

## Political Issues in Australian Aboriginal Toponymies

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### **Abstract**

Briefly we consider some of the political issues that arise in relation to Australian Aboriginal place names. First, we look at Aboriginal place names in Land Claim and Native Title cases through which there has been a tremendous expansion in Indigenous place names documentation. However that documentation may contain significant inaccuracies and in any case is too often inaccessible. Second, we briefly examine the process of dual naming with a focus on the state of New South Wales. Among the issues that arise in this arena are: the potential for disputes within and among Aboriginal groups; the choice of spelling for the place name; a public misunderstanding of the nature of Aboriginal placenames.

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### **1. Aboriginal Place Names in Land Claims and Native Title Cases**

For over 30 years Australian Aborigines have attempted to be recognized under Australian law as traditional owners of their territories.<sup>1</sup> To some extent place names are used as proof of land ownership and in any event form an essential part of the documentation of their case. This has led to greatly increased recording and documenting of Australian Aboriginal place names.

This may be viewed as beneficial in that the legal process has sponsored a tremendous expansion in research into place names. A great deal of cultural information will eventually become available for posterity – for instance, through discussions by Aboriginal witnesses during land claim proceedings which are then recorded in the transcript. In some instances this leads to disputes about territorial ownership and these sometimes hinge on place names. Because the transcript is compiled by and relied upon by non-specialists pernicious misunderstandings concerning place names can arise. Some examples of these problems will be presented.

#### ***1.1. Transcripts as a reliable record of place names?***

Although transcripts of land claim and Native Title proceedings contain valuable information about and commentary on Indigenous place names, there are instances where the information in the official record is less than reliable. Our first example involves a quasi-Aboriginal place name resulting from transcriber's misunderstanding of Aboriginal English. This is illustrated in an extract from the transcript of proceedings for a land claim for territory nearby Darwin in the Northern Territory of Australia:

WITNESS: Yes, over here, Tulket[=Talc Head] way.

MR GRAY: Yes. He is pointing again towards Tulket[=Talc Head] and to the ...

(Transcript p. 385)

I have inserted material in square brackets by way of explanation. The transcriber has heard the introduced toponym, Talc Head, as 'Tulket'. An Aboriginal person will often drop a word-initial 'h' and devoice a final voiced stop. Both these pronunciation practices can also be found in the wider Australian community but the transcriber presumably takes the toponym to be of

Aboriginal origin. Such a misunderstanding may seem trivial but it would impede someone trying to search for the particular place name, Talc Head, in the machine-readable transcript. These kinds of inaccuracy in the recording of a place name have political implications as they may be leading to potential future difficulties in accessing the information.

### ***1.2. Barrister's misunderstanding of an Aboriginal witness' place name***

The second example involves a barrister's misunderstanding of an Aboriginal witness' place name. In a nutshell this involves a passage of transcript in which a barrister and the Aboriginal witness are at cross purposes – each talking about two quite different places one called Ngan.giyn and the other called Ngandjin. The judge's barrister – the judge being the Aboriginal Land Commissioner [ALC] – believes he is talking about Ngan.giyn while the witness thinks they are talking about Ngandjin. The witness gave evidence at the place called Ngan.giyn in November 1989. Now she is being questioned at a place called Belyuen in March 1990. The barrister has the written transcript of proceedings from November 1989 and wants to pose follow on questions:

- ALC BARRISTER: I think you gave us – told us some – some of your story at Ngandjin. Remember that?
- WITNESS: Yes.
- ALC BARRISTER: And I think you said: when you were a little girl you lived there for a while with your – with your mum and dad?
- WITNESS: Yes.

(Transcript p. 2295)

The two toponyms, Belyuen and Ngan.giyn, lie in the northern portion of the Cox Peninsula, a body of land to the west of Darwin harbour. There is another place name, Ngandjin, which sits on the east coast of a largish island known as Indian Island which is to the west of the Cox Peninsula. The witness hears the barrister's spelling pronunciation of Ngan.giyn as Ngandjin and confusion reigns. (For details, see Walsh 1999.)

Here the political implication rests with the considerable confusion created in the evidence reducing its potential value and this inaccuracy in the recording of a place name leading to potential future difficulties in accessing the information.

