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AUSTRALIAN MARRIAGE CUSTOMS.

BY N. W. THOMAS.

TO deal seriatim with Dr. Howitt's defence of his position would, I fear, not make for enlightenment, at any rate so far as the casual reader is concerned. I continue the controversy, it is true, more in the hope of eliciting further facts from Dr. Howitt than for any other reason. I have already elicited from him (1) an admission that he has been guilty of a fundamental error in his account of *pirrauru* in *N.T.S.E.A.* and (2) the admission that the Kurnai terms *maian* and *bra* are not, as he has hitherto implied, strictly analogous to *noa*.

To reply in full to Dr. Howitt, and in particular to clear up all the errors into which he has fallen regarding my meaning, would be impossible. I can only ask him to read my remarks in the light of my definitions, not of his own. As I shall show below, his own terminology is extraordinarily lax, and to this is due such small confusions as I have fallen into.

It will be convenient to take in order the various points raised by Dr. Howitt's paper and to deal in succession with (1) questions of terminology, and in connection with it (2) Dr. Howitt's theory of social evolution, then (3) the origin of marital terms and the meaning of (4) *maian-bra* and (5) *kandri*, and (6) the area in which the *pirrauru* custom is found. I will then deal briefly with one or two subsidiary points.

Dr. Howitt gives the following summary of limitations

of marriage on p. 282 of *N.T.S.E.A.* At the outset there was (i) the undivided commune, where any male could marry any female; this I call "absolute promiscuity." (ii) Then came the segmentation of the tribe into two exogamous moieties, and a man is restricted in his choice of a wife to half the women of the tribe. In practice we find these tribes have regulations which make their marriage customs identical with (iii) the four-class tribes which limit a man's choice to one-fourth of the women of a tribe; (iv) the cross-cousin marriages of these tribes are forbidden by the Dieri, whose rule is identical with that of the eight-class tribes, and limits a man's choice to one-eighth of the women of a tribe.

These three systems I term "limited" or "modified promiscuity," and I term the kinship circle into which a man may marry the "*noa*-group."

(v) The Dieri and a few other tribes have, side by side with the individual marriage common to all the Australian tribes, a system which provides accessory spouses for married persons or gives unmarried men certain rights over women who are not their individual wives. This is known as *pirrauru*, and I term the circle which enters into this relation by the name of the "*pirrauru*-group," or "circle," though it is, in fact, merely a fluctuating set of legal paramours; at most, *kandri*-made *pirrauru* seems to be permanent.

In order to make things quite clear I take a typical four-class tribe; not the Dieri, as both their *kami*-relation and other modifications (legal fictions for facilitating illegal marriages) complicate matters. In such a tribe one-fourth of the women are *noa* (*i.e.* potential wives) or marriageable to a given man. In the accompanying diagram the women of such a tribe are shown divided into the four classes: a male of class 4 (in a matrilineal tribe) has the women of class 1 as "father's sisters," of 2 as mother's sisters, of 3 as *noa* (potential

wives), of 4 as sisters. If such a tribe were to practise *pirrauru* a certain number of *noa* women (who here number 36) become accessory spouses to the man; we may take their number at 8, and show the *pirrauru* circle by shading the squares indicating the women in question. Finally he has his individual wife, shown here by a black square.

I lay special stress upon the fact that the *noa* group is wider than the *pirrauru* group, and that all *noa* women do not in fact become the *pirrauru* of any single man, nor all *noa* men the *pirrauru* of any individual woman. I now turn to Dr. Howitt's paper.

