Mara ‘Moieties’ Once Again

JEFFREY HEATH*

The Mara (pronounced with flap r) are a small Australian Aboriginal language group whose traditional territory is centred around the mouth of the Limmen Bight River in the southwestern Gulf of Carpentaria (Northern Territory). The first-hand ethnographic sources presently available are a few passages in Spencer and Gillen (1904) and Spencer (1914)—survey works covering many other language groups as well. When I did linguistic fieldwork on several languages in this region (1973-7), there were still three or four excellent male linguistic informants of whom I was able to work extensively with one and briefly with one other. My principal informant was born around 1911, when Spencer did his last Mara fieldwork. I have completed a grammar-text-dictionary volume on this language, including a discussion of kinship nomenclature, but it is not known when this volume will appear.

The ‘Mara system’ is fairly well-known, since the semimoiety social organization (found also in some neighboring groups) was first described for the Mara in the ethnographic sources just cited. In this article I discuss the most ambitious reinterpretation of the Mara material, that of Maddock (1969). Maddock did fieldwork on the Dalabon, a few hundred miles from the Mara. Although he did not work with the Mara, his views must be given greater weight than those of more distant spectators, such as Lévi-Strauss, who lack Australian fieldwork experience.

Spencer and Gillen (1904:118-32) and Spencer (1914:60-4) reported the existence of four named patrilinical semimoieties for the Mara; the correct phonemic transcriptions are murunun, mambali, guyal, and budal. They reported that these four could be combined into two named patrimoieties, one consisting of murunun/mambali and the other of guyal/budal.

The ‘marriage rule’, stated in terms of these categories, was basically this for a male murunun: the wife had to be of the opposite moiety (here guyal/budal), and not of Ego’s mother’s semimoiety (hence if Ego’s mother is guyal, his wife should be budal). Therefore a patrilineal sequence of murunun men would choose wives from the guyal and budal semimoieties in alternate generations, and corresponding cycles would occur for sequences of males in each of the three other semimoieties. Note that the two patrimoieties, murunun/mambali and guyal/budal, and a fortiori all four semimoieties, were exogamous.

Maddock takes as his starting point the existence of the semimoieties and of these patrimoieties. However, he goes beyond this and suggests that the Mara had two other moiety systems as well, for a total of three such systems (as well as the single semimoiety system). In addition to the exogamous moieties murunun/mambali and guyal/budal, there were also ‘necrophagous’ moieties murunun/guyal and mambali/budal, and ‘ceremonial’ moieties murunun/budal and mambali/guyal. As the labels (exogamous, necrophagous, ceremonial) suggest, the three moiety systems were functionally specialized so there was no confusion. Nevertheless, at a higher level of structuralist abstraction these three systems can be seen as complementing each other in that they represent all logically possible reductions of the fourfold semimoiety system. The force of Maddock’s article is that the Mara possessed an elaborate and ultimately symmetrical cognitive representation of their own society (though far from conscious expression) based on the principles of binary opposition and logical complementarity; this cognitive representation, moreover, cut across all major sociocultural domains (kinship and marriage, ritual, cosmology,

* Department of Linguistics, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138. Ms. received December 1977, revised April 1978.
If Maddock’s interpretation is correct, it would provide important evidence favouring the general approach to Australian society advocated by Lévi-Strauss and supported by Maddock in a series of stimulating papers.

In this article I claim that all three sets of moieties discerned by Spencer, Gillen, and Maddock are fictions; they do not and did not exist. At the end of the paper I suggest that the semimoieties, though they do exist as cultural categories, are of somewhat lesser functional significance than has been believed.

In the case of the exogamous moieties muruŋun/mambali and guyal/budal, the blame is not Maddock’s but that of Spencer and Gillen. It is apparent that in their sometimes brief encounters with Aboriginal groups on the periphery of central research areas, Spencer and Gillen routinely enquired about native social classifications and in particular attempted to elicit terms for moieties and similar social classes. In the case of the Mara, and perhaps other groups, they misconstrued the responses of informants and detected ‘moiety’ terms or the like which in fact did not exist.

In 1904, Spencer and Gillen reported (p. 119) that the terms for Mara exogamous moieties were ‘Urku’ (muruŋun/mambali) and ‘Ua’ (guyal/budal). Although I attempted to re-elicit these terms from my informants, and pronounced them with all conceivable phonological perturbations, the terms were emphatically rejected. These informants were well familiar with the exogamous patrimoieties called man4a:yug and yirija in the Nunggubuyu language to the north, but they insisted that the Nunggubuyu social classification was barbarous and made much mirth of the fact that by using such moiety terms the Nunggubuyu blurred such crucial distinctions as that between FZ and MMBD/WM (the latter an avoidance category). In several months’ linguistic fieldwork on the Mara, during which kinship terminology and the like was frequently discussed, no exogamous moiety terms emerged.

I do not think that this can be explained as a historical change in the interval between Spencer and Gillen’s fieldwork and mine. In the first place, these informants (who were born at about the time of Spencer’s last fieldwork) still spoke the language fluently and kept up the social classifications and rituals of the old-timers. Only if the exogamous moiety terms were already archaic and uncommon in Spencer’s day could I conceive of these terms disappearing entirely from the memories of my informants.

