

CHAPTER 12

Some area names in the far north-east of South Australia

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Introduction

Area names are a prominent feature of Aboriginal landscape terminology in at least some parts of Australia. This has been discussed for instance by Bower (this volume). The aim of the present paper is to show that this applied also to the far north-east of South Australia. In the north-east of South Australia and adjacent regions these area names are important in that they transcend 'tribal' divisions. They show that Aboriginal people, though they feel they 'belong' to a particular tract of country traditionally, do not view the whole landscape as compartmentalised. A particular tract is viewed as part of a larger landscape both from the point of view of natural features as well as from the point of view of mythology.

This aspect of the area names has led to a certain amount of confusion with the notion of 'tribal' associations. Mick McLean, the most senior of the Wangkangurru people I had the fortune to speak with in the 1960s was quite clear in his mind:

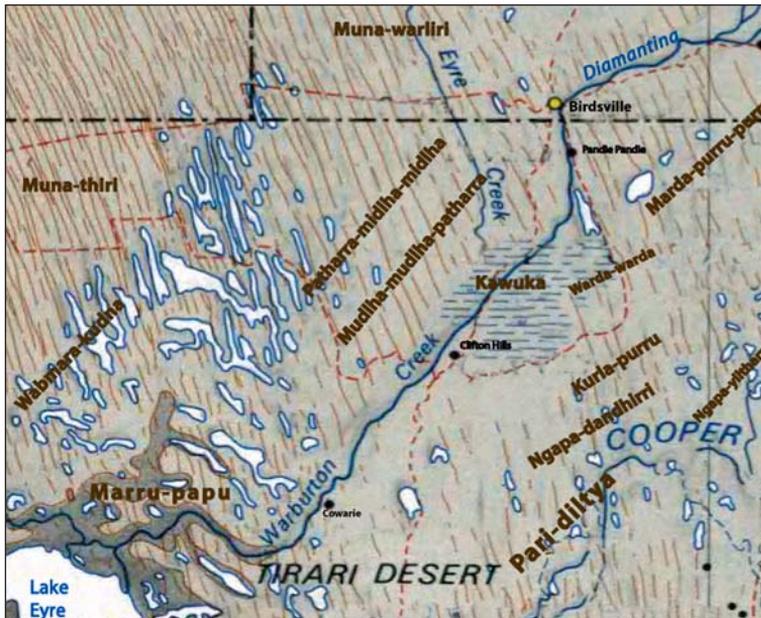
antha Wangkangurru¹ *mikiri-nganha,* *Munathiri-nganha*
I Wangkangurru well country-from high sand dune country-from

'I am Wangkangurru, from the country where we have wells (i.e. the desert country), from the high sandhill country.'

To him, his 'tribal' association was Wangkangurru, and the further explanations simply gave more detail of the area where he came from. His particular area, the 'high sandhill country' belonged to a local group of Wangkangurru people. Some area names however denoted much bigger regions, and they could be shared by several 'tribes'. The area around the lower Warburton, the lower part of the Macumba and the lower Kallakoopah was usually referred to by the Killalpaninna missionaries as the 'Salt Creek country'.

It was shared by Arabana and Wangkangurru to the west, Thirari people to the south-east, and Ngamani and Yarluyandi people to the north-east – not always amicably – as described for instance in a sad story told by Horne and Aiston (1924: 83ff). Wangkangurru people called the area *Marru-papu*: if they came from there they described themselves as Wangkangurru *Marru-papu-nganha* ‘from *Marru-papu* i.e. the ‘Salt Creek’ country’. The same type of description would have been given by a Ngamani person that came from the eastern part of that area, i.e. ‘I am a Ngamani person from the ‘Salt Creek’ country’. An area name may belong to a region that is entirely within one particular ‘tribal’ country, but it may also refer to a region that forms part of the country of several ‘tribes’.

Figure 12.1: The far north-east corner of South Australia, showing area names. Map by Colin Macdonald.



