

MINISTERIAL-IN-CONFIDENC

DRAFT REPORT ONLY

CONSIDERING TRADITIONAL  
ABORIGINAL AFFILIATIONS  
IN THE ACT REGION

NATALIE KWOK  
CONSULTANT ANTHROPOLOGIST

Prepared for  
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY GOVERNMENT

JANUARY 2013

## CONTENTS

Introduction.....	4
PART ONE: TINDALE'S MAP AND THE EARLY ETHNOGRAPHIC SOURCES.....	7
Mathews.....	7
Ngunawal.....	9
Ngarigo/Ngarigu.....	11
Wolgal/Walgalu.....	12
Further linguistic evidence.....	13
'The Canberra language'.....	15
PART TWO: UNDERSTANDING ABORIGINAL ASSOCIATIONS TO COUNTRY.....	17
Localised attachments and rights to country.....	17
Broader social and territorial relationships.....	18
A note on language named tribes.....	19
Ceremonial circuits, regional societies and cultural blocs.....	20
Beyond ceremony.....	28
'The line'.....	29
Tribal enemies.....	30
Local connections.....	32
PART THREE; CONSIDERING THE FINER DETAIL.....	36
Jackson-Nakano.....	36
Koch.....	36
Nyamudy.....	39
Molonglo.....	41
Conclusion.....	47
References.....	50

MINISTERIAL-IN-CONFIDENCE

MAPS

The ACT and surrounding region..... 3

Tindale's tribal boundaries..... 6

Mathews' ceremonial types ..... 22

MINISTERIAL-IN-CONFIDENCE

MAP ONE: THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY (ACT) AND SURROUNDING REGION

## MINISTERIAL-IN-CONFIDENCE

## INTRODUCTION

This report examines ethnographic, linguistic and historical sources relating to traditional Aboriginal associations to country for the broader ACT region. The research has been conducted with a view to identifying the Aboriginal cultural area(s) and group formations pertinent to this area at the time of the original intrusion of European explorers and first settlers. It should be borne in mind that this study was commissioned as a short desktop study. For that reason the conclusions drawn are necessarily precursory in nature. It has not been possible within the present time frame to locate and fully consider all of the historical and archival material of relevance nor to analyse genealogical data which could shed further light on local associations and interrelationships across the broader region. Present research has *not* been directed to a consideration of individual family connections to country. Pointed anthropological consultations with relevant family groups and close investigation of their particular family histories would likely enrich present understandings. As has been found elsewhere across the country (Sutton 2003), contemporary formations of landed identity, may be expected to reflect, albeit in transformed ways, underlying classical means of reckoning relationships between people and land. In all it should be borne in mind that early and traumatic disruption to traditional Aboriginal social structures and landed relationships - including the effects on the indigenous population of virulent diseases, violence and socio-economic marginalisation - combined with the poverty of the written record, undermine any confidence that a clear picture of the original territorial organisation could be attained.

While drawing at points on information gleaned from the reports of early explorers, newspaper articles, government records and the recollections of the first European settlers in the area, present research has, for the most part, been focused upon the writings of those who have applied a more professional approach to understanding traditional Aboriginal social and cultural institutions and relationships. Important in this regard are the recently published notes, journal entries and official report of the Victorian Chief Protector of Aborigines, G. A. Robinson who toured through the Monaro, the Limestone Plains and Yass in 1844; the writings of A. W. Howitt whose anthropological interests developed in the mid-late 1800s over the period in which he served as mines warden and Police Magistrate in Omeo; and the ethnographic and linguistic surveys of R. H. Mathews at the turn of the twentieth century.

N. Tindale's influential and - as subsequent analysis has shown (c.f. Sutton 1995) - highly problematic maps (1940 and 1974) depicting language-based tribal boundaries across the country have had an important bearing on conceptualisations of traditional landed affiliations in subsequent writings, in representations of identity amongst contemporary Aboriginal families, in governmental forums and in the formation of public perceptions around the issue. Ill-informed interpretations and misreadings of the material have further complicated an already troubled picture.

Coming after a long hiatus in academic interest in the issue, A. Jackson-Nakano's investigations into the Aboriginal history of Canberra and the ACT (2000) and Yass and surrounding settlements (2002), although substantially flawed in themselves, served to interrupt and challenge the unexamined general consensus. More recently Koch's 2011 re-examination of linguistic data has significantly shifted understandings of associations between language and place in the region. The aim of this report is to review the major sources of information pertinent to the question of Aboriginal

## MINISTERIAL-IN-CONFIDENCE

relationships to land in the broader ACT region, particularly in the light of present anthropological understandings of traditional social and local organisation.

**Note: spelling conventions used in this report**

This report in places reflects the language of the original sources and may contain terms which are offensive to some readers.

Because of their lack of familiarity with Aboriginal languages - and depending on their linguistic sensibility - Europeans had varying success in their efforts to listen to and record the words, names and sounds which they heard. For this reason a range of renditions of the same words and names can be found both between and within the texts of the various observers. In discussing the sources the original spellings have been maintained. The following table provides a guide to equivalent spellings. In addition, the reader should also be aware that in order to correctly convey sounds distinctive to Aboriginal languages modern linguistic conventions recommend some spellings which are counter-intuitive to English speakers.

Gundungarra	Gandgangara		
Monaro	Maneroo	Manero	
Namadgi	Nammoit	Nyamudy	<u>Namwutch</u>
Ngambri	Ngambra	Nganbra	
Kamberr	Kgamberry	Camberry	
Ngarigu	Ngarigo	Ngarrigu	
Ngunawal	Ngunnawal	Onerwal	Nunawai
Walgalu	Wolgal		

MINISTERIAL-IN-CONFIDENCE

MAP TWO: TINDALE'S TRIBAL BOUNDARIES

## PART ONE: TINDALE'S MAP AND THE EARLY ETHNOGRAPHIC SOURCES

Tindale's project to map Aboriginal tribal boundaries across the country was an ambitious one and, given the true nature and complexity of Aboriginal social and territorial relationships, one anthropologists today would argue was seriously flawed in its conception. The work has nevertheless had a tremendous impact on understandings of Aboriginal interests in country ever since, no less in the ACT and surrounds than elsewhere.

