

# CHAPTER 19

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## Kurtjar placenames

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### Introduction

This is a study of placenames recorded during research on the Kurtjar language of south-western Cape York Peninsula in the late 1970s. After introducing the language and its speakers' knowledge of placenames (see below), the paper discusses those names for which etymologies can be proposed, including ones which are homophonous to common nouns (see 'Names from common nouns') as well as those formed by compounding and/or affixation (see under headings 'Names formed as compounds' to 'Descriptive clauses'). Especially numerous are ones involving the many allomorphs of the locative suffix, including one found only fossilised in placenames (see 'Names formed with a locative suffix'). Descriptive clauses used to designate a few sites are also discussed, whether or not they represent proper names (see 'Descriptive clauses'). The nature of the names is quite similar to that in nearby languages, as will be illustrated by the occasional citation of names from Koko-Bera, to the north, although the unusual phonological development of Kurtjar poses special problems for the analysis of some names (see 'Notes on phonology and transcription').

### The language and the data

The traditional territory of the Kurtjar is in south-western Cape York Peninsula, along the Gulf of Carpentaria coast from near the Staaten River to south of the Smithburn River; the accompanying map (Figure 19.1) is a modified version of one in a manuscript by Black and Gilbert (1996). The data discussed here was gathered during a general study of the Kurtjar language between 1974 and 1979. At this time it seemed that the language was no longer in general use, although there were still about a dozen people, mostly elderly, who could speak it with some fluency. Judging from how limited knowledge of the language was among younger people it seems likely that the language had not been in general use since the 1930s, when some of the people still spent most of their time on the cattle stations in or near traditional Kurtjar territory. Apparently most of the

people had been moved to the town of Normanton in the 1950s or so, returning to Kurtjar territory mainly when they had seasonal employment on the cattle stations there.

Accordingly, my initial work on the language in Normanton (and briefly in Canberra) did not provide a particularly good basis for studying placenames, although occasional names did appear in stories or elicited examples. In mid-1978, however, I and two other Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies<sup>1</sup> researchers were able to accompany two Kurtjar speakers, Rolly Gilbert and Butcher Pallew, on a two week expedition into Kurtjar territory. This allowed us to visit several dozen named sites while gathering the names of many others, for a total of over 150 names. Those whose locations were determined are represented by numbers on the accompanying map, although the full list of names and their numbers is not presented here.

Considering the limited and variable contact Kurtjar people had with their traditional country in the decades prior to the research it was not surprising that their knowledge of placenames was similarly limited and varied. Indeed, the above two Kurtjar speakers complemented each other in an important way because Rolly Gilbert had spent much of his early life in the more northern area, including Macaroni Station, while Butcher Pallew was more familiar with the more southern part, including Delta Station. Accordingly not all of the placenames were familiar to both of these speakers, but it nonetheless proved possible to confirm a majority of them with other Kurtjar speakers, especially thanks to later assistance from Halo Ward in Normanton. Most of the names were subsequently listed in Black and Gilbert's (1996) unpublished dictionary of the language.

Some of those names relate to places said to be outside Kurtjar territory, usually in the neighbouring Kok-Nar territory to the north, but those that seem to have a Kurtjar etymology are nonetheless considered below.

For comparative purposes occasional forms are also cited from other languages, notably Koko-Bera (indigenously Kok-Kapér), a language of the coastal area near Kowanyama, to the north. This data is from fieldwork I carried out in 1978-79 and in 1998 and which was reported in an unpublished dictionary by Edwards and Black (1998). It is interesting to contrast the knowledge of placenames in this area with that of the Kurtjar: it was generally quite good for the local area, throughout which people still travelled, camped and hunted because it had been set aside as an Aboriginal reserve. As with the Kurtjar, however, it was far more limited and variable for the cattle station areas immediately south of the reserve. It is difficult for people to maintain knowledge of their traditional country when they seldom have access to it.

## Notes on phonology and transcription

Kurtjar has a somewhat unusual phonology for an Australian language, and the practical orthography used here (from Black and Gilbert 1996) may seem a bit awkward. The vowels in the practical orthography are as presented in Table 19.1.

