

## Gungganydji Re-Assessment of their northern tribal boundaries

24 August 2023



The Kunganghi [*Gungganydji*] Dancers 1965 'Season's Greeting from Yarrabah'. Notice the small shields compared to Inland Bama (The late elder *Nganygabana*) George Davis,<sup>1</sup> a *Yidinydji* with sword [*Galga*] and shield (*Bigunu*:), however, McConnel records that the *Gungganydji* did have different types of shields, (from the historic photographs of canoes) *Gugganydji* didn't seem to take big shields on their outriggers.<sup>2</sup>

When I finished my M.A.(Qual) ("Djarrugan, the Last of the Nesting")<sup>3</sup> back in 1990 there was no Native Title (The Act was passed on Christmas Eve, 1996). When I finished my M.A.(Qual) it seemed that nobody in Cairns was interested in the tribes of the Cairns Rainforest Region. That is why I started Chapter One of my *Cairns History* with Gungganydji observing the arrival of Cook and then later with Cunningham on the P.P. King expedition. It gave a completely different approach as to how we look at our Australian History. Henry Reynolds had published *The Other side of the Frontier* in 1981, and his follow up books which tried to tell the Indigenous side of our history, and I felt I should write an integrated history which told both sides of the story. That is why I tried to tell what happened from both sides, which unfortunately casts the 19<sup>th</sup> Century colonists in a different light.

Dixon proffers in his *Words of Our Country* that *Yidiny* is related to languages North of the Cairns district, an intriguing idea, although if one negates the hypothesis about the Pygmy people and read it instead as Bama, then:

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<sup>1</sup> After I finished my M.A.(Qual) thesis I was contacted by Frank Royee who was chairmen of the Malanbarra *Yidnidji* from Gordonvale. Over the years of the early 1990's, we became friends and, on several occasion camped with his family at Goldsborough. After years of travelling to Gordonvale and interviewing Elders, I wrote a speech for the local Member (Warren Pitt) which he presented in the Queensland Parliament. I also helped construct a *bayu* with George Davis (*Nganygabana*) and members of Frank's family in the Upper Mulgrave Forestry Conservation Camping Grounds. Mixing with the *Malanbarra Yidinyji* I became aware of their feelings and tried to convey this in my speech to Warren Pitt.

<sup>2</sup> Ursula McConnel, "Inspiration and Design in Aboriginal Art", in *Art In Australia*, May 15th 1935. Peter Griffin wrote to me on 22/6/1997 and explain how he was Acting Superintendent in the second half of 1965. He was there for about three months and later went back to collect songs and stories. P.C. Griffin, Letter to myself 22 June 1997.

<sup>3</sup> T. Bottoms, "Djarrugan", M.A.(Qual), JCU, Cairns, 1990 & T. Bottoms, *Cairns, City of the South Pacific, A History 1770 -1995*, 02), Published by Bunu Bunu Press, Cairns, 2015 & 2016.

It might be that at some time in the distant past the Cairns Rain Forest region was inhabited by ...[Bama]. Then gradually, their domain was inhabited by other Aborigines. The Yidinyji came down from the north, into the northern part of the forest, and speakers of Dyirbal moved up from the south. The ... tribes would have intermarried with these new arrivals, and begun to speak their languages, just as the Yidinyji legend said.<sup>4</sup>

In my MA(Qual) thesis I was a little perplexed and left the *Gungganydji* claim unanswered in this regard as I was trying to get recognition for *all* tribes in the Cairns region. Cook's Cape Grafton and its surrounds are the traditional territories of the *Gungganydji* who were inundated by the imposition of the Yarrabah Mission, from 1892, so that the *Gungganydji* were swamped. However, they like their northern coastal neighbours, the *Yirrganydji*, both were sea-going people. Peter Griffin in his 1967 *Yarraburra* observed that the Kunghanji [*Gungganydji*]:

drew much of their sustenance from the sea and even journeyed in their canoes to the coral reefs in search of turtle and bird-eggs. Their neighbours on the south and in the valleys at the head of Trinity inlet were the YEDTINJI [Yidinydji] tribe, with whom they had frequent and generally friendly contact to the extent that intermarrying was common. By contrast these people [the Yidinydji] did not spend much time on the sea-coast, although it was common for them at certain seasons to camp along the beach at Buddabadoo, and it is notable that in their language, YETI, there are words for all the edible fresh-water fish but for hardly any of the salt-water fish.<sup>5</sup>