In his 1974 volume<sup>1</sup>, having described the territory of the tribe he called the Ngunawal, Tindale made the comment that 'this tribe has claims to have been the one actually on the site of the capital' (Tindale 1974:198). This statement appears to have been pivotal in the ascension of the Ngunawal identity amongst certain local Aboriginal people and to the subsequent prominence of place afforded to it by authorities not only over Canberra city itself but over the ACT in general.

In its fuller context, Tindale's explanation for the statement is that 'Canberra lies very near the *southern boundary* of Ngunawal country [emphasis added]'. The broader extent of the ACT was actually shown within his schema to fall within the domain of three different language-named groups, the Ngunawal, the Ngarigo and the Walgalu [see map 2]. Putting aside for the moment questions of fact, there is no basis within the description of country supplied by Tindale, or in the original sources upon which he depended, for the extension of Ngunawal country through the greater part of the ACT. This is not to say that those who - for some time at least - lay claim to the Ngunawal identity and championed the cause of recognition of Ngunawal claims over the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and surrounding region, do not have ancestral associations with the area to the south and south-west of the Territory. In fact, it is because their prime connections appear to have lain in this area that at least one family group has recently abandoned the Ngunawal identity in favour of that of Ngambri. This name, which has been promulgated by Jackson-Nakano as the original group name for the people of Canberra and surrounds, is for different reasons, no less problematic. This study will be concerned to interrogate the more complex nature of Aboriginal group formations and associations to country but will begin by examining the evidence for association of the three language-based groupings, Ngunawal, Ngarigo and Walgalu.

### MATHEWS

R. H. Mathews was arguably Tindale's most important source in his mapping of tribal groupings in south-east Australia. Although Jackson-Nakano dismisses Mathews as an amateur, scorning his lack of anthropological or linguistic qualifications, Mathews was in fact, as Elkin has heralded him, one of the founders of social anthropology in Australia (Elkin 1975a:1). At the time of his writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there was no anthropological academic institute in the country, the first department being established at University of Sydney in 1925.

Mathews' long career as a surveyor provided him with a strong orientation toward the land and skills in mapping and drafting which proved useful in his later research endeavours (Elkin 1975:131). Whereas many anthropologists of his day conducted their research remotely, relying on information

<sup>1</sup> 1974, Tindale, N. B. 'Aboriginal tribes of Australia, their terrain, environmental controls, distribution, limits, and proper names'. With four sheet map. University of California Press: Berkeley and Canberra.

## MINISTERIAL-IN-CONFIDENCE

provided to them by correspondents, Mathews prided himself on his field-based methods. In his published articles, he often made a point of the fact that the knowledge he had acquired had been personally attained; hence, in respect of his Ngunawal vocabulary he noted, 'every word has been noted down carefully by myself from the lips of old men and women in the native camps' (1901:302).

Elkin has noted that Mathews had an easy rapport with Aboriginal people and that he conducted himself with an appreciation for Aboriginal protocols founded on his close association with Aboriginal people in his early life,

Whenever he met groups of Aborigines he observed Aboriginal courtesies of approach and the patterns of behaviour he had observed from childhood onward. Thus W.J. Enright, a lawyer from Maitland who accompanied him occasionally on visits to Aborigines on the near north coast of NSW in the 1890s, told me that when RHM got near a camp, he usually lit a small fire and sat at it until invited to join the group (Elkin 1975:132).

As well as his practical and sympathetic capacities, Elkin notes, on the basis of his writings, that Mathews was also well-read in the discipline of anthropology. Mathews contributed to and considerably progressed understandings of Australian kinship systems, totemism and initiation rituals, amongst other topics, as well as recording valuable information on Aboriginal languages. He was a prolific writer, publishing some 170 articles in a range of academic journals nationally and internationally. His work has left a legacy of rich ethnographic detail and important observations regarding the commonalities and interrelationships between groups.

Not only then was Mathews a competent researcher, but in the area of present concern he also held a level of special interest. Mathews was born at Narellan near Camden, but in 1850, when he was only nine years old, his family took up a property at Mutbilly Creek in the Goulburn district near Breadalbane. He came to know the area very well and many years later returned in the capacity of government surveyor to draft an official map of the district (Thomas 2011).

According to his own account, Mathews grew up in the company of Aboriginal playmates, probably at Mutbilly, and apparently also at Bungonia where his father worked for some period (Mathews 1904:203; Thomas 2011). These experiences clearly formed the basis of his positive and non-prejudicial attitude toward Aboriginal people. He seems to have made no claim, however, that his knowledge of linguistic distribution in the area was based on his early personal experience.

Although Elkin comments that Mathews grew up in an era when Aborigines 'were still numerous and following their traditional pattern of life as far as possible' (Elkin 1975:128), reports by contemporary observers to the Select Committee on Aborigines for the area show that there had already been a dramatic decline in the local Aboriginal population by 1845. At Bungonia, Francis Murphy of the Bench of Magistrates reported they occasionally visited, writing,

There are no aborigines permanently in this district<sup>2</sup>; the tribe, a pretty numerous one, which in former times was located in the neighbourhood of Bungonia, has nearly disappeared, and has dwindled down to a very few individuals, who here joined themselves

<sup>2</sup> Mathews, himself, however, does document that in his time at Bungonia his father worked with Aboriginal labourers and that he played with their children. reference

## MINISTERIAL-IN-CONFIDENCE

to portions of tribes of other places, chiefly of Braidwood and Goulburn... (Votes and Proceedings 1845:34).

Meanwhile, Francis McArthur of Goulburn reported, 'there are not exceeding twenty or thirty, of all ages and sexes, belonging to the Mulwaree, or Goulburn Plains tribe' and in the last ten years he found they had 'diminished at least one third - and very considerably in the last five years' (Votes and Proceedings 1845:35).

Elkin was not wrong in suggesting that Aboriginal people were still striving to maintain a traditional existence, with Murphy making further comment on their itinerant lifestyle. He maintained that although quite competent to appreciate the value and comforts of civilized life, by choice Aboriginal people preferred 'the dirty, squalid, wild liberty of the bush' (Votes and Proceedings 1845:35). Mathews had at least some contact with the families of those employed on the farm and is likely to have had his curiosity aroused by others who came and went as visitors.

