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978-1-108-00655-2 - Australian Aborigines: The Languages and Customs of Several Tribes of Aborigines in the Western District of Victoria, Australia

James Dawson

Excerpt

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AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES.

CHAPTER I.

TRIBES.

THE country belonging to a tribe is generally distinguished by the name or language of that tribe. The names of tribes are taken from some local object, or from some peculiarity in the country where they live, or in their pronunciation; and when an individual is referred to, 'Kuurndit'—meaning 'member of'—is affixed to the tribal name, in the same way as the syllable 'er' is added to London, 'Londoner,' or 'ite' to Melbourne, 'Melbournite.' Thus the Mount Rouse tribe is called 'Kolor,' after the aboriginal name of the mountain; and a member of the tribe is called 'Kolor kuurndit.' The language of the Kolor tribe is called 'Chaap wuurong,' meaning 'soft' or 'broad lip,' in contradistinction to other dialects of harder pronunciation. The Kolor tribe and its language occupy the country commencing near Mount Napier, thence to German-town, Dunkeld, Wickliffe, Lake Boloke, down the Salt Creek to Hexham, to Caramut, and to starting point.

The Kuurn kopan noot tribe is known by the name of its language, 'Kuurn kopan noot,' meaning 'small lip,' or 'short pronunciation,' with 'Kuurndit' affixed for an individual of the tribe, who is called 'Kuurn kopan noot kuurndit.' Its territory, commencing in the middle of the Tarrone swamp, 'Yaluuk,' extends to Dunmore House dam, Upper Moyne Falls, Buunbatt, Goodwood main cattle camp, Marramok swamp, and round by South Green Hills station to starting point.

The Hopkins tribe is called after its language, 'Pirt kopan noot,' and a member of the tribe 'Pirt pirt wuurong kuurndit,' and its language, which is very slightly different from the 'Chaap wuurong,' is called 'Pirt kopan noot,' meaning 'jump lip.' Its country is bounded by Wickliffe, Lake Boloke, Salt Creek, Hopkins Hill, Ararat, and Mount William.

The Spring Creek tribe is called 'Mopor,' and a member of it 'Mopor kuurndit.' Its language is called 'Kii wuurong,' meaning 'Oh, dear! lip.' Its country, commencing at the swamp Marramok on Minjah station, extends

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to Woolsthorpe, to Ballangeich, up Muston's Creek to Burrwidgee, through the centre of Mirræwæ swamp to Goodwood House, thence to Buunbatt, and to starting point.

The Port Fairy tribe is called 'Peek whuurong,' and a member of it 'Peek whurrong kuurndit.' Its language, 'Peek whurrong,' 'kelp lip,' is taken from the broad-leafed seaweed so very abundant on the sea shore. Its territory lies along the sea coast, from the mouth of the Hopkins River to nearly half-way between Port Fairy and Portland, thence to Dunmore dam, Tarrone swamp, Kirkstall, Koroit, Woodford, Allansford, Framlingham, and down the Hopkins River to the sea.

The Mount Shadwell tribe and its language are called 'Kirræ wuurong,' 'blood lip,' with Kuurndit affixed for a member of the tribe. Its territory commences at the Hopkins Hill sheepwash on the Hopkins River, and extends to Mount Fyans, Mount Elephant, Cloven Hills, Minninguurt, Mount Noorat, Keilambete Lake, Framlingham aboriginal station, and up the east side of the Hopkins River to starting point.

The Camperdown language is called 'Warn tallin,' 'rough language.' The Colac language is 'Kolac gnat,' 'belonging to sand,' and is hard in pronunciation. The Cape Otway language is 'Katubanuut,' 'King Parrot language.' The country between Cape Otway and the Hopkins River is called 'Yarro wæetch,' 'Forest country,' and the language 'Wirngill gnatt tallinanong,' 'Bear language.'

At the annual great meetings of the associated tribes, where sometimes twenty tribes assembled, there were usually four languages spoken, so distinct from one another that the young people speaking one of them could not understand a word of the other three; and even the middle-aged people had difficulty in ascertaining what was said. These were the Chaap wuurong, Kuurn kopan noot, Wiitya whuurong, and Kolac gnat. The other tongues spoken at the meeting might be termed dialects of these four languages.

