

# The Natives of Australia

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The origin of Australia's races is a subject of high interest; I will also attempt in this paper to give a brief explanation of the way in which this large island was populated, as well as its neighbour, Van Diemen's Land. To solve this difficult problem we must turn to geography, botany, zoology and linguistics because, the Australian continent having no written history, all relative theory about its population must be in harmony with the facts revealed by these different sciences.

In times past, the physical geography of Australia was not what it is today. Geological investigations have shown that certain parts were alternatively submerged or above the water in succession. Africa and Asia were joined together in the past by a southern land, which extended east as far as Australia, Van Diemen's Land and Papua. This was Lemuria, now swallowed up by the Indian Ocean. Certain banks and shoals indicate its old site. Dr Blanford tried to show that many animals formerly followed this path to reach Africa and Sir J. D. Hooker, the botanical scholar, claims that an entire Indian flora can be found in tropical Australia.

The first human beings, spread across this immense territory, were of a Negroid type. They were not necessarily homogenous, as they must have mixed with the inhabitants of neighbouring lands, and their language had been somewhat modified. It is from this Negro race that the oldest islanders of Australia, Tasmania and Papua descended.

The primitive race spread south-easterly with ease, because the tropical countries that it crossed provided an abundant supply of food. However the migration was slow, the emigrants being few in number and the population movements being dispersed. Certain clans walked in one direction, others in a different direction and, perhaps, some tribes stayed put for a long time in privileged regions. Industry developed more or less, according to the conditions.

Some of the southerly reaches of this flood of emigrants reached the north and north-western coasts of the Australian continent and spread across the largest part of Australia as well as Tasmania, which was then joined to New Holland. These first occupants can be seen as the Aborigines of Australia. Other

branches of the same migration reached New Guinea, New Caledonia, Melanesia and Polynesia, where not only fragments of the race can be found, but also traces of a common language, because a language can adopt foreign words without changing its fundamental character. Comparative philology and ethnology must always be studied at the same time. Moreover, according to their skeleton, the natives of Australia resemble the Negroes of Africa and the Melanesians, but have a look that is even more primitive.

The migrations continued for a long time, but it is impossible to be more specific about the duration. They followed one another at irregular intervals and ended up along the whole northern coast of New Holland. It is probable that the customs and the dialects of the last emigrants were slightly different from those of their predecessors. Each clan must have understood only a small number of individuals and the multiplicity of clans, that spread out over centuries across a continent as vast as Australia, explains the great variety of dialects spoken these days.

Later on, the primitive race was followed by hostile tribes of a higher character and a more advanced civilisation. Depressions and various geological disturbances had in the meantime changed the old configuration of the lands and the seas. The new emigrants must have followed a more northerly path than the first, as the connection between Australia, Asia and Africa via Lemuria had been submerged, but there was still an almost continual terrestrial route between India and the Australian continent via Ceylon, Nicobar, the Andaman Islands, the Malayan peninsula, Java, Borneo, Celebes and Timor.

For a long period, the second migration sent out isolated detachments to cross into Australia. When the two races came into contact to dispute the land, the advantage must have been with those newly arrived, who were better equipped for battle. The former inhabitants abandoned some of their customs, dialects and ceremonies, and assimilated those of the victors. The last invaders, however, did not reach Van Diemen's Land, which had become an island following the subsidence of a strip of land which became Bass Strait.

Although the philologists cannot establish a relationship between the Australian languages and those of the savages of southern India, it is not at all unreasonable to suggest that the Australians and the aborigines of southern India descend from a common stock. The Australians, thanks to their long isolation, have better retained the look of their Neanderthaloid ancestors; the later Indian ones have, on the contrary, noticeably evolved.

The Malay race never invaded any part of Australia. During historical times, the Malays came to fish on the northern coast, but their relations with the natives were limited to the coast. If a few men married with Australian women and committed themselves to the inland of the country, they were not able to influence seriously either the appearance or the language.

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The matrimonial customs of the Australian tribes are ruled by fixed laws, of a generally simple character. The communities are divided into two primary groups or clans, and the men of one group marry the women of the other. In some tribes, each clan is subdivided into two or (in the north) even four sections, and these sections intermarry, one with the other.

