The Extinction of the Australian Pygmies

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From the 1940s until the 1960s, it was fairly widely known there were pygmies in Australia. They lived in North Queensland and had come in from the wild of the tropical rainforests to live on missions in the region. This was a fact recorded at the time not only in anthropological textbooks and articles but also in popular books about the Australian Aborigines. There was even an award-winning children’s book tracing their origins. The more famous photographs of the Australian pygmies were reproduced in both the academic and the popular literature.

At the time, there was controversy about their origins but not over the fact of their existence. In 1962, the first volume of Manning Clark’s History of Australia recorded their presence on its first two pages and repeated the then influential anthropological theory about their origins and their place in the waves of migration of hunter-gatherer peoples from Asia who populated the Australian continent in the millennia before the British arrived in 1788.

Yet, since then, the Australian pygmies have been totally obliterated from public memory. To test just how complete this process has been, over recent months we have questioned a wide range of friends and acquaintances. Although most were well-educated and well-read people, none had ever heard of the pygmies, not even when we used some of their other, once-familiar alternative names such as “Negritos” and “Barrineans”. A few friends scoffed at the notion and demanded some evidence. They wouldn’t believe us until we emailed them the photographs.

The Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia (1994), published by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, today does its best to disguise these people. It lists some of their tribes, including the Djabuganjdji, Mbarbaram (Barbaram) and Yidindjji (Indindji), but does not mention a word about their stature. Only its entry “Rainforest Region” records the existence of “small, curly-haired people with languages which have distinctive features”, but the accompanying photograph of Yidindjji tribesmen taken in 1893 does not give any scale or point of comparison to show that these adult males were only about 140 centimeters (four feet six inches) tall.
Joseph Birdsell, height 186 centimetres (six feet one inch), with twenty-four-year-old male of the Kongkandji tribe, height 140 centimetres (four feet six inches). The photograph was taken at Mona Mona Mission, near Kuranda, North Queensland, in 1938.

Both the major introductory textbooks to Australian prehistory, Josephine Flood’s *Archaeology of the Dreamtime*, and John Mulvaney’s and Johan Kamminga’s *Prehistory of Australia*, still provide brief discussions of the academic debate about these people’s origins. Both describe them, respectively, as having “small stature and spirally curled hair” and as a “short, slightly-built people with dark skin and woolly hair”, but both decline to include photographs like those published here, which immediately convey just how dramatically different from other Aborigines they are. Similarly, the latest edition of Ronald and Catherine Berndt’s standard text in anthropology, *The World of the First Australians*, briefly discusses people from northeast Queensland who “might have negrito affinities” but does not mention their height. They dismiss any question of their difference as “purely statistical”.

No one today with a lay interest in Aboriginal anthropology, and few of those doing introductory courses in the subject, would ever find out that Australia had a pygmy people. What, then, has been going on? Why would these people have been expunged from popular memory? How did the Australian pygmies become extinct within the public consciousness?

There have been two main reasons. We explain them in detail below but, briefly, they were: first, a vitriolic debate within the academic discipline of anthropology in which the view prevailed that there was nothing remarkable about these people; second, the emergence in the 1960s of the radical Aboriginal political movement, which found the existence of a pygmy people an inconvenient counter-example to one of its central doctrines. As a result, these indigenous Australians have been subject to an airbrushing from history that makes even that of the old Bolshevik leadership of the USSR in the 1930s look mild by comparison.
Aboriginal encampment in rainforest behind Cairns, 1890. This is the photograph (attributed to A. Atkinson) found by Norman Tindale in 1938, which sent him and Joseph Birdsell in search of the people depicted. He identified the location by the wild banana leaves on the roof of the hut.

The first extended contact between Europeans and Australian pygmies occurred in the 1890s at Yarrabah, an Anglican church mission to Aborigines established in 1892 at Cape Grafton, just south of Cairns. The three main tribes in the region were the Kongkandji (Gungganydji), Indindji and Barbaram, whose territories covered, respectively, the coastal area around Cape Grafton, the eastern slopes of the Atherton Tableland from Lake Barrine south to Gordonvale, and the Great Dividing Range behind Cairns. All of them shared the same very short physical stature, as well as similar languages and culture.

In the mission’s first five years, about 150 Kongkandji periodically visited to receive rations but only a small number remained there permanently. After the Queensland Government passed its Aboriginal Protection Act in 1897, which forced Aborigines to be legally confined to reserves and missions, Yarrabah grew to a settlement of 150 residents drawn not only from the three local tribes but also from people all over North Queensland who bore no physical or cultural resemblance to the Cape Grafton Aborigines. Outside the mission, however, no one paid these people any special attention until an Adelaide researcher came across them in the late 1930s.

In 1938, Norman Tindale, an entomologist and anthropologist at the South Australian Museum, was going through a package of old photographs of Aborigines from the Warburton Mission sent him by a friend in Western Australia. One of the photographs of a group of men and women was labelled “Aborigines of north-west Australia”. The Warburton Mission was on the edge of the Gibson Desert, but the background of the photograph was clearly tropical jungle. It showed a wet weather hut thatched with what Tindale, a keen naturalist, recognized as the broad leaves of the wild banana tree. He could also tell that, if these were banana leaves, the people by comparison were very small. He made some enquiries and soon found that the only remaining stands of this plant were in the tropical rainforests on the eastern slopes of the Atherton Tableland in North Queensland.

At the time, Tindale and the American academic, Joseph Birdsell, were engaged in the most extensive project ever mounted in Australian physical anthropology to measure a large sample of Aborigines according to their weight, stature and a number of other bodily characteristics. They found the prospect of discovering a group in the Queensland rainforests so at variance with the norm, irresistible.
They also knew that, since the nineteenth century, there had been a number of theories about the origins of the Aborigines and the migration of ancient peoples to the Australian continent. In 1927, in his book, *Environment and Race*, the controversial Sydney geographer, Griffith Taylor, had speculated that several waves of Aboriginal migrants had swept before them an even older “Negrito” race. Maybe these rainforest people held the key to the story.