Like myself, Peter Giffin recorded his findings long before the 1996 Native Title Act of Determination. He basically confirmed that the *Yidnydji* were River people not Sea-oriented people. Dalrymple camped on *Wangal Djungay* [Double Island] on the 17<sup>th</sup> October 1873 and sent Mr Tompson [from the NMP<sup>6</sup>] to look for water opposite the island, where there were "the smokes of black's camps, and where doubtless a supply would be obtained."<sup>7</sup> Dalrymple surmised that the tribe were the same as in Trinity Harbour and that the "canoes similar to those at Trinity Harbour were found in the fresh-water lagoon behind the beach – one of which was forty feet long, cut out of one of red cedar."<sup>8</sup>

I would contend that Dalrymple probable got this wrong, but it did confirm that both the *Gunggaydji* and the *Yirrganydji* were sea-going people,<sup>9</sup> although not the *Yidinydji* who were inland and river people.

The key to understanding *Gungganydji* territory is knowledge of the legends, particularly the *Damarri* (and *Guyala*) Stories as to the naming of Woree where Damarri who pulled an axe from his head and "His cheek began to swell greatly and at the place he called *WOREE*, or cheek, he lay down

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<sup>4</sup> R.M.W. Dixon, *Words of Our Country*, St. Lucia, UQP, 1991, pp.6-7. "To summarize, names like Yirrganydji, Buluwanyji, and Gunganji break down into three components: stem yirr-/bulu-/gung-, then suffix GAY 'language,' then nyji 'having,' and their literal meaning is people having the Yirrgay, Buluway, and Gunggay, languages respectively. In Wood's opinion, the linguistically unanalyzable stems and archaic nature of the GAY suffix imply that these are very old names, and form an old and longstable nomenclature." Deane Fergie & Ray Wood, "Consideration of the Native Title of the Cairns 'Study Area' at Sovereignty Supplementary report to the Cairns Regional Inquiry", 2 August 2019, p.5.

<sup>5</sup> P.C. Griffin, *YARRABURRA, Myths, Legends and Rock Paintings of the Yarrabah Aboriginal Reserve*, [Canberra?] The Humanist Press, 1967, p.6.

<sup>6</sup> Native Mounted Police

<sup>7</sup> G.E. Dalrymple, "Narrative and Reports of the Queensland North-East Coast Expedition, 1873", Brisbane, Government Printers, 1874, p.18, para 243.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p.19, para 252.

<sup>9</sup> Although they hunted small game and wallabies, as well vegetables, fruit and nuts. see Bottoms, "DJARRUGAN", 1990, Chapter 3, PP.92-142.

to camp.”<sup>10</sup> This *Gungganydji* Storywater indicates that it is a part of their domain, as Christine Halse who did her PhD on Ernest Gribble and Yarrabah Mission, observed:

The expansion of white settlement and rural industries had a tragic impact on the local Aboriginal communities. It consumed their territory, destroyed traditional food supplies, disrupted tribal life, undermined kinship ties and prohibited the continuity of inter-tribal between the Kongkandji and their neighbours ended and development around Cairns forced the Idindji to *encroach* increasingly on Kongandji territory.<sup>11</sup>

If one looks at Professor Dixon’s linguistic map of 1976, Cairns is on the *Gunggay* linguistic side, and even McConnel map of 1939/40 could quite probably be seen as a part of *Gungganydji* land, particularly as it was the site of their familiar fresh-water lagoon (between the old Mazlin building and Orchid Plaza - roughly between Lake and Abbott Streets). Called *Gimuy* after *Ficus albatilla* – or Slippery Blue Fig, which grew near the lagoon. In what later became the township of Cairns, was likely to have been including in the original *Gungganydji* realm. Dixon also on the same page observed that “the Yidinydji had a large area in the coastal belt, but with access to the sea only at Cairns and the mouth of Mulgrave River, and a thin finger extending into the tableland forest as far as Kairi.”<sup>12</sup> Six years after the founding of Cairns in 1882:

Cairns was only a village, and the blacks [Gungganydji] came across Trinity Bay, about eight miles, in their canoes at high tide. They often landed on the beach in front of our house without any clothing on them, and if the door was open they would walk through the house and pick up anything they fancied - knives and forks, meat-choppers, axes, etc. “<sup>13</sup>



You can judge how *Gungganydji* would easily paddled across the Inlet from probably *Ginguirra* near the snout of *Bunda Ganyarra* (Crocodile) in the middle of the photo (L – R)<sup>14</sup>. (Photo↑ T. Bottoms, ↓Cairns Historical Society)

<sup>10</sup> P.C. Griffin, *YARRABURRA*, *The Humanist Press*, 1967, p.20; In Dixon, *Words of Our Country*, UQP, 1991, p.138, he identifies ‘warru’ as top portion of jaw, cheek.

