

# Classifications of the Tasmanian languages in relation to the peopling of Australia: sensible and wild theories

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‘The origin of the Tasmanian aborigines has been subjected to nearly as much consideration as the origin of mankind. The discussion has been extended over a long time; the resulting opinions have been characterized by much uncertainty, due partly to the paucity of the known facts.’

Wunderly (1938)

‘There is no hint of a relationship with languages from any other part of the world....Greenberg’s is one of the more outrageous hypotheses that have been put forward concerning the Tasmanian languages.’

(Crowley & Dixon 1991:420)

## 1. Introduction

The Tasmanians probably crossed the Bass Strait to the island of Tasmania some 40,000 years ago and were there cut off by a rise in sea-levels 10-12,000 years ago (O’Connor & Chappell 2003:21). Their distinctive languages and cultures were cut short by an appalling genocide in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the last full-blooded Tasmanian, Truganini, died in 1876. The Tasmanian languages are believed to have become extinct in 1905, with the death of the last known speaker, Fanny Cochrane Smith. Wax cylinder recordings were made of her speech, but their quality is so poor that little can be made of them, and moreover, doubt exists as to the unmixed nature of her speech. Records of the Tasmanian languages are fragmentary and incomplete as well as being doubtfully transcribed. As a consequence, but their actual affiliations will probably remain unknown (Crowley & Dixon 1991). Terry Crowley records the efforts made to record individual lexical items from ‘rememberers’ after 1905, and since 1999 there has been an attempt to revive the language, at least to the extent of using whatever specialised lexicon remains, particularly words connected with the seashore and the marine environment<sup>1</sup>. But what these words represent is uncertain since the communities on the Hunter islands were artificial, brought together by missionaries from different bands and the speech may have been a creole.

Apart from the languages, the Tasmanians themselves were the subject of much ethnological curiosity in the nineteenth century because of their distinctive physique, curly hair and a culture characterised by absences (inability to make fire, taboo on eating scale-fish and other technologies recorded on the mainland). Even before the death of Truganini, anthropologists had begun to speculate on the origin of the Tasmanians (Huxley 1868; Bonwick 1870) and this soon led to an unseemly scramble for osteological relics characterised by skulduggery practised on behalf of very august institutions in the quest for skulls (this disgraceful episode is recounted in the film, *The Last Tasmanian* made by Tom Haydon in 1978). One of the largest collections of Tasmanian skulls was blown to pieces when a bomb fell on the Royal College of Surgeons during the Second World War. Only in recent years has there been some restitution, with the reburial of Truganini and the return of other Tasmanian materials to the descendants of the last survivors.

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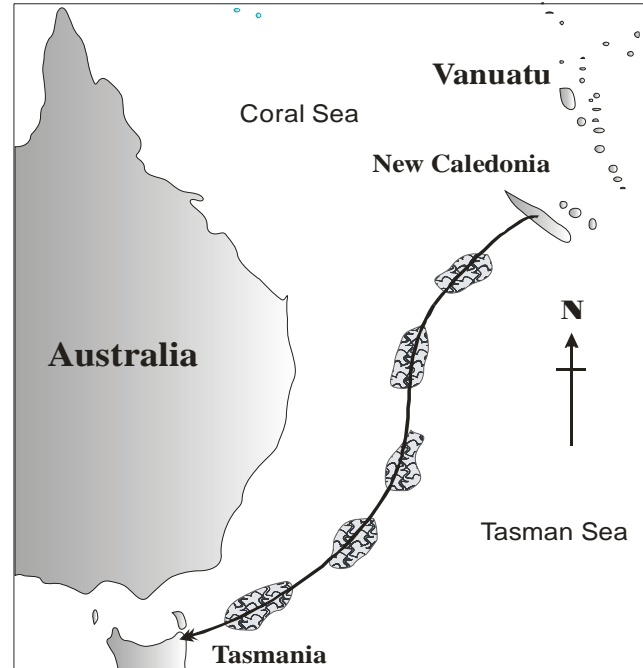
<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.fatsil.org/LOTM/dec99.htm#book#book> A counting book with numbers up to one million in Tasmanian has been created, perhaps a text of limited application.

Clearly there are puzzling issues in understanding the affiliations, both linguistic and genetic, of the Tasmanian peoples, but for every sober appraisal in the literature, there is a discourse from a parallel universe, one where anything is possible. The Tasmanians have become a mirror for unlikely hypotheses, a reflection of the pre-occupations of the times and a rich fabric woven with fantasy. Moreover, this is not a nexus that can be safely consigned to the nineteenth century; in 2004 an article in the PNAS proposed to link the languages of Tasmania with Kusunda, a language isolate in Nepal. This paper can only peer briefly into these swirling mists.

