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Laurent Dousset

“Horizontal” and “vertical” skewing: similar objectives, two solutions?

Introduction¹

In 1975, Robert Tonkinson presented a paper at a seminar that remained largely unknown and that Bob himself unfortunately has never published. In this paper, for which he has provided me with his preparatory notes, he mentions the process called ngaranmaridi, explained by Aboriginal informants as “to cut out”, and which he translates as “splitting”, for the Mardu people of the Australian Western Desert. He explains in these notes that ngaranmaridi occurs in several contexts and relates closely to what he calls “the riddle of the non-marriageable cross-cousin”:

...at the time of ritual introductions of strangers from different areas; would have occurred during big meetings; when the particular kinship links are being determined an element of choice exists as to whether to designate “FZ” as umari [WM] or gundili [FZ] and thereby differentiate their children accordingly. At the miljangul, discussions are held by Ego, if an adult, and others to decide which if any of the stranger women who are initially all related as ‘spouse’ will be ‘cut out’ and thus become jingani Z.

We may here ask why would people want to reclassify cross-cousins as siblings? Mardu Aborigines themselves provide the most explicit, albeit not complete answer to the question: “you can’t have too many wives”. I will return to the background to such an answer, of which I have recorded similar versions among the Ngaatjatjarra and Ngaanyatjarra people further to the east. Let me first set the stage for this paper and explain why “cross-parallel neutralization” — and what I, as a nod to other contributions, label “horizontal skewing” in my title — may possibly be relevant in the discussion of Crow-Omaha types of skewing: both are, I suggest, solutions to similar if not identical problems and objectives. Cross-parallel neutralization is about “cutting out” some potential spouses, and thus reorienting marriages in particular directions. I advance that “cutting out” or “skewing” are not systems, but social technologies in the broad domain of resource management.

Background: the Aluridja system

The so-called Aluridja type of kinship system, which is found among Australian Western Desert societies of which the Mardu are one, has considerably occupied kinship specialists since Elkin’s publication of his Kinship in South Australia (1938-40). Indeed, Franklin Tjon Sie Fat explained that “the most intriguing descriptions of anomalous or inconsistent terminological systems combining a variety of Dravidian, Iroquois, and ‘Hawaiian’ or generational features with a range of affinal terms and extensive marriage prohibitions pertain to the Western Desert peoples of Australia” (1998:78). Lévi-Strauss labeled it as “aberrant” (1967:231, 251 and figure 56, p. 249). The lack of section or subsection systems and the presence of what he considered endogamous moieties — more correctly known as merged alternate generational levels — were for him irreconcilable with what he considered “the

precision and clarity” of Australian marriage “classes” (1967:461). Similarly to Elkin, Lévi-Strauss thought that the Aluridja system must be in the process of transformation. Another example is Scheffler’s (1978) who, discussing the Pitjantjatjara terminology, indicates that a MB marries a FZ, and that the cross-parallel distinction is therefore introduced in ego’s parents’ generation. He nevertheless glosses the term watjirra (Xc; some MBCh and FZCh) as “distant sibling” rather than cross-cousin (see table 3.1, pages 90-91).

I have discussed elsewhere what I consider a misinterpretation of the Aluridja type of kinship system and will here only return to some of its general features. The terminology and social organization of these societies have been described in terms of lack: in particular the lack of a specific cross-cousin terminology, the lack of local groups as supposedly found elsewhere in Australia, the lack of descent groups and, last but not least, the lack of section or subsection systems which have been introduced in this area only quite recently (Dousset 2005). Aluridja people, it was thought, were marrying persons they called “brother” and “sister” since they had no other terms to differentiate cross-cousins.

While it is true that Aluridja kinship terminology is not as extensive as that which can be observed in other languages in Australia, it would be erroneous to believe that the cross-parallel distinction is not operated. There are two pieces of evidence here: first, the reconstruction of genealogies predating first contact with the West, which itself dates back to the 1950s among the Ngaatjatjarra people (Dousset 2002), shows that marriage practices are and were of the cross-cousin type even after contact, with only about 3% of irregular marriages (Dousset 1999); secondly, there are terms which refer to cross-cousin types of relatives in ego’s generation; and these relatives are potential spouses or brothers/sisters-in-law (Dousset 2008).

