

CHAPTER II

In this chapter, some aspects of the social organization and habits of the aborigines of the Hunter Valley will be discussed. Marriage, crime and punishment, amusements, and also inter-tribal hostilities. With regard to some aspects, such as government, there is very little information in the source material, whilst other aspects, for example tribal divisions and marriage laws, are too complex to be treated adequately by anyone but an anthropologist. The subject of social life is not strictly related to material culture, nevertheless a brief description has been included in an endeavour to render more complete the general picture of aboriginal life in the area.

The Hunter Valley natives conformed to the tendency of Australian aborigines generally to have only a rudimentary political organization: (1) The early settlers suggest that what government there was in the tribe was carried out by a council of elders, although there is difference of opinion concerning the powers held by this council. To Miller, for example, government consisted merely of a meeting where

(1) J.H. Bell loc.cit: p48.

'The old men, as usual, used to talk over the affairs of the tribe, and generally persuaded its members to adopt their views... but no authority existed.' (2)

McKiernan, on the other hand, saw this council as a far more positive body.

'The governing authority was vested in the assembly of the old men of the local groups who met periodically and discussed matters both national and international. (3) No secrecy was observed about these meetings. (4) A decision once arrived at was binding on every member of the tribe and would be enforced regardless of the consequences.' (5)

According to Howitt, in the Kamilaroi tribes, if serious complaints were made of the conduct of an individual, the council of headmen might decree his death. (6) Other sources concur in stating that the powers of the council were negligible. Threlkeld, writing about the Lake Macquarie natives, says of their government,

'None: the cleverest men in the tribe are attended to in their consultations, but nothing of any consequence is determined upon by a tribe, without a general meeting of all its members, who give their advice, and that which appears best is adopted.' (7)

-
- (2) R. Miller loc.cit.: p354.
 (3) The suggestion is that the council administered a traditional body of law, but no indication is given as to its nature.
 (4) In the Gringai and Geawegal tribes the young men attended the meetings, but were not permitted to speak:
 A.W. Howitt op.cit.: p325.
 (5) B. McKiernan loc.cit.: p888.
 (6) A.W. Howitt op.cit.: p343.
 According to Thorne - loc.cit.: p477 - the council of elders had power to decree punishment.
 (7) L.E. Threlkeld op.cit.: 24 (85)

Nevertheless, some degree of efficiency was achieved.

'So exact are the natives in these meetings, and in their subsequent arrangements, that each member of the tribe is apprised (sic) of the movements of every other individual belonging to it, and can at any time tell where the others are.' (8)

In many tribes there was a head man, who may or may not also have fulfilled the function of medicine man or "koradji." (9) This man was not formally invested with any authority, (10) but usually had earned his position of leadership because of his 'sagacity, courage, experience, and knowledge of tribal law.' (11) According to Thorpe, his superior rank was recognized at burial.

'On his demise he is buried with special honour, and the chiefs of adjoining sub-tribes attend his funeral ceremonies.' (12)

His powers, however, were restricted. To quote McKiernan

'Except in the matter of the disposal of widows, which was merely the enforcement of the customary law of the tribe, and the leading of the various expeditions or the performance of other similar duties, his position was a mere honorary one. He had no power to settle disputes, not even local ones, or enter into agreements binding the other members of the group.' (13)

(8) Ibid.

(9) A.W. Howitt op.cit: p315.

(10) R. Dawson op.cit: p327.

(11) Mr. W.C. Green, and also W.W. Thorpe loc.cit: p476.

(12) Ibid.

(13) E. McKiernan loc.cit: p886.

In the Gringai tribe the head man was called Murjain, and 'must have been an aged man before he was much thought of.' (14) The office was said to have been held predominantly by the one family. Amongst the Geawegal prowess as a warrior seems to have been the prime criterion for leadership. The son of a leader had priority as successor to his father, but only in so far as he was able to prove himself a capable warrior. (15)

Punishable offences amongst the aborigines usually took the form of theft (16), breaches of custom, such as infringements of marriage laws. (17) or

'Blabbing about the sacred rites of the tribe.' (18)

There is agreement amongst early observers as to the form this punishment took.

(14) A.W. Howitt op.cit.: p315.

(15) Ibid.: p316.

(16) A. Macdonald loc.cit.: p256.

Anon. "Notes on settlement on the Hunter 1815-29 and the aborigines of the district." In Papers of Rev. J.D. Lang, vol I, MSS: p64. In the Mitchell Library.

