.

**(Bottom)** The father of this family is from the Rawlinson Ranges group, the mother from Tjukurla. They have three children: one son is married to a woman from Maryvale and to a woman from the Kiwirrkurra area, another is married in Areyonga, and one daughter is married to a man from the Kurlkurlta area.

While map 2 only includes marriages among Ngaatjatjarra groups, it is important to note that there are many such relationships which extend the network beyond this first general framework. Data compilations still need to be undertaken to provide exact figures in order to estimate the

proportions of marriages inside and outside the Ngaatjatjarra area. These compilations are complex because they need to take into account the date of arrival of vehicles which have facilitated extensive networking in each of these groups, but also some arbitrary definitions on what is a Ngaatjatjarra group and what is not. My rough estimate is that these external marriages amount to at least 50% of all marriages today, while before first contact, in the 1950s, they probably accounted for about 25% of all marriages, which is still a significant figure.

To replace the missing statistical compilations, let us have a look (Map 3, above) at two particular examples of families illustrating the diversification of marriage patterns in more recent times (these marriages took place in the 1980s, 25 years after first contact). Interestingly, while the children of both these families marry in distant and distinct locations, diversifying their affinal network, both also have at least one child that marries within the Ngaatjatjarra area, thus ensuring the continuous integration of the descendants in their original language community.

### **Other (partial) evidence for prescriptive long-distance exogamies**

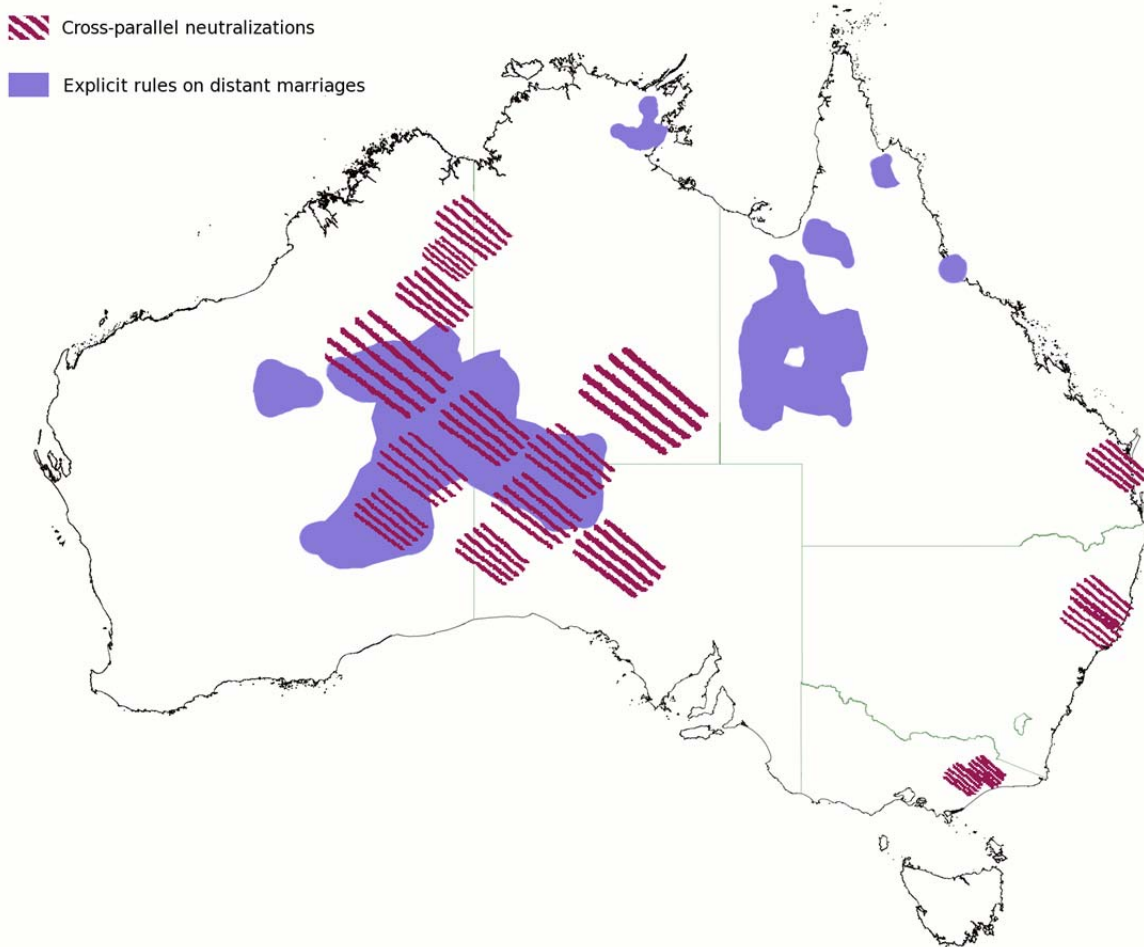
Denham makes an excellent point for a systemic necessity of partial outbreeding, versus complete inbreeding and boundedness; he also poses several hypotheses (and to some extent provides evidence) of a more widespread existence in Australia of such outbreeding or exogamic systemic and strategic rules and practices. We have seen above that in the Western Desert, ideal and practice tend towards the diversification of relationships and thus the establishment of networks. Strong exogamy and avoidance of the repetition of identical marriages are among the features that reinforce the shifting webs model. Genealogically and spatially distant marriage is an explicit rule among these people and not only part of an exceptional practice. It is worthwhile investigating whether there are other ethnographic records that testify to such explicit rules elsewhere in Australia which amend, not to say inverse, the fiction of boundedness.

