

A. S. MEEK'S JOURNEYS TO THE AROA RIVER IN 1903 AND 1904-05

Bell (1972) stated accurately that the Aroa River is 'an insignificant feature that has figured too prominently for too long in the literature because the geography of the area has been vaguely known'. My studies of the Kairuku sub-district of the Central District of Papua New Guinea (Fig. 1), which includes the area in question, have led me to believe that the Aroa River mentioned by Meek during 1904-05 is really the Dilava River. Meek did in fact travel up the Aroa in 1903 and collected at a place called Avera. Both the Aroa and Dilava Rivers have their headwaters just south of Mount Tafa. The former flows south-west but the latter due west for about one-third of its length and then south to join the Aroa about ten kilometres from the coast.

It is important to ascertain whether Meek collected on the Dilava rather than on the Aroa because many forms of New Guinean birds were described from there and so for taxonomic purposes the locality should be determined as accurately as possible. There are two reasons for saying that the Dilava River is where Meek collected in 1904-05; both are found in letters written to the Tring Museum in 1904. Fortunately, extracts from these letters were included in a paper by Rothschild and Jordan (1905). First, Meek is quoted on page 453: 'I have read Mr Pratt's article describing his expedition to the Aroa River (Dinawa and neighbourhood).' Pratt (1906) shows very clearly on his map that he did not go to the Aroa but along the ridge between the Dilava and Angabunga Rivers to Mafulu via Dinawa (= Dilava). Dilava was situated on a saddle overlooking the Dilava River. The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart began a central mission there for the Kuni people in 1900 and called the station Oba Oba. Crandall (1929) followed Pratt's route but by that time the existing bridle track had been extended by the Mission to the Auga and Vanapa valleys. Secondly, Meek mentions that Bubuni is on the Aroa whereas it is on the Dilava at an altitude of about 750 metres.

In order to show how vague the Aroa was in Meek's mind his use of the term 'upper Aroa' will serve as a suitable example. Rothschild and Hartert (1907) described Meek's collection from the upper Aroa, which includes about seventy species excluding hawks, cuckoos and finches. Included as coming from the upper Aroa are *Microeca flavigaster* and *Gerygone olivacea*, which are only found on the coastal hills in savanna. Meek most likely collected them near Aropokina, which he would have passed on the way to the Dilava and where both still occur today. Mayr and Rand (1937: 130) stated that Meise recorded the latter from above 2,000 metres on the

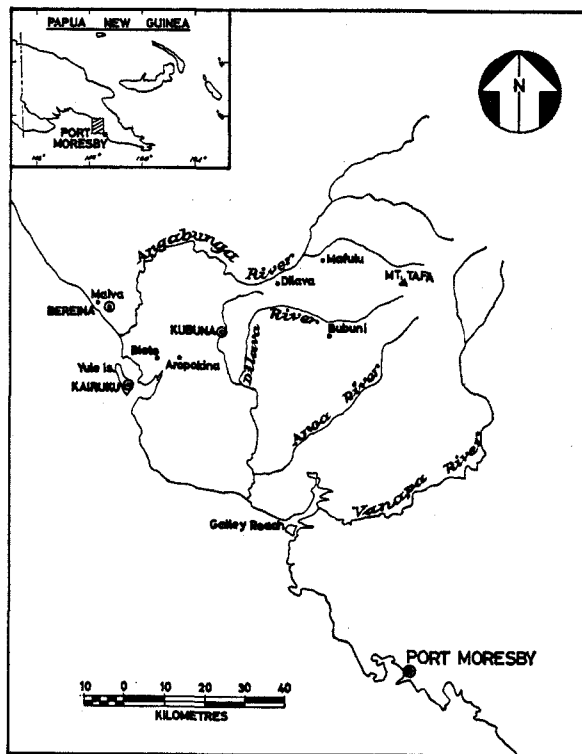


Figure 1. Map to show position of places mentioned in text.

Aroa River. They pointed out that this 'is undoubtedly an error'. Meek apparently gave no altitudes for birds collected on the 'upper Aroa'; so, Meise guessed that the location was high in the mountains. Kinnear (1924) made a similar mistake when reviewing the race *Myzomela fumata meeki*. He said that it came from the mountains of British New Guinea. Actually it does not occur much above 100 metres and is common from the coast to the Kubuna area. All of the birds that Meek, or probably his assistants, collected on the Dilava are typical lowland species, which I have seen near Kubuna in the foothills at about 100 metres on the Kubuna River, a tributary of the Dilava. Because Meek probably left Yule Island on 15 October 1904 and took three days to get to the 'Aroa', he would have reached the area. Furthermore, he travelled for two of those days on a 'sandalwood getter's dray'. According to Fr Victor Perrocheau (pers. comm.), who knew many of the early missionaries in the locality, sandalwood cutters' camps were situated near Kubuna. I think it may be safely concluded that the 'upper Aroa' should read the Aropokina-Kubuna area.

Birds collected at Bubuni (750 m) and at the head of the Aroa (= Dilava) River (above 1,200 m) seem to be in the correct altitudinal range and appear to be far more accurate than for the 'upper Aroa'. Finally, Owgarra (above 2,000 m) would most likely refer to a saddle high above the Auga River. Meek thought he was in the Angabunga valley but he was really in the Auga, a southern tributary of that river. Except about three, all species mentioned and collected by Meek were collected by the Archbold 1933 Expedition to the Auga River at the altitudes given by Meek.

To conclude, LeCroy (1971) and Bell (1972) have adequately pointed out the caution needed regarding altitudinal data of early collectors but has the geographical data always been checked? I hope that these notes make the Dilava-Aroa River area a little less vague than it has been for so long.

S. J. HERON, *PO Box 20, Bereina, CD, Papua New Guinea*.
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