**Table 19.1: Kurtjar vowels**

	front	central		back
	unrounded	unrounded	rounded	rounded
high, short, lax		i		
high to mid, short, lax	e		oe	o
mid, long, tense	ee		ooe	oo
low, short, lax		a		
low, long, tense		aa		

As in many Australian languages there is a contrast between front, low central, and back vowels that occur both short and long, but for Kurtjar these have been written as *e*, *a*, and *o* respectively, because long *ee* and *oo* are clearly mid [e:] and [o:], and even short *e* and *o* were recorded as mid (if high mid) [e] and [o] respectively for some speakers, if lax high vowels [ɪ] and [ʊ] for others. Kurtjar also has a mid to high central vowel [ə] written short as *oe* and long as *ooe*; despite the spelling the rounding is not great, so that e.g. Kurtjar *ooen* ‘faeces’ sounds rather like the Australian pronunciation of the English word *earn*. There is also a schwa vowel written *i*, which some speakers may not always distinguish from short *e* and/or short *oe*; I have attempted to maintain the distinction by writing short *e* and *oe* in forms where they seemed to be distinguished from *i* on at least some occasions, although this is the least reliable aspect of the transcription. Occasionally speakers exhibit more striking variations in vowels, as in a placename known to one speaker as ‘Manakorr’ and to another as ‘Manokirr’. Note also that *ua* (and long *uaa*) represents a diphthong whose onset is a high, central, unrounded vowel rather like the schwa *i*, even though it seemed less misleading to write it with initial *u*.

**Table 19.2: Kurtjar consonants**

	bilabial	lamino-dental	apico-alveolar	lamino-palatal	retroflex	dorso-velar
stops	p	th	t	ch		k
fricatives	bh	dh				gh
nasals	m	nh	n	ny		ng
lateral			l			
trill			rr			
tap			r		rd	
glides	w			y		

For the consonants (see Table 19.2), reasonably common symbols are used for the stops *p*, *th*, *t*, *ch*, and *k*, the nasals *m*, *nh*, *n*, *ny*, and *ng*, the liquid *l*, and the semivowels *w* and *y*. There are three contrastive fricatives: a bilabial *bh* that can always be voiced [β] but is often voiceless [ɸ] when not intervocalic, a voiced laminodental *dh*, and a voiced velar [ɣ] written *gh*. There is a three-way contrast between rhotics: a single *r* represents an alveolar tap, double *rr* is used for an alveolar trill, and *rd* represents a retroflex that varies between a glide and a tap. In the orthography the name Kurtjar would be rendered as ‘Korchard’.

To appreciate the etymologies of occasional placenames it helps to have some understanding of how Kurtjar developed historically (Black 1980). For example, it may not be obvious how *ooen* ‘faeces’ < \**kuna* could be the root for the name ‘Nuaangk’ (example 30 below) unless you know how the latter could developed from an earlier \**kuna-ngka* through the loss of the first syllable after its vowel was copied into the second, the loss of the final vowel, and the lengthening of the remaining vowel; similar changes, as well as the lenition of earlier \**t* to *r*, can be seen in \**kutaka* > *ruaak* ‘dog’. It may also help to know that the Kurtjar fricatives *bh*, *dh*, *gh*, and the tap *r* generally result from the lenition of earlier stops \**p*, \**th*, \**k*, and \**t* respectively, but that *gh* was also added after originally word final \**l* and \**rr* to yield *lgh* and *rggh* respectively. Note also that the *gh* is often elided in such final clusters, possibly always by some speakers, so that a placename recorded as ‘Lmeer’ (name 7 later) is essentially just an alternative pronunciation of *lmeergh* ‘ironwood tree’.

Koko-Bera has a simpler system of consonants than Kurtjar, without the fricatives and with only two rhotics, an alveolar *rr* and a retroflex *r*. Its vowel system is quite different, with five main vowels *i*, *e*, *a*, *o*, and *u* that can take contrastive stress (marked acute) rather than length. In many unstressed syllables a sixth, schwa-like vowel is written as *v* following Alpher’s (e.g. 1991) practice for the nearby Yir Yoront language. The contrast between the schwa and the main vowels is at best marginal, and in some environments speakers vary as to whether they have schwa or something closer to one of the main vowels (as in *ngvlthórr* or *ngolthórr* ‘black’), but it is convenient to be able to write schwa where the choice of which main vowel to write would be entirely arbitrary.

