The etymology of Coober Pedy, South Australia

Petter Naessan

The aim of this paper is to outline and assess the diverging etymologies of ‘Coober Pedy’ in northern South Australia, in the search for original and post-contact local Indigenous significance associated with the name and the region. At the interface of contemporary Yankunytjatjara and Pitjantjatjara opinion (mainly in the Coober Pedy region, where I have conducted fieldwork since 1999) and other sources, an interesting picture emerges: in the current use by Yankunytjatjara and Pitjantjatjara people as well as non-Indigenous people in Coober Pedy, the name ‘Coober Pedy’ – as ‘white man’s hole (in the ground)’ – does not seem to reflect or point toward a pre-contact Indigenous presence.

Coober Pedy is an opal mining and tourist town with a total population of about 3500, situated near the Stuart Highway, about 850 kilometres north of Adelaide, South Australia. Coober Pedy is close to the Stuart Range, lies within the Arckaringa Basin and is near the border of the Great Victoria Desert. Low spinifex grasslands amounts for most of the sparse vegetation. The Coober Pedy and Oodnadatta region is characterised by dwarf shrubland and tussock grassland. Further north and northwest, low open shrub savanna and open shrub woodland dominates.[1] Coober Pedy and surrounding regions are arid and exhibit very unpredictable rainfall.

Much of the economic activity in the region (as well as the initial settlement of Euro-Australian invaders) is directly related to the geology, namely quite large deposits of opal. The area was only settled by non-Indigenous people after 1915 when opal was uncovered but traditionally the Indigenous population was western Arabana (*Midlaliri*). Indigenous people – of whom the largest group consists of Pitjantjatjara speakers with ties much further north-west – now live both in Coober Pedy itself and on ‘the Reserve’, Umoona, which is the Indigenous community area outside Coober Pedy. According to Anangu (‘Western Desert people’) and non-Indigenous people I have spoken with, the number of Indigenous people in the Coober Pedy region (that is, including Umoona) would be 300–500 people but estimates are hard to ascertain – it should be remembered that a sizeable number of the Indigenous population in the region is highly mobile.

The town has two service stations and two supermarkets – one in the upper part of Hutchinson Street called the ‘Miner’s Store’, and ‘Lucas’ in the lower part of the main street. There are two liquor shops, one next to the Lucas entrance, the other in the upper part of Hutchinson Street adjacent to the Opal Inn Motel. There is one bank (Westpac), a post office, several small restaurants and other small shops, a hospital, the Coober Pedy Area School, and the Technical and Further Education vocational college (TAFE). A small aerodrome lies outside the town, and there is a small bus station at which buses arrive from Adelaide and

Alice Springs on a daily basis. Several motels and bars cater for tourists and residents, and motels arrange for tourists to be picked up from the aerodrome by car.

In attempting to clarify the exact source of the name 'Coober Pedy', we need to take into account that Coober Pedy itself is generally considered to be traditional Arabana country by senior *Anangu* ('Western Desert people'), although Western Desert Kukata and Yankunytjatjara also have ties to the region, particularly the ceremonial sites of the Breakaways of the Stuart Range. Arabana is a Karnic language. The three main Arabana dialects traditionally spoken were *Piltapalta* (south of Macumba), *Wangkakupa* (Anna Creek), and *Midlaliri* (Stuart Range area). Arabana people now mainly live in Port Augusta and Marree and a very small group of senior people have detailed knowledge of one of the three original Arabana dialects (*Wangkakupa*).[2] The last speaker of *Midlaliri*, Sam Warrpa from Coober Pedy, died in the 1940s[3] (ibid) and much historical, cultural and linguistic knowledge is likely to have passed away with him.

The expansion of Western Desert speakers

It is well-known in relation to Indigenous Australian history that there have been migratory waves of Pitjantjatjara and other Western Desert groups eastwards and southwards at least from the early 1900s to the 1940s.[4] These shifts may have taken place since the 1830s and five phases of later population movements have been outlined by Peggy Brock:

> there was a movement south to Ooldea and the transcontinental railway line from 1917 to the 1940s; Ngaanyatjarra speakers in the late 1920s moved from the Warburton Ranges and the Gibson Desert in Western Australia to Laverton, Mount Margaret, Kalgoorlie and Wiluna; by 1921 Antikirinya were moving east from Granite Downs to the Oodnadatta area, and Yankunytjatjara from the Everards were also moving east; and in the area they previously occupied came the Pitjantjatjara from the Mann and Tonkinson Ranges.[5]

At least some of these movements were motivated by a need to escape drought and associated hardship. Regionally, Western Desert variants have expanded, eventually resulting in relatively stable populations of Western Desert speakers in Oodnadatta, Coober Pedy, Port Augusta, and at Yalata on the west coast.[6]

In addition, as Anangu from the west arrived in increasing numbers many people from Arabana and other groups (including to some extent Western Desert people) died as a result of introduced disease.