Although he never consolidated his findings, amongst a series of articles published in the late 1890s and early 1900s Mathews provides an inventory of the linguistic affiliations of Aboriginal peoples in south-eastern New South Wales. Mathews considered his work on languages in the south-east to have been conducted amongst the 'remnant' population (1908:335) and in an article on the Victorian tribes admitted, 'this work should have been done half a century ago, while the natives were still sufficiently numerous to supply the necessary information' (1898:325). Nevertheless his work provides valuable documentation of vocabulary for now extinct languages as well as important information on their distribution.

As well as his attention to the particular, Mathews' interest in identifying and documenting patterns of cultural commonality over wide areas, and his attention to intergroup relations, particularly in the ceremonial context, have left an important record of the more complex societal formations which characterised traditional Aboriginal life. This aspect of Mathews' work will inform later sections of this report concerned with the issue of regional societies.

#### NGUNAWAL

Mathews was clearly the main source for Tindale in his mapping of the extent of Ngunawal country. Before considering Mathews' account of Ngunawal country, it is important to note a difference in the way in which Mathews and Tindale conceived of the tribe. Although Mathews occasionally employed the term 'tribe' loosely to refer to the broader language group, his usual approach was to refer in the plural to the *tribes* speaking one language or another and to *the speakers* of a particular language [emphasis added]. Unlike Tindale he did not consider the speakers of any one language to constitute a single politico-territorial unit, recognising rather that relationships to land and authority in respect of it were highly localised.

To the north of the present area of interest, from Goulburn, Crookwell and Yass extending through Burragorang and Picton and as far north as Mt Victoria, Mathews locates the Gundungurra language (Mathews and Everitt 1900:263; Mathews 1901:140). Of those speaking that language he writes,

## MINISTERIAL-IN-CONFIDENCE

The Gundungurra *tribes* occupied the country to the west of the Thurrawal and Dharruk, as far as Goulburn, where they adjoined the Ngunawal tribes [emphasis added] (Mathews 1901:127).

Mathews reports that he and, in this case, fellow researcher Everitt depended particularly on information provided to them by a number of competent speakers based at Burragorang,

We have given considerable attention to the study of the Gundungurra language, having visited and camped with the natives of the Burragorang, on the Wollondilly River, the most isolated and hence the best preserved and primitive remnant of the Gundungurra speaking people – two of our principal informants being “Billy Russell”, and “Bessie Sims”, who were able to satisfy us in every particular (Mathews and Everitt 1900:262-263).

Regarding the Ngunawal language Mathews wrote,

The native tribes speaking the Ngunawal tongue occupy the country from Goulburn to Yass and Burrowa, extending southerly to Lake George and Goodradigbee<sup>3</sup> (1904:294).

This description accompanied his 1904 published Ngunawal vocabulary list. He had earlier made reference to the dialect Ngunawal, under the name Wonnawal, as one of those spoken amongst those groups of the south-east who practiced the *bulan* ceremony (Mathews 1898:67). There was no specific mention of Queanbeyan in the original description; however in a 1908 article on the Ngarrugu language he described Ngunawal as a sister tongue and located it as ‘adjoining the Ngarrugu on the north from Queanbeyan to Yass, Boorowa and Goulburn’ (Mathews 1908:335). The inclusion of Queanbeyan here is evidently the corollary of his description of Ngarrugu territory, which was presented as extending from Queanbeyan, via Cooma and Bombala to Delegate. In a sense, Mathews seems to make neither group the occupiers of Queanbeyan itself – or both. Canberra was yet to make its mark so that clarity regarding its particular linguistic affiliations did not hold the same imperative as it does today. Given Ngarrugu forms the main focus of the 1908 article and the apparent lack of mention of Queanbeyan amongst Mathews’ Ngunawal informants, more weight seems warranted on the side of his including Queanbeyan positively with the Ngarrugu. In any case the extension of Ngunawal territory between Lake George and Goodradigbee brings it easily within the immediate vicinity of the present day city of Canberra. Jackson-Nakano claims that Mathews’ fieldnotes show his major informants did not extend Ngunawal country to Goulburn and Lake George. I have not had the opportunity to view these notes but would suggest that his conclusions were probably not drawn on the basis of only their information. Tindale, it may be noted, largely follows Mathews but gives Ngunawal territory a slightly broader girth from ‘Queanbeyan to Yass, Tumut to Boorowa, and east to beyond Goulburn; on highlands west of the Shoalhaven River’ (Tindale 1974:198).

<sup>3</sup> Goodradigbee does not provide a particularly clear point of reference since it is the name presently applied to a river extending north from present day Lake Burrinjuck to south of the Brindabella Ranges, however, in a 1911 article Lucy Carroll, perhaps Mathews’ main informant on Ngunawal, told a journalist that the proper name for the area of the new Burrinjuck Weir on the Murrumbidgee was Goodradigbee, ‘You tell your paper sonny, that Queen Lucy travelled along that river before any white people ever saw it, and tell them Queen Lucy says right name is Goodradigbee. You white people always changing names of places and say you know Aboriginal names when you know nothing about them’ (Barrier Miner 20/2/1911).

## MINISTERIAL-IN-CONFIDENCE

Mathews' main informants for Ngunawal appear to have been Ned Carroll and his wife Lucy (Jackson-Nakano 2001). Ned was born at Delegate and was apparently resident at Goulburn when interviewed by Mathews (Mathews 1900:262)<sup>4</sup>. Jackson-Nakano has dismissed Lucy Carroll (Queen Lucy) as an unreliable witness for Ngunawal claiming that she was a Wiradjuri woman possibly stolen by the Yass blacks from the Lachlan. While it is true that Lucy spoke Wiradjuri there is nothing to substantiate the theory about her capture<sup>5</sup> and her affiliations to country and that of her parents cannot be clearly determined. Nevertheless, in 1910 when authorities attempted to remove Queen Lucy to Edgerton reserve she protested vehemently, maintaining that she was born in Yass and indicating that both her parents and grandparents had lived there. Reporting that she had been told she must go to Edgerton she remonstrated,

But I say 'No'. My grandfather and grandmother live here. My father and mother live here. My husband and I live here. My great grandsons and great grand-daughters live here. Here I was born; here I will die' (Barrier Miner 10/8/1910).