In some regions of Australia (South Australia, Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales) marriage is of a very simple character. At irregular intervals, the old men assemble in council to appoint the women to the boys; the engaged couple take the name *tooar*. Great care is taken that the *tooar* are not closely related by ties of blood. The boys and the women thus allocated must speak neither to each other nor look at each other. If one of these women bears a daughter, she must give her, as soon as she is old enough, to the young boy to whom she is *tooar*. This one, in turn, when he has a sister, is supposed to give her to one of the woman's sons in exchange for his own wife. The children follow the line of the father and adopt his *totem*. By their appearance, their arms, their languages and their ceremonies, the natives in question are rather different from the other Australian tribes. But on the other hand, they greatly resemble the Tasmanians, which confirms the opinion advanced concerning their community of origin.

I am led to believe that the first inhabitants possessed the organisation that I have just described and that a part of their tribes escaped subjugation to the invaders, either because the invaders could not defeat them, or because they did not advance far enough towards the southwest to meet them. In the neighbouring regions, we find tribes divided into two intermarrying phratries, such as the Mattiri and the Karraru of Port Lincoln, the Krokitch and the Kamatch of Western Victoria, the Mukwarra and the Keelparra of the Barkunjee tribe, the Koolpirro and the Tinnawa of the Yowerawarrika tribe. I will give some details on this last tribe whose division into two phratries was first reported by me.

The natives told me several legends referring to former warriors and I noted that the bravest always belonged to the Koolpirro phratry. I concluded from this that the name Koolpirro must have applied to an old tribe of warriors, who, in times past, conquered the Tinnawa and that each of them possessed the *tooar* type of marriage laws. If we assume that this was so and that the Koolpirro, like the victors of today, were in the habit of killing the defeated males while sparing the women and the children of both sexes, they must have, whether they were already married or not, taken wives from the Tinnawa tribe. These Koolpirro already had children from their first wives; they therefore had to distinguish their offspring from their marriages with the strange women, which was easily done by calling them after their mothers, Tinnawa. On the other side, the boys

who were spared, once they became adults, took wives from amongst the Koolpirro and their children took the name of their mother's phratry. In other words, the Koolpirro men married their sisters to the Tinnawa men in exchange for the sisters they received as wives. The children took—and still take—the name of their mother's phratry, from whom they adopt the *totem*.

Sometimes, two tribes, after being amalgamated like the Koolpirro and the Tinnawa, integrate with two other tribes amalgamated in the same way. The result is a community with four divisions who marry between themselves. That is what we see in the Miappe of Queensland,<sup>1</sup> where the marriages are made in the manner indicated in the following table.

Husband	Wife	Child
Jimmalingo	Marringo	Kooperungo
Bathingo	Kooperungo	Marringo
Marringo	Jimmalingo	Bathingo
Kooperungo	Bathingo	Jimmalingo

Finally, two communities with four divisions each can unite in a way that gives birth to a confederation of eight subdivisions, as we notice among the Wombya of Northern Australia. These subdivisions intermarry while observing the rules which I indicated in 1898<sup>2</sup> and which can be summed up thus:

Husband	Wife	Child
Choolangie	Chingulum	Palyaringie
Cheenum	Chooralum	Bungaringie
Jamerum	Palyaringie	Chooralum
Yacomary	Bungaringie	Chingulum
Chingulum	Choolangie	Yacomary
Chooralum	Cheenum	Jamerum
Bungaringie	Yacomary	Cheenum
Palyaringie	Jamerum	Choolangie

On the south coast of South Australia, among certain tribes who have the *tooar* system, the children take their father's totem. Among the Yowerawarrika, who are the result of the fusion of two tribes, and among the Miappe who have four divisions, the totem is transmitted by the mother. In communities of eight divisions, it is, on the contrary, the father who transmits it. Moreover, this transmission is subject, according to the district, to variations.

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In various papers I have published on the initiation ceremonies, I reported feigned quarrels between the fathers of the novices and the other men assembled outside the camp. I also said that human blood is occasionally sprinkled upon the trunks of the initiates; in other cases it is collected in vessels and swallowed. It also happens that a man is killed and served as a feast to the assistants. It is possible that these ceremonies originated from customs in use at the time of wars between tribes who later disappeared. If, as today, all the defeated adult males were killed, then it is reasonable to expect that the young captive males were

brought up according to the customs of their captors. As a result of this, it would be necessary to remove them from the influence of their mothers who, naturally clinging to the customs of their ancestors, would have tried to instil them into their sons.