Traditionally the eastern neighbours of Yankunytjatjara and Antikirinya, the Lower Arrernte and Arabana groups seem to have been severely affected by the influenza epidemic of 1919–1920.[7] Outbreaks of whooping cough and polio at Oodnadatta in the 1930s coincided with tuberculosis. At the time, several groups of Anangu (in this case Pitjantjatjara) of the Petermann Ranges laboured under a three-year long drought lasting until 1939, forcing them to move away from the Ranges to find water and food. Many had died in the attempt.[8] In 1936 it was estimated that there were 500 'Aborigines' living in the Petermann Ranges, whereas a medical patrol in 1939 found only 26. The medical patrol, which included TGH

Strehlow, Dr Duguid and a tracker ('native guide'), crossed the Ranges at five points and travelled as far west as to the border of Western Australia, but found only 'five men, eight women, one old woman and twelve children'.[9] In addition, the measles epidemic in 1948 is said to have killed a combined number of nearly 100 Indigenous people around Oodnadatta, Granite Downs, Mimili and Ernabella, although the actual number of deaths may have been higher.[10] There is a lack of precise data for the more remote regions, that is outside the locales mentioned above, but Rani Kerin mentions that the measles epidemic of 1948 may have resulted in as many as 50 people dying at Ernabella, and 'many hundreds more in the surrounding region'.[11]

These experiences must have been horrific for people witnessing so many of their family members pass away. It is difficult to ascertain how these processes were interpreted but it is clear from Antikirinya elders' information provided to me in 2003 that two ceremonies were discontinued in the 1940s. This may have been due to introduced disease being calibrated into the ever-present, fundamental realm of spirits and magic, to the extent that the ceremonies were seen as being major parts of the problem (performances may to some extent have been seen as activating the disease) and consequently stopped as a survival measure.[12] In a more general sense, what data such as these suggest is that there have been a number of processes in place which have altered the pre-contact situation of the wider region of which Coober Pedy is a part.

Sites and settlements

Before entering into a discussion of the variant etymologies one should bear in mind that what is today the township of Coober Pedy may not originally have had *one* corresponding name – in fact, that would appear to be implausible, since pre-contact naming praxis of the wider region is focused on specific ritually significant *sites* that are parts of ancestral tracks. Hunter-gatherer groups of the area would seem to fit with the concept of 'bands' in the anthropological literature, to the extent that:

> bands frequently lack sharp territorial boundaries and their membership changes from season to season, and even day to day, as kinsmen arrive, depart and visit each other over a wide geographical area.[13]

Stanner outlined an Indigenous 'ecological life-space' or *domain*, divided into the *estate* (the 'traditionally recognised locus' of totem sites, constituted on ritual and genealogical bases) and the *range*, which were the foraging and hunting areas ordinarily used by the group.[14] The estate was normally included in the range, although the two entities were 'nowhere identical'. A clear distinction between these realms was seen as being scarcely possible to establish concerning good habitats, whereas in more harsh (arid) environments estate and range could be dissociated, that is, 'considerations of range (especially in protracted drought conditions) might dominate those of estate for as much as a decade'.[15]

Luise Hercus remarks that 'Arabana-Wangkangurru people did not think in terms of boundaries; there is in fact no such word in the language' – the areas where their territory ended and other peoples' began were mostly gradual.[16] However, when the term *wadlhu*

(‘ground, sand, soil, earth, country’) is used with a possessive – *anthunha wadlhu*, ‘my country’ – it denotes a specific area with which the speaker has a strong ritual affiliation, or in Stanner’s terminology, an estate.[17]

The way senior A<u>n</u>angu (‘Western Desert people’) speak about their own or other ethno-linguistic groups’ territories seems to consistently lack clear boundaries – typically, a directional term is used (*kakara<u>r</u>a*, ‘east’, *wilu<u>r</u>ara*, ‘west’, and so on), and when more specific regions are singled out senior A<u>n</u>angu will, virtually without exception, point towards what I would refer to as one or more ‘core’ localities – either old camping grounds associated with waterholes or more permanent post-contact localities (these are all ‘sites’, ‘areas’, ‘places’, that is referred to as *ngura*). In cases where other groups’ territories are explicitly referred to *vis-à-vis* Yankunytjatjara areas, a commonly occurring term is *kampa kutjupa* (‘the other side’), indicating the ‘other side’ of a mountain range, encampment or other locality. I believe that if one were to speak of ‘boundaries’ at all, one would quickly find that they overlap. The impression I have gained from many discussions with A<u>n</u>angu throughout the years is that what many *walypala tju<u>t</u>a* (‘whitefellas’) seem to regard as central, the concept of ‘boundaries’ or ‘borders’, is virtually non-existent or at best peripheral for traditionally-oriented Anangu.[18]

It would appear that principles of land tenure among Arabana and Western Desert peoples differed somewhat: for the most part, neighbouring groups of Arabana and Wangkangurru could freely come to partake in ceremonies, ‘whereas rights for foraging were far more intricate in that amongst the Arabana and Wangkangurru there were strict rules governing where people were allowed to forage’.[19] The last mentioned rules contrast with a higher degree of fluidity among Western Desert groups, among which ‘it can be impossible for the outside observer to come to “certainty” as to “who exactly” holds which rights in what areas’, consistent with an absence of ‘a single heavily dominant default mechanism for the transmission of rights in country’.[20] The principles of land tenure operative in Coober Pedy nowadays seem to be predominantly Western Desert. Thus,

> many Yankunytjatjara now claim relationship to Coober Pedy by virtue of being born there (an aspect of the flexibility of birth totemism) and occasionally by referring to the area as constituting *tjamuku ngura* (‘grandfather’s country’), a claim which not only establishes a genealogical link but also stresses the continuity and significance of the traditional kinship system.[21]

In the Coober Pedy region, one particularly important site for Arabana people traditionally was *Ulyurla Thidna* (‘Woman’s foot’) the hill marking the beginning of the *Warrpa* (‘Storm’) history, on the road to William Creek, supposed to be on the south side of the road when travelling towards William Creek from Coober Pedy.[22] Another important site – for Antikirinya people, and most probably also for *Midlaliri* – is what today is called Ice Cream Hill. In 2003, a senior Antikirinya man told me that Ice Cream Hill originally was *wii<u>l</u>-wii<u>l</u>* (‘restricted’) – about 70 years ago, when he was a young child travelling on foot with his family in the area, the children were not allowed to go there. Non-Indigenous people have lived there for quite some time and as a consequence its ritual significance for Indigenous

locals has been eroded. I have not been able to get any more information about this site in so far as *Midlaliri* traditions are concerned.