<sup>11</sup> Christine M. Halse, “The Reverend Ernest Gribble and Race Relations in Northern Australia”, *UQ*, 1992, p.89-90.

<sup>12</sup> Dixon, “Tribes, languages and other boundaries in northeast Queensland,” in N. Peterson (ed), *Op.cit.* 1976, pp.208-09. Buluwai/Yirrgay are distinct languages which Dixon denotes as Djabuganydji.

<sup>13</sup> J.H. Binnie, *My Life on a Tropic Goldfield*, Bread and Cheese Club, Melbourne, 1944[?], p.43.

<sup>14</sup> see [www.cairnshistory.com.au](http://www.cairnshistory.com.au) , - Media then Video, ‘The Mouth of the Barron River’ about 1 min. mark)



March 1883 of Trinity Inlet, above the stump on the right is an outrigger canoe, probably owned by the Gungganydji.

The *Gungganydji* were extremely familiar with the crossing over the Inlet to *Gimuy* as it was the only freshwater supply in the vicinity and explains why they were so nonchalant in treating whites' houses as their property, as it was Bama land.

Outriggers were used up and down the coast and to visit islands off the coast, including *Wunyami* [Green Island] and as far out as *Yurrbing* ['grinding teeth': the Great Barrier Reef]. Roth also recorded that: "This variety of dug-out can be made from at least five kinds of timber, and will range up to fifteen or sixteen feet [4.5 to 4.8m] in length."<sup>15</sup>

The site on which Yarrabah Mission had been established "was the terminus of the trade route from the north, and it was here that the neighbouring tribes would congregate to meet the trading [outrigger] canoes." Gribble observed that the "very last of these trading canoes came from the north in the year of 1894." The expanding farming and timber-getting activities of white settlers were also squeezing the traditional owners, like the *Yidinydji*, into the territory of their *Gungganydji* allies. Increasing numbers from other surrounding tribal groups in the region preferred a local reserve closer to their traditional lands and saw Gribble's Mission as "a viable alternative to tribal conflict or exploitation and poverty on the fringes of white settlement. For many, Yarrabah offered a refuge for people in crisis."

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<sup>15</sup> W.E. Roth, *North Queensland Ethnography* [Records of the Australian Museum, 1907-1910, Vol.VIII], Plate VII.