As soon as they could, Tindale and Birdsell drove from Adelaide to Cairns in search of the people in the photograph. They eventually found six hundred of them from twelve different tribal groups living on and around two missions, Yarrabah at Cape Grafton and Mona Mona at Kuranda on the Atherton Tableland. Some of them had only come in from the rainforest within the previous six years and spoke only their native tongue. They said there was still one family living a completely nomadic, hunter-gatherer life in the mountains behind Cardwell.

Tindale and Birdsell examined and measured 52 adults and children at Cape Grafton and 95 at Kuranda. Most adult males were between 140 and 150 centimeters tall (four feet six inches to five feet). The women were shorter by 15 to 30 centimeters (six to twelve inches). Tindale and Birdsell concluded they were not just small but were radically unlike any other Aborigines in Australia. They named them Barrineans, after nearby Lake Barrine. Tindale later said:

*Their small size, tightly curled hair, child-like faces, peculiarities in their tooth dimensions and their blood groupings showed that they were different from other Australian Aborigines and had a strong strain of Negrito in them. Their faces bore unmistakable resemblances to those of the now extinct Tasmanians, as shown by photographs and plaster casts of the last of those people.*

By 1963, when Tindale wrote these words in his book, *Aboriginal Australians*, the Barrinean pygmies were no longer an unknown people consigned to the oblivion of distant mission stations. Nor were they mere physical curiosities. They had become the centerpiece of what was then a widely influential explanation of the origins of human settlement on this continent. Their existence was offered as powerful confirmation of what was known as the “trihybrid theory” of hunter-gatherer migration to Australia. This theory had been primarily developed by Birdsell, who came to do fieldwork in Australia for a PhD in anthropology at Harvard University. He originally announced it in 1941 in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*. Over subsequent decades, both he and Tindale worked on the theory, drawing connections between the Australian Aborigines’ physical differences and a growing body of evidence about Pleistocene era hunter-gatherer migrations across Asia, archaeological findings of skulls and stone tools in Australia, and data about Aboriginal genes and blood types. The trihybrid theory that eventually emerged went as follows.

There were three major waves of migration of quite different ancient people who came to the Australian continent from southeast Asia. More than 40,000 years ago, when sea levels were much lower and Australia, New Guinea and Tasmania comprised one landmass, called Sahul, the first to arrive were a slightly-built people of pygmyd stature with dark skin and very frizzy hair. They were Negritos (named after the Spanish “little negro”), and they provided the initial population for the whole of this Greater Australia. About 20,000 years ago, a second type of people arrived from Asia. These newcomers, called Murrayians, were comparatively lightly skinned, wavy-haired, stocky in build, with a lot of body hair. They drove the Negritos before them until the latter retreated to the highlands of New Guinea, the rainforests of North Queensland and to then ice-capped Tasmania. The Murrayians became
the dominant population on the east coast of Australia, and the open grasslands and parklands of the south and west of the continent. Then, about 15,000 years ago, a third wave of hunter-gatherers arrived. They were comparatively tall, straight-haired and dark skinned, with very little body hair. Named Carpentarians, they colonised northern and central Australia.

Now, anyone who even casually dips into the literature on Aboriginal prehistory will find it a field where the evidence is thin on the ground but the air is thick with speculation. The trihybrid theory, however, was a comparative exception to this rule. Its authors found they could deploy a wide body of evidence in its support. They offered four different kinds of confirmation.

The first was their own project in physical anthropology. In two ventures into the field in 1938-39 and 1952-54, Tindale and Birdsell conducted by far the biggest survey of Aboriginal physiological characteristics ever undertaken, then or since. In their first expedition, sponsored by Harvard and Adelaide universities and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, they took measurements, blood samples and interviews with about 900 full-blood and 1500 mixed-blood Aborigines. With their wives as secretaries and research assistants, they drove to almost every Aboriginal settlement, reserve, mission and camp in eastern, southern and south-western Australia. In the second expedition, the same team surveyed another 2000 people in north-western Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

They constructed a database of multiple variables, including weight, stature, sitting height, shoulder breadth, tooth form and size, skin colour, and details such as baldness and beard abundance at certain ages. They compared variables among regional groups and found there were statistically significant measurements confirming their three different physiological types.

Both authors also published separate genetic studies of the Aborigines, based on blood types and family genealogies. This material was collected before the discovery of DNA and so retains the limitations of its time, being confined to an analysis of the O, A, B blood groups, the M, N blood types and the Rh series.

Their second type of support came from the remnant populations from whom the three Australian types were supposedly derived. Birdsell argued that, between the Bay of Bengal and the Melanesian islands, there was an arc of isolated peoples still in existence who all shared Negrito characteristics. They included the pygmy peoples of the Andaman Islands off the west coast of Burma, the Semang of the central mountains of the Malay Peninsula, the Aeta of the rainforests of several of the larger Philippine islands, a number of Negrito tribes, including the Tapiro and the Timorini, in the New Guinea highlands, the people of the Varzimberg Mountains of the Gazelle Peninsula of New Britain, and some tribes in the interior of northern New Caledonia.

These were all remnants, Birdsell argued, of a chain of migration by ancient Negritos across south Asia to the Pacific. He speculated that the chain had begun in Africa with an ancestral population of Negrito pygmies but the only connection he could make between the African and Oceanic Negritos was a propensity for women to develop steatopygia, a genetic condition that causes an excess of fat deposits on the buttocks and upper thighs. The second and third waves of migrant people, the authors argued, were also connected to remnants of ancient populations still living in Asia. The Murrayians, Birdsell said, had come from an Asian people whose other vestiges were the Ainu of Hokkaido in northern Japan and Sakhalin
Island. Similarly, the Carpentarians bore similar physical characteristics to the Vedda people of south India and Sri Lanka.