## 2. Early theories

First contact with the Tasmanians was in 1642, but it was not until the second quarter of the nineteenth century, a crucial period for a nascent anthropology in general, when exploration was coming to an end and the study of indigenous peoples began in earnest. The crucial puzzle, as it appeared at the time, was the physical distinctiveness of the Tasmanians, especially as regards their hair. Huxley (1868) argued that the Tasmanians and Australians were distinct physical types and that the affinities of the Tasmanians were with the negritos, whose most proximate representative, according to Huxley, were in New Caledonia. Since there was no trace of such populations on the Australian mainland, and such a long sea-voyage unlikely, they must have journeyed by using now-disappeared islands in the Tasman Sea as stepping stones (Figure 1). Such a theory had no geological basis and was in fact no more credible than Plato's Atlantis, but was opposed only by those who considered the New Caledonian origin credible but supposed that a sea-voyage was possible (Wood-Jones 1935).

**Figure 1. Tasmania peopled from New Caledonia?**



Another solution to the problem of negrito types in the Pacific was canvassed by Allen (1879), who thought that they probably hopped across the Indian Ocean on a now conveniently sunken land ridge (Figure 2);

‘though the Negro is now almost confined to Africa, and is not migratory, yet formerly a ridge of land ran *viâ* Madagascar, the Seychelles, and across to Borneo, and hence there was a path for the mixture of races. The submergence of the ridge, leaving now only the tops of hills above the water, had isolated the Negro and Malay again.’

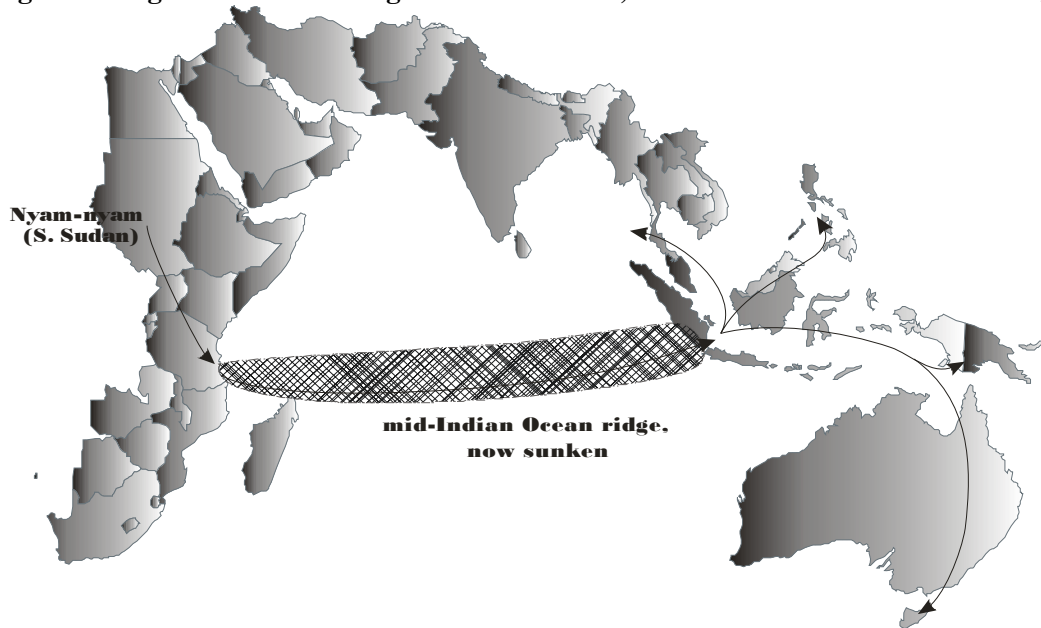
Allen (1879)

Sadly, this conceptual high-point sank beneath the waves like its geological counterpart, leaving the non-migratory Negroes trapped in Africa.