The question that immediately arises is why have so many prestigious anthropologists

advanced the lack of cross-cousin terminology when this does not seem to be the case? One must concede that those anthropologists who have advocated the so-called Aluridja “aberration” based their analysis predominantly on very few and questionable ethnographic records: Adolphus P. Elkin’s Kinship in South Australia (1938-40) and Norman Tindale’s later short trips into the area. As Katie Glaskin and myself have shown (2007), these ethnographies however are of very poor and contradictory quality. Both of these anthropologists’ fieldwork was of “the short-term survey method” (Burke 2005:212). Elkin and Tindale were in the habit of only staying a few days, at the very best a few weeks, in any given field location. As we will see below, one legacy of Elkin’s rapid ethnography, itself far from the anthropological ideal of prolonged participant observation, is that it resulted in erroneous depictions of Western Desert society that have led many researchers to an ambiguous analysis of the kinship system.

Tindale’s most influential publication on the Western Desert (1988) is crowded with contradictions and preconceived impressions and generalizations that are scientifically unsustainable and, more importantly, not in accordance with the data he has recorded himself and on which his paper is supposedly based (Tindale 1935 and 1963). For example, Tindale draws (wrong) conclusions about the geographical direction from which the section system arrived in this part of the desert, or he talks of clans without locating them, nor even referring to their nature or names. He also states that Pitjantjatjara, an eastern dialect of the Western Desert language, is rapidly becoming a lingua franca (this has yet to occur) or that it is a rather old Australian language (linguists date the Western Desert language at only 1500 to 2000 B.C.; see McConvell 1990). Moreover, again without drawing upon any of his field notes, he explains that the Pitjantjatjara are divided into patrilineal totemic descent groups, a formula that is particularly astonishing when one is aware that the only totemic system known

in the eastern Western Desert is conception totemism and that, since Frazer and Durkheim at least, one should know that this type of totem is not inherited.

The “short-term survey method” followed by Elkin and Tindale is directly related to the second explanation that can be provided to elucidate why so many anthropologists considered the Aluridja system “aberrant”: Western Desert people do have cross-cousin terms, however their use is restricted to very particular contexts.

With respect to contextual uses of kinship terminologies, it is necessary to note the importance of alternate generational levels in the organization of everyday life and ritual in the Western Desert. Egocentrically as well as sociocentrically named, they constitute the axes around which behavioral attitudes are shaped. People of the same generational level will sit together during ritual, opposing themselves to the other level sitting on the opposite side. People of the same generational level collaborate in everyday tasks, while the relationships towards people of the opposite level are largely dominated by restraint, if not avoidance. This general background is reflected in the contextual usages of the terminology, which I have called egocentric (or egological) and sociological (2002).

A sociological context is one in which speech and practice is articulated around the general opposition between alternate generational levels. In such a context, cross-cousin terminology is avoided and co-generational are called “brothers” and “sisters”. Furthermore, all members of the other generational level are called “mothers” and “fathers”, whether they are actual aunts, daughters and nieces, or uncles, sons and nephews. In an egological context, on the other hand, when particular persons are addressed or referred to, the cross-parallel distinction is applied and cross-cousin terminology used (but see further nuances below). People from the other generational level are distinguished as mothers, fathers, mother’s brothers and father’s sisters; while co-generational are distinguished as brothers, sisters and cross-cousins

or brothers- and sisters-in-law. This general picture is however not a sufficient description of the usage of the cross-parallel distinction and associated terminology, and we will need to further refine the egological context of terminological usage. To do this, we first need to have a closer look at the spatial organization of these groups.

