THE McKENZIE MASSACRE ON BENTINCK ISLAND

Roma Kelly and Nicholas Evans

The Kaiadilt people traditionally lived in the South Wellesley Islands in the Southern Gulf of Carpentaria (see Map). They were extremely isolated and had little or no contact with other Aboriginal groups. Most now live on Mornington Island (traditionally Lardil territory), although attempts to return to the South Wellesleys are now being made.

Nicholas Evans teaches at the School of Australian Linguistics, Batchelor, N.T. He recently submitted his Ph.D. thesis, a grammar of the Kayardild language, at the Australian National University. He is currently producing a Kayardild dictionary and a collection of ethnographic and historical texts.
MCKENZIE MASSACRE

The Kaiadilt were afforded their first glimpses of Europeans relatively early, in 1802, when Mathew Flinders met six of them on Allen Island. But they did not emerge fully from their isolation until 1948, when the entire tribe was moved to Mornington Island Mission at Gununa. This made them the last group of coastal Aborigines to come into regular contact with Europeans.

In the intervening period there were various attempts at contact by Government officials, missionaries and would-be settlers. During the 1860s a settlement, Carnarvon, was established on Sweers Island. For the few years of its occupation the Kaiadilt largely avoided Sweers, although there were some clashes with Europeans there. Other Europeans to visit Bentinck Island, such as the explorers Captain Stokes (1841) and Captain Pennefather (1880), were carefully avoided, but observed from cover. Dr W.E. Roth, Northern Protector of Aborigines (who visited Bentinck Island in 1901), and his successors Howard (1910) and Bleakley (around 1917) managed only fleeting contacts.

The massacre recounted below occurred around 1918, in conjunction with the only European attempt to occupy Bentinck Island itself. The Kaiadilt tradition does not identify the murderer, and no contemporary record of the massacre exists. Safely beyond the reach of a law that was in any case indifferent to the taking of Aboriginal lives, the murderer's untrammelled excesses went untried and unpunished. The European party almost certainly included one McKenzie, remembered by the wife of an early Mornington Missionary as 'a physically big man, an elderly rugged individual' (Tindale 1962a:266). He had obtained a Government lease to occupy Sweers Island and part of Bentinck Island. Arriving in 1911 'with some sheep and an Aboriginal woman, probably a mainland from Burketown way' (Memmott 1982:33), he built a hut near the mouth of the Kurumbali estuary on Bentinck Island.

During his short time on Bentinck Island, McKenzie systematically tried to eliminate the Kaiadilt, riding across the island on horseback, and shooting down everyone but the girls he intended to rape. Tindale, who has compiled a detailed genealogy from oral sources, estimates that eleven people were killed (1962b:305) — about 10% of the Kaiadilt population.

Later he moved to Sweers Island where he ran sheep and goats and established a kiln supplying lime around the Southern Gulf. For a time he employed two Mornington Islanders but 'they soon became disenchanted by the continual diet of goats' heads and livers' (Memmott 1982:34) and flagged down a boat to Mornington Island. McKenzie then obtained other mainland Aborigines as helpers, and a European partner named Nelson. But it is unclear who was with him on Bentinck Island at the time of the massacre.

Roma Kelly, who tells this story, was born about 1917 and heard about McKenzie from her own parents. Her Kaiadilt names are Dibirdibi 'rock cod' and Mambunkingathi 'born at Mambunki.'

These few paragraphs cannot do justice to the colourful history of the South Wellesleys. Other accounts are in Tindale 1962a and Dymock 1973 but the most thorough is Memmott 1982.

A practical phonemic orthography is employed. The digraphs th and nh represent laminodental stops and nasals respectively; rd and rn retroflexes, j and ny palatals, r a retroflex continuant like r in American English (written rl before other retroflexes), and rr an apico-alveolar trill. Vowel length is shown by double letters. There is no voicing contrast, but some stop phonemes are written voiced and others unvoiced, depending on their average phonetic values.