Secondly, and more convincingly, it can be demonstrated from analysis of the original ethnographic sources themselves that the alleged system of exogamous moieties was fictional. It is noteworthy that Spencer (1914), unlike Spencer and Gillen (1904), had the benefit of Spencer’s 1911 fieldwork with a Mara informant on whose lucidity he lavished praise. Spencer (1914) continues to insist that exogamous patrimoieties exist, but instead of the earlier labels ‘Urku’ and ‘Ua’ we now find that the terms are ‘Muluri’ (muruŋun/mambali) and ‘Umbana’ (guyal/budal) (Spencer, 1914: 60). No explanation is given for this discrepancy between the two works. Evidently, however, Spencer believed that his 1911 material had clarified the terminological question, and that the earlier terms ‘Urku’ and ‘Ua’ were incorrect. We must assume that this decision was correct, and the remaining question is the validity of the new terms ‘Muluri’ and ‘Umbana’. (These are the terms quoted by Maddock.)

As it happens, these are not sociocentric moiety terms at all. They are kin terms. For example, muluri designates male avoidance relatives, most importantly MMBS (and, with Omaha-style downward patrilineal skewing, also MMBS, MMBSSSS, etc.). Ordinarily, the men called muluri by a male will be in Ego’s own exogamous patrimoieties, but in the complementary semimoiety; thus for a muruŋun male the muluri will ordinarily be mambali. Spencer presumably attempted to elicit a moiety label which would include all muruŋun and mambali persons; the informant, however, replied with a kin term designating certain muruŋun and/or mambali men who happened to be in that relationship to him.

The other term is wumbana- (which must take a suffix, e.g. wumbana-di ‘my ——’). This is also a kin term, applied by male Ego to an elder brother-in-law (ZH or WB) and
to various genealogically specifiable kinsmen such as MMBDS (if older than Ego). For a mambali or muruun informant, these men would be guyal and/or budal in almost all cases. Again, Spencer attempted to elicit a moiety term from such an informant but got instead a kin term applying only to certain guyal/budal men. In other words, the ethnographer and the informant were talking past each other—the former (like latter-day structuralists) thinking in terms of formal social classes while the latter thought in terms of egocentric kinship relations.3

Actually, there is one way of saving Spencer's basic point without doing violence to the facts reported so far. There is no a priori reason why muluri and wumbana—could not have extended meanings 'my exogamous moiety' and 'the other exogamous moiety', in addition to their specific kinship senses. After all, some other Aboriginal languages such as Warlpiri (Meggitt, 1962: 203) have egocentric moiety terms of this type (though in Warlpiri these moiety terms are distinct from the terms used in the kinship classification).

However, the choice of terms whose closest referents are MMBS/WMB (muluri) and elder MMBDS/ZH/WB (wumbana-) for such extended senses would be incredible. It is difficult to imagine an extended sense 'my moiety' for a term (muluri) whose closest referents are (a) relatively remote genealogically (in contrast to F, B, or the like), (b) in the complementary semimoietv (not in Ego's), and (c) avoidance relatives who cannot be closely approached or directly addressed except in emergencies. Similarly, for 'the other moiety' we would expect that a term for M or MB or the like, rather than brother-in-law, would be chosen, though in this case the point is not as clearcut.

The fact is, moreover, that among my informants no kin terms have extended uses corresponding to exogamous moiety categories. It is true that I have occasional textual examples where a kin term normally restricted to the second ascending generation is used loosely to designate either a semimoietv or (more often) a localized estate-owning group (a subdivision of a semimoietv). The clear examples involve plural forms of the terms for MMB and FMB, and less often MF (but never FF), hence 'my MMBs' as a loose expression for a semimoietv or a local group which includes one or more persons called MMB by Ego. These examples provide, at most, additional evidence for the reality of semimoieties (not moieties), whose reality is not in question here. I know of no such indirect (or direct) linguistic evidence for the reality of the exogamous patrimoieties.

There are, of course, certain details of marriage and ritual systems for the Mara which could be construed as pointing to the covert existence of exogamous moieties muruun/mambali and guyal/budal. We have already seen that the 'marriage rule', if adhered to (even approximately), guarantees that the muruun/mambali and guyal/budal groups will each be exogamous; I know of only one breach (a guyal man and a budal woman), and that took place under mission conditions (it would not have been permitted earlier).

Secondly, each of the two major secret rituals is 'owned' by members of one exogamous moiety and 'managed' by the other. The gunabibi ritual is owned by muruun/mambali and managed by guyal/budal, the yabuduruwa owned by guyal/budal and managed by muruun/mambali. This seems, at first sight, to be definite evidence for the existence of real (though unnamed) moieties.

Let us take these two considerations in order. So far as the 'marriage rule' is concerned, I argue below that it is formulated by the Mara most often in terms of kinship categories, and that semimoiety (not to mention moiety) affiliation is not ordinarily appealed to in this context. The chief functions of the semimoiety system are in other domains. Spencer himself realized that it is highly difficult to formulate even a crude approximation to a correct statement of acceptable marriage practices using the semimoiety vocabulary. Only a small proportion of the women in a particular semimoiety are appropriate wives for a given male Ego. If the 'rule' is described in terms of exogamous moieties (even if these had convenient labels), it would be so vague that it would be virtually worthless.