(17) Rev. C.C. Greenway "Kamilaroi Language and Traditions" Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland vol VII, 1878: p244.

(18) A.W. Howitt op.cit.: p343.

'When a Black has committed any offence against his own tribe... he is compelled by the other blacks to undergo a punishment. He is placed in the middle of the whole tribe of blackfellows who form a circle at some distance round him. Each Black then throws a certain number of spears or bunnings (sic) at the culprit proportionate to the offence of which he has been guilty. He is allowed an Elemen to defend himself from these weapons after which he is again admitted to the society and friendship of the tribe.' (19)

The offender managed the Elemen or shield so dexterously that he rarely incurred an injury,

'although instances have occurred of persons being killed.' (20)

The punishment was always conducted in public, with the women and children present. (21) Once it was over the culprit was accepted back into the tribe, having to bear no social stigma as a result of his transgressions.

Personal quarrels were settled by a duel, using any weapons near to hand (22), or

'with waddies, giving alternate blows, till one falls: but sometimes in the heat of anger, they quarrel and give blows at random.' (23)

-
- (19) Lang Papers op.cit: pp64-65.
 Also W.H. Bretton op.cit: p214.
 B. McKiernan loc.cit: p887.
 L.E. Threlkeld op.cit: 24 (85)
 W. Cleveland op.cit: p89.
 And, describing a similar ceremony at Port Jackson,
 D. Collins op.cit: pp204-205.
- (20) R. Dawson op.cit: p64.
 (21) A.W. Howitt op.cit: p.344.
 (22) Ibid: p343.
 (23) L.E. Threlkeld op.cit: 24 (85)

Such disputes might on occasion involve several natives, who would

'have recourse to the use of club and shield for the settlement of differences,' but, 'a general fight was never known to take place between members of the different groups of the tribe.' (24)

As the area was so closely settled, contact between different tribes was frequent, and consequently inter-tribal wars were not uncommon. They were caused

'chiefly by neighbouring tribes trespassing on their land (in which matter their neighbours on the west, the Kahmilaharoy (sic) tribe, were the worst offenders) and the abduction of females.' (25)

Another important cause of inter-tribal hostilities was the natives' belief that the death of one of their number had been caused by someone from another tribe. (26) Thus wars were sometimes brought about by one tribe wishing to avenge a supposed murder.

Prior to the battle, messengers passed between the opposing parties to decide

'when and where and with what weapons they are to fight.' (27)

Preparations also included decoration of the body. Dawson was a witness to one of these battles, and described the intending combatants:

-
- (24) E. McKiernan loc.cit.: p887.
 (25) J.W. Fawcett loc.cit.: p180.
 (26) W.H. Breton op.cit.: p240.
 (27) Lang Papers, op.cit.: p61.

'They had painted their bodies with red and white stripes similar to... when they were dressed for their corrobories or dances; their hair had been untied and hung around their heads, which were stuck all over with small feathers of various colours from parrots and cockatoos, procured for this occasion. Around their loins was the opossum belt, in one side of which they had placed their waddies... and on the other the boomerang (sic)... each had a long spear in his hand, while several carried bundles of them, and two or three had only shields, which were whitened with pipe-clay and quartered with red ochre.' (28)

Bretton gives a vivid description of a battle he saw take place near Wollombi.

'When about to fight, the contending parties, except where treachery is employed (which I believe is not very often practised), encamp opposite each other. At dawn of the following day two young men, one from each side, advance in front of their respective friends, and, after using the most approprious epithets to each other, mutually throw a spear, and then retire to procure others, which are thrown in the same manner. If neither is wounded, they then commence a battle with the club, using sometimes an elamen, or shield, made of wood; while the women, particularly those advanced in years, who are, probably, more crabbed than the younger ones, excite them to the utmost. When one is worsted, another advances to succour him, and others to aid his adversary, until a general nebee takes place, and broken heads, and sometimes bad spear wounds are the result; but the latter do not occur so often as might be expected.' (29)

Once the battle is over, all semblance of hostility disappears.

'The conquered are allowed to depart without molestation; and they will even frequently join the victors, so that a person would not know that there had been any animosity between them. There is certainly more talking than fighting in their battles.' (30)

(28) R. Dawson op.cit.: pp279-280.

(29) W.H. Bretton op.cit.: pp212-213.

