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# BLACKFELLOWS, WHITEFELLOWS, AND HEAD LICE

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Head lice (*Pediculus humanus capitis*) are considered favourably by many Aboriginal residents at Doomadgee Mission on the Nicholson River in the far north-west corner of Queensland. This paper presents descriptive data that portray what people do with, and what they think about, head lice.<sup>1</sup> It also discusses some European reactions to the lice, and refers to a general theoretical concept of 'social grooming'. In the cross-cultural context portrayed, the data demonstrate the inappropriateness of imposing ethnocentric European definitions about illness and health on Aboriginal populations.

## ETHNO-CLASSIFICATION

At Doomadgee head lice are known by the English term and also by terms in the local indigenous languages (e.g., *dunurr* in Garrawa).<sup>2</sup> Three stages of development of the louse are classified:

1. *mindil*—the egg or nit, said to be white or 'shiny';
2. *māgayagaya*—the small louse soon after hatching (said to be white at first and then to become black);
3. *dunurr*—the adult male or female.

These terms are specific to the head louse; for example, the term for head louse egg, *mindil*, can not be used for other kinds of eggs. The general term for egg (*wuyjbi*) can, however, be used to refer to the head louse egg.

While the male and female louse are not distinguished terminologically, physical differences are observed between them: the male is said to be slightly shorter than the female and differences in genital organs and the posterior end are recognised; but the more noticeable difference is when the female is ready to lay eggs (*bindanaba wuyjbi*) for she becomes large (*walguru*—'swell up', sometimes referred to as 'tight round the body') due to having been 'filled up' by the male—indeed, the male and female are sometimes found 'chained up like a dog', that is, coupled together during coitis in the same position as seen in dogs.

Further data about the louse can be elicited in relation to the comparative classification of certain other organisms: it is smaller than the *dinbul* (tick); it is compared favourably with the *mugaga*, which is disliked—the *mugaga* is found stuck in the skin, mostly under the arms and in the pubic region, and is difficult to pull out;<sup>3</sup> *dunurr* 'belongs to bush', and by virtue of this fact there is a sense in which it is clean, as opposed to the flea, for example, for which there is no word in Garrawa and which is said to have been brought by Europeans—a contrast is drawn between the dingo on the one hand and the European domestic dog on the other: the former are (or were) without fleas and 'very clean' and edible (particularly the young), while the latter are hosts to fleas and are dirty and inedible; finally, the *dunurr* remains on the outside of the body as compared to *ngalarngalar*—a kind of worm parasite which enters the body of humans and other animals.<sup>4</sup>

Head lice are believed to come directly to their human hosts from cave- and tree-dwelling bats:

<i>wagalagala</i>	<i>wiyarijba</i>	<i>dunurr</i>	<i>mungana</i>
bats	put down	headlice	(by) morning <sup>5</sup>

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The bats fly around at night and sweep down close to people's heads; they are perceived as actively putting the lice down onto the head at these times. Sometimes the person can feel the lice fall onto his head, at other times it might happen while he is asleep and he does not feel it.

At another level of worldview old people explain how the head louse has a 'dreaming' or 'home', that is, it has mythological affiliations to 'country'. People knowledgeable about these matters have given different named places in separate locales as having 'louse dreaming'. Those places, in conjunction with 'louse dreaming', also have subsection affiliation—that is, affiliation within a system of knowledge which divides people, parts of their physical environment, their mythology, etc., into eight named segments or classes. The old people say that during their younger days if people wanted head lice they would go to these places and make the lice 'come up—might be next day'. Techniques for doing this included breaking twigs and leaves off a certain kind of tree at one place, although only females are said to have been usually able to go there and do this; at another place, the 'dreaming' is in large rocks and a person (male or female) would put his or her head against the boulder while a second person tapped it with a small stone—the two people would then change positions so that the techniques could be applied to both; as well, it is said that by visiting such places (and talking the language predominant there) people would maintain a head lice population over a general and wide area.

### 'HEAD CRACKING'

The last paragraph introduces the point that people at times encourage head lice in their hair. There may be a number of reasons, but the one most commonly talked about is that when you have lice people will 'crack your head'—*dunuraba* me (my head). When someone 'cracks your head' they locate the lice and their eggs in your hair, and then 'crack' the eggs.

