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'KAURNA' IDENTITY: A BRIEF HISTORY

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Introduction

Today it is widely accepted that the 'Kaurna tribe' owned the Adelaide Plains area at the time of South Australia's establishment as a British colony in 1836. The popularity of this belief can be largely traced to the anthropologist Norman Tindale's publication, in 1974, of the *Aboriginal tribes of Australia*.¹ In this book he argues that at the time of British colonisation the Kaurna tribe occupied the area from Cape Jervis, to the south of present-day Adelaide, to Crystal Brook in the north and bounded on the east by the Mount Lofty Ranges and in the west by Gulf St Vincent (fig.1). Tindale describes the Kaurna tribe as comprising several smaller groups of people or "hordes" who spoke the same or a similar dialect and had a sense of larger group identity.² The ethnographic evidence for this proposition is yet to be fully presented by Tindale and it is therefore difficult to assess his conclusions. The relevance of Tindale's concept of the tribe to the situation in Aboriginal Australia has also been questioned by anthropologists.³

In this paper I attempt to trace the origin and meaning of the term Kaurna and the history of its use. I also examine the range of early descriptions of the political organisation of the Aboriginal groups in the Adelaide Plains area at the time of contact. I then provide a brief history of the Aboriginal people who can trace descent to the groups originating from the Adelaide region and conclude with an examination of the present-day situation.

The 'Adelaide tribe' or the 'Kaurna'?

There is no conclusive evidence of the original meaning of the term Kaurna. Its earliest recorded use appears to be in William Wyatt's publication dealing with the customs and vocabulary of the "Adelaide and Encounter Bay Tribes". In a list of Aboriginal people, Wyatt describes an Aboriginal called Encounter Bay Bob as belonging to the *Kaurna* tribe.⁴ Encounter Bay Bob, as his English name suggests, appears to have had a stronger connection with the Encounter Bay area which is

outside Tindale's Kaurna territory. Some information concerning Encounter Bay Bob's background can be surmised through his early land claims. He was the first Aborigine to claim and receive a land grant in South Australia.⁵ The Protector of Aborigines Matthew Moorhouse recorded that Encounter Bay Bob first chose a piece of land that he claimed as his "birthright", but this land was already selected by colonists and so he agreed to take some that was "equally good in exchange". This land was in the Encounter Bay district.⁶ There is no record of the location of Encounter Bay Bob's first selection, but it seems likely that it too was in the Encounter Bay area.

Of further significance in the process of identifying Encounter Bay Bob is the possibility that the early Adelaide Aboriginal identity *Wattewatpinna* was in fact Encounter Bay Bob. The Lutheran missionary Clamor Schurmann records on a number of occasions in his diary that he obtained cultural information about the Adelaide people from his next door neighbour at the Native Location in Adelaide, *Wattewatpinna*.⁷ Moorhouse in a letter to the Colonial Secretary records that Bob was the European name of *Watta-Wattite-pinna* (this appears to be a variation in the spelling of *Wattewatpinna*).⁸ It is also interesting to note that Schurmann wanted to have *Wattewatpinna* accompany him on his trips to Encounter Bay.⁹ These pieces of information are tantalising, and there may still exist more convincing evidence that *Wattewatpinna* was Encounter Bay Bob. As yet I have not been able to conclusively establish this connection.

However, to begin to understand what was meant by Encounter Bay Bob's cultural classification as Kaurna, his family tree would need to be available for investigation. One would then have to take into account that the Aboriginal people of the Adelaide Plains and Encounter Bay areas appear to have traced descent and primary land rights mainly through the male line.¹⁰ This could mean, as one interpretation, that for Encounter Bay Bob's 'Kaurna' identity to have had a strong link with the Adelaide area he may have been connected with the Encounter Bay area through his mother and possessed a primary connection with the "*Kouandilla* district of the Adelaide Tribe" through his father.¹¹ This interpretation brings in a second Wyatt observation which identifies one of what he terms the "districts" of the Adelaide tribe. It is possible that the word Kaurna is a derivation of the term *Kouandilla*. With a minor spelling modification, "*Cowandilla*" is also mentioned as an equivalent term for the Adelaide tribe in a number of newspaper articles in the 1840s.¹² John Bull also states that the name

of the Adelaide tribe was "*Cowandilla*".¹³ In Teichelmann and Schurmann's 1840 publication dealing with the "Aboriginal language of South Australia, spoken by the natives in and for some distance around Adelaide", the people living to the north of Adelaide are described as speaking "*Karnu warra*, a northern dialect".¹⁴ When *karnu* is said using Teichelmann and Schurmann's German pronunciation it is very close to the English pronunciation of Kaurna. Teichelmann produced an upgraded version of the 1840 vocabulary in 1857, but it was never published. In this work he identifies north as "*kawanda* or *kawarnda*" and "*kawandilla*" as "in the north".¹⁵ Significantly, in both vocabularies Teichelmann and Schurmann do not identify a broad tribal term for the Adelaide region such as Tindale's Kaurna.

