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Traditional aboriginal place names: their recording and use

Paper submitted by Australia**

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INTRODUCTION:

Any discussion regarding the traditional place names of the Aboriginal people of Australia must take into account the relationship of the Aboriginal people to the land in which they live.

To them, land is not a commodity to be owned and used, there being no land ownership in Traditional Aboriginal society. The land has a deep religious significance, and was created for the inhabitants to live with. The traditional homeland of any Aboriginal language group was created specifically for that group, and was done so by the spiritual ancestors of the people.

During this creative period, now referred to as The Dreaming, Aboriginal life and lifestyle were formed. The plants and animals were established, as were the methods of hunting, gathering, preparing and sharing of the foodstuffs. Methods of social interaction and behaviour were established. In fact, it can be said there is not one aspect of traditional Aboriginal life that did not conform to the patterns of The Dreaming.

Particular to the subject at hand, the topographical features of the land were also created by the activities of the spiritual ancestral beings. This being the case, the features gain a religious significance, providing the locations of the events of The Dreaming, and thus are constant visual reminders of The Dreaming.

It has been said that all Aboriginal place names are associated with the mythology of the Aboriginal people. This statement is still to be fully verified, and in fact, may not be able to be substantiated due to the significant loss of the traditional Aboriginal culture throughout Australia. Whatever the case may be, it is definite that the far larger percentage of the traditional Aboriginal place names are so associated.

As this discussion continues into the recording of these names, it must be remembered that the replacement, the alteration, and in some cases, the dislocation of the place names, is not only an emotional event (as would be the case in most other cultures), but is also an event of religious importance, one that affected the basic beliefs of the Aboriginal people.

A casual glance at maps of Australia would give an indication that many Aboriginal place names are in use. This is true in a manner of speaking. But let us remember that the Aboriginal people named only natural features, and many of the Aboriginal names on our

maps are associated with man made features that only came into existence since European occupation. There are also significant problems with the Aboriginal place names used, and these will be referred to later in this report.

To provide some order to the recording of Aboriginal place names, I have divided this report into three sections entitled The Past, The Present and The Future, and have drawn heavily on examples from South Australia, the state I am most familiar with in order to provide a model for the rest of Australia.

THE PAST:

Two important statements made in the early 1800s should have set the pattern for much of the early recording of Aboriginal names.

In 1828, Thomas Mitchell, Surveyor-General of New South Wales, informed assistant surveyor P. Elliot that "the natives can furnish you with names for every flat and almost every hill" ¹. In the following year, principles based on this statement were laid down by Mitchell, and developed further between 1829 and 1852.

The second statement was an edict made in 1839 by Governor Gawler, the Governor of South Australia, being as follows:

"In regard to the minor features of the country, to which the natives may have given names, the Governor would like to take this opportunity of requesting the assistance of the colonists in discovering, and carefully recording and precisely retaining, these in all possible cases as most consistent with propriety and beauty of appellation.

All information on this subject should be communicated in precise terms to the Surveyor-General, who will cause memorandums to be made of it, and when clearly proved to be correct, to be inserted in the public maps". ²

The abovementioned instructions were only partially heeded, for a number of probable reasons - too lengthy to go into in this paper. However, examples can be given where the Aboriginal placename was recorded by a particular explorer, and then replaced by a name from another source by the same explorer. It is these latter names that have been widely adopted.

Of those Aboriginal names recorded by the early European colonists, difficulties have since been found in the following areas:

1. Spelling - This is by far the major problem associated with Aboriginal place names. With a few notable exceptions, no efforts were made to study the language of the native people, and the recording was undertaken as a side issue (when the opportunity arose) to the major endeavour of the explorer, surveyor or settler. In some cases, those recording the Aboriginal names were lacking in formal education in any field, let alone anthropology or linguistics. The result is that the spelling of the Aboriginal place names ranges from a close representation of the pronunciation of the toponym, to a word that bears no relationship to the correct pronunciation, and is no longer recognisable to Aboriginal people, dependant largely on the ability and the interest of the recorder. Professor Norman Tindale identified this situation in 1940s, and referred to it as "barbaric" or "historical" depending on your point of view.
2. Method of giving names - This is particularly noticed in the naming of streams. The Aboriginal people in many portions of this generally arid country, named watercourses by extending the name of a particular waterhole, spring or soak to cover that portion of the watercourse downstream to the next significant point (e.g., waterhole, spring etc). In these areas, it depended on which portion of the feature was first encountered by the white man as to which of the names associated with the stream were recorded and then extended to cover the whole feature.³
3. Dislocation or mis-application of names - Placenames were on occasions, applied to features other than those traditionally known by that name. This occurred by mistakes in the location of the feature involved, and also by taking the name of a feature (and in some instances abbreviating or constricting the name) and applying it to another, for ease of identification. In other examples, pleasant sounding Aboriginal toponyms or words from particular vocabularies have been transported to serve as place names in other areas. Also, descriptive words (and in some examples, words deemed to be of an obscene or insulting nature to the white man) have been recorded as "Aboriginal place names".

Thus, of the many "Aboriginal place names" appearing on the map of Australia, a large number of them are not the recognisable traditional Aboriginal names of the physical features of the country. They are not the names of the places embodied in the mythology of the Aboriginal people. They are not the names important to the cultural heritage of the Aboriginal people.

