

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02045-9 - Native Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia

Baldwin Spencer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

NATIVE TRIBES OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY OF AUSTRALIA

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Nature of the country inhabited by the tribes.—List of tribes, with their localities.—Physical appearance of the natives.—No Malay admixture.—Cicatrices.—Larakia woman with joint of index finger cut off.—Small number of children in each family.—Organisation of the tribes, a general *résumé*.—Totemic systems, a general *résumé*.—Intichiuma ceremonies.—Initiation ceremonies.—Burial and mourning ceremonies.—Spirit children and origin of children.—Reincarnation.—Sacred objects.—Camp life.—Habitations.—Flies and mosquitos.—Corroborees.—Definition of tribe.—Sending out of messengers.—Characteristics of native character.—Magic.—Mental ability.—Fondness for fun and sense of humour.

OVER the vast area of more than five hundred and twenty thousand square miles occupied by the Northern Territory there are, as might be expected, great variations in regard to climate and natural features. Whilst this is so, it is, on the other hand, possible to divide it into three main parts, a Southern Central plateau, gradually rising from the lowlands of Lake Eyre to the Macdonnell Ranges. A Northern Central depression, in the form of

B

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02045-9 - Native Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia

Baldwin Spencer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 NATIVE TRIBES OF NORTHERN AUSTRALIA CHAP.

a great basin, margined to the north, east and west by the Coastal Ranges, and lastly a fringe of coastland between the latter and the sea.

The first two of these, again, agree in all essential features. They have the same hot, dry climate, sparse vegetation of gum trees, Mulga scrub, Hakeas and porcupine-grass. Every now and then, but very rarely, the vegetation may be a little more luxuriant, in spots such as Palm Creek in the Macdonnell Ranges where a solitary colony of Fan palms (*Livistonia mariæ*) has managed to survive, and where groups of graceful Cycads grow in crevices amongst the rocks. Away, however, from the Ranges the country is more or less arid. The soil is dry and sandy with tufts of pale, withered grass that grow so far apart from one another that you can easily count them. It is wonderful how long the grass keeps its moisture. It must have learned the habit of throwing its roots down to a great depth. Towards the end of a long dry season, however, you can powder the grass up in your hand, and, for lack of nourishment, your horses become little more than bags of bones. For mile after mile there is nothing but thin gum tree forest, and in the dry season there is not a drop of surface water; you may get some by digging a soakage in the sandy bed of a river where the gum trees show that there is water below the surface, but, for the most part, you must rely on the wells that the Government has sunk at intervals along the course of the overland telegraph line. These vary in depth from a hundred to two hundred and seventy feet. Each one is enclosed in a strong palisade to keep out wandering horses and cattle and has, also, two trap doors which close down over the opening and serve to keep out wild dogs and small vermin. There is a windlass and a chain with a bucket at each end.



FIG. 1. OPEN FOREST LAND NEAR DALY WATERS. TYPICAL CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN COUNTRY.

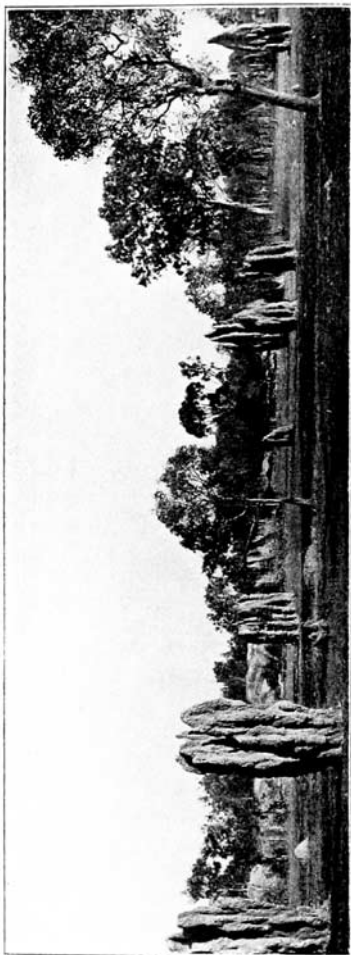


FIG. 2. ANT HILL COUNTRY, NEAR PINE CREEK.