It seems, as well, that Mathews must have been satisfied with the competence of his Ngunawal informants because it is the only language amongst those of present interest for which he provided details of the grammar<sup>6</sup>.

Separate substantiation of the association between the Yass area and Ngunawal is provided by the recording of the name Onerwal there by Robinson in 1844 (Mackaness 1941:26). Howitt also makes mention of the Nunawal in the context of relating the account of Wiradjuri territory given to him by an informant named Cameron. The Nunawal had been cited as the eastern neighbours of the Wiradjuri, although he [Howitt] noted the group was unknown to him (Howitt 1996:56).

#### NGARIGO/NGARIGU

Mathews described the Ngarigu as that tribe 'which formerly occupied the country from Queanbeyan, via Cooma and Bombala to Delegate' (Mathews 1908:335). Following Mathews, Tindale depicts Ngarigu territory extending up to Queanbeyan, giving its bounds as 'Monaro tableland north to Queanbeyan; Bombala River from near Delegate to Nimmitabel; west to divide of the Australian Alps' (Tindale 1974:198). The inclusion of Queanbeyan within Ngarigu bounds by these two researchers differs from the account provided by Howitt. Howitt restricts the group more closely to the Manero [sic] tableland. His description includes a listing of the surrounding groups in which the Wolgal are identified as their northern neighbours,

The Ngarigo had the Wolgal on the north, the Ya-itma-thang on the north-west, the Kurnai on the west and the south-west, and the Yuin or Coast Murring to the south-east. The Ngarigo in fact occupied the Manero tableland (Howitt 1996:78).

<sup>4</sup> Given more time it would be useful to examine Mathews' field notes, particularly to check some of the claims made about them by Jackson-Nakano.

<sup>5</sup> The fact that she was named after her mother's sister with whom some association with the Lachlan was indicated is certainly insufficient proof. KM to find source in Philip Johnson's diaries

<sup>6</sup> On this point the research of Besold should be consulted. According to Wafer and Lissarague she reports some difficulties with distinguishing Mathews' Ngunawal and Gundangara material (Wafer and Lissarague 2008:106).

## MINISTERIAL-IN-CONFIDENCE

Koch has examined Howitt's notes and papers and has discovered a number of pertinent references to Ngarigo as volunteered by his informants. For example, Mickey, an Aboriginal man from Mutong near Dalgety, described his language as Ngarego and told Howitt that 'Ngarego-mittang were as far as Cooma' (cited Koch 2011:135). He indicated good relations with the Queenbeyan (sic) blacks who he designated as *Ngye-mutch-mittung* [Nyamudy-midhang] and said that the latter used to go up to the mountains at the Murrumbidgee with them to eat bogong moths (Koch 2011:135). As will be discussed further in consideration of linguistic evidence, Koch has recently proposed that Nyamudy [Namadgi] should be recognised as a separate group for the broader Canberra area, albeit speaking a language very closely aligned with Ngarigu.

## WOLGAL/WALGALU

The third group which Tindale has converging on Canberra is Wolgal. Koch expresses scepticism regarding the status of Wolgal as a separate language-based territorial entity suggesting that Wolgal 'seems...to be a fairly general term, applying to people living in mountainous areas' (Koch 2011:136). Nevertheless both Howitt and Mathews vouch for its distinction and the accumulated evidence points to a heartland, extending at least from Cowambat through Kiandra, Tumbarumba and the headwaters of the Tumut River. An account by Jauncey in 1889 gives the location at Kiandra snowfields and headwaters of the Murray, Tumut and Murrumbidgee rivers (Jauncey cited Wesson 2000:86). In Tindale's account the Wolgal were in occupation of the 'headwaters of the Murrumbidgee, and Tumut rivers; at Kiandra; south to Tintaldra; northeast to near Queanbeyan' (Tindale 1974:199), in this he largely follows Howitt.

There is scant reference in Mathews' published articles to what he identifies, contra Howitt, as the Walgalu, simply a note that the tribe adjoined the Narrugu 'on part of the west' and that the Dhudhuroa lay further westward again (Mathews 1908:336). In his unpublished field notes, however, Mathews has some further information. He notes that the mother of his Dyrinning midhang (Dhudhuroa) informant 'belonged to the Walgalu tribe and language' which he locates 'about Walaragang junction of Tooma River or Tamberamba Creek up the Murray' (Mathews cited Clark 2009:203). In a separate entry he records that 'from Jingellic eastward was the country of the Walgulu tribe, whose speech resembled partly the Dhuduroa and partly the Dyrirringan, a tongue spoken from about Nimmatabel to Bega' (Mathews cited Clark 2009:213). Howitt is the main source of information on the Wolgal and it seems based his knowledge particularly on the information of a close Wolgal informant. Originally a geologist, Howitt came to the Victorian goldfields in 1852. He enjoyed a long and distinguished career as a mines warden and Police Magistrate at Omeo and occupied a number of other public offices in later life. In tandem with his other duties, Howitt developed a passionate interest in anthropology and worked in corroboration with Fison on a number of important studies. His most detailed research was conducted amongst the Aboriginal peoples of north-east Victoria and adjoining areas in south-eastern NSW. By his own account Howitt was initiated amongst the Kurnai, a status that allowed him to be privy to the more secret/sacred aspects of Aboriginal culture (Howitt 1996:511). Yibai-Malian, Howitt's main Wolgal informant, was a medicine man and one of the leading men in the organisation and conduct of the *Kuringal* [initiation ceremony] Howitt witnessed in the Bega area (Howitt 1996:516, 527-562). In his description of that ceremony, he mentions that he had known Yibai Malian for many years and so, it

## MINISTERIAL-IN-CONFIDENCE

may be assumed, had the opportunity to develop his knowledge about the Wolgal group over an extended period (Howitt 1996:516). Yibai-Malian aka Murray Jack, wore a breastplate describing him as King of the Wolgal and was born at Talbingo (near Tumut) (Koch 2011:136).