A campsite about ten kilometres outside Coober Pedy is predominantly called ‘Ten Mile (Creek)’. There are three other names I have heard used by Yankunytjatjara people but certainly nowhere as often as ‘Ten Mile’ – these are *karu kaḻi-kaḻi* (‘crooked creek’); *karu tjanmaṯatjara* (‘the creek bed with wild onions’), and *karu tjilpi tjuṯaku* (‘the creek belonging to the elders’). These are all in Yankunytjatjara. Now, two senior Antikirinya men have explained that the name of the place from ‘olden time’ was *Karlamarra* and that the site belonged to Arabana people in the old days. This name has not been explained by Antikirinya to me but may well include the Arabana *karla* (‘creek’), and *marra* (‘new’), literally ‘new creek’.[23] This site clearly has ceremonial significance for various Western Desert groups today.

As seen above, at least to some extent *Midlaliri* names and sites (estates) are known, and considered significant, by senior Antikirinya people. Considering the migrations of Western Desert people mentioned above, one would perhaps be inclined at face value to view shared traditions between Western Desert and other groups as more of a comparatively recent phenomenon. After Western Desert people established themselves in more or less permanent settlements in regions east and south-east of their heartlands, succession processes through which Arabana customary law knowledge was handed over to Western Desert people are indicated to have taken place east of Coober Pedy, in the Oodnadatta area.[24] However, at least some traditions were arguably shared among different ethnolinguistic groups also in a pre-invasion setting.

The tracks of some of the ancestral beings offer very interesting glimpses into some cultural patterns shared among various ethno-linguistic groups. It is not my intention to map out ancestral or other tracks in any exhaustive manner here, merely to draw attention to the fact that at least some of the ancestral tracks were and remain parts of larger wholes.

The Wildcat Dreaming or the Native Cat song cycle:

> covers a 3000-kilometre journey from Port Augusta on the coast of South Australia to Arnhem Land on the coast of the Northern Territory, appearing intermittingly in the oral traditions and ceremonial song cycles of various dialect and language groups.[25]

This song cycle is known by Antikirinya and Yankunytjatjara women, and was also reportedly known by Arabana and Arrernte, to mention but a few groups.[26]

Another example of a track that extensively crosses linguistic groups is that of the Seven Sisters Dreaming, known as *ukaralya* among Antikirinya and Yankunytjatjara, and as *kungkarangkalpa* among Pitjantjatjara groups. Daisy Bates recorded its existence among Thura-Yura Wirangu (on the far west coast of South Australia) under the name *yugarilya*.[27] It is known as *arralkwe* in northern/ eastern Arrernte, and as *arrarrkwe* in eastern/ central Arrernte.[28] The central trait throughout is that seven sisters were chased by a man, and that they eventually escaped into the sky, where they can be seen today as the Seven Sisters star constellation.

The Western Desert groups and the Karnic-speaking Arabana of the western Lake Eyre basin differed from each other in culture, social systems and traditions but there was exchange and some joint traditions – the Emu song-cycle, containing much Western Desert material, comes from the central Simpson Desert (Wangkangurru country), 'through the area of Shellpatch Bore and then goes over to Mt Chandler where it is continued by Western Desert people and taken far to the west'.[29] It is also worth mentioning that from what I have been told by Antikirinya elders, any person travelling across an area would be expected as a matter of course to stay away from restricted sites – also today, among traditionally-oriented Antikirinya and Yankunytjatjara, people are often reluctant to go around in an uninhabited area unknown to them, since they could be in danger of entering dangerous areas. In some areas, ogres or evil spirits (*mamu*) would cause harm, there could also be severe punishment meted out by the much-feared 'featherfoot', *tjina karpil* ('bound feet'), also called *kutatji*, the Law executioner. It is still considered imperative to know where you can go, where it is 'safe', and these sensitivities are likely to have been stronger in the past. In a hunter-gatherer economy people would at times have to travel considerable distances for water and food (even into areas associated with other groups), especially during hard times. Thus, at least in principle, the symbolic and the pragmatic seem to have been intertwined – to have knowledge of ancestral tracks and sites was far from optional, it appears to have been central to staying unharmed and alive.

More to the point concerning the area under consideration here, and as we shall see below, the Stuart Range was a pre-contact meeting place for Arabana and Western Desert speakers, in part reflected in linguistic borrowing from within the Western Desert language into Arabana.

An Arabana name? *Kupa* as 'uninitiated man' extended to 'whitefella'

Rena Briand, a French visitor to Coober Pedy who wrote a book about her time there, holds that:

> Coober Pedy is the bastardisation of the Arabana dialect for Kupa (or Goober), meaning male child or adult who has not been initiated by rites of circumcision and sub-incision, plus Piti, meaning cavity in the ground.[30]

This version of the etymology maintains that the Arabana term *kupa* became used for white people (since they were and are generally not initiated men), whence came the popular translation of 'white man in a hole'.[31] Briand is not a linguistic source, and it is unclear to what extent the author spoke or understood anything of the Indigenous vernaculars. However, it is clear that she consulted a number of Indigenous people, and the source is included here because it corresponds to some extent with other sources.

