

5

Social Relations and Kin Ties

Kinship classifications and relations were the cornerstone of Aboriginal societies: they formed the basis of social structure. Aboriginal people formally and systematically ordered their world, terrestrial and celestial, natural as well as cultural, into a number of discrete divisions or categories ('skins' in Aboriginal English), that regulated marriage as well as other activities. These categories were essentially social summaries of kinship relations.

In outline, five kinds of groupings occurred in Aboriginal societies. They are known to anthropologists as matrimoieties, patrimoieties, sections, semimoieties and subsections, dividing the Aboriginal cosmos into two, four, or eight divisions. No Aboriginal society is known to have had more than four (of the possible five) types of groupings. Matrimeoieties and patrimoieties, the primary categories, divided the cosmos in two. Marriage arrangements were subject to these divisions, requiring that a man take his wife from the category to which he did not belong and vice versa. In other words, men and women of the same moiety (be it of patri- or matrilineal descent) could not marry. The particular moiety into which a child was born was determined by descent principles: patrimoiety referring to the father's group and matrimoiety referring to the mother's group.

Some societies for example, were bisected by matrimoieties and further divided by patrimoieties, cross-cutting the society into four equivalent segments, which then resembled the four categories of a section system. Categories ordered people, so that every man, woman and child belonged to one kind of category, and only to one. A person's category did not change, unlike kin relations, whose categories were relative for any individual; it was an absolute division of the cosmos. These systems applied in most places across the country, and their simplicity and generality made them particularly practical when relations and

obligations between neighbours and strangers had to be deciphered. Even if the systems were different in kind, equivalences were possible to find, for different kinds were simply structural parts of a larger system, but they never replaced kinship relationships as the primary or ultimate tool for social interaction.¹ These systems lent themselves quite easily to the expansion of sociality. As well, they could be assigned symbolic roles that were connected to other species which had themselves been divided and classified.

One early observer commented that:

Everything in nature, according to ... (Aboriginal people), is divided between the classes. The wind belongs to one and the rain belongs to the other. The sun is *Wutaroo*, and the moon is *Yungaroo*. The stars are divided between them; and, if a star is pointed out, they will tell you to which division it belongs.²

The great French sociologists, Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss³, when discussing Aboriginal star lore go so far as to assert that the 'astrological mythology of the Australians ... is moulded ... by the totemic organization.' They argue that because certain stars are particular ancestors and therefore belong to a moiety, a marriage category and a clan, then these particular stars are also classed in a given group, and assigned kin. They are thus accorded a definite place in society.

The night sky among groups and communities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could be viewed, to some extent, as a mirror of social relations and structures on the ground: language groups, kin categories, 'classes' and their complex interrelationships were drawn on high. The sky heroes and heroines who resided in the sky, and who were represented by individual stars or groups of stars, planets, dark patches and upper atmospheric phenomena were in the long time past, and continued to be related to the people over whom they resided.

1 Maddock 1974:85.

2 According to Bridgman (Fison and Howitt 1880 in Maddock 1974:5) who observed the Aboriginal people of Port Mackay in Queensland.

3 In their classic work 'Primitive Classification' (1970:29).

The August night sky of the Aranda and Luritja people at Hermannsburg in Central Australia is a good example, as it has a relatively well-documented account of star groups and social relations and classes. Hermannsburg was settled by German-born Lutheran missionaries on the Finke River below Ntaria waterhole in the late 1870s. By 1929, when Maegraith visited and recorded their astronomy, both (Western) Aranda and Luritja people were living on the mission. The night sky at Hermannsburg was seen as two great camps separated by a large river, the Milky Way. All the stars to the east of the celestial river were known as Aranda camps and all the stars to the west of the river were seen as Luritja camps. Those stars which made up the Milky Way were thought to be a mixture of both Luritja and Aranda camps.