Wunderly (1938) summarises the various theories concerning the origin of the Tasmanians held prior to the Second World War;

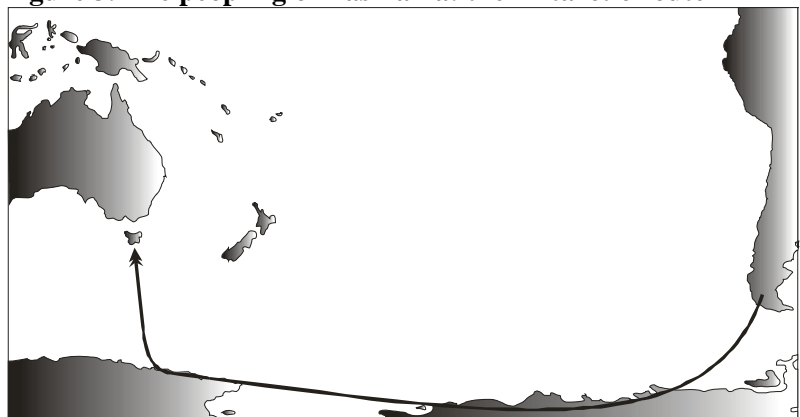
1. That they were autochthonous
2. That they travelled to Tasmania via Antarctica
3. That they arose from the Melanesians, and journeyed more or less directly from an island in Melanesia to Tasmania, the probable island of origin most frequently referred to being New Caledonia.
4. That they were Asiatic Negritos, who migrated to Tasmania via the Australian mainland.

**Figure 2. Migration route of Negroes out of Africa, across the mid-Indian Ocean ridge**



Of these, the most immediately attractive view is the Antarctica hypothesis (Figure 3), its only defect being the lack of a starting point (Cape Horn? The Cape of Good Hope?). But one may imagine the Tasmanians skirting the ice floes and spearing seals as they made their way from Patagonia. Wunderly observes 'the first and second of these views have been abandoned of lack of evidence'. Even the third view he eventually consigns to the dumpster of history together with all those sunken islands off the eastern shores of Australia.

**Figure 3. The peopling of Tasmania: the Antarctic route**



We are left with the fourth model, which is approximately what is believed today, if not expressed in those terms. The view that the Tasmanians reached their island from Australia by island hopping goes back to Bonwick (1870) and was reaffirmed in Ling-Roth's (1899) massive compilation and by the work of Meston (1936). The issue then became whether the Tasmanians simply were Australians whose physical features had been changed by isolation, or whether they were remnants of a former Negrito race, whose Australian representatives had been eliminated by incoming Mongoloids. Still for Wunderly and other scholars of the period, the contrast between the woolly hair of the Tasmanians and the straight hair of the Australians remained a problem. Wunderly (1938:200) wisely observed that 'undue weight should never be allotted to a single characteristic, especially of a superficial nature, when attempting to trace racial origins'. Nonetheless, he proposed to resolve the issue by a 'practical enquiry' by crossing a 'Mongoloid and a Negroid'.

Without resorting to Wunderly's ethically dubious solution, this issue continues to spark debate. Archaeological evidence has provided a sufficient demonstration that Tasmania was settled from Australia and for most authors, physiognomic differences are merely a consequence of genetic isolation (e.g. Turner 1914; Tiegs 1927; Ryan 1981). Although skull-morphometrics have a poor reputation these days, it is worth recording that early studies of Australian and Tasmanian crania reached exactly the same conclusion. Was it then the case that the Tasmanians were a relic of an earlier wave of the peopling of Australia? This view had been espoused, to a broad chorus of disapproval, by the geographer Griffith Taylor (1927). Two historians,

Keith Windschuttle and Tim Gillin (2002) have re-opened this debate under the challenging title *The extinction of the Australian pygmies*. Windschuttle is a historian who has made a career debunking post-modern retellings of history, but most of his targets have been more conventional; the refashioning of the Aztecs into gentle victims of circumstance and the like. But he takes on the prehistory of Australia in typically robust fashion. Broadly speaking, the claim is that there is an earlier literature which has been 'air-brushed' out of academic accounts of Aboriginal Australia, describing short-statured peoples in the Queensland rain-forest. Once known as the 'Barrineans' after Lake Barrine, the peoples in question were the Djabugandji, Mbarbaram (Barbaram) and Yidinjdji (Indindji). The first evidence for the unusual characteristics of these people was gathered by the physical anthropologists, Norman Tindale and Joseph Birdsell in 1938, following up on some striking photographs<sup>2</sup>. Tindale & Lindsay (1963) summarised the results of their research as follows; 'their small size, tightly curled hair, child-like faces, peculiarities in their tooth dimensions and their blood groupings showed that they were different from other Australian Aborigines and had a strong strain of Negrito in them' and made an explicit comparison with the Tasmanians. In the meantime, Birdsell (1967) was propagating the 'trihybrid' theory according to which Australia had been subject to three waves of peopling, the first of which were Negritos, whose only remnants were the Barrineans and the by-then extinct Tasmanians. The Negritos were eliminated or assimilated by two further waves, the Murrayians (said to resemble the Ainu) and the Carpenterians (Veddas exiled from Sri Lanka). Bizarrely, this theory was celebrated in a children's book narrating the journey of a pygmy family walking into Australia (Tindale & Lindsay 1954).