[Face page 3.]

The one shown in the illustration (Fig. 1) lies between the Katherine Creek and Daly Waters. It is one of the deeper ones and by means of an endless wire a horse can be hitched on to wind up the heavy bucket. When this view was taken I was travelling on an experimental motor car trip with the Administrator, and we utilised the motor car to do the winding up.

Away to the east of the telegraph line there lies the Downs country—huge stretches of slightly undulating open country, covered with a most luxuriant growth of grass with, every now and then, river beds, meandering across the open plains, starting nowhere in particular and gradually petering out (Fig. 3). Their banks are bordered, here and there, with clumps of coolibars but, often for scores of miles, you see nothing bigger than a small scraggy bush and, as you travel along, you collect such little twigs as you can to boil your next billy with. For miles upon miles also, in many parts, the whole country face is studded with white ant-hills of which there are several quite different kinds. In the first place they vary much in colour according to the nature of the ground. They may be red, or almost white, yellow of various shades, grey, or various shades of brown. A fair idea of the surface formation of the country can be had from the material of which they are made. In form they vary immensely. Some never seem to exceed an average of perhaps four or five feet in height and are in the form of single, flattened columns, or slabs, sometimes tapering to a point, at others with a bluntly rounded apex; others, again, are like masses of great bubbles of sand, from a few inches to a foot or more in diameter. These are piled irregularly on one another to form a mound which may finally reach a height of six feet or even more. Then, in addition to the smaller ones, which may be so

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02045-9 - Native Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia

Baldwin Spencer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 NATIVE TRIBES OF NORTHERN AUSTRALIA CHAP.

numerous and so close together as to give the country the appearance of a gigantic graveyard, there are the huge ones made, perhaps, of a single shaft, or of a main central one, with others clustering round it like smaller pinnacles around a main spire (Fig. 2). These are most extraordinary structures ; they may reach a height of twenty-five feet and must have taken many years to build.

In the whole of the central area, that is inland from the coastal ranges, there is no permanent flowing water. For a short time after the rainfall the creeks run, but this may be only for a few hours. After that the scattered water holes alone remain—some may last for a few weeks, others for months, whilst others, such as the chain forming the Newcastle Waters, are permanent, though, of course, they gradually decrease in area as the dry season advances. Towards the close of the dry season the natives must gather about the few remaining waters, though it is wonderful how they will secure water by means of little soakages in the sandy beds of creeks, or out of the roots of trees, or even, if it comes to the worst, by licking the dew off herbage. Amongst the ranges they have their little stores of water which no white man would ever find ; little crevices in the rocks or holes in trees out of which they can sometimes only get the water by means of a whisp of grass which they dip into the water and suck when it comes out.

The whole of the central area, right up to the Coastal Ranges, is very much the same everywhere except that when, coming up from the south, you reach Powell's creek, there is a distinct change in the vegetation. The gums remain, but Bauhenias, with rich foliage, red flowers and large brown pods appear ; the Kapok with its bright yellow flowers is very noticeable and the Mulga is largely replaced by Lancewood, while Indiarubber, Ironwood,

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02045-9 - Native Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia
Baldwin Spencer
Excerpt
[More information](#)