## Nature and origins of the names

In terms of their general nature Kurtjar placenames seem much like those attested for other languages in south-western Cape York Peninsula. To illustrate this I include examples from Koko-Bera as I list these characteristics below:

- a. Placenames constitute a morphologically distinct subclass of nouns in that they do not take overt marking for the locative case, whether or not they already include a locative suffix (see (d) below). As a Kurtjar example, 'Aalgh' can mean either 'Hull Creek' or the locative 'at Hull Creek'; the allative, on the other hand, has a suffix *-k*, i.e. *aal-k* 'to Hull Creek'. Similarly, Koko-Bera 'Pirrvków' is either 'Shelfo' or 'at Shelfo' (a place in Oykangand country, inland from the Koko-Bera).
- b. While the origin of many names remains unclear, others seem to be derived from common nouns, often animal or plant names. Some of those are simply homophonous with common nouns, without compounding or affixation (see 'Names from common nouns'). For Koko-Bera fewer examples are known than for Kurtjar, but one is 'Makérr', literally 'wind', the name of a small lake.
- c. Some names are formed as compounds (see 'Names formed as compounds'), as in Koko-Bera 'Thangvükór', a compound of 'mouth' (*thaw*) and 'sand' (*ngvükór* or *ngolkór*), the name of a site at the mouth of Topsy Creek.
- d. Some names contain affixes, especially the locative case marker (see 'Names formed with a locative suffix'), but also other affixes (see 'Names formed with other suffixes'); a Koko-Bera example of the latter is the name 'Penpéw', literally 'for *penp*', where *penp* is a grass species (*Heteropogon triticeus*).
- e. The derivation of some names remains problematic even though they seem to be formed from common nouns; Kurtjar cases are treated in 'Names of uncertain derivation'.
- f. Occasionally places seem to be designated by descriptive clauses, whether or not they represent proper placenames (see 'Descriptive clauses'). Some of these names are related to story sites, but no information on any 'dreaming tracks' was obtained. Koko-Bera examples include 'Pa-pulényvrr kunt' '(they) killed two people', a place where two men (*pa-pulényvrr*) were killed (*kunt*), and 'Kóy wandángvmvnt' '(it) dropped a fish', the place where a bird in a traditional story dropped (*wandángvmvnt*) a fish (*koy*).
- g. There has also been some borrowing of placenames between English and Kurtjar (see 'Borrowed names'). An example of a Koko-Bera name borrowed into the local English is 'Makérr' (in (b) above), which is anglicised as 'Magera'.

## Names from common nouns

Where names are homophonous with common nouns it usually seems fair to assume they are derived from those nouns, although chance similarity is not of course impossible. The following appear to be derived from names of animals. Here and elsewhere information on the likely etymology is followed by information on the designated place. Note that English placenames have been placed in quotes when they were given by Kurtjar speakers but were not found on a published map of the area.

1. *Bhookirr* 'skink lizard' (probably *Ergenia* species), a place on Spring Creek at the crossing of the old main road to Macaroni Station.
2. *Ncherdang* 'crab species', whether 'soldier crab' or 'sand crab', location uncertain.
3. *Rbhoord* 'magpie, butcher bird' (various genera), a swamp between Macaroni homestead and Vanrook Creek containing an emu story site.
4. *Rdoork* 'short-necked, humpy-backed, freshwater tortoise', Mosquito Waterhole, near the Gilbert River.
5. *Rtheelgh* 'young of bony bream' (or possibly any tiny fish), a place in the Macaroni homestead area.

The following seem to be from names of plants:

6. *Kuaard* 'wild mango bush' (*Barringtonia acutangula*), Yellow Waterhole near Middle Creek.
7. *Lmeer* 'ironwood tree' (also *lmeergh*), the name of both Shady Waterhole and of Lotus Vale Station.
8. *Nthen* 'a tea tree species', 'stinking leaf, small leaf, forest, or black tea tree', a place near Vanrook Creek north of Davidson's Well, on Macaroni Station.
9. *Waanchirgh* 'tree species with a milky sap', 'Graham Yard' (probably not the one shown on printed maps), in northern Delta Station.

The following are derived from other nouns or at least homophonous with them:

10. *Maanth* 'clothing', a waterhole between Delta homestead and the Smithburn River.
11. *Rbheel* 'the sound of women clapping hands (one placed on top of the other) against the upper leg to accompany a corroboree', Ross Creek.
12. *Rdeemp* 'bark (of tree)', Vanrook Creek at the location of an old cattle crossing, in Kok-Nar territory.
13. *Rdook* 'noise', a place on the Gilbert River.

## Names formed as compounds

A few names are clearly compounds. The following seems a reduplication of *morr* ‘white apple’ (i.e. *Eugenia eucalyptoides*); note that in this and most other compounds the two elements are separated by an epenthetic schwa, written *i*:

14. *Morrimorr*, a camping and burial site on a sandridge near Delta Station homestead.

