

Introduction

Martin Thomas

W. Baldwin Spencer dismissed R. H. Mathews' work on kinship as 'an interminable series of papers dealing almost exclusively with the class names & marriages of tribes galore.'¹ While some readers might concur with this assessment, I would encourage patience in considering the kinship writings, despite the challenges they pose. This aspect of Mathews' work is the least accessible to a contemporary audience. Yet for him it was the most important. No less than 71 of his 171 publications discuss marriage customs. Disagreements about kinship rules were at the heart of his dispute with Spencer and A. W. Howitt (see my general introduction to this volume). So familiarity with Mathews' work on this subject is integral to an appreciation of his larger project. Although anthropological understandings of kinship have undergone several revolutions since Mathews' time, his writings on the subject reveal much about his thinking and methodology—and the milieu in which he worked.

Mathews' first publication on kinship was read before the Brisbane branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia in 1894.² It concerns the Kamilaroi people of New South Wales whose country he knew well from his surveying days. In tackling this subject, Mathews was contributing to an established literature. The clergyman William Ridley did pioneering research on Kamilaroi language and marriage rules in the 1860s,³ while Howitt and his collaborator Lorimer Fison had discussed Kamilaroi kinship at length in their book, *Kamilaroi and Kurnai* (1880).

In *Arguments About Aborigines* (1996) L. R. Hiatt shows how the rise of anthropology in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was affected by the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. 'In the context of inescapable questions about the natural history of our own species, Australian Aborigines were assigned the role of exemplars *par excellence* of beginnings and early forms.'⁴ Many anthropologists of this period assumed that the principles of natural selection were as fundamental to the formation of social structures as they were to the development of organisms. Just as marsupials and monotremes had survived under conditions of geographic isolation, it was thought that Aboriginal Australia possessed 'primitive' forms of social organisation, long superseded in other parts of the world. As Hiatt describes the international interest in Aboriginal kinship, 'European scholars bent on discovering the origins of social institutions began a rush on Australian material'. From these data they 'fashioned some of the most celebrated and influential works in the history of anthropology'.⁵

The works of Fison, Howitt and especially Spencer (who worked collaboratively with F. J. Gillen, postmaster at Alice Springs) can be counted among these celebrated treatises.⁶ Mathews read them closely as his anthropological interests developed in the 1890s. Since Howitt and Fison were major voices in the field when Mathews began publishing, a perspective on their work helps in understanding the intellectual context for his own project. As D. J. Mulvaney glosses Howitt's approach, he sought 'to lay bare the essentials of primeval society, on the assumption that Australia was a storehouse of fossil customs'.⁷ The articles translated here establish that Mathews reacted strongly against this approach. The most pronounced difference was in the area of evolutionary theory. Mathews was a sceptic, whereas Howitt and Fison were enthusiasts. Their position was endorsed by strong relationships with social evolutionists in both Britain and the United States.

Fison's research into marriage customs began in 1869 in Fiji where he was stationed as a missionary. A questionnaire from the American evolutionist Henry Lewis Morgan prompted his fledgling inquiries into family organisation, first in Fiji and then in Australia where he teamed up with Howitt, a public servant and magistrate based in Gippsland, Victoria (who had risen to considerable prominence in 1861 when he led the search for the missing explorers Burke and Wills).⁸ Their patron Morgan began his research into kinship with Iroquois Indians, whom he had known as a youth in New York State. In *Ancient Society, Or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization* (1877), he advanced a theory about the evolution of society, establishing a historical hierarchy that began with the inchoate family structure of 'primitive man' and culminated with the putatively monogamous family unit of the industrialised capitalist state.

Mulvaney notes that Howitt was critical in his implementation of Morgan's ideas.⁹ But the glee with which he and Fison sought to identify developmental phases in Aboriginal social structure is nonetheless overwhelming. It is evident in the extensive correspondence between Howitt, Fison and Morgan,¹⁰ and in the journal articles they wrote in the 1880s and 90s, published mainly in *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*—a publication readily accessible to Mathews. Morgan had argued that in the most primitive societies (thought to be incognisant of the relationship between sexual intercourse and pregnancy) hunting rights and kinship affiliation descended through the maternal (or uterine) line. In more evolved societies, the transmission of both property and kinship between generations was patrilineal (or agnatic). Howitt and Fison were preoccupied with this issue, and were always eager to find evidence of the transformation from one evolutionary stage to the next.¹¹ Like Morgan, they drew extraordinary parallels between disparate cultures. For example, in 1885 Howitt and Fison

argued for a direct correlation between ancient Attican society and the 'low savagery of Australia'.¹²