The third type of evidence they offered was archaeological. Tindale and Birdsell claimed that excavations of ancient skulls and stone tools confirmed their thesis. They said the bones from Australia’s two most famous ancient burial sites, Lake Mungo and Kow Swamp, supported their ideas. Most archaeologists who support a “one people” model of Aboriginal origins find it hard to explain how the more “gracile” people found at Lake Mungo are much older (more than 25,000 years old) than the more “robust” skulls found at Kow Swamp (10,000-13,000 years old). Theories about evolution within the one population would expect the reverse. Tindale and Birdsell, however, said this pattern not only showed that Australia was populated by more than one type of people but it also fitted their particular thesis. The gracile or small-boned skeletons were probably those of the smaller, more slender Negritos, while the robust skulls were most likely Murrayian people. These claims, however, were no more than speculation since neither author ever made a study of the excavations from either site.

Their observations about stone tools, however, were a different matter. Tindale collected hand axes, cutting and chopping tools, spear points and other stone flakes from a number of sites in South Australia, New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia and classified them according to time (he was one of the first in Australia to see the potential of carbon dating), place and culture. He classified large ancient stone tools from some sites as part of “Kartan Culture”. Similar-sized but slightly younger tools, which were more finely worked and sharper, he labelled “Tartangan Culture”. He argued both Kartan and Tartangan tools were produced by Negritos and were evidence of at least two distinct waves of Negrito migration to Australia.

The Murrayians, Tindale claimed, had a culture that developed much finer stone tools. In fact, he said the evidence indicated there were three separate types of Murrayian culture, which he named Pirrian, Mudukian and Murundian. All three phases were reflected by innovations in their stone implements. The Carpentarians, in turn, had their own distinctive culture, which was reflected in much more sophisticated stone tools and far more deadly stone and wooden weapons. In short, the three different types of ancient migrants had not only distinct physiologies but also their own identifiable cultures.

The fourth support for the trihybrid thesis was invoked by Birdsell in the way the whole case fitted the ideas of Sewall Wright, one of the major figures in twentieth century neo-Darwinian biology. Birdsell regarded his own academic field less as anthropology and more as the study of “microevolution”, or how genetic change at the level of the small group affected larger populations or species. The main point of his Australian fieldwork was to provide empirical confirmation for Wright’s “shifting balance” theory of evolution, first proposed in 1931.

Wright argued that random genetic mutations could often have permanent effects on populations even though they might not offer any adaptive advantage for the population as a whole. Once they became established within a small group, random genetic novelties could eventually be transmitted to a much larger parent population through small but persistent degrees of interbreeding. Hence evolutionary change could occur in ways other than the Darwinian process of natural selection. There had been some experimental laboratory support among insect populations to show that this was one successful path to evolutionary change but Birdsell thought his empirical data from the Aborigines confirmed it too.
Birdsell not only sought to establish that three distinct groups of hunter-gathers had populated Australia but also wanted to study their subsequent pattern of evolution, which he thought his anatomical measurements could detect. He believed he had corroborated Wright’s theory and that it, in turn, substantiated his own work. In 1978, in his massive work, *Evolution and Genetics of Populations*, Wright himself concurred with Birdsell’s conclusion.

The “one people” thesis of Aboriginal origins

In the nineteenth century, most Europeans who looked at the Australian Aborigines thought they were a homogenous people, except for the Tasmanians, who were regarded by most who saw them as distinctly Melanesian in appearance. Until Tindale and Birdsell’s trihybrid theory came along, most twentieth century academic anthropologists accepted a largely homogenous model on the mainland too. In particular, a group of anthropologists and anatomists at the University of Sydney espoused this position and defended it strongly.

The principal advocates of the Sydney position were Stan Larnach and N. W. G. Macintosh, both of the university’s Department of Anatomy. They believed that all the Aborigines who occupied Greater Australia came from a small single breeding unit. “Three women and two or three men may have initiated the peopling of Australia,” Larnach wrote in 1974 in an oft-cited paper. They probably arrived here by chance after being blown off course, he said, or they may have been seeking refuge. He acknowledged that additional small landings of the same people may have boosted the population but insisted that only one group was sufficient to fully populate the empty continent too. Hence, he argued, all modern Aborigines were descendants of this original group.

When Tindale told the Sydney anthropologists in the late 1930s that he had found pygmy people in North Queensland, they dismissed his speculations about their separate origins as nothing but a particular, local evolution. Tindale and Birdsell, as representatives of a minor museum in Adelaide, found themselves treated as outsiders tilting at an academic establishment that would not budge. One of their collaborators, John Greenway, called the Sydney school “the tail that wags the anthropology dog in Australia”, for Tindale soon found that its rejection of his ideas determined the academic consensus around the country.

Beyond university anthropologists, however, the trihybrid thesis was much better accepted, as Manning Clark demonstrated when he used it to open his historical magnum opus in 1962. “Before the work of Tindale,” Clark wrote, “writers attempting to explain origins were forced back on intelligent guesses.”

In the 1950s and 60s, the authors were sought out by publishers to write some of the first books about Aborigines for popular audiences. One of these works, *Aboriginal Australians*, was written by Tindale and H. A. Lindsay in 1963. Tindale also produced two books for schoolchildren. In 1955, he and Lindsay wrote *The First Walkabout*, a story about a family of Negrito pygmies migrating to Australia, which won the award as best Australian book of the year for children in 1956. In a glossary at the end of the book, the authors informed their readers: “A few survivors of these tribes live near Kuranda today.” Later, in 1971, Tindale and his daughter Beryl wrote an illustrated children’s book, *The Australian Aborigines*, which also incorporated their ideas.

At the same time, however, a political movement was gathering force that would later swamp the trihybrid thesis and dissuade any converts it had won. In the late 1960s, Aboriginal
activists and their white supporters began to build a political movement among all Australian Aboriginal people. Previous attempts to achieve this had failed because Aborigines were divided by geography, culture and, in some places, by language, and few felt they had much in common.