The aborigines have a very ready way of distinguishing the ten dialects enumerated above, by the various terms which are employed by each to denote the pronoun 'you,' as Gnuutok, Gnuundook, Winna, Gnæ, Gnii, &c. The differences of language are also marked by peculiarities of pronunciation, especially by the way in which the end of a sentence is intoned. Natives of Great Britain will remember similar differences between the various counties or towns of their fatherland, which will serve to illustrate the differences of aboriginal pronunciation.

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POPULATION.

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CHAPTER II.

POPULATION.

IN attempting to ascertain the numbers of individuals in the different tribes, it has been found almost impossible to make the aborigines comprehend or compute very large numbers, or even to obtain, from the very few now alive, an approximate estimate of the aggregate strength of the tribes of the Western district previous to the occupation of the country by the white man. It has been found necessary to ascertain from some of the most intelligent middle-aged persons among them, first, the number of friendly tribes which met annually in midsummer for hunting, feasting, and amusements,—occasions of all others the most likely to draw together the largest gatherings,—and then the average strength of each tribe.

These great meetings were held at *Mirræwuæ*, a large marsh celebrated for emus and other kinds of game, not many miles to the west of Caramut. This place was selected on account of its being a central position for the meetings of the tribes occupying the districts now known as the Wannon, Hamilton, Dunkeld, Mount William, Mount Rouse, Mount Napier, Lake Condah, Dunmore, Tarrone, Kangatong, Spring Creek, Framlingham, Lake Boloke, Skipton, Flat-topped Hill, Mount Shadwell, Darlington, Mount Noorat, Camperdown, Wardy Yallock, and Mount Elephant. None of the sea coast tribes attended the meetings at *Mirræwuæ*, as they were afraid of treachery and of an attack on the part of the others. According to the testimony of the intelligent old chief *Weeratt Kuyuut*, and his equally intelligent daughter *Yarruum Parpurr Tarrneen*, and her husband, *Wombeet Tuulawarn*, when two of these tribes fought a pitched battle, each mustered at least thirty men; and for every able-bodied warrior present (and no one durst absent himself on such an occasion under the penalty of death) there would be at least three members absent, as the old men, women, children and invalids were kept at home; thus making an average of one hundred and twenty in each tribe; and, as the twenty-one tribes enumerated were generally present, there must occasionally have been the large gathering of two thousand five hundred and twenty aborigines.

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In the estimation of some of the earliest settlers, this calculation of the average strength of each tribe is too low ; but, as they could not tell how many tribes or portions of tribes were seen by them at one time, the statements of the natives who attended these great meetings, and of those who remember the accounts given of them by their parents, are the most reliable.

On questioning old Weeratt Kuyut—who was privileged as a messenger to travel among the tribes between the rivers Leigh and Glenelg—about the population of the Great Plains, which have Mount Elephant as a centre, he said the natives were like flocks of sheep and beyond counting.

At this date, July, 1880, there are only seven aborigines who speak the Chaap wuurong language, three who speak the Kuurn kopan noot language, and four who speak the Peek whuurong language.

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CHAPTER III.

CHIEFS.

EVERY tribe has its chief, who is looked upon in the light of a father, and whose authority is supreme. He consults with the best men of the tribe, but when he announces his decision, they dare not contradict or disobey him.

Great respect is paid to the chiefs and their wives and families. They can command the services of everyone belonging to their tribe. As many as six young bachelors are obliged to wait on a chief, and eight young unmarried women on his wife; and, as the children are of superior rank to the common people, they also have a number of attendants to wait on them. No one can address a chief or chiefess without being first spoken to, and then only by their titles as such, and not by personal names, or disrespectfully. Food and water, when brought to the camp, must be offered to them first, and reeds provided for each in the family to drink with; while the common people drink in the usual way. Should they fancy any article of dress, opossum rug, or weapon, it must be given without a murmur.

