

## EARLY HUMAN KINSHIP



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From Sex to Social  
Reproduction

Edited by

Nicholas J. Allen, Hilary Callan,  
Robin Dunbar and Wendy James



Royal Anthropological  
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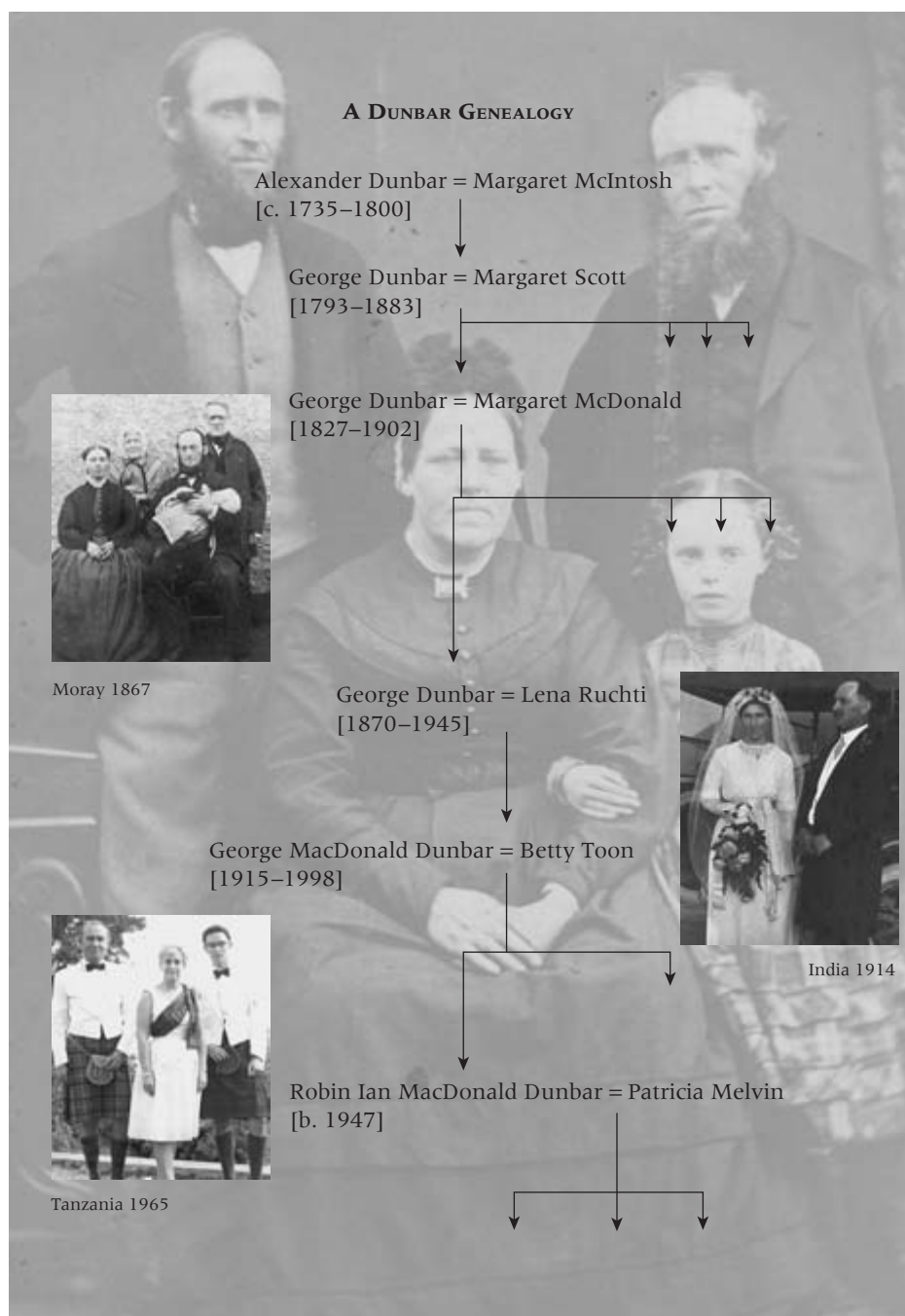
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Generations of a Scottish family. Background: the Dunbar family, Moray, c. 1872–73 (Lawson Collection, Royal Anthropological Institute)