The first point to which I wish to call attention is Dr. Howitt's failure to formulate a consistent theory. On p. 171 he asserts that what I call "modified promiscuity" must have preceded the creation of the *noa* group, that is to say that there was no stage intermediate between absolute promiscuity and the *pirrauru* marriage

of the present day. On p. 174, and again at the top of p. 177, without perceiving that he is contradicting his previous statement, he asserts that "the application of the term *ngaperi* to the other brothers who have not become *pirrauru*" (*i.e.* to all the men of the *noa* group) appears to be a vestigiary survival of what was once a fact. That is to say that between the "absolute promiscuity of the undivided commune" and the *pirrauru* marriage of the present day there *was* a stage, in which all the men of one *noa*-group were *de jure* husbands of all the women of another; and this view he emphasises on p. 181, where he asserts that the *kandri* ceremony is a restriction of the range of license within the *noa* group and creates the *pirrauru* group, while the *noa* relationship is itself a restriction on a former wider range of licence (*i.e.* absolute promiscuity). In order to make Dr. Howitt's error quite clear, I now quote from p. 172 (*cf.* the passage at the bottom of p. 177, contradicting that at the top) a sentence in which he affirms the view stated in the first of these three passages: "I consider the *noa* relationship as having restricted the range of an earlier and wider license to the present limits of the *pirrauru* marriage."

On p. 174, on p. 176 and on p. 183, Dr. Howitt charges me with not understanding the facts of *noa* and *pirrauru*. If this were in fact so, I should have ample justification in the confusions just quoted; but in fact the three passages from my remarks on those pages are absolutely accurate, and would have been clear to Dr. Howitt, even if he did not agree with them, had he read them in the light of my definitions and not tried to take my terminology in a sense of his own.

On p. 171 Dr. Howitt remarks, "Throughout my paper I spoke of *pirrauru* as group-marriage." As a matter of fact Dr. Howitt uses both group-marriage and *pirrauru* in two different senses, sometimes enlarging the

pirrauru circle and making it equivalent to the *noa* group, sometimes narrowing the *noa* to make it coincide with the *pirrauru* group (see Fig. 1). In *Folk-Lore*, xvii., p. 104, Dr. Howitt says that the tribes whose kinship terms he has just quoted had *pirrauru* marriage; among the tribes in question is the Arunta, and the term which Dr. Howitt mentions as in use among them is the word *unawa* (= *noa*). Now, as my diagram shows and as Dr. Howitt cannot but admit when he is challenged, the *noa* group is not as a rule co-extensive with any one *pirrauru* group, though it includes it; *pirrauru* is therefore used in this passage in the sense of *noa*-group-marriage. When, therefore, Dr. Howitt speaks of *pirrauru*, we are uncertain whether he means the extant Dieri custom or the conjectured institution which he asserts on p. 181 to have been restricted by the *kandri* ceremony.

Conversely, Dr. Howitt speaks of *pirrauru* as group-marriage (xvii. 185, xviii. 171, 185, etc.), and at the same time asserts the former existence of another kind of group-marriage among the Kurnai, whose terms *maianbra*, as I shall show below, correspond not to *pirrauru*, but to *noa*, in all essentials, Dr. Howitt's affirmation notwithstanding. There are therefore not only two kinds of *pirrauru*, but also two kinds of group-marriage, and Dr. Howitt leaves his readers to guess which he means in any particular passage. If he is misunderstood, his blood is on his own head.

(3) I now pass on to the third point of those mentioned above—the origin of the marital terms. Dr. Howitt asserts (p. 170) that “the (group) terms, husband and wife, father and mother, son and brother, all arise out of the *pirrauru* family.” If by this Dr. Howitt means *pirrauru* in its only proper sense, that in which it is used by the Dieri, this statement is unfortunately absolutely misleading. Dr. Howitt has shown nothing of the sort and can show nothing of the sort, for the

simple reason that, as my diagram shows, the *noa* group is not co-extensive with any one *pirrauru* group, but more extensive, whereas use of the kinship terms mentioned by Dr. Howitt is limited by the *noa* group and not by the *pirrauru* group. A boy, for example, in the Dieri tribe applies the term *ngaperi* to the primary husband of his mother (X Y in diagram¹), whether he is actually his progenitor or not, and *ngaperi-waka* to all his father's tribal brothers (NOAG), whether they are his mother's *pirrauru* (PIRN) or not. Dr. Howitt in fact admits as much on p. 174, line 21; yet he argues all through as if the *pirrauru* group were the limit of these kinship terms. Dr. Howitt's argument on p. 179 about the "group-mother" is vitiated by precisely the same error; no one who reads the passage would gather that a boy applies the term which we translate by the word mother, not only to his actual mother and to all the *pirrauru* spouses of his father, but also to all the women of his father's *noa* group, even to babies in arms; yet such is the case, though Dr. Howitt's argument is thereby reduced to an absurdity. Put in bald terms it comes to this: that the twenty-seven women of the *noa* group who are not *pirrauru* to a given boy's father are addressed by that boy as mothers, because eight or nine *other* women have relations with his father. Comment is needless.

