

BOOMERANGS & KUBURRAS

By Tony Butz

I write this article from a number of different perspectives. I am a trained history teacher, linguist, outdoor education instructor, State Coach of the Boomerang Throwing Association of NSW, and its historian. I have a passion for boomerangs: I have been throwing them for over 50 years, and making them for over 40 years.

*The boomerang is an Australian Aboriginal invention, yet most Australians not only know very little about it, they also perpetuate many myths and misconceptions about what a boomerang is or isn't. This is despite the fact that the word **boomerang** is the best-known Aboriginal word overseas, and that most people are fascinated by the whole idea of a Stone Age people inventing something that actually comes back to you when you throw it away! It is time to set the record straight, by investigating the linguistics, the history, the science and the art of the boomerang; but that also necessitates investigating kuburras. – T.B.*

What actually is a boomerang? What is a kuburra?

The word *boomerang* comes from an Aboriginal language called Dharawal. At the time of European settlement (1788) there were about 250 different Aboriginal languages, and perhaps 600 dialects. Dharawal was spoken by indigenous people living along the east coast of NSW, roughly from Botany Bay to Jervis Bay, and westwards almost to the Blue Mountains. In Dharawal, the word *boomerang* meant a “come-back stick”. If it didn’t come back, it was not a *boomerang*. The most common word for a hunting stick in Dharawal was *kuburra*. A *kuburra* could travel in a straight line for over 100 metres; but it didn’t come back. Here are the major differences:

BOOMERANGS	KUBURRAS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symmetrical, with a significant bend at the elbow, or crescent-shaped • Thrown almost vertically • Arms made with opposite aerofoils, to <i>give</i> lift • Used mostly for fun, occasionally to scare birds • Usually flat on the underside, to give lift • Arms usually between 90 and 120 degrees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One long arm, one short arm, somewhat like a hockey stick • Thrown horizontally, parallel with the ground • Even bevelling around edges to <i>avoid</i> lift • Used to knock down an animal or injure a man • Usually just as curved underside as topside • Arms usually more than 120 degrees apart

Distribution of artefacts and words

About 60% of Aboriginal peoples (language groups) used both boomerangs and hunting sticks, and had their own words for them. Another 10% used only hunting sticks; and a further 30% used neither. All relied mostly on spears for hunting game. We know that the western Sydney version of the (Eora) Sydney language was called Dharug (both language names being given by Europeans, not by their Aboriginal speakers). We also know that there was considerable overlap of territories between Dharawal and Dharug speakers (mostly for purposes of trade and ceremonies) and, consequently, an interchange of words into one another's languages. Although it seems certain that *boomerang* was a Dharawal word initially, adopted by Dharug/Eora groups in about 1802, we do not know which language used *kuburra* first, as it was found in both languages shortly after 1788.

The confusion begins

Although the word *boomerang* is now used throughout Australia (indeed, around the world) for the "returning stick", there is no universally used Aboriginal (or other) word for the "hunting stick". There may be about 10 different words for the boomerang in Aboriginal languages (such as *birgan*, around Moreton Bay, and *barragadan* in north-western NSW), but there are over 40 words for hunting sticks, since they were used more widely. We can't be sure what early recorders were referring to when they wrote down the Aboriginal words for different implements, because confusion about these odd wooden "weapons" began even before 1788, and has continued right up to the present day. (For the sake of clarity and consistency, we will mostly hereafter use the Dharawal words to distinguish between them: *boomerang* for the come-back stick and *kuburra* for the hunting stick.)

Early navigators and explorers thought that kuburras were wooden swords. William Dampier saw them in the hands of the Aborigines on the west coast of Australia in 1688, and assumed they were swords. Captain James Cook, on the east coast in 1770, noted that the Aborigines around Botany Bay were "all arm'd with darts and wooden swords", while his botanist, Sir Joseph Banks, likened them to "Arabian scymetars". (It is a myth that Cook was the first European to record the name *boomerang*, that he saw one being thrown, and that he took one back to England; there is **no** mention at all of boomerangs in any of Cook's or the First Fleet's papers.)

