

A Dutch Influence on Nhanda: A Reply to Blevins.

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The June 1998 edition of *Australian Aboriginal Studies* carried a paper entitled 'A Dutch Influence on Nhanda? Wanyjidaga innga!' by Juliette Blevins (1998). This paper called into question some of the evidence I put forward in my book *And Their Ghosts May Be Heard* (1994a) and the supplementary analysis, *Appendix: The English - Nanda - Dutch Vocabulary* (1994b).¹ Although I do not agree with her criticisms, for reasons which I will outline below, I would still like to thank Juliette for taking the trouble to publicly comment on my work.

The primary thesis I put forward in *And Their Ghosts May Be Heard* was that some of the Dutch sailors marooned on the central-west coast of Australia in the early seventeenth and eighteenth century survived and were absorbed into and influenced various Aboriginal groups they encountered. On this point I would like to take issue with Blevins for having seriously misrepresented me. I certainly did not propose that 'Dutch sailors made contact with Aborigines as early as the late sixteenth century [i.e. late 1500s]' as she maintains (1998:43). There is no unequivocal evidence of Europeans even encountering Australia until 1606 (Jansz.). The first attested instance of Dutch sailors becoming marooned on the west coast in fact occurred on 16 November 1629 when Wouter Loos and Jan Pelgrom de Bye were marooned, probably at Hutt River, as punishment for their part in the *Batavia* mutiny. This is well documented (Drake-Brockman 1963:229,237). Subsequently, 68 sailors from the *Vergulde Draeck* were stranded on 28 April 1656 and another 11 from the *Goede Hoop* around August 1656, again well-documented instances (Gerritsen 1994a:31-2). Following that, up to 200 sailors from the *Zuytdorp* became castaways in June 1712, as attested by a considerable body of archaeological evidence (Playford 1959). Possibly a further 12 sailors from the *Zeewijk* may have also become marooned on the west coast in July 1727 (Gerritsen 1994a:38).

The evidence of Dutch influence as a result of these strandings encompasses genetics, biogeography, social organisation, legend and mythology, material culture and linguistics. In the linguistics area I claimed in *And Their Ghosts May Be Heard* that 16% of Nhanda had been derived from Dutch (1994a:126-131). The basis for this claim was the result of a direct comparison of written material primarily collected in the 19th century with Dutch (see Gerritsen 1994a:126; Gerritsen 1994b), with allowance made for conjectured sound transpositions where Dutch phonemes were not readily pronounceable in an Aboriginal phonemic system (see examples 1994a:129). I further claimed that there were phonemic 'anomalies' in Nhanda and some other languages in that they contained sounds not normally found in Aboriginal languages.

It is in these areas that Blevins has challenged my evidence. As she correctly notes there are differences between material she has recorded and the written historical materials that I relied upon. I don't dispute that some differences exist. What is at issue is the reason for these differences. Her assumption that the material she has recorded exactly corresponds with the earliest historical materials is an unwarranted one, in effect treating this Aboriginal language as a linguistic fossil when there is considerable evidence of massive change in Aboriginal languages having taken place since the commencement of British colonisation. One need only consider the position of the Nyungar languages in the south west of Western Australia to appreciate the significance of this point. These languages, in the context of massive social and cultural 'disturbance', and subject to a major foreign language influence (English), have evolved into Neo-Nyungar with consequent changes in vocabulary, grammar and phonology (Douglas 1976:3; Dench 1994:175). By analogy one would expect a similar effect to have taken place in Kardu languages such as Nhanda where similar events have taken place over the last 140 years. Certainly the historical evidence points to factors that may have had considerable impact on Nhanda. By 1879 the Government Resident George Eliot (1879:4) reported that "I do not believe there are a dozen [Nhanda] within twenty miles of Geraldton". Following this enormous depopulation there was a movement of peoples from the east where different languages were spoken (Bates 1938:106; 1985: 58,62-3; Tindale 1974:102,254,260). Even where informant's antecedents can be clearly established there is still the problem of unconscious absorption of other languages, an effect noted elsewhere by Dixon (1981:14-5; 1983:437) and others (Breen 1981:281; Morphy 1983:5). Because of these sorts of difficulties, the lack of published material on the languages I was interested in at the time (principally in the Kardu sub-group), and the fact that historical materials were closer in time to the marooning of Dutch sailors than modern materials I deliberately chose to rely on historical materials in my research. I was well aware that historical materials have their own problems, such as which language they apply to and the issue of transcription errors, and discuss this in my book (1994a:124,212-20,303n38,323n22,n24,n31). I endeavoured to eliminate, with the materials then available, any obvious transcription errors.

