

# Australian Aboriginal toponyms...

Copying Indigenous-derived words and toponyms from one region to another is a well-known practice in Australia.<sup>1</sup> The practice dates back to the 19th century, when the colonists were highly mobile across the continent. A good example of the wide distribution of an Indigenous-derived name is *Kurrajong*/*Currajong* (< Dharuk *garradjun* ‘fishing line’); borrowed into English, its meaning was extended to the tree from whose bark fishing lines were made (Dixon et al., 2006, p. 114). The word can be found in the name of some 160 places throughout Australia, at least a quarter of which are homesteads or rural properties.

It’s also true, of course, that Australians travelled abroad in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, establishing homes and plantations. The Pacific islands were common destinations, especially Fiji. Australians went to Fiji to work for the colonial government, to establish or work on cotton, sugarcane or copra plantations, or to work for the Colonial Sugar Refinery Company of Sydney, or the Polynesian Company Ltd of Melbourne. There are two Australian Indigenous-derived placenames in Fiji connected with these two companies.

## Toorak

As well as being the name of the prestigious inner Melbourne suburb, *Toorak* is also the name of a Suva suburb. The name derives from the Victorian Boonwurrung language word /turrak/ ‘reedy grass, weed in lagoon’ (Clark & Heydon, 2002, p. 218). It was first used for the name of James Jackson’s Italianate residence, ‘Toorak House’, built in 1849, which from 1854 to 1876 served as the residence of Victoria’s Governors. During World War II it served as a Women’s Auxiliary Australian Air Force hostel. So, how did the name end up in Fiji?

In 1868, the Polynesian Company was established, along the lines of the practices and ideologies exercised in India by the East India Company, with the specific aim of purchasing land in Fiji for cotton growing (Anon.,

1907, pp. 106-111; Brewster, 1937, pp. 63-65). In 1868, it acquired a large parcel of land including what was then the village of Suva, in a dodgy deal to pay off the American debts of Ratu Seru Epenisa Cakobau, the Vunivalu of Bau, the most powerful chief in Eastern Fiji, and self-styled ‘King of Fiji’. The company planned to establish on this land a sugar mill and to develop the town of Suva. The original town plan included what would become the suburb of *Toorak*, its name being copied from the Melbourne suburb because it was then considered to be the most desirable residential area in the new town of Suva (Usher, 1987, p. 30; Moses, 1971, p. 65). Somebody will always find a competing etymology, of course: another account (Schütz, 1978, p. 22) asserted that *Toorak* meant ‘where the chief is’ in an unspecified Aboriginal language, and that the area was so-called by its owner, C. A. Huon, because he was the chief of that estate.

In 1877 the colonial authorities decided to move Fiji’s capital from Levuka to Suva, and the move eventuated in

1882. Today, Suva’s *Toorak* is quite the opposite of its former upmarket character, noted for its cheap rental properties, downmarket eateries and kava saloons. As Schütz (1978, p. 23) delicately puts it: ‘*Toorak* did not live up to its planners’ lofty ambitions; on the contrary, it occupies a place at the opposite end of the social scale.’ Dr Samuela Baravilala, in his

memoir of life in Suva in the 1920s, is more specific, recounting that when the bars closed at 10pm in Suva, gangs of men would descend on *Toorak* to drink kava, often resulting in brawling in the streets and, on at least one occasion, a fatal stabbing (Baravilala, 1993). Still, it does have a certain charm that its 19th century founders might be proud of: ‘[...] here and there are occasional bits of decayed elegance [...] some houses hint at earlier structures grander than the present ones. [...] *Toorak*, more than any other place in Suva, has the feeling of a neighbourhood that reflects the multi-racial composition of the population.’ (Schütz, 1978, p. 23).



*Figure 1. Street scene, Toorak, Suva*  
(source: Bhaskar Rao, flickr)

## ...in Fiji

### Miegunyah

The second Aboriginal-derived toponym in Fiji refers to a place that was a sugarcane plantation and is now becoming a suburb of Nadi. It is situated a few kilometres east of the centre of Nadi, on the western side of the main island of Vitilevu. The name is *Miegunyah* (sometimes spelled *Meigunyah*). The road that runs along the suburb's perimeter also bears the name (Department of Town and Country Planning, 2105). A nearby mosque and primary school carry nativised versions of the name: *Maigania Masjid* and *Maigania Muslim Primary School*. The local Fijian community call the suburb *Maqania*, pronounced /maŋga'niə/, whilst the local Fiji Hindi pronunciation is /me'ŋenjə/, /meŋ'genjə/ or /meŋge'niə/

*Miegunyah* means 'my house/home' and derives from the Dharuk (Sydney Language) *gunyah/gunya* (/ˈɡʌŋjə/) 'a temporary shelter usually made of sheets of bark and/or branches; any makeshift shelter or dwelling' (Moore, 2016) + the prefix *mie-/mei-* (/mai/~mi/), most likely from 19<sup>th</sup> century NSW Pidgin meaning 'I/my'.<sup>2</sup> *Miegunyah* has been used in QLD, NSW, VIC, SA and WA as the name of a homestead/rural property, a house, a vineyard, several residential estates and an imprint of Melbourne University Publishing.<sup>3</sup> So how did this name find its way to Fiji?