The prevalence of such theories explains the eagerness of Mathews to establish whether descent in Australian communities was patrilineal or matrilineal, just as it explains why anthropological disagreements on the subject were so fervent. It also contextualises Mathews' arguments against the institution of 'group marriage', a notion proposed by Morgan and which Howitt, Fison and Spencer discerned in the Australian data they gathered. Hiatt describes Morgan's thinking about this in the following terms:

The Iroquois system makes sense, he argued, if we assume that it originated in circumstances where men who were related to each other as brothers commonly cohabited with women who were related to each other as sisters, so long as the partners were not related to each other as brother and sister. Within the limits of what may be referred to as 'group marriage', sexual intercourse was promiscuous. The resulting offspring, who were reared together in a communal family, referred to each other as 'brother' and 'sister'; and they referred to all the male adults as 'father' and all the female adults as 'mother'. In the course of social evolution, group marriage eventually gave way to marriage between pairs; but, although sexual mores were thus transformed, the old terminology persisted as a survival from a past era in which it faithfully reflected the actual conditions of reproduction.¹³

As we read in the works presented here, Mathews was a staunch opponent of the group marriage theory, a position he shared with his near-namesake, John Mathew, a Presbyterian minister and anthropologist, based in Melbourne. As Elkin pointed out, Mathews 'was not concerned with the current theories or arguments'.¹⁴ He never argued for evolutionary stages or developmental hierarchies. For the most part, he saw his role as a gatherer of primary data, not as a theorist. In this regard he was an ideal fieldworker according to the model laid down by Sir James Frazer of Cambridge. As the anthropologist Frances Larson describes Frazer's position, he was convinced

that the separation of data gathering and intellectual analysis reinforced anthropology's scientific integrity, since those collecting information in the field remained indifferent to theoretical bias, while the theoreticians were obliged to consider the whole range of data available to them regardless of their own intellectual prejudices.¹⁵

Naïve as he was to assume that fieldworkers in the colonies would or could operate in a theoretical vacuum, Frazer applied his standard unevenly. He gave short shrift to Mathews, despite his lack of theoretical pretensions, and lavishly supported Howitt, Fison and Spencer who broadly endorsed his own position.¹⁶

Mathews' attempt to sidestep evolutionary theory led him to think about Aboriginal kinship in historical terms. As explained below, he was convinced that the system of moieties, sections and sub-sections was the residue of successive waves of migration and intertribal amalgamation.¹⁷ His idea that the institutions of kinship were historically determined—and thus bore no resemblance to biologically engrained attributes—was a minority position that won him limited acceptance in an era dominated by evolutionary theory.

*

The reader will notice how many of Mathews' kinship publications conform to the mould of scientific writing of his period. Often just a few pages in length, his reports list the names of moieties (which he called 'phratries' or less often 'cycles') for a particular district. He included a table listing the sections or sub-sections (sub-divisions of the moieties) and often provided a list of totems. He also tried to establish how totems and sections passed from parents to children—whether the system was matrilineal or patrilineal. Although often modest, such a report was sufficient to rate as a publishable 'discovery'. Letters to Mathews from the German ethnologist Moritz von Leonhardi show how closely such work was read outside Australia (see 'Correspondence', this volume).

The three translations published here show various faces of Mathews' work on kinship. 'Social Organisation of the Aboriginal Tribes of Australia' (1902) concerns the Yangman people (known as Yungmunni to Mathews), occupants of 'an extended area on the plateau which separates the sources of the Roper and Daly rivers in the Northern Territory'. Using tables, Mathews explains the names of sections and which of them are permitted to intermarry. These are the rules governing regular or what Mathews describes as 'direct' marriages. He points out that polygamy is acceptable and that sometimes the second wife belongs to a different section from that of the first. This was another aspect of Mathews' kinship study that drew the ire of contemporaries who believed that such unions were either illegal or else a sign that the culture was in decline. Mathews, however, was convinced of the antiquity and legitimacy of these 'irregular' marriages, which seemed to be tolerated by the community, although they transgressed the normal rules. He argued they did not contravene the ancient laws; instead a further set of rules came into play when such unions were being considered. He emphasised that 'irregular' marriages are fairly rare and that when they do occur, 'one of the spouses must come from a distant family, to avoid close blood relationship between the parties to the union'. Throughout his writings on moieties and sections, Mathews maintained that they were not designed to prevent inbreeding. He argued that the genealogy of each individual was well known to the elders of a community, and that inbreeding was prevented by their refusal to tolerate any marriage of close relatives.

