Lea Pfäffli:
“Indigenous Diagrams”

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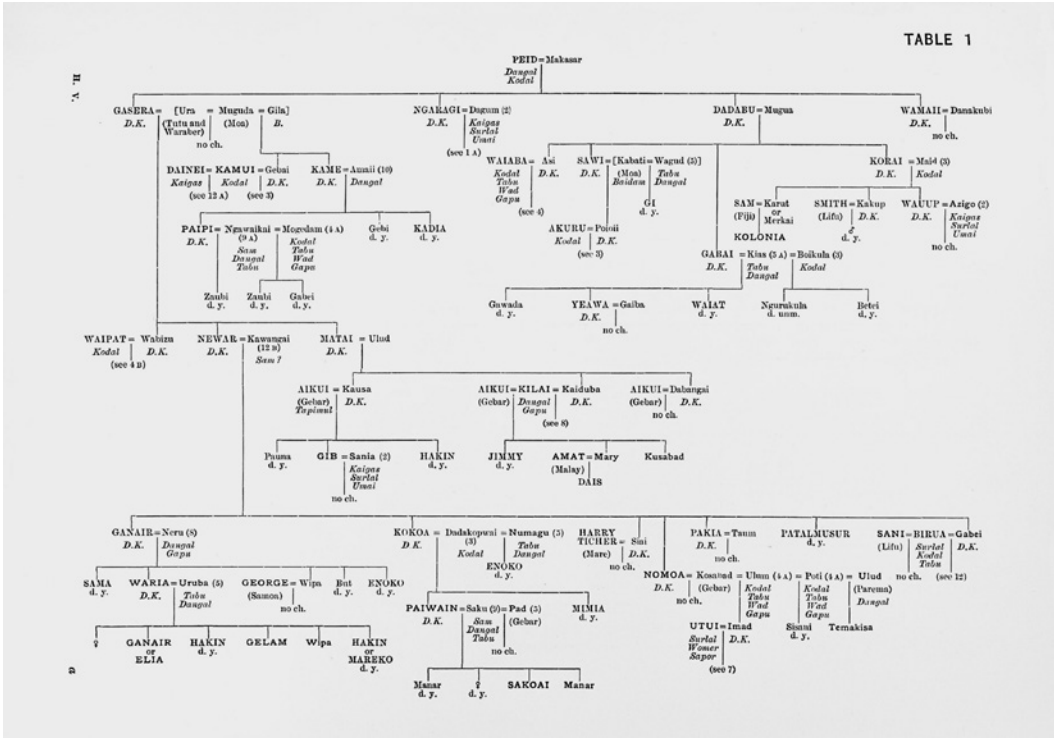
SHADOW OF THE TREE

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INDIGENOUS DIAGRAMS Blackboxing Mabuiag

Mabuiag, a remote island in the Torres Straits, 1898. Waria recorded the words of an elder of his tribe, chief authority in genealogical lore. They sat at the camp of W.H.R. Rivers, member of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits. What were the names of the children of your father? The names of their children, their wives, and husbands? And of the father and mother of your father? Surrounded by a large crowd listening and correcting, if necessary, Waria collected name after name of his ancestors and reported them to the ethnologist.[1]

Six years later, Rivers published the collected genealogies in a volume of *The Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits*. The ethnologist arranged them as schematic pedigrees, developing a specific style of notation: capital letters for men, Clarendon type for people living, the names of men always to the left of those of their wives, "d.y." for "died young," "n.ch." for "no children," the name of the totem in italics and the name of the island in parentheses. (Later this inscription style became influential in the formation of the Cambridge Anthropological School.)[2] In the pedigree in Table 1 of the volume, Rivers put the name of Waria in Clarendon type and to the left of his wife Uruba. In italics, he annotated that Waria was a member of the Dangal Kodal ("D. K."), while his wife originally belonged to the totem of the Tabu Dangal.[3]



William H.R. Rivers: *Genealogical Tables*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1904), Table I, n.p.

From *go-between* to *inscription*: Waria in Rivers's *Genealogical Tables*.

With the genealogies from Mabuiag translated into abstract diagrams, Rivers studied, as he called it, "social institutions" – not only from his time but also from the early history of mankind. The pedigrees tended to reflect, in his view, ancient, and often extinct, social facts. They could be used as a kind of "linguistic archaeology" in order to understand historical changes in social organization:[4] based on the diagrams, Rivers reasoned about marriage rules and interpreted them as relics of an evolution from the system of maternal descent to that of paternal descent. It could be of "little doubt that the Mabuiag custom is also the survival of a condition of maternal descent from which the islanders have emerged at a comparatively recent date," the ethnologist argued.[5]