Roderick Wilson, in his unfortunately unpublished thesis of 1981, interpreted the area names as names of subdivisions of ‘tribes’. In a way they are, but they may refer to subdivisions of several tribes – a person may be a ‘gibber-dweller’ and be Diyari or Yawarawarrka: ‘gibber country’ is an interpretation of the term ‘Paridiltiya’ (see below) used by J. G. Reuther (1981, hence forward referred to simply as ‘Reuther’) in his volumes VIII-IX which list personal names. Howitt (1996[1904]: 45) speaks of the ‘Pariltija-kana’, the ‘Pariltija men’ as a subdivision of the Diyari. Wilson however, in his thesis realised that the

description referred “to a much larger area than that intimated by Howitt” and he worked out with perspicacity that the term denoted a wide and not even continuous area of similar gibber terrain (Wilson 1981: 55).

We are fortunate in the case of the far north-east of South Australia in that we have an early record of these names: a number of them are shown on the map drawn in 1904 by H. J. Hillier, the school teacher at Killalpaninna, from the data provided by the missionary Reuther. For further details on this map, see Jones (2002).

Area names refer to country that is special either in landform or in mythology. They represent a different notion from the so-called ‘tribe’. It is interesting to note that the Hillier-Reuther map does not in fact give the names of ‘tribes’, only the names of areas, and it is likely that this reflected to some extent the way in which his informants thought about the country. N. B. Tindale had a special interest in boundaries and may have felt that this was somehow a gap, and on a copy of the map in the South Australian Museum he inserted the relevant names of ‘tribes’. He may of course have just been using the Hillier map as a working document to develop and elucidate his ideas on tribal boundaries.

There is almost an obsession with the need for an explanation for every placename. The popular books, particularly the multiple editions of the Reed books, as shown by L. Kostanski’s paper in this volume, bear witness to this. However, just as placenames are sometimes not analysable, the same applies to area names. In both cases an original ‘meaning’ may well have been lost in the mists of time. The area names that are analysable are landform names and mythological names and some are both.

Landform names as area names

Landform names descriptive of vegetation

Marda-purru-purru

This name, ‘Mardaburuburu’ in Reuther’s spelling, is the traditional term for what is now called Sturt’s Stony Desert. *Marda* is the Yarluyandi and Mithaka word for ‘stone’; *-purru* is the usual ‘having’, ‘full of’ suffix in the Wangkangurru language of the Simpson Desert. It is used in Yarluyandi fixed locations with the same meaning, and with the reduplication of *-purru* the name *Marda-purru-purru* means ‘very full of stones’.

This is clearly a landform name that transcends several so-called ‘tribal boundaries’, and it is written over a wide area on the Hillier-Reuther map. The form in which a name is given on this map obviously reflects the language of the person from whom Reuther got the information. In this case he notes that it was Yarluyandi. The *Marda-purru-purru* area also includes some Yawarawarrka country: the Yawarawarrka word for ‘stone’ is *mardra* (Breen 2004b: 43). Yawarawarrka people would have pronounced the name just slightly differently from Yarluyandi, but the name was otherwise the same: both Yarluyandi and Yawarawarrka used the suffix *-purru* ‘having’, but only in fixed locutions (Breen 2004a: 116).

Kurla-purru

The name ‘Kurlaburu’ in Reuther’s spelling belongs to an area to the south-east of Goyder Lagoon. *Kurla* is the Wangkangurru-Yarluyandi name for ‘sandhill-canegrass’, so the name ‘*Kurla-purru*’ would appear to consist of a noun + suffix and would mean ‘full of sandhill canegrass’. The area is traversed by large sandhills where the canegrass forms big clumps, which retain the sand around them.

There is some doubt about the accuracy of this explanation, as much of the area is in Yawarawarrka country, and in that language *kurla* means ‘burr’, ‘bindi-eye’ (Breen 2004a: 36). This explanation too has some support on the ground: there is no shortage of burrs.

The matter is further complicated in that Reuther must have heard the name from Diyari people and he gives a quite different explanation based on Diyari. He states that *kurla* refers to ‘the thigh of an animal’, and that *buru* means ‘limb, piece, portion, whole’ (Reuther, VII: 1027), so that the full meaning is given as ‘to leave the legs or bones whole (i.e. intact)’.