The Aranda and Luritja people, like most other Australian groups, had a system of categories or 'skin' groups which, among other activities, regulated and prescribed acceptable marriage liaisons. There were eight classes in the Aranda-Luritja system, however, only six were applied to the star camps and tracks.⁴ These six of the eight classes were named *Knaria*, *Ngala*, *Paltara*, *Mbitjana*, *Panunga* and *Parula*.⁵

The two brightest stars of the Southern Cross, *Alpha* and *Beta Crucis* were thought to be the Luritja parents of *Alpha Centauri* (the upper Pointer). *Alpha Crucis* is a male belonging to the *Knaria* class. He is married to *Beta Crucis*, a woman who belongs to the *Ngala* class, and they have a son, *Alpha Centauri*, who is a *Paltara* boy. This combination of *Knaria*-*Ngala* parents with a male *Paltara* offspring strictly accords with the class system.⁶ *Beta Centauri*, the other Pointer, is an Aranda man, the son of an Aranda father, *Alpha Trianguli* and mother, *Beta Trianguli*, who belong to the *Ngala* and *Knaria* classes respectively. *Beta Centauri* is a (cross) cousin of *Alpha Centauri* (*Paltara* class) and

4 In Maegraith's account.

5 Maegraith advances no explanation as to why only six are projected onto the night sky or conversely, why two (*Banata* and *Kamara*) are left out.

6 This also accords with Fry's findings (1931) in Strehlow 1947:174–175 when he analysed the Aranda marriage system.

belongs to the marriage class *Mbitjana*. Whereas the Luritja couple, *Alpha* and *Beta Crucis* and their offspring live in the west of the great creek *Ulbaia*, the Milky Way, the Aranda couple *Alpa* and *Beta Trianguli* and their son, *Beta Centari* live in the eastern section of the River (see Diagram 5).

The grouping of stars that Europeans know as the Southern Cross (*Crux Australis*) was not recognised as a meaningful pattern by either the Aranda or the Luritja peoples. Instead they have chosen the second and third magnitude stars *Gamma* and *Delta Crucis* along with the less prominent *Gamma* and *Delta Centauri* to form a constellation known as *Iritjiga*, the Eaglehawk. No particular star corresponds with any particular part of the hawk's anatomy, the constellation as a whole representing the bird.⁷

The constellation known to Europeans as Scorpius was of considerable importance to the Aranda and Luritja (see Diagram 4). It was almost vertically overhead when Maegraith carried out his investigations and made easy and clear viewing. The Aboriginal people divided it into two groups of stars, the stars in the head separated from those in the tail, to which were added some of the less bright stars of Sagittarius. *Lambda* and *Upsilon Scorpii* (near the end of the Scorpion's tail) were seen as the tracks of a *Panunga* man and a *Parula* woman respectively. They lay in the eastern section of the great celestial river and belonged to the Aranda group. *Iota* and *Kappa Scorpii* (in the bend of the Scorpion's tail) were the tracks of two *Panunga* men. The imaginary line that joins *Kappa Scorpii* with *Beta Sagittarii* in the east was seen as a spear and these stars were united in a dramatic myth. *Iota* and *Kappa Scorpii*, two *Panunga* men from the Aranda camp, are pursuing *Lambda Scorpii* (their classificatory brother and therefore also a *Panunga* man) and a woman, *Upsilon Scorpii*, whom *Lambda Scorpii* stole from *Iota Scorpii*. The spear belongs to the pursuers. The tracks of the escaping couple are represented by *Eta* and *Zeta Scorpii*. It is at this place in the star pattern that the couple were overtaken and killed vengefully by *Iota* and *Kappa Scorpii*. In the story, the brothers return with the bodies to their camp

7 Maegraith 1932:20–1.

and bury them in the creek *Ulbaia*, the Milky Way, digging the grave with a yam stick which is represented by the imaginary line joining *Theta Scorpis* and *Alpha Arae*.

Another narrative involves Antares (*Alpha Scorpis*) who was seen by the Aranda as *Arka* or 'tickly woman'. She was seen as flying west from the Aranda camp over the great celestial creek, to escape the attention of the men. She is fleeing with *Tau* and *Sigma Scorpis*, who accompany her on either side. They are also Aranda women, and belong to the *Mbitjana* class, whereas *Arka* belongs to the *Ngala* class. *Beta*, *Delta* and *Pi Scorpis* are seen as three Luritja sisters returning to the creek from a camp in the far west below the horizon. These women meet *Arka* as she flies westward, and she persuades them to turn back and return to their camp below the horizon. Antares, as well as being *Arka*, was described as 'the red ochre woman' (an obvious reference to its colour), who is proceeding from the creek with her digging stick towards a group of women in the west (the constellation known to Europeans as the Hyades), with whom she collects bush tucker and returns with it to the creek.

