Some Notes on Tribal Warfare and an Event at Tambo Crossing

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My interest in tribal warfare was revived by the recent *Gippsland Heritage Journal* article by Ian D. Clark on George Augustus Robinson’s journals.¹ Having read the microfilm copy of the journals many times I have noted that they are ‘often illegible, lapse into strange abbreviations, poor English, incorrect spelling and are correspondingly difficult to transcribe.’² With this difficulty of transcription in mind I realised that a tribal warfare event I had previously located at Tongio had actually occurred at Tambo Crossing about 25 miles to the south.³ A recent attempt to unravel this problem using the microfilm was no more successful and I am grateful for the transcripts supplied by Ian Clark which has helped clarify much of the information on this event.

The transcripts show clearly that the tribal clash that Robinson referred to was located at Tambo Crossing and not at Tongio. Robinson briefly referred to the event in the report of his trip in 1844:

A deadly animosity exists between them and the natives of the coast; a whole tribe having been destroyed by the Yatemittongs and their allies a short time previous. Blanched human bones strewed the surface and marked the spot where the slaughter happened.⁴

In his journals there is much more detail. The entry for 15 June 1844 stated:

Two miles above the crossing place up the stream is the spot where a great slaughter of gipps land blacks by the Omeo and the Mokeallumbeets and Tinnermittum their allies took place; was shown the place by [blank] alias Charley who was present. Saw the human bones strewd about bleached white. Strange idea occurred to me whilst viewing the scene of the slaughter. I thought it appalling best forget the whole sale slaughter by Christians. Charley spoke of it with zest went through the whole scene shewed the camp of wild blacks upwards of 70 camped besides fire. Canal of water in bed

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of tanbo 30 feet wide 500 feet long. Shew how the black found in line, then gave yell; the point of the attack; spoke of it with zest; five young women spared but I believe killed some time after. All the old women and children killed. Two young men escaped. 5

The location of this event is almost certainly the flat immediately to the north of where Lock Up Creek enters the Tambo River at Tambo Crossing. 6 The event occurred sometime during the four years previous to Robinson’s journey of 1844. The victims were members of the Bruthen group of the Brabiralung tribe. 7 According to Robinson’s notes the instigators were the Jaitmathang [Omeo tribe - Yatemittongs] and their allies the ‘Mokeallumbeets and Tinnermitum’. The latter was possibly a division of the Jaitmathang located in the north of their tribal area or else from the Duduroa tribe - an allied tribe to the north. The former group was almost certainly part of the Minjambuta or Mt Buffalo tribe, called by Howitt the Buffalo River tribe or the ‘Mogullumbitch’. 8 But the most intriguing part of Robinson’s journals is the sentence ‘I thought it appalling best forget the whole sale slaughter by Christians’. Nowhere in his notes or journals does he claim that any of these Aborigines were Christians. In fact this one sentence throws the whole scenario of the Tambo Crossing affair as an event of tribal warfare into considerable doubt. Other most unusual aspects of this event include the obvious one-sided nature of it. There were seventy casualties on one side and none mentioned on the other. There also appears to have been considerable organisation involved, and that a substantial group of attackers moved rapidly deep into enemy tribal territory and yet maintained the element of surprise.

At the Jindabyne Symposium in 1991 on the cultural heritage of the Australian Alps I noted that:

I have stated elsewhere my objections to the use of tribal warfare as a major factor in population decline. 9 It should be noted that the tribal conflict was not a new element, and that certain tribes such as the Jaitmathang and Brabiralung were traditional enemies. This lends some credence to the Tongio [ie Tambo Crossing] site as it was on the border of two tribes. However the fact that a whole tribe, or almost certainly a large number of individuals, could be destroyed within the few years prior to Robinson’s visit, and after European occupation, when this enmity had almost certainly existed for many, probably hundreds, of generations seems suspicious. An equally likely explanation for the
bones is that they were the remains of a massacre. Attributing the find to an inter-tribal clash was then the easiest way for squatters to explain such obvious remains to the Chief Protector of Aborigines. In his journal whilst travelling up the Tambo River Robinson noted that 'this country belong(s) to the Kaneggall or Wild Blacks Poor fellows all form(?) driven away'.

In an unpublished paper on Alpine Aborigines I wrote:

Unfortunately the whole question of tribal warfare is quite complicated. Flood remarked on the idea of a confederacy of the upper country tribes including the Minjambuta, Jaitmathang and Ngarigo but there is only minimal evidence of collaboration and co-operation and that is all in the post-European era. As a general rule the antagonism between the high country and low country tribes as outlined by Robinson can be accepted and prior to the European intrusion conflict was probably a regular, if not common, occurrence. However this conflict was essentially small scale and primarily for the purpose of obtaining wives by theft. Such raids rarely involved death and never wholesale slaughter as women and children were taken by any victorious raiders. With the advent of the European a number of changes occurred which increased the likelihood of greater numbers of deaths caused by tribal conflict. These changes included the opening of access through roads, the use of firearms by Aborigines and the development of unusual alliances amongst tribal groups. One instance that involved most of these ingredients occurred in Sale in 1855 and was observed by surveyor Dawson. A group of Jaitmathang and Dairgo warriors, formerly tribal enemies, raided the Sale Aborigine camp (probably made up mainly of Braikolung and Tatungalung) during which a small number of people were killed and much hysteria was caused. Some of the raiders were armed with old guns. It would seem that the effects of tribal warfare have been exaggerated and it is quite likely that many earlier supposed conflicts were actually massacres committed by Europeans and falsely attributed to tribal war. Whilst it is likely that a number of conflicts caused considerable deaths it would appear that tribal warfare as a culturally acceptable explanation of the Aborigines demise has been given more attention than it deserves.

The event at Tambo Crossing had few if any of the usual features of a traditional tribal clash. Almost certainly it was organised and instigated by Europeans. At the very least it probably involved recruitment of allies from afar and rapid and undetected transit of a large group of warriors from Jaitmathang tribal lands through 25 miles of enemy territory along European roads and the use of European weapons. These facts barely explain the total annihilation of the group. However the allusion to ‘Christians’ in Robinson’s journals indicates the involvement of one or more Europeans. Quite possibly a large group of them participated in this ‘whole sale slaughter by Christians’ making the event at Tambo Crossing another Gippsland massacre.

Notes
1. Ian D. Clark. ‘George Augustus Robinson’s 1844 Journey through Gippsland’ in Gippsland Heritage Journal No 17 (December 1994)
5. Transcripts of G.A.Robinson’s Journals for 1844 kindly supplied by Ian D. Clark, History Research Fellow, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra
6. J. Sommerville of Tambo Crossing - personal comm
8. A.W. Howitt Native Tribes of Southeast Australia. London: MacMillan, 1904, p.77

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