THE PRESENT

The Inter-Provincial Geographic Conference, held in Melbourne in December 1884 established the priority of native names in international usage.⁴ Since that time, it has taken till now to begin to establish a program that may allow this resolution to be effected.

In 1885, with the introduction of what is now termed Geographic I, issued by the Royal Geographical Society of Great Britain, the first attempts to produce a standard orthography for the writing of native names was commenced. Although the Australian Association for the Advancement of Sciences resolved in 1900 that "a uniform system of spelling native names of places in accordance with that adopted by the British Admiralty, and the royal Geographical Society"⁵ be adopted.

This system of orthography and its subsequent revisions had at the best, only minimal effect on Aboriginal place names (with the possible exception of Western Australia which produced a directive in 1901 entitled "The Spelling of Native Geographical Names" based on the Geographic I system). Certainly, none of the previously recorded Aboriginal toponyms used on mapping have ever been altered to comply with this or any other orthographic system.

It was not until the 1960s that serious and comprehensive linguistic research began in Australia (again with some notable exceptions), and with the establishment in the latter part of that decade of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies as a central authority for this work, the task of establishing orthographies for the Aboriginal vocabularies, and recording of Aboriginal place names gained momentum. The unfortunate aspect of this was that there was no communication between the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, the linguists or the anthropologists working in this field and the official nomenclature authorities in the states/territories of Australia. In fact, Peter Sutton, a linguist associated with the South Australian Museum, revealed that he (and probably many others), were unaware of the existence of such nomenclature authorities until recently.⁶

Communication has now been established, and a positive result of this cooperation was a pilot field trip undertaken in the north Flinders Ranges in South Australia. This took place as a result of an invitation by Dorothy Tunbridge, a linguist working with the Adnyametha people of the region, to myself to participate in a trip with her and some members of the local Aboriginal community. Mrs. Tunbridge has been working in this area for a number of years, and on this particular trip was wishing to identify some of the features significant to the local mythology.

My role was to ensure the accurate recording of the location of the features in question. This is the first time in Australia that such research was carried out by a team involving the Aboriginal communities, linguists/anthropologists and mapping/naming authorities. The results were very encouraging, and as can be seen from the programs instituted in areas in Canada, this method must provide the model for future comprehensive recording in Australia.

Discussion is also taking place between interested parties throughout Australia to enable the difficult question regarding orthography to be approached on an Australia wide basis with a view to developing orthographic guidelines that will meet the requirements of all the parties involved.

Many of the problems still have yet to be confronted, but a start has been made, and a base established that can only lead to an improvement in the recording and possible use of the traditional Aboriginal place names. The most promising result of the present endeavours is undoubtedly the great increase in dialogue between the Aboriginal people, the linguists/anthropologists, and the nomenclature authorities. An example of this is the inclusion of some 100 previously unrecorded traditional Aboriginal toponyms on the 1:50000 scale topographic maps of the Northern Flinders Ranges brought about as a direct result of the field excursion referred to above.

The Future

Looking ahead is always a difficult undertaking, but in this instance, it is hoped a number of issues will be resolved. Some very important questions are yet to be answered. Some examples being:

1. Do we alter the spelling of existing place names to comply with the orthographies now existing for the many Aboriginal languages in Australia? This is made more

complex given that in Australia we are working with both dead and living languages. An example from the Pitjantjatjara language (a language still used in the north west corner of South Australia, and portions of Western Australia and the Northern Territory, having an established orthography which is taught in the schools of the region), is of a spring originally recorded as "Opparina" in the 1860s, then altered to Aparina in 1940 following advice from Charles Mountford, Anthropologist, 7 and it is in this form that the name appears on mapping. The Pitjantjatjara orthography spells the name "Aparinya", and this accurately reflects the pronunciation of the name. Local usage is thus at odds with the current official representation.

2. Do we change the existing names of European origin back to the Aboriginal toponym? Or do we look at using both names? This would require a radical amendment to existing policy, commencing with the recognition of the validity of the oral recording of the Aboriginal people, when compared with the written recording of the European settlers.

Although no answers are currently available to such questions, they will hopefully be resolved in the near future. What is required is a continuation of the momentum now established, a continuation of the recently increased and still increasing communication between the interested parties; and a continuation of the increasing awareness of the importance of Aboriginal place names in the Australian cultural heritage.

Conclusion

Let us remember now the importance of the place names to Aboriginal people. Let us also take note of the words spoken by the Minister of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs in 1982:

"It is only through the Aboriginal part of our population that we can claim a long-standing, traditional relationship with our land, in any way possible to other nations who have occupied their native soil for hundreds or thousands of years. Through Aboriginal place names and folklore, Australians have inherited an indigenous tradition which extends the history of their country beyond the short

timespan of white settlement". (ACPEA, Multiculturalism
for all Australians, 1982.5)

It is suggested that the increased use of accurately spelt Aboriginal toponyms on mapping, can assist in the retention of (and perhaps the regaining of some of), their cultural heritage. This may be achieved by the Aboriginal people regaining a sense of value of their culture as a result of the official interest in recording various aspects of it. The extended use of traditional Aboriginal names may also provide one of the few "windows" into the Aboriginal culture available to the non Aboriginal Australians. The end result can only be a better understanding between, and a greater acceptance by each other of the many cultural or ethnic groups within this great country of Australia.

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