Lost in translation?

Remote Indigenous households and definitions of the family

Australia Bureau of Statistics definitions of the "family" take the nuclear family as their starting point. Using an anthropological approach to kinship, this paper argues that the nuclear family structure is not a "natural" outcome of Aboriginal Australian kinships systems, and explores the implications of this for the quality of Indigenous household data in the national Census.

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In August 2001, I observed the conduct of the national census at a remote outstation community in the Northern Territory. Because the community is small and its residents would be readily identifiable (at least locally) if it were named, the area in which this case study took place is deliberately left vague and the community is referred to as 'Community A'.

The purposes of this research were twofold: to evaluate the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) Indigenous Enumeration Strategy, as it was applied in this particular context; and to assess the quality of the data that were collected. Two key features that distinguish the Indigenous Enumeration Strategy from the general census procedures are the use of collector–interviewers, most of whom are themselves local Indigenous people, and the administration of census forms with a modified format and content. The use of collector–interviewers allows for direct observation of interviewee responses in a way that is not possible for the mainstream census.

In 2001, there were three census forms involved in the data collection process. Two of them provide the data for this paper—the Special Indigenous Household Form (henceforth 'household form') and the Special Indigenous Personal Form (henceforth 'personal form') (see Figures 1 and 2).

This paper focuses on the responses to the questions designed to elicit information about family and household structure. These data are supplemented by genealogical information that I collected in the course of independent anthropological fieldwork. Details have been altered slightly so that no actual household is represented.

Figure 1	The second page of the Special Indigenous Household Form (partial reproduction)						
List all of the people who live here and people who are staying here							
Person Number	**Name:** • List people in family groups • Include all children and babies • Include all people who live here most of the time, but are away	**Sex** **Write 'M' or 'F'**	**Age**	**How is this person related to Person 1 (Head of house)**	**If visitor write 'V'**	**Personal Form needed? Yes/No**
1				Person 1		
2						
...						
35						

The problem of cultural translation

In collecting data from traditionally oriented Indigenous people, the ABS faces a complex problem of translation. Even in the case of what seem at first glance to be straightforward demographic characteristics, such as a person's age, the Australian

Figure 2   The Special Indigenous Personal Form, questions 4–6

**4   How are you related to
'Person 1' (head of house)?**
Examples of relationships: husband, wife, de facto
partner, son, daughter, granddaughter, uncle,
son-in-law, friend unrelated

[ ]   'Person 1'

Relationship to 'Person 1'

[   ]

**5   Are you more closely related to anyone
else in this house?**

[ ]   No

[ ]   Yes

Name

[   ]

Relationship e.g. grandson, niece, daughter

[   ]

6   Are you married?
Prompt categories below

[ ]   Never married

[ ]   Widowed

[ ]   Divorced

[ ]   Separated but not divorced

[ ]   Married

**Figure 3   Person 1 (Head of Household) for each household
at Community A**

Lineage X   Lineage Y

○ Female △ Male = Marriage ■ 'Person 1' □ Not resident/deceased

settler culture and traditionally oriented Indigenous cultures view things differently. Whereas the vast majority of non-Indigenous Australians know the precise date and year of their birth, traditionally oriented Indigenous people tend to focus on life stages and relative degrees of maturity rather than on chronological age.

Translation becomes even more complex when we enter the sociocultural realm. In attempting to gather data on Indigenous 'households' and their structures that are comparable with data on settler Australian households, it cannot be assumed, *a priori*, that they are the same kind of thing. In what follows, I use the term 'Anglo–Celtic' to describe the kinship terminology of English-speaking Australians to emphasise that kinship terminology is not purely a matter of language. As will be demonstrated below, a kinship system is a cultural construct, not simply a list of terms.

The lack of congruence between the kinship terminology of the local system and that of the Anglo–Celtic system, and the differences in the dynamics underlying the structure and composition of households in mainstream and local Indigenous societies, were thrown into sharp relief as the collector–interviewers and the interviewees attempted to fill in the census forms. Direct observation of the census data collection thus afforded a unique opportunity to observe problems of translation that occur when one kinship system, with its associated family and household structures, is interpreted in terms of another and very different system.