The following names end in *ngkuaath* ‘big’, whose vowel becomes short because it is no longer in an initial syllable:

15. *Morringkuath* ‘big white apple (*morr*)’, a place near or the same as *Morrimorr* (14 above).

16. *Nyomokingkuath* ‘big mussel (*nyomok*)’, a coastal area extending north-east from the present site of Old Coast Well.

17. *Rdoolingkuath* ‘big waterhole (*rdool*)’, a waterhole in a swamp south-west of Myra Vale homestead, the location of a file snake story site.

The following names end in *mpaak* ‘two’, whose vowel similarly becomes short:

18. *Ngookimpak* ‘two young woman (*ngook*)’, a swamp on the west side of Davidson’s Well on Macaroni Station, near the *ngook* ‘young women’ story site.

19. *Rreerimpak* ‘two birds, probably gannets (*Sula* species) (*rreer*)’, a pair of waterholes adjacent to Two Mile Yard on Macaroni Station.

20. *Rrokimpak* ‘two hawks (*rrok*)’, a lagoon in Middle Creek.

## Names formed with a locative suffix

Forming placenames through the addition of a locative suffix is especially common in Kurtjar, and this may relate to why placenames do not take overt marking for the locative case, as noted in (a) in the introduction to this section. Kurtjar has a wide range of locative allomorphs, including the following, in which *V* is usually *a* or else the schwa *i*, but occasionally some other vowel:

- a. *-Vngk* is the most productive and least marked set of allomorphs;
- b. *-Vk* is fairly common, especially on animate nouns;
- c. *-V(n)th*, and *-V(n)ch* are also common, the variants without nasals generally being found just after stems ending in homorganic nasal-stop clusters, such as after the *mp* in *dhaghirramp-ith* or *-ich* ‘in a bark humpy’;
- d. *-Vnt* is rare, with no attested variant *-Vt*;
- e. *-Vmp* only seems to be found fossilised in placenames, but its variant without the nasal, *-Vbh*, is also attested on one other type of noun.

- f. *-Vl* is found on just a few forms; and
- g. *-t* is found on some nouns with final *n*, presumably just those that ended in *n* before final vowels were lost in the prehistory of the language.

Such a range is not unusual in languages of this area; for example, cognates to most of the above are found in Koko-Bera, in Kok-Nar immediately to the north of Kurtjar (see Breen 1976b: 249), and in Kukatj to the south-west (Breen 1976a: 155).

The following Kurtjar placenames appear to contain the widespread locative *-Vngk*:

- 21. *Maralingk* 'at the lily pads (*maral*)', a place on the Smithburn River.
- 22. *Mpeechirangk* 'at the Leichhardt tree (*mpeechirgh*)', 'Leichhardt Swamp' on Delta Station.
- 23. *Nchaardingk* 'at the cane grass (*nchaard*)', a place with a pair of small waterholes just south of the Smithburn River.
- 24. *Nchaarkirangk* 'at the spear (*nchaarkirgh*)', Flying Fox Waterhole on the Smithburn River.
- 25. *Walcharringk* 'at the saltwater (*walcharr*)', 'One Tree Swamp'.
- 26. *Wenchangk* 'at the end (*wench*)', a place near Gilbert Lagoon.
- 27. *Wordiwordingk* 'at the jellyfish or hornet (*Wordiword*)', a place near the coast on Delta Station.
- 28. *Yangardingk* 'at the (so-called) cedar tree (*yangard*)', a burial ground along the lower Gilbert River.

Placenames that may end in the same suffix attached to otherwise unattested stems include Dhakarringk, Dhamangk, Lbhirdangk, Merbhangk, Morrinthongk, Mpooedhirringk, Rbhirdangk, Walntardingk and Woomingk. A similar allomorph also appears to be found in the following two placenames, whose relation to the relevant unsuffixed roots is obscured by the sort of historical changes noted above in 'Notes on phonology and transcription':

- 29. *Nthoongk* 'at the base, bottom, or buttocks (*oonth*)', a lagoon in Middle Creek.
- 30. *Nuaangk* 'at the faeces (*oen*)', Picaninny Waterhole, near Wyaaba Creek in Kok-Nar territory.

The variant *-Vk* is found on several placenames based on animal names:

- 31. *Mpoordik* 'at the white ant (bed) (*mpoord*)', a place along the lower Gilbert River.
- 32. *Reekilak* 'at the Burdekin Duck (*reekil*)', 'Alligator Head', near Spring Creek on Delta Station.
- 33. *Rkeelik* 'at the sparrow hawk (*rkeel*)', a place on Delta Station.

