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## Pre-colonial inequality in Aboriginal Australia

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**Abstract.** In her paper, “Monopolisation of knowledge, social inequality and egalitarianism: an evolutionary perspective” (2016), Olga Artemova argues that precolonial Australian Aboriginal societies offer us an unusual non-economically based model on which social inequality can be established. This is through a complex religious system controlled by elderly men that prolonged the reaching of full adulthood for males. I am sympathetic to her general argument and agree with her that the Australian system of inequality had some distinctive features in which the role of religious knowledge was central. However, the evidence is that there were underlying economic interests at work in the system but such were the system’s entailments that they made it impossible for the inequality to become hereditary.

**Keywords:** Inequality, Australia, polygamy, economy of knowledge.

**Питерсон Н. Неравенство у аборигенов Австралии в доколониальный период.**

В статье «Монополизация знания, социальное неравенство и эгалитаризм» Ольга Артёмова стремится доказать, что доколониальные общества австралийских аборигенов явили нам необычный пример того, как социальное неравенство могло строиться на внеэкономической основе. Она считает анализируемый ею тип социального неравенства производным сложной религиозной системы, контролируемой старшими мужчинами, которые целенаправленно пролонгировали период посвящения молодых мужчин в ранг полноправных «взрослых». Я в целом разделяю эту точку зрения и согласен с тем, что австралийская система неравенства имеет некоторые специфические черты, и что главную роль в ней играло религиозное знание. Однако факты свидетельствуют, что подспудные экономические интересы тоже влияли на систему, но при этом характер её был таков, что неравенство не могло стать наследственным.

**Ключевые слова:** неравенство, Австралия, полигамия, экономика знаний.

Two apparently contradictory accounts are common in describing pre-colonial Aboriginal life. On the one hand there is an emphasis on a fierce egalitarianism which

in a contemporary context makes it extremely difficult for adults to order each other around (e. g. Myers 1986: 264–5). On the other hand, it is quite clear that there were marked inequalities particularly between males and females but also between young and older men. By inequality I simply mean that institutional arrangements made it possible for persons of a particular status to control the behavior of other adults. While some have argued that in the history of *Homo sapiens* egalitarian tendencies were original with inequality emerging later, a number of people have argued the reverse. Olga Artemova (2016) has argued the latter case drawing attention to what she sees as a unique feature of the institutionalized inequalities in pre-colonial Australia.

In her paper, “Monopolisation of knowledge, social inequality and egalitarianism: an evolutionary perspective” (2016), she argues that precolonial Australian Aboriginal societies offer us an unusual non-economically based model on which social inequality can be established. This is through a complex religious system controlled by elderly men that prolonged the reaching of full adulthood for males. Speaking more generally about human society she sees the emergence of social equality only coming about by long term and persistent effort over many generations of determined people (Artemova 2016: 30) fighting against the inherent tendencies of human nature to produce institutional inequality. On this basis it can be assumed that egalitarian societies, she says, were not numerous at any time in human prehistory.

I am sympathetic to her general argument about egalitarianism being emergent and agree with her that the Australian system of inequality had some distinctive features in which the role of religious knowledge was central. However, the evidence is that there were underlying economic interests at work in the system but such were the system’s entailments that they made it impossible for the inequality to become hereditary.

### Authority in precolonial Australia

In the history of the discussion of authority and leadership in Aboriginal societies there has been a debate as to whether the authority of senior men over young men and women only related to ritual contexts or whether it also extended to daily life.

The view up to the 1970s was that men’s authority did not extend beyond the ritual context and that day to day life was ordered by kinship (fig. 1). The key proponents of that view were Lauriston Sharp with his famous article, “People without politics” (1958) and later Mervyn Meggitt (1964) and Les Hiatt (1986). Hiatt summarized their views at that time in the following terms: “Aboriginal political life is characterized by a uniform distribution of rights, privileges, and duties through-out a social order based on kinship and suffused by an egalitarian ideology” (Hiatt 1986: 6).

