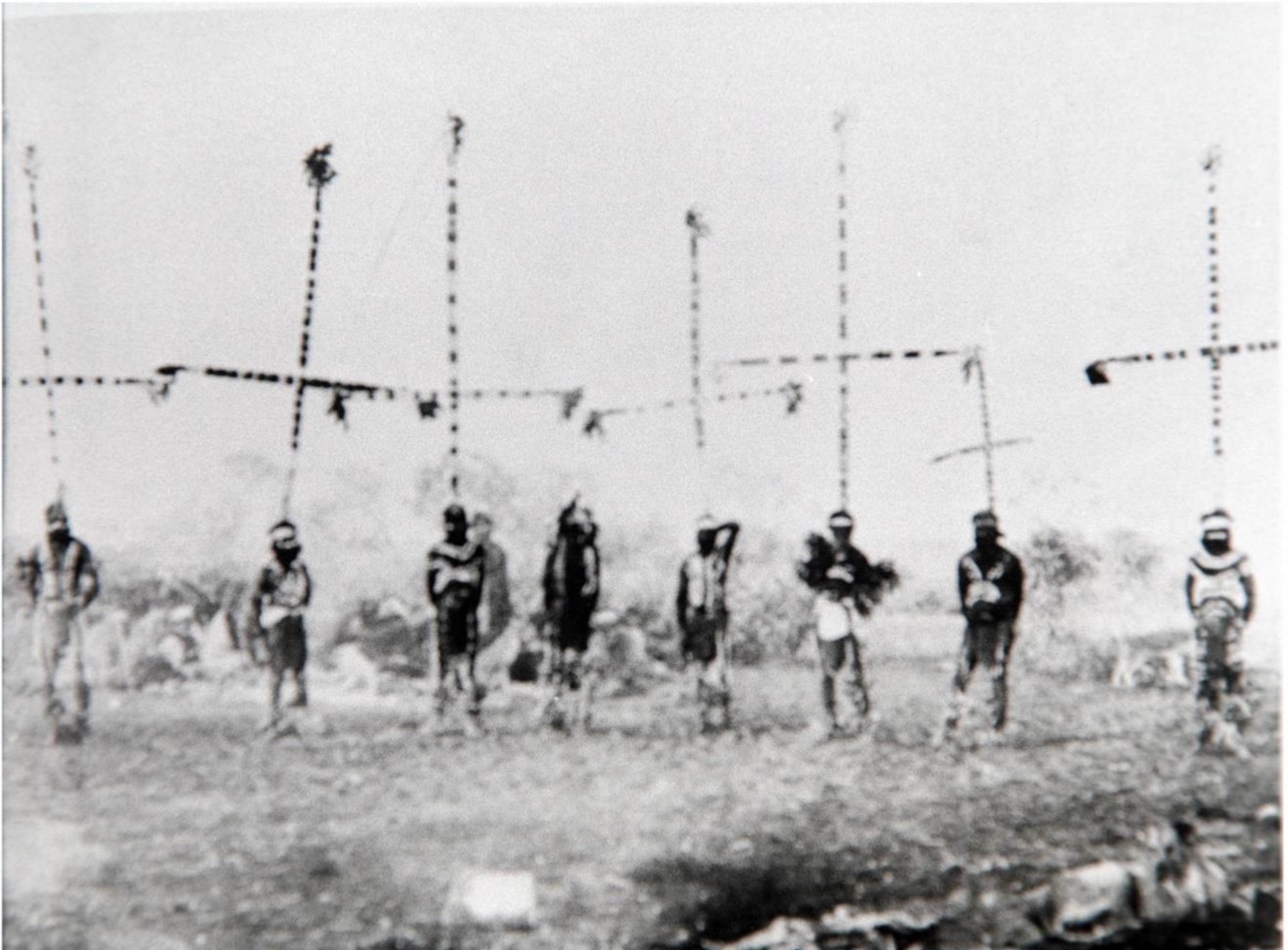
Published documents relating to the culture and language of Aboriginal people in the Milparinka area.



Corroboree, Wonnaminta

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Marriage, Circumcision and Avoidance among the Maljangaba of North-west New South Wales

JEREMY BECKETT*

THE Aboriginal tribes of the southern half of Australia are at best imperfectly known; many exist only as names. European settlement disrupted tribal life and decimated native populations, where it did not annihilate them, before the development of modern anthropology. It has sometimes been possible to recover a society's formal structure from the memories of old informants, and while this kind of data must not be taken as the reality, it none the less merits attention. This is particularly the case in Australia where kinship classifications seem to form a series of variations on a few basic principles.

The Maljangaba have received only passing mention in earlier reports. Their kinship system was a variety of the Kariera type, except that—like many other tribes of southeastern Australia — marriage was forbidden with close kin of the appropriate category. They are remarkable for the way in which, behaviourally and terminologically, they distinguished between actual and classificatory siblings. One aspect of this distinction was the rule of avoidance between siblings of the same as well as opposite sex. The same distinction is apparent in the allocation of roles in the circumcision ceremony which I discuss in the second half of the paper. I shall suggest that rivalry over the bestowal of women in marriage lies at the back of this. Among the Maljangaba, as among other Aboriginal tribes (see Hiatt's article in this issue), it is a girl's mother's brother and perhaps her brothers who bestow her in marriage, not her father.

The Maljangaba lived in the extreme northwestern corner of New South Wales, in the vicinity of the present-day township of Tibooburra. Their territory was opened to gold prospecting and pastoral settlement from about 1870, and contact with Europeans brought severe depopulation and progressive disintegration of indigenous institutions within less than two generations. Even in 1930 Elkin could find no reliable informants from this tribe (1938 : 47). Working between 1957 and 1967, I could draw upon the memories of only three men and two women who were old enough to have experienced the tribal life. By the end of the period only one man survived. Fortunately, this man, George Dutton, is an informant of outstanding quality, whose memory and understanding of the system has improved rather than deteriorated with the years. His biography has already been published (Beckett, 1958).

Maljangaba means 'lake water' and presumably refers to the people's habitat. Their country is dry and, though many small creeks run after heavy rain, permanent water can only be found in the lakes fed by the flood waters of the Bulloo and a few permanent water holes. These abound with water fowl at certain seasons. Salisbury, Cobham and Yantara lakes, and water holes near Mount Pool, Yancannia station and Mount Woods, were the principal camping places.

I have already published a map of the region's tribal territories (Beckett, 1958). Both my informants and the mythology stressed language or dialect changes as the feature distinguishing one tribe from another. Maljangaba social organization was broadly similar to that of its congeners, but its language differed from that of the Bagundji group of tribes to the south. Unlike the Bagundji, but like the tribes to the north and west, the Maljangaba practised circumcision. They shared with the neighbouring

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Danggali, Wainjubalgu and Bandjigali, of the Bagundji group, a variant form of the higher, South Australian *wiljaru* ceremony. Elkin (1931 : 51) identifies them as the easternmost of his 'Lakes Group'.

Among the Maljangaba, as throughout the region, formal groupings were all matrilineal. There were matri-moieties, subdivided into totemic matri-clans. The Hot and Cold Wind divisions cut across both moiety and clan, children belonging to the same wind as their mothers. Unlike the moiety division, but like the clan division, this created a differentiation *within* categories of kin. Structurally it is like the Thick and Thin Blood division among the Wongaibon (Radcliffe-Brown, 1923 : 427 ; Beckett, 1959 : 205). The moiety names, *Dilbungera* and *Magungera* had no meaning[1] ; there were no moiety totems.[2]

A child was named by its father at birth and again at initiation. The name was that of a place along the track travelled by one of the dream time heroes (*mura*). This gave the child the right to travel along the track, sing the songs and enact the drama commemorating the *mura*. This suggests that there was some kind of patrilineal grouping associated with a *mura*, but Dutton claims that a child was not necessarily named from the *mura* track with which his father was associated. Association with a locality is also hard to understand. There were defined localities associated with named 'tribes', but Dutton belonged neither to his mother's tribe (Maljangaba) nor to that of her husband (Wainjubalku—Dutton's father was white), but to the Bandjigali, in whose territory the mulga snake *mura*, to which he belonged, was situated. He was also born in this territory, but denies that this was the determining factor. Movement was not in any case restricted by such boundaries. A stranger ran a certain risk in approaching a 'foreign' water hole inhabited by a rainbow serpent (*gungi*), but could protect himself by uttering a propitiatory formula in the language of the country.

Maljangaba kinship terminology distinguishes only two lines of descent in the second ascending generation: GAGULU (FF), gandja (MM), BABADI (MF), ngabadi (FM) ; and in the second descending generation: NGURGARI (SS) and baluwadi (SD) ; BABABA (DS) and bababa (DD). The same is true in Ego's own generation, except that there were special terms for certain affines. Elder brother: GAGUDJA ; younger brother: NGURGARI (as for son's son). Elder sister: garulu ; younger sister: baluwadi (as for son's daughter). A male cross-cousin: BUNDJA ; a female cross-cousin: ngabu, unless she was Ego's own wife, when she was called gumbaga. Wife's sister was called mambu and brother's wife nadiga. Similarly, a woman called her husband's brother nadiga and his sister's husband mambu.

The terminology is more complicated in the first ascending and descending generations. Ego's own father or father's brothers are GUMA, and wife's mother's brother is GUMALI, whereas others of their moiety and generation are BANDANJI. Similarly, own father's sister is ngabada, whereas other women of her generation and moiety are bandanji. Wife's mother is ganjabada. Own mother and father's brothers' wives are ngama ; others of the same generation and moiety are ipulu. Own mother's brother is not distinguished from others in his category being called WALINDI, but wife's father is called DALU. Children and their spouses are also distinguished: son and daughter are GUA/gua, whereas others of

[1] These terms are closer to the Wongaibon Nilbungera and Magungera, than to the Gilbara and Magwara of the Bagundji or the Gulburu and Diniwa of the tribes to the north.

[2] Although there were no moiety totems, the moieties were said to mark off animals with scales from animals without, thus:

Dilbungera: emu, fish, lizard, snake—black and carpet, pademelon.

Magungera: kangaroo, goanna, bandicoot, mallee hen, teal duck, dog, brolga.

Totemic clans of opposite moiety were paired in the circumcision ceremony ; for example snake and goanna provided guardians for one another's boys. Kangaroo and emu, dog and snake were similarly linked.

I shall mention here the totemism of the Cooper's Creek tribes. Species which are essentially alike, but for some distinguishing feature, were divided between the moieties but linked. Thus: ringtail and straight tail possums ; white-eyed and little crow ; black and white emu ; black and red kangaroo ; carpet snake and black snake. I was told that these linked clans could not intermarry.

their generation are BANDANJI/bandanji, like classificatory fathers and father's sisters. Daughter's husband is called DALU, like wife's father, whereas others in the same category are GUARLU. Son's wife is gulidi, whereas others are ipulu.

The clans—' meat ' as they are called in this part of Australia—do not seem to have had any bearing on social relations, but the moieties constituted two broad categories which were clearly differentiated from one another. The transactions of trade, marriage and bestowal crossed the division. Relations with fathers and male cross-cousins were friendly, indulgent and advantageous. Relations within a moiety were concerned with obligation and responsibility, in the event of death, wrongdoing and the bestowal of women.

A man could marry ngabu (MBD or FZD), bababa (daughter's daughter) and, doubtfully, ngabadi (father's mother, mother's father's sister), provided they were ' not too close '. Wife's sister and own brother's widow were also ineligible. Own father's mother was said to be like a brother's wife. There was no prohibition of marriage with women of father's matri-clan.

Marriage was first explained to me in the familiar form of an exchange of sisters. In the betrothal ceremony two pairs of brothers and sisters sat side by side, facing their respective partners. The brother and sister involved in this transaction, who might be actual or close kin, called one another budinja. The dissolution of one marriage resulted in the dissolution of the other, consequently a man had a continuing interest in his sister. If she eloped with another man, he would be among the first to pursue her. If he heard her husband abusing her he would ' feel no good ', but he would not intervene until nightfall, when he returned to the camp singing the *dulbiri mura*. This was a signal for all the men to pierce their penises and scrota with sharpened sticks and bones. The blood which fell on to the ground secured the increase of the mulga snake. As Rose has pointed out it seems unlikely that actual sister exchange occurred often in Australia because of the considerable age difference between spouses. Dutton asserted that among the Maljangaba age differences were not very great. Nevertheless, it seems probable that a girl's budinya was more often a classificatory brother or a mother's brother (see below).

A girl was betrothed in infancy, hence her brothers were often too young to play a part in the transaction. It was her mother's brother (usually her own mother's brother) who bestowed her. Her mother might also influence the decision, perhaps responding to the request of a distant ' brother ' on behalf of his son. Her father had ' no say whatever '. A man might bestow his sister's daughter on behalf of his sister's son, as part of a sister exchange, but this was not the only possibility. He might equally exchange nieces with a classificatory son or father, though he should give the girl to a brother rather than marrying her himself. Thus, a man could never bestow a niece for his own advantage. The restriction on marriage with close kin ensured that he would not be making such an arrangement with his own father or son, nor receiving in return his own cross-cousin, daughter's daughter or the daughter's daughter of one of his brothers. In the case of ' sister-exchange ' the reciprocity lay less in the transaction of the marriage itself than in its maintenance and in the reciprocal right to bestow one another's daughters (FIG. 1). A brother was also the principal recipient of the bride price made over at his sister's marriage.

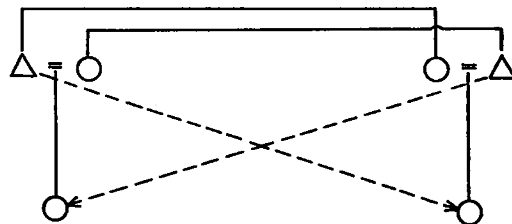

FIGURE 1
Reciprocal bestowal rights following sister-exchange marriage
(Broken line indicates bestowal right)

Those most vitally concerned in a girl's betrothal were her own mother's brothers

and brothers, because at least one of them stood to gain a wife by the transaction. All classificatory brothers were in some sense rivals in the marriage market, but real brothers more intensely so, not simply for girls of the appropriate category, but in the bestowal of their sister's daughters. They were also rivals of their mother's brothers in the sense that these might bestow their nieces for their own advantage and not that of their nephews. Relations between classificatory kin of these categories differ, but were generally consonant with them.

There was mild avoidance among actual, and probably among close classificatory brothers. In addressing one another they avoided the use of both personal names and kinship terms ; they avoided bodily contacts and though they might sit near one another it had to be with face averted. A man might enter his brother's camp in search of food, but the brother would immediately leave ; alternatively, he might wait outside and have the food brought to him by the brother's wife. The solidarity of brothers was stressed in the way in which the children of any one extended the term for own father to all the others, and the term for own mother to their wives. If one of their number died, they—and also their sisters—addressed his children as ' fatherless ' (walginja). A man would not normally have much to do with his brother's wife. He did not inherit her if she became a widow, but he might have a say in her subsequent bestowal and terminated the period of mourning by breaking the white clay widow's cap. His relationship with his wife's sister was similar. They addressed each other using the dual form and mourned one another's death.

Both men and women avoided their mother's brother. The avoidance was stricter and quarrels more strictly forbidden, ' because he is like your mother '. The *ff* and *mmb* were regarded like a brother, but there was no avoidance.

A man's close matrikin were near him in all the crises of his life. They supported him in disputes, conducted his burial rites, avenged his death, arranged his marriage and gave the order for him to be initiated. Dutton observed that a man could expect only the poorest cuts of meat from such kin. Summing up the ambivalence of the relationship, he said : ' Brothers are good to one another, and yet they're not.'

Certain duties were assigned to distant matrikin, of the opposite wind. They assumed the aggressive ' butcher ' role in the circumcision ceremony (see below) and similar roles in the *wiljaru*, pursued him if he eloped with another's wife and killed him if he revealed ritual secrets. Two of them slept beside him during the seclusion following circumcision, laying the foundation of the *dilbi* secondary marriage relationship.

