

1. Description

1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family: Kukatja (Alternate: Gugadja, Kukaja)

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com): Kux

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude): Kukatja speakers are found throughout Western Australia, primarily around the Balgo, Lake Gregory, and Halls Creek regions (1). 20°08'24"S 127°59'06"E (2).

1.4 Brief history: The Kukatja people were originally a very isolated, nomadic, hunter-gatherer society in Western Australia. Then they, along with many other indigenous aboriginal groups, were colonized by Great Britain. The Kukatja became a part of the Catholic mission of Balgo, and many of the modern-day speakers still live here. It was difficult for the people to assimilate in to the Western customs forced upon them, and it was hard to change their hunter-gatherer ways. As a result, they failed at becoming economically independent as a group, and now live off of support from the Australian government (3).

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors: The primary contact the Kukatja had with anyone from the outside world was from the Catholic missionaries in Balgo (3). They were forced to assimilate by the Australian government in the 1960's. For example, children were taken away from their parents and forced to live in dormitories to be raised by the missionaries themselves. This caused many problems when they were put back into their society (3). Even though the mission was very influential, the people maintained traditional religious and political beliefs, while respecting the Catholic authority (3).

1.6 Ecology (natural environment): The area is a very arid, dry desert-like region (3). There is little rainfall in the area and lots of sand hills (5).

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density: The total number of Kukatja speakers is 580 according to the most recent census, which happened in 1996 (1). The home range extends throughout rural Western Australia and the Kukatja territory overlaps with several other local indigenous groups, which historically, created a point of conflict (3). There is a very low population density with approximately 1 person per every 100km² (5).

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s): Being in a desert environment, most carbohydrates come in the form of indigenous starchy plants. Not many plants are durable enough to grow in the tough environment, and not many are edible, but a few are harvested and eaten regularly by the aboriginal people (6).

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources: Lizards are commonly caught and eaten because they are easily accessible, and many live in the harsh desert environment. Prior to the European colonization of Australia, food sources were very limited, but after the Europeans introduced new animal species, people of the Western Desert started hunting these animals. The types of animals hunted range from rabbits, feral cats, kangaroos, wallabies, emus, to goats (6).

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?: The Kukatja people used spears as their primary weapon (6).

2.4 Food storage: None

2.5 Sexual division of production: Women were traditionally the ones who gathered plants and lizards for the community to eat, while the men hunted larger game and went to war. Women commonly worked with natural fibers to make pieces of fabric for the community to use, whereas men worked on crafted stone tools and weapons (6).

2.6 Land tenure: Land tenure was determined by patrilineages where the members claim descent from a common, mythical ancestor. These ancestors are believed to have lived and traveled in a mythical past called "the Dreaming", and the places where they lived, traveled, and had their adventures are also referred to by this term. These places are regarded as sacred sites that currently contain the spirit of the particular ancestor. Because these areas are viewed as sacred, trespassing is taken very seriously and a major cause of conflict both within and between groups (6).

2.7 Ceramics:

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns: Food is shared among the local community members fairly equally. Especially if there is a large game kill, the meat is divided up, so that each person can have some nourishment. Because large animals are a rarity to find and hunt in the desert, when one is hunted, everyone in the community gets to have some of it (3).

2.9 Food taboos:

2.10 Canoes/watercraft? There doesn't appear to be any use of watercraft in any of the sources found. This is likely because the Kukatja live in the middle of the desert region, and don't travel far from their home territory, especially not far enough to reach a major waterway.

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f): Not found

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f): Not found

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f): The average age for the first menarche is 12 (8).

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f): Specific age was not found, but considering the shortened life span of the indigenous people and the young age of marriage, the first birth is likely in the young teens.

4.3 Completed family size (m and f): Not found

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f): The inter-birth interval is approximately 3 years (6).

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f): The first marriage for females averages at age 14, whereas for males it averages at age 25 (6). This is likely due to the societal belief that the wider the gap in ages of spouses, the better.

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce: Not found

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously: Polygyny is much preferred over monogamy, and most men in the community are polygynous (6).

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?: Brides are commonly exchanged between kin groups. Therefore, they are not bought for a price, rather strictly in exchange for a bride from another group. Therefore, the family of each bride benefits, by gaining a bride for a male in the group, whereas the bride herself, and her husband, don't gain anything (7).

4.9 Inheritance patterns: Patrilineal (6).

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict: Infants are heavily cared for by both parents, but after the children reach a certain age, they are forced to gain independence. Minimal care is given by the parents, and children are sometimes forced to live in their own "camps" with other children and even hunt and gather their own food. This is thought to produce strong children who will make strong and contributing members of the adult community (6).