A brief sketch of Community A

In this paper, I use 'traditionally oriented' as a shorthand term to refer to Indigenous people who live in communities like Community A, on or near their traditional country, with limited access to the economic mainstream. In these communities, the major organising principle of social life is kinship, and households are often large and compositionally complex.
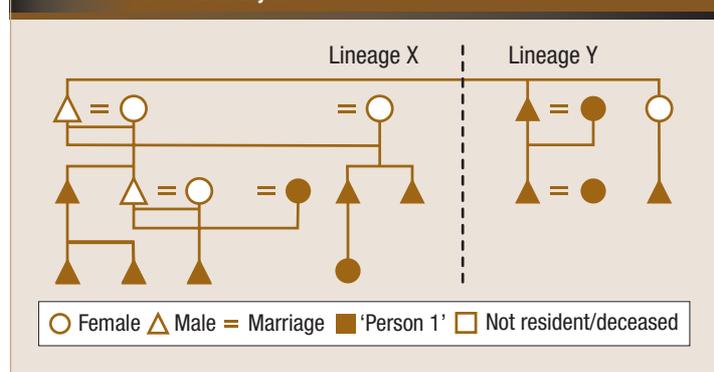
Community A is structured around the members of two lineages (lineage X and lineage Y) of the patrilineal clan on whose land the community lies. X and Y, the ancestors from whom the living members of the two lineages are descended, are classificatory brothers. Figure 3 shows the kin relationships, in simplified form, of the people designated as 'Person 1' for each occupied dwelling. The census does not capture (because it does not seek to) these inter-household relationships, but it is arguable that the composition of individual households can only

be fully understood in the context of this larger picture (see also Martin, 2002, pp. 21–22, for a similar discussion with respect to household clusters at Aurukun, Cape York Peninsula).

For example, two dwellings contain a female Person 1 who describes herself as married, but there is no evidence of a cohabiting spouse in either case. Local Indigenous marriages are often polygamous, and it is not at all unusual for a man to have more than one wife. It has become common nowadays for a man to live with only one of his wives, and for the other wives to occupy one or more separate dwellings. If the relationship between the two parties remains amicable, this does not constitute either separation or divorce (although, in one case, a man described his non-cohabiting wife as a 'widow'). In both cases here, the husband lived in a nearby dwelling with another of his wives (see Figure 3). This configuration of linked households is a common local feature.

A rose by any other name? Terms for core kin

All socialised human beings—including those raised in societies where the Anglo–Celtic system prevails—view their kinship system and its kinship terms as 'natural', because they are inculcated at such an early age. However, the kinship terminology of mainstream Anglo–Celtic Australia, like the local Indigenous kinship terminology, forms an elaborate abstract system in which terms only have meaning in relation to the overall structure of the system. The principles according to which the Anglo–Celtic system is constructed differ markedly from the principles underlying the local system. If two kinship systems differ markedly in their structure, it is not possible simply to translate the terms from one system to the other, and any attempt to do so is likely to result in a failure of translation and incoherent data.

To begin to unravel the truth of this assertion, let us start with terms for siblings and cousins in the two systems (Figure 4). I use the term 'ego' to designate the person who is the reference point for a particular constellation of kin. I place Anglo–Celtic kinship terms in *italics* and local Indigenous kinship terms in **bold**.

In the Anglo–Celtic system, the term *cousin* is used to refer to the children of ego's father's sisters and brothers, and of ego's mother's sisters and brothers; under the term *cousin*, the system merges all the children of ego's parents' siblings. The Anglo–Celtic term *cousin* is neutral with respect to sex. Anglo–Celts call the children of their own

father and mother either *brother* or *sister*, depending on their sex.

The Indigenous system operating at Community A is completely different. Local people call the children of their mother's brother **galay** and the children of their father's sister **dhuway**. Like *cousin*, these terms are neutral with respect to sex. That is, the system distinguishes two kinds of cross-cousins—matrilateral and patrilateral. Local people use the term **waawa** for the male children of their mother and her sisters and of their father and his brothers, and they use the term **yapa** for the female equivalents; in the local system, siblings and parallel cousins are thus merged. Like the Anglo–Celtic terms for siblings, these too are differentiated by sex.

People raised in the Anglo–Celtic system think of *son* and *daughter* as 'natural' categories. A child is