Looking at some of the specific instances Blevins raises I noted that she makes assertions such as 'Nhanda has no consonant combinations of k+n.' (1998:44), equating this with the nasal velar 'ng'. In doing so she ignores the evidence that I have already put forward showing that this is not the case (1994a:213, 303). Having made an intensive study of transcription errors, with particular reference to word-initial 'kn' and 'gn' (to be published in the near future) I believe Blevins has been too hasty in her judgements. My initial proposition was that the appearance of 'kn' in a number of historical word lists in WA was the result

of a Dutch influence, such a consonant combination being a characteristic of Dutch phonology. The argument was one of simple coincidence. Its appearance in historical vocabularies in other parts of Australia was puzzling but perhaps explicable as a poor transcription of the pre-stopped velar 'kng' such as is still found in Eastern Arrente. Nevertheless a good illustration of the apparent historical reality of a phoneme akin to 'kn' in WA can be found in Wajuk, originally spoken in the Perth area. This would appear shows that it is highly improbable that the 'kn' was a mistranscribed 'ng' as Blevins asserts. In vocabularies compiled by Lyon (1833), Moore in 1838-9 (1884) and Knight (1886) numerous words beginning with "Ng..." can be found. Both Lyon (6/4/1833:56) and Moore (1884:vi-vii) explicitly recognise the nasal velar, each describing the sound in exactly the same terms as Blevins, as in 'sing' and 'ring'. Yet each of these three authors also record one or two examples of words with initial 'kn': *knoobar* [Area name] (Lyon 20/4/1833:64); *knude*, *k-nude* [A species of casuarina] (Moore 1884:42,92) and *knolga* [teeth], *knangar* [beard] (Knight 1886:333). Blevins does not proffer any other evidence to bolster her claim that 'kn' was a mistranscribed 'ng' apart from the apparent discrepancy between the modern material she collected and the historical material. I put forward additional evidence in *Ghosts* (1994a:213-4) indicating the reality of a phoneme akin to 'kn' in historical transcriptions. I have since developed a number of other arguments and lines of evidence supporting this contention and these will be discussed in detail in the forthcoming paper.

I have also been taken to task with my spelling of Nhanda as 'Nanda' by Blevins (44). This usage was not a consequence of my alleged ignorance, as Blevins implies, but was adopted because it was a form common in many linguistic works up until recent times (see for example Capell 1963:W30; Oates and Oates 1970:58; Wurm 1972:50,126; Tindale 1974:249; Blake 1991:133). As the convention appears to have changed I use Nhanda here, noting, however, that other authorities use Nhanta as well (Thieberger 1987:53; 1993:90). Consequently Blevins' argument, which flows from my apparent 'mistake', is ill-founded and her dispute is not with me but with the linguist convention adopted by various authorities.

Regarding the fricative sounds *s*, *sh*, *f*, *z* and *h*, another area of disputation, Blevins correctly notes that 'very few Australian languages have fricative phonemes' (1998:44). From there she builds an argument based on the claim that I 'do not present a single etymology where a Dutch *s*, *sh*, or *f* actually occurs in a purportedly borrowed Nhanda word' (1998:44). Firstly, to set the record straight, I never identified any Nhanda word as containing *sh*. Apart from that there were six words identified containing *s* or *f*, but four of these were place names lacking any etymology. Consequently one would simply be guessing if you tried to arrive at a Dutch derived etymology for them. With one of the remaining examples, *mesja* [here] I did suggest a possible etymology *moesje*

[spot] but did not think this was conclusive. I was unable to find a credible etymology for the other remaining example *taafda* [knee] though I suspect it may have been slang or some other idiomatic expression which will eventually come to light.

Blevins conjectures that the occurrence of these fricatives may have resulted from transcription errors, citing an instance where the handwriting of "one explorer, Goldsworthy ...'Ijjecka' could easily have been misinterpreted as 'Isseka' "(1998:44). Unfortunately the facts are, firstly, that Goldsworthy was not an explorer but the Colonial Secretary for Western Australia (Goldsworthy 1886:314); secondly, the material published under his name was probably not obtained by him but by a local civil servant; and finally, he was not my source for this word anyway! It is a pre-existing place name. That of course does not eliminate a transcription error somewhere along the line, a possibility of which I was quite well aware. However I considered that this was unlikely because of the occurrence of 'Isachar Well' in the same area, a point I made in *Ghosts* (1994a:124) and which Blevins seems to have been ignored.²

Regarding the occurrence of *z* in historical transcriptions, Blevins claims that I give only one example. Again this is not correct, I gave three examples (1994a:124) - *wezueda* [possum], *Waardamarza* [Personal name], *Oolinzurra* [Place name]. Blevins could be right that the correct transcription of *wezueda* is *wayurda*, but, as she acknowledges due to "phonetic variation ... *wayurda* is sometimes pronounced with a medial 'zs' sound, but this is just a variant of the 'y' sound ..." (1998:44-5)[My emphasis]. Given this admission I hardly see how the occurrence of *z* in this instance can be treated as a transcription error; an unconventional or variable transcription, perhaps, but not a transcription error. Furthermore this raises the question of whether this explanation is valid for the other examples Blevins overlooked. And if this phonological feature is 'widespread throughout Australia' (1998:45), and my examples just mistranscriptions, as Blevins claims, why is it so extremely rare in other historical vocabularies?

