Darkiñung Précis
[commonly written with English characters as ‘Darkinung’, Darkinyung or Darkinjung]

The Original People from the Hunter River and Wollombi Ranges to the Coast:
- The Aboriginal Identification from Colonial History
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This Precis has been prepared to address an emerging controversy about who were the traditional people from the NSW Central Coast to the Wollombi Ranges of the Hunter region to the north of Sydney when the British settlers arrived. A preceding 2013 Abstract outlined the historical situation for the northern Blue Mountains / Hawkesbury region to the west of Sydney. The Hunter region has become contested for claims of National Native Title based on federal legislation as mining companies vie to extract coal and gas from the ground while it is still permitted. While traditional owner descendants seek preservation of their ancestral heritage, other people claim compensation for this destruction of land. Here are the alternatives being considered since the release of 2010 “Darkiñung Recognition”, with analyses of historical records. The findings are conclusive. Entries here are in time order.

- In the early 1800s young Ben Singleton from Kurrajong had been exploring the ranges north of the Hawkesbury River with local Aborigines. This concluded with a March 1820 expedition commissioned by Gov. Macquarie, which reached the tidal limit of the Hunter River within their territory at present day Maitland. Macquarie had named this location Wallis Plains on his July 1818 visit by boat, and there were already settlers there when he returned November 1821. When the penal settlement established 1804 on the “Coal” river at Gov. King's Town [later Newcastle] was transferred 1822-23 to Port Macquarie, expansion of settlement up the Hunter River facilitated further interaction with local Aborigines there.

- As settlers explored the mountain ranges south of the river, they learnt more words in the local language. John Blaxland jnr in 1824 first found that these Aborigines called their country Wallambine, written with a range of spellings in English characters. Surveyor General Thomas Mitchell then instructed that the term be used as “Wollombi” to establish a township at the junction of two mountain streams. References to the “Wollombi Tribe” followed for these Hunter River people.

- These “Wollombi” people remained on a war footing with those in the upper Hunter Valley from the north side of the Hunter River floodplain above Singleton's crossing. Those northern people noted 1819 as “Coomery Roy”, were the “C'amilarai” at Ogilvie's farm ‘Merton’ settled 1825 - i.e. Kamilaroi [various spellings], who had come over the Liverpool Range from the interior to occupy the upper Hunter Valley.

- Rev. Lancelot Threlkeld arrived at Newcastle in 1825, already having learnt some language from Aborigines at the Hawkesbury River in 1824. He moved to a new Aboriginal Mission at Lake Macquarie in 1826, although he transferred to his own land grant in 1831. In 1841 his mission was abandoned due to lack of Aborigines and Threlkeld moved to Sydney, dying in 1859. In 1827 while at Lake Macquarie Threlkeld began recording the language of the coastal people spoken from Newcastle to Broken Bay, but provided no identification. He did however, write of their connection to the Hawkesbury Aborigines.

- In the succeeding period, historical records commonly refer to the close familiar relationship of “Wollombi” or Hunter River Aborigines with the people on the coast who were referred to at that time either as the “Sugarloaf” tribe at Newcastle & Lake Macquarie or as the “Broken Bay” tribe at Brisbane Water & Wyong/ Tuggerah Lakes [historically known as Tuggerah Beach - differing spellings]. Although there may have been local speech variation (dialects) as in every language, there was never any distinction made between their languages. As well as visits, named men such as Wallatu and Kurba ‘retired’ to the coast.