Photograph T. Bottoms ↓



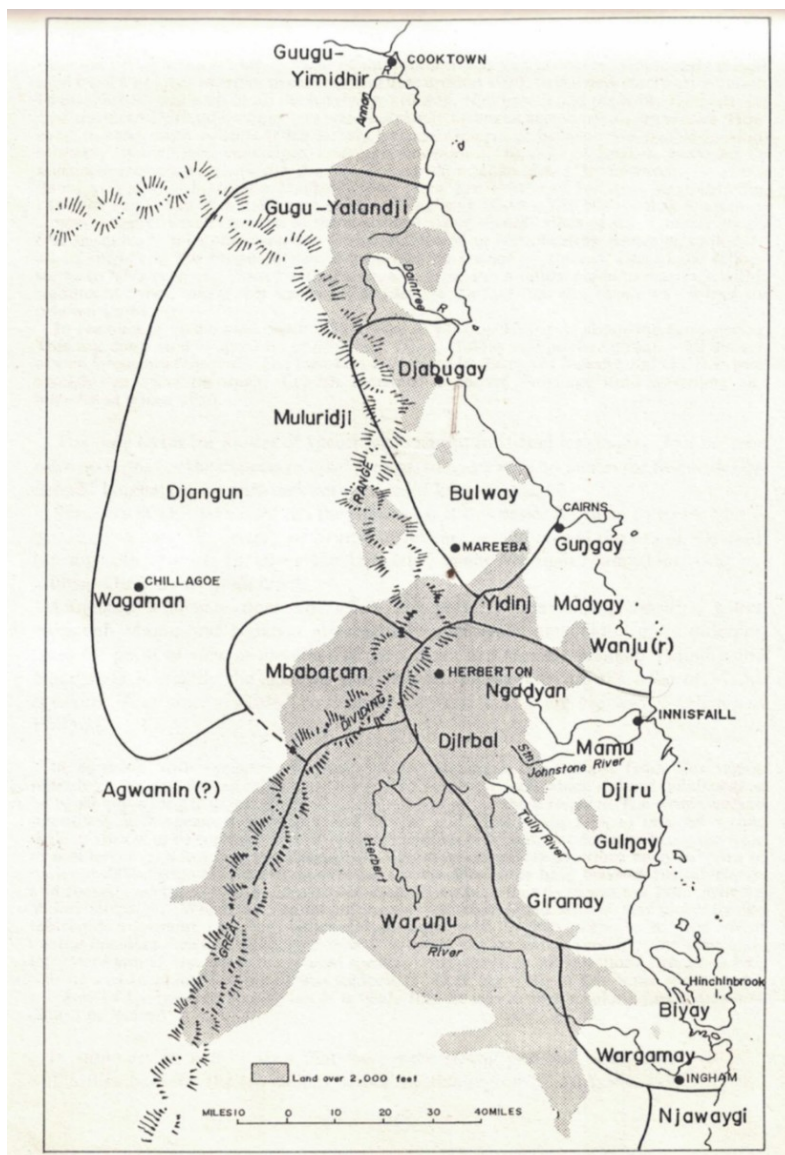
Ethnologist, Walter Roth (photographed by A.J. Colclough) was included in Roth's *Ethnography of North Queensland* and wrote: "Dug-out cut square at either extremity; with one outrigger, capable of carrying five to six people. Mossman to Cape Grafton." However, outriggers also extended down to the Mulgrave and Russell Rivers (to the left in the middle distance), and possibly as far as Hinchinbrook Island. The view of the Mulgrave and Russell Rivers (to the left in the middle distance), was taken from the cove to the west of Bramston Point (south of Russell Heads), looking north to Palmer Point.



On the Mulgrave River at Russell Heads in 1904 (A.A. White, on the Bellenden Kerr Expedition with Archibald Meston). These single outrigger canoes were a part of the trading network along the tropical coastline. The unique curved woomera (unique to the Gungganydji) called *balurr*, had ritual significance, for one of the heroic beings, *Damarri*, stood *Balurr* – the sacred curved woomera – in the prow of the boat, to calm the waters. To the *Gungganydji* they referred to the float as *bunul*, the local term for mullet, indicative of its habit of skimming along the surface of the water.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> W.E. Roth, *North Queensland Ethnography*, [Records of the Australian Museum, 1907-1910, Vol.VIII], Plate VII.