A girl avoided close contact with her brothers and mother's brothers. Their role in her betrothal and marriage has already been described. Her mother supported these kin in their attempts to maintain the marriage and with her real and classificatory mother's mothers assumed a disciplinary role, especially in female initiation. Because two sisters could not marry the same man, they might live apart during their adult lives. This may explain why the term for mother is not extended to mother's sister, but only to father's brother's wives.

Dutton contrasted the father-son relationship with relations among matrikin. Unlike the latter, the father would give his son a good cut of meat if he were butchering an animal. A father—or if he were dead, another of his *mura*—named his children, and inducted his son into his *mura* ceremonies. Dutton's father ' showed him the country '. A father put on mourning clay when his son was circumcised (see below), but he had ' no right ' to oppose the boy's initiation. There is a myth associated with neighbouring Gungadidji country which tells of a father who did offer resistance. I shall summarize it briefly.

> Porcupine (dandjili) used to live around Bulloo Down. He brought his two sons down to a circumcision ceremony and left them there, himself returning to his two wives. The men waited for him to return until, when they had sung all the *muras*, they decided to proceed without him. After the boys had been circumcised Porcupine arrived and took the two boys

away with him. He killed one and tried to kill the other without success. The surviving brother gathered up a party of men who came to kill Porcupine. The son split the shield of his father, who then fled into a nearby lake . . .

Dutton's only comment on the myth was that Porcupine was ' jealous ' because they put the boys through without him, even though he had delayed coming so long. Refusal might be a sanction. I was told of a case in which two men, believing their wives to have been ' boned ', refused to allow their sons to be initiated. They were eventually killed or wounded and the boys taken from them.

I have little to say about father-daughter relations, except to record a folktale concerning a father who killed and ate his wife because ' he was after his grown-up daughters '. The daughters in turn killed him. This story seems to parallel the *dandjili* myth. Both imply an opposition between father and mother's brother which is to be found in other matrilineal societies. Mr Warren Shapiro has suggested to me the following tabulation :

Behaviour with respect to :	Father (' outlaw ' behaviour)	Mother's brother, etc. (culturally defined rights)
boy	Attempt to usurp control of circumcision	Control of circumcision
girl	Attempt to usurp right of bestowal Incest	Right of bestowal

This tabulation has the implication of equating a girl's marriage not with a boy's marriage but with his circumcision. In both events, the child leaves the family circle and is placed under the control of outsiders, to be the object of a reciprocal transaction.

Neither a father nor his brothers could bestow a wife on his own son, though he might approach a ' sister ' of opposite wind if the boy's marriage were too long delayed. In general, the ' soft ' relationship between a man and his GUMA counterbalances the ' hard ' relationship among actual brothers. GUMA and GUA are not concerned in the marriage transaction, though BANDANJI (classificatory fathers and sons) may be.

During the circumcision ceremony a boy came under the protection of a real or classificatory cross-cousin who became his *mambu*. They became lifelong friends thereafter, and the ceremonial exchange of goods which terminated the ritual relationship might continue as a trading relationship. Trading partners were always of the opposite moiety but never close kin.

Male cross-cousins might become brothers-in-law if they were not too closely related. They might perhaps transact the exchange of sisters if they were old enough, but probably the more usual transaction was the exchange of their nieces on behalf of their sisters' sons. But they could not do this if they were brothers-in-law, because of the restriction on close marriages.

Although the Maljangaba were not the only Aborigines to stress the distinction between real and classificatory siblings, they seem to have given it greater elaboration. A salient feature of real sibling relations is avoidance. Brother-sister avoidance is familiar enough, both in Australia and elsewhere ; brother avoidance has been rarely reported, though Mr Nicholas Peterson and Mr Shapiro tell me that relations between brothers are reserved and formal among the Murngin. Among the Walbiri, by contrast, brothers treat each other ' with considerable familiarity ' ; but Meggitt suggests that there is an underlying tension and distrust between them, which stems from their rivalry in sexual matters (Meggitt, 1962 : 130).

In practice it may be hard to mark off avoidance behaviour from respect and circumspection. As a rule, avoidance is thought of as characterizing relations within the nuclear family, most commonly between brother and sister, and between affines, most commonly between a man and his wife's mother. One of the most widely accepted explanations of avoidance is that it reduces the probability of incest (see e.g. Warner, 1958 : 42 ; Murdock, 1949 : 273, 279). Radcliffe-Brown explained affinal avoidances as a means of ' giving stable

form' to relations which combine the principles of conjunction and disjunction (1952 : 92). Elkin (1938 : 69–74), who has given closest consideration to avoidance custom in Australia, does not dismiss the incest explanation of brother-sister and mother-in-law avoidance, but includes other factors when the practice is extended to male relatives such as wife's father, wife's mother's father, own mother's brother and brother. He points out that wife's father has bestowed his daughter on ego and so commands 'respect' as his creditor. Wife's mother's father is also a creditor at one remove. Elkin explains mother's brother–sister's son avoidance as arising out of the likelihood that the former will be or may become that latter's father-in-law, or at least belong to the same category and that he may induct his nephew into his *mura*. Brother avoidance Elkin regards as both an extension of brother-sister avoidance and, like mother's brother–sister's son avoidance, a reflection of unequal statuses in the totemic matriclans.

These explanations do not fit the Maljangaba material satisfactorily. There is no evidence that relations within the matriclans are of such importance as to generate avoidances expressive of respect—nor does Elkin bring forward such evidence. Moreover, it is remarkable that other fellow clansmen, and, in particular, *mmb*, is not avoided. The mother's brother is specifically excluded from becoming a father-in-law. In any case, a man is not indebted to his father-in-law but to his *wmb*, who has bestowed her and whom he does not avoid. Nor does he avoid her mother.

It is hard to see how the brother-sister avoidance, understood as an incest restriction, could be 'extended' to brother. One may perhaps see it as arising out of a restriction on brother's wives. The Murngin exclude a man from his elder brother's camp for this reason, though an old man may play the complacent husband (Warner, 1958 : 50). But in the case of the Maljangaba, the brother is more strictly avoided than the brother's wife.

Radcliffe-Brown's explanation seems to fit the present case better. The relations between brothers, and between mother's brother and sister's son, strikingly combine conjunctive and disjunctive principles. 'Brothers are good to one another, and yet they're not'—as the percipient Dutton puts it. Whatever the degree of sibling rivalry during childhood, rivalry over the bestowal of women must emerge in adulthood.* If this explanation is accepted, the avoidance of brother's wife may be seen as following from brother avoidance rather than the reverse. Brother-sister avoidance, which is usually explained in terms of incest, may also reflect the same combination of conjunctive and disjunctive principles. The brother is supposed to have an affection for his sister, yet he has an interest in the preservation of her marriage, regardless of her wishes in the matter. The *dulbiri mura* may be seen as another expression of the conflicts inherent in the relationship, and not simply a means of resolving marital discord. Significantly, a girl also avoids her mother's brother.

I have based my argument upon the rules of bestowal and sister exchange. But there are other Aboriginal societies with the same rules who none the less lack brother avoidance. The explanation is not sufficient in itself. However, the same criticism may be levelled against the other explanations. For example, when Murdock explains brother-sister avoidance in terms of the incest taboo, he is forced to assume that the taboo has been internalized where the rule is lacking (1948 : 273). Further research may reveal other variables—though not, unfortunately, in the present case.

I shall now consider kinship as it relates to the *milia* circumcision ceremony.

The Circumcision Ceremony

The *milia* circumcision ceremony was performed by the Maljangaba and their neighbours the Wonggumara, Gungadidji and Wadidgali, but it had similarities with ceremonies of the Yandruwanda and Dieri (Howitt, 1906 : 645–56). The *milia* was a mythical hero who travelled from Cobham Lake northwards into Queensland and returned, bringing boys from Bulloo Down (Wonggumara country) to be circumcised

* The incidence of competition over the *bestowal* of women has been largely ignored by recent writers.

near Tibooburra.[3] He introduced circumcision as an alternative to burning off the foreskins, which had caused too many deaths.

When the people had been called together, a ceremonial camp (*jambara*) was set up only a few yards from the ordinary camp, but surrounded by wind breaks high enough to obscure what went on within. Singing took place there each night until everyone had arrived.

A number of boys might be circumcised at the same time, but they must belong to the same moiety. The ' butchers ' of whom there might be several for each boy, must also belong to this moiety, but to the opposite wind, and they must not be close kin. They might be young men who had themselves recently been circumcised and were now exercising the right to take their ' revenge '. The boy's guardian (*mambu*) belonged to the opposite moiety. Matriclans were linked through the exchange of this service, e.g. dog or goanna with carpet snake.

Boys sometimes tried to escape initiation and there were various ruses employed to catch them, but once a mussel shell pendant had been slipped over their heads they were not supposed to offer any further resistance. They wore this throughout the period of initiation.

When a boy was first taken out to the ceremonial camp, his hair was twisted and a special song was sung over him by his guardians. He met the ' butchers ' who banged a stick on the ground and drew a line with it in the dust, signifying the boy, and then more lines. Then crying ' *ipi* ' (go under !), they picked up dust, smearing it up one arm and across the nose. Dutton can only explain this as meaning ' they go underground for you '. The butchers then pelted the boy with boomerangs and he fled, leaping into the arms of his guardian, who stood waiting to catch him. Someone struck the guardian's head to draw blood which was smeared on to the boy. A small hole was dug in the ground and the boy sat down with his penis in it, while a special song was sung.

The butchers sent men of the opposite moiety to find cutting stones, but always declared what they brought to be unsuitable, while setting aside what they needed.

The next morning the boys were brought back naked into the ordinary camp. The women knelt down on all fours while the men covered them with rugs. The boys were made to roll over them. A pole, topped by a boy's waistcloth, was set up and each neophyte was made to climb up it while the women and children pelted him with rubbish and the men threw bark boomerangs over the top, emitting shrill trilling sounds.

After this the boys were taken back to the ceremonial camp. Their fathers, real and classificatory, put on white clay as though in mourning for them, but the butchers denied that the boys were going to die and rubbed it off. The butchers then teased or ' shamed ' the boys, showing them their penises and anuses, and inviting them to commit sodomy, but the guardian drove them away.

Singing continued throughout the night until the morning star appeared, when the guardian took the boy a little way out of the camp and held him up until his penis became ' frozen ' (i.e. numb). Having satisfied himself of this by pinching the foreskin, he and another carried the boy back into the ceremonial camp and laid him down, then, placing a hand on his chest, warned him that the knife was coming. Several butchers must take a cut before the foreskin was finally removed. A ' father ' then gave the boy a boomerang and urged him to attack the butchers, whom someone had meanwhile given shields. When the boy had thrown his boomerang they walked away, teasing him as they went. A ' father ' then placed opossum wool on the wound and gave the boy a waist string and pubic covering. The foreskin was stretched on a forked twig and left to dry, supposedly to turn into a rain

[3] The *milia* set out from gurawalbu, near Mt. Brown, with stones taken from gambigudianda, a quarry in the vicinity. He went from Cobham Lake to Milparinka, through Yalpunga, Olive Downs, Naryalco, Yanco, Dingara and Bransby (all now stations) to Noccabarara. Here, on Bulloo Down, he collected two boys (who were the sons of *dandjili* the Porcupine) and took them back to ngunu creek, which is north of Tibooburra. He finally returned to Mt. Pool, where he died.

stone. The boy's own close matrikin were supposed to go away from the camp and have sexual intercourse while the operation was being performed.

After circumcision, the boys were taken away to another bush camp, where each received various kinds of instruction from the two *dilbis* who slept beside him. These were men of his own moiety but opposite wind. If the boys saw women approaching while they were out hunting, they had to lie down, holding up the shell pendants as a sign for the women to keep away. During this period of seclusion, kangaroo, emu, goanna, duck and lizard meat must not be eaten. Later, the taboo was lifted when the boy, sitting in a tree, was formally fed emu fat on a long stick.

When the period of seclusion was about to come to an end, the boys' mothers and mothers' mothers raced down to the camp with the intention of beating them, so as to 'teach them not to quarrel with their brothers and mother's brothers'. Their fathers' sisters and father's mothers followed after with the intention of protecting them.

The boys were forbidden to speak to their butchers after the operation had been performed, although the latter would tease them, saying: 'Why don't you answer me? I've done nothing to harm you.' However, when the wound had healed it was time to lift this restriction. Each boy's mother prepared food which the guardian took and guided him in feeding to the butchers.

After a final inspection of the wound, the guardian took leave of his ward, and the boy was handed over to an old woman (probably a widow) to be initiated in sexual intercourse. Dutton remarked, 'You are not allowed to go with young women for a start'.

The boy now set off with his father and male cross-cousins on a journey of several months to collect trade goods, and the guardian set off in another direction for the same purpose. When they reassembled they aligned themselves by moiety, one side standing behind the boy and the other behind the guardian. The two were pushed towards one another until the guardian eventually seized his ward, blowing into his ears and striking him on the chest. They then returned to their places and the moieties exchanged goods, which they then shared out among themselves. This followed the usual form of ceremonial trading, and the goods—rain stones, rugs, spears and the like—were the usual objects of trade.

A number of relationships established during the *milia* persisted after its termination. The guardian and his ward were supposed to remain good friends, as were youths who had been circumcised together. The boy also acquired a secondary right to the wives of his *dilbi* (the two elder 'brothers' of opposite wind who had slept beside him during the period of instruction) and began running errands for them. Only when he acquired wives of his own were the *dilbi* able to obtain any reciprocal right.

Certain rights carried over frcm one *milia* to the next. First, the right of a youth who had been circumcised to act as butcher on the next occasion; second, the right of a local group ('mob') who had given one of their boys to be initiated by another group, to receive a boy in return.

Although the events in the *jambara* were hidden from the eyes of women and children, there seems to have been no revelation of specific ritual secrets. The bull-roarer was swung in the higher, *wiljaru* ceremony, but not in the *mil'a*. Information about the *jama wiljaru* ceremony is meagre (largely because it is hard to separate it from the Arabanna *wiljaru* which Dutton himself underwent), but it appears that the roles were assigned on much the same principles as in the *milia*. Female initiation was not at all elaborate, involving little besides a brief period of seclusion, the same food taboos as in boys' initiation, and enclosure in a smoke pit. Once again, the mambu belonged to the opposite moiety, while members of the girl's moiety provided instruction and punishment.

I shall not attempt an interpretation of the symbols appearing in the ceremony. The *milia* is, of course, a typical rite of passage. It is also a 'ritualization' of secular social relations in Gluckman's sense of the term (1962 : 24). However, I should prefer to speak of secular relations being extended into the ritual sphere rather than

being exaggerated. The relationship between a youth and his guardian is consistent with secular relations between the moieties. Similarly, the relationship between the youth and his ' butchers ' is generally consistent with secular intra-moiety relations. In other words, the secular opposition of father/cross-cousin and brother/mother's brother is reproduced in the ritual. The former are supportive ; the punitive and jural authority of the latter is reproduced in the infliction of *necessary injury*. This ambivalence is explicit in the ritual. The circumcisers display aggressiveness towards the boy, but they later deny they have done so. The boy is allowed to take a symbolic revenge on his circumciser, and later to act himself as circumciser. But he also feeds his circumciser and resumes normal relations with him. Although I have referred to Gluckman's ' rituals of social relations ', I must emphasize that the *milia* does not give expression to interpersonal conflicts either existing at the time or likely to develop in the future. The ' butchers ' are strangers, from another place and opposite wind, as ritual executioners would be. Close kin withdraw while the operation is performed. In this instance classificatory brothers are ' good to one another, and yet they're not '.