As for the ritual groupings, it is essential to stress that although the muruun and
mambali own the gunabibi (i.e. are the principal performers in it), these two groups are responsible for distinct portions of the ritual. That is, murugun and mambali groups have separate song cycles, based on distinctive myth traditions, and thus the distinction between murugun and mambali is not neutralized. The same is true of the guyal and budal as co-owners of the yabudurwa. Thus co-ownership dramatizes, rather than blurs, these oppositions among semimoieties.

Ritual ownership depends on semimoiety and local-group affiliation and is thus transmitted from father to son. On the other hand, the role of manager (juggayi) depends on matrilineage; a male Ego is the manager of the rituals and territory of his mother’s semimoiety. For example, murugun men over several generations constitute a line of owners of the murugun portion of the gunabibi ritual, and their managers are a series of guyal and budal men whose mothers are murugun (Fig. 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>generation</th>
<th>patriline of murugun owners (M) and their sisters (Z)</th>
<th>guyal managers</th>
<th>budal managers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>M₁, Z₁</td>
<td>son of Z₁</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>M₂, Z₂</td>
<td></td>
<td>son of Z₂</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>M₃, Z₃</td>
<td></td>
<td>son of Z₃</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>M₄, Z₄</td>
<td></td>
<td>son of Z₄</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>M₅, Z₅</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1 Owners and managers of murugun rituals and territory.

Note: the alternation of guyal and budal managers assumes regular marriages for the murugun women (Z₁-Z₅).

The managers have certain specified duties, especially in ritual contexts (e.g. painting totemic designs on the bodies of the owners who perform the dances), and generally act as watchdogs or gadflies (it is they who punish ritual transgressions committed by the owners). Because of the complex division of labour between owners and managers in ritual performances, no major ritual (gunabibi or yabudurwa) could be performed without managers as well as owners present.

Although some guyal and some budal are managers for the murugun, while other guyal and budal are managers for the mambali, it does not make sense to say that this amounts to a blurring of the opposition between guyal and budal. It is simply a reflection of the fact that Ego’s own semimoiety affiliation is not the basis for distributing managerial obligations; rather, it is the semimoiety of his mother. The apparent blurring of the guyal v. budal opposition (and, for managerial status in the yabudurwa ritual, of the murugun v. mambali opposition) does not represent the creation of a moiety system (murugun/mambali v. guyal/budal) superimposed on the initial semimoiety system. Rather, it amounts to the recognition of a second semimoiety system whose four categories are: son of murugun woman, son of mambali woman, son of guyal woman, and son of budal woman. This system presupposes the initial system of named semimoieties and represents a secondary offshoot. It is defective in that females are not normally considered as managers; it is closed in that the managers do not transmit managerial status to their own descendants (or to their sisters’ sons); it is covert in that there are no simple terminological labels for the four categories, though there are longer expressions which can be and are used. (Actually, it is possible that a man might come to exercise weak managerial obligations toward his MM’s semimoiety group if no ‘full’ managers are available, but I have no definite evidence that this is the case and at any rate this transfer could be at most tenuous and restricted.)

Finally, we should note that in the less sacred (but none the less quite important) rituals, mandiwa (circumcision) and lurgun (mortuary), each semimoiety has its own separate performances based on its own myth cycles; managers may play a role but are (to my knowledge) of minor importance, and there are no co-owners from other semimoieties.

To conclude this section, we have found that the political organization of ritual does not provide clear evidence for the reality of exogamous moieties murugun/mambali and guyal/budal. Rather, it emphasizes the four-fold opposition among the semimoieties.
(and among the secondary semimoieties based on matrifiliation). The most we could say would be that the occurrence of overt binary oppositions between pairs of co-owners (murugun v. mambali; guyal v. budal) perhaps suggests that covert exogamous moieties are present, on the theory that the dramatization of an opposition between two elements in a structure of four elements automatically presupposes the covert subgrouping of the opposed elements vis-à-vis the remaining elements (Fig. 2 thus presupposing Fig. 3).

\[
\begin{align*}
murugun & \neq mambali \\
guyal & \neq budal
\end{align*}
\]

Fig. 2

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{(moiety A)} \\
murugun \quad mambali \\
guyal \quad budal \\
\text{(moiety B)}
\end{array}
\]

Fig. 3

Although I am prepared to recognize some merit in this suggestion, I would suggest caution. For example, among the Nunggubuyu to the north the covert moieties of Fig. 3 are in fact overt (manda:yug for Mara murugun/mambali, yirija for guyal/budal), while the Nunggubuyu counterparts to the Mara semimoieties themselves are either nonexistent or defective. However, the structure of Nunggubuyu ritual organization is not what one would expect from this; it is not the case that, of the two major rituals, one is owned by manda:yug and managed by yirija while the other is owned by yirija and managed by manda:yug. The gunabibi ritual is owned by the Nunggubuyu equivalent of the murugun semimoiety, without co-owners. The mada-yin ritual, which replaces the yabuduruwa as the other major ritual, is primarily owned by the Nunggubuyu equivalent of the budal semimoiety, but part of it is owned by the Nunggubuyu equivalent of the mambali (Fig. 4). Hence the exogamous moieties do not correspond closely to ritual owner/manager patterns among the Nunggubuyu, and we should be wary of assuming covert moieties among the Mara on the basis of indirect arguments.