How Mathews obtained such information reveals much about his kinship study—its strengths and limitations. As he points out in the 1902 article translated here, ‘more urgent matters’ had prevented him from ever going to the Northern Territory. He relied on correspondents to interview Aboriginal people whom they employed or knew in other ways. This was also true of Cape York Peninsula in North Queensland, a location discussed in ‘Remarks on the Natives of Australia’ (1906), the second translation published here. No correspondent is credited, but in an earlier article on Queensland, Mathews had acknowledged the assistance of Reverend Nicholas Hey, superintendent of the Presbyterian Mission at Mapoon, on the west coast of the cape.¹⁸ Letters from Hey in Mathews’ correspondence files reveal that he was the source of the Queensland data reported in ‘Remarks on the Natives of Australia’.¹⁹

Missionaries, who were usually well educated, were obvious points of contact for someone like Mathews. In 1901 Hey was reputedly the only European within 90 miles of the Batavia River.²⁰ He knew the local language sufficiently well to publish a treatise on the subject.²¹ Although missionaries were often more sympathetic to Aboriginal people than were the settlers who displaced them, they carried a generous share of cultural baggage. Many considered themselves duty-bound to eliminate the ‘heathen’ customs that so interested Mathews. In an early letter Hey warned him that the range of any ethnographic inquiry would be strictly curtailed.

[I]n order to become well acquainted with the old customs of the blacks it is essential to enter into all their little doings & know their traditions & there is always a great deal of filth & other obscene ideas connected with them, & it is not in our interest to show any great desire to enter into, but rather to abhor these things.²²

Despite this unpromising beginning, Hey became a valuable source of information. But his comments are indicative of the difficulties Mathews encountered on an almost daily basis. He quickly realised that the rules of marriage represented one of the more acceptable faces of Aboriginal society. Despite the very great differences between the cultures, the institution of marriage was common to both. Mathews had considerable respect for Aboriginal unions, which might explain the contemptuous tone in which he writes about the theory of group marriage.

Mathews also knew that moiety and section names were not secret-sacred. Quite the reverse. Knowledge of where each person (and indeed each element of the cosmos) fitted in terms of kinship was fundamental to almost every activity and social interaction. That is one of the reasons why many white people, including a number of Mathews’ correspondents, were given a ‘skin’ name, section or totem. Sometimes this was presented as an honour or a form of induction into the Aboriginal community. But it was also to do with Aboriginal

people's need to situate the settlers of their acquaintance within *their* system of classification. Awareness of this made Mathews confident that if properly directed a diligent correspondent from anywhere in Australia could gather a basic set of data. His own role was to efficiently 'manage' his precious volunteers, as he explained to E. S. Hartland in England.

I referred and re-referred the information sent me by old residents of Central Australia back to them for further sifting and inquiry. Half a dozen of my best correspondents were and are located in different parts of the Chingalee, Binbingha, Wombaia and Inchalauchu country peopled with tribes of the eight-section system and they all gave the same results, quite unknown to each other. I also had two excellent men among the tribes of the Victoria river and three more in the Kimberley district of Western Australia where the 8-section system prevails. I was the 'head and front' of the investigation and my men worked and re-worked under my directions.²³

Persons willing to become entangled in Mathews' research were comparatively rare. Should they volunteer a reply to his letters, he bombarded them with requests for information and offprints of his publications (perhaps in the hope of creating a reciprocal obligation). Mathews was well aware of the extent to which he pushed his correspondents, as can be seen in a letter he wrote to Daisy Bates that acknowledges the death of his correspondent Thomas Muir in Western Australia.

I am sorry to hear of Mr Muir's death. Poor old Muir must have been dreadfully bored by my letters, but he took them in good part, and tried his best to help me. But I only published his statements for what they were worth.²⁴

Limited by what he could expect of correspondents who invariably complained about lack of time, many of Mathews' writings on kinship do little more than report the names of sections and totems. But there are hints of a more complex understanding, as can be seen in 'Remarks on the Natives of Australia' (1906) where he comments on the Nawalgu, Milpulo and Marawara tribes of western New South Wales. Mathews reports that they have 'blood' and 'shade' divisions in addition to moieties, sections and totems. As I explain in my general introduction to this volume, the 'blood' and 'shade' castes or divisions influenced marriage arrangements and also governed where a person sat in relation to others. His report here is consistent with his documentation of the Kurnu, Ngemba, Kamilaroi and other communities of inland New South Wales. They did of course live in places that he could get to in person. So it is not surprising that his most original and reliable kinship study concerns these areas. As the astute Moritz von Leonhardi rightly diagnosed in his letters (see 'Correspondence', this volume), Mathews was far from correct in reporting matrilineal descent among

the Arrernte people of Central Australia, a part of the country that he never visited.²⁵

