

CHAPTER 1 THE LANGUAGE AND ITS SPEAKERS

This chapter provides general ethnographic and historical background. Where the language is spoken and how it is related to its neighbours is described in §1.1 and §1.2. Section 1.3 gives a brief description of the traditional life of the Martuthunira people, as gleaned from the limited sources. Section 1.4 describes the post-contact history of the Martuthunira while §1.5 outlines previous investigations of the language. Section 1.6 gives a short biographical sketch of the principal informant – Mr Algy Paterson. His story provides a more personal perspective on the social pressures which have affected the recent history of languages in the Pilbara region. Finally, §1.7 describes the nature of the data on which this description is based.

1.1 NAMES AND LOCATION

The name ‘Martuthunira’ appears in many different forms in the literature. Tindale (1974) uses the spelling *Mardudunera*, also used by O’Grady et al. (1966) and Oates and Oates (1970), and lists ten alternatives. These are given below together with the source of the spelling.

<i>Mardudjungara</i>	
<i>Mardudhunera</i>	(Radcliffe-Brown 1913)
<i>Mardudhunira</i>	(Wurm 1970)
<i>Mardudhoonera</i>	(Connelly 1932)
<i>Mardathoonera</i>	(Daisy Bates)
<i>Mardutunira</i>	
<i>Mardutunera</i>	
<i>Marduduna</i>	
<i>Mardathoni</i>	(‘Yabaroo’ 1899)
<i>Mardatuna</i>	
<i>Maratunia</i>	

To this list can be added von Brandenstein’s (1967) spelling, *Marduthunira*, which is followed by Wordick (1982). It should be noted that the phonetic representation of the language name differs depending on the main language of the informant. Martuthunira speakers give [marɔðɔneɪa], Yinyjparnti speakers give [marɔɣɔneɪa], and Thalanyji speakers give [marɔɖɔneɪa]. This grammar employs an orthography based on a voiceless stop series and the new spelling *Martuthunira* is used in keeping with this. ‘*Martuthunira*’

derives from the name of the lower reaches of the Fortescue River, *Martuthuni*, by the addition of the provenience suffix *-ra* (§4.8.5). Thus, as a name for the people, *Martuthunira* means ‘those who live around the Fortescue River’.

The reported location and extent of Martuthunira territory also differs from one description to another. Map 1 shows the extent of Martuthunira territory as described by those speakers consulted in preparing this description. Map 2 presents previous representations of the boundaries.

Radcliffe-Brown (1913:175) describes the Martuthunira as occupying “the coast of Western Australia from a point somewhere between the Cane and Robe Rivers as far as the Maitland River”. His map shows the territory extending as far to the south-east as the Hamersley Range. However, his map does not conform to the description in his text and places the south-western boundary between the Fortescue and Robe Rivers (see Map 2). Tindale (1974:248) makes a more confined estimate, giving the area as 2,100 square miles:

Coastal plain of the Fortescue River; north to visited islands of the Dampier Archipelago on log rafts; inland only to foot of ranges...[Radcliffe-]Brown (1913) gave them a tribal area of 3,500 square miles (9,100 sq.km.) which seems to be an overestimation.

My information supports Radcliffe-Brown’s original estimation. The north-eastern boundary between the Martuthunira, Ngarluma and Yapurarra/Pijurru is marked by a group of three hills – Mount Leopold, Moondle Hill and Mount McLeod – just to the south of the Maitland River. Mount Leopold is described as the ‘cornerpeg’ of Martuthunira country. On the Fortescue River, the Martuthunira extended as far inland as Booloomba Pool, though much of the gorge country was shared with the Kurrama and Yinyjiparnti. The ancient river valley linking the Robe and Fortescue Rivers, in the shadow of Mount Elvire, effectively represents the south-eastern boundary with the Kurrama. The Robe River (*Jajiwurra*), Jimmawurrada Creek and the Buckland Hills were also Martuthunira. Warluru Pool, where the Robe River leaves the Hamersley Range, marks the eastern extent of Martuthunira country. Warluru also marks the eastern boundary between the Kurrama and Pinikura, whose country borders the Martuthunira in the Buckland Hills from Warluru to Chalyarn Pool on the Robe. The Nhuwala and Pinikura meet nearby at Darnell Hill. On the west coast, the grass plains and mudflats between the Robe River and the Cane River were shared with the Nhuwala. Warrambo Creek (*Wartampu*) is described as the boundary although the Nhuwala foraged as far to the north-east as the Robe River.

The Martuthunira visited the islands of the Dampier Archipelago, which they presumably shared with the Yapurarra/Pijurru, and the Mary Anne Group. Tindale also includes Barrow Island within Martuthunira territory (see Map 2). However, there is no reliable archeological evidence of recent pre-contact occupation of Barrow and certainly no belief on the part of present inhabitants of the Pilbara that the island was ever visited.

Von Brandenstein’s (1967) map of the Pilbara languages gives a quite inaccurate picture of the location of the Martuthunira in relation to other groups. His map restricts the Martuthunira to the coastal plain between the Maitland and Robe Rivers and assigns the uplands between the Fortescue and Robe to the Ja’unmalu, which he describes as a ‘subgroup’ of the Yinyjiparnti. The status, linguistic, local or otherwise, of the term ‘subgroup’ is not made clear in his paper although the map implies that the Ja’unmalu were Yinyjiparnti speakers. Tindale (1974), presumably on the basis of his own field survey of the area, records Jawunmala as a Yinyjiparnti term for the Martuthunira, and this is certainly supported by the

description of boundaries given by Radcliffe-Brown and my informants. Von Brandenstein (1967:3) reports two terms used for people to the south-west of the Martuthunira:

Jardira is a collective name for the Kauarindjarri, the ‘Westerners’ and the Kurrama, the ‘Highlanders’, because they live both ‘on the one side’ as seen from the Martuthunira.

While *yarti* does occur as a word for ‘side’ in Pilbara languages (Panyjima, for example), it does not occur in Martuthunira. Jardira (*Yartira* in the present orthography) is most likely a local group term for people living on the Cane River (*Yarti*). The word given here for ‘west’, *kauari*, does not occur in Martuthunira, nor does the suffix *-ndjarri*.

Von Brandenstein’s apparent errors probably arise from a confusion between the names of language groups and the names of local residence groups. This confusion is understandable as far as the Martuthunira are concerned because of the etymology of the language name. As noted above, the name Martuthunira means literally ‘the people who live about the Fortescue River’. However, the term is also applied to a language and to a territory that encompasses country that is not in the immediate vicinity of the Fortescue. In many cases this territory includes local residence groups that may be referred to by similarly derived terms: for example the *Wartampura* on Warrambo Creek and the *Yartira* of the Cane River. These residence groups do not represent different linguistic territories or necessarily have any relationship to particular linguistic varieties. Quite likely some of the groups living on Warrambo Creek had primary linguistic affiliation to Martuthunira while others were primarily Nhwala.

1.2 NEIGHBOURS AND LINGUISTIC AFFILIATIONS

Map 3 shows the relative location and genetic relationship between Martuthunira and other languages in the Pilbara area. The earliest classification of the languages of the north-west of Western Australia, O’Grady et al. (1966), lists Martuthunira as a member of the Ngayarda subgroup of the Nyungic group of the Pama-Nyungan language family. The classification was based on a lexicostatistical survey of the languages and, in the case of Martuthunira, involved a simple 100-item word list compared with similar lists for Ngarluma (54% cognacy), Kurrama (64%) and Nhwala (68%). The Ngayarda subgroup included the following languages: Ngarla, Nyamal, Palyku-Panyjima, Kurrama-Yinyjiparnti, Kariyarra-Ngarluma, Martuthunira, Pinikura, Jurruru, and Nhwala. This classification included three dialect pairs based on cognate densities of 79% for Palyku-Panyjima, 78% for Kurrama-Yinyjiparnti, and 79% for Kariyarra-Ngarluma.

O’Grady (1966) lists a number of grammatical features that support the lexicostatistical grouping of the languages. First, the Ngayarda languages show phonological and morphophonemic features which distinguish them from members of the Marngu and Wati subgroups:

1. they have a laminal contrast and have lost a contrast between initial laminals and apicals, only initial laminals being attested in the Ngayarda languages;
2. they preserve a ‘Proto Pama-Nyungan’ morphophonemic alternation in the form of the ‘agent-instrumental’ suffix, **-lu ~ -ngku*, conditioned by the length of the word stem;

3. they have a morphophonemic rule of nasal dissimilation reducing the locative suffix *-ngka* to *-ka* where it is attached to a nominal containing a nasal-stop cluster (in fact this rule is restricted to Panyjima, Kurrama, Yinyjiparnti and Ngarluma).