The Sixties movement adopted the anti-imperialist rhetoric then prevalent in southeast Asia and Africa. British colonialism had caused indigenous oppression and dispossession, they argued, so all Aborigines should come together to reject the hegemony of white Australia. Although this was primarily a movement of radical urban blacks trying to create a constituency among dispersed Aborigines in rural areas, the appeal galvanized considerable support, especially among white sympathizers.

Their appeal to pan-Aboriginalism, the notion that all Australian indigenous people had a common political interest, was always dependent on the idea that they were one people. (The only exception allowed was that of the Torres Strait Islanders, who were later defined as a separate entity.) Their politics were based on the claim that they were the original owners of the continent who had been dispossessed by the British. They did not want to allow there might be a hierarchy of claims for arrival, and thus ownership, among Aborigines themselves. So anyone who argued against the “one people” thesis would be seen as betraying the pan-Aboriginal movement and undermining Aboriginal political aspirations.

Moreover, the moral appeal of the activists’ case would have been weakened by the notion that there had been several waves of Aboriginal migrants, each of whom had violently dispossessed the other. Rather than a story of aggressive white imperialists disrupting an arcadian Aboriginal people living in harmony with one another and their environment, the long term history of Australian habitation would have resembled more that of humanity at large where the stronger have pushed aside the weaker, irrespective of the colour of either side. Hence, instead of a simple moral tale of goodies and baddies, the history of this continent would have reflected more the hard reality of the human condition everywhere.

For the past thirty years, there have been few in mainstream political or intellectual life with the stomach to make these points. As a result, the activists’ case about Aboriginal origins has been accepted, largely without dissent. Few authors, and certainly none writing for schoolchildren, have dared to even suggest that Aborigines had anything but one common source. This is why today the educated but non-specialist public has no inkling that there were ever pygmies in Australia. Knowledge of their existence would pose an obvious question mark over the central doctrine of Aboriginal politics. Hence, for public consumption, politics have made the topic taboo.

Among academic anthropologists and prehistorians, there has been a consensus since the Sixties that has largely agreed with this view. Over this period, the trihybrid thesis has still been discussed in the major anthropological textbooks, but only to be dismissed. Josephine Flood’s *Archaeology of the Dreamtime* devotes two paragraphs Birdsell’s ideas and announces: “There is no evidence to support the identification of a Negritic element in Australia.” Hence, among anthropologists, she says: “There has been a general rejection of the three-wave theory.” John Mulvaney and Johan Kamminga, in *Prehistory of Australia*, take an even stronger line. There is little evidence, they say, to support Birdsell’s theories, which are “in any case irrelevant to present-day issues in recent human evolution”. They warn off non-specialists from even discussing the notion. “It is unfortunate that general authors still recount the tri-hybrid racial theory despite the evidence to the contrary.”
Even though we have suggested there are political reasons why Aboriginal activists and their supporters would not want this thesis accepted, we want to emphasise that we are not saying that this is the only reason, or even the principal reason, why academic anthropologists have followed suit. The history of the academic debate quite clearly shows that many anthropologists believed in the homogeneity of Aboriginal origins from the 1930s to the 1950s, that is, long before the political movement arose in the Sixties. A number of them simply continued to stick to their guns on this issue, irrespective of the political debate. Rather, our case is that the rise of Aboriginal political activism cast the trihybrid thesis into a particular political corner. It appeared a thesis that would give support to anyone opposed to pan-Aboriginalism and could thus be used against Aboriginal political aspirations. This added one more reason why those engaged in Aboriginal studies felt it should be buried.

The real problem with the mainstream anthropological case is not so much that it is political but that it is so dubious. For despite the self-assured tones in which Flood, Mulvaney and Kamminga write off Tindale and Birdsell, the evidence they and their colleagues cite hardly warrants such a confident dismissal. They make their case with four types of evidence:

**Craniology:** The measurement and comparison of both fossil and more recent skulls undermines the trihybrid thesis, Mulvaney and Kamminga claim. They cite the Sydney anatomists Macintosh and Larnach who in the 1970s made craniometric measurements of eastern Australian skulls, including some from the Cairns rainforest people, but could not distinguish the latter from other Aborigines. Josephine Flood cites the same studies: “Analysis of recent skeletal material from northern Queensland did not produce any evidence of a Negritic component among the rainforest Aborigines.” In Tasmania, Flood observes, skeletal remains from King Island, West Point and Mount Cameron West show no differences between prehistoric Tasmanian Aborigines and contemporary mainlanders.

Not only is there no evidence of distinct Negrito crania, but even the apparent dissimilarities between the gracile skulls found at Lake Mungo and the robust variety found at Kow Swamp turn out to be not so different after all. Phillip Habgood of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney claimed in an influential 1986 article that Australian fossil skulls display an “Australianness” that is unique to them. That is, “the ‘gracile’ and robust’ groups are more similar to each other, overall, than they are to any other anatomically modern *Homo Sapiens* crania from around the world.”

**Genetics:** Mulvaney and Kamminga argue that neither Birdsell nor his opponents can use genetic evidence as supports for their thesis because it is inconclusive. “Fifty years of blood genetic research,” they argue, “has failed to provide any clue to Aboriginal origins.” Josephine Flood, however, is more certain that genetic research actually counts against the trihybrid thesis. “Recent genetic studies,” she writes, “have shown that pygmy groups are not racially distinct, but simply represent local modification in physique in relation to their neighbours.”

