

HABITS, CUSTOMS AND RELATIONSHIPS OF THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINALS

[By W. H. FLOWERS, Rockhampton and District
Historical Association.]

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The following particulars of some habits, customs, and relationships of the Australian aboriginals have been compiled from notes written many years ago by my uncle, Mr. William Flowers, who, in his early days, had made a careful study of these people, and was accepted as an authority on their customs.

Before the advent of the whites the aboriginals in the Rockhampton and Palmerston district belonged to the large **Tarumbal** tribe, and they lived mainly in small family clans of from twenty to thirty, who camped together in one place. The men hunted and fished, and the women collected yams, earth-nuts, water-lily roots, fruit, etc., from the scrubs, lagoons and swamps adjacent to the camp. When food began to get scarce in one place the camp was shifted to another part of the country.

Each of these clans had its own name, which usually ended in "bura," which means "men of." The clan which lived on Torilla Plains was called "**Kuinmerbura**," "Kuinmer," meaning a plain. The clan at the top end of Torilla peninsula near Stanage were "**Kutabura**," "Kuta" meaning the end. The clan at Canal Creek were "Ristebura," "Riste" meaning sandfly.

Naturally, at times the different clans would wish to get together to talk matters over, perhaps to arrange for a corroboree and the initiation of the young boys into manhood.

There appears to have been quite a lot of formality about these meetings which were never done hurriedly. The visitors who wished to talk to another clan would walk to within about 100 yards from the camp of the visited clan and sit down in an open space. After waiting for some time the visited clan, if they wished to talk, would send some of the women to light a fire near where the visitors were sitting. When the fire was well

alight and the women returned, one or more of the men would walk slowly over and sit down near the fire, neither party speaking. After a time, both parties would start to cry and this went on for some minutes, then talk would begin.

If all consented to a change and a general meeting, a corroboree might be arranged. This was the meeting of two or more clans with games, dancing, speeches, etc. Weapons would be compared and exchanged. Sometimes wives were exchanged, either permanently or only until the corroboree was finished. After a time food would get scarce round the camp and then the different clans would separate, each going back to its own country.

Probably the greatest event in every aboriginal man's life was the one in which he was initiated into all the secrets and ceremonies of aboriginal life, or, as he describes it, "when he was made a man." A bora was held when the old men of the tribes decided there were enough big boys and young men to be initiated.

When it was decided to hold a bora, the time and place when and where it would be held was first fixed. The time would probably be a few nights before the second full moon. This would give time for runners to contact the adjacent and near adjacent tribes. The position of the bora ground would have to be carefully considered as regards food; as the blacks had no means of conserving food, the locality chosen would have to be one where game, yams, fruit, etc., were reasonably plentiful. To feed up to some 500 people on daily huntings was not easy.

While these matters were being discussed, some of the old men would make message sticks. These sticks were sometimes elaborately carved, and, with the crude tools available, must have taken some time to make. The one which I possess was given to my uncle after a bora, and would be at least eighty years old.

Runners to carry the message sticks were chosen from active members of the clan, as they were expected to travel long distances in quick time.

When preparations were completed and runners chosen they were given verbal instructions as to where

to go and the time and place of the bora. Each one was then given a message stick and sent off on his mission.

While carrying a message stick the runner was considered sacred and when he got to the camp of the clan to which he had been sent, instead of sitting down and waiting for someone to come to him, he would walk straight in holding up the message stick. When men of the clan came round him they were given the message verbally and the message stick handed in. A camp was then got ready for him, food supplied, and a young woman from the tribe from which he must take his wife sent to attend to his wants.

Relationship of the Australian Aboriginal

The tribal relationships of the aborigines are neither easy to understand nor to describe, as, in many ways, they are quite different from the blood relationship of the white man.

The people of each tribe are divided into two main divisions, though under different names in different parts of the country. The people occupying the Palmerston district and adjacent country were known as the Tarumbal tribe. This tribe was divided into two divisions—Youngeru and Witteru, the women being Youngeruan and Witteruan, the feminine being denoted by adding “an” or “n” to the masculine name. Every Youngeru must take as his wife a Witteruan, and every Witteru must take a Youngeruan.

These divisions are again subdivided into four subdivisions, Kurpal, Kuialla and Karilbura and Munal.

Every man must take his wife from the proper subdivision of the tribe. The children belong to the same division as their mother, but to the opposite subdivisions, thus:

Man	Woman	Children
Kurpal must marry	Karilburan	Munal and Munalan
Karilbura „	Kurpalan	Kuialla and Kuiallan
Munal „	Kuiallan	Kurpal and Kurpanan
Kuialla „	Munalan	Karilbura & Karilburan

The first two subdivisions intermarry, but the children belong to the third and fourth. In the same

way the third and fourth subdivisions intermarry, but the children belong to the first and second. In other words, a man from the first division marries a girl from the second, their children belong to the third and must marry into the fourth.