In 'The Natives of Australia' (1902), the third translation presented here, we get a sense of how Mathews synthesised the information he was assembling from so many parts of the continent. Atypically, the reporter becomes interpreter. He opens by expressing his ideas about the original population of the country, surmising that this occurred in the distant past when Africa, Asia, Australia and Papua formed a great southern land mass. The 'first human beings', who were of a 'negroid type', spread across this territory during successive phases of migration. In later periods the original 'primitive race' was invaded 'by hostile tribes of a higher character and a more advanced civilisation'. These new arrivals were superior fighters who displaced the original inhabitants. The later immigrants, however, never reached Tasmania 'which had become an island following the subsidence of a strip of land which became Bass Strait'.

Mathews was convinced that the descendants of these first inhabitants also survived on the mainland, particularly in the mountainous and coastal regions of South Australia, Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. His argument for this is that they lack the complex kinship system found across most of the continent. Instead of moieties and sections, they have what Mathews termed the *Tooar* marriage system, in which 'old men assembled in council to appoint the women to the boys'. Mathews writes that in both their physical appearance and cultural practices, the *Tooar* communities 'greatly resemble the Tasmanians'.

Mathews then discusses the more orthodox kinship and marriage systems found elsewhere in Australia—those involving moieties divided into either two or four sections. He hypothesises that these systems are the residue of various tribal amalgamations. He cites certain legends to support his case and argues that the historical experience of migration and inter-tribal merging can be discerned in initiation ceremonies. Commenting on the Kamilaroi ceremony at Tallwood, New South Wales, which he documented in 1896,²⁶ Mathews proposes that the removal of the novices from their mothers 'may be a symbol of what happened in the past'. During an enemy attack, he conjectures, 'a group of men may have taken charge of the women while the others took the young people away to bring them up in the traditions of the conquerors'. This article is unusual amongst Mathews' writings because of its interpretive approach. Some of these ideas were also advanced in 'The Origin, Organization and Ceremonies of the Australian Aborigines' (1900)²⁷ and 'Australian Tribes—their Formation and Government' (1906).²⁸ He discussed the *Tooar* marriage system in 'The Organisation, Language and Initiation Ceremonies of the Aborigines of the South-East Coast of N. S. Wales' (1900).²⁹ These 'overview' type articles give

important insights into how Mathews thought about the notion of kinship. He treated it historically—as evidence of Aboriginal migration into Australia.

The vehement arguments fought out by Mathews and his contemporaries are largely due to the fact that none of the combatants was prepared to recognise the possibility of cultural transformation and adaptation. In contrast to the turn-of-the-century observers, who regarded kinship classification as timeless and immutable, it is now acknowledged that the systems of moieties, sections and sub-sections have undergone major and continuing modifications. Working from linguistic data, Patrick McConvell argued in 1985 that the patrilineal system of eight sub-sections, found in such diverse locations as Central Australia, the Kimberleys, Arnhem Land and further east in the Gulf country, originated from a fairly limited area in the Lower Victoria River Basin.³⁰ The spread of this system did not necessarily displace older systems; in contemporary Arnhem Land, for example, the patrilineal sub-sections determine marriage, yet they co-exist with the older matrilineal moieties. McConvell suggests that these transformations were occurring at the time when Mathews and Spencer were pursuing their inquiries and that in some cases this explains their often divergent findings.³¹

ENDNOTES

¹ Spencer to Roth, 30 January 1903, Sir Baldwin Spencer Manuscripts, Pitt Rivers Museum MSS Box 1A/Roth 13.

² RHM 1894-95, 'The Kamilaroi Class System of the Australian Aborigines', *Proceedings and Transactions of the Queensland Branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia*, vol. 10.

³ Ridley, William 1866, 'On the Kamilaroi Tribe of Australians and their Dialect', *Journal of the Ethnological Society of London*, vol. 4, and Ridley, William 1875, *Kamilaroi, and other Australian Languages*, Thomas Richards, Government Printer, Sydney.

⁴ Hiatt, L. R. 1996, *Arguments about Aborigines: Australia and the Evolution of Social Anthropology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. xii.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Spencer and Gillen rose to international prominence with the publication in 1899 of their *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, Dover, New York, 1968.

