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ISSN1034-4438
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Volume 39, December 2015
LANGUAGE GROUP MAPS AND CONTEMPORARY IDENTITIES: TINDALE’S LEGACY IN THE CENTRAL MURRAY RIVERINE REGION

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Abstract

Ethnographic materials produced by early writers and researchers concerning the central Murray riverine region¹ have created a complex picture of Aboriginal land-holding groups which researchers of native title must now navigate. Whilst Norman B. Tindale has contributed significantly to the source material upon which researchers draw, he has also added to the complexity of the picture, particularly in regard to his maps and genealogical notes. The assumptions made by Tindale regarding language group identities, territorial boundaries and the span of kinship networks in this region have compounded some of the errors and misunderstandings present in the diaries, letters and other communications of colonists and colonial authorities of the central Murray riverine region. Research for contemporary land claims in the north-west of Victoria has indicated that Tindale’s legacy has had a profound effect on notions of language group identity and the resulting estate boundaries. This article provides a discussion of this legacy, and how it may be addressed in order to untangle some of the complexities of land rights in this area.

¹ The central Murray riverine region is defined in this paper as an area along the Murray River from Gunbower in Victoria to Morgan in South Australia—however, the primary focus of this paper relates to the north-west Victorian area within this region.
Introduction

The figure of Norman B. Tindale looms large over Australian anthropology, and rightly so. His most celebrated fieldwork was the 1938–9 joint Harvard University/University of Adelaide expedition with anthropologist Joseph Birdsell from which he produced two influential maps (1940, 1974), the latter of which is likely to be found on walls of Land Council and Native Title Representative Body (NTRB) offices across Australia. While there are no statistics upon which to found this view, it is the opinion of the authors that Tindale’s 1974 map (hereafter referred to as ‘Tindale’s map’) is possibly the most influential document in the arena of native title and land rights in Australia today. This is the power of maps—such simple documents that synthesise so many different sources and layers of information into one flat two-dimensional format. In maps of this kind, borders are imagined neatly nestled against each other in a perfect jigsaw leaving nothing out of bounds (rather like flying over farmland and viewing paddocks separated from each other by definitive fence lines).

For Tindale, the possibility of understanding Aboriginal Australia as a patchwork of different language group identities, each existing in their own exclusive and incontrovertible space, offered a way to address the then common misperception that Aboriginal groups were nomadic and, thus, did not ‘own’ country in the manner of Europeans. This view became the inspiration for Tindale’s ambitious expeditionary activity upon which so much of his work was based.

As stated in his 1974 opus, his work on Groote Eylandt with a Ngandi song maker led him to author an article within which was included ‘a map of southern Arnhem Land tribes’ in which the people of that region were presented as landed aggregations with firm territorial boundaries (Tindale 1974:3). This map, published along with the article in 1925, was considered too controversial at first and was only accepted for print after the original solid lines had been replaced by dotted lines suggesting a porous border. Here Tindale was concerned to convey what he had learned from his Ngandi informant, Moroadunei, concerning Aboriginal territoriality. Namely, ‘the existence of tribal boundaries, limits beyond which it was dangerous to move without adequate recognition’ (Tindale
1974:3). He cites the influence of Alfred Kroeber’s interest in ‘the study and delineation of unit traits of culture’ and Earnest Hooton’s belief in the ‘importance of having accurate knowledge of tribal distributions and boundaries for the study of anthropometry and serology’ (Tindale 1974:3–4) as detailed purposes of his study. Indeed, Hooton was so supportive of his endeavours that he used his influence to persuade the Carnegie Corporation of New York to set up a fund allowing Tindale and Joseph Birdsell to engage in the 1938–9 joint Harvard and University of Adelaide expedition (Tindale 1974:4).

Throughout his ensuing travels across the Australian continent, Tindale’s pre-occupation with anthropometric measurements combined with the influence of social Darwinism produced an almost taxonomic approach to Aboriginal Australians. As his famous index cards illustrate, Tindale, along with matters of cultural and linguistic import, was interested in the physical aspects of his informants in a way that modern anthropologists would find dangerously deterministic and racial (see Figure 1). Even without delving into the ethical difficulties involved, his interest in the ‘purity’ or strength of their Aboriginality based on spurious biological gradations such as ‘full-blood’, ‘half-caste’, ‘quadroon’, ‘octoroon’, etc., is troubling to say the least, particularly when viewed through a contemporary lens.