Boomerangs and kuburras continued to be referred to as "wooden swords" for years after 1788: in the journals of Governor Arthur Phillip (1789), Captain Watkin Tench (1789) and surgeon John White (1790). It is clear that none of these men ever saw a boomerang or a kuburra being thrown in these early years, or they would have immediately realised they were not swords. It took a French-speaking ensign of the New South Wales Corps, Francois Louis Barrallier, to make the first written record of a boomerang's flight. As a surveyor and engineer, he had been asked by Governor King to try to find a way across the Blue Mountains, in 1802. In the area of what is today Camden/Minto, he noted in his *Journal*, dated 12th November, 1802, that he saw the local (Dharawal-speaking) Aborigines throwing boomerangs and kuburras. Translated from the French, and recorded only in a footnote to his exploration notes, he wrote:

They throw it on the ground or in the air, making it revolve on itself, and with such velocity that one cannot see it returning towards the ground; only the whizzing of it is heard.

Barrallier did not name the boomerang in his *Journal*, but described it as a "piece of wood in the form of a half circle". He was probably not only the first European to realise that they were not swords, but also the first to fail to distinguish between the two implements. He had seen some thrown "in the air" (boomerangs) and others just above "the ground" (kuburras), but didn't realise they were different items. He certainly knew that there were no boomerangs around Sydney, as he recorded that

The natives of this part of the country make use of a weapon which is not employed by, and is even unknown to, the natives of Sydney.

He brought at least one boomerang back with him to Sydney, introducing it to both the local (Eora) people and the Europeans, for the first time. One of Barrallier's Aboriginal guides on some of his expeditions was Bungaree, originally from the Broken Bay area, who was later seen around Sydney giving demonstrations of boomerang throwing, to the wonderment of both Eora Aboriginal and European crowds. However, it wasn't until 1822 that the word (as "bou-mar-rang") appeared in print (in the *Sydney Gazette*).

Not surprisingly, this strange antipodean object captured people's attention, and soon there were rumours that Aborigines could throw a boomerang out, make it hit a kangaroo, and then have it return to the thrower! This physical impossibility was the result of failing to distinguish between the two very different types of throwing sticks; the next confusion, once the differences between the two implements was realised, was in referring to them as "returning" and "non-returning" boomerangs – a problem, and an oxymoron, that exists even to today.

The confusion continues

The first eighty years of the colony were a time of intense recording (transcribing) of Aboriginal languages in New South Wales, but many mistakes were made, including the recording of *boomerang* as *wommerang* – a confusion of *boomerang* and *woomera* or *wommer* (a spear-thrower). It is possible that a *wommerang* was a woomera used as a club; but not possible that it was a boomerang. When Sir Thomas Mitchell was given the task of assessing the fighting capabilities of Aboriginal groups during his many explorations, he wrote, in 1846, a detailed account of how a boomerang returns. As both a soldier and engineer, he correctly described it as the effect of air pressure on the two opposed surfaces, produced by the twist in the wood at the tips of the boomerang, combined with the spinning motion produced by the throw. So fascinated with the boomerang was Mitchell that he even used its shape to design a ship's propeller. For more than 50 years, Mitchell's account ensured that, in official government documents at least, the term *boomerang* was used only of returning sticks; but, in general conversation both in England and in the colony, there was still talk of "returning" and "non-returning" boomerangs.