The glottal stop 'h' is another contested phoneme. Likened by Blevins to "exclamations like 'uh-uh'" (1998:43) as in *uthu* [dog], she erroneously claims I only provide 'a single example' (1998:45). In fact I provided four examples in my book (1994a:125) - *hot.ther* [dog], *hewerloo* [light], *howa* [water] and *hurder* [today] - and a further three in the *Appendix* (1994b). One might be forgiven for thinking Blevins is splitting hairs here with her point on the technical description of the glottal stop. But the real point is how did this feature, one of a number in Nhandu that, as Blevins notes, 'makes it very different from other Australian languages of the area' (1998:43), come to be in the language?

I would propose that the 'glottal stop' was the form the Dutch 'h' took when incorporated in the local Aboriginal phonological system, recorded back as 'h' by English speakers whose phonological system has strong similarities to the Dutch one. A number of the words in historical Nhanda containing 'h' appear to have Dutch derivation (1994b). A further illustrative example, this time from Malgana, the language formerly spoken around Shark Bay immediately to the north (and only 60 km from the *Zuytdorp* wrecksite), is the word for 'shark', *heeon* [Hooley 1865] - in Dutch 'sharks' is *haaien*. Just coincidence perhaps?

My overall conclusion that 16% of Nhanda was derived from Dutch has also been challenged by Blevins, firstly by making the surprising claim that 'none of the evidence is given in the book itself' (1998:46). This appears to ignore the extensive arguments, evidence and examples I put forward on pages 126-132 and elsewhere. To support her argument she points to a couple of supposedly erroneous examples from the *Appendix*. Unfortunately I didn't claim the terms she refers to as Dutch derived items. In the case of 'Me' [*ngai, ni*] I listed a possible derivation [*mij*] but did not include it in the final count because I did not consider it a valid example. Similarly, although I listed the Dutch word for ant [*mier*] alongside the Nhanda equivalent [*minga*] I did not consider there was a valid connection between them for the very reason Blevins gives, it is a common term in most of the region, and also because it appeared to me that there was little similarity between the two words. Blevins makes the further claim that I did 'not provide a set of regular (or irregular) sound changes to derive the Nhanda words from the proposed Dutch source forms' (1998:46). Inexplicably Blevins again appears to overlook the evidence and arguments of sound changes I put forward in the book (1994a:128-30) and in the *Appendix* (1994b:2-3).

Finally Blevins discounts my analysis 'because nearly all the words ... have related forms in Aboriginal languages in other parts of Australia' (1998:46). I readily acknowledge that the bulk of Nhanda bears some relationship to other Australian languages. Similarly I am sure there are competing etymologies for some of the words I would claim to have Dutch derivation. In time it may well be shown that some of these derivations have greater validity than mine. Nevertheless I would still insist that part of Nhanda is of Dutch derivation and that no credible Australian etymology will be found for many of the words I have identified as being of Dutch derivation. Conversely Blevins assertion that, 'it is possible to show that most Nhanda words originate from a mother-language (called Proto-Pama-Nyungan) ... spoken on the Australian continent between 3,000 and 5,000 years ago (1998:43), is highly questionable. The methodological validity of linguistic reconstruction with such time depth and lacking any means of

verification is extremely dubious, as recently pointed out by Dixon (1997).

In concluding I would like to again draw attention to comparable circumstances in Cape York and Arnhem Land. In both these cases Aboriginal peoples came into contact with outside influences, Papuans in Cape York and Macassans in Arnhem Land. These contacts resulted in the absorption of "foreign" sounds, the fricatives s and z in Cape York for example (Capell 1970:240; Wurm 1972:52), and the appearance of Macassan loan words in Arnhem Land (McKnight 1972:295-304). Is it then so surprising that unusual linguistic features would appear on the west coast of Australia in areas where we know Dutch sailors were marooned in the 17th and early 18th centuries. I think not.

NOTES

¹ This document was excluded from the book for cost reasons and was previously only available upon application to the publisher, Fremantle Arts Centre Press. Because of the interest that has been aroused, copies have now been lodged in the Battye and National Libraries to make it more accessible.

² "Isachar Well" was first recorded in 1869 by Surveyor W. Phelps. Geologist H.Y.G. Brown recorded "Isacca Well" in 1872. "Isseka" first appears in records in 1912 as "Isseka Progress Association" (WA Department of Land Administration: Geographic Names File N/C 711/64)

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