

## The Meaning of Morawa

Morawa (population 600) is a picturesque town situated in the northern wheatbelt of Western Australia, about 370 km north of Perth. Over time a variety of derivations have been suggested for the name of the town,<sup>1</sup> which obviously originates from an Indigenous source. As is common in areas where there is “long-established dispossession”, sound “historical and philological reconstruction”<sup>2</sup> is required if one hopes to arrive at a valid meaning for the name of the place. While most of the derivations that have been proposed for Morawa have some rationale, they are all suspect for one reason or another.

The most frequently cited derivation for Morawa is ‘Morowa’<sup>3</sup> or ‘Morowar’<sup>4</sup>, referring to the dalgite [dalgyte or greater bilby, *Macrotis lagotis*], the small, burrowing, rabbit-eared bandicoot formerly found in much of the arid and semi-arid parts of Central and Western Australia. But a number of other etymologies have been suggested, including ‘Marrowa - the snake-wood tree which grows in the area’,<sup>5</sup> ‘Morawa - which hand?’,<sup>6</sup> ‘Moorawa – fog’,<sup>7</sup> ‘Morawa’ – elbow’,<sup>8</sup> and ‘Murowariyanni – hut’.<sup>9</sup>

In many instances it is difficult to establish the credentials of these etymologies. Often they are unsourced, and where they are sourced, the quality of the information is highly questionable, as in the document, “Native Meanings of Townships North of Gin Gin”.<sup>10</sup> While the likely sources of a number of these derivations can actually be traced with some degree of confidence, such reconstructions tend to show they are based on highly superficial and erroneous linguistic analyses, associations or coincidences which lack any corroborative ethnographic evidence. This can be seen with the Morowa/Morowar – dalgite; Moorawa – fog; Morawa – elbow examples.

The dalgite reference appears to originate from a journal article published in 1904, which provided a random and undifferentiated list of nouns and supposed Aboriginal place names from the Irwin River area, 50 km to the north west.<sup>11</sup> With ‘fog’ and ‘elbow’, while they resemble ‘Morawa’ phonologically, no provenance is provided. But the structure of the name of ‘Morawa’ suggests such offerings are completely erroneous anyway. The word is a compound, wherein Aboriginal speakers from the region employed the suffix ‘-wa’ in reference to a location, meaning “in possession of, containing, etc., ... denoting a characteristic of that locality”.<sup>12</sup> Hence, one finds places such as Gullewa, Mullewa, Nabawa, Tenindewa, Nullewa Lake and Mount Muggawa in this part of WA. Consequently the root term is the morpheme “Mora-”, or similar, which was the attribute of this place or locality.

Part of the reason why these spurious etymologies arise is explicable if it is realised that 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century recorders, because of their superficial understanding of Indigenous cultures and languages, often took attributes ascribed to a place by Indigenous informants as the derivation of its name.<sup>13</sup> So, Morawa may be a place where dalgites used to be found, it may be reputed to be fog-prone, it may lie close to the bend (an ‘elbow’) of a creek, but the name may not derive from that. In other instances the derivation comes from some linguistic coincidence based on words recorded by amateur ethnographers from the colonial era. ‘Marrowa’ – the snake-wood tree, is a prime example. The snake-wood tree (*Acacia xiphophylla*) never grew

anywhere near Morawa, its distribution was in the north west of WA, from Shark Bay to the Pilbara.<sup>14</sup> An Aboriginal term for this tree was recorded from the Buduna and Ngalooma languages from that region in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as ‘Marrawa’.<sup>15</sup> So the proponent of this derivation of Morawa has simply plucked an Aboriginal word out of the air, so to speak, and claimed this as the origin of the name.

The assertion that Morawa actually meant ‘Which hand?’ did not surface until 1968. Presumably it is based on the word ‘marra’ or its cognates, the term for ‘hand’, which shows great consistency across many Aboriginal languages in Western Australia. In the region around Morawa, where the Amangu language was spoken,<sup>16</sup> this term was recorded historically (i.e. pre-1910) as ‘ma’,<sup>17</sup> ‘maa’,<sup>18</sup> and ‘marrajee’.<sup>19</sup> But the phonological divergence between ‘Mora-’ and ‘ma’ or ‘marra’, and the lack of any etymological explanation, would suggest the connection is fanciful.

The final suggestion, ‘murowari-yanni’ (hut) is unsourced. When British explorers first intruded into the Victoria District (Irwin River north to Hutt River) from 1839 onward they reported dwellings of “substantial construction”, capable of accommodating up to a 10 people.<sup>20</sup> But these were known as ‘mido’,<sup>21</sup> or ‘minda’,<sup>22</sup> while less permanent habitations were generally known as ‘maia/mya/maya’ in southern WA. Consequently, there does not appear to be any sort of evidence supporting the ‘murowari-yanni’ derivation.

