

BANYJIMA BOUNDARIES - HAMERSLEY RANGES

In 1892, a virtual state of war existed in the Hamersley Ranges. On August 20th, 1892, a shepherd named James Coppin who was employed on Stevenson and Pollett's Mount Bruce Station was murdered by a group of Aboriginal men. A man named 'Parody' was charged with murder. At the Mount Bruce Station, the manager John Pollett threatened to 'take the law into my own hands' in a letter published in the *Nor'West Times* on January 30, 1892 under the heading, 'Troublesome Natives'. The letter ended, 'something will have to be done, and that shortly, or we shall not be able to live up here at all'.

Coppin had been living with Maggie, who had been forced to flee with the attackers for fear that she would report the murder. The witnesses' statements say that after the murder, for about six months until they were captured, Parody protected Maggie from Billy, who threatened to kill her.¹ Her father, Parody, had been one of the attackers. According to reports of the trial, the other accused belonged 'to the tribe adjoining that of the women Maggie'.² The waterhole where Coppin was murdered was variously named as Kangelgarra or Cundagulla and is now known as 'Coppin Pool'. According to an oral history given by Lola Young (Day 2004) the Aboriginal name for Coppin Pool is 'Gungallagarri'.

When other suspects were captured on Ashburton Downs, reports stated, 'This tribe of natives are not stationary in the Range but travel to and fro between that part and the Upper Ashburton and belong to the same people who sometime ago murdered the half-caste Coppin.' In her oral history Lola Young claims that her grandfather, 'George Cutacross' was involved in the attack on Coffin. The eulogy written by Lola to be read at her funeral on 11 December 2010 states: 'My dad's name is Cookie Cuttercross, a Banyjima man, and my mum's name is Dora Delaport, a Gurrama woman.' (The genealogy records him as Innawonga).

After the guilty verdict, an execution was planned to be held in the district of the murder. A telegram from Roebourne police stated, 'am informed it is contemplated hanging this offender [Parody] at scene of murder Hamersley Ranges. Police tell me there are very few natives there and do not believe any could be collected to witness execution.'³ The *Nor'West Times* reported, 'The idea of having the execution carried out in the district in which the crime was committed was to warn other natives, more especially those of the condemned man's tribe.' However, on January 21, 1893, the newspaper reported, 'The native Parody, who was sentenced to death for the murder of James Coppin last year and who was to have been hanged near the Hamersley Range, has cheated the hangman, despite all the care taken of him. He died within 100 miles of his final destination.'

¹ *Nor'-West Times* March 2 and December 10, 1892.

² *Nor'-West Times* December 10, 1892.

³ J Beresford, Sergt Police, 2139/92, 24 March 1892. If there were so few Banyjima people in the area, it is surprising that the owner of Mount Bruce wrote in 1892 'something will have to be done, and that shortly, or we shall not be able to live up here at all.'

On March 25, 1893, the newspaper announced, 'Cudderabiddy alias Billy, one of three convicted murderers of James Coppin, is to be hanged in Roebourne gaol at a date to be hereafter fixed. The other two, Cuggerabung alias Georgie and Nudderabin have been committed to Rottnest under a life sentence to penal servitude.'

This incident is relevant to a discussion on Banyjima boundaries because the above reports and other records reveal a movement of people from the Mount Bruce area southwards towards the Ashburton River, similar to the movement and intermarriage of the present Top End Banyjima group. Maggie and her father Parody, of the 'adjoining tribe' belonged to the Mount Bruce area, where Parody was due to be hung as a warning to his tribe.

In the same year as the Coppin Pool attack, Charles Straker Inspector of Aborigines visited Mulga Downs.⁴ Straker reported that he arrived from Mt Florence Station on the 29th October 1892 and proceeded to visit the natives at their different camps ... originally this was a small station owned by Leski and McRae but 'some years back' it had been bought by the present owners who had added 'a great extent more country'. Straker reported that under the new owners 'a good number' of Aboriginal people had 'come in from the Range' to work.

A Mr Hester reported that would be impossible to keep natives against their will as they could 'within a few hours get into the Hamersley Range where it is next to impossible to catch them if they wish to avoid being caught'. However, Hester said he was confident that he could get more people to come in. According to the manager, one problem with the 'hill natives' was that they 'cause a lot of trouble by coming and loafing on the shepherds as they consume their rations and lead them into all sorts of mischief'.

Under the heading, 'Trouble from hill natives', Straker added:

There are a large number of bush native in the Range up this way. Some time ago forty came into the station with the avowed intention of killing all the white men Just lately they have sent in a message to the effect that shortly they would come in and kill all the white men and native men and take away the women.

At Hamersley Station, Straker was shown a man 'who had received a flogging ordered by Mr Keep when that gentleman visited the Hamersley to witness the execution of Coppin's murderer'. He also reported that 'within and about the Hamersley Range there are a large number of bush natives who

⁴ Acc 495, File 726/92, Straker, C. Report on Ashburton Downs Station, November 1892, SROWA. Charles Straker was a travelling inspector of Aborigines. He eventually came to own Hamersley and Coolawanyah Stations (Batty 1915, 219).

refuse to work for any master'. Straker observed, 'This tribe of natives are not stationary in the Range but travel to and fro between that part and the Upper Ashburton and belong to the same people who sometime ago murdered the half-caste Coppin.'