Indeed, the only compelling evidence that the exogamous moieties are ‘real’ to the Mara is the simple fact that the Mara are familiar with the Nunggubuyu system to their north. Just as in the sociolinguistic study of verbal repertoires it is necessary to recognize the ability of informants to evaluate speech varieties which they do not themselves use (as well as the varieties which they do use), so in a cultural anthropological study of small Australian societies we must always recognize that cultural repertoires of individuals normally extend

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nunggubuyu clans (with Mara semimoiety equivalents*)</th>
<th>A_1 ( (= murugun) )</th>
<th>A_2 ( (= mambali) )</th>
<th>B_1 ( (= guyal) )</th>
<th>B_2 ( (= budal) )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>manda:yug moiety</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yirija moiety</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>owner of gunabibi</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>owner of mada-yin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 4 Nunggubuyu moieties and ritual organization.

* By ‘equivalents of Mara semimoieties’ I mean Nunggubuyu patriclans which are recognized (by the Mara and Nunggubuyu) as corresponding to Mara semimoiety groups to the south. Such linkages are established chiefly by the mythical tracks of particular dreamtime beings. The Nunggubuyu sometimes extend their clan terms to corresponding clans in neighbouring language groups, and in these extended senses the ‘clan’ terms (normally restricted to a particular set of people who own a given estate) can approximate the usage of Mara semimoiety terms. This is especially the case with the Nunggubuyu clan term murugun, which is also a Mara semimoiety term; however some Nunggubuyu clan terms are not so freely extendable.
PLATE I Looking southwards from the top of Mugumamp Ridge over the South Swamp with Ep Ridge in the background. Trench II/III is in the lower left; in the centre to the right of the western boundary road are the distinct surface features of Period II. (Photo: E. Harris)

PLATE II Looking south from the top of Mugumamp Ridge. Trench III: the islands and basins of Period I as exposed after the removal of the infilling volcanic ash. Unit 5. The boundary ditch of Period I has yet to be excavated. (Photo: E. Harris)

PLATE III Looking south across the South Swamp with the eastern end of Ep Ridge appearing in the centre of the background. Trench III: the islands, basins and interfluves of Period I; the basins partly filled with water. The photographic scale is one metre long. (Photo: E. Harris)
PLATE IV
Looking south over Trench II/III. The boundary ditch and other features of Period I after excavation, the stony bottom of the ditch being in the foreground. The northern half of Unit 7 (into which the features of Period I were cut) has been removed. (Photo: E. Harris)

PLATE V
Looking north from Trench II/III towards Mugumamp Ridge. The boundary ditch of Period I runs across the centre. It protected the gardens in the immediate foreground from runoff from the slopes of the ridge. (Photo: E. Harris)

JINDABYNE FIREPLACES  Valerie Chapman

PLATE VI
A sectioned Coptotermes lacteus mound at Braidwood, N.S.W., showing the thick outer clay walls and the carton interior. Photograph: Division of Entomology, CSIRO, Canberra, with permission for publication.
some distance beyond their own group. Nevertheless, these external cultural varieties (like external speech varieties) are usually subjected to disapproval and even ridicule; almost all of the informants I worked with from several language groups delighted in contrasting their own group's eternally sensible categories and norms with the follies of their neighbours (who invariably speak unpronounceable and impossibly complex languages, are full of sorcerers, and fail to distinguish between brothers and avoidance relatives). Hence the very awareness of external cultural varieties differing from one's own may facilitate the repression of latent internal tendencies, particularly in the areas we are concerned with (kinship and other social categorizations, etc.). The emerging evidence of linguistic anthropology in Australia suggests the presence of strong dissimilatory as well as assimilatory forces in these contact situations, and it is essential that diffusion theory recognize both of these processes. Whether ultimate ecological motivations for such phenomena can be discovered (in that dissimilatory forces impede the exchange of women among remote groups) cannot be discussed here, but this would seem to be a most promising arena for interdisciplinary collaboration.

Let us now consider the second set of moieties posited by Maddock. On the basis of his interpretation of Spencer (1914:253-6) on Mara mortuary practices, Maddock concludes that murunj/guyal and mambali/budal function as 'necrophagous moieties'. That is, in the consumption of the flesh of the deceased, a murunj or guyal corpse is consumed by mambali and budal men and women, and a mambali or budal corpse is consumed by murunj and guyal men and women.

Necrophagy has long since been given up as a mortuary practice, and if my informants remembered details of it they were unwilling to discuss it with me (the same is true, incidentally, of subincision). We will thus have to examine closely Spencer's description:

Everything is regulated by custom thus:

A Mumbali is eaten by Kuial and Murungun men and women.
A Kuial is eaten by Mumbali and Purdal men and women.
A Murungun is eaten by Mumbali and Purdal men and women.