Nor was this pre-occupation peculiar to Tindale amongst Australian and international anthropologists. The work and journals of the early amateur anthropologists such as Brough-Smyth, Howitt and Mathews and early anthropological practitioners such as Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard, are a testament to the pervasive influence of the social-Darwinist ethic which saw Aboriginal people throughout the colonial world as specimens from an ‘earlier’ manifestation of humanity. As such, the ‘racial purity’ of Aboriginal people was viewed as becoming increasingly degraded and diluted by ‘foreign blood’ as evolution inevitably consigned them to extinction when faced with competition from a ‘superior’, or ‘later’, human.
**Figure 1** An example of an index card completed by Tindale, from his 1938–39 expedition. South Australian Museum Archives AA 346.
While this aspect of Tindale’s research is not the focus of this article, it is important to note as context regarding his more celebrated work concerning the identification of clear geographical boundaries for the Aboriginal groups which populated the continent long before the advent of ‘Australia’. As we can see from Tindale’s (1940:149–151) discussion of the ‘[p]hysiographic and ecological controls apparent in tribal distribution’ in his ‘Distribution of Australian Aboriginal Tribes: A field survey’, he felt strongly that what he considered to be ‘the feeble resources for transport and restricted means for preservation of food’ (Tindale 1940:149) meant that Aboriginal groups, while widely dispersed, were not particularly mobile on the whole. Moreover, he opined that the hunting technology and limited natural resources available to a people living as hunter-gatherers necessarily meant that ‘often there is a high degree of correlation between tribal limits and ecological and geographical boundaries’ (Tindale 1940:149). In the same text, Tindale goes on to note that ‘[d]ivides, mountain ranges, rivers, general ecological and plant associational boundaries, microclimatic zone limits and peninsulas often furnish clear cut and stable boundaries’ (Tindale 1940:149).

With regard to climate, Tindale (1940) observed that the territories of Aboriginal groups tend to be larger in places of lower rainfall and smaller in places of higher rainfall. This is generally because people need to range further for their daily and weekly sustenance in harsher and more arid climates whereas areas with greater resources make fewer demands on their inhabitants (Tindale 1940:150). Interestingly, Tindale uses the terminology of ‘families’ and ‘hordes’ (at least in the context of the people of the Western Desert) when referring to Aboriginal groups. As noted by Rumsey (1989), the horde (or clan), which had its roots in the first two decades of the 20th century, became the unit of social organisation credited as the base socio-political unit in the formative period of native title law in the Northern Territory. During that time this intermediate grouping (between the tribe and the family) was further developed by Radcliffe-Brown (1930) as the ‘level with political power, including exclusive proprietary rights in land’ (Rumsey 1989:70).
In his understanding, hordes were a collection of families related through patrifiliation or matrifiliation which constituted ‘a small group owning and occupying a definite territory or hunting ground, the boundaries of which are known, and possessing in common proprietary rights over the land and its products—mineral, vegetable and animal’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1930:35). Radcliffe-Brown (1930:35) further states that the horde (or clan) is ‘the primary land-owning or land-holding group’ to which membership is determined by direct descent. He notes that the ‘horde’ in Australia is predominantly exogamous and, even where it is not strictly exogamous, ‘the great majority of marriages are outside the horde’ and that the ‘woman, at marriage, leaves her horde and joins that of her husband’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1930:35). He further opines that hordes linked together by a common language can be said to be ‘tribes’, the ‘primary mark’ of which is that all of the hordes within it speak ‘one language, or dialects of one language’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1930:36).

However, this seemingly clear exposition of the defining qualities of the tribe as an organisational unit are somewhat muddied by Radcliffe-Brown’s qualifying remarks that identifying the structural role of local groups is often problematic as, depending upon the group, they could be ‘a tribe, a sub-division of a tribe…or…a larger unit consisting of a number of related tribes’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1930:36). He further notes that, ‘adjoining tribes frequently resemble one another in language and custom’ and that it is ‘therefore sometimes difficult to decide whether we are dealing with a tribe subdivided into sub-tribes or with a group of related tribes’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1930:36).