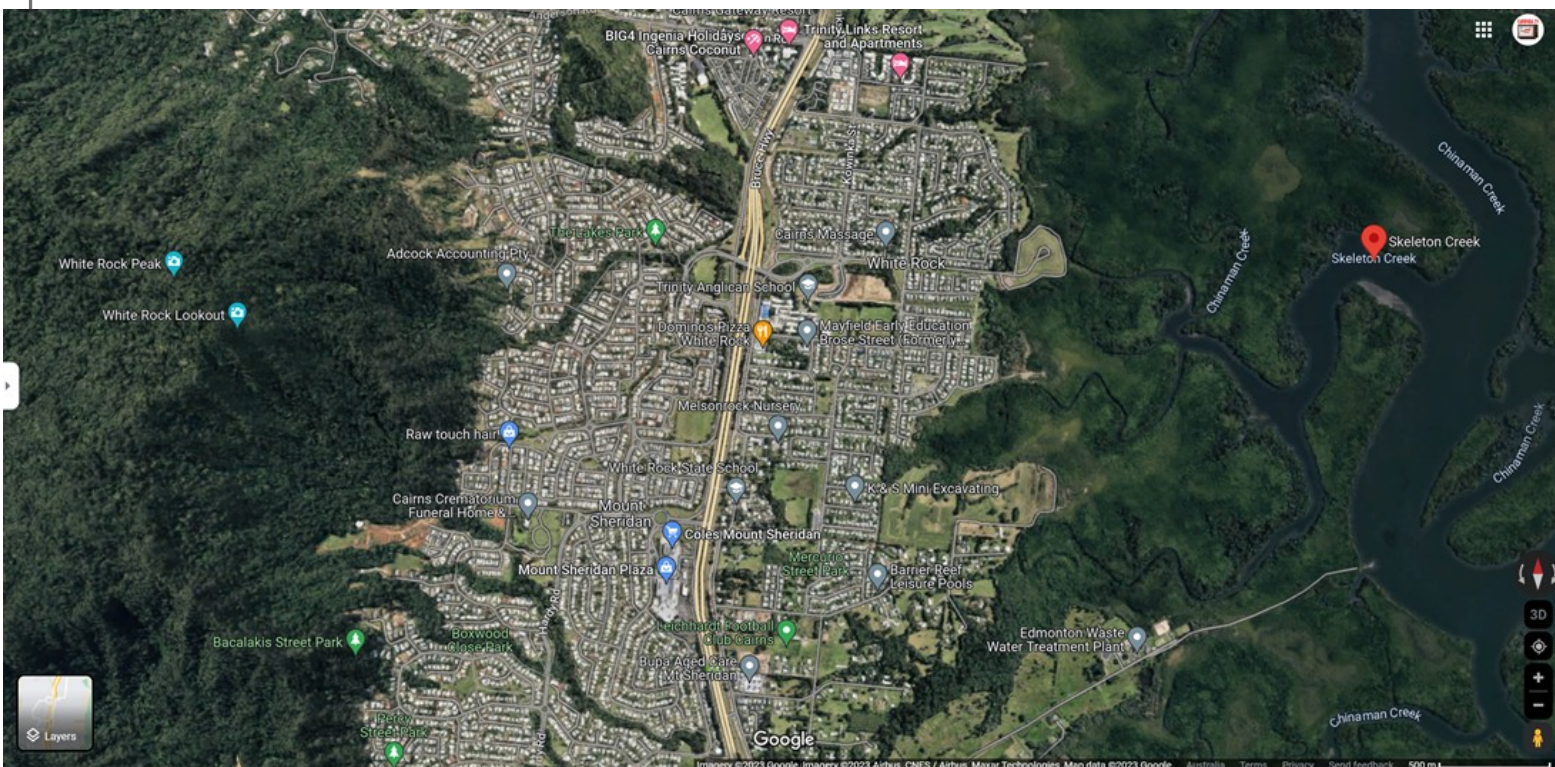


R.M.W. Dixon, 'Tribes, languages and other boundaries in northeast Queensland' in N. Peterson (Ed), *Tribes and Boundaries in Australia*, AIAS, Canberra, 1976, p.217. However other tribal groups need to be adjusted.

Photograph:  
Michael  
Watt



The confluence of the sea-going *Yirrganydji* & *Gugganydji* and part of their traditional lands and to the south the *Yindinydji* traditional lands, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. From White Rock Lookout







One of the Aboriginal camps & other races in West Cairns which Richards (PhD p.125) identifies “By 1886 it had swollen to about 100 people, its numbers including for a time the young Menmuny.” Apparently this is where he learnt English.



*Yirrganydji* country & sea front from Mt. Whitfield looking north to *Wangal Djungay* (Double Is.), and as Griffin says: “the area at the mouth of the Barron River was occupied by the YERKANKJI [*Yirrganydji*].”

Peter Griffin wrote *Yarraburra* in 1967 and stated that the *Gungganydji* [Kunghanji] :

whose tribal territory embraced Cape Grafton itself and extended around the shores of Trinity Bay towards Sturt Cove. A Stocky and sturdily built people, they drew much of their sustenance from the sea and even journeyed in their canoes to the coral reefs in search of turtle and bird-eggs. Their neighbours on the south and in the valleys at the head of Trinity inlet were the YEDTINJI [Yidinydji] tribe, with whom they had frequent and generally contact to the extent that intermarrying was common. By contrast these people did not spend much time on the sea-coast, although it was common for them at certain seasons to camp along the beach at Buddabadoo, and it is notable that the edible fresh-water in their language, YETI, there are words for all the edible fresh-water fish but hardly any of the salt-water fish.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> P.C. Griffin, *Yarraburra, Myths, Legends and Rock Paintings of the Yarrabah Aboriginal Reserve*, Canberra, The Humanist Press, pp.5-6.