⁷ Mulvaney, D. J. 1971, 'The Ascent of Aboriginal Man: Howitt as Anthropologist' in Walker, Mary Howitt, *Come Wind, Come Weather: A Biography of Alfred Howitt*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, p. 290.

⁸ Walker, *Come Wind, Come Weather*, ch. 11.

⁹ Mulvaney, 'The Ascent of Aboriginal Man', p. 289.

¹⁰ Stern, Bernard J. (ed.) 1930, 'Selections from the Letters of Lorimer Fison and A. W. Howitt to Lewis Henry Morgan', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 32 (new series).

¹¹ See Howitt, A. W. and Fison, Rev. L. 1883, 'From Mother-Right to Father-Right', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, vol. 12.

¹² Howitt and Fison 1885, 'On the Deme and the Horde', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, vol. 14, p. 165.

¹³ Hiatt, *Arguments about Aborigines*, p. 39.

¹⁴ Elkin, A. P., 'R. H. Mathews: His Contribution to Aboriginal Studies' (MS draft of Part IV), Elkin Papers, University of Sydney Archives, MS P130/9/138.

¹⁵ Larson, Frances 2007, 'Anthropology as Comparative Anatomy?: Reflecting on the Study of Material Culture During the Late 1800s and the Late 1900s', *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 12, no. 1, p. 97.

- ¹⁶ Frazer's support of Spencer and Gillen is described at length in Mulvaney, D. J. and Calaby, J. H. 1985, *'So Much That is New': Baldwin Spencer, 1860-1929: A Biography*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton. For his attitude to Howitt and Fison, see his joint obituary of them: Frazer, J.G. 1909, 'Howitt and Fison', *Folk-Lore*, vol. 20, no. 2.
- ¹⁷ Mathew also viewed the moiety system as the residue of tribal (or in this case *inter-racial*) amalgamation. See Mathew, John 1899, *Eaglehawk and Crow: A Study of the Australian Aborigines including an Inquiry into their Origin and a Survey of Australian Languages*, Melville, Mullen and Slade, Melbourne and Prentis, Malcolm 1998, *Science, Race & Faith: A Life of John Mathew*, Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, Sydney, ch. 6.
- ¹⁸ RHM 1900, 'Marriage and Descent among the Australian Aborigines', *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, vol. 34, p. 132.
- ¹⁹ Hey to Mathews, 26 October 1899, R. H. Mathews Papers, National Library of Australia (henceforth NLA) MS 8006/2/5.
- ²⁰ Hey to Mathews, 26 January 1901, R. H. Mathews Papers, NLA MS 8006/2/5.
- ²¹ Hey, Rev. N. 1903, *An Elementary Grammar of the Nggerikudi Language*, George Arthur Vaughan, Government Printer, Brisbane.
- ²² Hey to Mathews, 4 August 1899, R. H. Mathews Papers, NLA MS 8006/2/5.
- ²³ Mathews to Hartland, 10 August 1907, Letters to E. S. Hartland, National Library of Wales, MS 16889C. Reproduced this volume.
- ²⁴ Mathews to Bates, 16 July 1905, Daisy Bates Papers, NLA MSS 365/970/250-381.
- ²⁵ An entry in Mathews' diary for 1907, 'Left Adelaide 25th Feby—arrive H'burg 14th March', led Elkin and others to assume that Mathews made a short visit to Carl Strehlow in Hermannsburg that year. In fact, the diary refers only to the progress of *letters* between Sydney and Hermannsburg (which received mail just once a month). Mathews made no claim to have visited the Centre, even in writings that post-date 1907. Carl Strehlow's 'Mission Chronicle', in which he detailed all visits to the station, makes no mention of Mathews. I am indebted to John Strehlow for checking the Chronicle on my behalf.
- ²⁶ RHM 1896, 'The Bora of the Kamilaroi Tribes', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, vol. 9 (new series), and RHM 1896, 'The Bora, or Initiation Ceremonies of the Kamilaroi Tribe (Part II)', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, vol. 25.
- ²⁷ RHM 1900, 'The Origin, Organization and Ceremonies of the Australian Aborigines', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 39.
- ²⁸ RHM 1906, 'Australian Tribes—Their Formation and Government', *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, vol. 38.
- ²⁹ RHM 1900, 'The Origin, Organization and Ceremonies of the Australian Aborigines', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 39, 556-78.
- ³⁰ McConvell, Patrick 1985, 'The Origin of Subsections in Northern Australia', *Oceania*, vol. 56, no. 1, p. 16.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.