At the heart of Radcliffe-Brown’s understanding of local groups, variously called clans or hordes, and the tribes to which they belong are two concrete notions. The first is that both clans/hordes and tribes hold territory, the borders of which are static and immutable. The second is that those who populate these territories and organisational units speak solely one recognisable language or language variant. This is a seductively simple anthropological position as it describes a formula for understanding each Aboriginal group as belonging to a single

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2 Here we read ‘local group’ as ‘horde’.
cultural tradition and a single language population. Clearly, the kind of absolutism present in Radcliffe-Brown’s 1930 essay would have encouraged Tindale some years later to undertake the mammoth task of assigning each recognisably distinct Aboriginal group in the continent its own language and territory. Unfortunately, both Radcliffe-Brown and Tindale’s assumptions have been confounded by the complexity of the relationships between cultural traditions, language associations, country and people.

In relation to the first point, while Stanner (1965) identifies local groups, or ‘estate groups’, as having a core area over which they assert primary and exclusive rights to land and resources, he finds that they also make use of a broader area, which he termed their ‘range’ in which they sought the full gamut of resources necessary for their survival throughout the seasonal course of each year. Importantly, Stanner (1965:2) stresses the distinction between estate as ‘the traditionally recognized locus (‘country’, ‘home’, ‘ground’, ‘dreaming place’) of some kind of patrilineal descent-group forming the core or nucleus of the territorial group’, and the range as ‘the tract or orbit over which the group, including its nucleus and adherents, ordinarily hunted and foraged to maintain life’. For Stanner (1965:2), the combination of these two things could be described as ‘an ecological life-space’ called a ‘domain’. Interestingly, while nothing ‘could extinguish the fact and claim of estate’, Stanner’s (1965:2) discussion of the impact of climate and rainfall on a groups’ required range-size clearly allows for the cohabitation of significant tracts of land in extreme conditions or demanding environments.

Thus, while the suggestion that local groups and their larger aggregates had core areas of undisputed ownership is eminently defensible, the notion that groups were able to enforce exclusive rights and interests to country on the grounds of language group identity is an argument that is difficult to sustain. This was pointed out effectively by Ronald Berndt (1976:134) who, while engaged in a discussion with Tindale’s expeditionary partner and long-time collaborator Joseph Birdsell, was moved to state, while the concept of ‘dialectical tribes’ was not intrinsically wrong, ‘tribe’ as a label for a unit of people had a ‘hardening effect in relation to that unit’s
boundaries’ despite there being no obvious evidence of ‘language buffers or barriers...as being in fact hard boundaries’.

Concerning the second point, Aboriginal groups are often identified with country by means of the assignation of a particular language, or language variant in both the historical and contemporary ethno-linguistic literature (Clark 1996). However, in areas shared by two or more groups, one can expect more than one language to be commonly spoken by the groups frequenting those vicinities (where ‘language’ is still spoken). Cameron (1885:346) notes exactly this phenomenon within the vicinity of the central Murray riverine region when he refers to the ‘Ithi-Ithi, Wathi-Wathi, Muthi-Muthi, Ta-ta-thi, and Keramin’ tribes speaking and comprehending multiple languages. Furthermore, as Howitt (1904:58) notes, often, within the median space or territory between two distinct language areas, the occupants of that territory may speak what he calls a ‘mixed’ language comprised of elements of both. Moreover, these comments sit well with Sutton and Palmer’s distinction between language-speakers and language-owners (Palmer 2009:12; Sutton and Palmer 1980).