The version *kupa-piti* 'boys' waterhole' is recorded by Manning in his index of South Australian history but without any reference as to the source of the name.[32] 'Boys' waterhole' is certainly also a feature of what one could call 'wikipedia scholarship' and similar meanings are frequent on the internet – however, as etymologies, they are inadequate.

Many internet references, Manning included, simply mention that Coober Pedy is a 'corruption of the Aboriginal kupa-piṯi'. What 'Aboriginal' refers to is left unstated, which obfuscates matters considerably.

Noting that the exact source of the 'youngfella – hole in the ground' version is absent, Briand's etymological sketch also conflates *kupa* 'young', 'little', or 'youngfella' with 'uninitiated man', but 'uninitiated' is a special term in Arabana, *karuwali*. Luise Hercus has told me that throughout her work with Arabana people she never heard *kupa* 'young, little' used to mean 'uninitiated'.[33]

Finally, none of the people with Arabana background I have spoken to in Coober Pedy (and no Anangu) have mentioned any other etymology than 'white man's hole', which brings us to the Kukata etymology.[34]

Coober Pedy – Kukata for 'white man's hole'

'Coober Pedy' is commonly held to be a name from Kukata; a Western Desert lect no longer spoken extensively in the community (the name for the peopleand language is also spelt Kukatha or Gugada).[35]*Kupa piṯi* is typically said to mean 'whitefella – hole in the ground', or, according to John Platt, 'whitefellows' holes', or *guba biḏi*, 'white man's holes'.[36] Several other sources are considerably more vague as to the origin of the name. On the District Council of Coober Pedy's website, the name reportedly comes from 'the Aboriginal words "Kupa Piṯi" ([sic], meaning white man's hole or waterhole'.[37] In *The Canberra Times*, 4 November 1926 the following sketch is provided: 'the name Coober Pedy is an aborigine [sic] one and means "Man living in ground"'.[38]*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 April 1954 mentions that 'Coober Pedy is well named. It is an aboriginal [sic] term for "white man in a hole"'.[39] A more extended descriptive tag (which includes 'live') is found in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 May 1954: 'as a name for their settlement the opal diggers of central South Australia chose two aboriginal [sic] words, "Coober Pedy" – "white man live [sic] underground"'.[40]

'Aboriginal words', as indicated above, are of course terms with a considerable lack of clarity. What is of importance here is that the etymology sketched as 'white man's hole' seems well established in the public realm.

Rena Briand indicates that the place was officially named Coober Pedy at a miners' meeting in 1920.[41] This is supported by Jessie Lennon, a Matu-Yankunytjatjara woman who includes an extract from the Progress Committee meeting from June 1920 in her autobiography.[42] The name 'Coober Pedy' was selected by a vote of 16 non-Indigenous miners.

Jessie Lennon explains the name in the following way (orthography as in the original):

> Some whitefella must have asked some womens or mans, 'What now? What do you call these diggings?'

> Must have asked we-fellas here – old Tottie mob, George Turner. 'Oh, we say "*Pi*t̲*i kupaku* white mans" hole.'
>
> They must have been writing something down too, I reckon, and it came out, 'Coober Pedy.'[43]

George Turner was born in the Woomera area and was most probably one of the last fluent speakers of Kukata. He was in his seventies when John Platt recorded him in 1966. The reference to 'old Tottie mob' is no doubt involving one of his daughters, Tottie.[44]

'White man in a hole', or 'whitefella – hole in the ground' makes perfect sense as a descriptive neologism (albeit drawing on and based on Indigenous linguistic resources) in the context of mining – so the etymology seems to be referring to processes occurring after 1915, whereas traditional meanings from totemic ancestral tracks of the *Midlaliri* people are absent.

Was this how it happened, then?

As seen above, the group of miners in 1920 apparently at least asked some local Indigenous people about what they called the diggings before the miners settled on an 'official' name. Some or all of the miners may have had a genuine interest in getting to know the original name at the time, alternatively, they wanted a term reflecting the mining activity there (this, in fact, is what Lennon's account above says). In any case, they (or some of them) seem to have wanted a name from an Indigenous vernacular.

The Kukata utterance in the excerpt above is *Pi*t̲*i kupaku*, consisting of *pi*t̲*i* ('hole, quarry'), and *kupa* ('whitefella'), followed by *–ku*, a possessive marker. If the above etymology is correct, then the original utterance certainly has been simplified and significantly altered – in *kupa pi*t̲*i*, the word order is changed and there is no possessive suffix. Why did it not simply become recorded as something akin to 'Pedy Cooberku'?

Possibly because the miners either consciously altered it or otherwise simply got it wrong. Another option is that what they were told by Kukata people was not actually *pi*t̲*i kupaku*. More will be said about this below. For now, a closer look at the individual segments *kupa* and *pi*t̲*i* is warranted.

