

The Narungga, the townspeople and Julius Kühn: the establishment and origins of the Point Pearce Mission

Firstly I would like to thank people for coming today. When I heard the state history conference was to be held in Kadina, I felt my topic was chosen for me as it was here that the move to establish a mission at Point Pearce began.

I will examine the diverse and complex relations that existed between Narungga and Europeans during the earliest years of the mission. I will focus on the beliefs and actions of two influential men; King Tommy, a highly regarded Narungga leader, and Julius Kühn, a Moravian missionary who led the mission for the first 14 years. I will argue that communication and co-operation between members of both cultural groups is crucial to understanding the origins of the mission.

A seeming lack of records has prevented detailed historical investigation into the mission years of 1866-1880. But Kühn sent regular and detailed letters home to Germany which the Narungga Aboriginal Progress Association recently had transcribed and translated.¹ Kühn provides rich illustrations of Narungga presence and action, and the power relations that existed between him and Narungga. While this information is highly subjective – the pious 32 year old missionary had his own motivations for viewing and describing events as he did – Kühn was honest and straightforward, and his accounts can be counterbalanced with other sources such as articles and letters published in local and Adelaide newspapers and Government correspondence.

Many people living in the 21st century have particular understandings of missions. The popular film *A Rabbit Proof Fence* and the Federal government's *Bringing them home report* have reinforced assumptions that missions were detrimental for Aboriginal people, that missionaries prevented people moving across their country, forbade them to speak their language and

¹ Kühn's letters are held in the Unitaetsarchiv, Herrnhut, Germany under 'Papers, correspondence, transactions, diaries etc of the Moravian Missionaries in Australia', R.15.V.I.a, 1866-79.

provided only a rudimentary education. Missions are largely understood as being sited on unwanted, unproductive land where Aboriginal people were exploited and used as slave labour. Mission residents are widely perceived as victims, passive and helpless in the face of colonialism.

BUT a close examination of the historical records relating to the early years of the Point Pearce mission dispel such stereotypical understandings and assumptions and enable us to deepen our awareness of Narungga motivations and actions. Narungga living on Yorke Peninsula in the 1860s and 1870s were not helpless victims dependent upon the mercy of settlers or the government, forced onto the mission against their will, coerced into a life they did not wish to live. Instead they were active agents who adapted to new circumstances and used the mission and Julius Kühn to make the best of a disadvantageous system and secure a future for their children and grandchildren.

This paper may be regarded by some as an optimistic and overly desirous reading of the records, but I feel it is important to correct the imbalance of histories in which Narungga people are largely absent, and to provide examples of Narungga agency and cross-cultural communication and respect. Maybe these examples from the past can provide blueprints for the future.

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After copper was discovered at Wallaroo and Moonta, Narungga incorporated the changed circumstances into established movement and subsistence patterns. They found employment in the mines and townships as miners, bullock drivers, domestic helpers and general servants. But by 1866 the population of the mining towns had increased to 10,000. The influx of such large numbers, and the clearing of vast tracts of country, made it increasingly difficult for Narungga to procure an adequate supply of food.

Miners and other towns people were ‘deeply grieved’ at the ‘degradation and misery’ of Narungga and, by mid 1865, began speaking of the need to improve their condition. But

nothing came of these concerns, one of the excuses being that the number of Aboriginal people living in or near the mining towns was unknown.

In December 1865 a Narungga man whose name (typically) went unrecorded, took matters into his own hands. In a penny memorandum book he recorded a census of his people. He found the number of Aborigines living in the Moonta, Wallaroo and Kadina district totalled 252. He gave the census to Reverend Wilson of Kadina who sent it to Adelaide newspaper the *Register*.

When published on 3 January 1866, the 'Aboriginal Census' caused an immediate reaction. The document was considered 'quite remarkable' and was believed to be 'the first effort of a native to draw up a census of his own race'. Wilson stated that the 'intelligent blackfellow' who collected the census had 'got it into his head that there is a teacher coming to teach his people; and he has put numbers of them in possession of the same idea, and they are very glad'.

The census was interpreted as a 'cry' from the Narungga to 'come over and help us' and local settlers, Adelaide residents and government officials were stirred into action. Julius Kühn, who was temporarily residing in Adelaide, felt compelled to travel to Yorke Peninsula and offer his services.

With Kühn's arrival in Kadina on 2 February 1866 the mission movement intensified. Meetings were held to establish committees to petition the government for lands and funds. Kühn and 50 Narungga attended the Wallaroo meeting on 7 February. On 10 February, Kühn visited Narungga at their camps and 'told everyone that if anyone wanted to come to school I was prepared to make a start the next day, and soon I had about 30 pupils' (Kühn to Reichel, Kadina, 21 March 1866).