If a chief leaves home for a short time he is always accompanied by a friend, and on his return is met by two men, who conduct him to his wuurn. At his approach every one rises to receive him, and remains silent till he speaks; they then inquire where he has been, and converse with him freely. When a tribe is moving from one part of the country to another, the chief, accompanied by a friend, precedes it, and obtains permission from the next chief to pass, before his followers cross the boundary. When approaching a friendly camp, the chief walks at the head of his tribe. If he is too old and infirm to take the lead, his nearest male relative or best friend does so. On his arrival with his family at the friendly camp, a comfortable wuurn is immediately erected, and food, firewood, and attendance are provided during his visit. When he goes out to hunt, he and his friends are accompanied by several men to carry their game and protect them from enemies. A strange chief approaching a camp is met at a short distance by the chief, and invited to come and sit down; a fire is made for him, and then he is asked where he has come from, and what is his business.

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The succession to the chieftdom is by inheritance. When a chief dies the chiefs of the neighbouring tribes, accompanied by their attendants, assist at the funeral obsequies; and they appoint the best male friend of the deceased to take charge of the tribe until the first great meeting after the expiry of one year, when the succession must be determined by the votes of the assembled chiefs alone. The eldest son is appointed, unless there is some good reason for setting him aside. If there are no sons, the deceased chief's eldest brother is entitled to succeed him, and the inheritance runs in the line of his family. Failing him, the inheritance devolves upon the other brothers and their families in succession.

If the heir is weakly in body, or mentally unfitted to maintain the position of chief,—which requires to be filled by a man of ability and bravery,—and if he has a brother who is more eligible in the opinion of the tribe, or who aspires to the dignity, the elder brother must either yield or fight the younger brother in single combat, at the first great meeting, for the supremacy.

There is an impression among the aborigines that the second son of a chief is generally superior to his elder brother; and, if proved to be so in fight, the latter gives up his claim as a matter of custom, and the tribe accepts the conqueror as its head.

Should the heir be a boy, his nearest male relative is appointed regent till he is initiated into manhood. If there is no heir, the chiefs of the neighbouring tribes elect a successor from the deceased chief's tribe; but if their votes are divided between two candidates, the matter must be decided by these in single combat, which sometimes leads to the whole tribe quarrelling and fighting. As the tribe, however, cannot be divided, the result of the combat is accepted, and all are again friends.

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CHAPTER IV.

PROPERTY.

THE territory belonging to a tribe is divided among its members. Each family has the exclusive right by inheritance to a part of the tribal lands, which is named after its owner; and his family and every child born on it must be named after something on the property. When the boundaries with neighbours meet at lakes or swamps celebrated for game, well-defined portions of these are marked out and any poaching or trespassing is severely punished. No individual of any neighbouring tribe or family can hunt or walk over the property of another without permission from the head of the family owning the land. A stranger found trespassing can legally be put to death.

When the father of a family dies, his landed property is divided equally among his widow and his children of both sexes. Should a child of another family have been born on the estate, it is looked upon as one of the family, and it has an equal right with them to a share of the land, if it has attained the age of six months at the death of the proprietor. This adopted child is called a 'work', and calls the owner of the property by the same name. Should a family die out without leaving 'flesh relatives' of any degree, the chief divides the land among the contiguous families after the lapse of one year from the death of the last survivor. During that period the name of the property, being the same as the name of its last owner, is never mentioned, but is called 'Yaamp yaamp' in the Chaap wuorong and the other two languages. If, however, there are several claimants, with equal rights to the territory, the chief at once gives each an equal share, irrespective of sex or age. To those who are under age he appoints guardians to look after their property during their minority.

CHAPTER V.

CLOTHING.

THE aborigines are very fond of anointing their bodies and their hair with the fat of animals, and toasting themselves before the fire till their skin absorbs it. In order to protect their bodies from the cold, they mix red clay with the oily fat of emus,—which is considered the best,—or with that of water fowls, opossums, grubs, or toasted eel skins, and rub themselves all over with the mixture. Owing to this custom very little clothing is necessary.

During all seasons of the year both sexes walk about very scantily clothed. In warm weather the men wear no covering during the day time except a short apron, not unlike the sporran of the Scotch Highlanders, formed of strips of opossum skins with the fur on, hanging from a skin belt in two bunches, one in front and the other behind. In winter they add a large kangaroo skin, fur side inwards, which hangs over the shoulders and down the back like a mantle or short cloak. This skin is fastened round the neck by the hind legs, and is fixed with a pin made of the small bone of the hind leg of a kangaroo, ground to a fine point. Sometimes a small rug made of a dozen skins of the opossum or young kangaroo is worn in the same way.