O'Grady then lists four morphosyntactic features shared by members of the Ngayarda subgroup and which set these apart from other languages of the Nyungic group:

1. The better known languages of the subgroup (viz. Ngarluma and Yinyjiparnti) have a productive active/passive voice distinction.
2. With the exception of Palyku and Nyamal, the reflex of 'Proto Pama-Nyungan' **lu ~ -ngku* is not used as a marker of transitive subject in these languages.
3. The 'Proto Pama-Nyungan' suffix **-ku* has shifted "from the specialized meaning *indirect object* to the broader meaning *object* (noncommittally direct/indirect)".
4. The 'Proto Pama-Nyungan' verb suffix **(l)ku* has shifted "from *future* (or *optative*) to *present*".

Oates (1975) presents a different classification, devised by von Brandenstein, which distinguishes a Coastal Ngayarda subgroup from an Inland Ngayarda subgroup. Von Brandenstein's classification is based on grammatical criteria similar to those recognised by O'Grady (1966). He distinguishes three types of language (von Brandenstein 1967): those having an "Active Verbal Concept" (AVC) (read 'accusative case-marking pattern'), those having a "Passive Verbal Concept" (PVC) (read 'ergative case system'), and an intermediate type having a combination of both AVC and PVC features. By von Brandenstein's classification, the Coastal Ngayarda languages are AVC and include Ngarla, Kurrama, Yinyjiparnti, Kariyarra, Ngarluma, Martuthunira, Pinikura, Nhwala, Jiwarli and Thiin. Members of the Inland Ngayarda Subgroup are intermediate between the AVC and PVC type. Oates (1975:73) describes these as "being basically accusative languages like the coastal group, but also having ergative suffixes like the Western Desert languages (AVC with PVC intrusions)". The group includes Nyamal (including "Widagari" and "Bundjuwanga", described by von Brandenstein as "light" and "heavy" Nyamal respectively), Panyjima, Jurruru, Warriangka, Janadjina and Yinhawangka.

Von Brandenstein classifies Palyku, correctly, as a member of the Wati subgroup (Western Desert), the term 'Palyku' being described as the name of a local group speaking the Nyiyaparli language. But unfortunately, von Brandenstein's (1967) paper, which introduces the AVC versus PVC criterion, includes almost no actual language data and provides nothing but very general statements about the purported differences among the various languages. It is thus impossible to evaluate his arguments.

Austin (1988) presents a new classification of the languages of the Ashburton and Gascoyne districts based on lexical, morphological and syntactic criteria. He places Pinikura together with Payungu, Purduna and Thalanyji in the Kanyara group, and Jiwarli, Thiin and Warriangka together with Tharrkari in the Mantharta group. Austin argues that his earlier (1981c) classification of Jurruru as a Mantharta language is incorrect and that the language is properly of the Ngayarda group. He also notes (Austin 1988) that "von Brandenstein's errors have been reproduced by Wurm and Hattori eds (1981), in their map 20, which appears to be based on the same classification as that described by Oates".

O'Grady's (1966) list of Ngayarda morpho-syntactic features provides the best set of grammatical criteria for a Ngayarda group yet devised. The first three features are the result of

a syntactic change in a number of Ngayarda languages such that an accusative case-marking system has developed from a predominantly ergative case-marking system (Dench 1982). This innovation is shared by Panyjima, Jurruru, Yinyjiparnti, Kurrama, Ngarluma, Kariyarra and Martuthunira. O'Grady's fourth feature, the shift of a future tense verb suffix to present tense status, occurs only in Panyjima, Kurrama and Yinyjiparnti. By itself it cannot be used as a defining criterion for the group as a whole but it is suggestive of a sub-classification of the Ngayarda languages.

Nyamal does not appear to have a productive voice distinction (though the data is limited) but shows evidence of a split-ergative case-marking system dependent on tense and polarity (Klokeid 1978). Additional data is likely to be crucial in further determining the nature and scope of the syntactic changes in the Ngayarda group.

Palyku/Nyiyaparli fails a number of O'Grady's tests but is, surprisingly, retained as a Ngayarda language in his classification. Firstly, it lacks a laminal contrast though it does appear to share with its Ngayarda neighbours a restriction against initial apicals. Secondly, it shows no evidence of a voice distinction and appears to have an essentially ergative case-marking pattern. Thirdly, unlike the other Ngayarda languages, it makes great use of bound pronominal suffixes. Thus despite sharing 79 per cent of basic vocabulary with Panyjima, Palyku/Nyiyaparli is best considered a member of another language group. Von Brandenstein's grouping of this language into the Wati subgroup is correct. As for the other languages – Yinhawangka, Nhuwala and Ngarla – there is not yet enough data to enable confident classification. I have retained them in the Ngayarda group for the time being.

For the purposes of this study then, the Ngayarda group is taken to include Ngarla, Nyamal, Kariyarra, Ngarluma, Yinyjiparnti, Kurrama, Panyjima, Yinhawangka, Jurruru, Nhuwala and Martuthunira. Although there are grounds for considering Yinyjiparnti-Kurrama and Ngarluma-Kariyarra to be dialect pairs, I prefer to conform to the local socio-political perception of each as a separate language.

1.3 TRADITIONAL LIFE

Unfortunately there is no detailed ethnographic description of the Martuthunira people, and in the present situation it is very difficult to arrive at a clear picture of traditional practices. The first, and effectively last, true ethnographic description appears in Radcliffe-Brown's (1913) paper. Here, in addition to an analysis of the kinship system, he makes a few observations on the organisation of local groups and group totems indicating that, for the most part, the Martuthunira resembled the Kariyarra in these respects. It is also possible to glean some additional information from the reports of early explorers and settlers, and from descriptions in traditional texts. Although a certain amount of detail of traditional life is remembered by people in the Pilbara community today, such information must be treated with care. The traditional practices of the Martuthunira have been dead for a long time and memory can be corrupted by knowledge of the surviving social institutions of other groups in the area. Because of this, Radcliffe-Brown's description possibly remains the most reliable source.

The following sections provide an outline of traditional Martuthunira social organisation and economic life, with a few remarks on aesthetic expression through language. I have not

made a detailed study of any of these aspects of Martuthunira culture but, beyond the sources mentioned, base this discussion on an overall impression built up through general discussion with informants and a number of years of participant observation of everyday life and ritual in the semi-traditional Pilbara community. I ask that the reader treat the description with sympathetic skepticism.

1.3.1 THE KINSHIP SYSTEM

As in all Australian Aboriginal communities, the most important aspect of Martuthunira social organisation was the system of kinship ties that allowed every person to reckon a relationship to every other person with whom they would ever have contact. Rights to language, to the land and its resources, performing rights to songs and dances, as well as the simplest of interactions between people, were all mediated by the kinship system.