A Purdal is eaten by Kuial and Murungun men and women.

If, for example, a Mumbali dies, a Kuial man (who is a mother's brother of the dead person) tells the Kuial and Murungun women to go to the cooking ground . . . (Spencer, 1914:254; italics added)

As Maddock notes, these four rules can be collapsed into two: (a) mambali/budal is eaten by murunj/guyal; (b) murunj/guyal is eaten by mambali/budal. Or, more simply, taking mambali/budal and murunj/guyal as two unnamed necrophagous moieties, we can say that the deceased is eaten by persons of the other necrophagous moiety. If Maddock’s interpretation is ethnographically correct, I would agree that it would be legitimate to recognize covert moieties in this situation.

But is this what Spencer really meant to say? First, note that he spelled out four separate rules, instead of adopting the obvious formulaic simplifications suggested by Maddock. Secondly, Spencer normally took great pains to identify covert as well as overt social classes, and it is surprising that he did not comment on these moieties in this passage. These points, though not in themselves conclusive, should make us wonder whether his four ‘rules’ are in fact correctly formulated.

That emendations are in order is clearly established by scrutinizing the final portion of the segment quoted above, notably the italicized parenthetical remark. Note especially that Spencer here assumes that the MB of the deceased mambali is guyal. I am convinced that this same assumption underlies Spencer’s ‘rule’ that a mambali man is eaten by guyal and murunj persons. But Mara marriage, both ideally and in practice, works in such a way that a mambali man may have either a guyal MB or a budal MB, depending on from which of two possible semimoieties the deceased's father took his wife. Consequently, Spencer’s assumption is correct only for about half of the mambali men.

The ostensibly categorical statement that ‘A Mumbali man is eaten by Kuial and Murungun men and women’ must surely be reformulated as this: ‘A mambali is eaten by persons of his M’s (and MB’s) semimoieties, which may be either guyal or budal, and by
murungun persons'. Moreover, the mambali man's MM and MMB are almost always murungun, regardless of whether his M and MB are guyal or budal. Hence the rule can be further revised as follows: 'A mambali is eaten by members of the semimoieties of his M (and MB) and of his MM (and MMB)'. The same reformulation must, of course, be extended to the other three 'rules', so we end up with this: 'The deceased is eaten by members of the semimoieties of his M (and MB) and of his MM (and MMB)'. Note that the semimoieties in question are determined on the basis of first- or second-order matrifiliation, while the deceased's agnatic ties are not directly involved.

It seems apparent that Spencer understood the system, hence wrote out four rules instead of reducing them to two, and that it was pure carelessness which led him to formulate the rules as they appeared in print. The parenthetical insertion, which I italicized, was designed to indicate that the four 'rules' were oversimplified; regrettably, the passage is still sufficiently confusing to have caused Maddock to misunderstand it. Actually, Maddock himself formulated the correct solution as a preliminary hypothesis (1969:100), but then rejected this since it appeared to contradict the ethnographic facts (as he understood them). Maddock went on to try to account for these facts by means of a highly complex structuralist argument.

In our reanalysis, we are able to re-integrate the consumption of the deceased's flesh into the overall fabric of Mara mortuary practices. We will not quote Spencer's description of these events at length, since they involve a number of activities which stretch over several months, culminating in the final disposition of the skeleton. In this discussion (except for the necrophagy passage quoted above), Spencer clearly specifies the duties of particular participants in terms of their kinship relations to the deceased (e.g. his MB, or in some cases the members of his MB's semimoiety). Here is one example:

If, for example, a Mumbali man dies, then Murungun men actually put them [bones] on the platform, while Kuial or Purdal men, his mother's brothers, stand below. (Spencer, 1914:254)

Here Spencer is more careful than he was in the earlier passage in specifying that there are two possibilities for the MB of the mambali deceased (guyal and budal). Note again that 'Murungun men' could (and should) be replaced by 'men of his MMB's semimoiety'.

I fully agree with Maddock's suggestion (1969:102-3) that the consumption of flesh constitutes 'a technique for separating flesh and bone'. A point not clearly made by Spencer (see, however, Spencer and Gillen, 1904:549-54) is that the bones are eventually returned (by the MB, etc.) to the deceased's own agnates (ideally, his father) and are then buried in a special ground in the estate of the deceased's semimoiety (and local group). Hence, upon death, the flesh reverts to his immediate matrilineal ancestors and members of their semimoieties, while the bones revert to his own agnatic group.

There is an explicit ethnoanatomy throughout this region whereby flesh is considered to be derived from one's mother and bones from one's father. Maddock correctly notes this principle, but then argues that it has been skewed and twisted as it is subordinated to an overarching principle favouring the creation of rigid, sociocentric necrophagous moieties (motivated by the existence, in other sociocultural domains, of formally complementary moiety systems).

Hence abstract structural principles take precedence over the immediate cultural categories accessible to conscious formulation by any member of this society. But we have seen that this suppression does not really occur; the simple, immediate principle reaches the surface in unadulterated form.