The following abbreviations are used in glosses: ABLative, ACTual (past or present), ALLative, APPRehensive, ASSOCiative, CONSequential, CunTeRFaCTual, DeTransitive (passive or reflexive).
(Footnote 2 continued)

DUal, FAcitive, FUTure, INClusive, INCHoative, INTENSifier, INSTRumental, LOCative, Nominalizer, NOMinative, OBJECT, PLUral, PRECONDition, PRIOR OBJECT (e.g. OBJECT of a PRECONDition clause), PRIVative, PROPrietary, UTILitive, Verbal Dative, Verbal Intransitive ALLative, Verbal PURPosive. See Evans 1985 for a description of the grammar.
MCKENZIE MASSACRE

1 rukuthi mutha-ya dangka-ya mala-maru-th
place name many-OBJ person-OBJ sea-V.D-ACT
dathina-wala dog
that-LOT(NOM)

2 dog durrrwaa-j, dangka-wala jarii-j
dog chase-ACT person-LOT(NOM) run away-ACT

3 yuuma-tha mutha-a dangka-a people,
drown-ACT many-NOM person-NOM
kunawun
child(NOM)

4 yuuma-th, dathin-ki thungal-i warna-j,
drown-ACT that-OBJ thing-OBJ dislike-ACT
dathin-kuru bala-a-nyarr
that-PROP shoot-DT-APPR

5 dathin-ki dalurudaluru warna-j, bayi-wuru
that-OBJ gun dislike-ACT fight-PROP
jardi-ya warna-j,
mob-NOM dislike-ACT

6 yuuma-th, jangka-a dumu-y, jangka-a
drown-ACT some-NOM hill-LOC some-NOM
walnathi, jangka-a yuuma-th.
high up some-NOM drown-ACT

7 kunawuna-nurru-da bardak, marl-da
child-ASSOC-STILL belly(NOM) child-ASSOC
kunawuna-nurru, yuuma-th.
child-ASSOC drown-ACT.

8 kunawuna-wuru bardak, marl-da
child-PROP belly(NOM) hand-NOM
kunawuna-nurru yuuma-th
child-ASSOC drown-ACT

1 At Rukuthi those dogs forced many (Kaiadilt) people into the sea.

2 The dogs chased (them), many people ran away.

3 Lots of people drowned, and children.

4 (They) drowned, (they) didn’t like that thing, might get shot by it,

5 didn’t like that gun, didn’t like that warlike mob (i.e. McKenzie and his gang), and

6 drowned. Some went to the sandhills, some went high up, some drowned.

7 (Women) drowned with children still in their bellies, or leading them by the hand.

8 With children in their bellies and at their hands they drowned.

3 Dal.urudaluru, though a native Kayardild word analysable as [thundercrack- PROP-REDUP] is always indeclinable.
9 *wulthunga-tha biya-j, mala-ya wiriku-j,*

turn over-ACT swim-ACT sea-LOC dive-ACT

* yarki wiriku-j

underneath dive-ACT

9 They swam along turning over, dived into the sea, dived under the sea.

10 *warra-thi-da kurirr-wa-tha yuuma-th*

far-REMOTE-same dead-INCH-ACT drown-ACT

10 Far out to sea they drowned and died.

11 *kurirra dathin-ij-i dii-ja*

dead(NOM) there-REMOTE-LOC sit-ACT

*mala-y kunawuna-nurr*  

sea-LOC child-ASSOC

11 They sank dead with their children there way out at sea.

12 *jangka-a dumu-y, thungkuwa-ya*

some-NOM sandhill-LOC mangrove-LOC

*barri-j, katharratharr-i*

crawl-ACT estuary-LOC

12 Some (stayed) on the crests (of the sand hills), (some) crawled round among the mangroves, in the estuaries.

13 *katharratharr-i kujuu-j, yuuma-th*

estuary-LOC swim-ACT drown-ACT

*thungkuwa-y*

mangrove-LOC

13 (They) swam about in the estuaries, and drowned among the mangroves.

14 *jaa-j, jaa-ja thungkuwa-y,*  

enter-ACT enter-ACT mangrove-LOC

14 (They) went into the mangrove swamps.

15 *dathin-ki thungal-i warna-j, dathin-ki*

that-OBJ thing-OBJ dislike-ACT that-OBJ

*thungal-i dalurudaluru*

thing-OBJ gun

15 They didn't like that thing, that gun thing.

16 *dathin-ki thungal-i, wuran-kinaba*

that-OBJ thing-OBJ food-PRIOR OBJ

*diya-jarrba wungi-yarrb,*  

eat-PRECOND steal-PRECOND

16 That thing, after (they) had eaten and stolen food.

17 *ngamathu-walada¹ wungi-j, buluka*

mother-LOT(NOM) steal-ACT bullock

*ngamathu-wala.*  

mother-LOT(NOM)

17 (They) stole bullocks, the things that are like many mothers.

---

¹ The neologism *ngamathuwala* does not mean 'many breasts', as one might expect - this would be *munirrwala*. Rather, the rationale seems to be that a cow supplies as much milk as many mothers.
McKENZIE MASSACRE

18 bala-a-j, jul-bala-a-ja
shoot-DT-ACT INTENS-shoot-DT-ACT
durrwa-yii-j, jinka-a-j
chase-DT-ACT follow-DT-ACT

18 (They) were shot at, chased and constantly shot at, followed,

19 marndi-i-j, maku-uru marndi-i-j
rob-DT-ACT woman-PROP rob-DT-ACT

19 robbed, robbed of their women.

