

SOCIOLINGUISTIC PATTERNS IN AN UNSTRATIFIED SOCIETY:
THE PATRILECTS OF KUGU NGANHCARA

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ABSTRACT

Considerable sociolinguistic work has been carried out in socially stratified literate societies, where social organization is typically reflected in language by sociolectal stratification oriented towards a standard. Unstratified societies are therefore interesting as potential sources of new types of sociolinguistic data and as testing grounds for sociolinguistic theory and techniques of analysis. Here different principles of social and linguistic organization are found; in particular the lack of an "upper" group means that there is no upper lect to exert a gravitational influence on linguistic organization. This paper reports on the linguistic correlates of social organization among the Nganhcara (Cape York Peninsula, Australia). The Nganhcara are organized into unstratified, generally exogamous, patrilineal clans (PATRICLANS). Actual land-using groups, however, consist of individuals from several different clans. Patriclan membership is marked by, among other things, language. Each patriclan is associated with a clan-lect, or PATRILECT in our terminology. The patrilects share a common syntax and are differentiated primarily at the lexical level; a few phonological and morphological differences are also found. Despite the linguistic diversity of the land-using groups, children growing up in them identify with and learn their father's patrilect. Most speakers are receptively multi-lectal. There is considerable community agreement as to which features belong to which patrilect. Thus the patrilects are a sociolinguistic as well as a linguistic reality. Nganhcara patrilects differ from traditional sociolects in their lack of stratification and their clear boundaries. Although the patriclans are associated with the particular lands they own, patrilects are not geographical dialects in either origin or current distribution. A comparison with the sociolinguistic situation in Sheshatshiu Montagnais (Clarke 1984, 1985) leads to the conclusion that the degree and type of differentiation among the Nganhcara patrilects are attributable to the social importance of the groups they mark and to the linguistically complex environment in which acquisition takes place.

1. Introduction

A great deal of sociolinguistic work has been carried out in large-scale socially stratified literate societies, where social organization is typically reflected in language by sociolectal stratification oriented towards a standard variety. To be sure, other social parameters may also play an important role--e.g. the degree of integration into local social networks (Milroy 1980, Labov 1972: ch 7) or orientation towards local values (Labov 1963)--but the overarching social stratification provides a constant background theme. Consequently, as Clarke (1984:54) has pointed out, the sociolinguistic study of unstratified societies is potentially of great theoretical interest. Here different principles of social and linguistic organization are found; in particular the lack of an "upper" group means that there is no upper lect to exert a gravitational influence on linguistic organization. This paper reports on the linguistic correlates of social organization in such a society.

The Nganhcara are an Australian aboriginal group whose language, Kugu Nganhcara, belongs to the middle Paman subgroup of the Australian family. The traditional territory of the Nganhcara lies roughly between Kendall River and Moonkan Creek on the west coast of the Cape York Peninsula in northern Queensland. (See map on p. 43.) Since the 1950's the majority have associated themselves with one of the two government-run (formerly church-run) settlements in the area: Edward River to the south of the traditional lands and Aurukun to the north. Most have also continued to spend time on their own land for at least part of the year. In addition to being unstratified, non-literate and non-urban, Nganhcara society differs from the typical object of sociolinguistic studies in one other significant aspect: it is very small-scale, having a population of only 250-300.

Despite its small size, Nganhcara society is highly complex. There are two main units of social organization: the PATRICLAN (patrilineal clan) and the LOCAL BAND (actual on-the-ground land using camp group). Neither of these groupings involves stratification.

Patriclan membership is marked by, among other things, language. Each patriclan is associated with a clan-lect, which we shall call a PATRILECT. There are six patrilects: Kugu Muminh, Kugu Uwanh, Kugu Ugbanh, Kugu Mu'inh, Kugu Yi'anh and Wik Iyanh, and these are the focus of this paper. (A further name, Kugu Mangk, is probably an alternative label for Kugu Yi'anh.) In each instance, kugu or wik 'language' is followed by the verbal noun for 'go' in the particular patrilect (except

for mangk, which is obscure). We shall generally drop kugu / wik in referring to the patrilects; however, we shall distinguish between THE NGANHCARA (the people) and KUGU NGANHCARA (the language). Wik Iyanh speakers are inland rather than coastal people and are somewhat peripheral to the Nganhcara group. On linguistic grounds, however, Wik Iyanh is clearly a Kugu Nganhcara patrilect (see section 3).