Altair (*Alpha Aquilae*) and Alshain (*Beta Aquilae*), the brightest stars in the constellation Europeans know as Aquila, the Eagle, represent the tracks of two brothers, pursuing an emu. The emu's tracks are represented by Vega (*Alpha Lyrae*), *Eta* and *Pi Herculis*. The two brothers, one right-handed and the other left-handed, are from the Luritja group, and together they track and kill the emu at a place low down in the western sandhills. The other small stars in the European constellations of Aquila, Hercules, Lyra and Ophiuchus are the tracks of these two hunters and the emu. *Beta* and *Delta Cygni* are the tracks of a brother and an uncle (respectively) of the two Luritja hunters and, having followed the men at a distance, they assist in carrying the emu back to the celestial creek (see Diagram 6).

The star Arcturus (*Alpha Bootis*) is also named and is a *Panunga* man of the Luritja group. Other relevant stars in the August sky included Achernar (*Alpha Eridani*), seen as a large Aranda campfire around which men sit. The European constellation of Musca the Fly was seen as a mob of Aranda camps as were *Alpha Piscis*, *Alpha Pavonis*,

Alpha and *Beta Gruis*. Whatever the celestial phenomena, there existed the same definite, clear-cut division between the stars belonging to the two tribes, those in the east being invariably Aranda, those in the west invariably Luritja.

Although Maegraith did not see the summer constellations known to Europeans as the Hyades, the Pleiades in Taurus, or Orion, with his Aboriginal informants at Hermannsburg, they did describe to him the significance of some of the stars in these constellations. Aldebaran (*Alpha Tauri*), a red star, and the other Hyades are tracks of a party of young girls who are related to each other as cousins. Half of the cousins were *Mbitjana* and known as 'red', the other half were *Paltara* and called 'white'. They are arranged in two rows facing each other in a V-shape with Aldebaran being at the extremity of one arm of the V. The 'red' *Mbitjana* girls belong to the Aranda group and are the children of two other red stars, a *Ngala* man (probably *Alpha Tauri*) and a *Knaria* woman, a star not designated from the Aranda group. The 'white' *Paltara* girls' father is Venus, known as 'the daylight star' from the *Knaria* class, and their mother, a star not identified, is from the *Ngala* class. They also come from the Aranda group (see Diagram 1).

The Pleiades are the tracks of a group of young girls, considered to be 'not yet lubras' and assigned no class designation.⁸ These young women live at a place known as *Intitakule*, now called Deep Well⁹ or Kantala along Ellery Creek¹⁰ and are associated with the coming of frost when the male circumcision ceremonies were held.¹¹ The European constellation of Orion consists of two groups, one being old *Ngala* men and the other old *Knaria* women.¹²

8 Neither Maegraith nor Spencer and Gillen (1899:00) who also refer to the Pleiades as young women, mention whether or not they are pursued by men, as they are in many other contexts across the continent.

9 Spencer and Gillen 1966:500.

10 Strehlow 1907:23.

11 Strehlow 1907:-4.

12 Spencer and Gillen report that among the Aranda at least, Orion was seen as an emu (1966:499).

For the Aranda people, the sun was regarded as being female and of the *Panunga* class. Myth has it that she came out of the earth as a spirit woman, at a place now marked by a large stone in the country of the Bandicoot people (*Quirra*) at *Ilparlinga*, some thirty miles north of Alice Springs. She was accompanied by her two *Panunga* sisters, the descendants of whom are still around. One of these women has undergone incarnation, choosing a *Panunga* mother, and is now *Ngala*.¹³ Leaving these women at *Ilparlinga*, the sun ascended the sky and has done so every day since. The sisters remained in the country of the Bandicoot people, which gave rise to a totemic site for those who have a sun totem. Thus the sun is regarded as having a definite relationship to each individual member of the various groups. There is a ritual enacted by *Panunga*¹⁴ which is associated with the two sisters left by the sun.

The Evening Star was a *Knaria*¹⁵ woman who lived alone and was associated with a white stone which arose near a Gap in the MacDonnell Ranges known as Temple Bar, after she had left the earth. Every night, the Evening Star, known as *Ungamilia*, goes down to this stone. If an Aranda woman finds she has conceived a child when close to this place, the child will belong to the *Ungamilia* or Evening Star totem. There is a particular ritual associated with *Ungamilia* and is performed by certain *Knaria* men.