It may be that Radcliffe-Brown’s failure to understand the extent of Australian Aboriginal multilingualism and the porous nature of language boundaries stems from his preoccupation with structural functionalism and his desire to elicit clear rules of social relationship and interaction from his observations of his field work subjects. Clearly, language group identity, while a useful concept in many instances, is far from universally applicable, nor is it universally determinable from the language or languages spoken by any group of people. In a multi-lingual society where dialectical variations of western Kulin were dominant, language variation is, at best, an indeterminate identity marker. Moreover, the lexico-statistical analysis as employed by linguists such as Blake (2011) and Hercus (1986) depends to a great extent upon word lists without grammar recorded by various untrained colonial squatters and amateur ethnographers. Thus, one must question its reliability as a basis for the analysis of spatial organisation, even where, as in the case of Hercus and her work with speakers of Madi Madi and Wamba Wamba in the 1960s primary research was carried out with individuals retaining knowledge of local dialects (Hercus 1970, 1986, 1992). In light of this, Tindale’s seemingly
simple task of understanding tribal boundaries through language group self-identification appears, from a contemporary anthropological perspective, problematic.

As with many attempts at mapping the available ethnographic and ethno-historic information extant in the historical record, Tindale’s attempts are also problematic from a historical perspective. Given that he was undertaking his primary research in the 20th century, his maps of pre-contact ideas of territory were based largely, if not exclusively, on the reports and observations of a few early writers who had contact with Aboriginal people of the central Murray riverine region at the time of first contact. These people included the gentlemen squatters Peter Beveridge and Edmund Morey, and other settlers in the area. Tindale also relied on the publications of early ethnographers who had not conducted primary research with the Traditional Owners of the central Murray riverine region. Tindale’s (1940, 1974) own primary research was conducted with Aboriginal people living on missions and reserves, including Swan Reach in South Australia, and Lake Tyers in Victoria. In both of these cases, the people that Tindale would have spoken to, although connected to the central Murray riverine region, may have been living away from the area for many years, and in some cases several generations.

In recent scholarship, the idea of drawing a line on a map to indicate a boundary of an Aboriginal territory is accepted as problematic, for several reasons. In the first instance, the historical record as written by early European observers is unable to provide adequate descriptions to translate understandings of Aboriginal spatial organisation onto a cartographic map. Straight lines are particularly problematic, as boundaries (where they can be determined, or where they exist) are more likely to follow natural features such as rivers, mountains, or other topographical features. Daniel Sutherland Davidson (1938:667) discusses this difficulty, pointing out that reports on the location of most tribal territories give rough descriptions based on prominent landmarks, but rarely include distances or an indication of the full extent of a group’s territory. In the second instance, given the intrinsically ‘western’ nature of mapping, maps of Aboriginal territory may never be accurate illustrations. As historical geographer Sue Wesson (2002:31) argues, the very act of mapping is ‘a profoundly political process
which has provided colonial powers with guides to the dispossession of indigenes’ and that more recently, in native title debates, maps have been ‘used as instruments of power and identity formation’. With this in mind, we can see there is a disjuncture in cultural logic between an understanding of territory defined by relationships with kin and ancestral beings embedded in the landscape and one which is encapsulated in a document by unambiguous cartographic lines.

The limited number of sources available on this topic only adds to the difficulties of creating an accurate map of tribal boundaries. The histories and ethnographic material produced in the decades since first contact are representations and re-interpretations of a handful of early sources. Reading and faithfully analysing these sources in their context is no easy task, particularly considering that the authors of these early sources were European men intrinsically involved in the process of the dispossession of Aboriginal people. Theories and beliefs regarding race and class coloured the perceptions of these authors, and the ways that they viewed Aboriginal people. They also carried with them the cultural bias towards western understandings of property, borders and boundaries. All of this must be taken into account when using the primary sources of these early writers, and consideration given then to how we analyse their merit as accurate representations of Aboriginal culture and territorial structure.

The Central Murray Riverine Region

With regard to the central Murray riverine region, an error in the placement of language group names of the Murray River tribes, first by Brough-Smyth (1876a), then compounded by Tindale (1974), and finally corrected by Ian Clark (2005:5, 15), has dramatically influenced contemporary notions of language group identity and association with country. Stemming from the incorrect transposition of three language groups placed in order upstream, Brough-Smyth’s subsequent map does not accord with the primary source information of the local European observers who were his informants. The error in this reading of sources, which was then reinterpreted by later authors, was compounded in subsequent publications throughout the 20th century.
Mining engineer Robert Brough-Smyth joined the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines in Victoria (BPA) in 1860 as the Secretary, a position that he held until he retired in 1878. Through this position, and because of his general interest in the culture and welfare of the Aboriginal people, Brough-Smyth gathered information on the Aboriginal tribes of Victoria. He eventually compiled his findings in the publication, *The Aborigines of Victoria: With Notes Relating to the Habits of the Natives of Other Parts of Australia and Tasmania*, in 1876, which is ‘founded on information furnished by gentlemen who have had frequent and favourable opportunities of observing the habits of the natives’ (Brough-Smyth 1876a:v).

