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An overview of Taungurung history since invasion

Uncle Roy was well known as a ‘character’ and he liked to have a laugh. He poked fun at white Australian society, criticised politicians, celebrated Aboriginal culture and instigated pride. He made a cheeky joke of serious topics such as the European classification of Aboriginal people according to caste. Aboriginal marriage and lineage traditions were designed to support the viability of the family and clan. In Uncle Roy’s words, choice of marriage partner aimed to keep ‘genetics fresh in the tribe’.¹ Under the pressure of European settlement, however, these core relationships became the basis for discrimination. Uncle Roy recalls his own embeddedness in family, and how this was interpreted by outsiders:

Me grandfather was John William Banjo Patterson, he come from up north from near Deniliquin. Me grandmother was Elizabeth (Lizzie) Edmonds Patterson. She was a beautiful lady; I carry her in here [indicates heart]. Later I’ll tell you how she made me an Elder at nine and a half years old. She was a Daunarung woman from up near Wangaratta. She married my grandfather up in Cumeragunja up in New South Wales, he was Wiradjuri and Dja Dja Wurrung. Wiradjuri land goes all the way up to Dubbo. His mother was Emma Kerr, she was Dja Dja Wurrung; she come from Bendigo Creek. In them days you went through your mother’s

1 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 12 July 2016, DS300157.

tribal area, not your father's. John William and Lizzie had seven children, including Frank, my father who married Violet Stephens, she was Irish. That makes me 'half-caste'.²

Uncle Roy gave a nudge and a wink as he made this last statement, about being 'half-caste'. So, I asked him to explain 'which half is which?' Laughing, he said, 'I go this way!' indicating an invisible line from head to toe. 'I've got this half Irish', he says, indicating his left side, 'and this half Aboriginal!', indicating his right.

Uncle Roy mobilised racist terminology to critique the fractionalisation of Aboriginality according to admixture of 'blood'.³ People designated 'half-caste', like Uncle Roy and his family, were not officially categorised as Aboriginal by government, but the white community discriminated against them anyway. Uncle Roy's joke shows why Aboriginality is best defined according to cultural identification and community recognition.⁴

Uncle Roy Patterson identified as a Taungurung man, but he also acknowledged Dja Dja Wurrung, Wiradjuri and Irish heritage. The Taungurung clans belong to the Kulin Nation. Clans in this confederacy spoke related languages, shared borders, trading agreements, cultural links and kinship through intermarriage. These shared dimensions of experience supported friendly relations between clans in the confederacy.

Taungurung traditional land encompasses a large area of central Victoria, with clan estates bounded by natural topographic features such as river basins and mountain ranges, including the Broken, Delatite, Goulburn, Coliban and Campaspe watersheds:⁵

We got one of the biggest areas in Victoria, the whole central part of Victoria from Kilmore, Benalla, Glenrowan, Beechworth, about 15 kilometres from Bright, back down over the Buffalo ranges, down along the Great Dividing Range back to Toolangi, Kinglake, Whittlesea, back to Kilmore. The top of the range is our boundary, the river can be the boundary too. The running rivers is where we get our strength from; the Goulburn River comes off the back of Mount Buller, the Acheron comes out of the back

2 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 12 July 2016, DS300157.

3 Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 186.

4 Smith et al., 'Fractional Identities', 542.

5 Clark, *Aboriginal Languages and Clans*, 370.

of Mount Donna Buang. Then you got the Rubicon and the Howqua rivers, near Molesworth; they all start up in the mountains and all come through my ancestral Country. The whole central part of Victoria and there is only nine clans in the whole area.⁶

The nine clans of the Taungurung people are organised into two kinship units, known as moieties, which have association with a special ancestor species or totem; Bunjil the Eaglehawk has five clans and Waa the Crow has four clans. Moiety affiliation influenced traditional marriage arrangements, land ownership and political authority.⁷ Clan names are distinguished by two suffixes, 'balug' meaning a number of people and '(w)illam' meaning dwelling place.⁸