**Linguistics:** According to Mulvaney and Kamminga, there are not only no craniometric differences between Tindale and Birdsell’s Negritos and other Aborigines but nor has any linguistic evidence for their separate origin ever been found. “Apart from Torres Strait languages,” they report, “no ancestral links with languages overseas have been demonstrated.”
Human evolution: The critics argue that the small stature, the frizzy hair and other apparent Negrito characteristics that Tindale and Birdsell observed in North Queensland can be readily explained not by separate origins but by local evolution. Although Josephine Flood admits that Australian Aborigines are among the world’s most physically varying population, this is not evidence of multiple origins, she says. Instead, she endorses Phillip Habgood’s explanation that: “Morphological variation displayed by the late Pleistocene skeletal material developed as a result of mutation, genetic selection and drift (the accidental loss of lineages) as the first migrants moved out into a diversity of environments and climates.” That is, the Australian Aborigines had one common origin but evolved differently when separated from other, larger populations. Flood makes a similar point about Tasmania: “The differences observed between Tasmanian and mainland Aborigines in historic times are now considered to result from genetic change in a small, isolated population.”

In other words, the Tasmanians didn’t have their frizzy hair and Melanesian looks when they arrived there, but these features evolved during the eight-to-ten thousand years that Tasmania has been separated from the mainland. Similarly, the tribes around Cairns were not short, slender, frizzy-haired and of Negrito appearance when they first came to the district. These characteristics evolved naturally over the period they lived in the rainforests.

Before discussing these points, we should point out that the trihybrid theory does not claim its three waves of immigrants always remained separate peoples. As the ‘hybrid’ of its title was designed to emphasise, there was a good deal of interbreeding over the millennia. In Tasmania, before the sea rose to cut it off from the mainland, the theory holds that the Negritos and the Murrayians interbred fairly extensively. Birdsell wrote:

*The Tasmanians represent a dihybrid race whose predominant genetic element is not Negrito, but on the contrary represents the Murrayian Australian type from the south-eastern portion of that continent. The Oceanic Negritic element is clearly present but... a comparison with the Andamanese indicates that the Negritic element in the Tasmanians must have been the minority contribution.*

On the other hand, he did believe that, while there had also been interbreeding in North Queensland, the Aborigines he found in the Cairns district were relatively more authentic examples of the original Negrito people. This means that any debate about morphological differences, or outward appearance, should be in terms of statistical tendencies rather than clear-cut distinctions. With this in mind, let us put some objections to the case outlined above.

Problems for the orthodox position

Craniology: The research that is most widely regarded as having demolished the idea that the rainforest people from Cairns are Negritos was published in 1970 by Larnach and Macintosh. It was a study of 116 skulls of Queensland Aborigines held by the Australian Museum. Twelve of them came from the Cairns districts where Birdsell had found the pygmy people. The anatomists listed all the characteristics of these skulls and then performed a number of statistical tests on the results. They found they could not distinguish the skulls from Cairns from those of Aborigines from elsewhere in Queensland. They concluded:

*On the basis of craniology alone, it does seem that the very existence of Negritos in Australia is, to say the least, open to very serious doubt, and so far no prehistoric...*
skulls have been discovered that would qualify this statement ... These results fail to support Birdsell's theory of the trihybrid origin of Australian Aborigines.

While it is certainly true that their results fail to support Birdsell’s theory, it is equally true, however, that they do little to actually refute it. Given that this is a debate about statistical tendencies, a comparison of 12 skulls within a total population of 116 is hardly a major study and goes nowhere near matching the sample size from which Birdsell drew. His data included not only thirteen skulls from the Cairns district but also live measurements from 147 Aborigines there. As well as thirty head and face measurements, Tindale and Birdsell’s studies in 1938-39 and 1952-54 included weight, stature and twenty other body indices and metrics. The total population to which he compared this data comprised 3008 full-blooded Aborigines from all major regions of Australia.

Birdsell maintained right up to his last book in 1993, *Microevolutionary Patterns in Aboriginal Australia*, that his own analysis of these measurements confirmed his thesis. It is only by pretending this huge amount of data does not exist, and by confining their evidence to their own measurements, that Larnach and Macintosh can be thought to have decided the issue.

In any case, skull measurement is not exactly a precise science. It involves a high degree of interpretation. Over the years, people looking at the same sets of skulls have often interpreted them in accordance with the latest anthropological fashions. Macintosh admitted he had done this himself. In the 1960s, he said none of Australia’s fossil skulls showed any Tasmanian traits and none of the Tasmanian skulls had any connection with Melanesia. In the 1970s, however, after two other researchers argued that Tasmanian skulls were closer to those of the Tolai people of New Britain than they were to mainland Aborigines, Macintosh changed his mind and agreed with them. At the same time, he acknowledged that the Keilor skull from Victoria showed some particular Tasmanian characteristics.

Despite these uncertainties, by the mid-1970s, skull measurements were being used even more confidently to support the “one people” thesis. Its supporters argued that, despite the great variations in Australian fossil skulls, they could all be interpreted within the one framework. The gracile and robust skulls from Lake Mungo and Kow Swamp, they claimed, should not be regarded as evidence of two different types of people but rather as different points on one broad scale of difference within a single population. This was a remarkable conclusion, since there have been some dissenting anthropologists who have argued the Kow Swamp skulls are so radically different from the Australian norm that they are less like *Homo sapiens* and actually more like the earlier hominid, *Homo erectus*.

The “one people” theorists, however, have no trouble in accommodating such extremes within their own model. Macintosh and Larnach told an Australian Institute of Aboriginal studies symposium in 1974:

How should we interpret this mélange of gracile, intermediate and rugged items? To us, there is only one answer: a practically unchanging population over a period of 25,000 years and exhibiting a wide range of variability.

This approach, it is worth noting, makes the “one people” thesis virtually unfalsifiable, since it permits no evidence, no matter how disparate, to challenge itself. In real science, of course, unfalsifiable hypotheses should be ruled out of court immediately.
Genetics: The Sydney school has long been convinced that genetic studies also support the notion of an homogenous population. Larnach wrote in 1974 that, as a result of new genetic research: “We therefore have no hesitation in omitting Negritos as ancestors of the Australian Aborigines.” The work he cited was a then new study of Aboriginal blood groups by R. T. Simmons of the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories. Simmons had reviewed various surveys of blood samples taken from Aborigines on Cape York, the Gulf of Carpentaria and Arnhem Land between 1926 and 1971 and compared their gene frequencies. Among these surveys were those done by Tindale and Birdsall at the Yarrabah and Mona Mona missions in 1938-39.