A strong rapport rapidly developed between Kühn and Narungga. This was partly due to Kühn's sincere and kindly nature and King Tommy's influence. Prior to Kühn's arrival, King Tommy had decisively indicated that should a teacher arrive, he would send his children to school and would use his influence amongst his people. King Tommy recognised literacy as a way of

securing a place in the dominant society. (Interestingly, school attendance was not compulsory on Yorke Peninsula until 1877² and Narungga children taught by Kühn were better educated than many mining and farming children). Narungga willingly attended Kühn's lessons and clearly demonstrated their eagerness and ability to learn how to read and write. The enthusiastic acceptance of Kühn and his lessons was crucial to maintaining the momentum. Without this, plans for the mission would have stalled or remained modest.

Kühn made his school readily accessible to potential students. He immediately began learning their language, which he made use of as much as possible throughout his time on the peninsula. He held lessons in various locations around Kadina, Moonta and Wallaroo. Kühn found Narungga came willingly and asked him 'to come as often as he could'. Numbers steadily increased, and in May 1866 Kühn stated:

For 12 weeks now I have had 40-50 blacks around me ... some have been coming to school twice a day, I am hardly able to keep track of them all ... I am so overloaded I don't know where to start and where to finish.

Lessons were held in various buildings including a stable and a shearing shed. Kühn often had to walk up to 4 miles to visit Narungga in their camps which he found 'very tiring'. The community recognised Kühn's difficulties and rallied to alleviate them.

From January 1866, northern Peninsula residents campaigned tirelessly for a permanent school. They organized and participated in regular committee meetings and Congregational, Baptist and Presbyterian ministers preached sermons encouraging parishioner support. Appeals and petitions were frequently sent to the government and monetary subscriptions and donations were regularly collected.

This concern and support came from all sections of society; from mining families to doctors, from the local policeman to the captain of the Moonta mines. Some people lent buildings for the school. Others gave food, animals or wood. Women met regularly to make clothes for Narungga. Fundraising concerts (in which Narungga children participated) were so well attended that many people were unable to gain admission.

² *Yorke Peninsula Advertiser*, 30 November 1877, 2D.

The records indicate that the townspeople were sensitive to the plight of Narungga and critical of the inaction and lack of concern of the government and individuals who had profited handsomely from the occupation of Narungga land. Numerous letters and petitions illustrate a genuine questioning of the ethics of colonisation and Aboriginal dispossession.

Prior to Kühn's arrival, ideas regarding the form the mission would take were unclear and small scale. Advocates envisaged a Home or depot where the children would be educated and where adults would receive food and clothing when necessary'.³ It was suggested the home might be run by a schoolmaster and matron.⁴

Initially 'a reserve of 400 acres' was perceived as adequate,⁵ but by January 1867, the Committee were applying for 8 square miles (over 5000 acres)⁶ and envisioning a self supporting agricultural community. The rapport which developed between Kühn and Narungga, and the enthusiasm and support of Narungga and the wider public, increased the scale and scope of proposed plans.

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The choice of *where* to site the mission demonstrates Narungga-settler communication and co-operation. Between 1866-1868, committees met to determine the most suitable site. Narungga were vocal about their requirements and desires. The site needed to be near the sea so they could fish. It needed permanent water, good soil for cultivation, and scrub to provide timber and shelter.⁷ Committee members recognised:

the Home must be on a spot where [the aborigines] most congregate. To build at a place they only visit once a year ... would...cause the failure of the mission. The blacks have their own ways, their favourite haunts, and their own ways of resorting to them, and we must meet them...⁸

³ *Wallaroo Times*, 7 February 1866, 2D.

⁴ *Register*, 29 January 1866, 3E.

⁵ *Register*, 12 February 1866, 2F.

⁶ Kühn to Reichel, Kadina, 16 January [1867].

⁷ *Ibid.*, and 27 February 1866, 2H.

⁸ *Register*, 19 February 1866, 2H.

The initial suggestion of Port Hughes (only three miles from Moonta) did not meet the ten mile distance believed necessary to protect Narungga from ‘the danger’ of ‘intoxicating liquor’ available in the towns.⁹ Tipara Springs, thirteen miles from Kadina, was then suggested until it became clear Narungga would not reside in that area as a number of their people had died there.¹⁰

In September 1867, Kühn and several Narungga travelled to Point Pearce, which Kühn typically referred to by its Narungga name of Bookooyanna, meaning ‘oil bush plains’. Here Kühn saw ‘good land and very good permanent water, it was by the sea, had grass for stock, timber and stone for building, plus fish, kangaroos, wallabies, wombats and possums.’¹¹

But Boorkooyanna was forty miles south of the mining towns and did not meet the requirement of being readily accessible to committee members. The land had not yet been surveyed. The leasee, Samuel Rogers, did not relinquish his lease happily or readily. Despite these drawbacks, mission advocates chose to wait patiently for this land which they were finally granted at the beginning of 1868.