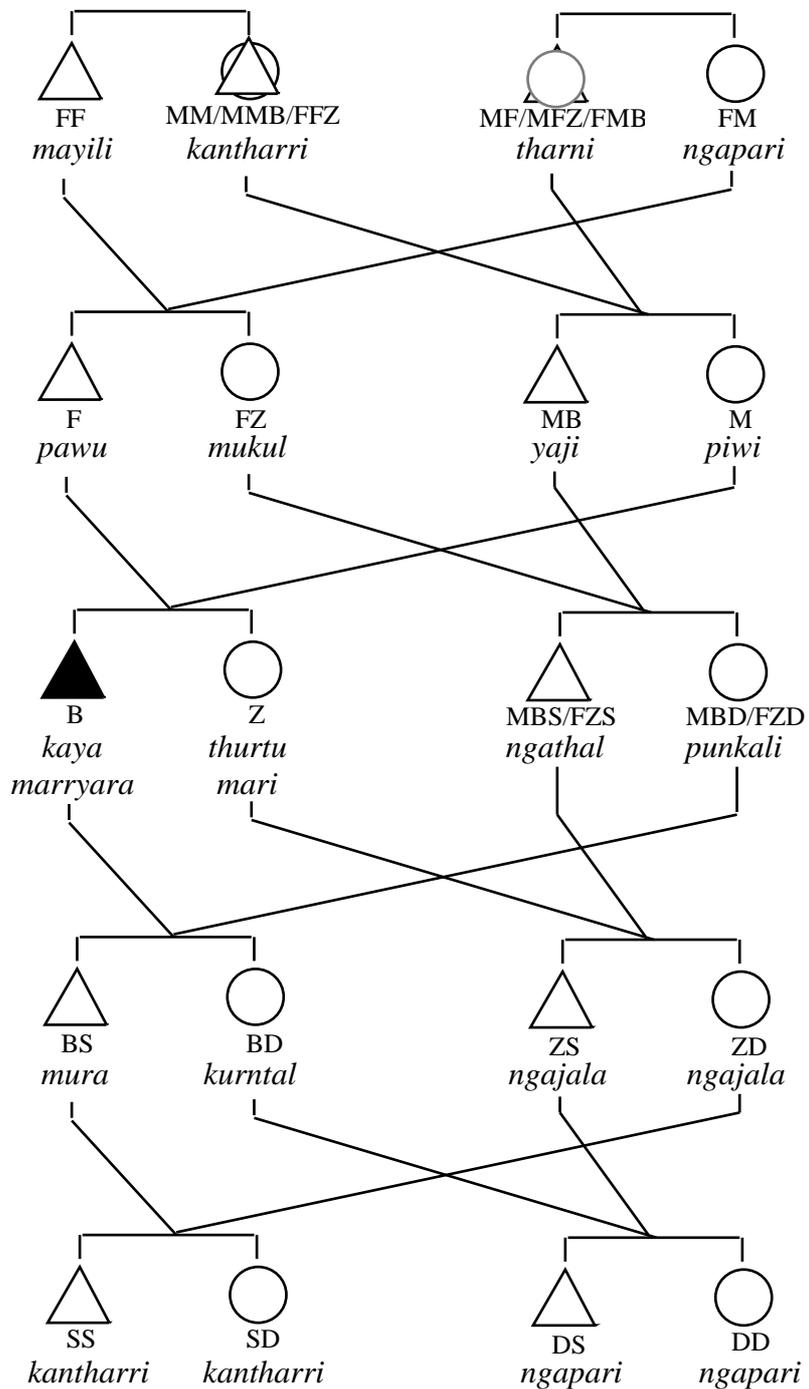
The Martuthunira kinship system is no longer in use and I was not able to collect extensive or entirely consistent information. For this reason, Radcliffe-Brown's (1913) reported data, gathered from actual genealogies, provides the basis for the present analysis. Radcliffe-Brown's description is generally consistent with my data and in a number of instances helped jog the informant's memory of terms and relationships. Radcliffe-Brown describes the Martuthunira system as of the Arunda type, but this has been successfully questioned by Scheffler (1978) who argues instead that the system is of the Kariera type.

As a Kariera system, the Martuthunira system can be successfully described in terms of just two patriline (in effect patrimoieties). Table 1.1 presents the basic Martuthunira kinship terminology for a male ego (affinal terminology is presented separately in Table 1.2). Both Radcliffe-Brown's data and my own are seriously deficient in terminology reckoned from the point of view of a female ego and for this reason the charts present relationships from the point of view of a male ego only.

Some additional explanatory notes to Table 1.1 are necessary:

- (a) The terms for mother's brother's children depend on the sex of ego. *Ngathal* is same sex MBC, *punkali* is opposite sex MBC. Thus for a male ego MBS is *ngathal*, for a female ego MBS is *punkali*.
- (b) Terms for grandchildren are also determined by the sex of ego. For a male ego, son's children are *mayali* while daughter's children are *thami*. For a female ego, son's children are *ngapari* and daughter's children are *kantharri*.
- (c) The superclass terms in the second ascending and second descending generations are *thami* and *kantharri* with no distinction for sex. Presumably, the terms *mayali* and *ngapari* were used specifically for agnatic kin.
- (d) Terminology repeats every four generations. Thus kin in the third descending generation are called by the terms used for the first ascending generation, and kin in the third ascending generation are called by the terms of the first descending generation.

TABLE 1.1: MARTUTHUNIRA KINSHIP TERMINOLOGY



1.3.2 ALTERNATE GENERATION SETS AND SECTIONS

The terminological equivalence between the second ascending generation and second descending generation points to a system of merged alternate generation sets. All kin of ego's

own generation, his grandparents and his grandchildren's generations are in one merged generation set, while all kin in ego's parents and children's generations are in the other set. In the Pilbara, as in many Australian societies, the alternate generation sets are extremely important in the organisation of ritual, so much so that the division is reified in a number of common Ngayarda grammatical systems (Dench 1987a).

The crosscutting of the two patrimoiety and the two merged alternate generation sets defines a system of four named sections. The Martuthunira section system is represented in Figure 1.1:

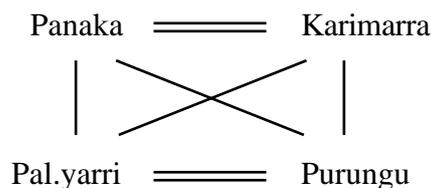


FIGURE 1.1: MARTUTHUNIRA SECTIONS

= indicates marriage
 vertical lines indicate patrilineal descent,
 diagonal lines indicate matrilineal descent.

A four-section system was shared by all groups in this area but the actual naming of sections differed between groups (see Dench 1987a for details). To the south of the Fortescue River, the Martuthunira, Kurrama and Panyjima shared the system as set out in Figure 1.1. The Nyiyaparli and Mardudjarra (Tonkinson 1991), now mainly at Jigalong, also shared this pattern of section naming. However, Radcliffe-Brown (1913) reports a different arrangement of the section names in Kariyarra and Ngarluma:

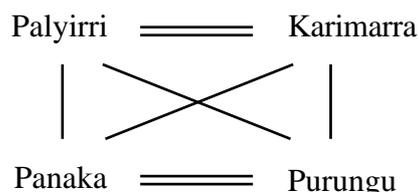


FIGURE 1.2: NGARLUMA SECTIONS

Figure 1.2 can be mapped onto Figure 1.1. That is, a person who is Panaka in Martuthunira will be Palyirri in Ngarluma. In both cases he or she will marry a person who is Karimarra. The difference between the two systems can be seen as a simple 'flip-flop' of the section names in one patrimoiety.

The current system of translation between the southern Fortescue communities (in particular the Onslow Panyjima community) and the Yinyjiparnti/Ngarluma community at Roebourne is somewhat different. The Yinyjiparnti arrangement of the section names, in comparison with the southern Fortescue arrangement (Figure 1.1), is presented in Figure 1.3.

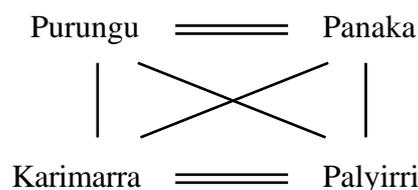


FIGURE 1.3: YINYJIPARNTI SECTIONS

This system is identical to the Ngarluma system as described by Radcliffe-Brown but the section correspondence between Panyjima/Kurrama/Martuthunira and Yinyjiparnti is quite different from that reported between Martuthunira and Ngarluma. It is probably wrong to draw the inference that the Ngarluma and Yinyjiparnti, who have the same pattern of naming, had a complex rule allowing translation from one system to another, or that the translation rule between groups north and south of the Fortescue has changed drastically in the last sixty years. Instead it would seem that different section-naming translation rules applied for different groups, irrespective of whether those groups shared the same system. Such a scenario would presumably reflect differing conventions of exogamous marriage but there is unfortunately no relevant data for either the historical or contemporary situation.

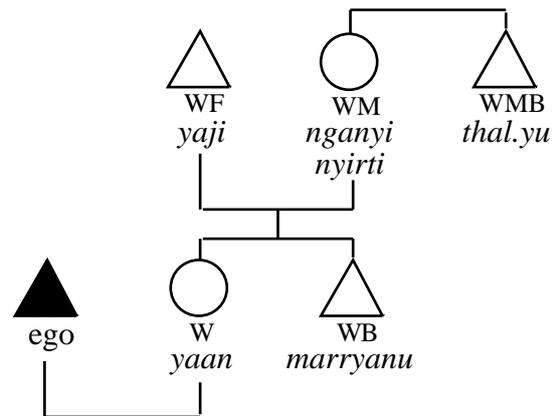
The sections are relatively unimportant from a sociological point of view. The section system allows the principles of kinship organisation to be easily stated without reference to complex genealogies but cannot be seen as a defining principle of the kinship system itself. Section names are used in reference and address but there are very few contexts in which members of one section will operate together by virtue of their shared section membership.