It is not possible to state with accuracy the population figures for each patrilect. Kilham (1974:70) gives the Nganhcara population at Aurukun in 1972 as shown in Table 1. For Edward River we obtained in 1979 the approximate figures in Table 2.

Iyanh	40	Mu'inh	7
Uwanh	40	Ugbanh	6
Muminh	31	Mangk	1

TABLE 1. Nganhcara Population at Aurukun

Iyanh	41	Yi'anh	10
Mu'inh	35	Uwanh	3
Muminh	10	Ugbanh	2

TABLE 2. Nganhcara Population at Edward River

These figures are only an approximation, as they cannot take into account fluctuations in population caused by the constant arrivals and departures to and from other settlements and towns, but it can be seen that Iyanh, Muminh, Uwanh and Mu'inh have relatively large numbers of speakers, while Ugbanh and Mangk/Yi'anh are poorly represented.

The relationship between land, language and land-users among the Nganhcara, and in the Cape York Peninsula in general, is a complex one. Our discussion here draws heavily on Sutton 1978, Sutton and Rigsby 1979, 1982, and dealing with a similar situation on the east coast of the peninsula, Rigsby 1980. In theory, land ownership (and, of course, patriclan membership and language) is inherited from one's father (strictly father's father). However, the land owned by any one group may consist of non-contiguous stretches of

territory surrounded by land owned by other groups. For example, Uwanh speakers owned some land near the South Kendall River, which was separated from their other territory near the Holroyd River by land owned by Muminh speakers who in their turn had holdings as far south as the Edward River. Local bands are more fluid in their membership and may contain individuals of several different patriclans (hence different patrilects, and sometimes even other languages) associated by kinship, marriage, or even friendship to a 'focal' adult male. Although patriclans are much more stable entities than local bands, over a long period they too may change. Clans may become extinct due to losses in battle, or to lack of male children, as is now happening to speakers of Ugbanh. A larger clan may split into several subsections; a smaller clan may join forces with another on a permanent basis and the two may come to be considered one clan. These long-term political changes are mediated by the shifting alliances and schisms at the level of the local band.

The fieldwork on which this study is based was carried out at Edward River in January 1974 by Steve Johnson and at Edward River and Aurukun in the first three months of 1979 by both authors. In addition to the usual phonological and grammatical study, the 1979 investigation involved the systematic elicitation of about two thousand lexical items from one or two informants for each patrilect. We also worked with half a dozen other speakers of various patrilects and carried out participant-observation. Informants for a particular patrilect were in all but one case identified with that patrilect by virtue of their clan membership. With Yi'anh no such speaker was available and we had to settle for an informant whose mother's clan was associated with Yi'anh. Informants were chosen on the basis of four factors: age, availability, willingness to work with us, and aptitude for linguistic work. The last factor proved quite important, given the vast cultural differences between Nganhcara and white Australian societies. The majority of our informants were middle-aged; none were younger than 25. This was to ensure that they had adequate linguistic and sociolinguistic competence. We made no attempt to get a random representative sample: this would have been absurd, given the small population and the complex relationships between kinship and language. The only way to get a really representative sample in this community would be to interview all its members. Nor did our field projects have the resources to study variation in the usage of individual speakers. One would expect that such variation might occur, particularly as a result of shifting political alliances. Consequently, what we have recorded as the characteristics of patrilect X represents more a stereotype, than observation of contextual use. Although our results must be

regarded as preliminary, they are worth presenting now, since a large scale sociolinguistic study of the Nganhcara community is unlikely to take place in the foreseeable future.