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CHAPTER 4

The use and abuse of Aboriginal ecological knowledge

Philip A. Clarke

Introduction

Prior to the irreversible social and environmental changes to Australia brought on by European settlement, Aboriginal hunter-gatherers relied upon strategies to survive that were heavily built around their understanding of country, and in particular their detailed knowledge of ecological processes. The plants and animals that, together with the minerals, were sources of raw materials to make food, medicine and artefacts were not randomly placed within the landscape, but sparsely distributed in ways that Aboriginal people keenly understood. There was no specific body of knowledge within Aboriginal tradition that was equivalent to the study of ecology in Western science, although the experience and familiarity that hunter-gatherers had with the Australian biota was immense. Knowledge of the relationships between organisms and the environment was encoded in their Creation traditions.

The life of Australian hunter-gatherers in the desert was nomadic, which maximised their efforts in making a living while maintaining a low level of physical impact upon the fragile environment. Accordingly, Aboriginal land 'owners' possessed highly developed skills in observing temporal changes and spatial patterns within their country, which is seen in the formulation of their seasonal calendars. European explorers recognised that the Indigenous inhabitants had an intimacy with the land, and they took advantage of this by recruiting Aboriginal companions to their expeditions. These Indigenous men performed various crucial roles, such as guide, tracker, protector and procurer of food and water. In carrying out their duties, their possession of ecological

knowledge was essential. It is argued in this chapter that in the case of the Victorian Exploring Expedition, led by Robert O'Hara Burke and William J. Wills, the lack of Aboriginal members in the small team that made the return trip from Cooper Creek to the Gulf of Carpentaria seriously jeopardised the outcome. The explorers had denied themselves a convenient way of accessing local ecological knowledge.

Aboriginal ecological knowledge

When Europeans arrived in Australia, the desert country was home to Aboriginal groups who to varying degrees were related by kinship and who shared common Creation mythologies and material culture traditions (Clarke 2003, 2007). Key areas within the arid centre of Australia provided refuges for hunters and gatherers during times of extreme hardship. In terms of the movements of people, the Cooper Creek system, with its string of water holes crossing the corners of Queensland and South Australia, was like a pulsating heart. Here, bands of people from groups such as the Diyari and Yandruwandha moved out into the desert in search of food after rains had fallen, then retreated back to their camps along Cooper Creek in times of drought.[1] By constantly moving across their country during good seasons, Aboriginal people reduced their overall impact upon the environment, allowing the land to recover from the short-term effects of their foraging activities. Ecological knowledge was important in choosing a time to set fire to the scrub to hunt and in deciding when to risk leaving safe waters to access more remote environmental resources (Kimber 1984; Latz 1995). As part of group-memory, this knowledge was encoded in Aboriginal Creation accounts involving the Muramura (Dreaming) Ancestors, which were told in song (Horne and Aiston 1924; Howitt and Siebert 1904; Jones and Sutton 1986). Aboriginal people believed that certain individuals were 'rain-makers' who held the ritual power to alter weather and bring water to their country (Clarke 2009; Elkin 1977; McCarthy 1953). During severe droughts, the memories of older group members were crucial when trying to predict where to find food and water.

Aboriginal groups living along Cooper Creek and pushing into the surrounding areas had a distinctive toolkit. The area was part of a region where people did not generally use throwing spears. Researchers George Horne and George Aiston (1924, p. 79) noted that among Aboriginal people at Cooper Creek, 'The spear does not seem to have been a very popular weapon … They had the long, pole-like spear called *piranburra*, made out of a box-tree root or mulga root, and employed it as much for digging as for any other purpose'. According to these authors, spears requiring a spearthrower were not generally made in this area, although a few came in via trade with Arrernte people to the north-west. For weapons of defence and killing game, the Cooper Creek people relied heavily upon a variety of handheld and throwing clubs, as wells as fighting staves (Horne and Aiston 1924; Jones 1996).[2] Other essential tools were the digging-stick used chiefly by women, and a range of bags made from string and animal skins for carrying food, water, implements and other objects. In spite of being in a desert region, Cooper Creek possessed large water holes rich in fish life (Glover 1990). A finely woven net of plant fibres was attached to stakes at 2 m intervals and stretched across a water hole to gill net fish during the night.

In the arid zone, grindstones and pounders were essential tools for processing small hard-coated food sources, such as seeds, which enabled larger groups to live in the desert than would otherwise be possible (McBryde 1987; Tindale 1977) (see Figure 4.1). In the Cooper Creek area, grinding (or milling) stones were typically slabs of rounded hard sandstone approximately 50 cm long, 30 cm wide and 4 cm or more thick.[3] The pounder was made from similar

hard stone material and of the size to fit into a hand. Being large, heavy and awkward to carry, the grindstone slabs were generally left behind at each of the main seasonal camps near water holes (Horne and Aiston 1924). In Australian popular literature these Central Australian grinding stones are often simply called 'nardoo stones' (Ramson 1988).

Hunter-gatherers across the world typically have diets comprising a large number of plant and animal species, making the identification of staple foods problematic. In Australia, with its variable climate, certain foods were relied upon almost exclusively when the seasons of flood or drought had limited access to most other sources. Nardoo, because of its abundance and availability during droughts, was a major 'hard time' food source for Aboriginal foragers in parts of arid Australia (see Figure 4.2). It is a small low-growing waterfern with clover-like leaves, that springs up in the mudflats after infrequent rains. Nardoo forms dense mats of vegetation that soon die off to leave behind sporocarps, which are flattened pea-shaped spore cases up to 5 mm in diameter. The dark hard outer coverings of these seed-like growths enclose a yellowish powder that has a bitter taste. Aboriginal foragers generally gathered sporocarps from dry mud after the plants had died (Bates 1918; Cleland 1957; Cleland *et al.* 1925; Cleland and Johnston 1937–38; Gason 1879; Johnston and Cleland 1943; Kemsley 1951; Kimber 1984; Riches 1964; Roth 1897; Spencer 1918; Worsnop 1897).[4] At Cooper Creek, explorer/anthropologist Alfred W. Howitt (cited in Smyth 1878, vol. 2, p. 302) claimed that nardoo 'may be called their "stand-by" when other food is scarce. In many places, miles of the clay flats are thickly sprinkled with the dry seeds [sporocarps]' (see Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.1: Grindstone. For desert dwellers, a stone slab such as this was essential for removing the hard outer coverings of nardoo sporocarps and grass seeds. The resulting meal was cooked into damper. Philip A. Clarke, Alton Downs, north-east of South Australia, 1987.

Figure 4.2: Nardoo plant. This small arid-zone fern grows in dense mats on the mudflats after rain, leaving behind the dried dark and split pea-shaped nardoo spore cases on the dry mud. Philip A. Clarke, Diamantina, north-east South Australia, 1986.

Figure 4.3: Linda Crombie collecting nardoo. Without this labour-intensive food source, Aboriginal people would not have been able to remain in the deserts during long-term droughts. Philip A. Clarke, Diamantina, north-east South Australia, 1986.

A meal of nardoo sporocarps, even in dried form, is rendered edible only after extensive preparation involving pounding, sluicing and baking into cakes (Basedow 1925; Bonyhady 1991; Earl and McCleary 1994; Horne and Aiston 1924; Murgatroyd 2002). The protracted process is necessary due to the presence of thiaminase, which is an enzyme that blocks thiamine (vitamin B1) absorption in human bodies (Earl and McCleary 1994; Everist 1981; McCleary and Chick 1977; Moran 2004). The highest levels of enzyme activity are found in green growing plants. Bancroft investigated how Aboriginal people at Annandale in south-west Queensland prepared nardoo:

> *The involucres [sporocarps], which are very hard, are pounded between two stones; a handful of them is held in the left hand and fed to a stone on the ground, a few grains being allowed to drop from the hand by separating, abducting the little finger, a smart blow being struck with a stone in the right hand, which effectively pulverises every grain at once; it is surprising with what rapidity they can do this work. The flour is mixed with water, kneaded to a dough, and baked in the ashes (Bancroft 1894, p. 216).*

The Ngardu-etya and Anti-etya Dreaming of the Yandruwandha people at Cooper Creek celebrated the creation of grindstones and the use of nardoo (*ngardu*) sporocarps and grass seed (Howitt 1904).[5]

The availability of nardoo sporocarps and their ability to grind it enabled desert dwellers to remain in country that experienced long dry periods. Grindstones for pounding were typically used close to water sources near mudflats where the nardoo grows (Clarke 2007; Thomson 1962). The production of flour through grinding was laborious, with the 'tap-tap' of the process heard from the camps far into the night (Howitt, cited in Maiden 1889; Lees 1915). In the Diyari language of north-east South Australia, *pita-ru* was the lament of hard-working women during droughts; it meant 'always-pounding' (Reuther 1981). Nardoo and other closely related species are found widely across Australia, although the use of sporocarps for food appears to have been completely avoided in regions outside the desert. Apart from nardoo, the seed of various grasses, portulaca (munyeroo) (see Figure 4.4) and various wattles were ground to produce meal in the desert.

In Aboriginal Australia, no single territory occupied by one Aboriginal group would have provided everything that was required for long-term survival. Trading allowed goods, such as nets and weapons made from sources in restricted areas, to be distributed for use throughout a much larger region (Clarke 2003; McCarthy 1938–40). Horne and Aiston stated that Kopperamanna, in the bed of Cooper Creek in north-east South Australia, was a major place for barter, where 'Thither came from the north the soft-wood shields, for none of this soft-wood [batwing coral tree] grows amongst the Lake Eyre tribes' (Horne and Aiston 1924, p. 34) (see Figure 4.5).[6] The shields had been traded into their country from many hundreds of kilometres to the north. In eastern Central Australia, a narcotic made from the pituri shrub was a highly prized trade item, with the superior leaves and sticks coming from the Mulligan River area of south-west Queensland (Basedow 1925; Clarke 2003, 2007; Hicks 1963; Smyth 1878; Watson 1983). Apart from its recreational use, for Aboriginal men the pituri was said 'to excite their courage in warfare' (Von Mueller, cited in Smyth 1878, vol. 1, p. 223) and it was given to male initiates prior to ceremony to heighten their sense of revelation (Latz 1995). As a stimulant, it was claimed to create sensations of well-being, and as a narcotic it suppressed hunger and thirst, such as that experienced during protracted hunting expeditions.

Ochre, important in Aboriginal ritual and painting, was a major trade item throughout Aboriginal Australia (Peterson and Lampert

Figure 4.4: Portulaca, also known as common pigweed or munyeroo. A succulent creeper that bears edible seed, which is as fine and black as gunpowder. The leaves and stems were used by desert dwellers as thirst-quenchers. Explorers ate this plant as greens to battle scurvy. Philip A. Clarke, Tennant Creek, Northern Territory, 2011.

Figure 4.5: Batwing coral tree (beantree). The light-weight timber is soft and therefore easily carved into shields and containers. Philip A. Clarke, Alice Springs, MacDonnell Ranges, Northern Territory, 2007.

1985; Sagona 1994). Parties of men from Cooper Creek went on long trading trips south to the mines at Pukardu (Bookatoo) near Parachilna in the Flinders Ranges of South Australia (Cooper 1948; Jones 1984, 2007; McBryde 1987; Wilhelmi 1861). The expeditions took two months and involved participants travelling about 500 km before commencing the return trip to Cooper Creek. Trade, based on this source of red ochre, connected people from as far north as south-west Queensland and the MacDonnell Ranges, and possibly as far south as the Adelaide Plains and Port Lincoln. The ochre is not bright red, but rather a metallic pink which is shiny when applied to human skin.

Aboriginal gatekeepers of ecological knowledge

The first British colonists in Australia encountered a land that was strange in comparison to their homelands. Many of the plants and animals appeared exotic (Finney 1984; Moyal 1986) and the seasons were different too (Reid 1995a, b). To Europeans, Australia was a 'new' land to explore, claim, settle and develop (Clarke 2008; Griffiths 1997). Although treated as an unoccupied wilderness, the continent had actually been shaped by its Indigenous inhabitants over many thousands of years. Aboriginal foraging practices that involved the use of fire kept large areas open for travellers (Clarke 2003, 2007; Hallam 1975; Latz 1995). Explorers, knowingly or otherwise, took advantage of this. For European travellers, Aboriginal pathways were a particular advantage to finding key places, such as water holes, and when moving pack animals across the country. As settlement spread across the continent, Aboriginal tracks were incorporated into stock routes and many eventually became part of the modern road system (Clarke 2003, 2008).

Survival of the explorers at key moments during each expedition hinged upon how the Indigenous inhabitants received them. In the early days of colonisation, Aboriginal guides were essential, being relied upon for their knowledge and experience of the different environments and Indigenous peoples. In their service to the explorers they found pathways, established protocols with Aboriginal land owners to allow expedition parties safe passage, collected scientific specimens and on occasion were even bodyguards (Clarke 2008). Aboriginal interpreters were necessary, as social conditions in the newly established towns and rural areas did not favour the colonists learning to speak a variety of Indigenous dialects (Donaldson 1985). In times of shortage, explorers called upon their Aboriginal guides to use the land to provide food and water, as well as for making shelter and watercraft. Explorers looking for indications that the country they traversed was suitable for agriculture considered large numbers of local Aboriginal people to be both a physical threat and a good sign that the land was fertile.

In employing Indigenous guides, explorers could either recruit Aboriginal men from settled areas to be part of the expedition, or opportunistically fall in with those they met during their travels and acquire local knowledge directly from them (Clarke 2003; McLaren 1996). Some explorers used both strategies simultaneously. By employing Aboriginal guides at the outset, expedition leaders gained companions who had time to develop familiarity with their needs. A disadvantage of this strategy was that the expertise of these guides was most concentrated upon the culture, language and environmental resources of their own territory, which the expedition would sooner or later leave behind. On the positive side, Aboriginal people who, as individuals, had lived as hunter-gatherers before Europeans arrived, possessed bush skills and general ecological knowledge of landscapes that could be broadly applied across the continent.

Indigenous guides were recruited from survivors of the early waves of British

colonisation. They were present at pivotal points of early Australian exploration history. Explorers routinely took Aboriginal companions, forming partnerships such as Mathew Flinders and Boongaree, George Grey and Kaiber, John Mitchell and Barney, Edward Eyre and Wylie, Edmund Kennedy and Jackey Jackey, Ludwig Leichhardt and Charley Fisher, Peter Warburton and Charley, Ernest Giles and Jimmy, and John Forrest and Windich (Clarke 2008; McLaren 1996; Reynolds 1990). From the early 19th century, many of these men were issued with breastplates, mostly brass and copper, as medals to acknowledge their efforts (Cleary 1993; Troy 1993).

The expedition and Aboriginal ecological knowledge

The Victorian Exploring Expedition took place in a period when the involvement of Aboriginal guides with explorers was declining, perhaps due to a desire to rely more upon newly available technologies, such as mapping instruments and superior weapons. When Burke received news of John McDouall Stuart's apparent good progress on his parallel route across Australia, the expedition was transformed from a scientific exercise into a race. The original plan to wait for a benign season to cross the continent's unmapped interior was abandoned. Burke also sacrificed the potential for Aboriginal guides playing a major role.

On 19 October 1861, Burke took an advance party from Menindee and made a dash for Cooper Creek. Aided by favourable weather and recent rains, they arrived at Cooper Creek little more than three weeks later, on 11 November. William Wright, who had been recruited into the expedition at Kinchega on the Darling River, went with them accompanied by two Aboriginal guides as far as Torowoto, then the three of them turned back (Brahe, cited in Victoria 1861–62). It was intended that Wright would follow the advance party to Cooper Creek with more supplies and fresh camels (Wright, cited in Victoria 1861–62). Before returning to Menindee, Wright instructed his guides to find Aboriginal people from inland groups to help the expedition reach Cooper Creek. Wright (cited in Victoria 1861–62, p. 108) later claimed that:

> *I told Mr Burke before I left him that I would procure guides to take him on to Cooper's Creek, which I did. I got the natives that were with me to get blacks to take him on as far as Bulloo. They left him there and he crossed to Cooper's Creek without any guides. Mr Burke had guides with him to Bulloo.*

Given the problems the advance party would eventually face in procuring food, it was unfortunate that Burke had reached Cooper Creek without the company of experienced Aboriginal guides from the Darling River area, who remained with Wright.