1.3.3 MARRIAGE

The important difference between Radcliffe-Brown's description and Scheffler's reanalysis lies in the marriage rule. Radcliffe-Brown assumes an Aranda marriage pattern in which a man would ordinarily marry into the class of kin including his mother's mother's brother's daughter's daughter. Radcliffe-Brown's conclusion is based on the assumption that two particular named kin, *thal.yu* and *nganyi* are WMB/MMBS and WM/MMBD respectively, and so differ from *pawu* (F) and *mukul* (FZ). Scheffler argues that these are in fact special members of the *pawu* and *mukul* classes. Thus the system corresponds to the typical Kariera pattern of cross-cousin marriage.

Table 1.2 presents the basic affinal terminology assuming Scheffler's treatment. The terms *nganyi* and *thal.yu* refer to prospective mother-in-law and prospective or actual mother-in-law's brother respectively. Actual mother-in-law is referred to as *nyirti*, a term which can be extended to father-in-law (*yaji*) and brother-in-law (*marryanu*). These terms are reciprocal and so, for example, *nganyi* is also used by a woman to her daughter's prospective husband, and by a man to his sister's daughter's prospective or actual husband.

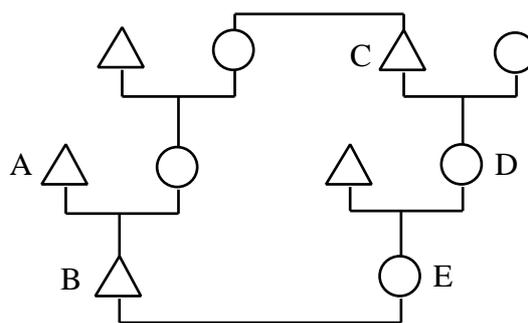
TABLE 1.2: AFFINAL KIN TERMS



Marriages were typically arranged before birth. Radcliffe-Brown (1913:185) gives an example:

Let us take the case of a newly married man, whom we may call A, who has as yet no children. A man C, who is the *talyu* [thal.yu]...of A, has a daughter born to him, whom we may call D. It is arranged that this girl D shall be the *nganyi*...of the first son born to A. When A has a son born to him this son B is told that the woman D is his *nganyi*, the man C being his *kandari* [kantharri]. The woman D grows up and has a daughter E, who is by betrothal the wife of B. He keeps his claim alive by visiting the father of the girl, that is, the husband of his *nganyi*, and by making him presents...The mother's brother of a girl occupies an important position. If there are several claimants for his sister's daughter it is often he who decides which shall be the favoured one. This man is the *talyu* of the girl's future husband. If a man wishes to obtain a girl in marriage he must therefore pay his attentions not only to the girl's father...but also to her mother's brother.

The relationships are shown in the following diagram (adapted from Radcliffe-Brown 1913:184):



A marriage arrangement was often determined through a chain of relationships as Radcliffe-Brown (1913:185) points out:

A man's *nganyi*, that is the woman to whose daughter he has the first right, is often the daughter of his own father's own *talyu*...In other cases a man A and his wife may ask the woman's father's sister...to promise her daughter as the *nganyi* of the yet unborn son of A and his wife...Whenever a man is made *nganyi* to a woman his mother is at the same time made *nganyi* to this woman's son...That is, there is exchange of sisters.

1.3.4 INITIATION

Unlike the inland Yinyjiparnti, Kurrama and Panyjima, the coastal peoples – Ngarluma, Kariyarra, Martuthunira, and Nhuwala – and the people of the Ashburton region – Thalanyji and Jiwarli, for example – did not practise initiation by circumcision. Instead, the initiation of young men involved the tying of a string or sinew band around each upper arm just above the bulge of the bicep, and so as to partially sever the muscle. The band was kept in place often for up to a year during which time the youth was kept in partial seclusion and was forbidden certain foods. Although described by Radcliffe-Brown (1913:167-174) for the Kariyarra and Ngarluma, and reported for the southern groups, my informants believed that this ritual initiation was not practised by the Martuthunira.

However, there is clear evidence from traditional texts that the Martuthunira, like the Kariyarra and Ngarluma, sent young men to the Yinyjiparnti and Kurrama for circumcision. The two Martuthunira culture heroes travelled up the Fortescue River, were captured by the Yinyjiparnti culture heroes who initiated them, and were sent back to the coastal peoples to ‘lay out the law’. The Martuthunira thus looked to the east for the origin of their law and would have sent young men to the eastern peoples for their ‘higher schooling’ in that law. Whether or not this practice was restricted to the most eastern of Martuthunira local groups – that is, to those people who would have had some links through intermarriage to Yinyjiparnti and Kurrama clans and country – is not known. The reader is referred to Tonkinson (1991) for discussion of initiation practices involving circumcision. I have recorded a number of Martuthunira terms for particular relationships established during and maintained after the process of initiation, although the Martuthunira did not practise circumcision themselves.

1.3.5 LOCAL GROUPS

Radcliffe-Brown describes the Martuthunira as living in a number of local patrilineal groups, or ‘clans’, each with its own defined territory. These groups were not named but could be referred to by citing the names of the more prominent camping places within the group territory. Radcliffe-Brown (1913:176) notes that the local organisation of the Martuthunira clan was, “in all respects similar to that of the Kariara [*Kariyarra*]”. Thus his description of the Kariyarra local group can be included here:

The country of a local group, with all its products, animal and vegetable, and mineral, belongs to members of the group in common. Any member has the right to hunt over the country of his group at all times. He may not, however, hunt over the country of any other local group without the permission of the owners...Hunting, or collecting vegetable products on the country of another local group constitutes an act of trespass and was in former times liable to be punished by death.

Radcliffe-Brown (1913:146)

Although the clan organisation was patrilocal, a woman retained some right to the country of her birth and a man often held some rights to the country of his mother and, often more importantly, his mother’s mother. Radcliffe-Brown (1913:147) notes, however, that such secondary affiliations seemed “to have meant no more than that a man was sure of a welcome in the country of his wife or mother”.

Within the group the basic social unit was the family, consisting of a man and his wife, or wives, and their children. Usually such family groups moved from one camp site to another, within a man's country and that of his wives, without reference to other families within the local group. However at times of ceremony, or when a particular food source became plentiful in the country of one group, a number of families would meet and camp together, often for some weeks.

In the camp each family had its own hut or shelter with its own fire. The family had its own food supply which was cooked and consumed by the family...A native camp is composed of two parts, the married peoples camp and the bachelors' camp. The latter contains all unmarried men, including widowers; unmarried women and widows live with one or other of the families of the married people. If a visitor comes to the camp and brings his wife with him, he puts his fire and shelter near the married people, on the same side as his own country lies. If he is unmarried, or if he has not brought his wife with him, he goes to the bachelors' camp. Radcliffe-Brown (1913:147)

1.3.6 LOCAL GROUP TOTEMS

Each local clan group had associated with it a number of 'totems' regarding which all members of the group bore the same responsibilities. For each clan totem there was a totemic centre or ceremonial ground, called *thalu*, within the clan territory. Ceremonies held at the totemic site served to increase the supply of a particular animal or food resource, bring rain or wind or the tide, or affect some human condition such as fertility or sanity. The word *thalu* is also used to refer to places characterised by an abundance of some resource, such as stone suitable for knives.

Radcliffe-Brown lists the totems for a number of Martuthunira local groups. For example, the totems of a Panaka/Pal.yarri clan centred on *Janyjarra* pool on the Fortescue River, included the following:

<i>wanta</i>	insanity, craziness
<i>walampari</i>	possum
<i>mulyaru</i>	carpet python
<i>kartangu</i>	edible gum of kanyji bush
<i>walyuru</i>	type of wild bean
<i>warrari</i>	common fly
<i>jarnungu</i>	bardi grub

Radcliffe-Brown points out that there was no prohibition on a man eating one of his clan totems.

