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## **MORE UNCONSIDERED TRIFLES:** Papers to Celebrate the Career of Sandra Bowdler

Jane Balme and Sue O'Connor (eds)



# australian ARCHAEOLOGY

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# THE LANGUAGES OF THE TASMANIANS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE PEOPLING OF AUSTRALIA: Sensible and Wild Theories

Roger Blench

## Abstract

The languages of the Indigenous peoples of Tasmania became extinct in the late nineteenth century and only very fragmentary records remain. What is known about the languages and the conclusions of mainstream linguists are briefly described. As a consequence of the difficulties in interpreting this material, hypotheses concerning the classification of the languages have been the focus of a variety of theories linked to the peopling of Tasmania, some of which are best described as highly speculative. The paper reviews a selection of these theories and the controversies concerning them. It focuses particularly on a new version of Joseph Greenberg's 'Indo-Pacific' theory and the problematic nature of such publications, as well as claims that the 'true' history of Negrito peoples has been air-brushed from the record as a consequence of political correctness.

## Introduction

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 1938:198).

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 and Dixon 1981:420).

The Indigenous people of Tasmania probably crossed the Bass Strait to the island some 40,000 years ago and were there cut-off by a rise in sea-levels 10,000–12,000 years ago (O'Connor and Chappell 2003:21). Their distinctive languages and cultures were cut short by an appalling genocide in the middle of the nineteenth century. Due to the fragmentary nature of surviving testimonies on Tasmanian language and culture and thus the difficulties of determining its affiliation, it became a particular focus for armchair theorists and thus a mirror for unlikely hypotheses, reflecting the preoccupations of each period and a fabric richly woven with fantasy. This paper reviews the often speculative theories of the peopling of Tasmania and hypotheses about relationships between the Tasmanian languages and those elsewhere.

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. In addition, it now appears that some of the 'Tasmanian' speakers were actually from South Australia and spoke Pama-Nyungan languages which would have added further to the confusion (anonymous referee, pers. comm., 2008).

Schmidt (1952) was the first linguist to synthesise these materials using modern methods while Crowley and Dixon (1981:395) analysed the data from the perspective of Australian languages. Their conclusions were that:

- Tasmanian languages appear to have had a phonological system similar to those of languages on the Australian mainland;
- Tasmanian languages seem typologically similar to languages of the Australian family; there are insufficient cognates and systematic correspondences to justify even a tentative hypothesis of genetic relationship; and
- there is *no* evidence that Tasmanian languages were *not*, at a considerable time depth, related to languages spoken on the mainland.

Terry Crowley describes 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. A counting book with numbers up to one million in Tasmanian has also been created, perhaps a text of limited application. But what such words represent is anyway uncertain since the communities on the Hunter Islands were artificial, brought together by missionaries from different bands and their speech may thus have been a creole.

Crowley and Dixon (1981:404) emphasise the difficulties of assessing how many Tasmanian languages there were, but the lexical counts they were able to undertake give a tentative figure of 'between eight and twelve'. These fall into at least two and possibly four phyla. They note that a very few apparent cognates with mainland Australian exist, for example the words for 'tongue' (Tasmanian *tullah* vs. Australian *ḏalan*) and 'two' (Tasmanian *boula* vs. Australian *bula*). But as they also observe, similarities of this type might be found with any of the language phyla of the world.

In most cases, it has been assumed that the Tasmanian languages arrived in Tasmania along with a migration of people, although it must be recognised that languages can and often do spread without concomitant shifts in populations. Some linguists consider that this would make the affiliation of Tasmanian languages in principle irresolvable as the time limit on the reconstruction of ancestral languages is around 8000 years ago. Trask (1993:377) says

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‘[W]e cannot hope to identify any ancestral languages which were spoken more than a few thousand years ago – perhaps 6000–8000 years ago in a few particularly favourable cases, probably not more than 3000–4000 years ago in most cases.’ However, such a view is increasingly being challenged, both in Australia (where proposals for a reconstruction of Proto-Australian are being taken seriously) and elsewhere in the world where very old dates are being attributed to macrophyla (see review in Blench 1999).