A significant, but now probably unresolvable, ethnographic question is whether the consumption of the flesh, and certain other specific duties during the mortuary activities, were in fact restricted to a few close kinsmen (e.g. M and MB, perhaps in some cases also MM and MMB); whether they were extended to a few agnates and local-group co-members of these kinsmen as well (e.g. MBS, MMBS); if so whether such extensions were made freely, or only
as substitutes in the absence of the closer kinsmen (e.g. both MBS and MB, or preferably MB and in his absence MBS); whether they were extended to all members of these kinsmen's estate-owning units (subdivisions of semimoieties); or whether they were really extended freely, as Spencer suggests in some cases, to any members of the relevant semimoieties (e.g. MB's semimoiety who happened to be present, even if they did not belong to the relevant estate-owning units and did not have close kinship relations to the deceased. It may well be that in some cases Spencer overgeneralized, extending rights and duties to an entire semimoiety where a more restricted group defined by territorial and/or genealogical relations was actually at work.

At any rate, it seems clear that the necrophagous moieties do not exist now and did not exist in 1904 or 1914, and we may safely bury them.

The case is similar with the Binbinga (the and are separately pronounced), also mentioned briefly by Maddock. Spencer and Gillen (1904:548) report that the flesh of the deceased was consumed by members of the opposite patrilineal moiety (the Binbinga had such moieties, like the Nunggubuyu, instead of Mara-type semimoieties). Again, we can restate this in simple kin-based terms: the flesh is consumed by the M, MB, and (allegedly) other members of their moiety. Again we wonder if a more restricted group was involved.

Maddock's third set of moieties are the 'ceremonial' ones. We mentioned earlier that it may be possible to recognize covert moieties murun/mambali and guyal/budal (i.e. the exogamous moieties) functioning in the determination of owner/manager relations in the two major secret rituals. However, these are not what Maddock means by 'ceremonial' moieties.

He reports that among the Dalabon he discovered a temporary joining of their equivalents of murun/mambali and guyal/budal (i.e. the exogamous moieties) functioning in the determination of owner/manager relations in the two major secret rituals. However, these are not what Maddock means by 'ceremonial' moieties.

Maddock's description, using letter indices for the semimoieties, is this:

... P joins with R and Q with S to form contrasted sets of dancers. PR men symbolize a culture hero classed as R, QS men a culture hero classed as S. (Maddock, 1969:101)

So here murun (P) is merged into budal (R), and mambali (Q) into guyal (S), for the purposes of organizing this rite. (The yabuduruwa, it will be recalled, is owned by guyal and budal.)

This joining also has a broader significance for the Dalabon. Maddock indicates that informants express a general preference for murun/budal intermarriage, and mambali/guyal intermarriage, although this obviously conflicts both with actual practice and with the other formulations (expressed in terms of semimoieties or kinship) of correct marriages. For example, murun men marry budal women half the time, guyal women the other half of the time.

Maddock suggests that the Mara may well have had similar ceremonial moieties, although they are not mentioned in the rather scant ethnographic literature. He points out that the Dalabon and Mara are not far apart geographically; that both have semimoiety systems (which are not common in Australia); and that both have gunabibi and yabuduruwa as their major rituals. Maddock feels that the Dalabon and Mara are thus part of a rather tightly-knit culture area and that more detailed documentation on the Mara would probably have revealed a great many additional similarities.

In fact, the similarities between the Dalabon and the Mara are superficial. To begin with, they are not in direct contact with each other, being separated by several hundred miles and by several intervening language groups (Warndarang, Ngalkan, etc.). Indeed, the Dalabon (i.e. the Dalabon/Ngalkbon/Dangbon dialect cluster) appear to have had their closest social relationships with groups such as the Djawonj and Mayali to their north and west, rather than with groups to their east and southeast like the Nunggubuyu and Mara (Fig. 5).

Moreover, the closest contacts which the Mara had generally followed a coastal axis running to their north and southeast along the Gulf coast. This is presumably due to a
mixture of ecological considerations, demographic patterns (population in this region was heavily concentrated on the coast), and associated cultural factors. There is definite evidence from genealogies, informant recollections, early ethnographic reports, and patterns of linguistic (and other cultural) diffusion for the great significance of this coastal axis (and to some degree of distinct subcoastal and inland axes running parallel to the coast) in determining communication networks among Aboriginal groups in this region. The explicit opposition between 'top' and 'bottom' (coastal) people is well known to all ethnographers who have worked on or near the coast in this area.

When we examine the details of Dalabon and Mara social structures, we find important differences. To begin with, the Dalabon have an elaborate subsection system. The Mara do not, though some of them are familiar with a similar system which has been adopted by some of their neighbours such as the Yanyula (Reay, 1962).

