

MORGAN'S AUSTRALIAN DESCENDANTS: FISON AND HOWITT ABANDON KINSHIP AND SAVE THEIR SKINS

Humanities Research Centre Seminar

Monday 26 May, 2014, 4.00 – 5.30pm

HRC Conference Room. AD Hope #14, Australian National University

Speaker

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Lorimer Fison had made a great breakthrough in kinship studies around 1870 when he recognized the system in the part of Fiji where he was working as having an essential identity with that of South India (Dravidian) but systematically different from Iroquois – the latter a discovery usually attributed to Floyd Lounsbury (1964). Having formed a partnership to continue Morgan's methods in Australia, and collected a number of Australian kinship schedules, Fison and A.W.Howitt embarked on the book *Kamilaroi and Kurnai* (1881). One might have expected this book to include detailed analysis of the different kinship terminologies in Australia, especially as the two groups in the title contrasted in kinship patterning. But anyone with this expectation would have been disappointed: despite the number of kinship schedules collected very few kinship terms even appeared in the book, let alone being analysed and compared. Instead the authors relied entirely on the four-section systems of the Kamilaroi and similar groups as a proxy for kinship – a serious mistake.

This paper explains the reasons for this puzzling decision, and brings to light what is available of the kinship material available to Fison and Howitt not published in the book, especially schedules of other groups from archival sources. This material is also triangulated by comparison and linguistic analysis of other reports of the time and later, and the database AustKin, which throw further light on the nature of Dravidian/Kariera systems of South-Eastern Australia. Had Fison continued with his initial successful strategy of 1871 in the Australian context the complexity and systematicity of these variations might have been revealed.

Patrick McConvell is a linguistic anthropologist working as a DORA Fellow at ANU (CASS) on two ARC projects on Australian kinship and prehistory.

Helen Gardner is a historian at Deakin University, with publications on Pacific missionaries and the history of anthropology, especially kinship studies, Gardner and McConvell are writing a book for Palgrave MacMillan on Fison and Howitt and *Kamilaroi and Kurnai*.

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