

CHAPTER VII

In this chapter attention will be paid to the religious life of the aborigines, insofar as it was reflected in their attitude to death, and in the rites and ceremonies which attended this event.

Once again there is a problem with the settlers' records. Their factual accounts of methods of burial are invaluable, but their interpretation of the rites is often fallacious. On the rare occasions when these religious ceremonies were revealed, they were often so unfamiliar and strange that to the early settlers their significance was obscure. As a rule, however, the aborigines were reluctant to disclose their sacred traditions and beliefs to the settlers. (1) This was not only because they were looked upon as uninitiated; the natives had a natural distrust of strangers, arising out of their profound belief in sorcery. Many of their tribal conflicts developed as a result of the universally held conviction that illness and death were always caused by the sorcery of a man from another tribe.

Like the corroboree and the initiation ceremony, the aboriginal burial captured the attention of the early

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(1) A. Boswell op.cit.: p7.  
B. McKiernan loc.cit.: p890.

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settlers, as it was to them a fascinating ritual. There are, therefore, many accounts of native burials, but they rarely appreciated the significance of the events they were witnessing.

It was apparent to the early settlers that the aborigines did have some idea of an after-life, (2) but descriptions of these beliefs reveal the influence of white civilization. Thus Emily Caswell wrote

'They are very superstitious they think when the blacks die they use the expression jump up white men. They suppose we were all black once.' [sic].(3)

Dawson found the same thing.

'I cannot learn, precisely, whether they worship any God or not; but they are firm in their belief that their dead friends go to another country; and that they are turned into white men, and return here again.' (4)

Even more revealing is Breton's comment.

'Several creditable persons have informed me that the natives imagine they will be happier in a future state than at present, as they are to "jump up" white men, and to possess all the comforts which they see us enjoy, with plenty to eat and drink, and eternal sunshine to keep them warm! If this be true their theological ideas must be of recent formation, or have experienced some sudden change.' (5)

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- (2) W.J. Enright "Aborigines of North Eastern New South Wales" : p4.  
(3) E. Caswell.  
(4) R. Dawson op.cit: p74.  
A. MacDonald loc.cit: p257 noted the same belief near Scene.  
(5) W.H. Breton op.cit: p205.

The aborigines had a distinct fear of the dead. They did not like to hear the name of a dead man mentioned, (6) apparently being afraid of his spirit. (7) As a rule, immediately following the cessation of mourning, they left the camp where death had occurred, and would not return to it or approach the grave for months. (8)

Two factors emerge from a study of the ritual of native burial. The first is that they had some idea of an after life, and hence burial was not the impersonalized termination of an aboriginal's existence, but represented merely a stage through which his spirit must pass. Secondly, death and burial were a community affair, involving every member of the horde or group. All combined in taking precautions to ensure that the spirit of the deceased was well prepared for its future role, and in seeking revenge for the death.

Preparation of the body for interment differed a little throughout the Hunter Valley. The practice of wrapping the body in bark appears to have been restricted to the area east of Maitland, and was a tradition common to the North Coast tribes as well. (9) Sometimes the body was interred in a full-length position, and other times

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- (6) W. Scott op.cit.: p47.  
E. Caswell; Lang Papers: p63.
- (7) W.H. Breton op.cit.: p203.
- (8) Mr. W. C. Green  
Lang Papers: p63.  
E. McKiernan loc.cit.: p389.  
W.H. Breton op.cit.: p203.  
W. Scott op.cit.: p47.  
W.J. Inright loc.cit.: p4.
- (9) E.H. Carr vol. III for descriptions of central and north coast burials.

it was doubled up in a squatting position. There does not appear to have been any significant pattern in the geological distribution of this practice.

Howitt describes both positions of the body being used within a very small area. Making what is an isolated reference to the continued use of one site as a burial ground, he says that in the Gringai territory about Dungog, (10) there was one spot where the natives had been buried frequently since 1830.

'When the grave, which was very neatly dug, was considered to be of sufficient depth, a man got in it and tried it by lying down at full length. The body, nicely tied up in bark, was carried to it by friends of the deceased.' (11)

Hard upon this follows another account, from a different source (12).