The lice and their eggs are found by passing an instrument (called a *gajala*) back and forwards through the hair. It is a small piece of wood usually 15–20 cm long and sharpened to a blunt point at one end. The implement is often cut from a sweet-smelling timber referred to in English as Cypress Pine (*Callitris* sp.).<sup>6</sup> When it is passed through the hair it parts the hair, leaving the scalp and hair roots exposed. The lice are also exposed and so too are their eggs, which are attached to the hairs and are said to shine in the sunlight. The eggs are oval in shape with a lid at the broader end provided with air cells pierced by pores through which air can enter the egg (Chandler & Read, 1961:623). The person 'cracks your head' by putting pressure down against the oval side of the egg so that it breaks or collapses and pops open the lid of the egg. The pressure is provided by the point of the *gajala* which has been burned 'to make it blunt and hard' while a thumb (or finger) nail holds the egg in place against the scalp. The *gajala* is thus used as a kind of lever against the scalp to 'crack' the egg: the verb *ngarrgadaba*, translated as 'to spear', is sometimes used to describe the process.

It is said that when an individual has his head 'cracked' it makes him 'sleepy': '... if you want to go to sleep that's the best way'. People say they like the sound of the egg being 'cracked' and that it is pleasant having one's head 'poked' or 'pushed'. They may also hear a sound like the sound that the bats are said to make when flying around at night, for when cracking each egg some women are heard making this sound by sucking air in through the front teeth. The individual usually lies with his or her head in the lap of the person using the *gajala*. He or she relaxes and sleeps there, changing position from time to time so that different areas of the head are accessible. At times people sit while the person working on them stands. Overall, the pastime is described as enjoyable, relaxing and intimate, and it is much indulged in.<sup>7</sup>

It is almost always females who do the 'cracking', both to females and males. It is common to see women of all ages *dunuraba* each other: from quite young girls through to old ladies. The behaviour is a regular part of the daily pattern of visiting engaged in by women, and they often take their *gajala* with them (at times carried in the hair or behind the ear). The pastime is part of wider social life, so that adult female couples who *dunuraba* each other are invariably close in terms of a general social relationship. The same applies, although perhaps to a somewhat lesser extent, when adult females *dunuraba* children. Both young boys and girls are

often seen as having particularly large numbers of lice and eggs, and people are keen to *dunuraba* them; it is common to see them standing while their mother sits and works on their head. Yet at times they refuse to cooperate, especially the boys, and mothers tell of how they quietly feel through their childrens' hair for lice and eggs while they sleep at night.

A woman will *dunuraba* her husband (or perhaps her lover), in private, particularly when he is fatigued. At times he may reciprocate. The behaviour is indicative of interpersonal intimacy and, except in children, in the case of a male/female relationship the intimacy usually indicated includes sexual affairs. A mother will not *dunuraba* her son once he has reached adolescence. However, occasionally a sexually mature, married woman will *dunuraba* an adult male with whom she has a close, but in formal terms a strictly non-sexual, relationship—her actual mother's brother, for example. In such cases there is little or no close body contact.

Given these considerations, at the level of formal ideology 'head cracking' is 'free', it is not (independent of the kinship system) constrained by special formal rules prescribing who can *dunuraba* whom. This is despite the fact that both the head and the hair of an individual are described by older Garrawa-speaking people as 'dear'. Thus, at the level of formal ideology hair cutting is 'dear'. An individual should only have his hair cut by a person who has a *junggayi* relationship to him, that is (to put it over-generally), a person affiliated with the semi-moiety with which his sister's children are affiliated and who thus bears certain responsibilities and enjoys certain rights in relation to him, his social and physical property, his ceremonies, etc. Hair cutting is 'dear' in that if a person lets a non-*junggayi* cut his hair *junggayi* are entitled to claim recompense. While the ideology would rarely be actually imposed at Doomadgee, recompense in the form of money, blankets, stores, etc., is said to be made at times among Garrawa-speaking people at the neighbouring settlement of Borroloola. Particular claims by individuals appear to be generated in circumstances already focusing on the status of *junggayi*-(ship)—e.g., certain ceremonies.

