

"The Worimi Tribe"

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When the first settlers arrived in the Newcastle district they found it inhabited by members of the Australian aboriginal race. Little attempt was made to understand them. As a result of impressions of the early navigators, including Dampier, they were regarded as the lowest of the human race.

Even that worthy man, Threlkild, who was sent out by the London Missionary Society and founded the first mission to them at Lake Macquarie, on the site of the present Toronto Hotel, failed to sense the deep inner life of his dusky charges, although he so far mastered their language that he was able to translate the Gospel of St. Luke into it.

To his credit there also lies the first grammar and vocabulary of the language of the people whom he called the Awabakal. The suffix kal or gal means a clan or horde. It is one of the units which go to make up the tribe. Awaba means a flat place, and Awabakal the people of the flat place.

Northward of the Hunter River was another unit called the Garewagal, the people of the sea whose territory extended to the junction of the Hunter with Glendonbrook. They formed part of the tribe called the Worimi, and their language was the Kuttang.

The Worimi extended along the East Coast as far as the Manning River, which divided them from the land of the Briai. Possibly, in the far North West corner of the tablelands, they may have come in contact with the Innewon, but along Glendonbrook they met the Kamilroi, one of the greatest of New South Wales tribes, and on the Hunter, near the mouth of Glenbrook, they would see the Dark'nung tribe, of which old Tom Dillon, well-known to Newcastle residents, was the last survivor. They occupied the country along Wollombi Brook and the McDonald River, to the Hawkesbury, and perhaps along that river.

Threlkild never told us what the Awabakal called their language, but old natives of Port Stephens informed me it was similar to theirs, and history tells us that when Threlkild visited Port Stephens in the days of Sir Edward Parry he preached to them, and was understood. He surely would not have done that without first learning that their tongue was similar to that which he spoke. A comparison of his wonderful work with the imperfect Kuttang grammar and vocabulary I prepared will also show the resemblance.

We can, therefore, I think, conclude that the Awabakal was a unit of the Worimi, and, as the areas between Lake Macquarie and the Hawkesbury, would not be capable of supporting a large number of inhabitants and another tribe lived on the south side of the Hawkesbury, it is probable that the Hawkesbury was the southern boundary of the land of the Worimi. It is not likely, however, that proof concerning that will ever be forthcoming.

Some men learnt a little of their language, but of their secret life, which was the predominant influence in the life of the tribe, practically nothing was known until the Royal Society of New South Wales, some forty years ago, published my account of the Keeparra Ceremony. I had established confidential relations with the Port Stephens aboriginals, but so secretive were they, and so apprehensive of having what was sacred to them ridiculed, information was never volunteered, and when sought it was only given to those whom they thought respected their beliefs. That work of mine I now know was incomplete.

When a boy arrived at the age of puberty his initiation into the full life of the tribe commenced. Until then he lived in the woman's camp. His acceptance into the men's camp was not a matter of a moment. If it was not convenient to hold the Keeparra, to which other tribes would also be invited, he might be put through one or both of the minor degrees, known as Murrawan and Dalkai. The ceremony of initiation into the first degree only occupied portion of a day. The second ceremony ran into two days and would comprise all that was in the first and something additional. He could, of course, go through the Keeparra without going through the minor degrees and therein would learn all that was taught in the minor ceremonies.

The Keeparra was held on an elaborately prepared ground consisting of two circles about a quarter of a mile apart and connected by a path running East and West. At one circle the women congregated, and neither they or any uninitiated person other than candidates were allowed to enter the other or sacred circle, nor to see any portion of the ceremony. The penalty was death. The earth was banked up around the sacred circle as in a circus, and around it were trees carved with symbols of the various tribes taking part. Those symbols were nearly all geometrical figures, but on each of the two trees between which the candidates gained entrance to the ring were carved figures of the iguana.

Space would not permit of a full description of the ritual which lasted about a month. It was, however, only a prelude to a long system of instruction which lasted some five years. During the ceremony and afterwards the candidates learnt all those laws which governed his future life, and whose observance was supervised by the Karaji, who claimed that no matter how far away he might be he would know immediately that he had broken the law.

It is doubtful if all went through the full period of instruction, and it is possible that it was only imparted in full to those who were most promising. Certainly every man did not become a "doctor," nor did every one become a Karaji.

The marriage of the youth was hedged with restrictions in regard to consanguinity and in regard to those whom he could speak. As a rule he could not speak, except on special occasions, with those with whom he could not inter-marry, and he was restricted in the choice of his food.

Each individual had a totem which would be something in the animal or vegetable world. In a sense that was sacred to the individual and could not be eaten by him or her. Marriage also between people of similar totems was forbidden. Certain foods were also forbidden at certain times or in certain conditions of life. An investigation of totemism shows that it made for the welfare of the tribe. If men went out hunting, it is most improbable that every one of the party would have the same totem and, if they came across a pack of kangaroos, the men whose totem was the kangaroo would refrain from injuring them, and the same taboo would be on the totems of

other members of the party. That system would thus save a particular class of game from extinction. That was, however, not the only part the totem played on the part of the individual.

It was a link between him and the unknown in which he firmly believed. Amongst what may be termed the unknown was his other self or spiritual double. The Worimi called the presiding genius Goolumbrat, who had given them their laws, and who is now up in the skies. He firmly believed in a home after death where he will be happy if he reaches it, but if it takes the wrong track after being ferried across the dark river by the spirit of his grandmother, he will be tormented by vicious hornets of an outstanding size.

The aboriginal had commenced to evolve an art outside of the symbolism of the Keeparra ground. On sandstone surfaces he made carvings, some of which were totems which would indicate whose ground they were on. In some places figures were drawn on rock, but it is not certain if some we know were in the country of the Dark'nung or Worimi. North of Port Stephens they did not make those paintings, but they stencilled red hands on flat rocks to indicate where they had gone and how many had gone.

All their ceremonies were not secret. Corroborries or dances of a social nature where held at which men, women and children were present. Ceremonies were also held to try and cause rain or to bring about an increase of certain animals or plants. The women also performed a ritual, the result of which they hoped would bring them children.

Some scanty remnants of their mythology have come down to us, but I am hopeful that more may be gathered before the last Keeparra is held or the last guardian of the sacred stones passed away.

Their material culture comprised many articles, included amongst which were a vast variety of stone implements, spears for fishing, hunting and fighting, clubs, shields of two different kinds, throwing sticks, boomerangs, fishing nets, fishing lines, shell fish hooks, bags of net for carrying articles, hair belts, and head bands and canoes.

The "doctor" practised cauterization in connection with wounds, and also had a knowledge of the curative powers of certain plants

Within the limits of this paper it is impossible to give more than a superficial view of the life of a most interesting people. Few Worimi full bloods are now surviving, but I trust that I have convinced you that the Australian natives did not deserve to be called the lowest race on earth, and I trust that I have succeeded in arousing your interest in those who survive in larger numbers on the northern part of the continent, where they may be educated to take part in the developments of those areas. Much can yet be done there, and in New South Wales much can yet be done in the education of the numerous survivors of mixed blood.