Similarly at Middle Creek owned by Stevenson and Pollett and managed by Mr John Pollett.

Straker heard of 'hill men [who] give endless trouble and are a great nuisance. They not only kill his cattle wholesale but have murdered one of his stockmen (Coppin) some time ago and have repeatedly come into the camp with the expressed intention of killing all the white men.' Straker noted, 'These natives who roam about from this part of the Upper Ashburton have little fear of police and fancy they can do this sort of thing with impunity. These are the same tribe of natives about whom Mr Thompson complains.'

From the above reports, it appears attacks were occurring on white settlements from 'hills natives', although local people like Maggie on Mount Bruce and those working on Mulga Downs had learned to accommodate the intrusion of settlement. At Mount Bruce, some of the aggressors retreat to the south west, presumably to their country, while at Mulga Downs they hid out in the hills. At times they 'loafed' on the Aboriginal shepherds and 'led them astray', terms that imply a kinship relationship.

If the Fortescue flats at Mulga Downs had not been Banyjima country, would it be expected that the 'hills natives' would have been so aggressive as to virtually declare war, as reported? The thefts, spearing of sheep and other attacks imply a desperate, possibly starvation situation in the Hamersley Ranges as hunting areas were taken up. For example, Straker was told the station owner would not allow Aboriginal people to use the waterholes.

By 1914, there is evidence that violent conflict had ceased between groups at Mulga Downs, at least for the duration of initiation ceremonies; however, a police report suggests the station manager did not welcome 'strange natives' who did not belong to the station. The Journal of a Constable Napier of the Tableland District, July 1st to July 31st, 1914, records a mixed gathering of Aboriginal people on Mulga Downs for initiation ceremonies:⁵

Sunday 12-7-14

Left camp at 8 a.m. and arrived at Mulga Downs Station at 1 p.m. and camped. Saw the

⁵ Journal of Constable Napier 452 Tableland 1/7/14 to 31/7/14, AN 5 Acc 430 File 5368/1914

manager Mr S Criddle.

Note: Mr Criddle informed the P.C. that there were a number of strange natives in the Station Native Camp that he would like to have shifted or cleared away.

After making careful inquiries the P.C. ascertained that the reason there was such a number of strange natives about Mulga Downs was owing to there being three young boys belonging to the Station, about to become circumcised and to through some tribal customs that are still practised in this District.

Therefore by 1914, after the date when many ancestors of present claimants were born on the station, those people who had moved onto the station were confident enough to be hosting ceremonies and conducting 'meeting camps'. From the genealogical record we assume that members of the Tucker family were born on Mulga Downs from at least 1880 and many known ancestors of present claimants were being born on the station around the time of the above police report. We can also assume that Indjibandi and Banyjima people were mixing on the station as they were up to recent times. Undoubtedly, the 'hill country' was becoming depopulated as people moved onto the station, but we know from names like Dignam's, Manjina and Mount Bruce and the many bush birth places recorded in the genealogies that Banyjima people still moved across the ranges.

Tindale (1976:15) claimed 'the scarp-faced uplands of the Hamersley Range clearly defined the home of the Pandjima, ardent followers of the twin rites of circumcision and subincision and therefore holding both their near and more remote neighbours in thorough distain.'

The historian Forrest quotes: "Fresh root and seed eating people of the lowlands [who] do not possess the active habits of mind and body which are characteristic of the hunter – the fierceness, energy or savagery – of the natives who inhabit the more elevated regions." Despite the descriptions, would it be likely that such a people be limited in range to the escarpment overlooking the Fortescue floodplain?

In his report on an ethnographic survey for the Great Northern Highway, Mulvaney (1984:31) commented:

Probably then it was likely that the Fortescue Valley was utilised by small groups of people extending their range when produce was obtainable and alleviating resource pressure on the more permanently occupied areas within the Hamersley Plateau and

Chichester Ranges. This mobility pattern may account for the ambiguities of traditional tribal ownership of this valley section and for the shared tribal areas of the groups which traditionally occupied this proportion of the Pilbara.

To the northeast, the Banyjima people had a similarly fierce reputation. In May, 1953, Norman Tindale notes he 'worked with Bailgu Pandjima and Indjibandi men'.⁶ Under the heading 'Intertribal enmity', Tindale writes:

The Pandjima and Bailgu were not friends and prior to the white times would kill each other if there was opportunity. When a lone man was seen he was killed. His friends missed and sought him without success. Then they would plan and carry out an attack on the enemy camp while they were asleep, using spears to kill. Only men were killed as a general rule, for the women were taken as wives, and the children reared as one's own. The killing of one man meant his brothers had to take revenge. There was no end to the fighting until white men stopped it.

All facts considered I suggest that the Fortescue Banyjima people were in occupation of an area beyond the escarpment of the Hamersley Ranges at the time of sovereignty and continued to resist encroachment on their lands until the twentieth century, when the geographical division between 'Top End' and 'Bottom End' now under debate became more pronounced.

Concerning the eastern shared boundary at Weeli Wolli Creek, I have done many heritage surveys on both sides of Weeli Wolli Creek with a combined team of Fortescue Banyjima and Nyiyaparli consultants (Day 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2007a, 2007b). The Banyjima consultants were insistent that they could only speak for land on the western side of the creek and the Nyiyaparli consultants vice versa.

⁶ Norman Tindale, N W Australia Journal, page 251.