1. 'Buthera Balug' (Bunjil moiety) is associated with the Upper Goulburn near Yea and Seymour.
2. 'Look Willam' (Waa moiety) is associated with the Campaspe River near Kilmore.
3. 'Moomoom Gundidj' (Bunjil moiety) is associated with the area west of the Campaspe and north-west of Mitchelstown.
4. 'Nattarak Balug' (Waa moiety) is associated with the Coliban and Upper Campaspe rivers.
5. 'Nira Balug' (Waa moiety) adjoins Wurundjeri Country in the hills and valleys near Kilmore, Broadford, Pyalong and across towards Mount Macedon and Heathcote.
6. 'Warring-Illum Balug' (Bunjil moiety) is associated with the *Warring* or Upper Goulburn River at Yea and Alexandra.
7. 'Yarran Illam' (Bunjil moiety) is associated with land east of the Goulburn River below Seymour.
8. 'Yeerun-Illam-Balug' (Bunjil moiety) is associated with Benalla.
9. 'Yowung-Illam Balug' (Waa moiety) is associated with Alexandra, Mansfield and the Upper Goulburn.⁹

6 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS300142.

7 Barwick, 'Mapping the Past', 105.

8 Barwick, 'Mapping the Past', 106.

9 Clark, *Aboriginal Languages and Clans*, 369.

Five of these clan groups have descendants today. Each clan has spiritual and economic responsibilities for their estate. As Uncle Roy explains:

Each clan was in a different area with their own information; we've got one mob here in this valley, we got another mob around Murchison. The southern side of Murchison is us; the northern side is Yorta Yorta. We got another mob up here at Mansfield, up into the mountain. There is a lot of area to cover, it is all mountain and river meeting in valleys. We travelled all around our Country. My family is from this area and up nearer to Wangaratta. My totem is the black crow. If anybody dies, he lets me know there's a death in the family. He comes over to where you are and goes 'arrk' and keeps on flyin'. It's just one 'arrk', nothing else, and he keeps on going. He is a beautiful bird. He is special to us, but to everyone else, he's a *bloody nuisance!*¹⁰

Uncle Roy took inspiration from his totem, Waa, the crow. He was generous and funny, but he could also be fractious, contrary and outspoken. Uncle Roy argued, for example, that while his knowledge of bush tucker and bush medicine might hold some similarity with that of neighbouring Aboriginal groups, the cultural and geographical contexts are different:

We are part of the Kulin Nation. All Aboriginals in this area of the Yarra Valley and that, Dandenong ranges and up all around here have got the same sort of tucker, but our culture is different. I had a bit of a barney with the shire about the cultural information they got from Wurundjeri people for an interpretive sign up here. I said, 'you've got no right to get that from Wurundjeri, you should have come to me, being Daunarung. This is Daunarung land and you've got no right to use other information. Our information is similar, but you've got no right to use their information on our ancestral Country'. Those signs had to be pulled down, and I gave them the information I had.¹¹

Uncle Roy wanted to demonstrate that Taungurung history and culture is distinctive, because it has been shaped by particular people, experiences, beliefs and geographies.

10 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 3 March 2016, DS3001137.

11 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 3 March 2016, DS3001137.

Taungurung people and first contact

Before white invasion, Aboriginal life was shaped by responsibilities to land and by strategic coalitions and traditional enmity. Aboriginal nations outside the Kulin confederation were viewed as ‘mainmait’ or ‘wild people’ from far off Country.¹² Such pejorative terms indicated inferiority and untrustworthiness. Mainmait were blamed for unexplained deaths, for kidnapped women and for stolen resources. Foreign and distant clans were also held responsible when European diseases swept along Aboriginal trade routes between 1788 and 1829, before permanent white settlement in these southern districts.¹³ Initial meetings with settlers on isolated pastoral runs were usually peaceful, as Europeans relied upon Aboriginal guides and traditional knowledge to find resources. As Uncle Roy suggests:

When the white people first got here, they took one camp and the Aboriginal another, and they noticed what the Aboriginals were doing, so they did the same thing to get their food.¹⁴

Interracial conflict and violent reprisals became more frequent when Taungurung people understood that the Europeans intended to stay. Their disregard for Aboriginal culture led to conflict, often centred upon access to resources, or relating to kinship, reciprocity and respect for Country:¹⁵

Cattle and sheep wanted to make camp at the waterhole, and there was a big fight over it, over the waterhole because white people reckoned it was theirs and the Aboriginal people reckoned it was theirs. If any animal come down to the water, they killed the animal. The white people shot the Aboriginals for killing their animals. We were classed as animals back then and are still being treated as animals by some people, even today.¹⁶

By the time Uncle Roy’s great-grandmother Emma Kerr was born in 1853, punitive settler ‘dispersals’ had forced Aboriginal clans away from settled areas. First peoples congregated on or near protectorate stations established by government (1839–49) to access rations.¹⁷ Here government officials

12 Clark, *Aboriginal Languages and Clans*, 418.

13 Campbell, *Invisible Invaders*, 152; Smith et al., ‘Fractional Identities’, 535.

14 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 3 March 2016, DS3001137.

15 Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 57.

16 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 3 March 2016, DS3001137.

17 Protectorate stations were established in the Goulburn Valley, Loddon Valley, near Melbourne and in the Western District. See Barwick, ‘Changes in the Aboriginal Population’, 288.

induced them to assume civilised lifestyles and attempted to convert them to Christianity. Traditional differences and animosities between Aboriginal clans became less prominent in the later years of the protectorate, as numbers declined and customary lifestyles were difficult to practise.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Aboriginal people made every effort to remain on their own Country for as long possible. Emma Kerr's mother, an unnamed Dja Dja Wurrung woman, gave birth to her daughter at Kelly's Station on Bendigo Creek. Emma Kerr's birthplace likely reflects the movement of Dja Dja Wurrung to the northern pastoral areas of their Country, in the wake of the gold rush.¹⁹ Aboriginal workers could more easily gain employment on pastoral stations after white station hands joined the rush to Ballarat and Bendigo diggings. Officials estimated that, just after the rush, in 1853, Victoria was home to 80,000 settlers, 1,907 Aboriginal people and 6.5 million sheep.²⁰ An additional 500,000 settlers arrived during the first decade of the gold rush, and many stayed permanently. This increase in the white population forced the Victorian Government to develop new Aboriginal management policies. A Select Committee of the Legislative Council was appointed to enquire 'into the present condition of the Aborigines of this Colony' in 1858. Plans were devised to concentrate all First Nations groups in one isolated location, but William Thomas, Guardian of Aborigines, strongly advised against the measure. Drawing upon his understanding of attachment to Country, he advised that 'each tribe' should have 'a special place set apart on their own hunting ground'.²¹ The Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of Aborigines (established as an outcome of this inquiry in 1859) initially heeded this advice. The Central Board subsequently oversaw the development of reserves across Victoria, including government-controlled stations and church-controlled missions.²² One of the first stations was established on Taungurung land, at Acheron in the Upper Goulburn Valley, now known as Taggerty.²³ Uncle Roy's ancestors envisaged Acheron Aboriginal Station as a place where they could develop a self-sustaining agricultural enterprise while living on significant traditional land. Their hopes aligned with the stated priorities of government but, unfortunately, not with the ambitions of influential local squatters. The next chapter traces this clash of perspectives.

18 Clark, *Goulburn River Aboriginal Protectorate*, 91.

19 Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 112; Attwood, *The Good Country*, 158.

20 Smith et al. 'Fractional Identities', 535.

21 William Thomas, minutes of evidence, 1 November 1858, in Victoria, Parliament, *Report of the Select Committee*.

22 Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 126.

23 Noble, *The Red Gate*, 2.

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