The ideology presenting the head area of the body as not 'free' but 'dear' involves concepts drawn from ceremonial life which cannot be presented in this paper. It is enough to state that 'head cracking' is 'free' from such constraints. The pattern described above about who will usually *dunuraba* whom is to be seen within the broader pattern of social life. While that social life certainly involves formally stated ideologies operating within such systems of knowledge as the kinship system and the subsection system, none of the ideology refers directly to the social pattern of 'head cracking'.

To *dunuraba* somebody is enjoyable and satisfying. As well as reciprocating what may have been done to you, it provides the opportunity to take some lice from the head being worked on and place them in your own hair as potential producers of eggs. However, some hosts may not allow the 'mother' or female louse about to lay her eggs to be taken. Both parties usually wish to maintain enough males and females to ensure that eggs are produced. Lice are rarely killed so there is no problem about killing eggs, they will soon be replaced.

Variations on the model of head cracking as described do occur. Sometimes the *gajala* is only used to find the eggs and they are then 'cracked' by being lifted up and squeezed with thumb and finger or bitten between the teeth—this behaviour is not to be confused with the eating of lice. The *gajala* may be replaced by a matchstick or a blunt, round-end knife, or anything that will do the job: a report from Kowanyama settlement on the west coast of Cape York Peninsula mentions a wallaby bone used for the purpose,<sup>8</sup> and one from Darwin recently states that people used the old-fashioned 'dolly-peg' after breaking one of the legs off.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, no instrument at all may be used, and the eggs (and lice) are felt for and located with the hands—either by one woman for another person or by a woman rather absent-mindedly feeling through her own hair with her hand and extracting one or two eggs; this occurs particularly at night when it is often difficult to see to use the *gajala*.<sup>10</sup>

At this stage in the discussion it is useful to introduce several relevant quotations from early ethnographers. The first, from Roth (1910:22), supports the data and the argument being presented.

The men's hair, combed out with a pointed kangaroo bone, was allowed to grow long . . . Head-lice were considered an advantage; a man would often lie down with his head resting in his wife's lap when she would comb his hair, examine for the vermin, perhaps eat some, make a peculiar smacking noise when squeezing others, or, if it were perfectly clean in this respect, she would infect it from some one else's head.

Roth appears to be making use of Petrie's data for the Brisbane region. The description agrees with the data presented in this paper on a number of points: 1. the head lice were regarded favourably; 2. the focus on the female as (typically) the 'head cracker'; 3. mention of the 'smacking noise' made by sucking in air through the front teeth; 4. the deliberate movement of the louse from someone else's head to one's own. However, Roth provides additional data in two respects: his claim that some 'vermin' are eaten, and in this respect it is unfortunate that he does not clearly distinguish between head lice and nits (or head lice eggs); and his very interesting statement that the deliberate movement of a louse from someone else's head to one's own is conditional upon it being 'perfectly clean'.

A second reference to Roth (1897) concerns his early chapter on sign language in the region he refers to as North-West-Central Queensland. He suggests (p. 71) that the signs are more correctly described as 'idea-grams', each sign conjuring up an idea, modified more or less by the context of the mute conversation' and in plate V containing illustrations of the 'sign language he writes (p. 79): 'Ideagram figure 85 is intended for a hair-louse being squeezed between the thumb-nails—a practice not unknown among more civilized peoples'. That is, the sign or ideogram for head louse is represented by using the two hands to show the louse being 'squeezed between the thumb-nails'. The fact that such an ideogram is part of the formalised repertoire suggests that head lice were a significant feature of the animal world and that the method of 'squeezing', or what I have termed 'cracking', was significant as behaviour associated with them. However, note once again that Roth does not distinguish between the head louse and the nit, and that the 'cracking' behaviour described earlier in this paper characteristically involves nits more than lice. Note also that Roth describes this sign language for 'tribes' to the south and south-east of the area described in this paper and mentions (p. 71) the probability of its being found elsewhere.

The final quotation is from Lumholtz (1979:242) writing of the Herbert River area in north Queensland:

If a black man desires to show how glad he is to meet his old friend, he sits down, takes his friend's head into his lap, and begins to look for the countless little animals that annoy the natives, and which they are fond of eating. When the one has had his head cleaned in this manner, the two change places, and the other is treated with the same politeness.