While Rivers speculated about primeval times in Mabuiag, black boxing Waria's report, he was surrounded by trans-imperial entanglements at the Torres Straits – and its effects on nature: British and French Colonials lodging at thriving two- or three-storied hotels. Islanders patrolling as policemen, selling pearl shell, bêche-de-mer, and sometimes a little garden produce. German, Scandinavian, and Greek day laborers waiting for a job as divers. Japanese competing with the British in the pearl industry. Boiled and smoke-dried sea slugs ready for the export to China. Mountains of eviscerated tins, kerosine cases, and empty bottles cast into the sea. Overfished waters, and a harvest that became scantier – after years of rapid fortune.[6]

INDIGENOUS DIAGRAMS Sticks and Stones

"I should perhaps add that although we communicated with one another in jargon, or pidgin-English, we used native words whenever there was a possibility of a misunderstanding arising, and by the context we could usually make certain as to the significance of new or obscure native terms. [...] It is a quaint, though not an ideal mode of communication of ideas, but with practice and the employment of suitable illustrations and similes, one can get along fairly well. I found, too, one could often elucidate a statement by acting it, or by using sticks and stones as dummies; it is remarkable what can be done in that way, and the natives quite enter into the spirit of the thing."

Alfred C. Haddon: *Headhunters: Black, White*, London: Methuen & Co. (1901), p. 33.

"On two separate occasions I was given a diagrammatic representation of the working of the system. (I). My informant placed three large white stones to form the apices of an equilateral triangle. Each stone he said represented [...] (II). A second diagrammatic illustration of the working of the system was given to me as follows: My informant drew three very long lines (D, E, F), each representing a man [...]."

Arthur Bernard Deacon: "The Regulation of Marriage in Ambrym", in: *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 57 (1927), pp. 325–342, pp. 329–330.

"It is perfectly clear that the natives (the intelligent ones) do conceive of the system as a connected mechanism which they can represent by diagrams [...] The way they could reason about relationships from their diagrams was absolutely on a par with a good scientific exposition in a lecture-room."

Arthur Bernard Deacon: "The Regulation of Marriage in Ambrym", in: *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 57 (1927), pp. 325–342, p. 329.

In his travel report, Alfred Court Haddon, ethnologist and leader of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits, described the communication between ethnologists and indigenous experts: Pidgin-English laid the foundation of the exchange. Additionally, Haddon mentioned the use of "illustrations and similes" and of "sticks and stones as dummies." What about diagrammatic representations? Did Rivers show an illustration of a family tree to collect the pedigrees? Did Waria use sticks and stones to draw family relations on the ground reporting the genealogies? Haddon did not specify their communication techniques any further.

Some decades later, the ethnologist Arthur Bernard Deacon stressed the role of diagrams in the exchange with local experts at the Pacific island of Ambrym. Not only did indigenous peoples understand complicated diagrammatic representations, they also used them in order to transfer their knowledge to the ethnologists. According to Deacon, the locals in Ambrym drew diagrammatic illustrations of the working of kinship systems – using lines, letters, and

stones. It shows that diagrams played a crucial role for local brokers of knowledge. That said, with Deacon's expressions of astonishment about the informants ("the intelligent ones") understanding advanced diagrammatic representations "on a par with a good scientific exposition in a lecture-room," the ethnologist deployed colonial discourses of othering.

Notes

1 William H.R. Rivers: "Genealogies", in: Alfred C. Haddon (ed.): *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straights: Sociology, Magic and the Religion of the Western Islanders*, vol. 5, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1904), pp. 122–129, p. 123.
2 William H.R. Rivers: "Genealogies", in: Alfred C. Haddon (ed.): *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straights: Sociology, Magic and the Religion of the Western Islanders*, vol. 5, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1904), pp. 122–129, p. 123.
3 William H.R. Rivers: "Genealogical Tables", in: Alfred C. Haddon (ed.): *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straights: Sociology, Magic and the Religion of the Western Islanders*, vol. 5, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1904), pp. 9–122, Table I.
4 Alan Barnard: *History and Theory in Anthropology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2000), p. 74.
5 William H. R. Rivers: "Kinship", in: Alfred C. Haddon (Ed.): *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straights: Sociology, Magic and the Religion of the Western Islanders*, vol. 5, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1904), pp. 129–153, p. 151.
6 Alfred C. Haddon: *Headhunters: Black, White*, London: Methuen & Co. (1901), pp. 2–4.

Further Readings

Dipesh Chakrabarty: "The Climate of History: Four Theses", in: *Critical Inquiry* 35/2 (2009), pp. 197-222.

Daniel Hedinger, Nadin Hée: "Transimperial History: Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition", in: *Journal of Modern European History* 16/4 (2018), pp. 429–452.

Bruno Latour: *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (1987).

Simon Schaffer, Lissa Roberts, Kapil Raj (eds.): *The Brokered World: Go-Betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770–1820,* Sagamore Beach, MA: Watson Publishing International (2009).