In the two sections below we will show that the Nganhcara patrilects constitute both social and linguistic realities. In the final section we discuss their theoretical status and compare the sociolinguistic situation among the Nganhcara to that of a similar native Canadian group, the Sheshatshiu Montagnais.

2. Patrilect as Social Reality

Despite the linguistic diversity of the local bands, patrilects are extremely important as markers of patriclan membership, which is a major factor in the organization of social and economic life. Patriclan membership brings with it ownership of land, which is of prime importance as a means of survival, as well as ownership of sacred places, rights to perform certain ceremonies, ownership of songs and dances, etc. All of these factors enhance the personal prestige and political power of the individual. Patrilect as a marker of patriclan membership is thus an important symbol of social identity.

A clear indication of the significance of patriclans and patrilects is the fact that the Nganhcara do not have a single generally recognized name for themselves as a people or for their language. What they use are terms referring to patriclans and local bands and the names of the patrilects mentioned above. The term Kugu Nganhcara was first used by the anthropologist John von Sturmer (as Kugu-Nganychara) to refer to the peoples between Kendall River and Moonkan Creek, who share many cultural features, and have a high degree of interaction (see von Sturmer 1980:169ff). (Nganhcara is the first person plural exclusive pronoun in the dative case. The name therefore means 'Our (exclusive) Language'.)

The social heterogeneity of the local band is reflected in language use. It is common to hear conversations between people each speaking their own patrilect, but fully competent in the other patrilects being spoken. Speakers of Kugu Nganhcara sometimes marry outside the orbit of their own language and are often multilingual in Munkan, Thaayorre, Ngathanh or other languages of the region. A further dimension to this complexity is added by RESPECT vocabulary, a parallel lexicon (which also differs from patrilect to patrilect) used in certain social situations, such as in the recounting of

myths or when speaking to people in mourning or to certain categories of kin.¹ The fact that the patrilects remain distinct in such an environment is a further testimony to their social importance.

Marriage among the Nganhcara is most frequent between speakers of different patrilects. Children grow up first speaking the language of their mother, and then switching to that of their father as they become adults. It is their father's language that they regard as theirs, but all speakers of Nganhcara are at least bilectal. Many have also learnt the language of their mother's mother, or other people who have been present in the local band. Despite the existence of some variation (see section 3), there appears to be general community agreement on the linguistic features of each patrilect, and considerable trouble is taken to make sure that children acquire the appropriate patrilect. For example, one widow in the community has even begun speaking her deceased husband's patrilect at home in order to provide the correct model for her children. In our 1979 fieldwork we found that we each became associated with the patrilects of our first informants (Smith with Uwanh, Johnson with Muminh) and were often corrected by speakers of various patrilects for using words inappropriate to "our" patrilects. These corrections were generally consonant with the vocabulary we elicited from our main Uwanh and Muminh informants.

In this section we have surveyed a number of facts which attest to the social importance of the patrilects to the Nganhcara: their significance as a badge of identity, the evidence of local language names, the maintenance of distinct patrilects in a polylectal and multilingual environment, the general awareness of the linguistic characteristics of each patrilect, and the care taken to insure that children learn their father's patrilect. In the following section we look at the linguistic features which distinguish one patrilect from another.

3. Patrilect as Linguistic Reality

The six patrilects spoken in this region are all very closely related and are mutually intelligible. They are identical in syntax and differ in only minor aspects of their morphology and phonology. Lexicon is thus their main distinguishing feature.

There are several other languages spoken nearby, the most closely related of which is Wik Munkan, spoken to the north of the Nganhcara

territory. Unlike Wik Munkan and the other more distantly related neighbouring languages, all Nganhcara patrilects display:

- (a) phonetic labio-velars
- (b) voice contrasts in the stops
- (c) a five-vowel contrast in final open syllables
- (d) vowel alternation in thematic high vowels in verb stems

In addition, Nganhcara has preverbal pronominal enclitics, which Wik Munkan lacks (Smith and Johnson 1985, Smith 1986).