In his discussion of the tribes of the River Murray, Brough-Smyth (1876a:38) indicated that his information came from Dr Gummow, a doctor from Swan Hill, who had sent him a map, ‘prepared mainly by Mr. Peter Beveridge, but partly by Dr. Gummow, showing the areas occupied by the Murray tribes from near Echuca to the junction of the River Darling with the Murray’. In a list of eight names, the last three tribes that Brough-Smyth names along this stretch of the Murray River were the Litchy-litchy, the Yairy-yairy and the Darty-darty. These groups, to use Tindale’s (1974) spelling, refer to the language names Latjə Latji, Jari Jari and Tati Tati. In his map of the area at the end of this volume, Brough-Smyth (1876a) places these three groups in downstream order between approximately Narrung and Mildura.

While Brough-Smyth’s map may have accurately reflected the information he received from Dr Gummow, it is apparent from an analysis of the primary sources available (including articles written by Peter Beveridge after the publication of Brough-Smyth’s work) that the weight of evidence suggested that these tribes were located in a different order along the Murray River. In 1861, Peter Beveridge (1861:14) named the tribes in the valley of the Murray River between Lake Boga and the Mournpall Lakes; ‘Boora Boora, Watty Watty, Waiky Waiky, Litchy Litchy, Yairy Yairy, and Darty Darty’. Later, in 1883, Beveridge (1883:19) revised and extended the range of this list, indicating that between Moama and Wentworth, the tribes appeared in the following order: ‘the Boora Boora, the Baraba Baraba, the Watty Watty, the Waiky Waiky, the Litchy Litchy, the Darty Darty and the Yairy Yairy tribes’.
Figure 2 Brough-Smyth's (1876a) positioning of the groups Litchy-litchy, Yairy-yairy and Darty-darty.
In other cases, where single groups are mentioned, it is often in the context of a language being spoken at a particular location. E.M. Curr’s publication *The Australian Race*, from 1887, includes some language lists from the Murray River. These include a list provided by F. Corney, Esq., of the ‘Laitchi-laitchi’ from Bumbang on the Murray River (Curr 1887:452-453). Bumbang station was on the Victorian side of the river at the bend in the Murray where the town of Robinvale sits today. Brough-Smyth’s *The Aborigines of Victoria* also included evidence of this type, including a vocabulary submitted by Hugh Jamieson, the station owner at Mildura Station, of the language of the Yerre-yerre tribe (Brough-Smyth 1876b:74). Another example of the type of primary source reference these maps were developed from is the reminiscences of the squatter Edmund Morey, the owner of the pastoral station Euston, which covered the part of New South Wales on the Murray River opposite Bumbang. Morey wrote, “The run I took up was part of the territory belonging to the "Tata-Tata" tribe [Tati Tati], below them were the Larcha-Larcha’s [Latja Latji], and the Yarruitongs beyond them had the country expanding to and some short distance up the Darling.”

3 A closer analysis of these examples, and some other primary sources, shows that Brough-Smyth’s maps represented these named groups in the wrong order. Briefly, from Morey’s evidence, the Tati Tati tribe were on the river at Euston Station, the Latja Latji were ‘below’ them there (possibly meaning to the south, and/or downstream). The Yerre-yerre, from Jamieson’s evidence as well as Beveridge’s later correction (he named them the Yairy-yairiy) were located around Wentworth, being the furthest group downstream of the three. So, the more correct map would have shown the downstream order as Tati Tati, Latja Latji, Jari Jari.

