

**COMMENT ON DENHAM'S
*BEYOND FICTIONS OF CLOSURE IN AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL KINSHIP***

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VALERIE MUNT

My interest in Denham's work springs from research over recent years, into the papers of the Cambridge educated anthropologist Frederick G. G. Rose (1915-1991). It is rewarding to note that Denham's article acknowledges a significant debt to Rose's early fieldwork which was carried out on Groote Eylandt in Australia's Northern Territory from 1939-1941. Trained in the Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Anthropology in the early 1930s at Cambridge and as a meteorologist under Fritz Loewe (of Alfred Wegner's Greenland Expedition fame), from this fieldwork on Groote Eylandt (1939-41), Rose came to the conclusion that 'canonical' models of Australian Aboriginal kinship and marriage, which paid scant attention to human biology, the economy and environment, could not be representative of reality. (See Conference Paper draft – delivered at 'Man The Hunter Symposium' Chicago, 1966, Rose Papers box 14).

In his frustration with the limitations of contemporary kinship theory, Rose turned to Marxist theory in order to gain a better understanding of how Aboriginal societies maintained their viability. From his fieldwork observations he concluded that marriage was essentially an economic arrangement which allowed the most useful distribution of available resources. He discovered that on Groote Eylandt marriage was much more fluid than the "structural functionalist" mapping of kinship had indicated:

'A man or woman in the course of a full span lifetime has . . . at least four spouses at different periods of his (her) lifetime . . . a woman (or girl) when she is young usually can marry . . . [a spouse] who, on the average is considerably older than she, but when she is old she usually marries . . . [a spouse who] on the average is younger than she' (Rose to Dr S. Moore c/- The Editor, *American Anthropologist* (31st May, 1963) (Uncatalogued mss., Box 21, Mitchell Library, SLNSW).

Kinship terminology – at least 'as far as the Australian aborigines are concerned' was according to Rose, an expression of the economic 'rights and obligations between individuals as members of groups, and do not express blood relationship (real or fictive) which we social anthropologists in our superior wisdom and in our categories of thought have arbitrarily imposed on them' (Rose 1968, 201). His research revealed that the practice of gerontocratic polygynous marriage was basically the most efficient economic arrangement for sustaining the Aboriginal population on Groote-Eylandt

Unfortunately Professor A. P. Elkin's¹ refusal to allow Rose's work to be published in the journal *Oceania* and his advice that Rose's work should not be printed, citing 'the weakness in [Rose's] arguments and methods [and his] bad articles' (Elkin to Carrodus (14th March 1945) Australian Archives CRS A659, item 44/1/4313) ensured that it would not see the light of day in Australia. Already a member of the Communist Party of Australia (Munt 2011, 114) Rose left Australia in

1956 to pursue his academic work in the former GDR at The Humboldt University where he published his Groote Eylandt research (Rose 1960) and soon became Professor of Anthropology (Monteath, 2010)

Although Rose's work did not receive the academic attention it deserved from British and Australian academic social anthropologists, his classic text: *The Classification of Kin, Age Structure and Marriage amongst the Groote Eylandt Aborigines: A Study in Method and a Theory of Kinship* (1960) was reviewed positively by Myer Fortes (1962, 81-82); and Professor Richard B. Lee from the University of California, who wrote to Rose on Feb. 26th 1962:

“Let me say it is the most significant contribution to Australian Studies in many years . . . it will precipitate a minor revolution in our thinking about marriage patterns in primitive societies in general . . .” (Box 26 Rose Papers).

It was hailed by Professor de Josselin de Jong of Leiden University as:

‘not only a new contribution to kinship studies, but a . . . new approach to them’ (Josselin de Jong 1962, 66-67); encouraged by Claude Lévi-Strauss in a personal letter to Rose: ‘As far as I know your inquiry into the age structure, associated with a set of marriage rules and kinship systems is something quite new . . .’ (March 31st 1958, box 34).