3.1. Phonology

The phonological inventory of Kugu Nganhcara is outlined in Table 3. We employ a practical orthography based partly on Australianist conventions. For homorganic nasal-stop clusters, all nasals except m and ng are written as n; ñ is used before velars to indicate an alveolar rather than velar nasal.

Consonants:

bilabial	lamino- dental	apico- alveolar	lamino- palatal	velar
p	th	t	c	k
b	dh	d	j	g
m	nh	n	ny	ng

glides: y, w lateral: l tap: r glottal stop: ?

Vowels:

i e a o u, both short and long (written doubled)

TABLE 3. Kugu Nganhcara Phonological Inventory

There are three types of phonological differences among the patrilects: systematic, semi-systematic and idiosyncratic. Only a few systematic phonological differences are found, and these are all quite minor. For example, alveolar obstruents are pronounced as retroflexes in Mu'inh and Iyanh. In Muminh the contrast between long and short vowels (generally restricted to initial syllables) is neutralized to a long vowel before /g/; thus Muminh kaagi 'play', yaagi 'tendon' kiiga 'back' cf. Uwanh kaagi, yagi, kiga. There are a few semi-systematic phonological differences: for example in certain words some patrilects have an intervocalic /r/ following a long vowel where others have an /n/ following a short vowel, for example Uwanh, Ugbanh, Muminh iiru 'this', aara 'that', versus Mu'inh, Iyanh, Yi'anh inu, ana; Uwanh, Muminh thaaaranamu 'from/of them' (3rd pl Ablative) versus Yi'anh thananamu, Iyanh thananam (corresponding forms in other patrilects unattested). Yi'anh has lost a nasal before [-cor] voiced stops in some words; thus Yi'anh wojeńnga 'gather', muga 'eat', kaagu 'bandicoot', pibeńnga 'float'; Uwanh wonje mungga, kaanggu, pimbi, but also Yi'anh, Uwanh kumbi 'shift', nhumba 'rub', yinjenga 'wet', wangga.amba 'fine fishing net'. Finally, there are a great many idiosyncratic differences in the phonemic make-up of the same lexical item in different patrilects. Examples follow (in some items not all patrilects have words from the same root):

- 'ego's mother's sister' Uwanh, Ugbanh, Mu'inh ngathidhe; Muminh ngathadhe; Yi'anh ngathidha; Iyanh ngatha
 'small' Uwanh mepen; Muminh mapan; Ugbanh madhadhi; Mu'inh mangaya
 Yi'anh mangengkong; Iyanh wayaya
 'hairy round yam (*dioscoria sativa* var. *rotunda*)'
 Uwanh, Ugbanh kungba; Muminh kungkuwa; Mu'inh kungguwa;
 Iyanh ka'ara; Yi'anh wanci
 'knife spear' Uwanh, Ugbanh, Yi'anh, Mu'inh cawara; Muminh, Iyanh thawara
 'cry' Uwanh, Ugbanh, Yi'anh, Mu'inh paabi; Muminh paawi; Iyanh paayi

3.2. Morphology

Wik Iyanh has a number of morphological features that isolate it somewhat from the other patrilects of Kugu Nganhcara, in particular:

- (a) It lacks a distinction between dual and plural third person exclusive: in all other patrilects ngana 'we (dual excl)' contrasts with nganhca 'we (pl excl)', while

Iyanh has the one form ngana 'we (excl)' for dual and plural.

- (b) There is only one conjugation for all verbs, compared with two in the other patrilects.
- (c) Many of the oblique pronoun forms have a unique structure, and show greater regularity than in the other patrilects.

These differences are in keeping with the fact that, as mentioned above, Iyanh speakers are somewhat peripheral to the Nganhcara group. We have not found any morphological differences between any of the other patrilects.

3.3. Lexicon

It is in the lexicon that the majority of differences among the patrilects are to be found. To illustrate, comparative vocabulary for one semantic field--terms for mammals--is presented in Table 4 (p. 38).