As noted, Howitt placed the Wolgal to the north of the Ngarigo. In his 1904 study he writes,

The Wolgal lived on the tablelands of the highest of the Australian Alps, and in the country falling from there to the north. The boundaries of their country commenced at Kauwambat (Cowambat) near to the Pilot Mountain following the Indi River to Wallerengang, thence to the starting point Kauwambat, by Tumberumba, Tumut, Queenbean, Cooma and the Great Dividing Range (1996:78).

Both Howitt and Mathews mention Wallerengang as a border for the Wolgal/Walgalu (Howitt 1996:101; Mathews cited Wesson 2000:86).

Janey Alexander, the daughter of Yibai-Malian (Murray Jack), appears to confine the group in a more southerly direction saying 'this tribe lived about the Murray River below Tom Groggin and were friends with the people down at Albury and up at Omeo' (cited Wesson 2000:86). Although elsewhere, Janey, along with her father and Mrangalla, provided an even more extensive description of country than Howitt's published list (cited Wesson 2000:86). This will be discussed further below in relation to ceremonial circuits. Also of possible relevance is the name of a township near Suggan Buggan, Wulgalmerang, possibly a rendition of Wulgal-Midhang, *midhang* being the commonly used suffix used to indicate belonging to place<sup>7</sup>. Jackson-Nakano has argued that the group occupying the larger Canberra region, extending from Lake George to Goodradigbee and from Gundaroo to Kiandra, which she calls the Kamberri or Ngambri, were Wolgal speakers (Jackson-Nakano 2001:97).

Koch has recently proposed 'Nyamudy' as the original and proper appellation for the local group in the Canberra area. He has further suggested that 'Nyamudy' would serve as an appropriate label for the local dialect of the area which he has identified as a variant of Ngarigo/Wolgal spoken on the Monaro and in the Tumut Valleys respectively (Koch 2011:141). While Koch has taken the name to have a broad regional reference including within its compass what is today Canberra as well as the wider ACT, as will be discussed in further detail below, I would argue that Nyamudy most likely had a more restricted geographical and social reference.

## FURTHER LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE

### Yuin language family

Commonalities between the languages of the south coast and hinterland region have long been recognised. In his major study of Australian languages linguist Schmidt (1919) grouped the languages of the area together under the banner 'Yuin'. This classificatory schema has recently been revised by Koch who has proposed that the southern grouping be expanded to encompass the

<sup>7</sup> Koch has interpreted *midhang* as meaning 'group' in languages of the Alpine area. It is also noted that *middhung* is listed as meaning 'one' in Ngunawal which is fitting with the notion of belonging.

## MINISTERIAL-IN-CONFIDENCE

Gandangara language<sup>8</sup> – originally, and in his view inappropriately, grouped with the Sydney and north coast languages – as well as the language of Omeo (Yaitmathang). He also proposes that separate recognition should be afforded to the language of the Canberra area [to be discussed below] (Wafer and Lissarrague 2008:101,105-106). Reflecting the degrees of relationship between the various languages of the group, Koch has described them as ‘a cycle of lects’ – a continuum of related dialects - progressing down through the inland languages of Gandangara, Ngunawal, Canberra<sup>9</sup>, Ngarigu, Omeo and up through the coastal languages, Thawa, Jiringayn, Dhurga, Dharumba and Dharwal (Wafer and Lissarrague 2008:105). Notably Wolgal has been omitted from this list. Here Wolgal was classified as Western Ngarigu<sup>10</sup>. In his more recent article, Wolgal is counted as a local variant of Ngarigo (Koch 2011:140-141).

The affinity of the languages in the region was vouched for by Stewart Mowle, one of the earliest contributors of a word list for the Canberra area. Mowle arrived at Yarralumla around 1837 as a young man and lived and worked, not only at Yarralumla itself but at various outstations in the mountain valleys to the west. For six years he was stationed at Mannus, close to Tumbarumba (Mowle 1955; Jackson-Nakano 2001:79; Wilson 2001). Although acknowledging that there were different dialects ‘among the blacks’ he maintained, ‘That they sang the same songs and understood each other from the coast to the Murray, I know from my own knowledge’ (Mowle 1896:24).

In 1887 Curr, commenting on the word list supplied for the Moneroo or Manera district by Bulmer, stated that ‘The language this gentleman informs me is called Ngarago, and it will be seen that it has many words found but little altered in the dialects of Queanbeyan, Moruya, and Omeo’<sup>11</sup>. He notes further, ‘whether this was always so, or is the result of the mixture of tribes, consequent on our’ occupation, it is now impossible to determine’ (Curr 1887:429).

Although underlyingly the languages of the entire region were technically closely related, the ability of Aboriginal people to understand each other, as Mowle suggests, from the coast to the Murray, is also likely to have been underlain in part by multi-lingual facility. Howitt corroborates that the songs sung in ceremonial contexts were shared from mountain to coast, reporting that the Wolgal used the same songs as on the coast (Howitt 1996:564). This cannot be taken as proof of shared language, however, for he also records that a Wolgal boy, who was initiated at the Kuringal he attended in the Bega area, was not able to understand the language of the local ritual leaders.

<sup>8</sup> This is the spelling used in Wafer and Lissarrague and apparently represents the phonetically correct rendition

<sup>9</sup> As will be discussed below, the listing of Canberra as a separate dialect is a recent innovation based on the findings of Koch 2011.

<sup>10</sup> A significant distinction is indicated by Howitt in respect of the totemic names applied to the moiety divisions within Wolgal as opposed to Ngarigo. In the Upper Murray region generally the totems eaglehawk and crow serve as the labels for the two great class divisions. According to Howitt’s account, the language names for these animals are, amongst the Ngarigo, Merung (eaglehawk) and Yukumbruk (crow), whilst for the Wolgal the equivalents are Malian and Umbe. Notably the Wolgal term Malian (eaglehawk) is, rather than being the same as that of the Ngarigo, the same as that employed by the Ngunawal and Wiradjuri. However Yibai-Malian whose name comprises the section name Ipai as well as Malian (eaglehawk) was the son of a Wiradjuri man so his account may have been framed in Wiradjuri terms (Howitt 1996:101-102; Wafer and Lissarrague 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Koch advises that the Queanbeyan and Omeo languages were likely to have stood in relation to each other as dialects, whereas Dhurga, spoken at Moruya, was a related language in the same Yuin family (Harold Koch pers.comm to NK, 4.9.2012).