1.3.7 LANGUAGE USE AND SOCIAL ORGANISATION

Like other Australian groups, the Martuthunira observed strict rules according respect to in-laws and to people bearing certain relationships established through the processes of male initiation. In particular, a man was expected to avoid all contact with his mother-in-law and with the man responsible for his circumcision, his *nhaankurti* or *mangkalyi*. Beyond this, a certain degree of respectful avoidance was accorded to other affines, especially father-in-law, and by members of an initiate's family to members of the *mangkalyi*'s family. Speaking to these people, where permitted at all, usually involved the use of a special avoidance vocabulary called *Kurntangka*.

The avoidance style, called either *Kurntaka* or *Paathupathu* in other groups, was common to all the Ngayarda languages. Von Brandenstein (1982) notes that much of the avoidance vocabulary was shared by the different Pilbara languages and was most highly elaborated in the verb and demonstrative class (see also Dench 1991:211ff). In each particular language the avoidance style involved the use of special vocabulary – some from the common stock and some language-specific – but with the morphology and syntax of the everyday language. Avoidance styles of this type have been called ‘mother-in-law’ languages or styles (for example Dixon (1972), and see Haviland (1979)), but this label is inappropriate in the Pilbara where the use of the style for ‘*mangkalyi* avoidance’ was at least as prevalent. I was able to record some Martuthunira *Kurntangka* but not enough to be able to make valid generalisations about the semantic structure of the avoidance vocabulary (see appended word list).

While affinal and ‘*mangkalyi*’ relationships demand a measure of respect and avoidance involving a special vocabulary, different degrees of relative restraint and familiarity were appropriate to all kin. As a general rule, relationships between members of the same merged alternate generation set were characteristically symmetrical – what I could do/say to/with my ‘brother’ he could do/say to/with me – while those across generation sets were asymmetrical (Dench 1987a, Tonkinson 1991). Of course, the actual behaviour appropriate between particular kin was more specifically defined. For example, between father’s father and father’s son existed a relationship of easy familiarity extending to obscene sexual joking and horseplay. Between classificatory brothers a similar relationship existed although between actual brothers there was greater restraint. These various relationships demanded different ways of speaking; topics which could be discussed and those that were proscribed, words that could be used and those that could not, and forms of address that were either too familiar or too formal for use with particular kin. Such rules of behaviour, and to some extent the styles of speaking appropriate to them, are still observed by some members of the Pilbara community.

1.3.8 ECONOMIC LIFE

The Martuthunira people were lucky to live in a rich and diversified country. Their territory, extending from the coast to the foothills of the Hamersley Range, gave them access to the flora and fauna of a wide variety of habitats. Life in this region was not especially harsh. The different environments and ecosystems meant that by taking advantage of seasonal abundances in particular resources the Martuthunira were able to live comfortably and relatively peacefully.

In the warm and shallow waters among the islands of the Dampier Archipelago and the Mary Anne Group, and in the mangrove estuaries of the mainland, the Martuthunira fished with spears and lines, and hunted dugong and turtle. The turtle hunter would leave his log raft and swim onto the back of the turtle, turning it over and stabbing it in the throat with a poisoned wooden spike. Dugong were herded up a mangrove creek and, on their return, were ensnared by a loop of spinifex rope positioned by men on either bank of the creek. One man would be towed behind the dugong as it made its way to the open sea, and there would climb on its back, stick it with a poisoned spike, and then paddle the dead animal, like a log raft, back

to the beach. Shellfish were collected from the beds of the muddy estuaries and King (1827) reports that the mouths of many of the creeks were planted with fish weirs. On the sandy beaches of the islands the Martuthunira dug for turtle eggs and collected the eggs of seabirds from the many rookeries. Water was obtained from soakages in the sandhills behind the beaches and from rock pools further inland. Unfortunately I was unable to collect much information on the life and language of the seagoing Martuthunira. My informant grew up with an inland group on the borders of Kurrama country and has very little first-hand experience of the coastal people's way of life.

On the mainland, the Martuthunira exploited quite different food resources. The two major rivers, the Robe and Fortescue, hold permanent water in numerous deep and clear pools and these are well stocked with fish which were 'poisoned' or were herded into nets by teams of people clapping rocks together as they swam the length of a pool underwater. The riverbeds were also home to many edible birds and animals and provided a cool and shady watering place for the animals of the open plains or rocky ironstone hills and tablelands. Emus, wild turkeys and kangaroos were hunted on the grass plains of the coastal hinterland, and euroes, wallabies, goannas and echidnas in the ranges and valleys further inland.

Useful and edible plants were abundant. The women collected mangrove nuts in the coastal creeks and the nuts of rushes in the river pools; wild beans and various seeds were collected in the grasslands and ground to flour. The wooded sandy banks of the many inland perennial creeks yielded underground tubers and species of succulent vines bearing fruits and berries. Honey, lerps, edible grubs and medicinal vegetable gums were collected from different species of trees in the river beds and wooded flatlands of Jimawurrada Creek. Rope and string were made from the beaten leaves of one species of spinifex (*wirpinykura*), and the resin of another species (*mirna*), once collected and built into nests by a type of ant, was then gathered and refined for use in the manufacture of various implements.

Although they were hunter-gatherers, the Martuthunira took steps to influence the productivity of their land. Hunters stripped the limbs from saplings or thinned stands of particular species of bush to ensure straight wood for spears and other implements in future years. Areas of spinifex sandplain were fired at different times of the year to promote the growth of different plants. Not all the plants so encouraged were destined for human consumption. The Martuthunira made sure that plants forming a basic food source for particular animals were in plentiful supply so as to ensure numbers in a coming season.

The Martuthunira toolkit resembled that of many Australian hunter-gatherers, with maximum efficiency being gained from a few all-purpose implements. Long spears with fire-hardened heads were launched from spearthrowers that doubled as musical instruments. Fishing spears had barbed heads, like the shorter hand-held punishment spears. A number of types of throwing stick were employed, including a returning boomerang which was used to kill flying birds as well as in fighting and as a musical instrument. Traditional stories recount the innovation of the returning boomerang and suggest the introduction of the hafted stone axe. Knives were chipped and pressure-flaked from quartz and chert, and the usual red, white and yellow ochres, together with ash and charcoal, were used for the decoration of the body and various implements.

Women used digging sticks which doubled as fighting staffs, and winnowing dishes and grindstones, which generally remained at often-visited camping spots. The older men and women wove spinifex rope which was knotted into nets used to trap birds and fish. Baler and conch shells were collected on the seashore and used as cooking utensils and water carriers.

I was unable to get a description of how the Martuthunira travelled between the mainland and the offshore islands but luckily King (1827:43-44) gives a detailed account and description of a log raft:

It appears that the only vehicle, by which these savages transport their families and chattals across the water, is a log of wood; that which we had brought alongside with our captive friend was made of the stem of a mangrove tree; but it was not long enough for the purpose, two or three short logs were neatly and even curiously joined together end to end, and so formed one piece that was sufficient to carry and buoyant enough to support the weight of two people. The end is rudely ornamented, and is attached to the extremity by the same contrivance as the joints of the main stem, only that the two are not brought close together. The joint is contrived by driving three pegs into the end of the log, and by bending them, they are made to enter opposite holes in the part that is to be joined on; and as the pegs cross and bend against each other, they form a sort of elastic connexion, which strongly retains the two together. When it is used, they sit astride and move it along by paddling with their hands, keeping their feet upon the end of the log, by which they probably guide its course. Such are the shifts to which the absence of larger timber has reduced these simple savages: they shew that man is naturally a navigating animal; and this floating log, which may be called a *marine-velocipede*, is, I should suppose, the extreme case of the poverty of savage boat-building all round the world.

The few needs that were not fulfilled by the resources of their own country the Martuthunira obtained by trade with neighbouring groups. Traditional narratives give clear descriptions of a trade route established between the Martuthunira and their southern neighbours. For example, Text 7 (Appendix 1) tells how chips of snakewood, a very important source of wood for boomerangs, were thrown to the south by a 'devil'. As a result, no good trees grow in Martuthunira country and the Martuthunira were forced to look to the southern peoples for a source of snakewood boomerangs. In the terms of the story, the southerners knew that the trees originated in the north and so were in effect sending the manufactured implements home. In return, the Martuthunira gave them hairstring belts. The Martuthunira probably also sent such items as baler shells and pearlshell ornaments inland up the Fortescue River.