Lumholtz's description raises three points: firstly, in contrast to my own data (and to the form of Roth's description) he describes the activity for what appear to be adult male couples (although this is not stated explicitly); secondly, he also claims that 'animals' are eaten, and in fact eaten 'fondly', and, like Roth, he fails to distinguish between head lice and nits; thirdly, he states that people are annoyed by the head lice. The last point has important implications for one of the arguments set out in this paper, for if the lice are annoying they are also the source of a pastime which is intensely enjoyable—in Roth's terms, they 'were considered an advantage'. We shall return to this question following some examination of opinion within European traditions.

## EUROPEAN ATTITUDES

The reactions and attitudes of Europeans towards lice are well known at Doomadgee: 'Europeans they don't like that lice, they think its something unclean about it'. Some may momentarily stop the habit if a white person such as the community health nursing sister approaches, yet others continue the activity while waiting outside the administration office and store in the white section of the mission. As with so much of Aboriginal life, people protect themselves from the judgements of whites by giving them no access to the practice: 'They don't tell whitefeller—they too frightened'.

Indeed, the perception of European attitudes is correct. At the official level of medical opinion and Government policy the Queensland Health Education Council's Publication No. 205 (1972), which deals with head lice, states that all forms of body lice are classified as 'Communicable disease', and that head lice must be 'removed and killed'. The same publication states that head lice carry no disease but that they are a 'nuisance' and that the worst that can happen is that sores may develop from scratching. The message is also conveyed in the recent *Newsletter of the Aboriginal Health Education Project*, March/April 1979, p. 3, disseminated by the Queensland Health Department's Division of Health Education and Information to Aboriginal people throughout the State. Further, 'Dr Teddy's tip' in *The Aboriginal Health Worker* (1978:46) explains how to get rid of head lice, and a number of published reports include head lice in their description of 'diseases' among Aboriginal people (Clelland, 1931; Davidson, 1957).

Leaving aside for the moment the scientific debates about the effects of head lice, at the level of publicly held folk theories head (and other body) lice are seen as filthy and disgusting and indicative of filthy and disgusting individuals. The widely known term 'lousy' has arisen as an adjective derived from 'louse' and while it is used in the technical medical sense to mean simply 'with lice' it is defined in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as meaning 'disgusting'; incidentally, a second meaning is given as 'abundantly supplied with money', and the folk use clearly terms as 'lousy' individuals seen as mean and miserly. Presumably, there has been some historical slang association of 'lousiness' (i.e., either the having of lice or the derived notion of being 'disgusting') with being able, yet unwilling, to part with one's money.

Thus, being host to head lice is heavily and negatively sanctioned by European society. A hairdresser discussed the matter with me and left me in no doubt as to how revolted she and her colleagues are when they find themselves working on a lice-infested head, and there was a time when I feared that this paper might not be typed because the typist was complaining of feeling itchy while typing.

Pure medical research is no doubt free from such biases, and in several papers I have examined the incidence of head lice in various parts of the world is correlated positively with such variables as family size, bed-sharing, socioeconomic status (including a reference to dietary deficiencies), crowding in the home, frequency of washing and combing, age (children having most), and sometimes with sex (females having more than males) and hair length and/or hair weight (see, e.g., Chandler & Read, 1961; Faust et al., 1970; Slonka et al., 1976; Mellanby, 1942). However, the application of pure research to formulation of policy may not be all that free from the biases. Consider, for example, a recent story in *The Telegraph*, Brisbane (14 December 1978: p. 9) entitled 'The nits that weren't louse up a school', which reports a desperate attempt in a New South Wales school to eradicate what were thought to be nits and lice by use of medical shampoos; however, the nits and lice turned out to be wax-like cuffs or plugs on the hair probably caused by over-use of the medical shampoos. If over-zealousness in attempts to eradicate head lice do occur they may be understood as linked to the strongly negative moral connotations associated with lice.

## BLACKFELLOW VIEWS AND WHITEFELLOW VIEWS

Despite its (unsuccessful) attempts over a long period to eradicate head lice at Doomadgee, European medicine appears to support a number of the local beliefs: the idea that children tend to have many lice (Mellanby, 1942:180); the position of a large number of the eggs as along the hairline at the back of the neck and around the ears (Slonka et al., 1976:740; Chandler & Read, 1961:623); and the fact that head lice usually do not carry disease (Chandler & Read, 1961:627; Slonka et al., 1976:739). Also, the literature reports that the effect of louse bites varies greatly with individuals, for the principal symptoms appear to be allergic in nature (Chandler & Read, 1961:625; Street, 1975:110). In fact, much of the reaction is due to contact of the bites with the faeces of the lice, which scratching would presumably encourage.<sup>11</sup> In this light, a habit described by a number of women at Doomadgee makes much sense: the hair is washed thoroughly and regularly after the lice are carefully combed out; they are then

replaced following the wash. The fact that the women are regularly removing the lice faeces may thus be related to their statements that they have no problems with itching, scratching, infection, etc.