In the Austkin project<sup>1</sup>, in which with Australian and other colleagues I have been involved during the past few years, we have compiled extensive ethnographic data into a database-mapping system we have developed ourselves. Two general types of datasets stemming from various sources (publications, archives, dictionaries, fieldwork...) have been fed into the system: 1) 650 kinship terminologies for 338 Australian languages, dialects or variants; 2) 607 category systems such as section or subsection systems, moiety systems, generational moiety couples etc. for 311 languages, dialects or variants. Into this second type of dataset we also feed marriage rules as defined by the ethnographic source. These marriage rules include prescriptive information (must marry a cross-cousin type, a genealogically distant person, outside your local group etc.), as well as proscriptive rules (not allowed to marry a first cross-cousin, inside your totemic group etc.). While the datasets do not yet cover the entire continent and while not all

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<sup>1</sup> Austkin I (2009-2011) and Austkin 2 (2012-2015) are two projects funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) and are a French-American-Australian (for Austkin 1) and a French-Australian collaboration on the establishment of an extensive spatial and historical database on kinship terminologies and social category systems in Australia, including the possibility of mapping complex search and comparative linguistic occurrences. Map 4 is an output of the Austkin project.

datasets are as yet for all languages of the expected depth and quality, some interesting features have already arisen.



**Map 4: Cross-parallel neutralizations and explicit “distant marriage” rules**

Map 4 shows that the Western Desert is not an exception and that several linguistic areas of Australia have systemic and inbuilt mechanisms to avoid systemic and complete inbreeding, but provide for the possibility, if not obligation, of extending the genealogical network outside the immediate ethnic identities or borders.

Map 4 shows the mapped results of two queries from the database. The first query (cross-parallel neutralizations) asked to list those languages and areas where, similar to the Western Desert above, cross-cousins and siblings reflect identical kinship terms. What this means is that where there is neutralization, one can expect one or both of the following features:

- close cross-cousin marriage is prohibited and only distant cousins can be married. This is the case in the Western Desert, or among Kija and Gooniyandi people north of the

Western Desert, or even some Aranda groups where 1<sup>st</sup> cross-cousins are called siblings and where at least 2<sup>nd</sup> cross-cousins are preferred marriage partners;

- elements other than crossness determine suitable marriage partners, such as exogamy, belonging to particular groups (totemic for example) etc. This is the case with the Gunnai (Kurnai) people, for example.

The second query maps those groups where the ethnography reports an explicit “distant marriage rule”, that is groups for which marrying someone who is genealogically close is considered incestuous. Again, as expected, the Western Desert is well represented, but also large parts of Queensland as well as south-east Arnhem Land are reflecting these ideals. I am reasonably confident that, with the feeding of additional datasets and the improvement of existing data, the extent of the areas in which there are explicit “distant marriage” rules will increase significantly.

### Concluding remarks

There has been a general tendency to consider the relative closeness and self-containment of Dravidian-type (and for that matter Australian) kinship terminologies as reflecting actual genealogical processes. The confusion stems, I believe, from forgetting that Australian societies and their kinship terminologies do not have a limitation to the extension of their range of application. A marriageable cross-cousin is rarely an actual cross-cousin, but is someone who, through the algorithm of cross-parallel calculation and what I have elsewhere called the relational triangle (Dousset 2008), sits in the same category. As Isobel White warned us long ago:

“Again, as in much of Lévi-Strauss’s writing about Australia, we find him unable to comprehend that compliance with a prescribed marriage rule seldom entails marriage with a close relative. In nearly all Australian societies the rule is for a man to marry a certain type of cross-cousin, but not the actual one” (1981:21).

The capacity of Australian social category systems (sections and subsections), as well as the very nature of their terminological systems that ostensibly prescribe boundedness and closure, or inbreeding and repetition, while simultaneously advocating through the non-limitation of range the existence of extensive genealogical networks, is at the roots of Lévi-Strauss’ and many others’ confusion. Australian category systems and terminologies provide for both systemic closure and openness. And the genealogies I have at hand for the Western Desert demonstrate that these two forces work simultaneously: some degree of inbreeding in order to reproduce the group as a group and some degree of outbreeding in order to diversify the pool of social, cultural and material resources available. As Denham says, closure is a fiction.



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