The above examples of primary source material also indicate that Brough-Smyth’s lines were largely arbitrary as the primary sources Brough-Smyth relied upon did not identify borders between the named groups along the river, they merely listed the order of the groups. Often this was worded as a list between two endpoints, as in Beveridge’s article from 1861, or as a mention of a group in a general area as in the language lists

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or Morey’s evidence of the Tati Tati at Euston Station. The original sources do not indicate where a line can be drawn to delineate the many groups living along the river. In fact, the sources do not indicate whether boundaries can be drawn at all, along the lines of language names or otherwise. They merely record, in general terms, the areas where Aboriginal people who were speaking certain languages can usually be found. Only Morey’s information suggests the assignation of a territory to a particular group (tribe), and he speaks only of his own pastoral run.

In undertaking his significant project to delineate the boundaries of the tribes of Australia, Tindale reviewed the primary sources that Brough-Smyth had relied on, as well as the sources available in the years after The Aborigines of Victoria, and Brough-Smyth’s maps, had been published. Tindale identified an error in Brough-Smyth’s maps; however he compounded the error by transposing two of the named groups, the Latjə Latji and the Tati Tati, but leaving the Jari Jari (Brough-Smyth’s Yairy-yairy) in the middle of the two groups.

![Figure 3](image_url) Tindale’s (1974) positioning of the groups Latjə Latji, Jari Jari and Tati Tati. Image courtesy of ANU Press.
Ian Clark, a cultural geographer, first identified this error and discussed it briefly in his 2005 report on Aboriginal Language areas in Victoria (Clark 2005:15). Clark’s discovery, however, came several years after he began publishing in this area of study, and after he had reproduced Tindale’s error in several of his publications (see Clark 1996; Clark 1998:175).

Tindale’s maps have been reproduced by many researchers since their initial publication in 1940, and later republication in 1974. In particular in the work of linguists, Tindale’s maps have been used uncritically by these researchers who, by their own admission, have a different research focus. In Arthur Capell’s Linguistic Survey of Australia, he noted that Tindale’s extensive work and mapped locations had ‘been used as the basis for the locations given in [his] work, sometimes as they stand, sometimes abbreviated’ (Capell 1963:vii). Although Capell did not reproduce Tindale’s maps as illustrations, the locations of the language groups were quoted directly from Tindale’s 1940 publication, including the placement of the Latjə Latji at Mildura, and the Jari Jari and Tati Tati upstream from there. Luise Hercus, a significant researcher in the central Murray riverine region because of her presence in the area conducting primary linguistic research in the 1960s (with the parents or relatives or contemporary Traditional Owners), also reproduced Tindale’s maps uncritically (see Hercus 1986:ix–xii).

While we acknowledge that more recent scholarship has challenged both Tindale’s positioning of the groups on his maps, and more generally the spatial organisation of language groups in the central Murray riverine region, this uncritical deployment of Tindale’s work before 2005 has effectively legitimised his map, and accompanying descriptions of language group territoriality. This is particularly so in the minds of a broad non-anthropological readership who, in the native title era, have very different motivations and agendas than either Tindale’s or that of his anthropological contemporaries. Luise Hercus’ conclusions on the spatial disposition and linguistic relationship between the language of the central Murray riverine region are often cited as authoritative by both native title researchers (of all persuasions) and by many contemporary Aboriginal people of the region. Hercus (1986) herself drew heavily on Tindale, as can be seen in her Victorian Languages: A Late Survey where she employed Tindale’s 1940 map to spatially ground her linguistic fieldwork.
conducted in the 1960s. Tellingly, her 1986 map follows Tindale’s lead even where her own primary research and analysis does not concur. Similarly, Clark’s (1996; 2005; Clark and Ryan 2009) extensive scholarship on the Aboriginal languages of Victoria is heavily influenced by Tindale’s work even though he does question the order of language group identities along the central Murray Riverine as located on Tindale’s 1974 map.

Undoubtedly, through the engagement of scholars such as Blake, Clark and Hercus with his work, Tindale’s legacy can be said to extend far beyond the anthropological or academic arenas and to reach into the very make-up of 21st century Aboriginal Australia. Modern perceptions of language based identity in the central Murray riverine region offer a window into the complexities of that legacy in this respect. The resulting confusion stemming from Tindale’s efforts to define language areas as tribal territories and his partial correction of Brough-Smyth’s order of ‘tribes’ along the Murray River has, in turn, impacted on the way in which Aboriginal families in the region understand their identity in relation to language groups.