“The harshest physical environment on earth ever inhabited by man before the Industrial Revolution”

This sentence, taken from the archaeologist Richard Gould (1969:273), summarizes well the conditions in which Western Desert people dwelled in the past and still live in today. The mean annual rainfall over the Western Desert, which covers about 600 000 square kilometers (about 230 000 square miles) is less than 200mm (79 inches) per year. However, more critical than the amount of rainfall is its unpredictability in time and space. With a very few exceptions near hilly outcrops, permanent water sources are nonexistent. Local conditions vary of course, even though only slightly, from one region to another. I will thus base the description below on the conditions experienced by Ngaatjatjarra-speaking people, a dialectal group of the Western Desert language.

They occupy the area just west of the border between the Northern Territory and West Australia, north and south of the Rawlinson Ranges. Numbering about 500 individuals, they inhabit an area of about 100 000 square kilometers (about 39 000 square miles), the size of continental Greece. The low population density (about 200 square kilometers or 78 square miles per person) is in phase with the low carrying capacity in the Western Desert, dominated by sand hills, plains, dry rivers, dry salt lakes, small amounts of large game but quite a significant number of reptiles which constitute the core of the protease diet. Staple food was

based on cereals harvested from various grasses, among them wild millet. Today's settled communities have stores and cold-rooms that are supplied on a regular basis.

The Ngaatjatjarra people were structured until the 1970s into five regional groups, each composed of several extended families. A regional group must be distinguished from the "local group", which has a patrilineal connotation not reflecting territorial organization in the Western Desert. A regional group was an ensemble of several family groups living most of the time in an area in which they travelled, but in which they had neither exclusive rights nor the strict authority to exclude other families from travelling through. They were the guardians of the sites scattered over the area they visited, rather than their absolute owners.

Even though these regional groups were usually exogamous, this rule was not based on corporateness, but on the ideal of diversifying social networks. Affiliation to land was and still is established individually through the accumulation of eligible criteria. The place where one was conceived, the birthplace and the place where the umbilical cord fell off, where people live for extended periods, where their parents lived for extended periods, for which one has significant religious knowledge and so on, are criteria each individual accumulates for one or several sites, thus increasing his or her relative power to speak for a particular area. Thus, while individuals, families and regional groups had strong connections to particular stretches of land because of their knowledge and the uses they made of it, these connections would neither be automatically passed on to the following generations, nor be exclusive rights.

After contact, with White society in 1956, and in particular with a government agency responsible for testing nuclear explosions and continental missiles after WW2 (Dousset 2002 and 2011), Ngaatjatjarra people migrated into missions and ration depots at the fringes of the desert, but returned to their homelands in the 1970s, establishing several settled communities.

While movements between these communities are considerable, they nevertheless broadly reflect the earlier regional groups.

The criteria determining an individual's connection to land have not changed much since, with the nevertheless significant exception of birthplace. Whereas, before the 1970s, children were born at various places, nowadays pregnant women are usually driven or flown to town hospitals, and so-called bush-babies are held in esteem but rare. This practice has standardized the landscape of birthplaces, and with it one of the most important criteria for socially mapping the land. Since one of the explicit ideals is to maintain a large geographical coverage of land affiliation, being born in hospitals is becoming a serious problem for the Ngaatjatjarra people who now consider the mother's place of residence to be the child's second (after the presumed conception site) connection to a particular site.

One of Western Desert people's explicit ideals is still today to maintain a wide geographical coverage of their land affiliations. The reasons are often expressed in religious terms, in which a dispersed social geography is a condition for efficient guardianship of important sites that need to be maintained, ensuring the continuity of the mythical figures associated with these. But the reasons can also be explained in terms of ecological conditions. Diversifying the network of mutual obligations is part of what Gould (1969) called the risk-minimizing mode of hunter-gatherer adaptation, which is particularly appropriate for desert people.