It seems highly likely the Narungga directed Kühn’s attention to Point Pearce which was a traditional meeting place and contained numerous, vital sacred sites. In the 1960s, Narungga Elder Tim Hughes said this was:

A most sacred part of our land ... the most important ... the biggest part, and most special.

That’s what makes us grow up ... that’s older than everything, all the land and islands.¹²

Narungga clearly approved of this site; during his first visit to Boorkooyanna, Kühn met about 50 Narungga there. All had heard of Kühn and asked ‘when I would come and build the mission house, they promised to come to me and learn then’.¹³ Narungga informed Kühn that when he ‘went to Point Pierce [sic] all the blacks would want to go to school’.¹⁴

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 16 January 1867.

¹² Transcript of interview with Elizabeth Fisher, Part III, Stories, p. 1.

¹³ Kühn to Reichel, Kadina, 16 January 1867.

¹⁴ Ibid., Gooduttera, 25 April 1867.

It is extremely telling, and more than coincidental, that the land chosen for the mission was popular with Narungga. By collaborating with Kühn, Narungga managed to secure this area for future generations. This shows Narungga working with and influencing influential Europeans, and settlers respecting Narungga wishes. At this point, Narungga must have been satisfied that events were unfolding largely as they desired.

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Prior to Kühn's arrival, King Tommy and other Narungga had said they wanted their own township, a place where the helpless old and young would be taken care of, and the sick cared for.¹⁵ Rather than envisaging mission as primarily a Christian institution in which they were subjugated inmates, Narungga imagined their own township in which Europeans provided support and aid. In Kühn they found a hard working and kind servant. He babysat and fed their children, nursed the sick, escorted immoral white men from the camps when men were away hunting, and taught people how to read and write. Narungga were free to move about. School was not compulsory. If they did not like Kühn's personality, methods or doctrines, they would not have gathered around him nor attended his lessons. Instead, Narungga entrusted Kühn with their sick, elderly and their children for weeks at a time while they went into the bush hunting and making skin rugs.

Kühn exhausted himself administering to Narungga. His efforts were appreciated. When there was talk of Kühn leaving, many Narungga, with tears in their eyes begged him to stay. Kühn wrote that he loved the blacks and they loved him (Kühn to Reichel, 16 January 1867). Narungga genuinely liked Kühn. He was also a useful protector and advocate who gave the impression he was on Yorke Peninsula primarily to serve them.

But Kühn's letters reveal the complexity of his relations with Narungga. Kühn was not a passive or docile servant but a pious man of strong evangelical faith and there existed a complicated power play between Kühn and those he was 'serving'. Narungga accommodation of and challenges to Kühn and his beliefs are fascinating and increase our awareness of nineteenth century Narungga agency and motivations.

¹⁵ *Register*, 27 February 1866, 2H.

Kühn believed Narungga religion and rituals were primitive and heathen. He openly derided Narungga beliefs and continually intervened in Narungga customs. He disliked corroborees being held on Sundays, and interfered in traditional marriage regulations. He made people choose between baptism and participating in Narungga rites of passage. In April 1867 Kühn recorded:

we caught a bat and the young people told me the old blacks believe ... bats created the blacks and can make rain. I told them that we might kill it and they agreed willingly, I thought that if they really believed in bats they would advise me against killing it. When we had killed it...they recognized how mistaken the old people were.¹⁶

The bat was *Mudatju*, a highly significant Creation Ancestor. But rather than admonish and denounce Kühn, several Elders appear to have accepted and even condoned Kühn's sacreligious act. Only days later King Tommy told Kühn 'he would like to stay with me now, it was not good to wander around'.¹⁷ He promised to leave his children with Kühn if he were to go travelling.¹⁸ Despite his disrespectful transgressions, Narungga deferred to and humoured him, and openly respected his wishes.

After Kühn moved permanently to Boorkooyanna in 1868, the number of children at the mission continued to increase, and 'Old people' attended Sunday Services if they were in the neighbourhood. By 1872 the 'wandering blacks' were 'beginning to send for Mr Kühn to pray beside them when they are ill, and to speak of sending their children to the Mission Station as a matter of course'.¹⁹

WHY did these confident, proud and independent people allow Kühn to deride their ancient beliefs? Why did they leave their impressionable children with him? Certainly he provided food, shelter, clothes, and was instrumental in securing the land at Pt Pearce. But I feel these obvious, practical reasons are somewhat superficial. To understand Narungga tolerance of – or even preparedness to accept – Kühn's beliefs, we need to dig deeper.

¹⁶ Ibid., Gooduttera, 25 April 1867.

¹⁷ Kühn to Reichel, Gooduttera, 25 April 1867.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Brief Review of the Operation of the Yorke's Peninsula Aboriginal Mission for the first five years*, Wallaroo Times Office, Wallaroo, 1872, p. 7.