According to the well known Aboriginal Elder, Oodgeroo Noonuccal¹⁶ each member of an Aboriginal group inherited at birth multiple totemic relationships (they could include conception, birth, 'cult' or ancestral affiliations, for example), implying a shared essence with a particular plant or animal of the region. They therefore became responsible for the ongoing welfare and continuity of that species. The word *oodgeroo*, for example, means paperbark tree. The bearer of this

13 Appungerta and Ungalla respectively in Spencer and Gillen's account (1966:496).

14 Panungra in Spencer and Gillen (1966:496).

15 Kumara in Spencer and Gillen (1966:496).

16 Noonuccal 1990:30.

particular totem would count the elegant saplings of the paperbark as part of his or her family. While individual plants and animals might well be used to serve human needs, a decline of the species reflects badly on its human relatives. The relationship between groups of humans and particular species of the natural world is one of stewardship. How these totemic beliefs are translated into protective practices in relation to stars is unclear.

There are other examples of social relations being represented in the night sky: among the Tiwi of Bathurst and Melville Islands, stars were thought to represent men and women. The reason they came to be in the sky involved social and kin relations on earth. One patrilineal clan of men from Melville Island, so the story goes, were constantly sneaking into the bush with the wives of other men, even though they had wives of their own. There was much jealousy and the ensuing fights resulted in several deaths. In order to escape retribution, the particular clan of men fled to the sky, creating the Milky Way. Because the stars in the Milky Way represent the male members of a clan, they are all thought to be related to one another. The women involved are represented as stars near the Milky Way, but they are dispersed from the main clan.¹⁷

There are many tantalising fragments about social relations and the night sky; among New South Wales and Victorian groups 'each star figuring in the myths belongs to a phratry, section, clan or other subdivision, precisely the same as the people of the tribe among whom the tale is current. The names of the subdivisions, as well as the names of the stars, change among the people inhabiting different parts of the country'.¹⁸ For the groups around the Clarence River in northern New South Wales, the Pleiades were a family of young women who all belonged to one particular tribal section known as *Wirrakan*, and Aldebaran (*Alpha Tauri*) was a man from another section called *Womboang*. Moreover, the arrangement of stars into meaningful patterns was based on the idea that 'a man and his wives, his family, his weapons, his dogs, are not generally far apart. Brothers, uncles and other relationships are often

17 Sims 1978:166.

18 Mathews 1905:79.

separated by considerable distances.¹⁹ The Pleiades in this area, were believed to send winter away as they disappeared in the western sky. Winter was meant to warn kinsmen on earth not to 'carry off a woman of the wrong totemic division, but to select wives in accordance with the tribal laws.'²⁰

Along the Darling River area of New South Wales, the stars were divided between kinship classes so that the two large stars in the tail of the European Scorpion (probably *Lambda* and *Theta Scorpis*) belonged to the *Kilpungurra* division, as did the bright planet, Jupiter. A great hunter seen as Altair (*Alpha Aquilae*) belonged to the *Mukungurra* division as did Antares (*Alpha Scorpis*). 'Each clan or section of a tribe ... (was) associated with an animal, a plant or a place, its totem.'²¹ So *Alpha Crucis* (in the Southern Cross) along with kangaroos, fire, the non-stinking turtle, the plover and the laughing jackass were the totems of the *Pattyangal* (Pelican) clan of the Ngeumba people of western Victoria.

On Groote Eylandt, the Milky Way was seen as a sky river in whose waters were many large fish and waterlily bulbs. It was from this river that the star people gathered their food. All the stars in the section of the Milky Way west of an imaginary line between the European constellations of the Southern Cross (*Crux Australis*) and the Great Bear (*Ursa Major*) belonged to one moiety (*Wirinikapara*) and those to the east, belonged to another (*Oranikapara*).²²

In the Kimberley region, the Lunga and Djaru people see the moon as belonging to the *djuru* subsection and as being central in a myth from the area that addresses the fact of death and the problem of wrong marriages.²³ The sun belongs to another subsection known as *nangala*.²⁴

