



Bathurst and Melville Islands, northern Australia

REGIONAL GROUPS

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1 <i>ḡikəlawila</i> people of <i>ḡikəla'ru</i> | 8 <i>marəkawijaḡəpila</i> people of <i>marəkawijaḡə</i> |
| 2 <i>wuḡaḡkuwila</i> people of <i>wuḡaḡ'ku</i> | 9 <i>wuḡaḡkuwila</i> people of <i>wuḡaḡ'ku</i> |
| 3 <i>malawila</i> people of <i>ma'lau</i> | 10 <i>maruawila</i> people of <i>maru'au</i> |
| 4 <i>miḡkuwila</i> people of <i>miḡ'ku</i> | 11 <i>ḡurupula</i> people of <i>ḡurupi</i> |
| 5 <i>munupula</i> people of <i>munupi</i> | 12 <i>jaimpi</i> people of <i>jimpinari</i> |
| 6 <i>jimiḡuwila</i> people of <i>jimi'lju</i> | 13 <i>aḡaḡḡitarila</i> people of <i>aḡaḡḡitari</i> |
| 7 <i>aḡiliwila</i> people of <i>aḡili</i> | 14 <i>mantiimpula</i> people of <i>mantiimpi</i> |

INTRODUCTION

1 THE LANGUAGE

1.1 Location

Tiwi is the language of the Aboriginal people of Melville and Bathurst Islands near Darwin on the north coast of Australia.¹ The two islands constitute a single geographical unit and tribal area of approximately 3000 square miles, being separated by only a narrow channel, in places not much more than half a mile across. They are separated from the Australian mainland by the Clarence Strait to the south and the Dundas Strait to the east, and their distance from the continental coastline varies from about fifty to about fifteen miles at the narrowest points. The fifteen-mile gap to the south, however, between Cape Gambier (the southern extremity of Melville Island) and Gunn Point on the mainland opposite, is partly bridged by a chain of small islands extending north from the mainland, and the channel between Cape Gambier and the northernmost of these islands is only eight miles wide. In former times the Tiwi were distributed fairly evenly over the length and breadth of both islands — i.e., over a total area approximately one hundred miles from east to west and thirty miles from north to south — but today, as a result of contact with European culture, they are concentrated in four small settlements — a Catholic mission in the south-east corner of Bathurst Island, two welfare settlements in the north-west of Melville Island and a forestry settlement also in the western part of Melville Island. Apart from these settlements, the islands are uninhabited and untouched by the hand of man.

1.2 Physical isolation

The close proximity of Melville and Bathurst Islands to the Australian mainland would naturally lead one to suppose that there must have been a long history of close contact between the Tiwi and the mainland tribes nearest to them. This supposition would certainly be erroneous, however, as all the available evidence indicates that there was scarcely any contact between the Tiwi and the mainland tribes, and that the Tiwi were, in fact, virtually isolated from the outside world before the first successful settlement of Europeans on the islands early in the twentieth century.²

The evidence which bears on the isolation of the Tiwi is of three main kinds — cultural, linguistic and historical — and may be briefly summarised as follows. Firstly, Tiwi material culture differs from that of the mainland in a number of striking, although not fundamental, respects. The boomerang and the woomera — two of the most characteristic artefacts of the mainland — are missing on the islands; on the other hand, the most important objects of Tiwi ritual and ceremonial, their grave posts, are not found anywhere on the mainland. Tiwi art, too, is very unlike that of the mainland, being more highly conventionalised and indeed almost non-representational. The differences between Tiwi and mainland culture cannot be

fully described here, but it can be stated that they are such as would not be expected if close contact had existed between the Tiwi and mainland Aborigines.³

Secondly, the Tiwi language, while it is clearly of Australian Aboriginal stock, differs very considerably from the languages of the nearby mainland. On the lexical level especially, the dissimilarity is almost total as there are virtually no lexical cognates. This degree of lexical dissimilarity suggests a very long period of isolation from mainland languages.

Thirdly, Europeans who lived in the area in the nineteenth century (either on Melville Island itself or on the nearby mainland) all gave the same picture of lack of contact between the Tiwi and the mainland tribes. Major John Campbell, who was commandant of the British garrison on Melville Island from 1825-1829 never saw any non-Tiwi visitors during his time there, and was of the opinion that the Tiwi never went to the mainland (Campbell 1834:158). The ethnologist Earl, who spent some time at Port Essington to the east of Melville Island in the 1840s, makes it clear that there was complete lack of contact between the Tiwi and the tribes of Cobourg Peninsula (Earl 1853). Foelsche, a police inspector in Darwin in the latter part of the nineteenth century, mentions the occasional raids the Tiwi made on the mainland for the purpose of stealing women, but had apparently never seen any Tiwi himself and had no other knowledge of them (Foelsche 1881). There is, in fact, every indication that Europeans living on the mainland opposite Melville and Bathurst Islands knew virtually nothing of the Tiwi and had never even seen them before the islands began to be opened up to the outside world at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The reasons why the Tiwi did not cross to the mainland regularly are not hard to find. First, there was the lack of motivation for making the crossing. The Tiwi were not short of food or of any of the necessities of Aboriginal life. There was nothing they lacked which could be supplied by going to the mainland, and hence no reason for crossing. Secondly, there was the lack of suitable boats for making the crossing. Like all other Aborigines, the Tiwi had only frail canoes made out of a single strip of bark, and while long journeys in these were by no means impossible, any sea voyage in such a craft would have been a hazardous enterprise and would not have been undertaken very often without sufficient motivation. Thirdly, the currents in the narrow part of Clarence Strait south of Cape Gambier are rapid and dangerous, even for modern boats, and much more so for bark canoes.

