

**Australia : General.****Enright.****Notes on the Aborigines of the North Coast of N.S.W.***By W. J. Enright, B.A.***XII. LANGUAGES.**

It is rather remarkable that, although New South Wales was the first part of Australia to be settled, so little has yet been published on the language of its aboriginal tribes. There are many vocabularies, and those mostly of a scrappy nature, and the only complete grammar of any tribe is that by Threlkeld. The grammar of the tribe which I have called the Katthang was discovered by Professor Elkin to be the Worimi, whose language was the Katthang. This grammar is very incomplete. That of Mathews and Miss Everitt on the Thurrawal language is better, but not as complete as Threlkeld's. Ridley, who was a scholarly man, a product of one of the English universities, collected some incomplete vocabularies of various tribes in northern and north-east New South Wales, but published nothing regarding the grammar of a New South Wales language except the Kamilroi, and that was not complete. Schmidt, the learned editor of *Anthropos*, has described the language of the area occupied by the Worimi as the second oldest in the world, and that of the Yuin who lived on the south-east coast of New South Wales, and that portion of Victoria adjoining it, as the oldest. I am not in a position nor am I competent to criticize his opinion, but the language of the Worimi was very primitive. The same word was used for "I" and "I am," another word meant "we" and "we are."

A comparison of the vocabularies of various tribes or sections of tribes along the east coast from a point a little south of the Clarence River to Botany Bay shows no great variation amongst them. In making that statement one must take into account that very frequently records of the vocabularies were gathered or obtained from men who had little or no education, and that others who had more education did not have a uniform standard of values of the letters of the alphabet they used in placing on record native words. The cases of the nouns were formed by suffixes, and want of knowledge of that led to differences in recording aboriginal names. Want of knowledge of conjugations of verbs would lead to similar errors. Another factor that has led to misleading statements is that the native was a keen naturalist.

He distinguished the different species of animal and vegetable life, and in some, if not all, cases had one name for the female of the species. On one occasion I heard a resident of the Newcastle district who took a

keen interest in the aborigines say that the language of the Lake Macquarie natives differed from that of the natives of Wyong district, and gave as a reason that there was a different word for opossum in each district. As he could not say which species of opossum either name applied to, his argument failed completely. Similarly, in our east coast district we have three species of ironbark. The unlettered native has a name for each, but ask persons who are not interested in the timber trade, botanists or nature students, and most of them only know a tree of any one of the species as an "ironbark." There might be three different aboriginal names collected in three different localities for the "ironbark," but as the inquirer did not recognize the difference in species, he would conclude that there were dialectic or linguistic differences.

During my association with the tribes living on the coast district north of the Hunter River, I learnt that the Kamilroi visited the Worimi of Port Stephens when a Keeparra (initiation) was being held, and after the conclusion of the ceremony exchanged gifts with them. Old intelligent Worimi natives informed me that they had no difficulty in understanding the Kamilroi. Were it otherwise, participation of people of one tribe in the ceremonial of another would have been difficult.

The Brippai who live on the Hastings River had no difficulty in understanding the Kamilroi or the Danghetti, whose territory extended to the boundaries of that of the Kumbangerai. There is a piece of country in New England wedged in between the lands of the Danghetti and the Kamilroi which is occupied by a number of small groups frequently referred to as tribes, of whose language I can find no record.

Mathews described their initiation ceremony, which was called the Burbung, but has left us no record of the language. What I have stated above shows that practically the same tongue was spoken from the Clarence to the Hawkesbury and from that river to Walgett and Moree. The natives of the Clarence River spoke a language very different from those of the country to the south of them. My authority for that statement is that of old Worimi natives who told me that Kamilroi was a "nice language," an "easy language," etc. Kumbangerai they referred to as a "hard language," or "one they could not understand."

Dr. Capell, whose authority on linguistics is established, has studied the Kumbangerai language, but so far the result of his studies has not been, but I am informed will be, published.

Assuming my conclusions are correct, it appears that the Clarence River is the boundary between two classes of migrants, one of them travelling down the east coast, and the other from the north-west.

As the tribes south of the Manning did not have the marriage sections, although their neighbours the Kamilroi and Brippai, with practically the same language and initiation ceremonies did, further questions are suggested:

- (a) Was the cult of marriage sections gradually penetrating easterly and south-easterly ?
- (b) Was it a custom of the Kamilroi acquired from tribes further north and west which would have been adopted by the Worimi if white settlement had been delayed a little longer ?
- (c) Did the marriage customs of the Kamilroi branch east from the Kamilroi to the Danghetti and Brippai ?

I doubt if those questions will ever be satisfactorily answered. The material has been lost. I think, however, we can safely conclude that the Kamilroi sectional system was gradually extending.

The Keeparra was the great school where different tribes met in friendly intercourse and imbibed from each other knowledge of various practices which would be considered by their respective headmen and adopted if they appealed to them. I have had evidence that tribes borrowed from each other emblems in wood or stone engraved with various symbols and the accompanying ritual songs. I have known of one of those pieces of wood to travel from the Macleay to the Tweed River. That travel extended over a period of years. The words of the song would travel with it and be used even by tribes who did not understand it. At some Keeparra it has perhaps attracted the attention of the headman of a visiting tribe, and when his tribe decided to hold a Keeparra he would mention it to the meeting of headmen who would, if they approved of it, instruct the messenger who carried the invitation to the neighbouring peoples to attend, to ask for the loan of the particular article which would, with others, be carefully secreted away after the conclusion of the teaching of the initiates.

Recently Mr. A. Edwards of Salisbury told me that his father was shown a tree on the upper part of the Chichester Valley, near an old ceremonial ring still visible, in which were secreted the ritual pieces. After examining them he replaced them. That occurred about seventy-five years ago. The tree itself has long disappeared. Perhaps before it disappeared the natives removed those objects which were sacred to them.

I was to have been entrusted with the collection of a north coast tribe who thought that the days of the Keeparra were numbered, but an uncautious answer on my part aroused the ire of one man who said he would never be a party to handing them over to be put in a museum. Professor Elkin, who was present, endeavoured to get over the difficulty caused by my blunder, but failed.

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