A great deal of work still needs to be done on the lexical affiliations of the six patrilects, but impressionistically Table 4 seems fairly typical of the kind and extent of differences which may occur. It will be noted that there are a large number of shared terms. Figures on cognate lexicon among several of the Nganhcara patrilects are given in Sutton (1978:178) and presented here in Table 5 (p. 38). The figures, based on a list of 100 common items attributed to Kenneth Hale, indicate that interlectal differences are on the order of 15% - 25%. Note, however, that these figures would be higher if phonological differences in cognate items were also taken into account. It is also clear from the data in Table 5 that the greatest lexical differences are between Iyanh and the other patrilects, an observation born out by Sutton's data and by our general impressions. This is in keeping with Iyanh's peripheral status. Without further study it is not possible to say whether some areas of the lexicon are more differentiated than others. We may note that no area seems to be immune from differentiation. For example even grammatical morphemes are involved; thus the comitative suffix appears in Mu'inh, Iyanh, and Muminh as -nhja, in Uwanh as -ra and in Yi'anh and Ugbanh as -la; the most common causative suffix is -nha in Iyanh and -nga in the other patrilects.

Gloss	Uwanh	Yi'anh	Ugbanh	Muminh	Mu'inh	Iyanh
bandicoot	kaanggu	kaagu	kaanggu	moŋke	koyondo	moŋke
native cat	cingka	cingka	cingka	cingka	cingka	cingka
glider possum	kaanam	kaanam	waga	maŋgan	manggan	woyanang
spiny anteater	ngincam	kompo	ngincam	ngincam	muthcu	kekuyuwa
possum sp.	kigande	kigande	kigande	kiigande	kigandhe	
small spotted possum	yome	yome	cwaa	cawanha	yome	kanjulu
rat-tailed possum	waga	waga	waga	othogo	waga	waga
white-tailed possum	kepenme	kapadbe	kengkonhnye		kengkonhnye	kengkonhnye
cuscus wallaby	muduwa	muduwa	muduwa	muduwa	mudhuwa	
red kangaroo	pukawanh	pukawanh	pukawanh	konomuntho	pukawanh	pukawanh
grey kangaroo	pangku	pangku	pangku	thuthamba	pangku	pangku
yellow fruit bat	yakalba	yakalba	yakalba	yakalbi	yakalwa	yakalba
black fruit bat	kuja	kuja	kuja	kuja	kujang	kujang
insectivorous bat	woole	kopome	wuki	monthe	matan	wuki
rat	mukum	ngototon	mukum	mukum	puntilang	mukumbang
little rat	mali	mali	mali		mali	mali
water rat	kupatha	kupatha	ciici	ciici	kalu	kalu
dugong	munpa	munpa	munpa	munpa		munpa
dolphin	watha	watha	watha	watha	watha	thaara
long-nosed dolphin	thinhammala	thinhammala	thinhanmala	thinhanbala	thinhanmala	thinhanmala
whale	wanhadhji	kaapunpi	wanhadhji	wanhadhji	wanhadhji	wanhadhji
	waala	kuga	waala	kuga	thandhi	wunthu
	yewo	yewo	yewo	yewo		yewo

TABLE 4. Lexical Items for Mammals

Iyanh				
88	Mu'inh			
74	87	Uwanh		
74	81	84	Muminh	

TABLE 5. Percentages of Close Cognates Shared by Wik Munkan and some Nganhcara Patrilects

3.4. Intralectal variation

We have noticed that within some patrilects different groups display differences in vocabulary. Iyanh in particular can probably be subdivided. We also were often told, or noted ourselves, that a particular speaker's Muminh, Mu'inh, etc. was somewhat different from that of our main consultants. Von Sturmer (1980:172) makes similar observations. These differences may well reflect different political groupings, but we do not have sufficient linguistic or anthropological data to show this.

4. Discussion

In the above two sections we have shown that the Nganhcara patrilects are significant social categories, and we have outlined their linguistic characteristics.