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of the interaction: they may be fleeing something or someone together; she may be chasing him; they may be participating in a communal ceremony. Women are rare in Dynamic Style rock paintings and there are only a handful of compositions showing male-female interactions, so this image gives us a unique glimpse of an aspect of ancient Aboriginal Australian gender relations. (Drawing and original photograph by Paul S. C. Tacon, then at the Australian Museum, 1994; Mick Kubarkku and the Yikarrakkal community are thanked for access to the site and permission to use the image in publications.)

# Preface

This volume introduces some new thinking on the emergence of typically human ways of organizing sex, marriage, parent/child and sibling links, and the consequent world of ‘relatives’ beyond. Although the chapters are all by specialists in one field or another of the human sciences, their findings are presented here in plain language as part of a set of accessible conversations.

While the academic topic of ‘comparative kinship’ might seem a little remote (and even to anthropologists a little ‘out of fashion’), questions about how we find mates and call on others to help raise our children are of strong interest to us all. In this book the contributors debate how far the way in which we do these things, mixed up as it is with language, memory of the past, intentions for the future, and moral or even religious expectations, marks an important difference between ourselves as *Homo sapiens* and our earlier primate heritage. A good deal of popular writing and media programming has recently promoted the image of our closeness to the rest of the animal world, but here – without denying the evolutionary basics – we take a couple of steps back to consider again the nature of the *differences* involved. Even though we do not presume any single, simple transition to the family and kinship life of ‘modern’ humans, we do seek to specify elements of social and cultural organization that have fed into the tendency of us moderns to think in terms of aesthetically pleasing overall patterns, and to negotiate agreed ways of ordering our everyday worlds. Arguably this tendency may have provided survival advantages for groups of our ancestors in relation to their rivals. This is a complex story but, we think, one with wide appeal, not only to those eager to subsume human life seamlessly into the Darwinian paradigm, but also to those who have been used to thinking of human history as quite outside nature.

The volume is based on papers originally given at a workshop sponsored by the Royal Anthropological Institute, London (RAI) on ‘Early Human Kinship’, in collaboration with the directors and other participants representing the British Academy Centenary Project ‘From Lucy to Language: The Archaeology of the Social Brain’. The workshop took place at the University of Wales conference

centre at Gregynog from 20 to 22 March 2005. The aim of the project was to bring biological and social anthropologists together with archaeologists and historical linguists in order to produce a 'state of the art' discussion on the place of organized patterns of kinship in the emergence of language and modern human society. Participants paid particular attention to the relevance of symbolic, holistic models of 'imagined' kinship and social reproduction derived from the structuralist tradition, which had so far not been brought into line with recent advances on the bio-scientific side of anthropology or evolutionary studies.

Questions of 'kinship' have always been at the centre of anthropology. These questions certainly point to biological continuities and changes in a population, but also to the way the birth and socialization of new generations is shaped by the language and conventional practices of adult society, including specifically their existing rules governing sexual access and marriage. At the same time, the facts of physical reproduction have always lent themselves to evolutionary interpretation. Advances in the biological sciences today have prompted a new wave of interest in questions about the roots of human kinship behaviour and its long-term history. These studies, often seeking constructive inspiration from new work on the behaviour of other primates, or even more distant creatures, have sometimes been accused of setting 'culture' aside in their treatment of human life.