Other names that may end in the same suffix attached to otherwise unattested stems include Milak and Kooempak.

The following two names appear to contain the locative suffix *-Vnth*:

34. *Laabhinth* 'at the spear rod tree (*laabh*)', a place on 'Kelso Creek' (labelled 'Snake Creek' on a published map).
35. *Rmaanginth* 'at the pandanus (*rmaang*)', a place in the lower Gilbert River area.

Other names which could contain the same suffix on otherwise unattested stems include Ngkiyakinth, Rdaarminganth, Rkuaaminth and Wakakinth. The name 'Warbhith' ends in *Vth*, but this is not an especially good candidate for the nasal-less variant of the suffix since the latter normally occurs after a stem-final homorganic nasal-stop cluster.

The only placenames that may contain the locative *-Vnch* have stems that are otherwise unattested, namely Bhanardinch, Rdeekirranch and Yentirrench. There are no good candidates for ending in the variant *-Vch*.

The following two names appear to contain a locative suffix *-Vmp*, although this is not the normal locative of the nouns involved:

36. *Raghichamp* 'at the sandpaper fig (*raghich*)', a place near the junction of the Gilbert River and Middle Creek.
37. *Rdeerrimp* 'at the whitewood tree (*rdeerr*)', a place on the Smithburn River downstream from the original location of Lotus Vale homestead.

Other names which could contain the same suffix on otherwise unattested stems include Wompenimp and conceivably Mpaamp (if from a root *aamp*) and Rdeemp (if from a root *eerd*). Such a locative is not otherwise attested in Kurtjar, but it may well be a fossilised form inherited from an earlier protolanguage, since cognate suffixes are found in other languages of Cape York Peninsula. In Koko-Bera *-Vmp* and similar variants (*-(v)yvmp*, *-nyvmp*) are in fact the most productive locative allomorphs, being found even on loanwords; e.g. *táp-vmp* 'in a tub'. The Kok-Nar language immediately to the north of Kurtjar similarly has a locative *-imp* (Breen 1976b: 249).

While Kurtjar is not otherwise attested as having a locative *-Vmp*, its expected nasal-less variant *-Vbh* (considering that Kurtjar *p* is rare except after nasals) was attested on one word, *dhoerd-abh* 'in an anus'. Kok-Nar is similarly attested as having a nasal-less suffix *-vp* after *miny* 'animal'; see Breen (1976b: 249). One Kurtjar placename could perhaps contain a fossilised *-Vbh* locative on the word *rdool* 'waterhole', whose normal locative is *rdol-ongk*:

38. *Rdolobh* 'at the waterhole (*rdool*)?', 'Billy Can Swamp'.

Locative *-Vnt* is clearly attested only on *leeliny-ant* 'on powdery soil', although *mokong-int* 'poor' was also attested with *-Vnt* marking the ergative, which is always homophonous with the locative in Kurtjar. Possibly it may also be found in the following placename, although the meaning of the putative stem seems atypical of those on which placenames are commonly based:

39. *Rdaabhint* (cf. (*maan*) *rdaabh* 'hoarseness, laryngitis'), a certain small pool of water.

Alternatively any name ending in *nt* could perhaps contain a reflex of locative *-t* after stem-final *n*, as is clearly the case for the following name:

40. *Raamint* 'at the lancewood (*raamin*)', 'Staaten River Camp', on the south bank of the Stataten River, in Kok-Nar territory.

Other names ending in *nt* include *Marinchint* and *Thooent*.

Finally, the following appear to contain a fossilised locative suffix *-Vl* that is otherwise attested only in a handful of words, such as the locative/ergative forms *maal* (< *\*pama-lu*) of *aam* (< *\*pama*) 'person', *ney-al* of *ney* 'what', and *nhebh-al* of *nhebh* 'one'. These are not the normal locatives of the stems involved in the following, however.

41. *Looenal* 'at the white berry (*looen*)', a place at or near Mosquito.  
42. *Ngkeengil* 'at the wild cucumber (*ngkeeng*)', either of two places near the northern limits of Kurtjar territory, distinguished by adding the words for 'large' (in 'Ngkeengil ngkuaath' 'Bell Swamp') and 'small' (in 'Ngkeengil cheekird', a small waterhole just across the road on the north side of 'Possum Mill').  
43. *Waliwinchal*, possibly 'at the water (*waal*) end (*wench*)', 'Leichhardt Waterhole'.