In connection with marital terms, I must once more refer to my point as to *ngaperi* and *mungan* (xvii. 303). I charged Dr. Howitt with being guilty of a grave confusion in asserting that to the *ngaperi-waka* (Dieri) who is also *pirrauru*, is analogous in position the *breppa-mungan* (Kurnai). But little of Dr. Howitt's reply has any bearing on my contention, and what little does bear on it leaves my position absolutely untouched.

¹ For the text here the *noa*-group must be taken as composed of males, the wife belonging to class 4.

As I stated, the *ngaperi* is the primary husband of the woman, but not necessarily the progenitor of the boy who applies to him the term *ngaperi*; *ngaperi-waka* is applied by a boy to all the men who are *noa* to his mother; some of them are, some are not *pirrauru* to her, but all are equally *ngaperi-waka* to him; if one of the *pirrauru* is his father, this man is *ngaperi-waka* (*little father*) just as much as a man who never has relations with his mother. It is therefore absolutely clear that these two terms, *ngaperi* and *ngaperi-waka*, refer to status in the tribe and in the family and not to paternity, for, as anyone can see, the distinction between "father" and "little father" takes no account of paternity.

The Kurnai terms *mungan* and *breppa-mungan* are, so far as we know, used just as the Dieri terms just discussed; and if Dr. Howitt had asserted no more, there would have been nothing to criticise in his remarks. What he actually asserted, however, was that the *breppa-mungan* (= *ngaperi-waka*) of the Kurnai corresponds to the *pirrauru* spouse of the Dieri. In reply to this it is sufficient to say that *all ngaperi-waka* are not *pirrauru*, as they should be if Dr. Howitt's assertion were not entirely misleading.

Dr. Howitt has, in fact, no reply to make to my charge that he is guilty of a grave confusion in his statement of the case. His case depends on the assumption that the *breppa-mungan* of the Kurnai is the *pirrauru* husband of the Dieri, only in the former case the actual rights are obsolete. But the Kurnai have no institution and no terms corresponding to *pirrauru*; their terms actually correspond, as I show below, save only that they are post-matrimonial, to *noa*.

In connection with marital terms, Dr. Howitt makes an important concession (p. 179) in reply to my criticism on one point. He admits that the term used by the Arunta to denote the husband of a boy's mother does

not mean father, for them. Probably he does not perceive the full importance of his admission; for it is fatal to his argument from marital terms of all sorts.

It is improbable that the Arunta term had an origin entirely different from that of all the others enumerated by Dr. Howitt; we may therefore take it that either the Arunta have forgotten that the term means father, or the other tribes have learnt that it means father while the Arunta have still to gain the knowledge. Now the latter case is clearly fatal to Dr. Howitt's contention; in the former case it remains for him to show that the term translated father was not extended by the other tribes to mean persons other than the progenitor, during a period of nescience similar to that which Dr. Howitt now admits for the Arunta.

Either way, therefore, Arunta nescience is a fatal stumbling block to Dr. Howitt.

(4) I now come to the question of the Kurnai terms *maian* and *bra*. Dr. Howitt, for the first time, says that these terms are only post-matrimonial. It is unfortunate that he has not told us so before; at most he has (*N.T.*, p. 169) said that they include husband, wife, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, whereas he translates *noa* by potential husband or wife. This is at best a very dim revelation. But as Dr. Howitt (*F.* xvii. 177) omits the "potential" in speaking of the Dieri, even this means of getting at the facts was denied me. I never denied that the *maian-bra* group included the husband and wife. If Dr. Howitt had told us the real facts I should have modified my sentence (xvii. 297) to read: "They do not imply sexual relations between the parties who apply these terms to each other, save in the case of the individual husband and wife." It is clear that this in no way modifies my point that *maian-bra* does not correspond to *pirrauru*, which *does* imply sexual relations between others besides the individual husband and wife.