### ***1.3. Transcriber conflates a distant ethnonym (Jawoyn) with a local place name (Duwun)***

In this third example the witness is responding to a question about traditional inheritance of Aboriginal territory. This is prompted by the Northern Land Council's attorney asking 'what country do those kids take?' The response most probably was: Larrakia-Jawoyn. These are two ethnonyms, both also glossonyms, the former relating to territory ('country') in and around Darwin and the latter referring to territory near the town of Katherine some 100's of kilometres to the south. Such dual affiliations are not uncommon in Aboriginal Australia and have counterparts in other parts of the world as when a person gives their affiliation as: Chinese-Canadian. In such cases a person would be declaring on the one hand their heritage and on the other their place of citizenship and/or land of birth. It would seem that the transcriber has equated the distant ethnonym, Jawoyn, with a particular toponym, Duwun, which sits within Larrakia territory. In the land claim materials this toponym has been spelled as 'Duwun' with the first syllable pronounced like English 'do' and the second syllable with a short vowel as in 'put'. However some literate Larrakia claimants have adopted a spelling pronunciation in which – as speakers of Australian English – the first syllable may come as something like 'due' or 'Jew'. The vowel of the second syllable can be as in the surname 'Caan' with a shift of stress to the second syllable, or the 'indistinct' vowel as in the second syllable of a word like 'often'. With this kind of input it is not so surprising that the transcriber – who has gained familiarity with a range of Larrakia toponyms

during the course of the hearing – may hear this witness’ ‘Jawoyn’ as ‘Duwun’ The result is a significant confusion:

NLC BARRISTER: Yes. And what country do those kids take?  
 WITNESS: Well, at the moment they have taken Larrakia Duwun.  
 NLC BARRISTER: Yes. Well, who do they take Duwun from?  
 WITNESS: Mother.  
 NLC BARRISTER: Yes. And they take Larrakia from you.  
 (Transcript, p. 1338) (For details, see Walsh 1999: 171–2.)

Once again there is a political implication: the official written transcript renders part of an Aboriginal group’s cultural heritage in such a way that it is inaccurate and/or unintelligible.

#### ***1.4. Accessibility of place name information***

Across Australia are many organizations that house very substantial records of Aboriginal place names. These include land councils, Native Title representative bodies and organizations like the Northern Territory’s Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority which seek to protect sites of particular significance to Aboriginal groups. Unfortunately for the most part such organizations do not make this information accessible to the public – in some cases not even to the Aboriginal group whose place names are in question. This conclusion is substantiated by two statements from Sutton. For instance, Sutton (2002: 75–76) reports that there are around 1800 pages dealing with around 3000 site records from about 120 clan estates in part of the Cape York peninsula in the state of Queensland. Nearly all of this material is inaccessible because it is part of an ongoing Native Title case involving the Wik peoples of that area: ‘This ... is still under restricted access at the time of writing, because of the role of these documents in the ongoing Wik Native Title Determination Application before the Federal Court’ (Sutton 2002: 75). This information remains inaccessible at the time of writing (Peter Sutton, personal communication).

In this instance the political implication is quite serious: Many of the most detailed repositories of information on Aboriginal place names remain inaccessible for the foreseeable future.

## **2. Dual naming**

There has been a widening movement to recognize Australian Aboriginal toponymies, especially through the process of dual naming. This involves retaining the introduced name but reinstating the Aboriginal name. One example is the famous landmark in the centre of Australia, Ayers Rock, which has taken on the Aboriginal name, Uluru, to give the dual name: Ayers Rock/Uluru (see also Amery and Williams 2002).

### ***2. 1. What is involved***

Dual naming is not re-naming but the reinstatement of the Indigenous name alongside the introduced name. For example, the introduced name Dawes Point (southern foot of the Sydney Harbour Bridge) has been joined up with the Indigenous name, Tar-ra. In the state of Victoria, there is a national park which is now called The Grampians-Gariwerd National Park, with the introduced name recalling some mountains in Scotland – alongside the Indigenous name, Gariwerd.

### ***2. 2. Dual naming as a step towards re-naming***

In some instances what started out as dual naming in fact has led to re-naming. A famous example is that iconic Australian landmark: Ayers Rock, just previously mentioned. Initially it

was dual-named as Ayers Rock/Uluru; later it was more often: Uluru/Ayers Rock. And recently, it appears to have been re-named, according to the Geoscience Australia website [<http://www.ga.gov.au/education/facts/landforms/uluru.htm>]: Uluru 'Formerly named Ayers Rock'.