In the official investigations that followed the expedition, much is made of the apparent bad decisions made by Wright at the Menindee camp (Moorehead 1963). He was a crucial player in terms of supplying the depot at Cooper Creek and maintaining the connection with Melbourne. It was through Wright that the guides among the 'Darling blacks' were recruited, as he knew those Aboriginal people well having worked as a manager of Kinchega Station. One of the guides on this trip had previously been north with him and would play a major role in subsequent events (Wright, cited in Victoria 1861–62).

On 10 November 1860, trooper Myles Lyons and saddler Alexander McPherson set out from Menindee, accompanied by the Aboriginal tracker Dick, to convey urgent despatches from the Exploration Committee in Melbourne to Burke who had now reached Cooper Creek (Wright and Beckler, cited in Victoria 1861–62). The despatches included the most recent intelligence of Stuart's progress on his south–north crossing from Adelaide. When the messengers became lost and desperately short of provisions and water, Dick conveyed them to the care of local

Aboriginal people in the Torowoto district. He returned to Menindee, which he reached on 19 December, having had to walk for the last eight days as his horse was lame. Dick took Dr Hermann Beckler back to rescue the stranded men, who had lived for weeks on a small amount of nardoo flour per day. Beckler (cited in Spencer 1918, p. 13) recorded in his journal on 27 December that they had found:

> *Macpherson [McPherson] at a short distance from us, apparently searching for something [nardoo] on the ground … Lyons was at the camp engaged in baking cakes when we came up to him. The seeds of which they prepared a warn [sic: warm?] meal, and out of that either cakes or porridge, is not properly a seed, but the sporangium and the spores of a small plant, the leaves of which are very like clover. It is, I believe, a Marsileana [Marsilea], and everywhere to be met with where water stagnates for a time.*

The Europeans owed their lives to nardoo and the actions of Dick.

Back at Menindee, Dr Ludwig Becker commemorated the heroism displayed by the Aboriginal guide in a portrait of 'Dick, the brave and gallant native guide'. In correspondence dated 31 December 1861 from the Exploration Committee to Wright, John Macadam (cited in Wills 1863, p. 140) wrote that 'The medal for Dick, the aboriginal guide, bearing a suitable inscription, is forwarded with this despatch, and the committee leave in your hands the bestowal of such additional reward as you may deem proper – not exceeding five guineas (say 5£ 5s.)'. Wright did not leave Menindee to travel to the Cooper Creek depot until 26 January 1861; on that trip Dick accompanied the party, possibly through coercion. By 28 January they had reached Pamamaroo Lake, where Wright (cited in Victoria 1861–62, p. 188) claimed that 'After breakfast Dick, the native, who had shown on several occasions a disposition to slip away, borrowed a clean shirt and then bolted. His unwillingness to accompany the party arose from his fear of the natives, and was to be regretted, as his absence deprived us of our only interpreter.' Wright appeared to have mixed feelings about Dick's worthiness as a guide.

With the public focus on the poor decision-making processes involved with the running of the expedition, along with the suitability or not of nardoo as a food source, the investigation of the roles the Aboriginal people played have been largely ignored until recently. Little has been recorded about Dick or any other Indigenous men employed during the Burke and Wills saga. It is likely that Dick first became familiar with Europeans, such as Wright, at pastoral stations along the Darling River, which was then at the frontier of European expansion towards the north. Dick's cultural affiliations were probably with the Barkindji people who lived along the banks of the Darling River and ranging south. These people had good relations with those who lived in the back country, north and west of the river (Newland 1889).

Burke's small party was successful on the stage from Cooper Creek to the Gulf of Carpentaria, due to their chosen route and the weather. They benefited from local people's foraging activities. On one occasion in February 1861, faced with having to travel through a bog, they came across an Aboriginal pathway which took them to a 'nice watercourse', past some 'little pebbly rises where the blacks had been camping' and to a place where Aboriginal diggers had left behind a quantity of 'yams' that were 'so numerous that they could afford to leave lots of them about, probably having only selected the very best. We were not so particular, but ate many of those that they had rejected, and found them very good' (Wills 1863, p. 212; Wills, cited in Victoria 1861–62, p. 229). Although not named, the roots were probably pencil yams (small yams) which are recorded as a major food source across arid Australia (Bindon 1996; Clarke 2007; Latz 1995), often found growing near creeks and lagoons (see Figure 4.6). The trip south to Cooper Creek

Figure 4.6: Pencil yams are generally collected after the surface parts of the plants die off, some months after rain. The tubers are cooked in hot sand and ashes. Philip A. Clarke, Tennant Creek, Northern Territory, 2011.

during late summer was more strenuous then the trip north and, with food supplies running short, the explorers looked for wild sources. On 21 April, Wills (1863, p. 235; cited in Victoria 1861–62, p. 238) wrote in his journal: 'I am inclined to think that but for the abundance of portulac that we obtained on the journey, we should scarcely have returned to Cooper Creek.'[7] Many other explorers had found this plant useful in treating the debilitating and life-threatening condition of 'land scurvy', also known as 'Barcoo rot' (Earl and McCleary 1994; Hagger 1979; Ramson 1988).

Having reached the Cooper Creek depot, the surviving three explorers (Burke, Wills and King) decided that their return to settled districts would follow explorer Augustus C. Gregory's 1858 path, which was to cross the Strzelecki Desert to Mount Hopeless north of Lake Frome where there was a police station, then head south towards Adelaide. On 23 April the three men commenced travelling downstream along the southern bank of Cooper Creek (Burke, cited in Jackson 1862; Wills 1863). The chosen path was one that would have often been used by Aboriginal people on ochre expeditions, although they would have gone only during favourable seasons after good rains. On 24 April, Wills recorded that 'As we were about to start this morning, some blacks came by, from whom we were fortunate enough to get about twelve pounds [5.4 kg] of fish for a few pieces of straps and some matches, &c.' (Wills 1863, p. 273). The Aboriginal interest in acquiring exotic materials is consistent with their trading practices, with visitors to their country expected to pay for the right to pass through unmolested.

When the explorers' attempt to reach Mount Hopeless failed through lack of water, they backtracked towards the main depot at Cooper Creek, near the South Australian border with Queensland. On 6 May, Wills remarked in his journal that 'I suppose this will end in our having to live like the blacks for a few months' (Wills 1863, p. 282). He was right, as the next day he and Burke started moving along the creek and found a group of Aboriginal people fishing. Wills (1863, p. 283) recorded that:

> *… they gave us some half-a-dozen fish each, for luncheon, and intimated that if we would go to their camp we should have some more and some bread. I tore in two a piece of macintosh stuff that I had, and Mr. Burke gave one piece and I the other … They had caught a considerable quantity of fish, but most of them were small. I noticed three different kinds; a small one that they call Cupi, from five to six inches [13–15 cm] long, and not broader than an eel; the common one, with large coarse scales, termed Peru; and a delicious fish, some of which run from a pound to two pounds [0.9 kg] weight; the natives call them Cawilchi. On our arrival at the camp they led us to a spot to camp on, and soon afterwards brought a lot of fish, and a kind of bread which they call nardoo … In the evening various members of the tribe came down with lumps of nardoo and handfuls of fish, until we were positively unable to eat any more. They also gave us some stuff they call bedgery or pedgery [= pituri]; it has a highly intoxicating effect when chewed even in small quantities. It appears to be the dried stems and leaves of some shrub [see Figure 4.7].*[8]

Incredibly, given their dire circumstances, Burke was for a long while reluctant to accept help from Aboriginal people and on one occasion even angrily refused a gift of fish, ordering King to fire his revolver (King, cited in Victoria 1861–62; Wills 1863).

The explorers feasted well on the prepared nardoo given to them by local Aboriginal people, but had no knowledge of its early preparation stages and for some time did not know from which plant it came. After leaving the company of Aboriginal people, the explorers searched in vain for it in the surrounding vegetation. On 10 May, Wills described his despair: 'I went out to look

Figure 4.7: Pituri. Desert Aboriginal people used the foliage of this small tree to produce a powerful narcotic, as well as to poison game animals. Philip A. Clarke, Port Augusta, South Australia, 2007.

for the nardoo seed [sic. sporocarps] for making bread: in this I was unsuccessful, not being able to find a single tree of it in the neighbourhood of the camp. I, however, tried boiling the large kind of bean which the blacks call padlu; they boil easily, and when shelled are very sweet, much resembling in taste the French chestnut; they are to be found in large quantities nearly everywhere' (Wills 1863, p. 285). The identity of 'padlu' as a food plant is a mystery. Based on linguistic evidence, Wills may have been referring to the pop saltbush, a common low-growing shrub of inland Australia.[9] The description also fits a species of *Acacia*.

After much searching, on 17 May the explorers, perhaps unfortunately, located the source of the nardoo. While walking along an Aboriginal path 'King caught sight in the flat of some nardoo seeds, and we soon found that the flat was covered with them. This discovery caused somewhat of a revolution in our feelings, for we considered that with the knowledge of this plant we were in a position to support ourselves, even if we were destined to remain on the creek and wait for assistance from town' (Wills 1863, pp. 286–287).

From this point, they relied heavily on the nardoo they collected, using a 'pounding stone' taken from a deserted Aboriginal shelter to process what they gathered (King, cited in Victoria 1861–62; Wills 1863). Wills (1863, p. 288) noted on 24 May that he had 'Started with King to celebrate the Queen's birthday by fetching from Nardoo Creek what is now to us the staff of life; returned at a little after two P.M. with a fair supply, but find the collecting of the seed a slower and more troublesome process than could be desired'. In his journal for June 1861, Wills frequently referred to himself and his companions 'pounding' nardoo. Among Wills' ailments was severe 'constipation of the bowels' (Wills 1863, p. 289). By 15 June, Wills wondered whether his condition would improve if he consumed less nardoo and chewed tobacco to suppress his appetite. From this time until Wills' last journal entry, the surviving explorers gathered and ate nardoo, which did not assist them to regain their health and well-being. This seemed inexplicable as, at this time, local Aboriginal groups appeared to live well on a diet comprised largely of nardoo and fish.

The health of the three explorers, already poor following the exertion involved in getting to the Gulf and back, continued to deteriorate at Cooper Creek. By late June, Wills was no longer able to move and Burke was not much better off. On 29 June, Wills (1863, p. 302) was close to death and noted in his journal that 'starvation on nardoo is by no means very unpleasant, but for the weakness one feels, for as far as appetite is concerned, it gives me the greatest satisfaction'. After Burke and Wills had died,

King (cited in Victoria 1861–62) was left to fend for himself. On one occasion, he was lucky to find a store of nardoo in a deserted shelter, which fed him for a fortnight. In arid regions, Aboriginal people often kept a surplus of dried food, such as nardoo and seed, stored in wooden containers or in bags of skin or woven string, for future use (Clarke 2003, 2007). These were cached in brush shelters or dry caves or buried in the sand.

It is clear from Wills' journal, found with his body, that for the most part the Victorian Exploring Expedition had only limited interaction with Aboriginal people. Sole survivor King (cited in Victoria 1861–62) eventually made the wise decision to join a local band of Aboriginal people. Each day women gave him nardoo, presumably prepared for eating, while the men sometimes provided him with fish. In return, King would shoot birds for them. In line with Aboriginal custom, as a single man King slept in the bough shelter of unmarried men each night. On one occasion, he noticed that a woman who had just given him a ball of prepared nardoo had a sore arm, preventing her from grinding any more. He treated her by cleaning the wound with a sponge soaked in water he had boiled, then applying silver nitrate. The effect must have been rapid and positive, as from then on this woman and her husband maintained a close relationship with the explorer, which included helping him make camp whenever the group moved to a new location.

King spent weeks travelling with his adopted band until the arrival of Howitt's relief expedition at Cooper Creek (Howitt and Foster, cited in Victoria 1861–62). Howitt proved an excellent choice of leader, as he was an experienced bushman, an accomplished geologist and an emerging ethnographer and anthropologist (Moorehead 1963; Murgatroyd 2002; Stanner 1972). Probably due to his bush skills and the presence of Aboriginal guides Sandy and Frank, the 12 men in his party appear to have largely avoided the health problems suffered by Burke's expedition at Cooper Creek. Howitt made sure that succulent vegetables, such as mesembryanthemum (pigface) (see Figure 4.8), portulac and wild spinach were frequently eaten (Howitt, cited in Victoria 1861–62).[10] Importantly, his party travelled during a mild season. The relief expedition found King on 15 September 1861 in such a state that he was not at first recognised as being European. King was able to return to Melbourne but he developed peripheral neuropathy, due to the prolonged deficiency of thiamine (Earl and McCleary 1994; Moorehead 1963). He never fully regained his health, dying in 1872 at the relatively young age of 33.

Conclusion

The tragedy of the Burke and Wills expedition highlights the importance of the proper transfer of landscape-based knowledge from the Indigenous occupants to the European newcomers. If the explorers had gained greater intelligence of local plant foods and their preparation, they may have avoided sickness altogether. A greater appreciation of the climate cycles of the interior may have tempered Burke's decision to make such a risky crossing. As demonstrated by the events surrounding the rescue of McPherson and Lyons at Torowoto, the presence of Aboriginal guides with an understanding of regional languages would have facilitated the communication of ecological knowledge to the stranded explorers at Cooper Creek. If Burke, Wills, Gray and King had the services of an experienced Aboriginal guide, such as Dick, in Central Australia the chances of them all surviving would have significantly increased. For the explorers, a closer relationship with local Aboriginal bands could have led to better prediction of the local climate and the possible use of bush medicines to improve their well-being.

From the late 19th century, scientists working in remote parts of Australia recognised the value of Aboriginal ecological knowledge. Biologists on the Horn

Figure 4.8: Sarcozona, an inland species of pigface. In 1861, the members of the Burke and Wills relief expedition, led by Alfred W. Howitt, ate the leaves of a pigface species to avoid scurvy. Philip A. Clarke, Port Augusta, South Australia, 2009.

Expedition, which travelled through Central Australia in 1894, employed local Aboriginal people as collectors and recorded valuable biological data from them (Baker and Nesbitt 1996; Clarke 2008). In the 20th century, Donald Thomson drew even more heavily upon Aboriginal ecological knowledge in his zoological work on the mammals and fishes of northern Australia (Thomson 1987). From the late 20th century, researchers have studied Indigenous ecological knowledge in its own right (Horstman and Wightman 2001; Lucas *et. al.* 1997; Rose 2005; Walsh 1990; White and Meehan 1993). While the great depth of Aboriginal-held information on the environment is widely recognised today by Western-style researchers, its continuation as an oral tradition is threatened by social changes within the Aboriginal community, with generations of senior custodians who have direct hunting and gathering experience passing away (Clarke 2007). Apart from this threat, modifications to the physical environment, brought on by altered fire regimes, invasion of exotic species and climate change, are changing the context for this knowledge.

Endnotes

1 For cultural boundaries of these groups refer to Tindale (1974). For the Diyari language, Reuther (1981) provided a vocabulary and Austin (1981) produced a grammar. Jones (1990) gave a demographic history of the Cooper Creek area. Note that in the literature Yandruwandha is sometimes written as 'Yantruwanta', 'Jandruwanta' or 'Yantruwunta' and Diyari as 'Dieri'.

2 Overview also based on the range of objects the author inspected in the

Aboriginal collection of the South Australian Museum.

3 The archaeological collection of the South Australian Museum has many examples of grindstones and pounders from the Cooper Creek district.

4 There are two species: common nardoo (*Marsilea drummondii*) and short-fruited nardoo (*Marsilea hirsuta*).

5 Kimber (1984) presented an overview of other Nardoo Dreaming accounts from surrounding areas. McBryde (1987) provided a Grinding Stone Dreaming from Wangkangurru people further west.

6 The batwing coral tree (*Erythrina vespertilio*) is also known as the Stuart beantree and grey corkwood. There are examples of these shields in the Aboriginal ethnographic collection of the South Australian Museum.