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 (Bonwick 1870; Huxley 1868) 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 1977). One of the largest collections of Tasmanian skulls was blown to pieces when a bomb fell on the Royal College of Surgeons during World War II. Only in recent years has there been some restitution, with the reburial of Truganini and the return of other Tasmanian materials to the descendant communities.

Clearly there are genuinely 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. Moreover, this is not a nexus that can be safely consigned to the nineteenth century; in 2004 Whitehouse *et al.* proposed to link the languages of Tasmania with Kusunda, a language isolate in Nepal. I can only peer briefly into these swirling mists.

### Early Theories

First European 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 that 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 and supposed that a sea-voyage was possible (Wood-Jones 1935 in Wunderly 1938).

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 *via* Madagascar, the Seychelles, and across to Borneo, and hence there was a path for

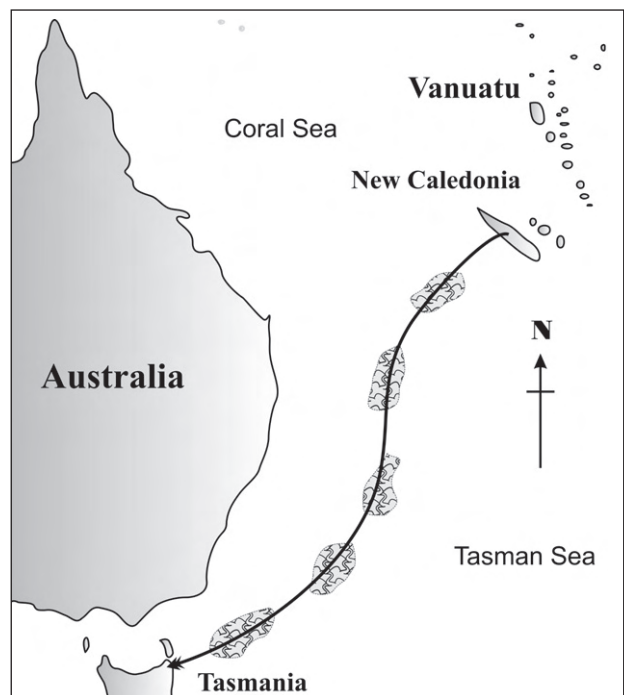


Figure 1 Tasmania peopled from New Caledonia?

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 1879:40).

Sadly, this imaginative solution 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 World War II:

- that they were autochthonous;
- that they travelled to Tasmania via Antarctica;
- 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; and
- that they were Asiatic Negritos, who migrated to Tasmania via the Australian mainland.

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 (1938:198) observes ‘the first and second of these views have been abandoned for lack of evidence’. Even this third view he eventually consigns to the dumpster of history together with all those sunken islands off the eastern shores of Australia.

We are left with the fourth model, which is approximately what is believed today, if not expressed in those terms. The view that Tasmania was peopled 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