'The following was the practice... at Dungog, and it relates to a time somewhere about the year 1830... The body was doubled up, heels to hips and face to knees, and the arms folded. It was then wrapped up in sheets of ti-tree bark secured by cords of string-bark fibre. A hole was dug in easy soil and in a well-shaded locality, about two feet deep and circular. The body was dropped in sideways, and after putting a stone hatchet and a club beside the body, the grave was filled in and the ceremonies ended.' (13)

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- (10) A.W. Howitt op.cit: p85.  
 (11) Ibid: p464.  
 (12) Dr. McKinlay, whereas the first was from A Hook.  
 (13) A.W. Howitt op.cit: pp464-465.

In the Gringai burial all the articles belonging to the deceased were buried with him, as they were amongst the Ceawegal also (14), and the other natives each contributed something as well. (15)

McKiernan describes the Raymond Terrace procedure.

'When a death occurred at the camp, the body was wrapped, some hours after death, in a bark winding-sheet and carried by means of a sapling some distance from the camp, where it was buried full length in a shallow grave. Green boughs were strewn in the grave before the body was lowered, and boughs were also placed over the rude coffin, after which the weapons of the deceased were thrown into the grave; over that were placed a few branches of trees and then the grave was filled up with earth. Some logs were then placed on top of the grave and the ceremony was complete.' (16)

No doubt this last measure was an attempt to protect the body from marauding dogs. (17) The shallowness of the grave and the need to cover it with bark and logs was the result of the poor equipment the aborigines had for digging. For this reason burial usually took place where it was easy to dig and where the soil was soft. Often this was on a hillside.

Essentially the burial rite at Port Stephens was similar to that at Dungog. Scott observed.

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- (14) Ibid.  
 (15) Ibid.: p464.  
 (16) E. McKiernan loc.cit.: p889.  
 (17) J.W. Fawcett loc.cit.: p180.

'One of a small camp of blacks about a quarter of a mile from our house, died, and they borrowed a spade... to dig the grave - This was placed a few yards above high water mark and the burial was timed for the flood tide, not on the ebb, lest the spirit of the departed should be carried out to sea and be lost in the great waters - The corpse was neatly encased in a sheet of "paper bark" from the giant Titree (Melaluca) and tightly bound with vines from the scrub - Then in an outer casing of a freshly stripped sheet of stringy bark, also bound up with vines.' (18)

Enright says that the coastal aborigines usually put the body in a small chamber on the side at the bottom of the grave, (19) but there is no other reference to such a practice.

According to Mr. Green the Upper Hunter burial procedure usually involved the digging of a round hole, generally on a slight hill or slope, the lowering of the body bound in a squatting position, and subsequent filling in of the grave. (20) MacDonald's description of interment at the junction of the Page and the Isis rivers, (21) while it corresponds in many ways to Mr. Green's, contains at least one additional feature which appears to be characteristic of the Kamilaroi tribe. (22)

Enright says,

'The Kamilaroi differed [from the coastal tribes] in their burial ceremony, inasmuch as they marked the trees around the grave...' (23)

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- (18) W. Scott op.cit: p46.  
 (19) W.J. Enright loc.cit: p4.  
 (20) Mr. W.C. Green.  
 (21) A. MacDonald loc.cit: pp256-257.  
 (22) W.J. Enright loc.cit: p4.  
 (23) W.J. Enright loc.cit: p4. See also  
 A.W. Howitt op.cit: p466 for confirmation  
 and L. Black The Bora Ground Pt IV: p23.

MacDonald's account is as follows:

'In order to bury the dead they dig a round hole like a well. They make a fire in this hole, and when it is burnt out, they carefully sweep up the ashes on a piece of bark and throw them out. When they put the dead in the hole, in a sitting posture, whatever belongs to him (spears, boomerangs, opossum rugs, &c.) is buried with him. They lay large logs across the top of the grave, level with the ground, and roof them over with bark, on which they raise a mound of earth. They carve serpentine lines on two trees, to the north-west of the grave.' (24)

An indication as to why only the trees to the north-west should be carved may be derived from the fact that the aborigines said that was where they came from. (25)

It seems obvious that the Kamilaroi influence was very strong in this region, and quite probable that these natives were of a horde or sub-tribe of the Kamilaroi.

Breton describes a Kamilaroi burial which he witnessed at Wollombi, and carved trees were a feature of this burial, in many other respects a most unusual ceremony.

'In an affray that took place on the Wollombi between two tribes, four men and two women of the Comleroy tribe were slain; they were buried at a very pretty spot in the following manner.