(Howitt 1996:533). Because songs could be exchanged over long distances, or might in a ceremonial context preserve archaic or even secret linguistic forms, it was not uncommon for them not to be understood by the performers themselves<sup>12</sup>. Mowle vouches that the 'blacks' did not seem to know the meaning of the songs he had heard,

It would be interesting to know what the songs mean. Who can tell? I cannot, and the blacks did not know, or they could not put them into English. They only know that they came from 'a good wee,' further intimated by a jerking up of the chin, the usual method of denoting distances and direction (Mowle 1896:24).

It should be noted that elsewhere in Australia, linguistic differences - sometimes of technically minor character - were employed as a means of marking distinction, or where useful for emphasising affinity between groups. Distinctions between language groups did not necessarily create a limited set of discrete and exclusively defined language groups, rather it has been found that particular features of commonality could create cross-cutting groups so that the same group - let's call them *a* - may in one context may align themselves as the group sharing feature *x* in common with group *b*, and call themselves together the *x* speakers. Yet the same group, in another context, could align themselves with group *c* and call themselves after a linguistic trait which defined them in common, and in opposition to group *b*, as let's say the *y* speakers. Linguists have suggested that the name Ngunawal is likely to derive from 'this' and hence means the people who use the form 'nguna'. The same formation occurs in other parts of NSW (Wafer and Lissarague 2008:110).

**'THE CANBERRA LANGUAGE'**

The brevity of existing word lists, limited degrees of overlap and the dearth of grammatical material make linguistic comparison difficult; however, on the basis of recent analyses both McDonald (Flood 1984:20) and more recently Koch have come to the conclusion that word lists recorded in the Canberra region do not represent, as had earlier been assumed, samples of the Ngunawal language, but are identifiable as instances of Ngarigo or of a dialect closely related to the latter language (Flood 1984:20; Koch 2011:140-141).

Koch bases his findings largely on a comparison of personal pronouns which he has identified as a valuable indicator of historical linguistic differentiation. He reports that the common exhibition of the unique forms *kulangka* 'I' and *kulandyi* 'you' in both Ngunawal and Gandangara (of the Southern Highlands) 'convincingly shows' that the two languages are related. In fact he asserts, citing Besold and Dixon, that they are so closely related they may be considered dialects of the same language (Koch 2011:139). Meanwhile, and in contrast, Koch finds evidence amongst various word lists attributed to Limestone Plains, Queanbeyan, the Monaro, Ngarigo and Wolgal, of common sharing of the forms *ngayamba* 'I' and *yindiki* 'you'. Relying on this evidence, together with the identification of certain other items of shared vocabulary, Koch concludes that there is sufficient grounds to show that, despite possible dialectal variation, 'the Canberra language -- and the Wolgal/Walgalu language -- are essentially the same as the language of the Monaro, which was there called Ngarigo' (Koch 2011:140).

<sup>12</sup> The importance of ceremonial ties in creating regional societies will be discussed below.

Koch treats the Wolgal name with some scepticism, believing it may have been a flexible term applied more or less extensively across the mountains. Names aside, however, he points to three local variants: the Canberra language [or Nyamudy], which he associates with the 'Queanbeyan-Canberra-Namadgi' area; a language which might be known as Wolgal, centring on the Tumut Valley; and Ngarigo, the language of the Monaro, spoken between Delegate and Cooma (Koch 2011:141). The language of the Canberra area may be seen as transitional between Ngunawal and Ngarigu (Wafer and Lissarrague 2008:106), grammatically closer to Ngarigu but sharing much vocabulary in common with Ngunawal (Koch pers comm to NK, 4.9.12). While Koch's arguments are quite compelling, the examination of the finer detail raises some questions. The matter will be taken up again in a later section.

Howitt's treatment of Wolgal as a separate language also receives support from Mathews. Mathews' fieldnotes record that one of his Dhuduroa informants' mothers 'belonged to the Walgalu tribe and *language*' [emphasis added] (Mathews cited Clark 2009:203). Elsewhere he describes Walgulu speech as resembling 'partly the Dhuduroa and partly the Dyirringan, a tongue spoken from about Nimmatabel to Bega' (Mathews cited Clark 2009:213)<sup>13</sup>.

---

<sup>13</sup> Dhuduroa is in fact a distinct language and cannot be classified with the others under the Yuin family mast although it does share some vocabulary in common with the adjoining languages (Koch pers comm to NK, 4.9.12).

## PART TWO: UNDERSTANDING ABORIGINAL ASSOCIATIONS TO COUNTRY

The model of language and territorial associations presented by Tindale depicting a series of neatly bounded tribes, much like separate nations, each speaking a distinctive language, closely guarding an exclusive territory and maintaining most of their social relationships within closed borders, has been found to be inadequate to the task of understanding Aboriginal group formations and associations to country.

Over time, anthropologists have come to appreciate that traditional Aboriginal relationships to land and socio-cultural formations are multilayered and highly complex. They range from the most intimate, local connections to place, through those that enable people to live together and gain their sustenance on a daily basis, to those bonds of recognition and mutual interest forged over wider distances by extended kinship and marriage networks, shared linguistic features, ceremonial cooperation and martial alliance. From an outside perspective it is possible to discern even wider socio-cultural blocs, areas distinguished by differences in language type, ceremonial kind and social organisation, although on the ground such divides tended not to be so sharply marked, with a melding of difference and overarching social ties.

Berndt provides a useful description of the diminished place the 'tribe' as a concept now occupies in understandings of Aboriginal socio-political organisation,

Especially as regards a larger tribe, the unity within it may be merely nominal, or held up as a kind of ideal: but except on certain ceremonial occasions, the tribe as such does not act as a whole in hunting or food-collecting, or in revenge expeditions, or other forms of fighting or warfare. It is the smaller groups within it which serve as a bridge between one large unit and another, so that really there is no clear cut demarcation between tribes, or languages, in ordinary everyday affairs. Distinguishing tribal units is a matter of convenience for us, in helping us to understand Aboriginal social organisation, and a matter of convenience for the Aborigines themselves in situations where they feel the need for some broader kind of identification apart from their local ones. It is also the leaders in the various smaller units who have the actual authority in tribal affairs, and at intertribal gatherings (Berndt and Berndt 1977:40).