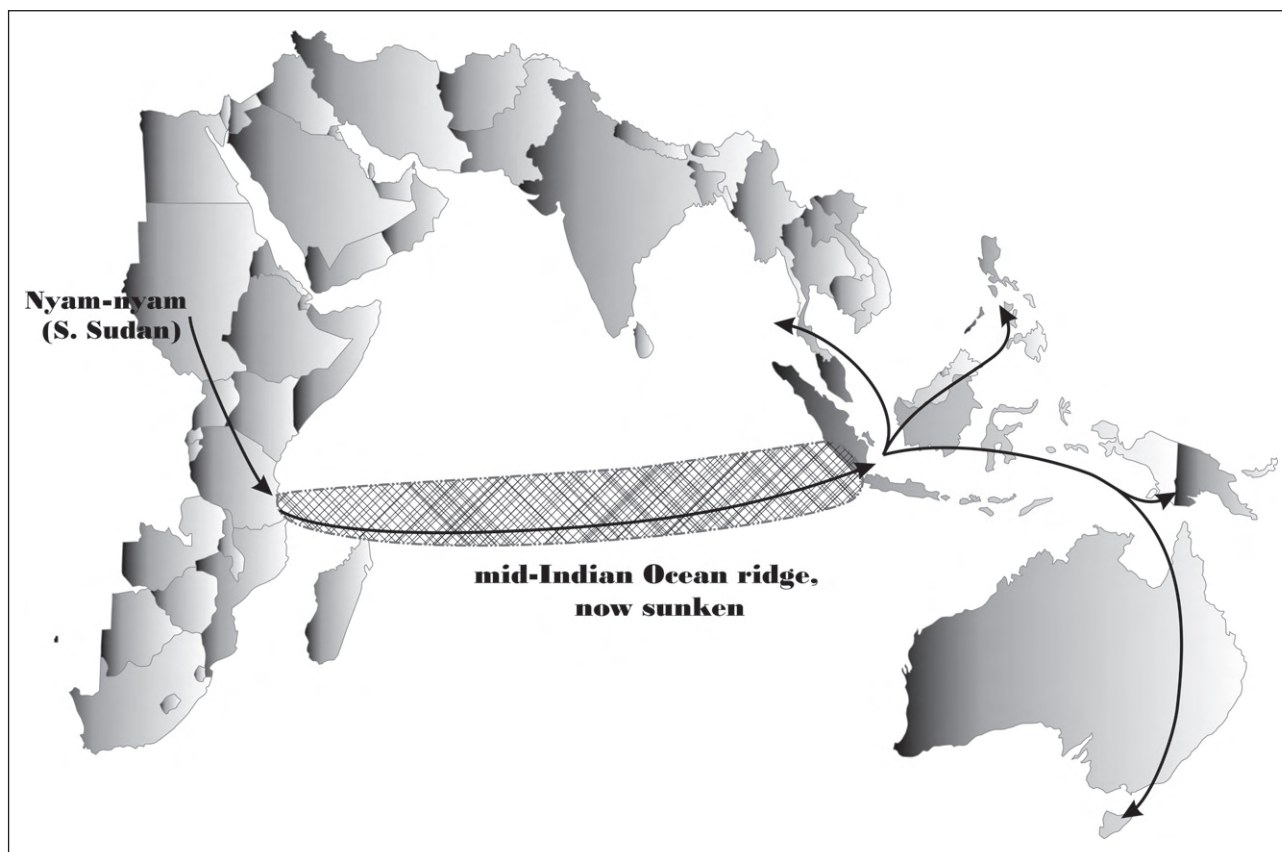


Figure 2 Migration route of Negroes out of Africa, across the mid-Indian Ocean ridge.