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals: There have been some observations of male homosexual activity, but it does not appear to be accepted by the group as a whole, and as result, no member is openly homosexual (5).

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these "other fathers" recognized? Paternity is not partible, there is believed to be only one father. In cases where the mother has a child with a man other than her husband, the husband is still recognized as the father, and the other man is never acknowledged. The child will grow up being told the father by marriage is his or her biological father as well, regardless of the truth (5).

4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? (e.g., "receptacle in which fetus grows") Women believe that they can make themselves sterile simply by singing "yawulyu" songs. (8).

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)? No, it is simply believed to be a spiritual process in which some higher being/spirit comes into the body of the women and grants her a fetus (6). The people believe this while recognizing the husband as the father of the baby. This is odd, considering the two beliefs oppose one another.

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape: There was no direct data on this topic, however, the people as a whole were believed to be peaceful, and domestic violence appears to be fairly rare (5).

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin): Cross cousin marriage is very common. However, unlike some groups, very distant cross cousins are selected, as to create as distant of marriages as possible, while remaining within the same family (3). Another study suggested that the practice of "bride swapping" was more common. In this case, brides were traded between groups, meaning the brides would be married to men outside of their own family (5).

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms? Yes, to some extent. Because the males commonly have multiple wives, or at least multiple sexual partners, monogamy is not highly regarded within the community. As a result, it is common for females to sleep with men outside of their marriage, and although it is not "accepted", it appears to occur frequently (6).

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children? There is evidence that the child rearing would be passed on to an aunt or grandmother, because both of these individuals assist the mother in raising the child, at least as a young infant. Usually an aunt will have children of similar ages to her sister, so it would be fairly easy to integrate the child into the aunt's family and household (6).

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females

4.22 Evidence for couvades

4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older): The older a potential father is, the more desirable he is. The older a man is, the higher social status he will have attained, which makes him more desirable for young women in the community. Usually men are at least ten years older than their wives. Young men are wifeless until they reach such an age (5).

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect? In one study, it was observed that sons-in-law did not speak directly to either their mother-in-law or father-in-law. It is believed to a sign of respect to the family of his wife, and most people follow this practice (3). Although they cannot speak directly to each other, there is no evidence they are not allowed to look at each other, as is found in some desert groups.

4.24 Joking relationships?

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations: Patrilineal. The Kukatja society is very patrilineal, and virtually everything is decided according to this system (6).

4.26 Incest avoidance rules: It is believed that the principal of "distant" cross-cousin marriage is an attempt to avoid incest, while still keeping marriage within the same family (5).

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony? The marriage is "Aluridja style" according to an anthropologist who studied the various groups in Western Australia (5).

4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name? Not found

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?): As previously stated, there are instances in which both are preferred. There are conflicting studies citing a preference for distant cross-cousin marriage (within community) and another citing a preferred system of bride exchanges between communities. It appears both are practiced frequently.

4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)? Yes, usually between distant cross cousins, so the families collaborate and plan out the marriage (5). Both families seek to gain from the arrangement, either monetarily or through status gain (5).

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who: There appears to be competition among different families to secure the highest status brides for their own males to marry. The society is set up in a hierarchy of social status, so the higher each family can rise on the status scale, the better for the family (5).

Warfare/homicide

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare: Virtually none, because warfare appears to have died out upon the introduction of Catholic missionaries to the area (3).

4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death: Not found

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing: Not found

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations): A notable enemy of the Kukatja people are the Ntarea people. One study found high reports of intermarriage between the two societies, which was very odd, considering all of the elders interviewed considered the opposing group to be their biggest enemy (4).

4.18 Cannibalism? No.

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size: Not found

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality): There is evidence for lots of movement within the territory "given" to the Kukatja people by the Dreaming and the ancestors. However, they never usually leave their territory, because of the conflict it could create, and because it would violate the rules of territory established by the ancestors (3).

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes): The political system includes a system involving a council lead by a head councilman. It is hard to convince people to be on the council, and sometimes the people go without an official leader. It is hard to find leaders because there are several different ethnic groups represented in the general area ruled by the same council, so it is hard for the different peoples to agree on issues. Another theory behind this lack of political leadership is an idea that the indigenous people in the area are trying to rebel against the white system, and maintain their traditional systems for as long as possible (3).

5.4 Post marital residence: Spouses live together in a house with their offspring. Sometimes grandmothers and fathers, and other close kin live in the house as well (6).

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense): There are very defined and distinctive boundaries for all of the people of the Western Desert because they all believe in the Dreaming and the ancestors (7). There isn't much evidence for active defense, because each group of indigenous people doesn't want to leave their territory, for it is their territory given to them by the ancestors. As a result, they don't see much benefit in inhabiting someone else's territory.