7 See King and Wills (cited in Victoria 1861–62) for other references to the use of portulac.

8 The fish species Wills observed may have been the spangled perch or catfish (cupi), bony bream (peru) and callop (cawichi).

9 The 'padlu' that Wills heard may have been the *paldru* that missionary Johann Reuther (cited in Clarke 2008) listed in the early 20th century as a Diyari word for 'shrub, pods burst open, pop-saltbush'.

10 Based on my field knowledge of the inland flora, the 'mesembryanthemum' is probably sarcozona (*Sarcozona praecox*), while the 'portulac' would be munyeroo (*Portulaca oleracea*). The 'wild spinach' is possibly either *Chenopodium auricomum* or a species of *Tetragonia*, all of which are sometimes known as 'native spinach' or 'wild spinach'.

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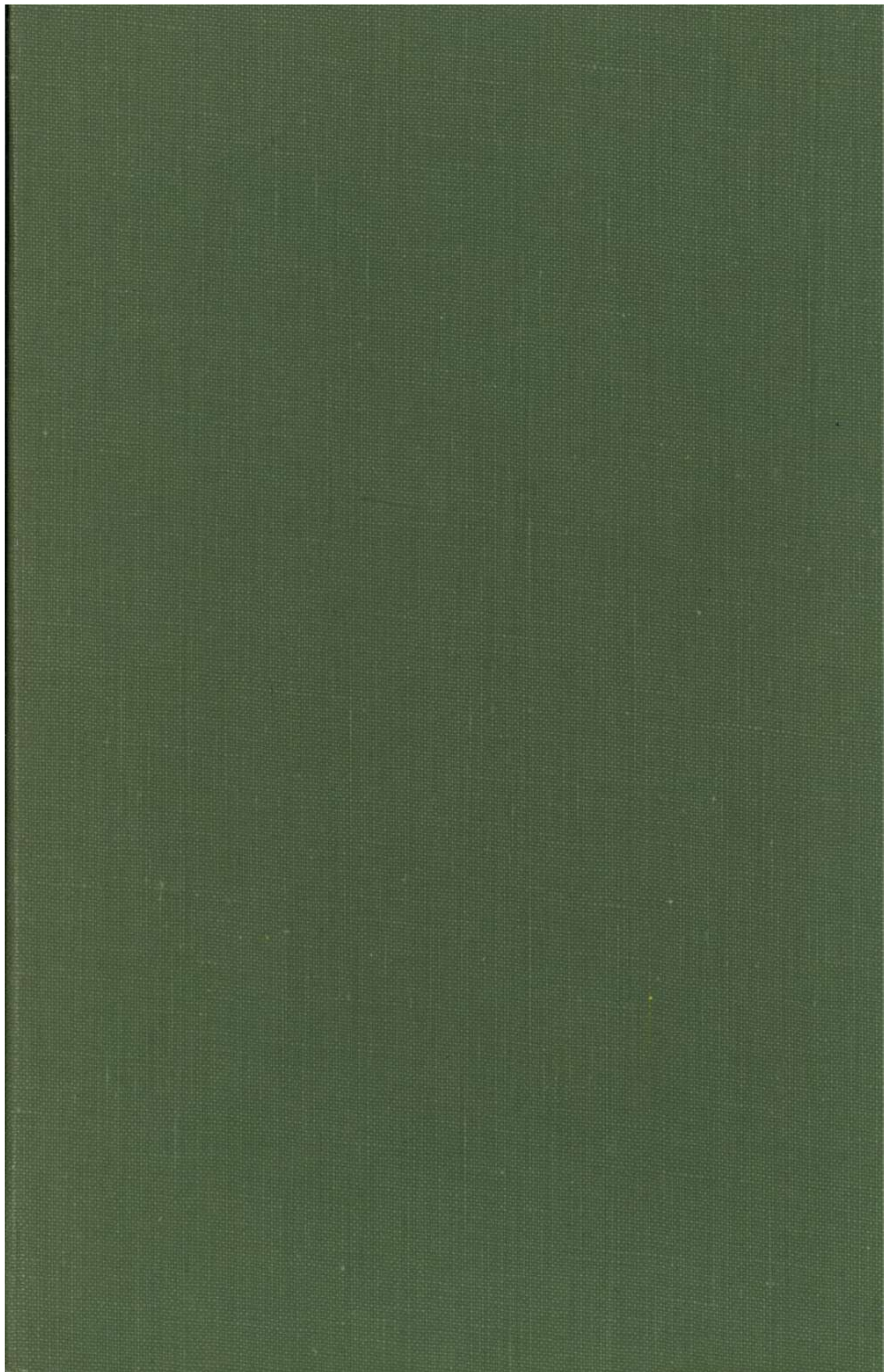

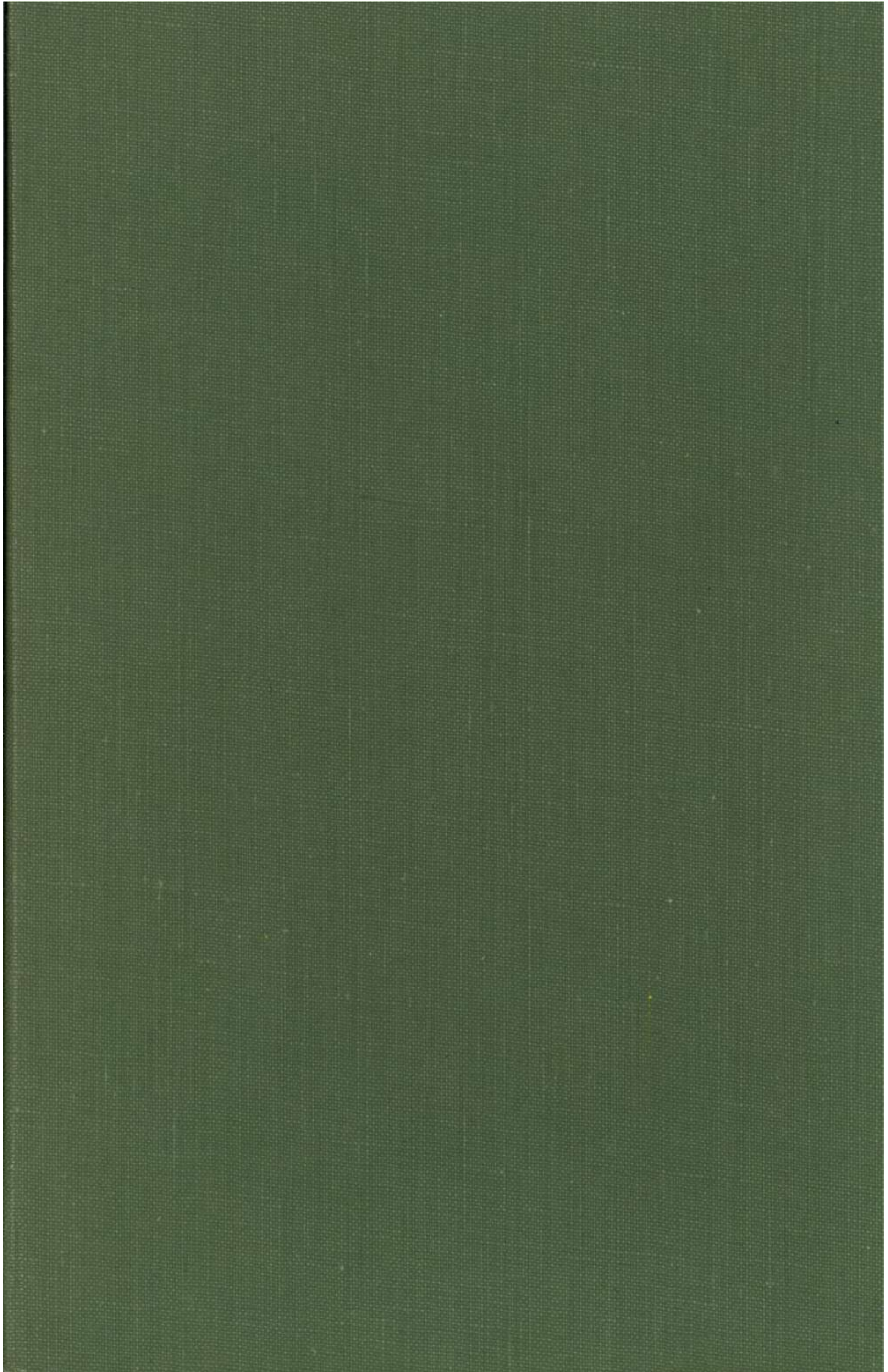

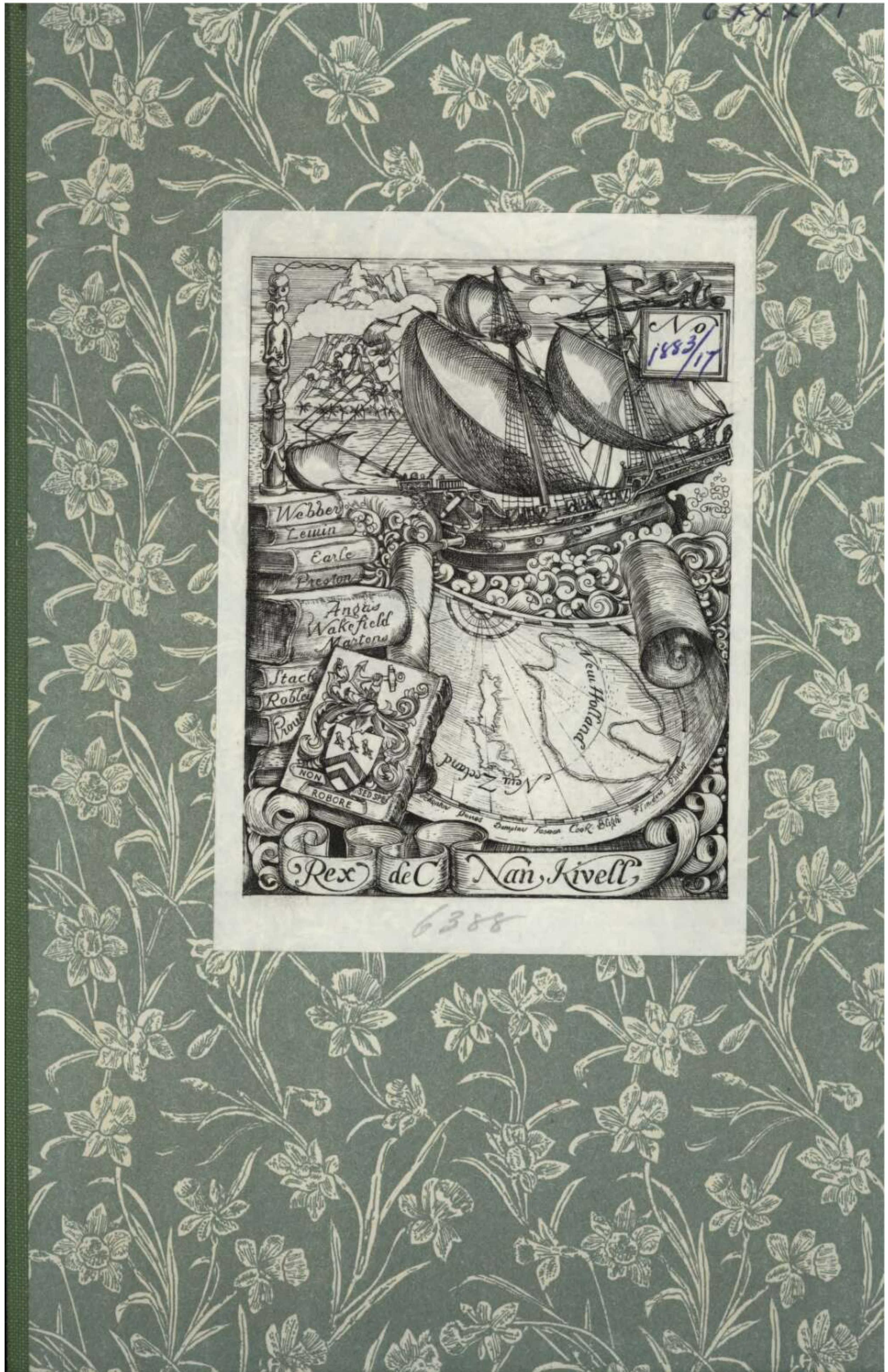

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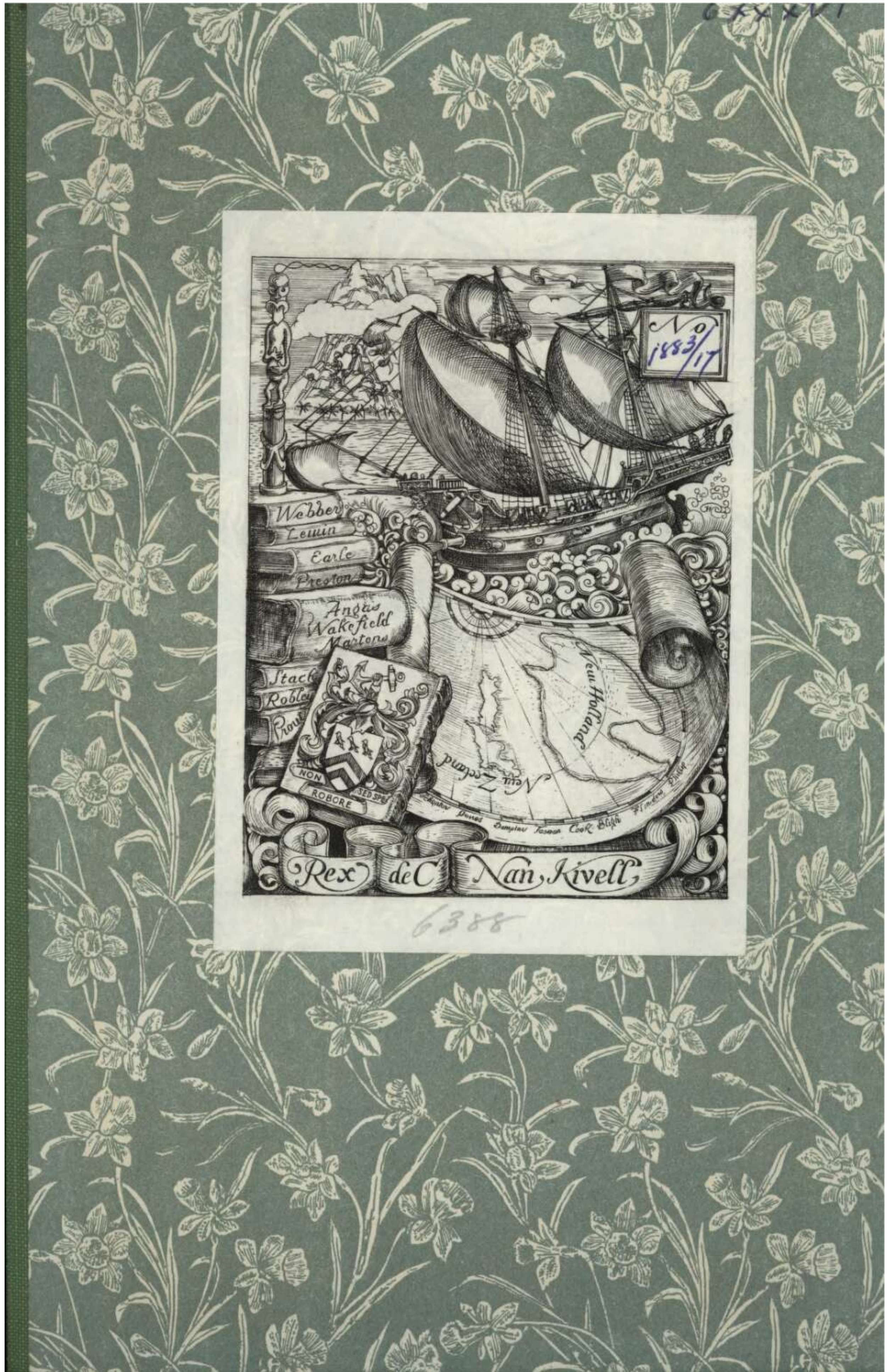