The *Kurla-purru* area is not near Diyari country and is right alongside *Marda-purru-purru*, the country ‘very full of stones’. The ‘full of canegrass/bindi-eyes’ explanation is therefore far more likely. If we accept this explanation it would simply be another example of the naming of an area according to vegetation. As noted by others, especially Nash (1997), this is a common phenomenon: “There is widespread evidence that in Aboriginal thought tracts of country are identified by distinctive flora” (Nash 1997: 189).

What we are emphasising here is that the notion of these areas in the north-east of South Australia is a separate concept from ‘tribal’ area.

Descriptive names involving body-parts

There are a number of landform names that contain words for body-parts: they show a vision of the land as a living body. Most striking are the following two names:

Patharra-midlha-midlha (Wangkangurru), Reuther's 'Pataramidlamidla',
and

Mudlha-mudlha-patharra (Karangura, Yarluyandi, Ngamani), Reuther's
'Mudlamudlapatara'

They are identical in meaning, and thereby illustrate most clearly the fact that area names cross 'tribal' boundaries. They mean '(area) which has box-trees growing at the end of the sandhills'. If one wanted to be technical, these names, like so many placenames, are possessive (bahuvrihi) compounds.

Patharra means 'box-tree' in all the languages of the region, and *midlha/mudlha* means 'nose': *midlha* is the Wangkangurru form of the word. In Wangkangurru (Hercus 1994: 98), as well as in languages very closely related to Diyari, repetition of nouns conveys a diminutive, so 'nose-nose' means 'the very tip of the nose'.

A mountain or hill of any sort is often viewed as a 'head': the traditional name of the Olgas, *Kata-Tjuta* 'many heads', is well known. In some languages the actual term for 'head' is even used to mean 'hill', for instance in the Kulin languages of Victoria (Hercus 1986: 201). There is an interesting discussion of the head/hill polysemy in the central-north of the Northern Territory by McConvell (2002: 284). The 'nose' of a sandhill in the Simpson Desert area means the 'tip' of a sandhill, the protruding part of the 'head'. There are very few box-trees in the Central Simpson Desert: there is simply not enough moisture. In these more easterly regions, there is just slightly more rain, and the maximum drainage is to the very tip of the sandhills. This applies even more conspicuously to the places where the outermost channels of Eyre Creek just occasionally carry some water, and box-trees therefore do grow at the tip of sandhills as they face in towards those channels.

Reuther obviously heard the names from both Wangkangurru and Yarluyandi speakers, as both forms of the name appear on the Hillier map. The Wangkangurru form does not feature in his Gazetteer but the Yarluyandi form does. This entry says:

Mudlamudlapatara, Jeljendi:
(this) is the name of a 'district'.
mudla = 'the place where sandhills terminate'

muclamudla = denotes the termination of many² sandhills

patara = 'gum-tree'.

meaning: 'gum-trees at all the sandhill terminals'.

Along the boundary of this 'district' the sandhills end and ranges begin, on the latter are stands of gum-trees. Hence the name. (Reuther, VII: 2406)

Reuther – and presumably also Hillier – never had a chance to see this country, where there are no ranges, but Reuther's basic interpretation still stands.

The following name applies to an area further south, but is just mentioned here because it is typical of the landscape-body connection.

Pari-diltya (Reuther's 'Paridiltja')

This name is another nominal possessive compound. It was explained by Reuther:

(This) is the name of a district. Pari or kajiri = 'creek'; diltja = 'sinews', 'muscles, tributaries'. Meaning 'a creek with tributaries'.

By this the Cooper's Creek is meant, with its tributaries. In this 'district' (or region) many tributary creeks run into the Cooper; also (one could say) the Cooper wends its way through the midst of them. The district has therefore been named accordingly. (Reuther, VII: 1705)

This name means 'area which has creeks that are (like) sinews'. It conveys a good picture of the gibber plains, which are crossed by watercourses, the smallest of which are often called 'gutters' by Aboriginal people. These watercourses, dry except after the rare heavy rains, are distributed across the body of the landscape like sinews.

The name of the Strzelecki Creek given by Reuther shows a similar vision of the landscape as a body. It is 'Mandra-parkulu', 'three stomachs', i.e. 'three deep waterholes'. (Reuther, VII: 1090)

Muna-thiri

Wangkangurru people use this term to refer to the Central Simpson Desert. Reuther gives the following explanation:

'Muna' = a sloping bank, 'tiri' = flat

Meaning 'for the sloping banks to terminate in a flat'.