Figure 4   Siblings and cousins in the Anglo-Celtic and local Indigenous systems
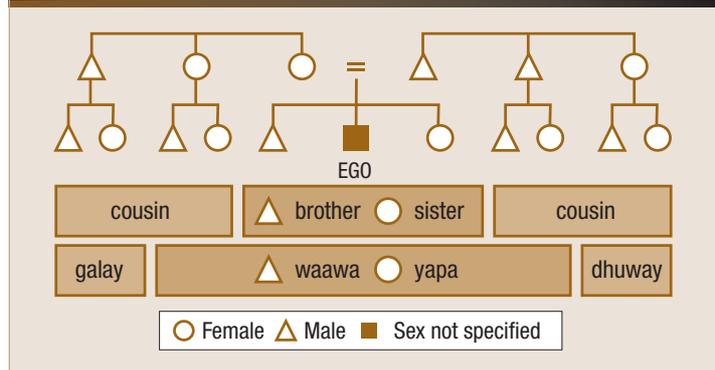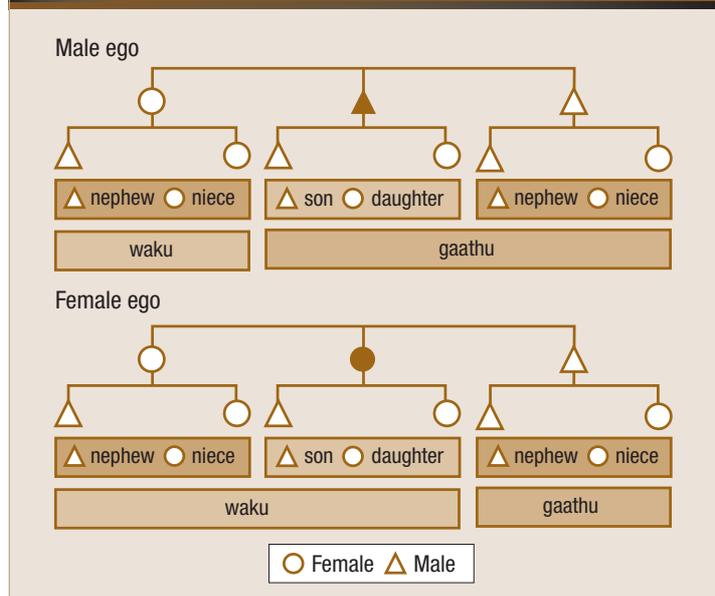

Figure 5   Children in the Anglo-Celtic and Indigenous systems

defined as the biological (or adopted) offspring of an individual, and both parents use the same terms for their offspring. The children of ego's brothers and sisters are merged under the term *nephew* for males and *niece* for females (Figure 5).

The local Indigenous system operates according to a different set of principles, which appear just as 'natural' to local people. A woman calls her own children and those of her sisters **waku** (child of my matriline), and those of her brothers **gaathu** (child of my patriline). A man calls his own children and those of his brothers **gaathu**, and those of his sisters **waku**. Children are here defined not with reference to their parents as individuals, but according to their generational position in a lineage. These terms for children (as with Anglo–Celtic *cousin*), are not differentiated according to sex.

All kinship systems have terms that are 'classificatory' in the sense that they classify people together according to a set of underlying structural principles. The term *cousin* is probably the most classificatory of the Anglo–Celtic kinship terms (although *uncle*, *aunt*, *grandparent*, and the category *in-law* are also quite complex). But the local Indigenous system applies more (and more abstract and general) principles of classification than does the Anglo–Celtic system. For example, all males in the generation above ego in ego's patriline (including ego's own father) are **baapa**, and all females in the generation above ego in ego's mother's patriline (including ego's own mother) are **ngaandi**.

But these terms have even wider application: they apply also to kin in generations other than the parental generation. Figure 6 compares the local Indigenous term **ngaandi** with Anglo–Celtic *mother*.

The term **ngaandi** applies not only to women in ego's mother's generation, but also to female members of ego's mother's patriline who are in the generation below ego, and in the generation below ego's grandchildren. No **ngaandi** is any more or less of a **ngaandi** than any other, just as no *cousin* is any more or less of a *cousin* in the Anglo–Celtic system. This is not to say that people do not distinguish between their actual mother and other people they address by the term **ngaandi**, in terms of sentiment and behaviour.

It should now be clear that none of the Anglo–Celtic terms for the kin comprising the 'nuclear family' are directly translatable into local Indigenous kinship terms. And vice versa; none of the core terms, let