Women use the opossum rug at all times, by day as a covering for the back and shoulders, and in cold nights as a blanket. When they are obliged to go out of doors in wet weather, a kangaroo skin is substituted for the rug. A girdle or short kilt of the neck feathers of the emu, tied in little bunches to a skin cord, is fastened round the loins. A band of plaited bark surrounds the head, and pointed pins, made of wood or of the small bones of the hind foot of the kangaroo, are stuck upright at each side of the brow, to keep up the hair, which is divided in front and laid over them.

Beds are made of dry grass laid on the ground; and in summer the body is covered with a thin grass mat, or a sprinkling of loose dry grass, but in cold weather a wallaby or opossum rug is used in addition. In rare instances the rug is made of skins of the ring-tailed opossum.

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A departure from this primitive mode of covering, and the adoption of the white man's costume, have weakened the constitution of the aborigines, and rendered them very liable to colds and pulmonary diseases, more particularly as—though they overload themselves with European clothes during the daytime—they seldom sleep under their rugs, excepting in the cold season of the year.

Fur rugs were very scarce and valuable before the white man destroyed the wild dogs, the natural enemies of the opossum and kangaroo, as it took a year to collect opossum skins sufficient to make one. The ring-tailed opossums were more plentiful than the common kind, but the skins were less esteemed. Rugs were also made of the skins of the wallaby and of the brush kangaroo, which are likewise inferior to the common opossum. A good rug is made of from fifty to seventy skins, which are stripped off the opossum, pegged out square or oblong on a sheet of bark, and dried before the fire, then trimmed with a reed knife, and sewn together with the tail sinews of the kangaroo, which are always pulled out of the tail, and carefully dried and saved for thread. Previous to sewing the skins together, diagonal lines, about half-an-inch apart, are scratched across the flesh side of each with sharpened mussel shells. This is done to make them soft and pliable. The only addition to this kind of ornamentation is occasionally the figure of an emu in the centre skin of the rug. It may be stated that, although many of the opossum rugs of the aborigines are now ornamented with a variety of designs, some of which are coloured, nothing but the simple pattern previously described, with the occasional figure of an emu, was used before the arrival of the white man. The figures of human beings, animals, and things, now drawn by the natives, and represented in works on the aborigines of the colony of Victoria as original, were unknown to the tribes treated of, and are considered by them as of recent introduction by Europeans.

CHAPTER VI.

HABITATIONS.

Habitations—*wuurns*—are of various kinds, and are constructed to suit the seasons. The principal one is the permanent family dwelling, which is made of strong limbs of trees stuck up in dome-shape, high enough to allow a tall man to stand upright underneath them. Small limbs fill up the intermediate spaces, and these are covered with sheets of bark, thatch, sods, and earth till the roof and sides are proof against wind and rain. The doorway is low, and generally faces the morning sun or a sheltering rock. The family *wuurn* is sufficiently large to accommodate a dozen or more persons; and when the family is grown up the *wuurn* is partitioned off into apartments, each facing the fire in the centre. One of these is appropriated to the parents and children, one to the young unmarried women and widows, and one to the bachelors and widowers. While travelling or occupying temporary habitations, each of these parties must erect separate *wuurns*. When several families live together, each builds its *wuurn* facing one central fire. This fire is not much used for cooking, which is generally done outside. Thus in what appears to be one dwelling, fifty or more persons can be accommodated, when, to use the words of the aborigines, they are ‘like bees in a hive.’

These comfortable and healthy habitations are occupied by the owners of the land in the neighbourhood, and are situated on dry spots on the bank of a lake, stream, or healthy swamp, but never near a malarious morass, nor under large trees, which might fall or be struck down by lightning. When it is necessary to abandon them for a season in search of variety of food, or for visiting neighbouring families and tribes, the doorway is closed with sheets of bark or bushes, and, for the information of visitors, a crooked stick is placed above it pointing in the direction which the family intends to go. They then depart, with the remark, ‘*Muurtee bunna meen*,’—‘close the door and pull away.’

Temporary habitations are also dome-shaped, and are made of limbs, bark of gum trees, and grass, scarcely rain-proof, and are smaller, opener, and more carelessly erected than the permanent residences. They are only used in summer or for