(30) Ibid.: p213.

Miller maintains that cannibalism was often practised after a battle.

'Until the advent of the Whites, cannibalism also prevailed to the extent of eating portions of a slain enemy by way of triumph.' (31)

Fawcett adds that it was also part of the initiation process.

'To possess themselves of the kidney fat of one of their enemies they fully believed would bring them high repute, and it often happened that when they failed to find an aborigine for their purpose that they murdered a European, even when he was a good friend to them.' (32)

There is no doubt that cannibalism was practised in Queensland (33), but with regard to the Hunter region, the evidence suggests that Miller and Fawcett may have been mistaken. Observers, in the main more reliable than the two writers aforementioned, such as Breton (34), Cunningham (35), and Dawson draw attention to the fact that to their knowledge it did not exist. To quote Dawson,

'The natives of Australia have by some people been accused of cannibalism, and the constant assertion amongst them, that the strange tribes, or others with whom they are at variance, will eat them in case they fall into their hands, gives accuracy to this notion, and has probably been the origin of it; but as far as my experience and enquiries went, in the district in which I resided, I had no reason for believing that this practice existed amongst any of the tribes there.' (36)

-
- (31) R. Miller loc.cit.: p353.
 (32) J.W. Fawcett loc.cit.: p180.
 (33) C.C. Petrie op.cit.: pp33-34. A.P. Elkin loc.cit.: pp203,
 (34) W.H. Breton op.cit.: pp242-243. 354, 358.
 (35) P. Cunningham op.cit.: pp4-7, 13.
 (36) R. Dawson op.cit.: pp124-125.

An important aspect of the social life of the aborigines was the institution of marriage. A full discussion of marriage would include the highly complex social organization, but this has been omitted and just a brief description given of some of the processes involved.

According to Fawcett, as soon as a girl was born she was given by her father or allotted by the council of the tribe to be the wife of one of the men, who could either marry her or dispose of her to someone else. (37) In general marriage did not take place between two members of the one horde or group. (38).

Polygamy apparently prevailed to a limited extent, the older men sometimes managing to procure two or even three wives. (39) As a result of this and the relatively fewer female children reared, a large number of the men were unable to obtain wives. Under these circumstances it was possible to obtain a wife from within the tribal group.

'If a young man possessed any sisters or female relatives, he often exchanged one of them for someone else's sister.' (40)

-
- (37) J.W. Fawcett loc.cit.: p180.
R. Miller loc.cit.: p353 - Girls were usually married at the age of twelve or thirteen.
- (38) Ibid.
S. McKiernan loc.cit.: p387.
W.H. Breton op.cit.: p202.
- (39) J.W. Fawcett loc.cit.: p180.
- (40) Ibid.

A reluctant bride was often beaten into submission (41), although Threlkeld says the extent to which this was carried on was exaggerated.

'The violence described by travellers is undoubtedly sometimes practised by the natives in obtaining their wives, but not often, as the women generally follow their lovers without compulsion: if they are reluctant to go they are ill-treated: but the brutality described... as a necessary concomitant of their courtship, is anything but common, being only resorted to in case of the young lady's refusal, which is naturally rare, as they well know that the blows, kicks &c... would be the consequence of their non-compliance: indeed, if a gin refused to go with a native, he would without doubt kill her rather than leave her triumphant.' (42)

Marriage was with the natives, apparently, only cohabitation, they had no nuptial ceremony as far as Threlkeld knew, and his is the only source to hand which mentions it. (43) The men, to be eligible for marriage, had to be initiated.

Most of the married aborigines showed a great affection for each other. (44) McKiernan suggests that the reason for the considerate treatment of wives in the Hunter area was that

(41) W.H. Breton op.cit: p202.

(42) L.E. Threlkeld op.cit: 24 (85) Whether the natives of the other tribe objected depended on the current relations between tribes.

R. Dawson op.cit: p153.

A. MacDonald loc.cit: p256.

(43) L.E. Threlkeld op.cit.

(44) J.W. Fawcett loc.cit: p180.