John Fraser, writing for an American audience in 1893, made this note about the New South Wales Aborigines, showing that, while he was aware of the naming problem, he had incorrectly used the word *boomerang* to refer to hunting sticks (*kuburras*), and had confused the meaning of *boomerang* with its purpose:

*The fighting weapons of the Australians are few in number, and simple in construction; they are spears, clubs, shields and the "bumarang". Of the last there are two kinds, but it is only the one of these that is used in fights... The Sydney names "bora", "bumarang", "karaban" are already established... I have said that there are two "bumarangs"; the other of these is commonly called the "come-back boomerang", from the strange peculiarity of its flight, but while that name may be descriptive enough, yet it is not convenient to handle, and in one view the name is in itself contradictory, and therefore absurd, for it really means the "playfighting" weapon. A dialect name for it is "bargan" which word may be explained in our language to mean "bent like a sickle or crescent moon". I will, therefore, say "bargan" when I mean that variety. **It is important that two different words should be used; for much confusion has been produced in the past by both varieties being called "bumarang".***

Five years later, in Spencer and Gillen's classic 1898 book, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, there appeared a list of over 400 Aboriginal words, but **no** listing of the word *boomerang* in their records of Aboriginal names for items or in general vocabulary, and no other word for a returning throw-stick. In their text, the authors themselves refer to five different types of non-returning hunting sticks as *boomerangs*, showing that they also thought the word was a general term for throwing sticks, even if NSW Aboriginal people didn't. In a way, this is not surprising, since the Central Australian peoples did not use returning boomerangs at all.

It wasn't until after the turn of the century that Central Australian indigenous people were introduced to boomerangs by Europeans (now looking for very collectable Aboriginal artefacts), along with the broader use of the term. They continued to use their own language names for the varieties of hunting sticks they used, but adopted the Dharawal word, *boomerang*, for a returning stick, as they had no word for it in their languages, just as Europeans had no European words for it. The popularity of this unique implement caused the word *boomerang* to be adopted universally, along with the incorrect use of it, even amongst Aboriginal peoples, for all types of throwing sticks, whether they returned or not. Partly, this was due to many Aboriginal languages having multiple meanings for a single word. For example, in the Nyungar Aboriginal languages (from the south-west corner of Western Australia), the word *kali* (or *kaili*, or *kylee*, or *kylie*) means "mulga wood", a type of acacia tree, from which the throw-sticks are made; so it is the word used for *all* throw-sticks, whether they return or not. It was a different story for the Dharawal speakers on the east coast of NSW, who had access to a greater variety of trees and, therefore, had many different names for their implements. *Boomerangs* were often made from mangrove or casuarina, while *kuburras* were often made from cedar or eucalypt. In addition, an implement often had a name according to its purpose. A *kuburra* was a veritable "Aboriginal Swiss Army Knife" since it could be used as a missile, as a club, as a fire-saw, as a fire-stoker and as a clapstick, and be given a different name depending on its purpose. As we have already seen, a *woomera* could be called a *wommerang*, if it was used as a club.

Thus, in both English and Aboriginal languages, the word *boomerang* has come to refer, rightly or wrongly, to a variety of throwing implements. Because the early language recorders had already confused the different types, we do not know for certain whether most recorded Aboriginal words referred to come-back sticks or to hunting sticks, where the indigenous people used both. It is possible that other NSW Aboriginal words for *boomerang* included *bargan*, *birgan*, *barragan*, *bumarit*, *wurangaing* and *barang*; while *kuburras* were also called *karaban*, *galurali*, *wirra*, *alye*, *garli* and *birridi*. Still other names for some sorts of throw sticks were recorded as: *kirra*, *kurugadha*, *palkaa* and *wana*.

The hooked hunting stick

Special mention should be made of the hooked hunting stick, usually made from mulga, and a favourite among collectors. Also known as an "emu stick", a "swan-neck", a "fighting stick" or a "figure-7", this artefact is characterised by an extra arm (or "beak") coming off what would otherwise be the non-throwing end of a *kuburra*. Originally unique to the Northern Territory, western Queensland and Bathurst Island, it was used like a *kuburra* for hunting but also in special ways for fighting. So, why does it have a "beak"?