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On some customs of the aborigines of the River Darling, New South Wales

ON SOME CUSTOMS OF

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BY

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LONDON.
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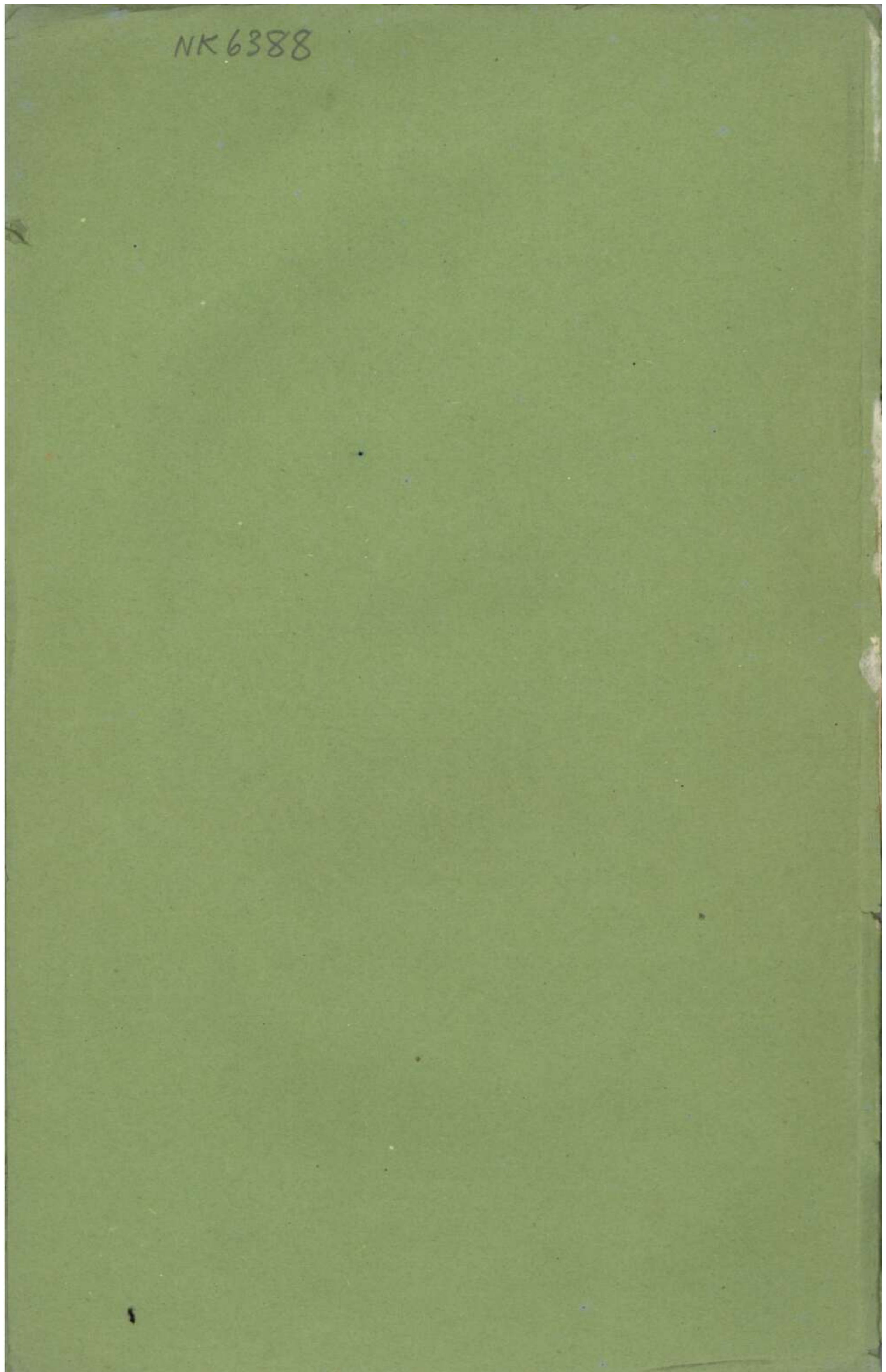
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On some Customs *of the* Aborigines *of the* River Darling, New South Wales.

By Frederic Bonney, Esq.

During my residence in a large area of country on the northern side of the river Darling, between the years 1865 and 1880, I had, as one of the early European settlers, the opportunity of knowing the aborigines in that district, before they were spoilt by civilisation. Employed by me as shepherds, and in other occupations, on a large sheep and cattle run, they were generally my companions in work during the first few years of my bush life, and over many a camp fire I have learnt much of their character and habits. The tribes that I know best are those called Bungyarlee and Parkungi, the former living about the creeks north of Mount Murchison; the latter by the river Darling above and below Wilcannia. They speak the one language called Weyneubulckoo, which is also spoken by the adjoining tribes called—

Baroongee, of the Lower Paroo River.
Mullia-arpa, of Yencanyah district.

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On some customs of the aborigines of the River Darling, New South Wales

Wombungee, of Fort Bourke district, on the Upper Darling.
Bo-arlee, of the Barrier Ranges.
Tung-arlee, of the Lower Darling.

The territory of these tribes lies within lat. 29°–34°, long. 141°–146°.

As a rough estimate of the aboriginal population of this territory when Europeans first settled in it, I may say I do not think it would average more than about 100 on an area of 2,000 square miles in any part of the territory. The country, in its natural state, could not support a large population, being subject to protracted droughts, during which both food and water must have been scarce. During my fifteen years' experience there were three severe droughts, varying in duration from eighteen to twenty-two months. At such times the little rain that fell on the dry and parched ground was insufficient to replenish the water-holes, or soak the ground enough to promote a growth of vegetation. But it appears, from what some of the old natives have told me, that Europeans have not experienced the worst that the country is liable to, for they say that they once saw it in a drier state than it has been since the settlers came, and there has been stock on the country as a drain on the water supply. On that occasion their only water supply was at the few springs in the back country and at the rivers. All surface water-holes were dry; some of which would, I know, stand through a two years' drought with stock drinking at them. They camped at the springs or the rivers, existing on the half-starved animals, which were forced to drink from the same supply, and in consequence of their weak condition were killed without much difficulty. In a drought there is neither grass nor herbage in the neighbourhood of water, and the desert-like appearance of the surrounding brick-red sandhills and grey-coloured clay flats is relieved only by sundry hardy bushes and small trees, which somehow hold up against the extreme dryness and hot winds. These long droughts are generally broken suddenly by a fall of 2 or 3 inches of rain, followed by lighter rains, which rapidly improve the appearance of the country; grass and herbage become abundant, and waterfowl return in large numbers to the creeks, and the aborigines gladly avail themselves of the opportunity of moving on to fresh hunting grounds, which they can only reach when surface water is plentiful.

About the year 1850 an epidemic attacked the Bungyarlee and Parkungi tribes, killing about one-third of them. I have been told by some of those who escaped that it came upon them while the country was in fair condition, and there was ample

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food and water for their wants. The disease affected the legs and quite crippled those attacked. It caused a panic among them all, and they travelled as fast as they could away from the locality where the epidemic appeared, leaving in their flight the dead unburied on their track. Those who were strong escaped by walking to the Paroo River and Upper Darling, to which countries the epidemic did not extend. About Peri Lake the mortality was great, many bodies being left on the sandhills unburied.

There is a similarity in the typical features of all the Australian aborigines, but to a close observer each tribe has its own peculiarities sufficiently marked to be distinguished from one another. The Weyneubulkoo natives are in stature slightly below the average of the English. The colour of their skin in their youth is of a dark chocolate hue, which darkens with age until it is quite black in the middle-aged and old. The new-born babe is almost white, but darkens quickly, though for some time the soles of the feet and palms of the hands are white. Their hair is always quite black, that of the men rather curly, of the women straight; the men generally have long and thick beards, and the bodies of the old men are not unfrequently covered with hair. The characteristic features of all the Australian aborigines are thick lips, overhanging brow, and extended nostrils; but these are all less prominent than among the tribes farther north, in the colony of Queensland. Many of them are weak-looking people, having little muscular development in their legs and arms; their legs especially are thin, though I have met with a few remarkably well-made men among them. They have, as a rule, good hands, with well-shaped fingers and finger-nails: teeth generally very good, very white and regular; they seldom fall out, but with use wear down evenly all round until little more than stumps are left in the jaws of the old people.

Though ugly and unprepossessing in appearance they are most kind, gentle, and of quite average intelligence and morality. Dirty in their person they often are, for which the scarcity of water in most parts of their country is some excuse. The aborigines of Australia are often spoken of as the lowest type of humanity. I think this is a libel on the whole of them, and I am positive it is so as regards the tribes I know best. It is unjust to take as specimens of the race those to be seen in the civilised districts near the coast, and about townships in the interior, who have lost all the native good that was in them, and become public-house loafers, often associating with Europeans who have fallen as low as themselves. There is nothing of the nobility of the savage about them; such are certainly most

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food and water for their wants. The disease affected the legs and quite crippled those attacked. It caused a panic among them all, and they travelled as fast as they could away from the locality where the epidemic appeared, leaving in their flight the dead unburied on their track. Those who were strong escaped by walking to the Paroo River and Upper Darling, to which countries the epidemic did not extend. About Peri Lake the mortality was great, many bodies being left on the sandhills unburied.

There is a similarity in the typical features of all the Australian aborigines, but to a close observer each tribe has its own peculiarities sufficiently marked to be distinguished from one another. The Weyneubulkoo natives are in stature slightly below the average of the English. The colour of their skin in their youth is of a dark chocolate hue, which darkens with age until it is quite black in the middle-aged and old. The new-born babe is almost white, but darkens quickly, though for some time the soles of the feet and palms of the hands are white. Their hair is always quite black, that of the men rather curly, of the women straight; the men generally have long and thick beards, and the bodies of the old men are not unfrequently covered with hair. The characteristic features of all the Australian aborigines are thick lips, overhanging brow, and extended nostrils; but these are all less prominent than among the tribes farther north, in the colony of Queensland. Many of them are weak-looking people, having little muscular development in their legs and arms; their legs especially are thin, though I have met with a few remarkably well-made men among them. They have, as a rule, good hands, with well-shaped fingers and finger-nails: teeth generally very good, very white and regular; they seldom fall out, but with use wear down evenly all round until little more than stumps are left in the jaws of the old people.

Though ugly and unprepossessing in appearance they are most kind, gentle, and of quite average intelligence and morality. Dirty in their person they often are, for which the scarcity of water in most parts of their country is some excuse. The aborigines of Australia are often spoken of as the lowest type of humanity. I think this is a libel on the whole of them, and I am positive it is so as regards the tribes I know best. It is unjust to take as specimens of the race those to be seen in the civilised districts near the coast, and about townships in the interior, who have lost all the native good that was in them, and become public-house loafers, often associating with Europeans who have fallen as low as themselves. There is nothing of the nobility of the savage about them; such are certainly most

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degraded creatures. To this sad end many of them come as civilisation creeps towards the interior of the country. The country having been occupied by Europeans and laid out in runs stocked with sheep and cattle, the habits of the aborigines have much changed; this probably is the cause of the rapid decrease of their number by deaths. The young now are often weakly, suffering from chest complaints; and few children are born, and fewer live to become adults. Before long the only representatives of these tribes will be some living about settlers' homes and townships, in a half-civilised state. In fact, there are now few to be found who have not been somewhat spoilt by civilisation; therefore I wish to record what I have learnt of them during their better days, and hope that others, who have had like opportunities, will do the same, so that sufficient information may be brought forward to prove their race to be better, nobler, and more intellectual than it is generally believed to be by those who have not lived among any of the tribes. All who have done so, and taken the trouble to learn something of their language, so as to better understand them, must have formed a good opinion of them.

I proceed, then, to give a description of the life-history of these tribes called Bungyarlee and Parkungi.

When a woman is near her confinement she leaves the general camp in company with another woman, and together they make a temporary camp beneath a shady tree, one or two hundred yards distant. This movement is probably made to prevent the occurrence of a death in the camp, which would cause all to move to another spot and erect fresh shelter; for after a death all desert the camp where it occurs.

It seems to have been the custom to kill many of the children directly after birth, to save trouble and privations in time of drought, when long distances must be travelled in the search for food and water, and it would be difficult in the fierce heat to transport a number of young children over a dry journey of twenty miles, and often more, without more water than can be carried in the skin bags used for that purpose. Whether the infant shall be killed or not is generally decided by the mother's brother, if she has one, and he is near at hand. If it is to be killed, that is done by a blow on the back of the head, by strangling with a rope, or choking with sand, and the body is buried without ceremony; but if it is decided that it is to be reared, the mother, as soon as possible, returns to the camp with her child, where it is carefully nursed and very well treated. Both men and women are very fond of children, and the kindest attention is shown to them by young and old alike. They are not spoilt by this kind treatment all round; one word

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from the parent generally is sufficient to check a child when doing wrong, and the greatest respect is shown to parents by their children. Altogether the treatment of children by these people, after they are once taken up and nursed, is judicious and very creditable. It is strange that while the life of the new-born babe is so slightly valued at its birth, a little later it should be valued so much. If it has to be killed at the birth the work is done without any notice being taken of it, but if allowed to live, and it should die a natural death a week or so later, all the women in the camp would mourn its loss—the mother and near relations crying aloud at intervals during the day, and in the evening at sundown, either in the camp or at the grave. Mourning is worn, the same as after the death of an adult person. One mother rarely has more than four or five children, and they are sometimes not weaned from the breast until they are more than three years old. The birth of twins is not less rare than among Europeans. I know of one such case where one of the twins was killed, and the mother dying soon after, the other child, a girl, was taken charge of and suckled by another woman, and she grew up to be the worst specimen of morality I met with among the uncivilised aborigines; she was neither honest nor truthful, lacking the two virtues natural to most of them.

When a mother is about to carry her child she leans her body forward, and, taking hold of the child by its arms, swings it over her left shoulder and places it between her shoulder-blades, with its hands round her neck. She then throws a fur rug round herself and the child, and afterwards a netted bag (*numyuncka*) is drawn tight under the seat of the child, with one end brought over each shoulder of the mother, and tied together under her chin to keep the child and rug in their position; so a pouch is formed to hold the child while it is being carried about. The men generally carry children on their shoulders.

A soft cream-coloured chrysalis (*kopudger*), about 2½ inches long, which is found under the bark of trees and at the root of broom-bushes (*poontee*), is much sought after as a nutritious food for children. It has very much the taste of a raw egg.

Some boys, when about the age of ten, have a hole bored through the septum of the nose with bone needles (*poongootah*), in which they can, when grown up, wear a bone about 6 inches long as an ornament at their dances,[1] and both girls and boys at about the same age are marked on their chest, arms, or back by raised scars (*nincka*), which are usually straight, horizontal, or vertical lines, about 2 inches in length, and close together,

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made by cutting the flesh with a stone chip (*carnee moolee*) in the winter season, when hoar frost is rubbed on to the flesh to numb it. Sometimes fine charcoal powder is rubbed into the cuts to lessen the pain and quicken the healing on young people; the scars are often very prominent, but they decrease with age.

Children are named after animals, birds, reptiles, or fish; the name is a word in their language meaning the movement or habit of one of them.

They avoid mentioning the name of a deceased person, and the word is not used in their language until it can be mentioned without causing pain to the relatives and friends, for it is from feelings of sorrow and not of fear that they do not mention the name.