(This) is the name of a country region. In this region the sandhills terminate on flat (country) and turn into gibber plains... (Reuther, ?:)

This explanation does not quite give the right picture: *muna* is the ordinary Wangkangurru word for ‘human chest’, and *thiri* means ‘flat area’. This is the land of the highest sandhills: between them are wide plains. The first white explorer who travelled through this country, D. Lindsay, constantly comments on these plains in his journal, for instance: “we went for ‘Beelpa’ or ‘Baalbia’, another native well over a very good plain with saltbush, cottonbush and bluebush” (Lindsay 1886: 3). The sandhills rise like heads from these plains, which are viewed as the ‘chest’ of the landscape, and the name means ‘(region) where the base of the sandhills (i.e. ‘the chest’) is flat’.

Muna-warliri

The senior Wangkangurru people never mentioned the name of this area, though part of it must have been in their country. The name is one of the relatively few noted by Reuther from the Wangkamadla people who adjoined the Wangkangurru to the north and east. It appears on the Hillier-Reuther map as ‘Munawaliri’ and is explained as:

Muna = a steep bank, waliri = the foot of a hill. Meaning ‘steep banks at the end of the sandhills’.

In this area the sandhills extend as far as the Salt Creek which has breached them at this spot. Here lay the territory of the two Kankuwuluna(s), and here the Wonkanguru, Wonkatjari, Wonkamarla and Jeljujanti (tribes) dwell. (Reuther, VII: 1061)

The ‘Salt Creek’ in Reuther’s writing is usually the Warburton, i.e. the lower Diamantina, but here it appears to be also used for a tributary, the lower Georgina or Eyre Creek.

The name ‘*Muna-warliri*’ is parallel to ‘*Muna-thiri*’. The word *muna* means ‘chest’ and *warliri*, though not well attested, means ‘bank’, ‘incline’, so the whole compound means ‘region where the base of the sandhills (the chest) is undulating’. In the eastern Simpson Desert and especially across Eyre Creek the sandhills are not quite as high as in the centre: it is more undulating sandhill terrain.

Area names based on mythology

The territory of the ‘two Kankuwuluna’ *Kangkuwulunha*

In the notes quoted above, Reuther refers to the *Muna-warliri* area as being also the ‘territory of the two Kankuwuluna’, and he makes it quite clear that this ‘territory’ is shared by a number of ‘tribes’: ‘here the Wonkanguru,

Wonkatjari, Wonkamarla and Jeljujanti (tribes) dwell'. The 'territory of the two Kankuwuluna' obviously spans across many 'tribal boundaries', and it is in fact a huge region on the eastern side of the Simpson Desert. This is confirmed by Reuther's comments on another area name, 'Ngamara' (Reuther, VII: 1443). 'Ngamara' is a much smaller stretch of land: he had heard about it from 'Judlajudlanja', i.e. Ulaloinya people who came from the north-eastern edge of the Simpson Desert around present-day Ethabuka and Carlo: "this area (Ngamara) is in the province of the Kankuwulanas". The translator adds a footnote: "this appears to be Reuther's first reference to this tribe".

'Kankuwuluna' is not the name of a 'tribe' at all. The name belongs to two most important mythological beings, the Two Boys, usually referred to now by their Wangkangurru name *Thutirla-pula* 'Boys-two'. They were also known as *Karuwali*, 'Big boys'. *Kangku* means 'boy', 'uninitiated youth', and *-wulu* is the dual marker: this applies to a number of languages on the eastern side of Lake Eyre and further north, including Diyari, Ngamani and Yarluyandi. *-nha* is the widespread proper noun marker.

The story and the songs of the Two Boys represented one of the most important Central Australian traditions, far-reaching in location, ritual and association. The Two Boys killed many colourful birds and put the feathers into their big bag. They travelled east from Dalhousie Springs near the Northern Territory border in South Australia: they went by a circuitous route right across the country of the Simpson Desert Wangkangurru to the country of the Ngamani, Karangura, Yarluyandi, Mithaka, Wangkamadla, Wangkayutyurru and Antekerrenpenhe. They brought with them the use of feathers in lieu of paint for important ceremonies, especially the *Warrthampa*, which was the main ceremony for the eastern people.