In 1873 sugar production was established in Fiji. Initially, it consisted of a few small sugar mills that were badly managed and not profitable, many of them closing when the sugar prices fell in the 1890s. In 1879 a representative of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company arrived in Fiji to assess prospects for a sugar industry in the colony. Operations at its first mill in Nausori (close to Suva) started in 1882. In 1903, CSR established the Lautoka Sugar Mill (close to Nadi) (Moynagh, 1981). It is in connection with this mill that we find the first references to the name.

The CSR documents of 1906-07 (Colonial Sugar Refining Company Limited, 1905-1926) include the following:

- Documents concerning Mr Reginald Arthur Harricks' subleasing in 1905 the land parcels *Wasina* and *Ione* (which were CSR freehold) 108 acres in total; the whole 950 acres of *Nasau*, leased by CSR from the Crown; and a portion (25.5 acres) of CSR's

lease of *Na Buyagiyagi*, leased from the Misses Luks; comprising a total of 1083.5 acres. These parcels were subsequently named *Miegunyah* by Harricks in 1906.

- A document entitled *Valuation of cane crops, livestock, implements &c. on Mr. Harricks' plantation 'Miegunyah'* 1906.
- 1905 and 1906 correspondence between R.A. Harricks and the General Manager of CSR in Sydney, regarding the subleasing of *Miegunyah* and the rental thereof, and the reimbursement of building materials for the estate. (Figure 2.)

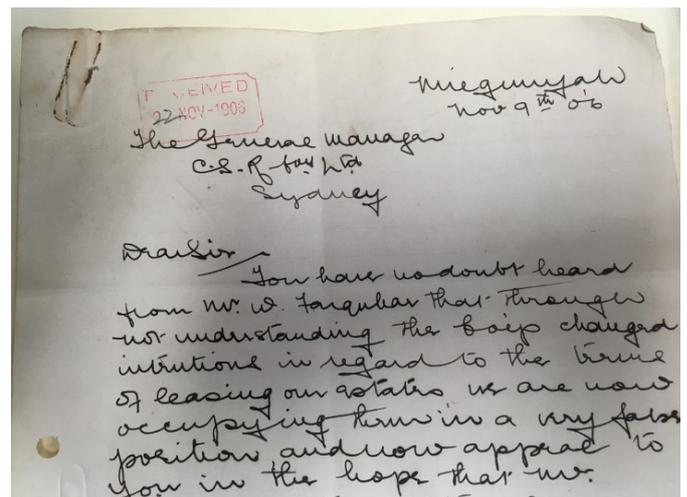


Figure 2. Correspondence from R.A. Harricks to the General Manager, CSR

The first public mention of *Miegunyah* is in *The Fiji Times* of 16 June, 1909:

Nadi.

[...]

A week or so ago Mrs R.A. Harricks of "Miegunyah" entertained her many friends at a "pink tea". The guests all wore some pink favour, the decorations and almost all the dainty tea being pink. Not the least exciting was the picturesque arrival on horse back of two bachelor guests who were clothed from their helmets to their shoes in pink, they were preceded by two coolies also garbed in pink and waving branches of cane flowers.

[...]

We have been unable to ascertain why Reg Harricks named his sublease *Miegunyah*. Given he came from Maryborough, the most likely inspiration for his adoption of the name is the house name 'Miegunyah' in the Brisbane suburb of Bowen Hills. It was built by businessman William Perry, the founder of Perry Bros.

*continued next page*

## ...Australian Aboriginal toponyms in Fiji

Ltd. hardware emporium. Perry built 'Miegunyah' on his estate in 1886 for his sons Herbert and George. It remained in the family until 1926, after which it had several changes of ownership up to 1966. During WWII the house was requisitioned by the Government and served as an officers' club and a safe house for the men of Z Special Unit commandos. In 1967, 'Miegunyah' was acquired by the Queensland Women's Historical Association, who refurbished it and opened it as a house museum dedicated to the pioneer women of Queensland. It is now known as *Miegunyah House Museum*.

Given Maryborough is only 250km north of Brisbane, and since the Perry Bros. business extended over the whole of Queensland (and most likely into the Pacific), Harricks may well have done business with them and heard of their house's name. Indeed, the building materials for which Harricks was seeking reimbursement could conceivably have come from the Perry Bros. hardware emporium.

### Paul Geraghty & Jan Tent

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> We use the term 'Indigenous-derived' rather than simply 'Indigenous' to highlight the fact that almost all Indigenous words were adopted and adapted by the English-based toponymy of Australia.
- <sup>2</sup> See Troy (1994) for a full exposition of NSW Pidgin.
- <sup>3</sup> See Tent & Geraghty (2020) for a more detailed account of the name's origin and use.

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## News from QLD

By the time you're reading this, our AGM for **Placenames Australia (Inc)** will have taken place in Brisbane. Some members were able to attend in person; others participated by videoconference. Apart from the annual election for office bearers on the Placenames Australia Management Committee, the main item of business was a resolution to alter the Constitution to allow AGM attendance to be via teleconference in the future.

The meeting was hosted by the Department of Resources from their Museum of Lands, Mapping and Surveying, and facilitated by our colleague Susan Birtles, Senior Policy Advisor there. Many thanks to all our Brisbane friends for your hospitality!

### Museum of Lands, Mapping and Surveying

The Department's museum has created a virtual museum for those who aren't local or whose travel to Brisbane is virus-disrupted. We invite you to take the tour!

<https://www.qld.gov.au/recreation/arts/heritage/museum-of-lands>

Historical maps for QLD are also accessible via that website.

The (non-virtual) Museum has reopened to visitors, and is working on making old titles records available. Queensland researchers are invited to explore the wealth of resources available through the museum.