### ***2. 3. Some issues concerning dual naming***

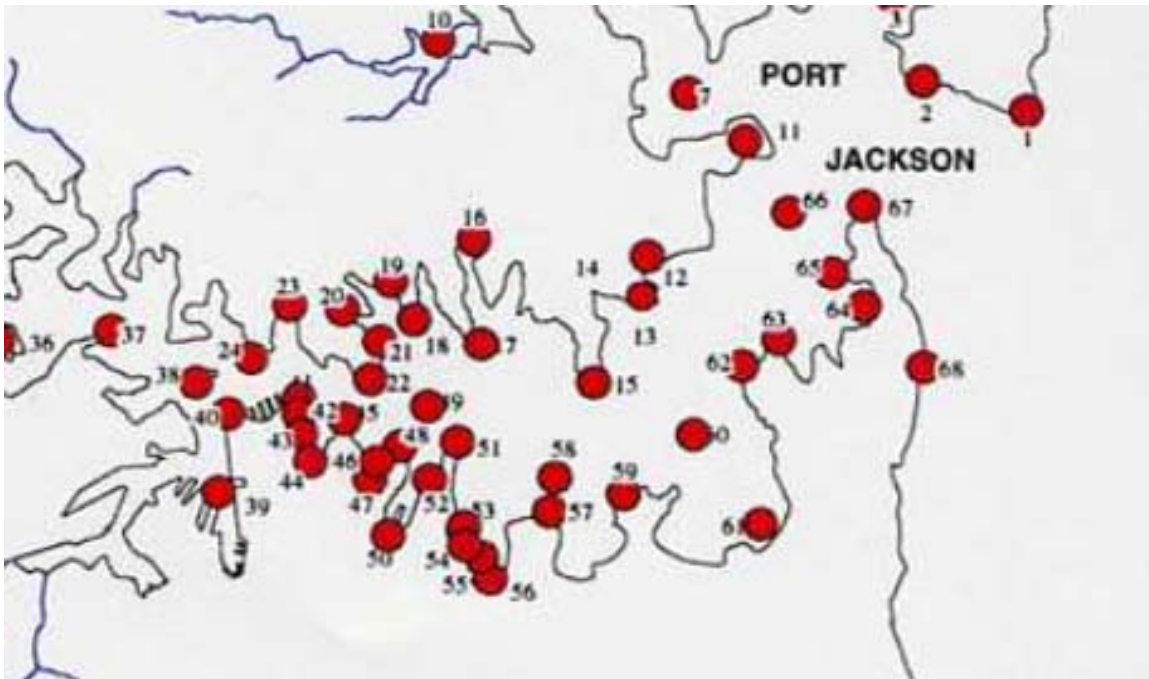
An important issue concerns multiple Indigenous names for the same feature (cf. Ian Clark in these Proceedings). Where a feature has a number of distinct Aboriginal names, should the name from the traditional owners take precedence over other names, for instance? And here the political implication amounts to the potential for discord among competing Aboriginal groups over the Aboriginal name to be applied to a particular feature.

Another issue for dual naming is the 'right' spelling for the Aboriginal toponym(s) under consideration. In the broad, I have identified a spectrum of views: phonetic purism vs toponymic pragmatism (cf. Walsh 2003). It is often a specialist in linguistics who will insist that the spelling to be adopted should mirror as closely as possible what can be determined about the precise phonetic features of the toponym; this is what I refer to as 'phonetic purism'. On the other hand what I refer to as 'toponymic pragmatism' is an approach where one tries to devise a spelling which steers the non-specialist towards phonetic accuracy. In this approach we do not expect 100% phonetic accuracy. Rather we are hoping that the majority of non-specialists will get the name mostly 'right'. We feel it is better if 90% of people get the name 80% 'right' rather than 2% of people getting it 95% 'right'.