The present volume is the fruit of exchanges between leading scholars on all sides of the current debate. Coming from various disciplinary backgrounds, they share the basic view that we need to avoid any sharp distinction between nature and culture as such in understanding human behaviour and the forms of social life. Specifically, this collection emphasizes the long evolutionary heritage to which we are heirs, in both a biological and a cultural sense, but also draws attention to the key importance for human history as a whole of the relatively recent exodus of *Homo sapiens* from Africa (c. 60,000 years ago). All the elements of human understanding brought together under shared categorical ideas and practices redolent with 'symbolism' must have been in place well before that time of expanded human movement. A capacity to think and act, even empathize in an emotional sense, with reference to distant places, absent friends, potential mates, the living, the recently dead, and the generations to come, must have been well established before this time. This is the starting point from which we offer this book as a new set of interdisciplinary conversations in the debate over human evolution and the nature of society.

# Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all those who attended the 2005 workshop which launched this project, particularly those who presented papers that could not in the end be included here – Bill Croft, and Clare Holden (who presented on behalf of herself and Ruth Mace). Robert (Bob) Parkin provided very helpful discussion at the meeting and subsequently. Steven Mithen was unable to take up his invitation because of fieldwork commitments, but has given us encouragement at several points in the evolution of the book. In the run-up to the workshop, we were very sorry to hear of the death of Per Hage, a specialist in the comparative history of kin terminologies, whose participation had been eagerly awaited. Several younger scholars and students were able to join us at the workshop and their responses played a key role in our deciding to take the project forward: Claire Cody, Iris Glaesslein, Anna Goodman, Matthew Grove, Hannah Hafezi, and Adam Newton.

Lord Runciman (W. G. Runciman), President of the British Academy when the Centenary Project 'From Lucy to Language: The Archaeology of the Social Brain' was launched, has actively supported our venture, and its aim of introducing a wider readership in fields of the humanities and social sciences to questions of long-term human history. The Centenary Project, while set within the disciplines of evolutionary psychology and archaeology, has engaged in a range of collaboration with other human sciences, specifically here with linguistics and various branches of anthropology. The Project contributed to the funding of our workshop, which was originally proposed and mainly sponsored by the Royal Anthropological Institute. Staff at the RAI have assisted in several capacities with the organization of the original workshop and the progress of the book. We would particularly like to acknowledge the help of Amanda Vinson in coordinating our efforts over the last three years, and Arkadiusz Bentowski for help in locating illustrations. In the final stages of preparation of the manuscript, we were greatly helped by the skills of Frances Kennett.

*The editors, November 2007*

# Notes on Contributors

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# Introduction and Background



# Why 'Kinship'?

## New Questions on an Old Topic

*Wendy James*

Tremendous advances have been made in the biological sciences over recent years in our understanding of the evolution and early history of humankind. We have a new wealth of evidence about the complexity of our physical ancestry, the successive migrations of our forebears from the African continent, and the genetic connectedness of our modern species of *Homo sapiens* across the world today. Our species was the last of the hominins to emerge from Africa, and we now know this to have taken place relatively quickly and perhaps as recently as 60,000 years ago (see John Gowlett and Robin Dunbar's 'Brief Overview' of human evolution which follows this introduction). At the same time the vigour of classic Darwinian evolutionary theory has been strengthened by new work, not only in genetics, but in evolutionary psychology, environmental history, and field studies of animal behaviour, including primatology. The model of selection for the survival of an organism and its characteristics by virtue of its ability to reproduce its genes in the next generation is a powerful one, and in increasingly sophisticated forms drives a good deal of today's work in biologically based research. It has also made claims to explain aspects of social history and cultural transmission, though here there has been resistance from many mainstream scholars in the humanities. The issue of how far 'nature' expresses itself against, or through, 'culture' has deep roots and has surfaced in different ways in Western thought.