19 Mathews (1905:79) occasionally writes from a particularly male point of view.

20 Mathews 1899:28.

21 Mathews 1905:87.

22 Mountford 1956:481.

23 Marriages which do not conform to the kinship rules.

24 For the neighbouring Wolmeri people, the sun is of the *djuru*

The creation hero spirit, *Galalang* of the northern Kimberley groups is represented as living in the dark patch of the Milky Way, between the European constellations Centaurus and Scorpius. Remnants of his feathered headdress are seen in *Alpha* and *Beta Centauri* which also act as an 'allusion to *Galalang's* establishment of the two moieties within the tribe.'²⁵ In the eastern Kimberleys, the moon is regarded as a man of the *djanama* subsection. He has many wives represented by the dark patches on the moon's disc, all of whom are of the *nawala* subsection.²⁶

Among the Walbiri people, the Milky Way is of enormous significance. It was seen as the source from which individual stars were created. Living in the Milky Way, there is an old woman who, during the painful male initiation rites involving circumcision, watches over the young boy who is being initiated. This old woman represented by an unnamed star, is believed to be related to the initiate, as his mother's father's sister.²⁷ The Milky Way itself was originally created by the sky heroes who were from a particular tribal section, the *Japaljarri-Jungarrayi* section, and who were associated with male initiation. The stars are seen to be associated only with this section and not with any other sections. Special sacred places on earth, so the story goes, fell out of the Milky Way as shooting stars.²⁸

To the Karruru people of the Nullabor Plain, the sun is a woman who is the mother of the morning star whose wife is the moon, thus introducing kin ties into the sky.²⁹ Kinship relations also link the stars of the people in the Victorian Mallee. Arcturus (*Alpha Bootis*) is the mother of Antares (*Alpha Scorpii*), and Vega (*Alpha Lyra*) is the mother of Altair (*Apha Aquilae*). Two small stars (or a double star) near the

subsection (Kaberry 1939:12-3).

25 Worms 1986:129.

26 Berndt and Berndt 1977:204.

27 Meggitt 1966:127.

28 Described in a painting on Door 29 at Yuendumu School by Paddy Japaljarri Sims (Warlukurlangu Artists 1987:127.

29 Isaacs 1980:51.

head of the European constellation Capricornus (probably *Gamma* and *Kappa Capricorni*) are the fingers of an uncle of Altair (*Alpha Aquilae*) and Achernar (*Alpha Eridani*) is the mother of Altair's wives (*Beta* and *Gamma Aquilae*)³⁰ (see Diagram 7). Among western Victorian groups, the stars and other celestial objects are all assigned a gender. Many of them are also married or related to one another. Sirius (*Alpha Canis Majoris*), for example, is the brother of the three stars in Orion's Belt (*Delta*, *Epsilon* and *Zeta Orionis*) who are related as sisters: he always follows them.³¹

In northwestern Arnhem Land, the moon is a man who belongs to the *Yiritja* moiety whereas the sun, a woman, belongs to the *Dua* moiety. They are married and their children are *Yiritja* as they follow the descent of their father, the moon. The sun is always in a hurry to get to her children for she can hear them crying, but she 'does not bring them over the world with her because she would kill all the *Dua* people.'³² Likewise, the sky of the people of the western Central Desert region was divided into two. The stars in the winter constellations—Scorpius, Argo and Centaurus—belonged to the *nananduraka* group and the stars in the summer constellations—Orion, the Pleiades, and Eridanus—belonged to the *tanamildjan* group. The winds were similarly divided.³³

In some parts of the country, there are constellations which are said to belong to certain clans or sections, and their constituent stars to individual people. On Murray Island in the Torres Strait for example, a constellation involving Vega and Altair is known as 'The Brothers'. When this constellation is rising, it belongs to one village and when it is setting, it belongs to another. Its name changes accordingly. Vega (*Narbet*) was said to be the property of a man who had inherited it from another, whilst Altair (*Keimer*) belonged to a man who had inherited

30 MacPherson 1881:4–75; Smyth 1972:433–34.

31 Dawson 1981:99–101.

32 Warner 1937:537–38.

33 Mountford 1976b.

Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia

from his father. These stars were also connected to certain identifiable stones, which were located on the land belonging to these men.³⁴

Kinship for Aboriginal people was the dominant way of ordering their cosmos. And all aspects of the cosmos—whether it be people, plants, animals, winds or stars—were assigned a place in the system. All things were united, related and mutually dependent. Ideologically, at least, the system implied the well-being and continuity of all life forms by prescribing ways in which people were expected to relate and behave towards each other, as well as to other animate and inanimate life-forms. The stars were but part of this vast totemic network.

34 Rivers in Haddon 1912 (4):220.