

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The human sense of identity and belonging is multi-layered. At an immediate level we can identify our belonging to a family, a locality and a community. From there it broadens to a matrix of various communities of interest, such as your membership of a profession, sports club, recreational pursuit, religious affiliation or suchlike. At increasingly broader levels we can identify as belonging to a region, a state, a nation and a particular cultural heritage.

Within these various layers of personal and group identity, there are often also competitive elements. For instance, your best friend at work may barrack for a rival football team, and this might then involve some friendly banter and mock mutual derision. The point though, is that in-group and out-group psychology does not necessarily lead to deep alienation and antagonism between individuals or groups, even though of course it sometimes does.

Traditional Aboriginal society was no different, in that there were many overlapping layers of personal and group identity. These successively involved your family and totemic relationships, a shared geographic water catchment area, a language group of several catchment areas, and then an even broader federation of adjacent language groups.

However, just like Victorians might refer to West Australians as 'Sand Gropers', Queenslanders as 'Banana Benders' and South Australians as 'Crow Eaters', so too did Aboriginal people have derisory nicknames for other Mobs.

This was clearly demonstrated in the early colonial period in Sydney, when an Elder named Mahroot was asked what was the name of the people at Liverpool. His reply was 'Cobrakalls, same as you call the French people'.

As Cobra was the Aboriginal name for a foul-smelling mollusc that the Liverpool people ate and regarded as a delicacy, he was of course saying that they were snail-eaters. More than that though, he was probably implying that the Liverpool Mob were known as 'Bad Breath People'.

Jimmy Dawson, who settled at Warrandyte in 1840 and then moved to the Western District in 1844, had a similar experience. In recording the names of various languages in the Western District, he was told various nicknames that meant things like 'Drawlers', 'Blood Language' and 'Seaweed Speakers'. These nicknames have since become institutionalised as the traditional language names in the area, because Jimmy Dawson's is the only record, and Aboriginal humour was not accounted for in accepting the names.

There are many other instances across Australia of joke names being mistakenly adopted as the traditional Aboriginal names, but I can give a couple of pertinent examples closer to home.

The Dandenong Valley catchment area, of the Dandenong Creek, Cardinia Creek and Bunyip River from Bayswater down to Kooweerup, was occupied by a Woiwurrung clan, the

Ngaruk-Willam-Balluk. In context, Ngaruk refers the rocky southern slopes of the Dandenong Mountains down to Westernport Bay, whilst Willam-Balluk means 'home country of these people'. However, they were colloquially referred to by others as the Balluk-Willam and this changes the meaning to 'Swamp People' or even more accurately, 'Bog Dwellers'. A very apt name for this area.

As can be seen from the preceding example, Aboriginal tribes very often take their name from the major river of their area. The proper name for the Yarra is Birrarung, so the locals referred to themselves as the 'Birrarung-Willam-Balluk', but were also commonly known by their language of Woiwurrung. To the surrounding tribes however, just like the snail-eaters anecdote, the Birrarung people of the Woiwurrung were given a nickname by their neighbours that reflected their dietary habits. This nickname was 'Wurrundjeri', which means 'Witchetty Grub Eaters'.

However, in 1835 Barman's surveyor John Helder Wedge, mistakenly thought that the name of the Melbourne river was 'Yarra'. The local Birrarung people therefore quickly adapted to the Whitefella change and began referring to themselves as the 'Yarra Tribe'.

This situation is tacitly confirmed by the Aboriginal Protector William Thomas, who kept a daily diary from when he started in 1839 to when he died in 1867. In his diary he makes about 400 references to the Woiwurrung people, but not one single reference to the name Wurrundjeri.

However, just before his death in 1867, he drew a map of the Yarra Valley and Westernport area in which he marks Coranderrk, the Aboriginal Reserve which had been established in 1863. So, the map was obviously made some time in the four years after that. Then, across the map of the Yarra Valley area, he superimposed the words 'Wurrundjeri of the Woiwurrung', thereby clearly showing that the name Wurrundjeri had only gained some currency after 1863.

The inescapable conclusion is that when Coranderrk was established in 1863, the non-locals there continued to refer to the locals by their nickname of Wurrundjeri, and the locals simply got used to it. The net result is that nowadays we all routinely refer to the Wurrundjeri as the traditional owners, when originally it was just their nickname.