The conversations in this book revolve around the possible ways in which we could re-engage discussion between those coming from the science side, and those from the humanities, on the very important question of how evolutionary theory could or should take account of the *ordered character* of human organization, specifically in respect of how we try to manage patterns of male-female and parent-child relations, and thus the purposeful outcomes of our own reproduction. Among our contributors several put forward new ways of imagining the key turning points in our past. Clive Gamble makes some bold propositions about mobility, bodily techniques, and abstract thought as evidenced in the material record (ideas developed also in his recent synthesis,

2007); while Kit Opie and Camilla Power offer powerful arguments from the bio-ecological perspective for early female coalitions and the evolutionary rise of ‘helpful grandmothers’. Chris Knight advocates a serious rethinking of some developmental anthropological theories of the nineteenth century, sadly swept aside by the Malinowskian focus on individualism and the present. Nick Allen draws inspiration from the structural-linguistic tradition in social anthropology in proposing the ‘tetradic’ model as a candidate for the earliest holistic representations of ‘kinship and marriage’ and thus of sociality as a field, almost a playing-field, of relationship-making. This model certainly encompasses several systematic principles along which the world’s peoples have selectively developed agreed schemes of reproductive continuity and related marriage rules – often, as ethnographers keep pointing out, surprising to modern English speakers. For these reasons, though not all contributors are persuaded of the case for the historical primacy of the cultural logic behind the tetradic schema, we have found the model ‘good to think with’ in our collective effort to conjure up social life as it might have been in the earliest human times. Between them, other chapters offer up-to-date research and speculation on what light primate studies can throw on the comparative human question, on the range of evidence available about modern communities who practise, or practised until recently, hunting and foraging as their main means of subsistence, and on methods of probing the long-term continuities beneath today’s linguistic and cultural diversity, with respect to kinship and marriage.

### **The ‘Social Brain’: From Genetic Kinship to a Capacity for Story-Telling**

Biologists, and all those who approach the topic from a biological or evolutionary angle, use the ordinary English-language concept of ‘kinship’ to refer explicitly to the underlying genetic relatedness of individuals, whether human or animal. Amanda Korstjens makes the point particularly clearly in opening her chapter below: ‘... it is essential to note that when primatologists talk about kinship they refer to genetic relatedness... animals cannot tell you who their relatives are’ (p. 151). And, of course, if they did talk about their relatives, would this necessarily match what the modern scientist means by genetic relatedness? Even when *people* talk about relatives, is this in fact what they mean? In the domains of everyday practice, and indeed the law, even the ordinary English ‘kinship’ can be used in several ways: for example, in the narrow folk sense of ‘blood relations’, but also in a more inclusive way to cover the concept of adoption, or relationship by marriage – what anthropologists call ‘affinity’. Thus, in English law, for example, one’s ‘next of kin’ can be an otherwise unrelated spouse.

The chapters by Korstjens and by Julia Lehmann in part III of this book show how powerful explanations of primate behaviour in terms of selective fitness can be, although Lehmann illustrates how difficult it is to apply the simpler versions of ‘Darwinian’ explanation to the complex range of behaviours observed among the great apes. ‘Hamilton’s rule’, whereby animals favour

their genetic close relatives over others (even where a naïve observer might identify an act as 'altruism') takes us a very long way, but sometimes has to be stretched to fit the cases observed. Robin Dunbar's chapter on the biological approach to kinship offers a very clear explanation of this rule, but also shows how we must in fact avoid a kind of teleology about genetic success and the continuity of social forms, and focus rather on the theme of strategic choice of action affecting survival and reproductive outcomes in all contexts. He also draws attention to the very interesting idea put forward by Austen Hughes (1988) that with respect to human kinship, it is important to recognize how people not only look back to past kin relationships but also look to the future, anticipating in strategic ways the crucial fertility of the current rising generation of young people. This insight does help provide a bridge to the way that social anthropologists have focused on purposeful marriage strategies along with received cultural schemes of kinship classification.