Simmons found there were some blood group gene frequency patterns at certain Cape York localities that were unique. However, rather than use these as evidence of a unique population history, he said they could all be explained by known factors such as admixture with other races and by breeding from very small gene pools. Otherwise: “Our findings do not suggest that the Aborigines of the Cape York area are basically different from those found in other parts of Australia, but are more admixed.” Simmons added that his findings supported the “one people” model. “In three decades of blood group research, we have found no blood group genetic evidence which would suggest that the unmixed Aborigines are not a homogenous people.”

For good measure, he paid particular attention to the question of any possible Australian connections to Africa. Repudiating the “Out of Africa” theory of human origins, Simmons said he thought that the Australian data indicated that the Aborigines actually evolved earlier than African Negroes. There was no blood group evidence, he said, to indicate the African Negroes or Negritos had any connection to the Australian Aborigines.

May I state here and now that our extensive blood grouping surveys conducted in Australia, Indonesia, Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia over three decades have produced no genetic evidence that the Negro ever entered the Pacific. The term Oceanic Negro in relation to Melanesians is then purely descriptive ... The extensive data now available on blood group gene frequencies make it appear unlikely that African, Asian and Oceanic pygmy groups are related. Blood group studies indicate that Papuan pygmies or Negritos differ widely from pygmy groups in other parts of the world, but that they are closely akin to neighbouring Papuans. Similar relationships have been found for other Negrito populations and their taller neighbours. The so-called Negrito or pygmy peoples outside Africa should then be called pygmy, and not Negrito as a descriptive term.

Despite the confidence of his tone, however, Simmons’s conclusions were not as definitive as he thought, especially in the light of new genetic research. Simmons was writing in the period before mitochondrial DNA studies arose in the 1980s to revolutionise the field. Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) is claimed by those who use it to provide a far more illuminating means of tracing human evolution than older and cruder methods used by researchers such as Simmons.

One of the major mtDNA studies was done in 1989 on the populations of the Pacific region. It was made by two of the leading pioneers of DNA research, Mark Stoneking and Allan Wilson, then of the University of California, Berkeley, who were the authors of the now famous study that found our oldest modern human ancestor, the 200,000 year-old African woman, “Mitochondrial Eve”. Their Pacific study included data from 21 Aboriginal
Australians from four regions: Alice Springs, Darwin, Perth and the Broome-Derby area. It found that mtDNA types were not shared between different regions of Australia and that the distribution of mtDNA types in Australia was diverse, just like on other continents. The most likely explanation, Stoneking and Wilson argued, was that “the populations that colonized each continent (including Australia) consisted of more than one mtDNA type.” In other words, the Aboriginal population was not homogenous.

In fact, Stoneking and Wilson said their work showed that at least 15 different mtDNA lineages colonized Australia. They said this confirmed an earlier study of Aboriginal Australians done in 1987 with a smaller sample, which found seven different mtDNA lineages. The authors acknowledged the smallness of their sample but argued that a bigger size would only increase the number of different lineages to be found. “Probably the most important insight to date,” they summarized, “is that relatively many females were involved in the colonization of Australia and Papua New Guinea.” Stoneking and Wilson were heavily sarcastic about the “one people” thesis:

*It has been proposed that Australia may have been colonized by a very small number of females, perhaps even by a single pregnant female who floated to Australia on a log. The mtDNA results contradict this assertion; there must have been at least 15 pregnant females that floated across!*

In his last book in 1993, Birdsell predicted that a crucial test of his theory would be a comparison of the mitochondrial lineages of the populations of New Guinea and Aboriginal Australia, especially if descendants of the Cairns rainforest people and Tasmanians were included. While there has not been research that has specifically included these last two groups, there was a study in 1999 that went some of the way towards testing the hypothesis. It was conducted by Mark Stoneking, now at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology at Leipzig, and Alan Redd, an anthropologist from Pennsylvania State University.

This time, their mtDNA analysis was done on a larger population of 319. Samples were taken from Australian Aborigines and people from the highlands and coastal regions of Papua New Guinea. The Aborigines comprised 105 individuals from northwest Australia (Great Sandy Desert and Kimberley regions) and 95 from Arnhem Land.

The study found there was a great evolutionary gap between the Aborigines and the New Guinea highlanders. It showed that the Aborigines of the north and northwest were comparatively recent arrivals and derived from the same ancestral population as the people of southern India. The New Guinea highlanders, however, had a completely different and much older ancestry. The highlanders, in fact, still retained some genetic links direct with Africa. Stoneking and Redd went out of their way to point out that this pattern fitted the mode of settlement of ancient Australia proposed by Tindale and Birdsell:

*These findings are somewhat consistent with Birdsell’s trihybrid model for the peopling of Sahul [ancient Greater Australia], a model that is based on morphological variation. Birdsell hypothesized that Oceanic “Negritos” first populated Sahul, but that two later migrations replaced most of them in Australia but not in the Cairns area of northeast Queensland or in Tasmania and New Guinea... The gene tree in the present study shows that the PNG3 cluster shares sites with African sequences, a finding that may be consistent with Birdsell’s first-migration hypothesis. Our results*
also suggest that there may have been a migration(s) from an Indian source that reached Australia but not PNG.