Other names which could perhaps contain the same suffix on otherwise unattested stems include *Bheenchil*, *Kontal*, and *Rdeewirkal*.

## Names formed with other suffixes

A few nouns appear to contain suffixes other than the locative. The following is formed with the normal comitative suffix *-ilim/-alim* 'with':

44. *Neekircherghilim* 'with a bean tree (*neekirchergh*, i.e. *Cathormion umbellatum*)', a campsite along Macaroni Creek south of Macaroni homestead.

The following are likely to contain fossilised forms of a semblative suffix that is generally attested as *-ighard* ‘-like’. If that reflects a stem-final vowel followed by earlier *\*-karV*,<sup>2</sup> after an original final consonant we could expect reflexes of shape *-kVrd*, as in the following two placenames:

45. *Lkeen kard* ‘like the moon/white grub/fish species (*lkeen*)?’, a sand ridge in the coastal area of northern Macaroni Station.
46. *Mpaarkird* ‘like a goanna (*mpaargh*)?’, a place of uncertain location.

In two placenames the same suffix could seem to follow a verb with a past perfective ending *-n*, although that construction is not otherwise attested:

47. *Yuaarrinchinkard* (cf. *yuaarr* ‘bloodwood’ and *nchi-n* ‘become broken’ or perhaps ‘climbed’), a place on Macaroni Station. (The meaning ‘become broken’ seems more likely than ‘climbed’ because the latter normally requires the object climbed to be in the locative, as in *yuaarr-ingk nchi-n* ‘climbed (on a) bloodwood’.)
48. *Rrangkithibhankard* (*rrangk-ith* could be the locative of some noun *rrangk* as required by *bha-n* ‘entered’), a place just downstream from the old Delta-to-Macaroni road crossing of the Gilbert River. Perhaps the same *rrangk-ith* is found before *rda- y* ‘throw’ in the verb *rrangkithirda- y* ‘change skins (said of mythical animals)’. The attested noun most similar to *rrangk* is *rraangk* ‘butterfish’ (probably ‘Mouth Almighty’, *Glossamia aprion aprion*), whose normal locative *-ich* has sometimes been found to alternative with *-ith*, but the literal meaning ‘entered (into) a butterfish’ for the placename, and especially ‘threw in a butterfish’ for the verb to ‘change skins’, do not seem particularly compelling.

Other names that could perhaps contain a reflex of the same suffix *\*-karV* after a stem-final *n* include Meerding(in)kard and, if an explanation for the *o* vowel can be found, Nkoolminkord.

Two names could perhaps contain a derivational suffix *-arr/-irr* that makes an uncertain difference between various pairs of forms, such as *lchirgh* or *lchirgharr* ‘many’, *meen* ‘different, other’ and *meen-arr* or *men-ar* ‘wrong one’, *moerrangk* ‘morning, tomorrow’ and *moerrangkarr* ‘early in the morning’ (or possibly ‘since this morning’), and *rduaath* ‘wood shavings’ and *rduaathirr* ‘wood dust (e.g. from a rotting log)’. The first name below would seem to be a variant of *wengk-arr* ‘properly, in a good way’ that retains the long vowel of the root *weengk* ‘good’:

49. *Weengkirr*, a place in Twelve Mile Creek between the Norman River and Walkers Creek.

50. *Lngkirarr* (or *Nkirarr*) (perhaps ‘sandy’? cf. *lngkirgh* ‘sand’), a Kurtjar camp across the Norman River from Normanton in the early 1900s.

The following is a compound in which the second element, *yoempi-ncherr* ‘taker’ is derived from the verb *yoempi-lk* ‘take’ by the addition of an agentive suffix *-ncherr/-ncharr/-nchirr*:

51. *Kuaaniyoempincherr* ‘grass (*kuaan*) taker’, a campsite on south bank of Staaten River (in Kok-Nar territory).

Whether or not the meaning seems sensible, the following placename appears to involve a variant of the same suffix on the verb *a-* ‘see, hear’:

52. *Kuaabhanchirr* ‘boy (*kuaabh*) seer/hearer (*a-nchirr*?)’, ‘Big Fish Hole’.

The following placenames seem to involve the same suffix on one of three verbs with a root *i-*, as discussed further below:

53. *Lbhaangirrincharr* (cf. *lbhaangirr* ‘large size bony bream’), a lagoon immediately south-east of Staaten River crossing (in Kok-Nar territory).
54. *Lnthaakincharr* (cf. *lnthaak* ‘smaller jellyfish species’), a place in the coastal area of Delta Station.
55. *Ngkaabhincharr* (cf. *ngkaabh* ‘brolga’), a place in the northern part of Macaroni Station.