When a youth is about sixteen years of age his elderly male relatives become anxious that he should be initiated into manhood, or, as they call it, "made a young man of." Considerable importance is attached to this ceremony, but the youth often trys to avoid it, for it is anything but a pleasant one to him; but plans are generally made without his knowledge for its performance. Sometimes an early morning dance is arranged, when a sham fight is got up to attract the youth's attention, and then he is caught and carried off. On other occasions, after a consultation on the subject in camp, women being present, some old men go to the youth and ask him to accompany them to go through the ceremony; should he refuse, young men catch him, put the down feathers from ducks among the hair of his head, and carry him by force into the bush while his father and the women cry aloud. When they have carried him some distance from the camp they place a small hard wood wedge on each side of one of the front teeth in the youth's upper jaw, and one of them, with a downward stroke with the pointed end of a throwing stick (*pirrah*), forces the tooth out. A string of opossum fur is wrapped round his body, and he wears a head-dress made with strips of opossum or kangaroo skin, his body and face being smeared with charcoal powder; one or two young men accompany him while in the bush, where he must remain for some time. They play with a wooden instrument called *moola-uncka*, which is a flat and oval-shaped piece of hard wood tied to the end of a long piece of twine, which, when whirled in the air, makes a loud humming noise; it is an amusement to the youths to make the noise, and by it women, none of whom are allowed to go near the youths, know where they are. Those thus treated are called *Tumba*. Sometimes, instead of knocking out the youth's tooth, they smear his body with red ochre (*keerah*). He is then called *Turlurra*. After a while some old men visit the youth's camp, where they are

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met by some younger men, who arrange themselves in a row in front of the youth, with their backs to him, and face the old men, whom they ridicule and insult until the old men get into a rage and throw sand in their own faces, and then throw fighting sticks or boomerangs at the young men, which they ward off with their shields (*oolumburra*). The old men then rush forward at the young men, who seize and throw them on the ground, after which the old men retire to the camp, but return later and dance with the youth and his companions, repeating their friendly visits until the end of the ceremony. During the first two days the youth drinks only blood (*carndurra*) from the veins in the arms of his friends, who willingly supply the required food. Having bound a ligature round the upper part of the arm they cut a vein on the under side of the fore-arm, and run the blood into a wooden vessel (*yokudjah*), or a dish-shaped piece of bark. The youth, kneeling on his bed, made of the small branches of a fuchsia bush (*gooyermurra*), leans forward, while holding his hands behind him, and licks up the blood from the vessel placed in front of him with his tongue, like a dog. Later he is allowed to eat the flesh of ducks as well as the blood. When the necessary preparations are made men and women go from the general camp to see the youth smoked. He and one of his companions sit or stand on a heap of green boughs from the fuchsia bush (*gooyermurra*), under which there has been laid dry grass and sticks; this heap is called a *windoo*, their word for an oven. The two youths are wrapped round loosely with a rug, their heads only being uncovered. After the dry grass and sticks at the bottom of the heap are lighted, thick smoke rises through the green boughs and collects round their bodies beneath the rugs. After they have been smoked in this way the rugs are raised over their heads, so as to envelope the whole of them, the smoking continues, the youths placing a finger in each nostril to save themselves from suffocation. After a little of this they are removed from the *windoo*. The hair of the youth who is being initiated is cut short on his head and pulled out of his face, and red ochre, mixed with emu fat, smeared over his body; he wears a necklace of twisted opossum hair. The time this ceremony extends over varies from ten days to a month. The youth's companions take the tooth when it is extracted, and return it to him later with a present of weapons, rugs, nets, and such like. The youth places the tooth under the bark of a tree, near a creek, water-hole, or river: if the bark grows over it, or it falls into the water, all is well; but should it be exposed, and the ants runs over it, it is believed that the youth will suffer from a disease in the mouth.

These tribes are divided into two classes, called "Muckwarra"

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and "Keelparra"; the relationship between the two is called "Kengoojah." A Muckwarra must marry a Keelparra, and *vice versâ*. Children belong to the same class as their mother, and when quite young are often betrothed by their parents. It is considered a very serious offence for two persons of the same class to marry, and one that cannot be forgiven. The offenders are spoken of by all as bad, and are generally despised. The loss to them of the love and respect of their friends is a very heavy punishment; illegal marriages are therefore rare.

When a young man has gone through the ceremony of initiation he is allowed to marry, if so desirous, the girl he was betrothed to when young. Accordingly, he asks the parents for her, and they, pleased that their early wishes are to be realised, at once arrange for the couple to be married in their simple way. The bridegroom is told by the principal old man in the camp that he can take the girl he wants, and at the same time there is given to him a piece of string with a knot tied in it. Should the bridegroom have a sister whom the bride's brother wishes to marry, two knots are tied in the string by the old man, one at each end of it. This the bridegroom keeps until he is able to hand it to his brother-in-law with his sister or another woman as wife; for he considers it his duty to give a wife to his brother-in-law if he can. The mother of either the bride or the bridegroom makes a camp for the young couple, and tells the bridegroom to occupy it, and when the bride elect comes into the camp she is told to go to her future husband; should she refuse to do so her relatives use force to make her, and they are afterwards considered as married. Although young women are often compelled to marry a man of whom they know little and often nothing, they generally find happiness and contentment in their married lives. Quarrels between husband and wife are rare, and they show much affection for each other in their own way. When a husband returns to the camp after an absence of several days and even weeks, the meeting with his wife appears a cold one. They take no notice of each other at first; he lays down his bundle containing his rug and other belongings, and enters into a conversation with others in the camp, while his wife takes his bundle inside his camp, and when an opportunity offers she joins in the conversation.

Once I was standing near a woman when her husband returned after a long absence. I knew that they loved each other, and asked her why she did not go forward and greet him. She replied sorrowfully, "Black fellow will not let us do like white fellow." She waited until he started for the camp, then she picked up his swag, or bundle, and followed him at a distance. It is not the custom to be demonstrative on such occasions. Brothers and

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friends when meeting do not at first notice each other, but gradually draw near, and, when alongside, throw an arm round each other's neck, and so stroll about, saying kind things to each other. Naturally they are most affectionate and courteous, always careful lest by act or word they may be thought unkind, and hurt the feelings of those they love and respect.

They believe that sickness is caused by an enemy who uses certain charms called the *Yountoo* and *Moolee.*

The *Yountoo* is made of a small bone taken from a leg of the dead body of a friend, either before or after burial; it is wrapped up with a small piece of sun-dried flesh, cut from the body of another deceased friend; string made with the hair from the head of a third friend generally serves as the tie. When this charm is required to be used it is taken to the camp where the enemy sleeps and placed in the hot ashes of a fire, with a piece of string tied to it, where it is warmed and then pointed at the person to be killed, a small piece of the bone being chipped off and thrown at the sleeping enemy. The *Yountoo* is taken away, and in about five weeks laid under the surface of the ground, and a fire lit over it which burns it gradually. The person at whom it has been aimed sickens after it has been burnt a little, and dies if the doctor does not suck out the piece of bone which is supposed to have entered the sick person's body.

The *Moolee* is a rough piece of white quartz, oblong in shape, and about 2 inches long; a piece of twine, made of opossum fur, is fastened to one end with some black gum (*nȳnia*). In using these, one is pointed at the person to be killed, and is supposed to enter the body; the other is warmed, then placed in some fat from a dead body and wrapped round with hair from the head. The whole thing is then put in a fire and left to burn slowly; when it warms, the person becomes sick, and dies unless relieved by a doctor. It is believed that the possession of one of these charms aids a man in composing and devising a new corroborree.

Both the *Yountoo* and *Moolee* are treasured as valuable charms, and hidden from view.

A doctor, or *maykeeka,* is a man, either young or old, generally the latter, who has in some way shown that he has the power of curing sickness by sucking from the body of a patient either the chip of bone from the *Yountoo* or the *Moolee.* This appointment is not an hereditary one. The bone chip from the *Yountoo,* when sucked from the body, is thrown away; but the *Moolee* must be thrown into a water-hole, or the river. When a doctor succeeds in sucking either from the body of his patient, the cure is considered certain. He shows something

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which he tells the patient and the friends he has sucked from the body.

On one occasion, when I was camped in the Purnanga Ranges, I watched by the light of a camp fire a doctor at work, sucking the back of a woman who was suffering from pains in that part. While she sat on a log a few yards distant from the camp fire, he moved about her, making certain passes with boughs which he held, and then sucked for some time the place where pain was felt; at last he took something from his mouth, and holding it towards the fire-light, declared it to be a piece of bone. The old women sitting near loudly expressed their satisfaction at his success. I asked to be allowed to look at it, and it was given to me. I carelessly looked at it, and then pretended to throw it into the fire, but keeping it between my fingers I placed it in my pocket, when I could do so unobserved; and on the following morning, when I examined it by daylight, it proved to be a small splinter of wood, and not bone. At the time the patient appeared to be very much relieved by the treatment.

During the year 1866 there was rather a large gathering of the aborigines at Karannia, where visitors from Cultowa, Marra, and Neelyambo, places higher up the river Darling, had come down to teach their neighbours a new corroborree. During an interval in one of the performances, a tall young man, who was suffering from a pain in his right ankle, limped into an open space between the dancers and the fires, and was met there by an old man, a doctor. They wrestled together until the doctor threw his patient, and sucked the ankle as the patient lay quietly on the ground; after sucking for some time the doctor rose and walked outside the circle of performers and spectators, and taking something from his mouth threw it towards the moon in the north-east. Returning to his patient he lifted him from the ground on to his feet; the patient stamped his right foot on the ground to test the strength of the ankle, as if he was trying on a new boot, and then walked away without showing any lameness.

I once saw an old woman at Momba trying to cure another one of a sickness in her stomach, by sucking the supposed poison through a string. The patient lay on her back on a rug on the ground, with a piece of string tied rather tightly round the middle of her naked body, with a loose end about 18 inches in length from the knot over the stomach. The woman doctor, squatting by the side of her patient, leant over her and passing the loose end of string through her mouth, sucked it from the knot to the end and spat saliva and blood into a tin pint pot; this was repeated many times, until the poison was supposed to have been sucked through the string from the body.

The large *moolar-uncka,* a wooden instrument before mentioned, is often used while a doctor is operating.

Over-eating, after a successful day's hunting, following as it often does a fast, causes a good deal of sickness from which these people suffer. Headache is a common complaint, and to relieve this a native ties to his forehead a small bunch of heated boughs; the fuchsia bush (*gooyermurra*) being considered best for the purpose. The same remedy is generally used to relieve pain elsewhere; an attendant holds the bunch of boughs while warm to the suffering part, and heats it again when cold.

I have found large doses of castor oil, half-a-pint or more, the safest and most effective remedy, and one that is very agreeable to the taste of the natives, who are fond of fat and oily food. On one occasion I gave between two and three drops of croton oil, in one dose, to a man who some years previously had been cured by a large dose of castor oil, when there appeared to be little chance of his recovery. When a similar attack came on he begged for castor oil, of which I had none in stock, so I gave him the croton oil instead, and with very good effect. Our medicines must be given to them in strong doses to be of any use.

A very sick or weak person is fed upon blood which the male friends provide, taken from their bodies in the way already described. It is generally taken in a raw state by the invalid, who lifts it to his mouth like jelly between his fingers and thumb. I have seen it cooked in a wooden vessel by putting a few red-hot ashes among it. When the aborigines are sick they are always despondent, and say that they are going to die; the sorrowful looks and loud lamentations of their friends around them are sufficient to make any one despondent; and as they lie in their camp naked, excepting the bandages of twine made with the hair of a friendly native, or with fibre or sinews, which are tied round the head and limbs wherever there is pain, they are miserable-looking objects.

A disease called *Tarree* is rather common among them, and generally fatal, though it has been successfully treated by a European doctor. It attacks the middle-aged and old, a hard lump forming in the stomach while the rest of the body wastes away to a skeleton; the lump grows to a great size, causing difficulty of breathing, and at last suffocation. Many of the children have large stomachs, which with several becomes quite a deformity, affecting their health and breathing; sometimes they even pine away and die. One youth under my notice, who suffered much in his childhood from this complaint, has grown up to enjoy fairly good health; but any great exertion causes troublesome breathing and coughing.

On some customs of the aborigines of the River Darling, New South Wales

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On some customs of the aborigines of the River Darling, New South Wales

It has been reported of the Australian aborigines that they help on to death, and even kill those who are helpless and crippled. I have good reason to believe that such is not the case among these tribes. After witnessing their kind treatment of the sick under most trying circumstances, I am of opinion that they are most kind and attentive to such, and that their patience and sympathy are quite exemplary. It sometimes happens that a change of camp has to be made, and a long journey over a dry country undertaken, with a helpless invalid, who is carried by the strong men, who willingly bleed themselves until they are weak and faint, to provide the food they consider is the best for a sick person.

Some years ago there was at Karannia (now called Mount Murchison) a strong young man whose intellect was weak, and who occasionally had fits of madness, when he would leave the camp and wander alone in the bush without food or covering, and his relatives and friends were much troubled about him, and watched him at a distance as well as they could. Once his old father, a big and powerful man, went out in search of him, and found him wandering near the river; he entreated him to return to the camp with him, when the son turned upon his father with a tomahawk and cut him; the old man returned to the camp, and with tears in his eyes told me what had happened, and begged me to assist him to bring back his mad son before he perished in the bush.

At Momba, an old man named Booingooroo, suffered for several years from violent pains in his head; occasionally his reason was affected by them, and he would wander from the camp and travel long distances by himself in the bush. All showed the deepest sorrow and sympathy; the young men went after him on his tracks, and tried to persuade him to return with them to the camp; if they did not succeed they did their utmost to keep a watch over his movements, and guard him against a death from starvation in the bush. This man, I believe, was suffering from the effects of a sunstroke. Cases of lunacy are very rare. During my experience I have not met with any cases of the kind except the two I have just mentioned.

The burial of a body takes place immediately after death. The feet having been tied together by the big toes, and the hands by either the wrists or thumbs and little fingers, the body is wrapped in a rug and bound round with a rope, and the bundle tied on to a long stick called *moolairee*. Two men are selected as bearers, and one walks in front of the other towards the grave with the body hanging from the *moolairee* stick between them, an end of the stick resting on a small pad stuffed with grass, on the head of each of the bearers. Should

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On some customs of the aborigines of the River Darling, New South Wales

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On some customs of the aborigines of the River Darling, New South Wales

the friends of the deceased have any doubt who caused the death, some questions are put to the corpse, when near the grave, by one of the principal old men in the camp, while it hangs from the stick between the bearers. The old man, with a bough or boomerang, strikes the corpse, and asks such questions as these:—

Were you camped at such and such a place when you were taken ill?

Did so and so kill you?

If the answers are not given by a movement of the corpse it is carried a little farther, until it answers by moving in the direction of the sorcerer's camp; should he be in the camp where the body is it turns round, and when the right name is mentioned it moves forward rapidly, the men running with their burden to the grave. In this way they find out to their satisfaction who they must punish for the death of the deceased person.

It is not improbable that by this custom of immediate burial some bodies are buried before life has left them. A man named Cultekololudger is said to have cured himself, or come to life again before burial. He had been ill for a long time and became very thin. His relatives, thinking he was dead, prepared to bury the body; but when they were carrying it to the grave it made an unusual movement, so the bundle was opened, and the bearers were startled by Cultekololudger asking them why he had been tied up. He is now living near the Barrier Ranges.

There are no fixed burial grounds. A grave 3 or 4 feet in depth is dug at a spot chosen not far from the camp where the death takes place, the digger using the sharp-pointed stick called *pirrah* to loosen the ground, and shovelling out the loose earth with the wooden bowl called *yokudjah*. The bottom of the grave is covered with boughs from the broom bush, and then the bundle containing the corpse, having been separated from the *moolairee* stick, is laid in the grave by two men who stand in it; one of them partly unwraps the bundle so as to cut off a piece of flesh or pull the hair from the head, whichever it is decided to do. Usually a piece of flesh is cut from the thigh of a child, or from the stomach of an adult. At the burial of a very small and thin man which I witnessed, there was a discussion at the grave as to which should be done, and it was decided to pull some hair from the head, rather than take any of the flesh. This was done by one of the men in the grave, who pulled out several large locks of it. At some burials several men stand by the open grave and cut each other's heads with a boomerang, and hold their heads over the grave so that the blood from the wounds falls on the corpse at the bottom

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During the ceremony of burial there is much crying and wailing, especially by the women, each one crying in a loud tone the word signifying their relation to the deceased, commencing with a high note and gradually lowering their tone in a shaky voice, repeating the word while they have breath to spare, dwelling long on the last syllable of the word. The words most frequently heard are *ammuccī* (mother), *gumbidgī* (father), *whimberrī* (child), *matoogī* (friend). This wailing continues over the grave for some time after it is filled in, and at the camp for days afterwards; when one of the women begins to wail, others join, and the mournful chorus can be heard throughout the neighbourhood. The women generally cry at the camp or the grave each day for a week or more after the burial as the sun is setting.