However, they went on to argue that, while these findings were consistent with the Negrito hypothesis, they could not find two separate migratory groups that would confirm the distinction between the Murrayians and Carpentarians. Although their study again found multiple migrations in the peopling of Sahul, there was no mtDNA distinction between the Aborigines they tested from northwest Australia and those from Arnhem Land. Rather, both types showed an ancestry that, although from substantially mixed populations, had links with the Hindu castes of southern India. Nonetheless, this research still left much of Tindale and Birdsell’s original theory intact. It found some correlation between their morphological observations and the genetic evidence. There was a strong connection between the people of India and northern Australia and there was still the possibility of an ancient Negrito migration all the way from Africa to Tasmania.

In 1974, when Lanarch and Macintosh announced that their craniological study had concluded the Cairns rainforest people were no different to those of other Queensland Aborigines, they emphasized their interpretation was not biased by any prejudice against the Tindale and Birdsell theory. “If we had found negrito evidence in the Cairns rainforest crania,” they said, “it would have been shouted from the housetops.” Given the propensity of Australian prehistorians to attract considerable media attention to their major discoveries, such as the skeletons at Lake Mungo, we do not doubt them.

This is in stark contrast, however, to the response over the past decade to the findings of Mark Stoneking and his colleagues. Here we have had one of the world’s leading geneticists announcing results that have dispelled a number of hypotheses about Australian origins and partly endorsed one of the most intriguing of them. Yet, this time, no one has been shouting from the housetops. Indeed, as far as we are aware, the academics of our anthropological community have not, in public, made even a murmur.

**Linguistics:** The field of linguistics is far from being as blank a slate as the major Australian anthropological textbooks would have us believe. The question of whether the Cairns rainforest people spoke a unique Negrito language was thought to have been decided in the 1960s and 70s when Arthur Capell and R. M. W. Dixon argued that they shared speech characteristics with other non-pygmyd Queensland Aboriginal languages. However, processes of language flow and language replacement mean even comparatively isolated peoples eventually merge some of their speech with geographic neighbours, so a lack of linguistic uniqueness need not decide the issue. Moreover, there are some internationally recognized linguists who have since proposed classifications that give some support to the Tindale and Birdsell thesis.

One of these was Joseph Greenberg of Stanford University who, until his death last year, was one of the best-known scholars in the field. In 1971 he proposed his “Indo-Pacific Hypothesis” in which he argued that there was a linguistic trail that followed the route that Tindale and Birdsell thought the Negritos had originally taken from the Andaman Islands, through New Guinea, to Tasmania. He acknowledged that the Tasmanian linguistic data was incomplete because, while it included vocabulary, it provided little grammatical information. Nonetheless his broad classification of world languages held that, apart from those of the mainland Australian Aborigines and the more recent “Austronesian” languages of Southeast
Asia and the Pacific, there was a correlation between linguistic patterns and Negrito migration. Greenberg wrote:

_The evidence presented here is intended to demonstrate that the bulk of non-Austronesian languages of Oceania from the Andaman Islands on the west in the Bay of Bengal to Tasmania in the southeast forms a single group of genetically related languages for which the name Indo-Pacific is proposed._

Unfortunately, Greenberg did not have any evidence before him about the rainforest people, so he could not comment on whether they fitted into his Indo-Pacific Hypothesis or not.

In 1987, Greenberg’s Stanford colleague, Merritt Ruhlen, classified Australian mainland Aboriginal languages in a way that bore some similarities to a different aspect of the trihybrid theory. In his massive, three-volume study, _A Guide to the World’s Languages_, Ruhlen made a broad division between the Pama-Nyungan subgroup, which is found in the east, south and west of the Australian mainland, and the non-Pama-Nyungan languages of northern and northwestern Australia. At least two reviews of the literature in the past decade have observed that this partition corresponds, very roughly, to Tindale and Birdsell’s division between the more recently arrived northerners, the Carpentarians, and the older indigenous people, the Murrayians.

Moreover, one of these reviews by Peter Bellwood of the Australian National University points out that there is a correlation between this linguistic divide and a “veritable efflorescence” of innovative stone tool technology in the north of the continent about 6000 years ago. The dingo, originally a hunting dog, appears to have arrived at about the same time. Bellwood comments:

_There are both linguistic and biological data which could indicate the arrival of new populations in Australia during the Holocene [the last 10,000 years], and the evidence of these microlithic tools in Australia may point towards the same conclusion._

In other words, the evidence connecting linguistics, stone tools and migration provides some circumstantial support to the trihybrid thesis.

On its own, however, the field of linguistics is unlikely to shed a great deal of light on this issue. One of the leading paleo-linguists, Johanna Nichols, says language relationships are difficult to trace beyond 8000 years of separate evolution. Since habitation and population divergence in Australia long precedes this date, linguistic evidence is unlikely to resolve the problem of Australian origins either way.

**Human evolution:** As we have noted, the supporters of the “one people” thesis characteristically explain away any differences found within the Aboriginal population in terms of local evolution. For instance, the Tasmanians had frizzy hair rather than the wavy variety that prevailed on the mainland, so this must have evolved locally after the Tasmanians were separated from the rest of the population when Bass Strait formed about 8000 years ago. The most commonly advocated mechanisms through which this evolution might have occurred are “founder effect” and “genetic drift”. This means that, if a group of people becomes isolated from the rest of the population, the particular genetic characteristics of these founders will become dominant in their offspring. Random genetic change, which occurs all
the time, will thus operate on this group differently to the wider population, which has the numbers and enough diversity to smooth out fluctuations of this kind.

Though plausible in explaining, in general, how evolutionary change can occur in isolated groups, this approach has some very big problems when it tries to account for the emergence of Negrito features. As we noted earlier, Tindale and Birdsell identified Negrito characteristics in at least seven different populations inhabiting a geographic arc from the Bay of Bengal to the eastern islands of Melanesia. They explained these populations as remnants of an ancient migration, an account that has all the virtues of Occam’s Razor. In contrast, the proponents of founder effect and genetic drift have to argue that each of these isolated populations, completely independently and quite coincidentally, developed the very same features of small stature, slender build, frizzy hair, and half a dozen other morphological similarities such as skin and hair colour, teeth patterns and the like. This is a highly implausible scenario.