Figure 6   The Anglo-Celtic term 'mother' and the local Indigenous term 'ngaandi' compared
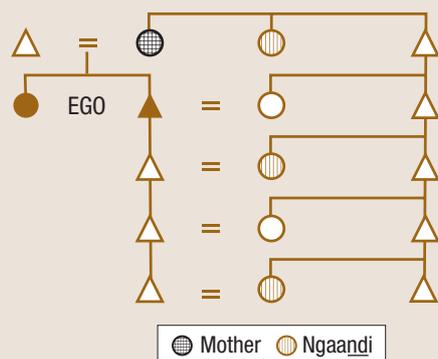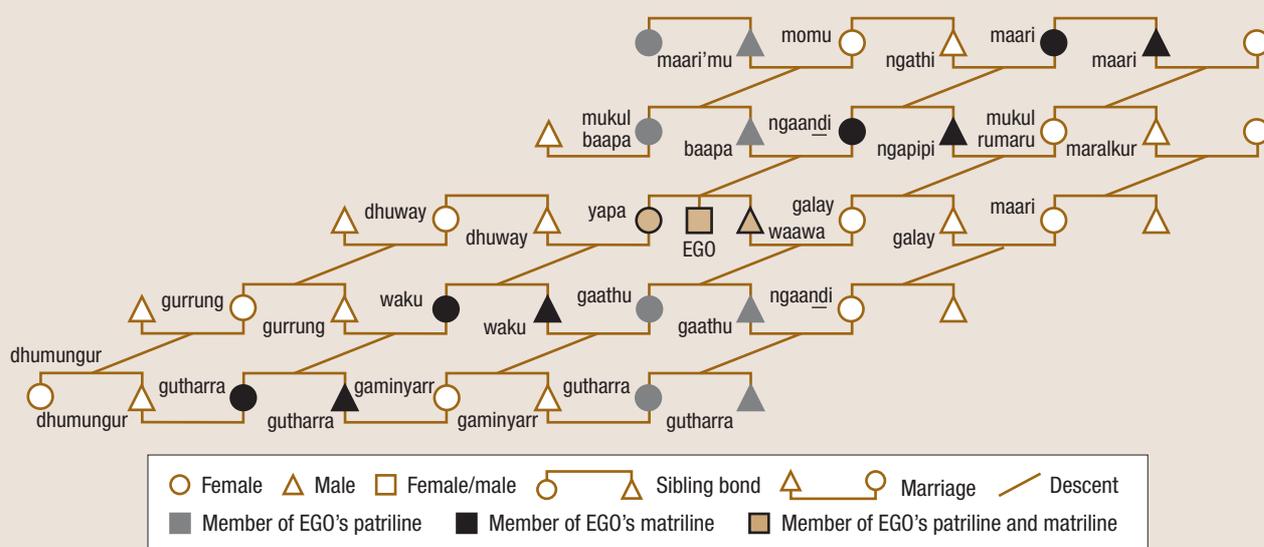

Figure 7   Partial representation of the structure of the local Indigenous kinship system

alone the non-core terms, of the local Indigenous system are directly translatable into Anglo–Celtic kinship terms.

The meaning of marriage

The local Indigenous and Anglo–Celtic systems differ in another very important way. In the Anglo–Celtic system (as it operates today), people are rarely kin before they get married. A marriage brings together, in a set of *in-law* relationships, two previously unrelated kindreds. Their only point of intersection is the married couple—the *husband* and *wife*—and the connection is then carried down into the couple's descendants. Kinship is constituted through marriage.

In the local Indigenous system, the preferred marriage is between people who are already in a kinship relationship: a man marries his (actual or classificatory) matrilateral cross-cousin—his **galay**—and a woman marries her (actual or classificatory) patrilateral cross-cousin—her **dhuway**. There are no separate terms for marriage partners and 'in-laws'. Marriage in the Indigenous system does not create bonds of kinship: it reinforces and reaffirms already existing kin relationships. Marriage is constituted through kinship, and kin terms can therefore potentially have more than one meaning—in Anglo–Celtic terms. Thus a man's **galay** may be his wife, but she is first a kind of *cousin* in the Anglo–Celtic system, and a man's male **waku** (his actual or classificatory sister's son) is his *nephew* in Anglo–Celtic terms, but may also in addition be his daughter's husband, or *son-in-law*. Figure 7, a partial representation of the structure of the local Indigenous kinship system, illustrates this point. The diagram includes all the terms that are discussed in the paper.

Local people (and ABS staff) are unaware of this difference between the two sets of kin terms. In filling in the census forms, the local enumerators sometimes translated an Indigenous kin term by one of its possible equivalents in the Anglo–Celtic system, and sometimes by the other. For example, the local Indigenous term **gurrung** could be 'translated' as a type of *cousin* (strictly speaking in the Anglo–Celtic system, this person is ego's *first cousin once removed*, and in local Aboriginal English is sometimes called 'poison cousin'), but one salient fact about this person from the perspective of the local system is that, for a woman, any male **gurrung**

belongs to the category (potential) *son-in-law*. The reciprocal term is **mukul rumaru**. Thus it is perfectly possible for a woman with no daughters and an unmarried man to refer to each other as **gurrung** and **mukul rumaru**, and for these terms to be 'translated' as *son-in-law* and *mother-in-law* respectively, as happened on one household form and the related personal form.