The 'territory of the Kankuwuluna' refers to that large area on the east side of the Simpson Desert where they travelled and spread the *Warrthampa* cult. It is an area name based on mythology.

Warda-warda (Reuther's 'Wodawoda')

This name is derived from the same myth, that of the Two Boys. *Warda-warda* is only a small area on the eastern side of Goyder Lagoon. The name means 'ceremonial head-dress made of feathers', and Reuther (VII: 2407) associated it with emus. The area is, however, on the track of the Two Boys. They had travelled underground during the easternmost part of their journey through the desert and emerged at the Goyder Lagoon Waterhole. They were allowed to take part in a *Warrthampa* ceremony and they said to the local people 'throw away your paint' and they showed these people how to make colourful headgear and other decorations from feathers. The local people then decided to have a series

of ceremonies using the new type of decoration at various sites around the flat country below the Kooncheree sandhill. This is why that whole area was known as *Warda-warda*.

Kawuka (Reuther's 'Kauka')

Reuther gives the following explanation from 'Jeljujanti' people:

Kauka = a bush species,

Ngardutjelpani here came across this species of bush, and named the place after it. (Reuther, VII: 817)

'Ngardutjelpani' is Reuther's name for the Ancestral Swan and so he clearly associates *Kawuka* with the Swan myth.

Wangkangurru-Yarluyandi people still use this name to refer to a large stretch of land, rather bigger than indicated on the Reuther map, on the channels of the lower 'Georgina', i.e. Eyre Creek, and on Goyder Lagoon. This area is subject to periodic flooding and is a major waterfowl breeding ground. According to the myth, *Kuti* the Ancestral Swan created these cane-grass and lignum swamps so that she could lay her eggs, which hatched into all manner of waterbirds from swans and pelicans to the smallest of the little stilts that run along the water's edge. The name *Kawuka* does not appear to be further analysable, and Wangkangurru-Yarluyandi people do not associate it with any species of bush. Apart from cane-grass and lignum there does not appear to be any other type of plant that is characteristic of this waterfowl breeding area. *Kawuka* is clearly an area name that is associated with mythology.

Wabmara-kudna (Reuther's 'Womarakudna')

Wabmara means 'wind' in Wangkangurru and *kudna* is the Wangkangurru form of the widespread word *kuna* 'faeces'. The meaning of the whole compound is 'massive dust-storm', i.e. 'what comes out from wind'. The preferred term in Wangkangurru is more specific: it is *Kanyakarla-kudna* 'what comes out from the hot north wind'. It is not the normal word for 'dust-storm' in Wangkangurru, but a figurative and poetic expression used mainly in recitals of mythology. An exact parallel is *maka-kudna* 'a cloud of smoke', from *maka* 'fire', literally 'what comes out from a fire'. This too was not used as the ordinary word for 'smoke', it was a figurative expression for 'a cloud of smoke'. This metaphorical use of the term *kudna* 'faeces' appears to have been widespread, but because it was stylistic we would expect it to be recorded only in languages where we have extensive data.

We have examples in the most comprehensive of dictionaries, the one by Reuther of Diyari. In this language the word for 'wind' is *watara* and the word for 'fire' is *туру* in Reuther's spelling:

item 930 *watarakudna* = 'a very thick duststorm'

item 929 *turukudna* = 'a pillar of cloud; a column of smoke' (Reuther, IV)

A similar expression is found away to the south in the brilliant dictionary of Parnkalla from Eyre Peninsula by Schürmann. In this language the word for 'fire' is *gadla* (Schürmann 1844: 4): 'gadla gudna the clouds of smoke produced by a running fire'.

The area name *Wabmara-kudna* or *Kanyakarla-kudna* is to some extent descriptive. It refers to the southern Simpson Desert. There is no doubt that this area is prone to the most horrendous dust-storms. The north wind gets there after blowing over hundreds of kilometres of dunes, and so it can truly be labelled 'dust-storm country'. The main reference in the area name, however, is to The Great Dust-storm of the Dreamtime. It happened when the Waterbirds, who had been chasing the Fish, were travelling through this part of the desert. The Ancestral Crane hid from the others, he held up his firestick towards the sun and 'charged' that stick by means of songs to make the sun hotter and hotter. He then called up the north wind to bring a huge dust-storm in order to 'perish' all the other waterbirds. This is one of the main myths of the Simpson Desert.

