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ABORIGINAL CLASS DIVISIONS

IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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in Western Australia.

The fundamental homogeneity of the Australian aborigines is evidenced by the similarity of their kinship and marriage divisions, though the primary (uncircumcised) hordes represented by the Bibbulmun race of the South West of the continent differed in many other respects from the dwellers in the north and Central areas.

Amongst the original hordes there were two classes or divisions into either of which every member of the group and tribe entered by birth. These two Classes (or moieties as they are called by scientists) were called "white cockatoo" and "crow" in Bibbulmun territory, and every man, woman and child belonged to one or other of these classes. The area belonging to the Bibbulmun race - the largest homogeneous group in all Australia - stretched from beyond Esperance on the South coast to Jurien Bay on the West coast. Throughout this wide area, White Cockatoo married Crow, Crow married White Cockatoo, any other marriage being punished by death.

Paternal descent obtained amongst the southern Bibbulmun, maternal descent amongst the groups north of the Williams district. At Esperance, Albany, Augusta etc., a crow man's children were crows, a White Cockatoo man's offspring were white cockatoos. North of Augusta, Perth, Gingin, etc. the children of a Crow man entered his wife's class and were White Cockatoos, and the White Cockatoo man's children entered the Crow class.

The Northern Bibbulmun had subdivisions of the two primary classes, but these subdivisions did not alter the marriage laws. Tondarup and Didaruk (white cockatoo division) could only marry Ballaruk or Nagarnuk (Crow division), any marriage within the division being punished with death, and as Tondarup and Didaruk were Manitch-inter-mat and "brothers and sisters" and therefore could not/marry. Similarly Ballaruk and Nagarnuk were Wordungmat and could not intermarry. So unalterable was this law amongst the Bibbulmun that it was not until white settlement took place in the South West that the death punishment was foregone. An instance related to the

writer by Baaburgurt - the last Capel River native - shows the beginning of the breakdown of this law. At one of the large gatherings assembled for initiation (which did not include circumcision), a young White Cockatoo girl from the Augusta area fell in love with a young man of the White Cockatoo class from the Williams district. She followed him up when he and other young men of his group were returning to their home grounds. On the third day she ventured to show herself in the open. The young man left his companions and went to her. "Where are you going?" he said. "I'm coming after you," she replied. "I want no sister," said the youth, and raising his spear he thrust it through her body, and without waiting until life had departed from the poor young body, he piled logs and branches on top of it and set them alight with the firestick he carried. His companions told some early settlers of the circumstance and the young man was hanged. That incident may be said to have started the breaking of the old straight law. Later when their women and girls were dying out the breach became general, owing to the paucity of girls of the proper marrying class. But to the end of their lives every old man amongst the Bibbulmun who had kept the laws of his people, believed that the extinction of his race was the direct and awful consequence of their breach of the old Bibbulmun law. Baaburgurt said, "The guardian spirits (jang-ga) of our totems, the spirit kangaroo, spirit emu and the Great overlord spirit Woggal (mythical serpent) who was punisher-in-chief for all breaches of all laws amongst us; the spirits in tree, rock and other winnaitch (sacred) shrines which we propitiated with offerings as we passed them on our way to hunting grounds - all abandoned us, all left their sacred dwelling places, and without the protection of woggal and totem spirits our totem foods became less and less. The sickness called woggalong was sent amongst us from the angry serpent, and the Bibbulmun who were like kalda (sea mullet) for numbers, lay down and died." Baaburgurt was the last member of the sea mullet totem group of Capel and Wonnerup.

Amongst the circumcised groups of the northern and central areas there were four class divisions, the meanings of which have never yet been ascertained. These were, with local variations in nomenclature : Boorong, Banaka, Kaimera, and Paljari. The first two intermarried and produced the second pair, and they intermarried and produced the first pair, and so on throughout all generations. This was the straight and fundamental law of the circumcised hordes which followed the primary horde (of which the Bibbulmun race formed part). No other marriages were allowed on pain of death. These classes in their purity of straight descent were found in the Arrunta/^{group} of North Central Australia, described by Professor Spencer, the dialectic variation in the class names being the only difference. This is a fact of great interest to students of Western Australian Anthropology, for the reason that south of the zigzag "road" of straight class marriages - a "road" that ran southeastward from the Nyool-nyool ngangga group of Beagle Bay, the Jookan ngangga group of Broome, the Ngallooma of Roebourne, towards the Nullagine and thence to the Arrunta area, the straight class laws had been broken for many generations before the coming of the white man. If the writer might venture a suggestion it is that the prevalence of infant cannibalism amongst the women of the circumcised groups may have been a principal factor towards the first breach of the old straight law.