But manufactured goods and raw materials were not the only things that were actively sought from neighbouring groups. I have recorded stories in Kurrama telling of families travelling into foreign territory to attend the opening of new songs and dances. And, as noted above, young Martuthunira men were sent inland to the Yinyjiparnti and Kurrama for initiation.

1.3.9 ART AND LANGUAGE

It is not possible to say very much about the artistic life of the Martuthunira as most of this knowledge has been lost. There is no rock or bark painting in the area and local people report that the numerous rock carvings were 'laid out by the gods' rather than being the work of their forebears. Very few of the traditional Martuthunira body-painting designs are remembered. For the most part, the decoration of wooden implements, mainly spearthrowers and shields, resembles that of their neighbours and depicts, in stylistic form, maps of the main watercourses within a man's own country (see von Brandenstein 1972b).

Musical forms and dance styles also appear to resemble those of neighbouring groups. Together with any memory of male initiation, any knowledge of the songs and dances accompanying that ritual has been lost. I was able to collect only a few secular songs, of which there were essentially two types: *jalurra* and *thawi*. *Jalurra* properly refers to the combination of a song and dance sequence performed by a group of singers and dancers and accompanied by clapping boomerangs (by the men) and the beating of skins stretched over the thighs (by the women). *Thawi* songs, referred to in the literature as *japi*, are solo performances sung to the accompaniment of a wooden or bone *nhirrimpa* rasped against notches carved in the back of a spearthrower, *mirru*. Examples of these song types are given in Appendix 2.

Neither *jalurra* nor *thawi* songs were consciously composed but were ‘dreamed’. A particular person (usually a man) may receive the gift of a *jalurra* – melody, words and choreography – from a spirit in a dream, often over successive nights. The more personal *thawi* songs recount the exploits of the dream traveller and his impressions of particular places and objects as seen in the dream state. While the text of a *jalurra* usually consists of just one or two couplets, the text of a *thawi* song is longer and may incorporate a number of verses. A set of *thawi* songs may recount a sequence of journeys taken by the spirit songman over successive nights.

Although secular songs became public knowledge, the ‘composer’ retained special rights and obligations of ownership. The first performance of a new song, especially a *jalurra*, was conducted with some celebration and families would be invited to attend and to lend their young men to help stage-manage the dances. The songman had an obligation to ‘open’ the song in his own country; to fail to do so was considered a gross insult to his family and would ensure a continuing quarrel. On a man’s death his songs, like his name, became proscribed for a time. Eventually, after a sufficient period of mourning had been observed, the immediate family of the man, usually a brother or sister, would announce that the song was to be opened once again to the public. At the opening ceremony the sister or brother who had inherited rights to the song would start to sing as others wailed in mourning for the deceased. The song could then be freely performed by anyone until the current custodian died.

The ceremonial reopening of a song has not been practised for a long time and as a result many songs remain locked away in the memories of old men and women. While small groups may sing these to one another, far away from any close family of the deceased custodian, they are often reluctant to have their performances taped or discussed with other members of the community. The irony is that in many cases the current custodians of ‘closed’ songs do not actually know the songs or have any knowledge of the need for their consent in opening them. To make them aware of the problem may offend propriety as much as the actual performance of the song itself.

The appended texts include an example of a half-sung, half-chanted mourning recitative, delivered by an old woman on Mardie Station as a daily eulogy to a dead brother. The woman, the last of her family, mourns the loss of her brother and heaps obscenities on the man whom she holds responsible for killing him with sorcery. Although the delivery was perfectly serious, people fought to contain their mirth at the extremely humorous images conjured by the embittered old lady. The text presents a very good example of an abusive harangue filled with personal criticism and directed obscenities. The ability to produce such abusive outbursts with the required stylistic flair was highly valued by the Martuthunira.

On the basis of the data it is very difficult to say very much about the aesthetics of narrative text style. While this grammar of Martuthunira allows the interpretation of the literal meaning of narrative texts and, to a lesser extent, the texts of songs, a full understanding and evaluation will never be possible. Too much of the cultural context which gives them their deeper meaning has been irretrievably lost.

1.4 POST-CONTACT HISTORY

The post-contact history of the Martuthunira is one that has led to their almost complete extinction in little more than a hundred years. Their decline is part of a general pattern which has seen the people of the coastal Pilbara and Ashburton River districts almost completely wiped out while inland groups such as the Panyjima and Yinyjiparti continue to boast thriving communities. The demise of the coastal groups can be attributed both to introduced disease and, perhaps, to a general despair following the complete breakdown of social structure following European settlement.

The first European contacts with the Aboriginal people of the north-west region of Western Australia were most likely the brief encounters reported by early maritime explorers. King (1827:38-39) describes at length a meeting with a group of Aboriginal people, probably either Martuthunira or Yapurarra, in the islands of the Dampier Archipelago in February 1818:

As we advanced, three natives were seen in the water, apparently wading from an island in the centre of the strait towards Lewis island: the course was immediately altered to intercept them, but as we approached, it was discovered that each native was seated on a log of wood, which he propelled through the water by paddling with his hands...On the boat coming up with the nearest Indian, he left his log and, diving under the boat's bottom, swam astern; this he did whenever the boat approached him, and it was four or five minutes before he was caught, which was at last effected by seizing him by the hair, in the act of diving, and dragging him into the boat, against which he resisted stoutly, and, even when taken, it required two men to hold him to prevent his escape. During the interval of heaving to and bringing him aboard, the cutter was anchored near the central island, where a tribe of natives were collected, consisting of about forty persons, of whom the greater number were women and children.

King (1827:40) goes on to report what may be the first words of Martuthunira, or of Ngarluma, ever to be recorded on paper. Unfortunately, I cannot interpret them.

He was then taken to the side of the vessel from which his companions were visible, when he immediately exclaimed, with much earnestness, and in a loud voice, "*coma negra*," and repeated the words several times.

The captive was freed soon afterward and the next day – February 27, 1818 – King (1827:46-47) attempted contact with the main group.

Upon the boat's touching the beach, I landed, and taking Boongaree [a Sydney Aborigine] with me divested of his clothes, walked towards the natives, who were standing together, a little in the rear of one, who was probably their chief. The whole party were trembling with fear, and appeared quite palsied as we approached and took the chief by the hand. A little coaxing, and the

investiture of a red cap upon the chief's head, gradually repossessed them of their senses, and we were soon gabbling each in our own language, and therefore mutually unintelligible...The chief...ridiculed our repugnance to partake of a piece of the raw gut of a turtle which he offered to us, and to expose our folly, ate a piece, which he appeared to think a dainty, although it was quite fetid from putrefaction. Our attempts to collect a vocabulary of their language were quite unsuccessful. An axe, some chisels, and other tools were given to them, but they expressed no pleasure in receiving the presents, or astonishment at their effect...We now took leave of these friendly Indians, and went through the ceremony of shaking each other by the hand, a mode of taking leave they appeared perfectly to understand.

In the early 1860s the region was opened to European settlement and it is from this time that we can date the beginning of the decline of the Martuthunira and their neighbours. While it is possible and even likely that actual contact with the settlers was preceded by contact with their diseases, it is difficult to provide evidence of this. The first important contacts were with pastoralists who moved their sheep and cattle into the newly opened grazing lands of the coastal plain. The squatters commandeered waterholes and were intent upon protecting their livestock from local Aborigines who were quite indiscriminate in their hunting. Crowley (1960:48) briefly describes this early period:

The north-west was the first region in the colony in which the settlers had to face more than inconvenient opposition from the aboriginal people who were being dispossessed of their lands...for a number of years the pastoralists felt particularly unsafe. They were outnumbered by the aborigines, they were separated from one another often by as much as fifty or a hundred miles, and the hardy north-west natives stole their stock and speared their shepherds and stockmen almost with impunity. Reprisals on both sides led to much brutality, and it was not for thirty years or more that the whole region within some two hundred miles of the coastline had been occupied and the surviving natives absorbed into the pastoral industry.