An area name that is not analysable: *Marru-papu* 'The Salt Creek country'

This name refers to the area around the lower Macumba, the Kallakoopah and the Warburton as they approach the north of Lake Eyre. The waterholes in that area are not permanent and become very saline as they dry out, and people had to rely on soaks. The name *Marru-papu* does not appear on the Hillier-Reuther map of 1904, nor in Reuther's list of placenames. It is, however, a term frequently used by Wangkangurru people. What the name means is totally unclear. The term *papu* is well-known: it means 'egg' in Wangkangurru. There is a word *marru* in Wangkangurru: it means 'beyond', 'on the other side'. People joked about the etymology: Mick McLean, who had learnt something of Western Desert languages over the years, thought it would be strange if the name meant 'kangaroo-egg' from the Western Desert word *marlu* 'kangaroo'. It seemed that *Marru-papu* was one of the names that are simply not analysable.

The work of Reuther, however, gives some indication of a possible origin of the name. Many people from the Salt Creek country came to Killalpaninna. In

his volumes VIII-IX Reuther gives the names of many people who were or had been at the mission. He notes the language group, place where they were born and other details. The majority of these people were born before white contact. Reuther here uses a term 'Maruwapu' which he interprets as 'the Salt Creek area' and he sometimes specifies the location further by adding 'Diamantina', i.e. 'the Warburton' of modern maps. Because the rivers flow together north of Lake Eyre this name includes the lower reaches of the Macumba and it includes the Kallakoopah, which is a branch of the Warburton/Diamantina anyway. There are 25 persons whose place of birth is given as 'Maruwapu' with the occasional explanation 'on the Salt Creek'. The majority of these are Wangkangurru people, but there are about half a dozen Arabana, a couple of Ngamani, and two Diyari. There is a further group of people whose place of birth is not specified and who are described as 'Maruwapula', 'inhabitant of Salt Creek' and this again includes some Arabana and Diyari. The area name 'Maruwapu' obviously refers to exactly the same region as the Wangkangurru *Marru-papu*. It is simply the Diyari/Ngamani/Thirari name.

In spite of being mentioned so frequently 'Maruwapu' does not appear on the Hillier-Reuther map as an area name, though it is given as the name of a specific location with the following explanation:

maru = 'plain; level ground'

wapu = 'a basin-like valley or gorge'

meaning: 'for the basin-like valley to be a level plain'.

Kuruljuruna found this plain, hemmed inside of the local sandhills (and shaped) like a basin. He therefore gave it the (above) name. (Reuther, VII: 1164)

The word *maru* 'plain' is not known in Wangkangurru, but *wapu* 'basin-like area' is a standard Wangkangurru word. We can only guess that the Wangkangurru area name *Marru-papu* represents some kind of popular etymology of 'Maruwapu' – or that the reverse happened, and that the Diyari/Ngamani/Thirari name represents a popular etymology of an ancient and unanalysable Wangkangurru name. All this is just speculation, and the origin and meaning of the area name must remain a mystery.

Summary

In the north-east of South Australia, the area, be it large or small, to which a person belonged, formed an important part of his/her identity. It constituted a very special kind of personal association, different from the 'tribe'. How far this system of special personal association extended remains uncertain. There is

certainly evidence for a similar situation on at least parts of Cape York Peninsula, with area names transcending linguistic boundaries (P. Sutton, pers. comm.). For the north-east of South Australia it has been possible to investigate the area names thanks to the long memories of Aboriginal people and thanks to the great work of Reuther.

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Endnotes

1. There are three r-sounds in Wangkangurru and adjacent languages, and the following orthography has been adopted in both papers in this volume: r = front tap, rr = trill, $\underset{_}{r}$ = retroflex glide, like r in English.
2. Reuther took repetition to imply plurality. Unfortunate wording like 'sandhill terminals' is due to his translator, P. Scherer, who followed literal accuracy to the extreme, as shown in this extract where he puts 'this' in brackets because it was not there in the German original. This preoccupation is often to the detriment of idiomatic English.