The name ‘Mawincherr’ could perhaps represent a similar formation involving an otherwise unattested root *maw*. That *-ncharr* and *-ncherr* can represent the same suffix in similar environments is clear from the fact that both were attested in *thirirdancherr* or *thirirdancharr* ‘whale’, literally ‘smoke (*thirgh*, here *thiri-*) thrower’ (cf. the imperative *rda-y* ‘throw’). (A second word for ‘whale’ is *kuaanidhincherr*, literally ‘grass (*kuaan*) burner (*dhi-ncherr*).) After *i* the variant *-ncharr* also seems to be found in *ghaath-i-ncharr* ‘corpse, dead person’ (cf. *ghaath* ‘dead’) and in *Rrangkithibhankardincharr*, a name used to refer to a man buried at the place Rrangkithibhankard (name example 48 above).

Since *-charr* is otherwise attested only after a verb root, it seems that the preceding schwa *i* in these forms and the placenames (53) to (55) above is either a verb root *i-* or else an epenthetic vowel or a reflex of a stem-final vowel that has replaced a verb root *i-* (we saw that the non-schwa root *a-* was retained in (52), even with a long vowel in the preceding syllable). The verb ‘be, stay’ (imperative *i-k*) is a good candidate in the case of *ghaathincharr* ‘corpse’ (then literally ‘dead stayer’) and especially *Rrangkithibhankardincharr* literally ‘stayer at Rrangkithibhankard’. A second possibility is a verb (imperative *i-rk*) used to derive verbal meanings from nouns, as in *rdoek i-rk* ‘tell a lie (*rdoek*)’ and

*oow i-rk* ‘reject’ (cf. *-oow* ‘nose’). In placenames (53) to (55) a third possibility could be the verb ‘eat’ (imperative *i-lk*), even though the irregular agentive form *ninchirr* was attested for ‘eater’ as a distinct word.

## Names of uncertain derivation

Some placenames are surely derived from nouns, but by mechanisms which remain unclear. The largest group of placenames of uncertain derivation consist of a noun followed by an otherwise unattested element *-intak* or (after *l*) *-ntak*:

56. *Dhongkualkintak* (cf. *dhongkualk* ‘emu’), a place on Middle Creek at the present site of Bottom Yard (cf. 57 below).
57. *Leemilntak* (cf. *leemil* ‘galah’), Goose Lagoon or ‘Goosey’, along the Gilbert River.
58. *Lowothintak* or *Lowochintak* (cf. *lowoth* or *lowoch* ‘spirit of deceased person appearing as a light, minmin light’), a place in the Lotus Vale area.
59. *Mbaalbhilntak* (cf. *mpaalbhil* ‘blue-tongue lizard’), ‘Black Scamp (or Black’s Camp?) Waterhole’ probably the same as Blackfellow’s Lagoon in the Smithburn River.
60. *Rriyorringuathintak* (cf. *rriyorringuath* ‘emu’), the same place as *Dhongkualkintak* (56 above).
61. *Waardinhintak* (cf. *waardinh* ‘white gum tree’, probably ‘ghost gum’ (*Eucalyptus papuana*)), a place of uncertain location between the Smithburn and Gilbert Rivers.

Other placenames ending in *-intak* include *Noorbhinhingintak*, *Rdaarkingintak* and *Waardintak*. Possibly the final *-ak* could be a locative suffix following an uncertain element *-(i)nt*, perhaps a fossilised genitive cognate to the Koko-Bera genitive *-Vnt* and still found within the normal Kurtjar genitive *-ngint*, which has an oblique (including locative) form *-ngintak*. In that case names (56) and (60) could mean ‘at the (something, perhaps the place?) of the emu’. Another possibility is that these names could be formed as compounds whose second element is *ntak* or *ntaak*, but no such form is otherwise attested.

The following three names seem to be derived from nouns with the addition of otherwise unattested elements *-iny*, *-in*, and *-iyan*:

62. *Lmpeerdiny* (cf. *lmpeerd* ‘guttapercha’ (probably *Excoecaria parvifolia*)), a waterhole along west bank of lower Gilbert River, probably in Gilbert Pocket.
63. *Rdaachin* (cf. *rdaach* ‘bulgama tree’ (*Hakea* species)), a pair of small waterholes on either side of the road south from Macaroni homestead.