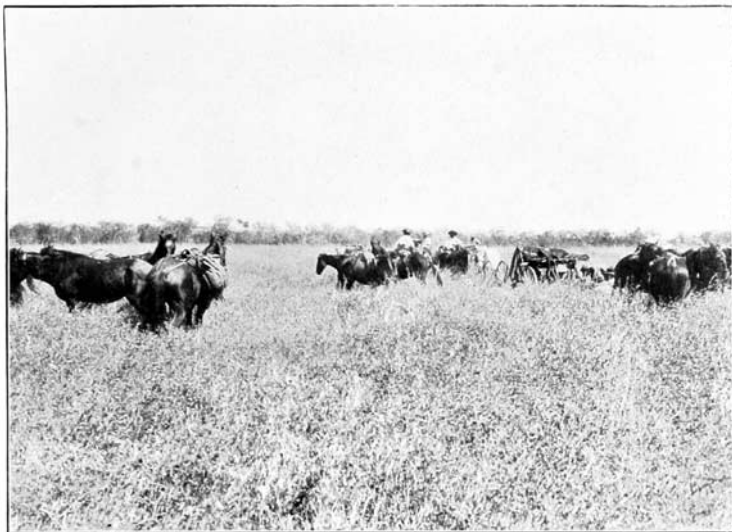


Fig. 3. DOWNS COUNTRY.

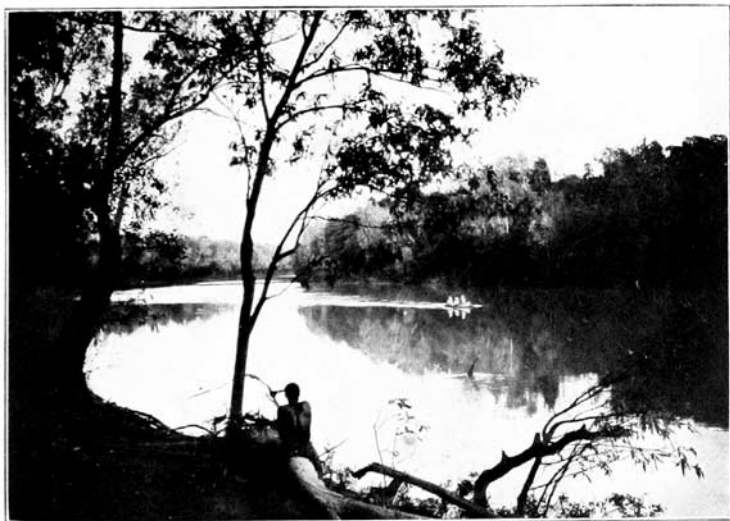


Fig. 4. DALY RIVER.

[Between pp. 4-5.]

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02045-9 - Native Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia

Baldwin Spencer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

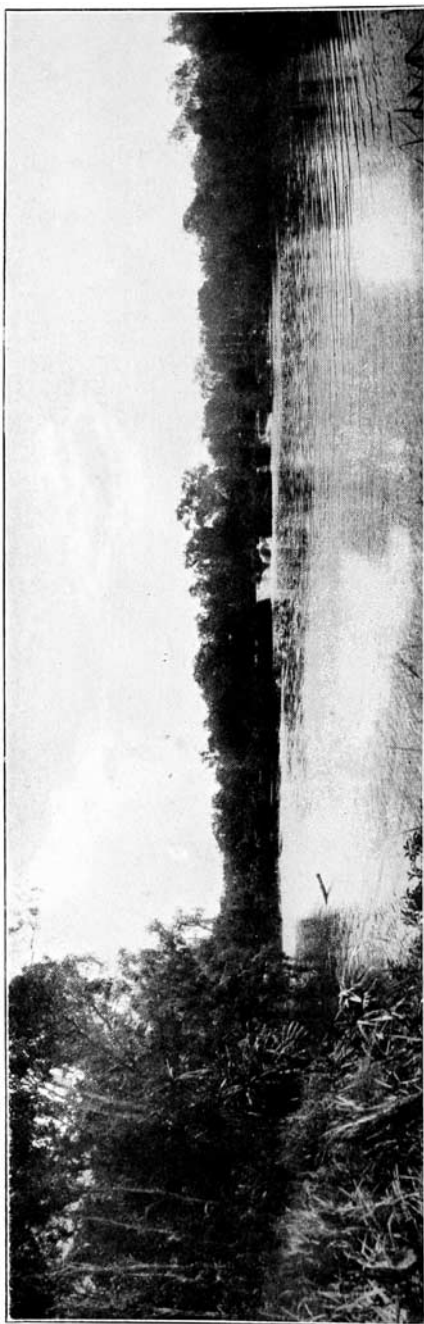


Fig. 5. ROCKY BAR AND REACH ON THE FLORA RIVER.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02045-9 - Native Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia
Baldwin Spencer
Excerpt
[More information](#)



Fig. 6. A LILY WATER POOL.