### LOCALISED ATTACHMENTS AND RIGHTS TO COUNTRY

Rights in country were not organised traditionally by way of membership in broad language-based tribes but through localised attachments, the principles for which varied in different parts of the country. In those parts of the country where land was inherited by descent, the local *land-holding group* may be described as the clan or local descent group. The clan were the owners of a particular *estate* – a tract or tracts of land and water over which they held primary rights and responsibilities.

Although the clan was the basic exclusive land-holding unit, occupation and use of land was not limited to clan members nor was the clan confined to its own estate. Other, albeit lesser, entitlements arose from maternal or other pathways of descent, affinal (marriage) ties and standing permissions between neighbouring groups, so that people might reside, hunt and gather over a broader territory. This they did in groups which anthropologists have labelled bands. As distinct

## MINISTERIAL-IN-CONFIDENCE

from the land-owning groups (clans), bands were the land-using groups, small, flexible groups, commonly of kin and affines (relations through marriage) drawn from more than one clan. The term range is used to refer to the area over which a particular band hunted and gathered in day-to-day living.

Commonly a number of related families with ties to adjoining estates in a common ecological niche clustered together to form a larger named occupational grouping. At times the members of such a grouping might live in separate family units, at others aggregate into a larger camp and cooperate for common purposes such as hunting, fighting and ceremonial participation. Although considerable flux affected membership on a day-to-day basis, in usual circumstances they were relatively stable entities with a well-defined territorial base. It is most likely that this level of local organisation which became visible to European observers and which made its way in piecemeal fashion into the historical records. Typically the group might be named after an environmental typifier, a geographic area or even after an influential leader.

It should be borne in mind that traditional Aboriginal practices allowed for a high degree of fluidity and contextual application of group names. Alternative means could be used to group people and their associated territorial interests together, a single name being amenable to variable application in different contexts. This is not meant to imply that all boundaries are amorphous and fluid, indeed there is consistent evidence that in this area local divisions maintained interests in well-defined and defended stretches of country

#### BROADER SOCIAL AND TERRITORIAL RELATIONSHIPS

While for an extended period anthropology was heavily preoccupied with the local, there has been a swing back in recent times to consideration of the broader intergroup connections. Mathews and Howitt recognised quite early that Aboriginal society was cross-cut by groups coalescing around variable factors such as moiety, section, totems, gender distinctions, ecological orientations, linguistic affinity and ceremonial cooperation.

In one sense, Tindale was not wrong to point to a level of common identification around language, however, what he and other earlier observers failed to understand was the remarkable capacity in Aboriginal society for coalition around different and shifting commonalities. Keen has gone so far as to argue that the bounds of traditional Aboriginal social groups, both in terms of group membership and territory, were never unambiguous, but always contextually and politically defined. Groups had many alternative names and could coalesce strategically around different shared features, such as spiritual ancestry, ceremony-elements or common tongue (Keen 1994:73).

...a shared name indicated the existence of a relationship ... However, each country and group was connected to several such strings, which cut across each other. One of a group's alternative names would connect it to one string of groups, another name would join it to a different though possibly overlapping string (ibid:73-74).

Current anthropological understandings present a picture of Aboriginal social and local organisation characterised by multiple, fluid and cross-cutting conceptual categories linking people and groups in contextually and strategically contingent ways (Beckett cited Baumann 2006:324, Merlan 1996).

## MINISTERIAL-IN-CONFIDENCE

Such linkages, underpinned by the recognition of common or equivalent laws and customs, may extend to encompass groups across countries, language groups and geographical regions. For this reason drawing the bounds around a single society is highly fraught.

Howitt's testimony makes it clear that these issues of multiple and shifting frames of reference troubled his own conceptualisation of landed identity in the south-east. In his efforts to name the various tribes occupying the lower Murray River he indicated that the exercise was in no way straightforward,

This is an instance of the difficulties which beset these enquiries, since a group of blacks at a certain place may be called by their local name, or by the name of the dialect they speak, or by the name of the tribe to which they belong (Howitt 1996:52).

Within Howitt's writing on the south-east he reveals a multiplicity of levels of identification, including the broadest geographic and economic zonal labels separating the coastal, inland and mountain peoples, directional terms, group labels deriving from the use of common names for 'man' such as Yuin and Murring, which recognised a sense of common humanity and shared socio-cultural understandings and connections, through to 'tribal' groups sharing linguistic affinity to localised clans. He writes,

Not only are the Coast Murring divided into the 'southerners' and 'northerners,' but they are also divided into those who live on the coast and those who live inland. The former are the Katungal, from Katung, 'the sea,' called by the whites, 'fishermen.' Those who live inland from the sea are called Paiendra, from Paien, 'a tomahawk,' and are called by the whites 'Waddyman,' ... referring to their climbing trees in search of game for food. Those who live on the high mountains still further back are called Bemeringal or mountaineers, from Bemering, 'a mountain.' Perhaps strictly the Bemering include the people living on the Manero tableland, and even those on the high country as far as Kiandra, but not those on the fall thence to the north...

Beyond the most distant Bemeringal known to the Yuin, namely at Kiandra, there were tribes they called Woradjera and also Kunamildan, or 'come by night,' who had at times crossed the mountains, and killed the Murring. The former are clearly the Wiradjuri, some of whom lived on the lower Tumut River (Howitt 1996:82).

We have already examined Howitt's published account of the territorial affiliations of various language named groups. In his account of the inheritance of rights in country, and again in his description of the rituals surrounding the arrival of the various local contingents to the larger ceremonial gatherings, the importance of very specific localised connections to country emerges.