Despite these early conflicts the transition from the traditional life of the hunter-gatherer to the station life of stockman, kitchenhand and maid, working for rations of flour, sugar and tobacco, blankets and clothing, is remembered as being relatively peaceful. Men and women who grew up in the station camps remember those days with nostalgia and affection. Although many of their parents' traditional practices were lost by then, they remember that they were free to sing their own songs and speak their own languages, and spent long months in the summer off-season, when it was too hot to work cattle and sheep, in 'holiday camps' living off the land, enjoying dance meetings and organising ritual initiation ceremonies. Nancy Withnell Taylor (1980:82) in *Yeera-Muk-A-Doo*, a history of pioneering families in the Roebourne area, says of the station people:

At the time they appeared happy and contented and the squatter liked to think they were for after all, he did what was expected of him and treated many as his faithful friends. But they were a depressed society, especially the old people who jealously guarded their sacred beliefs and ceremonies, and saw what was happening to them.

Of course not all pastoral managers were entirely benign, as Taylor (1980:82) points out (the quote is taken from Crowley (1960:48)):

Unfortunately there were the unscrupulous settlers and it is recorded that they treated the Aborigines cruelly and harshly; they considered them lazy and dishonest, scoffed at their tribal habits, interfered with their women and

‘developed a custom of periodically teaching the niggers a lesson with boot, stock-whip and bullet...’

Although the move from hunting and gathering to life on the stations resulted in many irrevocable changes in the life of the Aboriginal people in the north-west, station life was reasonably comfortable and was not solely to blame for the rapid decline of the coastal populations. Instead it was the pearling industry, established in 1867, which wreaked total havoc. Young Aboriginal men and women were in great demand as divers and in the lay-up season, pearlers “went nigger hunting as it became known, riding about the countryside recruiting Aborigines for labour” (Taylor 1980:115). Divers were often kidnapped and were taken many miles from their homes with little chance of maintaining contact with their own people. This practice drastically affected the whole fabric of Aboriginal society. Marriages and relationships among participants in the process of male initiation were typically established at birth and these vitally important social systems broke down with the departure of so many young men and women. The burgeoning pearling industry also saw the outbreak of smallpox in 1886. Taylor (1980:115-116) writes:

Hundreds of Aborigines died. Bodies could be found in the mangroves and throughout the country for many months. The wailing and howling of the Aborigines around Roebourne at night was eerie. There was no vaccine and no known cure.

Radcliffe Brown (1913:176) reported on the conditions and numbers of the Kariyarra, Ngarluma and Martuthunira in 1910-11. He estimates the number of surviving Kariyarra at between eighty and ninety with the Ngarluma numbering not more than sixty. He makes reference to the 1886 smallpox epidemic and also mentions an outbreak of measles soon afterwards that caused a further decrease in the Ngarluma population. As for the Martuthunira:

Their numbers have decreased greatly during the last fifty years, and there are probably not a hundred members of the tribe now alive.

Around the turn of the century the prevalence of venereal disease, certainly a problem in the north-west since the advent of the pearling industry, became of serious concern to the authorities. Biskup (1973:112) writes:

[I]n 1905 the Principal Medical Officer made a plea for a strict application of the Contagious Diseases Act to northern areas. Two years later the incidence of the disease reached alarming proportions – up to 15 per cent in certain districts.

It was decided that two ‘lock hospitals’ be established on Bernier and Dorre islands west of Carnarvon and these were opened in October 1908.

The usual method of collecting prospective patients was to send a police party into an area, catch as many aborigines as appeared afflicted with the disease, put them into chains and take them to Carnarvon for transshipment,...The death-rate among the patients was so high that in 1910 the hospital superintendent felt justified in ordering a bone-crusher, in order to “utilise all organic matter for the object of improving the nutritive value of the soil”. Biskup (1973:112-113)

The breakthrough in controlling the disease did not take place until the eve of the war. After the treatment of some 800 patients in all, the hospitals were closed in 1919 and the remaining patients were transferred to Port Hedland. As well as the immediate deaths, widespread venereal disease probably reduced the fertility rates of Aboriginal populations quite substantially. It is certainly the case that the birthrate in the north of the state was very low in the early part of this century.

During the twenties and early thirties, for instance, children under fourteen accounted for about one-third of the total population of the northwest, and only for about one-tenth in the Kimberleys. Biskup (1973:97)

Many factors contribute to a decline in birthrate and it would be simplistic to assume that venereal disease was the main determinant. Perhaps as important was a general lack of willingness to carry on. After only sixty years of disease and conflict with an invader, their society in complete disarray, their population dwindling, people who had the closest contact with Europeans, such as the Martuthunira, simply gave up. Algy Paterson does not remember any particular disease among the Martuthunira and gives an explanation for their rapid decline more in keeping with this general idea. He remembers from his childhood that few people lived past the age of thirty; that seemingly strong men and women would succumb to the slightest chill or fever and would die within days. It was as if they had lost the will to live.

1.5 PREVIOUS INVESTIGATIONS

Perhaps the earliest reference to the Martuthunira language appears in a pamphlet entitled *Aborigines of North-West Australia* by 'Yabaroo', published in Perth in 1899. This paper lists some two hundred words gathered from Aboriginal people who claim to be Ngarluma or Martuthunira. The name of the group is spelled *Mardathoni*. Daisy Bates recorded some Martuthunira linguistic data and her series of questionnaires had respondents from stations within Martuthunira territory. However, the importance of this material has decreased with the subsequent collection of more reliable data. From around the same period, Radcliffe-Brown's (1913) description of the Martuthunira kinship system includes vocabulary in the form of kin terms and names for flora and fauna with a totemic association to particular local groups. Radcliffe-Brown's description has led to a prominence in the secondary anthropological literature that is far out of proportion to the amount of primary ethnographic and linguistic data recorded for the Martuthunira.

More recently, Fink (1958) recorded a number of Martuthunira songs, and a basic list of 100 items was recorded independently by Sharpe in 1957 and O'Grady in 1958 (O'Grady et al. 1966). O'Grady also recorded a few sentences in 1970. While working on Yinyjiparnti from 1975 on, Wordick was able to record some Martuthunira vocabulary which appears in his dictionary of Yinyjiparnti (1982).

The most extensive investigation of the language prior to the present study was conducted by von Brandenstein, who recorded songs, short texts, vocabulary and sentences in 1965 and 1968. However, apart from mentions in a number of papers (e.g. 1967, 1972a&b, 1973) he has never published a description of his findings on this language. I have been able to consult von Brandenstein's diaries in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies but because of access restrictions have not been able to include his field notes as part of the data base of this investigation. By observation only then, the grammatical data collected by von Brandenstein appear to be consistent with those forming the basis for this study.

1.6 INFORMANTS

There were only three remaining speakers of Martuthunira when I began work on the language in 1981, although a handful of other people in Onslow and Roebourne had some very limited knowledge (amounting to a basic vocabulary and a few well-worn everyday phrases). The bulk of the material on which this description is based was collected with the assistance of Algy Paterson, who learnt the language from his mother and mother's mother. He is now the last speaker.

I was not able to check Algy Paterson's Martuthunira extensively with the other two speakers but it became clear that in each case he was more reliable than they as regards knowledge of the language, intuitions concerning grammaticality and awareness of where Martuthunira ended and some other language began. Of course working mainly with just one speaker of a language raises a number of important methodological issues and affects the claims that can be made on the basis of the data. These points are discussed in §1.7 below.

Algy's unsurpassed knowledge of the customs of his people is partly due to a childhood very different from that of his peers. While his contemporaries were growing up in the permanent camps established on pastoral stations, he was following an almost traditional nomadic existence living with his grandparents in the hills above the more established stations. Because his natural father was a European, Algy fell under the terms of the Aborigines Act of 1905 which gave the Chief Protector the power to fulfil his stated intention to take part-Aboriginal children away from their mothers and to have them placed in institutions.

Where there are no evil influences these half-castes can be made into good useful workmen and workwomen...But unfortunately they are more often found in communities whose influence is laziness and vice; and I think it is our duty not to allow these children, whose blood is half British, to grow up as vagrants and outcasts, as their mothers now are.