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex): Society is based upon a system of social status. One gains higher social status primarily through age and life experience (3). The older a person is, the more highly regarded they are by society. There isn't much evidence on the impact of gender, however, considering it is a patrilineal society, men are likely given higher status.

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:

5.8 Village and house organization:

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses): Children are sent to camps near the village to gain their independence. They are forced to live on their own and find their own food. This a way society creates strong, independent adults (7).

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:

5.12 Trade: There appears to be a system of long-distance transport and exchange of materials and artifacts through the entire Western Desert region. This usually happens between individuals with the same mythical ancestors and places where those ancestors traveled in the mythical past. Ceremonial exchange resulted with exotic items, like pearl shells from the coast and incised sacred stones from central Australia, that circulated within these networks, either between individuals and between patrilineages (6).

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6.0 Time allocation to RCR: The Kukatjan people place a lot of importance on ceremonies involving funerals and the mourning process. They believe each person is very important to their community, and the loss of one single person affects, in their minds, the entire community and their ethos, which are the ideas that characterize the Kukatjan people (3).

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine): There is a community "healer" who is responsible for caring for the ill members of the community and distributing medicinal herbs and supplies. In studies of the group, it is believed they have some basic understanding of physiology and disease, although their treatments are rudimentary, as expected due to their lack of education and technology (8).

6.2 Stimulants:

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):

6.4 Other rituals: Love-magic (7).

6.5 Myths (Creation): The Kukatja people believe in the common Australian belief of "The Dreaming." Essentially, they believe that heroes and heroines shaped the actual country of Australia. These heroes are the ancestors of all living things, and can take the form of any of these things. They believe that every human is the incarnation of an ancestor. The heroes created dreaming tracks that map the land where the people live, and that is how the people recognize modern-day territory (7).

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games): All of the rituals studied by Poirier contain the use of music. It is unclear what instruments were used, or what type of music is created.

6.7 Sex differences in RCR: There are a few women-specific rituals. One is a love-magic ritual, the other a ceremonial exchange. There is not much information on the details of the rituals, but it is noted that the women who participate in these rituals are elders of high status, and is viewed as very honorable to participate in such a ritual. These rituals are transferred throughout different groups in the Western desert, partially through the bride exchange process. But, these women actually purposely exchange their rituals with other groups of women throughout the desert, usually in exchange for a ritual from the opposing group. The women find it okay to do this,

because they believe that they all originated from “one family”. In general, these women’s rituals involve lots of songs and readings to the ancestors (7).

6.8 Missionary effect: A Catholic mission nearby had a heavy impact on the Kukatja people. Upon the missionary’s arrival, they tried to get the people to assimilate to Western culture, primarily by removing the children and sending them away for special schooling. The mission attempted to convert the people to Catholicism, with little success, and influenced the people in any way they could. Although the people mostly maintained their indigenous religion, they respected the Catholic mission as an authority figure, and worked with the mission when necessary, primarily as an intermediate between the Australian government (3).

6.9 RCR revival:

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs: The soul is said to be reunited and reincarnated with its ancestor upon death. It is also believed that the soul may split into two. One half returns to the ancestors, while the other remains close to the tribe itself to help keep children from wandering (6).

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?

6.12 Is there teknonymy?

6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.) : The body is viewed as empty, cold, dry place with the soul being the only important aspect. Interestingly, the Kukatja people believe the soul lives beneath the navel in the stomach (8). The Dreaming and ancestor worship are the primary beliefs (7).

7. Adornment

7.1 Body paint: It is believed the Kukatja use body paint, particularly in ceremonies and rituals (6).

7.2 Piercings: Not found.

7.3 Haircut: Not found.

7.4 Scarification: Not found.

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.): Adornment is said to be worn during ceremonies and rituals, but the details of such adornment were not found (6).

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment: Not found.

7.7 Sex differences in adornment: The main evidence found suggests it is primarily men who use the body paint and adornment during the rituals (6).

7.8 Missionary effect: Not found.

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment: Not found.

8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system: Not found

8.2 Sororate, levirate: Not found

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.): Not found

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

1. For the indigenous people of the Western Desert, a person does not necessarily have to live within a certain area to be considered “from” that area. The only rule for claiming where one originated from, is that the person must know the mytho-ritual knowledge for that particular area and feel responsible for its well-being (7).

2. The ear is believed to be the point of intellect in the body, rather than the brain (8).

3. The aboriginal doctors use many natural products in their treatments including rabbit urine, animal intestines, bush tobacco, mammary organs, and animal fat (8).

Numbered references

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