#### A NOTE ON NAMED LANGUAGE TRIBES

In the wake of colonisation, greater political import has been afforded to language named groupings than is understood to have traditionally been the case. Under the combined impacts of demographic stress and social reconfiguration, the usurpation of land and voluntary or enforced changes in residence and occupation, knowledge of finer levels of local organisation has often

become attenuated. Under such circumstances, although individual family associations with particular places might be retained, it has commonly been found that for the sake of social solidarity and political effectiveness – or as Marcia Langton has termed it ‘a survival strategy’ - a pattern of agglomeration of people sharing the same or related languages arose, such groups adopting a shared identity sometimes under the banner of a single language name. Such developments were clearly dependent upon the capacity for recognition within traditional frames of commonalities drawn at varying levels of inclusiveness. Whereas classically the language named group held its interests in land only by virtue of the component local groups, in the post-classical era such language named groups may come to claim undifferentiated interests and the right to speak over the broader extent of their combined country. Anthropologists have pointed to the rising importance of such language named tribes in the context of claims to country and land management in the current legal context. In the 1990s, Sutton coined the label ‘new tribes’ to refer to these self-identified language groups who act as corporate, and often legally constituted entities with claims and responsibilities over broad and bounded local areas (Sutton 1995:47).

More localised identities may be retained to varying degrees by different family groups within such umbrella groupings, sometimes leading over time to fission or reconfiguration. In the present Native Title context there has been an increasing move toward claims pitched at a societal level, encompassing a number of language named groups, who recognise their common basis in a more broadly acknowledged system of law and custom.

In the following sections we will examine the evidence for various levels of land related and sociocultural identity in what we may term the broader ACT region.

#### **CEREMONIAL CIRCUITS, REGIONAL SOCIETIES AND CULTURAL BLOCS**

Following Mathews, on the basis of linguistic affinity and cultural homogeneity as well as close ties of kinship, intermarriage and common ceremonial participation, Aboriginal groups traditionally occupying the country stretching between Bulli and Cape Howe on the New South Wales south coast extending inland to the Blue Mountains, southern tablelands and the alpine region in the far south of the state may be considered to have constituted a distinctive socio-cultural bloc. There were no hard and fast boundaries about such conglomerates, rather as across the country, the peripheries of one group and the next seem always to have been marked by transitional zones where linguistic and cultural features were melded or at the least where difference was easily negotiated through multilingualism and the capacity for cultural translation. In such zones there were also sometimes areas of territorial overlap where longstanding patterns of intermarriage effectively resulted in relatively free access on the part of neighbouring groups.

Mathews gave recognition to this linguistic and sociocultural bloc describing the grouping in one context as the ‘Thurawal nation’, this label merely applied for convenience after one of the constituent groups (Mathews 1898b:343) see map. Central to his definition of this conglomerate, as will be explored in detail below, was their link through a common ceremonial complex. As well as linguistic affinity, described above, the third defining feature was the maintenance of a distinctive system of social organisation.

## MINISTERIAL-IN-CONFIDENCE

The great nations of the Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi which adjoined the south-eastern group on the west and north-west, upheld a pervasive system of class and sectional divisions. In their world view the physical and the social world was fundamentally divided into two opposed halves or moieties which in the social sense formed intermarrying categories. Each moiety was in turn further subdivided to form two sections. Children gained their moiety and sectional affiliations by reference to the mother. People were identified with and commonly referred to by their section names, such as, in the example provided by Howitt for the Wiradjuri, 'Yibai', 'Wumbi', 'Murri' and 'Kubbi' (Howitt 1996:209). Such sections as well as a series of maternal totems played a role in the selection of ideal marriage partners.

The south-eastern conglomerate, on the other hand, was distinguished by the absence of class and section names and a totemic organisation based on affiliations organised by paternal descent. Writing of the Yuin, Howitt observed,

There are no class names, or even traces of them, but very numerous totems scattered over the country, as is the case in the tribes with descent in the female line. But in this case the totem names are inherited from the father, and not from the mother (Howitt 1996:133).

Howitt theorised that the Yuin and other groups may originally have upheld moiety divisions which were subsequently lost; the loss in his view not necessarily being seen as brought about by colonial disruption but possibly by cultural shifts in prehistoric times. Mathews and Everitt support Howitt's view that totems amongst the south-eastern peoples descend in the male line (Mathews and Everitt 1900:264).

There is on this point some difference suggested by Howitt between the coastal Yuin and related groups including the people of Braidwood, Queanbeyan etc, and the Ya-itma-thang, Ngarigo and Wolgal of the alpine country. In his inventory of different systems of social organisation, Howitt categorises the two groups separately (Howitt 1996). Whereas Mathews includes all the groups north of Cape Howe and Delegate (1898b:343) within a single bloc, Howitt's information suggests that the Ngarigo and Wolgal, while lacking sections, showed other organisational features aligning them with groups of the Murray, sharing with them the moiety divisions of eagle-hawk and crow, and a system of totemic affiliation in which totemic interests were inherited from the mother (Howitt 1996:102-103). It is pertinent to note here that one of Howitt's primary informants in this regard was the Wolgal man, Yibai-Malian, whose name may in fact be read as comprising the section name Yibai and the moiety name Malian [eaglehawk]. Yibai-Malian was the son of a Wiradjuri medicine man and it may be that his perspective was strongly influenced in this direction (Howitt 1996:511). In any case, the fact of his mixed heritage and of the congruencies with the Wiradjuri system postulated here may be regarded as reflecting a transitional status for groups on the periphery. The location of the Wolgal about the Tooma area in Mathews' fieldnotes may be tallied with his mapping of Aboriginal nations to place them right on the cusp of a major sociocultural divide.

Although such terminology had not entered into academic debate in his time, R. H. Mathews had begun working with concepts of both socio-cultural blocs and regional societies at the turn of the nineteenth century. Mathews' widespread and prolific studies of Aboriginal groups through NSW and Queensland stimulated his interest in the distribution of certain common traits across broad areas. In 1898 he published an article and accompanying map in which he divided Aboriginal tribes

## MINISTERIAL-IN-CONFIDENCE

of New South Wales into regional aggregates based on ceremonial types. He delineated eight different zones, the third of which was distinguished by their common commemoration of the *bunan* ceremony. The territory mapped extends along the NSW coast from Bulli to Cape Howe and includes the hinterland extending as far inland to Crookwell, practically to Yass, and appearing to follow the Great Dividing Range south so that Cooma is clearly within and Tumbarumba just beyond (see map). He writes,

MAP 3: MATHEWS MAP OF CEREMONIAL TYPES