At the present time, among the Kamilaroi, this is how the *Bora* or initiation ceremony unfolds.<sup>3</sup> The neighbouring tribes gather together at a common meeting ground and the men of a distant tribe take charge of the novices of a tribe to whom they are more or less strangers. At dawn, that is to say at the time when the native tribes usually attack the enemy, all the novices are taken away from their mothers. The mothers are persuaded that an enemy has truly come into the camp and secretly taken the boys. They are prevented from watching what will happen and, to prevent them from seeing, they are hidden under bushes, grass or other coverings, from where they can hear the voice of the enemy and the sound of his footsteps.

During the *Bora* of the Kamilaroi, great sexual licence is given to the men of all the tribes who participate in the celebration. Usually a man is restricted to the women of a certain section, but at the time of initiation ceremonies he can have intercourse with women of different sections who are forbidden to him under normal circumstances. As soon as the novices and the men have disappeared from view, the elders of the strange tribes uncover the women and take them away to another camp where they remain as their prisoners.<sup>4</sup>

All these phases of the ceremony may be a symbol of what occurred in the past. When a tribe attacked another in the morning, 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 hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that, during their time in the bush, the novices see many things which are entirely new to them. They are taught a language, known only by the initiates, just as in times past they were taught the language of the conquerors, and they are given a new name which will remain unknown to their mothers and their sisters.

In the wars, as I have said, the women were always spared and taken as wives by the victorious party. The sexual licence to which I have referred had, without a doubt, its archetype in the libidinous orgies which took place when many strange women were captured, and during which each man indiscriminately used the women until exhausted. Even today, when a woman is allotted to a man, she must first have intercourse with a certain number of other men.

While the *Kooringal*<sup>5</sup> accompany the novices, two warriors, referred to by the name *Buddenbelar*, come out of the bush and each of them throws a boomerang towards the aggressors; then they withdraw hurriedly to fetch the *Beegay*,<sup>6</sup> whose participation signals the release of the novices. This is suggestive

of a time when many small tribes were linked in more or less amicable relations, united against a common enemy. If one of these tribes were attacked, the men who escaped sought out the protection of their allies to punish the offenders. It is this that the contribution of the *Beegay* may symbolise, followed by the return of the novices to the camp.

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I have tried to give a brief sketch of the probable origin of the Australians and to show, by examples borrowed from matrimonial customs still in use in different places, the different elements of their social organisation. I have also sought to link the origins of their initiation ceremonies to the battles of the past, which must resemble the current wars. Certain tribes, isolated during a long period, have obviously modified their usage, but among all of them, the initiation ceremonies must have had a common origin.

After studying these questions for a number of years, I have arrived at the conviction that neither promiscuity, nor what has been called *communal* or *group marriage* ever existed among the Australian tribes. I am equally certain that the division into clans was produced as shown above, and was not at all devised to prevent marriages between individuals of the same blood type.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> RHM 1898, 'Australian Divisional Systems', *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, vol. 32, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> RHM 1898, 'Divisions of Australian Tribes', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 37, p. 152.

<sup>3</sup> RHM 1896, 'The Bora of the Kamilaroi Tribes', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, vol. 9 (new series), pp. 137-73.

<sup>4</sup> [Editor's note] In his other writings on initiation, Mathews never described the women as 'prisoners'. This is probably a misunderstanding on the part of the French translator. Women and children adjourned to a women's camp where they usually conducted their own ceremonies during the absence of the men and neophytes.

<sup>5</sup> [Editor's note] That this is the first appearance of the term *Koorringal* suggests that parts of the original paper were cut. In 1896 Mathews defined the *Koorringal* as 'the chosen band of athletes, who have the custody of the guardians and novices whilst the latter are going through the secret ceremonies in the bush'. See RHM, 'The Bora of the Kamilaroi Tribes', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, vol. 9 (new series), 1896, p. 151.

<sup>6</sup> [Editor's note] In 1896 Mathews defined the *Beegay* as 'a number of strange men who have arrived at the women's camp since the boys were taken away'. Eventually they are 'despatched to liberate them'. *Ibid.*, p. 167.