20 marngan-da kunawuna thaari-j,
nubile-NOM child(NOM) take back-ACT
marngan-da kunawuna kurrka-a-j
nubile-NOM child(NOM) take-DT-ACT

20 (McKenzie’s men) took the nubile girls back (to their camp), the nubile girls were taken (sexually).

21 jangka-wu maku-ru marndi-i-j,
some-PROP woman-PROP rob-DT-ACT
jangka-wu kunawuna-wu marndi-i-j,
some-PROP child-PROP rob-DT-ACT
bandarr-u
half-PROP

21 (They) were robbed of some of their women, robbed of some of their children, of half (their children).

22 kurrka-a-j, marngan-da kunawuna
take-DT-ACT nubile-NOM child(NOM)
kurrka-a-j
take-DT-ACT

22 (They) were seized, the nubile girls were seized.

23 marngan-da kunawuna rar-ung-ku
nubile-NOM child(NOM) south-ALL-PROP
thaari-j
take back-ACT

23 (They) took the nubile girls back towards the south.

24 rar-ung-ka kurrka-a-j
south-ALL-NOM take-DT-ACT

24 (The girls) were taken southward.

25 marngan-ki kunawuna-ya thaari-ja
nubile-OBJ child-OBJ take back-ACT
rar-ung-k
south-ALL-NOM

25 (They) took the nubile girls back to the south.

5 McKenzie had a camp at Kurumbali, on the south side of Bentinck Island. One listener remarked here 'just takem one night altogether, bringim back then might be three day altogether. Lot of woman bin find a child, jangkaa kandukandu, jangkaa ngumu [some red (half-caste), some black].'
Some (Kaiadilt) drowned, some (hid) in the mangroves, some (were) scattered about in the swamp.

(Some) crawled about in the mangroves, kept themselves hidden away.

Some couldn’t be found.

Yes, some drowned, some went into the sea, some went into the estuaries with their children.

Some were shot high up on the sandhills,

shot with their babies. Some were (still) in (their) bellies,

some already having human form, toddlers, were shot.

(That) man’s shoulder must have got sore, (he) travelled about shooting,
incapable of feeling sorry, nothing.

(They were) strangers, looked like they came from a long way away,

looked like strangers.

The mob who owned that country,

the dulmarra dangkaa (custodians)

(t) they blocked off the owners from (their own) country.

(You would have thought it was) their country.

(The Kaiadilt) went about barred from their own country, unable to go out in the open,

(McKenzie’s mob) shot them out into the sea, and killed, killed.

Mothers ran away, fathers ran away,

mothers ran away, grandmothers ran away,
45 jangka-a yuuma-th, jangka-a kurirr, 45 some drowned, some were
some-NOM drown-ACT some-NOM dead(NOM)

46 kirthan-da wuran-ki diya-j, 46 Behind his back (the Kaiadilt)
surreptitiously-NOM food-OBJ eat-ACT ate (his) food, ate (his)
buluku-ya diya-j, bullock-OBJ eat-ACT bullocks,

47 wungi-ja diya-j, bala-a-ja wirdi-..., 47 stole and ate (them), they
steal-ACT eat-ACT shoot-DT-ACT stay..., kept getting shot,

48 bi-l-da bala-a-n-janii-j 48 they were asking to get
3-PLU-NOM shoot-DT-N-VPURP-ACT shot,

49 bala-a-ju bakii-ju 49 they would all get shot.
shoot-DT-FUT altogether-FUT

50 jangka-a bala-a-j, jangka-a wirdi-ja 50 Some were shot, some stay-
some-NOM shoot-DT-ACT some-NOM stay-ACT ed alive.7
birjin-d alive-NOM

7 The translation is by Nicholas Evans, incorporating comments by the late Darwin Moodoonuthi.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dymock, J. 'Sweers Island — An Interim Report, Part 1', *Anthropological Society of Queensland News-

Evans, N. *Kayardild: the language of the Bentinck Islanders of North West Queensland*, unpublished

Memmott, P. 'The South Wellesley Islands and the Kaiadilt. A history and an analysis of the land and its
people'. MS, 1982.

Tindale, N.B. 'Geographical knowledge of the Kaiadilt people of Bentinck Island', *Records of the South

Tindale, N.B. 'Some population changes among the Kaiadilt people of Bentinck Island'. *Records of the