It should not come as any surprise to find that social groups as important as the Nganhcara patriclans should be marked linguistically. The fact that in such a linguistically heterogeneous environment the lexicon plays by far the greatest role in distinguishing among the patrilects is quite reminiscent of the example of Urdu/Marathi/Kannada contact discussed by Gumperz and Wilson (1971). The main difference seems to be that the latter is clearly a product of convergence and diffusion, while there is no evidence of prior convergence among the Nganhcara patrilects.

We have used the term PATRILECT to describe the different socially significant language varieties in Kugu Nganhcara primarily because existing terms--in particular the terms SOCIOLECT and DIALECT--seem to be inappropriate.

The term SOCIOLECT denotes the speech variety of a social group; however, it cannot be appropriately applied to the Nganhcara patrilects, since it implies a hierarchy of groups not present here; in addition the group hierarchy is matched by a prestige ranking among the speech varieties which is also lacking. Finally, the Nganhcara patrilects are more clearly delineated than typical sociolects, which generally grade into one another seamlessly, though this difference is probably a function of the fact that most studies have been carried out in modern urban environments where stratified groups are not discrete.

The term DIALECT can be differentiated from PATRILECT on two counts. First, it implies a close nexus between on-the-ground land using group and language using group, which does not obtain here. Second, dialect affiliation is generally derived from the region in which one lives or has lived, and the dialect affiliation of an individual may change over time; patrilect affiliation on the other hand is ascribed on the basis of lineage and cannot generally be changed. Finally dialect differences arise through linguistic changes which do not spread through the entire territory in which a language is spoken. Such a mechanism clearly cannot underlie the differentiation of the Nganhcara patrilects given the heterogeneous nature of the local bands.

It is instructive to compare the results of this Australian study with those of Clarke et al's work on Montagnais in Sheshatshiu (Clarke 1984, 1985). The Sheshatshiu Montagnais are similar to the Nganhcara in several social characteristics: they are small in number (less than 600); they are unstratified; they gave up the bush life only in the 1950's, and they are largely illiterate. In addition Clarke reports the existence of a "folk taxonomy" according to which 'individuals were associated with one of four basic groups, determined loosely on the basis of kinship and hunting territory affiliations' (1984:57). While these four groups were also marked linguistically, especially among older speakers, the linguistic delineation appears to be fairly subtle, and indeed reminiscent of the type of sociolectal differences found in urban studies (though again stratification is lacking). The prime linguistic markers which Clarke mentions are phonological variables; some lexical differences are also found, but there is a strong tendency for these to be levelled.

Why do two fairly similar communities yield such different results? One reason is probably that the territorial/hunting/kinship groups are not nearly as important to the Montagnais as their patrilans are to the Nganhcara. The significance of the latter means that their linguistic marking must be prominent and that there should be general community agreement regarding the characteristics of each patrilect. Why is lexical marking of social groups found extensively in Nganhcara, but not in Montagnais? Two factors are probably at work here. First lexical differences may simply be more salient than syntactic or phonological differences. This is certainly suggested by convergence studies, such as those of Gumperz and Wilson (1971) or Pandit (1972a, 1972b), in which syntax and phonology converge leaving lexicon as the main marker of group identity. Second, lexicon is more subject to conscious control than phonology

or syntax and thus a more suitable source of sociolinguistic markers in the learning situation of Nganhcara children, who must consciously learn to use their father's patrillect in a polyglot environment.

As a general conclusion we may say that the absence of social stratification in a society provides an opportunity to observe more clearly the relationship between other social factors and language. The diversity of unstratified societies, especially those which *prima facie* look similar, provides an opportunity to make comparisons and thus bring into sharper focus the effects of individual social parameters.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the Australian Research Grants Commission and Monash University who provided funding for our fieldwork on Kugu Nganhcara in 1979. Fuller information on the grammar of Kugu Nganhcara will be found in Smith and Johnson (in preparation). Thanks are due to Ruth King for commenting on a draft of this paper.

FOOTNOTES

¹For a discussion of similar phenomena, often called AVOIDANCE LANGUAGE, in other Australian languages, see Dixon 1980:58-65.