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(24) A. MacDonald loc.cit: pp256-257.

(25) Ibid: pp257-258.

'The bodies of the men were' placed on their backs in the form of a cross, head to head, each bound to a pole by bandages round the neck, middle, knees, and ankles (sic), the pole being behind the body; the two women had their knees bent up and tied to the neck, while their hands were bound to their knees; they were then placed so as to have their faces downwards: in fact, they were literally packed up in two heaps of earth, each of the form of a cone, about three feet high, and rather removed from the cross; for their idea of the inferiority of the women will not allow them to be interred with the men. The neatness and precision observed with respect to the cross and cones is very remarkable, both being raised to the same height; and so smoothly raked down that it would puzzle the nicest observer to discover the slightest inequality in the form. The trees for some distance around, to the height of fifteen or twenty feet, are carved with grotesque figures meant to represent kangaroos, emus, opossums, snakes, &c. with rude representations also of the different weapons they use. Round the cross they made a circle, about thirty feet in diameter, from which all rubbish was carefully removed, and another was made outside the first so as to leave a narrow interval between them: within this interval there was laid pieces of bark each piece touching the rest the same way that tiles do. The devil, they say, will not leap over the bark, and cannot walk under it.'.... Four Waddies (clubs) were stuck into the earth in the centre of the cross; and these they informed me were left in order that the deceased might have some arms, "when they jump up again", so as to be enabled to drive away the devil and prevent him from taking them again into the earth!' (26)

Although this procedure was in some respects typical of Kamilaroi burial, (27) in others it was quite abnormal. It is possible that earth displacement and the perpendicular position of the body would account for the conical mounds.

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(26) W.H. Breton op.cit: pp203-204.

(27) A.W. Howitt op.cit: p446 for description of Kamilaroi burial.



Enright refers to the burial of a female member of the Darkinung tribe near Bulga, which may be considered similar. There,

'The body was placed on the ground and the earth was piled on it in the form of a mound with the aid of boomerangs.' (28)

West of the Hunter Valley, on the Macquarie River in Kamilaroi territory, Sturt observed a grave which was similar to Breton's in that it involved mounds of earth and a cleared area surrounding them.(29) The Kamilaroi-type burial on the Page River also included a mound of earth. (30) It appears that the placing of the body on top of the ground and covering it with earth may have been a practice reserved for women by the Darkinung. The suggestion is then that the burial described by Breton possibly reflects a combination of Darkinung and Kamilaroi traditions.

Another unusual burial rite is described in the Lang Papers. It was performed at Raymond Terrace.

'When a Black dies a scene of the most frightful description takes place at his burial. The head is severed from the body which is wrapped up in Bark tightly bound by ropes of currajong - The body is then carried by the Blacks to the place selected for his interment which is generally a brush (sic) the body is then placed in a hole made for the purpose.' (31)

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- (28) W.J. Enright "Notes on the Aborigines of the North Coast of New South Wales" : p88.  
 (29) C. Sturt Two Expeditions into the Interior of Southern Australia London, 1833, Vol 1: p14.  
 Oxley recorded a similar one in the same area - Journals of Two Expeditions into the Interior of New South Wales, London, 1820: pp138-141.  
 (30) A. MacDonald loc.cit: p257.  
 (31) Lang Papers op.cit: p62.
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This is the only reference to any mutilation of the body prior to interment, and should not therefore be accepted without due reservations.

It will be noted that Breton's account revealed that the inferior status of women was reflected in their burial. (32) Other early writers refer to this phenomenon. In some cases it was just the women and children who were given unelaborate burials, in others many of the men were of the same burial status, special ceremonies being performed only for those who occupied a privileged position within the tribe. Howitt says of the Dunggog tribe -

'Venerable men, and men of distinction, were buried with much ceremony, but ordinary members and females were disposed of in a perfunctory manner.' (33)

Apparently the distinction between the burial procedures lay in the number of mourners and the degree of distress they exhibited. Thus Howitt,

'The grief displayed at the funeral of a venerable and honoured man was unquestionably great and genuine.' (34)

And McKiernan,

'In the case of the deaths of women or children there were no special mourners and no time was set apart for mourning.' (35)

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- (32) W.H. Breton op.cit: pp203-204.  
 (33) A.W. Howitt op.cit: p464.  
 (34) Ibid. also L.W. Threlkeld op.cit: 24 (85)  
 (35) B. McKiernan loc.cit: p889.