What has become known as 'the social brain theory' proposes that a key factor for the success of human ancestors over other groups in primate evolution was growing brain capacity (for a short general account, see Dunbar 2004). Specifically it is suggested that the extra development of the neo-cortex (and especially the frontal lobes) of the brain, where inventiveness is seemingly located, has made it possible for individuals to make the most of social cooperation in local groups of increasing size. Primate groups maintain sociality among themselves through grooming; but something else enabled early hominins to live in larger cooperating groups than could be held together by inter-individual grooming. Here must lie elements of the beginnings of kinds of communication that would become more sophisticated and reach further – gesture, chorusing, singing; the more organized use of space, and time; a division of labour and increasingly 'symbolic' kinds of collective performance; language. These kinds of communication would make possible various strategic ways of keeping selfish members of the growing group ('free-riders') in line, as well as making for understood conventions in the group's relations with others. In evolutionary terms, this more sophisticated range of strategies for coordinated action, in relation to the resources of the environment as well as in relation to competing species, would give such early human ancestral groups real advantage. They would survive to pass on their ways of doing things, by example, to their biological descendants. Those groups including individuals with exceptional brain capacity would do particularly well and their offspring would inherit a further enhanced potential for complicated strategic activity – no doubt requiring from us what Dunbar develops here as a 'multilevel' approach to evolutionary analysis.

Robin Dunbar also develops a discussion of what he has dubbed the 'story-telling' capacity located in the frontal lobes of the brain. Here is the uniquely human imagination which can guess at the intentions of others and empathize with their emotional states – not only one individual other, but a chain of interacting characters all imagining each other's state of mind. This provocative scenario of early human beings as story-tellers, and by extension dramatic actors and indeed stage managers, can only embolden the social anthropologists in their own efforts to rethink some of anthropology's oldest questions,

about, for instance, the performative, 'enacted' character of the earliest forms of human relationships between male and female, co-siblings, young and old, within cooperating groups. 'Kinship' is not mere story-telling – the term covers action as well as words, and in the human world much of the action is of a give-and-take character – as Hilary Callan reminds us in the Epilogue, a kind of game-playing. Exchange and communication are crucial to our social lives, not least to the way we try to reproduce ourselves.

In these chapters we reflect on the processes that led to our forebears being able to agree together on the various principles and modes of 'exchange' which define the making of human social relations, whether economic, material, kinship, or linguistic. How far can we propose models for what most of us would accept as a *qualitative* change, or series of steps, marking the transition from what we have to suppose is the animal condition of living in the here and now, to one in which the imagination is working possible action on a wider span of space and time – through story-telling and game-playing? One in which distant places, absent friends, strangers, the dead and the yet-to-be-born are part of a remembered and an expected order, one towards which present decisions about making useful relationships are directed? Such relationships will be 'makeable' through material gifts or barter or the mutual learning of techniques between specialists; through seasonal and no doubt festive regular contacts between groups in a region otherwise scattered for most of the year; with strangers as a result of movement in response to changing ecological conditions, including population pressures on resources.

The making of such relationships, by the older and wiser members of a community, is also likely to have included the option of making strategic arrangements over the giving or exchanging of youngsters in marriage, rather than losing them through the patterns of pragmatic dispersal we know from the primates. Here is the key point of emergence, perhaps, of what the social anthropologists speak of as 'kinship' in human society – there is an aspect of systematic give and take in mating arrangements and group affiliation; 'kinship' in this sense is on quite a different 'level', to borrow one of Dunbar's formulations, from genetic relatedness as such. It is inclusive of 'adoptees' or recruits within a group or category; and the whole 'system' pivots around the give and take of mating or indeed 'marriage' between such groups or categories. Where concepts, and terms, of kinship relationship – along with potential affinity, or intermarriage – are open categories, rather than labels attached to known individuals, they can in principle stretch out over distance and time, providing a framework for human mobility and newly extended forms of sociality. This in turn will have consequences for the biological reproduction of a population, and the distribution of genotypes. Understanding the patterns of 'affinity', and the way they are locally set up, is surely the key to the way that genetic reproduction of a whole community, or set of regionally linked communities, will henceforth unfold. Whether this has consequences for the evolutionary 'fitness' of a given population is difficult to say, of course. But taking this point into consideration may well assist us in understanding how *Homo sapiens* was able to move so rapidly over the face of the earth around 60,000 years ago, and seemingly prevail over the earlier species of *Homo* who

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