It is interesting to learn that *maian-bra* are post-matrimonial; but that they are so in no way invalidates my assertion that the *maian-bra* group corresponds to the *noa* group, not to the *pirrauru* circle. For, as Dr. Howitt admits, the *pirrauru* group does not contain all the tribal brothers or sisters of a given member of it; but the term *maian* is applied to *all* tribal brothers and sisters of the husband, the term *bra* to *all* sisters of the wife. Will Dr. Howitt tell us wherein they differ from the kinship terms which are limited by the *noa* group?

I may add that Dr. Howitt's point that *maian-bra* is post-matrimonial tells against himself with equal force. Or does he seriously assert that *pirrauru* is subsequent to individual marriage and a necessary corollary of it? If not, what is the point of saying that my contention as to *maian-bra* is wrong, because *maian-bra* are, like brother-in-law and sister-in-law among us, terms resulting from and acquired at individual marriage? Not only so, but how can Dr. Howitt assert that *maian-bra* mean husband and wife and that they point to a period of group marriage, when the wife applies the same term *maian* to her husband and to his sister? Does Dr. Howitt maintain that the wife was originally the wife of her husband's *sister*? If not, it is clearly not conclusive of the prior existence of group marriage that other men besides the husband are called *maian*.

(5) On p. 179 Dr. Howitt asserts that the *kandri* ceremony announces the betrothal of a male and female *noa*. On p. 176 he assures us that people who are made *tippa-malku* cannot be again betrothed; yet in dealing with the *kandri* ceremony (p. 179) he asserts the very reverse. It is probably merely another case of loose terminology. However this may be, the betrothal ceremony to which he invites my attention has absolutely no relation to the *kandri* as described in *N.T.S.E.A.*, p. 181. There it is represented that the individual

marriage has nothing to do with the *kandri* ceremony, and Dr. Howitt repeats in his reply to me (p. 167) that the *kandri* ceremony has to do with *pirrauru*. But if the betrothal ceremony of the Kuinmurbura, prior to individual marriage, is a parallel to the *kandri* ceremony, all this is erroneous. I fear Dr. Howitt has not mastered his facts.

(6) Dr. Howitt asserts (p. 184) that I omit to mention the *dilpa-malli* relation. I did not omit it (see p. 301, lines 11-12), though so far there is no evidence that it corresponds exactly to *pirrauru*. All that is asserted by Dr. Howitt (*N.T.*, p. 193) is that a group of men and women cohabit at certain times. But this is not *pirrauru*, which involves a ceremony to initiate it. Moreover, Dr. Howitt seems very uncertain as to the reliability of the information: he says, "according to my informant"—a formula which he does not use in speaking of the Dieri, though his information about them too has now turned out to be erroneous on a point of fundamental importance. Not only so, but Dr. Howitt (*N.T.S.E.A.*, p. 97) includes the Kurnandaburi among the Lake Eyre tribes, *i.e.* the Dieri nation. I may add that before Dr. Howitt argues that *dilpa-malli* is the equivalent of *pirrauru*, he should at least tell us what individuals constitute the group, whether all tribal brothers and sisters (*i.e.* the *noa* group) or only some of them; and in the latter case how they are selected. As to the Yantruwunta, I understand Dr. Howitt to class them too with other tribes of the Dieri nation (*N.T.S.E.A.*, pp. 90-92).

I have, so far, barely alluded to the amazing admission with which Dr. Howitt opens his reply to me. Not once, but several times, it is asserted in his *Native Tribes* that *tippa-malku* precedes *pirrauru*. This now goes by the board, though Dr. Howitt does not allow us to judge of the quality of the evidence on which he relies. As the Dieri are stated to have been decadent for more

than thirty years and to be gathered upon the mission stations, I submit that we have no trustworthy evidence.