Diversifying connections to distant and distinct locations is one answer to the problem of the unpredictability of rainfall in time and space. A strict and bounded system of landownership would be counterproductive in this environment. As Tonkinson (1991:65) wrote, "not surprisingly, considering the great uncertainties of rainfall in their homelands, Mardu local organization is notable for its flexibility and fluidity and a lack of stress on boundaries and exclusiveness of group membership" (see also Poirier 1992:759, Sackett 1975, Myers 1986).

While I do not wish to advance a causal relationship between environmental conditions and the structure of social organization, it is needless to say that these flexible modes of land affiliation and the diversification of these affiliations in time and space is a suited response to particularly unpredictable ecological conditions, since it consolidates mutual and diversified access rights in case of local shortage. This diversification is achieved through the various cumulative criteria enabling each individual to claim a connection to sites. It is also achieved by initiating boys at distant locations and in conjunction with distant families, since initiation also provides rights establishing a strong and lasting community of inter-initiates called ngalunku. The initiator is himself called waputju (WF), even though he may never become the actual father-in-law of the initiated boy. The most visible strategy in this realm, however, occurs during the organization of marriages, which is directly tied to the usage of terminology in which cross-parallel neutralization is, so to say, itself neutralized.

“Horizontal skewing” in the light of marriages

The works that were most helpful in the clarification of the Aluridja type of kinship were those that analyzed Crow-Omaha systems in terms of layered or parallel terminological options rather than independent systems, and in particular David Kronenfeld's (1973) work on the Fanti. He distinguishes three terminological subsystems that relate to different behavioral pattern or contexts. The first and central pattern is the one Kronenfeld refers to as being unskewed which is applied in contexts related to parental roling. The second pattern, less commonly used, he refers to as skewed terminology. This subsystem concerns contexts of inheritance among semi-localized matrilineages. Finally, the third pattern is the courtesy use of kin terms for non-kinsmen, extending the nuclear family terms according to approximate

relative age and aligning behavioral patterns.

There is no direct equivalence between these patterns and those found in the Western Desert.

What held my attention is the co-existence terminological subsystems reflecting distinct behavioral contexts, an idea that is clearly reflected in the Aluridja system: just as the Fanti do not have (only) a “Crow-system” as such, Western Desert people do not have an “Aluridja” system (alone).

The first and most visible usage of the terminology is halfway between the “egological” and the “sociological” contexts discussed above. It is also the subsystem used among close relatives (and closeness is defined in both genealogical and residential terms) and the terminology one is most likely to observe when visiting and living for only a few days or weeks with these people. It is thus the terminology that gave rise to Elkin's definition of the Aluridja system. In the context of co-residential usages, mothers (ngunytju) are distinguished from father's sisters (kurntili), and fathers (mama) from mother's brothers (kamuru). Each fulfills quite specific roles in the education of children. However, while kurntili and kamaru denote cross-relatives, their children are considered too close to become actual affines and are “cut out”, to use Tonkinson's terminology. They are called brothers (kurta) and sisters (tjurtu). The Ngaatjatjarra people explain this feature by the expression “kungkankatja, minalinkatja” of which the confirmed free translation is “children of a sister and of her brother are identical”: they are siblings.

The second terminological usage, which I have referred to as being “sociological”, concerns situations in which the above-mentioned neutralization is extended to all generations.

Mother's brothers are called “father” (mama), and father's sisters are called “mother” (ngunytju). “Mama” and “ngunytju” are here cover terms for all members of the opposite generational moiety, while “kurta” and “tjurtu” function as cover terms for all members of

one's own moiety. It is here again among Crow-Omaha researchers, and in particular in Alan Rumsey's (1981) work on the Ngarinyin of north-west Australia, that similar situations can be observed.