Everyone is kin

The Indigenous kinship terminology encompasses categories of people that the Anglo–Celtic system does not. It distinguishes and covers seven patri-lines that are related matrilineally through the marriage system. In the local Indigenous universe, everyone is classifiable as kin. The Anglo–Celtic kinship terminology focuses on the individual and their direct ancestors and descendants, and merges terms for patrilineal and matrilineal kin at every level. The system fades off very quickly into *cousins* and then non-kin as soon as it leaves the realm of ego's nuclear families of origin and procreation.

In the Anglo–Celtic system, there is simply no term for **dhumungur** (see Figure 7), who is the person (or the sister of the person) who potentially marries

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your **gutharra** (daughters' daughter from a female point of view, and sister's daughter's daughter from a male point of view). In the Indigenous system, this person is kin. At Community A, someone with this relationship to Person 1 was a resident in more than one of the dwellings. The question of classifying this person as 'unrelated' never arose. Instead, much thought went into what the 'correct' Anglo–Celtic term would be.

Kinship and the household

The preceding section has gone some way to establishing that Anglo–Celtic kinship terminology is not the ideal idiom for attempting to elucidate the structure of local Indigenous households. But what of the implicit model of the household that lies behind the census questions? The definition of the household in the *2001 Census dictionary* (ABS, 2001) allows for the possibility of more than one 'household' in a dwelling, but not

for households whose membership is spread across more than one dwelling. Two major types of 'household' are identified: those whose members are 'related' (family-based households), and those whose members are 'unrelated' (group households).

In the ABS definition of the family, "the basis of a family is formed by identifying the presence of either a couple relationship, lone-parent–child relationship, or other blood relationship … *other related individuals* (brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles) may be present in the household" (ABS, 2001, pp. 202–203; emphasis added). Although the ABS does not use the term 'nuclear family', it is clear from the definition that this is what is meant by a 'family', since other 'related individuals' may be associated with it, but are not part of it.

The model does not fit the Indigenous facts on the ground. Indigenous households "who make common provision for food or other essentials for living" (ABS, 2001, p. 209) are often spread across more than one dwelling (for example, in the case of a man and his co-wives, as mentioned before). Moreover, as Daly and Smith (1999) note: "The nuclear family is not the most common residential form … Indigenous households in the 1990s were characterised by considerable compositional complexity, porous social boundaries and large size" (p. 2). What was and is true of the households of Yuendumu and Kuranda discussed by Daly and Smith was also true for the households at Community A in 2001.

In their training, the enumerators had been taken through the basic terms of the Anglo–Celtic system and they were often successful in assigning the 'correct' term—in Anglo–Celtic terms—with core kin of Person 1. In at least one case, a father's brother, who in local terms is another 'father' (**baapa**) was put down as 'uncle', and the use of the terms 'nephew' and 'niece' corresponded to Anglo–Celtic usage. The enumerators' own superficial knowledge of the Anglo–Celtic system and the training provided thus had some effect. But when confronted with the complex realities of Indigenous households, it did not penetrate very far into the system, as the following two case studies demonstrate.

Case study 1: Dwelling J

Table 1 shows the 'usual residents' of one dwelling (Dwelling J), as they were listed on the household form. The local Indigenous kinship term by which Person 1 actually addresses each person is given in the last column. Superficially, if we take at face value the kin terms used, this looks like a four-generation family, consisting of Person 1 and his wife, their daughter and her husband (who is also Person 1's sister's son, and hence *nephew*—but note that, without knowing something about the local kinship system, we would not know that this person is the husband of Person 1's daughter), two of the daughter's children, and Person 1's wife's mother. A perfectly 'normal' pair of related nuclear families, plus one mother-in-law, one might think, although

Table 1		Details of Dwelling J as recorded on the household form, 2001 Census	
Person no.	**Age**	**Relationship to person 1**	**Indigenous term**
1	56		
2	34	wife	galay
3	70	mother-in-law	mukul rumaru
4	34	daughter	gaathu
5	38	nephew	waku
6	5	grandson	gaminyarr
7	10	granddaughter	gaminyarr