64. *Weerdiyan* (cf. *weerd* 'fire, firewood') a waterhole in the Smithburn River downstream from Myra Vale.

The following name may also begin with *weerd* 'fire, firewood', perhaps followed (after an epenthetic *i*) by an unattested verb *mordicho-n* in the past imperfective:

65. *Weerdimordichon*, a rise west of Waukanaka, on Macaroni Station.

The unattested verb could involve either some unknown element *mo-* followed by *rdicho-n* 'died' or else *mord* 'curled, twisted, tangled, folded' followed by an otherwise unknown element *-ichon*. Known verbs that appear to be compounds involving some element *mord* include (in their imperative forms) *mordinchi-lk* 'growl' (cf. *nchi-lk* 'climb') and *mordirdi-ngk* 'spear (in the Koncham auxiliary language)' (cf. normal Kurtjar *rdi-ngk* 'spear').

## Descriptive clauses

Four Dreaming (or totemic) sites were referred to by descriptive clauses which may or may not be the proper name of the site. All four expressions follow the pattern Noun-*a*-Verb-Past to refer to the totemic animal (Noun) having entered (*bha-nh*) the ground at the end of its story. I will translate the expressions as '(where) the animal went in', although the actual function of the *-a* (or *-am* if the speaker pauses before the verb) may simply be to mark focus on the element preceding the verb; as a different sort of example, it was found after *naangk* 'now, next' in '*Naangk-a[m] ri-nh cilang-ibh*' 'Now [they] went down'. The four sites are:

66. *Mpaamiy-a-bha-nh* '(where) the stinking turtle went in'.  
67. *Mpeerchilgh-a-bha-nh* '(where) the stingray went in'.  
68. *Nchilngkuath-a-bha-nh* '(where) the black-headed python went in'.  
69. *Chacharr-a-bha-nh* 'where the rainbow snake went in', a place near Vanrook Creek.

Such a construction was also used to refer to three sites or parts of sites that were attested as having other proper names:

70. *Rdoorng-a-bha-nh* '(where) the file snake went in', another way of referring to *Rdoolingkuath* (see 17 earlier).  
71. *Ngook-a-bha-nh* '(where) the young women went in', the depression where the women entered the ground at Ngookimpak (18 earlier).  
72. *Dhongkualk-a-bha-nh* '(where) the emu went in', the depression where the emu entered the ground at Rbhoord (3 earlier).

One site is referred to in such a way based on a postcolonial incident:

73. *Chaynaman-a-rrigha-ny* '(where they) killed (*rrigha-ny*) a Chinaman', on Duck Creek.

## Borrowed names

A few placenames were simply borrowed from English. Those given as (74) and the first variant in (75) differ from normal Kurtjar words in having final vowels; presumably the *n* was added to the second variant in (75) to avoid this irregularity. While (76) can apparently be used to refer to any town, and not just Normanton, the fact that it takes zero locative marking identifies it as a placename.

74. *Mirdanta*, Miranda Station.  
 75. *Talta* or *Taltan*, Delta Station.  
 76. *Taawin*, Normanton (or any other town).

Some Kurtjar placenames seem to have been borrowed into English, although the English versions are largely attested from the Kurtjar speakers who provided the Kurtjar names. In any case, 'Ngkook' was described as 'Anggoke' waterhole, near Delta homestead; 'Wilkinyakird' is 'Waukanaka' Lagoon, and 'Woomingk' is 'Wamakee' Waterhole.

## Conclusion

It seems that Kurtjar placenames are as often meaningful as not, unless the more meaningful names simply tend to be better remembered. Of the some 150 placenames attested for Kurtjar, it has been possible to suggest etymologies for nearly half of them, although the 75 numbered forms above do include some additional descriptive clauses, as well as some names whose origins are not fully clear. In any case, exploring the possible etymologies also seems useful for what it may suggest about earlier stages of Kurtjar, for example, that there may once have been an locative *-Vmp* (as in names 36 and 37) and conceivably a genitive *-Vnt* (see names 56 to 61) as found in nearby languages, or that the locative *-Vl* might once have been more widely distributed than as it was attested in recent years (see names 41 to 43). It thus raises questions for comparative studies of somewhat broader scope.

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## Endnotes

1. I am grateful to the then Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS, now the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, or AIATSIS) for funding my research on the languages of this area, including this expedition.
2. It is possible to reconstruct a morpheme of similar shape with the meaning 'not', for which the Kurtjar reflex as a separate word is *aard*.