It is safe to say, that despite a long-running and doughty defence by Birdsell, this has not been incorporated into mainstream accounts of the prehistory of Australia. Flood (1999) and Mulvaney & Kamminga (1999) both dismiss the trihybrid theory as irrelevant to modern accounts. According to Windschuttle and Gillin (2002) this is in part not an evidence-based view, but simply a reflection of a dominant ideology within the academic system. The growth of pan-Aboriginalism encouraged a simplified narrative of one people whose land was stolen by intrusive Europeans. At the same time, increasing scepticism about the results of physical anthropology and the realisation of the range of variation that can co-exist within contemporaneous populations made it seem ever more unlikely that the taphonomic evidence would uncover incontrovertible evidence for the waves proposed by Birdsell.

Nonetheless, it does seem that there are also problems for those espousing homogeneity and highly local evolution to explain the situation. In many ways this issue strongly resembles the debate over the peopling of the Americas. For decades, American archaeologists have asserted the homogeneity and late date of New World populations, relating this to a mythological opening and closing of an ice-free corridor across the Bering Strait. In the face of mounting evidence for the earlier dates and physical diversity of Amerindian populations and in particular their ethnolinguistic diversity, ever more strained arguments have had to be deployed. The underlying logic appears to be much the same; the need for a unitary narrative of European imperialism. But undisputed early dates for Siberia, combined with contemporary ethnographic evidence, point to continuous flow of populations following the southern edge of the ice-floes, using small boats to bridge any gaps. Given that Siberia is notorious for ethnolinguistic diversity it should be quite unsurprising that the New World reflects this situation, if magnified a hundredfold.

So with Australia. Once the way was opened, as much as 55,000 BP, nothing prevented the arrival of different populations from different regions with different physical characteristics. The diverse and hard-to-classify languages of the northeast point strongly to such a pattern (Harvey 1997). Results from mtDNA analyses can be a two-edged sword, but as far as recent studies go, they point to similar multiplicity. Redd & Stoneking (1999:808) say 'These mtDNA results do not support a close relationship between Aboriginal Australian and PNG populations but instead suggest multiple migrations in the peopling of Sahul'. The peopling of Australia was probably both fragmented and occurred over a long period; there is nothing to suggest that remnant populations might not have survived until the near-present just as the Hadza and the Kwadi in Africa tell of a much greater prior diversity (Blench 2006). The Barrineans might be 'Tasmanoids'

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<sup>2</sup> One of these, taken of an encampment near Cairns in 1890, shows a group of individuals in front of a banana-leaf shelter that is irresistibly reminiscent of African rain-forest pygmies. As Windschuttle and Gillin (2002) point out, it is only with a scale that allows you to see the average height of the population is only about 145 cm. that the image becomes really striking.

or they might be unconnected; constructing the debate as a war between single and multiple wave theories probably generates more heat than light.

### 3. Greenberg and Indo-Pacific

Disappointingly for Tindell and Windschuttle, the languages of the Barrineans appear not to be distinctive, or at any rate to resemble closely those of neighbouring full stature peoples. However, to try and bolster their argument, Windschuttle and Gillin (2002) unfortunately make appeal to one of the more improbable macrophyla hypotheses in linguistics, the 'Indo-Pacific' theory of Joseph Greenberg. Greenberg is known principally for his classification of African languages and more recently for his attempt to shoehorn New World languages into three phyla (Greenberg 1963, 1987). But in Greenberg's (1971) Indo-Pacific theory he discerned connections between Andamanese, most Papuan languages and Tasmanian. Although this purported to be a purely linguistic exercise but it conveniently swept up all the languages of the crinkly-haired populations in the region that were not clearly Austronesian.

Indo-Pacific is one of the more recent attempts to try and find a linguistic relative of the Tasmanian languages. The earliest attempt at a synthesis I can trace is Latham's Appendix to Jukes' (1847) *Narrative of the surveying voyage of H.M.S. Fly*. Latham observes;

- a) The Tasmanian language is fundamentally the same for the whole island although spoken in not less than four dialects mutually unintelligible
- b) It has affinities with the Australian
- c) It has affinities with the New Caledonian

It is doubtful whether the affinities between the Tasmanian and Australian are stronger than those between the Tasmanian and New Caledonian.