Figure 8   Dwelling J–actual relationship of usual residents

Legend:
○ Female   ■ Resident
△ Male   ▨ Deceased
= Marriage   □ Non-resident
1, 2 'Person 1', 'Person 2'
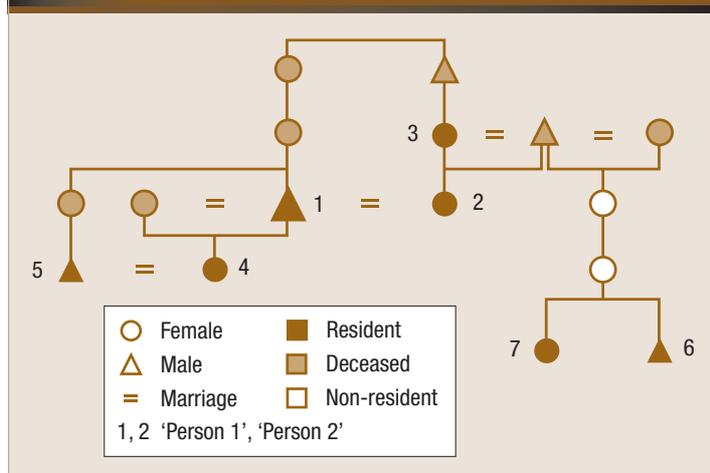
Figure 9   Dwelling K–actual relationships of usual residents and visitors

Legend:
○ Female   ■ Resident
△ Male   ▨ Deceased
= Marriage   □ Non-resident
1, 2 'Person 1', 'Person 2'   v Visitor
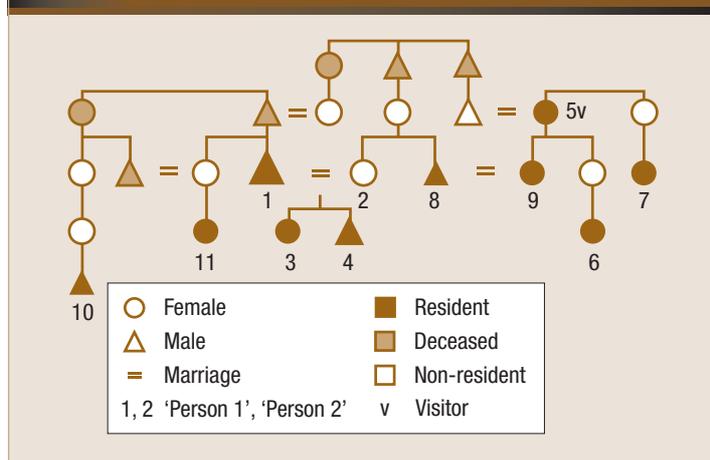
the fact that Person 1's wife and his daughter appear to be the same age gives grounds for suspicion that all is not as it seems on the surface.

And indeed it is not, as the genealogy for this household shows (Figure 8). Person 2 is indeed Person 1's current wife, and Person 3 is indeed her mother. But Person 4 is the daughter of Person 1 and his deceased first wife, and the two 'grandchildren', far from being Person 4's children, are people who would not even be classified as kin in the Anglo–Celtic system. They are the great grand-children of Person 1's mother-in-law's deceased husband's other wife. In the local Indigenous system, these children are considered kin to Person 1. Their mother is his **gaathu** ('daughter'). He looked after her when she was a child, and now her children live in his household.

Case study 2: Dwelling K

An even more complex scenario is demonstrated by the case of Dwelling K. A partial genealogy for this dwelling is given in Figure 9.

In one case, the Anglo–Celtic kin term entered in response to Question 4 differed from the one entered on the household form: Person 5v (a woman 'visitor') was put down as 'uncle' on the personal form and as 'daughter' on the household form. In the Indigenous system, Person 5v is Person 1's **ngaandi**. The enumerators realised, however, that this person would not be classified as *mother* in the Anglo–Celtic system.

On the household form, in attempting to solve the problem, the enumerators seem to have inverted the relationship: 'daughter' is probably a translation of **waku**, which is what Person 5v calls Person 1. The flipping between the perspective of Person 1 and the interviewee may be due to the wording of Question 4. 'How are you related to Person 1?' can be interpreted two ways—either as 'What do you call Person 1?' or as 'What does Person 1 call you?' On the personal form, another solution was adopted: 'uncle' is the English term that locals most often use to translate **ngapipi** (mother's brother). Here, the generational relationship is correct, but the gender is reversed.

Person 6 was put down as 'great-granddaughter'. Person 6 is another **ngaandi**. Again, the enumerators realised that *mother* was not the appropriate Anglo–Celtic term. They aimed for an Anglo–Celtic

term that picks out a **ngaandi** of a lower generation—but overshot by two generations. In the great-grandchild's generation, female children are merged under the terms **ngaandi** or **mukul baapa** (father's sister), depending on the patrilineage to which they belong.

