

## THE COMPLEX WORLD OF ABORIGINAL KINSHIP

Some years ago a woman said to me that she had been 'adopted' into a tribe, and the Aboriginal man concerned said that she was now his nephew. She did not understand how, as a woman, she could be a nephew, so I tried to explain it to her along the following lines.

Titles like niece, nephew, grandson, and granddaughter, are not decided by the gender of the person concerned, but by their filial or lineal relationship. If I point to a girl and say '*This is my grandson*' it simply means that she is the child of my son. If I point to a boy and say '*This is my granddaughter*' it simply means that he is the child of my daughter. Grandsons can therefore be either boys or girls, as can granddaughters.

The designation of uncles and aunts is similarly different to European conventions. The sisters of your mother are not your aunts as in the European definition. Your mother's sisters are your '*other mothers*', because somebody has to take up maternal responsibilities if something untoward happened to your birth mother. Similarly, your father's brothers are not your uncles they are your '*other fathers*.'

You aunties therefore are your father's sisters and your uncles are your mother's brothers. This is where it starts to get into brain haemorrhage territory. The children of both your mother's sisters and your father's brothers are therefore not your cousins, as in the European definitions, they are your '*other brothers and sisters*'. Their parents are therefore by definition not your uncle and aunt, they are your '*other mother and father*'.

To get back to my confused female nephew, her title of nephew means she must have been adopted as if she were the child of his wife's brother. This is the normal process of familial adoption in traditional Aboriginal society.

The terminology arises from the fact that a man does not have any nephews until he gets married and inherits them from his wife's side of the family. Similarly, a woman does not have nieces until she gets married and inherits them from her husband's side of the family.

This is one of the reasons that the terms '*Uncle*' and '*Aunty*' still retain special significance in Aboriginal society. They were originally titles that gained an additional dimension with marriage, but now survive more as honorific terms in the Aboriginal community.

In traditional society however, the terms were quite specific. If I am a man, the children of my brother are my '*other children*'. On the other hand, the children of my sisters, both boys and girls, are my nieces. Similarly, if I am a woman, the children of my sisters are my '*other children*' and the children of my brothers are my nephews. Did I mention brain haemorrhage?

A few years ago I had a most satisfying experience. My wife and I were on a caravan holiday in the Northern Territory. We had stopped at Kakadu National park and I was chatting to some Aboriginal Park Rangers outside the visitors' centre. The Ranger introduced me to the young man opposite him and said '*This is my nephew*'. I immediately said '*Oh you mean he is the son of your wife's brother?*' His eyebrows shot up in amazement and he smiled saying '*Oh you know this stuff?*' I smiled back and said '*A little bit.*'

Europeans have always had trouble understanding Aboriginal relationships, but ultimately it is only a trick of thinking. Rather than remembering relationship terms you only know the totemic structure of relationships. Tribal Aboriginal people carry this structure in their heads and can immediately locate a person according to the skin totem structure. However I have already ventured far enough into brain haemorrhage territory and won't go any further, save for one final note.

Within the totemic Skin Group system there were four primary groups. Your father belongs to group one, your mother belongs to group two, you belong to group three and your marital partner belongs to group four. All your brothers and sisters as well as your other brothers and other sisters (that is the children of your mother's sisters and your fathers' brothers) belong to the same Skin Group as you.

However your cousins (the children of your father's sisters and your mother's brothers) belong in the same group that your marital partner comes from. In other words your husband or wife is classed as a type of cousin, but are of no filial relationship to you.

When Aboriginal people tried to explain the structure of this relationship to settlers or anthropologists, as soon as the word 'cousin' was mentioned, the listener usually jumped to the conclusion that Aboriginal people practiced incest. The reality is that Aboriginal society had more degrees of safety against incest than any other society on Earth.