A closer examination of the Kukata terms *kupa* 'whitefella' and *pi*t̲*i* 'quarry'

Kupa – *Aboriginal English gubba from 'government (man)'?*

From the 1860s onwards to about 1920, South Australian Pidgin English spread north and west via *walypala* pastoral activity, The Overland Telegraph, The Great Northern Railroad and the Trans-Australian Railway.[45] From what is sometimes called 'Cattle Station English', Western Desert languages got loanwords like numbers (eg *puupala*, 'four' + 'fellow'), items like *makati* ('musket', 'rifle') and *pulawa* ('flour'), and certain verbs (eg *kauntam*, 'count', *payam*, 'pay /buy', *alpam*, 'help'), still actively used by senior and middle-aged Yankunytjatjara and Pitjantjatjara speakers in Coober Pedy, Amata, Ernabella and other

locales. The same applies to a limited number of borrowings arriving via ‘Station English’ or Pidgin that reportedly originate in Kaurna, a Thura-Yura language originally spoken in the Adelaide Plains region. These include Kaurna *nantu* (an extension of‘ male kangaroo’)→ Yankunytjatjara/Pitjantjatjara *nanytju* (‘horse’), Kaurna *wodli* (‘hut’ extended to ‘house’) → Yankunytjatjara/Pitjantjatjara *wa*l*i* (‘house’).[46]*Muka*t*a* or *muka*t*i* (Yankunytjatjara and Pitjantjatjara for ‘hat’) probably also originally comes from Kaurna *mokarta* (‘head’).[47]

In his discussion of structural and lexical features of Aboriginal English, phonetician Andrew Butcher mentions that among one of the most widespread words for non-Indigenous people is ‘gubba (used throughout south-eastern Australia; probably originating from “government (man)”)’.[48] Could this be the source of the Kukata term for ‘whitefella’?

The answer is: most probably not. For one thing, the regional scope indicated by Butcher lies well outside the Coober Pedy region, although this does not by itself exclude it from consideration, since words may travel over considerable distances. However, noting that *kupa* as pronounced by Kukata speakers in Platt’s 1966 recordings (see below) is dissimilar from the pronunciation of ‘gubba’, there is no good explanation available for an ostensive transition from the low central to the high back vowel.

The Parnkalla** kupa **(‘ghost, white’) borrowing in Kukata

How *kupa* became used in Kukata for ‘whitefella’ has been mentioned previously by Luise Hercus and Vlad Potezny, and my following treatment expands on their article by specifically assessing data from Kukata sources.[49]*Kupa* is, virtually without any doubt, a relatively recent borrowing into Kukata from some other language. Judging from Platt’s recordings of Kukata speakers in 1966, *kupa* only refers to ‘whitefella’ (for example in one recording Hilda Murray says ‘we don’t say whitefella, we say kupa’).[50] The Kukata word for ‘white’ was *piyu*n, according to Moonie Davies, one of Platt’s main informants.[51] This term is no doubt cognate with Yankunytjatjara *piyan* and Pitjantjatjara *pi*r*anpa*. Moreover, Kukata used *guyirdi* for ‘ghost’, a term shared with and possibly originating in Wirangu.[52]

Luise Hercus and Vlad Potezny hold that *kupa* entered Kukata from variants of the Thura-Yura language.[53] In Parnkalla and Narangga, *kupa* is ‘ghost’ as well as ‘white’. Parnkalla being one of the ethno-linguistic groups neighbouring Kukata, the term (and its extension ‘whitefella’, but, as documented above, with *only* this meaning in Kukata) may well have come from Parnkalla.

*Pi*t*i **‘quarry’***

There may be a danger in assuming that quarries only appeared in the region after *walypala* miners entered the stage.

*Pi*t*i*, according to Luise Hercus, is likely to be a loanword from Western Desert into Arabana-Wangkangurru.[54] This term only means ‘quarry’ in Arabana-Wangkangurru, in contrast to the wider semantic range of the Western Desert word, which includes hole or quarry, burrow, and the term is often found in placenames ‘associated with the origin of something’.[55]*Pi*t*i* apparently became borrowed into Arabana-Wangkangurru as a result of contact between

Anangu and Arabana as Anangu travelled from much further west to gain access to stone material from quarries in the Stuart Range. Arabana-Wangkangurru people Luise Hercus worked with stated this repeatedly.[56] Obviously, the travels for stone material optimal in the production of stone tools and the associated cross-linguistic contact must have been an established pre-invasion phenomenon (that is, before and unrelated to *walypala* activity in the region).

At least for traditionally oriented Anangu, digging deep in the ground is considered dangerous, since it would disturb spirits residing under the ground and bring about imbalance. It would probably be correct to assume consequently that the Stuart Range quarries were of a different order of magnitude than later *walypala* mining shafts. Having said that, *piṯi* as 'quarry' *does* fit in with what appears to be significant pre-contact Indigenous activity in the region.

Following on from Hercus' discussion referred to above, it is clear that *piṯi* may be found in Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara place names 'associated with the origin of something'.[57] To be more specific, in such constructions, the *piṯi* segment occurs without any overt grammatical markings – for instance, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara *Kaḻayapiti* (*kaḻaya*, 'emu'), and *kapi piṯi* ('soakage, well, waterhole' – *kapi*, 'water').[58] A parallel place name involving *kapi* ('water') is from about 80 kilometres north of Coober Pedy – Murloocoppie, from *maḻu kapi* ('kangaroo water'). According to Hercus and Potezny this name ('marlu-kapi' in the original) is of recent Kukata or Yankunytjatjara origin, whereas the area is said to originally belong to *Midlaliri* Arabana.[59]

In the case of *kupa piṯi*, it is not clear to what extent the *origin* of whitefella miners is reflected in the name. *Kupa piṯi* is a noun compound behaving grammatically in a similar way to the English 'opal mine', or the placename 'Germantown' in Victoria. The first and second nouns are not necessarily connected but are lumped together as it were so that one modifies the other without any additional overt grammatical devices. There seems to be nothing to indicate that *kupa piṯi* is a simplified form of *piṯi kupaku*. Lennon's account could be read as a description of the quarries associated with and produced by miners, with a possessive but without overt marking of plural (*piṯimurka kupaku* could otherwise have been applicable, *-murka* being a plural marker in Kukata). Alternatively, the version *piṯi kupaku* resulted from a back translation: from the original *kupa piṯi* the whitefella English rendering in the sources are 'whitefellow's holes', 'white man's holes', or 'white man's hole', all of these with the English 's' signifying possession, also present in Lennon's account.[60] 'Whitefella hole' might be the best English approximation of *kupa piṯi*, with an implied connection between the words without any overt grammatical treatment. However, since the English renderings fairly consistently employ a marker of ownership, it is hopefully not too far-fetched to suggest that the possessive marker *–ku* in *piṯi kupaku* reflects a translation of the whitefella English rendering into the assumed original Kukata expression.