Person 8 was put down as 'brother-in-law', and his wife, Person 9, as 'granddaughter'. Person 8 is Person 1's wife's brother, and so, like her, is Person 1's

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galay. This was 'correctly' translated. In the case of Person 9, the enumerators, perhaps suffering from 'kinship fatigue' at this point, but also from not knowing what the Anglo–Celtic term should be, attempted to opt for a 'straight' translation between the two systems. In the local system, the wife of a male **galay** (Person 9 in this case) is **maari**—a type of 'grand*mother*' (see Figure 7). Once again, as in the case of Person 5v, the term was flipped in the translation process.

The relationships entered on the forms seem to be not only wrong, but also incomprehensible. They certainly cannot be used to construct an accurate picture of the household, either in Anglo–Celtic or in Indigenous terms. However, if the Indigenous system is taken into account, sense of a kind emerges. The answers represent an attempt, from a local Indigenous viewpoint, to translate from the Indigenous system to the Anglo–Celtic.

Is the nuclear family 'natural'?

There is an assumption deeply embedded in the psyche and culture of the Anglo–Celtic mainstream that the nuclear family is a 'natural' and universal building block of all human societies everywhere. McDonald (1992) notes that one school of thought postulates "that the nuclear family household in England has its origins as far back as the Christian revolution in the 4th century" (p. 4), and he argues that "there seems to be a great deal of evidence that the nuclear family has become pre-eminent in our idealised morality in the past 300–400 years" (p. 5). Anglo–Celtic cultures thus tend to take the nuclear family as the norm, and to describe all other household types as variations on, or even deviations from, that norm.

The Anglo–Celtic kinship system, with its unique reciprocal terms for the members of the nuclear family, reinforces the view of the nuclear family as somehow 'natural'.

In Figure 10, each interior circle surrounds an ego. The terms within the circle are those by which other members of the Anglo–Celtic nuclear family address ego. The nuclear family and its constellation of relationships only comes into being with a marriage: any ego is likely to be a member of more than one nuclear family in their lifetime, first as a child ('family of origin') and then as a parent ('family of procreation').

The local Indigenous kinship system, in contrast, privileges lineages, not nuclear families (Figure 11). Ego and ego's siblings are not primarily constituents of a nuclear family, but a point of intersection between a pre-existing patrilineage and matrilineage

(see also Figure 7). The box in Figure 11 does not represent an individual ego, but rather contains a set of relationships that are constituted by the intersection of a patriline and a matriline in a particular generation. These relationships exist independently of any particular marriage because the **dhuway–galay** relationship between two people exists before a marriage does, and every person has many **dhuway** and **galay**. It is simply impossible to draw a box around a set of reciprocal terms that apply exclusively within a 'nuclear family'. The siblings in the bottom box are **gaathu** with respect to their patrilineal parent, and **waku** with respect to their matrilineal parent. The terms for sibling (**waawa** and **yapa**) lie within the intersection of the two lineages that is constituted by the marriage.
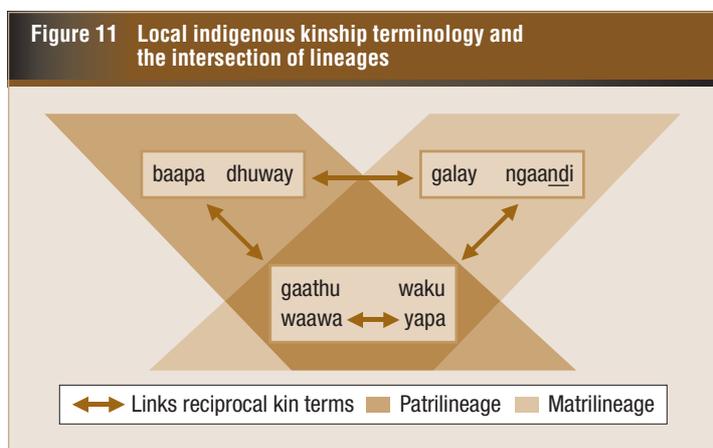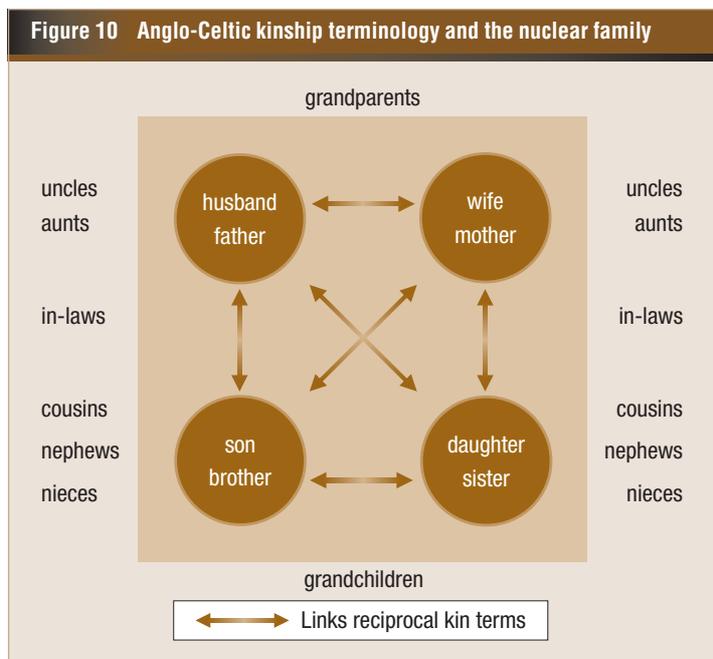
Of course, the structure of its system of kinship terminology does not in itself determine the structure of the unit of co-residence in any society. But it may confer an aura of 'naturalness' on certain types of co-residence units. In societies with Anglo–Celtic kinship terminology, the household containing a nuclear family appears 'natural'. In the local Indigenous setting, nuclear family households do exist, but they are no more 'natural' than many other kinds of household.