### ***2. 4. Dual naming around Sydney Harbour as an example of toponymic pragmatism***

In recent years I have worked with the Geographical Names Board of New South Wales on a number of projects, including dual naming around Sydney Harbour (see also Troy and Walsh to appear). A little over 20 places have now been officially dual named and others are under consideration. The map that follows indicates that there are quite a few candidates for dual naming:

Map detail from Attenbrow (2001, see also 2002: 8)



Some places have Aboriginal names recorded as early as the late eighteenth century but most are from the nineteenth century. Part of the dual naming process is to take these 'legacy spellings' and attempt to come up with something close to the phonetic reality when the place names were first recorded. The language(s) of Sydney Harbour and its surrounds fell into disuse a long time ago. Let us consider a few examples:

#15 Bradleys Head

legacy spellings: Booragy, Búrroggy, Burròggy or Broggy

'phonetic' spelling: buRagi

adopted spelling: Booraghee

#45 Bennelong Point

legacy spellings: Tu-bow-gule, Tubow-gule, Too-bow-gu-liè, Tobegully, Jubughalee, Jubùghallee

'phonetic' spelling: DVbVgali

adopted spelling: Dubbagullee

#46 Farm Cove

legacy spellings: Woggan-ma-gule, Woccanmagully

'phonetic' spelling: wAganmagali

adopted spelling: Wahganmuggalee

#60 Shark Island

legacy spellings: Bo-a-millie, Boam bill ... [word incomplete – document damaged], Boambilly

'phonetic' spelling: buwam(b)ili

adopted spelling: Boowambillee

In the ‘phonetic’ spellings I have used capital letters to indicate areas of phonetic uncertainty. Most Australian languages have a contrast between two kinds of ‘r’: one as in English represented as <r> and the other a flap or trill represented as <rr>. Because the records rarely make it clear which kind of ‘r’ might have been the original sound I use ‘R’ in the ‘phonetic’ spelling. Similarly ‘V’ is used where it is unclear which vowel quality was intended and ‘A’ where it was probably but not conclusively ‘a’. Finally ‘D’ is used for what might have been: d, dh or dj – the latter two being laminal stops. In English the ‘d’ in the word ‘width’ is similar to ‘dh’ (being dental) while the ‘d’ in ‘due’ is similar to ‘dj’ in ‘due’.

I have already alluded to the debate between phonetic purists and toponymic pragmatists. It should be clear from what has gone before that I see myself as towards the end of the spectrum where toponymic pragmatists reside. In this instance part of the debate involves academic politics. On one side is a view that one is dumbing down and thereby losing accuracy. My own view is that there is a need to have a record of linguistic details accessible to serious toponymic scholars regardless of the pragmatic solutions adopted for public use.

### **2. 5. Accommodating the expectations of non-linguists (Reid 2002)**

In northern New South Wales the Armidale City Council decided – where feasible – to apply Aboriginal names in its area of influence – particularly to street names.

However the council had some reasons for rejecting possible candidates for naming:

- a. too long or complicated-looking, e.g., imboodoonga; roowalgoonda
- b. phonotactic considerations, e.g., ngana; nggada; mbwi
- c. ‘wrong’ meaning or word class ‘Thematic names with a historical, botanical or zoological background are generally preferred’. So among those rejected are: aroonba ‘good’; noombadja ‘slow’; lidjirana ‘small’; nunnyaburra ‘we pl. inc.’; nanaminga ‘we pl. exc.’
- d. too similar to another street name. Examples of exclusions include:
 

Oowurra	too similar to Oorala
Woongala	too similar to Rujala
Naiya	too similar to Jundja
- e. too similar to an English word
  - Loona ‘too easily bastardized to Loony’

Clearly we would welcome efforts by bodies like the Armidale City Council to use Aboriginal names but the examples just presented show a poor understanding of language matters in general. How, for instance, could one reach the conclusion that ‘Naiya’ was too similar to ‘Jundja’? So, perhaps there is a need to develop a reasonable and consistent policy for the application of Aboriginal names. At the same time it is important to have a record of linguistic details accessible to serious toponymic scholars regardless of the pragmatic solutions adopted for public use.

### **2. 6. But what do the names mean?**

There is a common but mistaken belief that Aboriginal toponyms must mean something. In fact I have indicated that for some Aboriginal groups the majority of place names have no known meaning. Highly knowledgeable Aboriginal people in settings where the languages are still spoken by all age groups and a more traditional life style is still practiced will say: it’s just a name (Walsh 2002). Sometimes debates revolve around the meaning of the place name and this in turn leads to discussions about how readily access should be given to cultural knowledge. More generally, this unwillingness to accept toponymic opacity may lead to spurious ascriptions: people will attempt to equate parts of a place name with some word – even if it is not identical in

form. In my view these speculations have no more validity than equating parts of supposedly 'opaque' toponyms like Halifax and Vancouver with known words like 'fax' and 'van', respectively.

### Note

1. Time and space preclude any detailed account here. Some background can be found in Walsh (2008).

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