These views are reprised in Latham's (1862) *Elements of Comparative Philology* and suggest that Huxley (see above) was aware of them when propounding his own branch of island hopping.

Still more wayward views began to be expounded; in a comment on Allen (1879:49), a Mr. Hyde Clarke observed 'Then there was the curious circumstance that in the Tasmanian languages were traces of the Nyam-Nyam of the African Lake Regions'. Curr (1886-7) generally a respected scholar, saw as many Tasmanian cognates with African languages as with the languages of the nearby mainland. Schmidt (1952) provides a valuable overview of the main waypoints in Tasmanian language scholarship as well as being the first near-complete synthesis of sources. Plomley (1976) sets out the data known up to that point without advancing any hypothesis concerning the affiliations of Tasmanian. His work was completed by Crowley & Dixon (1991) who provide the most complete outline of the likely phonology and morphology of Tasmanian.

Greenberg's work on African languages gained him many supporters and non-specialists frequently supposed that the linguistic community might come round to Indo-Pacific, after a suitable interval. But this has turned out to be a forlorn hope; Indo-Pacific has met with almost no assent from specialists in the field. In an evaluation of this theory, Wurm (1975) noted some resemblances between West Papuan and Andamanese. However, additional decades of data on Papuan and a recent synthesis of Papuan prehistory (Pawley et al. 2005) has not increased support for the Indo-Pacific hypothesis. So can Indo-Pacific be consigned to a Sargasso Sea of dissolved theories? Unfortunately not; a high-profile publication in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences shows that it lives on in unexpected ways (Whitehouse et al. 2004). In part, their abstract reads;

*The Kusunda people of central Nepal have long been regarded as a relic tribe of South Asia. They are, or were until recently, seminomadic hunter-gatherers, living in jungles and forests, with a language that shows no similarities to surrounding languages. Our research indicates that the Kusunda language is a member of the Indo-Pacific family.*

The evidence, as so often in these cases, turns out to be lexical. I quote below the very small number of cases that incorporate Tasmanian examples;

**Short.** Kusunda *potoə* Indo-Pacific: Fayu *bosa* “small,” Sehudate *buse* “small,” Monumbo *put*, Bahinemo *bɔʰa*, Northeast Tasmanian *pute* ~ *pote* “small,” Southeast Tasmanian *pute* “small,” Middle Eastern<sup>3</sup> Tasmanian *pote* “small.”

**Unripe.** Kusunda *kátuk* (H) “bitter,” *qatu* “bitter”= Indo-Pacific: Kede *kat* “bad,” Chariar *kedeŋ* “bad,” Juwoi *kadak* “bad (character),” Moi *kasi*, Biaka *kwatəkə* “green,” Grand Valley Dani *katekka* “green,” Foe *kʰasigi*, Siagha *kadayai*, Kaeti *ketet*, Orokolo *kairuka* “green,” Doromu *kati*, Northeast Tasmanian *kati* “bad,” Southeast Tasmanian *kati* “bad.”

This may seem a curious choice of words for Indo-Pacific speakers to carry from the Himalayas, but motives in prehistory *are* always somewhat obscure. Similarly obscure was the choice of journal in which to publish this controversial thesis, a journal so unused to linguistics that it appears not to possess the correct fonts to print phonetic characters properly.

Indo-Pacific only exists in the eye of the believer and most believers have been Greenberg acolytes such as Merrit Ruhlen or archaeologists such as Colin Renfrew. Those most in a position to evaluate the hypothesis have given a resoundingly negative verdict. This is not the hidebound conservatism of an establishment unable to accept the bold ventures of long-rangers but a rational critique based on long experience of the detailed evidence.

This should not disappoint us; the efforts of early classifiers, in an era when there was no real evidence for time-scales, should be seen in a sympathetic light. But since we now know that Tasmania was occupied as much as 40,000 years ago, there is no reason to assume its languages have not been developing a distinctive character during most of that period. It is highly improbable that they should now show demonstrable links with their nearest relatives, even assuming that these could be determined. Attempts to have the world’s isolate language groups cavort promiscuously on a Procrustean bed of macrophyla are attractive after the perverse fashion of late-night television, but should not distract us from more serious tasks. We cannot know that Nepalese hunter-gatherers did not wander across half the world in deep time carrying a word for ‘small’, but it is hardly worth proceeding on the assumption that this is so.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Middle Eastern’ here does not indicate some as yet unacknowledged Semitic input into Tasmanian.

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