'The country being very productive, there was not that continual fight for existence which was the lot of the Blacks in other places, and so in the abundance of provisions there was little necessity for that slave-driving which was such a marked feature of other tribes.' (45)

The aborigines are also very fond of their children, and treated them with great care and kindness. (46) As a rule the children were not weaned early, sometimes being nursed until about five or six years of age. (47) Up until the age of puberty the children of both sexes remained under the charge of their mothers, assisting in the procuring of vegetable food. As soon as they were old enough the boys were taught the use of weapons, particularly the boomerang and throwing stick. (48) The girls learnt how to fish, or to search for fruit and roots, to sew skins for rugs, and to plait bags and small nets. (49)

Generally, the natives of the area were reported to have been

'A kindly, good-tempered lot - full of fun and keenly appreciate (sic) of a joke.' (50)

One pastime from which they gained much pleasure, and in which they were highly skilled, was that of mimicry.

- (45) B. McKiernan loc.cit.: p888.
 (46) J.W. Fawcett loc.cit.: p153.
 R. Dawson op.cit.: p68.
 W. Scott "Notes on Aborigines - Port Stephens", p34.
 (47) Ibid.
 cf. W.W. Thorpe "The Aborigines of New South Wales":
 p468.
 (48) B. McKiernan loc.cit.: p886.
 (49) J.W. Fawcett loc.cit.: p153.
 (50) W. Scott, op.cit.: p34.

Cunningham wrote of the Newcastle and Port Stephens natives:

'Most of them possess great powers of mimicry, bringing to your recollection as vividly the individuals they are imitating, as if the latter were strutting in propria persona before you; while their drollery and wit are often considerable

(51)

The aborigines' favourite form of amusement was the corroboree, or dance. (52) These corroborees were of two kinds, sacred and secular; the former were usually directed towards increasing the food supply or, more particularly, concerned with the initiation ceremony (53), while the other performances were largely pantomimic, and only a repetition of some traditional or current event of interest, staged simply for the amusement of onlookers and performers. (54) Unlike the sacred corroboree, which had to be performed on a special bora ground, the second type could be performed on any suitable spot. (55)

These secular corroborees were generally held before a battle, or when there were visiting tribes in the area. The ceremonies described by the early settlers were as a rule of this type, for few white men were ever permitted to see their sacred, initiation corroborees.

-
- (51) P. Cunningham op.cit: p15.
 See also W.H. Breton op.cit: p27.
 C.C. Patric op.cit: p12. The Moreton Bay natives were also great mimics.
- (52) E.J. Hye op.cit: p77.
- (53) See below, Chapter VI.
- (54) W.W. Thorpe loc.cit: p472.
 W.C. Green.
 E. Caswell.
- (55) W.C. Green.

Even the secular corroborees were occasion for elaborate preparations, particularly decorating the body. Dawson described some Port Stephens natives who were about to perform.

'They had figured different parts of their bodies with pipe-clay, in a very curious and even handsome manner. They had chalked straight lines from the ankle up the outside of the thigh, which made them appear, by firelight, as if they had hussar pantaloons on. Their faces had been rubbed with red earth, like ochre; and their breasts chalked with serpentine lines, interspersed with dots &c. They were perfectly naked, as they always are; and in this state they began to corroborey, or dance.' (56)

All the local whites at Bathurst were invited to see a corroboree performed in 1837 by the Bathurst and visiting natives, amongst whom were a tribe from 'Coal River'.

'The night was very fine but very dark, fires of the different camps lighted up the scene. By these fires were seated the women, many of them holding in their laps or between their knees opossum skin cloaks, gathered up into large pads, which they beat upon with their hands as an accompaniment to their singing, & which sounded much like muffled drums. The men... were all marked with pipe-clay in lines which followed their bones and made them look like skeletons, as in the gloom the outline of their dusky bodies was not discernable. The women then began to sing more loudly and to beat time on their cloaks. The men at first danced slowly and then more quickly, if dancing it can be called, spreading out their arms and legs which seemed to shake and quiver, while they uttered the most unmusical grunts, more like a horse sneezing than anything else.

(56) R. Dawson, op.cit: p6.

Finally they disappeared... others came stealing out, two or three at a time, with bodies bent and holding out one arm and hand to represent the head and neck of an Emu. In another hand a bunch of twigs was held behind so as to represent the tail. The head and neck were moved about as if to see that all was safe before bending down to eat some grass. Then a few active men came bounding in who represented Kangaroos, their hands held up like paws and a long branch for a tail. They soon jumped off, and they or others appeared again at different points.' (57)

-
- (57) A.A. Boswell op.cit.: pp8-9.
For a description of similar performances see
W.H. Breton op.cit.: pp 201-202.
E.J. Eyre op.cit.: p77.