

PART ONE

1. THE FITZROY CROSSING AREA

It is estimated that there were about 500 Aboriginal languages spoken in Australia at the time of the first European settlement. (Berndt & Berndt, 1964:40) Of these, the majority were to be found in the fertile coastal areas. Details can be found on the map by O'Grady, Wurm and Hale (1966). Most of these languages have become extinct and Aborigines who live in these areas now speak mainly English. Among the Aborigines who still retain their tribal identities there are probably up to 100 languages still spoken.

1.1 HISTORY

The history of Aborigines in the Fitzroy Crossing area is described by Kolig (1973:38). Note that throughout this quote the languages referred to by Kolig as Njigina, Wolmadjeri and Julbaridja are the same as those referred to as Nyigina, Walmatjari and Yulbaridja respectively.

First intensive contacts between Aborigines and Europeans in the Fitzroy River region occurred in the last decade of last century. The clash of societies resulted in the partial annihilation of Aboriginal groups originally having inhabited the Fitzroy area. Descendants from these groups identify today as Bunaba, Njigina and Gunian.

... The small numbers remaining were subject to stringent acculturative influences. In particular early European settlers gave little consideration to the cultural separateness of Aborigines and enforced compliance and conformity with a heavy hand.

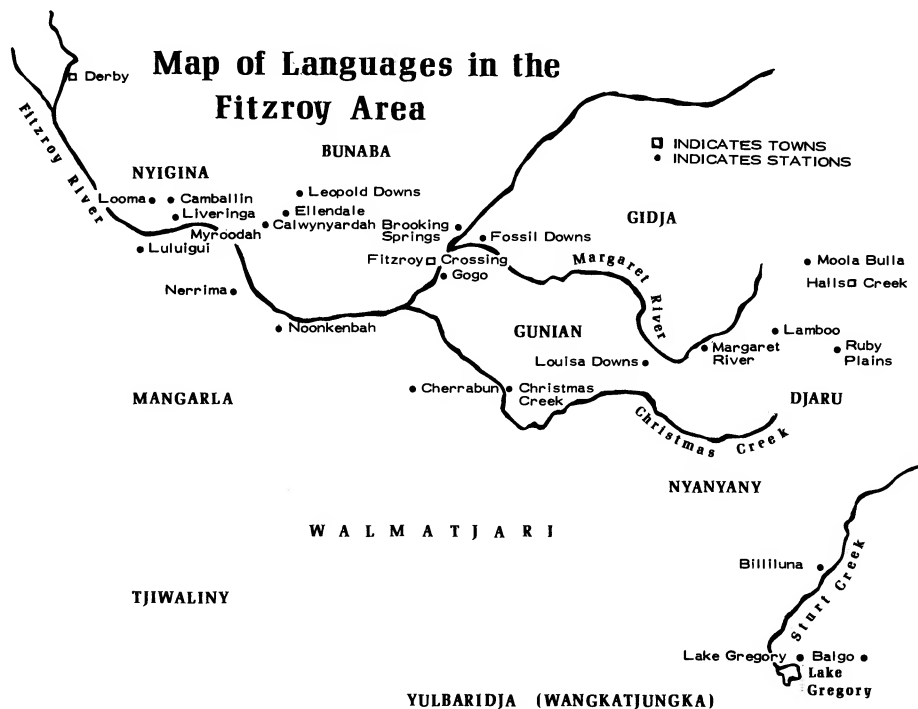
Already in an early phase of contact groups of Desert Aborigines began to infiltrate the area. Initially, these stemmed from the Desert fringe areas and the northern-most parts of the Desert. They were called Wolmadjeri. ... Wolmadjeri settled at first on pastoral stations in the South of the Fitzroy area, some of which do not exist any more. Wolmadjeri then gradually moved north-wards, but in general (sic) did not cross the Fitzroy River in great numbers.

The remains of the indigenes, Njigina and Gunian, succumbed to the influence of the immigrants and culturally were absorbed. Parts of the Njigina moved to Derby and parts of the Gunian took refuge at Fossil Downs, places where they were able to retain their respective identities in the face of the Desert invasion. The remaining indigenes became Wolmadjerized and Wolmadjeri became the dominant element among Aborigines.

Approximately twenty years ago another wave of Desert Aborigines, in general stemming from areas farther South in the Desert, arrived in the Fitzroy area. These are called Julbaridja, southerners, by the Aboriginal population. The Julbaridja who gained a footing on the southern stations in the Fitzroy area, pushed the Wolmadjeri northwards and these advanced and crossed the Fitzroy River now in greater numbers. There Bunaba and Wolmadjeri lived side by side.

The Yulbaridja have since advanced further and crossed the Fitzroy River as a consequence of the Pastoral Award. Each of these groups, Yulbaridja, Walmatjari, Bunaba, Gunian and Nyigina are now represented in the town of Fitzroy Crossing. A few Gidja (Taylor's spelling Kitja) speakers also live in the town. In a survey in 1973 the authors found Walmatjari people spread in a crescent shaped area on stations and in towns from La Grange Mission, Derby, along the Fitzroy River, Fitzroy Crossing, along Christmas Creek, Halls Creek town area and along the road from Halls Creek to Balgo Hills Mission.

In the following map, language names (written in capitals) are placed approximately over the original tribal territory of the group.



1.2 LANGUAGES

Languages of the Fitzroy Crossing area can be divided into northern and southern groups. In this paper the term southern languages means those languages which were spoken south of the Fitzroy River and Christmas Creek. The term northern refers to those languages which were spoken north of the Fitzroy River and Christmas Creek. Yulbaridja and Walmatjari are southern languages. Bunaba, Gunian, Nyigina and Gidja are northern languages.¹ Spelling of language names is taken from Wurm (1972).

The northern and southern languages differ in sound systems and in grammar. For example, southern languages have a three vowel system and the northern languages may have four or five vowels. Those from the north are prefixing languages while those from the south are suffixing languages. (English has both prefixes, as dis- in dis-satisfy and suffixes, as -ment in govern-ment.)

Walmatjari is distantly related to languages spoken as far away as the W.A. Goldfields area, though few Walmatjari speakers know the dialects of the Goldfields. People often speak more than one language within their own language family but there is very little bilingualism between the southern and northern languages, which are from different language families. For example, a Walmatjari speaker will frequently also speak the language of the Yulbaridja but is less likely to speak Bunaba, Gunian, Nyigina or Gidja. In actual fact, Walmatjari has become the prestige language so many people speak it as a second language.

Sometimes people will speak of their language as "hard" or "soft". They are usually referring to dialects, the main differences being in the sound system. The same type of difference occurs in English between British and Australian speech. The Walmatjari spoken by those from east of Fitzroy Crossing is slightly different from that spoken in the west. The western dialect is also referred to as Tjiwaliny.

Because of their contact with non-Aborigines and Aborigines of unrelated languages, it became necessary for the Aborigines to develop a lingua franca to communicate with their neighbours. The language which has developed is a pidgin which includes features of both English and the vernacular languages of the area. Fitzroy Crossing Pidgin is not the same as New Guinea Pidgin, but it shares some features with that language. The English spoken by many of the older people is rather an Aboriginal English, but the children's speech (except in school and when talking to non-Aborigines) is becoming a well-developed pidgin.