Rose's conclusions were also supported by George Murdock – re: ‘your paper “Age Structure and Marriage in an Australian Aboriginal Society”:

‘You make out an exceedingly good case for a matrilineal preference in cross-cousin marriage in societies with gerontocracy and a sharp age disparity in marriage. And your G.E. data provide strong supportive evidence. Though the reasons seem quite obvious now that you have pointed them out, I know of no-one to whom the idea seems to have occurred previously . . .’ (Murdock to Rose, April 2nd 1958, Box 34).

And by Prof Ashley Montagu of Princeton University:

. . . For the rest, I believe that I can go most of the way with you, as I did when I read your book, [1960] which I regard as one of the half dozen most important works published in the history of Australian ethnography. It is a masterly work, and I am glad to have this occasion to say so. . . I shall be re-reading your book and your letter with great pleasure and profit, and that I am grateful to you for the comments and issues you raise. (Ashley Montagu (USA) to Rose 2/1/64, box 21)

Despite such international recognition, Rose's classic study of Groote Eylandt kinship was never reviewed in Australia (Maddock, 1991, 66). Banned from pursuing his fieldwork in Australia in 1962 (Paul Hasluck to Rose 1/8/62, box 21, Rose Papers), Rose worked on a cattle station (*Angas Downs*) in Central Australia where he observed the changes wrought by the government policy of assimilation. Elkin finally came to acknowledge the importance of Rose's fieldwork with faint praise but a valuable research opportunity had been missed:

‘You are quite right about kinship organization; it is the form which varies in all sorts of ways throughout Australia . . . One can suggest certain sociological reasons why . . .’ (Elkin to Rose 16/7/63, Box 21).

Like Malinowski, Rose believed in the need for a more candid account of anthropologists' fieldwork data to:

'ply the full searchlight of methodic sincerity, as [anthropologists] move among their facts but produce them before us out of complete obscurity' (Malinowski [1922] 1966, 3).

As a Marxistⁱⁱ Rose regarded societies from an historical materialist perspective, however as a scientist he conducted his fieldwork with a rare dedication to the scientific method which involved repeated checking and testing of his conclusions. Indeed, Professor de Josselin de Jong wrote to Paul Hasluck, in regard to the government's refusal to allow Rose to enter Groote Eylandt in 1962 (Hasluck to Rose 1/8/62, box 21):

'I may add that I do not share Dr Rose's political convictions – to the contrary - but in his case too I have not the slightest doubt that in wishing to carry out his field studies he is actuated entirely by scholarly motives.' (P.E. de Josselin de Jong, Leiden University to Paul Hasluck, Minister for Territories, 18/6/62, box 31)

Though not a Marxist himself, Denham has employed Rose's large body of quantitative dataⁱⁱⁱ, and together with his own fieldwork amongst the Alyawarra speaking people in Central Australia in 1971-72, he demonstrates societal exogamy in Aboriginal Australia in spatial patterns which invite further analysis. In his research approach, Denham would surely endorse Rose's unsettling question:

'Are we not coming to conclusions that are logical enough on the basis of our assumptions but which, in fact, do not agree with reality and certainly do not measure up with what Aborigines know?' (Rose to Günter Gühr (17/2/58), Box 2).

Denham rightly suggests that in 'looking to Aboriginal Australia to better understand human social or cultural evolution in the ethnocentric European sense that equates "abidingness" with "failure to thrive" probably will continue to fail as it has since 1788.' To anyone who wishes to reach beyond such limited horizons, I commend Denham's most illuminating paper.

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ⁱⁱ In 1963 Rose collaborated on the first draft of the *Communist Policy on the Aborigines of Australia*, which laid the foundations for what would later become 'Full Human Rights for Aborigines and Torres Straits Islanders: A programme adopted by the 21st Congress of the CPA' (1967) (Rose Papers, box 21).

ⁱⁱⁱ Denham, W. (2012), "Kinship, Marriage and Age in Aboriginal Australia", *Mathematical Anthropology and Cultural Theory: An International Journal*, vol. 4, no 1 May 2012. http://mathematicalanthropology.org/Pdf/MACT_Denham_0512.pdf