Rumsey's paper was reconsidering certain claims made for the Ngarinyin. Like the Aluridja system, their terminology had been considered an unusual one, particularly by Radcliffe-Brown and Elkin who set it apart as a distinct type among Australian systems. "The feature of the Ngarinyin system which seemed most anomalous is the tendency for all persons within a single agnatic line to be called by the same kin term", Rumsey explains (1981:181). For Elkin and Radcliffe-Brown, the absence of generation differences within the system was due to an emphasis on the solidarity of the local clan as a unit in social integration. Rumsey confirms the important role of patrilineal generation merging, but he also demonstrates the existence of variability in its extent. He emphasizes that terminological usage is context specific. Quoting the example of a man calling potential wives by the term "mother", Rumsey shows that in the particular context he was investigating, the man was in fact referring to the entire opposite moiety for which "mother" stands as a cover term.

I have arrived at very similar conclusions for Ngaatjatjarra usages of the sociological terminological set. When father's sisters are called "mother", it is not the particular interpersonal relationship that is at stake, but the general principle of the generational moieties, structuring grossly the background of social interaction and role, that is the center of attention. This particular use of the terminology is most explicit in ritual contexts, where members of each generational level, called Ngumpaulurru and Tjuntultukultul, sit at opposite places and occupy different roles. Members of the opposite moiety are all called "mother" and "father", while members of one's own moiety are called "sister" and "brother". Just as Rumsey writes that generation merging among the Ngarinyin is undertaken in certain

discourse contexts (1981:185), we must conclude for the Ngaatjatjarra, and more widely among Western Desert people, that cross-parallel neutralization (combined in some cases with alternate generational level merging), is undertaken in particular situational and discursive contexts as well.

The third terminological set is used by interlocutors when discussing marriage rules or envisioning marriage and setting up alliance strategies. It is also the set which conforms most closely to the genealogical grid and distinguishes all kin categories known by Western Desert people, translating the prescriptive marriage rule: marriageable cross-cousins are distinguished from parallel cousins and some non-marriageable cross-cousins. When a teenager reaches marriageable age, certain kurntili (FZ) and kamuru (MB) are “renamed” yumari (WM) and waputju (WF). Children of yumari and waputju are watjirra² (cross-cousins) or wives/husbands, kurri. Other terms are in use, such as marutju for WB/♂MBS/♂FZS and tjuwari for HZ/♀MBD/♀FZD, but they usually refer to actual in-laws. What is important is the passage from kurntili (FZ) to yumari (WM), and from kamuru (MB) to waputju (WF), which goes hand in hand with the distinction of cross from parallel cousins. It does not describe a constriction from a classificatory to a descriptive class since waputju (yumari) is applied to various men (women) that sit in the MB (FZ) category, whether they are actual fathers-in-law (mothers-in-law) or not. The determining of who sits in this subset is tied to two decisional processes. The first is the normative, the second the intentional marriageability of his or her children. In the first process, discussions take place with respect to the normative capacity of a man or a woman to become an actual in-law. The first criteria retained are of a classificatory nature: a waputju (WF/HF) is of the kamuru class (MB). The other criteria are spatial and genealogical proximity or distance. A potential father-in-law (mother-in-law) should be genealogically removed (their children should be cross-cousins of

the third degree at least) and spatially distant. He or she should have a baggage of land-affiliations that is distinct from ego's parents' affiliations. Similarly, his or her children (and thus potential spouses to Ego), should have distinct affiliations from Ego as well. Ideally, he or she should not already be the father-in-law of one's sibling either. Dumont's "alliance de marriage", the repetition of identical marriages, is not an ideal here. The processes rather reflect what Keen (2002) called "shifting webs", the diversification and extension of the marriage network through the prohibition on marrying close "relatives".

These criteria lead to the second decisional process that takes place: the intention and possibility of getting involved in an affinal relationship with a particular person or family.

The strategies discussed are quite explicit and are about the inclusion or exclusion of potential fathers- and mothers-in-law according to political and economic opportunities. The strategies are fairly obvious today with the arrival of the cash economy and the payment of royalties by mining companies crystallizing people's attentions on particular "wealthy" families. There is however no reason to believe that these strategic principles were not at work in former days.

There are indeed a few examples of religiously and politically important men who, before contact with the Western world, were highly polygynous (more than two wives in an area where the incidence of polygyny is very low) and who were referred to by numerous persons as waputju, rather than kamuru.