Annual Report of the W.A. Aborigines Department (1901:3)
quoted in Biskup (1973:142)

When Daisy Bates left to accompany Radcliffe-Brown on his ethnological expedition to the north-west, at the time Algy was a young child, she was given the following instructions by the Chief Protector:

I am extremely anxious to clear the Native camps of half-caste children and I trust you will be able to do some very good work in this direction. Half-caste children removed from Native camps should be immediately placed in the charge of the nearest police, or, where there are no police some responsible Government official.

notes of Colonial Secretary's Office 1023/10
quoted in Dagmar (1978:53)

For fear of his being stolen away by the constables, Algy was hidden in the bush with his grandparents, travelling with them as they moved from one camp site to another, living off the land rather than off station rations of meat, flour and sugar, and learning the stories and skills of the old people. From the only father he ever knew he learned the language and culture of

the Kurrama people. Finally, when he was five years old, a sympathetic station manager eventually woke up to the fact that a small boy was being kept away from the settlement and promised to protect him from the Act. Nevertheless, although he then began to learn the skills and way of life of a stockman, his parents' lack of complete trust kept him in the bush. He did not learn any English until he was fifteen.

Since then he has worked as a stockman and dingo trapper on pastoral stations mainly in his own Martuthunira and Kurrama country. He has helped develop and maintain the stations of the area while white owners and managers have come and gone, and still points proudly to the windmills, watertanks and miles of fence line he has built. Today he is retired and lives at old Warramboos homestead on Yarraloola Station, having worked for three generations of the Paterson family.

But Algy's skills and knowledge come to no person simply through the accident of an advantageous childhood. While he has always accepted that life for his people must change, he refuses to allow his received knowledge to fade from memory and from public awareness, believing that it is relevant not only to the Aboriginal people living on the pastoral stations and in the towns of the Pilbara today, but also to the wider Australian community. He, rather than any visiting linguist, decided that his language should be preserved in written form for future generations and so sought out someone who could record it. In the same spirit he spends days recording Martuthunira songs on cassette tape so that he can dance to the recordings at the all too infrequent dance meetings held for primary school children at weekend bush camps. No one else knows the dances or the songs that accompany them.

1.7 THE DATA

The bulk of the data forming the basis of this study was collected with the help of one speaker. Obviously there are very definite limitations to an analysis based on the speech of just one individual. Most importantly, there is no way of knowing whether a particular phenomenon is a general rule of the language or a rather idiosyncratic quirk of the speaker's. Ideally, the linguist should work with a number of speakers and be constantly checking collected data against directly observed usage, but this is not always possible.

In the case of Martuthunira I was able to check some lexical material and the basic patterns of nominal and verbal morphology with the two other speakers, but beyond this their fluency was limited and I have had to trust that the informant is producing correct Martuthunira. There is no doubt that the Martuthunira data I collected over some five years is internally consistent. Although there are some early irregularities in the data, later data is remarkably free of error.

It must be said that Martuthunira will soon be a dead language, in all senses of the term. It will not be remembered in any detail by any speakers and very few words, if any, will be remembered as words of Martuthunira (with the possible exception of place names). That these remembered words are Martuthunira rather than, say, Panyjima, Kurrama or Yinyjiparnti, will mean little to the community of speakers. At present there is no group of young people for whom their Martuthunira origins are particularly important and for whom marking those origins with the use of Martuthunira words would be at all meaningful. But saying that Martuthunira will soon be a dead language does not mean that it is 'dying' in the sense that the phrase 'language death' normally implies. There is no analogical simplification of paradigms or massive syntactic interference from other languages. The language will not die, its speakers will; those that remain appear still to speak the traditional language. But

although Martuthunira is understood and spoken by the few remaining speakers, it serves almost no communicative function in the modern Pilbara community. The only reliable data that can be obtained comes from text and elicitation, and while this data base is enough for the discovery of normative rules of grammar it does not allow an investigation of rules of language use. Most information on language use is gained from the reports of the few remaining speakers and, since they have little opportunity to demonstrate that usage, must be assumed to be an idealisation.

The collected data can be classified into broad categories as follows:

1. Sentences elicited by translation (trans.)
2. Sentences constructed to check grammaticality (constr.)
3. Elicited text
4. Unelicited text and long narrative text

In addition I make a crosscutting distinction between 'situated' and 'non-situated' text. For each of these categories there are certain limits to the sorts of conclusions which can and should be drawn from its examples. In the next few pages I will discuss each class in turn.

(a) *Sentences elicited by translation.* These take the form of a request for Martuthunira translation equivalents of English sentences and are used to fill morphological paradigms, to test the productivity of syntactic rules and to provide contexts for particular lexical items. Data of this sort has obvious limitations. The way in which the request is framed and the grammar of the language of elicitation will, to some extent, determine the form of the response. Much of the data on which this description of Martuthunira is based was collected by translation elicitation. In most cases the language of elicitation was a form of non-standard English. In other cases the language of elicitation was Panyjima, and everyday Martuthunira was used to elicit Martuthunira avoidance language. Although much of the syntactic analysis is based on elicited data I have been careful to check the results against unelicited text material.

(b) *Constructed sentences as grammatical tests.* The advantage in checking the linguist's constructed language examples is obviously the building of a database of ungrammatical utterances which greatly aids the discovery of general syntactic rules. However, I made very little use of this type of elicitation until I was reasonably well advanced in the data collection process. While last speakers, if they are consistent, allow the accumulation of a data base uncluttered by the sort of variation found in a viable speech community, they are not Chomsky's (1965) ideal speaker-listeners. Because they are isolated from an active community of speakers constantly reinforcing each other's intuitions about what is and what is not grammatically acceptable they may tend to overgeneralise rules. It is often the case that last speakers of languages are the last speakers because of a genuine passion for language. Such 'amateur linguists' can be very dangerous. An informant who has worked with a linguist for a long time is likely to begin his or her own analysis and, as time goes on, will begin to make judgements based more and more on analytical reflection and less and less on untainted native speaker intuitions.

(c) *Elicited text.* Most of the data consists of what I call elicited texts; short texts ranging in length from about ten clauses to ten pages. In each case the text was a continuation of an

elicited translation sentence. For example, Text 3 (Appendix 1) has as its first sentence a response to the elicitation:

How would you say, “This spear broken by you fellas should have been given to my uncle for him to fix it.”?

Algy Paterson then continued to create a story, complete with reported dialogue, with the moral that young people were no longer learning traditional artefact manufacture. The body of such a text can be considered legitimate natural language production although the initial few sentences should perhaps not be. To some extent the introduction of the participants and their relative topic-worthiness is a direct response to a request for translation and may suffer interference from the language of elicitation.

(d) *Unelicited and long narrative texts*. These include texts of varying length which are not a response to elicitation. The ‘unelicited texts’ vary from short descriptive passages to long stretches of language which can best be described as letters. These are reports on events and feelings about events recorded on tape and sent as messages to other speakers (including the linguist). The ‘long narrative texts’, on the other hand, are mostly traditional stories or myths, or are personal recollections which through a great number of retellings have become somewhat formalised. They differ from unelicited texts in being much less spontaneous.

(e) *Situated and non-situated text*. In the absence of any reliable conversational Martuthunira data, I make some use of reported speech in text as a separate database (see especially §5.5). Reported speech is ‘situated’ in that it is assumed to take place in some defined extralinguistic context and makes use of deictic categories not available in narrative reporting of events. Of course, I make no claim that reported speech is a true reflection of actual conversational style. Non-situated text, on the other hand, is largely divorced from a particular spatio-temporal context and relies on purely linguistic devices in tracking reference and maintaining text cohesion. No oral narrative can be purely non-situated since its recounting takes place in a particular location that may bear some relationship to events in the narrative, and at a particular time in relation to those events.

A final comment on the use of examples: where an example serves only to demonstrate a simple morphological or syntactic pattern it is common practice to construct a very simple illustrative sentence. I have avoided using such artificial sentences and instead have, where possible, taken real examples from texts. Although they are often longer and more complicated than is necessary to illustrate the particular point, there are good reasons for making life this little bit more difficult for the reader and the whole description somewhat longer. Firstly, well chosen examples can give a perspective on the life and language of a people that is usually not otherwise presented in a formal linguistic description. To some extent, the use of real examples lets the language tell its own story. Secondly, real examples increase the total amount of data presented in the description and so better allow for secondary reanalyses by interested parties.

Given the varied nature of the data on which the description is based, illustrative examples are coded for type, based on the discussion presented above. The free English gloss in some examples is followed by the abbreviations (trans.) for sentences elicited by translation (for example Chapter 3, example (3a)) and (constr.) for sentences constructed to check grammaticality (all listed ungrammatical sentences are constructed, needless to say). All other examples are taken from text.