

# UNDERSTANDING TOTEMIC KINSHIP

All Aboriginal tribes across Australia were originally organised in the same way, sharing the same basic totemic structure and processes that determined kinship. These same principles still apply in many northern Australian communities that have retained their traditional culture.

The first point to understand is that all tribes were divided into two halves called 'Moieties' which were complementary opposites, like the Taoist concepts of Yin and Yang. These two halves were then divided into half again to form four quarters, called Skin Groups. Each of these Moieties and Skin Groups are symbolised by an animal, bird or reptile, and for instance the most common Moiety totems across Australia were Black Cockatoo and White Cockatoo. In southeast Australia the Moiety totems were usually Eagle and Crow. Cross-moiety relationships between similar types of Skin totem, were also represented by a similar animal, bird or reptile totem. These cross-moiety Flesh Totems had regional variations as well as the totems representing the four individual Skin Groups also varying. In some northern Australian areas the four Skin Groups were further subdivided into eight. However the original four-groups are still embedded in this structure as Sub-Moiety totems.

Changes to an eight-group system and other anomalies to the original four-group system occurred as an adaption to the massive depopulation caused by the 1789 smallpox plague which started in Sydney Cove one year after British occupation. This plague is estimated to have killed up to 90% of the Aboriginal population of Australia, resulting in 2 ½ million deaths.

Understanding the workings of the Skin Group system is difficult for non-Aboriginal people as it operates as a binary matrix. In reality it was the world's first computer system. To begin understanding the system it is helpful to visualise the four Skin Groups as a square divided by horizontal and vertical lines, thus forming four squares. If these four squares are labelled A, B, C and D as shown, their relationships can be explored. Each of these four Skin Groups has a special relationship with the other three Skin Groups. If you follow the model A can form three pairs AB AD and AC, B has BA BC and BD, C has CD CB and CA, whilst D has DC DA and DB. If we remove the duplications from these twelve pairings, we end up with six pairs, AC and BD as vertical pairs, AD and BC as diagonal pairs and AB and CD as horizontal pairs.

<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>
<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>

Each of these vertical, diagonal and horizontal pairs are called Classes, with the concepts of Spirit, Flesh and Skin separately defining each class. The two vertical classes AC and BD are Spirit Classes and represent the father-child relationship. The two diagonal classes AD and BC are Flesh Classes, representing the mother-child relationship. The two horizontal classes AB and CD are Skin Classes, representing the marital relationship. Both the Spirit (father-child) and Flesh (mother-child) classes have generational cycles, where children must be in a different Skin Group to both parents, but be in the same Spirit Class of their father and Flesh Class of their mother. However who can marry who is fixed and does not vary between generations. Nevertheless, girls always stay in their mother's Flesh Class, whilst boys stay in their father's Spirit Class.

Anthropologists and Ethnologists commonly use terms such as patrilineal and matrilineal to describe the generational Spirit and Flesh cycles, but such terms are complete misnomers. This is because Aboriginal descent is defined by circular, not linear systems. This is evidenced by the fact that each child shares the same Skin totems as both their mother's mother and their father's father. This will be readily seen when you follow through the Spirit and Flesh cycles shown on the accompanying display model.

Both the Spirit and Flesh cycles will produce exactly the same result in showing what Skin Group your children will belong to, so you can use either the Spirit Cycle or the Flesh Cycle to map your family's Skin Group relationships. The only rider to this is for the Spirit and Flesh cycles to be in unison, the parental marriage has to be 'right-skin', in other words marriages must only be AB or CD. If a wrong-skin marriage has occurred (i.e. AD AC BC or BD) then the Flesh cycle will give the correct answer as to which Skin Group the children of such a union belong. Therefore, presuming a right-skin marriage every child must end up in the same Skin Group as both their maternal grandmother and paternal grandfather, so it is quite misleading to describe such a system as matrilineal or patrilineal, when it is simultaneously neither and both.

To understand how the system works one must first understand the religious basis to the concepts of Spirit, Flesh and Skin. Briefly, traditional Aboriginal belief is that the spirits of all children pre-exist, having been created as part of the original Creation Dreaming and seeded into the Dreaming where they must wait until it is their turn to be born. This is achieved when the father of the spirit-child finds them in a dream and directs the spirit-child to the body of their mother, who makes their flesh. When the child is born, their skin is the package that keeps spirit and flesh together in the real world. Spirit therefore represents the father-child relationship because it is he who found your spirit. Flesh represents the mother-child relationship because it is she who made your flesh. Skin represents the husband-wife relationship because it is they who brought you into the real world and gave you both individuality and family.

How the Spirit and Flesh Class cycles interact with the static Skin Classes to produce the same result each time, is shown in the accompanying display model. The Skin Group totems and the Spirit and Flesh Class totems shown in the model are that of the Kulin Nation of Central Victoria. The Skin Group system was thought to be lost but was actually embedded into the rules of the traditional Aboriginal football game of Marngrook and decoded by Jim Poulter in consultation with northern Australian tribal people. However it should be noted that there were some regional variations in the skin totems used and some dialect differences in the names of the same totems, or in the spelling of the same totem name. Nonetheless, the totems used in the model were generally those used across the whole Kulin Nation, and the system itself certainly was the same. In fact the same system as shown in this model applied across the whole of Australia and still does in those areas that have retained their traditional culture.

In the display model the four Skin totems used are as follows: Toan the Feather-tailed Glider, commonly known as the flying mouse; Kloorong the Nankeen Kestrel; Thara the Swamp Hawk and Tuan the Brush-tailed Phascogale. The two Spirit Classes (Moieties) are represented by the totems of Bunjil the Wedge-tailed Eagle for Toan and Thara, and Wagara the Crow for Kloorong and Tuan. The Flesh Classes are represented by the totems of Tadjeri the Brush-tailed Possum for Toan and Tuan, and Yupoke the Rosella for Kloorong and Thara. The display model was devised by Jim Poulter, based on a similar model at the Warradjan Cultural Centre at Kakadu.