So what is the meaning of Morawa? I would suggest that it actually has a meaning associated with initiation, “the place where men are made/initiated”. This is based on linguistic evidence, supported by ethnographic data.

In vocabularies recorded in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century from this region,<sup>23</sup> the following terms can be found:

moora moora – hair string worn around the head<sup>24</sup>

mooralba – keloid (raised) scars<sup>25</sup>

moora – keloid scars<sup>26</sup>

marrowa – young man<sup>27</sup>

moorawa – initiated youth<sup>28</sup>

All these terms seemingly relate to ‘man-making’ activities, stages in initiation, primarily in regard to age-grade initiation, the transition from youth to manhood. In the south west of WA the ‘hair string’ was usually presented at age-grade initiation.<sup>29</sup> Scarring (cicatrization) was a part of the initiation process leading to age-grade initiation.<sup>30</sup> Once initiated a young man assumed a new status, distinct from an uninitiated boy. They were now ‘marrowa’ or ‘moorawa’. From these examples, cognates of the root term ‘moora-’ can be inferred, conveying the sense of ‘acquiring manliness/manhood’. By extension, and allowing for English speakers altering the pronunciation of that morpheme slightly to ‘mora-’, ‘Morawa’ would then mean a place where manliness/manhood is acquired.

In support of this derivation I would point to the occurrence of a number of important traditional ceremonial sites and meeting places around Morawa. One is a series of stone arrangements linked to circumcision initiation ceremonies at Canna, about 37 km north west of Morawa.<sup>31</sup> Another stone arrangement with a similar purpose can be

found 19 km east of Morawa, in the Koolanooka Hills.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, Peterwangy Hill, 50 km to the north west, was also reputedly a major meeting place of Amangu, Wa[t]jarri, and Badimaya people,<sup>33</sup> while Morawa itself appears to be situated close to the intersecting boundaries of Amangu, Badimaya and Kalamaya country.<sup>34</sup> In this context the fact that Morawa lay very close to the “Circumcision Line” takes on added significance.<sup>35</sup> The Circumcision Line divided the groups who carried out circumcision as an integral part of initiation ceremonies from those who did not. In the southern part of WA the Circumcision Line ran from just east of Geraldton to around Bremer Bay on the south coast. Those to the east conducted circumcisions of novices as part of initiation, to the west they did not. According to Daisy Bates, it was formerly the custom for some boys from non-circumcising groups to be sent to circumcising groups to be initiated. This was a diplomatic gesture, intended to maintain good relations, alliances.<sup>36</sup>

Given the presence of initiation sites close to Morawa, its proximity to the boundaries of several different groups, as well as its position in relation to the Circumcision Line, it is reasonable to infer that this locality was indeed associated with “man-making” ceremonies. This inference is strengthened if the meagre linguistic evidence is also taken into account. Such a conclusion is not certain by any means, and a definitive answer may never be found, but it is perhaps a more cogent explanation for the meaning of Morawa than any of the previous contributions.

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<sup>1</sup> Gazetted on 13 September 1913.

<sup>2</sup> Hercus, L. and Simpson, J. (2002) Indigenous placenames: An introduction. In L. Hercus, F. Hodges and J. Simpson, (eds) *The Land is a Map: Placenames of Indigenous Origin in Australia*. Canberra: Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, p.5.

<sup>3</sup> Western Australian Department of Lands and Surveys Nomenclature Index – Morawa: Western Australian State Records Office N/C File 279/66.

See also <http://www.landgate.wa.gov.au/corporate.nsf/web/History+of+country+town+names+--+m>

<sup>4</sup> Aboriginal Place Names – List No. 2, State Library of Western Australia: Accession 3778A/80-3.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Commission of Native Welfare to Surveyor-General, 24 December 1937, Uren Papers, State Library of Western Australia, Accession 3778A, Manuscript 1219.

<sup>6</sup> What Aboriginal place names signify, *West Australian*, 22 December 1968.

<sup>7</sup> Native meanings of townships north of Gin Gin: State Library of Western Australia: Ephemera - Printed Record 342.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>9</sup> Holland, L. J. (n.d.) ‘The History of Morawa’, Teacher’s Higher Degree Certificate thesis, Claremont Teachers College, p.1.

<sup>10</sup> Native meanings of townships north of Gin Gin: State Library of Western Australia: Ephemera - Printed Record 342.

<sup>11</sup> Colonial Secretary of Western Australia (1904) Western Australian Aboriginal place names (continued). *Science of Man* 7(1):10. It is actually recorded as ‘Murrawar’.