Alfred Howitt was the first to use Kaurna as a term for the tribe that occupied a similar area to the one later described by Tindale.¹⁶ In his 1904 book *The native tribes of south-east Australia*, he places the word "Kaurna" on a map of South Australia in the area just to the north of Adelaide. However, it appears from another map in this book, dealing with social organisation, that he may have defined the Kaurna territory as continuing south of the City of Adelaide to the edge of the Mount Lofty Ranges as they meet the Adelaide Plains.¹⁷ Howitt provides no evidence for his conclusions, although some further information may be found in a collection of his correspondence held in the National Museum of Victoria. In 1900 R.H. Mathews argued that the Adelaide tribe was part of a nation he called the *Adjadurah* which occupied the Adelaide region and Yorke Peninsula.¹⁸ He writes:

Owing to the similarity of the dialects of the Yorke Peninsula and Adelaide tribes, the prevalence of circumcision and other customs, together with the fact of their being adjoining neighbours, seems to me to justify the assumption that they were practically the same people. I have therefore included these two tribes in one nation.¹⁹

In 1889 J.J. East also argued that the Yorke Peninsula and Adelaide area people could be described as one nation.²⁰ The influence of the concept of nations in Aboriginal Australia can perhaps be seen in the later work of Tindale culminating in the *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*.

In the 1830s and 1840s, when describing Aboriginal groups, most observers used the term "tribe" and combined it with European place names, e.g. the "Adelaide tribe", the "Mount Barker tribe" and the "Encounter Bay tribe". Although these

labels were loosely applied it is probable that these "tribes" were most often groups of families whose male members had rights through kinship to closely associated pieces of land. According to Teichelmann and Schurmann a *pangkarra* was a "district or tract of land belonging to an individual, which he inherits from his father."²¹ Ellis equates this *pangkarra* with Stanner's concept of the "estate". He writes:

The "estate" according to Stanner, was the traditionally recognised locus ("home" "country", ground"), of some kind of patrilineal descent group forming the core or nucleus of the territorial group. This area seems usually to have been more or less geographically continuous.²²

Teichelmann's following discussion of the concept of tribe illustrates the similarity of his understanding of this concept to the *pangkarra* and to Stanner's "estate":

They are rather to be considered as large families, or bodies of relatives which might be called a republican tribe,... each tribe has a certain district of the country as a property received by their forefathers, the boundaries of which are fixed, according to their narration, by them...²³

These tribes were of a much smaller scale than Tindale's and approximate the groups that he calls "clans". The Lutheran missionaries were interested in the culture and language of the Aboriginal people with whom they were working. They were skilled at compiling vocabularies and grammars and they recorded ethnographic details that few other Europeans had the interest to notice. They wanted to understand Aboriginal language and culture so that they could use this knowledge to assist in their conversion of Aboriginal people to Christianity. However, these missionaries did not argue that a broad group identity existed from the southern Fleurieu Peninsula to the area over 100 kilometres north of Adelaide. This concept was first argued by Tindale many years later.²⁴

The early Lutheran missionaries recorded detailed information about the Aboriginal people of the Adelaide region, but they were not the only early recorders of this type of information. It was also part of the duties of the Protector of Aborigines to "make himself acquainted with their [the Aborigines] language and dialects, their customs, their habits, their prejudices, their tribes, numbers and peculiar districts..."²⁵ The Protector of Aborigines Matthew Moorhouse identified the "Adelaide tribe" in perhaps a broader form than did the the missionaries and the other colonists. He described this "tribe's" territory as stretching from "ten miles north of Adelaide to Mount Terrible, near Myponga in the south".²⁶ Moorhouse further defines the Adelaide tribe as follows:

... the Adelaide tribe varied from 150 to 300 at any one time, including the

off the old missions and into Adelaide. Many "Kaurna" descendants have moved to Adelaide and become prominent in the new bureaucracy that developed after Aboriginal people were given a role in their own affairs in the 1960s. Gladys Elphick was particularly involved in changing Government attitudes and developing new organisations for Aboriginal people.⁵¹ Mary Williams, another 'Kaurna' descendant, has played a significant role in the development of new Aboriginal organisations in Adelaide.⁵²

For the more recent generations who have been born in Adelaide a new identity has emerged. They have little connection with the old missions where their parents and grandparents grew up. They see themselves as *Nungas*, a term used by Aboriginal people from southern South Australia when referring to Aboriginal people.⁵³ Neva Grzybowitz, a descendant of the West Coast Aboriginal people, grew up in Adelaide during the Second World War and she remembers the term *Nyunga* being used. She says this word came from the West Coast and was corrupted to *Nunga* because people had difficulty with its proper pronunciation.⁵⁴ The more specific group names like 'Ngarrindjeri' or 'Narangga' are being used less by these younger people - although there are moves from several areas to encourage knowledge of Aboriginal heritage in younger people and this is producing a new 'Kaurna' identity.

The emergence of 'Kaurna' identity

Tindale's 1974 *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia* was influential in **promoting the use of the term Kaurna** and the associated tribal concept in the Aboriginal and European community. In the early 1980s a number of new Adelaide Aboriginal organisations used the term in their titles, for example, the Kaurna Children's Centre and the Kaurna Plains Football Club, adopted the term. However, in 1972, before Tindale's publication, Robert Edwards, the Curator of Anthropology at the South Australian Museum, making use of Tindale's earlier writings, produced a short booklet called *The Kaurna people of the Adelaide Plains*.⁵⁵ This booklet resulted from the activities of the Tjilbruke Monuments Committee established in 1971 to mark the track created by the Dreaming ancestor 'Tjir:buki'. In September 1972 the Governor of South Australia Sir Mark Oliphant unveiled a sculpture at Kingston Park commemorating the Tjilbruke Dreaming and marking the first site on the track running south of Adelaide.