However, over and above such specific cases it is clear that the population generally does not suffer from the severe symptoms described by European medicine. A possible reason for this in terms of physiology—apart from any sociopsychological factors, which are clearly important—is that, as described in the literature, people can develop immunity to head lice bites and become oblivious to them. According to Street (1975:108–9), this occurs in populations which have a high tolerance for lice:

The effect which louse bites have on people varies considerably from person to person, and show a progression from sensitisation to immunity. Generally when a person who has never previously been bitten by lice becomes infested for the first time, the effect of the bites is initially minimal . . . Gradually, however, the victim acquires a sensitivity to the bites, so that after about a week they cause intense irritation and red inflamed spots . . . This second phase, like the first, does not last for very long, as the sensitised skin gradually acquires immunity to the bites if they are continued. This explains why people living under extremely unhygienic conditions can put up with being permanently infested with lice and apparently take no notice of them.

Similarly, it is possible to become immune to louse-borne diseases (e.g., lice are known to have carried in some circumstances typhus, trench fever, and relapsing fever, although this appears to have occurred rarely, if ever, in Australia since European arrival).<sup>11</sup> Chandler & Read, for example (1961:627), suggest that in communities which tolerate the presence of lice individuals are 'exposed to bites . . . from birth; they suffer from louse-borne diseases early in life, become immune, and are kept immune by repeated reinfection'; it should be noted, however, that these writers are not stating clearly the extent of mortality from louse-borne diseases (presumably 'early in life') in such populations.

Further relevant points include references in the literature to the apparent absence of head lice in certain racial types. Two early reports (Greene, 1898:71; Sobel, 1913:661) describe this situation in the Black American context (Boston and New York respectively); the former explains that 'the coloured children' have oil applied to the hair regularly which proves disagreeable to the lice, while the latter attributes this result chiefly to 'constant combing'. However, apart from such behaviour-related causes, in a note concerning children of African descent in the Caribbean context (Guyana) Ashcroft (1969) suggests that the hair form is unfavourable to the lice. Zinsser (1945:136–38) mentions different reactions on the part of lice to hosts from different races, e.g., the louse is said to change colour to suit the skin colour of its host. If there is a possibility that the head louse is in any way race-specific (as well as species-specific) for hair form or any other physical or physiological attribute of the host, the possibility arises that racial differences may apply to the process of becoming immune.

It is very difficult to assess just how itchy people are. Some Garrawa speakers state that the head lice never cause them to be itchy; others explain the small amount of itchiness they experience as the result of the special circumstance where the 'mother' louse is walking around looking for a place to lay her eggs—this is said to make you sleepy; still others complain that lice can make you too itchy and give you sores, so you must be careful not to be host to too many. This last attitude focuses on the fact that people believe they can have a good deal of control over their louse population. The principle is inherent in the practice described above of selectively maintaining the lice population through visits to 'dreaming' places; old people are said to have had to restrain children from visiting the place for they would invariably behave haphazardly and indiscriminately there, and as a consequence make too many lice 'come up'. The deliberate removal of what is usually the 'mother louse' from someone else's to one's own head reflects the same principle of conscious control. It seems that people have personal preferences for the size of the lice population they wish to maintain, and no doubt these preferences are related directly to, among other things, the amount of discomfort they experience. The point made in this paper is that all these people deal with whatever unpleasantness they experience within the desirable process of 'head cracking'. It is

within the context of this social and physical activity that varying lice populations (ranging from near zero to very large numbers) are consciously maintained and controlled by various individuals rather than being either deliberately destroyed or fatalistically tolerated. This is despite the fact that the process of control involves the *selective* destruction of nits (and no doubt at times lice), and the *selective* toleration of widely varying degrees of discomfort on the part of different individuals.