Concluding remarks

Coober Pedy is frequently said to originally be Arabana country by senior Anangu, or 'Western Desert people'. Although the current name by most accounts is from Kukata,

‘Coober Pedy’ as ‘white man’s hole’ is evidently reflective of mining activities of a scale which only commenced after 1915 in the region. Here we have an interesting example of a name Indigenous in form and with a post-contact meaning, wherein references to the local Indigenous custodians are absent.

On the balance of all the evidence, taking into account contemporary Indigenous local opinions and archival sources, it would seem that the most straightforward solution to the etymology of Coober Pedy is that the name is a Kukata lexical ‘loan blend’ composed of Parnkalla-originating *kupa* (as ‘whitefella’) and Kukata (Western Desert) *pi̱ti* (‘quarry’).[61] By including Kukata data, this etymology previously suggested by Luise Hercus and Vlad Potezny (see above) seems to have been confirmed.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful beyond words to the late *tjamu* Johnny Cullinan, the late *katja tji̱lpi* Punch Gibson, and to Bobby Brown, Toby Pinpayi, *kamuṟu* David Crombie and *ngunytju* Ngitji Ngitji Mona Kennedy Tur for all their help and teachings throughout the years. Many thanks to Luise Hercus, Greg Wilson, Paul Monaghan, Rob Amery, Guy Tunstill, Joshua Nash and two anonymous referees for many helpful suggestions which in many ways have contributed to this paper.

References

Archival sources

Basedow, Herbert 1921, ‘Report upon the Third Medical Relief Expedition among the Aborigines of South Australia’, handwritten manuscript, State Records of South Australia, GRG 23/1 1921 330.

Hercus, Luise 2007, *Wirangu Dictionary*, FileMaker Pro database, held by Luise Hercus.

Platt, John 1966a, ‘Kokatha (Gugada) language elicitation’, Item no PLATT_J01 – 00225A, Audiovisual Archives, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra.

— 1966b, ‘Kokatha (Gugada) language elicitation’, Item no PLATT_J01 – 00230A, Audiovisual Archives, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra.

Newspapers

The Argus

The Canberra Times

The Sydney Morning Herald

Secondary sources

Amery, Rob 2000, *Warrabarna Kaurna! Reclaiming an Australian Language*, Swets & Zeitlinger Publishers, Lisse, The Netherlands.

Beckett, Jeremy, Luise Hercus, Sarah Martin and Claire Colyer 2008, *Mutawintji: Aboriginal Cultural Association with Mutawintji National Park*, Office of the Registrar, Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983 (NSW), Glebe, New South Wales.

Berndt, Ronald 1959, 'The concept of the 'tribe' in the Western Desert of Australia', *Oceania* 30(2): 81–197.

— and Catherine Berndt 1951, *From Black to White in South Australia*, FW Cheshire, Melbourne.

Briand, Rena 1971, *White Man in a Hole*, Phuong-Hoang Press, Melbourne.

Brock, Peggy 1995, 'South Australia', in *Contested Ground: Australian Aborigines under the British Crown*, Anne McGrath (ed), Allen & Unwin, St Leonards: 208–239.

Butcher, Andrew 2008, 'Linguistic aspects of Australian Aboriginal English', *Clinical Linguistics and Phonetics* 22(8): 625–642.

Cochrane, G Ross 1963, 'A physiognomic vegetation map of Australia', Journal of Ecology 51(3): 639–655.

Davis, Stephen and Victor Prescott 1992, *Aboriginal Frontiers and Boundaries in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

District Council of Coober Pedy website, accessed 17 February 2010: <http://www.cooberpedy.sa.gov.au/site/page.cfm?u=112>

Doohan, Kim 1992, *One Family, Different Country: the Development and Persistence of an Aboriginal Community at Finke, Northern Territory*, Oceania Monograph 24, University of Sydney, Sydney.

Douglas, Wilf 1964, *An Introduction to the Western Desert Language*. revised ed Oceania Linguistic Monograph 4, University of Sydney, Sydney.

— 1971, 'Dialect differentiation in the Western Desert – a comment', *Anthropological Forum* 3: 79–82.

Foster, Robert, Paul Monaghan and Peter Mühlhäusler 2003, *Early Forms of Aboriginal English in South Australia, 1840s–1920s*, Pacific Linguistics 538, The Australian National University, Canberra.

Goddard, Cliff 1985, *A Grammar of Yankunytjatjara*, Institute for Aboriginal Development, Alice Springs.

— 1987, *A Basic Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara to English Dictionary*, Institute for Aboriginal Development, Alice Springs.

— 1996, *Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara to English Dictionary*, Institute for Aboriginal Development, Alice Springs.