At the end of the 1970s this view was challenged by John Bern (1979) drawing on the wave of neo-marxist theorizing of the time, to argue that the earlier authors had failed to see that the religious beliefs that placed power in the hands of elderly males were working as an ideology and that the effects of that ideology permeated social life as well as the religious life. In particular it resulted in the prolonging of the religious education of young men with a principal consequence being that older men were able to practice polygamy, rather than because of some skewing of the sex ratio. The age at which young men could get married was delayed until 25–30 while young girls were married by 12–15. The rates of polygamy in northern Australia in particular were high even in the 1960s when Yolngu men aged 61–70 averaged five wives, and men 50–59, three (see Keen 1994: 86). At that time 28% of males over twenty had no wives



*Fig. 1.* A pre-wet season camp in northeast Arnhem Land October 1965. Baiman, his sons, and close relatives, sing in memory of his eldest son who had died recently, helping the soul find its way back to the subterranean ancestral world (photo by the author)

*Рис. 1.* Северо-восточный Арнемленд, лагерь аборигенов перед началом сезона дождей (октябрь 1965 г.). Байман, его сыновья и другие близкие родственники поют в память его недавно умершего старшего сына, чтобы помочь душе покойного найти дорогу в подземный мир предков (фото автора)

and some men had more than ten wives (see also Hart, Pilling 1960). Given that Keen was writing at a time when people had been settled on missions for fifty years in many cases, it is likely that the rates of polygamy could have been even higher in the past.

Despite the prevalence of polygamy there was little interpersonal authority between fully adult men in everyday life even though they accepted unquestioningly the authority of the religious cosmology, giving life an egalitarian aspect well summarized by Hiatt (1996: 99): “The business of everyday life was conducted informally through unspoken understandings, quiet consensus or noisy agreement. In general, the authoritarian mode in public affairs was discountenance. Vanity and self-importance were mocked. Nearly everywhere men insisted on speaking for themselves and, conversely, evinced a reluctance to speak on behalf of others... The tenacity of their roots, embedded deeply in the indigenous polity and temper, has helped to make assimilation of aboriginal communities into the imported structures of British government a task of notorious difficulty”.

### **The economic significance of polygamy**

The understanding of Aboriginal economic life pre-colonially has undergone a number of changes. As with most other hunter-gatherers, the pre-1960s image was of hunting as the mainstay of Aboriginal economies. This was reinforced by the first substantial quantitative based research on Aboriginal hunting and gathering during

the course of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land in 1948 the results of which were made famous by Marshall Sahlins (1972) who used the data in his argument about hunter-gatherers as the original affluent societies. In this study, McCarthy and McArthur (1960) showed that people only worked at food gathering on average for less than 5 hours and 9 minutes a day (Sahlins 1972: 16) and that meat hunted by men was central to the diet. Later research in Arnhem Land by Betty Meehan (1977) and Jon Altman (1984) was to show that while the ways in which men and women contributed to the diet were rather different, their contributions averaged out around 50/50 for the percentage of calories contributed. The big difference was that women's contribution was much more dependable because their contribution to the household economy was directly relatable to the amount of time invested in collecting any particular type of food. The lower day-to-day predictability of men's contribution meant that the stability of household provisioning was dependent on female labor and was one of the reasons for polygamy, but not the only one.

Frederick Rose (1960) provided an alternative economic argument for polygamy on the basis of his highly original statistical analysis of the Groote Eylandt kinship and marriage system. His figures showed that women were most likely to be co-wives at the age of 24 and that at that age their husband would be 42. This led him to argue that the significance of polygamy was that it created a collective of co-wives who could assist each other during the peak early years of child rearing, (i. e. 24), some wives staying back in camp looking after the children (fig. 2) while others went out



*Fig. 2.* Early evening in a northeast Arnhem Land wet season (December — April) camp in the late 1960s (photo by the author)

*Рис. 2.* Северо-восточный Арнемленд, сезон дождей (декабрь — апрель), ранний вечер в лагере аборигенов. Конец 1960-х годов (фото автора)

gathering. In the case of men he argued that 42 was the average age at which men reached the peak of their hunting skills and were in the best position to provide support to their wives. Within five years of the publication of Rose's views, Meggitt replied (1965) arguing that his figures did not support Rose's analysis. Using his own data he showed that the age for the peak burden of childrearing was 27, not 24, and that by the age of 42 most men had given up making a major contribution to hunting animals and were preoccupied with ritual affairs and the religious life. The economic significance of marriage is further confirmed by the nature of marriage arrangements in many areas as is discussed below.

## Gender inequality

The principal inequality in Aboriginal societies was between the sexes. This has been somewhat obscured by the writing on gender relations in the early 1980s. The first feminist neo-marxists to write a book length work on women was Diane Bell (1983) with her "Daughters of the dreaming". This was a very readable and well received book which rightly pointed out the lack of attention to the lives of women. Her analysis was influenced by Eleanor Leacock's (1978) writing on the lives of indigenous women in Canada with its very strong emphasis on women's autonomy and self-sufficiency, espousing an equal but separate view of gender relations. In Australia, Bell argues, this was manifested in the economic self-sufficiency of women who collected both plant and animal foods in the desert and had their own land related ceremonies. Bell's argument was that gender inequality emerged as a consequences of colonization and settling down. Not only did they undermine Aboriginal women's economic independence but combined with Aboriginal men acquiring European attitudes to women in general and towards Aboriginal women in particular, led to a catastrophic decline in Aboriginal women's standing *vis a vis* Aboriginal men. It is widely accepted that these views overstated the case for equality prior to colonisation. There are two lines of evidence that support this view that are particularly clear.