- Native-born Robert Mathews had become friends with Hunter River Aborigines in 1880s when he was living at Singleton town working as a surveyor in the bush. From some of the Wollombi people who moved through the ranges to the Hawkesbury River he completed a record of their language - which the Aborigines who spoke it called Darkiñung [various spellings]. He confirmed that << The south-east corner - - of the Kamilaroi - - (adjointed) the Darkiñung territory about Jerry's Plains. >> Principal families in the Hunter catchment were recorded as Clark(e), Saunders, Dillon and Taggart, while others from the ranges moved to the coast: eg Newman - Noakes/ Sales. Amongst these people, several came from Maitland, such as Joe Goobra (Gooburra) who was identified as the last full-blood Darkiñung man to be initiated.
An informant named Robert Miller provided a description for the inland upper Hunter Valley Aborigines whom he called “Wonnarua”, which was published by Edward Curr in 1887. The area given by Miller included that occupied by Kamilaroi when the settlers arrived. Claiming to have settled in the district in 1841, Miller wrote of a tribe speaking the language recorded by Threlkeld at Lake Macquarie and using coastal culture. The search of historic documents to 2010 has not traced this informant. By plagiarising Miller's report in 1898, Queensland journalist J.W. Fawcett gave it false credibility. Thus, present day descendants identified as “Wonnarua” either are from the upper Hunter beyond Singleton, Kamilaroi language people, or are from south of the floodplain there, Darkiïung language people - or in some cases had come from the Kattung language people of Paterson River district. Miller had apparently taken his term from those at Newcastle identifying themselves to Mathews as Wannungine, our people here, for the “Sugarloaf” tribe as above, who also used Wannerawa, our people there, for the “Broken Bay” tribe (Miller's “Wonnarua” term). Mathews noted the term Wannungine to refer to all these coastal people, and it is presented as the preferred identification for people of the coastal watershed who occupied the marine estuarine and lakes environment. Thus, they were separated from the Wallambine people (English “Wollombi”) who occupied the land draining into the Hawkesbury and Hunter Rivers.

About 1890 John Fraser, a Scottish emigrant retired to Sydney who had taught at a Maitland elite school and considered these Aborigines extinct, recovered Threlkeld's language records which were then republished by the colonial government in 1892 for an international audience at a World Expo in Chicago USA. Whereas Threlkeld had provided no identification, Fraser as editor contrived his own terms: he derived “Awa-ba ‘kal” for the Lake Macquarie language, i.e. people ‘(kal) of the place (-ba) called awa, and “Kuri-nggai” for people who used the common noun kuri for man. (In 1970 the term “Kurringgai” was re-presented by linguist Arthur Capell as “Guringai” for its use around Broken Bay.)

Around the 1990s, descendants of the ancestral Wannungine people adopted Fraser's term “Awabakal” for the above “Sugarloaf” tribe and “Guringai” for the “Broken Bay” tribe, when looking for their own ‘Tribal Link’. In the meantime P.A. Haslam, a Newcastle-born journalist, had been collecting stories and writing himself into scenarios for Aboriginal stories from the locality. This research project has not analysed his records, now used for others' new research, but found some of his notes quite imaginative. For instance he accepted stories told by << The Darkiïung Thespians: Tommy and Eric >>, which were known by witnesses to be implausible. [Percy Haslam ca.1913-87, Eric Taggart ca.1918–80, Tommy Sales ca.1923-95.] Re-consideration of some of the collection suggest that Haslam may have been told some useful ideas.

Re-examination of the 2010 reported findings, prompted by queries from a Queensland anthropologist in 2013, led to a most significant conclusion not emphasised before. Curr published the Hawkesbury language from Tuckerman (written by Mathews as Darkiïung), as well as Miller’s “Wonnarua” language - which was later found to be that recorded by Threlkeld (dubbed “Awabakal” by Fraser 1892). He (Curr) observed in 1887 that << The Wonnarua language is more nearly related to that of the Hawkesbury than any other >>. When Wilhelm Schmidt in 1913 impartially reviewed everything available, he discovered that Darkiïung, Wonnarua (Wannerawa/“Wonnarua”) and “Awabakal” were the same language - referred to as << ‘Middle-Kuri’ >>. A further defining conclusion came from Arthur Capell's analysis between his 1970 ‘initial report’ and his 1979 final publication, when he observed that they << are hardly more than dialects >> of the same language. The choice of the Aboriginal identifying term is between that contrived in 1892 by Fraser who thought them extinct, “Awaba”, or the term given directly by the people who actually spoke the language themselves, recorded on the spot by Mathews: Darkiïung.

New investigative inspections of the two Middle-Kuri languages, as compiled 2006 and 2008 by two authors from Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative, quickly showed that they are the same - varying only in some terms just as is seen in dictionaries of any language. Such variations had already been explained by Threlkeld. Thus, it is apparent from the historical records that the coastal Aboriginal people now called “Guringai” from Brisbane Water district and now called “Awabakal” from Lake Macquarie district - known by Mathews as Wannerawa/“Wannungine” - are the same ancestral Tribe as those from along the south side of the Hunter i.e. from the Wallambine. No term for the language was recorded from the coast, but Aborigines from the “Wollombi” called their common language Darkiïung!

The analysis of the history may be checked in the full 2010 “Darkiïung Recognition”, with references located using search terms in a download of the digital copy, available online from Sydney University Library at URL: http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/7745.