A short description of the simple kinship system existing in all Australian groups is necessary in order to explain how the breaches of the law began : Taking the grandparents first. All the grandfather's brothers are called grandfather. All the grandmother's sisters are called grandmother. All the father's brothers are called father. All the mother's sisters are called mother. All the children of father's brothers are brothers and sisters and all the children of mother's sisters are brothers and sisters. (A native calls the baby brother of his father "father" and the baby sister of his mother "mother.")

It is therefore only from the children of his father's sisters (paternal aunts) and his mother's brothers (maternal uncles) that that a man can obtain his legal wife. No other marriage was legal

in any tribe or group in Australia, circumcised or uncircumcised. It is perhaps the most simple law of kinship and marriage amongst the human race, but it became restrictive amongst the circumcised groups, in that there were not always sufficient wives to go found in a generation, owing largely to infant cannibalism.

The first breach of the "straight" class law apparently began by the maternal uncle marrying his sister's child (who should have been his son's legal wife and his own daughter-in-law); or in a young nephew marrying his father's sister (paternal aunt) who should have been his mother-in-law. Either of these marriages altered the straight law. They were evidently not punished by death but banishment, and the lawbreakers forming a new group, the uncle who married his niece formed one of the first decadent groups and started a new class division and new marrying pairs, Boorong-Paljeri, Kaimera-Banaka. When the nephew took his paternal aunt to wife and was banished, another variation of the class divisions took place - Boorong-Kaimera, Paljeri-Banaka, becoming the new intermarrying pairs. Breaches of these new classes went on, the changes becoming so frequent that the Northern four class system finally "fizzled out" somewhat near the South Australian-West Australian border - east of the Goldfields areas, the old class names being now applied to long, short, thin, fat, fair or dark members of the decadent groups along the border; so that between the northern groups following their straight marriage laws, and the Bibbulmun people of the Southwest, who kept their straight two-class system, the writer found many changes of the old Kimberley class divisions.

But not only was decadence manifest in the class system, the kinship system had also decayed before the natives had come in contact with white people. There is evidence of this decay in every new group that comes out of the wild today, not one member of such group being legally entitled to the women he brings with him as his wives.

amongst the derelicts of many old groups now wandering along the Trans Australian line or round the Great Plain's edge, or on the fringes of white settlement in the Goldfields areas there is not one man whose wife is the daughter of his father's sister or his mother's brother, not one.

It will therefore be understood why, when these group remnants foregather, or drift together, there is constant quarrelling and spearing amongst them. Those men who themselves have married unlawfully resent their sisters or mothers or daughters being the wives of their brothers even though they themselves have a sister, daughter, or mother to wife.

One instance may be given to show the extreme decadence of these derelict groups now within civilisation. A man had taken his mother's sister to wife, though his own uterine mother was in the same camp. A brother of the man also wanted her, and when she did not at once respond to his call, he sent a spear hurtling into her bough hut. The spear however ran through the real mother, who died six weeks later. A duel between the brothers followed, the writer being present. The dead woman's own son was entitled to throw one spear at his brother, who also held a spear. Neither was hurt, and for a time the woman was shared between them.

Amongst such decadent remnants, in or out of their wild areas, there will never be peace, unity, or cohesion. There were at one time a few groups whose old and middle-aged men tried to keep this decadence at bay. Amongst these were some groups north and north-east of Laverton (Western Australia). In the early 1900's the writer was investigating the Laverton, Lancefield, Leonora, Malcolm, and other districts where derelict groups were gathered, and she found amongst the Laverton mob absolute promiscuity obtaining. Young men had as wives their own blood sisters, daughters, mothers, and even grandmothers and what was the most deadly offence in aboriginal law, they were raping their own immature children. Some time later, when amongst the more northern groups, the writer found several men, young and middleaged, preparing weapons for a raid on the Laverton mob. The fact was communicated to the Government but no action was taken as it was thought the northern men

feared the Government and its police too much to venture on such an undertaking so close to white settlement. The raid came off in due course and eleven men, women and children of the Laverton mob were killed. A "round up" followed, one of the hunted men taking refuge in the writer's tent at Sandstone. Five or six men were arrested and were taken by train to Perth. The writer had a special commission from the Government at that time, in connection with the aborigines, and by virtue of this was enabled to accompany the chained natives to Perth, without police supervision in the railway compartment reserved for them, when direct first hand evidence of the raid, its "why" and "wherefore" was obtained. By taking this to the proper quarter the men were quietly returned to their districts without any trial.