### 'HEAD CRACKING' AS SOCIAL GROOMING

As a focus for physical relaxation 'head cracking' may not be all that dissimilar to a kind of massage of the scalp as it involves thorough combing through the hair and methodical and repetitive pressure being brought to bear firmly on the scalp at changing positions. Such tactile stimulation of the general head area is not altogether unknown in European society when certain phenomena are considered; for example, people enjoying having their hair cut, washed, blow-dried, 'permed', tinted, etc., and in some women, facial massage, application of various allegedly beneficial substances to the face, and even 'skin ironing' as described in *Time* magazine of 11 December 1978, p. 78. Many people also enjoy having someone else brush and/or plait their hair methodically; pimples and blackheads are picked, and dead, sun-burned, flaky skin is peeled off in a similar way to the use by Aborigines of the *gajala* to 'crack' pimples and the raised skin in 'prickly heat'. Similarities may also be found in European society for the way in which 'head cracking' is a focus for social activity; for example, people converse with the hairdresser or barber and request girl-friends, boy-friends, spouses, etc., to caress their head, face and neck.

Similar kinds of behaviour have been described in the literature on primates as 'social grooming' (Morris, 1967; Sparkes, 1963). It is important not to prejudge the issue by assuming any immediate applicability of features of primate behaviour to human societies.<sup>13</sup> However, some brief reference to the literature is relevant.

Morris (1967:175) describes social grooming as 'the development of a friendly mutual aid system'; it occurs in a wide range of both bird and mammal species, but 'reaches a peak of expression amongst the higher primates', where the fur is systematically worked through. He refers to 'special grooming invitation signals', and to the tight interpersonal bonds which develop between individuals who cooperate in grooming one another. He says females will on certain occasions reassure infants by grooming them.

Eimerl & DeVore (1965:107) state that among baboons and macaques 'most of the grooming is done by females' and that:

Being groomed is obviously an enjoyable process. The groomed animal sits or lies in an attitude of beatific contentment, like a woman having her hair combed or a man enjoying a scalp massage in a barber's chair.

The analogy with modern European society is carried further by Morris. He first describes 'grooming talking' (1967:178), the meaningless, polite chatter of social occasions which functions 'to reinforce the greeting smile, and to maintain social togetherness . . . enabling valuable group bonds and friendships to grow and become strengthened'. 'Grooming talk' is the most important human substitute for social grooming, but it is not the only one. After referring to the 'strong grooming response' released by fluffy or furry clothing, rugs, and pet animals, Morris talks of head grooming. He says the great deal of attention the head region receives at the hands of the specialist groomers, the barbers and hairdressers, cannot be explained on a simple hygienic basis, and thus a visit to the barber or hairdresser 'provides an outlet for social grooming'.

While Morris writes at times from an ethnocentric European point of view, and the arguments abound with over-simple conclusions, the concept of 'social grooming' is useful if not limited to an explanation that reduces social life solely to innate needs or desires. What is required is description of so-called grooming behaviour in a particular human society, and the integration of that description with an understanding of social life and the belief system in the



society. The data presented above from an Australian Aboriginal context indicate that important themes in 'social grooming' in that society are the fine-grained workings of interpersonal relationships incorporating the manner of use of personal space, both physically and socially; the mode of understanding the structure and function of the human body at both the level of formal systems of knowledge or philosophy and, the level of everyday commonsense, folk belief; and the conceptual classification and understanding of the human parasite insect world as part of the general relationship to the wider world of physical organisms. Investigation of such themes can enable cross-cultural understanding that goes beyond the simple listing of grooming behaviours as pieces of titillating exotica from other societies (see Zinsser, 1945:142-46). The broader aim is to arrive at a general model of 'social grooming' across a wide range of societies.

## CONCLUSIONS

The attitudes and beliefs about head lice held by Aborigines in the southern area of the Gulf of Carpentaria differ markedly from those of European Australian society. Head lice are distinguished from other body parasites and from insects which live close to the body. They are compared favourably with such organisms, which are not wanted. Head lice are associated with a pastime, in which women predominate, which is pleasant, relaxing, and usually involves considerable physical contact and interpersonal intimacy. As well, this pastime correlates with underlying beliefs about where head lice come from and their relationship to humans and animals.