Harris, Marvin 1971, *Culture, Man, and Nature: an Introduction to General Anthropology*, Thomas Y Crowell Company, New York.

Henderson, John and Veronica Dobson 1994, *Eastern and Central Arrernte to English Dictionary*, Institute for Aboriginal Development, Alice Springs.

Hercus, Luise 1994, *A Grammar of the Arabana-Wangkangurru Language, Lake Eyre Basin*, South Australia, Pacific Linguistics C–128, The Australian National University, Canberra.

— 1999, *A Grammar of the Wirangu Language from the West Coast of South Australia*, Pacific Linguistics C–150, The Australian National University, Canberra.

— 2005, 'A hole in the ground and a quarry', in *Many Exchanges: Archaeology, History, Community and the Work of Isabel McBryde*, Ingereth Macfarlane, Mary-Jane Mountain and Robert Paton (eds), Aboriginal History Monograph 11, Aboriginal History Inc, Canberra: 185–198.

— and Vlad Potezny 1999, '"Finch" versus "Finch-water": a study of Aboriginal place-names in South Australia', *Records of the South Australian Museum* 31(2): 165–180.

Kerin, Rani 2006, '"Natives allowed to remain naked": an unorthodox approach to medical work at Ernabella Mission', *Health and History* 8(1), accessed 17 February 2010: <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/hah/8.1/kerin.html>

Klapproth, Danielle 2004, *Narrative as Social Practice: Anglo-Western and Australian Aboriginal Oral Traditions*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin/New York.

Lennon, Jessie 2000, *I'm the One that Knows this Country! The Story of Jessie Lennon and Coober Pedy*, compiled by Michele Madigan, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.

Long, Jeremy 1989, 'Leaving the desert: actors and sufferers in the Aboriginal exodus from the Western Desert', *Aboriginal History* 13(1): 9–44.

Medway, Kerry 1989, *Coober Pedy: Opal Wonderland of Australia*, The Catacomb Church, Coober Pedy.

Miller, Wick 1971, 'Dialect differentiation in the Western Desert language', *Anthropological Forum* 3: 61–78.

Naessan, Petter 2004, 'Yankunytjatjara cultural transmission, discontinuity and continuity', in *Alchemies: Community exChanges. Undisciplined Thoughts – New Research in the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences,* vol 4, Glenn Pass and Denise Woods (eds), Black Swan Press, Perth: 339–355.

— 2008, 'Some tentative remarks on the sociolinguistic vitality of Yankunytjatjara in Coober Pedy, South Australia', *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 28(2): 103–138.

Peterson, Nicholas (ed) 1976, *Tribes and Boundaries in Australia,* Social Anthropology Series 10, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra.

— (in collaboration with Jeremy Long) 1986, *Aboriginal Territorial Organization: a Band Perspective*. Oceania Monograph 30, University of Sydney, Sydney.

Platt, John 1968, 'Some features of the verb in Kukata', *Anthropological Linguistics* 10(5): 1–7.

— 1972, *An Outline Grammar of the Gugada Dialect: South Australia,* Australian Aboriginal Studies (48), Linguistic Series 20, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra.

Shaw, Bruce 1995, *Our Heart is the Land: Aboriginal Reminiscences from the Western Lake Eyre Basin*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.

— and Jen Gibson 1988, *Invasion and Succession. An Aboriginal History of the Oodnadatta Region, Volume One. Report Prepared for the Oodnadatta Housing Society and the Aboriginal Heritage Branch, Department of Environment and Planning, Adelaide South Australia*, Department of Environment and Planning, Adelaide.

Stanner, William EH 1965, 'Aboriginal territorial organization: estate, range, domain and regime', *Oceania* 36(1): 1–26.

Sutton, Peter 1998, *Country: Aboriginal Boundaries and Land Ownership in Australia,* Aboriginal History Monograph 3, Australian National University, Canberra.

— 2001, *Kinds of Rights in Country: Recognising Customary Rights as Incidents of Native Title,* National Native Title Tribunal Occasional Papers No 2, Commonwealth of Australia, Native Title Tribunal, Perth.

The Manning Index of South Australian History, State Library of South Australia, accessed 10 February 2010: <http://www.slsa.sa.gov.au/manning/pn/C/c10.htm#cooberPedy>

Tindale, Norman 1974, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia: their Terrain, Environmental Controls, Distribution, Limits, and Proper Names*, Australian National University Press, Canberra.

Winford, Donald 2003, 'Contact-induced changes: classification and processes', *Ohio State University Working Papers in Linguistics* 57: 129–150.

[1] Cochrane 1963: 642.

[2] Hercus 1994: 6.

[3] Hercus 1994.

[4] Berndt 1959: 89; Tindale 1974: 210, 212, 217; Doohan 1992: 20; Brock 1995: 217.

[5] Brock 1995: 217. See also Shaw 1995: 15–16.

[6] Some of the migrations after the 1940s are mentioned in Long 1989.

[7] Hercus 1994: 22; Basedow, 1921, 'Report upon the Third Medical Relief Expedition among the Aborigines of South Australia', handwritten manuscript, State Records of South Australia, GRG 23/1 1921 330: 4–5.

[8] Kerin 2006: 89.

[9] Kerin 2006: 89. See also Long 1989: 30–31.

[10] Berndt and Berndt 1951: 155; Doohan 1992: 19. For Indigenous accounts of the 1919 and 1948 epidemics in the wider Oodnadatta region see Shaw 1995: 71–76.

[11] Kerin 2006: 94.

[12] See Naessan 2004 for an analysis of these processes.