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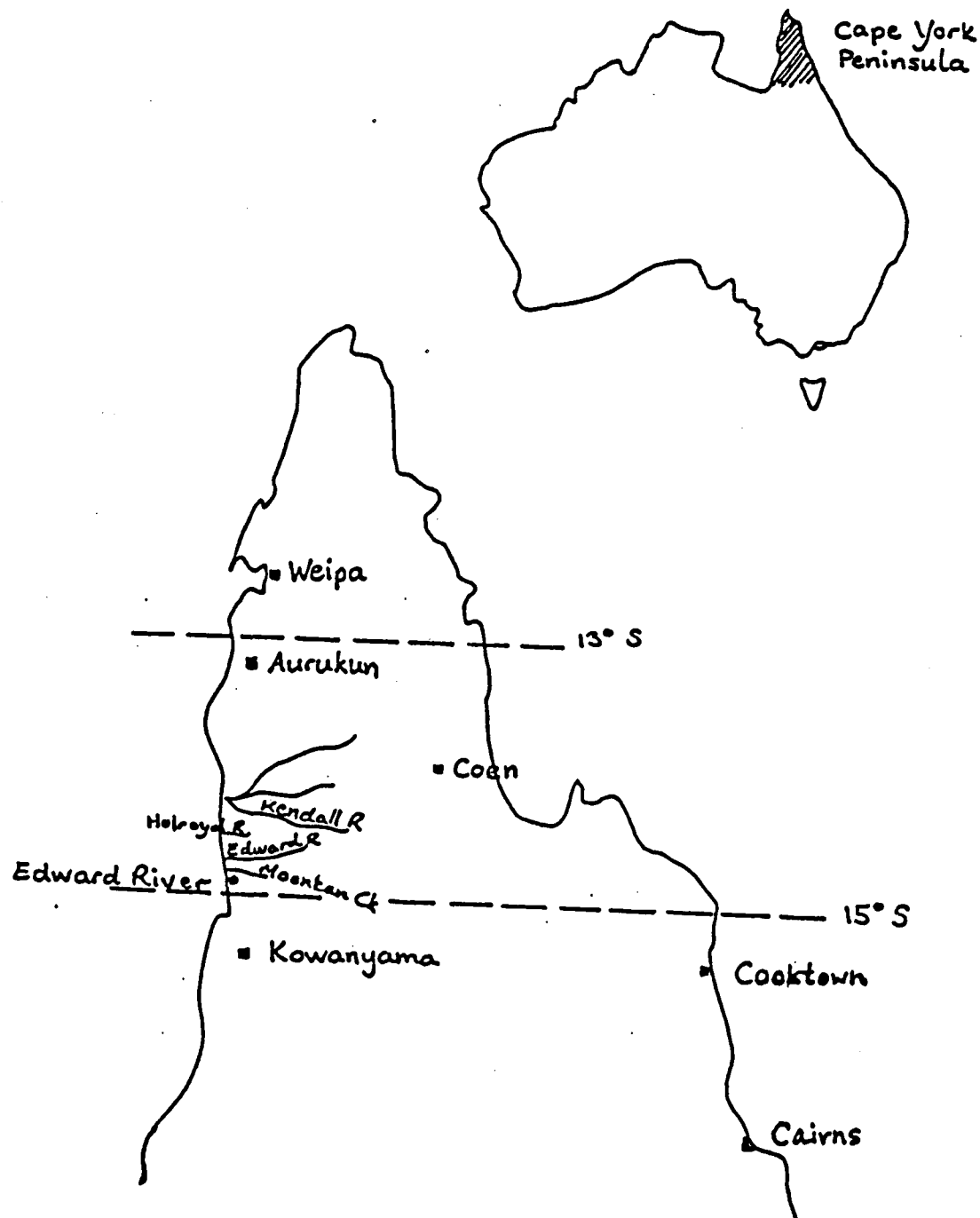


FIGURE 1. The Territory of the Nganhcara, Cape York Peninsula, Australia