To many lay observers, one obvious evolutionary influence could appear to be the environment. Because these people inhabited dense tropical rainforests, there might be the same processes of selection and adaptation at work as those that produced not only pygmy humans in the African Congo but also pygmy elephants and pygmy deer. The problem with this argument in the Australian context is that only one particular region of tropical jungle produced human pygmies. The Aborigines of the equally-dense Daintree rainforest to the north of Cairns, for instance, are not especially short in stature but have a similar range of height to those in the rest of Australia. The same is true of people from other Australian rainforest regions. If most rainforests did not produce pygmies, an environmental explanation is hard to sustain.

Moreover, the environment cannot account for the Tasmanians. Their ecosystem was not tropical jungle but, since the end of the last ice age, a temperate maritime environment. Apart from the west coast, Tasmania has one of the most people-friendly climates in the world. Yet this environment, too, harboured people with some Negrito morphological features. Even in the Congo, recent research suggests an environmental account is unlikely since the original ancestral homeland of the African pygmies, the Bambuti, now appears to have been not jungle but mixed forest and savanna, from which they were forced by the expansion of neighbouring Bantu people.

Although Tindale and Birdsell were, for the most part, well mannered towards their critics, Birdsell was not averse to taking them on. He was especially miffed when the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies sponsored a conference in 1974 on “The Origin of the Australians”, which he felt was set up to bury him and his ideas. This conference, he later objected, “made no real contribution to the topic in spite of the presence of 26 researchers of international stature using a wide variety of techniques and data”.

In his last book, *Microevolutionary Patterns in Aboriginal Australia*, published in 1993 when he was 85, he poured scorn on those physical anthropologists who ventured into evolutionary theory without any background in the field. When they invoked evolutionary explanations like founder effect and genetic drift against him, he regarded them as blundering into his own territory where they were out of their depth.

Genetic drift, in fact, had originally been named the “Sewall Wright effect” after its originator, who was Birdsell’s principal theoretical mentor. Birdsell maintained his critics did
not understand how to apply the concept. None of their claims about local evolution were based on calculations of how much time was required for genetic drift to produce evolutionary change. In Australia, there had been insufficient time, he argued, for genetic drift to produce the degree of morphological diversity observed within the Aboriginal population. His critics were simply sweeping everything under one convenient theoretical carpet:

Their intellectual bulwark consists of an elastic and untestable hypothesis. They presume that the microevolutionary forces of selection, mutation and stochastic processes of intergenerational drift and founder effect suffice in the time available to produce all of the regional variation now evident in the Aborigines. This view is held by archaeologists as a group, and by anatomists and craniologists. Numerically, this consensus is impressive. But none of the advocates are in a position to contribute substantively to testing the action of any of the various microevolutionary forces invoked... None are equipped to judge microevolutionary processes or the implications of regional variations.

In short, none of the explanations advanced by Tindale and Birdsell’s opponents provide a credible account of the evolutionary processes that produced indigenous Australians with pygmyoid status and Negrito features. Nor can they even begin to explain the physical similarities between them and people in South East Asia and Melanesia. Obviously, this is not proof that the trihybrid theory is right but it does mean its major rival is, on yet another score, seriously flawed.

Overall, it is hard not to be skeptical about the “one people” hypothesis. It is disputed by recent genetic studies, by the inadequacies of both its craniological measurements and its evolutionary theory, and by its inherent implausibility.

As recently as the 1950s, the anthropological community thought that Australia had only been occupied for about 8000 years, a belief that gave the hypothesis some credibility. Now, however, we have evidence of human habitation extending for more than 40,000 years. For at least 30,000 of these years, recurring ice ages raised and lowered the sea levels between Australia and Asia, eliminating the Arafura Sea and Torres Strait more than once and reducing the furthest distance needed to cross deep water between Asia and either northwest Australia or western New Guinea to less than 100 kilometres.

If one group of hunter-gatherers could make this journey early in the piece, it beggars all belief that none others could do the same over the subsequent 30,000 years. Indeed, as the evidence of the arrival of the dingo and the introduction of a whole new technology of stone tools 6000 years ago would suggest, hunter-gatherer peoples could make the crossing even when sea levels were not much lower than they are today.

In the process of establishing a better account of the origins of the first Australians, we would hope to see scholarship in the future eschewing political connections and proceeding unconstrained by the ideology of the current generation of radical Aboriginal activists. No scholar should be party to the cover-up that has prevailed for the past thirty years about the people of the North Queensland rainforests. Even though, as we have acknowledged, academic anthropologists arrived at their own theory of homogeneity before any political pressures emerged, the fact that the Australian pygmies have today been so thoroughly
expunged from public memory suggests an indecent concurrence between scholarly and political interests.

The story of human habitation of this continent is not the exclusive property of anyone. It should be the concern of all of us, black and white, to ensure it is told as openly and as truthfully as possible.

**Postscript:** What eventually happened to the Cairns rainforest people? The settlement at Yarrabah still exists at Cape Grafton. After 1897 it was not confined to the local people but accommodated Aborigines from all over North Queensland. The missionaries deliberately disrupted traditional tribal betrothals so that a fair amount of inter-marriage took place. It ceased to be a mission in 1960 when it was taken over by the Queensland Government. In 1986 it became a self-governing Aboriginal community but by then a large number of residents had left.

Mona Mona mission continued until 1962 when it was closed down. Its residents were dispersed to other Aboriginal reserves and into the general population. Some former residents now living at Kuranda want the original mission land returned to them.

Today, there are 14,700 Aboriginal people living in the Cairns region. We presume a good proportion of them must be descendants of the original Kongkandji, Barbaram, Indindji and Djabuganjdji tribes. For those who want to pursue the question, Norman Tindale’s genealogical records can now be consulted in a special indigenous family history section at the South Australian Museum.

**Note:** A footnoted edition of this essay is available [here](#).