

BIRRARUNG- THE RIVER OF MISTS

Just like there are three levels of government in Australia today, i.e. local, state, and federal, a similar structure can be defined in traditional Aboriginal society. At the local level, each individual tribe occupied a defined water catchment area. At a 'State' level a handful of tribes would share a common language. At the 'Federal' level a handful of language groups would share an identity as a cultural nation.

Then just the same as there is a present day fourth level of international trade and diplomacy, so these respective cultural federations would each maintain their international relationships.

So, to start at the second level, Woiwurrung is the name of the language shared by four tribes in the Melbourne area, each of which occupied the respective catchment areas of the Werribee River, Maribyrnong River, Yarra River and Dandenong Valley.

The Woiwurrung language people of the greater Melbourne area, were therefore also part of a broader cultural federation of five related language groups in central Victoria, covering the present-day areas of Melbourne, Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo, Shepparton, Mansfield, South Gippsland and the Mornington Peninsula. These five language groups showed their shared sense of cultural identity by using a word common to each of the five languages. This common word was 'Kulin' and meant 'the civilized people'

People outside the Kulin federation were regarded as less civilized than themselves and it was a common practice for the respective federations, to privately dismiss the people outside their own federation as 'wild blackfellas'. This teasing and private derision even occurred within each language group, with each tribe being given a nickname by the other tribes, like seaweed speakers, snail eaters, bog dwellers, or salt water drinkers.

Each of the handful of tribes within each language group, commonly identified their Home Country by reference to its main river, or the mountains where the catchment area originated. As the Yarra River is the main catchment area of Melbourne, the tribe here took their name from this river.

However, 'Yarra' was not the original name of the river, so calling themselves the 'Yarra Tribe' became a colonial adaptation by the local Aboriginal people. The original Woiwurrung name for the Yarra River was 'Birrarung', which means 'River of Mists and Shadows'. How Melbourne's main river got the name 'Yarra' arose in the following circumstances in 1835.

In early June 1835 John Batman, on behalf of the 'Port Phillip Syndicate' in Tasmania, made contact with Woiwurrung people in Melbourne for the purported intention of purchasing their land. This historic meeting was held on the Plenty River at present day Greensborough, not the Merri Creek as is commonly thought.

This meeting was facilitated by seven Aboriginal men from Sydney who acted as Batman's guides and interpreters. After the 'treaty meeting' Batman returned to Tasmania with two of his

guides, Stewart and Bulbalong. The other five Sydney men were left at Geelong with the other three colonists, plus a sailboat.

The surveyor in the Port Phillip Syndicate, John Wedge, then in August 1835 came from Tasmania with Stewart and Bulbalong. Wedge did some survey work down the Geelong coast and was ferried around by Thompson, one of the colonists, and two Warhuring men, Joanjoan and Diabering. Both the Wathuring men had become avid fishermen from the sailboat left behind for the colonists. Then, on 2nd September 1835, Thompson, Joanjoan and Diabering sailed Wedge, Stewart and Bulbalong to Melbourne for Wedge to do more survey work there.

As the sailboat came up the river and approached the Queen Street Falls, one of the Sydney men pointed to the waterfall saying 'Yarra! Yarra!' which in their Parramatta language meant 'Waterfall, waterfall!'. Wedge thought that the Sydney man was telling him the name of the river, so mistakenly recorded it as Yarra-Yarra.

Wedge, Stewart and Bulbalong were then dropped off at Melbourne, whilst the other three sailed back to Geelong. When they had finished the survey work a couple of weeks later, Wedge and the two Sydney men set off to return overland to Geelong. When they reached the ford at the Werribee River, the Sydney men again pointed and said 'Yarra'. Wedge subsequently wrote 'It was then that I realised my mistake'. The Woiwuring word 'yarra' in fact means 'hair' and yarra-yarra means 'fur'. It does not mean 'ever-flowing' as has sometimes been suggested.

As already indicated, all tribes have a permanent water source or river system as the central part of their lands and usually take their name from the major river in their land. The Birrarung people are nowadays known as 'Wurundjeri' because this was the nickname given to them by other tribes. The reality that Witchetty grubs were a staple part of the Birrarung people's diet.

Like everywhere else in Australia, the Birrarung people has for untold thousands of years, nurtured and protected this land. In doing so they farmed the land sustainably in ways that were essentially invisible to European eyes. Aboriginal people were therefore not 'hunter-gatherers' as defined by Europeans, they were in fact 'permaculture farmers'. This enabled Aboriginal people throughout Australia to enjoy the highest common standard of living, health and wellbeing in the world, prior to colonisation.

Locally, the sustainable farming practices were evidenced in teeming wildfowl in the wetlands of Bulleen, sparsely treed kangaroo farms along the river flats, hilltop grass seed farms, fish traps freshwater mussel and yabby farms along the river and creeks, possum farms in the stringy-bark copses, and myrnong farms up the wet gullies. This supported a local Aboriginal population of five to eight people per square mile in Manningham. It took no more two hours work a day to feed a family, so the rest of the day was spent in environmental management, as well as social, recreational, and cultural pursuits.

The Birrarung people often hosted intertribal events that involved thousands of guests, particularly during eel harvest season from mid-February to mid-March each year. The last of these great meetings was, at Pound Bend, Warrandyte in 1852. It included what proved to be

the last inter-tribal game of Marngrook, the traditional football game that was a pre-cursor to Aussie Rules Football,

After this, and under the visionary leadership of Simon Wonga, the Kulin people were ultimately able to establish Coranderrk Station in Healesville. Over the next decade it became economically and socially the most successful mission in Australia. It was during the time after the establishment of Coranderrk in 1863 that the Wurundjeri made a second accommodation in their tribal name and began referring to themselves by the name everyone else was using.

Jim Poulter

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