Conclusion

The census data, if coupled with the ethnographic data, offer a fascinating insight into the local Indigenous kinship system and principles of household formation, and into how local people think about and extract principles from their kinship categories. But as raw data on household structure, they are often uninterpretable, for two reasons.

First, the incommensurability of the two kinship systems results in 'relationship' data that reflect neither system; they cannot be used to construct 'families' within households. Second, the implicit model upon which ABS household structures are predicated—the nuclear family—is a poor model for Community A households in particular and, it could be argued, for Indigenous households in general.

The complex familial structures of Indigenous societies are one of their most enduring aspects, persisting in communities in 'settled' Australia as well as in remote, traditionally oriented communities (see Smith, 2000). While it is true that in settled Australia Indigenous people are, by and large, using the Anglo–Celtic terms themselves to describe their kin relationships, it cannot be assumed *a priori* that those terms have mainstream meanings.

Figure 10   Anglo-Celtic kinship terminology and the nuclear family

grandparents

uncles / aunts

in-laws

cousins / nephews / nieces

husband father ↔ wife mother

son brother ↔ daughter sister

uncles / aunts

in-laws

cousins / nephews / nieces

grandchildren

↔ Links reciprocal kin terms

Figure 11   Local indigenous kinship terminology and the intersection of lineages

baapa   dhuway ↔ galay   ngaandi

gaathu   waku
waawa ↔ yapa

↔ Links reciprocal kin terms   ■ Patrilineage   ■ Matrilineage

The designers of the census and of other instruments for collecting data from Indigenous Australians need to step back from questions on household and family structure, and decide precisely what information they wish to elicit. Is it information primarily about family structure, or about the size, age distribution, gender composition, and dependency structures of households? If it is decided that the latter data are the more important, one possibility which would sit more comfortably with the Indigenous facts, would be to add a new type of household to the ABS list—the *extended family household*.

This definition would apply to large households in which everyone is related to everyone else, and would therefore conflate the 'family' with the usual residents of the dwelling, or household. It would not attempt to distinguish any putative 'couple families' or 'one-parent families' among the residents of the dwelling, and the post-enumeration categorisation would not attempt to break extended family households into such smaller family units.

If it is still felt desirable to gather data on which relatives children are living with, then there could be a question or questions directed at the under-15s only, about whether their actual mother and/or father is a 'usual resident' of the same household.

The solution proposed here is grounded in Indigenous reality, in that it recognises the incommensurability of Indigenous and mainstream principles of household formation, while still allowing the dwelling to function as a unit of analysis and measurement across the board. It does not address the issue of linked households, which are such a prevalent feature of Indigenous community life, but that problem seems insoluble, given the dwelling-based framework of the census enumeration.

A more radical thought yet: perhaps these comments apply more widely. Members of many of Australia's other 'ethnic' communities also live in households that diverge in their structure from the types envisaged in the present ABS definitions (for example, Batrouney & Stone, 1998). It is perhaps time to consider retreating from the 'nuclear family' as the model against which *all* household structures are measured, not just Indigenous households.

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> The complex familial structures of Indigenous societies are one of their most enduring aspects, persisting in communities in 'settled' Australia as well as in remote, traditionally oriented communities.

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