A similar tendency was observed in the Clarence district on the North coast, where also woman's inferiority remained with her even to the grave:

'If a woman dies there is no mourning, and no nightly crying, for they believe that women have no souls and for them there can be no resurrection.' (36)

Traditional amongst the aborigines was the belief that death was usually caused by sorcery or enchantment by an enemy. (37) Thus in parts of the Hunter Valley an essential feature of the funeral was the procedure by which the guilty party was identified.

Thus Howitt describes the Gringai practice.

'Before being lowered into the grave, the medicine man, standing at the head, spoke to it to find out who caused its death, and received answers from another medicine man at the foot of the grave.' (38)

At Port Stephens the method was slightly different.

'All being ready the next thing was to find out who was responsible for the man's death, for it was believed that all sickness was brought about by the machinations of an enemy... The plan adopted was as follows - The coffin was supported on the shoulders of two men - a third holding a green branch, stood midway at the side, and called aloud the names of everyone he could think of, at the same time lightly striking the coffin with the green branch, the belief being that when the name of the guilty person was mentioned the corpse would give a start which would be communicated to the bearers.' (39)

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(36) J.F. Small "Customs and Traditions of the Clarence River Aborigines", Science of Man, ns. I. 21st March, 1898: p46.

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

(38) A.W. Howitt op.cit: p464.

(39) W. Scott op.cit: pp46-47.

The body was then immediately lowered into the grave and covered over. Scott did not know how the aborigines dealt with the guilty party, but according to MacDonald the Upper Hunter natives believed that the murderer would pine away and die. (40)

The Hunter Valley aborigines mourned their dead in the traditional manner, with loud wailings and lacerations of the body, and by painting themselves with pipeclay.

Emily Caswell wrote

'When a man dies belonging to a Tribe they all... go in mourning rubbing their faces with white clay.' (41)

And Dawson

'When any of their relations die, they show respect for their memories by plastering their heads and faces all over with pipe-clay, which remains till it falls off itself. The gins also burn the front of the thigh severely, and bind the wound up with thin strips of bark. This is putting themselves in mourning.' (42)

Another early settler witnessed aborigines expressing their grief.

'The Blacks then place themselves round the grave and a most dreadful howling commences which continues during the remainder of the night - at regular intervals at the same time making dreadful gashes in their skin with knives and stones.' (43)

Howitt remarks on the vigour with which the natives mourned their dead.

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- (40) A. MacDonald loc.cit: p256.  
 (41) E. Caswell.  
 (42) R. Dawson op.cit: p74.  
 (43) Lang Papers: op.cit: p62.

'The lamentations at a grave, and the chopping of heads and burning of arms, was something not to be easily forgotten. The grief, though violent, was not of long duration, and by the time the wounds were healed the sorrow was ended.' (44)

Emily Caswell did not mention the infliction of wounds or shedding of blood in the Raymond Terrace area, and McKiernan states specifically that there was none. Lamentations were performed by both men and women. (45)

According to Scott, if a widow lost her husband, she exhibited deeper grief, remaining by the grave for some time.

'The widow then made her camp fire by the grave side, and every evening as the sun was sinking she commenced a loud mournful wailing for the dead - and kept it up until the grass began to grow on the grave, and then, suddenly, she, with the rest of the tribe, vanished.' (46)

In many respects the settlers' descriptions of burial and the ceremonies which accompanied it are inadequate. Nevertheless one important fact does emerge. This is a distinction between the coastal procedure and that to the west and north of the Valley. On the coast, particularly north of the Hunter River, burial practices were basically the same, and reflect a cultural similarity with the North Coast tribes. Inland, however, like the Bora grounds, mortuary rites reveal the Kamilaroi influence.

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- (44) A.W. Howitt op.cit: p465.  
 (45) B. McKiernan loc.cit: p889.  
 (46) W. Scott op.cit: p47.

This indicates, perhaps, that burial customs were not so closely related to the environment as were other aspects of aboriginal life. It has been seen that material culture was relatively uniform throughout the area, but contact with the Kamilaroi subtly changed some facets of the spiritual life of the inland aborigines. It seems probable that this development would have continued, and the influence of the powerful Kamilaroi tribe become even stronger, had the process not been arrested by the arrival of the Europeans.