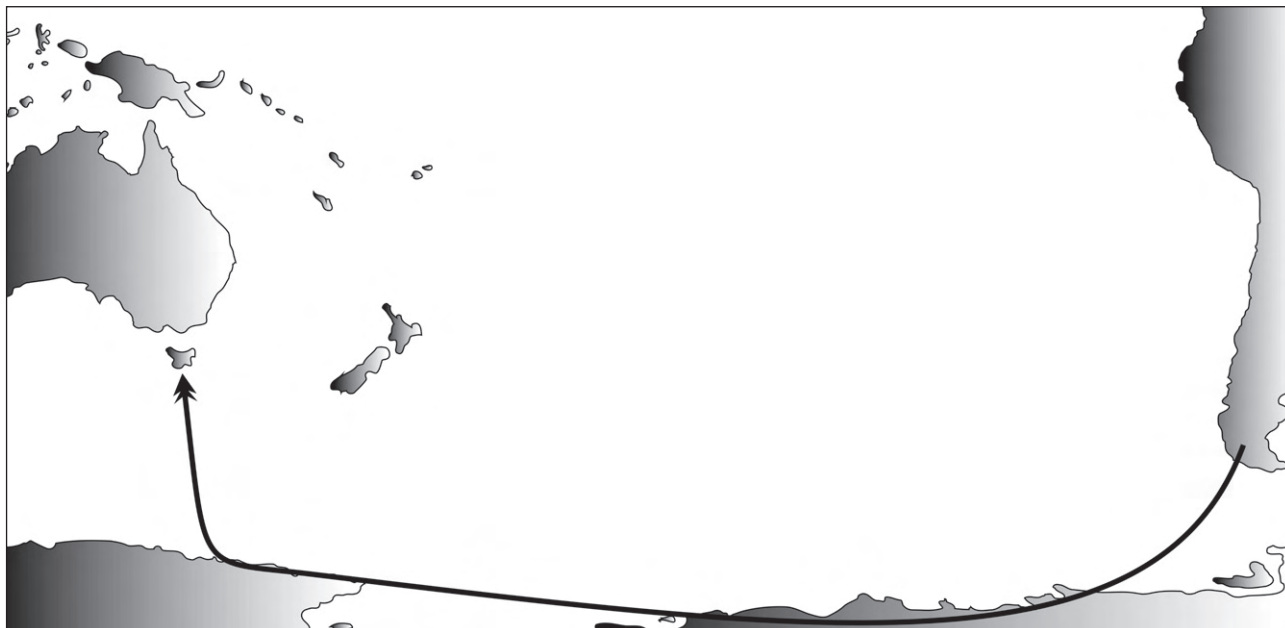
they were remnants of a former Negrito race, whose Australian representatives had been eliminated by incoming Mongoloids. Still for Wunderly and other scholars of the period, the contrast between the woolly hair of the Tasmanians and the straight hair of the Australians remained a problem. Wunderly (1938:200) 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. Ryan 1981; Tiegs 1927; Turner 1914). 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. Pardoe (1991:1) observed that 'Tasmanians have diverged no more than might be expected if Tasmania were still attached to the mainland'. 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 reopened 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 rainforest. 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 in 1938 by the physical anthropologists, Norman Tindale and Joseph Birdsell, following up on some striking photographs. One of these, taken of an encampment near Cairns in 1890, shows a group of individuals in front of a wild banana leaf shelter (identified as such in the caption) that is irresistibly reminiscent of African rainforest 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 145cm. that the image becomes really striking. Tindale and 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. Despite these claims, it is important to emphasise that these populations speak relatively standard Pama-Nyungan languages, and no evidence for significant lexical substrates has been advanced.

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 Tasmanians. The Negritos were eliminated or assimilated by two further waves, the Murrayians (said to resemble the Ainu) and the Carpenterians (Veddids exiled



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

from Sri Lanka). Bizarrely, this theory was celebrated in a children's book which narrated the journey of a pygmy family walking into Australia (Tindale and 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 and 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. For Ballard (2006), 'Pygmies' can be entered onto the charge-sheet of racist Western science, feeding colonial stereotypes as part of the process of subjugation. Whether this type of tired argument can really make a contribution to scientific debate is open to question, but increasing scepticism about the results of physical anthropology and the realisation of the range of variation that can co-exist within contemporaneous populations does make it seem ever more unlikely that taphonomy 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. Australia has not been cut-off from the rest of the planet and there remains a place for multientry hypotheses and internal diversification after entry into the continent. 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 supposed 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 (see review in Campbell 1997). 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 a continuous flow of populations following the southern edge of the ice-floes, using small boats to bridge any gaps (Fladmark 1979). 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 populations from other regions with different physical characteristics (Harvey 1997). There are some common elements and it has been suggested they moved into their current location from regions now under the sea. Results from mtDNA analyses can be a two-edged sword, but as far as recent studies go, they point to similar multiplicity. Redd and 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' or they might be unconnected; constructing the debate as a war between single and multiple wave theories probably generates more heat than light.