Whether head lice are believed to be indicative of good health (as has been reported for certain other societies throughout the world (Chandler & Read, 1961:621; Zinsser, 1945:146) remains to be established firmly, but it is certain that they are not categorically seen as a sign or symptom of bad health, disease, or illness. Rather than as organisms alien to the human body, head lice are perceived as body-familiars. As with the various kinds of parasite that abound on dogs, cats, horses, and other domestic animals, and on indigenous birds and animals taken from the bush as meat, head lice are seen as the norm rather than indicative of something abnormal needing to be destroyed.

In conclusion, the following general remarks arise from the discussion:

1. European society at the levels of the medical profession, government policy, and the local white medical worker has little, if any, understanding of the way Aborigines at Doomadgee (and elsewhere in the broad Gulf area) regard head lice.
2. Such understanding is relevant to policy and consequent provision of services. The data given in this paper suggest that European medical treatment offered for head lice (or indeed other body parasites) will be used selectively by the Aboriginal population. An understanding of this use may avoid such circular states of affairs as those which develop where schoolchildren are examined for head lice, treated to eradicate those that are discovered, and then return to their homes where lice are regarded favourably.
3. The discussion of head lice focuses on the general situation where white medical personnel are attempting to provide medical services to Aborigines; that situation can only benefit from European medicine adopting a non-ethnocentric approach to understanding what it means in Aboriginal society to be ill rather than imposing meanings from European society.
4. Anthropology and grooming: this paper presents data that are (or were) most likely not specifically limited to the southern Gulf area within Aboriginal Australia. Moreover, it represents a field of research which could usefully be pursued in other ethnographic contexts. The distinctively social dimensions of what can be designated 'grooming behaviour' may develop as an interesting study area relevant to anthropological research.

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## NOTES

1. The fieldwork for this study was funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
2. Unless stated otherwise, Garrawa terms are given here.
3. It is uncertain at this stage whether *mugaga* refers to what is classified scientifically as *Pediculus humanus corporis* (body louse) or to *Pthirus pubis* (pubic louse or 'crab'). However, for two reasons, it is most likely to be the latter: (a) the body louse does not live on the body but on the clothing; (b) the pubic louse is found, as well as in the pubic region, on other parts of the body where coarse hair grows (see Street, 1975:107-10).
4. The classification of such worms has as yet not been investigated fully.
5. It is unclear whether the 'bats' being referred to here are insect-eating bats (Microchiroptera) or small blossom-eating bats (Megachiroptera) (D. Smyth, CSIRO, Brisbane, personal communication).
6. In Garrawa the term *gajala* is also used to refer to longer sticks used for digging, killing goanna, etc. The small implement is translated by some people as 'yam stick little one', as compared with the longer stick. When used, the meaning of the term depends on social context. However, in Ganggalida (another language spoken at Doomadgee) there is one term for the small implement (*lalbad-thinda*) and another term for the big digging stick (*gadthira*).
7. A report from Maningrida in central Arnhem Land is of interest. Dan Gillespie reports (personal communication) a widely held theory that playing with the ears is a reliable method of inducing sleep; this is often done by twirling a piece of grass inside the ear, and it is said to be particularly effective for making babies sleep.
8. Personal communication from Dr Barry Alpher, Maryland, USA.
9. Personal communication from Vai Stanton, Department of Community Development, Darwin.
10. Two further variations should be noted here: certain kinds of grass seeds which are very similar in appearance to nits are often 'cracked' in the various ways described; and a reliable, but unsubstantiated, report from another Aboriginal settlement in Queensland describes the process of placing sugar grains on the scalp followed by the systematic 'cracking' of the grains.
11. Note Chandler & Read's description of the louse's bite (1961:634):  
When taking a blood meal, the louse first applies its haustellum to the skin surface, inserts its prestomal teeth into the epidermis, forces the stylets of the stabber apparatus into the skin, deposits droplets of saliva into the wound, and by means of its pharyngeal pump draws blood or tissue juice up through the buccal funnel into the pharynx.
12. As well, where this has occurred the body louse (*Pediculus humanus corporis*) is thought to have been the vector.
13. For example, such an incautious assumption is made by Baldwin et al. (1976-77). On the front cover of their published catalogue of anthropological films they juxtapose a photograph of East African chimpanzees with a photograph of Yanomamö Indian children. Both groups are seated and arranged in a line, and in both cases the individuals appear to be engaged in some kind of grooming behaviour. However, no explanatory notes accompany the photographs.

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