<sup>12</sup> Oldfield, A. (1865) The Aborigines of Australia. *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London* 3:291.

<sup>13</sup> Hercus, L. (2002) Is it really a place name? In L. Hercus, F. Hodges and J. Simpson, (eds) *The Land is a Map: Placenames of Indigenous Origin in Australia*. Canberra: Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, pp.66-70.

A typical example from this part of the world is “Bindoon”, 80 km north of Perth. It is often claimed Bindoon means “a place where yams grow.” But, while yams (*Dioscorea hastifolia*) did grow prolifically at Bindoon, the derivation is highly questionable. The word for yam was *warran* (with slight variations) wherever it grew in the southern part of WA.

<sup>14</sup> Flora of Australia Online: <http://anbg.gov.au/abrs/online-resources/flora/stddisplay.xsql?pnid+1326>

- <sup>15</sup> Yabaroo [Alexander Cameron] (1899) *Aborigines of North West Australia – A Vocabulary etc.*, Perth, J. W. Barnard.
- <sup>16</sup> Thieberger, N. (1993) *Handbook of Western Australian Languages South of the Kimberley Region*. pp.70,74.
- <sup>17</sup> Perks, J. (1886) Irwin and Murchison Rivers, Cheangwa vocabulary. In E. M. Curr (comp.) *The Australian Race*, vol. 1, p.374. Melbourne: Government Printer; R. T. Goldsworthy (1886) Champion Bay. In *ibid* p.316.
- <sup>18</sup> ‘Native vocabulary compiled by Marratharra for Winjaroo of Dhoongara,’ Section XII Pt.2F.1 folio 54. Daisy M. Bates Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 365.
- <sup>19</sup> ‘Native vocabulary compiled by Goolaara of Dandaragan (Melbourne)’ Section XII Pt.2C.18 folio 47. Daisy M. Bates Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 365.
- <sup>20</sup> Gerritsen, R. (2002) *Nhanda Villages of the Victoria District, Western Australia*, p.3. Canberra: Intellectual Property Publications.
- <sup>21</sup> Letter from Dr Foley to E. R. Parker, *Perth Gazette*, 31 January 1851.
- <sup>22</sup> ‘Native vocabulary compiled by Marratharra’.
- <sup>23</sup> There do not appear to be any remaining speakers of Amangu (Thieberger p.74) and the only available language material was recorded in the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Two salvage linguistic studies in closest proximity, of Nhanda (Blevins, J. 2001 *Nhanda: An Aboriginal Language of Western Australia*. University of Hawai’i Press Honolulu. *Oceanic Linguistics Special Publication No.30.*) and Badimaya (Dunn, L. 1988 *Badimaya, a Western Australian language. Papers in Australian Linguistics* 17: 19-149. *Pacific Linguistics Series A-71.*), add nothing further to the historical materials in this regard.
- <sup>24</sup> ‘Miscellaneous vol. 3 - Notebook 23A,’ p.100. folio 75. Daisy M. Bates Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 365.
- <sup>25</sup> ‘Sundry notes on weapons, ornaments, .... scarring etc.’ Section IX Pt.4d folio 31. Daisy M. Bates Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 365.
- <sup>26</sup> Oldfield p.295.
- <sup>27</sup> Perks p.372.
- <sup>28</sup> Oldfield p.295
- <sup>29</sup> Bates, D. M. (1985) *The Native Tribes of Western Australia*. p.156. Canberra: National Library of Australia.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p.153.
- <sup>31</sup> Serventy, V. N. and White, S. R. (1958) Stone arrangements at Canna, Western Australia. *Western Australian Naturalist* 6(4):85-90.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p.90.
- <sup>33</sup> Attended by Amangu from Carnamah and Irwin River, and people from Gullewa and Yuin (Bain, M. A. 1975 *Ancient Landmarks: A Social and Economic History of the Victoria District of Western Australia 1839 – 1984*. Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press. p.325n4). Peterwangy is reputedly a corruption *pedawangi* (all day – talk).
- <sup>34</sup> Horton, D. R. (1994) Map: Aboriginal Australia. Both Tindale (N. B. 1974 *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia: Their Terrain, Environmental Controls, Distribution, Limits and Proper Names*. Canberra: Australian National University Press, Maps: Australia SW Sheet) and Dunn (1988:22) differ to some degree in this respect and the area may be ‘disputed’ (Dunn, p.20).
- <sup>35</sup> Tindale (1974) Maps: Australia SW Sheet.
- <sup>36</sup> Bates, D. M. (1938) *The Passing of the Aborigines*. London: John Murray. p.148