Why cross-parallel neutralization / "horizontal skewing"?

None of the explanations advanced to elucidate the so-called Aluridja problem or aberration have, to my knowledge, done anything else than suggest its instability. Elkin himself had particularly peculiar ideas in this respect and proposed explanations I have summarized under

the idea of the “rucksack theory” (Dousset 2003). He thought of the Aluridja system as being the result of a transformation. In an attempt to explain this transformation, he quickly evacuated the obviously uncomfortable presence of the cross-cousin term watjirra, declaring it to be the consequence of an influence from systems with sections and subsections, such as from Luritja-speaking people in Central Australia. Elkin further that most affinal terms known by Western Desert people were imported during the many migrations of these groups to the south and south-west in response to droughts and Western colonization. Particularly puzzling is Elkin’s following intriguing question: why did the southern Aluridja groups not adopt all affinal terms, such as wife’s brother marutju or husband’s sister tjuwari, even though they were in contact with the same groups as the Spinifex people to the west who had embraced them? His answer is fairly straightforward: the groups migrating southwards did so for ecological reasons and were thus isolated from “new” forms of social organizations and kinship terms. This kind of isolation theory had already been used in similar contexts to account for “inconsistent” or “anomalous” systems elsewhere, such as by Alfred Howitt who tried to explain what was at that time the “strangeness” of the Kurnai kinship system, which is in fact very similar to the Aluridja's (see in particular Howitt 1996 [1904]: 170, 134-136, 169 ff and 269 ff). Elkin, however, goes further and adds to the “isolation theory” another astonishing idea: “as a result only a minimum number of kinship terms was taken by migrating groups, just sufficient to distinguish generation, sex and marriage relationships. There were no other needs” (1938-40:305). This is thus Elkin’s scenario on how “his” southern Aluridja system originated and spread: groups, pushed by harsh ecological conditions, rapidly packed their cultural baggage with some minimal kinship terms, those necessary in a Hawaiian system, leaving behind all other terms, and went off to find a better land. Let us call this transformational theory the “rucksack theory” and leave it behind us.