[13] Harris 1971: 225.

[14] Stanner 1965: 2–3, 12. Many thanks to one anonymous referee for mentioning this source.

[15] Stanner 1965: 2.

[16] Hercus 1994: 15.

[17] Hercus 1994: 15. I am grateful to one anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this Arabana expression.

[18] Indigenous Australian group boundaries have been researched and debated extensively in Australianist literature, see for example Stanner 1965; Peterson 1976, 1986; Davis and Prescott 1992; Sutton 1998. Sources relevant specifically to Western Desert fluid group boundaries (chiefly relevant to the question of linguistic boundaries) include Berndt 1959; Douglas 1964; Miller 1971; Douglas 1971; Goddard 1985.

[19] Hercus 1994: 15.

[20] Sutton 2001: 16, see also 18–19.

[21] Naessan 2008: 105.

[22] Luise Hercus, pers comm February 2010.

[23] The information about *marra* has been given by Luise Hercus, pers comm November 2009.

[24] See particularly Shaw and Gibson 1988: 184, a heritage report from Oodnadatta.

[25] Klapproth 2004: 69.

[26] Hercus 1994: 11.

[27] Hercus 1999: 198.

[28] Henderson and Dobson 1994: 233.

[29] Hercus 2005: 193.

[30] Briand 1971: 18.

[31] The earliest written reference to 'white man in a hole' may be in *The Argus*: 'local legend has it that "Coober" is aboriginal [sic] for "white man" and "Pedy" means "hole in the ground"' (Robert H Croll, 'The middle of Australia – opal nights – some Coober Pedy memories', *The Argus*, 18 August 1934: 4). I am grateful to one anonymous referee for alerting me to this source and to the National Library's newspapers website.

[32] The Manning Index of South Australian History, nd.

[33] Luise Hercus, pers comm November 2009.

[34] These people with Arabana background are English speakers or, less commonly, speakers of Pitjantjatjara/ Yankunytjatjara.

[35] The Kukata origin of the name has been mentioned several times to me by local Aṉangu from 1999 onwards, including Antikirinya man *kamuṟu* David Crombie and the late Nguṉti-Yankunytjatjara man *tjamu* Johnny Cullinan.

[36] 'Whitefellows' holes' is found in Platt 1968: 1. *guba biḏi*, 'white man's holes' is found in Platt 1972: 1.

[37] District Council of Coober Pedy, nd.

[38] 'Gem seekers: Australian opal miners' socialism', *The Canberra Times*, 4 November 1926: 12.

[39] 'Queer post-offices', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 April 1954: 13.

[40] Peter Dunstan, 'Coober Pedy dugout life', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 May 1954: 7.

[41] Briand 1971: 18.

[42] Lennon 2000: 46.

[43] Lennon 2000: 47.

[44] Platt 1972: 3.

[45] Foster et al 2003: xi–xii.

[46] Amery 2000: 87, 92. See also Foster et al 2003: xx.

[47] Goddard 1996: 79.

[48] Butcher 2008: 636. It is worth mentioning Medway in this context, as he holds that Coober Pedy 'is from an aboriginal [sic] word "kupa piṯi", which originally meant "boys waterhold" [sic], but is more popularly known to mean "white man in a hole" or "whitefellow burrow", for obvious reasons. The aboriginal [sic] words "kupa piṯi" are not thought to be local aboriginal [sic] words, but an aboriginal [sic] dialect from somewhere in Western New South Wales and was known by a former White Cliffs miner' (Medway 1989: 8). This version of the etymology cannot be validated and is most probably incorrect (as pointed out to me by an anonymous referee who also drew my attention to an earlier version of Medway's work). It is possible that the above version has emerged as a conflation of the Aboriginal English term 'gubba' and the semantics of the Arabana term *kupa* ('youngfella') but this is not possible to ascertain further. One should note, however, that the reference to the White Cliffs region in New South Wales may be taken to indicate Paakantyi language origin but in Paakantyi 'boy' is *parlu* and 'waterhole' is *thilpuru-kiira-na* (Beckett et al 2008: 85, 95, 101, 103), terms significantly dissimilar from *kupa piṯi*.

[49] Hercus and Potezny 1999: 175.

[50] Platt 1966b, 'Kokatha (Gugada) language elicitation', Item no PLATT_J01 – 00230A, Audiovisual Archives, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies: 12.34.

[51] Platt 1966a, 'Kokatha (Gugada) language elicitation', Item no PLATT_J01 – 00225A, Audiovisual Archives, AIATSIS: 07.55, 08.04.

[52] Gladys Miller, Kukata and Wirangu speaker, explained the term *guyirdi* to Paul Monaghan in June 2009 at Scotdesco, South Australia. Another source concerning Wirangu is Hercus 2007.

[53] Hercus and Potezny 1999: 175.

[54] Hercus 2005: 189, 192, *pirdi* in the original.

[55] Goddard 1987: 109 quoted in Hercus 2005: 187.

[56] Hercus 2005: 193.

[57] Goddard 1996: 139, the revised second edition of the Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara dictionary, contains an identical formulation to the 1987 version of the dictionary used by Hercus.

[58] Goddard 1996: 139.

[59] Hercus and Potezny 1999: 175.

[60] 'Whitefellows' holes' is found in Platt 1968: 1. 'White man's holes' is found in Platt 1972: 1. 'White man's hole' is from the District Council of Coober Pedy website, and 'white mans' hole' is the version in Lennon 2000: 47.

[61] For a discussion of similar 'loan blends' in language contact situations, see Winford 2003: 133.