The first is in respect to sexual dimorphism that underwrites, in general, an ultimate male ability to physically dominate women. Sexual dimorphism is clearly a long-standing physical inequality because it appears to have been biologically entrenched across the continent. A standard physical anthropological text book summarizes the mean stature difference between males and females as 170cm for males and about 157cm for females (Kirk 1981: 91–2). However, although it is probably reasonable to take sheer size as a proxy for raw strength it is not clear how important ideas about the appropriate customary behavior in matters of physical confrontation between men and women were in ameliorating the significance of this physical difference. A study of physical aggression carried out in southern Arnhem Land (Burbank 1994) found that even though Aboriginal women generally recognized men to be stronger than women this did not stop them initiating physical conflict with their partners. This was because women could assume that certain male relatives would intervene in the conflict if it seemed to be getting out of hand, lessening the effect of size difference (*Ibid.*: 177). Nevertheless, today it is almost uniformly women that get killed by their partners, particularly since people began living in European houses with their walls, doors, and locks which all impede vision and make timely intervention by others much more difficult (e. g. see Lloyd 2014). Today an added factor greatly aggravating violence in general as well as between men and women, is the presence of alcohol.

Another clear manifestation of inequality was in respect to marriage arrangements. As mentioned above, young men did not usually first get married until between the ages of 25 and 30, while young women were married by the time they were 15. The average age difference between a desert woman and her husband at first marriage was 20.6 years and in the tropical north 25.3 years (see Meggitt 1965: 156) with the average difference for all marriages being 14.5 years in the desert regions (*Ibid.*: 160) and 17.8 in the north (*Ibid.*: 158). In many areas this age difference was brought about by the custom of wife's mother bestowal which meant that the marriage partner of a girl was identified long before she was even born.

Wife's mother's bestowal worked in the following way. Two men in the relationship of WMB-ZDH, the one with a roughly 10 years old daughter and the other with a roughly 10 years old son, would agree that the girl would become the WM of the boy. This means that the boy's wife was a way off even having been conceived, at this point. If, for argument's sake the WM has a daughter when she, the mother, was 15, it would be another 15 or so years before the daughter was ready to marry the man she has been promised to even before her birth. This quite common arrangement resulted in a minimum 15-year age difference between a man and his wife. Indeed, as mentioned above according to both Meggitt and Rose the age difference between husband and wife on the first marriage rose to 21 years or greater.

Wife's mother bestowal emerged where the competition to acquire wives was very strong, mainly across the tropical north and in some parts of southern Australia, because of high rates of polygamy, so the pressure to lock in spouses for the male children led people to push the contractual arrangements earlier and earlier. There were economic benefits for the WM and her family as the son-in-law had to contribute regular gifts to his WM family of food and in the past hair-string, ochre and other valued items for as long as the marriage lasted, co-opting the bride's mother in the arrangement. Wife's mother bestowal had virtually disappeared by the 1960s.

## Demography and the economy of knowledge

The demographic consequences of this large age difference at marriage flowed through out the kinship system affecting close genealogical relations most directly. This in turn had consequences for the transmission of religious knowledge. It is easiest to see these effects if a set of simplifying assumptions about age and marriage are made based on Rose's and Meggitt's figures. These are that the age difference between husband and wife was 15 years; that marriage took place when a man was 30 (and therefore his wife 15); that the wife had a female child immediately; and that brother and sister were the same age. Using these assumptions and working them through the close relatives, certain things become clear. First that the generations traced through women cycle at twice the rate of those traced through men. This gave a matrilateral bias to the kinship network as it meant many more immediate matrilateral relatives were likely to be alive than those traced through the father and his brothers and sisters. Thus, when a man was 30 and had reached full adulthood, his father would be 60 whilst his father's father would be long dead, as he would be 90. On the other hand, the man's mother's mother's brother would have been only 60, the same age as his father, although a genealogical generation higher, and likely to be still alive. As is well known, it was this kind of age differential that made matrilateral cross-cousin marriage more common than patrilateral cross-cousin marriage as,

on average, the patrilineal cousins were 30 years older than the matrilineal cousins. Of course, in reality things were more complex especially when classificatory relatives were concerned but nevertheless the basic biasing remained even when the full complexities of everyday life were taken into account. Warren Shapiro's age-based analysis of close and classificatory cross-cousins among the Yolngu shows this clearly (Shapiro 1970: 61).