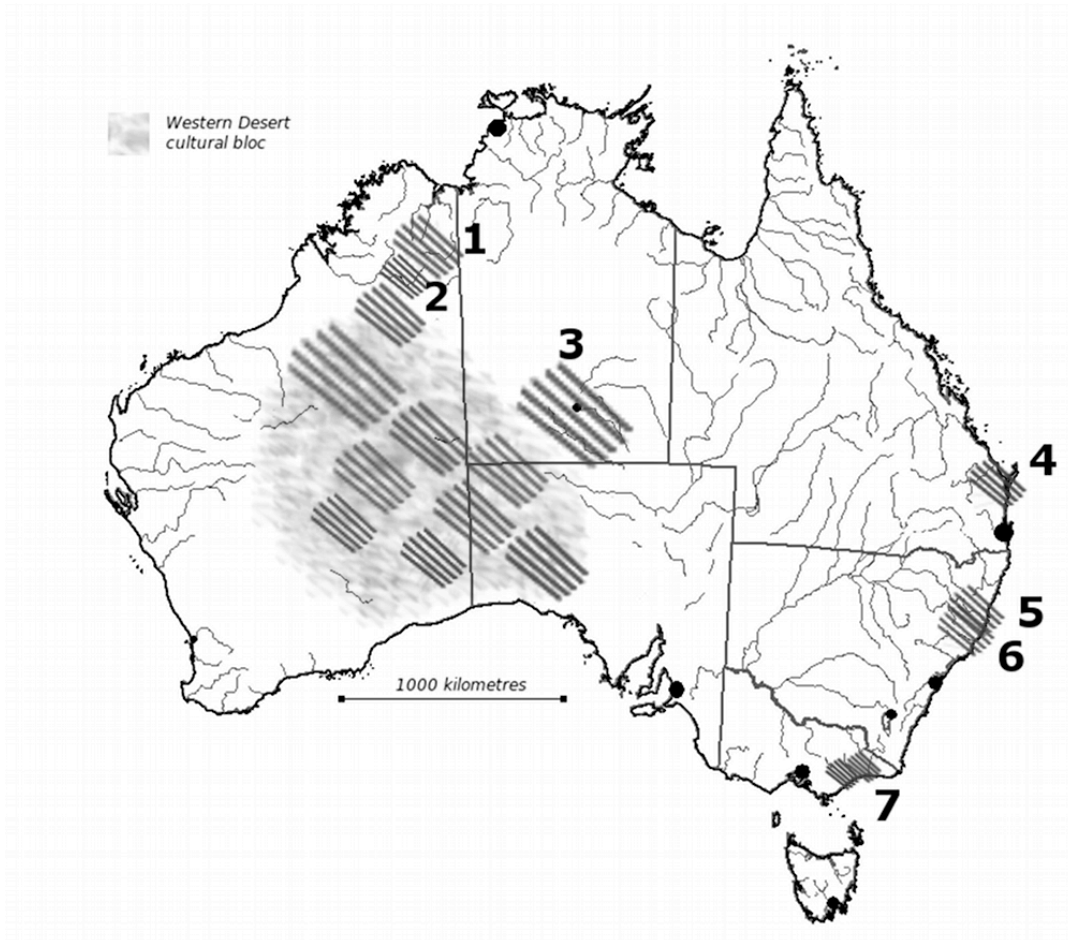
As I have tried to show, this apparent “aberration” is in fact not much more than a reflection of Elkin’s incapacity to elaborate on contextual uses of kinterms. This incapacity is the consequence of the short-term survey method he applied to collect terminologies in his surveys. Contextual terminologies can only be observed during their actual uses, as Kronenfeld’s and Rumsey’s work demonstrates. There is no way Elkin could have observed anything else than a limited terminological set used among co-residents, with its mixture of bifurcation in G^{+1} and neutralization in G^0 .

I have shown that there are three terminological sets among Ngaatjatjarra-speaking people and more widely in the Western Desert: one is generational, one is a mixture of generational and bifurcation (Elkin’s Aluridja), and one is fully bifurcate-merging. While I do not wish to suggest a direct dependency between ecological conditions and kinship terminology, it is nevertheless significant that the use of the three terminological sets can be seen as a response to such conditions. Using a generational terminological set among people characterized by their genealogical and spatial proximity, and inversely applying a bifurcate-merging terminological set to genealogically and spatially distant people, contributes to the diversification of affiliations to land and of accesses to resources. The core system of the Western Desert is of the bifurcate-merging type. Cross-parallel neutralization is a social technology that is in fairly explicit ways deployed in contexts where marriages need to be politically and economically oriented.

Is the Western Desert again an exception?

One further question needs to be asked: is the so-called Aluridja system, now understood as a system with co-existing terminological sets, still an exception in the Australian landscape?

McConvell shows (this volume) that the co-existence of subsets, in particular in terminological systems which have Crow-Omaha features, seems to be a quite well distributed feature. What about cross-parallel neutralization?



Map 13.1: Cross-parallel neutralizations in Australia (see Table 13.1 for legend)

	Language/tribe	G-0	G+1	Marriage
	Western Desert	B = MBS = FZS	F ≠ MB	At least 3 rd cross-

	(generic, but in particular, from north to south: Kukatja, Martu Wangka-Mardu, Mandjildjara, Ngaatjatjarra, Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara, Spinifex people, Kokatha)	(1st and 2 nd degree and co-residents) Z = MBD = FZD (1st and 2 nd degree and co-residents)	M ≠ FZ	cousin, local exogamy
1	Kija (McConvell 1997)	B = MBS (close) Z = FZD (close) = MBD (close)	F ≠ MB M ≠ FZ	Preferred: 2 nd cross-cousins 1 st cross-cousins possible but not preferred.
2	Gooniyandi (McGregor 1990)	B = MBS = FZS (close) Z = MBD = FZD (close) Merging also when mothers of cross-cousins are countrywomen	F ≠ MB M ≠ FZ M = MMBD when country-women	Merging “when distance is small”. Merging also when mothers of cross-cousins are from the same geographical area