The piece of flesh cut from the dead body is taken to the camp, and after being sun-dried is cut up into small pieces and distributed among relatives and friends of the deceased: some use the piece in making the charm called *Yountoo;* others suck it to get strength and courage, or throw it into the river to bring a flood and fish, when both are wanted.

After a death in camp, all leave it and pitch their camp on another spot, which is sometimes not far distant. The rugs, weapons, nets, &c., the property of deceased, are hung in a tree near to the camp for about two months, and are then washed and used by some of the relatives.

Most of the women wear mourning, and the nearest relative generally covers her head with white plaster made of calcined selenite or gypsum, and smears the same over her face and body. The head-covering, which is a thick cake, wears a long time; it is fixed to the head by the hair and a small net, which is generally laid over the head before the cake is plastered on. It requires patching only occasionally; but the thinner coat on face and body soon crumbles away, and has to be renewed every day. After wearing this for some months it is allowed to crumble away, and is not renewed. In the case of a widow, she is told by her late husband's brother, or her mother, when she may cease wearing her mourning, and the brother-in-law is sometimes allowed to take her as wife, though he may already have one. Some men are allowed two wives, but the rule is to have one only. I have seen an old woman wearing a patch of white

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plaster over the crown of her head, as mourning, after the death of a favourite dog.[1]

An ordinary grave is covered by a low mound of earth, a few stout pieces of dead timber are laid upon it, with a heap of green boughs over them. Some have a low brush fence round them, which has an opening on one side to let the wind in, as they say, and some large egg-shaped pieces of white plaster laid round the grave between the low mound and the brush fence. The most elaborate one that I have seen was covered with a small bough shed, about 8 feet square and 4½ feet high, which had a large opening on one side; the ground outside was cleanly swept, and the green boughs on the mound inside were covered with whitewash; some women, at a camp near, attended to this grave, bringing green boughs to replace those withered, whitewashing and sweeping.

Some months after a death the brother or near relative of the deceased starts off to find the man accused of causing the death, and to fight him; other men, young and old, accompany him. When he meets his enemy he fights him with spears and boomerangs; should he wound his enemy his craving for revenge is satisfied, and he calls out *ow-oo-ta* (enough), and the fight ceases. A grand dance, or corroborree, follows in which all join and make merry together. Should he happen to kill his enemy he and his companions bury the body. It is said that they sometimes cut off the head and hold it up towards the camp to enrage the deceased's friends, and a general fight is the consequence. This, I think, seldom happens; for, as a rule, a very little fighting satisfies these people: a few blows and a little blood are enough to do that, and make them friends.

Discussion.

The President observed that few departments of anthropology were so pressing just now as the collection of materials relating to the customs and characters of races, which were becoming either extinct or, as Mr. Bonney expressed it, "spoilt" by civilisation; and such materials could only be obtained in a satisfactory manner by those who had the opportunity of living among them for a considerable period, as such lengthened observation often corrected erroneous impressions, derived from superficial inspection. Mr. Bonney's communication was therefore welcome as an important contribution to this branch of knowledge. Low as the Australians were generally assumed to be in the scale of society, they evidently had a very complex and severely enforced code of unwritten

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The AUTHOR, replying to a question asked by the President, said that there was a decided curl in the hair of the aborigines of the river Darling, and called attention to a specimen which bound a native tomahawk exhibited on the table. In answer to the question, what decided the fate of the new-born children, and whether any preference was shown for the male sex, he replied that the fate of the children depended much upon the condition the country was in at the time, and the prospects of the mother rearing it satisfactorily, no preference being shown for the male sex. Being asked to give some information about the religion of the people, the author suggested that the subject had better not then he entered upon, as it would occupy too much time; but he hoped to have an opportunity, on a future occasion, of giving some information about it, with some other interesting information about the same people.

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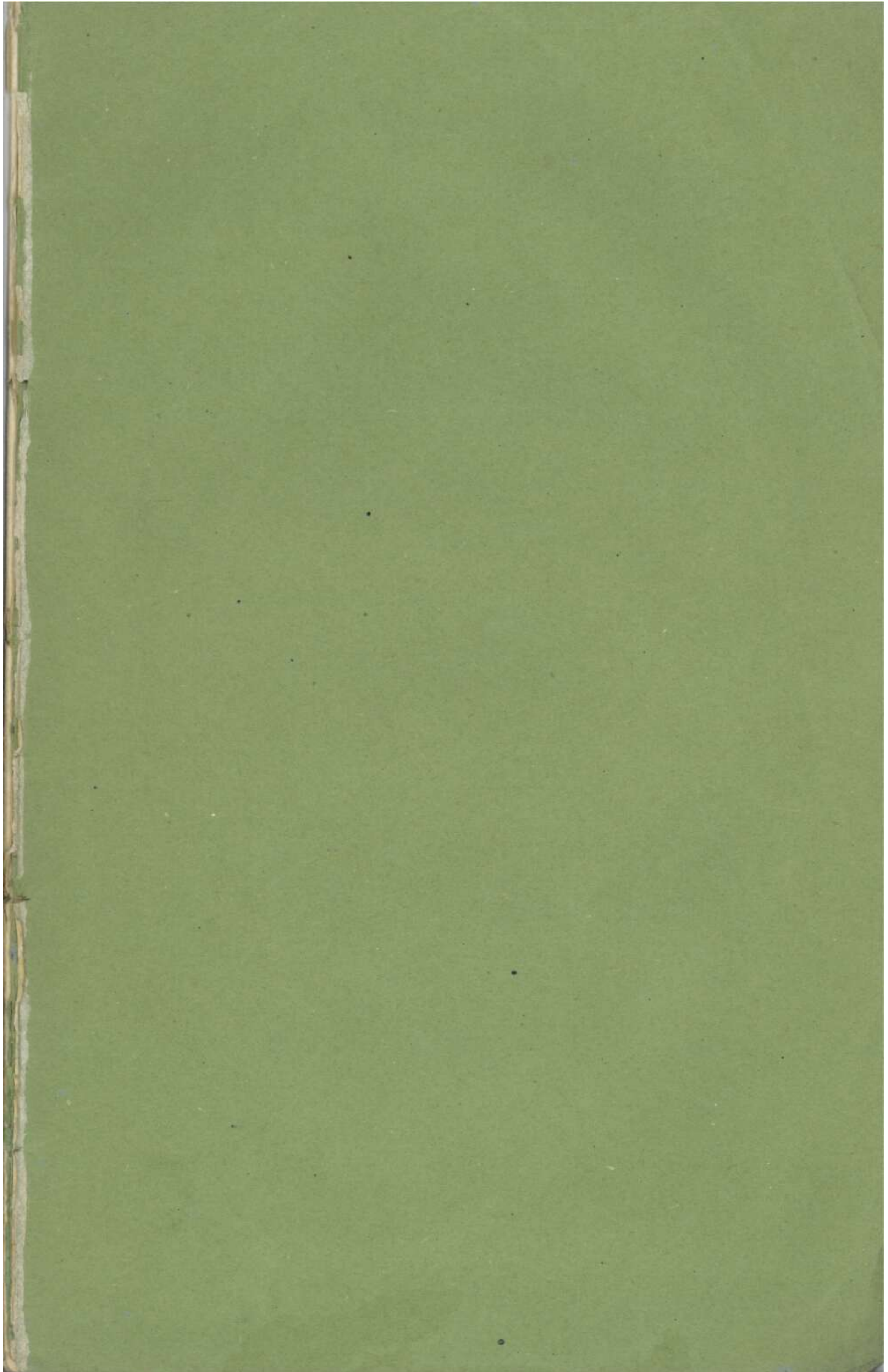

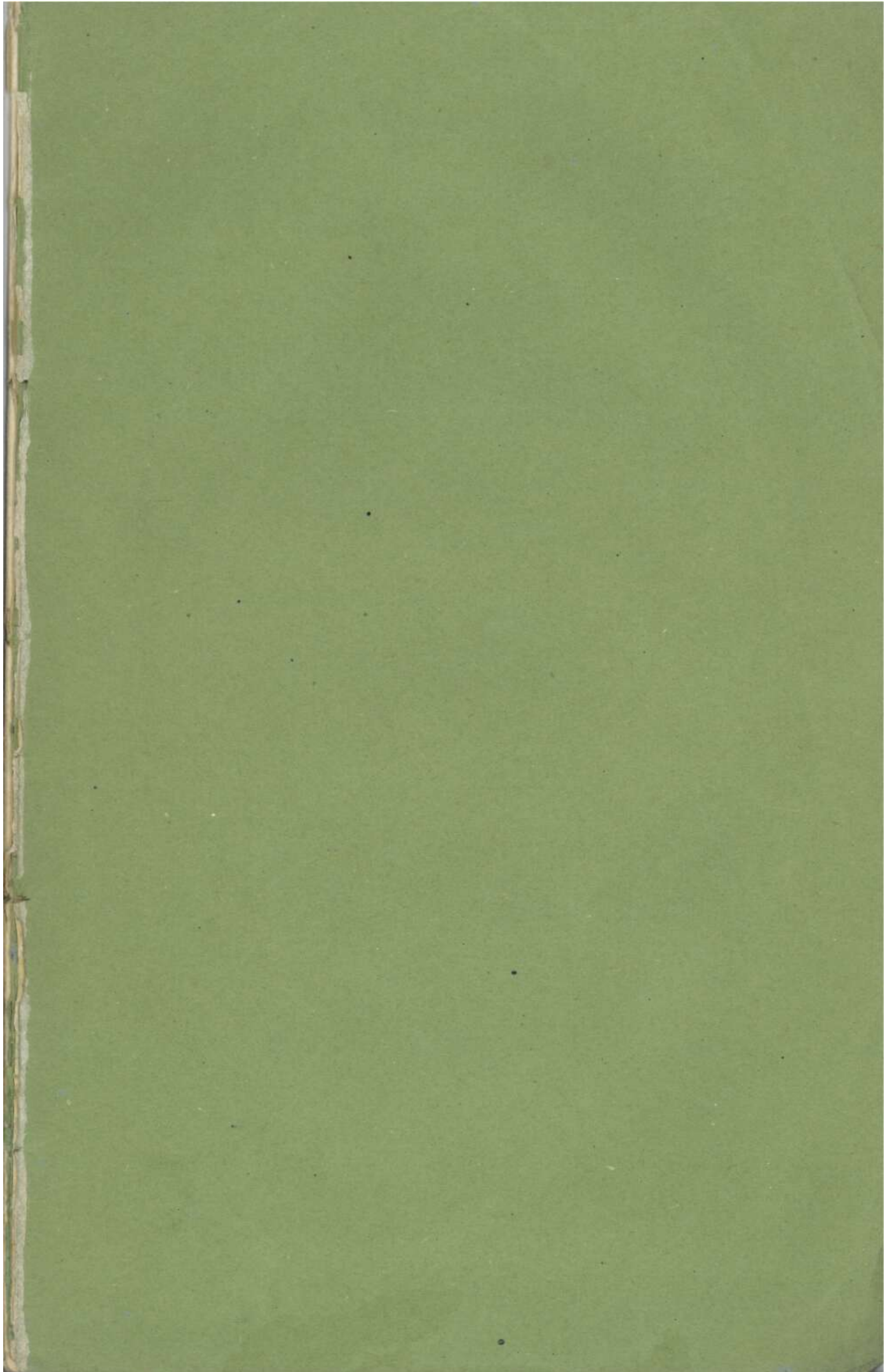

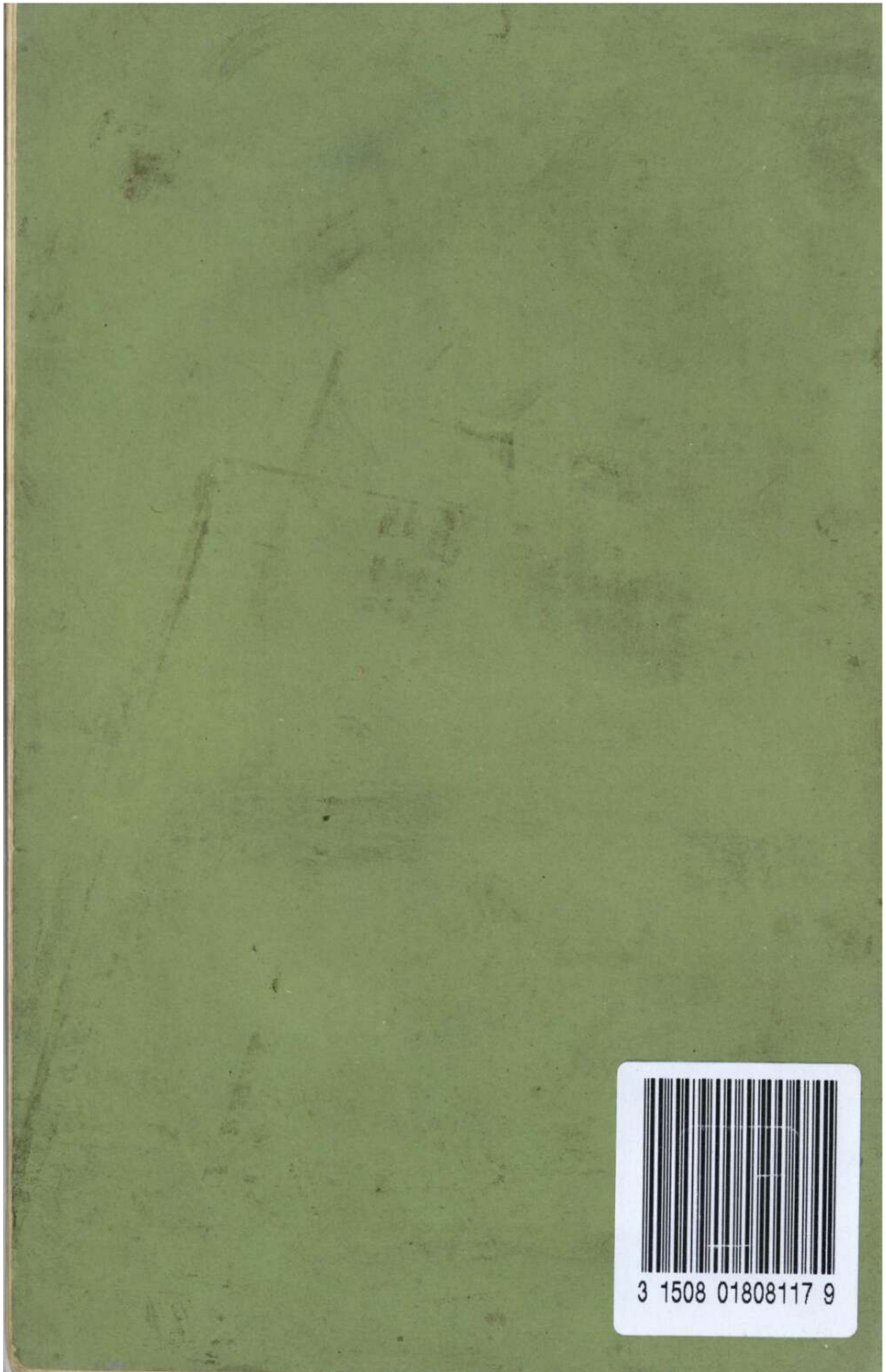
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