Fig. 7. SWAMP JUNGLE. MELVILLE ISLAND. *[Between pp. 4-5.]*

and so-called Quinine trees are abundant. But, even as far north as this, the vegetation is not really tropical.

After rising from the central part on to the Coastal Ranges, the height of which is not more than one thousand feet, there are sometimes, as, for example, going down to the Coast on the Gulf of Carpentaria, a series of "jump-ups," as they are called, where there is a sudden sharp rise, or fall, according to which way you happen to be travelling. This brings you down to the coast country where, in many ways, things are very different from what you meet with on the uplands of the interior. East, west, and northwards from the Ranges, rivers, such as the Roper, Daly and the Alligators, rise and run to the sea. These are fine streams with permanent running water, the tide affecting them for about eighty miles from their mouth (Fig. 4). They are marked by the presence of a series of rocky bars, each perhaps six, or at most eight, feet in height, that stretch across from side to side and over which the water pours all the year round (Fig. 5). These bars separate long reaches of deep, clear water, fifty to seventy yards in width, which may run for miles. These rivers and the billabongs and backwaters of the coastal district swarm with fish and water fowl of all kinds. Every now and then there are swamp lands and shallower pools, where the great, red-flowering lotus grows, and the ordinary water pools are flecked with white and heliotrope lilies (Fig. 6). The river courses are bordered with magnificent paper-barks (*Melaleuca leucodendron*) that flower profusely and attract great flocks of honey-eating birds. Now and again you come across a patch of jungle (Fig. 7) with clumps of graceful bamboos, fan palms, lawyer vines, mosquitos and land leeches, but, except just for these isolated patches, there is little that is really tropical. In many parts the so-called cycad "palm" grows profusely in

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02045-9 - Native Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia

Baldwin Spencer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 NATIVE TRIBES OF NORTHERN AUSTRALIA CHAP.

the scrub with a stem from one to eight or even ten feet high, crowned with a circle of stiff, fern-like leaves, with perhaps a large central cone. The climate of this coastal district, especially along the north, is very different from that of the interior. In the latter it is hot and dry with cold winter nights. Along the Roper river even, about one hundred miles from its mouth, the temperature in August fell to 29° F. during the night, and very often we had a fog that did not lift till nine o'clock in the morning. The climate in Darwin and along just the coastal fringe is less pleasant, but even here the average wet bulb for December is little more than 80, and these warm, moist conditions may be said to last through November to March, the rest of the year being relatively cool.

Such are the conditions under which the natives live, and, whether it be the difference in the food and water supply, or not, the fact remains that in many ways the coastal and island tribes are sharply marked off from the inland ones, in regard both to their customs and their organisations.

The distribution of some of the more important tribes is roughly shown on the accompanying map, the numbers on which correspond to those in the following list :

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Melville Island | 14. Kakadu |
| 2. Bathurst Island | 15. Kulunglutji |
| 3. Worgait | 16. Umoriu |
| 4. Warrai | 17. Geimbio |
| 5. Wulwullam | 18. Koarnbur |
| 6. Mulluk Mulluk | 19. Watta |
| 7. Brinken | 20. Puneitja |
| 8. Mudburra | 21. Gnornbur |
| 9. Waduman | 22. Djowei |
| 10. Bulinara | 23. Djauan |
| 11. Airiman | 24. Mungarai |
| 12. Allura | 25. Yungman |
| 13. Larakia | 26. Nullakun |