3	Arrernte (Aranda) (Henderson and Dobson 1994)	fB = fMBS = fFZS = mZ = mMBD = mFZD	F ≠ MB M ≠ FZ	2 nd cross-cousin and other conditions
4	Gubbi Gubbi (Mathew 1887)	Z = FZD = MBD	F ≠ MB M ≠ FZ	?
5	Dunghutti (Holmer 1967)	B = MBS Z = MBD	F ≠ MB M ≠ FZ	?
6	Kattang (Holmer 1967)	B = MBS [= MB] [and W = D]	F ≠ MB	?
7	Gunnai (Kurnai) (Fison and Howitt 1991 [1880], Keen pers. comm.)	B = FZS = MBS Z = FZD = MBD	F ≠ MB M ≠ FZ	At least 3 rd cousin (no indication as to whether they are cross or parallel or both), exogamy of patrifilial “flesh” totem.

Table 13.1: Cross-parallel neutralizations in Australia (see Map 13.1 for locations)

Very similar cases are those in the Western Desert and the Kija north of it since both associate the parallel-cross neutralization with distant marriage. It may be that the Kurnai represent a

similar case, even though they do not have a cross-cousin terminology. The fact that G^{+1} distinguishes cross relatives and that marriages need to take place between 3rd cousins at least are interesting facts in this respect. Kattang and Arrernte are other interesting cases since they seem to combine cross-parallel neutralization with skewing. Little can be said yet about the contexts of neutralization among the other groups, but cross-parallel neutralizations seem to have taken place in other places in northern New South Wales.

Irrespective of the amount of additional investigation or reconstruction that is still needed, we may advance that the Western Desert terminological system is not an exceptional form and that other groups have or had similar features. Despite the general bifurcate-merging “substructure” of the continent, actual terminologies testify to variability and adaptability that reflect the importance of considering terminological systems in the light of their contextual uses.

Conclusion

Barnes (forthcoming) recalls how “Godelier (2004:198) notes that there are some anthropologists who refuse to recognize Crow-Omaha systems as a separate type, and he is right about this. Needham (1971:14) commented that nothing of any real elucidatory value has come out of the comparative attention to the ‘Omaha’ type”. Kronenfeld, Rumsey and others have shown that skewing is articulated within strata of layered terminological usages against particular contextual backgrounds. This is also what characterizes the Aluridja system. The definition of sameness through cross-parallel neutralization and the marking of otherness through the use of cross-terminology are a way of orienting alliances towards individual and collective objectives. In this sense, my approach to the Aluridja problem has definitely been a

materialist one; but it has been so because Aboriginal elucidations of their own practices are congruent with these conclusions.

Despite the layers of contextual applicability of terminologies, the underlying principle of calculating relatedness among Western Desert people remains of the bifurcate-merging type. Lévi-Strauss' superficial depiction of the Aluridja "aberration" is thus in contradiction with his own project of crystallizing the deep structures of kinship (and the human mind). It may be that the identification of a "Crow-Omaha problem", and of the existence of semi-complex systems, may well be a similarly fallacious program, at least in those cases where skewing is a social technology rather than reflecting actual cognitive processes and deep structures.

NOTES

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(2) I will not go into the details of the usage of watjirra generally in the Western Desert, since

it has slightly different connotations in different dialectal groups. For example, among northern groups it denotes all cross-cousins, while among southern groups it is used only to refer to same-sex cross-cousins (other-sex cross-cousins are in this case called husband/wife). Those groups that do not know *watjirra* seem to be using *marutju* (brother-in-law) and *tjuwari* (sister-in-law) in a classificatory, rather than only in a descriptive way.

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