Annette Hamilton (1970) provides a concrete example of the impact of the age difference at marriage on the distribution of kin in an Arnhem Land community in her analysis of the specifics of the bestowal of 20 Gidjingali girls aged between 3 months and 13 years (Hamilton 1970: 18). None of them had an actual father's father alive and there was only one father's mother between them. There were, however, 9 mother's mothers, 6 mother's mother's brothers and two mother's fathers (*Ibid.*: 19).

The age difference between a man and his sons (and daughters too, of course) had major implications for the transmission of religious knowledge. While much of this would have been accomplished by the time a man was 30, a man would still have been well away from being regarded as a knowledgeable person because his opportunities to have participated in a range of rituals more than once would have been quite limited and there would be more esoteric aspects yet to be learnt. Further, some fathers would have died before they had imparted all that they knew.

This is where the ritual managerial system comes into play in a crucial way. Managers are generally described as sister's children (male perspective; daughters female perspective) of a ceremonies' owners. Their role varies with age, the younger adults being labor to be directed by the older managers, and between them they have the responsibility for the staging of any rite, everything from clearing the ceremonial ground, to preparing the ocher and down for decoration, making any objects and decorating the owners who are to perform and to direct the actual performance, but not sing which is usually the preserve of the owners. For a man who was thirty his own immediate manager was his sister's son who would have been only fifteen and not even in attendance at many rituals and it was really the father's sister's son and other close relatives in this category that were the important managers, as Olive Pink (1936) recognized long ago. This is because at the age of forty-five they would be mid-way in age between a man and his thirty-year old son. As such the managers of this category were very knowledgeable by then, having helped their mother's brothers with ritual celebrations on many occasions, so that if the father died, they would be the custodian of the knowledge and able to pass it on. Most men, unless quite senior, needed the assistance of their older father's sister's sons to get their celebrations right.

The age difference between a man and his son had a number of consequences but the most important in terms of inequality was that it was a barrier to entrenching it. This was because it was not possible for a successful father with many wives to pass on his success to his son(s). Kenneth Maddock (1972: 69–70) drew attention to this many years ago: "The marital inequality of older and younger men helps sustain the egalitarian polity (because it is responsible for a check on the emergence of hereditary leadership). A son can only be as important as the father by his own efforts".

As a man started to build his family his father was likely to be in decline. Further the father may not have been in a position to hand over all of his esoteric knowledge since much of this has to take place in performative contexts and not simply verbally.

Thus, such was the competition for wives that it got to the point where it was a major inhibitor of the emergence of a hereditary dominant class of people. There was not only the late age at marriage, postponing the age at which a man could start

developing his career, but it also led to the late acquisition of religious knowledge and the status that went with it. The acquisition of this knowledge from the father was also made more difficult because of the age gap which would seem to be partly responsible for the developed system of ritual managership for ensuring the transmission of that knowledge between generations.

## Conclusion

In the final chapter of his book 'The Australian Aborigines: a portrait of their society' Maddock examines the relationship between freedom and inequalities in Aboriginal societies in the light of Alfred Kroeber's ideas on progress and Karl Marx's on society. While the understanding of pre-colonial Aboriginal life has undergone some refinement since Maddock wrote the chapter, his conclusion still holds. He writes that traditional Aboriginal society had 'exemplary value as a model exhibiting many features of social freedom, the realization of which has usually only been speculated upon in Western thought' (Maddock 1977: 194).

He reached this conclusion even though he was aware of all of the inequalities described above. Although there were un-freedoms and inequalities in pre-colonial Australia he points out that there was neither servility nor was there opposition to the social system itself. This lack of opposition, he argues, cannot be explained by an absence of inequality or by what he calls disenfranchisement — meaning the greater importance of male religious practice over that of women — as both existed, but was to be understood in cosmological terms as an "assent to life's terms" as W. E. H. Stanner (1965: 213) put it. The Aboriginal view of life provided a utopian conception of society as having been laid down in the Dreaming and what was required of Aboriginal people was only to conform (Stanner 1979: 193). Further, religious authority was organised without a priesthood, leadership being invested in senior clan people, male or female depending on the context, and their close managers. Because no clan was entirely autonomous from others in this system, and because they were not arranged in a hierarchy, no clan had "rights of a kind the others lack[ed], egalitarian mutuality... [was] the governing principle" (*Ibid.*: 184). This brings the argument back to the beginning with the contradictory accounts of Australian Aboriginal societies as manifesting both aspects of egalitarianism and of inequality.

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