### Greenberg and Indo-Pacific

Dissappointingly for Tindale and Windschuttle, the languages of the Barrineans closely resemble 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's method is known as 'mass comparison' and it depends not on the classical 'comparative method',



which depends on uncovering systematic correspondences between languages (e.g. Durie and Ross 1996), but rather on the generalised resemblances seen when a large number of languages are compared. In the case when languages are closely related, this can often produce results similar to the comparative method. However, where languages are either not related or have diverged a long time ago, these resemblances can often depend on strained semantic correspondences or *ad hoc* phonetic equivalents. Greenberg is known principally for his successful classification of African languages (Greenberg 1963). But his later proposals, for example Amerind (Greenberg 1987) which proposed to shoehorn most of the languages of the New World into one phylum and Eurasiatic (Greenberg 2000) which seeks genetic connections between almost all the phyla of Eurasia, have generally been heavily criticised. Greenberg's (1971) Indo-Pacific theory discerns connections between Andamanese, most Papuan languages and Tasmanian. Although this purported to be a purely linguistic exercise, it conveniently sweeps 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 (1847:319) observes:

- the Tasmanian language is fundamentally the same for the whole island although spoken in not less than four mutually unintelligible dialects;
- it has affinities with the Australian;
- it has affinities with the New Caledonian; and
- it is doubtful whether the affinities between the Tasmanian and Australian languages 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 '[t]hen there was the curious circumstance that in the Tasmanian languages were traces of the Nyam-Nyam of the African Lake Regions'. Curr (1886-1887), 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 and Dixon (1981) 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 have 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) have not increased support for the Indo-Pacific hypothesis. So can Indo-Pacific be consigned to a Sargasso Sea of ghostly theories? Unfortunately not; a high-profile publication in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 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 (Whitehouse *et al.* 2004:5692).

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 *bo<sup>h</sup>a*, Northeast Tasmanian *pute* ~ *pote* "small," Southeast Tasmanian *pute* "small," Middle Eastern Tasmanian *pote* "small."

**Unripe.** Kusunda *kátuk* (H) "bitter," *qatu* "bitter" = Indo-Pacific: Kede *kat* "bad," Chariar *kedej* "bad," Juwoi *kadak* "bad (character)," Moi *kasi*, Biaka *kwatəkə* "green," Grand Valley Dani *katékka* "green," Foe *k<sup>h</sup>asigi*, Siagha *kadayai*, Kaeti *ketet*, Orokololo *kairuka* "green," Doromu *kati*, Northeast Tasmanian *kati* "bad," Southeast Tasmanian *kati* "bad." (Whitehouse *et al.* 2004:5695; note that 'Middle Eastern' here does not indicate some as yet unacknowledged Semitic input into Tasmanian).

As with so many proposals for remote relationships, the problematic aspect is that the few resemblances are so similar. The identification of genetic affiliation depends on systematic correspondences rather than general similarities and in genuine language families, related words often appear sharply divergent in surface forms.

Even apart from linguistic objections, 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 exotic was the choice of journal in which the authors chose 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. Pawley (n.d.) has recently assessed the main Papuan elements of Indo-Pacific, pointing out that Greenberg had some early insights into what is now called the Trans New Guinea Phylum, but that this was obscured by spurious links with other Papuan phyla and Andamanese. The rejection of Indo-Pacific is not the hidebound conservatism of an establishment unable to accept the bold ventures of long-

rangers but a rational critique based on long acquaintance with the details of the evidence.

This should not disappoint us; the efforts of early classifiers, in an era when there was no real evidence for timescales, should be seen in a sympathetic light. But since we now know that Tasmania was occupied as much as 40,000 years ago, its languages may have been developing a distinctive character during most of that period, especially if the languages on the mainland opposite were replaced by expanding Pama-Nyungan speakers. 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.

### Acknowledgements

Tasmania is far from my usual area, and I would probably never have become interested in it without informal discussions with Sandra Bowdler at various conferences over the years. I would also like to acknowledge the input from the anonymous referees for sharpening up the content.

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