True, the Mara and Dalabon both have semimoiety systems. However, for the Dalabon these are indirectly matrilineal. A child's semimoiety is determined by that of his or her mother on the basis of two non-intersecting matricycles (A-B-C-D-A . . . and E-F-G-H-E . . .), each of which goes through four phases and then returns to its initial state (Maddock, 1974:77). The Mara semimoieties, despite some confusion in the early literature, are strictly and directly patrilineal; a child inherits the semimoiety of his or her father. In the Dalabon system the father is 'thrown away', in the Mara system the mother is thrown away. Far from being a minor detail, this difference has enormous cultural ramifications and bears on the whole question of the significance of semimoieties. Thus each Dalabon patrilineal estate-owning unit has men belonging to two distinct semimoieties, and each unit thus maintains two distinct sets of totems and associated rituals, one for each semimoiety division. No such bifurcation occurs among Mara estate-owning local units. I will return to this point below in discussing the relevance of semimoieties to marriage and bestowal politics, again emphasizing the difference between the Dalabon and the Mara.

It is also true that the Dalabon and Mara share the gunabibi/yabuduruwa ritual complex. However, both of these rituals are broadly distributed, especially the gunabibi. It is important to note that each local culture (roughly, each language group) has modified such rituals to adapt them to local social structures and the like. In addition to the normal process of harmonizing rituals to pre-existing cultural patterns, there is the additional process of semi-deliberate differentiation by which these groups emphasize their uniqueness vis-à-vis other groups in their social universe. Moreover, the rituals are based on specific mythical tracks, with emphasis on those in the immediate vicinity; hence when the Mara perform a yabuduruwa they concentrate on songs and dances which are—at least as they interpret them—related primarily to the local segments of what might actually be much longer tracks. Undoubtedly, versions of the gunabibi among the Dalabon and Mara share many aspects of basic formal structure, but it is unwise to assume without adequate verification that their cultural significance, or specific details concerning the grouping of performers in individual component rites, is held constant.

Shortly after Maddock's article (1969) appeared, a long description of a yabuduruwa at Roper River Mission (now Ngukurr settlement) appeared (Elkin, 1971). The principal performers were largely Mara and the closely related Wärdarang; some of these are listed as...
‘Nunggubuyu’ by Elkin, but only because the Nunggubuyu language had spread south at the expense of Warndarang and Mara in recent decades. (The core Nunggubuyu group, at Numbulwar Mission, do not perform the yabuduruwa.) In Elkin’s report, which for now is certainly the best available on the Mara version of the yabuduruwa, I can find no evidence for ‘ceremonial moieties’ of the sort Maddock envisaged.

I was not permitted to observe gunabibi or yabuduruwa rituals or to record song-words or other non-public information about the specific form of the rites. However, my informants usually were happy to answer questions about the general political organization of rituals (which is not secret). In discussing Maddock’s ceremonial moieties with these informants, I was unable to elicit their recognition of such categories in their own ritual organization.

Indeed, Maddock’s own explanation for the existence of the Dalabon ceremonial moieties presupposes the coexistence of other types of moieties (notably the exogamous patrimoieties); the basic principle invoked is the logical complementarity among these systems which fuses them into a metasystem at a higher level of abstraction. However, among the Mara at least neither the exogamous moieties nor the necrophagic moieties are culturally real, so the background which (in Maddock’s theory) makes sense of the ceremonial moieties is lacking.

So the elaborate cognitive structures which Maddock envisaged for the Mara are simply nonexistent; they were spawned by the remarkable combination of poor ethnography by Spencer and Gillen, Spencer’s careless writing, and Maddock’s unwise extrapolations from his fieldwork on Dalabon to the very different culture of the Mara. All we can salvage are the four semi-moieties (and the four secondary semi-moieties based on matrifiliation). I want now to emphasize that even the semi-moieties are of lesser significance than has sometimes been thought.

The basic point is that the semi-moieties are mentioned by the Mara most often in discussions involving ritual and territory (which, in a sense, constitute a single cultural domain). These are obviously important, and it would be inappropriate to completely isolate them from other domains such as kinship classification.

Nevertheless, the frequent assumption that Australian semi-moieties (and other) social classes invariably function as ‘marriage classes’, so characteristic of uninformed ethnological speculations by non-Australianists, is particularly misleading in the case of the Mara. Because of the structure of the system, it is almost impossible to verbalize even a minimally coherent ‘marriage rule’ in semimoiety terms. Spencer and Gillen, in reconciling the Mara system with more familiar versions of the Aranda system, were forced to subdivide each Mara semimoiety into two units (e.g. muruqun-A v. muruqun-B) in order to provide a language within which a coherent marriage rule could be formulated.

Spencer claims that his most lucid informant was actually able to produce such a formulation; however, the implication of this is that most informants could not do so. Moreover, in view of Spencer’s serious misunderstanding of his other material obtained from this informant (notably the alleged exogamous moiety terms discussed earlier in this paper), we cannot be entirely sure of what exactly went on in these particular sessions.

My own informants, despite the benefit of many years’ contact with Europeans and with speakers of other languages (which usually greatly improves their ability to explain the meanings of difficult words, and so forth), were unable to formulate a marriage rule in semimoiety terms, though had I pressed them over a period of time it is likely that they would eventually have worked it out by translating kinship categories into semimoiety terms. It is apparent that actual discussions of and debates over marriage and bestowal revolve around kinship relations (and local political considerations), and are not ordinarily expressed in the language of semimoiety classes. These classes are too broad to define appropriate spouses precisely, and because of their patrilineal basis they do not directly take into consideration relations of matrilateral—yet it is precisely these latter which are most crucial in marriage and bestowal.
politics in all Aboriginal groups in this region.