When used as an "emu stick", it allows the hunter to get closer to his target. Draped in bushes to resemble the feathers on an emu's body, the hunter raises the stick to look like the head and neck of an emu, and approaches the birds downwind, walking like an emu until close enough to throw the missile at its target. When thrown in fights, the extra arm has been seen to catch on an opponent's shield, spin around it and hit the opponent. Severe wounds and broken bones have been recorded by witnesses to this use of the hooked stick. A third purpose of the "beak" (from a rather dubious account) is that when the stick is thrown so that the beak hits the ground first, it ricochets off at an incredible speed (like a cricket ball off a pitch) making it very hard to block. It is dubious because it is likely that throwing the stick in this way would almost certainly cause the beak to break off as it hits the ground; indeed, even without this kind of throw, many hooked sticks seem to have lost their "beaks". Hooked sticks were also used like a pick-axe in hand-to-hand fighting. In the Arrernte language (previously called Arunta) around Yuendumu, they are known as *kwetere*, or "fighting sticks", suggesting that, perhaps fighting was their main purpose in the past, as they could be used both as a club and as a hook to pull away an opponent's shield, rather than being actually thrown in battle.

Yet another part of the mystique surrounding the hooked stick is the occurrence, sometimes, of a notched section (or “step”) just below the beak on the main stem. This probably occurs naturally as the mulga tree root is growing, if there is a good water supply to the plant. Desert areas with more permanent water supplies enable stronger roots to form, while the mulga tree stem above ground is battered by desert winds and is formed into the thinner, longer arm of the hunting stick. Hooked sticks from around the Finkle River, Macdonnell Ranges and other parts of the Northern Territory and north-west Queensland (where there is plenty of permanent water) tend to have this “step”, but those from around Uluru and the areas occupied by the Walpiri, Iliaura and Warramunga peoples up to Tennant Creek (where it is drier) usually do not. Likewise, throwing sticks cut from branches (as opposed to roots) usually do not have a “step”. It seems quite likely, therefore, that the “step” grows there as part of the root and is left there in the manufacture of the stick to strengthen the weakest part of the implement and so prevent the beak breaking off.

Boomerangs in the 20th century and beyond

Overseas fascination with boomerangs began as early as the 1830’s, when a boomerang-throwing craze began in Dublin, Oxford and Cambridge among university students there. In 1969, the Boomerang Association of Australia was founded in Melbourne to promote boomerang throwing as a sport, and in 1971 it began annual Australian Championship events. In 1974, the annual Smithsonian Boomerang Throwing Tournament was begun in Washington D.C., USA., and in 1978 the Confederation of Australian Sport officially recognised boomerang throwing as an organised sport. The first international event, Australia’s Boomerang Cup, was held in Australia in 1981, as a series of test matches between Australia and the USA. This created a lot of publicity which then saw many countries (including Japan, Finland, France, UK, Netherlands, Canada, Germany, Bulgaria, Brazil, Switzerland, Sweden and Italy) form official boomerang throwing associations. In 1988, teams of throwers from Australia, France, Germany, Netherlands, USA, Switzerland and Japan competed in Australia for the first official World Boomerang Championship, leading to the formation of the World Boomerang Association in 1996, to stage international competition every two years, for both individual and team competitions.

The formalising of boomerang throwing into a sport, and its internationalisation, has meant that the nature of the boomerang has changed. In the 1960’s, by B.A.A. rules, boomerangs had to be made of wood and be “of conventional aboriginal design” (meaning they could have only two arms); but the quest for superior competition models and for breaking records meant that newer materials, especially a variety of modern plastics, have become more popular, along with having boomerangs of more than two arms. Today, sports and competition boomerangs have limitless shapes, and some are even made of materials designed by NASA for space flight. They are used in competitions around the world, covered by rule books that are hundreds of pages long. As Jacques Thomas, President of the Boomerang Club de France, said, in 1983:

Boomerang throwing is a prehistoric practice that has become a modern sport.

One thing that hasn’t changed is that in modern competitions, a boomerang must come back. There are separate competitions for hunting sticks, which are thrown to knock down cardboard targets at increasing distances. So far, the latter have just been called “hunting sticks”. For a while, some enthusiasts liked to call them “kylies”, after their Aboriginal name common in the west and north of Australia. Probably, there will never be universal agreement to call them either *kylie* or *kuburra*, but the come-back stick will always be a *boomerang*.

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