Griffin wrote his book 37 years *before* the Native Title came into play, and before some Bama started their own agenda by expanding their tribal boundaries. Griffin writes about Buddabadoo, but not the foreshore of Cairns. So, when Griffin writes:

Some of the stories were recited in full with apparent ease, completeness and authenticity; others were pieced together as the joint efforts of many people, each of whom remembered one part or another of the legend. Thus they are presented as the combined tales of men such as Dick Taylor who wears the cicatrices of the Yedtinji tribe; Richard Hyde, *raconteur par excellence*, and also from the Yedtinji; those who can claim strong Kunghanji descent, such as Wilfred Harris, chief exponent of the traditional weapons, Cecille Traille, Stafford and Arnold Murgha, and the professional songman, Hilary Harris. Also there are those who came to the area in the very early days, learning the Kungai (Kunghanji) language and roaming the territory with the original occupants; people such as Lizzie Harris, Oscar Graham, Lottie Maywee and Grace Tiaro.<sup>18</sup>

Griffin I think is genuine, but when you look at Dixon work (*Words of our country*, 1991) somehow *Gungganydji* traditional stories become *Yidiny* Stories. Dixon started work on his book in 1970.<sup>19</sup> On the premise that *Gunggay* was related to *Yidiny*, and that there more *Yidiny* alive in 1970 than *Gungganydji*, it is possible that Griffin's re-telling of *Gunggay* Stories may preclude the *Yidiny* Stories related by Dixon. He writes "from Cairns, there were the *Gungganydji* people, speaking the *Gunggay* language...A speaker of *Yidiny* would have been able to understand *Gunggay* and *Wanyurr* [according to the linguist, Dixon, a *Yidiny* based language], although a few words differed." Because Dixon wrote in his *Words of our country* in *Yidiny*, then one could be forgiven for thinking that these Stories were in *Yidiny* instead of *Gunggay*. However, I couldn't get hold of Dixon to ask him whether this hypothesis was correct. Nevertheless, I think it could be the case.

I have looked at Christine Halse (C.M. Halse, "The Reverend Ernest Gribble and Race Relations in Northern Australia", PhD, UQ, St. Lucia, 1992.) and her book (*Terribly Wild Man*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2002) as well as Matthew Richards ("Race around Cairns: representations, perceptions, and realities of race in the Trinity Bay district 1876-1908. PhD, JCU) and this were my findings:

- From Richards (p.125 ftn 44 & 45), and Halse (*Terribly Wild Man*, p.27) I gathered that *Menmuny* learnt English through his times in West Cairns in the 1880s (Richards, p.140). "Menmuny ferried Gribble into Cairns, but more often the boat was used as a fishing vessel crewed by Menmuny, George, Pompo and Willie Ambrym"(p.140, ftn 120). To the *Gungganydji* they loved sea fishing.
- Looking at the *Cairns Post* (using Richards references, p.149) dealing with an Aboriginal woman who claims the Yorkey (of Yorkey's Knob fame, *CP 5 October 1892*) had battered her [Yorkey is reported as the father of George Christian)<sup>20</sup> and again on 10 January 1910. I think it is probable that Menmuny was in Cairns before the Yarrabah Mission was opened in 1892.
- It seems very likely that the *Gungganydji* were the first Aboriginal people who were involved with JB Gribble. When Professor Rentoul and John Gribble interacted with Aboriginal people at Gordon's Creek (*CP 3 August 1891*) to baptise them, it is very probable that these were *Gungganydji*. The

<sup>18</sup> P.C. Griffin, *Yarraburra, Myth, Legends and Rock Paintings of the Yarrabah Aboriginal Reserve*, Humanist Press, 1967, p.15.

<sup>19</sup> R.M.W Dixon, *Words of our country*, UQP, 1991, p.1.

<sup>20</sup> I wrote *A History of the Yorkeys Knob Boating Club*, in 2016. In the Introduction I explain the history of the Knob, but I wasn't looking for Native Title. I relied on *Cairns Post* 7 October 1905 & other sources.

legend telling of *Damarri's* calling it *Woree* (after extracted an axe wound from his cheek) strongly suggests that they were *Gugganydji*.

- Richards states that the Barron Blacks were the *Djabugay* (p.125, fnt 27), when in fact they were *Buluwanydji* (akin to the *Djabugay* according to Dixon) but slightly different. However, Richards does state the "*Gugganydji* land was accessible only from the sea or through the dense rainforest across a small mountain range which completed the area's enclosure, and made an ideally isolated location for remnant reservation." In this I agree.

There are several mentions of how the *Gugganydji* made a pact with the *Yidinydji* to come to their aid if the *Mamu* (*Dyirrbal* speakers around Innisfail) tried to invade *Gugganydji* territory. That is why Griffin's work is so important as the legends tell of their proprietorial land claim over the *Woree* area.