If these relationships are examined carefully, it would be found that the nearest blood relation that could marry are first cousins, the children of a brother and sister but not of two brothers or two sisters.

It appears also that under this system it would be possible for a man to marry his grandmother, or at the other end of life his great grand-daughter. There seems to have been no provision made to guard against such a happening, but probably these people in their wisdom when drawing up their matrimonial laws decided that the chances of any man wishing to marry his grandmother were as remote as his chances of living long enough to be interested in marrying his great grand-daughter, and let it go at that.

All brothers of their father are looked on by the children as their father and the wives of each of the brothers as mother, but the mother's brothers and sisters are accepted as the equivalent of our uncles and aunts.

Naturally, the father and mother found the food for themselves and their children, but as the mother and children belonged to one subdivision of the tribe while the father belonged to another, the father had little authority over his children, the real authority being with their uncles—their mother's brothers.

If a man wanted to marry a girl he did not approach the father, but went to the mother's brothers. All the sisters of these tribal uncles of a man's children were also his mothers-in-law, and no man under any circumstances ever spoke to or acknowledged the presence of a mother-in-law. If by chance they met, the mother-in-law would cover herself or squat down while the son-in-law looked the other way and ignored her. It seems that with these people mothers-in-law were much more plentiful and no more popular than they are credited with being to-day.

Some of the older men, mainly the best fighters and hunters, used to collect, at times, three or four

wives. These were got by various means—by ordinary arrangement; by capture; or by barter, but these women must always be those from the subdivision from which it was permissible for him to take his wife. There was only one punishment for the breaking of this tribal law—both offending parties were killed when, and if caught, which generally was the case.

With usually a shortage of women some of the younger men would try, often with success, to persuade one of the younger wives to leave her elderly and much-married husband. This was considered quite in order, provided the woman was from the correct subdivision, and also provided that if, when caught, he took his chance of the spear throwing from the aggrieved husband and his tribal brothers. This meant that he had to stand out in the open with only a healaman, or small corkwood shield, to protect himself, and allow the husband and his tribal brothers to throw fighting spears at him. Sometimes the man was badly wounded or killed, but mostly he came through without hurt, in which case he kept the woman, honour having been satisfied. If the man was killed the husband took back his erring wife and was allowed to deal with her as he thought fit. He might kill her, but usually a spear through the calf of the leg was considered sufficient inducement for the lady to stay put and not go running about with strange men.

It is generally thought that the aborigines were naturally immoral because their code of morals was so different from that of the white man. Really, they were strictly moral judged by their own code before the white man corrupted them.

The women of one subdivision were the wives of the men of another subdivision so, although married to one man, a woman would be doing no wrong in being intimate with another man of that subdivision, but would be guilty of a crime punishable by death if she were intimate with a man of any of the other subdivisions.

A woman called her husband and all the men of his subdivision "Nupper," which meant husband.

Clothing

Little clothing was worn by the blacks, but they had small aprons spun from the wool pulled from opossum skins. The man's apron was a fringe about eight inches wide and hanging down about eight inches, which was attached to a belt made of long human hair, or plaited fibre. A man seldom wore these aprons, but would dress up if for any reason he was likely to go near the camp of one of his mothers-in-law.

Women's aprons were made differently from those of the men, being made entirely from spun opossum fur and went right round the body, the fringe being down about five inches in front and two inches at the back.

Both men and women usually carried a small bag under the arm which was supported by a cord over the shoulder. These bags and also larger ones were made by the women from tough grasses, the cords being made from fibrous weeds.

Fishing

The coastal blacks were clever fishermen with the harpoon and used to get the bigger fish and dugong in this way. Using a bark canoe—crazy craft at best—these people used to hunt and harpoon the dugong out in the bays and go across to the adjacent island. While afloat there were no idle moments; the man paddled and the woman bailed, using generally a fair-sized clam shell—heavy work at best, but a case of bail or sink.

For harpooning the bigger fish the barb used was about nine inches long, which fitted into a socket on a pole of about twelve feet long. A line was fastened to each end of the pole, and from the centre of this line the end of another line which was attached to the harpoon was fastened. When a dugong was struck the pole (made from light timber that floats) would fall off and be dragged behind, putting a heavy strain on the fish but not enough to pull out the barb. The fisherman would follow in his canoe until the dugong was exhausted, when it would be finished off, usually by

driving plugs in the nostrils so that the fish would smother.

Shallow fresh waterholes were fished by a number of the blacks dragging bushes up and down the length of the hole, stirring up the mud which brought the fish to the surface where they were easily caught with small hand nets.

This Society wishes to encourage the study of Local History, and this paper was supplied in response to a request to Local Historical Associations for papers to be read at the meetings of the Historical Society of Queensland.