1.3 Typological characterisation

Tiwi is a polysynthetic mainly agglutinative language,⁴ predominantly prefixing, noun incorporating, and of the type in which synthesis is in the verb. In other words it is a language in which all the elements of a sentence may be combined in a single highly complex morphological structure. The Tiwi verb is, in effect, a sentence in miniature, containing within itself not only pronominal reference to subject and object but also markers of tense, aspect, mood and voice, besides various other kinds of information, such as proximity and time of day. For example, the sentence 'He came and stole my wild honey this morning while I was asleep' may be translated by the single word *jinauatəmənijilipənəmaʃatumanəlapiankiŋa*, and 'He grabbed me by the foot as I was dancing in the evening' by the single word *jimanikəmarikuənəpəmaliŋa*. This potential for developing morphological structures of such a very high degree of complexity, while fairly common in North America, is quite exceptional in Australia. Nothing quite like it has been found anywhere else in the continent, or on the Australian islands.⁵

Most striking and unusual of all (for an Australian language) is the capacity which Tiwi has for incorporating noun-like forms into the structure of the verb, principally as direct object. For instance, in the first of the two examples given above, the noun object 'wild honey' is represented by the incorporated form *maʃatumanəlapī-*, and, in the second, the noun object 'foot' is represented by *məli-*. In this feature of its syntax Tiwi is almost unique in Australia, as, although noun incorporation has been reported in a few other Australian languages,⁶ its development in these

languages is only in a very embryonic stage. Strangely enough, almost exactly similar noun incorporation is found in certain American Indian languages.⁷

1.4 Genetic relations

Although it is clear from the deep structure, semantics, general morphological type and phonology that Tiwi is an Australian Aboriginal language, there is very little that can be said at present about its genetic relations with other Australian languages. Work done by Capell (Capell 1940, 1942) has shown that prefixing languages are mainly confined to an area in the north of the continent, and that noun-classifying languages (like Tiwi) are also mainly in the north; Tiwi is consequently shown to have more in common with the languages of its area than with the languages of other areas. There are a great many languages in this northern area, however, and the work of establishing Tiwi's genetic relationships with these other languages has not yet made any progress.

Lexical comparisons are quite useless for the purpose of establishing Tiwi's genetic relationships, as all that such comparisons ever reveal is that Tiwi has virtually no lexical cognates with any other Australian language — even with Jiwadja and Larakia, the two languages which are its closest neighbours geographically, each being separated from it by only about fifteen miles of water. It is to be assumed that Tiwi has been isolated from the mainland for several centuries, and that, owing to the very rapid rate of lexical replacement under Aboriginal conditions,⁸ the vocabulary has been almost entirely replaced during this period. Occasional cognates may be found in languages here and there, but the number would never work out at even one per cent if expressed as a percentage of an adequate sample. It is thus fairly certain that Tiwi's genetic relationships will never be established through lexical comparison but only through structural comparison, but this work of structural comparison has yet to be undertaken.

1.5 Dialects

Before their concentration into the present settlements by European influence in the twentieth century, the Tiwi were divided into fourteen regional groups or sub-tribes, each of which lived and hunted in its own area, and, except on the occasions of big tribal gatherings, did not have much contact with other groups, except for those immediately adjacent to it. The most distant groups were separated by well over 100 miles and must have had very little direct contact with one another. There is thus some reason to expect to find appreciable dialectal differences in the language.

Whether there are in fact dialectal differences in Tiwi has not yet been established as no formal study of this question has been attempted. It can be said, however, that, if there are dialectal differences, they cannot be of a major order, as the material collected for the present work was obtained from informants belonging to various regional groups both on Melville Island and on Bathurst Island, and does not reveal any obvious dialectal differences. Now it is probable that dialectal study cannot be very fruitfully attempted, as the various regional groups have been living together at settlements for some decades.

Hart's view that there is a special variety of the language for use in song and ritual (Hart 1930a:178) was substantiated, but time did not permit much study of this variety of the language. It differs from normal spoken Tiwi very considerably in lexis, as many old words and incorporated forms which have died out in speech have been retained in song. However, it is unlikely that it differs from ordinary spoken Tiwi in syntax and morphology. The view expressed by some researchers that the women speak a different variety of the language from the men is entirely without substance. There is also no parallel in Tiwi to the 'mother-in-law' language (used for addressing certain relatives) found by Dixon in Dyrbal (1968:19).