In this connection I need hardly point out that the two views cited by Dr. Howitt on p. 166 are in reality not inconsistent at all, unless we know that at the *kandri* ceremony to which the statement refers there were marriageable girls; and this we do not know. Women being scarce—there do not seem to be more than ten of all ages in the tribe to whom a man is *noa*—it is probable that they are all betrothed and married as soon as they are initiated; at any rate it lies with Dr. Howitt to show that his view is right.

In any case it seems clear that the *kandri* ceremony is but rarely performed, for otherwise it would not be necessary for a widower to give presents to his brother in order that the wife of the latter may become his *pirrauru*; in fact, this custom seems to throw doubt on the permanence of *pirrauru* altogether; for why should a man who has a *pirrauru*, as an elderly man presumably has, set out in quest of fresh adventures?

Space fails me to discuss all the points at which Dr. Howitt accuses me of ignorance of the Australian facts or of other misunderstandings. If space permitted it would be easy to show that these charges are all groundless; but I can only take a few cases. On p. 171 Dr. Howitt takes one of my sentences, and construes the term "group-marriage" in his own sense, not in mine, and proceeds to reply on that supposition. Controversy is really impossible if one is not allowed to define one's own terminology; as I have shown, Dr. Howitt's is too defective to permit me to put his terms alongside of my own as a means of avoiding misunderstanding. But I really must claim the right to use my own terms.

Again, on p. 174, Dr. Howitt says I have not mastered the facts of the *noa* relation; his only ground for doing so is because I say that the classificatory system is a

legal system. He himself admits that *noa* means "marriageable"; it is expressive of status, not of actual marital relations (though it includes these); and that is what I mean by the term "legal"; what Dr. Howitt thinks I meant is a mystery to me.

Again, on p. 176, Dr. Howitt says I have not mastered the evidence as to *pirrauru* and *tippa-malku*, because I say that both are entered upon by individuals, etc. All I mean by this is that a man (so far as I can see) gets, or may get, his *pirrauru* spouses one by one, not as a group; I do not assert that he has not more than one *pirrauru*, as Dr. Howitt could easily have seen by several passages (see p. 299, where I speak of *pirrauru* as a combination of polyandry and polygyny, an impossible remark if I did not recognise that there are several *pirraurus* to each individual).

To sum up: (1) Dr. Howitt admits having made an error of fundamental importance in the matter of *pirrauru*; even now we have no clear statement as to how many ways exist of becoming *pirrauru* or of entering into individual marriage; so far as I can make out there are four of each.

(2) Dr. Howitt denies the validity of my assertion that he wrongly put *maian-bra* on a level with *pirrauru*; I show that I am entirely justified in my contention.

(3) Dr. Howitt throws over all that he has said in his book about *kandri*, and brings it into relation with individual marriage, unless his whole point in his present remarks is, as I suspect, entirely erroneous.

(4) He speaks of *pirrauru* as group-marriage, and argues as if the group in question were made up of all the *noa*; he alternately asserts and denies that *noa*-group-marriage existed, and where he asserts it he speaks of it as *pirrauru*. His terminology seems to be hopelessly inadequate.

(5) He will not permit me to select my terms and

define them as I choose; but insists on construing them in the sense in which he himself uses them; and is then surprised that he cannot understand me or that I seem to contradict myself.

(6) He has not produced an individual term for *mother*, though he admits that individual mothers were known. Yet he still argues that individual marriage must have caused an individual term to arise. This is, "Heads I win, tails you lose."

I may remark in conclusion that I did not claim for myself any special power of interpretation, for my criticism of Dr. Howitt was purely negative. But I do claim that I say what I mean and mean what I say, that my terminology is adequate, and that my conclusions are drawn from my premisses.

I trust that Dr. Howitt will soon publish his corrections to *N.T.S.E.A.* At present we really do not know what to accept. It is strange that Dr. Howitt did not discern his mistake as to *pirrauru* earlier, for, had he done so, he would surely have taken the first opportunity of putting things right.

NORTHCOTE W. THOMAS.