Kühn saw himself as an instrument of an all powerful God, with whom he could communicate through prayer. I feel Narungga viewed Kühn as a protector or authority in more than the physical sense. During these early years Narungga were uncertain of the power of Kühn's religion which was manifested through his seeming ability to heal and cure, and sagely kept their options open.

On numerous occasions Kühn successfully nursed the sick and cured wounds and illnesses. Kühn doctored to people suffering from colds. He prayed beside sick people. He bathed, and then applied sticking plasters, poultices or cold compresses to sores and wounds which healed quickly. On one occasion he prepared an eye-mask for a young girl with bad eyes. Her eyes got 'visibly better' and Kühn found her a suitable pair of glasses after which she could see quite well. When King Tommy's wife asked Kühn 'to pray with her' for her fatally ill daughter, 'the girl got better, now the queen thinks that if I pray for her she will also get better.'²⁰ Kühn noted:

*... the blacks believe I can cure any illness, they come to me very often and the medicine I give them is very simple, but I am convinced that their trust in me and their belief in the medicine make them well.*²¹

Kühn's basic medical skills, his care, attention and diligence, built an impression that Kühn had the magic touch in curing the sick which is crucial to understanding Narungga trust in Kühn, and their willingness to accommodate his beliefs at the expense of their own.

This hypothesis is validated by Narungga actions during and after 1872. Between March – September 1872 16 mission residents died of whooping cough or croup. Narungga faith in Kühn and tolerance of his teachings dramatically diminished, and parents and grandparents took their children away from the mission. Five years later Kühn was still lamenting 'the prejudice against the mission station caused by these deaths.'²²

After 1872, very few Narungga dutifully attended the assemblies or listened respectfully to Kühn's beliefs. In April 1874 Kühn wrote:

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 16 January [1867], emphasis added.

²² *Yorke Peninsula Advertiser*, 23 April 1875 and *Register (Supplement)*, 26 July 1876, 2B.

Last winter and until Christmas I had about 50-60 blacks here in the neighbourhood. I visited them as often as time permitted ... they were too lazy to come 6-8 English miles to the Station. I asked them all to assemble at my place so that I could hold an assembly with them. They all asked if I had brought them anything to eat. I told them that they were free to fetch rations at any time. With a great deal of trouble I managed to get them all together.²³

In 1877 Kühn rode out to the camps every Sabbath to conduct a service but 'set out on my return journey with a heavy heart, since I had the feeling that the people showed little or no interest in spiritual matters'.²⁴ In 1879 Kühn pessimistically reflected 'to break down the walls of superstition and heathenism is not ... easy work'.²⁵

Kühn tried desperately to get Narungga to return to the mission station where 'everything that can be thought of [was done] to make them feel at home'.²⁶ Kühn offered high weekly wages of 5/- plus half a sheep and rations.²⁷ In 1876 a hunting party of between thirty to fifty Narungga camped 10-15 miles from the station, Kühn 'visited them twice a week', 'supplied them with flour, sugar, tea, soap and some clothing'²⁸ and bought their skins, noting 'all were well pleased with the price given'.²⁹ But, after finishing hunting, most dispersed to woolsheds across the Peninsula where they were employed in shearing; only the old and infirm came to the station.³⁰

Narungga came and went as they wanted. In 1879 critics complained 'there were only about thirty natives at the station', 'it was a rule for them not to remain there',³¹ and those on the station 'only go for food'.³² Kühn answered 'of course some come and go, staying a short time at the station, then wandering off again'.³³ He pointed out it is customary for them 'to disperse themselves through the peninsula, visiting different parts where friends are to be found and where they can enjoy fishing'.

²³ Kühn to Reichel, Boorkooyanna, 7 April 1874.

²⁴ Ibid., 20 June 1877.

²⁵ *Register*, 7 May 1879, 5G.

²⁶ Additional 'Report' included in *Brief Review of the Operation of the Yorke's Peninsula Aboriginal Mission for the first five years*, p. 8.

²⁷ Kühn to Reichel, Boorkooyanna, 27 February 1875.

²⁸ Kühn to Reichel, Boorkooyanna, 27 February 1875.

²⁹ *Register*, 29 January 1876, 13B.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *Register*, 29 April 1879, 4G.

³² *Register*, 5 June 1879, 7B.

³³ *Chronicle*, 10 May 1879, 12E.

Clearly, Narungga were not forced against their will into the Mission Station. Instead, they used it for food and goods when alternative options were unavailable. As such, King Tommy and Narungga's initial wish – for a township of their own where the sick, old and young could be attended to and where their children could learn how to read and write – was fulfilled. Through their foresight and wisdom, and because of the rapport, co-operation and communication which existed between them, Kühn and local townspeople, Narungga were actively and successfully secured the important country of Boorkooyanna for future generations.