In certain critical respects, the Dalabon situation seems to differ from the Mara situation. Maddock (1974:92-3) reports that when a man has a choice between two women as his prospective wife, and when both satisfy the basic marriage rules but belong to distinct semimoieties, the man will prefer (other things being equal) the woman whose semimoiety is such that their offspring will be in the same semimoiety as the man himself. Because semimoiety descent is indirectly matrilineal, the man must marry a woman of a particular semimoiety to guarantee this result, which men seem to favour since it permits them to pass on their own ritual knowledge and paraphernalia to their sons. As we have seen, the Mara semimoieties are directly patrilineal, so no matter whom the man marries his sons will be of his own semimoiety and thus inherit his rituals. The Dalabon system seems to be highly unusual for an Australian society.

Thus the semimoieties are less salient in thinking about or discussing marriage and bestowal politics among the Mara than they are among the Dalabon. For the Mara, the semimoieties are most salient in the context of ritual organization and of spiritual affiliation to particular territorial estates (on which the rituals are grounded). In this context (or set of related contexts) semimoiety membership is of the greatest significance. Moreover, while the regular semimoieties are directly patrilineal, so no matter whom the man marries his sons will be of his own semimoiety and thus inherit his rituals. The Dalabon system seems to be highly unusual for an Australian society.

The basic point, then, is not that the semimoieties are without cognitive significance, but merely that this significance is functionally specialized and usually limited to the domains of ritual and territory. Of course, they can also be of help to Mara persons in organizing their behaviour toward visitors from remote areas who do not have definite, traceable genealogical relations to them. As long as the Mara can translate their semimoiety categories into the semimoiety, moiety, and subsection categories of surrounding groups they can usually manage to at least roughly categorize any visitors who might materialize.

However, the importance of semimoieties
as an organizing principle for local interpersonal relations, notably marriage and bestowal politics, has been exaggerated. To conclude, formal sociocentric classes (moieties and semimoieties) play a considerably more limited role in integrating and ordering Mara society than Maddock believed.

NOTES
1. Fieldwork was supported by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. I thank Nic Peterson for comments on an earlier draft.
2. Maddock uses the terms 'patrilineal', 'necrophagous' and 'ceremonial' for the three types of moiety system which he recognizes. Actually, the necrophagous and ceremonial moieties are also patrilineal since they, like the 'patrilineal' moieties, are simply combinations of two (patrilineal) semimoieties. I will therefore keep Maddock's labels 'necrophagous' and 'ceremonial', but will refer to the first type as 'exogamous' (patri-) moieties. I should also note that, as we will see, the 'exogamous' moieties may have some significance in ritual organization, though I will not refer to them by the label 'ceremonial' moiety, which is reserved to the third type.
3. There is still the vexing question of the 'meaning' of kin terms themselves—labels for genealogical categories, or indices of behavioural and alliance relations (MMBS or wife-bestower)? I cannot enter into this here; my point is that the terms in question are ego-centric relationship categories rather than sociocentric classes.
4. Sometimes, in Nunggubuyu performances of the gunabibi, men of the mambali semimoiety from the more southerly Warndarang and/or Mara language groups participate and perform mambali rites, but the original Nunggubuyu equivalent of the southern mambali (the ydml clan) does not own or co-own the gunabibi; see below.
5. We can argue endlessly on the question of whether to 'recognize' covert social classes under varying conditions. Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Lévi-Strauss, and many others have discussed this question in the Australian context; see Goody (1961). To make a good case, one would like (in the absence of actual labels) at least some kind of indirect linguistic or other confirmation of the reality of covert moieties, but I am not aware of any such evidence in the Mara case.
6. Lévi-Strauss (1965:393) declares that the widespread Asian belief that 'the bones come from the father's side and the flesh from the mother's side' is 'incompatible with a system of restricted exchange'. However, in Australia this belief occurs in conjunction with systems of restricted as well as generalized exchange, in Lévi-Strauss' terminology.
7. Maddock notes (1969:95, 95n.) that Spencer and Gillen (1904:126-7) seem to indicate an indirect matrilineal basis for Mara semimoiety affiliation, although Spencer (1914:60) contradicts this and speaks of 'direct male descent'. Maddock inclines to believe that the 1904 analysis is correct, even though Reay (1962:95-100) showed that semimoiety descent is directly patrilineal for the Yanyula (immediate neighbours and close associates of the Mara). Maddock suggests that the Yanyula may have been confused by the recent introduction of subsection terminology, the implication being that indirect matrilineal descent is more basic and ancient.

My evidence, however, agrees with Reay and with Spencer (1914)—the latter, it should be noted, was based in part on Spencer's 1911 field session which was not available to Spencer and Gillen (1904). In cases of irregular marriage, the children acquire the semimoiety of the father, just as in cases of regular marriage. In one instance where a severely irregular marriage (guyal man, budal woman) took place, the children were guyal.

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