Conclusions

As legal and anthropological practice has developed within the framework of the Native Title Act, claimant groups have been defined legally by the language group associations of their ancestors. In areas of the continent where the local and regional Aboriginal languages are spoken, and in areas where traditional associations and social structures persist, native title claim groups have successfully conveyed their identity as Traditional Owners of country and as holders of rights and interests on and in country under the banner of language group association. In areas such as the central Murray riverine region where traditional language and social structure have not persisted, native title claim groups have been expected to follow this example and adopt either regional or local language names as they appear in the ethno-historic record. As such, Tindale’s map

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4 We note here that we are not questioning the authenticity of these language group names—we are questioning the expectations concerning their use by non-Aboriginal commentators.
has played, and continues to play, a central role in the reclamation of Aboriginal language names by contemporary native title claimants within the central Murray riverine region and elsewhere, yet his methodology is not often considered by the broader, non-academic, public.

In this new context, the questions people are asked, and ask about themselves, in relation to identity have changed considerably over the last two decades or so. In the central Murray riverine region, where once Aboriginal people generally referred to themselves as simply ‘River Mob’, the families of the region regularly differentiate themselves from one another by identification with one of the language group names that appears on Tindale’s map. Indeed, it is worth mentioning that people often adopt the spelling of these names as they appear on the map in preference over other possible iterations and then fiercely defend their preference in the face of sometimes more linguistically correct formulations. This is in fact an indication of how deeply language group names become ingrained in Aboriginal group identity and how quickly they come to be signifiers of association with country. Thus, Tindale’s map has become a powerful symbol in efforts of central Murray Aboriginal people to reclaim their language group identities and to attempt to gain the status of Traditional Owners under the Native Title Act.

One of the most obvious manifestations of Tindale’s influence on modern Aboriginal identities can be seen in the advent of the ‘single family language group’. This term is employed to describe instances where a single family of polity (as deployed by Sutton [2003] and later refined by Burke [2010]) understands itself to be the sole legitimate group of descendants of an ancestor identified in the ethno-historic record. In some instances, the ancestor is identified by the commentator who recorded their existence as belonging to a language group or ‘tribe’ but in many cases only the name of the person and the area they were encountered are recorded. In instances where a language group identity is not recorded, the descendants of that person commonly infer a language group identity from the location at which their apical ancestor was recorded as present.

Here, for the families descended from ancestors identified in the historical record, Tindale’s map becomes a
powerful reference point and the origin of a language group identity which, although it becomes concrete in a matter of years, rests often on contested ground. In the central Murray riverine region, this has brought families into conflict as they struggle (often now competing with each other) to reclaim the language group identity of their forebears while remaining a part of a single regionally based socio-cultural entity which is the modern manifestation of the cultural bloc which persists despite colonisation.

While it is beyond the scope of this article, many conflicts such as described above have their beginning in contested understandings of ‘country’ based on Tindale’s map and others like it. These conflicts are exacerbated by the demands of the Native Title Act in which Aboriginal people are asked to prove themselves as legitimate by presenting themselves as authentic within the strictures of section 223. The conflicts caused by the demands placed on Aboriginal families in the central Murray riverine region are repeated across the continent as Aboriginal groups continue to struggle to have their identities recognised as legitimate in the eyes of non-Aboriginal Australians and the political class that represents them. By identifying with a language group name and territory on his map, Tindale’s work provides these groups with an opportunity to convey their Aboriginality to the courts and the broader community as one which has been confirmed by one of the pre-eminent Australian anthropologists of the 20th century. In other instances, Aboriginal groups compete for the right to do so. Ultimately, whatever his broader contribution to the field, Tindale’s work has currency far beyond the confines of anthropological debate. Indeed, however we might understand it, it is without a doubt one of the most enduring and influential legacies in Australian history.
Acknowledgements

The authors would like to gratefully acknowledge to Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities of the central Murray riverine region.

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